

~~Antoinette~~

Deep within her tower, she sat at a table with an array of laptops, tablets, and artifacts. The resonance circle sat empty, and she had her chandelier to a normal white light. The necklace that had summoned the odd spirit of secrets sat in front of her, and she stared at it as she folded her arms across her chest.

Should she tell Avery of her concern with Maria? No. Avery would overreact. Besides, there was no tangible proof. But the werewolf was bound to find out sooner or later, as she grew increasingly involved in the affairs of the vampires.

Sighing, she pulled her hair over her shoulder onto her chest, and combed it. There was a missing piece in this madness, in her city, and she was determined to find it. Daniel had spent how many nights now, searching? Drifting through the city with the highest skill Auspex could provide, he was nothing more than a wisp of shadow, a dream, moving through the walls and streets. His hunt had no goal, nothing obvious. He was as likely to discover a random ancient city beneath Dolareido, as he was to determine the secret forces planning something unknown.

Was this unseen force using the hunters as cover? The hunters had become the focus of everyone, and rightly so. If they continued unabated, they would eventually strike gold, and ruin the delicate balance Antoinette had crafted. She did not mind if they killed Azamel, but not if it meant damage to her city.

She did not wish for Fiona to suffer, either. The silly girl was a ray of sunshine, and now that Antoinette had met her on multiple occasions, she was happy the tiny monster had come to her city. She followed the rules, and had only acted against them in ignorance, originally.

Chuckling at memories of the girl, Antoinette shrugged and looked at her laptop. The video feed had four pictures, one for each corner. One was of Samantha Terry, and the feed showed Julias and Jack sitting by her bed. Good. Those two had a tenuous relationship as of late, the sort all childer and sires eventually felt, as their natures clashed. The curse of Kindred, with their instincts forever pushing for solitude, while their human half demanded socialization to some degree. But, those two were not the typical Kindred, or men for that matter. They did not let ego dictate their decisions, usually.

Perhaps Jack would ask her to sire his mother. The more she thought about it, the more she felt she would, and that it would be a beneficial, and enjoyable change to her own life. To have a childer was an experience she had long forgotten, except that her previous was not only a male, a young male, but

also her lover. This one would be a mature woman, and according to Jack, she was not the analytical sort.

What would that be like? Forever her conversations with Tony had been mental battles, each trying to outwit the other. Love faded, replaced with resentment, paranoia, and with time, hatred. With someone like Samantha, where Antoinette was the clear intellectual superior, would she feel superior in more problematic ways to her new childe? She had known Kindred to sometimes sire those they considered easily enslaved; after all, a Kindred did not sire to pass on the generation of their blood, like breeding humans. Kindred sired to increase the strength of their dominion. There were even stories of Kindred who sired, raised their childe, and then devoured them, draining their blood, and their soul.

She shivered. Diablerie was a vile act, and she was glad it had rarely reared its ugly head in her life. No, she was kinder than the average sire, let alone one capable of Diablerie. She would treat Samantha with respect, and with the wisdom she had gained in the centuries since Tony's embrace. And, it would be nice to have a female companion who was of an age. Ashley and Julee were wonderful, but young, and she was never sure if siring them would be a good choice.

Jack was young. But, was he? The boy had similar attributes to an old man, a strange concoction of intellect, hope, and cynicism. It was terribly appealing.

She sighed as she watched the two men talk over Samantha's body. This potential childe was the mother of her lover. That was a strange situation to be in, but not unheard of for Kindred. Indeed, many Kindred abandoned all pretext of romantic norms, and many engaged in sexual webs more complicated than any soap opera dared dream. It was not unheard of for Kindred to embrace their biological children once of age, leading to parent siring child, who sired their child, who sired their child. There were almost laughably intricate romantic triangles between Kindred that included parent, grandparent, child, and grandchild, fighting for the affections of the same man or woman.

But, while such complications were normal in Antoinette's world, they would novel and shocking in Samantha's. The woman would be Antoinette's childe, while Antoinette made love to her son, took care of him, pampered him, and, in a way, replaced Samantha as the woman in his life. There would be a wall between her and her new childe, and it would take great effort to overcome.

If she decided to sire her at all. Perhaps she should tell the boy to let his mother go? No, that would be cruel. Life was worth fighting for, even a second life. But that did not mean another Kindred could not take Jack's mother for their own, and not her. The issue was that Kindred groomed potential childer before the embrace, and no one knew this woman except for Jack.

Sighing, she looked to the other camera feeds. There were three cameras set up, high on building tops and pointed at the hospital. Some of her thralls sat upon them, perched on roofs, watching the city streets from above; so were Invictus thralls, she was sure. They had to be careful to not step on each other's toes, but at least they all had the same idea: there was a chance hunters would come to the hospital.

And what if they did? What could they possibly hope to achieve from that? Surely they were not willing to risk their lives and the lives of kine in a hospital, in some mindless bid to assassinate a visiting Kindred. That did not mean they did not have some other trick up their sleeve, though.

Her phone buzzed, and she sighed yet again as she picked it up. First she was interrupted from her research by her own thoughts, and now she was to be interrupted by another's. She was tempted to not answer, but if someone was calling her on this number, it was important.

Ah, Natasha. She answered it, and forced down the frustration building in her chest. "Miss Vola, my dear. Are you well?"

"Y-Yes, Prince."

"It was most startling, receiving your message." Only some thirty minutes ago, Natasha had sent the distress message, warning the Prince and the sheriff of her immediate danger. For the GPS on her phone to vanish shortly after had been worrying indeed.

"Sorry, P-Prince. We had to investigate immed-d-diately, for fear we might miss the opportunity."

Antoinette nodded, phone to her ear. "Do not apologize for your tactical decisions, Natasha."

"B-But I... w-we could have wasted time, if I made a mistake. And w-w-w—"

"Vola, my dear, you must understand. Even should your decision lead to wasted effort, or disastrous result, if you made it through steps of correct, logical reasoning, then you made the correct decision. It is always possible, that should you make zero mistakes and perform perfectly, you will still fail in your endeavor. Such is life. Do not take on guilt that is not yours to bear." Natasha had to learn to stop blaming herself for things. She internalized her negativity, and the neurotic behavior was a shackle around her ankle.

"Yes, Prince. I... I understand." Antoinette could almost see Natasha squirm on the phone. "W-We found hunters."

"I see. Then I am doubly glad you sent the message. Was Daniel of use?"

"Um... n-no, not really. He showed up once we were... spit out."

“Spit out?”

“We found Elen, and she w-was... d-d-doing things, in a hidden chamber, and it was... was—”

“Come to the tower, Natasha. This is important.” Antoinette reached out, closed her laptop with the video feed, and left the research room. Her attempts to pierce the veil could wait. Hunters were the priority.

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~~Beatrice~~

Mission successful. Sort of? They learned something damn important about the hunters, but that knowledge seemed like such a small thing, compared to how awesome it would have been to kill some hunters, capture Elen, and maybe free that Begotten from her control; assuming it was mind control. So much potential success, and it'd all been right there in front of them. They followed a hunch, followed their instincts, and tracked down the hunters to what must have been a sort of jumping point they used for their weird... flesh... chamber... thing.

She groaned as she raised her head so the falling hot water fell on her face. Soaked in blood as she was, it had dried out a fair bit by the time she and her fellow witches had broken into a private indoor swimming pool. The pool wasn't close by, but they all desperately needed a shower after the insanity of what just happened, so they made the effort. They'd collected some of the blood into a jar, in case they could use it later, but for now, time to get it the fuck off.

“I wished Natasha joined us,” Jen said.

“Well, I'm sure she's got better gigs to shower in than here.” Triss motioned to the barely lit shower room of the swimming pool. Taupe tiling, large, with mirrors and counters; all around pretty decent, but it probably had nothing on the showers in the Elysium Tower.

The two of them stood naked under the falling water, a showerhead for each, and the two of them let out small groans and moans as they felt the blood wash away. A bit of it had gotten into her mouth, and it tasted very human. That was fucked up. How the fuck could a room of flesh, tortured and cut and spread and split and tied and punctured flesh, with arms and faces growing out of its walls, be human?

