

~~Natasha~~

“Is it d-dead?” she asked.

Eric nodded as he dragged the spirit’s body back into the alley. Still in the big wolf body, he wouldn’t be able to talk, but body language was fine.

She didn’t expect him to take a bite out of the tall, gangly thing. But he did. Natasha gulped as Eric ripped and tore at the humanoid in the plague mask, and gulped down a chunk of its flesh. She gulped again when Arturo did the same. She outright squeaked when Matthew, back into his huge wolf form, slipped past her, and tore at the body as well.

“Um... uh... is that edible?” She didn’t understand. It made sense for a wolf spirit to eat prey spirits, but this thing was a weird spirit of human inclination and physical manifestations. Drugs, and drug abuse. A wolf wouldn’t eat that, right?

Well, they weren’t wolves. They were werewolves. Maybe they had stronger stomachs? They were hunters, and that role extended to hunting anything they deemed dangerous to the physical world.

Or maybe they were eating it the same way someone might eat paper with a secrete message written on it, just to destroy it. Ask later, focus now.

After a few bites each, the wolves backed off, and returned to their human forms. Eric wiped his mouth, even though there was nothing there. Art and Matt did no such thing, and laughed when they saw Eric do it.

“That was disgusting,” Art said.

Eric nodded, shrugging. “Yeah, it was. I don’t eat city spirits often. But after my first successful group hunt, kinda seemed like the right thing to do.”

Matt nodded, smiling, but his face scrunched up a second later, obviously unhappy with the taste. “There are other ways to get essence. Eating spirits is... well, some Uratha like David do it a lot.”

David, the strange fellow of the pack. The boys called him an Ithaeur, someone who talked to spirits all the time, whether they wanted to or not.

“Yeah I know. But the best way to learn is by doing, right?” Shrugging, Eric motioned ahead, and the group of them stepped back onto the curving sidewalk of the Hisil’s Devil’s Corner.

“Or b-by asking someone who knows more,” Natasha said. “Avery knows more.”

Eric rolled his eyes and slipped his hands into his blue jeans pockets. A t-shirt and jeans for him and Art and Matthew; the fashion was timeless and immortal. At least Sándor wore a dark button shirt, and dark jeans. Only Natasha wore an ensemble that cost more than a hundred dollars: a proper suit, black. Invictus habits died hard.

“Surprised to hear you say that,” Art said, looking down at her.

“W-What? Why?”

The man squirmed and looked around, but no one else said anything, and he sighed.

“After everything that’s happened, I figured you’d be against Avery in most things.”

Natasha frowned up at Arturo with an urge to yell at him. She didn’t used to get that urge, not over stuff like this.

“Just b-because... she... Just because she t-told you two to... Just... b-b-because she...” Natasha grit her teeth, looked down, and took a deep, useless breath. It was so damn hard to find the words, when every time she remembered what Arturo and Matthew did to her, she got upset. She hated not being able to steel herself like Antoinette told her to, to set emotions aside and be logical about things. But, remembering the sudden understanding that a stake stuck out from her chest, and that Arturo had staked her — and Matthew by accessory, since he left it there — filled her with rage.

It was so much easier in the stories. The boys had apologized to her already, and they’d meant it, and she’d accepted their apologies. And they were now, gladly, trying to fix things. So why couldn’t she let it go?

Because this wasn’t a story. Real life wasn’t nearly so neat and tidy. They’d hurt her. Even if what they did made sense, a little, and might have even been something she’d have done if the situation had been reversed, they’d still hurt her. It’d take time for that to heal.

“Just because,” she said at last, “Avery jumped the gun d-dealing with Maria, doesn’t mean she isn’t smart, and wise. It d-doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a lot of experience, or hasn’t learned a lot of things.”

“Yeah.” Matthew smiled down at her, a fleeting bit of eye contact announcing he recognized her thoughts. And they hurt him. “But, let’s be real. Avery’s a bitch.”

Natasha smiled. Smile turned into a giggle when she noticed the pun, and she rolled her eyes. So did Eric. The boys laughed though, cause they were the type to think puns were hilarious. Horrible people.

Sándor looked like he was about to say something. But, predictably, he didn't, and the group kept walking.

Natasha looked around, and got her brain's cogs turning as she took in the sights of the Shadow Realm. Now that the boys had successfully helped Eric, it was Eric's turn to help them. First thing on the list: check out the new tear Avery's pack found some weeks ago.

"I've been out here," Eric said. "I didn't see anything weird."

"It's a ways out," Matt said. "Edge of the city."

Art nodded, but he didn't look happy about it. "Spirits hang out where they can find the most activity on the other side. If we left the city and went into the desert, we'd find few spirits if we jumped into the Hisil, and few loci to allow us to jump at all. It's humans, and us, mingling with each other and the environment that creates disturbances. Spirits are drawn to those, you know? So it's strange this tear is on the outskirts."

"There are other tears," Sándor said. "Some are on the edges of the city, and some are closer to the center. And some defy easy placement." Like the nightmare chambers.

The werewolves nodded. Sándor nodded.

Natasha nearly tore her hair out. "And n-none of you have t-t-t-talked to each other about them!?" The men all looked at each other, each with one or both eyebrows raised, as if what she was asking didn't make sense. Ugh, men. "W-Why not share what you know with each other? First things first, plotting all known tear locations on a map."

It took them a second, but eventually the four men got it.

"Makes sense," Art said. "We've marked them on a map already."

"As have I," Sándor said. "Mapping the nightmare realm is tricky, but there is an art to it."

"I suppose if we share what we know, we might see something we didn't see before."

Natasha nodded, and pulled out her phone. But of course it didn't work, or at least, not well, screen flickering and whatnot, and the GPS was useless. She put it away, grumbling.

It wasn't like she didn't understand them. And as much as she wanted to blame it on men being typical men, refusing to cooperate and turning everything into a competition even if it killed them, she knew that wasn't fair. Trusting someone else was almost always a bad idea when dealing with things like vampires, werewolves, nightmare monsters, and what have you. Still, it was easy to see why Antoinette got so frustrated.

They continued walking for a while. Spirits avoided them, especially now that they'd made a kill. They whispered to each other, alien creatures Natasha could only barely comprehend visually, and couldn't understand verbally. The First Tongue, according to the boys. Arrogant to think it was the first language ever spoken, but it wasn't like she could challenge it.

As they walked, Matthew and Arturo changed into wolves. Not the big, scary wolves she could have sworn came out of the Neverending Story, but normal wolves. Wolves were still utterly huge beasts, and she didn't have to crouch to pet their backs as they walked. Petting them, their fur, their warmth, she did it automatically without thinking about it. That was good, right? It felt nice, to forget about what they did, the arguments she and Art were getting into lately, and just touch them again.

She smiled down at Matthew, and scratched behind his ears. Big, deep scratches, complete with some fingernails. He struggled to keep walking, wanting to stop and enjoy it, but he compromised by leaning his side into her. She did the same for Arturo, and the huge wolf let his tongue dangle as he panted joy.

They walked like this for a while. It felt good, to be near them again. It felt nice.

Eric and Sándor glanced back at her, said nothing, and continued on. She thought maybe they might judge her, for being nice to Matt and Art, considering what they did, but Eric and Sándor didn't seem to have that in them. Those two would probably get along well, if it weren't for how they first met. Maybe—

Everyone stopped, and looked across the street. Natasha squinted into the darkness of another alley, and sucked in a breath as a slithering motion along the asphalt pulled into the shadow.

"Let's ignore it," Eric said. "We don't need its help."

"It?" she asked.

"Street-Tail King."

Oh. She gulped as she stared at the dark alley, and found her hand drifting to her sword hidden under her suit jacket. Darkness radiated from the alley, to the point it not only failed to conform to where the few lights hit the walls of the buildings around it, but also dripped out onto the sidewalk like oil.

Matt and Art changed back to human form again, and they both stared across the street, ready for a fight.

"We haven't talked to it," Art said, "since it talked to us last time. You were there, Natasha, Eric."

She was there, and she'd been thoroughly disturbed by it. She wasn't a werewolf, or a spirit animal or anything like that, but she could still feel how disturbing a creature Street-Tail King was. Not as powerful as Red Tide and Black Blood, but conniving and scheming. Manipulative, and smart. It'd have made a good Kindred.

"Maybe... m-maybe we should."

