

~~Beatrice~~

They walked through the cemetery gates, and stepped among the tombstones, a bunch of brainwashed kine behind them. She tried to not show it, but she was a little scared. Not of Jacob and the madness he pursued; that ship had sailed. No, she was afraid of Jack.

He'd accidentally hurt these kine, their brains, with how easily he'd dominated. Accidentally performed an act most ancilla Ventrue would have struggled to perform, let alone a neonate, no less. And he wasn't lying about it, either. The kine behind them were thoroughly brain fucked. She could have turned around, slit the throat of one of them, and the others would have barely reacted. Normally, a kine brainwashed by a Ventrue's Dominate, could break free if the stimulus they were exposed to was too extreme, or if they thought their orders went against their beliefs, or self preservation.

These five might as well have been wearing blindfolds and drugged to hell, with how little they were thinking. A blessing in disguise, she supposed. Killing an animal was easier when it didn't display signs of intelligence.

The woman Jack had left unconscious was still there, on the ground and sleeping against a tombstone, untouched. She'd be fine. No kine came to the cemetery with ill intent, not with people like Jacob and Black Blood haunting it. In the past, the kid would have felt horrible about leaving a kine unconscious and unguarded like this, but Jack walked past her, sparing only a quick glance and frown. He probably still felt bad, but didn't let it stop him. Sad. Every night was turning the kid more and more into a typical Kindred.

What would Julias say about that? He was the one Kindred in the whole city who tried to keep his humanity, keep thinking about kine as more than food, and tried to keep the peace between Kindred. Superman, a real white knight, who would tell Jack he should find a better place to let the kine woman sleep off the Kiss coma. He was dead, and Beatrice was about to kill a dozen kine in a prayer offering to the Crone, in hopes of learning a Crúac ritual to hunt down the hunters.

Depressing.

She guided Jack to the mausoleum in the back of the cemetery. They said nothing. This wasn't a fun time, and it wasn't a chatty time. It was a shit time, and she was about to expose Jack to a side of it she'd prefer to not.

The journey through the tunnel was gloomy as all hell. The warning sign above remained, Jacob's sign, and Jack took note of it, but he'd seen this tunnel before, from that time Black Blood rescued him.

Black Blood, and Jacob. The kine behind followed. Some managed a glance up at the sign, but where there should have been fear, she saw only numb faces. And when it got too dark for human eyes, they started feeling along the stone walls to guide them. Sheep to the slaughter.

“Clarice! How nice of you to join us. And five more? The Crone will be pleased.”

The sight was horrific. The seven kine Jacob had prepared dangled from hooks over the bowl, alive, and unconscious. Triss didn’t know if the Crone cared about pain, beyond what the Kindred had to suffer to learn Crúac, or if Jacob had ever indulged in torturing his sacrifices, but she was thankful he’d never done that with her around.

The elder stood by the giant bowl, dressed in his black robes and black eye bandage. Jennifer was there, wrapped in a black cloak as well, and her eyes were wide, locked onto Jack and the offerings he brought.

“You did this?” she said.

Jack nodded to her, frown deepening, before he turned to the people following. “Do whatever they tell you to.” And the five kine nodded, like ants obeying the word of their queen, off to die without a thought.

“Excellent,” Jacob said. “Nice to see you putting that gift to use.”

“Gift?” Jack walked up to Jacob, glared up at his bandaged eyes, and grit his teeth. “Don’t. Just don’t. I’m here so we can find the hunters. I’m not helping you beyond that, and it’s not a gift. It’s a curse, treat it as such.”

Jacob’s smile grew, but the ice behind it was growing, too. Gulping, Triss and Jen both took a step back as they looked between the two men; so much for Jack being a kid. Two men fighting, two rather strong Kindred evidently, was not something she wanted to be near when it started.

“Curses can be gifts, Jack. Problems can be opportunities. You think so small! Give it a few hundred years, and you’ll learn to see the bigger picture.” Jacob stepped around the bowl, put it between him and Jack, and gestured to the enormous metal sacrificial altar. “Now, since your sacrifices seem to be thoroughly under your control, I won’t bother with drugs.”

Beatrice raised a hand. “We could—”

“Nonsense! Come, you, you, you, you, and you, stand over the bowl, and lean forward.” If Triss could have seen Jacob’s eyes, they’d no doubt be wide with madness. Jennifer was in awe over Jack’s

abilities, impressed by his ridiculous power of Dominate, and Jacob was getting giggly over the power of it.

“How is this going to play out?” Jack said.

With a menacing grin, Jacob shrugged, and walked up to the first kine, the woman. “I have prepared the altar, and Black Blood has assisted. All that’s left now, is to prove our commitment, before I make the prayer.”

The slaughter commenced.

Beatrice forced herself to watch, but Jennifer had to look away. Triss didn’t blame her, honestly. If it were any other circumstance, Triss wouldn’t watch either, but the murder happening in front of her was her fault, her choice. Jacob may have been the one pulling the trigger, but she pushed for it, asked for it, and now she was neck deep in death because of it. Thankfully, Jacob wasn’t asking her to do the killing. Maybe he was protecting her, or maybe he liked killing kine and wanted to do it himself. Either way, she was more than fine with letting the old man do it for her.

Except, she would have killed them in a less messy method. A knife in the skull was instant death in almost all cases, and she knew Jacob had knives. The elder, on the other hand, never killed cleanly, as if the act of spilling blood needed to be as gory as possible. Maybe it had to be, for Black Blood to do whatever it was that Black Blood did. The spirit wasn’t in the room with them, far as Triss could tell, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t.

Jacob ripped the girl’s throat out, literally. The shower of blood into the empty, rusty bowl, and the struggles of the dying woman, were enough to stir reactions from the other sacrifices. If given time, they’d have probably broken free from Jack’s brainwashing, with the threat of imminent death weighing on them. But Jacob worked fast, spending no more than two seconds per sacrifice. The first one was still alive, by the time he’d ripped the throat out of the last one.

With each disgusting mess of murder and blood, he tossed the bits of throat into the bowl; blood and flesh were a part of the sacrifice, too. He let the writhing, silent sacrifices fall to the floor, where they bled out onto the Earth and stone, but not after having lost a gallon of blood into the bowl.

“Not exactly kosher, are they?” he said as he looked down at their bodies. His smile was gone, replaced by something else, something strange and twisted. Not a grin, or a grimace, but something Triss didn’t recognize, something between intrigue and resolution. Her boss was making jokes, but he didn’t mean them.

Jack turned his back to the slaughter, and stepped clear. For a second, Triss figured he was going to walk out, but he didn't. Like her, he probably felt committed to being present for the results of his actions. Unlike her, he couldn't stomach seeing such a horrible death.

Once upon a time, she couldn't have either. Even at her worst, when she hated life and killed scum to vent, she didn't delight in gore. This was disgusting. This was the road she was going down, if she wanted revenge. And it was the road she'd continue going down, if she ever wanted to see Julias again. Hell, this was a small taste of the Hell that she'd be treading on, a road paved in blood and murder, if she ever wanted to see him again.

Stop thinking about that, Triss. For now, just focus on catching the hunters. Killing some fucking shithead kine that were bad for the city, in pursuit of catching the hunters, was a perfectly reasonable action to take. Vampire lives came first.

Julias wouldn't agree. Julias, was dead.

The blood poured, and only got worse when Jacob hopped up onto the edge of the bowl, reached out for a person hanging over it, and continued with the same process. These sacrifices didn't squirm, and only swung mildly, giant hooks snug under the bindings on their wrists. Unconscious, they went to death with all the fight of a stone. Blood gushed from their ripped open throats, down into the bowl, and onto the bits of throat from the other sacrifices.

The longer she watched, the more it felt like she was watching chickens, cows, or pigs being slaughtered. Now she knew why some people became vegetarians after visiting slaughterhouses. She grit her teeth, forced herself to keep her eyes on the murder, and waited until Jacob was done.

It only got worse. Jacob slipped each dangling kine off their hooks, and set them in the bowl, piling them on each other. Then he reached down and tossed the five dead into the bowl as well. A pile of death, limbs, flesh and blood, that was their offering to the Crone.

Jack turned around eventually, and winced as he stared at the pile of empty vessels. "And what if this doesn't work?"

"Then we'll try something else," Jacob said.

"Until you've gone through all your ideas, like checking things off a list?"

