

~~Jack~~

Getting taken back to the real world was a curse and a blessing. Everything, everywhere, was teasing him with answers he couldn't get to. What was the Ritual of Faces? Black Blood and the red wraiths, what did they have to do with the ritual, how were the hunters doing it, why were hunters and spirits working together, what did the red wraiths mean when they mentioned 'who the monster speaks with... the trail to their goal.' Azamel? Were they talking about Azamel? If they were, how did they know Azamel was talking to him, and that he'd somehow be the way they'd get to her. How did the spirits know what he looked like?

All the answers were on the other side of the Gauntlet, and the Uratha weren't going to let him stick his fingers into their world to find out.

"You should recognize this place," Clara said, popping open a door behind one of the newer apartment buildings bordering on the Carthian edge of South Side and North Side. "Well, not this specific place, but you'll know what's going on."

"I don't—"

"A sex hole!" Fiona said, bubbling voice earning everyone's glance. Too loud, too high pitched for the somber surroundings, the darkness and flickering lights, and the curved, unnatural bend to the street lamps. "I've been 'ere, on the other side."

"I... don't understand," Damien said.

Carter smirked at him. "You have no idea how much this side bleeds into yours, no idea how much of the insane crap you glimpse is the work of spirits." No doubt the older werewolf was looking for a chance to get back at the Mekhet; a little face rubbing of knowledge over ignorance wasn't too dishonorable, evidently.

If Fiona was right, and it was a sex hole, Jack knew what he was going to find inside. Or at least, he knew what the physical version of it looked like. What would the spirit version look like?

Inside the building, there weren't hallways or doors. Which made no sense, because it was an apartment building, like the one Jack and them had tried to find a hiding place in earlier. But this building, once they were inside, had none of that. The building was five floors high, and once inside, there was no ceiling on each floor; it was a big, open building.

The walls were pink and light blue, and curved in ways to emphasize the bumps and S shapes associated with flesh. From the ceiling dangled an enormous chandelier, twenty feet tall and a hundred feet in diameter, made of crystal, and lit with flames of mostly pink and blue again, with some lit as varying shades between. The human sexuality metaphor of the flame was blatant.

Some of the sex spirits Jack saw last time were here. Maybe not the same spirits, but the same idea, same premise, same shapes, colors and floating torsos of breasts, curves and musculature. They were swirling around what looked like, maybe, a five feet high mountain of pillows. It reached from wall to wall of the enormous building. That was a lot of pillows; thousands of pillows.

Near the center of the mountain of softness, was a larger spirit, perhaps ten feet tall, and with a shape far more developed and specific than the other spirits. She — it — looked human, to an extent. Curvy, with a flat stomach, wide hips, and heavy breasts that hung from gravity. She was lying sideways, her breasts smooshed to the blankets. Her multi-colored hair was unhumanly long, and flowing over the pillows, maybe twenty feet. Like the chandelier, her hair was pink and soft blue, but changing from one, to the other. Her skin color was similar, drifting between colors you'd not expect to find on any normal human. As much as her body looked developed, with fingernails, nipples, toes and legs, her face was a nebula of color. Hard to describe, hard to nail down in absolute terms, as if a woman had put on make-up that was a portal into the endless nether of stars, energy, and souls. Pretty.

“You come to my home, Clara? Flowing Sanctuary?” it said. A heavenly, singing voice, layered many times over. A choir, both male and female voices filling the massive room with echoing rapture.

“Just using the locus to get back across. Got a problem with that?” Clara said. “You and your sisters”—she raised her hands to physically quote ‘sisters’—“walk on thin ice already, don’t—”

The beautiful entity shook its head. “No, of course not, I... I am surprised at your company though. Sexual little creatures, aren’t they?”

The two vampires and monster glanced between each other. “What?” they said.

“The one with no hair,” she said, and gestured to Jack. “Forever buried in sexuality, aren’t you? You are aging like a fine wine, as the humans would say. Whoever is enjoying your many layers of flavor in the bedroom, I hope they are mature enough to appreciate the depth you offer.”

“I... I um...”

“And you.” The goddess of sexuality looked at Fiona, and smirked. “Many women are flowers waiting to bloom. You are a volcano, waiting to erupt, and unleash your lust upon all you wish.”

Damien, Jack, Clara and Carter, even Flow, then looked at Fiona, as the small girl blushed red enough to hide her freckles.

“You, half-haired one,” it said, with a flick of her hand toward Damien, “are a conundrum. But, I'm sure once you pierce the walls of your inner bliss, you'll find you have pierced a dam, holding back a river of desire greater than most.”

Ok, wow, what a way to meet a spirit: a sexuality reading that had everyone feeling uncomfortable, except for Clara, who was doing her best to not laugh.

“Um... thank you?” Jack said.

The enormous creature shrugged, rolling onto her stomach and settling her chin on her forearms. She looked so human, but wasn't a she, and wasn't human; it was something which looked human, but fed on the sexual atmosphere created in parts of Dolareido. Hell, created in all of Dolareido. Slut City.

Clara took a little longer staring at Jack, than he liked. He, apparently, was a fine wine of sexuality. Maybe she liked the sound of that. He didn't get to ask. She placed a hand on his and Damien's shoulders, and the three of them fell into nothingness.

Fog, white fog. Endless, encompassing, burying. It wasn't the road, the portal, Fiona had used to bring them to this world. Whatever it was, Jack didn't want to be in it, touching it, swallowed by it. It was not good to touch it. It didn't want to be touched.

Images of waking up, trapped inside a brick wall assaulted Jack's mind. He was in a wall. He was in a massive, world-encompassing wall. He was—

He was in Dolareido. The bunch of them stepped out onto asphalt, and into the night of normal, good ole normal Dolareido. No spirits scurrying along the cracks of the streets, no talking birds in the sky, no thunderstorms with names, and no red ghost things hunting him down.

“Thank the Lord,” Damien said with a sigh.

Groaning, Clara offered them a salute, and started walking off with Carter. No Flow; the spirit had stayed behind, as far as Jack's eyes could see. “Stay out of the Hisil. We won't always be around to save your ass.”

And just like that, they were gone; leaving two vampires and a monster standing behind an apartment building.

“We... we should get back,” Jack said, “before sunrise.” He desperately needed a quiet moment to process the what-the-fuck his night had been.

“Aye! Please, hate to lose ye to the sun.” Fiona smiled at him, patted him on the back a few times, and started to walk off. Pausing, she added, “Ye know where Eric lives? I need to speak with him.”

“Um, yeah, Damien? Can you fill her in on his new place?”

“Sure.” He nodded, walking off with the girl.

Jack watched the two of them as they left. Fiona walked a foot behind Damien, to his side, and more than once, glanced at his ass. Volcano, indeed. Now, if only she could pierce Damien’s dam, the former assassin could find a little happiness of his own.

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He dragged himself up the stairs of the Elysium tower. Tired, fucking God, oh, so damn tired. How much stuff could happen in one night? Sunrise wasn’t far off. All he wanted to do was lie down and let the softness of the Prince’s blankets lull him into the deepest torpor.

Sex? He didn’t think he wanted any, wrecked as he was, but seeing Antoinette had a habit of changing his mind. But, at least for the moment, he didn’t want sex. He wanted to melt into pudding and become one with the pleasant contours of a glass bowl. He wanted to be the blood he sipped from a champagne glass, settled and still, except for maybe the gentle ripples caused by someone nudging it. He wanted to become a cow, and graze on grass, without a care in the world.

Brain fried, yeap. Complete and total exhaustion sending his mind through loops and into strange dementia, conjuring odd imagery like one might if they hadn’t slept in days. He’d done that once, spent three days awake; using energy drinks to stay up, so he could study for exams and finish projects. Every illness around hit him after that, sinking him into bed with the flu, a cold, pink eye, and everything, in between, for three weeks. After that, he started taking better care of himself; he already was, thanks to Julias, but proper amounts of sleep became a priority after that.

He was hungry, starving, the need for blood itching in his veins. A strange feeling for a vampire, craving blood like a heroin addict, while needing sleep like an insomniac. Maybe Antoinette had Ashley and Julee nearby? A quick drink before sunrise, and he could pass right out. Like a kine, drinking a cup of hot chocolate, after a long day of skiing.

Mulder and Scully found him easily enough; not many short men walking around at this time of night, wearing a suit with shoes like his. They circled above for a little while, scanning the area, no

doubt, before they came to him. Some thralls walked by, Antoinette's servants, wearing suits and earpieces similar to Ventrue gear. They nodded, offering small smirks as they watched the two crows come to him. Summoning crows to do his bidding must have seemed very vampire-ish, maybe even cool.

Jack stepped to the side, sat on the stairs, and held out his hands in front of him, turned slightly sideways, so Mulder and Scully could each perch on a hand. They'd gotten the hang of not piercing his skin when they perched, making holding them so much easier and enjoyable.

