

~~Beatrice~

Part of her wanted to sneak up on Julias, try and catch him by surprise, see if her scant twenty years could get past the man's eyes. Have fun! Play with him, like old times. But, these weren't old times, and her sneaking into his mansion, or trying to at least, was a bad idea. He probably had lookouts about, snipers, and they'd shoot first if they saw suspicious rustling in bushes.

So the front door it was. Knock knock.

"Good evening Miss Damor, Miss Denver," the doorman said. "Please, do come in. The master is in his study."

"Study, eh?" She looked over her shoulder back at Jen. "Cool with just sitting around while Julias and I talk? Join in too, if you want."

Jen nodded and smiled. It was easy to see the girl wasn't following Triss in hopes for sex, but rather, because she didn't want to be alone. Learning the ritual, and testing the ritual, must have been horrible to watch. Going through the process was hell on Earth, but still, she didn't envy Jen having to see it all. Stuck on the sidelines while being forced to watch torture was a horrible way to get introduced to this stuff.

The Nosferatu touched her new necklace, a simple black string with a tiny, white crow skull on it, and followed after the servant.

The study was exactly what you'd expect in a building as old and as grandiose as Viktor's mansion. A tall room lined with bookshelves filled to the rim with books. Fancy, thick carpet the color of blood, against the gold trimmings of walls and columns that held the wood bookshelves in place. In the center of the large room was a beautiful table, thin wood, almost as red as the carpet, and Julias sat before it.

There were a couple books on table, on Hinduism. Another on the history of monsters, vague as that was. Another she didn't recognize; something about artifacts. So, he knew that Azamel was some sort of twisted nightmare version of Ganesha. The book on history of monsters was self-explanatory, but the one about artifacts was odd. Maybe the man was looking into more of the stranger artifacts, things considered magical. Might find something about those handcuffs Jack mentioned.

"Light reading?" she said, coming over to sit at the fancy table across from him. Jen offered the servant a nod, and he returned it before closing the door behind him.

“You could say that.” He wasn’t reading the books though. Smart phone in hand, he probably had other books opened on that, showing on the phone’s screen. Such was the way of the digital age, sitting around surrounded by books and not using them, because ultimately, you had literally 100,000 fold the information available on your phone. Sad, but true.

Once she was comfortable, Julias put the phone down, and smiled at her. Hell, he got up out of his chair, gave her a kiss, a proper one, before sitting back down. Fucker knew how to sprinkle bits of love in just the right way. To inconvenience himself like that, to stop researching, and get up out of his chair just for a kiss? He was too damn good at being romantic.

Which Jen caught onto immediately, and swooned, before she started wandering around the library. Not library, study room. Much as the walls were covered in books, there weren’t any rows of the bookshelves.

“How you been?” he said. “Haven’t seen you for a few nights.”

Triss nodded, shrugging. “Been... getting in deep with Jacob, honestly.”

Jen threw a glance her way. Probably didn’t expect her to be so forward with Julias about what she was doing.

“Sounds painful,” her love said.

That got a laugh out of her, and an eyebrow raise from him.

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“By all means.” He put the phone down, and got in closer to the table, elbows down and eyes on her. “Did you see Jack leaving?”

“No. Was he here?”

“Yeah, got into a little argument.”

Ooh, argument between childe and sire. Something she’d never get to experience. Time to pry and learn.

“About what?”

Julias stopped for a moment. Might have been too sensitive to talk about, and if that were the case, he wouldn’t tell her. But he was contemplating, which meant he was evaluating; maybe it was Jen’s presence’s slowing down the evaluation.

“Kid’s trying to play nice with everyone. I appreciate that he’s taking his role as intermediary with the other paranormals seriously, but he fails to recognize how that niceness can backfire. The specific hangup was Azamel and Athalia.”

She winced, and nodded as she leaned in as well, mirroring his position, elbows on the table. “He probably wants to keep Athalia happy, doesn’t he? Not kill her daughter.”

“He’s going to do something stupid, maybe spare the girl’s life when an opportunity arrives to do otherwise.”

“Hard to imagine.” She remembered what the kid looked like when she found him, and how terrifying the imagery was, of Angela sitting on him and ready to cut him into bits. “And of course, she could still be dead. No one’s seen her since the accident.” Accident was a funny word to pick for actively running someone over, and she smirked.

“If only we were that lucky,” Jen said, sighing as she sat on a nearby couch, pulled out her phone, and... probably checked her Twitter feed. Ugh.

“New necklace?” Julias said, hand gesture included.

She smiled. Just like Julias to notice; she loved that. It wasn’t like she hadn’t worn similar, things that matched her tattoos and piercings, and yet the man noticed anyway. Always the little things that made her smile grow.

“Mhmm. Jacob’s been putting me through hell, and this is a first step to becoming... his apprentice, I guess.” She flicked a fingernail against the skull, and cradled it between two claws. “I’ll show you later how it works.”

“You should have seen her, Julias,” Jen said. “It was... disgusting, and brutal, and I know few Kindred who could stomach what she went through.”

Triss threw a grin her way. Yeah, it was disgusting and brutal. And it was so god damn empowering. The blur, the haze of her memory, she could still feel it, smell the scent of the beast and the touch it left upon her. It was exciting, thrilling, and it got her undead blood surging through her with a desire to taste more.

She really was a twisted fuck. Probably what led to Jacob being interested in her in the first place.

“Is that why you have a new necklace?” he said.

Triss nodded. “Yeah, but, it’s a secret what it’s specifically for, sorry.” Much as she loved her man, Circle secrets were Circle secrets. He’d understand of course; not like he dumped Invictus secrets on her.

“And Jen was with you during all this?”

“I was.” The other Ventrue got up and joined them, sitting beside Triss. She was in her usual suit, but the shirt was done up this time. The torture session put a bit of chill into her, Triss could see, and the woman had become a little less open to having her breasts hanging out, considering how gory and scream-filled the past couple nights had become. That’d probably change, now that Jacob had taught her the first ritual, and it’d be a little while before he’d teach her another. And of course, because Julias was here, and Jen did love to throw herself at him, she’d probably get the tits out sooner or later.

Except, she didn’t seem to want to right now. The woman was looking at Triss, her necklace, and then back to Julias, and just watching, thinking thoughts Triss couldn’t guess. Seeing the Nos get cut up, stabbed, bled, and screaming her head off, put a fear into Jen. It’d really suck if it damaged the relationship. Jen was her friend, but also a fuck buddy, and that fuck buddy dynamic was working out unusually well. It wouldn’t continue like that if Jen could only picture screaming, blood-drenched Triss in a giant, dirty metal bowl, with kine body parts sitting around in the metal basin with her.

“You look spooked,” Julias said.

“It was... hard to watch.” Jen shivered, but slid in closer so her chair was almost touching hers. “Beatrice is a lot tougher than I expected. I used to think I was tough, but it’s a different story, when Jacob’s... yeah.” They couldn’t share the details of the ritual, but no reason to tiptoe around how brutal it’d been.

“I know the Circle, and Jacob, can get into some horrific stuff,” he said, “but you girls are always welcome to visit me and wash away some of that horribleness. I get the impression blankets and pillows aren’t a luxury you get to have in your dark caves.”

“Ha.” Triss shook her head and leaned back in her chair. “We got it pretty cozy, actually. Not as cozy as here though.”

“No sign of the hunters?”

Jen shook her head. “No. And we have been looking. Aaron and Othello have been looking more than us, but they’ve reported nothing.”

Superman nodded, and pulled out a deck of cards from within his suit jacket. “We’ve been looking too, of course, and we have a lot more eyes than the Circle does. But still, these damn hunters evade us. It’s really starting to get under my skin, that they can hide so well.”

Both girls watched the man’s hands. Was he trying to be sexy? Hard to tell. He liked shuffling the deck, one-handed at that, showing off his skill like a god damn peacock showing off its feathers. And it was sexy, whether he meant it to be or not.

Her mind turned to sex the moment Julias was in the same room as her, and Jen was only making it harder to stop. And lately, with all the dark, witch stuff she was doing, she felt... empowered. She wasn’t the little Nos girl watching insanity from the sidelines anymore. She was learning. She was becoming one of those creatures of fiction, the sort you read about, practicing dark arts, exploring the boundaries of only god knew what. A witch. And that filled her with a tingling thrill.

She wondered how that made Jack feel, considering all the buzz he was getting. Did he get inta-horny when he was around Antoinette, ego as swollen as his dick? Heh, probably.

“Hey Julias,” Jen said, grinning at him, and the cards in his hand. “Looking to play?”

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The poker room. Triss was sure that’s what it was for, cause even though Julias had only moved in a nice, legit poker table recently, the room reeked of high-stakes gambling. Not a small room, not a large one either, with armless chairs with nice, red cushions. A fancy chandelier, a small one, hung from the center of the ceiling, and it cast a gentle light over the table, the sort of dim you wanted when eyeing other players to read their tells.

“How come we haven’t played in this room yet?” she said, pulling out a chair. “We’ve played in others, but not, what is apparently, a room designed for this?”

Julias shrugged, pulled out another chair, and sat down. “This room is meant for serious poker. Back in the day, I’m pretty sure Viktor did negotiations in here, while playing poker.”

“Well, deal ‘em up.” Jen rotated her right arm, then left, like she was prepping for a fight or a workout, before she sat down as well. Jen was likely to immediately establish the rules for the game, with sex as the intended outcome. Strip poker, or something like that. “How about a game of... history?” Or not.

