~~Natasha~~

It wasn’t the first time Tash had been close to an explosion. Working for the Invictus, they had all sorts of toys for dealing with the Carthians. They weren’t allowed to kill other vampires, lest they trigger a war, but sometimes blowing up a car, or a cellar, or even a whole building, was required to send a message. She was familiar with the kinetic punch, the wave of force that hits the body, and then the following wave. It was nothing like in the movies, where you could just hide behind a heavy object, and be fine. Energy didn’t work like that. Pressurized energy moving outward at a few miles a second hit everything near it, and the only defense against that was distance.

They had all been within ten feet of the door when it had blown apart. Considering how big the door was, the kinetic force that had hit them was strong enough to damage organs, let alone impact damage from their bodies slamming into the walls and floor.

The strange thoughts that go through the mind when coming to your senses from what might as well have been a thousand simultaneous punches to her body. She could see the ceiling, and a giant floating skeleton thing, something with wings and no lower body. Oh, right, Athalia, and she was turning into black mist.

Athalia. Nightmare. Rescue mission. The world and its realities came crashing down on her mind like an ice bath, and she struggled to lift her head enough to look around. The explosion had slammed her into the wall, and gravity had brought her into the floor on her back. One of her legs was underneath her, backward.

Familiar pain ignited inside her, in an unfamiliar package. Reflex told her to flex her muscle, her leg, try and work it, but it was broken or dislocated, and the effort turned pain into scorching agony. Weapon, weapon, she needed a weapon. Door, obstacle, she needed something, do something. She squeezed her left hand; pistol there. She squeezed her right; sword there. She couldn’t hear anything, only ringing. There were bits of wood everywhere, and one very large one on top of her.

Bits of the wood beam covering her body were breaking off, like small explosions, and she felt the impact of each random, shattering thud. Pop. Pop pop. Bullets? Bullets. They were shooting at her.

She looked beside her, at one of the doors that lined the hallway. It was blown open, broken in half, two parts still standing with their hinges. It wasn’t the floor that had stopped her from moving further back, it was the door frame of the side door. Her head was propped up against it slightly, enough that she could see the remains of the main door too. Giant slabs of wood, shattered and ruined, still remained on its hinges. The door itself had been a foot thick; the explosives used to shatter it would have been very powerful.

The hunters had predicted their intrusion, and had brought the tools needed to deal with some of the most powerful creatures Dolareido had to offer. Jack and his group had gotten cocky, very cocky, and now they were a prostrated mess.

No time to complain; and Jack would beat himself up enough for it anyway, no need to throw wood on that fire. First things first, she had to move herself out of the door frame, and into the room. A quick glance, and use of her auspex — forever an oddity in her ability to see in near pitch black — showed another empty dark room, with some wooden tables and chairs.

Grinding her teeth together, she forced down the pain, and dragged herself into the room. She twisted herself, and screamed in her mind where no one could hear, as her leg twisted underneath her. But, with the huge board sitting on her body, she had to get out from under it to get to safety, but leave it there until she was in the room. It was the only thing keeping the hunters from obliterating her in a rain of lead.

It made it easier to scream, so she kept screaming, in her mind. The pop pops were getting louder and louder as her hearing returned, and she matched her inner screaming to them, until it was all a blur of noise in her head.

The crunch of bone grinding on bone, the shards of broken limb cutting into meat and tissue, and crushing against each other, was agony. She ignored it. She forced her little body further, and further into the room, and as her leg twisted out from underneath her, she clenched her teeth down until she felt her jaw threaten to break, too. Bullets crashed into the wood, and others slammed into the stone of the door frame, inches from her head, each random impact a sharp spur in her side, demanding she keep moving.

The board slid off of her hip, and onto the foot of her bad leg, as she got herself into the room. No time to think, no time to lament the pain, no time to do anything, except put her weapons down, and yank. She couldn’t help but scream out loud this time, and the sound of her voice echoing against the stone drew a silence from the unending barrage of bullets. Free at last. She grabbed her leg by the thigh, and twisted it back into a moderately normal rotation. Crunch.

Her next scream was for everyone to hear.

Panting, almost crying, she stared down at her leg. It was aligned enough for her body to begin healing it on its own. With shaking hands, she picked up her pistol and sword, and pushed herself out of the beam of light cutting into the room. She checked herself for bullet wounds as she moved; none she could see. If not for being a corpse, she’d probably have a concussion, and ruptured organs from that explosion. Being pre-dead had many advantages, and she forced herself to appreciate that, as the burning pain of the ruined leg throbbed up into her body and mind.

She put her back to the wall of the door frame, further from the hunters. She wanted to be able to poke her head out and see, and maybe shoot, and until her leg was working again, she’d have to rely on her pistol over her sword. From here, she might be able to take some shots, and stop hunters from approaching. Maybe.

With a moment to gather her senses, she poked her head around the door frame enough to see into the hallway, and toward the shattered door. Where were the others? They must have got knocked back further than her, since she hit one of the side door frames.

Wait. She looked across the hall at the other door, opposite of her. Damien? And Noah. She sighed relief, and managed a small nod to them. They returned it from their side, both of them sticking their heads out from the door frame only enough for her to see them. Damien was still armed, too. Good. Noah was transformed; she surprised herself, being able to recognize that he wasn’t Art or Matt. Both had been shot, Damien a few times, and Noah half a dozen. Some of the wounds looked like they were healing, but some weren’t, leaking blood continuously. Silver?

Groans in the hallway, feminine sounds. Athalia? No, her skeleton form didn’t sound like that. And her skeleton form had vanished, poofed, into black mist that faded. Had to be Fiona. Oh no.

Natasha cursed under her breath, and tightened her back to the wall, head poking out only enough to see Damien and Noah. Oh no no no, not Fiona. If it was anyone else, it’d be easier to accept; they were all older and familiar with battles. But Fiona or Jack? They were kids.

She shook her head hard. Stop thinking that way!

“Surprised you came, Jack.”

Tash blinked, and leaned around the door frame a little more, to see one of the hunters behind the ring of fire circling the remains of the large, destroyed door. A woman, dark skin, and… and a glass eye? It was hard to see through the flickering flames in the distance, but the eye caught the fire and gave a slight, amber reflection.

“Angela,” Jack said from somewhere further down the hall. Thank god he was alive.

“Stick your head out again, please. I missed.”

This Angela woman truly was confident, and from the way she spoke, she would grate on anyone who had a kind soul. Reeked of bully, bully with a gun. A psychopath.

The two threw some barbs at each other, but it was Damien Tash found her focus on. He was inching out from the door frame he was in. Not out, not completely, but he looked like he was getting ready to run. Bad idea, bad idea! A hunter stepped over the flame and entered the hallway, and Tash unloaded a bullet at him. But the hunter was fast, paying attention, and threw himself back beyond the hall the moment Tash moved.

She couldn’t let the hunters come into the hall until they recovered, if they recovered. The explosion had been devastating, not to mention at least two of her companions were shot.

Damien leaned forward, weight on the balls of his feet, sword and pistol at the ready. Uh oh. Tash shook her head, and Damien nodded toward the hallway, further up. She couldn’t see from where she was sitting, her sitting on the wrong side of the door frame to look down the hall that direction without getting her head blown off, but some more groans made it obvious what he was aiming for. Fiona.

Now was not the time to grow a heart, Damien! Was Art and Matt alive? Or Jessy? She didn’t know, and she couldn’t think about that right now. She had to focus, and so did Damien. She shook her head at him, and pointed toward the destroyed, giant gate the hunters stood outside of. They were just waiting for someone to poke their head out, so they could blow it off!

More groans, from further up the hallway. Fiona, please, don’t die. Tash grit her teeth as she forced her eyes onto what sliver of the big door she could see, and again took another shot as a hunter crept up to the fire. She missed, flame blocking her view, but she nearly hit them, enough to scare them back into hiding.

Damien got into a sprint start position.

Don’t! You’re going to get shot!

He looked her in the eyes, and smiled at her. Him. Smiling. She wasn’t sure she’d ever seen that smile on him, not that sort of smile, a hopeless fool’s smile.

And then he was running. The man had already been shot, several times, gaping holes in his body leaving small bits of ash behind. And as he exposed himself, a hail of gunfire was only going to add to it. He was going to get shot, again.

