

~~Jack~~

“Guys, guys! We need to stick around and figure out all we can.” He tried to get out of their grip, but it wasn’t going to happen. Fiona had a good grip for a small girl, and Damien had fifty years of his second life in seniority. Struggling was pointless, but he wasn’t about to throw this opportunity away. Sandbagging was the best option he had, so he let his bodyweight succumb to gravity. Unfortunately, they were both strong enough to drag him, regardless.

“Jack, you pride yourself on your reasoning, yes?” Damien said.

“... I do, yeah.” Fuck. Already knew where Damien was going with this, but he didn’t want to hear it right now.

“I know figuring what to do about this ritual thing targeting you is a top priority. But, we’re in over our heads. We saw what we came to see, but—”

“Azamel’s warning is—”

“Has nothing to do with the hunter ritual.” Damien shook his head, as he looked back over his shoulder at Jack. “We have an idea now of what’s going on, so we should get out of here. Report, meet up with Jessy, delicately avoid talk of mysterious warnings, and mention Azamel’s explanation of where the ritual came from.”

“... fine.”

Fiona, giggling and almost jumping in spot, helped him back to his feet. Turning fear into excitement was a skill she had in droves. “Come on! Who knows what... what...”

Jack stood up, and turned around to face the direction Fiona and Damien were taking him. There’d be something bad ahead, something that warranted Fiona’s pause, something that was going to make Damien right, and make Jack regret his one moment of spontaneity.

“Uh oh, uh oh.” Sky came up behind them, and flapped a feather over their heads. “Leave, better leave!” And leave it did, flapping both wings and catapulting itself into the air, abandoning the three little monsters to find a perch on higher ground. That was fine, Jack couldn’t blame any bird for escaping at the moment of danger, that’s what birds did. But at the same time, he was really wishing the bird would have taken them with it.

They came out of the street, out of the cracks of shadow running along the uneven asphalt, out of the corner where building met pavement, out of the rainy windowsills, and out of the shadows cast by

warped benches. Red bits of wavy fog leaked out of crevices, as if someone was smoking, and blowing puffs of crimson cloud. With each wave of the fog that crept out onto the street in front of the three; hissing began, quiet and taunting. Drip, drip, splashes of red liquid fell to the street, before disappearing into nothing, wisps of more red smoke, while entities began to form.

Most definitely not the sex spirits he had seen in Dolareido.

The red things had streaks of black moving through them, or streaks of red moving through masses of black; hard to tell as the two colors mixed and fought for surface area. But with time, it was apparent something black, something that looked like tar dancing with smoke, was draped in red which ran like blood. Drip, drip. The red things had human-like torso shapes, but without distinguished features; legs as solid as cigarette smog. With time, long claws of black crept out of their hands, subtle but massive. Worse were the eyes, glowing white eyes, slitted and slanted. Demon eyes.

And there was a dozen of them.

“Someone... tore open... verge... who?” One of the strange, hovering spirits came forward from the group, and looked at them.

And that was enough for the weight of its presence to hit them. The three of them took a step back, and Jack gulped as he felt the ice in his stomach start to form. He stared into the eyes of the demon creature, until the bent streetlights started to flicker on and off, aware of the eye contact. Shit, shit, shit. As if the city itself was not happy about the creatures, the streetlights warped, bending away from their city-center hope, away from the hovering entities. The shadow was powerful as the lights began to turn off, one at a time; each a flicker, then a dying gasp, before it was gone.

As the strange spirits spread out to cover Jack’s exit back to the ‘verge’, darkness settled on them, until only the moon and its unsteady light offered them vision. Fiona might be able to see in total darkness, but Damien and Jack would be fucked. It hadn’t come to that, but it was getting a little too close for comfort.

Damien and Fiona nudged Jack in the back of his shoulders. Oh, right. Now that everything was going to shit, he was the ambassador, again. If it wasn’t his fault for them getting caught, he’d have kept his mouth shut. Well, would have liked to, but the situation wasn’t giving him any options.

“Um, uh... verge?” he said.

The strange, shadowy figure of obsidian death and bleeding crimson, gestured to the wall of the factory the three intruders had come from. “Black Blood has claimed this.” The choir of entities hissed,

one or two of them shrieking. The sound stirred the rat-like black blobs that ran along the building perimeters nearby, and sent them darting into whatever hole they could find.

“Black Blood has no claim to the old verges!” Sky squawked from his perch on a rooftop, and clawed at the roof edge a few times. “They’re from before!”

The dark spirit in front of its brethren moved forward again, without a glance to the bird. “You... you two are Kindred. Dead things. Useless. But you...” It drifted toward Fiona, closer, drip drip of something very blood-like creating a trail behind it. “Skin. Sinew. Bone. Organs. Muscle. Fat. Let us see.”

“Oh, I dinnae think so!”

So much for diplomacy. Before Jack could reach out, stop her from turning a bad situation worse, the woman let out her monster.

The giant spider creature, the woman of blades, of horns covering the top half of her face like an elegant mask combining into a crown, of spikes for feet and fingers, of silk and shadow, slashed out. A flicker of shadow in the already dim light was easy to miss, but Jack knew what to look for. The blades Vrall used weren’t for slashing, they were for stabbing, like an estoc sword. A very, very, very long estoc.

Either the strange spirits didn’t recognize what Fiona was, or they underestimated her, and how quick she’d be to throw the first punch. Eight blades upon long, smooth, sectioned spider legs stabbed out, cracking the air with a snap, and stabbing into each spirit, through their chests; if that was a chest, on top of their legs of smoke. It must have been, because the eight creatures all let out a weird shriek, distorted with ear-splitting nails-on-chalkboard shrill sounds.

The eight of them fell to the ground. And then, started to get back up.

“Warned.” One of them said, spreading out, body disappearing into the shadow of a nearby bench.

“Warned about the Begotten.” Another, one getting up from the wound, stood before them, fearless. The hole in its chest showed only more of the black and red smoke that made its body, and the hole was closing back up.

“Begotten opened the door, without permission.” Another moved toward the building on Damien’s left, and its body pressed to the brick, flatter than it should have been able to. As it moved toward them, shadow spread out from where its body merged with the building, burying it and the surrounding asphalt in billowy onyx for a dozen feet. A smokescreen of bleeding tar. “Kill Begotten.”

Ok, yeah, that sounded bad. Sounded like they didn't want Begotten opening doors that were otherwise locked. Sounded like covering up their tracks. Sounded like Black Blood was giving these things orders, too? He'd ask, but doubted they'd answer.

Jack stepped away again, drawing his pistol and sword, and began firing. No reason to be diplomatic at this point. "Shit. Shit shit shit. Plan?"

"Escape." Damien mirrored him. Though his weapons were already drawn, he wasted no time following Jack's lead, sinking bullets into the spirits.

The dozen spirits scattered, becoming smoke on the wind. Their eyes and enormous claws remained solid, but their bodies did not, half opaque as they took to the sky. The one against the building jumped for Damien, one set of claws slicing up through the asphalt like butter. But, a need for melee meant Damien had little trouble putting a bullet through the creature's head, sending it toppling to the street, at his feet.

It started to get up, hole in its head filling in with a mix of the black tar, and crimson mist.

No one wanted to say it, but none of them knew anything about spirits. Jack was starting to learn a thing or two, but ultimately, he had no idea if spirits were immortal, or if guns and swords could kill them. And these spirits kept getting back, even as Jack and Damien continued to sink bullets into them. Another one dived at them, this one from the front, and Jack sank six bullets into its chest before it went down. It too started to get up, slowly but surely.

"Run!" Sky said, and it took to the air and flew away. Typical bird.

Ok, he took it back. Jack wouldn't blame a bird for running at the first sign of trouble. Strangle Mulder and Scully when you get back, just because.

Damien tapped him on the shoulder, and nodded his head back toward the path behind them. Empty street, no movement as far as Jack could see, and the curved streetlights pointed the way toward South Side. He was afraid to see what South Side might look like in this strange Shadow world, and it was a good mile or two run from here, anyway. Kindred could do that, no need for air, but could Fiona? It seemed like she couldn't transform into her horror, not completely, not unless she was in a nightmare.

"Cover me, Jack." Damien got onto a knee, put his sword away, and nodded his head toward Fiona. "Get on."

"Oh, my hero!" Giggling, always with the giggling. She hopped onto Damien's back, and like he'd done this a hundred times before, he started running, one arm hooked onto her thigh to keep her

secure as she hugged him. With his other arm free, he continued to fire his pistol, and unlike Jack, he didn't miss.

Well, at least this way they didn't have to worry about Fiona growing tired now. Jack broke into a full on run, letting a touch of the beast out, a little of the hungry animal channel into his legs, tapping into that Kindred part of him that had no issue running. The beast loved to run, hop building rooftops, stalk the shadows, and track prey. Running was all he needed, for now.

The spirits gave chase. Naturally. But they didn't run on legs to do it; hell, their legs had vanished. The dozen spirits floated after them, flowing left and right in the air like sharks, arms hanging underneath them and pulling back with the momentum of movement and the impact of the air they cut through. Some of the spirits merged into walls, others into the street. They flowed after the three running intruders like living shadow. As the three of them rounded a corner, one of the spirits hovered over a bench, and its claws sliced through its bent shape without resistance.

