

~~Jack~~

Oh fucking shit.

He stared up at Antoinette, and how she dangled over Mary's claws, bent backward like a corpse stuck on a pike, skewered up the back. Sabrina's knife had been unbelievably painful, like fire, somehow made of ice, slicing through flesh like a fucking lightsaber. But Mary's claws looked a thousand times worse, and they held Antoinette up over Mary's head, ready to pull her in half. Or cut her in half.

But Jacob wasn't that much of an asshole. Anyone else would have been, considering Antoinette had been about to kill him. But for some reason, the fucker about to destroy the world, wanted them alive to see it. To rub it in their faces when it worked? If it did, life and death wouldn't be a thing anymore, and everyone, alive or dead, would be together anyway. Maybe it'd take a while for it to happen? Maybe Jacob wasn't entirely convinced it'd be that simple?

Or maybe, he just didn't want them to have to die first. Dying sucked. Jack could attest to that. And Jacob had saved them on a couple occasions, for absolutely no other reason, than what he'd said. He liked Jack, and the rest of them.

"Please," Jack said, "don't... don't hurt her."

Mary looked at him, eyes twisting down on the outer corners with almost cartoony exaggeration. She was tormented by what she was being forced to do.

"I'm trying not to! B-But Black Blood, he's... controlling... me..." The ghost looked down, body shivering. And Antoinette, still hanging over her, body limp and paralyzed, managed to turn her head enough to look to Jack. A tiny hint of shame showed through, and Jack returned the same. They'd failed.

Jacob waved a hand, and the distorting invisible walls disappeared, allowing everyone to see what was what again. Elders didn't like showing their strongest powers. They were better off as secrets, to be used on people that wouldn't live to talk about them. People knew masters of Obfuscate could do some really weird shit with distorting reality, if they had the chance to soak an area with their blood, but Jack had never considered something as extreme as invisible walls that warped perception, like some really fucked up mirror maze. That, was a scary thing to get trapped in, and Antoinette had still managed to beat him.

With a hissing whimper, Mary's ghost hovered over to the edge of the circle of standing stones, by the red barrier. With a little more force than was necessary, no doubt at Black Blood's silent command, she threw Antoinette through the barrier, and Sándor, eyes as stoic as ever, caught her with his one good arm, and bit down his need to grunt in pain. His body was still fucked up, too.

Slowly, Jack set his one eye on Elaine, and stared at her as hard as he could. She met his gaze for a moment before looking away, and rubbing her arm where Daniel had managed to nearly cut it off.

Sure enough, Daniel emerged, on the outside of the barrier. Soaked head to toe in not only the blood of the crazy flesh tunnel they'd come through, but also Mark's blood, the Mekhet limped around the barrier until he came to stand beside Sándor and Beatrice. He helped the gargoyle with the Prince, and they set her down on her feet. She tried to stand, but fumbled, and Daniel slipped under her arm to help her.

Jack looked to the crowd, and they all looked to him. No one had to say it. It was plastered on their faces. They'd failed, and now Jacob was going to start the apocalypse.

Snarling, Jack pulled against the invisible chains holding him. He pulled harder, and harder. He pulled until he felt his vitae pulse in his body and his bones threaten to break. But the ritual circle was made with his own blood, and he didn't need to be an ancient dragon of the Ordo Dracul to guess that meant it was unbreakable to him.

"Shame Mark died," Jacob said, one hand clutched to the side of his fucked up throat. "I suppose the lot of you thought he was gross? Which, I mean, he kinda was, but that was his Horror's fault, not him. The guy was loyal to Azamel, and has lost other people, too." Before Jack or anyone else could call him out, Jacob threw up a hand and shook his head. "Never mind. I'm wasting my breath."

"You okay?" Jack's mom came up to Jacob and peeked at his neck. Exposed flesh showed some Kindred blood pulsing within.

"I'll be fine. I have to finish this ritual, and it's going to take a bit."

"And... and Mary?"

"I am truly sorry," Black Blood said, and he weaved a finger over Mary's ghost. The chains that bound her reappeared, coiled around her, and the ghost settled back on the wet stone floor. "My options were limited."

"I gotta admit," the old Nosferatu said as he clucked his tongue once as he looked through the red barrier at the watching crowd, "you almost had me, old friend."

Antoinette sneered, but she didn't have the energy to put the ice cold glare in it Jack would have expected. Mary's claws had really, really fucked her up.

Sam leaned in and nudged her cheek against Jacob's shoulder.

"You—"

"Go. I'll be fine." He returned the lean to give her a quick kiss on the cheek again before nodding toward Mary's ghost.

Jack's mom watched Jacob for a few seconds longer than she needed too. He recognized that look. It was the look she gave his dad when she was worried about him, when he tried to do the manly thing and not talk about how much he was hurting about whatever. But Mary's sniffles called her, and her mom settled down in the shallow water beside her.

She got on her knees and set Mary's head on her legs, before peeking back up to Jacob's back as the man worked, and then to Jack. Something had changed. Her expression, her body language, the way she looked at Jacob's back as she ran her fingers through Mary's hair. Mary had whispered something to her earlier, but in all the chaos, Jack didn't have a fucking clue what. Their mom had mentioned their dad to Mary's ghost, so maybe something to do with him?

To everyone watching, it probably looked like his mom had betrayed them, had become Jacob's partner in crime, and doomed them all to Armageddon. Jack knew better. His mom was a lot of things, willful and determined, and soft and loving, but she was not a quick thinker. She didn't understand what was happening, the scale of things, what Jacob and Black Blood were actually about to do, what it meant for everyone and everything. She just wanted everyone to be together, and Jacob, a man she loved, was giving her a way to make that happen. She'd had maybe five hours to wrap her mind around the fucking insanity of it all, and he knew his mom, it'd take her a lot longer than that to process what was happening.

He couldn't hate her for that. He could be super pissed at her, like he'd been a thousand times before for her god damn fucking stupidity and utter inability to use her god damn head. But not hate her.

Jack took a deep, useless breath, hardened his gaze on his mother, and channeled that frustration until he could stomach the shittiness of what he was about to do. No point in trying to Dominate Jacob, or Elaine. It'd take way too long to Dominate one, and the other would intervene, and that was assuming it was even possible, tired as was. He couldn't even try it on Black Blood or Mary's ghost, and Mark was dead. He had one option.

She looked at him. A moment of eye contact was all he needed. He reached out for his mom's mind, and... got absolutely nowhere. He frowned down at the ritual circle, and tried again. But got nowhere. The ritual circle was blocking him.

He reached down for the cellar in his mind, the chains he'd summoned to hold down the curse, and tried to undo them. It didn't work. It was like he was wearing the necklace again. His Beast was out of his reach.

He snapped his glare to Elaine, and she nodded slowly, reading his thoughts and confirming. She was an Architect of Terror, a dragon who'd studied the Beast and how to manipulate it for literal centuries. It was her ritual circle, and he knew just how she'd made it.

"Black Blood," Jacob said. "Do the ritual now. I still need time, and I don't want that Strix curse to be a problem in the new world. Who knows what sort of shit it'll be able to do when the barriers are all gone."

As Elaine approached Jack, her hint of a grin faded, replaced with something heavy and somber as she looked at him.

"So this is what you wanted my blood for?" Jack asked. "You put me through that other ritual to get some curse-infused blood or whatever, so you can get this ritual to work?"

"Indeed. Like this, you are bound, and the ritual can force the curse to respond. It would not be necessary if you cooperated." She frowned at him as she looked down, and checked the dozens of red symbols drawn into the floor, still pushing the black water away. Daniel had done a number on her, more than Jack had noticed before. Several stab wounds and gashes were on her back, and a few more in her stomach and legs. Her suit was a mess, and several of the gashes were deep enough to expose hints of bone. Ventrue were hard to damage without fire or crazy shit like werewolf claws, but Daniel had thoroughly hurt her with nothing more than a regular sword. She was in worse condition than Jacob.

"You'll excuse me if I don't exactly trust a god of the dead," Jack said.

"Then you understand little," Black Blood said, and chuckled as he set his white, burning gaze on him.

The giant loomed in closer, and reached out with one of his hands. The towering limb covered the air over Jack, huge palm of bone bigger than Jack's whole body, and it blocked out what little light came from the ceiling above. The maelstrom of ghosts overhead continued to howl and groan, but as the

giant god summoned whatever magic he was going to use, the other ghost weren't needed, or maybe he couldn't use them for this. They stayed where they were.

"Just relax," Elaine said, and she came in closer until she was standing only a foot in front of him, "and let Black Blood remove the curse."

"I..."

Elaine winked at him.

He eyed her, and did his best to run through the thousand possibilities of what that wink meant. And there was most definitely a thousand things. The fuck was she scheming?

He didn't get much longer to think about it. Black Blood's hand glowed with the same dark he'd used to summon his ghosts before, and while no ghosts came down to join him, the red lines of the ritual circle underneath Jack lit up like fire. A rush of invisible energy hit him, more crackling nothingness down deep in the bones that defied the senses. Beast instincts told him it was supernatural, but he doubted he'd need a Beast to pick up on that. It was the same sort of chill you felt when walking past a graveyard at night, and you just knew it was the sort of night to walk on the other side of the street. Times a million.

