

~~Julias~~

Everything had fallen apart in a matter of seconds. When it was just the six hunters, he and his childe could have handled the situation easily. Even Angela, for all her absurd might and endurance, was only human. Six humans? He could have handled this himself.

Having to work quickly, break through Angela's defenses, deal with a magical barrier, and save Samantha, threw a wrench into what would have otherwise been simple. Unless the hunters managed to nail him with a shotgun or Molotov, he could shrug off the bullets easily enough. It wasn't like they'd use a grenade or a high caliber sniper rifle inside a hospital. Hell, even the guy with the assault rifle wasn't too bad to deal with; a bullet going through him instead of tearing him up was less damaging to a vampire.

But, he hadn't predicted running into the Begotten, Sándor. A colossal mistake. He knew the nightmare horrors couldn't use their full ability outside of the nightmare realm, so he'd been confident that, even if he came across the monster, he could handle him with Jack's help. Another mistake. Whoever this man was, whatever cosmic entity of fear and terror had merged with him, it had given the beast incredible vigor. Julias was as likely to win a battle of strength against this brute, as he was against Maria or Michael.

Using Angela against the Begotten had been the best he could manage, but once the two of them were down and fighting each other, there'd been nothing to stop the remaining hunters, and the four new ones, from unleashing Hell upon him. Shit.

Julias froze, staring, glaring, as the wall of bullets smashed into him, tore into him, ripped his suit apart, hacked through skin and muscle, and cracked bone. Most of the hunters didn't use armor piercing rounds; they wanted maximum torn flesh, and used hollow-point rounds instead. He growled as he felt the metal shred him, until he could do nothing but stand there, pinned to the wall by the momentum of dozens of bullets hitting him.

He knew bone had become exposed. Bone, muscle, some old organs, random parts of his body giving way under the sudden onslaught. His left arm screamed in agony, as did his left leg, as bullets ripped them open. He tried to look down, but couldn't, as a bullet crashed against his skull, his Kindred bone and its hollow-point nature the only thing keeping it from sinking into his brain and knocking him unconscious.

Going into torpor wasn't an option. He had to save Jack. A quick glance at the kid showed that, in the chaos, blood, bullets, and spraying bits of wall, Jack had managed to win his struggle against Angela, despite the dozen bullets he'd taken. His success was rewarded by a Begotten grabbing him from behind, ready to break him in half.

No. Julias would not allow that. Whatever it took, whatever happened, he would not let them capture, or kill, his childe.

He looked back to the six hunters shooting at him, and held up a hand. First, defense. He summoned the vitae in his core, summoned the Beast with it, and brought it to the surface. The monster within, dormant, contained, he let rise like a dragon disturbed from slumber. The growling monster rushed up to his skin, and it howled through the bullet holes in his body, through the clenched teeth of the ancilla Ventrue, and flooded his frame with Kindred blood. Literally. The running, living liquid washed over Julias's body, and where skin, tendon, and muscle had been ripped apart by the hail of metal, his blood pulled double duty, protecting, and forcing it to move. He was a Kindred, and a Ventrue. He didn't need muscles to move, only his will.

As the bullets crashed into the crimson liquid, they broke upon it like sand thrown against a wall. What bits of metal managed to pierce the flowing waves of blood coursing over him, did not reach the Kindred underneath. He was impervious to their weapons, while his vitae lasted. He had to be done with this quickly, before the inevitable.

The hunters had done a good job of avoiding his eyes before, but once they'd turned him into a target for their shooting gallery, they had no choice but to look at him. With all the muzzle flashes, and three hunters holding a flashlight directly at him, the darkness did not hide his gaze; they had no choice but to be able to see his eyes.

He grinned through the flowing waves of crimson, and reached out with his mind.

“Kill your comrades.”

To ask anyone to do something wholly against their nature was difficult. To ask a hunter to do so was extremely difficult. To do it to three of them at once, almost impossible. To do it, while they were shooting him, while he summoned up the blood barrier? Viktor would have been proud of him.

The three closer hunters immediately turned on their partners, and Hell broke loose. The other three were quick on the draw, and immediately grappled with their friends, grabbing their guns and taking them out of the equation. They'd had training for this sort of thing, then. But, three on three,

meant that no more hunters were free to shoot at him. And Elen could do nothing but watch from her chair, glaring and angry, as the six hunters became a free-for-all mess of punches and kicks.

He looked beside him, and winced as the Begotten slammed Jack's head into the wall. A splatter of Kindred blood soaked the surface, before burning away with tiny flames, as the boy fell down, rolling onto his back. Jack had managed to knock Angela around a little, hurt her, leaving her bruised and probably concussed, but the Begotten was mostly fine. Angela, only moments before, had stabbed him several times under Julias's Dominate, cutting through the skin and muscle around the man's shoulders, and for all Sándor's power, it didn't seem like extreme regeneration was one of them.

With a small grin on his lips that he just couldn't seem to get rid of, Julias walked up behind the Begotten, and when the monster turned around, likely tipped off by the ceasing gunfire, Julias drove his fist into the man's face. It wasn't like a Ventrue couldn't tap into strength and Kindred Vigor with extreme effect, it was just far harder for them than Nos or Daeva. And, letting his Beast come to the surface like a tidal wave, was hitting him with power he hadn't felt in decades. With the extra vitae sunk into it, he summoned enough strength to punch a hole through a brick wall, and he put that force into Sándor's face.

“Get the fuck off my childe.”

Earlier, a glance at Sándor's eyes had made it obvious breaking his mind would be difficult, and take time. So he resorted to brute strength, like Triss would. He didn't have the vitae to waste doing that, inefficient as hell for a Ventrue, but he had to put the Begotten out of commission, now. The coursing blood flowed over him, drained him to near starving, but got his body working, kept it working, and would protect him; it was now or never. Jack was staring at him, and considering the amount of bone and withered muscle Julias was showing, he no doubt looked like a fucking monstrosity. He'd yet to enter one of the nightmares to see what the nightmare monsters looked like, but he'd read the reports, and Julias probably didn't look too far off right now.

The hunters he'd broken wouldn't stay under his control for long. Sharp blows to the head, or a few minutes of freedom, would eventually release them from the very weak control he'd put them under. But a few minutes was enough time to beat this fucking asshole into oblivion.

He reached down, one of his arms showing the bones of his forearm, knuckles, and some fingers. It was enough to make Sándor open his eyes in what Julias could only guess was fear. Making a literal nightmare horror afraid of him? Yes, that stroked a Ventrue's ego just fine. He rewarded the man by grabbing his shoulders, picking him up, and throwing him into the other wall, hard. Before the man

could fall, the Ventrue shoulder checked him, driving his weight into the smaller man's chest hard enough to earn a spray of blood from his mouth.

The only thing that kept this from being a horrible Masquerade violation, was that the hallway was unlit, and they were fighting at the end of it, so its length managed to blanket some of the insanity in darkness. A quick glance showed none of the nurses or anyone had left their staff rooms, but the fight had only been going on for a minute. Someone was bound to show up sooner or later, take a picture, or try and get involved. The list of reasons to deal with this in the next thirty seconds was growing.

As Sándor started to fall, back flat to the wall, Julias drove his knee upward, catching the man's head as it drifted forward, and smashed the man's mouth and nose. The crunch of broken cartilage and breaking teeth was satisfying. The thud of his skull hitting the wall from the hit, and the crack it left in the hard white surface, was even more satisfying. Blood flowed over Julias's knee, and Sándor went limp, body falling forward until it hit the hospital floor with a wet crunch from his face.

Julias smirked as he walked over to Jack, reached down, winked at him, and picked up Angela. Break her neck this time, quickly now. A memory tickled him, one of Rebecca, smashing his head in with a hammer, and leaving him for dead in a burning building. She'd caught him off guard then, hadn't given him the time to build up to something like this. And, at the time, his childe hadn't been in danger. Jack was in danger now, and there was no way in hell Julias was going to—

He fell to a knee, and let go of the one-eyed woman before he'd even had a chance to squeeze. She stumbled back, landing on her ass beside Jack, and she froze as she stared up at him as well. The blood that coated him, protected him, started to fade, and he growled as he felt his insides run dry. Doing so much, so quickly, brought the world into a blurry haze, and ripped the strength out of him. The Beast in him, the creature he normally kept deep down in its cave, roared in frustration, as it ran hungry.

