

~~Eric~~

He walked over to the wall of gold, and tore at it with his claws. His claws left a scratch, but nothing more. He tried again, snarling, growling, and eventually roaring with each swing of his claws against the wall. The gate Matthew destroyed to get them into the casino, was apparently nothing compared to the strength of the walls they'd need to break through to get out.

“Quite the m-metaphor,” Natasha said. “You can get in, b-but you can't get out.”

He snapped her a harsh glare and a quick growl, which earned a growl in return from Arturo. They squared off against each other, baring their teeth and leaning in close enough to pose a threat. One wrong move and they'd rip the other's throat out.

“Stop,” Brianna said, and she snapped a bark at the both of them. “We—”

“You sent us in here,” Matthew said, throwing his own snarl at Brianna.

“There is tunnel! Connects to other casino!”

“Below us!”

Eric stamped his foot hard, and his talons dug at the crimson carpet as he glared at the others.

“Now we're trapped! What can—”

A gunshot forced the four werewolves to spin and face the source of the noise. Little Natasha, gun pointed up and away, glaring at them.

“Enough! W-We don't have t-time for this! This casino connects to the neighbor casino, yes. But now Red T-Tide is guarding the exit, and the connecting path. We have to get back down there, and past Red Tide. How!?”

The four werewolves stared at her, each of them breathing heavy. They knew they were riding the coattails of Kuruth, and each moment they stayed in their war forms, the more likely they'd freak out, rage, and kill anything that was alive, including each other. Natasha knew it, too, from the look on her face, and she glared at each of them like a teacher royally pissed with her students.

Slowly, the four of them nodded, each of them taking deep breaths as they forced their hearts to calm. Breathe, Luna had told him. Breathe.

“Can we fight it?” she asked.

Arturo shook his head. “Maybe with whole pack. Maybe.”

That was a big maybe. As strong as Uratha were, and built from the ground up to deal with threats like spirits, they couldn't fight spirits strong enough to control entire cities, not without exploiting its bans or using its banes. If they fought it without them, it'd take Avery's whole pack, Flowing Sanctuary, and Eric, and a lot of luck to bring down something that big. Which made their situation really fucking problematic.

Eric looked down over the railing, and rumbled in his throat. One of the huge spirit's red tentacles reached up, all the way up, and its tip brushed against the floor near Eric's talons. He suppressed the urge to slash it open. No point, yet.

Tash came up beside him, careful of the tendril, and peeked down over the railing. "Can we d-distract it?"

"Easily," Arturo said. "Red Tide is angry. Stupid. Always hungry for blood."

"Like a vampire?" the little vampire asked. "Oh. You m-mean, it always wants to fight."

"Yes."

"So we b-bait it with a promise of a fight?"

"Perhaps," Flow said. "Black Blood is forcing it to attack us, so there is uncertainty."

As if someone tied an anchor to Natasha's neck and threw it over the railing, her head slumped and her body tightened. Eric knew what she was going to say before she said it.

"We have to get out of here, and b-back to the physical world, to tell people what's happening. If we can't kill Red Tide, then someone will have to d-distract it." She pulled her head up against the weight, and looked to Arturo.

Arturo nodded, leaned in, gave Natasha a lick on her cheek, and before she could say anything more, he jumped over the railing.

Everyone stared down over the edge of the balcony as Arturo landed on the floor below them, the third floor, and sliced at the huge red tendril still reaching up for the rest of them. Red Tide let out a bellowing roar, as if a whale had decided to bring down the walls of Jerusalem with only its voice. Everyone covered their ears except Flow, as the vibration ripped through the whole building and churned the blood lake until it boiled.

Arturo leaned over the railing long enough for Red Tide to realize who'd hurt it, before ducking away as a dozen enormous tendrils lashed out for him. The railing of gold and glass shattered, and the entire floor bent under the weight of the spirit as it pulled some of its kraken mass up out of the blood

lake. The squid, octopus, monstrous entity, was deeper than the depth of the lake itself. Only maybe eight feet of blood waited below, but something far, far bigger come up and out of it, showing its giant, circular mouth, hundreds of its teeth, and two of its dark, squid-like eyes.

“I know you, Uratha,” it said. “How. Dare. You. Come out and die.”

However strong Red Tide was, it couldn't lift its own mass, not completely. But it wouldn't need to. With some of its tendrils pulling on the second floor and already pulling the entire balcony down, cracking and breaking the gold until it slanted down toward the bottom, once it got a good grip on the third floor balcony, the same thing would happen.

But it was distracted.

Tash reached out, and tapped each of her friends on the arm. The wolf in Eric told him she'd just used a Discipline, something invisible, something that warped and twisted air and light and perception, and told everyone and everything watching that there was nothing there to see. It was like a smell, something his human nose would never find. And hopefully since it wrapped him, Brianna, Tash, and Matthew, it'd hide them from Red Tide well enough they could slip past it.

“Go,” she said.

Eric and Flow went first. There was no time to climb down the individual floors, so they did the only reasonable thing: they jumped to the bottom floor. Some of the larger machines poked up from the red waves, and with everything made of solid gold, they were strong enough to withstand his weight. Flow had a harder time, but it managed to come down as a solid, thick stream of water, spinning like a compressed tornado. If Red Tide noticed, Arturo quickly rectified that. They didn't have a chance to look back and check, but the noises Red Tide made were deafening.

Brianna and Matthew came next, both landing on the fountain bowl held up by the now drowned gold men. Only the bowl remained visible.

Eric breathed deep the smell of blood. The Hisil realm was all ephemera, nothing was made of flesh or metal, but the spirits and the realm itself did their best to emulate reality. They failed in a lot of ways, but Red Tide captured the smell of blood almost perfectly, and Eric had to force down the rising urge in his guts that told him to rip and tear. It only grew worse as he watched the colossal monster smash tendrils against the floor Arturo jumped around on.

Arturo would be fine. He was fast, and all Irraka were sneaky. Once the coast was clear, he'd run, and live to hunt another day. The rest of them, on the other hand, were dead if Red Tide turned around.

Tash jumped down last, and Flow softened her impact with an arm of water. The little vampire landed, wetter now, but otherwise without a sound, and the five of them scanned the area for a path. The flood of blood wasn't uniform. Certain areas were higher, especially all the areas around Red Tide itself, like when Flow managed its body when moving over floors and ground. There were patches of floor visible with no blood, but too far to reach. And whatever tunnel door existed between the two casinos, it was probably nearby, and buried in red. The casino exit they'd come in from was their only option.

Eric pointed to another gambling machine, some exaggerated, ridiculous gold box. They all nodded, and everyone took turns jumping to the machine. Flow first, again turning into a spiraling tornado of water that bounced on the machine, and shot off into the distance closer to the exit, where no blood waited. They all looked Red Tide's way, but it didn't notice. Natasha next, following Flow's example. Then Brianna, and Eric. It was a hard jump, and Eric didn't like how the huge gold box teetered slightly when he jumped off it.

Finally came Matthew. When the huge werewolf landed on the gold machine, it teetered over, and crashed into the lake of blood. They'd managed to put a decent distance between themselves and the kraken, so the blood around the machine was only a foot deep. But it was more than enough to launch a huge wave of blood in all directions as the giant gold machine crashed into it.

Red Tide ceased its constant roaring, and spun around, sending glass shards everywhere as its dozen tendrils ripped the railings of the third floor aside before they slammed into the blood with the creature. It glared at them with one of its giant eyes, and again slammed its tendrils, causing waves of crimson to spike up around it.

“Uratha should die. Meddlers. Forsaken.”

That word. Forsaken. It shot fire up Eric's veins, and he took a step toward the creature. But a small hand on his elbow stopped him.

“Let's go!” the little vampire said.

He growled as he turned, and the group ran for the exit, now a giant hole from when Red Tide had smashed through it to get in. But they already knew what would happen. A wave of red crashed against them, hard, and threw them all into the chaos of crimson rapids. Flow let out an inhuman shriek before Red Tide's body overtook it, and its blue waters disappeared beneath the waves.

“Flow!” Matthew said, and jumped back to his feet. Eric managed to stay on his feet long enough to look to the goliath werewolf, but the waves flipped Eric over a second later. Matthew, on the other

hand, had enough weight that he rushed through the waves fast enough to reach them, and intercept a giant, red log.