Everything faded away. The red barrier, his worried lover, Jacob etching more symbols into the standing stones, his mom and his sister's ghost, and Elaine staring him in the eye with an expression he couldn't quite place. All gone, replaced with the white brain zone he'd grown to loathe.

Jack looked at himself. Surprisingly not naked, and wearing a suit. Both eyes again, too. Not that stereoscopic vision meant much in an endless plane of mental metaphors his brain concocted to understand the weird, mystical, magical strangeness of what-the-fuck-ever.

The white plane didn't last. Black clouds cut in from everywhere, rumbling and heavy, until Jack had to cover his ears. More and more of them appeared, carried on winds that thankfully cut well above his head, but left him staring up at a hurricane.

For a second, Jack figured the fucker would descend from them like some angel of death. But, nope, Black Blood came up from the ground, and as he did, the white endless turned into black oblivion instead. Black water inched its way up Jack's feet until it stopped at his ankles, before it opened up into an enormous whirlpool in front of him. Naturally, the giant asshole came up out of it, a colossal black skeleton with a skull big enough to eat Jack in one bite. Up and up until his entire torso stuck out of the whirlpool, and his two hands rested on the black water around Jack.

This time, no great canyon separated them. And that was terrifying.

“Where is the curse?” Black Blood asked.

Jack snarled.

Sighing, Black Blood shook his head. “I am not your enemy.”

“Says you.”

The god of the dead chuckled and gestured around at nothing.

“You are so utterly convinced, after everything that’s happened?” In a one-on-one, the weird, alien, harsh and guttural accent was even more scary. Jack kind of missed the Southern accent.

“I’m convinced you’re willing to do whatever it takes to achieve your dream.”

“And the times I saved your life?”

Jack ground his teeth. “Just because you’re not as bad as you seem, doesn’t mean you’re in the clear to break the world.”

Unfortunately, time passed slowly in the weird brain space. If Black Blood wanted to spend the next twenty minutes giving a speech, he could.

“Where is the curse?” he asked again. Apparently he didn’t intend to give another rant about his godly, unknowable intentions.

“Locked up.”

Black Blood tilted his skull to the side. “Without your necklace to help you?”

“Yeah. Imagine that.”

“Impressive. Now, bring us to it.”

“No.”

The god of corpses laughed. “Elaine’s ritual gives me the power to force the situation, little vampire.” And with a wave of his hand, Black Blood made that blatant. The endless black that penetrated and permeated Jack’s brain shot away, except it wasn’t the environment that moved away from them a hundred miles an hour, it was Jack and Black Blood. No momentum or inertia, but Jack still fell over as his eyes told him he damn well should have, with how fast everything ripped aside.

A forest replaced his surroundings, dark and creepy, with the quiet chirping of insects in the background. A moon overhead lit the forest, but it was weak, just like the lighting in the Great Below. A harsh breeze cut along every so often, and each time it brought a howl with it, no doubt finding some trees to funnel through to create the eerie noise.

Behind Jack, was the abandoned cabin, the one he'd locked the curse under.

"I believe I have seen this movie," Black Blood said. His giant skeleton torso still stuck out from a big black whirlpool, except now it was in the middle of Jack's memory, in front of him and not too far from the old cabin. Somehow, the black ooze didn't so much as touch or interact with the forest as it overlaid it, kind of like how the Begotten and their Horrors looked when doing their monster stuff outside the dream world.

"You've seen—Jacob."

"He adores this movie." Black Blood laughed, and gestured to the cabin. "You used the memory to lock up the curse. Most impressive."

Ah shit. It was so much easier to think of Jacob as some sort of big, soulless enemy to beat, than as a dude who watched movies. Good movies, evidently.

"Yeah well, the Ripper killed two people and he was going to kill more. I wouldn't let him."

"Then be happy I am removing it." Sighing, Black Blood shook his head and gestured to Jack with a hand, snaking it between the large forest trees to do it. "If you had let me take the curse from you, all those months ago, no one—"

"Would have died? Yeah, and you'd have another tool to bring about your utopia. Gonna use it to rule?"

"There will be nothing to rule, when all are together in all ways."

"You sound like a brainwashed cult member."

"And you are an ignorant insect. What use is there in convincing you." Black Blood leaned in closer, until his black teeth were within punching distance. "Go, release the curse from its prison. I will extract it, and you will be eternally grateful."

"Fuck you."

"I. Said. Go."

"F—"

Black Blood's hand snapped out, and grabbed Jack. Cold and brutal, the bones of the god of the dead squeezed on him, and Jack froze; not that he could move if he wanted to. Black Blood, or Mictawhatever, stared at him with dots of white flame in his eye sockets, and he squeezed harder, forcing Jack to groan as the bastard compressed his ribcage and lungs.

“Elaine’s ritual was drawn with your vitae, and vitae infused with the curse’s vitae. It allows me full access to your mind, vampire. You could fight me, and resist me, but all it would do is force me to rip your conscious mind into ribbons to reach my goal.” He came in closer, until his teeth were almost hitting Jack’s face. “I do not know how such damage to your mind will affect you in the new world. There are many unknowns. Your mother would prefer you intact to see it, as would Jacob.”

Jack tried to say something, but Black Blood didn’t ease up. The giant skeleton squeezed harder again, and Jack gargled on the few drops of air left in his metaphorical lungs. Metaphors could, apparently, be very painful.

“Now, go, and bring me my new prisoner.” Black Blood tossed him back, and Jack crashed into the front door behind him.

The door swung open, and Jack rolled through the dirty old cabin, before hitting the rug and sliding it across the shitty wooden floor. Eventually he came to a stop, lying on his back, and he stared up at the ceiling as his groaned. He was screwed.

Sighing, he looked over to the cellar door, where the curse still was. The door pushed up from the floor half a dozen inches so the Ripper bulged underneath it, trying to break the chains that held the old wooden door down. Jack had to let him out. He didn’t want to, but he had to.

Christ, they really had failed.

Jack got up, and stood in the doorway of the cabin. “Gimme a minute,” he said to Black Blood.

Black Blood rumbled, but said nothing as he nodded. Okay, Jack had a minute.

He closed the door to the cabin, and squatted down in front of the cellar door.

“I imagine you’ve seen everything that’s happened?” Since the real world was moving at a fraction of speed as the craziness going on in his head, now was a decent time for a little chat, before the end.

The Ripper let out a rumble of his own, all too similar to Black Blood’s. Some of his shadowy tentacles reached out from under the cellar door, and they could have grabbed Jack, but it was all a metaphor. Jack was safe until the door’s chains were broken, or undone.

“You failed,” the Ripper said.

“Yeah, apparently. Didn’t expect the red barrier.” Jack threw up his hands. “We didn’t expect any of this! The trap. Sabrina. The fucking red barrier, or Black Blood being able to touch ghosts, or this fucking ritual circle I’m trapped in.”



“Pathetic.”

“Oh shut the fuck up. Don’t act like you could have done better. This fucking ritual”—he gestured to the cabin’s front door and the giant death god waiting on the other side of it—“is locking you down just as much as it is me.”

A heavy rumble from the cellar door was all the confirmation Jack needed.

“You screwed up,” the Ripper said, “trusting Elaine and letting her draw your blood. Our blood.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think that. Except…”

“Except what?”

“She winked at me.”

The giant creature trapped in the cellar laughed. “She winks at you all the time, dumbass.”

“This was different. She was trying to tell me something.”

“Something like ‘ha, I win!’?”

Jack threw the giant creature of smoke a glare. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“What sort of useless, idiotic question is that?”

“I want to know, what your problem is! Why, in the ever living fuck, do you want everyone to suffer? I don’t care who are you, what you are, where you came from, any of it. No one, nothing, wants other people to suffer, just for suffering’s sake.”

The creature laughed. “You have no idea how satisfying it is, how much it completes me, to—”

“I don’t buy it. No one just, gets off, on being a fucking psycho killer. Except, you know, psycho killers. But I’m not a psycho killer, I know that, and whatever you are, you might be some sort of manifestation of my inner desires. And for some fucking reason, that also includes visceral murder? No. That’s not right. I’m not like that.”

The Ripper let out a slow, deep rumble.

“No, I guess you’re not.”

Holy shit, that almost sounded contemplative.

“I can’t even begin to imagine what sort of person Susanna was, to want something like you inside her,” Jack said.

“A tortured soul.”

“Aren’t we all?”

The Ripper laughed. “You don’t know torture. You think what Jeremiah and Angela did to you was bad? Or all the times the Uratha have hurt you? Or fire? You don’t know pain, stupid kid, until you’ve been betrayed by the people you love most. And when that happens, every bit of empathy you have is burned away. All that’s left is resentment, for everything and everyone.” Another chuckle. “A perfect fit for the Strix, who have nothing left but hate and resentment for life, and for the Kindred who tried to rejoin it.”

