

~~Jack~~

“Name them yet?”

“No. Really torn on it too.” Jack leaned down, held out his hand, and smiled as the two crows each took some oats from his palm. “It’s gotta be something meaningful.”

“Bonnie and Clyde?” His sire laughed at his own joke. Tacky, but the mafia boss man made it work.

“I’m thinking something a bit less depressing. Just... nothing coming to me.”

“I wouldn’t get too caught up on making the names special or meaningful. A name’s something that should resonate with the person giving it, not carry connotations or expectations on the person receiving it.” Julias leaned back against wall of his mansion. The two of them were outside, around back where there was a garden and some pretentious statues. Beyond the backyard, was the outside of the city, rocks and bits of trees and dirt and road. The mansion was surprisingly defensible, because no one could approach it without being seen. It was something Jack knew Julias would take advantage of. Man probably had snipers in lookout posts nearby, or maybe on top of the mansion.

“... Mulder and Scully.”

“You can’t be serious.” His sire facepalmed, loud enough for Jack to hear his soul breaking. “The great Jack Terry, rising star of the Invictus, watches too much TV.”

“Hey! ... does anyone call me that? Seriously?”

“That’s how I sold your promotion to Maria and Michael.”

“... you fucking liar.” He smirked at his sire, laughed a few more times, and lifted his hand. He wore a bird handling glove, a black one that matched his suit nicely, long enough to cover some of his forearm, but thin enough to be discreet. Crows weren’t eagles or owls, he didn’t need anything major, and the two crows perched on the glove beside each other without issue. “I was thinking G’Kar and Londo, if they were both males, but this one here is female. So, I’m thinking Mulder and Scully.”

“I hope you don’t tell anyone.”

“I’ll definitely tell everyone.”

“You’re not nearly social enough to use ‘everyone’ in a sentence.”

“True. But Damien and Jessy will know, at least.”

“How are things with the right hands, anyway?” Julias motioned forward, and the two of them started to walk the garden, and then further out, past the gate, and out into the endless grass, dirt, and rocks that surrounded the city. A casual stroll where the sun would be inescapable, if it decided to throw a temper tantrum and rise before it was supposed to.

“Good, actually. Jessy’s teaching Damien and I about the people we bully around to keep the city running smooth. I only just learned about this Terra Den company and the nasty shit their CEO Jeremy Long has been up to.” Cyberpunk mob bosses were a thing, he’d only learned in the past couple weeks. Using fancy tech to run his criminal organization.

“Yeah, he’s a tough one to keep under our thumb, but he provides a lot of benefits.”

Jack wasn’t convinced. He frowned over his shoulder, and kicked at a couple of rocks, motion subtle enough to not disturb the two birds still on his arm.

“He traffics some pretty nasty drugs, Julias.”

“He does indeed. Heroin, cocaine, barbiturates, others.”

“Then why aren’t we putting him in the ground?”

“Because he doesn’t sell to kids, and he doesn’t force his product on anyone. The only people getting addicted and involved in his business are people willing to ruin their lives, old enough and informed enough to make that choice.”

“Just because someone’s eighteen, and they’ve read the back of a get-help pamphlet, doesn’t mean they’re old enough or smart enough to make decisions for themselves.” Jack groaned, picked up a rock, and threw it. Still the crows did not move, comfortable on his arm. It made him smile.

“There has to be a cut off point somewhere, Jack. Eighteen-year-olds are fucking idiots, but so are twenty-five-year-olds, and thirty-year-olds, and so on. They’re all idiots, just slightly less idiotic than their younger selves. We draw the line somewhere, because the line has to exist somewhere.” His sire walked beside him, hands in his pockets, eyes looking up at the night sky. Out here, the darkness was real, and the stars and moon had a chance to shine through. “Half the human adults on this planet aren’t smart enough to think more than five minutes into the future, Jack. Don’t feel bad because someone gave them some rope and they decided to hang themselves with it.”

“Harsh... but, yeah, I get you. You have to call them adults at some point, and let them do their own thing.” They’d had similar conversations, before Jack was sired, when Julias took an interest in him and started asking him questions about things. He asked questions, and Jack loved to think about shit, think out loud about shit too; answering them came naturally. Lots of conversations about the

nature of people, that Jack had no idea Julias was slipping predator/prey bias into. Kine were prey. Kindred were predators.

The man had been training Jack on how to be a vampire for years before he ever became one. Damn, Kindred liked to think in the long term.

“So anyway,” Jack said, continuing, “yeah Jessy and Damien and I are getting along. Jessy’s easy, and she surprises me sometimes.”

“Smarter than she seems, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. Most of the time, she’s a crass, rude, sex-obsessed frat boy... girl. Sometimes though, you can tell she’s got this Kindred thing figured out, more than most.”

“She’s Michael’s right hand for a reason.”

“And Damien is... well, he’s Damien. I’ve caught him smiling on a couple occasions though, so I think that’s going well.” Getting through to that man was difficult. Half a century of self-induced brainwashing for a psychotic father figure wasn’t going to disappear overnight, or even over months. “Jessy’s got it in her head to get him laid. And I kind of agree with her, it’d do the man some good.”

“You know he’s a member of the Lancea et Sanctum, right?”

Jack shook his head. “He is, but their tenets are about the humans, not themselves.”

“Been researching the Second Estate?”

“A bit, yeah.” Knowledge, it was always about knowledge. If he knew things, he could make decisions predicting more steps ahead, manipulate outcomes, steer circumstances and events. He wasn’t half as good at it as Julias, but fuck him if he wasn’t going to do his hardest to get that good. “That reminds me. I wanted to ask Damien about history records. Did any survive?”

“Good question. The purge was a violent affair, but as far as I know, Lucas’s records were not completely lost. Bu—” He blinked, and looked down as he folded his arms across his chest. “Garry destroyed a lot Lucas’s stuff, during the purge, and then again after you killed him. He went to Tony’s lair that Lucas was using, and let out a little of his rage, I guess, before the tunnels were collapsed.”

After he killed Lucas. That was still a lot to wrap his mind around, killing such an older vampire, in such a powerful way. Dominating a vampire, even a broken one like Damien at the time, was not something Kindred his age were supposed to be able to do. At the time, both he and Julias assumed it must have been a fluke of circumstance, but after the incident with Angela, he knew it wasn’t. He’d be able to do it again, hopefully, if someone put his back to the wall.

He stroked the back of the head of the closer crow, Mulder, and smiled as the bird leaned into the touch. “I knew about what Garry did, but Damien might still have some stuff. And now that he’s working for Maria, I bet she’s got him digitizing some stuff. Or at least has a thrall helping him out.”

“Maybe. Were you looking to check into something?”

“Yeah... you might actually be able to provide some insight.” He leaned in toward the crow, and the crowd leaned in toward him. Nose bump. Scully grew envious quickly, pecking his glove, and he laughed as he started to stroke her breast feathers instead. “I wanted to ask about... Viktor.”

“Yeah? What about?” Julias tried to match his gaze, but he didn’t hold it, looking away to the dark horizon instead. His sire didn’t want to talk about his own sire, Jack’s grand sire, anymore than Jack did, really. But, again, knowledge was everything.

“I keep hearing that he was a very powerful Kindred. But, do we have any history on him?”

“No. Unfortunately, only the Lancea et Sanctum keep records about Kindred, but only those worthy of note, and only the most key points in Kindred history.” Their walking took them around in the empty land, but they didn’t go far, and soon they drifted back toward the garden behind the mansion. “Everyone keeps tabs on things now though, with the dawn of the digital age. At least, to a point. Detailed records about our illegal activities wouldn’t be smart, and any records outright calling out Kindred for being Kindred, less smart. Only the Second Estate would do that, because they dedicate so much of their existence to protecting those records.”

“... because vampire memories fade.”

“More than fade. You’ve seen first hand what happens when an elder Kindred needs to take a long sleep, a long torpor, to let the blood lust return to normal levels. Those years of dreaming wreck the mind, turn memories into their playground. Lucas was far more stable before the purge. And Viktor was far more stable when he sired me, far more.” Julias opened the back gate, and sighed as it let out a classic metal squeak. “Though, even then, he apparently had secrets from before that I was unaware of.”

“Such as?”

“Just... he was more of a monster than I realized.” Back in the garden, they walked beside the statues, the fountains, and Julias gestured to the statue that looked like Viktor. “He had a taste for torture. His torpor twisted him into a paranoid psychopath, but even before then, he’d grown a taste for inflicting agony I was unaware of.”

Ouch, so much ouch. Jack could see the pain dripping off his sire’s body, like blood into the dirt.

“You’re a century embraced and you’re probably the nicest Kindred in the city, Julias,” he said. “If you’re worried about Viktor’s past becoming your past, I—”

“I thought you were the one worrying about him?”

“I... I am. I shouldn’t, I know, but I am. Because...” He sighed, the exact same sigh Julias had made moments before. Lot of sighing going on, whenever the topic went in this direction. “Just worried Viktor’s bloodline might rub off on me, us, and sneak into our lives in ways we might not expect.”

The memory hit him with all the grace of a car crash. How dare they. That’s how his mind had put the whole scenario, that’s how his anger, his disgust, his hate, had framed the whole circumstance of his capture and his escape. How dare they. Something Viktor would say, to the point Jack could hear the sound of the man’s voice ringing in his head.

The last words Viktor had said to him were: learn your place, and die. Christ, he’d wanted to say those same fuckings words during the whole ordeal.

No wonder so many Kindred were stereotypical, brooding, dark and dangerous types. Even knowing about it, even being aware of how ridiculous and silly it was to worry about this, he did, and he felt like hanging out in a dark corner to brood about it. Brood menacingly at that. Maybe it was just something Kindred did when they were upset, brood in corners, maybe with some kine around to provide a meal if they were drawn in.