Not a log. One of the kraken's tendrils came slamming down from above, but Matthew stood in its way, and caught the oncoming behemoth limb before it hit the back of Natasha. The little vampire spun around long enough to realize it, and stared. Matthew had managed to stay standing. The titan slashed his arms to the side, and his claws ripped through the tendril, sending a splatter of blood the same color as the crimson that surrounded them into the drink.

But another tendril came sideways, crashed into Matthew's side, and smashed him into the ticket booth. More glass shattered, and rained down on them and the blood like sand.

"Kill," Red Tide said. "Kill Uratha. I can. Permission. Kill."

Eric found something to get his claws on, one of the giant oversized slot machines, buried in six feet of crimson. He pulled himself up over the surface of the rapids, only to find one of the tendrils pushing under the crimson, creating an enormous wave as it smashed through the slot machines and sent them flying. Eric climbed on top of his machine, and launched himself upward as the tendril swept the machines aside. He landed on the second floor balcony, but it was uneven flooring, damaged and ripped into chunks from when Red Tide was trying to catch Arturo. He had to climb, and before he could find a good foothold, another tendril smashed against the second floor, directly beside him.

The floor shattered. The world turned upside down as he fell down into the crimson water, and went under.

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~~Natasha~~

"Matthew!"

Her words were cut short. Crimson buried her, and she closed her eyes as the heavy liquid smashed her back against the gold gate Matthew tore threw earlier, now pushed even further aside by Red Tide's earlier entrance. She was light enough she held onto the gate, and when the waves passed by, she climbed up the metal until she was near the ceiling of the first floor, blood churning around her legs.

Matthew. Where was Matthew? The wolf stood there, glaring at Red Tide, somehow having blocked the absurd attack, but Red Tide's next attack sent the werewolf flying, and poor Matthew's huge body smashed into several of the slot machines hard enough they bent. Glowing coins spewed out of the machine and into the red liquid, and Matthew groaned as he eventually managed to stand up from the red lake. His left arm was backward.

Natasha pulled out her pistol, and shot every bullet in the magazine as fast as she could, straight at Red Tide's face. Whether the ephemera blood of the spirit's body didn't technically wet the pistol, or she got lucky, she didn't know, but the pistol worked fine. Unfortunately it was just a 9mm, and the bullets couldn't penetrate the monster's hide. They hurt it, enough it pointed one of its eyes at her, and charged.

It was like watching a tsunami of blood, coming straight at her.

Before Red Tide could smash her into the gate and through it, turning her into spaghetti cinders, Arturo leapt down from the third floor balcony, and landed on Red Tide's body. The creature bellowed and twisted, turning around with surprising speed, tendrils slapping the red lake even as they smashed pillars and gold machines hard enough to shatter them. The floors above collapsed, and fell into the lake around Red Tide, and all the while Art ripped and tore at its body. Tash's bullets couldn't penetrate it, but werewolf claws could.

Brianna erupted from the blood, next to Natasha.

“Brianna! We n-need to—”

The werewolf let out her own challenging roar, and charged Red Tide. Oh no.

“Matthew! We—”

The huge werewolf's limbs snapped into place, and once he could stand up again, Matthew followed Brianna's example. Oh no no no.

Another werewolf came up from under the blood. Eric! Before she could even call his name, the werewolf ran at Red Tide as best he could, red liquid parting against his waist. Every single wolf roared, like a chorus, and the three werewolves in the crimson jumped at Red Tide. Matthew managed to jump over one of the tendrils, but Eric and Brianna were thrown aside harder than if a bus had hit them going fifty.

Okay, everything was going from bad to worse. The werewolves were going berserk, and without them, she wasn't getting out of the shadow realm; wasn't like she was going to leave her boyfriends behind anyway. Where was Flow?

“Flow! Flow!” She jumped down in the red water. With Red Tide distracted, it only reached her knees, most of its mass pulled toward the center of the huge casino, in the empty space between all the balconies above. “Flow! Come on, I n-need you.”

A patch of water floated in the crimson, close to the torn open gate. Like oil on water.

“Flow!” Triss managed to get to it, and she reached down for it, but her fingers passed through it, unable to grab it. “Flowing Sanctuary!”

Some weird groaning noises came out of the water, and two glowing white eyes appeared. But that was all. No body, no giant mist arms or mystical wings, or any of the swirling tornado water Flow normally used as a body. Still alive, but couldn’t form. Did it need time? Did it need Red Tide to leave, so it wasn’t surrounded by its blood body again?

“What do I do what do I do.” She pulled out her sword and clutched it tight as she looked back at Red Tide. Arturo wasn’t on its head any longer, now wrapped in one of its tendrils. But Red Tide’s grip didn’t last long, as Brianna came up from the blood underneath the tendril and got her teeth into the limb. Blood squirted out of the red leathery tentacle, and it only got bloodier as Brianna got her claws into it and tore through it.

Red Tide didn’t expect that. It didn’t expect Uratha to give it so much trouble, judging from how it slammed its tendrils, like an upset toddler. It shrieked and roared, like some sort of angry whale, again loud enough that the blood lake churned and vibrated. It swung the tendril as it let go of Art, and the werewolf crashed into the sloped floor of the broken, collapsing second floor balcony. A second later, he was up, and jumping down at the kraken yet again.

Red Tide saw it coming this time, and slapped Arturo out of the air, sending him soaring until he landed near Natasha. She covered her eyes with her forearm as the wave of crimson hit her and knocked her on her ass. When she lowered it, Arturo was half standing, half leaning against a wall, arm broken, and one of his legs too.

“Art! Stop!”

Arturo glared at her, and she froze. She recognized that look. Matthew had given her that look once, when they’d been trapped in the tunnels beneath Dolareido. Arturo had managed to calm him down while Matt tried to rip their way free through mountains of rubble, but it’d been clear the larger man had been a hair’s breadth away from going berserk. It was easy to forget how volatile Uratha were when the violence started.

Art growled through clenched teeth before he looked back to Red Tide. His ears stood up, and he stumbled to the side, like a wolf trying to get into a better position before the prey charged into it. Red Tide was coming.

Tash stared up at the huge monster as it came for them. Matthew and Brianna were stuck between being wrapped in, or currently fighting, a giant tendril each, their claws tearing into the huge limbs that were crushing them. Eric bit and ripped another, but Red Tide managed to ignore him long enough to look straight at Tash and Arturo. And it charged.

Arturo scrambled, not in fear, but with frustration. His limbs weren't working, and every inch of him wanted to attack Red Tide. Red Tide knew it. It rushed them hard and fast, and Tash covered her face with her arm as she prepared to get thrown around like a ragdoll. If the huge kraken broke the limbs of Uratha like it was nothing, there was a good chance it was going to turn her into kindling.

Blinding white light buried her instead.

She let out a squeak as the light snuck around her forearms and punched through her eyelids, and she braced for inevitable death. Sunlight? Fire? What happened?

Her eyes adjusted eventually, and she lowered her arm. Not dead? Nope, still alive. A quick peek left and right showed she was still in the same place, despite the white light that now covered everything. She looked down, and gulped. Something was underneath her, glowing gold slightly. It was behind her. It was beside her, and above her.

She looked up.

“F-Flow?”

“No.” The angel face smiled at her, glowing white eyes similar to Flowing Sanctuary, but on a face that looked more like a ball of white light, now gentle enough to not burn her eyes.

“S... Safe? Of Grey Street?”

The angel smiled. Its face and its body looked like they were made of solid gold light, human shaped but without any defining features. Two white eyes and a white, tiny smile, were the only facial features against a blank canvas of glowing gold. Behind it, two angel wings spread out, the same gold as its body, and they were massive.

Its stomach was open, sorta, gold body having encompassed around Natasha in a bubble. Safe almost looked like a pregnant woman, holding a sphere that connected to her stomach, with Tash safely inside.

“B-But, you’re...”

This was not the Safe of Grey Street she remembered. Safe looked like an egg, with wings! She, er, it had been an egg with wings, both the first time Tash ever saw it, and the last time, though it’d been a much bigger the second time. And, the last time, Tash did see the hints of something... human-ish inside the egg.