"Anything to report?" he said. They both shook their heads. "Damn. Well, I've had a very productive night... in a way. Keep an eye open for this." He leaned in, and made a few clucks with his tongue, as he tapped into the minds of the two birds, conveying the best mental image he could of an old woman, a very old woman, in a wheel chair.

The two crows stood taller, cawed several times, and gazed into his eyes. Yes, they had seen someone like that, with several other two-legs watching over her.

"Could be a coincidence. Pretty sure most old ladies in wheel chairs would only be outside if they had friends or family with them. Still, if you see them, keep your eyes open."

The two crows nodded. If there was one thing crows were good at it, it was keeping an eye on things.

"You two know I ran into a crow spirit? That a god you worship, or something?"

Scully tilted her head to the side, showing him her profile, and blinked her eye at him. Apparently they did not.

Jack clicked his tongue again, leaning closer. Trading images, scenes, and sounds with animals wasn't easy. It required vitae to tap into the animalism discipline. Tired and drained as he was, he dug some up, and shared images of the crow spirit, City Sky. Mulder cawed in, what Jack could only assume was, envy.

But the idea of a deity, or worshipping something, was beyond their minds. Good. He smiled at his pets, set Scully on his other hand beside Mulder, and reached into his pocket to pull out some oats. It'd become an all-time thing by this point, to always carry some. They plucked it from his palm with their beaks. Poke poke, careful to not hurt him.

"Sorry I was gone so long. Shit happens. But, I'm sure you have things to occupy yourselves when I'm not around." They cawed their yes. "Good. I'll see you two later. Maybe in the future, I'll see if I can convince the Prince to let you come inside."

To his surprise, the two crows hopped up closer along his arm, claws careful with his suit jacket, and they each offered a nudge of their beaks against his shoulder, before flying off. A goodbye kiss, sort of. Where'd they pick up that trick?

Once inside the Elysium Tower, he went down the stairs, down and down, deeper into the black marble with white lightning cracks, past the statues of dragons, down and down, toward the giant vault door leading to Antoinette's bed chamber.

She wasn't there. No one was there. Ah, well. He sauntered toward the bed, dragging his feet more with each step, until he was sure there were boulders attached. But once he reached the enormous pile of silk, he stripped until naked, and climbed into the sheets on his belly. With another thirty minutes until sunrise, he couldn't really sleep, but that didn't mean his body didn't want sleep. A weird mixture of his old body's desire to sleep, combined with his new Kindred body being worn out from the bombardment of stress.

Melt away, stress, please melt away into the blankets. Melt—

“Oh, dear Ventrue. Naked already are we?” Antoinette's voice. Oh thank god. He tried to turn over, to give the elder vampire the respect she deserved, and because he loved her and the least he could do was get up. But, instead, he groaned into the blankets. “Tired, I take it? You look gaunt. My pets, help him.”

Putting his palms to the sheet, he pushed himself to his knees, as Julee and Ashley joined him on the bed. They weren't naked, or wearing anything sexual; either they knew he'd not be in the mood, or Antoinette wasn't in the mood. They didn't waste time either, getting close to him in their simple, colorful, pink and white pajamas.

He'd have said something, maybe how cute they were in the pajamas. But, no, too tired. They saw it, and a moment later, their necks were open to him, and he took a long drink from each. Two ghouls meant he didn't have to drain them; combined, they provided more than enough blood. After the quick feed, both girls were able to walk away from the encounter, but now, were as exhausted as when he arrived; they'd go to the room, next door, to pass out, and sleep the Kiss away.

Antoinette sat beside him on the bed, still wearing a business power suit.

“... busy day?” he asked, nodding at her clothes.

She chuckled, and gestured at his nudity. “I could say the same for you. You look ready to collapse.”

“I... I am.”

Raising a brow, she reached out, and nudged his shoulder. Collapse he did, face down, while the tall woman looked down from the side of the bed. The best he could offer her was a weak smile, his face pressed to a pillow, and turned to face her.

“Daniel has reported the details of the ritual he discovered. And... I admit, that is a terrifying discovery.” She sat down next to him, skirt nudging against his hip. Shuffling fabric drew his eyes, and he watched her slide off her jacket, dark colors with padded shoulders, before she set her hand on his back. The power suit looked great on her, with its dark skirt and white blouse. He managed to take a peek at her legs, as she folded one over the other. Smooth, long, curvy, toned legs with milky, alabaster skin.

Got damn it, dick, stop! You’re supposed to be exhausted.

Yeah but, you just had a bunch of fresh blood to drink. You’re good to go!

He forced his eyes back to hers. No sex, stop it.

“That was... honestly, only part of the mayhem tonight.”

“You may speak of it, if you wish. Whatever you do not think should be kept to the Invictus alone, you may discuss with me. No more holding the city at bay, remember?” She ran her hand up and down his back, soothing his spine, while her other hand started to undo her blouse.

“... I visited Azamel.”

“Did you, now? That is a dangerous game to play.”

“I thought she or Fiona might have information. If the ritual was done by the hunters, and the hunters are here for the Begotten, they might know something. Azamel did. She thinks an old woman is working with the hunters, some woman capable of the ritual.”

“That... I did not know.” Antoinette stood up, slipped out of her skirt and blouse, then sat back down beside him. White bra and underwear, perfectly normal, not sexy or anything. But, it still looked damn sexy on her, boring or not. The ridiculously huge cups were almost comical, doing their best to cover and support her breasts. “That is useful information, Jack. Thank you for sharing it. I will make sure Daniel is aware.”

“... Fiona also took me into the Shadow World. We ran into some strange red wraith spirit things who are, probably, partly responsible for the ritual. Communicating with this shaman the hunters work with, I guess.” And they were linked to Black Blood, and they were linked to the ‘verge’ thing that Fiona had opened, and someone had ripped their way through the portal, and it was all linked to the

warning Azamel gave them, and it was linked to the mysterious dark threat Daniel was investigating. Good God, what had his life become?

“... I missed this before. An exception to that would be if, instead of 'the Shadow World', it is written as, 'a shadow world', or a non-specific mention of the concept, rather than the specific place.)

“I... cannot say I agree with your choices, little Ventrue, but I admit that you have seen things of which I have only dreamed.” She slid closer, nudging him aside on the sheets, and lying on her side beside him. Soon, she was pressed to him, her bare breasts — she’d taken her bra off in a smooth, slipping motion as she lay on the bed — pressed to his arm, her leg sliding over his. “What was it like?”

He was mostly on his belly, but turned on his side a little, to face her so he could lay his head on his arm and the pillow. With her in underwear, and pressed to him, the meal he’d just had started to tingle along his skin. Her amber, almost crimson, gaze from just a foot away, and her heavy breasts smooshed against his arm, were so terribly inviting.

“It was... terrifying... weird... and... and it was Dolareido.”

“A shadow of Dolareido, then.”

“Yeah, that’s as good a way to put it as any. It was filled with spirit... spirit things. There were apartment doors that didn’t want to let anyone in. There were rat-like things, black wisps, sneaking around buildings. The windows were rainy, even though it wasn’t raining. The lights, not even the moonlight, were ever stable, always flickering. The streetlights were all bent and corkscrewing in the direction of South Side. I even met a crow, a giant crow named City Sky.”

“I... I am... mon dieu, I am envious.” She ran her hand down his shoulder and arm, his waist and hip, and down his leg. “I would have enjoyed visiting such an interesting place.”

“Interesting... terrifying. I can understand why the werewolves don’t want us there. Half to keep us from getting ourselves killed, half to keep us out of the politics.”

“Politics?”

“Yeah, spirits with big names, I guess. Black Blood,” — her right eyebrow raised slightly at the mention — “Red Tide and the Street-Tail King. It’s... weird, I guess. From what little I could piece together, they have their own factions, same as we do.”

“Oui, of that I am aware. But the details are forever beyond my grasp, little Ventrue. Thank you for sharing this information with me. I would... hesitate, if I were you, to be upfront with your superiors, about how much information you have given me.” Her questing arm reached across his waist



to find the small of his back, and pulled him in a bit closer. Body to body, her breasts pressed straight into his chest, and she set her lips onto his buzzed head. “I am sure they would love to dangle such information in front of me, out of my reach.”

“This is bigger than the Invictus. And the Invictus, they... well, you know.”

“They care nothing for such mysticism. A sentiment I do not share, but can appreciate.” She pulled him in closer, until his face came to rest against her collar. Melting, a perfect place for melting. He slipped his arm around her, and hugging her back, trying to merge them together. Two bowls of pudding, all mixed up.

But, as much as he would have lit up like a Christmas tree fire in July, if she tempted him, she didn't. Maybe she was exhausted, too?

“How was your day?” he said.

“Horrendous, though while I had assumed I would be complaining to a listening ear tonight, I had not thought that your night would be worse.”