He looked beside him at the Begotten. Groaning and growling as well, Sándor pushed himself up onto his hands, and then struggled to get up, blood flowing out of his mouth and nose as one of his hands pressed to the wall. And get up, he did. Angela's face bled in a similar mess, beaten in by Jack, and while she may have been mentally ready to get back up and fight him, her body disagreed with her. Her attempts to get up failed, and she vomited onto the floor, the concussion and blood loss mixing into a powerful concoction of misery for her. She was out of the fight, for a few minutes, at least. Sándor was another matter entirely.

Julias tried to stand up. His body didn't listen. The Beast in him raged and shrieked, but for all its fury, Julias's body was broken and empty. No more vitae to draw upon, no more blood, no more

strength, no more anything. The flowing dark crimson that covered his bones and forced his body to work, despite missing a myriad of muscle and tendons, ceased. Only the withered ligaments kept his bony arm and leg from falling apart entirely

Jack was struggling to get back up. After a blow like that, anyone his age would have been in torpor, and out of the fight until a day's sleep. Not Jack. The kid's dented head was healing over right before Julias's eyes, same as it would for him, and Viktor; not as fast, but far faster than a vampire his age should have been able to.

But then, that was Jack being Jack. He'd make it through this, somehow, even if Julias didn't. The kid always did.

Julias tried to stand up again, and he bit back the desire to scream as pain flooded him. Exposed insides, bones, withered organs, and worse, drops of Kindred blood fell to the floor around him, lifeless, useless to him. Get up. Get the fuck up. He grit his teeth, and bit down another scream, as he forced himself up to his feet.

As blood flowed down Sándor's face, he looked down at Angela and Jack, the two of them a mess of blood and wounds. Another, short-lived hint of sadness crossed his face, and he bit his lip, before he looked over to Julias. There it was again, something that crossed his eyes, something heavy, something Julias recognized from his own mirror. A moment later it was gone, and the monster walked toward him.

"Sand," Angela said, gargling, coughing up more blood and puke, before she managed to get herself onto a palm and elbow. "Kill... Mire... Capture Jack."

The monster nodded, and walked up to Julias. Apology was written into his eyes, but he said nothing. The short man grabbed Julias by the shirt, and drew back his other fist. The silhouette of the gargyle monster filled the hallway, and the array of claws it sported on one of its hands aimed themselves at Julias's face.

Julias managed to catch Jack's panicked eyes, and he offered his childe a small smile. You'll get out of this, kid. One way or another, you'll get out of this. I'll make sure of it.

Julias found the last bit of him, the final ounces of whatever strength he had left, scraping the bottom of the barrel for whatever remained in his corpse body, the tiny shred that kept him out of torpor. It was enough, just barely, to twist his body, and let the monster's momentum roll with him, as Julias grabbed his shoulder with a hand. Hard to bodyslam a man who wasn't wearing a shirt, but he

managed, grabbing the wrist of the punching arm with his other hand, and throwing the Begotten over him into the floor.

He dropped his weight straight down with his knee, down onto Sándor's chest, and made sure to put some momentum into it, jumping a few inches so he could put all of his weight into the knee. Crunch. Sándor coughed up blood again, a lot of it, before rolling onto his side, clutching his chest as he went fetal.

Julias, unable to get back up after that, managed to turn and face Jack while on his knees, his back to the hallway corner where the hunters were fighting each other.

"Jack," he said. "Get out of here."

"What?" Good, the kid was capable of talking. If he could talk, he could think, and could act. The world was nothing but a blur to Julias at this point, and the aching hunger in his gut was loud enough to tell him he was empty, and drifting into torpor. That was fine.

"Get out of here. Run."

"Fuck that! I'm not leaving you, or Mom."

"If my guess is right, someone from the Invictus will be here soon, or the dragons. They'll get you out of here." The Beast within Julias roared at the top of its lungs, demanding he get up and fight. Sorry Mr. Beast, would if I could.

"I'm not—"

"Jack." He sighed, and offered his childe a gentle smile. "You can't save her if you're dead."

"I—"

"Jack." Julias shook his head, before he glanced Angela's way. The woman was drifting in and out of consciousness, struggling against her blood loss and her damaged head. "The hunters I've Dominated, might be another minute. We don't have time to debate. They want you alive. Use that, and get out of here." He could hear them struggling in the back, fists hitting flesh, and an old woman's sharp barks of orders.

"We're not doing this," the kid said. "We're not doing this last stand bullshit. You're—" Angela's groans drew his gaze as well, and Jack reached out for the gun beside him, likely with a desire to shoot her. But his skull was still a half-ruined mess, and his attempts to grab the pistol forced him to roll onto his side, screaming in pain.

Sándor groaned as well, and Julias looked over his shoulder to make sure the man was still down. He was; not that Julias could do anything if he wasn't. Julias couldn't move. His body was paralyzed. Every inch of him refused to move as he knelt there, arms limp at his sides. Torpor was moments away. He doubted its heavy embrace would find him before the hunters managed to either escape his Dominate, or knocked out the ones who had been brainwashed.

“Jack.” Julias tried to lift his arms again, purely out of habit. They weren't budging. Using his body in a fist fight, driving it to such an extreme, had damaged it greatly. Pile on the hundreds of bullets, and his empty vitae reserves, it was like trying to move a mountain. He was done, no matter how much his Beast might roar and fight to say otherwise.

“Julias, please... don't...”

“Sorry Jack. I... I pushed myself a bit hard, here.” He got cocky; Ventrue do that from time to time, and it was a harsh way to teach his childe this lesson. Julias found his head collapsing forward, the weight of it too much to bear. His back slumped, and he fought against gravity to stay kneeling. “Tell her, for me.”

“Tell... tell Mom what?”

Julias managed something like a laugh, though it was more of a whispered chuckle as his lungs refused to cooperate. “Tell... Triss... everything...”

Jack got his head up, his weight on his side, but he managed to get a palm underneath him so he could force himself into a half sit, half lay. When he finally looked Julias's way, his eyes were wide, and a mix of anger and terror was in them; anger because of the hunters, and terror, because his sire was going to die. Poor kid.

“Please Julias! Don't... do—”

Footsteps silenced his childe. Julias tried to turn his head around to look at them, but he couldn't. Everything was going dark, and torpor crept up his spine, demanding he sleep. Only a mouthful of fresh human blood would stave off torpor now, and unless one of the hunters was feeling generous, they wouldn't give it to him.

“K... Kill him,” Angela said, coughing up another wad of blood, her bruising neck straining. “Kill Mire.”

Julias managed a smile. It'd be in the hunter's favor to capture him, but Angela wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. Good, this was better.

As his eyelids grew too heavy to keep from falling, he managed one more smile for Jack, before his eyes closed. As he heard the boots of a hunter come up behind him, he let his mind drift to Triss.

God, she was going to be mad, him being a reckless idiot like this. Hopefully Jennifer could comfort her. He pitied whoever the messenger was; it'd probably be Jack, too. Poor kid again.

Triss. Her smile, beautiful, and the way it sat between two sets of crocodile teeth always gave him a thrill. Her snake eyes, even more beautiful. Her touch, her embrace, the feel of her body, the way she laughed when she thought she was winning, and the way she got obstinate and juvenile when she didn't. The way she was super playful when she was happy and comfortable, like a cat. The sound of her purrs. Th—

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~~Jack~~

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Julias!”

The hunter sank a bullet into the back of his sire's skull, and a mess of gore exploded outward, scattering and turning into sparks and embers, before becoming dust. The first bullet sent Julias onto his stomach, and the next two were done as the man became nothing more than a still corpse. Executed, like Jack had done to a hunter only moments before.

Jack stared on, mouth open, jaw hanging, as his sire faded. The man, half skeleton at that point, had held a smile, and gave Jack what could only be described as a loving look, before the telltale flames of a dead Kindred took him. His suit, his skin, his muscles, organs, bones, all of it, turned into ash as it vanished into an almost gentle puff of smoke and flame. In the darkness of the hallway, it was a soft light, something that lit the faces of everyone watching, enough for Jack to see them.

