

~~Jack~~

He started to get up.

“Stop!” one of the hunters said. “Stop, or we’ll keep shooting until you can’t get up.”

He continued to get up, a small grin on his lips. This was going to be fun. This was going to be so much damn fun.

“Shoot him,” Elen said, voice cold and hard. “Don’t kill him if you can help it.” Well, nice to know they still wanted him alive. It’d make this slaughterfest all the easier.

The bullets began. Just like with Julias, it was like staring into fireworks, all going off at once in the dark hallway, complete with the ear-splitting cracks.

The bullets crashed against his suit, tore through it, and slammed into his skin; but they didn’t penetrate. Hollow-point rounds were great at tearing flesh, but the Beast laughed as it hardened Jack’s body. Useless, weak, pathetic metal. The fools didn’t understand the only threat to him now, was fire, and they didn’t bring fire. Perhaps they feared damaging the hospital? Their loss.

As the bullets crashed into him, and fell to the hospital floor, he smiled more, exposing his teeth and fangs. Tilting his head, he glared at Angela, stared, and her eyes widened as she realized he was mobile. Somewhere in all the chaos, the barely conscious woman managed to find one of the dropped pistols. She brought up the gun, and fired it at him, but the telltale sound of click click announced the empty clip. Her jaw dropped. Wonderful. Perfect. Let her soak in her fear. Let her roast in it for that moment, before he ripped her asunder.

As the bullets continued to slam into him, his body began to regenerate. The metal lodged into him from earlier fell out of him, joining the mess of metal of other bullets falling to the floor. The flesh within mended. Bones reformed and sealed. Muscle sewed itself back together. Skin knitted over the holes. Easy.

The conversation he’d had with his Beast was a blurry, fading thing, like a dream. He vaguely recalled that he knew it’d be like that, that whatever he’d done, whatever had happened, he wouldn’t remember the details. He remembered her, though. He remembered the short brunette woman, sitting on her mountain of bodies. He remembered the smile on her lips, the sickle in her hand, the farmer’s hat on her head. He remembered the crows that sat on her shoulders and hat, and on the rooftops. He remembered the thousands of rats that scurried around her, between her feet and the feet of her stool,

and through the bodies they gnawed on. He remembered the Beast that existed within her, and its titanic, overwhelming size.

That was him now.

His smile faded for a moment, as once the gunfire settled, Jack looked down at the ashes of his sire. Julias. Dead. His sire was dead. He'd died with a smile on his face, but that didn't change that they'd murdered him, killed him, destroyed his life and silenced his voice.

How dare they. How. Fucking. Dare they.

He raised his eyes again, and found the hunters staring, jaws dropped, confusion and dismay carved into their faces; they hadn't expected a vampire to suddenly be immune to bullets. The fear on their faces, the sweet, delicious sight of their terror, almost made selling his soul worth it.

Jack raised a wrist to his mouth, bit into it, and tore a chunk of his flesh out. The hunters gasped and backed away; maybe they'd seen something like this before. He doubted it.

Two hunters approached quickly, grabbed Angela and Sándor, and dragged them into the darkness with the other hunters. Their companions reloaded their guns, and pointed them at Jack, but didn't fire. They would soon, once they realized what he was doing, but he knew, and they knew, it wouldn't help them.

Jack swung his arm down at the floor, and splattered it with Kindred blood. A drop of will imbued into the flowing crimson kept it from burning into ash, and would keep it around for several minutes. And as the vitae set into the hospital floor, near the ashes of his dead sire, Jack could feel the pulsing wave of its power, his power. God, so much power, sweet, delicious, intoxicating power.

These kine couldn't see it, smell it, or hear it. They couldn't feel it. Jack felt it, and any Kindred in the area would. Any Kindred within a mile would. Each pulse a wave, each a thundering explosion, silent, unfelt, but blatant to any paranormal, he was sure. Others would know. That was fine, let them know. Let them witness his resurrection.

Five seconds after he spilled his blood, and created his summoning beacon, he smiled as he felt the call reach his flock. The room Julias had first used as cover had its door open, and as the fluttering noise in the background grew louder, one of the hunters turned to look in its direction. The noise grew louder, and louder, more fluttering, the sound of movement of small things in such number, it became a white noise; far too loud for white noise. Louder, and louder, and from all directions.

The cawing began. At first, just one, but one was the trigger that announced the flood. As if a host of angels — real angels, the ones in the bible, the freaky ones with extra mouths and eyes — had

descended from the heavens to speak the word of God himself, a shrieking sound crashed against the hospital walls. The hunters jumped, spinning around and pointing their guns at patient rooms, and the two hallways, seeking the cause.

The banging began. Birds slammed into the windows, hard, hard enough to break beak and bone, hard enough to die. That was fine. His army would die for him; that's what armies were for, dying, in heaps and droves for their lord. Him.

The banging grew louder in only a few seconds, until it sounded like gunfire itself. Sturdy windows.

The hunter with the assault rifle moved forward, pointed at Jack, and started firing. Apparently this one had decided to spare their ammunition, likely having put some of it into Julias earlier, but not wasting any others until now. These bullets were not hollow-point. These bullets were meant to pierce. The only reason holes didn't punch through the hospital wall or floor, where the hunter had shot Julias, was because the hospital was built to survive a hurricane.

Jack smirked, and raised an arm, the injured limb already healed over from earlier wounds. The pieces of metal slammed into him, each hitting him with far more force than could ever be explained as anything but 'getting shot by a rifle'. The punch a proper assault rifle could give, combined with the pointed tip of the bullet, meant each bullet hit him with enough force to pierce through metal.

But they didn't pierce him. The vitae in him hardened his body, a mix of malleability and durability preventing the bullets from penetrating his skin. Metal slammed into him, and broke upon him, water against the shore. The hunter with the rifle stopped shooting, and Jack could see his jaw drop. Yes. Cower. Let the fear roll through you. Delicious.

Jack took a step forward, chuckling as he did. He felt good. He felt amazing. He felt hungry.

"You," Jack said to the man with the rifle. "Come here, and kneel."

Without hesitation, he came forward. Fool should have looked away before Jack could make eye contact, but fear had paralyzed him. His mind broke like tissue paper under water. One of the hunters reached out to stop him, but after a moment, she thought better of it. She turned around, grabbed Elen's chair, and started wheeling the woman away.

She didn't get far. The windows of the open patient rooms erupted, including Jack's mother's. An explosive force complete with an ear-splitting bang. Jack almost started to dance to the tune as more windows shattered under the impact of his servants. As the glass smashed inward, all the hunters turned

to face the two open doors behind them, except the hunter under Jack's Dominate. The man with the rifle continued forward, came up to Jack, and fell onto his knees.

As if to announce the man's imminent demise, the hallway flooded with darkness. Loud, squawking, flapping darkness. The hunters threw their hands up over their heads, and tried to protect themselves from the onslaught, but the crows were unending. More of them poured in through the windows, and soon, patient rooms began to open. Crows were smart, very smart, and the only thing that stopped them from opening door levers was their absurdly small mass. That wasn't a problem when there were hundreds of them working together.

"Stop their escape. Kill them all," he said to his flock, "except for the Begotten. Capture the Begotten." Traitors didn't deserve death. Traitors deserved an eternity in the ninth circle of hell, in the frozen grip of Lucifer himself, or his maw, depending. Jack would recreate that Hell for this Begotten, while he still breathed. Heh, poor Judas.

Hundreds of crows became thousands. The swirling mass of endless black poured over anything and everything, like locusts, blanketing the walls, the floor, the doors, everything in fluttering obsidian.

Jack laughed as he held his hands out, and two familiar crows joined him. "Scully. Mulder. Is help coming?" The screams of the hunters buried his voice, but his voice was ancillary. Animalism was how he communicated with these friends of his, and now, it was easier than ever. As easy as being.

They both cawed a couple times, and clicked several more.

"Good. Unnecessary, but good." They'd contacted the Invictus and the Ordo Dracul. Antoinette would send someone, probably Daniel, and the Invictus would send someone, probably his fellow Right Hands. What would they say? What would they do? Undoubtedly, there'd be some arguments over the Masquerade, and Jack would have to justify his actions.

No, he wouldn't have to justify. What could they do to him? Nothing. They could do nothing.

He smiled down at his meal, who knelt patiently, waiting for him. With the crows swirling around him, a wall of flesh and feathers, it meant he was protected from outside interference, and free to begin drinking.