It was like running from a bunch of Wolverine ghosts. What the fuck?

"Fiona, can you not walk like you do in the nightmare?" he yelled, turning back and shooting at one of the spirits as it pulled ahead of the pack. Miss. Miss. Hit! It shrieked as lead tore through its demon eye, and it collided with the street, crimson and onyx splattering around, half of it in drops like tar, or thick blood. Half of it spreading into the air like mist. But, with time, the ethereal splatter of whatever the spirit was made of, began to pull itself back into its host.

"I cannae! Nae easily. Summoning Vrrall out 'ere is hard. It's... it's nae home, nae the nightmare. But if we can find a place dark and secluded, someplace quiet, I might be able to open a pathway back to my lair."

Easier said than done. The whole place was dark, but secluded wasn't going to happen, as every corner, every building, every object they passed, Jack was sure he saw something alive, or at least moving. More of those rat-like wisps along the corners, or new things he couldn't put a name to, but looked like slugs creeping up old buildings. Hairy, old slugs.

A shriek sent him down, falling to his chest hard enough for the street to tear into his suit, and some of his skin. Ripped fabric and bits of ash, lovely. One of the spirits flew over his head, and he shot at it from behind as it darted through the air, left and right. But, if it was going to consistently move like a shark, he could use that, and predict.

Miss. Hit! Getting better. The creature went down with another shriek, higher pitched, full of pain, and frustration. Physical things hurt them, but were they dying? How the fuck was he supposed to know, they kept getting back up.

He threw Fiona a glance as he got up, while Damien waited for him. Nice to know the man wouldn't leave him behind, when the shit hit the fan. There was so much shit, Jack struggled to see anything else. Trapped in a parallel dimension, with ghost things chasing them. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.

They rounded a corner, and Damien threw open a door of a nearby building. Front door of an apartment building.

"We're going to be trapped in here," Jack said, running up the stairs after Damien.

Damien shook his head. "We're going to get run down, if we stay out there." Once he stopped by an apartment door, he set Fiona down, and kicked it hard. Jack expected wood to splinter and the door to fly open; kicking open doors was a common Kindred tactic. But the wood did not budge. Tilting his head to the side, Damien tried again, driving his boot into the wood hard enough to send an echo through the hall. Nothing. "... what in the world."

The door snarled.

The three of them jumped back, and stared at a door that just made noise. It opened a couple of eyes from the white coating of cheap paint. Small eyes slitted vertically with black pupils. A lipless mouth followed, large and reaching from edge to edge, with bars for teeth, the sort of bars you'd find on a window in a rough neighborhood.

"Go away!" it said, voice full of deep thuds.

"Go away!" another door said.

"Go away!" said another.

"Ye've got to be shitting me." Fiona, caught between a laugh and hiccup, turned around and looked at the doors. They were all doing it, all sprouting eyes and mouths, all glaring at the intruders. Did people in Dolareido really live in this sort of paranoia? Maybe the Carthians had it right, and it wasn't as good a place to live as the Invictus and Antoinette liked to pass off.

Maybe he could talk past the door? Screams ripped down the hallway, putting an end to that idea as each door closed their eyes and mouths, becoming regular doors once more.

The three of them turned to face the sound, and began to back away from it. The hallway was lit with flickering light, bulbs that dipped in and out of different colors. Red to white, to black, and then

back again, as if the light itself was bleeding on them in rhythm with the delightful ear-splitting shrieks that filled the corridor.

Silence fell on them, heavy and cold. They continued to back away from the stairway, pistols up, swords out, and the two Kindred glancing over their shoulders to look behind them. The hallway came to a stop except for strange windows, which looked like they were being rained on. Despite the lack of rain. The carpet was damp, dark, and stained. The walls were cracked, bleeding rust, and showing other signs of wear and tear. It was one of the apartment buildings built on the North Side's edge, where people could find a cheap place to live without risking Devil's Corner shit. Maybe that's why the doors wouldn't let them in.

How much Dolareido reflected on itself, in this shadow world, was startling. But, it was also useful information. If he could predict what sort of reaction they'd get from environments based on what he knew about the city, maybe he could avoid situations like this.

Too little, too late. The silence pressed against them, and shadows beyond poked at the corners of the hallway. Outside, where they could run, the strange ghosts had been scary; inside a hallway, with no escape, the strange entities took on a new level of terrifying. Not Damien's fault, but Jack couldn't help but give the man a frown, as the shadows dancing on the edge of the corner ahead of them, started to emerge.

"Give us the flesh." Beedy eyes poked out from around the corner, but they didn't expose their bodies, yet. They carried darkness with them, like ink, or a poisonous fog. It hid their features, so only their glowing eyes cut through the obsidian nebula surrounding their guise.

"W-Why would a spirit want flesh?" Jack said, small sword in one hand, and pistol set to brace against his wrist. Whatever spirits were made of, they refused to die, no matter how many bullets the two Kindred sank into them. Fiona's monster limbs seemed to do better, but not much better. Would silver work? Probably not.

Another set of eyes poked out from around the distant corner, white slits cutting through the pulsing, bleeding light. Drops of black and red fell from wisps of onyx, and crept along the ruined carpet toward the three intruders. Every moment it got closer, darkness was drawn inward, like a vortex.

Vampires, and a Begotten of darkness, stepping back from shadows. Fucking lovely.

"Flesh, blood. Tools from the other side. Stupid creatures know not the power of their own bones, of their sinew." Claws reached out from the black, arms misty red and flowing with waves of darkness,

like food coloring dropped into water. Drip, drip. The claws came out further, then sank into the floor, as if the shitty carpet was nothing more than water.

The thing was talking about human bodies as if they were toolkits, as if the limbs, organs and contents thereof, were items to be used in... in a ritual. Crúac? But, there was more to crúac than just guts and bones, as far as Jack's paltry understanding was concerned. It didn't make sense.

“Did... did you have... anything to do with a ritual... with pictures? Drawn pictures?”

A laugh, a shriek mixed with ups and downs of tearing vocal cords. Another spirit crept in with the black, piercing eyes drifting down along the floor, then up against the opposite wall.

“One of us. Not one of us. Secrets, on the parchment, of the flesh and bone. A glimpse of who it is the monster speaks with. The trail for their goal.”

“W-What? I don't understand, I—”

The chorus of shrieks erupted, and the eyes and claws came with it. Darting out of the black, the spirits ripped and shredded the floor, ceiling, walls, and doors as they dashed for the three intruders. The doors opened their eyes and cried out in pain, eyes flitting around in a panic as claws sliced them open. Some of the doors fell apart, revealing obsidian endlessness beyond them, cold and empty.

Jack and Damien started backing up, each unloading bullets into the oncoming swarm. Screams echoed through the hallway, against the hollering doors that cried in pain, as more claws came for them. Rabid animals.

Fiona swung both her arms from side to side, as if knocking aside a great tide. The monster inside her snapped out with its limbs, and splattered white against the walls. Webbing, a mountain of it, in a pattern of chaos. Ropes, and ropes of it, joined wall to wall, thick strands, more than big enough to hang a man, covered the hallway passage.

The spirits crashed into them. Either they didn't see, or didn't expect them, many getting their claws trapped underneath the webbing at angles they couldn't use to cut. And as they struggled, the three of them continued to back up, shooting, and shooting.

Jack glanced over his shoulder. Window. If the doors weren't going to open for them, though even if they did, nothing seemed to exist behind them, then the window was the only way out. Jump out the window? He could handle the fall, Damien could handle the fall, and Fiona could too.

“Go, go!” Jack yelled as he slammed his back beside the windowsill, reloaded, and fired into the approaching black cloud. Swirling bits of red followed the pairs of eyes moving up and down in the



obsidian wall, and the webbing Fiona left disappeared into the rolling waves. Left, right, up, down, the eyes moved around and around, letting out shrieking cackles, and dragging a pair of claws up the walls, floor, and ceiling. Jack shot at them, taking his time to aim for a set of eyes each time, and squeezing the trigger with solid strength, Kindred strength. The odd sounding thud of bullets hitting spirit bodies joined high pitched shrieks, as pair, after pair, of slitted white eyes fell into the black. Then, got back up.

Damien shot the window. Jack half expected the window to not break, then announce its frustration to the intruders. But the satisfying sound of a bullet shattering glass filled the hallway, causing Jack to sigh, in relief, as he glanced at Damien, watching him work. Boot against the glass and wood, Damien made short work of the window. Before he could say anything, Fiona jumped out.

“Fiona!” Damien threw his hands up, before he, too, jumped through the window.

“Give us the woman,” the spirits said, their voice a harsh whisper between the gunshots. Many voices, fading in and out, speaking out of turn from each other. Voices overlapping, cutting through each other. “Give us the woman, Jack Terry, and we will tell you more of the ritual of faces.”

Ritual of faces. Name? Could be, or just what the spirits call it. Better than nothing, though. He had something to go with, something to sink his teeth into, and learn about. Later. For now, Geronimo.

They weren't up very high, so landing wasn't easy. He was light, undead; the combination made falling a couple floors easy to manage. His shoes didn't like it much, but his bones handled it fine. Fiona landed on her spider legs. Jack expected her to descend to her human feet, but she turned around, and sliced several spider blades at the window. The monster's blades slashed over Jack's head, crashing into the window, and slathering it in webbing.