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~~Eric~~

Jessy had managed to create chaos. Clara amplified it. Now Eric was going to take advantage.

How cocky were these fuckers to think they could hold them in control, and rely on this monster Sándor to do all the heavy lifting. There had to be more going on, because everything about the situation and its sudden upheaval reeked of predictable cliché. How could they have thought this monster would be able to handle them? Either the man thought little of Eric, Clara, and Jessy, or he thought highly of Sándor. He couldn’t have been expecting Angela and her group to cover him, since he sent them to deal with the intruders.

Maybe Jeremiah didn’t expect the intruders to arrive so quickly? Eric had only been in the dream for what he guessed was an hour. If the Invictus were launching a rescue mission for Jessy, or Avery was launching one for Clara, it was record speed. It was also ballsy and reckless. He’d have to thank whoever it was, because it gave him the window he needed, to throw himself at four hunters instead of nearly two dozen.

Three hunters. The one with the old woman Elen was still helping her, with whatever. Better for him.

His roar caught Jeremiah by surprise, but the old bastard dodged nonetheless, rolling to the side and firing at him. But Eric’s new body had no issues with speed despite his weight. His talons dug into the stones beneath him, weight driving them into the rock. It felt natural, to tear the earth beneath his colossal weight, not natural for a wolf, but natural for a werewolf. Traction let him pour his strength into his body, let him summon speed that defied his size, let him move under Jeremiah’s bullets and close in on the three hunters. Payback.

The three hunters brought up their pistols, eyes looking up at him, wide, startled, scared. But despite the fear, they opened fire, and Eric roared fury as several of their bullets hit him. Silver. He knew it the moment it cut into his muscle. Acid, burning, melting, his bane in a stupid fucking hunk of metal shot out from a peashooter. It wasn’t pure silver, and from the way it felt in his flesh, he knew only a small part of it was silver at all, but it was enough. His flesh wouldn’t heal fast like it should have, like he instinctively knew it should have, but it wasn’t enough to stop him from slamming into the three.

They went flying. His weight was far more than their simple human bodies could handle, and smashing the back of one of his hands into one of the hunters sent them rolling through the air. The next, he swiped for, but the hunter fell back, collapsing onto their ass to avoid the swipe, and rolling to the side to avoid his incoming step. The next hunter tried to line up another shot, but he reached out, grabbed her pistol, and squeezed. She managed to let go of the pistol in time to avoid losing her hands, as he crushed the metal in his grip.

The feel of metal, bending, warping, breaking in his palm. Strength so massive and skin so tough, the metal broke, destroyed in his hand, bent into a worthless shape. What a thrill!

There was something so fucking satisfying about giving into the carnage, and letting his base instincts dominate. He looked at his enormous hand, at the darkness of his gray fur, at the massive claws. He looked at his fingers, and how the strength in them, the tendons along the bones, how easy it was to tap into them and bear down on something to break it. It was like crushing an egg in the palm. Popping a human skull would be like crushing a grape.

The sizzle of silver burning in his wounds snapped his mind back to present circumstance. A second pause was enough for the hunter who rolled out of the way to bring their pistol back up, only to have to roll out of the way again as Eric pounced at him. Not a cat pounce, or even a dog pounce, but a monster’s pounce, a titan’s pounce. The size of his limbs versus the weight they had to carry, and the momentum against gravity, made the motion feel more like he was a rhinoceros charging into prey. Even missing, his size was enough to cause his leg to hit against the hunter, and knock them over like he’d smashed them with a giant hammer.

These bastards were good at avoiding. They’d had practice against other monsters, had probably hunted and killed other beasts like him. For a brief moment, images and memories ran through his mind, of old movies he’d seen, new ones too, depicting werewolves as ferocious monsters that needed to be killed. The idea cut through his animal mind, into the fury and rage, reminded him that he was the villain according to these humans, and he was a human only weeks ago.

The rage crashed against his insides, stirring them into rapids of adrenaline and hunger. He was not the villain. There were no villains in this maelstrom of carnage, no heroes, no good guys or bad guys. There were predators, and there was prey. These humans had threatened him with torture and death, and he was going to devour them.

He glanced over his shoulder. The leader, Jeremiah, he needed to die. Eric wanted to turn and attack him, shred him, tear open his guts and stomach, rip him apart, eat him. Eat him. Eat him. But he couldn’t, the other prey was in front of him, and they had teeth and claws of their own. Clara? No, she was still fighting the gargoyle monster, using her weight to try and wrestle it, while Jessy remained behind the creature, stabbing and clawing, roaring and screaming.

Jessy. She was far more similar to beasts like him than he’d thought. Even now, she had her claws and teeth on the monster’s body, was tearing into his shoulder, and roaring strange sounds a normal human throat couldn’t make. She was… enticing.

The smell of blood began to fill the room, his nose catching it, and he breathed it in deep. The rush of it sent life and heat through his veins, warming him, demanding he roar; he did. Jeremiah looked at him, glared at him, and raised his pistol at him. Pistol. Metal pipe that shot small stones. But these stones were silver, and burned with the wrath of his bane.

Jeremiah turned the pistol on Clara, and started firing.

“No!” He threw himself at Jeremiah, but for all his speed, it was too slow. This bastard was far faster than an old man should have been, and he unloaded six bullets at his fellow wolf. Three slammed into the gargoyle monster, sinking through the leathery skin of Jeremiah’s comrade, but three more hit Clara, and the result was far more visceral.

She howled, a layer of pain in her roar as she fell to a knee, before turning around to look at Jeremiah. Three little sprays of red came out of her back, before turning into small blood streams leaking out of her. The fur blocked seeing the specifics of the wound, but Eric knew it’d be burning, veined, like someone poured acid into her flesh.

Eric slammed a hand down against Jeremiah’s arm, hard enough to send the pistol out of his hand, but Jeremiah didn’t hesitate to retaliate. The knife came up, and massive as it was, Eric couldn’t move his huge arm out of the way. Much as he still had his instincts as a trained fighter, his new body was huge, and wasn’t too concerned with dodging. Silver, sharp and surreal, cut into him and sent pain up through the flesh. It wasn’t like with the monster crushing him, blunt force trauma and pain. The special metal burned him like fire burned vampires, reduced his skin to a ruined, bleeding mess.

He ignored the pain. It was easy. Clara had called to him, her howls and roars woke him up, and the beast inside answered the called. Pain? Meaningless. There was only the hunt, the fight, the kill. There was only his prey, and his pack. This stranger wolf was a friend for now, enemy of his enemy, and his mate, the undead, was now fighting for her life against a monster of insane proportions. He had to join them, had to help, had to end the threat, save his mate, defend his territory.

The beast in him didn’t know how to plan. He was vaguely aware of it, of a haze, of something blocking his thinking; like being drunk, brain buzzed on a high of adrenaline and blood lust. Should he worry about the giant gargoyle, the man with the tattoos and knife, or the trio of hunters recovering from his attack? Should he worry about the hunter who took the old woman away? Should he worry about the tattooed man’s pack member with the strange eye? All those questions faded away, as his instincts took over.

Cut off the head of the snake, and the body dies.

He dove for Jeremiah, ignoring the huge blade of silver pointed at him. The tattooed man was wise, white hair announcing his age, and scars announcing his experience. Old prey was weak, but old prey was smart, and this old prey kept the blade up and pointed at Eric as the werewolf threw his weight at him.

As cold metal slid into his chest, Eric roared into the man’s face. The blade went low, the old human’s height too low to be able to hit Eric in the heart. Eric felt it in his breath though, and as he roared over man, a splatter of the werewolf’s blood washed over Jeremiah’s face. Ignoring the pain, Eric drove his hands down against the human’s shoulders, and with his weight, pushed him onto the ground, and pinned him.

The room shook as an explosion happened. Eric looked down the dark, enormous chamber, toward the path he originally came from. The explosion was loud, and a second later, Eric felt his body shudder from the force as it slammed into everyone and everything. Too far to hurt them, but enough to stun everyone.

No, it didn’t stun Jeremiah. The human underneath him, glaring at him like he was nothing more than a rabid dog, pulled down on the silver knife jammed into Eric’s chest. Eric roared, more blood erupting over his tongue and onto the man beneath him. But the roar was weak, blood filling his lungs, his breath, and robbing his energy with each moment. He had to get the knife out of him. Ignore the explosion, ignore everything else, just deal with the dangerous prey in your clutches right now.

