

~~Jack~~

Alone, in the old, abandoned tunnels, and soon to enter Azamel's hole in the ground. He didn't want to be here, but it was important, too important.

With the Invictus, meeting the elders was an imposing affair of big leather chairs and long hallways. With the Uratha, meeting Avery was as cozy as sitting down on a couch, next to a bomb. With Azamel, meeting her was like walking through a tunnel into some sort of nightmare realm — probably was — and talking with the monster under the bed. They were monsters, she was a monster, and the feeling in his gut told him he was going to be speaking with something akin to a clown demon, whispering to him from a gutter drain in the street.

Prickly, crawly things, invisible but there, tickled along his skin as he got closer and closer to where Azamel lived. The lights were flickering, but on, some of them at least, and they made a buzzing noise as they struggled to remain lit. Quiet screams echoed along the concrete bricks of the concave walls of the tunnel, so quiet he was sure his imagination was being a giant asshole and making things worse than they actually were. But the fact Azamel was a genuine monster, a thing of legend, a fucking nightmare, casted doubt on whether it was his mind playing tricks on him.

The Invictus knew he was here. He hadn't told them, but they knew, they had to. They'd set up explosives, so no doubt they had cameras watching those to some extent or another. Hell, even without the explosives, Invictus used technology like a weapon; there'd be cameras all over the city they could either tap into, or had set up themselves. And since everyone had seen him talk to Athalia at the party, no doubt his bosses could piece together why he was here, and that it was requested he not talk to them about it, lest the encounter be canceled and all hell break loose.

Why couldn't old demons use e-mail, or texts?

He shivered and rubbed his arms. Dressed in a good suit, the sort he'd wear to an official meeting with the Invictus, hoping to make a good impression. It was probably wasted. Still, he adjusted his tie, rubbed his buzzed hair a few times, and stepped into Azamel's home. A vivid imagination painted for him a merry picture, lots of ways he could die down here, probably while having a private conversation with a monster out of a Stephen King novel.

But she wasn't there.

He stopped at the stage, where the old woman kept her furniture, and raised a brow as he looked around. The lights were on, including a god-awful lamp on the stage, but no one was home.

“... hello?” he said. His voice echoed against the concrete walls. No one. Maybe—

“This way.”

He jumped. Oh good fucking god it someone’s voice, a whisper, like ice on his neck. He turned around, but no one was there. It could have been a vampire, someone using their cloak of night, someone who was enough of a master to both hide themselves in it, but also let their voice out? No, no fucking way, vampires didn’t feel like this, like needles stabbing him up and down his body.

But the voice did come from a direction, and, gulping down on nothing, he headed toward the sound. It was coming from down the other tunnel, where none of the lights worked.

“This way...”

Dead, so dead, so fucking dead. He hadn’t even seen anything yet, and he could feel that panic crawling up his legs and down his spine. Like someone with a needle and balloon beside his head, ready to pop it at any moment, he could feel his muscles tense and his teeth clench until they were grinding. Weight shifted onto the balls of his feet, and his fingers clenched at his sides. It hadn’t been nearly this bad last time he was here, but last time Triss was with him, and Azamel had simply been on the stage, rocking back and forth in her chair. This time he was alone, and everything felt different.

He stepped into the tunnel, but managed only ten feet before he noticed the floor of the tunnel gave way into a stairway.

A stairway? What the fuck. Where there should have been subway tracks and concrete, instead, a large square hole was the subway floor instead, thin and long, like the sort you found under cellar doors leading into basements. And, with the hole into hell only a few feet in front of him, he could more clearly hear the screams. The tunnel past the stairway wasn’t there anymore, blocked off by a giant wall of tattered and cracked concrete instead. That wasn’t supposed to be there either.

“Down... here... Jack,” the voice said, mixed in with the howls and shrieks.

Yeah, if there was one way he was going to die, it was right down this stairway. A clown was going to jump out at any moment, and rip the soul right out of his fucking body. The fuck kind of vampire was scared of the things in the dark? He fucking was.

Again, he gulped on nothing, and took a step down. His shoes clacked on stone, heavy stone, the soft thud ringing down into the stairway. Just like walking into a basement, right? Walking into a basement filled with cries of what must have been torture. And, he couldn’t see anything past ten feet, endless black awaiting him with its gaping maw.

“And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you,” he said, a whisper too quiet for himself to hear. Butchering a quote and dropping half its meaning, but, he was a product of his generation, after all, internet snippets and a short attention span.

He pulled out his smartphone, and shined the light into the stairway. It added a whole six inches onto how far he could see. The darkness wasn't a lack of light, not wholly, but a fog, a black fog that tugged at his fingers as he held the phone light out. Cold. He yanked his phone back, and winced as he took a step into the obsidian shroud, so its icy embrace swallowed him. With one hand still holding the useless phone for its buried light, the other reached out to the stairway beside him for balance, and he began the descent.

“You idiot Invictus think you can control us, control nightmares themselves, with explosives.” The cold voice matched the icy fog and unending obsidian like a creepy laugh fit a clown. God damn it, stop picturing clowns with psycho eyes. There are no clowns!

“... Athalia?” He kept walking. The stairway kept going down, and down, and down, each step echoing the soft clack of his shoes down into the depths. Stone above him, stone beside him, stone below him. The light of his phone was enough for him to see the ones directly near him, but all that got him was a glimpse of old, worn, black and gray rock, blurred by the icy fog of death.

“Keep walking, little leech.”

Yeap, definitely Athalia. That alleviated his fear, a little. He knew Athalia, seen her injured back in the tunnel when he first met her, then later at the ball, surrounded by sex. A person, a woman, who got up and walked around and ate breakfast.

It didn't feel like that, not this time. As that icy voiced floated through the black, it felt more like the time he was lost in a sewer once when he was a child, one of those walk-in water tunnels on the edge of town. Endless black. He was only four at the time, and when he was older, he realized it was a very small tunnel with only a few forks that were all dead ends, none in use. Perfectly safe. At the time, in the nigh pitch black, the chill had scared and scarred him to the bone; thought for sure something was in the dark chasing him. It was years before he could walk past a dark room without hurrying past, hoping to dodge whatever nightmarish arm would reach out from the shadows to yank him into the death onyx.

It felt fucking just like that.

“Athalia, come on, I'm—”

“I. Said. Walk!” The darkness shook around him, vibrations quaking and tearing the air asunder, like glass shattering over his head. The voice lost its whisper, and became an ear-splitting shriek, knocking him onto his ass against the hard stone.

Further down the stairway, he could see movement. Twitchy movement, something jerking to the side, then to the other side of the thin stairway tunnel, something white. Then it was gone. He reached out for the wall, hands shaking, slipping on the stone as if it was slippery. But, it wasn't slippery, it was his fingers refusing to hold still, unable to stop trembling as he tried to brace his weight against it. He almost fell over again, but, forced his knees to stop wobbling. It was a stairway of stone, steep, and if he started falling down it, he probably wouldn't stop until he reached the bottom, and broke every bone on the way.

The weird, white thing in the distance flickered again, then faded into the black, gone. He walked after it, like a moth chasing a light in the darkness. What was that Metallica line? The soothing light at the end of your tunnel, was just a freight train coming your way.

“You... you trying to scare me for a reason? Cause, I mean, it's working, but I thought we were supposed to be working together,” he said. Silence greeted him. “Athalia?” Nothing.

Yeah, successfully terrified. He pointed the phone down as best he could, enough so he could see his shoes reach each step, and stared on into the darkness that swallowed him. It never ended, just kept going down, and down, and down, dragging him deeper into some ridiculous metaphor for hell. Did he find himself in a David Lynch film? Or maybe he was in 1990's Jacob's Ladder, and this was all in his mind, cause he was fucking dying and the afterlife was greeting him with a very, very, very deep grave.

He kept walking. Down. And down. And down. Endless, fucking endless, for thirty minutes he kept walking into the black, the engulfing obsidian, until he felt dampness in the air, on his skin, in his lungs; couldn't stop himself from panicked breathing, despite the lack of need. Down, and down, until he felt the pressure of depth in his ears threaten to pop his brain. But still, the stairway went on, and because he was an idiot, he kept walking.

Finally, floor, and not stairs. He almost tripped when he found it, foot slamming into the floor of dark stone when he expected to be going down another stair. It was a room, the black fog not as thick, enough for his light to almost reach the walls, exposing what looked like small bumps along their surface. The room was maybe twenty feet long and wide? He stepped forward a little further, and then stepped backward.

Death was waiting for him.

Slowly, turning around with all the urgency of a mountain, black wings drifted across his path and before him. Two glowing white dots hovered in the distance, eyes in the black, but the face that held them was still hidden by the black mist. But it came closer, and closer, and when he kept thinking it'd have reached him, that the two white, glowing eyes were normal human-sized eyes, they kept getting closer. Like seeing something in the distance, but thinking it was closer and smaller, the two white dots came closer and closer again, until he realized how huge the face was. A skull, with dark skin, gaunt skin to the point of skeleton-like features.

He fell back, on his ass, and gasped. It was its eyes that he'd seen when he was on the stairs earlier.

"You deserve a taste," it said, she said, "of a nightmare."

"M-Me? The fuck did I do?" Natasha had told him about Athalia, what her form looked like, a form Tash had gotten a peek of when Athalia got in her way, that time Tash and her two werewolf friends were looking for the spider monster. But the description didn't do it justice, this giant skeleton torso with enormous black wings. Worse, she blended into the black fog, so he couldn't really see any of her limbs, any defining features other than the white eyes a few feet in front of him. Any movement she made was a ghost on the still air.

