

~~Damien~~

He looked at the picture again, then put the phone away. Gulping, he pulled the phone out again, and looked at the picture. She was so beautiful, and fun, and joyful, and overwhelmingly sexual. The frizzy red hair, bouncy and big, her soft face and pale skin, her golden eyes, it was all gorgeous. Of course, she knew she had large breasts, and in classic Dolareido fashion, had no issue using them to get what she wanted; in this case, him. Lucky him.

He was damn glad she left her cozy little town, and came to Slut City. Apparently she was a city girl to the bone, despite where she grew up, and came to Dolareido to both feed her horror, but also indulge her more human desires. The internet had corrupted her. He was glad it did. He shouldn't have been, but he was.

He stared at how she cupped one of her breasts, grip gently milking, and how its heavier bottom half filled and overflowed her hand. The pink, large nipple, milky white skin, and—

“Mister Burksen?”

He snapped his head up, and Maria raised a brow as she met his gaze. He must have had a strange look on his face, with the way she showed confusion on hers.

“Uh, yes, Madam Turio?” Putting the phone away, he looked down at the table, the computer it held, and the books beside it. Old books, written by various people throughout history. They were in English, but old English was difficult to read, with dead words, a lack of words, strange symbols, and a host of nuance that he didn't get. But it was his job to try and digitize the old world into the new world.

Lucas would have balked at that. Recording the words of Sanctified Kindred on a computer? Madness. A true sin against the Lord himself. If they continued, the wrath of God would rain upon them, and the ten plagues of Egypt would destroy them. Locusts would scour the land, and people's skin would blister with boils.

The man's words had enraptured Damien, at the time. His impressive control of voice was moving, enthralling, and the man moved Damien to action in his name, and His name, like guiding a fish with a shiny, shimmering hook.

The memory was bitter, now.

“You look distracted.”

“Ah, I am sorry, Madam Turio. My personal life has thrown some twists my way.” Nodding, grimacing, he tried to focus on the task at hand. The Invictus lived in the new world more than the other covenants, at least in Dolareido. They digitized things, recorded them, as long as specific words weren’t used. ‘Kindred’ and ‘Masquerade’ were no-go words, or any obvious use of ‘vampire’ that would implicate their kind. Talk of paranormal content was to be adjusted, and works that could not be adjusted were to be marked for storage. The journal of a powerful Ventrue discussing how his long age had allowed him to chronicle the growth of a society, could be adjusted and digitized. The almost prophetic words of a vampire infected with Malkavia, that the vampire had been sane — or insane — enough to write down, were too dangerous and problematic to alter. Such words were invaluable though, and were to be stored, left as paper books only, and placed inside a vault.

“Personal life?” She smiled, and Damien froze. Maria never smiled. “Do tell.”

Do tell. She cut through the ‘personal life’ barrier with as much tact as a nuke, and now he was left helpless to deny her, unless he upset her. More so, he couldn’t lie, lest she eventually find out and punish him.

He hoped he hadn’t traded Lucas for Maria. The two were similar in a way, and of the faith. There was a definite possibility that both of them had similar dispositions, and Lucas’s hidden totalitarian motivations could exist within her as well. Lucas also considered the personal lives of his flock to be his business, as the Lancea et Sanctum and the Sanctified devoted every part of themselves to the faith. Was Maria pursuing more knowledge about him in pursuit of that, or was she simply being curious... forcefully?

In either regard, she was an elder, his boss, and was the building block he’d use to rebirth the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido. He had to appease her.

“I... seem to have entered a... relationship, I think, with Fiona.”

“Oh.” A hint of anger crossed her face, before vanishing. She was reading her tablet, and was delving into some old, forgotten words of languages few could read. Secret scriptures from the Lancea et Sanctum’s storage, stories of dead worlds, letters long beyond mosts ability to decipher. “Tell me more.”

“Are... are you sure?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Because probably the only man to ever love you is dead, and it no doubt weighed on you like no pain anyone could ever understand?

“We’re just younglings, going through... juvenile feelings. I didn’t think that’d interest you.”

“It does.”

“... very well.” Ok, how to talk about this. “Fiona is... a silly girl, and—”

“Woman, Damien. She’s a woman. She may be a young woman, but a woman nonetheless.”

“Woman. She seems to be attracted to... tormented types.” Far as Damien could tell, Eric was a bitter man, though for far different reasons.

Maria chuckled, and turned the page. “Ah yes, that sort. Many young women are. Such a motif has been known for many for centuries. Bram Stoker’s Dracula painted the vampire as a tormented soul, broken by his pain, and overwhelmed with passion for his obsession. Or Erik in the Phantom of the Opera. A man with drive, with grit and determination, moved to commit heinous acts in the name of his obsession.”

“And... women are attracted to this?”

“Women are attracted to powerful men, Damien. Many mistake this for simple things like money, or status, and while there is truth to that, it is also proxy to the personality trait that is so alluring. The ability to play an instrument is an example. Yes, there is attraction to the status that comes with someone being a musician. But, a man proving he has the grit and determination to master — or at least learn — a skill that most cannot, is alluring. A man in uniform garners similar reactions for similar reasons; not only is his life in order, but he has shown he can pursue something to completion, and bear fruit. A man who is not passive, but active, determined to acquire what he wants, and has the mental fortitude to push through barriers to acquire it, is beguiling to any woman.”

He stroked his chin as he looked at Maria. She didn’t lift her head, eyes still on her tablet, but he doubted she was reading it. Doubtless her mind was on her relationship with Lucas now, and that made every word he said now dangerous.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that. I just assumed women... uh...”

“Desire money, and drama?”

“Well, yes, that.”

The corpse woman chuckled, and scrolled to another page. “There is that, as well,” she said. His turn to chuckle. Maria, making a joke. This was progress in their strange relationship. “It is the combination of that grit in personality, and the darkness that comes with tormented characters, the drama, that is enthralling to young women like Fiona. In older women, they find the dark, tormented

characters juvenile. Erik compared to Raoul, in Phantom of the Opera, for example. The tormented soul versus the stable man? With maturity comes understanding that the drama of a dark, brooding man, is not healthy, and a relationship with such a soul is doomed to failure.”

He sighed at that, and sat up straight, looking at Maria with more obvious body language. “Then what hope is there for any Kindred?” Vampires, overwhelmingly so, were tormented to some degree or another, ripped in two by the struggle of their human side, and their new Beastly side.

“Touché.” That got her. She nodded, and set the tablet down on her table as she turned her chair to look at him. “But we have an advantage. We live for centuries, and while our minds may be trapped, unchanging, wisdom can still be learned. Perhaps a dark, tormented soul can also be stable and reliable? Julias is an example of such a man. He has grown considerably in the century I’ve known him, but still, he is a tormented man.”

“He seems a lot happier now that he has Beatrice. But, also weighed down with his new responsibilities.”

“And yet, he not only bears his burdens, but engages Miss Damor in both emotional and sexual gratification. He is a rare breed.”

Damien nodded. If there was a Kindred in Dolareido people could consider a success story, it was Julias Mire. The great Viktor Honors, replaced by his rising childe and prodigy Julias Mire, who had sired a childe fit to someday replace him, the star Jack Terry. And like Honors, Mire had a dark side, something that used to torment him from his past.

“What about Mister Terry?” His relationship with Antoinette didn’t fit Maria’s descriptions, as far as he could tell.

“I did not think of Mister Terry as a tormented soul, young as he is, with as boring a first life he had.”

If only she knew how untrue that was. The kid was plenty tormented, by Viktor’s ghost, by Angela’s face, by his kills, by his first life’s mistakes, by many things. Like sire like childe, Jack would go through pains similar to Julias, and his torment had only just begun, if it took Julias a century to overcome his pain.

Better to not tarnish the boy’s image for Maria, though. Damien smiled and nodded. “I meant, in regards to the dynamic between him and the Prince.” If Maria was willing to educate him on more aspects of romance and whatnot, he’d take her up on her offer. Zero personal experience was a terrifying problem to have; fear of the unknown was universal.