“Yeah but, I wouldn't mind getting a peek at her.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Jen, really?”

“What? She’s got this teeny tiny little body, but still has feminine curves, except it’s all petite, and... she’s beautiful.” Jen sighed and turned under the shower, running her fingers through her hair as she did. “And you heard her. She’s got those two boys doing things to her nigh every night, and you just know they’re both fucking her at the same time.”

“You make it sound naughty. You were getting DP’d on the regular before you jumped into my bed, Jen.” Laughing, Triss looked over and watched the blood slide off Jen’s skin, disappearing into the drain. Hot damn, Jennifer had a body.

She must have noticed her gaze, cause Jen smiled at her, and started to make more a show of rubbing her body down. Around and around, she moved her fingers around her large breasts, circled her nipples, and slid them down to her smooth slit to begin rubbing it free of the mess.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to arouse you, obviously.” With a few chuckles, she looked up into the falling water, ran her fingers through her hair, and raised her elbows as she did, emphasizing the hourglass figure, tight waist, flat stomach, the big tits, everything. A model pose for an adult photoshoot, no doubt. The brown eyes and almost alabaster skin combined with her shoulder-length black hair always did remind Triss a little of herself, though Triss had darker skin, more muscle definition, and much smaller tits. Still, they looked similar, and seeing herself bathing rather erotically, a bustier version of herself without the crocodile teeth, was hot.

“Well that makes you a bitch. I’m dating Julias, not you.”

“You wound me!” She feigned offense, bringing a hand to her sternum to clutch at her heart. “And besides, I’m not trying to... you know, damage that. Buuuuut...” Licking her luscious lips, the damn Ventrue walked up to her, and slid under the falling water that Triss had been claiming as her own before. “You know Julias doesn’t mind if we get a little physical. I can kiss you, right?” She leaned in close, and did just that. Of course she leaned in her body too, so her breasts pressed to Triss’s, a bit lower with their size and weight, nipples grazing under hers.

Rolling her eyes again, Triss put her hands on Jen’s hips, and returned the kiss. “We’re not fucking unless Julias is around.”

“I know, sad as that makes me.”

“Well I know I’d be pretty pissed if you fucked him when I wasn’t there.”

“Yes, but he’s your boyfriend. The gender dynamic is different.”

“That’s sexist.”

It was Jen’s turn to roll her eyes. “Come now, no it isn’t. Do you really think Julias would feel jealous, if I licked you all up right now? Because I know I’d make sure, and you’d make sure, to not only explain to him what I did to you in great detail, but to do a repeat performance for him.” Jen took Triss’s hips in return, and pressed their bodies a bit closer together, hips to hips, breasts to breasts, and she swayed side to side in a dance-like motion. “I won’t, of course. But I thought you should know, I very much want to do all sorts of things to you right now.”

“I’ve noticed.” It was very hard to not be convinced by her. And Triss had to admit, there was a little logic to it. She knew she’d be right fucking jealous if Jen fucked Julias without her. But, would Julias feel that way if Beatrice and Jennifer fucked?

Her gut said yes, he would. Even if the two of them could bury the man in sexual favors to ‘make up’ for their wanton sex drives, it didn’t feel right. She supposed Jen would be right, and it’d be fine to fuck without him, if she and Julias weren’t romantic with each other, but something about the emotional connection made the physical act of sex carry more weight, and meaning. That was something Jennifer just didn’t get. The girl didn’t crave romantic connection like other people did. While there wasn’t anything wrong with that, it did mean Triss had to keep the girl’s sex drive on a leash, which probably only turned Jen on more. Julias had given her the freedom to fuck her ghouls whenever she wanted, but she hadn’t been. She’d been saving up all her sexual desires, her salacious and carnal nature, all her sexual hunger, for Triss and Julias.

She trusted Jen. The girl had proven to be a great friend, and trustworthy. But damn, seeing her strut her stuff all the damn time, constantly trying to seduce Triss, was mouth-watering; once she Blushed, at least. Hell, the way she was rubbing their bodies together right now was enough to have Triss struggling to keep her voice under control, and not moan. The moment they got back to Julias’s, she was going to fuck his brains out, and Jen’s.

“You were like a superhero.”

“I… what?”

“Tonight, in that flesh room. The boys getting aggressive like that, I expected that. But you ran in there and didn’t hesitate. Bullets flying, screams and gunfire, in an alien room of fleshly nightmares, you faced it, fought it, without indecision or delay.”

“What? Fuck yeah I hesitated. Felt like I froze for an eternity.”

Jen shook her head. “Try one second, from behind cover where no one noticed.”

Shrugging, Triss leaned in and set another kiss on Jen, this time on her neck. Ok, maybe a little teasing, to get them all tingly when they saw Julias tonight.

“Well, you were too young to be on that trip, but you stuck your head out anyway,” Triss said.

“I barely managed to get a grip on that hunter’s mind.”

“But you did, and saved our asses.”

Jen smiled at that, and if Triss didn’t know any better, it looked like the girl was feeling shy about it. Surprising, that Jen knew that emotion at all.

“So,” Jen said. “I’m thinking tonight, we fuck Julias in the shower.”

“You ever fuck pussy in the shower?”

“I don’t have a penis, and neither do you.”

Triss shrugged. “I’ve heard horror stories about how nasty it can be, from the positions, to how the water washes away the juices so it’s all… rubbery.”

“They have water-resistant lubricant these days.”

“Ah, right, yeah. I’ve used them, too.” Triss sighed with the memory. That was a good time. “I was sitting in the tub with Julias, one of those old school tubs. We’d found a couple outside, two kine, man and woman, and he used Dominate to turn them into temporary thralls, right? We used them as our servants for the night, and it was… was the first time Julias showed me what it was like to be a pampered princess. I sat on his dick, and—”

“Anal, I imagine.”

“Excuse me for enjoying it!” She shoved Jen away, and got back to wiping her body down. Always teasing her about the anal thing. Some women liked anal! Fucking hell. “So I was sitting on him, leaning back in the tub, facing him, and I relaxed there while the two kine massaged me and fingered me. Felt like a god damn queen, being pampered like that.”

Jen didn’t stay on her side of the shower for long. Licking her lips, she came back over, slipped behind Triss, smooshed her big tits to her back, and hugged her from behind. Her hands found Triss’s breasts, and she cupped them, fingers crossing over her nipples, and she fiddled with the nipple piercings between her knuckles.

“Let’s do that then. I’ll play the role of servant, and do things to you while you sit on your lover boy.”

“We already do that, all the time.” She squirmed, and Jen held on. Her hands continued to massage Triss’s body, fingers tracing around her nipples, before they slid lower to run along the subtle lines of Triss’s abs. It made her tingly, very tingly, especially when Jen’s fingers slid lower, and started to gently press and tease the softness of her smooth mons. The snake tattoo’s tail started there, right over the clitoris, and Jen’s fingers stopped there as well, a hair’s breadth away from the pierced clithood. If Triss Blushed Life, her clit would be screaming with need, swollen, and demanding to be touched. But she didn’t blush, and Jen didn’t touch. Oh how her friend liked to walk that line.

“How about this time, I—hey!” She snapped her head up to the shower room entrance, and glared as Aaron and Othello walked in. “Assholes. This is the girl’s shower room!”

Othello, Triss had seen naked plenty of times; more than. She’d seen him fuck his beautiful ghouls dozens of times by this point, and usually in the ass, so there’d been a hypnotic appeal to it. So she’d watched, more than once. Hell one time she’d given instructions like a porn director. That’d been a fun night. She hadn’t expected to see him walk into their shower naked, though.

Othello was a hunk, no two ways about it. The tan skin, big and strong body, dreadlocks, very fashion model. Aaron, on the other hand, she’d never seen naked. With his clothes on, he seemed like a normal dude, average height, average build, pale skin. Nude, was another story. The fucker was mother fucking ripped, like a god damn Olympian ninja, a lean and athletic build that would have put most accomplished elite to shame. She hadn’t noticed it because he lacked bulk, girth, but god damn.

And like Othello, Aaron kept his pubic hair shaved off too, like most in Dolareido. Without the Blush going, both of them looked like they had small dicks, but she knew better than to judge a book by its cover. Kindred without the Blush always looked a bit emaciated, anyway.