The knife was in his side under one of his pectorals, and try as Eric might, the arm closer to the wound did not want to respond correctly. Something was cut, torn, preventing the closer shoulder from rotating on the angle he wanted. But the rest of the arm worked, and he sank his claws into the prey’s shoulder, earning a satisfying roar of pain from his meal. His other hand reached for the man’s head, but the prey pushed against the silver knife, sawing through muscle and bone, and Eric had to grab the assaulting wrist instead.

At a certain point, pain took on a new voice, and it shrieked in his head, a wall of ice to block his way. He backed off, jumping back from Jeremiah, and held the massive gash in his chest. The flesh within tried to heal, tried to snap back into place, tried to stop the blood, but it didn’t. It was nothing like that time the short man had stabbed him with his metal claw, this time his body couldn’t manage. The silver cut through more than his flesh, it cut through the fury, the beast, the thrill and rush, it cut through his being.

Eric fell to a knee, hand still on the gash in his chest, blood gushing up and over his fingers. With a few seconds to breath into his bloody lungs, the blood slowed down. Even if it was silver, it wasn’t pure; how Eric knew that, he didn’t know, but something in him knew the knife could have done more damage to him if it was more silver, though it would have been too soft. Instead, the bastard found a balance between hardness, and wolf’s bane. Lucky for Eric, it was enough that he could feel his body heal the wound enough to keep him from bleeding to death in minutes. Unlucky for him, that it almost could.

Footsteps behind him. He tried to turn, but the cut muscle in his chest roared in agony, stopping him, and six arms grabbed onto him. It wasn’t a lot of weight, not even six hundred pounds, but with the hole in his chest and cut on his arm, each from silver, it was more than his body wanted to handle. He tried to reach back and grab one of the hunters, but the hunter grabbed his arm instead, while the one behind him wrapped him in a headlock. The remaining hunter grabbed his other arm, and a new set of footsteps announced the returning fourth hunter, who came up behind him, and threw themselves onto his back as well. He roared, twisting and turning, but his energy was gone, leaking out onto the stone floor beneath him as blood.

With a groan of his own, the old man stood back up, and rubbed his shoulder. He too was bleeding, but Eric had had the opportunity to do a lot more than give him a minor shoulder wound. Had it, and lost it.

“We need you alive, Eric Tanverson. Elen still has a lot of information to pull out of you. Sándor!” Like barking orders to soldiers, Jeremiah turned with a snap toward his monster.

The giant beast was still struggling with Jessy, but in the chaos, the monster had trapped Clara underneath its giant foot. Massive as the creature was, its foot and enormous talons were large enough to pin Clara on her back, talons stabbing into her shoulders. Blood pooled around her waist, the silver bullets not healing, same as Eric’s wounds. She snarled, twisted, barked and roared, but wounded as she was, the four-armed, four-winged demon was large and heavy enough to keep her down.

The monster fell forward, keeping its one foot on Clara, and earning a shriek of pain from her as he forced more of his weight on her. Four hands fell to the stone, catching the beast’s weight as he came to a knee, and he used the momentum to launch Jessy forward from his back. Her claws were sunk deep into its body, and she kept one hand within the beast’s flesh, but the weight and inertia was enough to spin her, and turn her upside down, legs on the beast’s head. It was enough for Sándor to snap his hand up, and grab her.

For a moment, Eric expected Jessy’s deformed body and array of spikes and horns to penetrate the beast’s hand again. But the demon kept his grip loose, and threw Jessy down at the floor with all his might. The sickening crunch of bone filled the room as the vampire bounced against the stone, and bits of her bone spikes flew outward from her, shattering and breaking from the impact. More than just the bone spikes, but her bones as well. Arms twisted and crunched, legs snapped and bent, and joints dislocated, as the vampire bounced twice against the floor, before going still.

Her transformation began to fade. The extra muscle vanished. The spikes, what remained of them, pulled back into her limbs and under her skin, and the deformation of her form disappeared. A few seconds later, all that remained was Jessy, clothes tattered, body broken, arms and legs twisted around and bending in places they shouldn’t have.

“Ok!” Jeremiah said, clapping his hands together one. “You gave Sándor quite the fight there, vampire. Impressive.” Laughing, the old bastard put his metal claw away, and pulled out… metal rings. Eric struggled, dug through his mind, and found the word buried underneath rage and scents and blood and hunger. Handcuffs.

“Fuck… you, you fuckin—aaaaarg!” Jessy’s voice broke into screams as Jeremiah rolled her onto her stomach, and yanked on her arms as he drove the heel of his boot into her spine. He snapped each wrist into the cuffs, and let go of her hands. They fell onto her ass, trapped behind her. One of her arms was snapped at the elbow, the other at the forearm, shoulder dislocated as well, and until she healed, she wouldn’t be able to use the arms anyway.

“You… you fucker,” she said. “You put these on—”

“On Jack, yes. Tenacious boy, though. I didn’t expect the grandchilde of Viktor to be as resistant as he was. A mistake on my part. If I had known, well, I would have brought him back into Sándor’s nightmare instead.” Laughing again, he squatted down in front of Jessy’s face, and grinned at her as she raised her head to glare at him. “Now, really, stop struggling. I want Azamel’s head, not yours.”

“You’ll fucking kill us once you know what you want to know.”

“Probably, but not necessarily. Dolareido’s a nice place compared to many; not many paranormals killing people. If you vamps play ball, some of you will get to live.”

“Some.” Snarling at him, she twisted and squirmed, earning more screams from herself. It was turning Eric’s stomach, watching her limbs bend and twist in ways they shouldn’t have been able to.

“Angela warned me the vamps here were stubborn. I should have listened to her.” Sighing, the man walked over to Clara, and squatted down over her. She was pinned on her back, still transformed and massive compared to Jeremiah, but small compared to the gargantuan demon towering over her. Helpless. “And you, you’re going to tell me more about your pack. Werewolves weren’t on my radar when I first came here, and when I learned you were here, I was content to ignore you. But now you’ve made yourself a problem.”

“Fuck you,” Clara said, gnashing her teeth together.

“I’ve killed several werewolves in my time, woman.” Jeremiah drew his knife, and set the silver blade to the pinned woman’s furry neck. “But I’ve never had the opportunity to torture one. Your healing ability is immense, and—”

A howling shriek cut through the room, the chamber, and echoed against the enormous walls that surrounded them. Like a ghost choir, the inhuman screaming continued, long, until everyone was looking for the source of the deathly sound.

Jeremiah stood up, and turned to face the distance where Angela had taken her crew. “Athalia.”

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~~Damien~~

Well, this was going far worse than he had anticipated, and he had anticipated it going poorly. Hindsight was twenty twenty, and a bastard. Jack had said it was likely a trap, but they were arrogant in their abilities. They were all accomplished, powerful paranormals, and more than capable of killing multiple hunters at once; or they should have been. One mistake put them all on the defensive, and as Damien looked down at his body, he sighed. Holes. Many holes. But he was still conscious, a step up from his encounter with the Azlu creature.

He looked around the room. Empty, and dark, save for the light cutting across the floor from the open door, gentle, flickering fire light. With his back to the table leg behind him, he looked down at his hands. Sword and pistol, good. His legs were spread, and the holes in his gut and chest struggled to close themselves. He was no Ventrue or Gangrel. Healing wounds like this would take time. Better than the guaranteed death a kine would suffer, but if he couldn’t defend himself, it was the same thing.

He looked at the spider monster beside him. Fiona. Despite the danger, despite the haphazard plan, he’d managed to save her. Wounds covered her limbs, terrible wounds that bled dark red, but she was breathing.

He reached out for her, and gently pulled her onto her side, facing him; didn’t want her choking on her own blood. Pain ran through his body, reminding him that some metal was now lodged in his withered organs and bones. He’d survive. Would Fiona? Her eyes were—she had no eyes; made it hard to read her emotions. But from the shallow panting and small shivers, he could tell she was in a lot of pain.

“D… Damien?” she said.

“Yeah?”

“You… you’ve been shot.”

How could she see him without eyes? But then, how did Jacob? Not the time to think about that.

