

~~Damien~~

It'd been a long time since he'd been in this much pain. Maybe that time he'd helped Jack and the others bring down Jeremiah and Angela? Fighting Sándor's Horror had certainly been painful. Maybe that time the azlu had stabbed him through the stomach, straight through him, and left a large hole in his guts and spine? That hadn't been too painful, considering how quickly he'd gone into torpor, only to be awoken by Beatrice's blood.

Beatrice. The Nos took a peek his way, long enough for them to share that uncomfortable memory, before she looked back to Sándor. She'd been doing that a lot. He'd thought maybe she'd been taking piano lessons from him to impress the gargoyle, but seeing her watch Sándor as he and Jack talked, sealed the deal. She liked him. It was understandable. Sándor was a great guy. But Triss was not only Jacob's protege, she was also trying to resurrect her dead lover. It was a love triangle even a soap opera couldn't match. Love square, with Jennifer involved.

He watched her as best he could, but he knew even if she tried something, he was in no condition to stop her. There wasn't a drop of vitae left in him. He'd managed to heal his jaw enough it worked again, but that was the best he could do. If someone so much as looked at him too strongly, his face would probably crack like an egg and spill his brains. He had his sword back, but swinging it would be near impossible. He was tempted to give it back to Jack, but considering what the kid had tried to do with it, maybe he could wait on that.

The kid was willing to kill himself to stop the Ripper. He'd legitimately tried. And the moment Jacob and Black Blood were dealt with, he'd try again. Maybe someone could stake him before he did, but that'd only delay the inevitable. The necklace had ultimately backfired, given them all a false sense of security, and now Monica and Caleb were dead because of it. The kid would never forgive himself for that.

Lord, please, the kid didn't deserve this.

"You guys absolutely sure you want to come?" Jack asked.

"Enough already," Avery said. "We're going."

He winced as he looked between the six remaining werewolves, before nodding, and looking to Beatrice.

"Triss, I—"

“I’m going. I need to talk to him. You’ll either have to stake me or kill me, because I’m going.”

Jack sighed and looked to Athalia.

“Don’t look at me. I’m not dragging her back. Besides, I’m here now, and we know for sure Jacob’s going to try something tonight. I’m going, too.”

He looked to Mary.

“I’m going! I don’t want to hurt Jacob, but if he’s going to let that... that... black thing, tear everything down, then what happens? What happens to you, and Mom? No! Black Blood is—”

“The reason you got to try a body again,” Triss said. She regretted it the moment she said it, eyes widening, and she took a step back as she put up her hands. “Sorry. Fuck me, I’m sorry. But you’re all so convinced Jacob and Black Blood are out to kill everyone, but—”

“Not kill everyone,” Jack said. “But they are going to—”

“What, start an apocalypse, that then that kills everyone? Bullshit. Fuck, I had to kick Aaron’s ass to get here, because that dude is so convinced what Jacob wants to do is good for everyone, that he was willing to die for it. You get that? Jesus christ, Black Blood is the reason Jeremiah didn’t kill all of you!”

Silence heavy enough a graveyard would be envious. Everyone looked between each other, with more than a few wincing. Only Sándor managed to keep his eyes on her.

“Beatrice,” Sándor said eventually, “we don’t want to kill them. We want to stop them. That’s all.” Unfortunately for the man, the tone in his voice, monotone as it was, said it all. Stopping them most likely meant killing them, or at least killing Jacob. Whether Black Blood could even be killed or destroyed was still a question mark.

Jack let out a snort. “My necklace is gone. We could get everyone to comb this place for it, but you know damn well we’ll never find it in time. Hell, a ghost probably had orders to run off with it. It’s gone. That was Black Blood’s fault.”

Slowly, Damien put up a finger.

“He did tell us to stay put. This fight wouldn’t have happened if we—”

“If we what?” Jack said. “Just let Jacob destroy the—”

Triss threw up her hands. “He’s not destroying the world! We don’t know if—”

“He’s going to break the whole fucking universe,” Avery said, and she dragged herself toward Triss, rage boiling in her eyes. “He lost his girl, and now he’s pissed and wants to merge it all, get rid of the whole life and death cycle. He’s a bastard who’s throwing a hissy fit, and he’s bringing us all down with him.”

“Oh fuck you.” The Nos walked up to Avery, and met her glare with her own. “Jacob has done more for me than anyone. He deserves the benefit of a doubt.”

Jack shook his head. “We’re pretty sure he and Black Blood triggered the war between the Invictus and Carthians, probably for the distraction.”

“Did he kill anyone?” Triss asked, eyes snapping to Jack.

Jack hesitated. “No.”

“Then what the fuck? Everyone running in with guns out ready to kill him, but—”

“He’s going to get everyone killed!” Jack threw up his own hands, and got in Triss’s face, even closer than Avery. “Killed, or turned into soup, I don’t fucking know! We have to do something.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Enough!” Everyone snapped their heads to Sándor, and the man let out a slow breath. For a split moment, there was something more in his expression than his usual stoic calmness. He looked angry. “Enough. We have no time. We will go, and figure out how to handle the situation when we arrive. I am not willing to let Black Blood alter the fabric of the entire world, but Beatrice is correct, as well. Jacob and Black Blood deserve the benefit of a doubt.”

Everyone listens when a quiet man speaks.

Slowly, they all nodded, and looked to Jack. Jack shrugged and motioned to Sándor. And again, a hint of emotion came through the man’s face. Surprise? Awkwardness? He didn’t expect to suddenly have everyone looking to him on what to do.

It took him a second to find the words. “Let’s go.”

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The werewolves struggled to keep up, for a little while. After five minutes, their wounds healed well enough they managed to follow, though it was also because Sándor slowed down to a fast walk.

No point in tiring them, or himself out, before he opened a tunnel into what was going to be utter chaos. They didn't know what they were walking into, how could they? All they could do was go through Sándor's tunnel, and come out near the deepest tear, where Jacob and Black Blood were working to destroy the world.

Damien and Clara took up the rear. His legs mostly worked, and so did hers, though one of her arms was borderline useless. Sándor glanced back frequently, scanning for ghosts that might dive them, but it looked clear. And Mary hovered above, circling, also looking for ghosts to scare off. Or more likely, devour.

"You trust her?" Clara whispered, and she nodded toward Beatrice.

"Mostly."

"Mostly." After a quiet growl, not nearly as intimidating in her human form, Clara clutched her ruined shoulder.

"She's smarter than she seems," Damien said.

"You sure? 'Cause so far, all I know is she's been trying to bring back her dead lover, and in the process, caused Samantha a shit load of pain."

Damien shook his head. "That's not a fair statement."

"You know the details?"

"No..."

"Then," she nodded again in Beatrice's direction, "don't be so quick to assume you can trust her. She was willing to get her fingers into some very fucked up pies, Damien."

"Why are you telling me?"

"I... fuck, I don't know. Gotta tell someone."

"Jack?" he asked.

"Nah. His head's not... it's not on right."

That was putting it lightly.

"Sándor?"

"I thought about that, but... you seen the way they look at each other?" She leaned in closer. "Triss was genuinely concerned about the dude. Almost like she came down here just to save him, you know? And I think Sándor is... well, he's hard to read, but I think he's not oblivious to it."

Damn. If Clara could put it together, there was a chance other people would, too. It wasn't exactly a bad thing, if Beatrice was interested in Sándor, or vice versa, but it did make things complicated.

"Jesus," Clara said, "I'm glad Brace isn't here."

"Oh?"

"He'd be dead."

"Maybe."

"Ha, I guess. He is a hunter. Dude's got some tricks up his sleeve. But... after what happened, with the Ripper?" She shivered. "You just know that fucking psychopath would have killed him in the most horrible way, just to hurt me."

"That... is true."

"And fuck me, I..." Wincing, she looked to Jack, then back to Damien. She opened her mouth again, but no words came out, and she sighed as she slowly looked down.

"It won't happen again," he said.

"You know that for sure?"

"I do." Damien gestured to the sword on his back. "He tried to kill himself, Clara, to make sure it didn't happen again. The resolve it'd take to come to that conclusion, is immense. And I can guarantee that's still his plan."

