

~~Eric~~

“No thanks.”

“Not interested in becoming immortal?” She ran her finger down his leg, before bringing it up to her lip to give it a small bite. “I think it’d really agree with you.”

“... are you offering?”

“No. Well, maybe? Siring’s been opened up, so I could get you in, if so inclined.”

“Just like that?” He snapped his fingers.

“Yes and no. Normally, the vamp should really get to know the human they’re going to sire, spend time with them, form a bond.” The finger she bit soon found itself on his neck again, and she slid it around his jugular. Took a lot of willpower to not swipe it away, not because he didn’t like it, but because he was very literally exposing his neck to a deadly creature. The glint in her eye told him to hold still though, and that, he wouldn’t mind what she had in store for him.

“You don’t know me very well.”

“Well that’s half the reason I’m here. Want to get to know the sexy, brooding bouncer.”

“...you said earlier I’m the only human who knows about you, who isn’t a thrall or ghoul.”

“Yep.”

“Why don’t you fuck some of them?”

“Ha!” She gave his chest a pat, turned to the table, and gestured to one of the nearby booths. Two men were in there, each with a woman sitting in their lap. The two guys were talking to each other, despite the fact the women on their laps, facing toward the table, were grinding on them. He couldn’t see from the angle, but they were probably having sex. “Two of my four ghouls right there. I fuck the four of them on a regular basis.”

“... at the same time?”

“At the same time.”

Well, damn. He’d clearly underestimated how sexual this woman could be, and he’d already guessed her as extremely sexual.

“Surprised you bothered with me then.”

“You men always think more is better. Sometimes, less is more.” Laughing, she leaned back in the booth again, snug up against his side, shoulder to shoulder. “Fiona being there really got me in the mood, too. Damn that little girl is like, half boob.”

“Is sex all you think about?”

She raised a brow at him. Flirting with her angry side, he could see, but he was starting to get a little annoyed with her constant sex talk. Didn't the woman ever think about anything else? Ugh, his mouth was going to get him into trouble.

“I think about a lot of things, Eric. But I can't talk with you about any of those things.”

“Secret night life of vampires?”

“Exactly. But, hell, you've seen Antoinette, you've seen Beatrice and Natasha and Fiona, and apparently you've even been in nightmare land. You got one up on me. Maybe I can talk to you about some things private?” Grinning, she held out her palms in front of her, as if cupping her own bosom, except far larger. “The Prince's tits were something else, weren't they?”

Oh for fuck's sake.

“For one second, I actually thought I might have offended you, and you were going to prove me wrong by talking about something other than sex.”

“Fooled you.” She winked, laughing. “I know what I like. When I'm not dealing with the Invictus or worrying about the Masquerade or trying to play in the fucking Danse Macabre, I'm fucking. If I was still human, I'd be exercising all the time, putting my ass on the internet, and fucking in my free time. But now I'm Kindred, and my body is like this permanently.” Sighing, groaning a little too, she slouched and let her back sink into the booth. “So now I'm either fucking, or trying to be a vampire. And let me tell you, it's no picnic.”

“I imagine not, with those hunters after you.” Maybe directing her mind onto more pressing circumstances would clear her head. Those four who'd nearly killed him, who'd burned him, were still a problem.

“And they're new. They weren't even a problem before, not really. Christ, it's one thing after another.” She elbowed him in the side. “Got me talking about shit. Sneaky fucker.”

Despite himself, he laughed. “Sorry.”

“So where's Fiona? Seen her lately? She take you out on that date yet?”

“I have not seen her lately, no.” And he needed to. He frowned as his memories drifted back to her, her knowing stuff about him, her refusing to show up and talk to him, and how much he needed to ask her questions.

“She’ll show up eventually. That girl can be pretty hard to find, when she doesn’t want to be found.”

“Yeah, I noticed she’s... an unusual... thing.”

Laughing, Jessy took his closer arm, and set it on her leg. No hesitation, not even a blink. Why would she be hesitant though, considering a bit over a week ago she was riding him, naked, and fingering another girl at the same time. And, as much as he wanted to be surly and be left alone, god damn her leg felt good. Smooth, completely smooth, and he could feel the muscle within, giving her shapely, curvy legs. Whoever she’d been when she was alive, she’d been a fitness nut like him, to get this sort of body.

He could feel his arousal stir. God damn he broke easily.

“Well, until Fiona actually takes you out on a date, I’m considering you fair game.” She helped guide his hand up her leg until it reached the bottom of the short skirt. And predictably, she guided it between her thighs. She had nice thighs.

“Do you know where she is?” Much as Fiona was very attractive, she was also very young, and he wasn’t sure going on a date with her was a good idea. That wasn’t the reason he needed to talk to her, but it might be a good plan to slip that info in.

“Either doing her nightmare thing, or hanging out with the others. Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s hanging out with Damien.” She pulled his hand higher, and higher, until his wrist was forced to push up against her skirt. Shifting from side to side, she helped him get his hand higher up her thigh, skirt inching higher with him.

“Damien?”

“My partner. Bit of an asshole, and loves to sit in dark corners and brood. She seems attracted to those types. Can’t say I really blame her.”

“Can I have her number? I need to talk to her.”

“Ha, you’re an asshole too. Got your hand on my thigh and you’re asking for another girl’s number.”

“I...” He tried to frown, but all he could do was laugh. This woman, calling him an asshole, when she wasn’t letting him move his hand away from her thigh. And, he really didn’t want to.

“If she didn’t give you her number or tell you where she lives on her own, then I’m afraid I can’t help you. Wouldn’t be very lady-like of me to give a guy another girl’s info without her consent,” she said, grinning at him. Which earned a sigh but nod from him. He had no choice but to wait for Fiona to come to him at some point then.

Her voice wavered, and she let out a long sigh, as his finger grazed along her clitoris. Soft, tender, the opposite of the hard body she sported. Her pubic area was smooth as silk, her skin’s delicateness highlighted by the softness of the perfect, inviting mound of her mons. Not a hair to be found, so the gentle pressure of his hand against it caused the soft skin to mold to his palm lightly.

She guided his finger down lower, to her clenching entrance. Wet. Jesus, this woman. He wasn’t much better, shaft hard against his pants already, in blatant betrayal of his earlier statement about his mood. And of course she noticed immediately, and chuckled as she reached out, and set her hand on his crotch to begin rubbing it.

“This qualifies as sexual harassment,” he said.

“Then it’s a good thing it’s a corrupt business. You have no HR to complain to. Besides, you enjoyed it last time.” She pushed his finger in deeper, and clenched. Fucking hell, her insides were so hot, and wet, squeezing in a pulse that had him remembering what it felt like the night they had sex.

“... I... actually wouldn’t mind some information.”

“About?”

“Things, like... the debt you wiped, with Montoya. Or maybe some things about vampires.”
Might as well see if he could make some sense of his new, insane life.

“Alright, I’ll answer some questions. Some. But only while we’re having sex.”

Yeah, he saw that coming. Well, sort of. He figured she’d say after sex, not during.

“... alright.” What the heck, might as well. She was gorgeous, she was fun, and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t been thinking about that night.

“Awesome.” And, like she’d done it a million times before, she undid his pants button and zipper, undid the button of his boxers, and slid out his member. Far too comfortable with herself, and him apparently, as she didn’t hesitate to slip onto his lap facing him, grab his cock, aim it up at her slit, and lower herself. From beside him to on him in two seconds flat.

He had to admit, he really did, that this was a perk of this new job he did not expect, and he was enjoying it no matter what he might say to Jessy or himself. A quiet groan escaped him, and he set his hands on the hips of the woman as she eased herself down onto his length until he was stretching her insides, until she too made a quiet groan as she forced in the last inch.

“Nice and deep. Love, fucking love that. Wait, hold on.” She adjusted her knees, her skirt a little higher so it stopped biting her thighs, and she adjusted him too so he was slid forward a little, now leaning back. Like moving a feather. He must have weighed nothing compared to what she could move.

“Comfortable?” he said, smirking up at her.

“Enough. You?” Without missing a beat, she put her hands on his shoulders near his neck, elbows hanging and nudging against his chest.

“I—oh...” He should have expected it. The moment he said something, she squeezed, hard, hard enough he groaned again, and he tightened his grip where he held her waist. “I... wanted to know, what you said to Montoya.”

“Montoya Montel, as you know, is a business man who gives out loans to stupid people who think they’re rich. Because stupid people who think they’re rich, like yourself at the time I’m sure, spend money they don’t have. They get in deep, and he rakes in the interest.” She leaned in closer, got her lips near his ear, and breathed softly as she gently started to grind her hips. Every motion, she matched with a clench of her insides, rhythmic, milking. He was completely outclassed. “I imagine he was sending some fucker to harass you?”

“Yeah, Mr. Pitt.”

“Ugh, slimy fucker. Well in any case, Montoya works for Terra Den Industries.”

“... does he now?”

“Mmhmm. Terra Den does a lot of illegal shit. Course, you can’t prove any of it.” She growled into his ear, and ran her fangs along his neck. Fangs. Shit, he forgot about the fangs, and the way sex had ended last time. Thinking with your dick, stop thinking with your dick.

Breathe, just breathe. Nothing wrong with this. If she does bite you, it won’t kill you, won’t hurt, and you’ll feel great. Better than great. The thrill of it, of a predator, a hunter, riding his cock as she teased his neck with the potential bite, sent shivers up his spine, until he groaned again. Her nipples were swollen, and pressed through her shirt and into his suit’s jacket hard enough for him to feel them. She really enjoyed playing the horny, aggressive animal. And, he seemed to like it too.