“History you say?” Julias smirked, for a moment. That look in his eye, of confidence and determination, faded. He wasn’t sure of himself, maybe, feeling a bit exposed. Not a look Triss was used to seeing on him. “Elaborate.”

“We play, and cash in chips to learn about one piece of history from everyone else at the table.” Jen gestured to the chips already on the table. It was normal for them to use chips when they played, and cash in your chips to earn something. It made strip poker take a while, but far more interesting than just comparing hands. These Ventrue loved to bluff.

“... personal history?” Julias said.

His nemesis nodded. “Personal history. I want to learn more about you, Julias Mire, and maybe a little bit about Triss here too.” The evil woman got comfortable, and waited for Julias to deal. He always dealt first, his house after all.

“I... I’m not sure,” the man said.

Triss blinked, and so did Jen, both women looking the man up and down. Always so confident, and his suit betrayed no weakness. But his eyes betrayed plenty. They fell to the table, to the cards he was shuffling, and he winced every so often.

Triss didn’t go digging through the man’s past willy-nilly like this. It was enough to learn the man had once been married, before being embraced, and had to leave that life behind. Watched his wife move on without him, meet someone else, die of old age, all the classic turmoil Kindred went through, given enough years. Everyone human, everyone they let live their lives without becoming a ghoul, or a vampire, gave way to the years. Kansas had it right, people were dust in the fucking wind for someone like Julias. So Triss let the topic be.

Jen had no such compunctions. “Of course, if you do well, you won’t have to share anything.” Her slender fingers took a stack of chips, and lifted them, only to let them fall back to the table in controlled fall between the fingers. Satisfying click click click sounds, masking the gravity of what she was asking. And she was a smart girl, she knew exactly what she was asking, for Julias to take a trip down memory pain lane. Strange timing.

“... deal.” He tilted his neck to the side, managed to get a small crack out of it, and started dealing the cards.

“Wait, Julias,” Triss said. “Come on, you don’t have to—”

He shook his head, a hand up, while he dealt the cards with a single hand, sliding a card off the top with his index finger. Fancy fucker. “It’s ok.”

Was it though? She eyed him closely, head drifting to the side as she tried to analyze his face. But he put on his poker face, and that meant she was fucked in that department.

She sighed, and tossed in a chip; no blinds here, just everyone putting minimum bid into the pot. She barely understood how to play poker, and shit like ‘blinds’ and ‘ante’ and fucking whatnot was hard for her to wrap her mind around. But Julias and Jen were merciless, which she both appreciated, and did not.

Texas Hold ‘Em. She knew how to play that, mostly, sort of, kind of. A little. The fact Julias and Jen liked to play with some house rule quirks made everything just a little harder to figure out, too. Julias tossed each of them a card, and then another. And she was going first, ugh.

Queen and an Ace. Good, yeah? Or not good? She frowned and made it look like she had bad cards... which, she may have had, for all she knew. A glance at Julias and Jen was borderline pointless, their gazes showing their usual, calm, collected faces. Julias didn’t blink, or anything, as he waited for her opening bet.

“... I open one.” Woo, opening bet. God, she had no idea what she was doing.

“I’ll call,” Jen said, throwing a white chip into the pot.

“Call,” Julias said, mirroring the two women. With a devilish little smirk, Julias ‘burned’ a card, whatever the fuck the point of that was, and dealt the ‘flop’, three cards face up on the table. Queen, Seven, and a Five.

Triss felt the urge for a cheek muscle to twitch, but she didn’t have cheeks, so it caused the edge of the muscle above her crocodile teeth to shift slightly. Was that how Jen and Julias could read her? Her hair was covering her crocodile teeth though, so maybe not. How those bastards were able to figure her out, every time they played, was her new mission to find out.

But two Queens was good, so.

“I bet one,” she said.

“Raise you one.” Jen winked at her, earning a long groan from Triss, before she looked back to Julias as she tossed in two chips. “Did you play poker much, when you were alive, Julias?”

“I did, actually. But, isn’t that one of the pieces of information we’re supposed to be playing for?” He threw in two chips, and made an obvious point of showing another before tossing it in as well. Raising by one, then.

“Call.” Triss tossed in one again.

Grinning the biggest, most devilish of all devil grins, trying out out-devil Julias, Jen put her cards down, folding. All that confidence, and she wasn't pushing forward. Did she have a bad hand, and was masking it with her control of facial expressions, or did she have a good hand, and was folding anyway, to throw people off the trail of her tells. Triss couldn't recognize a tell to save her life, so it didn't do much for her.

"I was hoping the secrets we'd be playing for would be of a more personal, meaningful nature," she said.

"Trying to get your fingers into every personal aspect of my life?" Julias chuckled, and juggled some chips in his hand as he played around with his poker face. But, after a while, Superman nodded, burned another card, and tossed another onto the table. A Queen. Triss felt her finger twitch.

"I bet two," she said.

"Fold." Julias reached out, took back the cards, and started shuffling.

"God damn it." She frowned down at her claws, and stabbed one against the table. Not hard enough to pierce the nice surface, but hard enough to make a click. She won, but she could have won double that or more, if she'd managed to pull Jen and Julias into the hand.

This wasn't a game for Carthians, that was for sure.

"I am trying to get my fingers into your lives, yes. You may have noticed that I like Triss quite a bit, and I think you and I should connect as well." Jen leaned forward over the table. With her shirt done up, it almost looked cute, how her breasts were concealed instead of being served on a silver platter.

Julias raised a brow. Not his usual 'I'm surprised but not really' eyebrow raise, more like his occasional 'I'm actually surprised' eyebrow raise. Knowing her man well enough to recognize those expressions wasn't helping Triss with poker; if anything, he was taking advantage of it for his bluffs. But still, it wasn't what she expected to see from him, to Jen's statement.

"It may interest you to know the Prince keeps an eye on you," he said as he handed Triss the cards. Her turn to deal.

Jen raised a brow, same way Julias did. "Does she?"

Two peas in a pod.

"She does. She wasn't happy that your sire left."

Rolling both her eyes, Triss dealt each player two cards. If the Prince was watching Jen, it was because Jen wanted people watching her, considering how she acted and the way she dressed. But then,



there was that time where Triss and the Prince talked, on the balcony, and looked out over everyone, including Jen. Antoinette had taken particular notice of Jennifer, enjoyed how much the girl embraced sexuality. Her dream for Dolareido, or something like that.

Everyone threw a chip into the center of the table, before looking at their cards.

“Marcus felt... wait, I’ll save that one, for after the game.” She winked at him, licked her lips, lifted the corner of her cards off the table to take a peek, and tossed in a couple chips. Opening two, then.

“I never spoke with Marcus myself.” Julias held a chip in his hand, and rolled it across his fingers, knuckle to knuckle. “I do remember he enjoyed wearing suits. A rarity, considering he was a Carthian.” Julias tossed in a couple chips as well.

And what did Triss have? A Two and a Five. Well, whatever. She tossed in a couple chips too, calling. Round over, Triss threw in three cards for the table. Two Sixes and a Five. Ooh la la. Feint having a bad hand, or push for a win? What to do what to do. But, not her turn yet.

Jen tossed in a chip. “Carthians sometimes wear suits. But they don’t always feel comfortable on the soul.”

“Believe in a soul?” Julias tossed in a chip as well.

Jen nodded, and nodded again in Triss’s direction. “After the things I’ve seen? I have to believe in something beyond a simple body.”

Yeah, no argument there. Triss nodded, and tossed four chips, raising by three. Jen and Julias called, so Triss dealt in another card to the table. A five. Full house! No, wait, don’t get excited, control yourself. Don’t start bouncing your knee, and don’t look to Jen in anticipation of the round starting.

“Do you not, Mister Mire?” Jen said, and tossed in a chip, betting one. It’d be nice if they could say what they were doing, to help Triss keep track. But the two Ventrue lived and breathed this atmosphere.

Superman tossed in a chip, and another. Raise by one then. “I’m not sure honestly. I consider myself a pragmatist, but I’ve seen enough in our world to believe in something beyond that.”

Triss smiled. Good, because she’d hate it if it turned out Julias didn’t believe in anything. It was rare for vampires to be atheist, considering all the shit vampires were, and could do. They were usually agnostic to some extent, believing in something beyond flesh and blood. And after the trip Jacob had sent her on, into the unknown of where-the-fuck-ever, Triss certainly believed there had to be

something more than simple science. Part of the reason she was in the Circle, as was Jen. They believed the old myths, the old mythologies, in some form or another, that they were perhaps metaphors, or interpretations of grand designs.

She thought back to one of her first conversations with Jacob. ‘Do you think there is some hidden meaning to being a Kindred? Some explanation to our existence that will raise us to a new level of understanding?’ he’d said. And she’d said no, because of course she didn’t think so. A new level of understanding, like a religious person finding divine purpose for their life? Fuck that. But, as she hung out with the others in the Circle, she started to notice Jen, Jacob, Aaron and Othello, everyone seemed perfectly open to the idea of there being higher entities, like gods, or greater aspects to the individual, like a soul. And Triss found herself leaning in that direction more and more.

Heavy topics seemed to be the theme of tonight, all driven by Jen.

Triss won the hand again. She felt like a bystander in the conversation though. Julias and Jen were fencing verbally, that much she could tell, poking at each other and looking for holes in their statements. Too preoccupied with each other to care about the game, maybe.

Triss slid Jen the deck, everyone threw an ante into the pot, and she dealt the cards.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Jen said, handing everyone their cards almost as smoothly as Julias would, “if the Invictus believe in anything beyond money and power.”

