

~~Jack~~

The meeting at Bloodlust went about as well as he expected. There was awkwardness, and strangeness, weirdness, and all the synonyms. But once they realized Antoinette wasn't there to destroy them or spy on them, they seemed to settle in. Triss turned into a punk, Jen turned into a slut, Fiona was all giggles, and even Athalia managed to crack a smile. Damien got less defensive, and so did Arturo. By the end of it, Jack was finally able to relax.

And then the phone rang.

They didn't have long until sun up, maybe an hour, and doing more recon was a bad idea. But this was too important to not investigate immediately. Antoinette went back to her tower, where she could better relay the information to her thralls, through her network, and whatever it was a Prince did that kept the city running. Jen, Triss, Athalia, and Fiona all left, unaware of what Daniel had found, only that the rest of them had to leave asap. They'd find out sooner or later; this information went around the Kindred underground, no matter how hard people tried to keep it secret. Natasha, Damien, Matthew, and Arturo all took a ride in the Invictus car Jack called. A tight fit.

843 Baker's Street was the apartment building Isabella had given Jack. Now it was the apartment building they were driving to, at Daniel's behest. Part of Jack wanted to tell the man his solo efforts were getting in the way of their investigation, and that he might have compromised what could have been a good ambush opportunity; or worse, gotten himself killed. Bad idea. And besides, the man knew what he was doing.

The five of them walked through the front of the shitty old apartment building, down the shitty old apartment building stairs, along the shitty old apartment building carpet in the hallway, stained and dirty, past the dented, scratched walls, and down into the basement of the shitty old apartment building. Even if the ritual wasn't here, he wouldn't have been surprised to find a corpse or two buried in the building's guts. There were some storage lockers down here, with open fence showing all their contents; no rituals would be done in this room. But at the end of the room, there was another door, and the group of them moved through it a little slower now, as the lighting grew less, and the world grew quiet.

There was another stairway, going down, and at this point, he was starting to get the same vibes he caught from Athalia's stairway into hell. It was dark, it was deep, and it was confined. Claustrophobia. Gulping, Jack stepped along, Damien ahead of him, Tash and her wolves behind him.

The door led to another door, one with an sliding view window, ready to accept passwords. This door led to a stairway. And this stairway led to a door.

And that door opened to show the same ritual.

“... wow.” Damien stopped, blocking them, until Jack tapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry.” Stepping in, the Mekhet looked around, in blatant shock over the sight.

Jack didn't want to look at the sight. Once was enough.

“Same as last time,” Daniel said, and pointed up.

And like a bunch of lemmings, they all looked up, and gasped. The skeleton on the ceiling had another picture attached, but, like Daniel said, it wasn't Jack. Thank god, he couldn't stomach that a second time.

“Eric?” Matt said.

“Eric.” Art said.

Eric. Why was the picture of Eric? Shit. Shit shit. What was the pattern there? If the ritual was finding people the hunters could use to get close to the Prince, Eric did not fit that bill.

Like last time, the walls were covered in symbols, written in blood, and some in what looked like charcoal. The tables that lined the walls were metal this time, and someone had still carved symbols into them, scratching the strange shapes into the metal surface. Many had symbols painted in red next to them, and the smell of rotting blood was evident. If the old woman had been here recently, and the blood was already rotting, then the sacrifice might have taken multiple trips to complete.

A bird skull. A cow skull. A horse skull. Same as last time, symbols painted around a giant circle on the floor, something he would be sure the Circle were responsible for, if he didn't already have someone else to suspect. Jacob and his witches insisted it wasn't them, and Azamel was sure it was this strange shaman woman. But, it was hard to imagine humans, kine, doing this, stringing someone up, killing them, burying every surface around them in symbols, while dissecting them.

Disgusting.

“Wait,” he said. “Julias said he and Jessy found Eric in the sewers after his first change, with Athalia. Think he talked to Azamel?”

“I w-wouldn't be surprised,” Tash said.

Then Azamel was a link. Which made sense, considering she was the hunters' target all along. But others had talked to her as well. What made Eric and Jack different from the others? They were both young as fuck, in paranormal terms, but that hardly seemed like a decent link.

"This is sick," Damien said, standing by one of the tables, and sifting through the piles of papers. "Someone drew a dissection."

A dissection, for the most part. While most of the pictures showed calculated removal of skin and muscle, a few showed some rather barbaric tearing.

"I think it's that Black Blood spirit," Art said.

Jack froze, before slowly turning his head to look at the man. Art wasn't looking his way, instead looking up at the skeleton pinned to the ceiling.

Jack did his best to sound like he didn't know what they were talking about. "What do you mean?" Not that he didn't trust Art and Matt; their hearts seemed to be in the right place, but he didn't want them interfering with him learning as much as he could.

"Old, big, nasty spirit, an Incarna." Art looked in Daniel's direction, squinting at the statue in a trench coat, before looking back up at the hanging skeleton. "I don't know, honestly. Those red wraiths seem to be interested in this stuff, and those red wraiths are connected to Black Blood, and—"

"And we don't know." Shrugging, Matt got down onto a knee, and looked over the enormous circle symbol on the floor. "I smell... chemicals, old."

Daniel nodded. "This was probably a bunker set up for producing or storing drugs. Professional." As professional as you could get in Devil's Corner, Jack figured.

Red wraiths and Black Blood. Connections he'd already made, but knowing that's what Art and Matt were thinking meant it was a good one.

"Triss said something," Jack said, "about you not being invited?"

"Yeah. She and that other witch are getting into deep shit with Jacob, and Black Blood. Everyone's blowing it off, but—"

"We're not blowing it off." Daniel shook his head and adjusted his glasses, but otherwise did not move. "I'm well aware of Jacob's interactions with Black Blood. These rituals are new, however."

While they chatted, Damien did nothing but stare. Tash looked disturbed by the sight as well, but didn't take long to push past it and start cataloging things. Jack joined her, and sighed as he looked at

the pictures stacked on the tables around the room. What once probably held vials and jars, now held piles of evidence of the occult, with a blatant obsession with the macabre and grotesque.

He picked up one picture, and stared at the accurate, detailed tendons. Why the artist had to pay so much loving attention to all the minute particulars of what lay underneath skin and muscle, he couldn't fathom. Those red wraiths wanted a piece of Fiona, to see her guts and whatnot, and he assumed that that was connected to this.

But was it? Those red wraiths were cutting everything apart and blatantly obsessed with getting their hands on flesh. The ritual was about gore as well, but different. The pictures in front of him would have been at home on a surgeon's desk; most of them, anyway.

"Matt," he said.

"Mm?"

"You interrupted something being done by the witches?"

"Yeah. Triss, Jen, and that Jacob asshole, were performing some sort of ritual, and communicating with Black Blood. There was a corpse there, and a ritual bowl, full of guts and whatnot."

Jack winced, and held one of the drawings in front of him, facing the table, his back to Matt. "... messy?"

"Extremely."

Then there was a disconnect. Black Blood and its red wraiths, if they were its red wraiths, had some sort of interest in flesh, but a total disregard for acquiring it cleanly or keeping it intact. The person performing this dissection and this ritual was far more concerned with exact detail, patterns, and a strange combination of anatomy and occult knowledge.

Much as it'd be easy to blame Jacob and Black Blood, it was seeming more and more like they and the rituals weren't connected; not directly, at least.

"We need to find Eric," he said. "But—"

"But the sun will be up soon," Damien said, finally lowering his eyes from the corpse above. "What do we do about this?"

"I'll lock it down." Nodding, Daniel gestured to the door. "Let's leave, and get some place safe for sunrise. Take Art and Matt with you, Natasha, until you are safe at the tower."

It was hard to not smile at that, Daniel, being protective of Natasha, in his own, official, cold and distant sort of way. Jack had no right to judge, but still, cute.

“I’ll go with her, I suppose,” he said. They were going to same place, after all. “Thanks for showing me, sheriff. I know you didn’t have to.”

“I messaged the Prince, Mister Terry, not you. But I do not disagree in involving you. You’ve proved your worth.”

Jack smirked at the man. Proved his worth. He was talking about Lucas; which Art and Matt didn’t know about, if he guessed right.

They left, and headed back to Elysium Tower to sleep. Hopes up, hopes down, Hella’s sighting proving very true, but in the end, wasted. At least her picture had confirmed they knew what the shaman and her companions looked like. Something was better than nothing.

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~~Eric~~

Come sunrise, he took the opportunity of his temporary freedom from the watchful eye of vampires, to do fuck all. He drifted around, watched a shitty movie, bought a couple burgers, only to eat the meat and nothing but. Someone asked if he was doing keto, and he almost said no, but on second glance, he had to admit he was. In the past week, he’d eaten nothing but meats, muscle and organ, and other strange things that were ultimately just parts of an animal.