The screams had stopped. At some point, they'd faded away on his journey into Hell. Where the fuck, why and how would a chorus of death cries vanish?

There was more movement in the room than Athalia. He blinked, panicking, trying to see. His eyes had trouble focusing on anything in the dark, but he tried again with his phone, hoping maybe a sliver more of the light would reach the walls.

He wished it hadn't. Subtle reflections caught on eyes, tear-filled eyes. Dozens of them. There were faces on the walls, staring at him, each twisting and turning their heads as much as they could, but their heads were only half emerged from the blackness of the barrier. Thick thread the color of rotted skin cut in criss-crosses along where their faces emerged from the wall, stitching them into it like they'd been grafted there, bleeding skin struggling against the strands. Their faces were all the color of char, their eyes crying clear tears down the black skin, with red irises. Not red like Antoinette's, which were a step closer to amber, beautiful and alluring. No, these faces on the walls had irises like blood. He almost expected them to cry tears of crimson, but the torn skin on their necks, temples, scalp, wherever the thread was, did plenty to keep blood trickling down the walls and onto the faces below them instead.

The faces were trying to speak, but like their heads, their lips were sealed with thread as well. Mouths tried to pull apart, obsidian skin tore, and thick red droplets fell down their chins. They were

dead silent, despite the tears, the blood, despite their desperate attempts to cry out to Jack; he could see it in their eyes.

It isn't real, it isn't real, it isn't real.

He looked down. The floor was stone, black, but as he stared at it, he started to notice more lines in the subtle bumps. The stones he'd been walking on, hard and rock, were shaped like body parts. Too damn hard to see in the black on the stairs, with the dark fog blocking much of his light, but now, he could see knuckles, elbows, arms and legs, all piled over each other and compressed down to create a flat surface, small bumps and grooves where hard bone would be. Like he was walking on a stairway and floor paved with corpses.

"You don't respect us," she said, hovering backward a few feet, so all he could see was the two glowing dots in the eye sockets of her huge skull-like head. "You ask me to stop hating you, your kind, when it is your kind that treats us as second-class citizens of the night. And yet, it is you vampires who are fragile things."

This whole conversation felt weird. Talking to a giant floating torso of what looked like black bones, black spikes and claws, black wings, and a dangling spinal cord, was terrifying in and of itself. But, it wasn't that he was talking to some sort of death-monster incarnate that was weird, it was the words Athalia was using. She was trying to manipulate the conversation, lead him into a corner maybe, get him to trip over words.

He'd be fine with that, and fully capable of dancing around that sort of conversation, playing the game and all, but it was hard to talk and not have a quivering lip as he stared at the monster. Felt like that time he was dealing with a giant spider monster thing, something his mind was sure didn't exist, and yet his eyes were telling him it was.

"... you're right."

Athalia turned to him again, and came closer. Her bone hands walked on the floor, acting as her legs, and her spinal cord dragged along the stone, ceiling too high for her to float much.

"Explain."

"W-Well, I mean, just looking at you, I doubt any neonate or ancilla vamp could handle you in a fight, especially... in here." He gestured to what might as well have been Hell's basement.

"... yes, that is true."

“We die if we catch a sunrise. We sleep half the day. We light up like kindling. You’re right, we are fragile...” He got up, dusted off his knees and ass, and adjusted his tie again. “You could probably handle ten, or twenty of us in a fight, in here.”

“... I could.”

“And yet, you’ve requested I come here, so we can talk, and find a way to work together.”

“Azamel has requested you. I just delivered the message.”

“Athalia, face it. Kindred may be weaker than your kind, weaker than Uratha too, with only our few elders as a real threat, but we’re very, very good at what we do.”

“... and that would be?” If skulls could frown, he was sure Athalia’s gaze would be fury incarnate. But, instead, she could only stare at him; it was enough, and he stepped back a couple times as the two glowing dots in the center of her large eye sockets bore a hole through his sternum.

“Living in cities with the people, controlling them, manipulating them, hiding among them. And by doing that, with decades, we can turn cities into havens for our kind. Not just our kind, but your kind too.” He gestured to her, open palm up, extending the metaphorical olive branch. Or handing her a sandwich, depending on the metaphor. “How often do Begotten manage to turn a food source into a home, with a support structure?”

The monster snarled, and black mist flowed out of her mouth, over her exposed, dark teeth and gaunt lips.

“We—”

A door opened, creaking, heavy, stone grinding on stone.

“Rarely, very rarely do Begotten ever find equilibrium with their food source.” Another voice, another he didn’t recognize, one with some rasp to it, and some depth as well. A lot better than the banshee shrieks and death whispers of Athalia; damn thing’s voice was like ice in his skull.

As the door opened, the black mist faded away, or at least dispersed a bit, some of it flowing into the new exit and vanishing into the new source of air.

“Athalia,” the voice said, “you were supposed to let him through.”

“I wanted to talk to him... and ask him about Angela.”

Angela, psycho hunter woman with the glass eye?

“She nearly killed me,” he said as he followed Athalia. How she’d fit through the small door in the weird room, he had no—oh, she phased through it, body turning into black mist and moving through the door like a gaseous blob. Yeah, the sort of monster who could sneak her way into a closed off room through the cracks under the door. That’s ok, he didn’t need to sleep later or anything anyway.

He stepped out into Dolareido.

“Wait... the fuck?” He looked around, down at himself, and froze. Blood was raining on him.

“Hello Jack,” the raspy voice said, with an accent he couldn’t recognize. But he recognized her, sort of, as she stood before him, waiting.

“... Fiona?”

“Indeed.”

Gone was the Scottish accent, and gone was the bubbly champagne of her voice and body language. Instead, a woman hovered before him, a woman with no eyes, giant black spikes like horns curling backward over her head like hair, serrated and covered in little spikes, two of them coming from where eyes should have been before curving back over her forehead to join the others. Skin the color of dark steel, and instead of feet, she had long shins that came into knife-like points. At least she had a mouth and nose, lips a darker tint, thin, and her chin sharp. It looked like she was hovering in the air at first, but as he took in the sight of her, he recognized the spider legs coming out of her back, massive, long, each blade-like and similar to her feet; they were holding her a few feet above the pavement. He’d seen those, back when Fiona had helped him in the tunnel with the spider monster.

No wonder the wolves thought she might have been an Azlu or whatever, she was a spider monster. Except unlike that gross abomination, Fiona’s monster form was strangely beautiful, wearing a white silk — spider silk? — dress that hugged tight to her curvy, curvy, curvy body. Holy crap she barely had a waist, and her breasts were massive, bigger than Fiona’s human breasts. Nearly as big as Antoinette’s, and considering the blood rain was soaking the dress, he could see the nipples, and—for the love of god, stop staring at the spider monster’s enormous breasts.

Once he managed to tear his eyes away, he looked beside him. Athalia reformed, black mist coalescing into bones, wings, and spikes. And without a ceiling over her head, she spread her black wings and hovered higher into the air, without bothering to use them. The blood rain mixed into the black mist that dripped from her dark bones, same as it did to Fiona and him.

“I... recognize this city,” he said. The three of them were stepping out of a dark alleyway, an alley he walked past on the way to Elysium usually. Sure enough, once they were out on the street, he



recognized the buildings. Except... “What the fuck.” The buildings, their signs, normally a subdued Las Vegas, looked warped, strange, like they were melting. They weren’t melting, as far as he could tell, but the blood rain made it look like that, as if they were being destroyed by the flood of crimson that fell upon them.

None of that compared to the fact the moon in the sky was red; and really fucking close. If he’d had a plane, he could fly into it. And to make it all perfectly terrifying, the red moon was dripping blood, oozing it down onto the city, almost as if something had wounded a god in the heavens.

Athalia hovered to his right, drifting over cars and the people inside them. People on the streets. People in the cafes and pizza joints. People in the bars. Not a one of them moved, all holding perfectly still, all... all... actual statues, made of stone. He approached the ones on the sidewalk, and touched one in the shoulder, some older man with a belly, in a trench coat. Stone.

“A nightmare,” Athalia said, whispering voice cutting through the rain. “I found this chamber, many years ago, a good example of the horrors your kind have inflicted on someone, someone who felt fear, someone bathed in it. It scarred the Primordial Dream, forever a nightmare. Fiona found it as well.”

“W-Wait, we did this?”

Fiona shook her head, massive array of glorious, horrifying horns of black turning with it. “Not directly. Someone, probably human, must have... glimpsed, the sort of world Kindred have here, and saw something they probably shouldn’t have. Something that terrified them to their soul.” Fiona raised herself higher, walking on four of the massive, segmented blades that served as spider legs, while the other four reached out to poke against and balance on nearby buildings, street lamps, and cars. “It isn’t only us Begotten that can be monsters.”

Athalia snorted, a strange sound considering her voice was nothing but loud whispers, like a howling wind given the ability to speak.

“I uh... um... so, I’m in a nightmare?” He stared up at the blood moon as he walked along with the two monsters. Trying to be prim and proper, all business and such, wasn’t going to work anymore since he was soaked to the bone in blood. And despite himself, he licked his lips to taste it. Tasted... weird... and wrong, and provided no filling sensation, no tingling warmth in the core. But at the same time, it did fill him with something else, a colder sensation with stings of pain, like swallowing frozen thumbtacks. Yeah, don’t do that anymore.