Wait. Triss was standing there, naked, with Jen’s hands roaming all over her. The boys had never seen her naked. She should probably feel shy about all this.

Eh, not really. She’d been fucking Julias and including thralls semi-regularly in their bedroom, for months now. Put Jen on top of that, and then seeing all the shit that went down at the Circle’s den, she’d become thoroughly robbed of all shyness and shame. So she let her eyes linger a bit, and she didn’t cover herself up, either.

“Nice tats,” Othello said, offering an eye wiggle as his eyes roamed up from her sex to her breasts, where the snake bit into one nipple. “Everything’s pierced.”

“The fuck you dumbasses doing in here?” she said.

Aaron shrugged, and came in closer. He turned on one of the showerheads, and started washing. It was true the boys still looked bloody, so they hadn't showered yet.

“Honestly?” Aaron said. “We said we wanted to stay close, and this is close. Considering how dangerous shit is, and considering your guard is down right now, we should group up. But, I think we both just wanted to see some tits and ass.”

Triss and Jen both laughed. Ok, points for honesty.

“Othello gets ass every night,” Jen said, peeking over Triss's shoulder at them. “And you both have seen me, and my insides getting filled on the regular.” If Triss had no shame, then by comparison, Jen was some sort of shame black hole, sucking it into a vortex where it was promptly destroyed. “But Aaron, I've never seen you fuck anyone. Hell, I don't know anything about your sex life.”

The man shrugged as he ran his hands up and down his lean muscles. Much as Aaron always had a calm demeanor, mature, wise, cold, Triss noticed him sneak the two women a few glances, especially when Jen started massaging Triss's breasts again. And Triss let her. Hey, it was just a bit of fun, showing off. The fact none of the Circle gave a shit about her crocodile cheeks, her snake eyes, or her claw-like fingernails, was awesome. The fact they were all comfortable as fuck with nudity, was also awesome.

“You never asked.”

“Are you serious?” Jen let go, and stepped around Triss to lean against the shower wall with her shoulder so she could look at Aaron, arms folded under her breasts. “All I had to do is ask?”

“Yeah.”

“... alright, what's your favorite kink?”

Right to the good stuff, as expected. The girl could be so suave, verbose, and poetic when she wanted to be, but sometimes she was just a god damn slut. Triss loved her for that. Julius did, too. The dichotomy of her personality was like a really good spice on food; or she assumed it was. Christ, how long had it been since she'd eaten spicy food? Over twenty fucking years, Jesus.

“Kink?”

“You know, kink, like, do you prefer vaginal or anal, do you really get off from blowjobs or face fucking, or maybe you want to fuck some tits?” To emphasize, she jumped in place a few times, small jumps that made her breasts bounce.

Triss couldn't help but laugh. Jacob had told her stories about witches of the Circle that made sacrifices, performed rituals, and otherwise did some pretty nasty stuff, and did it naked, in the middle of the woods; often during an orgy. Nudity meant nothing to witches.

Aaron shrugged, and pressed his hands to the wall, head down, so the water ran down his neck and back. "I like doing whatever she wants. Usually it's pretty gentle. A lot of spooning, some missionary."

Jennifer groaned in pain and stopped bouncing. "Aaron, you don't understand. Women like a man with desire, with passion, and they like it when he expresses it with aggression."

The man lifted his head, and slowly raised a brow, just a little, enough to give that classic Aaron look, the 'I'm not sure if you're right, and even if you are, I'm not sure I care' look. The man lacked passion, that was for sure. But he had the calm and collected thing down, and some women dug that, Triss figured.

"Not every woman wants to be choked and fucked hard, Jennifer."

Jennifer looked at him, squinted an eye, and gestured to Othello. "Othello, how often do you get your fingers around your ghoul Madison's neck when you fuck her?"

"Almost every time." The big guy nodded, shrugged, and started washing himself as well, across the room from them under another showerhead. Triss took a little longer than she probably should have watching the guy, but damn he had a body, with an ass of steel. And, like he said, he had a habit of using his hands, big strong hands, wrapping one around Madison's neck, and holding her down as he fucked her ass. It was powerful imagery that scratched an itch in Triss's mind just the right way.

Triss licked her lips as she let a memory of Julias doing just that to her drift through her mind. The man got pretty aggressive with her sometimes, held her down, pounded her hard, and didn't stop until she was a mess. And she had to admit, those were the times she probably came the hardest. Jennifer had a point.

But Aaron just shrugged, and lowered his head again, letting the water fall down over his face. "Think the Prince is like that with that kid?"

"Touché," Jennifer said. "Based on how we see them interact, I'm guessing she plays the dominatrix a bit. He's probably spent many nights as bottom, watching her dance on him."

Othello laughed. "Maybe. I'm guessing he's spent most nights with his dick between her tits."

They all chuckled. This was classic locker room talk, dirty and ridiculous, with a mix of feminine and masculine vibes stirred in. This was fun. Horribly juvenile and stupid, but fun.

“I think,” Triss said, coming up behind Jen, and hugging her in the same way Jen had hugged her before, “we should try that with you and Superman.” She leaned in closer, pressing her piercings into Jen’s back as she clutched her tight, hands cupping her breasts.

“Which part, the dancing or tit fucking?” Jen turned her head enough to give Triss access to her neck, and Triss responded appropriately, kissing the woman’s skin as she massaged her body. She was very tempted to get on her knees, and stick her tongue inside Jen’s pussy right here and now; and the idea of having the boys watch her lick Jen to an orgasm or two was exciting, too. But she didn’t. Self-control, dumbass, exercise some self-control.

“Both.”

Jen laughed, and pressed her ass back into Triss, earning a lingering gaze from the two boys.
“Deal.”

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~~Julias~~

He reached over and set his hand on Samantha’s forehead, sighed, and lowered it back to the sheets. “You going to be alright, Jack?”

“Dunno.”

“Good answer.”

Jack laughed and shrugged. “I mean, what else is there to do?”

“Go talk to Antoinette.”

“Right now?”

“Right now,” Julias said. Jack reached for his pocket, but Julias shook his head. “In person. Go talk to her tonight. Hell, tell you her you want to do it tomorrow night, dusk.”

“Dusk?” His jaw dropped, and it took a few seconds before he realized. Wide eyed, he looked at his mother, before his gaze steeled. The Jack face, the face he made when he was determined to do

something and finally realized it. "... yes. I'll ask her to do it tomorrow, the moment we wake up. That'll give Mom the night to acclimate. Docs say she's stable for now. Shouldn't be an issue to wait one more day."

Nodding, Julias got up, and Jack joined him. He was tempted to suggest Jack get this done tonight, but rushing an embrace, even in this situation, was a bad idea. It was an important part of a Kindred's life, both the giver and receiver, and with only an hour of night left, now was not the time.

Thoughts of Tony clawed their way into his head, and he grimaced. Antoinette would be thinking of her old childe, no doubt, when deliberating this, and that could mean she'd change her mind. Tony, he was sure, was her greatest mistake; or at least that's probably how she thought about him. Creating a new childe was not to be taken lightly, and she knew that most of all.

"So, what does it feel like to embrace someone?" Jack said. The two of them began the walk toward the elevator, and dismissed any curious nurses with small mental suggestions, gentle uses of Dominate. The kid had a talent for it, that was for sure.

"Feels like putting a piece of yourself into someone."

"I can't really visualize what that feels like."

Julias shrugged as he hit the elevator button. "It feels like, you're taking a part of you that resonates, and sharing it with someone. Not just sharing, giving, infecting. It feels a little... wrong, but also, meaningful."

"Resonate?"

"Like when you read a good story or watch a good movie, or listen to a great song, it resonates with you, sticks with you. You feel it in your guts, your heart, everything."

The kid nodded, and stepped onto the elevator. No one else was using it, and he noticed Jack sigh with relaxation. He hated being stuck in an elevator with strangers, probably.

"I know that resonating feeling, yeah."

"So, when I embraced you, a lot of that kind of... got muffled. More Beastly desires surfaced for a while." That same night, he'd gotten into a fight with Rebecca, and had nearly beaten her to death. At the time, he'd almost found it fun.