“I paid a visit to the CEO, Jeremy Long. We had other business to discuss, and I made a point of note that he was to insure Montoya knew your debt was cleared.”

“Why would you be paying a visit to someone as important as Jeremy Long?”

“Because I’m Kindred and we own this fucking city.” Chuckling, she moved her head around to plant her kiss near his other ear, lips and fangs both grazing the lobe. “You work for us too, remember? We own you.”

“I... guess you do.” His hands drifted higher. It wasn’t him, he wasn’t telling them what to do anymore. Entirely on their own, they slipped up and slid under the shirt, its cut so high it was already exposing half her back. As his fingers slid in under the shirt, he caressed her spine, and breathed faster, deeper, as touching her earned some quivers and some more clenches from her. He’d barely touched her and she was so damn wet, it was amazing.

Look at you Eric, getting seduced again because a woman’s willing to jump on your dick. Don’t you ever learn? How many times do you have to go through this shit before you realize you should stop sticking your dick in crazy?

Not the same thing, asshole. Sheryl was using you for money. This woman is ordering around multimillionaires, and has the power and position to make any thing she wants a fucking reality, far as you can tell. It isn’t the same thing. She doesn’t need your money, and she isn’t faking her arousal. Get out of your fucking head, and enjoy it.

“You don’t mind if I have a little nip, do you?” she said into his ear. “You taste really fucking good.”

“Do I?”

“Mhmm. Different than most kine—humans.”

Ok, maybe there was something he had that she wanted, that she was using sex to manipulate out of him. His blood, since apparently she really liked it. But last time, she didn’t know that, and she slept with him anyway. The woman just really enjoyed doing what she did. Hell, maybe she actually liked fucking him specifically; she did say she came here to get to know him.

So relax and enjoy it, for fuck’s sake.

“As... as long as I can still function when you’re done. I have a few hours left tonight.”

“Sure. And, hey, this is kind of fun. I don’t normally get to just talk like this.” Instead of biting him, she leaned back, put her elbows on the table, and grinned at him, the angle putting her rolling abs on display. Just like last time. “My ghouls aren’t exactly great conversationalists.”

“And I am?”

“Course you are, it just needs to be squeezed out of you.” On queue, she squeezed, hard, almost hard enough to hurt him, and he winced as her insides wrenched on his length. But she eased up, and chuckled at him as her tight, heavenly, wet, surprisingly deadly insides began to milk him with more rhythmic squeezing again.

“So,” she said, eyes on him as she gently eased herself back and forth, “you noticed those hunters that day?”

“I... noticed four people, and Fiona’s description jogged my memory.”

“Next time you see them, run. They know you work here, and after that shit show, they know... well, they’ll either kidnap you like they did Jack, or they’ll shoot you on sight.”

“Will the hunters come this deep into the city? Where I guess a lot of you vamps hang out.”

“I’m sure they’ll sneak their way in.”

Shit, that was a problem. “The Prince, she said she’d have someone watch me.”

“And I’m sure she will, and probably does right now, but you still need to protect yourself.” Her hands found his jacket, and undid the button below the breast to open it. And with the same casualness, she began undoing the buttons of his white shirt, top to bottom. “If you’re not already, you should find a place near here to live. The closer to Xnomina HQ, the better.”

“Xnomina?”

“Yeah, most Invictus vamps live close to it, so it’s our home beacon.” With his shirt undone, she reached down, and began to run her fingers up and down his chest, fingertips tracing his abs. “Course, you could go live in the Carthian half of South Side.” Laughing, like she said something funny, she brought her hands down to where the two of them were connected. She put her elbows on the booth table behind her again, and with one hand, started to caress her clit while her other slipped under the bottom of the shirt, and pulled it up over her breasts.

“Carthians?” He tried to not stutter, to keep the wavering out of his voice, but it was hard when watching a beautiful woman playing with herself while riding him. Her breasts, large despite her

leanness, jiggled ever so slightly with her consistent, smooth rocking motion. And he stared at them, because, boobs.

“Another group of vamps. You though, I think you’ll be happier here, with us. And you should definitely move into a place nearby if you haven’t.” She paused her self touching, and reached out for his hands. No point in resisting, he couldn’t even if he wanted to at this point, and he let her guide his palms up to her breasts. Soft, so damn soft, unlike the thighs currently squeezing on his sides.

“You really love your body, don’t you?”

“Fucking right I do. I remember, over fifty years ago before I was embra—turned, I was big into fitness. MMA for women wasn’t around at the time, but I was involved in a lot of fighting. And unlike girls like Beatrice, I got to keep my rack when cut my weight down.” Laughing again, she winked at him, and pressed her hands against his, to cause his fingers and palms to squish against her large tits. “Nice, right?”

“Very.” And they were. Though, much as the natural size of them was pleasant, it was how hard her nipples were that was more pleasing. She was enjoying herself immensely, sexually. No ulterior motive, no faking it, just a woman who enjoyed the fuck out of fucking.

There was something about that genuine, honest simplicity, that was calming on his soul.

“So, you should move somewhere nearby. I’ll set you up with one of the apartments in the Carlava Villa if you want.” She put her hands on his shoulders again, and started grinding on him, harder. Juices dripped down his length, and he could feel them running down his testicles. He’d never had sex with a woman who got this wet, and he found himself staring at her, shocked, by how much she was enjoying herself.

“That’s... an expensive... place to live, even with me working here.”

“I can—ah, hold on.” Fingers tightened on his shoulders, and muscles clamped down on his cock, as she started to ride faster. Never up and down, never bouncing, but instead always grinding herself back and forth. She started to squeeze, and didn’t stop, making each inch she managed to work of his length around inside her drag along her insides.

She started to cum, and she grinned at him as she did. Holding his shoulders still, she ground her body on him, and clenched in rhythm with it again, mixing with the random spasms of her insides as she shivered in bliss. More juices leaked out of her smooth lips, and when he looked down, he groaned as he watched some of the slow juices trickle out of her onto the base of his cock. His hands continued to massage her breasts, thumbs tracing circles around her nipples, as he stared between his arms down

at her taut slit. Her abs crunched with each tremble, highlighting the strong but feminine curves of her waist, and where it met her hips and pelvis in the glorious S shapes a woman's body had in droves.

"Nothing quite like a guy staring at me like when I cum." Still shivering a little, she resumed her previous rhythm. Orgasm was nothing more than a speed bump for her. "I was going to say, I can handle the cost of getting you a nice suite in the Carlava Villa, if you prove your worth."

"Prove my worth?" Uh oh.

"Don't worry, nothing you probably haven't already assumed. Those hunters are going to cause problems for us, and we need eyes and ears open. Report to me information, anything unusual, peculiar, and I'll treat you right."

"... and what does treating me right include?" More deals with devils. Well, fuck it, in for a penny.

"Money, a better place to live, in a place where Kindred keep shit safe and peaceful." She started to pick up her pace again, animal eyes devouring him, his body, and his eyes too. "I don't think you'd make a good thrall or ghoul, too much spine, but a vampire? Mmm, you got a certain quality to you I like."

This vampire could not tell what was different about him, just that he was different. He was pretty sure he was a werewolf, whatever the fuck that actually meant, but how was he supposed to know that for sure? He had to talk to Fiona, alone, but until she came back, he was fucked. And the fuck was going to happen if this Jessy woman tried to turn him?

"I uh... think I'll pass, on the being-turned-into-a-vampire thing."

"I wasn't offering. It takes time to build up to something like that. I'm just saying, I like what I see, Eric Tanverson." She took his hands, and guided them down to her ass cheeks, exposed now that she had the skirt pulled up. Large, firm, they hugged his body tight, molding to the muscles of his legs near his pelvis as she ground on his cock. "I wouldn't want to change you anytime soon anyway, or want any vamp to change you anytime soon. You taste way too good."

"... thanks."

"So, you'll do it? Be another ear for Invictus vamps like me, and I'll make sure you get some good living to go with your new salary." She continued to grind herself on him, getting faster again, and faster, until she went rigid, and started to shiver. Without breaking eye contact, she slid her hands down from his shoulders to his chest, and caressed his muscles as she came, as she soaked him, as she clenched down on his cock until he felt the warmth of his cum building up underneath his length. "And

lots of sex, of course, as a bonus.” And of course she didn’t miss a beat, talking easily despite how he could still feel her shivers on his cock.

In for a pound.

“Sure.”

“Excellent. I’ll probably drop by every week for a quick check up. In the mean time, try and get laid some more? I can tell I’m the only pussy you’ve been getting.”

“I... I was waiting for Fiona. The date, remember? And besides, you’re one to talk. You’ve cum twice and I haven’t cum once yet.” I’m rubber, you’re glue.

Laughing, she came in closer, pressed her breasts to his chest, and put her lips on his neck. “I’ll fix that,” she said. He took a breath, braced himself, and waited. But she didn’t bite him, instead, ground on him more, and pushed her breasts into his bare chest in small circles. “Relax, it’s not going to hurt, except that tiny pinch at the start. You remember, right? Just pumping cum into me as I drank you?” Her voice was heavy, hungry, and her hands slipped around his waist underneath his shirt to hold him tighter.

Relax, right, relax. Easier said than done. He had a million new instincts telling him this woman was deadly and he should be careful with her, not to mention relaxing was not a word in his vocabulary. Never was.