Not that the corpse woman was going to have an unbiased view on romance, women, men, or anything in that realm, but her wisdom was valuable nonetheless.

“The Prince is unique, but there are women who prefer their men to be less... rigid, in their pursuits. If the man is happy to let the woman drive, so to speak, and the woman has the desire to be the one driving, then there is no issue. Jack does not feel the need to press his desires on others, unlike most men, and Antoinette does not feel a need to try and minimize conflict, unlike most women. She is content to be the...” The elder set the tablet down, raised her hands, and air quoted. “The ‘man’ in the relationship.”

Damien choked, doing his best to suppress the laughter that struggled to free itself. Seeing the small corpse woman, her cracked pale skin, her ancient white dress, her long black hair that forever had some knots and twists to it, seeing her air quote was too much. And it earned a small smile from her in return.

“But,” she continued, “make no mistake. If Mister Terry did not possess a drive, a will, to pursue the things he considered important to him, he would hold no attraction to the Prince. Such weak, flaccid men, with no drive of their own, are nothing more than children, to be spoon fed and protected, not be drawn to sexually.”

That made sense, he supposed. While Jack and Antoinette’s relationship was a bit unique, and the elder vampire was the ‘man’ in that relationship, dare he use the word, Jack did not lack drive. He was simply comfortable, and perhaps happier, to let Antoinette be the dominant one. But, what did dominant entail? The term seemed antiquated, in a modern context. Perhaps it wasn’t though, and he, spending fifty years living under rocks, simply didn’t understand how the gender dynamics applied in the new world.

“I—” He jerked in place as Maria’s phone began to ring. Someone had to be daring to call Maria an hour before sunrise, when she had already retired to her chamber for the oncoming day.

She answered it, offering a quiet snarl as she did. “This better be important. It... I see. Are—oh. Then... yes, we must take care of this immediately. Send every thrall in the area to either the hospital, or to investigate the possible causes of the power loss. We do not have long.” She put down the phone, stood up, and turned to him. “Damien, a messenger crow has arrived at the Invictus headquarters. Eight minutes before that, a massive blackout struck South Side, and three city blocks are without power. The South Center Hospital is within the center.”

“The hunters are attacking the hospital.”

“Yes, in all likelihood. The crow was sent by Mister Terry. We have attempted to contact our thralls in the area, but none of them are responding. And since Mister Terry has not called us himself, I can only assume the hunters have somehow blocked cell reception, and other digital communication methods as well.”

Oh no. Oh shit. After what the hunters accomplished in the tunnels tonight, he could only assume they’d managed to use similar methods to disrupt power and communications on such a large scale. He’d told Maria about the barriers the hunters had used already, but none of that information had been circulated yet, having only told her half an hour ago. There was only an hour until sunrise, and they hadn’t expected anything to happen in the single hour he’d been at the Cathedral. Mistake.

“What do Mister MacDonald and Mister Mire say?”

“MacDonald is currently in North Side, punishing some Uratha and Kindred for being uppity. Mire is with Terry, at the hospital, most likely.”

“That... is a problem.” The night had gone from bad to worse in a very small amount of time. The high of his time with Fiona, the thrill of her body, the joy in the picture she’d sent him, all gone in a flash as he realized hunters were attacking the hospital, likely in a bid to either kill Jack’s mother, or capture the boy who sat with her. If they went during the night, now, it had to be because of Jack’s presence, and Mire being there made it all the more problematic. If one of the Invictus council was captured, the fallout would be catastrophic.

“I am calling MacDonald now, and we will see what can be done, but with so short a time before sunrise, I am hesitant to send Kindred.” Maria stood up and began pacing, phone to her ear. “But...” Her eyes fell for a second before looking to him.

Damien nodded, got up, tested his busted, wrapped ankle, tested his aching hand, and found them functional. He grabbed his sword, one of the pistols Maria kept in her personal chamber, and started for the gate.

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~~Julias~~

The dark hall awaited them. The patient's rooms leaked light from under their doors and small, vertical windows, but most of them provided only the small light of the low-light mode, or the small amount of light from the machinery within. It meant the hallway was pretty damn dark from end to end and around the turn. The switches he flicked where the hallway looped and connected to, the main room where elevator opened up to and where the staff rooms were, had turned all the hallway's lights off in the East Wing. Perfect for vampires.

Lights in the distance flickered, moving with the telltale snap speed of flashlights. There they were. Julius moved forward slowly, staying half crouched, gun down and held in both hands. The moment one of the hunters poked their head out, he'd shoot. No, wait, it might not be a hunter. He had to at least put half a second into identifying the target first. If they had a gun, that put the chances it was one of the hunters up to ninety-nine percent. If they didn't have a gun, who the fuck were they and what were they doing in the East Wing? Maybe a nurse or orderly hadn't heard about the raid, found an emergency flashlight after the lights in the hallway went out, and were walking around inspecting the patients.

He kept his shoulder to the wall, and whenever he came to a door, he used the indent it provided to create some cover. Maybe three inches deep into the wall wasn't exactly enough cover for a gunfight, but it was something. And if it did turn into a gunfight, he could open the door and step into the room. With a patient room opposite of him, Jack did the same thing, and small as he was, he could fit a lot better into the three inch groove. But would the kid know to not shoot until they at least confirmed it was the hunters? It might have been Miss Jez Tummer, the thrall orderly.

They moved quickly. Into a doorway slot, then the next one, then the next one, always prepared to swing it open if they needed to dive in. Samantha was at the end of the hall, and based on how the flashlight was moving, the hunters were coming toward it, having entered the U-shaped hallway from the other entrance. They would run into each other, face to face eventually, and when that happened the bullets were going to fly.

"How long?" a voice said, a woman. A glance Jack's way showed the boy tense horribly, and his gun hand trembled for a few seconds before it steeled itself. Angela's voice, then.

"Two minutes," another said.

"You have one."

"Why ask if you already know the limit. The fuck is this, Star Trek?" The man's voice sparked some rage from Jack as well, but nothing nearly as visceral. It wasn't Jeremiah, then.

“Just get to it. They’re coming.”

“We don’t know who’s coming. Could just be—”

“Someone turned off the lights. Who the fuck else would do that except for them? They’re coming.”

Sounded like Angela knew Jack and Julias were in the building, then. They must have decided to raid the hospital at night, knowing that, and because of that. Cocky mother fuckers.

“Think the woman will get through the portal alive?”

“Machine’s working her lungs. We can do that ourselves with a manual ventilator.”

“Ever rip a ventilator out of a person before?”

“No. Worst case scenario, she dies, and we continue with the original plan. Now shut up and get this done.” The click of someone checking the slide on their pistol echoed through the quiet hall. Angela was just around the corner, and from the sounds of it, she’d already found Samantha. Shit.

He had to act, and act quickly. Jack no doubt heard the woman’s words, and if Julias guessed right, the kid was going to respond in the next five seconds. The hunters were doing something, something involving a portal and Jack’s mother. That wasn’t enough information to act on, but they had to act anyway.

So, Julias nodded to Jack, and the boy nodded in return. Now or never.

Jack slid up to the end of hall, back to the wall, and he didn’t poke his head out or expose himself. He waited, and Julias moved forward along with him, still on the outside wall of the hall. If Jack stuck his head out first, Julias would be in a weird position where he’d have to use the inside wall, the corner Jack was using, for cover, while he was still on the outside wall. It’d be better to use the door at the end of the hall, where the hall turned on the end of the U shape.

He nodded to Jack, pointed to himself, the door at the end, and waited for kid’s return nod. Jack confirmed, and readied himself, gun up, waiting, and Julias readied a dash. He was going to be both a distraction, and the following fire when the hunters left themselves open to Jack’s attack.

What a fun way to spend a night with his childe, murdering people.

Time came to a near standstill, everything slowing down, as Kindred reflexes kicked into overdrive. Human adrenaline had nothing on the power of vitae, and while Julias was no Mekhet or Daeva, he could use Celerity enough to manage some speed and inhuman reflexes. He drove his weight forward, and came down on the side of his leg and hip, a sliding kick aimed for the door. Facing the



hunters, he scanned the group of them as best he could in the fraction of a second it took him to reach the door, foot smashing into it, momentum driving his torso back upward, and hand slamming the handle down and open so the door swung open with the momentum.

