

~~The Ripper~~

God damn it felt good to be in the driver seat again. God damn it felt good to end someone's life with his bare hands.

Jack the Ripper dropped man's corpse, and it burst into a pile of ash as it collided with the street. Joe was no more. Finally. Fucking finally! Irritating god damn worm. Jack laughed as he stepped onto the pile of ash, and kicked it away. Finally.

He looked to the Carthians who'd shown up. Some stared down at him from nearby buildings. Some stared at him from across the street. The four ancilla, Garry's strongest, stared at him from twenty feet away, each of them injured and hurting. Cory backed away, putting more and more distance from Jack as he clutched the hole in his stomach.

Jack looked at the bag in his hand. This stupid necklace. It forced down the Beast, and Jack, new Jack, was bound to the Beast in a way old Jack wasn't.

But it was also the only reason Jack wasn't staked and tucked away in a cellar somewhere for years while the Prince and Jack's bitch grand sire looked for a cure. So he sighed, and tossed the bag to Vivienne.

"Hold onto that."

"I... wh-what? O-O-Okay." She snatched it up, and stared at him as he looked to the crowd of onlookers hidden around in the nearby buildings and alleys.

"All of you!" Jack raised a hand, like a fucking emperor, and grinned at all the stupid bastards staring at the kid in the boxers and shoes. "Your little leader is ash. I don't know what Joe said to convince you all that you should try this, that you should actually attack us, attack me! I don't know what lies he said, or what delusions he weaved, but let me set the record straight. Jack has been trying to keep the peace, to save as many lives as he could. Jack is the only damn reason I haven't buried you stupid assholes in the ground." He tilted his head to the side, and licked his fangs. "You should have listened. Now, you're all gonna die."

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~~Damien~~

Oh God no.

Damien stared on from a distance, buried deep in his Cloak with binoculars in hand. Close enough to hear what Jack said though, just barely. No, not Jack, not anymore.

Stake him? Could he stake him? Last time Damien had staked the Ripper, the curse had just finished a one-on-one with a giant spider monster the werewolves struggled with. He'd been a tattered, broken vampire, weakened and drained. Now, Jack looked like he'd just finished his warm-up and was ready for a proper fight. It would have been funny that he was standing around in his underwear, if not for the look on his face, a blend of excitement and psychotic glee.

Damien scanned the sky for movement. There was none save for two crows, who broke off from what looked like pursuit of fleeing Carthians, and now circled the sky above. Like vultures. But no swarm came, no flock of crows, no legion of rats, nothing. Either the Ripper was saving them for when he needed them, realized they wouldn't be of use with his targets fleeing, or he actually cared about the Masquerade. Strong as he was, even the curse couldn't take on a few billion humans armed with flamethrowers, and nukes.

Jack walked toward the Carthians. Damien recognized them. Garner, Kass, Bella, and Steve. Garry had about ten ancilla in the Carthians, but not all vampires did combat well. These four did, and were often considered the biggest threats in the Carthians save for Garry himself. Frontliners, fighters, people who liked to throw down. People who probably agreed with an anarchist like Joe.

The four of them spread out as they circled Jack. Were they serious? Did they actually want to fight him?

No no no, everything was going wrong. Killing Joe was recoverable. Everyone knew the man had a problem, that he was hungry for action. But if the Ripper started wiping out Garry's whole covenant, everything would be over. The war would turn into chaos. The Prince would get involved. It'd be a giant mess. And Damien and Maria's goal of reviving the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido would be lost.

Damien pulled out his phone.

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~~The Ripper~~

“Gotta be honest. I expected you fucks to run.” He grinned at each ancilla as they surrounded him. “You really think you shitheads can beat me? Four of you?”

“You can’t use your pets here,” Bella said. “The cops will be here soon. You won’t violate the Masquerade.”

Jack tapped his chin with a finger. “True. I don’t want to piss off the blue.”

“You don’t want to piss off your Prince.”

“My Prince?” He raised a brow at that. “Ain’t no Prince of mine. But either way, I won’t summon my legion. Yet. But hey, if you fucks think you can really fight me, you better commit. Otherwise Cory is gonna die.”

Bella stood up straighter before snapping her gaze to Cory.

Of course Cory stuck his head out from behind a car, and looked at Jack, confused. Looked him right in the eyes.

Poor Cory. The young Gangrel was only twenty years embraced, far as the Invictus knew, and a bit more timid than his stupid dog brethren. He clearly wasn’t used to a Ventrue being up front and center, and a single mention of his name was enough to have the man looking at Jack with wide eyes.

Jack glared at him, and again, Cory didn’t look away. Eye contact was powerful, even without Dominate. Predators knew that, human predators, humans who knew how to prey on weak-minded fools. If you wanted to crush someone’s mind, break them, reduce them to a pathetic child incapable of a single thought, you met the eyes. Glare into their useless souls and make them submit. Cory couldn’t look away.

Jack reached out, and broke the kid’s mind. Like snapping a plastic spoon.

Come to me.

Cory walked to him.

Steve was closest, and he made a running dive to get in Cory’s way, but Jack’s suggestion was powerful and overruling. Breaking someone’s natural desire for self preservation was the hardest part of the mind to break. Everyone had self preservation as the most basic, deepest instinct, and if you could override that, you could make anyone do anything.

Cory jumped over Steve, and ran over to Jack before standing beside him. Ah, the look of shock on Steve's face, and the blank stare in Cory's face. Fucking beautiful.

“So, get over here and fight me, fist to fist, or I rip off Cory's head, just like I did Joe. Or maybe I'll rip off his limbs first and see how much damage it takes before he finally goes poof.” Grinning wider, Jack kicked at the pile of ash under his feet again.

The four ancilla glared at him, but they were smart enough to avoid meeting his eyes. When the fists started flying, Jack wouldn't be able to break their minds. Even Jack the Ripper took longer than half a second to Dominate someone, and they probably knew it. That was fine. He wanted to get his hands dirty tonight.

“Well, let's hear it,” Jack said. “Let's hear the speech. Let's hear how much the Invictus suck, how horrible we all are. Let's hear about how we're all a bunch of soulless lawyers and greedy accountants. Let's hear the stupid bullshit about how Invictus are evil, and you Carthians are the passionate, sympathetic good guys trying to make this city a better place. Let's hear all the ridiculous, delusional crap you tell yourselves. Come on! Now's your chance for last words.”

They looked at each other, checking to see if anyone actually had something to say. Apparently they did not. The only thing Jack saw there was panic. Joe was dead, and Cory was soon to follow. Say one thing for the idiots, they were in it for each other. A bunch of morons who shared stupid ideals, and they'd die beside each other for their stupid ideals.

“Oh, before I forget.” Jack kicked at Cory's leg, the knee, the outside of the knee. Crunch. It was enough pain to immediately break his suggestion on Cory's mind, and the man fell to his side screaming. “Don't want you going anywhere.”

That was enough to set them off, and the four Carthians ran for him. Perfect.

Of course, the Carthians weren't so stupid to think they could just take him in a straight fight. They'd been outside for a bit now, and in the chaos, some of them had gotten some guns again. So much for a fist fight, Bella pulled out a pistol and unloaded on him while her three friends rushed him. Hell, it was actually a smart move. The bitch was a good shot, and Jack had to lift a hand and cover his face to stop bullets from slamming into his head. Some bullets hit his chest, and one hit his jaw, but they flattened against his skin and flesh, barely able to scratch him as his pulsing snakes of blood emerged again as she fired.

She threw the gun aside, getting the hint, and he grinned at her as the coils of dark crimson seeped back into his skin. Of course the moment he did, the other three Kindred dove at him, a delightful mix of fear and anger on their faces.

It quickly turned to mostly fear as Jack spun, and backhanded the fucker going for his back, Garner. Slow, already injured, Garner fell to his side hard. Useless. But Steve came at Jack fast, looking for some payback for Jack smashing his head in with a gun. And sure enough, he came at Jack with a knife.

Jack stuck his hand out as Steve came at him for the stomach stab, and Steve sank the blade up through his left hand. With vitae hardening Jack's flesh, Steve had come at him hard and fast, intent on puncturing him like he was a wall of wood, and the blade pushed up through Jack's palm, right between the middle and ring finger. The pain was an afterthought, lost in the glory of a good fight. A great fight! Jack clamped his hand down on Steve's hand, over his knuckles and the blade grip, and squeezed. Steve screamed.