“Money and power are pretty appealing, and have proven their worth time and time again in the real world. The concept of a soul, or whatnot, hasn’t so much.” In went a chip from Julias’s pile, betting one.

Triss checked her cards. Five and a Jack. She tossed in a chip as well, calling, as did Jen. Her friend dealt three cards to the table. Three, Six, and a Queen. Nothing. But, the two Ventrue weren’t glancing her way, only looking at each other. Perfect time to try bluffing.

Julias tossed in one.

“I’ll see your bet, and raise three.” In went four more chips from Triss. Ahead, but if this backfired, she’d be hurt. Why was she bluffing? No fucking idea, except that it was something people did in poker.

Jen matched Triss’s bet, and raised by three as well. New raises always had to be at least as much as previous raises, according to them. “Has it not?” Jen said. “You Invictus deal in only the things you can touch. The Circle, the dragons, even the idiot priests deal with real things that exist beyond your money, or defined walls of power.”

Julias threw in his chips, calling. “No one in the Invictus denies that the Circle touches on forces that defy science, and our understanding of Kindred.”

Triss called, and Jen threw in another card. Queen. Still nothing for Triss then.

Julias threw in two chips. So did Triss, and another two. Jen saw it, and then raised four. Pot growing damn big.

“Sometimes the Circle gets the impression the Invictus look down on us,” Jen said, playing with a few chips in her hand as she waited for Julias to make his decision. “You and Triss hooked up when she was a Carthian. She’s a witch now, though, a member of the Circle. Would you have given her the same chance?”

Triss raised a brow, and almost said something. But the environment was perfect for listening, digesting, absorbing. She knew Julias didn’t care she was a witch, hell if—

“If anything, Jennifer, I would have been more intrigued. I dislike the Carthians and their juvenile attachment to their illogical anarchy. But the Circle? I respect your group, quite a bit, and I respect your beliefs... what I know of them.” Julias called, throwing in enough chips to catch up.

They were playing for secrets, personal secrets. Kind of weighty, kind of a big deal. Twenty chips for a cash-in, to turn these innocent pieces of plastic into valuable information about the other players. It was a weird thing to play for, especially considering how open Triss and Julias were with each other. If Triss wanted to know about his past, she could just ask him. But, she felt it might be akin to torture for him.

“Triss hasn’t told you much, about the Circle?”

“She’s told me a little. She respects the privacy of the Circle.”

“I try,” Triss said with a grin, calling. Neither Ventrue looked at her, gazing at each other, or glaring. Almost made Triss envious, with how Julias was looking at Jen. Or maybe not, considering how much it was starting to look like a fight brewing.

Another card on the table. Better for her. Better for the others though? Their expressions were unreadable, but she was committed to the bluff. Julias threw in some more chips, so did she, and so did Jen. Only person looking at the chips was her though, the two Ventrue doing some sort of mind dance with each other. Now she was thinking about two cowboys dueling at the strike of noon, or two samurai, having a stand-off.

“I have to admit,” Julias said, “I do occasionally imagine you lovely ladies, dancing naked around a bowl of blood or something. Chanting and swaying, painting your bodies with charcoal, and praying to unseen entities.”

Triss snorted on a laugh. Half true.

“Maybe we could show you sometime?” Jen said, tossing more chips into the pile.

“I’m not sure your boss would be comfortable with that.” Chuckling, Julias threw in some chips as well.

“And if he was?” More clink clinks, Jen shifting chips around in her fingers.

“Then I would say yes, I’d be interested. To observe, of course, not to partake.”

“Does the concept of dancing naked around a sacrifice in the moonlight frighten you?” And of course, Jen had to add sacrifice to the description.

“Yes, but I also find it intriguing, and romantic in a way.”

Heh, yeah, he probably did. Considering the sort of paintings Julias liked to keep around, he had a love of macabre shit, and dancing around naked in moonlight around a sacrifice was probably a painting he had somewhere already.

The hand ended. Triss came out on top. Again. This was getting very strange, because it was the first time Triss had more chips than others, let alone what was turning into all the chips.

But the two Ventrue had enough left for some more hands. Chips were going fast, faster than usual. They could cycle them back in, but they’d put out enough chips for a total of five secrets, and considering how powerful each cash in was, getting secrets from all other players, too many chips would have been deadly.

Normally, with strip poker and the way they played it, it was each time someone lost ten chips down from their starting pool incrementally, they’d have to remove some clothing. Pair of shoes, pair of socks, pants, shirt, etc. Doing it this way, getting to cash in on secrets, everyone’s secrets, was weird. Why didn’t she notice it before? Jen proposed the rules, Julias accepted, and Triss just went along with it. It was a weird way to play.

Were they letting her win?

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~~Julias~~

Well, Triss figured it out, perhaps a little. Poor girl wore every expression on her face, beautiful snake eyes dilating with every good hand, every realization.

Julias had picked up on Jen's plan the moment she'd mentioned the word secrets about their past. Talking about the Circle, souls, everything, was just pretense, poking at each other and seeing where boundaries lay. Dancing around each other in silly circles, because Ventrue never liked to lower their guard, expose their neck when engaging in contract negotiations.

Which is what they were doing, in a way. How deep were they willing to take the secrets they were willing to answer? Jen brought up souls, and he responded in kind. She invited him to see her dance naked around a sacrifice, and he found that inviting. Scary, and inviting.

This woman would be amazing at the Danse Macabre, if she engaged in it more. Jacob kept his circle out of city affairs, mostly, so Julias had little exposure to Jen when it came to dealings about territory, or dinner parties with Kindred poking holes into each other's defenses. Did so and so do so and so to so and so. Answer a question without really answering it. Ask a question without asking it. Imply a threat, suggest a course of action, without ever exposing your own motives. She'd be really good at it.

Triss wouldn't. Poor girl was perplexed, and glancing between them, trying to understand what they were up to. It was so damn cute, it made Julias want to hug and kiss her. But that would break the duel he was locked into with Jen.

Another hand, another round. Julias folded earlier this time. Another hand later, and Jen folded earlier. Throwing Triss off the trail. It didn't take long for the two Ventrue to run out of chips, and for Triss to have them all, leaving both Ventrue vulnerable.

If Triss had been with him alone, answering questions about his past would have been easy... easier, at least. And probably likewise for Triss and Jen. But two Ventrue, in the same room, learning a bit more about each other? That'd never come easily.

"Guess I'm cashing in." Grinning a big grin, but still eying the two Ventrue with mountains of suspicion, the Nos counted her chips up. Enough for five secrets, from everyone else at the table.

"Secrets of a personal nature, correct?" Jen said.

Julias nodded, eyes falling to the deck of cards in his hand. Idle shuffling, a great way to mask fear. Few Kindred enjoyed talking about their past, and none of them enjoyed putting their neck out, over personal issues or otherwise.

“... you guys don’t need to do this,” Triss said. “This is starting to turn heavy. How about we all go to the master bedroom, fuck, eat, fuck some more, and sleep?”

Both Ventrue slowly shook their head. No, this was as good as it was going to get, to get both Ventrue willing to talk about shit like this.

“Marcus was a playboy, as you know,” Jen said, swiping a hand across the table and snatching up a chip. “As often with sire and childe, our relationship was romantic, and sexual. But that faded quickly. The fallout of our splitting is one of the reasons I left the Carthians. And one of the reasons Marcus left Dolareido.”

Now that was a secret. Julias looked at her, caught her eyes, looked into them and waited for the smirk or the grin to label it all a joke. Never came.

“... I never knew that,” Triss said. “Barely ever talked to Marcus, and you weren’t in the Carthians long enough for me to ever talk to you.”

“I noticed you though.” Chuckling, Jen mirrored Julias’s chip trick, rolling the chip between her fingers across her knuckles. “God, you were a bitch. Hated everyone, always hung out alone, listening to your metal music and hiding inside a tomb.”

“Hey! I was... cultivating an aesthetic.”

Both Ventrue laughed, and Julias rolled a chip Triss’s way. Girl could be damn funny when she wanted to be.

“My turn I guess.” He sighed, and began cutting the deck with his one hand. Then shuffling it, with one hand. Decades with a deck in his hand, playing poker with kine in various circumstances, to sharpen his instincts and skills. It was always about the facade. “I was married when I was embraced, as you know. Viktor wanted me to stay here and help grow his arm of the Invictus.” Long sigh, for dramatic effect, and because it was sincere. “After the embrace, I visited her, and we got into a fight. I hit her.”

Both women sat up straight, looked at each other, at him, at the poker table, at him, and winced. Lot of wincing going on these days.

“Why?” Triss said.

“I was angry, at everything. My life was gone, and I had to leave her behind, and I couldn’t tell her why. We were screaming at each other, and I tried to convince her to understand, and... and the argument grew larger, encompassing other things, earlier things.” He rubbed his temples with his free hand, trying to dig the memories out of the haze of years gone by. “It wasn’t the happiest marriage. It was a hundred years ago, and... you know how it is, was. Not that that is an excuse, but, I don’t think she was ever truly happy, being my wife. The anger came out, from both of us, and... I let out a swing. Not a slap, but a punch, with a bit of my new strength in it that I couldn’t control.

“She lived. I damaged her jaw, but didn’t break it. I took her to the hospital, and vanished that night.” He couldn’t remember much, couldn’t remember the details, couldn’t remember what they were arguing about. But, he could remember the anger in her eyes, and then that single moment of realization, and fear, when he threw the fist. “I came back to her, a decade later, to visit, to apologize, maybe give her some of my new fortune as a member of the Invictus. But I found she was re-married, moved on, had children, and... and she looked happy.” Another delightful memory that would last with him for hundreds of years, scarred into his mind. His wife, ten years older, gorgeous, with a smile on her face as she enjoyed an evening with her family. “I left. Didn’t say anything to her, didn’t let her know I was still around, or anything.”