The four men looked at her.

"You—" Matt opened his mouth, but silenced himself. Wincing, he looked down before looking to Art for help. Of course, Art could only do the same, wince and squirm. They were bound, and had to do whatever she said.

But she wasn't so stupid she'd ignore their advice.

"I'll do it," Eric said.

Art shook his head. "It'll offer the same deal as last time."

"That's fine."

Natasha shook her head this time. "J-Jessy won't like you... getting involved like that."

"I'm already involved. And Jessy will understand."

No she wouldn't. Jessy was perfectly happy to get herself in deep water, but if Eric did, she would be pissed. Very, very pissed, and Eric knew it. The fact he was willing to face Jessy's rage to, potentially, gain information to help the city, was oddly heroic. And dumb.

"Eric," Matt said, "Street-Tail isn't some minor spirit. It's a count. If you agree to a deal, it'll enforce it."

"The azlu are fucking with Dolareido. Killing people. I want them gone. And if these tears really become the problem Azamel warned us they might... yeah."

"We can—"

"You've been here for two years and we're still finding traces of azlu." Eric walked up to Matt and looked at him, face steady. "You may want to hunt azlu cause of the Gauntlet or some bullshit, I want to hunt azlu because every person who dies in my city is—"

That apparently crossed a line. Matt stood there and took it, but Art put a hand against Eric's chest and shoved him back.

“We care, Eric, ok? We have to have this conversation again? We care, and Avery cares. But we’ve done this longer than you, and we’ve seen what happens when we get in deep with spirits.”

“Eric,” Matt said, “spirits are tricky. It’s not going to play fair, if it can.”

The offered deal from Street-Tail King was that, if it told them why the azlu were here in Dolareido, and why so many were showing up, then they’d have to deal with the mystery, no matter what. If Street-Tail told them some ancient curse was summoning the azlu, and the only way to stop it was a suicidal sacrifice, then Street-Tail would enforce the deal.

So, the way to deal with the situation, was to talk without committing to anything. A vampire would straight up lie, but Tash didn’t think that was a good idea with spirits.

“Let’s t-talk to it,” Tash said, nodding to Eric. “Don’t say you’ll do anything, but we should talk to it. And I w-want to talk to it t-too.”

Sándor watched, half interested, but the boys looked terrified. They chewed on their lips and looked around, as if they could find something lying about that might change Natasha’s mind. It made Natasha’s heart ache, seeing how scared they were over just the possibility Natasha might get hurt.

“Alright,” Eric said, before looking at the boys. “Don’t worry guys, whatever deal I’m making, it’s just between me and Street-Tail.”

The boys didn’t look consoled, but they eventually sighed and nodded, and followed after Natasha and Eric. Sándor followed behind, eyes scanning the sky. The man was a gargoyle. It made sense he’d keep his eyes up and looking at the perches and stuff, if he lived up there, constantly looking around for prey and whatnot. How much exposure did he have to the Hisil? Begotten could get around anywhere as long as they found tunnels, or created their own to places they’d been before. Plus, he was super old. He probably knew more about spirits than he let on, probably even more than the boys, but would rather not say anything.

But he did come with full intent to help them. Maybe he’d say something, eventually.

The approach to Street-Tail King felt considerably scarier without Avery and the whole pack. It was really, really tall, as tall as Matthew when he was in his werewolf form. She tried to pierce the darkness around the spirit with her special Auspex, but it didn’t work. Whatever it was that radiated around the tall spirit, it wasn’t normal darkness, but as they got closer, she could see its silhouette, and its great height.

“No Avery?” it hissed, and it chattered its teeth a few times, sending a disgusting shiver up Natasha’s spine. Rats could be quite cute. Street-Tail King was not.

“No Avery,” Eric said.

“Or Flowing Sanctuary, I see.” The huge rat creature took a step forward, and Natasha froze. Light from the streetlights cut across its body, and she looked it up and down, taking in the strange form. Wererat, but not really. It could have been a wererat, a ten-foot-tall monster, but there was asphalt in its fur growing out of its body, along with bits of metal, some rebar sticking out of its huge shoulders and hunched back, and of course, a long tail that looked like a big strip of road, broken and crumbling.

Worse, were the rats. Bloody brown and black things that didn’t look fully formed, some of them even hovered slightly, and dozens of them scurried up and down Street-Tail King’s body. Like, a mother spider carrying her children on her back, except a giant rat walking on two legs. Nightmare fuel.

“You killed Needle Swords,” the spirit said.

“I did.”

“Who gave you the right?”

Eric growled, a very wolfish growl despite his human form. “I’m Uratha, that’s my right. Needle Swords was yours?”

“It was.”

“Wanna tell me what the fuck you were doing letting that freak affect my side of the Gauntlet so much?” Eric took a step closer to the huge rat, and glared up at him. He took affronts to Dolareido personally, which would forever make Natasha smile. He’d only been alive a bit over thirty years? He acted like he was Antoinette, thinking the city was hers. It was cute.

“We go where there is essence, Uratha. It’s not our fault if the humans make it worse.” The enormous rat shrugged, and licked one of its fangs with a long tongue. “Maybe if you didn’t deny us the physical world, we—”

Art shook his head. “Not happening. You know your place, spirit. Don’t push it.”

The rat smiled, a strange thing to see on a rat face, and tapped a claw against the large front teeth of a rodent.

“That will change soon enough.”

Tash raised a brow, and looked back to the boys. But they also looked confused, and glanced between each other, and even Sándor, before looking back at the spirit. They wanted to ask questions, but they also knew better than to do so, not when every question got them in deeper with the spirit.

“Street-T-T-Tail King,” Natasha said, gulping once as she looked up at the spirit. Beady black eyes caught the streetlights, but there was none of the curiosity she might find in normal rat eyes. This thing was insidious. “We w-w-wanted to... t-talk about the deal you offered Avery.” A shared glance between her and Eric confirmed, he wanted to do this.

The rat cackled. “I knew you would. One of you damn dogs would, eventually. Just can’t help yourselves. Gotta settle affairs, right? Gotta deal with the shartha.”

“Shartha?”

“Hosts,” Matt said. “Azlu, and some others.”

“Right, right,” the rat creature said. “There’s no beshilu here, or razilu or srizaku, but there are azlu. And more come.”

All three werewolves growled. Apparently the spirit said trigger words.

“B-Before we make any deals, we need some assurances.”

“That’s not how deals work, little Kindred. Buyer beware!”

She glared up at the monster. “You’re not a human s-selling stuff! I want to know more about the deal.”

The rat laughed, but didn’t retort this time. Blobby rat spirits crawled down its back and disappeared into the darkness of the alley, but more emerged, hidden in the thick fur of their master.

“I don’t have to answer anything.”

“You will,” Eric said, “if you want anyone to take the deal.”

Natasha nodded. “Yeah, so tell us! Tell us if... if it’s p-possible. If you tell us why the azlu are here, why more are coming, and how to stop—”

“I did not say I knew how to stop them... though I suppose I do, in a way.”

“And it’s p-possible?”

“Yes, it is. At the end of this mystery, you’ll be able to do something.” The rat laughed again. “I know what you ask and why, and I’ll be generous and tell you! Because I want them gone, too. The mystery can be solved. The azlu can be dealt with. And if you are powerful, skilled, and careful, no one need die. But time grows short.”



Eric looked to the others, but all they could do was shrug. It sounded like a good deal then, on the surface. It wouldn't be of course, but if they could make it work, then some information was worth the risk. Eric knew that, and was willing to get in deep with a 'count' to get in.

Jessy was going to be livid.

"Alright Street-Tail King, I'll play," Eric said. "You tell me why the azlu are coming to Dolareido and killing people, and I'll follow that mystery to the end, no matter what."

With a hissing chuckle, Street-Tail King held out a hand. A rat hand, complete with long claws, and a deadly aura even Natasha could sense.

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~~Eric~~

He should have known it wouldn't just be a trade of words. Much as Eric had been spending the past few months getting intimately familiar with the Hisil, he wasn't too familiar with how spirits functioned outside of what they ate. Spirits did deals and trades, to the point it was existential for them. How spirits managed to seal deals between them, he didn't know, but it was probably just as existential for them to satisfy any deal they'd agreed to as much as it was to make them in the first place. Spirits going back on deals probably wasn't a thing, or was damn rare.