Kass came at him opposite of Steve, and Jack was off balance, holding Steve and slowly crushing his hand into mulch, but leaving his right side open. Kass's throat was looking better, but there was still a big dent there, and she didn't run with as much speed as she should have. Probably trying to avoid putting bouncing pressure on her fucked up back. Well, stupid her, she came at him a little too slow, and he turned to face her, Steve in toe, until they were face to face.

Kudos to her for still having the balls to come at him straight regardless, and she swung a straight punch for his face. He took it, head twisting slightly with the impact, but he punched her back a moment later, and he punched at lot harder. She went down, clutching her jaw; not broken, since she rolled with the punch, but close. She got up quickly and dove at him, full body tackle, maybe thinking if she got in close she could grapple him.

Jack spread his feet, braced his weight, and spun. Steve swung around him as his feet came off the street and stuck out with inertia, and Jack let go of his hand when he collided with Kass. A beautiful side-on collision that had them both rolling over the asphalt like fucking dolls. And hey, the knife was out of Jack's hand too, so that was nice. He watched, happy tickles working up his spine, as Steve and Kass rolled over the street hard enough to tear open skin.

And then thud, something hit Jack. The ground came up to Jack pretty damn quick, and he collided with his chest first before his chin crashed into it. Thankfully a Kindred used vitae to fuel their body, not their actual organs, not truly, or he'd have suffered a pretty nasty concussion from how hard

his head hit the street. Someone had fucking tackled him when he'd been distracted. Bella was on top of him, and she was smart enough to pull out a knife as she dove for him.

Once, twice, three times she stuck him in the back with the knife, putting every bit of strength she had into it. But when she tried the fourth time, he forced the blood out through his skin again, and the knife sunk halfway into his flesh, and got stuck.

He rolled over. She was a smart enough grappler to stay on top of him as he did, letting go of the knife, but she wasn't strong enough to keep him from pushing down on the street until he was sitting up. And she didn't expect him to drive his forehead into her chest. Not a good angle for maximum damage, but enough to send her back and reeling.

"Ow! That hurt!" He reached behind him and pulled the knife out of his back. "You got a little fight in you. I like that." The best Ledger impression.

"Fuck you."

"Ugh, my wit is wasted on plebs like you." Laughing until it echoed through the street, he marched toward Bella, stomping his feet as he did. "Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of a Carthian bitch about to lose her head." He winked at her, and waggled her knife in front of him.

And there it was, panic, fear. Bella scrambled to her feet and put her fists up, eyes on his for a split second before she remembered to avoid holding his gaze. It was kind of annoying, how everyone knew now how quickly he could Dominate people. It was so much fun when they didn't see it coming.

He took a step toward her. She took a step back. He chuckled darkly, licked a fang as he drank in the fear, and took another step.

"I'm going to cut open your gut, and rip out your insides piece by piece. I wonder how many organs it'll take before you pop. Then I'm going to rip your friends apart." He pointed the knife at Garner, still recovering from what looked like a broken jaw, and Kass and Steve. They hadn't just hit each other when he threw Steve at her, they'd rolled over the street a dozen times at high speed. They'd broken bones. Well, more bones. "I'm going to collect all your ashes into envelopes and mail them to Garry. And—"

Bella stopped walking. He stopped talking. She blinked past him, eyes snapping to something else, something she didn't expect. Jack expected it, the sudden wave of power that came from behind him. It was bound to happen eventually, and it might as well happen now.

Slowly, Jack turned around, and sure enough, there he was. The mother fucking sheriff of Dolareido.

Daniel stood there in his usual dark trench coat, wearing his subtle glasses, and he looked at Jack with the steady gaze he always did.

“Carthians,” the man said. “Take your injured and leave.”

Jack laughed. Old faithful was a stone cold fuck.

“Howdy sheriff. If you’re gonna entertain me instead of these fuckwads, I’m cool with that.” Shrugging, Jack turned toward Cory, and kicked him. Of course he put force into it, bracing his weight as best he could, so he could send the dude half flying, half rolling toward Bella, screaming as he did. A fresh dent in his side, complete with ripped open flesh, threatened to spill his withered spleen.

She caught him as best as she could, but she wasn’t in the best condition either. All of them had broken bodies, and running on vitae to keep from collapsing. She fell back with a whimper of pain as the man flattened her to the asphalt.

The others joined her. Slowly, Steve and Kass got up off each other, Steve cradling his hand and Kass holding her throat. Garner clutched his broken chest and jaw, but after a couple steps, he collapsed, and cried out in agony as he did. Steve and Kass helped him, each slipping under one of his arms and half carrying him as they walked.

“Bye guys,” Jack said. “But remember, we’re not done. You poked the bear. I’ll make sure you’re all dead, sooner or later.”

Each and every one of them managed a quick glance to him, and he relished the look in their eyes. They were terrified of him now. He’d have been hard if he’d been Blushing Life.

“Jack,” Daniel said. “Where is your necklace?”

Jack shrugged and gestured back to Vivi. “She’s holding onto it.”

“You didn’t destroy it?”

“Well if I did that, you, the Prince, and Elaine would bust my ass and do everything you could to lock me up, wouldn’t you?” He winked. “I’m just out for a bit of fun.”

The sheriff, predictably, didn’t react to his words. The perfect straight man, Jack could make a living telling jokes with this guy.

Daniel looked to the building beside them as it went up in flames. “We have four minutes before the police, and fire department arrive.”

“Of course.”

“Will you put the necklace back on?”

“Not until I’ve had a bit more fun.”

Daniel glanced to the fleeing Carthians. “I... don’t think Jack would want you to.”

“I am Jack.”

The sheriff frowned. Subtle, but any sort of expression from this statue was saying a lot.

“Vivienne, are you alright?”

“Y-Yes.”

Ah, right, Daniel was her grandsire. Jack felt his smile grow as he looked at the sheriff, and then glanced toward his grandchilde. A menacing glance.

Message received. Daniel’s scowl remained, and he adjusted his leather gloves as he glared at the Ripper. “How do you want to do this?”

“I wanted a good fist fight, but these Carthians failed to deliver. So, I won’t summon my army, if you don’t use the sword. Deal?” Jack looked the man up and down a moment, waiting for a response. “Come on, hit me!”

Daniel hit him.

‘Hit him’ didn’t really put into words what it was like to get hit by a five-hundred-year-old Mekhet who’d been working as an enforcer for most of that. Daniel was a blur of movement. If there’d been any indicator, any tip off in his eyes and face, Jack didn’t see it. All he saw was a haze of trench coat and glasses come at him, and then a fist collided with his face.

Jack had been smart enough to pull up his vitae and reinforce his flesh, but he’d also let the blood coils seep back into his skin, dormant. Mistake. Well, even someone as awesome as him could make mistakes and underestimate someone. But damn, the sheriff hit a lot harder than a Mekhet had any right to, and Jack flew back as the world spun around him.

The moment he landed, Daniel was on him, grabbing him from behind. Not mounting and punching, like Bella had tried. Daniel was smarter than that bitch. Daniel got behind him, and picked him up by hooking his arms under Jack’s armpits.

Daniel was a tall man. Jack was not. Daniel hunched over him as he hooked his arms up under Jack’s shoulders and then his hands behind Jack’s head, pinning him under the sheriff’s weight and forcing Jack’s chin down to his sternum.



“You serious, sheriff? A full nelson?”

The sheriff said nothing. What an asshole.

Well, grappling was definitely an art Daniel knew that Jack did not. And Daniel had a hundred pounds on Jack. For all intents and purposes, Jack was already defeated.

Jack pushed his arms forward and together, driving the strength of them directly against Daniel’s grip against his head. It hurt having his chin driven down into his own sternum, but it also directly put the strength of his arms against the strength of Daniel’s forearms and ability to keep his fingers entwined. And Jack was fucking strong. Daniel’s grip broke, and he slipped his arms out before Jack could trap them against his sides.

But he was too close to avoid getting a proper backhand as Jack spun around. Back of the fist to Daniel’s shoulder was enough to have the sheriff flung to the side, but like a fucking acrobat the man rolled through the air with it, and landed on his feet and one hand. With the sword still in its sheathe on his back, and the trench coat flapping in air, he looked like a fucking shitty cyberpunk ninja or something.