Both women stared at him for a while, giving up pretense of avoiding the awkwardness of it all. He sighed again, and stared down at the cards in his hand as he continued to shuffle them in the one palm. Never told anyone that story, ever. Not Tash, not Jessy or Jack, and certainly not his sire.

“I... can’t imagine you hitting a girl. I mean, not in that context, not like that.” Triss squirmed, and when he looked her way, she looked down. Yeah, painful.

“Me neither.” Jen didn’t lower her gaze when he caught it though. “You’ve changed a lot since then.”

“Have I?” If Triss had said that, that he’d changed, he could understand. He’d had the time to prove to her and himself that he wasn’t that guy anymore. But Jen, she barely knew him. Or that was the problem, that he thought she barely knew him, when she did. And in there, was probably the motivation for this dangerous game.

Maybe they should have played truth or dare instead, so he could at least take dares for the remaining secrets.

“You have,” Triss said, and she slid her chair in closer so she could reach out and poke him in the leg with a claw. “I’d make a joke, maybe something like ‘if you hit me, you know I’d hit you back, and

I hit harder,' but... doesn't seem like the time. So, serious note, yeah, I don't get that impression from you at all. Hundred years of being a vamp has done you good."

"Ha." He laughed, barely, and set the cards down so he could take Triss's hand in both of his. And, of course, kiss her knuckles, like a princess. Which got her chuckling, and then rolling her eyes and pushing his hands away. Which made Jen swoon like a school girl.

"Kindred are often sired for reasons more than obvious." The opposing Ventrue reached out, took the cards, and began to shuffle them, in varying ways of fancy flourish. Not like Julias could of course, considering how long he'd had to practice compared to her. But still, he watched her fingers work the cards, and both he and Triss smiled at her.

"Do tell," Triss said. "I can do that, right? Ask for a more specific secret? I did win, after all."

"... alright." She palmed the deck, and began cutting it, over and over, one-handed like Julias. "As I said, we are often embraced for reasons not so obvious. It comes out of us in strange ways, small parts of us we take for granted." With a shrug, she started dealing herself a hand. Five-card draw. Two twos, two kings, and an ace. She dropped the ace, and drew a five. Two pair, mediocre, and she sighed as she put the cards back into the deck. "Marcus was hoping to use me, to play in the Danse Macabre, high stakes."

"How?" he said. Night was getting more and more interesting.

"He knew I had a knack for political seduction. And he wanted me to use my personality to sleep my way to the top, in a sense, ridiculous as the notion is. When I found out much of our relationship was built on that assumption, that I'd do his bidding because I was his childe, I told him to go fuck himself."

Antoinette had it right then, about Jennifer at least. Maybe not about Marcus, if the man was willing to use his childe as a stepping stone in the Danse Macabre.

Triss laughed, leaning back in her chair. But with a few moments, her laughing faded, and her expression grew heavy. Yeah, the grossness of the situation sank in, and she scratched the back of her head as her eyes looked left and right down at the table, piecing together the images. Girl was so damn readable.

It meant Jennifer's new life as a vampire, was founded on a lie. Marcus didn't love her, and her new eternity of being an undead creature, forced to subsist on the blood of the living, was bullshit.

"Damn," Triss said. "That must... really fucking suck. You know my story, that my sire was just an obsessed stalker. At least... at least mine has some honesty to it."



Jen shrugged, dealt herself another hand, and came out with a full house. “Marcus always did like to think long term, a trait sadly missing in most Carthians.”

“... you should talk to the Prince sometime,” Julias.

His fellow Ventrue laughed. “You can’t be serious. She’s ancient, and I’m a decade embraced. Everyone at this table is older than me.”

“Yes but not everyone at this table manages to capture the eye of everyone the way you do.” Winking at her, Julias held out a hand for some cards. She tossed him five, and after a quick peek, he held up two fingers. Four jacks. He showed the hand, as if it was prophetic in some way. He smirked at the thought, but he could see the two women were a bit more moved by the lucky hand than he was. They were witches, after all.

“... you think I capture everyone’s eye?” Jen said.

A chip nailed the woman in the face. Incoming fire, from Triss.

“You go to a ball, basically naked, and have everyone staring at you? Not to mention I’m sure more than a few kine came their brains out because of you.” The Nos rolled her eyes, got up, and slipped behind Jen. Curious move.

Not so curious, when Triss set her hands onto Jen’s shoulders, then slid them forward to reach the woman’s neck. At the chest, she started undoing the buttons of Jen’s shirt. Jen was in a dark suit, jacket buttons undone, white shirt underneath, and a pencil skirt. Seemed Triss wanted to get her out of it, as her claws started to undo the buttons of the shirt, all the way down to the skirt. Jen never wore a bra, pointless as they were to a Kindred, and Triss set her claws along the inside of the shirt to spread it, exposing Jen’s breasts.

And Jen let her. She sat back, leaned her head into Triss’s neck, and kissed her jaw. But she kept her gaze on Julias as she did, both women did, subtle grins abound.

“I thought we were going to share more painful memories and secrets?” he said. Not that he minded, eyes drifting down the visual feast Triss was creating for him. Jennifer’s smooth skin, tinted slightly dark, and heavy breasts with red nipples, were beautiful. And Triss cupping her breasts, letting the size and weight of them conform to her fingers and claws, was an addictive sight.

That first night he’d gone on a date with Triss, helped her get a meal in the Bloodlust club, and the kine had actively sought Triss’s touch on her breasts, was a beautiful night. He’d never thought things would progress this way, that he’d be waking up each dusk with her in his arms.

And Jen being there too was an alluring, fascinating bonus. He'd slept with multiple women at the same time before, but this was a strange dynamic that deserved to be analyzed. He loved Triss, she loved him, and Jen was the friend that enjoyed tagging along for that ride, in all its aspects. It was all new to him, waking up to someone who was there for more than sex; not since the marriage had he enjoyed that. Hell, sometimes, there was no sex. Double hell, sometimes Jen was there, for the day to sleep, when there was no sex.

His romantic relationship had grown terribly strange, and wonderful. And considering the grin in their eyes, they didn't seem to mind the horribleness of his secret. Thank god. Like a soothing balm on his guilt, he watched the two women, and leaned back in his chair as well.

"I still have three secrets to share," Jen said, "and you, four." Her hand reached up, caressed along Triss's jaw and neck, before her hands fell to relax against the table completely, like his own. And through it all, Triss grinned at him while massaging the Ventrue's breasts. "But if we share more, we might spoil the night."

Once Jen began to blush life, her nipples hardening before his eyes, Triss ran one of her hands down to the woman's stomach, and under the waist of her skirt. A shiver and tremble from Jen made it obvious that Triss had begun caressing the woman's clitoris, or at least, the lips of her sex. No need to jump to such powerful stimulus so quickly.

And then his phone rang. Jack's ring.

"Um, hold on... in fact, don't stop what you're doing. It's Jack. I'll tell him to leave me alone or something." He pulled out the phone, and brought it up to his ear as he watched Triss and Jen both continue to grin at him. Succubuses. Neither of them were Daeva, and yet, they both took a strange delight in acting like them. Hell, Triss was really getting into it, riding Jen's love of showing off, and joining her at every opportunity these days.

He loved it.

"Yeah Jack?"

"Julias, there's, um... been a development," the kid said.

"Development?"

The girls remained silent, but didn't stop the show. Jen slid the shoulder of her jacket off so it fell back over the seat, and Triss took advantage, sliding the shirt apart further, and then undoing the zipper of the skirt. Black underwear of Jen exposed, Triss slipped a hand down underneath it again, and began to gently stroke the hidden flesh within, as the two women watched him on the phone.

“Yeah. If you give Tash a call, she can fill you in on more details. The sheriff found... what looks to be something straight out of the Circle’s ritual book, if I had to guess. We think it was done by the hunters though, but it certainly feels the same. Sacrificed kine, bloody symbols drawn on the walls, etc.”

“... that... does sound like something they might do.” If Jack and the sheriff thought it was done by hunters, and looked like Circle work, that was worth looking into.

Looking into anything other than what he was looking at, was going to be difficult.

“Distracted?” the phone said.

“You could say that.”

“Sorry, but this is important. It, it’s uh... yeah, there was a picture of me, at the site. Hand drawn.”

What? Fucking shit. Julias forced his eyes away from the display, from the two beautiful women trying to seduce him, and got up to begin pacing.

“That is not good. Must have had something to do with...” He looked the women’s way. They caught on quick, Jen redressing fast as Triss let her go, and got up to walk toward him. “Hold on.” Hand over the phone, he winced the biggest wince he could, like he was a college student losing his one opportunity to get laid. “Business, ladies. Apparently, hunter business.”

Both sighed, and pat him on the shoulder as they started to walk out.

“Shame,” Triss said. “She wasn’t lying, you know, about showing you what it’s like in the Circle. Dance naked in the moonlight? Child’s play.” She winked at him, and walked out the door as Jen waved at him.

“Jack, I hope you realize I’m watching two very attractive women walk out the door because of this phone call.”

Both women laughed as they shut the door behind them.

“Sorry Julias, but, yeah, blood ritual thing, and my picture at the crime scene. Hand drawn, too. I’ll have a more detailed report tomorrow. Right now I’m going to take a visit to Azamel’s, see what’s up there. And, who knows, they might know something about this fucking insanity.”