Jack groaned, and sat down beside the cellar door. “I thought you didn’t know anything about them?”

“I don’t. Just... faint traces of hate. Susanna thrived on it, and quickly found life was more enjoyable as a monster. No guilt, no shame, no empathy, just pure indulgence in power in all its manifestations. Murder and rape and everything between.”

“And that’s what you wanted of me? I’m not Susanna.”

“No,” the Ripper said, voice again soft, and contemplative, “I suppose you’re not.”

“I still have empathy.”

“I suppose you do.”

“And I’m never letting go of it,” Jack said. “I don’t care what you do. I don’t care what happens to me. I don’t care what happened to Susanna. I’m never going to become a heartless monster, Ripper. I’ll die before I do. I’ll kill myself before I do.”

Another rumble from the cellar.

“I thought, with time, I could take over your body. I... never thought you’d actually be so stupid as to kill yourself than just let me have my way.” Some of the curse’s animal eyes looked at him from under the cellar door. “I’m not so stupid to realize I can’t suppress you forever. If you’re willing to kill yourself to stop me, that’s... that’s will I can’t break, not completely.”

Jack smiled. “That a compliment?”

The Ripper laughed, a twisted and disturbing sound. “I am bound to a host so utterly pathetic, he can’t let go of his humanity. Viktor is a thousand times the vampire you were.”

“Yeah, well, he also went borderline insane and made stupid decisions that got him killed. We all thought it was because of his last torpor fucking with his mind, but I’m betting the curse in him was getting closer to breaking free, and it was turning him into a psycho.”

“Maybe,” the Ripper said. “But I cannot stop until I have it, Jack. I can’t stop until I get to experience that... that rush. You’d understand if you just gave in. The feel of power, utter power so complete and whole, you realize everyone around you is nothing more than a sack of meat to murder, fuck, feast on, and toss aside. Total freedom.”

Jack did not like the order he described those actions.

“I thought you were some sort of amplification of my Id, but I guess not. More like, you’re...”

“A manifestation of Strix desires.”

“Whatever that means.”

“Whatever that means,” the Ripper said, mirroring his tone. Some of the beaks and snouts inside the shadows nodded. “It doesn’t matter. All I know is, I can’t stop. I won’t stop. I tried to work with you at first, Jack, to get you to ride with me, like Susanna did with her curse. But you refuse.”

“Yeap,” Jack said. “Sorry.”

“There is no reconciling this disagreement between us.”

“Probably not. Sounds like it’s pretty existential for you to abandon all humanity and become a murdering monster.”

“Sounds like you’re a vampire that refuses to embrace what a vampire could be. What I... what the curse, wants my host to be.”

Jack coughed on a laugh as he looked down between his legs. “We’re never going to get along. This dance is going to keep going until we’re dead.” It was more than true. It was inevitable. If they somehow managed to stop Jacob and Black Blood — not happening — then he was going to kill himself, unless someone pulled a miracle cure out of their ass. He wasn’t going to let anyone else die because of the curse.

The Ripper groaned annoyance. They could hear each other’s thoughts, of course.

“I have no intention of bowing down,” the Ripper said, “not to you, and especially not to some death god relic no one cares about anymore.”

Jack laughed again. He couldn’t help it. Everything just gets kind of funny when you’re staring down the barrel of an apocalypse.

“So I gathered,” Jack said. “We’re at an impasse. The only option left is mutually assured destruction, I guess.”

“You’re the one that doesn’t want to die. You’re the one afraid of death.”

Jack blinked, and looked at the creature trapped in the basement.

“You’re not?”

“It doesn’t matter. We are bound in this ritual, and because you were stupid enough to trust Elaine, the ritual is strong enough to bind me.”

“Well, we got a bit before Black Blood rips this cabin open and makes me open the cellar. So tell me, Mister Big Bad Curse, you’re not afraid of death?”

“I’m not afraid of death.”

“Uh huh,” Jack said, making sure the sarcasm was absolutely dripping. “You were panicking when I had a sword against our throat.”

“It’s not the same. I’m afraid of spending a thousand years forced to be bound to a useless piss ant like you. And I’m afraid of my existence ending, to a useless piss ant like you.”

Jack raised a brow. “That, specifically?”

“This is just another way that you, a weak vampire that will never amount to what Susanna was, is an unworthy vessel. Being afraid of death? Pathetic. The only death worth fearing is one in a bed, weak and old and frail, with no story told, no mark left, nothing but nothing.”

“We can’t grow old.”

“Dying to passivity is the same. Dying because a worm like you refuses to embrace the power and desires of a true monster, it sickens me, and terrifies me. I can’t stomach it.”

“I... I mean, I guess I’m kind of impressed. I expected you’d be a sniveling snake who’d do anything they could to avoid dying.” Jack laughed again and gestured to the monster. “The fuck are you? You’re like, a viking or spartan or something, except evil as hell.”

The Ripper snorted. “I would be the greatest force of destruction this world had ever known. And I would die happy, if I burned this whole world to the ground, and the flames took me with it.”

“Surprised you’re not on board with Black Blood then.”

Another snort. “The old god wants the opposite. He wants everything together, with everyone holding hands and singing Kumbaya for all eternity.”

“I uh, don’t think that’s exactly what he’s going for.”

“Close enough.”

Again, Jack laughed. He couldn't help himself.

"This is the first time we've ever talked like this."

"Yeah well, I hate you," the Ripper said. "Talking with you is pointless."

"And I hate you. There's no way we can keep existing together."

"Agreed."

"Then... we have nothing to lose." After a few seconds to think about it, a few seconds more to let out a long, annoyed groan, Jack got up, and squatted beside the cellar door again. "I really hate you, Ripper. People who didn't deserve to die, are dead, because of you. But at the same time, I'm thankful you helped when you did. I gotta admit, having the power to get revenge for Julias was great. Even beating Avery up when she deserved it, that was great. Even beating up Garry and Michael, that was great. So, as much as you've been a huge thorn in my side, and have caused a lot of people a lot of pain, you've also helped a lot."

He expected the Ripper to laugh at him, but instead, he got an acknowledging grunt.

"You're weak, pussy bitch, Jack, and it infuriates me so much because you're strong, too. Killing Viktor and Tony? Stopping Damien and killing Lucas? Cutting off your hands to escape Angela? You did that yourself, you stupid fucking little shit. You have will. If you'd just let me in, we could have fucked this world into submission."

Jack laughed again and rubbed his head. "Yeah, I guess we could have. Ah well."

The Ripper eyed him with a half dozen eyes. "Why does it sound like you're about to suggest a plan?"

"Because I can't stop thinking about that wink Elaine gave me. She was trying to tell me something."

"If it was Viktor or Tony, they'd have just winked at you to make you angry. She's won. She and Jacob and—"

Jack slammed his hand down against the cellar door. "We're not having this conversation. I'm not going to sit here and try to convince you not everyone is the sick monster you are. It doesn't matter. We either submit, and Black Blood turns you into his bitch toy before Jacob merges all the realms into soup. Or... we do the only thing we can do. Resist. Fight."

The Ripper chuckled, louder this time, enough the vibration pulsed through the floor. "You say that like I wouldn't have done that in the first place."

“Yeah but you’d fight like a mad dog, and I need something better. Smarter. Something’s going to happen, or has already happened, or—fuck me I don’t know. I’m saying, keep your eyes and ears open as Black Blood starts to, uh, remove you. Don’t waste your energy until you see a good opportunity to strike.”

“You really trust Elaine? She’s committed diablerie. Amaranth. On her own childe. She’s more a monster than you rea—”

“And she’s had hundreds of years of guilt ripping her up over it. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s half willing to help Jacob and Black Blood, just to alleviate her guilt.”

“Then—”

“But she’s more willing to... to help me. She wants to help me, more than she wants to undo whatever horrible shit she’s done in the past.”

“And you believe this, why?”

“Because I’ve talked with her, hung out with her, saw into her eyes. You might not think an elder can have humanity, but I know different. Antoinette wouldn’t be close friends with her, otherwise. And you damn well know Antoinette is smart. You can hate her all you want, but you know it’s true.”

The Ripper let out a rumbling sigh that sounded a little too close to Jack’s.

“So the plan is... to let Black Blood do what he wants, but look for an opportunity to fight back?”

“I guess. Got a better one?”

“No, I don’t.” Another grumble.

“Like I said, you got two choices. Either—”

“Submit or fight. If those are my choices, then it is no choice at all. At least if we stop Black Blood’s ritual, you and I can have one last fight for control. And... And I suppose, that is a fight worth having.”

“That’s probably the best compliment you’re capable of giving, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you. Release me.”

Grinning, Jack reached out, and the key appeared in his hand. The joys of metaphors. He slipped the key in the lock, and let the curse out.

The memory disappeared. The old cabin in the woods, the woods, it all vanished into mist that faded away, until all that was left was Jack and the Ripper, standing before Black Blood, still inside

Jack's mind. Back in the murky, shallow black water, and back underneath the rolling dark clouds, endless and in all directions.

Now or never.

"You took your time," Black Blood said. "Be happy I am in a good mood."

