

~~Jack~~

“Why would ghosts care about us?” Noah asked, gesturing to the approaching green lights. Thankfully, they were taking their sweet-ass time coming their way.

Jack ground his teeth as he looked around, checking for any ghosts that might come up out of the ground and do... whatever it was ghosts did to living, breathing people. Or in his case, non-breathing people. His encounter with the ghosts of angry workers from the industrial boom had been violent enough he knew anyone with a pulse would struggle to survive dealing with them. At least, humans would. Werewolves would fair better. And this time it wasn't just him, Sándor, and Clara.

“They care,” Sándor said, “because they're angry. We're alive. They're not.”

Noah frowned as he stared out at the lights. “Kind of cliché.”

“Not so cliché,” Jack said, “if it's true. Clara told you what happened last time we ran into them, I assume?”

Nodding, the werewolf gestured back to Clara and Avery, who were inspecting nearby webs.

“So we've got three problems,” Noah said. “Ghosts, the azlu, and Jacob and Black Blood are probably tearing down the whole world right now.”

“Yeap.”

“Any idea why Jacob wants us to stay here?” Noah asked.

“He wants us to deal with the azlu,” Jack said, “and otherwise, not interfere with him, I guess.”

“Agreed,” Avery said, joining them. “But I ain't waiting. Let's go.”

Wincing, Jack nodded, and followed after Avery as she marched ahead. A glance Sándor's way showed the man doing his usual stoic thing, but even he looked a little concerned. They were stuck, and the only way out of it, was to expose their flanks to ghosts and giant spider monsters. Fucking. Great.

Everyone went silent. Sándor took rear, and Jack and Damien took middle, with Damien doing his best to keep them wrapped in his Cloak. Brutally difficult for anyone except an elder, and every time Jack looked Damien's way, it was obvious the man was struggling. The original plan was to sit and wait for the azlu to show up, not go marching forward through a giant, dark cave, filled with enormous rocks the size of hotel buildings, and ravines deep enough it'd take hours to climb back out of them; assuming

falling into them didn't splatter their bodies apart over the jagged rocks. It was going to be a tough time for the vampire Cloaking them.

Mist was everywhere. It came and went as they walked, sometimes peeking up between the uneven floor up to their ankles, sometimes reaching up to their waists and hiding everything below it, and sometimes disappearing entirely. More than a few times, Jack ducked down to see if he could see what the hell was happening around his feet when the mist reached high, but the mist was too thick. They had to go slow, but they had to go fast.

At least they had a path to follow. The ravine with the spiderwebs continued on, sometimes filled with mist, sometimes not, and every so often it stopped having webs, too. But after another five or ten minutes of walking, they found traces of another web. The spider was in here, somewhere, and much as the werewolves struggled to smell much in the Great Below, they could smell the azlu.

The green lights stopped coming closer, and many faded away. Everyone stared up at them, trying to figure out what was happening, why the ghosts stopped approaching, but no one had a clue. All they could see was, in the distance and way, way, way up, lights drifted by, going in the direction of... something. All except one.

A pair of ears poked up from the mist, and Jack flung himself back as he yanked out one of his pistols. A wolf. He snarled at the damn werewolf as he put the pistol away, and the creature morphed back into human form with a few sickening crunches of bone. Caleb.

"It's up ahead," he whispered.

Avery and Clara looked between each other, wincing.

"Sándor," Avery said. "Can you burrow yet? Open your lair, or whatever?"

"No. Still blocked."

"Then we push on past it," Clara said. "I hate this. We hate this. But the azlu has to wait."

Caleb nodded, transformed back into a wolf, and disappeared under the mist that hung around their waists. How he managed to prowl around, while spending energy using the Uratha version of Cloaking on himself, Jack didn't know. His own Beast instincts knew how to meld him with a crowd, and hunt among sheep, not literally hunt with nose to the ground and eyes peeled like a wolf.

He hated not being in control, but it was better to let Avery and her pack lead.

The shallow ravine the azlu used was on their right, so Avery, with a growl and snort, moved them more toward the left. Jack could see the frustration through the back of the short woman's head,

but it was the urgency and panic he was more worried about. Everyone was feeling it. They had to get away from the webs, from the azlu, as soon as fucking possible so Sándor could get them out of the damn underworld.

She froze. Everyone else promptly did, too. No need to explain. The visible werewolves leaned forward, weight on the balls of their feet, ready to transform. Noah had the flamethrower now, and since he wouldn't be transforming, he stayed in the center of the group, surrounded on all sides. Damien drew his longsword. Jack drew a shortsword and pistol. Sándor did the same as the Uratha, though he turned around to face behind them and slowly tightened and released fists at his side.

Something was nearby.

“Azlu?” Jack asked.

Avery shook her head, half turned and put a finger to her lips.

Nodding and biting his tongue to force himself to shut up, Jack raised his pistol and held it over his sword hand's wrist. Sword was a strong word. Big knife. But it did make it easier to handle the thing when working with a pistol. Not that he figured they'd be of much use, but still, it was better than—

He jumped back and unloaded six bullets down at the mist in front of him, but it was too late. The ghost giggled as she flew away, a glistening knife in her hand, and the most manic smile Jack had ever seen. Big, empty, black eyes, that didn't match her soft face at all, and a gray, see-through body whose pants — jeans, they looked like — combined with flowing waves of mist at the knee. She wore a t-shirt, something from the nineties, and her long hair went past her shoulders. He recognized her.

A tiny bit of string flew through the air, and disappeared into the mist.

“Oh fuck oh fuck.” With his knife hand, he scooped some fingers down his neck and chest. When his fingers found the knife wound, the pain followed, and he groaned as he took a few steps back, clutching at the skin as it struggled to heal. The burning sensation came a moment later, like the ghost had cut him open with dry ice. No normal knife wound felt like that.

She'd come up from the mist, and had sliced him across the sternum, deep enough to penetrate his shirt, skin, and a bit of bone. And his necklace.

Everyone looked his way before looking up at Sabrina. She laughed like a banshee as she circled overhead, fifty feet up and out of reach. Apparently the Cloak of Night didn't do a good job of hiding from ghosts. Or maybe, it didn't do a good job of hiding from her. Considering what she did to the other ghosts Jack ran into on his first trip into the Great Below, she was a scary, powerful creature. And

judging from the crazy, evil smile she had on, she was happy to slice Jack's chest open. She'd gone for the necklace on purpose.

"You were told to stay where you were!" she screamed, before cackling again.

Jack breathed deep and fast until he was hyperventilating, but it did nothing. Panic set in, and he clutched at his chest again and again, hoping the necklace was actually still there, and seeing it disappear in the mist had been a trick of the eye. It hadn't.

"Sabrina!" Clara yelled. No point in staying quiet anymore. "What are you doing!?! You did that to—"

"Viktor's killer! Jack killed Viktor! Killed my master! Killed his own grandsire! Black Blood proved it to me!"

Everyone froze as they looked between Sabrina and Jack, and only then did they realize his necklace was gone.

It hit him like a wave. Overwhelming, overpowering, the Beast and its instincts rushed him and buried his thoughts in primal hunger. He winced as he looked away from them, closed his eyes, and summoned the flame in his mind Elaine taught him. Throw the thoughts, throw the feelings, throw it all into the fire and let it burn away. Empty your mind.

It didn't work. He couldn't do it, not now, not with everything falling apart around them and a gun to their heads.

"Sabrina," Damien said, aiming his longsword at her. "How dare you."

"Me? Me!?! He killed Master! Vile, horrible vampire!" She cackled again as she hovered in circles. "Black Blood told me what to do. Jacob told me what to do. You should have stayed where you were, and killed the azlu. Now you all have to die."

They all looked to Jack again, and he gulped on a dry throat as he met their eyes. Avery's gaze was mostly steady, but he spotted some anger there, and fear.

"I'm fine," he lied. "I'll be fine. Let's just get this done. Don't drop a piano on my head again and we can all—"

A harsh, raspy growl cut him off, and every wolf looked in the direction of the inhuman sound. They all recognized that sound.