Daniel rubbed his shoulder where Jack hit him. It’d been a good hit, something broke, but Daniel adjusted the shoulder with an audible crunch, and rotated it around as he looked at Jack.

“You heal fast for a Mekhet.”

“Practice.”

Jack laughed. “You get beat up a lot?”

“Not as much as you.”

“Touché!” Jack rubbed his jaw as he grinned at the man.

In typical, cold, brutal fashion, Daniel came at him unannounced. Such a shame. The sheriff wasn’t interested in goofing around. To him, this was just a job to get over with as efficiently as possible, and that meant no banter. Dude was not the sort to talk around the water cooler.

But Jack the Ripper was! People at the office loved him.

Jack ducked. Apparently Daniel didn’t expect Jack to summon enough speed to do that, cause he collided with Jack, chest to Jack’s upper body. Jack laughed as he punched up, and nailed the fucker in the chest.

“Haha!”

Daniel, somehow, managed to jump with the punch, and back as well, landing on his feet again, with minimal damage. There'd been contact, knuckles to bone, and the sheriff rubbed his chest for a second with the most dispassionate, stone face Jack had ever seen. This wasn't nearly as much fun as Jack had been hoping.

*Don't you dare hurt him.*

Shut up kid. I'm having fun. You lock me up for weeks and expect me to just sit around when I finally get out?

*If you hurt him, the Prince will—*

Do what? She can't hurt me, without hurting you. So shut the fuck up and let me have some fun. If he dies, he dies.

The Ripper rolled his eyes, and crushed the voice in his head. He was in the driver seat now, and he wasn't going to let some idiot child he was forced to share this body with dictate a god damn thing. Shut. The fuck. Up.

"You're fast, you know that?"

Daniel didn't respond.

"If you were using your sword, I bet you might even be able to hurt me. Maybe even kill me."

Daniel didn't respond.

"Course, if we were playing for realsies, I wouldn't be out here, would I? I'd be hiding in my tower, like the Prince. I'd be sending my legions, my thralls and ghouls, my pets, my army. I'd be sipping a fine red and looking out the tower window, while my latest ghoul blows me. Sound about right? Maybe something Viktor would have done?"

Daniel didn't respond. Fuck, this guy was more than just boring. He was professional. Ugh!

Sighing, and wearing his biggest, best grin, Jack pointed his hand at Daniel, and made the classic 'come at me' gesture. He was tempted to voice it, say something like 'come at me bro' or 'get over here!' or some such, but it'd wasted on this fossil.

Sure enough, Daniel came at him. Faster. Jack didn't manage to duck this time, and the fist came straight for his face, dead center on the nose. And the fucker put some power in it too, cause despite Jack keeping his vitae up and ready, strengthening his body and hardening it, his nose went crunch.

Jack flew back, hit the street, rolled a half dozen times, and collided with the front of a car. The bumper dented in, and so did the hood where the back of Jack's head smashed down onto it.

Seeing stars, Jack fell forward to his hands and knees, and blinked a bunch until the world stopped spinning. Concussion? Nah, vampire. Broken bones? Nah, super vampire. Broken nose? Apparently. Teetering, Jack stood up, got his bearings quick, and glared at the asshole a good fifty feet down the street from him.

Daniel clenched and unclenched the fist he used to punch Jack. He'd hurt himself, punching that hard.

Chuckling loud enough it echoed against the big, empty office buildings, Jack began the walk back to the sheriff. And naturally, Daniel stared at him with those cold eyes the whole time. Perfect.

"Come on, no speech? Nothing to say at all? Sheriff, I'm giving you the perfect opportunity to tell the audience what you're thinking?"

Daniel didn't so much as glance at the nearby Kindred, thralls, and ghouls who stared on. His eyes remained focused on Jack, hands at his sides, elbows slightly bent and ready to get his hands up again. Laser focus.

As Jack closed the distance, he reached deep down into him, found the biggest wrecking ball he could, and smashed it into the bastard's mind.

Jack the Ripper was strong, fueled by an ancient curse passed onto his bloodline by the Strix themselves, forged from the ashes of diablerie. He had power in spades. But tackling the mind of an ancient vampire as old as Daniel was a pretty big task. The most powerful Ventrue didn't go around dominating vampires of similar age, that's just not how it worked. With Dominate, you punched down, and broke the minds of weaker foes.

Punching straight, hitting Daniel's mind, was like a regular human punching a tree. Jack's assault came to a quick stop as he smashed into a giant wall of steel in the sheriff's mind. And within the metaphor of his mind, Jack the Ripper looked up and up at the steel gate that barred his way.

Beside him, Jack the weakling stood there, arms folded across his chest, a big stupid grin on his face, and he gestured to the gate.

"You think you can break that down?"

The Ripper snarled, and slashed out at the gate with one of his many claws. He poured his power into it, and sure enough the metal scratched and dented where his will struck it. But that was all.

“Yes.”

“Sometime this century?”

The Ripper snarled down at the stupid boy. “It wouldn’t take a century.”

“It’d certainly take longer than a minute though. And right now, you and Daniel are standing in a street, with a bunch of Invictus and Carthians watching.”

The metaphor around them happened a thousand times faster than the physical world outside. The Ripper had time to think and work, but he knew he wouldn’t be breaking into this fortress.

A glance around showed more than the steel wall. Beyond it, a steel building with no windows, square and beyond boring. And above that, a pale sky, with no moon or sun or clouds. And underneath their feet, endless dark stone, or metal, or something hard and featureless.

Fortress didn’t do justice how fucked up this man’s mind was.

The Ripper had traces of memory of the lives that came before him. He had shreds of moments from Julias’s life, before siring Jack. Of Viktor’s life, before he sired Julias. Of Elaine, before she sired Viktor. And of Susanna, before she sired Elaine.

None of them had minds like this, but then, his chain of memory didn’t extend to their minds post siring a child. But he doubted any of them had developed a mind quite like this. Susanna definitely didn’t. Her mind was an orgy of sex and gore and murder and rape and torture, an excess of stimulation that she relished. Elaine and Viktor and Julias’s minds were predictable, small houses that slowly raised into castles, and would have continued to grow if this incarnation of the Ripper had stayed within.

What sort of fucked up past did Daniel have to turn his mind into this? No wonder he was interested in an angry bitch like Athalia. Her stupid loud voice was probably the only thing on the planet capable of penetrating this shit.

Snarling, the Ripper let the Dominate hold go. Instantly the streets of North Side were visible again, the heat of the burning office building, and the eyes of the onlookers. To them, they’d have seen a couple seconds pause in the fight, nothing more. To Daniel and Jack, it was a failed attempt to Dominate.

Daniel didn’t even bother grinning, but he did take it as a sign to attack. Again, Daniel came at him, and again, it was a blur of movement. It wasn’t just speed. Daniel was a masterclass assassin, and used his Cloak to hide his movements. Jack, normal Jack, still remembered what it was like when Daniel had slaughtered the dozen or so Kindred that’d been with Lucas, after he’d used Damien to kill

him. The sheriff had been a ghost, appearing for only a second to slice someone in half, before disappearing again.

Well, Jack was not some young Kindred. Jack poured his vitae into his senses, into his awareness, and jerked his head to the right. Daniel's fist came at him, for the head again, with enough speed to make a car jealous. But he'd underestimated Jack, probably because of the failed Dominate attempt. The curse was strong, very strong, and Jack summoned enough speed to tilt his head out of the way, and get his closer hand up and on Daniel's arm.

Finally, a look of surprise on the bastard's face. Subtle, but there, and it made the fight worth it.

Jack got his left hand's grip on the man's punching hand, his right, and he grinned at the bastard as he returned the punch, straight for the fucker's chest. And this time, with a firm grip on the fucker's wrist, Daniel wasn't going anywhere. All Jack needed was an anchor and he could pour his strength into something, and that anchor was their connection.

Broken bones. He felt them, the delicious sensation of bones breaking like fucking pasta noodles snapping in half, and Daniel's face lit up with pain and rage like he was Italian. No scream though. The others screamed, the Carthians, screamed like stuck pigs. But not Daniel, just a grimace. It took the sheriff a second to get his precious statue face back, but Jack had already lined up another punch.