She slouched, and that invisible anchor he'd grown quite familiar with hung off her neck in front of her.

"Carter's dead. And Ja... the Ripper killed Monica and Caleb. Fuck... fuuuuck. Avery won't even talk about, it. She's—"

"Focusing on the mission so Jacob doesn't trigger Armageddon. Your boss has the right idea." The fact Clara had almost said Jack killed her pack mates didn't escape him. She was cracking.

"I know. I know, alright?" She put a hand to her jaw. Like Damien, her mouth was a royal mess, split lips and missing half a dozen teeth, lopsided, and he was pretty sure her left cheek bone was cratered. "And—"

"Clara, we're going to see this through. Either we save the day or we all die trying. Lord willing, we stop Black Blood and Jacob from destroying everything, and we live to see another night."

Lord, what sort of insanity led him to being the voice of will and courage? That was not the territory of Mekhets. And yet, it was land his sire had walked, frequently. Perhaps a little of him was showing through. He prayed it was only a little.

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Getting clear of the spiderwebs took longer than they expected. A fifteen minute journey. Not exactly an eternity, but it felt like one, with everyone forced to walk as their injuries continued to heal. No one managed to recover fully, though Jack's injuries seemed to become an afterthought for him. He still looked like hell, but whatever strange power the curse gave him, it allowed him to continue pushing and fighting until he was well past what most vampires could handle. Even if he lost both arms and legs, and had his guts ripped out, he'd keep fighting. The only way to legitimately kill him, would be to cut off his head.

Damien hated that he was thinking about it. He hated that Jack had been thinking it, too, and likely still was.

There were many spiderwebs, far more than anyone expected, giant things that reached high and connected colossal stones to colossal pillars. The azlu had been busy, probably doing its best to do what it did, weave webs, while also only eating when absolutely necessary to avoid gathering attention. Smart.

Why it had an instinctual need to weave webs that separated the realms, strengthening the walls between them, the Uratha didn't seem to know. But it was what they did. And considering Black Blood and Jacob were trying to tear down the barriers between realms, they wanted the azlu gone as much as the Uratha did. Which carried some scary implications. How much of their fights with the azlu over the years had been orchestrated by the spirit of death?

Sándor held up a hand, looked around, and a hint of a grimace showed on his face.

"Give me a moment. Burrowing from here isn't easy."

"Why?" Noah asked.

"No true darkness. No similarities with my lair. No pathway to reuse, no portal, nothing. This will be... draining."

Sándor held out his hands at his side, and squeezed them, as if grabbing the air. As he did, the silhouette of the gargoyle emerged. Four enormous wings and four enormous arms reached out, and did the same, the four hands grabbing the air and pulling it in toward Sándor like invisible curtains. As he did, darkness fell on them. The green lanterns in the distance disappeared, and eventually so did the giant boulders and pillars, the distant, almost infinitely high walls, and the mist. Soon, all any of them could see, was blackness.

Damien wasn't too far from Athalia when Sándor started, and so close, he could hear her breath quickening. Whatever it was Sándor was doing, it was enough to have Athalia in literal awe. Truthfully, Damien had never seen anything from Sándor to make him think the gargoyle was some monolith of strength like Azamel had been, but then again, he hadn't ever witnessed Sándor engage his strength outside of a simple fist brawl with the Ripper. And back then, it'd only been his Horror, separated from Sándor himself.

Now, Damien couldn't help but stare up at the disappearing cave, and how the gargoyle in front of them somehow managed to bury it all in darkness. He didn't just wrap them in a pocket of black. He brought darkness down on the whole area. A hundred yards? Two hundred? Three? It all vanished behind the veil.

Athalia's breathing changed, and vanished. Damien looked at her, but the darkness was too thick. Pitch black. He could hear her though, and it wasn't her anymore. Athalia's Horror didn't breathe, but he could hear the giant bone hands on stone.

"We in the dream?" Jack asked ahead.

"No," Sándor said, deep voice a rumbling bass. "We are burrowing. It cuts near the dream."

Burrowing, indeed. They were moving. Damien sucked in a useless breath as he looked around. Still too dark to see anything, but there was movement in the black, as if the darkness itself was a river they were swimming through. His feet didn't move, and the ground he stood on remained solid, but his Kindred eyes caught enough hints of something to tell him they were moving. A kine would have gotten motion sickness, if they'd somehow noticed.

One minute of silence. One minute of no one saying anything, waiting with baited breath — the breathers, anyway — as Sándor brought them deeper into the Great Below. Sándor had already described to them what they'd find, but they all knew there was no way they'd be able to appreciate it until they actually saw it.

They were right.

Sándor pulled the darkness open, like someone pulling apart an onyx curtain of Saran wrap, and the light spilled over them. Light was a strong word. More like, hints of reflection, as if light had managed to sneak its way into Hell, and they were getting glimpses of it shining against the endless walls of the endless depths.

“Holy shit,” Triss said, looking up and around.

The Great Below from before looked cozy compared to the world that welcomed them now. The ceiling was just as high, miles high, as if they hadn’t gone deeper at all, but the pressure on Damien’s skin told him otherwise. Everything felt heavier, and everything looked darker. Stone, endless stone, with stalactites big enough to destroy city blocks if they fell, and stalagmites as tall as skyscrapers.

The differences were immediate. There was no mist. Everything looked wet, was wet, with lines of water dripping down the rock faces that surrounded them. Or at least, it looked like water, slowly trickling down the stone, until it fell into the black around around their feet. Damien almost jumped up when the water soaked through his shoes, but the silence told him to stay put and don’t move.

Black water, shallow, but everywhere. Oh good Lord.

“It’s not Black Blood,” Clara whispered. “It’s... from the same place, I guess? It’s not the spirit. I’d smell it if it was.”

Everyone relaxed, slightly, and looked back out to the cave. This one had more cave tunnels to it, colossal winding paths that led into each other, creating less a maze of tunnels, and more an endless array of warped, twisting and turning pillars of stone so massive they were beyond reasoning. From wide births in the stone above, bits of light fell on them, giant beams that were soft, afraid to light up the blackness with anything more than subtle, passive illumination.

There was no color. No green lanterns of ghosts searching for whatever it was they searched for. All they could see, no matter the direction they looked, was a giant cave that looked like the evil twin of the cave they’d just come from. The fact they now had to walk in cold black water several inches deep, made it a thousand times worse.

“Watch where you step,” Sándor said. “The Great Below isn’t... stable.”

“Earthquakes?” Triss asked.

“No. It’s not solid matter. It will change if something decides to attack us.”

“What the fuck? How?”



“I don’t know. The few times it happened to me, it was very strange. The ghosts here have evolved into little more than monsters, and the Great Below alters with them wherever they go.”

Triss groaned as she clutched her arms and hugged herself. “Fucking lovely.”

Sándor faced ahead, took a small sideways step closer to Triss, and walked forward.

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~~Beatrice~~

Well, she was in the shit, now. Deep shit. The deepest shit shat by a god of shitting. Every second that passed, the familiar air of the Great Below sank deeper into her. Her combat boots wouldn’t let water this shallow in, but that didn’t stop the atmosphere from punching her in the guts over and over. She knew this feeling. She’d felt it every time she’d summoned Black Blood for his help.

Death. Not rotting corpse death. Not violent death. Not even the blood or guts or anything death often came with. Just, death, the sort of death you found in a graveyard, but only at night. A heavy, cold blanket, something that pushed you down and sucked the heat and energy out of you.

She’d gotten used to the feeling. She’d had to. Every time Black Blood answered her, she’d had to stand in the presence of the huge bastard, and drink in the essence of him, whether she wanted to or not. It wasn’t the sort of a thing a human could do. Hell, she doubted anyone who wasn’t already half dead could be around Black Blood too long. No wonder he and Jacob worked together.

Sándor took a step closer to her, or more like, slid a little closer to her, and started ahead. She smiled at the back of his head, but something else punched her in the gut. A memory. Julias, slipping in a little closer to her, back on their first date, and she’d been like an angry cat, hissing at him. Christ, she was stupid. She was so fucking stupid.

