

~~Antoinette~~

The next evening was not a pleasant one. She'd hoped to awaken to news from her thralls of the boy's whereabouts. She'd awoken to despair.

"Why am I not out in those streets, Daniel?"

"Because we're trying to find a needle in a haystack, Annie." The man stood and watched out over the city along with her, the two of them by the large window in her office, at the top of her Elysium tower.

"I am an extra pair of eyes!"

"You know that's not how you find someone in a city."

Her hands were in fists at her side, squeezing, clenching, shaking.

"It is my city."

"It is."

"And I should be able to find anything within its veins."

"You know that's not true. Millions of people, thousands of streets, tens of thousands of buildings, and a billion places to hide anything and anyone." The man shook his head, and gestured to the desk behind them, her main desk. The laptop upon it displayed various messaging windows she had used to communicate with the Invictus, and Natasha as well, about the boy's disappearance.

Part of her was tempted to tell Jacob or Garry, but she could not trust those two. Jacob may have been playing games with her, tormenting her by stealing away her love, while Garry may have been making a move for power. The man had been somewhat quiet, less aggressive than usual, at the ball. There had been times when Garry was quiet in the past, and it was purely because he was in a quiet disposition. Sometimes a cigar was a cigar, after all. But there had been times when his quiet behavior was a precursor to aggression against the Invictus.

And Jack was not Ordo Dracul, he was Invictus, a target for those such as Garry. That alone presented problems, as the Invictus would no doubt suspect her in some sort of trickery as well. Perfectly reasonable suspicion; it would not be the first time she had manipulated them to dance to her tune.

Still, Jack was missing, Julias confirmed it. The Invictus were looking for him, regardless of their potential suspicion of her.

She wanted more. She wanted to demand Garry search for her love. Demand it of Jacob. Demand it of Avery. Demand it even of that abomination Azamel.

“... should I bring this to the attention of the werewolves, and the monsters, my sheriff?”

“I’m sure Avery already knows. And Azamel probably does by now too.”

“And you are sure it was not your friend Athalia that is responsible? The entire Kindred population saw her speak with Jack.” And every ounce of willpower Antoinette had went into stopping herself from marching down to confront Azamel and her subordinates about that conversation. “Perhaps she spoke to my thralls, and is working with them, manipulating them, falsifying their reports?”

“I... can’t imagine she’d do that. Azamel might, but why would she? It’s the Invictus she has a problem with, and the Invictus won’t bend over backward to save their youngest Kindred. Jack isn’t the bargaining chip Azamel needs with them. And, revenge against the grandchilde of the man Athalia hated, a dead man, seems too insane even for Athalia.”

She glared at her companion, stared at him with all the fury her eyes could muster. And the man returned it with a quiet, calm, almost cold gaze, before adjusting his glasses again.

Her fury broke, and she sighed as she stepped in closer to the window, to gaze out through the wall of glass from only an inch away. He was right, after all. While the Invictus would attempt to save their young neonate Jack Terry, ultimately, he was not of grand importance to the covenant. Of grand importance to Julias individually, as to her, but Julias was intelligent enough, wise enough, to not let his love of his childe destroy the Invictus if such an ultimatum were ever presented to him.

She was not so sure she could be that heartless anymore, not after Jack had touched her soul, ripped the roots clear that shackled her depths, deep down in the lingering black.

It had only been an hour since the sun had set. In that time, she received three hundred and twenty-seven reports from her dozens of thralls, all of which were of no value or use, except for one. A mention of four humans, seen together, skulking about. But attempts to pursue them by the two thralls that had spotted them were quickly rendered fruitless, as the four humans vanished.

She knew of these four. She had read the Invictus reports her network of spies had uncovered; nothing significant. But the report had mentioned four individuals seen more often, kine, with scars. They suspected hunters. And now, so did she.

For all her power, for all her intelligence and experience, it was her and Daniel running the city, two Kindred against hundreds. She controlled the ebb and tide of power, the flow of money and influence of Kindred and organizations alike. Macro, the Invictus would call it, macro management. To be the one in the street, giving orders, partaking in the hands-on digging for clues and evidence, that was not her purview. And no matter how logical that assessment was, how correct it was for her to be giving her orders from above where they had the greatest effect, it still hurt. She wanted to be in those streets, looking for her love with her own eyes.

Perhaps she was overreacting? No, it was foolish to think that Barry's death and the sighting of these four suspicious kine had nothing to do with Jack's disappearance. And Kindred were paranoid creatures by nature. They did not simply disappear for no reason, especially not at Jack's age, and especially not in the modern world, where technology had made constant communication as easy as it was. She had called him twice more upon awakening, texted him, but again, there had been no answer.

"Natasha's out there," Daniel said. "She's plugged into the network. Any thralls find traces of Jack, she'll know. And I'm sure Mire's got his own feelers out."

"Yes... I know." And it was not enough. Not enough. "We should have looked into these suspicious kine earlier."

"We let the Invictus run much of the city so we can focus on our own affairs, Annie. You know that."

"Perhaps that is not enough anymore? We toil, exploring what mysteries lay beyond our grasp, for centuries now!" She grit her teeth, and forced her nerves to calm. A moment later her hair was pulled over her shoulder, and she combed it with both sets of fingers as she watched her city beneath her. "When the greatest joys are to be found within our reach, within our presence."

"... you want to stop?"

"No. When the secrets of existence are so near, to be beyond our grasp is but a question of time. Still, this dilemma has made it painfully clear that without the closer things, our seconds lives are... void of value." Void, in general. "If he is dead, Daniel, I... I do not know what I will do."

Her old friend winced, an expression she did not see him carry often. And as he came closer, he gave her a single, gentle touch of the shoulder, and stood by her to watch the city beneath them.

Neither of them said what had become too strong a reality to ignore. Jack's disappearance was killing her, and threatening her objectivity, threatening her abilities as Prince. She would be quite the fool to abandon her role as Prince, abandon her role in the Ordo Dracul, in order to join Jack in

romance, and protect him for all the years to come. And she would be quite the fool to abandon Jack, who wrested her soul from atrophy and sparked life into its withered corpse.

No matter the hardships her second life threw at her, should would find a way to have both. And with time, Jack would grow to become a Ventrue worthy of fearing, a greater power than his grandsire or even his sire, relative to their ages. With time, he would become as like her, a rock against the tide.

But it would be decades until he was strong enough to face the more dangerous threats of their second lives, and until then, she could only offer so much protection.

“... sometimes, my old friend,” she said, “I remember the faces of mothers and fathers as their sons went to war, almost seventy years ago. Do you remember?”

“Sometimes.”

“Some nights, I would hear crying, mothers learning of the deaths of their sons. Wives, who lost their husbands.” She stopped combing her hair, and let her hands fall as weights at her side. “Only now do I understand such pain, the desire to protect with all your soul, that which you cannot protect.”

Forever wiser than she, her old friend said nothing, and gazed upon the streets below them. Asphalt, black veins through the body of her greatest accomplishment, Dolareido. Her greatest accomplishment, and now her greatest enemy.

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~~Beatrice~~

Julias left the moment the sun set. He did his best to be lovey-dovey with her, to kiss her and say ‘I love you’ and stuff, but she shooed him away. No time for the romantic stuff when shit hit the fan.

As for herself, she had no idea what to do. Jack was missing, and with all the shit that’d been going on lately, she doubted it was an accident or coincidence, especially not with the girlfriend the kid had. Antoinette was wearing the pants in that relationship, and it’d be a bad idea for Jack to piss her off.

Plus, why would he want to? The two oddballs really loved each other, and with a rack like that, no way the kid wasn’t doing everything in his power to fall asleep on those things every dawn.

She slapped herself in the forehead. Stop. Thinking. About. Sex.

Crouched, upon the edge of a roof between North and South side, not too far off from the canyon where the Circle of the Crone liked to sleep. She needed to pay him a visit. Jacob had mentioned to her that they'd be preparing defensive measures of their cave, in case someone managed to discover it. Unlikely, with how well it was hidden in the unclimbable canyon's base, but shit happened, and you didn't get to live to be Jacob's age without compensating for the shit-happens factor.

She jumped along the rooftops, and soon down into the canyon. Jagged rocks and steep cliff faces meant you weren't getting down here without a pulley system or something similar. Dangerous for even her to scale. Each step a trap capable of breaking a leg, each hand hold ready to break apart or slice open the fingers. But soon she was down in the crag, sharp rocks and prickly bushes everywhere.

She crouched low through the darkness and found the opening of the cave, and crouched lower again to move through the tiny opening. Didn't get far though, before she ran into bars. Giant, thick, spiked, metal bars.

“What the fuck.”

“Beatrice Damor?” A voice in the black, one she didn't recognize.

A man came out, wearing nothing but a robe like Jacob would probably wear, dark brown and leathery. Maybe in his thirties, healthy, strong looking man, and now that he came closer, she managed to recognize the silhouette of his body and blur of his face. This was one of Jacob's thralls.

“They got a thrall to guard the gate?” She laughed and leaned her crouched body against the tiny tunnel wall. “Any Ventrue or Daeva could break your mind and have you open the door.”

A sudden light forced her to block its glow with her hands until her eyes adjusted. Once she could see again, she squinted at the man, and the small candle he was holding. There was something around his neck, a necklace, something made of bone. It reeked of Jacob.

“The Master has protected me from such mental control. I guard the gate, until the city is safe once more.”

Anti-brainwash necklace? That was pretty awesome, actually.

“Cool. Let me in.”

“Yes, Beatrice.”

