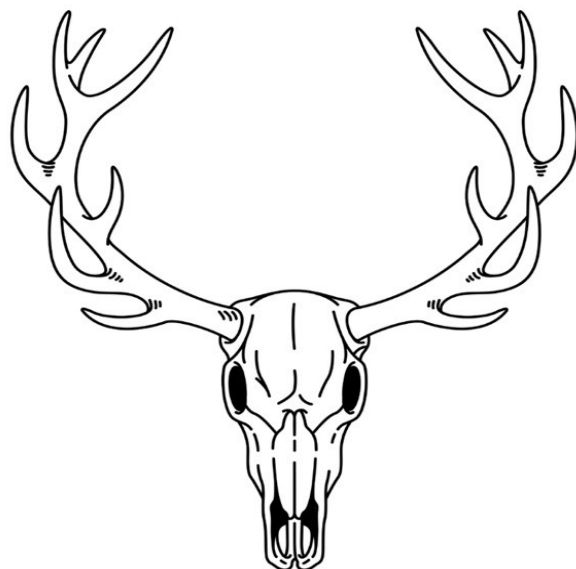


MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS SEASON 2: CRYPTIDS

Hollow

M N BENNET



Hollow

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

To me, this is a light and fluffy monster romance. However, I know my definition of fluff is a little different from others, so there might also be just a smidge of trauma and torture sprinkled throughout the story. But I swear it's mostly a fun ride! Seriously, just adorable monsters being cute and spicy with each other and occasionally there's a little casual slaughter on the page.

If you're worried about anything, please read the content warnings below. I provided a thorough list.

Content Warnings:

Depression
Anxiety
Paranoia
Threats
Bullying
Profanity
Exhibitionism
Fighting and violence
Death (on page)
Family loss (off page)
Blood
Torture
Light gore
Extreme acts of fluffiness (these monsters are too cute!)

This is an open-door romance so there is a lot of graphic sex between monstrous adults: Kissing, jerking, oral, face fucking, throat fucking, gagging, swallowing, rimming, anal, spanking, breeding, primal play, outdoor play, hair pulling, biting, scratching, grinding, food play (who doesn't like whipped cream with their cake?).

Please remember your mental health is important and if this story isn't for you that's completely okay. Your comfort matters. Your joy matters. You matter.

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For anyone who has ever wondered how hard two monsters would go at it together.

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PROLOGUE

REX COULDN'T BELIEVE he'd let Tiffany talk him into a camping trip. They could've driven up to New York City for Halloween; instead, they drove an extra hour to Sleepy Hollow, and now, they were forced to camp the weekend leading up to the holiday because this tourist town had booked every semi-affordable room months ago.

"You know about the monsters in these woods, right?" Derek asked, leading the way deeper through the trees.

"The only monster in these woods is that screaming kid up the hill," Beth complained as she trekked alongside Derek.

"Seriously, kid's a little banshee," Tiffany said.

Rex kept close to her, helping knock away the overgrown plants on their trail. They'd barely found parking since way too many people had the same idea about using the camping grounds. Now, they walked further through the trails, attempting to find a spot that wasn't overrun by other tourists.

After walking through the dark for half an hour, Derek found a decent spot, and everyone set up their tents while Beth started a small fire.

"What was that you were saying about monsters?" Beth asked, playfully batting her foot against his thigh.

Derek grinned, seeming to perk up at the question. Rex did his best not to groan, but he'd never understood Derek and Beth's obsession with Halloween. Tiffany didn't care much about it, but she loved any excuse for a weekend road trip, and Rex loved any excuse to get away with Tiffany for a few days.

“There are two monsters in these woods,” Derek explained. “One is some humanoid deer person. I think it’s called like Stag Man or some shit. Real creepy looking.”

“I think a deer man would be kind of cute,” Tiffany said, playfully pursing her lips and smiling with her eyes at Rex.

“Yeah, until he stomps your head in with his hoofed feet,” Derek countered, punching his open palm to solidify the horror of Stag Man. “There’s nothing cute about these monsters.”

Tiffany frowned, shooting Rex an icy glare because she found everything that came out of Derek’s mouth obnoxious. Rex grimaced, hoping to salvage the night.

“What’s the other monster?” Beth asked.

“The Horseless Headsman,” Derek said in a gruff, breathy reveal, doing his best to appear ominous. Rex found him ridiculous.

“I’m sorry, Horseless Headsman?” Rex laughed. “Is that a fucking joke?”

“No, it’s the demon offspring of the Headless Horseman,” Derek clarified.

“I know some children go out of their way to avoid becoming their parents,” Beth said with a smirk, “but reversing the name just seems...”

“Stupid,” Rex finished.

“I know that one,” Tiffany said, scrolling through her phone. “I swear, I know that one. He’s got like a giant pumpkin head or something?”

“He does,” Derek answered, returning to his hilariously terrible wicked tone. “You see, the Horseless Headsman has fire from Hell itself lit inside the center of the pumpkin. And it’s said the shadows cast by that Hellfire carry the souls of every demon from Hell itself.”

“Do demons have souls?” Beth asked with a bored expression as she fixated on the small campfire. “I thought the whole point of demons was that they were soulless or something.”

“Fine,” Derek snapped. “Not the souls, just the demons themselves. They lurk inside the shadows, waiting for the Horseless Headsman to summon them and—”

“I fucking knew it,” Tiffany shouted, holding her phone up. “The Horseless Headsman. He’s a cutie. His videos are always popping up on my feed.”

Music played, and some shirtless guy with way too much gray costume paint on danced while wearing a pumpkin over his head. Rex cringed at the tacky sight.

“That’s not the Horseless Headsman,” Derek snapped, growing more impatient.

“He says he is.” Tiffany shrugged. “Doesn’t seem that scary to me.”

“That’s just some fucking idiot who dresses up as a slutty version of the monster to make tips from stupid tourists.”

“I’d drop a few ones if he did that little dance for me,” Beth teased.

“You’re joking, but the real monsters in these woods won’t care if you take them seriously.” Derek glowered. “They’re hunters, killers, and pure evil.”

“Then why the fuck would you insist on camping out here?” Beth rolled her eyes. “I will never understand that type of dumb shit.”

Rex’s eyes went wide, watching Derek shrink further, the louder Beth yelled.

“Oh, there’s a monster in the woods,” Beth continued in a mocking tone, poorly imitating Derek’s voice. “Let’s go run around in the trees. I bet it’ll scare the girls into sleeping with us. Hehehe.”

Rex and Tiffany eyed each other, trying their best not to laugh. Rex had a harder time with it.

“Look, we’re not in any danger as long as we stay in the designated zones,” Derek said, retrieving his map. “The monsters keep to their territory.”

It was an official map of the wilderness surrounding Sleepy Hollow. Rex read the front flap and snorted. “‘Daxter’s Guide to Surviving Sleepy Hollow’? This is cheap tourist crap. They’re not real.”

“They are,” Derek continued. “They’re locked in eternal combat, fighting over this land. And they’ve killed hundreds of people. Thousands even. Anyone who wanders too deep into the woods and stumbles onto their battle.”

Rex rolled his eyes.

“Oh, shit.” Tiffany turned her phone to face Rex. “He’s not lying.”

She scrolled through links to articles all citing confirmed deaths in these woods.

“Well, he is exaggerating,” Rex said, realizing there weren’t hundreds or thousands of confirmed deaths, and most of the articles cited accidents and

animal attacks.

“I’m telling you,” Derek said with a wicked glint. “I know the whole story...”

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CHAPTER ONE



JACK STEPPED through the fog at the edge of the forest and casually made his way down the trail that led to the nearby market. Sleepy Hollow always had a ton of tourism, especially in the fall, and Jack loved to capitalize on adding to his adoring audience.

“Holy shit,” a woman shouted with a hand pressed to her chest. “Honey, look at him.”

She turned to the man beside her, and Jack immediately noticed their wedding bands. As the fear washed away from the woman’s face, her heavy breathing was replaced by nervous laughter.

“Whoa, man, that’s wild.” The husband approached, eyeing Jack up and down, taking in every aspect of his monstrous glory.

Jack stood shirtless in a pair of ripped skinny jeans. The woman and her husband stared at Jack’s haunting gray skin; they eyed the black stitches that held his broken flesh together. They locked their wide eyes onto the bulbous pumpkin head covering Jack’s grotesque face.

“You are quite the sight,” the woman said. “Isn’t he something, hun?”

“Yeah, Marg.” Her husband nodded, side-eyeing Jack’s shredded abdomen with an envious streak. “Definitely something.”

“Oh, and is that your puppy?” Marg asked as she finally noticed the bloodhound following alongside Jack.

“I am no puppy,” Astaroth bellowed in a commanding telepathic echo. “I am an arch-demon of Hell, grand and great with legions of warriors ready to lay siege upon the lands at my behest. Now, kneel before me, mortal, and give me the belly rubs.”

Marg blinked, completely stunned, unable to comprehend what she heard. Most humans only heard Astaroth's voice as a faint whisper in the back of their mind, whereas Jack heard the telepathic voice of his demon-possessed dog as clear as day.

Despite her initial shock, she obeyed the demon and gave the bloodhound lots of belly rubs.

"Now, tell me I am the bestest boy in all the lands, who shall bathe in the blood of my enemies and those goddamn squirrels."

"Aren't you just the bestest boy in all the world?" Marg said with a chipper smile. "Yes, you are, oh yes you are."

"Astaroth, stop messing with people's minds." Jack snapped his fingers. "You know that gives them nightmares."

"Only the weak-willed."

The hound huffed and sat back up. When the couple stared at Jack with confusion, he played it off by making a minxy grin with the shadows on his pumpkin head. This created more confusion, but the perplexed smile on Marg's face proved Jack had piqued her curiosity.

"Well, how'd you go and do that?"

Jack tapped the side of his pumpkin head, making a metallic clink.

"It's just a fancy helmet, ma'am, and the shadows bouncing around are nothing but a bit of fun stage lighting," Jack lied, finding most people would believe anything without doing a lick of their own research.

Jack didn't know the first thing about crafting a helmet into the shape of a pumpkin, and he certainly didn't know the mechanics of shifting shadows to mimic his facial expressions underneath. Thankfully, the shadows moved of their own accord, always mimicking his face beneath the pumpkin to the best of their ability.

"That's really cool," the husband said, approaching Jack in a very size-him-up kind of stance.

He stood a few inches taller than Jack, but most people did since he only stood at 5'6. Sure, his black combat boots offered him a bit of a lift, and the pumpkin head added about an inch or two, but Jack never concerned himself with being short.

"I always assumed the Headless Horseman was taller," the man said with a snort, then let his gaze fall to the bloodhound. "Maybe you should've brought your steed instead."

“Perhaps I should condemn your soul to the deepest depths of Hell for my minions to devour you for all time.” Astaroth’s telepathic echo sent a shiver through the man, but he shrugged it off, likely assuming the words were an intrusive thought.

Then the man continued his short jokes, playfully jesting how his wife should get a photo of him with the little Headless Horseman.

Jack’s round shadow eyes furrowed into angry little triangles, and his jagged smile curved into a sour frown.

“I’m not the Headless Horseman,” he scoffed. “That fool’s been dead for ages. Keep up with your lore, tourists.”

Jack handed them a flyer on the bullet-point history built around his monstrous origin. It wasn’t as catchy as the campfire stories, but it got the gist across to those who’d never heard of him before.

“The Horseless Headsman?” the man asked, a bit bewildered. “That’s kind of...lame.”

Astaroth growled, eyes glowing red as heat swelled from the bloodhound. Jack quickly patted Astaroth on the head, giving him scritches so he wouldn’t unleash his hellish wrath in front of so many witnesses.

“Hey, I didn’t come up with the name or the legend,” Jack laughed. “I just put on the best performance for it.”

He pointed to the time printed at the bottom of the flyer for a shadow performance he put on in the town square the last Saturday of the month, which happened to be this weekend.

“Be sure to pop on over,” Jack said, strutting away from the couple and continuing his way downtown.

Anytime someone’s eyes landed on Jack, he mesmerized them with shifting, shadowy expressions. He wowed them with the sinister realism of the stitches across his flesh. He impressed them with the quality of his gray makeup from head to toe. No one ever suspected Jack was anything other than an impressive cosplayer. So, he handed out flyers and encouraged tourists to attend his upcoming performance.

Jack had spent the better part of two centuries hiding away in the neighboring forest of Sleepy Hollow. As a horrifying monster, life didn’t offer him many other options...until he stumbled onto social media.

It turned out the monsters lurking deep in the darkness of the world captivated people—so much so that many would dress up as hideous

horrors for fun. So, Jack did the sensible thing and turned his horrifying appearance into a trending thirst trap online.

“Oh, cute doggy,” a woman said, kneeling in front of Astaroth with her hands outstretched. “Is he friendly? Can I pet him?”

“Human peasant, I am the furthest thing from friendly, and if you touch me with your ill-scented hands, I shall eviscerate you and your entire feeble bloodline.”

“Ugh, he’s a bit shy. Let’s not.” Jack intercepted, shooting the woman a giant grin, then handed her a flyer for his upcoming performance.

After making their way to a less crowded street, Jack turned his attention to his demon dog.

“Why must you always threaten torture?”

“I don’t always threaten torture,” Astaroth clarified. “I threaten mayhem and destruction in equal measure, too.”

“Well, if you can’t be nice to the tourists, then you can’t join me on the walks.”

“How dare you?” Astaroth growled. “You speak of threats, then threaten to remove my W-A-L-Ks?! Oh, yes, I have mastered the simple art of your pathetic alphabet stew. And let it be known that if I am not granted leave for my daily walks, then I shall cast a curse so horrid upon the lands that all who are born here will weep from their first breath until their dying day. Agony will befall all mortals who dare—”

“All right, Christ, you’ll get your damn walks. But we’ll be sticking to the woods if you keep trying to kill people.”

“Fine. If you’re going to insist on such outrageous demands, I shall stick to the woods.” Astaroth sniffed the air. “Better scents anyway.”

Astaroth continued sniffing around, pressing his snout to the ground and letting out a gruff little huff before whipping his head back up and turning his attention to a distant crowd. He growled softly and glared.

“What is it?”

“Not sure.” Astaroth cocked his head. “Too many stupid peasant mortals to discern, but I suspect treachery is afoot.”

“Well, tardiness is about to be afoot, so let’s get going.” Jack gestured ahead, and the pair continued their walk through downtown.

Shortly thereafter, they arrived at a small amphitheater with wooden benches stretching into a long half-circle facing the small stage. The

platform itself was kept simple enough for a handful of people. A vibrant white curtain covered the rock wall behind the stage.

“What you all don’t seem to understand is the Headless Horseman left these lands a long time ago,” Daxter Winston said with a boisterous voice.

The old man had a way of captivating audiences, holding their attention. Jack had seen him tell stories to tourists for nearly fifty years, selling his trinkets, peddling his phony witchcraft, and offering anyone foolish enough the opportunity to speak with the lost souls of Sleepy Hollow. Observing Daxter helped Jack create his own online persona, and when he started playing the role of the less popular Horseless Headsman, it was Daxter who dusted off the legend and shoved the Headless Horseman off the stage.

“So, you see, the real story is that the Headless Horseman came from Hell itself,” Daxter explained, peering down at the audience as he walked across his stage. “He was a demon with an unspeakable name, one so foul it still haunts the souls of this very land. He haunted the townsfolk here for nearly a decade, tearing through anyone who dared step out at night.”

Jack stayed at the back of the crowd, eating up the story he’d heard a hundred times already. Hell, he almost started mouthing Daxter’s next lines.

“But one night, the Headless Horseman met someone far more wild and wicked than even himself. A witch most foul had sought him out. And you see, I know a thing or two about witches.” Daxter conjured a flame in his hand, a simple trick that had originally piqued Jack’s curiosity a half-century ago. It turned out Daxter had no talent for magic, but he was a brilliant magician all the same.

Astaroth scoffed. “Don’t you get tired of this blatant pandering—”

“Shush. You’re gonna ruin the best part.” Jack side-eyed his dog, who huffed in protest and lay down on the ground.

“This wicked witch seduced the Headless Horseman. Not to tame the monster, but to bring a new creature far more horrifying into this world.”

The audience stood entranced, staring at the shifting shadows on the backdrop behind Daxter. They showed the story of a man riding a horse, a woman bringing him to a stop, chaos and carnage. Jack tossed in a few of his own shadows to amp up the fear, show just a bit more gore, and do what Daxter’s hidden projector couldn’t pull off. It was enough to cause a few gasps, but nothing so frightful as to send audience members fleeing.

Jack had learned that while fear sells, scary coupled with sexy sells far more, so he kept his horror a bit tamer than in years past.

“For you see,” Dexter continued, “the witch bore a child. A haunting monster who used his first breath into this world to slaughter his demonic parents.”

Jack rolled his eyes. That part of the story always annoyed him. He didn’t kill his mother, and the Headless Horseman wasn’t his father. Jack’s father was nothing more than an average, boring human who’d passed away so long ago, Jack barely recalled the man’s face.

“That is how he earned his name,” Dexter said, gesturing to the crude shadows of a monstrous baby beheading the witch and attacking the Headless Horseman. “After defeating and devouring his parents, the Horseless Headsman went deep into the woods, seeking refuge.”

Someone in the audience snorted. “Horseless Headsman? Seriously? I mean...seriously?”

Dexter didn’t miss a beat, letting the shadows behind him weave in menacing ways as he leaned out, staring ominously at the man who’d laughed.

“You see, they call him that not merely as an homage to his father, but as a warning to all those who cross his path. He rides no steed, but the shadows carry the gallop of a thousand horses forged in Hell itself. For his mother wished to create a monster so foul, he would lead Hell’s army onto this world.”

Astaroth tsked. “As if any demon would follow you around.”

“You follow me.”

“No, I merely allow you to serve me,” Astaroth corrected, sitting up and puffing his chest. “It’d be far too much work to retrain a new mortal every few years. Such tiny lifespans they possess. And far too breakable. It’s almost boring.”

Jack shook his head, ignoring Astaroth, and focused on the soft patter of hooves that started to feed the ambiance. Shadows shifted into a terrifying pumpkin head.

“If you hear the stride of a horse,” Dexter said with a wicked lilt, “then chances are, that’s the approach of The Horseless Headsman. For you see, he comes to claim anyone who dares step foot into his forest.”

Dexter eyed the edge of the forest where the audience stood far too close to now, especially with the fog rolling in to add a hint of eeriness. This came from one of Dexter’s little machines. Jack wouldn’t waste the forest’s magic just to add a bit of flair.

“He haunts these lands, hiding in the shadows that he controls. If he finds you, he’ll take your head. There are over a hundred cases of decapitation in the woods of Sleepy Hollow.”

Okay, that part was true. Mostly. Over two centuries, Jack had decapitated quite a few foes, though he didn’t exactly keep a head count, so to speak, on the number of humans he’d slaughtered. Silly townsfolk who wanted to burn away the evil. Incompetent monster hunters who thought they’d become legends. And a slew of other fools with zero redeeming qualities. Beheading people was quick and easy and tended to end conflict relatively fast.

Jack hadn’t realized that by making that his calling card, he inadvertently set himself up for the name he’d be stuck with forever.

“And here we have it—our very own Horseless Headsman,” Daxter announced, gesturing dramatically to Jack, who stood at the edge of the audience.

The audience roared when they took in Jack. Some let out frightened yelps, others uncomfortable giggles, but mostly loud cheers of excitement.

Sheepishly, Jack waved a hand. No, he didn’t have a modest bone in his body, but Jack knew a little humility went a long way. And since he couldn’t exactly make his pumpkin head blush, he conveyed shyness with his body language.

After the briefest of moments, Jack let the humility wash away and threw his arms out wide, letting the remaining flyers he had flutter into the crowd. Jack’s expression shifted between deranged to menacing to some haunting cackle as he bellowed with laughter.

“If you think this mortal’s magic is entertaining, you should see what I have to offer.” Jack twisted the shadows from the projector into harrowing images of slaughter until the entire backdrop turned black.

Daxter shot him a look—one that said, ‘I’m going to figure out how the heck you do that one of these days,’ but he wouldn’t. The fact was, Daxter didn’t believe in any of the magic or monsters he peddled, and as far as he was concerned, Jack was just some human influencer hungry for views. He believed Jack held some love for the craft of old school magicians, which was true. Jack often found himself fascinated by Daxter’s sleight of hand.

After the little performance, Daxter continued with simple tricks to wow the crowd and open some wallets when he ushered them over to his little shop down the road.

Jack waved a farewell and got a toothy grin and thumbs up from Dexter as he led patrons into his store.

With the performance over and Jack's flyers all handed out, he led Astaroth toward the forest so they could return home.

"I know you said no killing," Astaroth said with a mischievous lilt in his telepathy, "but there's a monster hunter on our trail."

"Wait, really?" Jack's shadowy eyes widened in disbelief.

There hadn't been anyone brazen enough to hunt him down in decades. Maybe the 1970s...or was it the 80s? He struggled to keep track of the years with so many all blurring together. He should have been offended someone came to kill him, but he found himself a bit flattered. It seemed his monster presence online had perhaps garnered more attention than he realized, and his performance was so majestic, someone suspected he was an actual monster.

And yes, Jack most certainly was a cryptid of legend, but most people didn't believe the truth, no matter how many times he declared it in his videos.

"Yep. Sniffed the fucker out a few blocks back, and he's been lurking around trying to size you up."

"You sure he's not just enamored by my good looks?" Jack playfully ran his hands down his muscular abdomen, hooking his thumbs around the loops of his jeans and posing suggestively.

Astaroth stared at Jack with a pouty face. "I would consider him enthralled by your ridiculous bulbous head, but—"

"How many times do I have to remind you this isn't my actual head?" Jack pointed to the pumpkin he wore. "This is a prop. It's for my costume."

Astaroth squinted, seemingly very suspicious of Jack's words and likely doubting the pumpkin was not, in fact, attached to Jack's body.

"The point is, he's carrying iron," Astaroth said, sniffing the air. "Has six pointy yet pointless weapons."

Astaroth's floppy ears perked up slightly as he tilted his head.

"And seems to be communicating with a team via satellite phone."

"Seriously? Deep pockets."

Astaroth scoffed. "Please. I would buy a far more effective arsenal if I sought to dispatch with the likes of you."

"Maybe he's after you."

"Hmm, doubtful, but that would be entertaining."

“Whatever,” Jack said with a shrug. “I don’t have time for hunters. Let’s go.”

“I could kill him quickly. Quietly, even.”

“Liar.”

“Fine. But if he wanders into the woods, I’m eating his soul.”

“Deal,” Jack said, leading the way into the woods as fog rolled up around them.

Jack looked back to see the mysterious hunter rushing ahead to catch them, but as soon as he reached the edge of the forest, Jack and Astaroth vanished behind a magic cloak of fog.

Even if the hunter worked up the nerve to seek them out and wandered into the woods, he’d never cross their path. Astaroth wouldn’t need to eat any souls, and Jack wouldn’t have to decapitate any foolish human hunters today.

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CHAPTER TWO



“DAMN THING DISAPPEARED,” Irvin snapped from outside the truck.

Such an unsettling voice. Irvin proved to be one of the most dehumanizing hunters, believing cryptids only existed to suffer and entertain.

Dimitri sat in the back box of the truck, trying to enjoy the calm while he still had a bit of solitude. They’d driven for days on end with few breaks. Though the boxed cage offered enough room to move, Dimitri often struggled with queasiness when being transported. While he’d been fortunate to receive a reprieve from the ride, he found the silence of the interstate replaced by the cacophony of too many humans.

Wherever they’d brought him was far too crowded, too noisy, too much. Dimitri hated large groups of humans. The voices had become fainter than when the truck first arrived. They drove it a bit further to a secondary location, and Dimitri almost found peace. That was until Irvin returned from whatever scouting he’d completed.

Dimitri stared at the black skin around his fingers. It created an ombre effect over his pale hands. He’d gotten so much whiter after years of too little sunlight. The black over his fingers and feet used to stretch further up his arms and legs, offering a cloak from detection and a shield from attacks.

Dimitri focused on the natural energy coursing through him, attempting to fuel the shield. Blackness stretched over his palms before thinning out and turning into little dotted specks past his wrists. He’d lost so much power locked away.

“You up, you damn stupid deer.” Irvin pounded on the truck door.

Dimitri cringed, awaiting what came next.

The chain crank rattled as the metal door slid up, exposing Dimitri to a bit of sunlight. Not much, given the clouds he spotted in the distance. Irvin sneered at Dimitri, clutching his light machine gun. Dimitri had the misfortune of learning much about guns and their evolution over the decades. They were violent machines with metal teeth that ripped through everything in their path. Given the arsenal equipped to the hunters lined up outside the truck, Dimitri realized this wasn't a kill mission.

No, without a Hearst in sight, they couldn't risk slaughtering their cryptid quarry. This meant Dimitri was assigned to a retrieval team. He hated those more. It was better to kill the beast upon contact. Bloody, violent, and depressing, but at least Dimitri wouldn't have to watch another monster be caged, dragged away, given fleeting hope only for it to be snuffed out.

"Out," Irvin demanded.

Dimitri stood tall. His chains clinked as he stretched; their restraints kept him mostly immobile. The shackles around his hands and feet didn't connect his limbs to each other. Instead, the chains coiled around each of his limbs independently, hooked onto rods embedded in his flesh. There were four rods in each arm, constantly digging into the nerves of his body. There were even more rods in his torso and legs. The chains bound to him weighed heavily on Dimitri's muscles. Still, he obediently made his way out of the truck cage and onto the cool, damp dirt.

Fresh earth comforted Dimitri. His bare feet dug into the ground, seeking the healing properties nature offered him. Dimitri's large antlers twitched, excited by the trees surrounding them. He clenched his clawed hands, hungry to commune with nature. It'd been so long since he'd wandered freely through a forest. How he craved to disappear between a thicket of trees.

With a deep breath, Dimitri tasted the memories of this forest. A small wooded area, one rooted with potent magics. The properties of this place could fuel Dimitri's broken body so much faster. His green eyes glowed with a spark of hope.

"None of that," a gruff voice said, followed by an immediate jolt of electricity.

It pulsed from the collar around Dimitri's neck, but the wave of electricity was carried through the chains to each of the rods buried deep

into his flesh.

Dimitri roared, holding himself as still as possible. He didn't want to fall over, finding the hunters always kicked him when he was down, but he couldn't allow himself to thrash either. Whenever he resisted the pain, fought against the agony, they only added to the pulse. He suffered for a minute, containing himself as his nerves flared with white-hot pain.

"Good boy," Samuel said, an older hunter who'd held the controller to Dimitri's obedience for almost three years now.

Dimitri had several leads who controlled him over the many years since being detained by the Hearst family. Samuel wasn't the worst of them, but he was certainly the smuggest when doling out punishment.

"Now, you see that fog, Dimitri. We need you to cut through it and help us track down the Nuckelavee," Samuel instructed.

That explained the retrieval mission. The Hearst family loved to hunt down and kill monsters of all kinds, but they didn't care much for the work involved. Sometimes, one of them would accompany Dimitri when tracking a cryptid in a forest, but the more elusive the creature, the less likely they were to spend hours hiking.

Dimitri held a powerful connection to nature, seeing all she had to offer. Memories. Mysteries. Magics. None of it deceived him.

Without a word, Dimitri led the way through the fog that cloaked their destination. The enchanted fog was seeped in potent magic, more than nature itself had to offer. No, this power was gifted to the forest.

Dimitri didn't know much about Nuckelavee's, but he didn't think they possessed any access to magic. Not many monsters or spirits did. Dimitri had the misfortune of learning all too much about cryptids over the last fifty years as the Hearst family forced him to assist in tracking down as many as possible to add to their trophy collection of exotic primordial beings.

As Dimitri searched for their destination, he quietly listened to the memories the trees offered him. They held so many beautiful secrets. Dimitri learned a little about the witch who wandered these woods. She spelled much of the wildlife, the plant life, and the atmosphere itself. Such a mighty witch wouldn't be felled easily, but according to the trees, she'd left these lands long ago.

This fog, this magic, they were mere remnants of her power.

After hours of silent travel, Dimitri cut through the fog to an open yard deep in the forest. Not too deep, as this wooded area wasn't very big. Only

the fog created the illusion of endless miles.

They stood before a small cottage and a strange man with gray skin and a pumpkin atop his head. This must've been the Nuckelavee.

"Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It's your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern," the pumpkin-headed monster said while staring into a cellular device. "I've been getting a lot of comments suggesting folks think they can crack this. Let me tell you, don't be deceived by my friendly demeanor. This is a whole lotta monster, and I don't think some of y'all can handle it."

Dimitri cocked his head, studying the way the Nuckelavee caressed his gray flesh as he flaunted his naked chest and flexed for the cellular device he held. While Dimitri understood they could be used to make telephone calls without fixed locations, and that many telephone calls had evolved into the form of jaunty letters sent in rapid succession as a method of avoiding conversation, he hadn't realized they also involved talking at the telephone. Not in it. At it. A truly bizarre notion to Dimitri. Upon closer inspection, it almost seemed as though the cellular device reflected the pumpkin's face like a mirror.

There was so much about technology Dimitri didn't grasp. Before he was abducted by the Hearst family and locked away in their dungeons, technology seemed less complex. Televisions were big boxes with staticky screens instead of flat, giant sheets mounted on walls. Telephones came with cords; now they had imaginary wires that populated the air and sent strange signals. Dimitri didn't like it.

Mostly, Dimitri didn't understand it. No one in the Hearst family ever sat down and explained the nearly fifty-year gap in technology he'd missed, so he only really pieced together things when brought out on a hunt. Even then, most monsters didn't use telephones or anything else. Only the hunters did that when communicating with the Hearst family. Otherwise, they stuck with their radios.

"We have unwanted guests," a dog growled, carrying a deep telepathic echo as it stepped outside.

"Oh, shit." The Nuckelavee turned his phone off and stuffed it in his pocket. "What can I say? Thirst traps sell."

The pumpkin the Nuckelavee wore had a strange, shadowy smile. It seemed to move like magic. Truly fascinating. This Nuckelavee had a name, and while he didn't want to learn it, knowing the creature would soon die,

he found it weirdly interesting. Jack Whoa Lantern. Dimitri had no idea what his parents were thinking with such a title, but it certainly was catchy.

“It appears I do get to devour some souls this eve.” The dog stood firmly beside Jack Whoa Lantern and eyed the hunters, Irvin in particular. “That was our deal.”

“Well, let’s hit the brakes on that.” Jack Whoa Lantern raised his hands to the dog, indicating murder was unnecessary.

A foolish decision in Dimitri’s opinion, but he couldn’t warn the monster. He’d paid the price many times before when he attempted to help a cryptid escape the clutches of the hunters.

The dog barked in protest.

“So, it would appear you lot are hunters.” Jack Whoa Lantern gestured to the guns and Kevlar. “Now, I am curious how you lot managed to find me. Guessing you have some fancy tech, but it shouldn’t be able to pinpoint me.”

Jack Whoa Lantern sized everyone up until his eyes landed on Dimitri. The squinting triangle shapes turned into large, round orbs, and it appeared the pumpkin was genuinely surprised to see Dimitri.

Well, the pumpkin itself wasn’t. It was just a mask of some type. Dimitri could sense the magic wafting off the hollowed-out pumpkin, but he didn’t understand why the Nuckelavee wore it over his head.

“And what exactly are you?” Jack Whoa Lantern narrowed his eyes and studied Dimitri’s features. “Are you a Leshy? Holy hell. I haven’t come across one of your kind in almost a century. Since when do guardians of the forest work with hunters?”

“I have no choice,” Dimitri said so fast he didn’t even register the words.

His Russian accent was thick, but he rarely spoke these days. The only reason he even picked English was because the Hearst family and their hunters would scold him fiercely when he didn’t communicate properly.

“No choice, huh?” Jack Whoa Lantern asked. “And why’s that?”

“Do you not aaarrhhhh—” Electricity coursed through Dimitri’s body, sending sharp pulses of pain through all his nerves.

He nearly collapsed until Samuel let go of the button that triggered his collar. The chains around his arms and legs were warmed from the shock, and the rods embedded in his flesh throbbed.

“I see.” Jack Whoa Lantern nodded. “Hmm, I think I can fix that.”

Dimitri wanted to speak, to warn the Nuckelavee to flee. Mostly, Dimitri wanted to hope this Jack Whoa Lantern could fix things. But Dimitri knew there was no helping him.

“Enough of this,” Irvin said, signaling to the other hunters to spread out into a formation.

“You can call me Jack,” he said, giving Dimitri a big ole grin. “I’ll get your name after I kill these fools.”

Dimitri wanted to believe it, even if it seemed preposterous that this half-naked, pumpkin-wearing, telephone-obsessed Nuckelavee could really take on twelve hunters.

“Yes,” the dog bellowed with a happy bark. “I get to consume souls.”

“Fine, but you only get to eat one,” Jack declared. “The screams are so annoying. It’s like, how long does it take to devour a soul?”

“Mere seconds that linger for eons, if I am fortunate,” the dog whispered with a low growl, his eyes glowing red.

Each of the hunters tensed. Dimitri felt their squeamish confusion dance on the breeze. Even if this cryptid and his beast were to die this day, the fear they invoked brought a bit of joy to Dimitri.

Dimitri quickly discerned the hunters couldn’t hear the dog’s words, as all their attention was fixated on Jack. While Dimitri had no idea what the dog was, he realized there was something wicked within it.

When the beast dug his paws into the dirt, Dimitri locked his glowing green eyes on him, attempting to see the layers of magic carried inside the animal.

“Well, Astaroth, which one do you want?”

Astaroth released a deep, throaty howl. In an instant, the dog launched into the air, snarling as he tackled Irvin. Astaroth’s front paws slammed into the man’s chest, his teeth latched onto Irvin’s jugular, and within seconds the two tumbled onto the ground.

The other hunters shifted their attention, guns raised, and voices filled with shock as they all shouted to take the dog down.

It was too late.

As quickly as Astaroth had appeared and attacked, he’d just as quickly vanished into the forest. Fog filled the space between the trees. It was much thicker than earlier. Dimitri could still navigate his way through the fog, but not with the same ease as before.

“Welp, guess that means I get to deal with the rest of you lot.” Jack had his hands on his hips, and his shadowy expression had soured into something aggravated. “I’ll make this fast because Housewives is on soon, and I’ll be damned if you make me—”

“Light him up, boys,” Samuel shouted.

The rapid thud of gunfire blared. It was too late. Dimitri dropped his head in defeat, having seen the heavy artillery tear apart some of the strongest cryptids across the world. The iron ripped through the strongest monsters, eviscerating them in mere minutes.

They wouldn’t kill the Nuckelavee, but they’d make him wish they had.

As the gunfire finally settled, a small laughter followed. It started as a slow chuckle but quickly grew.

Dimitri couldn’t help but look. Disbelief filled his thoughts.

Jack stood riddled with hundreds of holes in his flesh, but he didn’t bleed. Instead, blackness seeped from his injuries. Not some goopy ooze, but more like the tangibility of darkness itself. Eventually, the black energy retreated back into Jack’s body, stitching the holes back up as the bullets clinked into a pile on the ground.

While Jack appeared to have many scars across his body, many held together by black stitches, these new wounds didn’t last. They healed almost immediately, and the darkness disappeared beneath Jack’s gray skin. It was a sight unlike anything Dimitri had witnessed.

“You lot probably thought that iron would do the trick,” Jack said with a light laugh. “You’re about to see why they call me the Horseless Headsman.”

Before any of the hunters could reload, shadows sprang forward, slithering out of Jack. The clack of stampeding hooves echoed from the core of darkness.

Then, in a sudden frenzy, black tendrils launched from the ground and whipped across the open yard.

Samuel gurgled.

Dimitri turned around, staring into the stunned hunter’s eyes. His hand clutched the device that kept Dimitri in check. His thumb was close to pressing it until his grip faltered and the device fell. Suddenly, a thin red line appeared across Samuel’s neck, and that surprised expression became vacant. Samuel’s head tumbled off his shoulders and fell onto the ground with a heavy thud.

Many other thuds followed, and Dimitri turned to find all the hunters standing headless in the forest. One by one, their bodies collapsed until Dimitri stood alone with Jack.

“You killed them all.”

“Not all.” Jack tilted his head and seemingly shifted the density of the fog surrounding them.

As it lessened, Irvin’s screams wailed from all directions. The magic of the forest kept Astaroth and his prey cloaked, but as the fog thinned, it no longer shielded the gruesome carnage that the hellish hound unleashed.

“See, this is what I’m talking about,” Jack said matter-of-factly. “It’s so damn noisy. I can turn down the volume, but I swear Astaroth will be out there for days, maybe even weeks, just tormenting that poor fucker.”

“Could not think of a more deserving soul.” Dimitri took solace in Irvin’s shrieks.

The fog thickened again, silencing Irvin.

“Thank you, Jack Whoa Lantern.” Dimitri lowered his head, staring down to meet Jack’s hollow black eyes.

“No worries. And it’s just Jack,” he said with a big smile. “I mean, it’s Jack Whoa Lantern online. That’s pretty much my username everywhere, but Jack’s the only part of the name that’s actually mine.”

“Well, thank you, Jack.”

“And you are?” Jack’s shadowy eyes carried this kind curiosity in them.

Yes, they were vacant black orbs, but Dimitri found the shadows held such animated emotion. It was an interesting trick that he hoped to learn more about soon.

“I am Dimitri.”

“Well, Dimitri,” Jack said, tilting his head. “Care to explain who the heck those hunters were and why they were dragging you with them to get lil ole me?”

Dimitri didn’t know where to begin, but he found himself eager to divulge all he knew. It had been so long since he spoke with another creature like himself, spoke with someone who didn’t harbor disgust in their voice and hate in their eyes.

CHAPTER THREE



DIMITRI WAS a gorgeous giant of a man. He was easily a foot taller than Jack. Well, maybe not quite. The top of Jack's pumpkin stem barely reached Dimitri's chin, though. Still, it was hard to gauge his height with those massive antlers that added an even more domineering appearance to the Leshy.

Though Jack had only ever encountered a handful of Leshys in his life, none looked quite so human. Dimitri had fairly normal flesh. No bark or wired hairs. His face, a very cute one at that, seemed mostly human. No large snout or protruding bones. Aside from the antlers themselves. But usually, Leshys had entire jaws composed of corpselike flesh and bone.

The only features that really stood out to Jack were Dimitri's clawed hands and feet, his antlers, and, of course, the glowing green eyes. They held this stoic somberness to them. Jack could lose himself in such beautiful emeralds.

"You're not like other Leshys, are you?" Jack grimaced, and his shadowy expression mimicked the look on his enchanted pumpkin.

Definitely the downside to his shadow abilities. They acted on instinct and broadcasted his hidden facial expressions on a big pumpkin billboard.

"I just mean, um, well, like you look different," Jack said with a twinge of anxiety. "Not like bad different. Good different. But not really good, because that implies other Leshy look bad. Which they don't. I love how Leshy look. Not in a lecherous way. In an awesome way. Because they're awesome. You're awesome, too. I just think all people of all looks are amazing and wonderful and awesome and should be proud of it."

Jack managed to silence himself momentarily as he gulped nervously. Dimitri's blank stare down at him in absolute silence only further fueled the nervous monster into rambling more.

"OhDearGodInHell, you think one of those hunters could try shooting me down again so I can stop babbling?"

Dimitri burst into laughter, loud and boisterous, completely opposite of how he appeared, how he carried himself. It was as if the weight of the world poured out of Dimitri's mouth. His joy echoed throughout the woods, and Jack sighed with relief.

"You are a funny little man," Dimitri said, still laughing. "I am half-human."

"Really? Fascinating." Jack nodded, thinking about all the monster fuckers who followed him online professing their love for an untamed man.

Guess it turned out some folks really did enjoy rolling in the sheets with beasts. Dimitri was living proof of that.

"You wished to know why the hunters were here," Dimitri said, his accent becoming more captivating with every new word he uttered in English. "I cannot say for certain. They do not share information with me aside from tracking targets for the Hearst family."

As Dimitri continued speaking, the chains coiled around his body rattled.

"I imagine you were a quarry intended to be detained and returned to the estate for examination and extermination. That is all they do with cryptids, monsters, spirits. Really, any creature they can later put on display for a private party."

"And they only ever kept you?" Jack asked, raising a hand to touch one of the chains wrapped across Dimitri's chest.

When the Leshy recoiled, Jack paused.

"Not the only one. I am useful for tracking; others are useful for whatever the Hearst family requires." Dimitri shrugged. "It was a rare occasion to see other monsters. And even then, it was usually just for interrogation or experimentation. Mostly, they are replaced and do not last as long as me."

"How long were you with the Hearst family?" Jack swallowed hard because that question sounded like Dimitri was a guest. "How long did they keep you trapped?"

Jack knew Leshys were immortal forest spirits who seemingly lived as long as the land itself, but he wondered if the same applied to a half-Leshy.

"Fifty years, I believe."

Jack's eyes widened. Considering Dimitri looked like he could pass for his twenties, it was likely his human half didn't detract from the longevity of his Leshy bloodline.

"That's awful," Jack whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"It was not your doing." Dimitri's somber expression returned, his face fell into this hidden sorrow. "It was my own foolishness that led to my capture."

"No, it was their hate," Jack said, grinding his teeth beneath his pumpkin mask.

He didn't know the Hearst family or the hunters they hired, but he hated them all. It was a reminder of why his mother created these magical woods for him centuries back. Humans always sought to slaughter what they didn't understand, what they didn't approve of, and what they didn't have control over. Humans were horrible, even to themselves.

"You should prepare yourself," Dimitri said in a low voice, stealing Jack from his thoughts. "More hunters will seek you out. The Hearst family will seek retribution for my escape, and for your flaunting of power."

"But you're their only tracker, right?"

Dimitri stared.

"The only Leshy they have?"

Dimitri nodded slowly.

"Then let 'em send a hundred or a thousand, it won't make any difference."

"Your shadows are powerful, but they will be more prepared. They always go prepared."

Jack looked at the corpses littered across his yard and scoffed. They didn't seem that prepared, in his opinion.

"Without you, I doubt I'd even need my shadows for the next batch." Jack pointed to the fog. "Trust me, no one really finds their way through it. The whole design is meant to send folks in circles until they wind up back at the forest entrance."

"A truly powerful magic."

"Yep." Jack eyed the collar around Dimitri's neck, recognizing several of the sigils from his mother's grimoire. "Speaking of powerful magic."

Seems they use more than a jolt of electricity to keep you in line.”

Dimitri pressed a clawed hand to the collar, staring off sadly into the distance. “It is meant to prevent me from connecting fully with nature.”

“Well, fuck that, let’s get rid of it.” Jack stepped forward until Dimitri flinched. The hesitation in the Leshy’s bright green eyes gave Jack pause.

“I am never supposed to remove my collar.”

“You don’t have to obey anyone’s rules but your own anymore.”

Dimitri stayed silent for a long minute. The longest minute in Jack’s very long life. But he patiently awaited as Dimitri processed all the sudden changes in his tragic plight.

Dimitri knelt, revealing the lock pad in the back. “It might not be easy to remove. None of the hunters would carry a key.”

“No need.” Jack conjured a shadow, slender yet jagged.

It soaked into the gaps of the key slots, unraveling the pattern, and with a quick click, the lock fell off—and the collar with it soon after.

