

~~Damien~~

One of the hunters came out of the shadows. He recognized this one. A woman, short, thick with muscle, and with a shotgun in her hand.

“... you’re dead,” Damien said. “You were one of the hunters killed in the chaos, in the—”

“In Sándor’s chamber, yeah.” She came closer, tilted her head, and showed them her neck. There was a giant scar where an Uratha had torn into her.

“How!?” Matt asked, growling as he began to pace. The big guy put himself between the group of them, and the hunter, a protective instinct shining through. He probably thought of the four of them as his temporary pack, at least in some capacity. Good for them, they needed a frontliner.

“Oh, sorry, let me just spill all our secrets, and our master plan. Get me in a monologue, right?” Sighing, the hunter began to pace the barrier, going from wall to wall, mirroring Matt’s pacing. Matt was trapped in the circular trap though, while she was blocked by the previous barrier, straight as it cut across the tunnel. So she couldn’t cross the barrier made with black soot, while the amber circle beneath the paranormals trapped them. Or at least, that’s how it looked.

Perhaps they were in a stalemate? Unlikely. The trap had been set with a purpose. Perhaps she intended to undo the wall barrier, and then kill Damien and his group with the shotgun? If she did that, she opened herself up to being shot back, as the amber circle didn’t seem to block things like his sword. Both barriers were magical in nature, though, and perhaps the hunter had a way to attack through it.

He had to think. Think. Figure a way out of here, before the hunter took advantage somehow, and shot them like fish in a barrel.

“Tell me what I want to know,” the hunter said.

Matt growled, still pacing, while everyone else stood in the center. Damien found himself partly holding an arm out, keeping it between Fiona and the hunter. Vicky and Parker, naturally, stood furthest back, with quiet and unassuming faces. At least they weren’t panicking; Damien could appreciate that.

“We’re na gonna tell ye nothin!” Fiona said, frowning and sticking her tongue out.

The hunter raised an eyebrow, looking at Fiona with an obvious look of confusion, before she returned the frown. “Don’t do that.”

Fiona blinked, and looked to Damien before the hunter again. “Do what?”

“Act like that.”

“... like what?”

“Like a person.”

Everyone looked at everyone else, vampires, monster, and werewolf trading glances with each other, as they digested that comment. The hunter didn't think they were people. How far did that belief go?

“Tae fuck? I'm a person!” Fiona's frown grew, and she stomped her feet.

“You're a soulless monster and a murderer.”

Damien sighed, and pressed his arm against Fiona as she tried to move forward, blocking her. So the hunter's belief extended into such an extreme, believing that paranormals didn't have souls. He knew he did. His faith reminded him of that every night. And, even without faith, vampires, werewolves, and monsters never abandoned their internal struggle with morality and ethics. If that did not prove existence of the soul, then what did?

But trying to prove that to a human was pointless. Once upon a time, Jack would have disagreed, and said that communication was worth it. Now, Damien doubted it.

“Ye dinnae ken! Ye... dinnae get tae say that!”

Damien blinked, and looked down at the tiny redhead. There were tears in her eyes.

“I don't? How many humans have you killed, monster?”

Sniffing, Fiona wiped her tears away with fists, and stepped behind Damien. Less a shield from potential physical harm, and more a shield to hide her face, he could see.

“I've only killed the mean ones.”

The hunter rolled her eyes and pointed at Matthew. “And you, werewolf. How many humans have you killed? Vamps need blood, monsters need lots of different things, usually got from crushing humans into mulch. But you, werewolf? You don't need to eat humans. I bet you've killed plenty, though.”

This hunter knew a little about them, more than Matthew had predicted. That information alone was valuable, if a bit late.

“I've killed,” Matt said, glaring at the hunter as he squeezed his fists until they cracked. “I killed a crack dealer that had ruined a neighborhood, South of where I lived. I killed a few murderers, once I

managed to get my hands on them. And I've killed one hunter, some dumbass who thought I should die." The aggression rose in the man's voice, and Damien found himself stepping back from the large Uratha, pushing Fiona back along with him. It was hard to tell if Matt was talking about some past killing, or he was implying the inevitable with the hunter in front of him.

"Yeah, uh huh," the hunter said. "And the possessed? Ones with spirits riding inside them? They could be saved, but how many times did you just kill the human helplessly caught in the middle of your hunt?"

That was enough to stun Matt. The hunter knew way, way more than they could have predicted.

"That... We avoid that as often as possible."

"Uh huh." She didn't sound convinced. "I'm looking for a reason to not kill you all, right now. Cursory poking suggests there's no reason to spare any of you."

Damien snarled, and withdrew his pistol, holding it in his right hand while holding his sword in his left. He pointed it at her, and predictably, she smirked at him.

"Because if you lower the barrier to kill us, we'll shoot you. Is that not a good reason?"

Laughing, the hunter pulled something out of her belt. It took them all a second to recognize it, but she flipped the clear top off of some sort of small handheld metal tube, and showed the red button. A detonator.

Everyone looked at each other with raised eyebrow, confused, but Damien figured it out faster. He looked down and around, before he looked up at the ceiling above. Where were the explosives? It wasn't like the hunters could have simply dug into the concrete of the tunnel. Getting through that material required serious work.

A bluff? Maybe. Damien stared at her, watched her close, and continued to look for any signs of hidden explosives, until the others caught on, and gasped.

"You c-could cause a cave in!" Vicky said.

Yeah, she could, if she wasn't lying. A cave in would kill the hunters, and potentially kill Matthew and Fiona from lack of oxygen. Could Fiona dig them one of her special tunnels into her nightmare world in that circumstance? He didn't know, and he didn't want to find out in that situation.

"Smell any traces of anything, Matt?" he said.

The big man shook his head. "I don't smell traces of anything, somehow. Not... not even things I should be smelling."

Their sense of smell was being blocked, or mitigated. Shit.

“Crazy, right?” the hunter said with a laugh. “We have ways. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, we’re not your average hunters. We’re organized, and we’re—”

“Working with monsters,” Damien said, slowly rotating his wrist with sword in hand.

“Just one.”

“One? I counted four.” Jeremiah, Angela, Elen, and the Begotten.

The hunter woman paused, spent a few seconds longer thinking about his words than Damien expected, before she started pacing again. “Jeremiah is a great man. Been hunting monsters for decades. Sold a big part of his humanity, to become a tool capable of destroying wicked things like you. Some would call that righteous.”

Matt snarled as he paced, though big as he was, the circle was a little cramped for his pacing. “He’s a psychopath. He’ll throw you to the wolves the moment we find and circle him.”

Damien smiled at Matt and his personal twist on the ‘throw you to the wolves’ line, before looking back to the hunter. “Elen, the shaman woman. How long have you known her?” No answer. “How old is she?” No answer. “How does she perform her strange magic?” No answer. “... how can you accept the murder of innocent people to fuel her—”

“She didn’t kill innocent people.” The hunter laughed and shrugged. “Dealers? Rapists? Scum who’ve not only thrown their lives away, but dragged other people down with them? Not one of us is crying over their deaths. World is better off without them.”

He frowned and raised a brow. That was harsh. These hunters had a steel resolve if they didn’t see a problem with that way of thinking, that was for sure. It was something Kindred and Uratha did, sure, kill humans they felt worth killing, in pursuit of their agendas. But humans killing humans was a different matter.

Damien put up his hands, though he kept pistol in one, sword in the other. “You seem willing to talk, while your comrades are not. Why?”

“I like to know my enemy. And maybe you’ll tell me what I want to know.”

“That’s it?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Shrugging, the short woman approached the barrier, and reached out to press a palm against it in front of her, eye level. She leaned her weight into the palm, too, proving how secure

the flat barrier was. Two barriers seemed overkill to Damien, but then, these hunters were probably sick of failing in their encounters with the Kindred of Dolareido.

Sighing, Damien lowered his hands, and gestured to the rest of the paranormals trapped with him. “I’d appreciate it if you let us go.”

She laughed. “Why would I do that? You’re all monsters.”

“Because if you let us go, we’ll let you go. I’ll report back to my superiors that not all the hunters are psychopath killers that need to die.”

“Ha! Mercy, from a vampire?”

Damien shrugged. “God has mercy for humans, and plenty of it. Not for us, but for you.”

That earned two raised brows from the woman. She pushed off the barrier to stand up straight again, and stared at him, tilting her head to the side. “I thought the Lancea et Sanctum were wiped out in this city.”