Oh god he really was a slave, a mindless servant sort of type. He had a small smile that never went away, the sort of person who was happy to serve their master. Well, the blood bond did that. Three tastes and you were bound to your master, devoted to them, for months, years even.

Kindred weren't immune to the blood bond. She had to visit Damien and see how that was going, cause the two hadn't even made eye contact at the ball. Hell they'd made damn sure to not even look each other's direction during the whole fiesta.

The thrall disappeared around the corner, back into the depths of the cave. And just as she was about to call out to get the fuck back here, the bars slid away, disappearing into tiny holes in the little cave wall. When the fuck did Jacob get this set up? Must have always been there, just never activated. And she doubted the bars could be taken out with anything other than a nuke. Made the cave a pretty damn safe place to stay then.

She crept through the tunnel, and winced as she heard the loud screech of rock and metal scraping against each other, bars sliding back into place.

Everyone was home. Hell, everyone was actually together, standing around the blood bowl. More candles were lit than usual, some thralls and ghouls wandering around and lighting them, tending to them, making sure they bathed the room in a pleasant, creepy-as-fuck glow that highlighted the array of bones and skulls along the walls with defined shadows.

Aaron, Othello, and Jennifer. Each wearing robes similar to the thrall at the door, each watching Jacob as old eyeless, not wearing his eye bandage, dragged a finger across his chest to bring forth some Kindred blood. Thick, heavy, the powerful liquid coated into a single drop upon his fingertip, and he dandled his fingers over the blood bowl before him to let it fall into the red.

This blood bowl was a pale comparison to the one she'd seen in the secret underground lair in Three Kings Cemetery, and she was fucking thankful for that. No corpses dangling over this thing, dripping old, cold blood into it. No screams echoing in the walls. And the moving shadows were caused by flickering candlelight, not the stuff of nightmares.

She almost asked what was going on, but that'd have been pretty dumb. The atmosphere screamed silence, and maybe some chanting. No chanting though, much as it would have fit, but everyone kept quiet as they watched Jacob work his magic, his ritual. And, as Beatrice came in closer, she felt the chill work up her spine again, the same chill as that time in the cave.

"Beatrice," Jacob said, his gaze still on the blood... she thought. Hard to tell, being empty eye sockets and all.

"Jacob." Hushed voices, as if volume would shatter the power of what they were doing.

Aaron and Othello stepped aside, and she stepped between them. The five of them, standing around the blood bowl. And just as she was about to make a stupid comment about her lack of proper

fashion, Jen came around the group and tossed a robe over her shoulders. The woman smirked at her, adjusted the robe a little, made sure to spend a little more time than necessary adjusting it around her chest, then went back to stand where she'd been.

They did this every so often, watched Jacob do his work, to get glimpses into the true nature of the Circle of the Crone, and the Crone goddess herself, whatever the fuck that was. Occasionally, Jacob described various roles in the organization's structure during these demonstrations. The Whore, the Hero, the Maiden, the Fool, Father and Mother, Hermit, and others. Jacob had, on occasion, referred to himself as the Father of this particular little pod of witches, and also, the Fool.

The rest of them though? He gave no role. Or rank for that matter, other than that they served him. Serving him, for the most part, meant doing whatever the fuck they wanted. But, on occasion, he had requests for them, like the time Beatrice was sent to spy on the burned building and the Kindred investigating it. And then he'd go weeks, months, without so much as a single order or goal.

Fuck he was a weird dude, and Antoinette wanted her to connect with him. Yeah, sure, she'd get right on that.

"Jack is missing," she said.

"Yeap," Jacob said.

"Know who did it?"

"Nope."

She sighed, and looked at everyone else. The three others were content to listen quietly, or stare at the pool of blood with interest. It was moving, almost like it was boiling, but it wasn't. A couple bubbles came up from underneath it, and for a second, Triss thought maybe someone would leap out of the bowl, as if they'd been drowning. It was only a foot deep, but still.

"I want to find him."

Eyeless nodded, and chuckled. "I'm sure you do."

"Can you help me?"

He nodded again, and gestured to the bowl with his chin. "Watch."

His hands disappeared into his robes, and pulled out objects. Objects was as best a descriptor as she could come up with, as each thing was unique. First, a crow feather, or at least something black. Then, a dead spider, a large one. Both into the blood bowl; or pot, now that he was tossing things into it like ingredients. Then, a rotted finger. Good fucking god

Another nod, and he took out a final item. A knife. A knife she recognized.

She stepped back.

“I had an interesting conversation with Fiona,” eyeless said.

“... don’t torment her, Jacob. She’s a really nice girl, and—”

He waved a hand over the bowl, dismissing her and drawing her eyes to the blood at the same time. Damn liquid refused to hold still.

“I didn’t torment her. But, her naivete is apparent. She did not realize how many questions she answered without answering them.” A chuckle, a laugh, like an old man might make when he managed to outsmart a young whippersnapper. “It seems Azamel is not in Dolareido just to chase something. No. Seems she’s in Dolareido to avoid something too.”

“Avoid?”

“Oh yes. The old monster’s caused a stir in many places in the world. Small towns in quiet, ignored places, have been damaged, or destroyed. Some not so small, in different corners of the country, gone.”

“... destroyed villages?” What the fuck?

“Indeed. Scary, isn’t it?”

“How do you know what—”

He gestured to the blood bowl. Right, of course, magic. Fucking blood magic.

“I am preparing a ritual, before I go and speak to Azamel herself.”

“... herself.” Yeah, if Azamel was destroying literal places, wiping them off the map, maybe it was better if they kept their distance? “Sure you want to antagonize her?”

“My dear, sweet little Beatrice.” French accent included. “You want to see how dangerous a beast is? You have to poke it first.”

Cause that was a good idea.

“Seriously?” She mimicked his gesturing hand, and met his eyeless gaze as best she could.

He smirked. Always with the smirking. “Afraid of a little chaos?”

“I—”

He chopped off his hand.



The four of them jumped back, and raised their hands to guard themselves at the brief flash of light of the man's hand disintegrating. It looked almost like fire, a brief touch of flame like a firecracker, but turning into ashes without a sound. The man was so old, antediluvian, severing a body part created instant dust. And as the four of them managed to lower their hands and stare at the falling ashes, they gulped.

The ashes danced upon the surface, before sinking into the blood. Aaron, Othello, Jennifer, they stared at the crimson liquid for a few moments before they looked to watch Jacob. Man was ancient, disgustingly ancient, and before their eyes, he regrew his hand. First it was the blood coming out of his wrist, binding on itself, turning into bone, into muscle, into tendons, ligaments, and skin. But Triss couldn't help but stare at the bowl of blood instead, at how the bubbling was getting worse, at how it churned, writhed, and breathed.

He was going to teach her crúac rituals, blood magic, and he'd said the way to do that was pain, because with pain, you could tap into the beast. Hurt someone enough, really hurt them, and the pain turned the ego off eventually. Instinct took over. For a vampire, that meant frenzy, that meant letting the thing with claws and fangs on the inside out onto the surface, meant giving it control. Jacob wanted her to let her beast closer to the surface, cause it was the beast in a Kindred that had true power. It was the beast in a Kindred, that could call upon the power in the blood, do shit like cross barriers, empower Kindred with insanity beyond understanding, and even communicate with madness like the Black Blood.

She licked her crocodile teeth, and watched, wide-eyed, as a single eye floated up from underneath the blood. An eyeball, an actual, white eyeball, with a dark blue iris. And then, another eyeball floated up as well, same color. It drifted around in the settling blood, the red liquid finally calming as it offered its prize.

Jacob reached down, took an eyeball, and slipped it into one of his eye sockets. The four of them winced, maybe even groaned a little at the unsightly display, and Jacob laughed at them as he covered the grotesqueness with one hand. The hand glowed red, subtle, between his fingers and from his palm where they couldn't see with it flat to his face and eye. But, when he removed the hand and lowered it, the fake eye had an eyelid, and eyelashes to match it.

"Handsome, don't you think?" he said, Joker smile on full tilt. And when he moved his hand over to cover his other, empty, shredded eye socket, Triss stared at him.

He was kind of handsome, in that older man sort of way, salt and pepper hair giving him a sort of debonair appeal. With his lean frame and deep cheeks, it would have fit well in a soap opera, wearing a

nice suit and running a massive corporation or something. Crazy to think so, but maybe there was some appeal to this man, sexually, even romantically, that drew Minerva to him.

“The eye, um... what’s it for?” Why was she the only one asking questions? Why did the other three just watch wide-eyed, and not wonder how he was doing this insanity? For fuck’s sake he just created an eyeball out of blood, and random occult shit! But no, Jen, Aaron, Othello, they just watched on, intrigued and amazed, but silenced by their own hesitations and fear. Or laziness.

She wanted to know.

“Begotten are not creatures of blood and shadows, like Kindred. They aren’t beasts of muscle and aggression, like Uratha. They are nightmares.” He laughed again, and reached for the other eyeball. “They think they’re beyond our reach. But they’ll learn. I’m going to do a little hunting, for nightmares.”

“... I want to come.”

Everyone raised a brow as they looked at her, Jacob included, and he lowered his hand to expose the empty, ruined eye socket, while also looking at her with the good eye.

“You think they’ll know where Jack is?” Aaron said.

She shrugged. “I’m sure the Invictus and the Prince are throwing every resource they have into finding him... well, Julias and Antoinette are at least. And I’d probably step on their toes. But the Begotten know something, about something. Athalia talking to Jack, and Jack disappearing on the same night? Come on, fucking suspicious. And, I bet Jacob’s thinking the same thing.”