“You are,” Fiona said. “The lair, our lair. The Begotten of Dolareido share this chamber.”

In a nightmare, a literal, actual nightmare. A real place, in a dream world, that was apparently a real thing too. Fiona had told him all these things, but words were meaningless compared to the sights he was seeing, to the nightmare fuel before him. A giant, red, bleeding moon, titanic drops of red falling like a waterfall onto some of the larger buildings, while other globs turned into misty red above, becoming rain. The more disturbing part was the people, the cold, dead, stone people, their empty gazes, and how the blood running down their heads looked like tears on their cheeks.

He looked at Fiona, her large ass wrapped tight in the partly see-through, white silk dress, and then looked at Athalia, the bones and black wings and dangling spinal cord, a hovering torso. Couldn't be more different, and yet, he could see how Fiona would be the more deadly monster. Damien said she lured men in to her, abusive men, and she punished them for being lowlifes, before killing them, a regular black widow; or at least she used to kill them. He wasn't sure how she was feeding anymore, but he hadn't seen any reports about strange, butchery murders since then.

Athalia's nightmarish form was far more chilling, far more direct, far more 'the thing in your closet' sort of horror. Or maybe, the thing in the tomb, in the old mausoleum, in the empty grave, the thing that would snap out from the darkness and drag you screaming into the dirt and bones beneath. Both were horrors of darkness, both were terrifying in their own way. And both were escorting him down a street in a literal nightmare.

He shivered.

"I can taste your fear," Athalia said, voice slithering across the blood drops and into his ear.

He swatted away the sound, and frowned at the colossal entity. "Where are we going?"

"To speak with Azamel," Fiona said.

"I got the impression Athalia here wanted to talk about Angela."

The reaper monster drifted head of them, and began to hover backward a few feet above the bloody street, eyes locked onto Jack. "I suppose you must know by now. Jeremiah said it, so Beatrice heard it, and I assume she would tell Julias, and you. I... wanted to ask... how is my daughter?"

He stopped, and stared at the skeleton, at her giant skull, at the glowing white dots within. Hard to remember the actual woman's face, Athalia's face, when he was looking at the reaper version, but he managed, after a while. The dark skin and black hair, the soft face, and the steel eyes. Just like Angela.

"... she's your daughter?"

Sucking in a breath through her teeth, Fiona stepped to the side, her spider legs drifting her some five or six feet away from him; predicting an argument, no doubt. If Angela was Athalia's daughter, yeah, an argument was likely.

"She is."

"That... psychopath, is your daughter?"

Predictably, the reaper monster snorted again, the harsh whisper cracking the soaked air.

"She isn't a—"

"I was bound." He marched up to the giant skeleton, up to the skull nearly half the size of his body, and poked the floating monster in her giant sternum. "Tied to a chair. Your psychopath daughter put a blowtorch up to my fucking lips." He jammed his finger into the monster hard enough to make her hover back a few inches. "That maniac hit me, and hit me, and hit me."

"She—"

"Fuck you! Your daughter cut me, shot me, laughed at my misery, taunted me. She treated her fellow hunters like cannon fodder. I'm glad she's dead, I'm glad she—"

"She's not dead."

He stepped back from the reaper, and stared at her as hard as he could. Maybe, just maybe, if he thought about it really hard, wished for it really hard, she'd explode. No such luck.

"She's not dead?"

"I would know if my daughter was dead, and I know that she is not."

"She was stabbed! She got hit by a car!"

"... injured then, but not dead."

Fuck. Shitting fucking shit!

"She... she hated me, Athalia, hated me like... like you hates vamps but a thousand times worse." He lowered his gaze to the bloody street, and tried his best to keep calm. Again, no such luck, and his arms started to tremble slightly as the memories of being captured, tied up, stabbed, punched, shot, burned, all slammed into his mind with the grace of a nuke.

The reaper monster sighed, black mist flowing out of her skull mouth, before dispersing on the bloody street around his feet.

"I am surprised your Invictus council did not tell you, if Beatrice did not. I'm sure they know."

“I haven’t had the opportunity to meet with them yet, none of them, not really. We’re... they’re... giving me a vacation.”

Fiona drifted back toward him, and lowered herself down until she was beside him. Much as he barely recognized her, it was Fiona, someone he’d hung out with on several occasions, someone who had helped him look for Natasha. A new friend. He let the monster slip her strange hand, two large claws for fingers, and one large claw for a thumb, around his shoulder. And with her enormous spider legs still holding her sharp feet an inch above the pavement, she started to walk forward, nudging him along with her.

“I only learned a few days ago, myself,” the spider monster said, “about Angela, and Athalia.”

“Fiona, he’s not going to—”

“Athalia, you underestimate vampires, and you underestimate Jack. Even after his escape from those hunters, you underestimate him.”

How Fiona knew about Jack’s encounter with Angela, or any of the details, he didn’t know. But then both she and Athalia were monsters of darkness, according to her, and they lived and breathed shadow as well as any Nosferatu or Mekhet, or better than. They probably got their hands on the information in ways his superiors wouldn’t appreciate. But, that was fine, and he sighed as he looked at the woman beside him. Those massive black horns coiling back over her head, from her eyes, from her scalp, looked almost like hair.

“I... didn’t come here to talk about that night,” he said.

“It deserves to be talked about.” Fiona rubbed his head a few times, not unlike how Antoinette would have, though she was only average height in her spider form, other than the extra legs. And the feel of her black claws on his head was strange, but welcome. “I know you came here to talk with Azamel, but she knows we’re talking to you first. She’ll understand if we spend a moment talking.”

“... will she?” he said.

Athalia snorted again, but nodded, and hovered with them, beside him again, as Fiona walked him along. “She will. And she knows I wished to ask of Angela.”

“Angela... your daughter. I... did you—”

“I did not know she would come here. I... abandoned her, years ago, left her with an orphanage in a distant city. She knew about me, what I was, and it had created... problems.” Seeing and hearing an angel of death give a confession was a strange sight to behold, from how her enormous skull head

couldn't provide any facial ticks, to how her voice was a harsh whisper with very peculiar inflections. Like listening to a graveyard wind confess its sins.

“She knew you were a monster, back then?”

“She did. I left her because it was the only hope I had of keeping her from the life, before you ask.”

He put up his hands in surrender. “No judgments here. Not like a vampire would have any right on judgment in the reproduction front anyway.” Vampires spread like a disease, no other way to think about it.

The winged monster nodded, and sighed as she dragged her claws along some of the still cars. “But she disappeared several years later. I'd heard sightings of her from elsewhere, then once again a couple years later, before she showed up here, with this Jeremiah bastard using her against me. Against us.”

“... fuck.” He sighed, and bit his tongue before he said something he'd regret. No use in blaming Azamel now, for Jeremiah following her to Dolareido. “Did... you want to ask anything about her?”

Athalia stopped, and floated their, enormous spinal cord dangling half a foot above the red and black street, before she resumed again. Hesitation, maybe?

“... I... don't know. I guess I can piece together her life from what you told me, and her new role as Jeremiah's partner. She must have... got into... hunting very young, to be who she is now. Lost her eye in a hunt probably. Became... hateful.”

Jack winced as the reaper's voice died away. No need to say it, no need for him to call attention to it or blame her either, for Angela's attitude. Like mother like daughter, times a thousand.

Wait.

“... Athalia,” he said, “Angela's your daughter, but she's here to kill us, me, Azamel, and...”

“And me.” The reaper drifted ahead of them, and fluttered her onyx wings a few times, black mist and black feathers alike falling into the street of consequence and bad decisions that lay ahead of them. “But she's my daughter. I can't kill my daughter, Jack.”

He opened his mouth, and then shut it. To make a comparison between Angela and Tony was a bad idea; childes were not true children of their sires, the relationship was different. It had been painful for Antoinette to orchestrate Tony's death, he was sure, but he was her childe, not child, and she'd had over a century of being the man's enemy to steel her heart. Athalia had... how long?

“How long have you known Angela’s been hunting monsters?”

“As I said, I heard that she’d resurfaced a couple years ago, but I had no details, nothing I could... I had no idea it had progressed like this.”

He had to admit, there was a bit of sympathy for the devil going on here, between him and Athalia. What a royal bitch Athalia was, but she’d lived a very hard life, gave up her daughter, and now that daughter was a psychopath who probably wanted to kill her monster mother. That sucked. Anyone would think that sucked.

And it was going to suck a thousand times more if, and when, he killed Angela.

Again, he bit his tongue, kept the words down, no need to say them and make things worse when Athalia was probably already thinking them. Angela and Jeremiah were now primary targets, and in a city filled with vampires and werewolves and monsters, being a primary target meant death. The hunters had bitten off more than they could chew, and one way or another, it was going to cost them their lives. He’d make sure of it.

He could still remember the look in Angela’s eye as she brought the blowtorch in toward him with a practiced hand. She was excited to see him turn to ash. She’d done it before.

“... I couldn’t break her.”

“What?” Athalia and Fiona said.

“Angela, I couldn’t break her. The hunters got in close, made eye contact, underestimated me, and I broke them, dominated their minds. But Jeremiah, well I didn’t try on him, but Angela? I tried, and I really tried. The others hunters I broke like toothpicks, but her, I couldn’t get through. There was... it was like, a wall, in her mind, that blocked me out.”