A moment to catch their breath. Or for her to catch hers. The Kindred looked at each other, the web-covered window, then around themselves. Two courses of action: run, or ask Fiona to cover the apartment building entrance with webbing, and then run.

A shriek from around the corner, outside the building, made the decision for them. Jack looked left and right, and let his shoulders drop, as more of the deadly creatures started to emerge from shadows. Their eyes blended into the flickering darkness, slits of white joined by dripping blacks and reds that leaked onto the street before them. Cracks in the sidewalk filled with the dark liquid, mixing red and black into ribbons, little streams, and overflowing veins that bled onto the street.

“Leave the flesh.”

“Leave her to us.”

“Undead will be left alone.”

“But only if monster left behind.”

“Will dissect her.”

“See her insides.”

“Blood, muscle, organs, bile.”

“And the horror inside. Where is it? How does it work?”

“Taste. Let us taste the Begotten.”

If aliens came to Earth, and needed to ingest people to figure out how they functioned, Jack figured they'd sound like this.

“I'm nae letting ye touch me!” Fiona backed away, down the empty street toward South Side. But, even if they could run to South Side, there wasn't anything there to escape to. Where were they running?

They weren't running anywhere. They were just running. Sky said run, and unless the bird had some miracle planned for their rescue, their running was fruitless.

Damien didn't agree. He scooped up Fiona, and bolted, making his way to South Side. “Don't stop.”

“But—”

“Jack, keep running. We'll figure this out.”

Easier for a Mekhet to say in the circumstance. He could run, he could hide. A Ventrue was at his best when standing his ground, preferably with army of thralls and ghouls under his command. An army of animals, at his beck and call, would not go amiss, either.

But, he had none of that, so he did the only damn thing he could. He ran, firing shots behind him. Was Sky overhead? He didn't know, and couldn't pause to look. Run. All he could fucking do was run. All he could do was—the two vampires, and the monster luggage on Damien's back, came to a dead stop, and stared at the wall of water coming their way.

Holy fucking hell, had a meteor hit Earth? That's what happens in all the movies, a giant wave of water followed the meteor's impact, and half the world drowned, or some such. A quick glance up showed the moon was still there, so the Moon didn't fall to Earth. And the water wasn't coming at five-hundred miles an hour; maybe a tenth of that. But there was no denying, it was a giant wave of water,

fifty feet high, hitting the rooftops of North Side factories and warehouses, as it crashed down and around them.

Jack threw up his hands, covered his face, and waited. He couldn't drown, he hoped. He didn't need to breathe but considering where he was, for all he knew a giant wave in the Shadow world was more than capable of drowning a vampire. Maybe he'd melt away, like in some vampire myths. Maybe he'd walk on water.

Whatever it'd do to him, he didn't get to find out, as the crashing tide split around him and Damien at the last moment. Snapping out and back in, whipping around them with ferocious drive, the great water smashed into the oncoming, shrieking dozen of pursuing death creatures. He turned, and stared on, as thunder rumbled through his body, enough to make his feet inch along the vibrating street. It would not have surprised him if one of the spirits had started to cry out 'Moses!', as the collapsing walls of compressing terror crashed in upon the ghastly creatures. Poor Ramesses.

Like drops of red and black food coloring, lost to insurmountable amounts of crashing water, the spirits began to fade away into the unending liquid. They cried and shrieked, alien sounds that reminded Jack of a fox's scream. Bone chilling. It was impossible to see what happened to them after the first ten feet of water, as the splashing white foam and rapid, crashing waves disguised their journey, well and beyond what he could see. But, with how hard the water was slamming against the buildings, any human would have cracked like an egg on contact.

With time, the water began to fade, and Damien set Fiona down before drawing his sword once more. Jack still had his, but the hell was a sword going to do against water? He stared into the path ahead, where they had planned to run; there was now a river cutting around them. Nope, no glass between him and the water, but Jack peered into the water anyway, wondering if fish would be swimming by, like in one of those underwater aquariums.

The strange places a mind went when death was on your door. Maybe this was why Fiona always turned into a weird, giggling creature when she was super excited.

The water was eventually gone, draining into the gutters and manholes, and leaving behind a goddess of the Nile. Jack tilted his head to the side, and stared at the beautiful entity, with white wings, rising high, and catching the moonlight. Whatever the wings were attached to, it had womanly curves, formed in the clear blue liquid body. The goddess had no arms, but a human-ish body nonetheless, with jaw, neck, shoulders and hips. Its legs merged into a flowing blue wave which seemed to churn on itself, over the asphalt. Mist sparkled and flowed out of the woman's shoulders where arms should have been, and the sparkling crystal spread outward, nudging against the dead streetlights, rekindling them.

“... you are Terry?” she... it said, as it came toward them. “And you two must be Damien and Fiona. You are lucky my pack did not catch you during the misunderstanding, monster, or your death would have been sure.”

“I, um... your pack?” Pack? The misunderstanding had been with the werewolves, but—“You work with Avery?”

“She does.”

Jack felt every muscle, every tight, gripping, squeezing bit of his insides relax, as he recognized Clara’s voice. She stepped out from behind the strange spirit, wearing jeans, brown hiking boots, and a loose white shirt. Casual, comfy, and beautiful against her tan skin tint.

“Hey, Clara.” Wait, shit! They weren’t supposed to be here. Crap! This wasn’t a good thing, but at least it was better than being cut up by those other things. “Um... how’s it going?”

“Oh, you know, fine. Was hunting some red wraiths, until apparently, someone stirred the hornets’ nest. Every red wraith in the area converged here.” She nodded up to one of the rooftop ledges, where Sky had perched. “And this fucker found me and Carter, said you were in trouble.”

Carter, right, one of the werewolves getting a new apartment, courtesy of the Invictus. Older, and tough as nails by the look of him.

“Um, er... yeah, uh—”

“This one,” the water creature said as it pointed at Fiona with one of its angel wings, “tore open the verge... but it is closed once more. So, not torn, then. Opened?”

Fiona, with a single nod and silly giggle, hopped off of Damien’s back. “Aye! I go where I want. I’m a—”

Damien snapped his hand out, and covered the girl’s mouth. Yeah, no need to follow that up, Fiona talked too much.

Carter stepped forward, snarling, and cracked his knuckles as he came in closer and closer. “If Begotten can open portals, then she’s too dangerous to be left alive.”

“Whoa, whoa!” Jack threw up his hands, and took a step forward, getting between the oncoming old man, and Jack’s two friends. “No need for that, and you don’t have the right to make that call. Fiona goes where she wants, and she wanted to show us the damage to the... verge, whatever that is.”

Carter didn't seem too convinced. He reached out, and shoved Jack aside, with all the grace of a bully. High school flashback. Funny thought, before the asphalt greeted Jack and his torn up shirt and jacket, again.

He wasn't worried about Fiona and Damien though; Damien was an assassin and Fiona was freakishly strong when she chose. The fragile truce between the wolves and vamps didn't need more shit dumped on it though, and someone did love to throw shit at it.

Groaning, he got back up, and marched back over to Carter. The old man was built strong, not fitting his age at all, but the scars and gray hair didn't lie. If he'd shaved or buzzed his head, Jack was sure he'd recognize the man as a drill sergeant from any number of old war movies set in Vietnam. Now if only the old wolf would unleash an either unrelenting wave of insults, or a particularly malicious insult that rendered someone a sobbing mess in only a few words, the image would be complete.

"Ye want to fight, old man? Fucking mon' then! Ye bawbag." The small girl took a few practice swings at the air as the somewhat large, tall man, who might as well have been made out of steel, came in closer.

Then Damien stepped in the way. Without losing a beat, he ejected the magazine from his pistol, slipped in a new one, and manually ejected the old bullet by racking the slide, all without letting go of his sword. But, there was no need to manually eject the old bullet.

"You don't own this world," he said. "You want to keep things secret from us? Fine. But you have no basis for telling us we can't be here. We're exploring, learning, and you have no right to make us do otherwise." Steel face, eyes locked, the Mekhet's eyes might as well have been a pistol barrels, with the look he was giving Carter.

Both Jack and Fiona raised a brow, and stared at the normally calm man. So did Carter, before he smirked, and drew a hand back.

"You expect a bullet to stop—"

Damien pulled the trigger, and Carter let out a scream as he fell to his ass. Big and bad drill sergeant Carter gasped and clutched his jeans covered leg, staring at the wound, his mouth open and eyes wide. The blood splatter was unusually massive, considering it was a typical 9mm pistol, but as Carter's scream turned into a guttural, growling snarl, hands still clutching the leg, Jack understood.

Silver bullet. It'd left a shredded hole through the wolf's leg. The flesh bulged with veins and flexing muscle around the damaged skin. The veins show red, blue, and bits of black, as if the silver was poison. But then, if someone had shot a bullet made of fire at Jack, he'd be screaming in pain, too.

"You fucking maggot!" Carter struggled to get back to his feet, but the bloodshot eyes and trembling body made it all too obvious he wouldn't be doing that for a minute or two. Caught by surprise by his bane, the werewolf held out a hand, and Clara helped the man to his feet. Er, foot, poor guy forced to stand on the one good leg.