“So did you.”

She laughed, and a splatter of blood rained onto her lips. There was only one bullet wound on her stomach, but it must have hit something important. “I… I… could use… a moment… to heal.”

“Can you heal from this?” He forced himself to lean in toward her, and set one hand on her crown of horns. They were hard like metal, but the skin of her shoulder, despite its black, metal-like tint, was soft.

“Are you… worried about me?”

“What? Of course I’m worried about you.”

“Just… you’ve been… ignoring me lately, and—” Another cough covered her small lips in blood, and Damien winced as he watched the dark red leak down over her cheek.

If he was a stereotype, so was she, he supposed. He was too blind to notice signals, and she was finding some where there were none.

Jack waved at him from his side of the large hall, and motioned for him to stay put. Not much chance of that changing at the moment. Sighing at his own stupidity, Damien reached down across his chest, and touched the bullet holes. Several of them had punctured clear through his body; a good thing if you were a human, to get the metal out of the body, but not so good when a vampire, and the metal was never the issue. Three holes along his stomach, and from the shape, he knew he’d actually been shot in the back. Each attempt to twist his body caused his muscles to tear, only for his vitae to work to repair them.

He was an idiot. If he’d stayed in the room he’d managed to drag himself into after the explosion, maybe a better situation would have presented itself. But no, he got emotional, lost his head, and did something impulsive.

Sighing again, he looked at the beautiful monster in front of him. He didn’t want her hurt, and that led to a really, really stupid, impulsive decision. He wasn’t used to that feeling. Didn’t know it, didn’t recognize it, didn’t know what to do with it. Now he felt like a fool, like the time Jack had come out of hiding to save Antoinette from his sword. But, like then, the fool boy had managed to save the girl. Hopefully Damien’s stupidity had managed to save the girl, too.

“I wasn’t ignoring you,” he managed to say at last. He forced his eyes up from her shivering body, to the hallway and door, to Jack, Arturo, and Matthew. The three of them were talking with each other, whispering, voice lost to the sound of flames and occasional gunfire. Noah and Natasha were safe for the moment, but where was Athalia? He didn’t know. Whatever was happening, the hunters had the opportunity to storm in and finish the job. They wouldn’t be safe much longer.

She lifted her head, a struggle for her, and pointed face toward him. “Yes you were, you… you didn’t—”

“You want to go on a date?”

“… w… what?”

“You want to go on a date, when this is over?” Ok, yeah, this was good. This was progress, character development, a step toward developing some sort of social life and not getting in his own way. A step toward abandoning Lucas’s brainwashing.

Unless she said no.

She started to laugh, but pain put an end to that quickly. With a small whine and whimper, she set her crown of horns against the floor again, and smiled at him. “Yes.”

He managed a smile back. A date after all this was over sounded good, because it meant this would end, and they’d survive. She believed it. He, on the other hand, was far too pessimistic to assume they were going to get out of here alive. Better if she did, though.

He forced his vitae to do its work, to close the bullet wounds enough so he wouldn’t leak everywhere. It took time, time they didn’t have, and Damien kept looking to Jack and the doorway as he did his best to speed up his healing. But he was no Ventrue, no Gangrel, healing would take time. Time, and blood.

He looked down at his waist. Three more bullets had caught him on one of his rebounds against the hallway wall, and got him in the side, by the hip. He could feel bullets lodged into the large bone of his pelvis, and the only reason the bones hadn’t shattered was his vitae forcing it to stay together. Even now, he could feel the almost self-aware, dark, crimson liquid in his body, thick, strong, forcing the bone shards together hard enough to function. With enough time, his body would force out the bullets, but he didn’t know how long it’d take. As much as he’d suffered many scrapes in his time hiding in Dolareido, never anything like this, Azlu spider monster aside. And the time Tash shot him. What fond memories.

He gritted his teeth, and forced his body into action. Every moment drained him, emptied him of vitae, of energy, as his body rebuilt itself. No time. If he couldn’t get his body working, they were dead, and he couldn’t have that. But he didn’t have time.

Fiona pressed her claws onto the floor, and pushed herself up enough to have both palms against the stones beneath them.

“You should hold still until—”

“We have to… have to do something. Or we’re dead.” Groaning, shaking, she lifted some of her spider legs from her back, and hung them over her head in front of her. Each spider leg shined a gentle black, like metal, and each came to a sharp point, like a rapier. But with them so close now, he could see that on the tip, at an angle along the sharp point, were tiny holes. As she pressed the four tips together, white liquid oozed from the holes, as thin as thread, becoming solid the moment they struck the air.

She was weaving web.

“What are—”

“I… am going… to patch us up.” Despite her shivering, her spider legs worked quick, her more human-ish hands still on the stone floor while her long blades did their magic. “I’m not going… to just wait… to die… After this, I’m going… to go on a date… maybe somewhere nice. And then we’re… going to go hunting, for food, for both of us. And… and then, we’re… we’re going… to date more.”

He coughed, caught between a laugh and the scorching pain of muscles clenching with the involuntary action. “We are?”

“Yes, b-because… because I… I am… I deserve to live, and… and I refuse… to not…” Her words trailed off as she focused, the web she weaved tight and thick, becoming a large bandage.

It was strange to see, and hear such a deadly monster waver with her words. Either from blood loss or from nervousness, the beautiful creature’s voice lost its usual conviction, to the point Damien almost felt bad for her. Fiona always had conviction, reaching almost juvenile absurdity. And Vrall was Fiona, sort of. Considering her proactive, social nature, he had no choice but to assume it was blood loss. It was Vrall’s voice, not the Scot’s, and to hear the mighty creature speak like that, scared him.

As the bandage took form, she raised an arm, and the spider legs brought the bandage to her bicep. It was like watching a real spider wrap a fly in its web, except it was a quartet of silk strands spooling out and around her arm. The white material immediately turned dark red, soaking in her blood, but she wrapped and wrapped, and tightened the weave as she built upon it. It was a very thick, durable bandage. She moved onto her legs, the human-ish ones, and begin wrapping the holes that had punched through her. One had not gone clear through, but better to leave the metal in there and wrap it for now, he supposed.

“I’ll… get you after,” she said.

He motioned to his body, and the holes that were mostly sealed. “I’m at no risk of bleeding to death. My insides are shredded, though.”

“Vampires are durable.” The creature smiled at him as she moved on to her calf, wrapping it faster than the other parts, her speed picking up as she got used to the motion. “Can you move?”

He tried to sit forward, but the motion sent scalding agony into his stomach. If he was alive, he’d have vomited with pain. Wincing, he leaned back, and forced one eye to stay open so he could watch the door. “I can, but I need a few minutes to make it… not tear my insides… apart.”

Nodding, the spider woman worked quickly, wrapping her various wounds tight, including the hole in her stomach. That was a problem. For a vampire, the organs were pointless, and the muscles and bones only served as a frame for the vitae to enact its power. He needed his body intact, but it wasn’t going to die on him. At worst, he’d run out of vitae, and go into torpor until someone fed him. Unlikely to happen in the current circumstance; they’d just cut off his head while he slept.

Fiona, on the other hand, was different. He didn’t know how though. Were her organs necessary, did she need her blood, how much of her horror was like a biological creature?

He was running questions through his mind to avoid dealing with present circumstance. She was in worse condition than he was, and unlike him, she was going to get worse.

“You… like to think a lot, don’t you?”

He blinked, and shook his head. His gaze was still on the doorway, but he hadn’t noticed Fiona had started dragging herself over to sit beside him. Her long spider legs pressed to the stones, and forced her along the floor, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

“It keeps me alive.” Heal faster. Heal faster. He needed to get his body working, now. Every time he looked at Fiona, he winced at the sight of her wounds and blood-soaked bandages. She was a monster, and a powerful one; he couldn’t imagine a few bullet holes and a bullet in her gut would kill her. He hoped not. He really hoped not.

“Stuck in your head a lot?” Her voice was becoming less and less like Vrall. Not Fiona, but, not the same rigid and formal Vrall, the scary monster creature he’d once ran into in a jungle beneath the city. It was nice.

He didn’t answer her question. Eventually she sat beside him, leaning against his shoulder. It was a struggle for her, moving a total of two feet, and he almost told her to go hide in the shadow instead. They weren’t directly in the beam of light from the door anymore, but next to it, and not exactly hidden.