And drink he did. He motioned for his prey to come closer, and the man stood up, crouching enough for Jack to be able to reach his neck. Once he did, Jack grabbed him, hands on his shoulders, and he squeezed hard enough to break bone. This worthless maggot didn't deserve a pleasurable Kiss. No, this was going to be agony.

The hunter screamed, and Jack laughed, as he sank his fangs into the man's neck. The murder of crows flowed around him, swarming, swirling, a tornado of beaks and claws that spread out and flowed through the hall. Kill the hunters, kill them all.

The swarm of crows communicated with him using their caws, explaining to him what was happening as they did his bidding. Two of the female hunters went down, swiping and slicing at the birds with their knives, but there were too many. Jack could hear them, but seeing them was difficult; only small flickers of their bodies were visible through the walls of crows. Their screams were a siren's song, and he groaned in joy as he drank down his meal. The birds were pecking their eyes out, ripping their scalps apart, and their clothes could do nothing to stop the hundreds of claws and beaks.

Blood was going to fill the hospital, overflow it, pour through the halls and down its elevators and stairs. Blood was going to drown the patients and staff. Blood was going to paint its walls, counters, doors, everything. Blood would cover the building, by the time he was done warming up.

As Jack refilled his stomach on the blood of the shrieking hunter in his grip, the old thrill of murder tingled along his bones. Fuck, how long had it been since he'd done this, just crushed someone as he drank them? Must have been over six hundred years. God damn it felt good. So good, he pushed his hands together harder, and smiled into the screaming man's neck, as the hunter's shoulders collapsed inward, collar bone breaking, then his ribcage. Like popping a grape.

Blood splashed over Jack's body, as the hunter in his hands broke. Strong as Jack was, he couldn't get his hands to push all the way through, but he was content to get them within a few inches of each other. Flesh, bone, all became mush between his squeezing grip, the hunter's clothes an inadequate shield to keep the blood off of Jack's hands; and it was the only thing that kept the hunter from splitting in literal half.

Grape popped, blood drained, the broken, dry husk of a man was now useless to him. Jack threw him aside, and licked his lips. Yes, god yes, it felt good. It felt so damn good.

Scully and Mulder cawed a few times, and Jack shrugged at them. "I am different." They clucked a few times more. Apparently, they weren't entirely sure what to think of him. "Don't worry. You're still my favorites." And they were, of course. That's how it was supposed to be. Two crows to be his eyes and ears, and he wouldn't throw those things away without just cause.

He stepped forward over the body, and toward the other two. Ah, two women. Screaming, crying, they died swinging, but it had done nothing. It was a pity he didn't get to see it, with the amount of his servants he'd summoned, but the aftermath was plenty appealing nonetheless. Bodies torn open, crows biting at their brains through their now empty eye sockets, and much of their skin exposed as his

servants pulled and tore it off. Stomachs torn open, intestines pulled out, organs pecked to bits in moments. If he'd had time, he'd have made some necklaces.

The liver was a nutrient powerhouse, and essential food. Had to have that. Brains, eyeballs, heart, kidney, all good, but the liver was the prime meal for his army. Of course, when dealing with thousands, nothing went to waste. He watched with a smile as his army ripped off their skin with their beaks, finishing the job they'd started while the hunters had still been alive moments before. While it'd been shame he didn't get to see it, see the terror in their eyes as crow beaks punctured them, hearing their screams over the swarm had been delightful.

The swarming mass cawed their frustration, and Jack listened, Animalism the bridge that turned their chaotic squawks into noises he could understand, could interpret into sights and sounds. Several of the hunters had escaped back through the hole in the wall, and they not only took the woman in the wheelchair, but also the damaged one with the glass eye. And, according to the crows, the hole had closed up, and vanished.

“Fuck!” He turned, and punched the wall, hard. Vitae pumped through him, and the Beast within flowed outward freely, pouring into the limb, and causing his fist to sink into the wall. The hospital wall was some sort of concrete painted white, and it cracked and crumbled around his fist. The fucking bitch escaped him again. Again!

After a few moments, his smile returned. No matter, he'd find them again eventually. However it was the hunters were traveling around, it was magical, and it was limited. If it required a sacrifice to paint such a circle and create the portal, that was a limitation he could use to track them. And for all its power to jump from location to location, it seemed like the hunters couldn't make the portal opening wherever they wanted. They had to manually go to a place first. Which meant the hunters were still somewhere in the city, coming out of a portal, and departing from such a location to head out, and paint more circles.

He blinked at the wall and his fist. The sight of the damaged wall stirred a strange dissonance in his mind. Jack could never punch concrete hard enough to nigh shatter it. Jack could, now, easily. Hell, he felt almost as strong as a proper elder Nos or Daeva now, in pure physical strength.

He squinted at the wall, and drew his hand back to admire the damage he'd done to his skin and bone. It was minor, and healed over quickly, far quicker than Jack normally could. Yes, he was different now, very different, and something about it tickled somewhere in his brain. The conversation he'd had with his Beast was such a blurry thing in his memory, and it was hard to pull out the specific words that'd been said.

It didn't matter. What mattered was revenge, saving his mom, and everything in between.

More caws in the vortex announced the capture of the Begotten. They'd stopped one of the hunters from dragging him through the portal, pecking and stabbing, until the hunter was forced to abandon the monster.

"Yes, finally. How many fucking times have these bastards sneaked away? Not this time." Capturing their enforcer wasn't as good as capturing Elen or Angela, or the MIA Jeremiah, but it was still a great step toward that goal. Now, time to collect the prize.

Jack stopped, and tilted his head to the side. In one of the patient rooms ahead of him, were two people, and the caws of his army announced both their arrival, and who they were. Antoinette, and Damien.

Jack held out his hands, and opened them, palms out. The crows went silent, and many of them flowed out the windows of the nearby half dozen patient rooms with open doors. Outside, he could feel their presence, feel their claws perch atop roof edges and power lines, feel their beady eyes scanning the darkness for any suspicious movement. A few caws from outdoors announced that the hospital exterior was clear.

Time to collect the prize, and talk to the Misses, then.

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~~Antoinette~~

Blackout. It was a true blackout. Such power outages were rare in her city, where electricity was the lifeblood of its pulsing heart, and for power to cease was enough to elicit panic from many.

Such panic was a problem. The fire department was out in full swing, driving the streets, looking for the problem as best they could; no doubt their equipment was hampered by whatever spell the hunters had cast, forcing them to do things manually. Hospitals had backup generators to keep their patients alive and maintained, but for many night organizations, no electricity was paralyzing, and it left customers out on the streets, flooding the large sidewalks, and bringing traffic to a standstill.

The South Center Hospital, on the other hand, looked deserted. It was stupid of her to approach the hospital directly from the front, but it was also the fastest method. Time was of the essence, and she

was not about to risk the Masquerade by jumping onto the building's side and charging in through a window. Admittedly, there were better routes she could have taken into the hospital, but she did not have the mind to plan that out. It had been a literal eight minutes since Jack's crow had arrived at her tower, and she had jumped rooftops to get to the hospital as quickly as she had.

Gunfire. She looked up at the building, and toward the East Wing. Too difficult to isolate the noise to the exact floor or room, but there was no doubt it was happening near Samantha Terry. There was no time. Go. Now.

She did not enter. She was about to, but a growing noise drew her eyes and ears, until she was forced to look upward. The stars were quite visible in the district, with all the lights out, and nothing protected Dolareido from the heavenly gaze of the stars above. It made her feel exposed. She had spent so long building this city, and with each decade that went by, the amount of light the city produced increased. For the roofs, the walls, and the windows, to be dark or only lit with gentle light, elicited a strange feeling, as if she were afraid of the dark.

No. This darkness, as alien as it was to her these days, was not what sent chills up her spine. The silence it brought with it did not upset her either. These were where Kindred were their most comfortable, between walls and shadows. And, as much as she originally thought so, it was not a fear for Jack that had her body trembling. She was not human, and she did not have adrenaline to trigger such a response. Vitae did surge through her, though, and it was in fear, but she did not know why.

Her mouth parted, and she stared up at the sky, as crows descended upon the hospital. Their wings hid the sky, and their growing noise became unimaginable. Not so loud as to damage her ears, but overwhelming nonetheless, heightened by the eerie silence of the district moments before. Cawing, the squawking bird noise that crows made, distinct, unique, wholly recognized as a sound of death and impending doom. It was all she could hear, as the sky became a moving tapestry of shadow and feathers.