How did these hunters know this much? It had to be Elen’s magic, or Jeremiah’s unusual skill set; or both.

“They were, except for me. I survived.”

“Yeah well, God doesn’t seem to give a shit about hunters, so you’re not going to sell me on converting.”

He sighed, louder this time. Dolareido didn’t care for religion, and neither did the hunters. The only people who thought God still existed was him, who spent fifty years hiding underneath streets and in filth, and a dried-up corpse vampire woman, whose lover and loyal servant of God was dead. With the way the world was going, he couldn’t blame people for their lack of faith. But a little faith could go a long way.

“Dolareido rarely had deaths, hunter, of those that didn’t deserve it. Even Azamel, for all the ire she’s earned, has done little since arriving. The Kindred of Dolareido have changed quite a bit since Tony and Viktor’s deaths. Surely we weren’t on any hunter radar.” Normally it’d be Jack saying these things, but the boy was in no mindset to be playing ambassador or peace talker; and he wasn’t here. If Damien could pull it off, well, the better for everyone.

“You’re right, you weren’t. But, you gave that elephant freak monster sanctuary. And besides that, you’re vampires. You’ll eventually cause problems. We might as well kill you along with all the other

paranormals. Kind of like a crusade, you know? And hey, if you're a God-fearing vamp, I'm sure you know what those are."

Damien's sigh turned into a quiet growl. Jack was right. There was no communicating with these people, and that was infuriating because he knew not all the hunters had to be mindless killing machines or genocidal crusaders, with zero consideration for specifics. The Devil is in the details, and that was a painful lesson Damien had learned the hard way, a lesson these hunters had yet to.

He glanced over his shoulder at Fiona. The smile on her face had faded, and her shoulders slumped. She had stayed close to him, and was peeking out from behind him at the hunter. Scared. This was the first time she'd ever faced a hunter, while forced to stay in her vulnerable human body. Worse, this was the first time she'd ever heard the words of a true believer of their cause, someone of complete faith in their views of the world, willing to kill her.

Vicky and Parker were pressing up against the other side of the circle, trying to get out. They were getting a little more panicked, each trying hard enough to escape to force their shoes to slide on the concrete beneath them.

"... Matthew," he said, "transform. See if you can break through this."

The big guy wasted no time. The juggernaut of strength began to grow, fur pouring out of him as muscle mass appeared from nowhere. Weight, solid, heavy, filled his body, turning the already big man into a Goliath of towering proportions. The hunter stepped back and stared up as Matthew hit seven feet in height, then eight, then nine, and nearly hit ten feet. He would have, if it wasn't for how his head and neck set forward from the shoulders instead of above.

Damien had to step back to give the gargantuan creature his space. His arms were nearly as thick as Damien's whole body, and with the wolf's forward hunched posture, they dangled enough to almost reach the floor beneath him. His tail was big enough Damien had to step back several times to keep out of its way, and doing so drew his eyes to the beast's feet. Not paws, but monstrous feet that looked more at home on a dinosaur than any wolf, with talons there were already starting to puncture the concrete with the Uratha's weight.

The werewolf's breath was slow, but loud and heavy, enormous lungs fueling the giant creature. His snout was thick and long, and his mane of fur around his neck thicker than the short fur on the rest of his body, almost like a lion. His ears were pointed at the hunter, and he rumbled animal aggression deep in his chest loud enough Damien felt the vibration through his shoes.

The hunter gulped, but managed to keep her eyes on Matt as she stared up at the hungry, angry beast. Brave, this woman.

“The reason I’m this close,” she said, “is because this detonator won’t punch through concrete from too far.”

However the barrier worked, it didn’t seem to block sound. From further down the tunnel, a couple of hunters appeared, each armed with assault rifles, grenades, knives, the works. Shit.

Matt started clawing at the barrier. He had to get through the ring barrier that circled them first; the second barrier could wait, if they were going to even attempt it. Three hunters were manageable, but not if the one with a detonator started the fight off with an—

Boom. The shock wave was immense, far greater than Damien could have predicted; which was stupid, now that he thought about it. Their attack on the Begotten’s nightmare had proven the hunters had access to heavy explosives. Why wouldn’t they use some now? Well, they were in a tunnel, and detonating a high-yield explosive could cause it to collapse, especially since it seemed to come from above. They must have dug it in there somehow, or concealed it, for no one to see it or smell it.

The realities flashed through his mind, before other images did. A quick glance to Vicky, Parker, and Matt showed them all slowly turning their heads upward, to the source of the shock wave. The world had gone into slow motion, just like in the films. He brought his eyes to the small woman hiding behind him, and winced as he saw the shock painted on her face as she looked up.

His vampire discipline Celerity kicked into override, a thousand times more effective than any human’s adrenaline. Speed at his fingertips, absurd speed, the sort that had let him cut off Antoinette’s arm and leg, the sort that helped him save Fiona in the nightmare from the unrelenting gunfire, and now, it’d help him save her again, God willing.

Except, they were trapped inside the circle, and among the blast coming down for their heads, were giant blocks of concrete that would crush them into paste. Matt might live, but the rest of them weren’t going to be so lucky. And yet, that reality didn’t seem to stop him from trying. Parker was Daeva, another practitioner of Celerity, but the man wasn’t ready for this; lazy idiot. As the blocks slowly fell, Damien sped toward him, slammed a palm into his stomach so he’d start falling down, and then slammed a palm into Vicky’s back toward her partner, so she’d fall on top of him. He made sure his punches were downward angled, and strong enough to drive them into the floor fast so Vicky would land on him before the concrete did. She was a Ventrue, resilient, and had the better chance of survival.

He, on the other hand, was going to break like glass. Ah well. He threw a punch upward, hitting one of the falling blocks, the world still a slow motion symphony of falling death, and used the reversed momentum to drive himself down onto Fiona. Her golden brown eyes were wide with shock. He stared into them as he fell on top of her, smiling, and bracing his weight into his elbows as he put his chest over her head. With any luck, she'd live.

He didn't look up as the explosion crashed into them. It wasn't fire, napalm or such, thank the Lord. It was pure kinetic force though, and it crushed them all into the subway tunnel floor like pancakes. Pain wracked his body, a blanket of agony from head to feet, before the individual balls of pain joined in. Thud. Thud. Sickening crunches, sounds he recognized: bones breaking. He could hear them because they were inside his body, punching through the ringing deafness the explosion caused. Each crunch took a moment to echo with pain, but it did, and it wasn't long before the sonata of agony overwhelmed him. The concrete came in two waves. The first fueled by the explosion's punch, turning each giant block into enormous bullets, and with the second wave, larger chunks of concrete fell, slower, fueled by gravity.

One hit his back. Another hit his shoulder, then forearm of the same arm. Then the other arm, the hand. Another hit his lower back, and others hit his legs in various places. One falling block of death crashed into his ankle, and summoned a cacophony of misery through him as he felt the joint shatter. Another hit the floor in front of his head before toppling down onto his skull; lucky, or it'd have shattered his head like a glass jar.

Worse was the weight of the blocks. Jagged and misshapen, the heavy pieces of rubble crushed him into the ground, pinned him, dug into his broken limbs. He couldn't move, the weight unrelenting, oppressive, and uncaring. And, with time, all was silent.

But, he was alive; as much as a Kindred could be. Groaning, he tried to push against the floor, and couldn't. The very attempt reignited the pain into a concert of agony, and he groaned, unable to muster the energy for a proper cry or sob as his body shrieked in torment. A jagged, sharp piece of concrete was sitting on his head, but another was resting on that, pinning his skull down, and a mess of chaos and weight pinned his limbs. Bones were broken, a hand and wrist, an ankle, a leg, an arm, ribs, and he had the distinct impression one of his hips was, too.

The world was quiet. Underneath rubble, and lots of it, sound was muffled and turned into nothing more than quiet rumbles. Darkness. He groaned again as the pain danced up and down his body, demanding he move but knowing full well he couldn't. A Gangrel or Ventrue would have been able to take the blows better, but not a Mekhet. Vicky was Ventrue, so, maybe she'd pull through?



An explosion ripped outward from the pile that buried him, and his groans turned into shouts as he felt the weight shift, and the darkness split with beams of light. Someone had torn their way out from under the rubble. Matthew.

Half the rubble that covered Damien flew into the air, outside the barrier, including the block that pinned Damien's head to the floor. With it gone, he managed to lift his head enough to look around, and force down his groan as he started taking stock of the situation. His spine was intact, at least, if he could move his head, and send agony into his limbs trying to move them, too.