“I worry about that too, but there’s nothing to show that his ghost will haunt us. That’s not how siring works.”

Nothing to show, right. Nothing at all. Nothing, nothing at all.

“M-Mire?”

Both men stood up straight, backs to the Viktor statue, as they looked out over the bushes and garden railings to the familiar voice.

“Back here, Tash.”

Heh, Tash. Sometimes it was easy to forget Julias had worked with Natasha, for a very long time at that. Julias never hung out with the group of them, him and Tash, Jessy and Fiona, Damien too. The boss hanging out with the employees or their friends was always a weird dynamic. Dumb reason. Jack should ask him at some point.

Natasha poked out from behind the wall of the mansion, and offered a tiny wave as she walked up to them. “Hey g-guys.”

“You alone?” Julias said. “You—”

She put up her hands a little. “Art and M-Matt escorted me. And, um, I c-can call them again, to come by and escort me out. B-But, I was hoping to leave with Jack.”

She was? Strange, he had no meetings planned with her, and from the look on her face, it seemed like she wanted to talk serious talk.

“Um, sure,” he said. “Right now?”

“No, I wanted to visit t-t-too. I don’t see Julias much... these days.” She came up to them, and smiled a little brighter, especially as her eyes found Mulder and Scully. “Animalism?”

“A bit, yeah.” Jack resumed stroking the heads of the two crows, smiling with the pleasurable texture of soft feathers. “But not as much as you might think. Crows are surprisingly social if you give them a chance.”

She nodded as she came in closer, and Jack lowered his arm to hold out the two birds to the tiny woman. Copying him, she stroked behind their heads a few times each, earning some quiet caws. Not the delightful, pleasant whistling the typical pet bird made, but then, Jack always hated those birds. He’d worked in a pet store for a little while when he was younger, and he knew first hand that parrots of all shapes and sizes could be juvenile assholes. Corvids, on the other hand, or at least crows, seemed to have something else going for them. Like comparing dogs to wolves.

“I do plan on keeping them as pets,” he said. “Haven’t fed them any vitae yet either, trying a more passive approach.”

“D-Did you name them?”

His sire shook his head. “No, he didn’t.”

Laughing, Jack brought them in closer, and again nudged his nose against their beaks. “I’m thinking Mulder and Scully, but Julias thinks it’s dumb.”

“It is dumb. You’re a Kindred, a right hand of the Invictus, act like one.” Much as the words sounded like they should have had some bite, Julias was smiling as he said them. He was trying to say the things he knew he should say, Jack could see, but he didn’t really believe them himself. Which earned some giggles from Tash.

“How... about Huginn and Muninn?” Tash said, fingers rising to offer more head scratches for the two crows.

“Who’re they?”

She nodded, smiling as Scully pushed her head into her finger. “Odin’s t-two ravens, from Norse mythology. They flew around... M-Midgard, and kept Odin informed about what happened within.”

Well, damn, that was a pretty good comparison for what he was up to.

“Almost perfect, but they were ravens, right? And I’d like something a little more modern.” He shrugged a little, and adjusted his tie a bit, drawing attention to the suit to pair with his point. “Ugh, picking names for things is tough.”

“It is. B-But I think Mulder and Scully is fine.” Tash walked up to Julias, and offered her old partner a small nod, halfway to a bow. “Any sightings of the hunters y-yet?”

“No.” The older Ventrue found them a bench, and gestured for them to sit with him as he sat on the end of it. Tash sat center, and Jack took the other end so the crows had some room, his gloved hand further out. “It’s like they disappeared. No sightings of those four we’d seen before, and no sightings of Jeremiah or Angela.”

“And Fiona?” she said.

Jack’s turn to shake his head. “Haven’t seen her either. Jessy says she likes that Eric fellow at the club, so maybe he’ll know?”

The little Mekhet sighed, but nodded. “Y-Yeah, the Begotten are hiding more now. I... I hope F-Fiona is ok.”

Jack hoped Antoinette didn’t get her killed if she did eventually decide to enact a purge. The possibility was there, despite his love’s attempts to settle his worries. No wonder the monsters were hiding, with hunters on one side, and an angry Prince on the other.

“... then pay her a visit,” Julias said. Both the tiny vampires raised a brow at him, and he laughed, offering a dismissing finger wave. “You know where Azamel hangs out, and you know she’s probably hiding out there. If she’s in her nightmare world, you know she’s still got feelers on that hole in the ground she loves so much. She’ll know where Fiona’s been.”

Jack shivered. Azamel was forever a giant, twisted, corrupted elephant god, in his mind, no longer the old woman in the rocking chair. “You want me to pay Azamel a visit?”

“You visited her last time, without my permission.”

Not this again.

“Azamel and Athalia didn’t want my visit to be official business. They wanted something more organic, and I can’t really blame them for that. We covered their tunnels in explosives.”

Natasha shrank down between them as the air started to heat up with impending argument.

“I know you’re not a fan of deterrence, Jack, but it’s the lesser of two evils here.”

“I... I’m not disagreeing with you. But I’m not going to ignore the knock-on effects of that either. Azamel’s pissed. We didn’t strap explosives to Avery’s home.”

“Avery’s home is not a stronghold, and not a place she’s worried about defending, Jack. And we remember Simon was the true issue with the Uratha last time, not Avery.”

“And yet the Uratha have caused more trouble for us in their time here than the Begotten have. They nearly killed Natasha.” Not that he was unhappy about the Uratha being in Dolareido, but when compared side by side, the Uratha had already caused some problems with their aggressiveness. The Begotten, not so much.

Tash inched a hand up. “I—”

Julias cut her off. “Don’t forget the amount of kills Fiona’s ravenous appetite led to. And the Uratha didn’t bring hunters to our doorstep.”

“You didn’t know hunters were here when you set up the explosives.” The fuck did his sire not get about how Azamel was being treated unfairly?

“We didn’t know, but we knew trouble was going to follow her arrival, and unlike Avery, we knew it’d be Azamel’s fault. Last time her hunger grew out of control, and she destroyed entire buildings.”

Jack winced, and looked down. Yeah, there was that. “And we weren’t worried about Avery going full on aggro when she showed up, rinse and repeat Simon’s actions? Jacob certainly was, and is.” Why was he arguing so hard to give the Begotten a break? It wasn’t just because of Fiona, despite her being a perfect example of why they shouldn’t judge the hungry monsters too harshly. Maybe it was because of Athalia. The way she’d looked at him during the ball, that hate in her face, steel gaze cutting into him.

He wanted to make her not hate him, or the Kindred. And, he couldn’t imagine how rough things were for her, with her daughter in the city, trying to kill her.

“I know that look, Jack,” his sire said. “Stop it. Stop feeling sorry for other people and trying to save everyone.”

“This isn’t like with the kine, Julias, with the arbitrary eighteen-year-old cut off. This is a mother caught between who she is and a psychopath daughter trying to kill her.”



“It doesn’t matter that she’s a mother!” His voice split the air, going from a raised voice to a full on yell. Mulder and Scully took off, taking to the air and perching on top of the mansion. “I know your mother is still alive, Jack, but that’s no reason to sympathize with Athalia. And don’t think we don’t know you’re still visiting your family, your mother especially, with Amanda’s help.”

Shit. Shit shit shit shit.

“I... She doesn’t know, Julias. There’s no harm.”

“She might see you, your sister might see you, and you’ll have to get your fingers into their brains again. And... this situation with Athalia...”

Silence fell on them both, and they both leaned forward to set their elbows on their knees, hands dangling between. Yeah, no need to say it. Jack was letting his family issues cloud his judgment.

He wasn’t supposed to have family issues. He never connected with his sister, and his relationship with his mother was ‘fine’, but just fine. Never a true connection, never any deep meaning, never any major value. He wondered if he’d feel sad at either of their funerals. He wondered... he wondered why he was still asking Amanda for help, so he could spy on them.

“I... I um... uh...” Natasha, fidgeting her fingers like she was tearing apart invisible sheets of paper, stood up, and turned to face them. After backing up a bit of course. “Jack, um, d-do you want to walk me home? I wanted t-to talk to you about some stuff.”

“... yeah, ok.” He stood up, slipped off the glove, slipped it into his jacket pocket, and faced his sire. “Cool with that, Julias?” First names meant connection, first names meant he wasn’t letting the weight of the argument put a wall between him and his sire.

“Yeah. Just be careful, Jack.” Good, more first names, both signing a truce. “And, as for your visits to your family? I’d have stopped you already if I didn’t trust you.”

“... thanks.” Much as Jack appreciated it, the cut of Julias’s gaze said enough.

You’re flirting with pain, Jack, and it’s going to eat you alive.

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Jack called for a drive, and both he and Tash started back for his apartment. He didn’t go there much, but he still had stuff there, and sometimes it was nice to remind himself that he did actually own

his own place. Now, he had money for a much better place, but would he ever move into one? The Invictus wouldn't let him full-on live with Antoinette, probably. He had to keep his Invictus-connected laptop and stuff at his apartment, safe from the Prince's prying fingers. Safe-ish. As if she didn't already know everything the Invictus told him.

They got out before arriving at his apartment though, and decided to walk around. Mulder and Scully followed him from above, blending in with the rest of the crows that hid themselves on the rooftops. Plenty of the crows in Dolareido didn't bother hiding, and perched atop street lampposts, or garbage cans, benches, and street signs. Some of the braver ones stood upon the signs of the local casinos, bars, and clubs. The bravest stood on the street with the kine, and picked up bits of food. He knew about crows that dropped nuts onto the streets in Japan, and used traffic to break them. They used the traffic signs or pedestrian flow, to wait to cross the street, and pick up their prize. And since then, crows had been spotted doing some fairly insane things, intelligence-wise, all over the world.

