~~Beatrice~~

Heal, damn it, heal! She didn’t have time for this. The climax was happening, the end point, the big, inevitable moment where shit was going to be decided. No way, no god damn motherfucking way was she going to miss it. More than not miss it, she was going to be a part of it. She was perfectly fine not being the one to defeat Angela, as long as she got to be a part of killing her.

Vitae poured through her legs, until the bones were in place, and the muscles connected enough that she could stand on them. She sank her claws into the nearest tree, and dragged herself to standing, eyes on the clearing and the apocalyptic chaos within. Holy fucking shit. Fire was everywhere, and while she could see the nightmare was fighting the flame, like wet wood might, the unending flame the hunter had spread eventually got the upper hand. The clearing was catching fire, and she couldn’t tell if it’d spread beyond. If it did, well, fuck her.

The crows were on fire, too. How Jack had managed to summon so many, she was sure she’d never know, other than that the curse was something fucking nasty strong. He’d summoned more during this whole fiasco, and now those crows were circling around the hunters, like a fucking tornado. Now that Damien was down, and the gargoyle was gone, the hunters were free to focus on the birds. The rifles didn’t do much, but every shot of Angela’s shotgun took down half a dozen or more. It was raining feathers and bird corpses.

And Jack just watched. The kid wasn’t too far from Triss, standing by a chunk of the invisible wall with arms folded across his chest, and a big grin on his face. His shirt was gone at this point, and his pants were full of tears, but still on. It was kind of badass, seeing how ripped the little twerp was in a setting and situation like this. And scary. He was enjoying this. He was enjoying watching the hunters fight off panic and a thousand crows at the same time. The fact his army was dying by the droves didn’t bother him at all.

“Now what?” Jack said, loud enough they could all hear it over the dying birds and gunfire. “Your enforcer is gone, free of your spell. Most of your barrier is gone and—” the boy glanced down, laughed, and stepped forward. The barrier, or at least where it was in front of him, no longer was. Movement skittered along his feet, black shadows in the darkness. Mulder and Scully, if Triss had to guess. Smart birds, to not perch on his shoulders like usual, with all the bullets flying around. “And your barrier is gone. You think your protection circle is going to stop me?”

“Fire will,” the hunter with the flamethrower said, and predictably, unleashed a wave of flame toward Jack. Flamethrowers could shoot far, very far; Kindred were right to fear them.

The mighty Jack jumped back, and disappeared into the dark forest. Despite the sheer destruction the kid and the gargoyle had created, there was still plenty of forest. Hell, unless her eyes were deceiving her, Triss was sure some of the forest was reforming around them. The dark, twisted, fucking horrible trees were everywhere, and Jack didn’t have to go far to vanish into the black.

The birds were fading away, the tornado of wings and squawks of pain dying down as Jack’s army died off. But as the birds bled away, the hunter with the flamethrower let out a shrieking curse, as the fuel nozzle went dry. She turned off the ignition flame, threw the gun and pack to the ground, took one of the rifles, and readied her shot. But Jack didn’t reemerge from the wood.

“Knew that was going to happen eventually.” Laughing, Jack moved through the forest. Triss couldn’t see him, but his voice moved, a vague direction she could only guess was now the other side of the clearing, across from her. “So now what? This fire won’t last forever, and then I’m going to get you. Gonna getcha. Gonna fuckin getcha.”

Christ, he was a creepy bastard. It wouldn’t have been so bad if the curse had simply been vindictive, angry, vengeful, and full of wrath. This curse thing was a twisted fuck, worse than Jacob.

Triss stared through the flames at Damien. From where he’d fallen, he was mostly safe from the hunters, with that giant altar rock between him and them. He was on his back, flat to the ground, and he wasn’t moving. The fire wasn’t spreading as fast as it could have, so if the Mekhet got a little lucky, he was safe from the flames for a minute or two. And if the hunters didn’t step out of their circle to try and finish him off, he might recover enough to wake up from his torpor, and drag himself to safety. Most likely, he’d be stuck in torpor, and someone else was going to have to drag him to safety.

Fiona would. Fiona would get him to safety, take him back to the real world, and give him a drink. Where the fuck was she? Where the fuck was Athalia, too?

Triss snarled and dragged her claws down the bark of the tree. Athalia. That bitch had probably tied up Fiona somehow, and left her somewhere where she couldn’t help. Then she’d come back, and watch and wait, until she had an opportunity to save her daughter. And it wasn’t like Triss would be able to stop her, fucked up as she was. Her insides were on fire, rib bones stabbing into shit, and the cut she’d given to herself earlier was threatening to burst open. All that was background noise to how her legs were one bad step from cracking in half.

It didn’t matter. If she had to kill Athalia to reach her goal, then she would.

“Clara,” Triss said, getting down onto her knees. Ok, yeah, crawling was easier. Getting down wasn’t so easy, but once she had her weight on her knees, she breathed a sigh of relief as the pressure eased off her bones and insides. “Clara.”

The werewolf was conscious. Better than conscious, Clara looked at her as she too got onto her knees. The two of them were behind a fallen tree, so most of their bodies were hidden from the eyes of the hunters, but not hidden from the fire. The invisible wall was dying off, and as it did, the fire the hunter with the flamethrower had been spreading, spread further. Shit, maybe she was wrong about Damien, and someone had to get him, now.

“Clara, get up.”

“I… getting…” Her snout struggled to make human sounds, eventually gave up, and forced herself to lift her head. “Fire.”

“Yeah, fire. A lot of fucking fire. Damien’s in the middle of it, and I need you to get him out. Othello too, before the fire gets them.”

“Othello?”

Triss motioned to the giant circle of destruction the kid and the gargoyle had made. On one of the branches, pretty damn high up, dangled the vampire in torpor.

“I can barely move,” Triss said, “let alone get through the fire. Get Damien and Othello to safety.”

Snarling, the werewolf shook her head and looked around. “Gargoyle. Hunters.”

“Most of the hunters are dead, remember? The gargoyle’s free of the control spell and it’s gone. And Jack… Jack will handle the rest of them.” Much as she tried to act calm, a glance in the direction Jack had vanished was enough to get her shaking. She didn’t need Auspex to feel the fucking animal rage and hunger coming from the curse. It’d only grown worse as the night had gone on, and the aura exploded when Jack had gone full blood-armor mode. She could feel it, and she knew Clara could feel it.

“I… should help Jack.” As if she hadn’t been injured at all, Clara hunched low behind the fallen tree, like she was prowling, and looked into the clearing. The fire raged, a strange back-and-forth between the nightmare’s desire to return to its original shape, and the sheer amount of flame. If it weren’t for the nightmare’s… nightmary self, the whole forest would have become a raging inferno already.

“Jack will be fine. Damien and Othello might fucking die! Help them.” She tried, oh she fucking tried, to not snarl at the damn wolf. Pissing off a giant werewolf creature was not a good idea, especially when Triss wouldn’t be able to defend herself.

She was tempted to make a comment about the werewolf’s attraction to Jack, and how it was probably clouding her vision, especially now that she was transformed and likely a hormone and rage-fueled unstoppable juggernaut. Well, not unstoppable. The fucking gargoyle saw to that, but the gargoyle was gone, and without that fucker, the hunters were outmatched, outgunned, and already defeated.

Except, they weren’t. They were obviously up to something. Jack saw it, and would pounce the moment the opportunity presented itself. But the curse didn’t give a shit about Othello, and probably didn’t give a shit about Damien either. Christ, how fucking horrible would Jack feel, if Damien died when he could have done something to help, but the curse just didn’t give a shit. Yeah, Clara had to help them.

“Fine.” With animal grace, the werewolf crouched low, got on all fours, and started to prowl along. For a moment, Triss thought she might transform into something else, like one of her more wolfy forms, but then she wouldn’t have hands. Needed hands for a rescue mission. Maybe Harcourt could help? The man was still hiding behind a tree in the clearing, and had obviously helped Damien. If—

The sky exploded in fire. Triss threw up her hands to block the light from her eyes, snarling and hissing as if she’d been hit by sunlight. Kindred eyes adapted quickly, but for a split second, she couldn’t see a fucking thing around her except searing amber light. After the screaming pain in her retinas passed, she managed to lower her hand.