Vicky and Parker were still buried under the rubble. He looked up higher, ignoring the pain in his spine and muscles, and looked back to the source of the noise. Matthew, on the rampage. The giant beast roared fury as he ripped through the tunnel, barriers destroyed by the explosion; or the titan had succeeded in tearing through them. The beast sprinted down the tunnel, and gunfire erupted, but it was outside Damien's viewing angle.

"D-Damien?"

Oh thank God. He forced his head down to look at the face buried underneath his chest.

"Hey... F-Fiona," he said through clenched teeth. "Glad you're... alive."

Fiona frowned up at him, and started hitting his chest. "Ye fuckin bawbag! Tae fuck is wrong wit ye! Ye... didnae have tae... do that."

He tried to smile, and managed it for a second or two, before the impacts of her tiny fists against his chest triggered the assortment of broken ribs to revolt against him. He swallowed down the pain as best he could, and let his head collapse against the floor.

"You injured?"

"I'm fine, awright? And ye?"

"... not so fine." He couldn't find the resolve to dismiss his injuries, and more groans escaped him.

He could faintly remember the sight of Antoinette, filled with holes, a mangled corpse missing an arm and leg besides. She hadn't whimpered, cried, sobbed, or groaned. The steel resolve of the woman in the face of such pain, while he had to bite back his tears as he tried to roll off Fiona, was a testament to the difference in their abilities and age. It was a degree of resolve he strove for, and right now, it was ten thousand leagues beyond him.

But he bit down his pain and groans, a little, and smiled down at Fiona. "Can you move?"

“Aye!” She slid out from under him, and he coughed up some blood through clenched teeth. Shit, that was not good. Kine bleeding through the mouth was problematic, but if he was, a Kindred, it meant his insides were a broken mess.

Once Fiona was free of his body, he collapsed completely, and a few blocks of concrete rolled down from the pile onto him. That earned a short-lived scream, pain he was not expecting.

“Damien! Damien, ye fucking moron.” She reached down, and tried to lift one of the blocks. She was a monster, after all, and spiders were strong for their size. But the blocks were heavy and large, and instead of lifting it straight off of him, she mostly rolled it off, and it crushed some flesh on the way off his body. “Shit fuck shit!” She set her hands on a block, and from a black silhouette of eight legs, started to spin webbing. The white thread, she shot out at the walls and ruined ceiling above, and its absolute stickiness was strong enough to get the weight off of him.

By the time she had the rubble off him, there were a dozen white threads latched onto what remained of the walls. Sighing, looking tired, she moved onto the rest of the pile, and started the same process. Damien lay there, and did his best to watch, but keeping his head up was proving impossible. He let it collapse, and listened.

“Vicky, Parker?” Damien said.

“They’re alive.” Sweating and grunting, Fiona continued to dig, and reached under some smaller rubble to grab their hands. It looked like his maneuver had been successful, and Vicky had protected Parker with her body. Ventrue resilience was a powerful tool, and in the moment, he was terribly envious.

More gunfire echoes filled the tunnels, along with animal roars that threatened to deafen anyone within half a mile; more than they already were. He felt the vibration of it through the tunnel floor, overshadowing the thunderous cracks of the rifles. Whatever was happening, it was beyond a bend in the tunnel, out of sight.

Vicky and Parker dragged themselves over to Damien, unable to stand, but in far better condition than him. With grunts and groans of their own, they reached out and took stock of him, lifting his broken hand, dented head, and other limbs. He shouted when they lifted his broken foot.

“If any hunters come back for us,” Parker said, “we’re fucked.”

Vicky sighed, rolling her eyes. “Mekhet and Daeva, you break like porcelain.”

Parker laughed. Damien clenched his jaw, until Parker peered down at him, and winced.

“Fiona,” Damien said, “catch up with Matthew, and see if he needs your help.”

“What? I’m na gonna leave ye, Damien, or the rest of ye. None of ye could fight a bee right now!”

He sighed, and turned his head enough to look up at the ceiling. Somehow, the hunters had managed to get explosives deep into the concrete, powerful ones. They hid the scent too, of themselves and the explosives. On top of all that, they used two different sorts of magical barriers to set up a trap, and get information. Maybe they hadn’t counted on a werewolf springing the trap, especially Matthew, Avery’s juggernaut, hence the hunter and her back up fleeing.

Damien looked over to Fiona as she moved over to sit beside his shoulder, and set a hand down on his neck. She frowned at him and stroked his skin. It felt nice.

“You’re limping,” he said.

“Ye’re more broken than a crushed box. Stop worrying about me.” Fiona shrugged and looked down at her legs in front of her. One leg was torn up, blood dripping from the wound. It wasn’t like Damien’s legs managed to cover hers perfectly, after all. But at least nothing she had was broken. “Ye going to be... ok, Damien? Ye’re... ye’re beat up, in a bad way.”

He stared at the blood on her leg, the exposed, pale skin, and sniffed. As his vitae did its best to mend his wounds, at least enough so he’d be able to use his limbs, it drained quickly. In moments, he was starving, and staring at the slow, dripping blood, of Fiona’s leg.

Pain, white fire, almost cold like ice on his withered veins, demanded he heal. And he was healing, thick Kindred blood pulling into his wounds and forcing his bones back into alignment while mending ripped muscles and tendons. It was slow though, very slow compared to the Uratha. Hours, instead of minutes. He wouldn’t be able to completely heal his wounds without going to sleep for the day, and a belly full of blood.

There was no one to feed on, though. He could feed on Vicky or Parker, but the Vinculum was to be avoided at all costs, not to mention addiction to vitae.

There was Fiona. He stared at her wound, glared at her, and he felt his fangs start to emerge. Thoughts melted away, buried in the agony, and gave rise to an animal need inside him. He was vaguely aware it was there, demanding he give in and let it feed. How long had it been since the Beast in him was let out, frenzy driving Damien to feast? Decades. Many decades. It was a forgotten feeling, the rush and exhilaration of the animal within, caring about one thing and one thing alone. Blood.

He wanted hers.

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~~Julias~~

The three of the Invictus council watched the screen, and sighed. In their primary meeting room where the three did their usual private conversations, the giant touch screen on the wall allowed them to sort large amounts of information and break it down together. Right now it was showing a blueprint of Dolareido, and had various glowing dots. GPS signals from the phones Invictus were carrying.

Unfortunately, it was only the Invictus showing up, and that provided no end of frustration to the council. Garry didn't let them put trackers on his Kindred. Understandable, but still frustrating.

One of the lights lit up. Jonah's light. A second later, the three council members received a message on their phones.

"Looks like Mister LeBrun's run his distress app," Maria said as she moved over to the table to sit. Jonah was a serious sort, so if he was the one pressing it, it was worth considering.

Michael sighed, growling at the phone. "Not the hunters one, though. Seems he's in a fight with Carthians."

"That's Madam Herrington's team." Julias matched Michael's sigh, and sat back, putting his ass to the edge of the table as he watched the screen. The three dots were moving around in the same area, instead of sweeping the area like they should have been. "It wouldn't surprise me if she picked a fight with some Carthians."

"Give my childe a break, Mister Mire. Herrington's been learning to temper her impulsiveness."

"I wonder," Maria said, "if her relationship with the Uratha has helped calm her nerves? Having a strong man to hold her in his arms, instead of a host of weak and helpless ghouls, may be settling her."

Julias laughed and shook his head. "Maybe, but I doubt it'll last."

"The relationship?"

"No, her being less impulsive, if she is. Sorry to say, Mister MacDonald, but I've got thousands of solid hours of work with Herrington at my side. Impulsiveness is in her bones."

The man laughed and shrugged. "What do you propose we do about this situation?"

“We can’t let this go unanswered,” Julias said. “Whoever’s to blame for this scuffle needs to be punished. We’re busy hunting hunters. Covenant squabbles are not allowed.”

The two elders nodded.

“I’ll go deal with it,” Michael said.

Julias blinked at him, and watched as Michael headed for the door. He was a tall guy with a big frame, lot of muscle, with a shaved head and a single chain that connected nostril to ear. He looked like a Carthian, except for the ten-thousand-dollar suit he wore, a shade of blue so dark, it almost shined with stars.

“Garry might drop by,” Maria said. “We can’t escalate the situation.”

“I won’t escalate it. I’ll settle it. If I have to break some arms, I’ll make sure to spread the pain around.”