An Uratha going back on a deal though, was probably possible, and would have nasty repercussions. But a smart, scheming spirit like Street-Tail King would have a way to make it a safe deal, for it.

Eric reached out for the hand, knowing damn well it'd be a binding contract, like signing a deal with the devil, but before he could touch the strange spirit, Sándor pushed his hand down.

"Hey!" the rat hissed. "Do not interfere, Begotten beast!"

Eric blinked at Sándor a few times, but the man's solid, hard expression stopped him cold.

"The spirit is just desperate to get its claws into you. It knows we're already on the path to dealing with the azlu, and it wants to gain something from it first."

"I know that, but—"

Sándor shook his head. “Don’t play into its games, Eric. Avery was right.”

That was most definitely not something Eric wanted to hear, but something about the way the man said it didn’t stir a reflexive need to fight him on it. With Avery, sure, first word out of her mouth and Eric wanted to tell her to fuck off. But with Sándor, the man dripped of plain, almost boring honesty. It’d be like getting mad at a tutor for correcting his algebra; not that he’d ever had one.

“You really think we’ll find out why the azlu keep coming here?”

“Yes, I think we will. Maybe not from this,” the Begotten gestured to the rat, “but we will. And... I’d prefer to keep Dolareido healthy and alive in the mean time. That includes you.”

Eric blinked at the man, several times. But slowly as they looked at each other, things clicked into place. Something had happened to Sándor, something that attached him to Dolareido in a way Eric hadn’t expected from the relative newcomer. Maybe it was Azamel, maybe not, but the man wasn’t the closed off statue he was back at the ball.

Sándor wanted to keep Dolareido safe, and he considered people like Eric to be Dolareido. And Eric could understand that. Maybe he should think about the nightmare monster the same way? Hard to do, when Eric’s first encounter with the man had been beyond violent. Plus, Sándor had literally entered his mind against his will, his dreams. Hard to ignore that. But he should.

“If you d-don’t think it’s a good idea,” Natasha said, looking up at Sándor, “then... then I think we should listen to him, Eric. He’s older than any of us.”

Older didn’t mean wiser. But, it often did.

“Alright,” Eric said, taking a step back from the spirit. “Alright, let’s do this on our own.”

Sándor nodded. “In the future, don’t be so quick to risk your own life.”

“Yeah I know. I just...”

“Finally found something you wanna fight for?” Art said, smirking. “It’s like a coming of age story... for a dude in his thirties.”

Eric bit back a sudden desire to spit venom at the asshole. But it wasn’t like he was wrong. He was the odd man out in this world, relatively new to all this paranormal shit, and just trying to figure out how, and what, and why.

“Besides,” Art continued, “I think Street-Tail King is going to point us in the right direction anyway.” The fellow Uratha grew a serpentine grin, and a glance Natasha’s way showed she was

looking up at her boyfriend with a similar grin. Apparently Art had come to some sort of sneaky conclusion.

Street-Tail hissed. “Ha! Why would I do that? Stupid Uratha.”

Shaking his head, Art came closer to the spirit. “Because we’re not Avery, and we’re not Flow. We know you have beef with her.”

The rat hissed and took a step back. Not to get away from Arturo; seemed like the rat might be able to take him a straight fight. But instead to get away from the words he was speaking.

“Not with Flow. I know not the river guardian. But Avery, she...” The rat hissed and slammed its tail in the darkness behind it. It was loud, and heavy. “You’re Avery’s pack. I won’t help you. Interloper. Trade, yes. Help? No.”

Street-Tail King had a problem with Avery; probably from when she’d been with Simon. And it probably thought Eric was with Avery, considering how much Eric had already interacted with him and her pack.

“I don’t care about Avery,” Eric said. “I’m not part of her pack. Neither is Natasha.” Might as well include her, since the rat saw her with Avery that one time. “Avery is a pain in our asses, too.”

Street-Tail King snorted, only its beady black eyes visible as they caught the light.

“You bring two of hers I know belong in her choir.”

Natasha raised a quick hand. “They’re w-w-working for me. Bound, by... a debt to me.”

Eric suppressed his grin as he looked down at the little vampire. Smart woman, speaking a language the spirit would understand: economics.

“Does the Kindred speak truly?”

Matt and Art both sighed, and nodded.

“See?” Natasha said with a tiny smile. “I’ve lived in this city my whole life too, j-just like Eric. Avery isn’t out friend. W-We’re not here to do... Uratha things. We’re here because Dolareido is in danger. And... and you care about Dolareido, don’t you? I bet you grew up here, or... or whatever it is spirits d-do, and... and you’re a part of this city.”

Silence. But after a few moments, the rat’s tail shifted over the asphalt of the alley.

“I do not like Avery.”

“Me neither,” Eric said.

“Me neither,” Natasha said.

They looked to Sándor, but the man managed only a tiny shrug before stepping back. They looked to Art and Matt, and both boys groaned and looked away. They might have thought Avery was mean, but they still liked her. And considering they were her pack and had worked with her and under her for a bunch of years, that was understandable. The rest of them, though? Yeah, Avery was a bitch.

“Very well,” the rat said, and it gnashed its teeth a few times. “You do not lie?”

Tash put up her hands. “No lie.”

“Tssh. The word of a Kindred means little. You.” The rat pointed its eyes at Eric. “I can smell the city on you, in your flesh and bones. You’re a part of Dolareido. You swear you are helping Dolareido, and not just serving Avery?”

“I swear. Not that that means much.”

“It means more than it would coming from Avery’s pups.” The rat nodded from the darkness, smile returning and exposing pointed teeth. “I suspect you all know Black Blood is behind the tears.”

Matt, Art, and Natasha winced. Eric and Sándor frowned at each other. None of them wanted Black Blood as an enemy, but if these tears were a problem, then it certainly seemed like it was going in that direction.

“The tears wouldn’t explain the azlu,” Art said. “Not like this, not this... cooperation, and multiple azlu showing up. Powerful spirits tearing holes through the Gauntlet isn’t unusual either, and sure that sometimes attracts azlu attention since they want to strengthen the Gauntlet, but—”

“The azlu,” the rat said, “can sense what’s happening. They’re here, desperate to strengthen the Gauntlet, driven by their stupid instinct with overpowering need, because they can sense what’s coming.”

They all looked between each other again. That sounded ominous. That sounded stupidly over dramatic, and ominous, and the longer Eric spent as an Uratha, the more the stupid, crazy-sounding shit came true. If it sounded insane and ominous, it was probably very real.

“And... that is?” Eric asked.

“Minerva’s legacy.”

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“No wonder Jacob despises her,” Sándor said.

They all nodded, wincing with every step. The situation had just gone from bad to shitty, and Eric and Sándor didn’t really know the details. Natasha filled in what she could.

“It was t-ten years before my time,” she said. “Before my embrace. But, everyone knows about it, about Simon the werewolf. So everyone... d-dances around the subject, about Avery and Jacob.”

“She hasn’t told us everything either,” Art said. “Her pack got wiped out, after Simon left Dolareido. Only she survived. She met Flow when the spirit was just a tiny thing, barely awakened. Flow saved her life.” Sighing, Art sat down on a bench. It was almost comical, seeing the big guy sit on a bench in such a strange place, especially considering the bench was warped and uneven. “We only know a little about Minerva, and even that Avery doesn’t like us talking about much. We normally feign ignorance about it.”

Sándor shook his head. “I think we’re passed that now, don’t you think?” He didn’t sit down, but he took a stand beside the bench, and looked out to the street as they talked. Keeping watch. “If we can trust the spirit...”

“Spirits can lie,” Matt said, sitting with Art, voice hushed. “It’s rare. They prefer to do trades, you know? Everything has to be a trade, and if you’re caught lying, your credibility is shot.”

That made sense. Spirits weren’t humans. They didn’t have internal struggles of consciousness, and were much, much better at understanding other spirits upfront. It’d be like asking wild animals to lie to each other. Sure, animals tricked each other with their natures, but outright lying? Conscious deception with words? No, spirits could usually be trusted, even the manipulative, deceptive ones like Street-Tail King, who’d twist their words into half truths by their nature.

But they could lie, and that was important.

Sighing, Art leaned forward and set his elbows on his knees, heavy. “Natasha, cloak us please.” Heavy words, with zero of his usual flirtatious charm used on her.