Jack missed. Daniel stepped back far, twisting away even as his right arm stayed locked in Jack's left hand. But with some distance between them, Daniel had enough room to bring up one of his feet for a face kick, taking advantage of Jack's forward momentum from the missed punch. Punches hit hard, but kicks hit harder, and Jack only just managed to twist his head enough to keep the boot from colliding with his nose. It'd only just gotten realigned and he didn't want to do it again.

Apparently Daniel really was a ninja, because he balanced on one leg, and with torso facing Jack, kept the same kicking foot up in the air, bent at the knee and hip, and kicked out again, this time at Jack's chest. Not the power of a full kick but it still fucking hurt, and Jack recoiled with the impact. Which left Daniel an opening to kick him in the face, with the same foot, all without lowering the leg. And he repeated the motion several times.

In a shitty kung fu movie, it'd have been silly, with exaggerated sound effects. With an elder vampire doing it, it was pain, and Jack groaned as the five-hundred-year-old Mekhet's boot collided with his chest and face hard enough Jack could feel his hardened flesh struggle against it. Daniel's boot also started to split with the strength of impact, but it didn't stop the sheriff from kicking him again and again anyway.

Snarling, Jack yanked on the man's hand, hard. That sent Daniel toward Jack's left, and Jack toward his right, and with enough force they both fell over. But Jack didn't let go, and he scrambled over to Daniel to get beside him. He punched down, but Daniel rolled out of the way. The street cracked around Jack's fist like glass. Daniel had half rolled, half flipped, getting back to his feet and yanking on his right hand. For a second Jack thought he was trying to get the hand back, but he yanked Jack right toward him, and like a yoyo, Jack came up to him.

Daniel slammed his forehead down against Jack's nose.

"Fuck!" Jack slumped down, dangling from Daniel's clutched wrist, nose broken again. "Oh you fucking asshole!"

"Jack, get a hold of yourself and—"

Jack squeezed. Fuck this. He didn't want to squeeze and potentially lose the anchor he had on the slippery bastard, but he did anyway, and Daniel's face broke into more delicious, subtle signs of agony as Jack crushed the bones in the man's wrist. And that created a lovely opening for Jack to get back to his feet, and punch the fucker straight in his nose. And Jack punched harder than this fucker. The man's glasses shattered and flew away.

And Jack didn't let go of his hand either. Oh the glorious way the sheriff twisted onto the street as he fell from the impact, and his broken wrist bones ground against each other. Nose shattered, he looked up at Jack with a quick snap of awareness, and far faster than Jack would have, recovered and got back to his feet.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of you," Jack said, grinning as he squeezed harder on the sheriff's broken wrist. It was enough to stop the man from whatever punch or kick he was about to throw. "I'm going to beat you into fucking pulp. I'm going to smash your bones." To prove his point, he yanked on Daniel's wrist again, and punched him in the other shoulder. For all Daniel's speed and strength, he didn't have the resilience of a Ventrue or the curse, and he almost fell again as the punch broke something. "I'm going to rip off your kneecaps. I'm going to rip out your teeth and make you swallow them. I'm going to break your face in until there's nothing left, and Annie has to spoon feed you blood for a decade before you can feed yourself again. I'm going to—"

A small jolt of pressure made Jack stop, and he blinked down at his chest. Something thin and sharp was sticking out of him.

Jack the Ripper growled as he looked over his shoulder, at Damien. “I’m going to fucking kill you.” He spun, and Damien jumped back, but not fast enough. The back of Jack’s fist collided with the man’s side, and sent him spiraling through the air before crashing into a streetlight.

Jack let go of Daniel, and turned to face his so called friend, and his wide eyes. “I’m going to kill you. Then I’m going to rip Fiona’s guts out, and... and...”

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~~Damien~~

Thank the Lord.

Slowly, Damien crawled back up, and cradled his side where the Ripper had backhanded him. The curse was faster than Damien expected, and that single hit was enough to break several of Damien’s ribs.

But thank the Lord, Jack’s eyes closed as he slumped forward, and fell on the street.

“Damien,” Daniel said, and he gently held his broken wrist. “Thank you.”

“Can’t believe you agreed to a fist fight with... the curse. You know it won a fist fight with one of those azlu monsters. It won one against Sándor too, you know. In his gargoyle form.”

The sheriff sighed as he reached up to his broken nose with his good hand, and righted it with a crunch. Mekhet weren’t as resilient as Ventruue or Gangrels, but Daniel was hundreds of years old, and could probably recover from simple wounds easily enough. Just, maybe not a dozen of them.

“Lesson learned.”

“Did... did he destroy the necklace?”

“No!” Vivi ran over to them, a small bag in hand. Her only hand. “No, it’s here!”

Both men blinked down at her, before Daniel finally managed a small smile.

Damien took the bag from her, took out the necklace, thanked the Lord yet again, and slipped it over the head of the unconscious vampire.

“Vivi,” Damien said, “your arm?”

“It caught fire, cause of that asshole Joe. Jack... tore it off, to save me.”

“Leave it to Jack to make a hard decision fast.”

Nodding, Vivi knelt down beside the man. “I... I knew the curse was dangerous. Everyone’s been talking about it. But he ripped Joe’s head off! Ripped it off!”

Farewell Joe. You will not be missed. Not by anyone outside the Carthians, at least.

“And...” Vivi sighed and shook her head. “And Bruce is dead, too. The fire got him.”

Damien winced as he looked up at the burning building. “Garry—”

“I don’t think it was Garry. Joe wanted to do this on his own. Or at least, it seemed like that.”

The sheriff raised a single finger. “Either way, the fight’s over. Damien, get everyone out of here.”

Right, get everyone out. He wasn’t Invictus, but he was a Right Hand.

“Right. And—”

Daniel reached down with his good arm, and flung Jack over his good shoulder. “I’ll get Jack to the tower, where we can awaken him safely.”

Damien stared at the man. How was the sheriff still standing? He’d watched the fight from a distance, as far a distance as he could manage with binoculars, so he could run in if he ever found Jack truly distracted. Damien was sure one good punch from the Ripper would take Damien’s head off; it nearly did. And Daniel had taken several.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. Get this situation handled.” The sheriff nodded to his grandchilde, and the burning building.

Damien returned the nod, and as the sheriff disappeared into his cloak, Damien noticed the man limp as he faded. He was deeply injured.

The others didn’t know, they hadn’t seen. Damien knew. He’d seen how hard the curse could punch when he had to use his fists. The others didn’t realize that Jack had punched the sheriff hard enough to break concrete, hard enough to break the legs of a giant spider monster, hard enough to kill younger Kindred outright. Hard enough he’d left a fist print in the street.

And why? Daniel could have come at him with his sword. That could have killed Jack outright. Maybe. The blood shield the curse could summon might have been strong enough to prevent it from



cutting into him at all. And if he got angry, he might have thrown the Masquerade to the dirt, and summoned his legion.

Daniel risked his life to play it safe, and to avoid killing Jack too. All for Antoinette.

That was a friend.

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~~Antoinette~~

She removed the stake from the boy's back, and waited in front of him.

He dangled within her prison, arms up and bound by chains. The prison had been designed to contain even the most powerful paranormal creatures, but the raw strength the curse demonstrated rivaled that of Antoinette or Jacob, ancient Daeva and Nosferatu and naturals of strength. If Antoinette needed to, she knew she had the strength to lift a truck and hurl its mass. If she needed to, she knew her strength allowed her to bend the hardest metals, and tear through the sturdiest walls. With centuries of power to draw from and a Daeva's natural affinity for strength, she was confident she was one of the strongest creatures on the planet.

The curse's strength terrified her. For it to be able to Dominate entities quickly and easily, summon entire legions of creatures easily, recover from and prevent wounds easily, and also summon absurd strength? How many years would a Ventrue need to achieve such power? A millennium?

Jack snapped open his eyes, and she found his eyes as the boy looked around in panic.

It was him.

"My love," she said, smiling. "How are you?"

"Antoinette? I... oh... oh." He looked down as depression rushed him with all the subtlety of the fire that burned the Tanvar building. "Oh christ, I made everything worse."

"How so?" She reached up and undid the shackles upon his wrists, and then the shackles upon his ankles. A precaution she was not sure would hold him, but the look in his eyes told her the truth. Perhaps it was the torpor, or the necklace, but he was himself again.