“What… the fuck…”

There was Azamel! In the fucking sky, with all six of her limbs spread out. Azamel, the giant fucking elephant creature. Her, all of her, was in the mother fucking sky, and directly overhead the hunters. She was horizontal, as if lying on a surface, except hanging, and pointed down at the ground; her elephant trunk was dangling with gravity, down toward the hunters. Good fucking god, she must have been fifty feet in the air. The strange things she’d held in her four hands, last time Triss had gotten a glimpse of her, were gone.

Symbols were drawn around her, into the air by her limbs as if drawn on whatever surface she was attached to. Elen’s symbols. Amber, glowing cuffs were shackled to the giant elephant creature’s wrists, securing her to the night sky. If they gave, the enormous monster would have fallen and flattened the humans underneath her. The mighty Horror… no, not Horror. That was Azamel. Triss could feel it. This wasn’t the shadow or whatever of the Begotten, this was her, genuinely her. And she trumpeted in pain, a blasting sound that filled the whole nightmare with its alien noise. Not if a hundred trombones had been blown at full volume, would it sound like the horrible noise that came out of the elephant monster, or as loud.

Jeremiah raised the book in his hand, and closed it with a grand thump. Fucking dramatic asshole.

“And so it comes to this!” he yelled, holding up both hands, book in his left, as he looked up at the giant creature overhead. “I did not want to do this, Azamel. This soul ritual will be the death of us, you and I!”

Soul ritual? Death? Fuck. Fuck fuck. They’d guessed right, then. Jeremiah was going to do something that’d get him killed, in order to kill Azamel. What a predictable fucking cunt. In his mind, he was a hero, sacrificing his life and the lives of his soldiers, in order to wipe a great evil from the world. Sack of shit.

Azamel trumpeted again, and Triss covered her ears, trying to block out the sound as best she could. It didn’t help much. The Begotten thrashed, pulled against the bindings, trumpeted again, and Triss fell to her stomach as the sound ripped through her. Ow, ow ow ow.

Jeremiah pointed a finger up at the monster above. “Struggle all you want. You will pay for the things you’ve done!” The fire raged around the man and his hunters, but did nothing to drown out the sound of his voice. It was as if he was standing at the nose of a ship, and his voice bellowed out to everyone around him, a ship floating in a sea of fire, beneath a burning, cursed sun.

“Soul ritual?” the elephant monster asked, booming voice matching Jeremiah’s.

“Do you think I chained and bound a Begotten to my cause, and have spent years working with Elen, to play this idiotic game of cat and mouse in this city? My daughter convinced me that maybe we could kill you the old fashioned way, monster. But…” Sighing, a noise they could all hear despite the fire and the squawking of dying crows, Jeremiah reached for the knife Elen held out for him, before he gave Angela a parting nod. “We are bound, old monster. And I will see you dead before the end.”

The psycho gave the big book to Elen, held the knife in one hand, and fished something out of a pocket with his other. A lock of hair. A lock of hair?

“I gave that to you, long ago.” Again the elephant’s voice boomed over the fire, the clearing, and the dark forest beneath her. “You’ve kept it all this time?” The anger in her voice vanished. It was still an elephant talking, though its mouth did not move, and the voice was anything but an old woman’s. But, the anger was gone, replaced with something sad, and even a little tender.

Harcourt poked his head out from behind his tree, only to have a dozen bullets slam into the bark beside it. Poor guy ducked behind cover again, ass to the grass and half surrounded by fire. It didn’t scare him all that much, hot as it must have been. For Kindred, being around all this fire was terrifying, and Triss had to fight against her Beast’s urge to flee every second she was here. Just touching the red flame would burn through skin and turn it into ash in half a second. The true fear, was if she actually caught fire. One mistake and she’d be up in flames like kindling, and that’d kill any Kindred, including an unprepared Elder, in literal seconds.

“I’ve kept it. And now, with the sacrifices made, I can use this nightmare to ensnare you, old friend. So many lives sacrificed, to be the bedrock, the foundation of this ritual. But you forced me, forced my hand.” Sighing yet again, a long and exhausted sound that carried far more years than any human should have been carrying, Jeremiah lifted the knife, and tuft of hair.

Triss started to move toward the clearing, crawling along her belly. The asshole was acting as if everyone else had ceased to exist, as if two vampires, a werewolf, and a rather angry hunter, weren’t still out to kill him and his crew. Jack especially, if he still had his weapons, would have had an easy shot available to him, now that their precious barrier was gone, and he was hiding in the darkness of the woods. The rocks they were using for cover weren’t perfect. Maybe she could sneak around, find a pistol, and—and Jeremiah stabbed his hand, through the hair.

The world went dark.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Antoinette~~

Azamel vanished, fading from existence like a ghost might, becoming see-through for several moments, before ceasing to be.

“What the fuck,” Mark said. Antoinette blinked at the man, almost surprised that he was not mute. The skeleton creature flowing with insects and oozing annelids had a quiet, raspy voice, as one would expect from something that belonged in a pit of corpses. It was not a sound she appreciated, and she stepped away from the gross creature as it began to walk, or flow, toward the large, damaged wooden door ahead of them.

The similarities between Mark, a vile Begotten of rot, decay, and death, and Black Blood, a spirit that identified with her city, according to it, were not lost on her. Mere coincidence, she hoped.

Despite the urgency the situation demanded, Antoinette spared a moment to analyze her surroundings. Oh how Miss Vola would have squealed with delight, over the sights around Antoinette, of a castle hallway from an age long dead. The braziers along the walls were small gargoyles, almost identical to the creature before her, and were made of black metal that held a flame. The stones on the floor were smooth, and arranged in specific, symmetrical patterns, but worn and dusty with age and grime. The ceiling above, lumber and slightly warped, was in similar condition.

It reminded her of her castle, so long ago in Europe, if no one had cared for it. For a moment, she considered analyzing it, to determine the most likely age of its birth, and when perhaps it had last been renovated. But cruel reality required she respond to her immediate situation.

“Where did Azamel go?” her sheriff said.

Mark shook his… its head. “I don’t know. I don’t know!”

The enormous gargoyle shook his head as well, and began to walk, then run for the door. “I feel them. Come.” That voice, a deep and powerful voice, sent a chill through her spine. She almost thanked the monster for the sensation. It had been ages since she had felt such a feeling, a mixture of fear and excitement, and of awe. She could literally feel the bass of the gargoyle’s voice through the stones of the floor and into her bare feet. There was a touch of rasp underneath the voice, layers that fit well into a nightmare, layers that added a hint of a snake-like hiss.

Her Beast struggled to understand the threat of the monsters before her. With other vampires, the Beast engaged in a play for dominance through an aura of monstrous destruction, competitive play for the alpha position, or lustful need. An unspoken back and forth always occurred when Kindred met each other, and the Beasts within knew how to examine the other, as wild animals did others of their own kind. When she had first met Uratha, it did not take long for her Beast to understand the aura the spirit wolves exuded. Begotten, on the other hand, were difficult to read, and now that she was literally within the nightmare realm, where Begotten merged with their Horrors, and became true creatures of terror and dream, that difficulty did not wane.

Mark clearly exuded something that felt weak, and yet deadly, dangerous, an assassin in the most ancient sense: rot, and the diseases that came with it. The enormous, and perhaps in a strange way, sovereign and handsome gargoyle, on the other hand, her Beast read as a blatant threat, a direct one. She did not know what abilities the strange creatures had, other than they could bestow nightmares in a similar way the Nosferatu could, and when in the physical realm, summon their Horror’s physical abilities to their person.

The one time Azamel had truly, without limit or restraint, summoned her Horror to her and attacked the environment around her, decades ago, it had destroyed a building. A large building, through sheer blunt force. Antoinette did not sense such raw strength from the gargoyle, but she did sense strength, and other forms of prowess. What abilities the four-winged, regal creature had, she could not tell, and she doubted her sheriff and his Auspex would be able to infer them, either.

She looked to Daniel, and he to her. Five seconds into this affair, and already things had not gone as planned. Azamel had predicted Jeremiah would attempt something tonight, some final effort to achieve his goal, and so far, her predictions had proven far too accurate. Was such foresight a question of Mark and Azamel having glimpsed into Jeremiah’s defenses, or did Azamel know the old hunter better than any of them could have imagined?