Her three fellow witches nodded, while Jacob held his chin in his fingers, and considered her. God, he had an eye, a fucking eye, and he was using it to look at her. Gross.

“You can come, if you’ll be an asset.”

“... and how do I do that?” Here it comes.

Eyeless snickered and gestured to the blood bowl. “You’ll need one of these eyes.”

Yeap, of course it had to be something really fucking gross and nasty. Something right off the cover of a metal album.

“The fuck am I supposed to do with one of these eyeballs?”

“Wear it.”

She blinked, and stepped back. So did the others, wincing and each reaching up to touch a part of their face with caring fingers. Othello of course would be against the idea of damaging his face, even temporarily. Aaron and Jennifer, well, no one liked the idea of losing an eye. Replacing it with an eye from a dark blood ritual wasn't any better.

"I... I..." Fuck it. "Fine, let's do it." She leaned forward, set her hands on the edge of the blood bowl, and stared the old man in the eye. "Take it."

"What? Me? My dear Beatrice, if you want to explore the depths of darkness crúac can provide, you have to learn to embrace the pain." He gestured again to the bowl, where the single eye rolled around half sunk in the liquid. Considering how much blood was in the bowl, and how dark and thick it was, she imagined the reason Jen and them were at the bowl was to provide their own blood for the ritual.

"I'm embracing the fucking pain, just—"

"Just do it yourself."

She let her head drop. Just do it yourself, he said. Easier said than done! The amount of reflexes a person had, Kindred included, to not harm the self, was high. Very high. Every instinct she had told her she shouldn't be ripping off, or out, her own body parts. But it was in that darkness of pain and blood and the beast where the insanity Jacob demonstrated existed.

She remembered a story of Odin, Norse mythology, and how the god gouged out one of his eyes, in pursuit of knowledge. This shit was right up that alley.

"You... you don't have to," Jen said, stepping in closer and putting a hand on her shoulder. "Jacob was going to do this alone. Azamel is dangerous, and we shouldn't piss her off."

Aaron and Othello nodded, but said nothing.

She looked between the three of them, and slowly, she felt a frown and harsh glare creep into her expression. The three of them did nothing but fuck all day, every day. Witches? Circle of the Crone? Suddenly, she felt insulted. These three weren't witches, they were freeloaders.

"... why are the three of you in this covenant?" She pushed Jen's hand away, and glared at her three companions. "Jacob offers us secrets, knowledge, power, and the three of you do nothing but fuck your food and do him the occasional small favor? Don't any of you care about this shit? Don't any of you want to fucking know what's out there? Don't you want to understand how the fuck he's able to do the shit he does, understand the things he communicates with? Christ, we're vampires, and all you three give a shit about is satisfying your hungers!"

The three squirmed, looked between each other and her again, and then back to Jacob. Eyeless shrugged, and waited, smirking at all of them the whole time. And when his one-eyed gaze met Triss, he winked the eye at her. So gross.

She wasn't done ranting. "The shit we've seen, the shit we've felt, and you three are concerned only with... existing! Fucking god, even you Aaron, all you do is read. You can read until the god damn apocalypse, but they're just words, they're not real! And you two," she gestured to the Ventrue and the Daeva, "sex and blood and that's it, that's all you two live for. How the fuck Jacob lets you three just coast like this without actually giving a shit about this stuff, the Crone, the madness that hides beyond our view! How can you not care?"

The rant really came out of nowhere, and she was probably just redirecting her fear into an outburst. But, it was still true. These three did nothing to belong in this covenant, other than agree with its views. They barely helped Jacob in his endeavors, and their interest in the terrifying nature of their primal existence was nil. Well, fuck them.

Before they could respond, she used one hand to pry open her eyelid, and reached into the socket with the claws of her other hand.

She'd be able to regrow an eye, with a good night's sleep and a belly full of blood. Unlike Jacob, she wouldn't be regrowing any limbs in minutes, but still, losing an eye was temporary. And the pain was temporary.

Temporary, but the memory wouldn't be. The slicing of her claws along the soft shell of the eye earned a shudder from her as the scalding agony exploded outward from her face and down into her body. Maybe she should have done this slower? No, fast was good, like tearing off a band-aid. Except, the eye. And as she got her claws around the squishy flesh of it, she screamed. Flesh, cutting and splitting apart in her fingers, Kindred blood fighting against the damage, and she having to tell her body to let it be as she forced the claws in deeper, behind the eyeball, pulling it out of her while the claws fought against her eyelids trying to close.

Her claws were sharp. It made the whole process a blurry agony of blood and distorted images as the eye was cut into by her fingers. She'd never really thought about it, what it'd be like to see through an eye as it was being destroyed, as the lens distorted under pressure, as the eyeball was punctured and the fluid coated her claws and eyelids. She screamed again, her other eye closed, the ruined eye in her grasp but still in her skull, and every reflex in her body telling her to let go.

She didn't. She tugged on it, and fumbling in pain, she swiped her finger along the backside of the eye. She knew enough about anatomy to know the eyeball didn't just float in your skull. It was attached, and she had to detach it.

The eye fell away, rolling off of her hand, and landing against the rock of the cave floor with a quiet plop that followed the silence of her cries. And as she forced her other eye open, she watched it fade away in a tiny ember, before it became ash. Her empty eye socket was closed, no opening that, and she felt her Kindred blood flood it to heal the wound. Regrowing an eyeball wouldn't be happening any time soon, and she could suppress the healing to prevent that, until they were done what needed to be done.

Holding her hand over the empty, agonizing eye socket, she forced herself back over to the blood bowl, and glared at everyone. First Jacob, who was smiling a smile so... genuine, he almost looked like a father admiring the dedication of their child. Pride. Ugh. The other three looked shocked as all hell. Good, fuck them twice.

She squeezed the edges of the bowl with the one hand, and, trembling, she forced down her other hand away from the other, empty eye socket so that it also gripped the bowl. A drop of Kindred blood trickled out of the wound, and down her cheek to land and mix into the crocodile teeth of her mouth.

"Do it," she said.

One-eyed bastard almost looked ready to cry tears of joy, with the over-dramatic presentation of a Shakespearean actor. He reached into the bowl, scooped up the eyeball, and reached out for her face.

Every single god damn mother fucking reflex she had told her to yank her head away. A wounded animal. She gripped the bowl tight, and stared at the man with her one good eye, as another drop of her Kindred blood worked down her cheek bone and down onto her extra teeth.

Jacob's smile hardened, became a determined, solid gaze as he opened her ruined eye, and slid the eye in. He was fast, smooth, delicate, precise and quick all at the same time. There was no describing the sensation of having a new eyeball inserted into an eye socket full of blood, and thank god Jacob was kind enough to keep the brutal sensation succinct; cause she couldn't take much more. Didn't want to start crying after that speech. She'd made a point, and to start crying now, she'd seem like a whiny baby instead of a proper witch willing to do the shit they weren't.

He pulled his hand back, fingers releasing her eyelids, and waited.

She groaned, forced down her screams, and gasped on useless air as she squeezed the blood bowl. The liquid and the lighting wasn't right for a reflection, poetic as it would have been, but she stared into

the blood anyway as she felt the unnatural eye mold to fit her skull. And, for her Kindred body to attach the optic nerve to the new vessel.

She could see out of the eye.

“That... is fucking creepy,” Jen said, but she had a weird smile on her face, like maybe she was a little interested in what they were up to. Which made Triss happy, and pissed, cause maybe she wouldn’t have given a rant if she’d known. “You got blood on and under the new eye, and it’s very poetic. And it doesn’t match your other eye.”

She rolled her eyes — oh fucking god ow! — and wiped the Kindred blood away from underneath the new eye. It began to fade away, turning into wisps of ash along the back of her hand.

She had an eye now, a normal looking eye, next to her usual snake eye. Too late to worry about that now, she could get rid of the new eye later.

Oh shit, why hadn’t she thought about that? She had to get this thing out of her later, and go through this again.

“See anything?” Aaron said.

“I... I can see with the eye, yeah, but... nothing new.” She squinted at Jen, then the boys, and then around at the ghouls and thralls taking care of the den. Everything looked normal, once the dizzying pain settled. “How’s this work, Jacob?”

“Let’s go find out.”

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“You continue to impress me,” one-eye said. The two of them were sitting on a rooftop, in the middle of South Side where the casinos and high-price strip clubs were, where the most people were, where the most lights were, where a Nosferatu like Beatrice knew her cloak of night wouldn’t be able to keep her hidden if she even so much as tripped.

Jacob’s could, without issue.

“Then you have low standards, cause I thought this was the sort of shit you witches do.” Their legs were dangling, and she smirked a little as she let the heel kick against the building underneath her.

Did this qualify as making a connection with the old man? It hadn't been her intention, but maybe she could get two birds with one stone.

"We do. We did. You know my old circle perished to hunters."

"So you got a new circle, of a bunch of sex-crazed slu—well, except Aaron. You know what's up with him? What's his deal?"

"He shares many of my views, but instead of enacting them, he prefers to explore their philosophies with dialogue. And often, just read." He shrugged, and offered her a small, holy-fuck-maybe-genuine smile, before looking out to the crowd below them.

Neither of them were wearing robes anymore, instead opting for some street clothes. He was wearing some black pants, probably something for a suit, with a white button shirt to go with, loose and undone to the chest. She was in her usual black jeans and white tank top, high cut and tight so people got to admire her abs and nipple piercings. Well, they would have, if her and Jacob had gone to see any other Kindred. Instead, Jacob took them out into the city, hidden, to watch and learn.