“… think you can open a door and get us out of here?” he said. “Back to your lair?”

“No… not like this.”

“Then anything we can do to get me back on my feet faster, the better. Think you can patch me up?”

“I think so.”

Nodding, he pushed himself away from the table, and got onto his knees in front of her, butt against his heels behind him, weight on his toes. The enormous blades came for him, and he closed his eyes for a moment, reflex warning him they might stab him. They had before, once, when he first met her. Just think of them as sewing needles, only sewing needles, not ancient living swords that have killed likely hundreds of people in previous lives.

Fiona smiled at him as she used all eight of the pointed swords, the tiny holes almost invisible along their sharp angles. The small droplets of white emerged, and as some of her blades poked at his clothes to slide them up, exposing his chest, stomach, and holes there in, she began to weave her bandages. He wasn’t sure if her smile was because she was feeling better, or she was feeling worse, and was facing death like she faced all her worries: with giggles. But it was a nice change of pace from the cold pit of his own thoughts, he had to admit.

Had to admit a lot of stuff when around her, lately.

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~~Jack~~

“Ok, they’re alive,” Jack said, grinding his teeth into dust as he looked through the door across the hall. He never expected Damien to be so rash, though. Maybe the Mekhet thought his extreme speed would be enough to rescue Fiona without him sustaining more damage; dumbass. Ugh, Jack slapped himself in the forehead. He thought he could save Antoinette from Damien, back in the day, so he couldn’t fault for the man for being impulsive like him.

Except now the man had been shot, several times, on top of who knows how much damage from the initial assault. Jack couldn’t rely on Damien anymore, injured like he was. Maybe he’d be able to save Fiona from bleeding out, though. The two of them had moved out of the light beam from the doorway, so he couldn’t see them very well; hopefully they were still alive. Damien definitely would be, but whether he could still fight, still aim a pistol, still anything, was hard to discern.

Think think.

He looked to the two wolves around him. They were still healing, and from the sight of it, it was going to take hours. They feared silver the same way vampires feared fire, but the wolves would fight despite it, he knew they would. He could rely on them to fight until they were nothing but bone, until they were dead. But how to use them? They couldn’t move up, couldn’t press the attack, couldn’t do anything to break through the barrier the hunters had set up. And the clock was ticking.

“Athalia… if you can hear me, wherever you’re hiding, we could really use your help.” He looked down and stared at the floor, as he started praying for a monster of darkness to come help him. She was the only true unknown factor, since Noah and Tash had to be in the other rooms. If they were alive or dead, he didn’t know, but they wouldn’t be able to press up either. Maybe—

A breeze moved through the hall, and stirred the flames in the grasp of the gargoyles on the wall. Jack raised his head, and stared at the flame as it danced in the cold air. The air smelled different.

The two wolves noticed it, too. They raised their noses, each wolf breathing the new air deep, and looking to each other with confusion in their eyes. A strange expression to see on giant wolf heads, eyebrows raising, eyes lifting. Stranger, was the look of shock.

Jack looked back into the hall, and froze, as darkness began to seep over the stones. Cold, quiet, the silent shadow crept up along the ceiling, the floor, the walls, and reached out with slow tendrils of obsidian fog. The distant roar of fire, the curses from Angela, the occasional gun shot, all of it became quiet, deadened, as if submerged in water, or behind a thick wall. The flowing black moved further, and the breeze that came with it attacked, slashing gusts against the gargoyle braziers, and ripping the fires from their hands until they were extinguished.

One by one, the flames went out. The encroaching darkness was cold, like ice, enough to send a painful chill down Jack’s spine as the shadow engulfed the hallway. One by one, the fires died. One by one, the only sources of quality light available in the hallway of ancient stone, vanished. Jack gulped, and stared down at the shadowy movements as it trickled along the walls; far more than a simple shadow. It was like that scene from The Ten Commandments with the Angel of Death, the creeping fog that stretched out over Egypt, and killed the firstborn.

If only he had some lamb’s blood.

He pulled out his phone, turned on the light, and pointed it down, but the light didn’t reach far, the black fog blocking much of its power. He recognized this fog. This was Athalia’s fog, the same icy shadow that surrounded him when he took those stairs down into hell, into her nightmare world.

Distant hollers of trepidation reached his ears.

“What the fuck is that?”

“What’s going on?”

“Keep the fire going!”

The voices of the hunters struggled to reach him, unable to penetrate the fog easily, but he could hear them a little. It was enough to send another chill up his spine, as he heard the fear in their voices, the panic, as the creeping death came for them.

He stuck his head out from the stone door frame, and watched more and more of the gargoyles succumb to the black. Closer, and closer to the fire and remains of the giant door, and closer to the awaiting hunters, the blackness moved. Many of the hunters pulled out flashlights, others turning on mounted lights on their rifles, and the hunter with the flamethrower applied several coats of the liquid flame around the bottleneck between them and the paranormals. Their little lights might as well have been candles against the encroaching fog, and the fire was nothing more than a small thing, a tiny thing against the endless onyx. Like building a fire in the wilderness, the light it provided only highlighted how vast the darkness around them was.

All the gargoyle braziers died, leaving Jack and his two werewolf companions in the black, except for his phone. And like the hunters, his phone was barely more than a firefly.

The darkness continued, and Jack watched as it came into contact with the fire. The roaring flames struggled, but the darkness was cold, death in mist, and it killed the flame like smothering life was the black fog’s purpose. The hunter with the flamethrower tried again, and again, voice rising into screams as they painted the area red. But with each moment, it was more and more like watching primitive torches fighting the inescapable blackness, and then eventually, nothing but tiny candles. All the new fires the flamethrower created died in moments.

And then there were only the hunters, and their flashlights, weak, and futile.

Jack raised his phone, and pointed it at Art and Matt. Both wolves looked scared, and that was not a look he expected to ever see on one of the titans.

“Matthew, Arturo, we have a window here. See if Tash and Noah are fine, but stay low, move slow, and don’t make any noise until you’ve got a stone wall between you and the hunters. I’ll go check up on Damien and Fiona.”

No idea, he had no fucking idea Athalia was capable of this. He should have, now that he thought about it. They were in a nightmare, and just because it wasn’t Athalia’s didn’t mean she didn’t have access to everything that made her a creature of darkness. A monster under the bed. With a few, slow, useless breaths, he prepared to sprint across the darkness and into Damien’s room. A glance at the two werewolves showed they were ready to move, too.

The world went red.

Jack froze again, and every nerve in his body went numb as a flash of screaming faces filled his vision. He wanted to fall back, to get away from the sudden death shrieks in his ears and the pained face of someone dying horribly away from his eyes. But he couldn’t move. The air became blood, and the wails of the murdered blazed in his face.

The world turned to darkness again, a little bit of light from his phone the only brightness to guide him. What the fuck was that?

“What the fuck was that!?”

“Guard up! I know who that is.” Angela’s voice. The other hunters must have seen that too. “Come on out, Mother!”

A shrieking howl filled the stone walls, erupting outward from the darkness and its origin, where it crept out from the hall, toward the hunters. Jack fell onto his ass, and closed his eyes, but it didn’t help. The red images came again, piercing his eyelids: dying faces, blood tears, throats being ripped open by claws. And then gone again, as silence crushed everyone. He raised his hand to his ears, but when another inhuman scream echoed through the hall, the hands did nothing. The bloody screams followed, and no matter how hard he closed his eyes, an image of death, gore, screaming and torture filled his vision.

When it passed, he forced himself out into the hall. Running wasn’t going to happen, and the hunters were too busy shining their lights around at random shadows. But after a few seconds, another shriek slammed into their souls, everyone’s, and demanded they stare at nightmares. Jack tried to ignore it, but the scream in his mind was a death cry, distinct, and all too familiar. It reminded him of the hunters he’d killed, that he’d sent rats to devour alive. It was a sound that stuck with you, scarred you, a sound you’d never forget. And if he guessed right, everyone was hearing it.

He pitied any of them who hadn’t heard that sound before. The nightmares, in bed and sleep nightmares, would ruin them for years.