The water splashed around them as they walked, but it was thicker than water, and didn’t make much sound. They walked slow, and scanned left and right with each step. Mary stayed close to Jack, and Athalia stayed close to Sándor, pretty much directly beside him, a little ways back, close to Triss too. And every so often, she gave Triss a worried glance. Worried about them all dying, worried about Sándor, or worried about Triss’s weird relationship with Sándor, she didn’t know.

Triss glanced back. The werewolves were so beat up, they were nothing but a liability at this point, and that included Damien. They should have listened to Jack and just stayed put. But then again, she couldn't blame them. If the world really was about to end, then it was all or nothing, even if 'all' included six werewolves and one vampire who wouldn't be able to do shit. They knew it, and they'd rather die as sacrifices in a battle, than do nothing. Badass, but probably futile. They didn't know Black Blood like she did. They didn't understand just how fucking powerful he was.

Gravity yanked down on Triss's right leg, and she yelped as she half plunged into a fucking hole in the water.

"The fuck!?"

Sándor had a hand on her in an instant, and he pulled her up and away. Actually, he fucking threw her, and she yelped again as she fell back on her elbows with a splash.

Before she could say anything, a huge arm shot out of the black where she'd sunk, and lashed out for Sándor. A big, black arm, just as black as the dark water, it had too many segments, three elbows that bent and twisted, and let the arm snap out at Sándor.

Sándor jumped, the silhouette of four titanic wings pushing him back with a hard gust. Athalia and Jack came up to the hole, but the arm pulled back into the black like a whip, splashing them as it vanished.

"The fuck was that?" Jack asked.

Sándor could only sigh as he let the silhouette of his Horror fade away. "A ghost."

Mary hovered over to the hole, and stared down into it with her black gaze. For a second, Triss wasn't sure which was the deeper and scarier, the hole into death she'd almost fallen into, or the girl's eyes.

"It's gone now," Mary said. "Whatever it was, gone. Gone gone."

"Gone, as in gone away?" Triss asked. "Or, gone, as in... not human anymore?"

"Both." Mary slowly ran her long claws over the water, as if tempting the other ghost to attack her. "I can... smell it. Smell what it was. Something angry. Something that killed. Something that was stopped."

Jack risked coming a little closer. "Stopped?"

Mary came closer to the water until her nose almost touched it, and she hovered there for a few seconds. Gravity pulled her hair and rags down, but far too slowly, as if the girl was borderline immune to... existence.

“Executed, for drowning people.”

Triss snarled as she got up off her butt. “Well ain’t that just fucking fitting.” Groaning, she slapped her ass. Yeap, soaked. But at least she didn’t get any water in her boots yet. “Okay, so holes in the ground. Any other surprises?”

Sándor offered her a small smile, and a smaller shrug. “I’m sure there will be. Ghosts pass through, and the place changes.”

“Almost like the spirit world?” Jack asked.

Sándor shook his head. “More immediate. Be on your guard. We still have another half hour of walking.”

“Why drop us off so far from where we’re going?” Triss asked.

“If we came out too close, Jacob or Black Blood might notice.”

That was true. Their entrance wasn’t exactly subtle, and Black Blood and Jacob would probably intercept, or squash them the moment they stepped out of Sándor’s tunnel, or something. Which meant, the only reasonable course of action, was to drop them off far enough they could approach sneaky style.

Which meant there was a good chance she’d walk into another hole that’d try to kill her. Except she couldn’t drown. How the fuck would that work?

“Let’s keep going,” Jack said. “We’re running out of time.”

On they went. Jack, Sándor, Mary, and Athalia took lead, scanning the floor and sky for potential doom. Everyone else stayed directly behind them, with enough distance that if a ghost explosion suddenly blew them up, it wouldn’t take out the whole group. Probably. Triss stayed in the middle of the group, able to help someone if some ghosts came at them from behind. Probably.

Sándor glanced back over his shoulder. For a second, Triss thought he was looking past her at the werewolves, or maybe Damien; they were still all royally fucked up. But they met eyes, and looked at each other for a few seconds. It wasn’t as if Sándor normally avoided eye contact, it wasn’t his style. But something in his eyes caught Triss off guard, and she stared into his gaze, unable to look away.

Something had changed. He gave another barest hint of a smile, and looked ahead again.

Ten minutes later, Sándor held out a hand, and everyone stopped and crouched. A deep, rumbling sound filled the air, followed by a heavy crash.

Triss crept up and joined the front line. She almost asked what was up, but the shadows ahead moved, and she shut up quick as she watched.

That, was big. Black Blood? No, and whatever it was, it moved ahead with the same colossally slow movement she'd expect from a giant dinosaur. Big, heavy steps, each that crunched the stone underneath it. No talons, but big, flat, almost circular feet. It moved on all fours, but it was in a squat, like a gorilla or something. It didn't have a head. Instead, the chest had a single, big fucking eye, and it glowed white as the giant thing moved along.

Wherever it walked, the ground and shallow water spread apart. Crunching stone, earthquakes, massive vibrations pulsed out with each step, before its weird giant feet even hit the ground. It let out a bellow, without a mouth, and looked in their direction.

Thankfully they'd been smart enough to get behind some big rocks when Sándor had put up his hand. A giant white beam of light shot out from the creature's weird eye, and passed over them like a searchlight. No one moved. Even the werewolves, wincing in pain as they crouched in awkward positions, didn't so much as groan, as the blinding light moved over their cover.

It moved on. The strange searchlight pointed ahead of the towering creature, and it walked away, each step it took still splitting the ground apart and leaving behind craters.

"Mary," Triss whispered, shaking her bracelet, "maybe you should hide in here? Other ghosts might, uh, sense you, I guess?" It might sense living things too for all she knew, but ghosts did seem able to interact with each other in a way they couldn't with living things.

Mary frowned at her, and looked to Jack, but Jack gestured to Triss. Finally, a bit of trust. Mary hovered over to her, and slipped into the bracelet, like a puff of smoke coming out of someone's mouth, in reverse. One second there, the next, gone.

"Thought I recognized that bracelet," Jack said.

Triss grinned at him, and plucked it a couple times. The elastic band snapped the cute bracelet back in place, earning a smile from the kid.

They moved on. Endless, giant pathways surrounded them, and they all looked the same, but Sándor seemed to know where he was going. And whenever a strange noise came up, everyone ducked into cover.

The ghosts down here weren't fucking human. Sándor had said that, but this was insane. The gorilla ghost twice the size of a T-Rex was just the beginning. One ghost went by that looked like a centipede, made of human torsos, and wherever its hands touched the shallow black water, the water recoiled and refused to flow back, as if the ground the centipede touched was tainted. Another ghost flew by, on actual wings, with human arms dangling from its underbelly. The pillars moved aside rather than let it touch them, and considering how titanic the pillars were, the whole Great Below groaned with the sound of shifting stone.

Another flew by, hovering a few feet over the water. It looked like a giant eel, except massive, maybe fifty feet long, with wriggly, moving skin. It didn't get close, and Triss had to squint, but unless she was wrong, its skin was made out of human fingers. No eyes, and a giant mouth that looked all too similar to Mary's, or what Mary's might become. As it hovered along, the cave let out quiet, but very deep moans, and the stalactites above pulled down, lengthening. The eel was like, some sort of zipper or something, and the cave followed its path by dragging the giant stalactites closer to the ground.

One ghost left Triss hypnotized. Whatever it was, it stayed mostly under the water, with only some bumps from a likely very warped spine sticking out of the water's surface. The bumps were skulls. And as it passed, stone pillars grew up from the ground in its wake. They came up slowly, and reached about ten feet high, maybe four feet wide. And on each one was a crucified skeleton. Stranger, was the pillars didn't disappear or anything. They stayed there, permanent, dozens of small pillars in a scattered pattern behind the borderline invisible spirit, marking the path it had swam, as if some sort of horrible crusade crucifying sinners had come by.

That, was a scary fucking thought. The ghost of a crusader, maybe? That was one very old, very powerful ghost. Jesus fuck, what if they came across the ghost of someone who burned witches? Or the ghost of a witch that'd been burned?