"That sounds horrible."

"The worst of it passed quickly. You're my first childe, and I have a lot of... the part of me, us, that keeps us from giving into the Beast. There are horror stories of younger Kindred, desperate to hold

onto who they loved in the first life, embracing a bunch of people. Young Kindred can resist their Beast just fine, usually, maybe even more easily than older Kindred, but a young vamp who doesn't know better can find themselves ruined by over-draining themselves of that special part of them."

"Draugr."

"Correct."

"Ever had to kill one?" Jack asked.

"Yes."

"Tell me about one of them."

Julias raised a brow at the boy as the elevator opened up into the ground floor hall. More people down here, more nurses, less doctors, and some civilians going by. He lowered his voice.

"Different situation. A woman, a fledgling, decided to go homicidal."

Jack stopped and raised a brow, before leaning in. "What?"

"She killed a whole bunch of people she felt wronged her, in her first life."

"Wronged her?"

"Some of them deserved it. Most of them didn't."

"Fuuuuck. So killing people can do it, too?"

This was a tricky topic. His childe was asking him heavy questions about the Beast, and the soul, about whatever it was that separated humans, and vampires, from other animals; if anything truly did. He brought Jack to the cafeteria, and they sat down by the window so they could look out toward the parking lot.

"It's not about killing. It's about you, as an individual, a sentient entity, having things about you that are worth holding onto. They're the sort of things an expert in torture would try and break, if they wanted to mindfuck you. If you were a courageous leader who cared deeply for his soldiers, an enemy who captured you would try and break that part of you, make you turn on your fellow soldiers, make you turn on your commitments and convictions."

Jack's eyebrows raised in understanding, before he lowered them as he looked down at the table. "And you damaged yours, for me?"

"It was just temporary. I feel fine these days, and I could sire your mother if the situation demanded. Hell, I want to. But I know better than to let how I feel be the basis of making the decision."

Jack nodded again, and rubbed his chin with finger and thumb. If there was anything Julias could trust his child with, it was being logical and being willing to set his emotions about something aside. Usually. Maybe he shouldn't trust him with that anymore, considering present circumstances.

"That brings me to a point," Julias continued. "You left your sweeper team tonight."

"... Yes."

"And you didn't bring an escort with you, violating the buddy system."

"Yes."

"Want to explain?"

"I—" Rage built in the boy's face, hardening it, furrowing his brow as he glared down at the table. "Athalia pissed me off."

Julias didn't need to explain that that wasn't a good enough reason to behave as he did. Again, he could trust Jack to understand that there would be ramifications for him letting his emotions force a poor decision out of him. Later, he would punish the boy, and Jack would nod and accept it without argument. For now, energy was better spent trying to get to the root of this problem.

"How?"

"She's determined to reconcile with her daughter."

"Isn't that understandable? It's her daughter."

Jack raised his eyes, and glared at Julias. That was a surprise. The kid didn't break eye contact or look down or anything. He stared Julias straight in the eyes, before finally closing them and shaking his head.

"There's no communicating with these hunters, Julias. You haven't looked them in the eye like I have. There's no truce to be made here, no compromise, nothing. The only way we end this threat is if we force the hunters out, or kill them all." The boy opened his eyes again, but to look out to the parking lot, and stare at the mostly empty space. The lights shone bright, far away enough from the brighter areas of South Side that the streetlights weren't washed out by casinos or strip clubs.

"I don't disagree."

"But... hearing her, that fucking... asshole of a woman, try and argue that maybe there could be? Because it's her daughter? Selfish."

Ouch. Julias leaned back, and followed Jack's gaze out to the parking lot. It was a beautiful night, not a cloud in the sky, so a hint of star managed to show through despite Dolareido's nightlife filling the sky with its own light. It didn't fit the atmosphere at all. But then, Dolareido always did its own thing, went its own way.

"Can you blame her?"

"I know what you're going to say, Julias. She is being selfish, but we all are. This circumstance with Mom is similar, in that I want to save her so she doesn't die, like Athalia does her daughter. I get it. I fucking get it, but..." His fingers pressed into the table, and Julias felt a little vibration through it. The boy was visibly trembling with rage, if only barely. Deep down in his guts, the kid was boiling. "That daughter killed my sister, nearly killed my mother, has killed and assaulted Kindred, and... and..."

"Tortured you."

Jack's shaking faded away, and he managed a glance at Julias before looking out the window again. The rage subsided, and Julias could see the creeping, cold, uncomfortable ache in the boy's face. Fear.

"I... can't be afraid. I have to deal with these hunters, and—"

"Jack, everyone's afraid. The only people who aren't afraid are psychopaths."

"I know, and I get it. But I'm a key part of the Masquerade now. Like it or not, I can't let fear stop me from doing my job."

Sighing, Julias shook his head. This kid was going to tear himself apart in the same way Julias used to. If only he could do this, if only he could do that, if only he had complete control of every facet of his life. If only he was omnipotent, and could fix all the aspects of his world, for himself and everyone he cared about. Hell, even strangers on the street, he'd fix their problems, if he had the power. Jack would do the same.

"You're not even two years embraced, Jack. Cut yourself some slack. You're young. Very young."

"I know."

"Do you want me to move the Right Hand title? Isabella would love it."

"... would she make a good one?"

“Heh, no. She spends all her time with her actors and actresses, helping them learn. Ever see one of their plays? They’re quite good, and show a lot of skin.” As per custom in Dolareido, whatever was done in Slut City had to be done with less clothing than the norm.

“If she won’t make a good Right Hand, then no, don’t give it to her. The council gave it to me for a reason. And I know I fucked up tonight. But, it was that, or…” He grit his teeth and snarled down at the table, quietly. “I don’t know why Azamel paired her with me.”

“It was probably Athalia’s request.”

“You think?”

Julias nodded. “You’re only the second vampire she’s ever trusted.”

That hit something in the kid, wiping his snarl away and making his eyes droop. “I don’t deserve it, not anymore, not when it comes to this.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. The only other vampire she’s ever trusted was Daniel, and that was a forced situation. I think this peacekeeper gig you’ve picked up is going to stick, and the Begotten and Uratha are going to continue coming to you, when trying to smooth out issues that involve the others. In this circumstance, Azamel, and even Athalia, may trust you to do what is best, even if that means killing Angela.”

“Imagining keeping up that peacekeeper role, with Athalia at the forefront of the Begotten, after killing her daughter… is hard.”

Julias nodded once again, and leaned in as he put his elbows on the table. Enough with the depressing crap. The kid needed to think of the future, not brood over the shit in his lap.

“What’re you going to do, when your mom wakes up?”

“Wakes up? Oh, from… the embrace.” He rubbed his buzzed head, and looked around at the empty cafeteria. Not completely empty, with a few people sitting around on the other side, chatting with each other. “I don’t know. Probably apologize for being so distant with her before I was embraced. And probably apologize for… you know… getting Mary killed.”

Oh boy, that idea backfired quick.

“You know it’s not your fault.”

“I know, I know. But something inside my head doesn’t give a shit about the logical explanation, and is content to blame the fuck out of me.”

“Ah, yes, that part. I am all too familiar.” They chuckled. Finally, a little relief from the depression the kid was feeling. “I meant, once the horrible part is over. After explaining to her that Mary’s dead, and you’re alive, comes explaining to her everything about her new life, explaining—”

“I assumed whoever sired her would do a lot of that, honestly.” Aha, finally got the kid thinking about a future that didn’t suck, and wasn’t filled with pain. A small smile sneaked its way onto his face, and he looked at the table again as his mind wandered. “You don’t think?”

“I think whoever does will want to include you. Assuming Antoinette, you’ll be there to greet your mother in her new world. You’ll make it easier for her to accept, and once the painful parts are over, I’m sure the Prince will encourage you to help your mother integrate.”

“She’d be a dragon, though.”

“The dragons are the most secretive organization on the planet. Samantha isn’t working her way up that ladder any time soon. No, Antoinette will ease her in at the most basic level, and won’t give her any sensitive information for many years. That means, there’d be no covenant issues including you in helping her new child be comfortable in her new life. Help her hunt. Help her find a new place to live. Help her go shopping.”