The hunters did not look happy. Some of them looked a bit sad, if he was reading them right. Did they not want this? Sándor was out of commission, the brutal, ridiculously strong monster beaten by a Ventrue. Angela lay on the floor not far from Jack, trying to sit up, trying to see what had happened, but managing only the dry heaves of extreme nausea and pain.



As the small mound of ash that was once Julias spread over the dark hallway floor, Jack looked passed it, to Elen and her hunters, and found something different on her. She looked happy. Satisfied.

All Jack felt, was fury. Blinding, white fury. It coursed up through him, made pain disappear, and sent vitae pouring through his limbs. Thick Kindred blood engulfed his wounds, filled them, rendered them moot, as his vampire body demanded he moved, as the Beast demanded he moved. He needed to be able to move to kill them all, and he was going to kill them all.

Julias had been smiling. His sire had spent his last moments trying to save Jack's life, and died doing so. He'd spent his last moments smiling at him, in that typical 'this is alright, don't worry about it' sort of way. His last god damn fucking moments, and he did his usual 'you got this' smile.

Jack's insides wrenched, vitae mixing and coursing, while his muscles wanted him to vomit again, and again, and again. It wouldn't happen. All he could feel was every muscle in his body flexing, the memory of his sire's eyes, his smile, his ashes, hitting every nerve in his frame like fire.

Don't be dead, please don't be dead. God, please, please don't... don't be...

The pile of ashes before him mocked him, a testament to yet another thing that was Jack's fault. Another thing he couldn't fix.

He squeezed his fists until his arms shook, and forced himself up, even as the world swayed before him. Kill them. Kill them. Kill them all.

"Stay down," Elen said, her stupid old granny voice weak and pathetic.

He ignored her. Get up. Get the fuck up. Get up, kill them all. Ignore the pain, ignore the spinning world, ignore the wounds. Let it flow, let the blood flow, theirs and yours.

Stand up, he did. He demanded it, forced it, didn't care if his body was willing to do it or not. Vitae surged through him, Kindred blood fueling his will. Stand up. Stand up, and kill them. Kill—

White. Complete, total, all consuming, all encompassing white.

He froze and looked around at the white that surrounded him. It was the same white that had flashed in his vision when he executed that hunter. Endless white, as if God had decided to hit the reset button on the universe, but forgotten to turn off the light. There was no feeling or weight to it; might as well have been walking on floating clouds with the color depth of white plastic.

Without the hunters around him, without the smell of blood, without the pain of his wounds, his fury diminished, and his mind started working again. Where were the hunters, the blood, pain, and wounds?

“Oh... kay...” What the fuck. He reached down and pressed on the floor, but his brain registered no feeling to it. Looking down did show that he was naked though. Naked, and without the wounds that Angela had dealt to him tonight.

Angela. He squeezed his knuckles as he remembered how many times she'd shot him tonight alone. A dozen? And those bullets really fucked him up, tore him apart. A bullet that went straight through was barely a wound to a Kindred, but a hollow-point round that tore up flesh and got lodged in the body, was a lot deadlier. Sándor smashing his head into a wall hard enough to crack the bone, had scrambled his circuits so bad, he hadn't been able to move. All those wounds had ceased to exist.

He sighed. Was he dead? He supposed it didn't matter, since Beatrice was going to kill him anyway. He was tempted to let her. She was going to blame him for Julias's death, in a moment of rage and grief, and she was going to cut into him. He'd let her. She'd say that he died trying to save a fucking kine, a human, someone Jack should have left behind long ago. He'd agree.

Maria and Michael? They'd punish him. Leaving his sweeper team early had no doubt earned some sort of punishment, but that spiraling into this, into his sire dying, was beyond horrible. They might execute him, as a warning tale to all other Kindred to always obey orders. Jessy and Damien would protest, but it's not like they could stop the two elders.

The white world he found himself in gave him a moment of peace, at least. The fury that bubbled through him, threatening to blister and boil his skin and insides, lessened, now that he was out of the scene. Without Angela's face to stare at, the heat in his guts lowered enough that he found himself fending off the rising need to cry.

Mary was dead, and now Julias was dead. Sighing, Jack clutched at his naked chest, and fell down, ass hitting the strange white surface, hard enough to elicit pain but finding none. He sat there, staring down between his knees at the white oblivion, and let the misery rise. His emotions were raw, and no matter how much he looked for his trusty logic switch, he couldn't find it. His earlier run-in with Mary had left his guts exposed, soul shredded, and nothing he could do now could hide its bleeding surface. Sadness, agony, regret, guilt, it all washed over him, digging at him with a knife in his guts.

Jack rolled up into a ball, and lay on his side. Julias was dead. Dead. His sire was dead. His friend was dead. Oh god. Oh fucking god.

After a minute of paralyzing agony, movement forced his eyes open, and he sat up with a jolt. He stared, eyes analyzing the strange, floating shadow that stood before him, and he gulped down on nothing.

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be to a shadow monster on the plains of oblivion.

The monster creature stood over him, a flowing wave of mist, shadow, darkness, and wings. Onyx poured over itself, and from within the churning waves of its black smoke, he could see other things, too: claws, feathers, some red eyes that belonged on a snake, a beak... with teeth, many things. It was like he was staring at an amalgamation of beasts, of the sort of creatures Kindred identified with. Crow, snake, fox, wolf, rat, pieces of those things were all there, inside this flowing mass of darkness that stood six feet tall.

It was a Beast. He knew it, somehow. Some part of him knew.

He was looking at his Beast.

The chains, though, he didn't understand those. Chains wrapped the shadowy creature, with enormous locks of rusted iron dangling from around its body. How could chains remain hooked around something that looked like it was made of smoke and shadow? Metaphor. It was a metaphor for being bound.

"... are you... my Beast?" Might as well ask.

The monstrosity said nothing. It probably wasn't capable of it. But, despite the communication barrier, several of the flowing heads blinked their red eyes at him before disappearing into the murk of its body. One of them nodded.

"Am I... dead?"

The monster shook its heads.

"Then, I don't understand. What's going on? Where am I? I—this is in my head, isn't it? This is one of those 'life flashes before your eyes' sort of things, right?"

The monster nodded.

"And... you summoned me, for this heart to heart? I suppose you'd want to have one, if I got us both killed." With a sigh and groan, Jack forced himself back up onto his feet. "I really hate you, you know that? First person I ever killed was an innocent woman, and that's on you."

A blurry, shadowy image of her face appeared in the air, covered in blood, like some sort of holographic projection his mind decided to torture him with. His mind, or the Beast. Not the face of her on the news, either, but the face Jack was most intimate with, the dead Mrs. Pavala, the one he'd found when he'd awoken from his frenzy, with puncture marks in her neck.

“Yeah, her. Fuck you, you fucking... monster.” Insulting it for its bloodlust made as much sense as insulting any animal for chasing a meal.

The image changed, to Julias, his final moments as a juggernaut of unstoppable... protection. There was no rage on his face, just a cocky smile, and a concern for Jack written in his eyes, in a way only Jack would recognize.

Before Jack could say anything to this fucking abomination tormenting him, the image changed again. This time, he didn't recognize it, and he stared, curious, at the two people. Julias, and Viktor. The clothes suggested sometime around World War I, and based on the positions of the two men, it looked like Viktor was draining Julias of his blood; and not by Julias's choice.

The image was more than the two men. Somehow, the Beast extended the scene, filling it, showing Jack the environment, the lighting, the smell, the sounds, despite it being a frozen moment. The beast also took the courtesy of giving Jack back his clothes and shoes whilst setting the scene, how nice of it.

Julias's mansion, or rather, Viktor's mansion, at the time, now surrounded them.. There was more though. Within Viktor, on him, around him, the shadowy waves of a Beast floated, normally invisible. And as the elder vampire killed Julias, preparing him for the embrace, the darkness of Viktor's Beast moved into the corpse, infecting, duplicating.

When Viktor set his bloodied wrist to Julias's mouth in the next frozen moment, and forced a heavy drop of the thick, dark liquid into Julias's mouth, the shadowy creature inside Jack's sire awoke.