Without a word, all the werewolves — save for Noah — transformed. Clothes disappeared, fur emerged, and their bodies grew to massive sizes as the war form came out. Huge muscles and long

claws, each werewolf hit at least eight feet tall, towering animals with crazed eyes and bared teeth. Noah transformed into something different, muscles getting bigger and body getting definitely hairier, but otherwise still a human dude. One of the other werewolf forms.

The werewolves spread out, and Noah backed up as he pointed the flamethrower in the direction of the noise, and turned on the small ignition flame at the tip. The flamethrower was basically a pressured jug of fuel in a metal container on his back, ready to spit a flammable liquid out as a stream, hitting the ignition flame on the way out. If Jack got hit and wasn't ready for it with his blood shield, it'd kill him instantly, and Damien had no such defense.

The two vampires steered clear, backing away, until they'd reached Sándor's position. Jack looked at him, Sándor looked back, and shared a very knowing glance. If shit went bad and the Ripper came out, there was a good chance it'd be up to Sándor to do something about it.

"Get what you deserve!" More cackling from the dead ghost above. "Get what you deserve! Tricked me. Tricked me!"

Her laughter was insane, and constant. And purposeful. Was she pulling the azlu to them? If so, that was a good thing, sorta. Deal with it now, and they could focus on the bigger issue. The delay was a problem, but if they could deal with it quickly, then that was better than nothing.

He thought the azlu was trying to avoid the werewolves. Maybe it had been. Except there were thirteen werewolves in Dolaredo including Eric, but only nine of them were present. Maybe it sensed an opportunity.

Damien jumped ahead. No, not jumped. Flew. Jack and Sándor spun around as several other ghosts appeared in the mist, and threw themselves at the two of them. Not blue collar workers from the fifties, like the ghosts Jack had run into before. These three looked like regular men and women, wearing modern clothing, or maybe a decade or two old.

"We'll be free!" One of them said.

"Soon, free!" The woman laughed and smiled, big, empty, black eyes staring into Jack's soul.

"Free!" the third one said. "The god of the dead promised us. No more Great Below. No more wandering. No more weight pulling us deeper, and deeper. We'll fly! To the heavens!"

Black Blood had, evidently, recruited some ghosts to help him, and had promised them quite a bit.

"Black Blood—" Sándor didn't get to finish. The girl tackled him, and the two of them fell into the mist. Even five feet from Jack, he couldn't see Sándor or the ghost wrestling him to the ground. At

least the man hadn't looked too surprised by the situation. Considering the sorts of journeys the Begotten had been going on to prepare for stopping Black Blood's ritual, he was probably well acquainted with ghosts at this point.

Jack didn't get time to make a judgment call. He went down as one of the other ghosts tackled him, and started punching him. Hard. Very hard. It was a strange feeling, getting punched by a ghost, because the weight felt off. It was like getting hit by a gust of wind so strong it could send you flying, somehow limited to a single fist.

Thankfully they weren't using the crazy telekinetic shit Mary did to him, the first time he met her ghost. Maybe it was something ghosts could only do in areas important to them? Whatever the reason, getting punched by something clearly stronger than a human, was infinitely better than getting tossed around or squashed under a thrown boulder by a crazed super ghost haunting her home.

Problem was, he knew from last time defeating a ghost wasn't easy without something that could really hurt them. Last time, that'd been Sabrina. He had werewolves this time, but they were a little busy, judging from the encroaching rumbling, screeching, and the howling wolves.

He stared up into the empty eyes of the ghost directly over him. There was nothing for Dominate to latch onto, nothing to conquer and enslave. The thing punching him, its great strength still incapable of hurting Jack with the curse coursing through him, had as much presence of mind as an amoeba. Just like Mary's ghost.

Jack winced as the memory cut him, before he glared up at the ghost, summoned vitae into his limbs, and punched him in the face. The ghost's face half collapsed in as Jack made sure to punch the fucker hard enough it'd have killed a kine instantly. It flew back in the air, ten feet up before it fell back into the mist, head snapped back far enough it nearly came off. As long as the ghosts were going to manifest physically, he could at least punch them.

Jack got up, snarling and spinning around. Burning, pulsing sensations rippled through him, and he ground his teeth as he looked for the nearest target. Damien was up, and already slicing through the ghost woman that came at him. But while the slice earned a shriek of pain from the ghost, and literally cut her in half, she reformed a second later, and fled into the mist.

"We can't kill them," Jack said.

"Yeah. Any ideas?" Damien asked.

"Sabrina saved us last time."

"Yes, well, old friends and all that."

Yeah, old friends that come back with a mind to kill. Karma was a bitch.

Jack spun around. "Sándor? You okay? Sándor!"

Another ghost flew into the air, before two enormous shadows reached up, grabbed it, and ripped the ephemeral thing in half. Again, ghost shrieks echoed through the giant cave, but the ghost reformed a second later as it collapsed back into the mist below.

Sándor stood up, a tiny frown on his face and a bleeding lip, but otherwise he seemed fine. Jack looked at the blood on his chin a little longer than he'd have liked, before he looked back to the Uratha. Most of them had run off a few hundred feet away, and their howls and roars mixed with the cries of an animal that shouldn't have existed. Waves of mist pillowed and spread, like a giant shark swimming under water and pushing waves with its mass. Bodies flew left and right, massive, furry bodies, but they landed on their hands and feet before dashing back at the giant creature.

The azlu had arrived, and it was big.

Noah and Clara weren't with their pack. Noah, still in his larger, muscled human form, pointed the flamethrower at the spider far in the distance, but he looked around at himself, at the fog, and at the new nearby ghosts that poked up from the mist. More ghosts. Some of them looked modern, but Jack noticed a few that wore old fashioned clothes from the fifties or sixties. All of them had twisted faces, giant black empty eyes, and mouths that opened far too wide.

Clara stood with her pack mate, transformed into her enormous war form, teeth bared and claws at the ready. When one ghost poked up from the mist, she slashed down at it, but the ghost ducked away and disappeared into the thick fog. One unlucky ghost wasn't fast enough, and Clara raked her huge claws down the ghost woman's face and neck. The result was far more visceral than anything Jack, Damien, or Sándor managed, and the ghost wailed as it clutched the wounds the claws left, before she fell into the mist. She didn't come back up.

"Plan?" she half said, half barked. More ghosts poked up from the mist, and more.

"Plan, plan, right." Jack ran over to her, sword in hand, and he parked a little ways from them so Clara could keep swiping at whatever got close to Noah. The further Jack stayed away from the dude with the flamethrower, the better, but it was becoming obvious they were surrounded by more than a few ghosts, and they had to get their backs together. "The ghosts know what Noah's going to do. We protect him, get him to Avery, torch that azlu, and then we get the pack to deal with the ghosts."

"Trying!" Clara said. "Too many!"

*You won't make it. Just look how far away Avery and the azlu are.*

Shut up.

*Jacob played you like a fiddle. He knew Avery would bring fire to deal with the azlu, so it can't spread when it dies. Black Blood knew Sabrina would freak if she learned you killed her master. Now ghosts are everywhere, convinced Black Blood is going to free them from this prison. They're not going to let Noah torch the bug. Black Blood gave them orders, and they're going to follow them. You're fucked.*

Shut up!

*Look, dumbass. Look how many ghosts are between you and the spider. Jacob set this up so Avery would get herself killed fighting the azlu. Can't say I blame him. He hates her, with every fiber of his being.*

Oh fucking shit, the Ripper was right. If Jacob had the opportunity to achieve some crazy, ridiculous dream, and kill Avery as some sort of icing on the cake, he would.

“Sándor, help Clara. Keep Noah safe. Damien, you're with me. We deal with the azlu now. Noah, use the fire on the ghosts. I'm betting it'll do at least something. Let Damien and me get away before you accidentally kill us.”

Sándor and Damien both nodded, without hesitation. The instant trust was beautiful, and a problem. Without the necklace, they shouldn't have trusted him so quickly.

Noah threw him a harsh glare. “We brought the fire for—”

“We don't have time to kill the azlu the proper way! I know if we kill it and let it do the multi-spider thing, it'll escape and reform later. We have more important things to worry about! So just keep the ghosts preoccupied, and let me save your boss's stupid ass! The ghosts are trying to stop you, not me!”