"Jen, Othello?"

"The same. They share my views, and they have no issue indulging their animal desires, as you well know. Jen get into your pussy yet?"

"W-What? No, no... not yet."

"Then we're thinking about it?"

Oh good fucking god not him too. First the Prince and now the Joker.

"We are Kindred, aren't we? Pretty open minded about this sort of stuff. Julias included."

"So that's a no. Wimp."

She frowned at him, but he only laughed and shrugged. This was just how he talked, full of juvenile digs that were never meant to be taken seriously, but at the same time held little bits of wisdom. Useful, if she could swallow all the crap attached to them.

"... you think... Jen might be into me? Romantically, I mean? I get wanting to fuck me. I have the nicest ass this side of the planet," she said. Old man laughed, and for some reason, she smiled at the sound. "But sometimes I get the feeling she wants to do more than that. Wants more than that."

"Well that's just because you're infatuated with yourself. Christ you carried that chip on your shoulder about the teeth for how many years? Could have gotten over that in a quarter the time if you

didn't have your head so far up your ass. No, she's not in love with you, and doesn't have a crush on you, but she does like you as a friend. Ya fucking nitwit."

"... I think I liked you better when you were this mysterious figure I kept at a distance."

He laughed, loud, boisterous even, and wiped a finger along his cheek bone beneath his new eye. "It serves any elder to seem inscrutable and unapproachable. But spend a little time with us and you realize we're just like you, only smarter, stronger, and a lot more fucked up."

"I get that. I... I wonder how Jack is with Antoinette then?"

"Oh no doubt that kid has seen a side to her no one else has, a womanly side, a loving side. And probably a lot of her other sides, dominant, motherly, queenly, seductive, everything in between."

"... you've known her a long time."

"Yep. But, she's practically a different woman now, now that Jack's softening her up."

She scratched her cheek bone underneath the new eye, and winced at how the socket was still sore. Maybe when she was half a millennium old she could grow a fucking hand in minutes, but for now a nasty gash took hours to heal, and a missing eye would take the night, and some blood.

"You think Azamel knows anything about Jack's disappearance?"

"No doubt."

"Oh... kind of got the impression you weren't sure."

"She knows something. I don't know if she knows where the kid is, but she definitely knows something. And with these eyes we're going to pay a visit to her, a real visit."

"What're we doing here then?"

"My friend suggested I take a peek into a crowd, and see if we can catch a glimpse, before taking the plunge."

"Glimpse of?"

"A nightmare."

She shivered and hugged her knees to her chest. Her only true experience with the Begotten was Fiona; her experience with Azamel and Athalia had been short lived at best. With Fiona, there was a genuine... thing inside her, something that was not only scary, but strong. Young, sweet, fun Fiona, controlling something that strong, that weird inside her, and they were going to go meet with her new



mentor? Some super ancient entity that'd been destroying whole towns, a monster thing that could have very well been a god from ancient mythology for all Triss knew.

"... Malachi." For some reason, the topic brought up that memory, of the thing in the darkness talking to Jacob like an old friend, with a different name.

"An old name, not used by any kine or Kindred anymore."

"That thing, that Black Blood creature or whatever, it called you that."

"Because I've known it for a long time."

"... how long?"

Jacob turned to look at her, actually look at her, with an eye, an eye she was mirroring. The two of them must have looked damn weird; should have worn some eye patches.

"When this was just a small town, surrounded by dark wood, the harsh elements, and murder within, I met the Black Blood. I was already well versed in crúac, and both Antoinette and I had expressed interest in exploring what lay beyond our realm. She and I came here, and pursued our agendas on our own, but with the occasional helpful boon for the other." He laughed, always with the laughing, and gestured out to the people below. "We exploited the sheep, and used them to build us our city. But, far before the village became a city under our rule, as I started poking at the barrier and looking across it, I found it."

"So this thing was around before you guys showed up?"

"Yeap. You know anything about spirits?"

"Jacob, I didn't know spirits fucked existed until you showed me that... fucking... thing. Happy to keep thinking the only supernatural shit I had to deal with was vamps and werewolves. You know, the classics." But now a whole new can of worms was open, and she couldn't walk in shadows anymore without thinking something was inside the black, following her.

"They reflect our world, spirits. One affects the other, like whipping a rope attached to something. The inertia affects it, bounces back, creates a loop. That world, on the other side? Crazy. Fucking. Shit. Mountains that can speak, floating wisps of glowing light get eaten by black shadows on wings, colossal giants walking around made of asphalt, and the tower of blood where the Elysium tower is, in a crazy man's version of Dolareido."

She blinked, and looked out through the lights of the city, and far away to where the massive tower of glass stood. "Blood tower?"

“Yeap, in that place, Antoinette’s tower drips of it. Straight out of a painting. Black Blood is on the other side of the wall that separates our worlds, a tempestuous spirit of death and pain. It’s not what it seems though, and it... it...” Holy shit Jacob was speechless. First time for everything. “It’s shared with me a lot of twisted wisdom about the nature of death and pain, because that’s what it is, but also about existence, about the flowing connection of life. Like blood.”

Well, that would explain the ‘black’ part, and the ‘blood’ part she supposed. “That... sounds like something that... fuck, that sounds like the sort of shit you read about in old books, mythology and shit.”

“Many Kindred, even my peers in other cities, refuse to acknowledge or explore that world on the other side. Antoinette’s the only elder I’ve ever known also interested. And the werewolves, those fucking dogs, refuse to... Fuck em, just fuck them.”

“Is... is that what these eyes are for? We going to see that? The other side?”

“No. Like I said, we’re going to see nightmares. Completely different thing.”

“... how?”

He laughed, loudly, and reached out to set his hand on her shoulder to balance himself as he laughed more and more. Well, if she wasn’t making a connection now, she didn’t know how she could.

“You sound like Minerva.”

“I... I uh...” Ok, wow, maybe that was how to make a connection with the old man.

“Ever curious, so ever curious. There are many realms, Beatrice, layers upon, underneath, around, and within. The realm of spirits, the Shadow, or the Hisil as the dogs and spirits call it, I am familiar with, as is Antoinette, and the Uratha march upon that land and guard the wall between us and it. Fucking dogs. But other realms? Those idiot dogs are blissfully unaware of things like dreams. The power in dreams. Nightmares. And the things that roam within them.”

“And... Black Blood? It was... pretty nightmarish.”

“Ah, now there’s a puzzle. Dreams are something the human mind creates, but can also reach, tap into, something out there that exists, a place. But spirits, twisted reflections of reality, do not reflect humans themselves. Or vampires or werewolves, for that matter. What could they know of dreams then? Of real, true, powerful dreams, of life destroying nightmares only possible in a human’s mind?” He reached up and touched his cheek below his new eye. “Some of them do happen to know a thing or two, and Black Blood has shared its secrets with me on occasion.”

“... in exchange for?”

He winked his new eye, and stood up. “Come on, not seeing anything up here. Let’s get down into the tunnels and head in Azamel’s direction.”

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Back in the tunnels. She hadn’t touched them much since that whole monster-from-a-shitty-sixties-monster-movie incident, cause a shitty monster from a bad sixties movie was pretty fucking terrifying when you had to deal with it face to face. The texture of its hairy spider body and mutated human flesh was still fresh in her mind.

“I really hope she knows where Jack is,” she said. “I owe the kid a lot, and he’s Julias’s childe, and he’s an awesome kid.”

“He’s an adult.”

“I know! And fuck you, you call him kid too. He’s small, and barely an adult, and... and now I can’t stop picturing him underneath Antoinette, her just squishing him with her tits and pampering him like some sort of milf fucking the kid next door for his eighteenth birthday present.”

The two of them chuckled. Yeap, bonding. And she wasn’t even trying, it just sort of happened. Talking to Jacob like an actual person actually had him responding like an actual person. Such a weird realization.

“I like the kid too. Clarice is bringing change to Dolareido, and in ways people can’t predict.”

“Yeah, I guess he is.” Clarice. Silence of the Lambs? Why the fuck was this ludicrously old vampire watching movies? She kind of liked that he did, but it was also unsettling, how this old fart was savvy on the latest references.

The two of them walked the dark tunnels, still masked in Jacob’s cloak of night. He never had to stop, or refocus, or deal with any of the strain of keeping up such a discipline constantly like Triss did. Fucking terrifying in a way, how easily he kept them as hidden as shadows in a dark room.

“I once thought Damien would also bring change, and he did for a while. But the man has regressed to a simple clergyman, and Maria’s right hand. Ah well.”

“... did you really convince Lucas to attack the Prince?” Really shouldn’t have asked, but she remembered Antoinette getting angry with him about it.

“I’d never have touched the situation so directly. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t plant the idea in his head.”

“Jacob! Christ man, a lot of Kindred died, and—”

Jacob put a hand up and waved it aside, dismissing her. “Let it go, Triss, I know what I’m doing. And besides, I didn’t convince him, he did that on his own.”

Yeah but, like one-eye said, he put the idea in Lucas’s head. Still, Triss couldn’t appreciate any of the details, the nuances, or scope of that situation. She hadn’t even been alive when the purge happened. So shut the fuck up and trust your boss, a little at least.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Last thing I want is for my witches to keep their mouths shut. Don’t like what I do? Bring it up, so we can argue, maybe throw a punch or two.” He came closer, and as they walked the dark and tracks of the abandoned subway tunnels, he hooked an arm over her shoulders to half hug her. “Fair warning though, I punch hard.”

“Yeah, I remember you hitting the Prince in the cave. I... I did want to ask about Minerva.”