Jack expected a follow up: something to explode, Clara unleashing hell, or the strange water goddess-spirit thing with the soft, white eyes half hidden inside the flowing, crystal water face, to unleash a special kind of torture on them. Or maybe just for Fiona to take Damien's actions as an invitation to go all out on the offensive, instead of the warning shot that it was. But, no one moved, jumped or started shooting or slicing. The only person who made any more noise, other than Carter's snarling and growling — very guttural despite still being in human form — was Sky, crowing and cawing.

Jack sighed in relief, and stepped between everyone again. "Ok, Damien's views aside, we might have overstepped ourselves a bit here. We had planned to go back once we were done getting our toes wet, but... those weird, um, you called them red wraiths? They ganged up on us. Apparently, they wanted to get their claws into some meat." He gestured back to Fiona, the only one of the three of them who qualified.

Clara smirked at him, but when she opened her mouth, the water creature spoke, instead, sliding forward over the shallow water beneath her.

"You wounded one of my pack," it said, billowing mist as a gesture at Carter.

"Your pack?" Damien said. "Thought it was Avery's pack."

"I have entered a contract with Avery. You need not know the details, except that if you wound one of mine, you contend with me." The angel of water started to rise higher, and higher, water pulling in from the gutters, from the windows that were forever wet, from the cracks in the old and worn asphalt, from everywhere. Higher, until she was ten feet up, and her white angel wings grew larger along with her. "You need not permission to be here. I need not permission to kill you, either."

Ah, shit.

Clara stepped around the flowing water, jeans getting wet as she stepped onto the curving waves which formed the spirit's lower body. "Calm down Flow, he's not our enemy. Much as this little fucker, and his friends, have a habit of showing up where they shouldn't be, we owe him our lives."

"... sympathy is disaster in the making, Clara," the singing voice said, words cutting the opposite direction of the angelic voice. Flow shrank herself back down to normal human size, and flowed over to Carter, before encompassing his leg in some crystal blue. Within moments, the wound began to heal. Shards, of what Jack assumed was the silver metal bullet, were removed, and Carter breathed heavy sighs of relief as the wound closed.

"You didn't say that to Avery the day you met her." Rolling her eyes, Clara got down on a knee, and examined the wound, as well.

"That was not Dolareido. We must be strict here."

"Uh huh."

"Your juvenilism will get you killed, Clara." Shaking her head and shrugging her wings, the water goddess flowed away, and took position higher in the air, waves pushing up her body until she was looking down at them and some of the shorter buildings. Nice vantage point.

Ok, time to take stock of the ridiculousness that was his current situation. He was in a parallel Dolareido world. He, his fellow vampire, and their spider monster friend, were just on the run from a bunch of weird wraith things who very much wanted to cut her open and play with her insides. Two werewolves were upset at the three trespassers, because they were on the wrong side of the Gauntlet. And, the three troublemakers had been saved by some sort of water goddess creature thing.

The Prince was never going to believe this.

"Um... Flow?" he said. One mystery at a time, what the fuck was Flow.

"Flowing Sanctuary." Patting Carter on the shoulder, she nodded in Flow's direction, and with a grunting sigh, the man walked off to join her. It. "Our totem."

"Totem?"

"Totem."

He tilted his head to the side, and rubbed his buzzed hair. Totem? "I... I'm picturing Native Americans, or First Nations people, and totems."

"Well aren't you a racist fucker."

“W-What? No! I... um... I plead ignorance.” He threw up his hands. No knowledge whatsoever on the topic. But, she said totem, and there were spirits, so of course that’s where his mind went.

She rolled her eyes, and laughed. Yeah, make fun of the young kid for not knowing anything about this stuff. Must be what she was thinking, cause she came forward, pat him on the shoulder, winked, and started walking, arm hooking around the shoulder too so he had no choice but to follow.

“Relax. You had a giant bird called City Sky helping you, so, yeah.” She smirked at him, then offered both Damien and Fiona a nod as she guided Jack past them, and back toward the road they’d been running on. “And you’re right, we don’t have a right to keep you out of here. But that doesn’t mean we won’t.”

Yeah, saw that coming. He glanced over his shoulder, at Damien and Fiona, but the two of them were busy keeping a close eye on the strange water spirit, and the very angry Carter. The first time anyone had used silver on the wolves, as far as Jack knew. It could have gone a lot, lot worse. Fur flying, ashes too, lots of blood, screams, and carnage; that’s what Jack was expecting. Instead, a single incident shut down a wolf who thought a little too highly of himself.

He should have trusted Damien would make a rational decision, 'cause he did. A leg shot was good. He could have shot him in the chest, and potentially killed him, or in the head, and guarantee it.

“We’re not here just randomly exploring,” he said. “A ritual’s been performed, back in the real—”

“Physical world.” She tightened her arm around his neck, enough to hurt a little, before releasing him. Sighing, she walked over to one of the wet, warped benches, sat down, and gestured to the bent street lamp which was turned almost corkscrew toward the city’s center. “Shadow world is as real as any other.”

“Right, I mean... well, you know what I meant. Back there, a ritual’s been performed, and I’m trying to rack down details.”

“Ritual? Fucking Jacob up to more shit again?”

He sat down next to her, and looked around at the spirit world, the Shadow world. Still a little ways from South Side, and he was already starting to feel a bit overwhelmed at all the strangeness. The larger buildings in the distance didn’t look normal, some of them bent and warped in subtle ways only someone who’d been born in the city would notice. He couldn’t tell from here if they’d have the same water running on their windows, but it wouldn’t surprise him. At this point, blood on the windows wouldn’t surprise him, either.

“We think it was the hunters.”



“Hunters, doing a ritual?”

“Jeremiah and Angela aren’t exactly normal hunters. Azamel thinks some old woman who works for them did a ritual. It was... pretty nasty.” He looked back down the road they’d run down, and gulped as he forced himself to examine the memory. Red wraiths chasing him, hovering after him, after his friends, claws and bodies dripping a weird blood as they moved, claws slicing through everything.

It wasn’t so bad compared to what it could have been. The wraiths had come up to them, talked to them, practically introduced themselves. Of all the ways to meet sick fucks like that, wanting to claw up Fiona and dissect her, out in the open in the moonlight wasn’t so bad. Except, now, he wouldn’t be able to shower without thinking they were ready to pounce him whenever he closed his eyes. Great, just great.

“Natasha was examining the scene, too,” he said. “She might have told Arturo and Matthew.”

“Maybe. When was this?”

“Must be... six, or seven hours ago.” Yeah, daylight was coming, and he didn’t want to be outside when that happened, Shadow world or not. “At least, that’s when we found it. Ritual was done well before that. Weeks, maybe months before.”

She threw up her hands before leaning forward, to let them dangle off her knees. “Well, you’ve seen them, and, yeah, I guess you know they’re out for flesh. You have any idea how fucking weird that is? Spirits sustain on essence, not flesh.”

“I uh... I don’t think they were looking to eat it. More like... looking to... study it?”

“Slightly more viable, but still fucking strange.” She looked left, looked right, and leaned in closer to him. Too close, close enough her breath was on his ear, close enough he could tell she was flirting him, indirectly. “Avery sent Carter and I here to check out where these wraiths were going. Where did they find you?”

“Don’t tell her!” A caw and a gush of air later, the enormous crow came down to join them. It stood on the street, preened its feathers a few times, and shook its head. “Uratha are bullies.”

“We already know Begotten can get in here,” she said. “But, if Fiona doesn’t want to share—”

“Aye, I dinnae want to share with the likes of ye.” The redhead marched up to Clara, and glared down at her, height advantage given by Clara still sitting down. “Sky is right, ye werewolves are bullies. Mean, loud, bullies.”

Jack started rubbing his head again. Being the in-between for the Uratha and Begotten, when dealing with Kindred, was tough enough. Please don't make things worse, Fiona.

Flow flowed over to them, Carter behind her, and the waves lapped gently against the street and Jack's feet as the spirit circled around them. Far as he could tell, the spirit was glaring at Sky, crystal white, glowing eyes piercing through him like an actual angel warrior's might. Intimidating, to say the least, and Jack kept glancing her way as she gently moved about.

"Back to the ritual," he said, before this spiraled out of control. Too much going on, and he needed to make something of this, before they were taken back to the physical world.

He described the ritual, in perhaps a little less detail than he should have; his Kindred prerogative to hold onto details coming through a bit, and wait for Clara's reaction. Some nods as he described the symbols, the skeleton, the blood and arrangement, but her eyes went wide as he described the pictures. She gulped when he described the picture of him.

"Everything sounds like someone was communicating with these weird red wraiths," she said, "but... the pictures... that doesn't."

"It's strange! It's haunting," he said. "Fucking has me looking over my shoulder all the damn time."

"Let's talk more, when we get back."

"I—"

"We're going. Now."

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Eric~~

So this was Azamel, old Granny sitting in a shitty old chair, smoking a cigarette. Like a scene from his childhood.

"This is the Eric Fiona spoke of?" She blew a puff of smoke at him from her perch on the weird concrete stage. "Attractive man. No wonder Fiona was interested in you."

"Um, thanks." He scratched the back of his neck, and looked at the rest of them. "Mark, right?"

The man shrugged, nodded, then returned to his book. Well, so much for conversation.

