

~~Beatrice~~

Holy mother of fuck.

Athalia and Triss stared out from behind a rock, now much closer to the standing stones, close enough to hear what everyone near them said. Triss had her Cloak dialed up as high as she could take it, to the point she was going to be ravenous and depleted soon. Athalia had some tricks of her own, and she managed to help bury them in shadows that blended into the black water nicely. Whether Black Blood was just pretending to not notice them or not, Triss couldn't tell, but a sneaking suspicion told her he had, him or Jacob. No way they didn't have precautions set up to let them know when people approached.

But the gang had no choice. So Athalia and Beatrice got closer, staying low and keeping some of the giant boulders between them and the standing stones. Once close enough they could hear and see, they peeked out, listened, and jaw dropped. They looked at each other, eyes wide, before looking back to stare out at the titan, and Jacob, and apparently, Sam.

Jacob, god damn it. How much chaos had he stirred, just so he could have distractions? Hearing that he'd had nothing to do with Azamel's arrival, or Jeremiah's, settled a huge pit in her stomach, but still, a lot of shit had gone down that was his fault. Kinda. Sorta. In typical witch fashion, typical Jacob fashion, he'd found a nice moral gray area to ride and fuck people with. Give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself, and Jacob was handing out miles of rope for free.

Samantha. Seeing her tearing herself apart as she stood there beside the man, listening to him, her eyes peeking at Jack every few seconds as Jacob explained his master plan like a villain — which he probably loved — was painful. Poor Sam. If anyone on the fucking planet would understand the desire to hit a big reset button on the whole fucking universe, and put everything back together so that even life and death didn't exist anymore, everyone together forever, it'd be Sam.

Then of course, there was fucking Black Blood. No wonder every time Triss was around him, she felt like she was in the presence of something so much fucking bigger than he let on. But in no fucking universe did she'd think he'd have a lady he was trying to get to.

Things went from bad to worse before she could blink. Mark jumped out of the fucking water like the Bogeyman, and Elaine came up with him. The water around Jack was only a few inches deep, but that didn't mean shit to Mark. Jack dodged back instantly, reflexes no Ventrue of any age would

normally have, leaving Elaine grabbing air. She jumped to the left, and Jack jumped back and to the right.

And then he came to a standstill. He squirmed and wriggled, but something had locked his feet down. Not Black Blood, he hadn't moved. Eventually the kid looked down with his one eye, and stared.

"What's going on?" he asked. "I—Elaine!"

Elaine smiled at the kid, before she walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Much as the kid evidently wanted to punch her, fists shaking at his sides, he couldn't.

The water at his feet spread away, pushed by something, and glowing red lines, like the ones Jacob had carved on the standing stones, lit up the ground around Jack's feet. He was standing on a ritual circle. Elaine had baited him into it.

"Elaine!?" Samantha ran over to her, and eyes wide. "What're you doing? Jack, what's—"

"We knew your son wouldn't cooperate. He doesn't trust Black Blood, even though Black Blood is the only way... the only reasonable way, to remove his curse." Sighing, Elaine took Samantha by the shoulder, and gently pulled her away from her son. "His heart's in the right place, but you know your son."

"I... I do, but—"

"He will do everything he can to stop Jacob, and Black Blood, even if it means getting himself killed, Samantha. Is that not right, childe oh mine?" Elaine, dressed in a business suit and skirt that looked horribly out of place, guided Samantha back to Jacob's side. "Black Blood will need tools, once the realms are converged. If he can convert the curse into such a tool, then it will be valuable. If not, then it will be destroyed. Either way, your son will be free of it."

"Mom! Don't—"

"Don't what?" Elaine said, snapping her gaze back to Jack. "Save you from yourself and your stubbornness?"

"You can't trust Black Blood to—"

"Are you so blinded by your distrust that you cannot see what Mictlantecuhtli has done for you? The times he has saved you?"

Mictawhatnow? Triss and Athalia looked at each other, expecting the other to know, shrugged, and looked back to the insanity.

“You’re the one that told me to trust less, Elaine,” Jack said.

“We are not speaking of the Danse Macabre, Jack. Black Blood is beyond ancient, and his goals are amiable.”

“Amiable? He’s going to...” Jack looked up at Black Blood before slowly turning his single eye to Elaine, anger gone. He’d thought of something. “Elaine, who did you kill? Who did you... you know...”

It was like someone hit the elder in the gut with a sledgehammer. She looked away and took a step back, before setting a hand against one of the standing stones.

“It does not concern you.”

“If you’re siding with Jacob and willing to break the whole fucking world, I think it kinda does.”

Elaine shook her head desperately, the practiced motions of an elder vampire thrown out the window, hair bouncing against her shoulders.

“This world is a cruel place, little Ventrue. Jacob understands that. Your mother understands that. Mark understands that.” She gestured to the man in the hoodie, standing a ways off, arms folded across his chest and head pointed up at the ghosts circling above. “This broken machine grinds its gears, and we are caught in its eternal cycle of misery. Enough, I say. Enough.”

Well, fucking shit. Stopping Black Blood and Jacob was already going to be insanely tough. But Elaine and Mark, too? Fucked. Triss and the gang were absolutely fucked.

“Now, bear witness,” Black Blood said, “to a miracle.”

Nodding, the god of the dead reached down for the tear, and slipped a claw into it. The ghosts above howled, and the water rippled as everything shook. The standing stones didn’t budge, immune to whatever the fuck Black Blood was doing, but everyone else felt it. Energy. Triss looked Athalia’s way, half expecting her hair to stand up like lightning was about to strike, but it didn’t. The water around her rippled, instead.

Movement above forced them all to look up, and everyone’s jaws dropped. The ghosts overhead swirled over themselves, bodies half merging and overlaying with each other, and came down. Like a funnel or tornado, hundreds of the ghosts, maybe thousands, slowly crept down from on high and reached down for Black Blood. And like he was controlling the fucking weather, Black Blood reached up with his other hand, and a black glow — however the fuck that worked — shot out of his bone palm.

The ghosts came down to it as if Black Blood's palm was the sole point of ground the tornado could land on. The tunnel's tip twisted on the way down, until it finally reached him.

Black Blood let out a groan, like a fucking dinosaur exerting itself to lift something big. Kinda applicable. He pulled up, and up, and tore the fucking universe apart. Triss's jaw dropped, again, as the giant skeleton lengthened the tear, pulling it up with him as the skeleton lifted. The ghosts above helped him. Almost like someone holding a rope, the tornado of dead straightened, and Black Blood squeezed on it harder with every foot he managed to tear the portal's opening. The swarm of ghosts went from howling, to screaming, and Triss covered her ears as the banshee shrieks hit hard enough she felt it in her withered guts.

Again, the god of death groaned, whatever he was doing obviously taking a massive amount of effort, and he squatted down in front of the tear. Higher, and higher, his claw ripped the tear further up, until he was standing again. Then higher, until the tear reached his chest. Higher, until the giant tear reached his head. Only then did the giant god stop ripping a hole through the world, and let go of his tornado of ghosts. Released from whatever Black Blood was doing to them, their shrieks faded into gentler-but-still-horrible howls, and the tornado lifted until it again became the swirling hurricane above.

Colors danced inside the tear. Blues, reds, greens, golds, violets, and strange colors that didn't make a lick of sense.

"Stop!" Jack pulled and pulled against whatever was holding him, but invisible chains bound his arms and legs. Considering how strong the kid was with the curse to help him, there was no way the ritual binding him was using strength to do it. Magic.

Black Blood let out a sigh, and even with his strange, new alien dialect and anatomy, he sounded exhausted.

"You okay?" Jacob asked.

Black Blood nodded as he stood there, arms hanging at his sides. Not like a skeleton needed to breathe, or a giant death god or whatever, but he looked drained. Ripping tears through the dimensions took a lot out of him. That was good for Jack and the gang then, hopefully.

Jacob nodded, and gestured to Jack, head still pointed up at Black Blood. "Gonna be able to do the ritual for Jack?"

"Yes. In a moment."

Nodding, Jacob opened his book, and resumed carving symbols.