She glanced down at the bracelet. Mary was on the road to becoming a twisted, fucked up ghost like that, something that embodied an aspect to a ridiculous degree. A entity of murder, or rage, or hate. Sabrina had been on that road, too, before Mary ate her.

Christ, poor Sam. There was no stopping it now. She had to say goodbye to her daughter's ghost, because if they brought Mary back to the surface in her current condition, there was a good chance she'd kill people. And that'd probably include innocent people. Heartless as Kindred could be, they did try to keep innocent people alive. Save for a few assholes like Honors, vampires in Dolareido didn't like seeing nice people die, and that was exactly what would happen with a hungry, angry, volatile monster

ghost like Mary. Though, truthfully, the elders would be more concerned about a ghost attracting unwanted attention and breaking the Masquerade, more than anything.

How much of Mary's change was Triss's fault, she didn't know. She had a sneaking suspicion it was mostly hers, and another sneaking suspicion Sam might hate her for it. She knew she wouldn't. Sam just didn't have that in her. But, still.

They continued on, and even though no one had to ask for it, they went slower. No one touched the ground where the centipede left dry craters in the water. No one touched the skeletons on the stone pillars. You didn't need magical powers to tell this place was fucking deadly to all life, and the only things that'd survive down here were either already dead, or half dead. They couldn't stay long.

They stopped at a river. A deep canyon with thick shadows cut through the stone, and the apparently endless water around their feet flowed into it, slower than water should have. They could hear the water below, but from high up, it was borderline impossible to see, more black moving inside blackness.

"Uh, can we get a lift across?" she asked Sándor.

He shook his head as he gestured down the river.

"It's grown since I was last here. But there was a bridge. Hopefully it's grown, as well."

Shrugging, she followed after him.

Bridge was not the word she would have used. More like, path of the damned. It was a bridge, but made of bones stained black. They were arranged in an ancient, brutal pile, as if someone with no understanding of art or architecture took a bunch of corpses, stuck them together, and let them rot until the bones fused. And somehow, it worked. The bones worked together to create a massive arch that crossed the wide canyon.

You couldn't build a bridge out of bodies, she knew that. But this place didn't give a shit about things like physics. She stared down at the bones, piled on each other, a mountain of dead, thousands of corpses, now broken apart into nothing more than rib cages and limbs and skulls. The bridge had no railing, no overhead arches or suspension beams or anything. It was just one long, thick stretch of bones, and they creaked and rattled as the group stepped on them. Sometimes they broke, old bones turning to shards, but the bridge held strong.

Triss, like any metal head, normally really loved that sort of aesthetic. Except down here, it didn't look pretty or artful. There wasn't anything awesome about a pile of dead bodies, even if they were

down to nothing but bone, and that's exactly what they were walking on. A big pile of the dead that somehow shaped itself into a bridge. It looked ugly, and vile.

What crazy-ass ghost created it? What sort of monstrosity could go around creating structures out of thousands of corpses? Had to be someone from history, someone important, who built their world on the backs of the dead. Someone who thought they were above death or something. Maybe after a thousand years of being trapped down here, they evolved into something fucked up that went around, crafting shit out of bones?

She gulped as she peeked over the edge of the ugly bridge, and down into the river below. Something was moving down there. She glanced over at Sándor, and he nodded, knowing, but didn't react otherwise. So everyone just kept walking along, or sneaking along, as best they could.

Everyone came to a stop after they got off the bridge and rounded a curved wall, and stared out into a new area of what the fuck.

Now, it looked like actual, real, artful architecture. Unlike the pile of death they'd just come from, now everyone was forced to look up, up and up, at a giant archway, made of bones big enough for gods. Multiple of them, towering overhead as they circled an area miles across. So damn big the giant boulders the crew had been using for cover looked like pebbles. Each archway had to be at least half a mile tall, the tops nothing but blurs no matter how hard she squinted. They didn't reach the top of the cave, not in this part of it, not even close, but they tried.

In the center of the area were standing stones, dozens of them. Not like the super famous ones. These were each as tall as a sky scraper, half as tall as the pillars of the archways, but only maybe ten feet wide, and they stood in circles, each circle a bigger circle around the smaller one, with some space between each stone. Compared to the pillars of the archways, they looked like toothpicks with how thin they were. Someone had carved etchings on their sides facing the center, and they glowed red with enough light to light up ground zero.

Above, were the ghosts. No green lanterns, as if whatever brought ghosts this deep into the Great Below destroyed whatever ghosts used to find their way. These ghosts looked like blobs of black ink or ooze, but they flowed through the air overhead, circling the archways and touching along their tops. Hundreds of them. Thousands, with shapes like centipedes and dragons and everything in between. They howled, but so far up, it didn't sound much louder than the whispers of thousands of children.

From the look on Sándor's face, the standing stones, and ghosts above, were new.

Black Blood stood in the center, between the standing stones. Actually fucking stood, a giant black skeleton sixty stories high at least. Black ooze dripped from his body, some of it so thick it looked almost like a robe made of black slime hanging from his shoulders and hips. His eye sockets each held a small white, glowing dot, and his fingers ended in claws. The endless ooze mixed with the black water at the base of the stones, causing it to boil around Black Blood's giant skeleton feet before it settled and flowed away.

Black Blood was rarely seen in his actual true body, if that's what this even was. Triss had dealt with him a dozen times, but always either as some shadow of his presence, or while he was possessing a body, often a corpse, and more often, Elen. To be here, in what was basically Hell's evil goth twin, in the presence of a fucking towering god, was paralyzing. Triss and the crew managed to get behind some rocks, but otherwise, every one of them was borderline petrified as they gazed up at Death.

"The fuck do we do now?" she asked.

"We stop the ritual," Jack said. "I see some pretty important-looking stones, judging from all the glowing writing on them. Let's just smash them."

"Direct," Sándor said.

"Uh huh. You think you can smash things that big?" she asked. Jack and Sándor shared a quick look before nodding. "Well, damn."

"What about her?" Athalia asked the boys, gesturing to Triss. "She'll give away our position."

Triss glared at her. "I am literally right next to you."

"You'll wait until I'm not close enough to rip your head off."

"For fuck's sake, Athalia. Trust me a little, okay?"

Athalia glared at her. "Tell us then, Beatrice. You wanted to talk to Jacob, to figure out what was going on. When we go down there, if he tries to stop us from breaking the ritual, we're going to kill him. What're you going to do?"

"I... I don't fucking know. I want to stop him too, okay? But we don't have to kill him." If they even could.

The boys looked at each other again, shared a few small frowns, before Jack nodded.

"She comes. If she tries to stop us, we politely, gently, stop her instead." And as if he hadn't just given her a threat, Jack gave her his best friendly smile. Normally it'd have been cute. With the four



big, deep scars across his face, and the single eye, it was a lot more intimidating than he probably realized.

Triss scrunched up her nose before gesturing to the others behind them, around another big ass rock. “And them?”

Jack looked to Damien, and made a few gestures with his fingers. Damien made a few back. It was like some shitty military flick, but sure enough, the two idiots nodded after a few seconds, made a few more gestures, and nodded again.

“They’ll follow as best they can when Black Blood is distracted,” Jack said. “We figure maybe they can... do something?”

“You figure they ca—nevermind. Okay, so, we go in, and... what? Break down those giant fucking stones, while Black Blood just stands there and watches? Look at him!” She pointed at the giant. They were still probably half a mile away, and the titan looked enormous. Like, Godzilla’s little skeleton brother enormous.

“Black Blood isn’t allowed to interfere with us directly, right?” Jack said. “The Uratha said as much, and it does seem like he can’t just... kill us.”

“It... he, affected us directly, twice,” Sándor said, “in my lair.”

“Yeah but he didn’t kill anyone, hurt anyone, or anything, really. First time, he mostly just yanked us clear with Jacob’s help. Second time, he broke Jeremiah’s ritual, at least long enough for Sándor to get in there. Both those times, he was in the dream world, so maybe he has more power there? And Eric and Tash say he’s stomped around in the spirit world, but doesn’t get to directly interfere with them unless they step on his toes, whatever that means. And in the physical world, he doesn’t get to do shit, right?” He looked to Triss, and waited.