"We're dealing with gods and demons, aliens and angels, really fucked up shit, Jack. It isn't about business, or checking things off a list, it's about commitment, and intent."

"Intent? I—"

Jacob walked over to him, and this time Jack backed up. The Nosferatu was soaked in blood, mostly at the hands, but every motion the elder made splattered blood around him. It got onto Jack's suit coat, and his face, but it was a pale comparison to the rivers of red that coated Jacob's sleeves.

"You Invictus are all the same. You live inside numbers, and you treat respect like a currency. You're so blind to the greater mysteries, God could come up to you and kiss your forehead and you wouldn't even notice. He could take off your sandals, wash your feet, and you'd try and quantify, identify, qualify, and turn it into a footnote for your books." The chuckling vanished. Jacob snapped his hands out, and grabbed Jack by the collar, splattering more blood everywhere. "You're swimming in the blood of a bleeding universe, walking on the ashes of dead deities, and you're too scared to even consider what could possibly exist beyond your insignificant, immortal lifespan."

For a second, Beatrice was almost impressed with the metaphor. But as she looked at Jacob, watched him clutch Jack as if desperate to get his point across to a boy who was desperately trying to stay grounded in the real world, she knew he'd been literal. Where had Jacob been in his life, what places had he visited, what entities had he talked to, to think like that? He was good friends with what might as well have been a deity, and he spent his time reading ancient manuscripts and sacrificing kine — and his own vitae — to a hidden god.

She came up to him, set an arm on his cloaked, dripping wrist, and nudged it off of Jack. Jacob turned his head to her, sighed, and stepped back, joining her at the bowl. When she looked back at Jack, she found the man looking down at the ground, caught between a frown and seeming genuinely hurt.

"I..." Jack stirred, still looking down and staring at the mess of blood the witches walked through. It was everywhere, flooding the cracks of the cave, until it sparkled like rivers in the candlelight. "I... I'm terrified, Jacob."

The three witches froze, and stared at him.

"What?" Jacob said. And for the first time, Triss heard the sound of complete, total, genuine shock from her boss.

"I'm scared shitless. I've lost my sister. I've lost my sire. Now I'm carrying around something inside me straight from a horror movie, something that belongs in a fucking tome of dark rituals, not in my chest. And now we're slaughtering people while we make prayers to dark gods. You might think this is all just another day, or maybe you're excited to see things get shaken up, get fucked up and twisted, but every fucking day all I can do is hope and push for a time when things are back to the way they were. The sooner we can stop all this, the better. I'm hanging on by a thread here, and everywhere

I look, all I see is shit that makes immortal bloodsucking vampires look blasé. So yeah, excuse me if I resist the idea of killing twelve people for a fucking prayer.”

All eyes fell to Jacob. Beatrice had never expected Jack to pour his heart out like that, especially not to Jacob. Maybe he felt like he could trust Jacob because Triss said he could. Or maybe he just couldn't hold it in anymore. Whatever it was, Jacob didn't look at him, keeping his head turned toward the bowl in front of him instead.

“Down here in the dark,” Jacob said, voice calm and almost soothing, “it gets pretty frightening. We're buried in corpses and struggling to keep from drowning. Sometimes, you can hear the voices, and feel their fingers trying to drag you down.” Sighing, he shook his head, and motioned for Triss and Jennifer to step in toward the bowl with him. “Don't worry, you'll do better than most.”

“Better than most...” Jack lifted his eyes back up to the bowl, sighed, and stepped in closer. “So how does this prayer work?”

Jacob smiled, and pulled out a knife. “The sacrifice has been prepared. The three of us are going to imbue the sacrifice with our vitae. And then, we shall burn the corpses, a signal, to whoever's watching.”

“Burn? There's limited oxygen down here. The fire will die out.”

Chuckling, Jacob shook his head again, even as he slit his wrist. A thick, heavy glob of Kindred blood pooled at the wound, before eventually falling onto the corpses. Normally they'd use a single drop in their rituals, but Jacob forced out another, and another, each large and landing with enough impact they could hear it in the silence. Once he'd lost enough blood to make a kine lightheaded, the knife was passed around. Triss took it and did the same. Jack met her eyes, and she held a smile for him, a warm one, hoping it'd lessen his worry, as she bled into the bowl. Jennifer did the same, without the smile, and grimaced as she forced out her blood; poor girl was too soft for this insanity.

Jacob walked to the back wall, and disappeared into the heavy, unnatural shadow that covered it. Triss knew what was back there, the body parts and tools of torture, the symbols drawn on the walls, and the overwhelming dread, but it was better to not let Jack see it.

“Is Black Blood here tonight?” Jack said. The silence was absolute, and his soft voice echoed.

Some things went clank and clunk in the black. “He's watching,” Jacob said, “from the other side. His followers help him perform their own rituals.”

“Followers?” Jack began to pace side to side, chin in his fingers. The look on his face was obvious: should he play his hand and let Jacob know more information. Triss would have probably said no, but she was curious. “You mean his red wraiths.”

Jacob came back out of the darkness holding a torch, unlit, and a strange smile on his face. “Your visit to the Hisil was informative. Black Blood wasn’t too happy that you left before he got to chat with you.”

“I imagine it wanted to know how I got there.”

Triss and Jen both looked between the two men, and Triss felt horribly lost. What the fuck were these two talking about, and what had they been up to?

“Yes, he, did.” With a head motion that suggested eye rolling, Jacob stepped up to the bowl, plucked a lighter out of his robes, and lit the torch. Fire, Kindred’s bane, lit the room a hundred times more than the couple candles they had, and everyone but Jacob covered their eyes until they adjusted.

Jacob tilted his head upward, as if in prayer, raised his slit wrist over the fire, and forced another large drop of his dark vampire blood from the wound. It splashed over the flame, and for a moment, nothing happened. But with time, and an unending smile from the Nosferatu, the flame changed color. He’d done this last time, with their first attempt at a sacrifice and prayer. Black flame.

It was a Crúac ritual, to create the flame, one Beatrice had no idea how to perform. Whatever the flame did, Jacob insisted it was a helpful step in bridging the communication gap between their pitiful little physical world, and the great beyond. Smoke signals, was the analogy he used. But like all things Crúac, it wasn’t as simple as a drop of blood on a torch.

Jacob tossed the torch into the bowl of blood and death, and without so much as a flicker, the massive bowl, sat upon dozens of carved skeletons below, erupted in flame.

The fire was huge, far bigger than last time, and Triss and Jen both jumped back, jaws hanging. Jack wasn’t near the bowl, but he stepped back too, eyes wide and hand raised to block the light that did not come. The flame was black. Like as if she was staring into a void, Triss gazed into the black flame that devoured light, and found herself lost in it.

It danced, swaying left and right, and as seconds rolled by like eternities, faces appeared in the flame. Eyes, mouths, wisps of definition that came and went as the obsidian fire moved about in its deadly waltz, she stared at them all with wonder. They never held still, but she recognized them in the split moments they made themselves visible; the faces of the bodies in the bowl.

Then the howls began. As the fire swayed and flowed, devouring the bodies and disintegrating them, noises echoed within the metal walls of the sacrificial altar. Wails, like banshees crying out for their lost loved ones as they roamed graveyards, filled the cave the four vampires stood in. The sound had nowhere to go, so it echoed against the stone and metal, until it sank into the walls, and into the graves above. Three Kings Cemetery was a haunted graveyard, after all.

Beatrice raised her hand to her mouth, covering it, feigning surprise, but hiding an annoyed smile; annoyed with herself. Hanging out with Jacob had made her thoughts oddly macabre and poetic lately, and she couldn't help but indulge the drama of it all in her mind. No wonder vampires indulged in Gothic aesthetics and poetry, she was doing it and she wasn't even trying. Must have been a natural side effect everyone suffered, when they lost the things most precious to them in the world.

The fire rose higher, and higher, until it licked at the ceiling. It melded into the shadows, creating them and hiding more of the candlelight. The banshee cries and ghostly wails were persistent, but not loud enough to bother the ears. Background noise, the sort a psychopath killer might play as a lullaby before bed.

Jacob waved a hand through the flame before looking at Jack, and nodding to the boy. No damage came to the elder vampire, or his robe, despite how quickly the black flame was eating the bodies. Before Jack could respond, Jacob looked back to the flame, and began to speak.