Both of them frowned and shook their heads at that, as if tasting something rotten. Shopping trips, hours spent doing nothing but looking in windows, comparing items, no thanks.

“That does sound... I mean it sounds fun, but like I told you, Mom and I were never that close.” It pained Jack to say that, Julias could see. It ate away at him. Family remorse.

“A strange thing happens to people when they get to your age, Jack. Either they grow even further apart from their families, and commit to being separated, or they get pulled back to them. You saw that with your sister.”

“You think I’ll reconnect with her?” he said. “It could go the other way, and make things worse than they were.” His eyes drifted back to the parking lot, as did Julias’s, and the two of them watched some humans come and go. Watching people move in and out of a hospital had a sobering effect, with how somber many expressions were. Much as people came to a hospital to be healed, the default mood for those that came to one was sadness. It gave the building a heavy atmosphere, not unlike a graveyard.

“I have no idea what’ll happen, but—”

The lights in the parking lot went out. A split second later, the lights in the hospital went out. Ok, now it really felt like a graveyard.

Everything went quiet, and Kindred hearing cut through the silence to hear the panicked gasps of the kine around them. Jack and Julias stared at the window, and watched as power continued to go out from buildings across the street. In this section of South Side, office buildings were everywhere, with lights already off, but there were plenty of apartment buildings as well. Their lights flicked off in the same second that the hospital's had, like a wave of darkness that crashed over the city as if a monsoon of blackness had suddenly attacked.

A gentle whirr continued in the background, something normally covered by the sound of life in Dolareido, and its consistent activity. The whirr picked up, becoming a hum, and the lights of the hospital turned back on, in low light mode.

The power was out, and the hospital's generators took over seamlessly.

There was no boom of an explosion, no boom of thunder, no warning of a planned blackout, nothing. The power was out, randomly. And there was no way it was random.

Julias got up, motioned for the Jack to do the same, and started walking toward the cafeteria exit. He had a pistol and knife hidden inside his suit jacket, and he knew Jack had the same. There was an issue with drawing them, though: it was a hospital, and a gunfight would be a problem; hell, even a knife fight would be a problem. Even if no kine were injured, a fight inside a hospital was not something the Invictus or the Prince could hide from the media.

He pulled out his phone. If—

“... my phone... has no signal,” he said, and he turned to look at Jack as he held it up.

The kid did the same, and groaned before putting it away. “Cell tower down?”

“No, that wouldn't be it. They're jamming it somehow.”

“Jamming? Can people even do that?”

The two of them looked at each other, and shrugged. Technology was a bitch, and even youngsters like Jack didn't know everything about it.

“Excuse me?” One of the humans got up from their chair to join them, a nurse, woman, young and innocent looking. The sort of girl to play an extra in a movie, and get killed off by stray gunfire. “Are your phones working?”

“No signal,” Jack said. “Hospital have Wi-Fi?”

“Yes, but that’s down, too.” She held out her phone, showing how her usual Wi-Fi network signal showed no bars. “But, that’s weird. The hospital’s generator keeps everything running, Wi-Fi included.”

Jack shrugged, and Julias grimaced as he poked his head out of the door. The cafeteria had a door connected to the main hall, and the main hall went from one end of the front of the hospital to the other end. The lobby sat in front of the hall, and connected to the parking lot that spanned the front of the building, a room large enough to handle dozens of patients. The lobby was out of view from his current position, and as he poked his head out down the hall, he could only see the large doors that lead from the main hall into it.

Crisis mode. Everything had just gone horribly wrong, and they had to act fast. What to do, what to do. If the hunters knocked out the power, that was one thing. Knocking out the power for a whole city block, or more, and putting out some sort of jammer on both cell signals but also Wi-Fi, was extreme to say the least. Plan, assume the worst case scenario, and deescalate when more information was found. He had to assume they were making an attack on the hospital, to come for Jack’s mother, and for whoever was here. They would be willing to get violent, even with humans around, and mow down innocents to kill vampires, if their assault on Jack’s family was any sort of precedent. If they were willing to brutally murder Jack’s sister, they were willing to do anything.

No amount of training, preparation, or equipment, could have prepared the Kindred for hunters willing to use humans as shields, or willing to butcher them. It made no sense. And it wasn’t like Kindred considered the humans as hostages or vital targets to be saved; there were millions of them in Dolareido, more than enough to keep all the Kindred well fed. What could the hunters hope to accomplish using humans in this war?

That meant they wouldn’t use the humans as hostages, unless they were humans Kindred like Jack considered important, like his mother. The only possible reason they had to come to the hospital then, was to catch Jack and any other Kindred, and potentially use his mother to force the encounter. It wasn’t like they knew she’d survive the stabbing, otherwise they’d have probably attacked last night.

Think. It was a stroke of luck Samantha survived; Angela had tried to kill them both, not spare one in hopes this situation would occur. It hadn’t even been forty-eight hours since her assault either, so the hunters had to discover she survived, was sent to this hospital, and then plan this attack in that time. How much could they accomplish in that amount of time? Considering what Angela and Jeremiah had proven capable of, probably quite a lot.

“Hey, what are you doing?” a voice called out from the hallway ahead. Julias frowned, and pulled his head back, as the doors of the lobby opened. One of the nurses slammed into the hallway wall, clutching her chest and shoulder, and she slid down onto her ass, as a group of hunters stepped into the hallway.

Julias pulled back, and motioned for Jack to the same. Backs to the wall inside the cafeteria, so no one inside the main hallway could see them, Julias looked around with snapping eyes. Windows. Leave?

“Out the window?” Jack said, eyes wide as he looked up at him, reading his mind. There was fear there, in his gaze, and not because hunters were likely here to kill or capture him. Fear, because his mother was the tool they were going to use to make it happen.

“No. We can’t risk it. If they knocked out the power to an entire area, then they’ve made a move to take advantage of that. There’s probably hunters out there, waiting for one of us to go outside.”

“I thought w—” Jack looked at the human in the room. Her eyes were flicking between them like they were crazy, and slow realization was dawning on her.

Julias looked into her eyes, and grabbed her mind. A panicked soul was easy to manipulate, and he took advantage of the rising worry in her. Eye contact.

She broke immediately.

“Hide.”

Nodding, expression flat and cold, the human walked over to the cafeteria counter, climbed over it, and disappeared. The other human in the cafeteria stared at them, and what the nurse did, before he scampered off to join her. The one cafeteria staff on hand managing the night shift, an older man with a hair net, didn’t hide. At least, until Julias pulled out his pistol. The man stepped back from behind his counter, and vanished into a room beyond.

The phone landline would be down, no doubt, with how ridiculously thorough these hunters were being. No one was making any communication about the situation in the hospital any time soon. Nearby phone booth? Even if Jack or Julias could go outside without risk of being sniped by awaiting hunters, Dolareido didn’t have phone booths anymore.

“I thought we had thralls stationed around the hospital?” Jack said. “And I know Antoinette does.”

“We do, and she does, but only a few. You know protecting your mother wasn’t a priority, Jack.”

“I know.” He might know, but the boy’s eyes still twitched with rage. “I... know. Those thralls should be enough, though, right?”

“Maybe. Maybe they’re dead. Maybe they couldn’t check every face in the area. We still have a thrall in the hospital, and she’s trained. She’ll make her way to your mother and establish a defense.”

“We have a thrall in the hospital?”

“One of the orderlies. She—”

Both vampires almost jumped out of their skin, as a sharp rapping started on the window not far from them.

“I—Scully! Mulder!” Keeping his voice a whisper, but almost shouting nonetheless, Jack walked over to the window without ever leaving the wall his back was pressed to. He was smart enough to get low once he reached the glass, using the building wall as cover, and the two birds flew in to sit on his shoulders once he crouched and opened the window. “Report!”

The two birds made some click sounds and some quiet caws, and Jack mirrored it. Julius scanned the room again to make sure no one could see, because using Animalism to talk to animals was a Masquerade violation, albeit a small one. Talking to birds was one thing, talking to birds in the middle of this situation, and asking them to report, was enough to draw suspicion.