Jack smirked up at the fucker. "Figured you'd be upset. Antoinette and Daniel almost ruined everything for you."

"They used the flesh witch to bypass my barrier. Impressive. But I could have summoned Mary's ghost to aid me sooner, if necessary."

"Oh?" Jack asked. He didn't believe it. Black Blood looked drained as fuck after opening the tear. Using Mary when he did had been an act of desperation, and now the old god was trying to make it seem like it was casual and easy. Hopefully.

"Indeed. And the other remnants I have summoned, I could have bound and sent them to fight in my stead. I have been prepared to do so, in case Elaine decided to attack Jacob."

"Wait, what?"

"Only a fool trusts another blindly. But, Elaine has proven committed. This ritual is successful, and I will rip this Strix curse from your mind and bind it. Another tool in my repertoire."

Jack ground his teeth as he glared. Elaine, please, don't be the villain the Ripper thinks you are.

"Now," Black Blood said, turning his skull to face the curse, "you will bow and submit."

The curse and the Beast it possessed let out a heavy snarl. "Fuck you."

Black Blood laughed, harsh accent vanishing under the sound of merriment. But then he ruined it. He snapped out his hand and straightened out his torso, all with enough speed both Jack and the Ripper were struck silent. The god of corpses may have been a limited, weakened thing in the real world, but in Jack's head, he was very much a god.

Black Blood's outstretched hand hovered over the curse. The Ripper, or the curse, or the Beast, or however their strange entanglement worked, was a huge creature, a giant ball of smoke and tendrils, claws and talons, feathers and fur, beaks and snouts, and lots of animal eyes. A perfect metaphor for the darkness in all Kindred, that prided itself on its ability to adapt to its environment. From living in a forest and hunting villagers at night, to living in the middle of a populated city and becoming a political figurehead, vampires were the kings and queens of living as wolves among sheep.

Jack stared on, unable to do anything, not even able to reach out and engage Black Blood in a battle of wills. Something was blocking him. The ritual? Or maybe the fact Black Blood was a literal god — whatever the hell that meant — and not an individual with a human mind? All Jack could do was watch, as black ooze dripped from his palm down onto the Ripper. The strange liquid twisted and turned, like living snakes, all too similar to how the Ripper protected Jack's body with Kindred blood when fighting. Except now, the Ripper was helpless to do anything but snarl and roar as the black snakes coiled around him.

Please, Elaine.

The snakes tightened around the giant cloud of black mist, and the Ripper choked on a snarl as they constricted.

“Striges,” Black Blood said, eyes focused on the Ripper as more and more black snakes dripped out of his palm, “are nothing more than shadows of history. Vermin, that slipped through the cracks of the realms, forever doomed to loathe the vampire for abandoning them and their cause. You are even more forgotten than I, and useless in all regards. We have no use for the Strix in the new world. You would be nothing more than thorns in the sides of those of us who try and embrace unity.”

“Fuck... you...” More snarls and hisses, but with each second, the giant, curse-tainted Beast became more and more bound in the black coils.

Black Blood chuckled again, and reached out his other hand, palm facing down. This one emitted a black glow, and buried the Ripper in black light; how black light worked, Jack didn't know, but his brain understood the metaphor just fine.

“You have power, though. Great power. But you are a curse of the Beast, and bound to it. You will be nothing but a slave once bound to something less autonomous. A necklace, perhaps? Or a knife?”

The Ripper pulsed inside the black coils. “Fuck. You.”

“Whatever Jacob and I choose, you will be discarded, once the abyss chasm has been crossed, and the final realms merged.” Nodding, Black Blood stood up straighter, legs still hidden inside his whirlpool, but more of his torso came out so he could loom higher and higher over the curse. His skull reached the swirling black clouds above, and he chuckled as the endless black ocean around them rippled. “Now, release your hold on the boy's Beast.”

The Ripper tried to make a sound, probably more curses, but nothing came out, not even a hiss or snarl.



“I said, release the boy!”

At first it'd looked like Black Blood was binding the curse, the same as he had Mary's ghost. But now, his other hand pulled something out of the Beast, up into the aura of his downward palm. Black smoke? Jack stared on, unable to look away as he felt the drain, straight down into his guts. Something was coming out of him. His eyes told him something was coming out of his Beast, but it felt like something was coming out of his insides, like someone was pulling a string out of his intestines. A memory flashed of a TV show he'd seen once, where surgeons removed a giant tapeworm out of someone's guts. It'd looked super satisfying, but probably also super painful if not for the drugs the patient was on.

He didn't have drugs. There was pain, enough to make him stumble back a bit and clutch his guts and heart. In the past, he'd have ranked the pain pretty high, but after the past few years, it wasn't all that bad. It was the weird sensation that had him reeling, the draining, as if someone had put a convenient hole in his side that let all the vitae pour out of him.

“Do not worry, Jack,” Black Blood said. “You will live. You have taken many wounds, and you are not capable of sustaining your vigor with such injuries on your own.”

“So I'm noticing.” He tried to stay standing, but it wasn't long before he fell on his ass. Energy, gone, like he'd just gotten hit by a super flu. Not a concern for a vampire, and he was damn happy for that, but all those memories of lying on his mom and dad's couch, puking into a bucket while watching Saturday morning cartoons came rushing back. He felt like shit.

It took time. People on the outside would probably only see a few minutes go by, but for Jack and everyone else in his skull, it was a lot longer. Black Blood weaved his fingers like a puppeteer, and every second more black smoke came out of the creature Jack knew as his Beast. With each passing moment, the Beast grew smaller, and smaller. It usually hovered around as a giant ball, almost touching the ground and reaching four or five times Jack's height. Now it kept shrinking down and down, until it was half of what it was. Less.

The black smoke beneath Black Blood's other palm, on the other hand, only grew larger. As Black Blood drew it out, his coil-weaving changed targets, and instead wrapped chains around the growing black smoke, chains similar to the ones he'd wrapped Mary in. He'd captured his target.

Jack's Beast, beneath Black Blood's left palm, was now a measly eight feet tall. The new creature, under Black Blood's right palm, was gigantic, as big as Jack's Beast used to be. An owl, made of shadow and smoke, and two glowing yellow eyes.

It squawked as it tried to escape the chains, and the smoky body showed hints of feathers, straining against the strange, ghostly bindings. Jack stared at it, before flicking his eyes between it and the Beast. The Beast, his Beast, didn't have a voice anymore. And it didn't have power, at least not the power of an elder snorting a mountain of cocaine like it did when the curse possessed it.

The shadowy owl and his Beast did share a lot of similarities. Both were made of black smoke and had feathers, but the curse's form was specific, and gargantuan, an owl big enough to pick up a car. Strix, and Kindred, were connected somehow. Black Blood said connected by history, so maybe a common ancestor? Did paranormal creatures evolve? Maybe there'd been some cataclysmic event involving magic and Crúac and stuff?

Jack looked beside him at his Beast again. It was the first time he'd ever gotten to see it without the curse; not that Kindred normally ever got to actually see it. It didn't say anything, didn't insult or quip or bullshit him, didn't do anything but hover there beside him, a bundle of Kindred aspects and hungers, with none of the intelligence. It was the creature that Jack would become if he ever became a draugr, mindless, concerned only with its next meal.

The huge owl, chained up and bound, looked to Jack, and they met eyes. Whatever the curse was, however it work, how it managed to get a personality and intelligence, how it managed to become the Ripper, Jack doubted he'd ever figure out. He doubted the Ripper really understood, either. But as they met eyes, it was obvious the shadowy owl still had that intelligence and personality. And, fucked up as it was, Jack knew that intelligence and personality was partly his own.

The Ripper hadn't been created in a vacuum. It was some sort of twisted, fucked up version of Jack. Jekyll meets Hyde. And, for some even more twisted, fucked up reason, he felt... parental.

"There are few differences between ghosts and striges, and many similarities," Black Blood said. "Reflections, beings of ephemera, undead, and more. It is no accident that Kindred are half dead, after all. Such interesting parallels."

Jack forced himself back up to his feet, fighting against shaky legs and a body that weighed a thousand pounds. Slowly, he walked toward the giant owl, dragging his feet every step.

"Sit down, vampire," Black Blood said. "Your role in this story is over."

Those words, it was like someone had just stabbed him in the back with fire. Heat and frustration pulsed through him, and he clenched his fists hard as he came closer and closer. If Black Blood wanted to stop him, he couldn't with one hand working on binding the Strix curse while the other continued to

draw it out of his trapped Beast. Two hands, both in use, a metaphor his mind spun up to show that Black Blood was too occupied to stop him.

Maybe if Jack had been a Gangrel, or more importantly, if Black Blood hadn't bound his Beast up in black coils, Jack could have summoned its strength to help him. But, nope, all Jack had was just Jack. A young guy with a stubborn streak a mile wide. He took another step and another, earning some annoyed snarls from Black Blood.

"You will do nothing but hurt yourself if you attempt to stop me, Jack Terry."

