

~~Beatrice~~

Beatrice stared at the crow that'd wandered into the cave. That, was unusual. Rats, sure, sometimes they approached the cave entrance, but the people inside, the lack of food, and the overall air of 'don't come in here or you'll get eaten' the cave gave off dissuaded rodents and insects. The entrance was also full of sharp brush, and not friendly to birds.

The crow hopped over to her, and the motion announced who it was. It had a broken wing.

"Scully?"

Jennifer sat up. "What? I—oh! Um, that... that does appear to be Scully."

"Scully, what're you doing here?"

The crow hopped up to the alcove, and flapped her wings a few times, settling. The broken wing looked nasty when she did that, but it did work, fully flapping and everything. Triss couldn't help but smile at the thought of her flying, like a car with some drag on one side.

"My Animalism sucks. Jen, help me out?"

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "Learn to step outside your comfort zones of Disciplines."

"You can talk when you can Cloak. At all."

Chuckling, Jennifer leaned over to the bird, and clucked her tongue a few times.

Scully clucked back, crooned, cawed, and hopped left and right a bit. Pretty damn animated. Triss looked past her to Othello and Madison, who were still going at it, and deep into the heavy, grunty loud parts of sex. Madison was borderline comatose, Othello having Kissed her, but the big lug just kept pounding away, making the poor girl cum again and again and again. No wonder they didn't notice the bird.

Aaron would have noticed instantly, but the dude was out with his supposed girlfriend none of them had seen. Triss was starting to doubt she existed.

Jen snapped her hand out, and grabbed the bird.

"Jen, what the fuck!?"

Jen snarled as she held the shocked bird by the body, pinning her wings, while her other hand grabbed her feet.

"Scully, listen to me closely. If you're lying, I'm going to rip you in half. Say it again."

Scully took a few seconds to recover, but eventually she clucked and cawed again.

“I... I don’t believe you.”

Scully cawed again.

“Shit. Shit shit.” Jennifer slowly let go of the crow’s body, but not her legs. “She says Jack’s in danger.”

“Jesus, I figured it’d be something like that if she came looking for help. But why are you—”

“She says Jacob’s the danger.”

Beatrice froze. “What?”

“Jacob’s the danger. Jacob’s been up to something, and everyone knows, everyone except us, and they’re all out dealing with stuff right now connected to it.”

Oh fucking shit. Triss groaned and buried her face in her hands. No no no. Jacob, what the fuck are you up to?

“She know details?”

Jen shook her head. “She’s a familiar, not a person. Probably not safe to give her too many details, cause, you know.” She gestured to how easily she’d caught the bird.

“Did Jack send her?”

“No, she came on her own, because she thinks Jack’s in trouble. She thinks Jacob might have done something, and apparently, he’s been up to something for a while?”

Triss leaned in close to Jen, and whispered. “When Jacob took me outside a bit ago, he... he thought I knew about something, about... something.”

“About... something.” The word was quickly losing all meaning.

“He was up to something, and he thought I already knew about it. Apparently Jack and the others already know. And... And whatever it was, it was big. He ran off to do... whatever it was.”

“And you’re telling me now?”

“I had to fucking think about it, okay?” Triss sighed as she looked to the crow. “Why’d she come here, and not visit the others?”

“She says she can’t get to the Prince, but Mulder’s still trying. She tried everyone else, and they’re all gone.”

“All of them?”

“Everyone with a window.”

Groaning louder, Triss slid back and smacked herself in the face a few times. “Jacob Jacob, what the fuck are you up to?”

Jen and the bird clucked at each other a few times more.

“She says whatever it is, everyone’s been trying to stop it for a while. Something to do with Black Blood.”

Black Blood. Hearing the name in this context was like getting stabbed in the fucking spine with a fucking icicle.

“So, Natasha?” Triss asked. Jen shook her head. “Damien?”

“With Jack.”

“The werewolves?”

“Most of them are with Jack. The others aren’t at their home.”

“Eric?” Triss asked. “He’s probably with Jessy.”

“Not home.”

“Sándor?”

“Probably with Jack,” Jen said. “Scully says they’re all grouped up to fight a spider monster. I assume she means an azlu, not Fiona. And... she thinks Jacob’s interfered.”

“Fuuuuuuck. Wait, what about Fiona? She around?”

“Scully doesn’t know where she lives.”

“Fuck. I don’t have her in my phone either. Fuuuuuuck.” She snapped her gaze over to Othello, who was slowing down. For half a second, she thought about going over there and telling him, getting his opinion. But, no, that’d be stupid as fuck. Othello was her friend, but he’d been Jacob’s friend for fucking decades. Did he know what the fuck Jacob was up to, then? Probably not. Didn’t mean she could trust him.

“Triss?”

“Let’s go outside.”

Jen glanced over at Othello, nodded, and the two—three of them left, one of them still a hostage. Once they were outside, Triss wrapped them in her cloak, and they put a bit of distance between themselves and the cave.

“Okay,” Triss said, “we gotta figure this shit out. Jack’s in danger. A bunch of people are in danger. The bird thinks Jacob’s to blame. Everyone knew about this except us, and everyone also happens to not be home! Fuck. Fucking christ fuck fuck!” She threw up her hands and marched around, stomping on the ground and sand. “What the fuck is going on!?”

“She says she thinks the Prince is home, but she doesn’t have a way to get to her. Not easily, anyway.”

“Not like the Prince has a pigeon carrier service set up. It’s the twenty-first century for christ’s sake. Fucking fuck! Why doesn’t she go back to the thralls and ask them to contact the Prince?”

“Mulder’s already doing that, but it’s a complicated situation.”

“Complicated,” Scully said, earning a small jump from both vampires.

Triss threw up her hands again and pointed at the bird. “I fucking forgot she can talk. She can explain it to Jack’s thralls!”

Scully shook her head. “Can try. Complicated. Mulder will try.”

Jen couldn’t help but smile at the talking crow. “Mulder getting those girls involved is already going to piss Jack off, and you know it. And Mulder’s going to have to try and explain what’s happening with bird talk, at least enough so they can contact the Prince.”

“He can just fly in there and yell ‘call Prince! Call Prince!’?”

“Scully,” Jen said, “is Mulder under orders to not tell the girls about the dangerous stuff Jacob is up to?”

“Yes.”

“Which could make it difficult for a crow to figure out how to approach the situation. He’s a crow, Triss, not a human.” Nodding, Jen clucked and crooned at Scully a few times more, getting similar in return. “But, Scully thinks he’ll succeed anyway.”

Triss rolled her eyes. Damn slut was just being patronizing now, since she could talk to the bird a lot faster with Animalism.

“Okay,” Triss said. “I... oh fuck.” She threw up her hands again and paced around some more. “Do I even want Mulder to get the girls to call the Prince? Is that something we want happening?” Scully flapped her wings a few times, trying to get away, but she wasn’t going anywhere. “Christ, we don’t know what Jacob’s up to! Do we even want to... to... I don’t fucking know!”

“True. We don’t know what Jacob’s up to, exactly. But... do we... trust him?”

“We should! We fucking should! He helped us when we were fighting Angela and Jeremiah! And he and Black Blood saved Jack’s ass before then, too! Remember? Black Blood saved him and all his friends from Sándor’s nightmare that first time. And me, the second time! We should trust him!”

Jen frowned slightly as she looked between Scully and her.

“Triss, I know we... we should trust him, but we also shouldn’t trust him. Even he’d say something like that.”

“I know! But...”

“And we know he’s been up to something. And he’s been talking to you about it, more than anyone. And apparently, everyone knows, and they’re not happy. So, I guess... you’re the only one with any idea what Jacob’s up to that we can talk to. Do you trust him?”

“Fuck me. I... kinda trust him. Trust him enough to give him the benefit of a doubt! Trust him enough to get a little angry at the idea of the Prince, and apparently everyone on the fucking planet, trying to get in his way!” She stomped around a few more times for good measure. Maybe kicking rocks and sand would help summon answers. No such luck.

Jen watched, listened, and when Triss was done, they all looked down and tried to wrap their minds around the problem. It was like trying to find a path in fog thick enough to strangle them.

“We need more information,” Jen said. “Scully, you’re sure everyone’s gone? Anyone we could talk to?”

“All gone! Checked all see-through walls!”

“Windows, Scully.”

“I know. I said! See-through walls!”

Triss couldn’t help but laugh. Bird brain was not human brain.

“You checked all the windows,” Triss said, “and it sure fucking sounds like people are all out there, doing only god knows what. You said Sándor was with Jack, too?”

“Master said so. Damien with, too. And wolf people.”