“Oh Crone, it is I, Malachi, your acolyte, oh Crone. I and my fellow witches offer you this sacrifice. No blood was taken from them. Every drop has been saved, and spilled for you. Three witches have spilled their own blood for this sacrifice, so that we may hear from you, oh Crone. Send us a sign, teach us a way for us to hunt down our adversary, and bathe in their blood.”

He was hamming it up. He was really hamming it up, the bastard. Beatrice smiled at the man, if only because he'd adopted the voice of a preacher, saying a prayer to God in front of his congregation. The Crone, according to Jacob, didn't care about words; if anything, platitudes would offend her. What the Crone cared about, was intent, desire, and action. She cared about death and sacrifice. She cared about blood.

Hopefully, she'd care about them enough to answer their call.

The flames danced and swayed, howls and wails quiet but piercing, and the gentle roar of the fire the choir to their song. The bodies in the bowl were cooking, and the sound of crackling fat and blood grew louder. It smelled horrific. She stepped in closer, and ran her hands through the flame. It did not harm her.

This needed to work. Please, work. She had to find the hunters. She had to kill them. The thirst for revenge was coursing through her, devouring her, demanding she pursue it until the end, whatever end that may be. It was consuming her, down to her soul.

No wonder some vampires became obsessed with revenge, or obsessed with anything, really. She had eternity ahead of her. If she wanted to spend the next thirty years plotting the perfect revenge against someone who wronged her, it was perfectly reasonable for a vampire to do just that. If she wanted to spend the next two hundred years preparing the perfect ritual to resurrect someone, she could do just that. She had all the time in the world. And she'd do anything to make that happen, to—

“Come closer, child.”

Everyone froze, before they started looking around. Jacob? Jen? Jack? No, none of them. And it wasn't Black Blood either. That was not a familiar voice. It was quiet, a whisper, hidden in the muted banshee cries, and the gentle roar of the flame. And it sounded feminine.

After a small gasp, Jacob stepped away from the fire, and bowed his head. He said nothing, and he was trembling. Not a big tremble, not shaking in his boots or anything, but even a small tremble from her boss was enough to make her take notice. Jack was frozen like a statue, eyes on the fire, and Jennifer had taken several steps back, taking her cue from Jacob and bowing her head as well. She was trembling too, and a lot more than Jacob was.

“I said,” the whisper continued, “come closer, child.”

The fire, the faces in the flame, they turned and looked at her. Not Jacob or the others, but her, Beatrice.

“I...” It was talking to her. The things in the flame, the flames themselves, were talking to her. Oh fuck. “Me? Not Jac—Malachi? I mean, I—”

“Now, child of the night. Come to me.”

She did as instructed. In for a penny, in for a soul. If she was willing to go this far, kill this many people and dedicate her existence to the purpose of revenge, talking to an ancient god entity seemed par for the course. Was this how Jacob felt, the first time he talked to Black Blood? No, Jacob was already an elder when he came to Dolareido, and a devoted servant to the Crone. He must have been used to sticking his toes into dark water. She, on the other hand, was not.

“Closer...”

With a deep gulp, Beatrice set her hands on the bowl, and leaned in. The black flames and the faces within accepted her without pain, as before and as with Jacob, but this time, they responded to her. They bent around her, looked at her, enveloped her, and their banshee wails quieted. A second later, the room was deadly silent, and all Triss could see was the black flames flowing over her eyes.

“Yesss... my child...”

“I—”

“Silence,” the fire whispered. “Let me... see... you...”

Oh fucking god, it was examining her. She was being examined by something, something in the flames. Was it the Crone? Who the fuck else could it be? She forced herself to look down, into the burning corpses and the ashes piling up, and she regretted it instantly. The corpses were moving, writhing, slowly twisting. If it was from the force of chemical reactions from the fat sizzling and blood boiling, she had no idea, but several of the dozen bodies tilted their heads to face her.

“I know your pain, child.” The corpses were talking. Oh fucking shit the corpses were the source of the whispering voice, and the now silent wailing.

“You do?”

“I... know this... pain. Let him go, child.” The bodies continued to twist, as if in agony, but the voice was calm and eerie. Death was whispering to her, sharing its secrets with her. “He... is beyond... your reach.”

She ground her teeth, and glared down at the talking corpses in the black flames. “But not your reach.”

“Let him go, child.” The voice started to grow quiet, and the bodies began to grow still. “Let him go.”

“But, that’s not what... not what we made this sacrifice for!” She clenched hard on the bowl until she felt her claws fight to penetrate the metal. “We need to find the hunters, to kill them.”

The corpses renewed their writhing with all the hurried pace of the typical zombie. The only noise she could hear anymore was the roar of the fire, and the cooking of human meat.

“You... desire... a tool for revenge.”

“Yes.”

“Were... it not for Luna, and her meddling, I... would leave you to your battle, child. I have no use... for children who are weak.”

“Luna? As... as in...”

“The moon aids one of the Uratha, more than... she should. This human city... sits on a border... and Luna... takes advantage, to voice her... concerns... Ask the child of the moon, if you wish to know more.”

Ok, so one of the Uratha was being spoken to by the fucking moon. The. Fucking. Moon. Yeah, nothing crazy about that. But then, she had her head in black fire, was watching burning corpses squirm and whisper, and was apparently speaking to the Crone herself. Who the fuck was she to judge insanity, at this point?

“I... I need your help. Please, I... I have to... I have to get them. If I can't have him back, the least I can do is make them suffer. They might run, or try to escape, or—”

“How much... are you willing to suffer... child, to see your revenge... a reality?”

She snarled into the fire, and glared. “Anything.”

One of the corpses snapped out their arm, grabbed her face, and the room filled with screams of agony. Her screams.

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~~Jack~~

“Holy shit!” Jack ran forward and reached for Beatrice, but Jacob jumped between them. “Get the fuck out of my way!”

“No.”

“What? Move, fucker!” Jack pushed forward, but Jacob remained in front of him. Tempted, so very tempted, to try and Dominate him, or maybe even just punch him, but Jack wasn't that stupid, even in a panic. Now wasn't the time to test his curse against Jacob's years.

He glared up at the eyeless fucker, and tried to get around him, but Jacob, grinning a wicked bastard grin, stepped side to side to keep him from getting to Beatrice.

“Jack,” Jennifer said from the other side of the bowl. She had to yell to get over Beatrice’s screams. “This is... the way.” His fellow Ventrue’s eyes were wide, staring at the horrific display. If it was the way, she certainly didn’t seem comfortable with it.

A corpse had literally reached out from the pile, grabbed Triss’s face, and was squeezing. Whatever it was doing, was making his friend scream like she was being burned alive. Her arms were locked, flexing, hands gripping the giant bowl’s edge. Her mouth was open wider than a human’s could, showing her enormous crocodile teeth, and her long tongue was bouncing around in there like she was being electrocuted. Her eyes were wide, and staring straight ahead into the black flames.

Jack stepped back again, glaring harder at Jacob with each step. “If she dies, you die next, Jacob.”

“Oh ho, big threats from the little Ventrue.” Sighing, but never losing his big grin, Jacob shook his head and gestured to the dancing flames. “Look, Clarice. Look at her. She’s communing with the Crone herself.”

“She’s getting her brain felt up by a fucking flaming zombie!” He wasn’t trying to be funny, but Jacob laughed at him anyway, a deep hearty laugh anyone would make when they heard a great joke. “How can you be so calm? She’s your student! She could—”

“I’ve been on this Earth for longer than you could ever appreciate, Jack. I’ve tasted black waters and I’ve swam in the blood of the dead. I’ve spoken to many creatures, many entities, and I have spoken to the Crone in this manner once before; if she is truly the Crone.”

“If?”

He shrugged, and gestured to the display behind him, at the burning bodies and the dancing flames. The quiet shrieks of ghosts and the damned resumed, but they were nothing compared to the cries of pain from Jack’s friend.

“There are many entities out there, floating around in realms beyond our understanding. How they operate is knowledge I cannot begin to fathom. I have spoken to these flames once before, and I can only guess that they were indeed the Crone. But perhaps they are someone else. Or perhaps they are a part of her. Perhaps all Beatrice is speaking to is the Crone’s pinky finger.” Jacob came in closer to him, smiling all the way, until he was only a foot from him. “We’re talking about gods, Jack. Gods. For all I know, the Crone, or Luna, or whoever else out there listening, is an entity with a thousand parts, a thousand voices, a thousand imitations, a thousand versions.” Shrugging, he slowly reached out, and set a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Whoever this entity is that we have summoned, that has graced us with their presence, she did not steer me wrong last time.”