Dimitri stood tall, breathing in deeply. He must’ve soaked in some of the magic of the forest as his antlers swelled with each inhale, and the blackness over his fingers and feet soon stretched over the skin of his calves and forearms.

“It has been so long since I truly felt nature’s embrace.” Dimitri’s skin trembled as he stretched; the chains made it impossible to pull further.

One by one, Dimitri ripped out the rods embedded into his flesh, chucking them to the ground. He removed them from his arms, his legs, and his torso. The chains rattled, collapsing into a pile of bloody rods the more he removed.

After removing them all, Dimitri stood covered in deep, bloody gashes. Jack realized the painful effect of being deprived of a connection with nature and how much it slowed Dimitri’s healing process. Leshy were usually quick to recover in a forest, especially one seeped in so much magic.

“Do you mind?” Dimitri turned around, revealing a few rods dug into his back.

Jack approached, gently running his fingers over the skin around the rod, then he dug his fingers in to get a grip on the deadly device. Dimitri growled but remained still. His body shivered as Jack yanked the rods out one at a time. With the final rod removed, Dimitri was freed of his shackles, of his detainment.

“I should be leaving,” Dimitri said, taking a wobbly step.

“Nonsense.” Jack intervened, helping to steady Dimitri’s stance. “You need to recover.”

“Yes, and I will find another forest to lay my head.”

“Not one with nearly as much magic.”

“That is true. This place is quite potent. More so than even the oldest trees of my former home.” Dimitri took a deep breath, seeming to absorb some of the magic in the air. “But I understand the rules and respect the privacy of other cryptids.”

“Huh?” Jack blinked a bit, confused until he recalled that most monsters preferred solitude. Most monsters weren’t like Jack. “Stay, I insist. I enjoy company. I mean, you’d probably be more chill than my demon dog.”

“I could not impose; you have already done more than I could have dreamed.” Dimitri gestured to the corpses strewn about.

“Well, if you refuse to stay, that would be offensive,” Jack teased, continuing to help hold Dimitri upright. “I mean, I went and slaughtered like a dozen guys for you. It’d be totally rude if you just bailed.”

Dimitri snorted.

“Please, come inside, rest, recover,” Jack insisted. “It’d be a favor to me. I couldn’t send you off half-dead and bleeding out.”

Dimitri stayed silent for a long time, contemplating. There was a stillness to him that made Jack antsy. He didn’t really know anyone quite as quiet as Dimitri, and naturally, Jack desperately wanted to fill the silence with idle chitchat. But he resisted the urge, though his body fidgeted the more he remained quiet.

“I shall stay and recover at your insistence, but I will do my part to make myself useful while I am here.”

“Well, I hate folding laundry and loading the dishwasher and really cleaning of any kind, so I won’t say no to a little help around the house.” Jack grinned big and wide, filling his pumpkin head, then he turned to lead Dimitri into his small cottage.

Dimitri had to duck in order to enter through the doorway, and prepared to stay low until the inside of the home revealed itself to be quite large.

“Spatial magics,” Jack explained like it was the most normal thing in the world to step into a giant ten-bedroom home. “My mother always called it her little dream chateau.”

“Quite the witch,” Dimitri replied, staring up at the high-vaulted ceilings. “Where is she now?”

“Off wandering the road of life somewhere.” Jack shrugged, making his way through the home and giving Dimitri an impromptu tour. “It’s been a while since I had a roommate. I mean, unless you count Astaroth, but he’s more like an unwanted house guest, though I suppose it’s better he’s here instead of inciting the apocalypse or some shit.”

“Roommate?” Dimitri asked inquisitively. His accent or his tone made him sound confused, and Jack found that cute.

“Or you can be my unwilling houseguest,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Whichever you prefer.”

Dimitri smiled at Jack with the softest, gentlest expression, and that filled Jack with all the hope in the world. It’d been quite some time since he could be himself around another person. Sure, his followers knew he was a monster, but no one really believed it. Jack wanted to get to know Dimitri, learn all he could about this half-human, half-Leshy who’d been liberated from foul human hunters.

“Oh, shit,” Jack sighed.

“What?”

“I just realized I gotta deal with all those corpses.” Jack huffed. “I swear, the one downside to murder. The cleanup.”

“I can help you dispose of them.”

“Nonsense. Relax, maybe wash off some of the blood,” Jack said. “Try making yourself at home. Check out the rooms, pick whichever one you want. Except for the last one down the hall to the right, that’s my room, or the one upstairs beside the library. That’s Astaroth’s space, and he will bite you if you cross the threshold.”

“I see.” Dimitri tilted his head. “You have a library.”

“Yeah, tons of books.”

“Nice.”

“Read whatever you want,” Jack said, making his way outside. “Seriously, relax.”

Jack watched as Dimitri lost himself to the wonder of the dream chateau.

CHAPTER FOUR



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Dimitri did his best to take it easy and recover. Still, despite all the safeguards Jack assured him of within the dream chateau and the powerful magics in the woods outside, Dimitri struggled to drop his guard.

“Aaahh,” Dimitri shouted, awaking after only a few hours of rest with his claws drawn and his fanged teeth bared.

Even though he’d witnessed Jack slaughter the hunters with ease, even though he knew logically he could sleep without fear of waking up chained in captivity again, Dimitri still woke covered in sweat and filled with terror. Every time he dozed off, he awoke in a breathless panic like clockwork.

Thankfully, the dream chateau was made with more than magical mysteries. It was crafted with sturdy walls, so Jack never heard Dimitri’s shrieks.

Dimitri stepped into the adjoining bathroom to his bedroom, struggling to slip through the frame because of his antlers.

“Are you serious?” Dimitri huffed, turning to the side and bending low as he fiddled around until he got through. “Ridiculous.”

Whenever he panicked, his antlers swelled to twice their size. It weighed heavily on his head and obviously made walking around challenging.

“This is an utterly useless skill,” Dimitri said to his reflection. “You know, giant horns do nothing against a threat. You are no moose.”

As his breathing eased and his annoyance grew, he was able to focus on shrinking his antlers.

“Why not giant razor-sharp claws when you awake?” he asked himself, holding his arms up and flexing his ombre colored fingers. “Well, then we would have shredded blankets. That would not be good. Stick to the ridiculous antlers.”

After settling his nerves, Dimitri stared at his vacant expression. The green glow of his eyes dimmed some, lessening the glare in the mirror as he studied himself. Dimitri splashed his face with cold water and shook away the last lingering nerves. Then he began examining the small scars across his flesh. Dimitri considered himself grateful for the potency of the magic here. His wounds had nearly healed, mostly sealed and scabbing at this point.

Once he’d finished up and showered, Dimitri air-dried in his room while looking through the closet of new clothes he’d acquired. Jack had ordered them online, having them quickly rushed to his PO Box in the neighboring town. Dimitri did not realize that even peasants could snap their fingers and demand goods immediately. Well, perhaps Jack was of nobility, but he was certainly nothing like the Hearst family.

“I should not have let the Jack Whoa Lantern pick the clothes,” Dimitri said, deciding between the bright pink or olive-green tank tops.

Dimitri didn’t have the bandwidth to think of clothes when Jack offered, so he passed along the task, which involved Jack playing a guessing game with his sizes.

Dimitri skipped the tank top, going shirtless once again because all of the T-shirts had quippy slogans and itchy fabrics. Most of his clothes were absurdly colorful. Dimitri tossed on a pair of black joggers that were a size too small and cut off right below his knee. The only pairs that fit had “Juicy” and “Baddie” printed on the ass.

“I am not a juicy or a baddie,” Dimitri muttered as he rifled through the closet to retrieve his jacket.

It was certainly his favorite piece of clothing Jack had purchased. For starters, it had an open zipper, which meant Dimitri didn’t have to shrink his antlers even more to wriggle through the head hole. The jacket itself was a lovely forest green with fur lining the sleeves and the hood section. Since it was a size too small, Dimitri did have to keep the jacket open, which exposed his chest and stomach, but it wasn’t as if anyone other than Jack and the forest creatures would see him.

“I am going to explore a bit,” Dimitri said as he left his room and made his way through the main living quarters.

He hadn’t spent much time in the dream chateau, leaving between his restless naps to wander the woods.

“All righty,” Jack said, pausing his video game. “I made breakfast if you want. I mean, I ordered way too much, but it’s good.”

“I am not hungry.”

“Oh, come on, you gotta eat something,” Jack insisted. “I bought more bread. I know you like that stuff.”

Dimitri slowed himself, turning to find a loaf on the countertop.

“You go through so much of it...” Jack said more to himself than to Dimitri as he continued gaming. “Like, easily a hundred slices or something. Is a bread diet healthy? Maybe for a Leshy? Hmmm.”

Jack spent most of his time in the main living space, which connected to the entryway. Despite the elegant wooden floors and the fortified stone walls, there was something juvenile about the atmosphere.

Perhaps it was the brightly colored furniture from the yellow couch to the pinstriped recliner. Maybe it had to do with the giant television that filled half a wall, littered with gaming stations of all types. Not that Dimitri knew what those were. He mostly avoided them, assuming they were deadly machines much like most of the technology he encountered. It could’ve also been the anime posters plastered everywhere occupied by similar anime-themed throw blankets. Dimitri found Jack’s joyfully free spirit clashed with the mystique of the dream chateau.

Dimitri had difficulty absorbing everything about this place, unwilling to explore despite the brief tour Jack had given him the first day he arrived. Mostly, Dimitri still found his presence intrusive despite Jack’s assurances that he more than welcomed the company.

“Have fun,” Jack called out as Dimitri stepped out into the cold.

The chill sent a shudder through him, and Dimitri felt the pin-pricks of his protective cloak growing. The blackness covering his hands extended to his forearms. Even covered beneath his jacket, Dimitri knew much of his strength had returned. He looked at his feet, which were entirely black along with his calves, leaving only a little unshielded skin where the fabric of his joggers reached.

Dimitri spent most of his time wandering the woods. The dense fog kept him cloaked, however, since Jack had amplified the fog to hide the presence

of his murderous demon dog still out there somewhere with Irvin, it made navigating a bit more difficult. Had the fog been this thick, seeped with even more magic, Dimitri doubted he'd have found Jack to begin with.

Part of him was glad he'd found Jack, stumbled onto this unforeseen liberation. Another part of him questioned this newfound freedom.

Dimitri stared at his wounds, taking a deep breath, and soaking in the wondrous magics of the woods.

"I need to decide..." Dimitri trudged ahead, knowing he'd recovered enough to move on.

He should move on. Staying here wouldn't be wise, not for him or for Jack. Dimitri questioned himself, believing he didn't have the strength to outrun the Hearst family, but he knew all too well that staying in one location would only result in his capture once again.

They were powerful and prideful. They would burn this forest to the ground to claim their quarry, to reclaim their tracker.

"Caw, caw, caw," called several crows from above.

Since arriving, many crows had flocked to the forest, extending their friendship to Dimitri. As a Leshy, crows often offered companionship, serving as some of nature's mightiest servants.

"Hello, my friends." Dimitri tore pieces of the bread, leaving a trail as he wandered deeper into the woods. "Now, do not fill up on this. It is merely a treat."

Every creature deserved a bit of flavor in their life. Sure, bread didn't offer the full spectrum of nutrients a bird required, but who in life ate and drank purely based on the nutritional value alone?

The crows followed his path, some flying ahead and circling back. Dimitri listened to their calls as he lunged from one location to the next. The fog helped Dimitri lose himself to the forest, pretending the terrain was much larger than in actuality. An illusion for certain, but one he gave way to in order to explore for hours on end.

Dimitri jumped between trees, hopping from one spot to the next. He joyfully skipped through the woods for hours, contemplating his choices. With his strength nearly fully returned, he had to make a choice.

If he stayed, it would certainly endanger Jack. Though abandoning him to face the wrath of the Hearsts was worse somehow. But if Dimitri fled, surely, they would give chase. There were so few Leshy left in existence, and even fewer creatures that could pinpoint other monsters.

Dimitri paused, pressing against a tree and digging his claws deep into the bark.

“What would you have me do?” Dimitri asked nature herself. “Would you have me remain in these woods, aimless, or should I return to my home?”

An empty home, but one he could twist and turn into an armory now that he knew what to expect from hunters. The plants and animals of his home knew of his father’s touch, and thus, they would easily obey Dimitri’s commands.

The forest here, though, came with many differences. Trees here held more secrets. Beasts were more cautious. Even the soil reacted with hesitation to Dimitri’s call. Only the crows seemed friendly, but Dimitri knew they mostly wanted his food.

Everything here was so different, Dimitri knew he’d have to adjust, to change if he wished to fit into this new world. Part of him wished to return home, risk the distant travel, and hide in the frozen forests he was so familiar with, even if he knew those forests were now empty. No family would await his return. The risk of the hunters tracking him there once again also posed a danger, but surely, they would find their way through Jack’s mysterious fog and claim Dimitri once again.

“I do not know what to do,” Dimitri sighed. “Please, goddess, offer me any guidance. I have longed for your wisdom.”

The silence of the forest did not last long. A butterfly appeared, flying freely through the bitter chill of the autumn wind. The black wings held yellow spots lining the edges. Dimitri knew this beautiful Black Swallowtail should have already begun her migration.

“Thank you, goddess.” Dimitri offered his finger to the fluttering butterfly, who rested. The butterfly crawled until it reached the edge of Dimitri’s clawed index finger.

Dimitri listened to the soft whispers of his goddess through the beacon of the butterfly’s call. Her wings gently flapped, carrying a message of guidance that Dimitri had long since craved.

“All things in life are afforded a second chance,” Dimitri whispered. “The beauty of butterflies is nature’s proof of such changes. One of many examples. We all grow, we all transform, we all become something new.”

Dimitri stared at the butterfly, wondering what wondrous thing he might transform into if he remained here in the forest outside the town of Sleepy

Hollow. Who would he become under the guidance of Jack Whoa Lantern? Dimitri wasn't certain, but he decided that was okay.

Staring up through the trees, he watched the crows circle the sky. They couldn't navigate the fog like Dimitri, but thanks to the bond he'd extended, they could follow his trail despite the magic. One of the crows swooped down, abandoning the flock, and zipped in close to Dimitri. Without hesitation, the bird snatched up the butterfly and ripped her to pieces with his beak.

"Nikolai!" Dimitri shouted. "You have already eaten. You are no crow, but a little piggy. Your greed knows no bounds."

Nikolai cawed in response, then hopped up Dimitri's arm and shoulder. Once he reached Dimitri's head, he bounced up into the antlers and perched himself into a cozy position. While Dimitri felt sorry for the lovely butterfly who'd delivered a kind message from nature herself, he did take some solace in the fact that his new crow friend let his guard down as he rested atop Dimitri's head.

"You are the worst," Dimitri said, casually walking through the woods back to Jack's magical not-so-little cottage.

Dimitri lingered in the yard, listening to Nikolai, who cawed up to the other crows. They continued flying close to the tree line, circling Dimitri and the cottage. Each of them was ready to issue a warning should the fog fail to uphold privacy.

"How was your walk?" Jack asked, carrying a bag of trash out to a large green bin.

"It was informative."

"That's...good?" Jack cocked his head, a single shadowy eyebrow raised. "I suppose an informative walk is the best sort of walk."

"Do the garbage people have special privileges to navigate the fog for trash retrieval?"

Jack sighed. "I wish. Nah, I just haul it to the curb of the woods every other week. It's a total headache, but the price of privacy."

"I can always take it on one of my walks."

"That's a nice offer, but it's a few miles to town."

"I do not mind."

Nikolai let out a low croak, insisting Dimitri establish well-deserved treats for his labor.

"I already get plenty," Dimitri answered. "No need to ask for more."

“Are you talking to me or the...” Jack pointed to the crow perched on Dimitri’s antler.

“Ah, yes, this is Nikolai. He has taken it upon himself to lead the murder, should I ever require assistance.”

Jack’s shadowy expression contorted into a question mark until returning to a smiley face. “I totally forgot they were called that. Here I was thinking you were plotting a murder. Well, more murder. Well, I suppose you didn’t really murder anyone. That was all me.”

Jack laughed aloud, a bit nervously. Dimitri had learned that Jack did not like silence, always finding ways to fill it, whether with his television, his telephone, his random muttering, or the need to sing songs.

“So, would he actually murder for you?”

“Most definitely,” Dimitri said plainly. “He awaits my command to peck out the eyes of my foes.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Dimitri grinned. “No, mostly he wants me to do him favors and give him treats.”

“Can you understand him?” Jack asked. “Can he understand you?”

“Of course,” Dimitri said, tossing his last torn chunk of bread for Nikolai to chase. “Leshy can communicate with all of nature and her servants.”

“That’s really cool,” Jack replied quite eagerly, then he stared out at the forest and seemed to panic. “Do you think the fog cloak upsets nature or her servants?”

“Doubtful, the mist offers mystery. Nature enjoys such wonders. Plus, it creates a stronger current of magic in the atmosphere. What is not to like?”

“Dang, you’re going to have to explain all this to me,” Jack said. “Despite spending my entire life in these woods, I’m not a very woodsy kind of person.”

“No?”

“Not in the least. Pretty sure that’s why my mom made this.” Jack pointed to the cottage. “I’m a glamper all the way.”

“A what?” Dimitri tilted his head curiously.

“It’s a bougie bitch who knows they deserve the best modern technology has to offer,” Jack explained, which only further confused Dimitri.

“How about I explain all the beauty and wonders of nature, and you provide better definitions to your sentences.”

Jack cackled. “Oh, man, totally valid. There’s so much I gotta catch you up on.”

“How about we start with your video games. You seem quite enthralled by them.”

“Definitely.” Jack smiled. “Do you want to build, kill, or romance? Because I’ve got games for everything. We’ll avoid online gameplay for now. I don’t think you’re ready for forty-year-old incels or twelve-year-old trolls.”

“You know trolls?” Dimitri asked, following Jack inside. “I have not met many trolls. They are quite vulgar things.”

“Not those kinds of trolls,” Jack said, then paused for a moment to think. “Well, kind of those kinds of trolls. Just not monstrous. Well, maybe in attitude.”

Jack slapped Dimitri on the back, ushering him inside first.

“I’ve got so much to introduce you to.”

Dimitri eagerly stepped inside the dream chateau, ready to learn all about the world according to Jack Whoa Lantern.

CHAPTER FIVE



JACK STAYED vigilant when heading into town. While he didn't anticipate the hunters being so bold as to attack him in a crowded place, he also didn't want to dismiss the idea after Dimitri's warnings. After everything Dimitri had experienced, he still carried the weight of his fears everywhere he went, and Jack hoped to offer his new houseguest a little happy distraction.

Making his way through the grocery store proved difficult. It turned out that all Jack had to worry about was the extra-crowded streets thanks to tourism. With Halloween less than two weeks away, Sleepy Hollow had a massive influx of tourists.

"It's the Headless Horseman," a guy pulled Jack into a half-hug, snapping a quick selfie with him over the grocery cart.

"You should probably ask before touching people." Jack glowered, his shadowy expression twisting into something menacing.

"Chill, it's just a picture."

"Yes, but you obviously don't understand the lore surrounding my legend as the Horseless Headsman, not the Headless Horseman."

"Oooh, gonna take my head?" the guy mocked.

"No," Jack huffed. "Sadly, I don't have the time."

Jack gripped his cart and pushed ahead through the aisle.

The guy laughed until he went to his phone.

"What the hell?" he shouted. "Hold the fuck on."

Jack turned the corner, smiling at the enraged confusion. In the past, Jack would get worked up when people touched him, took selfies without asking, and treated him like a prop for their amusement. Now, whenever

someone did that, he just fried their phone with his shadows. A quick, simple, and quite expensive lesson on personal boundaries.

Despite the distraction, it didn't deter Jack from his mission. Jack needed to stock his fridge. Heck, even his pantry started getting low on snack goodies. Dimitri hadn't complained, though, seeming to enjoy whatever food Jack offered. Still, he thought it'd be nice to cook a real meal instead of nuking leftovers or ordering takeout.

The only thing was that Jack didn't really know Dimitri's food preferences, so he bought extra supplies to prepare for any possible substitutions. Tonight, he'd make lasagna. It was classic, delicious, and always better when made at home.

After finishing his shopping, Jack carried his groceries to his truck, which he rarely brought into town. Driving annoyed him. Then again, maybe the narrow streets with too many vehicles annoyed him.

As Jack drove home, he found himself eager to surprise Dimitri with a home-cooked meal. Jack had never had a roommate. Well, not counting the unwanted demon lord from Hell bent on world domination. Astaroth was mostly an unwanted guest whom Jack occupied because an apocalypse sounded like too much work.

But living with Dimitri excited Jack. The Leshy had missed out on so much of the world, but it didn't detract from his interest in learning more. Every day, Jack hoped to introduce Dimitri to a piece he'd lost, to show him hunters weren't the embodiment of humanity, that most people were actually decent.

"Except for this son of a bitch riding my ass," Jack growled, glaring into the rearview mirror at the car flashing their lights in broad daylight.

Jack contemplated casting a shadow over their windshield, considered lunging from his truck and unleashing fiendish carnage, but ultimately, Jack settled for leaving them petrified.

"You want me out of the way," Jack said aloud. "Fine, I'll just end it all."

He whipped the steering wheel, driving off the road and into a ditch. The screech of the car was all he needed to hear as Jack chuckled before the fog enveloped him and he vanished between the trees. They'd have a heck of a time trying to make sense out of what they'd witnessed. Once he got home, Jack spotted Dimitri at the edge of the forest, sharpening his claws along the bark of a tree.

“Hope you’re hungry,” Jack said, carrying in two paper bags full of groceries.

“Need assistance?” Dimitri asked, wandering from a thicket of trees.

He drifted out of the fog effortlessly, almost with a skip as he approached the truck.

“Sure.”

Dimitri helped bring everything inside and put away the haul while Jack prepped for cooking. Jack asked Dimitri his preferences for the dish, making sure only to add ingredients the Leshy would like, but it seemed nothing was off the menu. The entire time he worked, Dimitri hovered on the sidelines, silently observing Jack work.

“Okay, you gotta go, big guy.”

Dimitri blinked in response, saying nothing.

“Cooking is better without an audience, don’t let any of those cooking shows trick you into thinking otherwise.”

Dimitri nodded, then turned and stared out a window silently.

Jack grimaced. “You can watch TV or something. You don’t just have to stand there doing nothing.”

“I am observing the trees.” Dimitri pointed outside. “They are singing silent stories.”

“I mean, as long as you’re not bored.”

“Never.” Dimitri tilted his head, appearing to listen intently to the magical trees.

Whatever, Jack would take it. He went to work cooking, setting the table, and making everything look as pretty as possible. Jack rarely went for elegance when plating, but he wanted this to be a special meal. After he got everything ready, Jack invited Dimitri to join him.

“This is too beautiful to eat.”

“Well, let’s just hope it tastes as good as it looks.” Jack laughed. “Go ahead, take a bite.”

Dimitri eyed the dish, searching for the perfect spot, then cut a small piece off the edge of his slice of lasagna. He did so in such a way that it didn’t disturb the rest of his food, then he took a small bite, seeming to savor every flavor.

“Mmmmm.” Dimitri closed his eyes as he chewed, truly enveloped by the sensations.

Jack wondered how long it'd been since Dimitri had had a real meal, something made with love—and a hint of frustration for the damn directions. It didn't escape his mind that the Hearst probably treated Dimitri poorly when they kept him locked up.

"You gotta try the garlic bread." Jack lifted the breadbasket, placing it close to Dimitri.

"Oh my." Dimitri took a small bite, then almost immediately chomped down on half the slice of his garlic bread. "This is amazing. Nikolai will be so envious when he learns of what bread is capable of becoming."

"You have no idea," Jack said. "I'll have to take you to my favorite bakery sometime."

"I would like that," Dimitri said between bites of garlic bread, already onto his third piece with a fourth on his plate.

"Now, dip it into the sauce."

Dimitri followed Jack's suggestion and practically melted as the bread hit his tongue.

"Heavenly."

Jack took great pleasure in watching Dimitri enjoy his meal. And sure, Jack felt awkward lifting his pumpkin mask up to take bites of his food, but he made do. It wasn't the act of wearing the pumpkin itself. No, Jack always wore his pumpkin mask, even when completely alone. He'd trained himself centuries back to never risk being caught without the mask, the comfort, the safety.

What Jack hated was the fact that he had to reveal his chin, even only a bit, in order to take a bite of food. His hideous face would certainly churn anyone's stomach if they saw the full extent of his broken flesh. He only hoped these tiny glimpses didn't ruin Dimitri's appetite.

But in truth, a strange warmth washed over Jack as he watched Dimitri. This reaction wasn't what he anticipated. Dimitri didn't stare. He didn't steal secret glances. Most of all, he didn't avoid eye contact either. Somehow, Dimitri simply existed in this moment, enjoying his meal and Jack's company, completely unfazed by the small horrors available every time Jack raised his mask to grab a bite.

"I have to wonder, how do you see through this pumpkin?" Dimitri asked, pointing to the shadowy eyes of the pumpkin. "At first, I assumed you had carved small eye slots. But seeing you raise the pumpkin to eat, I see there are no openings at all."

“Oh, my vision works through the shadows,” Jack explained. “Anything the shadows sense, so do I.”

“All shadows?”

“Just the ones connected to the Nuckelavee. Though his spirit can extend to all forms of darkness, so I suppose in a sense, I could see through all shadows.”

“Not just see, though. You said sense. Can you smell and hear through your shadows as well?”

“And feel and taste through them too.” Jack grinned. “It’s sort of automatic, but also on a secondary wavelength. If I need to, I can disconnect from those extensions. But that’s only if I’m having a total sensory overload.”

“I see. There is much I did not know of the Nuckelavee.” Dimitri stared at Jack; his glowing green eyes held this haunting aura. “I assumed you were the Nuckelavee, but you speak of it as if it is a separate entity.”

“I mean, sort of. We’re one now, but we weren’t always,” Jack said with a chuckle. “It’s complicated. I’ll have to give you the full story sometime.”

“I would like that very much,” Dimitri said, taking a bite of his lasagna. “May I ask another question about the pumpkin?”

Jack gulped, unsure if he wanted to proceed, but Dimitri’s genuine curiosity held no judgment, and that sparked a bit of courage in Jack.

“Absolutely. Ask away.”

“Is it difficult eating with the pumpkin?”

“No, I’m used to it,” Jack answered, quickly scooping a big bite of lasagna into his mouth before dropping the mask to hide while he chewed. “It’s more of a headache when I fall asleep with it on.”

“Oh, so you wear it a lot?” Dimitri studied Jack, seemingly to analyze Jack’s shadowy expression, which only made his nervous grin grow wider. “But you do not require the pumpkin to function?”

“What? No, I mean, it’s not like a part of me, but it’s a creature comfort, you know?”

Dimitri gave Jack this sincere knowing nod. “I believe I do.”

Jack contemplated sharing the purpose of the pumpkin, the magic woven into the mask, the reason he wore it almost all the time. Then the door flung open, and Astaroth barged inside.

“I have finished off my foe and require sustenance.” He pranced inside. “Prepare me a feast fit for a king.”

Jack frowned. "Gimme a second to feed him."

"No," Dimitri said with a raised hand in protest as he leapt out of his seat. "You have cooked this glorious meal. Allow me to feed the dog."

Dimitri shuffled toward the dry food on a countertop in front of Astaroth's empty metal bowl on the floor.

"Ten scoops," Jack said. "Demon possession burns calories pretty fast."

"We have the metabolism mortals would envy," Astaroth boasted.

Dimitri grabbed the cup from the bag with a scoop of dry food and prepared Astaroth's meal.

"The audacity," Astaroth scoffed. "You think the brown pebbles alone shall satiate me? After my conquest of torture, my voyage of carnage, my—"

"For Christ's sake," Jack shouted. "He has doggy gravy packets in the upper cabinet."

Dimitri opened the cabinet above the bag of dry food, pulling out a few different flavors of the gravy packets.

"He gets two max."

"Are these the right ones?" Dimitri asked. "They say they are for puppies. Are the ingredients identical to doggies, or are these older from when he perhaps possessed a puppy?"

"Oh no, those are the right flavors. He just has a sensitive stomach because he's a little bitch," Jack said, making a mocking expression at Astaroth.

"My stomach is the most refined stomach that has ever stomached," Astaroth replied with a stern squint in his gaze. "I merely prefer the juvenile flavors."

Dimitri finished preparing the meal and moved aside for Astaroth.

"May I ask a question?"

Astaroth eyed Dimitri up and down. "You may, peasant."

"What happened to Irvin? I assume you have finished your torment of him. How did he—"

"Who?" Astaroth cocked his head, and his ears flopped.

"The hunter you dragged away."

"Oh, he was such a bore, that one. Barely made it six days. I ended up venturing elsewhere for entertainment," Astaroth explained. "Who requires both their lungs to breathe? Utterly ridiculous."

Dimitri's glowing green eyes widened, then his shocked expression seemed to ease. Perhaps he found some peace in Irvin's death, at least, Jack hoped as much. Even as Astaroth continued rambling on about all the ways he desecrated his corpse for the remaining days he was out in the woods.

"Surprisingly, his eyes made for a fitting crowned jewel atop the pyre of his reassembled limbs. Sadly, he did not burn well. This dimension is quite flaccid in terms of anguish. Quite boring."

Once Astaroth had his food, they returned to their meal, and Dimitri helped clean up. He didn't take no for an answer, and Jack gladly accepted.

"Why don't you pick a movie?" Jack said, handing Dimitri the controller.

It was entertaining watching him scroll through the endless selection available for streaming.

"So many choices, yet never anything to watch, you know?"

"I fear I will pick the wrong one."

"Doubtful," Jack said, grabbing his phone. "I'll be back."

Jack scrolled through notifications, replying to comments, deleting others, and blocking a few haters because life was too short to dwell on nonsense. Even if Jack was immortal, he wouldn't waste his eternity on some desperate online douchebag.

After going through as many updates as his mind could handle, Jack went through some of his drafted videos. He picked one where he flexed in the dark with only orange neon lighting to illuminate his muscles.

He added the text "Tis the season" in scary Halloween font, then went to find a song to fit the short clip.

"You are always on that thing," Dimitri said, practically whispering in Jack's ear.

"Holy shit." Jack nearly jumped out of his skin and quite literally almost knocked his pumpkin head off before properly securing it. "You were just on the couch. How do you move so quietly?"

"Leshy legs." Dimitri shrugged. "We learned from the trees."

Jack laughed at that, finding it absurd and honestly the best answer he could've hoped for.

"You make these videos to share with the world?"

"Yeah."

"Is that safe?"

“About as safe as anything is in this world,” Jack said. “But I have fun posting content. It helps fill up the long days. I’m not exactly built to work a nine-to-five, and even if I was, I would never subject myself to such hellish torture.”

“Capitalism is my favorite form of anguish,” Astaroth shouted from the kitchen. “Convince mortals they have all the choices in the world, then slowly strip them of every choice until all that remains is submission and obedience and a desperate yearning for a grand life they will never obtain. Glorious.”

Dimitri’s pointed ears twitched a bit, something Jack had noticed he did when confused. Sometimes Jack imagined it was Dimitri’s way of trying to listen more intently, as if that would help him understand the context of a subject.

“Why are you naked in the video?”

“I’m not naked.” Jack pointed to the low-hanging, small towel around his waist that ended halfway down his thighs, leaving his gray body very exposed.

“Does everyone only post naked, not naked footage?”

“I mean, it is the internet, so mostly?” Jack shrugged. “There’s so much I gotta catch you up on. But I don’t always post thirst traps. It’s really just to find new followers. People like to look at a sexy bitch, so they stumble onto these clips, then follow for my longer content of running my mouth about nonsense.”

“Thirst trap?” Dimitri scrunched his face. “Is there a nearby watering hole you wish to detain the online people at?”

Jack burst out into laughter. “Wow, your mind makes the funniest connections. No, a thirst trap is just a photo or video of someone being sexy for the sheer thrill of it.”

Dimitri didn’t seem to grasp what Jack was saying, so he tried to explain it more thoroughly.

“I post a lot of monster content on my page,” Jack explained. “I mean, look at me, I can’t exactly hide the fact I’m a monster. Eventually, I realized people really like what they see. I can admit I’m a sexy guy. Well, so long as the pumpkin head stays on. That unmasking would probably kill my follower count.”

“You are mean to yourself.”

“No, just realistic.” Jack ran a hand over his bare chest. “But I can appreciate all the monster lovers out there who think I’m sexy.”

“People think monsters are sexy?”

“Yes and no.” Jack rocked his head side to side. “Most people think I’m just a human dressed up as a monster, which to them is sexy.”

“So, if they thought you were a real monster, they would no longer find you to hold sex appeal?”

Jack paused, trying not to laugh. There was something so endearing about Dimitri’s questions, about the way he worded things in English. “Hmmm, I mean, if you find yourself in the right comment sections, you will learn there are a lot of folks hungry for monsters.”

“My word, they want to eat us?” Dimitri appeared quite perplexed. “I have seen humans commit many atrocities, but I had no idea they feasted upon our kind.”

“Oh my God,” Jack said with a laugh. “Not eating us, exactly. They’re hungry in a different kind of way.”

“I do not know of these other hungers. Can you explain?”

“They wanna get with monsters.”

“They wish to meet us?” Dimitri shook his head. “I would not like that.”

“No, like sexy times get with us.” Jack winked suggestively.

“Ooooh, they wish to fuck us?”

Jack snorted. “Well, more like they wanna get fucked by us.”

“I see. Quite the interesting prospect, but unlike my father, I have never fancied humans much in the way of intimacy. Too breakable.”

“Yeah, doubt the monster fucker crowd sees themselves that way.” Jack’s cheeks burned, and he found himself even more grateful for the pumpkin over his head. “Let’s just say there is a huge obsession with monster cock.”

Dimitri’s eyes bulged.

“You look like a literal deer in headlights,” Jack said with a laugh as he pulled out his phone.

Dimitri didn’t respond; he merely kept his green eyes fixed on his shaky reflection.

“It’s not recording. That’s just the camera.”

Dimitri didn’t say anything, merely stared at himself.

“Here you go.” Jack turned off his phone. “Camera shy, I take it?”

“I am unused to such boldness in front of society,” Dimitri explained. “My father taught me the importance of solitude.”

“Introverts unite,” Jack said with a ‘woo’. “Or I suppose...not? That would defeat the purpose of solitude.”

“He believed remaining hidden, unknown, is what kept cryptids preserved.” Dimitri stared off stoically. “Though his belief did not serve him well in the end, and it has not served the one hundred and twenty-seven monsters I have encountered any good either.”

Jack gasped, shocked the Hearst family had hunted so many cryptids over the decades. He wondered how many they hunted down before Dimitri; he wondered if, without the Leshy, they would have trouble tracking monsters. Mostly, he found himself saddened by how quickly Dimitri mentioned the kill count. He must have many of their deaths ingrained in his mind. Such a horrifying existence. Jack hoped he could help Dimitri make new memories to mend the wounds of his old life.

“I played a role in all their deaths.”

“You were forced by those hunters, by that family.”

“No.” Dimitri shamefully shook his head. “The Hearsts presented me a choice, and I picked survival. I was not forced.”

“Choosing to live means you were forced,” Jack said, wishing he could find the words to explain how cruel a decision they put on Dimitri.

He wanted to elaborate on how no one should have to face such choices. He wanted to offer comfort with words, but Jack feared he might say the wrong thing.

“Perhaps you are right,” Dimitri finally spoke, pressing a sharp nail to the black glass screen of the phone. “Let me declare myself to the world.”

“Wait, seriously?” Jack quirked an eyebrow.

“You make existing seem carefree.” Dimitri gave a soft, small smile. “For so long, existing seemed like a chore, an obligation. I would wish to see this pleasant side of life.”

“Well, let me just say, you will not find much joy online,” Jack said. “People are jerks. But if you manage to get through all the dick bags and find your community, you’ll meet some awesome people.”

“I believe I already have.”

A warmth filled Jack’s chest, and he believed if his heart still beat, then it would most certainly be thumping loudly at this moment.

“You’re too kind,” Jack said, unable to meet Dimitri’s gaze. “All right, how about we make a short intro video. That way, the comments can do the heavy lifting, and we can think up more for your lore later.”

“Okay, but I do not wish to speak,” Dimitri added. “Is there a way I can silently participate?”

“Oh, most definitely.” Jack’s eyes lit up, almost quite literally with the tiniest of sparks at the core of the shadow orbs. “Just follow my lead.”

Dimitri nodded.

Jack turned on his camera and hit record. “Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It’s your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern, and you will not believe what’s been going on. No one asked, but the last few weeks have been wild here in Sleepy Hollow.”

Jack kept the camera zoomed in close to his animated pumpkin head that mimicked his mouth as he spoke.

“Usually, humans aren’t so bold, but believe it or not, a few tried to unalive me.” Jack’s mouth turned into a tight, worried line.

In the corner of his eye, he saw Dimitri tense up, shocked by how much truth he spilled into his video.

“They failed, obviously,” Jack said, tilting the phone slightly to reveal his chest. “I’m a beast in more ways than just the sheets.”

“Do not speak of valor. It had nothing to do with the victory. You merely won because mortals fail at all things they attempt,” Astaroth shouted between hearty bites of his meal. “Their incompetence knows no bounds.”

Jack kept the camera on himself, but his audience had grown accustomed to Astaroth’s off-screen commentary. In years past, he wasted hours editing out the demon dog’s insults, only to find that after one crude line about hating humanity got Jack his first video to hit a million viewers. That was when he realized people liked snarky hate with zero apologies. It made giving zero fucks a bit easier, even if most of it was still for show.

“Side note,” Jack said, pulling the camera even closer somehow. “I met another monster. He’ll be joining me here in Sleepy Hollow.”

Jack expanded the screen to catch his full upper body.

“And no, before you even ask, he is not headless or head giving...” Jack winked. “That I’m aware of.”

He pulled Dimitri into the frame, relishing how the uneasy Leshy stared in this very assertive manner. Despite his nerves, he managed to come

across as domineering. Perhaps it was the faded glow of his green eyes. Maybe it had to do with the jagged points of his antlers. Honestly, it was probably his expressionless face coupled with the sharp jawline and broad build.

Hell, all of that kept Jack's attention while he filmed, and every other minute of the day.

"He's spent the last few centuries in Hell, so he's a bit behind on the times." Jack let the camera sit on Dimitri, making a mental note to add a sound to the video later to enhance the awkward silence. "But my goal is to catch him up."

Jack let the camera catch a full view of Dimitri's bare abdomen, and the very hairy happy trail leading to places he could only dream of exploring.

"So, be sure to comment what you think my devil daddy needs to do now that he's out of Hell."

Jack turned the camera, focusing on Dimitri's face and sharp antlers, before stopping the recording, saving the video draft, and putting his phone away.

"I was not in Hell," Dimitri said with a quizzical expression. "Not literally, at least. You may require elaboration on such details."

"Oh, part of my lore is that I'm from Hell," Jack explained. "It's just easier for people if they think we're all from the same place."

"We?" Dimitri raised a brow.

"Monsters. Cryptids. Fiendish beasts." Jack grinned. "If it ain't real in their mind, it's too confusing."

"But we are real."

"Again, not in their mind, and it's important to keep the worldbuilding consistent for humans. They get pissy if the lore isn't loreing and the way they bitch when something gets retconned," Jack explained, realizing Dimitri probably didn't understand much of what he blurted. "Trust me, I learned this when my videos got popular with the book girllies, gays, and theys."

Dimitri seemed confused in the most adorable way.

"You wouldn't believe how much those bookish nerds love a sexy thirst trap." Jack posed playfully as if he were still on camera, yet he knew full well the only eyes on him were Dimitri's. "Trust me, if they can mount it, they'll most certainly try to ride it. Reading makes folks bold."

"There are entire communities dedicated to the research of books?"

“Not exactly.” Jack smirked, awed that out of everything he said, Dimitri’s singular takeaway involved simply reading the day away.

There was something so cute about how Dimitri processed what Jack said. It made Jack want to share more of the world, overwhelm his new friend, and feed him knowledge on every absurd thing ever, just so he could watch his cute reaction. But Jack held back, knowing as much as he liked to see the scrunch in Dimitri’s brow, he wanted to take his time introducing him to the world he’d missed out on.

“I’m going to have to give you a tour of my library. Tons of classics, for sure, but you wouldn’t believe the stuff humans read now. Might make the devil himself blush.”

Dimitri eyed Jack curiously, which made the bold monster blush a bit beneath his pumpkin head. Oh, how Jack found himself grateful Dimitri couldn’t see him pining.

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CHAPTER SIX



DIMITRI'S EYES widened as he scrolled through Jack's phone.

@DarkBookGurl666: Dear Daddy I need a Deer Daddy

@Username77723405: 10 pt buckshot

@KingGael: More like back shots

@Username77723405: Sign me up

@PumpkinGurl69: I've seen the way you arch bish. I know that deer boy is cracking you open.

@JackFanEdits: Jack's gonna Whoa all right. Can't wait to see the stag man wreck your pumpkin face carving a hole with his 🍆

@BezBaddieFan: Jack's face since he uploaded this: 🍆💦🍊

@AaronLong: The eyes are weird. Maybe adjust the filter.

@MiaMommy: What filter? I want

@TedRed37: There contacts dumb a s s !

@PumpkinSpicy: Please get out your Santa costume this year and be that big bad reinDEERS ho ho ho

@Username889230: Sit on my face!

@GaheyyGagged: The way I'd let you both rail me.

@DylanKR: Eiffel towered by monsters!!! FR. Need this in my life.

The final comment Dimitri read before handing over the phone involved a picture of a tiny cartoon person suffocating by pressing their face into giant chest muscles. The cartoon had the name “me” over its head, while the chest had the name “Deer Daddy” written out.

“Humans are very odd.” Dimitri handed Jack his phone. The pair sat together on a bench outside. “I had no idea how bold they have become.”

His detainment in the Hearst estate didn’t often involve talking with many humans. Usually, he received curt commands and simply did as he was told. Rarely did anything spark an actual conversation, and if by some miracle it did, no one spoke like this.

“Humans are definitely braver behind a screen,” Jack explained. “Half of these people wouldn’t say any of this in person. Especially the haters. They’re usually just pencil-dicked incels jealous other people are actually enjoying their lives.”

“No one seemed hateful. Perhaps disturbingly detailed on what they wish for me to do to them, to you, and everyone else on earth.”

“Oh, I deleted the trash comments ahead of time,” Jack said. “Not that you couldn’t handle it, but it’s a lot to take in—and there’s a joke somewhere. But I figured this way we could slowly roll you out to the crazy of the world.”

“I prefer slow.”

Jack’s eyes twisted into something minxy, which made Dimitri’s face burn. “There’s another joke there.”

“You have many jokes, it seems.”

“Only bad ones.”

“I like bad jokes,” Dimitri said with a sultry gruffness to his voice as he leaned closer to Jack.

Whether from all the very vivid comments or perhaps all the kindness Jack had shown him as of late, Dimitri found himself interested in exploring the fascination humans had with monsters.

Jack jumped up from the bench, a bit flustered as he stepped away. “Well, I have a ton of stuff I have to get done before tonight’s show.”

“Oh, yes, the Halloween performance.” Dimitri nodded.

“Yeah.” Jack smiled. “Have you considered attending?”

“I do not know what I would wear.”

Jack chuckled. "You don't have to wear anything. I don't."