He was tempted to visit Azamel. Of his three options, the Begotten seemed to be the only group willing to be basically hands off with him. Avery wanted him under her thumb to some degree, and the vamps were blatant about wanting to control him entirely. Jessy said he should just do whatever he wanted, play the field, like an athlete with options. A good idea, except that the three groups were liable to either kill him, or get him killed, if he fucked up.

The more he thought about it, the more he found himself leaning toward Azamel. The only thing she asked is for him to try and help her if she and the others were under attack. Of all the options, that seemed the nicest; except that, of course, hunters were already in the city, trying to kill her. But they were probably going to try and kill him too, so that was almost a moot point.

And for some stupid reason, he liked the monsters. He liked Fiona for obvious reasons, but Athalia? Bitch. Mark? Asshole. Azamel? Colossal bitch. Those three probably pissed everyone off around them, merely by existing. That was appealing, for whatever reason. Maybe seeing a bit of himself in them.

The werewolves all seemed cool, but he got a bit of a military vibe from them. One for all, all for one, no man left behind, blah blah. No thanks. The vamps wore their mafia motif on their sleeves; though, he'd yet to talk to a Carthian, so maybe they were different.

The vamps, the Invictus, were also writing his cheques. That meant they owned his new life. It also meant they owned his dad's life. If he did something to piss them off, that'd be the end of that. And it wasn't like he could just ignore everything Avery had to say; christ, he ran into some fucking random spirits just last night. Should he have hunted them down, or chased them back to wherever, or was there something else he was supposed to do?

Why did he care?

He went to a hotel. Random hotel, random room, paid in cash, nothing that would give him away. Kat had food; thankfully she could graze on food and not get fat, too lazy to make the effort to gorge herself. Here, he could close his eyes, forget about his troubles, the ridiculousness of his new life, and breathe. That's all he needed to do, breathe, relax, and let the stress melt away.

Of course, that wasn't going to happen.

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The woods. The forest. A riverbed at his feet. The gentle, lulling sounds of water cresting over small rocks and pebbles. Wind, soft and soothing against his fur as it rustled the leaves of the trees around him. He sat by the river on his haunches, paws wet against the pebbles that dipped into the water, gibbous moon above. In the distance was Dolareido; he recognized the tall buildings, skyscrapers, and the glow of casino lights.

Would it be so bad, if he stayed here? The forest behind him, city in front of him, both in his world, both a part of him.

No, it wouldn't.

He took a long, deep breath, and sighed. If he didn't know any better, he'd think he was relaxed.

Breathe it again. Smell that? The woods, water, life and death in a nice balance. What else do you smell?

Asphalt and sex and metal and alcohol, from the city, on the breeze.

You breathe that, breathed it your whole life. The city is in your blood, in your lungs, and it's your duty to defend it.

I never asked for duty.

You never asked to breathe.

I should be thankful for a life I didn't ask for? Gracious? Sounds like a Johnny Cash song.

It could be.

He snorted, and looked down at the river. A wolf looked back at him, a normal wolf. Eric was a wolf now, a werewolf in truth, some sort of ancient entity's bloodline reborn in the human body. Father Wolf and Mother Luna were his new parents? Was Father Wolf a better parent than his dad in the hospital?

Yes and no. It was so long ago, I can barely remember. His children killed him. He prowled the borders between spirit and solid, flesh and ephemera, and kept things in order. A tough job, considering how thin the lines between Hisil and Gurihal were. A horrible mistake, killing him, I think. It led to—

The river exploded, water erupting in a cloud of cold force that sent Eric flying back. He spun through the air before crashing into the ground, rolling and rolling, until rock and earth tore off clumps of fur mixed with blood. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.

Eric, shaking, head pulsing, forced himself up onto his paws, and stared out toward the river. It was a small stream, a foot deep; nothing should have been jumping out of it, let alone exploding out of it. But water continued to rain down from above, and the river itself churned and boiled, as if a million piranha were swarming some drowning fool.

Shadows crawled out of the water. Tall, wide, like curtains against the backdrop of the night sky. The city was behind it, and soon hidden from view as the curtains spread, edges smooth, and body completely opaque. Several hooks, or nails, were at the top of each curtain, a corner. It was almost like he was looking at a pair of enormous bat wings. Two pairs of wings? Four arches, four spans that covered the world in obsidian, before disappearing into the water below.

An arm shot out from the water, and slammed down into the ground before Eric. A mostly human arm, but the skin was dark, black, tinted with strange shades of gray, like metal, and enormous claws. Then another arm... and another... and another.

Whatever this thing was, this shadow clawing out of the depths of his dream, it had four wings, and four arms.

It roared, an alien sound, deep and rumbling, and with a vocal fry and tear like a metal singer scream. It came up onto the shore of pebbles, and the small rocks were crushed under the weight of its colossal talons. Two legs at least, but a long tail, slithering left and right like a fucking dragon's, dangled behind the entity.

"This is the one," it said. It could talk.

Eric looked up. The moon was gone. There was still light; he was in a dream after all, and shit didn't have to be logical. But, the moon was gone, vanished, like it was afraid of this monster. And the voice was gone. Instead, a new voice replaced it, this thing's, a voice of guttural growls and harsh, raspy vocal fries.

Whatever this thing was, it was twelve feet tall. Good fucking god.

Eric backed up, and snarled at it, ears down and back against the fur of his head. He was a wolf, and these things came naturally. But he wasn't a wolf. He was Eric. And Eric was fucking terrified.

He backed away, and let out a barking howl at the monster. It stared at him, two giant horns piercing the sky. Its eyes glowed red and amber, like lava. Its mass caused the earth to break apart underneath it, as it shifted its weight with its new stance, standing tall in front of Eric. It spread its wings, and blotted out the sky.

"Jeremiah will have you, and you will answer his questions." It took another step toward him, and Eric took a few steps back to keep distance. Each step the monster took, the claws sank through the rock beneath it, like butter.

"Jeremiah? The fuck does he want with me?" Hey, he could talk. Right, a dream, rules didn't matter.

But his dreams weren't normal dreams. He didn't control these things, these sleeping hallucinations; and this invader didn't belong. Every hair on his furry body stood up with animal aggression, and he bared his teeth as he snarled and barked at the titan walking toward him.



It didn't like that. It sprinted forward, shredding the ground while launching itself toward him. Eric turned, and fled. Run, get the fuck away, get the fuck away!

The forest. There was a forest. Safe place, his hunting ground, side by side with Dolareido, his other hunting ground. Two sides to the coin, wolf and man. He could hide here, or turn the tables.

The monster didn't agree. As Eric forced his aching, bruised body past a couple of trees, the monster slammed its mass into them, and broke them. Trunks three feet thick snapped, exploding bark and shards of wood, and sending the trees crashing into others. The forest died around Eric, trees spinning out of control and breaking upon others. The thickest trees survived the impacts, and the smaller shattered, showering the flattening land with twigs, leaves, and chaos.

Eric's dream body was big, for a canine, but still only a wolf. One-forty, maybe one-fifty pounds. This thing chasing him was at least twenty times that much. It reached out with one of its four arms, and slashed out, claws slicing through the wood and sending more trees toppling. All this little dog could do was run and hide, scampering underneath fallen trees that left a foot of room to crawl under.

Why didn't it answer his question? And if it wanted to catch him for Jeremiah, it wasn't doing a good job. It was going to fucking kill him, drop a tree on him, or fucking step on him. A glance back showed the beast kept its four wings against its back, folded tight, while the four arms rendered the forest into mulch.

"You can't hide, Uratha."

The blood curdling noise echoed through the trees, until Eric felt it dig into his spine, serrated, iron hot needles stabbing into his back. His muscles twitched and cringed, and Eric shook his head as he tried to dislodge the voice from his ears. He couldn't. Couldn't fight this thing. Couldn't attack this thing. Couldn't do anything but run. Run where? He was going to die. It was going to catch him and it was going to kill him.

He kept moving. The forest greeted him, familiar, home. The trails where prey ran, the sights and sounds and smells, he knew them all. The little flits of drifting essence, the ephemera entities, spirits, manifesting, growing, building up, becoming. He sped past a critter, a squirrel maybe, body glowing green and partly see-through, eyes deep and dark. There was an owl, with eyes like the night sky. There was a fox with several tails, and it screeched before disappeared into the forest, as did the others. Everything wanted to get away from the intruder, the Goliath, ripping and tearing its way through the green and brown of the woods.

Where was the voice? Gone. It abandoned him, left him to run from this monster alone. And it was gaining on him. He threw his belly to the forest floor, and forced himself under a giant log, something ancient and part of the land, something that offered him a nod with eyes opening in the lines of the tree's bark.