But, as she continued to press herself into him, grind into him, gently clench on his cock, and moan softly into his ear, he took another breath, and let himself relax. A little. It was enough to make Jessy chuckle again, and after putting a kiss on his neck near the shoulder, she bit into him.

Breathe. Just breathe, like the dreams told him to.

He held onto the woman’s waist and hips, and let himself melt into the booth as the waves of bliss washed over him. Whatever her bite was, whatever gave it such power, he stopped caring. All that mattered in the moment, was how it rendered him so relaxed, he felt every muscle unclench as his cum started to flood her insides.

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~~Beatrice~~

What a weird situation to be in.

She sat up, and looked across the room. Julias's biggest bedroom again, the fanciest bed, and the nicest room. Being in it made her feel like a queen, or a princess, or something super ridiculous. Maybe some day she should ask Julias to get some thralls to custom fit her a really big dress, the ones with the huge ass, fancy Victorian dresses.

Julias and Jen were in bed with her. Sex over, the blankets all screwed up, and everyone naked. This was the fifth time they'd fucked, the three of them. Each time, Beatrice found herself enjoying it, a lot, and she could tell Julias and Jen were enjoying it a lot too. Julias, well, he got another set of boobs and legs in the bed, so, duh. Jen was enjoying worming her way into their lives. Hell, she was snuggling into Julias right now. Triss's damn fault for leaving Jen in the middle when they were done.

Jen caught her glance, sat up, crawled over, and put Julias between them. "Come on, there's plenty to snuggle." Naked body pressed up to Julias's chest and side, she set her chin on his chest, and smiled at her.

Triss rolled her eyes, and slid into the nook of Julias's arm as well. Part of her wanted to be jealous that maybe Jen was taking her man, but the emotion never came. Why wasn't she annoyed that Jen had her naked body snug against Julias's leg and side like that, rubbing her big breasts into him, and teasing a finger along his chest and stomach? Somehow, the sneaky Ventrue bitch had successfully become her friend, wormed her way into their bed, and gotten comfortable. And Triss liked it, liked the strange, cozy, relaxed smiles Jen had on her. The girl had one right now as she watched Triss, chin still on Julias's chest.

Triss caught Julias looking at the Nos, and her Superman hugged her in closer. His arm behind her reached up to slip his fingers into her hair, and she melted as she settled her cheek on his chest, body lifted a little so she could rest on it, face only inches from Jen's.

"Your man is great a poker," Jen said.

"You're both sneaky bastards. What the fuck is my tell? Tell me!"

Both Ventrue bastards shook their heads, in sync.

Grumbling, she lowered her forehead down to Julias's chest, and hit it against him a few times. "Dicks."

Julias laughed. Jen laughed. The two had a lot in common, and every time she was with them, she noticed more and more of it. If Jen had another ninety years of vampire life under her belt, she'd probably have gone through the same emotional life phases Julias had, now that Triss thought about it. Maybe that's why she liked the two of them so much, because they were kind of similar? Or, she was a glutton for punishment, cause the two sneaky fuckers loved to tease her.

"What're your plans today, ladies?" Julias said. "I have to get back to HQ in a moment."

"Do you?" Jen climbed up onto the man's waist, straddled him, and put her hands to his shoulders.

With Triss already snug in the nook of Julias's arm and chest, she got a front row seat to Jen's blatant attempt to seduce her boyfriend. It was strangely adorable. Julias was impervious to direct seduction, and Jen knew it too, but she tried anyway. She traced one hand down the man's body, his broad chest, his flat stomach, and her other reached up to caress one of her breasts, before cupping it and lightly bouncing it in her palm. It was more than big enough to fill her hand, and jiggle as she bounced it.

"Not going to work," Julias said, grinning his typical jackass grin.

"You'll make a lady sad, ignoring her advances," Jen said. But, as if a light bulb clicked on over her head, she slid off of him, and onto Triss. The Nos squeaked as she suddenly found herself underneath Jen. The girl wasted no time, got Triss onto her back, and set herself down onto her, chest to chest. "How about Triss and I give you a treat? Should only take a few minutes." The evil woman leaned in, and put a kiss on Triss's lips, all while looking toward the other Ventrue in the bed.

Triss let her. Hell, her claws found their way onto Jen's waist, and half-hugged her as she returned the kiss. She managed a glance Julias's way as she kissed Jen too, and grinned as the man's expression broke. Yeah, that's right you cocky dick, even you can't resist this.

Jen sat up, and straddled Triss's waist, like she was on Julias a moment before. And like a kid drawn into a silly game, Triss raised her hands up along the woman's waist, belly, her sides, and up to her breasts. The game was to try and seduce Julias, make him late for his job, and Triss knew they couldn't; man was too good at being Ventrue, and loved the Invictus too much. But it was fun to try anyway. Triss cupped Jen's breasts, holding them with thumbs along their inside contours, fingers along the outside. Soft, inviting, Triss squeezed them a little harder than she should have, to see them conform to her fingers. And of course, so Julias could too.

“Not going to work ladies.” The bastard winked at the two of them, climbed out of bed, and started getting dressed.

Jen sighed, and rolled over to lie beside Triss again, before the two of them rolled over to watch the man get dressed, Jen behind her. And also just like a kid, Jen started playing with the various piercings in Triss’s ear, and the chain that connected ear to nostril, while the two of them watched Julias.

Triss let her. Facing away like this, it was easier to smile where Jen couldn’t see how much she was enjoying it, especially when Julias smirked at the two of them.

“Something about a man putting on a suit,” Jen said.

“I know right? Arg, makes me want to... put on his tie, kiss him goodbye as he goes to work, while I stay home and clean the house.”

The Ventrue pressed to her back laughed. “Can I move in next door, and be your friend? We can have book night every Saturday, and secretly get drunk.”

“You know ladies,” Julias said as he came around to the foot of the bed, straightening his tie, “you’re painting an awfully lovely picture.”

The two girls sat up, facing the man. Must have been quite a sight, two girls naked, sitting in a man’s bed, and try as she might to stop smiling, Triss couldn’t help herself. Julias was smiling at her because she was smiling, and she was smiling because he was smiling. And damn it all if the two of them weren’t smiling because Jen was smiling like a satisfied house cat.

Kindred were weird.

“White picket fence?” he said. Turning, he offered them a small wave, and looked over his shoulder to wait for Triss’s response.

Triss winked at him, and waved back. “Of course.”

Jen waved too, grinning at the two of them. She really ate up their romance. Every time Julias and Triss got tender with each other, kissed romantically, hugged and cuddled and stuff, Jen squealed or mewled liked she was watching kittens. Made sense, considering the house cat comparison.

Julias closed the door. Now, it was just the two of them.

“Ah well, I tried. Damn man is too resistant to my seduction skills. Frustrating.” Jen slipped out of bed, and started getting dressed.

“Figured you’d try and continue on me,” Triss said, “once he was gone.”

“Course not. You two are lovers, I’m the friend.” She scoffed, an actual scoff, as if already wearing the queenly dress Triss was imagining earlier. “I won’t violate that.”

“... thanks.”

“That said, I reserve the right to admire a naked Beatrice as she gets dressed. And maybe feel her up every once in a while.”

“Perfectly reasonable.” In fact, Triss got up off the bed, and started helping her. The pencil skirt, the shoes, those Jen put on, but the shirt and suit jacket, Triss slipped onto her arms. And of course, no jacket buttons done, and only the bottom shirt button done. “Jesus, wear a bra.”

“Why would I wear a bra?”

“Etiquette.”

“Ha.” Jen laughed, and followed Triss as the Nos started getting dressed. Putting on a thong, a g-string at that, was always an exercise of pure decadence, underwear meant for nothing more than to let a viewer know what the body would look like naked, without being naked. She liked it. And Jen liked it too, cause the woman groaned as she watched on, staring at Triss’s back while the Nos slipped on the underwear, and then her black jeans.

But before Triss could slip on her black tank top, Jen came up to her, and put her hands on her hips from behind. Evil, devilishly evil hands sneaked up her stomach, and caressed her abs, fingers tracing through the subtle indentations, before rising higher to find her nipples. “You should wear a bra.”

“I have half the rack you do.” Two girls, talking about and fondling each other’s tits. Were they inside Julias’s head? Or Jack’s?

“Yeah but everyone can see your nipple piercings through your top.” And, to prove her point, she continued to play with her nipples, tugging on the piercings and caressing them between finger and thumb. If Triss was still blushing life, it’d have been enough to have some delightful sparks starting to warm her.

But she wasn’t blushing life, thank god. Rolling her eyes, she put the tank top on, pushing Jen’s hands out of the way at the same time.

“Come on, let’s go. Jacob said he wanted to continue my lesson,” Triss said. She really, really, very much did not want to continue that lesson, but she was committed. Treasures macabre were

promised to her at the end of this hellish journey, and fuck it all, she really wanted a taste of that madness.

And out they went. The servants nodded to them, they nodded back, and everyone was perfectly at home with the two witches inside the Invictus mansion. It was weird, so very weird, and she prayed it'd stay weird, and not turn to suspicious.

“I was thinking, about what you said in the den, before you took out your eye. It's true. The rest of us don't really pull our weight for the Circle.”

“I wasn't asking you to pull your eye out too, you know. Just—”

“Yeah, just that, shit in this city used to be great, and now it's not, and we're not really stepping up to do anything about it. So I was talking to Aaron and Othello about it, and we all agreed, we need to start doing more shit.” Jen followed her out the back door, the two of them nodding to the informed thralls.