So Mulder and Scully had no troubles blending in with their neighbors, keeping tabs on his car, and then tabs on him as he and Tash got out of the car and started walking the sidewalks. Time to do some rounds, walk around, see if they spotted anything out of the ordinary. A quick walk around familiar territory just to make sure things looked normal. Chance of it helping with the hunter hunt was less than zero, but whatever, better than nothing.

"Sorry about that," he said to the tiny girl beside him. "With Julias, I mean."

"That's ok. I know w-what it's like to argue with your sire."

"... Daniel knows how to argue?" Imagining the borderline lifeless man in a debate, let alone an argument, was impossible.

Tash giggled again, quiet and subtle. People were around, better to keep their voices from traveling too far. Normally, kine hearing some of their dialogue was harmless, but the conversation topic was sensitive, and with the risk of hunters hiding in their midsts, best to not get cocky.

"The same way that a s-st-s-stone does, or a w-wall."

"Then he must be good at it, cause I've argued many o' times with a wall. Lost every one of them."

They chuckled. Yeah, both of them knew what that was like, rehearsing arguments, or having arguments with imaginary people. It never ended well, just going around and around with pretend situations, pessimism leading to the worst outcomes.

"I, um... I visited the old prison, w-with Art and M-Matt."

“Yeah? Invictus leave behind any evidence?”

“No, n-nothing anyone besides Uratha would find. B-B-But... they... they um...”

He raised a brow as he looked down at her. She caught his gaze, made a tiny frown, and took his wrist. With a small yank, the Mekhet took him into one of the dark alleys, maybe ten feet into its depths, so the neon lights of the nearest casino cut across the asphalt between the walls at an angle. She put her back to the wall where it hid her from the light, and he stood next to her, both now in the darkness, and soon, both hidden in her cloak of night.

“What’s up?”

“They... th-they wanted me to... t-to ask you...” Sighing, she hugged herself, looked down, and shivered a little. Social anxiety, he recognized the signs well enough, but what did she have to be anxious with him about? “Are you ok?”

“... um, I guess?” Weird direction to take the conversation, and random. “What’s this about?”

“The b-boys, they... they could feel the... the um... th-they think what happened at the prison, is... is... worse than... than...”

He sighed, long, and hard. Seemed like the thing to do, to finish her sentence with a noise of blatant brooding. Just two vampires, in a dark alley, hiding in shadow, talking about their problems. His problems, this time. Did the cliches never end?

“They could?”

“Y-Yeah, they... they noticed it, immediately, when we arrived.”

“You asked Matt and Art to help with the hunters, didn’t you? Avery won’t be happy, you stepping around her like that.”

Natasha shivered a little, rubbed her arms, and gulped. “Maybe. The boys, they say they c-can handle her, and that she... won’t d-d-do anything t-too mean to them, for disobeying her.”

Must be nice, to have that level of freedom. Must be nice, to trust your bosses to be... human, about things. He trusted Julias like that, but he trusted Michael and Maria a total of zero. If he stepped out of line like that, they’d punish him. No wonder Julias wasn’t too happy about him seeing Azamel without his permission.

“And... they noticed what happened?” he said. “Thought the Invictus cleaned the place up. The usual evidence sweep.”

“Yeah, the d-did, and no... no kine would find evidence. But the boys, they... b-b-both noticed, how... how bad it was, how bad it must have been... They said you... um, that the event, scarred the place.”

“... I suppose it'd be pretty stupid of me, to dismiss that, pass it off.” He swiped the air with his hand, like wiping the remains of a broken plate off a table. Part of him still wanted to not say anything, to act tough for others. He had let Julias see how damaged he was, a bit anyway. He had let Antoinette see more. He hadn't told either of them the extent of it, of what it was like for his mind to reach out, and crush the souls of human beings like they were ants, annoying, pestering, biting little ants that deserved to be squashed.

Antoinette said she wanted him and her to have a more adult, mature relationship, talk with each other about serious things, vampire things. At the time, he thought that meant talk more about the trials and tribulations on a larger scale. Now, he realized, it meant he could talk about this sort of disgusting shit, the shit that got under his skin and made him hate being a vampire. Tash worked for the Prince, and he trusted her, so, this could be a trial run.

“... it was horrible,” he said. “Yeah, it hurt being tortured, and they terrified me, and sometimes I dream about Angela's psycho eyes.” Fucking daily torpor dreams were never so vivid before. And you couldn't just wake up from a nightmare as a Kindred. You slept through that shit, and let it take you down into a spiraling pit of insanity until the sun set. You didn't have a choice. Kindred could force themselves awake during day hours, but the effort of being awake while the sun was up was like dragging a boulder on your back. You didn't do it to avoid scary dreams.

“That... d-does sound bad,” she said, voice a hovering waver almost lost to the street noise.

“And... and it was more.”

“More?”

“... you ever want to kill someone, Natasha?”

“I d-d-don't kn—”

“I mean, have you ever wanted to kill someone. You ever wanted to feel your fingers around someone's throat, because you know, you just know, deep down in your bones, that the sensation of their windpipe crushing and their bones cracking in your grip, would be the most euphoric sensation? Ever wanted to look into someone's eyes, actually meet someone's gaze, hold it from only inches away, and see the life drain out of them, see the terror in them as they realize they're gong to die? Ever wanted to...” He held out his hands in front of him, and squeezed the air, like he was squeezing organs into

mulch. Hate. He'd had no idea what hate was before that. In that moment, in that single night, he'd tasted hate to such a degree, it was scarred into his mind; and onto the prison itself, according to Tash's wolves.

No wonder he was turning into a brooding cliché. Christ, just thinking about that night had him craving the feel of crushing their worthless minds with his superior Kindred mind. He was the predator, they were the prey, how dare they.

"... no... I... d-don't know what that's like." The far, far older Kindred looked down, and Jack looked away, toward the street. She had fifty Kindred years on him, and she didn't know what it felt like to hate like that. Wonderful. "... you... you sounded like you w-wanted to help Athalia, earlier today, with Julias."

"I do! Fuck, I do. I... I don't... I don't walk around, feeling like this. But sometimes, it hits me. Sometimes, I remember what it was like being trapped in that chair, with those fucking hunters holding me hostage, and..." He looked at his hands again. His hands were squeezing the air, like he was crushing minds, like he was crushing organs and bone. "... I feel like a fool."

"W-Why?"

"I'm just over a year embraced, Tash. Who the fuck am I to be getting so morose about this? I survived hunters trying to kill little ol' me, and dealt them a serious blow at the same time. I have the most amazing girlfriend. I'm swimming in money, sex, and blood... food, for the metaphor. I...I'm just a confused idiot who over thinks everything." He shouldn't be letting it get to him so much.

"... I would... I would say you might be over thinking, a little? B-But... all Kindred have to fight their... b-b-beast," she said, looking at him, weak smile on. "You w-want to help Athalia, and others. That's good. You... you're tasting some... some p-powerful feelings... that Ventrue come t-t-to naturally. It's your b-bane, right?"

He sighed, nodded, and leaned his head back, putting it to the old building's wall so he could look up at the washed out sky. All Kindred blood clans had tendencies, weaknesses inherent to the blood, that manifested in their behavior. With Ventrue, it was perfectly manifested in that one moment where Viktor had cut him open. 'Learn your place, and die.' Only for Viktor to die, in the end.

He nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"Then, you... you... I d-don't know. You're one of the nicest Kindred I know, Jack. I... d-d-don't think you have anything to worry about. But... but the boys, they... they were surprised, by the... the

pain and hate and death... carved into that place. I wanted to make sure you were ok. Are... are you ok?"

"... yeah, yeah I think I am." He smirked at her. "Antoinette told me that you told her, that she shouldn't try and keep the real world out of our relationship?"

She squeaked, and lowered her head. "... I d-did."

"... thanks, for that." And he shouldn't try and protect Antoinette from this side of him, just because he thought he was overreacting. He probably was overreacting, and Antoinette could confirm, with her wealth of experience. Or, in either case, help him.

Natasha's phone rang. She pulled it open, blinked at it, and answered. "Sheriff? ...um, Terry is here with me, should... Oh, ok. Um... sure, we'll b-be right there."

"We will?"

She smiled at him, a tiny, curious smile, as she put the phone back in her pocket. "He said y-you would want t-to see this anyway."

What wonderful, delightful twists and turns was Dolareido going to throw at them tonight?

"Hey Tash?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Don't tell the Prince about our conversation, if you don't mind. I'll tell her, eventually." When he could wrap his mind around it a little better.

"Sure."

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They took a drive toward Devil's Corner, closer to the border with the Carthians. This late at night, and in this particular section of the dirty corner of the city, it was basically the most dangerous place Dolareido had to offer. The people who were outside hung out in alleys and in groups, heads covered in whatever was a fashionable 'fuck you I'm dangerous' getup. Men were particular to tattoos on the chest, and jeans hanging down till they were basically falling off. Women were particular to fancy chain link piercings, and short haircuts, sometimes going bald.

Getting mugged was a possibility, for Jack and his little Mehket friend, but it would only be an excuse to let off some steam for him. And, he didn't want to let off steam by breaking kine minds and bones. Instead, he looked up and made sure Mulder and Scully were still there, before he headed down the alley for the location. A storage locker rental site, where storage lockers as big as small bedrooms were set up, hundreds of them.