Natasha did so, and as she did, an aura radiated from Arturo. It wasn’t the Cloak, something a vampire could do to make people effectively invisible. But it was something, like a prowling animal using brush to be unseen, despite them being in full view. It didn’t extend past himself, but if Arturo wanted to talk about sensitive stuff, it made sense to double down on stealth.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Arturo said. “But I don’t know much. Avery doesn’t tell us much about what Minerva was doing, because it’s dangerous. She’s told Clara a little more, but…” Shaking his head, he put a finger to his lips. “Don’t repeat anything I say about Minerva specifically. I’m saying these words, no one else does, and keep it that way until we’re out of the Hisil, understood?” Everyone nodded, though Eric noticed Sándor’s lack of expression. Arturo’s words didn’t mean much to him, even if he wasn’t the sort to stir the pot.

Arturo nodded. “Simon and his pack killed Minerva because she was looking for a way to tear down the Gauntlet.”

Everyone winced. It was quickly becoming a habit.

“Tear it down?” Natasha said. “I… I know she—”

“Minerva wanted to punch a hole in the Gauntlet, so she could communicate with spirits regularly; everyone familiar with Minerva already knew that. The damage she was going to inflict, on the other hand… We doubt anyone understood just how much she was going to fuck shit up.

“The Ordo Dracul and the Circle of the Crone get into that shit all the time with their experiments and rituals. Minerva worked with both of them. She was friends… lovers, with Jacob, and got her hands dirty in that business. She was good friends with the Prince too, and was a part of Antoinette’s experiments with ephemera.”

“Antoinette experiments with ephemera?” Eric asked.

“Yeah. It was a big contention point between her and Simon. We don’t like vampires experimenting with ephemera because they’re playing with fire. Things like the azlu show up and start killing people. Worse, they sew up the Gauntlet, strengthening it in their mindless pursuit of instinct, to the point they’d kill an area. If the Hisil and Gurihal are completely blocked from each other, the area becomes a wasteland of nothing, devoid of life. There’s a balance to strike, and that’s what Uratha do.”

Matt raised a finger. “Other hosts do different things. Beshilu, rat hosts, gnaw at the Gauntlet and destroy it. Kinda like the tears we’ve been finding. But we’ve found no beshilu.”

“Azlu though, more have come. We’re finding traces of the fucking spiders, and… and we’re not sure why.” Sighing again, Art sank his fingers into his knees as he looked down. “Minerva wanted to reach across the Gauntlet, and eventually tear it down. She thought the separation between the physical and shadow was… bad.” Natasha opened her mouth, but Art put up his hands. “It’s not debatable, Tash. It’d be bad. People would die or suffer, by the billions.”

“B-But… did she want to tear down the Gauntlet everywhere?”

“We don’t know. Probably not. Maybe she only wanted to do it in a small area. But it wasn’t a risk Simon and Avery were willing to make. And... and when Avery found out she wasn’t just researching how to do this, but had figured it out, they stopped her.”

Natasha’s jaw dropped. “She found a way t-to open a portal?”

“No. Portals exists. Doorways. Verges. They open and close, and sure, we hate that they exist, but they’re manageable. They can be stable or unstable, but unstable ones usually just collapse and fade. What Minerva was doing was more like... tearing things apart at the seams. If she succeeded, she’d have created a permanent hole, and it would have damaged the Gauntlet around it. Simon was convinced the seams would keep tearing, and... and it’d spread, like a hole in old clothes, you know?”

Natasha and Sándor might not have felt the horribleness that statement implied, but Matt, Art, and Eric all shivered. Ice ran up Eric’s back, and his breath caught in his throat. It wasn’t a human fear, like a fear of death or pain, of hunger or anything like that. The spirit wolf in him was fucking terrified of the idea of the Gauntlet disappearing, in a way he couldn’t express with words. It was ingrained into him, like instinct. The Gauntlet was existential for Uratha, and as alien an idea as it was, he couldn’t deny it. The fear grabbed him and continued to jolt up and down his spine until it sickened him.

If the Gauntlet disappeared, billions would die, but it’d be worse than that. Spirit and flesh, everywhere. Things like hosts, azlu turning human bodies into giant spider monsters, would be common. Possessed people, possessed objects, spirits would have free reign to indulge physical pleasures until they were satisfied. Existence itself would become chaos.

“... that’s heavy,” Eric said eventually.

Matt and Art smiled at him. They knew how much he’d dumbed down his thoughts to say that.

“I... I can understand Avery n-now, I guess,” Tash said. “D-D... Does Jacob know this?”

“He knows Avery killed Minerva because she was fucking with the Gauntlet. He doesn’t know about the damage Minerva might have caused. He doesn’t know Minerva was on track to screw over everyone and everything. He doesn’t know his lover... had found a way. He doesn’t know, because if he knew it was possible, he might just try and do it.”

Eric gulped. Good god. “You’re sure she figured out a way to do it?”

“Avery thinks so. Simon thought so. Avery won’t tell me about it, but I can only assume it was some ritual.”

Sándor managed a small frown, but it was gone a second later. “So instead of pursuing more information about Jacob, and his accomplice Black Blood, you harassed Maria?” Ok, the man’s face still didn’t frown, but his voice certainly did, and it shocked everyone. Strange to hear anger coming from him.

“We didn’t know these new tears attracting the azlu had anything to do with Minerva,” Art said. “We thought maybe it was just Black Blood or Red Tide, or even Street-Tail overstepping themselves. What we do know, is there are spirits here talking about Maria, and about crossing the barrier. These spirits also hang around some of the tears we’ve found. We also know some of these tears rip more than just a hole from the Hisil to the Gurihal and back. Some go to other realms too, which was never Minerva’s plan, far as we know.”

“Right,” Matt said. “You went through one that went to somewhere else, didn’t you?” The big guy gestured to Eric and Sándor.

The Begotten nodded. “We did. A land of ghosts. I’ve seen it before in my travels, but I avoid it. All living creatures do.”

“And,” Art said, “the one we’re checking out tonight goes somewhere else.” They all opened their mouths, but Art put up his hands. “We don’t know where it goes. We couldn’t get a close look. There were blood wraiths everywhere. We want to get closer, but we’ll need a distraction.”

“You couldn’t do that before?” Sándor asked. “There’s less of us now than there’d be if your entire pack found this before.”

“We were injured. Jack kicked in our teeth. Avery planned to investigate it once we were all healed up, but even then, it’s tricky. The red wraiths are connected to Black Blood, and they might be part of its choir. If we piss them off, we might piss Black Blood off, and we still don’t know what its banes and bans are. Still don’t know how much control of the city Black Blood has.”

“Avery wants us to be careful,” Matt said. “She... she really wants to avoid the same situation Simon created with the vampires.”

“Then explain M-Maria.” Folding her arms across her chest, Natasha glared at both of Avery’s pack members, eyes turning into little daggers. Damn, cold. Ice cold.

The two boys sighed as they looked down.

“Black Blood deals in death,” Art said eventually. “And the dead. Maria lost her lover Lucas. These blood wraiths we know are connected to Black Blood have been caught saying Maria’s name. You heard them yourself, Tash.”



“I—”

“And when we went to investigate Maria’s den, we didn’t go in swinging. We demanded to see what she was up to, and she refused. If she’d just let us—”

“You would have violated her privacy! And—”

“If we didn’t act, and it turned out she was behind all this, the Gauntlet could be gone, Tash! Things would have—”

“B-But you didn’t know, and you made things worse! You c-c-could have—”

Sándor stepped between them, face solid and unmoved. “Later. For now, we’re here to get a peek at this tear. And from what I’m hearing, we have two options. Distract any nearby red wraiths, or dispose of them.”

“I’ve seen these wraiths,” Eric said. “Hovering freaks with giant claws? Obsessed with flesh?” That was weird, even by spirit standards. The only way spirits could awaken with a hunger for that, was if there was a lot of that in the physical world. And sure, Dolareido had its share of blood and flesh, but statistically, it was less violent than other big cities.

Unless Black Blood was involved, and had created the essence gatherings that formed the wraiths. Maybe they were part of its choir.

“We need information,” Eric said. “Recap. According to you, Art, everyone who knew Minerva closely also knew she was trying to punch a hole in the Gauntlet. Like you said, there are portals and verges and gateways through the Gauntlet already, in Dolareido and in other cities I’m sure. But you’re telling us that what Minerva didn’t tell anyone, was that what she was doing was quite literally capable of damaging the Gauntlet in a real way, like, so it might... all come crumbling down?”