Six hunters, in the hallway, and the door to Samantha's room was open. One of them had an assault rifle, one of them had a shotgun, the rest had pistols, and while one of them was down on their knees by the floor, Angela stood over him, pistol in right hand, and her fake eye glinting with reflections of the flashlights.

The thrall Jez was on her knees, hair held by Angela's free hand, and she looked battered, beaten. One of her arms was broken, and she looked almost unconscious, dazed and listing. Fucking assholes.

The hunters managed to look his way as he slammed open the door, only for Jack to poke his head around the corner, crouched, and begin to unload his weapon. If there was ever any hope for this to not escalate, Jack crushed it. But the kid saw the opening, six hunters standing around, and Julias had already told Jack they were going to kill them. It was how he expected this to go, but, seeing his child not hesitate, not flinch, not even say a word, just unload bullets at the humans, with every intent of killing them then and there, was a painful thing to see.

The bullets crashed into the air with a loud crunch, and fell to the floor. Jack reloaded his next magazine and sank every bullet he could at the standing hunters, taking less than a second to reload, and only two more to empty the gun once again. And again, each bullet slammed into the air in front of the kneeling hunter. The hunter's eyes were wide, blatant shock painted there, and he breathed deep a sigh of relief as he put away a small, black bag.

A trail of black soot ran across the floor from wall to wall, a line that separated the two Kindred and the seven humans. The bullets fell on that line, beside it, on the side closer to the vampires.

"Holy shit," the man said, standing up. A small man, for a hunter, with a shag of red hair, and a scar across his cheek. "A second sooner and we'd be splattered."

Laughing, Angela came over to the black line, dragging the thrall behind her. Jez didn't struggle, and if she wasn't unconscious before, she was drifting into it now.

"Jack," she said, "how nice to see you again."

Growling, Jack kept his back to the corner, and stuck his head out for longer than was safe. The hunters didn't take the opportunity to shoot at him; the barrier was likely blocking them as well. Julias stuck his head out from the room he hid within, and stood up as he realized his hunch was correct. But

he wasn't willing to bet his life on it yet, and he kept most of his body inside the room he'd opened. The room was empty thankfully, sparing him having to worry about a patient, unconscious or otherwise.

"Angela," Jack said, the venom in his voice palpable.

"And you are Julias Mire, childe of Viktor Honors the murderer." And, like Jack, the venom in her voice could fill a swimming pool. "I've met a few hunters that have tried to take a shot at him, you know."

Ah yes, the history of his sire coming to light, bringing all the pain expected with it. Wonderful.

"Considering the things I've heard, you're the monster in the room, Angela." He nodded past her, toward the woman she was dragging.

"I'm not going to waste my sympathy on a thrall, vampire."

Why? The Vinculum wasn't permanent, and neither was vitae addiction. If they threw a thrall into a cell for a few months, or a year at most, both could likely be broken. He almost told her that, but giving the hunters new tools they could use to kill Kindred was not a good idea, even if it could possibly endear them to the hunters a bit more.

"You killed my sister," Jack said through clenched teeth.

"What? I didn't touch your sister, or your mother." She nodded toward the door. "I heard about it on the news, same as you did, I imagine. I'm taking advantage of an opportunity someone else created."

Julias ground his teeth, as did Jack. She was lying. He'd been playing poker for too many decades to not recognize a bluff, a confident one, but a bluff nonetheless.

Did she know they wouldn't believe her? Probably, which meant she wasn't lying for them, she was lying for her troupe, to keep them in the dark about her activities. A possible opportunity, a way to show these hunters their leader wasn't the beacon of trust they probably thought of her as, if they were willing to go to war, and fight for her.

Take advantage of it later, handle the immediate situation now. There was black soot on the floor, and it was probably erecting some sort of magical barrier, invisible but hard as stone. If any sweeper team ran into something like this, he didn't get to hear about it, having left to go find Jack before the reports were circulated. And knowing his luck, or rather, Jack's luck as of late, that probably did happen.

"Assuming," Julias said, "that you didn't kill Mary or hurt Samantha"—an evil glare from Jack forced a pause from him—"what are you doing here, and with Samantha?"

“I thought that would be obvious. We’re taking her, and either she’ll tell us a way to force Jack to tell us what we want to know, oooooorrrr...” She laughed, and reached out to press her gun hand against the invisible barrier. A lot of trust for an invisible wall. “Jack comes with us now, and tells us what we want to know about Azamel.”

“All this for a Begotten,” Julias said, sighing as he stuck his head out a little more. At this point it was pretty clear that the invisible barrier wasn’t going to burst any time soon. “Azamel hasn’t hurt a soul since she’s been here.”

“She’s brought villages, towns, and cities to ruin, vampire. She’ll do it to this one, too, given time. Millions of innocent people here, and they’ll die because you continue to house a monster.”

This time, she wasn’t lying. Julias blinked, and managed a quick glance at Jack to see what his reaction was, but the boy was too busy oozing rage from every pore to notice Julias anymore.

“Has my mom told you yet?” Angela said, grinning at Jack like a hungry hyena. “She tell you what her boss did to mine?”

“... Azamel told me.”

“From the mouth of the bitch herself. That’s just the tip of the iceberg, fuckwit. She’s ruined many lives, destroyed so many homes. And I bet you’ve seen her, the real her, the fucking monstrosity she is. You have the god damn nerve to defend her? A fucking twisted, evil re-imagining of a god? You’re all monsters.”

“Angela,” the hunter with the red hair said, “it’s time.”

“Finally. Let’s get this over with.” Angela put her pistol into the holster on her hip, pulled out a knife, and with all the grace of a butcher, slit Jez’s throat.

Julias stood up straight, stepped out of the patient room, and walked up to the barrier. Pistol in hand, he reached out with his other, and pressed fingers against the odd surface. He glared at Angela, met her one good eye with his, and then looked down at the corpse of Jez lying on the cold surface floor of the hospital hall. Angela had cut deep, two inches into the poor woman’s throat. In her dazed state, Jez probably hadn’t even felt it, just faded away in five seconds as all the blood of her body poured out of her.

The other hunters winced. Angela didn’t. She put the knife in her other hand, and redrew her pistol into her right. She didn’t back away from Julias; if anything, she came in closer, and glared up at him.

“We’re going to kill all of you if we have to,” she said. “Or, help us kill Azamel, and you vamps get to live. Viktor’s dead, so Tony’s, so the worst of your kind are off the list. We didn’t come here for vamps from Slut City, we came here to kill a true horror, a monster you can’t possibly understand. We can compromise. Tell us what we want to know about Azamel, help us kill her, and we’ll move on.”

A lie. She smiled when she lied. Subtle, a fidget of the corner of her mouth where she tried to suppress the desire to smile, but it was there. People often had issues suppressing those muscles when they bluffed, especially if they got a thrill out of it. This psychopath of a woman was that sort. She got off on lying, and on being a menace. One look in her eyes, glass one included, was enough to tell him plenty about her, about how she felt about vampires, and how she would get off on seeing them all burn.

She wasn’t a hunter. Hunters often married their job, and many even took it into the pleasure realm, enjoying killing monsters, but there was something else in this woman’s eyes, something insane, something inhuman.

“You killed her.” He nodded down at Jez’s body.

“I did. A thrall’s a thrall, another of your devoted servants. And we need blood.” She nodded toward the redhead. “Get to it, Bill.”

Bill sighed, nodded, and pulled out a small paintbrush. Squatting down by the wall opposite of Samantha’s open door, he dabbed the paintbrush into the blood around his feet, and started painting on the wall.

“Angela, you should get away from them,” Bill said, as he began to paint a circle on the wall. “Ventrue, right? You—”

“I’ll be fine, Bill.” The woman glared at Julias, stared him straight in the eyes, and licked her lips, the hunger for violence blatant on her face. “No Ventrue is dominating my mind. No Daeva or Nos or whateverthefuck who tries is going to get anywhere. Not me.” Like a striking snake, she brought up her blade and stabbed it at his face. His eyes went wide, and every reflex he had demanded he move out of the way. He almost did, before the blade crashed against the barrier, tip slamming into it as if she’d just stabbed rock. “Made you flinch.”