There were chains. Jack walked around the two figures, frozen in time, and listened to the classical music playing in the background, as he watched a Beast be born within Julias. The shadowy creature inside Viktor had chains, just like the Beast floating next to Jack. And the new one, awakening inside the corpse that was Julias, had them as well. Dark, rusty things, that circled around and around the black cloud, sealed with massive stained locks, and a few dangling giant balls of metal.

“The... the chains, they don't seem... right. Do other Kindred have chains around them?”

The Beast shook its heads, somehow. Images of Kindred Jack knew appeared, Damien and Jessy and Natasha, Antoinette and others. Their Beasts were blurry, and lacked detail. Made sense, Jack supposed. If this Beast was showing him his family tree, it might have more detail to draw on, like a genetic memory. It was the only way it could show him something he'd never seen, Julias being sired. However it was doing what it was doing, his Beast knew the utmost detail of what came before it, but didn't seem to be able to show him much about other people.

There were only the swirling masses of shadow in the other Kindred, claws and talons, wings and beaks, and tails. No chains or locks or rope. The Beast was showing him what was hidden, secret. Jack knew. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

The Beasts in the others were contained within the Kindred, but they weren't chained, bound, limited. The prison that wrapped Jack's Beast, and Viktor's, and Julias's, wasn't normal.

Before Jack could inquire about how his inner monster was able to see other Beasts, the myriad of Kindred shown to him vanished, as did Julias, Viktor, and the mansion. The white world grew hazy for a moment, before shapes grew solid, and the familiar comfort of streets, walls, and windows surrounded him. He didn't recognize the place though, except that it was night, and it was outside. He was on a thin street, and a glance down showed the road was cobblestone, not asphalt or anything like that.

There weren't any people outside, and the street lamps weren't lit. Lit being the operative word. Wherever he was, it was a period of time before electric street lamps, but street lamps nonetheless.

Beside him, between two buildings of warped wood and bent stone, was Viktor. He didn't look anything like the Viktor Jack remembered. His long hair was disheveled, a mess around his torn and dirty clothes. Very old, very dirty clothes. This must have been over three hundred years ago. A tall woman was hugging him too tight for a normal hug, and Jack stared as the curvaceous woman sank her fangs into his grandsire's neck.

This was the moment Viktor was embraced.

Jack stepped in closer, and blinked as he realized the woman, a blonde with pale skin, and legs almost as long as Antoinette's, had her thighs spread. Viktor was having sex with her. Man, if people knew this was the circumstance Viktor was in when he was sired, poor and fucking a whore, it'd have damaged his image greatly. The woman was beautiful though, and Jack stared a little harder than he should have at how her white rags around her legs were spread, and chest pulled down, exposing one of her large breasts.

This woman was a vampire, though, and from the feel Jack was getting from her, she was no fledgling. She had some decades on her. Centuries. This elder, this woman, who seemed perfectly content to play the role of nothing more than a 1600s prostitute, was killing Viktor, mid sex, so she could embrace him.

"Who... is she?"

The Beast did not respond. Of course it didn't. It didn't seem to be able to use words, and everything it showed Jack was a combination of the five senses, scents and sounds, taste and touch, and

things to see. Jack could feel the air of the night, wherever they were, and he could hear the clop clop of shoes and hooves against the cobblestone, despite how everything was a single frozen moment of time. He could hear Viktor's quiet moans, and her moans matching his, despite how tightly her lips were sealed on his neck. She was enjoying herself.

“Did they know each other before this? I find it hard to believe she'd sire him if she just ran into him, randomly, and offered a quick fuck in a dark alley.”

Sure enough, the image changed. It cut to an earlier time, maybe a few years earlier; he could only tell because Viktor looked younger. Younger, and far better off. He wore a pretty fancy suit fitting the time period, and was sitting at a table with other people and fancy utensils. The woman was there again, but judging from where she was sitting and where her eyes were glancing, she was with another man. Not a vampire though. A ghoul, maybe? The only Beast at the table was her, and like the Beast taking Jack on this ridiculous journey through the past, the chains still wrapped her.

So Viktor had been well off in life, and the vampire woman, likely having some games with her nightlife, was involved somehow. At this point in history, it wasn't like she had to worry about technology. She could probably dress up as a prostitute whenever she wanted, or pretend to be a luxurious, rich woman whenever she wanted. Whatever this stranger was doing, she was drawing the eyes of multiple men, and one woman, at the table. She wasn't a Daeva, she was a Ventrue, and it was through sheer confidence and allure, that she'd captured everyone's attention.

The Beast inside her struggled, fighting against its chains, but the woman only smiled.

The image of the inside of the large establishment vanished, and so did the characters within. Wiped away like sand, the white oblivion that surrounded him appeared for a second, before it disappeared again as another image overlaid it.

Jack gulped, and stared at the sight of three naked women, writhing on a bed. A man sat in a chair beside them, but whoever he was, he looked thoroughly drained. He was dead, naked, body completely still on a very hard looking wooden chair. The signs of a Kiss victim were blatant, along with what looked like the liquid remains of a very, very good time on his crotch.

There was a man behind him, too, standing behind the chair, blending into the shadows. A Mekhet or Nosferatu using Cloak of Night, maybe? Whoever he was, he had a Beast, though no chains bound its form. He wore black robes that hid him from head to toe, and Jack could only just barely make out an expression on his face from within the hood: disappointment. His eyes were cast upon the bed, on the three women writhing on it.

Jack looked back to the women on the ancient-looking bed. He guessed it was a feather mattress, and some fur blankets, all on a bed frame that looked like it was made of the same sort of carved, curvy wood the chair was made of. He looked up and around, and frowned as he analyzed the walls of logs, and a nearby stove made of stones. Was that safe? Didn't stones crack and break when hot enough?

Knowledge of antiquated technology aside, he could only guess he was maybe a couple centuries before the moment Viktor had been sired. Not long after the Medieval Ages then, if he was guessing right. That alone made what he was looking at pretty unique. Three women, naked, rubbing each other all over.

The woman in the middle was human, and she was being Kissed, the long deep Kiss that'd eventually kill her. It was the woman who had sired Viktor. Her legs were spread, and Jack could see the sexual juices between her thighs, a mix of a man's, and her own, as the two women fingered her. Both women were draining her, and it was obvious the woman in the center, his great grandsire, was having the time of her life as she was brought closer and closer to death.

Then, one of the women beside her, a pale, short woman with long black hair, set her wrist to the woman's mouth. A Beast awoke inside the woman between the vampires, like someone tossing fire onto a dry parchment. The black, twisting abomination awoke within her, and grew within moments. Only the chains that surrounded it kept it from overwhelming her.

Jack stood beside the bed, and stared down at the naked women responsible for the siring. While her friend was a tall, curvy woman, red hair with freckles, it was the brunette that was Jack's great, great grandsire. She looked young, too young to be in a threesome. Looks were deceiving though, and upon inspection, he had to admit she looked older than Natasha; which wasn't a fair comparison he supposed, since Natasha looked far younger than she was. And of course, Jack looked younger than his age, too.

Age aside, he took a moment to analyze her. A bit over five feet, with some curve to her for a small woman, more muscle and health than he expected anyone from this time period to have. She'd been groomed for her embrace, then, as the dead and soon-to-be undead woman between her and her vampire friend must have been.

And the brunette's Beast struggled against its chains as well. Whatever these chains were that other Kindred didn't seem to have, they went back a long, long way into Jack's family history.

"I don't understand. Why are you showing me all of this? ... and how? Last I checked, I'm currently about to get captured by Angela and a bunch of hunters. I don't have time for this soap opera!"

None of this helps me.” Or did he have time? Speed of the mind. Speed of thought. Speed of the subconscious. It was the only possible explanation.

The image changed again, and suddenly they were in the streets of what he could only guess was some old city in Europe. Jack’s history sucked, and his geography sucked too, but considering how old it all looked, and how horrible it smelled, it had to be the medieval ages now. The darkness hid many details, and damn it was quiet. This was an age when people actually slept during the night, when they hid in their homes from wolves and crusaders alike.

“Holy fuck. How far back can you remember?” he said to the hovering, smoky mass beside him. “How far back can... I remember? Fuck, will I even remember any of this, when I snap back to reality?” No, he imagined he wouldn’t. Maybe a haze, like a dream. Whatever was happening to him wasn’t normal, and it wasn’t something any other Kindred had ever spoken of. Torpor dreams could be strange and vivid, but this was something else.