Arturo nodded. “Avery told us that she told Minerva about what would happen, toward the end, but Minerva didn’t listen. She either already knew, didn’t believe her, or didn’t care.”

“And Jacob doesn’t know this.”

The boys shook their heads.

“Well, shit.” That’d make any interaction with the deadly-as-fuck elder a pain in the ass. “And you’re also saying only Avery herself knows exactly what Minerva was doing to threaten the Gauntlet, what ritual she was doing.”

“Yeah,” Art said. “But whatever she was doing, it didn’t involve tears, far as we know. Avery would have said something by now.”

Natasha raised a hand. “Or Minerva hadn’t gotten to that p-point yet where she’d need them.”

Eric nodded to the little vampire. “So the only reason we have to think these tears have anything to do with Minerva, is what Street-Tail King, a scheming, dirty, underhanded spirit told us. The spirits we’ve found around these tears are, instead, talking about Maria, and...”

“And finishing a ritual,” Matt said.

“A ritual.” Eric groaned and looked down the road and where it led to the edge of the city. “I can understand why you thought it was Maria.”

Natasha sighed, but slowly nodded. “M-Maybe, back then. But we know more now. A new tear was created while Maria was healing. And Jack has t-told me that he knows for sure Black Blood is connected to these tears. It’s connected to Jacob, but I don’t think it’s connected t-t-to Maria.”

“Which means,” Sándor said, “we have to consider that Black Blood is chasing Minerva’s legacy. Which, I think is safe to say, a bad thing. And it also means anything we do to put a stop to it, is going up against Black Blood.”

“And maybe Jacob,” Art said, “if the vampire is helping it. I... christ, if Jacob’s trying to do what Minerva was doing...”

Black Blood, a spirit so strong it was basically a god, was a deadly threat, but an obvious one. Jacob was sneaky, and the worst enemy they could have asked for.

Natasha hugged herself as she looked down. “If Jacob...” Earlier frustration wiped away, she sat between her two boyfriends on the bench, and leaned into Art’s side. “No w-w-wonder Street-Tail King wanted to make a deal, to force anyone who knows the truth t-to... make sure it gets dealt with, no matter what. Oh, oh god! What about Samantha, and J-Jack! What about—”

Sándor shook his head. “We don’t know anything for sure yet. The word of a spirit is usually good, but Street-Tail King seems to embody a lot of Dolareido’s dirty aspects. Lying could be included. For now, let’s focus on the goal, checking out this new tear.”

He didn’t sound convinced.

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The closer they got to the tear, the fewer spirits they ran into. Most spirits hung out in the more densely populated areas, wherever there was the most human activity on the other side of the Gauntlet. That meant the entertainment district with its high rise apartment buildings and hotels, jammed to the gills with residents and tourists alike. Out here toward the edge of Devil's Corner, there wasn't much activity.

Considering the edge of the city led out to a rocky desert, it was a perfect place for someone to do something they didn't want others to interfere with.

Natasha sighed, eyes still down on the sidewalk as they walked. She was a thinker. Eric was too, he supposed, but not like her, a forward thinker trying to solve problems. It was a good thing she was in charge of this adventure.

"If Jacob is helping Black Blood, I can't imagine he wants to d-destroy everything," she said. "He can't know!"

"That makes things worse," Art said. "If he knows, then our goal is clear: kill Jacob. And the Prince would help with that. If he doesn't know, then it gets more complicated. We'll have to convince him, and he hates our guts."

Natasha sighed louder and hugged herself as they walked. "Poor Samantha."

"If the man is intelligent," Sándor said, "he can be reasoned with."

Eric said nothing. He knew even a smart man can do stupid things, but they all knew that too. No point in saying it. And he was happier keeping his mouth shut.

"What if Jacob's not involved at all?" Matt said. "Black Blood could be doing this on its own. And even then, Black Blood might not know the damage it's going to cause."

Art shuddered. "If this is Black Blood's goal, then... then I don't know what to do. I doubt we could beat it in a fight. Best we could hope is to find its bane, or somehow prevent it from being able to do the ritual, permanently."

"Worthy goals," Sándor said. "But for now, let's focus on making sure this ritual, or whatever it is, doesn't happen. Easier to do that, than fight Black Blood straight on."

Everyone nodded. All this planning and speculating was pointless if they couldn't deal with the immediate issue.

"M-Maybe Street-Tail King knows more?" Natasha asked. "It seems p... p-pretty convinced that these tears are being made to try and do whatever Minerva was doing. How did it find out?"

Arturo shrugged. “It’s a sneaky bastard. If it didn’t want to be found, we wouldn’t be able to find it. You saw Red Tide, and you’ve seen Black Blood. Street-Tail wouldn’t be able to take any of them in a straight fight, but it still manages to fight for power in Dolareido. And it does it by being a really sneaky fucker.”

Eric had seen Red Tide from a distance once. Fighting that would be like fighting a ship-destroying kraken. No thanks.

Natasha looked up at Art. “But?”

“But, sneaky as it is, Red Tide and Black Blood are older, and an order of magnitude stronger. The fact Street-Tail learned what it did is surprising. I’m surprised it knew what little it did.” Art mirrored Natasha, rubbing his arms a few times, like he was cold. “Dolareido is a big place, a huge, dense city, with millions of people. The spirits here are powerful, with massive choirs. I’m sure Street-Tail King has been up to some crazy stuff for decades, so has Red Tide and Black Blood, and a lot of that stuff probably enters the ‘deadly as all fuck’ category. But this... this is a step up. Street-Tail King put its life on the line, telling us anything.”

He was right, of course. The spirits had their own world in the Hisil, with objectives that had nothing to do with the physical world. They fought each other, made deals, alliances, started wars, and did all they could to spread their influence. That was the key, the driving force behind their actions, spreading influence. And for spirits, that meant spreading their very manifestation. Getting to the physical world was a way for them to do that, and experience pleasures only the physical world provided.

Sometimes Eric thought of them as mindless animals, slaves to their instincts. They weren’t.

“We’re almost there,” Matt said. “Let’s get higher. Tash, keep us cloaked as best you can.”

A minute later, they were on the rooftops. No need to climb, there were fire escapes.

Natasha was an impressive little vampire. It was easy to think she was weak because of her size, but a cursory understanding of the paranormal world made that irrelevant. It was her attitude that made it easy to underestimate her, her meekness. But the truth was, the girl was really good. After dealing with a few vampires, some around Natasha’s age, Eric had built an understanding of their capabilities, and Natasha defied them. Her, Jessy, Damien, and of course Jack, all of who were or had been Right Hands. No wonder.

She kept them wrapped in her Cloak, so any spirits that looked their way wouldn’t see them. Arturo did his own thing, blending into the night shadows in a way that had all of them struggling to see

him, even with him right next to them. Eric doubted either would be able to keep Street-Tail, Red Tide, or Black Blood from being able to see them, at least not when close. But from a distance? They should be good. Should be.

The last building at the edge of the city held a convenience store and some shitty apartments above it. The road kept on and on though, asphalt disappearing behind the low hills of the desert. Maybe a quarter mile down the road, there was a gas station. And around the gas station, was a dozen blood wraiths, drifting around, massive claws dangling from long black arms underneath their smoky, dripping torsos of red and black, colors flowing like wet ink. No legs, just black and red smoke.

Above the gas station building, maybe five feet over its flat roof, was a tear. Straight out of a SciFi or something, it genuinely looked like a tear in reality, as if someone or something had dragged a claw along the air and cut through it to something behind it. As if the air was a curtain hiding something, and someone had taken a knife to it. As if... a whole bunch of dumb metaphors that couldn't quite get across what they were looking at.

But it was something they'd seen before, all of them. And just like the one in the hospital, it looked frayed at the edges, like it really had damaged the material around it.

The group crouched at the edge of the building. Natasha squinted like a squirrel, either from trying to see the tear from a distance, or from how she had to focus to keep them all wrapped in her Cloak. Thankfully they'd brought some binoculars, and Eric took a peek.

"It's different than the verges," Matt said. "The other portals in the city, old and closed, you know? Jack came through one of them once, with Fiona and Damien. We checked it out. But it was old and stable. These new ones are... well," he gestured to the tear in the distance, "not stable."