She didn’t want to spill secrets. Jacob was still her boss, and she didn’t want to fuck him over. Then again, she didn’t want him to go causing apocalypses in his free time, either.

“Black Blood can’t do shit without possessing a body, and that pretty much has to be a corpse if he wants to do anything hands on, usually... Otherwise, he’s stuck to wherever his summoning rituals are drawn, and even then, seems limited to talking. Maybe some, like, super light interaction. At least that’s how it works in this physical world anyway, which this ain’t.” She gestured to the giant stone pillars. “I can’t tell what the fuck those things are, but if I had to guess, they let Black Blood get a shit load more hands on while between them.”

“Then we don’t get between them,” Jack said.

“You know Jacob’s going to have some way of stopping you.”

The kid grinned. “Most definitely. Sándor, can you get up high somewhere, and swoop in when Black Blood is distracted? Hit one of those standing stones from behind hard enough to knock it over?” Considering how skinny the stones were, relative to their ridiculous height, yeah, easy to imagine them falling over like dominoes with a small breeze, if hit from up high.

Sándor nodded.

“I’m going to distract Jacob,” Jack said, “pretend I hurt everyone so much that I had to come alone. Triss, uncloak me. Sándor, fly up high. Athalia, go with Triss and follow me in after, as a second distraction if necessary, or whatever you think will work. Triss, summon Mary—”

“She can hear you.”

He blinked his one eye at her, sighed, and leaned in toward the bracelet. “Mary, stay hidden until you see an opportunity to really fuck up the ritual. Sound good?” The bracelet vibrated slightly. “I’m guessing that’s a yes.” Another vibration. “Alright then. Sándor, you go.”

Sándor nodded, scanned the sky, and spread his wings. In any other place, he’d be giving himself away, but here everything was so dark, his Horror’s silhouette was almost invisible against the black. But to be careful, he flew behind one of the titanic pillars of stone first, and climbed.

Triss stared at him as he did. It was so weird, seeing his human body move as if it could fly, or climb vertical slabs of rock, but it did. Something about how his Horror interacted with his human body. However it worked, it looked really fucking cool, with a giant badass gargoyle overlaying his body as he found grooves for his huge claws to fit into.

A minute later, he was so high he looked like a dot against a giant black canvas.

Nodding, Jack dusted himself off. He didn’t have a suit jacket or shirt anymore, but at least his pants were in decent condition, save for the knees. Burned off.

“Alright, I’m going,” he said, and he looked to the rest of the group. “We know what’s up, guys. With me, I mean. If there’s an opportunity to end this, and I get killed in the process... just let it happen, okay?”

Oh sweet Jesus fucking Christ. Triss snapped her hand out and grabbed the dumbass by the shoulder. The bracelet vibrated.

“The fuck are you talking about?”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled it down. She tried to keep her grip on his shoulder, but he softly smiled at her as he easily forced her to let go. She might as well have been trying to fight Jacob's strength.

"Triss, come on, you saw the aftermath."

"Yeah, and that ain't your fault."

"I know it's not my fault, not really. But it's still my burden."

"The fuck?"

He rolled his eyes — eye — and put a hand on her shoulder. He pushed her down until she was sitting, and she couldn't even so much as struggle in his grip. Holy fuck.

"The Ripper killed two people tonight, Triss. It nearly killed a whole bunch more."

"That was the Ripper, not you."

"I know. But I'm not letting it happen again." Slowly, Jack looked to the rest of the crowd. Damien, and Avery and her werewolves were close enough to hear everything. "I'm not. Letting it. Happen again."

She stared at him, and he stared at her, single eye cutting through her like a knife. There was a bit of Julias in that eye, that level-headed, hard determination, the sort some people had when they found the mindset to do whatever had to be done, like cut off their own hands to escape handcuffs.

Well, fuck him and his stupid bullshit.

"We can just stake you when this is over, and figure out what to do."

"Maybe. Maybe. And I'm not even saying don't do that. But I am saying that so far, no one knows how to get rid of this curse." He looked down when he said it. He was lying. "So, sure, once we've stopped Jacob and we know the city, and the fucking world, is safe, maybe we can try that. But no matter what happens, I'm not going to let the Ripper hurt anyone, ever again. No matter what."

She didn't get to say anything. The asshole got up after his stupid speech, and walked toward the standing stones.

The bracelet vibrated again. Snarling after Jack's shadow, Triss leaned into her wrist, and whispered.

"We're not letting anything happen to Jack, don't you worry. I didn't lose Julias just so I could lose his childe, too. And there ain't no way I'm leaving your mom alone."

She winced the moment she said it. Mary may have become a crazy psycho ghost, but she wasn't so stupid she wouldn't get the implication in what Triss just said. If Jack was gone, Sam would be alone. That meant Mary was already written off.

The bracelet vibrated slightly, once, and went still.

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~~Jack~~

He took a deep, useless breath, and walked forward. It was the sloppiest, shittiest plan he'd ever come up with. Plan A: knock over the big stones. Plan B: be a distraction so his friends could knock over the big stones. End of plan. If he knew what Antoinette was up to, maybe he'd be able to do something smarter or more nuanced. But he was flying blind, and those big pillars with the bazillion etchings on them looked important.

When in doubt, break stuff.

He didn't have his gun; no ammo for it anyway. He didn't have Damien's sword; wouldn't really help him much anyway. He didn't have his own sword; left behind with the azlu, and then lost in the fog, with no time to find it. It was just him, in torn up suit pants, and some soaked shoes; at least they weren't dress shoes. Presentation was important, so the Invictus had a nice cross between dress shoe and combat shoe he'd grown fond of.

He chuckled quietly at himself. Much as his imagination and thoughts tried to distract him from what he was looking at, reality came back with a vengeance as he got closer, and closer. The archways were beyond massive, supported on bone pillars thick enough it'd take minutes to walk around a single one. The standing stones in the center of the strange area looked like toothpicks because of how skinny and short they were in comparison. They were all colossal structures, and he gulped on a dry throat as he found himself staring up.

Black Blood looked like a small action figure, standing beside those things.

The huge skeleton was leaning over, and talking to someone. It was just bass-filled rasps from a distance, but as Jack grew closer and closer, the rest of the sound spectrum filled in, and he could make out words.

“—will be alright,” Black Blood said. “Don’t you worry yer pretty little head none.”

Pretty little head? What the fuck?

Ice shot up through Jack’s limbs, and he ground his teeth as he glared up at the huge skeleton. He wouldn’t talk to Jacob like that. Who would he talk to like that? A girl. What girl? Not Triss, not Jen, they weren’t here. And there weren’t any other girls that’d be here that he’d talk to like that.

Except his mom.

He tightened his fists until his fingers trembled, and he walked faster. The pain vanished. His muscles and tendons boiled with vitae, and hints of the crimson snakes he used bubbled in his wounds, ready to emerge and protect him. If they were holding his mom hostage, he was going to rip Jacob into fucking bits.

Except, Jacob wouldn’t do that. Much as it fucking hurt to think it, Triss said the man might actually love his mother, and from what he’d seen, he had to agree with her. Then, why the fuck was she here? Maybe it wasn’t her. Maybe it was some other person, or a girl ghost, or—

It was her. Once he got close, he squinted hard enough he could see Jacob beside her, and the two stood beside a table. A wooden table by the looks of it, and definitely not a normal part of the decor. There were things on it, but he was too far to see. But he’d recognize his mother’s silhouette and posture from a mile away.

If Jack died, what would happen to her?

If Jack didn’t die, what would the Ripper do to her?

As he grew closer, but still a frustrating distance from the closest of the standing stones, Black Blood turned and faced him. The giant creature, with a skull taller than Jack’s body, chuckled as he squatted down, causing his knees to poke out between the center circle of standing stones.

“I do believe I spy, with my little eyes, a little Ventrue,” Black Blood said. Jack snarled up at the spirit god, and came closer. “Hold up, kid. You got that look in your eyes — eye — that tells me you’re itching to stir trouble.”