Outside, Dolareido, the night sky, way up on Rich Side. It was a few miles to the edge of the city where their den was, a secure den now that Jacob had updated it. But most nights, Jen and Triss were both at Julias's mansion. It'd only taken a couple nights of some rather awesome sex before Triss felt comfortable asking Julias about Jen sleeping in the basement bunker at night with them. Going out at night, alone, anywhere that wasn't within throwing distance of your fellow Kindred, was no longer allowed. So Jen leaving the mansion every night before dawn was problematic anyway.

Plus, Triss kinda wanted her around. She... really liked having her around. Not as much as she liked being with Julias, but there wasn't anything wrong with having your cake and eating it too, right? It'd been so damn long since Triss had a friend, an actual friend friend. The sex was bonus, a very tasty bonus.

Triss buried them both in her cloak of night, and they started walking toward the den. Grass, random trees, rocks, some small smooth sloping hills, and decent open sky. The city's edge. No chance they'd get ambushed out here, unless the hunters felt confident enough to hang out in trees with rifles or some shit, instead of hiding in the comfort of walls and locked doors. Not like they'd be able to see cloaked vamps from a distance anyway, hopefully.

“What're you going to do?” Triss said.

“Aaron and Othello are partnering up. Jacob's pointed them in the direction of the hunters' last known location, but he expects they'll find nothing. Still, they're going to try and dig up some evidence, some clue or trail they can use. Whatever, right?”

“Sounds good. And you?”

“I’m going to be helping you with whatever you’re doing.” Jen winked at her as they walked, the long grass reaching up to their knees. “... and... that includes the lessons you’ve been taking with Jacob.”

“You want to get involved in crúac?”

“... yes.”

“Jen, think twice about this. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“How terribly cliché.”

“I’m serious! I told you what happened, what he did. I told you about... the knives. I wasn’t exaggerating, Jen.” She stopped to touch her stomach under her tank top. Pain was becoming normal, considering Jacob had already done a couple sessions of stabbing her a dozen times, and then the night with the hunter pumping her full of lead happened. Ugh, she didn’t want it to become normal, to become something she could handle, cause then Jacob would find new ways to make sure it still had some spice to it.

“I don’t expect to be part of the ritual on the first night... unless, Jacob is feeling particularly mean.”

“Which you know could happen.”

“But even if that happens, I want to be a part of this. You’re my friend, and... and I didn’t join the Circle just to be a freeloader off that psycho.”

Triss stopped, and looked at the girl. The business suit with the pencil skirt and open shirt was becoming Jen’s favorite clothes to seduce Julias with, and Triss by proxy. She looked good in it, great in it even, but she didn’t look like a member of the Circle. Hell, now that Triss thought about it, the only people in the circle she felt actually fit the role, was her, and Jacob.

“Why did you join the Circle?” she said.

Jen sighed, shrugged, and stopped as well, turning to face Triss. “My sire left not long after he embraced me. He was a member of the Carthians; you might remember him, Marcus.” Triss did remember him, but barely. Not a guy she’d ever engaged with. “I got a little taste of the Carthians, their borderline anarchist ways, and... ugh, hated it. I’m not interested in fighting for a cause.” The wince on her face made her look guilty for the admission, like it pained her to say it.

Triss put up her hands. “No judgment from me, Jen.”

“You certainly sounded like you were judging, when you yelled at us.”

“Er, well, yeah, kinda. But I mean, not wanting to fight for a cause, just want to do your own thing? I get that. But you don’t need to be a part of a covenant for that.”

“Unfortunately, if I left the Carthians and went covenantless at the time, Tony would have considered me a part of his group, whether I wanted to be or not.”

Ah, right, Tony. “God I’m glad I ripped that Rebecca bitch in half.”

Jen raised a brow. “... you killed Rebecca?”

“Shit, did you not know? Crap. I probably shouldn’t have said that. People think Julias did it, and it’s better it stays that way.” People wouldn’t question why Julias killed her, considering the nature of the incident. But, why Beatrice was there, would have garnered questions, and questions could have led to talk of what actually happened. If people found out about Jack... “I followed Julias, and... yeah, big fight of a situation. I took advantage of it, and killed that fucking bitch.”

“Why?”

“... why not?”

“Because as much as you’re a loose cannon, you’re not that much of a loose cannon, to go killing Kindred. Garry asked you to kill her, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Can you blame him?”

“No, I can’t, I suppose. I heard about what she did to Jack too, the night of his embrace.”

“Back on topic. Why are you in the Circle now, if Tony’s dead? You don’t have to stay anymore if you would prefer to be by yourself.”

“... because I like it.” She started walking toward the den again, a bit faster, and Triss had to jog a moment to catch up to her. “I like the philosophy, the views, the beliefs. I like how open we all are, sexually. But it’s not just that. I like Aaron and Othello. I like the skulls with candles in them. I like the painting of bones on the walls. I get a tingle up my spine each time I see Jacob use that blood bowl, and do some crazy shit... Fuck, it turns me on, you know? We’re vampires, we’re beasts of blood, and... gives me shivers.”

Yeah, Triss knew that feeling, and knew it well. The same night Jacob had exposed her to Black Blood, and spent a little time introducing her guts to knives, she fucked Julias. Not long after either. Went to him, a little startled, a little scared, sore and hungry, and a little afraid to admit the whole

ordeal had sent a tingle up her spine. A creature of the night, practicing dark rituals with entities colossal and terrifying? Yeah, it had sent a thrill through her she doubted she'd find anywhere else.

"I get that," she said. "I get it... more than you know. But, I'm not kidding Jen. It's scary shit."

"... bring it."

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"I suppose it was only a matter of time," Jacob said. The man was in his black robe again, hints of stained red around the thread. He stood with a very Sith style, hands slipped into the sleeves of each other arm in front of him so his hands were hidden, head hidden in the robe's hood, body beneath the gate of the cemetery. His cloak of night was impenetrable, and no one would be able to see him until he wanted them to.

"... I suppose it was," Jen said.

Triss frowned at Jacob, but didn't say anything. She could warn him to be nice to Jen, but that was pointless, and would have invited the bastard to be more of a bastard. Better to let things unfurl naturally, and for it to scare the fuck out of Jennifer at a normal level.

"You coming because you're genuinely interested, Jennifer?" The psycho started to walk along, slowly, making sure to take his time and let the mood sink in, let the inevitability of pain and screams soak the two younger Kindred. Like marinating god damn steaks. "Testing these waters because you want to get closer to your girlfriend won't end well."

"She's my friend, Jacob." Jen fell in step beside him, and offered him as hard a glare as she could muster. It wasn't normal for the girl to carry a frown, let alone a harsh glare; anything but a seductive smile looked strange on her. But, it was better than nothing, and Jacob laughed as he continued along. "And, I am interested for my own sake too." The cemetery was silent, and yet, Triss thought for sure it was laughing at Jen too.

"As long as you're here to taste of the blood, to give it a chance peek because you're interested in what the blood has to offer, then you are welcome to come." The Joker shrugged, chuckle coming and going. "Three Kings Cemetery will be a place you come to know well then, Jennifer. I hope you agree with it." Not 'hope it agrees with you' of course.

As they walked, he hopped onto one of the graves, one with a very large, fancy tombstone with an angel on it. A warrior angel, with sword drawn and pointed upward. Truly amazing craftsmanship, and Jacob leaned out to catch his weight on its raised sword like someone swinging on a stripper pole.

“Did I ever tell you the story of Captain Darmer?” he said.

The two women raised a brow at each other, then at him. “Um, no?”

“Well, in the 1500s, pirates started to become a thing. Colonization was common, and not long after, trade by boat. Countries had to police their own waters, but it was proving impossible to actually police the open sea. It was an interesting time for vampires, as while a major focus of crime — always a tool for Kindred — was turning to the sea, vampires found themselves grounded. What vampire would dare sail open waters, when a sunrise could kill them?

“There were a few, actually. Most died, horribly, a victim of their circumstance. One died when his ship was blown apart by cannon fire during the day. Another starved, and probably sits at the bottom of the ocean as we speak, deep in torpor and likely dead from barnacles eating his poor ass. But, Captain Darmer was smarter than that. A woman, she used her feminine wiles to lure men and women into her employ. Soon she had a small army of thralls as her crew. They raided at night, sailed at night, and during the day they docked inside a hidden base, within a sea cave.

“Now old Captain Darmer, she was smart in many ways. The crew served her faithfully, as thralls tend to do, but they were also afraid of her and her powers. Darmer kept the skull of one victim of each city she raided in a chest, usually a politician or someone of importance. She spoke to those skulls, listened to their whispers. The crew thought she was crazy at first, until she started asking the skulls for secrets, about things, random things, weird things, the things you could only know if you were a politician, or a rich bastard.

“She spoke to her crew about the whispers of the skulls. When they doubted her, she guided them to raid a city, or find a sailing ship carrying expensive cargo. Time after time, she was correct in her predictions about the bounty. The whispers of the dead guided her, as they were bound to her, unable to escape to whatever afterlife awaited them.”

Both girls squeaked, paralyzed, as Jacob turned and grabbed both of them by the shoulders. He had the bandage covering his empty eyes, but the smirk said it all.

“She bound these skulls with crúac, forced them to speak to her, took away their freedom and rendered them helpless voices.” He leaned in closer to Jen, and licked a fang as he got in her face. “Are

you prepared to walk such waters, Jen? To feel the souls of the damned tug at your bed sheets every night?”