“Oh, shit, sorry. Please, complain away!” He lowered his head enough he could feel the softness of her breast, near her collar bone. “I'm all ears.”

“Ah, well then, I must take advantage of such an offer.” Sighing, a lovely, deep, long sigh, she started to stroke the back of his head. Fingers, against buzzed hair. Euphoric. “Much of my day is spent managing the Masquerade, as you know. There are squabbles that occur between Kindred, or mistakes made by Kindred, which must be hidden. Today though, a rather... unusual event occurred, centered around that fellow, Eric.”

“The kine? The dude with Beatrice when they saved me?”

“Indeed. In retrospect, I should have realized something was strange about the man. His inclusion into the affairs of the night was quite random, but no longer. Evidently, he is a werewolf.”

Jack yanked his head up and blinked at her. “Really?”

“Oui. And now the man, once a small thorn, is a potential knife in my side. Julias has supervised cleaning of the man's awakening — apparently this was his first transformation — to make sure the fool's destruction is not known by the public.”

“This happened tonight?”

“Mhhmm.”

“Wow. Everything happened tonight.” He smirked, laughing, and settled his head back against Antoinette’s collar. Another werewolf, holy shit.

“Why do you laugh, my love?”

“Just... just find it... great, you know? That we’re talking like this, talking about the shit happening in Dolareido. We didn’t do this much before.”

The goddess nodded, leaning forward enough to kiss his head. “I was afraid it would taint our interaction. When we first met, you were a shining beacon of wonder, joy, and honesty. I would have done anything to keep you pure, isolated from the dirty machinations of the city.”

“Aw, come on, it’s not that bad, is it? I mean, yeah, I’m not the same guy I used to be.” And frequently, he was put into situations where he was forced to become like Julias, had to lie, or manipulate, or withhold information. On top of that, he’d discovered a new level of hate and anger inside him, sometimes to the point of paralysis. He’d confided in Tash, now he should confide in Antoinette.

Later, he could confide in her, later. For now, God damn it was nice to relax with her and talk about their day.

Antoinette got up. Jack raised a brow, watching; oh, she wanted to get them under the blankets. He rolled with her movement, making space for her to pull the sheets back, and soon the two of them were beneath the blankets, cuddling. Jack had not really cuddled with anyone, until Antoinette. It must have sucked, horribly, for two kine to cuddle; body heat alone made the idea nauseating. He’d die of heat stroke.

But two vampires? No heat issues to worry about. So, he hugged her tight, as her back fit against him. He got to be the big spoon. Which, of course, didn’t work very well. He chuckled again, as his face pressed against her hair for a moment, before shifting his chin over her shoulder, instead. With the blanket over their shoulders, he couldn’t see her body. But he could feel it, feel the way her large, curvy butt and legs pressed along his body.

Possessed by some evil spirit, or inspired by a sex spirit, his hand drifted over her hip, and up her flat belly, to caress her breast. Maybe one of those sex spirits he dealt with tonight had hitched a ride in his body? It wouldn’t have surprised him, as the touch of Antoinette’s skin against his body set him on fire, despite his exhaustion.

The best part was, she didn’t stop him, say a word, or do anything to discourage him. All she did, was chuckle, as his hand slipped between her breasts, and began to cup and massage where the weight

one pressed down on its sister, squashing it to the bed. The softness of it, combined with the weight of it, was the most pleasant feeling in existence, and he sighed joy as he softly squeezed her bosom.

“We have fifteen minutes before sunrise, little Ventrue.”

“Yeah, don’t mind me.” No sex needed, but even without sex, there was no denying how great a breast felt in his palm. “If I had my own, I’d be cupping and massaging them all day.”

“Yes, I do believe you have said that before.” Chuckling, she brushed her hair with her fingers, finding a better angle for it against the pillows. “What will you do about Eric?”

“I... I don’t know. That’s really Julias’s decision.”

“Anticipate your superior’s actions, my love. An important skill, to insure your future actions can be made swiftly, and in the correct context.”

“Good point. I suppose Julias will want him to see Avery at some point, turn him into a known factor. I might be asked to be involved.” His hand drifted down a bit, so he could hug her proper, arm cutting across the upper half of her stomach. “I... don’t think we’ll kick him out of the luxury suite. Jessy put him there, since he helped us out, helped me out. She trusts him, a bit, and since he works at Bloodlust, the arrangement made sense.” Comfy and cozy, she sank into him as he pulled her close. Her arm found his, rested upon it, her fingers settling on his wrist.

“I will have to speak with him, again. The poor man was quite nervous, when we met.” The tall woman chuckled, turned her head a touch, and waited. Message received; he leaned in, kissing her neck and cheek. “Fledgling Kindred have their sire to rely on, while this man does not. Whatever advice Avery gives him, I must give him context that it is my city, not hers, and that his decisions must be made with that in mind.”

“I don’t think Avery will use Eric to rock the boat, or do anything like that.” Avery does seem to have the city’s best interest in mind, even if that means wanting to do things her own way.

“Perhaps not on purpose, no. But I am sure she will attempt to convert him to her cause, and indirectly, that will create a barrier for me. Truthfully, I would be more content if he continued in his current capacity, as a bouncer for Bloodlust, and in his new living location. There, it is easy for us to keep an eye on him.”

“A werewolf bouncer... watching vampires come and go, Kissing kine every night. That is an interesting idea.” It was a good one too. “But, Uratha aren’t like us, they don’t create their own reasons for existing. They have a powerful reason built into them, hunting spirits and keeping the ‘balance’.” He struggled to raise his hands, to make air quotes. Not easy to do, lying on his side, but it was warranted.

“Long ago, there was an Uratha who hid within my city for a short while. She did not serve any of the tribes. I asked her what she called herself, if not a member of a tribe, and she answered: 'a ghost'.” Shrugging, Antoinette brought his hand to her lips, kissing it. “Perhaps Eric will pursue the same fate.”

“A ghost... a ghost werewolf?” What a strange way to refer to oneself. He nodded, and hid his face in the back of her neck. “Maybe. It’d be nice if he could create a little stability out of this. Can’t go five minutes without something turning upside down.”

“Indeed.”

Exhaustion returning, he sighed, as the rising sun called for slumber. It didn’t matter he was deep underground where its rays didn’t reach him, Kindred knew when the sun rose or fell. When it started to rise, a Kindred’s body and mind grew heavy, eyelids too, until there was no choice but to give in, close their eyes, and turn into a corpse, until the sun fell, again.

“Love you,” he said into Antoinette’s ear, as he drifted under. If she said it back, he didn’t hear it, but she said it all the time anyway. He should say it more.

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~~Beatrice~~

The next night. She awoke, stretching her arms out and yawning, exposing her crocodile teeth. Back in the lair with her fellow members of the Circle, back in her small hole in the wall, with all the blankets. All of them. She smirked at the pile, sure some real fur was mixed in there; not a fan of killing animals for a fur blanket, but damn it felt snuggly. Maybe she could convince Julias to spend some time here with her. Fucking with the curtain pulled aside so everyone else could watch.

Her long tongue licked her huge teeth at the thought. Yummy.

She got dressed: combat boots, gray jeans, and a black tank top. Kindred were creatures of habit, after all. But, mostly, she just liked to show off her ass and abs. They pulled people’s eyes down, away from her mouth; a habit she doubted would ever die. Jacob wore a bandage over his empty eye sockets though, so, she could justify drawing people’s gazes to her better features. Not that Julias minded her teeth, but still.

She slid out of her cave, and hopped up into Jen's, expecting to find four extra legs in the girl's room. But, no, just Jennifer, alone. She was wearing a... Snuggie, one of those blankets with sleeves, designed for comfort above all else. A book was in her hand, and not an eBook reader, but an actual book.

"Whatcha reading?" Triss said, as she plopped down next to Jen.

The woman turned the page enough for Triss to see there were some pictures to go with the walls of text. "Manifestations of the Paranormal, by Terrence Moulouvia." Nodding, Jen flipped back a page to show what she'd been reading a moment before; the picture was beautiful, if disturbing. A dissected crow, wings typically pinned, with its stomach peeled open and pinned apart, like the wings. "This book is a hundred years old, it has examples of myths, things witches were supposedly doing to sacrifices."

"The Masquerade isn't as well guarded as we thought, if this shit keeps ending up in books." She reached over for it, and Jen handed her the book without complaint. "Jacob showed me some inof his books from his collection. Similar stuff, but much older."

"Yeah, many cultures have been documented these rituals at different points in history. More surprisingly, the same rituals, but at different places in the world, often with an ocean separating them." Jen pointed at the dissected crow, then at the necklace Triss was wearing. "Makes you wonder what sort of... things, really exist."

"You mean Black Blood."

"Partly, yes. That thing... possessed a corpse, Triss. And it talked to us."