Julias shook his head. “What if it’s the werewolves? Eric’s with Herrington, and we know Avery has a half dozen of her pack helping the Carthian sweep teams.”

“Then I’ll break them. Put them in their place.”

“We’re trying to be friends with Avery, aren’t we?”

“Not if they violate the Masquerade. Besides, it’s Garry I’m worried about having to deal with. Avery is reasonable. Tones is just a moron.” With that, Michael closed the door, and was gone.

Julias sat down next to Maria, and looked at her. The small corpse lady was looking at her tablet as usual, and scrolled through pictures with scans of ancient texts. Looked like Latin. Julias couldn’t read it, but it also included some pictures, drawn in ink on the parchment, and it didn’t take a genius to guess they were pictures of spirits. A bit of fire, with eyes. A gust of wind, with eyes. A pool of water, with eyes. She scrolled to the next page, and more pictures awaited, animals with strange features, like foxes with multiple tails, or deer with antlers of colossal proportions.

“What’s this?” he said.

“Research. There are spirits in Dolareido, but trying to communicate with them has been frustrating.”

Ok, that was a little surprising. He didn’t expect her to straight up answer him like that. Dodge the question, sure, but direct honesty? The only Kindred he’d expect that from was Jack.

“You’ve been trying?”

“A passing curiosity of late.”

“You know Avery won’t approve.”

Maria shrugged, and scrolled to the next page. No pictures, and a wall of Latin text Julias struggled to understand. Something about a wall between two worlds.

“I am not Minerva. I can fend for myself, should those dogs come to my door. And, I do not know whatever it was that let Minerva perform such successful experiments.”

Successful experiments? “How much do you know about her experiments?”

“Terribly little. Only that she spoke to things on the other side, and reached across the wall. How she did it, is beyond me.”

Julias nodded. Either that was all a misdirect by her, to convince him that she didn’t know how to do whatever it was that Minerva did, or she was telling the truth. From the way she said it, his instincts said truth, but she was much older than him, and had the better poker face.

“I wanted to ask you,” she said, “about Beatrice Damor.”

He leaned back in his seat and raised a brow. “Oh?”

“You two seem to be quite in love.”

“Yeah, we are.” Dangerous territory. Hopefully the Lucas and Maria comparison wasn’t going to be made.

“Do you plan to marry her?”

He chuckled and scanned the corpse’s face, looking for hidden meanings in the cracked flesh.

“You think Kindred should marry?”

“I... do not subscribe to ludicrous notions. We are immortal creatures, and we are not human. The sanctity of marriage and the roof it provides mean little to our kind. And yet... I often think of it.”

“Think of marriage?”

“Something akin to marriage, yes. Two Kindred, forever devoted to each other—or at least for centuries. Hundreds of years ago, such pairings in Kindred were not so rare.”

“Hundreds of years ago, Kindred could subjugate entire villages, get a castle for themselves, and become self-made nobles. A different time.”

“Indeed.”

“But, if you’re asking would I spend the next few centuries or more with her, hell, maybe even eternity, at my side? Yeah.”

Maria sighed, but didn’t look his way, eyes still on the tablet. Didn’t look like she was reading though; rather, she stared off into nothing, the tablet in front of her. He couldn’t tell what brought on this topic, but it wasn’t like Kindred didn’t regularly sit and daydream about what ifs.

“You should tell her that, Mister Mire.”

“It’d sound an awful lot like a marriage proposal.”

“It would.”

“I... I’m not sure how that would go, honestly. Triss is—”

“Tell her, Mister Mire. Ask her.” Maria lifted her eyes from the tablet, glared at him with enough frustration in her gaze to cut into him, before looking back to her studies. This time she did resume reading, and Julias knew better than to interrupt her, especially considering the look on her face.

It was strange to see Maria being emotional like this. Romantic. But it wasn’t like he disagreed with what she was saying. Hell, it was the fifth secret he was going to share with Triss and Jen, that he wanted to marry Triss; or at least commit to that in the way Kindred did.

“I think I will.”

“Good. Be—”

A phone ring came in, his phone. Sighing, he got up and answered it. “Madam Leauvion, why the call?”

“Mister Mire. I... I wanted to inform you that we had to end our sweep early.”

“What? Why?”

“Mister Terry felt it best to end it prematurely. Tensions were high.”

Ok, not good. “Why are you calling me, and not Mister Terry?”

“He... left, Mister Mire, on his own.”

“On his own? Oh for fuck’s sake. Thanks for telling me, Madam Leauvion.” He hung up, and sighed as he headed for the door.

“We warned you, Mire,” Maria said. It was obvious he’d been talking about Jack, of course.

“I know, I know. Guess I just expected... I’ll talk to him.”

“Please do. Your childe has been a blessing to the Invictus, and it would pain me to see him perish due to bad decisions. If he left his mission without a companion, he will be easy prey for hunters.”

Maybe. He might be easy prey. Or he’d kill them all.

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~~Natasha~~

Chaos erupted. Once the strange faces on the wall spotted her and the others, there was no chance any of this was going to go well. She’d hoped to eavesdrop and then leave, but this place, this giant room of flesh and the dead, was alive. It saw them, through her Cloak of Night, and now the hunters were together, four of them, hiding behind some pulsating mounds of flesh as they readied their guns.

Natasha broke, dropping her Cloak of Night, and grunting little squeaky grunts as she pulled out her own pistol, her back to the flesh. “S-Sorry,” she said. “It’s... hard t-to keep it going in here. So many eyes now.” Hundreds of eyes from the wall of red meat behind Elen were looking, staring, gaze flitting about randomly.

Triss nodded and shrugged, before peeking over the mound of flesh they hid behind. “Hello there!”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at the Nosferatu, and grimaced as she looked to see what weapons the witches would bring to bear. Oh, right, they had none. She looked Jen’s way too, and grimaced twice more. The Ventrue was too young for this, and unarmed except for a knife, the worst of the blood clans to not have a ranged weapon.

She expected the witches to be panicking. They weren’t. If anything, they seemed eager for a fight, grinning and licking their fangs as they peeked around the flesh mound to scan the room. It was true that the witches hadn’t had a proper confrontation with the hunters like Tash had, and that this would be their first crack at it, but it was the most horrible circumstance possible. No room for error here, and no back up yet. Would Daniel or Antoinette come? She checked her phone, and—no signal anymore. Of course not.

“So that’s Elen,” Aaron said. “And the Romanian guy is Sándor?”



Tash blinked at the Gangrel. Romanian? She peeked around the mound of flesh to see if she could still see the man. She could. He was standing now, shirtless, and she had to admit, really damn sexy. Sándor had dreamy blue eyes and a defined chin, with some short, dark gruff on his face that matched his buzzed dark hair. He might have been twenty-five years old. But, there was no way she'd be able to guess his nationality at a glance, or from the scant few words he'd said. Aaron could, evidently.

She nodded at him, and switched the safety off on her pistol. "It looks like he's b-being controlled by Elen and her magic." A far better explanation for how a fellow paranormal could have betrayed them, than the thought that maybe a paranormal simply wanted to help hunters out of the kindness of their heart. "I d-d-don't know how, but we should... we should kill the hunters, capture Elen, and... m-maybe detain the Begotten."

Jen nodded from her spot behind a giant rib bone jutting from the bloody skin floor. "Agreed, but I don't see how we're going to do that. I—" Shards of bone shattered outward from her position, and she squeaked before flattening herself to the rib as best she could, back to it and arms held in snug. Gunfire.

Tash stuck her head out, and managed to get a peek of Sándor. He was coming closer. Sticking her head out earned the ire of the hunters, and they unloaded at her, bullets slamming into the flesh around her. The alien flesh that encircled them acted like any human flesh would, when hit with a sudden assault of high speed metal shards. It rained blood, bullets tearing into the masses of red, spraying the crimson everywhere, and ripping up chunks of flesh to go with. The faces on the wall groaned and screamed in pain, but the hunters continued firing. They were connected to the chamber, somehow.

"Tash," Triss said, "this Begotten dude. He strong?"

"V-Very!"

"Othello, Aaron, you two take him. Don't kill him if you can, but if he gives you no choice, rip off his head. Expect to get shot. I'll be right behind you, and I'll engage the hunters close range. Tash can shoot them." She looked over Natasha to Jen, and made a gesture, pointing at her own eyes, then Jen's, then at one of the hunters, then a fist grab in the air. Probably a gesture for Jen to Dominate one of the hunters once the chaos started.