The Beast said nothing, but it showed him everything. It looked up with some of its heads, and Jack followed its gaze up to see the moon, half hidden in clouds. There weren’t any street lamps anymore, nothing lit. There were a couple people moving around with lanterns held in hand, always in pairs, and they had rags held up to their face. Yeah, it smelled horrible, nasty horrible, and the rats were everywhere.

Jack froze, and slowly turned around in a circle. Rats. The rats were everywhere. Crows sat upon the sloped roofs of the old buildings, stone and wood, and they cawed into the night air, as the rats scurried along the walls. It wasn’t them that smelled, it was the shit, and the bodies.

A body sat in the street beside him, on his side and clutching his stomach. Dead. Dead for days actually, considering how sunken the skin was, and how some rats were gnawing on his toes through worn shoes. Another body was beside him, a woman, and they were thrown over each other like they knew each other. Family, maybe. There was no way any city would leave corpses in the streets like this. They stank horribly, and since the smell was mixed with shit from an ancient and horrible plumbing system, Jack didn’t have to work very hard to figure out what time period he was in.

This was during the Black Plague. What in the actual fuck.

“Ok, I’m guessing you’re showing me our bloodline. And so far, it seems like our bloodline is Julias, to Viktor, to another elder vampire, to another elder vampire.” A short chain of people, very powerful people, forged over centuries. He turned to face the hovering Beast beside him, and glared at it. It simply hovered there, chains dangling and clinking, before it moved to a window.



And then Jack was inside the building. A house from this era wasn't exactly clean or luxurious living. The houses were decently large, two floors, with glass windows that were difficult to see through. The Beast took him upstairs, and he followed, expecting creaks and groans from the wood, but finding none. It wasn't real, just a moment in time, and nothing Jack did would affect it. He couldn't change the past; assuming this was the past, and not some sort of pre-death hallucination.

The woman, the small one with the black hair, his great, great grandsire, was kneeling in front of another vampire, a man, someone dressed in the garb of the church. *Lancea et Sanctum*? Whatever was happening, it wasn't good for her. She was on her knees, a drawn circle surrounding her, and various objects peppered the floor. A crucifix, complete with Jesus, and other things sat around the circle: a spear, a necklace with a cross, and other objects Jack didn't recognize. The vampire standing in front of her was chanting something in Latin, and reading from a book that was definitely not the Bible. Testament of Longinus, maybe?

The chains, the invisible, circling, encompassing, stifling chains on the woman's Beast, weren't present. No, wait, yes they were, just half invisible. They were coming out of the circle, out of the floor, out of the objects the priest had laid around. Not priest, bishop, a member of the Sanctified probably. Only in the moment of this freeze frame, was her Beast bound by the chains. Jack's ancestor screamed and shrieked, pounded her hands against the air, but could not escape whatever sort of binding circle the bishop had created. It was like that barrier Jack dealt with tonight, the ones the hunters made with some black powder. Magic? Theban Sorcery, like what Lucas had used against the Prince?

The bishop was doing something to Jack's ancient predecessor, binding her Beast, limiting it. Why? Why not just kill her, if he wanted to stop her.

Wait. This was the man who was watching the threesome, the one with disappointment on his face, the guy standing behind the dead dude on the chair. What sort of insanity was going on? Who were these people? This... this must have been like the madness in Dolareido, the strange relationships between ancient Kindred, manipulating each other. The *Danse Macabre*. There was no way his Beast would be able to explain to him the complicated relationships he was seeing unfold before him.

With a swipe of one of its shadowy limbs, the Beast wiped away the image, and replaced it with something new. Same city, same stench of dead, same scurrying of rats in the dark, and fluttering of crow wings against the cloudy moonlight. Dozens of shadows, dozens of moving bodies, dozens of tiny eyes in the obsidian death of the night.

No, not the same. There were far more rats, and far more crows. The two animals, denizens of cities as much as any kine or Kindred, overflowed the streets, poured down alleys, and scurried up the

warped, aging wooden walls of homes. No living walked the street, not this late, and what should have been silence, was a constant white noise of rat claws on rock, and rat squeaks. The hundreds of crows that sat upon building roofs made no noise, except for some occasional wing flutters and caws. White noise, a lot of it, to the point it was overwhelming.

Jack stared at the mountain before him, something very out of place in the road. Ten feet high, the mound covered the street completely, and spread out onto all the streets that connected to what Jack guessed was some sort of town center. The mountain didn't belong there. Neither did the woman sitting atop it. But there she sat on a simple three-leg wooden stool, a big grin on her face, and her manic eyes staring down at the havoc she'd wrought.

The mountain, was made out of bodies. At least a hundred bodies, piled onto each other, bleeding, rotting, and providing a feast for the rats. The little creatures gnawed and chewed at the flesh of the dead, and the woman upon them smiled down at her flock. Blood soaked her face, moonlight catching it enough for Jack to see her. She was wearing loose rags and trousers, and a hat, something a farmer would have worn. Dressed like that, she looked like nothing more than a simple tradesman, her curves hidden by the rags.

She held a sickle in one hand, bloody, dripping, and she held the severed head of a corpse in her other.

Jack gulped as he stared up at her. While the scene was frozen, he could hear her chuckling, and feel the bloodlust flow from her, down over the corpses, and onto the rats and crows. Her army. They scurried around her, moving yet not moving within the frozen memory. A crow perched on her shoulder, and another perched on her hat, a human finger in its beak.

This was the brunette from before, the small woman, his great great grandsire. A serial killer.

No chains bound her Beast, and the more Jack stared, the more she didn't feel like a Kindred. Her Beast was huge, an enormous creature that mixed into the shadows of the streets, the windows, the sky, everything. So titanic and colossal, a gate to Hell must have opened up, to let such a creature out onto the plains of human existence. Free. The Beast within this monster was free to rampage and roam, slaughter and bathe in blood, and indulge every base desire it had. The Black Plague itself couldn't have been its doing, but that didn't mean the woman and her Beast half didn't take advantage.

She was a monster, a bloodthirsty monster upon her throne of corpses, and the rats and crows obeyed her.

“I... I don't understand. She's... she's a Ventrue, right?” He looked to his Beast, and frowned at the chains that bound it. Bound as it was, his Beast was the same size, shape, and moved in the same way the other Beasts it'd shown him had, of other Kindred not in Jack's bloodline. Another glance to the short woman sitting atop the bodies showed that hers was different. It was more than just its size, it was how it moved, lifting into the air and burying the area in its invisible shadow.

This was a massive Masquerade violation. No Kindred who saw this would let her live. There was no way out of it, no way to explain the situation that didn't involve 'dark creature of the night' in the response. She must have been a menace, and any Kindred who found her would kill her to keep their kind secret. Did the Masquerade even exist in this age? It had to, in some form or another. Maybe it didn't go by that name, but no vampire wants to get caught, or have their food source be enlightened on how to deal with their hunters.

He looked down at the bodies, and the rats that poured over them. The little creatures came out of holes between the limbs, and some holes in the bodies themselves. They were getting fat on the carcasses. Chittering, scampering, they moved with the same one-minded swarming motion that the rats he'd once summoned had. This use of Animalism was awe inspiring, and Jack couldn't help but take a step onto a corpse, and then another, as he stared at his great, great grandsire. Closer he came, closer, ignoring the way the rotting flesh felt under his feet. It didn't respond to him, not really, being a memory and all that, but his Beast was content to make sure he felt it against his shoes. The texture of flesh, some old, some new, coagulating blood, bones, he felt it all through his soles.

At the top of the small mountain, he squatted down beside the stool and the woman who sat on it, and he stared at her eyes. No remorse there, no regret, nothing to suggest compassion for the damage she'd done, or for the damage she was helping magnify. The Black Plague had killed tens of millions, maybe even over a hundred million people in its time. Any vampire with an agenda would have found it easy to take advantage of the carnage, and thrive, immune to disease as they were.

But this woman didn't look like she had an agenda. She looked like she was enjoying herself, with her army of rats and crows. A queen on her throne, a queen of mayhem and destruction. In a city, rats and crows were everywhere, and would come as a natural choice to any Kindred looking to use Animalism. But to use it on this scale, and to pile up bodies like this? No Kindred would do that, and an elder would have struggled to create this mess. This woman looked like she'd been enjoying her midnight stroll, and had randomly decided to summon an army of animals while she slaughtered a hundred people, for fun.