The monster didn't care. It slammed all four of its hands down into the enormous piece of ancient wood, and ripped it apart. In the shower of bits of bark and death, it threw its mass forward, taking down two more trees with each shoulder, and sending them forward in a mad spin of inertia. One of them hit another tree, and went into a spin, bouncing around against rock and earth until one of its branches caught Eric in his side.

Pain. He'd always thought you weren't supposed to feel pain in a dream, not pain like this, pain that scorched up the spine and gave you a headache, made you want to vomit. Pain silenced for a moment, before it doubled again when his body collided with something, the length of his wolf body curving around it before he slumped to the ground. A stump had blocked his flight path with all the grace of a car crash.

The world blurred around him. His body was heavy. His fingers didn't respond; right, he had paws now, not hands. But he knew how to use paws, and they weren't responding. His lungs had stopped working, diaphragm no longer pulling down. Nothing was working. He was a lump, a pile of flesh, pulsing with agony and crying tears — that's why everything was blurry, his eyes were filled with tears. Or, blood.

The monster crouched down over him, glowing red eyes glaring into him. Its face looked human, for the most part, except for the massive horns, and as it growled, shark teeth joined the list of inhuman features. One of its four hands reached out, and picked him up. He was a wolf, against a twelve-foot gargoye creature, and he was going to die.

The monster grabbed his head with one hand, his back legs with another, and started to tear him in half. No questions, no words, nothing to explain this pointless murder. Skin, muscle, tearing, bones separating, crushed into bits, grinding into—

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He sat up in bed with a jolt. Where, where was he? Right, the hotel. Where was Kat? Right, not at the hotel. What fucking time was it? Sunset.

Christ, sunset? How long was he asleep? Must have been over ten hours. What in the... oh fucking hell. He looked around himself, and winced as he felt the wet sheets. A cold sweat soaked the bed, and himself. His dreams hadn't been doing that since his first change, but whatever that dream was, it scared him fucking shitless; evidence was there in front of him, whether he wanted to believe it or not. He'd probably have literally shit the bed, if it'd gotten any worse.

He got up out of bed, and headed for the shower. His feet were like cinder blocks, dragging, knocking against the door frame and the hallway. Some random, shitty hotel, so he blamed his clumsiness on that. And the weight of his body? Had to be the shitty bed. Shit bed, shit hotel, shit sleep, and now he had stubbed toes. Even if the vamps can track you, you really should sleep in your proper bed, Eric. At least then you can sleep deep and proper.

He got to the bathroom, set his hands on the tiny sink, and looked into the tiny, warped mirror. Looked like shit. Felt like shit. Everything was shit.

“What... the fuck was that?” He held a hand up to his face, stared into the mirror, and cradled his jaw. No idea, no idea what that fucking was. The dream was vivid, blatant. His dreams often were, since the changes had started hitting him. There was usually a voice in his dreams, and it talked to him, that much he managed to wrap his mind around. But that thing, that giant fucking gargoyle thing, was not like anything else.

It found him. It ran him down in his dream, and killed him. Holy fuck, he could still remember the sensation of pain, unimaginable pain, in his bones and muscles as they started to tear to pieces. Saran wrap being pulled apart, resistant and pliable at first, before it started to give way in a bloody mess. He now knew what it felt like to die, in the most horrible way possible. What a lovely memory to have drilled into his mind for the rest of his life.

Nasty nightmare? It was unusual for a nightmare. God fucking damn, he felt like shit, like someone had run him over with a truck. He didn't feel like someone had torn him in half; still breathing, after all. If someone had run him down though, hopped out of the truck, and beat his ass with a baseball bat, he might feel like this. Except the pain wasn't in his body, wasn't in his bones or muscles like it felt like it should have been, and it wasn't real pain. Something in his brain told him he was fucked, and needed to lie the fuck down, told him he was beaten and bruised, even though he didn't feel like it.

He stared down at the sink. Red eyes. Glowing, red eyes. Maybe a spirit, like the ones in the alley? No, those his instincts told him were spirits. They smelled like spirits; what that was, his human brain wasn't able to put a finger on, but they did. There were spirits in his dreams, but they couldn't

have been real, just dream things spawned by whatever was clawing its way out of the depths of his subconscious to talk to him.

He looked at the mirror again. Everything turned double, and started dancing around. Colors blurred, bleeding over each other. Hallucinating? No, he knew this feeling, the same feeling of being in a choke hold. Except you were normally lying on the ring floor during one of those, not standing.

He collapsed. One of his hands managed to grab the sink basin on the way down, but he went down anyway, bodyweight jerking on the sink hard enough to half-turn his body with his shoulder as a pivot point. He almost wrenched his arm out of the socket, but let go at the last moment, other shoulder slamming into the floor.

“Fucking... shit...” He gasped for air. For a moment, for a painfully long fucking moment, he felt like the wolf in that dream again, after he was slammed into the tree trunk. A sack of broken flesh, lying down, unable to do anything. He turned his head and stared at the crummy ceiling. It was spinning.

Breathe. Breathe. Get some air into your fucking lungs.

He forced in the air, slow and deep. His body ached, or fake ached or whatever, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. The problem was his brain didn't want to function, didn't want to uptake the oxygen. Christ, was he having a stroke?

No, that made no sense. Wrong symptoms, and his new body didn't seem like it'd ever get a stroke. Something else was happening to him. Fuck, fuck fuck fuck, what was happening to him?

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He took a taxi back to his new home. Thinking he could get a better night's rest at some random hotel backfired, apparently. No, there was no way the shitshow that was his brain right now was caused by the hotel, unless there was a gas leak in the hotel and he borderline died. Now back at his Invictus-bought penthouse suite apartment, he could catch his breath, take a shower, get dressed, and get ready for work.

Hopefully. The ride up the elevator did not go well. He was in the suit he wore the night before, and that was the only thing that got him past the concierge, considering he was dragging his hands against every surface so he didn't fall over. It was a damn expensive place to live, and lot of the people coming and going were dressed in tuxedos or other expensive, ridiculous suits. Some women were

dressed for nights at the opera, while others were dressed for high price nightclubs where they'd blow a blue collar's monthly wages in a single night, on heroine. Everyone looked like they bled money, and at the moment, he very much did not, tripping over himself like he was dying.

Fuck, maybe he was dying. Was that dream a premonition? That gargoyle, demon, whatever the fuck it was, belonged on a god damn cathedral, casting judgment on everyone passing by. It did not belong in his head. It wasn't supposed to be there, that much his new senses could tell him. If it didn't belong there, the fuck did that mean?

He pressed the button on the elevator, and did his best to not look at the tiny dog sitting in a woman's purse; dog didn't bark, so, props to her for good training. Concrete weighed on his shoulders, and pulled him into the side of the elevator. Stay standing, just stay standing. Another person came on, older dude in a suit with a mustache, maybe visiting someone. Eric managed a small nod. Be polite to the strangers, and let everyone look at you like you're drunk, just don't prove it.

His floor, finally. Only a few other apartments on this floor, as each apartment took up a corner of the large building; ridiculously fucking huge apartments. He forced in another breath, and made for the door, swallowing down the nausea in his stomach, and ignoring how the hallway attempted to thwart him like he was in fucking Inception.

He smelled someone, someone familiar, and recent. She'd been here before, and he could smell her again. Gulping, he opened the door.

Yeap, there she was. Sitting on his couch was Jessie Herrington, with Kat cuddling into her tits. She was wearing a white shirt, buttons undone far enough to show a bit of the black bra underneath. Looked great with the black jeans.

Even feeling like he was about to pass out, his dick loved to give him a quick rundown. God damn it.

"You look like shit," she said.

"I... feel like shit." No use arguing, no energy for that. He dragged himself over to her, and collapsed onto the couch hard enough to launch her an inch into the air. "Tried to get some sleep somewhere safe, alone, away from fucking... everyone. Guess it didn't work."

"Didn't sleep?"

"I did, just doesn't seem to have worked."

"I figured you wolves were basically unstoppable juggernauts, always at your prime?"

“Yeah, I was feeling like that for a while, too. Knee is healed, and... yeah.” His head collapsed onto the couch back, and he turned it enough to look over at Jessy. The woman held his cat snug to her, and raised her enough so Kat could put her two forearms against her shoulder, near Eric.

Kat offered him a few slow blinks, before turning her head to nudge into Jessy’s neck. The purrs were audible, and ridiculous. Traitor.

“The place smelled like cat shit, F Y I. I cleaned your litter box.”

“... seriously?”

“Well, I mean, I called the help and had them do it.” Jessy laughed, and nudged her cheek into Kat’s head for some rubbing. “I am far too important to be cleaning litter boxes.”