"So those azlu creatures are drawn to them?" Sándor asked. "Because they want to seal the tears?"

"Yeah, but we don't know why so many keep coming. Azlu want to block off the Gauntlet, and would see hole and go to work on it like beavers. But it's really weird for multiple azlu to show up at the same time. Unless they can sense something we don't."

"How did they develop such an instinct?"

"A question for Father Wolf," Art said, body a subtle blur of shadow beside them. "But you'll have to go back in time a ways to talk to him."

"How far?" The Begotten almost sounded serious.

"No idea. Ten thousand years? A million?"

“Quite the range.”

“Yeah well, none of us know for sure what happened to our ancestor, or if he even existed. But Luna holds us responsible. If you wanna know, ask her.”

Eric handed the binoculars to Sándor, sneaking a glance to Art as he did. If Luna didn't talk to them, but talked to him, maybe he could ask? Then again, asking a supposed deity about the death of her supposed mate, was probably a great way to get smote.

“We don't know,” Matt said, “how the hosts learned to do what they do. Might as well ask a normal spider how it learns to spin a web. There's probably an answer, but best we can guess is instinct.”

“The instinct of a monster,” Sándor said. “A terrifying proposition.” After few moments of silence as they all absorbed what the nightmare monster said, Sándor lowered the binoculars, squinted, and looked again. “I... don't know what's through that tear.”

Matthew shrugged. “We don't either. We thought the tears always went between the physical and shadow halves, but then you guys found that tear in your nightmare room... place... thing, the one that went to that place with all the ghosts.”

“I've seen that ghost realm, long ago. I avoided it, but I've seen it. I've seen other realms connected to ours, as well. Dreams, nightmares, the spirits, the dead, but other things too. Odd creatures, and...” Sándor lowered the binoculars, and handed them to Matthew, without ever moving his eyes off the tear. Whatever he saw stunned him. “I don't recognize what I see through that tear.”

“Is that... bad?” Natasha asked.

With a heavy groan, Sándor tore his eyes away from the gas station, and looked each of them in the eyes. “I've seen the bright place, where nightmares cannot go. My horror cannot go where the Dark Mother doesn't allow, but at least it understood what we saw through those woods and into the shining light of the bright place. But I've also seen across chasms between realms into... into things I can't understand. This tear reminds of that, of staring across a... colossal emptiness, into things I can't fathom, or reach.”

Mister stoic was also apparently a poet. And good with ghost stories, because despite his steady tone, everyone stared at him like he was describing their inevitable deaths to some deadly poltergeist.

“Begotten really get to realm hop, don't they?” Matt said.

The Begotten nodded. “If I’ve been there, I can find a way to tunnel back there from my lair. If I’ve found a doorway, I can open it, no matter who has created it. I’ve opened some strange doors in my long life, made by strange entities. I say this so you know I’ve seen a lot of things, and…” He sighed again and gestured back toward the tear. “I don’t know.”

“How much longer till sunrise?” Eric asked.

“An hour,” Natasha said. “I’d prefer more time. Maybe… m-maybe we should retreat? There’s more of those wraiths here than you’d thought there’d be, right?” She gestured to the boys, and they nodded. “We’ve learned a lot tonight. A lot… lot lot lot. I…”

“Have to talk to the Prince.” Art nodded, and pat Natasha on the shoulder. “And we have to talk to Avery.”

Eric raised a hand. “Avery’s going to freak out that you told us about Minerva.”

“Yes,” Sándor said, “and so will the Prince, after a fashion.”

The little vampire nodded, looked down, and frowned. “It’s… it’s such bad t-timing. The Invictus and Carthians are fighting, and it’s only going to get worse, and the P-P-Prince is…”

“Let those vamps do their thing,” Art said, “and we’ll take care of this. We have to take care of this.”

Matthew shook his head. “But if Avery pisses off those wraiths, Black Blood will get involved. We’re still not sure what its bans are. We think it can’t interfere with us if we don’t interfere directly with it, but we don’t know for sure. And we still don’t know what its banes are, either. No idea how to hurt it.”

“Then we’ll have to do this the sneaky way,” Art said, grinning.

Matt returned the grin, nodding. “Sneaky.”

Eric looked between the two men as they nodded to each other, and the glance between them spoke a million words. The two of them were so in sync with each other, it was like looking at one person. In that one glance between them, they shared a million ideas, a million plans and failures, and a million conversations. No wonder they were comfortable in their relationship with Natasha.

“Alright,” Natasha said. “Let’s head back. W-We can make a plan, and get a better look at that tear another night. And see if we can do it without B-B… Black Blood catching us.”

Catching us, and killing us, Eric thought.

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~~Antoinette~~

Within one of the changing rooms of Antoinette's tower, the elder delighted in one of her greatest guilty pleasures: playing dress up with another.

It almost surprised Antoinette, how little effort it required to convince her childe to try on the new dress. She knew better than to call attention to the behavior; the perfect way to make anyone stop a new, desired behavior, was to call attention to it. But still, Antoinette found herself smiling as her childe slipped the fishnet top over her head.

"I feel naked."

"And you look naked. Well, nearly."

Samantha squirmed and wriggled like a worm on a hook, and adjusted the black bikini top underneath the fishnet top. Again. It was a tiny thing, barely enough to cover her nipples, and considering it was latex, it reflected light beautifully. No doubt it would draw wandering eyes, as intended.

"Isn't this Jessy's shirt?"

"Of course not. Though, I have seen the Gangrel wear such clothes before. Brazen and blatant, are they not?"

Samantha frowned as she looked down at herself, at the high hip thong and tiny latex skirt, the fishnet stockings, and the top. "I look like I should be going to a rave, or m-maybe star in an action film where I wear sunglasses all the time. It's like... if I wanted to use my boobs as a weapon, this is how I'd dress them."

Antoinette chuckled. "Ah yes, to empower your décolletage with the ability to kill. Such is the purpose of these clothes."

"I meant more like, how I literally look like a super villain or something."

"Perhaps to you. To me, you look like a young woman from the eighties who spends her nights going to public, dangerous gatherings and hunting for thrills."



Samantha giggled and spun around in front of the tall mirror a few times, trying to catch a glimpse of her reflection. Of course there were more mirrors about, with tri-sections surrounding her to let her see all of herself, and she grinned as she looked herself up and down, front and behind.

“I was never that kinda girl, you know?”

“Oui, but I have a sneaking suspicion you wished you had been. And with Dolareido’s infinite pleasures so close, I am surprised you did not taste them.”

“I met James when I was pretty young. And sure, we did some crazy stuff, but... not crazy by Dolareido standards.”

“I assume that has been changing, with your growing relationship with Jacob?”

After a mischievous grin, Samantha paused in front of the mirror, and looked herself up and down several more times, confidence building in her expression. She also wore several silver bracelets and a necklace to match the black ensemble, along with heels; not the usual necklace she wore, not tonight. The dress was loud, as was all fashion from the eighties, and perfect for their mission for the night.

“I think you’re right. Jacob’s been, uh... still helping me find ways to enjoy myself. Him, and the others.”

Antoinette, standing on the other side of the changing room and before her own array of mirrors, held a long dress of black against her naked body as she peeked over her shoulder at her childe.

“You tempt me to ask of Othello.”

“Oh god, Othello, him and Madison are—”

“Non non, do not tell me, childe. I am delighted that you have awakened to sexual bliss, but some things will lose their allure if you share them openly.”

“But, you always wanted to know everything I was up to? Especially the sexy stuff.”

Nodding, Antoinette let the black dress fall over her head. It was barely more than a few strips of fabric, with an open back and a cross over her breasts, loose strips that only decades of practice allowed her to walk in without exposing herself.

“I did, and do. But you must admit some pleasures are pleasurable because of how taboo they are, non? In the future, many years from now, such things will no longer be dark, dirty little secrets, and you may find yourself chasing the indescribable bliss of indulging such carnal sins, bliss you can only experience when knowing full well the acts are taboo. Chasing, but never again quite able to find.”

Antoinette rejoined her childe and stood behind her, looking the reflection up and down and admiring her choice of fashion. Samantha thought she looked like a villainess or femme fatale, and while Antoinette would not have used such descriptors, it fit, in a strange, naive way. Perhaps in the future, Samantha would feel more comfortably actively dressing to look, as Jessy would no doubt put it, a 'slut in heat', but for now, she would entertain the silly woman's delightful flights of fancy.