"You perform in the nude?" Dimitri asked with a raised brow. "I thought you said that was not allowed online, and this performance will be uploaded onto the internet."

"No, not like that. I mean, when I said you don't have to wear anything, I meant like you don't have to dress up in a costume. Um, my costume is just me. Pumpkin head, gray skin, shadow stitching, and bam. I'm my glorious monstrous self."

"Oh, I see. So, I can just be a Leshy for Halloween."

"Exactly."

"Do I have to be in the videos?"

"Not unless you want to be."

"Perhaps in the future. I am not ready to be objectified by humans quite yet. And thirst traps are difficult."

"You didn't make a thirst trap. Trust me, if you had, the comments wouldn't have been so tame."

"Oh, my." Dimitri blushed. "I will prepare myself for the future."

"Speaking of, if you're going to be in more posts, we'll need to come up with a name for you."

"I am Dimitri," he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"No, like I'm Jack, but online I'm Jack Whoa Lantern." Jack did a little shake with his hips that seemingly entranced Dimitri. "You'll want to come up with a catchy name before someone in the comments makes one that sticks. Right now, it looks like you might end up called Deer Daddy or Buck Shot."

"I do not like those names."

"Exactly, so start thinking of a better name."

Dimitri sighed, and Jack went inside.

The crows above cawed, one swooping in to join Dimitri now that his attention would not be split between them and the phone.

"Ah, yes, Nikolai, I have not forgotten you." Dimitri reached for the bag of seeds and began tossing them across the front yard.

Crows flew down between the overgrown grass and patches of dirt as they feasted. Nikolai remained perched on Dimitri's antlers.

"Here you go, buddy." Dimitri extended a hand, offering Nikolai some seeds from his spot. "Do you perhaps have any good nicknames for me?"

"Caw-caw-caw."

“No. Absolutely not,” Dimitri nearly gasped. “You are such a vulgar little thing.”

As the hours passed, Dimitri bid Nikolai a good evening and told the crows he planned on venturing into town.

Jack came out dressed in a black leather jacket and matching pants. He wore a spiked choker around his neck and similar spiked bracelets.

“I thought you said you were not dressing up.”

“Well, I’m still going as me, the Horseless Headsman.” Jack strutted by Dimitri. “I just add a little outfit flair for my shows.”

Astaroth came outside wearing a golden halo and a white robe.

“This is what you picked as your costume?”

“Ah, yes,” Astaroth replied. “The mortals celebrate All Hallow’s Eve by dressing as something frightening. This is the most horrific thing I could come up with.”

“An angel?” Dimitri almost laughed.

“Angels aren’t real.” Astaroth scoffed. “I’m a delusional Christian.”

“The delusional ones are terrifying.” Jack pointed.

“They’re all delusional,” Astaroth replied.

“I wouldn’t say that.” Jack shrugged.

“Didn’t the Church try to burn you at the stake?”

“Twice.”

“Case in point.” Astaroth grinned. “Admittedly, demons could learn a few things from the atrocities committed in the name of faith. It’s almost admirable.”

“And you don’t think humans are good at anything.”

“Generally, no.”

With that, they set off and walked into town. The fog weaved around them, making Dimitri’s steps a bit wobbly. Jack reached out, pressing a hand to his shoulder and steadying his stance.

“Sorry about that, but I figured since we’re going to be walking all around the festival, might as well cut down on the trip through the woods.”

In a matter of minutes, they reached the edge of the forest and stood close to downtown.

“The walk with the trees is the best part, though,” Dimitri teased.

They explored many sights downtown. Scantly dressed people enticed them to play horrifying games, silent masked men stood ominously close

with flyers to haunted houses, and vendors shouted about their wicked delicious foods.

“Oh my God, I love your horns,” a drunken woman said, stumbling toward Dimitri. “They’re so sexy. Can I try them on?”

Without waiting for his response, she reached out and snatched him by his antler, yanking as hard as she could.

“Please, let go.” He pulled free and glared at her.

“Okay, rude much? So, rude. You’re actually such an assho—” She fell into the ground, disappearing into the darkness before a scream escaped her lips.

Dimitri’s green eyes widened in shock. “What just happened?”

“Nothing much.” Jack pointed to a nearby alleyway where the woman stood petrified, hands clutching the brick walls for safety.

“What did you do?”

“Just sent her on her way...quickly.”

“What if someone saw?”

“Crowded place like this with so much going on, doubtful. And what are they going to do if they did?” Jack stood boldly, unfazed by the presence of so many people around him. “And I don’t think she’s going to say anything. Not that anyone would believe her.”

Dimitri blushed a bit. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Jack smiled.

They continued making their way through the crowded Halloween festival, but the longer they ventured, the more difficulty Dimitri had. His senses were sharper than most, and the noise, the smells, the behavior all around him became a whirlwind of exhaustion.

“Do you want to go back?” Jack eyed Dimitri. There was a softness in his shadowy expression.

“No, I wish to see your performance.” Dimitri frowned. “I just do not wish to see all of these people.”

“Well, I can’t get rid of them all...without causing a scene.” Jack winked. “But I might be able to help make them disappear. Not entirely, just enough to get through the crowd.”

Jack reached into his pockets, retrieving a small device. He opened it and pulled out two tiny earbuds. When Jack brought them close to Dimitri’s ears, he recoiled a bit, unsure what these devices did.

“Trust me, please.”

Dimitri relaxed, allowing Jack to stick them in his ears. It did help lessen the noise. Part of Dimitri hoped to cancel out the sounds altogether, but he would settle for this small reprieve.

“Put everyone else out of your mind,” Jack said before turning on his music.

A soft piano’s melody played in Dimitri’s ears and drowned out the world around him. Every awful noise was replaced by this calming music. Dimitri smiled at Jack, grateful for every little thing he did to help him adjust to this strange new world.

“Now, follow me, and ignore the chaos.”

Dimitri did just that, trailing behind Jack. Dimitri lost himself in the swagger in Jack’s steps, following the swish of his hips as he effortlessly parted the crowd and led the way downtown.

When they arrived at a large outdoor auditorium, Jack cut through the edge of the crowd and brought Dimitri to a quieter location.

“My show’s starting up soon, so I’m going to leave you with my phone. Keep the music jamming as long as you need, and if you want to head out early, Astaroth can lead you back to the woods.”

“I better be getting paid for my services,” the dog huffed.

Dimitri smiled at Jack and watched him disappear backstage. People chanted and cheered, awaiting the start of the performance. When an old man entered from stage left, Dimitri turned off the music. The crowd quieted as a spotlight fell onto the man. He wore face paint resembling a skeleton.

“I’m Dexter Winston,” he said, tipping his top hat to the crowd. “And tonight, I’m going to give you the history behind the Horseless Headsman, while he gives you a hell of a show. If you came to the quiet town of Sleepy Hollow in hopes of seeing the Headless Horseman, let me just say you’re about to get an upgrade.”

Jack Whoa Lantern entered the stage, and Dimitri knew it was the persona who entered, not the monster he’d come to know. As Jack Whoa Lantern, he possessed an air of cockiness, a bravado for entertainment. Dimitri enjoyed the flair of Jack Whoa Lantern, but he preferred the kindness of Jack.

Casting shadows, Jack began conjuring silhouettes to match Dexter’s story.

It seemed bizarre learning that Jack was the child of the Headless Horseman. If the Headless Horseman was also a Nuckelavee, that didn't make sense. They were spirits. They shouldn't be able to procreate. Still, Jack's mother was a witch, so perhaps she played a role in the birth.

"Wait, he killed his mother, too?" Dimitri asked, very confused by the chronology of the story. "As a little baby? That would be difficult even for Jack."

"The story behind the legend of the Horseless Headsman is all fake," Astaroth replied.

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Humans love their falsehoods. It brings them joy to lie to others, to lie to themselves, to be lied to. I'm not certain why, but I think it has to do with the fact that so many of them are inanely stupid."

"Ah, I see."

Dimitri figured this must have had to do with the worldbuilding lore Jack mentioned. People liked their proper narrative structure, even if it was built on something fake. Dimitri continued watching the show, entertained by Jack's continued performance as he moved into fighting fire with his shadows. When the music changed again, Jack began dancing provocatively. It seemed every song brought out a new show from Jack.

All in all, Dimitri enjoyed himself.

After the show, many people took photos with Jack, bought trinkets from Dexter, and asked for autographs. Dimitri stayed on the sidelines quietly, while Astaroth abandoned them to pursue something more fun.

During a lull, Jack rushed over to Dimitri and grabbed his hand. "All right, let's get out of here before Dax drags me into an encore."

Dimitri raced off with Jack, disappearing into a more secluded part of downtown where few others congregated. The noise of the festivities was still quite loud even a few blocks away, but Dimitri ignored it in favor of Jack's rambles.

"It was a good show, but not my best," Jack insisted. "We've got to find another way to amp up the show without turning into some Vegas magic stunt. I don't want to be a tacky douche. I just want to raise the stakes, you know?"

Dimitri, in fact, did not know, but he nodded politely all the same.

"Your origin story was quite fascinating."

"Yeah, yeah, I know it's silly, but Dexter tells it with such flair."

“I have wanted to ask for some time about your actual origins, your connection to or as the Nuckelavee—”

“The reason I wear the pumpkin,” Jack interjected with a thin smile.

Dimitri nodded, admitting to his piqued curiosity.

“Well, it all started in 1818 when I was born a boring, basic mortal,” Jack said with the same theatrical flair he had during his performance earlier. “My mother’s a witch, quite the skilled one at that.”

“Yes, and I assume you did not kill her as in the staged origin story for the audience?”

“Nope, she’s alive and kicking the hell out of someone somewhere, I’m sure of it.” Jack laughed. “By the time I turned twenty, she’d given up on teaching me the craft. I had no talent for magic whatsoever. So, she turned to other methods.”

“The Nuckelavee.” Dimitri nodded, trying to convey he followed this true version of the story.

“Not quite. The Nuckelavee will show up later. First, she attempted to summon a demon to imbue me with powers, but that didn’t work out. The dude basically tried to possess me and devour my soul, so my mom just banished him.”

“Is that your demon dog, Astaroth? Did she banish him into the dog’s form?”

“Oh, no, I didn’t meet Astaroth until way later. No, that demon she sent packing. Then she decided I needed something less sentient.”

Dimitri followed Jack further down the streets, listening intently. For the first time in a long time, Dimitri lowered his guard, finding himself less fearful of what might jump out of the darkness. He was with Jack, the embodiment of the shadows.

“My mother heard legends of a Nuckelavee possessing a corpse in the town of Sleepy Hollow. She decided to release the spirit from the corpse and put it in a living semi-willing host.”

“Semi?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “No one really says ‘no’ to my mother, so I just accepted my fate. Unfortunately, I didn’t realize part of that acceptance would be the Nuckelavee wedging its way into my body and... Let’s just say things got messy.”

Dimitri stayed close to Jack as he recounted his story, captivated by every little detail of how he transformed.

“Nuckelavee are powerful spirits, but also more like primordial energy. They don’t really have desires or motivations; they just exist. Since it was possessing a corpse, it sort of struggled to function. No independent thoughts, all base instinct and fleeting memories from what was once connected to the body.”

“Why would it possess a corpse to begin with?”

“Don’t know. I suspect when it initially possessed the nobleman or whatever, the process just sort of killed the original host. Thus, creating the Headless Horseman.”

They continued walking through the neighborhood, but the rustling of leaves caught Dimitri’s attention. Trees whispering their hello. These were not just the trees around town, but the trees of the woods he spent much of his time in. They were closer to home than he realized.

“Fun fact about the Headless Horseman: there was no horse. That was just the Nuckelavee.”

Jack then tried describing his true form, or the form of the spirit merged with his body. It was similar to a centaur, only instead of a half horse, the full body of the horse took on a demonic, shadowy form, and the appearance of a human rode on top of it—only the mortal had no legs and seemed fused to the horse’s spine. It sounded truly sinister in Dimitri’s mind. Especially when Jack turned his smiley face into one with jagged shark-like teeth that snapped loudly.

“Anyway, my mom managed to separate the Nuckelavee from the corpse it possessed and then merged it with me. Which is how I ended up like this.” Jack gestured to his many stitched-up injuries across his arms, chest, legs, and neck.

“I was wondering about this. You seemed virtually immune to damage, even with iron, but you have so many wounds.”

“Scars, really,” Jack said with a light laugh. “When the Nuckelavee jumped into my body, it literally ripped me apart. I ended up torn into a ton of tiny pieces.”

“That sounds...” Dimitri forcibly contained a shudder. “That sounds incredibly painful.”

“For sure. Mostly, it wasn’t the best start to our relationship, but since we were fused as one being, the Nuckelavee immediately went to work fixing what it’d broken.” Jack stood under a bright streetlight and posed with his arms out wide. “Ta-da, this was unfortunately the best it could do.”

Dimitri frowned, disappointed in how Jack saw himself. There was nothing unfortunate about his appearance.

“The stitches are actually just my own shadows holding my body together.”

“That must take a lot of concentration.”

“Not really, the Nuckelavee is on it.”

“Does it talk to you?”

“No, I mean, sometimes I can feel its feelings, and I know it can feel mine. We’re the same being now, but also not at all. Weird, right?”

“It is interesting that you were human before all this.”

“I guess.” Jack shrugged.

“That makes us similar.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I am half-human, half-monster. You were full human and now are full monster.”

“Hmm, didn’t think about it like that.”

“You know, Leshy are also more spirit than other creatures. Not the same as this Nuckelavee, but some similarity.”

Jack smirked; his shadowy eyes seemed delighted by the connection.

“Can I ask another question?”

“You just did, but sure, I’ll give you another question.”

“What is that pumpkin made of?” Dimitri asked, sensing the magical properties but unsure what the purpose of such a thing was.

“It’s enchanted. Witches and enchanted pumpkins, I swear.” Jack chuckled. “It’s hollowed out and got a little extra reinforcement to it. Sort of like an armored helmet.”

“Fascinating. Bizarre but fascinating.”

“Yeah, let’s just say before the Nuckelavee ripped me open, I had a face only a mother could love. But after it blew my head apart and stitched me back together, even my mother had a hard time looking at me. The pumpkin helps.”

Dimitri got quiet, saddened by such a thought. He couldn’t fathom his mother being disgusted by his appearance, not ever. She loved all his features, those that were human and Leshy. She loved everything about his father, no reservations or hesitation at his monstrous appearance.

“I apologize for prying.”

“Nah, no worries. I used to share this stuff online all the time. Just most folks didn’t like my OG lore, saying it was too complicated, or commenting how they heard different versions of the Horseless Headsman—Daxter’s doing.”

“He seems very intrigued by the Horseless Headsman, even if he tells the wrong story.”

“He just likes the money monsters make.”

“Why do you tell the world you are a monster? This is why hunters come for you. You cannot just announce yourself to the world.”

Jack laughed loudly. “I mean, I sort of can. And I do. But no one takes it seriously. They think I’m cosplaying as a local legend.”

“Only you are the local legend.”

“Yeah, but no one believes in cryptids—not really.”

“The hunters who brought me here believed in your story enough to try to kill you.”

“Sure, but look how that turned out. Trust me, they’re not even on my radar.”

Dimitri found it oddly comforting how dismissive Jack was of the threats of human hunters. It wasn’t purely bravado either, considering how easily he dispatched of them. Part of Dimitri wanted to believe he’d remain safe in Jack’s company.

“Point is, no one really believes in monsters or spirits or demons, and those who do are usually labeled wackos, conspiracy fanatics.” Jack strutted ahead, flaunting his body under another streetlight. “So, as far as the world is concerned, I’m just a sexy cosplaying boy with an ambiguous sexuality.”

“Why ambiguous?”

“Ah, to piss off the gay boys who claim I’m queerbaiting and to let the monster girlies think they got a shot.”

Dimitri quirked a brow. “I think my English needs work. I understood the words but none of the meaning.”

“That’s right, you’re still so far behind on the times. We’re going to have to do a bigger crash course on social media. I guess history, too.” Jack hopped up with enthusiasm. “I’m gonna go grab my laptop when we get home and make like a whole spreadsheet on it.”

Dimitri merely stared without blinking, finding Jack’s enthusiasm delightful.

“Hmmm, oh, just so you know, a laptop is like a personal computer. Do you know what a computer is? It’s sort of this magical device, only instead of magic they use...um...science? No. Um, well, it’s made with computer chips. Wait, no. Um, well... Okay, I don’t know how they’re made, but I know how they work.”

Dimitri laughed. “I know what a computer is. The hunters would use it when researching cryptids, when communicating with the Hearst family.”

“Okay, okay. We’re going to have to make a list of the things you know and don’t,” Jack said. “Oh, I can get my markers, and we can make a color-coded list of things. How fun.”

Jack rushed ahead, filled with this overwhelming glee that spread to Dimitri. He followed Jack toward the woods, and the pair disappeared into the magical fog. All the while, Dimitri trailed behind Jack, listening to his random shouts of trivia he planned on teaching Dimitri.

There was so much about the world Dimitri didn’t understand, but he found himself a bit excited to learn more about it alongside Jack.

CHAPTER SEVEN



“MAY I ask what it is you do all day locked inside your room?” Dimitri asked.

Jack plopped onto the couch, eyeing Dimitri and Astaroth chatting.

“Mostly, I work on my goal to unleash the apocalypse and destroy the world,” Astaroth said rather casually. “I also play games on Steam.”

Dimitri tilted his head, ears perking up inquisitively. Jack adored when Dimitri’s pointed ears twitched.

“Video games,” Jack said, holding up his controller to answer that curiosity in Dimitri’s vibrant green eyes.

“But better because mine involve mods,” Astaroth explained. “I enjoy modding. Nothing is quite as entertaining as stepping foot into a god’s realm and spitting in their face by altering the mechanics of reality to bend to your whim.”

“What is modding?”

“Adding changes to a game,” Jack answered.

“No, it is so much more,” Astaroth continued. “It is staring at creation itself and defying the laws of the world. It is truly glorious.”

“Quite sinister,” Dimitri said, turning his attention toward Jack. “But are we just going to ignore the apocalypse comment?”

“He always talks about that,” Jack said. “I’ll worry when frogs start raining down.”

Astaroth tsked. “As if I’d do something so pedestrian as the ten plagues.”

“Mostly, I just tune him out when he talks about destroying the world,” Jack continued. “He’s been running his mouth about it for centuries.”

“The mortal ways are numbered,” Astaroth said with a wicked glint in his red eyes. “I am working to burst the bubble of capitalism, which will eradicate all sense of certainty for the mortals, then and only then will I unleash true catastrophe across the globe.”

“That is ominous.”

“Meh, money’s overrated when you live in the woods off the grid.”

“You live on your phone, foolish peasant,” Astaroth said rather smugly.

Jack couldn’t counter it because he sort of did. It hadn’t really occurred to him that, technically speaking, he wasn’t entirely off the grid. Mostly, he just ran stuff through Astaroth to avoid a legal paper trail. For a demon dog, he knew how to cook the books for all digital data.

“On that note, I am going for a walk if anyone wishes to join.”

Astaroth’s tail wagged back and forth. “World domination can wait; I wish to go for the walk.”

“I’m going to stay here,” Jack said. “I’ve got some filming to do, anyway.”

“Have fun,” Dimitri said as he exited the house with Astaroth.

“Back at you.”

With the house to himself for a bit, Jack sprawled out onto the couch and started going through his notifications. Jack made his way through the comments, smirking at some of the very suggestive ones.

@JackFanEdits: When is Deer Daddy returning?

@TedRed37: You cant just tease us with a hottie cosplay partner and then never update.

@DevotedCryptid: They’re not cosplaying!

@TedRed37: STFU and go touch grass.

@DarkBookGurl666: GIMME DAT DEER DADDY !!!

@PumpkinSpicy: I want!

They included a screenshot photo of Dimitri’s solemn expression. Christ, he really made somber look sexy.

There were increasingly more provocative comments and more photos. Some crudely drawn memes, others were just screenshots of Dimitri that

Jack couldn't help but wonder if they'd be turned into memes.

Then the memes of Jack's face started popping up in his comments. Someone used one of Jack's shocked expressions with the text reading "when Deer Daddy comes in the back door." That turned out to be one of the tamer comments with several thousand likes.

Jack sighed, put on his best face, and went to record a quick video.

"Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It's your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern, and I've been reading those comments. It's clear you're all hungry for Deer Daddy—not his official name, FYI." Jack grinned. "But don't worry, he'll share it with you soon. We've got big plans for..."

Jack paused for several seconds, then hit stop on the recording before sending it to his drafts. He'd work on something cheerful and sultry later. Instead, he found himself dwelling on a bit of vulnerability, so he hit record again to let out the feelings.

"Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It's your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern, and I am all twisted up."

Jack didn't hide the glumness in his voice, the vulnerability, but he was cautious about being too raw. People sometimes saw sensitivity in a post as an invitation to be extra cruel.

"Have you ever been around someone and just felt completely like yourself? No pretense, no expectations, no mask," Jack said, waving a hand over his pumpkin head. "You just were able to let it all hang out. Freak flags and awkward jokes—only, they aren't awkward with that person. Nothing is awkward around them. No need to change what you say, reel back your craziness out of worry you might run them off. Because they see it. They see you, and for whatever God-awful reason, they like it."

Jack smirked into the camera, letting the recording roll in silence as he contemplated.

"But then you wonder, do they like you?" Jack pondered the question. "Do they see you because they want that in their life, or are they just a good friend?"

Jack went to the text captions and typed, 'Felt cute. Might delete later.' Then he hit upload, and as the percentage of the loading video increased, he contemplated sharing these thoughts with Dimitri.

It wasn't as if Dimitri would just scroll online and stumble onto Jack's mini confessional. Was it even a confession? What would Jack confess to

exactly? That he liked Dimitri? That he wanted Dimitri? That he wanted Dimitri to want him?

All that did was put a pit of anxiety into Jack's stomach, twisting his necrotic organs around. If Dimitri didn't feel the same...Jack might ruin a good thing. A great thing. It wasn't great, though, pining and wondering and feeling... It could be wonderful, though, if Dimitri felt the same.

Why would he, though?

The door burst wide open, Astaroth growling as he rushed inside. "Fucking stocks."

Jack quirked a brow.

"I can't even enjoy a leisurely walk without someone attempting to ruin my plans for world domination."

"By conquering the stock market?" Jack chuckled.

"I have no time for your nonsense," Astaroth snarled. "Keep it up, and I'll buy those apps you use and destroy them."

"Yeah, all right." Jack scoffed, then thought about it for a moment. "Wait, you don't actually have that kind of money, right? That'd be absurd."

Astaroth glowered at Jack, his eyes glowing red.

"Learn something new every day." Jack lay back on the couch, scrolling through notifications. Already, comments were pouring in on his vague posting, encouraging him to go for it.

Jack sat up, considering.

It would be absolutely foolish.

A waste of time.

But it couldn't hurt to have a small conversation. Heck, it might not even lead to a confession of feelings. Maybe they'd just chat like usual, and Jack would be content with that much.

Jack stepped outside for some fresh air and maybe to wander the woods to find Dimitri. Maybe he could think of the right way to broach the topic on the walk. It turned out, he didn't have to since Dimitri skipped around near the edge of the woods leading back to the open yard of the cottage. He jumped into the air, occasionally bouncing against a tree before landing back onto the dirt.

"Wait, are you actually prancing around, like literally skipping around like an actual deer?" Jack went to retrieve his phone and film this moment for posterity, then thought better of himself. "I can't believe this."

Dimitri jumped again and landed in front of Jack with a low grunt. “Well, I am basically a human stag.”

“OhMyGod, is Stag Man based off the Leshy lore?”

“Who?”

Jack did pull out his phone this time, pulling up images of Stag Man. “He’s a cryptid legend. Not sure if he’s real or not. Then again, no one’s ever sure about any of them. I’ve always been partial to Moth Man.”

Dimitri stared at the grainy photos of Stag Man. “I am not familiar with this. Perhaps he is a Leshy, too.”

“That’d be cool. Those photos are mostly fake. Not a lot of monsters like to get caught on camera.” Jack playfully wiggled his hips. “Most of ‘em aren’t as photogenic as me.”

“Or humble.” Dimitri grinned. “And to be clear, I was not prancing. I was frolicking. There is a difference.”

“Good to know.” Jack smiled, trying to work up the nerve to ask the question that’d been bouncing around his head.

Dimitri stared at Jack, probably confused by the weirdly silent smile. Dimitri’s unblinking, glowing green eyes studied Jack until he couldn’t contain himself.

“Do you like me?” Jack blurted.

“Of course, I do.”

“No, not like me like that, more like do you like me like me?” Jack asked in a frazzled tone, annoyed by his own absurd question.

“Perhaps my English needs more work. What does a double like mean?”

“Oh, Christ, I’m an annoying tween, aren’t I?”

“Is the tween another type of monster legend?” Dimitri asked with such sincerity, it eased the growing tension in Jack’s nerves.

“I’m sorry. I’m being silly because I’m nervous,” Jack said as his voice steadied a bit. “I’ve come to realize that I like you. I have feelings for you. Romantic feelings. Which is something I haven’t had in a long time for anyone. The last time I even tried exploring something with someone, they were human—I don’t exactly meet a lot of other monsters—and things didn’t exactly work out.”

“I see.” Dimitri had this calm demeanor, this knowing expression, this unreadable face, and it made Jack panic.

“To be clear, you don’t have to like me back, I’m just stupid and fickle, and I talk too much, and my brain gets all sloshy when I think because I’m

ridiculous and—”

Dimitri leaned forward and kissed the pumpkin where Jack’s shadowy mouth was rambling. Suddenly, Jack’s expression went blank, vanishing altogether, and leaving only a pumpkin over his head.

“I did not think that would work, but what an interesting trick I have learned.” Dimitri grinned. “It seems you become silent when flustered.”

“So, were you kissing me because you also like me or because you just wanted to shut me up? Because I totally get it if you just wanted me to be quiet, I can talk a—”

Dimitri kissed Jack’s pumpkin a second time, knocking the air out of Jack’s lungs as he gasped with surprise.

“I do like you,” Dimitri replied. “But I do not like kissing your pumpkin.”

“Yeah, I’ve never really done kissing because of the pumpkin.” Jack chuckled nervously.

“As adorable as the pumpkin is, it is not kissable,” Dimitri said. “And I wish to kiss you.”

“I’m not very kissable either.” Jack trembled a bit. “I don’t show my face ever. I mean, people have seen it, and I’ve seen the look in their eyes when they see me. Truly see me. It always ends the same. Horror, screams, sometimes pitchforks. Usually just pity and disgust.”

“I wish to see for myself,” Dimitri said with this calm command.

“It’s okay if it freaks you out, I won’t be offended.” Jack slowly lifted the pumpkin off his head, squinting as the sunlight hit his eyes.

His actual eyes that Dimitri stared into.

“They are golden,” he said breathlessly.

Jack’s cheeks burned, and his gray skin reddened ever so slightly. The longer Dimitri stared at him, the more he took in, and that terrified Jack.

The scars on his face were stitched together, but his features were still a bit jagged, a bit broken from when his body exploded upon contact with the Nuckelavee.

Dimitri reached out a hand and brushed aside a strand of Jack’s shaggy, white hair.

“You are not hideous.” Dimitri leaned closer. “You are beautiful. Absolutely breathtaking in the best way imaginable.”

Jack nearly collapsed into Dimitri, nearly fell to pieces from his words.

Dimitri pressed a hand to Jack's chin, lifting his gaze to meet his, then pressed his lips to Jack's. The moment was absolutely electric. Jack had never kissed another person. Sure, he'd been intimate, explored bodies, but always with the comfort of his mask. Dimitri saw him entirely and did not flinch, did not hesitate.

Dimitri's tongue guided Jack's leading in every way, and Jack followed his instructive movements. The assertive smack of his lips, the controlling caress of his hands, even the strong buck of his hips as he pushed Jack back against the wall of the cottage.

Soon, Dimitri's mouth left Jack's, and he ran his tongue along Jack's neck.

"Ooh, goddamn," Jack moaned, intoxicated by this moment.

Dimitri continued teasing his skin with his tongue, and every time Jack's moans got louder, Dimitri silenced him with a passionate kiss.

The sharp tip of Dimitri's antler grazed Jack's skin, sending a delightful shudder through him as Dimitri's tongue licked Jack's chest.

"Sorry about that." Dimitri leaned back momentarily, shrinking his horns.

"Wow. They get smaller?"

"And bigger, if I so desire."

"There's a joke somewhere in there."

Dimitri grinned. "No jokes. You are no jester; you are a beautiful prince."

Jack lost himself in Dimitri, the two of them kissing and grinding their bodies against each other as the night sky took hold. They didn't go any further, but Jack would've done everything with Dimitri, anything for Dimitri, to Dimitri.

It was hard to imagine a time Jack found himself so swept away in another person. Never anyone who'd seen all of him.

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE FOLLOWING days with Jack had been really sweet. They continued exploring each other without going too far. Dimitri would kiss Jack, tease Jack, teach Jack. It sparked life into Dimitri, reminding him of all the joys he'd long since given up on. Jack's jovial nature washed away the horrors Dimitri couldn't bury. He could lose himself in happiness for a little bit each day.

Jack still preferred wearing his pumpkin mask, which Dimitri respected, but he did enjoy seeing Jack without the headgear when they cuddled in the evening. When they kissed. When they caressed each other, learning which spots were sensitive in the most arousing of ways, and which areas were merely ticklish. Jack had about a dozen ticklish spots that Dimitri could and would easily exploit whenever the mood struck.

But for now, all Dimitri did was focus on cooking dinner. Jack had gone out to town to set up for his final shows of the season. Apparently, with Halloween done, the tourist season would soon settle. Dimitri wouldn't complain about fewer humans in the area.

"You wouldn't believe the madness going on today," Jack said, returning with Astaroth.

The dog quickly trotted off to his bedroom.

"Oh?" Dimitri asked, focused on thinly slicing his vegetables.

"A flock of crows attacked the local florist. There were reports of crows dive-bombing people all over town. Someone even said they robbed a grocery store."

Dimitri tried to make the most of Nikolai and the services his flock offered. It saved him the hassle of venturing into town to run errands. The crows would soon be flying south for the winter, only staying this long out of courtesy to Dimitri. The bond between crows and wolves and Leshy was more universal than anything else. As Dimitri peered through the kitchen window at the changing leaves fluttering between the fog, he wondered if any wolves might migrate to these woods. Surely, they wouldn't abandon their homes for a region so far.

Then he remembered his father's teachings. How wolves treated Leshy as a member of their pack. How crows treated Leshy as a member of their flock. The creatures also held a strong bond of their own, one forged without the presence of Leshy. It amazed Dimitri how two animals so starkly different in nature formed such strong alliances.

The more Dimitri's mind lingered on his fallen father, the more bitter his mood turned, and this wasn't meant to be a somber night. Dimitri buried the memories and gave Jack a small smile.

"They did not rob," Dimitri corrected. "Money was left at all destinations."

"Huh?"

Dimitri didn't answer, merely letting his gaze fall to the bouquet of flowers. There was an assortment of Dimitri's favorite flowers from orchids to lilies, marigolds, lavender, and even a wily sunflower who convinced Nikolai he'd make an excellent addition. Dimitri didn't know which flowers Jack might like, so he picked ten of his favorites and promised each flower that if they put on their best performance, he'd plant them somewhere lovely. In truth, Dimitri had already chosen a spot in the woods for each of the flowers in this bouquet.

"So, you put a hit on the florist for pretty flowers?"

"I did not hit the florist or instruct Nikolai to assault those working there," Dimitri said with a huff. "I merely wished to make a fancy dinner."

"Ooooooh." Jack's shadowy expression twisted into surprise as he glanced over at all the ingredients.

"You are home earlier than I expected."

"That explains why the birds were divebombing me in the woods."

"Wait, what?"

"That's so sweet," Jack said, practically swooning, and glossing over the murder of crows that tried to attack him.

Dimitri would have to have words with Nikolai. He explicitly asked them to warn him of Jack's return, not to prevent it.

Jack walked into the kitchen, watching Dimitri work. "Question, how'd you get money?"

"Currency is easy to acquire if you have the right friends."

"Did your murder army of birds steal the money?" Jack asked. "I heard it's illegal to train crows."

Dimitri scoffed. "As if I could ever train obedience into Nikolai. He is as defiant as the earth is round."

"Well, it's not that round. At least, not according to the folks who passed high school biology with a C minus."

Dimitri quirked a brow.

"Some people think it's flat, so your defiant crow comment wouldn't work on them."

"Is this one of your online trending jokes? I do not like it." Dimitri made a face, studying Jack, who stifled a giggle.

"No, the only joke is the American education system," Jack said. "And the healthcare system. And the legal system. And well, basically all the systems...and anything privatized for the sake of capitalism."

"Whatever, I do not care." Dimitri finished the food and began plating. "Let me know when the people uprising. That, I always find entertaining."

"They don't do that anymore."

"Shame. Guillotines are quite effective for policy reform in bad systems."

Dimitri did his best to properly plate the steak, mashed potatoes, and green beans. Once he had the food, he added the crispy onions on top of the green beans, then pressed a spoon over the potatoes to create a perfect crater for the gravy, and he finished by adding a dollop of horseradish sauce for the steak.

Dimitri wanted the dinner to be as pretty as all the competitive cooking shows. When he wasn't exploring the woods, Dimitri spent a lot of hours watching television and catching up on the world. Apparently, humans were very obsessed with exotic ingredients, little to no time for prep work, insults, and pretty plating. Dimitri ignored the first two, worried they'd ruin the flavors, but thanks to Nikolai, he received plenty of insults. He hoped the pretty aesthetic would enhance Jack's eating experience.

"Please, take a seat."

Jack did as he was told, and Dimitri set the plate in front of him.

“Wow. You made this?” Jack’s shadowy eyes bulged in surprise.

Dimitri adored the extra animated expressions Jack would make.

“I wanted to enjoy a good meal together, a good night, a uh...a date night.”

“Date night?” Jack’s expression shrank into something soft and surprised. “I wish I’d have known. I would’ve done something special.”

“This was meant as a surprise,” Dimitri said, eyeing Jack’s plate. “You can do something special for another date night.”

“Already planning future dates?” Jack nodded as if to concur. “I can get on board with that.”

“Now, please, eat.”

Jack cut into his steak. Dimitri kept it medium rare, preferring just the lightest hit of char. He wasn’t sure of Jack’s preference, but this allowed him the ability to sear it a bit longer if Jack preferred something well done.

“Oh, damn.” Jack let out the most outrageous moan beneath his pumpkin mask. “This is delicious. Whew, that sauce has some kick. Gah, this is awesome.”

Jack went on, praising the food with every bite, insisting Dimitri try it too. He did. It was great. Mostly, it was great to see Jack lost in the joy of the meal.

It didn’t take long for them to lose themselves in idle chitchat. Jack did small talk better than anyone in the world, never running out of things to say. Dimitri nodded, keeping his attention fixed on Jack. Even if he didn’t have much to contribute, he liked to engage in the discussion in his own little way.

“It’s strange just enjoying someone else’s company,” Jack said, poking at his food with his fork. “Nice, really.”

“Surely, you have had more than just Astaroth here in the chateau.”

“Yeah, there’s been a few folks who’ve befriended me over the centuries.” Jack picked the biggest bite of steak, smashed it into as many of his potatoes as he could fit onto his fork, and shoveled it into his mouth.

Even beneath the pumpkin, his chomping was quite loud, but Dimitri figured this sudden hunger came as a much needed distraction from speaking.

“Other cryptids?” Dimitri asked as casually as he could muster.

Jack shook his head, gesturing for a moment as he chewed.

“Most monsters don’t hang around long,” Jack said, scooping up another massive bite. “My mother’s magic appealed to a lot of supernaturally inclined folks, but not so much me.”

With that, Jack lifted his mask just enough to stuff his mouth with food.

“Hmmm, so most of your company has come from humans?”

There was a long silence between them. Jack seemingly swallowed the entire bite from before with no chewing.

“Humans are hard to be with,” Jack said. “They’re usually impressed in the beginning, but some stuff will always scare them no matter what they say.”

Jack’s shadowy expression on his pumpkin turned somber, and Dimitri suspected a few of his previous partners might have preferred the Horseless Headsman keep the headgear on at all times.

“Then there’s the real challenge,” Jack continued. “Not every monster is immortal, but me... I’m forever. Well, at least until Astaroth destroys the entire world, but I’m not holding my breath.”

“Immortality can be isolating.” Dimitri studied Jack’s sad eyes.

“Everyone just grows older. They change, they die, the world keeps moving. But me... I just stay like this forever.” Jack stared at his hands, and Dimitri wondered what he saw, what he thought.

“And I stay like this.” Dimitri reached out a single hand, using his black claws to gently graze the lines of Jack’s palm.

“Do Leshy not age?” Jack asked. “How does that even work?”

“We do, and we don’t.” Dimitri continued tracing his nails over Jack’s left hand. “As a youth, I aged pretty normally. At least, according to my mother. My father says my aging was much slower, given my human genetics.”

Jack seemed to listen intently, even if his gaze remained locked on Dimitri’s gentle touch.

“Leshy are eternal but not,” Dimitri explained, poorly perhaps when he noticed Jack’s expression scrunch. “Once I reached maturity, I stopped growing. So long as I remain in the forest, connected to nature, I will maintain my vitality.”

Dimitri hesitated for a moment, contemplating his next words. Part of him wanted to remain silent, to quell the pain of his own past, but another part of him wanted to connect with Jack. Still, a small piece of him worried he’d make this about his own struggles, ignoring Jack’s pain.

“I used to hate my immortality, believing it would lead to eternal servitude to monstrous humans.” Dimitri paused for a long time, allowing Jack’s eyes to meet him. “I would even reject the Hearst’s demands to restore myself when their hunters would drag me into the woods.”

Not just any woods, but the bland, dead forest on the Hearst property. All the money in the world and their many acres of nature seemed desiccated most days. Dimitri hated the sad trees and the unnatural soil and the broken wildlife.

“What made you restore your vitality?”

“Pain, mostly.” Dimitri’s hand retreated on instinct, but Jack reached out and grabbed hold of him, steadying Dimitri. “I learned to be obedient in order to survive, even if most days I did not want to live.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I am not,” Dimitri continued. “I hated my life for many years. I saw immortality as nothing but an eternal prison serving monsters more wicked than any others I helped track down.”

Dimitri paused, taking in every part of Jack, and releasing that sorrow that haunted him most days.

“Now, I can see immortality as a gift. I can spend my days, my time, with the goofiest, most ridiculous, most absolutely silly monster in the world.”

“Those are some real choice adjectives there, buddy.” Jack chuckled. “You couldn’t have gone with clever, suave, or charming?”

“How about adorable? Beautiful?” Dimitri asked, adding a bit of a growl into his voice. “Sexy?”

Jack slapped his hands over his pumpkin head, almost trying to cover his flustered expression.

“You are perfect to look at, with or without the pumpkin.” Dimitri smiled.

Jack lifted his pumpkin off his head, revealing his face for a second time. Not since they kissed had he been so bold. Without saying it, Dimitri noticed how nervous Jack was. It wasn’t just his body language, but also the way his eyes flitted to meet Dimitri’s before looking away. He seemed to expect Dimitri to react with disgust, fear, or hate. But Dimitri couldn’t feel any of those things when in Jack’s presence.

“You make me not hate what’s underneath the mask.”

“Maybe one day, I will make you like what you see underneath the mask.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Jack teased. “You’ve seen my ego. Could you imagine how insufferable I’d be if I was walking around with pretty privilege, too?”

“You are a vexing man.”

“I try my best.” Jack grinned.

His golden eyes held such an alluring shimmer. The stitches holding his face together framed his carefree smile.

Dimitri smiled back, enjoying the rest of the evening and listening to Jack talk about anything and everything under the sun.

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CHAPTER NINE



CRINKLED and crackling leaves fluttered in the air, carried by a frigid gust. Many others still littered the trail, crunching beneath Jack's boots with every step. Winter had finally arrived and brought with it much colder days than in years past. December didn't usually have such bitter chills.

Jack folded his arms as he huddled for warmth underneath his thick Christmas sweater. While going shirtless was his trademark style, Jack wasn't venturing into town to promote his monstrous legend. Plus, he liked his ugly holiday sweaters.

"How are you cold?" Dimitri asked, his jacket was left unzipped and fully exposed his muscular abdomen.

"Not all of us have super Leshy weather resistance."

"I would not call it that," Dimitri said. "I just do not think this country gets very cold. Hot, yes. Unbearably so."

"Well, I'd be nice and toasty if we were in my truck." Jack shivered, his shadowy expression twisted into a row of chattering sharklike teeth.

Dimitri didn't respond, merely took a deep breath, and smirked.

"Yeah, yeah, nature's good and all that."

Jack often found himself forced on exhausting hikes whenever he tried to drag Dimitri into town. It was sort of their compromise with each other. Dimitri would agree to people if Jack agreed to nature. Honestly, Jack considered Dimitri's sacrifice a bigger burden. He remembered living life as an introvert for almost a century.

Maybe he was never really an introvert, just a broken extrovert. The point was, once he found himself, found the spark and joy that came with

interacting and putting himself on display, he couldn't imagine going back. However, he recalled how physically draining and mentally mortifying it was to interact with people when he didn't have the bandwidth for such things. So, he'd pick at Dimitri for sure, but he'd also show his gratitude for every outing he agreed to.

"How are you even so cold?" Dimitri asked, standing behind Jack and wrapping his arms around the frozen little monster. "I thought you could turn off your sensations."

"I don't like dulling my shadow senses unless I'm really overwhelmed," Jack explained. "It puts me in a fog."

"Like the mystery fog?" Dimitri gestured to the blanket of fog that parted with their every step.

"I can't tell if you're making a witty pun or a straightforward comparison."

"I never do anything straight." Dimitri raised his brows and gave Jack a teasing expression.

Jack snorted.

As they reached the edge of the woods, Jack paused and retrieved a set of string lights. He turned them on, letting the bright colors add to his pitch.

"What do you think?"

Dimitri stared unblinkingly. Jack handed him the lights.

"Try them on."

"Try them on?" Dimitri asked, holding the string of lights. "What are they for?"

"Something to make you festive."

"I am not festive."

"Well, you kind of are." Jack gestured to Dimitri's antlers.

"These are not for the Christmas."

"Dude, you're going to see tons of people with reindeer antlers on tonight."

"These are not reindeer." Dimitri pointed to his antlers. "I am not a reindeer."

"Well, yeah, but people are going to see them and think you're wearing them like everyone else. I mean, yours will be fancy in comparison. Most of the antlers will be cheap and probably made of cloth, but folks are going to assume you dressed up for the occasion." Jack held up the string lights that

would make a nice decorative necklace or belt or both. “You might as well embrace the festivities.”

“I agreed to attend the festival.” Dimitri crossed his arms in protest. “I never agreed to participate in Christmas joy.”

“Okay, Grinch.”

“You are a Grinch, all monsters are Grinches,” Dimitri countered. “We are isolated from the world because we are different.”

“Speak for yourself, bitch,” Jack said with a bit more sass than he’d intended, but fuck it, he went with it. “I’m a Martha May all the way.”

Jack popped his hip and posed. Hell, he was half a breath away from strutting circles around Dimitri just for the entertainment.

“Where did you even keep those?” Dimitri eyed the string lights.