He laughed, then groaned. Dizziness overwhelmed him, and faded away with each pulse of his heart. Ok, yeah, no laughing.

“You were supposed to work tonight, right? Take the night off.”

“I... I think I might just. The music would make my brain explode.”

“Guess that means I won’t be feeding on you tonight.”

“Sorry.”

“Ah that’s ok. I wouldn’t want to catch whatever parasite’s fucking up your brain anyhow.” She kissed Kat’s head, got up, and started walking around, Kat’s forearms still on her shoulder, and butt sitting in her arms. “How’s your dad?”

Knowing the Invictus could monitor his expenses was horrible, and embarrassing. His life was enough of a train wreck, no need for all those eyes peering into it, with his purchases on a list they could analyze and laugh at.

“As useless as ever, and dead set on not getting better. Man just doesn’t fucking care.”

“Your mom died, right? Were they close?”

Eric lifted his head, and raised a brow as he looked at her. What a way to approach a sensitive topic, for any man; girl was exposing his psyche with all the grace of a wrecking ball.

“They were close. She died of cancer.”

“Cancer’s a bitch.” Sighing, Jessy continued around his place, and peeked into his cupboards. “Empty.” She checked a drawer. “Empty.” And another. “Utensils.” Then a cupboard. “Empty.” Then she checked the freezer and fridge. “And a whole fucking lot of meat. I bet Kat loves that.”

“I... it’s... it’s the only thing I can stand eating anymore.” There were other things too, bones, strange organs not normally sold that he asked a butcher for. He kept them in the back of the freezer, to avoid having to look at them until it was easier. And to avoid unwanted topic conversations.

“When did she die?”

“Must be almost twenty years now.”

“Dad ever find another relationship?”

“No.” Eric wanted to get up and watch Jessy closer, make sure she didn’t touch anything. Stupid. It was her apartment, really, and it wasn’t like he had anything in it to hide. The biggest secret he had was the brains and bones and hooves in the freezer, and she’d already moved on from that.

“Probably very depressed, especially after his son’s career and marriage were ruined by a knee injury.”

“Thanks a lot.” Groaning, he crawled over onto the rest of the couch, and lay on his back, head on the couch arm. “And you? Tell me some shitty stuff about your past.”

“Don’t really got one.”

“No past?”

“I mean shitty stuff. Got no baggage.” With a shrug, she came back over to him, and sat down on the glass table, Kat still in her arms. Damn cat looked perfectly happen to go coma in Jessy’s ever petting embrace. “Kind of silly, isn’t it? So many vamps got a story, some fucked up path that led to their embrace. That poor kid Jack was an attempted murder by an enemy vamp. Natasha, I know her siring led to the death of her parents. Julias, well, Viktor sired him without telling him what was happening; now that’s some fucking scary shit. And my sire, MacDonald? He’s old as dirt and can’t remember the details, but he tells me he had to fight someone else to the death for the right to be embraced, bare hands.”

Jesus, that was grim.

“But not you?”

“Nah. My parents and I never got along, so I ran off when I was pretty young. They didn’t try and find me. Years later, I’m working a shitty factory job in North Side, and got into a bar fight on the edge of South Side, near the Carthian district. Apparently I’d got into a fight with a ghoul, who are fucking strong as shit compared to normal kine. Still kicked his ass, though. Broke my arm, but kicked his ass. Michael thought that was boss, so he spent a couple years grooming me, then sired me. Here I am.”

Shrugging, she gave Kat another kiss. “I had a cat, back then. But after my embrace, he didn’t like me. You know how cats can be, when they’re old and you try and introduce them to new cats; or in this case, a vampire. Too much of a change for an old boy like him.” That put a thought in her head, and her eyes looked up, drifting. “I suppose that is the biggest baggage I have. Lost my cat when I was embraced. Maybe that’s why I like you so much.”

“Because I have a cat?”

“Because you have a cat. A dumb, loving cat.”

She was definitely dumb and loving, no doubt about that. At least Kat didn’t like the other Uratha; probably their military vibe putting her off.

“Guess that makes me lucky.”

“Damn right. Lucky you have an awesome cat, because cats are awesome. Lucky you’re a werewolf, because that’s awesome. And lucky you caught my eye, because I’m awesome.” Jessy winked at him, before she started rubbing her face on Kat’s head. Kat returned the gesture, head bumping her and purring like a lawn mower.

“Not so lucky last night.”

“Yeah, you really do look like shit. Couldn’t have just been a bad day’s sleep.”

“I... I had this dream. Do vampires dream?”

“Sorta.” She came over and sat down on the arm of the chair his head was on, so only an inch separated his head from her butt. That was fine, it was a great butt. “Kindred have torpor, where we go comatose during the day. We dream then, pretty vivid, weird shit sometimes. It gets really nasty when we purposefully go under for years at a time, to suppress our blood lust. The dreams get nuts, and you’re stuck in them, for years. Lot of vamps wake up from that a different person.”

“... that is some scary shit.”

“Right? I haven’t done one yet, and a lot of us don’t until we’ve got a century under our belt. It’s generally not something to look forward to.” Shrugging, she stood back up, and sat down on his stomach instead. He braced for pain, but, his new body handled her weight fine. He felt like utter shit, but at least his muscles weren’t fucked. “You?”

“Dreamed I... dreamed I was a wolf, last night.”

“Sounds almost blasé, a werewolf dreaming of being a wolf.” She leaned back over the couch, butt on his stomach, and lifted Kat up and over her shoulder to set the feline on a nearby cat tower,



before she got comfortable on his gut, her elbow on the back of the couch, chin in her palm, face toward him.

“Except my dreams talk to me. Talk talk to me, as in, call me out by name, and... tell me things.”

“Sounds creepy. What sort of things?”

“This fucking Uratha shit came with baggage. Something about ancient beings and the duty I’ve inherited from them.” He threw up his hands, before setting one on his forehead. “I’d just love it if everyone left me the fuck alone.”

“That include me?” Raising a brow, she licked a fang, and waited. He thought she was joking, but, it seemed like she really wanted to know.

“Fuck no, you’re one of the few people that seems to be upfront with me.”

“Ha! Well, it is the norm for vamps to lie, cheat, manipulate; s’why I told you to play the field. What about the dogs and monsters, they fuckin’ you over?”

“Avery wants to... adopt me into the fold.”

“Typical.”

“Azamel wants me on her side, but as far as I can tell, she’s got no rules beyond that. Simply help her out if she’s under attack. Otherwise, do whatever I want.”

“But Julias wants you to work with Avery, and the Invictus think you should stay where you’re at.” Laughing, she shook her head, like it was a song and dance she’d heard before. Probably was. “I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes, despite all the luck. I see the hospital bills.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I put you on the Invictus payroll, and that comes with chains. Course, that was before you got your paranormal badge, and now you have some rights; or at least, more than kine.” She reached down for his jacket, and spread it, before she started tugging on his arms. “Come on, help me out.”

He raised a brow again; doing that often with her. Eventually he conceded, and helped her slide off his suit jacket. She got to work on his shirt buttons next, humming as she undid them. No grins or mischievous smiles, despite his expectations, only a small smile as she undid one button, then the next, and the next. If he didn’t know better, he’d assume she was his mother, taking care of him because he was sick.

“Gonna get some vapor rub for me?” he said.

“Ha! Don’t think I won’t. You’re a man, which means you’re a big baby when you’re sick. A big, dumb, very sexy baby with a really nice six pack.” She whistled as she pulled his undone shirt out from the waistline of his pants. With some effort, she got the shirt off entirely.

“Strange looking baby.”

“Yeap.” She pat his chest, chuckling, before she undid the button and zipper of his pants, and yanked those off too, before sitting back on his stomach and pelvis. Now all he had left was his boxers. “But I’m not your mom, I’m your babysitter. Ever had the babysitter fantasy?”

“Hot babysitter sexually satisfies young boy?”

“Yeap.”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Didn’t want some busty lady to introduce you to the awesomeness of sex, with a tender hand and soft tits, when you were going through puberty?”

“Oh, I did. Just, all my babysitters were ugly as balls.”

She laughed, and set her elbows onto the back of the couch as she continued laughing. “Well, I’m your babysitter now, and your senior by a good forty years. And I’m a fox.”

His turn to laugh. Damn this woman was brazen, bold, confident, and fun. Sheryl had been a lot of those things, but in hindsight, he wasn’t sure she was ever fun.

“Get into Fiona’s pants, yet?” she said.

He hesitated. Any other woman, and he’d be sure it was a trap, but this Jessy woman was different; not necessarily a good kind of different, but different. He was a one-on-one kinda guy, when in a relationship. He wasn’t in one right now though, and neither was Jessy. But, that could change.