Antoinette followed after the running gargoyle, and after sharing a stern glance with her sheriff, Daniel followed as well. Sándor did not run like a lumbering beast. He, it, ran with the grace of a sprinting tiger, except he carried his weight on two feet of talons rather than four. Leaning forward, the beast’s tail slithered left and right behind him, matching its great strides as it poured power into its sprint. The inevitable comparison to a dinosaur ran through her mind, and she dismissed the juvenile simile quickly. The beast had wings, four of them, and his face looked mostly human, though with kingly, giant horns curling backward. Sándor looked more a demon than an artist’s unscientific portrayal of the ancient dinosaur.

When they reached the wooden door with a large hole carved into it, a work obviously done by claws, Sándor thrust out his hands, and the doors swung open for him. Antoinette had anticipated resistance from the door, but it parted to more than simply the gargoyle’s strength. It opened the way a door does when touched by its owner, with total familiarity and servitude. Beyond, Antoinette expected the enormous castle interior Jack had described to her, but she found something else entirely.

She stood upon a cliff edge, a narrow road that raised to a point. The point grew in width enough to hold, with impossible strength, a castle. She once had her own property on the face of a cliff, and she knew all too well the realities of an enormous structure of stone on the edge of a mountain. What she was looking at here, here in the nightmare, was not physically possible.

A lightning strike, distant and well behind the old castle, shook the nightmare whole with the following thunder. The flash of white against the cloudy night sky illuminated the castle, its glorious stone Gothic architecture, and a nigh endless drop that awaited beneath its precarious perch upon the cliff edge. The nightmare cared nothing for the reality and impossibility of such elevation. It cared only to terrify those within, and for all her strength and ability, Antoinette could not ignore the overpowering presentation of its aesthetic. Were she human, such a castle, at least a mile high, would have had her quivering.

So too, would the village that awaited her. She gazed out over the old, wooden buildings, the long winding road they surrounded, and the tall, twisted trees of black bark between them. Not unlike the castle behind her, the buildings weren’t set flat upon stone earth, but instead hung off the sides of the skinny cliff, and she could see the enormous roots of trees about them curling, twisting, and holding the buildings into the rock. A single earthquake would have left the village decimated, perhaps nonexistent, but it was a nightmare, and she had to start thinking in such terms.

Before the four of them could proceed down the road, and into the clearly haunted village, the sky was set aflame. Antoinette covered her eyes for a moment, lowered her hands, and gasped as she made sense of the insanity in the dark air above the woods ahead of them.

Over the distant forest, over the horrible trees and wicked branches, was Azamel, the enormous elephant creature, now in her full size and monstrous glory. Shackled to the sky, the monster trumpeted her agony and rage, and struggled against the amber, glowing symbols that bound her. But she could not move.

“In the forest,” the gargoyle said, and took off. The creature’s great weight tore into the ground, shredding rock and earth alike as he sprinted forward, spread his wings, and caught the air. With wings spread, Sándor looked far more enormous, his wings titanic and long enough to lift his colossal weight against the air currents beneath him.

Before she could pursue, the world went dark. Beyond dark. The world ceased to exist. She froze, and vitae pumped through her limbs like a flood as she prepared for an attack. None came. She listened for the sound of the wind, of the distant gunfire in the forest, of Sándor’s absurd wingspan, or of Azamel’s trumpets of pain. Nothing. As if the world had decided it simply no longer existed, and had blinked out of reality, all around her she found nothing. No wind touched her skin through her business suit, and no ground greeted her bare feet. The smell of rock, wood, and mountain air vanished. It had all faded away.

All except Azamel. The elephant above came closer, and closer, until Antoinette was not far from the hanging giant. Or, had Antoinette come closer to her? With nothing else in existence, literally, to form context, movement had no meaning. She may as well have been floating through space, though she could tell she was not, somehow.

“Daniel?” she said. No, she did not say it. She tried, and she was certain her mouth moved and lungs compressed to create the noise. And yet, no noise came. She was speaking into oblivion, and oblivion was all she could hear.

“Azamel,” the darkness said. “Azamel. I loved you.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

~~Jack~~

Jack reached down, picked up a rock, and grinned as he stepped out from the forest. He didn’t need his pistol, or any of his weapons, to kill these fuckers from a distance. A well thrown rock with Kindred strength behind it would kill just as well as a bullet.

This wasn’t how he wanted things to go. The hunters were supposed to be buried under his legion, and he’d torture them to death in a beautiful, gory display of dominance. He’d march toward them, unstoppable, a fucking Terminator, and he’d spend the whole night picking them off one by one. He’d break their legs, and drag them screaming to a room, where he’d gather them and bathe in their wails. He’d Kiss one or two of them to death, but the others wouldn’t get to die so quickly, or pleasurably. It’d be a great night of slaughter!

But noooo, Jeremiah had to be a fucking asshole, and sacrifice his pawns for some sort of gambit. Now there was fire everywhere, blocking him. Worse, the hunters were all dead! He’d get, at best, seven hunters to kill, and that was a pale comparison to the nigh two dozen he’d had not long ago. Even doubly worse, was how they’d ruined his groove. It was cool, beating up the gargoyle enforcer, but his night of unleashing unimaginable horrors on the hunters was wrecked. Now, he was in the fucking forest, ready to throw a rock, because they had fire and protection circles, and—

No. Fuck a rock. This was his follow up performance! His debut at the hospital was awesome, and he had to top that. Nothing less than a grand display of strength, complete with explosions and loud noises, would do.

He put the rock down, reached out for the base of a tree trunk, and reached into himself. Jack, old Jack, was such a weak Ventrue. He, on the other hand, was the mother fucking best. A drop of vitae was all he needed. For him, a single drop was enough to break minds. A single drop was enough to heal wounds. A single drop was enough to summon a wall of blood around his body. A single drop was enough to command legions of animals. And, and this was where old Jack sucked, a single drop was enough for him to unleash strength. Real strength. Kindred strength. Ventrue didn’t come to Kindred strength as easily as the Nos or the Daeva, but Susanna had spent the time to build it, develop it, master it, and the new Jack could feel Vigor as easily as Dominate, Animalism, and Resilience.

There was something about the power of raw strength, that fucking rocked.

Jack sank his fingers into the trunk of the tree, the one tree that stood between him and the hunters, and started to lift. He was going to crush them, all of them, right now. The barrier was mostly gone now, said the chirps of his two best agents, so there wasn’t anything stopping him from attacking the humans from a distance. A tree thousands of pounds heavy, thrown sideways, directly at the hunters? It’d be great. They’d shoot him, and he’d shrug off the bullets as he threw the tree. They’d get crushed, damaged, but probably live, and he’d walk up to them once the fire died, and have some fun.

Which would give first, the roots of tree and their grip on the ground, or the wood itself, snapping the trunk? He—

He let go of tree, and stared up at the sky. Amber fire scorched the black clouds, and he glared into the burning light, letting it sear his retinas for a single moment before his irises adjusted. Azamel, in the sky, bound to it, with Elen’s ritual symbols burning in the air around her.

Jack stepped out from behind the tree, and glared at Jeremiah. The fucker was doing something, yelling and babbling, and he had a knife in his hand. The fuck was he doing? The fuck was Azamel doing here? Christ, she was making a racket, trumpeting her strange Horror’s pain, and practically making the forest shake with its piercing, layered noise. What the fuck was—

Darkness. Everywhere, was darkness. The tree he was leaning against, gone. The feeling of its bark under his hands, gone. The feeling of ground under his shoes, gone. The sound of fire, the breeze on his naked chest, all gone. All that was left was him, standing in endless darkness, underneath Azamel’s hanging, enormous elephant body.

“Azamel,” someone said. “Azamel. I loved you.” Jeremiah’s voice.

Jack frowned, and swung his hand out for the tree he knew was beside him. Nothing. His hand moved through the air, unimpeded, not by tree or even air.

The elephant above remained where she was, and while he could see her, it, whatever, she wasn’t making any noise, despite her attempts to. The flapping, dangling, gigantic elephant trunk was obviously trumpeting, but not making a single sound anymore, when before the darkness came, she’d been driving a railroad spike into his brain.

Ok, so, what was happening?