“I have a new name,” Safe said, hints of femininity in its otherwise powerful, multi-layered voice. It almost sounded like a choir. “Sanctuary, of Dolareido.”

“Sanctuary?” Tash gulped as she stared up at the angel, and then peeked down behind her at the pool of water also named Sanctuary.

Nodding, Sanctuary released its protective bubble. Its arms spread out, letting it go, and the light of the sphere fell away, like a flower opening up to bloom. The rolls of gold gently flowed back into the angel’s stomach, and once again, the angel had the slim figure of a tall, muscular woman.

It turned around, leaving Natasha standing behind it, and it faced Red Tide.

“Cease, Red Tide. These Uratha and Kindred are under my protection, as is Flowing Sanctuary.”

Red Tide had already ceased, stunned by the interference. It stared at Sanctuary, weird mouth half under the blood and churning it like a slow motor.

“Black Blood and I. Arrangement. I kill.”

“Black Blood does not own Dolareido, and you know it.”

“We have a pact!”

Sanctuary spread its wings, and tiny bits of gold dust fell from them onto the floor around it. Red Tide hissed and pulled back, and the red lake it brought with it pulled back as well. Flow, now a puddle, came to a stop on the casino floor.

The werewolves stared at Sanctuary with dropped jaws. Its radiance must have broke through their berserking, because each of them stopped biting and tearing at Red Tide. But Red Tide still had two of them in its grip.

“Then we are at an impass,” Sanctuary said. “I will defend Dolareido, and give sanctuary to those who need, and deserve it. Black Blood will destroy this city, and you are helping... him.”

Him? Everyone had trouble figuring how to call spirits' gender, because sometimes they did look masculine or feminine. But the Uratha insisted they were all 'its', and that included Black Blood. Didn't it?

If Black Blood really was Mictlantecuhtli, then, that made sense. A very weird sense, but, sense.

Red Tide roared again, and slashed out with two of its tendrils, straight for Sanctuary. Sanctuary did not move. It held out its hands, and more gold light erupted from them, a wall of light, curved, like the one that'd encompassed Tash earlier. The tsunami of blood crashed against it, and Sanctuary did not falter. Waves of red shot out to the sides, blocked by the huge barrier, and Tash stared through the gold wall at the endless flood that could not reach her.

Arturo could, though. His body passed through the barrier, as if it were a sift blocking anything not alive.

"Art!" Tash let out another squeak as she ran over to him. "Art, you—"

"Alive," he said, voice a guttural growl. He forced himself to his feet, and stared through the gold barrier at the waves of blood that continued to crash against it. His eyes were wide. "Must save others." Alive, but barely out of Kuruth, if he couldn't formulate a sentence.

The others! Eric had managed to get out of Red Tide's way, and was standing on the fountain, beside the Kraken. Matthew and Brianna were still in its grip, though, and while Red Tide was distracted, it was still tightening its grip on the two wolves.

"Jessy, now," Sanctuary said.

"Jessy!?! W-What—"

Tash and Arturo both fell back as a blast of wind and light crashed against them. Sanctuary pushed its barrier forward, and it erupted, an explosion that cut through the blood and parted it, all too similar to another scene from The Ten Commandments. Whatever Sanctuary did, it was big, and it sent the blood to the sides of the casino hard enough it pushed over hundreds of gold machines, and launched thousands of glowing coins through the air.

The blast wave hit Red Tide hard, and the creature roared as it stumbled back. It was so big, stumble wasn't the right word, more like a giant slab of concrete getting pushed along the ground by a hurricane. Whatever Sanctuary threw at Red Tide, its giant squid-octopus-kraken body smashed against the back wall of the casino.

Something on four legs ran past Tash, and she almost slashed at it out of reflex. But it went past her, straight up to Red Tide, and up its face. It wasn't very big, not as big as a werewolf, but it was big enough that the spikes on its body tore through Red Tide's squid face, and pulled another giant roar of pain from the monster. It got the kraken in one of its eyes!

Red Tide's roar turned into an alien shriek, and its tendrils went wild, slashing at everything nearby, and letting go of its two hostages. The werewolves flew in random directions, both crashing against walls before falling into the blood. They didn't stay there long. Sanctuary darted over to them, wings carrying it far faster than it should have been able to fly, and it wrapped Matthew and Brianna in gold bubbles, before taking them back over to Tash and Art.

Before Tash could say anything, Sanctuary did it again, and grabbed Eric and... Jessy! And brought them to Tash.

"Let's go," Sanctuary said, and again, it smiled at Tash. "Quickly."

"R-Right." She got up and made for the exit. It really wasn't much of an exit anymore. The gold gate was mostly gone, and Red Tide had smashed through the revolving doors, and put a hole maybe thirty feet wide in the gold wall. Like an octopus, it'd fit its body through a hole far smaller than it, to get into the casino.

Everyone went into automatic mode. Eric helped with Brianna, Arturo helped with Matthew, and Jessy ran beside Natasha, still on all fours. It was her strangest form, an animal form she'd developed years ago, something like a giant wolf, but covered in spikes. She still had a human-ish face though, with a snout and teeth way too big, making the whole form terrifying.

"How!?" Tash yelled as they got outside into the blood soaked streets.

"Safe came and found me," Jessy said. "I was trapped under some rubble, and one of those blood wraiths found me when I finally got out. It saved me."

"Saf—Sanctuary came?"

"It's been trying to stop Black Blood for a little while now, I guess. It came 'cause it knew something was up, what with Red Tide wrecking everything."

Tash looked behind her at the angel. And it was an angel. Sanctuary followed behind them, with Flow at its side, a little tornado of water, barely more than five feet tall, half its usual size. It looked drained.

“Quickly,” Sanctuary said. “The tear, right? In here.” It ushered them to the right, and they dashed in.

They came in through the revolving doors of another casino, and went through the same process as before. A shocked spirit told them they needed a ticket, they ignored it, and tore through the gold fence blocking off the rest of the casino.

“Where’s the basement?” Tash asked.

Arturo pointed to the staircase, on the other side of the casino.

They got five feet before the wall between the casino they were in, and the casino they’d just escaped from, cracked, like an earthquake ripping a canyon through the Earth.

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~~The Ripper~~

“You can’t.”

I can.

“Bullshit. I am in control. I am in control!” He tried to let go of the sword. Every drop of will and vitae he could find, he poured into the hand. Let go of the sword. Let go of the sword.

When I realized what I had to do, I found a way, you fucking asshole. There’s no way I’m letting this continue.

The hand holding the sword slowly pointed the long blade toward him. It was too long to point the blade at his chest, not with his hand on the handle, but that wasn’t Jack’s goal anyway. Apparently, the kid was thinking nuclear.

“You’re just a fucking kid. A child! A stupid, useless, worthless, weak maggot!”

Julias knew differently.

Slowly, the longsword found its way to his neck. The Ripper pushed, twisted, writhed and fought, but all it accomplished was the sharp blade sawing gently against the blood barrier along his neck. The blood barrier was fading. Somehow, despite all the energy and rage the Ripper poured into the coiling dark crimson snakes that made him a god, the fucking kid was weakening it.

“You won’t, you fucking little shit. You won’t leave your precious Miss Big Tits behind. You won’t leave your—”

They’re all dead if I let you live. Antoinette will understand.

“You... won’t... have... me!”

Shit shit shit shit shit. He squeezed the handle harder, until his arm trembled, bones threatening to break, but the fucking kid kept the blade where it was.

The Ripper looked around, panic surging through him. Someone had to stop him, save the kid from killing him and himself. Sándor? Dude was still clutching his head like something had popped inside it. Damien? That dude was one step away from collapsing into torpor. The werewolves? The ones that managed to get their heads above the mist were either coughing up blood and falling right back down, or were staring at him, shocked, and looked about as ready to move as Damien. Fucking useless and weak, every last one of them. What fucking good were they now, if they couldn’t stop Jack!? Useless!

He managed to get his second hand on the sword, but it didn’t help, dooming the second hand to squeeze and shake violently, but accomplish nothing.

“Someone fucking stop me! Stop me before this fucking kid kills himself!” Again he stared around at the group of useless fucking shits he’d annihilated, but every last one of them stared on. One of the wrecked werewolves managed to get their ruined head above the mist, and they stared at him too, as dumbfounded as the rest of them. Clara.