Jack ignored the god of death, and came closer, close enough he could reach out and touch the giant shadowy owl. The chains that bound it meant touching the owl would do nothing. But that didn't mean he couldn't touch the chains.

And one of the links in the chain looked different than the others. It was subtle, super tiny, but one of the links of the silvery ghost chain had a red mark on it. Jack squinted at it, bringing it into focus as best he could. He recognized the symbol. It was one of the symbols in the ritual his physical body was standing on. The ritual that currently had Jack trapped, the ritual made out of Jack's blood, drawn from him when the curse's vitae infused it, was affecting one of Black Blood's chains. Something about the ritual was affecting Black Blood then, and he didn't seem to notice. Maybe he couldn't.

"Black Blood," Jack said. "You're a god of the dead, right? Of corpses or death or whatever."

"My influence is far reaching, but yes." Well, at least the big bastard was willing to answer questions. Typical villain behavior, convinced he'd won so he was willing to spill some secrets. Jack couldn't blame him. Everyone that was a threat to him was accounted for, and currently sitting outside the red barrier. The only people who were even remotely a threat, were: Jack, bound in a ritual; Sam, far too weak to do anything; Mary's ghost, bound in a ghost chain; and Elaine, who Jacob was probably ready to squash into pulp the moment she so much as looked at him funny.

"You bound my sister's ghost like it was nothing. You grabbed her, like she was just a fly."

Black Blood snorted a chuckle. "I am a god of death and the dead, little vampire. She is a ghost."

Right, and he'd said the Strix were strangely connected to vampires, half-dead creatures, and were similar to ghosts. The fact there was some crossover was probably how Black Blood was able to extract the curse at all.

Jack had assumed that one time the curse had actually hit Black Blood, the last time they'd had a mind meld, it'd been because they were in Jack's mind. But, maybe there was more to it than that.

Maybe Black Blood was genuinely worried about the curse. Maybe, the curse was a genuine threat to him. And if Elaine knew that... Well, it wasn't like Jack had anything to lose.

"You almost let Jacob die. Antoinette almost got him."

"I was toying with the Prince, nothing more."

Jack smirked. "No, you weren't. You were tired. You would have forced Mary's ghost to help sooner, if you could have. You're exhausted. You're weak. You're not some limitless god of power. So... fuck you."

Before Black Blood could say anything, Jack reached out, and grabbed the chain. No pain. He'd expected pain, like grabbing an electric fence or something, but whatever Black Blood was doing, it had one purpose: binding the curse. It didn't care that Jack touched it.

"What are you doing?"

Jack smirked up at the big bastard again, before looking back into the eyes of the Ripper. No need for them to communicate, Jack knew what it wanted. It wanted to kick Black Blood's ass.

The symbol on the chain glowed. It reacted to him. Elaine, you sneaky bitch.

Jack took a deep, useless breath, and pulled apart with every ounce of effort he could find. All or nothing, everything came down to this.

He figured he'd have a pretty huge epic moment. Maybe some roaring and screaming as the chain resisted him. Maybe he'd have a Samson moment, resummon his lost strength and push down some big pillars, hopefully without the dying part. Maybe something out of an anime, where Jack would find the spark inside him to overcome any barrier, any obstacle, any resistance!

Nope. The moment Jack pulled the chain, the symbol on the one link flared, the link disappeared, and Jack was flung back by a big, invisible, explosive force. He landed on his ass hard, and tried to get up fast. Didn't work. He was fucking exhausted already, so he sat up instead, hands pushing down against the black shallow water, and watched the insanity unfold.

"What!?" Black Blood snapped his head back, but it was too late. The chains changed. Instead of the ghostly, silvery, dark chains Black Blood had spun to coil and trap the curse, they changed into dark red chains. An intimately familiar shade of red. Those, were chains made of Kindred blood.

The chains snapped out, still wrapping around the Strix curse, but also wrapping around Black Blood. One chain wrapped around the back of his skull. Another chain got the hand that'd been chaining the curse, and yanked it back behind Black Blood's shoulder. His hand sucking black smoke

out of the bound Beast got a chain, too, forcing the hand against Black Blood's chest, stopping his ritual.

The chains did more than that. They pulled the giant shadow owl straight toward him.

The curse, with chains behind it but no longer wrapping it, stuck out its giant black wings, and let out a paralyzing screech. Jack clutched his ears, but it didn't help. It was the sort of sound Mary made, a shriek you couldn't make with vocal cords. The sort of sound only something ephemeral could make, and only something that embodied death itself could make.

The giant owl slammed into Black Blood's face, and everything exploded. The world, Jack's bound Beast and the black ropes that bound it, the endless mindscape and its black water and clouds Black Blood filled it with, Black Blood himself, the curse, it all shattered and fell apart. He couldn't see. Everything was gone.

Jack fell on his ass. Again. In black water, again. The world crept back into view as he forced open his eyes. Eye. He groaned as pain ravaged him, pain the Ripper had been suppressing. The scar tissue, the barely formed layers of skin and muscle, all screamed at him to get blood in him and take a long torpor. The curse—

The curse was gone. The anger and rage, the extra personality whispering in his mind. The sickening desires. Gone. Jack clutched his chest and looked down at the ritual circle around him. It was gone, too, and no longer pushed out the black water. Deactivated, or completed? Either way, he was back in the real world.

He looked to his mom. She sat beside Mary's ghost, holding her, now that Mary was back in chains. Both of them were looking up. Elaine and Jacob were both looking up, too. Jacked looked to the red barrier. Same thing. Everyone beyond it was looking up.

The screeching noise yanked Jack's eye up as well. And just like everyone else, he froze, and stared.

A giant black owl was fighting Black Blood. No, fighting was the wrong word. The curse, the Ripper, whatever it was now, its black wings erupted out of Black Blood's right arm, followed by black smoke that exploded outward like someone had just opened a door or window to a house fire. And Black Blood slammed a hand down on the wings and smoke hard enough they again exploded, and disappeared. But before the skeleton could recover, black wings erupted from another piece of his bone, this time from his left shoulder. Again, the god of corpses slammed a hand against the invading

parasite, and ripped and tore at his own bones and black ooze, until the owl shrieked in agony and disappeared, only to reemerge somewhere else on Black Blood's body.

"Get out! Get out!" Black Blood roared, and the sound hit like a blast wave. If Jack hadn't already been on his ass, he would have fallen over as the black water around the giant god shot outward from him. Again and again, invisible pulses erupted from Black Blood, each followed by a grand boom.

"Black Blood, what the hell!?" Jacob jumped back to his feet, and put his book and knife on the table. Unfortunately for Jacob, the pulsing eruptions of Black Blood fighting off the curse parasite sent his table over, and a dozen artifacts fell. He paused long enough to glance to them, before looking down at Jack's mom, at Mary, still bound, then to Jack, and then finally, to Elaine.

"What. Did. You. Do?"

Elaine shrugged and gestured up to Black Blood.

"Why ask me? Your god of corpses is the one who failed."

The giant god raged and tore at his own body, but the curse refused to die. Its shadowy body emerged from the god's forehead, and it screamed until everyone was forced to cover their ears. Black Blood again raked at his own body, and dragged his claws across his bone face, shredding the shadow owl that fought to exist. Wings erupted from behind his shoulder, and he spun as he reached for it, sending giant splatters of the black ooze on his body outward, thick as sludge and heavy enough it caused the black water everywhere to splash violently from impact.

Jacob came closer to Black Blood and waved a hand up at him. "Destroy it, before you lose control of the ghosts!"

Lose control? Jack looked up, and gulped. The hurricane of ghosts were dispersing. The mutated, horrific creatures, with see-through bodies made of limbs in all sorts of strange combinations and permutations, spread out from their tightly wound circle. Slowly, as Black Blood fought against the parasite, more and more of the ghosts dispersed, some disappearing into the endless black, and others swirling around the gigantic pillars of bone before flowing away. No green lanterns. Ghosts down here didn't have them. Like blind animals, living in pure darkness and only capable of mindlessly roaming as they searched for a new meal, the ghosts floated away.

"Mom?" Mary said. She squirmed against her chains, but they held true for now. She hadn't been able to squirm at all seconds before. They were getting weaker.

"I don't know, baby. I don't know what's going on. I—"

“Malachi! Behind you!”

The old Nosferatu spun around, just as Elaine swung a knife at the back of his neck.

Jacob was ready for it. Somehow, even as the man stared up at Black Blood, obviously confused as all fuck, he spun around and smashed the back of his hand against Elaine’s face. He didn’t hold back. Ventrue were hard to hurt, and an elder like Elaine was very hard to hurt, but Jacob put enough fury and malice into the backhand that Jack felt it. A hard enough punch that Jacob screamed with it. Elaine fell, and the knife flew into the black water.

“After everything I’ve done for you!” Jacob stomped after her, and Elaine struggled to get back to her feet. “After everything I’ve sacrificed! After everything you’ve sacrificed! This is how you repay me!?” By the time she managed to get back to one foot and one knee, he drove a foot into her chest, and she flew back. Her body smashed into one of the standing stones, hard enough her head cracked against it. Her cheek and jaw already looked damaged from the backhand, and now Kindred blood splattered over the stone where her skull hit it. The standing stones were, apparently, a lot harder to knock over than anyone figured they’d be.