The thought of being in one with this playful tiger of a woman, was appealing though. She was fun, like Fiona, but instead of Fiona’s young, girlish joyfulness, she had a mature bite to her. And she was rich, no denying the appeal in that.

“Almost. She visited me, and I had her quite satisfied, before it was my turn. Then Avery interrupted us.”

“Ah, damn, nasty case of blue balls then. Jerk it out yet?”

“Heh, no,” he said. Nodding, she reached down beside her hip, slid her hand under the waistband of his boxers, and grabbed his dick. “Whoa, hey!”

“Too sick for a quick jerking?”

“I... uh.” What was he supposed to say to that? He felt like shit, but, as he felt his blood flow respond to her touch, it didn’t make anything feel worse. “I guess. But, I’m not really feeling up to sex.”

“Didn’t say sex.” She rolled her eyes, leaned back onto the couch, her butt on his stomach, and her closer arm with its elbow on the couch back. Her other hand continued to stroke him, her body blocking the view. He could feel it more than well enough, and he groaned a little as his girth hardened, filling her palm. “I’ll get mine, later.”

“Y-Yeah, ok.” He could work with this. He needed to relax, clear his head, see if the grogginess and shit would fade with time. “Your ghouls?”

“Nah. You, when you’re feeling better.”

“Heh, thought you had a bunch of ghouls, for a regular orgy, with you as the center of attention?”

“I do. But, eh, been doing that sorta shit for decades. Sometimes it’s nice to take it easy, enjoy a palette cleanser.”

“Is that what I am?”

“Not sure. I can’t turn you into a ghoul; don’t think so, anyway. And yet, I continuously find myself wanting to fuck you. Isn’t that strange?” She shrugged, stopped stroking him, and took a moment to toss aside her shirt, and then her bra. They went flying, the bra landing on Kat and her cat tower. Naturally, Kat didn’t care, and looked at the bra sitting on her body, before looking back out the window. “There, some eye candy for you.” Topless, she ignited something inside her, and his jaw dropped as he watched the difference manifest. Color came to her skin, and he could hear the dead heart inside her begin to pump.

Eye candy was putting it lightly. Like she said, she was a fox. As much as he loved Fiona’s softer body and enormous breasts, Jessy’s muscles, feminine but strong curves, plentiful breasts, and short blond hair, were all amazing. Reminded him of other fighters he met in his career. Maybe he should have hooked up with one of them, and not a spectator like Sheryl.

“It’s pretty great eye candy.”

“I know, right? Fuck, I am gorgeous.” She put her hand on his cock again, and slid down his boxers enough so she could hold it upright and stroke it more readily. Her thick thighs blocked the view, but he could tell from her grip how familiar she was with what she was doing. Comfortable. Might as well have been his own hand, with how she found the right pressure and grip style, each stroke

working the bottom of his length before working up and nudging against the base edge of his glans. He might last five minutes, watching the topless woman work her magic.

“Sure you don’t—”

“Nah. Just stay there, relax. Hell, if I get into the mood, I might just masturbate and put on a show for you.” She winked at him, grinning like a devil. “And I’ll call Ganders, tell him you won’t be coming in.”

“You’re being very nice. Trying to seduce me to work for the Invictus?”

“What? No, I told you to try and play the field, play all of us. Told you that cause I know, in the end, you’ll work for us. Avery’s too rigid, and expects you to step into line. Azamel can’t provide you with anything except for protection, and she can’t even protect herself, with these fucking hunters coming for her.” Shrugging, she took one of her breasts into her palm, other hand still stroking him, and gently massaged the soft weight of her tit. Big enough to fill her palm, even overflow it slightly, it had Eric’s eyes hypnotized as she bounced it with a couple fingers, purposefully showing off its natural size.

He groaned as he watched, and shivered as he felt his precum wet his glans. The growing warmth of cum pooling underneath his testicles, getting ready to erupt, caused his length and glans to grow more and more sensitive. Pleasure sparks grew, and grew, until it went into his core, causing his abs to flex underneath the woman’s ass.

She smirked at him. She knew he was going to cum, and make a mess on the very, very expensive couch; she didn’t seem to care. Her grip shifted higher, squeezing the more sensitive top half of his cock, as one of her fingers reached up to cover the hole of his glans. And as the first gush of his hot cum squirted from him, she gently blocked its flow, so it flowed back down onto his cock, and her fingers.

“Don’t worry about the couch. The help will make sure it’s clean.”

“N-Not sure I... like the idea of... of a maid in my apartment.”

“Heh, you will.” She continued to stroke him, far more gently, but consistently, milking another wave of his cum from him, and another. Soon his own fluids coated every inch of his hard, veined girth, and she massaged it into his skin with her soaked fingers. It was hard to not groan louder, as his cock grew sensitive, and she continued to stroke it with slow, firm grip, sliding fingers along his skin with his cum. “If I’m going to be over here on the regular, making a mess with you, you’ll be a problem. I’m a vamp, I leave no traces behind. But you? I’ll be coating this place in your jizz, and that’ll definitely get

stinky. Poor Kat.” She glanced back over her shoulder at Kat. Lazy animal was content to stare at the window from her cat tower, looking down over the huge city of lights. Probably felt like a queen.

“This... going to be a regular thing?” he managed to say between more quiet groans, as she pulled another wave of his cum, and another. God fucking damn, she milked him, squeezing him at the base and working it for a few strokes, before sliding her soaked grip higher, to draw out another few drops of his cum.

“Definitely. You’re the kind of asshole I like. Fiona likes assholes too, like Damien, but he’s a different kind of asshole, doesn’t do much for me. You though, I like.” She smiled at him, and blushed.

It was the first time he’d ever seen her blush. Stripping in a night club? No blush. Fondling another girl while riding him, in public? No blush. Admits she likes him, blushes. It was so god damn endearing, he couldn’t help but smile.

She started stroking him again.

“Oh...” He let out a long breath, and fell back, relaxed onto the couch.

“Tash tells me a little of her exploits with her two boyfriends. You guys can go two, three times easy. Sometimes four. Least I can do is jack you off a second time.” Laughing, she used his cum to gently massage the sensitive, exposed skin of his glans, making sure to use a soft but consistent grip along the base edge. Girl knew how to please him better than he did. “I asked her if her boys had ever fucked her while transformed.”

“Transformed?”

“You know, that big form you guys got, Gauru I think it’s called? The big, huge, scary war form.”

“I can’t imagine that’s safe.” He melted into the couch, and struggled to keep his exhausted eyes on the topless woman. The subtle back and forth sway of her torso, with her up and down hand movement, made her far too hypnotic to not stare at. And her free hand reached down to his chest, where she caressed his muscle, his collar, and soon the front of his shoulders. He could fall asleep, right now, if she wasn’t also sitting on his abdomen.

“Probably not. But, fuck me if the idea isn’t really, really hot.”

“You into wolves?”

“I’m into the idea of a nine-foot-tall werewolf monster thing, with enormous hands fighting to tear off my clothes, and a giant dick rearranging my insides.” She stopped blushing. Talk of very, very kinky sex was as normal to her as breathing was to him.

“Are... you asking me to do that?”

“Just putting that out there. I wouldn’t say no if you tried.” Chuckling, she looked down at her stroking hand, and took some time to work the base of his shaft, squeezing harder on the tougher part of his cock, and spurring some heat to build between his thighs. “Well, except for, you know, the begging and pleading ‘please no, it won’t fit, oh please don’t hurt me, oh god you’re splitting me apart’ sort of stuff. If you hear any of that, pay no mind. It just means you’re doing good. Oh!” He eyes lit up, and her smile grew; he could almost see the fantasizing in her eyes. “Especially if I try and get away, and I’m all shaky with orgasms, and dripping cum everywhere and stuff? And I’m begging for a break? Arg, pin me down and just have your way way with me.” Nodding to herself, eyes drifting upward, she licked her fangs again, and shivered.

This girl, was insane.

“I... I could really hurt you, you know.”

“I’m a vampire, dumbass. I’ll be fine. Besides, you won’t hurt me, not in any way I won’t like, I mean. You like me too much.”

As if to prove her point, she started to stroke his whole length, and quickly. Lubrication made it easy, and her firm, consistent grip, made sure each stroke sent a powerful wave of bliss and pleasure sparks into his thighs and core. A few seconds later, the tingling of heat underneath his testicles announced itself. A few seconds more, and a gush of his cum squirted into her palm. She shifted her grip higher to encompass the whole of his swollen glans with her grip, and used his cum to keep her touch dripping hot and heavenly.

He struggled to keep his eyes open, as he melted into the couch.

