

~~Beatrice~~

This was going to be interesting. And dangerous. And scary. And exciting.

Jacob guided them back down into the chamber beneath Three Kings Cemetery. Guess he didn't care if Julias found out where this ritual chamber was. The dragons knew, so, it couldn't have been his most secret, most important, most diabolical location. And considering the array of limbs and blood symbols he had on the back wall, where darkness hid the collection, she could only imagine the sort of fucked up shit he had in his primary ritual chamber. Or primaries? Or whatever other chambers he had.

But this one was more than enough to have Superman staring, wide eyed, at the grotesque imagery.

Once they reached sacrifice bowl, wide eyed became stunned. There was a fresh corpse hanging from the hook, drooling guts and blood into the rusted concave metal, so poor Julias got an eyeful for his first visit into the depravity of the circle.

"... I saw a police report on this man," Julias said. "A pedophile from another city, on the run."

Jen nodded as she came over to the bowl. The woman wasn't entirely comfortable with crúac yet, but she was getting there. Triss though, for some reason the blood and slaughter came to her naturally, quickly, and she embraced it. She'd killed kine before she ever met Jacob, and butchering some sick, twisted, or otherwise needs-to-die fucks, in order to perform their experiments and rituals, was fine by her.

Maybe not so much for Julias, though.

"I drug them and keep them under," Jacob said, smiling at Julias, while pushing the corpse so it started to swing on the hook. "There are some rituals, that require pain and torture and all that juicy goodness, but I don't normally indulge. Especially not with the girls here." There was still a chunk of intestine hanging over the pelvis, where Jacob had slit the bastard's stomach open. It was connected to the ass, after all, so she imagined it was the large intestine dangling; Jacob had ripped out the stomach, she saw that. Kindred craved blood, not flesh. Seeing the man's insides didn't tickle her appetite, but it did tickle something else inside her, when she used his blood to paint symbols.

"Thanks for that, I guess." Wincing, Julias came up to the bowl. Bold. He looked into it, and winced again as he no doubt noticed the mountain of blood, guts, and the way they'd been torn out, not cut out. "What sort of ritual were you performing?"

Triss and Jen looked at each other, and then to their boss. Of course, their boss laughed, and shrugged.

“Witchy witch kind of stuff.”

“... uh huh.” Rolling his eyes, Julias set his hands on the bowl. Blood on his palms and fingers now, but he kept them there. Very bold. “What do I need to do?”

“You need to cut off your hand.”

Beatrice and Jennifer both winced, sucking the air in between their teeth, as they looked between Jacob and Julias.

“I can’t just bleed for you?”

“No. We’re opening a door, and that takes a sacrifice.” Jacob reached into the bowl, moved aside some guts, and found one of his rusty knives. Fucking bastard just had to make this as hard as possible for Julias. “Cut off your hand, and fill the bowl with your ashes and vitae. I will perform the ritual, and open the door to your childe. Lucky for you you share the same blood, or I wouldn’t be able to open this door.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“Of course not. How would I know where to go? I’ll be delving into a world of dreams and nightmares, piloting through an endless sea of fog and mayhem. Thoughts and fears and desires from the entire plane of existence. I’ll—”

“Ok, I get it. You’ll use my blood to home-in on him.”

“Exactly.”

“And if we didn’t have my blood?”

Jacob tapped his finger, big jackass smile on full display, doing the work of expressing what his bandage-covered eye sockets couldn’t. “Perhaps the sheriff’s blood, though it’s unlikely he’d willingly give me that. Without a strong guiding light, I won’t be able to find the realm, so if it’s not blood, it’s nothing. You are lucky Jack went on this mission.”

Triss pat her lover on the shoulder. She knew he didn’t trust Jacob, but Jacob was proving to be a very informative teacher. Sort of. If he said he needed this or that, he needed this or that. Sometimes he fucked with you, but it was always in good fun. Sort of. Lots of sort ofs, with Jacob.

“Have you done this before?” he said.

“I’ve been experimenting with the nightmare realm, yes. Azamel is a large threat, and so is her group of friends.”

“So you’ve found her nightmare lair before?”

“No. Like I said, I need a guide, something crúac can understand. Your blood. Your flesh. Your ashes. Without the guide, I’ll just be drifting around in the dreams and nightmares of the world. And fuck that, you know?”

Triss choked on a chuckle, keeping it down but only just. Her boss’s antics were growing on her, but she could see they were irritating to Julias. And it wasn’t a good time to chuckle. Jacob handed Triss the rusty, shitty knife, and gestured to the bowl.

“Ladies,” Jacob said, “a drop of your own blood, too. And a drop of mine.” The old man smiled at her, and waited.

Nodding, she put her hand over the bowl, and concentrated. There was more to this than just a drop of vampire blood. Crúac was about intent as much as anything else. The beast in her, that thing she had connected with somehow, it had crossed a barrier inside her, exposed her to something new and wonderful and thrilling and fucking dangerous, something in her blood. The vitae she concentrated and forced into her blood was the same mental effort you’d use to make a ghoul, or resurrect a fresh corpse as your childe. It was special, magical, and it deserved respect. It was what Jacob wanted, and as much as he joked and goofed around, she knew he had all the respect in the world for the power of their blood. And now, now that the beast inside her was whispering in her ear, she did too.

A single drop, before she handed Jen the knife. A single drop that was mentally draining, and left Triss a bit dizzy for a moment. That single drop did more than suck the energy out of her, it also quietened her mind, softened her thoughts, and let something with fangs and claws nuzzle a little higher up in her spine. It was almost like a purring sensation, coming from something that lived inside her, something that was now happy with her. Something that wanted to go hunting later.

Julias raised a brow at her, and she smiled at him, before she looked over at Jen. The same look on her face, one of joy, of embracing a dark, dirty little secret, and relishing in the strange tingles it sent up the body. She was succumbing to it too, just like Triss, and god damn it was good to have a friend with her on this journey. They were witches, manipulators of blood and the occult, practitioners of scary rituals that could backfire, that could summon things they didn’t mean to summon, that could spell doom for everyone involved.

Wow. She really was getting off on this. So naughty.

Jacob took the knife, and let out a large drop. It splashed against the guts of their kill, and burned away to ash. If it had entered someone's body, dead or alive, the vitae would react and do its thing, as if it really was sentient, as if it wanted to spread its vampire disease. Christ, she still hadn't talked to Damien to apologize to him, about giving him her blood. Ok, yeah, if the man returned from this alive, she'd visit him and talk to him.

Everyone looked at Julias, as the old man handed him the rusty knife. Julias looked at it for a moment, before he sighed, and took it.

Julias set the knife to his wrist, and began sawing.

Triss and Jennifer both winced, but Triss forced herself to keep watching, while her friend looked away. Yeah, it wasn't easy to watch someone cut through their own wrist, especially when it was a guy you happened to love. Julias bore the pain well, and considering he had a century embraced under his belt, she imagined he'd had many encounters that involved a lot of pain. Hell, she rescued him from a burning building where his head had been smashed in by Rebecca. The man was used to pain.

Cutting off your own hand was different from pain. Maybe if she'd given him a nice, clean axe to do a proper chop, it wouldn't have been so bad, but cutting off your own limb, with a knife, was a psychological nightmare. The mental barriers the brain had between you and such self destruction was immense; she'd run into them several times, in her crúac rituals. Pain was temporary to a vampire, but the mental struggle to not harm the self in a way the old living body would consider permanent, never went away.

Even the mighty Julias started to show signs of pain, extreme pain, as the knife pushed through bone. She put a hand on his shoulder, but the man was too focused on grinding his teeth together. And through it all, she watched. This was important. It was a sacrifice, it meant something, it was pain and limiting the self, even if only temporarily.

Thankfully, it wasn't too drawn out. He was a vampire after all, and had the strength to drive through bone with a knife in only a few seconds. The extremity fell to the bowl, and wiggled with the impact, before evaporating into ash. Several heavy drops of his vitae fell into the bowl after, dark red, almost alive in and of itself. Onto the pile of guts it went, fading into ash seconds later, little red flames, almost like sparks, dancing on the blood's surface as it went poof.

Groaning, Julias put his stump of a hand to his chest, inside his jacket. "There. Happy?"

Triss looked at Jacob. Jackass had a giant grin on, of course, and he drummed his palms on the bowl's edge a few times; for effect, she was sure.