And then a bunch of people fell out of the bottom of the new-and-improved tear, a few feet over the black water. They landed with quiet splashes, but ended up dogpiling on each other, and they scrambled as they tried to get to their feet. Oh god, Natasha, three werewolves, one fucked up weird looking spiky wolf vampire, and Brianna.

“Welcome,” Black Blood said, looking down at the newcomers, “to the apocalypse.” If a skull could smile, it’d look like that.

Before the werewolves could so much as howl, Jacob tossed his book and knife back onto the nearby table, and launched himself toward the invaders. Holy fuck he was fast. It didn’t even take one second to get up to their face, and drive a fist into the closest werewolf’s snout. They didn’t get a chance to respond. Jacob punched hard, and the werewolf went down. The biggest one managed to come to their senses enough to try and take a swing at him, but Jacob ducked and drove his fist up under their jaw. Like a fucking Hollywood movie, they flew up and back, and landed on their back in the water. And the final werewolf, Jacob got in close and slammed his elbow against their chest. They went down, clutching their broken sternum, gasping. It was like watching an adult martial artist dismantle a bunch of children.

The four-legged little spiky monster, a Gangrel, probably Jessy, got up long enough for Jacob to get a hand on the back of her neck, and he lifted her up. And as deadly as the girl’s weird monster form was, it couldn’t do shit to someone directly behind her. He held her out, and she roared and clawed at the air around her, doing her best to turn around, but unable. And of course, Jacob grinned as he looked at Natasha and Brianna.

“Don’t make me.”

“Okay!” Tash said, and she put up her hands. “Okay, okay. Stop, p-please. We... we d-didn’t mean to...” Slowly, her eyes turned to the giant skeleton feet beside her, and then up, to Black Blood. “Oh... god...”

Triss and Athalia shared looks again. If they were ever gonna get a distraction, it didn’t get much better than this. Where the fuck was Sándor?

Movement, a hint of something in the water’s reflection. They looked up.

That, was a flying man. For a moment Triss expected to see him with legs pointed straight behind him, and one hand pointed straight ahead. Superman. But before the memory of the word could rip her guts out, a hard squint managed to bring the man into focus. Sándor wasn’t flying like a superhero. He

was flying like a fucking monster, arms at his chest and legs behind him with knees bent. A gargoyle, looking to land on something, or perch, or rip it to shreds.

The silhouette of the gargoyle surrounded him, so thick it almost blocked out any sign of the man. With four ludicrously massive wings outstretched, he was coming in hard and fast, aimed straight for the closest standing stone. No wonder it'd taken him so long to get involved. He'd climbed super high so he could dive bomb like a fucking falcon.

Black Blood looked up toward the oncoming shadow, and raised a hand. His arm was long enough to reach the furthest standing stone on the outside of the circle, the one Sándor was aimed for.

Again, energy permeated the air, and the black water churned as the invisible force worked through everything nearby. Triss and Athalia both froze as they watched, knowing full well Sándor was going to fail, and knowing full well they couldn't stop him. Black Blood saw him coming, and from how calm and direct the titan's movements looked, he'd been prepared. And the gargoyle was too high up, and going way too fast, for anything the girls said to matter.

Before Sándor could reach the standing stone, a giant red circle erupted from the black water. It circled the entirety of the standing stones, along with Jack, Mark, and Elaine, close to its edge. The light cut upward, reaching high enough it disappeared from view, higher than the standing stones, the archways, and probably all the way up to the gigantic cave's roof.

Sándor was going fast enough to punch through a concrete wall, but when he collided with the light, he came to a complete standstill. The barrier erupted with more light, almost blinding red, and a strange red circle drew in the air where Sándor hit it, filled with shit loads of symbols Triss had never seen before. It was like a bird crashing into a window. The silhouette of the gargoyle, and the man, squished against the light like it were some solid barrier, before he plummeted.

"Shit!" Triss jumped up, and ran past Athalia. The woman tried to grab her, but Triss saw it coming and dodged it. Sándor was falling like a fucking stone, and if someone didn't catch him, the man was going to die. If he wasn't already dead.

Too far. Too far! She ran fast, knowing full well Jacob and Sam and Natasha and fucking everyone was staring at her. She didn't care. Athalia wasn't fast enough, and the werewolves and Damien were way too fucked up to do anything. Someone had to catch him, and she was going to fucking—

Sándor opened his wings. Like a parachute opening, his fall came to a harsh stop, before he resumed falling, much more slowly. Oh thank fucking god. She slowed to a jog as she got closer, staring up at the guy as he came down, and down, circling in spot like a leaf falling from a tree.

He landed beside her, and collapsed to his knees. He tried to put his weight on his hands on the cave floor, and fell over with a grunt. He'd aimed his left shoulder for the standing stone, like he'd been trying to break down a door, and hit the barrier instead. No more left shoulder. Somehow, the only noise he made was another quiet grunt as he used his working arm to push himself back up to his knees, and looked at his ruined arm.

"Jesus fucking christ." Triss got down on a knee in front of him and put a hand on his good shoulder. "You hit that thing hard, man."

He nodded as he looked down, and regretted it immediately. His collar bone was fucked, the shoulder, the upper arm, everything. The collision had crunched the arm against his own body, and probably snapped a bunch of his ribs, too. And of course, the only noise the gargoyle made, despite the excruciating pain, was a grunt.

"Can you stand?" she asked. It'd probably be better to lie down, but it wasn't an option.

He didn't nod this time, but he did try to stand. And of course, failed, and almost fell over again. She grabbed his good arm, and pulled him up with her. Once on his feet, he slouched bit so his busted arm hung in front of him, but otherwise the man didn't move or go anywhere.

"I think," he whispered, looking to the red light barrier, and past it to Jacob, "that we're blocked off."

She laughed. It wasn't funny, but she'd entered gallows humor mode.

"Well well well," Jacob said, yelling a bit so his voice carried. "I knew there'd be more of you. Hi, Triss. How was your trip?"

She rolled her eyes, and walked toward the red light barrier. "Hi, boss. It sucked."

Jacob gave her a big wave with his free arm, the other still holding Jessy by her neck.

"Aaron alive?"

"Yeah, barely."

"Good. And hey, you set this up?" he asked, gesturing to Natasha and the others who'd fallen out of the tear.

“Dude, I didn’t even know what the fuck was going on until a few hours ago. Fuck you.”

Laughing, he shrugged and nodded, and threw Jessy with all the grace of a kid throwing a big stick. The girl spun through the air, went through the red light barrier as if it didn’t exist, and crashed into the black water not too far from Triss. Gangrels were usually pretty good about landing on their feet, but Jessy crashed and rolled before sliding to a stop, drenched.

The red light barrier was a one-way barrier.

Jacob marched over to two of the werewolves, and before they could so much as roar or snap a bite at him, he grabbed one by the foot and repeated the process, and then the other, launching them like frisbees. It was almost comical, but the werewolves landed much harder, and Triss winced as she heard a few crunches.

“Stop!” Tash yelled. “Stop! P-Please. We’ll... we’ll go, okay? Right, Brianna?”

Brianna glared at Jacob, but the girl wasn’t an idiot. One look at the Nosferatu, and then Elaine and Mark, Jack, Samantha, and then up at the giant skeleton, was enough to break her resolve. She slowly nodded, and walked toward Triss and Sándor.

“Come on, Eric,” Brianna said.

The final werewolf got back up, glared down at Jacob, but followed after Brianna and Natasha. His tail hung between his legs slightly.

“Y’all were already pretty beat up, huh?” Jacob asked. He walked after them, dusting his hands off, and ushered the newcomers out like an annoyed mom getting her kids out of the kitchen. One after the other, they walked through the red light barrier, and each of them grimaced as they glanced back. Well, that’d been unexpected, for everyone, including them. If they’d been more aware of what was happening, they might have been able to actually do something, and they knew it.

“What happened?” Triss asked Natasha as she walked past, and checked on her boyfriends. It was her boyfriends, as the two werewolves transformed back into human form once they managed to get to their feet. The last one was Eric. They all looked beat to fuck, like they’d gone ten rounds with hands tied behind their back.