Jacob marched after her. The jokes, gone. The chaotic, random funny remarks, gone. This wasn’t the Jacob any of them knew. There was that one time Jack and Jacob were hanging out, when Avery and Clara had approached, and Avery had tried to make peace. Jacob had backhanded Clara so hard, a human would have been in the hospital for weeks. This was a hundreds time worse than that.

“Mom!” Mary said, not screaming, not even yelling. Just, talking, in the most Mary-like voice Jack had ever heard her use. “Stop him, please. Stop him. I don’t want this! I don’t want this!”

Their mom looked down at Mary, and clutched her tight as she looked into her empty black eyes.

“Baby, we can be—”

“No! No, it’s not right! Mom, it’s not right! He’s going to change everything for everyone, and... and... ruin things, for everyone.”

“But—”

“No! You’re wrong! You’re wrong! You’re wrong!”

“Mary...”

“I’m dead, Mom. You’re alive! You’re alive, and Jack’s alive! Be alive!”

Mary’s ghost, a bundle of ephemera and memories and a mountain of hate and destruction, said the words Jack struggled with. Just like old times, Mary didn’t have any problem saying the emotional

bits. The ghost wasn't Mary, but she was damn close, and Jack had been adamant about making her cross over. When Mary's ghost looked his way, he tried to hold eye contact, lasted half a second, and looked away. Fuck, he felt like shit.

If Jacob heard Mary, he didn't react. He couldn't have, not with how close he was to Black Blood now, and how loud the giant skeleton was as he ripped and tore at the curse fighting his body. The vampire continued his walk toward Elaine, and he yanked off his eye bandage as he did. Snarling loud enough everyone could hear it even over Black Blood, he tossed the bandage aside, and closed the distance to Elaine.

"I can tolerate a lot, Elaine. But a traitor? Fuck you. You can die here, and you better thank God itself that in the new world, when I find you again, I won't be able to kill you a second time."

Elaine wobbled as she pushed herself back up to her feet, back sliding up the stone pillar, the smallest grin on her face.

"I regret many of my decisions, Jacob. This is not one of them."

The only reason Jack heard her, over the insane roars of Black Blood, was how close he was now. He'd ignored his wounds, ignored how drained he was, ignored how fucked up it felt to have an ancient deadly curse pulled out of him, and had walked toward Jacob's back. After everything that'd happened, knowing Elaine had actually set shit up to fuck Black Blood over, to give them a chance? No way, no fucking way, he was going to let her die.

Elaine didn't even so much as glance Jack's way, knowing it'd give him up.

"It's pointless!" Jacob yelled. "It doesn't matter! Why—why am I wasting my time explaining this? It won't matter, once everything is together." He came up to her, and put a hand around her throat as he pulled back his other. Elaine grabbed his wrist, but she didn't have the strength to break his grip, not anymore. "No more speeches. I'm done playing games. Goodbye."

Before his other fist could turn her head into plaster, Jack grabbed the arm from behind and kicked the back of Jacob's right knee. Somehow, Jack found a sliver of strength he didn't think he had, some remnant of vitae, some tiny little bit that screamed out and told him to attack. Something angry.

It was enough. Jacob got halfway through the punch before his body collapsed, knee giving out. You didn't need to hit a knee very hard if you got it from behind. The punch went wide, his grip on Elaine's throat went wide too, and slid her to the side enough that Elaine managed to get out of the fist's path. It cracked the stone.



She threw herself at Jacob, eyes wide with the mania of a hungry vampire ready for a fight to the death. Unfortunately for Jack, he was still directly behind Jacob, and Elaine tackled him with far more strength than Jack could have guessed. The three of them hit the ground tumbling and rolling, and Jacob and Elaine locked hands like he had with Antoinette. They rolled closer and closer to the red barrier, and the overturned table near Mary and Jack's mom, making loud growling and hissing sounds every foot of the way.

Jack scrambled to his knees as fast as he could, only to find Jacob in a full mount over Elaine, straddling her waist and slowly pushing his fists down toward her. She had her hands up, each open and blocking Jacob's oncoming fists, but the man had given up trying to punch. He was trying to get his fists down to her face, so he could rip her head off.

"Jacob!" Antoinette's voice. The Prince slammed both hands against the barrier once, but it was enough to make a harsh impact sound, and force Jacob to look her way.

"Mom." Mary squirmed harder in her chains, and stared up at her mom with enough panic in her ghost eyes Jack felt his insides ache. Their mom was watching the violence, paralyzed, and it was breaking Mary. "Mom, please!"

"I... I don't—"

"None of you understand!" Jacob yelled. "And I'm sick of trying to explain it. I understand it. Black Blood understands it. And Samantha understands it. The rest of you can—"

His hand snapped out, out of Elaine's palm, and straight into Jack's face. So much for sneaking up beside him. The world went white as Jack flew back, and something in his face cracked. Pain followed, joining the merriment faster than he expected, and Jack rolled and bounced, and bounced, until a red glow hit him.

He was one foot away from crossing the red barrier.

Groaning, he touched his jaw. Mistake. Burning pain shot through the bone and into his skull, and he choked on a scream of agony. No time for pain, no time for misery. He got back up, and dragged himself toward Jacob again. A glance back showed Antoinette directly across the red barrier from him, looking at him, eyes wide. She wasn't even looking at Jacob or Elaine, or the raging Black Blood anymore. She was looking at him.

For a single moment, he thought about walking through the red barrier, to spend a few final moments with her. But some really big, stupid part of him told him to drag his ass back toward Jacob, and do whatever he could to stop the inevitable. He didn't know what Elaine hoped to accomplish by

fucking over Black Blood like this. Maybe her plan had backfired, or failed somewhere along the line. It didn't matter. He wasn't going to let his great grandsire get her head ripped off by Jacob, not after this. No way in Hell.

“All of you!” Jacob threw a glare at everyone beyond the barrier with his empty eye sockets, before getting back to the elder between his legs, and resumed violence. “I'll bring you all into the new world, alive or dead, even if I have to drag you as you kick and scream like idiot children.” He raised a hand, and punched straight down. Elaine tried to block it, but Jacob had raised his fist high enough it was basically a haymaker. It crushed her hand into her own face.

He didn't stop. He pounded into her, again and again, and she managed to block them, but each block was pitiful and weak. Elaine didn't cry out, didn't scream, didn't beg for mercy as Jacob broke bones, driving her blocking hands into her face. And when her eyes refused to open anymore, eye sockets crushed, she held up her forearms, and blocked as best she could as Jacob broke those as well.

“Stop,” Jack said through a broken jaw. “Stop, please. Stop it.” He was too far, way too far. Even if he'd been close enough to fight him, what could do he? The curse was gone, its power gone. He wouldn't be able to do a thing to the elder witch. Slow him down? For what? At best he'd stop Jacob long enough to get thrown through the red barrier and be forced to watch the world end on the sidelines.

It didn't matter. He had to stop this. He had to fix this. He kept going.

“Into the new world! No more life! No more death! No more pain, no more misery, no more—”

Jacob's head fell off.

Jack stopped and stared. If his jaw had worked, it would have dropped open. His one eye slowly slid from Jacob's headless body, to Jacob's head, as the eyeless thing fell harmlessly on Elaine's broken and battered forearms and head, and into the black water. His body fell over, half sideways and half forward onto Elaine, before it ignited into a puff of cinders.

Elaine managed a small squeak of surprise, and pushed the corpse off before it could burn her. A second later, the corpse was gone, nothing but ash, and the scary robe sizzled and burned before the black water doused the small flame that'd managed to spread.

Jack stared down at the robe, at where the eyeless man used to be. All the man was, all the... everything, just up and gone in a small puff of ash. All that was left of him was a soaked, creepy robe, half burned.

His mom stood over Elaine, by her legs, with Elaine's knife in her hands. Kindred blood soaked the blade, but with no vitae powering it, the blood ignited and burned away, tiny flames and cinders that left behind nothing more than a faint trace of soot.

"Mom?" Jack asked, voice quiet, words mumbled and agonizing to say with the broken mouth.

"I... I couldn't... couldn't let him do it. I... I couldn't..." She dropped the knife, and stared down at Elaine as she took a few steps back. "I had to stop him. I had... to stop him, right?" Her eyes opened wide and wider, until her horrified gaze looked to Jack again.

He wanted to look away. No one could look into eyes like that and not get scarred for the rest of their life. But he couldn't look away, as his mom stared at him, desperate for him to say something, anything.

"You had to stop him, Mom." He dragged himself closer to her, and set a hand on her shoulder. She was trembling. "You had to. It—"

"Malachi!"

Oh fuck. The whole time, Black Blood had been roaring and screaming and fighting off the curse, stomping his feet and twisting and turning between the standing stones only a couple hundred feet away. But now, the giant skeleton looked their way, and the white flames in his eyes exploded in size until they were too big for the eye sockets.