“Very. If only Invictus would maim themselves at my behest more often.” Chuckling, Jacob rubbed his hands together, and came over to join the others on their side of the bowl. “Beatrice, Jennifer, mood lighting.”

Rolling her eyes, Triss pulled out her phone, pulled up a light program, and pointed it down at the bowl. The program had various settings, and used the phone’s screen to display a rather trippy color effect; lots of bleeding reds mixing with white. Jennifer used the same program, and pointed the phone up at the cave ceiling.

“... you have got to be shitting me,” Julias said.

Jacob shrugged. “You don’t like mood lighting?”

“There’s a fucking corpse, right in front of you. There’s guts in a bowl. I can smell the shit and blood and piss and drugs. Have you no respect for the dead?”

“I have the utmost respect for the dead.”

Triss and Jen froze. Jacob didn’t say that with a joking inflection. Jacob said that in a serious, monotone voice. He never used that voice. The two ladies looked at each other, before looking at Julias to see what he’d say.

He said nothing. Sighing, Julias took a step back, and with his good hand, motioned for the man to continue.

That was a strange snap from Jacob. Respect for the dead? Wh—oh, Minerva. Ok, yeah, sensitive topic, and Julias had grazed it. But her man, all knowing and stupidly wise, backed off before he made things worse.

Jacob reached out both of his hands over the ashes of their sacrifice, and over the entrails of their kill. The corpse continued to dangle there, dripping blood, and Triss didn’t know if it was required for the ritual or not. The specifics seemed to be something only Jacob knew, and Triss was half convinced they didn’t matter. Intent, desire, and respect for the ritual mattered. Sacrifice and pain mattered. Blood and will mattered.

Jacob reached down into the mess of their kill, and touched his fingertips against the drying blood. Not dry yet though, and once the blood coated his fingers, he walked over to one of the nearby walls. Not the wall in the back, where the unusual shadow hid the gore display, the symbols and body parts, the chests of metal and limbs. All the walls of the cave had symbols drawn into them, etched or chiseled, many painted in blood, symbols she was growing to both recognize, and enjoy the sight of. They were beautiful in their own way, and represented the dark arts in a strange, media-friendly format.

Maybe she should make a Twitter account, and share? Ha.

She froze, as Jacob turned toward the back wall. Wait. “Jacob?”

“Powerful as I am, Beatrice, and as much as I know, navigating this realm is not something I can do alone. Not if I want to go with my own hands.” He offered a small wave over his shoulder, and disappeared into the black fog near the wall. “And you know, if Jack really is in trouble, I’d like to help.”

She blinked a few times at the man’s silhouette, before it was gone. Jen came close to Julias, and nudged her elbow into his side before looking at his fucked up wrist. Yeah, hand gone, god damn.

“You’re going to summon him?” Jen said to Jacob’s disappearing silhouette.

“I am.”

Triss shook her head. “Will he want a favor for this?”

“Of course. But I’ll handle that,” the Nosferatu said from the dark. “Julias, on the other hand, will owe me based on the outcome. If the kid doesn’t need help, a small favor will suffice. If I need to rescue him? Well, a big favor.”

Julias stared into the black, and Triss could almost see the man calculating a thousand outcomes based on this conversation alone. “Naturally,” he said, tone sarcastic, borderline mimicking Jacob.

That earned a laugh from Jacob, and the clang of one of his chests being opened with a snap.

“Though, I have to thank you, Mister Mire, for the opportunity to do this. This is a step I’ve been meaning to take, but I’ve had no beacon to guide me.”

“Does that qualify as the favor?”

“Ha. No.” Another clang resounded through the cavern, and then, the distant howling of corpses.

Julias raised his head, looked up, and around, as the quiet screams started to fill the air. Whether they were the echoes of the past, or their kills, Triss didn’t know, but whatever Jacob was doing on that back wall, whatever rituals he was painting or dancing or whatnot, it had tainted the cave with screams.

Black Blood’s body came for them. She wasn’t sure if it was his body. ‘His’ because his voice sounded masculine, but she was pretty sure spirits didn’t have genders. And this spirit’s body was an ocean of ooze, black and flowing and thick but not. It should have felt like tar, but it felt like nothing, and as it began to ooze down the cracks of the walls, Jen and Triss waited patiently.

Julias, not so patiently. As he cradled his stub of a wrist inside his jacket, he stared at the walls, before looking between the two witches. “Uh...”

“Just wait,” Triss said. “Black Blood can’t do his thing until he... sets up.”

“Sets up?” Blinking over and over, Julias looked around at the rising tide of black, and lifted a leg as it started to come up over his boots.

Triss touched his arm, and nodded. Slowly but surely, the black ocean, bleeding up the walls, bleeding down the walls, and falling from the eye sockets of the skeletons that held up the ritual bowl, began to fill the room. She’d been through this a few times now, Jen too, and the two of them had gotten comfortable with it; as comfortable as you could. But her Superman looked disturbed, even a little scared, and she smiled at him as she waited.

Only when the strange, black liquid covered them, and filled the underground cavern to the ceiling, did Jacob return to the bowl. Triss and Jen knew what he did over there, painting his symbols, using the blood of corpses and metal of torture devices as his paint and brush. Probably not something Jacob would want others to see; hence, the black fog that covered that side of the cave. But then, she doubted he cared too much, if he was willing to bring Julias down into the cave. Maybe it was to keep people calm, if he was bringing them into the cave for the first time?

Unlikely, because no one was going to stay calm when the darkness started talking to them.

“Well well, if it isn’t the mighty Julias Mire.” The spirit’s voice rose from the shadow, and everyone turned to the bowl where the strange, deep, bassy voice came from.

“... you must Black Blood.”

“That I am.”

“I didn’t think Black Blood would be from the South.”

Jacob, returning from the black upon blackness in the back of his cave, laughed, and set his hands on the bowl again. “He’s borrowing the voice from someone we killed.” Of course, Jacob called him ‘he’ as well, and the habit was rubbing off on Triss.

“Naturally.” Rolling his eyes, Julias looked down into the bowl. They were all standing inside black water, but there was enough light for them to see, and the blackness didn’t impede them like water would. It meant they could move around easily, and Julias took a step back as a face looked up at him from the contents of the bowl.

From the guts, intestines, organs and flesh, a face of oozing black smiled up at him. It was made of the remains of Jacob's sacrifice, and Black Blood's infestation had turned it black. Triss wasn't sure if it was more or less disturbing than the first time she had met the strange entity, when it had possessed a corpse, walked around, and helped Jacob with teaching her a ritual. Most fucked up night of her life.

And this was probably Julias's. He'd cut off his own hand, and was now staring down into a bowl of entrails, that were looking up at him and talking to him, all while being submerged into a black water. Yeap, that ranked pretty high on fucked up shit.

"Am I to understand, that we're going to save the infamous Jack Terry?" Black Blood said. Wait, infamous?

"What has Jacob told you of my childe?" Julias didn't like that very much. He put his good hand against the bowl, and stared down at the face. Ballsy. It was cute, seeing Superman get all fatherly.

"Only good things!" Jacob said, hands up, like he was afraid of Julias's judgment. Course, he wasn't, and he laughed a moment later as he climbed into the bowl. "We're just going to check and see if things are going his way, Black Blood. If he needs rescuing, we rescue him."

"And if he does not?" the spirit said.

"Then poor Julias owes me a favor for nothing."

"And the boy is in the clutches of these hunters and their Begotten friend? I reckon he does."

Julias's frown only grew as Black Blood made it obvious that Jacob was sharing details with the spirit. More than that, that Black Blood knew details that Jacob had only just learned. At this point, Triss expected him to, with how much her boss relied on him for their rituals and whatnot. It must have been a shocker though, for Superman to hear his childe was a topic of conversation between a psycho and an alien god. The kid had a habit of causing waves, though, so it wasn't like it wasn't deserved.

"I can sense the blood of our beacon. Good to go. See ya later." Jacob nodded, offered Julias a finger wave, and stepped into the bowl. Stepped into, and sank into, with a plop. Like as if he'd dropped into a deep pool.

And the black water around them vanished. As if someone had popped a balloon, it all went away in an almost explosive shattering of black winds and black splashes. It had no impact, but it sounded like it should have, and looked like it should have. It drained down into the floor like the floor had opened up to swallow it, and it was gone the next second.

And then there were the two witches, and a bowl of guts. No black bloody ooze stuff, no talking faces made of entrails, no nothing.