“We were in the spirit w-world,” she said, “when Street-Tail King tried to, um, capture us.”

“It slipped what Black Blood was up to,” Brianna said, gesturing around. “But, I guess everyone already knows. The fuck happened to the tear? It shouldn’t have brought us here.”



“Black Blood has connected them,” Jacob said, walking back to his table and fetching his knife and book again. “They all lead here, now, even the ones he managed to open across the chasm.”

Sándor coughed, eyes widening. “He managed to reach across the abyss?”

Jacob grinned, and resumed drawing his symbols on the standing stones.

“I have,” Black Blood said, filling in. “Tiny tears that will not to rip apart. That is a bridge to build, not a barrier to destroy. But I have peeked into the realm beyond, and touched it. It will be my beacon, for the bridge I will build once the realms are combined.” The massive skeleton gestured to enormous tear beside him. “Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair.”

Everyone stared.

“He’s joking,” Jacob said, laughing with a hearty, full laugh, while somehow continuing his work. “The Ozymandias quote, I mean. Ugh, I told you, Mict. No one gets your sense of humor without the Southern accent.”

Black Blood shrugged, and squatted down over Jacob while looking out to the rest of the crowd now standing around the red barrier. Sándor and Triss, Tash and her boys, Brianna, Jessy, and Eric. On the other side of the barrier, Jack in a binding ritual, Elaine, Mark, Jacob, Black Blood, and poor Sam, who struggled to look anyone in the eye. She hadn’t expected any of this, and every moment, it was obvious she was drowning. She’d jumped in the deep end and didn’t know how to swim. The rest of them weren’t much better off.

“Who else hides in the shadows?” Black Blood asked.

“I—”

Black Blood snapped his glare at Jack, and the poor kid shut up instantly.

“It does not matter. Watch from the dark, or from the sidelines. You cannot cross the barrier.”

He wasn’t lying. They all felt it, some sort of rippling energy that told the air to bow down and listen, the same way a fortress wall would if you put your ear up to it. A fortress wall bigger than the fucking Great Wall of China.

Athalia stayed hidden. Maybe she’d get to do something, use shadows, or maybe tunnel in, so that made sense. The rest of them though, Avery and Clara and what was left of their pack, they dragged themselves over to Brianna and the wolves. Everyone back in human form, they all took a moment to check in with each other. Even Damien joined them. With all the Cloaking he’d done, and the punch to the face, dude was running on empty.

“Where’s Monica?” Matthew asked, clutching his side. “Where’s Carter? And Caleb?”

Avery glared past them at Jacob, but before they could all give him the same glare, Clara came in closer. She whispered something, and Brianna, Matt, and Art all froze, before peeking over their shoulders at the kid in the ritual.

Jack looked away.

“Street-Tail King had specific instructions,” Jacob said, “as did Red Tide. As did Sabrina and the other ghosts. If you’d listened, no one would have been harmed.”

“Fuck you,” Art said.

“He’s not lying!” Samantha came up to the barrier, eyes pleading. “Jacob told me about the stuff he did. If people had just listened, no one would have been hurt. If people weren’t so ready to kill each other, no one would have been fighting!”

“He’s going to get everyone killed,” Avery said, and she marched up to the barrier as if she didn’t basically have to drag herself to do it. “Your boyfriend is going to get everyone fucking killed.”

“That’s not what’s going to happen!”

“Says you. Uratha have been guarding the barrier between the Hisil and Gurihal for thousands of years.”

“And I,” Black Blood said, still squatting down, skull face pointed at Avery, “have witnessed it for thousands more. Do not confuse what you recognize as normal, as the same as correct in the large scheme of things, wolf. You do not get to decree this broken world as the way things should be done.”

“And who gives you the right to change it for everyone?”

Black Blood gestured to Jacob and Samantha with a hand. “Those of us who have enough awareness to recognize a broken system.”

“Sounds like a load of bullshit to me.”

Jacob sighed and shook his head. “Don’t bother, Black Blood. She’s a stubborn breed. Part husky, probably.”

Triss fought to keep the grin off her face. Even now, the mother fucker could not help but make jokes, and god damn it sometimes they were funny.

Triss gave Sándor a small pat on his good shoulder, and walked up close enough to the red barrier she almost touched it. From this close, it was easy to look everyone in the eyes, if they had them. Jack

looked miserable. Samantha looked like she was about to tear in half. Mark and Elaine watched, expressions neutral, except Elaine looked a bit... wounded.

She'd done something, something really nasty, something Jack didn't even want to say. Jack said she'd killed someone, but that didn't really seem enough to warrant all this madness. Despite her efforts to hide it, she looked wounded, and guilty. Not guilt about causing Armageddon, 'cause that probably seemed perfectly reasonable to an elder. Guilt about something else.

"You really couldn't have told me about any of this?" Triss asked, gesturing.

Jacob looked her way, and paused etching his symbols long enough for his eyeless gaze to sink in, before he sighed and got back to it.

"I was tempted, I was. But in the end, I couldn't risk it. Sorry."

Sándor joined Triss's side. "And you, Mark?"

Mark folded his arms across his chest, and stared at Sándor from under the shadow of his hoodie's hood.

"You're not the only one who's lost people."

"Azamel?"

Mark shrugged and spit to the side. Gross. Everything about the man radiated gross. It made sense, considering what Triss had seen of him so long ago, when she and Jacob took a trip to visit Azamel. Dude's Horror was a pile of maggots, insects, bones, rotting flesh, and slime.

It was hard to imagine someone doing something as insane as all this, so they could see someone like Azamel again. But the fuck she did she know? Somehow, the old bitch had Athalia's complete trust and devotion, and Mark's, and Fiona's. Hell, she'd convinced Sándor to take her place.

She almost asked Jacob if he didn't think she'd want this, too. She'd lost someone, and all of this was a way for her to see him again. But she already knew what his answer would be. She wouldn't be willing to remake the whole fucking universe to do it. He was right, not telling her. Maybe right after Julias died, maybe she would have, maybe, but now? Fuck her, changing everything for everyone like this was just way too much.

She couldn't get any closer than this, and they didn't have any more available distractions. Now or never.

"Now, Mary."

Jacob lowered his knife and looked her away, eyebrow raised. For the first time in Triss's second life, the man's expression switched to full on shock, as Mary's ghost shot out of the bracelet. The ghost wasted no time, and bolted forward toward the closest standing stone, near Jack. The wall of red light didn't stop her in the slightest, like wind pushing through a screen door, and she threw herself at the standing stone, claws out, and enough wind followed behind her Triss fell forward and hit her head on the barrier, and fell back on her ass. Again.

"Mary!?" Sam said. "What—"

Black Blood snapped his hand out, and the whole Great Below noticed, an explosion of movement that was beyond fast. Nothing that big could move that fast. The arm snap cut through the air, and made a weird boom sound before a ripple pulsed outward. The pulse picked up the water and turned into a tsunami that smashed into everyone, throwing them all to the ground. Triss was already on her ass, and the wave slapped her to the ground hard. The stones of the whole fucking cave groaned, the ground vibrated underneath her hard enough it inched her across the stone, and her teeth rattled in her head.

She sat up, wiped the black water from her face, and stared up at Black Blood. His hand was still out to the side, in Mary's path, and Mary was in his grip. Literally. He held her in his palm, and let out a booming growl as he brought her in closer to his skull face.

"Do not. Touch that."

Mary shrieked and screamed, twisted and squirmed, but Black Blood held her as easily as a kid would a worm they dug out of the mud. Well, shit. Whatever limitations bound Black Blood, they didn't apply to ghosts.

"Black Blood, don't hurt her!" Sam yelled, looking up at the giant and waving her arms.

"I will not hurt her." He brought in his other hand, and held it over Mary's ghost, palm facing down at her. "I will bind her."

Before Sam could ask, a sparkling chain fell out of Black Blood's grip, slithered down out of his palm, and slipped around Mary's shoulders. Around and around, until it'd snaked her four times, and Black Blood set the bound ghost on the ground beside her mother.