Both Kindred tried to shake themselves loose, but the old man’s grip was absolute. They weren’t moving unless he wanted them to move. Bastard was obviously exaggerating the nefariousness of his tale... at least, a little.

“... what happened to Captain Darmer?” she said.

The old fucker started to laugh. “Alas, poor Darmer, dragged into the depths of the sea by those she had cursed to serve as her tools.” Jen gulped, and so did Beatrice, but Jacob let them go, and dismissed them with a small hand wave. “I kid. She tried to raid a ship she wasn’t sure about and found herself in battle with a navy ship. She burned.”

Laughing all the more, Jacob started the long walk through the cemetery, and toward the mausoleum deep within the gathering of the dead. Pillars on the sides of the stone building’s entrance, and a cross on the entry’s archway, greeted the three of them with its intimidating, awe-inspiring magnificence. Jacob started up the small stairway, and stopped as he came to the statue of the virgin Mary. With a small chuckle and smile, he reached out and touched the worn statue’s face, before he opened the gate into the building.

In the darkness of the mausoleum, Jacob withdrew an LED lantern, and took a second to examine the various coffin shelves within, before he pressed on a nook in one of them. The floor began to slide to the side, exposing the old, stone stairway beneath. Triss glanced Jen’s way to see how she reacted to exposed stairway, and blinked as she noticed Jen stare at it with eyes wider than normal. She was afraid.

Triss took the woman’s hand. Jen squeezed hers in return, offered a smile too, before she let go. Much as Triss wanted to be supportive for her, this was serious, neck-deep Circle of the Crone shit, and they had to be able to handle that on their own; to a degree, at least.

Jacob started down the stairs, and the two of them followed. Tiny stairway, short entrance, and they both ducked to get their heads under the old stones. Jacob pulled a crank ahead, and it closed behind them. Jen began to shiver, and set a hand on Triss’s shoulder as they walked down the narrow stairway into the blackness of the depths. The smell of dead flesh, old and new, filled their nostrils, and Jen raised her wrist to her nose. She’d have to get used to it, if she was going to be joining Triss down here.

“How many times... have you done this?” she said.

Jacob turned around, and walked backward, lantern held up so the two girls could see the bloody designs drawn on the walls as it turned from stone bricks, to a cave. “Oh, hundreds.”

“I meant Triss.” Fucker knew Jen meant her too.

“This is my third time coming down here.” Third time she was going to attempt to learn a crucial ritual. It was going to hurt.

They continued, into the depths of the Earth, passing pillars of wood that held the cave up, and various rocks and small cuts in the dirt beneath them. It felt like walking into a catacomb, an old-fashioned catacomb not unlike the one Triss used to hang out in. They were beneath a cemetery, so it certainly fit, but it just felt so god damn macabre each time Triss came down here. She liked macabre, and hell, she even liked this, but it could be a bit much. And Jen kept her hand on Triss’s shoulder, her fingers clutching and shaking a little as they went deeper and deeper. Kindred their age wouldn’t be able to escape a cave-in, and that sucked.

The sign ‘Continue Forth, and Deaths Awaits Thee’ came up, and Jen stared at the skulls dangling from it. If any human found this place, they’d find that, report it, and the Invictus would immediately suppress the story. But there was no chance anyone would find this place. Even if they did, all they’d find would be bones and corpses, nothing that could risk the Masquerade. Hopefully. But Masquerade risk or not, it was fucking spooky as shit to see that sign, in a pitch-dark tunnel, with the two of them being led by a creepy man in a dark robe holding a lantern. She couldn’t blame Jen for squeezing her shoulder tighter.

Eventually the room opened up. There wasn’t any howling this time, thank god, but the blood bowl was still there, held up by the dark skeletons underneath it. Jen let go of Triss’s shoulder, and drifted closer, eyes drawing across the terrible sight of the large blood bowl that put the one she was familiar with to shame. She froze when she looked up, and noticed the enormous hook hanging there.

Jacob reached out, and pulled her back.

“W-What? I haven’t touched—”

The man shook his head, and pulled her back further, until she was beside Triss. Triss almost said something, almost asked what the fuck he was doing or getting at, but the man offered them only a small frown before he turned toward the bowl, and stood before it.

“Come out.” Jacob pulled back his hood, exposed the white bandage that circled his head to cover his eyes, and he scanned the darkness with his lantern raised.

The two girls looked at each other, then at him. Black Blood? No, couldn't have been. Jacob looked spooked, or annoyed, and he and that Black Blood entity were on good terms far as Triss could tell. Try as she might, she couldn't sense anyone else except for Jacob though, and judging from Jennifer's eyes, she couldn't either.

But there was someone. The soft clack of boots against the stone floor echoed in the silence, and shadows twisted and turned as someone exposed themselves from their cloak of night.

Face as deadpan as ever, the sheriff came out of the black, wearing his usual trench coat and his usual glasses. He had both hands in his pockets, until one raised to adjust his glasses. He looked so dull, he looked so boring. The presence of him had the same cold steel Triss imagined the empty gaze of a jaded executioner would.

Jen and Triss backed away, and stared on, shivering, as the sheriff approached Jacob.

"Hello Jacob."

"Why hello there Daniel. The fuck are you doing in my home away from home?"

Daniel sighed, and looked over to the blood bowl. Triss couldn't see into it from where she was, but the sheriff reached in, and pulled out flesh. A human head, a man's, and he dangled it by his hair. Poor dude's eyes were open wide, and horror was etched into his face, frozen in death.

"I'm investigating possible leads into disturbances. More than one finger has been pointed at this." The sheriff motioned to the blood bowl, and then to Jacob, as if the two were the same.

"I doubt my decor is the cause of these disturbances," Jacob said, hands raised to quote 'disturbances'. "And I never gave you permission to be in here, Daniel."

"I don't need your permission." The sheriff walked up to Jacob, looked at him, face as still as a tombstone, and past him toward the two women.

And the two women were struck still. They stared up at the man, both not moving, but trembling a little, both waiting. Being near the sheriff at a ball or Kindred gathering was one thing. Being alone with him was another.

"I, um... w-what sort of disturbances?" Triss said. Probably shouldn't have said anything, but the silence was killing her.

"That is part of the mystery." The man sighed, and continued to walk around the room, hands in his pockets, as casual and calm as ever. Far as Triss knew, Daniel was younger than Jacob; not that it was easy for elders of that age to remember their exact ages, but everyone was under the impression

Jacob had a century on him. Did it even matter at that age? Or, was Daniel just that good, he didn't give a shit about Jacob as a threat?

Triss winced as she noticed the hard, long flat bit along a portion of the back of his trench coat. His sword. She was tempted to make a joke, something along the lines of 'is that a sword in your coat, or are you just looking to fuck?' but it was probably a bad idea.

"What have you and Black Blood been up to, Jacob?" Daniel's wandering took him around the room, and he paused every so often to look at the various patterns etched into the walls with rock. Other patterns were drawn with blood, and they stained the dirty stone like a timeline of torture.

Jen mouthed 'Black Blood', and looked Triss's way. She mouthed 'later'. Best not to throw gasoline onto this fire.

"Ask him yourself."

"It, ask it." Daniel shook his head, and reached out to touch the edge of the blood bowl in the center. "Remember what it is, Jacob."

Jacob, groaning, tossed the lantern backward, and Triss had to scamper to catch it. Not like she was going to let their only source of light go out, this far underground. Jacob approached the sheriff, rolled up a sleeve, and... held his own chin, like he was thinking about something. She thought for sure he was going to throw a punch.

"Black Blood and I have a mutual and beneficial relationship, Mr. Sheriff, and it's none of your concern. You and your pretty lit—tall lady can continue your experiments, continue poking through to the other side in your own way, and I'll continue with mine."

"Not good enough." Daniel continued around the bowl, beyond it, so it was between him and the girls. Past the bowl into the black was where Black Blood had appeared last time, where it had snatched the corpse Jacob had prepared for it.

And then they were gone. Blackness. A side of the room Triss had never seen. It was just a room, a wall, a cave or something, but she never went over there, because that's where that thing had come from. Good a reason as any.

Clanking. Metal, chains, stone hitting other stone, and some other metal sounds she couldn't identify echoed through the room.

"How many have you killed in here?" Daniel's voice.

"You follow the news. You control the news. You should know."

“... and this?” More metal clanks, and some fleshy thuds.

“She was selling drugs to kids. Apparently she’d never heard that song. You know the one? Drugs drugs drugs. Some are good, some are bad? Far as I can tell, she thought they were all pretty good.”

Triss facepalmed. Why, why was her boss such a fucking weirdo?

More metal clanks continued, Daniel examining what Triss could only assume was some sort of torture wall. He had a few more questions too, about kine Jacob had obviously killed and was hanging up back there. The smell of rotting flesh and blood was constant, and Triss had expected it coming down, but whatever techniques Jacob used, kept the smell from escaping beyond the stairway. Good, cause even this smell would upset a grave keeper.

Daniel returned to the light, and stood by the bowl. It was like watching a fucking FBI agent investigate your shit, with you right beside them, unable to stop them for fear of retribution. It was a wonder the sheriff didn’t flip the enormous blood bowl just to make a mess.

She stood up straight as Daniel came up to her, and looked down at her. The angle of the lantern lit up his lenses, one of them allowing her to see his gaze. Cold. And, as his eyes switched between the two women, she almost thought she saw a hint of sadness. Was he pitying them, the two witches?

“And you two. What have you done with the veil?”