Triss nodded, flipping the page to another picture. "He's used different voices before. Seems like he's settled on the voice of a Texan now. I feel like he—err, it, would be right at home cooking us up a barbecue, or talking about cheese." She laughed, but it was a cover. Black Blood's jovial attitude, and undefinable nature, made the damn thing terrifying in a way she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"I always imagined," Jen said, "entities like that, colossal in scope, wouldn't really talk. They'd exist, but do things on a plane beyond our understanding."

"Well, that Black Blood thing is a spirit from the Shadow World. Far as Fiona has told me, that's a sister world to ours. Things there can get... pretty... crazy." Dark, bleeding, black ooze, obsidian death fog, encompassing and overwhelming them. Something that could punch through to their side of the coin, in the most sick, twisted, macabre way. What other entities existed in that world? "I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of the gods of myth and legend were spirits."

"Think they were all spirits?"

“Unlikely,” a third voice said. Both girls looked up from the pile of blankets and pillows they sat on, to the pale Gangrel, Aaron. He raised a brow when his eyes caught sight of Jen, in the blanket-with-arms, before shrugging.

“You know something?” Triss asked.

“I do.” He came in a little, and once Jen offered, he sat down on the blankets, facing them. “Jacob’s interest isn’t only in the Shadow World.”

Jacob wasn’t home. He was out, doing his usual sneaky sneak things. Probably sleeping in some hole in the ground he’d dug a century ago. It meant they could talk about him, if they kept their voices down. Jacob’s ghouls could hear them, if they got too loud.

Triss slipped Jen back the book, and tilted her head to the side, squinting at the man. “What are his interests?”

“No idea. But I’ve been around him long enough, seen enough of his artifacts and overheard his rants, to know he dips his toes into other worlds.” Aaron shrugged, reached out, and took the book from Jen’s hand. “And you, Triss, already know he has an interest in nightmares.”

Ah, yes, can’t forget about nightmares being an actual place. Professional envy there, Nosferatu and their ability to bestow nightmares ultimately outclassed by literal nightmares walking around. Athalia, and her horror, that torso of bone and wings, was just too damn fucking cool.

Footsteps turned their heads, and the three of them offered a nod to Othello, as the beautiful man jumped into Jen’s home.

“Talking about Jacob?” he asked, long hair falling over his dark, tan shoulders. Man never wore a shirt, showing off his muscles every chance he got. Fucking Daeva. Not like she was one to talk, though.

Triss nodded again. “We are.”

“I’ve known him longer than the rest of you. I can assure you, his interest in other realms is nothing new.”

“By how much?” Jen said. “How long has he been... well, tempting fate, calling on entities from across God knows what?”

Othello shrugged, sitting down beside Aaron. All the witches, sitting across from each other. If they had a ouija board, it would have been perfect.

“Since forever. I suppose he became more interested in it after Minerva’s death.”

“... that’s a good point,” Triss said. “You’re pretty damn old, Othello. Been around longer than any of us. What was Minerva like?”

Her question hit him in a strange way. He lowered his gaze, and leaned back so his palms caught his weight on the blankets.

“She was nice, I guess. I never talked to her much. It wasn’t every day a Kindred got to be on speaking terms with both the Prince, and the Joker. But she was nice, and sweet, to the point it was almost sickening.”

Heh, Joker. Dude was far too old for comic book villains, but maybe Othello stayed up to date with pop culture. Daeva did that sometimes, obsessed with the material as they were.

“She talked with both Jacob and Antoinette?” Jen said.

The Daeva nodded, and adjusted his jeans a bit as he got comfortable on the blankets. “I get the impression she was involved in both their secret pursuits. We know Jacob’s agenda includes... well, being an all powerful warlock,” he said. Right, not witches, it was witches and warlocks. “The Prince is a dragon, so her pursuits are undoubtedly similar, only pursued in a different way.”

Aaron leaned in, voice a whisper. “Operating tables and scalpels, computers and fancy tech, less chanting and blood rituals, more detailed notes and experiments.” He flipped through some pages, stopping at a page showing a human in a coffin, being lowered into the ground. “While we touch on topics like... the meaning of life, or death, and which ancient gods drift among us, manifesting as unknowable concepts, the Ordo Dracul treat it like science.”

“Yeap,” Othello said, “and Minerva seems to have been interested in both worlds. Probably something to do with why Avery killed her.”

Jen’s eyes lit up. “Were you there for that?”

“No. Glad I wasn’t. I saw Jacob the day after, and he was beat up bad.” Smirking, the Daeva leaned back a bit, putting his shoulder blades on the cave wall. “Then again, so were Avery, Simon, and the rest of the pack.”

Triss tried to whistle. No good, damn it. “Jacob against a whole pack of werewolves?”

“We did watch him beat up Arturo and Matthew, Tash’s two boy toys.” Chuckling, Jen reached out and took the book back from Aaron. The chuckle faded, and her eyes fell as silence buried them. The boys waited, looking at each other and the women with raised brows, until Jen sighed. “It wasn’t pretty. Jacob really hates werewolves, that mindless sort of hate, you know?”

“Yeah.” Triss collapsed backward as well, settling her shoulder against the wall as she looked at the cave ceiling. “It was impressive, seeing a small guy like that decimate two werewolves in hand to hand, like they were fucking children. But at the same time, he goaded them, and took advantage of the situation.” Not doing the best job keeping him cool, Beatrice. Prince asked you to, maybe you should try a little harder. “I should talk to him, later.” After you go see Damien. Been putting that off long enough. Ugh.

“Where your boys been lately, Jen?” Othello asked, gesturing to the cave around them. “Used to be you and me stinking up this place with ghoul sweat. Now it’s just me.”

“I... honestly... haven’t really felt like enjoying them.” She shrugged, the blanket-with-arms looking utterly hilarious, and cute, on her. “Been more than satisfied with Triss and Julias.”

Triss winked at her, before looking back at the ceiling. Was Jen getting drawn into the lovey dovey romance Julias and Triss drowned each other in on the reg? Or was the sex that good, Jen didn’t need it from anyone else? Either way, it made Triss chuckle a bit, and earn an elbow in the side from the Ventrue.

Othello smiled smugly, then let Jen's admission pass with a shrug. “I remember the way Jacob was, after Minerva’s death. It wasn’t pretty. He turned into a stone. It was a long time before the Jacob we know and love, and hate, came out again.”

“It was true love,” Aaron said. “Rare among us vampires. I can only imagine what it must be like, to know someone for years, know you could spend the next century loving them, and then someone else tears them away, like”—finger snap—“that. I wonder if Jacob even realizes the powerfulness of his life story.” God damn, Aaron did love to over-narrate things. Maybe a repercussion of his unhealthy love of reading. Why read when you could watch the movie.

“He’s had no one to talk about it with,” Triss said.

The other three vampires looked at each other. The guilt on their faces was blatant.

“Correct,” Aaron said. “Approaching Jacob about the topic isn’t easy, as you can imagine.”

“Since her death,” Othello continued, “Jacob’s been buried deeply in his rituals and research.”

“Research?” Jen said. “You make him sound like a dragon, not a warlock.”

Triss snorted, throat catching on a small laugh. The word witches sounded cool, bad ass, and very dark and mysterious. Warlocks sounded like nerds.



“He’s being a bit more thorough,” Othello said, “than I remember him being before Minerva’s death. Not that I know that much; we avoided getting too involved in the crúac, Triss, until you called us out on it. Dolareido’s been... easy living, for the most part.”

Aaron nodded. “We just sit here and watch the Carthians and Invictus get on each other’s cases, while our boss explores the depths of madness, and other dimensions.”

“You had a good thing going,” Triss said. “I can’t blame you. It’s not... well, yeah, I mean now that everything’s turning to shit, monsters, werewolves, hunters, and fucking what not, I expected the you three to participate a more. But if Jacob’s been hands-off with you this whole time, yeah, no wonder you haven’t been involved.” Leaning back in, she tapped a claw against one of her larger crocodile teeth, several times, as she looked at the others. “Within six months of working for the Carthians, Garry had me doing scouting missions on operations the Invictus were running. That bar over by Fifth and Darper Street? That was me.”

That earned some oohs and aahs from the other vampires, and Triss grinned with the sound. Yeap, she’d done some damage that night, when she wasn’t supposed to have. Broke some poor suit’s arm too. Bitch had it coming, though.

Those were the good days. Instead of worrying about monsters, nightmares, spirits, and what might as well be gods, she worried about when and where to get her next meal, and how she was going to get away with breaking an Invictus woman’s arm. In the end, the woman probably didn’t report it, to save face, or whatever. Good for Triss, because it had been a stealth mission; one she fucked up. Now, if she fucked up, she’d piss off a demon, or an ancient spirit of the Black Plague or some such, and get everyone killed. Not only bigger stakes, but a playing field she wasn’t comfortable with, not at all.

No, that wasn’t entirely true. Now, she was dipping her toes into crúac, and overcoming her fear of pain. Now, she was talking to an ancient, deadly spirit on something similar to a schedule. She was earning the title, witch, very much so.