“It took decades to learn this ritual, Azamel, to get the ingredients I needed. Elen, a shaman from the old world, before we Americans ran this land over, and killed everyone. A nightmare realm, to trap you, the whole you, the real you. People who trusted me with their lives, to be sacrificed.” The man’s voice broke, wavering, a hitch in his throat. “It’s a cursed ritual, Azamel, and it was my last option. I never wanted to do it, but my hand has been forced. If you’d just… let me kill you, none of this would have had to happen.”

“If you loved me, then why are you doing this?” A woman’s voice, and one Jack struggled to identify. Azamel? It sounded kind of like her, the human her, but softer, without the cracks and grit of decades of smoking and age.

“You killed my friends and family.”

“They came for my head, Jeremiah.”

The man grunted. “Can you blame them? You’re a monster, Azamel. They knew what needed to be done.”

Azamel stopped struggling against her bindings, and went limp. Her eyes were still open, but she looked drained, empty, as if someone had ripped something out of her.

Jack stared ahead into the darkness, and frowned as Jeremiah faded into being, younger, and without any of the tattoos or scars. He stood there in clothes Jack guessed came from post the American civil war. A woman stood next to him, a bit older, attractive, handsome, someone in her forties. Azamel, back when she was strong, tough, and judging by how she carried herself, ready to boss people around. She wasn’t wearing the sort of shitty dress women wore back then either, giant dresses with huge asses. She was wearing the same sort of clothes Jeremiah wore, and both of them looked a bit dirty, like they’d been working fields. They probably had.

“I defended myself.”

“You ruined their lives,” Jeremiah said. His voice had its youthfulness revived as well.

“How? I built this town, and gave them a life.”

Was this the past? Azamel had said she’d known Jeremiah, a hundred and fifty years ago, fucked up, lived with him in a town she’d been mayor of; dictator of a town, really. Jeremiah had been a deputy, and when his sheriff had learned who Azamel was, Azamel had basically exiled him from her town. Jeremiah asked why, Azamel explained about her monster side, Jeremiah left town, got the sheriff, and they tried to take the town back. Azamel killed them all, save for Jeremiah. All in all, it sounded like Jeremiah had been a fucking moron, to throw away a babe with money and power, for some misplaced sense of justice.

But this conversation he was witnessing didn’t sound like it fitted into that time line. Then, it was happening now? Right, Jeremiah had said something about soul ritual.

Oh fucking god, were they having a soul battle? Is that what was happening? He was watching these two fossils butting heads, except instead of heads, it was their souls? Someone come kill him quick, and spare him the drama.

“You were a tyrant, Azamel,” Jeremiah said. “You killed people.”

“Just the criminals.”

If Azamel was in the sky during this, and her soul, or projection of her soul, or whatthefuckever, was standing in front of Jack, next to Jeremiah’s soul, then where was the real Jeremiah? Probably invisible like everyone else was. They could probably all see Azamel, her, prostrated in the black emptiness above, while her and her pursuer had a friendly conversation. Dramatic. Stupid. The moment Jack figured out how to find the real Jeremiah, or any of his hunters, this sham would be over.

“You ruled with an iron fist,” young Jeremiah said.

“And gave people a good life, a life worth living. They had money. They had homes. They were not abused.”

“They had no freedom!”

“They had the freedom I gave them, and it was enough! You ruined it for them, Jeremiah, not me!”

Jack walked around, but it made no difference. Like walking on a frictionless surface, he couldn’t get anywhere, and the reference points he had, Jeremiah and Azamel, remained fixed where they were relative to him. Growling between clenched teeth, he reached into himself, and grabbed vitae, far more of it than he needed. It poured through him, into his fingers and toes, into his nostrils and eyes, and he stared around with every sense he had on overdrive. He couldn’t smell them, hear them, or see them; the hunters simply weren’t nearby. He couldn’t smell the forest, his burning, dying legion, or blood anymore, and there’d been plenty of blood.

He froze, and looked around with bewilderment as new things flickered into existence, new places, new areas, and more than one. A building, wood, dirty windows. Sunlight. He winced as he prepared for the burning, but none came. Instead, the illusion spread out before him of a town, obviously a village from a hundred and fifty years ago. People were walking around, townsfolk, guys in boots, and women in stupid dresses.

The illusion didn’t hold still. It faded in and out, and each time it showed something different, but also of the town. Kids running through the streets. Horses trotting along with carriages. A sheriff, walking around with a gun in its holster on his hip, a revolver. They were coming up on the end of the ‘Wild West’ era, the American Frontier, and people weren’t as utterly filthy as Jack expected they would be. The illusion provided no noise and no smells, as if to spare Jack the authentic experience of horse shit.

The sun burned bright in the sky, and Jack spared a peek at it, several times. It was fake, but damn, it’d been a while since he’d seen the sun literally above him, shining, and being annoying. He didn’t miss it.

“You fed on the fear they had of you!”

The illusion jumped to the inside of another building, a fancy one for the era, big, and imposing. Azamel’s home, no doubt. She had hunting trophies on the walls, deer and bear heads, and a large fireplace built into the wall. Bear fur rugs, with the bear’s head and hands still attached. A stone house, well built, sturdy, meant to last the ages. A few more decades and she’d probably have some electricity set up for lighting.

Young Jeremiah and young Azamel stood by the fireplace, yelling, in the familiar way lovers did. Either the illusion had fully pulled them into its lie, or just the sight of her old home was enough to regress them.

“All people should fear the might of a predator, and the wrath of a ruler. I did not abuse that power!” young Azamel said, throwing up her hands, before they tightened into fists at her sides.

Ok, they may not have been literally butting heads, but the anger in their voices may as well have been shotguns jammed up to each other’s throats, and triggers pulled. The two of them screamed with enough vitriol, it made Jack smile. God damn, old people knew how to hate, really really how to hate, in a way young people just couldn’t appreciate it. Old people hated down to the fucking essence of their being; case in point, a soul ritual, demonstrating just that.

Jeremiah took a deep breath, calming himself. “Angela convinced me to avoid using this ritual, when we captured Sándor. She thought, maybe with Elen’s magic, the way she can manipulate flesh, we could catch you without having to use it. But… my hand’s been forced.” Lowering his head, Jeremiah began to pace around the room with the familiarity of someone who’d done it a hundred times. He didn’t glance at the taxidermy around him, or even the fireplace.

Jack’s smile grew. Yeah, you fucker, I forced your hand. Using Elen and the fucked up shit she could do, to try and catch Azamel when she was vulnerable, just an old woman in a wheelchair, was a good idea. Pissing off Jack until new Jack could come out to play, was not a good idea.

“You speak as if this ritual will kill you,” the oddly beautiful, or rather handsome woman said.

“Because… it probably will.” Sighing again, the man stepped closer to the woman, and set a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve done more than hunt you all these years, Azamel. I’ve researched, as well. I’ve dug, and dug, and dug. Not long after you destroyed my home, I tracked down where you’d been before. From there, I went down a hole, searching for anyone who knew anything about the elephant monster. Nightmares, Azamel, the nightmares you spun and the memories they’d left in others were my trail.

“It took years to find people who knew of you. They were old by then, a hundred years ago, and were only children when they’d seen you. All the way to the Middle East, Azamel, where I learned about a woman, a foreigner, journeying across the land. Apparently, she’d been haunted by a nightmare, and ranted and raved about it.” Slowly, Jeremiah used his other hand to reach into his suit shirt, and pulled out a knife from within. The blade was white.

Azamel’s eyes went wide, and she stepped away. Jeremiah’s other hand held her shoulder firm, stopping her from taking a second step.

“It took years,” Jeremiah continued, “to figure out that you, your Horror, have nothing to do with Ganesha. It took decades to learn about the story of the cursed elephant, an old horror story told around campfires. It was just a tale, a stupid tale, Azamel, that people in the East told each other, to spook each other about the folly of mistreating or underestimating the anger of elephants.

“It was when I heard about a man who’d died, long ago, that I pieced it together. This man was supposedly a big believer of the tale, and due to unfortunate circumstances, found himself trampled to death under the feet of an enraged elephant. Worse than trampled, he’d been skewered first, by a tusk.”

Oh. That made a lot more sense. Jack had been racking his brain, trying to figure out why Azamel’s horror was some sort of twisted, corrupt version of Ganesha. He’d even looked it up. Ganesha was a god of intellect, wisdom, and a ‘remover of obstacles’. Nothing about that, at all, was scary.