It was impressive that the kid had managed to tame two crows. Momentarily controlling an animal wasn’t too difficult; mental possession of an animal was far harder, and required preparation, but he was sure Jack could pull it off. Taming animals in such a way, on the other hand, took months and months, if not years of diligent practice. He’d managed it in weeks, with a fine mastery of Animalism’s subtler techniques.

“They say the people on the roofs can’t see anything in the dark.”

“The thralls have night vision goggles.”

Jack shrugged. “Night vision sucks.”

“True enough.” It wasn’t like the snipers set about would be able to identify hunters that didn’t want to be identified; they didn’t have photographs of the hunters to work with, just descriptions. And disguising oneself was easy. “Their phones work?”

After a few more clicks and croons, Jack shook his head. “Based on what Scully and Mulder are saying, probably not. Looks like the thralls are fidgeting with their equipment to try and get it working, but can’t.”

“Then whatever it is blocking our phones has some range.” And none of the thralls had access to an easy landline. “We’re in a race against the clock, Jack. Send the crows out for help.”

“Right, right. Good plan. Mulder, get to the Invictus.” He looked to the bird on his right and started making some more clicks and croons. “And Scully, go the Elysium Tower.”

Julias figured the Prince and the Invictus were well aware of the power outage now. But the power was out for the block, and more blocks besides if he guessed right. Figuring out what was going on in that chaos was going to take them a few minutes, and whatever it was the hunters were here to do, they planned to do it quickly. Minutes were precious; which meant sending Jack’s crows to get help was borderline pointless, but maybe it’d help. Hell, maybe the sheriff would show up and save them all.

Fat chance.

The birds left, and Jack closed the window. Sighing and looking down at the floor, he reached into his suit jacket, and pulled out his own pistol.

“I hope they don’t get shot,” he said, glancing back to the window a couple times as the flickering wings vanished into the night.

“Ever try to shoot a black bird in a blackout?”

“Good point.” That perked the kid up, and he lifted his head as he put his back to the wall, next to Julias, beside the exit of the cafeteria. “Plan?”

“There’s lots of ways out of the hospital, but the hunters know what we look like, in detail. They’ll shoot us on sight.” He supposed they could steal someone else’s clothes, but that’d take precious minutes they didn’t have. And he knew they wouldn’t be leaving Jack’s mother behind anyway.

“I don’t suppose you secretly know how to use Cloak of Night discipline, Julias?”

“Not well enough for a situation like this.” Best he could manage was avoiding having people notice him, and even then it only worked on kine not looking for him.

“Isabella knows it well, and she isn’t Mekhet or Nos.”

“Isabella is a talented woman. Maybe I should have made her a Right Hand.”

Jack chuckled. Good to see his spirits were up. Hell, if anything, the kid looked like he was getting excited, now that the first rush of fear had passed. Probably fantasizing about an opportunity to kill Angela. Not so good, if the kid’s head wasn’t on straight, like tonight with his sweeper team.

“We’re... going to save Mom, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“K, good. Cause, I know that’s not a priority.”

“She’s deemed a future childe. We’ll give her the same courtesy we’d give any potential.” Which, he supposed, wasn’t all that much. Kindred cared about themselves first, their childe second, covenant third. Other people’s potential childer ranked pretty low on the list. “Well, I will, at any rate.”

“Thanks.”

“But we’re probably surrounded, and sunrise is in an hour. The hunters are going to do everything they can to kill us. That’s their primary objective. Killed or captured, either way you’re dead. We need to remember that your mother is their tool, not their objective.” He checked the slide on his pistol, before inching his head back out the cafeteria entrance. The hunters were gone, but the hallway had started to fill with nurses, doctors, orderlies, janitors, everyone that kept a hospital running.

“Who was that?”

“I don’t know. Terrorists?”

“Why would terrorists attack a hospital? This hospital?”

“I don’t know. I—”

“There’s a bunch of them! Six I think.”

“Did they say what they wanted?”

“Just to know where the emergency ward was.”

“Someone call the police!”

“The phones are down! Everything is down!”

“But the backup generators are working.”

“The machines are on but there’s some kind of interference blocking the internet and phone reception. I can’t call anyone!”

Eventually, an older doctor showed up, and she barked orders at the gathering in the hall. Get back to work. Person A check the electrical room. Person B double check that the systems were functioning correctly on all floors. Person C drive to the nearby sister hospital and see if their phones were working. Person D and E, drive to the nearest police station. On and on, she addressed each

doctor, each nurse by name, each janitor and orderly by name, told them exactly where to go, and what to do.

“And everyone stay out of their way. No one be a hero. Let the police handle this.”

“But—”

“Doctor Thompson, if you so much as look in their direction, I will have you shaving pubic hair for the next year. Shut the hell up, and do what I told you to.”

It really wasn't a meeting to be having in a hallway, but that's where the crowd grew, and the chief physician handled it. Julias was tempted to go up to her and get involved, use her somehow, but it was a losing scenario. They didn't have time to manage the chaos of involving the humans, and until the police arrived, all they'd do is get in the way. Worse, the hunters would kill them.

That thought struck him with anger, and he glowered as he pulled his head back into the cafeteria. What the fuck happened to these bastards to drive them to this point? Killing innocent humans? Twisted.

“What's the plan?” Jack said.

“We get to your mother, and handle the situation.”

“Handle?”

“Kill any hunter we come across. No mercy, no questions.”

Jack nodded, and checked the slide on his pistol as well. “You know Angela is here. She'll turn this place into kindling if things don't go her way.”

“I'm hoping mass murder of innocents is beyond what she's willing to do. Hopefully her anger toward you driving her to homicide was not the norm for her.”

“... me too.” With a long sigh, Jack pushed off the wall. “Ok, we need to get upstairs. Take the stairs?”

“Maybe. They might see that coming. If they find your mother before we get to her, they might sit and wait for you, and cover possible entrances.” Or just kill her and leave, in hopes of driving Jack into a rampage they could take advantage of.

“Then we need to get to her before they do. We can do that by the stairs faster.”

“Assuming they aren't also taking the stairs,” Julias said.

“How many fire escapes could this hospital have?”

“A lot. It’s a hospital, Jack. It’s a big building with a lot of people. It’ll have fire escapes, and emergency fire escapes.”

They both looked at each other. Emergency fire escape, for patients. That would be the best way to get to her asap.

They nodded, and put their pistols away as they walked out into the hall.

“Um, excuse me sir,” one of the nurses said. “I’m sorry but we’re closing the cafeteria, due to the power outage. Please head on home.”

Julias met the woman’s gaze with his own, and offered a gentle smile. “Where’s the fire escape used for patients, doctors, and emergency staff.” And, like the others, their minds broke with only the slightest nudge. He was good at Dominate, outstanding at it, a testament to his bloodline. Molding her mind like clay came as easy as breathing once did Julias, as it would to Jack when he grew older, far easier than it came to most Ventrue. It kept his vitae reserves in plentiful supply, and he had a feeling he’d need them.

“Um, follow the red line to the back of the hospital. We have a fire escape in the back reserved for staff use, and it has tools to handle emergency evacuations of patients.”

“Thanks. Now forget you ever saw me.”

“Yes sir.” With a nod, she went along her way, and disappeared into one of the rooms.

The two Ventrue nodded at each other, and started for the back of the hospital.

“You know Triss is going to kill you, Julias,” his childe said, “sticking your neck out like this.”

“I can say the same thing about you and Antoinette.” If anything, Antoinette would be even more pissed. Jack was young, and his second life was proving to be a roller coaster. He was also the first person Antoinette had ever loved since Tony, far as he knew. If Jack got hurt, or worse, she was going to tear Julias in half, literally.

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~~Jack~~

He looked at his pistol, as Julias looked at his, and the both of them sighed as they put them away again. If they walked around carrying, in a hospital where everyone could see them, it'd cause havoc. Skilled as they were at Dominate, Julias above all, it wasn't a skill meant for mass manipulation. If they wanted to get dozens of people eating out of their hand, they'd have to be sired Daeva. Not that the raging fans enthralled by Daeva were exactly reliable, with the same love, obsession, and fragility of any diehard fan.

They walked quickly. Jogging and running wouldn't help much when they didn't know exactly where they were going yet, ultimately following some painted lines on a hospital floor, and hoping they stumbled onto the door the nurse told them about. They should have asked her to show them. Julias probably wanted her out of harm's way before she got caught in the crossfire. He was too kind to these kine.