Looking up didn’t help. Some of the ghosts were back, including Sabrina, and she stared down at him even more confused than the fucking mouth breathers. Fucking useless!

He forced his legs to move, until he managed to get himself over to one of the giant pillars of stone, and smacked his head against it. Jack refused to let him summon enough strength to so much as rattle his brain, let alone knock him into torpor. He tried again, and again, but it wasn’t long before Jack forced him to walk away from the pillar, all while forcing the blade against his neck harder, and harder. The only thing that kept it from cutting straight through, was every fucking ounce of will the Ripper had.

I’m sure Antoinette is doing something to save the others, and to stop Jacob. Maybe she’ll succeed, maybe she won’t. But none of it will matter if an evil like you is around to ruin it. I don’t know what Elaine’s done with my blood, but I know it didn’t have a copy of the curse in it. And as far as she’s aware, the only one left of Susanna’s bloodline with the curse, is me. So, it dies with me.

“You... can’t! You fucking can’t! I will not... end... like... this! I will go down fighting! Swinging! I will die with my fingers around the throat of God! I will not die to a shit... like... you!”

Yeah. Go fuck yourself.

The blade sank deeper.

“Jack?”

The blade stopped.

The Ripper and Jack looked to the sound. A voice they recognized, raspy and twisted, but familiar all the same.

“Mary?”

Mary the ghost hovered on the mist maybe fifty feet away, her black empty eyes wide, staring, confused. Beside her stood Beatrice and Athalia, also staring, confused. Everyone so damn fucking useless.

“Jack, what the fu—” Beatrice, halfway to taking a step forward, took a step back. “Ripper.”

The Ripper snarled at her. Mistake. Jack slid the blade a little deeper against the side of his throat.

“I... can’t... stop him!”

“Stop him? The fuck are you talking about? You—” With a snarl of her own, Beatrice jogged over to him, but came to a stop ten feet away, afraid to get closer. “Jack... Ripper, what the fuck?”

“Stupid kid. Stupid fucking kid. He... he... won’t... get his way! It’s mine!”

“It’s my body! My life!” Jack’s voice, cutting through. “I won’t let you use it to hurt anyone else.”

“You don’t deserve it. Weak, stupid, worthless kid. Just a dumb fucking pussy, pathetic. You let everyone walk all over you. You let stupid people run things. You’re a fucking bitch.”

“You’re a monster.” Again the stupid little maggot’s voice cut through. “A movie monster of the week. Just a kid’s impulses on steroids. No substance, no real motivation, just a pile of desires! Fuck you, you don’t get to do what you want.”

The blade slid a little further.

“Jack!” Mary hovered in close, close enough to touch him, and she did. She took the sword, and yanked it from his hands with enough force she nearly broke his fingers. Holy shit she was strong.

“Mary—” His head snapped. “Fucking don’t—” His head snapped again. “You don’t get to—” Another snap. “It’s mine!”

Beatrice came a little closer. “What do we do? Jack, tell us—”

The Ripper let out a roar, causing Mary to squeak and drop the sword, and for Triss to jump back. But she was way too slow, and he got his fingers around her neck. The look in her eyes as she realized what he was about to do was euphoric.

“You die.”

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~~Beatrice~~

But his fingers didn’t squeeze. He tried, tried until his body made weird little cracking sounds, but his fingers didn’t squeeze, thank fuck. Once Triss calmed down, she slowly pulled his fingers away from her neck. It was like trying to bend the fingers of a corpse with rigor mortis, but she managed to get him off and backed away.

“Jesus fucking christ.” She held her neck with both hands as she looked to Athalia. “Jesus... fucking christ.”

Athalia came closer, looking around, eyes locked on Sándor for a moment before looking back to Jack.

“The fuck did you do to Sándor?” Athalia asked before Triss could. Oh god, Sándor. The poor guy stood there holding his head like it was about to explode.

The Ripper grinned at Athalia, but when he tried to reach out for her, his arms refused to move, twitching oddly.

“Kill—don’t kill—fucking do—fucking die—I’ll—” He snapped his gaze back to Sándor, then Athalia and Mary, then Triss. Yeah, this was a Gollum situation. Sorta. Kid was straight up fighting the Ripper like split personalities fighting over the body.

Where the fuck was his necklace? Hell, where the fuck was his skin? He looked burnt, cut open, clawed open, bit open by teeth, and she did not like that she could see bits of his skull. The fact he only had one eye made it a thousand times worse.

“Sándor?” Athalia asked. “What’s going on? You... Are you alright?”

He didn’t respond. Just, groaned. That dude never made a sound unless he really fucking meant it.

“Athalia, Mary,” Triss said, “can you hold Ja—er, the Ripper still?”

The two looked between each other for a few painful seconds before nodding.

The Ripper snarled with enough venom it probably tore up his voice. “Fuck you, you can’t—” Giant, skeleton shadow hands encircled him, and at the same time, Mary came up to him and set her hands on his shoulders.

“Jack,” the ghost said, voice somewhere between a gentle whisper and a fucked up, raspy, scary thing. “Jack.” Her grip was solid, here in the Great Below, considering what she did to Aaron. She could hold him. Maybe.

Triss wanted to watch, to see what would happen, but for now she had another concern. Sándor. She came up to him and touched his shoulder, but he didn’t so much as flinch. His eyes were closed, and he was shivering.

“W-What happened?” Triss asked. “I—” She looked around, and gulped. Now that the Ripper wasn’t the center of her attention, everything else clicked. There were ghosts hovering above, and one of them, a girl, was holding a knife, and she looked very angry. There were werewolves standing around, but it looked like it took everything they had left just to do that. Damien’s face was a crater. “Who did all this?”

“I did,” the Ripper said, chuckling. “I never got the chance to finish Dominating the gargoyle. Alas, I tore his brain up on the way out.” He had one of those super sick, twisted laughs, the kind that let you know the guy probably jerked off to videos of people getting run over by trains.

“Sándor, dude.” Triss took his shoulders and turned him to face her. Still no response, still closed eyes. “Sándor... come on, man. It’s me, Triss. Got Athalia with me. We came to... rescue you.” She gulped as she looked around again. Damien and the werewolves were trying to move closer, but only the vampire managed to cross ground, and she’d seen snails move faster. She gave Sándor a gentle shake. “Dude, come on. You’re scaring me. The fuck did that fucker do to you?”

The Ripper's sick laugh cut through the silence. "He's—He's hurt, and—I fucked him up and—" Jack's head thrashed around hard, and he clenched his teeth as he snarled. A human would have been foaming at the mouth. "I am me. I am mine. You won't have me. You won't hurt anyone else. You are nothing but a parasite. You are nothing."

Holy shit, the kid looked like he was exorcising a demon, eye glaring around at everyone. More head snapping. More grunts and groans. Everyone froze, even more than they already had, as the kid writhed and squirmed in the ghost and Begotten's grip. From the way Athalia and Mary were shaking, they were having trouble holding him. Oh shit oh shit.

A few yells. One scream, the sort you heard on a battlefield a thousand years ago, when people with shield and spear charged the front line. And then silence.

"Bring him over here," the kid said, slowly lifting his head and looking to Triss with his one eye. "I'll see if I can fix him."

Triss blinked at Jack, or the Ripper or whoever it was, before looking back to Sándor. She might as well have been talking to a wall, trying to penetrate whatever was happening inside his head.

"I uh, not sure I want you in his head again. He—"

"He'll recover," the Ripper, or Jack said, "with time. But we don't have time. Bring him over here and I'll do some quick clean up. The Ripper damaged the place where we make conscious connections."

"The white place?" She'd met her Beast there, sorta. She went there sometimes when learning Crúac rituals.

"Basically, yeah. I have to Dominate him, and try and fix him. Fix what the Ripper did. I won't let the Ripper touch him. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't." He growled deep in his throat. "Enough! Enough! I won't!"

Oh sweet Jesus fuck. Whatever battle Jack was having inside his head, it looked like he was winning, but it could have been a trick. But, the fuck were they supposed to do? Athalia and Mary wouldn't be able to hold him, and if they did nothing, they were fucked anyway.

"What do you think, Athalia?" Triss asked.

"I can get us to the portal, to where Black Blood is performing its ritual. But..." She looked up at where the ghosts were. Were. They were gone. "We need Sándor's help."