Now, a spooky campfire story about some sort of evil elephant that looked like Ganesha, maybe a story meant to dissuade people from aggravating elephants, or a warning to avoid the dangers of an elephant, that idea made much more sense. He could imagine it easily, a person trekking through the jungle or savanna, forced to move at night, being terrified of running into a lion or tiger or something. Then, they stumble onto a fucking elephant, sleeping. Elephant wakes up and panics, or maybe hates humans for hunting their kind, or goes on a rampage for any number of reasons. All Jack knew, was a raging elephant was a fucking terrifying idea; it’d give most Kindred pause, let alone kine.

Running into that, in the night, and having it attack you, skewer you with its tusks, and trample you to death? Yeah, that must have qualified for creating a nightmare chamber, according to what Fiona told him. Maybe the tale created the Horror, and that experience created the chamber it needed to exist? Fuck him, he had no idea. But it definitely painted Azamel in a new light. She wasn’t a Ganesha knock off. She was an embodiment of the terror people felt, before the might of an enraged creature, a symbol known throughout dozens of cultures, suddenly going on a rampage. A majestic creature, corrupted by fury, murder, and bloodlust. Badass.

Except, badass was not what he was seeing. As Jeremiah approached Azamel, the woman stepped away from him, and her eyes were wide. From what Jeremiah had said, the knife must have been ivory, specifically the ivory of an elephant tusk.

Jeremiah lunged. Azamel yelled, and threw her hands up as she stepped back. All of this happened maybe ten feet from Jack, but no matter how hard he tried to close the distance and help Azamel, he couldn’t get closer. The ritual, the soul ritual, didn’t allow for interference apparently. All he could do was watch, as a man lunged at a woman, with a knife.

It didn’t play out like Jack expected. Azamel should have landed a punch on Jeremiah, and the man would have fucking exploded in a gory mess; she was that strong. But instead, Azamel tried to push him away, and all she got for her efforts was Jeremiah slicing down at her, and cutting into her skin with the knife. She had no strength here, not in this place, where her Horror’s strength was bound.

The scene quickly went from the one-sided tussle Jack expected, obviously favoring the monster, to something out of a horror flick. The blade left a gash along Azamel’s arm, and she screamed as she fell back. Blood flowed from her skin, and splashed over the floor, sliding into the cracks between slabs of stone.

“I’m sorry,” Jeremiah said. “I never wanted to do this!” He came at her again, and now that the reality had sunk in, Azamel reacted more realistically. She was just a person, in this strange ritual Jeremiah had pulled her into, without the strength of her Horror to call upon. And while young Azamel looked like a sturdy and tough woman, she didn’t have a knife. There were things around that she could have used to defend herself maybe, like the metal poker beside the fireplace, but Jack knew why she couldn’t use it. Illusion. Young Jeremiah was real. Young Azamel was real. The knife Jeremiah had was real, somehow. Everything else wasn’t.

Azamel fell onto her back, and Jeremiah got on top of her. He brought the knife down again, holding it dagger style this time, underhanded, and Azamel shrieked as it pierced through her blocking hand.

“I’m sorry!” Jeremiah yelled. Tears were in his eyes, but they didn’t stop him. He brought the knife down again, and again it cut into Azamel, this time her other blocking hand, but this block was nothing more than a panicked throw of her arm.

Jack ground his teeth until he felt his fangs emerge from their sheaths. Get up, Azamel. Get up! Punch him, kick him, do something, you god damn woman. So your Horror was bound, and all you had left was the human part of you to fight off Jeremiah. Jeremiah was human, too. Kick him in the balls. Headbutt him, and break his nose. Use your fucking feet, and get him off of you. Just fucking hit him!

It was no good. Jeremiah was in a full mount, and Azamel had nothing to defend herself. Jack doubted muscle mass played any part in this confrontation; they were illusions, projections of something inside them. Jeremiah was winning the fight, because he came armed, somehow able to take his special tool into the ritual with him, while Azamel had nothing. All the damn woman could do, was scream, as Jeremiah’s knife cut deep into her right hand.

The next stab got passed her bleeding, ruined hands, and sank into the shoulder of her right arm. Jack heard the thunk of the ivory blade hitting bone, and winced as Azamel’s screams rose an octave. She tried to beat the man off of her with her bleeding hands, one of them with a hole carved clean through it by Jeremiah’s earlier stab, but the arm with the stabbed shoulder was out of commission. The best she could manage, was some weak slaps with her other hand. Jeremiah did not budge, as her red fingers painted his face and chest with blood.

*Save her!*

I can’t save her, dumbass. This ritual is showing me what’s happening, but it’s all in their minds.

*How?*

Fuck me, I don’t know. He said he commandeered the nightmare to do it, so, I guess we’re still in Sándor’s nightmare.

*We have to save her.*

What? Why? The fuck has she ever done for you, Jack?

It wasn’t like he wouldn’t try and save her if he could, but only because it’d help him achieve his goal. He didn’t care if Azamel died.

*She doesn’t need to have done something for me, for me to want to save her from a death she doesn’t deserve.*

She doesn’t deserve this? You heard what Jeremiah said, and the man’s definitely got that ‘so psycho he can’t help but speak true’ thing going for him. She’s done some nasty shit.

*You’re worse, curse.*

I didn’t say I wasn’t. And when someone comes to take my head, I’ll fight them. But I won’t stand there and say I haven’t rightly earned their ire.

Jack shook his head. Old Jack could complain about present circumstance all he wanted, it didn’t change that, for all new Jack’s power, for all the destruction he could unleash, he was currently unable to do shit. He was a vampire. His world was flesh and bone, blood and smoke. The fuck could he do about dreams, nightmares, and the creatures that lurked inside them? The fuck could he do about a ritual that, evidently, commandeered them?

Staring at Jeremiah, Jack clicked his teeth. The man had spent fucking decades setting this up. He’d journeyed the fucking world, extended his life with witchcraft, enlisted the help of dozens of hunters, and a witch, and had captured another Begotten, all with the express purpose of killing Azamel. It made for a great villain, and Jack found himself torn between respecting the man’s devotion, and being sickened by his obviously emotional state. He was crying, as he stabbed Azamel to death. In the end, he was a blubbering fool, driven by emotions as pathetic as lost love.

Jeremiah raised his knife, ready to plunge it into the woman’s body yet again; she’d already been stabbed in the hands, forearms, and shoulder. No longer able to defend herself from her old lover’s blade, this stab would kill her. It was plain to see that, with every stab, Jeremiah was getting weaker, too. The ritual was a last resort for him, and if Jack had to guess, that wasn’t just because it required sacrificing a bunch of people to fuel it. The ritual was probably, literally killing him. Would killing Azamel fast spare him? Did it matter?

Before Jeremiah plunged the blade, the world shook, and a loud, echoing crash ran through Jack. He stumbled, didn’t fall, and looked up at the elephant above, still bound to the sky in a haze of black endlessness around the illusions of the old town. The world shook again, and the elephant above vibrated with the impact. It wasn’t her.

“No! You will not be saved, monster. This has to end, here and now!” Jeremiah, stunned, quickly reestablished his grip on the knife, and brought it down toward Azamel. But the third time the illusion and the darkness around them shook, it was like God had decided to smash Jeremiah’s silly bullshit with a fucking sledgehammer.

Jack, Jeremiah, and Azamel, all flew back, landing on their asses and rolling over the black nothingness beneath them, as the illusion exploded. The town, the sun, the roads, the people and horses and buildings, even the taxidermy, fur rugs, and hunting trophies, all shattered like glass. The shards glinted, catching the sparks of a destroyed universe, before they faded away into the oblivion around them.

Existence reemerged from its slumber. Jack was back on the ground, grass, and dirt, exactly where he’d been before Jeremiah had enacted the ritual. Azamel, the giant elephant Azamel, lay on the ground, beside the clearing, half slumped over against trees. Her giant eyes were closed, and her four hands were limp at her sides. Her enormous weight was enough that many of the trees broke trying to keep her from falling over, but some of the fatter ones managed to stop the giant from crumbling back into the forest.

Jeremiah lay in the center of his circle, and his four bodyguards, and adopted daughter, stood over him. Their mouths were hanging open, staring at the intruder above them. Jack looked up, and for a single moment, he grinned, as the shape came into focus.