“I suppose you are looking for Fiona,” Azamel said.

“He wasn’t, actually.” Athalia shrugged, and gestured to him once she’d climbed up onto the stage and took a seat. “Fucker just had his first change. And based on the few words I picked up, he’s killed some people, eaten them, and now he’s terribly worried about his cat.”

“... that’s the long and short of it, I guess. Athalia thinks I should hide out here, with you guys, for now, at least.” Which seemed like an unusual, and random offering of goodwill from someone he’d never talked to. Was Fiona talking him up? Having someone in his corner was a nice change of pace.

“That would be prudent,” the old woman said, blowing smoke out through her nose as she talked. “Of course, if we do you this favor, I expect the favor to be returned some day.”

“Of course.” He was in over his head, so deep, so fucking deep, that he needed to grab onto something before he drowned, anything. This old woman he trusted about as much as his ex wife throwing him a rope. “I... I really would like to see if... if my cat is alright.”

Mark smirked at him, but returned to his book. Eric was almost tempted to say something stupid, like ‘help a brother out’, but he would have choked on the cliché.

“When Fiona returns, she can go search. But I doubt the cat survived your anger, Eric, if this was your first change.”

“Any idea when that’ll be?”

“No. And I do not lie, about your pet’s chances of survival. The old myth goes that a wolf hunts those they love, when they change. Myths are born from truths, mixed with ignorance, in the dark.”

Shit. He couldn’t leave Kat behind. Not a chance, no way. Only damn thing on the planet he trusted, at this point, was that cat.

“Then, I decline. Sorry, but I’m going back. Thanks for the offer.” He nodded to Azamel, and Athalia, before he turned and walked away. He could be sneaky, right? Figure out a way back into the apartment, see if his cat was there... see if he killed her. Fuck, what would he do if he’d killed Kat? Stomach full of human flesh, that was one thing, but knowing he’d kill his pet and only friend was a fate he wasn’t sure he could stomach.

“They might kill you,” Athalia said, unmoving from her perch. “You don’t want to hide here with us? We could use a werewolf who owes us. But if the blood leeches think you’ve violated the Masquerade to a large degree, they’ll end you.”

“Yeah, I know.” He shivered at the memory of the white-haired woman. Tall as the tower she commanded, her amber red gaze confident and calculating. The queen of Dolareido. Yeah, she’d kill him, and now that he could understand the memory, and understand the feeling looking at that woman put into his gut, he knew he wouldn’t have a chance against her in a fight.

But he needed to see, now, what happened, what he did, how bad it was. And god damn it, he needed to see if Kat was alright.

“I’ll go with him.”

Eric looked over his shoulder, and the two ladies raised a brow as Mark hopped off the concrete stage, leaving his book behind. A thicker man, dark skin like Eric, short curly hair, and some fat to go with what Eric could see was some muscle mass underneath his hoodie. Eric knew his type, from his drinking days, the guy at the bar who hangs by himself, watches people, gets drunk, occasionally gets into fights when they drift his way, and does more than hold his own. Some fat to go with the muscle was a very, very effective way to make a body strong and resilient, when weight classes weren’t a factor.

His voice sounded plain, but the man did not seem plain. He seemed gross. He smelled gross. He felt gross, the air around him, the presence he took with him. A glance down at Eric’s arms showed there wasn’t any creepy crawls on his skin, but this Mark fellow made it feel like there was, and it only got worse the closer he got.

“Why?” Eric said.

Mark offered a small, backward salute to Azamel, and nodded toward the tunnel Eric came from. Deep breaths, deep breaths, nothing to fear from these monsters, they were friends of Fiona’s, and you know the circumstance they’re in. If you’re a freak, and apparently you are, other freaks should be your friends. He might not be the same type of freak, but a freak anyway.

Was freak PC? How the fuck do you ask a question like that?

“I want to see the fallout,” Mark said. “We’re not on the best terms with the vamps, and this situation is a good test.”

“Test for what?”

“See what happens if a Begotten let their hunger out, and the vamps went on the offensive to stop it.”

“... you’d eat people?”

“Depends on the Begotten.” He shrugged again, and continued down the path, hands in his jean pockets, eyes on the tracks ahead of him. Casual, calm, creepy. “Some of us? Yeah, some of us would do exactly what you might have done. So, let’s go find out.”

“Alright, sure. Keep an eye open for my cat, too. Black and gray lines, white tummy. Soft face.”

“... you’re the only werewolf on the planet who owns a cat, I’m pretty sure.”

Eric smirked, and shrugged. “She’s a dumbass. I love her.”

The two continued in silence after that. Attempts at conversation with the man went nowhere, as this Mark fellow was lost in his mind, thinking about God knows what. The most annoying thing was, as they walked for minutes, through the winding maze of the depths of Dolareido’s guts, the smell of rotting flesh. It wasn’t coming from Eric, and it wasn’t coming from the stuff Eric vomited earlier; that had its own unique smell. Whatever the scent was, it was distinctly the smell of rotting, decaying flesh. It made Eric’s hair stand up straight, despite Mark’s relaxed body language. Eric could feel that the man wasn’t using any aggressive body language, but that smell carried its own threats the man couldn’t put a finger on.

The smell of two undead joined the subtle smell of necrosis. Eric slowed down a bit, but Mark shrugged and gestured ahead. Keep walking then, it’s only two Kindred, what threat could two Kindred pose?

Or Mark was looking for an excuse to fight.

“Eric!”

“... Jessy? I...” God damn he was happy to see her; especially happy that she wasn’t greeting him with a hail of gunfire. He smiled at her, and his smile doubled as his eyes fell to the cat in her arms.

“Kat! Oh thank fucking god, I thought I might have—”

“So it was you.” The man next to her was tall, wearing a suit that must have cost thousands. With his combed back blond hair, broad shoulders, and clean shaven look, he might as well have had ‘mafia’ tattooed to his forehead.

And Eric didn’t like the way the man was looking at him. It was obvious enough the big guy wasn’t happy, and was now thinking of Eric as the werewolf who had caused unwanted damage, but there was something else to him, too, something in his eyes made Eric want to avert his gaze before it became dangerous. Almost as if the vampire — and he was a vampire, from the smell — was going to

attack Eric with his eyes alone. Jessy hadn't exactly shared many details with him about how vamps worked, but he'd seen enough vampire movies to know some of them could use mind powers. Not that movies were the best source, but better than nothing.

"I... uh... yeah." Eric folded his arms across his chest, and did his best to look apologetic, but not too apologetic, something in between, like 'I'm sorry, but it was inevitable' sort of sorry. Made him feel like a politician. "Apparently... I'm a werewolf."

The big guy snorted, and looked to Jessy. She had something between an awestruck smile, and a know-it-all grin. Meeting the man's gaze, she raised Kat up to her cheek, and rubbed her face into the cat's body. Kat, being Kat, responded with a quiet meow, some loud purrs, and full on return snuggles. Not like Kat would care she was surrounded by werewolves, monsters, and vampires; if anything, Kat was overjoyed to be rubbing against an undead creature. Damn cat.

"Sorry about Pitt," Jessy said, still snuggling Kat. "You really tore the place up though, made a huge mess, and now we got a clean up crew working overtime dealing with it. Can you fill us in on what happened?"

"He—"

Mark held up a hand, turned around, and pulled Eric back with him a few steps. "Careful what you say," he said into Eric's ear. "You want out from under their thumb? Don't give them information so easily."

"The fuck do you care?"

"Azamel doesn't get along with the Kindred of Dolareido. And now that you've pissed off the vamps, damaged their Masquerade, neither do you. We could use a friend like you." Well, at least the man was honest.

"I get... along..." He glanced over his shoulder at the two vampires. Jessy was grinning at him, in a way he hadn't really expected, almost playful, as she gently swished side to side with Kat, cradling her. The other guy was in a permanent state of subtle frown. "If they wanted to kill me, don't you think they would have done so by now? I'm sure the two of them have guns, and vampire shit at their disposal."

"You underestimate how strong you are now, as an Uratha. And besides, Kindred never do things directly. You'll figure that out soon enough." The man nodded, turned back to the two vampires, and waited.

Never do things directly. Eric didn't like the sound of that, and this big guy with Jessy did seem like that sort. But then, the fuck did Eric know about shit like this? Mark was being upfront with him about things, about needing a friend, but Jessy had been upfront with him too.

Sighing, Eric stepped forward to speak with the Kindred once again. Less reacting, more thinking, make intelligent choices about what to say next.

"Pitt showed up, said Long was going to send Xnomina a message, about not being bullied around anymore. My body was supposed to be the message, I guess." Wouldn't have surprised him if Pitt was going to write a literal message in his flesh though. Slimy fucker.

He ate the slimy fucker. The rush of the kill was pleasing and satisfying in his memories, like a warm blanket on a cold day. The feel of human flesh going down his throat and into his belly, was euphoria, ambrosia, divine and addictive. Nausea hit him again, and he struggled to stay standing. Ignore it, ignore the fact you ate Pitt, that you ate his goons, ignore that you swallowed bits of their muscle, their limbs, their brains.

"We figured as much," the big guy said. "But, instead of just killing them, you created a huge mess, woke up every person for half a mile with the racket, left a huge amount of evidence of a paranormal, and have undoubtedly turned a bad situation with Terra Den into a catastrophe."