“Any news on the hunters, by the way?” she said. The two boys were supposed to be looking into it.

Aaron raised his hand for a moment. “I spoke with some of my crow friends. I... actually, did you know your little Ventrue friend Jack has been dipping his toes into animalism?”

“Has he?” she said.

“Mhmm. I don’t think he knows how many other Kindred have also made friends with the crows and rats of Dolareido. He’ll learn, eventually.” Holy crap, the Gangrel actually smiled. “My friends

noted some weird activity in Devil's Corner. Of particular interest was an old woman in a wheelchair, hooked up to a breather."

Othello rolled his eyes. "Yeah, you told me about this. Lot of old people in the city, Aaron."

"This one had an escort."

Jen leaned in. "That's not... too unusual. There are..."

"It's not just that. My friends told me they didn't like what they saw. There was something unusual about it, about her, about everything."

Triss shook her head. "That doesn't mean she, or they, were hunters. Hell, Azamel is an old woman, sitting in a crummy chair, with a bunch of bodyguards around her."

Aaron mirrored the head shake. "Based on what you told us about Azamel, this wasn't her. This woman looked two days away from death. Only thing keeping her alive was drugs and the respirator."

Shrugging, Triss got up, stretched a bit more, and headed for the exit of Jen's hole in the wall.

"Wait," Jen said. "We should... we should talk about that night, with Black Blood."

Yeah, they probably should. Problem was, Triss didn't really want to talk about it. Much as it appealed to a dark part of her that loved scary shit, that loved she was a part of scary shit, there was no denying the chills Black Blood sent up her spine.

"We'd love to know the details," Othello said. "And if Aaron and I are ever going to join you in these secret rituals... I know I'd like to know a little more, instead of going in blind."

"Yeah... ok." Groaning, she sat back down. Maybe this was better than the awkward conversation she'd planned to have with Damien. "Black Blood is a spirit, and that's about the extent of my knowledge. That, and Black Blood knows Jacob, has known him for a long time. Calls him Malachi."

"Malachi?" The two men said.

"Yeah. No one else calls him that, and I don't suggest you start. Probably an old name from his younger days, when he first came here to Dolareido. Far as I can tell, Jacob was just as wild then as he is now, and had another group of vamps as part of his Circle. They got down and dirty with the blood magic, the crúac rituals, and all that shit. Jacob discovered Black Blood, on the other side of the wall, when Jacob and company were still newcomers to Dolareido." She looked up, letting her mind wander for a moment, to images of cowboys and farmers, old bars and streets of mud and horse shit, to brothels and prostitutes with warts on their faces. A time when superstition ruled the world. God damn, it must have been a paradise for Kindred; if they could find a safe place to sleep, far from mobs with torches.

“They’re friends, I guess,” she continued, “if you can be friends with a spirit. It... it was like speaking with a shadow of a god, if you can imagine that. Something dark, something that literally oozed black stuff, black mist, black water, black everything. It took the place over, used all the symbols and shit Jacob had set up, and seeped its way into our world. It likes to use a corpse as a host, I guess, or at least, a tool. I don’t think host is the right word here, more like a puppet. And, like Jacob, or Malachi, it shares an interest in crúac, blood rituals, and other things. The two of them seem to be buddy buddy, and delight in...”

“In being gross,” Jen said. “Black Blood seems intelligent, really intelligent, the sort of intelligence that comes with not being human. Above human. It was weird, and as it and Jacob talked about the next crúac ritual like it was as mundane and predictable as the weather, I... it was scary.” She shivered, and hugged the blanket tighter as she looked down, at the book. After flipping through pages to where she’d left off, she turned the page. A person burning on a stake greeted her. The artist had taken the liberty to not show the facial expression of someone being roasted alive; how nice of them.

Above the burning person, was a wisp of smoke. Smoke made sense; the drawing was detailed, and the artist didn’t spare details like flames on the wood, or the smoke it gave off. But the cloud above carried an expression, cuts through the smoke making the shape of eyes, and fangs.

“Ain’t no vamp surviving this,” Othello said, as he pointed to the picture.

After a moment of reading, Jen shook her head. “This account suggests the person was human all along, and was being possessed by a vampire.”

“Dominated?” Aaron asked.

She shrugged again. “This book wasn’t written by a vampire or anything, just a human touching on things when they’d only scratched the surface. I’m reading it because Jacob said it was oddly accurate in many ways, and a lot of the information was pertinent to the things we witches and warlocks can do with crúac.” Her fingers found the drawing, and she caressed where the smoke formed the grinning face. “I guess this is the sort of stuff we’ll be exploring, with Jacob and an otherworldly entity as our guide. Cheating death by possessing people? Seems doable, considering the things we’ve seen Jacob do. And considering what we saw Black Blood do.”

Silence fell on them again; no need to say what they were thinking: what boundary had Minerva crossed, to earn death at the hands of the werewolves? Was Jacob and Black Blood going to get them killed, if they pursued the rivers of blood and insanity the old Nosferatu was inviting them into?

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~~Eric~~

The forest. A bright, shining moon. A gibbous moon. Grass around his naked feet. Breeze against his naked skin.

He was dreaming.

Catching on quickly, aren't you?

The voice in his head. His normal voice, his him, his me. Good ole Eric's voice, internally narrating. Nothing wrong with that, everyone does that.

You'd be surprised at how many people don't. You know who narrates their actions and motives in their heads?

Introverts?

Well, yes, them too. But so does a Cahalith.

Cahalith?

Mmhmm. You think all Uratha walk around, seeing things, hearing voices? The Ithaeur may be harassed by spirits, but what's happening to you isn't the same.

... am I sure this is me?

Yeah, just you who knows more than you. And I'm telling you, you're in for a rough ride, werewolf.

Eric breathed deep, and looked down at his naked body. Him, the man he knew. Average height, very dark skin, and well built. Muscular, with little in the way of body fat. Lean, abs and serratus anterior muscles, everything chiseled and ready for war. Old habits die hard, and keeping the fat mass low meant staying in a lower weight class. It also meant people underestimated you, when you were wearing clothes.

No clothes out here though, in the soothing, gentle breeze of mother nature. Out here where it was the rule of the world. Mother nature? Father wolf is dead, you coward. Your forebears ruined everything, and now it's on you to manage the mess. Mitigate, like a janitor cursed to wear a ball and

chain while idiot school children continue to litter and spill. Poor fool, doomed to wander the halls in a circle, forever cleaning, never done.

Eric turned, and looked to the city before him. Dolareido had no forests, not like the one that surrounded him, but his dream felt different. He stood high on raised ground, sloping hills of grass, with endless trees behind him. The city of lights, drugs, and sex lay before him.

So I'm Cahalith.

Indeed.

What does that mean?

I'm sure Avery will give you a better breakdown. Or a worse one, depending on how much bias you're willing to accept. All I know, is that you're a storyteller. A fucked-in-the-head storyteller, Eric. Which is hilarious, by the way. It doesn't fit you at all. Or maybe it does? Forever in pursuit of glory, because glory makes for a good song; or good media exposure, in the modern world, anyway. That is why you got into fighting, isn't it?

That's how I destroyed my knee. I learned my lesson.

Well, recent events are giving you a second chance. Get to be big, bad, dangerous, and glorious! All the glory, all the fucking glory, all for you, Eric. That knee is fine now, nothing to stop you from going on a glorious hunt.

For... Father Wolf? Or... Luna?

You know her name. She's been talking to you, hasn't she? Because if she didn't, you'd have crumbled by now. You don't know how to breathe, how to take a moment, how to focus on the fucking moment. You should feel proud, special; Luna actually talked to you. Maybe she likes you?

Eric looked up at the sky, the few clouds that gently moved by, and the moon that cut through them with its light. Her light.

Were his ancestors' sins, his problem? No, of fucking course, they weren't. He didn't ask to be a werewolf. He didn't ask for...

Someone's here.

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He sat upright in his bed. Kat was there, and her smell assaulted him from every direction; she'd been rubbing up against everything while he was sleeping, evidently. She sat beside him, meowing a few times before stretching out. A few more meows, then she walked over to rub her face against his chest.

Fur was everywhere. The new bed did not appreciate it, its purple silk sheets exposing all of Kat's glorious colors. The maid was going to hate him.

He had a maid.

Eric laughed, crawled out of bed, and put on some loose pants. His new apartment might as well have been a mansion, far as he and Kat were concerned. So much space. What was he going to do with so much space? Laughing again, he stepped out of his room, and—

“Hi.”

“Sweet Jesus!” He jumped and spun around, bringing up his fists. The room was dark, the only source of light the crack of illumination getting around his black-out curtains. But it was enough for his new eyes to see well, and see that he was alone in the room. The door was closed, too; Kat's routine was to sleep with him for solid eight hours, every night, though there was still five hours of sleep left on the schedule. The joys of working nights.