Triss pulled out her phone, and sent out a few texts. She tried to be as discrete as possible, in as short a time as possible. ‘Hey, what’s up?’ And waited. And waited. And waited.

No response from Jack.

No response from Natasha.

No response from anyone’s numbers she had, Sándor included, but he was probably in his lair, or in the tunnels. Or like the crow said, with Jack.

They waited ten minutes. A god damn fucking eternity. No answers.

“What about Athalia?” Jen asked the bird.

“Don’t know.” Scully pecked at Jen’s fingers a couple times, but Jen held on. “Don’t trust Jacob.”

“Yeah, well, I do,” Triss said. “I shouldn’t, but I do. But... but I... fuck me, we need more information! But who the fuck—”

“Athalia,” Jen said. “Let’s go see if Athalia’s home.”

“Athalia. You fucking serious? She—”

“Triss, come on, you talked to her not too long ago. She—”

“She won’t kill us. That doesn’t mean she’s our friend, Jen.”

Jen shrugged. “Do you have a better idea? We go to the tunnels, find what Begotten we can, and ask them what’s going on.”

“And... the Prince?”

“There’s nothing we can do about that. She’s going to find out. She probably already knows, or Jack’s thralls are calling her right now. And that... could be a good or bad thing. Fuck me, I don’t know. Let’s go.”

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Scully perched on Jen’s shoulder, and the two occasionally clucked at each other. After a while, Jen didn’t bother holding Scully hostage. Mulder had obviously reached the girls by now, which meant

the Prince knew, or knew whatever Mulder could communicate. No point in holding his partner captive anymore.

Triss tried to understand Jen and Scully, but it was pointless. She just didn't have a knack for Animalism. It came naturally to Ventrue and Gangrels, and if Aaron had been around, she might have asked him for help. But she wasn't sure she could trust him anymore than Jacob, and that fucking sucked. Thankfully, she had Jen. And even if she didn't, Jack's two crows were scary smart. Not smart enough to navigate complicated secrets and delicately communicate that with some uninformed thralls, but still, smart. Ish.

Christ, what was going on? She was in the tunnels, going on a trip to maybe, hopefully, find Fiona or Athalia, or maybe even that asshole Mark, and... do what? Ask them what the fuck was going on? Not like they'd spill their secrets if they thought Jacob was an enemy, considering he was Triss and Jen's boss. Fucking fuck, the whole trip could backfire so easily, and land Triss and Jen in a cage with some stakes in the heart for all they knew.

Was she overreacting? No she wasn't overreacting! Jack's familiar, on her own, decided to come find her and Jen. This wasn't some fucking prank. Oh god, everything was going to fucking implode tonight, and she didn't even know what the fuck was going on.

Jen and Triss finally entered the room with the concrete stage. No Fiona or Mark, but Athalia was there, reading a book as usual. And when she looked down and spotted Triss, Triss expected to see her scowl, or at least stare at her with her usual icy glare. Instead, Athalia's expression softened a little, to something even passable for happy. Well, happy might have been too strong a word. Slightly glad.

"Beatrice. Jennifer. Visiting?" Literally the nicest greeting the woman had likely ever given in her life.

"Uh, kinda. Um..."

"You have a crow with you."

Jennifer nodded, shifting her shoulder with the bird slightly. "Yes. Jack's familiar Scully came to us."

"That's strange. Why would she do that?"

Triss squirmed as she came closer to the stage, until she was only a foot from it and looking up at Athalia.

“You... you know about... uh...” She scanned Athalia for something, but the Begotten waited, confused. “So, yeah. There’s... uh...”

“Out with it, Beatrice. Is this about Mary or Samantha?”

“No. No I don’t think so. I mean... maybe? It’s...” Oh fucking christ, was she really about to do this? “Do you know if... if Jacob’s been up to something?”

Athalia’s eyes shifted into her usual ice daggers, and her familiar scowl resurfaced.

“Up to something?”

“Yeah. Up to something. Up to something... big... And now Jack’s in danger, and probably so are a bunch of people.”

Groaning, Athalia closed her book and gently set it on Azamel’s old chair. She stood up, cracked her knuckles, and made fists as she glared down at the two of them.

“You remember you work for Jacob, right?”

Of course she fucking remembered.

“Yeah.”

“And you’re here, because Jack’s familiar came to you, because it thinks her master is in danger... from Jacob?”

Triss groaned and rubbed her face with her palms. “I know! I know, okay. Dude is my boss, and sure, that might not mean much to most vampires, but it fucking means something to me. But... but Jack—”

“Is the only vampire in the whole damn city you can completely trust.”

Sighing, Triss put her hands on the stage, and let her head dangle between her arms and shoulders.

“Yeah. If the kid’s in danger, yeah, I should help him. Fuck me, even if it’s to stop Jacob, I should help him.”

Athalia sat down beside Triss, legs dangling off the stage, eyes looking out at nothing, face stern.

“Sándor told me he, Jack, Damien, and a bunch of the werewolves are hunting azlu tonight.”

“The fuck does that have to do with Jacob?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you.”



“Girl, I’m trying to help Jack, okay? Jack, and Sándor. You just said he’s with Jack. I help the kid, I help him, too.”

Slowly, like she was weighing a thousand possibilities in her head, Athalia eventually turned her head and looked back down at Triss. That, was a scary face. Athalia sucked in a breath between clenched teeth, before nodding and looking ahead again.

“Jacob and Black Blood have been up to something for... we don’t know how long. Years, probably, especially the past few years. They’ve been creating tears, strange tears that cut from one realm to another. Physical, spirit, even into the underworld. Even to places Begotten can’t go.”

“Tears...”

“Yes. Tears. Black Blood and Jacob have literally been tearing holes in the... fabric of reality, if you want to get comic book movie about it. They’re pursuing Minerva’s legacy.”

Oh fucking shit. Minerva.

“Jesus fucking christ, what—”

“Minerva wanted to punch a hole between the physical and spirit realms. Maybe a permanent one. Black Blood and Jacob are taking it a step further. They’re going to tear down the walls between all realms.”

Triss threw up her hands. “Okay, you hear yourself, right? Tear down the walls between realms? The fuck? He’s one vampire—”

“With the help of an entity we’re all quite sure is no simple spirit.”

Fuck, she had a point. Triss knew something about spirits from everything she read, and from what the werewolves and Jack’s friends were willing to tell her. Black Blood didn’t seem to fit the bill, not completely, what with doing weird shit like penetrating Sándor’s dream realm, twice.

“I don’t know what this has to do with azlu.”

“I don’t either. Sándor said Avery was ready to ambush one, using a tear they found that didn’t fit the pattern.”

“Pattern?”

“Long story. But if you’re sure that Jack is in danger, because of Jacob—”

“I am.” You didn’t need Animalism to sense the panic in Scully. If Scully had been some regular crow, then sure, Triss wouldn’t have taken it too seriously. But the bird was literally undead, a familiar,

and that meant quite a fucking lot. Combined with what Jacob had told Triss earlier, yeah, she had no choice but to take it seriously.

“Then I have to go.” Athalia hopped down from the stage, and started down the tunnel the way Triss came from. “Damn it, Fiona. Perfect night to get drained.”

“Um, I’m sorry, you have to go?” Jennifer stepped aside to let her walk past, but followed after her at a healthy distance. “Going to tell us where?”

“The tear Jack and the others went through didn’t fit the pattern. They’re through it right now, hunting azlu in the Great Below. If you’re telling me the bird says Jack is in danger, from Jacob, then I’m going to that tear.”

Triss jogged up beside her. “You know we’re coming, right?”

“You know I will kill you if you get in my way, right? The cat’s out of the bag. Jacob is doing something we want to stop. You work for Jacob.”

“Okay, then we—”

Oh fucking shit. Athalia’s glare was deadly. She didn’t mean just stop him. She meant stop Black Blood. And ‘stop’ probably meant kill, both of them if possible. You didn’t stop someone like Jacob without cutting his head off.

Jennifer jumped in front of Athalia, and held out a hand, like creating a barrier. “We want to come, but that doesn’t mean Jacob has to die.”

“Get out of my way, Jennifer. I didn’t have to tell you anything. I told you because I thought you deserved to know. But that doesn’t mean you get to stop me.” Athalia held out a hand, pointed it at Jennifer, and the tunnel went silent as darkness spread out from the Begotten, blocking out the flickering lights of the old tunnel. The shadow of the skeleton monster with no legs, and enormous bone wings, slowly moved inside.

Triss jumped between her girlfriend and the crazy monster lady.

“Whoa whoa whoa. How about we figure out what’s going on first? Okay? We get to Jack and Sándor and that Avery bitch, and we just stop Jacob from getting them killed, or whatever. Killing or not killing can be figured out later, okay?”