The boys nodded, and ran in. No fanfare, no waiting for a 'go' order or anything. Witches did everything on the fly, and Tash was going to have to get used to that if she was going to survive this insanity. She stared at Othello as he jumped over the flesh they hid behind, and ran toward the awaiting hunters, and the monster.

Daeva were fast. He might not have been as fast as Natasha, but he was still fast. And Daeva were strong. Like Nosferatu, a Daeva could punch through concrete if they had the years and the vitae, and Othello had those things. It was almost unfair. He darted around the hanging chains, and came at the hunters, chuckling softly as he closed the distance in seconds.

A silhouette of an enormous wing snapped out, blocked Othello's path, and slammed outward toward him. Half wind, half blurry darkness, it crashed into Othello's body and sent him flying through the air, hitting the dangling chains, body parts, and the metal and hooks.

Aaron should have taken a second to reevaluate. He didn't. Growling, the man stood up, and charged at Sándor, spikes erupting from his body as he closed the distance. Tash had seen this transformation before, in powerful Gangrel. Jessy did this transformation, a grotesque mess of muscle and bone. It was as if an alien creature had erupted from inside Aaron, and decided it should have spikes on the shoulders and back and head and elbows and knees and knuckles, and leathery skin to go with.

"Get out!" Elen said. Natasha peeked out again to see the old woman behind one of the tumorous mounds of flesh, in her wheelchair, a scalpel in her hand. It almost glowed with how it caught the amber light.

Othello laughed as he pushed himself up from the bloody floor of flesh. "We can't. You closed the door!"

"Guess we found you with your pants down," Beatrice said, poking her head out again. Tash did too, and groaned as two hunters took Sándor's left side, and another two took his right. A wall between the vampires and their target.

"You are not welcome here!" Her shrieks sounded less human, more banshee-like, as she grew more irritated. It sounded like Beatrice guessed it right; caught with her pants down.

Except, pants down or not, the vampires were now trapped in a room with four hunters, a Begotten, and an old woman with a deceiving amount of power. Maybe they could cut their way out, if they had to; and they might have to. Sándor had been an overpowering presence in the nightmare, and she had no idea if that translated to the physical world.

This chamber of flesh and blood was the physical world. How was that possible? Think think think. The sacrifices, those had been focused on a single thing: the human body. Organs, tendons, sinew, muscle and blood, whatever it was Elen did to do her magic was based around that. What kind of magic was based on that? Not even Crúac was so debased, so disgusting and horrible. Not that she was

an expert; she knew almost nothing. But as far as she knew, Crúac was some sort of blood magic for vampires that used vitae, and it was often brutal and grotesque, but not always.

If someone could do magic-y things with vampire blood, and the vitae it contained, could someone do the same with human blood? Why did they sacrifice kine in other locations though? If Daniel found the other locations, maybe whatever it was that they did, was something the sheriff could track.

That made her frown. Kine were for feeding on, not for butchering, especially not for lunacy like this. A strange feeling, one she'd never really felt before, getting possessive over their flock. The Prince would have been proud.

She poked up over the mound, and started shooting. The hunters had been mostly behind cover, staying close to Sándor but keeping some flesh or bone things between her and them. But their heads or hands were poking out, and those were good enough targets to shoot at. She grinned as one of the hunters yelped, when she landed a bullet against his gun. It'd have been better if she shot his finger, but hitting the gun was better than nothing.

She changed targets to the shirtless man, Sándor. He was a Begotten, and Begotten were tough when in the nightmare. But out here, in the physical world? She pointed her gun, and aimed for his knees.

The man knelt down on one knee, and brought his arm around over his chest to place his knuckles to the bloody floor of flesh. A shimmer of blackness covered him, and the wing of the gargoyle appeared for a split second to catch the bullets. Shit. He stood back up, glared at her, and started walking for her.

Aaron ran past him. The monster reached out for him, but Aaron slipped under his arm, and sprinted toward the hunters. More and more spikes covered him, erupting from bones in strange ways, until Aaron didn't look human anymore. He fell to his hands, and jumped up onto the chains. Oh, gross. His claws tore into the body parts that were strewn about the chains on meat hooks, and he swung from chain to chain as the hunters raised their weapons to him. They unleashed a hailstorm of bullets, and the chains clinked furiously, sparks flying, as well as chunks of meat, as the bullets collided with the hell scene.

Othello got up, and darted in, coming for Sándor. With the Begotten looking up at the monkey Aaron, Othello had a second to get in closer, and pull back a fist. Growling, Sándor jumped back, but Othello was on him in seconds, and he pounced him. Anyone would have fallen over with the impact and weight of Othello, but Sándor remained standing, apparently far heavier than he looked.

The silhouette of the man's wings snapped out once more, and he stepped forward, hands connected with Othello's, the two of them locked in a battle of strength. And Sándor was winning.

Triss vanished. Natasha looked around, and gulped as she watched the foot puddles the invisible Nosferatu made as she ran into the chaos. The hunters caught on quick though, and as Beatrice leapt around, splashes following her, two of the hunters changed their target to her.

Not two, just one hunter. Jen had gotten closer in the chaos, and when she peeked out from behind another rib bone, one of the hunters looked at her.

"Lower your weapon," Jen said, confident, insidious grin on her face.

The hunter froze. He had an opportunity to shoot Jen, but he didn't. He stared at her, arms trembling, fingers fighting to keep a grip on his gun, head twitching. A mistake, to look her in the eye. But it was dangerous for Jen too, standing there, staring at the man, herself exposed as well.

When the other hunter turned to face Jen, raising his gun, Beatrice reappeared, and swung her claws down at her. The hunter jumped back, and rolled backward, soaking herself in blood as she came to her knees. Holy shit these hunters were good.

The other two turned to face Beatrice, putting their back to Natasha. Tash stood up, aimed, and sank two bullets into one of the hunter's back. The woman cried out as she stumbled with the impact before falling. And then she got back up, turning onto her back, a blood puddle half covering her body, as she started shooting at Natasha. Kevlar armor under her jacket, probably. A bullet whipped past Tash's head, and she ducked back down behind her flesh mound cover.

This was the weirdest fire fight, in the history of fire fights.

She peeked over again to see Beatrice grappling with two of the hunters. She was super strong, being a Nosferatu, but these hunters were brutally efficient, and they grabbed her and used her light weight against her, lifting her so she couldn't anchor and throw or tear. Aaron jumped down from the chains, and Tash thought for sure he was going to help Triss, but he ran for Othello instead.

In the insanity, Natasha had stopped watching Othello. He was fighting the Begotten one on one, and he was losing. The two were still locked, fingers and palms together, squeezing, but Othello had fallen to his knees, and his head was hanging between his arms. How the hell was Othello losing a fight of strength?

Aaron jumped the Begotten's face, and started slicing. Sándor let go of Othello's hands and jumped away, before he thrust his palm out, and the shadowy silhouette of the colossal creature

slammed a wing into the Gangrel. Aaron went flying, knocking into chains and the body parts hooked on them, but he managed to land on his feet.

Everyone was too busy to really care that the wall of faces was chanting again. They'd closed their eyes, and Elen wheeled herself away to put her back into a groove at the base of flesh wall. There, she started to repeat the chant the faces on the wall were saying. Her wheelchair looked less like a wheelchair, and more like a proper throne, with how it sat underneath and between a host of visages.

Arms, sickly gaunt and pale, oozed out of the fleshy wall between the faces, and began to encircle Elen. A wall of meat and bone. Either this flesh room thing was sentient, or Elen had summoned them. Gross gross gross.

Beatrice continued to wrestle with the hunters, while Natasha shot a few more times at them. But they did a better job staying in cover this time, and when Beatrice jumped toward their cover, they unloaded two dozen shots her way. Bullets ripped into her and pushed her back, enough of them cutting through her flesh to reverse the momentum.

Oh no. This was going badly quickly. It would have been easy to handle, if Sándor wasn't proving ridiculously strong. Beatrice was forced to fight three hunters, while Jennifer kept one of them frozen, occupied. Unfortunately for the Ventrue, she was too young to rip the man's will away completely; hunters had far too much resolve, and Jen wasn't Jack.

Ok, think fast think fast. She poked her head out, and started shooting again, forcing the hunters to stay behind cover as Beatrice dragged herself behind some cover as well. Sándor remained in the open, and as Othello and Aaron both jumped the man again, the beautiful man slapped them both down with the wing silhouette, slamming them into the shallow blood of the fleshy floor, and causing it to splash everywhere. Everyone was coated in it, and with how it was crashing and slathering everything in red, a little got into Natasha's mouth.