The thought cut through his building rage like a blowtorch. Too kind to the humans? Well, they were in his way. If it weren't for them, he'd pull out his pistol, march up into the emergency ward, and kill any fucker that looked suspicious. Shoot first, ask questions later. If someone died so he could save his mother, so be it.

And that thought stuck out from the others. Julias had a reflex to try and spare the humans, and Jack didn't. When had that happened? He knew when it'd happened: every night since becoming Kindred, small changes to how his mind worked, how he felt about things, how he thought about humans and vampires.

He shook his head, and searched for better thoughts. Yes, you're angry, and being angry can turn you and anyone into a major asshole. People committed some of the most horrible crimes as actions of rage and passion. Give yourself a break, and let it go. You have faith in humanity, humankind, and you don't think they're just sheep to be fed on. You don't. You don't.

They found the fire escape, and started up. It wasn't being used, which was good. The elevators had their own power generators, he supposed, fancy a hospital as this was. Safe to use in a blackout. The best care in the city, and the hospital he'd have moved his mother to, if she hadn't been brought here anyway.

Hospitals had security, supposedly. Where were they? The chief physician had told them to keep people safe, and not interfere with the terrorists. Understandable, he supposed, considering if six hunters had shown up, they'd have made it pretty clear pretty quick, that they weren't to be fucked with. Julias and Jack had hid in the cafeteria while the hunters had moved on, so they didn't know where they

were. They could be around the corner, could be in the fire escape stairs above them, or below, or waiting when they opened the door.

Julias pulled out his pistol again, thinking the same thoughts, and Jack mirrored him, no longer having to worry about kine eyes in the empty fire escape. If this were any other situation, the only realistic response would be to hide and wait for support. No kine was worth risking the lives of Kindred over. In fact, the Invictus were likely to punish them for being this stupid, taking on hunters that had proved far more capable than hunters had any right to be. Two Ventrue, formidable, but one of them barely a neonate, and the other far too important to die in a stupid mission like this, were going to face off against half a dozen hunters that had a frustrating habit of nearly killing Jack. They should have found a hiding spot, waited for back up, and secured their own lives.

But, they weren't going to let his mother die. They were going to risk their lives to try and save his mother. Julias hadn't even hesitated. The man was too damn nice. Beatrice was lucky.

The emergency ward wasn't very high up. A couple floors up, and Julias poked his head out the door into the hall. God, it'd be great if they had Natasha with them, or Beatrice, or Damien. Anyone who was good at the Cloak of Night. It wasn't a blood clan unique discipline, it was just that Nosferatu and Mekhet were naturals at it. Jack doubted he'd ever be able to learn it, and Julias had a hundred years under his belt and couldn't use it well.

The lights were soft and gentle. Everything looked subtle, with the ambient light from the weak backup power providing only enough energy to keep things running at minimum. It was good for Kindred, who could see perfectly in low light, and it made Jack feel a little better. Darkness, shadows, his instincts told him to use them, prowl through them, attack from them. But then again, there was light, enough for humans to work by, and more than enough for hunters to shoot at humanoid silhouettes with.

Don't get overconfident. A mistake here meant a world of hurt. His mom could die, or he could die. Worse, he could be captured, and Angela would make sure to not repeat the same mistakes. She'd cut out his eyes, nail him to the floor with giant spikes, and torture him with fire, acid, and... and... He shook out his head, and swallowed down his anger. The anger was caused by his fear, and he'd never forget what Yoda said about fear.

It was chaos in the emergency ward, a strange sort of mayhem. Nurses and doctors and orderlies, but also people in work clothes he didn't recognize. Tradesmen or something, electricians maybe. Everyone was running around, making noise, yelling. Far more panic than an hour ago when he'd been up here.

“Who were they?”

“I don’t know!”

“Danna says stay out of their way.”

“What if they hurt the patients?”

“Why would they do that? Who the fuck would attack a hospital?”

“I don’t know. Just, stay out of their way.”

“Where’d they go?”

“East Wing.”

“Why?”

“The hell if I know. Danna says someone has already gone to get the police, but with this blackout and all the phones down, we’re... we’re at their mercy. Just stay out of their way.”

A lot of hustle and bustle, people trying to manage emergency checks on all the patients, considering the circumstance. It was impressive none of them were running away. He supposed you had to care about your patients, if you wanted to be a doctor; more so even, if you wanted to be a nurse. The sort of job people got if they cared, and that meant they wouldn’t leave the patients to suffer whatever fate awaited them alone.

It meant a lot of bodies, standing around, creating noise, panic, and a lot of eyes looking around for a reason for the insanity. It meant Julias and Jack would have trouble moving around without being mobbed by panicking kine. They could Dominate them, but Dominating hordes of kine would be exhausting. If only they had a Daeva to herd them.

A person in dark blue pants and work shirt, black work boots, and a belt with dangling keys walked by, and Julias reached out to grab him.

“Hey what the fu—”

“Silence,” Julias said, closing the door behind them so they were standing in the fire escape stairway. A little eye contact and the man broke instantly. Damn, Jack’s sire was good. Even in the best circumstance, it took Jack a few seconds of eye contact to establish the connection, find the mind behind the person’s eyes, and grab it.

The tall man blinked, and stared at him, but said nothing.

“Take us to the East Wing. Can you do that?”

“... yes sir.” With a slow nod, the man reached for the door, but Julias grabbed his wrist.

“First, how many are there.”

“How many, sir?”

“Of the... terrorists.” They’d heard six, but no harm in being thorough.

“I didn’t see them. It’s chaos up here. Everyone’s running around, trying to check up on the patients, get answers from security or the chief.”

“Where is security?”

“Downstairs. Not equipped to handle something like this. Power going out is bad. Phones and internet out is worse. A bunch of people with guns showing up, on top of that? No one knows what to do, what’s going on, and we’re running around like headless chickens. If shit—”

Julias put up a hand and shook his head. “We get it. Stay out of the way, and hide if things get ugly.”

“Yes sir.” The man nodded, devoted to Julias like the vampire was his lieutenant. Julias probably rewrote one of his memories to make him think something like that. A subtle, hidden suggestion, to turn the man into a committed soul, instead of a mindless automaton.

“You’re taking us because we need you to tell anyone who gets in our way that we’re with the company, doing an emergency check on some equipment since we were in the neighborhood.”

Vague, with a hint of authority and Good Samaritan. Combined with their suits, it’d be enough to get anyone out of their way. The man nodded, and soon the three of them were out in the hall.

People were running around, some literally, barking orders and others listening, or questioning loudly. Others were running away from something, and Jack knew what: the East Wing, where his mother slept. The hunters were there already, and no doubt checking each room looking for her, and for them. If one of the nurses or doctors had told them what room Samantha Terry slept in, they’d be there already.

It’d only been five, maybe six minutes since the power went out and the hunters showed up, but it felt like an eternity. The hunters moved fast, knowing full well Dolareido was a city controlled by vampires, and any attempt they made to do anything had to be done quickly. But, how did they expect to get out? The Prince and the Invictus would put two and two together soon enough, and notify the thralls somehow. He’d sent Scully and Mulder for help, and he wasn’t the only vampire in the city

using animals for communication and surveillance. This was a doomed effort, liable to get the hunters trapped and killed, all for the sake of punishing him.

No, there had to be something else. The hunters wanted him, or Eric, because they'd seen Azamel, knew about her, her place, her defenses. The two of them held valuable information, and were brand new paranormals, too, what the hunters probably considered weak and easy targets. Their mistake. But even so, they wanted the information, and they weren't going to suicide for it. They had a plan to get out.

The gentleman they'd turned into their comrade for the night guided them down the hall. They'd both been down this hall before, to see his mother, and they knew the way. But with the lower light, and the chaos of people scampering around, everything took on an edge. Every corner, every gurney, every counter, every door, all held the possibility a hunter would pop out and blanket the hallway with gunfire; or worse, actual fire. The hunters knew the vampires died to fire easier than dry paper, and they wouldn't hesitate to use it in a tight hallway, Angela especially.