“In my shadows, duh,” Jack said, mind wandering to gaming of all things. “You know, I’d make the ultimate D&D companion for any campaign. I’m funny, I have practical applications for all my powers, and I’m OP as fuck. I’m the whole package.”

Dimitri blinked, not saying a single word or shifting his expression in any way. It was a sign he didn’t understand what Jack had said and was resisting the urge to let his eyes glaze over, but Jack knew if he kept rambling, Dimitri would eventually surrender and space out.

“All right, Grinchy Grinch. Let’s get going.”

As Jack tucked away the string lights, he noticed Dimitri’s antlers began to shrink.

“Seriously?”

“Now, no one will confuse me for being festive.”

The antlers turned into tiny pencil-thin nubs atop Dimitri’s head. They almost looked like twigs caught in his hair or broken off pieces of a crown. Jack liked that idea better, imagining Dimitri as some mythical king of the forest.

“Well, I’m dressing up.”

“Yes, I see.” Dimitri nodded to the sweater and jingly balls hanging from Jack’s belt.

Jack took it a step further and ran his fingers along his pumpkin until the buzz of magic thrummed against his palms.

“What is that?” Dimitri stared wide-eyed. “Your pumpkin is white.”

“And blue too, right?” Jack asked, retrieving his phone to check his image.

He'd shifted the natural orange into a wintry white and frosted blue, giving the pumpkin the perfect holiday flair.

"It's a glamour," Jack explained. "While I'm useless at magic, my extended lifespan did help me learn some of my mother's basic spells. This only took me a century to master."

"It is very impressive."

"Yeah, well, I still can't do many types of glammers. Just little things and only for a few hours at most." Jack smirked. "So, like Cinderella, this pumpkin has to leave before midnight."

"Understood." Dimitri extended his elbow, with his arm folded just enough for Jack to slip his arm in between.

Dimitri escorted Jack as they walked with their arms interlocked. It was such a lovely gesture, Jack found himself blushing.

"You will need to lead," Dimitri said. "I have no idea where I am going."

"Oh, yeah, of course." Jack laughed, steering them away from the wrong direction and heading toward the festival.

Despite how crowded the event was, Dimitri seemed much calmer this time around than during Halloween. He kept himself pressed closely to Jack as they wandered through the event, but his attention flitted in every direction.

Dimitri's glowing green eyes held a twinkle that could only be conceived as pure awe. Behind his calm demeanor, Jack watched as Dimitri's eyes flitted about, soaking in the sights. Giant inflatable Christmas-themed props. String lights in every conceivable color, some sparkling, others flashing, and many spelling out words of joy or designed to in a wintry image.

As white fluff fluttered through the air, Dimitri crinkled his nose and gave the phony snow a wicked look.

"Deceitful."

"Or cute," Jack said with a smile. "Some people like a little snow with their Christmas."

"It is not Christmas for weeks."

"Still, we don't always get snow anymore until January hits," Jack explained. "Or if we do, it rarely sticks."

"Because you all butcher nature," Dimitri countered. "She withholds her joy, waiting for the season of humanity to pass."

“That’s ominous.” Jack playfully shuddered. “Think she’ll beat out Astaroth when it comes to destroying the world?”

“Maybe,” Dimitri said, eyes still lost on the many bright wonders illuminating the crowded streets. “But nature will not destroy the world, merely the pests once they stop serving their purpose.”

Jack found that curious, wondering how much of this Dimitri knew for certain or merely speculated. Did he speak to Nature herself? He was a spirit of the forest. Surely, that came with special insight.

“Who knows,” Dimitri said, tightening his grip as he walked alongside Jack. “Perhaps in a century or two, we can place a bet on who will destroy the world first. Nature in a fit of fury, humanity in a fit of stupidity, or the demon dog in a fit of boredom.”

Jack nearly laughed at that, then choked back the noise at the simple realization of Dimitri’s words. A century or two. Sure, it wasn’t a promise or a guarantee, but it was something. Dimitri was considering their future. A confusing future for sure. A whim of words muttered as his mind was distracted by the many sights. Still, Jack clung to those words, to the idea of more years with Dimitri around. As friends, as lovers, as something more. He didn’t know. He wasn’t certain if he wanted to know just yet. Something about the prospect of the unknown—oh, how the unknown held so many possibilities, and Jack could swim in that wonder with utter delight.

“You should finish your costume.” A small child ran up to them, poking Dimitri in the leg.

“Excuse me?”

“Your costume.” The little kid pointed at Dimitri, then at Jack. “You didn’t finish dressing up.”

“I am not dressed up,” Dimitri growled at the little kid, though his subtle intimidation did nothing to lessen the sparkle in the kid’s eyes.

“Yes, you are.” The kid pointed to Dimitri’s tiny antlers. “They look authentic, but too small. A little cheap.”

The kid pulled out a pair of plastic light-up antlers and put them on. “See. My costume is better.”

“It is not a competition.”

“Well, not dressed like that,” Jack joined in, teasing Dimitri.

“My mom brought extra red noses,” the kid said. “You could be an okay Rudolph.”

“I am not the red-nosed reindeer,” Dimitri snarled.

“I don’t know, you did find your way through the fog of the forest pretty darn well.” Jack immediately stifled his laughter as Dimitri glowered in response.

“You’re also wearing the wrong green for elves. It needs to be brighter. Happier,” the kid said, pointing to the dark forest green jacket Dimitri had on. “The ears look good enough. Maybe that one is the wrong size, though.”

Dimitri’s pointed ears twitched. “They are not the wrong size. My ears are perfectly sized!”

“Why are you a reindeer and an elf? Makes no sense.”

The small child continued rambling much to Dimitri’s dismay, all while Jack fought to maintain his composure. It was a losing battle, and he loved every second of it.

“Give me your decorations.” Dimitri turned to Jack. “I will be festive if it will get rid of this child.”

“Okey dokey.” Jack knelt down and opened his shadows in front of the kid.

The small child’s eyes bulged in response as Jack pulled out the set of string lights he had gotten for Dimitri.

“Magic.”

“That is nothing,” Dimitri huffed. “Watch this.”

It seemed he wished to awe the child into silence. Dimitri’s antlers swelled back to their standard size, and he wrapped the string lights around them. With the extra remaining length, he coiled it around his neck like a piece of gaudy jewelry.

“Better,” the kid said, dismissing the show of Dimitri’s antlers. “But now you’re three things. A reindeer, an elf, and a Christmas tree. Trying too hard.”

“Go away, small child. You annoy me.”

The kid raced off, returning to another group of children. All of whom stared at Jack as he continued strolling through the festival. He could tell from the hushed whispers and curious eyes that the first child had mentioned his little shadow show, so he decided to give the rest of the children a little magic for the season.

Jack waved his hand, unleashing shadows in the shapes of snowflakes around the children. Ornaments leapt from the darkness and into each kid’s palms. They shouted with excitement, with wonder, with disbelief. The

shadows vanished, and the children chased the darkness, giggling the entire time.

“You seem to like children,” Dimitri said, leading Jack to a less crowded street of the festival.

“They aren’t worn down by all the hate of the world yet; they haven’t learned how to hate just yet.” Jack shrugged. “It’s nice.”

“They are loud and dirty,” Dimitri countered. “Too exhausting.”

“Fair point.”

They continued making their way through the festival, and Jack filmed a few moments as his own personal keepsake. Dexter had a Krampus exhibit over at his venue. It seemed the old man loved to add a little horror to every season of the year. He told frightening tales of what happened to naughty children this time of year and sold all types of holiday tonics guaranteed to provide the best winter solstice experience. The Christmas tree lighting ceremony seemed even more spectacular this year. Though Jack believed it was true every time he attended the festival. Mostly, he enjoyed catching candid shots of Dimitri.

Despite his reluctance, Dimitri appeared truly awed by the spectacles of the festival. The way he stared at the lights, entranced. The way his ears twitched when they walked past the chorus of carolers. The tiny little smile he gave every time he sipped his hot chocolate.

Jack loved watching every second of Dimitri’s quiet excitement.

After they’d had their fill of festival food and sightseeing, Jack led the way toward the woods. He asked Dimitri a million questions on the walk back home. Anything to occupy the long trek through the fog.

Once they got into the house, Dimitri went to work untangling the light strings from his antlers. The only problem was that he kept looping them back around, making it so much worse.

Jack snorted. “You’re twisting them up even more.”

“They are impossible,” Dimitri said, tugging at the string and wincing.

“Hold on.” Jack approached, standing on his tippy-toes to get a better look at the mess Dimitri had created.

“Is this more witchcraft?”

“What? No. This is just impatience at its finest.”

Jack took his time untangling the light strings. Little by little, he managed to unravel them from Dimitri’s antlers until all that remained was a single loop.

“There.” Jack dropped back down, letting his heels cement his stance as he smiled up at Dimitri.

Dimitri stared down at Jack, his expression unreadable, which sent a quiver of anticipation through Jack. Perhaps it was the heavy breathing from Dimitri’s frustration a moment ago, or maybe it had to do with the sharp glow of his green eyes, but something about this stare-down enticed Jack.

When Dimitri’s clawed hand trailed up Jack’s side, he felt the shift between them. Dimitri leaned closer, his nose nearly pressed to the frosted pumpkin mask. Without a word, Jack lifted the pumpkin off his head and braced himself for Dimitri’s reaction. Yes, he’d seen his face before, but the fret of horror that might sweep across Dimitri’s expression still lingered in the back of Jack’s thoughts.

Dimitri didn’t panic, didn’t appear shocked, didn’t react in any way other than excitement. He leaned closer, immediately pressing his lips to Jack’s, and the two of them lost themselves in passionate kisses in the main foyer of the chateau.

Their bodies pushed against each other until Jack’s back slammed against the door. He gasped into Dimitri’s mouth, who continued kissing him, who kept running his hands along Jack’s body. His fingers slid beneath the fabric of Jack’s holiday sweater, and suddenly, he found the room a sweltering mess.

“Hang on.” Jack pushed Dimitri back long enough to pull off his sweater.

He grabbed Dimitri by his jacket and pulled him close again, this time sliding his hands along Dimitri’s abs as they kissed. He ran his hands up the inside of Dimitri’s jacket, pausing when he reached Dimitri’s shoulders. Then Jack slid the jacket off entirely, and they made out shirtless in the foyer.

“You feel amazing.” Dimitri grinded against Jack with each kiss.

“I want to feel you,” Jack panted between kisses. “I want to taste you.”

Dimitri tugged at his joggers, pulling them down just enough to expose his erect dick.

“Fucking hell,” Jack said with a nervous chuckle.

“What?”

“It’s just, you have a fucking monster cock.”

“Well, I am, in fact, a monster.”

“Yes, you are.” Jack grinned, dropping to his knees.

He stared up at Dimitri, who stood shirtless. Jack wanted to see all of him exposed. He pulled down Dimitri’s pants, sliding them off around his ankles and taking in the beautiful sight of Dimitri’s naked body.

“What about you?” Dimitri eyed Jack’s jeans.

“This isn’t about me.” Jack gripped Dimitri’s cock, getting a full grip on the beast of a thing, and wondering if something this big would fit in his mouth. In any part of him should things ever go that far.

Jack never considered himself lacking, but he certainly didn’t compare to this.

Dimitri played with Jack’s hair as Jack sized up Dimitri’s dick.

Having had his fill of sightseeing, Jack teased the head of Dimitri’s cock and ran his hand up and down his shaft. Dimitri shuddered when Jack ran his tongue along the hood of his uncut cock.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes.” Dimitri nodded.

His dick twitched with excitement, the more Jack teased the head or when he ran his tongue along the shaft.

“Let’s see if you like this.” Jack bobbed his head up and down, taking an inch or two at a time until he’d adjusted to the girth of Dimitri’s cock in his mouth.

When the head hit Jack’s throat, he hesitated. But Dimitri’s quiet shudder enticed Jack to take it all. So, he did just that. Jack pulled back, holding only the head of the cock in his mouth. He twirled his tongue around it, teasing and taunting, then he pushed forward and swallowed the entirety of Dimitri’s cock.

“Fuck.” Dimitri ran his hands through Jack’s hair, nearly holding Jack at the base before releasing him and pulling his cock out. “That is amazing.”

“Don’t stop,” Jack insisted, taking a heavy breath.

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely.” Jack gripped the base of the cock, holding it steady and aiming it toward his mouth. “I want to feel all of you.”

Jack took Dimitri’s cock back into his mouth, bobbing his head up and down the shaft. It didn’t take long for Dimitri to thrust into Jack, to let out a low growl. Jack loved every second of it.

Dimitri grabbed a fistful of Jack’s shaggy, white hair and controlled the bob of his head. The force behind each guiding push made Jack gurgle as he

choked on the full length of Dimitri's cock. Jack's throat muscles clenched around the cock, making it impossible to breathe. It wasn't that Jack required oxygen, but his body was still accustomed to the reflexive action of inhaling the air around him.

"Too much?" Dimitri asked, gently brushing his thumb under Jack's eye.

He saw a few tears catch onto Dimitri's clawed nail and hang there for a moment as Jack gagged.

The only answer Jack offered was by twisting his head ever so slightly, allowing the cock buried in the back of his throat to pulsate at the motion.

Dimitri growled, moving his hand to join the other. Now, he held a firm grip on Jack's head with both hands, forcing Jack up and down the full length of the throbbing shaft.

Jack took every brutal thrust, savoring the pleasure it incited from Dimitri, who groaned eagerly as he face fucked Jack harder with each passing second.

Spit and slime coated Dimitri's massive cock. It couldn't be helped. Jack's gag reflex hit the faster and deeper Dimitri pumped into his throat. But every time Dimitri offered a reprieve, every time his rough strokes steadied, Jack leapt into action. He wanted this; he wanted to choke on every inch of Dimitri, wanted to serve as a skull for Dimitri to fuck to his satisfaction.

Jack's own cock throbbed, leaking precum the more Dimitri used his mouth and throat to his own gratification.

It seemed unending.

Jack's body quivered the more Dimitri fucked his throat. His muscles ached from holding his position as his throat was reamed out. The shadow stitching along his jaw stretched something fierce to hold steady. Jack's vision blurred as his teary eyes struggled with the swift pumps that triggered Jack's gag reflex over and over.

Still, Jack refused to relent. He gripped Dimitri's hips, helping heighten the force of each thrust.

"I am close." Dimitri pounded away, drilling Jack's face more erratically.

Jack cupped his hands around the perfectly round globes of Dimitri's ass, squeezing the firm muscles that clenched each time Dimitri bucked forward.

It brought Jack closer and closer, too. His aching dick exploded, and he came on himself, his hard dick trapped in his tight jeans.

“I...” Dimitri went to pull back, his cock twitching.

Jack leaned in, keeping Dimitri in his mouth as he fired off his load. The warm, salty cum splashed against the roof of Jack’s mouth and spilled down his chin as Dimitri pulled out.

“Fuck.” Dimitri panted, staring down at Jack.

His body was covered in a sheen of sweat, and he looked absolutely glorious, towering above Jack. Dimitri appeared like a god, one Jack would happily serve at the altar of for as long as he’d have him.

Dimitri knelt just enough to kiss Jack, licking away the cum that spilled down his face.

“I tried to swallow it.” Jack gulped.

“You are quite a mess.” Dimitri joined Jack on his knees, reaching his hand for Jack’s crotch.

“No, I, um...I sort of already finished.”

“I see.” Dimitri paused, staring with his glowing green eyes. “Next time, I would ask you to try to wait before you finish, so I can taste you too.”

Dimitri gave Jack a gentle kiss, sweet and soft and somehow completely enveloping.

Jack basked in the afterglow of their sex, and he lingered on the idea of a next time. Oh, how he hoped for so many more next times with Dimitri.

CHAPTER TEN



JACK HAD POSTED up in the kitchen, filming himself because he claimed it had the best lighting and aesthetic. Dimitri enjoyed watching Jack film his content. He even found his algorithm gravitated toward Jack's videos whenever he played on the phone Jack had gotten him. Sure, Dimitri didn't know what an algorithm was, but he appreciated his.

"I would like to make the videos with you," Dimitri said, studying Jack as he tinkered away on his phone.

"Wait...really?"

"I have enjoyed participating in a few of your videos."

"Well, yeah, all you have to do is stand there and be sexy," Jack teased.

"I gotta do all the talking."

"A truly difficult task for you," Dimitri countered.

Jack laughed. "Fair enough. So, no more vague posting about my monster buddy."

"Yes, I would like to do the monster dress up on the internet as well." Dimitri forced a small smile of enthusiasm, revealing his sharp fanged teeth. "I believe it would make trips into town easier as well. I would not need the excuse of being festive for my antlers or ears or...well, all things not human-y."

"That is brilliant," Jack said. "I'm totally on board with getting you set up on my page. We can get you some solo posts started. I'll need to make you an account. We'll have to figure out your angle."

"Will this angle involve speaking?"

“Hmmm.” Jack strummed his fingers along the chin of his pumpkin head. “Actually, that could be your angle. It adds mystique, intrigue, and a perfect counterbalance to me.”

“Because you never stop speaking?”

“Well, yeah, mostly. Your channel can focus on trending audios and guest appearances from me.” Jack paced the room, continuing to list off all the ideas he had for Dimitri’s official deep dive into social media. “Maybe we should get you a little whiteboard, so you can communicate without talking. No, that might go from cute to cunty.”

“Why would that be cunty?”

“Hey, I don’t make the rules.” Jack shrugged, as if he weren’t the only person rambling about the laws of social media and then skipping past any explanation. “We need to define your style, though.”

Jack eyed Dimitri up and down, giving him a scrutinous look with his shadowy eyes.

“I suppose hot bum is making a comeback, but we’re going to need to flash it up just a little so it looks effortlessly stylish instead of stylishly effortless.”

Dimitri blinked at Jack, attempting to understand the difference between what he’d just said. “Now, you are just throwing words around to confuse me.”

“Maybe.”

Jack’s eyes lit up in this adorably mischievous way. Dimitri always found his antics endearing.

“We should head to town and make a video.”

“Why not make it here?”

“I mean, we can make some here too, but I have a brilliant idea.”

Dimitri sulked a bit. Going to town was such a headache. Humans were everywhere, and they always stared. The good news was, thankfully, most of their stares fell to Jack as he pranced about, constantly making a spectacle of himself.

“What kind of video?”

“It’s a surprise.” Jack waved Dimitri toward him. “Do you like surprises?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re going to like this surprise.”

“Doubtful.”

With that, Jack led Dimitri out to his truck, and they drove into town. They passed through Sleepy Hollow and reached the interstate.

"I thought we were going into town?"

"I mean, we're going to *a* town." Jack grinned. "Trust me. You do trust me, right?"

Dimitri nodded and eased back into his seat. He did trust Jack. So much so that the natural tension that crept inside him washed away as Jack sang along to the music playing on the radio.

When they arrived at their destination, Jack pulled into a parking space close to the mall. Dimitri stepped out hesitantly, eyeing the parking lot for passersby.

"Do the people here also know of your content?"

"Maybe?" Jack shrugged.

"I only ask because they may not react so casually."

"Oh, 'cause the whole..." Jack gestured to his pumpkin, then to Dimitri's horns.

"Yes," Dimitri replied sheepishly.

"Doubt anyone's going to care." Jack waved a hand at the half-empty parking lot. "Malls are mostly dead. Anyone working inside isn't paid enough to give a shit, anyone bored enough to roam the hollow halls of decaying stores doesn't have time to care either."

"You make it sound harrowing."

"That's half the fun." Jack winked.

Dimitri followed Jack into the mall, sticking closely to him, but it seemed Jack was right. They only crossed paths with a handful of people, half of whom were too preoccupied to notice them, and the other half only cared enough to gawk for a moment before returning to their tasks.

Being a monster in the modern era proved quite easy.

"Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It's your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern," Jack said into his phone as he recorded himself walking toward a large fountain in the center of the mall. "We're out here at the Westfield mall, and we're going to do a little Christmas shopping. Today's game is to see who can buy the other the best gift with fifty bucks."

Jack held up two crisp fifty-dollar bills, then handed one over to Dimitri.

"Place your bets," Jack said into the camera. "Of course, you're all bound to bet on me. Jack Whoa Lantern rarely falters. That said, I wouldn't

count Deer Daddy out just yet.”

Dimitri pulled Jack aside, cupping a hand around the side of Jack’s pumpkin almost as if he planned to whisper in his ear—an ear hidden by the enchanted mask.

“I do not like that name,” Dimitri hissed.

Jack chuckled, then paused the video.

“Do you have another in mind?”

“No, but perhaps we can hold off on the name...”

“We need a name otherwise, they’re going to keep coming up with their own,” Jack said. “Plus, I like Deer Daddy.”

“I am not a deer or a father.”

“You can be my daddy.” Jack winked.

Dimitri’s entire face burned red at the prospect.

“We can keep the name for now, but I reserve the right to change it,” Dimitri said, feeling quite flushed.

“Rebranding’s a bitch, but thankfully I’m the H-B-I-C.”

Dimitri scrunched his face, never fully understanding anything Jack said.

“Okay, so the goal will be to record yourself and the things you see while doing a little holiday shopping.”

“What am I supposed to buy?”

“A gift for me.”

“What do you want?”

“Something thoughtful.”

“Okay, like what?”

“Something you put thought into.”

“But it is for you, correct?” Dimitri asked, quite perplexed. “Should you not be the one to think of what you want and tell me?”

“It’ll mean more if you get me something you think I’ll like.”

“What if you do not like it?”

“Then my Christmas will be ruined, and it’ll be all your fault.” Jack gave Dimitri a big, menacing smile with shadowy, jagged teeth. “No pressure, right?”

“You are impossible.”

“Don’t overthink it,” Jack said. “Just try to have fun looking around. If you see something that reminds you of me, makes you think I’ll like it, then grab it.”

Dimitri sighed. The pair agreed to meet back by the fountain in an hour. Dimitri believed he'd need much longer to search for a decent gift. With his phone pointed ahead, Dimitri recorded his every footstep.

A woman glared at Dimitri's bare feet as his clawed toes clicked against the sleek marble flooring of some clothing store. Dimitri was reminded of the signs at the gas station near the wooded entrance he frequented, informing patrons they required shoes and shirts if they wished for service.

Dimitri already wore an itchy sweater underneath his jacket; he had no intention of wedging his feet into shoes. Thankfully, he didn't intend to waste much time in the clothing store. The stiff fabric of the clothing was unappealing, and the mannequins' faceless stares followed Dimitri throughout the store. He glanced toward the woman who had glared a moment before, but she'd lost interest in Dimitri. Still, the eerie sensation followed him until he abandoned the store.

It wasn't like Jack seemed particularly in love with clothing, so Dimitri wandered from one store to the next, hoping to catch sight of something Jack might like. Eventually, he landed inside a store comprised of toys and games. A whole wall of video games. They also had tiny little action figures everywhere and stuffed animals of every kind.

It was impossible to recall every single game Jack had, as it seemed he had more video games than perhaps this store's inventory held. Instead, Dimitri focused his efforts elsewhere. The toys seemed like nostalgic trophies to celebrate the love players held for their games. Dimitri searched for something Jack could put on display when playing his video games. Something to cherish when blowing things up and cackling.

"This is horrific." Dimitri smiled down at a stuffed animal.

Dimitri aimed his phone to zoom in close. He wasn't sure how all the other videos got so close to something without hitting it. Every time Dimitri moved his phone closer to zoom in, he always ended up smacking the stuffed animal. No matter. The footage was good enough. Jack could make the video better.

As Dimitri continued looking for something else to add to his gift, he felt pinpricks on the nape of his neck.

Dimitri scanned the nearly empty store and peered through the glass windows. There was no one looking at him from inside the store or the mall itself. No one he could see at least. Still, the haunting feeling followed him

as he paid for his gifts, as the clerk bagged them up, as he roamed around until he reached the fountain.

It was difficult to describe, the ominous sensation of someone's hateful gaze landing on him. Dimitri couldn't prove it, couldn't explain it, couldn't find the source, but he knew someone somewhere watched him with malice in their heart. A wicked gaze that stalked him.

"How'd it go?"

"I bought the gifts," Dimitri replied, scanning the mall.

"Gifts as in plural?" Jack smiled. "Well, aren't I special?"

Dimitri nodded in response, more on instinct than actual attentive listening.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone is watching me."

"Who?" Jack turned to join in the search, finding nothing and no one much like Dimitri.

"I do not know." Dimitri swallowed hard. "Perhaps I am being of the paranoid persuasion."

"It's not paranoid, given everything." Jack's expression turned somber. "I didn't think about it when I dragged you out. I figured it's gotta be less stressful than a whole ass festival."

"I enjoyed our outing," Dimitri replied, turning his focus back onto Jack, and ignoring the lingering sensations that came with being haunted. "I believe I may have just reached my limit."

"Every introvert's gotta recharge those batteries," Jack said with a light laugh. "No worries, I will be on extrovert buffer duties until we get home."

Dimitri gave Jack a small smile and followed him out to the car. As they drove back, Dimitri didn't dwell on the goosebumps of his own anxiety and instead focused on Jack's wording. Home. A place open to Dimitri, a place offered to him for refuge and comfort and opportunity. His life had changed a hundred different ways in such a short time, but he was learning to appreciate this second chance.

Once they got home, Jack instructed Dimitri to wrap his present.

"Why?"

"So, we can open them."

"But it will be easier to open if I just leave it in the bag."

"Yeah, but it won't be as festive. There's a joy that comes with unwrapping a gift."

“But there is also frustration that comes with wrapping. Why not cut it out of the equation?”

“Then we won’t have the joy of unwrapping our gifts, the fun, the surprise.”

“But we will have joy in just having the gift. I simplify. Everyone wins.”

Jack merely glowered in response. It created an uncomfortable silence.

“Fine,” Dimitri huffed. “I go wrap gift.”

“Make sure to do it with love,” Jack shouted as Dimitri exited the living room momentarily. “Nothing worse than opening a bitter gift.”

Dimitri muttered his annoyance in Russian.

“Awww,” Jack cooed. “Must be whispering sweet nothings about me.”

It took Dimitri what felt like an eternity to wrap his presents, and it didn’t turn out nice. The stuffed animal proved challenging to cover, and the rest of his gifts clinked around within the wrapping. Perhaps he should have wrapped everything individually, but that seemed so unnecessary.

Once he stepped back into the living room, he found Jack had wrapped four lovely rectangular boxes. Their edges were folded perfectly, and the lines of the wrapping seemed so crisp.

“Is it a competition to see who wraps the best gift?”

“No, but it is a competition to see who got the best gift.”

Jack called Dimitri over to the couch, and the pair sat beside each other while Jack set up.

“So, do you want raw reactions of us opening the gifts or post-glow monologuing about the gifts?” Jack asked, holding his phone up. “To be clear, I’d do the talking on your behalf.”

“Why are you asking me? I do not know which is appropriate for the media of socializing.”

“It’s not about appropriate. It’s supposed to be fun,” Jack explained. “If you’re not having fun, then you don’t need to make the video.”

“But I want to make the video,” Dimitri insisted. “I want to do the monster cosplay.”

“I know, but I want you to enjoy making the videos,” Jack explained. “Too many people treat these apps like a lifeline. They get consumed and overwhelmed and burnt out. I used to be obsessed with engagement and follower counts and staying active just for the sake of being active. Trust me, not the way to go about it. It’s important to keep it chill and fun.”

“Fun is a high expectation.” Dimitri resisted the urge to sigh deeply. “Can I just enjoy it moderately?”

Jack collapsed back onto the couch, languishing dramatically. “I suppose.”

Dimitri sat in silence, awaiting Jack’s instructions.

“You still have to pick. Are we opening them on camera or off?” Jack picked up his poorly wrapped gift from Dimitri.

“On camera.”

“Okky doky.” Jack propped the phone on a small tripod and aimed it in their direction. “We are back from our mall trip, gifts are wrapped, and we’re exchanging some early presents. Since I’m fantastic and impatient, I’m opening my gift from Deer Daddy first.”

Dimitri furrowed his brow, still annoyed by his online name. Jack made a joke about the poor wrapping job as he began tearing apart the paper.

“Ah, this is so cute!” Jack held up the little keychains. “Someone knows some of my favorite characters in my favorite games.”

It wasn’t as if Dimitri knew them per se, merely that Jack seemed to enjoy every game he picked up, so it wasn’t much of a stretch to find a few novelties he’d like.

Jack made sure to show each of the keychains close up while giving the briefest description about why he liked that particular story and character.

“This, though, is quite the sight.” Jack grimaced, holding up a monstrous reindeer with snarling teeth and a rabid expression. “What on earth inspired this holiday horror?”

Dimitri grinned and pointed a clawed finger at himself.

“Yesssss!” Jack screamed. “How did I miss that? Oh, my God. Y’all, I have my own Deer Daddy to cuddle with at night?”

Jack leaned over, tilting his head so the pumpkin mask rested on Dimitri’s shoulder.

“Although the real thing is much better.”

Dimitri snorted in response and averted his gaze from the ever-watching camera lens.

“All right, now it’s time for Deer Daddy to see what I got him.”

Jack started up a little drumroll as Dimitri opened his present, then began narrating to his audience.

“I’m planning more gifts, already sent Santa my list, but who can really wait until Christmas day?” Jack spoke with such animated cheer, Dimitri

fell into a trance as he tore through the wrapping paper.

Dimitri's eyes widened with surprise at the gifts inside. Books. Several of them, in fact.

"Oh, lookie here." Jack pointed to Dimitri's face. "He likes 'em for sure. You can tell from the softening scowl and the slightest hint of a smile."

The first book was a collection of the fauna, flora, and fungi in the region.

"He loves nature," Jack explained. "Like a lot. Like daily hikes a lot."

Jack made a shadowy tongue to profess his disdain for the outdoors, but Dimitri couldn't help but smile. It was such a sweet gesture.

Beneath the first book was a historic text that professed to explore ten thousand hidden historical truths not taught in school. This would likely help with the many things Dimitri missed out on, even if the cover appeared to show history dating further back from his capture. There was so much of the world Dimitri never learned, even before the hunters grabbed him, so much of his life was spent hiding away from the world. Now, he could learn everything about it thanks to Jack.

"This is honestly a book everyone could use," Jack said, holding it up for the camera. "I'm not linking it because I don't sell shit, but everyone should be informed. Go grab this book."

The next two books were romance novels with monstrous men on the covers.

"I see you roaming my library looking for something good to read," Jack teased. "Thought you'd enjoy some monster romance. Who knows, maybe you'll find a scene you like so much we can recreate it for—"

Dimitri cut Jack off, swooping in close and pulling him into a tight hug. They were such thoughtful gifts. Even the silly monster books were meaningful. It reminded Dimitri that his life wasn't a horror show anymore. He wasn't trapped or tortured.

Jack wrapped his arms around Dimitri and returned the hug. They sat in that embrace for some time before Dimitri released Jack.

"Just so we're clear, this means I won the gift-giving contest." Jack grinned, then turned his phone off. "I'm the champion."

"You are insufferable." Dimitri fought back a smile as Jack teased him about being the best gift-giver in the world.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN



DIMITRI SHRANK his antlers and leaned over, resting his head on Jack's shoulder as they read through some comments on their latest video. It'd become a little ritual of theirs the last few days. They'd post a video, they'd let it circulate, then they'd sit on the couch together, sinking into the cushions while Jack introduced Dimitri to the underbelly of social media.

@DarkBookGurl666: You two are TOO cute! It's killin me!

@OmegaRiley: Look at that afterglow. Deer Daddy must've cracked you good, Jackie Boy.

@ShyLoverYaoiYuri: When is Deer Daddy going to talk? I wanna hear what he has to say.

@KingGael: He can't talk. Voice is probably too hoarse from Jack ramming his lantern down his throat.

@JackFanEdits: My boy is thicc!

@Username433224538: 😂😂😂😂

@DevotedCryptid: Does Deer Daddy got more than the antlers? Like does he have the hairy legs like satyrs?

@TedRed37: Those are goat people dumb B I T C H!

@KingGael: RUDE 😂😂😂😂😂😂

@CreepiCrawliBoi: I hope he has a fluffy tail.

@ArtistGaiMai: DOES HE? *runs away to add that to my art of the boys*

@KingGael: Of course he has a tail. Jack NEEDS something to grab when he's cracking him open.

@JackFanEdits: Jack ain't cracking anything. Love for my boy but have you seen Deer Daddy? Giant BEAST.

@PumpkinGurl69: Bet he's a beast in the sheets!

@JackFanEdits: He can be a beast in my sheets. Hell, I'll take both boys. Gimme those monster 🍆🍆

@KingGael: Jack has that Short King Supremacy. He's bending Goliath over and showing him the WHOA factor.

Jack turned off his phone, realizing the thread of comments only continued getting more extreme.

"Humans are quite insatiable."

"Sluts, all of 'em," Jack said with a smirk.

"I would like to test this short king supremacy," Dimitri teased, adjusting his position so he could wrap his arms around Jack's waist.

"I never said a thing about being king." Jack's cheeks burned as Dimitri moved in closer.

"No? You do not wish to challenge Goliath?" Dimitri nuzzled his face into the crook of Jack's neck, while also tickling Jack's sides with his sharp nails.

Jack cackled, trying to break free, but Dimitri towered over him, pinning him beneath the couch as the two playfully wrestled. It didn't take long for Dimitri to overpower Jack, to pin his hands above his head, and trap his legs between Dimitri's thick thighs. And yes, Jack could've broken free. He could've called on his shadows to loosen Dimitri's grasp, to fling him across the room, to showcase the short king supremacy he knew nothing of. Instead, Jack used the shadows to remove his pumpkin mask.

They both panted a bit as Jack wriggled against Dimitri's hold. Not enough to break free, but enough to fuel the embers of their playful fighting a bit longer.

"You are gorgeous." Dimitri pressed his lips to Jack's, kissing him passionately.

Jack lost himself to the smack that he almost didn't feel the bite of teeth as Dimitri pulled away. Soon they found themselves grinding against each

other, lips locked in a make-out session, and Jack swooned every time Dimitri bucked against him with his throbbing cock. Oh, how Jack wanted to pull away from the sweet kisses and work his way down Dimitri's strong body.

He wanted to kiss every muscle from Dimitri's chest to his abs, then he wanted to rip off Dimitri's pants and lick his shaft, tease the head of his cock, and swallow him whole.

"Fuck, you feel so good," Jack moaned.

Astaroth's bark completely killed the moment. The demon dog approached, his tail wagging.

"It is time for my morning walk," Astaroth announced. "I crave the scents of the wilderness."

"They are always the same," Dimitri groaned, pulling away from Jack.

"Not true, they shift with the winds, and I must investigate."

"Dude, you could literally take yourself for a stroll," Jack said, desperately hoping Astaroth would take the hint.

"That is not part of my routine," Astaroth explained. "I am to be escorted by the Leshy servant."

"He's not your servant," Jack said, frowning deeply at Astaroth.

In fact, Jack was so enamored by Dimitri, it only just now registered that his pumpkin mask was off in front of Astaroth. Not that the dog paid much attention to such things, but it was the smallest of signs that Jack was growing more comfortable in his own skin. Even if his skin was dreadful.

"Come now, simple peasants, I seek my morning walk," Astaroth demanded. "You two can succumb to your carnal pleasures at a later point."

"We will know no peace until the demon has his walk." Dimitri sulked as he sat up on the couch.

"Fine." Jack huffed, retrieving his enchanted pumpkin.

It didn't take long for them to head outside, Astaroth leading the way through the snowy trails. It didn't matter that a blanket of snow covered everything; the demon dog sniffed his way down his usual route, insisting the others catch up.

Jack huddled underneath his jacket for warmth, whining when snow slipped into his boots. Meanwhile, Dimitri taunted him, walking barefoot through the forest with his jacket open and exposing his muscular abs.

Damn, Jack would love to continue where they were, to cozy up with Dimitri and warm himself by a fireplace.

The caw of a circling crow caught Jack's attention. He turned to find Dimitri's pointed ears twitchy as he seemed to listen to the bird.

"He's all by himself," Jack said.

"Yes, Nikolai has lingered a bit, but he will be joining his flock in a few days." Dimitri changed the direction of their path and followed the flying crow.

"Wait, where you going?"

Dimitri didn't respond as he trudged through the snow.

"Oh, a new trail to explore." Astaroth hopped through the fluffy snow, sniffing every scent, and panting with excitement the deeper they ventured through the woods.

"What's going on?" Jack noticed the tension in Dimitri's clenched jaw, the scowl in his furrowed brow, but Dimitri didn't respond.

Instead, he kept pressing forward, following the crow's path.

Nikolai cawed once again, and Dimitri growled.

"We are being followed." Dimitri leapt into the air, easily jumping through the trees.

"Show off," Astaroth huffed. "This is supposed to be a walk, not a hunting party."

"Wait, what'd you say?" Jack turned to Astaroth.

"I said I intended to go for a walk, but I suppose hunting down and slaughtering a human could be fun too." Astaroth bolted ahead, vanishing between the thicket of trees in a quick blur.

"Son of a bitch."

Dimitri scaled the trees, lunging from one to the next. The rustling snow that collapsed onto the ground was the only trail for Jack to follow.

"Hold on." Jack gave chase.

By the time Jack reached Dimitri and Astaroth, they had a guy pinned down. Dimitri pressed his foot onto the man's chest, pressing his claws into the puffy jacket. Astaroth snarled and let out aggressive barks every time the man even attempted to squirm.

"Why are you following us?"

"What are you talking about?" the man cried. "I'm not following anyone."

"Rip out his liver," Astaroth shouted. "We can feed it to him as a means to force a confession."

“You have been following our path for nearly three kilometers now,” Dimitri snapped. “Casually stalking us, but your presence did not go unseen.”

Jack glanced up at Nikolai, who continued circling them from above. Clearly, the crow had spotted this guy using the same trail.

“I wasn’t following you, I swear.” The man was whimpering, fighting back tears. “I was hiking and got turned around is all.”

“Lies.” Dimitri glared, the shimmer in his green eyes turned haunting. “You mean to hunt us down and report back to the Hearst.”

“The who?”

“I don’t think he’s one of the hunters...” Jack stood close by, uneasy and unsure if he should intervene.

“You are a scout, a poor one at that.”

“No, no, I’m just lost,” the man pleaded, beginning to hyperventilate.

“The fog does turn folks around easily,” Jack said, trying to broker some type of conflict resolution.

“The fog also leads people out of the forest, not in circles.” Dimitri pressed his foot down harder onto the man’s chest. “Who are you?”

“Ow, ow, ow, my name is Ted,” he whined. “Theodore Ackley. I swear, I didn’t mean any harm.”

Dimitri growled.

“I have my wallet wi-with-with my ID,” Ted cried. “And cash. Not much, but I-I got a little on me. Please.”

“Why were you following us specifically?” Dimitri leaned in close, mere inches from Ted’s face.

“I saw the pumpkin head guy walking nearby. Bright orange head is kind of hard to miss in a blanket of snow. Plus, he’s got flyers all over town,” Ted insisted. “I figured he’d probably be heading back to the city, so I thought I’d ask, but you both kind of looked creepy in your costumes, and I got worried. Like, what if you dress up and perform Satanic rituals in the forest? Or attack people for no reason? Which seemed ridiculous, but I just figured I’d follow your path until I found something familiar close to town.”

“This one bores me,” Astaroth grumbled. “Far too easy to break. I prefer a challenge.”

Astaroth trotted off deeper into the woods, no longer amused by Dimitri’s feral state of panic.

“I think he’s telling the truth,” Jack pleaded.

“Please don’t kill me, please don’t kill me, please don’t... Oh, God, no!” Ted winced and cried and looked away as his pants were soon covered in a big wet spot.

“Fuck, he pissed himself.” Jack cringed.

Dimitri warily released his foot and stepped back. He kept his eyes locked on Ted the entire time the man sobbed to himself.

Jack awkwardly laughed. “Oh, damn. Okay, maybe we should kill him just to put the poor dude out of his misery.”

“Please, don’t kill me,” Ted cried.

“That was a joke,” Jack insisted. “A bad one, but yeah.”

“Perhaps I am mistaken.” Dimitri frowned. “You may leave.”

Ted sat up cautiously, looking around the barren forest with no clue where to run.

“That way.” Jack pointed.

Ted didn’t hesitate. He crawled to his feet and sprinted as quickly as his legs would carry him.

“I feel foolish.”

“No, could happen to any of us.”

“I am obsessed with the fear of the Hearsts returning for me.” Dimitri leaned against a tree. “I need to bury the thought, remove them from my mind, and stop dwelling on what may never come.”

“Do you really think they’ll hunt you down again?”

“I did.” Dimitri paused, staring up at the cloudy sky. “But now I wonder if I am merely a minor profit loss for them. My decades bound to their service were perhaps meaningless to them. My absence fills me with dread every waking moment, but for them it may be a simple inconvenience.”

“Is there anything I can do or not do to help you?” Jack approached Dimitri, reaching out his hand and pressing the back against Dimitri’s. Their knuckles brushed against each other. “I know I can’t erase what happened or remove the fear, but I am here, and I will do everything in my power to protect you.”

Jack rarely exerted the full extent of his strength. Even the dozens of hunters who showed up with Dimitri didn’t require much effort on his part. Still, Jack worried despite all his abilities that he wouldn’t be able to quell the horror haunting Dimitri’s mind.

“Just help me ignore my own paranoia.” Dimitri gave Jack a soft, sad smile. “I wish to busy myself. Busy myself with happiness.”

“I can do that.”

Dimitri pressed his head against Jack’s pumpkin and rested there for a moment, collecting himself and calming his nerves. Jack stood close, running his knuckles back and forth, enjoying the silence together.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” Jack asked, mixing chemicals together.

Dimitri crinkled his nose at the sharp aroma. He must’ve looked like he was second-guessing the decision, given the questioning expression Jack gave him.

“I am excited to try this.”

“You don’t look excited.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

“Looks can also be quite transparent.”

“I am certain. Let us proceed.”

Dimitri had spent the week trying to ignore the paranoia gnawing at his thoughts. It was challenging to ignore the fear that came with anticipating the worst possibilities lying in wait. Dimitri always expected everything to fall apart; it kept his hopes low and made basic survival easier. But everything had been fine since he found Jack, since Jack found him. Dimitri didn’t know if he’d ever truly work through the panic rooted in his mind, but he hoped to make a little more progress every day. It helped that he had Jack, who provided the perfect and most ridiculous distractions.

It wasn’t easy, but Dimitri tried to go with the flow, to be carefree, and to delve deeper into impulsive decisions simply for the fun of it. And Jack’s most recent idea sounded fun for the most part. Even if it smelled awful.

“Okay, but you’re absolutely one hundred and twenty percent on board?”

“I am no math genius, but your numbers are off.”

“I won’t proceed unless you’re one-hundred and twenty percent certain.” Jack folded his arms as his shadowy expression twisted into a pouty face.

“Oh, for goodness sake, yes, I am absolutely certain,” Dimitri huffed. “In fact, I am one-hundred and thirty percent certain.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Jack held up his arms in protest. “That’s way too certain. There is a proper ratio to certainty, and you’ve exceeded it.”

“You are impossible.” Dimitri swore under his breath in Russian, which only made Jack’s sly smile grow wider.

“Alrighty, fine. Let’s get this show on the road.” Jack pulled out his phone and hit record. “Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It’s your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern, and y’all won’t believe what Deer Daddy and I are up to today.”

Jack panned the camera over to Dimitri.