Both the monsters looked at each other, and shrugged.

“And in the fight,” he said, “she was ruthless, but... really, really good. I mean, it... it didn’t feel like I was dealing with a regular human, you know?”

Athalia sank, body inching closer to the bloody pavement, until she no longer hovered, but stood there on her bone hands, spinal cord dragging along the bloody street. She looked down at the ground, black mist trickling out of her, and raised her gaze to look at Fiona.

“Jeremiah,” Fiona said to her monster companion, “felt the same way. The four with him, the weird knives they had, they were dangerous. That Jeremiah though, he... it didn’t feel normal.”

“Azamel wanted to talk about that, about him. Let’s go.” Athalia continued on, and with a sigh, Jack followed after her.

Why didn’t Julias or Antoinette tell him about Angela? They had to know. Jacob too, though, Jack had no expectations of that Joker to tell him anything. The others though, why hadn’t they told him? Surely they would have, sooner or later, but it’d have been nice to know ahead of time. Arg, that was partly his fault, not telling anyone he had a meeting with Azamel, even though they’d have probably guessed it. They couldn’t have guessed the day though. Or, maybe, they just thought he should hear it from the mother herself? Nah, they trusted Athalia less than he did. They were going to tell him, they must have been. Maybe they thought everyone else would do it, so they didn’t have to be the bearer of bad news.

He could worry about that later. For now, he had to worry about himself, about the secret meeting he was having with the old monster partly responsible for the newest threat in Dolareido. Newest, and likely one of the biggest.

When they turned a corner, Jack froze, and looked up. He had to look up a little to look at either Athalia or Fiona, but for this new beast, this new monster, he had to look way, way up.

“Holy... fucking...” He stumbled to the side, and stuck out a hand to catch a car to keep from falling over. It didn’t help much, and he kept stumbling against it as his muscles refused to work, fingers slipping on the wet car hood, and elbow slamming against the metal. He barely noticed, eyes locked onto the giant elephant creature sitting in the middle of an intersection.

There was no traffic since the cars weren’t moving, so the monster was free to sit there, in what Jack had to guess was the center of the weird nightmare city. Nightmare, he was in a fucking nightmare, looking at monsters, and this monster in front of him was the most twisted, weird thing he could have imagined. Ganesha, even he recognized that. He didn’t know shit about Hinduism, but he was pretty sure this incarnation of the god was very much not accurate to Ganesha.

There was the body, the two legs and four arms that looked human, and the large belly too, but the head was an elephant head, and the blood rain dripped down from its tusks. Each hand was wrapped with a huge chain, and from each chain was dangling shit he did not expect to find, but probably should have. A giant net, like a fish net, except one big enough that a boat would have had to haul it in, not human hands; and it was filled with human skulls. Another hand’s chain held a dangling corpse, a curved spike skewering it through the stomach, like the corpse was fish bait. It was almost as if he was looking at a fisherman of human flesh. The swords in the other hands looked like scimitars, but in the context, he could only imagine them cutting up human bodies on a butcher’s table.

He forced himself to stand up straight, and stare up and up at what he could only assume was Azamel. Sitting down on the pavement, the monster was at least fifty feet tall, and as it, she, breathed, he could hear the rumbling of titanic lungs, and hear the beat her heart. Slow, pounding, and colossal.

“Jack Terry, of the Invictus,” she said. Her voice was almost pure bass, and Jack winced as it vibrated through him. The puddles of blood trembled all around Azamel for hundreds of feet in all directions, as if a herd of dinosaurs was marching through. But there were layers to it, human layers, enough that he could understand the words.

“... Azamel?”

“Indeed.” She didn’t move much. She was a monster, a nightmare incarnate, sitting in a world where she reigned supreme; he should probably go up to her. Hell, he was surprised she didn’t ask him to bow. “I am surprised you came.”

“I did say I would, didn’t I?”

“... then either you are a fool for ignoring the threat these hunters and Jeremiah pose, or you thought me so incapable of logical reasoning, that you risked your life to see me and ensure I am placated.” She laughed, a booming and roaring sound that made her elephant trunk trumpet a little. Fucking weird, and terrifying when combined with the blood flowing down her body, tusks, and the dead in her hands.

“Little of both?” he said.

“Perhaps.” She reached out with a hand holding a scimitar, chain gripped tight in her palm, and used three of her human-but-giant looking fingers to gesture him to come closer.

Sighing under his breath, he forced himself to stand straight, stand tall, and walk toward her. Athalia and Fiona stuck with him as he approached the gargantuan entity. Good, cause he was three seconds away from panicking and bolting. He’d seen vampires do crazy shit, he’d seen fucking magic at work, he’d seen a pack of werewolves unleash their inner titans, he’d seen a spider monster mutation thing, and he’d seen legit nightmare monsters, Athalia and Fiona. But Azamel was a new level of holy fucking shit, and he wasn’t sure how to process what he was looking at as he got closer, and closer, and closer.

Her foot was bigger than him.

“As I’m sure you guessed,” the giant god of death said, “I asked you here, because I need a way to communicate with you Kindred that will not escalate into conflict. Surely you know what your covenant has done to my home in the physical world?”



“... the explosives, right?”

“Your superiors are fools to think they can control me with such a small measure. I could make my home elsewhere.”

“... could you though?” He tilted his head to the side, and rubbed the back of it a few times as he let his mind piece together the puzzle. “The old tunnels are used by Kindred, and most of them are located in parts of the city where either the Invictus or Carthians consider it to be in their purview. I know Jacob uses some of the tunnels in a different corner of the city, so you’ll be avoiding him too. It seems you need a foothold in the physical world”—oh good god he called it the ‘physical world’ like that was a normal thing—“in order to pursue your agenda, but you also need some degree of privacy, and defensibility. If it was just privacy, there’d be a million places in Dolareido you could hide, but you need walls, some way to guard yourself from... hunters, and other dangers, while you’re in the physical world. Hard to beat fifty-foot-thick walls of rock lined with concrete in that department. But the Invictus explosives would cave in all entryways into this particular alcove, which could cause the whole tunnel to cave in if it dominoes, spoiling your defensible position. And... you like this spot, in the tunnel depths. You often came here before, last time you were in Dolareido. Something about it resonates with you, and from what I know about Begotten, that’s important.”

The three monsters stared at him, until all Jack could hear was the heartbeat and breath of the god giant before him. He looked around for the fourth, for Mark, a man he’d never seen but had been described to him. No one knew what the man’s horror might look like though, or at least no one had told him. For all he knew, Mark was watching him right now; certainly felt like he was being watched, especially with the three monsters staring at him. He really should have tried to word the breakdown better, maybe in a less offensive way, but like usual, once the thought sparked in his head, it just came out of him.

“Fiona, you tell this little Kindred too much,” Azamel said.

“Nothing he and the other Kindred hadn’t already learned.” The spider monster shrugged, and lowered herself until she was beside him again, stiletto feet grazing against the blood puddles around him. “I told him we can’t simply walk in and out of our lairs wherever. Something I know the Kindred have managed to pieced together on their own.”

Azamel snorted. Even as a giant elephant god thing, Jack could tell that snort was a ‘there’s more to this than we’re saying’ snort. He’d figure it out eventually, but for now, it was one more secret on a pile of hundreds.

“Yes, little Kindred, I value the local in the tunnels. My statement was true though. I could make my home elsewhere. But I would prefer to keep what I have, and you would be better served to keep that a reality.”

How the fuck did the giant elephant monster articulate so well? The heavy, booming voice alone should have made that difficult, and yet its echoing, wall-shaking power was enunciated without issue. It, or she, didn't have human lips, and yet he could see her mouth move between the tusks to speak as a human would. Nothing in this nightmare world made sense. Everything in this nightmare world was determined to get under his skin. He would not sleep well today, even in Antoinette's arms.

“If you're willing to keep the peace,” he said, “willing to keep your appetites under control, and willing to help us deal with Jeremiah, Angela, and the other hunters, then I can't see any reason the Invictus will ever detonate the explosives.”

“... our hungers are not always easily satisfied,” Azamel said. “Perhaps, one day, a Begotten will make a mistake, their hunger seeping out and infecting the humans with nightmares. On that day, the Invictus may respond with cruel swiftness. I hope that you can help create understanding with them, that that need not be their response.”

“Spreading nightmares... I'm pretty sure I can get the Invictus to take their itchy fingers off the trigger, with a little show of good faith from you.”

One of Azamel's scimitar-wielding hands stabbed the sword into the ground, the enormous blade cutting down into a car like stabbing a sausage with a fork. The blade stood up on its own when she let go of it, metal cutting clear through the car and into the soaked pavement beneath it. Hand free, she held it out before Jack, and set it on the street, palm up.

She wanted him to get into her hand.

He looked at Athalia and Fiona, but they said nothing. They waited, Athalia resting her weight onto her large hands — nowhere near as large as Azamel's — against the street, while Fiona gently drifted in place, with her weight hanging on her eight spider legs. Athalia might let him die to Azamel if her boss decided to kill him, but Fiona would probably protest, and she seemed ok with him getting into Azamel's hand.

Trembling, shaking in his blood-soaked three-hundred dollar shoes, he stepped into the monster's grip.