Beneath the giant skeleton was the tear, a mostly vertical slit cut through the air filled with strange, shifting colors, a few feet over the shallow black water. Looking at it now, it was as thick as one of Black Blood’s claws, or thicker, like the skeleton had run the claw through tight fabric to tear it.

Jack took another step forward, enough that he could see past the standing stones on his left, to the table where Jacob and his mom stood. Both of them peeked their heads around their closest stone to see

him. The Nosferatu wore his usual black eye bandage, and the scary dark robes that everyone pretty much assumed were made of human skin, dyed dark. His mom wore a suit, nothing special. He'd probably asked her to join him, without explaining the significance of it before she arrived. Fucking asshole.

His mom stared at him before she darted in his direction.

“Jack! What are—”

Jacob dashed out and caught her shoulder. “Wait, Samantha.”

“Wait? Jack’s—”

“Here to stop us, Sam.”

“Us?” Jack said, glaring across the way to his mom and the fucker holding her shoulder.

His mom’s mouth fell open as she looked him up and down. “Jack! What happened to you?”

“What happened to me!? Jacob knows!” Jack glared at them, fists shaking, and he took another step toward the nearest standing stone.

Mistake. Black Blood slammed a hand down in front of him, close enough he could have squashed Jack into mulch. But he didn’t. The ground shook and the water splashed, soaking Jack’s legs, but Jack didn’t budge. He flinched, but he didn’t take a step back. And with Black Blood’s hand flat against the ground, he could see over it to stare at his mom and Jacob. Close enough they could talk, far enough they had to yell at each other to be heard.

Black Blood could have scooped him up. He wasn’t. Either playing nice, or he literally couldn’t touch Jack.

“Black Blood!” his mom said. “Don’t hurt him!”

“I won’t,” the titan said. Hopefully he was lying, and literally couldn’t hurt him. “As long as he stays back. He’s here to disrupt the ritual.”

“J-Jack? What happened? Why’re you—”

“I assume,” Jacob said, “he didn’t listen to me. Right, Jack? You pushed on, Sabrina interfered, and—”

“You let the Ripper out,” Jack said, and he pointed at Jacob, glaring. “Sabrina cut off the necklace. It’s gone! The Ripper got out and killed two people! Caleb and Monica are dead! The others are half dead, dying. I had to leave them behind! That’s how I got these injuries, Mom. A ghost gave

me a couple. Avery and her pack, Damien, and Sándor gave me the others. Anything to stop the Ripper from killing them!”

His mom stared at him, a mix of fear and understanding on her face. So, she knew, or at least knew Jacob had left a trap for him that he’d have to get through to get here. That must have taken a lot of trust, for Jacob to straight up tell her that he’d left a trap to stop her son from stopping them.

Jacob sighed and shook his head, before turning and walking back toward his table of ritual shit. There were plenty of strange things on it, multiple books and artifacts, and even a small cauldron. A witch’s toolkit.

“I refuse to feel sorry for any of Avery’s pack, Jack. And you know why.”

“You fucking—” He took a step toward Jacob, but Black Blood let out a rumbling, raspy growl. “The fuck were we supposed to do, just let you up and end the world!”

“I’m not ending it! I—” He laughed as he threw up his hands. “I knew you’d see it like that. I knew you’d all see it like that. What would a kid like you know? Sam, maybe you can convince him?”

Jack stared at the back of the bastard’s head, before setting his one eye on his mom.

“Jack, I... I um...”

“You seriously going along with this? You know what he plans to do? What they plan to do!?” He gestured up at the giant skeleton.

“I know! Jacob told me. He told me about the barriers between realms. He’s going to tear them all down.”

“You realize that means changing the entire fucking world, right? Everything’s going to smash together and change! Everything!”

“Yes! Everything! Everything will change!” The fear and worry vanished, and she stared at him as something rose up he almost never saw in his mother. Rage. “Everything should change! Do you have any idea what it’s like to lose everyone you love, Jack? Because I do! I know what it’s like to lose a husband. I know what it’s like to lose my only daughter. I know what it’s like to lose my only son!”

“I wasn’t dead! I—”

“You were! You were gone, and for all Mary and I knew, you were dead! It took years for us to accept that! You were gone, and James was gone, and we only had each other. And then I lost her! I lost her twice!”

“But—”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to lose a child, Jack? To lose a part of you like that? Of course you don’t, and you never will. And don’t even tell me losing a vampire child or a ghoul is the same. It’s not!”

He looked away. Of all the crazy shit he expected to run into down here, his mom defending Jacob was not one of them.

“Mom. Everyone could die.”

She scrunched up her nose like a chipmunk, but it didn’t last. The rage faded away, and she looked back to Jacob.

“It won’t matter if that happens,” she said, “because when Jacob and Black Blood are done, all those realms will combine. We’ll all be together, in the same place, and stuff like life and death won’t even be a thing! Right, Jacob?”

“That’s the plan,” Jacob said, and he picked a book off the table. “There was a time when that’s the way it was, the way it already worked. Then everything broke apart, got split off, separated into smaller chunks, and became one giant mess.” With bandaged eyes pointed down at the book, he stepped around one of the closer standing stones, and got to writing. Jack half expected the man to write with Kindred blood and his fingertip, seemed witchy enough, but instead the man used a knife. He was too far for Jack to see any details, but it was a large knife, and somehow it cut through the stone as easily as butter. The blade was dark red. Kindred blood? Probably his.

Whatever symbols he drew, each one glowed red when he was done drawing it, casting him in increasingly bright crimson light. Against the reflection of the black water beneath and around him, it looked all too much like a scene out of a horror movie.

“You really think you can just... fix everything?” Jack asked. “Cast a ritual, against everyone else’s will, and change the whole world? You really think it’ll fix—”

Jacob snapped him a glare, and even with the bandage covering his empty eye sockets, Jack could feel the harshness in it.

“You really asking me that? You? I have never seen a kid so obsessed with trying to fix things, as if every problem you ran into was a personal challenge to your ability to fix them. Well here’s some advice from the grown ups, Jack. Life is unfair. You don’t get to fix everything.” He closed the book hard enough it made a slap sound, before he walked over to him. “And you know it. You know the



world is fucked two ways from Sunday, and yet you still try and work with it. It's a rigged game, and for some reason, you keep betting against the house."

"You—"

"I'm not playing this stupid game anymore. Not me. Not your mother. We're going to bring it all back together. Life won't be unfair anymore."

"Because there won't be life anymore! This is suicide!"

Black Blood growled, loud, and Jack took a step back as he covered his ears.

"It ain't suicide, little man," Black Blood said. "You have any idea how long I've been down here? How many cycles I've suffered?" As the monster talked, his voice changed. The Southern accent faded away, and something else replaced it, something Jack didn't recognize. Something old, with harsh syllables, and no care for how guttural and abrasive it was. He wasn't playing anymore. "Do you have any idea, little vampire, how many times I have watched the rise and fall of civilizations? Do you have any clue, how many times I have seen the world of souls rip itself asunder. The rise and fall of kingdoms, burying themselves in corpses." The colossus gestured around them. "There is nothing about this great machine worth sparing, little vampire. It is a broken system, its cogs and gears spinning endlessly, even as they rust and tear themselves to bits."

Black Blood leaned in closer and closer, until the giant skull was five feet away from Jack. Jack could have sat in one of his eye sockets.

"Souls, ripping each other's vessels into chunks, and sending each other across the chasm. I have watched it for thousands and thousands of years. I have risen and fallen with the tides of civilization, and each time I rise again to witness the slaughter that binds and feeds me. But before this endless slog of murder, when I was nothing more than a tiny mote of existence, I saw witness to the great divide. Everything, torn apart, existence so whole and complete rendered into limp, useless little realms that do nothing but churn. But I remember. Before the rivers of this broken existence grabbed me and tainted me, I remember. I will bring it together again, little vampire. I will have her back."

Each word was a growling rasp, but Jack understood every one. He stared up at the huge skull, and the glowing white dots in his eyes. From so close, he could see that they were white fire, burning inside empty voids.