No one else was supposed to be in the room. His front door was locked, and the bedroom was locked with a new, proper lock. He did recognize the voice, though.

“Fiona? Er... Vrall?”

“Yes, that is who I am,” the spider woman said. Her voice was quiet, but not a whisper. She didn't need to whisper, given how much these fancy suites focused on sound insulation. As far as Eric knew, his neighbors might as well have not existed, sound-wise. Made talking with the monster who'd snuck into his room, and was now under his bed, easier.

“How did you get in here?” He squatted down by the bed, with enough distance that, if something decided to reach out to grab him, he could jump away in time. No reason to suspect Fiona, but there was no denying that a giant spider lady was talking to him from under his bed. He couldn't see her, but she was there.

If there was one way to get arachnophobia, it'd be from something like this.

“Damien knows which room you're staying in. He showed me.”

“How, exactly did he show you the place? I haven't left here since last night.”

“You can’t hide from the eyes of a Mekhet, especially that one.” She chuckled. “But, it’s true that I’ve never seen the insides of this particular room before. I had to use Vrall’s past experience with half-blind jumps to... well, find this delightful corner of shadow.” A hand reached out from the blackness. Her hand. Not Fiona’s, Vrall’s. Less fingers than a human hand. Each finger was a long, pointed blade. If she squeezed anything with that grip, her fingertips would sink in like a fat needle into an arm, hungry for blood.

“And why... why are you... like that?”

“Like what?”

“Why are you in that form right now? Where’s the pretty redhead?”

“Ah. Here in the dark, on the edge of the dream you just had, Vrall can come with me.” More chuckles, and another hand slipped out from the darkness. Two sets of claws began tapping on the floor, until at last the spider woman’s face peeked out from the black. Only the bottom half of her face emerged, so the top half of her head — which would not be able to fit under the bed anyway — was hidden. The seductive smile, thin lips, dark skin.

Damn she was beautiful, in a ‘come into my web so I can fuck you, then eat your head’ sort of way. But she was a spider, not a praying mantis. So she’d fuck him, then liquefy his insides and suck out the juice.

“Did you see my dream?”

“No. I have never been able to enter the dreams of others, only nightmares. Some Begotten might be able to? It would be interesting.”

“I... I’m a werewolf, Fiona.” And she fucking knew it, too.

“Yes.” Her hands and face slid along the length of his bed a foot, then back a foot, without making a sound, without altering her angle; like she was sliding on a sheet of ice under the bed. “Did something happen?”

“You haven’t talked to your buddies?”

“Athalia? Mark and Azamel? Not yet. I only just arrived back from a rather long and dangerous journey. The sun is beginning to rise.”

The black-out curtains would keep the sun out for a long while, thank god.

He leaned down a little closer to the spider woman’s face, so she’d see his frown.

“I killed four people, and ate a chunk out of each of them.” He spared no expense on the malice in his voice. There was anger there, rage, maybe even a little blame, aimed at Fiona for not telling him more, when she had the chance, before the madness started.

“I... can't apologize, for that.”

“You fucking... no, no, of course you can't.” He sighed, and fell back, his ass meeting the hard bedroom floor. Right then, he kind of missed his old apartment's shitty carpet. “Yeah, I know. I fucking know, but... fucking christ, Fiona. I killed people.”

“What happened?”

“Those fucking pricks working me over a loan came for me. Jessy had wiped my debt with an asshole, but apparently they wanted to kill me and send her a message.” He laughed, a sad laugh caught in his throat. “I vomited up bits of human. I can still fucking taste it too. Blurry images, nothing specific, but there was a rush, a terrible, amazing rush, when I bit into them. It... it's still there, on my tongue. The fuck am I?”

Cannibal. Cannibal? Was he actually a cannibal, if he wasn't human? And he wasn't human, not anymore. His dad was human though, so Eric had to be human, too, to some extent. Christ, Dad. He had to go see his dad again, and soon.

“If I had had time, I would have told you more, Eric.”

“No time?”

“Correct. After the hunters showed up, my kin and I had to hide. I became distracted. I haven't been to the Bloodlust since then. And, I am hungry.”

A hungry monster. He gulped, and found himself inching away. He was a hungry monster, in a way, but what was he compared to the nightmare under his bed.

“How do you satisfy your hunger?” How do you satisfy our own, new hunger, Eric? Far as he could tell, he wanted to eat what he always liked eating. Except, maybe, a bit more toward bacon and beef, spare the carbs.

“It's different for different types of Begotten, and not by our... nature. I am a monster of darkness: Eshmaki.” Without moving her fingers or face, Fiona's exposed hands and chin flipped upside down, as if she was now clutching the underside of his bed. Fucking christ. “But, so is Athalia, and she doesn't eat what I eat. She doesn't find those who are guilty, and make them suffer for their violations.”



“Violations?”

“It is different for each Begotten who satisfies their hunger in this way. Nemeses. I, Vrall, must find those who have mistreated others, bullied others, abused others. I devour the dread dripping from their pores. I inhale the fear escaping between their clenched teeth, then absorb the terror fleeing from their screaming mouths.” She sighed, wistfully, and licked her lips. He still couldn’t see above her nose, the shadow of his bed somehow hiding her enormous crown of horns. “When I first came to Dolareido, I let Vrall indulge her hunger, and torture prey to the point of death. I even devoured their flesh.”

“How many did you kill?” This tiny girl — not so tiny right now, but still — was a killer, someone who had killed people before. A young, small woman, with blood on her hands. What did that make him?

“Almost a dozen, before the Kindred sought me out. I had crossed a line, damaged their Masquerade.”

He winced, and nodded. Athalia was right, then, all of them were. Eric had come dangerously close to a precipice he didn’t know existed. If he had damaged their Masquerade irreparably, those vamps would have his ass on a stake, no matter if he wanted to reconcile.

“I know the feeling,” he said. “You’ve... killed people... coherently?”

“It was easy for me. The people Vrall wants to eat, or at least terrorize, deserve to be punished. Abusers deserve nothing but pain and suffering.”

“Personal vendetta?”

“No.” Still upside down, the nightmare licked her lips, then opened her mouth enough to expose some of her fangs, this time. “Vrall is the horror, the monster in us all that... it is too large a concept to explain so easily. There are men and women who have nightmares, Eric. Nightmares that haunt them because of a little kernel inside them. A little nugget of wisdom, a tiny voice they’ve buried speaks to them in whispers, begging for them to stop being such horrible people, to stop torturing others for their own sick pleasures. They ignore the voice. The voice crafts nightmares to persuade them to stop.” Grinning, her claws reach up to tug on his blanket’s edge. “Those nightmares extend, touch, and live in a realm beyond your imagining. The dream world touches everyone’s mind, and in an unconscious mass, horrors are birthed, to teach lessons. Fear the dark, fear the long drop, fear the greater predator, fear the wrath of the vengeful.”

“You teach people lessons?”

“Some Begotten think in such a way. Vrall does. Whether or not it is taken to heart, is up to the Begotten. But, I can tell you that Vrall, that I, am not some scarred and beaten thing that has come back from the beyond to enact vengeance. I am an idea, a nightmare, that has grown from a seed planted deep in the minds of billions of people.”

Ok, yeah, literal nightmare.

“Heavy stuff.”

“And you, are an Uratha. Vrall knew of your kind, centuries ago. You guard the wall, tend the herd, keep balance between this world and its shadow.”

So his dreams were telling him. It was nice to hear someone else confirm it, so he knew his new life wasn't just a delusion brought on by insanity.

“And, if I don't want to play guard duty, or worry about culling weeds?” He got up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Breathe, right? Breathe. A meow cut through the silence following the question, as he stretched his shoulders and opened the bedroom door. Kat knew where the litter box was, no need to help her.

Fiona, or Vrall, started to change. Maybe, because he was more awake, or from the light bouncing down the hallway, and little bits of the sun were working their way through the rest of his apartment. Whatever it was, as the room became lighter, until a normal human could see, Fiona was no longer the spider monster.

Out from under his bed, crawled the redhead. Wearing jeans and a jacket, she was the epitome of a casual, fun-loving gal. A tired gal, though. He could see the stress on her face and body, the weight in her steps. The strain of stress didn't erase the smile from her face, though, as she hopped onto his bed to sit at its edge.

“Fancy!” she said, accent returned. Kat returned from her outing, and hopped onto the bed, and looked at the short woman. Fiona returned Kat's curious look, tilting her head to the side. “Never seen a cat get along with a werewolf before.”

“Kat is brain damaged, I'm pretty sure.” He shrugged, and sat back on his bed, as well, with Kat between him and Fiona. Kat seemed hesitant with Fiona, looking her up and down. With Jessy, Kat was more than content to get affectionate. Fiona was giving her pause. Strange.

Fiona held out her hand for the cat, and Kat sniffed it several times, before at last rubbing her cheek against Fiona's hand, inviting pets. The redhead giggled, and began to pet the stupid feline. Feet

bouncing against the side of the bed, the monster smiled at Eric, and looked him up and down several times.