“I’ll send over the clean up crew immediately.” He hung up the phone, looked at the table, and sighed. Time to head back to HQ.

He looked down at the cards, and smiled. One secret down, four to go, right? They were probably going to kill him.

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~~Natasha~~

“I... I’m surprised, you d-didn’t let him take the photo,” Tash said.

“The ritual must have left scars on it. The only Kindred who could learn more are the Circle, and us.” Daniel walked around the room, with more attention paid to the symbols than before. Last time, the picture of Jack, and the skeleton it was dangling from, had been the stars of the show. But there were hundreds of symbols, and they had to be inspected.

“I know, b-but... it must be terrifying.”

“I know it is.” Daniel leaned over a table, and snapped a picture with his phone. “Everything always is. Now come on and help me look for anything I might have missed.”

“R-Right, ok. What did you get?”

“A decent scan of all primary images, but I haven’t touched anything.” The sheriff found the stack of papers, and started taking pictures of each one individually, before setting them on the table. “Each of these will need to be cataloged.”

“Right.” She’d get into detail mode then, and look for the little things. With her own phone, she started snapping pictures of each, and every tiny little symbol. So many. So very many.

“Jack’s no doubt reported this. Let’s do a sweep, and take the pictures back to the Elysium tower. We can leave the clean up to the Invictus.”

She nodded, and hmm’d her agreement as she zoomed in on some of the symbols on the ritual circle. So many symbols, and lettering of some kind. She didn’t recognize it though, and that was strange. What language had letters she didn’t recognize? She was sure she’d recognize nearly any language written, even if she couldn’t read it. Strange that it wasn’t Latin, because she expected anything like this to be using Latin.

The symbols of skulls were more easy to recognize. Bird, various hoofed animals, but no human skulls though. Suppose that was the point of the human sacrifice, to complete the arrangement of skulls. Worthy point of note then, maybe something to do with the different animals in the total?

“... how are things?” Daniel said.

“Um, ok? These, um, skulls are—”

“Not with this. I mean, in your personal life.”

He did say that, right? It wasn't just her imagination. Her sire was asking about her personal life?

“Um, it's... it's uh... good, actually. Surprisingly g-good.”

“Still seeing those two Uratha?”

“... I am.”

“Is it a fulfilling relationship?”

Ok, wow. This was way too weird a topic to have with her cold and dead sire. But he was asking, and that deserved reward, some effort on her part to return the effort he was putting into it.

“It is. They, um, they're smart-t-ter than I thought.”

“Oh, you thought they'd be stupid?”

“What? N-No! No, I... I thought maybe, they'd be... like what the stories, about Simon p-painted them as. Aggressive, and... yeah, st-stupid, I guess.” Thinking about it in that term, maybe she owed them an apology, when she saw them again.

“Uratha are stupid.” Her sire managed the tiniest chuckle, and she followed suit. Yeah, they kind of were. Were there any academics in the Uratha business? Instead of digesting mountains of books, she imagined their smartest sat around totems, and spoke to otherworldly creatures. Not exactly book smart.

Maybe it was better to think of them in terms of wisdom. A smart person knew a tomato was a fruit, a wise man knew to use it in a vegetable salad.

“B-But they do know a lot, and they show... p... p-patience, in a strange way. And, they're... sweet.”

“... I appreciate that you're in a unique relationship, Natasha. Understand that Antoinette is my friend, and has been for centuries; I am all too familiar with unique relationships.” A less-than-subtle hint about the Prince's rather sexually diverse past. It made Tash smile.

“Th-that is true, b-but, a girl doesn't t-t-talk to her dad, or sire, about the boys she brings home.”

“True,” he said. Tash glanced over her shoulder at him, and managed a peek at her sire’s quiet smile. Typical, that he had to be surrounded by the remains of a deadly sacrifice ritual, and investigating it, to be able to let a bit of himself out.

She was just like him. Antoinette’s guide to finding love was still on her mind, cultivating the garden of the self, letting others see it, and all the silly, romantic comparisons that came with it. Opening the gates for others was something she’d find easier doing while working, and, that’s what her sire was doing. It was cute in a way, and she mirrored his tiny smile as she watched him work.

With a heavy sigh, the sheriff took another picture, and flipped the paper to the next one. “I do not understand why this artist bothered to draw scenes from this ritual. The result is Terry’s face, but these other drawings seem pointless.” He turned, and showed a picture of a knee being cut open. “At least, whoever this kine was, they didn’t suffer.”

“D-Didn’t suffer?”

“Not likely. No signs of struggle, all the bones are undamaged, and these drawings are... detailed. They show signs of dissection, of detailed inspection of tendons and muscle fiber.” He showed her another picture, of the skin of a finger being peeled off. “... it’s almost as if... whoever was drawing these wanted to show someone something.”

“I don’t—”

“Ever read a medical textbook, perhaps on muscle tissue?”

“N-No. Glanced, once, maybe?”

“They’re filled with diagrams of muscles and bones. They look similar to these, except without this rather... macabre approach.” Another picture showed skin being pilled off the shin. Another showed muscle being pulled aside, and then cut apart, to show what looked like the bones of the forearm. “Someone was doing a demonstration.”

“... horrible.” She shivered, and resumed looking at the symbols. At this point, she was glad she was looking at the strange occult markings, and not vivid images of a body being dissected. The sort of nefarious purpose would lead to a dissection of a sacrifice, she couldn’t guess. “How m-much of this... w-w-will we leave behind for the Invictus?”

“We’ll be taking the skeleton and the images. Invictus will handle disposal of the locker’s contents.”

“... skeleton?” she said. Daniel nodded, and gestured to a duffel bag by the closed door. “... ugh.”

“... do you trust those two boys?”

“Um, Art, and Matt?”

“Correct.”

“... I... I am starting t-to, yes. I wasn't sure at first, b-because of what I'd heard about Simon, and... and um, how I m-met the... boys.”

Daniel nodded, eyes on the papers. Diligent, giving no pause except to examine his evidence more thoroughly.

“A painful introduction. I would tell you to be careful with them, Natasha, as they are wolves and aggressive by nature, but... I won't tell you that, because I trust you.”

She chuckled, and peeked at him again. Like a hardboiled detective, he continued his work without looking her way, but she knew he was probably smirking with his joke. At least, as much as his face was capable of smirking.

“I asked them, Art and M-Matt, to... investigate the old p-prison with me.”

“Putting your boyfriends in an awkward position. Help their girlfriend, and upset their boss. Obey their boss, and upset their girlfriend,” Daniel said.

“... yeah, I g-guess.”

“No, you made the right call. We need information about these hunters, and if we can get the Uratha to help, then by all means.”

Heh. She took pictures of each individual letter in the circle, tilting her head around and around to see if she could figure out what they meant, or where they were from. Nothing, no memories triggered, no awareness raised. Utterly clueless. Sighing, she moved on to take detailed pictures of some of the symbols on the walls, zooming in to inspect individual ones. On close inspection, she saw a lot of the symbols were repeated, placed in varying sizes, but usually oriented upward.

“Should... sh-should I ask them to come here?”

“... that may be prudent, before the Invictus arrive and contaminate the scene.”

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“Sheriff,” the two wolves said, at the same time.

Daniel raised a brow, and looked down at Natasha beside him. Yeah, talking at the same time was something they did, a lot. She thought it was delightful, but her sire, probably not so much.

He stepped back, and gestured them into the locker room. Both boys stepped in at the same time, and each whistled as they looked the walls up and down.

“... I smell humans,” Art said. “A few humans were in here.”

Matt took a long sniff as he went down into a squat beside the skeleton. “Smells like this poor bastard’s blood on the walls. Couple months old? Ugh, reeks.”

Dogs had a sense of smell so much stronger than any Kindred’s, let alone kine’s. Tash did not want to be them, in a room reeking of old blood.

“Never seen symbols like these.” Art leaned over one of the tables, and ran a fingertip along the blood. And then tasted it. Ugh, ugh! Tash gagged at the sight, and the wolves chuckled. “Yeah, human.”

“I thought that was considered a... sin, of a sort?” Daniel said, gesturing to what Art just did.

“Eat not the flesh of man.” Shrugging, Art ran a finger along one of the carved symbols, while Matt came to join him. “It’s old, rotten blood. Not exactly a problem.”

“It’s a good thing you called us, Tash.” Matt took some time beside the skeleton as well, and sniffed the air several times, loudly, drawing in each breath with slow, calculating depth. Twice now she was seeing them play detective. It was a good look, she liked it, put them in a more respectable light than just her silly boyfriends. They were professionals, and dedicated.

“Why d-d-do you say that?”

“Spirits were here. Summoned.”

Daniel stepped in, and held out a picture. “Anything to do with this?”

“Shit, Jack?” Art took the picture, and compared it against the others on the table. “... fuck, this is some... horrible shit. What happened here?”

“You don’t know?” the sheriff said.

“Nope. Never seen anything like this. All I know is, someone cut a hole through the wall. It’s gone now, but someone cut a hole, a tiny sliver, and was... probably talking, or showing...” Arturo held up the picture of Jack, and a picture of a human heart, free of its ribcage, drawn in the same style, same hand. “I assume Jack’s still alive and kicking, as much as a vampire can be alive. And being Kindred,



not like you can just remove the heart and draw a picture of it. Then again, how did someone get this angle on him, on his face? Quite the mystery. And I always did love a good mystery.”

“Thought you just loved shadows, hiding like a pussy?”

Art threw Matt a punch in the arm, and Matt returned it. And then another round, punch for punch. Daniel looked at Tash, and managed a subtle eye roll. Tash did her best to keep the laughter between sealed lips, but it didn’t work too well. Leave it to these two goofballs to go from professionally analyzing a blood ritual, to making jokes, in the middle of what looked like hell.