“Drumroll, please.” Jack grinned.

Dimitri merely stared at the camera, uncertain what to do. Jack never prepared him for any of their recordings, merely going with the flow. Doing his best, Dimitri took each of his index fingers and tapped them on the countertop. There was a certain lack of rhythm in his beat that nearly made Jack burst into laughter.

“As you can tell, he’s rapt with anticipation.” Jack paused for a moment, eyes flitting upward. “Am I using that right? I have a whole word of the day set on my phone. Rapt with anticipation? Sounds right. And wrong. What do you think?”

Jack turned the phone back to Dimitri, who simply shrugged in response. All words in English sounded right and wrong to him, no matter the arrangement.

With that, Jack stepped over to the kitchen countertop close to the sink, and revealed his bottled concoctions, rubber gloves, and the box the supplies came inside.

“Deer Daddy has agreed to a little makeover,” Jack explained. “Some of y’all suggested he’d make a killer platinum blond, which he immediately shot down.”

Jack frowned, putting his pouty face back on display, then once again turned the camera to Dimitri, who gave a blank stare.

“But don’t worry, we’re going with a cool look.” Jack ran his fingers through Dimitri’s curly black hair. “Just you wait.”

As Jack continued his rambles to the audience, Dimitri took a bit of joy in his role for the video. Jack seemed so content when speaking to his viewers. He didn't struggle for topics, running his mouth on even the most mundane things with utter glee. It excited Dimitri, seeing that spark of joy every time he filmed his content.

According to Jack, most creators lose themselves in their online journey. Whether a need to stay monetized, a fear of doxxing, or a chronic obsession with all things online, it was easy for people to become lost in a haze. But Jack didn't worry about money, since his mother taught him how to invest in a proper portfolio centuries ago. Something Jack mocked Dimitri about, explaining that poor immortals were just insulting. Dimitri didn't understand why, but he took Jack's word on it.

When it came to doxxing, a word Dimitri had only recently learned, Jack didn't fear his address being uncovered. Why would he when he had the mystical cloak of the fog surrounding his woods?

And while Dimitri sometimes considered Jack chronically obsessed with the online world of his video games, he didn't think it bordered on anything dangerous. After all, Dimitri still managed to drag Jack away from his games long enough to join him on hikes.

All in all, Dimitri enjoyed learning about the world of content creation from Jack. Mainly because he could babble for hours about comments he loved and laugh at comments Dimitri loathed. Humans were mean behind a screen.

"That's when I knew..." Jack made small talk about his life, discussing anecdotes from over a century ago.

Dimitri listened intently, finding all of Jack's silly stories entertaining. As Jack talked, he used hair ties to wrap all of Dimitri's curls into funky little spiked off sections. From what Dimitri had gathered, Jack didn't intend to dye his entire head, merely the roots. This likely meant he'd have to sit through this daunting process again once his hair started to grow out. As Jack worked, Dimitri noticed the camera positioned in front of them.

"This will be a very long video."

"Oh no, I'll do a time lapse," Jack explained. "I'll probably only end up using a few shots. Thirty seconds max."

"What is time lapse?"

"I'll speed up the video, add some cute music, and get some close-ups of your scrunched face." Jack bopped Dimitri on the nose with his pinky—

one of his few fingers not covered in the heinous chemicals.

"I am making no scrunchie faces."

"You are. I'm guessing the dye is very potent?" Jack chuckled. "Thankfully, the pumpkin offers a buffer, and I have my shadow senses dimmed."

Jack continued working, and Dimitri tried not to fidget but found it difficult to get comfortable in the stiff kitchen chair.

It didn't take long for Jack to finish. He had all the dye applied and set the timer. Dimitri was allowed to stand and stretch, but Jack asked him to remain close for filming purposes.

Jack stared at Dimitri's tail. "Oh, I just got the best idea."

"No."

"Please, please, please."

"No."

"But it's a waste of dye." Jack dropped to his knees, his shadowy eyes turning into sad, giant saucers. "I'll be forever grateful."

Dimitri found himself softening to Jack's pleading.

"In fact, I could be very, very grateful." Jack eyed Dimitri's crotch.

"You are not dyeing the hairs there."

"What? No, I was being sexy and suggestive and..." Jack's expression turned to surprise. "I just want your tail to match your head."

"What? Why?"

"It'd be so cool. Just imagine."

Dimitri did not wish to imagine, but he also did not care much since he couldn't see his tail anyway. "Fine."

"Really?" Jack squealed, not waiting for a second confirmation.

He went to work applying the dye to Dimitri's tail, which twitched in response.

"It's so cute and fluffy," Jack shouted.

"You are not putting my tail on display in your videos."

"Of course, not," Jack agreed. "It's more entertaining for people to speculate. The comment section blows up with people assuming you do or don't. The second we confirm that, Deer Daddy loses his mystique. Well, some of his mystique."

Dimitri huffed, still annoyed by the absurdity of his online name. It was in no way dignified. It likely added to why so many humans claimed he wasn't a real monster. Some would even comment that his antlers were

cheap and fake, his clawed hands looked like clip-on nails, or his contacts were simply dramatic. Jack explained it as a human mechanism to explain the supernatural, logically away any hint of something outside the ordinary. Dimitri could only wonder what they'd say if they saw his tail.

After Jack finished dyeing the tail, Dimitri was given time to relax until it came to washing out the dye. That proved a little messy.

"You could shrink your antlers, you know." Jack struggled to wash Dimitri's hair out under the sink with the antlers clinking against something no matter the angle.

"No, I would ruin Deer Daddy's mystique."

"You're impossible," Jack huffed and continued his work.

The counter ended up covered in water, and the floor soon joined when Jack realized how difficult it was to rinse Dimitri's tail.

"Finally," Jack sighed, using a towel to fluff Dimitri's tail, then tossing him another one to dry his hair.

Dimitri grinned, finding the exhaustion in Jack's shadowy expression entertaining.

Jack dragged Dimitri back to the kitchen chair.

"What do you think?" Jack held up a mirror, allowing Dimitri to have a genuine reaction before grabbing his phone. He stared with wide-eyed anticipation.

"The roots are very red."

"Crimson," Jack said. "And I figured the root effect—there's a word for it—would look cooler than dyeing your whole head. Do you not like it?"

"I do like it." Dimitri craned his neck, eyeing his tail, and wiggling the fluffy nub to further examine the red roots around the dark black fur. "I even like the matching."

"I knew it." Jack raised his arms in pride.

"You do good work."

After a moment, Jack hit record on his phone, and Dimitri stayed silent during Jack's monologue of the results.

"He loves it, obviously," Jack said. "Though I do wish we would've added some green highlights in there. Would've totally added to the holiday wonder."

Dimitri let out a quiet snarl, to which Jack merely giggled.

After Jack had rambled on for a few minutes, Dimitri took Jack's phone away. He hit the stop button, exited the video recorder, closed the

background apps, and stuffed it in his back pocket. All his lessons with Jack were paying off. He felt as if he'd conquered the beast of technology.

"Hey, I wasn't done talking."

"You never are," Dimitri teased. "But I wish to show you how grateful I am."

"How grateful you are?"

"Yes, you wanted to show me how grateful you were, but I want to show you first."

"Uh, hold on... What?"

"In fact, perhaps you can show me how grateful you are by being a good boy for me." Dimitri hooked his fingers around the loops of Jack's belt. "Can you do that?"

"Uh, yeah, absolutely."

"Good." Dimitri unfastened Jack's belt and yanked his pants down in one swift motion as he dropped to his knees.

The action startled Jack, and he released a small gasp. The gasp was quickly replaced by a moan as Dimitri licked his palm and wrapped his hand around Jack's shaft.

Dimitri took in the sight of Jack's cock, finally getting a full look at his semi-erect dick. His shaft was dark gray, but the head of his dick was much lighter, especially as Dimitri slipped the foreskin back with gentle strokes.

Jack's body shuddered in excitement as Dimitri worked, getting Jack at full attention.

"Oh wow." Jack backstepped, hitting the table, and pressing his hands to the edge for leverage. "Don't stop."

Dimitri didn't plan on stopping. He leaned forward, licking the head of Jack's cock. As he ran his hand up and down the shaft, he would tease Jack and pull the foreskin back.

"That's so good."

Dimitri took more of Jack into his mouth, but when his antlers jabbed at Jack's stomach, he paused.

"I almost forgot," Dimitri said with a gruff chuckle.

With that, he shrank his antlers until they were too small to interfere.

"Should I also, um..." Jack pointed to his pumpkin.

"Take it off, leave it on." Dimitri shrugged. "The choice is yours tonight."

"Oh."

“I want you to be in charge of every moment.” Dimitri grabbed Jack’s other hand, moving it to the back of Dimitri’s head, and giving an almost instructive grip.

Jack didn’t need further explanation; he grabbed a fistful of Dimitri’s hair and pulled his head back onto his cock.

Dimitri readily accepted it, taking the first few inches with ease. When the tip hit the roof of his mouth, Dimitri’s eyes watered, but he continued taking in more. When it hit his throat, he gagged in protest. Jack released his grip, but Dimitri refused to relent.

He slapped his hands on Jack’s hips, steadying himself as he worked to swallow the entirety of Jack’s cock.

“Fuuuck,” Jack groaned, returning his hand to snatch Dimitri’s hair.

He held Dimitri in place for several seconds, thrusting forward to keep his engorged cock deep in Dimitri’s throat. Once he had his fill, he pulled Dimitri back forcibly, making him play with the head again. Dimitri did this, using his hand to run up and down the shaft as he licked the tip in a circular motion.

“Oh my God, that’s it.” Jack wheezed. “Keep doing that. Fuck. Take it.”

Jack pushed Dimitri back down, ramming his head up and down the full length again and again. He moved faster each time, panting aggressively as he controlled Dimitri’s head with every pump.

“Fucking take all of it,” Jack growled.

As Dimitri worked, taking Jack’s dick obediently, he found tingling sensations caressing his body. The more his head bobbed, the more his own cock swelled. This wasn’t mere arousal, but a precise grip. Someone was stroking his dick.

Dimitri’s eyes widened, and in the corner, he saw the shadows teasing him from every direction. His clothes turned black, then melted away entirely before reappearing scattered on the floor. What a fascinating trick. Dimitri had so many questions, all of which would have to wait as Jack started pounding faster into Dimitri’s throat.

He gagged and gurgled, unable to calm the tight muscles of his throat as Jack rammed faster and harder. It was intoxicating. Dimitri’s entire body quaked with excitement. Every eager chill was met with the warm embrace of darkness touching him.

With a perfect grip on his cock, Dimitri found himself sinking into the ecstasy of pleasure. No, he was actually sinking into the shadows. It altered

his position, knocking him backward some as Jack pumped faster, fucking Dimitri's face with vigor unlike anything he expected.

Dimitri lay there, halfway into the floor, lost within the shadows, as Jack railed his face and fucked his throat. Each thrust into Dimitri's mouth was met with a perfect stroke of his cock.

"Uuugaah." Dimitri attempted to speak, a foolish attempt.

"You're close, right?" Jack ran his hand gently across Dimitri's cheek, wiping away tears.

He was right. It was exactly what Dimitri tried and failed to say.

Jack humped Dimitri's face, groaning as his thrusts became more erratic.

"Together," Jack demanded.

The shadows stroked Dimitri faster; they played with his balls, and they even teased his hole. Dimitri moaned, lost to the pleasures of satisfying and being satisfied all at once.

Jack gripped Dimitri by the antlers and pulled his head all the way back down, holding Dimitri at the base of his cock as he erupted. The instant the load sprayed down Dimitri's throat, he climaxed as well.

It was the most intense and pleasurable feeling Dimitri had ever experienced.

After Dimitri had finished and Jack had pulled out of his mouth, the shadows soon released him. They lay on the kitchen floor until Jack's shadows returned once again, cocooning them in the warmth of absolute darkness.

"Let's take this somewhere cozier." Jack's voice echoed from every direction in this hollow place.

Dimitri could move, could think, but he found himself lost in the darkness, completely enveloped by it.

When the light of the world returned, the two lay in Jack's bed.

"What an interesting trick."

"Supes convenient when I don't feel like walking."

The two of them lay together, and Dimitri basked in the simple pleasure of cuddling with someone he cared deeply for.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE BAR WAS massively overcrowded with drunken celebrations as people prepared for the countdown. Jack's pumpkin held a golden shimmer. He'd glamourised it for the occasion. Usually, Jack didn't make New Year's Eve such a spectacle. Sometimes he'd venture into the bar scene if he was feeling a bit festive, but on this particular night, Jack wanted Dimitri to experience the full wonder.

"They are so loud," Dimitri said, standing extra close to Jack in order to avoid the bustle of the crowd.

He remained hyper vigilant whenever they ventured into town, studying each person closely. Jack wondered if Dimitri still worried about hunters hiding in plain sight, but he didn't have the heart to press Dimitri on the matter. Plus, it could've been as simple as Dimitri despising large crowds of people like any true introvert.

Daxter's bar rarely got this busy, but it was the perfect monster-friendly venue, since most folks expected to see Jack wander inside on occasion.

"Ah, this part I can get behind." Dimitri pulled Jack closer as everyone paired off as the ball prepared to drop.

They'd found themselves wedged into a private, cozy little corner of the bar as the television screens revealed the countdown to the new year.

Dimitri leaned in close and gave Jack a sweet peck on his pumpkin.

"Wait." Jack pulled Dimitri toward him and checked to ensure most of the drunk patrons were distracted.

Shadows shot out, cocooning Jack and Dimitri from everyone around. Jack removed the pumpkin, ready to be seen. Light illuminated between the

cracks of darkness as Jack wanted Dimitri and only Dimitri to see him.

“How about a real kiss to celebrate the new year?”

“I would be honored.” Dimitri swept in close, wrapping an arm around the small of Jack’s back and pulling him in for a kiss.

Jack surrendered himself to the feeling, the explosive joy that filled him. Every experience with Dimitri simply completed Jack. He couldn’t explain it, couldn’t comprehend it beyond feeling complete. Fulfilled. Happy. This surge sparked inside Jack, making him crave even more experiences with Dimitri. Every and all experiences. There was so much he wanted to do with Dimitri.

After their kiss, Jack put his golden pumpkin back on, and they stayed to watch some of the fireworks before finally making their way back toward the woods.

The warm buzz filled Jack the entire time as they cut through the side alleys and approached the woods. Normally, he’d complain just a little about the cold and the fact that he was forced to turn their outing into a long trek. Always part of the compromise. Dimitri loved to explore nature, to walk the same trails a thousand times over, and Jack wanted to experience the sights and shows and splendor of the world. Mostly, he wanted to share those moments with Dimitri.

As they approached the woods, Jack noticed footsteps near their usual path. It wasn’t uncommon for people to venture into the woods, but they usually stuck to the real trails, not the hidden paths Dimitri had carved out during his many explorations.

“Hold on,” Jack said, feeling a bit of that anxiety Dimitri carried with him everywhere.

Dimitri didn’t respond, but his ears perked up, twitching as he listened intently to the noises around them.

Jack spent so much time downplaying the dangers of hunters because they posed no threat to him that he sometimes overlooked the horrors they’d done to Dimitri. The danger they still posed to Dimitri.

Surely, no hunter could navigate their way through the fog, but perhaps they believed they could intercept Jack and Dimitri before they got home.

Jack listened to the hazy whispers from afar and the heavy breaths of walking through deep snow.

“Calm yourself,” Dimitri said, gripping Jack’s shoulder before he could chase down the potential threat. “The trees tell me it is just inebriated teens

seeking seclusion in the snow so they can fornicate.”

Jack gave Dimitri a puzzled expression in response.

“They wish to fuck in the woods,” Dimitri said quite plainly. “Not a terrible idea, though for some folks, it is far too cold for such things.”

He teased Jack, tugging at his sweater.

“It is cold, absolutely freezing out,” Jack whined, letting his own nerves wash away.

He didn’t know how much of this concern was his own and how much was a protective need to look out for Dimitri.

“I am grateful you take my paranoias seriously,” Dimitri said, seeming to read Jack’s mind. “But I would prefer we return home quickly, so I can ravish you.”

“We got quite a walk left,” Jack teased.

“I will surrender the walk home if you—”

Jack didn’t even wait for Dimitri to finish, opening the shadows beneath them and dropping them into his bed.

“That was quite unexpected.” Dimitri chuckled.

“Come on, you knew the second I had permission to ignore the nature hike, I was going to get that sexy ass back in my warm bed.” Jack lay with an arm propping his head up and his legs sprawled out in quite a suggestive pose.

“How quickly do you believe you can undress us, sweet Jack?”

“Is that a challenge?” Jack perked up, removing his pumpkin mask.

Shadows slithered through the room, stripping off articles of clothing as both men moved to their feet.

They stood naked before one another, and Jack dropped to his knees, already desperately hungry for Dimitri’s cock. It brought him more pleasure than he ever realized was possible.

Jack took Dimitri’s semi-erect cock into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the head.

“You are wonderful,” Dimitri panted, guiding Jack’s bobbing head up and down. “I wish to feel all of you. I wish to fuck you.”

Jack gulped, gagging a bit as the cock hit the roof of his mouth. While Jack had considered sex quite a lot since he and Dimitri started exploring each other’s bodies, he hadn’t fully figured out how he felt about going further. Jack had only recently adopted this submissive desire to please Dimitri at all hours of the day, craving his satisfaction above his own.

Normally, Jack was a bit more assertive with his carnal desires, something he'd explored with Dimitri on one occasion, but most nights ended with Jack hungry to suck Dimitri's cock above all else.

"I have to be honest with you," Jack panted as he spat out Dimitri's dick. "I'm not usually this big of a pleaser."

A string of spit hanging from Jack's mouth to the tip of Dimitri's leaking cock held a slight glimmer. Jack licked his lips, wishing to taste the precum mixed with his spit.

"It's not that I don't please people, it's just I usually take on a different role."

Dimitri stared down at Jack with those big, beautiful, soft green eyes. It was like he listened to every word that spilled from Jack's mouth with great care.

"I understand if you would prefer we did not advance." Dimitri grazed Jack's face with his sharp claws. "I am content just as we are. I need only your company to find pleasure."

Fucking hell, Dimitri had a way with words that made Jack's entire body quiver with anticipation.

"It's not that," Jack said, forcing the words out. "It's just, I'm usually... well, by usually, I mean always, um, sort of, the top. The giver uh, if you will. I've never hmm...received before."

"I see. You worry about..." Dimitri gestured to his massive cock.

"Yes and no." Jack grimaced. "I'm not breakable by any means. But I also have no idea what I'm doing there. When it comes to topping, I am a pro. I mean, maybe not like a *pro* pro, but I know what I'm doing. You know?"

"I understand." Dimitri helped Jack to his feet, still towering over him even as they stood facing each other. "Would you prefer to top me?"

The question sent a surge through Jack, and it took everything he had not to respond with a commanding "yes" because he absolutely wanted to rail Dimitri. Despite the desire to take charge and fuck Dimitri, there was a deeper yearning that had rooted itself within Jack's anxiety.

"No, I want to feel you inside me." Jack shuddered.

It was the truth. He'd always been curious, tempted, and had a few almosts over the centuries, but no one ever got so deeply intimate with him.

"I want this," Jack whispered. "I'm just worried I won't... I just don't want you to expect me to be... It won't be as good as my oral game, you

know?”

Jack's cheeks burned with this confession, and Dimitri's hands were cool to the touch as he cradled Jack's face.

“I wish only to explore this with you,” Dimitri said, leading Jack toward the bed.

Dimitri guided Jack onto the bed, putting him face down and ass up. Jack trembled, nervously lying there and awaiting further instruction. While he knew what he liked, he also knew he was not ready for such aggressive play. Dimitri palmed Jack's ass, massaging Jack's cheeks.

Jack allowed himself to sink into the pleasurable sensation, holding onto Dimitri's gentle yet firm grip, his calm yet rough play.

“Do you have lubrication?”

“Uh, yeah.” Jack craned his neck to the nearby dresser and used his shadows to toss a bottle of lube onto the bed.

“Good. Now, relax.”

Jack anticipated what came next. The lube, the sharp pressure of Dimitri entering him, but to his surprise, something else happened. Dimitri's tongue tickled him, trailing along the crack of his ass.

“Whoa, what are you doing?”

Hands gripped his cheeks and spread them wide. Jack moaned, completely overwhelmed by the feeling of Dimitri burying his face in Jack's ass. He lay there panting with pleasure as Dimitri rimmed him.

Dimitri licked Jack's hole, pushing his tongue into the entrance, and teasing him. Jack whimpered as Dimitri moved his tongue rhythmically.

“Relax,” Dimitri whispered, pouring the lube down Jack's crack.

The cool liquid made him shiver nervously, but the warm embrace of Dimitri's tongue made Jack quiver with anticipation. Dimitri's tongue guided the lube to Jack's hole, taking his time to prepare Jack for what came next.

This went on for some time, creating a full-body warmth that eased all the nervous tension in Jack's body. He found himself sinking deeper into the mattress, lost in this moment. He believed if Dimitri began to fuck him, he wouldn't even realize, given how wonderful he felt.

“Are you ready?”

Jack responded with a nod as he kept his head pressed to the pillow. He did his best to arch his back.

“I require a response.” Dimitri gripped Jack’s shoulder, pulling him up to face him.

“Yes, I’m ready,” Jack said with a shaky breath.

“Good.” Dimitri lay back on the bed, moving to the center, and forcing Jack to straddle his waist.

“Whoa.” Jack grinned nervously.

“We go at your pace.” Dimitri grabbed the lube once more and stroked his erect dick. “This is about you. You wish to please me? I wish to see you pleased.”

Jack turned his head sheepishly until Dimitri grabbed his chin and forced his eye contact. Those beautiful green eyes were so piercing, they saw through all the emotions hidden in Jack’s golden eyes.

“Take the lead, my love.”

As the words spilled out of Dimitri’s mouth, Jack lost himself. He was completely entranced. He pressed up against Dimitri, locking lips with him and grinding against his body.

Dimitri adjusted his hard cock beneath Jack, lining it up with Jack’s hole, and pressing the head against the entrance.

Fuck.

Jack shook, holding his breath as he prepared to push down onto the cock.

It burned unlike anything Jack had ever felt in his life. His body trembled, and his hole clenched.

“Relax,” Dimitri whispered. “It will hurt less if you relax your body.”

Jack obeyed. Well, he did his best to obey, easing the cock deeper inside him, but the pain didn’t subside. It hurt all the way to the base where he sat frozen atop Dimitri.

“Ow, uh, hold on.” Jack grimaced, staying perfectly still after a failed attempt to thrust on top of Dimitri. It seemed sexy in his mind, but it only proved painful in reality.

“Easy.” Dimitri brushed his fingers through Jack’s bangs, pushing the white hair back. “Let it rest inside you. Let your body adjust to this new sensation.”

Jack bit his bottom lip and nodded.

They stayed perfectly still, staring at each other in silence as Jack adjusted. Shadows shifted along the wall, and it took everything Jack had to

keep them from thrashing about on instinct. This pain was not an attack. It was merely the price of pleasure.

“Fuck me,” Jack commanded. “I want you to take hold and fuck me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Jack kissed Dimitri with tender passion. “I want to surrender to you, to feel all the pleasure that comes with it, but I can’t lead this. I can’t... I need you to—”

Dimitri thrust upward, sending a searing shiver through Jack. Before he could shout, Dimitri swallowed the sound with a rough kiss.

He continued bucking upward into Jack, wrapping his arms around his back, and holding Jack in place as he fucked into him. Jack groaned, barely able to handle the sensations. Dimitri’s sweet kisses distracted him, but didn’t remove the piercing pain pulsating through Jack.

Just as he thought he’d buckle, just as he thought he’d need to stop, to wait, this burning ache turned into a deep, powerful warmth. It spread through Jack’s entire body, making him quake.

“Aaahhh,” Jack moaned, unable to contain himself as Dimitri pounded into him.

Jack’s dick bounced between them, slapping each of their stomachs as Dimitri continued fucking him.

“Goddammit,” Jack whimpered. “You feel so good. Fuck, just like that. Fuuuuck.”

Dimitri continued his powerful thrusts upward; his hands slid down to Jack’s hips, holding him in place. The more Dimitri railed into Jack, the bigger his antlers grew. They swelled atop his head like a commanding crown, and what he commanded was that Jack satisfy him.

Jack panted, moving in tandem with Dimitri’s swift thrusts. Each passing second made his dick ache with the pressure of release. The more he fucked himself onto Dimitri’s dick, the closer he felt to climaxing.

“I’m gonna... I can’t stop myself...” Jack shot his load across Dimitri’s stomach and chest, panting as the euphoric sensation passed.

Dimitri slowed his thrusts, almost coming to a stop.

“Wait,” Jack pressed his hands to Dimitri’s sticky chest. “You’re not finished.”

“Yes, but you have...”

“Fuck me.” Jack grinded against Dimitri, wincing as he pushed the cock deeper inside him.

It hurt once again, more so now that he'd already finished.

"I want to feel you inside me," Jack insisted. "I want to feel all of you inside me."

"Okay." Dimitri wrapped his arms around Jack and shifted their position.

He rolled Jack onto his back and put his full weight on top of him. Dimitri snarled into Jack's ear as he pounded away.

"Uuuahhh," Jack groaned, biting back the scream that nearly escaped his lips as Dimitri fucked him faster and harder.

Shadows raged along the walls, shifting across the ceiling, and taking on jagged, threatening shapes.

"I am close." Dimitri bit down on Jack's neck and pumped all the way inside him.

Jack moaned as Dimitri's dick twitched inside him. Dimitri took a few spasming thrusts as he poured his seed deep in Jack's hole.

The shadows erupted around the room, vanishing entirely before they struck anyone or anything.

Dimitri's antlers shrank down, much like his cock.

"You are astounding." Dimitri lightly kissed Jack's collarbone, neck, and chest.

"You are fucking amazing." Jack playfully slapped one of Dimitri's ass cheeks.

Dimitri chuckled, cozying up to Jack. The pair lay in the bed, covered in sweat, cum, and the sweet euphoria that came with so much pleasure.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



JANUARY PASSED without any looming threats. Honestly, Dimitri hadn't seen any kind of danger, big or small. The only indication the hunters were stalking him came from his own paranoia, and as difficult as it was, Dimitri did his best to ignore the fears as he moved into February. It seemed for all intents and purposes that that chapter of his life had come to an end.

Dimitri scoffed, closing the book he sat with in the library. His mind was too scattered for leisurely reading at the moment. But his lifetime with the Hearst family wasn't a bad chapter. It was an everlasting saga of torment, yet it had come to an end all the same.

Dimitri put his book away and left the library, finding that the silence gave way to his thoughts that screamed far too loudly. Hopefully, Jack was playing his video games and could offer some type of entertainment for Dimitri.

Music played on a loop as Jack recorded himself doing some silly dance trend. He wore a tie around his neck, no shirt, because he never wore a shirt, and he let his jeans hang even lower than usual. It exposed the deep V-cut below his abs, leading to his groin.

"Look at you." Dimitri tsked in a flirty tone. "Nice moves."

"Okay, moves." Jack grinned. "I keep popping when locking and rocking when talking."

"I do not know what that means."

"Neither do I apparently, but I'm going to get this dance right in one of these takes."

Jack wiggled his hips in the most alluring rhythmic manner. He rolled his shoulders back in sync with the sway of his hips and the shake of his butt. When the beat of the music took a sharp turn, Jack shifted his stance, moving in this glorious and chaotic manner.

Dimitri kept his gaze locked onto Jack, lost in the allure of his tight, muscular body bouncing around completely carefree.

“Maybe when you finish, we can try another kind of dance.” Dimitri stepped close behind Jack, delicately running his claws down Jack’s arms, and bumping his crotch against Jack’s butt.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Jack said. “Someone’s feeling frisky.”

“Always.” Dimitri wrapped his arms around Jack, squeezing him tightly.

They had been fucking quite a lot since their first night together. While Jack was rather new to bottoming, he proved very enthusiastic, always willing and ready to submit on any occasion. And for Dimitri, that turned into a regular occurrence. Exploring Jack’s body and throwing him into infinitely new positions was the perfect distraction for his mind. It allowed him to focus all his insecurities on someone he cared about, someone who captivated him in every way. Honestly, there was nothing more gratifying than fucking the cum out of Jack and using him until he begged for more.

“Ah, are you two preparing to fight yet again?” Astaroth asked, trotting into the living room. “I do so enjoy the torments the Leshy peasant unleashes upon you, Jack.”

Dimitri’s face burned, and he turned bright red at the demon dog’s comment.

“It is of no surprise to me when I hear your screams echo through the chateau,” Astaroth continued. “I’ve always known you to be weak of will, incapable of fully harnessing the raw power of the Nuckelavee.”

“Uh, we are not fighting,” Dimitri said, unable to bring himself to clarify.

“Nonsense,” Astaroth countered. “I hear you throwing him around at all hours of the day.”

“I mean, I do want to try out some of my wrestling moves on you.” Jack snorted, jabbing Dimitri in the ribs with his elbow. “We could add a little fighting in the bedroom.”

“Do not stop on my behalf,” Astaroth continued. “I quite fancy whatever excruciation you employ on Jack. Though, while his screams are

delectable at times, he does tend to find some pleasure in your acts.”

“Astaroth, read the room, dude.” Jack shook his head.

“I can offer you lessons in proper torture,” Astaroth said to Dimitri, completely ignoring Jack’s presence. “If you wish a professional’s expertise.”

“I am not trying to torture Jack.”

“Good, because you’re falling short,” Astaroth replied.

“We’re not fighting, we’re fucking.”

Astaroth scoffed. “Fighting, fucking, it’s all the same if done correctly.”

Dimitri scrunched his face and looked at Jack’s bewildered, shadowy expression.

“As much as I would love to add a little kink to the bedroom, if you ever took tips from the demon dog, I would never have sex with you again.”

“Understood.” Dimitri chuckled.

Jack’s bewilderment washed away, and his trademark smile returned.

“So, how about we try out this wrestling you speak of?” Dimitri said, enthralled by the idea of pinning Jack beneath him before fucking him to celebrate his victory.

“Oh no, mister.” Jack pressed a hand to Dimitri’s chest, holding him back. “We’re not fooling around until much later. Think of it as a reward to ourselves for this evening.”

Dimitri cocked his head, trying to decipher what Jack meant.

“We have a date night, remember?”

Dimitri blinked, attempting to recall.

Jack’s shadowy eyebrows furrowed, and his toothy grin turned into a frown. Dimitri’s shoulders raised, and his neck sank as he nervously tried to figure out what he’d forgotten.

“What is today?” Jack crossed his arms.

“Thursday?”

“What else is today?” Jack’s big black eyes seemed all the more menacing when glaring at him.

Dimitri believed the void of shadows might very well launch out and strike him if he gave the wrong answer.

Biding his time, Dimitri grinned uncomfortably at Jack while he tried recalling what they had planned. It didn’t help that Jack planned many frequent outings, which ultimately did help distract Dimitri. Mostly, it was nice that things had settled in town with the holidays over and tourist season

behind them more or less. Plus, like Jack, most humans didn't enjoy venturing outside in the cold except for holidays.

"Holidays," Dimitri muttered. His big, green eyes widened with excitement as the answer came to him. "We have Valentine's dinner tonight!"

Jack's expression completely changed, his eyes transformed into heart shapes, and he smiled.

"Yes, oh my goodness. I'm glad you remembered." Jack patted Dimitri on the shoulder. "Otherwise, I might've had to kill you."

"This is a joke, correct?"

"I don't know, forget an important relationship milestone, and find out." Jack swaggered away, leaving Dimitri longing for the intimacy they would explore later tonight.

It also left him tingling with excitement. Relationship milestone. Valentine's Day had never meant much to Dimitri, no holiday had, but with Jack, they all seemed so very special. Jack had a way of making even simple, uneventful days better.

Dimitri considered returning to the library to read. He could get lost in a book for several hours, for the whole night if he didn't already have date plans, but his mind was still too scattered to read quietly.

Doomscrolling took precedence, and Dimitri watched many pointless videos that either brought him great joy or incredible annoyance. Jack had taught him to simply block anyone he didn't like, and he'd never have to stumble upon them again. The world had become a true marvel, allowing anyone to customize every little interaction to their preferences.

"Come along, peasant," Astaroth walked into the room, wearing his doggy jacket and scarf.

"It is time for your walk already?"

"Yes."

Dimitri put his phone away and got ready. "It is funny, only I seem able to handle the cold in this home."

"Don't be absurd," Astaroth snarled. "Hell burns cold, and I relish the icy embrace of eternal death, but this particular host body functions best when I keep the temperature within certain parameters."

"Fascinating."

Dimitri passed more hours by taking a much longer hike with Astaroth than usual. They explored several trails they hadn't taken in weeks.

Astaroth talked the entire time about the best methods of torture and his plans for unleashing the apocalypse. The many horrors mentioned left little time for Dimitri to dwell on his own thoughts. Though he had hoped to listen in on the whispered dreams of the slumbering trees. They always got quieter during the winter, much like most of nature.

Dimitri stared up at the cloudy sky, wondering when Nikolai and his flock would return. He had missed his little murder of crows.

By the time they returned to the chateau, the sun had set, and the night sky had taken hold.

Dimitri returned to his bedroom and made his way into the master bath to shower off the grime of the day. If he had plans for a dinner date, he thought he should be presentable.

Once he hopped out, Dimitri air-dried for a bit in only a towel, until a knock on the door alerted him that date night would begin shortly.

Jack strutted into the room, dressed up in a white suit and red tie. Even his enchanted pumpkin was glamoured a light pink for the date.

"This is one fancy date, I take it."

"It's Valentine's Day," Jack said with this sickeningly sweet tone. "I never really do anything for Valentine's; you know, the whole evil corporate holiday. Blah, blah, blah, but I figured, why not make it a little special? Like it could be fun, right?"

"Yes, very fun." Dimitri gulped, wondering what was in store for tonight.

Jack pulled out a black dress shirt and matching slacks for Dimitri to put on. It was not the sort of outfit Dimitri would willingly wear, but he could make the sacrifice for Jack.

"Looking good," Jack said as Dimitri fastened the belt around his slacks.

Normally, Dimitri tucked his tail away within his joggers, but these pants left little breathing room.

"No worries," Jack said, tearing a small seam in the back. "I didn't want to make it too big, so I figured we'd have you try them on first. Wouldn't want your whole ass hanging out."

Jack let out an awkward laugh, and Dimitri smirked. It was a nice gesture.

"Is this a place that requires both the shirt and the shoes for the service?" Dimitri asked as Jack finished buttoning up the tight dress shirt.

“Yes, you will have to wear shoes tonight.”

Dimitri lifted his head and sighed. “Ah, I suffer so for you.”

“Yes, yes, you endure so much for me, and I thank you for it,” Jack said teasingly. “Now, go put your slides on.”

The single slot sandals were the only footwear Dimitri didn’t entirely despise. They left room for his claws, they didn’t pinch his feet, and they were easy to slip off since the design didn’t wrap around his heels like most footwear. Still, Dimitri hated the oppressive feeling that came with any kind of shoes. It left him disconnected from the earth, a tiny buffer that felt infinite.

“I wear a shirt with the buttons and the pants with the fancy belt, and now I wear the fancy shoes.”

“These are in no way fancy shoes.” Jack side-eyed Dimitri. “These are fancy shoes.”

Jack flaunted his foot in the pointy, sleekly polished black leather dress shoes.

“Bah, all footwear is unnecessary.”

Jack grabbed a fancy jacket that matched Dimitri’s black slacks and tossed it on him. Dimitri pouted but did not resist as Jack shoved his arms through the sleeves and pulled them up over his shoulders.

“Look at you, Mr. Spiffy.”

“I hate it.”

“I know, and it means a lot that you’re dressing up just for me.”

Dimitri tried not to sulk because he knew how much this meant to Jack. He stared down at Jack’s tie and the matching pocket square.

“You can grab one of those ties to finish the outfit,” Dimitri said, biting back a grumpy huff. “I will not protest.”

“Oh?”

“I know you wish to complete the outfit.”

“Yay,” Jack said, scurrying away and returning with a bowtie and matching emerald green pocket square. “These will match your eyes.”

“Put on the baby tie.” Dimitri lifted his head, exposing his neck to make Jack’s work easier. “Anything else?”

“I was wondering if we should do matching fedoras?”

Dimitri stared, unblinking.

“Too much?”

Dimitri remained silent and unblinking.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Jack turned away, then paused, then looked back at Dimitri, and waited for a response.

Dimitri did not respond, standing completely still and simply staring down at Jack.

“Okay, yeah, we’ll scrap the fedoras,” Jack conceded. “We’ll save ‘em for like an anniversary.”

Jack froze at that, his body a bit tense at his excited little confession. Dimitri had grown quite used to Jack’s many thoughts blurted out into the ether. Honestly, he preferred it, since it provided less guesswork in the end.

“I would like to celebrate many anniversaries.” Dimitri grabbed Jack by the waist and pulled him close. “But I will never wear a fedora.”

Jack grinned, releasing a bated breath of anxiety, and Dimitri enjoyed the calm that washed over his boyfriend, his partner, his everything. Jack truly meant everything to Dimitri, so he endured these silly little adventures. Partly because they made Jack happy and partly because Dimitri did like being dragged out to do things he otherwise never would have explored. Sure, he might’ve been reluctant, but that was part of the fun, too.

After they finished getting dressed, Jack drove them into town. Dimitri climbed out of the truck, grimacing at the crowded parking lot. Many cars meant many humans.

“Don’t worry,” Jack said, seeming to read Dimitri’s mind in a way only he ever could. “Street parking is practically impossible downtown, so lots are easier.”

Dimitri followed Jack’s lead, glowering at the bustle of people standing outside bars that blasted music almost as loudly as their patrons talked. Cigarette smoke wafted in the air, mixing with the fruity aroma of vapes and the pungent odor of something much stronger. Dimitri could use something strong to take the edge off.

Instead, he grabbed Jack’s hand, squeezing tightly as they passed through a crowd. When they cut the corner, they finally found a bit of peace in an empty alleyway. Jack kept his smile bright as he led them further away from the busy main streets.

“What do you think?” Jack eyed Dimitri as they arrived at a quaint little restaurant.

Even from outside, the ambiance radiated elegance. The dim lighting created a soothing atmosphere, and everyone within was dressed in the type

of refinement Dimitri hadn't seen since hauled out and put on display for one of the Hearst family's galas. Very rarely did they show him off to their elite guests, but on occasion, they liked to point and laugh and mock the beast who knelt at their feet.

Dimitri shivered, quelling the horrid memories attempting to resurface. Instead, he focused on the simple awkwardness of walking inside this restaurant despite how out of place he appeared.

"Will they not be bothered by our unusual costumes?"

"Black tie is essential here." Jack adjusted Dimitri's suit jacket and smirked. "Which is why we're dressed like the best."

"I mean, our other costumes." Dimitri tilted his head, gesturing to Jack's pumpkin. He even allowed his antlers to swell a bit atop his head to emphasize his point.

"Fanciest place in town, for sure, but with the right know-how, even a ditzy influencer like me can convince them why letting me show up as the local legend is actually a good thing."

"But how?"

"Why all the questions?" Jack retorted, side-stepping behind Dimitri and pushing him ahead toward the restaurant. "Let's just enjoy ourselves."

"Why the evasion on specifics?" Dimitri held his stance firmly, making it impossible for Jack to push him toward the doors. "You always love to brag."

"New Year, new me," Jack insisted. "I'm trying humble pie out for a change."

Dimitri quirked a brow. "You are, as they say, the liar."

"Fine, I asked Astaroth for a favor," Jack confessed. "It's not like he had anything better to do, and he likes proving he can conquer any human ruling or whatever. He's weird, but he gets shit done."

"What did the demon dog do?"

"Don't know, don't care." Jack shrugged. "All that matters is he got us reservations, no questions asked, and ensured the other patrons couldn't complain about our unconventional attire."

"He is a good dog," Dimitri said with a small chuckle. "Very capable."

"Yes, yes, whatever," Jack sighed. "Just don't let him know it. We'll never hear the end of it."

"And what did you have to give him?"

“Originally, he wanted a thousand souls sacrificed under a blood moon for some archaic harvest ritual.”

“I presume you negotiated a more reasonable deal?”

“I should’ve gone with the one-and-done ritual sacrifice.” Jack tsked. “Would’ve been easier. The little menace ended up making sure I have to give him extra walks on the weekends, non-negotiable twenty-minute belly rubs every evening, and more of those bull testicle treats that he likes so much.”

Dimitri’s face soured. “Is that a demon kind of treat?”

“No, actually, that’s a regular ole dog treat.” Jack shook his head. “I don’t understand it, but whatever floats their boats.”

Dimitri assumed Astaroth always intended on getting the extra luxuries around the house. It wasn’t that the hellish hound wouldn’t have appreciated a thousand human sacrifices, but Dimitri suspected, as wicked as the dog was, that he enjoyed his regular routine. Now, he managed to enhance it by arranging walks, cuddles, and treats.

“I will help with the weekend walks.”

“And the belly rubs?”

“I do not rub bellies.”

“Not even mine.” Jack wiggled his shadowy eyebrows in the most absurd manner.

Dimitri snorted as they stepped inside the restaurant.

The Maître d’ certainly flexed his snooty muscles in a poor attempt to shame Dimitri and Jack into considering dining elsewhere. It didn’t work. Dimitri loved that Jack could smile through any condescending comments and laugh off any disgusted looks. And they certainly got a few bewildered stares as they were escorted to their table.

“Front and center?” Dimitri tensed as he took his seat. “You really are making me put in the work.”

“It’s the best seat in the house,” Jack said. “I suppose they’re all the best seats in a fancy establishment like this.”

When their server arrived, he listed off the specials and the best wine pairings. Jack ordered a bottle and picked their entrées. Dimitri smiled, grateful he wouldn’t have to read through the menu of food far too fine for his palate.

Their wine and soup arrived first. Jack squinted at the half-empty glass and picked up the bottle to top off his drink.

“I will never understand the purpose of only filling the glass halfway.”

“It is to allow for the release of flavors,” Dimitri explained.

Jack retrieved a twirly straw and put it in his wine glass.

“I don’t wanna release the flavors,” Jack said, taking a big sip through the shadows of his pumpkin. “Aaah, I wanna taste ‘em.”

It was creative, for certain, the ways Jack managed to eat with the pumpkin mask. It also sparked a bit of warmth in Dimitri’s chest. Jack had been comfortable enough around him to lift his mask when they ate together, even if he often preferred to wear it. Here, though, in the company of so many, Jack wouldn’t bother lifting his mask at all. He’d merely use the shadows to transport the food and drink to his mouth.

Dimitri wondered how the logistics of such things worked.

“You are a very silly man.”

“And you are still so suave for a beast,” a sinister voice said, slithering into Dimitri’s ear with a haunting familiarity. “To think, something as simple-minded as you managed to retain some knowledge of the opulence which surrounded you. Fascinating.”

Every muscle in Dimitri’s body flexed, time itself froze, and he considered a thousand different ways to flee. But he remained fixed in his seat, too stunned to move.

The old man stood beside their table, a smile on his face. He appeared harmless. Quite a feat for such a threatening foe.

Dimitri’s chest tightened, his mind whirled with all the horrors he’d endured. His throat tightened, and he struggled to breathe, to think, to anything... The head of the Hearst family had shown up. The patriarch had come to reclaim Dimitri. He couldn’t fathom what was happening.