He forced himself forward, on his hands and knees, and crawled across the hall. The hallucinations returned every few seconds, and lasted a second, but if he concentrated on moving, he continued to make progress. The hallucinations didn’t freeze him, only made him feel frozen, feel like he was buried in ice, or frozen earth, or at the bottom of a lake of cold corpses. Keep moving, keep moving, ignore the death cries, ignore the eyes of the dying penetrating your eyelids.

Once he reached the next door frame, he brought up his light.

“Thank god,” he said. “Damien you dumb—” He winced, and lowered his head in reflex as a dying woman’s face hit his eyes, and then was gone. “You good?”

The man had bandages wrapped around a lot of his body. Legs, arms, his chest under his shirt and jacket, white bandage that looked like Fiona’s silk dress. Except, her dress was soaked dark red, and while she was covered in bandages as well, she was a panting, trembling mess, bandages redder still.

He braced for another scarring hallucination, but none came. Biting his teeth together, he slowly looked behind him at the darkness, and raised his light. He couldn’t see the door he came from, where Art and Matt still were. Or, might have still been. Subtle movements, silhouettes, moved through the black fog, and Jack squinted to see if he could identify them. No. All he could do was hope it was them.

“I’m good,” Damien said. “Was… were those…”

“It was Athalia.” The spider monster next to him nodded, voice ragged and quiet. “She… she is… a better Eshmaki than Vrall ever was. She is the terror in… in the dark.”

A glowing recommendation from a fellow monster. Jack nodded, and braced again as another shriek echoed through the stone walls. But nothing came. The inhuman sound was more distant, like it must have been closer to the hunters. Thank fucking christ.

His dreams in torpor today were going to be borderline PTSD.

“I guess we have an addendum to the plan,” he said. “We need to get out of here ASAP, once the primary objective is met. The werewolves have been shot with silver, Fiona here is bleeding, and Damien is beat up. My wounds are minor, but we still haven’t found Tash or Noah.”

“I saw Natasha,” Damien said. “She’s alive. Injured, but not as bad as me.”

“And Noah?”

“He was with me, before I decided to help Fiona. He was shot several times as well, and at least one of those was silver. Not in good shape.”

“Damn.” Grunting, Jack forced himself back up onto his feet, and held out a hand for Damien. The Mekhet stuck his gunhand out, and Jack lifted him by the wrist. “Fiona, how does this attack from Athalia work?”

“She… she is… she is lost to the darkness, Jack. She knows she is supposed to attack the hunters, but… but you may not be able to approach with her also attacking you.”

“You mean the hallucinations? I—”

“No. Not them. Her… from the black. She might attack you, and… and anyone who is… is where she is. Hide. Hide until… the darkness fades. Or at least, don’t move.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. Things weren’t going smooth. Why didn’t things ever go smooth.

“Alright. We’ll… we’ll try and get closer, but stay out of her way,” he said.

Damien managed a shrug, but winced, sucking in his breath through his teeth. “As much as we can stay away from fog.”

“Fiona, stay here. See if you can hide more, and don’t come out until we’re back.” He felt bad, sidelining Fiona, but the monster was shot up worst than any of them, and it was plain to see a gunfight was not where Vrall was at her strongest. If they had to fight in woods, or in tight hallways or something, her webbing and blades would be invaluable. But the large, open hallways and corridors provided no cover, no way for any of them to use their abilities easily. No wonder the hunters were setting up camp in this monster’s nightmare.

Jack got down on a knee by the door frame, and peeked his head out to look down the hallway. The darkness was thick, and the light couldn’t penetrate far. It wasn’t just light though, but sounds. Distant screams echoed from the black, as if from a great distance, like someone crying for help from the depths of a canyon. But the hunters were only maybe a hundred feet away, and he could see tiny white dots in the dark, their flashlights, struggle to find the source of their torture.

“I’ll be back…. I promise,” Damien said.

“… bye,” Fiona said.

Jack raised a brow at the man. That was very out of character for the once-assassin. Maybe the man listened to him, and talked to Fiona? He was tempted to look back at Fiona and check her reaction, but he’d barely be able see her if he tried. Better to ask about it later.

He got down on his knees, and crawled once again, pointing his light at the floor, and making sure every motion he did was subtle. It might have been unnecessary. The hunters could barely make sense of their own surroundings, let alone resume the attack on Jack’s crew. But Fiona had said something about Athalia, and not moving, so, subtle movements for now.

“Focus! She’s out there, somewhere. Keep looking, get your backs together, and keep your lights up!” Angela’s voice. Like the others, it was distant and submerged, but it hit with more volume. Woman was not afraid to yell, and make a stand. Something about her was unique, something that made the whole situation of her, fighting monsters and nightmares, almost seem to fit like a puzzle piece. Almost.

Jack forced himself along, taking each baby crawl step nice and slow. Closer, and closer to the next door along the hall, closer to Tash and Noah, closer to getting this group back together. If Athalia didn’t kill them all.

The next door was indeed open, and he almost crawled into it, but held up his light instead. If it was him in this darkness, and some shadow poked its head in, he’d be liable to shoot said head.

“Noah? Tash?”

“J-Jack? Oh thank god. W-What’s going on? Noah is across the hall.” Tash’s voice. Relief washed over him. More of his group, still alive.

“I—” An ear-piercing scream sundered his skull, and he fell to his palms. For a moment it was there again, a group of faces, close enough he could see the white of their eyes as they rolled up in their unknown torture. He was too close to the next room, too close to Athalia, and her nightmare scalded his vision with the bleeding faces of the dying. When it passed, he shined his light on Tash where she was hugged to the wall by the door frame. “It’s Athalia. She’s—”

The door frame of stone exploded. Jack fell down onto his side, and stared up above him at the slice marks that appeared in the stone. Massive slash marks, the sort of marks a werewolf’s claws might make. Bigger.

“What the fuck!” Staring at the claw mark that wasn’t there a moment before, he gulped at the bits of its rock that fell around him. “Damien, did you—”

Slash marks cut across the floor, next to him. Deep marks, and he rolled away from the sound of stone tearing apart in a split second. Gulping again, he pointed his light at the deep slashes, and drove his feet against the floor to push himself away and into the room.

Fiona said don’t move. Why? The massive slash marks could have come from Fiona’s Vrall, but—no, they couldn’t have, they were way too thick. Whatever made the marks had thick, massive claws. Athalia had thick, massive claws, on her colossal bone hands. Shit. Oh fucking shit.

“Don’t move!” he said, as Damien poked his head around the door frame, on his knees as well. “Don’t move, don’t move a fucking muscle, don’t—” Again, the screaming hit him. Hit them. Jack managed to keep his eyes open for a split second, and saw Damien and Tash both freeze. Teeth gnawing, claws tearing, knives twisting, blood splattering, screams echoing. All in his eyes, in his ears, in his head where he couldn’t get it out.

And when it was gone, Tash lowered her hands from her eyes. He shined his light down at the floor between them, so they could see each other, and he offered her a small smile. He wanted to roll over, curl into a ball, surrender, and try and block out the images; it wouldn’t work, though. Whatever Athalia was doing, it was not something that could be blocked out. Unavoidable. Immutable. Like a nightmare that comes back every night to haunt you. Best he could do was give his friend a small everything-will-be-fine, lying smile.

No one moved a muscle. If the red flashes wouldn’t hurt them, then all they had to do was not move a single fucking muscle, and whatever was—another quartet of slashes hit the ground, somewhere between the stone floor, and the gate that exploded earlier. Jack looked in the corner of his eye, and winced at the sight of Damien. The man had crawled forward a few feet, and drew the attention of whatever was happening; the claw marks had hit the stone floor in front of him.

“Wait,” Jack said. “Just… just wait… Hold still. Wait until… I don’t know, until these flashes are gone.” If that would ever happen. The hunters beyond continued to yell, but from the shape of their lights, he could see they were keeping some kind of formation. With the black fog between him and them, they looked like stars against the endless oblivion of space. Now there was a cold thought. “Noah, you there?” He had to speak up, almost yell, for his voice to penetrate the thick blanket of death, but he risked it.

“I am.”

Jack turned his head slowly, and only enough to see the other side of the hall through the corner of his eye. Noah’s voice sounded almost like a bark, so the man was still transformed. How long werewolves could stay in their titan form, he didn’t know, but he got the impression it wasn’t forever. Everything felt like it was on a timer. They still had to rescue their friends, and now everything had ground to a halt.