“N-Nothing!” Jen said. Triss nodded. Hell, the fuck did they know about it? Triss, almost nothing. And Jen, probably less.

He stared, still, silent, not even a twitch of the lip to indicate any emotion. After a while of what Triss could only guess was staring into their fucking souls, he walked over to one of the walls where Jacob had painted various symbols in blood, and dusted with bone. The sheriff raised a gloved hand, and ran a finger around the symbol.

“You really like to walk a fine line, Jacob,” Daniel said.

“You’re one to talk, dragon. What sort of nasties have you summoned? What sort of experiments have you performed on the kine, hmm? Does your precious Natasha, or Annie’s precious Jack, know about the shit you two have done in the depths of your tower?”

Oh good fucking god why weren’t they discussing this shit in private, and not in front of the two little neonates who were well beyond their pay grade? This sort of conversation belonged in a Primogen meeting, not out in the open world. But then, they were underneath a graveyard, in a sealed room. The only people hearing the things they shouldn’t be hearing would be people in the room, which were just



the two neonates, currently standing shoulder to shoulder, and staring at the two elders having a tiff. And if Daniel thought it was too much information for them to know, he could kill them, and there wasn't much Jacob could do about it.

What a lovely night.

"... I can't stop you from acquiring new subordinates, Jacob. But understand the Prince and I will only tolerate your games to a point. If you stir the carnage that occurred before we—"

"Have you so little faith in me, Daniel? How long have we known each other, hmm?" Jacob came up to him, stood beside him, and offered him a weird mix of frown and smirk. Joker put a hand on the man's shoulder too. "And, if you wanted to observe me teaching my subordinates here a crúac ritual, you had only to ask." Up and down, left and right, damn fucker's personality was all over the place.

"... No, I don't want to witness that barbarism." He pushed Jacob's hand off of him, and again approached the blood bowl. It was impossible to tell what the cold man was thinking, or what he'd do, but he was searching, and a Mekhet searching was a pain in the ass. They always found something with that auspex shit.

And like he was reading her mind, Daniel looked at her, and set a hand on the blood bowl. A flinch crossed his eyebrows, and another, as he looked at her, glasses catching the LED lantern's white light, hiding his eyes. But she managed a glimpse of it again, that weird look, that pity look, as he touched the blood-stained metal where a corpse's parts lay, where Triss had lay when Jacob cut into her.

She knew a little bit about auspex, that Mekhet who had a lot of years on them could take that ability into ridiculous realms of insanity. Supposedly, powerful ones could see things, touch things and divine knowledge from them. The Carthians didn't have any particularly strong Mekhet, so she never got to ask. Which just reminded her she had to talk to Damien at some point.

And there was that. Watching this man, this cold guy as he examined their world, he had an air to him she couldn't quite put her finger on, until she compared him to Damien. A quality, a certain something she found in both their eyes, beneath the surface. Something cold.

And to have a cold thing look at you with a degree of pity, was a strange sensation indeed.

"... be careful, Jacob," Daniel said as he began walking toward the exit. "Things are different this time. The city is built, the people are content, and... yeah. Think about Minerva, would you?"

And all the voices in Hell went silent.

Triss looked at Jen, who looked back at her, and they both looked at Jacob. The elder had his back to Daniel, his eyeless gaze on the blood bowl. Daniel had his back to him, and never once glanced over his shoulder as he walked up the stairway to leave.

Maybe Triss should have used this opportunity to try and be Jacob's friend a little, like Antoinette had asked her to. Be his buddy, be his support, help him out and maybe stop him from doing reckless shit. Bringing up that the Prince asked her to do that could maybe brighten his day, let him know she was looking out for him. Or, backfire horribly and render Triss's tenuous connection cut. But Daniel had brought up Minerva, and that put a stake straight into the old man's back, and out through his heart.

So, she stood there, and waited for the man to do something. It wasn't until they heard the sliding of stone and grinding rock, announcing Daniel's departure, that Jacob turned around.

"Nosy fucker, isn't he?" Jacob said, half grin, half frown.

"Yes..." Jen, shivering enough for it to be visible, walked forward and peeked over the bowl. Body parts, no doubts, and she made an 'ick' face like an upset squirrel before backing away a little.

"How may kine have you killed?" Jacob said.

"Killed?"

"Yes, killed, you silly girl." He reached into the bowl, and started throwing the body parts around. Legs splattered flaps of skin and wet meat against the walls. There were a couple more skulls too. Good fucking god.

"I... just a couple, you know that. When I was young."

"Triss, how many have you killed?" the bastard said.

"... I didn't count. A fair bit. Kine who deserved it, when I was in a bad mood."

Jen raised a brow at her. Yeah, that wasn't something they'd discussed yet. For all Jen's confidence, and her delightful embracing of the Circle's philosophies, her hands were surprisingly clean. And then there was the whole thing with Rebecca too. Fuck, now she could see Jen's eyes changing, adjusting, adopting a new perspective on Triss. If she was scared or perplexed or surprised, Triss couldn't tell, but the lady was thinking something new about her.

"You're going to have to get comfortable with death, and blood, Jennifer." Once the bowl was empty of bodies, Jacob motioned for Triss to come over. "And don't worry Beatrice, Daniel pissing me the fuck off won't make this any worse than I'd already planned it."

“... right.” Wincing the whole way, Triss handed Jen the lantern, and got into the bowl. She took off her top too, and tossed it aside. It wouldn’t survive if she kept it on, and it wasn’t like Jacob was some sort of pervert. Well, maybe not entirely true, but he hadn’t done anything perverted to anyone as far as she knew.

She put her arms and legs out, and stared at the ceiling, the dirty bowl pressing to her ass and back, bits of the dead rubbing into her skin. The chain hanging over her had flakes of dried blood on it. Sighing, she turned her head to watch Jacob as the man walked over to the wall where the light couldn’t penetrate, and he started ruffling through what sounded like a box. Out came candles and a lighter, and the man began to decorate the bowl with the candles along its edge. Vampires hated fire, and elders really hated fire, but Jacob didn’t so much as flinch as he flicked the lighter on, and lit each candle.

He gave her the necklace, and she put it on. An ugly thing, old string she was sure was coated in the blood of a thousand dead; smelled like it. Or maybe it was the tiny skull on it that smelled so bad. A crow skull. Bird skulls were surprisingly neat looking, and a crow skull just reeked of witchcraft. Triss was almost surprised at how cliché it was that Jacob had asked her to wear such a thing during the first lesson.

But the surprised turned into panic, when Jacob had locked her wrists and ankles down, as he did now.

“... Triss told me about this,” Jen said. “About how this is done.”

“Ah, good, then I don’t need to ease you into this.” Jacob, still not done lighting the candles, yanked a knife out of somewhere in his robe, and slammed it down.

Beatrice had expected him to finish lighting the candles first. Shouldn’t have. She needed to be prepared, she needed to use her fucking brain and stay aware. But, not like it would have helped much, as she screamed out, the blade cutting into her intestines. She knew what that felt like now, knew it intimately. No amount of bracing, no amount of preparation would ever be enough, for the feeling of metal cutting through the muscle of the abdomen, and the stabbing into the guts. Parts of the body that were never intended to have anything more than food — or a meal’s blood — pass through them did not know what to do about metal puncturing through the wall of flesh. The only possible response, was pain.

“Oh god.” Jen took a step back. Probably for the best; Triss was going to start spitting up blood sooner or later.

“Crúac is blood magic, Jennifer. But at the same time, that is such a poor descriptor, that fails to capture both the power of the Circle of the Crone, and of the Beast in us all.” Another knife came out, and slammed down. Triss was prepared this time, but it didn’t matter. The most she managed was to grit her teeth and not scream, her crocodile teeth filling the gaps between each other snug, to the point of grinding on each other.

“You may have noticed, Jennifer, that when I perform my rituals, blood is always needed. Typically Kindred blood. But that is fuel, essence, for the ritual. It is not the vehicle.”

“Vehicle?” she said.

“Mhmm. Dolareido is such a cozy place these days, I honestly didn’t think this would be necessary to teach you or Aaron or Othello. But, Beatrice is interested, and with everything that’s happening in Dolareido these days, I think it’s important. So I am teaching her at her request.” Done with the candles, he picked one up, and dripped some of the wax droplets onto the bird skull between Triss’s breasts. “So, you’re going to have to get used to something I think even an open-minded person like yourself will have trouble with.”

“... which is?”

Jacob grinned at her, and with a snap of his wrists Triss almost couldn’t see in the black, he yanked out the two knives, and stabbed again, higher, getting between ribs and reaching her stomach. Blood flowed up her withered insides, vampire blood, thick, heavy, desperate to stay inside her. Its rise was joined by a flood of searing misery, pain like acid coursing through her flesh. Triss yanked against the chains, yanked hard, putting all her Nosferatu strength into trying to snap the chains. Should have been easy. Steel chains, small ones at that? She was Nosferatu, and she was a strong Nosferatu. Steel was her bitch.

They didn’t budge.

Jacob chuckled, pat Triss on the head, and smiled at Jen. All a blur in Triss’s eyes as the agony fought to overwhelm her senses. Don’t let it, don’t let it overwhelm you.

“Letting out your Beast.”

“... frenzy?” Jen said. “You can’t be—”

Jacob grabbed one of the daggers, and forced it across Triss’s body.

There was agony, and then there was this. Bone, fighting against blade, before it gave way. Muscle slicing apart, tearing or cutting, she didn’t fucking know. But she felt the fire scorch over her,

her entire body, head to toe, until she threw her head back, and thick Kindred blood splattered over her crocodile teeth. Her mouth opened wide, full size, to expose the depths of her torment.