"Her?"

"My Lady of the Dead."

“Wait. You’re serious? You—”

Before Jack could go on a lovely rant intent on ripping into Black Blood for being a colossal asshole, willing to destroy the world for the sake of a girl, Black Blood slammed his other palm down beside him. The black water exploded outward, and Jack flew back from the impact of the dark waves against his chest.

“Do not presume to understand me, vampire! You know nothing, understand nothing. Malachi has been my companion for over two centuries, and he is not foolish enough to presume to understand my reality. You do not know what it means to live in the currents of existence, to be controlled by its ebb and flow. You do not know what it means to be bound and chained by the realms! You know nothing of an existence measured in millennia.” After another heavy growl, Black Blood pulled back his second hand, and gestured to Jacob and Jack’s mom. “Malachi realized how broken and futile this existence was, as did I. And together, we have the power to change it.”

Groaning, Jack pushed himself back up to his feet. His mom almost ran over to him, but stopped when Black Blood glanced her way. She had instructions to not touch Jack, maybe? Or maybe to not leave the standing stones area? Figure out why later, stop Black Blood now.

If he did, his mom was going to hate him. Well, as long as she was alive, she could hate him all she wanted. And for Jacob, Jack was tempted to try the ‘would Minerva really want this’ angle, but considering the sort of research Minerva did that got her killed, it was probably something she was interested in. Maybe only academically, but regardless, not a good angle.

And fuck him, he didn’t entirely disagree with them, either. Mostly, but not completely.

“How long have you been trying to do this?” Jack asked.

Jacob chuckled as he moved over to another standing stone. It took him a bit to reach it, with how far apart they were, and he walked between Black Blood’s feet to do it. Still close enough he could stop Jack, if Jack tried to dash for one of the stones.

“You want me to explain my master plan? I think we already did that.”

Snarling, Jack looked to his mom. The look she gave him almost broke him, but he glared at her with as much anger as he could pour. Finding real anger to throw at his mom was almost impossible, but tonight, he stared at her with his one eye hard enough he was afraid she’d die on the spot with how she squirmed under his gaze.

She looked away, walked after Jacob, and whispered in his ear. Jacob stopped carving his etchings long enough to hear her out, before he nodded, and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. Probably just a

bit of familiar action to calm her down. The idea he'd kiss her on the cheek, in this circumstance, just because he wanted to, was too difficult to stomach right now.

"Black Blood was experimenting with tearing holes through realms since before Avery killed Minerva." Jacob didn't stop writing his symbols as he talked. Much as the dude liked to talk, he was also smart enough to not let it stop him. Too smart to let a villain monologue be his undoing. "You probably found some of those old tears, right? Stable, not actually tears."

"Yes," Jack said.

"Him and Minerva, testing things. Black Blood had even tried making portals before Minerva, to mixed success." He nodded as he glanced down at his book, and drew another symbol in the stone. "After she was murdered, it took a while to figure out just how far she'd gotten in her research, notes in her books I had to decipher. The few books Simon didn't find. She'd found a way to destroy the Gauntlet, and Simon and Avery killed her for it." He sighed as he lowered his head, earning a kiss on the cheek from Jack's mother. He smiled at her, before returning to etching his ritual symbols. "That's when Black Blood and I decided to make it happen, on a grand scale. Step one, tear down the walls."

"And step two?"

"Trickier, but more than doable once spirits and gods have full freedom to act. You may have noticed entities like Black Blood can't just go around doing whatever they want."

"I have." And the idea of things like Black Blood being able to just walk around, doing whatever they wanted, was terrifying.

"Like he said, chains of the realms. We tear down the walls and merge the realms, and most of those chains are gone."

"Let me guess. You ran into problems."

Jacob nodded, smiling to himself as he approached another standing stone, this one closer to Jack.

"We ran into a lot of problems, of course. Those azlu spiders kept showing up and undoing our work. So, with some Crúac and some collected hair to point me in the right direction, Black Blood manipulated some spirits to leave a trail of bread crumbs for a certain pack of werewolves. They could do the dirty work of killing azlu, while Black Blood and I focused on this."

"And the fact Avery and her pack could die doing this? Just icing on the cake, right?"

Again, Jacob glared at him, but another touch from his mom on the shoulder settled him.

“I didn’t know Simon was dead, at the time. But Avery is just as deserving of death as that mongrel was. Besides, Avery’s pack is Meninna. They live to kill hosts like the azlu. I could have sent her a card showing a picture of an azlu and she’d have come.”

“Uh huh.” Jack glared at his mom again, but spoke to Jacob. “And the wild goose chase Avery went on, looking for something Maria was up to?”

“A few years ago, I intercepted one of Ann’s item orders and replaced it. I knew she’d use it in her resonance machine, so I made sure it’d summon a spirit that’d tell her Maria was up to something. Plus, getting the blood wraiths who love Black Blood so much to repeat the same lie.” He shrugged. “A small bread crumb, with no evidence to back it up, and Avery and her crew went to Maria looking to kill. If Avery had any sense in her head, you never would have had to interfere. Am I wrong?”

No, he wasn’t wrong. Avery jumped the gun, and judging from what Jack knew about Uratha, that seemed to be a common problem. And considering Maria was looking to die at the time, it turned that whole situation into dynamite. But none of that was directly Jacob’s fault, not really.

Jack clenched his fists, but kept his gaze on his mom. She tried to match his glare, but she looked down, her momentary burst of rage already burned away. His wasn’t, and wouldn’t be any time soon.

“And Amanda?”

“I slipped a ring on her finger. Black Blood and I did a lot of work on it, so it’d alter her memories and get her to behave as it did. Of course, do you really think an elder like Michael would throw an entire covenant into war over one young vampire’s dead human friend? Michael grabbed the opportunity, faked her death, and had the Invictus and Carthians killing each other because that’s exactly what he wanted. I just gave him an excuse. A very weak excuse, that he exploited, because he’s a dog who wants his bone. Am I wrong?”

Jack’s fists ached.

“Why do those things?”

“Going around and ripping tears between realms was bound to attract attention. I needed people distracted. This ain’t exactly easy.” He gestured at the stones, newly formulated, according to Sándor, and also to the tear between them. “Distracting you and the Prince, though, that was beyond hard. Impossible, actually. Julias picked well. Everyone else, I can have running after their vices, or willing to killing each other over the most meaninglessly shit, with the drop a hat. Hollow, pathetic. Not you, though. Can’t seem to get you off the trail.”

“And the curse? Azamel. Jeremiah and Angela and—”

Jacob sighed, shook his head, and moved onto another stone. “Sorry. That wasn’t me. And trust me kid, I wouldn’t wish a Strix curse on anyone. After seeing what it did to Elaine?”

Jack froze, and finally tore his eye away from his mom to stare at the elder vampire.

“What do you know about Elaine?”

“Lot more than Annie does.”

“You... you know about—”

“Yeah, I knew her, and I know about what she did to get rid of the curse. Poor woman went through hell you can’t imagine to overcome that. Worse than anything, and I mean anything, you could ever know.”

“You knew her before Antoinette did?” Jack asked.

“Barely. I met her, when she was recovering from her addiction, and from... curse withdrawal, if you can believe it, on top of her other issue. I helped her, on a few occasions, from giving in and killing some random young vampire in the region. Not exactly an easy feat, stopping a vampire my age, practically foaming at the mouth like they had rabies. But yes, I knew her, and helped her, at least enough she didn’t make her condition worse.”

God damn it, Elaine.

“And,” Jacob said, “you’ll be delighted to know we’re not going to let you keep that curse. It’s not fair to you, and damn it, kid, I like you. Black Blood and I helped you out a few times already, for good reason. You’re good people. Plus, the curse could be a valuable tool.”

Jack took a step back. Okay, if they tried something, it’d be the perfect opportunity for Sándor and the others to swoop in and break stuff.

“I’m not—”

The water in front of Jack erupted. He bolted back a dozen steps, but it wasn’t fast enough. Someone with dark skin and wearing a hoodie came out of the water, sending it in all directions, and from under them, a blonde woman sprinted at Jack.