Daniel was waiting beside one, back to the roll-up locker door, wearing his usual trench coat. Hands folded across his chest, holding his elbows, he was looking down at the facility's floor, mind wandering about god knows what. He didn't look happy, but the man never did, so that didn't tell Jack anything. The facility was no different than a garage for storing cars, multiple floors dug into the earth, with some above ground, pillars of concrete and other building materials, old metal, rusting doors, and the occasional puddle along the cracked ground.

In Devil's Corner, this was the perfect place for people to get involved in the really nasty shit, the visceral and hands-on brutal stuff, and hand-me-downs from Terra Den drifted this way. Drug dealers fighting over turf, or dealing in general, were not uncommon in the multi-layered dens of old buildings like this. And what sort of shit people stored in these lockers, he could only imagine. How Dolareido was, statistically speaking, safer than other cities, Jack didn't understand, when he first got involved in the nightlife. But seeing how Jessy bossed around big, bad corporations like Terra Den, and kept them in line, he understood now. The Invictus kept the titans with money from ruining everything, and the Carthians kept their local population of... rougher types, from getting too rough with shit.

But, Devil's Corner didn't have the Carthians, and the Invictus had no reason to deal with it either. So a trip to storage cell, in the middle of the night, with the sheriff standing outside it waiting for him and his childe, had an air of crime scene, murder mystery, or other grizzly discovery. The sheriff should have been smoking, and there should have been police tape around, to complete the image.

"D-Daniel." Tash walked up to him, and stood straight, smiling up at her sire. "You found something?"

"Indeed." He turned, and offered Jack a small nod, before leaning down to pull the roll-up door open. Darkness awaited them, and he ushered them in, before closing the door behind them, and turning on the light.

Jack wished he hadn't.

The Ventrue gasped, and stared. Walls, all the walls, all the fucking walls, were covered in symbols. The floor was covered in the biggest one, so large it covered the entirety of the room's base. Red, painted, etched and carved. They smelled, rotten blood, a smell all Kindred knew well, knew

instinctively, knew to never ingest lest they wanted to vomit their guts out for hours. Joined with the sight, it created a nauseating mess.

He recognized the symbols. Anyone would recognize the symbols. Inverted pentagrams in circles. A bird skull. A cow skull. A horse skull. The skull symbols sat outside the flat edges of a triangle, a triangle that surrounded the pentagram. And around the triangle itself was another drawn circle, two borders, with symbols drawn within the two borders, letters of a language he didn't know.

"... what in the ever living fuck." He looked around and around, and gulped with each wall he looked to. The enormous symbol beneath him was big enough to reach the three tables that were pressed to the walls, out of the way of the door. And each table was covered in more symbols, hundreds, thousands of them, many carved into the wood their surfaces, many painted with more dried blood.

"J-Jack."

"This looks like something the Circle would do. But, why would they, in a locker in Devil's Corner? The fuck?"

"... Jack, um—"

He turned to Tash, and gestured to the table and a stack of papers on it. Piles of drawings, done in pencil. Drawings of the symbols, but drawings of other things too, and he reached out to start pushing them aside. A drawing of a skeleton. A skull. A hand with half of its flesh eaten off. Whoever drew these was really talented, and sick as fuck, and—

"Jack!"

He turned around again, and looked to Tash as she tugged on his arm. But, she wasn't looking at him, she was looking up. And, like being asked to not look down, he followed her gaze up to the ceiling.

There was a skeleton, nailed to the ceiling. Not a fake skeleton, not a drawing, and not an old skeleton. It couldn't have been more than few months old, he could smell flesh and blood, but he couldn't see them on it, minor traces of the smell a vampire couldn't miss. String, or some sort of thin rope, tied the limbs to the nails, and they looked stained with blood.

Now they were knew where the blood came from, used to paint the symbols.



“Fucking god.” He walked over to it, underneath it, and stared up at it, slowly rotating in spot. “Sheriff, why d...” Why do you think this has anything to do with me, or that I’d want to see this? No need to ask, no, not when he was staring at himself.

There was a drawing, of Jack, on a necklace. And it was dangling from the skeleton’s neck.

“I’ve already dug up the records on this facility. No one was renting this locker, according to the manager’s records.” Daniel walked up to stand beside Jack, and looked up along with him, at the picture. Or probably, at least, but Jack couldn’t look at him to check, eyes locked onto the picture.

It was a really good picture. Someone with a great hand, a fan of the pencil, someone who could cross-hatch and capture the depth of a shadow, and the depth of an emotion. They caught the look of joy in his face, the total, overwhelming bliss he felt, when he put on his headphones and let music wash away his thoughts. The only thing that could ever truly, totally and utterly silence his mind, was music. And when he listened to complex, long music, with sprawling movements, let it take him away on a journey of pure sound, vibration, waves, energy, he knew he wore that emotion on his face.

Someone captured that expression, the unique expression he wore when listening to music, fucking drew it, and put it on a corpse.

“I... I... how? Kindred faces don’t show up on camera! Digital, or analog, or what-fucking-ever!” He gestured to the picture, and started looking around for some sort of reference. “How the fuck!?”

“Jack, p-p-please, calm down.” Tash grabbed his hand and tried to pull him away, but he yanked it free and gestured back up to the hanging picture.

“What is this? What’s going on?” Oh god, oh fucking god. He stared at the picture, at the portrait, and put both hands on his head to begin rubbing his hair. “They... that...” He had headphones on in the picture too, big ones, open, supra-aural, expensive and magnificent. “My apartment! They... they... had to be watching me... and drawing me...”

Panicking. He was panicking. He was legitimately, truly, panicking. He didn’t know what that was like, to lose control, have your body fight against you, have your impulses go haywire. If he was still alive, with a beating heart and dependent on oxygen, he’d be gasping and fighting his own body for air. He stumbled around, pushed past Tash, and fell toward the table. Still on his feet, he slammed his palms down against the wooden surface, and forced his eyes to focus on something solid, but all he could find was occult symbols, and drawings of dissected body parts.

Someone was stalking him.

Why did that hit him so much harder than anything else? He'd fought monsters, survived explosions, and had managed to withstand torture. Why did this get his skin crawling, run ice down his spine, have him trembling. It was a Kindred instinct to remain hidden, to never let anyone have a piece of evidence proving you were there, that you existed. Someone had a very, very accurate portrait of him, done in fucking pencil. It sent that part of him into hysterics, and he took long, hard blinks trying to reset his mind.

The fact that he was in a room where a human had probably been cut up, dismembered, blood used for painting and bones used for a ceiling decoration, wasn't helping.

"How d-did you find this?" Tash said. The next moment, she was behind Jack, patting his back. He didn't have the heart to tell her he would prefer to not be touched right now.

"... I can't share the details. Sorry." Daniel, not sharing details with his subordinate. Strange.

Jack forced himself to stand up again, gulped on nothing, and turned to face the two Mekhets. "I imagine you're... you're investigating... the unknown threat."

"Unknown threat?" Tash blinked at him, but with time, her eyes settled, and she looked down.

"... yes." Daniel nodded and adjusted his glasses, glove to the bridge over his nose, as his dull eyes remained fixed on the skeleton above. "But we should not speak of it. With anyone."

Just as Jack suspected. It wasn't just him keeping an eye open for stranger, dark things, miscellaneous things, things that would lead to Azamel warning him. Daniel was keeping an eye open too, and considering how often the man vanished, it was probably his full time job now, hunting down whatever the fuck it was that had Azamel so spooked. Did it have Jacob or Antoinette spooked too? Did they know anything about it? Antoinette must have, if Daniel was looking into it.

Jack sighed as he forced himself to look back up at the skeleton on the ceiling. His face. His god damn face, eyes closed, headphones on, and a serene smile. It was tilted on its side, but whether that was the paper or the angle of the portrait, he couldn't tell. The picture showed a fraction of his neck, but not enough for him to be able to tell anything else, except that he was probably sitting or lying down for it.

"D-Do you... listen to your music with your curtains open?" Tash said.

"Rarely." It was the portrait that was getting him so nauseated, and overwhelmed. The skeleton, the blood symbols, the blatant occult work surrounding him, all of that was blasé, dull, compared to the god damn bit of graphite on thin white paper with his face on it.

The tiny Mekhet sighed, a tiny, mouse-like sound, and reached out for her sire. “Should... should we... t-t-take it down?”

“It’s been here for a couple months,” the sheriff said. “I think we’re safe to do that. I’ve already completed my investigation; what I can accomplish from here, anyway.”

Jack looked around, and groaned as the horrible smell took on a new meaning. “Couple months? So... they... they did this before they kidnapped me.”

“Correct.” Daniel pulled a small knife out of his sleeve — what a place to store a knife — and cut the string holding the skeleton’s right arm to the ceiling. And then another string, and then another. What flesh remaining between the joints keeping the thing together tore under the disturbance, and soon Daniel didn’t have to do much to make skeleton come down and apart. With quick, snapping hands, he grabbed the bones as they fell, like a professional juggler, setting each bone down to the floor in the same position they’d been in when above. Fast hands, very fast.

With the skeleton reconstructed on the concrete beneath them, Daniel held the picture of Jack in his gloved hands, and rotated it around.

“... here. Give this back before you leave.” The sheriff nodded, and handed him the picture.

“Shouldn’t I keep it?” Jack said. “The Invictus might—”

“We’ll be keeping it, for evidence, and to help with the investigation.” Daniel adjusted his glasses again, and began to walk the perimeter of the small room once more, one hand in a pocket while the other touched the tables and symbols. Not a request, a demand. He was the sheriff, he got to make demands, and everyone else had to listen. But, Jack had to bite his tongue to keep from saying something anyway. It was him, god damn it. Him in that picture.