It was weird, seeing a ghost that could go in and out of a bracelet, and otherwise be made of mist whenever she wanted, be bound by chains. Flashbacks to The Muppet Christmas Carol movie with the two old farts as ghosts in chains hit Triss. Creepy scene in the movie, creepy scene here. Mary still didn't have legs, but otherwise she was stuck to the ground and shallow black water, like any person

would be if their arms were bound at their sides and they were put on their ass. Worse, she tried to get up, and she couldn't. She tried to scream and shriek, and she couldn't.

"Baby?" Sam said.

"Mom!" Mary frowned up at her, gave Black Blood a death glare, and frowned up at her mom some more. "What are you doing! Stop them! Stop them! Stop them!" No crazy banshee shrieks, but she could still talk.

Samantha stared down at her daughter's ghost before kneeling down beside her.

"Mary, what... what happened to you?"

Mary shook her head. "Doesn't matter. Stop them! You can't—"

"Stop them? They're going to fix it all, baby. We can be together! You and me, and the other Mary. Jack, and your dad, too! You don't miss your dad?"

Dad. The word hit the poor ghost harder than anything any of them could have said. Mary's evil black eyes softened, and her psycho monster mouth softened, too.

"Daddy?"

Well, shit. Another one bites the dust. Mary stopped squirming, and instead sat there, somehow looking pitiful and sad despite the banshee face. And Sam, good ole Sam, didn't hesitate to run her hand over her daughter's ghost's head. Bittersweet, to be able to touch her ghost here and nowhere else.

"Jacob," Elaine said, "how much longer?"

"Not sure. Half an hour? Maybe more."

"Then I suggest Black Blood performs the removal now, before the Prince and her sheriff interfere. She might come through the tear, same as the others." And as if to seal that point, she and Mark both stepped closer to the tear, ready to punch whoever came through it.

Jack tried to yank himself free of his invisible chains again. No good. Kid could punch through a bank vault, but the ritual didn't give a damn.

"You can't—"

"Cannot what, oh childe oh mine?" Sighing, Elaine shook her head and gestured around them. "Please stop fighting us. Jacob has outsmarted and outwitted every one of you, all for your own good. You deserve better than this fallen world has given you. And I will not let the curse exist for one second longer than it must."

“Not let it? What do you mean? I thought—” The kid blinked, several times, as his expression changed to realization. “You... You resent it.”

“Of course I resent it!” Holy shit, another first time for Triss. Elaine got angry, and yelled. “Do you think I did not suffer under its influence? Do you think I remember my past with its power at my beck and call with fondness?”

Jack looked down. “I thought—”

“You thought I was nothing more than a power-hungry Ventrue, willing to throw your life away so I can acquire that dreaded curse’s power for myself.” She came up to him, and gave the man a rather harsh poke in the chest. “I am trying to help you. I also want this vile thing destroyed. Or, if Black Blood can use its power as a tool for his whim, that will satisfy as well. A fitting fate, for such a horrible thing to be reduced to a tool, I think.”

After a few moments of painful silence, Jack eventually lifted his head, and glared at Elaine with his one eye, and then at Jacob.

“You’re all so convinced this is the right thing to do, merging the realms or whatever, that everyone will be happier this way. And I get it. You’ve all experienced the worst this shitty existence has to offer. I fucking get it. But don’t get it twisted. You’re not trying to change things because you think everyone will be happier. You’re trying to change things because you want things to be better for yourself, because you want to be with the people you’ve lost.” He let out a snarl, glared at his mom hard enough she shrank, and glared back at the elders. “Instead of letting go of the people you’ve lost, you’re going to change the whole world. You’re all selfish.”

Triss stared at the kid, long enough for Jack to glance her way, before he looked back to Elaine and then to Jacob. Powerful words. The kid had a gift for them, Ventrue or not, and everyone paused to absorb them. Even Jacob stopped carving symbols, for a few seconds at least, before he got back to it.

“I think we’ve earned the right to be selfish,” he said. “Everyone who’s seen the worst life has to offer would agree.” With his book-holding hand, he pointed at finger at the rest of them, eyeless gaze still aimed at his work. “Clara, lost a brother. Am I right?”

Everyone looked at Clara. She opened her mouth, ready to say something, but nothing came out, like someone had come along and yanked out her voice. Eventually she looked down.

“Avery. Lost a bunch of your old pack, right? Mates you knew for decades? Closer than family?”

Avery snarled, but even she eventually looked down.

Jacob continued. “We know what Triss has lost, and Sándor, no need to bring that up. But it keeps going! I bet everyone here has someone they wish they could talk to again, right?” He gave them a moment to respond, but all he got was grunts, growls, and eyes looking down. He was right. “Damien! You can talk to Lucas again, and you can bet your ass it’ll be a different conversation, now that the dude won’t have his head jammed up his ass with some religious delusion. You’ll actually be able to talk to him, and maybe convince him a thing or two.” They all looked to Damien, and through his battered and broken face, there was surprise.

Jacob went on. “Athalia! Come on out, you bitch. I know you’re out there. How else could Beatrice have gotten here?”

With a quiet snarl, Athalia stepped out from behind her rock, and joined the rest of them at the red barrier.

“It could have been Fiona.”

“As if Fiona would have the sense to stay hidden, looking for the right moment to strike.” He gestured at the red barrier. “Too late for that, regardless. So answer my question. You really don’t want a chance to talk to your daughter again?”

“My daughter hates me.” Athalia did her best to say it straight, but there was a hint of a waver in there, and Triss looked away. She’d said hates, not hated. She still hadn’t moved on.

“It won’t matter,” Jacob said, with enough confidence to have everyone listening, whether they wanted to or not. “None of it will matter when everything and everyone is together. What could she hate you for, when there’s nothing to hate you for?”

“Or to love her for,” Sándor said. The words cut through the silence like a knife, and just as quickly as everyone had been listening to Jacob, now they were listening to the gargoyle. Except he didn’t follow it up with anything, of course. He didn’t need to, everyone knew what he meant. Without context, everything was meaningless.

Jacob shook his head. “Love will still be a thing, you losers. Existence! You make it sound like—”

A sword stabbed up through the water, near Black Blood’s foot, and close enough to Jacob that the man jumped back. He set the book and knife on the table, turned, and ran back toward the random sword, but jumped back again when a geyser of blood shot out from around the weapon.

What in the ever living fuck.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Antoinette~~

She pushed through the blood and flesh until it consumed her. Walls of undulating muscle and meat. A sea of crimson, warm, and full of life.

She dared not open her eyes. Forward she pushed, Daniel ahead of her, one hand behind for her to grasp. He could see not see either. But their instructions were simple and direct, and it was apparent their exact direction was less important than simply pushing forward. Such was the way of magic; such an archaic, idiotic word, but nevertheless, magic. Intent and sacrifice mattered more than specifics to witches. Dragons followed different rules, but within the tunnel of flesh, it was no dragon experiment that guided her.

With her free hand, she risked dragging a finger along the wall of flesh they pushed through. It had a heartbeat. Elen insisted flesh was no mere amalgamation of chemicals, arranged in such a way as to convert fuel into ATP, or self-replicate DNA. Life and flesh were connected, and deeply bound to existence in the physical world. The physical world was, according to the deranged old woman, alive.

Such ignorance could only be found in a witch, of course. Defining life itself was no easy feat, and yet practitioners of mysticism and stupidity tossed the word about as if they understood the universe. And yet, as Daniel and Antoinette pushed forward, she could not help but feel life, in something as undeniable and primal as a beating heart. Whatever tunnel this was, whatever it passed through, it did not appreciate them turning its flesh and veins into a passageway. Anything alive would have drowned or suffocated.

Kindred were, of course, an exception to that rule, as they were to many.

Daniel stopped, and squeezed her hand. She squeezed it in return. They were there. They were ready.

She could not see, but she felt the vibrations through the blood and flesh that pressed on them. Daniel cut through the flesh barrier before him, the same as he had to get them onto the abhorrent path. And once he did, gravity turned on them. Forward became up, backward became down, and she squeezed Daniel's hand before she could fall back into the tunnel of endless flesh. Something cold



poured over her, a harsh contrast against the pulsating, warm blood, and when gaps of air fell with them, she dared to open her eyes.