Athalia snarled as she shook her head. “You don’t fucking get it. I told you what he’s been up to. You tell him we know, and everything dominoes. We take care of this now, tonight, all of it, because Jacob sure as hell plans to. He’s done something to get rid of the others, get them out of the way, I don’t

know, so he can do his ritual without interference, and start a fucking apocalypse!” She took another step forward, and the enormous shadow in the dark followed her. “So get out of my way, before I rip you in half. I need to contact the Prince.”

Triss gulped, and joined Jen’s side, but otherwise the two ladies were in Athalia’s way, in the kill zone.

“Mulder’s taking care of that.”

“Says you.”

Jen gestured to Scully, and Scully gave her wings a few flaps.

“Mulder at Master’s nest! Talk to Master’s pets. Pets talk to Prince blood drinker.”

Athalia snarled. It sounded nothing like normal Athalia, and far too much like the skeleton monster.

“I guess that’s a good thing. The bitch and I aren’t in each other’s phones.”

“Same,” Triss said. “And no one else is answering their phones. Like, no one. Which means you got no one to go to for help, except us.”

Athalia ground her teeth hard enough Triss could see the jaw muscles bulge, even in the weird darkness.

“Alright.”

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“It’s gone.”

Triss stared at Athalia, and then at the empty basement. “Gone?”

“Gone. It’s fucking gone!” Athalia kicked a nearby wooden box, and Triss braced herself for exploding wood from the sheer strength of the impact. But it didn’t break, only rolled over with the strength she’d expect from a kine woman. Begotten were strange. Out in the physical world, they seemed basically human unless calling on their Horror, and the best they could do when not in their lair, was summon some kind of shadow of it. The shadow of her Horror was probably strong enough to kill Beatrice and Jen, at the same time, if they weren’t careful. Without it, she was weak.

“And, uh, Jack and Sándor were on the other side of it?” Triss asked.

“Yes, probably. The tear opened up to a place where at least one azlu was frequently visiting.”

“And this tear isn’t in the pattern? Whatever that is.”

“Yes,” Athalia said. “Ultimately, Avery figured Black Blood made it to direct her attention to the azlu.”

“Which means... you expected a trap all along.”

“Maybe. She thought Black Blood just wanted to give her a distraction.”

Triss groaned as she paced around, digging her claws into her scalp.

“Christ, now I wish I had the Prince’s phone number.”

Jen raised a hand. “We can still go talk to her.”

Athalia shook her head. “We’re running out of time. If you want to run downtown and get her, go ahead. But Mulder can explain to her what’s going on. And as much as I don’t want to trust a bird...” She gestured to Scully, still perched on Jen’s shoulder. “He’s a familiar, not a bird. So, I can assume he’s done his job.”

Jen and Triss squirmed. Trust Mulder? Don’t trust Mulder? He was a familiar, true, but also a bird.

“I’ll go,” Jennifer said. “Alone.”

“Jen, you don’t know what she’ll do! If she’s been working against Jacob all this time, and she finds out we know about all this shit, she could stake out right there, or worse.”

Sighing, Jennifer made for the stairs. “Scully’s with me. And I can update her on what Athalia’s doing. And... if Jacob and Black Blood are going to... to do what Athalia says they’re going to do, we need her help and we need it now. You know damn fucking well we have to stop Jacob.”

Athalia snorted and folded her arms across her chest, but a quick glance her way showed her rolling her eyes, and nodding. She agreed with Jen. She didn’t want to agree, but she did.

Triss sprinted up to Jen, grabbed her, and turned her around. Before her best friend could say anything, Triss grabbed her shoulders, and kissed her; Scully had to move.

“Don’t... Don’t get yourself killed, okay? The Prince plays nice but she’ll kill you without a second thought if she thinks she has to, Jen.”

Jen grinned at her, gave her a quick kiss back, and started up the stairs again. “I’ll just seduce her, of course.”

Triss stared after her as she disappeared through the door. Christ, the whole night was turning into one giant clusterfuck of insanity.

“Okay,” Athalia said. “I can’t open this tear. It’s gone, like it never existed. I’ll open up my lair, and from there, I can tunnel us into the Great Below.”

Great Below. Fucking scary name.

“You can get us to where Jack and Sándor are?”

“No. I can get us where we think Black Blood is going to perform the ritual, or I can get us to another place in the Great Below that’s... not exactly close, to the others.”

“Not exactly close!? The fuck does that mean!?”

“It means I can’t just burrow into wherever I want! That’s not how it works!”

“What fucking good is it if you can’t—”

“We came here first for a reason! So we can use the tear and—”

“Well the tear is closed, and we don’t have a fucking clue what’s happening in this ‘Great Below’, so unless you have a better way to—”

“The fuck am I supposed to do!? I can’t burrow wherever I want! Opening up the lair is hard, and burrowing for myself can be just as hard! I need to know where I’m going, and—”

“Okay!” Triss threw up her hands for the millionth time that night, and paced around, stomping hard enough her army boots protested with loud clunks. “Okay, okay. You think we should help Jack, or try and stop Jacob and Black Blood on our own?”

She rolled her eyes. “You really think the two of us could stop Black Blood? Besides, that tear is deep in the Great Below. Very deep, on lower levels. I’ve never visited it, only Mark and Sándor. Mark because he can hide even better than me or Fiona. Sándor, because he’s strong enough to survive.”

“So it’s dangerous.”

“Extremely, for more reasons than your boss or Black Blood.”

“Then I guess our only option is for you to drop us off in, uh, normal Great Below or whatever, and we run over to Jack and Sándor.”

Athalia sucked in a hard breath as she paced, same as Triss. “We can try. It’s a dangerous place, too, and it’s not like I have a map of the area. It’s massive, hard to navigate, and... and I don’t know if I can get us to Sándor... at all.”

“Oh my fucking god this is bad. This is very bad. Why didn’t they leave anyone on this side of the tear to... to...”

“What? Stop Jacob or Black Blood from possibly closing the tear behind them? Fist fight a five hundred-year-old vampire and his god friend?”

“I get it,” Triss said. “That’d backfire pretty badly.” She’d seen Jacob easily beat Matt and Art in a fight, at the same time. One werewolf wouldn’t do shit if Jacob was serious. Avery was smart, keeping everyone together as a group. She’d need them all anyway, if she was hunting azlu. “We need to get to them. We need some fucking way to get to them.”

“I’ll open my lair right now, and get us as close as we can. Just, be careful of all the ghosts. A lot of them are—”

“I have an idea.”

Samantha, please don’t hate me.

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“This is stupid,” Athalia said.

The two of them ran down the street, wrapped in Triss’s Cloak. Every so often, Athalia ran out of breath, but then massive, shadowy, see-through, barely visible skeletal wings erupted from her back and carried her for a little while, hovering her an inch over the rooftops, before they jumped to another ceiling. Triss wasn’t sure if anyone would have been able to see it with how subtle they were at night, whether she had them wrapped in her Cloak or not.

“Yeah well, stupid is the theme of the night. My girlfriend is risking her neck talking to the Prince. She might not even need to, if Mulder already got Jack’s girls to do it. At least Jen can be specific with the details.” She checked her phone. Still nothing. “Where the fuck is everyone!?! I texted half a dozen people!”

“There’s no signal in the Great Below, or in the spirit realm.”

“Fuck me, the others are in the spirit realm?”

“Probably, if Avery was concerned the azlu might escape to there, perhaps wounded. This way the others can ambush it. Or maybe Black Blood is up to something, and they’re investigating.”

“I thought you were in the know,” Triss said. “Figured you all told each other everything, and apparently decided to leave me out!”

“You know why we left you out. And we don’t tell each other everything. That’s a recipe for a leak.”

“You’ve watched too many spy movies.”

Athalia let out one of those weird, raspy snorts that sounded more like her Horror than her.

“I’ve texted them, same as you, and they aren’t responding. We can safely assume the others are also busy.”

Triss mirrored the snort as best she could. “And through all this cloak and daggers shit, it never occurred to you to get the Prince’s number on your phone!?”

“Sándor has it on his. Otherwise, we Begotten keep to ourselves. If I needed to contact the Prince, I would physically! Her or Jack or the others! We know where they live! And last I checked, it was Jack’s job to act as liason for us!”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Not like we all live in different places in this giant fucking city or anything, far away from each other! Put people in your phone!”

“Would you even tell the Prince if you could? If Jen hadn’t said she would go, would you even tell her? You know she’ll kill Jacob if she has to.”