“... my childe is right. You are a deranged, sad woman, with a mountain of woes.” And she was right, that he couldn’t dominate her, not with a simple glance at least. Something in her was blocking him, a wall between him and her, and it wasn’t the physical barrier.

He looked to the other kine, but they were smart enough to avoid eye contact with him. If they saw his eyes, the path was open to him, the eyes a window to the soul. He didn't need to be able to see their eyes, as the Beast reached out from his own; as long as they could see his eyes, he could find their minds, and break them. They kept their eyes away, trusting in the barrier to keep them alive, so they didn't have to keep their attention on him. A lot of faith in a bit of black dust.

“I am what my mother made me.”

“Way my childe tells it, your mother left you in an orphanage.”

“Not before she let a little of her monster side feed on me.” She dragged the knife through the air, grinding it against the barrier, and snarled at him like an angry tiger. “You know what that's like? To have your own blood use you for food?”

Julias looked to Jack, without hiding the glance. Let them see he was curious about this, it invited more conversation. The more they talked, the more time he had to figure out a way through this barrier. But the boy looked confused. The details of Angela and Athalia's relationship when they were still a family was not known to him.

“You knew my sire, or stories of him at least,” Julias said. “Viktor was a violent, deranged man, toward the end.”

“Heh, Viktor ever torture you?”

“Nothing so direct. Has Athalia ever tortured you?”

“Not directly. But, she's a twisted creature, as any Begotten is. She feeds on destruction and ruin, and the fear that comes with it. One time, when she was so hungry she couldn't control herself, she destroyed my doll house. Cried afterwards, both of us. Pretty stupid, sad little story, right?”

That painted a full image. A young girl, impressionable, still open to ideas like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, exposed to the horrific nature of her young, unstable, monster parent. Begotten had insatiable hungers, and he could only imagine the trauma it'd cause someone so young. She'd never be able to sleep comfortably, never able to feel at home, never able to feel truly loved, if her mother was a monster forever fighting her hungers.

“It is a sad tale, Angela, and I sympathize, I truly do.”

“What? Fuck you, vampire, you don't—”

“But it's nothing I haven't heard. I'm sure most hunters have suffered equally horribly pasts, and so too have us paranormals. The Uratha, the Kindred, and the Begotten, go through worse, and many of

them are not only less violent than a psychopath like you, but many strive to save as many lives as they can. You don't get to use your mother's treatment of you as an excuse for your actions."

She sneered, and looked over her shoulder to Bill. The man's painting was complex, but it was clear that it was some sort of occult circle he was drawing on the wall. If it had to be done in blood, then it couldn't be good; reason enough to stop them, let alone saving Samantha, and taking the opportunity to stop the hunters permanently.

"Your childe killed several hunters. Your wolf friends killed several hunters as well, or nearly; Elen managed to save them."

He raised a brow. She was willing to talk about Elen. Maybe some information could be gathered? Jack said she had a habit of talking, and hadn't learned the important skill of saying less than she knew. Children had that habit.

The more he looked this twisted woman in the eye, the more it was becoming clear she was exactly that, a child. Athalia had abandoned her, with good cause, and the whole situation had created this revolting example of a human. The guilt Athalia must have felt, every day, especially now that Angela had killed Jack's sister, was immense. It explained her anger, classic redirection.

And Jack probably knew it, too, though he probably wasn't admitting it to himself. Easier for him to think of Athalia as a burden, and Angela as nothing more than an enemy at the moment. He couldn't blame him. Killing her would have been easier if he didn't know this much about her. No one minded killing a faceless enemy. It was always harder to kill a person, someone with a family, with a past, with a voice of their own.

"Elen can resurrect people?"

"Elen can do some pretty amazing things. But I'm not going to tell you." She shrugged, not realizing she just told him that no, she couldn't resurrect people, but she could do some magical stuff otherwise. The woman would be a horrible poker player. "I look forward to what she tells me about Jack, when she starts digging through Samantha's brain."

He snarled, while Jack outright growled, and the boy approached the barrier. His eyes were wide, and glaring, animal fury blatant and overwhelming his gaze. His free hand reached out to press on the barrier, with his gun hand clenched at his side, still pointed at the hunters.

"You're not touching my mother."

"Sorry, kid. You got information we need. Come with us, and we'll spare your mother. But you're not going to do that, are you? Too selfish to—"

Jack slammed his hand against the barrier, hard, hard enough to make his arm bounce off it, and for his body to push back five feet across the floor, shoes literally sliding with him. If he'd punched a person, he'd have broken their bones. The crack of the impact was enough to make the hunters jerk, and for Angela to flinch; Julias suppressed the urge to make the obvious retort.

“You can lie to your hunters, about what you're doing, and why. But I know what you're doing, you fucking, disgusting bitch.” He walked back up to the barrier again, and again pressed his free hand against it, fingers spread at eye level. His voice dropped, a whisper, only he, Julias, and Angela could hear. “If you touch my mother, I'm going to rip off your fingers, one at a time, and your toes, and let you bleed out as I slowly cut your stomach open with a thousand small cuts.”

Angela glared at the kid, and Jack returned it. There was more here than simple hate, there was something greater. Something inhuman was in them, both of them, aching to dance in the blood of the other. Julias held his gaze on his child for a little longer than he needed to, but it was hard to look away from Jack, once the honest introvert, with a smart mind and analytical nature, being filled with so much bloodlust.

That said, seeing this vile woman standing there, lying to them, lying to her hunters, cutting open Jez's throat like she was a sheep, and ready to sacrifice Samantha to Elen for whatever strange ritual she had planned, was infuriating. He couldn't deny the rage was building inside him as well, and he glared at the woman, keeping his vision on her real eye, as he let the anger boil over. This woman had ruined his child, poisoned him, driven him to insane depths of hate and wrath, and was going out of her way to ruin his life. What could she possibly get from Samantha's mind that would be of use to her, except leverage over Jack?

Everything about this screamed vendetta. She wanted to hurt Jack. Using him to get information about Azamel seemed ridiculous at this point, with all the other targets she could be going after. With the resources she was spending on this hospital attack, and the lives she was risking, this had clearly become a sunken cost, and there was no way she was unaware of that. Were the others? Was Jeremiah? Something was off. The hunters didn't know what sort of woman Angela was.

“Almost done here,” Bill said.

“Good. Zak, get the woman.”

“Get her? I don't know how to remove a ventilator.”

“I know how, sort of,” Bill said. With a groan, he reached up, and finished the occult circle he was drawing. A star, an inverted pentagram, some symbols Julias didn’t recognize, all arranged in a specific pattern. “I’ll help Zak. Olivia, you can open the gate now.”

“Finally.” Another hunter walked up to the circle, and placed a hand against its center. Bill disappeared into Samantha’s room, and Zak went with him. Four hunters in the hall, one preoccupied with the circle, while Angela continued to stand at the barrier, glaring at Jack like she was trying to fillet his soul.

Julias had to stop this. Samantha was going to die, either by what was bound to be a haphazard removal of her ventilator and insertion of a manual, portable one, or by what was going to come next. Jessy’s report had described what Elen was going to do to Eric, cut into him, and learn things from him whether he wanted to tell her or not. She had some way of getting information with her magic, and could probably do more things besides, considering what Angela said. Either way, he had to stop her, for Jack’s sake.

He set his free hand on the barrier, open fingers like Jack, and stared into Angela’s eye.

“What’re you gonna do, Mister Mire? You can’t cross this barrier, and you can’t break my mind. Throw your weapons away, lie down on your stomachs, put your hands behind your head, and we’ll take Jack, instead of her. Otherwise, Samantha comes with us, and we’ll get some tasty info about Jack from her.” Lies on top of lies. She’d take Jack alright, after she executed Julias.

“Fuck you,” Jack said. “You’re just doing this to hurt me.”