She needed to thank Elaine once again for the artifact. Whatever plots her old friend schemed, she had helped her love far more than anyone else had.

“That fucking asshole Joe attacked the building, even set it on fire. It got Bruce. Nearly got Vivienne.”

“But not you?”

“It got me, pretty bad, but...”

Ah yes, the curse summoned its power to protect him. As deadly as the sun and fire were to vampires, those with the strength to summon the Juggernaut’s Gait to protect themselves were immune to them, and indeed almost all potential sources of injury. For several seconds. The curse’s ability to use its power for an extended period of time was nothing short of extraordinary, and no doubt had saved Jack’s life on multiple occasions. Terrible power at a terrible cost.

They walked together, and Antoinette held out a hand toward one of the many rooms filled with chairs and couches. A room with no other *raison d’être* other than socializing.

Jack sat down upon a sofa chair, and she sat upon the end of a couch near him.

“What happened?”

“That fucking asshole Joe. I knew he hated the Invictus, but I didn’t think it’d be this bad. He let it drop that he wasn’t happy with Garry, so I’m guessing Garry told him to ease up with his vendetta against us. He didn’t like that. Guess he exploded.”

“Oui, I imagine he did.” The damn fool. A perfect example of all the things Antoinette fought against. “And you killed him?”

Jack, sitting upon the chair in nothing but his boxers, looked at Antoinette as if an anchor hung from his neck.

“I ripped his head off.”

“Oh... oh dear.”

The boy slowly nodded as he leaned back into the cushions, and closed his eyes. “Ripped Vivi’s arm off too. But it was the only way I could stop the fire from spreading.”

“The fire sounds unusually ravenous.”

“Yeah. It was some liquid or something, from one of those incendiary devices Terra Den’s made.”

Of course. Garry had chosen well, siring Jeremy Long. The Invictus underestimated the Gangrel's ability to make decisions with the future in mind, as had Antoinette. And now their war was fought on even ground, whereas the Invictus usually had the advantage in terms of hardware.

"And... the curse emerged."

Jack nodded, eyes still closed. "It did."

Antoinette mirrored Jack's sigh, and watched the boy as he kept his vision sealed. Slowly, he let his head fall back against the couch, and his arms went limp between his thighs.

"It had the opportunity to destroy the necklace," she said. "Once again, it did not."

"He... it knows I need it. It's playing the long game, like a typical vampire. It thinks it'll get me with time. If it destroyed the necklace, it knows when I eventually got control again, I'd stake myself, or you'd stake me and lock me up or something."

A cruel, painful reality that Jack accepted without hesitation. Prudent, and disheartening, to say the least.

"And you believe you will be able to wrestle back control of your body every time?"

A painful question, but it had to be asked, and he finally opened his eyes to look at her.

"You know I don't."

"Oui. We are under a time limit."

"More than one."

"And Daniel tells me you did more than kill Joe." Ah, poor Jack. The word 'kill' pulled a wince from him, and she reached out to touch his knee. "You nearly killed five other Carthians."

"I was going to, before Daniel and Damien showed up. I would have. The Ripper would have. He would have killed every one of them." Despite Jack's attempts to refer to the taint that infected his mind as 'it', 'he' yet again rose in his words. The menace was a powerful force in more ways than one.

"Daniel tells me the curse challenged him to a fist fight."

"It takes time to summon an army. The curse just wanted a fight it had a chance of winning. It couldn't penetrate Daniel's mind, so we know it isn't God, despite its opinions."

"That is good. But... the damage my old friend suffered was severe." The curse listened to every word they said, so Antoinette worded her statements carefully. But no doubt the curse knew how close it had come to defeating Daniel.

Jack winced and sighed again. “Could Viktor hit that hard?”

“Non.”

“Fuck, it’s so damn strong, despite me — and it I suppose — being a Ventrue. If Daniel had used his sword, it’d have been a different situation. Maybe...”

Maybe. Yes, the curse and its mastery of the Juggernaut Discipline was horrifying, if it could withstand the sword of her sheriff. But for all its power, the curse was not God, as Jack said. It could not penetrate Daniel’s mind; no Ventrue could. And Damien, a skilled but young ancilla, managed to surprise it, and quite literally stab it in the back. Another weakness.

“The other Carthians,” Antoinette asked, “why did they follow Joe into battle?”

“Not sure. Joe had beef with the Invictus, and with Viktor personally. I get the impression Viktor probably did some nasty shit to them. Like, seriously dark shit.”

Antoinette tapped her chin with a finger as she let her mind wander. “I have monitored the activities of the Invictus since I arrived in Dolareido. Viktor Honors proved devious, frustratingly so. He performed many sleights against the Carthian in ways they could not directly accuse him of.”

“Like any good businessman or politician.”

“Indeed. I am sure Viktor has hurt their lives in ways even I am not aware of.”

Groaning, Jack stood up, joined her on the couch, slipped under her arm, and cuddled into her side.

“Bruce is dead.”

“I am sorry, my love.”

“I... I could have saved him, I think. Maybe. But Vivi was right there...”

The classic dilemma, and one of the greatest sources of guilt. When forced to pick between two people, one survives, one dies, how does the chooser manage the guilt that follows? Antoinette had long grown immune to the irrational guilt such a choice led to, mostly, but for Jack, it would haunt him for years yet.

There was little to say. Jack knew the reality, far better than most. What was needed now was not words, but silence, rest, intimacy, and touch.

Sighing, Jack nuzzled into her side a little harder. Message received, she smiled down at the boy as she leaned back, and presented her lap to him. He set his head upon her legs, smiled up at her, and closed his eyes.

“Any luck getting Michael and Garry together?”

“I have pursued ideas, but I cannot share them with you.”

“Why? I—right, cause Michael might pick up on it if I say or do something odd.”

“Precisely.”

“I hope you get something together soon. I... I don’t want to take this necklace off again.”

She nodded as she caressed his buzzed head, and earned a quiet sigh of pleasure from him as she brushed her hand against the grain.

“I am confident I can create the circumstance you wish, my love. I am not so certain you can turn it into the outcome you desire.”

“Neither am I, but I need to do something. It’s a shitty, sloppy plan, but it’s all I got.”

Nodding, she continued to caress his head, lulling the boy back into relaxation. “If there is a Kindred in this city that can force those two mongrels to listen, it is you.”

“I hope so. Christ, I hope so.”

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~~Natasha~~

Slowly, Natasha climbed out of the mess of limbs, and over to the camera. She flipped it off, and let out a slow, happy groan as her legs refused to stop shivering.

In her apartment, she and the boys had decided to make up for lost time from all their weeks separated. Sex, sex, and more sex. They were waiting until Avery felt she had a good opportunity to talk to Red Tide, and while Tash and the boys kept going into the Hisil to investigate stuff, they tried to remain more hands off. Didn’t want Black Blood catching on to what they were up to. So, they had time for sex.

And Natasha had time to pursue her sudden interest in film! Well, not really film. Sure there was that, her getting to totally nerd-out on all the aspects to filming, the gear and lighting and stuff. But then there was the sex, and how much Dolareido — and Jessy — had poisoned her mind. A good girl does not like being in porn! But Dolareido insisted otherwise. Jessy insisted otherwise.

Despite her claims of being a good girl, she had enough self awareness to see where her sexual tastes were going. This latest film had a lot of ‘no please stop oh no don’t you can’t oh please not there no please let me go oh please’ dialogue in it. Also lots of grabbing, holding, fingers around throat, being held down, and getting fucked hard in all sorts of ways.

And it looked amazing on screen. Something about seeing her very tiny body and dainty frame bouncing around between two huge guys, was super arousing. It wasn’t like Natasha was a curvy, super feminine creature, but having two big guys get all ravenous horny and pound her until she was mewling and cumming and soaking them, all on camera, was strangely empowering. She didn’t have to look like Jessy or Antoinette to be sexy.

But of course, part of that was just an excuse for the truth: she definitely had a CNC kink. Next time, maybe they could tie her up, like she was a prisoner? A helpless prisoner, not able to do anything, as two horny guards take an interest in her? Or maybe something a little more epic, like, she was a captured assassin! And two royal guards were having their fun with her while she plotted her escape.