“Last time...” Jack glared at the man, but gave up after a while. You can only glare for so long before it becomes meaningless. “Is this how you—”

Beatrice’s screams and cries stopped, and the poor woman collapsed onto the floor of the cave. Jen ran over to her, and Jacob, after giving a small grin and nod to Jack, went to join her.

“Triss, you ok?” Jennifer said. “You—”

“I... have honored... your sacrifice,” the fire said, deadly, soft voice cutting Jack to his guts. “Go... and bathe the world in ecstasy... and blood.”

Boom. The fire exploded outward, engulfing everyone in flowing wind that swarmed around the cave, trapped. The black flame hit all of them, but did nothing. Whatever Jacob did to the flame, it didn’t care about Jack, the other Kindred, or their clothes. Not true for the people in the sacrificial altar bowl. The exploding fire took the ashes with it, mixed it into the air, and littered cave with the black soot of the murdered.

Jack thought he was tainted before this ritual started. Now, he was covered in the blood and ashes of the people he’d helped sacrifice to some sort of god creature. Fucking hell.

“I’m fine,” Triss said after a few minutes. “I’m... fine...”

Jacob nodded, standing up and helping Triss do the same. “What did you learn?”

“She... it... showed me a way to... to... open those doors. Elen’s doors, the flesh doors.”

“Shit, really?” Jack came in as well, dusting the ash off himself as best he could. Considering how much blood Jacob got on him, he’d have an easier time removing tar. “You mean the weird ritual Angela did to create a new one?”

“N-No.” Shaky, Triss reached out for support. Jack went to help, but Jacob got there first. The eyeless bastard’s snarky smile vanished, for a second anyway, as he helped Triss keep her footing. “It showed me... how to open... an active one. The Crone, it... she... showed me, what Elen is doing, the strange blood magic she’s doing. She’s burrowing around in some sort of... I don’t know, pocket dimension? The flesh room I fought Sándor in isn’t in the real world, I guess, or at least not completely. It moves around, and it has multiple doors in the city. It’s only connected to one of them at a time.”

Jennifer came up behind Triss, replacing Jacob, and slipping underneath her friend’s arm. “And you think you can open one of these doors?”

“If we can find one that’s active. Last time, we found one that was open, but there’s no way Elen will make that mistake again.”

“I’m surprised she made that mistake at all,” Jack said.

Triss shrugged, but almost fell for the effort. Poor girl was wiped. “Must take a lot of... I dunno, magical energy or some bullshit, to open and close the active door. Last time, she flooded the whole place with thousands of gallons of blood, to get us out, before closing the door.”

Jack shook his head. “I know what it takes to open one of those doors. It takes a sacrifice. That’s why Angela killed the thrall we had in the hospital. That was a fresh door, but... I wouldn’t be surprised if they had to do that every time they opened a door.”

After a long sigh, Triss nodded, but smiled at Jack once she managed to lift her head again. “We won’t need one this time.”

That was good. That was very good. All the killing was starting to make him sick.

*Learn to enjoy it, vampire. It’s a part of who you are, no matter how much you deny it.*

Jack grit his teeth, clenched his eyes tight, and forced the voice down into the recesses of his mind. “So, what now?”

“Recon,” Jacob said. “Maria and Michael and Garry are all still working together, like sweet little doggies, trying to catch the hunters. Someone needs to find one of the gateways the hunters use, one that’s active. They’ll close it, and Beatrice will force it open.”

Beatrice managed a thumbs up, before her arm fell limp at her side. “Jen, let’s get back. I need to rest.”

Jennifer nodded, adjusted her spot under Triss’s arm, and started the walk back out of the cave.

“Jacob, I want to talk to you, in private,” Jack said. Triss and Jen looked over their shoulders at him, but he smiled and shooed them off. “Don’t worry.”

They both frowned, but after a few seconds, continued on. Once they were a ways away, and Jack could no longer hear their shuffling, he let out a long sigh, and started walking around the now empty bowl. Good fucking god, that strange black fire had completely devoured the bodies. Fire didn’t do that; there’d be no need for crematories otherwise. There weren’t even any bones.

“Clarice Clarice, forever the investigator. Searching for clues?” Chuckling, Jacob walked around the bowl, staying opposite of Jack.

“Just marveling at how fucked up this all is. I heard what the flame said about Luna, and I’ve heard the Begotten talk about someone they call the Dark Mother.”

“All women!” Laughing, Jacob slapped the bowl’s edge a few times, like playing a drum. “Women are pretty amazing, aren’t they?”

The way Jacob had looked — or probably looked — at his mother reignited in Jack’s mind, and he glared at the eyeless bastard hard enough to light him on fire. Or not, since he didn’t, but he tried.

“And this weird thing you did with your vitae, to make the fire black. You used that to first speak with Black Blood?”

“Oh, smart, aren’t ya?” They circled each other, keeping the bowl between them. “Like I said, it sends smoke signals. Humans might be blind to this stuff, but the spirits are not.”

“And you’ve been sacrificing people since—”

“Since before I came to Dolareido, Clarice. It’s one of the reasons Black Blood and I get along. Black Blood is a kindred spirit to this Kindred.”

“Uh huh.” Jack stopped circling, and thus Jacob stopped circling, like a twisted mirror. The elder Nosferatu enjoyed doing things that put people off guard, got under their skin, and annoyed them. He was doing it as a reflex probably, not even thinking about it. How anyone could stand Jacob for more than five minutes, he couldn’t fathom. Minerva must have been an interesting woman.

“And you—”

“I want to talk to Black Blood.”

“Do you? Then make a sacrifice. It will beckon him.”

Of course it would, because the only way anyone was doing any of this dark ritual shit was on the backs of corpses, floating in an ocean of blood.

“Yeah, I’m not going to do that.”

“Ha, you think your Prince doesn’t? She’s talked to Black Blood on her own, on several occasions.”

Muscles in Jack’s body tightened as he glared at the man. “I... won’t judge her, for that. I can’t.”

“And you judge me?”

“I’m trying not to, Jacob. But throw me a bone here. I just watched you kill twelve people, and I helped. I’m willing to help you with the twisted fucking shit you do in the dark, ok? So just... let me talk to Black Blood. Your its friend. You don’t need to sacrifice anyone to talk to it.”

Jacob’s smile softened, and he stepped away from the bowl. “Him. I can summon him.”

“Him, fine.” Spirits didn’t have genders or sexes or whatever, but if Black Blood insisted on being considered male, fine.

“I can summon him because he’s my friend. He’ll need a corpse to work with, if we’re to physically interact, but if you’re only looking to chat, then—”

“Then I reckon I better make an appearance.”

Jack spun around, looking left and right and scanning the floor and ceiling. That was the spirit’s voice all right, heavy and filled with bass, and rasp, layered and inhuman. The Southern accent on top of it almost made it comical, but the cold weight that fell onto Jack’s shoulders for the second time that night wasn’t comical at all.

The walls began to bleed.

“You... you were eavesdropping,” Jack said.

As the thick, black ooze dripped from the cracks on the cave walls, and the symbols drawn upon them, it began to pool around their feet. The onyx color dripped from the ceiling, and from the eyes of the skeletons holding up the giant bowl. One god left, another one arrived, and both were dressed in black. No more black flame, but now it was black blood, a thick liquid that flowed over everything until Jack could have swam; if the liquid had any consistency. For all its thickness, it didn’t have weight or texture to it. But as it slowly overwhelmed Jack’s body, as patient as Death, Jack could feel the cold inevitably of the monster’s presence.

This god that sat on Jacob’s shoulder was as sick and twisted as the Crone. No wonder it got along so well with Jacob.

“Indeed I was, little vampire. Why, I ain’t ever seen a creature like this Crone, reach across the stars and air, earth and black fire, to make an appearance. Truly a blessed night.” The creature’s voice was far too smooth for how terrifying a noise it was.

“You... look up to the Crone.”

“When I was nothing more than a tiny black ball of decay and murder, before Malachi and his friends ever came to this place, people worshiped creatures of the dark, little vampire.” The ooze flowed up and around, engulfing everything and everyone. Jack knew to let it do its thing; it was how Black Blood filled an area with its—his presence. If the spirit wanted to kill Jack, it’d be easier to now, but it wasn’t like he didn’t have the opportunity to kill Jack multiple times before.