“I’m doing this to force your hand. Surrender, and we don’t harm her.”

“She’s innocent.”

“Yes, she is. But she’s half dead, unlikely to recover, and I won’t let that life go to waste. You—” Her voice stopped, and her body went rigid, before her arms started to go limp at her sides. Gulping, she stared at Julias, and her head tilted slightly to one side.

Julias grinned.

“Boss?” one of the hunters said. The hunter had to be careful to not look at Julias, or he’d catch the hunter’s mind and break it in seconds. They couldn’t see what was happening then, not clearly, not with their eyes facing in other directions, as Julias and Jack did nothing but stand there, not drawing any attention to themselves.



Angela did nothing either. She stood there, eyes wide, stuck on Julius's, and he managed a small smile as he reached out with everything he had, every ounce of vitae, every bit of blood, every bit of will he could muster. He slammed his mind into hers, and made her tremble. He slammed it into her again, hard enough to make her head sway back slightly. He crashed against it, against this strange barrier in her mind, the wall of hate and anger and inhuman determination.

For a moment, he remembered the heroes in ancient tales. Many heroes from mythology were psychopaths, capable of great feats, while obsessed with themselves or their goals. How many of them were twisted, convinced of their immortality, or gladly committed war crimes in pursuit of glory? Legends upon legends of the greatest the human race had to offer, and many of those stories described what could only be called a lunatic, someone driven in ways no sane mind could understand.

That's what it felt like, crashing his will against this woman. This maniac was barely human, but she was human still. That meant, for all her boasting, all her will, all her determination, she was limited by what she was. He took that part of her, the human part, and squeezed on it, found the foundation of the wall she'd built, and hammered his will on it. It was like trying to break through rock with his teeth, but he did it again, and again, until he felt his insides begin to vibrate.

"Break... upon... me," he said through clenched teeth. No one could hear him except him, and the woman trapped in his mental grip. His voice echoed in her mind like a cannon; he could hear her thoughts, except that they were buried underneath the thunderous echo of his own, crashing upon her will. She would break, he gave her no choice. The howling winds and roaring explosions of his resolve, his thoughts, his words, slammed into the pillars of her psyche again, and again, and soon her trembling shakes were in sync with his hammering Domination.

And he broke down her gates with all the subtlety of a battering ram. This was how Viktor broke minds, and how the man had originally taught him to. Human minds were ants to be crushed, nothing more, according to his sire. They had no Beast, nothing in them that protected them from the overwhelming, alien power of the monster inside Kindred, or Uratha, or Begotten, or whatever else crept around in the dark. Humans had nothing like that. And this Angela, despite her strange mental state, despite the oddity of her, her personality, her everything, was human.

He crushed her, and grabbed her mind.

"Break the line."

"Yes..." With a slow nod, Angela set her foot against the black line of soot, and nudged it open.

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~~Antoinette~~

“Flesh magic?” she said.

“Y-Yeah. I... I can’t think of any other w-w-way to p-put it. It was flesh. The walls, the floor, the... the b-b-bones, it was all flesh, and other... things you find inside a person.”

Antoinette frowned and leaned back in her seat. Natasha was down with her in their primary experimentation room, chandelier above, empty summoning and resonance circle behind them. The details of her encounter could wait for tomorrow night, but tomorrow night was likely to be filled with talk of Samantha Terry. It was better to learn of this now, and she could ruminate upon the information while handling her new childe.

A small piece of her bubbled with excitement over the prospect of a new childe. How many years had it been since she tired Tony? She could not recall the date, but it must have been over two centuries. To have a new childe, a woman of maturity nonetheless, someone she could both teach, but also indulge in conversations her ghouls could not appreciate, was exciting indeed. And above all, it would make her love happy.

Tiny smiles sneaked their way onto her face mid conversation. She would consider siring Ashley and Julee in the future, but the two were still content to simply enjoy the freedom she gave them: immortality, sex, money, education, fashion, and anything their whimsical hearts desired. And she was content to enjoy their glee by proxy. With Samantha it would be different. Everything would be different.

She forced her mind back to the topic at hand, as unsavory as it was. “What you describe can only be the creation of magic.”

“M-M-Magic is... I’d... I w-wish there was a more scientific explanation.”

“As do I.” That was one of the goals of the Ordo Dracul, to discover, document, and understand the mysterious workings of the universe. To lump the unexplainable under the title ‘magic’ was doing a disservice to her order, and the universe at large. But, that did not change that some acts were so alien and obtuse, that they defied any explanation she had available, her or her order. A room made of flesh, a

living, breathing, pulsating room with ribs, and dangling chains with bodies hooked upon them, was magical, and abhorrent.

“For now,” she continued, “we will call it magic, flesh magic if you will, until we discover how the witch Elen is performing these acts. Is she communicating with an entity from another realm? Perhaps there is a wavelength of energy she has learned to sense that we have not, and she manipulates it. There are humans that can see colors that others cannot.”

“That... that um, d-doesn't sound... comparable.” Natasha squirmed in her seat, and fidgeted with one of the tablets Antoinette had provided, scrolling through texts relevant to the topic. There were not many, but there were some, talks of strange magics that revolved around the manipulation of living flesh. Living was the key to it, as far as the texts suggested. It was not magic that could be performed on the dead or undead, but only those with living, breathing bodies, and souls within; or bodies who had died within the past few minutes. If Elen was performing this magic, and that was indeed what seemed to be happening, that was her limitation.

The report the Invictus had shared with her said that, while Elen was going to perform her magic upon Eric, she was not going to do so to Jack; they had resorted to torture with her beloved. Eric was alive, while Jack was undead. A pattern, perhaps, proving that Elen was bound by that rule.

“No, I suppose it does not.” With a long sigh, Antoinette leaned back in her chair and looked up at the dangling chandelier. It produced a white light, but she could change its color to allow her tablets, and the complicated software and delicate lenses they used, to view the usually invisible substance ephemera. Such discoveries were a step toward understanding the madness others called magic, and that she too, was forced to call magic in the meantime. Frustrating.

She could still remember when Lucas had summoned a literal bolt of lightning, and struck her with it. But it had not burned her. It had suppressed her powers, locked her vitae to her insides, blocked her from using it to extend her will outside of her. It had nearly spelled her doom.

“What interests me more than this flesh chamber,” Antoinette said, “is what you have discovered about the Begotten. If Elen was indeed controlling him through something she was carving on his back, which Daniel's discoveries of her sacrifice rituals suggests is quite within the realm of possibilities, then that is an opportunity.”

“We could free him!” Tash sat upright a little straighter, a hint of resolve crossing her young face as she nodded.

“Oui, perhaps we could. That would be invaluable, and likely turn this strange war we have found ourselves in, deep in our favor.”

“That would b-be so great. And... and...”

“Mmm?”

“He was... very p-pretty.”

Antoinette laughed, and shook her head. “Little Vola, you already have two strapping men in your bed every night.”

“N-No! Not for me. Just, he was v-very pretty. I bet he’d... you know, f-fit in Dolareido.”

“Ah, he had that look, did he?”

“Well, he was shirtless!” She threw up her hands, as if that justified her apparent inability to not think of the man through a sexual lens. “He, umm, Aaron said-d that he looked and sound Romanian. He had blue eyes, and short b-black hair, buzzed, like Jack’s. Normal height, and... athletic.”

Ah, athletic. Perhaps it was her long friendship with Jessy Herrington that had sparked the girl’s interest in masculine physiques. Or Antoinette had simply underestimated the size of the small woman’s sex drive before she got to know her, underestimating her and her almost cliché — but terribly cute — desire to be small in the arms of her large, powerful, deadly lovers.

Except they were not lovers, not yet. Plenty of sex to be had, but as far as Natasha had mentioned, it had not entered the territory of love yet. Would it? Antoinette feared for her, as a woman being shared by two men was a difficult thing to manage, when love entered the equation. But if she could make it work, all the power to her.

“Perhaps he can be rescued. Perhaps not. If this shaman has managed to ensnare a Begotten, true monsters, beings of literal nightmares, understand that saving him may not be possible. And, sad as it is, if the circumstance arises, we must prioritize the lives of our Kindred over his.”