Jack ran off in Avery's direction, and didn't look back. The ghosts looked at him, but the few that got in his way lost their heads as Damien ran past him as a blur, and sliced their skulls off in a single swinging motion. They reformed in moments, but it was enough of a delay for Jack to run past, unblocked.

The ghosts didn't pursue. He was right. The Ripper was right. Sabrina had orders to take Jack's necklace, but the other ghosts were told to keep whoever had the flamethrower away from the azlu, to force Avery to have to fight it the old fashioned way. And of course, without the necklace, there was always the chance the Ripper would replace the azlu as the threat.



Now he was kinda regretting not just listening to Jacob, and waiting where he'd left them. But it wasn't like he was going to let Jacob trigger fucking Armageddon, either.

He almost looked back when a loud roar erupted, and the cave floor vibrated with impact. He recognized the sound. A giant, angry, four-armed gargoyle made that sound. If Noah made a mistake and torched Sándor... Jack didn't even want to think about it. But shitty as it was, better Sándor than Jack or Damien. He might survive.

The azlu was just as disgusting as the others they'd seen. A spider had gotten an old woman, crawled into her, and ate her from the inside out. Then, a giant monster body came out of the host's waist, almost like a centaur had a horse's body below the belt, except it was a disgusting, freaky, mutated, monstrous spider body. The host's body was also mutated, pulsing with muscle and equipped with giant scythe-like arms made of bone. And too many eyes.

David and Avery tore into its sides, and it spun around, shrieking and screeching and swinging its arms at Carter. But the old werewolf was fast, and ducked under the arms before jumping the monster straight on and landing on the human half of it. Jack couldn't tell who the others were in the chaos. They were covered in blood, and they stood up from the mist as broken bones snapped back into place. Erica, Caleb, Monica, and Mason, all four of them with huge gashes on their body, gushing blood that disappeared into the fog. It only slowed them down for moments before the wounds closed, and the blood-soaked beasts again threw themselves at the giant monster.

"Noah!" Avery yelled, feral eyes looking in Jack's direction. "Fire!"

"Can't get here! Ghosts are blocking him! Black Blood knows what you planned!"

"Fuck!" Evidently not happy about the news, she sank both her claws into the fat spider body, and got to tearing, until the monster's blood gushed over her.

"Damien," Jack said, "look for an opportunity to get in there and end this quickly. Stay hidden as best you can until then."

"On it." Damien slipped away, crouched into the mist, and vanished, his Cloak and the fog working together to make him almost invisible. His friend was tired. Cloaking all of them for so long had drained him. How well the Cloak worked on the spider monster, Jack didn't know; didn't seem to do much against ghosts. But with seven werewolves trying to tear it into bits, it wouldn't notice a vampire hiding in the mist.

Jack, on the other hand, wanted it to notice him. He walked straight up to it, and fired every bullet in his magazine as fast as he could. Big as the werewolves were, the azlu was gigantic, and aiming for

the lower half of its body, where spider body connected to human body, was enough to avoid accidentally shooting them. It shrieked as it noticed the new pain sensation, but when it tried to take a step toward Jack, one of the werewolves sliced at one of its many legs hard enough it stumbled. Jack slapped in a new magazine and unloaded it as fast as the gun allowed. And another magazine. And then another. The azlu shrieked and screamed, and hints of the human it possessed came through in its voice. Jack emptied his last magazine into it, before holstering the pistol. Dozens and dozens of bullets, and the damn thing just refused to die.

He pulled up his Beast, and sent vitae into his limbs. Mountains of it. Without the necklace, it was like riding rapids, a torrent of energy and instinct that hit him and threatened to drag him under the overpowering current. If he'd been back in his mansion, or maybe in the Elysium Tower, he'd find some peace and quiet, and throw his thoughts into a flame. Now, all he had was chaos, roars and shrieks, blood, and an enemy he had to kill and kill now.

He jumped straight at the giant spider monster, and sank his shortsword into its chest. With anything else, the short blade would have sunk straight through the chest and into the organs, and ended the fight in seconds. With the azlu, it was like trying to stab through a thick layer of wood, and his sword penetrated maybe three inches before it came to a stop, and Jack was left dangling from it like a fish on a hook. Jumping at it with his small body had not been the smartest plan.

The monster swung both its arms down for him, and while he managed to swing aside enough to avoid one, the other bone scythe arm collided with him and smashed him into the ground. Thick Kindred blood coursed over the wound, summoned under the skin and thick enough it stopped the monster from getting through the limb. The stone ground was not forgiving, but nothing broke, and Jack groaned as he forced himself back to his feet.

He had to be careful. He couldn't have a repeat of what happened with him and Avery, or Garry and Michael, and let the Ripper out by getting pulverized.

He managed a glance back to Sándor's group. Enormous shadows cut through the air over pillars of flame that shot out in random directions. With all the mist, the distance turned everything into a blur, and he couldn't tell what the fuck was happening over there. But he didn't hear any screams of pain, so, probably alright enough he could focus on the giant spider monster trying to kill him.

Avery and the others ripped and tore into the creature with more ferocity than Jack could manage. Claws, ripping through exoskeleton, drawing splatters of more monster blood, until the whole place smelled of it. The spider turned and slashed at one of the werewolves, and they dashed out of the way before disappearing into the mist. Shadows enveloped them, and they ceased to exist, only to pounce

from the mist on the spider's other side, and get his mouth around one of the enormous spider legs. But the spider was too big, too strong, and a solid kick of the spindly leg sent the werewolf flying back into the mist.

It quickly got worse. As Jack looked for another opening to jump onto, or maybe get under the damn spider, or maybe get his sword back, the huge thing jumped. Apparently eight legs and monstrous strength allowed for some pretty big jumps, and the huge thing cleared twenty feet with half a dozen werewolves stuck on its body. It landed hard, nearly collapsing onto its side, but managing to stay standing, while three of the werewolves fell off.

As Carter got back up, a spider leg came down onto his chest, through him, and pinned him to the floor. Screams mixed with roars, but Jack couldn't see the man now that he was below the mist. His clawed hands stuck up through the surface of the fog, and swiped at the spider leg several times, before falling back down below.

Avery roared. Not a normal roar, something that'd hurt the ears but otherwise do nothing. It was a blast wave. It erupted from her like an explosion, and everyone not currently attached to the monster with a clawed grip flew away, and they didn't land nicely. Whatever it was Avery just did, it hit Jack hard enough he fell back and slid over maybe thirty feet of stone before stopping, and when he got back up, he was facing the wrong way.

He spun back around in time to see Avery's claws erupt with flames, and sink into the spider's large abdomen. The whole fight had been filled with screaming and shrieking monster sounds, and it only got worse as bits of the monster's flesh caught fire. It wasn't normal fire. It faded away quickly, thank god, but once Jack ran back in to join the fight, he could smell the burning hair of the spider's body.

Those claws hurt. He knew.

Six werewolves took the opportunity to jump back up from the mist, and tear into the spider's big fat abdomen where Avery had left a nasty gash. Blood rained, and Jack took a step back as the monster spun around at high speed, trying to dislodge the pack. They held on, sinking their claws in as deep as they could go, as if they were trying to burrow their way into the spider's insides. It bucked and roared, and sliced at them as it turned the human half, but couldn't get anything more than passing grazes on the wolves that cut but didn't kill.

Jack wanted to help, but any time he got close, the spider spun around again and swiped hard. With his blood shield protecting him, he'd survive a hit, but all it'd accomplish would be getting sent flying again.

The spider finally stopped bucking and spinning long enough to turn its human half again, and raise both arms, ready to take a big swing down at one of the wolves with both hands. Before it tried, a blur of motion cut through the mist, and slammed into the side of the spider's head. The spider's swings went wild, twitching randomly and slashing at nothing and everything around it.

Damien hung from his sword, both hands holding the handle tight, the long blade skewering the monster through the temple, all the way through. He'd put a lot more power into his jump than Jack had. But the monster wasn't dead. It swung its body in random directions, not swinging at anything in particular, but its death throes were still deadly as fuck, and Jack backed away again.