And besides, apparently the spirits knew about him. Maybe they liked him? Or found him interesting enough to keep alive.

“Other witches?” Jack said.

“Yes, but not Kindred. Oh, the murder that happened on the soil beneath your feet would make your skin crawl. Sins my simple existence did not know could exist at the time. The pain and death dripped down into the world, and into me.” Black Blood laughed, and the black water rippled around them all. Jack couldn’t feel it, but he could see how the waves distorted his vision, bending it.

Jack ran a hand over his buzzed head. “Trying to understand you is difficult. The other spirits I’ve seen—”

“Are defined,” the flowing onyx said. A glance toward Jacob showed the Nosferatu nod, holding a small grin for Jack, but the old man seemed content to listen to the conversation.

“I... had a question for you.”

“Bless your heart, little vampire, thinking you can just ask me a question.”

Growls filled the room. It took Jack a moment to realize they were his own. Growling at an entity that might as well have been a god, was not a smart thing to do. But the curse inside him disagreed. It growled, and Jack had to bite down to suppress it.

“You want to make a deal.”

“Now don’t you fret none. I’m a fair spirit. You ask a question, and then I’ll ask one.”

“And if I lie?”

“Well, certainly possible, little vampire. But break a deal with a spirit at your own risk. If I find you’ve been steering me wrong, I will gut you and your precious mother, and spread your ashes across my city as warning. Can’t let nobody think they can get away with breaking a deal with me, even if they are carrying some ancient curse.”

“No lying then.” And information was the most valuable commodity, to Kindred and to anyone who knew a thing or two about the seedy underbelly of Dolareido. Answering a question could be his undoing, for all he knew. But he needed to know. “When I was in the Hisil, we were attacked by these... red wraith things, that I’m pretty sure work for you. They wanted flesh. Why?”

“Ah yes, my friends on the other side.” The black mist lifted, swirled upon itself within the sacrificial altar, and something resembling a human stood within, with only the most vague features, like a cloud of obsidian. “As you have seen tonight, there is more to flesh than simple meat and bones.

That Elen witch knows this. My old friend Malachi knows this. Flesh is a machine with power, meant to carry a soul. Learn to bend it, work it, shape it, and a host of options come up.”

Of course the ancient entity of death and murder and dark magic and only God knew what else would want to develop an understanding of flesh magic. If spirits embodied their intentions, then Black Blood likely had parts to him that existed in a weird, ‘I am witchcraft and flesh ritual’ sort of way. No wonder he was so strange compared to other spirits.

“This flesh magic,” Jack said, “is pretty fucked up shit, you two. Even worse than sacrificing people to perform rituals.”

Jacob set his hip against the side of the bowl, head pointed at him and arms folded across his chest. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I saw the shit Elen did to track me and Eric down. She figured out how to use flesh like... like... fuck me, I don’t know. It was sickening, the things she’d drawn, analyzing skin and muscle and... and... tapping into something that let her learn about me, and Eric. And now you’re telling me you two have been trying to do the same thing? You must have been pursuing this for a while, if there are literal incarnations of this fucked up desire wandering the Shadow half of Dolareido, ready to attack my friend, for a chance to see her guts!” Again, the curse took a joyride on Jack’s behalf, and announced his words as a shout. Jack didn’t mind this time.

Jacob looked to the mist, and the mist looked — probably — at Jacob; hard to tell where mist was looking.

“Don’t go walking where you ain’t welcome, boy,” Black Blood said. “There’s alligators in them waters. Don’t come visiting my realm unless I’m there to oversee it. Something might bite you.”

This conversation was quickly making it apparent, that Jack had a lot of growing up to do. He wanted to argue, spit bile, throw a fit, and maybe even challenge them. This curse made him feel like he could do it, too. To set aside the impulse, ignore it, let the emotion pass and then default to a logical decision, was a skill he prided himself on, but no one could do that easily when frustrated. His poker face was shattered, and he fucking knew it. Regain control, pause, let the bubbling rage settle, and then speak.

“You live in the Shadow Realm, Black Blood, but it’s not yours. Besides, we used a door that someone else put there. Your doing, I assume?” No point in keeping the Begotten’s ability to open inter-dimensional doors a secret, not after Black Blood had rescued them, and watched the Begotten leave the strange in-between realm on their own. He no doubt knew Fiona had been the one to open the

portal to take Jack and Damien into the Shadow Realm. Maybe Jack could learn about the portal Fiona had found, and—

“That’s a second question,” Black Blood said, chuckling.

Jack bit down again. “Shit.”

“My turn for a question,” Black Blood continued, “about this curse of yours.”

“Of course you’d want to talk about the curse.”

The black mist leaned forward toward him. Dark fog flowed from its body, and dripped off of it like dye dispersing in liquid. “Don’t be getting too big for your britches, boy.”

“Sorry,” he said through clenched teeth. Like fucking hell he was sorry, but he had to play nice. God, he sucked at the Danse Macabre.

“Right you are. Now, the curse, explain to me the ritual that your ancient sire performed. Every detail now.”

Fuck. If they learned about the details, they could perform it. But it wasn’t like there were any Strix in Dolareido; that he knew of, anyway. And that tree at the bottom of some ancient cave seemed to be important, too. He had no idea where it was, and he had no idea if Black Blood could leave Dolareido. He seemed awfully attached to it, connected even.

“I guess Triss told you.”

“Yes,” Jacob said, “but what you told her was vague. Give us details.”

Frowning at Jacob the whole time, Jack recounted the tale. He did his best, and extrapolated where he thought it was safe. Susanna and Diablerie, how she performed it on someone who was likely a family member, and how she’d rubbed the ashes into the old, dead tree. How the Strix, the whole flock of striges, descended upon her, and filled her with the curse.

It was not a fun memory to go dancing through.

Jacob laughed, holding his face in his hand as his cackles filled the cave. “The amount of sins that woman committed in a single night, is astronomical. Your great great grandsire makes me seem tame by comparison, Jack, even when compared to my most wild nights.”

Well, that was a good thing, if Jacob was telling the truth.

“I have another question,” Jack said.

“Shoot,” the darkness replied.

Ok, time to be smart about this. He couldn't just outright ask if Black Blood knew about some mysterious force conspiring to destroy the city. If Jacob or Black Blood were actually that force, perhaps pursuing resurrection or something, him tipping off his hand could get him killed. Back to the portal question then. Hopefully it wouldn't give him away.

“When we visited the Shadow Realm, we came through a portal, some sort of cut that went from one world to the other. Your doing?”

“I reckon it was. Few of them are my projects, and I'd appreciate it kindly, if you let em be.”

Finally, progress. If that one was Black Blood's doing, the others Fiona said were found in Dolareido probably were, too. Someone was cutting, or tearing, holes in the fabric of reality, and that someone was Black Blood; or at least, was Black Blood in several instances.

Fabric of reality. He almost laughed. It was like out of a fucking comic book. No, it wasn't the general fabric of reality being cut up. Be specific Jack. Black Blood was somehow creating holes from his world to theirs, and was probably doing other things, too.

“And you, boy, answer me this. What have you learned about that tart Maria?”

Jack blinked at the misty ghost, and glanced between him and Jacob. “Uh... Madam Turio? Why do you want to know—”

“Them's ain't the rules, little vampire. Answer the question. What have you learned about Maria? And you know damn well what I'm referring to.”

Shit. Fucking shit fuck.

“Maria... There's evidence and rumors, that she's been... trying to... Well, we don't know. She might be trying to resurrect Lucas, but it might be something else. Maybe she just wants to talk to him?” He managed a shrug, but it wasn't a very convincing follow up. “From what I'd heard, she was seen talking to spirits at some point.” A little prodding had garnered that information from Natasha, and now he regretted it. It was information he had to share, to uphold the deal.

Both Jacob and Black Blood made some weird grumbling sounds. Either they didn't know that, or they did, and weren't happy Jack knew about it.

Why though? Why would Maria be talking to the spirits? If they were Black Blood's wraiths, and had become weird flesh-obsessed creatures because that's what Black Blood was into, what did that mean? He wanted to ask. Christ, he wanted to ask. But if he gave Black Blood another question, he'd

have a chance to ask Jack about anything. He might ask Jack a leading question, and Jack would unintentionally expose his motives about looking for the reason for Azamel's warning.

"I... think I'm done," Jack said.