It tasted human.

"Release the B-Begotten, Elen!" Natasha said. Might as well delay the chaos a little, until she figured out what she could do.

One of the hunters cursed, loudly, and started shooting at her. "Fuck you! We're fighting fire with fire, you filthy monster."

Natasha rolled her eyes as she slapped in another magazine. To Kindred, and probably every other paranormal, that was some terribly cheesy dialogue. She poked her head out again, and squinted as she scanned the room, looking for the three hunters. Still where they were, but Tash could see they were

concerned about Beatrice sneaking up on them again, or one of the boys running for them, or Natasha shooting them if they got caught out. If only Sándor wasn't there, ruining everything, this would have been easy.

Triss got back up, and vanished again. The hunters started firing at the splashes in the blood her feet made, but stopped a few seconds later, as the splashes came in close to Sándor.

"Sand, look out!" one of them yelled. But the Begotten was too busy fending off Othello and Aaron to do anything, as the invisible woman rushed for him.

Her invisibility ceased as she jumped Sándor's face, her claws on his chest. Gunfire tore Natasha's eyes away from the mess of vampires digging into the monster, as one of the hunters started firing. She expected to see one of the Kindred getting shot, but instead, the hunter Jennifer had Dominated was shooting at the other hunters. The hunters panicked and spread out, throwing themselves to different points of cover as their friend fired wildly.

The hunter Jen controlled fought to free himself, eyes glaring, jaw clenched, gun hand shaking. But, somehow, she'd managed to get enough control of him to prevent his escape. Impressive.

"Wake up!" Beatrice said. Tash snapped her vision back to the three Kindred, and winced at the sight of them bringing the Begotten to his knees. Triss was tearing at the man's back, trying to destroy whatever symbol it was Elen had carved there.

"No!" The old shaman in the back shouted, hidden behind her wall of curling arms and layered fingers.

Blood flowed into the grand chamber with all the grace of a typhoon. It came from beneath, from around, from above, surging and crashing against the walls and flesh tumors and chains alike. Geysers bulbed up from the flesh underneath them, and bloodfalls fell upon them. It shot out from torn holes in the walls like gunshots out of a tsunami, and one slammed into Natasha hard enough to send her flying into the back wall.

She kept hold of both her weapons, though. Progress over last time an explosive force had hit her.

Blood flowed over them, crashing, splashing, churning. As if someone had broken a dam, it swirled with chaos as walls of red turned the world into a whirlpool. Any attempt to get her bearings, any attempt to grab onto the giant bone ribs that filled the room, was pointless. She screamed into the torrent of crimson as her body was thrown into the chains. Body parts with hooks sticking out of them caught her, tore into her, ripped a few inches into her, but didn't hook her.

She dared not open her eyes. It wasn't red water, it was blood. It was thick and overpowering, and a part of her wanted to drink it down in the madness, but she had no idea what would happen if she did that. Worse, she could feel it getting into her wounds. As the crashing waves ripped her up and tore up her clothes, she had to wonder if the hunters and Sándor were going through the same thing. It didn't seem like it, from the little she managed to see when her head broke over the waves. The hunters were by Elen, where the blood did not touch.

Sándor, on the other hand, had managed to grab hold of one of the dangling chains, and was weathering the raging waters with all tenacity of a colossal boulder. It crashed against him, but he did not give into the heavy liquid. Tash stayed curled up as a ball, knowing full well if she stuck her arms or legs out, they'd snap in the liquid insanity.

And then they got sucked out. She choked on a bit of the strange blood as the new momentum pulled her stomach up into her throat. Her back hit something soft, then hard, as she bounced around a smaller area, the tunnel they'd come in from. Like a ball bouncing around in an arcade machine, she ricocheted over and over, body hitting bone and flesh of the snake-like entrance tunnel, until she landed on her back on something much harder than bone.

The concrete of the basement greeted her, and she coughed and sputtered up blood as she lay there, staring at the dark ceiling for a moment. Once reality set in, she sat up quick and looked around; no sword, and no pistol. Damn it, dam—oh! She scooped through the blood, picked them up, and sighed as she put them away.

She groaned as she forced herself up onto her feet, and glared at the tunnel entrance. Blood flowed out of it, and so did Beatrice, Othello, Jennifer, and Aaron. Once they were in the basement with her, a foot of blood around them, the tunnel of flesh closed itself. She stared at the flesh, and walked up to it as it started to turn darker, and darker, until it blocked off the amber light completely. She touched it, and sighed as her fingers found concrete, the same concrete of the rest of the basement wall.

Absolute blackness. She used her Auspex, and her unique quirk to see in darkness, and gasped as a white circle, something drawn with chalk or something, appeared. They'd drawn some sort of summoning circle, and—wait, this was the same circle they found at the ritual sacrifice sights. It wasn't a summoning circle, it was a traveling circle! Traveling to... some sort of... weird flesh chamber thing. Gross, so gross.

She looked down at herself, and then the witches. They were all soaked. She'd hoped that, once outside the strange chamber, the blood would go away, but it did no such thing. It was real blood.

“Natasha.”

She squealed and turned around. A light flashed, and she raised a hand to block it before it incinerated her eyes.

“S... Sire?” She sighed relief as Daniel stepped down the last few stairs, except stopping before the final two. Keeping his shoes above the blood, no doubt.

“I see that you’ve encountered something suspicious.” He gestured to the blood, and the four witches sitting in it.

Beatrice laughed and stood up. “You could say that.” Groaning, she tried to wipe the blood off, but it soaked and coated everything. “You boys ok?” she said to Aaron and Othello.

Othello nodded and stood up. Tash tried not to stare, but, the man did have an obnoxiously sexy look to him with his dreadlocks, and all the blood dripping down his tan skin. Yum. Aaron, on the other hand, was still covered in all the strange mutations and protrusions Gangrel grew when they wanted to fight; or at least, the powerful Gangrels. It was haunting.

Sighing, the boys climbed to their feet, before Aaron reached out to help up Jen. As he did, the spikes disappeared, along with the grotesque leathery skin, and the deformed facial features that had him halfway to some sort of dragon monster thing. It didn’t bother Jen though, and she took his hand with a quiet slap of wet palms. She got up, and groaned as she adjusted her now only half-on bra, still shown blatant since she kept her shirt unbuttoned.

“I’d offer a cloth,” Daniel said, “but I feel it’d be pointless.” The five vampires looked at him, and laughed. “Report?”

Natasha nodded as she took off her jacket, and began to wring it out. “W-We found Elen, and Sándor. Elen seems t-to be able to use some kind of... flesh... magic? Whatever it was, it w-was alive, in a way. And she could-d-d control it. It was a chamber of flesh, and body parts and... and—”

“And,” Daniel interrupted, “is connected to the sites where I found the sacrificed.” He nodded toward the wall past them, his light now shining there.

“Yeah!” Learning things was exciting. It sent a jolt of joy and energy through her, to see they were making progress in their goal. Happy worker bee syndrome. “The chamber Elen uses... it was... it was gross.”

Her sire raised a brow, before shining the light around at the foot-deep blood pool that filled the basement. “Clearly.”



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~~Eric~~

Eric stomped out of the building, through the hole in the wall he'd made. A part of him was sad about that, something about a Masquerade he should have been paying more attention to, or worrying about more. A larger part of him wanted to beat this bastard into the ground. A massive part of him could barely think as bloodlust poured over him, and demanded he fight, demanded he hunt, demanded he do what animals did. Assert dominance.

Caleb got up quickly, but Eric was already running forward. A run, proper, full, all out run. Every step was a smashing weight into the black earth, and he grinned as he felt each step tear up the hard ground behind him. It felt good. It felt so damn good to be out in the open, and let his warmed up body swing. He'd yet to do this in this Gauru form, and god damn it, it felt amazing.

Eric crashed into the man, and a metal cage on four, round legs on the side of the black path crumpled underneath Caleb's weight as Eric drove his fellow Uratha into it. Glass shattered and went everywhere. Caleb didn't let it stop him. As the two met eyes, Caleb roared up at him, and slashed out at his chest, despite Eric pinning him to the metal cage by his shoulders. Eric didn't think he'd have to dodge claws, but the new Beast in him knew better. He jumped back, and dove back in, trying to pounce after the escape, like Caleb had done to him a minute before.