Daniel jumped through the hole, and took her with him. He jumped into the darkness, and the two of them landed on their feet in ankle-deep black water.

“Antoinette!?” Jack’s voice.

A spark of joy and relief ran through her, only to be crushed by the sights before her. The tear, now colossal and filled with every color she knew, and more. Jack, stood and seemingly paralyzed over a ritual circle whose lines of red pushed the black water from its circumference. Black Blood, a black skeleton of absurd size, looming over them. Standing stones taller than the entity, covered in thousands of red symbols. A dark cave of nigh infinite measure. And a barrier of red light that circled the standing stones, and Black Blood alike.

Jack. Poor Jack. Her lover looked terrible, shirtless and with several claw marks across his flesh with only scar tissue covering them. Similar claw marks cut across his face, leaving him with one eye. In truth, she doubted her lover would, or perhaps even could, die in battle, not with the power of the curse to protect his vessel, but the blade was two-sided. His necklace was gone, and the claw marks were thick. Werewolves.

The Ripper had fought the Uratha.

Beyond the red circle waited a host of faces. Beatrice stood closest, eyes wide, mouth agape, staring at the Prince. Athalia and Sándor, the werewolves, Damien, and even her student Natasha. How she had come to be here would, no doubt, be an interesting story. And sure enough, most of the werewolves looked debilitated with extreme injury, as did Damien. And she counted ten werewolves. Three were missing. A glance Jack’s way confirmed her suspicions.

She took a second to wipe the infinite blood from her face and eyes before glancing down at herself. Soaked to the core in blood, crimson wet drenched her business suit, as it did for Daniel and his trench coat. He spared a moment to remove his glasses and shake them off, before donning them once again and scanning the area.

“Jacob,” Antoinette said, and she clenched her fists at her sides. When her eyes fell to her child, who huddled behind her lover, fire burned through Antoinette’s spine. “Samantha. How long—”

“I wisped her away tonight,” Jacob said, one arm out and blocking off Samantha. Or, protecting her. “She didn’t know what I was up to, if that’s what you’re wondering. Wanna tell me how you got past Black Blood’s barrier? We worked pretty hard on that, you know. It goes under us, too.”

She glared at the man, and took a moment to push her now red hair over her shoulders and behind her, before her eyes finally settled on Elaine. Fire became an inferno, and her fists trembled all the more.

“You side with Jacob, Elaine? Why?” she asked. Jacob deserved no answers.

Elaine did her best to keep guilt from her face, or any emotion at all. But Antoinette knew her friend well, and a trace of shame cut through her, followed by her own rage.

“I have made mistakes in my life, Ann. I would see them undone.” Her words wavered, even as her old friend forced herself to meet Antoinette’s gaze. What trials had Elaine suffered, to come to such a ridiculous conclusion?

“Undone?”

“The realms will be merged,” Black Blood said, in a voice she had never heard before, in an accent so beyond ancient she could not hope to identify it. “This broken world will be fixed. First, the fallen world, and then across the chasm to the realm beyond. All, back to the way it once was.” In the most cliché fashion, the god of corpses felt the need to explain himself. Good. Elen’s haruspex had attempted to draw out Black Blood’s plan, but had failed. It was too grand an idea for paper and pencil to convey.

Antoinette slowly set her glare upon the giant, and he stared down at her. She would not show fear, not before this relic.

“All this time,” she said, slowly turning her gaze from Black Blood to Jacob. “All this time, you two have conspired to... undo the world?”

“You may have hope for this world,” Jacob said, “but we don’t.”

For the first time in the hundreds of years she had known the man, his smile was gone, not even a whisper of it, and his face had become deadly serious. Black Blood was beyond terrifying, but it was not the god of corpses and death that petrified her. It was Jacob, her old friend, and the way he stood. This was not the man who embodied chaos, and the joy chaos brought. This was a man who would die for his beliefs.

“Jack,” Antoinette said. “Has Jacob’s ritual been completed?”

“No. He’s still got some more shit to do. But, uh, Black Blood is—”

“Unable to interfere.” She looked up at the nearest standing stone, and then at Black Blood, who leaned in closer to her as he guessed her intentions. “I had suspected as much, for a long time. Elen’s

haruspex proved it. Without another to act as his intermediary, what he can do and not do is quite limited. His reach is different, in different realms. And down here, in the depths of the forgotten, his power is vast, where ghosts are concerned.” To prove her point, she aimed a finger up, at the swirling ghosts above. “Drawn here, I assume? To help power this... insanity?”

Black Blood let out a deep growl that vibrated the ground and churned the water about them.

“I am a shepherd, and—”

“You,” she yelled, moving her finger to point at the skeleton instead, “are a fossil from a bygone era! Your power has waned, and despite Jacob’s best efforts, you are still but a shell of your former self. You have been all but forgotten by the surface world, and have lost almost all power to affect it. It takes a colossal amount of effort for you to touch the physical world, and correct me if I am wrong, but you are currently spending that effort, on this.” She gestured around at the standing stones, and the hurricane of ghosts above.

Technically true. Black Blood, or as Elen discovered, Mictlantecuhtli, could not touch her directly, not without absurd effort and sacrifice of energy. But that did not mean he could not wield forces that could. Curses, rituals, voodoo dolls or their ancient equivalent, tainted items, a host of methods to enact his weakened influence. She had to be careful. But in the moment, face to face with her, he could not touch her.

She had chosen the right moment to strike, had waited for it, and now she had to act.

“Sire, please,” Samantha said, “Jacob’s not trying to hurt anyone. I—”

“Childe,” Antoinette said, and she glared at Samantha until the ignorant pup looked down. “I can understand how you have come to side with Jacob on this. I can understand how others have come to side with him.” She gestured to Elaine, and then to the many standing beyond the wall of red light. “I can understand how those forced to watch this madness could, perhaps, side with Jacob if they were given the opportunity. But...” Sighing, she shook her head and looked to Jacob once more. “I would have loved to discuss this with you, Jacob. I would have loved to sit, and philosophize with you. But instead, you have decided to ignore our friendship.”

Jacob shook his head as well, and gestured to her. “We can still be friends, Ann. Just step aside, and in the new world, we can still—”

“Daniel. Deal with Elaine. Kill her if you must. I will deal with Jacob.”

Her sheriff, forever her weapon, did not hesitate. Whatever strange relationship he shared with Elaine, considering her many years of attempting to seduce the man, did not stay or slow his hand.

Sword in grip, body and coat drenched in blood, he dashed for Elaine with speed so great, a splatter of crimson followed in his wake.

Elders did not battle like this. It was simply not done, and for good reason. There was no way to prepare for such conflicts, where each Kindred was capable of feats grand and godly. Battles of power and wit, where the smallest mistake meant death. Perhaps Gangrels did, forever chasing the rush of the Beast, but even then, it was beyond rare in elders.

In any other circumstance, Antoinette would have used Majesty, enamored an army to do her bidding, and have them fight for her. In any other circumstance, Jacob would have stuck to the shadows and avoided combat entirely, or bury a victim in a most heinous Nightmare that would leave them paralyzed for hours, if not days. A Nightmare so strong, suicide would be the only outcome once it was over. They were above settling battles with their own, literal hands. Usually.

Elders were smarter than this.

“Prince!” Jack said. “There’s—”

A shadow erupted from the water between Elaine and Daniel, and grabbed Daniel’s foot. Mark, the Begotten, and one of the stealthiest creatures she had ever encountered. Antoinette snapped her glare to the disgusting man as he yanked the foot out from under her sheriff, but she knew the mistake the moment she made it. Jacob leapt for her, and she was forced to duck and roll.

Jacob would never be as fast as her, but he was fast nonetheless. Daeva and Nosferatu were both the primary embodiments of pure Kindred strength, but neither were terribly resilient, and if the man managed to hit her, there was a good chance it would prove immediately fatal. And while she could dodge his attacks, and he would struggle to dodge hers, his next maneuver rendered such an advantage moot.