“You have balls. I like that.” And he did too, smirk and smile included, and the one-arm hug persisting. But as he dug through the memories, his arm grew heavy, slid off of her, and the two again walked side by side as normal. “Love of my life, all the cliches of life-changing romance wrapped into one.”

“And she wanted to see the other side too? Like you?”

“Like you.”

“I... I don’t... I mean I guess I do? I figured everyone in the circle did, see what sort of shit was hiding in the dark. You really let those three just sit around and do nothing all the time.”

“They do tasks for me every now and then. And this ritual? It took far too much Kindred blood for one Kindred to provide.”

“Yeah but, we’re in the fucking Circle of the Crone. I was expecting more shit like you told me you did with your old group in Dolareido, dancing naked to rituals and... and even more stuff like that Black Blood thing. More things like this.” She inched her head toward him and pulled down on the cheek of the new eyeball. “Christ this fucking hurt.”

“Ripping out your own eye was utterly delicious. And I was worried perhaps I’d scared you that night, with Black Blood and I, stabbing you until you frenzied.”

“It did scare me! It fucking terrified me, and it really fucking hurt you god damn fucking asshole. I can still remember the pain, and... and there was more... I want to know more.”

The elder’s smile evolved once again. He had a million smiles, each with its own persona, history, implications and flavor; this new one was a mix of intrigue and excitement.

“Quite the beast inside you.”

“... thanks, I think?”

“I—oh my.” His eye shot out to the darkness of the tunnel ahead of them, and he gestured to one of the shadows near a flickering light, cast by the abandoned stage of old, forgotten, locked away stations.

The shadow was moving.

Jacob let go of her shoulder, and the two of them came closer. Looked like shadow, didn’t make a sound or give off a smell or anything, just shadow, lack of light. But it was moving, shifting back and forth across the dirty metal and concrete of the subway tunnel, like hazy fog fighting against a breeze.

They approached. Nothing happened. They got down on their knees and reached out to touch it. Nothing happened. Triss covered her new eye, and the shadow returned to normal. She covered her old eye, and the shadow sprang back to life again, shifting against the ground and wall.

She touched it. Nothing happened.

“What the fuck am I looking at?”

“Not sure.”

“... not sure?” She threw up her hands and glared at the man. “I thought you knew everything!”

His laughter was howling, almost like a banshee’s. “You and I will explore all sorts of depravity and insanity, my apprentice.” Oh fuck he was riding the Star Wars vibe and everything. “But, you decided to join me as I explore this new boundary that I have previously ignored. Dreams? Always I thought them just a fleeting wisp of the subconscious acting out its theater of thoughts, but with Azamel’s return, Black Blood and I have refocused our efforts. This,” he said as he pointed to the eye, “is something it taught me, so that we could both understand these nightmares, it and I.”

Wonderful, she was wearing an eyeball given to her by what might as well have been death incarnate.

“So we’re both going into this blind.”

“No, that’s what the eyes are for.”

“You know what I fucking mean.”

A smirk and chuckle later, he got up and started moving again. The flickering shadow was just that, a flickering shadow, and as far as she could tell, it meant nothing, except that her normal eye couldn’t see it.

“Azamel and her companions are burrowing.”

“Burrowing?”

“Burrowing. Those monsters, those nightmares, they tunnel through reality as we know it, breaking through and fucking with things. Nesting. They hide in this other world neither me or Black Blood have ever seen, and like ants they dig their tunnels into our existence. Except this time, Azamel is up to something.” They started walking again, and Jacob hopped onto one of the tracks to walk it tightrope style. Hop, skip, hop. “In the old days, instead of doing this myself, I’d have my circle of witches investigating. But as you can tell, my current circle is pretty lazy.”

“Which is your fault.”

“Ha! True.” He started walking backward, while remaining on the subway track. No need to balance his movements with his arms either. At first it was silly, but now it was impressive. “Perhaps it’s time for a change? Everything’s changing, with Azamel and that bitch Avery returning, Lucas’s death, Viktor and Tony’s death. Quite the upset, and I’ve just been lazing about, doing fuck all.”

“... bullshit.”

“Bullshit?”

“Yeah, you fucking can’t trick me that easily you old bastard. You were involved in that Lucas shit in more ways than you’ve let on. You apparently had something to do with that fucking spider monster in the tunnels. And I bet you know Azamel and Avery in more ways than you’ve said. Fuck, you probably had something to do with that whole Viktor and Tony shit!”

He stopped. She stopped. That might have been too far. Yeap, too far. She froze a little, a lot, then petrified as the elder glared at her. He stepped off the track and came up to her, frown on his face, and his one eye cocked, ready to blow her brains out. So much easier to stare at him when he had no

eyes, just a bandage, but now he had the one eye looking into her fucking soul, while the other socket was now visible, an empty eye slot where his Nosferatu deformity had blessed him with shredded and removed eyelids. Just an empty eye socket that looked like it belonged on a monster. Or a corpse.

“You really want to know?”

“... know what?”

“Secrets. You really want me to let you in, like I did with my circle in the days of yore?” Fucker smirked when he said ‘yore’ too. “You want to explore the cracks in the world, the blood that trickles through its seams, see what darkness you can summon from its crevices? I’m happy to drown you in the sick delights of blood magic, Beatrice. But if you want to know the secrets this city is built on, that’s a different matter entirely.”

“I... I... don’t know.” Fuck fuck fuck, what wasp nest was she poking now? “I used to be a Carthian, because I thought I wanted to flip the status quo, you know? Invictus run shit, money money money, and everyone bows to the Prince even though she’s the smallest group in the city. I—”

“Bullshit. Garry put a roof over your head and you thought you owed him.”

“I did owe him!”

The man came up behind her. Too fast for her to turn around, or she was still frozen. Both. His hands took her shoulders, and he held her that way as he came in closer until his chest was to her back, his chin beside her neck. Devil on her shoulder.

“Garry is no different than any Kindred his age. He’s got a goal and he’s willing to sacrifice the younger to achieve it. You owe him nothing.”

This conversation was going in random weird directions and she wasn’t sure she liked it. Flirting with some dangerous shit, and not the dangerous shit like the fucking madness of crúac, but the more evil shit. Secrets, the sort of shit politicians kept in their closets. Real fucking evil.

“Then—”

“I’ll let you in, Beatrice. You want to know the sort of secrets that could collapse the Invictus, destroy the Carthians, bathe the streets in Kindred blood and have everyone tearing each other’s throats out? Want to look old bosses in the eye, or the Invictus triumvirate, or the Prince herself, with knowledge in your skull that could bring the city to its knees, bring the covenants to civil war and ripping themselves to bits?”

“... I... I... don’t know.”

“Good answer.” Repeating the fucking past like it was a play he’d seen before. And probably had. He pat both her shoulders a few times, before stepping around and resuming their walk down the valley of the shadow of death. “But enough drama, we can talk about it later. For now, we’re going to Azamel’s little hole in the wall.”

“Yeah... ok.” She gulped on nothing, and walked after her boss.

Fuck, that’d gotten dangerously close to signing her soul away on a dotted line, or joining a cult or something. Not that she hadn’t already done those things. Maybe she should just jump in and see if she could swim? Blood magic that screamed ‘you’ll go to hell for touching this’ was almost blase in comparison to what he was offering her.

How the secrets beckoned so sweetly, sirens on the rocky shore.

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~~Julias~~

Dusk, a vampire’s morning. Many Kindred used it as a time to make sure they still had all their limbs, that they lost nothing to the sun or to an enemy while they were asleep. Of course, that never happened. You never woke up and found yourself missing a limb or suffering any burns. You either woke up fine or you didn’t wake up at all.

Jack could have been out there, in the sun, a pile of ashes. Though Kindred his age didn’t truly turn to ashes, rather a burnt, withered husk. He shuddered at the thought of his childe, panicking in the streets, sunrise peeking over the buildings, and the boy forced to spend every ounce of vitae he had to fight the daily need to sleep. Exhausted and unable to find a safe place, he’d collapse, and cry out as the—

He slapped himself in the face. Hard. Maria raised a brow, and gestured to the large display on the wall that showed two dozen video feeds from their thralls.

“Mire, please, control yourself. We are doing all we can,” she said, raspy voice calm and collected. Too collected. He did not like that she was so calm about Jack’s disappearance, and his poker instincts told him she was hiding something. Wouldn’t surprise him if Maria had found out about what



Jack did to Lucas, and had arranged for his death. Would Damien have killed him, for the Lucas incident? Maybe. Damien had seemed like he'd changed, but you could never be sure.

It was only the two of them, in the Xnomina headquarters, where Julias could monitor the inflow of information from their thralls. The Invictus network was massive, and it either controlled or monitored every organization with a notable amount of money. What corporations that dabbled in big money, that dabbled in enterprises worth billions, the Invictus controlled a large portion of their stocks; or all of them, if they were local to Dolareido. What branches of organized crime existed in Dolareido, they controlled. Any person with enough money to present a threat, the Invictus knew of, and were either ready to manipulate to their will, or already were. Money was power, and the Invictus were power.

None of that helped a fucking bit when you were down in the cracks of the city streets trying to find a single individual.

“I should have stayed with him.”

“You had no reason to suspect this danger would occur.”

“I didn't have reason?” He turned to face the small ghost woman, and marched around the table to get nearer. She was sitting in her large business chair, a tablet in her hand, and was both watching the wall display while checking Invictus business, as if everything was perfectly fine. “Barry's dead!”

“Missing. You know Kindred vanish, Mire, neonates above all. They underestimate the sun, or they misstep and find themselves without the blood needed to wake from their hiding hole. Or they leave, and find a city or town with people they do not know, to get away from the hooks of their old life.”