“D-Do you have any theories, sheriff?” Tash said, following after him and taking pictures of the symbols with her phone.

The tall, lanky man came back to the skeleton, now on the floor face up, and he squatted down beside it. Him and his childe investigated the place like a duo, detective and the rookie. Amanda would have done the same thing. Mekhet were like that, and he was glad to have some helping him, especially now.

But, Jack could see, the sheriff didn’t want to share details. If the man was trying to keep details from the Ventrue about what he’d been doing during his recent disappearances, Jack could understand. Hell, if the man was keeping secrets from Tash, just to spare her from having to know things she didn’t

need to know, he could understand that too. Jack didn't tell Jessy or Damien about having Mulder and Scully shadowing him twenty-four/seven now, for the same reason.

Couldn't even be honest with your partners. The Danse Macabre was such a lovely bed fellow.

"... if I had to guess... someone used this man's body—"

Jack stepped in closer. "Man?"

The sheriff nodded and gestured to the waist. "Shape of the pelvis."

"... right." Breathing deep, trying to stop the pin pricks dancing up and down his spine, he looked down at the portrait, and stared at his face. A portrait of him, a beautiful one, done in pencil and with such a delightful hand, was awe inspiring. And terrifying. The juxtaposition was a cheese grater on the soft matter of his brain, tearing it apart and shredding it into bits until he felt the weight of its remains hit his feet.

Pull yourself together. You're a Ventrue. And this, this is nothing more than a threat to be dealt with. Right? Right.

"I believe someone used this man's body as part of the ritual." Daniel gestured around to the symbols, especially to the giant circle beneath them. "They wanted information. If this occurred before Jack's kidnapping, we must presume that whatever they learned from this was directly involved in the kidnapping, and perhaps the cause of."

Jack sighed, but nodded. "From how they were talking to me, I got the impression they knew a lot about us. Not just Kindred covenants or blood clans, but about how our covenants are set up here in Dolareido, about us, and about the Prince." They certainly had information, no doubt about that.

"Then... w-we should... look for more of these?" Tash said, gesturing around the room. "If this is some way for the hunters t... t-to get information, or a location, or... or anything, they'll p-probably do it again."

Nodding, the sheriff got up, and folded his arms across his chest as he stared down. "I'll check missing persons, and see if there are any other kine who've vanished."

"How are you going to be able to separate random missing people from the other death and whatnot?" Jack said. Much as Dolareido was a safe place for kine, it wasn't perfect. People died, were killed, sometimes by vampires with a motive, sometimes by vampires who got lazy. As long as the Masquerade was not damaged, Kindred were allowed to kill kine, and that made tracking down shit like this oddly complicated.

“I’m sheriff for a reason, Jack Terry.” Daniel didn’t shrug, didn’t roll his eyes, didn’t smirk or anything. He stared at the skeleton, and held out his hand to Jack, for the picture. “I’m good at what I do.”

Jack sighed, nodded, and handed the picture back to him. A picture of him. Of Jack.

Christ.

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He wasn’t going to go back to his apartment, not yet. No fucking way.

Not being able to go anywhere outside central South Side without a companion was a pain in the ass. He didn’t think it would be, considering he didn’t really go anywhere, but tonight he wanted to put a little distance between him and his apparently spied-on den. He also didn’t want to go back to the Elysium tower, and start dumping all these troubles onto his love’s lap.

But, he knew that was because he was an idiot. The night before, she’d asked him to start doing just that. More than just that, she wanted him to talk to her about things as an equal, not simply him dropping his woes onto her so she could soothe his pain. Actually talk about shit, actual real shit. If they weren’t vampires, it’d be the sort of thing two people looking to spend the rest of their lives together would do. It was the step up from enjoying chemistry, to establishing compatibility. Marrying Antoinette was an image he enjoyed, but it wasn’t how Kindred did things. Normally.

“What did you want to talk about?” Damien said. The two Kindred sat upon one of the man’s secret tower hideouts, way up high, an old radio tower. He had a telescope up here, and Jack looked through it with intrigue. You could see so many things up here, and he was sure Damien had probably looked at him in the past, spied on him, or some such.

“You any good with a pencil, Damien?”

“I am, actually. Had a lot of time to practice, hiding all those years.”

“... ever draw a picture of me?”

“No. A strange question.” He tilted his head to the side, eyebrow raised as he looked at him.

Jack, sighing and shrugging, sat down on the small tower roof. Only six feet wide, with a radio tower of rusted metal above them, and some concrete bench-like walls the tower stood from. Perfect for two Kindred to sit and talk about the scary shit coming their way.

He didn't suspect Damien, but it seemed prudent to poke about the topic a little. Later though. He'd ask about it later. The moment he steered the conversation into the direction of dark rituals, a stalker's portrait of him, and all the weird implications it brought, that's all the conversation would be about. But there were two reasons he wanted Damien with him.

"Damien, you ever worry about your sire?" Nice and quick, like a bandaid, one of the strong ones that rips out all the arm hair with it. How ladies could ever stand to wax their legs, let alone other body parts, he'd never be able to comprehend.

"... worry about him? You killed him, Jack."

"I... that's not what I mean."

"You mean whether or not your grand sire's reputation will re-manifest itself in you." Blunt and on point. Jack appreciated that, or would at least, if it didn't hit so hard right now.

"... yeah." Jack sighed, leaned back, and looked up at the sky. In the South Side of Dolareido, the stars were invisible, lost to the night lights of the city. The natural stars of the universe were distant and weak, compared to the nearby lights of bars, casinos, clubs, and everything in between.

"I assume you've already talked with Julias and the Prince about this."

"Julias, yes. With Antoinette? ... not so much."

"May I ask why?"

Jack brought his head back up, and raised a brow, mirroring Damien. Surprising, for Damien to be so forward with a question about personal stuff. He wasn't the man he used to be, whatever that meant, but it was plain to see in his body language and vernacular that the man wasn't dripping with brooding hate, like he was when Jack met him. For a question about the sire Jack had killed to not faze him, was a better outcome than Jack could have hoped for.

"I assume you read my report about my escape."

"I have."

"And I assume you've acquired more details about it, from Jessy or Maria or elsewhere."

"... I have."

“I... had to—”

“If you’re going to tell me you had to become the Alder Viktor Honors to escape the confines of torturous kine bent on killing us and our friends, and that you’re worried such a mental state will follow you home, then I’m going to have to insist that you’re being paranoid.” The Mekhet shook his head, leaned back, and looked up at the sky, same as Jack had been. “How familiar are you with psychology?”

“... more than most, but not enough to call myself anything more than an interested amateur.” Where was he going with this?

“Then I assume you’re aware that it’s human nature to look back at our past to explain our present. And that, our past often manifests in our present because humans are drawn to the familiar.”

“Absent father leads to daughter who grows up to become more interested in emotionally unavailable men. Yeah, I get that.” As usual with psychology, the theory — hypothesis, really — was soft science, filled with examples but with no way to prove direct causation.

“Your father died when you were younger, yes?”

“... yeah.” Jack didn’t think about his dad much. But, it was true, the old man was a void to be filled.

“So now you look for him. You look for him in yourself, and your sire, and your grand sire.” Damien shrugged, like Jack would shrug after giving a simple explanation, before he leaned forward again, and set his knees to his elbows, eyes on Jack. “But, if you’re thinking that maybe there’s something more going on, something specific to Kindred, something in the blood, then I’m afraid there are few examples to back that up. In all likelihood, your ability to handle that situation the way you did, as brutally as you did, was you being you, Jack. Viktor’s bloodline is strong, but that’s it.”

If there was anyone who knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of desperate Jack, it was Damien, Jack supposed.

“... I’m not sure I like that explanation any more.”

Damien managed a smile. A small thing, the sort of smile Jack might have expected to find on Daniel, if the cold man ever heard something that tickled his funny bone in just the right way.

“Lucas was a powerful Kindred as you know, Jack. And, an unusual one. A Mekhet with... Ventrue tendencies, I suppose is the kindest way to put it. Controlling others, ruling others.” The assassin wiped the definition aside, old dust on a tome. “From the moment I awakened him from his

long slumber, I could tell that he and I could not be more different. I followed his lead, convinced myself it was the correct thing to do, blinding myself with a delusion... be careful you don't do the same. You're you, you control you, and you can change you."

Jack leaned in, mirror to mirror. "You've changed more than I give you credit for."

"It's easier to change, when you've hit rock bottom and have nothing to hold on to."

Jack laughed. Ok, there was some wisdom in that, he supposed. Very Buddhist. Also very Fight Club.

And the man had a point. Jack was so convinced that his newfound desire to crush people was some carry-over from Viktor, and not just him being him. Was that better, or worse? No idea, but he felt a bit better about it, at least. If it was him being him, he had control of it, or at least more control than he did if it was Viktor's ghost coming to haunt him.

"Course, I could just be making a mountain out of a mole hill," Jack said. "Could all just be in my head, and I'm spiraling my brain down into a pit with this reductive reasoning."

"Better that you think about things, than to not."

"Jessy would disagree."

They both started laughing. This was good, this was fun, this was growth. It'd been a while since the whole Lucas incident, and Damien was quickly becoming a Kindred he could trust with his life. From enemies to friends. Straight out of a romance novel, heh.

"Seen Fiona around?" Jack said.

"Not yet."

"Julias said I should visit Azamel, to see what's going on, where the Begotten have been. And since we've both been to the nightmare, we're supposed to be working on that... project?" Determining what that project entailed was difficult. Maria wanted them to consolidate their knowledge, but they'd already tried that. They knew fuck all.