The scream echoed for ages.

The first time they'd gone through this, Triss had asked him to stop. He didn't. She learned for the second time to accept the reality of the situation, to try and embrace what this fucking lunatic was trying to teach her. You had to be crazy to see what this fucker was talking about, the way the beast in a Kindred's guts had more power than they realized. It didn't only speak in terms of animal, it spoke in terms of blood, and things beyond.

Pain, and blood loss, brought that beast to the surface, screaming and roaring the whole way. But she wasn't there yet, and she glared up at Jacob with her snake eyes as the man grinned down at her. She managed a glance at Jen too, and grit her teeth at the sight of the woman, her wide eyes, and the panic starting to rise in them. Despite her confidence, Jen was not hard, not like Jacob wanted from his witches.

Would she be able to handle it? Triss didn't know, and as Jacob twisted the knife, she didn't care.

"I told you to stop trying to control it!" Jacob yanked the knife out, and she screamed as the man made sure to do it on an angle, tearing through ribs with the motion. "If only you were Gangrel, letting your Beast out would be so much easier." Spinning it around in his fingers, between his knuckles, he walked around the blood bowl, smiling at Triss with every step. Fuck him, fuck him and his stupid fucking smile fuck him fuck him.

Again, Jacob dropped some wax droplets onto the skull crow between her breasts. The sting of hot wax was buried in the waves of agony. Her toes stretched outward inside her boots, her fingers and claws tried desperately to grab onto anything; the only thing they found was the blood bowl's edge. She could feel more of her blood pooling inside the bowl, until her ass was splashing in it as it faded into ash. Hungry. So hungry.

"I... I don't understand. How is she going to learn anything from this?"

"Her mind is in the way. Crúac isn't about learning a set of ingredients, it's about scarring your soul, letting your soul taste the Beast within."

Triss twisted, squirmed, struggled, tried to break free of the chains. Hungry. So fucking hungry. Had to get blood into her. She was losing more of it, losing all of it, and as her Kindred body started to heal itself, Jacob laughed, and stabbed the blade into her leg. For a faint moment, she wanted to

complain about him damaging her jeans, before she screamed, coughing up blood over her chest. Jacob hit the bone, and went into it, twisting the blade around and churning her flesh like potatoes and butter.

Her voice started to go hoarse from her constant shrieking.

“Pain is delightful, isn’t it?” The psychopath walked up to her side closer to her head, leaving the one knife jammed into her femur, while he brought the other up to her neck. Then, up her chin, and toward her mouth. “If I bury you in it, let it wash away your thoughts, your feelings, your everything, the Beast within you can actually touch your soul, Jennifer. Like tea time, between these two Brobdingnagian concepts. I have taught Triss the rites for this particular crúac ritual. Now, I must force the communion within. And”—his knife came up at an angle, up through the base of her jaw, and up into her mouth—“that’s half the fun.”

Triss’s scream turned into a roar, and she twisted her head from side to side to try and dislodge the metal skewering up through her jaw, hitting the roof of her mouth through her tongue. Get out get out get out, eat, eat, let me feed!

To a vampire, the beast was both a problem and an ally. It gave them their instincts, their abilities, it gave them their acute senses and their love of blood. It also took over if a vampire got too hungry, went too long without eating, or suffered so many wounds that they bled away all they had. Any animal went frenzy if dying of hunger, but for a vampire, it was like letting an entity off its chain, Mister Hyde on the inside, something that was there all the time but you kept it down because if you didn’t, you’d break the Masquerade and quickly find yourself dead. More than that, you kept it down because you could feel the thing that was still human inside you slip away every time the fucker got close to the surface.

Giving into it was freeing.

Thoughts vanished. Images vanished. Ideas, concepts, vanished. Triss vanished. All she wanted, all she cared about, was getting this fucking thing, this sharp and painful thing, out of her body, and devouring something. Someone. Anything! Anything with two legs, anything that bled.

There were two things, things like her, in the room with her, near her. She could drink them! Have them, drink them, take their lives and fuel hers. Law of the jungle, law of the wild, law of the fucking world, the strong prey on the weak. Break free, break free!

The chains would not break.

One of them was still talking, making stupid noises. Woman beside him was also making noises. Again Triss struggled against the chains, harder, every ounce of her Nosferatu strength pulling against

the weird metal. Steel? What was steel? No, just hardness, just a thing she wanted to break through, but she couldn't. Fury and fire mixed together, and the thing inside her guts roared until the walls became an echo chamber, the blood bowl vibrating with her voice.

And then, everything froze.

White. She saw white. Going to die? Bright light? Snarling, twisting, turning, she stared at the white light, and drew her head back to the bowl as it grew brighter. What the hell? What the fuck? Silence came second. She turned her head to look around, but all she could see was white. Yeap, she was dead, this was death. That man killed her... Jacob, Jacob was his name.

No longer bound. No longer in a blood bowl. Her, standing, naked. She looked down, and sighed relief at the lack of knives puncturing her, her guts or her jaw. Naked, but still with her tattoos and piercings, still with her claws and her crocodile teeth. The beast was no longer roaring in her skull, and the pain was no longer the fire on its tail.

She walked around, on the white endless. It had no feeling, no texture, and she had no weight; strange to be walking around then. She turned around, and around, and around, until a black wall in the distance caught her eye. Wall was a strong word, more like a pocket of shadow, some weird hole of darkness against the endless white that surrounded her. And, there was movement in its embrace.

She walked toward it, but arrived instantly. Wherever she was, this heaven, or hell, or purgatory or whatnot, it didn't care about the physical. Land of the mind, or something. Was this all in her head? But if that was true, then what the fuck was she looking at?

Before her, against the small pocket of blackness, was an altar. A dead crow's body sat upon the small wooden table, candles burning all around it. Its head was already removed, and its feathers, brains, and eyeballs were scattered upon the alter, around the candles. Its skull sat in the center. But she'd seen the altar before, in the real world. Jacob had showed her the ritual, demonstrated it, this ritual, the Crow's Eye ritual. But, words, all words, just words. Feathers and brains and eyeballs, crows, and... the thing that sat before her.

The beast.

Shadows, flowing, flicking at the whiteness around it, a cloud of onyx with wings and talons, a snake tail, claws, a beak with teeth. It had all these things, wrapped in obsidian and flowing in and out of existence, shadow swirling in and out against the white. Like a tide in the ocean, or blood in a sacrifice.

The beast looked at her, eyes blood red, nothing but blood, only blood. And, with its wing arm claw limb, it reached out, picked up one of the candles, and dripped wax onto the crow's skull. It set the candle down, stepped aside, and waited. Well, far be it from her to keep the beast waiting. Wax on, wax off, sensei. She stepped in, got down on her knees before the altar, and did the same thing, a drop of wax for the crow skull.

The beast reached out with its wing arm claw limb, and cut its talon claw knife fang across it. A drop of blackness fell upon the crow skull. Triss reached out, cut her wrist a little with her claw, and forced out a drop of her vitae onto the crow skull. The beast nodded.

What the fuck was this zen horse shit? This wasn't the fucking Matrix! Oh god, she took the red pill. When did she take the red pill? Why the f—

“—UCK!” Pain snapped its ugly maw and devoured her whole once again. Weight, blood, knives and twisting and bone and sinew and tendon and muscle and organs and stained, rusty metal, all came crashing back. Back to the real world, back to heavy, back to two people looking down at her, one of them looking like she was about to cry, one of them grinning an evil, mad doctor's grin, as he stared down at her with no eyes.

He raised his knife.

“Jacob,” Triss said, “... something happened.” Something, something happened. Like a dream, it all faded, hazy, wisps of images and sensations dispersing into the whiteness of wherever her mind had taken her. But something had happened, something had changed. Something in her trumpeted triumph. Something in her roared its power.

Jacob leaned over her, looked into one of her eyes, then the other, and smiled. “Welcome to the fold, witch.”

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~~Jack~~

As much as he loved his vacation, spending every moment he could in Antoinette's arms, it was time to get back to work.



“Finally done fucking your girl?” Jessy said. “Been at it for a week now. Poor woman must be painted white.”

He laughed. Crass and crude, but at the same time, that was how Jessy gave compliments. It was Jessynese for ‘glad you’re back, hope you had good sex’.

The two of them were in his apartment again, on the couches and opposite of each other, ready to get to work.

“It was pretty great,” he said. “Ever had a stronger person pin you down and pamper you in sex, Jessy? Like, someone who could turn you into ash before you even realized they wanted to hurt you. And instead, that person is making you cum again, and again, and again?” He almost surprised himself with how direct he said that.

The Gangrel raised an eyebrow, and took the glass of blood he handed her. “Can’t say I have. Been that girl, thousands of times. Never been on the receiving end.”

“Hmm, actually, you might be able to try that on Damien. I mean, he’s too strong for that, but, you know what I mean.”

“What?”

He shrugged, and took a sip of his drink. Damien wasn’t around, and both Jack and Jessy knew the man was entertaining the possibility of sex. Seemed safe to talk about, a little at least. And honestly, he was a little happier to talk about something like sex, instead of Angela and Jeremiah and shit.

“You were getting kind of buddy buddy with Damien. Thought you might have wanted to show him the ropes on a few more things.”

“Ha. Kid, are you trying to hook me up with the priest boy?”

“He’s almost as old as you, and I can see that glint in your eye when you tease him.”