Sándor, the gargoyle, flew above them, hovering, the flap of his wings sending waves of air down against them. In his four hands, black strands of nothingness were dripping away, falling like drops of water, and disappearing into the fire-lit night air. As if the beast had grabbed onto oblivion itself and ripped it asunder, the flaps of blackness draped over its palms and fingers hung like flayed skin, bleeding onyx onto the clearing beneath the gargoyle. In the bleeding droplets, Jack could see hints of the illusions he’d seen, of the village, the sun, the people, the houses. The black drops splattered and vanished against the grass, as if the ritual had never existed.

“You killed my family!” Sándor fell from the sky, and landed with a great, resounding thud. He wasn’t nearly as big as Azamel, but unlike the giant elephant, a lumbering oaf of a creature, the gargoyle moved like a fucking tiger. It sprinted through the fires of the clearing, and fell upon the hunters, just like a fucking tiger would. Only the amber circle that circled the hunters gave it pause.

“Run!” Jeremiah said. The four hunters did just that, though Angela showed a second’s hesitation, before she turned and ran into the woods, out of the amber circle, through the fire, and past Azamel. One of the hunters had literally grabbed Elen, and thrown the old woman onto his shoulder, leaving her breather and wheelchair behind. Considering who she was, Jack imagined the woman was actually immortal, and wouldn’t die from not being able to breathe

Jack grinned after them, and got ready to chase. Oh yes, this was going to be fun. But, he could spare a moment, a single moment, to see what Sándor was going to do to Jeremiah.

“You killed my Ashley! You killed my Sam!” the beast bellowed again. That sexy voice of his, so deep and booming, with just a hint of snake rasp underneath it, echoed throughout the forest like it owned the trees, the grass, the dirt, the rocks, and the fucking air. And he did; not ‘it’ anymore, ‘he’. The difference between the Horror Jack had fought, and the proper, merged and whole creature he was looking at now, was colossal.

Jeremiah brought himself to standing, glaring defiance through teary eyes up at the gargoyle. All he got for his stubbornness, was Sándor flapping four titanic wings down toward Jeremiah, again, and again, and again. Jeremiah faced into the wind, but fell to his knees a moment later as the air hit him without mercy. The ground around him suffered the same fate, and bits of dirt and grass succumbed to the insane pressure of the wind, until a small tear ripped through the circle. A small tear was all that was needed, for the amber circle to die, and when it did, the gargoyle stopped beating his wings.

His prey was defenseless. The following silence sealed that reality in beautiful inevitability, and it would have made Jack’s mouth water, if he’d been Blushing.

“I did what I ha—” Jeremiah’s voice was cut short as the gargoyle reached down, and scooped the man up with all the gentle care of an angry rugby player.

“Did you really think I’d let you use my home for this ritual, once I was free?” The gargoyle squeezed, and Jack licked his lips as he saw Jeremiah’s face change color several times in Sándor’s huge, clawed grip. “You killed my son! You killed my wife! No more. You don’t get to hurt anyone else. You don’t get to use me, or my home. No more!”

Sándor was more than strong enough to crush Jeremiah into pulp, and probably instantly at that, but he didn’t. There was a moment, a fleeting, perfect, beautiful moment before a kill, and Jack could see that Sándor, for all his rage and indignation, was craving that moment. He found it, when Jeremiah tried to scream, and couldn’t. The gargoyle had thoroughly compressed on the man’s body, like a constricting snake, and likely broke most of his ribs besides.

When Jeremiah failed to scream, the glint of beastly satisfaction was blatant on the gargoyle’s face. He’d achieved nirvana, in the throes of fury. And now that he was satisfied, Jack knew Jeremiah was a dead man.

Sándor lifted the still squirming, still trembling and kicking and fighting man up to his mouth, and bit off his head.

Glorious. As much as Jack, the new Jack, was a creature of power and animal fury, the strength of the Beast unleashed in all its glory, there was something he simply wouldn’t do: eat his prey. Vampires drank of their prey, sure, and while to Kiss prey to death was the ultimate expression of a vampire’s predator status, there was something so delightfully carnal about the enormous gargoyle literally crunching down on Jeremiah’s neck, and tearing off his head. Crunch. Crunch.

Sándor didn’t stop there. He tore the man apart, and devoured him piece by piece, quickly at that. Maybe he didn’t want to savor it? Jack would have savored it. Rip, tear, arms and legs, guts, they all went into the gargoyle’s mouth, disappearing between his sharp teeth and fangs. It was strange, seeing a mostly human face, Sándor’s, eating human flesh. But within his dark, steel-colored skin, those teeth were big and sharp, and they destroyed Jeremiah’s bones like they’d been made for it.

As much as Jack wanted to savor the death of that fucking asshole, time was a wastin’.

“Sándor!” Jack yelled.

“… Jack.” The gargoyle turned to face him. He was still standing in the center of the clearing, surrounded by fire and the corpses of thousands of rats and crows. Standing, standing, aaaaand falling. With a heavy thud, the gargoyle fell to his knees, and his wings flopped weak to the ground around him. They touched fire, and Jack winced instinctively, but as far as he could see, the gargoyle didn’t react to the flame.

The monster was exhausted. Well, he did spend weeks locked up in a cell, unable to move. And he did just literally rip a ritual apart with his hands. Damien freeing Sándor during the ritual was something Jeremiah had not expected, and was probably trying to beat, like a race. Fucker lost.

“Alright, you look exhausted. Do—Clara!” He motioned to the rising werewolf on the other side of the circle. “You and Clara, help Damien and Othello… and Azamel, I guess.” The giant elephant creature looked unconscious, not moving, but seemed to be breathing.

“… alright.” As if someone had ripped all energy, or reason to keep on living, straight out of the monster, the gargoyle let his head droop for a moment. After a second, he looked around, first to the werewolf that he’d fought twice now, then to Damien currently unconscious by the altar. The colossal monster reached down, scooped Damien up, and set him directly on the altar, safe from the fire that continued to eat at the grass. With four hands, Sándor began to squash fires with his palms with all the hurry and hustle of a drunk turtle. Fucker really was out of it.

“Sándor, where can Angela get to from here?” Jack said.

“Nowhere. The forest is endless. It—” Sándor raised his head with a snap, and looked in the direction Angela and her friends had run off. “Another Begotten comes.”

“Another Be—Athalia! Now!?” Jack threw up his hands, and ran off after Angela. If Athalia helped Angela escape, he’d kill her. He’d rip her head off and drink the god damn blood. If he had to kill her while she was merged with her Horror, he’d break every stupid bone in her big skeleton body, one at a fucking time.

He glanced in Beatrice’s direction, back to Sándor, back to Clara, then to Beatrice again, who stepped out from behind her tree, and was jogging around the fires toward him. She was beat to all fuck, and limping like crazy. Anyone else would have been lying down and doing their best to recuperate, but not her. She had hate behind her, pushing her, driving her toward a very clear goal. And Jack could not help but fucking love that.

He hopped over to her, and before she could say anything, he slipped under her arm, and helped her give chase to the fleeing hunters. She deserved to be a part of this.

“Jack,” the gargoyle said over his shoulder. “Your Prince is here… at the castle. She’ll be here in seconds.”

Antoinette was in the nightmare? Now things made more sense. Azamel had gone to her, after Jack had recruited Athalia, knowing that there was a chance that, in all this chaos, Sándor might be freed. It was the only possible way Sándor could have escaped the cell. She’d known about Elen’s control of Sándor, sure, but how the fuck did she guess it would come to this? Well, for all her omniscients, she didn’t predict that by entering the nightmare, Sándor’s nightmare, she’d be giving Jeremiah the opportunity he needed to kill her.

Jack glanced back, past the forest, the fires, and to the haunted village. Yeap, he could see her, other Jack’s lover. If she’d been foolhardy, she could have rushed into the forest in seconds, once the ritual was broken. But she was too smart for that, and she was approaching at a more reasonable pace, her sheriff beside her, both scanning for threats.

Wait for her? Nah. She’d probably try and stop him or something. And besides, the longer he waited, the bigger chance Angela had of getting away. Getting Beatrice had slowed him down enough, but damn, the way she was riding her hate to the point it was the only thing keeping her on her feet, was admirable. He couldn’t leave her behind. She was the only one who understood, and who’d appreciate what he was going to do.