“Releasing the flavors truly does wonders.” The old man grabbed Jack’s glass and swirled the wine around a bit. The twirly straw clinked against the glass, and the wine swished about. “Here, try a sip now. You’ll taste such a difference in refinement.”

“Excuse me, who are you?”

“I am Gordon Hearst.” The old man invited himself to their table, taking a seat. “You’re Jack Whoa Lantern, correct?”

Jack’s shadowy expression flickered momentarily, perhaps hiding the shock on his face. Dimitri couldn’t be certain. He couldn’t be certain of anything right now.

“In some circles.” Jack eyed Gordon cautiously, keeping his gaze focused on his presence, but flitted his attention to Dimitri, who barely processed what was unfolding.

“I’d like to discuss my property, which you’re currently in possession of.” Gordon’s unflinching smile sent a shiver of fear piercing through Dimitri’s insides.

His foolish fantasy of living a happy life had come to an end. Fate would keep him bound and trapped by the Hearst family. There was no escaping their wicked grasp.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE AIR in the restaurant had gone stale and stiff, carrying the weight of all Dimitri's fears. Jack struggled to breathe, watching Dimitri still himself as his body trembled. Terror oozed off Dimitri, becoming palpable, and Jack wanted nothing more than to behead this monstrous human man who dared approach them.

He wasn't a particularly powerful-looking human. Gordon Hearst was a fat and decrepit old man, with shaky hands and a ragged wheeze as he took heavy breaths. Still, he held himself calmly, unfazed by the presence of monsters.

"I could end you here, and now, so I suggest—"

"In front of an audience?" Gordon scoffed. "I highly doubt that. Everything I've researched on you suggests you prefer discretion, despite throwing yourself in the public eye."

"I'm not worried about an audience."

"Fascinating. Hmph." Gordon squinted his dark brown eyes, the heavy creases of his wrinkled face locked in on Jack. "I wouldn't be surprised if you were stupid enough to cause a scene, but my marksman over there will blow that hollow pumpkin head of yours clean off if you make the wrong move."

"It wouldn't harm me," Jack scoffed.

"It would harm your reputation, though," Gordon said with this aggravating lilt. "You can't exactly play a pretend monster once they realize you're the real deal."

Jack turned to see Ted. Theodore Ackley, the man they stumbled upon in the woods, the one Dimitri believed was stalking them, the very same man who cried and pissed his pants to convince them he was harmless. The sheer lengths he went to in order to throw Jack off, and he fell for it like a fool. Jack balled his fists, desiring to rip Ted's intestines out and stuff them down his lying throat.

The marksman, Ted, sat at a table with a woman. Both were dressed elegantly for the evening, with their eyes fixed on Jack and Dimitri.

Gordon grabbed the wine bottle and poured himself a glass. He grinned, wicked and arrogant and filled with this smug superiority.

"I believe that's why you move with such discretion, a way to maintain your public image. Wouldn't want the town to think you're an actual monster, now, would you?"

Jack glared, his shadowy expression twisting into something feral and sinister. It took everything he had not to lunge forward and rip this man's throat out. But Gordon had a point. Jack preferred people to think it was all an act, a show, because it allowed him to wander the world as himself. If he started slaughtering evil bastards in front of witnesses, he'd have had a lot of explaining to do.

"Hmm." Gordon grimaced, smacking his lips at the sweetness of the wine. "Foul and cheap, but I can't be too surprised."

Jack scanned the room, seeing whose eyes fell to them, and did a head count on the packed restaurant. Shadows crept from his stitches and slid beneath the table, coiling around Gordon's legs.

Gordon didn't even react as the shadows slithered over his flesh. Jack knew how to move his shadows with precision. If he wanted them to go unnoticed, they would. But Jack let the eerie pin prickles strike, hopefully to elicit some fear. Gordon proved unflinching, which was disappointing.

"Something tells me I can get rid of you before a single person blinks." Jack leaned closer, staring Gordon down. "And your marksman. Neither would be able to get a scream before drowning in the darkness of my shadows. No one the wiser."

"Perhaps." Gordon smirked. "I don't doubt your skills. After all, you killed my best scouting team in a decade. No easy feat. Each of those men had nearly thirty cryptids under their belts."

The original hunters who'd stormed the woods in search of Jack, back when they kept Dimitri collared and chained up. Those men were easy to

dispatch. In fact, the most challenging part was the clean-up. Jack hated burying bodies, but he'd take a little satisfaction in dropping this pompous old man into a hole so deep the world would never find him.

"However, if you remove me, then the rest of my team will storm this quaint little hovel and shoot you both down in front of everyone," Gordon explained. "And I assure you that will cause quite the spectacle with plenty of witnesses. Something tells me those bullets won't do much to you. I did a bit more homework on the Nuckelavee, and it turns out you wicked things don't have many weaknesses."

Jack growled, grinding his teeth beneath the pumpkin mask.

"But Leshy are far easier to kill. Just ask Dimitri." Gordon nodded to Dimitri, who remained petrified. "For immortal woodland guardians of the forest, they sure are easy to slaughter. Found a half-dozen and we only managed to bring back this worthless lout."

Dimitri's face turned ghostly white, and his eyes became vacant, lost in the horrors of his past. Jack didn't push for answers, understanding Dimitri had endured so much, but he wondered what became of Dimitri's father and mother. She was human, so maybe she wasn't around anymore. But the mention of a half-dozen Leshy? Did Dimitri have other family in those woods? Siblings? Friends?

"I should kill you here and now," Dimitri hissed, his jaw clamped tight.

"Careful, Dimitri. You know I've never been fond of your rebellious streak," Gordon said matter-of-factly. "I'll be certain to break that free-spirited attitude you've adopted since running away."

Jack scowled, the pit of rage burning hotter inside him with each passing word. Gordon's disgusting comments only further fueled the fury in Jack's chest. He wanted to hack the old man up this very second.

"But I am a magnanimous man, one filled with more virtue than a fiendish creature like you could ever comprehend."

The smugness on Gordon's face twisted into sour contempt. This wasn't just wealthy arrogance. It was disdain for Dimitri's very being.

"If you return without resistance, I will let your little pumpkin-headed freak go without a fuss," Gordon said, proposing the most foolish offer. "He can return to his sad, online clout. A Nuckelavee would be interesting to add to my collection, but irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. Let him become a young man's trophy. My legacy is filled with great catches."

“You speak as if you can actually threaten us,” Jack snapped. “Bring in your hunters, I’ll dispose of them before a single one fires off a shot.”

“Tempting.” Gordon locked eyes with the petrified Dimitri. “Would you like to test my forces, Dimitri?”

He averted his gaze, looking down at the table and away from Gordon.

Jack’s worries grew as the panic on Dimitri’s face worsened. It wasn’t that Jack feared Gordon or his forces, but he feared the grip this old man had on Dimitri.

“Return my property, Jack, and you can return to your peaceful, pointless existence,” Gordon said. “Leshy are hard to come by, given they’re damn near extinct.”

That sent a shiver through the air so sharp, Jack felt Dimitri’s pain. He’d been defeated by words alone, reminded of horrors Jack couldn’t even fathom. All he wanted was to slaughter Gordon and hold Dimitri close.

“I’m even willing to pay you a finder’s fee for your cooperation.” Gordon smiled as if nothing he said carried the weight of so much hate.

“Take your hunters and leave this town,” Jack said in a low rasp. “If you ever step foot in Sleepy Hollow again, wander in my woods again, I will kill every last one of you.”

“That so?” Gordon appeared unfazed.

“I don’t care if there are a thousand witnesses or a million pitchforks. I would burn down this little life I carved out to protect Dimitri. I would slaughter every single hunter on your payroll, and then I’d rip you apart piece by fucking piece.”

“Temperamental, I see.” Gordon pulled on his dress jacket, straightening it out as he stood to his feet. “I would prefer not to go to war over something as trivial as Dimitri, but if you wish for a fight, I will gladly deliver, monster.”

Jack’s shadows swirled around Gordon’s feet, and he prepared to drop the old man in the void of eternal darkness. He didn’t give a damn who looked over and saw.

“Stop,” Dimitri whispered, hand pressed to Jack’s.

This wasn’t a warning, merely a hope to stop Jack from giving in to such an impulsive and public move. Jack only held back out of respect for Dimitri. After all, he’d already resigned himself to burning everything to the ground for Dimitri. A dangerous sentiment, but one that rang true with every fiber of Jack’s being.

“Take a few days to consider my proposition.” Gordon gestured to his marksman, and they prepared to leave their table, too. “If you’re still feeling this hostile after some time to think, we can go to war.”

Jack watched them leave, keeping his shadows tucked in the corners of the restaurant and ready to launch on any potential threats. Mostly, he worried that Dimitri had been defeated before they even rallied to fight back.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



DIMITRI PACED BACK and forth through the chateau, unable to settle his nerves since encountering Gordon Hearst. The head of the family had come to collect Dimitri.

“I know you’re freaking out, but—”

“But nothing,” Dimitri interrupted. “It is over. I always knew remaining here was a risk. Of course, they would come back for me. It was foolish to believe otherwise.”

“And it’s even more foolish that he thinks he can take you,” Jack said, blocking Dimitri’s path. “I told you that you were safe here, and I meant it.”

“Maybe I should leave, flee,” Dimitri said frantically. “But where would I even go where the Hearst family would not follow?”

“Nowhere,” Jack said, blocking Dimitri’s path and pressing his hands onto Dimitri’s shaky shoulders. “This is the safest place ever. First off, I’m here, and I’m a force of nature. Secondly, the woods are protected. Gordon couldn’t find us if he wanted to.”

“You cannot hide in here forever.”

“I mean, I could, but I won’t need to.”

“You do not understand, the Hearst family has infinite resources. Gordon will not simply give up.”

“I already told him what will happen if he tries anything,” Jack said. “Trust me, he might act tough, but—”

“He does not fear you,” Dimitri interrupted, recalling all the years he’d spent bound to the Hearst family. Decades forced to serve them, to track

monsters for them, to watch his own slaughtered for sport. And it all started when a young Gordon Hearst found Dimitri's family. "He fears nothing."

"I have met many of mortals who present themselves untouchable," Astaroth said, curiously studying Dimitri's frazzled reaction. "Wealth, power, hubris, it's all bravado in the end and never serves them the invulnerability they believe it will."

"We'll put an end to this," Jack said, grabbing Dimitri's hand. "I will put an end to this."

"This could prove entertaining," Astaroth said, then took his leave, rushing off through the woods quite abruptly.

"I need rest," Dimitri said, pulling his hand free from Jack and going to his room, where he lay for hours unable to sleep.

He could sense Jack on the other side of the door, silently guarding him, offering his comfort even if Dimitri couldn't find peace.

After finally dozing off for a little while, nightmares of his past clawed at his mind. He was dragged into horrid memories mixed with fears of what might come now. Dimitri watched his family get slaughtered again and again; he watched Jack strung up by the Hearst family and burned alive. The roaring laughter woke him, and Dimitri jumped up with a terrified shout.

"You okay?" Jack burst into the bedroom, groggy and stumbling forward.

He must have slept outside in the hallway.

Dimitri frowned. "You are too kind."

Jack gave him a silly grin. "You can talk to me."

"Join me." Dimitri patted the mattress, his expression so somber it must've been the reason Jack hesitated. "I wish to tell you of my family, of how the Hearsts found us."

Jack's shadowy face took on a very serious look, and he quietly sat on the bed beside Dimitri.

"My mother had already passed by this time," Dimitri said, recalling he was nearly fifty when Gordon had invaded their woods.

As the youngest of his siblings, he hadn't known his mother as well as they had. Barely a teen when illness had taken her.

"My father had roamed the lands for over a thousand years, convinced he'd seen the worst humanity had to offer over the centuries," Dimitri said, fighting back the tight pinch in his throat as he spoke.

A sad whimper almost escaped, but he refused to cry. He'd cried far too many tears during his captivity. He wouldn't allow the Hearst horrors to bring him to tears yet again.

"When the hunters came, they started with my father burning, bleeding, and breaking him in more ways than I could ever fathom." The coldness in Dimitri's tone helped him distance himself from the memories, to ignore the fresh images of his father's severed head propped onto the hood of a truck as a trophy. "Until that day, I believed Leshy truly immortal. It was then that I learned we were only everlasting in the sense of longevity. We could be slain like all the other creatures of the forest, like the forest itself."

The wails of wildlife caught in the crossfire echoed in Dimitri's mind. Trees shrieked as their memories burned down to cinders, lost forever. Dense, black smoke poisoned the skies.

"I had four siblings, all of whom were..." Dimitri paused.

His throat tightened, and tears welled in his eyes, but he refused to break down. After a shaky breath, Dimitri steadied the tremble in his body.

"They were all slain." The words spilled out, but Dimitri couldn't finish his confession. "I wish to tell you about them, all of them, but I..."

"It's okay." Jack squeezed Dimitri's shoulder, offering this gentle embrace to say what neither of them could.

Dimitri did his best to keep his family buried. It was painful digging up their lives, remembering all the beauty they offered the world, and the brutality of each of their deaths. Most of all, it hurt knowing he was meant to die that day, too. His resilience had merely entertained Gordon, so much so that he decided to test Dimitri's survival, only to realize the Leshy might provide more than simple entertainment.

"Gordon kept me not simply as a tool but as a living trophy," Dimitri said. "When he first detained me, he warned that the horrors I endured paled in comparison to what he would do if I refused him. He told me if I helped track down more pesky little cryptids, then he would let me live."

Dimitri's eyes watered, recalling his terror, his confusion, his selfishness.

"I did this only to learn Gordon was a man true to his word, but I was the foolish one believing that he meant I would be free to live. The bargain was only ever for my life, which I had come to regret keeping. He did let me live, and he kept me chained and shackled from that day on, only to

venture out when taken on a hunt or paraded in front of his most elite guests.”

Dimitri sat silently on his bed, shaking a bit as he quelled his nerves, silenced his memories, and tried his best not to dwell on the horrors Gordon would soon unleash.

Jack didn’t speak, didn’t pry, didn’t even give Dimitri a look of pity. He just remained by his side, quietly offering support in any small way.

Suddenly, Astaroth pranced into the bedroom carrying a folder in his mouth. He approached Jack and Dimitri and set the folder gingerly on the floor.

“No one is in the mood to play fetch,” Jack said. “Read the room, Astaroth.”

“Read my notes, lesser peasant,” Astaroth growled. “I have found the address of where your enemy is staying, along with reports on his numbers.”

“You what?” Dimitri asked in utter shock.

“You both seemed so insistent on learning the details, so I acquired them,” Astaroth explained as if it were nothing. “This should make ending their lives easier. I’ve also left meticulous details on effective torture methods when dragging out a mortal’s death. Jack kills them far too quickly, and Dimitri, while I admire your efforts, your torture technique is lacking.”

Jack picked up the folder, flipping through the documents inside. Dimitri read over his shoulder, his eyes growing wide at everything Astaroth had provided. This wasn’t simply an address. It came with details on how many hunters he brought with him, names, histories, a blueprint of the manor, and documents of the guard rotation. There were even scanned invoices with the list of guns in Gordon’s inventory, along with all the other gadgets he’d brought.

“He is staying in a manor on the north side of town,” Dimitri said, following the map Astaroth had made of Sleepy Hollow with a red marker leading from the woods to Gordon’s current residence.

“Oh, the richy riches,” Jack commented. “No surprise there, I guess.”

“How did you do this?” Dimitri asked.

“I have mortal servants who handle my light work,” Astaroth replied, not really providing much of an answer.

“Thank you, Astaroth,” Dimitri said. “You are a very good boy.”

Astaroth's tail wagged, and his eyes glowed bright crimson. "I will admit, researching the Hearst assets was quite intriguing. So much money moving around in illuminating ways. The methods are crass but worth investigating."

"None of that money will help him when I'm done with him."

"He has used these funds for the best hunters, the most dangerous weaponry."

"He already knows there is nothing in his arsenal that can harm me," Jack said. "And trust me when I say, he won't get the chance to hurt you."

"So, you truly intend on ending Gordon's life? Going to war with him and the hunters?"

"War implies a battle," Jack retorted. "I'm going to fucking massacre them all."

Dimitri's heart pounded in his chest, every part of him desperate to believe this, every part of him equally dreading a confrontation he didn't think he could win. In all his years, he'd never seen a single monster come close to harming the Hearst family or even putting in a real dent on their forces, but Dimitri had never seen anyone with Jack's capabilities and immunities either.

"Hmm, that could indeed make acquiring the companies easier," Astaroth mused. "Perhaps I shall look further into it."

Dimitri didn't fully grasp Astaroth's agenda. He didn't know what the demon dog was up to, but he thanked him for the research he did on their behalf.

"Do have fun killing those mortals," Astaroth said, trotting out of the bedroom. "Paint the walls with entrails for me. Maybe bring me back a skull. I do so enjoy chewing on them."

Jack turned his attention to Dimitri.

"I think we should put an end to the Hearst threat before he decides he wants to make a move."

"I would assume staying in town was his first move," Dimitri replied. "He would not risk staying in town unless he wanted a base of operations."

Dimitri recognized such maneuvers for some of Gordon's longer hunts. He would send Dimitri and the scouting party out to track down the quarry, force the monster out of hiding, and offer initial intel. Then Gordon would take his time joining in the hunts, pushing his limits, and proving he could

kill any beast. Of course, with the assistance of his hunters, along with the best technology and weaponry money could buy.

“Then let’s tear that base down,” Jack replied, a furious edge in his tone. “That bastard doesn’t get to come into my town and threaten my boyfriend without losing his goddamn head.”

Dimitri gave Jack a small smile, appreciative and even a bit hopeful.

“Let us bring an end to this.”

Dimitri nodded with agreement. They didn’t rush to leave. Instead, Jack reviewed the documents Astaroth had gotten and smirked at the inventory list. Dimitri used the hours to settle his nerves. It didn’t work, but they consumed him less as they left the chateau.

Jack drove them through the woods, into town, and to the far-off estates on the north side. The quiet of the drive helped Dimitri process his nerves. Though it did nothing to alleviate his anxiety.

Dimitri nervously trailed behind Jack, uncertain they could truly get the drop on Gordon and his hunters even with all their intel, but this was the best advantage they had. If they moved in before Gordon could coordinate his forces, they might be able to win this.

“They will surely have traps ahead.”

“I’m not worried, trust me.”

They approached the front of the manor.

“Should we be here?” Dimitri asked nervously. “What about the element of surprise?”

“I doubt there’s any surprise on this property.” Jack nodded to a camera positioned above the entrance. “I say we knock the front door down and say hello. That’ll really surprise them.”

Dimitri concurred. Maybe the bold gambit would pay off. Dimitri trusted Jack and followed his lead.

Jack hadn’t been joking either. He dug his shadows into the hinges of the double doors and threw them into the home, creating an explosive entrance.

The pair stepped inside. Dimitri’s ears twitched, assessing how many heartbeats were nearby, and easily recognizing the strained patter of Gordon’s heart.

“I wondered what would take you so long,” Gordon said, announcing himself with such smug arrogance.

Dimitri wanted to carve that smile off the old man's face, but he carefully surveyed their surroundings. Upon entering the manor, the foyer led into a spacious open area. The floor was white marble with a murky black swirl. The banister was made from a deep reddish-brown wood and carved into elegant designs leading up to the railing of the second floor.

Hunters surrounded them from above; their guns trained on Dimitri and Jack. Several more slipped in from the sides of the first floor, creeping out cautiously as they took aim.

Between the men up top were large spotlights. No, not exactly. Dimitri wasn't sure what they were precisely, only that they were large blocks with rows of bulbs and protective glass over them. It almost seemed to shield the bulbs.

"They say the Nuckelavee is unstoppable," Gordon scoffed, clearing his throat with this gruff coughing laugh. "But everything I've researched suggests that power comes from the darkness the spirit lurks within."

Lights blasted from every direction. Dimitri squeezed his eyes shut, unable to see anything through this burning brightness.

"No shadows means no power." Gordon laughed. "Secure the Leshy and bring me the Nuckelavee's head."

Dimitri swung his arms wildly, growling at the air and any threatening hunters who approached.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



GORDON HEARST MIGHT'VE BEEN the most arrogant person Jack had ever encountered in his life. Jack squinted, struggling to see anything thanks to the absurdity of these light towers blasting brightness from every direction.

"You assume the Nuckelavee requires shadows to cast its powers," Jack said with a laugh. "What, did you do a quick Wiki search for that answer?"

Jack sliced through the light blasting around them, creating a bubble of darkness to cloak their presence. A rhythmic clip-clop of horse steps moved through the shadows Jack cast. It carried the summoning of the Nuckelavee's rage, an indication of Jack's true power. He wouldn't unleash it all here—he wouldn't need to—but he would show them a taste of what his dark spirit could do.

"Relax," Jack whispered, cupping a hand underneath Dimitri's chin.

Dimitri snarled instinctively, then settled once he realized Jack was the one who'd reached out.

"How did you..." Dimitri blinked, his glowing green eyes shifting to better see in the absolute darkness around them.

"Told you, I got a lot of tricks." Jack winked.

Then he turned his attention back onto the approaching hunters, opening shadows beneath their feet. Screams filled the foyer, echoing loudly as the hunters vanished one by one.

After he'd removed the hunters from the first floor, Jack pulled the shadows inward, studying the light towers and the positions of the remaining hunters above.

Jack stepped out of the shadows he used to hide his and Dimitri's position.

"Your mistake, Gordy old pal, was assuming I require darkness to attack," Jack said with a few tsks as he shook his head disapprovingly. "I don't require darkness. I am the darkness."

With that, Jack unleashed shadowed tendrils, stabbing the hunters perched in position on the second floor. He coiled darkness around the light towers, lifting the massive machines off the ground and hurling them across the room. Hunters shouted. Gunfire blasted. Metal crashed. Everything and everyone was destroyed in a matter of minutes, all while Jack stood in place, directing the darkness of his powers to overwhelm and eliminate the threats.

All but one threat. Gordon Hearst had run away in the commotion, abandoning his hunters who fought for their lives, no longer able to secure the situation. Some attempted to flee, while others feebly fought back. In the end, it didn't matter to Jack. He slaughtered them all the same.

"Jesus Christ," Ted said through chattering teeth.

"Well, if it isn't the little weasel from the woods." Jack cocked his head, turning his shadowy expression into one of utter contempt and chilling cruelty. "Can't cry your way out of anything this time."

Shadows sprang forward, impaling Theodore from every direction. He wailed and sobbed. Blood gushed from his wounds; his body twitched, and eventually, he settled into a cold, silent death.

"Prick," Jack scoffed.

Shadows opened from the ceiling, spitting out the first batch of hunters he'd captured. The room rained with their panicked screams. One by one, they splattered onto the marble floor, some dying after the immediate crunch, others wailing in agony as they lay in a pile of their own blood and broken bones.

It didn't take long for Jack to slaughter every single hunter in this manor. He cast shadows across the room, rounding up the corpses and hacking off the heads of each hunter. Part of him wanted to put them on display, remind the world why the Horseless Headsman wasn't to be trifled with, but another part of him realized that would draw more attention than he cared to deal with. Plus, Jack had cultivated a popular image online. Yes, he brought the scares from time to time, but always in a charming, endearing sort of way.

If he painted the town of Sleepy Hollow with the blood of his enemies and decorated the streetlamps with severed heads, it might ruin his image.

“Fuck it.” Jack chunked the heads into the shadowy abyss along with the rest of the corpses. “I’ll dump you somewhere else, make you someone else’s problem.”

“You will not escape, Gordon!” Dimitri shouted.

He leapt from the shadows Jack had cloaked around him and jumped up to the second-floor railing.

Jack quickly surveyed their surroundings, finding no hunters remained, and then hopped through a shadowy portal to reappear upstairs beside Dimitri.

Jack trailed behind Dimitri, following his furious boyfriend who stomped through the manor in pursuit of Gordon.

Dimitri took deep sniffs, tracking Gordon’s fear. Jack could practically taste the terror oozing off the old man, so much so that he dulled his shadow senses some.

“You waste your time running, Gordon,” Dimitri shouted, dragging his claws along the walls.

He slashed through the walls, tearing in deep and ripping out chunks. When Dimitri reached a decorative painting, he snatched it by the frame and smashed it onto the floor.

“Aww,” Jack said, musing over the lovely artwork destroyed in Dimitri’s fit.

This process repeated itself a few times until Dimitri turned the corner. Jack mourned the poor paintings until he passed a few portraits he didn’t like.

“Pretentious.” Jack stepped on one, cracking the broken glass beneath his heel.

Dimitri’s ears twitched as he seemed to listen to where Gordon had gone.

Jack sent his shadows slithering down the hall searching on Dimitri’s behalf.

The old man’s heartbeat patted faster, his body trembled, and his bones creaked with an unsteady stance. Jack smirked, using his shadows to open a nearby door.

Dimitri lunged ahead, barreling down the hallway and entering the room where Gordon hid.

“Wait, wait,” Gordon pleaded, fumbling as he backstepped into a dresser. “You need me... You can’t...”

Dimitri ignored Gordon’s desperation, appearing absolutely demonic as he approached. Jack watched in awe as the blackness of his hands extended, coating his entire arms in darkness. The black energy covered Dimitri’s entire body, except for his face. That appeared angelic despite the black cloak.

Gordon opened the top drawer of the dresser, frantically searching through it. Dimitri dragged his nails along the other end of the dresser, slowly approaching Gordon. He dug his claws deeply into the wood, adding to the horror Gordon experienced. The darkness lining Dimitri’s skin seemed to harden, forming tiny spikes.

It looked like a menacing suit of armor.

Jack didn’t understand what the energy coating Dimitri was exactly, something primordial in nature connected to the Leshy themselves. It was actual darkness, though—that much Jack could discern. The energy radiated off Dimitri in waves, creating a small buzzing sensation that sparked with Jack’s own control over the darkness. How had he never noticed it before? Perhaps because Dimitri kept the energy contained and limited to his hands and feet only. Jack wondered if this might have played a small role in their initial connection; the chemistry between them bound by the darkness they each harnessed in different ways.

“I do not need anything from you, old man.” Dimitri’s antlers swelled, growing larger and twisting into sharper, devilish curves.

Dimitri looked absolutely demonic, and Jack loved it.

Gordon continued rifling through the drawer, retrieving a small electronic device.

“You’ll see why you need me, creature.” Gordon flipped a switch and smirked.

Dimitri paused.

Jack held his breath.

Gordon gloated.

And then...nothing happened. Not a goddamn thing.

“Wait...” Gordon looked over the device, examining it closely and even aiming it at Dimitri. “It should be... No!”

Dimitri growled, creeping closer to Gordon.

“That son of a bitch.” Gordon hurled the device at Dimitri.

It smacked his chest and crashed onto the floor.

“Your time is done.” Dimitri wrapped his hands around Gordon’s head, squeezing tightly.

Claws dug into Gordon’s wrinkled face. Blood trickled. Bones crackled. Gordon released a horrified wail. His eyes turned bloodshot, oozing blood as they seemed to bulge. His jaw snapped as he screamed.

Dimitri didn’t relent, applying an unfathomable amount of pressure until Gordon’s head caved in on itself, and Dimitri smashed the insides with explosive fury.

“Fuck you,” Dimitri roared.

Blood splattered everywhere. He clenched his fists, his body shaking with rage. The darkness coating his skin slowly retreated back to his hands and feet, revealing the red droplets covering Dimitri’s chest, stomach, and arms.

“You okay?” Jack asked.

Dimitri panted, taking heavy, infuriated breaths.

His muscular chest swelled up and down with each sharp inhale. He bared his teeth; his fanged canines appeared bigger when he was so enraged. The antlers atop his head finally shrank, untwisting, and taking their regular shape.

“I am better now.”

Jack looked down at the bloody, headless mess that was Gordon Hearst. He lightly kicked the strange device Gordon attempted to use. Perhaps it was some monster-fighting gadget, something Gordon anticipated would work against Jack and Dimitri, much like the light towers. The only difference was that this device seemed like a dud.

“What do you think this was supposed to do?”

“No idea.” Dimitri stomped on the device, smashing it beneath his heel. “But it did not help him, and now it is as broken as Gordon’s corpse.”

Then Dimitri raised his leg and dropped it onto Gordon’s chest. Again and again, Dimitri stomped on the old man’s corpse, breaking bones and turning flesh into a mucky mess.

Dimitri shouted, raging as he smashed every piece of Gordon into chunks of bloody slop. After he’d had his fill, Dimitri took a moment for himself, staring at what he’d done. Jack stayed silent, allowing Dimitri time to process everything.

“We can leave now.”

“Great idea, but we might want to clean up first,” Jack suggested.

“I am quite the mess.” Dimitri chuckled, holding up his bloody hands.

Jack grinned at how Dimitri also wiggled his bloody toes.

“Yes, there’s that, too, but I meant more the mess in this manor,” Jack elaborated. “The bodies are mostly gone, but we’ll have to clean up the blood otherwise someone’s going to ask questions.”

“Easy.” Dimitri shrugged. “Burn this place down.”

“Not a terrible idea,” Jack said with a small laugh. “A lot quicker, that’s for certain. Plus, whoever’s renting it out isn’t exactly hurting for cash.”

“It is probably a newly acquired property of the Hearst assets,” Dimitri retorted. “It is not the first time Gordon has bought an estate simply to prove the reach of his wealth.”

“Well, a lot of good that fortune will do him now.” Jack stared at the bits of skull scattered across the floor.

“He is not the worst of the family,” Dimitri said, lowering his gaze. “In time, they will surely retaliate. I fear they may continue coming forever.”

“Or at least until we kill the last of them.”

“I worry my problems have now become your problems,” Dimitri said with a soft sadness in his voice. “I am glad to have slain Gordon. I am glad this chapter of my life is over. But I believe more is to come.”

“And we’ll face it together,” Jack said, extending his hand and interlocking his fingers with Dimitri’s. “You think I’m worried about these monsters? I’m the baddest monster on the fucking planet.”

“I do not wish to burden you.”

“Nothing you do is a burden.” Jack tightened his grip, squeezing Dimitri’s fingers. “I would do anything to protect you, to make you happy. I love you, Dimitri.”

Dimitri leaned closer, pressing his forehead against Jack’s pumpkin head.

“I love you, too.” Dimitri’s eyes watered. “I have never loved anyone with my entire being. It is terrifying to feel such devotion and fear that I am failing you with my past.”

“And the only thing I fear is losing you. Losing you to these hunters and losing you to the doubt you carry.” Jack cupped his free hand over Jack’s face, caressing his cheek. “I am at your side always.”

“Thank you.” Dimitri exhaled, seeming to breathe out the heavy burden he carried inside him this whole time.

Dimitri wanted to be happy, that much Jack could tell. But Dimitri feared his happiness might be at the expense of Jack's safety. Jack needed Dimitri to know that he'd never feel safe without Dimitri in his life. His heart couldn't handle it; his mind would wander aimlessly without Dimitri bringing him comfort.

The pair hugged, remaining in the room for a long, silent embrace, and Jack wanted nothing more in this world than Dimitri's happiness.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



IT'D TAKEN A FEW WEEKS, but life settled back into normal. Well, as normal as things could get between two monstrous boys who just slaughtered a billionaire and two dozen of his best hunters. Jack had done his part to cover up the horrors. The bodies were dumped somewhere far away, thanks to the shadows, and the fire burned down most of the manor Gordon Hearst had occupied.

Dimitri didn't dwell on the looming fears of future threats. He couldn't control if or when the Hearst family sought him out again. Part of him considered tracking them down himself, seeking out each member of the family and killing them before the idea of retaliation even crossed their minds.

But Dimitri wouldn't know where to begin. In theory, it sounded like a bold strategy. In reality, Dimitri still relied on the maps feature of his cellular device to navigate his way through Sleepy Hollow. Hell, he often got lost on the three-block walk from his favorite tea shop to the local indie bookstore.

Eventually, Dimitri accepted the things he couldn't control and took a page from his boyfriend's book. Dimitri relaxed and prioritized his joy, ready to face what came next, if or when it ever did. Hopefully, the Hearst family would see the loss of their patriarch as a sign not to fuck with monsters. If not, Dimitri could at least enjoy the sight of Jack unleashing his wrath once again. He proved to be quite the formidable force.

"Well, that's some fucking bullshit," Jack said with a frown.

He scrolled through his phone as the couple sat on the couch. Dimitri rarely had the energy to review comments from followers, so he often waited until Jack insisted. It usually involved dragging him over to the couch and turning it into an impromptu cuddle session as Jack read off his favorites.

“I can’t believe anyone would say that,” Jack scoffed.

This cuddle session had ended early as Jack sat up with annoyance, reading through the comments.

“There’s like ten thousand likes.”

“For what?”

Jack handed over the phone.

@KingGael: I know Deer Daddy is clapping them cheeks but is he also putting belt to ass when you run your mouth like this?

The comment had over ten thousand likes and a string of responses.

@DevotedCryptid: No!!!! My baby is a lover not a fighter. 🍊🔪🍊🔪

@KingGael: He loves getting his ass beat in more ways than one. 🍊😏

@CreepiCrawliBoi: You can tell Deer Daddy is ready to shut him up in some of those videos

@StagStan: Nooooooooo! He loves it.

@Username77723405: Deer Daddy ain’t mad. He’s just a deer in headlights on video.

@CosplayQueen420: Nah, he’s fucking Jack up.

@DylanKR: In and out of the bedroom.

@TedRed37: I have seen Jack dance. No way can he throw fists.

@Username433224538: What does that have to do with anything you stup!d b!tch!

From that point, most of the comments in the thread devolved into abrasive arguing. But there were still many other people in separate comments who’d jumped on board with the idea that Dimitri was stronger than Jack.

Admittedly, Dimitri couldn't help but smile. Jack's followers always said the most absurd things, but all in all, Dimitri had learned not to take anything too seriously.

"They make some wild assumptions about us," Dimitri said.

"Yeah, the biggest one being that you can kick my ass," Jack said with an edge in his voice. "There's tons of comments rolling in suggesting I'm some kind of pushover."

"I do not understand the problem. These comments are only speaking the truth," Dimitri replied, hiding his joy to play off his comment with a seemingly straight face.

"Are you kidding me?" Jack gasped. "I'm way stronger than you."

"That is an obvious lie weaker men tell themselves."

"You've seen what I can do, I'm like a fucking demon god."

"That is not strength," Dimitri scoffed. "That is shadow magic."

"Which is part of my strength."

"No, no, that is cheap trick." Dimitri shook his head. "In a battle of strength, I would win. In a battle of magics, you might fare better by just a bit."

"Just a bit?" Jack's shadowy expression had the cutest, most ridiculously exaggerated look of shock and bewilderment. "I would fucking demolish you."

Dimitri stifled a snort, truly enjoying this game of teasing with Jack.

"I do not know if I could agree with such blatant lies," Dimitri tsked. "But I suppose if it makes you feel better, I can force myself to come to the same conclusion."

Jack squinted at Dimitri, staring suspiciously.

"You are a very strong man." Dimitri patted Jack's shoulder. "The strongest man in the world. No man has ever possessed such powers."

"Don't patronize me." Jack slapped Dimitri's hand away, becoming adorably feisty. "Especially not with the truth. I am the strongest man in the world, and no one has ever possessed shadow powers at my level."

"I do not understand why you are upset?" Dimitri's cheeks ached as he resisted a grin. "I said all of this."

"Yes, to appease me, but it's the truth."

"Of course, it is the truth." Dimitri nodded affirmatively and a bit dramatically.

It only further infuriated Jack.

“That’s it, we’re settling this.” Jack stood up and stomped across the living room.

He moved the coffee table further from the couch and turned it at an angle.

“Get your ass over here.”

Dimitri obeyed, curiously seeing where this led.

Jack set up his phone so it could record and then positioned himself on the opposite corner of the coffee table. They each sat on the edge close to each other. Jack repositioned himself to sit on his knees and then placed his elbow on the table with his arm raised.

“Only one way to settle this.” Jack flexed his muscles. “I’m going to fucking crush you.”

“Oh? Bold words from a little man.”

“Yeah, this little man is about to bend you over and spank you.”

Dimitri’s ears perked up at that, and his cheeks burned a bit. There was something incredibly hot about Jack’s assertive streak that hit. It sent a surge of excitement rushing through Dimitri.

“Let us see.”

Dimitri lined up his arm, and they started their match. No doubt Jack attempted to play it cool for the cameras, but Dimitri forced his boyfriend to put in more effort almost immediately. While Jack possessed unmatched abilities, and his body could handle pretty much anything thrown at him, he didn’t have enhanced strength by any means. Jack was pretty on par with your average human, so that made this far easier for Dimitri. He toyed with Jack, making a game of it.

Whenever Jack started to get a slight push going, Dimitri would flex his muscles and apply real pressure. He would push Jack’s arm back almost all the way, teasing him with defeat, and then he’d relent just enough so Jack could push them back up to the starting point.

“Grrrah,” Jack groaned, clenching his teeth so hard that Dimitri heard the grinding beneath the enchanted pumpkin. “I’m gonna win.”

Dimitri teased yet again, allowing Jack a bit of fleeting hope, until a shadow opened beneath Dimitri’s elbow. It tilted the trajectory of his grip and gave Jack the edge needed to slam Dimitri’s arm down.

“That’s what I’m fucking talking about!” Jack jumped up in excitement and snatched his phone in his hands, twirling round and round as he gloated.

Jack roared victoriously. He flexed his arms, posing, kissing his biceps, and being all around the sorriest winner in the world.

“You cheated.”

“Whatever, baby.” Jack smirked for the camera. “A win is a win is a win.”

He tucked his phone into his pocket and flipped Dimitri off with both hands.

“And a loss is a loss is a loss.” Jack stuck out a shadowy tongue, mocking Dimitri. “Just admit it. I bested you.”

“You bested me with the magics, which is cheating.”

“Yeah, but my connection to the darkness is far superior to anything you could do so—”

“Ah, very arrogant.” Dimitri rose to his feet, towering over Jack, who remained unfazed.

“I mean, we can test it out if you like?” Jack sauntered up to Dimitri, playfully shoulder-bumping him. “But when I beat you, I am claiming a prize.”

“And what is that?”

“You’ll get on camera and say I’m stronger in all the ways.” Jack folded his arms and made a cocky little face. “I’ll write the script and everything.”

“Fine, I will speak on the silly little camera for the audience if I lose, but if I win, I will claim a prize as well.” Dimitri stepped in close to Jack, pressing his chest against Jack’s crossed arms.

“And what’s that?” Jack asked boldly.

“This.” Dimitri slapped his hands onto Jack’s ass and squeezed tightly, pulling Jack uncomfortably close. “After I best you in battle, I am going to fuck you into the dirt.”

“Fuck,” Jack said with a definite quiver in his voice. “Might have jumped the gun on my prize. Is it too late to change the bet?”

“I do not know, you tell me.” Dimitri moved ever so, caressing Jack’s hips until he lowered his arms.

With his guard dropped, Dimitri snatched Jack by one of his arms and spun him around to build momentum. Once he managed that, Dimitri hurled Jack through the air and sent him crashing out of the living room window.

Jack yelled. Glass shattered. The collision came with a loud thump and the crackle of clinking shards of glass, but Jack sprang up quickly with a look of shock.

“Are you crazy?” he shouted. “You threw me out a goddamn window. Do you know how expensive those were? And I don’t even know how to replace a window. Who do I even call? What the actual f—”

Dimitri lunged ahead, coating his body in the darkness that remained mostly around his hands and feet. By the time he jumped through the window and pounced onto Jack, he had fully armored himself. The tackle sent Jack tumbling backward, but instead of falling on his ass, Jack sank through the ground and disappeared into the shadows.

“You are predictable.” Dimitri whipped around and backhanded Jack as he sprang out of the darkness.

“Son of a—”

Dimitri didn’t waver, offering Jack very little opportunity to think. It was the best strategy Dimitri could come up with against his boyfriend. While Dimitri didn’t intend to go all out, he was also careful not to hold back. He didn’t anticipate Jack would unleash his full wrath either, but Jack possessed more power than he did, even if he spent most of his time as a jokester.

“Enough of that.” Jack shielded himself with shadows, launching them into Dimitri’s path.

A portal opened and sent Dimitri tumbling through, crashing into a large tree.

“Sorry, friend.” Dimitri pushed off the tree, then turned to jump back through the portal, but it had vanished.

Dimitri closed his eyes and caught his breath. As he awaited Jack’s surprise attack, he did his best to listen to the trees as they whispered warnings.

Even before Jack’s boots crunched against the ground, Dimitri had sussed out his location. He launched himself ahead, startling Jack, who now had to pivot away from ferocious claws that swung at him swiftly.

“So much for the element of surprise.” Dimitri kept swiping his claws, slashing bark, and almost landing a few blows on Jack.

These weren’t intended to strike, though. Dimitri wanted to lead Jack into position. After Dimitri got Jack where he wanted, the two of them sparred. Jack seemed to have the advantage, disappearing into the shadows anytime Dimitri came close to landing a heavy-handed blow. Dimitri allowed this, doing his best not to tire himself out, and instead allowed Jack to gloat as they battled.

“Caw-caw-caw,” Nikolai called from above, announcing his arrival and his commands.

Dimitri smirked as dozens of crows dive-bombed at Jack.

“What the—” He weaved back and forth, dodging the aggressive birds who didn’t relent.

Even when he jumped into his shadows, the crows gave chase, holding no fear of the darkness.

“Son of a... Get off me, you psycho... Aah! Damn Edgar Allen Poe looking motherfuckers!” Jack swatted at the crows as they pecked him from every position.

Dimitri watched and caught his breath.

“If you think a couple birds will stop me, you have no idea what I can do.” Jack sent a wave of shadows, knocking the birds back, offering himself the tiniest reprieve.

This break was cut short by the nearby howls. Soon, a pack of wolves joined the crows, growling as they ran toward Jack.

“You brought wolves? Actual fucking wolves?” Jack scrambled backward, doing his best to evade the coordinated strikes. “I didn’t even know we had wolves here.”

“We do not,” Dimitri replied. “These are special.”

“They’re not special, they’re crazy,” Jack shouted, gesturing with his free hand to the immobilized arm now being gnawed on by a wolf that had snatched Jack up.

“Nikolai met them on his migration,” Dimitri explained. “Crows and wolves are best of friends; they are bound to the Leshy on a spiritual level.”

“This is cheating, you brought allies.” Jack wriggled his arm back and forth, trying his damndest to break the wolf’s grip on his flesh without actually hurting the creature.

“They are not allies,” Dimitri continued. “They are an extension of the Leshy. The crows are our scouts. The wolves our vanguards. The trees our sentinels.”

“That all sounds fancy and shit, but... Aaaah—” Jack scrambled backward as another wolf pounced on him.

Before long, Jack lay on the ground surrounded by seven wolves and a murder of crows. Dimitri took his time approaching, prepared to call off his forces, but it appeared he waited too long.

Jack summoned absolute darkness around them, and all the beasts vanished in an instant.

“What did you do?”

“Sent them a few miles north.” Jack smirked. “By the time they get back, I’ll have won this.”

“You are cocky,” Dimitri said with a low hum. “I will enjoy humbling you, Jack.”

“All by yourself? I’d like to see you try.”

“A Leshy in the forest is never alone.” Dimitri’s rhythmic hum reverberated, and his eyes glowed a brighter green.