“Bah, he’s too small.”

“I’m smaller than him,” he said.

“And I’m not trying to get into your pants, am I?”

They laughed. It was true, and it made being friends with the aggressive animal easier.

“You do have a type.”

“And that type isn’t you or Damien. But, it’s not like Damien isn’t a sexy fucker, just not in my wheelhouse. If I got him into Bloodlust, I could get him laid before the night was over.”

“New mission?”

“New mission.”

“I do suggest you don’t try and get him laid in the actual club; send him somewhere quiet instead, with walls.”

She snorted annoyance, but nodded once she thought about it, and sipped her drink as she leaned back in his couch. “That Fiona was a firecracker though, damn. Didn’t have to do much to get her tits out and legs open.”

How had he not predicted it was Jessy who got into Fiona’s pants? Not paying attention.

“Be nice to her,” he said. Jessy had gotten into the Fiona friendship circle a little late, and he still wasn’t convinced the Gangrel knew how to be gentle with her. The monster inside Fiona may have been something epic and terrifying, but the girl was young, younger than even him.

“I was nice! She had a great night, and so did Eric. I made sure of it.”

“Eric, right.” The guy that drove Jack to safety. “I’ve yet to speak to him directly. I have to thank him.”

“He works at Bloodlust most nights. Drop by, say hello. Though fair warning, I might be on him at the time.”

“Like him?”

“Yeah, I kinda do, actually. He’s not as big or tall as I usually like my guys, but still, sweet body on that guy. Used to do MMA.”

“I meant do you like his personality.” He tried to not laugh, but it came out anyway.

“Not sure yet. He’s got some serious grit and bitterness to him. I can like that.”

Ah, yeah, gotta love a dark, brooding dude. Ha. He laughed some more and shook his head. Time to move on.

“I suppose we should talk about work,” he said.

“It’s not work, kid. It’s life. You think about it like work and it’ll eat you up. Think about it like life and it becomes a motivation on its own. Live and breathe the struggle, and it stops being an annoyance, and starts being as natural as breathing used to be.”

He raised a brow at her, and looked for the joke, the smirk. Not a one. She meant what she said, and despite the messenger, it was advice he had to admit sounded plausible, and useful. Tracking down

the hunters, building relations with the neighboring monsters, cultivating the kine into a manageable food source, and establishing defensive measures against all the above, was work, but also not. It was life. Becoming good at it was becoming good at what Kindred did, at their second lives. It's how you got to live to be five hundred years old.

"That is a pretty awesome way to think about it," he said. "Guess... I still think about shit like this in terms of my old life, work as a barrier to get out of my way so I can get back to living."

"Ha, yeah, you're a real product of the new world. Well, you'll get in the groove eventually. It is so god damn satisfying to see your efforts bear fruit when it's your life we're talking about. The money is just a nice bonus, the real reward is knowing you can rest easy and drink of the kine, because you defended your territory."

"Speaking of defense. Any new developments?"

"Not a one. Those hunter fuckers just vanished. Sometimes I wish we lived in a smaller city."

He nodded, and rubbed his head as he considered it. "Smaller city means this many vamps would draw attention more easily though. We could sire a bunch more vamps here instead; city could handle a thousand or more."

"But then we're at each other's throats fighting over kine. You think it's tense with the Carthians now? Mob mentality is a ruthless, fickle bitch, and she grows more ruthless and fickle the bigger the crowd."

"Which reminds me, I should visit Garry."

Jessy quirked a brow, downed her drink, and got up to get some more. Girl acted like she lived there, but he didn't mind. "Why?"

"He's friends with Avery."

"Yeah but, we're trying to get around that, not use that. The deal was to give Avery a treat so she'll like us too, right?"

He dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand. "She'll see through that. The council knows it too. They're trusting me to think up something better, some way to get her involved, get her on our side, and get her out there looking for those hunters."

"... and Garry's the key?"

"Sort of. Wanna be friends with someone? Be friends with their friends."

She sighed, but shrugged. “I don’t see that happening, but, whatever, you’re the voice. You gonna arrange a meeting with him?”

“Eventually. For now, let’s take a trip back to where Barry’s den burned down.”

“What? Why?”

“Need to recruit a couple friends.”

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“Where is Damien anyway?” he said. The two of them were standing on the building Jack had used, when he talked to the two crows. It wasn’t so long ago, and he knew crows had good memories.

“Hanging out with Maria, doing churchy things, I assume.” Sounded like she didn’t care for the Lancea et Sanctum either.

Jack looked up at the sky, and around the nearby buildings, the old antennae, the vents, steam exits, and the crows that made their living up here on the city’s rooftops. Rats and cockroaches too, but they stuck to the insides of buildings, while the crows perched and made the outdoors their home.

“So, uh... what’re we doing?” she said.

“Waiting.”

“... uh huh.” She shrugged, folded her arms across her chest, and waited. Sometimes, he really liked her simple mind.

It took a little time, but eventually, two crows took off from some nearby power lines, and flew over to perch atop a jutting vent over their heads. But, once he looked up to meet their gaze, they flew down to land on the building roof a few feet away from him. The two crows hopped over to him, cawed a few times, and fluttered their wings a few times more. He crouched down, and motioned with them to come closer. Without hesitation, they closed what little distance remained, and hopped up onto his arm.

“Careful of the suit,” he said, clicking his tongue to articulate that he meant his clothes. And they obeyed, claw grip growing softer as they hopped higher up. Though, defeated by the lack of space, one of the crows hopped off, catching flight and turning around to land on the other shoulder.

“You’re good at animalism,” Jessy said, “damn good for a vamp your age.”

“Thanks.” He looked to his right, and smiled at the crow, made eye contact with it, looked into the black gaze it offered him. She offered him, apparently. He looked to his left, and nodded as he looked into its eyes too. His eyes. A male and female, the two crows cawed at Jessy, who came closer and leaned in to click her tongue at them a few times as well. She could speak to them as well, anyone who knew animalism could; Ventrue and Gangrel, specifically.

“They recognize you.”

“Mmhmm. They tipped me off about the four hunters scouting this place out. I had them watching the ball too, watching me.”

“Smart.”

He nodded, and looked at each crow once again, taking turns. “Did you keep track of me when I left the ball with Damien?” They nodded. “Good. Show me.”

The mental connection required vitae, required him to tap into a part of him inside, animalistic, a creature that spoke in body language, smells, snarls and howls when angry, or purrs and gentle bites when pleased. He didn’t do those things, the beast in his guts did, silent but there, and with his vitae acting as the bridge to connect with these creatures, they could hear the beast.

And his beast was stronger than it was when he talked to these birds the last time. They fluttered a little, cawed a few more times, and looked past him at each other with frequently tilting heads. They were asking if this was the same two-leg walker from last time. Looked the same. Smelled the same. Didn’t feel the same.

“I am the same.”

The birds shrugged, as much as a bird could shrug, and continued the mental story. An alley. Dark. Damien walked out of it. Jack was still in there. They flew in closer and watched Damien walk away in the direction of the Cathedral. When they landed on the building above the alley where Jack was stabbed, they looked down, but he was gone.

“Didn’t see anything strange? Like, anyone stepping out of thin air? Or something stepping out of shadows when there shouldn’t have been anyone there?”

The birds shook their head, and cawed thrice more. They showed him again, the blackness of the alleyway, and hints of him, hands grabbing him from behind, stabbing him through the heart from behind, and dragging him away. Well, it was another point for Damien; not that Jack still suspected him, but more evidence that the man probably hadn’t betrayed him was good.

“Hey... you two, you want a home? Easy access to food?”

“Jack, are you turning these two into pets?”

He turned to face her, shrugged, and nodded toward each crow. “Why not?”

“Because you’re controlling them with animalism.”

“I am not, I’m communicating with them, and asking for a favor. Just... slightly influenced favors.”

Jessy rolled her eyes, but shrugged. “Plenty of Ventrue and Gangrel raise pets, in smaller towns and stuff. Feed them some vamp blood and they’ll be loyal, and addicted.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” And he found it a bit cruel. Forcing the blood vinculum on humans, turning them into thralls or ghouls, was a bit cruel as well. But sometimes it was done with good intent, with permission, like with Antoinette’s ghouls. Sometimes it was done simply because Kindred were higher on the food chain, and knew how to use the resources available to them.

Maybe one night he’d have a thrall or ghoul of his own, but not tonight. The two crows looked at each other, then at him, then at each other, and went around and around for a little while, until he pulled out some rolled oats, and tossed them on the ground. He squatted down as well, and smiled as the birds hopped down his arms like a diving board, jumping off, and began poking at the oats.

“I’ve noticed,” he said, “a lot of the Kindred in this city rely on thralls and ghouls for their reconnaissance and labor. Hell, almost overwhelmingly.”

“Viktor didn’t only use thralls, and neither does Julias. Both used animals frequently.”

“Guess I’m continuing in their footsteps. There’s a goldmine of information to be had by making friends with animals.”

Jessy frowned, for a moment, before wiping it away and shrugging. “It’s not easy managing a bunch of thralls. You think you’ll do better with a bunch of crows?”

He looked into the crows’ eyes, and as they poked at the rolled oats until satisfied before eating them, they looked back at him. Something there, something that clicked, something that made sense, something that worked like the right cog to fix a clock.

“Just call me Poe.”

“... Edgar Allan Poe? Dude, that was a raven in the poem.”

“... shut up.” Ok, maybe she wasn’t so simple. “Alfred Hitchcock then?”

“Better.”