"Then I suggest we pay them a visit." Another smile sneaked its way onto his face. Jack was sure the man liked Fiona, but he wasn't sure if Damien knew he liked her. And he knew that he was the last person on Earth to be giving relationship advice.

Maybe this was that stereotype, that everyone in a relationship felt the need to get everyone else they knew into a relationship, or give relationship advice in general? His life was becoming some sort



of weird, dark comedy sitcom. Queue dropping a chainsaw on a naked hooker's head from a stairway balcony. Queue laugh track.

“Alright. I have to call in a shit show first.” He sighed, pulled out his phone, and looked around for Mulder and Scully. Sure enough, they were there, sitting on a nearby building. They'd come closer if Jack asked, but he wanted them to stay at a distance for now, keep an eye on things.

“Shit show?”

“Long story. I can tell you about it on the way to Azamel's hole in the wall.”

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“... did you suspect me?” Damien said. “The question about my drawing ability suggests you did.”

“No, but I won't let that bias affect decisions. Just cause I trust you doesn't mean you might not be secretly planning to stab me in the back.”

“True.”

They chuckled again as the two of them walked the tunnels. Same night he learned he was being stalked by some sort of deadly ritual, and he was already laughing. Jaded, or growing accustomed to the life of a vampire, he didn't know.

The lights were working, and many repairs were already completed; not that those tunnels were the tunnels they were currently working through, but still, it was nice to know that the tunnels were being maintained, even if they looked like they weren't. The dingy, flickering old lights, the dust and dirt and rats and everything in between, it all screamed abandoned tunnels. And they were abandoned, as far as the populace knew, so he supposed it fit the disguise. Just in case a kine managed to get into the abandoned tunnels by accident.

“I don't recognize your description of the ritual,” Damien continued. “It sounds like... it sounds strange, in a cliché sort of way. The symbols you describe are classic symbols used in witchcraft, known by kine across the world. But, real... supernatural things, rituals, sorcery, we know they don't bend to such bastardizations.”

“If they're bastardizations. Just because they're popular today, used in media and shit, doesn't mean they never worked in the past.”

Again the Mekhet nodded. “That is a valid point. The pentagram, upside down or what have you, in the circle, in the triangle, in the circle, with the symbols, definitely sounds like a ritual circle. The sheriff’s presumption is probably correct. What surprises me more is the presence of a skeleton.”

“... not the portrait of me?” Cause dealing with the dead was a not-uncommon act for Kindred.

“The portrait could be explained through multiple avenues. Did they use it during the ritual to learn about you, or did the ritual inform them about you, leading to the drawing? Did the ritual create the drawing? As much as the portrait is... strange, a body being used is what surprises me more. A sacrifice is extreme.”

“I guess it is.”

It’d only taken them ten minutes to put some distance under their heels, deep under the city streets. So easy to get into the tunnels through the Invictus half of South Side, especially near the HQ Xnomina like Damien and Jack were. A casual stroll, two Kindred, two right hands of the Invictus, wandering around in the poorly lit tunnels. Dangerous, but not terribly. Invictus and Carthians used the tunnels regularly, and with the buddy system going, it was unlikely the hunters would risk getting caught in them. They’d get collapsed on from all sides once the Kindred found out. No, the hunters would likely remain topside, where they could hide in the thousands of buildings and alleys. Like cockroaches.

Unless they were hunting monsters. Azamel was down here, which meant the hunters would have to come down here eventually, right?

“You remember the details Beatrice shared with Julias, about the incident with Jeremiah?” Jack said.

“Mostly.”

“She said that Jeremiah guy showed up, in Fiona’s nightmare.”

“Correct.” The Mekhet rotated his shoulders a little as they walked. He was wearing a long black jacket over his suit, and from the way he held his posture, he probably had a sword in there, a long one like Daniel liked to use. And some guns of course, because it was the 21st century.

“The four hunters followed Fiona into the nightmare, but how did Jeremiah get in there?”

He shrugged. “I had assumed the same way the other hunters had. He—”

“He broke in.”

Both Kindred jumped, spun around, and pulled out weapons, Jack pulling out a pistol from inside his suit jacket, while Damien pulled out a sword from within his overcoat. Smooth, quick. For a moment, Jack felt some pride about that; for Damien it was expected, but for Jack, it was progress on his skills. Except, of course, that being happy he managed to do that as a reaction was his hubris kicking in at the worst fucking time.

“Athalia?” Damien said.

Yeah, Athalia. Jack lowered the gun, looked at the woman for a moment, then sighed and put the pistol away. Julias said kill her if she became a problem, but she wasn’t a problem yet. And if there was anyone who could keep it that way, it was him, supposedly, for some reason.

“Damien, Jack,” she said. “I’m surprised you’re both down here.”

With a small breath, Jack nodded. The situation hadn’t changed, despite Julias’s words. She was a reluctant ally until shown otherwise. “Came to see how you guys were doing, actually. Haven’t seen much of the Begotten lately.”

Wearing some jeans and a black sweater, Athalia walked up to them, and motioned for them to continue walking. Attractive, with an icy bite in her eyes that always put Jack on edge. He’d gotten past it, when she talked to him at the ball. But now it was back, that wall of ice he’d have to break through if he wanted to make progress with her.

She’s not a wild animal you need to tame, Jack. Grow the fuck up.

“We’ve been spending more time in the nightmare, as you can imagine.” She got a couple feet ahead of them, and kept that pace. Yeah, it was her tunnels, in her mind. “With Jeremiah and Angela looking for more ways to get to us, we’ve been keeping an eye on things while remaining hidden.”

Damien looked at Jack, and Jack looked at Damien. Both shrugged. If she wanted to do the leading, whatever, that worked for them.

The Mekhet put his sword away, slowly, wearing his hesitation longer than Jack did. “Did you notice us coming down here, or did you stumble onto us?”

“Fiona sensed you coming.”

He raised a brow. “How?”

“She’s very skilled, especially for a girl her age. You tripped her threads.”

“Didn’t see any spider webs,” Jack said. Damn, that was an impressive skill, if Fiona could lay out trip wipes like that. “There any news? Any sightings?”

A long sigh fell out of her, like she was rolling a heavy boulder off her back. “No. And that is a problem. Jeremiah has no reason to wait, not when his goal is simply to eliminate Azamel. Is he looking for a new avenue of attack? We do not know.”

“How did Jeremiah break in last time?” Damien said. “Into your nightmare world.”

“It... it’s something some people can do. We don’t know how, exactly, but Jeremiah and Angela can break through to our chambers.” She shivered. Athalia, afraid, was a strange image. It was hard to think of her as anything other than the legless, winged reaper entity.

Heh, she’d fit in nicely in Antoinette’s collection of Temperman art.

“I could tell Jeremiah and Angela weren’t entirely normal,” Jack said. It was enough to pull Athalia’s gaze over her shoulder, catch his, and squint at him with her steel eyes before looking back to the tracks they walked.

“Elaborate.”

“Um, well, I couldn’t get through to their minds. It was almost like a wall was there, blocking me. The others were easy, but those two? Felt like trying to climb Everest.”

“... yes, that does make sense. You are the only vampire I know who’s attempted such a feat, and lived to speak about it at least.” Nodding, sighing, she slowed down a little, enough for the two Kindred to walk beside her. Good, progress. “I’m surprised you’re talking to me at all, honestly.”

“Because of Angela?”

“Yes. I’m sure your superiors told you to kill her, and now you all know she’s my daughter. And... you know I do not want her death.”

Jack looked to Damien, but the man said nothing. He was good at knowing when to sit and listen, or walk and listen in this case. Another voice would have damaged the tenuous, fragile bridge Athalia was offering Jack, one of communication. It was times like this he was glad Jessy wasn’t with them all the time.

“Well, if detaining her is possible, then we’ll do that,” he said. Lied. Sort of. Julias and the council wanted him to kill Angela, but surely if he could capture her, they’d prefer that? It was his job to keep everyone getting along, and killing Athalia’s daughter was not a step in that direction.

And he was going to ignore the pulse in his brain that started to pump agony and fire the moment he thought of Angela’s face.

Athalia laughed, shrugged, and put a hand out to offer him a small pat on the shoulder. Her expression was both sad and humored, his words no doubt having dug up a mix of memories for her.

“You can try, boy, you can try. But she’ll kill you. She’ll kill all of you, and she’ll smile doing it. I know your bosses would prefer she was dead, and I don’t blame them.”

The Mekhet stepped in, small frown to go with. “Then you are putting us in a strange situation, Athalia. You won’t help us, but will you stop us?”

“I... don’t know.” She might have been offering Jack some compassion, but steel would have been envious over the look she gave Damien. “Consider the circumstance I find myself in, blood leech. She’s my daughter. Do you have any children?”

“... no.”

“Any childes?”

“No.”

“Neither of you have the faintest idea what it’s like to be a parent, and being a sire doesn’t even come close. But I don’t need to waste my breath. Go read a book about it, there’s only been... what, a hundred thousand books about the overwhelming power of parenthood written in human kind’s short existence?” Scoffing like she was talking to things less than insects, she looked back to the tracks ahead of them, and took them toward Azamel’s home. “So I’m struggling with the circumstance.”

“I—”

Damien flicked his wrist toward Jack, shutting him up. “I don’t deny the circumstance you find yourself in is a horrible one. But that’s ultimately irrelevant, and you know it.” Didn’t expect that from Damien, not at all.

“... that I do.”

Jack didn’t expect hard words to mean much to Athalia, but the topic was a strange one, and Damien’s cruel approach seemed to reach the monster woman between them. But with a few more seconds, she shrugged it off, steeling her gaze once again, as they followed the turns down deeper into the depths of the Earth.