"Very well," Black Blood said.

Jacob nodded, and so did the mist. But as Jack walked away, Jacob held up a hand.

"Do try and keep Elen alive, Jack. You owe me and Black Blood a favor."

"Favor..."

The eyeless bastard grinned at him. "For saving your lives, lest you forget."

Fuck.

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~~Damien~~

Damien sat within Maria's abode, deep underneath the Grand Cathedral of Dolareido. Nearby, Maria Turio sat at her piano, and played music with the delicate exactness of a virtuoso. Near her, her large, hunched ghouls swept the floor, tended the candles, and wiped the shelves. Damien sat at a desk with two laptops, and perused some ancient texts, looking to cross reference with the book that sat between the two screens.

Curses and Rituals, a Summary, by Sir Isaac Landers. There were many such texts in the world, of people attempting to decipher magical concepts, and many more that were tomfoolery — as Maria would put it — or just fiction. It was all worthless, except for a few texts that the Lancea et Sanctum held.

Whoever Sir Landers was, Damien didn't know. A vampire probably, based on the way the man approached concepts like blood and sunlight, without ever actually saying the word vampire or Kindred. Learning to read old English was a pain in his ass, but slowly, Damien was discovering how to understand Landers's words.

"I assume," Maria said, without ceasing her quiet playing, "that you research such old knowledge, to help your friend."

“Indeed.” The internet, for all its infinite wisdom, was full of shit. It was taking ages to find credible researchers, and those he did manage to find, had their careers silenced, delayed, or unfulfilled. Research into the dark arts of Crúac, he could understand being stonewalled. But Theban sorcery, he hadn’t expected to be so closed off and buried. It was damn secretive.

A mention of a concept here, an altar there, a long lost manuscript in a foreign tongue with a shoddy sketch, it was all so difficult to dig through.

“Though…” He groaned, ran his palms over his face and fingers through his hair, before he turned to Maria. “I’m hitting a wall. Trying to make sense of all this chaos is difficult.”

“Lucas spent centuries researching this material, Mister Burksen. And we have only a fraction of what he originally once had, due to Garry’s sabotage.”

“Do you have any insight to offer, Madam Turio? Jack says that his curse was originally sealed away by a Sanctified. I can only assume it was a spell of some sort, meant to seal away whatever sorcery the striges cast upon his great great grandsire.”

“I am afraid I do not.” She stopped playing, set down the cover on the grand piano’s keys, and walked over to his desk. Her white dress flowed on the mist that seeped from her skin, and Damien did his best to pretend he didn’t notice that. It wasn’t real, just an illusion, something her Kindred vitae perpetuated through her Nosferatu curse. Real or not, it, along with her cracked and destroyed skin, made her look like a ghost. No, a ghost would have been envious of how terrifying she looked.

He was getting used to it though, being around her as often as he was. Behind the cracked skin and cold mist, Maria was a woman, a heartbroken woman who refused to let her woes prevent her from doing her job. Admirable. She scooped the book off his desk, and began to examine its texts. She could read the old language far more easily than he, no doubt.

“Maybe the Prince’s friend Elaine will know something,” he said.

“Elaine? Elaine is visiting?” Maria leaned her hip on his desk as she flipped through the pages of the ancient text.

“So says Mister Terry. You know her?”

Rolling her eyes, Maria continued flipping through the pages. “The woman is strange, even by Kindred standards. She is like fire; a breeze may settle her or have her blazing.”

“Volatile then?”

“In a way. And no doubt she will indulge the Prince’s sexual appetite. I expect the white-haired one to host a ball soon, similar to last, with flesh on display and blood to be shared.”

Damien offered his mentor a knowing smile. He didn’t mind the sexual displays anymore, uncomfortable as they made him, but he knew Maria did. She wasn’t Lucas, but she still hated such blatant, sinful indulgences.

“Do you trust her?”

Maria shook her head. “Never trust a dragon, Mister Burksen. They hold their pursuit of knowledge above all else. They’re the sort to read an ancient tome bound in human skin, in a room filled with dangling hooks and skeletons, and smile with delight as they accidentally summon Death herself. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Such types would destroy a world, if only to learn whether it was possible.”

An oddly powerful, and frightening description of Antoinette and her order. Damien looked down, the images of such ideas stirring up his imagination. He could understand Jacob pursuing deadly rituals in his desire to expand the reach of his power, but for someone to perform dark arts to learn if they could, seemed even worse.

“In... one of the rooms,” he said, “in the Elysium tower, I saw some strange symbols drawn upon the floor and walls.”

“When was this?”

“When I assaulted the building.”

“Ah.” She nodded again, and stopped walking in front of one of her hanging drapes along the cave wall. A beautiful tapestry of blood red and gold embroidery. She pushed it aside, exposing one of her paintings. Jesus Christ, being stabbed by a spear, wielded by a soldier.

She normally left it covered. Perhaps the image bothered her. But then, why keep it and expose it occasionally, if it did? He’d found her staring at it on several occasions, when she was in thought. Something was on her mind, something about the Second Estate.

Maybe she was prompting him, to inquire specifically about the Lancea et Sanctum? He hadn’t done a good job pursuing anything in that region of his job; far too busy dealing with hunters and searching for a cure to Jack’s curse. But, the least he could do was inquire.

“Have you spoken with the Prince about our desires?” he said.

“The next Primogen meeting is soon. I will speak with her then, as unfortunately, reviving the Second Estate will require the ears of all Primogen. Antoinette will have the last word, but the others must have their say as well.” With a tired groan, she gave him back the book, and began to pace about, hugging her chest and chin in hand.

“You believe the Prince will resist.”

“Undoubtedly. But, time has settled her rage. With Lucas... gone, and with you being a valuable asset to the city, I feel I can convince her that a small revival of the Second Estate is warranted, and earned.”

“Me, a valuable asset?” He blinked at that.

“You are her lover’s friend, and have helped him in multiple situations. You have also helped in general, Mister Burksen. Do not sell yourself short.”

That was true, in a sense. Damien had become an active member of Dolareido in the months since his return, and since Lucas’s death. He aided the Invictus, fought monsters in the sewers, helped Jack on a rescue mission, and aided the Prince when Jack summoned the crows at the hospital. Go him.

“Thank you, Madam Turio. But I worry not only for the Prince’s resistance, but Garry Tones’s as well. He despised the Lancea et Sanctum as much as she did, when my sire was Archbishop.”

“Indeed.” The corpse woman walked about, chin in her fingers, eyes up. Her pondering stance. “We will need to convince him that things will be different this time. I trust Mister Terry and yourself to handle such a discussion.”

“Oh? Not at the Primogen meeting...”

“No. Speak to the man on his property. I trust Mister Terry to handle the conversation with delicacy, and I trust you to explain the desires of the Lancea et Sanctum, Mister Burksen.”

Wonderful. Sweeps for hunters already devoured much of his time, and now he had to prepare for a personal meeting with the strongest Carthian in the city.

“Should I—”

“Wait until our Primogen meeting is done. I will report the... temperature, of the idea. Act accordingly.” She nodded, and he nodded. Silence fell, a comfortable silence, filled only with the swish swish of the ghoul’s broom, and—“How goes your relationship with the Begotten?” Whoa, what?

“My—oh, Fiona. It goes well, it does. She’s a delightful person, and I can’t help but be happier in her presence.”

Maria smiled, but continued to walk around, likely juggling two thoughts: the Primogen meeting, and for some reason, Damien's relationship. But, if she wanted to talk about his romantic situation, he could oblige her. She knew more about romance than he did, and honestly, he felt happy knowing he was making her happy.

How much had the elder changed, since she betrayed Natasha?

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~~Natasha~~

If the sex went on much longer, she'd have run out of space on her SSD. Apparently, the boys and their libidos agreed with being filmed, far more than she could have anticipated.

She stepped out of the shower, wrapped her hair in a towel, and started on the rest of her. The shower wasn't big enough for three people, so they took turns; naturally she went first. Soon she was out and walking around her room wearing a towel on her head and a towel wrapped around her.

She looked at herself in the mirror hanging on the back of her bedroom door; without any makeup on, and the blush of life turned off, she was as white as a sheet. No makeup meant her lips were a pale, dull pink, and her eyes had no pop. Human women would have to deal with all the skin blemishes and discoloration caused by frequently putting on and taking off makeup, but at least vampire skin didn't do that. It was just pale, smoothly pale.