Azamel rumbled contentment, and raised her hand. Enormous things moved slowly, relative to their size; it was physics. Nine point eight meters per second squared was gravity, so a giant trying to

walk looked like they were walking slowly. On top of that, square cube law said enormous heavy creatures simply couldn't exist, as the surface area to support their weight increased at a slower curve compared to the weight itself. None of these seemed to apply to Azamel. He squeezed her thumb where it stood upright beside him, and held on tight as she lifted him into the air, like a human would lift a pebble. So fast he felt his guts pull down into his pelvis, like a roller coaster pulling up or down too fast.

He always hated roller coasters.

“There are forces at work, child of the night, that you cannot comprehend. Jacob and Antoinette test their knowledge upon the shores of existence itself. But this realm is but one of many, and your idiot elders flirt with forces beyond their understanding. Beyond my understanding.”

Ok, Antoinette and Jacob fucking with crazy shit, he could understand. The two of them were ancient, and if they were flirting with dangerous shit Lovecraft style, he couldn't really blame them. If he was half a millennium old, and had dealt with shit like vampires, werewolves, and monsters his whole life, he'd be curious to know about what lay beyond the veil too. But if the giant elephant god monster thing in front of him said it was beyond her understanding too, was willing to admit ignorance, and since these monsters were capable of insane shit like entering nightmare realms, then he had to consider that.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because, you asked for a sign of good faith, and I have been assured you are unique among your brethren. Fiona and Athalia vouch for you, and events to this point suggest they are correct to do so. I tell you this, in confidence and trust, that you will do what is necessary to keep the peace.”

“I... I don't get it. What's one got to do with the other?”

The god snorted, and Jack clutched her thumb tighter as her hot breath slammed against him. Smelled of rotten blood and a damp cellar.

“I seek my own goals, and Dolareido is the stage for my pursuits. Your kind need not be my enemies in this journey of mine. But, someone is poking holes through the walls of realms, and I believe they are attempting to upturn the city in its entirety. Someone is hiding in the wake of Jacob and Antoinette, hiding their actions, their flirtations with the other realms, and using those two as a smokescreen.”

“Upturn the city? What's that—”

“Destroy, little blood leech. Dolareido and its humans are at risk, to something... someone, here in the city.”

“... that is the most vague and useless warning ever, Azamel! How am I supposed to keep the peace and—”

Her fingers wrapped his body, and began to squeeze. Oh shit, oh shit oh shit. His arms were free, and they pressed down on the colossal fingers surrounding him; might as well have been trying to move a building. Her grip was absolute, and she squeezed tighter, and tighter, until his ribs were threatening to break.

“Do not test me, vampire. Since I have arrived here, I have attempted to make peace, despite the trials I faced last time I nested within your city’s walls. Your superiors were not innocent, but the two who were most responsible for my suffering, are dead. So now I attempt peace, and it is thrown back in my face. I offer advice, I offer knowledge, and again and again, it is thrown back in my face.”

“You... b-brought... Jeremiah... here...”

With another snort, and a trumpet sound from her alien trunk, she loosened her grip. He was still trapped, but at least he wasn’t at risk of being turned into paste.

“... what did you tell Jeremiah of me?”

“Nothing! Christ, nothing. They fucking tortured me, tortured me! I fucking bled and killed and nearly died, and it’s because Jeremiah and that psychopath Angela are here for you. You... you knew he would too, didn’t you? Chase you to Dolareido.”

“... I made a tactical decision, vampire.”

“I almost fucking died! Barry died! They—”

“Hunters were already here, preparing in wait, when Jeremiah arrived pursuing me. Do not mistake his presence for the entirety of the troubles that plague your city.” The giant monster sighed, and brought him in closer, closer, until he was only a few feet from her enormous eyeball. She released him, and kept her hand out, palm up for him to stand on, beside one of her tusks. “You truly told him nothing?”

“Well I mean, I don’t have any way to prove that to you, but no, I told him jack shit. Figured it’d bite me in the ass if you ever found out.”

“You are wise,” she said. A compliment from the beast he suddenly so very much wanted to kill. He wasn’t sure if he wanted her words to make him feel pride, but they did anyway. “You would do well to avoid Jeremiah and Angela, little vampire. They are hunters that have progressed past the limitations of a human. They are far more dangerous than you understand.”

“Past the limitations?”

“Surely you felt it, when dealing with them.”

Yeah, yeah he did. Angela’s unbreakable mind was what she was talking about. The fuck else did those two have going for them?

“Any other tips for me about them?”

“I am sorry, but the nature of their... inhuman abilities eludes me. They are tough to kill, and will not be broken easily.”

Well, better than nothing.

“Ok, so, you say something’s happening in the city, something that’s threatening the whole city? And it’s probably not the hunters? Some... magical sorta stuff?”

“Indeed. And while I have asked you here to agree to be my voice for your infuriating superiors, I have also asked you here to keep an eye open for what troubles may brew in the dark corners of the Earth.”

“Because... if Dolareido is destroyed, everyone’s fucked. Me, you, the wolves, everyone.”

“Correct.” And, with a long sigh, she reached up with her other arm, the one with the sword, and used it to scrape at her tusk. “I so despise this game.” She lowered him back down to the street, and he hopped out of her palm. Maybe she had wanted to look him in the eye, so she could be sure he was telling the truth or something. “But it is a game we must play.”

“Yeah, no argument from me here.” Sighing, and strangely enough, getting a little more comfortable with the company, he leaned against a nearby car. It was a shitty game, playing for lives. Just like politics, the smarter you were, the more you didn’t want to play it, but the more you knew you had to.

“Fiona, Athalia, and Mark will notify you if they discover anything about this unknown threat, Jack Terry,” Azamel said. “And, if the hunters make a mistake and expose themselves, we will bring it to your attention.”

Jack glanced the two monsters’ way. Impossible to read either of their expressions, Fiona with the horns coming out of her eye sockets, and Athalia with the skull face. Fiona would probably be more than happy to help him, and Athalia would no doubt hate every second of it, but do it anyway.

Good god, Angela was her daughter. Angela was her fucking daughter. How the fuck was that going to go?

“I’ll let my bosses know and—”

“Do not tell anyone else of this.” The monster ripped her scimitar from the skewered car, and offered him an annoyed, loud trumpet sound again. “Not your lover, nor your sire, or your friends. There is a strong possibility one of them causes the ripples I fear, or that the spreading word will cause the perpetrator to hide their tracks all the better. No, keep this to yourself, tell only the Begotten, and even then, be careful with your words. Whatever stirs the realms has touched their toes into many worlds, Jack Terry. The realm of spirits, the realm of dreams, the realm of the dead. Someone is searching for something, and leaving scars in their wake.”

This very much, super definitely sounded like something he should tell Julias. But, god damn it, she asked him not to, and she was the one telling him the info. And it wasn’t like it was info he could action; it wasn’t a lead or anything. Best he could do was keep an eye and ear open for strangeness. And fuck, strangeness found him every day these days.

“I will do as you ask,” he said.

Azamel groaned, a strange, satisfied sound, like a giant cat might make. Or a purring whale? It filled the streets around him with vibrations, causing the pools of blood scattered over the asphalt to tremble. Something about the way he said his phrase that appeased her.

She liked to be obeyed.

“Fiona, please escort Jack from the lair.”

“Yes Azamel.” Fiona nodded her giant head of horns, and turned to walk with Jack.

He kept glancing over his shoulder, at the reaper and the elephant god as they began to chat. But soon he was too far to hear them, as if the nightmare buried sound with its rain of blood. Down and along the streets they walked, Jack eventually walking the line of its center, moving between the still cars that looked like they wanted to go, to move and drive, but never would. The statues in their seats looked as zealous as their cars, but they too were only a decor for the stage of these deals with devils.

“Hey Jack,” Fiona said, lowering her human-ish body down to hover beside him while her spider legs continued to walk, height of them arching far over Jack before coming back down to the street. “I had sex! Well, sort of. There was a man and woman present, and fingers, so I think it counts.”

He laughed. Fucking hell this woman. He really needed to hang out with her more, she was awesome.

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Jack stood before the triumvirate, and waited. The room felt different than it did in the past, where he'd feel trapped, weak, and at the mercy of his superiors. Tonight, he was the young blood coming into his own, rising up from the pool of tadpoles and making people notice him, making people respect him. Michael noticed him, Maria noticed him, and Julias was happy with him, impressed, and grinning a sly, cocky grin as he watched the boy from his seat.

They were in the Xnomina headquarters building, where the Invictus usually had their meetings. He waited, standing before the council in the main meeting room, the three of them sitting and looking at him while he stood at the head of the table. But, it wasn't just the council he was dealing with, as Jessy was behind him, wearing a business suit with legs like she often did when doing business. And even scarier, was Damien was there too, standing beside Jessy, wearing a similar dark business suit, some shade of very dark navy, and a midnight blue tie to go with, with some jagged black lines down its length. Very slick, and it matched the half-buzzed head look Damien carried, dark hair running down the side to his shoulder.

The only remaining original right hand of the Invictus council behind him on his right, and the assassin and newest member behind him on his left. Hard to read their mood, and for Jessy's mood to be hard to read was a damn strange thing.

"Master Terry," Maria said, a small smile on her cracked lips. "You have been through much in your scant time as Kindred. You have suffered under the quarreling of Tony and Alder Honors, and survived. You and your lover suffered under the assault of Lucas, and survived. And in the most absurd fashion, a monster from another realm sneaked into Dolareido, assaulted the Uratha, and you, and yet you survived."