He shivered as the memory of the prison bubbled up. The hallway of fire, the waves of rats, the smell of burning fur and flesh, the screams of the hunter that'd been eaten alive, the sweltering heat. Kindred had a natural pyrophobia, and his experience with the hunters only made it worse. Thankfully no Kindred would judge him for avoiding fire, when all of them avoided it. The elders in particular, never touched it, and let their thralls and ghouls manage their love of candles and braziers.

He had to believe the hunters wouldn't be so psychotic as to go on a murdering spree in a hospital with wayward pyrotechnics. They wanted him, his knowledge, his personal experience with Azamel, and this was a maneuver to get it. Maybe Angela had convinced her fellow hunters that attacking his mother and sister was a necessary evil, to get the Kindred to make a move they could exploit. If his mom hadn't lived, he'd probably be raging through the city right now, screaming and crying and looking for hunters in such an overt manner, that they'd capture him easily. A pissed off enemy was an easily manipulated enemy.

The enslaved kine had to explain that they were here to help on several occasions. It wasn't like Jack and Julias hadn't Dominated these doctors before so they could see his mother unhindered, but those suggestions lasted the night; they could last longer, but no reason to waste the vitae doing so. So it was efficient to use this one man to get them past the onslaught of panicked people wondering about the two guys in suits.

They got to the East Wing without issue. The wing, like the other wings, was a loop, two entrance doorways, with rooms on both the inside and outside wall. His mother was in one of the outside rooms

toward the end of the wing, which meant it wouldn't be the first room the hunters would check; if they didn't already know which room she was in. Considering the pace Jack and Julias were moving at, the hunters would probably be arriving at it soon, and that made Jack anxious. Go faster, go faster.

The East Wing hallways were empty, and the entrance to them had nurses and others running past, trying to do what nurses were supposed to do, but they were avoiding the hall. They'd seen the strangers enter it no doubt, and the strangers would have made a show of their guns to scare away the people. It was in the hunters' benefit, he supposed, to scare away everyone. Anyone who stuck around was a possible thrall, and they'd shoot them. Which meant, once Jack and Julias entered the hall, any hunter who spotted them was liable to shoot on sight, without taking the time to recognize them.

For all the hunters knew, no Kindred were even in the hospital, so maybe they weren't expecting anyone to show up. Or did they know Jack had been in here? Did they follow him after he left his sweeper team? Fuck, if they had, and his mom died because of this, he was going to crumble. And then kill them all.

"Who're they?" one of the doctors asked, an older man, standing at the wing's entrance.

"With the company, checking out some equipment to make sure things are working."

"You... can't go in there. Those people, they had guns, and they weren't playing around. We... we have to say out of their way."

"Derek, look, these two men here are—"

"I said you're not going in there." The doctor got in front of the wing, glared up at Julias, and glared down at Jack. "They could kill some of the patients. We have to save as many people as possible, even if that means letting these... terrorists, do what they want."

It must have been a tough pill to swallow. The man wanted to help these people, but by trying to stop the hunters, all he'd accomplish would be getting more people hurt. Being brave, being heroic, it got people killed and usually not much more.

It was common advice for people that were under risk of being captured, that they should do everything they could to not antagonize their capturer, while still holding secret the relevant information. As much as the movies liked to make a thing out of being badass, and spitting in the face of your torturer, reality was far less kind to such stupidity. It didn't take much to break a man, and anyone who knew a thing or two about the nerve endings in teeth could make the most hardened veteran spill their guts.

Julias put up a hand, and drew the chief's eyes to his. There was a snap of urgency to the movement, and Jack fidgeted in place. No time. They didn't have time. Get out of the way now, before his mom died. And if she died because of this delay, he'd—

No. Stop it. Get a grip, calm down, and understand the situation. This was good. Julias was being logical, and handling the situation in a way that'd have the least fallout. If Jack and Julias started waving their guns around, it might have started a riot or stampede, or worse.

"Mister Bronson," Julias said, glancing at the doctor's name tag, "keep everyone away from the East Wing, and make sure no one comes to inspect the area when gunfire starts. The patients will not be harmed."

"I... I will... keep everyone away from the East Wing."

"Right now."

"Right now. Ok people! Let's get out of here! Come on, everyone into the break room. Equipment's working and no one's coding." The doctor began waving his hands, and the cluster of people started to move in the guided direction. If it were the middle of the day, there'd be twice as many people, and it'd be hell to manage. But Julias found the right people, and manipulated them in the right way, to get a chaotic situation under control, and he probably could have even if there'd been a riot with twice the people. Decision-making finesse.

That was the regal side of Ventrue. To stand there in the face of a horde, and make decisions that garnered the best outcome, with all the pressures of the world and a thousand voices screaming at you. Viktor and Julias had that air to them, and both would look perfectly at home on thrones.

"Alright, you get out of here too," Julias said to the first enslaved man.

The kine nodded, and ran back to the hallway where they'd found him, back into the throngs of chaos. Jack and Julias both readied their pistols, and began the slow crawl into the hall, before his sire turned his head, smirked, and flicked several switches on the wall in the main room where the two hall entrances connected. The hallway went dark, lit only by the small amount of light in each patient's room, and what came from the staff area behind them.

It was a strange situation. The hospital staff wanted to go into the hallway, but were under orders to stay out of the way of the thugs who showed up with guns. Jack looked over his shoulder, and grimaced as he found the staff watching the two of them enter the darkness. They looked terrified, but not for themselves, for the patients. They sighed, downtrodden, and walked away, disappearing into their staff rooms, looking into the black hallway where the insanity was occurring. He half expected one

of them to run up to him and try and stop his intrusion, in some mindless attempt to stop a stranger from entering a secure ward. One of them might try and play hero, run into the inevitable fight between the hunters and him, and they'd get themselves killed, like an idiot.

Put yourself in their shoes, Jack. You haven't been doing that much lately, with anyone, trying to think what you'd do in their situation. You used to try and do that a lot, but since Angela hurt you, you've considered everyone an enemy.

Every reflex he had screamed at him to ignore the quiet little voice in his head, but apparently it had a point to make, and it started knocking on his skull louder.

You haven't tried putting yourself into the shoes of these hunters, either. They have motivations, and they're good ones. Killing monsters? Saving people from enslavement? From the fangs of literal undead? Who wouldn't consider that a good motivation? Maybe, if you could just talk to them, they might—

No. The hunters had lost every right they had to be considered anything more than meat to be butchered. If he got his hands on them, he'd put them on hooks and let them dangle until they bled to death, skin ripping and muscle tearing.

He shook out his head again, and kept walking into the darkness. His mind was grasping at straws, trying to find ways to make him back out of this kill-kill attitude. Something in him was telling him these kine weren't important, just blood bags to be drained. Something in him was telling him his mother was to be protected, because she was a potential child of the night, and the other kine were not important. Something in his guts was telling him the hunters were not only just as worthless as other kine, beneath respect, but that they were revolting, and deserved to be wiped out. Exterminated. The world should be cleansed of them, so he would be allowed to live eternal with his army of thralls, ghouls, and his territory, filled with sheep to feed on.

He shook his head again, harder, enough to draw Julias's eyes. Shrugging, Jack held his pistol up, and motioned for him to go first, which earned an eye roll from the man. But, Julias knew, just as Julias knew Jack knew, that Julias had to be the one to go first. The man could soak a bullet better than him, as long as one didn't blow his brain to smithereens.

The hallway grew silent as the group of hospital workers behind them began to disperse. Hiding themselves in their break rooms and whatnot, their voices, footsteps, and breathing became a quiet hum in the background, allowing Jack to focus his hearing on the darkness before him. The emergency ward, where everyone was in critical condition and under constant monitoring, was quiet. He didn't know if it had sub sections, if there was something below 'critical emergency' where they'd move his mother if

she stabilized, but it hadn't even been forty-eight hours since she'd been stabbed, so here she stayed. Other kine in other rooms with similar problems were sleeping, dying, recovering, and were likely all asleep, coma or drug induced. The ward was silent as fuck, the distant background noise fading into nothingness as he focused on the hallway.

What was that line? Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death? A dark hallway, with rooms on its sides, many with dying patients, fit that description better than he'd like.