It was as if a demonic entity had sliced open the sky, spilled its obsidian, endless blood over the stars, and from it, an army of black birds came to reap the souls of her city.

She was stunned. She tried to move, tried to tell herself to ignore the birds, and enter the hospital, but the sight was horrific and beautiful. The squawking birds numbered in the thousands, and the volume of their calls only grew as they came closer, and closer. As they began to lower themselves onto the hospital, Antoinette gasped, staring, as dozens of the birds matched speeds, and smashed their beaks into the windows.



Many of the birds died, and each that did hit the glass with such force, that even staring up from the parking lot, many feet away, it sounded like a gunshot to her ears. She flinched, something she rarely did anymore, as more birds destroyed themselves upon the glass, harder, sometimes in pairs, in trios, quartets, and quintets at the same time. They hit the glass hard enough, that the loud crack of their beaks against the windows echoed against the walls of nearby buildings.

It took them maybe twenty seconds, before the windows exploded inward, such was the force of their determination. As a hundred crows fell to their deaths, bodies of fragile bones smashed into pulp against their targets, the glass broke, and thousands of crows flew inward into the patient rooms. Oh no.

Footsteps behind her grabbed her attention; Kindred ears captured the sound as pure reflex, rather than conscious effort, so loud was the army of crows and their kamikaze mission. From the sound and the pace, it was a Kindred.

“Prince,” Damien said.

“Mister Burksen. I assume my love’s other pet found you?”

“Found the Invictus, yes. Madam Turio sent me.”

Antoinette frowned. This boy, a member of the Sanctified by Lucas’s choice, had become Jack’s friend. A frustrating position for Antoinette, who wished for nothing more than for the boy and his accursed religion to disappear. But, the man had proved his worth and reliability. If things continued as they were with Damien and Maria, Antoinette would have no choice but to eventually let them reopen the Lancea et Sanctum in Dolareido in an official capacity. She dreaded the thought, but she could not deny them for forever, lest the covenants feel her rule totalitarian. And that would lead to other troubles.

Even now she danced the Danse Macabre, as the sky parted to unleash its army upon the hospital. Sighing, she turned back to the building.

“Come,” she said.

“... uh... you’re coming, yourself? Are—”

“My sheriff and my student are both hunting down the cause of this power outage, Burksen. I assume Turio sent you because the other Invictus are indisposed. Logic dictates that we work together, and rescue Mister Terry and Mister Mire.” She marched forward for the hospital front door.

“... alright. Then, I suggest we scale the building wall, and go in through one of the windows the crows are using.”

She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. “The sky devours us with endless wings, and you wish to perform yet another violation of the Masquerade? Do you not think kine are awake, and aiming their phones about at this very moment, filming this?”

“I’ll Cloak us.”

“I can tell from the way you move that you are injured.”

“I...” Damien looked down at one of his hands, and the leg she noticed he was keeping his weight off. “I’ve fed enough to Cloak us. My injuries are irrelevant. I’m not going to let them hurt Jack.”

She blinked at the man, and tilted her head to the side slightly. Those were powerful words, and not words she ever expected to hear from Lucas’s child.

Looking at the man could not help but spark memories within her. This young man, just old enough to be ancilla, had cut off one of her arms and legs. He had stormed her home with weapons and zealots, and the two of them had shared barbed words. He had played his hand, exposed what he thought of her, what Lucas thought of her, and had sent his companions to their demise in order to defeat her.

And he had failed, because of Jack. To see them become friends in the months that followed would forever be the rarest of social interactions and changes of personality she had ever seen in another. That did not change that the sight of the man sparked anger in her, and she was not comfortable with letting a man who had taken a sword to her, help her. For all her power, even she was vulnerable to a swift hand with intent to betray, and stab her in the back if she lowered her guard. Though, considering his injuries, she was the one helping him.

It was not that she could not use the Cloak of Night herself, but it was certainly not a discipline with which she had had much practice. Daniel offered to spend the time and teach her, but instead, she focused on the abilities that came naturally to Daeva, and her pursuits in the Coils of the Ordo Dracul. To her utmost annoyance, Damien’s suggestion was the better approach.

“Very well.” It took effort to keep the venom out of her voice. But now was not the time for such juvenile frustration; healthy paranoia, perhaps, but not childish antics.

The boy nodded, and summoned up his Cloak of Night. It was a subtle, hidden thing, for a Kindred to tap into their vitae, and encapsulate themselves, or others, in the aura of the Cloak. Humans watching would first have found their eyes sliding off the two Kindred, in such a way that did not garner attention. And then, as the full effect of a true Cloak of Night arrived, total invisibility followed.

The boy was powerful, to be able to encapsulate both her and himself in his Cloak, to the degree of total invisibility. Natasha could as well, but then, Natasha was a talented woman, and the Prince trusted her to handle herself with Daniel, despite how exhausted little Vola was after her return tonight. A talented Mekhet was a dangerous thing.

The two of them ran over to the hospital East Wing, from the outside, and looked up at the windows the crows were pouring in through. Such recklessness. Such insanity. Did Jack do this, or Julias? Their bloodline was impossible to predict, forever causing mayhem in her city with their surprising bursts of strength and talent. Viktor had ruled the Invictus under such strength, bullying his two fellow councilmen into submission. But Viktor was dead. Who was summoning the crows, and how were they managing such a massive number?

She sighed as she looked down at the dozens of dead crows at her feet. Neither Jack or Julias would be so cruel as to use Animalism, and send so many creatures to their death. But then, when Jack had escaped the hunters' torture, the reports indicated that many rats had died in his escape. Jack would never kill animals like that, never let himself become so drunk on violence and death, that he would kill hundreds of creatures to enact his will. Would he?

"It'll take me a few seconds to climb up," Damien said. "If—"

"Come." She grabbed him, and threw him. The man's eyes went wide, and he almost let out a yelp, before he managed to close his mouth at the last second. Fool boy was weightless in her grip, and she had no trouble launching him at one of the windows where fewer crows entered. If his Cloak failed, she would have to leave, and enter through the hospital front door instead.

It did not fail. Impressive. She leaped after him, keeping the distance between them small, so he would not have to extend his Cloak too far. Two vampires, dangling off a windowsill, outside a hospital. Très drôle.

How long had it been since she had left her tower, in pursuit of a mission? For decades now, over a century perhaps, she sent her thralls, or Daniel, to enact her will, to force the covenants into line, or to deal with kine who overstepped their limits. Not since the Purge had she truly used her own hands in such a way. She had forgotten the thrill of engaging things with her own fingers, to leave the safety of her tower, and seek out an objective, with purpose. She could not deny there was excitement to it, but any potential joy to be found was lost under the growing fear within her core. What had happened here?

She forced up the window -- better than risking damage on the broken glass -- and rolled into the room. Damien followed, silent and slick. His movements were terribly similar to Daniel, and she struggled to suppress both a smile and frown at the value and threat that represented. For now, she

could trust him to watch her back, if only because she was standing and at full strength, while he was not.

The two of them stared down at one of the patients. The machines beside the man continued to beep, and the crows that filled the room avoided him. The ventilator continued, and the sensitive equipment such as the IV feeding into the man's body was untouched. The birds swarmed around the room though, and both vampires were forced to crouch to prevent them from hitting their heads.

The noise was immense. The birds were not trying to be stealthy, despite their seeming attempt to not accidentally kill or contaminate the patient in the room. They had somehow managed to open the door as well. She knew crows were intelligent, but—

As she stepped out of the door, she froze, and Damien froze behind and beside her. The two of them stared out of the hall, at the swirling maelstrom of feathers, and blood. The screaming of kine mixed into the chorus of caws, and Antoinette had to force herself to keep her hands off her ears in an attempt to block out the noise. The blood was everywhere, splattering and scattering across the whirlwind of flapping black shadows.

The hospital lights of patient rooms were low, with the hospital in low light mode on its generators. The lights of the hallway itself were off, and from the room they were entering it from, the two Kindred were looking down the hall toward the center of the hospital. And from there, their eyes were buried in the carnage and mayhem.

A body lay on the floor, and blood was splattered across the floor and walls, painting the white surface endless red. The clothes this person — a hunter, she surmised — wore, were torn to shreds, most of it removed and spread about, but enough of it remained for her to identify them. Birds, hundreds of birds, were tearing into the corpse, ripping flesh through the holes in their clothes with their beaks and reckless abandon. As if piranha had been given wings, the creatures devoured the body with enough mouths, and with such speed, that she could see bits of bone emerge before her eyes. The hunter was a woman, though the defining curves soon disappeared under beak and gore.