“Agreed.” Nodding, Triss grabbed the man’s arm, and pulled him toward Jack. He didn’t resist, but didn’t help either, completely unaware of what was happening outside his head.

Damien stared on, still too exhausted to do shit. He’d gotten closer, and when she looked his way, all he gave her was a small nod. He agreed with the plan, then, or didn’t have the energy to argue with it. Good enough for her.

The walk from Sándor to Jack wasn’t long, but it felt like an eternity. Her foot hit something, and she gulped as she leaned down enough to see through the mist directly at her feet. She shouldn’t have. The smell had been warning enough, but she was a dumb fuck who wanted to see. That, was Monica, human Monica, with a hole straight through her throat.

Triss glared at the Ripper, but it didn’t last. His face switched between maniacal villain to distraught kid every second, completely ruining any anger she could summon. Seeing Sándor fucked up had pulled her rage right up to the skin, but again, watching Jack struggle with the curse blew it all away. Poor kid.

Once she got Sándor close, Athalia tightened her grip on him with her big skeleton arms, but they all knew it was superfluous. She and Mary might be able to hold the Ripper for maybe a whole five seconds if shit went bad. Might. Worst of all, they all had to avoid making eye contact. It was fine if the Ripper looked at them, but if they looked him in the eye, he could make the connection, and then they’d have to deal with the fucker in a willpower battle. Which was exactly what he was looking to do with Sándor.

She came in close, and closer, until she was only five feet away from the kid, outside of possible kicking distance.

“How do I—”

“Open his eyes.”

Fucking christ. She took a deep, useless breath, reached up over Sándor’s forehead, and pulled up on his eyes. They were bloodshot.

The dude stopped struggling. No moving, no squirming, nothing. He didn’t lower his hands from his head, but he did come to a complete freeze, eyes pointed straight at Jack. And Jack, or the Ripper or whoever, didn’t move a muscle either. They both came to a complete standstill.

Which was naturally when the fucking ghosts made an appearance again. One of them popped up from the mist, and tackled Damien to the floor, earning a gargled holler from him. Another tackled Avery, and the old wolf went down with a yelp. The other werewolves went down a second later,

hidden in the mist, but the noises of ghost fists punching flesh, earning roars and harsh groans, were everywhere.

“Shit! Shit shit shit.” She let go of Sándor, and thank god the man stayed where he was. “The fuck do we do? The fu—Mary!? Mary, where are you?” She was gone, vanished, like a fucking... ghost. “Athalia, the fuck do we do!?”

“I don’t know! I’m a bit busy!”

Shit. Shit fucking shit. Whatever Jack was doing, Dominating Sándor to somehow play repairman, she had no idea how long it’d take. Mental stuff usually took seconds, maybe thirty, but the fuck did she know? It was pretty fucking unique circumstances.

So, she did the only thing she could think of. She ran over to Damien, and—jumped back when Mary came up out of the mist.

The ghost that’d been punching Damien came up out of the mist with her, and Mary had her fingers around the ghost’s throat. Not like ghosts needed to breathe, but whatever it was Mary was doing, it wasn’t choking. The ghost screamed and cried in her grip, but Mary stared into the empty eyes of her fellow dead with her own, and squeezed harder.

The ghost, just some random dude, probably from the nineties, withered away in her grip. Bits of white came off the ghost’s body, especially the ghost’s face, and as Mary unleashed a banshee shriek, the mist exploded outward and away from them ten feet in all directions. The ghost in her grip cried out, but it was a dying sound, getting weaker by the moment. Whoever Mary was killing, she was actually killing them, a ghost. You didn’t need to be a fucking exorcist to recognize one ghost absorbing the other, complete with skin and body and clothes and everything getting sucked into Mary’s open mouth like she was a literal black hole.

One minute, there was a man struggling in her grip. The next, everything that ghost had been, became a puff of white fog that went down Mary’s gullet. The mist around Mary, burying the stone again, and Mary floated a few feet up as she looked around at the other ghosts. Somehow, her giant, empty, black eye sockets, and scary big mouth filled with increasingly numerous, increasingly sharp teeth, looked... happy? Excited?

No, Triss recognized the look. She’d seen it a few times, on more normal faces. The excited hunger vampires got when they were about to feed.

The other ghosts came up out of the mist, and came at Mary, showing the same fucked up expressions.

“Free!” one of them said.

“Free! Black Blood will free us!”

“No more weight!”

“No more darkness!”

Oh fuck, they’d made a deal with Black Blood. Now it made a lot more sense why a bunch of ghosts were suddenly jumping into the mix.

“Mary,” Triss said, “we should—”

Mary dove at the ghosts, and ripped into them, literally. Claws came out of her fingers, just like Beatrice’s, and she ripped the ghosts into puffs of cloud and fog. They screamed with each slice and each chunk that came off them, as if Mary’s claws were made of acid, and the screaming only grew worse when she gobbled up the chunks. Down the hatch, like a fucking eagle snatching another bird straight out of the sky.

It was a slaughter. The other ghosts had their fists, but Mary’s features were growing scarier and scarier by the second. Her teeth grew longer, and now she had more of them. Her eyes had always been large, black voids, partly see-through like the rest of her, but one glance into them now had Triss frozen. Now they looked more like... endless space, like oblivion.

“Die!”

Triss blinked at Mary, but Mary’s mouth hadn’t moved. That wasn’t her voice.

Everyone spun around. Another ghost came out of the mist, a woman, and she lunged straight for Jack. She had a knife in her hand.

“Mary!” Athalia said. “Do—”

Mary swooped down like a fucking jet, straight down at Jack, and collided with the girl hard enough the whole area exploded outward with mist. It felt like a hard gust of wind, and Triss took a step back as the fog washed over her.

Mary had stopped the ghost, hands holding her wrists, and was matching death glare with death glare.

“Sabrina,” Mary said, voice a raspy hiss.

“Mary! Let go! Jack should die for killing the master. Him, and his family, and that includes you!” Sabrina struggled against Mary, and while neither hovering girl had legs below the knee, it looked like they were both bracing against the ground as they pushed against each other.

Her argument wasn't very compelling.

“Black Blood sent you.”

“Of course! Freedom is—”

“Before! I meant before! When I was just... just new, and hiding in my home, and you came up from the ground and spoke to me! You wanted to be my friend, but it was a lie! You were trying to get close to Jack!”

“Yes! The stupid boy should die! He killed the master! He killed my love!”

Their voices grew louder and harsher, until everyone was wincing with the nails-on-chalkboard shrieks, everyone except Sándor and Jack. They were still off in Lala Land. Everyone else covered their ears as the two ghosts screamed at each other loud enough the mist that reformed around them rippled. But as much as Triss wanted to get away before she lost her eardrums, she stared on as Mary changed more, and more. Her mouth grew bigger, lips peeling away slightly, just enough to show off a few more of her crazy teeth. It made her mouth look scarier than Triss's.

Triss expected Sabrina to freak out, but the other ghost only returned the shrieking and screaming, and a few of her features changed as well. Her hair raised and grew longer, and turned into tendrils that hovered in the air behind her. She grew claws of her own, and the clothes on her body grew looser, and weirder, until they looked less like clothes and more like dirty rags that grew out of her skin.

Mary was right behind her. Her mouth only got more monstrous, lips splitting back further until her cheeks were gone, and all that was left was sharp teeth. Her eyes raised at the outer corners, turning into slanted, big slits. Her clothes, already a torn mess, ripped even more, until the strips dangled from her and hovered in the air like Sabrina's hair. More and more of the clothes shifted, breaking and molding together, until they'd changed into strange rags that hung off her arms and chest, hiding her legs entirely.

Neither of them looked human anymore.

Athalia moved away from Sabrina, but she had to keep Jack where he was, next to Sándor. Her options on where she could go were limited. She did manage to cover her ears at least, even while her Horror's silhouette arms stayed outstretched and held Jack firmly in two giant hands.

“Mary,” Triss said, but she couldn’t bring her voice above a whisper, and it disappeared under the screaming.

Sabrina spun the knife in her hand into a reverse grip, and yanked hard on her arm, pulling it down enough to stab Mary’s wrist. Mary’s scream increased in pitch, but otherwise kept going, endless. She didn’t need to breathe. She didn’t even need air to make noise at all. It was an unending string of screams that crossed the line from noise, into an actual attack that hurt everyone nearby, including the two ghosts.