Sighing, Julias walked around, cradling his wrist, and Triss followed after him. Half to keep him company, half to keep him from touching anything he shouldn't be.

"I'm sure Jack is fine," she said. "And if he's not, Jacob will do something. He likes the kid."

"Why is that?"

"Dunno. Kid is good at making friends."

"He... he wasn't, when I was grooming him for the embrace. That kid was antisocial as all hell, and thought of everyone else as mindless sheep, slaves to capitalism and peer pressure." Sighing, Julias looked at her, the bowl, Jen, and the dark end of the room where Jacob had done his ritual out of sight. "Suddenly he's friends with every vamp in the city, including Jacob."

She laughed, shrugged, and tapped on his arm. Mistake. The gentle impact nudged against his wrist, and he groaned.

"Ah, shit, sorry. Um, well, Jacob's not so bad once you get to know him. He likes to keep Invictus at arm's length though, cause, you know."

"Indeed."

"Don't be like that," Jen said, walking over to him and nudging up against his other side. "Really, you can trust the man more than you think you can."

Triss raised a hand. "But not completely."

"No no, not completely. That'd be a mistake, and Jacob wouldn't want that. But you can trust him with Jack's life, sure."

"But... maybe not the Uratha's. Jack took some on this trip, right? I don't know about them. Boss might leave them to die." Jacob did absolutely hate them, for their meddling, their entitlement, and their involvement in Minerva's death. It was hard to say if Jacob was able to make smart choices when they were involved.

Hopefully their involvement wouldn't affect Jacob's rescue mission.

"Come on, Jen," she said as she walked back to the bowl. "We're supposed to be a tether."

"He never did explain how that works."

Shrugging, Triss held her hands over the bowl, and concentrated her effort and will into the area. Jacob said if they concentrated their vitae into their fingers, and kept it over the bowl, it'd work. Why'd he need a tether, if he had Julius's blood to guide him? She didn't understand, didn't know how, but knew how to do what he wanted. Yeah, it made no sense, but these days, nothing did.

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~~Natasha~~

Jack spun in place. His gun flew out of his hand, and his phone did too. Its light twirled as the phone spun repeatedly, streaks of light cutting across the chamber of madness, as werewolves struggled to handle the hunters surrounding them. Everyone froze when Jack went down, and the two vampires gasped at the sight of the boy's head exploding.

No, not exploding, thank god. But for a moment, the side of his skull was gone, and Tash felt every muscle in her body clench as she brought her hands to her lips. The bullet had hit his eye, against side of the socket along his temple, and cut through the bone along his ear. Through the fires flickering in front of her, all she could do was watch as the boy collapsed backward, turning to land on his stomach. He touched the wound, body shaking, and bits of blood dripping from the wound before fading into ash.

Since Athalia's strange shadow fog had dissipated, the fire that Angela had renewed was taking its sweet time burning away, leaving her and Damien stranded. She could jump over it, if her leg was working. Damien could jump over it, if he didn't look like he'd been shot a dozen times, considering the bandages on his body. But she had to get over there, had to save Jack, had to save Art and Matt and even Noah and Athalia. Had to save Fiona. Had to save Eric, and Clara, and Jessy! Had to do something.

"Sorry about that, Angela. Sándor and I had a bit of trouble with these three, and I'm guessing you had trouble, too?" An older man stepped out of the darkness, pistol in hand, other arm dangling weakly at his side. Blood. As he came in closer, the old man looked at the prostrated skeleton creature, then Jack, and chuckled as he held out a hand to Angela.

"... yeah. Athalia kamikazed." She took the man's hand, and dragged herself over to get her pistol.

The man had to be Jeremiah. But—oh god. Tash stepped back, as something stepped out of the blackness, something tall, something that earned the thud thud of a giant's footsteps. Its horns came first, topped upon an almost human, but not quite human head of colossal size; no, its whole body was colossal. And it had four arms. Four wings! Some sort of gargoyle monster, something that walked on raptor talons, and leaned forward, counter balanced by a tail.

Three bodies dangled in its hands. His hands. Jessy, Eric, and Clara. Clara and Eric looked like hell, and they were in their human bodies, dripping small drops of blood as the beast moved in closer to the others. From the way they dangled, they looked unconscious.

Four hunters walked around the monster's legs, and they looked beat to hell, too. Soon-to-be bruises covered their bodies, and gashes, patched up but otherwise a serious problem for kine. They limped and dragged, but remained at arms, guns held and ready to shoot. It was more than enough to bring the wounded and exhausted three werewolves near Jack and Athalia to a stand still.

"We lose anyone?" Jeremiah said.

"A few, yeah. Athalia killed a couple, and these fuckers hurt Jackson enough to kill him." She nodded her way to a man by the pillar, slouched, and not responding. Blood was pooling around him.

"And the paranormals?"

"None dead. Two vamps right there." Angela pointed to her and Damien. Oh no. "Three more dogs here. And Mom's little friend is down in one of the rooms, bleeding out. We should go check and kill her."

"That we should." Jeremiah walked over to the flamethrower, and sighed as he picked it up. Damaged. He set it back down, and looked across the flames to the two vampires. "I'm not in Dolareido for you blood suckers. I'm here for Azamel, and the rest of her kind, true monsters. Bring the spider woman here, and you get to live."

"W-What?" Tash said. "... n-no, we—"

Damien leaped. Tash jerked, and snapped her head to the side as the man jumped over the flames. No way his body could handle that, but he did it anyway, sword up and ready to slash.

His impulse earned him another bullet to the chest. Jeremiah raised and drew his pistol with the speed of a professional duelist, a subtle and quick movement that wasted no motion, hip firing. The pistol he had was something high caliber, and it slammed into Damien's chest the moment the man had left the ground, putting a stop to his forward motion so he fell back to the ground beside Natasha.

“Is the spider woman a hot spot for you, boy?” Jeremiah said.

Tash shook her head. “She... y-you can’t, she...” There were no words she could say to this psychopath. The look in his eyes was one of zero empathy, as if someone had ripped that part of him out with bloody claws. It was the sort of look she expected Jacob to have, if the man had eyes of his own.

“Fuck... you,” Damien said.

“Hot spot it is. Isn’t that cute.” Shrugging, Jeremiah walked toward the werewolves. Each of them had four hunters around them now, guns pointed at their huge bodies. The beasts struggled to stay standing, and both Art and Matt had blood leaking from their chops; their own blood, mixed with the blood of hunters they managed to bite earlier. Many of said hunters were the ones holding guns to the werewolves, and they did not look pleased. How they were standing, Tash couldn’t fathom, but these hunters had the resilience of ghouls, without a ghoul’s extreme healing or strength.

“Now, this little punk here lied to me.” Glaring at the Uratha, Jeremiah stopped beside Jack, who was still on his hands and knees, trembling. Jeremiah slowly, almost gently, put his boot on the boy’s back, and pushed down, until Jack gave in and collapsed to the floor. “He mentioned someone named Avery, and when I asked him about it, he lied about who it was. I only found out later from Elen about the werewolves. Took some digging to find out about Avery.”

The bastard pulled his foot back, and kicked Jack in the side, hard. Poor boy was knocked onto his side, trembling, cradling his face and trying to stop Jeremiah from kicking him again. No luck. Jeremiah kicked him again, and again, as if getting revenge for what Jack just did to Angela. Angela was beat up, and had had a gun pointed at her; he must have assumed, and assumed correctly.

“All of you, you’re all going to surrender, immediately. I can make use of each of you, and if you play nice, some of you will get to live.”

Matthew snarled. “Some? You—”

Jeremiah hip fired once again, and the bullet slammed into Matt’s leg, sending him down onto his knees with a howl. Oh no.

“P-Please, don’t,” she said.

“Please don’t?” The man looked her way and laughed, and with only a quick glance, fired at the two remaining, standing werewolves. The bullets slammed into their legs as well, and each went down, growling and grunting as their palms caught the stone floor. “You’re our prisoners, monsters. You have no rights, and you don’t get to beg. Do what we say, and if I’m feeling charitable, I’ll let some of you

live. But be under no illusions, you're nothing but pests, and we're exterminators. Only reason some of you might get to live is we're after—”

The world split apart.

Everyone turned, and looked at the cut through the universe. A seam, like someone had taken a sword and sliced through the fabric of space. Tash knew her brain was having trouble interpreting it, like an illusion, one made to defy the eyes and make them see something incorrectly, messing with depth perception and colors. But something had cut its way through the air, and was reaching out through it.