“B-But we’ll try, right?”

Smiling, Antoinette nodded again. “We will try.” The tactical advantage alone warranted the attempt, let alone freeing a fellow paranormal from the hunter psychopaths.

“Any idea ab-b-bout this?” Tash said, with a gesture to the small jar of blood on the counter.

Antoinette scooped it up. Tilting it from side to side revealed no abnormalities; it looked like normal human blood. Kindred blood was darker, thicker, and it acted with a will of its own, determined

to keep the host healthy and in one piece. This was not that. This was a jar of thick, red water that moved with gravity and the laws of liquids, nothing more.

“I presume, once this is analyzed, we will find the blood of many humans. I also presume it will also show signs of rot, now that it has been removed from its body.”

“That chamber w-was a... b-b-body?”

“Based on what you described, I can only assume it was some sort of body. It had skin and flesh of its own, and a sentience, displayed in the reaction of those faces on the wall. I can only surmise that Elen has either created or discovered this entity. I... would not be surprised, if this old woman has created it, through decades of effort, and the murder of others.” If murder was the correct word. Perhaps she had merged them, combined them, like some sort of alien entity found in a science fiction fantasy. “Based on the drawings Daniel has collected, and now our understanding of her powers, at least in relation to flesh, and what she tried to do to Eric, we must assume that she works powers in regards to flesh. She not only treats it as a mechanic treats a vehicle, but she treats it like she were a whisperer, someone who can speak to what others cannot.”

“B-Because she... she said... things about...”

“Assuming the reports of your friend Herrington, Eric, and Clara are decently accurate, then this Elen shaman has discovered something truly mysterious about the power of flesh. I wish to know more, as will Jacob.”

“W... Will you tell him stuff y-you learn, if we capture her first?”

“That is a good question, Miss Vola. Will I tell Jacob.” The question deserved pondering, and she sat there for a minute, looking down at the table as she tapped her finger upon it. “I imagine not, honestly. The man cannot be trusted.”

“B-B-But... he’s your old friend.” As much as she was arguing in the man’s favor, Vola’s face betrayed her views of him. She did not like the old Nosferatu.

“Jacob has not been a true friend in... I suppose that is not correct, or fair of me.” She tapped a finger against her chin, and smiled at Vola. “He aided me, in creating the wild goose chase that Tony and Viktor pursued, which led to their demise.”

Natasha’s jaw dropped as she pieced together the implications of that. Antoinette had arranged for Tony and Viktor to clash, and Jacob had joined her in that pursuit. Two elders had conspired to kill two other elders in the city, and had done so without ever giving up their identities. The Danse Macabre could be deadly, and she could play it like no other.

“You’re... a d-d-dangerous woman, Prince.”

“Oui, c’est vrai.” She nodded, acknowledging the fact. No harm in letting the small Mekhet offer her ego some gentle strokes. “I—” Her phone rang. Sighing, Antoinette picked it up. Daniel’s ring. He would not call without good reason, same as his childe. “Yes Daniel, what is it?”

“Ann, one of Jack’s crows showed up.”

“That is peculiar.”

“And there’s a massive blackout in the city. A few blocks are without power, and that includes South Center Hospital.”

Antoinette growled into the phone, and clenched on it. It took will to not shatter it to pieces. “Then we go.”

“There’s only an hour till sunrise, Annie.”

“That is more than enough time to dismember whoever is responsible.” She got up and started marching out the door. “I assume communications are down?”

Natasha hopped up, and looked around in a panic, grabbing her sword and pistol quickly before jogging to catch up to the Prince.

“Yes,” Daniel said.

“Then you will find and fix this issue, and slaughter any hunters you find. I will go to the hospital.”

“We should send some thralls to—”

“I am going, Daniel. I have been hands-off in this affair long enough. These vermin think they can exploit my love and his youth by attacking his mother. I am going to tear them apart, limb by limb.”

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~~Jack~~

Jack could feel his sire smashing his will against Angela’s, and it was awe inspiring. Dominate was normally a subtle skill, and not a Masquerade violation due to how impossible it was to see. Unless

a Mekhet was using Auspex to spy on the paranormal activity, Dominate was a hidden talent that seemed like nothing more than a man speaking convincing words.

This wasn't subtle. Jack could feel this. Jack could almost hear this. There was the thud thud of Angela's heartbeat, and in the dead silence, he was sure he could hear something crashing in rhythm with it. Julias's mind was slamming into her, battering against her, smashing through her mental gates, and from this close, Jack could feel the waves of the Kindred energy pour out of him. This was a side of Julias he'd never seen. Always his sire was about subtle decisions, spending energy where it was best served, never ridiculous expenditures. This was not that. This was like that time Viktor had summoned an army of rats, to allow the three of them to storm Tony's position, a surreal display of insanity.

"Break the line," his sire said.

Angela twitched, the eyelid over her glass eye fidgeting. Even now, as the century-old Kindred destroyed her defenses and grabbed her mind, she resisted. The will this woman could muster was nuts, something no human should have been able to do. Werewolves, vampires, monsters, and probably other things Jack had yet to see, they could stand up in a fight like this, be a part of it, instead of a simple sack of meat as kine always were. Angela had no right to be able to resist them like she was. But, despite whatever it was that blocked Jack, Julias broke through it, and Angela moved her foot just enough, to push a small gap into the black powder at her feet.

The barrier Jack had his hand against fell away. From this close, he had the warning about what was happening, and he let a smile sneak onto his lips, as his hand fell to his side. His pistol hand brought up the gun, pointed it at Angela's face, and fired. No hesitation this time, no mistakes. Execute her, be done with it, and dance in the river of her blood once his mom was safe.

Except, the bullet didn't land. Angela's body fell like a sack of rocks, hitting the ground hard as a blur of movement tackled her legs from behind, bullet cutting through her forehead but not penetrating. Julias, Angela, and one of the hunters rolled over each other in a mess of limbs and grunts. Jack was soon included in the mess, as the diving hunter half spun with their tackle, legs out to the side, and slamming into Jack's legs.

He wouldn't let this happen, not again. As he fell, he caught his weight onto open hand, the rest of his weight rolling onto his elbow and side. He pointed the gun at the mess of bodies, and started firing.

Some bullets hit Julias. He knew it'd happen, and he fired anyway. He saw where his sire's head was, though, and as long as he didn't turn the man's skull into splatter art, Julias would be fine. Other bullets slammed into the mess of limbs, most hitting the hunter that had tackled them, and hitting what Jack guessed was kevlar underneath his jacket. Damn it.

The whole situation lasted three seconds. By then, the other hunters had responded. Jack was forced to turn around, and roll to the side, putting the original wall corner he'd used as cover between him and the hunters. A good thing, because Bill and Zak both came out of his mother's room, guns blazing, unloading a flurry of bullets into the wall corner Jack was hiding behind. At least Olivia stayed at the circle Bill had painted. Her hand was pressed to its center, and there was a gentle, amber glow on her fingers. He'd love to shoot her and stop whatever it was she was doing, but bullets smashed into the wall corner, shredding it, and forcing Jack back into hiding.

The hunter on the other side of the hall, standing by his own line of black powder, ran their way, and started unloading his shotgun. This one came closer, and closer, unloading shell after shell at Jack, until he came around the corner to join him. Pure aggression. This hunter had balls, using the suppressing spray of his shotgun — sawed off, evidently — to pin Jack back until he had to retreat to one of the doors behind him. Jack threw the door open, and ducked in around the door frame, before poking his head out enough to start firing at the incoming asshole.

A quick glance past the shotgun wielder, showed Julias in the corner of the hall, wrestling with Angela. It didn't last long. Even a Ventrue was a lot stronger than a human physically, especially if they were ancilla, and especially if the human had been shot. The bastards were wearing bulletproof vests, but there was still blood, some of Jack's bullets having hit their limbs. Angela was bleeding from the head, but now also from the arm, and the hunter who tackled them was bleeding from the leg. Julias stood up, and despite the hole in his stomach and leg that Jack put there, the man held both kine by the throat, one for each hand; must have dropped his pistol in the mess. Their legs dangled, and Angela slammed her foot up to kick him in the crotch.