That, was a fucking painful truth, and at the moment, Triss did not want to think about it. She snorted again, but a glance back showed Athalia smirking. Damn bitch.

“You can’t tunnel or burrow your way to the Prince, or something?”

“I could, but it’s not easy. And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m a little busy trying to get to Sándor! We’re already wasting enough time!”

This bitch. This fucking bitch. How the fuck could Daniel stand being around her?

Eventually they stopped at a lovely little house in the quiet neighborhood section of Dolareido. No expensive houses or anything, and a few small apartment buildings nearby, but otherwise it was a pretty comely place, with front lawns and shit. But holy fuck, even standing in the house’s driveway, she could feel the cold dread emanating from it.

“Alright, let’s go,” Triss said.

Athalia froze in the driveway. “You... You go.”

“Athalia, if she’s coming with us, she’s going to have to be around you.”

“I... I...”

“Come on! We don’t have time for this shit. You want to save Jack?”

“I want to save Sándor.” But the small twitch in her lip said it all. She wanted to save Jack, too.

“Right now that’s the same thing. You’ve never been to the Great Below, right? So we need a ghost to help us, right?”

“I could find them without her help.”

Triss threw up her hands. “Maybe! You could ‘maybe’ find them without her help! Jacob and Black Blood are apparently doing some apocalyptic shit according to you, and Jacob’s closed the tear they took to get into the fucking underworld. Guaranteed he’s sprung a trap, and that trap could be fucking deadly, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then like you said, we don’t have time to fucking waste, and we need help.”

If they went to the Prince instead, she was as likely to just lock Triss up in a cell instead of actually help her. This was the better option. Hopefully.

“You know I don’t trust you about this, right? You like Jacob. Jacob is our enemy.”

“I get it! I get it I get it, we can worry about it later.”

Athalia rolled her eyes, took a single step up the driveway, and stopped.

“I...”

“Athalia, holy shit, Mary is—”

“Don’t you dare tell me Mary won’t mind, or will forgive me for what my daughter did. Mary is not Samantha.”

“She’s... okay, she’s not Sam. She’s got a temper. But she didn’t throw a fist at Sándor when she met him, either.”

“Sándor—”

“Mary knows who he is, and what happened. She let it slide with him. She’ll let it slide with you.”

Athalia took one more step before stopping. “You didn’t tell her... what I did, at the end? Jack didn’t tell her?”



“No. I didn’t. Don’t think Jack told her either.” If he was smart. No need for Mary to know Athalia had tried to save her daughter’s life, at the end.

Nodding, Athalia slowly took another step, and another. She was the sort of woman who tried to keep up appearances, put on a strong face, all that shit, but when it came to this, she looked nervous as fuck. So Triss did the best thing she could do: take point, and not look at her.

“Sorry Sam.” She bashed in the window to the side door with her elbow, and unlocked the door. “Sorry, Mary.” One step into the kitchen, and she sucked in a useless breath. That, was some bone-chilling cold.

Athalia followed her in, and rubbed her arms as she gulped hard enough Triss heard it. She shivered openly, and chewed the inside of her cheeks as she looked around. Much as Athalia was half nightmare monster, she was also half perfectly normal human, and the unnatural cold radiating from the whole damn house turned her breath into mist.

“Mary,” Triss yelled. “Mary, you home?” She smacked herself in the forehead. Of course she was home, if the place felt like a graveyard in the middle of winter in Greenland. “Mary! This is important. Big time fucking important, and we need your help.” No answer. Triss reached down, almost took off her shoes, smacked herself in the forehead again, and walked from the kitchen into the living room. “Mary!”

Athalia followed, slowly, peeking left and right as she did, rubbing her arms every step of the way. Adrenaline, anxiety, and freezing her balls off had her quivering like a leaf in a hurricane. Half from the cold, and likely half from adrenaline and nervousness. And fear.

Triss got halfway up the stairs to the bedrooms before she realized Athalia wasn’t following her. Instead, the Begotten walked around the living room with slow, gentle steps, and looked around at the furniture, eyes wide and hypnotized.

“Sh... Shouldn’t we get Samantha?” she asked.

“She’s the last person I want involved in this. Christ, I can see it now. Someone goes to take a stab at Jacob, and she jumps in the way. Dies for him. We all cry. Very tragic. No thanks. I’d rather her angry than dead.”

Athalia sighed but nodded, and finally joined Triss on the stairs. She didn’t get far. The first door, Jack’s old bedroom, instantly caught her eye, and she stared into it. A simple, small, nerd’s bedroom, complete with an overused computer desk.

“I can’t believe that kid... came from this.”

“Yeah, me neither. But then again, Samantha—”

“Has an unusually strong will, too. Just... so different than her son.”

“Different, and kind of the same.” Shrugging, Triss continued down the hall. Samantha and her dead husband’s room on the left. Mary’s on the right. “You ready?”

“No.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Triss opened the door.

Sure enough, the biting mist flowed out of the room and over them like it had a mission. They both braced for inevitable chaos, but all that followed was silence and deadly cold. After a few more seconds of patiently waiting for an explosion that never came, Triss walked into the room.

“Mary?” she said. “Mary, it’s Beatrice... and Athalia. We need to talk.” No answer. “Mary, it’s super important. Jack’s in trouble.” No answer. “I uh, don’t know if you remember Athalia. You might have seen her at the ball. You... You know who she is.”

Still no answer. The room looked like any young girl’s bedroom, despite Mary being older than Jack, very colorful and bright, but the mist and dark lighting changed it into a twisted version of itself. Triss very much did not want to stay in.

Athalia stood in the center of the room, still rubbing her arms and shivering, and she looked like she’d jump through the ceiling if someone popped a balloon.

“I’m... Athalia,” she said. “And... I need your help.”

The bedroom door slammed closed. So much for popping a balloon. Both girls jumped and spun around, but no one was there. And the mist around them grew thicker, and colder.

But no Mary.

“Keep talking, I guess,” Triss said, sitting down on the corner of Mary’s bed.

“Y-Yeah, okay. Um, Mary, I... I know what Angela did to you was... horrible.”

“And Mom!” The mist twisted and swirled with a powerful gust, and Athalia covered her face as the wind had her long black hair scattering.

“And your mother. And... I can apologize. I can say I’m sorry...” Athalia looked Triss’s way, before a tiny, nervous smile appeared on her lips. “But, I didn’t do those things, Mary. Angela did. I made a lot of mistakes raising her, but she made her own choices. And your mother knew that. That’s

what we talked about, at the ball, remember? She came up to speak to me, and not for the first time. She—”

“I know!”

The bed spun, banging against the walls and desk, and Triss squeaked as she clung for dear unlife. Athalia jumped, and the homicidal furniture flew underneath her, catching her as it crashed into the walls. Dent, dent, dent, the drywall gave way to the bed smashing into it, over and over, and Triss and Athalia half rolled over each other as the mattress bounced and slid and tried to buck them off. The vanity desk took one good hit, and a couple dozen cute bracelets and necklaces scattered over the floor. The mirror shattered, and rained broken reflections into the mist below.

As quickly as it'd started spinning, the bed came to a stop in the center of the room. The floor disappeared in mist thick enough to bury someone alive, and the cold only grew worse, until Athalia's dark skin started changing color.

“Mary!” Triss said, sitting up, but not daring getting back on the floor, not when the bed was a kneecap risk. “Mary, you fu—”

Athalia touched her shoulder and shook her head, before she looked up and around at the bedroom ceiling.

“Mary, I know you're angry. What happened to you is horrible, all of it. And... And even though I know it's not my fault, and Angela's decisions were her own, I still feel horrible. There's nothing I can say or do that will make this better. You're angry. You should be angry. You deserve to be angry. And... And I know there's nothing Samantha can do to make it better, either. She wants to, I know. God, I know what it's like to have an angry daughter, and have every fiber of my being want to do nothing but help her. But your mother can't.”

Triss stared at Athalia. That was a fucking heavy topic, and if Mary didn't take it well, she was liable to smash Athalia into mulch, and Triss into kindling.

The mist spoke. “She... She doesn't understand. She thinks I can get over this. I can't! I can't I can't I can't!”

Athalia nodded as she took a deep breath, shoulders shaking. “I know. Your mom doesn't know what it's like to be angry, so angry that it's all you can feel. Nothing else but anger, right down to your insides. So angry, that it doesn't matter what anyone says. It doesn't matter what happens. Nothing will ever change it or take it away. Nothing.”

The mist between the bed and the door parted, and Mary slowly floated up from the depths of the cold. Holy fuck, she looked worse than last time. Her clothes were ripped and torn, her face was covered in strange cuts as if she'd cut herself open with her fingernails, and her giant, black, empty eye sockets were massive and twisted. And sad.