The seam began to bleed black. Tash froze to the point her body ached, muscles clenching, eyes stuck on the sight of air bleeding. Air didn't bleed, but it was. As if the universe could bleed, as if someone had cut through its skin, infected skin rotting with black ooze. And someone stepped out of it.

“J-Jacob?” she said. Everyone was silent, and her voice was loud enough for all of them to hear.

Dripping of black ooze, and yet with his dark robes and hair still looking dry, Jacob smiled at the group of insanity before him. The bandage that covered his eyes looked dry too, gray and worn like it always was, as if it was decades old. There was blood on him, dried and crusted, but whatever the ooze was, it fell off of his body like it wasn't real.

“How the fuck did you get in here?” Angela said.

“How indeed.” Laughing, Jacob spread out his arms, and with him, spread the tear in the universe. Unlike Jack, Jacob didn't hesitate.

Everyone jumped back as the black liquid gushed out of the hole. Like water rapids, the blackness raged from the tear, and washed over the stone floor around the group of hunters, werewolves, and everyone else. The fire, already dying, disappeared beneath waves of black, as did the wood remains of the giant door, the stone floor, and all the fallen things. Guns, lights, the bodies, Jack, everything disappeared under the black waves.

Leave it to Jacob to have the perfect opportunity to monologue, and instead, laugh. Laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Defying expectations at every turn. Tash glared at the man, and the man offered her a tiny wave, as he let the gushing water pour around him. It didn't hit him, despite how fast it was rushing from the tear, as if the black liquid was sentient and avoiding him. Maybe it was. Maybe—hands, there were hands in the water! Black hands. Dozens of them. They poked up from the water, exposing scrawny wrists and skin so thin the tendons were defined, before they disappeared beneath the surface of the raging stream.

Raging whirlpool, more like it. As the insane amount of liquid gushed into the chamber, it defied every law of physics Tash could imagine. The water rose quickly, faster than the vertical geyser created, and dozens upon dozens of the strange, black hands reached out from the ooze to grab onto varying things, varying people.

But the fire was out, and that was good enough to get moving. If this was Jacob's rescue attempt, it was a good one, because every single hunter, and the four-armed monster, were struck dumb. It was entire seconds before they responded, all of them raising their guns, and firing upon the elder. As much as Jacob was easily one of the most powerful Kindred Tash could imagine still alive in the present day, a few hundred bullets traveling faster than sound, slamming into him over a whole two seconds, would turn him into pulp.

The water erupted. It shot upward from around Jacob, and only a subtle silhouette of the man remained as he disappeared into the black abyss. The force of it sent waves ten feet high, well above the already two-foot deep current, and the hunters screamed as it slammed into them. Even the werewolves, massive as they were, let out yelps of surprise as the dark ooze smashed into them, and sent them under. More than under, but pulled under, as the dozens of onyx hands, with their dripping fingers, reached up over the waves, and pulled the beasts into the black.

She reached down, and yanked Damien up onto his feet. The man groaned as he leaned on her, but he hadn't dropped his sword either. If anything, he was clenching it tight, ready to fight, despite the new hole that had been put into his chest. The bullet looked like it slammed into his sternum, through it, and was probably lodged in the organs inside him.

"Come on," she said. "Let's—"

A roar cut through the maelstrom of noise the black rapids made, and Tash stared at the colossal gargoyle as it struggled against the arms grabbing it. They were tiny, so very tiny compared to its immense size, but there were dozens of them grabbing at its legs, and trying to topple it. With its four wings folded snug to its back, it still had four hands to fight off the assaulting limbs, but three of them were full. Big as it was, holding a whole person in each palm was a large task, and eventually, the monster was forced to let them go, all three of its hostages falling into the black.

"No!" Jeremiah's voice. He unloaded bullets at the geyser, but as far as Tash could tell, it was an endless void of black liquid, ready to accept each bullet as the meaningless hunk of metal it was. Jacob had vanished, and the alien entity was making short work of the chaos Jack and his crew had been unable to handle.

Athalia was lost to the liquid. All three Uratha were gone. The tide raged, and slammed against Tash's and Damien's legs, and the black hands came for them too. They took their time though, more concerned with the other chamber, and dealing with the hunters struggling, twisting, squirming, and kicking at them. One hunter went under, screaming. Another did as well, but they slashed and kicked and fought, and broke free, before reaching down to grab and free any fallen brethren from the black.

The hands weren't trying to pull the hunters under, not the same way they were trying to grab the werewolves. The strange, alien hands buried and pulled the enormous, unmoving skeleton monster into the black. They had long ago quickly pulled the injured, prone Jack into their depths. They grabbed the falling Jessy, Clara, and Eric, and pulled them beneath the raging surface of the dark ocean, where they disappeared. But the hunters, they fought against the unending ocean of hands, and began firing at the ghostly limbs.

Bullets worked. The hands shattered, tearing apart, and exposed strange liquids within. Black wasn't a good enough word to describe the liquid void, so dark it confused her eyes all the more.

"F... Fiona." Groaning like a dying man, Damien pushed himself off of Tash's shoulder, and started wading through the water in Fiona's direction.

What had happened to that man? She suspected those two were interested in each other, but it was strange to see Damien go from cold and detached about everything and anyone, to suddenly risking his life to save her, and going back for her too. She almost wanted to go with him, but she had to watch, to see what happened, to look for an opportunity, as the hunters fought against the raging waters. Hands reached up through the black around her, but she didn't resist them; no point. Whatever it was, whatever they were, it was from Jacob, and the man was going to help them. Probably. Hopefully.

An explosion of water erupted in front of the gargoyle monster, and it jumped back. It was such a massive entity, all its movements seemed a bit slow; it was the difference in size, not because it was actually slow. But either way, it was not fast enough to escape Jacob erupting from the dark waves. Like a shark attacking prey from beneath, the old Nosferatu threw himself at the gargoyle's neck, going for the kill.

To see Jacob punch a giant gargoyle in the mouth, and send the creature toppling over, was strange. It was like a scene from a comic book. Maybe that's what the old Nosferatu was aiming for, for something ridiculous, over the top, and all-around unnecessary. But whatever his goal with theatrics, it worked. He punched the twelve-foot-tall gargoyle beast of Goliath proportions in the chin, and sent it falling back. Jacob must have weighed only one twentieth of what the gargoyle did, and his strength

ultimately sent himself flying back and away from his target after the punch. Like a gymnast, Jacob backflipped several times before landing on his feet in the waist-deep water. The black ooze was rising.

The gargoyle fell back, massive weight slamming into the dark ocean waiting for it, and onto dozens of black hands. Many shattered, snapping apart like bone and flesh should, before disappearing into the ooze. Others reached out and up, grabbing onto the beast's struggling limbs. They couldn't pin it down, and it thrashed against the hands, breaking more and more of them as it rolled back onto its knees.

The hunters were all standing again, the ones that were still alive, and each of them was firing at the oncoming hands. As the strange, dark limbs tore apart under a hail of bullets, the hunters backed up toward where Jeremiah had originally come from. They formed a line, those with pistols holding one of their wounded on a shoulder, and those with shotguns or rifles standing in front of them, all of them backing up. It was like watching military, or special forces. The synchronization, hand gestures mixed to signal movements and intentions, and a mix of fear and fearlessness.

No vampire in Dolareido had this sort of training.

"Come on!" Jeremiah, pistol in one hand, other hand dangling at his side with a bleeding shoulder, started to back up as well. Angela had found her pistol at some point, and draped her weight over Jeremiah's shoulders with one of her arms, while the other continued to shoot at the hands.

Now, go now! They're both distracted and slowed! Go!

Tash raised her pistol, and began to fire. But the ocean of black crashed against her legs, and the hands grabbed and pulled at her.

"No! Stop! Let m-me shoot!"

The hands, the water, the strange, black ooze didn't hear her. Or didn't care. The hands grabbed, yanked, and pulled her down, and she kept firing at Jeremiah and Angela as best as she could. She wouldn't hesitate and lose this opportunity like Jack did, Athalia be damned.

One bullet hit Jeremiah in his leg, another hit his shoulder, and another hit Angela in her shoulder too. But she couldn't get them in the neck, the head, anywhere that meant death! She tried again, and again, but the flowing water slammed into her harder, and buried her, soaking her in the strange, not-wet liquid, and blocking her vision as the hands pulled her into the depths below.