“How’s Fiona handling this?” Jack said. “I mean, with people actively hunting your kind, it must be a pretty huge change for her.”

“Fiona is an interesting girl. Her horror is unique, in a way, with its own identity and memory to draw upon.”

“Vrallar’trakla, of the Eight Blade Arach,” Damien said, chin in his fingers, eyes down on the tracks.

“Yes. She has a reservoir of experience to draw on, but at the same time, is just a young girl.” Shrugging again, Athalia took them into the final tunnel to Azamel’s abode.

But the old woman wasn’t there. Fiona was there, and the Begotten Jack had to assume was Mark. They both sat on the stage, doing their own thing, Mark reading a book and Fiona watching something on her laptop. There wasn’t any internet down here, no WiFi or anything, so the only way she was getting things onto her laptop was trips topside.

“Damien! Jack!” The redhead hopped off the stage of concrete, and ran up to them. She hugged him, then Damien, full on tight hugs, with a little extra time for Damien too. Girl probably delighted in making the man squirm, as having a feisty, curvy redhead full-on bear hugging him had him squirming like a trapped pet, looking over the girl’s short height at Jack.

Jack shrugged back at him, smiling. “Hey Fiona.”

“Jack. How are ye? I’ve been meaning to talk to ye since the whole... since that whole horrible incident. It sounds terrible!” She guided them over to join her on the stage, where she re-sat in Azamel’s chair. Why she was sitting on the old monster’s chair, Jack had no idea, and seeing her get comfy in the worn material was strange to the utmost degree. He expected Azamel to incinerate anyone who dared touch her cigarette-ash covered throne, but Fiona looked calm and comfortable. Athalia and Mark didn’t seem to care either.

“I’m fine now. It was pretty horrible, but smooth sailing since.”

“I hear ye were promoted too. Pretty young vampire to gie promoted!” She put her laptop aside, and rocked back and forth in the chair. There was nowhere else to sit, so the two vampires stood. There was something comfy and fun about the girl’s obliviousness to the fact the two guys were forced to stand while she sat. With Kindred, especially older ones, he’d have to do a song and dance about making sure they had a place to sit, or he’d stand and let them sit instead.

“Yeah, promoted, and now I have a host of new shit to worry about.” He shrugged it off. Half joke, half serious, a lovely balance of sarcasm and witlessness. “It’s good, and bad. Things I’d normally pass up the chain, I’m now tasked with trying to figure out myself. That’s half the reason I’m here, really, to see what the Begotten are up to.”

“N’ I hear ye have a buddy system.” She gestured to Damien, smile growing when she did. “Protecting each other?”

The Mekhet nodded, but said nothing. When the redhead caught his gaze, Damien didn't hold it for long, looking away and putting his hands back into his overcoat pockets. Uncomfortable, but at least his expression didn't sour. It made Jack tempted to bring up Eric, and see what was going on there, see if Fiona was still interested in Damien. But he didn't have the social maneuvering skills to do that without making shit awkward. Julias could do it, but he couldn't.

“Damien's protecting me more than I him.”

“True.” The Mekhet nodded, matter-of-fact. Heh, jackass.

“Did ye come aw the way down here to talk to us, 'n' me?” Giggling, Fiona started rocking the chair, but with her feet up on it, folded under her knees. “I was going to visit ye lads soon. But until we have a better feel for what's going on, where th' hunters might be hiding, we're hiding.”

“I'd have greatly appreciated that, thanks,” Jack said. “Cause, information is at an all-time low right now, or rather, the need is at an all-time high. Shit just hit the fan and I'm scared shitless.”

“Wha? What happened?”

To share the info or to not share the info. Daniel and Tash would keep the scene locked down, prevent any kine interference, and when the Invictus arrived, they'd do a proper clean up and cataloging of any evidence the sheriff let them keep. Ultimately, the sheriff dictated policy in such matters. But in the whole of that circumstance, at no point was telling the Begotten about the ritual, the skeleton, or the portrait, a needed step.

And yet, they might be just what he needed. The hunters were here for them, and Kindred — him specifically — were getting caught in the middle. They wanted to help, and considering it was probably the hunters that performed the ritual, the hunters hunting these Begotten, they might be able to help. Julias wouldn't like him sharing the info, but Jack was allowed to exercise his right as right hand of the Invictus, and make decisions, even bad ones.

“Have you guys,” he said, “ever heard of a ritual, involving a room filled with... basically every occult symbol from the big book of occult symbols? Big ritual circle on the floor, pentagram in the center? Most done in blood, some carved with a knife, far as I can tell. And, uh, a skeleton nailed and tied to the ceiling?”

Damien poked him with an elbow, and Jack offered him the biggest ‘I have no idea what I'm doing’ shrug he could manage. The three monsters all looked at him like he'd lost his head, too.

“I have.”

The five of them looked down to the tunnel at the other end of the large room, and the two vampires tilted their heads to the side, as an old woman came around the corner. Mark, who'd otherwise been sitting around on the stage in jeans and a hoodie, doing absolutely nothing, hopped off the stage of concrete and went to the old woman's side.

Jack hopped off the stage as well. "Um, hi, Azamel. I was hoping to speak with you." He glanced over to Fiona, but the girl continued to sit in the old monster's chair, rocking back and forth, as if she wasn't risking her life by pissing her off. Maybe Azamel wasn't so harsh with fellow Begotten. Mark seemed more than invested in helping her, as he slipped his arm under hers, while she waddled toward the stage, leaning on a cane.

"About the sacrifice?" she said, offering him something between a smirk and snarl, before finally reaching the raised concrete of her weird home.

"No, actually. We came to ask about your scarcity as of late. We thought maybe the hunters got you, or that you were in hiding from them."

"Hiding is a strong word." With Mark's help, she got back up onto the stage, and with a few thumb gestures, sent Fiona packing. The girl jumped down with the two vampires, while Azamel got comfortable in her chair, slowly, body creaking with the motion. "That bastard Jeremiah can break into our home, our true home, and I must be vigilant."

Damien didn't know what Azamel looked like in the nightmare world, now that Jack thought about it. Jack had described her to him, and he hoped a description is all he'd ever get.

"I see," Jack said. "And, uh, you said—"

"I'd ask to see a picture of the ritual aftermath, but, I already know what happened."

Oh thank god. "Please, by all means, fill me in."

The old woman eyed him up and down, squinting. Probably wondering if the information was worth trading over, if giving it to him straight wasn't as good as getting something out of him in return.

"... the picture was of you, boy, wasn't it?"

He winced, and nodded, head sinking between his shoulders. "Yeah, it was."

"Then, it sounds like Jeremiah had his eyes on you, in more ways than one." Azamel pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and got to lighting it. Or, trying, but it was easy to see her old, bony, veiny fingers couldn't go through the motions, not without causing the old lady to wince in much the same way as



him. Mark came up beside her, and after a few moments of more failed attempts, the old woman grumbled, and put the cigarette pack and a lighter in the man's hands.

"More ways than one?" God, finally, some good news. Azamel knew what the fuck was going on. And of course lots of bad news to accompany it, but that was expected.

"I don't know how Jeremiah does it, but it's a ritual he's done before. He's got eyes on you now, and he'll find you, learn things about you." The old woman laughed, took a puff, and broke into coughs. Deep, lung-destroying coughs. "Well, you know that now, since he kidnapped you."

"... yeah." He shivered, rubbed his arms, and looked to the rest of the group. The girls were looking at him, Athalia with something between pity and disdain, Fiona with straight up concern. It was sweet, and he gave her a half smile, half shrug. Yeap, this was just his everyday life these days. "Do you know about the person that had to die for the sacrifice?"

A puff of smoke later, she tapped the cigarette ashes into the ashtray, and sighed as she looked up, leaning back in the chair. "I'm sure Jeremiah picked some nameless fool off the street."

"Wait," Damien said. "These are hunters, convinced that, to protect their fellow human, they need to kill us. Why would—"

Azamel blew her next puff of smoke at the man. And considering she was up on the stage, Damien back on the ground, the fact the smoke reached him was impressive.

"You mistake Jeremiah for a hunter. The hunters, these cliché humans, bundles of hypocrisy, self loathing, and traumatized pasts, are his tools. He is not them. His purpose is grander."

"Grander than lives?" Jack started to pace, rubbing his head as his eyes fell from the old woman, to the concrete beneath him. "... he killed an innocent person, to gain a tactical advantage on his hunt for you?"

The old monster shrugged, took another smoke, and looked to the side. Digging through memories. "I doubt Jeremiah would break into a person's home and kidnap a loving parent, for this sacrifice. I am sure he took someone he thought the world wouldn't miss, a thug or thief or some other ludicrous stereotype, drugged them to keep them under, and sacrificed them to the madwoman witch."

"... I'm sorry, what? Madwoman witch?" He stopped pacing, and blinked. A lot.

But while he sounded confused as all hell, and was, Azamel shrugged again, casual, and blew some smoke at him.

“There’s an old woman, almost as old as I, that serves Jeremiah quite faithfully. Every so often, I can see her fingerprints on acts, such as the divining she used to learn about you.” A hand gesture to him, before she tapped the cigarette on the ashtray again.

Damien sneered. A hard expression and far more disgruntled noise than Jack had heard from the man for a long time. “And you didn’t think this important enough to mention earlier?”

Again Azamel shrugged. “Often, there are years between her acts, and it has been years since his companion has performed any of her rituals, to my knowledge. I thought she might have been dead.”