Okay, monster was dying, that was good. Carter was down and not getting up. Not good. He could still hear Clara and the others fighting ghosts off behind him. Not good. Help Carter, or help Clara and Sándor?

"Damien! Help them finish it off!" He spun around, and jogged toward Clara. The werewolves behind him continued to rip and tear into the spider monster, but it'd die eventually. It'd break apart into a bunch of smaller spiders, with the azlu's spirit half hidden inside one of them. Maybe they could catch it? No, not a chance in the mist. They'd have to find it and kill it again later, but for now, he had to save as many people as he could. And he knew he'd never forgive himself if something happened to Clara. And he hated that he knew he still felt that way about her.

He got maybe fifty feet before motion caught his eye. He spun around again, half expecting to find a giant spiderweb launched at him or something, but instead, he found the black, empty eyes of a ghost, and the glint of a knife.

"You killed the master!" Sabrina swung the knife down, and Jack sucked in a hard breath as the metal cut along his forehead. The only thing that stopped it from cutting deep into his skull, was reflexes and the blood shield. Whatever the fuck that ghost knife was made of, it cut through the blood with far more effectiveness than it had any right to. It was just like that time Avery had got him with her claws.

Sabrina had used the knife to kill ghosts. Apparently it could kill more than that.

"It was an accident!"

"Liar! Master Honors wouldn't die to an accident!" She came at him again, swinging fast, and Jack backpedaled as best he could. Behind him, the sound of a flamethrower spewing fire in random directions only grew closer.

“He wanted to kill someone I loved, so I set the whole building on fire to stop him. I didn’t think—”

She half cackled, half snarled as she dove at him like she wanted to tackle him, and he rolled to the side. But the moment he was back on his feet, she dove again, forcing him to again duck. And again, she swung her knife at him, pushing him back toward Noah and the flames.

“You didn’t think fire would kill a vampire!? Well then this is going to be ironic!” Her manic laughter reached psycho levels as she pointed behind him, no doubt at the fire Noah was spewing everywhere. He didn’t dare look.

“That’s not irony!”

“What!?” She came in close and stabbed up for his guts. He sidestepped and risked a punch, and grinned as he felt knuckles smash into ghost flesh. As long as she was manifesting herself physically, a fight was a two-way street.

“Irony is when something extremely unlikely happens! A pilot dying in a plane crash isn’t ironic. A pilot having a random plane fall on his house and kill him while he’s sleeping would be ironic!” One perk about being a vampire he never truly appreciated, was getting to argue while fighting. No need to worry about breath management.

“Nerd!” She swung again, shoulder to hip, and he jumped back only far enough to keep the blade from piercing skin. His shirt and suit weren’t so lucky, getting a second cut through it. “How could you!? How could you kill the master!”

“Your master was a psychopath! A violent asshole!”

“The master was loving! He adored me!”

“Probably because you’re a fucking psychopath! And a violent asshole!”

She shrieked, mouth hanging open further than a human mouth could, and the noise forced him to squint as his ears struggled.

“You don’t deserve to live! Master’s grandchilde is a killer! A monster! Without the necklace, you’re just a monster!”

“What do you—”

“Black Blood told us! Told us everything! Master Honors had the curse, but he kept it controlled. Your sire had the curse, but he kept it controlled. You’re the first one to release it! You’re the monster!”

He'd told her everything, then. She went for the necklace first because because it was his weakness. She didn't know what that meant.

It was his turn to snarl, and he stepped in closer to the ghost. She was freaky fast, almost as fast as Damien, and her body was hard to keep focus on with how it leaked the same mist they were fighting in. But he came in close enough to drive his fist into her face, and as she hovered back in some weird sort of ghost pain, complete with angry alien screams, he jumped toward her and again punched her, bringing a fist down and putting the power of the curse into it as hard as he could. He didn't have time for this.

As usual, the power and his bodyweight didn't get along, and he flew back from the impact. But so did she. Her ghost body broke apart from the punch, face literally breaking in half like a log to an ax, before she fell into the mist rolling, causing the mist to spread around her in waves.

"I'm not a monster."

He didn't wait to see her reaction. Hopefully having her face smashed apart would give him at least a few seconds of peace.

He managed another ten feet, before his body stopped working. A small glint between and above his eyes forced him to look up, and he groaned. That, was a knife.

"You killed the master!" Sabrina said, and she yanked the knife out of his skull as he fell into the mist. "You killed my love!" His face planted against the stone, and as torpor pulled him under, Sabrina stabbed him in the back again, and again, and again.

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~~Beatrice~~

It wasn't the first time she'd been in Athalia's lair. By all accounts, it should have been awesome. An enormous cave that went straight down, with downward spiraling ramps of rock along the walls. At the bottom, a pile of bones. Lots, and lots, and lots of bones. The whole thing was super metal. And it was so dark, each step had to be carefully calculated. She'd survive falling. He'll, she could survive tripping and rolling down the whole damn spiral until she landed in the bones, vampire and all, but she'd break every bone in her body. No time to spend the next week in torpor healing.

Beside her floated the giant skeleton monster, Athalia. In some ways, she looked similar to Black Blood's supposed true body, a giant black skeleton. Similar roots in being super scary and shit, probably. Black Blood was some sort of spirit or god of death and the dead, and you didn't embody that much better than a black skeleton. And there were few things people feared more than death.

They didn't go far. Just as Triss was about to ask what the plan was, Athalia hovered over to a wide tunnel connected to the wall of the huge pit, and disappeared in blackness. Complete, utter, total fucking blackness. Triss followed as best she could, which wasn't very well.

"Uh, Athalia, I can't see shit."

"Just keep walking."

"Easy for you to say. Can you see?"

"Eshmaki like myself and Fiona can see in darkness, yes. We are darkness."

"Uh huh. Fiona's the biggest ray of sunshine I've ever met."

Athalia snorted on a quiet laugh. "Her Horror's body count is in the many thousands."

That was more than a little disturbing, actually.

"How'd someone like Fiona get a Horror so... murderous?"

"The Horror comes to us in our dreams, and devours us. Becomes us. Fiona is not the sort to feel guilty for doing what comes naturally. Like a spider."

"So... Fiona's dreams attracted a spider Horror, because they both lack guilt?"

The darkness chuckled quietly. "Or perhaps because spiders are happy creatures. Have you ever met an unhappy spider?"

Apparently Athalia found a bit of her shitty sense of humor when merged with her Horror.

"No," Triss said.

"Do not judge things you do not understand."

"Uh huh, thanks for the life advice. Now when are we—"

The darkness peeled away, and Triss stared on in awe, at the cave they stepped into.

It was huge. It was beyond huge. Endless mist covered the floor in a cave with walls so far and so big, she couldn't contextualize how big they were. A thousand feet high? A mile? Titanic pillars of stone reached up from the ground to touch the ceiling, and once she dipped her head left and right to try

and get a little sense of depth, she could only gawk. She might as well have been trying to see if she could move her head enough to make the moon move in the distance. It was too big and too far.

The whole place had a strange, eerie glow, subtle but there, something almost green, almost blue, despite the whole place having no real light source. The light was just... there, quiet, and subdued, like it was afraid to grow brighter and reveal the secrets of the underworld.

In the distance, tiny green fireflies drifted around. She squinted and dipped her head left and right again. Nope, not fireflies. Bigger, and further.

“Holy shit,” she said.

Athalia sighed as she nodded. “Yeah.” She was back in her human form again, and looking just as overwhelmed by the sight before her as Triss.

“You know where the others are?”

“Yeah. That way.” She pointed to some place in the distance.

“Uh, you sure? Cause this all looks identical.”

“Sándor pointed it out to me before.”

“Uh huh. And you... went there and visited it, physically, right?”

“... no.”

Triss groaned and buried her face in her hands. “We’re going to die.”

“No we’re not. Now sum—” She cut herself off as she took a step back, and looked directly ahead of them.

Triss almost asked what was the problem before her Beast announced the presence of another vampire. And their Beast was one she was intimately familiar with.

“Aaron?”

Maybe fifty feet in the distance, someone stood up from the mist, a normal looking white dude, average height, average build, and short blonde hair that was so predictable you almost didn’t notice it. He wore the most typical blue jeans she’d ever seen, and a black t-shirt with absolutely nothing on it. The Gangrel gave the sheriff a run for ‘most boring man on the planet’.