She forced her head above the surface long enough to hear Jeremiah say something.

"Elen, crash it!"

An explosion of white filled the chamber, and slammed down against the pillars, the walls, the hunters, the everything. What darkness was brought by Jacob was lost inside the overwhelming onyx that swam over them all. Black, on black, on black. Silhouettes of movement against the churning oblivion. And the sensation of being ripped out of the universe.

All was silent.

The hands pulled her under, deeper, into an endless black. The floor was no longer solid. The stones stopped blocking gravity's will. The eternal void beneath her welcomed her with a silence and numbness, all sound and feeling gone as its black tendrils filled everything.

And then she was floating. Blackness everywhere, nothing but blackness. No, there was something moving, but it was black on black, and trying to see the details had her straining her eyes.

Liquid.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," the endless void said.

"... h... hello," she said. Texan accent?

"I see I may have startled you. And for that, I apologize." The voice chuckled. A deep, manly voice, with extra bass mixed in that made it sound thick, and inhuman, even monstrous.

"Black Blood," Jacob said. Whoa, wait, where was Jacob? "What happened?"

"It seems that the shaman woman in the hunters' employ is capable of some powerful things. She has an understanding of the realms, greater than ours, old friend."

Slowly but surely, the darkness presented something more than fuzzy silhouettes of obsidian against onyx. It was a road. Not a road like asphalt, but something glowing white. It looked like stars at first, distant, and weak, but with time more of the stars broke through the darkness and became a road of gentle, white light. Very gentle. It was almost like walking on the reflection of moonlight on broken glass.

Natasha was being lowered from above. The hands! They were still on her, holding her, and they drifted through the black, dripping water around them, as they lowered her and others onto the road. Gravity, solid ground, but not, because as far as she could tell, she wasn't in a place where either would exist. Could exist. And yet, there she stood, looking down at herself and testing her feet against the soft white light.

Black, oozing, thick droplets fell onto the strange road, before dripping off and disappearing into the great endless void beneath them. Ok, she had no idea what she was looking at, but she sighed relief as she watched Eric and Jessy, Clara and Noah, and Art and Matt join her.

“Jessy,” she said, and she walked over to her friend. “You look... b-beat to hell.”

“Ha... fuck... you.” The woman was on her back, and she wasn’t getting up. Her skin was full of holes, the sort her Gangrel spikes would make; a favorite of her transformations. But that stuff normally healed moments after she was done. “Thanks for... coming to my rescue.”

“... w-w-we tried.” Sighing, she looked over at the rest of the crew. Art, Matthew, and Noah were all on their knees, panting, wheezing, back in their human form, and bleeding, legs no longer working after Jeremiah’s final shots. Their bodies were full of holes, and cuts caused by silver knives. She really, really, really hoped they wouldn’t die; she was attached to two of them.

“Cl... ara.” Jack! The boy, still missing half of his face, forced himself up onto his feet. Drifting forward along the road of quiet stars, one hand pressed to his shredded skull, he made his way toward Clara. “Clara.” When he reached her, he fell down onto his knees beside her, lowered his hand from his face, and pressed the ash-covered palm to her shoulder. “Clara... you...” The sound of Clara’s breathing cut through the silence, as Jack rolled her onto her back. He sighed relief, and looked over his shoulder to the rest of them. “Jessy. And... where’s Eric?”

“I’m here.” Eric sat up, but stayed sitting, just as beat up as the other werewolves. “You guys really just threw yourselves into the meat grinder, huh?”

“Course they did,” Jessy said. But she wasn’t getting up, and her smile faded as she groaned in pain. “That said, um... where the fuck are we?”

“Wait,” Jack said. “Where’s Athalia, and Fiona?”

Jacob, standing further down the road, walked over to them, and smiled. “Give Black Blood a moment. They’re different, and not so easy to pull through this strange realm. I guess they got hooks in it that we don’t.”

“Well now, I do believe I have them,” the hidden voice said.

And just like the others, black hands reached out from the ooze, and through the strange void around them, pulled two monsters. First was Athalia, the skeleton monster. The hands, floating and drifting, set her colossal form on the road by Tash. Next was the the spider woman Fiona, or Vrall, and Damien next to her. Athalia didn’t move, but at least Fiona was breathing.

“Athalia?” Jack said, forcing himself up onto his feet, and walking over to her as well. It was Julius all over again, looking for things to blame himself over as a reflex. Like sire, like child, she supposed, but it wasn’t going to do the boy any favors.

Athalia let out a low groan. How could she groan, she had no vocal cords! But then, the darkness was talking to them, something invisible and with thousands of hands, so talking without a throat wasn’t so crazy. What was crazy was how much damage the poor woman had suffered.

And Jack had tried to shoot her daughter. She was going to hate him for that. He was going to hate himself for hesitating. A delightful mix of the most horrible outcomes imaginable.

“We have... ways... to take care of ourselves.” Coughing, Fiona forced herself up onto her feet—she didn’t have feet. She forced herself up onto her points, where feet should have been, and used her eight spider legs to help keep herself up. “This is... in between. We don’t normally walk through this realm. But burrow through it.”

“Yeah well, I’m not a Begotten. Black Blood and I have to make due with what we have access to.” Chuckling, Jacob gestured to the endless void around them. “But there are many things you can find, if you look hard enough.”

“I’ll get... Athalia back... to her lair,” Fiona said, and she dragged herself over to her skeleton monster friend. “I... I think I could use... a little help.”

Damien tried to offer, even raised a hand, but the poor boy fell to a knee the moment he did. He still had a hole in his chest, and his many bandages painted quite the image of broken bones and ruined insides.

“I’ll help-p,” Tash said. “Matt, Art, are, um, y-you guys... gonna be ok?”

“We’re alive. We’ll heal,” Matt said. The three werewolves helped each other onto their feet, and their legs trembled, bleeding, earning groans from each of them. But they were standing, shaky knees, but standing. Super resilient, if also super stubborn.

Art didn’t look convinced. “Assuming Jacob and his spirit friend don’t kill us right now.”

The dripping ooze, around them and yet connected to nothing, chuckled. “Bless your heart, little doggie. To think I care about your intentions anymore? Well, you have no idea.”

“Then explain.” Noah pointed his finger out at the blackness, eyes glaring. It was surprising, seeing the bald, tattooed man looking angry, when he was so calm and composed in their initial outing. “Why’s an Incarnae working with this vampire?” A rather pointed hand gesture for Jacob, too. A lot of

animosity, and as far as Tash knew, Avery's pack had never interacted with Jacob or Black Blood directly. She had, but they hadn't, except that one time with Tash.

Jacob walked up to Noah, and grinned at the man. Grin turned into something more sinister, before Jacob put a finger against the man's chest. Noah didn't stop him, only frowned. If Jacob wanted, he could shove the werewolf, and even a gentle push would be enough to knock the wobbling man over. He knew to not try and fight the elder.

Jacob's expression softened, and he walked ahead on the road of gentle light. "You capable of getting back to your lair from here, Fiona?"

"I... I am... but, I warn you. Don't reside in this in between world for long. Things exist here, old vampire, that should be avoided." Vrall's natural accent and speech mannerism came through more obviously for a moment, and Tash raised a brow as she reached down to help the spider lady lift the giant skeleton. Heavy! And Tash's busted leg screamed at the unwanted weight. Her vitae kept it together though, well enough she could help with this.

"Why thank you for the advice," Jacob said.

"Appreciated, thank you kindly," the darkness said.

Tash looked around at the endless void, and shivered at the sight of it. It was the sort of endlessness that made her think she was in space, in a space suit, abandoned by her fleeing spaceship. Without a way to propel herself, she'd be lost to the void of space, left adrift in nothingness. Chilling.

More chilling, was when Fiona reached out, and touched the darkness. Tash stared on as one of the spider legs on Fiona's back began to tug and pull at the strange blackness, as if plucking and pulling on stretched skin.

The skin tore! Tash raised a hand to cover her eyes as a black fog washed over her. Why was everything black, solid obsidian black? Black ooze, black endless void, black fog; she was sick of it. After this, she wanted bright lights, colorful garments, pink pajamas and cute kittens. After this, she was going to sit down, surround herself with a billion pillows, and watch a romcom.

Sighing, she tugged on Athalia's finger, holding one of the bones of her enormous hand, and struggled to drag the colossal creature into the black fog with Fiona. After this, she was going to throw out all her black clothes, suits included.