He was a Ventrue though. Only the Gangrel matched their Resilience, and Angela's reflex probably didn't take that account. Julias barely reacted, and glared at the two humans in his grip.

"You. Kill them." Julias nodded toward the man in his hand, and dropped him.

The kine collapsed, his leg almost gushing blood from the impact. But once he was down, he pulled out his pistol, and started firing. First, at the kine with the shotgun approaching Jack. In the chaos, the hunter put every bullet into the hunter's back; headshots would have been better, but he was probably aiming for center of mass, or resisting Julias's snappy mind control as best he could. It was enough to send the man with the shotgun onto his face, though. And that was enough for Jack to shoot the man in the skull when he landed.

There was a flash moment, a single instance of time, and it stood out with a white background, scarring Jack's eyes. The moment the bullet slammed into the man's skull, and the splatter of blood and



brain matter rained over the hospital floor around him, the world froze. It was for a moment, a single moment, but it was long enough for Jack to notice it, and long enough to hear the growling chuckle that came with it.

His growl. His chuckle. It didn't sound like him.

Julias still held Angela, and she was his shield between him and the three hunters still outside his mother's room. But, even as he held her, an animal snarl escaping him, he squeezed the woman's throat harder, eyes glancing between her and the other hunters. The hunter at his feet and under his control broke the momentary standoff, turning to face the other hunters, and he started firing. Jack couldn't see the other hunters from his new position, himself halfway in a patient's room and down the hall toward where he'd originally come from, but he could hear them. They must have been hiding in his mom's room, out of the dominated hunter's line of sight.

"Put her down!"

"No," Julias said, looking over the struggling, squirming woman's shoulder, as he squeezed on her neck. Yes, break it, crush it. Angela held his wrist with both her hands, her gun on the floor, and her arm bleeding more as she fought against him. His Dominate hadn't lasted long on her, but it didn't need to. Jack could see her neck begin to buckle, and he licked his lips as the woman's frantic struggles grew more panicked, her face turning red in the darkness.

And then everything started to glow amber. As if a portal to hell had suddenly opened up, the orange light filled the hall, and Jack had to raise an arm to cover his eyes for a moment. Julias stared ahead into the hall, and Jack stepped over the corpse of the hunter he'd executed to put his shoulder to the corner he'd been using as cover again. Bullet casings were everywhere, and the white of the wall had been torn apart by metal shrapnel, exposing the building steel underneath. The amber glow grew, and Jack stuck his head out, ready to pull it back to avoid getting shot.

The wall, opposite of his mother's room, the one the hunter had painted on, had opened.

Jack blinked, staring at where the hunter had drawn the blood circle. He'd recognized the circle from the ritual sites Daniel had showed him, but he didn't know their significance. Significance now explained. The circle was open, and an orange light flowed out of it, pouring over the hall, and the room his mother was in. And suddenly, everything smelled thick of blood, far more than it had. What the fuck was going on?

A man stepped out, someone of average height, dark hair buzzed short like Jack's, shirtless, wearing jeans and combat boots. He smelled of blood, too. For a second, Jack could see the man's

muscular back as he stepped out of the portal from Hell, and he squinted to see the strange circle drawn between his shoulder blades. It was a similar circle to the one that'd been painted on the wall, and it looked like it was carved into his flesh.

The man turned to face Julias and Jack, and raised the corner of his lip in a snarl. He leaned forward slightly, put a foot behind him, and readied a sprint. As he did, a subtle, black silhouette filled the air around him, and Jack felt every muscle in his body clench, as he recognized four giant arms, and four colossal wings.

Oh shit.

The beast charged forward, and as he did, his boots tore the floor apart. Jack had seen the werewolves do that, using their talons to anchor their weight, so they could propel themselves. This man was doing the same thing, except it was the strange silhouette of the colossal, four-armed gargoyle tearing the floor apart. And as he came in close to Julias, he threw his weight to the side, one of the wing silhouettes, a shadowy mist lit by the amber of the portal, flapped to force the Begotten toward a wall.

Julias tried to compensate, turn to face the monster, but Angela fought him, bringing up both her feet and driving them into his chest. Julias still didn't let go of her, but it threw off his balance, and he couldn't keep his hostage between him and the monster. With a quiet, cold ruthlessness, Sándor jumped, bounced a foot off the wall, got around Angela, and smashed his weight into Julias.

The hospital wall didn't appreciate it. It cracked, bits of white falling away like brick, and where the Begotten drove his hands into Julias's shoulders and into the wall, it was dented. Angela fell, and scampered to take away the gun of the hunter Julias had dominated. The two of them started to roll, trailing blood and firing the gun wildly.

Angela was strong, even with only one uninjured arm. While her gun, and Julias's gun had scattered around on the floor in the earlier mayhem, she managed to grab onto the wild, flailing gun hand of the dominated hunter, and she pointed it at Jack.

The sensation of metal tearing through his flesh was not a pleasant one. He thought he'd get used to it, with how often it was becoming a part of his life. But, as much as he thought maybe he could handle pain, the way a bullet tears through the flesh with such unbridled enthusiasm, was not a pain he could ever prepare himself for. One bullet hit his leg, another hit his guts, and another hit his chest. His body hit the wall, back planted to it, and two more bullets slammed into his ribs. When another hit his gun arm, crashing into the bone, he dropped the pistol, and his body fell back, back sliding down the

wall as his feet gave out. He tried to get up, but another bullet crashed into him, ripping up his legs, and putting that idea on hold with a silent wave of agony.

How? How did this happen? One moment, Jack and Julias were kicking ass, ready to put these six hunters in their place. Hell, one of them lay beside Jack, a big hole in his skull where Jack had executed him. There'd been a sick satisfaction in that, in the cold and brutally efficient act of putting a bullet in his head when he was down, taking advantage of the opportunity Julias's Dominated hunter had created. But now, Jack looked down at the many holes that peppered his body, made by bullets that had ripped through his muscle and bone, scattered some ashes to the hospital floor, and left him broken. Angela didn't stop firing at him, until the pistol clicked, empty.

Angela drove her elbow into the side of the Dominated man's skull, and the hunter went unconscious. With the Dominated hunter down, and Jack momentarily incapacitated, Angela got up, and joined Sándor, kicking at the man while the Begotten rammed his fists into Julias's sides.

“Zak! Bill! Get Raymond back through the gateway now! Elen might be able to do something for him.”

Two of the hunters ran around the corner Jack was sitting against, and grabbed the man Jack executed. Do something for him? Unless Elen could sew the bits of his brain back together, she shouldn't be able to do a thing for him. Could she?

He managed a glare up at the hunters as they ran past, but they were very, very good at avoiding his eyes. They'd learned from their mistakes in the past, and had training in this exact, specific niche of combat with vampires: avoiding looking them in the eyes. Just a glance, just a peek his way, and he'd reach out and break them, but of course he wasn't that lucky.

He tried to move his gun arm. Grab the pistol, grab it, grab the pistol. He growled as the pain tore through him, and vitae flowed over the bones, forcing them back into place. Move, move your hand, grab the pistol. You have to do something or you're dead. If you don't do something, don't fix this, you're dead, your sire's dead, and your mother's dead. Move!

He managed to look to his sire, but Julias was busy. Angela was in there with the Begotten, and the two of them were fighting him hand to hand. Angela didn't manage much with her bleeding arm and head, and upon second look, Jack could see his bullet had hit her in the bone of bicep; partly out of commission then, at least until it was fixed up, probably by Elen. But that didn't stop her from trying, kicking at Julias's side and forcing Jack's sire to block with his arm, while the Begotten pounded on him.

Sándor was strong. Sándor was ridiculously strong. Jack hadn't seen such a display of sheer, brute strength since the werewolves had fought against that spider monster in tunnels, or maybe when Antoinette had torn apart over a dozen Kindred with her bare hands. The stomach-turning crunch of bones breaking, the thud of flesh rippling under explosive impact, the way the body moved off the floor half an inch with each upward punch — or in this case, several inches — was nauseating. Jack stared as the smaller man, probably fifty pounds lighter than Julias, beat him into a pulp.