“Dolareido is—”

“Is not large enough to completely hide all contact with their old lives. Surely you are aware that Jack has, on occasion, gone to visit his mother and sister?”

“I... I'd suspected, but I didn't know for sure.” Groaning and running his fingers back through his hair, he sat his butt against the side of the massive table, and folded his arms across his chest. “With Amanda's help, I presume?”

“Of course. They often partner, and she is young as well. She still feels such pain.”

Maybe the kid was just letting a part of him out that he normally suppressed? Jack thought himself the distant, analytical type, and he wasn't wrong, but he was still human, or at least had a human soul.

Even as a Kindred, he was far too young to have lost his humanity, which made old ties terribly powerful. It was one of the strongest reasons some fledglings fled the cities they were embraced in.

But Jack wouldn't do that. He'd just flip a switch in his brain, ignore the emotions, and make life choices logically, no matter how much it hurt him. It was part of the reason Julias admired him, and sired him. It was a unique skill most people did not have, and it served a Ventrue well.

But perhaps most of all, Jack wouldn't leave the Prince.

"He's still in the city, alive, I'm sure of it."

Maria frowned at him, and met his gaze as he returned it. "Do not let your connection to your childe cloud your mind, Mire. Your blood connection to Master Terry has not provided you with any clear message, has it? Can you even be certain the boy is alive?"

Blood sympathy, the connection between sire and childe. The nature of it, the degrees to which it acted, how it felt, it was all an enigma. They knew of it, knew it existed, knew it was real, but beyond that, the only Kindred who had even scratched the surface of such mysteries were the Ordo Dracul, and it wasn't like they were sharing their secrets.

Worst of all, trying to interpret blood sympathy was like trying to predict the weather based on the pain in your knees. Not exactly consistent, and he usually ignored it. But not tonight.

"I can feel it in my gut. He's alive."

The ghost woman sighed, but nodded, and set her eyes back upon her tablet. "You have almost every thrall and ghoul with at least a year's experience searching for him, Mister Mire. This will attract attention. And it may very well be that the boy is simply indisposed."

"Barry's dead, suspicious activity has been seen, confirmed by Damien and Jack and Isabella's lackey, and we know the boy was speaking with Athalia. His phone's tracker isn't working! And hell, he was supposed to go to the Prince's to sleep that very night. The only way he's indisposed is if he's been captured."

"... captured by the Begotten then, perhaps?"

"We checked all the footage we have of the tunnels, the ins and outs. Athalia went back there, alone." And as much as he suspected Athalia and her boss Azamel of any and all sorts of deceitful shit, he doubted they'd simply kidnap Jack. The repercussions were too obvious. And if Azamel was going to play that game, she wouldn't have started from a position of openness, the way she'd made herself known in the tunnels. Or she'd at least get a bigger bargaining chip.

Maria tapped a finger on her chin. “I understand the werewolf Clara Moreno is quite taken with Jack. Perhaps she played a hand in his disappearance.”

“Now we’re just grasping at straws.”

“Straws are all we have, Mire. Damien has insisted that these four kine are likely to be hunters, and with the timing of Barry’s death, and now Jack’s disappearance, that they are to blame. But we have only conjecture.”

Close, so very close to flipping the desk onto the tiny ghost woman and crushing her. It would have meant his death, or at least a very painful retaliation from the elder Nosferatu, but the urge still worked through his limbs. Jack was alive, he could feel it, and his fellow council member refused to acknowledge the very real threat of hunters.

They should never have had that ball.

“... Maria?” Enough with the last name only bullshit.

“Yes Julias?”

“What do you know of Athalia, and Viktor?”

“... you truly wish to know? I imagine you understand that your sire caused her great strife.”

He pulled out a chair and sat down beside the ghost woman, near her, ignoring the white mist that dripped from her cracked and decaying skin. This was important, and now was no time to be squeamish about her Nosferatu disfigurements. He slid the chair in closer, until he was only a couple feet from the small, rotted corpse, and met her gaze.

“I know Viktor became a horrible person over the centuries. I’ve accepted that.” I’ve accepted that it’s in the blood, that it’s a real possibility for me to suffer, and Jack as well. I get it. “So, if you know the details, I would like to know.”

Maria sighed and set her tablet down upon the table. “You think this information will help you find Jack?”

“There may be a connection. I was content to leave Athalia’s past out of this, but I no longer have that luxury. I need to know what happened.”

“So that you can manipulate her when the time comes.” She said it deadpan, no judgment, no insult, or pride or admiration.

“... yes.” He wasn’t Viktor.

“Viktor had become... violent, as his age grew. As you know, the man’s gift for domination and animalism was great, and he used these to fuel his growth. Before his long torpor to squelch his bloodlust, he used such abilities to feast upon Kindred.”

“I understand he—”

“He hid his actions well, Julias. A master of manipulation, he used others, toyed with their memories as he drank Kindred, some until they... died. He engaged in violence of an unsavory nature, of an indulgent nature, as he often satisfied his need for Kindred blood with barbaric cruelty.”

“Indulgent?”

Another nod before she looked away and back to the screen on the wall.

“He did not engage in diablerie, but I could tell his lust had grown to such a point. Michael and I convinced him to let torpor hold him for years, to suppress his need for such cannibalism. He awoke... twisted, as you know.”

He did not like where this conversation was going. Before his long sleep, he’d known Viktor to be a ruthless but intelligent and patient man. He’d had no idea the man was involved in such disgusting brutality.

“I live in the man’s mansion now. I’ve seen his dungeons.”

“Yes... his desire to take the Kiss past the needed point, and into killing prey, did not abate with his torpor. He no longer craved Kindred blood, but the desire to feel prey die to the Kiss only increased. His indulgences continued, kept secret by his many talents and many connections. And he did more to his prey than simply kill them, he tested torture, of which... are you sure you wish to know the details, Julias? He was your grandsire.”

Yeah, his grandsire was a monster. Kindred were not kine, even if they still had the memories of being kine. Many embraced killing kine as a sport, took joy in it, like hunting rabbits. The Prince discouraged such blatant cruelty, which was normally enough to make any Kindred with a sense of self preservation avoid doing it. But Viktor didn’t bend so easily.

“... tell me.” He didn’t want to use the info. He was happier not knowing what sick shit the man who made him who and what he was today, did in the dark. But knowledge was power.

Knowledge and money, powerful bedfellows. He was Invictus to the core, just hopefully not like Viktor was.

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~~Eric~~

Chasing strangers through the city streets, for a girl he barely knew. This was strangely like the first time he'd ever really gotten to know Sheryl, except that'd been some punk that'd taken her purse. Eric had jumped to her rescue and ran the man down. Now, the memory made him want to vomit.

"Which way?" she said. Or yelled, really.

He brought a finger up to his lips to shh her, but he had to be subtle about it too, with the four they were following possibly nearby. Fiona didn't get subtle, and he had to flick her in the shoulder and get her to look at him to pick up on the queue.

"Ever tail someone?" he said.

"No..."

"It's simple. Stop acting like you're tailing someone, and head in their general direction."

"... done!" She stood rigid, taller, and walked like a robot. "Like this?"

Oh good god she was going to get them both killed.

He facepalmed, shook his head, and just kept walking. There were enough people around outside the club to hide tiny Fiona's pathetic attempts at blending in, their shoulders clearing her head. Should be enough to hide her antics for now.

Took a moment for him to realize he was walking, in a direction, without even stopping, like it was natural to stalk someone. He just knew, knew where the four had gone, where the prey had been, how to follow them. Dolareido wasn't only his home, it was a home he knew inside and out, every street and every corner, and evidently every smell. These four didn't belong, something they were carrying or doing marked them with a smell that didn't fit, and he could pick up on traces of it in the air, despite the amount of people around him.

This was really stupid. He should turn around and get back to his new, amazing job. Ok maybe not amazing, but better than his last job and paying infinitely better on top of it. Debts to pay, bills, real world shit to deal with. Everything that was happening to him, the dreams, the hallucinations, being able to smell and hear better than before, wanting to hunt and feed, it had to just be stress.

Don't be a fucking moron. Even thinking the thoughts sounded stupid; they'd have been gut-wrenchingly hilarious to hear out loud. They weren't caused by stress. Something fucked up was happening to him, and this girl knew about it, knew more than that too, knew a lot of things probably. And he needed to know, if only so he could find a way to make it stop and get back to his life. Pay his debts — assuming Jessy's promise fell through — and pay his bills. Get a new place, a car, maybe get a root canal for a tooth that was bothering him, maybe try hitting the dating scene again, and just living life.

The little glass of champagne beside him had wanted to go on a date, that much was obvious from the first night she met him. That Jessy girl didn't seem like she wanted to date, more so just fuck him. And maybe that wasn't so bad? Let go of his baggage for a night, or at least thirty minutes, and enjoy some sex with a beautiful woman.

“Ye're doing it again,” she said, and poked him hard enough in the side to make him wince. “Ye still on their trail?”

“Yes.” And he was. He was following the subtle scent like he'd done it a hundred times before, a thousand times, like it was normal, natural. Instinct. Hundreds of people walked past them every few seconds, suits and dresses, fresh fabrics, leather, cologne and perfume, drugs and alcohol, all the smells of home. The streetlights, the flashing signs of nearby casinos, clubs, fancy bars, the not-so-subtle advertisements inviting men and women into arenas full of vices, full of sex. His home, and these people didn't belong.

“Talk,” he said.

“Talk?”