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~~Julias~~

The ritual chamber might as well have been under the ocean. The black ooze had filled it top to bottom, and any human was bound to drown. But he didn't have the sensation of being under water, so maybe they wouldn't, but there was no denying that he was submerged in some sort of liquid. It was cold. It was unnatural. It was alive. He felt it pressing against his lips and nostrils, and if he tried to breathe, he was sure it'd enter his lungs.

And then Black Blood was gone, to somewhere with Jacob. Julias had no idea Jacob had become this close to the strange, alien entity. His departure meant the cave was no longer submerged in black liquid, and only silence remained. Even the creepy screams that had come from everywhere and nowhere were gone. Better for Julias to pace around, cradle his fucked up wrist, and worry about everything.

He looked over at Jennifer and Triss, the two of them standing beside the bowl, hands outstretched, and eyes focused. They were the tether. Jacob would find his way back using them, using Black Blood, and maybe his blood too. Owing Jacob a favor was not high on the list of things Julias wanted to have in debt, and this could prove to be entirely pointless.

No, it wasn't pointless. There was something going on. If he could help make sure everyone came back alive, he would. Stepping way out of his duties as a member of the Invictus triumvirate; he should trust the Right Hands to do this. But, no, he knew something was wrong, and if he had to owe the old monster a favor in order to make sure his childe came back alive, so be it.

Perhaps it was the fabled sire and childe link, warning him. Others had spoken of it, and Julias thought he felt it, but he could have been completely wrong. The flip-flopping in his mind grew irksome, and he shook the thoughts clear of his head. Having been submerged in what might as well have been death water didn't help any either, making him reconsider this choice of action. It'd been like swimming in the stomach of a ghost. Or the devil. Did he make a deal with the devil? He tried to tell himself no, but the encounter was not far off from how he imagined such a meeting to go.

Cutting off his wrist, with a shitty knife, like he was stuck in a bear trap and needed to get out. That was hell, in a way he hadn't expected. He'd been hurt plenty of times in his Kindred life, but something about forcing a knife through his own skin, muscle, flesh, and bone, was more than painful. It was sickening down to the soul; assuming vampires had one of those.

“He’s back,” Jen said.

Julias looked behind him to where they’d originally entered, but Triss touched his arm and pointed to the walls. They were bleeding again. The weird, black ooze trickled down over the cracks of the cave wall, over the red, painted symbols, and the etched carvings, seeping into the crevices as it leaked onto the floor. Other parts of the wall were covered in the strange black liquid dripping upward, and oozing upward, as if gravity was a joke to this monster. Maybe it was.

He sighed, and braced himself for the sickening sensation of being submerged. It wasn’t too bad; he’d had to do stake outs submerged in water before, and as long as he didn’t try to breathe, he didn’t have to deal with water in the lungs. Drowning wasn’t the issue, a strange form of claustrophobia and dread was the issue. He did not envy submarine crews.

Once the black liquid filled the cave again, a hand came out of the bowl, Jacob’s. Triss and Jen both reached in without hesitation, and began to pull the man out of the bowl of guts. The entrails of his sacrifice had turned black, and it looked less like entrails, and more like some sort of swamp. Except, the swamp’s mud didn’t stick to Jacob’s arm, sliding off of him cleanly as the two women pulled him out.

And after Jacob came more people. Oh shit. Several hands, from several different people. Julias reached out with his good hand, and pulled on one, as Jacob pulled on another, and the girls took one each. Noah, Arturo, and Matthew. Clara, Jessy, and Eric. Then Damien, and finally, Jack. Each one climbed out of the black ooze of the bowl, and each one rolled over its edge to collapse onto the cave floor.

They looked like shit.

Once they were all out, Julias looked around for the others. “Where’s Natasha? And the Begotten?”

As the werewolves and vampires forced themselves to their feet, each finding something to grab or lean against, bowl or wall, Jack held up his hand.

“Tash is with them, helping them get back to their lair. They said they can heal better there, and she was the least injured of us.”

“Least injured.” Julias frowned at the group, but as he looked Jack up and down, the frown faded. The kid really did look like hell, and Julias set a hand on his shoulder as he looked the boy in the eye. Judging from the wound, a bullet must have clipped the side of his other eye socket and smashed out

along the bone; the ear was gone, too. Painful, really painful. Only the unnatural vitae of the boy's vampire body was keeping the wound from being fatal, with bits of the inside of his skull exposed.

"I'm fine," the boy said. He was most definitely not fine. He was shaking in pain, and he looked downtrodden, as if he'd failed his mission. Julius knew the look, it was his look.

Jacob laughed, and wiped off his knuckles. "You sure, Clarice? Looked to me like you were all about to die."

Jack winced, and looked over his shoulder at the elder. With a moment to wallow in misery, Jack let his head drop, and stared down at the floor. Julius might as well have been looking in a mirror. Considering the rescue mission seemed to be a success, the boy had to be upset about something else. Something else was probably Angela.

They were all still in the strange, black water, but none of them were surprised. Must have been how Black Blood managed to get them out from wherever. The murky depths made them all look depressed though, and Jack looked like he was morose incarnate.

"The hunters," Black Blood said, voice rippling through the currents of the black, "were more than prepared. Why, they even had someone familiar with the workings of the realms." The bassy voice chuckled, in an all too familiar way, Jacob's way. As it laughed, the water began to drain away into nothing, inch by slow inch, as if the spirit was delighting in reveling in the downtrodden group. "But don't worry about that old bat. I'll get my claws on her, soon enough."

"You don't get to touch anyone!" Matt said, swinging his arm across the air in front of him. Dramatic. "The hell do you think you're doing, spirit? What—"

Everyone fell back as the draining water, waist deep at that point, shot outward, and a giant hand of black, leather skin, erupted from the raised waves. The crashing water, with a great mass it did not have before, sent everyone down onto their backs and stomach, everyone except Jacob. The hand, colossal, the size of a person, slammed down against Matt with all the grace of a car crash, and pinned him.

Everyone stared on, jaw dropping, as the raging spirit began to manifest. Something above them, connected to the ceiling, began to take form. The wrist of the giant hand had emerged from the draining water, but above them a face began to take shape, black, almost shiny with its ooze texture. The form remained vague, without details, but there were enough to see eyes, a mouth, and a nose. Enough for lips to move, and speak.

“If I had listened to my friend Malachi, you would be dead, idiot dog. So hold your horses. The only reason you and your pack get to stay in my town, is because I think you might serve a purpose. Red Tide and the Street-Tail King, they step onto my land and tarnish my waters; deal with them. Until then, dog, accept the truce I offered before, or I will end you myself. We done?”

Matt, giant of a man, was a bleeding, ruined mess. Black Blood hadn't hurt him, far as Julias could tell, the spirit was only taking advantage of Matt's wounds. Then again, seeing a giant face of shadow and ooze looking down at them from the ceiling, with a hand that belonged on a fifty-foot-tall giant made of black leather and metal, put this alien entity's power into perspective. Jacob had made friends with a god.

Matt grunted and groaned, but said nothing. The sort of man who'd die to uphold his views, conviction, honor, and all the stupidity that went with such concepts. Still, he seemed like a nice guy, and Julias hoped the alien creature wasn't going to kill him for the man's idiocy.

“We get it,” Arturo said as he walked over to Matt. “Let him go.”

Black Blood said nothing for a few seconds, as if contemplating killing the werewolf. It wasn't like they could stop him. The only people in the room not injured were the Circle of the Crone, and the two witches took their queue from Jacob, who would have probably delighted in the death of another of Avery's pack.

But, with time, the spirit raised its colossal hand. The limb disappeared into the draining, murky depths, and the face of ooze above them melded into the stone, before it disappeared.

“Y'all take good care of yourselves now, you hear?” Departing words from the alien entity. Jacob was struggling to not laugh, and Julias was struggling to not pull out his pistol and shoot the man.

“As you can see,” Jacob said, gesturing to the large group, “things went badly. Your instincts were right, Julias. Not your Invictus plans that you trust so much, but your instincts that told you your childe was in danger. An instinct of the blood.” The old monster came up to him, and pat him on the shoulder, same as Julias had done for Jack moments before. “Wanna come over to my side of the fence?”

“We're already on the same side.” This old bastard was going to be the death of them all, if he continued to cause strife in such indirect ways. But, better indirect than direct, like Garry, he supposed. “Report. Everyone going to survive? Uratha need medical attention?”