Branches lashed out, smacking Jack.

“You’re sicking the trees after me now?” Jack braced himself for the onslaught of attacks.

Thanks to Dimitri’s magics, he enhanced the capabilities of the trees. Granting them strong arms where their branches once were, creating vines from the tree’s willpower, and turning the forest into a final trap of defeat.

Dimitri summoned the forest’s power, ensnaring Jack’s arms and legs. Once bound by the branches and vines, the trees dragged Jack to his knees. They yanked his arms in opposing directions.

Jack strained against the grip, unable to break free. Dimitri was unsure if Jack had tired himself out or simply grown bored of battle and decided to surrender. Either way, Dimitri enjoyed his victory walk as he strutted toward Jack. Seeing him on his knees, bound in place, and forced to look up at Dimitri was quite intoxicating.

“Are you prepared to submit? To accept defeat?”

Jack sighed. “You realize I could get out of this at any moment, right?”

“So you say, but there is only one thing I wish to hear from you.”

“And what’s that?”

Dimitri took off Jack’s enchanted pumpkin and grinned at his exhausted boyfriend.

“I want to hear you tell me I am victorious.”

“You want me to use those words exactly?” Jack laughed. “Here I thought I was the one with a script. But okay, I’ll say it. You are—”

Jack immediately choked on his words. Dimitri had slipped out his hard cock as Jack rambled and shoved it into his mouth.

“This is how you will tell me of my victory.” Dimitri ran his fingers through Jack’s hair and shoved him further down onto the dick. “Tell me I

have won.”

Jack gurgled in response, gagging and slobbering all over Dimitri’s cock as he gave the only speech Dimitri wished to hear. It was a wonderful sound. Dimitri growled as he rammed his dick deeper into Jack’s throat.

Dimitri took great pleasure in controlling the bob of Jack’s head, sliding him up and down his cock. He could fuck Jack’s throat all day, shoot his load into Jack’s mouth, and savor the gulp as he swallowed. But Dimitri craved something far sweeter than oral.

Once Jack had done his best to slick Dimitri’s cock, he was pulled off and left gasping for air.

“I did not prepare as best I could.” Dimitri scratched his head, realizing he had forgotten lube.

“Worried you’ll break me?” Jack taunted, which would’ve sounded much cockier if he weren’t so winded.

“I cannot enjoy your ass if I wreck it.”

“Trust me, I’ll be fine.” Jack spat on the head. “Do your worst, Deer Daddy.”

Technically, they both healed rather quickly, and perhaps the pleasure would outweigh the discomfort. And in truth, Dimitri did enjoy the idea of fucking a bit of the arrogance out of Jack.

“Fine. Now, I will take my real prize.” Dimitri released Jack from the branches and vines that held him in place.

When Jack tumbled forward, Dimitri did not give him an opportunity to sit back up. Instead, he dropped behind him, pulling his jeans down to his ankles, and ripping them off with his sharp claws. He lacked the patience to take them off properly.

Jack quivered beneath Dimitri, positioning himself on his knees and arching his back. Dimitri lined up his slick dick and pressed the head against Jack’s hole. With a quick and brutal thrust, Dimitri shoved into Jack.

“Uuuuuhh,” Jack groaned, bracing himself.

Dimitri pressed a hand between Jack’s shoulder blades and the other to the back of Jack’s head. As he slid deeper inside Jack, he pushed his boyfriend’s face into the dirt.

The pair rested like that for a minute, Dimitri allowed Jack’s hole to adjust, and took in the pleasurable warmth of being buried deep inside of Jack.

Holding him down, Dimitri began to take slow, powerful thrusts. Each time he bucked into Jack, his body surged with exhilaration. The more he fucked Jack, the more primal he felt.

Jack yelled, and Dimitri bit down on his shoulder, hands clawing at him slightly.

Soon, Dimitri pounded harder into Jack, literally fucking him into the ground. Jack dug his fingers into the dirt, grasping at anything as he rasped with his face shoved down.

"I told you I would fuck you into the ground," Dimitri growled. "Tell me how much you like it."

"Yes," Jack moaned in response. "Fuck, fuck...me."

Dimitri railed Jack with a faster, harder rhythm. The forest grew silent except for the slap of their skin, the deep snarling growls Dimitri let out, and the wispy whimpers Jack released.

Dimitri kept one hand pressed to the back of Jack's head, snatching a fistful of white hair as he kept him in place. He slid his other hand down, slapping Jack's ass as he pounded away at him. He squeezed the ass cheek, his claws digging into the skin.

The primal need to claim Jack, to own him, to mark him. It dominated Dimitri's every thought as he fucked Jack.

Black blood dripped from the scratches on Jack's ass. Not blood. The oozy darkness inside of Jack.

"Fuck," Jack shouted, repositioning himself slightly as Dimitri continued slamming into his ass. "I'm gonna... I'm gonna..."

Jack's body convulsed beneath Dimitri. His hole clamped down as every muscle in his body tensed. Jack fired off his load, cumming onto the ground. His pained moans became almost euphoric in sound as Dimitri continued thrusting into him. Eventually, his muscles eased, becoming like jelly as he lay there taking Dimitri's cock.

Dimitri took advantage of this slight change and released his grip entirely. Jack had moved his arms ever so slightly, creating a small gap underneath them. Dimitri pressed his chest against Jack's back and wrapped his arms under Jack's. After he did that, he placed his hands against the nape of Jack's neck and interlocked his fingers.

Now, he held Jack down with the full weight of his body. He kept Jack's arms bound by his grasp and pressed his head back into the dirt. With Jack

fully in his control, Dimitri wedged his legs between Jack's to further spread them and fucked into him with a furious need to cum.

Their bodies clung together, sticky with sweat. Dimitri continued railing into Jack, lifting his hips quickly, and slamming them down hard. Each time he rammed his cock deep into Jack, he found himself getting closer and closer. He teased the hole with brutal pumps, pulling out until only the tip remained inside, then he shoved in all the way to the base. Every stroke sent a surge of enticing sensations, drawing Dimitri closer to his climax.

"Fuck," Dimitri growled, burying his dick one final time as he shot inside Jack.

He bit down on Jack's nape as he came, savoring Jack's low whimper and the quiver of his body wriggling beneath Dimitri.

After he came, Dimitri lay atop Jack with the full weight of his body, holding him in a controlled embrace. He kept his softening cock inside Jack.

"Just so we're clear, I'm clearly stronger than you," Jack grumbled.

"That so?"

"Yep. Absolutely no way could you handle a fucking like that. Obviously, I'm more powerful by default."

"So you say." Dimitri nuzzled into the crook of Jack's neck, teasing him with nibbling kisses. "Perhaps someday soon I will have to show you exactly what I can take."

"Oh?"

The couple rolled around in the dirt, smiling and laughing and enjoying life together. Dimitri didn't know what was in store for him, how long he could keep this simple, happy life with Jack, but he would hold onto it with all his strength.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“HOWDY HO, my creepy crawlies. It’s your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern.” Jack grinned as he talked into the camera. “I know, I know, it’s been a minute since I’ve posted. Y’all wouldn’t believe the bs we’ve been going through.”

Jack planned on posting some content to explain his recent absence for the last two weeks, but he didn’t really want to delve into the specifics. Mostly, this was Dimitri’s story to tell, one he undoubtedly would never share with his followers. Plus, it wasn’t like anyone was really going to believe a billionaire came to Sleepy Hollow intent on capturing Dimitri and killing Jack.

“Things are settling around here,” Jack said, rolling past any explanations and right into the pleasantries. “As you can see, Deer Daddy is up to his usual.”

Jack shifted the camera to face out through the window, recording Dimitri who sprinkled handfuls of seeds, grains, and small nuts in the front yard for the birds that swarmed. Well, for the crows who had returned. Any other birds that once frolicked in the area had been quickly run off by Nikolai and his troops. Flock. Murderous whatever.

“I swear, y’all think he doesn’t talk, but he does.” Jack zoomed the camera in on Dimitri, whose mouth moved as he spoke to Nikolai above all others.

And Jack knew it was Nikolai, because the bird was always the one to perch atop Dimitri’s antlers.

“He talks more to those birds than he does to me. I’m telling you, he can hold a whole ass conversation with them. Meanwhile, they’re just going

caw-caw-caw, flappity flap flap chirp chirp bird speak or whatever.” Jack made a flippant gesture. “I’m sure there will be a bird watcher in the comments who can translate.”

Jack continued silently recording Dimitri, unsure what to say in the moment. Only Dimitri could leave Jack speechless. He smirked, keeping the camera steady as he half-started something quippy before realizing it wasn’t good enough, and he’d need to voice over this video later. Something worthy of Dimitri’s random musings.

It appeared that Dimitri and Nikolai had broken out into an argument. The rest of the flock stayed clear as the pair went back and forth, Dimitri waving his hands, Nikolai flapping his wings, and Jack laughing in the distance as he filmed.

Such a perfect, carefree moment. That was until the fog surrounding them shifted. It carried a warning in the air that sent a chill through Jack, the kind of sensation he hadn’t felt since his mother left with most of her warding spells.

The fog turned denser than usual. Jack felt the pull of the enchantment protecting him from intrusion. A last failsafe designed to alert him should the magic of the fog fail to keep out intruders, but such a thing had never occurred before.

Jack stopped recording and watched the edges of the woods where silhouettes filled every direction.

The crows cawed, flapping their wings, and circling above at Dimitri’s behest. His stance shifted, readying himself for the looming threat.

Jack’s muscles tensed at the onslaught of armed hunters who crept through the fog with their guns trained on Dimitri.

“Not fucking happening.” Jack raced outside furiously.

Shadows descended, preparing to eviscerate all the hunters. There were so many surrounding them. One by one, he used his shadows to gauge the headcount. He reached a hundred before someone cut through the crowd and interrupted him.

“You may wish to stay your hand, Horseless Headsman,” the finely dressed young man warned.

“Give me one good reason,” Jack tsked.

“Patrick,” Dimitri growled, his glowing green eyes locked on the man.

This must have been another member of the Hearst family, likely offended that Jack and Dimitri had slaughtered the head of their home. He

looked like a younger, more muscular version of Gordon. His spine didn't hunch as much, his suit fit more sleekly, and his hair both atop his head and on his face was fuller and thicker. Mostly, his blue eyes didn't possess the same milky discoloration as Gordon Hearst's. No, these eyes were sharp and menacing, locking onto Jack with malicious ire.

"I can give several," Patrick said with the same cocky arrogance Gordon once spoke with. "But let's focus on the most pressing reason."

Patrick pulled out a small electronic box and flipped a switch. A red light turned on, and a high-pitched shriek whispered in the air. The frequency was one even Jack's shadows struggled to hear.

"Aaaahhhh," Dimitri screamed, cupping his hands over his ears as he collapsed to the ground.

Jack panicked, frozen and unsure what to do.

"That's just the first setting," Patrick said with a smug laugh, turning a small knob to increase the pain.

A spark sounded like static pulsing, and Dimitri began to convulse in sheer agony.

Jack recalled all his shadows, sending them surging toward Patrick. He would slaughter this foul human, then turn his attention back onto the hunters after he'd secured Dimitri.

"Ah-ah-ah, I'd be careful." Patrick pressed a button, and the red light dimmed.

Dimitri stopped convulsing, but his body still twitched. He clamped his jaw, attempting to compose himself.

"Dead man's switch, so don't get any ideas unless you want to short-circuit his brain." Patrick chuckled. "Setting one emits a high-pitched noise perfect for dropping Leshy. The second setting sends little jolts of electricity frying his nervous system. You really don't want him experiencing the next settings."

Jack trembled, fighting back the equal bouts of fear and fury that consumed him. He wanted to snatch Dimitri away into the pocket portal of his shadows, but he didn't know the range or capabilities of that damn device. He wanted to drop Patrick Hearst into absolute darkness and slash him a thousand times over, choking him with his insides as he ripped this hateful human apart.

But Jack didn't do anything. He stood still, practically petrified by indecision.

“How did you...” Dimitri asked through chattering teeth.

“My old man has had you chipped for years now,” Patrick explained. “Though we never had to resort to such measures with you collared and shackled.”

Dimitri’s ears twitched, his face contorting into sheer horror as he tried to comprehend this hellish revelation.

“You were always so well behaved.” Patrick gave Dimitri a wicked smile, the kind of expression that sickened Jack. He wanted nothing more than to peel Patrick’s flesh from his face and decapitate him.

Instead, Jack stayed silent, processing these horrors and attempting to figure a way out. An escape that wouldn’t harm Dimitri.

“Come now, you didn’t think we’d rely on the shackles alone?” Patrick asked mockingly. “Then again, you always were a stupid creature, weren’t you?”

Dimitri flinched. Jack couldn’t tell if it was because of Patrick’s words, his hateful tone, or the way he waved that wicked gadget around.

This device, the one Patrick held. It was identical to the one Gordon attempted to use when Jack and Dimitri confronted him.

“It didn’t work before, though,” Jack muttered, turning his attention to Dimitri. “Gordon, he had the same thing, remember?”

Dimitri nodded.

“Ah, yes, Father didn’t realize I’d dropped a little jamming field over his location when you came knocking down his door,” Patrick boldly confessed. “Guess I owe you two a bit of thanks. As the family heir and all, I finally get to lead the Hearst businesses into a prosperous direction.”

Jack understood now why Gordon’s overconfidence failed him. The old man didn’t underestimate the monsters he approached; he failed to recognize the monsters in his family, and one devoured him as a consequence.

“My father always had an obsession with cryptids, legends, the monsters of old.” Patrick smirked. “But like so many of our ancestors, he wasted their potential.”

“Meaning?” Dimitri asked.

“Meaning he finally had one bright idea when he snatched you up, Leshy,” Patrick said. “But all he did was use your talent to track down and kill other monsters. Pointless. Why have one cryptid to help track down

trophies when you can have a thousand cryptids and sell them to the highest bidders? I won't waste that potential."

"What kind of potential?" Dimitri asked with a snarl of contempt.

"Limitless," Patrick said proudly. "Honestly, I don't care what the buyers want. They can turn you into tools, weapons, or fuck toys for all I care. It's an untapped market."

Dimitri grimaced, staring down at the ground with a vacant expression, and Jack couldn't help but wonder what horrors he'd endured. Horrors Jack deluded himself into thinking he could wash away with silly jokes and pointless doomscrolling. He never offered Dimitri real help, a real second chance, and now the fears that haunted Dimitri had come true. The Hearst family had returned in full force. Their former patriarch was a mere feint attack, a phony vanguard that didn't prepare Jack for what Patrick had in store.

"Think of the profit margins he could have been building? I mean, he used you to what? Track down a few dozen monsters, all of which he killed for his own ego in some petty vanity to prove himself an apex creature. Pathetic. I want that little tracking talent to find, capture, and sell these oddities. Even if I only found a quarter of what my old man tallied up in his lifetime, it would change the entire landscape of business."

Dimitri snarled, attempting to stand up. Electricity erupted, dropping him back to the ground, but he did not cry out in pain. Instead, Dimitri growled and locked eyes with Patrick even as his skin sizzled with smoke.

It was a test of power, of will, and Jack wanted to cry out, but he didn't know if that was the wrong move. Everything he'd done leading up to this moment had clearly been a mistake.

Patrick rolled his eyes, relenting more from boredom than surrender.

"You are disgusting," Dimitri spit.

"You have no idea. Hell, the military contracts alone that I hold would foam at the mouth for something like you," Patrick gestured to Jack. "An unfeeling, unkillable creature on the battlefield could really cleanse an area when the right buyer needs to swoop in to claim the resources of some war-torn land. Well, war-torn once the propaganda machine paints the right narrative."

"This is all very fascinating, your evil villain speech, or whatever," Jack said, taking a step toward Patrick. "But you don't hold the cards you think."

“That so?” Patrick waved the electronic box in his hand with his thumb firmly pressed to the dead man’s switch.

“It’ll take seconds to cut your head off and retrieve that little device,” Jack said, shadows slithering toward Patrick.

“I can hold out,” Dimitri rasped.

“Careful,” Patrick said, backstepping as the shadows encroached around him. “This is synced to my fingerprint. Without me—”

“Oh, goodie.” Jack tilted his head, adding this ominous flair to his appearance as shadows swelled behind him, drowning the terrain in darkness. “Looks like I get to sever a hand, too.”

“Well, shit, you’re filled with a real fire, aren’t you?” Patrick nervously chuckled.

Hunters cautiously shifted, guns aimed at the shadows, at Dimitri, at Jack. None of it would matter. Jack would swallow them all in the darkness before they could fire, but he was surprised they held their ground without breaking ranks or impulsively firing off rounds out of fear.

“Maybe you could easily dispatch me and my men,” Patrick said, holding up the small electronic box. “But once I’m dead, once my forces on the ground here are dead, my tech team off-site is just going to enhance the neural signal hitting little ole Dimitri there, and believe me when I say he’ll be begging for his... Well, begging until his head pops clean off from the pulse of energy.”

“You would not risk your assets,” Dimitri snarled. “You need me.”

“Yes, but I need my life a lot more,” Patrick retorted. “So, if it comes down to a bluff, I’d rather blow your fucking head off than risk my neck, you piece of shit woodland freak.”

Jack clenched his fists, doing everything in his power to contain the wrathful force of the Nuckelavee. The spirit raged within him, syncing to his own fury, and wishing nothing more than to respond with violence. Unlike Jack, the Nuckelavee didn’t possess self-awareness; it didn’t consider consequences. No, this spirit of spite sought to satiate these slights with slaughter. Jack couldn’t exactly disagree, doing his best to contain his shadows for Dimitri’s sake.

“Besides, I’m very much of the mindset that if I can’t have the monster, nobody can. I’d rather scour the world for another Leshy than start off my legacy with a fucking loss.” Patrick cackled—actually fucking cackled like

some maniacal psychopath. “You see, I knew you were quite unstoppable, but your little monster crush? That is an easy weakness to exploit.”

Jack didn’t know what to do here and now, how to stop Patrick, how to stop the chip embedded in Dimitri’s head, how to stop the hundred-something hunters surrounding them. Yeah, he could go to war no problem, but Patrick was right... If he fought back, Dimitri would pay the price. He struggled to focus as Patrick continued his taunting laughter, only just barely starting to contain himself as he clutched his ribs dramatically.

“So, I’m going to give you one opportunity to surrender, one chance to kneel,” Patrick said, pointing to the ground. “You do that, and maybe just maybe, I’ll let you two share the same cell so you can cuddle between missions.”

Dimitri growled, forcing himself to his feet.

“Please. Grand gestures of bravery really are pointless.” Patrick released the button and laughed as Dimitri dropped to the ground in pain.

“Stop,” Jack pleaded, his voice filled with distress. “Please. I’m begging you.”

Patrick glowered at Jack, smiling as Dimitri writhed in agony, crying out.

“Doesn’t look like you’re begging,” Patrick said, completely straight-faced without an ounce of emotion. “Don’t worry, though. I’ll teach you to beg, isn’t that right, Dimitri?”

Dimitri roared, refusing to surrender to the pain surging through him. His body twisted in on itself as electricity sizzled, and the high-pitched frequency held a long, sharp, piercing sound that even started to sting Jack’s ears. Jack grimaced, his body shaking from the horror he witnessed, knowing there was nothing he could do to help.

Once Patrick was content that Dimitri had learned his lesson, he pressed the button again.

“I can do this all day, but I lack the patience for soft torture,” Patrick said. “I want an answer, and I want your submission, or the next step is telling my boys to start hacking off chunks of Dimitri.”

Jack’s jaw fell wide, hidden beneath the pumpkin, but his shadowy expression mimicked the horrific reaction on his face.

“What?” Patrick shrugged. “He doesn’t need his hands to track quarry for us. Hell, he can go without a lot of appendages when scouting for other little monsters.”

Jack ground his teeth, wishing nothing more than to slaughter Patrick, to kill every person here. But any move he made to oppose Patrick would hurt Dimitri, would kill Dimitri. Jack had no options, no countermoves, no plan around this horror, so he did the only thing he could.

Jack dropped to his knees and lowered his head.

“Good boy,” Patrick said with smug satisfaction, looking down on Jack and Dimitri.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



NIKOLAI'S RAGE vibrated from the sky above so fiercely, it swept Dimitri into a further fit. It took everything he had to keep his composure, to send Nikolai and the other crows a warning. He couldn't soothe their tempers, he couldn't soothe his own, but he didn't want them to swoop down and attack the hunters. No matter how coordinated the crows were, they were heavily outnumbered by trained hunters. Any retaliation would only result in their deaths.

Low growls from the wolves called to Dimitri. They hid between the trees, ready to launch an attack with the crows, and awaiting their command. As much as Dimitri wanted to relent, to let the beasts unleash their fury, he sent a plea for restraint instead. The wolves remained silent and hidden, ready to attack should Dimitri request their aid.

Still, Nikolai cawed loudly in harmony with the rest of his flock above. He struggled to accept patience, and instead sang a song of death, wishing most of all to peck out Patrick's eyes and tear the flesh from his smiling face. Dimitri deeply understood the sentiment, craving nothing more than Patrick's death.

"Get the gear, get the gear," Patrick instructed, waving his hand that held the device.

A device that kept Dimitri in check. He'd never felt such pain before, and he'd endured a lot of torment at the hands of the Hearst family. A lot of torment at Patrick's hands. To think the young sadist had a plan to take charge this entire time. Dimitri often overlooked Patrick's ambitions, sensing the young psycho derived most of his pleasures from inflicting

horrors. Honestly, Dimitri assumed Patrick was a layabout, content with his family's fortune and filled with no drive to claim the company his father constantly tried to teach him to run.

It turned out Patrick paid very close attention, so much so that he plotted a coup right underneath Gordon's nose, arranging the old man's death and ensuring his easy succession as the Hearst heir.

Now, Patrick had Dimitri and Jack in his clutches with the intention of trapping hundreds, maybe even thousands of monsters. He'd turn them into captives for the wealthiest and most depraved individuals, and there wasn't a goddamn thing Dimitri could do to stop this.

"You're probably wondering how I got here, huh?" Patrick stood over Jack, towering over him with a wicked grin.

Jack didn't respond. He simply remained kneeling. Even his shadowy expression had vanished. The enchanted pumpkin atop his head was just a plain ole pumpkin with no face.

"Oh, come on, don't be a sore loser," Patrick said with a chuckle. "You're about to be sore all over. Might as well smile while you can."

Jack didn't respond.

Patrick kicked Jack's stomach, intending to provoke some reaction, but got nothing in response. The glazed look of fury in Patrick's eyes was a familiar sight. Nothing annoyed the man more than being ignored, something Gordon had mastered with decades of neglect. Dimitri sometimes wondered if that sparked Patrick's twisted fantasies, a need to hurt others so badly his father had to pay attention, had to respond if only to clean up the mess.

"Well, long story short, technology always beats magic," Patrick said with a bitter smugness. "So, this whole enchanted fog bullshit didn't give me and my men any trouble."

Several hunters approached Patrick with metallic briefcases.

"But you're about to see the full extent of how useless magic is to solid technology." Patrick smirked.

Dimitri shivered as the hunters withdrew several metal rods. They used to ache, constantly tearing into Dimitri's flesh to prevent him from fully healing. It was a simple obstacle meant to deter his escape, his resistance. When he would have an outburst, the rods carried a pulse of electricity, spasming every muscle in his body and preventing him from fighting back. Dimitri couldn't help but wonder if perhaps that had been the chip this

entire time. An evil little device buried in his head and connected to his nervous system.

“Got him?” the hunter asked as he lined up a rod with Jack’s forearm while another hunter held it steady.

Dimitri flinched when they stabbed the rod through his flesh and wriggled the device in between bone and muscle.

Jack didn’t react, though. He didn’t scream from the pain. He didn’t react to the cutting comments and cheap laughs at his expense. No, all he did was passively resist. It made more work for the hunters as they stabbed him over and over again with the metal rods. They lined up each device, stabbed Jack, and made a crass joke at his expense. It was a grueling sight to watch unfold, and Dimitri couldn’t do anything, not really.

“Stop this,” Dimitri shouted.

There was one thing he could do. He could speak. He could warn Jack. He could beg Jack.

“Do not surrender because of me,” Dimitri begged. “Do not let them own you, too.”

Jack’s shadowy expression stirred on his pumpkin but didn’t come to the surface.

“Fight them!” Dimitri yelled. “Kill them! Kill them all! Do not worry about me. Do what you must to survive, to stop them. I am begging you to just—”

A jolt of electricity coursed through Dimitri and dropped him to his back. He recoiled inward, his body spasmed and contorted as every cell of his being burned.

“How sweet,” Patrick said as he released the pain and gave Dimitri a break. “I hate sweet.”

Patrick sent another pulse of electricity, reminding Dimitri of his place.

“Enough,” Jack roared, his shadowy expression twisting into angry eyes and jagged teeth.

He went to stand until a hunter kicked the back of his leg, keeping him on his knees. Another hunter quickly clamped a metal collar around Jack’s neck and locked it in place. Soon came the shackles, heavy and designed to connect to the rods embedded in Jack’s flesh.

Still, Jack resisted, and Dimitri writhed in pain, wishing more than anything he could convince Jack to flee.

“I can tell you two are going to be quite the pair to break,” Patrick said, pushing the button of his device and offering Dimitri the smallest reprieve.

Dimitri didn’t anticipate it’d last long, knowing Patrick’s mean streak far too well. He’d take great satisfaction in tormenting Dimitri, knowing every injury he inflicted hurt Jack by extension. Jack might have been invulnerable, but his heart cared too deeply for Dimitri, and that had become his undoing.

A low growl drew everyone’s attention, and Patrick grinned at the sight of Astaroth holding his ground by the front door.

“Aww, look at the little puppy.” Patrick’s grin twisted into a sour frown. “I have no use for a damn dog. Shoot it.”

Some of the hunters hesitated, but one boldly stepped forward. He trained his pistol at Astaroth’s head and pulled the trigger.

In a blink, blood splattered, a scream bellowed through the woods, and Astaroth pinned the hunter to the ground with his teeth pressed down onto the man’s jugular. With a swift motion, Astaroth ripped out the man’s throat and pranced over his bloody corpse.

“I do so enjoy hugging mortals with my teeth.” Astaroth’s voice slithered through the undercurrents of the air, sending a shiver through all those around him.

His eyes glowed a devilish red, and his voice echoed louder so everyone could hear him speak.

“You have come to claim hold over my peasants,” Astaroth released a low growl as he spoke. “This will not do.”

Dimitri stared in awe as heat erupted from Astaroth’s mere presence.

“I refuse to train new peasants on my preferred routine.” Astaroth cut his gaze at Dimitri and smiled. “The only solution is to slaughter you all.”

Dimitri clung to the hope Astaroth’s presence brought. Even if the demon dog’s ruthless attack resulted in Patrick triggering the dead man’s switch, Dimitri would gladly sacrifice his life knowing Jack would be safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“WAIT!” Jack trembled, believing full well that Astaroth could easily kill every single person here and make a show of it too, but Jack feared what would happen to Dimitri if the dead man’s switch was triggered.

“Are you attempting to offer the mortals an advantage?” Astaroth asked, cocking his head. “I find even when I provide them ample time for preparation and insight on my disadvantages, they still underperform. How they became the superior species in this realm is a mystery in itself.”

“I’m attempting to save Dimitri.”

“Ah, yes, my preferred servant.”

Jack rolled his eyes at that, knowing the exaggerated shadowy expression did not escape Astaroth’s attention.

“I’ve already taken measures to protect the preferred servant,” Astaroth said, wagging his tail. “He treats me like a good boy, providing proper scratches, and he doesn’t ignore my walking schedule.”

“I give you tons of treats and a roof.”

“You think my loyalty can be bought with food?” Astaroth raised his nose at that as if to shame away the very idea. “You merely earn a pittance of my time.”

“I’ll be real, a demon dog was not on my bingo card,” Patrick said with a laugh.

“Do not interrupt your betters with trivial one-liners.” Astaroth turned his gaze back onto Patrick.

“Someone kill that damn thing.”

The first hunter who raised their gun suddenly combusted. Jack's eyes widened in shock. The screams were guttural, making him almost pity the poor bastard who had threatened Astaroth.

"Holy fucking shit balls," Jack said. "Since when can you set people on fire?"

"I've always been able to light lesser beings aflame, but where is the fun in that?" Astaroth said, staring at the writhing body burning on the ground. "It is truly pathetic how boring and breakable mortals are. You can't do anything fun with them before they collapse to pieces."

The other hunters backstepped, frightened of what Astaroth might unleash next. Jack didn't want them to escape, hoping that if one moved too far out of line, Astaroth would unleash another brutal assault.

"You better stop!" Patrick waved around the device he had to use over Dimitri. "I swear to God if you—"

"Swear to whichever lesser deity you wish," Astaroth retorted. "It will not assist you."

As Astaroth approached, Patrick threateningly pointed his device at Dimitri, who flinched, bracing for the impending pain.

"Stop," Jack insisted. "He can hurt Dimitri—kill him even."

"Who can do such things?" Astaroth tilted his head. "This mortal?"

Patrick scowled at Astaroth, unwavering in his rage. "One more step, creature, and everyone dies."

"Well, that was the plan, but I suppose if you insist, certainly." Astaroth sized up Patrick Hearst, taking him in with a squint in a way that suggested he still struggled to tell the difference between most mortals. "You are the feeble mortal who deems himself the emperor of his family fortune, correct?"

"Enough of this." Patrick released his thumb just enough to send a shocking pulse at Dimitri.

Jack tensed, frightened by the surge of electricity about to hit the love of his life. Dimitri braced himself, awaiting the pain. Only it didn't hit. Nothing happened. Seconds ticked by, and still, nothing happened. Not a single thing. This wasn't some misread either. Jack watched as Patrick slapped the device, attempting to trigger severe pain. He turned to Dimitri, who stared, just as perplexed by the turn of events.

"If you mean to torture my preferred servant with that chip in his head, you are wasting what little time you have left on this mortal coil."

“What the hell?”

“As a former resident of Hell, I can answer that.” Astaroth had a wicked grin that almost looked silly given his floppy ears and saggy cheeks. “Once I realized who you were, why you had come, I went to work contacting those within the company who pledged their fealty.”

“What?” Patrick’s face fell in surprise.

“After your fallen patriarch threatened my servants, I took it upon myself to investigate the Hearst companies,” Astaroth continued, unfazed by Patrick’s bewildered confusion. “Your father put in great efforts to hide his gains, breaking the control of the companies to bury assets in seemingly innocuous ways. He believed it to his benefit, strengthening his grip on the world while hiding his true power.”

Jack studied Astaroth’s words, doing his best to piece together this revelation.

“Perhaps under his flagship, he might have noticed when I made inquiries,” Astaroth said. “Though I still doubt he would have stopped my maneuvers.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I took your company, obviously,” Astaroth gloated. “All that wealth and you didn’t even notice it slipping between your fingers. Pathetic.”

“No, no, no.” Patrick pulled out his phone, performing his own investigation into his assets.

“I don’t have everything, of course, but enough to compel the ticky tacky typy humans who work beneath you to obey my commands.”

“The what?” Jack asked, still trying to process how Astaroth of all people—well, dogs...or more precisely demon dogs bent on global destruction—would and could help in this situation.

“The ticky tappy humans who fight at their screens, making foes weak with broken codes and malicious content.”

“You mean you own his tech guys, the IT department?”

“That’s what I said,” Astaroth huffed, then perked his ears up at Patrick, who seemed to be scrambling through his phone. “None of your feeble technologies will work here. None of your fortune will buy your way out of this situation.”

Patrick trembled in such a way, it incited Jack’s murderous streak, but he contained himself, trying to understand the situation before he did something foolish.

“How did you do this?” Jack asked, amused and impressed by Astaroth.

“I craved to expand my empire, so I figured the Hearst conglomerate would pair nicely with my own companies,” Astaroth explained as if it were the simplest of things. “I sent mortal proxies to handle my affairs. Such trivialities tire me. They paid off a few mortals, slaughtered a few more, and easy peasy lemons are sleezy.”

“That is not the expression.” Jack shook his head.

“Now, to finalize my corporate takeover, removing the current head will make my bid all the more appealing to the noxious board of executives.”

“Wait.” Patrick held up a hand. “Wait, wait, wait.”

“You have nothing to offer or oppose me,” Astaroth said, staring at Patrick with what one could only assume was pity. Not for his impending death but for his pathetic plea for mercy. This demon dog offered many things, but mercy was not among them. “Quite frankly, begging is just sad at this point. At least try to embrace your death with a bit of dignity. I know I shall take great pleasure in devouring your soul. Don’t sully the taste with weeping.”

“No, no.” Patrick grabbed one of the guns from his hunters.

The metal burned bright and hot in his hands.

“Aaaaauugh! Fuuuck!” Patrick dropped the weapon.

“Worthless endeavors to survive. Amusing in a tragic sort of way.” Astaroth leaned forward, stretching his front paws and raising his hips to get a full back arch. “Capitalism is such a predictable mechanism. Rather boring, in fact, but I suppose I can spice it up into an interesting apocalypse. So few things in this mortal plane provide proper entertainment. I only hope your screams of anguish offer me some solace in this somber reality.”

Astaroth approached Patrick, turning to face Jack momentarily.

“I will allow you to slaughter these nobodies, but I wish to feast upon this one.” Astaroth nodded in Patrick’s direction. “His hubris radiates in waves. I wish to take my time shattering his hope, breaking his mind, and consuming his soul.”

“Yeah, have at it,” Jack said with a cough.

Astaroth lunged for Patrick Hearst. The demon dog’s jaw cracked open wide and made room for six elongated gray arms. They were so slender, they were practically skeletal. In a swift motion, the clawed hands snatched Patrick, and Astaroth howled with excitement as he barreled deeper into the forest to devour his quarry.

“Guess that’s my cue to deal with you lot.” Jack twisted in his confined state, cracking his back.

It released the tension built up from all the stress these bastards had caused.

“Take him down,” one of the hunters shouted, aiming his gun at Jack.

Before he had a chance to fire, the crows swooped down cawing with fury as they pecked at any hunter with their gun trained on Jack.

He turned to spot Dimitri focusing his mind, likely communicating with the woodland creatures. Not just his crows or the wolves who leapt out and tackled men from behind. The trees uprooted themselves, encasing the area and preventing escape. When the hunters fired their rounds, vines stole their weaponry and strangled their screams.

“Can’t let you have all the fun, sweetheart.” Jack took off his enchanted pumpkin and tossed it over to Dimitri. “Hold this for me, will you?”

Dimitri watched in awe as Jack’s body cracked and snapped and was ripped to shreds. He stared at Dimitri, who didn’t blink, didn’t gasp, didn’t look away for a single second.

The shackles holding Jack captive shattered. The rods embedded in Jack’s flesh flew out like rockets. His skin ripped apart at the seams, falling away to pieces as his demonic form took shape.

Jack wouldn’t require the full strength of the Nuckelavee to defeat these foes. He rarely needed more than a fraction of his power to slaughter enemies, but he would take great pleasure in unleashing his wrath.

The Nuckelavee took on the strangest form as a fully actualized spirit. Jack never truly grasped his transformation, but he took great satisfaction in the fear it provoked.

In his true form, entwined with the dark spirit, Jack had turned into a man merged with a horse. Not a centaur. No, this was a skeletal demonesque creature riding atop a horse. Only the rider possessed no legs. No form below his waist. A rotted waist where the jagged spiked ribs poked out and the shadowy flesh burned alive with dark flames.

The horse’s head swelled with embers, and each time it snorted a heavy exhale, black flames scorched the ground beneath them. Its hooves stomped deep into the dirt, cracking through and tearing the earth asunder.

As the ground quaked, many hunters lost their balance. The trees around seized the wolves at Dimitri’s request, and the crows flew away. Soon, all that remained was a Leshy who watched a Nuckelavee in his full form.

“May the darkness offer you an escape from the hell I will unleash.” Jack galloped ahead, swinging one of his elongated arms and using the talon scythe-like fingers to behead several hunters.

Jagged spikes sprang from his back, seeking out targets. Screams filled the air, and the shadowy chains slowly coiled into Jack’s back again, bringing with them many hooked hunters.

They clawed at the ground. They shrieked with terror. They fired their guns futilely. Some fired a shot into their own head before reaching Jack. A smart move, for when the other hunters were within his grasp, Jack ripped their flesh off.

No one put up much of a fight; none of them knew how to oppose such a triumphant force. Jack turned his home into a battlefield, gutting each and every hunter who dared separate him from the love of his life.

“I love you,” Dimitri mouthed as Jack worked.

He sat on his knees, observing the destruction without an ounce of remorse for the hunters who screeched and wailed and begged to no avail.

Jack slaughtered through the hunters, smiling at Dimitri as he worked, and bringing peace to their home as he soaked the ground in the blood of their enemies.

“I love you, too,” Jack mouthed back, hacking away at everyone foolish enough to threaten his happiness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



ASTAROTH USED his newly acquired intel to provide Jack with the location of the chip embedded in Dimitri's head. Dimitri sat in a wooden chair squarely in the center of the living room while Jack stood beside him, and Astaroth rolled around on the couch. The idea of Jack slipping his shadows into Dimitri's skull frightened him, sure, but he wouldn't leave the device dormant in his head even if Astaroth had assured him it would no longer function under his company policy.

"Who would want a silly gadget to administer torture and compliance?" Astaroth growled. "I swear, mortals sap the joy out of everything with their technological shortcuts."

Dimitri did his best not to squirm as shadowed tendrils slithered deeper in his ear. As Jack worked, Astaroth rambled on about better methods of torture. Ways to break the nervous system of a victim without relying on some feeble chip. Dimitri did his best to tune Astaroth out as he went on in very explicit detail.

"Stop moving your head." Jack snatched Dimitri by the hair, clutching his fingers tightly through the curls. "You know, usually, when I grab you like this, there is a much bigger payoff, but then again, I'm usually prodding a different hole."

"Must you make poor humor about fellatio at a time like this?" Astaroth barked. "I'm in the middle of a conversation."

Jack rolled his eyes and continued working.

"The whole point of torture is to get one's hands bloody," Astaroth continued. "And compliance is so much more satisfying when conditioned

through physical and psychological torment. A silly chip like that strips away the creativity of carnage. I want no part of it.”

“Then maybe you should shelve these terrible things,” Jack said, wriggling around Dimitri’s head.

The shadows moved in such a way that Dimitri swore he could feel them right underneath his face. It was creepy and unnerving.

“I suppose I can eliminate some technologies if I apply the right pressure.”

“Don’t you have like stocks or some shit in multiple tech companies?”

“Well, yes, but that’s just part of my plan for global domination,” Astaroth explained. “Simplification has made the mortals duller and dumber, which in turn will make exploiting the masses far easier when I raise my armies to unleash destruction upon the land.”

“Oh, of course.” Jack chuckled as he worked. “Duh.”

He winked at Dimitri, who nervously smiled in response, careful not to move too much as Jack worked. It didn’t help that Jack seemed semi-distracted as he rooted around Dimitri’s skull.

“Got it,” Jack said, retrieving the chip.

Detaching it must have been more work than anticipated because Jack got very quiet as he tinkered. Dimitri broke out in a nervous sweat, waiting for Jack’s face to fill with a carefree smile.

“Souvenir?” Jack finally said as he held up the tiny, bloody chip.

“Burn it.” Dimitri made a disgusted face.

“Yes,” Astaroth added. “Let us hear the final squeals of the dying device.”

“It’s not alive,” Jack retorted.

“Shame. Then I am going to kill the air fryer.” Astaroth climbed off the couch. “She mocks my serving sizes.”

“Don’t destroy my kitchen gadgets,” Jack shouted. “She’s not mocking you. She’s just an automated voice with random one-liners to, like, help people make healthy food choices.”

“She is about to suffer for her unsolicited advice.” Astaroth trotted away.

Jack sighed. “He is insufferable.”

“He is a good dog,” Dimitri replied. “Very good, given all he has done.”

“Well, don’t thank him too much. It’ll make him even more insufferable.”

Jack plopped down on the couch and called Dimitri over. The pair lay there while metal clinked in the kitchen. Jack responded by turning the television up and ignoring Astaroth's torture of the air fryer.

"Doesn't he have an actual person to torture?" Jack huffed.

"He provides Patrick with brief breaks," Dimitri replied, having made a similar inquiry.

It turned out that Astaroth would allow Patrick to escape, only for him to get lost in the woods and be recaptured by the wicked demon dog. Now, it seemed Patrick didn't bother running, instead begging for an end. Dimitri hoped Astaroth didn't offer him an easy end.

Over the last few days, Dimitri had done his best to put the attack behind him. The Hearst empire even seemed well on its way to crumbling. Patrick was rotting in the woods, suffering a slow agonizing death. The hunters were all dead. Even their corpses had fallen away into the shadowy abyss Jack controlled.

"Question." Dimitri turned to Jack. "Does it get crowded in the shadows?"

"Huh?" Jack cocked his head.

"You have a hundred corpses just from the recent attack. Surely, the shadows are not infinite."

"Um, they might be." Jack shrugged. "I don't really wander around too much. Easy to get lost."

"Lost? They are your shadows."

"Well, more precisely, they're the dark void of the universe itself, but the Nuckelavee sort of hijacks them for itself and me by extension," Jack explained, his shadowy eyes exploded into star shapes as he had a realization. "Hey, I guess they are infinite since the whole connected to the universe thing. Probably. Most likely. My best guess. Hmm. Glad I figured that out. I'm so smart."

"So, the corpses just float around in there?"

"Oh, hell no. That'd probably smell rancid as fuck after a while." Jack laughed. "No, I opened a doorway to the ocean and just chucked 'em out to be fish chum."

"Hmph." Dimitri side-eyed Jack. "I do not know if I approve of littering the ocean with corpses. It should not be a watery grave."

"Meh, think of it as compost," Jack countered. "Plus, if the fishies can handle garbage island, I think they can handle a few dozen bloated corpses."

It's gotta taste better, anyway."

"Garbage what?"

"We'll go over that one another day." Jack laughed.

It turned out Jack and Astaroth had taken it upon themselves to remove all trace of the hunter's presence in Sleepy Hollow. They didn't set up in a manor like Gordon and his team had, so it was easier to do away with their gear and vehicles by dropping them in the shadowy abyss and then sending them thousands of miles away. Dimitri hoped Jack didn't then drop them into the nearby ocean or any ocean for that matter.

Jack returned to the show they had on, and Dimitri cozied up closer. Dimitri sank deeper into the cushions of the couch, twisting around so he could use Jack's lap as a pillow. The pair lounged for hours, lost on silly shows. Jack's hands absently moved about as he talked nonstop about the shows, explaining all the extra little details. Dimitri listened, remaining silent as Jack's fingers twirled through Dimitri's curly hair.

Dimitri could stay like this forever. Truly forever. With Jack.

Days turned into weeks, and life slowly settled back into normalcy. Well, as normal a life as two monsters living together in an enchanted forest could be. Dimitri still heard Patrick's shrieks deep in the woods during his hikes. Thankfully, the fog turned thicker since Astaroth dragged the former Hearst heir away. It lessened the noise, dulling the cruel torture unleashed. Not that Dimitri felt particularly terrible for Patrick. If anyone in his life deserved such a gruesome end, it was a Hearst. Still, Dimitri didn't realize how brutally savage Astaroth could be when eviscerating a soul for his own pleasures. He seemed to rip apart Patrick's being one layer at a time, savoring the slaughter.