He took one step toward Jack and the others, and let out a shriek that silenced every single ghost above. The vibration pulsed through the floor and stones, and while Jack and probably everyone wanted to cover their ears, they couldn't. He tried to lift his arms, but his body didn't respond. Ice spread through his limbs, and the ghostly nails-on-chalkboard sound he'd become way too familiar with shot up his spine until every tendon in his body seized hard.

Black Blood couldn't touch them. Couldn't hurt them. Right?

"Damn the rules! I'll see you burn! I'll spend a thousand years tearing your skin from your flesh, and force-feed you blood to keep you alive until I am satisfied! I'll tear out your eyes and rip out your tongue. I will drive metal and stone through your intestines, and every dead remnant in my domain will taste of your pain! Pain! You will know pain!"

Rules?

The skeleton took another step forward, and leaned down, arms outstretched. He was going to grab them.

Before his giant hands could wrap their bodies, huge shadowy wings erupted from Black Blood's face, and again the titan roared as he stood up straight, and tore at the Ripper. It was like some freaky cancerous disease, trying to break out of Black Blood's body, or take it over like an alien parasite. They ripped and tore at each other, splattering black ooze and black shadowy feathers alike.

But Black Blood was winning. As the titan stepped back and clawed at his face, some of his bone claws snagged the curse's chest, and Black Blood ripped the shadow owl free from his body. Only a slither of shadow connected it to his bones, like an umbilical cord.

"How dare you! I am not some Kindred for you to infect, vile leech!"

The giant owl in the god's hands let out a screech, and flared its wings as best it could as it pecked at the titan's fingers hard enough bits of black bone fell into the water below. And somewhere in the alien screech sounds the owl made, two words came out.

"Fuck you!" The bird let out a final harsh flap of its wings, hard enough it freed itself from Black Blood's grip, and flew directly into the titan's chest.

Black Blood stumbled back. The white in his eyes erupted until two giant pillars of white flame shot out from them, and he let out an alien shriek of his own, before he sank his claws into the giant shadowy bird, and ripped it nearly in half.

Another shriek. The curse fell to the shallow water, two chunks barely bound together by black strands at the bottom of its body, each half of its head still holding a glowing yellow eye. They both looked to Jack, before the dying creature let out another weird sound. Laughter.

*Run, you moron.*

Jack's head snapped up. The whisper was in his mind, quiet, raspy, and dying. The destroyed black creature laughed again and tried to flap its wings, but Black Blood took one step forward, and crushed it underneath his foot.

The curse died, and it hit Jack like whiplash. He stumbled back, and his mom caught his wrists before he fell back on his ass again.

"Damn you all!" Black Blood took a step closer. "Malachi was my friend! And you, Samantha, betrayed him! I cannot complete the merge without him! Damn the rules, I no longer care! I will see you suffer a thousand agonies for a hundred thousand years! Death is too good for you!"

“Go,” Elaine said. She pushed herself to her feet, one of her forearms a broken mess, the other barely holding together, but she managed, and she pushed against them with her shoulders. How she managed to see at all with her destroyed face, Jack didn’t know. “Go!”

Jack and his mom managed to turn around long enough for it to become painfully clear they weren’t getting anywhere in time. They were too beat up, Jack dragging his feet and Elaine barely able to stand. Everyone on the other side of the barrier stared, and most of them took steps back as they realized what was happening.

Whatever rules bound the god of corpses, he didn’t give a shit anymore. He was going to catch them, and kill them.

“Jack!” Antoinette’s voice. She pounded against the red barrier again and again, each crash of her hands against the red light loud enough it sounded like a gunshot. “Run!”

“No!” Jack’s mom broke off to the side, and Elaine and Jack almost fell over as she ran past them. “Mary!”

“Shit!” Jack stared after his mom, but all he could do was watch. She used Daeva speed to throw herself back toward Mary’s ghost, and collapsed on her hands and knees beside her.

“Mom! Run!” the ghost said, struggling and squirming in the ghost chains that still bound her. “Leave me! Run!”

“I can’t! I won’t!” She grabbed the chains and pulled on them hard. Jack half expected it to be too heavy for her, but their mom had no trouble lifting her daughter and the chains.

It didn’t matter. Black Blood was on her in a second, and he scooped her up off the stone, watery floor without issue. Sam screamed as Mary’s ghost fell back to the ground, and Black Blood lifted their mom up into the air until he was standing again.

“They will not arrive soon enough to save you,” Black Blood said. “I will not be cast back into the depths alone. You will come with me, Samantha Terry, and you will suffer Hell unimaginable.”

He lifted her up to his skull face, and growled over her as he began to squeeze. Jack’s mom’s scream cut off, turning into a hoarse gargle that died a second later. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Couldn’t happen. Black Blood wasn’t supposed to be able to hurt them!

Jack ground his teeth, and dragged himself back toward the giant god of corpses.

“Black Blood! Stop it!”

“A thousand curses upon you, Samantha Terry. A thousand lifetimes of misery. A thousand swords in your belly and a thousand maggots in your eyes. A plague upon your undead flesh for ten thousand years. You will know death in all its forms, and—”

A scream cut him off, harsh enough Jack almost fell over as he clutched his ears again. He knew that scream. He'd heard it shatter glass.

Mary erupted from her chains, broke them, and dove at Black Blood. The banshee ghost screamed without end, and pulsing waves shot out from her that pushed the water away as the sound threatened to pop Jack's eardrums. She shot up for Black Blood's hand, and as she closed the distance, she changed. The hanging threads and strips of fabric of her new, tattered and torn cloak grew longer and longer. Her claws grew longer, until her hands were dwarfed. The mist that poured from where her legs should have been converged into something more solid, with weird hanging bits underneath her elongating body.

Hands. Holding knives. Her body grew longer and longer, her tattered cloak becoming some sort of giant cape full of tears and holes, but somehow creating a perfect shadow beneath it. And within, sticking out from under the strange shadow of her elongated body cape, were hundreds of hands, holding knives.

She'd been stabbed to death, and Angela hadn't stabbed her once. She'd stabbed her a bunch of times.

The horrific creature slammed into Black Blood's wrist, and slashed down with her claws. The god of the dead roared in rage, and pain, and let go of their mom as he took a step back, only for the strange creature to dive at his chest. Mary's ghost must have grown five times in size, all the extra length coming out of her human torso like some sort of human centipede hybrid, and she used it, slamming it into Black Blood's sternum. She was still tiny compared to him, but big enough, and strong enough, to force him back another step. And as she did, the hundreds of hands underneath her body stabbed at the giant god's bones. Bits of black bone fell like rain.

If those knives hurt half as much as Sabrina's knife, Black Blood was in the worst agony Jack could imagine.

Black Blood roared again, and chains shot out of his palms, aimed for Mary's ghost. But she was fast, and she flew underneath them before rising up to attack the god's face, again dragging her many knives across his dark body.

Jack held out his arms, and caught his mother. Unfortunately, physics in reality didn't do the whole 'catching some who's falling' as cleanly as it did in the movies. All the strength in the world

couldn't have stopped him from collapsing forward when she hit his arms, but it was better than letting her crack her head on the stone. Unfortunately, he was barely holding together in general, and he collapsed with her straight into the shallow water.

"Mom, we have to go!" He'd found enough vitae to get his jaw bone aligned. It'd only take a gentle tap to break it again, but it was enough for now.

"No, not without Mary!"

"Look at her!" He threw a hand up and pointed at Mary's ghost. The monstrous thing slashed at Black Blood, a frenzy of screams and shrieks that forced Jack to yell into his mom's ear from half a foot away. "That's not Mary anymore!"

"That's my daughter! I don't care what you say, I won't leave her!"

"That—"

Just as quickly as Mary's assault began, it ended. The god of the dead managed to get a hard slash of his claws through her, and Mary's shrieks came to a harsh stop. She tried to fly away, to get some distance between her and the giant skeleton, but Black Blood slashed out again, and again his claws met her ghostly body. Giant gash marks cut deep, and didn't fill in like mist should have. She looked like a centipede someone had cut halfway through a dozen times, never quite managing to cut off a piece of her, but it didn't matter.

The giant ghost fell, and landed only a short distance from Jack and their mom. She tried to get up, her mutated form pushing against the stone, including the hundreds of hands still holding ghostly knives. But she couldn't. She fell over, and writhed and twisted on her side, her upper human half pushing against the stone floor and staring uselessly at Jack and their mom.

"Run," Mary said. "Mom, Jack, ru—"

"I am a god of the dead, remnant. How dare you think to strike me." Black Blood walked toward them, three whole steps all he required to cover massive ground, and reach down for them. "You broke free of my chains. A powerful remnant, you have become, Mary Terry. But all you have earned is a place at your mother's side." He snarled and laughed as both his hands covered them in shadow. "All three Terrys will spend an eternity, prostrated upon torments you cannot comprehend, with only pain to be your—"

A blinding flash of gold erupted from the center of the site. It almost looked like it came from the giant tear, but it came from... everywhere, a wave of gold and white that buried everyone and

everything. It seared the eyes, but Jack looked anyway, eye half locked on the giant skeleton hands about to scoop him and his mom up, and the other about to scoop Mary up.