If anyone was alive in the madness, she could hear them no longer. The scream she heard a moment before was gone, and another scream, a woman's, rose to a banshee shriek, before it died off as well.

She wanted to move forward, to leave the doorway and enter the madness, find Jack, find Julias, but she could not. If she entered the pandemonium before her, surely the crows, an ocean of violence unhinged, would devour her; or at least, harm her to a degree she refused to underestimate. A whirlwind of claws and beaks was not to be dismissed lightly.

She peered at the flapping darkness, and after a few more seconds, she called out. “Jack? My love?” To get through the noise of the murder, both the act and the group of crows, she had to call loud. It would give away her position to any hunters, but it was worth the risk.

And, as if parting the Red Sea, the crows split apart. While many stayed on the floor, dotting it to the point they were wing to wing, eyes glistening in the flickering shadows, others continued to fly, soaring over along the ceiling, and along the wall. Many birds flew past her and out the window, clearing space, and in the mouths of the birds, was flesh. As the thickness of the sea of feathers lessened, the sight of more corpses drew her eyes. Disgusting, how the birds had shredded the clothes of these hunters, pecked out their flesh, destroyed their faces, tore off skin and chunks of muscle.

Antoinette had seen many forms of torture in her second life, and only a few were able to match the sheer animal brutality this senseless mayhem had brought forth.

Jack, her little Ventrue, stood only fifteen feet away. A crow sat on each shoulder, his pets, and the boy wore a smile. His suit was coated in blood, as was his skin, human blood that drenched him, dripped from his fingers, and flowed down his body. But the mess of gore was not what struck her cold, it was the strange smile on his face. She had never seen him wear such an expression.

“Annie!” the boy said, hands out as if to embrace her arrival, but not her physically. “Good news! Well, good and bad.” Annie? Not once, in the nigh two years she had known this boy, had he ever called her that. “Damien too, sweet.”

“... Jack,” she said. “Where is... where is Mister Mire?”

“Dead.” Nodding, sighing, he crouched down, and the birds that covered the floor hopped aside, pushing wing to wing so they could reveal a patch of dust and dirt, soaked in blood. “Hunters got him.”

Antoinette could not move, every muscle and tendon in her body frozen. Who was this boy? It was not Jack Terry, her love. The inflection in his voice, the confident and almost sinister gaze, the odd smile, none of it belonged. In the corner of her eye, she could see that Damien felt the same, as the man stepped forward slightly to stand beside her, and he kept his weight on the balls of one foot, ready to sprint forward in an attack.

“I... I am... sorry.” Mire was dead? Oh no. If, that was truly what happened. This snake speaking to her could not possibly have been Jack, and now, as she stared at him, every word she heard from him became suspect.

“Yeah, I was pretty bummed. But! Good news. Crows say Mom is fine, they killed two hunters, which makes four total, if Elen can’t revive the one I shot in the head, and I drained and popped one a minute before.” Popped? “And the best news we’ve had in god damn forever, I caught Sándor.”

She squinted for a moment, before she stepped forward. The crows moved aside for her, barely, while they gave her lover plenty of room; slaves, making way for their master.

Sure enough, Sándor the Begotten was there. The man was a mess, bleeding and broken, and she could tell many of his wounds had not been caused by the birds. He was on his back, but she could tell he was bleeding quite profusely from wounds underneath him, as blood leaked onto the floor around him. Someone had broken many of his ribs, if not all of them, and his face was a ruined mess, nose smashed and teeth lost. Every breath the man took was a gargled mess, blood oozing from his parted mouth and broken lips. Someone had thoroughly crushed this man.

Jack, or whoever this snake was, walked up beside her, grinned up at her, and then down at the shirtless man on the floor. “Julias really fucked him up. Never seen a Ventrue punch that hard. But it drained my sire pretty bad, left him defenseless.” Crows sat upon the Begotten’s arms and legs, and a few of them had left scratch marks there, some peck marks as well, but Sándor did not respond. He was close to death, but she doubted the horror inside the man would let him simply bleed out.

If Natasha’s report about this Begotten’s strength was to be believed, and it was, then Julias defeating him in a fist fight would have been horribly costly indeed. Impossible, even, for other Ventrue his age, but Julias was Julias. Was... Julias. She sighed, looked over Jack’s head to the ashes upon the floor, and frowned at the crows stomping over it. Jack, her Jack, would have made sure his summoned crows would have not touched them. Her Jack would not have done any of the things he was doing now.

The crows upon Sándor’s body cawed a few times, announcing their presence, and Jack chuckled as he squatted down over his prize.

“Hey, Sand.” He looked up at her, and Antoinette struggled to not look away in disgust at the alien creature meeting her gaze. “Angela called him Sand, heh. Sand!” Leaning over the Begotten, he slapped the man’s broken face, but found no response. “Damn, unconscious. Well, he ain’t going anywhere. Let’s check Mom.” He pat the man on the chest, used the ruined ribcage to push himself up, and walked toward his mother’s room.

And Antoinette followed, closely, as did Damien. She glanced back to him, and found the same fear in his eyes. He did not recognize this boy either. After a quick grimace, she nodded to Damien, acknowledging his fear with her own; and perhaps, warning him that she would soon act.

Jack stepped into his mother's room. She almost stopped him. Did the hunters have some sort of doppelgänger in their employ, or could somehow possess Jack and turn him into this snake before her? That made no sense. It was clear that Jack had done great damage to the hunters this night, thus, it was unlikely the hunters that were responsible for this change in Jack. Jack had always had an unusual, unknown element that people noticed, but this? This was beyond the pale.

The crows perched upon the bed, the chairs, the equipment, everything within his mother's room, but none touched the woman's body. Sensitive equipment was also left alone; crow claws and fragile equipment did not mix.

"They were going to take her," Jack said as he stepped in closer. "Take her, and Elen was going to do things to her. Probably cut her up, do some shit to her mind or guts, voodoo magic, or whatnot."

Antoinette sighed, but nodded. "To force your cooperation."

"Yep. Fuckers. Whatever, she's fine, and I'll get them. Kill them, rip them apart, shred them, throw their guts to the birds, my birds." Nodding to himself, he reached up and stroked the bellies of his two crows upon his shoulders. "The hunters are in the city, and they're not leaving; Jeremiah won't, at least, not until he's killed Azamel. So we have plenty of time to find them and skull-fuck their corpses. I—" As the devil creature leaned over the unconscious body of his mother, his voice came to a sudden stop, and he froze.

"... Jack?" Damien said, stepping around to the other side of the bed. "You ok?"

Antoinette, keeping a couple feet between her and the alien entity, looked down at his eyes. They were locked onto the face of his mother. His hands trembled at his sides, and his shoulders matched, quivering, as if the boy were carrying great weights in his empty palms.

She said nothing. Something was happening to Jack, something sinister, something horrible, and in the moment, something told her to watch. Let this unfold.

"I—" Again, his voice cut short, and the boy's right hand took the bed's edge with far more strength than required. "I... I..."

As Jack struggled, Damien slid a hand into his coat. The Mekhet was as suspicious of Jack as she was, and, at least in this, she could trust him to do something to help the boy, even if that meant cutting off his legs to incapacitate him. But Antoinette had no clue what was happening to her love, and if watching him struggle now provided some answers, then she was left with no choice but to observe.

She looked to Samantha. The poor woman looked horrible, but at least she had not been harmed by the influx of crows. Antoinette looked around at the many birds sitting about, and frowned at how

some of them gobbled down bits of flesh, while others preened, rubbing at the blood that soaked their feathers. Some of that blood dripped onto floor, and Antoinette glared at the birds. Disease was a true risk for Samantha, and the current situation was a large problem.

Jack put his other hand on the bed, and he stared down at his mother harder, as if trying to penetrate her mind with his. If he did something violent, Antoinette was ready to pounce and stop him. But, he did not. He stood there, a trembling statue, hands locked to the bed while his torso leaned forward enough that he could stare down at his mother.

“Mom?” Jack said at last. “Mom, I... I... what...”

And then the boy turned around. For a moment, Antoinette thought he would march out of his mother’s room, but he froze at the doorway, again like a shivering statue. His hands found the door frame, and squeezed. Bits of the metal frame bent under his trembling grip. Jack, even at his strongest and most desperate, could not have dented a metal door frame by squeezing it with his fingertips.