Matt stepped behind her, and hugged her from behind, her head pressing to his chest.

"You look like a queen," he said.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. She could have covered herself in dirty rags and mud, and they'd say she was beautiful. They meant it, too. As for a queen, she had her long black hair all done up in the towel, so it did kind of look like a tall crown.

Matt was in his jeans and nothing but. His hair was still a bit wet, and it fell heavy around his head, long blonde dirty air that matched the gruff on his face. A big, handsome lumberjack of a man. She doubted he'd ever used a computer in his life except to browse YouTube and send e-mails. How did she end up with someone like him, and Arturo?

“I c-can’t... b-b-believe you told Eric to... to do whatever he wanted. If he were Kindred, w-we’d have him... under scrutiny, you know? We c-can’t let Kindred j-j-just do whatever they want. It could violate the M-Masquerade.”

“I guess we play a little fast and loose with the rules. Not all Uratha packs do that. The Iminir — Storm Lords — are practically a military cult. They’d put Eric in chains if they had to.”

“And... y-you? You call yourselves, um, Hunters in D-Darkness.”

“Mhmm. The Meninna.”

“W-What are you known for?”

His grip around her body tightened, and he squashed her to his chest harder. The giant, solid wall of muscle was steel, and she froze, like a deer in headlights. His head came down lower, and lower, until she could feel the warmth of his breath on her ear, and feel his heartbeat against her back.

“Meninna pay respect to the Black Wolf, who gives the Meninna his favor. We Meninna guard our territory with total commitment, and protect what is ours.” His grip tightened a little more again, and she found her legs wavering, as Matthew, gentle giant Matthew, smiled at her in the mirror. It was Matthew’s smile, but it had more edge to it, more animal hunger, more aggression.

And it was not good that she liked it! This was obviously a case of Stockholm Syndrome, because a massive man had his hands around her, trapping her, and was implying that she was his and he’d protect her like property, and she liked it. Nope, not good. Definitely bad thing. Bad bad. Toxic relationship!

Matt kissed her on the head, picked her up, and set her on her bed. “A lot of us have been setting up roots here. Whether or not David learns about what happened that led to the Azlu situation, or if that has any effect on why we came, a lot of us will want to stay. I know Art and I will want to stay for you.”

Awww. She squirmed on her bed, thankful she wasn’t Blushing Life, cause every time Matt or Art talked romantic talk, she could feel herself getting ready to blush blood red.

“W-Would you... really stay for me?” She almost stopped herself when she heard the shower turn off. Art would be coming out any minute, and she wasn’t sure if she could say this to both of them at the same time.

“You don’t... want us to?” Matt backed up against a wall, hands in the small of his back. He tried to look at her, but his eyes fell away after a second. From aggressive and possessive one minute, to uncertain the next.

When it came to wolfy things, guarding territory and protecting pack mates, Matt was comfortable. Not only comfortable, he was skilled and confident. She could throw dangerous hunters or deadly monsters at him, and Matt wouldn’t blink. But, if she said something romantic to him, how would he react? If his averting gaze was any indication, he might be sheepish, or even shy. Hard to picture Matthew as shy, but she was picking up those vibes now.

“Of c-course... I want you to. Y-You and Arturo. I... have b-been... getting rather... attached, t-to you two, you know?” She held out her palms toward him, and made grabby hands, like a toddler. With a growing smile, Matthew walked over to her, and got down on his knees in front of her. Sitting on the bed meant she was in a perfect position to hug him, and kiss him, and nudge her nose into his.

He met her kiss, hands roaming down her body and squeezing her waist through her towel. It was a good thing she’d just drained them — sexually speaking — minutes before, or Matt would have pinned her down and started fucking her again, no doubt.

“Hey,” Art said from her bedroom door, “I’m getting jealous watching this.”

“S-Sorry!” She said, gently pushing Matthew away by the shoulders. “W-We were... getting a little... um... I d-don’t want you to leave Dolareido.” And now the cat was officially out of the bag.

“Oh?” And of course, unlike Matthew who didn’t have a deceiving bone in his body, Arturo was a deceitful, manipulative bastard. His smile said it all. He knew she had feelings for him, and Matthew, and he was going to dangle—“I don’t want to leave Dolareido, and I don’t want to leave you. I like you, a lot.” Grinning the whole time like Loki would, Arturo, also only dressed in his jeans, sat down beside her on the bed, leaned down over her, and started kissing her.

She frowned into his kisses, and punched him in the chest a few times. Pointless. The man may not have been as big as Matthew, but he was still huge. Might as well have been punching her door frame. One of his arms slipped behind her, half hugging her, and he continued to kiss her, until she relented. Ok, much as she wanted to punch him, Arturo was a really good kisser.

Like peeling a delicate gift, Matthew pulled the towel on her body apart, and groaned at the sight of her naked body, one of those happy groans Natasha made when drinking. “It’s not just us, either,” Matthew said. “Avery is getting in comfy with some human dude. Clara and Carter are sitting pretty in

that tower. Mason and that Carthian chick are together all the time. And there's a rumor Clara's been having some fun with a bunch of guys."

Natasha laughed, before sucking in her breath quick, as Matthew started to kiss her neck, under the jaw and opposite of Arturo. She tried to push him away, but it didn't last long, and Matthew's hands roamed up to caress her breasts as he kissed her. He gently pressed his thumbs into them, and she could feel him smile against her neck, as his fingers tenderly massaged their softness. Small as her breasts were, the big man seemed perfectly content to obsess over them.

"I... w-wonder, about Clara," she said, little mewls slipping into her words and between Arturo's lips.

Arturo kissed her again, sighing into her kiss as he closed his eyes. "Why?"

"I still think she likes... J-J-Jack. She—" She squeaked, reached out, and pressed both hands on Matt's face. "If you d-don't stop, I'll drain you until y-you can't get up!"

"Don't threaten me with a good time."

She rolled her eyes, and wiggled away from the two men. If that went on any longer, it'd have led to more sex, and it'd barely been more than an hour since they finished up. Kindred healed quick, and she probably could go again if she really wanted, but it wasn't good to get addicted. It was a wonder the Uratha didn't spend literally every waking moment fucking each other, if they could all recover this quickly. It wasn't like they could simply not Blush Life, to prevent arousal.

Maybe she should drain them both of blood? She'd Kissed them just yesterday! But if she drained them both to the point they went comatose, or at least close to it, maybe it'd get their sex drives under control for a little while. Not that she minded. She wouldn't be able to make a sex tape if they weren't such bundles of testosterone and desire.

Thinking of sex tapes, she walked over to the laptop. She'd stopped the recording, but she hadn't had an opportunity to actually examine the footage yet. Unable to suppress her grin, she scanned through the video quickly, to make sure they never fell out of frame. And she muted the video ahead of time, because she knew she got all squeaky during sex. Didn't want to trigger her boyfriends' hunger right now. Maybe later.

Oh god! That was her! Little her, on her back on Art's chest. Her pink-clad legs were sticking out from between the two titans, and the camera was pointed three quarters at her ass, showing what the two men were doing to her. How did all that fit inside her?

Shock over, she shifted herself a bit, to keep the camera screen out of sight of the boyfriends. Couldn't have them see it! Not until she edited it and got it all pretty. It was her project, and it had to be perfect before anyone could see it. Only then, she'd show them, and as long as they said it was good, she'd show Jessy too. And maybe Antoinette?

"You think Clara still likes Jack?" Matthew said. He'd joined Arturo on the bed, and both of them were staring at her. Oh, right, the towel. She closed the laptop, yanked on the towel, and pulled it out from underneath Matt's ass.

"I d-do. She, she um... she's getting d-distracted, right now. B-But that's just sex. So unless s-someone else comes along, I... d-don't see her just giving up on Jack."

The two men nodded, each lifting a hand to hold their chin, in unison, like a choreographed maneuver.

"Know any vampires who'd like a strong-headed woman like her?" Art said. "Clara's fun on the outside, but once you get to know her, she's damn stubborn."

"Um... I d-don't, no. I mean, there are lots of single K-Kindred in Dolareido. Does... does it n-need to be Kindred? You said Avery is d-dating a man named Henry." And there was no vampire named Henry, unless the Prince's opening of siring had led to a new Kindred with such a name.