Laughing, she stroked him for a little while longer, and squeezed out a few more drops of his cum, before she let go at last. “Look at this.” She showed him her hand, fingers spreading and pressing together. “Tash was right, you guys cum buckets.” Strands of white, thick globs of it, coated her palm, her fingers, and a few drops dripped down her wrist. That was a lot, far more than he would cum in the past.

“You talk about that sort of stuff with your friend?”

“Girls talk about everything. Hell, Tash and I have a system. If we go too long without talking to each other, we know something’s wrong.” She shrugged, and got up. He breathed a sigh of relief; nice to not have her sitting on his gut, no matter how amazing the sight was. “If we were gonna go again, I’d give you a proper show, and masturbate with this hand, get your cum inside me.” Winking, she played

with his cum in her hand again, pressing her fingers together and making a fist, before she walked to the kitchen. “I’ll clean you up. You, relax.”

“Yeah... ok.” And he was. The rippling bliss of orgasm aftershocks continued up and down his cock, and he looked down at the cum-soaked phallus, before letting his head fall to the couch arm again. Exhausted for two reasons, now. “Were you always this sexually aggressive?”

“Nah.” Whatever she was doing, she opened a few cupboards and drawers until she found what she was looking for, and got the water running. “Aggressive, yes, but not sexually. It took a few years as Kindred, before it really sank in.”

“What sank in?”

“Just how fucking hot we vamps are, and I was a dumbass for not indulging.”

He coughed on a laugh, before his body relaxed into the couch again. “How so?”

She returned, a wet rag in hand, and she sat down on his gut once again. He shuddered for a second, as a hot sensation covered his flaccid cock, and then, sliding texture. She was cleaning him, and still topless. If he stared at her too long, he’d get hard again; his new sex drive was proving to be insane, almost as much as the woman sitting on him.

“Well, as you can see, I’m a fox. Getting down to this low body fat percentage, as you know, is brutal. But as a vamp, all the issues with being super lean are gone. No more chronic hunger, or being cold all the time, or energy issues, or mood swings. I get to keep this amazing fitness model body, without any of the downsides.”

“That is pretty great.” Women did a number on their bodies, getting as lean as Jessy, for things like bikini bodybuilding competitions. Not healthy, or fun. He’d had it rough too, staying lean for his career, for photoshoots, but not as hard as a woman for sure; and his new body made it easy.

“Yeah, I cut down as part of my grooming. Hated it, but Michael assured me it wouldn’t be a problem after the embrace. He was right.” She took some time on his testicles, wiping them clean, and grinned at him as she did. “There’s a lot of other things too. Can’t get pregnant, or diseases, so no reason to ever use a condom.”

“I have to admit, cumming inside you is wonderful.”

“Damn straight.” Once done, she aimed the rag, and threw it into the kitchen from her seat on his belly. Based on the sound of impact, and the smile on her face, she’d landed it in the sink. “Sexual endurance is another big plus. Gimme a meal and I’m insta-horny. Let me blush life and I can cum until

I've soaked you. And I haven't taken a shit in fifty years, so, this ass is one hundred percent for quality anal and nothing but, at this point."

He raised a brow, and looked at the ass currently sitting on his abs. A very large, toned ass.

"I know, right?" she said, and gave her ass-in-jeans a good slap, hard enough to make her breasts jiggle for a moment. Woman knew exactly what she was doing. "But, you know, that's all kind of secondary to the biggest change."

"What's that?"

"The overwhelming majority of Kindred don't fucking care. Fuck everyone, fuck no one, Kindred just don't fucking care. Got a high sex drive? Have an orgy with a dozen kine. Got no sex drive? No one will bat an eyelash if you never fuck a soul. Whether you're a prude or a slut, no one fucking cares anymore, and I god damn love that. Do whatever the fuck makes you happy." Sighing, relaxing, she leaned back on the couch, and put both elbows onto the couch back. Still topless meant her breasts were on display, but he was sure that was half the reason she was sitting like that, to give him a treat. The other half was, she genuinely didn't seem to give a shit.

He really liked that. Sheryl liked to pose, and be sexy too, but the moment things winded down, she'd cover herself up. Terrified to ever be seen without make up. Terrified to ever let out a fart. Jessy, she'd probably fart right on him, if vamps did that.

"I suppose," she said, "I should tell you the other reason I'm here."

Ah shit. "Really would prefer... you didn't spoil... the mood." He struggled to find a little venom or bite to put in his words, but he was too exhausted. Despite what was turning into a pleasant evening, he still had trouble seeing straight, and every part of him felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. He would never get up from this expensive couch unless he had to.

"It's important. Last night, only a bit before sunrise, Jack sent me a message. Another ritual has been found."

"The weird one with the symbols and picture?"

"Yeah. Except this time it wasn't Jack's face. It was yours."

He forced his head up, and stared at the woman. Zero tact, off like a bandaid. He could appreciate that, usually, but knowing a bunch of psychopaths had his face, a little easing in would have been better.

"My face."



“Yeah. Jack thinks it’s a connection with Azamel.”

“Azamel? I talked to her once! I—” The memory slammed into him, and tore through his eyes until he shut them. Fuck. Fuck fuck. “The... in the dream... I was being chased by some sort of monster. And, and it said... Jeremiah wanted me.”

“Fuck, that doesn’t sound like a regular dream.” She slipped off his stomach, and got dressed. “Try and get some more sleep, maybe sleep off some of whatever’s been done to you. I’ll watch over you for a few hours.”

“... done to me?”

“Uratha who’s wrecked like he’s been binge drinking, had a dream where a monster says Jeremiah’s looking for you? Yeah, I’m guessing something’s been done to you.” Shrugging, she reached down, yanked his boxers back up over his bits, and reached out for his hand. Of course, she didn’t bother to wait for him to brace himself, and instead yanked him up onto his feet with all the grace of an ox. “Come on, up and at ‘em.”

Dizzy as fuck, his weight fell onto Jessy, arm hooked around her shoulders. But she handled his weight easily, and guided him to his bedroom. Kat followed, offering a few concerned meows, and rubbing against their legs as Jessy dragged him.

“It... it was a dream. It meant nothing.”

“Wish I could agree, but see all the scary shit out there I have, and you start being a little more open minded about ridiculous shit. Describe the monster.”

“The monster? It—” His voice caught in his throat for a moment as Jessy lifted him, and threw him onto the bed, borderline literally. “It was... at least twelve feet tall, dark skin like leather, and... and four arms, and four wings.”

“That sounds... pretty rad, actually.”

Rad. Good god, the woman really was from an older time.

“It had a tail, and glowing red eyes, and... it’s a blur. I think... think I can remember its face. Mostly human, except for... sharp teeth... and horns.”

“Sounds like some sort of dragon. Well, leathery skin? Oh, a human-looking face you said. Maybe some sort of really big demon or gargoyle thing,” she said. He could tell she was saying these things with an air of sarcasm, but at the same time, her eyes fell a bit after she said them. Fun to joke, but not so fun when those were genuine possibilities. Christ, his new life was fucked up.

“It did have claws, and talons.” He remembered those all too well.

“I’ll give Fiona a text, see if it sounds familiar to her.”

He tried to sit up, but his body might as well have been upside down. The strength to move was there, but every attempt to use it made his brain disagree, like some sort of extreme vertigo that was convincing him he was heavier than he was.

“Think it was a Begotten?”

“Could be, right?” She shrugged, pulled out her phone, and got texting. “You were asleep, and those monsters can fuck with your dreams.”

“But Jeremiah is hunting Azamel, and vampires, and werewolves too, if he’s after me. Is he working with a Begotten?”

“Could be. I’m not coming to any conclusions yet. I’ll get Jack and Damien involved, and we’ll evaluate.”

It’d be damn weird, if those hunter psychos were working with a monster. Weird was normal at this point, though, so maybe it was a good idea to consider that. Either way.

With Jessy’s help, he got under the sheets. On his back, he stared up at the ceiling, and looked over at the vampire woman.

“Wake me in a few hours?”

“That’s the plan.”

“What’ll you do?”

“Figured I’d watch some TV in your living room.”

“I—” Kat hopped up onto the bed, nudged against him, and found her usual spot beside the pillow. “I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“Not comfortable with me being around while you sleep?”

“What? That’s not what I meant. Just, after what you just did for me, I figured I should ask if you wanted to stay the night.”

Laughing, she tapped her phone against her forehead a few times, and smiled at him. “You mean in bed with you.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Kindred. I go comatose when I sleep, and I sleep during the day. And unless those curtains you got are sealed to the walls to not let in a single crack of light, I’ll turn into kindling come sunrise.”

“Those... are legitimate points.”

“That said.” Shrugging, she climbed onto the bed with him. Still in her jeans and shirt, but at least no shoes, she lay on top of the covers. “Don’t think I’ve ever lain in bed with a man, and not had sex.”