“Wraiths?” Art said.

“Wraiths,” Matt said.

Tash glanced Daniel’s way, but the man said nothing. She expected a ‘Wraiths?’ from him, to roll with the flow of the conversation, but that was her naivete showing through. If he knew or didn’t know anything about what they were talking about, it was advantageous for him to not let the Uratha know what he knew. Like her earlier, when they mentioned wraiths at the prison. She knew, and Daniel knew, wraiths were connected to Black Blood, and, maybe Maria. But that was all, and that wasn’t enough.

Art turned to face them, wincing as he looked down at the portrait of Jack in his hands. “I’m getting some familiar scents, but nothing I can pinpoint. I can’t track it down, but… hunters talking with wraiths gives us something to look into. We’ll get back to you, or Jack, if something comes up.”

If something comes up. That meant something. Matt made a quick peek over his shoulder, and when she caught his eye, he offered a small wink.

They were going to show her something.

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~~Beatrice~~

Back in the Three Kings Cemetery, Triss looked up at the sky. Too close to South Side to see any stars.

Jacob probably hated that. A member of the Circle, long as he was, as old as he was? Man was probably born under the stars, and danced naked in the moonlight on regular occasion, back in the day

before electricity, and phones, and cameras. Did he sacrifice humans callously? It wasn't hard to imagine, a Nosferatu getting hardcore about his delving into the dark arts, sinking deep into a pit of cruelty, malice, and madness to join it.

Hopefully, the mental image wasn't entirely accurate. Jacob seemed to have a soft spot, enough to at least do as Antoinette asked, and keep kills to kine who deserved it. But, she doubted the man, back in the day, realized he'd lose the stars by helping create a city. Probably didn't realize how much stuff he'd lose, going down that route.

Sympathy for the devil. And the devil, was whistling what she was sure was a Saturday morning cartoon theme from the eighties.

"Your sacrifice doing ok?" Jacob said.

"Um... she's a sacrifice. Do we care?" Triss adjusted the body on her shoulder. Unconscious. A heavy woman, some muscle and fat to go with. Supposedly a killer, drug dealer, and a lot of things in between, according to Jacob. But considering the hellhole they picked her up from, a dark, dirty crack in the ground in Devil's Corner, she bet he was right.

The joys of cities, for Kindred at least, was that the population drifted into group categories, whether they wanted to or not. Certain categories were easier prey, easier to make vanish. Certain categories were asking for it. Certain categories bred unjust, unfair environments, that naturally lent toward self destructive behavior. Sad as that was, deadbeats wanted by the police and liable to get thrown in jail for a few lifetimes, were perfect prey for Kindred who wanted to remain on the down low. Not all Kindred were concerned with the validity of the charges though, and she had to trust Jacob put in due diligence. Not the easiest thing to trust in him for.

No chance of them being seen, in Jacob's cloak of night. She and Jen were free to walk, skip, jump, or do whatever. Jacob took full advantage, while the rest of them were a lot more comfortable feeling the vibe of the cemetery: dead. They walked slow, somber, while Jacob hopped around, climbing up some tombstones, and offering a kiss to one of the larger angels.

"We care a little," Jacob said. "Don't damage the goods."

"She's a person." Jen sighed, rubbed her arms, and looked around. Didn't take her for the type to be afraid of cemeteries, but after what happened below, maybe that had changed.

"A wanted criminal, and justly so. As far as we're concerned, she's just a sacrifice." Jacob, in his dark robes, slid down the angel's side and approached Jennifer. "You wanted to go deeper down this rabbit hole, Jen. You'll have to get used to killing kine."

“I thought we fueled the rituals with vitae?” She said, bite in her voice as she pushed past Jacob. Took guts to push around the elder, but at this point Jen was familiar enough with the man to know he enjoyed it when people got snippy with him, pushed back. More familiar than Triss really, but unlike Triss, Jen’s punches were harmless.

“We do, usually. But fresh blood can be used in different rituals, in different ways. And besides, we need the body. Gonna introduce you to an old friend.”

Triss jumped over to Jacob, and reached out with her free hand to pull down on his robe to get him to walk beside her, lean in to her so she could whisper as they moved.

“The fuck, you’re going to summon that thing again?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s my friend. He’ll want to meet Jennifer, and—”

“Black Blood? That... that thing, that possessed the corpse first time you sent me into this mess? That thing is a god damn fucking... thing! You seriously consider it a friend?”

“Ha! Sent you? You volunteered. And besides,” he draped his arm over her shoulder, and onto her other shoulder where the kine lay, “Black Blood’s eager to get to know you better. I trust him, he’s my friend, like I told you.”

“... better? It”—and it was an it, according to the sheriff—“is a fucking... spirit. An actual, real, fucking nasty son of a bitch spirit, Jacob. The fuck sort of game are you playing at here?”

“Whatever do you mean, sweet Beatrice?” Chuckling, Jacob walked up to the mausoleum, and opened the stairway down into their lovely little slice of hell. He put a little distance between them so she had to speak up to keep the conversation going, meaning he didn’t want her to whisper anymore.

“I mean, that thing... that thing scared the fucking shit out of me last time, Jacob. You can’t be—”

“I can be friends with whoever I want, Mom.” Bastard laughed, a little louder, as he pulled out his LED lantern, and started down the stairs.

They never talked about Black Blood. Jacob avoided the topic the few times she tried to bring it up, or kept his answers short and vague, like that time they were visiting Azamel. Figures, that Jacob wouldn’t reveal more details about the alien entity that had possessed a corpse, and joined in torturing her that first night. She shivered as her mind delighted her with unfortunately vivid memories of the

corpse staring down at her, laughing, as she, it, stabbed her in the stomach, and let Jacob explain the whole technique of learning a ritual. Empty the mind, let the beast through, and find your fucking zen.

They weren't doing that tonight, no plans to teach her more crúac rituals any time soon, thank god. Tonight Jacob was going to demonstrate a ritual, with Black Blood there, for whatever reason. Poor Jen, girl had no idea how deep this insanity went. Neither did Triss. And that was exciting, and terrifying.

Down into the depths and darkness. Down beneath the hundreds of dead of the cemetery. Down into the Earth where the light couldn't penetrate. Down into Jacob's home away from home. Triss adjusted the unconscious woman on her shoulder, and followed the robed man into the black, lit only by his lantern. Jen stayed close, and squinted her eyes to try and see ahead of them. Last time the sheriff had been waiting for them, and that had been scary in its own right.

"... you got another hole in the ground like this somewhere?" Triss said.

"Of course."

"Yeah, that makes sense. If Daniel knows where this place is, and I assume so does the Prince, you... probably have some place that they don't know about." To do your more heinous, dangerous shit.

"I suggest you girls do the same. Find a place no one knows about, or make one. It might take a few decades, but with diligence and determination, you can have your very own underground hole in the wall. Collect your favorite possessions. Bring your enemies so you can torture them safely, without fear of interference. Learn to play the drums without bothering your neighbors."

Triss could almost hear Jen roll her eyes.

Slowly, they approached the bowl. It didn't take long for the bowl to mean something new to Triss, after the few times she'd seen it. Every time, it was pain. Every time, it was screams. Even now, she ducked her head and looked around at the walls of stone, sure she could hear the sounds of people dying. Her voice was mixed in there somewhere, had to be, still echoing from those nights of torture.

She set the kine down beside the bowl, and she squatted down next to them. Here, it was plain to see the dark skeletons holding up the bowl, the great weight on their bodies, crushing them, destroying them. She almost wanted to ask if Jacob had carved them, or sculpted them or whatever. Hard to tell what the material was, old as it was. Smooth stone, or old metal. Could you make something like this out of metal, back in the old days? Was it from the old days? Lot of questions, and she wasn't sure if she'd ever ask them.

Nah, she would eventually. It'd take time though.

Jacob picked the sacrifice up, and jumped into the bowl. Up and up, he raised her until he got her hands over the hook that dangled above, and let it catch the rope holding the kine's wrists. Dangling. Meat on a hook.

"Back in the days of yore, Kindred, or everyone really, thought that without pain, a sacrifice was meaningless. Burn the witch? She had to be awake for it, otherwise what was the point? Hang the criminal. Make sure they squirmed. Wasn't until the late 1800s they came up with humane neck snapping hangings. Heh."

"So I guess we're civilized, because we're doing this with drugs? Keeping them under?" Jen circled the bowl, arms folded across her chest, and a touch of a sneer on her nose and lips. She wasn't used to killing kine, and this display was closer to hanging and gutting a deer, than any sort of way a Kindred normally killed kine.

Triss was used to it, to separating herself from the reality that she was killing something she used to be, letting out her young Nosferatu frustration and beast on humans that deserved death. She'd developed quite the reputation in her younger years, and had had Garry talk to her multiple times about her bullshit. The Masquerade was more important than her life, and if she continued to increase the body count, the sheriff would put her out for sunrise. Probably nailed to a cross too, for dramatic effect at the Prince's request. Her siring had been done without permission, after all; each day she was alive was a gift, according to Garry.

Jen's younger years, on the other hand, had been lacking in the violence department. Sleeping around was about the worst of it, which meant nothing to a Kindred. She did have a couple kills to her, the typical accidents a young Kindred might have. But Jen didn't have the animal inside her that was comfortable with killing prey; yet, according to Jacob.