Jacob vanished.

Antoinette jumped to her feet, and flexed her toes against the stones underneath her; she was barefoot, having already abandoned her heels. She ground her teeth as she looked left and right, and poured vitae into her senses as she scanned for the man, but reality was not kind. No vampire, not even an elder Nosferatu, could vanish before her eyes from a mere thirty feet away, not without preparation.

She looked down and searched for the blood, but it was pointless. Jacob had no doubt already soaked the area with his vitae, and now both she and Daniel were trapped within his grasp.

“Oubliette,” she whispered. They were trapped within the maze of his Oubliette. She looked for Daniel, but her eyes betrayed her. The colors of the great tear portal twisted and danced, and angles of

surfaces turned on their sides. Up became left, left became right, and she doubted the very stone she felt beneath her feet as she took small steps away from where she last saw her old Nosferatu friend.

“Prince!” Sándor’s voice. “Break the standing stones!”

Jacob’s maze of distorted vision may have compromised her eyes, but it did not affect her ears. She had assumed the standing stones were important, but with no time to process the information, Sándor did well to guide her. The nearest stone was thirty feet away, and in any other situation, she could have reached it with a single leap. She dared not attempt it. The maze was lying to her vision, and such a leap could easily launch her straight into the barrier, or through it if it were one way. She could have trusted her memory, but in the scant few moments she had had to memorize the area upon arrival, it was not a risk she was willing to take.

So she walked. With eyes scanning for patterns in the warping and winding invisible path, she tested directions for whichever brought her closer to the stone covered in glowing symbols. Black Blood and the tear waited within the maze as well, and as imposing as both colossal entities were, neither moved. Elen’s divinations had been correct. Black Blood did not have the power to touch her, not even here, not with him drained by performing this ritual, and with how weak the entity was compared to who he used to be, 600 years ago. But that did not mean it was safe for her to touch him, or the tear. Yet another reason to tread carefully.

One step toward the nearest stone took her further from it. Another to the left took her closer to it. She built a map in her mind as she tested each direction, as she scanned for Jacob’s invisible approach, as she looked to the red barrier beyond and the onlookers watching, as she looked to Jack and his concentrated, worried expression, as she looked to Samantha who now knelt beside her bound and captured ghost’s daughter, whispering with her, and as she looked to Daniel.

Trying to understand what Daniel, Elaine, and evidently, Mark were up to, was as difficult as tracking bullets in a maze of mirrors. Daniel was fast, faster than Antoinette, and certainly faster than any Ventrue, but it was clear he had become trapped in the maze of invisible, warping paths as well. Thankfully, it also seemed so too had Elaine and Mark. And from the few, short lived glimpses Antoinette managed of Elaine’s face, her old friend was forced to create a mental map, same as Antoinette. She had not anticipated her partner-in-crime to trigger an Oubliette directly on top of them.

Elaine. How could she do this? What could Jacob have said to her to convince her this madness was the best possible course of action? What mistakes had she made that she refused to share with her? With the nature of the curse known to them all, as well as Elaine’s history with it, Antoinette had had no choice but to assume Elaine had performed a rather heinous experiment to rid herself of it, so long

ago. But for Elaine to feel so guilty, so broken over what she had done, or perhaps feel guilty over other secrets in her past she had not shared, that she would aid Jacob in this madness, Antoinette struggled to accept.

She wished Daniel would spar with Elaine verbally, in an attempt to learn more. But it was not his way, and while he was clearly superior to Elaine in melee combat, he had two opponents to deal with. He needed to focus. And, while Daniel was as skilled at Obfuscate as Jacob, and quite capable of hiding himself if given the correct situation, trapped inside Jacob's Oubliette was not such a situation. And if he used Auspex to search for the truth in the maze, it would be a moment's hesitation that could get him killed.

But that did not mean he could not give Elaine and Mark trouble. Once Elaine was close enough the warping vision of the Oubliette was not enough to stop her, she took a swing at the man, and Daniel responded with masterful use of Obfuscate. His body became a blur, a distortion of light, not a product of speed but of his ability to twist the shadows. Elaine missed, and Daniel sliced along her side as he stepped around her. The sword cut through her suit and skin, but could not penetrate deeper, as the Ventrue undoubtedly poured vitae into her flesh.

Neither Mekhet or Ventrue were particularly well equipped for melee combat. That was the purview of Daeva, Nosferatu, and Gangrels. Elders compensated for such limitations, and compensated well. Mekhets frequently learned to use swords. And Ventrue never fought alone.

Mark burst from the black water yet again, and for a sliver of a moment, the silhouette of something grotesque gushed from the onyx fluid, a mound of maggots and other insects that swam out in all directions. Again, Mark reached up for Daniel's leg, but the sheriff stepped clear, only for Elaine to drive her fist into his chest. He recovered quickly and adopted a defensive stance. Elaine did not have the strength to kill him instantly, but unlike Daniel, she had the Resilience to outlast him. A battle of attrition.

A blur, identical to Daniel's own, came for Antoinette's face, and she sidestepped it, only to return Jacob's punch with a fast jab. But unlike her, Jacob could tell where the walls of lies of his Oubliette were. He stepped away and disappeared as quickly as a fly in a dark room. Normally her senses would have been able to track him, with him so close, but not within this maze of twisting vision.

"I really wish you'd just stay out of this," Jacob said. There was no point in turning to find the source of the voice. All a deception.

"You are trying to destroy the world, old friend."

“I’m trying to save it. To fix it. You know what that’s like. You spend every day trying to fix this broken system, but you just don’t think big enough.”

“Is that what you told my childe?” Antoinette set her harsh glare on Samantha, who knelt with her daughter’s ghost and stroked her hair. How unfortunate that, for the first time, Samantha could physically touch the ghost, and yet Mary had apparently degraded into something horrible, something Antoinette had only seen glimpses of in her long, long life. She had become the sort of ghost that folklore tales were written of, to frighten young children and keep them away from old, abandoned homes, or dark forests.

“I told her the truth,” the old Nosferatu said.

Samantha looked to Antoinette, eyes beyond distraught. The poor thing did not understand, overwhelmed by circumstance and the potential joy of Jacob’s promise. And now every moment the young woman struggled against the insanity before her. Wisped away into the depths of the Great Below, to watch her lover and his god-of-the-dead companion attempt to collapse the realms into one ball of existence, all things she could not have even considered twelve hours ago. No wonder she looked paralyzed.

“You told her what you believe. That is no truth.”

“You telling me you think life is fine the way it is?”

“I did not say that.”

A chuckle. “It’s a broken system, Ann. We all know it.”

“It is not a broken system!” She risked peeking behind her, only to catch a blur of Jacob’s movement. He was nearby, looking for an opportunity to hit her. Elaine and Daniel would be forced to land multiple hits against each other, but for Antoinette and Jacob, one good blow could be cataclysmic.

She had to be especially careful.

“You can’t be serious,” Jacob said.

“I am. There is beauty in this unfair world, old fool. You know as well as I the power of context. All that you love and hate, you owe to the power of context, of comparison and limitation and definition. And it is that power you wish to strip of everyone.”

“You sound like the beaten wife who says her husband is good some of the time, and those good times are why she stays with him.”

“It is not the same!”

“It is!”

She did not need to spin about this time. Her old friend manifested in front of her, a mirage of shifting dark colors, and his fist came directly for her face. She ducked underneath, only to jump away from the man’s knee as he drove it up toward her skull. Too far. Her own strength betrayed her, and she launched twenty feet back from the man, through multiple walls of the bending, winding Oubliette. They had no texture, they were no barrier, but each wall she passed through twisted and warped her vision.

She closed her eyes and let gravity guide her before vertigo could betray her. Water and stone met her feet, and she landed gracefully as she opened her eyes again. The red barrier was directly behind her, where moments before it had been much further away. Another trick of the Oubliette. If she was not careful, her old friend would simply force her through it, assuming it could be passed through from this side, and she would be doomed to watch the world end on the sidelines with everyone else.

“It is not,” she said. “There is much to be had in this unfair world, and much to defend. You seek to undo life.”