“We’re here too,” Art said from beside Noah. Good, they were all alive. Things were going better than—

Jack’s head jerked up as impact sounds filled the hall. A slash mark appeared on the remains of wood still attached to the door frame of the large gate. And a blur of movement, of bone, of wings, came and went. And then another, against the pillar in the next chamber, the one the hunters were grouped around. Jack couldn’t see it, but he could hear it. So could the hunters. Their lights went up, all of them pointing at the pillar, before the little lights started aiming around randomly again.

No more flashes came. Jack gave it a moment, twenty seconds, and he counted them. No more flashes. As the twenty seconds went by, another slash landed against something in the other chamber. And then another, each announced by screams, the hunters still suffering the red hallucinations. By the twentieth second, a third slash hit something, and earned a scream. One of the little stars in the black flew up, and landed on the floor.

Athalia had hit a person.

“Fuck you!” Angela’s voice. Jack couldn’t see what she was doing, but that changed when she unleashed a wave of fire. The oppressive darkness might have put out the fires, but that didn’t stop the hunters from making new ones, short lived as they were. Shrieking with blood curdling cries of rage, Angela fired the streak of red death into the air. “Fuck you! Die! Die you fucking bitch! I’ll kill you!”

Jack gulped. He’d heard those screams before, from the psychopath. Part of him was happy knowing the anger and hatred she’d shown when the two of them were fighting wasn’t unique to him, but a larger part wasn’t. She was a menace. She had to be killed.

Another slash hit something Jack couldn’t see, but the sound was unmistakable, and Angela turned her fire on it the moment she heard it. The red light cut through the black fog, spreading it, dissipating it for a few seconds, and lighting up everyone and everything around it. Something large slipped into the black, dark bones and massive limbs fading into the obsidian, breaking into flowing black ink. Another slash cut through the onyx, and Angela turned faster, unleashing a spray of flame straight at the door. Jack froze, only ten feet away from where the liquid stream of fire fell on the stone. Some of the red caught Athalia, and her enormous rib cage and dangling spinal cord lit up, red on the dark bone. For a brief moment, where the flame landed, the bone turned white, the black material on it burning away.

The following shriek froze everyone. A banshee’s cry.

A couple of the hunters had glowing necklaces too, but the glow was subtle, only noticeable when Angela went nuts with the flamethrower. How much fuel did a flamethrower have? How long could you spray the fuel before you were out? He had no idea, but Angela didn’t seem to be worried about it.

Another slash, and the sickening crunch of claws on flesh and bone. Someone screamed, a feminine cry that forced Jack to wince. But Angela didn’t. The devil turned to the source of the sound, and unloaded a river of fire.

The banshee’s cry returned times a thousand, as the death angel of bone erupted into flame. The colossal, flying creature raised her enormous hands to her skull face, and fanned her bone wings to take flight, high above the hunters. But she was on fire, and her screams were hot ice on his spine.

Jack stood up. Now or never. “Go! Now!”

The three vampires and three werewolves ran for the door. Damien handed Jack his gun, and kept his sword as he embraced himself in his cloak of night. He’d been shot many times, and a Mekhet wasn’t going to be up for discipline theatrics soon after that. Natasha followed in after him, her phone raised as a light, other hand holding her pistol. Jack adopted the same stance, and frowned at how unwieldy it was. Mental note: next time, always bring a proper flashlight when dealing with monsters, or hunters, or anything.

The blanket of obsidian death that weighed on them all faded away, and the black fog sank into the floor. Their lights punctured the thinning mist, and the exposed group of hunters. The large group of hunters.

He was right, a few of them had some necklaces on that were glowing, gentle white light. The light lessened, and faded away as Athalia raised higher; necklace’s glow must have had something to do with Begotten, or Athalia specifically. He looked up as the skeleton creature’s shrieks continued, and winced all the more as several of the hunters raised their guns, and opened fire.

Shrieks turned into a staccato of interrupted howls and grunts from the monster. The black layers on her bones were on fire, and burning like dry paper, while bullets pelted her.

As another hunter raised their gun, the werewolves fell upon them. Three of them, each in the front row of the assault, each wounded and bleeding. But they pounced into the fray nonetheless, darkness embracing them as the flashlights of each hunter they jumped went down with them. Athalia’s fog had put out all the gargoyle braziers, and that included the ones in the next, larger room; darkness to be exploited.

Angela didn’t flinch. She turned the flamethrower to the wolves, and shot over them. She knew. The fucker knew. The three vampires jumped back, far back, putting a couple dozen feet between them and the fire as fast as they could. The werewolves threw themselves to the floor, under the flame. Much as fire was deadly to Kindred, it wasn’t too picky about who it burned, either.

“Don’t even think about it! Fuck all of you. You’re dead! All of you!” Her screams were a crescendo, mixed in with the roar of fire.

The other hunters took advantage. Three of them were on the ground, and blood pooled around their bodies, gash marks an inch or two deep in their flesh. It was hard to see anything, now that all the fires were out, but Angela was creating new ones, and the hunters all had flashlights. They were shining them around in a near panic, but there was enough of them to create enough light to move by. The three that were on the ground, the massive gashes exposed what looked like bullet proof vests.

These fuckers were far more prepared than he could have imagined.

The three werewolves all got up, and the hunters raised their weapons, each of them with barrels pointed at the closer, more obvious threat: giant wolves on two legs. The Uratha didn’t wait to get shot this time, and jumped into the pack of humans. Athalia’s earlier attack had brought the hunters together, herded them, and the beasts took advantage. Flashlights went up as hunters fell onto their backs, and the wolves sank their claws into them.

Or at least they tried to sink their claws into them, but there were more hunters than any of them expected. Several were beside the enormous pillar, half hidden in the darkness, and they came up to the werewolves. Melee range. With so many of the hunter lights not being aimed properly, it was a mess of flashing black as the lights snapped across in random directions. Wolf claws and wolf teeth bit and chomped, and hunters with silver knives swung at them.

The werewolves and vampires had better vision in the dark, Tash most of all, but in the chaos of swinging limbs, gunfire, knives, and claws, it was too hard to figure out what to do. Jack stood there, stunned, and looked around quick to find an option. But fire blocked their path, Angela firing the stream of flame at the vampires. Holding the flamethrower in her right hand, she pulled out a pistol in her left, and pointed it at the vampires as well.

The three of them dove to the floor and into the darkness of the hallway, as bullets flew past their heads, some slamming into the stone walls around them. They couldn’t get closer. If the fuel so much as touched them, there was a good chance they’d die in seconds, or at least lose a limb.

The sight of Athalia on fire was a fucking nightmare on a nightmare. But she had disappeared again, and her death shrieks were gone. If she was dead, Jack was going to fucking hate himself. If she and Fiona died, they were all trapped, and fucked.

“You fuckers helping Athalia, you all deserve to die with her. Come on, Mom! Get down here so we can end this! Show yourself! Show yourself you fucking—”

Athalia’s wail cut through the noise of the fight like nails on a chalkboard. The black fog reformed above, in a random spot maybe a hundred feet away. Athalia said she couldn’t tell where things were like that; the dozens of random claw marks everywhere proved it. But the corpses on the ground looked like they’d been mauled by a fucking dinosaur. Athalia was swiping at things without know what the fuck they were, or who they were.

Christ, that was cold.

Athalia, drifting like a fly with a damaged wing, fell to the ground slowly. She landed on her hands, enormous claws resting on the stone as she twitched and shook. Her bones looked white, as if someone had bleached them pale. Almost like a sick person losing all color in their face. The fact she was still alive was amazing; she’d been set on fire. But the white dots of her eyes, little glowing dots in the center of her skull eyes, were flickering in and out like a dying light.

Whether or not she was dying, it wasn’t enough to stop Athalia. The skeleton creature roared at the group of hunters, and came running forward. The sight and sound of the death angel, running on her two hands, spinal cord swaying like a tail, and mouth opening wide to unleash the inhuman scream, forced everyone to look her way. The werewolves tried to take advantage of the chaos, but the hunters opened fire on them, the men and women with knives ducking low so their companions could fire over their heads.

They’d practiced for this. They knew how to mix ranged and melee combat. The fuck kind of bullshit was this, a military squadron? The hunters had underestimated Jack when they kidnapped him, but now he was returning the favor. They all were.