“I... I don't know,” Eric said.

Noah rolled his eyes, and got down on a knee beside the sitting, trembling man. “Of course you don’t. You won’t let us teach you anything.”

Dragging himself back to his feet with Arturo’s help, he and Matthew knelt down next to Clara, and helped sit her up against the wall.

“You ok?” Matt said.

“Y... Yeah. That... gargoyle thing....”

“Gargoyle thing?” Julias said.

Jack stepped around the bowl, forced his head up, and cradled his face with one hand. “The Begotten working with Jeremiah and Angela. I... christ, I’ll do up a proper report tomorrow night with the details. We hurt them, killed a few of them, and Black Blood forced them to do... something. Not sure how they did it, but they pushed us out of the nightmare we were in somehow. No idea, except from what Black Blood said, that Elen did it.”

“That Elen woman needs to die,” Damien said. Many of the group nodded.

“I saw her,” Jessy said. The poor woman looked like someone had body slammed her from the Eiffel Tower. “Old woman. Should be dead yesterday.”

Jacob raised a hand, as if correcting a classroom. “Hmm, maybe not die? A woman like that has knowledge.” Everyone turned, and stared at the old monster, frowns galore, until he put his hands up. “Ok ok, maybe not.”

“So we have time to take a breather then,” Julias said. “That’s something. No paranormal died, and we have a lot more knowledge now than we did before. This is progress. Painful, but progress.”

“Painful?” Art said. “The fuck did you—”

Julias pulled out his stump and showed it to him, earning chuckles from the Nosferatu. Everyone winced.

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~~Antoinette~~

“That... that is good.” Antoinette sighed relief, and the tension in her body melted away, as Julias explained the rescue efforts of Jacob. “I am impressed with your actions, Mire. To owe my old friend a favor is a dangerous thing, and he will ask it of you in ways you will not be able to predict.”

“We’ll see. I’m pretty good at predicting,” the Ventrue said over the phone. “I regret ever letting the boy go. I let my emotions get the better of me, and thought rescuing Jessy and the others worth the risk.”

She did not agree with his plan, but she had to admit, it was a very time sensitive situation. Extreme acts of ludicrous bravery were, sometimes, fruitful. Most often, they were not, and survivor bias was a deadly sin.

“I look forward to seeing my love,” she said, implying the obvious with a deeper tone.

“First thing tomorrow night. But, he’s in a bad way, Prince. They all are. Jacob and his... friend, really saved them from what I guess was a battle they were losing.”

She was glad that it was the Ventrue that owed Jacob, and not her. And yet, she could not deny that she too owed Jacob in a way, for his efforts. Perhaps not in a capacity her old friend would hold her to, but nonetheless.

And Black Blood. That cursed creature was involved. She did not wish that, for that alien entity to seep its claws, its dark liquid, its insidiousness into her city, least of her all fellow Kindred, and lover.

“Thank you, Mire, for your... for everything.”

She could almost hear the man smile.

“No problem, Prince. We both love that stupid kid.”

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If she would not be seeing her love until tomorrow night, then she had time to follow up on the new development.

She left her office, and moved down into the depths of her labyrinth. Daniel followed behind her, and she nodded at him over her shoulder as he stepped in beside her.

“How fair your journeys into the realms?” she said.

“Still having trouble tracking down the source. At first I suspected Jacob was causing these weird disturbances, but now I don’t know. It might be Jeremiah.”

“Ah yes, Jeremiah. Twice now the hunters and their plans have been foiled. I fear they will do something desperate, in retaliation.”

“Jeremiah seems like the sort of man who will respond harshly, but with some degree of intelligence.” Daniel adjusted his glasses with a single finger, before he slipped his hands into his trench coat pockets. “Unfortunately, he’s proving far too unpredictable.”

“Agreed.” With a begotten working for the man, his avenues of attack had increased tremendously, to the point she would not be able to predict his actions so easily. “It may be time we offer Azamel some freedom, in return for her help against the man.”

“I’m starting to wonder if she knew Jeremiah had a Begotten under his thumb, and waited on the info since the beginning, to put us in this position.”

“Perhaps.” The old creature was patient enough. “But, I do believe she is also too prideful to readily admit that, in all this, she is the hunted, and we are her walls. It is a difficult position to be in.”

“Are you excusing her behavior?”

“Non. The old monster will have to answer for her deceptions, but at the same time, we must ask for her help in dealing with Jeremiah, and his Begotten slave.”

“I see.” Daniel nodded, and followed her. She had not explained to him what she was doing yet, but he followed nonetheless. Loyal to a fault, her old friend. And he would be able to guess, soon enough.

There were many chambers in her labyrinth of floors and halls, of rooms and alcoves, that she did not allow others to explore. Off limits to her ghouls, to her love, and to her new student. Unsightly secrets, dark, dirty, in ways that did not become her, and the image she had crafted for herself.

She opened one of the doors, thick and sealed with many bars of metal. The mechanical padlock was old fashioned, but complicated, sturdy, and required a specific code that only she knew. It could not be picked. Perhaps it was time to move onto the digital age of locks, as she had done in many other places, but there was something powerful in the simplicity of the old. Unless someone came in with a blowtorch, they were not getting through.

She took a moment to look through the window of one of the cells. There were a half dozen humans, kept alive for one purpose only: death as the occasional, emergency meal, or sacrifice. There

had been the time Jack was a mess of ruin, and she had fed him three souls, to insure his daily sleep would revitalize him. She did not tell him the details, tell him of how she kept the truly wicked here as blood bags, to be killed at her whim. Murderers, that she murdered without pity. It was better that such knowledge not be shared needlessly, lest it change the view Natasha and Jack had of her.

Perhaps Jack should know, though? It would be a step in their relationship, but not one she felt comfortable making, not yet. For now, she would keep her darker activities between herself, and Daniel. And for now, she needed one sacrifice.

She did not make a show of it, did not indulge in the kill or dance in the blood. She did not enjoy this, but it had to be done. A simple use of majesty to turn one of the sacrifices into a dotting slave, willing to do everything and anything for her. This one was a man who had killed his wife in a fit of rage. There was a certain justice to killing him, she supposed, but she tried to not frame it in such close-minded definitions. He was a sacrifice, and a kine who no longer deserved to live. She needed fuel. Nothing more.

The sacrifice followed them down, and down, and down into the deepest pits of her tower, far further than the undercity of Dolareido went. There was a secret route that connected the labyrinth to the Dolareido tunnels, but it was old, and she had long sealed it off. With recent events, she considered re-opening it, in case suicidal hunters showed up at her tower, and decided to nuke her home, literally.

Deep, and deeper, until the air was hard to breathe for the sacrifice. Down here she felt comfortable with the more grandiose experiments, the ones she shared with no one save her fellow dragon Daniel, the ones she was concerned could implode and destroy much if not deep underground. Down here, she could pursue her desire for knowledge, and not worry for the ramifications.

“I know what you’re going to do,” Daniel said, following behind her in the dark hallway of metal.

“I have to speak with it, Daniel.”

“You really don’t. Last time—”

“Last time was different. There need not be strife between us and the entity.”

Sighing, Daniel shook his head, but followed. She did not like dismissing him so, especially when he made a good point, but it was a point she had already debated. This conversation needed to happen, and as the entity encroached on her city more and more, it would happen more often.

She opened the doors to her final chamber, and once the sacrifice had entered, Daniel closed it behind them.

Above her was the same chandelier as in her main experiments room. On the floor, the same symbols, drawings that represented natural balances and mysteries in the machine of the universe. The average person did not understand the power in the enigma of mathematics, how mathematics was the language of existence itself, and how reality as they knew it existed upon the foundation of numbers. Many of those, she captured in the symbols below. With the wavelength provided by the chandelier, and the vibration provided by her machines, she created resonance. And certain things were attracted to varying types of resonance.

Black Blood required more than resonance to summon. The entity required sacrifice. It required blood, and flesh. Disgusting creature.

Antoinette did not waste time, and did not let the moment build. It was an abhorrent ritual, and she would not relish the kill, like the witches would. A nod to Daniel was enough, and her sheriff stabbed the man in the back of the head with a knife.

No pain, no misery, no fake words or fanfare. The man fell onto the center of the symbols, beneath the chandelier. The walls of metal, covered in more of the symbols she had spent decades perfecting, were the murderer's last sight, before he slumped to the floor. Daniel, with knife held, squatted down over the kill, and split them open from chin to crotch in one, clean slice.