Fuck, she looked like a psychopath.

“So this is what... what she was like, before someone chained her other half down?” He looked down the bodies to his Beast, and it stood at the base of the corpse pile, a pale shade of the enormous silhouette of wings, claws, beaks, fangs, snouts, eyes, and feathers his great, great grandsire’s Beast displayed. “But, she’s not like other Kindred. What happened? What—”

It all vanished. In a blur of black and red, shadow and blood, the images turned into mist, and the textures, the sounds, the horrible smell, it all went away. Jack was left standing on the endless white oblivion, same as before, and his Beast, still wrapped in its chains, was now level with him, hovering beside him.

By this point, Jack knew to just wait, but his mind drifted to where he was a minute before this insanity occurred. He was in a hallway, with Angela, Elen, Sándor, a bunch of hunters, and the ashes of his sire, and friend. He was going to die, the moment this alien entity stopped this journey through his ancestral past. It all felt so pointless, and yet, he wanted to know.

The white oblivion vanished, and darkness replaced it. Jack spun around, looking for his guide on this horrible ‘A Christmas Carol’ rip-off. It was there, hovering beside him, chains still occasionally making their clink clink sounds, and it did not waver, as the world around them descended into the depths. Down, and down, the world sank, and the familiar darkness of earth and its swallowing mouths enveloped them. Tunnels.

Deeper, and deeper, and deeper, down slopes of rock, down landslides of bat shit, down fungus and moss, down wet bones, down a spiral chasm of blanketing weight and cold humidity. Down, and down, into the awaiting arms of the center of the Earth. Each foot down was like a step into a graveyard plot. He could feel the dead above him, thousands, millions, billions. Ages upon ages of dead inside rock and dirt, inside petrified bones and trees, inside amber, inside the darkness that surrounded him.

A tiny fire was the only thing that separated the endless darkness, from the small woman. She wore some rags, dirty trousers and a ripped up shirt; must have not been too far removed from the time period Jack was just in then, by the looks of them. A decade, a century, or two? Hard to tell this far back in time. And upon closer inspection, he realized this woman, crouched and alone at the bottom of this pit, was his great, great grandsire again. She looked battered, but like any Kindred, she didn’t bruise.

She was Kindred, and surprisingly, her Beast looked normal. No longer was it the giant, swirling mass of death and shadow, but something far more subdued, and sneaky. That was the normal essence of Kindred, to be subtle, manipulative, to hide in darkness and strike from it. The colossal Beast he’d

seen in this woman when its chains were off was not that. But now, it had no chains, and it wasn't the titan he saw on the mountain of bodies and rats. It was normal; for a ghostly, inhuman presence.

There were circles on the ground, etched in with stone, the humidity and wet rock of the earth reflecting the small fire. In the center of the circle was his ancestor, and beside her was another vampire, someone who looked an awful lot like her. Way too much like her. Jack blinked down at the vampire, a stake through her shirt, straight into her heart, keeping her paralyzed.

His ancestor held up her hands, as if awaiting rain to fall onto her palms. Why? There was nothing down here. It had to be some sort of cave, the end of one, at the end of some sort of spiraling network of natural tunnels. No living thing existed down here except for insects and whatnot, so it wasn't like a Kindred could do much down here. Hide, sure, but without a regular source of human blood, living down here wasn't an option.

But he looked up to where his ancestor was looking, and froze. The flicker of her small fire was enough for Kindred eyes to see in the dark, but as he looked the crucified mayhem up and down, he wished it wasn't. Total, blinding darkness, would have been better than seeing this.

Only now did he notice the tree of black, and the bodies tied to it, hooked to it, split apart and spread along it. Once his brain registered what he was looking at, the rest of his senses kicked in. It was almost complete silence this deep in the Earth, and the only sound was the crackling of the small fire. It was cold, so far down, and wet. It was the smell that hit him, similar to the smell of the streets of the city he'd been in, but different. There weren't as many bodies, but there was no breeze down here, no fresh air of any kind to cycle out the smell of rot, blood, and shit.

Why was there a tree down here? How the fuck did a tree grow down here? It was dead, but it was big, no leaves but solid branches that had no trouble holding up the remains of what must have been thirteen bodies. Jack stepped closer to it, and eyed the symbols carved into the black bark. He didn't recognize any of them. None looked like the symbols Elen seemed to use, or the symbols the bishop had used, further in the future when he bound this woman's Beast.

Jack turned back to look at his ancestor. The image changed, jumping forward in time, and his ancestor now Kissed the paralyzed vampire. Sister, mother, daughter, he couldn't tell except that the resemblance was obvious. And that made the sight all the more horrific, as his ancestor sucked down the blood of another Kindred. Vitae addiction, and the Vinculum, were two of the three fears that stopped a vampire from feeding on another, but neither meant anything to someone who performed Diablerie.

And it was Diablerie. Jack stared, hands locked at his sides, as the image shifted forward again, and his ancestor was left holding not her relative, but a pile of ash in each palm. She had drained the relative of every shred of their blood and vitae, to the point it killed them. And if legend and myth were to be believed, his ancestor had absorbed more than her blood, but a piece of her soul. No one who performed Diablerie had to worry about suffering the Vinculum for their victim.

It sounded ridiculous, the idea of absorbing, devouring, destroying a soul, but he was looking right at it. His ancestor glowed with a new energy, almost like a new life, and it made Jack's insides freeze. It only grew worse as the woman got up, carried the ashes of her kill to the tree, and rubbed the ashes into the bark.

And when she did, the tree woke up. Flowing waves of black mist, lit only by the flickering flame, poured out of the tree, and fell upon the woman. The living shadow leaked out of the eyes, mouths, and nostrils of the corpses on the branches and trunk, some of them new, some of them old, some of them nothing but skeletons. It oozed from them, heavy, and fell upon the vampire, flowing over her, and coating her.

The air grew colder, and stiller than death, as his ancestor fell to her knees, and screamed. The sound was an explosion against the silent walls of the cave, and Jack almost jumped back as the image shifted forward again. The scream echoed for an eternity, crashing against the walls with nothing to deaden it. As the sound smashed into him again and again, Jack couldn't tear his eyes away from the small, pale woman with dark hair, and how the Beast inside her began to grow, and grow, and grow.

The little fire she'd built, a tiny thing of twigs surrounded by small rocks, struggled against the rising tide of obsidian mist. The lack of wind was the only thing keeping it alive, as the heavy fog descended from the tree, onto the woman, and the ashes of her kill. It swirled around her, crashed into her, and tore through her with far more inertia than mist had any right to use. It threw her to the ground, and bore into her, entering her without creating wounds, but as the flash-freeze images moved forward, each a second apart, he could tell she felt like it was shredding her apart. And when the mist started to pour into her through her eyes, she fell to her knees, and screamed up at the darkness above her, the tree, and the things on its branches.

As the Beast within her morphed and grew into a colossal titan of morphing shapes and shadows, something new appeared. Jack stared from her, to the tree of the dead, and he blinked at the silhouettes that appeared there. There'd only been dead bodies before, but now, there were flickers of black caught by the fire. Feathers? He peered harder, squinting, trying to make out what it was that now perched on the branches. Not crows.

Whatever it was, there was more than one. Their eyes opened, and began to reflect the fire light, glowing amber in the darkness; the eye glow was brighter than the tiny fire warranted. There were feathers, and wings, hugged tight to oval bodies, that sat upon claws, bird claws. Owls? What the fuck. Why were a bunch of black owls down here in this Hell pit, far below any source of life?

The owls, bodies as much misty shadow as the fog that penetrated and mutated his ancestor, looked down at her, and if owls were capable of showing a satisfied expression, it'd look like that.

The image and memory shattered as Jack's other half quaked, body of rippling shadows and evolving animal parts practically falling over; if such a hovering mass of darkness and limbs could technically fall. The darkness of the cave vanished, along with the dead tree, the corpses tied to it, the owls that sat upon it, and the ancestor. All that was left was the endless, white oblivion, the staging area for this fucked up conversation between Jack and his other half.