"Indeed we are civilized, little lady, indeed we are." Jacob hopped off the bowl, and started toward the other side of the room, where the darkness was impenetrable. "At least, relatively. It's all relative. Everything is." He tossed the LED lantern over his shoulder as he walked, and Triss jumped for it. If it broke, they'd be fucked, and have to feel their way out of here. Fucking bastard.

Snarling, she followed him.

"The fuck are you keeping back here?" she said.

"You probably don't want to see." The old man glanced over his shoulder at her. It was getting easier to read his body language, despite the bandage over his eye sockets.

“Why would I—oh fucking god.”

The lantern reach was less, in the strange dark side of the room, like there was a fog fighting it. There was no fog though, just oppressive blackness, and Jacob’s wall of what the fuck. From this close, she could see he had chests, old fashioned wooden chests that you’d keep large blankets in, except in this case, it was bones. At least, one of the chests had bones sticking out of it, human bones. As she looked around, lantern raised, she noticed the other chests were partially open, one with handles sticking out, weapon handles. Knives, swords, similar. Another chest had limbs, rotting limbs. The smell hit her, and she gagged, causing the lantern to shake around in her hand as she struggled to remain standing. The smell was localized to this side of the room though, mostly. Maybe it had something to do with the weird blackness.

She raised the lantern, and tilted her head to the side. More symbols. So. Many. Symbols. Hundreds, thousands of them, many spattered with a language she’d never seen before, letters she didn’t recognize. Circles and triangles, in and outside each other, and various drawings of bones, of skulls. Cow skull, bird skull, others. No human skulls though, except for one, in the center of a triangle, in the center of the wall.

On the wall were chains as well, dangling, each lined with hooks, and many of the hooks held a body part of some kind. They seemed preserved somehow, as if someone had dried them, but without them shrinking. A hand. A foot. A leg. Limbs, angled and hung in a pattern, and Triss raised the lantern higher to scan the wall. The pattern was a loose circle, and a triangle of limbs within.

The wall was bleeding. Black? She stepped in closer, beside Jacob, and reached out with her free hand to touch the onyx liquid. Cold. But, as it coated her fingertip, it faded away, dripping off of her like oil, but evaporating quickly like alcohol. This is where that alien thing came out of last time, then.

She looked at Jacob, and he looked to her, big Joker smile on his face.

“It was a long, long time, figuring out this ritual,” he said. Meandering along, he ran his fingers across the stone of the wall, the chains, the body parts, and smiled as he stopped in front of one of the symbols. A painted bird skull. Probably a crow, considering Triss was wearing a crow skull around her neck.

“What’s this ritual for?” Jen’s voice. Triss looked over her shoulder to find her fellow neonate hugging herself, and looking the wall of death up and down. Her eyes lingered on one of the chests, and the body parts it was full of. Like a heavy blanket, the smell enveloped her too, and she gagged, taking a step back.

“You’re about to find out. And, do keep this a secret, would you, Jen? The Prince knows, but as you can tell, the sheriff doesn’t appreciate what I’m doing. You can only imagine the sort of dirty looks I’d get if more people knew.”

“And what is that?” Jen said, gesturing to the wall. “I... I don’t—”

“Words can’t do it justice.” Jacob chuckled a little more, opened one of the chests, and pulled out a large knife. “Come on. We get to eat!” With a slow, wandering sway, Jacob returned to the bowl, knife hand taking practice swings at the air. Like a child testing his new toy sword. “Did you know, my ladies, that I once met a Kindred, before I came to Dolareido, that didn’t eat only blood, but also flesh?”

“Flesh?” Triss followed him, Jen a moment later, and the Nos looked up at her boss with a raised eyebrow. “Doesn’t sound like a vampire.”

“And yet they suffered all the same weaknesses. Fire, daylight. Unfortunately for them, they had an extra weakness: the need to eat fresh flesh.”

That was some classic movie monster madness, by the sounds of it. “Sounds like... sounds like something different. And how the fuck do you remember something that long ago? Thought you elders didn’t remember shit from that far back.”

“You wound me, Beatrice! Some of us remember better than others. Some of us take the time to write down important things, and reread our journals back to ourselves, to break through the illusions torpor brings.” Shrugging, Jacob gave the body a push, so she... it swayed back and forth over the bowl. “I helped her. For a while, I hunted with her, back in the old days when... when we embraced our beasts with reckless abandon, in the dark corners of the world. Even took a bite of flesh, to try it. Alas, couldn’t digest it.”

Jacob kept journals? What fortune would the Prince give Triss in exchange for those. What secrets, what power. Triss smirked, and looked back up to Jacob.

“What happened to her?”

“No idea. It was hundreds of years ago.” And with all the grace of a shitty butcher chopping up meat with a cleaver, he ripped the woman’s clothes from her body, and took a swipe at the hanging, naked flesh. The belly. Jen and Triss both jumped back, gagging, Jen choking along with it, as the woman’s guts fell into the bowl. Jacob didn’t let them fall out either, but made them come out, using his free hand and yanking the globs of meat free. “She fucked like a minx, though.”

Both women stared on, eyes wide, jaws dropping, as Jacob emptied the woman of her insides. Drugged to high heaven, she wasn’t waking up, and after this, she never would.

“Jesus, Jacob.” Triss walked around, held the lantern up despite herself, and peered into the bowl. Rope and rope of intestines. Kidneys. Liver. He ripped the diaphragm open and tore out the heart and lungs. He kept yanking things out, ripping, tearing, blood gushing over his robes. He managed to avoid other juices, other things that came out of the body and its organs, but he more than embellished in getting blood on himself.

The girls said nothing. Triss couldn't say anything, and a quick peek at Jen showed the same paralysis. The fuck. The fuck fuck fuck.

Jacob, laughing, chopped off the woman's leg. A hard hack, knife carving through skin and muscle and bone with a single swipe, before it got stuck in the other leg. Jacob grabbed the removed leg before it landed, hopped down off the bowl, and smiled at the ladies as he held it over his head. He let some of the drops of blood fall onto his tongue, then held it out to them. “Quickly now, before it spoils.”

Leg. Leg. He was holding a leg. As if to show off his trophy, he rolled the leg back and forth in his palms, and held it out to them. Muscle, fat, fresh dripping blood. Down deeper, and deeper, into this private pit of hell of theirs.

Oh, what the hell. She grabbed the limb, held it up by the knee, and let the blood drip onto her tongue.

This bloody display was disgusting. It was barbaric, and horrific, and... thrilling. So dark, so wrong, so bad, that it stroked a little part of her brain, somewhere, that liked being bad. Life in the palm of her hand, life in so callous and visceral a form, a limb from prey. Part of her wanted to make a comparison to a chicken or cow leg, but that didn't do it justice. A human life, even a scumbag life like this kine's, someone Triss would have gladly killed in her younger years, was still significant and special. To feel a kine die in her arms as she drank them to death, was a feeling she knew well enough to recall from memory. But this approach, dismembering, spilling all the blood everywhere, and tasting it from a limb? This wasn't feeding, this was a ritual. This was special too.

She held out the leg to Jen, and waited. Sure enough, after a few useless breaths, Jen took the leg, and did the same thing. A hunk of meat, of sacred meat, of something worthless and special, all wrapped in one.

Jacob nodded, smiled a quieter, more sincere smile, and tossed the leg into the bowl of death and pain. “Now, each of us will spill a drop of our blood onto the mess.”



“Mess?” Jen, gagging some more as she leaned over the bowl, gestured to the entrails. “This was... ugh.”

“Kindred these days.” More laughter, always with the laughter, Jacob slipped a knife out of his robe, and sliced open his palm with all the grace of a bulldozer. “You drink human beings, you drink their blood. Never forget what they are. A soul, wrapped in guts and muscle, sinew and bone, tendons, and”— he reached into the bowl, and pulled out something wet and dripping, something that fit into his palm—“organs. A divine combination of meat and something more. And, how easily, it all slips into nothing but a bowl.” After tossing back in the lump of guts, the psycho reached his other hand out over the bowl, and squeezed his palm until a thick drop of Kindred blood fell into the gory mess. Without looking, he tossed the knife Triss’s way.

She snatched it out of the air, and slit her palm open as well. Long passed giving a shit about being careful or gentle about knives and flesh. She stepped in toward the bowl, forced herself to look down at the abhorrent jumble of death, and dribbled a couple drops of her blood.

Jen took the knife, and cut her palm, but with a blatant wince and hiss. Not used to pain. She would be, if she continued down this road. Sighing, she dripped some blood onto the mess as well.

“Sure you don’t want to be back in the cave with your kine bedfellows, Jen?” Jacob said. “Or maybe Julias’s bed?”

The Ventrue rolled her eyes, and threw Jacob the knife. Almost threw the knife at him, too, but Jen seemed to calm down at the last moment. And once disarmed, she looked down at the cut on her palm as it healed.

“You’re just like Marcus. All you think about is sex,” Jen said.

“You’re the one sleeping with everyone in the city, not me.” The eyeless bastard shrugged.

“That’s not what I meant. You keep reducing people and their actions down to sex, and only sex. You don’t know me, Jacob.” She stomped over to him, and jammed a finger into his chest. “I like sex. That doesn’t mean it’s all I think about, or that I am defined by it.”

The old man laughed, and gave her a poke in the sternum too. “I know. Lighten up, girl. Been working for me for what, six, seven years? You need to let your tongue fly loose more, loose as your legs.” Without skipping a beat, the jackass pulled a necklace out of his robe, a string with various small animal skulls dangling from it, and started to shake them over the entrails.

