



DREAM of the HUNTERS
CHAPTER X: KIN OF WITCHES

by Ayaz Minhas

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....Zenith the black cat did not need his companions to traverse the gates. The owl provided those pathways to him. In the heart of the ancient jungle, he caught a sight of the vast blackness of space, mirroring his own hide, before becoming swallowed in blue light. The black cat took several jumps before he could go no further, and emerged in the famed city, New Orleans.

He appeared beneath a bright moon, balancing on the roof of a tall building looking out over a large square filled with mausoleums. He then leaped from rooftop to rooftop, scaling the railings of balconies that overlooked Halloween parades. He cast glances at humans with faces painted with skeleton smiles, gathering around lurid constructions of wood, paper, and plastic, the likenesses of monsters the humans had never seen in their lifetimes.

The smell of food from the sea drifted upwards into his nostrils, filling him with pangs of hunger. It had been a while since he hunted. It brought back memories of days he had scavenged near the Creole neighborhoods in the city, before he had met the witch. She had lived here long ago. He thought of her at night sometimes, her skin like slate and her barbed French accent, and her hands running through his midnight fur.

Absent a willing Jinn, humans have no natural capacity for magic. Him and Vega had been the witch's proxies, eager to use their powers to support her. He had been addicted to it, the thrill of conquering humans and other Jinn, and testing the limitations of his power. There was no greater joy than being young and dangerous and skilled at magic in the old American city in the 19th century, when gangs of Jinn skirmished with one another in the alleyways and sewers with smoke and flame, when humans sought the black arts to enchant lovers, predict the future and wreak vengeance on enemies. Like all things, however, the good times had ended. The black cat's tragedy had struck and the Janissaries had come with their Covenant, demanding that all mystical beings respect human life.

Why do you wish this upon yourself, Kin of Witches? he remembered.

Zenith put aside the memories. He moved through the city instinctively, with a map programmed into his mind from the years of his youth. He wove through the narrow spaces of the city, crossing through the Greek Orthodox enclave before entering the French Quarter. Some things had changed, much had stayed the same. He finally found the old hotel, awash in the light of

streetlamps, the mahogany door of its entrance left ajar to allow the sounds of the city make their mark on the occupants. Two peculiar gargoyles, their grimaces eroded by tempest rain, loomed above the entranceway. The cat's ears twitched, and he moved silently away from the door, seeking out his target.

He found what he wanted near the side of the building, where sounds murmured from beneath a dark hole between bricks. The cat sank into this place, and wound his narrow frame through the building's foundation and followed the whispers till they transformed into jeering and yelling. He followed the sounds, and then entered a large chamber, the basement of the old hotel.

The room was filled with crowds. Cats and foxes, stray dogs, possums and raccoons, Zenith saw an armadillo out of the corner of his eyes. They screeched in a myriad animal dialects and languages. Some were Jinn beasts, some were simple nocturnal beasts curious about seeing such a strange spectacle in their habitat. In the center of it all was a black cauldron, where a single repulsive creature sat on its edge. The rat.

His fur was grey and black and his ears were wet. His tail was longer than most rats, and he was without teeth. Vega wheezed when he spoke, "Come one, come all! Seethe darkness, hear the mute hiss! Feel the void across your skin! See the power of the Jinn!"

Smoke bubbled from the cauldron, and there was a glint from sparks, like an electrical current. Some of the animals screeched in fear and pleasure at seeing the light.

There were few bloodlines of Jinn in the form of prey creatures. Most were predators, a vestige from ages ago perhaps to

avoid bloodshed among beasts of Smokeless Flame in the name of hunger. Yet some did exist. Vega was one such being.

“Who wants to taste the lightning?” the rat said, his reedy voice dripping with madness.

Vega had gone rabid years ago, but being a creature of Smokeless Flame, the disease had not killed him. He did not seem to mind the madness.

A stray dog panted and yelped, and sprinted toward the cauldron. Vega chuckled, and his face vanished in the cauldron. A stream of black liquid spilled over from the vessel’s edge, which the dog lapped up greedily.

Zenith watched curiously. After a moment, the dog yipped with pleasure. The black cat saw a thin thread of electric blue appear on the tip of his tale and travel to the top of his nose. The dog yipped in pain. A bolt of lightning suddenly appeared and fired into the cauldron. The basement was filled with an awful light, the dog collapsed, a twisted grin on its face. It lay on the floor motionless.

“This is the magic, my fellow beasts!” Vega sneered. “Few creatures posses it. Many Jinn know not how to wield it. The Janissaries have pretended its arts are theirs alone for generations. Magic belongs to all creatures.”

“You speak lies, vermin.”

Zenith approached. Creatures whispered in fear. The Kin of Witches was legendary in the city. Cats hissed, dogs whimpered in fear, a large reptile blinked once, and turned away, wanting no part of the matter any further. The rats jeered. The ranks of some

of the beasts began to thin as creatures departed into holes and dark corners.

“Kin of Witches! You have graced us with your presence!”

“Magic destroys those made from Clay,” Zenith sneered.

“Ahh, but I am not made from clay, old friend,” Vega laughed. “I can reach into the unseen, the upside down spaces, the dark worlds, like you can. Some of our other brethren, they want to taste the fire, as well.”

Zenith was tired of talking, and wanted to put an end to the rat now, but an uneasiness swam inside him. *What was the creature speaking of?* In the corner of his eyes, he saw dog who had drank from the cauldron twitch on the floor.

“You came alone,” Vega tittered. “I doubt your sorceresses can pull you from out of this space, so deep underground. “And that legendary wind of yours, that held the old witches aloft in the sky, cannot be summoned here.”

The red light behind Zenith’s eyes glowed brighter. He snarled. “Are these your last words, scum? I’ll play with you before I kill you.”

Vega looked momentarily terrified, his rodent instincts reacting to the cat’s threat. Then he tittered. “Do you miss our mistress? We have a new master, now. And he wants the Jinn to rule again.”

“So you have sworn allegiance to the Azazel and the Black Swan,” the black cat hissed. “Your end will not come easy, rat.”

The dog on the floor suddenly lurched, twisted, and rose, coming to its feet like a puppet. Zenith watched, transfixed on the sight, as a patch of white crawled across the dog’s brown fur, and

the hair drifted off its body. Its eyes became bloodshot. Foam dripped from its mouth.

“Ahh, my concoction,” Vega said. “For most of the lower beasts, it makes them feel good. For some it kills them. For a chosen few, well...”

The dog barked furiously at Zenith. The black cat observed the beast. Its muscles seemed to have grown to twice their girth, and the teeth of the dog seemed as sharp as shattered glass. Zenith hissed, and arched his back, ready for battle, when two pale shadows emerged. Thin naked felines, with milk-white skin, emerged from the shadows. They hissed and spat at the black cat.

The remaining crowds of animals watched the sight, mesmerized. Vega stood atop his cauldron, his tail whipping back and forth. “Jinn beasts, ghouls, skinwalkers, wraiths, marids, demons!” the rat screamed. “Azazel will give us the earth again! And to those chosen creatures made of Clay, those who are lucky can join us!”

“I will slay these monstrosities,” Zenith sneered.

“You will try, Kin of Witches. You will try.”

The white creatures pounced, and the black cat roared.