“Heh, how about a woman?”

“Only Tash, and without sexual context. Tried to get Tash into bed a few times, for a proper fucking, but she didn’t really pick up the signals. And I don’t think she’s into women, which makes me all sorts of sad.” Smirking, Jessy turned on her side to face him, head propped up on a palm, elbow to the bed. “Got her into bed with my ghouls a few times though. You should have seen it, that tight little pussy spread open on a cock. Bet I could barely fit a finger inside her.”

Ok, yeah, this woman was a sexual animal. He could feel the blood start to work its way down to his cock again, the pulses of his heart each pumping a wave of blood into the member. But he took a deep breath, and forced his body to calm. You need some more sleep. Get some more sleep.

Except, he wasn’t tired. He was exhausted, and weak, and feeling dizzy and tender, but not tired. The weight of his eyelids never grew, and his body didn’t sink into his blankets.

“I think sleeping most of the day has fucked my sleep schedule,” he said. “I doubt I’ll be able to sleep.”

“Bleh, you’re going to need to feel better though.”

“Wh—oh, because you think hunters are going to try and do to me, what they did to Jack.”

“Yeap. Got Kindred watching the place right now. And right now, I’m texting Damien and Jack about the weird dream you had.” She stared into the glow of her phone, but she had trouble texting with the speed of the typical phone user. It made sense, he supposed. She was born before cell-phones existed, let alone texting. “It’s why I’m dressed. Otherwise I’d be under the blankets with you. Way to a man’s heart is his cock.”

“Stomach.”

“Cock.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s stomach.”

“I’ve been embraced for over fifty years, dumbass. I’ve seduced hundreds of men, turned dozens into doting sex slaves. Even turned some of them into ghouls, if they proved themselves capable in and out of bed. Never cooked a damn meal in my life.”

He laughed, and looked up at the ceiling as he smiled. “You’re confusing men, with boys.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. When the sex is over, and the heat has died down for the moment, is where the difference becomes apparent.” And where he and Sheryl never really connected on anything, unless money was involved. “If you fill a man’s stomach, that’s where infatuation turns to love.”

“I see.” She nodded, checked her phone a few times more, and turned over onto her back next to him. “I suppose you’d know more about this, despite the age diff. Married and divorced, I imagine you have wisdom to share.”

Wisdom to share about his failed marriage, and painful divorce. All the bitterness and constant thoughts about it running through his head, summarized in a word he didn’t expect: wisdom.

“You know? I just might.”

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~~Julias~~

He was tempted to call Triss, and see if she had something to contribute. But he knew it’d be a bad idea. Much as he wanted to confide in her all the details of what was happening involving the hunters, at a certain point it crossed into needless, and potentially disastrous information overshare. If they got involved, they might trip over what the Invictus were doing, or give something up to the Carthians.

Was that a bad thing? Now that Garry was taking a more active role in fucking with the Invictus, Julias found himself hesitant to let him in on the details of Invictus movements against the hunters.

He sighed from behind his desk in the Xnomina HQ, and watched the video feed from a dozen thralls stationed around Carlava Villa. Snipers on rooftops, eyes in parked cars, and more than a few

Kindred about, doubled up, each paired with at least one member that was good at the cloak of night. No one was getting into the building that didn't belong there.

~Just jacked Eric off a couple times. Now we're gonna take a nap on his bed.~

Julias looked at the text, tied into the network for the Right Hands. God damn it, Jessy. That woman, what the hell. Young kindred often let their sex drives get the better of them, until they were older, but Jessy was plenty old at this point. He figured she'd have calmed down by now. Well, at least she said she jacked him off, not fucked him; that'd be a hard position to jump out of and prepare to defend herself, if someone attacked.

The following texts about Eric's dream, were not so silly. Talk of a monster was understandable, dreams were weird. But the specific mention of Jeremiah seemed out of place. Combined with Eric's exhaustion despite his Uratha physicality, it was too much of a coincidence for Julias to pass it off as a meaningless dream.

Dreams were the purview of the Begotten. He was tempted to try and contact Azamel; easier said than done, with no actual way to message her, except maybe send a runner into the old tunnels.

The others should be here, but they weren't. MacDonald was off with a crew, investigating potential Terra Den issues; whatever that meant. Turio was doing something, by herself, about something she didn't want to talk about. In the past, he'd have chalked it up to Maria being Maria, pursuing whatever sort of creepy shit a devout person like her did. Why she never left the Invictus to join the Sanctified, he'd never understand.

That wasn't fair. Maria was a far more reliable council member than Michael was. She put her foot down and got things done, without putting the Invictus, or Xnomina, in harm's way. Usually. There was Antoinette's warning about her, and there was a buzz going around that Maria was dipping her toes into dangerous, nondescript things. What those things were, no one knew, but he didn't put it above Maria to pursue the strange sorceries Lucas was supposedly capable of. Jack confirmed that Lucas had actually cast a bolt of lightning, and hurt the Prince, preventing her from using her majesty discipline. Theban sorcery, supposedly. It was one possibility of what Maria was up to. He didn't want to consider others, not yet.

He held down the 1 key on the keyboard. "Jack, any sightings?"

"No."

2 key. "Mister Burksen?"

"No."

3 key. “Madam Lauevion?”

“No sir.”

He went through a few more, and sighed with each one. No point in asking, they’d report in any sightings the moment they had any, but he was growing impatient. He hated that he was growing impatient. Impatience was not a good trait for any Ventrue, and it wasn’t one he ever wanted to learn, before or after his embrace. The issue was, this was possibly pointless. Eric’s dream, if it was an attack of some kind, was a giveaway, which meant the hunters knew Eric knew, and that the Kindred probably knew; assuming they knew Eric was working with the Kindred. Another maybe.

Considering the ritual was of his face, there was no way the dream was just happenstance. It had to be real, had to be something, had to mean the hunters were going to come for Eric. How. How was the problem. Would the hunters come in through the front door, or chopper in, or something ludicrous? The Kindred had every inch of the building’s exterior monitored, under the assumption the hunters would come for Eric. There was just no way it was going to go the way their plan thought it might.

He looked at his phone, at another text from Jessy, this one for him specifically.

~Eric says the way to a man’s heart is his stomach, not his dick. Thoughts?~

Sometimes, Julias forgot that he and Jessy had worked side by side for decades. To Jessy, that meant every detail of her personal life she felt sharing, was up for him to learn, whether he wanted to or not.

He facepalmed, before he texted back. ~A boy, a young man, can’t think past their own dick. A man is capable of appreciating more. You could consider that to be a metaphor for the stomach, yes.~

~That’s basically what he said!~

~Sounds like you got your work cut out for you, if you’re trying to break this man.~

~Bah.~

He laughed, and put the phone back down. Break was the wrong word, but it was probably how Jessy was thinking about it. She had to break the man of course, not enjoy a growing romance like an adult, no no. To Jessy, he was a challenge to overcome, and puzzle to figure out.

Jack had told Julias that he was sure Eric and Jessy were interested in each other, and it was good to see his childe noticing details. A little tidbit of information could turn into a vital puzzle piece for a key issue, or valuable ammo in war. He was catching on quick. Poor Antoinette, forced to watch her

lover become more and more of a schemer and typical Ventrue with each passing night. Julias was proud, but he had to admit, it was a little sad, seeing the kid's innocence melt away.

The Carlava Villa wasn't the only thing Julias was monitoring. There were thralls keeping an eye on the Mirrden District, in case Garry made a push for it. There were Kindred roaming South Side in pairs or triplets, hunting, keeping an eye open for anything and everything that might have been involved with the hunters. MacDonald had a bunch of Kindred keeping an eye on the Carthians, wasting time and man power over Tones's stupid crap. If the two damn dogs could stop fighting for one—his phone buzzed.

A message from Triss. ~Hey Superman. Jacob says you guys are doing a stakeout on Eric?~

Of course Jacob knew. No Invictus had told him, but at this point, it was expected the old man would find out what the Invictus were up to, except for the most private, and well-kept secrets.

~Sorry Triss, Invictus business.~

~Thought hunter business was for everyone?~

~It is, but coordinating with the other covenants makes things difficult.~

~True, I suppose.~

The Prince was the exception, of course. In matters dealing with the hunters, he kept her up to date. Unfortunately, she couldn't be bothered to deal with this matter personally. She had some thralls watching, he was sure, but she herself was attending to 'Princely' affairs; which likely meant putting counter measures in place against both the hunters, and the Begotten, Uratha, and even the covenants. She always did think ahead. The sheriff was off pursuing some mysterious agenda no one really understood, but at this point, Julias was sure he was doing something involving handling the new threats of the city. The man was a mystery.