“Oh, it’s you.” He nodded slowly, face still deadpan as he slipped his hands into his jean pockets. “We weren’t sure who’d come through.”



Triss almost walked over to him, but halfway through her first step she noticed Athalia had taken a step back. The tunnel behind them was no longer a black, endless cave, but more of the same Great Below cave, and a rock face with some curvature to it that led nowhere. Athalia had closed her lair off, and looked like she was getting ready to open it again.

“Aaron, what’re you doing here?” Triss asked.

The man frowned slightly before he looked up, turned to the side, and paced, as casual as ever. “What do you think?”

“I... oh shit.” She looked to Athalia, hoping to see something to prove her thoughts wrong. But of course not. Athalia looked at Aaron like he was a threat.

“You guessed it,” he said. “So please, go back the way you came. We can talk when Jacob and Black Blood are done.”

“Fucking shit, really? You? God damn it, Aaron! You’re the one fucking person in the whole fucking city I expect to keep a level head!”

He winced and motioned for her to calm down. Which, of course, only made her fucking furious.

“I do have a level head. I’m not yelling or screaming in an underworld realm filled with angry ghosts. Notice the lights?”

She snarled at him, but she couldn’t help but look past him and up at the endless fog in the titanic, endless cave.

“The green lights?”

“The ghosts carry green lanterns when they’re out, drifting around. Not sure why. On some endless journey to find something, probably.”

She gulped. The green lights were blurry dots in the distance, but there were hundreds of them. Thousands. Okay, yeah, no yelling.

“So you know what Jacob’s up to.”

“Yeap,” he said.

“And you’re on board.”

“Of course.”

“Of course? He’s going to start a fucking... I don’t know, a fucking apocalypse or something.”

The Gangrel sighed as he shook his head. “He’s going to fix it.”

“Fix it?”

“The world. It’s broken into pieces. He’s putting them back together.”

“Oh my fucking god, you sound like a cult member.”

Her fellow witch shrugged, and took a step closer. “Yeah, I guess I do. But is it really a cult, if they’re right? You know other realms exist.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“You know there are barriers separating them.”

“I guess.”

“And chasms, separating others. That’s step two of the plan.”

“Oh my fucking god, there’s a phase two?”

“Yes,” he said. “First step is tearing down the walls, and bringing the realms we can touch back together. The spiritual, the physical realm, the dream, and the... remnants.” He gestured around them. “There are other realms too, attached to these that we don’t know about. The tears will spread and bring them together, too. And then, we bridge the chasm to reach the realms beyond, and combine everything.”

“The fuck is in the realms beyond?”

“You know what.”

She sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. That’s what Jacob meant, when he said there was a way she could see Julias again, without having to resurrect him.

“Why the fuck are you telling me this? This is some pretty typical villain monologuing dumb shit.”

He smiled, and even chuckled a little. Rare, for Aaron.

“Jacob thought you deserved to know. And besides, villain? Beatrice, just think about what Jacob and Black Blood are doing for two seconds, and tell me I’m playing the role of villain, here.”

She opened her mouth, and slowly shut it. Christ, right back to wondering if she was doing the right thing, trying to stop Jacob.

“So everything will just be... merged?”

“Yeap.”

“No more death? No more life? Everyone just... together, all the time?”

“We hope.”

“You hope!?”

He slowly nodded. “There’s no way to tell exactly how things will go, not for sure. But it has to be better than—”

“Than what?”

“Than everything.” He took another step toward her. “You look me in the eye and tell me losing Julias wasn’t like going through Hell on Earth.”

She frowned, but she looked away before she could stop herself.

“That’s... not fucking fair.”

“Think about it. You get to see Julias again. Jacob gets to see Minerva again. Sándor gets to see his wife and kid again. Everyone’s lost someone.” He looked to Athalia. “You, get to see your daughter again, in a place where monsters and humans and life and death don’t even exist anymore. She’ll have no more reason to hate you.”

Athalia stared at Aaron, but even her icy expression broke.

“My daughter...”

“No more life, no more death, no more pain. We get to see the ones we lost, be with them, and this life and death cycle, this bullshit of nothing but misery will be over.”

“Jesus fucking christ, Aaron,” Triss said. “I... I thought you...”

It was his turn to look away and wince.

“Like I said, everyone’s lost someone.”

“I thought you hated your family.”

“You don’t know anything about my relationship with my family.”

“I fucking asked! I asked, and you never told me a damn thing.”

He smiled. “I suppose you did. And I suppose I didn’t.”

Athalia let out a snarl as she finally took steps forward, or more like stomps, and tightened her fists at her sides. “We don’t have time for this. My daughter is dead, and nothing Jacob or Black Blood does will bring her back.”

The man sighed, and leaned forward slightly, putting his weight on the balls of his toes.

“I didn’t think you’d listen. Beatrice, maybe, but not you.”

Triss got between them and held out her hands. “Aaron, we just want to save Jack, and then talk to Jacob.”

“Says you,” Athalia said.

God damn it, not now. Triss threw the woman a glare, and Athalia returned it, not backing down. If she decided to fight Aaron, she was going to rip the poor guy into bits.

“Aaron,” Triss said, “for your own good, just step aside, okay? I mean, fuck me, what if it’d been the Prince or the sheriff who came through Athalia’s tunnel? The fuck can you do to stop them?”

He grinned. “I wonder.”

She blinked at the man, and the growing presence of the Beast inside him. Far as she knew, far as anyone knew, Aaron was a young vampire, maybe twenty-five years embraced. No one knew who his sire was, but that wasn’t uncommon for vampires. Much as the Prince ran a tight ship, people had children they didn’t tell people about, or young vampires came to the city and found sanctuary in a covenant.

But as Aaron smiled at her, the presence inside him grew larger, and larger. Oh shit.

“I doubt I could beat the sheriff or the Prince in a fight,” he said. “It was never the goal. Just, slow them down, and let the boss finish what he needs to.”

“Dude, you could fucking die.”

He shrugged. “Won’t matter, in the end. Dead, alive, it’ll all be the same soon enough.”

“Holy shit dude, you’re...” She sighed as she looked down, and gently rubbed the fake candy bracelet with a thumb. “Tell me one thing.”

“Sure.” God damn it, the way he was so open with her about all this made everything about it even harder.

“Your girlfriend. She exist?”

He smiled at her with the most gentle, bittersweet smile she’d ever seen. “Yes.”

She winced again, and ground her teeth until they clicked. All this time, all this fucking time, the dude had been playing sleeper agent. Well, not really, but he’d been hiding shit from them, hiding how close he actually was to Jacob, hiding a lot of shit. And he even had a girlfriend, someone he cared

about! He was still going to go through with this, like, some sort of mindless devoted cultist working for a god of death and his right hand priest?

That was fucking twisted.

“Get out of my way, Aaron.”

“No.”

She took a step toward him, and that was enough. The Gangrel burst forward in speed, more speed than a Gangrel should have, and knocked her over. More than knocked her over, she screamed as something sharp cut along her body. Landing on her back on stone wasn't fun, and losing track of everything as she rolled under mist less so.

She got back to her feet in time to see Aaron, or what was once Aaron, getting thrown fifty feet by the shadow of a giant skeletal arm, a shadow that came out of Athalia's body. Athalia summoning shadows of her Horror, Triss had expected. Aaron being covered in spikes, standing taller and lankier than before, and having two huge bone spike hands coming out of his mutated wrists, she hadn't.

“What the fu—”

Aaron jumped out of the mist and came running, this time at Athalia again, and really fucking fast, like a sprinting cheetah. But he didn't run on four feet. He ran on two, leaning forward, with a fleshy tail covered in fucked up bone spikes swinging left and right behind him. His mouth was royally fucked up, filled with giant teeth that cut through his own lips. His clothes were in tatters, and chunks of his flesh were stretched and protruding in strange places. An extra arm came out of his side, small, with a normal hand armed with ridiculously long claws.

Gangrels as young as Aaron couldn't manage transformations like that. He'd transformed into something out of *The Thing*, like, possessed human alien zombie monster hybrid what-the-fuck shit. That was... That was Garry-level shit.