Triss said nothing. Better to let these two hammer out their issues, than for her to jump in and make things worse. It was plain to see that Jacob kept the circle at arm’s length, and Triss was the first

one, since his original circle, to really try and break through to the man. She was an asshole though, and could match Jacob's asshole attitude easily. Jen was a calmer, more articulate, elegant sort, who didn't like to get her words dirty.

She was going to have to learn. With all the blood and guts that'd be falling on them, drowning them in no time, Jacob wouldn't hesitate to get just as visceral with his language.

Jennifer snorted, and folded her arms across her chest once more. "When's the last time you gotten between anyone's legs, old man?"

Ok, maybe she could throw an insult or two.

Jacob, laughing like fucking Santa Claus, reached into his robe again, and pulled out another necklace. This one didn't have skulls, but it did have some stones, smooth black stones, wrapped and looped in the string the necklace was made from. He dangled it over the bowl, and shook it as well.

He began to chant. A language she didn't recognize. Sounded like it came from maybe the Middle East, but she didn't know shit about languages, so maybe not. Whatever it was, it sounded melodic, and almost hypnotic. Until the silence around them joined in, with the screams of the dead.

Hell opened its gates for them.

Drip. Drop. Drip drop. Black began to ooze from the walls, heavy, thick, sliding down the crevices of the stone like molasses. Scary, black molasses. It churned and bubbled, splashed and boiled, and splattered out over the stone floor of the cave, as it crept out toward them. Like a scene from a James Bond flick, the water in the cage rising to drown them. Except, this black liquid wasn't water, and Triss stepped away from it as it came closer, and closer.

Jacob did no such thing. With a big smile on his asshole face, the eyeless Nosferatu squatted down, and let the couple inches of heavy obsidian liquid roll across the bottom of his robes. He ran a finger through it too, scooping it around and around like a child playing with his pudding. Heavy and sticky, the strange liquid coated his fingers, and he laughed as he stood up to let it drip off.

"Um... uh... what do we do?" Jen said, backing up toward the exit.

Triss sighed, and held up a hand. "We wait... Malachi here is going to show you... well, some strange shit."

"Malachi?"

The old man walked up to Jen, hooked an arm over her shoulders, and pulled her back toward the bowl. "An old name I sometimes used when communicating with the other side."

“... the other side? Like... the Disney song?”

“Shh!” Jacob shuddered, and pressed down on her shoulders, so the two of them started creeping along. “Don’t say the D word!”

Ok, Jen might have been annoyed and scared by the whole situation, but Triss couldn’t help but laugh.

“I... I...” The Ventrue winced as she looked down, and shivered as the black ooze started to pour over her feet. “Is this... what happened when you... did this, Triss?”

“Nope, Jacob had already done his madness when I arrived.” Her turn to wince, as the ooze started to coat her feet. It felt cold, and alive. “Or at least, some of it.”

“Indeed my beauties, indeed. But this ritual is not always done in the same manner. There are many ways to break through the wall. Especially when you have help from the other side.”

“You sound like a cartoon villain,” Jen said. But, even as she tried to make jokes, come off strong, she was staring down at the cold, rippling liquid creeping up her ankles. Past the ankle, to the shin, and she started to shake. “I... I still don’t know what’s going on. You mention Black Blood, but... I thought we were here to learn crúac? I thought we were going to... to delve into... the dark arts of the Circle?”

“Oh, but we are.” Jacob hugged her shoulders again, and gestured to the bowl.

The skeleton sculptures beneath the bowl were crying black tears. Heavy, thick globs of the onyx liquid fell from their empty eye sockets. If a skeleton could make a facial expression, horrified would be the word Triss would use to describe them now, as if their eyes had widened, as if their lips had pulled back, as if their pupils had dilated, mouths open and screaming their fear.

The ooze started to climb. Not up the girls anymore, or Jacob, but up the walls, the same walls it’d bled from. Defying gravity, it started to climb the stones, the symbols, the crevices, until all the walls were a mix of black flowing both up, and down. The ooze that surrounded them, covered their feet in the cold, started to creep along the ceiling. Gravity reversed, the ooze covered the stone above in the same way it did their feet, and, as if to taunt them for being bound by physics, it started to rain black. And then the pool of black around them started to rain upward.

It was no longer a question of avoiding or dodging the drops; they were coming from everywhere. The lantern fell from Triss’s claws, and she cursed as she reached for it. Too late, it fell into the black, and floated. Thank god. Or, not floating, but rather, hands, obsidian hands rose from the goop, and kept the lantern aloft, four hands together, palms up. The only source of light, and the black ooze knew to keep it above the suffocating blackness.

Triss and Jen each turned around, slowly, stopping to stare at the floating hands for a minute, then looking at the raindrops of cold darkness going up, and down, up, and down, and then back to the floating hands. The skeletons holding up the ritual bowl continued to cry tears, but the skeletons on the top layer of the metal bones cried tears downward, and the skeletons beneath cried tears upward. A pattern.

Then the screams erupted.

Triss and Jen threw their hands up to their heads, and covered them as best they could as a woman's shriek split the soaked, dark air. A man's followed, a bellowing holler that caused the black ooze to ripple. Another woman's, and another man's cries bounced around in the cave, echoing over the death water and into the Earth.

No wonder people called Three Kings Cemetery haunted.

Black mist began to roll over the area, swallowing everything as it crept over the black water. This part she recognized, this part Triss was here for last time. She forced herself to hold still, except for a couple steps toward Jen to get closer to her, as the rising onyx fog grew. There were screams in the fog tonight, far louder than last time, and Triss took Jen's hand, squeezed it, and closed her eyes as the mist swallowed them.

She opened her eyes. Just like last time, she could see. The black ooze was gone, no longer raining up and down, no longer coating the walls, no longer falling from the skeleton's eyes. Instead, mist leaked from their eyes, mixing into the gentle haze of darkness that swallowed them all. The lantern was gone. The light was gone, but she could see, and she knew the others could see too. The screams started to fade away, and a calmness settled over them. The sort of calm you'd expect to find by surrendering to hypothermia in an icy river, letting the numbness of your body sink you into sweet oblivion.

A hand snapped out, enormous, solid black ooze with mist dripping from the claws, and the hand ripped the corpse from the hook.

Jen screamed and jumped back, crouching, ready to fight or flight. But, both Jacob and Triss raised a hand, and motioned for her to come back. Impressive that the Ventrue responded that way; Triss figured she'd fall on her ass.

"Oh my, three blood of the undead tonight. Why, I can feel a certain tingle to that, if I may say so." In the darkness beyond them, beyond the bowl, in the black where Jacob's wall of goodies sat, the

sound rolled out from, as if the abyss was speaking to them. And, unless Triss was going out of her mind, the abyss had... a bit of a southern accent?

“Trying a new voice today, old friend?” Jacob said to the darkness.

“No, old friend, this is an old voice.” The deep, bassy rumble defied gender standards. Multi-layered and thick, the strange sound vibrated through the air, through the bowl and metal, and into the bodies of the Kindred staring, one of them with jaw dropped. “This one, you brought me... a hundred a fifty years ago, Malachi. I remember. A Mister Gardener? What a fine man he was. Fine man.” The laughter was deep, melodic, almost soothing, like as if someone gave a blue whale a southern drawl, and a cigar.

“Ha, did I? Christ, that’s a fucking long time ago. Was he fat?”

“That he was.” Black Blood’s laughter drew them in, or Triss at least. The rumbling grumble, from beyond the veil of shadow that swayed in the black beyond the bowl. That was a sexy voice. A sexy, alien, unimaginable voice.

Twitching movement. Flesh, naked, sagging and thick, flopped and stumbled as it came out of the blackness. Unnatural movement was easy to see, for any person. A subtle twitch, a sway that didn’t make sense, something that broke what humans learned were common movements to all other humans. Horror movies took advantage of that, made ghosts or whatnot twitch in unnatural or impossible ways. The uncanny valley, something that looks human, but a part of your brain knows it’s not.

Jen and Triss groaned, quietly, in disgust at the sight of the sacrifice’s body coming forward. The removed leg was reconnected to the pelvis, but hovering maybe half an inch beneath the joint, with black mist seeping out of the empty space. As the corpse came forward, knees crunched, ankles twisted and broke, and the body’s right arm snapped back and forth at the elbow, ninety degrees in the wrong direction. Crack. Crunch.

“That... that is... w-what...” Jen stared on, hands fallen limp at her sides, until one hand managed to rise and touch a couple fingers to her bottom lip. Jaw still dropped.

The corpse came closer, and as she—it opened her mouth, black mist seeped from over its teeth. The closer it got, the closer the wall of black behind it came, a second wall of black fog Triss did not want to touch.

As it stood there, one of its arms snapped off completely, tearing, twisting like a crocodile death rolled it. It grew still after, arm now hovering to the shoulder, attached by black mist instead of tendons and ligaments.

“Come, stand by the offering.” It waved them in, motion jerking, not smooth at all, as it walked over to the bowl.

Gulping, Triss did as requested, and walked over to stand in front of the entity. Jen did as well, after a moment or two. Jacob was already there, waiting, arms across his blood-soaked chest, and a warm smile on his face. So very, very creepy.

“And who is this fine lady?” it said, nodding in Jen’s direction as it leaned over the bowl. Twitching grip found one of the organs, the liver, and Black Blood raised it from the bowl to examine it. Triss was sure the entity would have begun eating it, but, instead, it inspected the liver bringing it up to its face, and eying it.

“... Jennifer.”

“Well Jennifer, pleasure to make your acquaintance. I do hope this meeting leads to a grand friendship.” The corpse winked at her, and squeezed the sacrifice’s liver, until it popped.