“Yes, talk. Walking in silence with someone isn't casual, talking is.”

“Oh, right! Talking.” She nodded a few times, and smiled up at him as they worked through the crowd. “Jessy says ye used to be a fighter?”

“Yep.”

“And something happened to yer knee?”

“Yep.”

“How bad?”

“Ruined it. Lost my career.”

“... oh.” She visibly shrunk, and pouted up at him. “I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, it was quite the shit show.” Easier to not mention the wife, and the divorce, and—

“And ye’re divorced! Was it cause of yer destroyed career?”

Wow. He had to wonder if this girl had a single thought in her head, or if she simply was incapable of thinking them without speaking them. Honestly, that was a pleasant change from the snakes he was used to dealing with.

“Partly.” No longer being famous and having all his money evaporate put a strain on the relationship. And having no money exposed a side to that relationship he wished he’d never seen.

“... dinnae want to talk about it?”

“Not especially.”

“Sorry.” She stepped in closer, and hooked his arm. Taking Jessy’s advice of being aggressive then. “I could make it up to ye? Want to go on a date?”

“... I—”

“Though, Jessy does really expect payment for her speaking to that bawbag, Montoya. So, after she jumps yer bones, then we can go on a date.”

“... so we are going on a date?” He raised a brow at her, and she beamed up at him. Damn cute, no denying that.

“We are! Aren’t we?”

“How about we finish following these four and then we can discuss it?”

“If we go out on a date, I’ll tell ye more about what’s happening to ye.”

God damn it. He frowned down at the tiny redhead, and she grinned the most evil grin he figured she could manage; which, wasn’t evil at all. Just adorable.

“How... how do you know what’s happening to me.”

“I ken ye can tell I’m nae normal.” She shrugged, and gestured out to the people around them that they pushed past. “These folk are normal. So many folk in Dolareido! Wasn’t like this at home.”

“From Scotland?”

“Aye. Now I’m just a wee lass in the city, no money, working as a waitress now and doing her best to stay out of the porn industry.”

He laughed. He stopped for a second, and blinked. Forgotten what that sounded like, laughing. Fiona raised a brow at him, but he started walking again as he wiped away the smirk.

“Young girl leaves her small town home and goes to live in the big city? Does sound like porn is in your future.”

“I ken! Ugh, and this town is the sluttiest town. The things I’ve seen on my hunts! Holes in the wall, filled with folk fucking every hole each other has.”

“... hunts?”

“I’ll tell ye later.” A wink and another elbow to his side, before they resumed their walk.

Naive as she seemed, she wasn’t naive. Maybe wore her thoughts and emotions on her sleeve, but certainly not naive. Even if she’d pretended to be, he wouldn’t have believed it, not when he could almost smell the invisible black drip from her, almost see it.

“... you’d really be comfortable going on a date with me, specifically after feeding me to your friend?”

Whatever he said, it hit the girl’s funny bone, because she erupted into laughter, enough that some people looked at her and stumbled around her as she struggled to not fall. He had to reach out to hold her shoulder to stop her from running into strangers walking by.

“Aye, fed ye to ‘er! Ye’ve no idea lad. But, yes. I mean, not before, but after sure, that’s normal for Dolareido. And I’ll likely get to see at yer goods, so that’ll be an interesting sneak peek at ye.” Giggling madly, she hugged his arm and resumed walking once more.

Dolareido definitely had that effect on people. If you weren’t comfortable with a sexual atmosphere, this part of South Side would make you comfortable with saturation therapy. He’d never been to one of the infamous sex holes, but apparently this girl had? Hard to imagine.

The smell continued, and he followed it, putting some briskness into the speed. They had to catch up, but from the smell, he figured they were nearby. How he knew that, he didn’t know, but that was why he was doing this insanity after all, risking his new job and potentially his life. He needed to know what the fuck was happening to him.

Fifteen minutes of walking, and the smell was getting stronger. More of that metal and wood smell he couldn’t place. And, eventually, how the strangers smelled, their flesh. Consistent, persistent, whiffs of various odors that were always around with those odd smells, the smell of people, individual people. He could smell them.



He didn't like where the smell was leading them. If the smell had been going closer to Devil's Corner, or maybe toward the more conservative area of South Side, it'd be understandable. But the trail was taking him toward North Side, away from where people gathered, away from the familiar sights and smells. The city was as familiar to him as his own body, but North Side, not so much.

The people grew less and less, until they were no longer surrounded by shoulders to hide their actions, until there was only a few people, until eventually there were none at all. The smell was all the more obvious without the additional bodies, but Eric felt every muscle tense as he glanced left and right along the near-empty streets of where North Side met South Side. The neighborhoods were rougher, sometimes nicer, sometimes meaner, but the people were always tougher. Unlike Devil's Corner where everyone was broken by economic struggles, people here were just as poor, but they carried themselves, their own, and anyone who was stupid enough to try and rob a house or sell drugs on the street corner was bound to get shot. Shot by a gang protecting their turf from lowlife scum, or by a grandmother with a shotgun on the porch doing the same thing.

But there were at least a few people around, and with Fiona's more casual wear, it was enough that the two of them could walk without too much issue.

"So how did ye get in deep with Montoya?"

This girl, right for the jugular.

"I was young and stupid."

"Aye, I know that feeling." More giggles, and she wiped her smile away. "What did ye do?" He doubted she was trying to be nonchalant, to hide that they were following a trail. But whether she was trying to be casual or not, she did look it, when bombarding him with horrible questions and giggling about him.

"Bought my wife and I a bunch of stuff... mostly her."

"Och. Och god that's horrible. So now Montoya wants his money back and ye dinnae even have the lass ye borrowed the money for. Why doesn't he go after her?"

"... cause I'm the one that borrowed the money, not her."

"Wedding ring?"

"Engagement ring, yes, among other things."

"... ever get the ring back?"

“You can’t legally force someone to give back a gift. We got married, verbal contract fulfilled. It just didn’t last.” His fingers tightened until he felt the knuckles turn white. How many of those final conversations with Sheryl had turned to screaming, yelling, throwing and smashing plates, and tossing each other’s things out the window? A lot of them.

Destroying his knee was the worst thing that had ever happened to him, brought to the surface just how fucking awful that relationship was, once the money started to run dry. Christ it ached. Each step ground on the bone and wrecked cartilage, and eventually he was going to start limping a little. It always healed enough for him to use it again the next day, but it never healed enough for him to do anything particularly stressful to it.

“What a twat! Worthless pile of shite.”

“I... yeah, I guess.” He smirked at her, and shrugged a little as they walked. “Money brings out the best in people, and then the worst.”

“I wouldnae ken, have none. Jessy though? Her and Natasha, they’re rich.”

“... really?”

“Aye. Jessy works for Xnomina. Nathasa used to. The two of them have a lot of money saved up, wee fortunes. Their bosses are super rich.”

Well, damn. Hell if he made this Jessy woman happy, she could just pay off his debts instead of telling Montoya to fuck off. He kind of preferred the latter option, but anything to get the maggots off his back and let him rebuild his life.

“What have yer dreams been like?” she said.

“... my dreams... you really know about this, don’t you? What’s happening to me.”

“Course. I am following ye, and ye’re following yer nose, literally. I’d be dumb to do that for no reason.”

Yeah, well, his sense of smell wasn’t perfect. It was definitely in overdrive, but every twenty feet he had take a few sniffs of the air, deep, and look around for contextual clues. Certainly didn’t have the nose of a hound dog, but no denying that his sense of smell was far better than it should have been.

“I dream about... hunting things. I dream about biting and tearing into things. Flesh and blood. I dream about the moon.” So poetic. So stupid.

She nodded a few times and kicked at little pebbles on the sidewalk. “I used to dream about the dark. Nightmares. Started when I was young, never went away.”

“Pretty common nightmare.”

“Aye, that’s what I thought. But it kept happening, and happening, and in the dreams the shadows would grab me, tie me up like... like a spider’s web. I’d get dragged into the black, screaming, kicking, ‘n crying.” She hugged herself, hands rubbing her bare arms, and leaned in a little closer to him.

“You don’t seem the type to get those sorts of nightmares. Traumatizing past?”

“Na.”

“Feel extremely guilty about anything you did before the nightmares started?”

“Na.”

“Scared about the place you lived?”

“Na! Loved my home town.”

“Odd.”

“Yeah, and... and the nightmares only got worse. Things changed. I closed in, held folk at a distance. Got scared of going to sleep. Eventually scared of my own room.”

He raised a brow at the girl. Heavy stuff, sort of stuff you tell your best friend or your therapist. Why was she telling him?

“Ye’re likely wondering why I’m telling ye this,” she said.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“I can see ye’re confused about what’s happening to ye, and... well, it won’ t be the same as me, but it’ll be powerful. I thought maybe I could help a wee bit, before Avery finds ye.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned Avery. Who are they?”

“Later! I’ll tell ye later. Or she’ll show up and tell ye herself.” The redhead shrugged and gestured out with her chin. “Where to?”

He stopped, sniffed at the air, and looked around. Moon cut in and out through the clouds drifting by, stars buried in the light of the city. Not much wind. He could still smell them. Why didn’t they take a taxi or something?

He smirked. Old job habit kicking in.

“You said you were experiencing nightmares?” he said. “That have anything to do with... why you’re... I don’t know.”

“Different? Ye can feel it can’t ye.”

“... yeah. I guess I can.” Felt like admitting to a terrible secret, or admitting believing in some childish fantasy. Felt like admitting to crazy shit, and letting it in. But then, he’d already admitted that to himself, considering he was going on this ridiculous journey, risking his new job, and getting himself into who the fuck knows what.