“You won’t touch him!” Mary screamed, and she raked her left hand down, the one Sabrina had stabbed. Apparently the knife hadn’t hurt her enough to stop her from using the arm. Or, she was a ghost, and the actual location of the damage didn’t matter. Either way, Mary sliced her claws down Sabrina’s chest, and Sabrina twisted as she tried to escape, her right hand now free.

But Mary kept her right hand’s grip tight on Sabrina’s left hand, and yanked the woman close again. Sabrina didn’t see that coming, and got whipped around hard, right into Mary’s left hand. Again, Mary raked her claws down Sabrina’s torso, and this time they went deep enough they left scars several inches deep in the ghosts see-through body.

“He killed Master! He—”

Mary drove her hand into Sabrina’s gut, and ripped her claws up through it until they came out of Sabrina’s face. Triss braced for gore, but all that happened was a bunch of weird ghost stuff splitting apart like snow. That, and Sabrina’s shrieking coming to a sudden stop.

Mary wasted no time, and opened her big, horrifying mouth, and sucked Sabrina in, or her body, or whatever it was. The white see-through misty ghost stuff went into her mouth, like a vacuum cleaner sucking up dirt from the floor. And just like that, she was gone.

Everyone stared at Mary as the horrifying creature quickly turned to face Jack, and hovered over to him.

“No one will touch you or Mom,” she said, whispering, but her voice still a shrill mess of rasps and weird nails-on-chalkboard scratches. “No one. No one. No one.” Her claws found his head, and she stroked his short hair. “No one.”

Slowly, Mary turned her head, and set her giant, slitted black eyes on Athalia.

Athalia gulped, let Jack go, and the silhouette of the Horror faded away. Slowly, she backed up, wincing as she did. She was still hurt from her tussle with Aaron.

Triss came a little closer, and when Mary didn't throw her the same evil glare she'd thrown Athalia, she came closer again.

"Jack's currently on a trip in Sándor's mind, Mary," Triss said.

"How long?"

"Not sure. Should be done by now." And thank fucking god it took longer than expected. If Jack saw what Mary had done, how the fuck would he react? Thankful? Terrified?

Jack, or maybe the Ripper, slowly turned his head and looked her way. She looked right back at him.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Jack~~

It wasn't easy. Finding the will and determination to put a sword to his own throat, was not easy. But buried in his own mind, watching the Ripper ruin everything? He fucking found it, found the spark in him, the drive, whatever it was people found when the bullets started flying, and they needed to run up that beach.

Julias was right about him.

"Fuck you! You're just an ant! You'll never—"

"Shut up."

Jack slammed the cellar door on the giant creature. The curse, whatever magical Strix powers it gave him, it turned all the crap happening in his mind into metaphors he could see, at least whenever the Beast and mental Disciplines were involved. Conscious awareness of all the stupid crap that was supposed to be done by the Beast's power, subconsciously. It fucking sucked.

Supposedly, Triss had seen the same place before, the white room, some place in the mind where the consciousness and the Beast interacted, and could even do some weird magical shit. She'd remembered it, probably because of some Crúac weirdness. Maybe this weird conscious awareness of what was happening in the mind was what gurus talked about, when they talked about enlightenment? Or maybe he just had a super active imagination.

Case in point, his imagination summoned a really creepy looking cabin in the woods, with white wood boards for walls, a shitty wooden floor, boarded up windows with dusty old white curtains, and furniture and decor that came straight out of the Great Depression. A mounted buck head on the wall, a fireplace with a chimney, and a rug that had all the shades of white and brown that only someone who'd bought a car when they came with built-in ashtrays would own.

And in the corner of the room, was a big cellar door on the floor, with a big chain over it, keeping it closed. Mostly closed. The curse smashed up against the cellar door, opening it a few inches, and shaking the chain hard. The curse snarled and shrieked, and clawed at the wood floor it was trapped under. Several of its shadowy arms crept out from under the cellar door, and pushed up against it or yanked on the chain harder, but it held, for now. And it would for as long as Jack could hold him down there. He didn't know how long it'd be, but for now, he was in control again.

"You can't trap me in this ridiculous memory forever," the Ripper said, hissing and snarling.

Jack frowned back at the Ripper, gave him the finger, and opened the front door of the cabin. He was tempted to quote some lines from the movie, but while the asshole trapped in the basement of his mind might have been able to pull quotes and laugh about shit, all Jack could think about, was the feel of Damien's face against his fist. Clara's. Monica and Caleb's throats.

At least the violence was over, and he could start fixing things. He had to fix things. Just one fucking thing, anything, before he did what had to be done. Mary, Triss, and Athalia were waiting for him back in the real world, and from the sounds managing to pierce his ears during Dominate, violence was picking back up again. He had to work fast.

Sighing, he stepped through the gates of Sándor's mind, and into the mansion. Sándor did not resist him. Unlike Jack, Sándor wouldn't be consciously aware of what was happening in his head. He'd probably know Jack got to see a peek of his memories, but not the literal representation of them, paintings on the walls of a decrypt castle hallway.

That was fine. He didn't need Sándor to be consciously aware of what was going on. The representation of his consciousness was plenty helpful.

"Here," Jack said, and he motioned to one of the paintings. "Help me."

Sándor sighed as he looked at the picture. The gargoyle Horror waited, perched on the throne, but Sándor the man stood with Jack, and the two of them helped put back up the picture of the wife and child he'd lost to Jeremiah and Angela.

Dominate was a powerful Discipline. Elder Kindred used it to literally tamper with the memories of people. If Jack could use it to help undo some of the damage the Ripper had done, that was at least one thing he could fix.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Sándor said, or the representation of him did anyway, with the same tone he’d said it with before.

“Stop wondering. This is who you are. And you know, just like you already said you knew, that it’s worth it.” They moved onto another painting. Another painful memory, put back on the wall.

“Yes. But I have lived a long life. I... I’m tired.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” They moved onto the next picture. The old woman, sitting in her chair by the fire. “She passed away in her sleep?”

Once the painting was back up, Sándor stood in front of it, eyes locked onto the old woman wrapped in a blanket on the chair, and nodded.

“Rozalia. She’s the one that insisted I live on, and... find reasons to keep living.”

“Sounds like a smart woman.”

“She was.”

Jack gave the man a small pat on the shoulder. “I could give you the speech again, but you already knew it before I even said it the first time. And she probably said it better than I could have.” Sighing, they moved onto another painting. “Though I am gonna pull the guilt card here, and say you do owe us a bit, for all the shit that Jeremiah did when he used you.”

“Shameless.”

Laughing, Jack helped hang up the final picture. “Yeah well, I’m a vampire.”

“True.” Sándor nodded, the tiniest hint of a smile showing through as he helped the painting settle, before returning to his throne.

“And speaking of vampires. How do you feel about Triss?” Maybe this was a little wrong, using Dominate to get a peek into Sándor’s head, but if this was the one thing he could fix before he died, along with stopping Jacob, then it’d be a good life. Right?

“I... like her. But she scares me.”

Jack laughed. “She scares you? I’m guessing it’s not the mouth.” Sometimes it still caught him off guard. Triss was gorgeous if you looked at her from the front, mouth included, but the moment you got a profile shot with her hair pulled out of the way, the crocodile cheeks were disturbing.

“No. She... She...”

Jack shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, I get it. She’s a bundle of aggression and very direct about what she wants. Might not actually know what she wants, but once she thinks she knows, she’s pretty... I don’t know the word, courageous? About pursuing it. Her first date with Julias, she basically forced the guy to take her out to Bloodlust.”

“Forced her?”

“Yeah. Big step for her. And if I’m guessing right, and I think I am, she’s tried to be direct with you?”

Sándor sank slightly in his throne, and gestured to the wall. One of the paintings changed, colors flowing over each other until a new image formed. Sándor the gargoyle, holding Triss and Jen in his giant hands, both girls looking pretty scared.

“Well, shit,” Jack said.

“Yes. I...” Sándor groaned, but gestured to the painting again. Again it changed, this time showing Triss and Jen, fixing their dresses, and then giving Sándor some very ‘it’s okay don’t worry about it we’re fine’ looks. Everyone hated those looks, Jack included. Sándor included.