~Guess what I'm doing?~ the phone said. Another text from Triss.

He was almost tempted to text her, and say he'd have to get back to her. The night was proving uneventful though, and with as many eyes as he had watching the tower, he didn't need to be watching the video feeds himself. It wouldn't be so bad, to text her back.

~What?~

~Got my hands all covered in kine blood, and I'm drawing patterns on Jen's big tits.~

~...what?~

~Ha, kidding. But we are doing some crúac shit. Jacob's showing me some rituals.~

~And you're texting me while doing this?~

~We're on the way. I'll send you a juicy picture if we get naked and rub blood on each other, or something. ttyl~~

Julias rolled his eyes and set the phone back down. He didn't mind the idea of Jen and Triss being naked around Jacob; he doubted the old man gave a shit about naked girls, at this point. There was concern about the dark and dangerous road the two witches were going down, though. Triss had awakened to a new level of confidence, since she started wearing that necklace, and watching her put her own blood around his door frame was an odd sort of thrilling.

He was in love with a witch, a practitioner of the dark arts, and an all around badass woman. Two, sort of, with Jen attaching as a friend.

He smirked, leaned back in his grand chair, and took stock of his second life. Dating an amazing woman, her friend too, he was now on the council for the Invictus of Dolareido, his childe was performing above all expectations, and Lucas, Viktor, and Tony were all dead. Everything should be better, but they weren't, not with the hunters, werewolves, and the damn monsters ruining everything.

Groaning, he buried his forehead in his palm. The Begotten were not the problem, not the way his reflex insisted they were. Hunters in the city, here to kill Azamel, were a problem, but as much as he'd like to blame Azamel, hunters were a problem all paranormals had to face. It was her fault, but at the same time, it was hard to blame her for simply existing. Not all paranormals were lucky enough to live in a city like Dolareido.

His phone buzzed again. He checked it, and chuckled at the picture. Triss, doing a stereotypical selfie for her phone, with her free hand lifting her tank top so he could see her breasts and nipple piercings. Jen was behind her, kissing her neck, and grinning at the phone as she did. The beast within would normally dodge or blur such photos instinctively, but with a little mental effort, a Kindred could pose for a camera.

Where were they? Looked like a cemetery. Probably the Three Kings Cemetery. He knew Jacob performed a lot of his extracurricular activities in that area, but he wasn't in the picture. Either he was not in camera shot, or not around. Julias hoped he wasn't around, but he got the feeling the two witches were growing comfortable enough to not give a shit about posing for Julias, even with Jacob around. Not because they didn't respect the old man, but they were catching on that Jacob was happiest when people treated him like the asshole that he was; in this case, ignoring him to pose for the phone.



Another picture came in, this time with Jen's hands groping Triss's breasts, still suckling on her neck. Then another, groping her breasts still, but now kissing her.

~Evil.~ He texted before he rolled his eyes, again, and took a couple seconds longer looking at the picture, before setting the phone down. She knew she was torturing him. He'd have to repay her and Jen next time he saw them.

He looked back to the video feed. Carlava Villa was a fairly tall building, with many floors. It had to be tall, to justify the large size of the apartments. Most of the floors had eight, but the top few with the grand suites had only four, giant apartments worthy of millionaires and presidents fucking prostitutes in secret. Three were being taken up by Uratha now.

He frowned, and watched Damien's high perch camera feed. Through the curtains of the building, he could see the silhouettes of some entities on various floors. One of them was Clara, the werewolf who had an interest in Jack. It was a good thing Jack hadn't given into Clara's flirtations, but Jack had expressed some sadness over being unable to reciprocate. He liked Clara, he told Julias as much, and he seemed to think highly of her, but felt bad about not being able to return her interest. Poor kid probably didn't realize that it'd offend Clara if she realized she was being pitied.

The silhouette of Clara was alone, sitting on a couch. Watching TV, or streaming a movie, perhaps. He could find out, if he wanted, bring up the Xnomina monitoring program, then use his Invictus passcode to get access to the private information. No reason to spy on what she was watching though, except to maybe piss her off later with the knowledge. No reason to do that either.

He set his curiosity aside, and moved his eyes to another video feed. Hella Vendram was watching from the street view, a distant position a good couple blocks away from Carlava Villa. Isabella didn't get her crew involved unless directly ordered, and even when ordered, she was hesitant to throw them into the direct line of fire. He could appreciate that; but it was also why she wasn't a Right Hand, and Jack was. Where Jack was both accomplished and trustworthy, Isabella was as well. The difference was Jack's ability and desire to get things done; case in point, he was sitting in a car with Natasha at this very moment, hidden in her cloak of night, almost directly outside Carlava Villa. Natasha could keep him hidden, barring some ridiculous counter card the hunters hadn't played yet.

And that was a possibility.

Julias sighed, and looked for that joy he had a moment ago, when Triss texted him. Gone. He grumbled, and dragged his fingers down his face. Being stuck behind a desk was man's version of hell. He thought things would be better as a council member, but having to be hands off with everything, so he could provide macro support and keep people aligned on objectives, was both infuriating and

nauseating. No wonder CEO was considered one of the most stressful jobs on the planet; no amount of money can justify dying young to a stomach ulcer. Unfortunately, Kindred didn't have to deal with stomach ulcers, so nothing existed to end this strange misery he'd found himself in.

He wanted to be out there, with Tash and Jessy, with Jack, getting his hands dirty. The oldest, strongest ancilla in the city, and he was trapped behind a desk. No, that wasn't true. He could go out there if he wanted. The problem was he knew it wasn't a good investment of his time, or a good use of his managing skills. From here he could give orders while monitoring the situation; maybe he should get a proper monitoring van set up, like a police crew?

If the hunters showed up and caused a ruckus, Carlava was only a five minute run away. But even in that circumstance, it was probably better to stay here and monitor the situation on the dozen video feeds. Viktor would say it was the responsibility of underlings to do the heavy lifting, and die, while it was the duty of leaders to oversee how. Grim, but true, unfortunately.

He leaned back in his seat, and checked Damien's feed again. The man was a stone, unmoving, and silent. Fifty years of sneaking, hiding, observing, learning the sword, learning to use guns, learning his disciplines. The man was basically a self-taught assassin, and had insisted on doing his stakeout alone.

And, no matter how much Julias found the man unnerving, he was proving to be both trustworthy, and a damn valuable Right Hand.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Damien~~

Damien took a slow, deep breath. Pointless. He didn't breathe, no Kindred did, and the act had lost its value even as a nervous tick, long ago. Now, he was doing it to check if his hearing was still adjusted. If the breath was quiet, his ears weren't adjusted enough. If the breath sounded loud, they were.

The other Kindred weren't used sitting and watching silently. They were taught to be more proactive in their pursuits, to engage, that the best defense was a good offense. It was true, he supposed.

In the modern world, with technology at hand, being passive meant losing engagements. He who struck first, won. This was especially true when using explosives.

But when it came to doing a stakeout, and waiting for an enemy to expose themselves, patience was required. The younger Kindred, and those his age, were spoiled by Dolareido. They had no patience. They wanted to run in, convinced they could take on any threat.

That was slowly changing though, as the new threats made it apparent how deadly they were. The Kindred were starting to understand that the Uratha, and the Begotten, were stronger than them. Only the ancilla and elders were strong enough to stand up to them, and the overwhelming majority of Kindred in Dolareido were neonates. Kindred ruled the city, but before the terrifying power of werewolves, or the sheer alien nature of the monsters, most vampires were weak and vulnerable.

And these hunters were hunting Begotten. They came here to kill Azamel, not Kindred. Sometimes Damien wondered if he was the only one putting that together, to come to the realization that these hunters were veterans, not to be taken lightly. Did it matter? He wasn't sure. What he did know, was that if he spotted Jeremiah or Angela, he would kill them. Athalia could burn for all he cared. He wouldn't let her daughter damage the fragile world Dolareido held. He wouldn't let those maniacs hurt this budding new existence he was carving for himself from the ashes of his sire's corpse.

He wouldn't let them hurt Fiona.

He shook his head, and took another slow, deep breath, to align his ears. It also sent his mind wandering to last night, and the small get-together with the Prince, Jack, Natasha, and the others. Jennifer and Antoinette had, naturally, worn their sexuality openly, leaving nothing to the imagination. It wouldn't be long before Fiona would be dressing the same way, and he had to admit, he was looking forward to seeing her in yet more revealing clothing.

The girl was gorgeous, delightful, and her sunny disposition was soothing to his soul and mind. Not only gorgeous, she was beautiful, and sexual, and the sight of her heavy breasts struggling against the plunging cleavage of her green dress was—

“Damien!” Jessy’s voice, tapping into the open line. “Get in here now! I... intru... ck...—”

Static.