“I don’t. Life will still exist, just not as a shitty cycle of dying and living.”

“Then it is not life! It is existence as stale and meaningless as that of a stone.”

Jacob came at her again. Black Blood moved above, but he was nothing more than a distraction to be ignored. Invisible splashes in the black water around her came closer and closer, first from her front, then her right, then her left, then behind. She did not turn.

The final splash came directly beside her, and she spun to meet Jacob as again the man swung for her head, only for his fist to pass beside her as she dodged. She was faster than any Nosferatu, but there was also a moment of hesitation in Jacob’s punch. Was he toying with her? No, his frown remained deadly serious, and the strength of his attack was blatant. If he had hit her, fist to skull, it could have very well been enough to kill her.

“I think,” he said as he blurred into shadow, “we should agree to disagree.”

“How quaint.” She swung a fist for where the man’s shadow and where it seemed to be heading, but the moment she took several steps forward, the orientation of everything changed, and again she could no longer tell her left from up. Attempts to use the standing stones, or even the giant above as a land mark, proved futile. Again, she was forced to build a mental map as quickly as she could.

“You don’t wish you could talk to Tony again? You know, François? Maybe apologize to him for dragging him into the Danse Macabre, and letting it slowly turn him into an asshole?”



She snarled as she tested another step, again moving toward one of the standing stones. Black Blood put his hand in the way, but she knew very well he would not be able to use it against her. Once she reached the bony appendage, it would be a simple matter to jump over it, or perhaps simply push forward, and force the colossal creature to move his hand for her. She did not want to touch it, but if she had to, then so be it.

“Tony’s mistakes were his own.”

“Right right, because everyone lives in a vacuum, and no one affects each other at all.” The sarcasm was palpable. “Tell that to everyone else on the fucking planet, who knows just how much that isn’t true. Tell it to everyone who knows how full of shit you are!”

Again, the shadows blurred, and Jacob appeared. He came at her from the other side this time, and again she was forced to dodge first, stepped back so his fist slipped past her waist’s side. She spun, and brought up the heel of the opposite leg behind her and around, hoping to drive her bare foot directly up into his stomach with enough power to shatter his insides. But her old friend rolled with the kick, a dodge sideways that required him to land on his hands and roll.

By the time she caught up with him, he was again a shadow. She was tempted to spare another peek for Daniel, as the man continued his battle on the other side of Black Blood, but she could not so much as glance his way again lest Jacob put a hole through her skull. And she knew, if she witnessed her sheriff cutting off Elaine’s head, the image would scar her. She did not wish to lose another friend, lost to the damnable cycle of life and death.

Do not think about Jacob’s madness. Do not entertain the thought. Do not consider it. He is wrong.

“I understand your motivations, old friend,” she said, “and I sympathize. But surely you must recognize this insanity for what it is!”

Another punch, this one directly from her front. She ducked underneath it, and stepped back to avoid the inevitable attempt to knee her face again. Unfortunately, she did not expect Jacob to dive at her once he slammed the leg back down. A second fist came for her chest, and she backed away again, only barely avoiding the punch with her greater speed. But again, doing so pushed her far back enough she stepped through one of the invisible walls of warping perception. Again, she lost all sense of direction. Again, she would have to rebuild her mental map.

Jacob was testing her reflexes, and he was slowly getting closer and closer to landing a blow. She was losing this jousting match.

“I’m not insane. It’s the world that’s insane.”

“Is that what you told my childe? Did you convince her that this apocalypse you are orchestrating is the only to escape from this so called ‘madness’?”

“Samantha’s been through some of the worst hell this world can manage. No one deserves what she’s been through.”

Jacob was not wrong, in that regard. There were few pains greater than that of a parent losing their child, and while Antoinette did her best to help Samantha overcome such hardship, Antoinette and Jacob both, they were ultimately incapable of truly understanding. But for all the pain she had suffered, Samantha had proved durable in a way most could never, in the way her son had proved several times. The idea that she would agree to Jacob’s absurd plan to reduce life and death and the realms, and all the stars and gods and things betwixt, into a mere... soup, with all context, all pains and pleasures, and separation and distance, removed? Antoinette could not see it.

“I do not disagree,” she said. “I cannot imagine my childe’s pain, but she was recovering. Time heals—”

“Oh shut the fuck up you sanctimonious bitch.”

Jacob came from behind her, and only her great Celerity gave her the time she needed to spin and knock his punch aside with the back of her hand. She struck again, fist aimed for his chest, and he stepped back with it. But not fast enough. Her knuckles met his shoulder, and the man flew back, spinning through the air and creating a mess of his robes, before he fell to the water. The graze was enough to tear the robe at the shoulder, and she had felt flesh give. He was wounded.

He managed to look up at her, hidden eyes holding more than rage. Disdain. Not for her, though. The last glimmer of his face she caught before he again disappeared into the blurring darkness about them, ripped her rage out from under her. He was full of sorrow.

“Jacob, please. You have yet to do anything irrecoverable or unforgivable.”

“Says you,” Avery said from beyond the red veil.

A glance her way showed, through the twisting invisible barriers, the onlookers watching her and Daniel with eyes wide. The Prince and the sheriff were the only ones would could stop the madness, now that Jack and Mary were bound. Beatrice looked utterly torn, eyes snapping between her mentor when he emerged from the shadows, and the Prince. And Samantha, she continued to hold her ghost daughter’s head on her lap, her gaze snapping between everyone, eyes so wide Antoinette feared she would see her childe’s confused and broken soul.

“Ignore Avery,” Antoinette said as she shook her head and gestured about them. “Jacob, this is not over. You need not commit to this lunacy! Please, stop the ritual and come back to my tower, with Samantha. We can—”

“Malachi has spent decades committed to this plan, vampire.” Black Blood rumbled above her, his arms doing their best to block Daniel or Antoinette from reaching the standing stones, futile as it may be. “Because he can see past the immediate. This broken machine will continue to turn and grind everyone and everything until all that is left is misery. Enough, we say.”

She almost threw the creature an insult for daring to imply she thought only in the immediate. But she could not deny that while she planned in centuries, Black Blood likely planned in millennia.

“It is not broken, Jacob!” she yelled. “I am sorry that you have struggled. I am sorry that life is unfair. But life is beautiful because death comes for us all, even Kindred.” Again, she set her eyes on her childe, and the two of them stared at each other through the warping, invisible maze. “And you would undo that?”

A question for her childe, answered by her lover.

“I would.” Again the man appeared, the haze of his robe burying her in a layer of shadow she did not expect. He came from above.

She rolled to the side as the man punched the ground. The black water erupted outward from his punch, the ground cracked, but Jacob was plenty agile, and he rolled with the force that pushed back up into him; the other arm dangled at his side, injured by her punch earlier.

The water exploded about her in much the same fashion, as she drove her bare foot into it and launched herself toward the man with every ounce of speed she could muster. He tried to fade into the madness of his maze once again, and no doubt would have, even if she had managed to land her punch. She did not punch him. She grabbed him.

Just as the man nearly jumped away, her hand found the wrist of his bad arm, and she yanked him toward her. A grimace of pain lined his lips, only to disappear as she drove her forehead against his nose. She did not spare her power, but the angle did not allow for something deadly. His head snapped back hard, nose obliterated, but he recovered quickly and swung his fist for her. If she caught it directly, it would have shattered her hand and arm.

She pushed it aside with her free hand as best she could, forearm hitting against the inside of his wrist, only for Jacob to throw his own head in as she was distracted. His forehead collided with her cheek, and her head snapped back as something cracked in her face. Pain flooded her, and her vision

went white as her brain bounced in her skull. But she knew if she let go of the man, all could be lost, so she squeezed on his wrist hard. A weaker Kindred's wrist would have broken, but Jacob no doubt pumped vitae through his body and kept it from crumbling under her strength.

She returned the punch, but despite her greater speed, she was disoriented, and Jacob snatched her wrist before she could drive it into his throat. He pulled on it, attempting to throw her, but she stepped with it as she pulled on his wrist as well, forcing him to step around with her. She raised a leg, only for Jacob to bring up his and force it back down.