"But in all those situations, you were a spectator," Michael said. Thank god he still thought that. "Even in defeating the spider abomination, you were taking advantage of an opportunity created by the Uratha. It wasn't until these hunters decided to make their move that you were given a real challenge, a direct challenge." The Gangrel leaned forward, set his elbows on the table, fingers netted together on it, and smirked at him. "You performed beyond our expectations, Master Terry. Vengeance for Barry Tellern, served."

Holy crap. He could feel his Ventrue ego grow until it was threatening to burst.

Julias turned his chair to face him more directly, and tapped a finger on the table. “And on top of all that, you have managed to smooth relations with two... three groups, from the past.” Three? Ah, right, Damien. If that qualified. “The Uratha owe you, and we have reports of the werewolves integrating with the Kindred in both the Invictus and Carthians, a far better situation than last time, where only Garry managed to find common ground with them. With the Begotten, situations are more tense, specifically with Azamel, but I assume your meeting with her went well?”

Ah shit. It wasn't like they weren't going to figure it out, or wouldn't have predicted it since Athalia talked to him. But still, it'd be nice if he could do something without everyone in the city knowing he was doing it, or knowing he'd do it before he did.

“... it did, sire. To a degree, at least.”

“Consider this your first report to the Invictus as our intermediary with the Begotten,” Maria said with a small hand wave.

“Yes Madam Turio.” He almost said ‘um’ to begin his report. But, that wouldn't do for an Invictus report. No um, ers, likes, no filler words. “Azamel is upset with the Invictus, as you know. But she is willing to cooperate with us, as defeating Jeremiah has become her new goal. To prove her... harmonious intentions, she has asked me to be her voice, as you expected, but has also stated she will provide me information if the hunters expose themselves. In the nightmare, she—”

“You were in the nightmare?” Maria raised a hand, and gestured to Damien. “Then you two are to consolidate your knowledge. We need to know more about these monsters.”

“Agreed,” Michael and Julias said together.

Jack looked over his shoulder at Damien, and waited for the man's reaction. A shrug, a small nod, and a smaller smile. Well, that was pretty good for Damien.

“This only lends more weight to our decision,” Julias said. “Congratulations Master Terry, you are now the third member of the right hands of the Invictus.”

He froze. Oh shit. Shit shit shit.

“... I'm sorry, sire?” If one more god damn thing was put onto his shoulders tonight, he was going to crack like a toothpick.

The man smirked at him, one of those manipulative smirks the man used on him frequently, from well before Jack was Kindred. “The combination of your surprising strength, tenacity, your relationship



with the creatures of Dolareido, and your ability to foster such relationships, is a powerful tool. We would be fools to ignore that power, simply because you are young.”

“But we’re not jumping the gun here,” Michael said. “Madam Herrington is running the show. Both Mister Burksen and you, Master Terry, report to her. Understood?”

“Yes Mister McDonald, understood.” Shit shit shit.

“This is an important decision,” Maria said. “And not just for you, Master Terry, but for the Invictus. Younger Kindred will see that advancement occurs through accomplishments, and with great accomplishments, you receive great advancement.”

That was an interesting spin. Were other Kindred getting lazy? Dolareido was a nice, easy place for Kindred, relative to other cities supposedly, and he got the impression from the other Kindred, like Amanda, that they were a little unprepared for all the shit being dumped on them lately. Lucas’s return, Azamel’s return, Avery’s return, spider abominations, and the newcomer Jeremiah, it seemed like the Kindred of Dolareido, or at least the younger ones, had no training on how to deal with these major threats.

But that didn’t mean Jack should suddenly find himself on the frontlines, dealing with those threats!

He almost asked why him, why not one of the other Kindred, older Kindred, like Bruce Vanna, or Hella Vendram. Or hell, Isabella Leauvion, older than Jessy or Natasha, why not her? His eyes danced between the three councilmen before him, and they met his gaze with steel faces and subtle smiles.

“I can see that you are concerned with the choice,” Julias said.

“... a little, sire.”

The ghost lady shrugged, leaning back in her chair and licking a fang. “To be one of the right hands of the Invictus council in Dolareido, is not as simple a matter as who is the strongest, Master Terry. Madam Vola served me well, and not for her might. Your ability to impact a situation, and to steer the result toward our expectations, or simply in our favor, is what is expected of a right hand. You have proven capable of doing this in many situations where far stronger Kindred would fail.”

Well, that was true, he supposed. Not necessarily true like they thought it was, since they didn’t know about Lucas, or Viktor and Tony. Julias did though. Maybe he was the swaying voice in this decision.

“Thank you for the honor,” he said. “I’ll make the Invictus proud.”

“See that you do,” Maria said.

At least Julias wasn't being so serious about it. “It's not all about extra responsibilities, my childe,” he said. “You have more freedom to enact your judgments, and your allowance has been tripled.”

Tripled? He raised both brows, and did his best to stop himself from smiling. Couldn't be done, and a little crack of a grin sneaked onto one side of his lips, and then the other. Course it was an allowance, not a salary; Invictus basically owned you, they weren't paying you wages. Still, that put him into pretty deep into the six figure salary range, and that meant nicer suits, a nicer apartment — and he already had a great apartment — and maybe some extravagant expenditures for Antoinette. Eh, probably not, she had more money than the Devil, and expensive purchases probably didn't mean much to her.

Shit, stop thinking about money, pay attention.

Michael got up, and leaned his ass against the table by his chair, signaling that the conversation would soon end. “We'll be hosting a ball in six weeks, in honor of both Mister Burksen's and Master Terry's joining of the council as our right hands. And of course, other Kindred in the Invictus will discuss their own advancements, agendas, and such. The ball will be for you two though.”

A ball for him in six weeks, just as Antoinette predicted.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, and offered Michael a small bow. It was a chance to glance behind, head down, to see what Damien was doing too.

The man noticed Jack's action, caught the queue, and gave a small bow as well. “Thank you, sir.”

“Mister Burksen.” Maria got up and walked around the table, soon standing beside Jack. She wasn't looking at him, but Damien instead. Still, being this close to her, her ghostly clothes and more ghostly mist, always chilled him, made him feel like he was standing next to that girl from The Ring. “You are to use that ball as an opportunity to communicate with other Kindred. You may not be a member of the Invictus, but we are the First Estate, and as you know, the Lancea et Sanctum are the Second Estate. We have been partners since long before your embrace, or mine, Mister Burksen, and you are to foster that partnership by getting to know your fellow Kindred. Do I make myself clear?”

Poor guy. Jack knew an introvert when he saw one, hell he was one, but Damien was both introverted, and a troubled man. He probably wanted to do nothing more than hide away from everyone else, feel guilty about shit, and read the Bible a bunch. Being forced to go to a party and socialize with a bunch of strangers? Jack wouldn't wish that on his worst enemy.

“Yes, Madam Turio.”

“Good.”

Julias got up to stand beside her, arms folded across his chest, and that pleasant-but-cocky smirk on his face as he set his butt to the table behind him. “And we have a mission for you three.”

Jessy stepped in, as did Damien. “Yes sir,” they said in unison.

“Yes sir,” Jack added, a little late, a little surprised. Come on, a giant responsibility had just been dumped on little him, young him, inexperienced him. His sire already had a task for him?

Michael came up to join them, so that the triumvirate all stood with the table behind them, and their respective right hands in front of them.

“Yes. The Invictus have decided that we could be on even better terms with the werewolves. Garry is, and that would suggest Avery is at least capable of some degree of compromise. Go, speak with her, and offer her incentive.”

Incentive? Jack raised a brow, and glanced between the three, as each of them offered him a small, knowing smile.

“Indeed,” Julias said. “We want you to explain to Avery that we’re opening the doors to her, inviting her into the territory. If she wants help with tracking down one of her targets, we can give it. If she wants a better place to live than a junk heap in the Carthian district, we can give it.”

Oh, that was actually a pretty good idea. Kind of like an open borders treaty between two countries, a step before trade agreements, two steps before a defensive alliance, three steps before a full alliance. He doubted it’d ever reach full alliance, but if they agreed on open borders, and if that worked out nicely, there was a good chance that could grow into a defensive alliance, where the Uratha and the Invictus could agree to help each other if one was attacked by a third party.

And perhaps most importantly, it stopped Garry from having a potentially disastrous advantage, since he and Avery were somehow on decent terms.

“Naturally,” his sire continued, “we’re hoping she’ll keep a nose out for the hunters, and help us if an opportunity presents itself. And Master Terry will be in charge of this meeting with Avery. So, the next time you and Avery plan to meet, please bring Mister Burksen and Madam Herrington with you. They don’t need to be in the meeting with you, if Avery demands, but they should at least be outside the door.”

Made sense, especially if he was going to be acting as a right hand now, something with a much bigger 'official capacity' stamp on it.

Michael nodded in Jessy's direction again. "But, again, outside of matters as intermediary with the Begotten and Uratha, Jessy is your superior."

The right hands nodded.

"Dismissed," Maria said, and moved back to her seat.

The right hands bowed, turned, and left.

"Oh, Master Terry," Julias said as they opened the door, "take another week off. You've earned it."

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The three of them sat inside Jack's apartment on the couches. Slick, sleek, it was a nice place that he was pretty proud of. He could move to a better place now though, if he wanted, a penthouse suite maybe, and indulge in a personal hot tub, a bed twice as big as king size, maybe even as big as Antoinette's, and maybe a sound system for some serious music listening.