“At least you didn’t ruin it. If they said it’s okay, believe them. They’re vampires, right? Twisted, kinda fucked up vampires. They’ll brush it off.” Very much a pot calling kettle situation. “Seriously Sándor, Triss likes you. Jen likes you. The Ripper wasn’t lying. I can’t even begin to give life advice to someone who’s been through all this,” he gestured around at the paintings, “but Triss — and Jen, surprisingly — are great people. Just talk to them and give them a chance, and I think you’ll be surprised at the happiness you can find.” And to wrap his shitty little bite of wisdom in a pretty bow, he gestured to the painting of the old woman sitting by the fire. “Right?”

Might have been shitty, juvenile advice, but Sándor thought about it for a while, blank face looking down for a short eternity before nodding.

“You are right.”

“Okay, I think everything is back together enough. I can’t fix everything, but your subconscious should clean up what I can’t after a few night’s sleep. I think. Hopefully.” Shrugging, Jack gestured to

the man on the throne, and gave him a small salute before walking out the colossal door. One glance back showed Sándor leaning forward, putting an elbow on his knee, and putting his chin on his fist. Classic thinking pose. And hilariously, the four-armed gargoyle perched overhead mimicked him, two hands holding onto the huge stone throne, the other two adopting the classic thinking pose.

Jack had been tempted to talk to Sándor about Julias, and the weird situation Triss was in trying to resurrect him despite her growing interest in Sándor. But at a certain point, he'd be abusing Dominate, and how Sándor had opened his mind to him. It was time to get back to the real world.

Reality snapped back into existence. Fog. Mist. A giant, empty cave, with green fireflies in the distance. And Sándor standing a few feet in front of him, slowly lowering his hands from his skull.

The two looked at each other for a few moments, awareness coming to Sándor, until eventually the man nodded, Jack returned it, and the two looked to the crowd.

First, Jack looked at Triss. Eye contact. She braced for a mental fucking, but he gave her a gentle smile instead, and looked to Athalia. A small nod for her, before his eyes moved to his sister's ghost, directly in front of him. Holy fuck.

"M-Mary?"

The ghost nodded, and lowered her hand down from his face.

"Jack."

Mary the ghost looked a thousand times worse than she had the last time he'd seen her, and she'd looked like hell on wheels then, destroying the ball. Now, she had a mouth that made Beatrice look tame, and her eyes were straight up demon eyes. Her clothes had changed. They'd gotten more and more torn and tattered the last few times he'd seen her, but now they were dangling strips of wrinkly sheets that were half merged, like some sort of cloak or robe that hid her legs and turned into mist. And she had claws.

"What happened to you?"

"I was scared before, but not anymore. I'm going to protect you. Okay?"

He blinked a few times, before looking down at himself. The pain hit him like a wave, and he sucked in a useless breath between clenched teeth. He dug deep, and poured vitae into his limbs as best he could. Now that he had a second, the wounds managed to seal enough that his insides weren't visible anymore, bones and muscles hidden. If Avery had hit him with her claws when they had the weird red glowy thing going on, it'd have taken multiple nights to heal from, and that was with the power of the

curse. But the other wolves and their magic-but-not-super-magic claws, plus the fire, he could heal that in a single night with the curse's power.

He didn't have a night. Some scar tissue thin enough he could still see the dents in his body was good enough for now.

He reached up and touched Mary's hand. One of her hands was on his shoulder, and she smiled at him with her crazy mouth.

"Protect me?"

"Those other ghosts, and that horrible Sabrina! I got them. Killed them. Ate them." She floated away a few feet, and held out her claws in front of her. "I... ate... them."

Sabrina was dead? And the other ghosts? He gulped on a dry throat as he stared at his sister, or, some thing, some monster, that looked like a twisted version of his sister.

"You can do that?"

"I... I didn't know. I just... I just did it."

Sándor let out a quiet sigh, and everyone looked to the man as he lowered his hands.

"I've seen other ghosts do this," he said, "deeper in the Great Below. Old ghosts. Angry ghosts."

Mary snorted and shook her head. "I'm not old."

"True. But your circumstances are special." The poor guy winced and clutched his skull again, but managed to recover before Triss could touch him.

Which was when people finally realized Beatrice was here, as in, Jacob's student, the enemy. They all slowly looked at her, even the werewolves and Damien, who managed to stumble their way over.

Jack forced himself to look at them. And they forced themselves to look at him. The Ripper getting out when it did was the worst possible thing that could have happened, they all knew it, and they all knew they couldn't let it stop them.

"I'm not letting him out again," Jack said, "even if that means..." He half expected someone to say something, maybe something like 'no way, you can't kill yourself'. But the looks on their faces, even their werewolf faces, said it all. They were terrified of him, and they didn't disagree with his plan.

Sándor gave him one hard look, but he turned and faced Athalia. "What's going on? I thought you were going to stay in the physical world, in case something happened."

“Something did happen,” Athalia said. “You idiots let your guard down and got locked down here, and it looks like one of those azlu things’ webs was blocking you from tunneling out.”

“How’d you find out?” Jack asked.

“Your birds,” Triss said, offering a tiny smile and tinier wave. “They realized you were trapped down here. They went looking for help. Couldn’t find any. Eventually Scully came to me.”

Scully and Mulder, taking the initiative? He’d given them specific instructions to stay out of harm’s way, especially where Jacob and Black Blood were concerned. But, he had encouraged them to think for themselves. Good thing he did.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s take a few minutes here to recoup. I... The Ripper did a lot of horrible shit, after the ghosts and azlu showed up. Let’s... figure out... who’s still alive.”

Beatrice and Athalia stared at him, only now the reality of what happened sinking in.

Damien managed to join them on his own, but his face wasn’t doing any better. It was taking everything he had to not fall into torpor on the spot. The werewolves transformed back into human form, and all of them managed to get back up on their feet, too. Barely. They joined the group, and every one of them kept Jack in the corner their eyes.

“Carter?” Jack asked. Avery shook her head. “Fuck.” Nodding, head sagging like the old anchor was back, Jack found a big rock to sit on, and winced every second it took to get on it. His insides were on fire, and he kept flexing his right hand, feeling the tendons fight against wounds.

Sándor moved from person to person, and helped them all sit on a nearby rock. They needed it. The werewolves were stubborn, but even they accepted the man’s help, and sat or leaned against the big rock a little ways from Jack. They refused to have their backs to Jack, even as they tried to hide it.

Damien sat down on Jack’s rock.

Jack couldn’t help but laugh, and it sounded a little choked. “Damien you fucking idiot.”

The man shrugged, and of course regretted it immediately. Everyone was fucked up, beaten and broken, but Damien couldn’t heal as well as Jack or the wolves. His jaw was still fucked, and every motion he made, he took care to not put any momentum into it that might make his jaw move. Give him another twenty or thirty minutes and he might be able to heal the bone enough to get the jaw working, but that was it.

“Okay, elephant in the room,” Jack said. “The curse is under control again, and will be for the rest of the night. Even if something happens, I’ll take back control immediately. You saw me do it, and I’ll do it again.”

The wolves, Sándor, and Damien all looked at him, eyes heavy. They knew what he meant. For now, he’d found the will he needed to bring the curse under control, by trying to kill himself. And it fucking sucked.

Cry later. Fix the problem now.

“Second elephant. Uh, Athalia and Beatrice and Mary are here.”

Triss threw up her hands. “If you’re worried I’m some sort of sleeper agent, don’t be! I had no fucking clue what was going on, that Jacob and Black Blood were up to anything, and fuck you guys, I resent being kept in the dark.”

Jack smiled at her. “Yeah, we figured. But if you knew, you really think you’d be able to keep the secret from Jacob? That he wouldn’t sus it out?”

Flailing hands turned into limp arms, and she grumbled as she slipped them into her jean pockets.

“Well fuck me.”

He almost apologized, but they had no time.

“You here to stop us?”

“You fucking kidding me? I’m here to save your ass! You and Sándor and everyone else.”

You and Sándor. The gargoyle glanced her way, and she glanced his. Just quick glances that didn’t mean anything to anyone else, but Jack knew Triss pretty well, and after the shit he’d seen in Sándor’s mind, he knew him well enough, too.