Even Athalia stared in surprise, and almost didn't respond to the fucking weird monster's crazy speed as he rushed her. But Beatrice wasn't far, and she threw herself into his side hard enough the both of them tumbled over the stone. If he hit Athalia with one of those arms, he might cut the damn woman in half, and no way she'd survive that. Hell, he might cut Triss in half, no matter how much vitae she pumped through herself to harden her body. She wouldn't survive that, either.

“Aaron,” she said through clenched teeth, “don't make me fucking kill you!”

Aaron the movie monster clicked his fucked up teeth together, and spread out some of the weird bone spikes coming out of his cheeks, like an insect working uneven, mutated mandibles. Whether the man could even talk anymore, she couldn't tell. He didn't try. His head twitched, snapping side to side with disgusting speed, almost like Mary's ghost did when she got twitchy.

He looked like the sort of monster you killed with a shotgun when it rushed you, and she didn't have a shotgun.

Aaron rushed her again, and again the speed was crazy. They were supposed to be of similar age, but her Beast told her otherwise. Beasts always sized each other up, a sort of silent judging of each other's hidden aura, auras that could be suppressed. Aaron, apparently, had been suppressing his, far too well. Crúac ritual, maybe? Or maybe a ritual to get this strong? Whatever he'd done, she wasn't going up against an equal. This fucker would kick her ass easily.

Except she had backup.

Before Aaron reached her, Athalia flew into the air, literally, and came down on him with two giant shadowy arms. Squash. Aaron disappeared under the mist as the two hands punched down on him hard enough Triss felt it through the stone. The arms disappeared a second later, and Athalia landed beside where Aaron was. But he wasn't. The mist was too damn thick and didn't behave like mist should, same as Mary's mist. It didn't move out of the way fast enough. And when Athalia kicked at where Aaron supposedly was, she found nothing.

He came up out of the mist behind her, and swiped at her back with his two claws. Triss ran for him, but they were too far. Athalia surprised her though. Without hesitation, she rolled forward and away from Aaron, and came back up away from the vampire facing him, snarling. He'd nicked her back enough to draw blood, but only just.

Aaron dove at her, but Beatrice was close enough this time, and she again collided with him. She held on, and the two of them rolled through the mist and over the stone, hitting a few rocks and getting more than a few scrapes.

Holding onto a Gangrel transformed and squirming and slashing, all covered in spikes and teeth and whatnot, was not easy. Random parts of Aaron stabbed into her arms and legs, cutting through skin and muscle. But she was a fucking Nosferatu, and strong as fuck. Even a Gangrel transformed into some weird horror movie monster couldn't get out of her grip. And she had claws, so she returned the favor, clutching Aaron's arms to his sides and sinking her claws into his stomach and chest. More screams. If there were any nearby ghosts, they were on the way.

When a bone spike somehow managed to stab her in the leg, she let go and rolled away, clenching her teeth through the pain. She tried to get up, but her leg didn't appreciate it, and she fell back on her ass as Aaron disappeared into the mist again.

A grunt and scream told her he'd found Athalia.

She forced herself to her feet, pumping vitae through her leg until it sealed itself well enough to work again. Athalia and Aaron were hidden, somewhere under the mist, but she could hear them, roaring and shrieking at each other. She dragged her damn leg and speed-walked toward them, but slowed as she looked up and around.

It was getting darker. A lot darker.

Another scream told her Aaron had hurt Athalia, badly. Sure enough, she spotted a few flicks of blood flying through the air, and she dragged herself over to where they came from. It got darker again. Another grunt, and a huge shadow came crashing down through the mist. Another alien shriek, before it got darker again, until Triss couldn't see anything.

"Triss," a raspy voice said, "hide."

For a second, she thought it might have been Mary going all banshee on her, but she was still in the bracelet. Maybe Aaron, talking with that crazy mouth?

Aaron stood up, looking left and right, bits of blood on his fucked up face and arms. He spotted Triss, but looked away quickly. Looking for Athalia, then. He hadn't killed her.

It wasn't his voice, then. It was Athalia's Horror's.

Triss wrapped herself in her Cloak, the best Cloak she could manage, and crouched until only the top of her head stuck out of the mist. Watching Aaron twist and turn, looking for the woman he'd just been stabbing, was freaky as fuck. He really embodied the scary alien monster vibe, a complete one-eighty compared to the Aaron she knew. The Aaron she thought she knew. Seeing the calm, calculating, logical man side with Jacob had her wondering a lot more than she wanted to, too.

Save Jack now. Worry about Jacob later. If the man made a good case, maybe Triss would agree with him, and maybe even Athalia would? But for the moment, it didn't matter.

Slash marks cut through a nearby boulder, and Triss almost screamed at the random explosion of sound. No Athalia, but then again, Triss couldn't see shit in darkness this thick, just a slight silhouette of the mist, the boulders, and Aaron maybe fifty feet away.

Aaron spun around, looking at the explosion of violence. Another slash hit stone, a boulder closer to Aaron. Triss held very still, statue mode, not turning her head or fake breathing or anything. Aaron spun around again. Mistake. His gross spiky tail and weird alien limbs went flying as another slash cut through the air, this time right on top of him, hitting him in the back.

All blurs. The only visible thing was shadow, and darker shadows. The green lights in the distance were gone. The mist and fog were just a slightly different shade of black and gray. How the fuck could Athalia see anything? And where the fuck was she? This wasn't in the dream world or whatever, so she still had her physical, human body around, probably lying under the mist.

If Athalia made a mistake, she'd slice herself into a chunky mess of limbs.

Jack had told her about this, about Athalia doing this in the dream, that time he'd gone on a rescue mission to save Clara, Eric, and Jessy. Athalia had vanished, the area went dark, and she'd started slicing up things randomly, with enough power and speed anyone she hit was probably dead. And apparently, she couldn't aim for shit when doing it.

Aaron got back up, a few enormous cut marks along his back, deep enough they exposed bone, or at least maybe, considering how dark everything was. With the weird shrieking sound he made, it was a wonder he managed to get back up at all. His tail snapped around behind him loud enough it made noise, almost like a whip crack, and he clicked his mouth mandible things together as he took a deep breath through his nose. Smelling the air. Oh shit, he was looking for her body, and unlike vampires, living bodies had scents and heartbeats.

He took a step in a random direction, slowly. Another slash came down, but missed Aaron, slicing the ground beside him hard and fast enough it left a huge wake in the mist. He held still, waited for the mist to settle, and took another slow step. Again, a slash down at the ground near him, but missing him. It'd been big enough, and fast enough, to cut a car into four pieces.

Aaron crouched low, and only the tips of his spikes poked up through the mist, as the Gangrel went into prowl mode. Shit shit shit, he figured it out.

The sound of rocks ripping apart filled Triss's ears. One of the random slashes hit a little too close to Triss, and she almost threw herself to the side. Hold, very, still. That was the plan. Except now Athalia couldn't see Aaron, and he was on the hunt for her real body.

Aaron stood up, with a woman held by the throat with his new, gross hand and arm coming out of his side. Shit fucking shit! He drew back his one of his spike-tipped arms, and—



And lost it. The arm came flying off, and Aaron let out a guttural shriek as he let go of Athalia and fell away. Before he could so much as turn around, the other arm came off, and Aaron fell back as his screams jumped an octave. Triss couldn't see what the fuck happened, but something blurry in the dark had got him from behind. Athalia's Horror?

The darkness around them shattered, exposing the distant green lights, the unending fog, and the overwhelming walls of the colossal cave.

Athalia stood up and backed away from Aaron, panting, bleeding, but alive. Okay, good to move then. Triss ran over to her, and the two of them looked down at the growling vampire as he knelt, staring up at them with his alien face, both shoulders missing arms. He still had the weird arm sticking out of his side, but he wouldn't be doing much with that.

Mary floated behind Aaron, looking like the Grim Reaper with how her black eyes were furious with rage, and her mouth was full of sharp teeth.