“So... so that's it? Like, almost a thousand fucking years ago, my great great grandsire committed Diablerie, and... and made the sacrifice to... to... a bunch of owls, and that gave her Beast great power? And then some Sanctified person chained it up?”

His Beast hovered back up to its full height, standing maybe six feet tall, chains clinking against each other as it came back to its full strength. Except, full strength wasn't really full, because it was bound.

“The reason you've been fucking with me, been ruining my life, is because of some ancient fucking ritual? Something that happened almost a thousand years ago, is haunting me?” He stomped toward the abomination, and tried to look it in the eye, but it had too many eyes, and they disappeared and reappeared in a constant, unending sea of shadow.

He was getting sick of shadows.

“That isn't fair! I didn't do this? This isn't my fault? This thing is... is...” He fell back on his ass, and sat there, staring down at the white below him. Naked as he was, he felt exposed. Well, considering this was all happening in his head, it was tough to get more exposed than that. He was sick of the metaphors, too.

Another image appeared, and the Beast floated aside to make room for it. It was his ancestor again, his great great grandsire, the psychopath, and she was out in the woods. Her Beast was bound in chains, size shrunk to that of a normal Kindred; this was happening after that bishop had done his ritual on her. She was wearing old rags, and definitely looked worse off than she did than when she was sitting on a mountain of bodies. Hell, she looked like she was mid frenzy, a crazed look in her eyes.

Suspicions confirmed. The next freeze frame, his ancestor fell out of a tree on an unsuspecting woman walking by, and she drank her to death. Good god, what happened in the decades between these moments Jack got to see? How could this woman go from the horrible crimes of Diablerie, to the almost royal position of sitting atop the carnage of the Black Death, to this? By the looks of her, he had to assume this happened before she sired the blonde woman, if this was some sort of ancestral memory his Beast was taking him through.

Images overlapped, and Jack squinted as he tried to understand what he was seeing. It was her, on top of her, transposed, as if he was seeing her inner self. This new image was of her naked, and she had a big hammer in her hand. With the hammer, she smashed the locks and chains of her Beast. Slam. Crack. Slam. None of them broke.

The images started coming faster, and faster. Jack stood up, and braced himself against the onslaught of information. Her again, his ancestor, when she sired the blonde woman. Again, her, naked like he was now, and smashing a hammer against the chains containing her Beast. Then again, this time a new image, showing the blonde woman, his great grandsire, summoning a pack of wolves. Jack forced down the urge to vomit, as the next image showed the wolves flooding over a small village, killing the denizens within. All of them. And with her as well, he could see her inner self, hammering against the chains that bound her Beast. The next image, was of her siring Viktor. Again, he could see her hammering against her chains, to no avail.

The next image was of Viktor, engaging in some sort of torture of someone bound to a chair. The man was wearing a nice Victorian suit, and there was a candle nearby, giving Jack some idea of the time period, as he watched his grandsire murder a kine. Again, Jack could see the man's inner self, hammering against the chains of his Beast, getting nowhere. The image changed again, to when Viktor sired Julias, and the hammering of his chains continued.

The next image froze Jack to the guts. Julias, punching a woman. Based on the suit and her dress, it had to be sometime around World War I, so Julias was a fresh vampire. This was his wife, then. This was when he'd hit her, and spent the next century feeling guilty about it. And it showed in the man's inner self, a naked Julias, who took a single swing at his chains with a hammer, before he looked at the hammer, and threw it away.

The next, Jack saw coming. He didn't want to see this, but there was no way he couldn't look. Knowledge was bitter sweet, and no matter what it was, he was drawn to it, had to have it, even if it meant being sick. The sight of himself, dying in Julias's arms on a rooftop, bleeding out from stab wounds and the Kiss, was more than enough to accomplish that.



Jack took a step back, and held his guts, as he watched himself die. He watched the chained Beast inside Julias deposit a piece of itself into Jack, and sure enough, the alien creature grew inside him as well. Julias's inner self took a swing at the chains of his Beast too, trying to free it from the chains that bound it, but at least he swung with less enthusiasm than his ancestors. He was more than happy to keep the infernal creature inside him bound and limited.

Wait. Julias had said siring another robbed a Kindred of a piece of their humanity. That was the clue, the key. That was what was happening in each of the scenes, these memories that had been stored from Beast to Beast to Beast. Each time, it was when a Kindred was doing something that cost them a piece of themselves, struggling against their Beastly urges.

He knew what was going to come next, then. He wished he didn't.

The Beast beside him snarled, and drew forth the image of Mrs. Pavala. Him, killing her, draining her when he was in a frenzy. And there Jack was, hammering away at his chain, oblivious, not realizing what he was doing. Then there was when Viktor had cut him in half, down the face to the crotch, getting his blade an inch deep through his whole body. Holy fuck, Jack may as well have been a zombie after a wound like that, and the only reason he wasn't dead, was because he ignored the pain, pushed it down, and found a way to make himself move.

Slam. Within the frozen image, memory-Jack slammed the hammer down on the locks and chains of his Beast. Tapping into that animal will, was a part of how he'd dragged his ruined body across that floor, to kill Viktor and Tony.

Another image came. When Jack had reached out, grabbed Damien's mind, the mind of a far more powerful — if troubled — Kindred, and Dominated it. Slam.

It was when Angela made her appearance, that the images came at him rapid fire. When she stabbed him, cut into him, and when Jeremiah had as well. Slam. Slam. Slam. When Jack had broken through the spell of the handcuffs, Dominated those hunters, and had them cut off his hands so he could escape. Slam. Slam. Slam. But the locks refused to break.

It was when the image showed him summoning the rats at the prison, that Jack took a step back, and almost screamed. Memory-Jack wasn't using a big hammer anymore, it was using a fucking sledgehammer, a massive one, meant to be used by two hundred-plus pound men, breaking rocks. And memory-Jack smashed it against the locks of his Beast with as much strength as a Kindred could provide. Boom. Boom.

Then, when Jack fought Angela inside the nightmare, tried to kill her, failed to kill her. Boom. Boom. More strikes. Heavier. Faster. When Jack found out his mother was in the hospital, dying, and his sister was dead. Boom. Then, when Jack fought Angela in the hospital. Boom. Boom.

Then, when he watched his sire die. The sledgehammer grew bigger, darker, to the point it was the size of Jack's body. And somehow, seeing Julias die, had been enough to make memory-Jack lift that fucking thing, and bring it down. Kaboom. Kaboom.

And now, the enormous sledgehammer was in Jack's hands. He looked down at it, at its sudden appearance, and he gasped. So heavy he could barely move it, left alone lift it.

The images disappeared, morphing into nothing but black sand that faded away. Dust in the wind. But the Beast wasn't done with him yet. As the sand flowed off into eternity, a few scattering remnants swirled together, and formed Julias at his last moments. A man, on his knees, half skeleton at this point, and a warm smile on his face as he looked at his incapacitated child.

The small smile meant a million things. *I'm proud of you, Jack. You'll get through this. These hunters won't stop you. You kidding me, Jack? After the shit you've done, you'll take care of these punks.*

*Tell her for me, Jack. Tell her I love her, and she should move on; after an appropriate amount of grieving time, of course. Don't push her, Jack. She'll close in to herself, hide in her catacomb again, hate the world, and you should let her do that, for a little while. Give her some time to mourn, and then, give her a push, would you?*

Tears filled Jack's eyes. His inner self was content to hit him with all the agony and misery that came with watching Julias die. He clutched his gut with one free hand, and leaned forward, letting the weight of the sledgehammer in the other prevent him from falling on his face. Tears fell onto the white endlessness, and they were red.

"Oh fuck you. Crying blood tears? Give me a break." He raised a hand to wipe them away, and laughed at the streak of red across his arm. Funny, they weren't actually blurring his vision red, but red they were. The Kindred metaphor was nauseating. "Is there even any time for... for anything? We've been in here for a while."

A window appeared before him, two, in the shape of eyes. Yeap, that made sense, if this was all happening in his head. And, predictably, through the windows and their onyx borders, he could see the hallway of the hospital. Blood was everywhere, Angela's, Sándor's, Jez's flowing from around the corner, and now ashes coated a large portion of the hallway floor. It was dark, hallway lights off, and

only the flashlights of some hunters, some light from the patient rooms, and the light from the primary room where the hall connected, provided any illumination. Considering the hospital was in low light mode, the flashlights were the primary source of light, and that wasn't exactly a lot.