He took off through the forest, in the direction the hunters had gone. They wouldn’t be able to move fast, not in this forest, with all its evil, sharp branches, twisted trunks, and roots sticking out of the ground. He could smell them, too, sweating. And as he took off after them, it wasn’t long before he could hear them, their boots snapping twigs, their limbs breaking branches, and the grunts of their exertion. A few seconds later, he could see the light of their flashlights.

“Still with me?” Jack said to the woman hooked over his shoulders.

“Why… are you… helping me? I thought—”

“Ha, thought what? I’d kill Angela and leave you out of it? She killed Julias.”

“You’re not Jack. The fuck do you care about—”

He looked to her, and leaned in close; easy enough, considering she was draped over his shoulder. Her snake eyes met his, and she froze, staring.

“I’m not a demon, Beatrice. I’m Jack. Not the same Jack, but Jack all the same. Got his memories, and got my thoughts, his and my thoughts, going through my head. I want Angela dead as much as you, so does old Jack, and unlike old Jack, I can make it happen.” There was a moment of realization in her eyes, and he chuckled. She hadn’t thought of him as a person before this, as someone who could think, as someone who could use their fucking brain. Well now she knew. Now she knew the kid carrying her wasn’t some mindless force with a stick up its ass. Now she knew, he was Jack, and he was going to bathe in some blood tonight.

“… really?”

He winked at her, and took both her arms, pulled her onto his back, and started running proper.

It didn’t take long to reach the hunters, slow as they were. Hell, the one with Elen on his shoulders was starting to fall behind. Elen probably weighed ninety pounds, but the dense forest didn’t treat the hunter kindly. Jack could smell fresh blood, and spotted the telltale shine of bits of the liquid when the moonlight peeked through. They were getting cut on the branches.

How to kill the old woman? She was a witch, and obviously had great power, though it seemed like she needed time to set up whatever it was she did with her occult shit; not unlike a Crúac ritual, he supposed. She could be valuable. Well, once he caught up to her, it’d be easy enough to Dominate her, and tell her to sit down and shut the fuck up, while he dealt with the others.

And there they were. Five hunters, plus one witch. Angela was leading them, limp and all, while the dude with the old woman on his shoulders was in the middle of the pack.

He didn’t bother to tell the Nos to hold on. She would or she wouldn’t. If she wanted to be part of this bad enough, she’d hold on, and close as she was, it wasn’t like she wouldn’t be able to tell he was about to unleash a bit of his power. And it’d only take a little bit.

“He’s here! He’s here! Stop him! Stop—”

The woman, the one who’d been using the flamethrower, was taking up the rear. She had a rifle now, and she pointed it straight at him, its muzzle light shining into his eyes and blinding him. He didn’t care. When the gunfire started, and the explosion of bark and wood began, he didn’t mind. When some of the bullets crashed into his body, he didn’t flinch or wince. The pain was minor, and a little will was enough to summon his Kindred blood, and begin filling and healing the wounds.

He ran up to her, and she screamed a mix of rage and fear as she emptied her magazine into his chest. Maybe if there’d been more room, more light, and less roots tripping her up as she walked backward, she’d have been able to aim for his head. That’d have at least have slowed him down. But as her bullets went thunk thunk in his chest, blocked by his building wall of blood, he didn’t slow down at all.

“Hi,” he said as he got in close, reached out, grabbed her shoulders with both his hands, and squeezed.

Things were a bit awkward with Beatrice on his back, her legs hooked on his hips. But he was strong enough to carry dozens of Beatrices, and she was doing a good job keeping her arms out of the way of his, and her head behind his. It meant he was clear to go nuts, and nuts did he go. The hunter shrieked bloody murder, and started twisting and turning as he squeezed on her shoulders harder, and harder, and harder, until his fingers sank through skin, muscle, and bone.

Her arms didn’t come off completely. Clothes got in the way, and probably a few bits of skin hidden inside, but they were basically both completely off, popped off like squeezing a stick of butter until it separates. Her screams rose to a climax, and she foamed at the mouth before the pain became too much, and she passed out. Damn.

“Jack,” Beatrice said. “You… don’t need to be so—”

“These fuckers hunted us, killed us. These worthless, pathetic humans had the audacity to kill us!” He snapped the idiot Nos a harsh glare over his shoulder, and she recoiled. Good. “They’re fucking sheep, and they killed Julias. You want me to spare them?”

“No…”

“Then shut up, and let me get revenge for the both of us. And hey, I’ll even let you have a shot at Angela.”

“Fine! Fine, just… fine.”

He caught up to them again pretty quick. A man this time, the one without Elen. He had a shotgun, and that was substantially more dangerous than the rifle. Unfortunately for the hunter, the forest was the perfect guard against it. A rifle might penetrate through trees, but a shotgun wouldn’t.

Jack slipped between the trees, ducked low underneath nearby branches, and closed the distance over the seconds, as the hunter roared his fury. Boom, boom, shotgun shells unloaded their pellets, sending bark everywhere, but only managed to clip Jack every so often. He’d summoned his blood to protect him fully by this point, as he had with Sándor. The pellets hit him, and then fell to the forest floor, as Jack got in close.

Very close, close enough for eye contact. Perfect. The hunter met his eyes, and only too late realized he’d done it. Maybe he thought his tattoos, his bracelets and necklaces, his bullshit, would keep Jack out of his mind. Jack reached out with his thoughts, and smashed through all that crap instantly.

“Cut out your stomach open, and pull your guts out.”

The man’s eyes went wide. There was a kernel of awareness in there, a part of him that knew what Jack was demanding he do. Perfect. What was the point of a torturous death if the person being tortured wasn’t aware of it?

Jack sped past his victim, and didn’t look back. He didn’t need to. The sounds were telling. A knife being drawn. A quiet cutting sound. Screams of agony. It was a shame Jack couldn’t really indulge and watch, but they were appetizers anyway. He couldn’t let the main course escape.

The next hunter, the other guy, had Elen on his shoulder, and was running, not even bothering to turn around and shoot. Jack made no effort to be gentle. He hopped in close, jumped at the man’s back, pushed down on the man’s head with his left hand, and grabbed Elen with his right. He was right, the old woman weighed basically nothing, and her shitty old gown didn’t tear when he yanked her off the man’s falling body, then dumped her on the forest floor. And the hunter, his real target, fell with a satisfying crunch against the cruel forest floor.

With Beatrice on his back, Jack actually had a bit of weight to him. He stood beside the downed hunter, waited a second for the man to look up, winked at him, and brought his foot down on the side of the man’s neck. Crunch.

Breaking someone’s neck wasn’t a good way to kill someone, if the goal was efficiency. People survived a broken neck all the time, or took a long time to die. The man’s scream ended quickly, but he was still twitching, squirming, dying. Perfect. The night was starting to look bright again.

“What do we do with her?” Beatrice said, nodding toward the old woman lying on the ground. A quick glance showed she was on her back, looking up, and not moving. Breathing, but not moving. In the tussle, her dress had come up a bit, enough for them to see her calves. Skin and bones, to the point that the woman should have been dead. A walking corpse.

Not walking. A living, breathing mummy, sure, and probably immortal. But not walking. She wasn’t walking anywhere anymore, hence why the hunters had her in a wheelchair. The breather was probably so she had enough oxygen to think straight when performing her rituals. Aging, and aging, and aging, but never dying.

“She’s not going anywhere, and I have questions for her.” And even if she did somehow manage to escape, despite the Prince being on Jack’s heels, it wasn’t really Elen his hate was pointed at. She was a tool. His hate was saved for the wielders of the tool. One was dead, and another was going to die a horrible, horrible death soon enough.

Noise up ahead, besides the screams of panic and grunts of exertion, announced the location of the two remaining women. Jack took off after them, chuckling with every thud his boots made against the wood and grass. The dark chuckle, the kind villains practiced in front of the mirror. He knew Angela and her remaining hunter could hear him, and that made it all the better.

This was how the night was supposed to go! Fuck Jeremiah and his stand-off bullshit. This was how things were meant to be, a vampire running after humans, in the dark, and bathing in the slaughter. It felt good, god it felt good. He was closer to his Beast than old Jack would ever be, and his Beast was howling with joy at getting to unleash its instincts tonight. Catch them, kill them, maybe save one, and drink them until they were nothing but a dry husk.