"So, you two are my two new slaves, mm?" Jessy said, cocky grin on her face. She couldn't pull it off like Julias, hers being far more hyena-ish. "Just kidding."

"We are your subordinates," Damien said. "Close enough."

"Ugh, no it's not, church man. I was just joking, for christ's sake. You do what I tell you in the context of the job and only the job. Besides, it's a fluid position, considering it doesn't apply in ambassadorial matters."

Jack smiled at her. Didn't say he was surprised she knew the word ambassadorial though; didn't need a kick in the face from a new boss.

"So, I'm a right hand of the Invictus now," he said. "That's, um... terrifying."

"Tell me about it. Kid, you just got in on a whole whack of shit." Jessy got up, got a bottle of blood out of his fridge, and poured herself a glass. Not one of his preferred wine glasses, but a normal glass, and she chugged the blood down with all the grace of an ox. Probably best she didn't get a wine glass. "I mean, I'm sure the triumvirate have secrets they don't share with us, nasty shit like betrayals,

ancient agreements, murders and stuff, bones in the closet. But they do share a lot with us, a lot of stuff that allows us three to run this city.”

“Sensitive information about political figures,” Damien said.

“Every. Damn. One of them.” She poured herself another, decided to sip this one, and came back to sit with them in his living room. “All the big wigs. Anyone with their name in drugs, money, or politics — listed from least to worst evil for your convenience — and we know stuff about them, shit that can either ruin them, or be used to hit them where it hurts.”

The Mekhet raised a brow, following Jessy with his eyes, though he didn’t move his head much. Seemed to like holding still while the world moved around him. “Do we right hands spend a lot of our time exploiting kine?”

“Kine number in the millions, Damien. Control them, you control the city... for the most part.”

Jack nodded. Yeah, most part. Once you were as strong as an elder vamp, or these werewolves or monsters, that stopped being so clear cut. But for the majority of paranormals in the city, they were at the mercy of whoever controlled the teeming masses. Hence much of the tension between Carthians and Invictus.

Jessy finished her drink, and folded a leg over the other, elbows on the back of his couch. “Jack, Damien’s been at this for a little while, unofficially at least, so don’t feel feel like you need to worry about two freshmen dragging me down. Besides, Damien’s got a lot of notches in his belt, knows his shit. Fucker was hiding from us for fifty fucking years, right?” The two men nodded. “Exactly. Damien knows the Devil’s Corner damn well, and that’s a feather in our cap we didn’t really have before. And you, you adorable little nitwit, can’t seem to stop making friends. And as you heard from the triumvirate, that’s becoming more and more important.”

He grinned at his boss, and settled a little in the couch. If he got along with Triss, he could get along with Jessy. “I’m not even a year embraced though. Barely a neonate, nowhere near ancilla. When push comes to shove—”

“You’ll do fine.” Damien nudged him in the side with an elbow. A grand gesture, considering who it was coming from. Jessy wouldn’t get the full meaning of the gesture thankfully, about what Jack did to Damien during Lucas’s raid. And hopefully, she’d never learn.

“Yeah, we saw the cleanup at the old prison,” she said. “You really fucked those hunters up. So, maybe it’s only when your backs to a wall, but you have a habit of pulling through, and that’s what matters.” Jessy winked at him, with all the subtlety of an action movie hero.

He nodded as he let that sink in. These vamps fifty years older than him in Kindred years, were trusting him with the rough stuff. Now if he could trust himself to be able to tap into that part of him again when he needed to, everything would be perfect. He didn't, but, practice makes perfect.

"What about Amanda?" he said.

Jessy shrugged. "She'll get a new partner. Not like you can't visit her or something."

Yeah, that was true. Amanda was the only one who knew he was visiting his mother and sister, hopefully, and hopefully she wouldn't tell that to anyone. And hopefully she'd help him do it again.

"... I really pissed off that hunter, Angela," he said. Better tell his new partners what was up before it bit him in the ass. "Athalia thinks she's still alive, and she probably is. And... and she's Athalia's daughter."

Damien and Jessy both raised their eyebrows at that, and the Mekhet leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, hands together between them.

"... that does complicate things," he said.

Jessy threw up a hand. "Fucking right it does. Can't be much of an ambassador for monsters if you go killing their children. And as a right hand, if you do kill her, you won't just be putting yourself into deep shit, you'll be taking the Invictus in with you."

Yeah, what wonderful world. "I'm sure my sire knew, they all must have known, when they gave me the position. So I mean, I guess... they're trusting me to figure out a way to kill Angela, or at least deal with her, without bringing down Athalia on our heads?" And he did not, not not not not want that reaper creature slipping under the crack of his door while he slept. Antoinette's vault was air tight, but still.

"Quite the responsibility," Damien said. "Or maybe, they don't expect you to be able to kill her, not now that she's prepared. Could be they're putting off dealing with it."

"And she could be dead," Jessy said. "Everyone's convinced she's still alive, but you said it yourself, she was stabbed and then hit by Beatrice with a car. Besides, I'm betting that the Invictus don't give two shits what Athalia thinks, aren't afraid of her, and fully expect you to kill her daughter if the situation presents itself."

Lot of ifs, lot of unknowns. This was the difference between reality, and the cute little plans he used to make for himself, his safe plans about where his old life was going to take him. Now every night was an unknown, every night was an adventure! Except, unlike most people, Jack was familiar

with many logical fallacies, including the survivorship bias fallacy. Adventure sounded great because you heard about it from the survivors. Adventure would be known as a minefield of death and trauma, if the overwhelmingly larger number of victims were ever given chance to voice their experiences. But the dead can't speak.

The Gangrel shrugged, switched which leg was folded over which, and snapped her fingers. "Either way, we keep each other covered now. Buddy system for all movement, except small trips in the center of Invictus territory of course; we're not joined at the hip."

The Mekhet, predictably, groaned. "That's dropped our freedom to go solo from... the entire city, to a quarter square mile."

"Yeah," she said. "But that's enough room we can still live private lives, right? I mean I know the Cathedral is a ways out, but you shouldn't go there without Maria anymore anyway, not till these hunters are done. And that quarter square mile is in the dead center of the city. Elysium's there, Xnomina's there, hell Bloodlust is there. Oh, speaking of, you boys wanna go? We don't have to do that Avery trip thing till Jack's vacation is over. Could be a nice chance for us to bond."

Were she human, Jack would have found her suggestion a blatant attempt at getting drunk.

"How can you like it there?" he said. "The music alone—"

"Fuck me, man, you don't go to a nightclub for the music. You go to a nightclub for the people. Slip into a booth with a cute guy or girl, be flirtatious, aggressive, but not overbearing or—"

"Yeah, I know. Antoinette's been showing me how to... bag chicks, I guess?" To speak in a language she would understand. "Not that I'd sleep with them. She'd kill me."

"Right right, you two are all lovey dovey with each other. Ugh, bleh." She stuck out her tongue, as if romance were swiss chard, before she looked at Damien. "How about you? Rumor has it the priest has never known the touch of a woman." The animal got up, and slid onto the couch between the two men as she raised an arm up to rest it around Damien's neck. Poor guy was now trapped in her hug. "You have no idea how much playing hard to get can turn on a girl on. We should get you a... a uh, that white collar thing priests wear."

"... a clergy collar," he said.

"Yeah! Girls will be lining up to bag you at just the sight of you."

"Didn't you just tell Jack that I should be flirtatious and aggressive if I want too—"

"Dude, no, you're not getting it. With the priest setup, they come to you, like flies to honey."

And just like that, it sounded like Jessy had a new goal. Get Damien laid.

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He still had two hours before sunrise. He'd prefer to spend at least one of that with Antoinette, but his fingers dialed a driver, and he set off toward Julius's mansion. Damien came with. Vampires were on the buddy system now when leaving the safer areas of the city; which made taking Damien a funny irony that had Jack smirking. Damien smirked too, on more than one occasion. Maybe his new life as a right hand of the Invictus was agreeing with the assassin? Or at least, a score better than hiding in the city bowels for half a century.

"Visiting one of the council, after he's given us orders? Highly unusual," Damien said.

"Thought you could use a moment away from Jessy."

"... thank you. But, honestly, I know she's only trying to help me, and that's a welcome change."

The two of them were looking out their respective windows, elbows on the door armrest, chins in their palms. An occasional glance at each other to let the other know they were listening, complete with a small smile or nod. Two introverts communicating. All they needed now was Natasha nodding along and they'd be the smoothest trio of little nods ever.

"She is trying, I guess," Jack said. "You ever been to Bloodlust? I don't like it much there either, but it really is a prime place for getting an easy meal."

"It is frustrating, being a Kindred of the Lancea et Sanctum, taught to steer kine away from sin, and then throwing myself into the center of it for my own needs."

"I thought the deal with your religion was it's the kine who needs to not be sinful, and that Kindred were under no such rules?"

"... yes, that is true. But, certain dogma is difficult to toss aside. And I would prefer to not encourage sinful ways in kine anyway."

Jack shrugged, and tapped the armrest with his fingertip a few times. "Dolareido is Slut City, right? Adultery is rampant. But we have a low homicide rate, low assault rate, low... most of the rates I'd be worried about, legally or religiously."

"Agreed."



“Then I suggest you stop sweating the minor stuff, and focus on the big stuff. There are still murderers, rapists, drug dealers peddling to minors, that sort of shit in Dolareido. I’m sure they could use a little fear of God in their lives, right?”

“A valid point. And I have been a bit... directionless, without Lucas’s shadow haunting me.”