Elen sat in the back, a hunter holding her wheelchair's push handles. She had a grin on her face, and her fingers were netted together, indexes tapping each other. If she'd started mumbling 'excellent', it would have been fitting.

Angela sat against one wall, and Sándor lay on the floor, thoroughly beaten and destroyed. If Angela had been a normal human, she'd have gone fetal, too. But somehow, the fucking demon woman had mustered up enough strength and will to get her hands under her, and start pushing herself up.

Angela. Her words had sealed Julias's fate. Things could have gone differently, maybe, but she'd decided to order his death, instead of capturing him. Stupid. She did it to hurt Jack. Reasons piled on reasons, to do whatever he could, to get revenge.

"I guess we're just frozen in this moment, so I can sit on the precipice of this god awful decision, until the end of time." Sighing, he looked to the bound Beast beside him. "I don't want to die. And I'm not going to give some courageous speech about needing to save the people I love. Honestly? I really don't want to die. I want to keep living, spend a century or two or three in Antoinette's arms. I want to save my mom, too, and give her another chance at life.

"And I want revenge. I want to kill that bitch, Angela. I want to kill that bastard Jeremiah. I want to kill that fucking traitor Begotten. I want to kill the old woman Elen. I want to kill the hunters, at least the ones that knew what their bosses were up to." He tried to lift the hammer. Holy fuck it was heavy. "But, I won't become a Draugr to do it. I won't just become a mindless host for a stupid Beast with nothing but an impulse to feed."

The Beast pulsated for a few seconds, before it brought up the image of the mountain of corpses again. His great, great grandsire sat upon it, on her stool, and she looked happy. Psychopath happy, but happy. She also looked immensely powerful, and not at all mindless. Draugr were supposed to be nothing more than animals, and this woman looked like a queen, bathing in her power.

What would that mean for him? The fuck did any of it mean? He didn't know what the symbols meant, when his ancestor had performed Diablerie; hell he barely knew a thing about Diablerie, secret and taboo as it was. He didn't know anything about the black, dead tree. He didn't know a thing about the dark, shadowy owls on its branches either. Trying to wrap his mind around the hundreds of years of history, of the Danse Macabre, of political machinations, deceptions, and apparently, the curses and magic that led to his present circumstance, was impossible.

All he knew was, the only chance he had at surviving the present circumstance, was with the help of this fucker, wrapped in chains.

“We save Mom, right? Much as I want to kill Angela and the others, the priority here is saving Mom.”

The Beast nodded, as much as it could, a few heads — rat, wolf, crow, owl — emerging from its billowing mass to oblige him.

Sighing, Jack looked down at the sledgehammer. It took two hands to lift it, and more than that. It took will. It took effort. It took hate. He summoned up his rage, his fury, grimaced as he glared at the dark, wooden handle, and took a deep breath as he forced his determination into his grip.

He wouldn't die here. He refused to die here. Come what may, he'd survive this, and he'd make sure the hunters wouldn't. He'd make his own mountain of bodies, and summon the crows and rats to feast on their corpses. He'd drink their blood, and dance in a river of flowing crimson.

He'd kill them all.

With a heavy grunt, he lifted the sledgehammer, glared at the Beast, its chains, and slammed the enormous weight down against the rusty metal. Kaboom, the endless white oblivion around him trembled, rippling under the impact. One of the locks, already withered and damaged by memory-Jack's previous attempts, shattered. The next lock did the same. Kaboom. With each lock, the Beast before him grew, and grew, and grew, as the white wasteland shuddered in an earthquake. A swirling wind of black fog fell upon them both, circling them, enveloping them in a tornado Jack could not see past.

It felt hungry. It felt angry. It felt frustrated that its territory had been violated. It felt disturbed that the kine before it weren't bowing, begging for their lives. The swirling black closed in on him tighter, and the Beast before him grew larger, and larger, until its mass overshadowed Jack completely.

In the future, there would be a struggle between him and this creature, a fight over his body and mind. It happened before, and to all Kindred, and it'd be a hundred times harder for him now.

That didn't matter. Saving his mom, and revenge, saving his own life, they were all that mattered. Jack frowned up at his other half, and brought the hammer down. Kaboom.

Sorry, Antoinette.

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~~Damien~~

He shouldn't have been doing this, and Maria knew it. The sun would be up in less than an hour, and Damien was injured. The only reason he'd agreed to Maria's request was because Fiona's blood had managed to heal him considerably, and her spider webbing cast on his leg functioned surprisingly well. And, of course, he agreed because it was Maria, and he couldn't say no to her. If he did, he'd risk the Lancea et Sanctum, or his life.

It was a beautiful night, though. Without a cloud in the sky, the blackout allowed the stars and moon to shine through over the district. It didn't fit the dread he felt in his guts, but there was no denying the beauty of the night sky when the city's lights were off. He'd lived in Dolareido for over seventy years, fifty of them as a vampire, and had watched the city embrace almost every vice. With each one, the amount of lights the city kept on during the night grew, until the stars were practically a faded memory.

He jumped up onto a roof overlooking the hospital, and walked up to the thrall standing there.

"Report," he said, and the thrall jumped, almost squeaking with surprise.

"Um, sir Burksen, sir! All communications are down, and—"

"What's going on in the hospital."

"Sir." The man, dressed in a black trench coat not unlike Damien's, pulled out some very large binoculars, night vision equipped most likely, and resumed scanning the hospital. "Mister Terry entered the hospital some time ago, and Mister Mire entered not long after. Not long after the black out, six people wearing coats entered the hospital together. They got out of their car after the blackout, making a report impossible. And even if we could have, six people exiting a car is common at a hospital. Lot of families visiting."

"Then how do you know these were the hunters?"

"Timing, and the way they walked. Most people walk toward a hospital slowly, like they're afraid of it. These six walked toward it with a purpose."

Sighing, Damien walked up to the roof edge, and held out his hand. The thrall gave him the binoculars without question.

"See anyone else suspicious out here?" Damien scanned the hospital. The night-vision annoyed his eyes, and he flicked it off. Kindred vision was almost as good anyway.

“No sir. We suspect snipers, but there’s just no way to be sure.”

It’d have taken a large team, and weeks of planning, to make a surrounded location like a hospital in the center of a key district in a large city, even remotely safe against snipers. But, sniping was difficult, very difficult, and that was their only saving grace in this communication darkness.

“Hear anything?”

“There’s been some gunfire in the hospital, a lot of it, but it’s died down.”

Frowning, Damien looked down at the thrall’s equipment. A sniper rifle for the trained marksmen, and some other standard provisions: food, communications equipment, and such. He didn’t have any sort of directional microphone that would let him hear specifics, if one of those things even existed. Perhaps Damien should inquire with the Invictus?

“Gunfire. See any muzzle flashes in the windows?”

“No sir. But I only have the West and Front wall covered from here. And most of the windows are patients’ rooms.”

“I—” Damien froze as the familiar sound of gunfire sounded off from the hospital. “East Wing.” Kindred hearing to the rescue. “Stay here. If you see those six hunters, any of them, come out of the hospital, and they’re not being held captive by a Kindred, shoot them.”

“Yes sir.”

Ah, the joys of a thrall. Nigh mindless obedience. No need to argue with the person, or try and assert dominance like with a Kindred.

Nodding, Damien stepped up onto the edge of the roof, and looked below. From his perch, he was facing the front of the hospital, and scanned one more time with the binoculars for anything out of the ordinary.

A quiet hum started, a white noise that rose above the unnoticeable threshold, and grabbed his attention. He handed the man back his binoculars, and raised a brow as he looked at him. Was the thrall humming? No.

He looked up, and felt his body turn to stone, as the stars started to flicker out of existence. First one, then another, then back into existence, then gone again. Then dozens, then hundreds. And as the stars hid away into the black, the growing noise grew louder, and sharper.

The flap of wings, and the telltale caw of crows, became a choir. A flock so vast it blocked out the sky, and so loud, it would have shook the heavens.

Death had come on wings.