"Julias, come on, he saved your kid's life. Cut him a little slack."

Julias was his name, then. That was the name of the man Beatrice said she was dating, whose mansion she'd taken Jack to.

"... you're Jack's sire," Eric said.

The vampire snarled, and glared down at Jessy. Both she and Kat shrank a little. No hiding that body language: Julias was a deadly man if he chose to be. Eric's new instincts were in overdrive, in a very blatant screaming-in-his-ear sort of way. Be careful with this man.

"Your help in saving Jack's second life has already been returned by the Prince, Eric. That deal she made with you was continued by us." The man, arms folded across his chest as well, tapped his finger against his bicep. "And you'll find disturbing the Masquerade is not only more important than a single Kindred's life, but you were specifically warned—"

Eric stepped forward, and let his arms hang, available, in case he had to get physical. After everything that had happened tonight, he didn't want to get physical. It was late, very late, and all he wanted to do was go to bed, curl up with Kat, and sleep.

“I didn’t know this would happen. I didn’t know a slimy loan shark was going to show up at my door and try and kill me, mister big bad vampire. I didn’t know I... I’d change...”

“You didn’t know?” Jessy said.

He shook his head. “No.” Don’t give them anymore details than they need, than will serve you. Much as he felt he could trust Jessy, Mark had a point. If he was going to get out from under their thumb, it was in his interest to not let them know everything, so he could get some damn control of his life back. “Hit me like a fucking train, out of nowhere, and I... can barely remember what I was doing.”

“... ok.” Julias began to pace side to side, head down and chin in his fingers. “Much as I’m sure this Begotten here is trying to recruit the new werewolf, understand that this is a Kindred city, Eric. You do what we tell you to do. You caused some major damage, and the clean up is problematic.”

“I can—”

“Unless you are versed in mind breaking or forensics, shut the fuck up. The issue is that news like that inevitably leaks, in some fashion or another. You know damn well we have a hunter problem, as is, and there’s no way we’ll be able to cover up every detail about this event so they won’t know. And being that they’re human, some we won’t recognize could have already visited the crime scene by now.”

Thinking ten steps ahead seemed to be the man’s game. Eric could respect that, as long as it didn’t mean biting Eric in the ass over something that wasn’t his fault.

“... so what do I have to do to make the vamps happy?”

Maybe vamps wasn’t the right word, cause Julias eyed him with a little more malice than Eric was hoping for. Learning how to be PC in this strange world of darkness was going to be tricky.

“Go talk to Avery and get yourself put on a leash.”

“Avery?” Play dumb, see what he says.

“Leader of an Uratha pack, the Hunters in Darkness, here in Dolareido. Jessy, take this man to his new apartment. He’s your problem until Avery talks to him.”

The Kindred grinned a sneaky, deadly grin, like a child given access to their first BB gun. “Yes, sir.”

“... ok.” So much for not being under anyone’s thumb.



Jessy walked over to him, winked, threw Mark a snarl, and nodded in the direction of a different fork in the tunnels. “What about you, boss?”

“Gonna head back to the scene, talk with Vivi, and make sure everything’s fine.” The man made the same sort of snarl Jessy did, again aimed at Mark, who stood there with all the defiance of a lazy statue.