"Holy shit," Triss said. "When'd you... How'd you—"

"I can touch things here. I can... hurt... kill..." Mary clenched her fists in front of her. Bits of Kindred blood dripped from them, before burning away to ash. With a raspy snarl, she hovered around until she was in front of Aaron, and she glared down at him all the more. "He almost killed Athalia. We should kill him."

Good thing Sam wasn't around to hear this.

"In his defense," Triss said, "Athalia was trying to kill him, too."

Slowly, Aaron transformed back into his normal body. The extra arm, the alien face and messed up spikes, the tail, it all disappeared. His clothes were full of holes, but in better condition than they should have been. He'd figured out how to not ruin his clothes doing crazy transformations. He was definitely older than he'd told her.

"I guess I lose," he said. "Didn't expect Mary." Bastard didn't even have the god damn courtesy to look upset.

"Damn fucking right, you asshole. Christ, you trick me for years, team up with Jacob and Black Blood to break the whole damn world—"

"Fix."

"Whatever! And you were straight up going to kill whoever came through this, uh, burrow or tunnel or whatever." She gestured behind her at the cave wall Athalia had tunneled them through.

He shook his head as he looked down. “Jacob didn’t expect you. And I wouldn’t want to hurt his favorite student.”

Favorite student. She hissed as she looked away, and paced around in the mist.

“You... fucking asshole.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Boss’s orders. Slow people down.”

“God damn it, Aaron. I—”

“We kill him or leave him?” Athalia asked.

“I don’t want to kill him.”

“He’s a threat.”

“He’s not a threat anymore. He has no arms.” And if Mary could do that because they were in the Great Below, the fuck could the other, stronger ghosts do?

“He’s a Gangrel, right? Frustratingly good at regrowing limbs.” Athalia wasn’t wrong. Gangrels were good at that cause of all the body morphing shit, and Aaron was apparently older and stronger than Triss or anyone else knew. “So unless you have a stake on you, we should—”

Mary grabbed Aaron, earning a pained grunt from the man, and then a pained scream, as the ghost ripped off one of his legs. And then the other, each leg taking her a few moments of concentrated effort, like a human ripping apart a piece of cardboard. Holy sweet mother of fucking god, Mary was strong. Maybe they didn’t have to fear the other ghosts. Maybe the other ghosts had to fear her?

At a certain point, Aaron stopped screaming, and his eyes rolled up as the man thankfully slipped away into torpor.

“Jesus fucking christ, Mary. You—”

“We’re running out of time. My brother is out there, maybe dying, maybe dead.” She tossed the armless, legless body into the mist, near a big boulder. Triss had seen dogs treat sticks they’d found in gutters with more care. “Your friend is alive, right?”

“Kinda, yeah. I mean, if he’d been younger, you’d have probably just killed him.” Young neonates like Triss couldn’t exactly survive losing all four limbs. Maybe a Ventrue or Gangrel could, but even then it’d be a close call. “He’s older than I thought. He’ll be stuck in torpor until someone feeds him some blood.”

“Lucky for him,” Mary said, more of that inhuman rasp coming through, almost like Athalia’s Horror’s voice. “Let’s go.” And without so much as a glance back, the young woman drifted forward in the direction Athalia had suggested when they first arrived.

Triss and Athalia glanced at each other. Athalia looked tired, panting and sweating, some blood dripping down her side and leg, but even she noticed what Triss noticed. Mary wasn’t scared or jittery or anything anymore. She was angry, and determined. And Triss wasn’t sure if that was better or worse.

Athalia followed after her, but Triss took a moment, and squatted down beside Aaron’s body. His limbs were already gone, disintegrating into tiny flames that turned his flesh into small piles of ash. Seeing the guy without any limbs was a new kind of sick and twisted, and she was thankful she didn’t have a pulse or working stomach organ, or she’d have probably puked at the sight of him. But, he was alive, shriveled and drained, but still Aaron. All someone had to do, was give him a few pints of blood until he’d generated his limbs, and he’d wake up, in a week or five.

“Fucking... fuck. Aaron, you... fucking asshole. You could have talked to me... God damn it, you fucking idiot, you could have fucking talked to me.” She knew the dude hated his family from when he’d been alive, but was any of that true? Like he said, she didn’t know shit about him, because he refused to tell her.

In the end, she didn’t know the guy. But that wasn’t quite true, either. She knew him... a little. Quiet dude, read introspective books, thought about shit day-in day-out all the time without pause. That wasn’t a lie, right?

She stood up and sighed. He wasn’t dead, no need for drama. Hopefully a ghost wouldn’t find him while they were gone.

“You better still be alive when I get back.” She jogged after Athalia, and a very scary ghost lady.

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~~The Ripper~~

He turned his head enough to get a peek at the bitch stabbing him. Her face hadn’t reformed. She literally had a crater through the center of her head, so the damn thing was split in half, but even like

that he could see the crazy expression in her eyes. She stabbed his back again and again, cackling and screaming, and once her mouth fully reformed, he could see the wide, psycho smile.

Damn. That ghost knife really fucking burned.

“Lady,” he said, grinning as he looked down, and pushed himself off the ground, “if you weren’t already dead, you’d soon wish you were.”

“You—” She shrieked again as he jumped up to his feet. “You—”

“Black Blood didn’t tell you why I wear the necklace, did he?”

“Weakness! Your weakness!” Her face finished reforming, and she came at him again.

He stepped into her, faster than that idiot Jack could, and drove his fist through her chest and out through her back. He expected it to feel like punching through mist. Instead, her body resisted, like jelly strong enough it could have been flesh. But his fist still went through her, and her screams became endless as she collapsed back into the mist again, a hole through her body. Eventually, they stopped.

He touched his forehead. Yep, she’d put a tiny slit clean through it. Fucking hilarious. The stab wounds burned like all fuck, more of that icy pain that told him they weren’t regular wounds. Hell, even moving his limbs felt weird, considering he had a small hole in his brain. But his Kindred body adapted quickly enough. If she’d been smart, she’d have stabbed him in the heart, where the weird ghost wound would have probably put him in torpor for days. Stupid bitch.

He laughed, and laughed, and looked around him at his options. What to do, what to do. Sabrina didn’t get back up this time; he’d hurt her a lot. Finally, a bit of peace and quiet from her god damn stupid screaming.

*Don’t you fucking do anything!*

Funny, isn’t it, Jack? I kept expecting some big, emotional moment to be how you let me out again, like the first time. Like the time you killed Joe. Ripped his head clean off, remember? You did that, not me. Maybe you are a monster.

*Shut. The fuck. Up.*

But hey, if getting hit or stabbed in the head does it, then that works for me. You should probably watch your head more. Now, you have to watch all your friends die.

*You fucking—*

The Ripper laughed, and forced down the voice in his head. That's all Jack was anymore, just a voice, one he could crush and bury. Christ, how long had it been since he'd come out to play. Way too long. And all that time, he'd been waiting, preparing, building his strength, getting stronger. The body was his, this time. He wouldn't let go of it, not again. There wasn't some giant elephant bitch to crush him into a pancake to force it, this time.

He licked his lips, and looked to Clara. Still transformed, the huge wolf fought off half a dozen ghosts that swirled around her. They'd figured out werewolf claws hurt. Sándor was in there too, back to back with Noah and taking swings at any ghost that got too close.

Oh god, this was too perfect.

"David!" The Ripper turned and looked back to the pack. "David! Get over here. I need a distraction."

David, surrounded by his pack, stood over the dying corpse of the spider monster. It hadn't broken apart yet. When it did, Avery and everyone would be very distracted.

David looked to him, then back to Avery. When she nodded, David ran over to Jack, temporarily getting on all fours before almost skidding to a stop beside him. Werewolves really were titanic creatures.

It was a simple plan: kill everyone. He was confident the Prince, the sheriff, maybe Elaine, someone would come looking for him, and he could explain only he'd survived. And then he could kill everyone back in the physical world when they let their guard down.

But in order to kill everyone, he had to get rid of the biggest threats first. The dude with the flamethrower, and then Sándor. The gargoyle fucker would probably be an easier fight than last time, since they weren't in his lair, or the dream world or whatever. But he also had a brain now, and fighting a super strong, giant gargoyle monster with a brain might actually be harder than his battle with the dumb, mindless brute had been. So, sneak attack him, or Noah? And what about Damien? He'd probably be able to tell The Ripper was in control if he used Auspex on him. And what if the sheriff did the same?