The sickening sight of bullets slamming into fur and flesh forced Jack to take a step forward. He expected Angela to unleash more flame in his direction, but instead, Angela was looking at Athalia, and started shooting her pistol. Bullets slammed into the monster’s bones, cracking them, and splinters of the white monster’s body snapped off. Some bits shattered, raining down around Athalia, and others broke off in huge chunks, until Jack could see through holes in her titanic ribs. The monster ignored her wounds, screaming, shrieking, and ran at Angela. More bullets slammed into Athalia’s face, and her jaw shattered, half of it breaking off and falling to the stone floor. Athalia didn’t stop.

“Come on, Mom! Bring it! Fucking bring it!”

Oh good god what sort of family drama was he witnessing? And Angela, she had zero sense of reality. Her words sounded like a shitty soap opera, and her actions were the sort of temper tantrum he’d expect from a literal child. But the psychopath was fearless, and she fired again, and again, until the click click of no ammo sounded several times.

Angela reached down with her pistol hand, and tried to draw a new magazine, but the skeleton creature, full of holes, shrieking in pain and what Jack could only guess was morose fury, threw herself onto Angela. The woman went down, flamethrower falling away before sliding across the stone floor as the necklace on her neck began to glow brighter. The skeleton creature grabbed the woman with one hand, picked her up, weight balanced on her other enormous hand, and threw her daughter at the other hunters, the ones firing at the werewolves.

Jack had lost track in the madness. The hunters shooting were trying to hit the wolves, and the wolves were running around in the darkness, leaving trails of blood everywhere they went. But with all the gargoyle braziers extinguished, and only the lights on their rifles or handheld lights to provide illumination, the advantage started to become theirs.

But the vampires were blocked. Angela had doused the doorway in flame, and it hadn’t settled yet. What light the fire gave off, the werewolves were on the other side of the nearest pillar, keeping the shadow on their side. It also meant the vampires couldn’t see them anymore, except for split moments where they ran from one pillar to the next. They could see Athalia though, see the ruined monster of bone and carnage whip her own daughter through the air toward the hunters around the pillar.

Fuck this.

With a deep breath — the habit would never die — and step forward, he got ready, preemptively winced, and jumped.

“Jack!” Tash and Damien said. He ignored them. A Mekhet was likely to die if they got too much fire on them, and both of them were more injured than he was. And he’d done this before.

The fire wasn’t too high, maybe three feet. The flickering heat was great, but not as great as the last time he’d felt its bite. It took advantage of the hole in his stomach where the giant splinter had stuck him, and it took advantage of the hole in his pants where a couple of bullets had sliced him. Those patches of skin, and the fat and muscle underneath, were gone in seconds, turned to ash. And he felt every fucking wave of agony it caused. Burns were pain beyond pain. Burns, true, deep burns, were deadly, to the point a person could die from how stressful the pain was on the system. He wouldn’t die to that pain, but that didn’t change that fire hit him with it, blinded him until he saw white, and wiped the world away until their was only the incinerating misery of his bane.

And then he was on the other side of the fire. He focused his vitae toward the burn marks, but there was something about burns that he knew he couldn’t heal, not until he slept come the dawn. The werewolves weren’t healing the silver wounds either. Did monsters have similar? Whether they did or not, being set on fire and then shot a dozen times would put almost anyone into the ground, but Athalia was still alive.

Except, barely. The titan fell to the floor, twenty feet from where Angela had slammed into some of the other hunters. Jack wasted no time, and ran over to the psychopath.

Angela dragged herself off of the bed of other hunters, and started to get up. “I’ll kill you, I’ll—”

Jack kicked the gun out of her hand, smile on his lips as he felt his boot slam into her wrist. He didn’t break her bone, but he got close, and the yelp of pain she made was a siren’s call to his soul. He kicked her in the stomach, and sighed bliss as he felt her guts ripple from the impact. He kicked her in the side as she rolled over, and groaned delight as he felt his boot crack ribs. He kicked her in the back, and grinned his biggest grin ever as he felt another rib crack, in the lower back by her kidneys. Another kick, in her chin, snapping her head back, and silencing her rage as her teeth slammed together. Another, and another, bruising muscle and damaging her guts, until at last she stopped trying to get up.

It’d only been three seconds. Three seconds of bliss.

As she stopped on her back, panting, wheezing, she looked at him, glass eye lifeless, while her real eye burned a hole into his skull. One glance from her was all it took, to light the fire in his gut, to send a scorching inferno up into his chest and out into his limbs. The agony of his burns vanished, buried in the pulsing hunger in his brain.

And then he had a half dozen guns pointed at him, including a shotgun. Shit.

But before the hunter with the shotgun could put a spray of death into his face, a howl erupted over the hunters. Arturo burst from the darkness, as if ripping himself out of a literal wall of shadow. The titan of muscle grabbed the shotgun, and roared into the woman’s face before he slashed across her shoulder. Claws sliced through muscle, earning a scream from the woman hunter as she fell, and the ire of the other gun wielders. But Noah and Matthew collapsed on them at running speed, on all fours, only getting onto their hind legs at the last moment, and bulldozing the hunters.

Jack could smell the blood on them, their own blood, and he could hear the panting in their breaths. They were exhausted, and wrecked. They had to end this soon. Tash and Damien would be joining them in moments when the flames faded, but in the mean time, Jack had to deal with Angela.

He brought up his pistol, and pointed it at her face, phone light held up in his other hand and shining it down on her.

He expected the psychopath to flinch, to raise her hands, maybe cover her face, maybe crawl away. He expected her to swear, curse, scream at him. He expected her to beg for her life, plead for him to not shoot her. He expected a dozen things from her, any of them, all of them, anything to add to his growing hatred for the fucking bitch.

He didn’t expect her to close her eyes, and wait for it. A gentle smile graced her lips too, as she stopped moving, stopped struggling, stopped doing anything, and waited for him.

It was disgusting. He froze, pistol shaking in his hand, as his light shined on the woman’s face, lighting it up so he could see every detail. She really did look like Athalia, her human form. And he stared at it, the face with scars, the fucked up eye with the cut across it, the panting, exhausted woman. The world froze. The backdrop of the werewolves, fighting off almost a dozen hunters around him, preventing them from shooting Jack, vanished. The flashes of light from flashlights in the darkness around them were like slow moving spotlights. The rumble of the burning fire blocking Tash and Damien from joining was a gentle whisper.

The skeleton monster with the destroyed face looked at him. Half of her bottom jaw was gone, exposing the giant vertebrae behind it connected to her skull. Holes and chunks of bone were gone, exposing a strange, black inside. Her arms were crumbled and borderline ruined, but working enough that she pushed her claws against the floor, and dragged herself toward him. Slowly, but surely, the colossal skeleton monster, inched his way, ribs scratching against the bloodied stone floor.

“D… Don’t…,” the monster said.

He stared at the skeleton creature. The death angel, the monstrosity, burned and broken, clawing her way toward him and her daughter, dragging her ribs and dangling spinal cord on the floor.

“Athalia, she has to die. She’s going to kill us. She—”

“Please… she’s my daughter.”

He knew this was going to happen. He knew, if the opportunity presented itself to kill Angela, and Athalia was there, she’d do something. Maybe stop him, maybe attack him, maybe anything. But beg? He didn’t, couldn’t have foreseen begging, not from her.

“… I… I’m sorry.” He forced his eyes off of the monster, and onto the awaiting Angela. The apology was for the mother, but there was a sickening ache in his stomach when he looked down at the daughter. The psychopath looked over at her mother for a moment, and back to him. He couldn’t tell if she was daring him, or asking him, to kill her. Either one made him not want to.

No, he couldn’t afford mercy. He readied the pistol, and—

The world spun. White, then black. Colors. Spinning, flashing strobes of streaking chaos. He landed on the ground, on the stones, palms out, pistol gone, phone gone. The world was a mess, pain mixing with flickering colors, and an unbalanced sound. Something was missing, something was gone.

His left eye. His left eye was gone, and his left ear. He lifted his hand, and pressed it to the side of his head. Flesh. Bone. Ash.

“Almost missed him.” Laughter came from a distance, and so too the thud of loud, heavy, colossal footsteps. “You ok, Angela?”