Honestly, she kinda liked the former one better. Something about being helpless tickled her insides and made her smile. She definitely wasn’t helpless, Antoinette had helped her see that. But in a sexual situation, when her boys were all over her? She was helpless when they fucked, a little, trapped between two much, much stronger men who were lost to their lust.

She squirmed with the pleasant memory as she saved the latest project to her laptop.

“Shower time!”

The boys sighed. Not a happy sigh, like her sighs. Annoyed sighs. But showering together was fun, and didn’t always lead to sex. Not usually, at least.

They got showered — no sex — and changed the sheets on her bed. Then they climbed into it, and did the best thing ever. Post-sex cuddling. Though, since Art and Matt weren’t into each other, just her, it made it difficult to find a good position. She tried being the little spoon, but that didn’t work cause one of the boys got left out. She tried lying between them, but she couldn’t hold onto both of them. Plus it made any sort of movement really awkward, legs and arms hitting people.

Ultimately, they had to settle on taking turns. So she cuddled Matt for a little while, kissed him and hugged him, then she cuddled Art for a little while. Kissed him and hugged him too. And then they did other stuff.

TV. Stream a movie and relax. Anything to make her stop thinking about all the horrible things happening.

“Words going around Jack really hurt the sheriff,” Art said. Thankfully he’d waited until the movie was over to say anything. A couple of hours not thinking about Jack and the sheriff’s fight had been nice.

Natasha whined and hit her head against his arm. “D-Don’t say that. You know it wasn’t him.”

“No you’re right. Guess I feel a little better about getting my ass beat by the Ripper though, if he was able to take on the sheriff. That dude is terrifying.”

“My sire isn’t... t-terrifying.”

Matt, sitting on her other side, looked down and blinked at her. “Yeah he is.”

“Ok, he is. A little! B-But he’s not so bad, once you to get to know him.”

Art laughed. “Hard to get to know a statue like him. How did you two ever meet?”

“It’s... n-not a very impressive story. I was studying in university, and we met in the library. He was reading about some w-weird stuff, in the mythology section. I asked. We... t-talked, sort of.”

“Sounds like the start of a professor-student porn.”

“Hey! There w-wasn’t any attraction there. Just, a shared interest, about mythology. Though thinking back on it, he m-must have been reading the book to learn about spirits.”

Ancient Egypt was a pretty big source of information about spirits, and how they interacted with humans. So much about their mythology was based on their environment. The desert, the Nile, the animals, and their lengthy interest in death. No doubt the Hisil around Egypt a few thousand years ago would have been a mighty sight, full of metaphor and powerful spirits. No doubt Antoinette had been researching it for her experiments. No doubt, Daniel saw something in Tash that night that made her a potential dragon in his eyes.

Natasha sighed as she melted against Matt’s arm. “Sometimes, I w-wonder... about all the bad stuff that happened to me after becoming a vampire. Not me. My mom and dad. Sometimes I think... m-maybe I resent Daniel for all that stuff.”

Art shook his head, and gave her a soft punch in the shoulder; he had the room, with her leaning against Matt.

“Not a chance. We’ve seen the look in your eyes when you talk about him, Natasha. Yeah, you’re sad about what happened to your parents. Anyone would be. But resenting him? Never seen that. If anything, you feel guilty.”

“I…” She knew she had a habit of feeling guilty about stuff. But awareness didn’t help all that much when dealing with a personality trait. “I guess I do. B-But about what?”

Art pulled her off Matt and into a hug against his side. “The stuff you told us about? About leaving the Ordo? Joining the Invictus?” He tightened his hug on her. “Why you thinking about this stuff now? Cause of Jack and Daniel fighting?”

“I guess, yeah. I… I feel b-bad, knowing he got in a fight with Jack. More than I thought I would.” It’s not like she and her sire had a close relationship. “I d-don’t know. It’s weird. Daniel and I aren’t close, but… but things happened, that make me…” Feel bad about him and for him. Leaving the Ordo when she was young had been painful, largely because, despite his cold exterior, she knew she’d hurt her sire.

Matt nodded to her. “I hear Jack, before the Ripper got out, did good work and saved Vivi’s life. That must make you feel good, right?”

“It does! It d-does…” A relationship she never quite managed to salvage. Part of her wondered if she’d do what Daniel did when Lucas showed up at the tower, with Tash as a hostage. Would she put Vivi’s life over the life of her friends? She didn’t know. She had a lot of questions about herself, about her relationship with Vivi, her relationship with Daniel, and how she fit in the Ordo. A turbulent time in her life.

Self reflection was a dangerous habit.

She smiled up at Matt and Art, and hugged each of them. As much as everything was getting super dangerous, the fact she could sit down and talk about personal, deep, important stuff with her boyfriends was a very big deal. It was, frankly, pretty amazing how much better her life had gotten in the past few years. Turbulent, with so many things having happened, but amazing.

And then the doorbell rang.

Natasha blinked at the boys, pulled out her phone, and checked for a missed message. Weird. People didn’t just show up unannounced, not in the modern world with technology available.



But a moment later, they all felt it. A heavy, powerful presence. The aura of an elder vampire making no effort to hide it.

Natasha gulped, got up, and answered the door.

“M... Maria?”

“Natasha. I wished to speak with you.”

It was easy enough for an elder as powerful as Maria, and a fellow user of Obfuscate, to go walking through the city, and even building hallways, without being noticed by kine. With someone as powerful as Maria, kine could literally bump into her and think they’d tripped on their own feet.

But her Cloak was off now, and Natasha could see the corpse woman from close. Small as Maria was, Natasha was smaller, and she looked up at the disgusting, horrifying woman from only a couple feet away.

“T-To me? Is it... important?”

Maria shook her head. “Personal.”

Personal? Natasha stared at the elder for a few seconds. Maria had visited her once before, where she’d sort of stumbled her way through an awkward conversation where the elder tried to salvage some trust between them. It’d been the first time Maria had ever shown any sort of vulnerability to Natasha, despite several decades of Natasha working in the Invictus, and years working as a Right Hand.

“Um, Matt, Art, can we meet up later?” They still had time before Avery got back to them.

“Sure?” Art said, squinting at Maria as he did.

Maria did a lot more than squint. She snarled. A quiet, dark sound, the sort you’d expect to hear out of a corpse in a white dress leaking mist everywhere. Natasha almost expected her to follow it up with something like ‘you will die in seven days’ before she disappeared into a well.

“I’m s-sure. I’ll be fine.” Natasha stepped aside, and Maria stepped in. Maria could hold a gaze that’d break glass, and she pointed it at the boys as they put on their shoes and left. They tried to meet her eyes, but no one could beat Maria’s angry glare.

Once they were gone, Maria — not Natasha — closed the door, before she sighed and let the angry expression go.

“I am sorry for my anger. I am... beyond redemption in that regard, I assume, when it comes to Avery and her pack members.”

“I t-told Avery you’re not dangerous, n-not in the way Avery’s investigating.”

“Yes, the way Avery is investigating.” Before Tash could say anything, Maria put up a hand. “I know you and the Prince and the Uratha are delving into something deadly within Dolareido, something outside of my purview. I was dragged into something, perhaps even framed, but I do not know enough to come to any solid conclusions. That is not why I am here to talk with you. Keep your secrets and keep them safe.”

Maria was smart. Maria was too damn smart. Natasha was sure Michael and Garry knew nothing about Black Blood, except that maybe it existed. The issue with the tears, the red wraiths protecting some of the tears, the potential damage Black Blood might cause to the Gauntlet and maybe even to other barriers between realms, all of that was well beyond what Michael and Garry could even think about, let alone plan to deal with. Those two lived in a world of territory, money, blood, and nothing else.

“Then w-why are you here to talk to me?” Tash stepped back and motioned for Maria to go wherever she wanted. She saw pink as she did. Pink sleeve? Tash blinked down at her arm. Oh shit, pajamas. Well, she wasn’t going to cuddle in a suit, but she didn’t want to talk with her old boss in pink pajamas with blue bunnies on it either.

“I am here... to talk about... the harm I caused you, Natasha Vola.”

“Harm?”

“What I did to you, letting Lucas take you hostage.”

“Oh. B-But... I thought we—”

Maria held up a hand again as she shook her head. “I had a... painful conversation with Mister Terry. I realized that I have not... that I have...” Sighing, Maria looked down for a moment, and then away. Whatever Jack had said to her had put a pretty big crack into her personality, because she never, ever showed vulnerability like this.