No gunfire, no claws or fangs, no blood, no nothing. All in all, coming out of the altercation with his life was a pretty big step up from the horrible execution he was expecting. He wasn’t happy though, another leash on his life. At least Jessy was enjoying this, grin permanent and unending.

~~~~~

“Holy shit.”

As a kid, it was always a delight to watch movies where someone who was poor suddenly became rich. Thrust into a life of money and options, thrust into luxury; the comparison of their old lives to the new life of indulgence was escapism at its finest. Those movies always ended with the poor-become-rich getting to keep their money, to some extent at least, and coming to some sort of moral lesson that allowed them to become a better person. Eric would be content with the former; he didn’t need the latter.

The whole place was reeked of slick, modern, rich, and technology. It smelled of chemicals, the sort used to keep a place sparkling clean and sterile. Sterile was a pretty good word to describe the giant apartment in general, now that he thought about it, as he kicked off his boots, and started walking around. The walls were mostly windows, but the drapes — with switches to control them — might as well have been made of black panther fur, far as his eyes could tell.

A giant, open kitchen, with an island, black upon the white tile floor. Not cheap tile either, but something that might as well have been expensive marble. There was a crystal thing hanging over the dining table, with lights inside bathing the table in gentle waves. The table itself was glass, thick glass, with red wood legs from a probably endangered species of tree. The walls were white like the floor, and the cupboards, the shelves, all of it was stainless steel color, screaming of professionalism despite how it was an apartment, not a chef’s kitchen.

Jessy winked at him, and set down Kat. “I know cats can... take time to... the fuck?”

Eric laughed as Kat ignored Jessy's otherwise true comment, and walked over to the couch. Black, and from the scent Eric's new nose picked up, it was real leather. It wouldn't have surprised him if Kat started to scratch it, with no scratch tower in her new home, instead she jumped on its back, and looked out through the enormous window behind it. Perch mode.

"She'll be there for a couple hours," he said, sitting down on the couch as well and reaching out to pet her behind the ear.

"A couple hours? Analyzing her new view?"

"I doubt she's analyzed a thought in her life, cat or not." He shrugged and motioned for Jessy to join him on the absurdly expensive couch. "You know if you hadn't shown up in the tunnels with Kat, tonight would have gone much differently."

"I can imagine, seeing that we found you with Mark. We're not on good terms with the Begotten, Invictus especially. How'd you wind up with them?"

"I was... on the run, I guess. Hard to remember the details, blurry and fading, like a dream. I remember running into the sewers, because I knew... the territory, the land, had a network of tunnels. Something in my brain kicked into... a mode. I had to go to safe ground until I could take my home back. My... den." Den was as good a word as any, and it was how his mind was framing things. But now he had a new den, in the same territory. That was normal enough, he supposed, for his new instincts to adapt. A new, better den.

"The Begotten do hang out in the tunnels a lot," she said.

"I ran into Athalia, and I... tried to kill her. Didn't go so well."

"Ha! Beat up by a girl." She sat down with him, gave him a soft punch, and winked at him. "I've never seen Athalia fight. What was that like?"

"Like trying to fight a monster. Bones, claws, and spikes... and she could fight in total darkness. It was startling, to say the least." He made a couple of quiet kissing sounds in Kat's direction, coaxing the dumb cat to come his way. Meow meow and a hop later, she was on his lap, smiling up at him. Far as he knew, cats didn't smile the way humans did, but Kat might as well have been, with the big grin on her face as she got comfortable on his lap. Purring like a motor, she looked between the two of them, before burying her face against his stomach. "She knocked some sense into me at least."

"Still can't believe you're a fucking werewolf. That complicates so many things, but at the same time, it's really fucking awesome." She got in closer, and licked one of her fangs with blatant boasting. "Vamps could really use a Uratha in our corner."

In their corner. Was he in their corner? He didn't think he was, at least, not by choice. Far as he was concerned, they had a gun to his head and he had to play by their rules, or they'd shoot. That included Jessy, much as he was enjoying her company, and she him, evidently.

"The Begotten were sure you'd be a problem, that you'd kill me if I'd made too big a mess." And he agreed with the monsters.

"We wouldn't do that unless it was warranted."

"What qualifies as warranted?"

"If you weren't willing to reconcile." She sighed, and looked down. Didn't take a genius to read the body language; she'd been avoiding saying things directly, and he was calling her out on it. "You're already working for us, so that's fine. But, sometimes, a vamp can go frenzy, and they don't come back. I imagine it's an even bigger issue for werewolves."

"Frenzy?" Asking about it was pointless; he could tell what she meant when she said it. He felt like he was in a constant state of frenzy the moment the transformation had hit him. Didn't surprise him that vampires could do that, and it scared the shit out of him that they could succumb to it. Like she said, a bigger issue for werewolves.

"The beast inside craves blood, above all else. The hunger can overwhelm, and you give into it, ride it like a wave, and sometimes vamps don't come back from that." She shrugged, got up, and started to walk around the inordinately expensive apartment. "The mess you made is what a frenzied vamp might do, if they were pissed enough, and ravenous enough. If you weren't able to come to your senses, we'd have put you down."

"Or try to."

That got her. She flinched, looked his way, looked at Kat, then started to drift again.

"Yeah. You're Uratha now, which means you're dangerous. Julias is going to make sure everyone knows that, and now... now I don't know. It's a weird situation to be in."

"You're telling me," setting his hand on Kat's head, and scratching her cheek and ear, as he considered, "... what am I supposed to do now?"

"Boss said talk to Avery, get a leash... but, well, fuck him."

"... I'm sorry, what?" He raised a brow, and tilted his head to the side. Kat didn't care, and pushed her head into his hand with the sudden cease of his scratching, demanding more.

“I’m saying, you’re a fucking werewolf now.” As if lightning had struck her, she paused, and looked up with a snap of her fingers. “A fucking werewolf, Eric. You have any fucking idea how dangerous that makes you? You know how few vamps can pose a threat to you? Ancilla and elders, that’s it, and the city isn’t exactly swimming in them. The overwhelming majority of vamps are neonates, no threat to a werewolf. That makes you,” she pointed a finger at him, grin included, “a major player.”

“And, I’m doing... what, with that?”

“You’re going to play the game! The Danse Macabre.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really not following.”

“You’re going to lie. To Avery. To Julias. To the Prince.”

“... you want me to lie, to these people I’m pretty sure are more than capable of tearing me in half with their pinky finger?”

She jumped onto the couch, her weight causing the leather to tremble, and bounce Eric an inch. “Well, before, you were agreeing to do what we told you, because you didn’t have options. Now you’re strong enough to give us pause. You’re strong enough that, you can just play along, knowing you could break out of your golden chains whenever you want to.”

Golden chains. Guess she was onto the gilded cage metaphor he’d been subconsciously framing this whole situation as.

“So in either circumstance, I—”

“In either circumstance, you get to have a sweet new place to live, lots of money, and get to slip your foot in the door with a lot of factions. The Begotten desperately want a werewolf on their side, cause they really are the underdog in this shitstorm. The Kindred will want to keep you even more controlled now; expect another meeting with the Prince, and maybe one with the other covenants, too. And most of all, the Uratha are going to want you in their corner.”

“What makes you think I won’t join the monsters or werewolves? It’s the vamps who tried to put me in a cage.” He brought Kat up to his shoulder, so her front paws could press on him, giving her easy access to rub her head into his neck.

“Because the monsters only know how to chase their hunger, and the werewolves are... I don’t know, honestly. You’d be better off asking them, I guess. They seem obsessed with doing some sort of

ancient duty, hunting spirits and shit.” She shrugged, scooted in closer, and set her fingers to Kat’s neck. Immediate purrs. Slut. “Something to do with the moon, and some Father Wolf or some shit.”

Try as he might to hide it, her words struck something in his mind. Glass broke, and the splintering cracks wore away at the wall until it fell apart, shards dancing along the remains of his mind. Father Wolf. The moon... Luna. Memories bubbled, new memories, images of things, of teeth and claw. They weren’t his, he didn’t own them, but they came up, anyway. Old claws, covered in ancient dirt and older blood broke free of prehistoric graves in his brain matter, each holding up signs written in crimson earth.

You’re not the same anymore.

You can’t run from what you’ve become.

You have a duty now, Uratha.

They’ll come for you now, Uratha.

With web, with claws, with tail and fang, feather and tongue, they’ll come for you.

They can see you now, Uratha, sense you. They’ll come for you, find you, possess you.

Nothing will ever be the same for you.

Breathe.

“Yo, breathe Eric. Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He gulped down the rising panic in his throat, and hugged Kat tight. Didn’t care if Jessy got to see his vulnerable side. At the moment, he needed to hold his only damn friend in the world.

Jessy tilted her head, and watched him. No laughter or grins, despite his expectations. Nothing like that, only a small smile as she watched him.

“... I have to get back, sun will be up soon. This place is pretty secure, Eric, so rest easy. I’ll see you tomorrow night to follow up.”

“... thanks, for everything.” Especially with Kat. Above all else, especially with Kat.

She winked at him, and left.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Natasha~~

“It’ll be d-dawn, soon,” she said, “so, I have t-to go.”

Both boys pouted, and transformed. She squeaked and jumped back as the two men began to shrink in size, clothes vanishing and fur popping in, instead. For a moment, she thought they were transforming into their larger forms, that she’d driven them to some sort of anger. But instead, a couple of wolves now sat upon her living room floor, giving her puppy eyes. Art with a darker shade, almost black, and Matt was a soft gray; both were too damn adorable.

“B-Boys! What are you doing?” she said. The two canines made whining sounds, sad puppy whining sounds, and walked over to her. They pressed up against her skirt, and pushed gently, nudging her away from the door. They were full-sized wolves, and she had no chance of pushing them out of the way with only her bodyweight. “Come on, boys! I... I need t-to go, the Prince will be upset, if I’m late. She’s getting very... p-p-protective of things lately.” Understandable given the circumstances, but now that Tash worked for her, it meant Tash had to appease her. If she showed up late, she’d get a firm scolding, or at least, a firm glare.

But the boys either didn’t get the hint, or chose to ignore it, likely the latter. They pushed against her some more, until she was giggling. A signal of their triumph, as they each let out a quiet bark, before pushing her hard enough she started to fall. With a squeak, she went down, and hands reached out to grab their soft fur, as the floor greeted her.

“Come on, I... I have to. I can’t stay here. I know y-you’d p-p-protect me, b-but it’s safer at the tower. And, it’s the P-Prince’s orders. And—” Knock knock.

“Madam Vola. It’s me, Madam Turio.”

Natasha jumped straight up, and spun around. What? Why? Why was she here? And why now? Gulping, Tash started pacing back and forth, and looked down at the two enormous dogs sitting by her. They didn’t transform back, content to sit there, eyes wide and looking at the closed door of her apartment.

Her boyfriends were here. That made a discussion with her old superior a strange conversation to have. But maybe it was good Art and Matt were here. She’d be able to rely on them, trust them to back her up if things got hairy, if things got violent. They wouldn’t get violent though, no way. Maria wouldn’t resort to violence against another covenant unless absolutely necessary, and if she wanted to be violent, she wouldn’t have knocked.

Tash looked at the two wolves, nodded, took a deep, useless breath, and walked to the apartment door. Slowly, she opened the barrier to an old wound she'd hoped to forget about.

"H-Hello... Madam Turio."

"... hello Vola. May I come in?"

"Y-Yes, please." Tash nodded, and backed away while gesturing with her arm into the apartment. Maria was an elder after all, and respect was due, no matter their past or affiliations. "I, um, I'm v-very surprised, that you'd... come here... in p-person."

"These are strange times," she said, as she nodded toward the two wolves. "I am glad you've found company you enjoy. For all the years I've known you, the only one you could stomach were your fellow right hands."

Julias and Jessy were her only friends, that was true. Not so true anymore, but the memory was a powerful one.

"Stomach... is a strong w-word. It's not... l-like I... didn't..."