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~~Eric~~

Never had he expected Safe to get so powerful, so quickly. Sure, Eric had run into the spirit on a few occasions, ever since it'd grown past its simple beginnings and actually adopted a more complex existence. Safe became Safe of Grey Street, and Grey Street was one of the friendliest places in Dolareido. And naturally, it did what all spirits did, especially as they grew stronger: tried to spread its influence.

For spirits, spreading influence usually meant literally spreading what they represented. For a spirit of fear, that meant making more things afraid, and affecting the physical world in those same areas. For a spirit of safety, becoming a spirit of sanctuary was an ultimate expression of that safety. And if Sanctuary of Dolareido got out of control, it'd turn the whole city into one nest of pure safety, where nothing even remotely dangerous happened, ever. A dangerous possibility.

But for now, Sanctuary was the only reason Red Tide hadn't killed every one of them. It was the only reason Jessy was alive.

"Quickly," it said, and it flew forward through the casino. The spirits of addiction, greed, lust, money, lights, and a few spirits of violence and shadows, scattered. Halfly because of the Uratha that most spirits hated or feared, and halfly because a spirit that'd been slowly earning a name for itself busted into their den of sin with a flare for the dramatic, apparently. The giant glowing wings were enough to send them running like their ephemera lives depended on it.

The pack followed after Sanctuary, but it wasn't easy. Each step was pain as Eric's body fought against the wounds Red Tide had dealt him. Getting a broken bone was nothing for the spirit wolf to heal. Healing a few dozen, often of the same limb, was not so easy. Red Tide hit like a semi, and it was a wonder Eric's brain hadn't come out through the back of his skull each time he'd gotten hit. The other werewolves weren't any better off, the three of them struggling to keep up, and almost tripping over their talons.

Once they got to the center of the casino, thankfully not blocked off by a giant fountain this time, the cracked wall again boomed with impact, and the crack grew longer. Again, another boom of impact, and the seam through the gold wall reached from floor to ceiling, cutting through the floors above. Blood already poured out of the crack. No balconies this time, but the ceiling was high, twenty feet up, and when Red Tide came through, it was going to flood the first floor instantly.

Eric fell in beside Jessy. Alive. His mate was alive. The rage melted away enough he could think clearly, and he watched her back and her weird, alien form as they ran. She didn't use it often, strangely terrifying as it was, but the fact she'd managed to seriously wound Red Tide was beyond impressive.

“Where?” the smaller vampire asked.

“Here,” Brianna said, and she tore ahead of the pack as they approached the bar.

Before she could hop over it, another boom shook the casino, and they all turned long enough to see the massive crack split open. Blood poured through it like an avalanche of liquid, ripping and tearing everything apart as it came straight for them.

“What—” Natasha didn’t get to finish. Sanctuary wrapped her up in its arms, and flew past the bar and to the door downstairs behind it.

The rest of them followed, throwing themselves through the door hard enough it nearly came off its hinges. Eric glanced back long enough to see Matthew make sure everyone else was in before he came in, following behind Flow. Mistake, looking back like that. Eric’s shoulder slammed into the concrete wall — not gold — of the staircase, and he snarled as he pushed off it and continued down the stairway as it weaved down and down.

The basement of a casino was a strange place. Above, it was all glamour and indulgence. Below, it was security, steel, things harder than steel, electronics, and even more greed. One of the more slimy spirits, some combination of greed and gluttony, slithered down the hall of cold blue, and put up a hand.

“No access! You need—”

Sanctuary blasted past it, and the spirit threw itself against the wall, flattening its green, slime, slug body. They ran past it down the hall of concrete, and when they came to another gate, this one of steel, Brianna crashed into it first, and tore it open. Apparently, it’d been resealed since the last time they’d visited with Sándor weeks ago.

With a heavy roar, Brianna ripped the bars apart, muscles bulging through her fur as the ephemera metal gave her resistance. Once open wide enough, they ran through, and took a right into one of the doors. Again, a giant slab of metal. Brianna went at it with her claws, but something went crack in her shoulder, and she yelped as she stepped back. She’d broken her arm, or re-broke it, after Red Tide had broken it only minutes before.

Matthew pushed past them, slammed both hands directly into the metal, sank his claws into it, and pulled his arms apart. The metal gave him trouble, but there was little that the goliath werewolf could not rip through, with leverage. He didn’t have leverage to tear it apart, but once he put his feet against the wall, and pulled on the door, it came off with an ear-piercing shrieking tear.

As they scrambled in, the ceiling above cracked. A roar shook the casino, a hundred times louder than Brianna’s, and the vibration pulsed through their bodies. Blood dripped from the seam overhead.

“Quickly,” Sanctuary said, and it dove through the room, wings carrying it while it carried a squirming Natasha.

The large room held nothing of real value to a spirit. Spirits wanted essence, and the only way to get that was to collect it from the physical world, at loci where it bled from the physical world into the spirit world, or from literally devouring or absorbing other spirits. The room in the real world would have been where a casino held tangible, real world cash, once upon a time. It was there in the spirit world, too, massive mountains of cash bills, utterly useless to anyone and everyone.

It did glow an unusual green though, similar to the slime spirit outside. And if they touched it, it'd probably summon some nasty spirits who'd defend it as if their lives depended on it. Not trouble they wanted.

In the center of the dark, metal room, there was the tear, a cut in the air that looked all too similar to a tear in fabric made by a knife. However Black Blood had made it, he'd cut it diagonally about seven feet wide, three feet thick at the center. Not at an easy fit.

“It looks different,” Brianna said. “Smells different.”

Eric took a deep whiff. It was true. Something about the tear was different.

“It still goes to Great Below,” he said. “But... there is...”

“No time,” Sanctuary said. “Go, quickly.”

Tash stared up at the angel, eyes wide. “B-B-But what about—”

“Once you are through, I will leave. Red Tide cannot pursue me beyond its realm.” The angel spirit smiled down at Tash, and gave her a tender pat on the head.

“Flow!” Brianna said, and she transformed back into human form with far more speed than Eric could manage.

The water spirit nodded and jumped toward her. Its blue body condensed, its features vanished, limbs and wings gone, and its eyes and mouth melted away into a tunnel of water that leapt straight into Brianna's chest. Avery's necklace. The spirit disappeared into it, leaving Tash staring at what just happened with jaw dropped.

“Can you—”

“I cannot,” Sanctuary said. “Flowing Sanctuary has a pact with Avery. We do not have time to discuss this, Natasha. Quickly, through the tear.”



“B-But, you—”

Sanctuary picked Natasha up, and threw her through the tear. Everyone froze.

“Well shit!” Jessie let out an upset snarl, but jumped through the tear after her friend.

Brianna let out the same snarl and followed in after her.

Matthew and Arturo looked between each other, at the spirit who just threw their girlfriend to her possible demise, and jumped in after her as well.

“Sanctuary,” Eric said.

“Eric.” It smiled at him, and pointed him toward the tear. “Thank you for your help, in my growth. Take care of her for me, would you?”

He stared at the angel, and almost said something. But another crashing thud from Red Tide splintered the ceiling, and blood rained on them. No time to talk this through. No time to figure out what happened to the tear, and where it’d take them. No time to tell Sanctuary it had no chance against Red Tide, and it probably wouldn’t be able to escape, either; it probably already knew.

He jumped through.

The tear was both physical and not physical. He could touch it, and once inside it, it had some sort of ground or floor to touch. Almost like passing through the Gauntlet. And whatever the tear cut through, it did cut through the Gauntlet, but it didn’t take him through it. The darkness of whatever the tear cut through resembled the gold eternity of the Gauntlet, with something like stars in the distance, white dots that didn’t quite hold still.

He didn’t have time to stop and admire the obsidian endlessness around him. The tear opened up to another realm, and he fell through it, stuck somewhere between crawling and walking, and then falling on his face on... more water? At least this wasn’t red water. It was black.

He got back to his claws and knees, and looked up. And up. And up, at the giant skeleton god that squatted down in front of them.

“Welcome,” Black Blood said, in a harsh accent Eric had never heard before, “to the apocalypse.”