Hopefully that’s what it was, vulnerability, and not some sort of trick so she could somehow betray Natasha again.

Betray. Ugh, such an ugly word. Natasha didn’t like to think about what happened through that lens, but she also knew she had a habit of downplaying bad things that happened to her. Jessy had made it abundantly clear that yes, Maria had betrayed her; she’d had to yell it at Tash a few times, but she’d managed to sink the message in.

“I realized,” Maria continued, “that in our last conversation, I did not truly admit fault. That I did not apologize with the depth owed.”

“I... thought...”

Sighing, Maria stepped past her to the TV, stood beside it, and peeked out the curtain before closing it again. Afraid someone might hear her apologize? Definitely vulnerable.

“No. What I said last time wasn’t good enough, Vola. I need to be clear, with you and myself. I need to admit painful truths, or I will be forever trapped in the past.” Maria looked at her, straight at her and into her, to the point Natasha froze. “I am sorry, truly sorry, Natasha. Not only did I do you a horrible deed, but I debased myself to do it. For a... for something as juvenile as romance.”

Natasha gulped. Maria had implied all of this in their conversation about it, long ago, but she hadn’t really been able to say it.

“Romance isn’t j-juvenile.”

Maria smiled. “No, I suppose it is not. Nevertheless, it is important you understand that I am... not that person anymore.”

Natasha got that impression before Maria had even said anything. The way Maria looked at her, the somber posture, the vulnerable expressions, it was all very not Maria.

“Th-Thank you, Madam Turio.”

Maria smiled at her. A genuine smile. Natasha froze. Can’t freeze twice, so she basically petrified. Which made Maria chuckle a little, before she pat her on the shoulder.

“If you ever need something of me, Natasha, ask. I did something horrible, and I will repay you that debt.”

Repay the debt? Did she know what she was saying? That was a pretty big debt, now that Natasha tried to put it in those terms.

“I... I will, thank you.”

Smile unwavering, Maria nodded to her, and left.

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Tash the vampire, Sándor the monster, and Avery, Clara, Eric, Noah, and Arturo and Matthew the Uratha, all sat around in Natasha's apartment. Of course Natasha had trouble focusing on the task, considering the conversation she had with Maria just yesterday. Her conversation with Jack had apparently cracked the woman right open. A monolith no longer. Freaky.

Natasha, dressed in an actual suit now and not pajamas, shook her head. Focus! Important stuff.

"We f-found tears here," she pointed at the map displayed on her laptop, "here, and here, and here." Click click, she drew a thick red dot on each point.

"And we're ignoring old tears?" Noah asked. Natasha nodded. "Then, we know about tears here, here, and here." He took the mouse and repeated the procedure. "Thankfully none of the tears from the Gurihal — physical world — seem to be visible to the naked eye. Likely the work of Black Blood, not wanting the Kindred in Dolareido learning what it's up to."

Sándor nodded as he stepped in and took the mouse from Noah. Somehow, he knew how to use one. The elders preferred to use a touchscreen, and Kindred knew better than to push the issue; oldies liked to touch things with their fingers.

"I've traveled through the dream, and have found tears that could..." He frowned at the map of Dolareido on the screen. "How do I mark elevation?"

Natasha stood up straight. "Elevation?" She hadn't even thought of that! "Um, uh, g-give me a moment. I'll get this loaded in another program." Everyone stared on, Avery and Sándor with obvious confused expressions on their faces, as she loaded the 2D map of Dolareido, and set it as a flat plane in a 3D map of Dolareido used by the Invictus. A few seconds of tabbing between the programs, and she redrew the marks they'd made already.

Sándor took the mouse back, but frowned at the screen as the map rotated in three axes wildly.

Natasha managed to choke down a giggle, and took the mouse from him again. "T-Tell me where it is."

The poor man sighed and nodded. Smart enough to use a mouse, not smart enough to understand how to hold middle click and drag a focus point through three planes.

"Up. Maybe a mile up."

"Up there?" she asked. "W-Why?"

“It’s not easy to think about the dream realm as a place alongside the physical, unlike the spirit realm. But there is... levels, to the dream world. There is distance.” He frowned as he looked down, processing. “It’s hard to think of it like that, but not impossible.”

Natasha was happy not trying. Maybe Begotten had some sort of sixth sense about it, but the time Natasha had been in the dream realm, she could not imagine trying to understand where it was in the physical world. It wasn’t in the physical world! Trying to locate where it fit in the real world was a strange idea.

“There is a connection,” Sándor said, reading her mind. “A geographic connection. Human minds are like tethers on the dream realm, and it’s... attached to the world, in a way.” Nodding to himself, his words more for his own benefit than hers, he pointed at a spot. “Here. A nightmare about a city here. And here, a nightmare about a basement filled with the dead. And... here, the hospital nightmare Jack, Clara and I found a tear in.”

She drew on the spot, but he shook his head. Of course, he was pointing at a 3D image on a 2D screen, and it took some back and forth before they got a good spot.

It made sense, in a strange way. The Begotten didn’t tell Tash much, but Fiona told Damien a few things, and Damien told Tash a few things. Human minds — probably vampire minds too — dreamed, and lived in their own mental realm when they did, safe and protected, mostly. But sometimes they could have a dream or nightmare so powerful it created a mark in the dream world. It was a place, something to find. It had to have, if even in the most weird and indirect way, some geographic connection to the physical world.

She wasn’t sure she entirely believed that, or if it was true, it could be like pointing out where a floating object was in the ocean on a map, and then saying it was still there months later. Maybe true, maybe not.

“And,” Sándor said, “here, here, and here.”

“Three above, three b-below?”

“Mhmm.”

“Dreams and n-nightmares?”

He shook his head. “Dreams and nightmares both go into the dream, which... which isn’t actually above, but it does feel like it rests above.” Oh god even Sándor didn’t trust his coordinates. “The ones below are from The Great Below, including the one Jack, Clara and I came out of.”

“You went back there?” Clara asked.

“I’ve been there before. I’m sure I’ll go there again.”

“Why?”

He managed a slow shrug as he looked at the screen. “Monsters go where we wish.”

Natasha blinked at him. It was easy to forget Sándor wasn’t just a man, or even a paranormal like the vampires and werewolves. He was a nightmare monster, a whole different class of paranormal, a creature that vampires and werewolves could only look at with awe. More than once she’d heard Jessy or Jack compare them to Pennywise, in all regards, and that was far more terrifying an idea than any vampire or werewolf. Clowns were scary enough.

“It’s still dangerous, don’t get yourself killed,” Avery said, earning a few raised eyebrows pointed at her. “If you’re scouting for tears, and Tash is busy, ask us for help.” More eyebrows raised. “Oh fuck off.”

There were chuckles. Even Sándor managed a smile.

Natasha however, stared at the 3D map in front of her, and slowly rotated it with the mouse as she considered. That was a weird mess of dots.

“Anyone see a pattern?” Noah asked. Everyone shook their heads. “Natasha, any sort of algorithm you could run to test for possible patterns?”

“M-Maybe. I don’t know how, but I could get someone in the Invictus to help.” She stared at the arrangement some more. “But... if... if there’s one more tear here,” she pointed at a spot in Dolareido, beneath one of Sándor’s, “I think I see a pattern.”

“You do?” Noah almost sounded offended. Matt and Art chuckled at each other, earning a quick frown from the man. Private joke?

“Um, y-yes. Here. Three dots from above can be make a triangle. The three dots below can also be a triangle. B-but there’s eight dots between them. Except, eight could be...” She added another dot, completing the point of a triangle, far sharper than the triangles above and below. Then she added some more dots, finishing more triangles, until the eight dots in the middle became twelve.

“It’d have taken us months, maybe years to find those,” Clara said, blinking.

Natasha smiled, and drew some lines, connecting the dots.

It was a weird shape, and a 3D shape at that. A six-pointed star plastered in the center of Dolareido, with a triangle above it that fit nicely into the star's hexagon center, along with the triangle below it.

"I b-bet, if Sándor went looking, he might find a tear... here." She drew a dot above the three high ones he drew. "And here." Another below the three on the bottom. She attached them with lines, completing an almost symmetrical, crystal shape. "I d-don't know about how you'd find those. Those look... high, and um, deep. But they'd confirm."