"Therefore," she continued, "if you have been indulging, perhaps... some rather indecent acts with Jacob and the Circle, I would say to keep it secret, for now. If, say, you have experienced a rather joyous time with both Othello and Jacob filling your body with theirs," she leaned down until her chin was over her childe's shoulder, so she could look her in the eyes through the mirror's reflection, "I would advise to keep it to yourself, for now. If you have ever found yourself with both of them inside you, together, while perhaps that infuriating Jennifer and intriguing Beatrice touched you, an act of pure obscene indecency, I would advise you to keep it to yourself... for now."

Every word had Samantha squirming and looking away, embarrassed as Antoinette described acts the woman had obviously already indulged in, or was on the precipice of doing so. And now, thanks to Antoinette's words, sealing the acts as taboo in her childe's mind, Samantha would enjoy them a thousand times more.

Oh, to feel that rush again, the joys of discovering a new kink, a new way to explore and embrace eroticism, when such things were discouraged. Blurry memories danced through her mind, teasing her with her inability to solidify them, but her memories were not so lost she could not recall sensations, and emotions.

"I do suggest you keep a journal," Antoinette said. "Avoid mentioning anything that could break the Masquerade if discovered, and I would also suggest using pen and paper. Your memories can be archived safely, and in several hundred years, when deep torpors have rendered these memories hazy mirages, you can read your own words from a time long forgotten. It is a... powerful experience."

"I should do that! That makes sense." Nodding, her childe spun in front of the mirror a couple more times, smile ever growing.

"You like Jacob. You wish to spend time with him. You wish to see him smile."

Blinking, confused, Samantha looked up at her through the mirror. "Well, yeah. I mean, we're dating."

Antoinette could not help but laugh at the silly girl's obliviousness. She was too charming for her own good.

“What I meant, young childe, is that you actively seek ways to make him happy.”

“Isn’t that what dating is?”

“In a sense. Dating often comes from a place of selfishness; a reasonable act, when you have yet to form a deep bond with the other. Only when two have been in a relationship for a time, and have developed love for the other, do you truly find joy in putting the other before yourself.” She leaned down over Samantha, and gently probed her temple. “Before yourself, not instead of yourself. Remember that.”

“O-Okay.” Samantha looked back into the mirror, nodding. The advice had sunk in, to some degree at least, and that was enough for now. “But, I know lots of people who’ve gone out of their way to put their partner before themselves, even when it’s a young relationship.” Perhaps not.

“Yes, but there is a difference between the wistful joys of a new relationship and all its novelty leading to powerful gestures — often done from a place of selfishness, not selflessness — versus a genuine, deep desire, to see your other thrive. You were married for many years, and happily, oui?”

“Yes. James and I loved each other, and often did things for each other.” No hesitation from her childe to speak of her dead husband. Naive and fragile in some ways Samantha may be, but sturdy and strong in others as well.

“I only bring attention to this topic, because there are some individuals that are inherently self sacrificing. Such individuals can display the behavior of one deeply in love, and yet, they are simply lacking in self confidence and self worth, and cannot imagine doing something for themselves. Such individuals do things for others and only others, and it can, and does, lead to terribly self destructive patterns.”

“You think... I’m one of those women who don’t know how to consider themselves first?”

“I think you can be. I wanted to draw attention to it, that is all. And I apologize if I you were consciously aware of it as you pursued your relationship with Jacob. I am not there to monitor your interactions with the man, but as I said, you seem to enjoy his company, to the degree that I thought, perhaps, quite powerful.”

“Oh, I get what you’re getting at. I...” Samantha sighed as she looked herself up and down a few more times. “It’s a little early to think I might love him. I know I’m the sort to get, uh, swept off my feet easily, but I’m not a child, sire.” Even as she said it, she grinned at her reflection. Not a child, but she was well aware her emotional attitude when romance was involved, was quite powerful and

juvenile, and fun. The sort of woman who genuinely found themselves caught in the drama of soap operas.

“Agreed.”

“But, he is great. And it’s not just all the sex.” She managed to say sex without squirming. Oh how her little childe was growing up. “I’m afraid to push too hard though.”

“Oh?”

“About his past, and about who he is. He talks about some of the things he’s done, interesting stuff you know? Exploring the world, and even some of the witchy stuff he’s delved into. But he doesn’t talk about the personal stuff, like Minerva. At least, he doesn’t tell me everything, like where the... emotional scars are.”

“It may take years for him to do so, but if your relationship continues to grow, I am confident he will.” For all Jacob’s troubled past, the man was not so broken that the touch of a good woman could not soothe his soul, at least a little. “Now, let us be off. I hope to make great progress tonight.”

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All eyes fell on Antoinette the moment they entered Bloodlust. A few seconds later, onlooking eyes fell to Samantha, and soon after, Ashley and Julee. All four women were dressed to kill, inviting the gazes of the men and women in the club. It would make this teaching moment easier.

Soon, the four of them were upstairs. Ashley and Julee stood behind the booth, doting and ready, while Samantha and Antoinette sat within.

“How has your skill with Majesty progressed?”

“B-Badly. It’s easy to find a meal with the witches, so I’m getting lazy. Othello’s always sharing Madison, and Jacob has thralls and ghouls, and... yeah.”

“As expected.” Antoinette rolled her eyes, and put a hand on Samantha’s where it rested on the booth table between them. “We will—”

“Where is everyone?” Slowly, Samantha leaned over the edge of the booth seat, before sitting upright with a start. “Sorry, sire! I just... I see plenty of kine, but aren’t there usually at least some Kindred here? And I don’t see any of the thralls or ghouls I usually do.”

There was no avoiding it. Samantha was a Kindred of Dolareido, and while she was no Invictus or Carthian, the war affected the city and everyone in it. To Antoinette's chagrin.

"This growing war affects many things. It simmers, for the moment, but soon I expect it will boil. All the Invictus and Carthians are preparing for that war."

Sighing, her childe nodded as she scooted back into the booth, and then closer again until she was almost touching Antoinette's side. The poor creature was afraid, perhaps for herself, but a single glance to her eyes screamed who she was truly afraid for.

She would forever be a mother.

"You... can't stop the war?"

"That is a complicated question, Samantha."

"I know, but you're the Prince. You're super strong, and so's the sheriff."

"I am strong, young Kindred, as is my old friend Daniel. But we are not invincible. Plenty of Kindred my age have been defeated by hubris, and by ignoring the reality around them." After a heavy nod, Antoinette leaned over the table, setting her elbows upon it and netting her fingers together. "Here we sit, in a club, or perhaps a night lounge depending on your perspective, and we are able to do so because I am quite hands-off with the covenants in my city."

"But..." Her childe looked down at her own hands, set them on the table near Antoinette's, and twiddled them. "People might die. You don't want to stop that?"

"In other cities, there are often no-kill rules in place for Kindred. I have strongly discouraged killing, but have not outlawed it, largely because psychology and history have made it painfully clear that laws against behavior do not prevent that behavior, not without great consequence. And in many cases, encourage the behavior. In other cities where the covenants rule with iron fists, the other covenants battle against them, and kill kine in secret. They wage war constantly, but unofficially."

"But... but because of how you do things here in Dolareido, it's relatively peaceful."

"Relatively. But despite my centuries of efforts, these infernal, infantile covenants cannot ever truly harmonize. With Viktor and Tony gone, it has been better, but the damage between Michael and Garry is severe. They have both killed Kindred, and hidden the evidence well."

"Killed?" Samantha gasped as she looked up at her.

"Indeed." Antoinette pat her childe's hand once again. "If I decided to embrace ruling this city as many other covenants do, you and I would not be sitting here in a club, without worry of assassination."

At best, we would be looking over our shoulders every moment, anticipating it. At worst, sections of the city would be under constant guard, with no-trespassing laws in place.”

“But, what if... I don’t know, you dealt with the Invictus and Carthians yourself? Maybe the city’s Kindred, or at least Michael and Garry, aren’t... redeemable?”

“There are many who would say the same of Jacob.”

Silence. Samantha stared at her, confused and shocked, but as understanding dawned, her eyes grew heavy and looked to the table and her fingers once more.

“He’s got a dark history, doesn’t he? Things he... he hasn’t told me, but he’s hinted about them.”