“I still owe ye a date,” she said. “And after that night with Jessy, I think it’s safe to say we can escalate!” Chuckling, Fiona turned on the bed a bit, pulling up one knee onto the blankets.

“You look exhausted.”

“So do ye!”

“I work nights, Fiona. I’m running on two hours of sleep. I should go back to bed.”

“... can I join ye?” She giggled, but she also looked down, and started tracing shapes into the blankets. Giggling was her nervous tick, then. Shy? No, but inexperienced.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said.

“Ye dinnae?” She frowned for a moment, before slipping out of her jacket, and setting it aside. Now, wearing only a t-shirt, she pulled that off as well, all with the grace of a drunk — or very tired — college girl. Her massive bra exposed, she lay on her back, making grabby hands at him. “Dolareido is called whore town, right? I’m very much looking forward to enjoying some of that.”

“You really... should find someone closer to your age.” And maybe someone with a disposition a bit closer to yours. Maybe a giant sunflower.

“Come on, ye telling me ye dinnae want a piece of this.” She rolled over enough to stick her ass out. The jeans hugged her tight, showing she was a very beautiful woman. A beautiful monster, with a sunny personality he couldn’t wrap his mind around.

“I’m serious, Fiona. This is a mistake. I’m a fair bit older than you, and—”

“I dinnae care. Ye’re handsome, and ye’re nice, in yer own, strange way.” She sat up straight again, reached behind her, and tossed her bra to the side. “I’m tired, sore, and I... I feel like I owe ye. I should have told ye more, before I went into hiding. From now on, I’ll be around more; so will Athalia and Mark.”

Kat, perhaps psychic and predicting, jumped off the bed and left, giving Fiona free room to crawl toward him. Suddenly, Eric found himself caught between staring, and laughing. It was true that Fiona was gorgeous, the frizzy red hair, the freckles, the pale skin, and the enormous breasts swaying beneath her were an overpowering combination of beautiful. But she had zero grace, and her attempts to be seductive were atrocious. Her cat crawl might as well have been a donkey crawl.

“Fiona, come on, I’m serious.”

She'd gone deaf; his words weren't landing. She crawled onto his lap, smiling at him as she put her knees on either side of his legs, and hooked her arms on his shoulders, hands crossed behind his neck. Her body was on display, and she leaned back until her heavy breasts flattened against her torso with their mass. God damn.

"Ye didnae enjoy that night, with Jessy and me?" she said.

"I did. A lot."

She took his words for invitation. Hands found his, and guided them to her body, her bare stomach, her soft skin, and her luscious breasts. He groaned quietly, as he felt his fingers sink into them, her breasts' softness molding them around his hands. It earned a shiver from her, too. She giggled nervously as she looked him up and down, and re-hooked her hands around the back of his neck.

"If I... if I had to guess," she said, "ye're interested in her."

Shit.

"I... um..."

"Nae, it's a'right. Though I think ye might be barking up the wrong tree. She has four servants, and she bangs them on the regular. At the same time." Fiona kept one hand on his neck, and let her other drift down his chest muscles. She licked her lips, and Eric smiled at the difference between her and Vrall's lips. Much as Vrall was unusually attractive, for a monster, Fiona's pink lips against her pale skin were far more appealing.

"Yeah, she does." Though Jessy seemed to suggest her 'ghouls' were banging other people, and not her, as of late.

"If there's a'budy on the planet that won't mind a lass having a taste of ye, it's an open-minded woman like Jessy." Still with one hand hooked behind his neck, she reached down to her pants, undid the button and fly, and reached in. "I was in the Shadow World last night."

He tensed, hard enough for the girl to notice; she knew he knew what that was now, to some extent or another. With a nod, she smiled at him, and continued to touch herself, while one of his hands slid down to hold onto her waist. She wasn't ripped like the girls he knew in MMA, or Jessy, but she was mostly thin, a bit curvy, and a touch of softness to her, that was so terribly inviting. His other hand continued to sink into her breast, now reaching under to cup it, letting its fullness overflow his palm. Warm and heavy, her swollen, pink nipple begged his thumb to touch it. It did, reaching up to caress while his fingers continued to cup the breast's weight.

God damn, he broke easily.

“You were in the Shadow World?”

“Yeah, helping some friends learn some things. We met a sex spirit there.” Fiona slipped her hand out of her pants, and put it on his chest. Wet. Already. “She had some interesting things to say about us. Apparently, everyone in Whore Town is... a slut. The vampires are the worst, but the spirit had some interesting things to say about me. Clara laughed at us.”

“Clara?”

“A werewolf, like ye. I’m sure ye’ll meet her, too. Bet she might even give Jessy a run for her money at stealing ye.”

“I’m not—”

“I’m just kidding.” Giggling all the more, her hand slid down his chest, over his abs, and down to his pants. Simple, loose sweat pants to wear at home provided no protection from her hands, nor did they hide how hard he was getting. He couldn’t stop caressing the woman’s breast, and that was only making things worse.

Her hand found his cock, then giggled and shivered all at once, as she began to gently stroke it within his pants.

“I still feel like I owe ye, for saving my life, and helping Beatrice save Jack,” she said.

“You don’t—”

“I want to.” She started stroking him faster, her grip at the base of his cock, working him back and forth similar to that night with Jessy. “It’s a treat for ye, and it’s a treat for me. My hometown was so boring, and Dolareido isn’t, and... and I haven’t really gotten to partake! I get to see it, all the time, in my hunts. I lied to my friends, but it wasn’t until that night with ye and Jessy that... that someone else touched me. A’m needin’ more.”

Horny girl leaves hometown, and struggles to break out of her shell in the big city. He could understand that, he supposed. But it only served to highlight how young the girl was, and how her aggressive, sexual attitude was far more ‘fake it until you make it’ than legit.

That didn’t mean he didn’t agree with her, though. And when a topless, beautiful woman is sitting on your lap, and stroking your cock while pointing it at her, it’s hard to think clearly.

Whatever was happening to him, whatever it meant to be a werewolf, it was sending his body a very powerful message: you are alive, healthy, and ready fight or fuck at any time. And do it again, and again, and again. And god damn, he wanted to.

“Don’t... suppose you brought any condoms?” he said.

“What? No, course nae. Ye’re the man, ye should have some!”

“Only thing I brought with me to this new place was Kat. Been a pretty hectic night.”

“It’s a fancy place, right? I bet the bathroom already has some.” She let go of him, got up, and walked toward the door as she kicked off her pants. Left only in her underwear, she grinned over her shoulder at him. Simple underwear, blue, and terribly cute.

He got up, and followed after her. Early in the morning, sun rising, and he needed sleep. A middle-of-the-night tryst with a deadly monster wasn’t what he had planned for his morning, not after what happened last night. But, watching the small girl’s large butt, her curvy hourglass figure, and breasts so large he could see the sides of them from behind, he couldn’t deny what he wanted, now. Typical man, breaks like a dry twig the moment a girl shows her boobs.

He got up, and followed her, only to find underwear on the floor outside his door.

“This place is nice! I like it.”

“It pays to have friends in high places.”

“The Kindred own the town, I admit that.” She found the bathroom down the hallway, and whistled as she flicked on the light. “Oh, oh! Hot tub!”

He laughed, leaned against the door frame, and watched the naked girl explore his bathroom. Yeah, it was ridiculously classy and sleek, a large scale bathroom with a middle of the floor drain, so the corner shower didn’t bother with glass panels to contain the water. He’d heard of places like this, of rooms like this, called ‘open design’ or something. What the fuck would a couple do if one was showering and the other wanted to take a piss? Zero privacy. Well, the place probably did have an extra bathroom somewhere, considering how big the damn apartment was.

“Found some!” She drew some condoms from a cupboard, and waved them in the air, prize earned.

“I still think this is a bad idea.”

“So do I, but I’m a young lass, and I deserve to make mistakes. Tasty, delicious mistakes.” She wiggled the condoms left and right as she came closer, grin so big he could see her teeth. No fangs, nothing unusual.

“You’re kind of skipping some steps, too,” he said.

“I am?”

“Yeah. Last thing you want to do is jump right to the sex, Fiona.” Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it. “Sit on the tub, and spread your legs.” God damn it, Eric, you weak fucker.

She squealed, doing as directed, zero hesitation despite the blatant blushing. Redheads did blush easily, pale skin catching the red blood and putting all her emotions on display. Nervous. Giggling nervous. She set the condoms aside, put her palms on the white tub’s edge, and spread her milky legs apart.

Wherever the sun struck, there were freckles. Her face was covered with them, and so were her upper arms. But under them, everything from the breasts downward, was creamy, milky white, alabaster almost, and demanding to be kissed. She’d shaved herself smooth, normal for Dolareido, and her pink pussy shivered along with her trembling thighs. Very nervous.