“Once we’re past the azlu webs,” Jack said, “Sándor can take us through a tunnel down deeper, where Black Blood is performing the ritual. We expect resistance, especially if Black Blood’s convinced a bunch of ghosts to help him.”

“Sabrina was unstable,” Sándor said. “Easily manipulated.” Mary snarled at the man, but Sándor didn’t react. Probably for the best. “I don’t think Black Blood will so easily manipulate the ghosts deeper in the Great Below.”

Jack raised a finger. “Before we get going, I need some details. What happened with Scully and Mulder?”

“After Scully came to me, bitching and whining,” Triss said, “we realized everyone was gone. Everyone except maybe the Prince, or the Begotten. Since everyone’s convinced Jacob’s behind all this, I figured, hey, Prince might not exactly trust me, you know? So Jen and I went to see Athalia. She told us what was up.”

Everyone looked at Athalia, but she just shrugged.

“Jennifer and Beatrice were in the dark, and if not for her, I wouldn’t have come, or have Mary for backup. And those ghosts and that Sabrina girl would have killed Jack, and probably the rest of you, too.”

“Yeah, so don’t you fucking judge us.” Triss pointed a finger at Jack, and twisted it around a few times. “Shit is going down, and I want to talk to Jacob before everything explodes. You all think he’s going to start an apocalypse. I think the man deserves a chance to talk.”

Everyone looked to Beatrice, listening, before looking to Athalia again.

“Hey, I told her the plan was to stop Jacob and Black Blood, no matter what.”

“And that’s bullshit. Jacob may be a lot of things, but my boss is not some fucking psychotic murderer out to kill everyone.” Triss pointed at Jack again. “And I’ve seen him with your mom. You might not like to think it, asshole, but Jacob’s been great with her. Fuck me, he might even love her.”

It was like someone stabbed him in the ass with a red hot poker, and he ground his teeth as he forced down the reflex to cringe.

“I know.”

“Well then, what the fuck? Y’all just gonna hunt him down and kill him? I want to hear what he has to say! And you fucking owe me.”

He let out a slow sigh before nodding. “Jen—”

“Went to go see Bitch McBig Tits. And now your asshole girlfriend is holding her hostage.”

“And Jen—”

“Told her what was up, about all this.” Triss gestured around her. “I asked the Prince for her help, but she said she was too busy.”

Too busy meant she was doing something directly connected to the situation. Rescue? Maybe. But more likely something to do with stopping Jacob and Black Blood. She didn’t tell Jack what sort of stuff she was up to, explaining that it was better they didn’t all share with each other every secret, in

case Jacob managed to figure out what someone was up to, he wouldn't figure out everything. Not putting all the eggs in one basket, and shit like that. It made Jack feel like he was working for the government, and vomit inducing as that feeling was, it did make sense.

Nodding, Jack rubbed his head a few times. Pain. Still not enough new skin to protect all the bits. He looked back to Sándor, and watched as the man checked in with everyone.

Athalia, Mary, and Triss had come down to save their asses. And they'd succeeded, mostly. He did owe Triss for that. The idea of bringing his sister along terrified him, but Mary wasn't Mary. It was her ghost, a remnant, something not her. And at the moment, she was the scariest one out of all of them.

Which pretty much sealed the deal on whether or not they were coming.

"I know Sándor and Athalia are coming. And I can't stop you two." He gestured to Triss and Mary, but all that got him was a couple frowns in return. Triss's frown was scary, and Mary's was utterly horrific. He moved on. "Damien, Avery, Clara, David, Mason, Erica, Noah. I... don't think you should come. You're injured, and—"

"It doesn't matter," Avery said. "Even if we were missing our fucking arms—"

"Hey," Mason said, and he gestured to his half arm. The werewolves laughed, though they regretted it immediately, each of them groaning and clutching their ribs.

Every single werewolf looked like they'd been through hell. Bleeding, faces smashed in, visible dents in their bodies, broken limbs they'd managed to get together enough to function, barely. It was a mess. And every time Jack forced himself to look Clara's way, she looked back at him, and for some reason neither of them looked away, until it started to sting.

Jack only had one eye, and while he'd managed to heal some of his face, he knew it still looked pretty fucked up. The fact a werewolf had raked him straight across it was probably still blatant. And she looked like someone had smashed her face in with a hammer. If she had any teeth left, he couldn't see, since she could barely open her mouth and her lips were swollen. One of her eyes refused to open, even more swollen. Her cheek bone looked broken, and from how her arm dangled, he knew that was worse than broken.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The Ripper, never satisfied with just a physical beat down, taunted her, found what he thought were the best words to hurt her, and used them. It was a good thing Harcourt wasn't here, or the Ripper would have ripped his guts out and worn them like a hat, all for Clara's sake. Anything to hurt her. Anything to hurt Jack.

So they stared at each other for a little while, just long enough it made things worse, before they finally looked away.

“Then, I guess we get moving,” Jack said. “We continue on, get out of the range of these spiderwebs, and Sándor pops us open a tunnel to the center tear, a few levels down.” And to seal in the imagery of how fucking scary that was, he pointed down, at the endless mist beneath their feet.

Mary hovered over to him. He almost recoiled, but forced himself to meet her empty black gaze as she gently poked one of his wounds. Gently enough to not hurt him, thank god.

“I’ll protect you. And Mom.”

“Mary, I—”

“I’ll protect you. And Mom! I won’t let anything happen to you. Mom won’t be alone! It won’t happen! Won’t! Won’t! W—”

“Mary,” Sándor said, “the ghosts deeper in the Great Below are extremely violent, and their age has made them inhuman. They won’t be…” His voice trailed away as Mary slowly turned her head, a full one eighty degrees, and glared at him. It was enough to have everyone squirming.

“We believe you,” Triss said, hands raised placatingly at Mary. “Just, everyone’s a bit beat up, and maybe a little crazy right now. We need to be smart, right?”

Mary drifted away from Jack and joined Triss’s side. The two of them continued talking, but Triss managed to sneak a glance Jack’s way, and a nod. She was on Mary duty, then. Thank god someone was. If Jack had to play chauffeur to his unstable, and apparently crazy psycho strong, and mutated sister’s ghost, it wouldn’t end well.

“Jack, a word? In private?” Sándor asked.

“Uh, sure, yeah.” He looked to Damien, but before his dumbass friend could get off the rock to give them privacy, Jack hopped off instead. After giving Damien a small pat on the knee, and an eye roll, he walked off with Sándor maybe fifty feet. Everyone watched them, except Mary. No doubt he wanted to talk about her, and she was the only one who didn’t have the presence of mind to realize that.

“Your sister’s ghost has changed.”

“Yeah, you said that.”

“I’ve seen ghosts like her before. Ghosts evolve as they age, especially those in the Great Below. It only gets worse the deeper you go.”

“But she’s never been in the Great Below.”

Sándor nodded slightly as he looked down, before taking a quick peek at Mary through the corner of his eye.

“She’s... on an accelerated path. Likely because—”

“Of all the shit she’s been through. Getting resurrected, dying again, all the other shit, I can’t even fucking imagine.”

“Indeed. I’ve seen ghosts like her before. Some places called them the moroi, or moroaice. They were devourers, and that included living things.”

“Jesus...”

“Other places called them banshees. They are... violent ghosts, Jack, and hungry.”

A banshee. That’d certainly explain the constant screaming and wailing she did when fighting or breaking things.

Jack rubbed his buzzed hair. There were a slices through it where skin had grown over but hair hadn’t, and he frowned down at the mist as he rubbed it some more.

“We’ll run into more ghosts like that, when we go deeper?”

“Maybe. The ghosts down there evolve into many strange things, often abandoning human shapes. We’ll avoid them, as best we can. But...”

“But we might need Mary’s help to deal with them, right?”

He looked Jack in the eyes, face solid steel.

“Yes, and it could get her killed.”

They looked at each other for a few uncomfortable seconds before Jack looked down and rubbed his head more. Her dying wouldn’t necessarily be the worst thing, and they both knew it. And holy fuck, Jack felt like fucking dogshit for thinking it.

“It’s a good thing she’s here. We need her help.”

“I know, and I don’t disagree. But I thought you should know... I’ve never seen a ghost as... degraded as her, not get worse.”