“He does, my childe, but he is my friend for a reason. Be careful with him, but... but trust that Jacob is not Viktor, or Tony or Lucas.” A sly grin teased across Antoinette’s lips, but she crushed it immediately. “Ask him sometime, about his wishes for the city. I think you will find the old fossil’s plans to be both drastically different than my own, and yet, contain his own strange, twisted wisdom.”

“I’m afraid to do that.”

“You are dating an elder, Samantha. Be prepared to wade through darkness.”

Her childe slowly smiled, strength coming to her. “I’ve waded through a lot of darkness lately. I... guess I can handle a little more.”

Jacob’s darkness certainly was not ‘little’, but Antoinette returned the smile and nodded. Defying all odds, Jack had managed to deal with the nigh infinite troubles and pains that fell upon him. Perhaps Samantha could do the same.

Or Antoinette’s hopes for Jacob would be in vain.

“Now, returning to the covenants. I will not stop this war as long as they do not break the Masquerade, because not only would it not be as easy you as believe, but also because there is more to this conflict than meets the eye. For now, understand that you should avoid speaking with either group until this war is over. As long as you do not interfere, they will not touch you. As long as I do not interfere, they will not touch you.”

“M-Me? I... I guess I am your childe. I’m a target.”

Antoinette grinned at her childe, and winked. “Not a good one, not if whoever threatens you wishes to live. Unfortunately, Kindred are crafty, and it is better to be cautious than arrogant.” Samantha looked up to her, wanting more information. Feeling charitable, Antoinette gave her a little

more truth, to sate her hunger. “Garry and Michael are not the men people think they are. There is, perhaps, a little hope that things will turn out better than my colleagues believe.”

“And Jack...”

“Thankfully, Jack is not the focus of this issue. Unfortunately, he is a valuable tool in Michael’s control. But I am confident Jack will discover a way to deal with this war with minimal deaths.”

“Minimal. Ugh.”

“Now, for the matter at hand. You are here to practice your skills, my childe. Once you can seduce men and women in this environment easily, we can move up to more difficult tasks.”

“Like?”

“Such as seducing a room filled with lawyers, for example.”

She cringed. “Lawyers? Bleh! Why not doctors?”

“Come now Samantha, doctors? Medical doctors? Sweet childe, they are walking, talking medical encyclopedias, without a single critical thought in their minds.” Antoinette laughed as she slipped an arm behind Samantha’s shoulders and gave her a gentle hug as she smiled warmly down at her.

“Lawyers think. They look for logic patterns and logic holes for a living. They—I digress. Tonight, you shall seduce a couple.”

“Couple?”

“A couple. Go downstairs, catch the eye of two, and enthrall them. You will use Majesty, of course. You will Awe them.”

Samantha immediately began squirming, obviously still terrified with the idea of being front and center of such sexual attention. Surprising, considering the woman had no doubt become exactly that among her witch friends.

“We uh... we’re not going to sleep with them, right?”

“If you wanted to, and Jacob did not mind, I would say to indulge as you desired. Jack and I prefer to keep our physical relationship between us, and when we are feeling playful, we ask our close friends, and our thralls and ghouls to join us.” Speaking of Jack in such a manner almost earned a groan from her childe, but Samantha recovered quickly. “And I am under the impression you and Jacob are in a similar arrangement, though instead of close friends and thralls, you have the Circle.”

More squirming. “Kinda.”

“Then do not sleep with your prey tonight. Feed, and send them both into the sleepy bliss of the Kiss.”

“Um, if I get two kine up here, will you feed with me?”

“No. As you know, we Daeva prefer to feed on the same individuals. If you ever find someone to feed on regularly, given time, the thought of feeding on another will disgust you.” Antoinette nodded back toward her two ghouls, who remained attentive behind the booth, and they both smiled at Antoinette in return.

“Right, right.”

“Majesty, young childe, is about power. Other Kindred blood clans may think of it as nothing more than seduction, but seduction too, is a battle of power. It is not as direct as Dominate or Nightmare, but a battle nonetheless. You will not clash with the minds of those you enthrall directly, but indirectly.”

Samantha nodded. “I have to draw their attention, but not make it a straight on fight. So, like... teasing a cat with a toy on a string. I have to get the cat to chase, even if the cat doesn’t want to.”

“An apt analogy. With Majesty, you can have anyone chasing you, desperate to satisfy you, to please you, and eventually, to serve you. Once you have had centuries to master it, you will have the power to enslave entire rooms. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of people, rendered hopelessly addicted to you.”

“Addicted. It... it sounds dangerous, like it could backfire, you know? Obsessed fans can do some horrible things.”

“It very well could, my childe. But you are no simple kine musician. You are Kindred, and far stronger than the kine you feed on. You are the predator, and they are the prey. Remember that. Now, off with you. Approach the two kine you wish to enthrall for the night, reach into yourself, summon the vitae within, and call to them. They are cats, and you are their owner who wields the toy.”

Nodding, and taking a deep, useless breath, Samantha slid out of the booth, and walked downstairs. And without so much as a glance back, either. My my, how the young vampire had grown.

Antoinette smiled after her childe, but once she was gone, leaned back into her booth. Tempted, quite tempted, to message Jack and inquire about his current circumstances, but the two of them had decided to not ask about each other’s business. Jack had asked her about the Ordo in the past, but after she had explained that her secrets could not be shared, even with him, those questions ceased. He



respected her and her position. And it was not long before they agreed it would lead to misfortune if Jack told her of Invictus business.

But she was the Prince, and had long earned some leeway. She texted him, a simple message.

~Are you alright, my love?~

Two minutes later, a response.

~Yeah. I think I'm gonna have to talk to Maria though. Not looking forward to that.~

How quickly the boy flirted with the rules. Do not discuss matters of the covenants.

~I do advise against that. Maria knows what you did, Jack.~

~It's the only way I'm going to learn about Michael and Garry. If I'm going to put an end to this, I need to learn. And I get the impression if I asked either Michael or Garry directly, it'd end in one of us killing the other.~

Antoinette sighed down at the phone before pressing it to her sternum. What to say, what to say? The boy wanted to learn about Michael and Garry's past, and that she could understand. But even she did not know the full depths of those two, and what had driven them to hate each other so. It was something personal, she understood that, but she had never uncovered their secrets. And even if she had, she would hesitate to share it with Jack.

Perhaps Michael had divulged his secrets to Maria? Or, considering her proximity to the man for so long, she had uncovered his secrets herself. With the woman's intelligence and tenacity, and Michael's stubbornness, Antoinette would bet on the latter.

~Be careful, my love.~

~I will, my love.~

She smiled. Jack never used poetic language. For him to indulge in flowing words was a rare treat.

Before she could slip the phone back into her purse, it buzzed once again. A message from Natasha, but not a normal text message. The little Mekhet used their secure channel in their custom software. Most dragons did not trust technology, and they were right to do so, but Antoinette had spent millions in secure software. It could be trusted. Mostly.

~Prince, I've learned something very important.~

~Oh? If it is of true importance, you may wish to tell me in person.~

Samantha returned, and Antoinette smiled at her young childe as she approached, a man and woman behind her. Two young kine, in their twenties, and both obviously quite drunk. But also, quite enamored with Samantha, nearly drooling as they followed after her, eyes wide with wonder. To them, Samantha had become the center of their world. Except, perhaps not. Another glance at their eyes showed that yes, they were quite enthralled in her Majesty, but not to the level of devoted servant.

Samantha would need decades of practice and growing power to reach such levels of Majesty. But still, considering the woman was not even a year embraced, this was good progress.

“Antoinette,” she said, knowing to not use the Prince’s title in front of kine. “This is Doug and Maggie.”

“Doug, Maggie.” Antoinette offered the two of them a playful nod. Naturally, both kine looked at her, her great height, white hair, and enormous bust, and even a fool could see the arousal spike through them. But it was Samantha that had them on a leash, and soon they turned their gazes back to the young vampire.

Another buzz from Antoinette’s phone.

~Yes, we definitely need to talk in person. But I need to tell you something right now. Jacob... might be a problem. A big problem.~

A big problem. Natasha wanted to say enemy, but her timid nature, and the risk of the software being monitored, had her avoiding the word.

Antoinette kept her face stone cold, but only by suppressing a powerful urge to wince, as she looked over to childe, who beamed with pride over her successful hunt. Oh no.