“I wish I had a bevvv.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m sure there’s something to drink in the place. I haven’t looked.”

“Later, then?” Grinning big once again, she reached down between her thighs with one hand, and caressed her folds. Very wet. What had that sex spirit said to get her so riled up?

Maybe you should stop worrying about why these beautiful gifts are being dumped on your lap, Eric. Your knee is healed, you feel as healthy as an ox, and you have a great, new place to live. Pitt is dead, your debt is gone, and you got some vampires in your corner, backing you, willing to deal with that Montoya fucker. And two women are throwing themselves at you, both fun, both gorgeous, both looking for something non-committal. Perfect, right?

Well, maybe he was looking for something a little more committed? He wasn’t young, anymore. Not old, not young, an age where the idea of getting drunk and sleeping with a stranger lost its appeal.

He shook his head at his thoughts, smiled at the beautiful creature waiting for him, and approached. He was still wearing his pants, but the loose fabric didn’t bother him, despite how it hugged his upright cock. It’d be good protection for his knees, since he was going to be on them for a bit.

He breathed in, deep, and earned a sigh of desire from the small woman as she looked him up and down. She liked the look of him, and seeing a girl sigh with lust, was the biggest stroke to a man's ego he could imagine. It set his blood on fire, and filled his mind with imagery. If things continued, he'd have this tiny, curvy, busty creature in his bed, and he'd fuck her, and fuck her, and fuck her, until she wasn't able to move anymore.

All in good time.

He got down on one knee, set a hand against the tub edge outside her leg, while his other reached in, finding her sex. Warm, soft, wet and hungry. Fiona bit her lip, and chewed on it as she watched him, cheeks growing redder, and redder.

And all the redder, as he eased two fingers into her awaiting body.

“Oh! ...b-be gentle.”

He smirked at the trembling woman, but did as requested. He'd had sex hundreds of times, but she hadn't. How much did she know about it, about her own body, about pleasure. No reason to do things quickly, when he could go slow, and help her find what she liked.

With his palm up, his middle and ring finger together, he pressed them into her body a few inches, and looked up at her. Her expression melted, and her hand, once caressing her folds, reached out to grab his shoulder, instead.

“You... you... know w-what you're doing, right?” she asked. Poor girl was trying so hard to be the aggressor, bouts of shyness made her so unbearably cute. Like sweet ice cream, almost too sweet to enjoy. Almost.

“I do.” He leaned in, breathed deeply the scent of her flesh, her soft skin and curvy thighs, then set his lips onto her wet clitoris. A sharp inhale confirmed her sensitivity; no surprise there. He set his tongue against it, and kept the pressure soft, gentle, with long and caressing licks. Her shivers increased, and little squeaks started to come with them. Her breasts shook with her trembling, their softness causing them to ripple from movement. Her quickened breathing only made it worse, and Eric found himself staring at her just to watch her breasts jiggle.

The young creature was too beautiful. He almost felt unworthy, touching something so pure. Maybe pure wasn't the word, but there was no denying the girl was a bundle of joy who wanted the experience of the pleasures life had to offer; she was untainted. Strange, considering she was a monster; a shining example of what all the monsters, vampires, werewolves, and God-fucking-knows-what-else should strive to be. She was happy.



It was infectious. He grinned up at her, groaning into the softness of her mons. Vibrations from his voice earned a mewl from her, and mewl became squeak as he pressed his fingers up against her g-spot.

“Oh! There, inside... I like that... more, there.”

Not afraid to admit what she liked. If only more people were like her.

She was already wet, and waiting; no need for him to gently warm her body. If she wasn't so ready and hungry for it, he'd spend time warming her up, kissing and suckling her clitoris while gently massaging her lips and labia. If there was one thing Sheryl didn't have any complaints with, it was the sex.

No no, don't think about Sheryl. Don't think about Sheryl, or werewolves, or debts, or your worthless father, or the fact you're probably still digesting a human fucking being. Think about the gorgeous woman in front of you, creaming onto your hand with only the slightest touch. And god damn it, just look at her, smell her, feel her. Her warm juices leaking down your knuckles feel great, and her mix of feminine deodorant and sweat — whatever she was doing earlier had been physically taxing — smelled better than than some fake scent perfume crap.

He groaned into her clitoris once again, and wrote some letters on it with his tongue, as he probed against her g-spot faster. Much faster. Her body started to tremble from the effort, and her breasts jiggled blatantly as she gripped the tub side with one hand, and his shoulder with the other.

She came in moments. Shaking like a leaf, she squeaked between her high-pitched, quiet moans, and squeezed his shoulders. As more of her liquids trickled out, he eased up the pressure of his tongue; no need to overstimulate the tiny nub he was suckling. But, by keeping his tongue on it, holding still while she came, he could tell the tiny redhead was forced to mewl as every movement brought friction against her hyper sensitive flesh. His fingers pressing against her depths forced her to become a shivering mess, though. Each upward thrust of his digits against her g-spot forced mewl after mewl out of her, in a blatant display of surrender.

She started to fall back, and he snapped out his free hand to wrap around the small of her back.

“W-Wait! Slow down... I...”

He grinned into her smooth pussy, and drew away his face. His fingers within came to a stop as well, but remained within, as he enjoyed the random spasms of her depths around his digits. Warm, and tight, the juxtaposition of her hard, clenching muscles within, compared to the softness of her body, was alluring. Christ, he couldn't wait to get inside her.

He started again.

“Wait! I said w...wait... nnnng!” The poor woman had little control of her voice. She set both of her hands on his shoulders, and pushed against him, trying to get him to stop. But her body responded with all the grace of lit kindling. She was sensitive, aroused, and her body wanted to be touched. She wasn't ready to be fingered so soon after an orgasm, but there was something deliciously primal about hearing a woman's exhausted moans, and small, begging words, as they were being forced to cum.

And she did. Poor thing looked at him with begging, golden eyes, and started to shudder all the more as her grip upon his shoulders renewed. To say she was sexually sensitive would have been an understatement, and Eric stared up the valley of her belly to admire her convulsing body and trembling breasts. Wow. It almost felt wrong, touching something as pure as this girl, his cynical and jaded mind unworthy of being near her. Her body came and came hard, her insides squeezing down on his fingers like a vise, causing more juices to leak onto his palm.

He forced his fingers through the clenching, and continued to finger fuck the trembling redhead.

“Eric! St... stop... I...”

Again, the sound of her begging for a ceasefire, between mewls and moans of pleasure, set his whole body on fire. If they'd been in bed, he'd have thrown her to her knees, and pounded her hard enough to wake the neighbors. The squeaks and squeals, mewls and whimpers, mixed in with moans, begging, and breathless words were intoxicating. Her words and sounds drove him to finger her harder. Hard enough to make her ass bounce against the tub edge, and her thighs to squeeze his arm in a futile attempt to stop him.

It wasn't until he felt her juices trickling down his wrist, that he stopped.

Poor girl collapsed forward, and he helped ease her down the outside of the tub to the floor, so she could sit with her back against the white tub. She sat there, legs spread, and shivered without stop. Panting and breathless, she looked at herself, where her legs were quaking; he doubted she was used to her body refusing to listen to commands.

“Ye... bully...” She grinned at him, before her gaze fell back to her own flesh. Still panting, still trembling, her eyes traced the length of her legs, down to her curling toes, before up to her smooth mons. She cupped her breasts with both hands, and hugged herself, cradling her breasts with her forearms as she shivered. “Och, that is... is so much better than... doin' it by myself.” Giggles mixed with the mewls, as she hugged herself a little tighter and her grin grew.

“You are a shameless woman, aren't you?”

“I have shame! Somewhere. I lost it, haven’t found it.” Giggling up a storm, she tried to reach out for him, but the trembling in her thighs stopped her. She hugged herself again instead, and bit her bottom lip while looking him up and down. “I’m all tingly.”

He licked his lips, and growled. A growl, and a rumble, something close to a loud, bassy purr. He had never make that sound before, but it came out as naturally as breathing. It earned a wide-eyed stare from Fiona, before she reached up to touch her lip.

“... I like that sound,” she said.

If she complimented him one more time, he was going to explode. He rumbled again, earning more wide-eyed stares of wonder from the beautiful, naked, and shivering woman sitting on his bathroom floor, her spread legs were trickling with her juices. How much his life had changed. So many downs, so many ups. This one was a very, very good up.

He reached for his pants, and—

Knock knock.

He froze, and looked out the bathroom door into the hallway. Room service? It was an apartment, not a hotel. Landlord, or what-the-fuck-ever they had in a fancy building like this?

“Just ignore it,” he said. “They’ll go away in a minute. And I very much need to get inside—”

Knock knock, louder this time. “Eric! This is Avery. I know you’re in there, open the door.”

Oh god mother fucking, stupid fucking, shit, fuck, god fucking hell, shit, fucking cunt.