Whatever, he'd wing it. What fun was there in violence if you over-planned? It was so much better to go with the flow, and kill anything you could get your hands on. And in the Great Below, they had nowhere to go until rescue came.

"Let's go."

David nodded, and the two of them ran toward Clara. Once they arrived, Clara wasted no time, and ran up to David, ghosts chasing after her. The two fell into a dance they both knew well, David slipping past her and crashing into the ghosts chasing her, and her dodging his pounce with ease.

Clara skidded and turned, and chased after David, only to pounce past him and get another ghost that'd been chasing her. And just like Sándor and Noah, she got back to back with him, and systematically fought off and shredded the ghosts.

“Noah!” The Ripper said, in his best Jack voice. One part pussy, one part entitled know-it-all nerd, one part superiority-complex Ventrue. “Stop with the fire!”

Noah nodded as he let go of the trigger. The igniter was still on, but he stopped spewing liquid flame everywhere. The way the flame interacted with the Great Below was interesting, burning beneath the mist and causing the unnatural stuff to avoid the flames. The ghosts themselves reacted even more oddly. A few of them were on fire, literally, but the liquid flame dripped off their bodies without making any sort of dent in their mass. Some of them dispersed to escape the flame. Some didn't bother.

It certainly hurt them, though. They screamed and roared, just not with the musical agony the Ripper would have hoped to hear. Burning alive was pretty much the most painful way to die, far as he knew, and whatever the ghosts were suffering didn't reach nearly the same level. Ah well, at least it was hurting them enough they avoided the fire.

Spirit magic bullshit was the only thing that'd really kill them. Spirit magic ghost knife. Spirit magic werewolf claws. If it wasn't fancy spirit magic crap, it wouldn't do much to a ghost, or a spirit. Which meant that Sabrina bitch would be coming for him again. He'd deal with her after he'd gotten rid of Noah and Sándor.

“Get lost!” The Ripper yelled at one ghost, thankfully one not on fire, and charged the bastard from behind. One solid punch to the back of the head was enough to have his skull collapse in, and the ghost fell into the mist and dispersed.

The nearby ghosts looked at the Ripper, apparently a little surprised he'd come back. They looked to the distance where the werewolves were ripping apart the dying azlu, and then around, as if looking for someone to tell them what to do. No one did. The ghosts roared with frustration, some even spat curses, and they all flew away.

Clara and David stayed with each other, still back to back, and moved closer to Noah and Sándor. Everyone was panting, exhausted, and the breathers were sweating. Everyone was an easy target.

“You guys okay?” Jack asked, carefully stepping around strips of fire on the stone. It was really fucking hard, finding the right balance of pussy bullshit to say, but he felt he did pretty good. He’d been listening to it for years.

“Yeah,” Noah said. “Fire didn’t do much but scare them off, even when I hit them directly.”

“Shame.”

Noah raised a brow. “And the others?”

“Carter took a big hit. Might be dead. Avery and the others are fine, though.” Nodding, the Ripper came in closer, and stood beside the man as Noah looked off to where the azlu had been. A little closer. A little closer. Slightly behind. Act like you’re checking their six. Perfect. He’d have preferred to kill Sándor first, but he had to work with what he got.

That sweet, sweet moment, when everything goes right. Sándor was looking toward the azlu, now that the ghosts weren’t swarming them. Noah was relaxing, and lowering the nozzle on the flamethrower. Clara and David were walking toward their pack. Everyone had their back to Jack the Ripper. It was all perfect.

The Ripper drew back a fist, aimed it for the back of Noah’s head, and—

Got punched in the face by Sándor. The Ripper rolled with a groan and came back up on his feet, snarling as he touched where the bastard had punched him. A pretty damn hard punch, too, something the gargoyle’s Horror could have done, not him.

“Sándor!?” Clara said as she spun around, and looked between the bastard and the Ripper.

“Well, fuck me.” Sighing, the Ripper wiped off the shoulders of his suit, and rubbed his hands together as he looked between the three werewolves and the nightmare monster. “Dude, you ruined it. I was going to punch his head clean off. You were all gonna turn around, shocked, and just as you realized what was happening, I was going punch you in the guts and rip out your innards.” He pointed at Sándor, and twiddled his index finger toward his stomach. “How’d you know it was me?”

Sándor made the tiniest frown a face could make, but said nothing. Because of course he said nothing. Fucking asshole was ruining the game.

The Ripper could have tried to keep up the facade. Kept trying to be Jack, and convince Sándor he was wrong. He could have played the long game, looked for the perfect opportune moment to make as big, and dramatic a revelation as he could. Kill them all in the most poetic, perfect way. Alas, real life

wasn't a story. Sometimes you had to make due, and roll with the punches. That was fine. He could take a punch.

The three werewolves spread out slightly, finally realizing what'd happened. With two of them transformed, they'd be a problem. Best deal with them, first.

The Ripper licked a fang, grinned, and offered Clara a tiny finger wave. "David, old friend. Would you kindly—"

David froze, the command ringing throughout his whole being. Poor guy. He never knew about the command the Ripper left in his mind, all those months ago when he'd Dominated him. So much for being the spirit guru of his pack.

He turned, and sank his fangs into Clara's neck. She roared as she fell back, but she couldn't dislodge the man, and the werewolves fell into the mist as David tore her open with his claws.

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~~Antoinette~~

Jen glared at her, but the glare faded into nothingness, and her eyes closed, as paralysis and torpor took her.

"Necessary?" Daniel asked, as he gently set the woman on the bed in the cell, before joining Antoinette in the hall. Scully stayed with Jen, the bird having come to the conclusion that she was to protect Jen, as if Antoinette were not trustworthy. The strange ways a crow's mind, an already intelligent species, interacted with the gift of Kindred unlife, was quite interesting. Pets given unlife often became almost robotic with their newfound intelligence the taint gave. The crows, on the other hand, still held personalities of their own.

Something for her fellow dragons to research later, research likely already done. She had other worries.

"Prudent."

Her sheriff nodded as he followed her, and the two of them descended once again into the deepest layers of her Elysium Tower.



“You are concerned for Jack?”

“Of course I am concerned for my love. But ultimately, I am more concerned for the city, and the world at large.”

“I know, but—”

“Enough, Daniel. Do not distract me.” This conversation was ridiculous, beyond cliché, and she would not entertain it. They had far larger worries.

It was Daniel’s attempt to console her, she knew. Alas, the man would forever have the social grace of an ox. She appreciated his desire to settle her nerves, but it was best she not think about Jack and the predicament he was in. The Prince and her sheriff had a ritual to complete, and until it was done, she would encase her heart in ice.

Deep down in her tower, in the chamber she had painted in thousands of symbols with blood, the Prince and her sheriff withdrew their blades, and began the second phase.

The kine dangling from chains screamed and shrieked. Antoinette did not enjoy the noise, and she tuned it out as best as possible. The fact these kine were little better than scum did not make such butchery enjoyable, and forever she would be unable to process how some Kindred could revel in such violence. But it had to be done, and to her chagrin, the sacrifices had to be awake for the act. Pain, and fear, were components in the ritual.

Intestines splattered over the floor, and the hanging sacrifices, mouths gagged and eyes covered, twisted and writhed in absolute agony. The Prince had not engaged in such carnage in many decades, but the ritual was clear. The symbols had been painted in the blood of the dead, and now, the fuel was to be life represented: more blood, and the organs. The ancient Egyptians knew far more than the modern era realized.

“Now,” Antoinette said, “if you would be so kind. I do not have your book or knife; Beatrice hid them well. But I believe I have conducted the ritual correctly according to my records of the book, for a task as large as this, and this knife will suffice.” She held out the blood soaked knife, an ancient thing, stashed away in her vaults. A knife baptized in the blood of an innocent child. “I had originally planned to perform this ritual myself. How fortuitous Beatrice left you where she had. And I believe you are the expert in this art?”

Elen managed a small grin up at the Prince from her wheelchair, reached out with a slow, unsteady hand, and took the knife.