“Mom doesn't understand.”

“Your mom is too nice.”

“She is!”

“She always been that nice?” Athalia asked.

“Yes! Even... Even when Dad died. She was sad, but never angry.”

Nodding, Athalia crawled off the mess of a bed, and stood in front of the ghost. Still shaking like a leaf, still obviously so cold hypothermia was gonna be a real risk, not to mention her kneecaps, but she did it anyway.

“Mary, Beatrice and I came here because we need your help.”

“My help?”

“Jacob and Black Blood, they—”

Mary hissed and pushed away from Athalia, and into a wall, disappearing.

“Black Blood! Dark. Black. Scary.”

“Very scary!” Triss said. “But, he's up to something, Mary, and we think he's going to... uh, break everything, I guess.”

“Break everything?” Mary asked, still hiding, voice gently filling the room.

“Yes,” Athalia said. “Black Blood has been sneaking around the city, in the spirit world, the physical world, and other worlds, leaving tears that go to other places. It's a ritual. We think it's going to tear them open more, and... collapse all the walls between realms. It'll merge everything, or destroy everything, we don't know. But... But it's a very real possibility that Black Blood is going to get everyone in this city killed, or worse.”

“Mom!”

“Your mother, and everyone.”

“But Jacob—”

Triss shook her head. “Jacob is working with Black Blood, Mary.”

Slowly, the ghost stuck her head out from the ceiling. “Jacob? But... But he was nice, and... and fun and—”

Triss put up her hands. “I’m as in the dark as you, but... but Athalia’s right. I know Jacob’s up to something, and Athalia knows Black Blood’s up to something. Pretty sure they’re doing this together, and... and it’s bad. Very bad.”

“But, what can I do? Black Blood is... he... He’s not normal!”

It took a lot of effort to not laugh at that.

“You’re right. It’s not normal,” Athalia said. “But, it sprung a trap, and now a bunch of people are in danger, including your brother.”

Mary’s eyes opened even wider. “Jack?”

“He’s trapped in the Great Below, with Damien, a bunch of the werewolves, and Sándor. Jacob’s trapped them down there.”

Mary covered her face in her hands, but she was see-through, and her freaky black voids-for-eyes stared through them.

“Jack’s in danger?”

“Yes. We don’t know how bad, but considering Jacob locked him down there, and he knows Sándor could get them out... I’m betting he has some sort of trap in wait to stop that.”

Beatrice nodded, and took the risk getting off the bed. What was that chittering sound? Oh shit, Athalia’s teeth were hitting each other with some extreme shivering.

“Mary,” Triss said, “can you stop freezing the place so much? You’re gonna kill her.”

After a few seconds, and a few pained stares from the ghost through her see-through fingers, Mary lowered her hands, and the mist faded a little. Less mist, less extreme cold. Athalia smiled at Triss, still shivering, but at least not likely to pass out anymore.

“Sorry! Sorry sorry sorry. I can’t help it. I can’t help it. I can’t—”

“It’s okay,” Athalia said. “We came here, because we’re going to go help Jack.”

“No one else can?”

“Everyone else is gone,” Triss said, “except for maybe the Prince, and Jennifer is already on the way to speak to her. Maybe she can come with us?” If the Prince and the sheriff didn’t come with them,

the trip into the fucking underworld was going to be scary as all fuck. They didn't have any time to spare, but it'd be nice to have two elders for back up.

"I still don't know what I can do."

"You're a ghost," Triss said. "The Great Below is full of ghosts. We need your help."

"B-But... I..."

"You've been there before," Athalia said. "Haven't you?"

"Only a peek! Only a little peek. It's... heavy there. Heavy. It pulls you down! I... I..."

"We're going down there," Triss said. "One way or another, Athalia and I are going down there, and we could use your help."

"But I... it's... Black Blood is scary!"

"Damn fucking right he's scary."

"It," Athalia said.

"He. H—nevermind. Yes, Mary, he's fucking terrifying, but if we don't do something, Jack could die. Sándor could die. Damien—"

"Damien?" Mary let out a tiny squeak. "Poor Fiona."

"Yeah, exactly. So, we're going to go, and we don't have anymore time to waste. We have to go now. You in or you out?" Christ she felt like shit, pushing Mary like this. Mary's ghost. Whatever. The girl was clearly distressed as fuck, and bullying her to get her help was one of the grossest things Triss had ever done.

"I'll... I'll go. Mom—"

"I'll text your mom before we go, whatever you want. And I'll do everything I can to make sure you see each other again, and come back safe." She had no idea how to do that, but she'd fucking try anyway.

Slowly, empty eyes flicking between Triss and Athalia, Mary nodded, and gestured to her desk.

"Take one of my things. I can hide inside."

Nodding, Triss stepped over to the desk. Poor thing was a mess, but at least most of the jewelry was still on the desk. She scooped up a nice bracelet, and slipped it on. It wasn't silver, or a chain, or black rope, or any of the jewelry Triss would have worn. It was a candy bracelet, the kind kids wore and ate, but made with fake candy, meant to last. Very colorful. God damn it.

“I mean it,” Triss said, holding out her wrist. “I’ll make sure you get back and get to talk to your mom again, okay?”

“Okay...”

“Anything you want me to say to her before we go?”

“Just... Just tell her that... that whatever happens, it’s okay. I love her, and I’m happy we got to have those three days together, and—”

Triss groaned and shook her head. “That is the most sad shit I have ever heard! Mary, come on, if I text her that, she’s going to freak.”

Mary smiled, nodding. “Tell Mom I’ll talk to her later, then.”

“Better,” Athalia said, and she smiled as she stepped back, and motioned to the bracelet.

Seeing a ghost suck itself into an object was freaking weird. The mist, Mary, the cold, it all condensed and flowed into the bracelet like it’d become a black hole. Silent and surprisingly subtle, everything that was the ghost entity sank into the bracelet. Just, upped and flowed into it, until everything in the room went back to normal. Just a normal, not haunted girl’s bedroom.

Triss stared at the necklace. Athalia stared at the necklace. Thinking about Samantha carrying around her daughter’s ghost in a necklace on and off for months, was disturbing.

“No time to waste,” Athalia said.

“Right.”

Once they were outside, Triss and Athalia checked their phones. They were working again.

“Nothing from Sándor or Mark,” Athalia said.

“Nothing from anyone for me, except Jen. She tried to call me.” Triss dialed back. Jen answered instantly.

“Beatrice Damor.” That wasn’t Jen.

“Prince?”

“Indeed.”

“Uh... can I speak with Jen?”

“No, you may not.”

Triss ground her teeth together, loud enough the Prince probably heard it. “If you—”

“Your dear Jennifer is alive, Beatrice. I am sure you understand that I cannot allow her to leave until this matter is settled.”

“Matter? You’re the one keeping secrets. I don’t even know what the fuck is going on.”

“You know enough. I cannot risk Jennifer giving Jacob any more information.”

“You... fucking...”

“She will be fine,” Antoinette said, voice ice cold, “but she will remain here, for the time being. Surely you can understand why I am doing this.”

“Not a trusting bone in your whole body.”

“Perhaps. But regardless, Jennifer tells me you are actively seeking to save my love from a trap my old friend has sprung.”

“I’m... trying to get there, yeah. Athalia and I are gonna try something.”

“Wonderful.”

“Um, I assume you’re going to come with me? Or at least Daniel? I—”

“Unfortunately, my sheriff and I are preoccupied with a non-trivial matter.”

“Non-trivial? Your boy wonder is locked up in the fucking underworld!”

Silence, for a few more seconds than was healthy for Triss’s sanity.

“I know, Beatrice. And I fear for him, and for what he may do.”

“What he might do?” Triss asked.

“Do what you must to save him and the others, Beatrice. Though I must ask, please, leave my child out of this.”

Triss opened her mouth, but said nothing. Sam wasn’t at the Prince’s? Then where the fuck was she? Maybe with Jacob? Shit.

“Fine. I haven’t even talked to her yet.”

More silence. The Prince didn’t believe her. Why the fuck wouldn’t she? Unless... Samantha wasn’t answering her phone.

“I am warning you, Miss Damor.”

“I’m leaving her out of this, Prince. You got Jen, right? I’m not gonna risk her life on a shitty lie.”



“Very well.” Definitely didn’t believe her. “Unfortunately, my student is busy in the spirit realm, or I would send her to join you. You must do this on your own.”

“I don’t even know what I’m doing! All I know is, Jacob’s locked Jack, Avery, and Sándor in the Great Below or whatever.”