Back again, he turned and walked toward the bed. His face was pained, as if someone was dragging a hot poker through his insides.

“I... I...”

“Jack, my love, what is happening to you?” She hesitated to ask, fearing his response.

“I won’t... let it... Mom, I won’t... I won’t let it...” He collapsed. As if someone had staked the boy with a proper wooden stake, he collapsed, and slipped into unconsciousness. The two birds upon his shoulders flapped their wings in panic, and flew toward the window.

“Jack!” She caught him before his head hit the floor. The smell of blood was on his lips. If he had fed on one of the hunters, then the boy did not need to enter torpor, especially as he apparently had no visible wounds; bullets holes in his clothes, but no wounds. And only moments before, he had looked healthy, energized, and ready for war. There was no reason for this collapse.

As her love went into torpor, the army crows cawed once, and left. Leaving was not so easy for thousands of birds trapped inside a hallway and several small rooms, and Antoinette stayed low as the birds rose. Their black wings became a whirlwind above her head, and she stared up, teeth clenched as the creatures, as if of one mind, flowed together out through the destroyed window. Damien ducked as well, hands covering his head, until it became clear the birds had no intention of doing anything, except leaving.

The caw noise filled the hall, blocking out the sound of anything else. A glance out the door showed the birds leaving, including the ones perched upon Sándor. With no more guidance from their



unconscious master, the birds flowed out of the hospital in a matter of seconds, and what was nothing but endless black feathers, became a hospital hallway. Blood was everywhere. Four corpses decorated the floor, and one of them wore scrubs, or the remains of them. The crows, under her love's command, had eaten the bodies to the point of nigh skeletons.

"Jack's... different," Damien said, walking out of the room, and grabbing the Begotten once the crows had gone. He dragged him into the room with the three of them, and drew a pistol. Better to keep the prisoner at gun point, even if he was incapacitated.

"Clearly he is different. I—"

"I... sorry to interrupt, Prince, but... he's different. Auspex shows he's... he's uh..." The Mekhet squirmed, looking blatantly uneasy, as he looked back over his shoulder to her, and Jack. "He's dangerous." Was the pistol for Jack, and not the Begotten? No, Damien would not do such a thing.

She sighed, and looked down at the boy in her arms. He was different, that much was obvious, and to summon an army of crows in such a manner was a feat elders as old as Antoinette would struggle to accomplish, were Animalism one of her talents. He had not only done so, but it seemed easy for him, with no strain to him at all. That was, until he saw his mother's face.

A glance toward Samantha showed two crows remained, perched upon the windowsill. His pets, Scully and Mulder, no doubt. They stepped side to side a few times, and bobbed their heads a few times more, likely anxious to investigate their master's sudden fall.

Antoinette stood up, boy in her arms horizontal, and she leaned down to set a kiss upon his forehead. "Something has happened to him, something I... I do not know."

"Jack's been acting more and more strangely," Damien said, "since his first run in with Angela. And he's always been unusually skilled; I just assumed that was his bloodline showing through."

"Perhaps it was. Perhaps it is..." She set the boy down in one of the chairs, and slid a finger across his forehead. Who was this man who had summoned an army to his aid? This boy in the chair was not Jack. Or perhaps it was, and Jack was the one that, upon seeing the face of his mother, stopped whoever was controlling him. His words had suggested some form of inner struggle.

"What... what are we going to do?"

"You are going to help me, Mister Burksen." She got up, stepped over to Samantha, and looked down at the monster on the floor. "My tower has facilities that can contain the Begotten."

"The Invictus—"

“Are not equipped to secure foes of a paranormal nature. You do not have...” Sighing, she shook her head, glanced over her shoulder back to Jack, and then back to his mother. “Be silent, Damien, and do what I tell you. You will guard the Begotten, and you will guard me, as I do what must be done.” Desperate times called for desperate measures, if she was forced to ask this Sanctified to be her guard.

“... very well.” He did not look happy, and no doubt the Prince’s orders would pose a dilemma for the boy, since he was to report to the Invictus, not help her. Maria could burn, for all Antoinette cared at the moment. “What must be done?”

“If I had known that the hunters would be this aggressive, that Angela would be so petty, as to launch such a grandiose assault on the hospital, I would have done this earlier. But I... had to deliberate.”

“Siring Jack’s mother?”

“... oui. It is not a decision to be made lightly.”

Damien nodded, eyes drifting between the three unconscious people in the room. “I’ll guard you. I haven’t seen any staff, so I imagine they’re all hiding. And police aren’t going to arrive for some time at that. You’re clear.”

The Mekhet was a touch wordier than Daniel, but he cut to the point in a similar manner. She appreciated the candor. Unlike Daniel, she did not feel comfortable dropping her guard and exposing herself to his sword. But if she tried to remove the ventilator from Samantha to transport her, she could die before Antoinette could get her back to the Elysium tower for a safer embrace.

“You...” Sighing as well, Damien shook his head, eyes lowering. “You don’t need to worry. Things are different now, Prince. You can trust me. I’ll cover Jack and Sándor, and you.”

She stood up straight, and looked at the man. He did the same, meeting her gaze, and unlike her, he lowered his guard. Not the guard of his body, weapon still at hand, but the guard of his gaze. No frown, no smile, no grimace or smirk, no grin or sneer, nothing but an exposed face, that let her peer into his soul. She had peered into countless souls in her long life, and had grown skilled at reading the intentions of any who let their guard down.

The gaze of the Mekhet was a powerful one, and said much. Damien was a troubled young man, torn asunder by his past, by the ghost of Lucas, and by his new life. He was worried for his friend Jack. He was also deathly afraid of her. And, like many Kindred, the man’s life was now defined by regret. She was too harsh, to judge him as she did.

Nodding, she leaned down over Samantha, and stared at her face.

Two days in a coma had not been kind to her; though, she probably looked better than she did the night of the stabbing. She had pale, sunken skin, just like a vampire. Her short hair was cut to the ear, and was supposed curl with waves, but the trauma, the pillow, everything had ruined it.

But she was in good shape, preparing herself for potential mates, perhaps. Bouncing back from the horrible luck that had befallen her, she was a single mother striking back at life.

How would this woman respond to her new awakening, and her new life? No doubt there would be misery, due to the death of her daughter. There would be elation, that her son was alive. There would be shock, that she was now a vampire. To survive the mental damage such mayhem would cause, would be a trial greater than the trial she had only just begun to recover from.

But she deserved a chance.

Antoinette leaned in, moved the tube coming out of the woman's mouth aside slightly, and set her fangs to Samantha's neck.

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~~Natasha~~

Power came back to the city, twenty minutes before sunrise.

"Oh thank g-god," she said.

"Yes. This was futile." Daniel nodded, and the two of them stepped out of a local hydro building before climbing up onto the rooftops. "Quickly, back to the tower."

Their search for the source of the power outage had proved fruitless. The local power facility had emergency staff, but they had been royally confused. Spying on them was the plan, to let them locate the source of the power failure, and Daniel and Natasha would race to the designated location and quickly handle it. But the technicians were dumbfounded, saying the power failure had no source. More dumbfounded, when the power came back on, on its own.

"Um... w-what is that?" She pointed to the sky. The light from the city lit a blurry, black movement, something vast and flowing across the sky.

Daniel frowned. "A murder."

“Murder? Oh, c-crows. That... that is a lot of crows.”

“Yes, yes it is.” Daniel frowning was an unusual sight, but his frown continued as he watched the flock of black birds fly away. Some remained, perching upon roofs and power lines, but that was normal for Dolareido. Rats, crows, cockroaches, and kine. All four were everywhere in the city, but a giant flock like that flying away was not normal.

“I felt something,” she said. “Earlier, I m-mean. I d-d-don’t know what it was, but...”

“Now we know. Someone summoned them.” The sheriff adjusted his glasses, and leapt, before she could ask how on Earth someone could summon an army of crows that big. Even Viktor would have struggled with that, and that man had been a master of Animalism.

On the rooftops, the two Mekhet ran back for the tower. They’d arrive at the tower with maybe fifteen minutes to spare; Mekhet were fast, and sprinting across rooftops wasn’t hard. Still, fifteen minutes before imminent death was enough to get her anxious, and then some.

“Are we going to call the P-Prince?”

“No. The ring or vibration could give her away, if she’s being stealthy, assuming she has not disabled notifications.”