Caleb jumped. Eric slammed into the bent metal, claws shredding through it like dried leaves in the Fall. As he ripped his claws free, the bastard landed on him, and started clawing at his back. A set of teeth came down for Eric's neck, but he threw his weight back, driving his talons further into the black earth as he used his strength to send Caleb flying back off of him. His rival weighed many hundreds of pounds, but that was nothing for Eric. In fact...

As Caleb landed, Eric grabbed the metal cage, one hand underneath and one on its rear, and he sank his claws into the cold, hard material. With a little leverage and grip, he anchored his talons into man's black earth, and threw the cage at Caleb.

“Eric! Eric, stop!” Jessy said. “Holy shit, you guys can't—”

The heavy, hard object crashed upon his rival, and pinned him. Within seconds, Caleb ripped the metal cage in half, sending shards and bits of its strange guts about the hard black they walked upon.

The undead watching gasped, and stood, staring, no longer fighting. Nine undead in total, watching the two Uratha rip the man-made world apart in their Luna-given lust.

Fine by him.

He stomped after Caleb, and his fellow wolf met him between the tall human structures. They crashed against each other, and started to bite and tear. There was a reason for this, some reason they were fighting, some sort of preparation, or ritual, or test. But it was a blur, background noise in his mind. All that mattered at the moment, was beating his rival, beating him into the hard, black earth of the human den.

Caleb charged at him, and Eric met his charge, roars deafening the watching undead. But his rival was smart, and fast, ducking underneath Eric and dodging to the side to avoid his claws. Caleb was slightly bigger than Eric, but he was Irakka. The sneaky wolf lived and breathed shadows, and that meant he had a weakness in direct confrontation. Eric was Cahalith, seeker of glory. He wanted to face his threat head on, and he reveled in the blood, both of theirs, as it painted the dark, hard earth.

He turned, and roared. Not the same roars as before, the normal sound of beasts trading instinct and aggression, but something else, something from the spirit side of him. He'd done it a minute before, in the human structure, and it had startled Caleb. Doing it again did the same, bringing Caleb to a sudden halt, enough time for Eric to charge him. But Caleb got down onto all fours, and sprinted around Eric, a burst of speed from four sets of claws helping the creature circle around him and go for the hamstrings.

Teeth tore into his calf, and Eric screamed, guttural and alien in his throat. Caleb didn't let go, and with four sets of claws sunk into the black earth, he had the leverage to pull the weight out from under Eric. He was not gentle. Fangs ripped into Eric's leg, ripped out muscle, ripped out skin, and the beast's thrashing forced his leg to bend sharply and way too far. Crack. His shin broke, and Eric shrieked again as he started clawing at his rival. Bleed. Bleed! Die!

"Get off him!" A woman's voice, human voice. Undead voice? Someone ran over to them, spikes jutting out of their shoulders, their knees, their hands. Massive claws, and a face he didn't recognize. They dashed in, and started clawing at his rival, drawing far more blood from Caleb than Eric would have expected.

Someone was interfering in his duel.

Caleb didn't let go of Eric's leg, but he was no longer thrashing. He was trying to see what was going on, who it was that was clawing into him, and that was enough time for Eric to realign his knee

over the bone. He roared in a mix of agony and rage as his body mended itself, spirit and flesh sewing muscle and bone together in seconds. It was enough for him to turn, jump down on the beast, and begin tearing. Caleb was caught off guard, and for the moment, stunned.

The intruder continued to interfere, stabbing spikes into Caleb again and again, until his blood coated his side where she'd punctured him. Eric reached out for her, and wrapped her hardened, spiky body in his grip. So light, he was easily able to lift her, and hold her in his one hand, wrapping her waist almost entirely between finger and thumb.

“Eric! Wait, it’s me! Jessy!”

He stared at the creature. Spikes, and leathery hard skin. Jessy? His mate? He breathed deep, and the subtle Kindred scent of her hit him harder, enough to jolt his insides. Yes, he knew this person. This was his mate, in her strange battle armor some of these undead could use. He—

Everyone froze as a tenth undead stepped around a distant corner. Caleb let go of Eric, and Eric stopped clawing at him with his other hand. The two of them stood up, and stared past the nine undead watching, to the newcomer.

A man walked forward, white, a bald head, with some metal attached to ear and nostril. The watching undead parted, and gave the man room. They were shivering.

“Boss,” the black man with the teeth and claws, Jonah, said. “We, uh, we got—”

“Shut the fuck up, Mister LeBrun.”

“... yes, Mister MacDonald. Apologies.”

The bald man, MacDonald, looked to the other undead, and snarled at one of them in particular. “Joe. You start this?”

Joe backed off, but he kept his chest high; trying to be intimidating. A pointless gesture. Eric could feel the presence of this new undead, and how greater it was compared to the tiny Joe creature.

“Just a scuffle, put Jessy in her place.”

“And this?” MacDonald yelled, gesturing to Eric, and his rival.

“Sire, it’s not... um, not what it looks like.” Jessy squirmed in his hand, but Eric did not let her go. The presence of this new undead had shocked him, Caleb, and everyone into a moment of peace. Eric could faintly remember the creature’s name, too. Michael. One of the leaders of the Invictus pack. The words meant little to him anymore, but this brute of a human-looking creature was powerful.

“Put her down,” he said.

Growling, Eric and Caleb both gnashed their teeth at Michael. This man with the metal on his face wanted to take away his mate, like a father wolf, unhappy with another for advancing on their pup. But Eric was no juvenile. This spiky creature in his hand was his mate, and he’d earned that right. She wished to mate with him, and he with her. No one was going to stop that.

Eric took a step back, turning around, and set Jessy a ways away on the black earth, far from the inevitable fight.

“Um, Eric?” Jessy said, the spikes and hard skin on her body disappearing. Back into her regular form, he leaned down and offered her a long, gentle lick along her neck. Soft, compared to him. Small. The smell of her was subtle, but he knew it wouldn’t be later, when she pretended to be alive, like these undead creatures did. He’d breathe in her scent then, take her in, and mount her. He couldn’t wait to hear her mewls when he’d force himself into her tiny body, and feel her lust soak him.

But not until he dealt with her annoying father.

He turned back again to face Michael, and started a slow march toward the man. Another duel. But this undead creature was no Uratha, and Eric still had plenty of strength left to bite and tear. His rival could wait.

“Holy shit. Eric, you can’t—”

Eric snapped his head around and growled at his mate, rumbling deep and loud in his throat. Gulping, she put up her hands, and took a few steps back. He’d defend her from her father wolf, claim her for his own, and if that meant hurting this Michael creature, so be it.

His rival was looking at the undead creature as well, growling, rumbling, and pacing. But he wasn’t going to join in. No, Eric was going to have to break the undead, before he could return to his proper duel with Caleb. It wouldn’t take long. He took another step toward Michael, and roared with all his rage and hunger, until his voice rolled over the black earth, the hard dens of the humans, and throughout the night. A proper Cahalith roar, one the other auspices could not match. It was enough to make Michael draw back his head, and wipe a finger across his nose.

“Boss!” Eric’s mate called out. “Uh, I don’t... this wasn’t supposed to happen, you know? And... I don’t think Eric’s listening anymore. Caleb?” She looked over to his rival. “Caleb? ... ok, um, we have a problem.”

Caleb had readied himself, biting at the air and growling quietly, pacing, but not interfering. Whatever it was Jessy was asking of him, Caleb did not indulge.

“I’ll knock some sense into them,” Michael said, “and then you’re going to have to explain how the fuck this happened.” The undead gestured to the Uratha, the hole in the hard surface of the human dens, and the torn asunder metal cage.

“... careful Boss, the guys are fucking crazy in this form.”

The undead snarled and marched forward, adjusting the neck of whatever human fabric he was wearing on his chest, and sighing as he did. “Yeah, I know. Got some thralls combing the area to make sure there’s no one around to see any of this.”

The world of came a stop, and everyone froze, as the man’s skin began to churn. Like a bubbling ocean, Michael’s skin opened, revealing flashes of dark, unnatural blood within his carcass that hugged his insides. As more of him twisted and bubbled, he grew in size, adding a head’s height to him. Like his daughter, Michael started to grow spikes and hardened skin; these Gangrel corpses could change their bodies in strange ways. Taller again, the undead grew, and the spikes that emerged from his body were immense, and grotesque. His fingers grew claws, and the claws were hooked. His human fabrics began to disappear, and Eric stared as inhuman mouths appeared on the man’s skin, swallowing the fabric.