“Athalia’s knowledge is more than enough to suit your needs.” A few muffled groans came in through the background. Didn’t sound like Jen, though. “I must go now, Beatrice. My task awaits. I must thank you, for sending Jennifer to me. Jack’s thralls were not exactly specific with details. I was... not sure if I would be able to time this correctly, but now I have a time frame to work with.”

“Time frame?”

“Indeed. It all happens tonight, Beatrice. I pray we will speak again tomorrow.”

Beep.

“That fucking bitch!” Triss stared at her phone and squeezed. It took every drop of willpower she had left to not crush it into powder.

“What did she say?” Athalia asked.

“She’s busy, doing something. Something pretty fucking important. Any idea?”

“No. It likely has something to do with Jacob and Black Blood, but she keeps her secrets.”

“Everyone keeping fucking secrets.” Because she was Jacob’s friend and student, and apparently her boss was up to something so bad, literally everyone else was getting ready to stop it.

He’d said she could see Julias again. He’d said there was a way to do it, without resurrecting him. He was going to change everything, and bring them along. Christ, Jacob, you fucking idiot.

“We’re running out of time,” Athalia said.

“Yeah... yeah, I know. Let’s go.”

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~~Eric~~

“Come on girl, we all saw it,” Jessy said. “You know, before Mary, uh... yeah. Gimme details.”

Groaning and tearing her hair out, almost literally, Brianna shoved Jessie away.

“You have a problem.”

“You’re the one getting DP’d at a ball. I ain’t never done that.”

“You... shit, really?”

Jessy laughed and stuck out her tongue. “Never.”

“Fuck.”

Eric and Tash traded a knowing look, rolled their eyes, and followed after them along the sidewalk. Arturo walked up ahead on the sidewalk in his wolf form, and Matt did the same behind them. This deep in Devil’s Corner, the spirits were a lot more aggressive and deadly, and it paid to pay attention. Jessie, on the other hand, was far more curious about Brianna and her relationship with Santos and Derick.

“Don’t believe her,” Eric said. “I’m not sure there’s a kink out there Jessie hasn’t conquered.”

Jessy promptly gave Eric the middle finger without turning around.

“This is diplomacy. Jack’s not here to play nice guy or liaison with the Uratha or whatever, so I’m gonna step in and fill his small shoes.”

“By pestering them about their sex lives?” Eric asked.

“Yes. Best icebreaker.”

Time to put a stop to that. Eric came up behind her and gave her a good tug on the shoulder. Before she could shake him off, Natasha stepped around her, and took her spot beside Brianna.

“Asshole,” Jessie said.

“Sex addict,” he said.

“You love it.”

“I do, but some day someone’s going to get really upset with you.”

“I’m just trying to—”

“I know, I know.” He leaned in and put a kiss on her cheek. “You can sexually harass me later.”

Brianna snorted and looked back. “I mean, she wasn’t lying. I did get DP’d, in public. But Dolareido just seems to really have that vibe going for it, even in the spirit realm. We can sense it. I’m sure you can, too.”

Eric could. Dolareido was more than just a city, it was an epicenter of some seriously weird shit. Ancient deity talking to him in his dreams, and doing some weird mojo on the whole city, it was all par for the course in Dolareido. Giant sex spirits that could have been gods elsewhere, they almost seemed blasé here, and after being in the city for a while, Avery's Uratha were getting pretty comfortable with Slut City's vibe. Just, not quite Jessy level of comfortable, not yet.

"I blame Jessy," Tash said. "She infects people. Like a v-virus."

"An awesome virus," Jessy said.

Brianna chuckled, but let the conversation die. They were getting closer and closer to where Black Blood had been spotted, the tear they'd investigated weeks ago. Apparently he, it, whatever, had been doing something particularly ritual-ly. Caleb and Monica hadn't been especially clear on details, because they hadn't dared get close. Sneaking around in Dolareido wasn't like sneaking around in a forest. It was difficult, even for Irraka. Borderline impossible for Cahalith like Eric.

Cahalith. Storytellers, like Avery and Clara. Why Luna decided he should be a storyteller, he'd never understand.

Brianna was Rahu, like Matt, a bit tall and pretty muscular, more than Jessy. Black, short hair, and a really nice ass. Jessy was probably testing the waters to see if she could get Brianna to join them for a threesome... or maybe a fivesome, with Derick and Santos. Which Eric would say no to of course, but now that they'd had a little fun with Marge, he'd opened the floodgates.

The group stepped into a dark alley, and Natasha wrapped them in her Cloak. Art didn't need it, fading into shadow, and he scouted ahead while the rest of them got closer together. They went through a few alleys, and a few more, now hidden from the watching eyes of the spirits in the shadows. And there were a lot of eyes. The strange black blobs the size of rats were everywhere this deep in Devil's Corner, probably under Street-Tail King's control. Some of the eel-like things flying around swam past on the way to South Side. And some spirits that looked like tires rolled on past, more than a few of them screeching like someone burning rubber. Any of them could have been spying for Black Blood, too, or Red Tide, if it'd somehow dominated their choir.

The buildings were old, older than they were in the physical world. The Hisil did that, emphasized key details until they were hilarious exaggerations. Hilarious if you were looking on from a distance, but terrifying if you were face to face with buildings that looked ready to collapse any second, with dingy brick walls falling apart, many with giant holes some of the rat spirits were using as doors. The windows had bars, and the bars were thicker than in the physical realm, Gurihal, thicker, rustier, and covered in spikes.

A few demons Eric had come to recognize as spirits of addiction scurried off. Addiction came in many forms, but drugs were a particular breed that refused to die, like cockroaches, and they looked like cockroaches, too. Some of them walked upright, and had needles for fingers like the fucker Eric had killed months ago. As long as they stayed small and stupid, the effect they could have on the real world would be minimal. It was when they got large, large enough to have unique names and complex motivations, that they started having real effects across the Gauntlet.

He hadn't been hunting in the Hisil in a while. It was probably time to pick it back up. Much as they had to worry about Black Blood and the potentially apocalyptic shit he was up to, that didn't mean he couldn't keep doing clean-up duty for the city.

They rounded a corner, and stopped.

That, was a lot of blood wraiths.

A dozen of the creatures looked down the dark street, facing away from Eric and the gang thank god, their long black arms hanging at their sides, and absurdly long claws hanging below them. Legless creatures with human-like torsos, they hovered a foot over the ground like evil genies, and their onyx, ink-like bodies were draped in red cloaks that looked like they were made of blood. Dripping, crimson blood. Eric couldn't see their eyes from behind them, but he remembered what they looked like. Slitted, glowing white eyes.

Natasha held up a hand, and slowly looked to Eric. Eric shrugged. The fuck were they supposed to do? They had to get to the tear to investigate, and this was the path they'd planned to take. It was a detour, a huge detour, ducking left and right through a dozen streets and alleys they didn't have to take to get to the city outskirts. No one knew they were going to take this path.

"You are too easy."

The group spun and faced the alley's other direction, but Eric already knew who it was.

"Street-Tail King," he said, growling.

The giant stupid rat stood in the shadows of one of the buildings. It was a dark night, an especially dark night, and now it was all too obvious why the shadows were especially thick. This fucker and the black wraiths were doing something.

Hisses behind him confirmed. The dozen blood wraiths turned and faced the group, and they chuckled as they tapped their claws together. Trap.

"You fucker," Brianna said, fists clenched at her sides. "The fuck are you doing?"

“Stopping you from interfering with Black Blood.”

“You know if Black Blood succeeds, it’s going to ruin everything for you. Get out of our way!”

“Black Blood is persuasive,” the spirit said. Its asphalt tail twitched twice, before it settled on the ground behind it. Several large rat-like dark blobs pulsed and moved on the hump on its back, before they flowed off its body and down into the shadows. “It insists we will survive the great change.”

“Survive, maybe.” Brianna took a step closer to the huge spirit and pointed a finger up at it. “But even if you do, so what? You want across the Gauntlet to the Gurihal, but it won’t be there anymore. It’s going to ruin everything!”

“You don’t know that.”

“The fuck do you mean—”

“Black Blood will tear down the walls. At first, I wanted to stop it, because it may bring everything crashing down, as you say. That’s why I told you.” The giant, two-legged rat twitched its whiskers, and plucked at one of them with long claws. “He insists otherwise.” He?

“It lies.”

The spirit shook its head. “I am bound, Uratha. I have no choice.”

“Bound?”

The rat slowly shook its head. “You don’t understand. Mictlantecuhtli will not stop until she is his once again. He has bound me, and I have no choice.”

“Mictawhatnow?” Jessy asked. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Natasha snapped her hand out, and yanked on Jessy’s arm, silencing her. The little vampire’s eyes were wide, and staring at the rat.