“R-Right, makes sense.” Better to meet back at the tower. Maybe there she’d get some answers about the crows.

She chewed on her lip. A blackout that had knocked out power for several blocks, and blocked out all communication, wired and wireless, in that area? She’d assumed magical from the get go, but hadn’t said anything when the Prince told her to investigate. Maybe she should have.

The two of them walked in through the front doors literal seconds after the Prince.

“P-Prince?” Natasha said.

“Miss Vola, Daniel, I am glad to see you are safe.” The tall woman turned to face them, and Tash froze as she realized another woman was draped across her arms. She froze twice over, when she realized that not only did Damien stand next to her, but Jack was hooked over one shoulder, and Sándor, beaten to a pulp and bleeding profusely, was hooked over the other. Both were soaked in blood, and with Jack, she knew it was not his.

“I... I um...”

Daniel stepped forward. “Is she embraced?”

“She is. She will likely not awaken until tomorrow night. Daniel, take Sándor, and lock him within Cell 5. Use extreme measures.”

“Extreme... yes, my Prince.” With a nod, Daniel walked over to Damien, scooped up the bleeding Begotten, and walked toward the back of the lobby where the stairs led down.

“Natasha, join Damien, and help him... help him...” After grinding her teeth together for a moment, she looked away. “Set Jack within Cell 4... and stake him.”

Natasha froze thrice. “W-What? I—”

“Do it! Do not question it.” The bite in the Prince’s words could have broken steel. “And see to it that Damien has a place to sleep. Mister Burksen should not risk his life racing the sun returning home.”

“Y-Yes m-m-ma’am!” Nodding, she stepped up beside Damien, and gestured toward the path Daniel already walked. “Do... d-do you not need help with... your... childe?” Childe. Oh god the Prince had a childe now. So exciting! Super exciting! But Antoinette wasn’t smiling. If anything, she looked angry.

“No, Miss Vola. For today, she will rest next to me, and I will make sure to greet her come sunset. Now, tend to her s—” Antoinette bit down, as if the word was difficult to articulate. “Tend to her son. Quickly.”

Nodding five times faster than she should have, she took Damien’s free wrist, and pulled him toward the back.

Antoinette followed, but slower. They had ten minutes before sunset, and the Prince probably wanted a few minutes to process what had happened to her, how her life was going to change, and how everything was going to change. Ten minutes was also enough time for her to ask Damien some questions.

Once they were down the stairs, several floors, and had taken a right in the halls of black marble, she felt comfortable enough to open her mouth. Hopefully her sire and boss couldn’t hear her this far away.

“W-What happened?”

“Not sure. We showed up to see the aftermath.”

“Can you... t-tell me what you think happened?”

“... Julias is dead.”

She froze again. This was too many freezings in a single ten minute window. “W-W-What?”

“He died helping Jack defend his mother, most likely.” Damien nodded toward the kid lying across his shoulder. “When we showed up, Jack had... had somehow summoned at least a few thousand crows. He blocked out the sky. Every rooftop was covered, and they poured into the hospital, breaking in through the windows. He killed three hunters with their help, and captured the Begotten.”

Processing. Processing. Ok, her brain wasn't willing to make sense of everything Damien just told her. Needed more. “Jack... Jack did... what?” At least he'd decided to capture Sándor instead of killing him. Lucky. He didn't know Sándor was being controlled by Elen. If Jack was killing hunters, he had no reason to not kill the Begotten as well, except maybe to torture him for information.

“It wasn't Jack.”

“I—”

“Jack wasn't Jack.” Damien sighed, following her, steps brisk. “Whoever this kid was, it wasn't Jack. He was... he was... cruel.”

Flashbacks hit Natasha. The alley, when Jack had told her he was struggling with rage issues that defied normal explanation. Oh no.

“M... multiple p-personalities?”

“He summoned an army of crows, Natasha. More crows than any vampire should be able to summon, not without preparation. And he used them like soldiers, slaughtered three hunters, and when we finally got to them, we found the birds ripping muscle off the bones. He walked over Julias's ashes, let the birds walk over them, and he... he...” Damien sighed, shook his head, and nodded toward the hall. “Let's hurry.”

“O-Ok.” Hurry, hurry. Yeap, do that. Get down to Cell 4, and stake the young man so he'd be stuck in torpor until it was removed. “We saw the crows, but I... I d-didn't know what to think.”

The hallway had a few cells, each large and filled with many tools for securing kine. Some of them had people in them, horrible people, violent criminals and the like, people Antoinette considered harmful to her city. Such kine could be kept unconscious using drugs, or not, if she was feeling particularly... wrathful, toward a rather heinous criminal, left to rot in a cell. They were emergency food. The quality was poor, but come dire situations, even poor quality was ambrosia.

As they entered the hallway, there was a solid metal cabinet on the wall. She dialed in the number on its digital door lock, and opened it. There were a few wooden stakes — if it wasn't wood, it was

unreliable at best — along with some other weaponry that would work well against paranormals. A mini flamethrower, a shotgun, some knives and swords, and silver knives too. She grabbed a stake.

The cells with doors along the hall were numbered 1, 2, and 3. The cell at the end of the hall, numbered 4, was different. The door looked thicker, and the number itself was larger. Natasha had never seen its interior, and it did not have a sliding view window to let her do such, unlike the other cells. A digital lock, and a manual lock, were ready and open on cell 4, made of metal she was sure no one was getting through, including Uratha.

She dialed in the code, unhooked the enormous padlock, and pulled open the gigantic metal door. Or rather, tried. Frowning, she set a foot against the wall, and pulled with all her might. It slid open with all the grace of pushing a parked car with the emergency brake on. But, with a little Kindred strength put into it, she managed to get the thing open, and she gawked at the thickness of the door. Godzilla wasn't getting through this thing.

The room was empty. That made sense, she supposed, if it was meant to be some sort of multipurpose room they could store particularly dangerous people in. If there'd been a chair, a monster would have little trouble turning it into a weapon.

Cell 5 was on the next floor, beneath her. It was Antoinette's cell for securing the most dangerous and magical entities; and she'd never used it before, according to the Prince. Sándor deserved it. How could she keep a Begotten under control? Antoinette probably had more tricks up her sleeve than Natasha knew about, if she was willing to share the resonance circle with her so early into her new life as a young dragon. There may have been rooms deep in the tower, filled with dark secrets that Natasha was happier not knowing about.

But for now, a big, empty room of metal to hold a big baddie would do fine. Hopefully. She lay Jack on the ground with Damien's help, and stared at the young man for movement as she did. None. For whatever reason, he was out cold, but better to paralyze him than risk his awakening. Damien held out a hand, and she gave him the stake.

Stab. Damien didn't bother to open the man's suit; it was a blood-soaked, hole-ridden mess anyway. Jack's body flopped once, limbs flailing out a little from the impact, as Damien sank the wooden object into his heart. Puncturing the organ wasn't as easy as it sounded, considering you had to get through the ribs and muscle protecting it. She was glad Damien did it.

“Julias... is dead? And A-Angela—”

“Escaped. Again.”

Natasha, sighing loudly, got up, and motioned for Damien to follow. Once he was outside in the hall with her, the two of them closed the enormous door, and she locked it, both locks. No one was getting in or out. It'd be terrifying to wake up in a room like that, but Jack was staked, and no vampire, even an elder, was going to wake up from that situation.

“She k-k-keeps getting away!”

“Some sort of circle had been painted on the wall. Maybe—”

“Oh... oh no. I ran into that w-with the witches, tonight. It... the hunters, they use some sort of...” She threw up her hands. “Long story! I'll t-t-tell you at dusk.”

Mirroring her sigh, Damien nodded, and looked around with wary eyes. “I really wish I could get back to my place before sunrise.”

“And I w-wish I could see my b-b-boyfriends before sunrise too, but I can't. So we have to deal.” She guided the surly Mekhet down the hall, and into the main room where the stairway connected and descended, massive walls of marble showing dragon statues, and where hallways showed peeks of far more enjoyable rooms. Not everything in the tower was a cell; she hoped Damien realized that.

“I can still remember the first time I met you,” he said. “A tiny little thing, fast, shot me when my guard was down.”

She raised a brow as she looked over her shoulder at him. That was a strange direction to take the conversation.

“I... I—”

“Now, you're a dragon, going on missions with the sheriff of the city. And you have two boyfriends.” With a tiny smile that almost didn't exist, he held up two fingers and showed them to her. “Two. Werewolves at that.”