Black Blood couldn't. A dozen chips and tears and half broken bones on his colossal frame didn't mean shit to him, but the giant gold chains that now bound his wrist, connected to them by enormous handcuffs, did.

The blinding light faded away, and Jack's eyes stopped burning, still locked onto the giant hands above only a few feet away from grabbing him and his mother. The fingers wriggled, desperate to capture him, but the strange gold chains that came out of nothingness pulled back on the god's wrists, and Black Blood thundered as he fought against them. It was like watching a desperate psychopath fight against the chains that bound him to his cell.

"I. Will. Not. Be. Denied!"

The chains came out of glowing orbs in the air, glowing the same gold as one of the colors in the giant tear. The tear stood there, unchanged, still surrounded by the standing stones and their glowing red symbols, as more giant gold portals opened up around it. Two high above had the chains binding the giant god's wrists, and two more appeared, also high in the cave sky. Two gold chains shot out of them, and snapped gold metal bindings around Black Blood's body, his throat, and around the base of his spine. Two more portals opened up, close to the ground, and again shot out gold chains that snapped around Black Blood's ankles.

The titan fell. With another one of his ghostly roars, a searing sound that stabbed the ears, Black Blood fell backward. For a moment it looked like he'd fall through the giant tear, but he fell beside it, and the cave trembled as the colossal creature smashed into the ground on his back.

"Vas reln korta," someone said.

What the fuck? Jack forced himself to his feet, his mom helping him, and the two looked around for the source of the new voice. It wasn't raspy, had no ghostly shrieks or screams, and it wasn't a primal roar.

It sounded lovely, like... ocean waves on the beach.

"Reln difera! Forv ku—" The chains around Black Blood's body yanked hard, and Black Blood's head snapped back into the ground with a crack. An explosion of black water outward announced he'd broken the stone underneath his skull.

Jack didn't know what language they were speaking. There were other words layered into it, like multiple languages being spoken at once.



“Nu ramrelu. Ziar, thaisrah,” the ocean said. Not grating, not heavy or powerful or aggressive. Calm, and deep. Immutable. And just like Black Blood, the words were layered, other words blending in that Jack’s brain swore it could find English in, but couldn’t.

Black Blood and the invisible voice shared a few more sentences, and while Jack couldn’t understand a word of it, he didn’t need to. The god of corpses was being reprimanded, punished, or whatever the godly equivalent was.

Black Blood snapped his head up enough to look at Jack and his mom, and again, his eyes erupted with white flame.

“I will return, and have my revenge, Samantha Terry. I will rise again. I will—” Instead of letting the god of corpses have his epic final villain monologue, the gold chains tightened harder, and dragged Black Blood down. He was already on his back, arms and legs spread out between the standing stones, but somehow, the chains pulled him down anyway. The gold hovering orbs that held his chains lowered until they touched the ground, and seeped lower until they disappeared into the rock. They brought their chains with them, and Black Blood twisted and writhed fruitlessly as he sank into the black water.

Whatever the chains were doing, it wasn’t easy. Black Blood resisted, and the chains were dragging him straight through solid stone; if that mattered at all to a god. Slowly but surely, the giant skeleton sank and sank, as if the water around him were quicksand with no bottom. Or, thick black sludge. His feet went first, then his hands, then his waist. His skull went last, and his burning eyes stared directly at Jack’s mom as the silenced god of corpses was pulled deeper, and deeper into the Great Below.

The moment the black skeleton was completely gone, the red barrier of light surrounding them vanished. No fanfare, no special effects or loud noises, just gone, like someone flicking a light switch. The ghosts above that still remained grew silent, and went on their way, fading into blackness as they flew off. The glowing red symbols on the standing stones remained, but their glow didn’t, the red light fading away slowly until all that was left was quiet darkness.

“Jack! Samantha!” Antoinette dashed for them, and Daniel followed beside her. She stumbled several times on the way. Whether that was because she was overwhelmed with emotion, or because Mary’s claws had thoroughly wrecked her body, Jack couldn’t tell. But once she reached them and hugged them both hard enough Sam and Jack winced, he had a feeling it was the former.

Daniel helped Elaine, picking her up before sliding her hair out of her face.

“It was a stupid plan,” he said to her. “A lot of problems.”

Elaine, face a broken mess and arms even worse, managed a weak shrug as she walked toward Antoinette. Daniel stayed with her, and helped her from falling over a couple times.

“It was stupid,” Elaine said. “But I needed to be sure. I—”

An explanation Jack was dying to hear was cut short, as blinding gold light flooded the giant cave again. Thankfully not so blinding he couldn't tell there were a half dozen orbs coming up out of the black water, each burying the onlookers in their presence, each four times as tall as a person. The black water pushed away from them as they hovered up from the ground, and once they were a couple feet above it, the six orbs drifted toward the tear.

“W-What's going on?” Samantha asked. “I—Mary! Mary. I have to see Mary!” She wriggled free of Antoinette and Jack's arms, and ran over to her daughter's ghost. With no hesitation at all, she got on her knees beside the giant, grotesque creature, and pulled its head onto her lap. “Mary. Oh god, Mary.”

Jack winced as he looked to Antoinette, to Elaine, to the rest of the crowd who'd all dragged themselves closer, before his eye fell on his mom again. If his body didn't feel like it was about to break into bits and pieces, he'd have run after her and pulled her away.

Mary's ghost squirmed. The upper body, the human half, looked mostly the same as it had before, but the giant cape, or millipede half, was disgusting to look at. Hands and fingers and knives, clawing uselessly at the ground, with several giant gashes cutting through the enormous body.

“Mom.” Mary's voice was soft, a whisper, some of the ghost harshness still there but mostly a faded thing. “You're safe, Mom.”

“I am, baby. I am. We... I... oh god, baby, I'm so sorry. I didn't want this to happen!”

“I know, Mommy.”

Fuck. Jack winced again and looked away, hiding his face in Antoinette's shoulder.

“I didn't... I didn't want this to happen.” Their mom broke down into sobs, and clutched the ghost's head close to her chest. “I would have done anything, baby. I would have done anything.” She didn't care about the god of the dead who'd threatened revenge on her. She didn't care about the giant glowing orbs nearby that were drifting toward the massive tear. Stakes so high they defied reason, and in that moment, she didn't care. She cared about her daughter.

“I know. But you did the right thing, Mommy.”

“We could have been together again.”

“It wouldn’t have been right. Not right. Not right. Not right. Better this way, Mommy. Better this way.”

No one else said anything, or even moved. The only noise in the entire massive cave, was Samantha’s sobs.

A new light grabbed Jack’s eye, and he looked up to see a seventh giant glowing orb hover down from somewhere up high. The same as the others, it came down and down until it hovered a couple feet over the black water, but instead of going toward the tear, it came toward them.

“It will be,” the orb said, voice flowing out of it gently in deep, bass-filled pulses, “another cycle before Mictlantecuhtli will be able to interfere with the Fallen World again. Punishment. He has violated the decree.” It was way too soothing a voice, almost like a brown noise machine.

Jack blinked his one eye, and stepped away from Antoinette. It only made sense for the Prince to do the talking, but for some damn reason, Jack opened his stupid mouth first.

“What the fuck happened? How the fuck did any of this happen? I’m gonna assume you’re like Black Blood, or Mictwhatever. And apparently, there’s rules he had to obey? How the fuck does that fucker get to do what he did, and nearly destroy everything, without breaking your fucking rules!? Where the fuck were you!? You only finally interfered because, what, because he actually touched my mom!?” His jaw felt like it was about to fall off, shouting like that, but rage blocked out the pain.

If there was one way Jack was going to die, it’d be pissing off a divine being with his big fat mouth. But the glowing sphere hovered there, unmoving, gently pulsing, unphased.

“We will undo the damage,” it said. “The... tears, as you call them.” And with that, it slowly hovered toward the other glowing orbs, and the giant tear that stood over them, as tall as Black Blood had been.

Jack looked to everyone, and everyone looked to him. His mom stayed with Mary and refused to look anywhere else, and Mary’s ghost didn’t move either. He half expected the ghost to start fading away, but it didn’t. Maybe it wasn’t going to die from Black Blood’s wounds. Better if it did, and fucking christ that hurt like hell to even think about. But Mary now looked almost completely like one of the other ghosts they’d seen before, down here deeper in the Great Below. And it’d kill their mom, if she ended up like that.

Sighing, Jack looked up at Antoinette, but all she had for him was a confused shrug. He looked back at Avery, but she did the same. None of them had a clue what these glowing gold spheres were.

Well, they owed the glowing orbs their lives, since Black Blood was going to break the rules or whatever that fucking meant. So, Jack followed, and Antoinette helped him, holding him up as they walked.

The orbs waited, some hovering higher than others, and from a distance, it looked like they were arranged in a pattern, a seven-point shape. Jack conveniently ignored the prime number, and came closer.

“Hello?” a voice said. It wasn’t one of the orbs. It came from the tear.

He recognized that voice.