“One of his many names. It does not matter.” Street-Tail King shook its head again. “Ignorance is bliss. Be happy he only wants you to remain here. Malachi is... generous.”

Eric looked back at the dozen blood wraiths. Fight? Two vampires and four werewolves against the twelve of them, and Street-Tail King? Doable, maybe. But turning the current insanity into a fight was a bad idea, when none of them had the slightest fucking clue what was going on.

“Well, uh, thank you for your generosity, in sparing our lives,” Brianna said, gesturing around them, “but you know damn fucking well you can’t keep us here. You”—she pointed at the rat—“are bound by your bans! Think we don’t know? Think we don’t know you aren’t allowed to get caught in

light, exposed? We spread your name and how you're involved, and you break. Power, gone. Avery will—”

“Then it's a good thing we do this in the darkness,” it said, smirking, and gesturing around them, too. Metaphorical darkness, and in the spirit realm, literal.

“And tomorrow? We left you alone because you've been useful, rat. Tomorrow Avery will—”

“There will be no tomorrow. It all changes tonight, Uratha. You cannot stop Mictlantecuhтли. He has bound me, and he will—”

“Fail.”

Everyone looked up at the new voice, and as the thundering roar vibrated through their bodies, Eric's muscles tensed until his bones hurt. He reached down for Tash to throw her out of the way, but she already had her sword out, and was dashing for the blood wraiths. Fast, so damn fast she was just a blur.

Eric managed to follow the blur long enough to see Tash get past the spirits, and slice one of them through the neck. It took one whole second for her to get the sword out and dash thirty feet. The sword wouldn't do much damage to a spirit, except she got it in the neck so deep, it let out a screech that broke everyone's paralysis, like a popped balloon.

Then the water hit them. A raging river, heavy, overwhelming, and powerful. It crashed against the wall beside them first, and the bricks smashed in. The building groaned, and spirits within shrieked, as chaos erupted.

Art, Matt, Brianna, and Eric all transformed into the Gauru form, and readied for war, even as the water ripped the world apart. Eric didn't know how Flow got above them, or how it'd managed to stay out of sight as long as it had, but spirit took its shot, and buried everything below it in enough water to rip the buildings apart. Most of the water fell onto Street-Tail King and Black Blood's servants, but Flowing Sanctuary was not a precise, delicate spirit. It hit the whole damn area with a tsunami. The only reason Eric didn't crumble into a balled up piece of paper was his transforming, and in the chaos, he couldn't tell if Jessy was as lucky.

As the water ripped and tore everything apart, Eric sank his talons into the street and stood up while catching his claws on a building wall. The water had pushed them into one of the buildings, and it was falling apart around them. But as much as his friends were in a mess, the blood wraiths were worse. They didn't have much mass, and as the water broke down walls of what looked like the inside of a decrepit apartment building, the wraiths slammed into the chairs, couches, counters, and straight

through walls of drywall and brick. One of the unlucky ones crashed through a wall, went through the apartment Eric was in, and into a window. The metal bars acted like a strainer, and the spirit broke apart as it was pushed through.

Flow didn't stop. More water crashed on them, and more. The only thing that kept the building from falling on their heads was the steel support beams, but the spirit realm didn't care about materials. Everything was ephemera. Everything did its own thing based on how it felt as a reflection of the physical world. And the steel beams didn't think too highly of the old, dingy apartment building it was mimicking.

The building collapsed.

Hundreds of floating black blobs, rat spirits with beady glowing eyes, flowed away in the flood as the water broke through more walls. Other spirits hidden in the building, tiny things with little claws in the cupboards, and larger ones that looked almost like doors, and old televisions, with rust and broken limbs, grabbed onto any surface they could as the water swirled. The ceiling fell on them, and Eric covered his head with his huge arms as wood and tile and carpet buried him.

Water again. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't figure out which way was up or down. He opened his eyes but found only darkness, and flashes of movement as layers of building crashed onto him. Enormous pieces of floor and wall bigger than him broke apart, and steel beams rolled through the water and broke his ribs.

Something grabbed his arm, and lifted. As the water cleared from Eric's eyes, he raised his claws and swiped down at the colossal creature lifting him. He stopped halfway. It wasn't Street-Tail King.

"Okay?" Matthew asked, voice a growling bark. The Rahu was titanic when transformed.

"Yes."

The huge werewolf nodded, turned, sank his claws into a pile of rubble, and lifted. Water continued to churn around them, and a glance up showed the night sky. It hadn't been a very tall building, four floors, but still, Eric didn't expect to survive having a building dropped on him.

Oh fuck, Jessy. He snapped his gaze around. More chaos. The water thrashed and tore at more walls of nearby buildings, creating whirlpools filled with chunks of brick and wood. Rubble was everywhere, and the water crashed into it like rapids, contained and angry.

Maybe fifty feet away, in the alley between a mountain of knocked over brick, concrete, and splashing waves, Street-Tail King stood. Two werewolves tore at him, roaring and howling, massive claws taking chunks out of the rat that splattered against the water. Brianna and Arturo. The ephemera

chunks behaved like flesh, for a few seconds, before they disappeared into the blue and broke apart like ice melting.

Eric looked to Matthew. The titan pushed through the flowing water and headed for Street-Tail, but two black blurs jumped out of the depths and onto his back. The blood wraiths sank their huge claws into his muscles, and the blades passed through flesh with far too much ease.

Eric took two steps toward him before Matthew spun around and crashed into the water. Splashing rapids buried him, and Eric lost him in the darkness as the giant werewolf thrashed and crashed into whatever debris was too heavy to flow away.

Movement in the corner of Eric's eye whipped him around, and one of the spirits erupted from wet black, claws out. Eric snapped his arm out and sank his claws directly into the creature's face. It screeched, a sound far too similar to the sound Mary's ghost made, before it swiped at Eric's arm. But Eric swung his arm to the side and smashed the spirit toward one of the collapsed walls, and the creature's hands lost track of their momentum, missing his arm as he lifted the dead thing up, and then down onto the wall.

The sensation of spirit flesh breaking and ripping apart in his claws was euphoric. The sound of crashing water turned to thunder, and his heart beat became war drums in ears. Faster, and faster. The strange smell of ephemera filled his nostrils, a scent his human half couldn't understand, but the wolf spirit longed for. The smell of the hunt.

Somewhere, deep inside him, he knew the Cahalith part of him was happy for this. What meaning was there in negotiating with a spirit? What story could be told from such a boring event? But a battle, with such high stakes? Perfect. If only there was an audience, like there'd been in the old days when he'd fought for spectators. Like a gladiator.

A simple glance around satisfied him. Spirits were watching. Spirits of the air and the crow watched from a distance, paralyzed. Spirits of darkness, of disease, of addiction, small and weak, unformed and pathetic, barely more than motes of essence, stared on. Spirits of technology, of streets and cars, of surveillance and lethargy watched on, petrified. Flowing Sanctuary's reckless destruction had broken an entire building, and the ambush the stupid rat had set for them. It had also summoned an audience.

He stomped through the water, looking for his mate. The undead ones didn't need to breathe, but that didn't mean she couldn't die again if one of those bloody clawed ones found her. He sniffed the air, hunting for the scent of ash, but found none, only water and dying spirits. He looked down at the churning waves, but found only darkness and water. No mate, or her small friend.



Another one of the bloody spirits rose from the water, a broken, bleeding thing. An easy kill. Eric sank his claws into it, and ripped it in half. It tried to scream, but its ephemera body could no longer make sound, torn asunder.

Where was she?

Matthew burst from the water, one of the spirits clawing and stabbing, but its body was in his mouth as the Rahu devoured it. The other tried to escape his clutches, but the enormous Uratha ripped it in half easily.

So much for the ambush. The spirit of streets and rats underestimated them. Eric snarled as he turned to face the giant rat, and let the fire in his chest guide him toward the hunt. He wanted to find his mate, but she could fend for herself. The hunt was important.

They wouldn't stop until the streets overflowed with the broken, shattered bodies of Black Blood's servants.

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~~Natasha~~

She stared down at the insanity from on top a nearby building. It was tilted, bent, warped, and looked kind of like a laundromat. Judging from how the spirit realm made the building look, it was a good bet the laundromat was a corrupt place in the real world, a front for some shady business. Typical for Dolareido.

The only reason it wasn't crumbling underneath her, was because Flowing Sanctuary had directed its power straight down at the alley, and the building across from where it'd started. How a water spirit worked, Tash didn't know, and still didn't know, despite asking Matt and Art. They always gave her vague answers, things like 'spirits, yo' or 'ephemera has the power to create mass from nothing' which seemed absurd to her. Though, in retrospect, Mary's ghost was an ephemera being, and she made things from nothing, mist and stuff.