She blinked at him. “I... I g-guess I changed. Why are you—”

“I've changed too, haven't I?” Smile destroyed. He looked around at the walls, and despite how the rooms they passed were far more appealing than cells, with living rooms with couches, fancy lighting, paintings and the like, he still looked nervous. More than once, he glanced over his shoulder, checking the stairs and hallway behind him.

“Y-Yes, of course.”

“The Prince doesn't seem to think so. Half the time I was with her tonight, I expected her to rip off my head, literally.”



“She...” Tash looked down, and juggled the thoughts for a while as she guided Damien to a guest room. It was a small room, a bed and nothing more. A great bed though, and the room locked from the inside, with a normal door lever lock, and an actual barricade bar. A guest room meant for vampires. “She’s old, D-Damien, very old. Give her time.”

“We’re old, too.”

She laughed at that as she stood in the doorway. It died away, as the night’s events weighed on her. “You know it’s n-not the same.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t.” Damien looked around at the room, before he turned to face her, hands reaching for the door. “Julias is dead, Natasha, killed by hunters. Jack has gone The Shining on us, and yet the Prince is still looking at me like I’m the threat.”

“I’ll... I’ll t-talk to her.”

His small smile returned, partly. “Thanks.”

She left, and he closed the door behind her. Only once she heard the sound of metal clicking, did she let her head drop, and her hands find her shoulders, hugging herself.

Julias was dead. Mister Mire. Her friend, companion, a man she could always rely on to be fair, straight, honorable, and dependable. A man who’d helped her so many times when she was in the Invictus, lent her a hand countless times. He was dead.

She found her bed, curled up on it, and buried her face in her hands. Sobs crept up through her body, up her spine, into her lungs, and into her core. Before she knew it, they were in her neck, and up into her head where she could no longer stop them. She cried, dry sobs she hid in her palms. No, not Julias. No. No no no.

Oh god, what would she tell Jessy? Oh god oh god, what would... what would Triss do? And Maria and Michael, they’d be beyond upset. And... and... oh god.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, and shook with the trembling clenches of crying, until sunrise came.

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~~Antoinette~~

The last thing Antoinette did, before setting Samantha on the bed next to her, was send Beatrice a message. ‘Come to the tower, the moment the sun sets. Immediately.’ That was not a conversation she looked forward to having.

But, it would be some time before Beatrice arrived tomorrow night. In the mean time, she had other problems to deal with. Problems, but also, a great delight.

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As sunset arrived, announcing the next night, she slowly sat up from her bed. She had long learned how to manage the surge of the nightly awakening with grace, and she used the wave to propel herself to action. Within seconds, she was out of bed, and adjusting her clothes. She had changed into a clean suit, before settling for the day, as Kindred did not move during their daily torpor. Her suit was immaculate. She, on the other hand, was nervous. It was not a feeling she was accustomed to.

She smiled down at Samantha, and waited. Put aside the grief and misery, bury it, and focus on the moment. Julias did not die. Jack is not waiting in a cell for you, with a stake in his heart. He had not performed a massive Masquerade violation. A monster is not in your deepest, darkest prison, waiting to be interrogated. None of that existed. All that existed, was this moment.

Samantha opened her eyes.

“Bonjour,” Antoinette said, voice as soft as she could manage.

The woman was still dressed in the hospital gown; it was better this way, so Antoinette could add some evidence to the testimony she was doubtless going to give in this conversation.

“I... I... w-where...” The woman was only an inch shorter than Jack, but Jack was a small fellow, so his mother was perhaps an inch or two shorter than the average woman. She was thin and lean, like her son, but with the hips and legs that came with age and motherhood. Her hair was brown, with some curves and waves weaved into it, damaged by the trauma of the past two days.

She looked to Antoinette, and the vampire froze. Those eyes. Those green eyes. Jack’s eyes, on a soft face. They went wide as she stared at her, and looked her up and down a few times. Antoinette’s great height, red eyes, and long white hair caught her off guard, as expected. So Antoinette waited, giving the woman several seconds more, before continuing.

“Samantha Terry. What is the last thing you remember?”

“I... god, I... I... oh god.” She brought her knees up to her chest, hugged them, and set her chin upon them. “My little... my little girl... oh god.”

Then Angela killed Mary first. A disgusting, cruel, heartless woman, to make a mother watch her daughter die. No parent should ever have to see their child die. Ever.

Poor Athalia.

Sighing, Antoinette walked over to her cabinet and desk against the black marble wall, took the chair, and pulled it over to the bed to sit. “I am sorry, Miss Terry, but your daughter is gone.”

The woman trembled, and continued to hide her forehead against her arm, the rest of her face hidden behind her knees. It was several minutes before the quivering woman found her voice.

“Everyone’s gone,” she said, voice breaking with the rise of sorrow. “All gone. I... I can’t... I...”

Antoinette reached out, and set a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “You are not alone, Miss Terry. I—”

“My family is dead!” she screamed, lifting her face and glaring up at her. The softness of her visage was stricken, destroyed. “I don’t even know you. Don’t give me that shit. I—”

“Samantha.” With a slow, gentle sigh, Antoinette pulled her hand back, and offered her grieving child a small smile. “I was not referring to myself.”

“W-What? I... I don’t understand.”

To guide this woman’s fragile mind would be difficult. Antoinette considered carefully, before speaking. “You and your daughter were assaulted two days ago.”

“Two days? But... but I remember... I remember being stabbed, again and again and—” She lowered her legs, and pulled up her hospital gown, with no concern that Antoinette could see her bare genitals for the act. Unlike Jack, who’d been stabbed literal moments before Julias sired him, Samantha’s stomach wounds had healed as part of her embrace. “God, I’m so pale. And... and... oh god, I—”

“Your world has been changed, Samantha Terry. I changed it. And I changed it without your consent. For that, I must apologize and ask for your forgiveness. But, explanations can wait. For now, I need your help.”

The small woman stared at her, confused and paralyzed. There was anger there, wanting to lash out, but it took only a moment to see that this Samantha creature was too gentle to explode with rage or fury. No, this woman would curl into a ball, pull her sorrow inward, and wither away, if given the chance. A soft, delicate woman, hardened by her life but still a tender, loving creature. She did not have the drive that Antoinette would have looked for in a potential childe, but then, perhaps that was for the best.

“M-My help? Y... You mean, to help catch the... the woman that... k-killed...” Her whole body started trembling again, and she started to curl up once more.

Antoinette could not have that. She reached out, and grabbed the woman’s wrist.

“No. We know very well who killed your daughter, and have been hunting her and her group for some time. You and your daughter are unfortunate victims of her war.”

The small woman stared at Antoinette, obviously wanting to pull her arm back, but refusing to. Timid. Docile. It would take time to help this woman overcome her natural, accommodating attitude.

“Then I... I don’t understand what I can do.”

“Come with me. All your questions will be answered, and you will be fed, once you have done for me this one task.”

Samantha’s eyes widened at the mention of ‘fed’. A new Kindred, a fresh fledgling, would no doubt be starving, in need of blood, and soon. But some stored blood would suffice, and the woman would not need it immediately. She was not Jack, and not of his bloodline. Her Beast would not send her into a frenzy on her first night so swiftly.

Antoinette felt her eye twitch as the thought ran across her mind. Jack’s Beast. The boy had gone into a frenzy on his first night, despite Julias sharing with him his stored blood. It should not have happened. The boy’s inner monster was strong, and fought to free itself with far more enthusiasm than a young vampire’s Beast should have. Was it related to the madness of last night? When a Beast took over the mind of a Kindred, completely took over, the result was a Draugr, a mindless animal concerned only with its hunger. What had taken over Jack, or replaced Jack, or manipulated Jack, was not mindless. It was cruel, filled with malice, and disturbing joviality.

She brought a hand up to her chest, and clutched at it through her blouse. Her Jack, infected, changed, altered. No, do not think about it. Think about your childe for now. Help her first. And maybe, just maybe, she can help you.

Gulping, and coughing on her dry throat, Samantha turned to face the side of the bed.

“I feel... f-feel... strange, and...”

“You will feel many strange things, Samantha. Your life has been altered, in more ways than you can imagine.”