Vampires craved blood, not muscle, meat, organ, or bone. To see a kine have their insides become their outsides was not a pleasing sight, and she frowned at the mess it made, a mess she would have to clean; no thrall or ghoul would be allowed down here to clean it.

But the deed was done. She walked over to the machine, a large thing of pipes, metal compartments, and digital readouts. It was a far older version of the resonance machine she used in her main experiments chamber, with Daniel and Natasha, but still young enough to have digital components. She set the frequency to high, and set the chandelier's wavelength to the strange blue.

Now, all that remained was to wait, as the humming sound vibrated along the walls, against the floor, and into the chandelier.

They did not have to wait long. The blue light faded away, hidden in the encroaching darkness, as black liquid began to drip from the metal ceiling. As if the ceiling had cracks in it, veins of black began to form over their heads, and soon began to bleed its ooze onto the floor. It was coming, and she folded her arms across her chest and suit jacket as she waited for the inevitable.

The alien creature took its time, ooze dripping both up and down from within the circle of summoning. It could not leave, or at least, if it did leave the circle it would have no essence to sustain

itself. She doubted the creature needed to concern itself with such things, old and powerful as it was, and it remained within the summoning circle she had created purely for its own comfort.

The ooze filled the space, creating a pool of black two feet deep upon the summoning circle, as if pressed to glass around its edges. It also formed the same circle above, against the ceiling, over the chandelier, and the bleeding black dripped up and down continuously. The corpse disappeared underneath the slow waves, unable to float in the strange obsidian. At least, that was how it seemed at first, but one of its hands rose from the black. And then the other. And then, the corpse sat up.

“Well, butter my biscuits!” The corpse had adopted a new voice, and as black oozed from his eyes and nostrils, he looked at her as he stood up.

Antoinette raised her eyebrows, looked at Daniel, who only shrugged, before looking to the corpse. “... quoi?”

“Don’t worry yourself over it. Now, what can I do you for, high and mighty Prince of Slut City?” The strange corpse tilted his head to the sides, as if stretching his neck, and dusted off his shoulders. With body split open, throat to pelvis, much of what was supposed to be inside the body, fell out of the body. What things were not well attached, landed in the ooze, disappearing, while the man’s intestines fell but remained attached to the body. Why the gory state was required, Antoinette did not know, but without it, the creature would not be summoned.

“I wanted to speak of your actions tonight.”

“Ah, yes, I figured as much. Love to have your fingers in everything, don’t you.” The corpse shrugged, and began to pace, hands in the small of his back.

“What is with the absurd accent? The last time we spoke—”

“Oh I dunno, just trying it out. This poor fool you brought me has nothing new. But Jacob, this one time, brought me a fellar from the South, and I—”

“Enough.” Antoinette shook her head, and glared at the body. “Show yourself. I have no intention of speaking with a corpse. Not this time.”

The corpse stopped moving, stared at her, and considered. For a moment she thought the entity might leave; it was her asking for its favor, in visiting after all, and yet she was demanding it abandoned the charade. But the entity, like Jacob, loved to talk, to toy with others, to be a thorn in their side. She had earned the right to see the creature itself.

“Fine.” The corpse fell back down into the pool. And once it was gone, underneath the waves of black, the room filled with darkness.

Antoinette took a step back, and looked around as the liquid fog filled the whole of the large chamber in mere moments. Daniel reached for his sword, and she did not stop him; she had expected the creature to at least stay where she provided it essence. It did not want to. The strange liquid crashed into the walls, but was weightless, not affecting her or Daniel despite it washing over them. It took only seconds for the two of them to be buried in its obsidian depths. The blue light of the chandelier was almost gone, and Antoinette squinted to make out shapes in the dark.

There was a face, in the black. Except the face was at least twenty feet tall, and it floated over the corpse, looking at the two vampires. The eyes and lips, the nose and chin, all were vague blurs in the ink they swam in. But it was there, the creature, its actual body, encompassing them all in its presence.

It was terrifying.

She steeled herself, and frowned at the giant visage in the murky depths. This was the creature that haunted the shadows of her city, affected it in ways she could not understand, and undermined her efforts to control it. Determining how, exactly, the alien entity was undermining her was difficult, but in her studies, and Daniel’s previous investigation, they had found many places where people behaved strangely, did strange things to each other. If she had not known better, she would have assumed them servants of the Circle of the Crone, these random kine who explored the functions of their own bodies with knives and needles.

This thing, this creature, was a menace, but she needed to know.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Thank you?” Black Blood said, its unfitting Southern accent remaining, except now filled with overwhelming bass and inhuman depth that shook her body to the core. “You have nerve, little lady. I’ve offered you a truce, to let you be, while you leave me to mine, and you continue to poke your nose where it don’t belong.”

“My experiments do not affect you.”

“Don’t they?” The enormous face grinned at her as it chuckled, heavy voice causing the depths of the Earth to tremble. “You’ve summoned denizens of my city. You acquired a seeing eye, at one point, didn’t you?”

Seeing eye? The squid-like creature, she supposed, that had spoke of Maria’s involvement. She could ask Black Blood about Maria directly, now that she had taken the time to summon the

monstrosity, but that would expose that she did not know what Maria's intentions were. It would also expose that she believed the creature she and Natasha had summoned. Giving this alien entity any more information was not something she wished to do.

"I want to speak of your move against the hunters, tonight."

"Of course you do." The bleeding silhouette of black drifted around in her chamber; though, its size prevented much movement. Large as the room was, Black Blood's visage was enormous, and it had little room to move through the murky shadows. "Or, was it you want to know about monsters?"

"... both."

"And why should I tell you these things?"

"I believe it will benefit us both. You wish for things to continue as they do, do you not?"

"Heh. Well, Malachi might not appreciate me sharing the details. You want more info? Go ask my friend."

This new voice and attitude the spirit wielded was insufferable. She expected a colossal entity of unknowable intent, with voice as alien as the stars, to be difficult to understand. Instead, this creature dare impersonate a normal man, with a normal voice, and talk 'buddy buddy' about Jacob, as if Black Blood could understand friendship or comradery. It was a spirit, and understood only how to further its agenda, nothing more.

"But," the spirit continued, "that boy you got under your thumb, the Terry boy. My oh my, I see potential in that little man. Jacob called it right."

"W... Why do you speak of my love?"

"Jack Terry? That kid is going places, Prince. And don't worry about him, I'll keep an eye out for him."

The alien's words only worsened her worry, a thousand fold.

"I... I wanted," she said, "to propose a deal."

"A deal? With a spirit? Them's dangerous waters, vampire. I'll hold you to any deal you make."

"I am sure you will." Sighing, she began to pace, and did her best to ignore the black water that permeated everything. It was not real, or at least, it was not the physical body of Black Blood, only some effect of it. That did not make her feel better. "Chaos has come to my doorstep as a raging tide in a single year."

“That it has.”

“And I fear these hunters will bring far more damage than we could have estimated.”

“Probably.”

“And—”

“And you want me to do something.” The inhuman voice chuckled, bassy rumbles vibrating her walls, and causing the black liquid to churn. “Me, who you have shunned and refused to speak with. Me, who you only discuss in dark corners, and ignore. Me, who rules the other side of your town. Our town.”

“... yes.”

“Well now, ain’t that something.” The voice chuckled yet again, breaking into more of a laugh, a very Jacob laugh. “Jacob and I have an agreement, little missy. You got a request for me? Ask him. And besides, I saved your boy, and the others. Way I see it, you owe me; but don’t you worry your pretty head none, Jacob will take care of it. In the mean time, how about you worry about yours, and I’ll worry about mine?”

“Black Blood!” She glared at the shadowy creature, its enormous face in the murky black, and clenched her hands into fists at her side. “Do not dismiss me so easily.”

“You had your chance. I’m done with you.”

And like someone had set off an explosive, the black liquid shot outward from the center of the room. The corpse upon the floor exposed, but unmoving, the dark ooze vanished into the nether as raging wind twisted and turned the onyx into the air, before it faded. In a single moment, like someone popping a balloon, Black Blood returned to its realm, leaving her and Daniel standing in the blue light of the chandelier, the hum of the resonance machine their background noise, and a corpse at their feet.

“Merde.” With a sigh, she turned around, and headed for the door.