“Here,” the darkness whispered. Not Jack, not Trissy, and not the two hunters. “Here!” He recognized that voice. He’d recognize Athalia’s monster voice anywhere.

There they were. He slipped around a fat tree, and found the two women running, huffing and puffing. And falling. Just as Jack reached out to grab onto the Angela, she stumbled down into the earth, and disappeared beneath grass and twigs, with her hunter friend beside her. He got a glimpse of her eyes for only a split moment, and found a mix of pain, likely from her running with a limp, and utter despair. But not fear, like her friend.

He’d have to fix that.

He stopped before the pit, and looked down into the blackness below. A hole, but not a natural one. Around its edges were finger bones, sticking up from the around the roots and dirt. They held open the hole, unmoving, and certainly not inviting, but Angela and the other hunter had gone down the hole like Alice.

“Athalia?” Beatrice said.

“Athalia. Fucking bitch. Probably has Fiona tied up somewhere, and was waiting for an opportunity to save her daughter.”

“She… opened a door to one of her nightmare chambers, then?”

“Yeah. Ready?”

“You’re going inside?”

“Yep.”

“For all you know, Athalia’s opened the chamber to—”

“To somewhere her daughter could survive.” They wouldn’t land inside a volcano or something.

“Maybe Begotten can give guests immunity to their lairs?”

“Maybe. I’ll deal with anything she throws my way. And then I’m going to kill her, too.”

“But—ah!” Beatrice squeaked, as Jack jumped into the hole.

The transition from one nightmare chamber into another was seamless. Just like when he’d went to visit Azamel in the tunnels, found nothing, and then took a magical stairway down into a room covered in sewed-up faces. How their lairs managed to blend into each other, and the physical world, he had no idea, but it meant things could get difficult. Lairs were evidently big, and complicated. Linking them together meant he might have to navigate a maze if he took too long chasing after Angela. Better to throw caution to the wind, and stay on her heels. Momentum! It was all about momentum.

He was not, not not not going to let this become a long, drawn out chase. He was ending this in the next five god damn minutes. Killing Angela might take longer, but in the next three hundred seconds, he was going to get his hands on her, break her legs, and make her watch as he drank her one remaining hunter to death.

While they’d jumped down a hole, the hole didn’t go down. It went up. Physics, gravity specifically, decided to go on a bender, and before Jack could reorient himself, he was being thrown out of a hole by his own bodyweight. Up and up, and then down and down, onto more grass and dirt.

He got up quick. Beatrice had let go of him in the strange gravity reversal, and was lying next to him in the grass. Clean, green grass, a bit damp, and almost glowing under the moonlight. Where the fuck were they? It was cold, and it was windy. Some nearby trees bent and blew with the wind. Tombstones stood defiantly against it. And the moon above was enormous, without a cloud in the sky. The moon, hilariously, had a subtle skull face drawn by its craters.

A cemetery. Jack and Beatrice had tumbled out of an open grave, literally. And moments before, so had Angela and her friend. Said friend now had Angela’s left arm over her shoulders, and the two were currently stumbling away toward what looked like an old church. Like, 1600s church, like a bunch of Amish had built a big barn in a day, put a cross over the front door, and some pews inside, church. He assumed there’d be pews, anyway, with no cushion, and probably all aimed at a pulpit.

“Angela!” Jack yelled. “Stop running already! Christ, I’ve had a long night, and I’m getting sick of having to chase you guys down.”

“Fuck you! Fuck—” The words were lost under the explosion of a gun. Angela pointed her sawed-off shotgun at him, and boom.

He’d been ready for a fight though, and as the pellets slammed into him, his skin, his jaw and neck, his chest, and his right eye, the blood wall coated his skin and protected him. It was enough to make both hunters pause, before they pressed their backs against the large doors of the church, and disappeared inside.

For just a second, when the door was open, Jack could see into the dark church, and noticed movement. Large arms of bone shifted around in the darkness, and so did the two white dots he recognized as Athalia’s eyes, inside the huge skull of her monster body. He was going to have to kill her, to get to Angela.

“Trissy, you good to walk on your own?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Not fine to fight, though.”

“Just stay behind me. I’ll deal with them.” He marched up the small wooden stairs up to the church door, and opened it.

Immediately, he was hit with bullets. Shotgun shells were unloaded upon him in quick succession, only for Angela to reload in record time, and do it again. The female hunter with her held down the trigger on her rifle, and the much larger bullets slammed into Jack’s flesh.

Two hunters wouldn’t be enough to stop him. He laughed as he walked through the storm of bullets, through the dark church lit only by their flashlights, and headed toward the muzzle flashes. He had to pour vitae into his blood shield to protect him, but it was enough to stop the assault of both hunters cold. A waste, but scaring them to death was half the fun.

“What is this?” he said, throwing up his arms. “Now? Now you finally accept your mother’s help? Now, at the end, when it doesn’t matter, now you accept the help of a creature you’ve been hunting for years?”

Angela glared at him, trembling. The two of them had their backs against the back wall of the small stage, and while they were trying their best to shoot him down, they made no headway. The reality of the inevitable was sinking in for them, and Jack relished the terror building in their eyes.

Jack glanced back, to see where Beatrice was. But, Beatrice was Obfuscating herself with her Cloak, and doing a pretty good job of it, too. He could see her, mostly, but she was a natural at the Cloak, and as long as she moved slowly in the darkness of the old church, he doubted anyone else would be able to notice her. Except for, of course, a nightmare monster of shadows.

Looking behind him had been a mistake. He knew it the moment he did it. Angela and the hunter were now out of bullets, and Jack didn’t see any grenades or anything on them. He also didn’t see Athalia anymore either, and he should have fucking realized she’d attack him the moment he turned his head, and the hunters had stopped shooting.

Athalia came down, and Jack snapped around, jumping back and away. She’d been hiding up in the darkness of the high ceiling, and had a good opportunity to attack him. Hell, she might have even hurt him. She was no Sándor or Azamel, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t dangerous. Maybe she knew it’d be pointless in the end, or maybe she was afraid of him after seeing the things he could do, but she didn’t take the opportunity to attack him. She stood there, in the isle of the church, enormous hands crushing pews as she placed herself between Angela and Jack.

“Curse,” the black skeleton creature hissed, “remember our deal. Angela is beaten. Leave her be.”

“I’m not beaten!” the bitch in the back screamed, and she drew her knife, the shiny one. Heh, out of ammo. She tried to run at Jack as well, but her friend pulled her back.

“Fuck you, Athalia. Your daughter looks plenty threatening to me. I’m afraid I’m gonna have to put her in the ground.”

“You will not touch my daughter.”

Jack snorted, and started to pace the width of the small isle. He didn’t glance toward Beatrice, or acknowledge her presence in any way. The others knew she had to be nearby, but they knew she was injured, and probably thought she was still outside. Then again, if this was Athalia’s lair, there was a good chance Athalia knew more about her surroundings than was obvious. Besides, she was a creature of darkness, a monster of shadows. Maybe she’d be able to spot Beatrice no matter what.

She didn’t seem to, though. Maybe she was too distracted with him, or she was baiting him. Maybe maybe maybe. The hunters also had a nasty habit of being able to spot Kindred protected by the Cloak, but it was so damn dark in the church, that as long as Trissy crouched low and kept pews between her and the targets, she might just make it.

“This wasn’t part of the deal,” he said. “Sparing your daughter was only if it was guaranteed she was incapacitated.”

“She’s beaten, Jack! She has nothing to defend herself with.”

Rolling his eyes, Jack took a step forward. It was enough to make Athalia flinch, but not step aside. Making her flinch with a single step sent a shiver of pleasure up his spine; not as much as if she’d jumped back, but fear was fear, and it felt fucking good to use it.

“Get out of my way, Athalia. Your daughter doesn’t even want your help.” He looked past the skeleton, to the two women on the stage. They both had knives now, and looked ready to die swinging. But, even with that resolution to die in combat, there was fear there, plenty of fear, and he licked his lips as he smiled at them. Not enough on Angela though. There was time to correct that.

“She is my daughter!” The black skeleton creature, a beast with bone wings, a massive size with no legs to speak of, slammed her claws against the church floor. The wood splintered, and the church rumbled with the impact. “You will not touch her!”

Jack rolled his eyes, licked a fang, and stepped in closer. “Yeah, well, we’ll see about that.”