Maria turned to face her, raised a brow and chuckled, before moving into the living room. Without a glance or care for the wolves, Art and Matt were forced to step aside to make room for her. They stayed in wolf form, maybe to remind Maria that they were indeed werewolves, and were dangerous. Or because, dogs were loyal, and Natasha could use a couple of loyal companions right about now.

"I do not lie. I am... glad, that things are going well for you." The ghost lady sniffed the air, and chuckled again. No hiding the smell of sex, not with what the werewolves did.

It was hard to read Maria's expression. She was wearing a white dress, something in fashion a hundred years ago, at least. If she was seen out in the open, anyone would have assumed she was a ghost, a pale lady, a woman in white, a specter, something that would have sent anyone nearby into a panicked run. But the elder was a master at the cloak of night and its derivations. If she didn't want to be seen, she wasn't going to be seen.

It meant that a ghost woman was walking around in Natasha's apartment, white mist falling from her cracked and rotted skin. It was enough to keep both wolves away from her, backing up and staying out of range of the fog she leaked, wherever she walked. One of the more blatant examples of how vampires were, genuinely, supernatural and paranormal creatures. Natasha had dealt with it for years, but after not being near the woman for some months now, it was a shock to be so close to a walking, torn up corpse leaking cold mist around her.

“... th-thank you.”

“This must be Matthew Wilson, Rahu Uratha. And this is Arturo Ibarra, Irakka Uratha.” The ghost lady leaned forward, hands to her knees against the dress skirt, and a half grin on her lips as her wavy black hair fell over her shoulders. “Don’t feel like showing your faces to me?”

The two canines shook their heads, and growled. A quiet growl, enough for Tash to tense, while Maria didn’t react. Stone cold, as always.

“If it’s any consolation, little doggies, I never agreed with Viktor’s rather harsh treatment of your kind, upon Avery’s last visit.”

It wasn’t. Art and Matt both growled again, and showed their teeth a little.

“B-Be nice, boys. Mar... Madam T-Turio is only... only... I am not sure what she’s doing, actually.” Truth. Maria’s visit was unexpected, and more so was what she was saying.

“... may we speak in private, Vola, before the sun rises?” The ghost lady turned to face her, but backed away at the same time, before turning to look out the window. She nudged aside the drapes with a hand, bits of her peeling skin falling off and vanishing into ash, as some of the street light came into the apartment.

The two wolves came up to Tash’s side, and growling louder. They didn’t want to leave. Tash didn’t want them to leave either, but this conversation was important, and it was one they’d both been avoiding.

And maybe, Maria would drop clues about the secret the strange spirit was talking about.

“You boys, you can head on back. I’ll b-b... I’ll be fine. She’s not the enemy.” Mostly, mostly not the enemy. It was hard to forget about the betrayal, but at the same time, Tash kept trying to put herself into Maria’s shoes. Give up your subordinate, who had a fifty-fifty chance of surviving, so the love of your life could pursue their wildest dreams? It was hard to think about the question objectively, and she had to accept that. Emotions got the best of everyone, given time, even Tash.

Art and Matt transformed, human skin and clothes emerging from the depths of animal muscle and fur. A smooth transformation, nothing like what it’d been when the two wolves were getting ready for war. Each giant of a man gave Maria long, harsh glares, before they stepped toward the door. When they left, they each gave Tash a kiss, Art winking, and Matt smiling, as they moved into the hall.

“See ya later,” they said together, before starting down the corridor.

Tash smiled at them, gave each a small wave, and closed the door.



“No longer being in the Invictus has agreed with your sex life, at least,” Maria said, still looking out the window.

“It, it um... it’s been good.” No use trying to hide the grin. “B-But, um I don’t think that has anything to do with the Invictus, or m-me being in the Ordo Dracul now.”

“... we haven’t spoken, since that happened.”

“... n-no, we haven’t.”

The two of them sighed. Maria’s sigh was far more bold, obvious and direct. That was Maria, never one to shy from direct words; it made the whole conversation very unusual, given how Maria was tiptoeing around the issue.

“Understand, my... Natasha, that I... I did what I did, because I assumed you would not be harmed. Lucas promised your safety, and that, if push came to shove, he would not kill you.”

Not kill her. That didn’t necessarily mean not hurt her, torture her maybe, in hopes of breaking Daniel. But, still, that was better than nothing.

“... th-thank you... Maria.” First naming an elder, let alone an Invictus superior, was dangerous business, but Maria seemed intent on making this personal. That was a huge step for the woman, even if it sounded like nothing. “That... that w-wasn’t the only reason I left the Invictus.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Um, p-people knowing that D-Daniel is my sire, that... that proved to me, that maybe I... I had what it took to follow in his footsteps. That I have what it takes.”

“I’m not following.”

Tash nodded. Not following because Natasha was doing a horrible job explaining it.

“P-People, they weren’t... too surprised to learn about it. Many, they just nodded like... l-like it was to b-be expected.” So either everyone already knew, or she’d made enough of a name for herself that people were expecting someone like the sheriff to be her sire.

Maria nodded, confirming Tash’s suspicions. “You worked your way up our ranks quickly, Natasha. I’m surprised you were ever concerned you weren’t regarded with respect, and fear, by your younger Kindred. You were my right hand for a reason.” Maria shrugged, stepped away from the window, and into Natasha’s kitchen. “May I?”

“Um... oh! Y-Yes, make yourself at home.”

The elder nodded, and fetched a bottle of blood from the fridge. “I will not ask for your forgiveness, Natasha, over the incident; I do not expect it. Such is the way of things as old as I, to let transgressions marinate our souls.” She chuckled, a coughing hoarse sound from the ghost lady, before she took a sip of the red drink. “Something Lucas used to say. I think now, perhaps, it was merely his way of avoiding asking for forgiveness, from ever having to say, he was sorry.”

Talking of Lucas, with her. This was brand new territory, and Tash found herself tripping on her tongue. What to say, what to say?

“W... What was he like?”

“You know damn well what he was like, Natasha. You saw his brutality and one-mindedness, firsthand.”

“I... I know, b-but, what was he like... behind closed doors?” Very new ground, very new, and Tash held her unneeded breath as she waited for Maria to respond. Times like this, it would have been great if she hadn’t asked Matt and Art to leave.

“... different.” Sighing, Maria walked over to Tash’s couch, and sat down. The apartment wasn’t exactly high class, not the sort of class an elder vampire would want, but Maria didn’t seem to care at the moment. Or it was all a ploy to get Tash to let her guard down, reveal secrets about the Uratha, or the Ordo Dracul. “As you can imagine, this body cares little for sexual stimulus, anymore.”

“I... I d-didn’t know.” Guessed, she’d guessed, but never let her mind get that far, to the point of picturing it. But now she couldn’t stop. Corpse, trying to fuck. Ew.

“We indulged ourselves in blood, drinking kine by the dozens. He was not disturbed by this body, and was more than eager to hold me and kiss me, when we feasted.” Ghost lady smoothed out her dress skirt, took another sip, and motioned for Natasha to join her. Still the boss, even though Tash hadn’t worked for her for months.

And Tash joined her. Because, why not?

“When the blood was gone,” Maria continued, “and it was only Lucas and I, he would... he would settle. The harsh wall that guarded his soul would fade, and sometimes, he would set his head upon my lap, and melt away. He’d speak of his trials, his doubts, of his pain.”

“This was... b-before his revival?”

“Yes. Torpor did not treat him well, Natasha. Not once did I meet that man, the man who had doubts, the man whose resolve was only as deep as was... reasonable. Lucas was hungry for power and

determined to grab it before his sleep, but the awoken Lucas was a new creature entirely. I do not envy Damien, to have spent so long caring for the sleeping body of his sire, only for the raised Kindred to be a... deluded fool, a zealot to the core.”

“Are... you g-getting along with Damien?” Talking. A normal, natural conversation with her old boss; a Kindred over a couple centuries older than her. In the past, she’d defer such things to Julias, who’d handle conversations like this with finesse. This was Tash stepping well out of her comfort zone; Maria was too, though. So, even ground... ish.

“The boy is devout, and diligent. At first, he and I agreed his becoming a right hand was not possible. Did you know that?”

“I d-did not.”

“But, with time, we’ve all grown to trust him. And, I admit, it is nice to hear him speak with me of the Testament of Longinus. There are few left that consider the word of such a figure to be something to consider. Few left who fear God.”

A million responses to that jumped to mind. It wasn’t scientific, it wasn’t evidence based, so how could anyone believe it. But then again, Maria couldn’t even walk two feet without leaving a trail of ghostly mist behind her, so, the supernatural was more easy to accept for someone like her. Or Tash just lived in constant denial of the supernatural nature of Kindred. Not anymore though, not after the things she’d seen, not after the things Antoinette had shown her.

Maybe it was time to consider that... maybe, Maria, Damien and Lucas had decent justification for their religious beliefs.

“I admit m-my knowledge of... Longinus is a l-little lacking.”

“The tale of Longinus, the Spear of Destiny, of Christ’s death, it is all very... powerful, and fills a Kindred’s life with purpose. Lucas followed that purpose, and while I believe age and power corrupted his undead soul, as it does so many, I do believe his faith never wavered. I had... I had hoped if I offered you to him, as a tool to defeat the sheriff, perhaps victory would soften him, and return the man I once loved.” She sipped her drink again, and traced her scarred finger along its contours. “A silly girl’s hope.”

Tash looked down, and let the weight of that sink in. Yeah, it was a silly girl’s hope, the classic ‘love can change him’ fallacy that destroyed so many relationships. It was stupid, and pathetic, and something Tash would trip and fall into if such a situation came her way; she had no right to judge.

Tash's mind began to drift to the events of the night. The ritual which had ended with Jack's face drawn on paper. Did Maria have something to do with that? No, Maria had no reason to perform such a ritual. But, Art and Matt said it likely had something to do with the weird red wraiths of Dolareido, and the trail led them to Jacob doing something weird with that Black Blood spirit. And there had been a corpse, a walking, moving corpse, which had randomly collapsed when the three of them had disrupted the ritual.

"... If... if you could talk to Lucas again, M-Maria... What would you say... t-t-to him?"

Maria looked up from the glass, and met her eyes. Look down, look down, look down. No good, Tash's gaze was locked with the ghost woman's, and wasn't going anywhere.

"... I would say to him that I love him, little Vola. I would confess many things to him, and once the confessions were over, and I had recomposed myself, I would demand he cease his unending quest for power." Again, the ghost lady's eyes drifted to the drink, and she took another sip as she stared into the void. "I would do almost anything for such an opportunity."

That was very on the nose, and Tash had to focus to not let out a squeak.

"I'm sorry... that it ended the way it d-did."

"Yes, well, I cannot blame the Prince, or the sheriff, for killing him. Self defense, and Lucas had it coming. A tragedy, in all its manifestations. And as much as I would love to speak to Lucas again, to have that fool back in my arms, I would council against revenge." She got up, and poured herself more blood from the kitchen. To see a corpse walking around her kitchen, reaching into her fridge, like she was a frat girl trying to get drunk and forget an ex boyfriend, was an image Tash would remember for years.

"D-Did... did you come here... for anything else?"

"Looking for me to leave, Vola?"

"N-No! No, just... you never talked about yourself much, even when I w-w-worked for the Invictus." Tash stirred in her spot on the couch. If she didn't move, stayed put and listened, maybe Maria would confide in her, tell her about her secret involving spirits.

"What is there to speak of? You know of my past as much as I do, Tash. Blurry memories, a haze of pain and anger over the damage this transformation has done to me. It is a told story, cliché at this point."

“... N-Nothing’s a cliché when it’s happening to you.” Much as she’d like to take credit for the line, she’d heard it elsewhere, and it stuck with her.

“Too true.” Maria didn’t rejoin her on the couch this time, instead taking a stool at the counter. Even more unusual for the prim and proper corpse. “... thank you, for listening to me, Natasha Vola. It has been a long time since I’ve talked with anyone openly. Not since before the purge.”

Not since before Lucas took his fifty-year torpor then. Poor woman. Tash had Jessy and Julias, and slowly but surely, her circle of friends was expanding to include Jack and Antoinette, and even Beatrice, Damien, and Fiona were not uncommon people for her to see. She could talk to people if she wanted, let out some of her troubles. Maria had no one.

Tash got up, stepped into the kitchen, and poured herself a glass of blood, as well.

“... you can... t-tell me now.”