Sándor returned to his usual statue face as he looked at the shape. "I can look, but you're right. That is high, and deep. It would be dangerous looking for them."

Noah shook his head. "It's an interesting pattern you've created. And yeah, it would have taken us years to find those other tears, assuming they exist. We should check if they do. But we don't have to find them all, just one or two to confirm this shape is probably what's up. If it is, then..."

Avery nodded. "Then we check out what's going on in the center."

"We've been there before," Clara said. "Didn't find anything unusual. It's just a street in South Side, right?"

There was only one special thing about that spot in that particular road. According to the map, it was basically the most center point of the populated part of the city. People typically thought of the Elysium Tower as the center Dolareido, but it was more the center of South Side and its entertainment district. There were other parts to Dolareido, the more Northern neighborhoods, Devil's Corner, and Rich Side, and they skewed what would really be considered the population center of the city.

Thankfully the 3D map included a color legend for population centers. Everyone in Natasha's apartment could see the weird shape being drawn centered on it.

Natasha nodded. "There's nothing there. M-Maybe in the tunnels?"

Clara shook her head. "Been through there too. Didn't find anything."

"Then maybe there is no center p-point. Maybe these high and low t-tears are what need to be finished?" She pointed at the tears Sándor was afraid of looking for. "Or... m-maybe whatever's going to happen in the center hasn't happened yet?" Finally, some potential good news. Everyone relaxed a little as they realized they might actually be able to get ahead of this problem.

"Then we can get some people on it," Avery said. "Or you can?"

Tash paced around in front of the laptop. People stared at her, waiting. In the past, that many eyes on her waiting for her words would have made her so anxious, she'd turn into a stuttering mess. Not anymore! Well, not so much.

"I can ask the P-Prince to have our best trained thralls investigate, but... b-but if we're thinking this is something Black Blood is doing, then we should have a paranormal investigating, maybe?"

They all looked at each other. Who to send? Who was good enough to keep an eye out?

Sándor shook his head. "Too risky. Black Blood isn't like other spirits. We might need to bide our time, and only check that area every so often."

Arturo groaned and growled simultaneously. "You mean wait for it to make the first move? It's already made first move! Lots of them!"

But the Begotten just shook his head. "Nothing has come of Black Blood's actions yet."

This time, Tash shook her head. "I d-don't know. This war between the Invictus and Carthians is odd, and the t-timing is awfully convenient."

They all nodded, even Sándor. Something was building up to something. Unfortunately, they had no idea what that something was. A ritual? A big explosion?

"Still," Sándor said, "let's go slow. I want to see what's on the other side of that tear we found here." He pointed at the far triangle point, the tear they'd found in the Hisil, the one he was confused about. "It's important."

"It better be," Avery said. "I had to negotiate with fucking Red Tide to get it to help us."

"Make a bad deal?" Eric asked.

"No. It knows Black Blood is a problem, and it wants it gone, too."

"Didn't have to convince it about the tears being Black Blood's doing?"

"It already knew, the fucker. And it's agreed to provide Black Blood a distraction while we investigate the tears. So as long as we do that, deal satisfied."

Tash frowned. Red Tide was horrifying, and the idea that it was also smart enough to get information like that made it worse.

"So that's the plan," Clara said. "Tomorrow, we take a trip into the Hisil, and Red Tide provides a distraction."

Eric raised a hand. "What kind of distraction?"



Avery shrugged and laughed. “I guess we’ll know when it happens. Red Tide, is an asshole.”

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“She did what?”

Tash smiled as she sat down on the stairs beside Jack, in his big fancy mansion, and gestured to nothing in front of them, as if the memory was on display for them in the center of his lobby.

“She apologized! I w-was very surprised.”

Jack smiled at her, then at himself as he looked down. “Good. Good.”

Mulder sat on Tash’s shoulder closer to Jack, while Scully sat on his shoulder closer to Tash, so both birds were next to each other. Jack reached up and pet Scully behind the head, scratching under her feathers, and Tash did the same for Mulder. Of all the things Tash knew of Jack, she hadn’t known the boy had an interest in birds — crows, at least — until after he made friends with the two birds. Well, crows and ravens were interesting birds, and Kindred naturally gravitated toward them.

Would it be in the same, in a much smaller city? Maybe a town in the woods? Probably not. Dolareido overflowed with rats and crows, but in the woods, Ventrue and Gangrels probably acquired other animals. Owls, coyotes, maybe snakes. Owls would make for awesome, and hilariously cliché familiars.

“You sound, um... I d-don’t know. Like you’re relieved, that she apologized, I mean.”

“I guess I am. I guess a part of me has been afraid I’d grow up to be an elder, trapped in my old ideas.”

“Oh, right. I g-guess that is a real fear. Some Kindred can’t change, except maybe from what long torpors cause.” And it wasn’t like those changes were wanted ones. The dreams were supposedly quite intense.

“I was wondering about that. Daniel. The curse tried to break into his mind, but couldn’t.”

“Well, I mean, n-no Ventrue could Dominate an elder, especially one as old as my sire.”

Jack shook his head. “His mind though, it was... it was a fortress, Tash.”

“F-Fortress?”

“The curse sorta gives me a metaphor to see, to visualize what’s going on.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I guess it’s a side effect of it being able to communicate with me.”

Suddenly, Natasha knew exactly what it felt like to be a member of the Ordo Dracul. She very much wanted to dive into Jack’s mind, and unlock the secrets of the curse. She wanted to take a scalpel — metaphorical of course! — and dissect his brain. She wanted to do experiments and see how he responded. She wanted to record data, and then see if she could recreate whatever things about the curse made it... ‘the curse’.

It didn’t take much to jump from that, to picturing herself a hundred years from now, wearing a lab coat or some such, and doing experiments on a strange creature she’d caught, something pinned down on a surgery table. If Antoinette could somehow do that to spirits, she’d probably do that. Maybe she already had, and just didn’t tell Tash about it? She definitely had dark secrets she didn’t tell her about, secrets Tash would learn with time. Spooky.

“Extraordinary.”

Jack laughed. “You sound like Antoinette.”

Uh oh. Caught.

“Daniel’s mind,” he continued, “is... Holy fuck. No wonder he is who he is. You got a hell of a sire. And honestly, I kinda understand his interest in Athalia now.”

“Oh?”

“She’s the only woman who could penetrate that man’s walls.”

That definitely made sense. Natasha struggled to even talk to the man, and Daniel actively tried to open his gates to her. Tried and failed, but tried. Athalia was direct and loud enough she could probably kick them down.

“I... I w-wanted to thank you. About Vivienne.”

With a heavy groan, Jack stood up and paced in front of her. “Please don’t.”

“D... D-Don’t?”

“Don’t. It was a shit situation, and I let Bruce die to save Vivi.”

Natasha nodded as she squirmed. “Sorry.”

“Aw, come on don’t apologize. It... It’s not like that. I just really don’t want to go through the typical conversations about it, you know? I don’t want to sit down and have a painful talk every time shit goes bad. Just... Let’s just say Vivi survived and Bruce didn’t, and Joe was to blame. Done.”

Poor Jack. Why did horrible things keep falling in his lap? They happened so often, he’d grown frustrated not with the events, but with the conversations that followed.

How many horrible talks had Jack had in just a few years? It must have been dozens. Conversations with his mom, with Athalia, with Beatrice, and probably others Tash didn’t even know about.

Jack continued to pace, glancing her way every so often between what looked like compulsive scratches he made on Scully’s neck, like someone with a nervous tick scratching their head, which Jack also did. Scully liked scratches, so no harm no foul.

Mulder cawed from Tash’s shoulder. No need for Animalism. He was concerned for his master.

“I understand,” she said. “B-But, thank you anyway.”

He managed a small smile for her, before sitting down beside her again.

“Progress on figuring out the tears situation?”

“Avery’s got a plan. W-We’re gonna... do something soon. Dangerous.”

“Need help?”

She laughed. “You know you c-can’t. You know—”

“I know. Gotta handle the fallout of this stupid Joe situation. Christ, I—”

Tash pat his knee. “Let me handle the t-tears issue for now, ok? I’ll be fine. Avery’s on board now.”

“Thank god. After... after the fight the Ripper had with her, I was afraid they wouldn’t help me.”

Tash smirked at him. “B-But I’m not you.”

“Good point.”