This bitch. Both Fiona and Athalia looked uncomfortable, wincing as Jack and Damien looked to each of them for a little support. But both seemed loyal to Azamel; hell, it seemed like they liked her. And for Azamel to not bring up information like this, was a power play, her indirectly reminding the Kindred that she knew more than them, and that they needed her. It was also her being a colossal jackass.

Mark didn’t seem to care either way, standing by the chair, hands in his pockets, with his bored expression on the vampires.

Her warning about mysterious forces, whatever the fuck that meant, was genuine, he had no choice but to believe that. Daniel was looking into something, and it was probably related. Anything to do with this witch Azamel was bring up now? No, it couldn’t have, Azamel acted like this woman was nothing more than another tool for the pest Jeremiah. Her warning had been far more heavy, and filled with concern.

“Is there anything we can do?” Jack said. “I’d prefer to stop this ritual from happening again. Innocents getting killed should be avoided, and prevented.” The only people who seemed to give a shit about the humans getting caught in this horribleness, were the vampires and the werewolves. How fucked was that?

Athalia hopped up onto the stage, and pulled out a wooden stool from around a changing wall to sit on. “You really care?”

“Of course I care. Kindred don’t kill kine when we can help it.”

“Here,” she said. “Kindred don’t kill kine when they can help it, here. I’ve been to other cities, and the Kindred there are far less worried for the lives of their meals.”

This again, ugh, retreading the same ground. He sighed, forced his body to relax, and walked up to the stage to look up at Athalia and Azamel.

“Yes, here. You guys know it’s not like that here in Dolareido. By far and large, we want to keep people alive. And not just for ‘waste not, want not’ reasons. So, yeah, we have a little more compassion than your typical vampire, and that extends to stopping a psychopath from murdering innocent people.

“And before you interject, yes, that also extends to stopping said psychopath from being a major tactical advantage for the enemy, against both Kindred and Begotten.” He squinted at Athalia, catching her retort before she managed to speak it, before he looked back to the old monster rocking in her old chair. “I stuck my neck out, giving you this info about this discovery. I’m hoping you can throw me a bone here.”

Mark snorted. Athalia snorted, quieter, but still a snort. Fiona nodded several times, eager but bound by Azamel’s ruling.

“Jeremiah’s witch is an old woman, very, and human. I have never seen her myself, but I imagine she is on death’s door,” Azamel said. “She will likely be in a wheel chair, and with several humans to take care of her. Fragile.”

“Thank you.” That was something he could work with. There were a decent amount of old women in wheelchairs in Dolareido, but it was a much smaller number than millions.

“And I suppose you want to know if I have made any progress in dealing with this menace.” Another puff of smoke, and a sneer to go with it. “That is why you’re here, yes? Not simply to check if I am still alive.”

“... a little, yes. I wanted to see if you guys were still alive, but I suppose you won’t believe me on that.”

“I believe you!” Fiona said, sitting down on the stage edge and kicking both her feet out.

Athalia snorted and shook her head.

“I believe you,” Azamel said. That got some raised brows from everyone. “You are young, naive, and foolish, Jack Terry. That’s a large part of why I trust you.”

“Thanks?” I guess? “I know Jeremiah managed to get into your nightmare world without being let in. And, considering how paranoid Kindred are of the idea of someone catching them sleeping, I can only imagine what that’s like.”

“There... is a striking similarity to be had there.” Another puff of smoke later, she put the butt down, and fetched another cigarette. Good god, how was she not dead yet. “Your superiors and Prince

may not be welcome, but a silly fool like yourself is a welcome sight, Jack Terry. And, if you need a place to escape to, come here and we will know. Someone will be along to take you into our home.”

“Wow, thank you.” Their home, right. Walls covered in bleeding faces. A bloody version of Dolareido. A malaria-filled jungle, supposedly. He shivered at the thought, and all four Begotten chuckled, each in their own unique way. Yeah, make fun of the vampire for being a little afraid of nightmares, jackasses.

“If something happens, I’ll find ye and gie ye somewhere safe.” Fiona hopped down to join him, hooked his arm, and Damien’s arm too, and started walking them back the way they came. “If I had known ye were worried about me, I would have visited sooner.”

Jack looked back over his shoulder, at the three monsters watching him leave. It was his job to meet with the monsters, be their friend — or intermediary at least — and see how things were going. If it was as simple as a casual visit to the tunnels, maybe he should be doing it more often? Probably not, with hunters around making every journey outside a dangerous circumstance. Better they visit him.

“I’d come around more, but it’s dangerous these days,” he said. Damien’s cloak of night, or Jessy’s brute strength, were all well and good, but these hunters had too many tricks up their sleeves.

“Then I’ll come to ye! Me or Athalia or Mark. We can gie around a wee bit better. In fact, I’ll show ye.” Like a soldier, she turned around, pointed to the other tunnel, and marched. Damien and Jack managed some glances toward the three monsters on the stage watching, but they didn’t look interested in the silliness. In fact, it almost looked as if their minds were elsewhere. And for three monsters to be sitting and standing around, with half-glazed looks, minds elsewhere, was strange.

The other tunnel was dark, and it was where Jack had found the strange hole and stairway that led into a Hellraiser landscape. No hole this time, but the darkness was still there, more darkness than there should have been, considering Azamel’s room was lit, and they’d only just made the corner.

And as the darkness enveloped them, humidity took them as well. Oh shit.

The girl between the two Kindred started to change. It was all lost to the darkness, absolute, total darkness, but both Kindred had no trouble noticing that little Fiona was getting taller, considering she was holding their arms. Taller, and taller, and eventually, hovering, the natural impact and sway of walking gone. Rustling, branches and leaves, catching the impact of delicate, long limbs. All lost in the oppressive obsidian of their new surroundings.

Until his boots started to meet mud. Yeap, this was the jungle, the place Damien had told him about. Jack coughed, then gagged as the heat, humidity, and smell smashed into his nostrils. Dirt, rot,

fruit and fungus and insects and life and death in its most compact form. Another step almost had him tripping, but Fiona's hand found him, and caught his wrist.

And then pulled him up by the wrist, up and up and up. He gasped, and stared at the approaching leaves, the passing branches and vines, as the moon came into existence. Moons. More gasps as they went higher, and higher, passed what he was sure was monkeys howling in trees, and snakes waiting for prey to stumble into their thermal strike zone. Damien was beside him, but it was hard to see much with any clarity, not with how fast Fiona was lifting them.

Soon, they were high in the trees, high enough that falling would have meant death for a human. The canopy gave way, and the open sky was above them, the stars and moons shining with such brilliance, Jack had to gasp yet again. Gasp and slip, cause the branch Fiona set him on was slippery as fuck. She caught him though, one of those massive spider legs reaching across his chest, like a parent stopping their child with their arm during harsh stop in the car.

Damien was on a different branch, another tree, a sister tree Jack supposed, with how the branches were almost touching.

"Um... why are we up here?" Jack said.

"I wanted to talk to you where it's a little harder for people to eavesdrop." Scottish accent gone, this new, eyeless creature of curves, a silk dress, and blades, continued to hover, a single inch above the branch. "Have you talked with Damien about Azamel's warning?"

"... no, I haven't." Ugh, Fiona didn't understand the dance, or Danse, didn't get how to word things in just the right way to avoid implying things, not commenting directly on things, and protecting information. Reminded him of himself, when he was younger.

"Oops." She brought her claw fingers to her lips. If she was trying to look sheepish, she couldn't pull it off without eyes. "Sorry."

Damien, standing far more comfortably than Jack was, tilted his head to the side. "Something I should know? Or, shouldn't know?"

Maybe he should tell Damien? Man was becoming one of the few Kindred Jack trusted. Or, he was the source of the problem Azamel warned him of... nah. He was already trusting his partner with a lot of things, might as well go the whole way on the big stuff. It'd be nice to have someone to consolidate knowledge on.

"Azamel's warned me that someone out there is up to nasty shit," he said.

“... nasty shit?”

“Yeah, exactly, I don’t know what it entails either. But someone out there is preparing something, I guess, something dangerous that will probably get a lot of people killed.”

Damien sighed, and grabbed a nearby branch with his gloved hand. At least he was a little more familiar with the insanity of randomly being in a jungle than Jack was. “Any more to go on?”

“Nothing, except that it’s some magical shit. Spirits, monsters, dimensional stuff, the sort of shit that would have a creature like Azamel scared.”

“... Cthulhu?” he said.

God damn it. Jack laughed, and shook his head. He didn’t give Damien enough credit; the man could be funny when he wanted to be.

“We do not know,” Fiona said. Or, Vrall said, or something. “But, we Begotten are tuned in to far more of the hidden worlds. We can... smell, that something is changing, and we can see the scars this thing’s travels are leaving on the pathways.” The eyeless monster sighed, enormous horns flowing from where her eyes would be if she had any, curling back into the grand crown of black horns. “And now that we know Jeremiah’s witch friend has set her eyes upon Jack, I fear you will be targeted again.”

The Mekhet sighed as well, and looked up at the moon. For a moment, Jack thought he might have been doing that ironically. But, no, he was doing it un-ironically, like Daniel would.

“I kind of wished you hadn’t told me.”

Jack laughed, shrugged, and gestured to Fiona. “Blame her.”

“I do.” He looked back to them, but there was a grin there, enough to pull a chuckle from the spider woman. “You said scars, Fiona?”

“Mhmm. Someone is breaking through to other worlds, and not gently. There are scars where they tunnel through to other realms.”

“Other realms? Like, the spirit world?” Jack said. “Like, where the Uratha more or less tell us to fuck off and not touch?”

“... yes, that is one of the realms.”

Yeap, this was one of those precipices Jack knew he should back away from, but was going to throw himself off of anyway.

“Show me.”