One of the blood wraiths let out a screech as it sliced at the water. Could it hurt Flow? Was the river that smashed and sloshed in the alley and debris actually Flow's body? The Uratha could hurt

spirits with their claws and teeth in ways Tash's sword couldn't, but then again, slicing one of them in the neck with her very normal metal sword had certainly hurt it.

Now, was not, the fucking time, to be taking, mental notes!

The new river ripped the apartment building apart, until it literally fell on her friends. She suppressed a squeak, and stared on as the werewolves, now transformed, turned what was once an ambush into a quick battle they were easily winning. Flow had attacked the way it did, because it knew the werewolves would be fine. But, where was Jessy?

In the water, she spotted Brianna and Art ripping into the giant rat, but it fought them off, lifting one by the throat with one hand, and landing a slash across Art's chest with the other. Tash snarled as she gripped her sword, and ran over the rooftop of the building opposite the one that collapsed into the churning waves. Eric and Matt were in there, between piles of rubble and floating boards, fighting off more of the wraith spirits. But the moment they made headway, a couple blood wraiths jumped from the water or shadows and threw themselves at their backs.

She almost jumped down to help them, but they could handle the wraiths. Eric was probably looking for Jessy, but she was probably buried under a pile of bricks and three feet under water. For the moment, a safe place to be. Brianna and Art needed her help now.

Tash stared down at the jump. She'd climbed up high to get away from the wraiths in the insanity, five floors. Maybe she could shoot Street-Tail King? Gun soaked, might not fire. And she was pretty high up. She could see in the darkness just fine compared to others, but there was just too much chaos.

She smiled as a memory came back to her, something Jack said he'd done, something Clara had confirmed.

She took a deep, useless breath, held her small sword in both hands, blade pointed down, and jumped.

Falling was a strangely freeing sensation. Weightlessness. She'd fallen from great heights before, even broke a leg once, and it'd left the idea of jumping off buildings deep in the 'don't do that' section of her subconscious. But she was a professional, damn it. Falling five floors would take about two seconds, an eternity, when trying to land on someone's head in a chaotic brawl.

The brawl moved to the side slightly. Natasha grit her teeth as she twisted in the air hard, and held out the blade with one hand instead. It was the only way to get it over Street-Tail King's skull. This was going to hurt.

It hit the stupid creature straight in the head, and she screamed as she squeezed the hilt tight as her weight and speed forced the blade through its skull. It felt like she'd just stabbed a giant tree stump, and the impact jolted her body hard enough her shoulder wrenched. But she didn't let go as the blade got halfway down before it got stuck, and Tash crashed against the spirit's back. She didn't let go.

Screaming louder as pain tore through her shoulder, she squeezed tight, reached out for the blade, and caught it with her other hand. She held on as the rat mirrored her scream, pitch included, and thrashed around hard, tossing both werewolves into the water, before it reached back and tried to grab her. It couldn't. It shrieked and roared and smashed its asphalt tail into the water again and again, sometimes swinging high and slamming into her back. But it was all sporadic, random thrashes, a dying creature not sure what was happening as a piece of metal sank deeper and deeper into its skull. A living creature would have been dead already.

Brianna and Art erupted from the water, and pounced the huge two-legged rat full on. It fell over, and everything turned to black so deep even Tash's eyes couldn't penetrate it. Water, crashing around her, thrashing, bodies, claws, and a hundred rat-like blob things falling into the water with her. She held on through it all, even as the grinding in her shoulder screamed in her skull to let go. No need to breathe, but that didn't stop panic from flooding her as bricks and concrete and flesh and fur smashed into her until she was trapped against the street.

But the chaos settled, and the enormous body pinning her moved. Oh god no, still alive? Enormous hands grabbed her, claws nearly puncturing her skin, and yanked her up through the water. Oh shit oh shi—

“Natasha,” Brianna said, half barking.

“Oh! Oh...” Natasha looked down at the giant body beside her in the water, her sword still trapped in its skull. It wasn't moving anymore. “It w-worked. I—ow!”

Brianna made a tiny yelp sound, and let go of her. Which of course led to Tash falling right back into the water. Groaning, she got back up and clutched her dislocated shoulder.

“Sorry,” Brianna said.

“It's fine. Just, give it a g-good yank. Downward, please.” She leaned forward, and gestured to her dangling arm with her good arm.

Brianna wrapped her giant wolf hand around her wrist, and forearm considering how big the werewolf's hand was, and yanked down. A sickening sensation, especially since her Kindred body fought to get the arm back into the socket on its own, but all it did was pull the bone closer, into the

wrong spot. Brianna yanked hard enough to almost pull her back into the water, but Tash stayed up, and let out a blissful sigh as the humerus bone slipped back into the groove.

The raging river stopped thrashing and slamming into everything. The water calmed. The rat was dead, and so were the blood wraiths.

“Dangerous,” Art the huge werewolf said, looking at Tash while gesturing to Street-Tail King’s body.

“Yes, it was. B-But we don’t have time for this! We have to get back!” She grabbed her sword, put a foot on the giant rat’s head, and yanked. Street-Tail King’s body was covered in fresh bite and claw marks, and weird colors bled into the water. The same color gushed out of the hole Tash left in its skull.

She knew who Mictlantecuhtli was. Antoinette would too, and she needed to know.

Art half growled, half sighed down at the creature. “Sad.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess.” She never liked Street-Tail King, but at least it’d been direct about its nature. It’d even helped them before, for selfish reasons, but still. “I... I w-wonder what happened? How’d Black Blood bind it?”

Brianna shrugged. “Don’t know. Spirits can bind each other, if very... very powerful.” It was hard for her to talk in her werewolf form, but she managed. The water didn’t provide any resistance to her huge body, and she walked through it quickly, causing it to splash against her thighs as she made her way to the other two werewolves. “Okay?”

“Yes,” Eric said, visibly shaking. Soaked and torn up, bleeding from several holes, he looked ready to rip something open and eat it raw.

“Where’s Jessy?” Tash asked.

Eric snarled as he looked down at the water, and tread around, pushing over piles of rubble and digging through them as he looked for her.

“Flow,” Brianna said, “enough.”

The water rumbled, a deep, ocean-like sound of power and majesty. It listened and obeyed, and the water receded. Slowly at first, as if Flowing Sanctuary struggled to control itself, but it did, and the water formed together into a spiraling whirlpool that went up instead of down. Up and up, until a torso and arms that looked more like misty waterfalls formed, along with a blank face with glowing white-eye slits, a little too similar to the blood wraith’s eyes for Tash’s comfort.

The huge angel wings were less calming, and far more intimidating, than angel wings should have been. Safe, her spirit friend, made her feel safe. Flowing Sanctuary made Tash feel like she'd stumbled onto some sort of ancient underwater temple, and it'd protect her as long as she was in it, but it'd also crush and drown anyone it didn't like.

Tash backed away from the huge spirit until at least one werewolf was between it and her.

"Reckless," Art said with a growl.

"You were surrounded. I needed to create the opening. Appreciate my help, Uratha."

Art dismissed her with another growl and a hand, er, claw wave, before he walked down the alley, the water now shallow enough it didn't pass his ankle. But he was a werewolf, so, tall ankles.

"Jessy," Eric barked.

"Looking," Art said, and he pushed over a pile of rubble. Not there. He flipped over another pile. Not there.

Tash followed after him, but stopped as she looked down. Red. That was a lot of red. The blood wraiths dripped red from their weird bodies, as if they'd been draped in cloaks made of magical blood that dripped and dripped and never stopped. But that blood disappeared and didn't do anything. Now, as Tash stared down at the alley full of ankle-deep water, creeping ripples of red joined the river, until it looked a little too much like a certain scene in *The Ten Commandments*.

Everyone stared down, even Flow, before the rumbling started. Rumbling turned into a gentle earthquake, complete with vibrations heavy enough the water rippled and made micro splashes. It only grew worse as the rumbling grew louder, and the splashes of red pushed against Flow's river body.

"It comes..." Flow said, powerful, feminine, scary angel voice sounding way too small compared to the oncoming bass.

"W-What? I... oh fuck." Tash tightened her grip on her sword, and backed up until her back hit the other wall in the alley.

"Uratha," a voice said, loud and heavy enough Tash felt it in her guts. "Uratha, come out, and die." It came closer, and closer, the destroyed building the only barrier between the giant red mountain of blood water, and Tash and her friends.

She gulped. "Red Tide."