It also felt like idiotic, teenage gossip. He smirked again as he imagined a couple idiot fourteen-year-olds, sitting around an ouija board, half laughing, half trembling in fear as the board spelled out a name. Something he was sure this girl beside him probably did when she was younger. She was ten years his junior at least. This silly, bubbly girl was dragging him through the city streets at night, away from the populated areas, and into the edge of North Side where there were no people out this late. If she pulled out some ridiculous, goth voodoo shit, it wouldn’t have surprised him.

Or it might have, considering the circumstances, considering he was the one picking the direction, following the scent.

They rounded a corner between two buildings. “I—”

Something hard and fast cracked him against the jaw, and sent him down to the asphalt.

“Eric! Don—” A sickening thud of something against flesh, and Fiona fell down beside him onto her side, one hand clutching her face and the other bracing against the road. Her phone slipped out of her pocket and slid across the shadows.

A boot crushed it, hard, repeatedly, until the phone was nothing but bits of plastic and metal.

“Who are you? Why are you following us?” One of the four they’d been following squatted down beside Eric, frown on her face and a black baton in her hand. A police baton too, one of the more modern ones, expandable, so it could be held and concealed.

Funny, he really should have seen this coming. Every instinct he had told him following them was a bad idea, that they were dangerous. And yet he walked right into a baton to the face. Distracted by the cute girl, probably. History repeating itself.

He tried to get up. Mistake. The woman with the baton didn’t hesitate to use it again, and slammed the metal stick against his arm. He rolled with the pain, and groaned as his shoulder made friends with the asphalt.

“I didn’t say get up, I said who are you.”

“Dinnae hurt him! He—” She went silent as she looked at one of the four. Eric managed to glance in the same direction, and his body went numb as he recognized the glint of a pistol in the moonlight. And then, the moon disappeared behind the clouds.

What to say to these people? It wasn't supposed to go down like this, it was supposed to be following at a distance. When they eventually spotted the four, he and Fiona would hide, observe from far away, and then she'd tell him why he was going out of his fucking mind. Too easy. Life never went according to plan. Hell, life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans, right? Fuck you Lennon.

He stayed down this time and looked over toward Fiona. Girl was still down, and had learned from his mistake. No getting up for either of them.

“I'm—”

“Dinnae tell them a thing!” she said.

Wait, what?

“You can't—”

“Nothing!”

Eric blinked. The woman squatting over him with a baton in hand blinked. The other three were blinking if he guessed right. The tiny redhead was looking at a pistol aimed directly at her, and instead of cowering, petrifying, pissing herself, she was frowning and telling him to not give up his name.

Well he had his wallet in his pocket, so it wasn't like they couldn't find out who he was that way. But instead of grabbing his wallet, the three strangers still standing stared at the girl.

“She knows something,” one of them said.

“What's she know?”

“Enough to follow us.”

“That doesn't mean they're blood suckers.”

“What other reason would they have for following us?”

“... this is the guy we've seen at the club a couple times. Bouncer, right?” The woman squatted beside him, a black woman with a scar cutting across her neck. Four scars actually, parallel, and nasty. Claw marks? “Hold still.”

“I—Arg!” She grabbed one of his hands and yanked it backward, behind him, twisting it in just the right way so attempts to free himself of the grip would mean dislocating a joint. If he was standing, he’d have a counter, twisting his body with the motion while reaching out to grab her shoulder and force her to fall, foot hooking her ankle. Not doable when on the ground, when your head is spinning and throbbing.

A clink of metal made him raise a brow. He couldn’t see what the girl was doing as she moved quick, but a second later, searing pain hit his finger. Quick, but painful. Burning.

“The fuck are you doing?” he said.

“He’s clean. No ashes.”

She’d burned his hand. Christ. He tried to get up again, but another swift crack of boots to the stomach made sure that wasn’t happening. Nausea hit him, and then a need to breathe as his lungs refused to work. At least trying to breathe was helping keeping him from vomiting up the rice this woman’s boot had worked back up his guts.

Fiona snarled, but Eric could see the flickering flame grow nearer to her. Another one of the strangers was approaching her, lighter in hand, while the other two strangers held their pistols at the ready. Or at least, one of them was a pistol. The other was a shotgun, and it was pointed at Eric. Shit.

The stranger took Fiona’s hand, prying it to the side so Fiona reached out to try and free herself. The stranger didn’t hesitate, and slammed his other hand forward, fist tight, lighter inside his grip to turn the fist into what might as well have been a brick as it collided with the girl’s face. Cartilage crunching, nose broken, Fiona went down, a streak of blood smearing across the asphalt. The man didn’t let go of her hand, and kept it twisted as he exposed the lighter from his fist again.

Eric got up. A burst of energy, adrenaline, a mountain of stupidity. The woman near him swung the baton, and she swung with zero hesitation or mercy. Metal cracked against his shoulder, but she’d aimed for his head; he’d blocked. Instincts kicked in, fifteen years of punching bags and faces, but also something more, something that wanted him to reach out and rip this person in half.

Ripping her in half was not in his power, much as every fiber in his body was telling him it was. He’d have to settle for punching her in the head; he’d had plenty of practice doing that too. She spun out and went down, rolling with the punch along the asphalt and landing on a knee and foot, facing him, snarl on her face. Hit her hard, and she was already getting back up. No ordinary woman. None of them were ordinary.

The one with the pistol pointed the gun at him, and fired. Shit.

Part of him was sure they wouldn't fire, that this was all a misunderstanding, that they were just crazy punk kids who wouldn't actually fire the gun. Normal people weren't so quick to take a life. Normal people avoided killing. As the gun let out a flash of light and crack of thunder, his mind wandered back to something he once read, about how soldiers in the World Wars often fired to miss, because they didn't want to kill. They had to change how they trained soldiers to break that reflex.

This person also missed. Didn't look like he was aiming to miss though, with cold hard reflex in his eyes; he'd fired because his training taught him to. He'd missed because a bunch of white webbing was grabbing half of his body and pinning him to the wall.

What in the fuck?

"Fuck!" The woman Eric had struck stood up straight, and pulled out a pistol from behind her. A necklace she was wearing started to pulse, a subtle white that had her looking down to stare at the strange, alien shape. "She's one of them! Shoot her! Before—"

She went down, body thrown across the alley and against the wall. Blood splattered over the bricks as something long, black, and blade-like cut across her forearm. She'd blocked it, whatever it was; girl had reflexes better than any fighter Eric had fought. Whatever the black blade shape was, it dispersed like a flickering shadow.

The man beside Fiona had turned to face him, but turned back again to face Fiona, only for the tiny redhead to backhand the man across the chest.

Not Fiona. Something else, something around her, on her, in her, something with a lot of long, sharp... legs? Something that smacked the man to the side, and exploded a white web over half of his torso. More of the weird webbing, and it stuck the man to the wall like some ridiculous seventies Spider-Man comic. Not so ridiculous was how the man's skull cracked against the brick. An easy concussion.

The final woman pointed her shotgun at Fiona. The little redhead was standing now, eyes glaring daggers into the last stranger still standing. Blood was trickling down her nostrils, her face, chin and neck, soaking through the tank top.

She looked fucking terrifying.

Both of her hands came out before the woman could fire, and the monster came out as well. Eight blade-like limbs, nothing but shades of onyx against the night that surrounded them, and four of them struck out against the woman.

But she dodged. How the fuck she dodged, Eric had no idea, but the woman rolled to the side underneath the blades that struck out at her. Before she could roll again, Fiona ran in and slammed out with her human hand, unleashing another web of the white. A mess of aimless stickiness as far as Eric could see, ropes of the material sticking to random things in its path, including the woman and the shotgun in her hands. She half-rolled into a pinned kneeling position on the ground, and tried to raise her shotgun to point it again, but couldn't get it pointed at them with webbing tugging at it.

"Let's go!" Fiona ran over to him, grabbed his hand, and started pulling him into the alleyway. Not out into the street where maybe they could find someone; not likely this far into North Side, but a hell of a better chance than between the old buildings. Apparently he wasn't moving either, and he stumbled forward as the bleeding little girl yanked on his hand harder.

As they vanished into the darkness between the many old buildings, factories and the like, gunfire erupted behind them. They were shooting at them, and Eric winced hard enough to hurt his teeth as a couple bullets slammed against the walls around his head. Holy fuck, they were actually shooting at them.

Wincing turned into gasp as Fiona screamed out and fell down to a knee.

"Fiona!" Shit shit shit shit shit. He reached down to help her up, and as he did, she turned around.

She stuck out both her arms, and swung them through the air, screaming in pain as she did. But as she did, more of that strange, white rope shot out of her hand, and connected wall to wall. A blockade, or spider web, something.

She fell. Shit shit shit shit. Shit! He scooped her up and rounded the corner. He knew North Side well enough to keep moving, and he broke into a run as he clutched the small woman to his body.

He could feel her blood soaking into him, warm, wet. He could feel her heart beating a million times a second, his as well. He could feel his knee grind itself into dust as he ran.

"Phone... need to call... Natasha..."

"Your phone?" he said between gasps. "They crushed it. We need to get you to a hospital!"

"N-No... not... hospital... find... darkness..."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Good god he should have brought his shitty phone.

She reached out to him with one hand, grabbed his collar, and stared at him. Blood soaked her grip, and her other hand clutched at her side. Shot. He was holding a gunshot victim. She was bleeding to death and he had to—



“Darkness,” she said, eyes hardening and glaring into him. “Now!”