Michael took a step forward, and as he did, an arm fell off, fading into ash. A giant arm of monstrous size grew in its place, growing out of him with the speed of wind, and the size of an elephant’s leg. Eric took a step back as the undead creature leaned onto one side, weighed by the giant arm, and it only got worse as more spikes grew from it. Michael now walked on two legs and the one hand, each step causing the gargantuan arm to hit the black earth. Upon his back, wings began to grow, bat wings.

It got worse yet again. As Michael grew closer, his legs thickened, and talons erupted from his ape feet, far larger than Eric’s. This lopsided, grotesque monstrosity charged at him, bellowing a cry of gargled rage Eric had never heard before, in his dreams or life. It was not natural.

But, if this was the creature Eric had to fight for the right to be with his mate, possess her, own her, then so be it. He roared in return, and met charge with charge.

Michael’s wings grew in size, filling the space between human dens, fifteen wolves wide, and he flapped them a single time to send him up into the air, over Eric. Wind crashed against Eric, blinding him with dirt and dust, before the strange undead fell upon him.

Heavy. The corpse man had been maybe a quarter of Eric’s weight, before he started to change. But now, he was far heavier. As if the undead had eaten a mountain of rocks, Eric struggled to deal with

the weight of the monster on his back, and he felt, and heard, the crack of his bones. Michael's one giant arm clawed at Eric's back, and ripped into his fur, shredding his skin and flesh, while pinning him under its grotesque, unreal weight.

"The might of the werewolf, defeated so easily." Through the mess of his gnarled mouth, twisted fangs, and crooked jaw, the colossal creature hissed down at him. His one normal-sized arm was covered in spikes, and he used it to stab Eric again, and again, and again, each earning shouts of pain from the pinned werewolf. Each was white fire into Eric's body, earning roars mixed with whimpers and yelps. "Be happy I'm not Jacob, or you'd be dead."

Eric roared into the black earth, and tried to get up, but the corpse used his giant arm and pushed Eric's snout into the hard surface. Crunch. Teeth broke inward, and so did some bone.

"You're not selling yourself very well here, Eric. Jessy insists you're useful. So far all I see is a mindless dog that I can easily defeat in combat. You should—"

Eric twisted, and drove his elbow up into the monstrosity's face. He didn't know why, didn't know where the idea came from, but he knew to do it. Something inside him told him to, told him to use the elbow, when he couldn't get the leverage to use his claws. And, it was a delightful sensation, to feel the man's face crack against the bone.

Michael the abomination rolled off of him from the forced momentum, before coming back to his feet. A disgusting creature. It was something that would have crawled out of the earth, out of the tunnels humans had dug, out of the mounds of dead that humans buried in wooden cages, if a Host from ages past infected the human world, or if a Magath of flesh and destruction and corrupted animal had come for vengeance. It was horrific, and repulsive. It should die.

Eric got up, took a step toward him, and collapsed onto a knee. He clutched at his side, and whined as blood coated his palm. Not just coat, but gush over. He looked around at the hard black earth beneath him, and another quiet whine escaped him as he noticed the amount of blood. It was his blood.

Dizziness hit him, and he planted a hand to the ground as he struggled to keep from collapsing. How many times did this beast stab him in only a few seconds? It must have been dozens. How many bones did he break? Again, dozens. In the haze of pain and midst of blood loss, Eric fought to keep the darkness in his mind from taking over. He would sleep if he gave in. He would die.

All this, for a duel for a female. He looked over to his mate, and froze. She was staring at him, eyes wide, hand up to her mouth, covering it. Shocked. Scared. Worried. He didn't want her shocked, or scared, or worried.

Michael charged him again, ripping Eric's attention back to him. The black earth tore up underneath the abomination's enormous talons, and his wings tucked in to his misshapen back of spikes and flesh nodules. His massive arm crashed into the ground with each step, shaking the earth. Once the monster was close, he reached out with the giant arm, and wrapped it around Eric's throat.

The trapped mouse bites the cat.

Eric's neck was long enough he could twist his snout downward, and start biting at the creature's wrist; unimaginable pain filled him for using his broken snout, but he had to. The hand and wrist were fat with rippling, leathery skin, and Eric couldn't get the angle needed to get a proper bite, but something was better than nothing. It was enough to earn pause from Michael, and a few seconds pause was enough for Eric to feel a little of his strength return. He started kicking at the monster's chest with his feet, but not the kicks his human half would have used. These were raking, clawing kicks, each dragging his talons down Michael's chest.

The monster tried to stop him with his smaller arm, but it wasn't large or strong enough to block Eric's giant feet. And when Michael tried to let go of Eric's neck, to use his larger, titan arm, Eric held on with both of his, sinking his claws into it.

"Let go!" Michael the abomination raised his disgusting arm of pulsating flesh tumors, spikes, thorns, and overwhelming muscle and mass, and slammed it down against the street. The extra mouths on Michael's body screamed, and the few extra on his grotesque arm shouted frustration, as the monster crushed Eric.

The black earth splintered around him, and the echoes of snapping bones filled his ears. His bones. His insides. Eric coughed up a fountain of blood over his teeth, snout, and neck, precious life flowing onto the black ground, soaking him.

"Wait! Wait, fuck me, wait!" Jessy's voice. The tiny woman ran over to him, and got down on her knees beside him. She set her hands on his chest, and sighed relief. "Thank god, he's still breathing. Boss! What the fuck, man. You didn't need to do that."

The monster stood over him, flapped his enormous wings, and with his smaller arm, touched the many deep gashes on his chest. Some of them had broken through the extra mouths there, and the undead winced as he touched their split lips and tongues.

"He fought well. I can see why you like him, and—"

Shadow erupted behind Michael. Eric forced his head up enough to see what it was, but he felt it, and heard it first. Caleb appeared from the shadows, and dove at Michael's spine, all four sets of claws

out to catch his weight as he landed upon the monstrosity's back. Michael roared, as did the extra mouths, some of them shrieking, some of them screaming, as he started to thrash around, but Caleb was behind his wings and not easily reached.

"Shit! Shit shit shit shit." Jessy jumped up over Eric, got under his head, hooked her arms under his arms, and tried to pull him. His torso was far too large, too wide, for her to get a good grip, but she managed to spread her arms, and get them underneath his armpits enough for a very poor drag away from the renewed action.

Why was his rival helping him? Did he still want his mate for himself? No, wait, did Caleb ever want his mate? There'd been another reason for the fight. A test.

Thoughts ripped their way out of the swirling chaos of his mind, and back into the light of consciousness. Breathe! Fucking breathe, force it in, use it to press it down, ice against the fire hot rage and animal hunger within. Deep breaths, each a splash of cold water on his face.

"... Jessy," he said, coughing up blood onto his long tongue. It dripped from his many teeth and across his enormous chest. Healing, but not fast enough to get him up on his feet any time soon. Some animal inside him told him he wasn't going to die from the wounds, but the same animal was screaming at him to worry about the elder vampire that turned into some sort of eldritch nightmare.

He'd seen Jessy do some crazy shit, but apparently, elder Gangrels could take it to a new level. Michael looked like he belonged in a John Carpenter film set in Antarctica.

"Eric, your brain working yet?"

"It... it is."

"Fucking christ, you dumbass. You went full feral on me." She dragged him a few more feet away, before collapsing onto her butt, and his colossal head and neck fell onto her chest and stomach, shoulders pinning her legs. "Can't believe you attacked Michael. Dude's centuries old."

"... I... stupid."

"I can see that." She pat his chest and ran her fingers through his fur where it was thicker around his neck. "He fucked you up bad. Think you'll live?"

"I... will. Need time."

"Michael wasn't going to kill you, but he's going to kill Caleb if the fucker doesn't stop."

Eric getting lost to the animal hunger and overwhelming presence of the Uratha spirit inside him was understandable, he supposed, given his youth and how new this was to him. Even more



understandable, considering Caleb had baited him into this, and then Michael showed up to make things worse. An excuse. He needed to be in control in this form, no matter what.

He turned his head, and growled at the watching vampires. Joe and three of his companions, along with Jonah and Hella were watching Caleb tear at Michael's back. Debby and Kathy stood in the hole in the office building Eric had created using Caleb's body. It was a blur in Eric's mind. Punching a giant hole in a warehouse re-purposed as an office building was not a good idea.

Michael probably showed up to stop the squabbling, and he found two werewolves fighting out in the open street, destroying property. Big Masquerade violations. Shit.