“B... Because of... this... Angela woman?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Antoinette walked over to her wardrobe, retrieved a robe of solid white, and offered it to her new childe. “I know... I know that misery and anguish overwhelm you, Miss Terry. Your world has been destroyed, for a third time. As if the Fates themselves conspired against you, happenstance and atrocious luck have ruined your life and killed those you cared for most. But, if you will set your misery aside for a moment, and listen to me, I promise you not all is lost.”

Samantha slowly slid her legs off the bed, remained seated, and looked between the robe and Antoinette. If she knew how to Blush Life, she probably would have, purely to let tears flow as waterfalls. In Antoinette’s many years of unlife, she had seen true grief countless times, soul crushing torment, and Samantha dripped of it.

“My... m-my...” Her head dropped, and her shoulders shook. “You... you’ll... you’ll get her?”

“We will capture Angela and her group, and we will crucify her. Literally.” With a nod, Antoinette took initiative, and threw the robe around Samantha’s shoulders. The poor woman would go comatose, or slip into shock, if Antoinette let her. “Come. Not all is lost for you, Samantha.” With that, she reached out, and set a hand on her childe’s.

“Not all...” Clearly lost to her confusion, helpless and disoriented, she took her hand. Progress.

Slowly, gently, Antoinette pulled the woman up to standing. Petite as she was, the robe dragged on the black marble floor, and Antoinette smiled at that. There was some Jack in her, in her quiet mannerisms, her shy glances, her careful steps. She reminded her of the first time she had met Jack, a small boy at a ball full of vampires. There had been a strength in him at the time, and in his mother now, it only needed to be drawn forth.

“I am Antoinette, and for now, I am your host.”

“An... toinette.” Clutching the robe around her at the neck with one hand, the other still in Antoinette’s grip, she followed along as best she could. Antoinette did not pull her too hard, but hard enough to force her to take steps. If she dallied, the poor woman was bound to collapse with depression.

Once she arrived at the main stairway, that connected to the center room and various halls, she went up a couple floors, and made sure to both give Samantha a moment to admire the dragon statues

and carvings, but also hurry her along. The marvels of her tower were many, and she looked forward to sharing them with her new child. The extravagances of fortune and time were hers to have, and while they could not cure the agony she undoubtedly felt, they could alleviate the pain a little.

Jack, on the other hand, she could aid quite a bit.

She guided the woman down the hall, past the metal doors that were obviously cell doors, and when Samantha stopped to stare at the closed window slits, Antoinette pulled her along.

“I... are—”

“These prisons are not for you. Do not fret, little Terry.” She could not help but smile at herself for the phrase. “But, there is someone within one of these cells, that you need to see.”

“... it’s... you... you said you’re still looking for her.”

“And we are. This is someone you will wish to see.”

“You can’t bring back my daughter, Miss... Antoinette. You can’t bring back my family. There’s no one I—” She went silent as she stared at the enormous metal door. Shaking, she stood there, watching, eyes wide as Antoinette set the number for the digital padlock, and used her key to unlock the manual one. Each lock was made of metal thick enough to give a blowtorch pause, were they made of normal metals, and she did not use normal metals. Security was paramount.

The door was thick, two feet thick, and made of reinforced material similar to the locks. It was also as heavy as a vehicle. No one was getting into, or out of this room, if she put them in there.

Samantha gasped as Antoinette pulled it open, without too much trouble at that. She gasped again, as the hallway light entered the metal square room, and lit a body.

“Someone’s d-d-dead... in there!”

Antoinette looked over her shoulder, offered the oblivious woman another smile, and stepped into the room. “Be calm, Samantha. And come with me. Not everything is as it seems.”

“I... but, I... I—” Her body went rigid, frozen to ice, once Antoinette sat on her knees on the floor, and lifted the boy half onto her lap. “Jack!” The world exploded upon her face. Her eyes lit up with wonder, and fell with the weight of turmoil, as she saw the stake sticking out of the boy’s chest. “Oh god! Oh god, oh god oh god oh god oh go—”

“Samantha Terry,” Antoinette said, putting some bite into her voice to cut through the woman’s oncoming shock. “Come here, kneel beside your son, and observe.”

It must have been Hell for the poor mother. To wake up from a coma with new sensations in her undead body was confusing; sensations lost, as well. Her memories were a bundled mess, and the loudest, most pronounced, were of her daughter's death, the final member of her family. She had awoken in a stranger's home, and was at the mercy of their whim, a whim she knew nothing about. Dressed in a hospital gown and a robe, she had walked down a hall of obvious cells, and now, in a dark room undoubtedly meant to contain and imprison anything imaginable, she found the body of her son with a stake through his heart.

“Wh—”

“Now.” She did not wish to be cruel, or to destroy her new childe. But this had to be done. She could not simply sit by and let her childe come to terms with the changes of her life, when Antoinette needed her help. Seeing Jack rise from the dead would demonstrate the life of a Kindred to her, and perhaps fill her with joy that one of her children was alive. And maybe, if everything aligned perfectly, Samantha's face would do what it did for Jack last night, and settle his demons.

She did not have the time to let her new childe collapse upon herself.

Gulping, panicking, trembling, Samantha came over to her, and knelt beside her son, across from Antoinette. “He's... he's... You found him? He... he disappeared, two years ago, and... did this Angela woman have something to do with it? Oh god... oh god oh god.”

Antoinette shook her head, and yanked the stake from her lover's chest. Samantha let out a cry, short, weak, and she reached out to set her hands onto the chest of her son. As whimpers built within her, and spilled from her in tired sobs, she managed to frown up at Antoinette.

“How could you? He—”

Antoinette nodded down toward Jack. “Watch the wound.”

“What? You—”

“Watch the wound, Samantha.” Again, she raised her voice, and cut through the small woman's rising panic. She could not let her succumb, not yet, not until after this moment.

It would all be for naught, if Jack did not awaken. It would all be for naught, if the insidious monster she met last night was what waited for her. Please, Jack. So much had been lost already. She could not lose you, too.

Samantha gasped, a noise no louder than a mouse, as the wound on Jack's chest began to close; and it closed quickly. “Oh my god. What's happening? What's happening? I don't—”

Antoinette raised a hand, offered her childe a warm smile, and nodded down at Jack. Sure enough, it healed over, the currents of Kindred blood within showing themselves for a moment before the pale skin of the boy's chest hid them. He healed fast, faster than a Ventrue his age should have been able to. She had grown to expect much of Jack's abilities, but purely in his conscious efforts. How quickly he healed during torpor, on the other hand, was purely a function of his natural Kindred strength, and it was quite impressive.

What dark Beast lurked within her little Ventrue, that had grown to such heights under her very nose?

The stars aligned. She had not known if Jack would awaken, considering his unexpected torpor at the hospital. That would have only added to Samantha's confusion and misery. But sure enough, once the hole healed over, Jack's eyes opened. The hallway light exposed his beautiful, green eyes.

He was not used to waking up on a metal floor, and he blinked several times as he stared up at the Prince. "... Antoinette?"

The tension in Antoinette's chest vanished. She had not realized it was there, a slow creeping that had sneaked into her core, tightened all the muscles there, and constricted her depths. But the sight of her lover's eyes, his eyes, Jack's eyes, and the blatant honesty he carried within them, genuine sincerity without the layers of lies and deception most carried, washed away her anxiety.

Purely through her gaze, she could tell Samantha was similar in a way, a genuine, sincere sort, if perhaps without Jack's eye for analysis, or his delightful old-man cynicism.

And once Jack shifted his eyes to Samantha, it was fireworks. Antoinette leaned back a little, giving enough space for the two to react to each other without her interference, even as Jack's back lay along her thighs. The two stared at each other, blinking, confusion on both their faces. Jack's broke first, understanding coming through, and he offered his mother a small smile.

"... hi... Mom."

"Jack! Oh god, Jack!" The world vanished for Samantha Terry. In the moment, there was only her, and her son, her long lost son. She grabbed him, yanked him off Antoinette's lap, and crushed him in her embrace.

Antoinette smiled as she watched them, and let the joy pour. Her childe, a sweet, innocent woman, did not hold back. She wailed, and her motherly — if small — voice echoed in the metal chamber. Poor Jack was going to break in half with how hard she clutched him, and while the boy let his arms go limp



at first, with a few moments to collect himself, he returned her hug. The two merged into each other, clutching, trembling, until Antoinette felt an urge to cry flutter up her chest.

How long had it been since she had felt such a feeling? An eternity. She clutched the scene with her eyes almost as hard Samantha clutched her son with her arms. No words could describe the expression on her face, except for, perhaps, painful rapture.