Julias took it, a small grin on his lips as he blocked as many punches as he could. He glanced Angela's way, and the woman froze.

“Kill the Begotten.”

Whatever wall she had in her mind to keep vampires from getting their fingers into her brain, it must have been damaged, because she turned on the shirtless man beside her instantly, and tackled him. Sándor fell over, caught off guard and a slave to physics; he wasn't as big a guy as Julias. And Julias sealed the deal by driving his fist down at the man's face when Angela caught his side, forcing him onto his knees. Angela pulled a knife out from behind her with her good hand, and threw herself onto the Begotten's back, stabbing wildly, sending blood everywhere. The Begotten only grunted as his blood painted the walls, and rolled underneath her, bringing her down with him.

As Sándor and Angela rolled around on the floor, Jack stared at the pistol beside him. Forcing down the bubbling scream that threatened to make his head explode as pain flooded him, he twisted over, and reached for it with his offhand. Get it, get the pistol, and shoot everyone, riddle them with holes. Time was running out, and if things kept going the way they were, either the hunters would kill him, or sunrise would.

Julias looked down the hall, where the circle had been drawn, where the amber light was bathing the area in the colors of a crimson sunrise, where Jack's mother's room was, and he froze. His eyes went wide for a moment, before the room erupted with an unending sea of thunder and metal. The flashing white of a thousand small explosions lit the hallway like the fourth of July, if someone had been unlucky enough to accidentally light all the fireworks at once, at their feet.

Jack did his best to ignore the hail of gunfire, half his focus on getting his gun arm working again, other half trying its best to twist itself so he could grab the pistol with his bad hand. He got his fingers on it, and pointed at the rolling Begotten and Angela, but the rain of gunfire rattled his brain, and he snapped his head to the side as a chunk of the wall corner he was sitting against exploded. His back was to the corner, wall blocking him from being caught in the gunfire, and with Angela and Sándor on the

floor, there was no reason that the few hunters still on their feet, and whoever came out of the hole in the wall, couldn't unleash hell at anything higher than three feet.

Julias, already with dents in his body and some twisted, mangled bends to one of his wrists, didn't try and dodge. He just stared at whatever Hell awaited him, and managed a small grin, as the bullets started to rip him apart.

Jack froze, and stared at his sire. Sándor threw his head down and covered his ears with his hands, and Angela, perhaps brought out of her enslavement by the Begotten's punch, or maybe the explosion of metal death, did the same. She broke her enslavement in seconds before, and had done so again. She was insane.

Julias was insane, too. As dozens of bullets ripped into him, Jack stared on, paralyzed, unable to look away as the small shards of metal opened him up. And yet, the man remained standing. Kindred blood filled the wounds, pulled withered skin and muscle over them, and hid the damage as best it could.

For a moment, Jack was reminded of when Viktor lost a chunk of his skull to a sniper bullet. It'd taken some of his brain with him, but the man had managed to regrow it in minutes; a staggering, impressive regenerative display he now only expected from transformed Uratha, but not Kindred, not even elders. And yet as the metal ripped into Julias, Jack found the same thing happening.

It was more than that. The bullets hit his skin, and many didn't penetrate. Some flattened against his hardening body, falling to the side. Others cut through his suit and skin, but were pushed aside by the writhing mass of dark Kindred blood within. Others went through him, slamming into the wall behind him, and the holes in his flesh filled in within seconds.

It was worse when some hit his face. The sight of teeth getting ripped from his mouth, a cheek tearing open, and a chunk of his upper skull getting exposed, made Jack's stomach turn. His sire's combed-back blonde hair was ripped into a mess of torn bits, with his scalp getting hammered with at least a dozen bullets, one penetrating his sire's skull, above the eye, and causing him to stagger. He didn't fall.

Jack managed to stick his head around the corner enough to see what was going on. The four other hunters in Angela's troupe were there, and so were four more. While the four that joined them had pistols, three of them were unloading their bullets at Julias, the fourth stood behind a wheelchair. Elen, the old sack of bones, ready to succumb to extreme age and frailty, watched the fireworks from a safe ways back. The other black line of powder was behind her, keeping her back safe while she watched the onslaught, six hunters unleashing Armageddon on Julias, one small piece at a time.

Jack ducked his head back in, and brought up his gun. Still not the good hand, and that arm was struggling to work as well, considering a fair amount of metal was now lodged inside him. But if Julias could stand there, and take a couple hundred bullets in five seconds, and not fall, the least Jack could do was shoot at the fucking bitch at his feet.

Angela managed to crawl Jack's way, and throw herself at him, tripping over herself as she did. It didn't need to be a graceful tackle. A stumbling mess of shoulders and limbs was more than enough to crash into Jack before he could get the pistol straight. He held onto the gun this time, squeezing the grip as hard as he could, and he struggled underneath the shoulder of the woman. Work, body, work, mend. Fix the bones, reattach the tendons, get the muscles to bare functioning minimum. Let him kill this woman before she ruined everything.

She turned so she was facing him, on top of him, and the sheer manic rage he found in her one good eye was almost enough to shock him. Being controlled by Julias, twice, must have triggered something in her. This was the Angela he saw when she was on him last time, in the street, when Eric and Beatrice had run them over. If both her arms worked, he wouldn't have been surprised if she'd tried to strangle him, pointless as it was.

But her arm didn't work, and neither did his. The best she could manage was hammer punches down on his face with her good hand, and a weak grab on his throat with her bad one. He blocked them with his forearm, before swinging the gun hand against the side of her head, sending her falling over. The two of them were out of the way of the gunfire, and with Julias pinned to the wall under a constant incoming rain of death, Jack was on his own.

At least, that's what he hoped for. In all the chaos, the darkness, the pyrotechnics of muzzle flashes and bullet ricochets, Jack rolled onto Angela, and started beating his gun down on her. Break her face in. Use the grip, smash her teeth in, break her nose, break her eye, smash her skull in until it's pulp. And when she's almost dead, when she's struggling to breathe, when she's gargling on her blood, Kiss her, and drink her until she's a withered corpse.

Each blow he rained down, she managed to block, same as he had her. The difference was, he was a vampire, and she was just a stupid human. He was stronger than her. Break her. Rip her in half. Ruin her. Tear—

Two hands found him, lifted him off the floor, and smashed him into the wall. His skull cracked against it, and for a brief moment, he knew Sándor had crawled out from under the gunfire, and got him when his guard was down. Stupid, stupid Jack.

Jack fell onto his back, dazed, hot misery exploding outward from his dented skull. His eyes barely worked, but he looked up at the bleeding, shirtless man, and met his gaze. The monster had blue eyes, and they looked a little sad. He'd seen similar eyes, in Angela actually, when he was about to shoot her in the beast's nightmare.

The silhouette of the monster gargoyle filled the hallway, and Sándor raised his boot. He was going to die, skull crushed under the boot of a man he turned his back to, a monster at that. And of all the ways to die, this seemed to be the most empty, most pointless, most unsatisfying of them all.

The gunfire stopped, and Sándor turned around. Julias walked his way, and Jack's jaw dropped as he stared at his sire.

The man was missing half his flesh. The suit had torn to shreds, exposing an arm, half of his torso, and his pants were no better off, one leg half exposed below the knee, the other half exposed above it. Some of his sire's bones were visible. Jack winced, staring, eyes locked onto how he could see a lot of the bone of one leg, and one arm. And as Julias took another step toward Sándor, Jack was reminded of a scene from Terminator, where his skin was being shot off, but it didn't stop the machine.

Blood coursed over Julias's body, thick Kindred blood, and it filled in the gaps where muscle was gone, and filled in for tendons and ligaments, keeping his kneecap where it should be, and allowing his wrist to work.

His sire held up his hand, pulled it back, and drove it into Sándor's face, enough heft and vitae behind it to send the man half spinning through the air before he landed.

“Get the fuck off my childe.”