"True," Art said, "but Avery's Avery. Sometimes I think she'd prefer to just walk away from all this, and live a quiet life with a baker named Henry, Henry McBoring"

Giggling, she tied the towel tight around her, and came over to sit on Matthew's lap. She snuggled back into his chest, turned so she could press her cheek against it, and set her legs on Art's lap.

"She... d-doesn't want to be Uratha?"

Art shook his head. "More like, she's paid her dues, and she wants to live a quieter life. Still be Uratha, still hunt, but not at the front of the pack, and not into life-threatening danger." His hands found her legs, and traced fingers up and down her skin. "Sometimes I think that's half the reason she came to Dolareido, to settle an old score so she could relax for the first time in her life."

"First t-time?"

"I think Art's right," Matt said, kissing the top of her towel crown. "Avery found us after she left Dolareido, but we can tell she's been carrying scars. She's been fighting and hunting for a very long time."

"W-What kind of scars?"

“Well,” Matt continued, “as far as we can tell, she and her pack got pretty upset about what happened in Dolareido, about killing Minerva. They must have done something reckless since then, because her old leader Simon is dead, and her old totem is dead. Flowing Sanctuary was a spirit she befriended not long before she met me.”

Art nodded, and started to massage her calves. “She’s been through hell, but she doesn’t talk about it, with anyone. We just know about Minerva, and Jacob, and the shit that went down here in Dolareido. When David said the spirits were pointing to this city, she was... excited, in a way. Or terrified maybe. We could tell she wanted to come here, but...”

“But,” said Matt, “she seems to be happier, now that she’s here. She’s dating, and we think she’s going to try and reconcile with Jacob again.”

Natasha looked down at her lap, frowning. The idea of Jacob ever forgiving someone a major transgression was difficult to imagine, but the death of his love Minerva, she couldn’t see him forgiving anyone for that, ever. Avery had a long battle ahead of her.

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~~Antoinette~~

Come dusk, she sat upon her throne in the primary meeting room of her headquarters, her Elysium Tower, and waited. With Daniel at her side, standing and still, an eternal gargoyle guarding over her, she feared no vampire. As Maria, Michael, Garry, and Jacob stepped into her room, she offered each a small nod, a knowing nod, a ‘this is my city, obey me’ nod. Only Jacob, and his eyeless gaze, offered anything resembling defiance, subtle motions hidden in his body language.

Would her old friend ever calm himself? Would he ever be her friend again? Doubtful, and tragic.

“Report,” she said. It was a formality of course, to ask for redundant information. And yet, there was always the possibility for misunderstandings to be cleared, or for the Primogen to announce newly developed issues they’d yet to share with her. Hopefully they would not, but it was better to brave such waters immediately.

“The sweeper teams have found nothing,” Garry said. “Couple of the Uratha say they get close to finding something, but however this Elen woman is getting around is throwing them for a loop.”

Michael nodded, and tossed a few pictures onto the glass table. “We’ve found more remnants of those burned symbols, the ones we think Elen uses as a portal. The hunters are clever, but they seem to be on the run. Or at least licking their wounds.”

“Mister Terry,” Maria said with a small smile, “has done them far more harm than any of us could have predicted. Were it not for him, I fear more than Berry Tellern and Julias Mire would have died. The hunters are indeed hurting, and we must take advantage of this as soon as possible.”

Jacob chuckled, but nodded, saying nothing. Garry, on the other hand, leaned back in his chair and donned the expression he always wore when ready to speak, like an aggressive, barking dog. Forever a child, this man.

“But he and no one else has managed to find the hunters, since he captured the monster,” Garry said. “We’re running out of time. Sooner or later the hunters are going to strike again.”

“Indeed,” Jacob said. “Jeremiah and his hunters will do anything to obtain revenge against Azamel, and the longer we wait, the longer we allow him to recover. Let’s not forget, their shaman can hunt down individuals, using some form of haruspex.”

Haruspex. To know that such magics could actually be done, using flesh and sacrifice, was an unsettling truth to discover. Valuable information, but the sort that haunted her dreams. What madness could this Elen witch unleash with her mastery of flesh? What dark gods did she pray to?

“Agreed,” Antoinette said. “But until we learn of a way to defeat Elen and her magic, they will continue to be cockroaches.”

Jacob leaned forward over the table, smiling his deadly smile. Dressed in his usual black robes that he insisted on wearing to these meetings, he looked less a modern vampire, and more an ancient relic of magic and mystery. He found it fun, no doubt, while she considered it nothing more than quaint.

“I may be able to help with that. My fellow witches and I have been doing all we can, to find a way to beat Elen at her own game. We might be onto something.”

Antoinette frowned at her old friend, and tapped a finger against the glass table. “You are the cause for the disappearances in Devil’s Corner as of late.”

“I am.”

“You kill too many, Jacob. If this continues, you will summon yet more of these infernal cockroaches to my city.”

Her words earned nothing more than an annoyed smirk from the man.

“And what progress have you made, in catching Jeremiah and Angela, hmm? Got that Begotten locked up downstairs, but has he told you anything?”

The game, once again, began. Jacob would take a jab at her, a verbal lunge, and subtly imply she was not suitable to lead the city. She would defend herself, assert dominance, and Jacob would retreat with all the regret of a mischievous child. Why did he insist on these stupid games, this pointless jousting?

“No, he has not. He will eventually break free of Elen’s spell, but I imagine it will be too late by then.”

Michael lifted a finger from the table. “But, without Sándor, she can’t escape into the nightmare, correct?”

Jacob shook his head. “Jeremiah broke into the dream realm on his own before, the same night he kidnapped Jack. We don’t know if he used Sándor to do that or not, but considering the magical handcuffs, and the strange glowing knives we’ve seen, I wouldn’t put it past him to have done it without the gargoyle monster.”

Far too many unknowns. The hunt for the hunters grated on her, irritated her beyond belief, a grain of sand that refused to be banished.

“Jacob,” she said with a sigh, “Elen and her strange magics are beyond the reach of the Invictus and the Carthians. And though I loathe to say it, such... an obsession with flesh, is not my forte. In matters of Elen and this strange chamber of flesh that she hides her hunters with, I will defer to you.”

The eyeless man winked at her, only noticeable through the small flex of his eyebrow. “Like I said, already on it.”

“If I may,” Maria Turio said, “I would like to speak of the Lancea et Sanctum.”

Of course she would, because each grain of sand these children slid into her shoes was a victory for them.

Antoinette did her best to not roll her eyes. “I have already allowed Burksen to preach to any who wish to learn of Longinus.”

“Yes, but you limited our freedom to speak of this. And, I am... seeking, to reestablish the Second Estate, in its entirety.”

She glared at Maria, but said nothing, slowly tapping a finger against her table, while Garry began to boil.

“So we can kill all of you again?” the Gangrel said. “Learn from the past, for fuck’s sake.”

“It will not be as last time!” Maria slammed both hands on the table. It survived. For all her obvious frustration with the Carthian, Maria was not the sort to let her emotions get the best of her. She could control herself. But, could she control herself in matters connected to Lucas?

Garry, unlike Antoinette, did roll his eyes. “You say that, but all I see is Lucas’s woman wanting to take up the mantle.”

It was tempting, to interrupt this squabble and prevent escalation. But it was better to see how the Nosferatu would respond to this verbal torture.

“In fact, I wish to do exactly that, except without the man’s eyes for conquest.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“It means, Mister Tones, that I wish... to leave my position as council member for the First Estate. Should I be given permission to do so, I will create the Second Estate as a child branch of the First Estate, until such time that we can be considered a separate covenant unto ourselves.”

That was not what Antoinette had expected to hear. “Are you serious, Madam Turio?”

“She is,” Michael said. “I will rule the Invictus, and Turio and I will be partners. We expect the Second Estate to rely on the first for all resources, until such a time they can stand on their own.”

Maria raised a hand before Garry could speak up. “And before you seek battle, Mister Tones, allow Mister Terry and Mister Burksen to prove to you that this is not a bid to grow our influence.”

The Carthian ground his teeth until everyone present could hear, but after a time, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. “As long as it’s just the Church fuckers existing within the Invictus, I guess it doesn’t matter much.”

Antoinette smiled, a subtle smile, but one that earned a frozen look from the corpse woman. “Very well, Maria Turio. For now, you may act as leader of the Lancea et Sanctum, provided you remain within the confines of the Invictus. We will see, with time, if you remain true to your intentions.”

Unless Antoinette’s ears were deceiving her, tonight’s meeting sounded like progress.