What a horrific way to think of the man who sired you. Julias had been nothing but supportive, instructive, and open-minded with Jack, while Lucas had royally fucked this guy’s head up, to the point he was now paranoid every action he performed was tainted.

“I suggest going to Bloodlust, and giving Jessy’s idea a try,” Jack said. The poor guy groaned, and Jack laughed as he reached across the car backseat to poke the man in the shoulder. “Jessy wasn’t lying, about the hard to get thing. Just sit there, look interesting, maybe look slightly out of place or unique, or even churchy, and some girl’s bound to take an interest.”

“... I could do that, I suppose.”

“Or hell, you can try and get Clara interested in you instead of me.”

“Yes, I noticed at the ball that she seems attracted to you. And as an Uratha, she is one of the few who could stand up to Antoinette. Or at least, not die instantly.”

Yeah, Antoinette was crazy strong and deadly when she wanted to be. Part of her charm, when instead of being the all powerful dragon of Dolareido, she was gentle, tender, and loving with him. But he doubted that she’d be so gentle in their next meeting. And that was exciting too; he couldn’t wait.

“Has she actively tried to sabotage your relationship?” Damien said.

“No. Just, made it very clear she likes me.”

“You have a habit of making people like you.”

“Somehow I don’t think I managed to do that with Angela. And I get the impression Garry doesn’t like me either.”

Damien nodded, and opened the car door as it stopped before Julias’s mansion. “He likes very few. But he’s also on your list, isn’t he? To be friends with.”

“Like trying to become friends with a very angry bulldog.”

The Mekhet laughed, or rather, chuckled louder than Damien normally ever did, and joined his side as the two of them walked up the grand walkway to Julias Mire’s massive abode. “Then you need to find bacon.”

Jack rolled his eyes, and knocked. Bacon was a halfway decent metaphor for getting some sort of treat for Garry, to get through that man's aggressive exterior, his utter hate for the Invictus, and what Jack had noticed was a general dislike for any sort of social posturing. Jack could appreciate that, but trying to sway him would require a lot more than an agreement on how annoying social machinations could be.

"Master Terry?" the doorman said.

"Yes, here to see my sire."

"Um, yes sir. He was not expecting you."

Jack shrugged, nodded, and followed the servant in, Damien behind him. "I felt this conversation was best done face-to-face, and with a little touch of surprise." Not that he could ever get Julias to be surprised, given the man's penchant for prediction, especially of Jack's actions. But he could try.

"Ha, yes, very good sir."

The three walked along one of the rustic hallways, until the servant opened the door to usher them into one of the mansion's many meeting rooms. Which was kind of weird, actually, considering Julias didn't usually—

Julias, Jennifer, and Beatrice all raised their heads as he stepped in. The three of them were sitting at a table, and playing poker, but for some reason Triss wasn't wearing her shoes, or her socks, or pants. A double take showed the Nosferatu was wearing nothing but a thong and a tank top. At least Julias and Jennifer were still clothed, other than suit jackets tossed aside, and Jennifer missing her shoes as well. She looked good in the skirt and white shirt though, especially with only the one button done so he could see her sternum, lack of bra, and inside contours of her large breasts. Damn she was sexy.

Damien stepped in, looked at three of them, and facepalmed. "Slut city," he whispered to Jack.

"I wasn't expecting you," Julias said, eyebrow raised. "Actually, I figured you'd be at the Prince's, enjoying your vacation." The man looked past Jack to the servant who let them in, frowned at him, and the kine hid a grin as he speed-walked away. Good relations with the boss, maybe?

"I wasn't expecting you to have company. Um, hello Jen, Triss."

"Hello little Ventrue." Jen grinned at him as she leaned onto her elbows, and set her chin onto the back of her hands. Flirtatious did not begin to describe the look she had in her eye. "And hello to you too Damien."

The Mekhet offered a slow nod. He wasn't as shy as Jack used to be, but the man was clearly uncomfortable with looking at Jen, and how her breasts were nearly hanging out. Beatrice's warrior ass in a thong didn't help either.

"God damn it Jack," Triss said, turned in her chair and elbow on its back. "Are you fucking Ventrue all experts at poker? This is fucking ridiculous. I can't get anywhere with these bastards."

He smirked at his sire, who returned the smirk. "I'm horrible at it. But, Julias is trying to teach me. I don't envy you, playing against him."

"Then maybe you and the Prince should play with us and take some of the heat off of me."

"Strip poker," he said, chuckling. They were playing strip poker. His sire, a hundred-year-old vampire, his lover, and his lover's friend, were playing strip poker. Hunters at the door, monsters and werewolves ready to turn the city upside down if it got in the way of their goals, the city nearly in a state of martial law for paranormals, and they were playing strip poker.

Part of him thought he should have been angry they weren't taking the threat more seriously. The threat had nearly killed him, killed Barry, and everything was going to cascade into a city version of a brushfire if they didn't keep it under control. And they were relaxing.

It was a good life lesson. Learn to relax every now and then, or the weight of everything was bound to crush you. At least he hoped that was the lesson.

"I wanted to talk about Angela," he said.

"Athalia's daughter." Triss got up, walked over to the couch in the very fancy, austere living room, grabbed her dark jeans, and slipped them on. Everyone in the room watched her force her toned, curvy, hard legs and ass into the jeans, but Jack noticed Jen staring a bit harder than the rest of them. Something happened there.

"Athalia mentioned you knew," he said.

"Yeah, Eric and I overheard when we were in that fucking nightmare world. How did you hear? I assume Julias told you."

"I had not, actually." Julias sighed, leaned back in his chair, and put the cards down. "I knew Athalia would tell him though."

Ah, yeah, that made sense. Man was good at predicting everything, damn it.

“Why didn’t you mention something during the meeting, sire? Or, you know, before I went to visit Azamel?” Maybe calling him sire was a bit too formal, considering the company. And maybe it was a bad question to ask, considering the company.

“Should we go?” Jennifer said, reading his mind.

Julias shook his head. “No, we’re all in this together, dealing with these hunters.”

Jen nodded, but when Triss sat down on the couch, she came over to join her, making room for Damien and Jack to sit down in their places at the table with the man of the mansion. It also got Jen closer to Triss, a lot closer, legs touching. Something had definitely happened; he could ask about it later. For now, he took a seat at the table, and Damien followed.

“She’s Athalia’s daughter,” Jack said again, “and everyone’s convinced she’s still alive, so I guess I should follow suit. And you guys... you didn’t see how that conversation with Athalia went tonight. She doesn’t want her daughter to die.”

“She doesn’t get a say in the matter.” His sire steeled his face, a subtle frown not unlike Viktor’s, and he leaned back in his chair as he netted his fingers together on his stomach. “Angela’s not only a hunter, she’s an adult. Spare her no mercy. Catch her unawares? Kill her. I didn’t give you a heads up because Athalia’s relation to or thoughts on the situation are irrelevant.”

He winced, and shivered. “You haven’t seen her, Julias. You haven’t seen what Athalia is... like, a fucking...” How could he get across that monster? “Like an angel of fucking death, Julias. And she... she can get anywhere she wants to go. If we kill her daughter, and she can’t handle it, she’s going to take it out on us.”

Triss clicked a claw against one of her crocodile teeth a couple times, loud enough for everyone to look her way. “Kid’s right. I’ve seen all four of the Begotten, seen what those monsters look like, and Athalia? She’s... like an angry dead god climbing out of a grave.”

Jack nodded. That was as good a description as any. He could see it too, the enormous bones pulling the colossal skeleton torso out of the ground, leaving its legs behind. It didn’t need them.

“Jeremiah stood his ground against them, and he’s human.” Julias did not look convinced.

“... Angela didn’t feel entirely human.” Sighing, Jack looked down at the table, and scratched his fingers along his scalp a few times. “I’m guessing Jeremiah is similar. Azamel thinks so too. Angela... she felt like something more than human.”

“I’m less worried about Athalia though,” Triss said, “than I am Azamel. Did you see her Jack?”

He twitched, and looked at Triss. She looked spooked. He must have looked terrified then, in comparison.

“Yeah... she was there... The meeting we had was in the nightmare.”

“Then I don’t envy you. I only got a glimpse of her monster, or horror or whatever, and... fucking hell.”

“Then the question,” Damien said, “if Azamel is our biggest concern, is if she’ll go on the rampage for Athalia, if and when we kill Angela.”

Jennifer raised a hand. “Um, correct me if I’m missing something, but aren’t a bunch of you friends with Fiona? Why not convince her to help you?”

Jack, Triss, and Damien all winced.

“I... I’ll... talk to her,” Jack said. “Just... we—”

“Fiona is probably the nicest person in the city,” Damien said. “We don’t want to throw her under the bus.”

“I remember when you brought her before the Primogen, Jack,” Julias said. “And she did seem like a nice girl, a very nice girl. But, Jennifer’s right. We need a way to deal with these Begotten that doesn’t result in a repeat of last time, but we can’t let Angela live if we get the chance to kill her.” The strongest Ventrue in Dolareido leaned forward, set his elbows on the table, and looked at Jack and Damien with harder eyes than Jack was used to. “I trust you two and Jessy to handle the situation as you see fit, but you Jack, are to do everything you can to keep the peace between Begotten, Kindred, and Uratha. Understood?”

“Understood.” If there was one way he was going to die... well, this dilemma had a million ways to get him killed. One was bound to get him.