"Caw-caw-caw," Nikolai called out, drawing Dimitri's thoughts from such things as empathy.

The crow always knew when Dimitri's mind wandered, and Patrick stole a bit of his attention. Nikolai would have none of that, especially during their walks. Well, flights and walks, since the flock of crows circled overhead most of the time. Occasionally, Nikolai would perch on Dimitri's antlers, but this trip, he focused his energy on helping the wolves hunt.

It was fascinating how well the two species coordinated together. Even without the magical influence of the Leshy spirit, the two creatures had a harmonious relationship. Nikolai and the other crows would scout out

potential targets, prey to be hunted, and the wolves would respond in kind by circling their quarry and sharing the bountiful meal with the birds.

Dimitri often used the walks to get to know the beasts better, learning the histories of the wolves, finding out what made them happy, and why they followed Nikolai hundreds of miles north. He also used this time to commune with the trees, to catch up with the voices of nature, and to ask they do their best to hide the presence of the wolves.

They weren't native to the area, and while the fog worked well to keep hunters at bay, the wolves didn't always stick close to home. They roamed far and wide, exploring the whole land, and Dimitri wanted to ensure they didn't stumble onto any dangers when outside the enchanted fog's reach.

When Dimitri returned home, he spotted Astaroth, who walked into the house a bloody mess. Jack immediately berated Astaroth for tracking in bloody and muddy footprints, then went to work cleaning the mess and wrapping the demon dog in a dozen towels.

"I see you are still hard at work." Dimitri chuckled.

"Actually, just wrapping up a job." Astaroth's eyes glowed momentarily. "I grew bored of the mortal and finished him off once and for all."

Patrick Hearst was dead, truly dead. Did that mean the worst of Dimitri's fears had finally concluded? There were other Hearsts out there. There were hunters who tracked targets on their own and freelanced their services all the time. Even so, Dimitri didn't dwell, didn't let what could be haunt him.

"Do handle the remains for me, lesser peasant," Astaroth said to Jack, pulling Dimitri from his thoughts. "I will leave coordinates to where the body can be retrieved."

"Huh?" Jack cocked his head.

"I'm leaving for a time. Quite urgently, in fact," Astaroth explained. "Otherwise, I would set aside some time to properly mangle the remains into a grotesque effigy for someone to stumble upon."

"You are leaving?" Dimitri blinked, a bit taken aback.

"I need to properly acquire the Hearst business, so I may be gone for a time. I must consult with my feeble mortal proxies on ensuring the acquisitions are properly handled. I might also indulge in a bit of slaughter. The Hearst family does have a few allies who would look better painted on walls with their entrails, don't you agree?"

Shortly thereafter, Astaroth handled whatever business he had in his room and then prepared to venture off into the world. Jack wished the demon dog good luck, while Dimitri thanked Astaroth for removing any potential future threats.

“Nonsense. As if I could ever be threatened!” Astaroth guffawed before taking his leave.

Dimitri watched the dog trot away, vanishing into the fog of the forest.

“Will he return?”

“Unfortunately,” Jack said, rolling his eyes. “He takes the occasional murderous pilgrimage but always returns.”

“Good, I like Astaroth.”

“Meh. I’ve always preferred cats.”

Shortly after that, the two of them set off to clean around the house. Dimitri mopped the floors while Jack attempted to get the blood stains out of the towels.

“I should probably just burn them,” Jack huffed.

Dimitri chuckled and helped Jack ball up the ruined towels into a trash bag.

“Can I ask how you’re feeling?”

“I am fine.” Dimitri shrugged.

“It’s just, you experienced a lot because of the Hearsts,” Jack said slowly, picking his words very carefully as if he walked on glass that might crack if he blurted something out too quickly. “What they did to your family, the years in captivity... I mean, Patrick seemed like a real piece of work.”

“I do not wish to go into anything explicit,” Dimitri responded. “But Patrick was the worst of his family. Perhaps the worst humanity had to offer. He took great pleasure in being cruel and hateful. As terrible as he was to me, to other monsters on his father’s cutting board, and even to humans below his station, I was mostly fortunate.”

Jack remained silent, giving Dimitri the time and space to pour out this venom that had stuck with him for so long.

“I will never be grateful to Gordon Hearst for he was a monster himself, but he did shield me from the worst of his son’s depravities because I remained a useful tool.”

They stayed quiet for a few minutes, and Dimitri let a piece of his trauma, a small piece, break away and be forgotten. He couldn’t wash away

all the decades of captivity in a simple conversation, but he was able to release a bit into the ether.

Jack must have noticed the shift in Dimitri's demeanor because his pumpkin head was quickly illuminated by a cheery smirk.

"Well, if Astaroth doesn't finish off the rest of the Hearsts in his power grab for whatever trillion-dollar apocalypse he's planning, then I'm going to track down the rest of them."

"You are too kind," Dimitri said. "But I believe now they will truly keep their distance. They have lost much, and for a family not used to ever losing, this will likely stun them."

For the first time, Dimitri felt safe, truly safe. He didn't ignore looming fears; he didn't push them aside in favor of positive thoughts. He actually believed he no longer had to fear the wrath of the Hearst family.

"Can we just do something silly and simple for the rest of the day?"

"What'd you have in mind?"

"We have not made any proper videos in a long time," Dimitri said. "Shall we record as the Deer Daddy and Jack Whoa Lantern?"

"Absolutely."

"Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It's your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern," Jack said, posing beside Dimitri. "And Deer Daddy."

Jack quickly closed the video out.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not in the mood for a story time."

"You are not in the mood to talk?" Dimitri asked, feigning shock. "Are you feeling well?"

"Ha, ha, ha," Jack gave a slow, dramatic, and mocking laugh. "You're hilarious."

"What shall we do then?"

"There's a bunch of dances I've been wanting to try out," Jack said, pulling up saved videos and sounds he had at the ready.

"I do not dance."

"Perfect, you'll make a stylish accessory to my moves."

The first video they recorded went quickly enough. It pretty much involved Jack twerking at the camera while Dimitri stared in disbelief with his arms crossed.

The next few were a bit more tedious and involved Jack reshooting them again and again when he messed up or required multiple angles.

“Keeping the outtakes,” he blurted, preparing his next video.

He handed Dimitri the phone and dropped to his knees in front of him.

“What are you intending to record here?”

“Going to open the video with a baddie back arch,” Jack explained, positioning himself on all fours with his ass raised high, his head pressed to the floor, and his back arched to absolute perfection. “Just like this.”

Jack changed up, losing the arch, and smiled up at Dimitri.

“When you start recording, make sure to get a good shot as I move into position,” Jack said. “Bitches eat that shit up.”

Dimitri quirked a brow.

“Okay, it’s me, I’m bitches.”

Dimitri recorded a few takes of Jack giving his best arch performance in the world, and admittedly, Dimitri found himself craving something more exciting than silly dance videos. But Jack was now lost in the joy of filming content, so they continued.

Jack used Dimitri as a prop for a few of the short, choppy clips, and then set up for the most outrageous part of his performance. Dimitri held Jack’s ankles as the entertainer did a handstand while shaking his ass in front of the camera.

“How is this a trend?”

“Trust me. Once I edit it all together, it’s gonna kill.”

“It is going to kill my eyes, surely.”

“Sassy.”

Dimitri lost himself in the dancing videos, even finding himself convinced to attempt a few of the easier ones. This was a life Dimitri never predicted, and he couldn’t imagine anything better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



JACK STRUTTED INTO THE LIBRARY, standing in front of Dimitri, who sat at a desk with a book in his hand. Dimitri didn't look away, continuing to read even as Jack blocked some of the lighting with shadows and pulled out his phone to record.

"Howdy ho, my creepy crawlies. It's your boy, Jack Whoa Lantern," Jack said, posing in front of Dimitri. "Do y'all like my top?"

Dimitri stared at Jack, then looked into the camera, seeming to eye Jack through the camera's reflection.

"You are not wearing a top." Dimitri quirked a brow, and Jack nearly lost it right there.

His shadowy expression disappeared as he hid his reaction, then he stopped the recording and roared with laughter. "Oh my fucking God, you're absolutely brilliant."

"For pointing out the obvious?"

"No, for your timing, sweetie," Jack explained. "Comedic gold."

"Can I get a comedic translation?"

"Okay, first off, you're the top, that's the joke."

"I am your shirt?" Dimitri cocked his head in utterly adorable confusion.

Jack could live in this moment forever, which might've contributed to his delayed response.

"No, you're the top." Jack thrust his hips, simulating sex. "Get it? When I ask if folks like my top, I'm asking if they like you."

"Why wouldn't they like me?" Dimitri asked, almost feigning offense.

“I can’t believe that’s your takeaway.” Jack chuckled. “It’s just a really good joke, is all. And you hit the nail on the head. Also, the added benefit of those being your first-ever words in any of our videos. Oh, this is going to blow up.”

“You realize I am not a top,” Dimitri said, standing to his feet and setting his book aside.

“Well, they don’t need all the details of our relationship.”

“You just gave them all the details. Inaccurate details, but all of them nonetheless.”

“Not inaccurate,” Jack countered. “You haven’t exactly shown me your versatile side.”

“Oh?” Dimitri’s expression shifted to something soft and coy. “You wish to be my top? Do you think your audience will like my top as much as they like your top?”

“Who doesn’t like watching a short king bend over a big, thick daddy?”

“No one better be watching, mister.” Dimitri jabbed Jack in the chest with his nails, then eyed the phone in Jack’s hand.

“I don’t make that kind of content,” Jack said with a smile. “Now, can we return to the important part of the discussion?”

“Which is?”

“Which is me cracking that big ole Deer Daddy.” Jack made the most ridiculous expression, even conjuring a shadowy tongue to demonstrate his fiendish arousal.

“Keep it up, the only thing that will crack will be your pumpkin head.”

“All right, all right, I’m done.” Jack wiggled his eyebrows. “Time to turn on the charm. Prepare to be swooned, my love. I’m going to romance you so hard. And then I’m going to do something else so, so hard.”

“You are an absolute dork.”

“The most absolute dork that ever dorked,” Jack said with a grin. “And you love it.”

“I do. And I love you, even if your humor is nauseating at times.”

“Only at times, huh? I’ll take the win.”

“If you wish to bother me during my reading, you better make it worth my time.”

“Is that a challenge?” Jack tsked.

“Depends.” Dimitri smoldered, his glowing green eyes holding this delightful cockiness to them. “Can you meet it?”

“I most certainly can.” Jack shoved Dimitri back, knocking him through his shadows before he had a chance to react.

Jack stepped through as well, and the two of them stood alone in Jack’s room. Well, Jack’s room in technicalities only. Technically, Dimitri had his own room, although he never used it. Technically, Jack hadn’t asked to officially move into the same room together, although Dimitri spent every night in Jack’s bed. *Their* bed at this point.

“You little jerk.” Dimitri grinned.

“You like it?” Jack asked, gauging Dimitri’s expression.

“I do.” Dimitri’s grin grew. “I would like very much to see what else you have planned to take charge.”

Jack took a nervous breath, then decided to proceed boldly.

“Strip,” Jack said with a slight edge in his voice.

Dimitri cocked his head, sizing Jack up almost as if he waited for Jack to repeat himself. There was no need for that, though. Dimitri’s ears twitched, perhaps enjoying the dominance. Jack wasn’t quite certain, but he had this primal urge to boss Dimitri around for a change. He’d craved it for months now, controlling Dimitri, dominating him, fucking him to completion, but every other part of him so badly wished to please Dimitri, to offer him safety and comfort and love.

They had all that, though, and now they could explore new things together.

Dimitri did as instructed, standing stark naked in front of Jack. He reached out to unfasten Jack’s jeans.

“No.” Jack swatted Dimitri’s hand away. “You’re impatient.”

“A little.” Dimitri smirked.

“That’s very bad.”

“Oh?” Dimitri leaned closer, reaching for Jack’s pumpkin.

“Stop,” Jack said. “Tonight, you’re going to learn to listen.”

“That so?”

“Yes, it is.”

“So, no sweet kisses?” Dimitri teased, licking the pumpkin.

“I’m not a sweet top.” Jack glared, doing his best to be assertive.

In many instances, that wasn’t a challenge, but with Dimitri, all Jack wanted to do most days was fall to his knees and serve.

“Aggressive, are we?” Dimitri purred. “I like to see this side.”

“That so?” Jack unfastened his jeans.

“Take what is yours,” Dimitri said. “I will gladly surrender it.”

“On your knees,” Jack ordered.

“Yes, sir.” Dimitri dropped down, still managing to appear so tall despite Jack now standing over him.

Jack pulled his jeans down just enough to expose his semi-erect cock.

“Get on it.” Jack nodded to his dick.

Dimitri went to work sucking him off, his head bobbing up and down as he shrank his antlers to further accommodate Jack.

Jack wrapped his hands around the sides of Dimitri’s head and gripped his ears, controlling the motion of each bob.

“That’s it,” Jack gasped as he pushed his dick further into Dimitri’s mouth.

He hit the roof of his mouth and bucked his hips while shoving Dimitri’s head further down.

Dimitri’s throat muscles constricted around Jack’s cock, and he gagged.

Jack continued pumping in and out of Dimitri’s mouth.

“Fucking take it,” Jack hissed. “Choke on my dick.”

Dimitri gurgled in response, gulping as he attempted to keep the cock deep in his throat.

Jack kept ramming until he started throbbing with an urge to fuck Dimitri’s face until he came. That wouldn’t happen, not when he had plans to fuck more than just Dimitri’s tight throat.

Jack snatched Dimitri by his hair and yanked him off his cock entirely. “Good boy.”

Dimitri gasped in response, taking deep breaths as spit ran down his chin.

“You’re quite a sight, aren’t you?”

Dimitri’s tail wiggled a bit, only further enticing Jack to take complete control.

“On the bed,” Jack commanded.

Dimitri did as instructed, and Jack pulled his jeans all the way off.

“Roll over into position.”

Dimitri obeyed, moving up on the bed and rolling onto his stomach. He adjusted his elbows and knees to prop himself into position.

Jack stared at his naked boyfriend sprawled onto the bed for him and slowly crawled up behind him.

Dimitri arched his back, rubbing his butt against Jack’s erection.

“Goddamn, look at that bubble butt.” Jack palmed Dimitri’s cheeks. “Slapable.”

Dimitri craned his neck, giving Jack the most mischievous expression. No words, but a look that dared Jack to it.

Jack smacked Dimitri’s ass.

“Mmm,” Dimitri moaned.

Jack squeezed Dimitri’s ass, eager to slap it a second time, so he did just that.

Dimitri responded by arching his back and spreading his legs wider. He lay there on the bed with his knees pressed deep into the mattress and his perfect ass on full display.

Jack slapped Dimitri’s butt a third time.

This strike resulted in Dimitri letting out a sharp yelp.

“Sorry, might’ve gotten carried away.” Jack grinned, his shadowy expression looking all the more wicked with the pumpkin over his head.

“I did not tell you to stop.” Dimitri’s fluffy tail twitched in anticipation.

Jack slapped Dimitri’s ass a fourth time, sweeping his hand across, and then he drove it back down to pelt Dimitri’s other cheek with his knuckles.

“Ooaah,” Dimitri moaned.

Jack palmed Dimitri’s cheeks again, staring at the red taking hold of one side but not the other.

“We’ll have to even this out,” Jack said, sliding in closer. “But first, I want to split you open.”

Jack retrieved the lube, coating his hard cock, and lining the head up with Dimitri’s puckered hole.

“Oh, fuck,” Jack groaned as he slipped the tip inside.

Dimitri’s back hunched upward in response.

“Not-uh,” Jack responded, running his hands up Dimitri’s spine. “Back in position, baby.”

Jack gave a firm shove and forced Dimitri back into a deep arch.

“Hold just like that.” Jack thrust forward, pushing his cock a few inches deeper into Dimitri.

Jack groaned in pleasure as he buried his cock deep inside Dimitri. Jack did his best to keep perfectly still, allowing Dimitri’s hole a moment to adjust to the intrusion. It also helped prevent Jack from immediately bursting inside Dimitri. The tight warmth was absolutely euphoric. Dimitri clenched, moaning as he lay there with Jack’s cock fully inside him.

“You okay?” Jack asked, trying not to lose himself entirely to how good this felt. He wanted to make sure this was also good for Dimitri.

“Yes,” Dimitri said with a raspy wisp. “Fuck me.”

After a minute of letting his cock adjust, Jack bucked his hips, slapping them against Dimitri’s ass. He pulled his slick cock nearly all the way out, keeping just the head inside, then he slammed back slowly. Jack’s balls slapped Dimitri’s, and the two of them grunted in unison.

“You ready for this?” Jack palmed Dimitri’s ass, spreading the cheeks so he could watch his cock disappear inside Dimitri’s hole as he worked.

“Aaah, yes.”

“I’m going to fucking ruin you.” Jack took short, stabby thrusts. “You ready for that?”

Dimitri lay there, groaning as Jack steadied his strokes, slowing them until Dimitri’s noises shifted from pain to pleasure.

“That feel good, baby?” Jack continued bucking forward, massaging Dimitri’s tense back muscles as he gradually fucked him harder.

Dimitri buried his face into the pillow and growled as Jack’s thrusts got faster. It didn’t take long for Jack to find the perfect rhythm for pounding Dimitri’s ass. Every stroke felt infinitely better than the previous, and Dimitri’s moans into the pillow kept getting louder. The muffled noises only further enticed Jack.

“Come on, baby, I want to hear you.” Jack grabbed ahold of Dimitri’s antlers with both hands, jerking his head back right as he slammed his cock all the way to the base. “Scream for me.”

“Aaaaahhhh,” Dimitri yelled with a hoarse groan.

“That’s it,” Jack whispered with a gravelly command. “Take it just like that. You love it. You love that fucking cock. Take it. Take this dick!”

He kept a strong grip on Dimitri’s antlers, holding his head back as he fucked his ass deeper into the mattress. Dimitri groaned, taking the pounding.

Jack released one of the antlers, sliding his hand back down to Dimitri’s ass cheeks.

“Time to even this out,” he said, giving Dimitri a quick whack on the butt.

Dimitri whimpered. His body quaked as Jack continued pumping into him, searching for a steady rhythm. It didn’t take long for Jack to release Dimitri’s other antler, running his fingers through Dimitri’s hair and getting

a firm grip on the black curls. He yanked Dimitri's head back again, savoring the deeper arch it forced. With every few strokes, Jack managed to slap Dimitri's ass again, almost timing it with the pounding he gave him.

"Fuck," Jack rasped. "You're fucking perfect."

Dimitri moaned in response.

"I'm going to..." Jack bucked faster, his dick throbbing hard inside Dimitri.

Each time he pushed a little deeper until he reached the base, then he took tiny, swift strokes as his cock pulsed. The electric feeling flowed through his body, and Jack released Dimitri's hair, clawing at his back as he shot his load deep inside him.

Dimitri buried his face in the pillow, moaning as he took Jack's seed.

"Not-uh." Jack yanked Dimitri's head back, listening to the beautiful grunt Dimitri let out.

Jack quivered, sliding his dick out as his last shot spilled onto Dimitri's back. As he thrust along Dimitri's crack, almost instinctively craving to be inside him again, Jack reeled back his hand and gave Dimitri one more hard slap on his ass.

His bright red handprint framed that beautiful cheek, and Jack wanted nothing more than to fuck Dimitri again this very second, to will his cock to rise to the occasion so he could pound the man he loved until they both finished.

Fuck, but they hadn't both finished. Not yet. Jack stared at his load splattered across Dimitri's back.

Then Dimitri collapsed onto the mattress, panting beneath Jack. Feeling a bit feisty, Jack teased Dimitri's hole, pressing his cock against the rim. When Dimitri held his breath in anticipation, Jack pressed the head against the hole, pushing in just enough to feel the tight warmth one more time before finishing. Fuck, with just the tip inside, Jack found himself bucking a bit, craving another fuck, a rougher fuck, a harder, more controlled fuck.

"Don't worry, baby," Jack whispered, slipping out again.

Cum leaked from Dimitri, dripping down his crack and onto the bed. This was possibly the most beautiful sight, something Jack could savor for a hundred lifetimes. It was a sight he planned to bask in many more times, but for now, he had other plans.

"Hold on." Jack grabbed ahold of Dimitri's hips.

“I do not know if I can take more,” Dimitri said, his voice ragged as he took heavy breaths.

He trembled in Jack’s grasp, further enticing him. Jack sucked in a tight breath, resisting his own primal urges, and focused on his partner.

“We’re almost done, baby.” Jack flipped Dimitri onto his back and stared at the hard cock that slapped Dimitri’s stomach.

Retrieving more lube, Jack went to work stroking Dimitri. They locked eyes, and Jack studied every minute expression Dimitri made as he stroked his dick.

“Oooh.” Dimitri’s teeth chattered as Jack fisted the hard cock.

He focused mainly on the head, massaging it with a tight grip as he played with the foreskin. Then, he changed the rhythm, loosening his hold just enough to run his hand all the way down the base before tightening his grasp. Dimitri grunted every time Jack stroked him. It didn’t take long before Dimitri started to buck his hips upward, fucking Jack’s hand and the air.

Jack scooted in closer, his soft dick pressed against Dimitri’s bouncing ass. Dimitri’s thick thighs wrapped around Jack’s hips as he continued his thrusts.

“Uuuuaagh.” Dimitri groaned loudly as he climaxed.

Two jets of cum hit Jack, splattering across his chest. A third and final shot landed on Dimitri’s stomach.

Dimitri lay there panting and smiling at Jack.

“Okay, time to take this off.” Dimitri grabbed the pumpkin and tossed it to the other end of the bed before pulling Jack in for a kiss.

“I am definitely topping you again.” Jack chuckled.

“Yes, but for now we rest.” Dimitri lay back on the bed, letting their sweaty, sticky bodies crash into each other. “My ass is sore.”

“Just you wait,” Jack teased, grinding against Dimitri and nuzzling into his neck with sweet kisses. “Next time, I’m really going to fuck you. Show you exactly what this monster boy is capable of unleashing.”

Shadows danced across the room.

“Is this what they mean when they warn of the exuberance the short kings carry?”

“Bet your ass it is.” Jack playfully pinched Dimitri’s butt. “And best believe I will be collecting.”

“You are exhausting.” Dimitri laughed.

The two of them lay together in bed, cuddling and playing and teasing each other. Jack couldn't imagine life getting any better than this. He had a man who loved him deeply. A man he loved with all his heart. Dimitri saw him for everything he was, knew Jack completely, and loved him for it. Jack adored Dimitri's kindness, his curiosity, his quiet devotion, and more than anything, Jack wanted to share the world with him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



DIMITRI DID, in fact, walk funny the next morning, and he couldn't stop thinking about how hard Jack had railed him. Part of him craved it again, another part wanted to bend Jack over the kitchen table and fuck him. Anything to assert himself in equal measure, to tease him, to please him, to test the measure of their love.

It didn't take long for them to fall into such playful patterns. They would spar with each other, they would film with each other, they would fuck each other. Life had become something so sweet. Almost as sweet as the floral fragrances of spring. The winter cold had finally faded, and sunny days were abundant.

"Come along, lazy pumpkin."

Dimitri had decided to use the walk as an opportunity to share a bit of his life with Jack, parts of himself that he'd boxed away for what seemed like an endless winter. But just as spring had rolled back around here and the flowers blossomed, so had Dimitri's memories of a life that once was.

Jack sighed, trudging behind Dimitri as they left the house for one of their regular hikes.

"I miss Astaroth," Jack whined.

"Oh, I knew you cared about that little demon puppy."

"No, I just miss how you two would do most of the walks," Jack said. "I would get dragged along maybe once a week. Now, it's like almost every day."

"Walking is healthy for you."

“I’m a living, breathing corpse,” Jack scoffed. “I don’t think I have to worry about my health.”

“It is good for the mental health, too,” Dimitri insisted. “Nature offers a lift in the spirits.”

“It could offer some damn shade.” Jack squinted, cupping a hand over his pumpkin shadowy eyes as the sun pierced between branches.

Dimitri politely asked the trees to be considerate. Their snickers could be heard just beneath the rustle of leaves caught in a breeze.

“If you didn’t whine so much, the trees wouldn’t find you to be such an easy target.”

“I knew they were doing it on purpose.” Jack scowled at random trees, and Dimitri laughed.

“Those trees do not move,” he explained. “Well, not without a little assistance.”

“Oh, well, which one of these bastards is out to get me?”

“No one and everyone,” Dimitri chuckled.

As they continued their hike, the crows kept their distance along with the wolves. Even the trees kept their conversations burrowed deep beneath the soil, communicating through their roots. Dimitri rarely asked for privacy on his walks, and while he didn’t explicitly ask this time around, his aura must have radiated the emotion strongly enough for all of nature to understand.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“I am,” Dimitri said, trying to find the right segue into the conversation he wanted, but he was not nearly talkative enough to string together random connected topics until he reached the one he intended to have. “I wanted to share a bit about my family with you.”

“Oh?” Jack asked with wide eyes.

“These hikes we take, the woods... They have sparked memories. Good times. Sentimental times.”

“As you know, I have a few siblings. All very different from me and very different from each other. Well, my brothers were very similar in one respect.”

“What’s that?”

“Let us just say, they got all the violent streaks in the family.”

“Tell me about them.”

“My oldest brother, second oldest in the family, was named Florian,” Dimitri said, trying not to let the lump in his throat swell as he attempted to use past-tense phrasing about his siblings. Because they were in the past, forever, but he could still cherish them as if they were right beside him and Jack. “My other brother, also older, was named Mikhail.”

“You’re the youngest, right?” Jack asked with a musing expression.

“Correct, though my sister, Elena, definitely acted like the baby of the family,” Dimitri said.

It was mostly true, and she couldn’t protest his opinion on the matter.

“If you thought our little sparring match was tough, you should have met my brothers,” Dimitri said with a light laugh, recalling the few times he’d been dragged into a fight against them. “Usually, they reserved their combative nature for one another, but on the rare occasion, they sought to teach me how to defend myself.”

“How’d that go?”

“It went well, more or less. The less being I sometimes got thrown off a mountain top or tossed into a freezing river.”

“Jeez.” Jack let out an awkward laugh. “Fun times, I take it?”

“I miss it. There are very few people you want to strangle and hug in the same day. My brothers and sisters were such people.”

“I get that, I mean, as much as an only child can, I guess.” Jack shrugged. “That’s pretty much how I feel about Astaroth. Heavy on the strangle part.”

“You and the little demon puppy would probably get along better if you sparred more,” Dimitri said with a smile on his face. “That is what kept my brothers so close.”

He explained how much of what he’d learned in combat came from his older brothers. Florian and Mikhail would battle for weeks on end sometimes, tearing through the forest to track each other down.

“Mikhail had formed a pact with all the bears in the region, making Florian’s assaults much more challenging. But Florian always possessed superior control over his dark armor.”

“The energy around your hands and feet, right?”

Dimitri nodded affirmatively and even demonstrated a bit of his control. His entire left arm was soon coated in spiked darkness. It took on this bizarre plated armor aesthetic. Then Dimitri balled his fist and retracted the dark energy until it only covered his hand again.

“My sister, Elena, said they behaved this way because they embraced the old ways, the chaos of nature over the order,” Dimitri continued. “My father said it was because they needed to go off and find their own forest to haunt.”

“Oh?”

“It is not uncommon for Leshy to seek solitude from their own kind or any others. My brothers had reached an age of independence.” Dimitri’s smile cracked, and he did his best to hide the somber face that took hold of him. “Who knows, if they had set out for their own journeys a bit sooner, they might have never encountered Gordon or his hunters.”

Jack remained quiet, taking in what Dimitri shared, and offering solace with the simplest and kindest squeeze of his hand. Dimitri interlocked their fingers and let the sorrow wash away. He could remember the sad memories any day. This was about sharing the good.

“Elena used to love venturing into the towns. She would explore every human settlement she could find.”

“That’s cool,” Jack said with a genuine look of enthusiasm as he focused on Dimitri while carefully winding through the trail.

“She would bring me along many times.”

“Oh? Did y’all shrink the antlers and wear little hats?”

“Sometimes, if she absolutely wished to walk through the town. But we were always careful not to bring attention to ourselves, always cautious per our father’s rules.”

“Is that why you’re sometimes hung up on going into Sleepy Hollow?”

“No, that is because you stop to talk to everyone, and they all want to talk to you,” Dimitri said with a sigh. “It is exhausting.”

“Life of an extrovert.” Jack grinned. “Made all the better by my emotional support introvert.”

“I have to provide the emotional support?” Dimitri asked. “I suppose I can do that.”

“Good, because you’re stuck with me forever.”

Dimitri’s face and chest heated at that. He loved the idea of being stuck with Jack forever.

“You know, I think Elena was an extrovert, too,” Dimitri said. “We did not always venture into towns, but she always talked with someone. Usually, the birds. She sang to them, and they loved her more than any Leshy ever.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. I am certain of it,” Dimitri continued. “They would share their senses with her and with me when I was in her company. They would fly through the towns, showing us everything. They would steal the best pies, and we would taste them on the birds’ tongues. We would sense all the wonder and learn all about the human world from the safety of the forest.”

“Wow, that’s really cool. And like you would feel them flying around?”

“Exactly. Alas, I do not possess the same level of connection with birds, but I hope perhaps one day Nikolai and I can attempt such a bond.”

“That would be amazing,” Jack said wide-eyed. “I had no idea a Leshy could do so much.”

“Yes, there is much even I do not know,” Dimitri replied. “Truly, my eldest sister, Zaria, was the wisest. She knew even more than my father about our connection to the forests.”

“Oh?”

“She spent all her time communing with nature.”

“Well, you do that too.”

“Not like her. She knew all the old legends. The trees trusted her so much, they would even walk with her through the forest. I am not at that level. Not yet, at least. One day, I hope to learn as much as she did.”

Jack smiled at Dimitri, a look of absolute support.

Talking about his siblings helped keep a piece of them alive, and it helped free Dimitri from a layer of the guilt he carried over their deaths. He would always harbor some guilt, some regret, for not being strong enough to protect them, smart enough, skilled enough, but he didn’t hate himself anymore.

It warmed Dimitri’s heart to share this part of himself with Jack. It bonded them.

“I love you, Jack.”

“I love you more, Dimitri.”

“Not possible.”

“Oh, is that a challenge?”

Dimitri stopped in his tracks and turned to face Jack, standing taller and allowing his antlers to swell until they twisted in gnarling shaped curves that loomed over Jack.

“Maybe it is, little pumpkin man.”

“All right, all right.” Jack cracked his neck, then started stretching his limbs. “You want to have a love off? Let’s go. I will kick your ass...with love.”

Dimitri laughed at that, and Jack grinned. What came next, Dimitri did not know. They would likely banter more, then they would fight and probably fuck and fall more madly in love along the way.

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EPILOGUE



Two Years Later

ASTAROTH HAD REMAINED on his pilgrimage of capitalism or whatever, but he checked in on the rare occasion. He even recently sent tickets with a message to an upcoming convention in New York.

I thought you'd enjoy this. It is an entire event where mortals dress up in absurd attire to prove who among them is the most tragic.

Was that damn demon dog making fun of the fact that Jack cosplayed in his daily life? Whatever, Jack easily overlooked it when he saw the Premium Gold VIP tickets included. Despite the rude note, it was the perfect excuse to drag Dimitri into the city. Though Jack quickly learned why Leshy stuck to the wilderness.

“Don’t worry. Aside from the convention, we’re going to be staying holed up in the hotel until our drive home.”

“Why must we drive?” Dimitri groaned, his face still appearing a bit nauseous from the car. “Just portal us back to the chateau.”

“No. Road trips are a bonding experience.”

“They are an annoying experience.” Dimitri sighed. “Roads are evil.”

“Aren’t those trails you love basically just walking roads?”

“They are nature’s roads!”

Jack laughed.

The only reason Jack didn’t decide to pack up and drive back immediately after the convention was he still wanted to enjoy some of the food the city had to offer. They could just order it directly to their room instead of going out, which honestly would make everything a little simpler.

“Why are we wearing this?” Dimitri asked, yanking at the frilly edges of his green top. “Must we be so dressed the entire time?”

It was an open vest exposing Dimitri’s chest and stomach.

“Stop, you’ll mess up the leaves.” Jack swatted Dimitri’s hands.

“These are not leaves,” Dimitri huffed. “They are plastic deceivers. They hold no imagination or desire. They are like the mannequins. Phony.”

“Yeah, well, they look pretty, so don’t mess up my hard work.”

Dimitri pouted. But he looked good pouting as per usual. Jack had gotten him all dressed up in iconic green from head to toe. He dyed his hair a vibrant red. He wrapped these gorgeous leafy vines around Dimitri’s neck, chest, and torso. Jack even managed to coil the end of it around Dimitri’s right thigh.

But Dimitri kept trying to wriggle free, so much so that his fluffy tail kept tugging at the vines.

“These pants are uncomfortable.”

“Well, it was either that or the dress,” Jack retorted.

“A dress would have been better. Breezy.”

Jack cocked his head and made a bemused expression. He’d definitely have to remember that for the future.

“Oh my God, I adore the Harley and Ivy costumes.” A woman dressed as the universe’s most powerful moon princess stopped to take them in. “Love a good crossplay.”

She pointed to two men in her group who were dressed in the same theme as the moon princess. The guys wore short skirts, high heels, tight blouses, and stylish tiaras.

“See, I could have put you in that.” Jack elbowed Dimitri teasingly.

“I would wear it all except for the foot prisons.” Dimitri shuddered at the very idea, then wiggled his clawed toes.

Jack smiled at the moon princess and twirled for her to show off his costume. He even did a little kick with his leg, lifting it behind him to pose

as he held an oversized hammer behind his head.

He could never truly decide on a favorite Harley ensemble, so he sort of mixed and matched some vibes. He'd altered the colors of his enchanted pumpkin with streaks of pink and blue since no one here would see his hair underneath. He wore a black and red crop top, though it was so skimpy it barely covered his chest. The left pec had a heart symbol, and the right had a diamond. Jack had gone with matching shorts and put a spade symbol on his right cheek and a club on his left.

"But I don't get what the mashup is." The moon princess pointed to Jack's pumpkin head and then to Dimitri's large antlers adorned in flowers.

"Holy hell, Tiffany!" One of the guys walked over and pointed a finger at Jack. "That's the Horseless Headsman getup."

The moon princess, Tiffany, looked at Jack for a moment. Her eyes got wide with excitement.

"Eeee, you're right, Rex!"

"Hey, Derek, check it out," Rex called his friends over.

Derek dragged over another woman dressed in a black tuxedo with a top hat and cape. She seemed somewhat preoccupied with her phone as Tiffany tried to get her attention.

"Beth, look at him." Tiffany pointed at Jack.

"Who is this Beth you speak of?" She covered her face with the cape, leaving only the mask visible. "I am—"

"Just pay attention for one second." Tiffany pointed at Jack again.

"Oh, shit," Beth said with a light laugh. "He looks just like Jack Whoa Lantern."

"Right? Only hotter."

"I swear, I've seen so many of his videos," Beth said, eyeing Jack up and down. "You pull off the look way better."

"Hands down." Tiffany nodded. "Just look at those abs."

Tiffany and Beth then proceeded to mock Jack Whoa Lantern for the next several minutes, expressing why Jack's cosplay of the legendary Horseless Headsman was way hotter. It was a first for him. On more than a few occasions, he'd been told he didn't look as good in person or as scary. It all depended on which posts his followers vibed with most.

After a grueling conversation where Jack politely nodded his head to Tiffany and Beth as they continued unknowingly bashing his content, Dimitri finally intercepted.

“Go away, we are bored with this conversation.”

“Okay, rude much?” Tiffany quirked a brow.

“Leave.” Dimitri snarled, his eyes glowed a brighter green, and his antlers twisted into gnarled shapes. Darkness quickly coated his flesh and took on a spiked form.

The group dispersed, and Dimitri turned to Jack with a grin.

“Would you look at that? My introvert has found a way to get rid of people, too.”

“It is a useful skill. Humans are exhausting.”

“Yes, well, we’re not here for the people.”

“You are. You will likely talk to everyone.”

“Maybe just a little bit.”

They explored the convention, and true to his word, Jack only talked to everyone just a little bit. They bought merch, they sat through panels, they wandered every inch of the venue until Dimitri complained his feet were sore. It was a first for the both of them. Jack always tired on their walks—well, grew too bored to continue—but now it seemed he’d tuckered out Dimitri.

Jack decided to call it a day, preferring to spend what was left of Dimitri’s energy back at the hotel. If he tired out his boyfriend too much, he’d pass out the second they stepped through the door. They headed back for some peace and quiet. Dimitri went to clean up after they returned, while Jack made it his mission to run out and grab some food. Plus, it let him explore the city a little on his own.

When he returned, Dimitri had just started running a bath, so Jack went to work arranging dinner with a bit of privacy.

Dimitri spent over an hour soaking in the tub. While Jack contemplated diving in to join him, he ultimately had to pass so he could finish dinner preparations for the evening.

“You missed out,” Dimitri called out from the other room.

Water splashed and sloshed. Jack hurried up his final touches as he realized Dimitri had hopped out of the tub.

“This bath is amazing,” Dimitri continued. “I did not know they came this big.”

“That’s what she said,” Jack muttered as he arranged a few candles around the room.

“It is like a swimming pool.”

Jack made a mental note to look into updating their tub at home. Bubble baths weren't exactly his speed, but he wouldn't mind getting all squeaky clean alongside Dimitri from time to time.

Dimitri strutted into the main room wearing nothing at all. Oh, how he loved to air-dry. He wore a towel over his head, drying his hair and antlers—also his ears. Dimitri always hated getting water in his ears.

For the briefest of seconds, Dimitri's green eyes went wide as he took in the sight of dozens of candles spread across the room, illuminating a very sensual ambiance. But he didn't see everything Jack had arranged—that much, Jack made certain of.

The bounce of Dimitri's bubble butt captured all of Jack's attention. He locked in on Dimitri as he made his way over to the dresser. It was almost disappointing to see Dimitri slip on a tight pair of boxer briefs.

"That is not dinner attire."

"I am getting there," Dimitri said with feigned exasperation. "You always rush me."

Dimitri tossed the towel into a corner and shook his head until his dark curls didn't appear as damp.

"Do I have to put on the suit and tie for dinner?"

"You know what, let's be fancy, and stick with the birthday suits," Jack teased.

"Ah, then you are the overdressed one." Dimitri nodded to Jack's ripped jeans and leather jacket.

He'd changed when picking up food. It was hard enough playing off the pumpkin head mask; he didn't need to wander into restaurants wearing his cosplay costume, too. Although most New Yorkers didn't seem to care. The only folks gawking at him were fellow tourists.

"Don't worry, I'll get there." Jack removed his pumpkin head and stuck out his tongue. "First, let's eat."

"What did you get?"

"A little bit of everything." Jack gestured to the empty table with a fancy silk cloth he'd arranged for the room.

Shadows opened and revealed brown-bagged dishes from eight different restaurants.

"We are meant to eat all of this?"

"Over the weekend," Jack replied with a shrug. "Why not? Gives us plenty of reason to stay indoors and not starve."

“This is too much.” Dimitri made his way toward the table, already curiously poking around each of the bags.

It was too much and at the same time not nearly enough. Jack had bookmarked well over a hundred different food places he wanted to check out before leaving, and tonight he’d barely made a dent in his list.

“This one has seven trays alone,” Dimitri said, removing plastic containers containing a bunch of different pasta dishes.

“It’s like a sampler platter,” Jack insisted. “You get a little taste of everything.”

“Samplers are just that, a sample.” Dimitri waved the container of gnocchi. “This is a whole entrée. Seven entrées. How many more plates of food did you get?”

Jack blushed. Okay, maybe he went a little overboard, but he didn’t want to try just one dish at each restaurant. He wanted to make sure he tried the best dish, so he got several from each place, hoping one of them would be absolutely amazing.

“If I am to eat all this, I will not be doing the bottoming.” Dimitri went to work making a plate. “I do not think either of us will be doing the bottoming.”

“Oh, that doesn’t really matter for me.” Jack chuckled, pointing at his stomach. “Most of this just goes to the shadows, anyway.”

“Really? Does that not make you more hungry?” Dimitri asked, cocking his head. “Is this why you eat so much?”

Jack laughed. “I eat because I like flavors. But you know my body doesn’t work like most.”

“Yes, I know some of the organs are just for show. It is just that most of you works normally. No blood, but you still stand tall when needed. You also do the breathing, but do not require the air. I just assumed the stomach portion and everything related functioned.”

“I mean, maybe it does?” Jack shrugged. “I don’t really know how it works. Magic, science, something in between. I mean, it’s not exactly something anyone knows much about.”

“The Nuckelavee is a fascinating spirit indeed.”

Jack smirked. It was nice sharing things about himself, even finding new things to share after two years together. He hoped the same would always be true, even after they’d learned every little thing about each other,

that they'd still have something fun to add. That they could retell a story and enjoy hearing it again and again. Jack loved his time with Dimitri.

"Then you will definitely be doing the bottoming this weekend." Dimitri playfully patted Jack on the butt.

"Oh, hell no." Jack snatched away Dimitri's overfilled plate. "I got plans for that ass."

"Wait, I want my food," Dimitri pleaded, reaching out for his goodies.

"You'll get your food, mister." Jack pushed Dimitri back onto the bed. "But before you eat, I'm going to grab a snack and get my fill."

"You are insatiable." Dimitri lay back on the bed, allowing Jack's shadows to guide and control him.

They flipped Dimitri onto his stomach and stripped him of his underwear.

Jack crawled onto the bed slowly, making his way closer to Dimitri. He'd left most of the food on the table but brought a little something to enhance their evening.

He pressed a canister valve, and it released a sudden *kuh-CHHHH* sound. Dimitri nearly jumped at the cold sensation and loud hissing.

"Did you just spray my butt with whipped cream?"

"What?" Jack giggled, observing his handiwork of lining whipped cream down the crack of Dimitri's ass. "I like my cake with a little whipped frosting."

"You are ridiculous."

"Oh, I'll show you *ri-dick-ulous*." Jack smacked Dimitri's ass cheeks, then playfully palmed them as he leaned down and licked the whipped cream between his crack.

Dimitri's teeth chattered as he released a wispy whimper, and his body quivered. Jack buried his face in Dimitri's ass, loving every second of every day they spent together. No matter what they did, they did it together, exploring the world and each other in new ways.

THE END

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Thank you again for taking a chance on *Hollow*. I hope you'll consider leaving an honest rating and/or review of the book. That really helps boost visibility for authors, especially for queer indie books.

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MAYHEM MANUSCRIPTS

Books in Mayhem Manuscripts Season Two: Cryptids

Pareidolia by Lee McCormick

Feral by Emmy LaRoux

Hollow by MN Bennet

Palingenesis by Rae Stone

Tenebrous by Bree Wiley

Golden by B. Ripley

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Mortis by Lily James

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Solais by C.S. Autumn

Marked by N. Boeyer

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MN Bennet lives in the mountains of Arizona and is still adjusting to the cold after being born and raised in the South.

He enjoys writing paranormal and fantasy stories with huge worlds (sometimes too big), loveable romances (with so much angst and banter), and Happily Ever Afters (once he's dragged his characters through some emotional turmoil).

When he's not reading or writing, he can be found binge watching anime or replaying Baldur's Gate 3 for the millionth time.

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