“Please, Jacob. Do not make me do this.” Locked in melee combat like this, it was the Nosferatu at a disadvantage. They were both strong, but she was faster, and he could no longer hide from her.

“You might think this world is good the way it is. I don't.”

“And Samantha?”

“She—”

“You would not know Samantha at all, if not for this broken world. You would not know what it felt like to care for again, perhaps even loved again. Are such joys not worth this life?”

A groan of pain forced them to both look nearby through the distorting walls. Not Daniel, or Elaine. Mark coughed and puked blood as Daniel lifted the man up high, sword sticking up through the man's back and out through his stomach. It was a strange thing, seeing the man in the hoodie bleed red; everything about his aura suggested he would bleed rotten, putrid ooze. Stranger, to see the silhouette of the disgusting Begotten appear around, over, and within him, a mountain of maggots and bones that fell apart over Daniel before disappearing into the black water.

Elaine was no fool. She did not stand there to gawk at her dying partner, but threw herself at Daniel instead. The sheriff yanked his sword out and to the side, cutting it out the side of Mark's body, only to bring it down toward Elaine, but she saw it coming. Her hand flowed with red, Kindred blood that seeped out through her skin and around her fingers, and Daniel's sword crashed against it, earning a harsh wince from the Ventrue. The blade was now lodged in her hand, and Daniel could not remove it.

Elaine closed the distance further, and got her hands on Daniel. The two went down, all grace abandoned as they rolled over each other, closer and closer to the red barrier.

Elaine whispered something, so quiet only Daniel would hear it.

Jacob yanked on Antoinette's wrist again, ripping her attention back to her old witch friend.

“I don’t want to lose Samantha! I won’t lose her. No one will lose anything anymore. Everyone will be together! Why do you think that is so horrible!?”

“Because what joy is there in such a life, when there is no loss!? No death, no pain, nothing?”

“You make it sound like it’ll be Hell. It won’t. We’ll have our memories. We’ll know what life was like, what the pain was like. A shitty nightmare we finally get to wake up from!”

He yanked on her hard enough she fell to the ground, the same as Elaine and Daniel. They rolled over the stone floor, and the shallow black water soaked through Antoinette’s suit as much as the blood of Elen’s flesh tunnel. Cold, and chilling, even to her Kindred body.

She tried to punch the man, but he yanked on her wrist as they rolled. She did the same. Each attempt to drive their fists through the other was usurped by each pulling on the other’s wrist. For a moment she thought they neared the red barrier, and a surge of panic and vitae shot through her limbs. But the next invisible wall of warping, twisting deception showed they had rolled closer to Jack, the wooden table covered in Jacob’s artifacts, Samantha, and the ghost bound in chains.

Samantha met their eyes. She was beyond terrified.

Jacob hesitated. Antoinette did not. She brought one of her legs up, and got her knee against Jacob’s gut, and pushed forward. The man roared in sudden agony as she ground her knee into his side, where the hip met torso, and his grip on her wrist tightened until it was her turn to let out a pained groan. But she had the advantage now, and she pushed her knee against him, forcing him further away, wrists locked in each other’s grips.

“Samantha!” she said. “Please, it does have to end like this. Jacob has been—”

Jacob roared, a guttural and inhuman sound, and twisted his whole body hard. What distance she had managed to create vanished, and the two of them were shoulder to shoulder, chests half together, arms prying and tearing at each other.

“We’ll be together in the next world,” he yelled. “Everyone will be! Sam and her kids, and even you! I’m trying to help us, help everyone, and—”

The only thing that kept them from throwing the other with the sheer strength of an elder, was their grip on each other. She let hers go. Jacob froze for a hundredth of a second, confused, and instead slipped the hand under Jacob’s shoulder, and around the back of his torso. No more a battle of punches and avoiding them, she rolled the man over her, and slammed his body into the water with the grappling technique. Again, the black currents exploded outward with the force of two elders combating, and

Jacob went limp as his spine and side hit the stone beneath almost hard enough to crack it. Something inside him, on the other hand, had.

Before control returned to him, she got a hand about his throat, and tore it open. Fingernails ripped through Kindred skin, and with her great strength behind them, an inch of flesh tore from him. Dark Kindred blood splattered over their bodies before disappearing in a harmless puff of ash. And again, before her old friend could compensate for losing a sizable portion of his neck, she got behind him, knelt, wrapped her arm around his throat entirely, and put him in a headlock.

The only thing that kept his head from coming off immediately, guillotined by her forearm, was the panicked grip he managed to place on her wrist with both hands.

Antoinette did not look to Samantha. She could not. No doubt her childe stared with dropped jaw at the display before her, of Antoinette and Jacob rolling and fighting and tearing into each other like savages. If Antoinette had to kill her childe's lover in front of her eyes, then so be it, but she did not want the memory of Samantha's eyes burned into her when she did.

"I am sorry, Jacob. But you have made your choice. I cannot let you live. Even if I simply stopped this ritual, you would attempt it again in the future." She pulled on her arm harder, tightening it on Jacob's ruined throat even more. "Goodbye."

"S-Sire." Samantha's voice, trembling. Antoinette ignored her.

"Prince!" Jack's voice. Antoinette managed to turn her head enough to look to the man, and his single eye was wide with surprise.

She turned her head long enough to see Mary's ghost lunge for her. The chains that bound her were now merged into Mary's body, and the horrifying creature's eyes were wide not with rage, but panic.

Antoinette let go of Jacob and jumped to the side, but it was no use. The awkward angle, Jacob holding her wrists, she could not get to her feet fast enough before Mary sank her claws into Antoinette's back. All of them. Slowly, with ghost claws sticking through her back and out through her chest, Antoinette stood up, and looked down at the strange blades that jutted from her body.

Then the pain hit her. Like fire, vampire's bane, the scorching agony ran up through her body, exploding outward from the ten huge claws inside her. Not even when Damien had cut off one of her arms and legs had she felt such pain. The world ceased to exist, the stone under her, the water around her ankles, the many onlookers, it all faded as her brain struggled to process what burning alive from the inside out would feel like to a vampire.

She tried to move, but her limbs refused to respond. Only her neck listened, enough for her to turn her head slightly, enough to watch Jacob slowly lift himself to his feet.

“Thanks, Black Blood.” Gargling, hand against his ruined throat, Jacob gestured to Antoinette, and then up at the titan. The god of the dead’s right index finger was pointed directly at Antoinette. No, not at her, at Mary, who still hovered behind her, with claws still skewered through her.

“Mary?” Samantha asked, and she ran up to join them.

“Under my control,” Black Blood said. “My apologies, young vampire, and young ghost. But I could not risk Malachi dying. I cannot finish this ritual without him.”

Mary the ghost hissed and snarled, and set her empty black eyes on Black Blood.

“Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!”

Black Blood unleashed his own hiss and snarl, considerably more terrifying than Mary’s own horrific sounds. The ghost went silent.

“In a moment. What should we do with her, Malachi?”

She wanted to scream, but she refused. She would not give the horrid god the satisfaction. All she could do, was glare at him, hoping the venom in her eyes would be enough to kill him. It was not. The titan twirled his finger, and Mary lifted Antoinette into the air, over her, so Antoinette’s body spread out limp, limbs and head hanging uselessly.

“Just toss her out,” Jacob said, offering Antoinette one final, sad glance, before looking away. “She’s got no other way in here, and it won’t be much longer. She can watch.” He took a step toward the table again, and Samantha took a step to him. But before she could slip under his arm to help steady the wounded man, she stopped herself, instead looking to Antoinette, and her daughter’s ghost.

“You are not going to kill her?” Elaine’s voice.

“Nah. She’s Samantha’s sire. She might be the most annoying pain in the ass I’ve ever had to deal with, but she at least deserves to see the change.”

Antoinette, still dangling over Mary’s claws with head upside down, set her eyes on Elaine. Where was Daniel? Oh no.

“Do not worry for your sheriff. He lives.” With a playful smirk, Elaine gestured to the red wall. “I managed to toss him through the barrier. Jacob, you did not tell me you set up an Oubliette in the area.”

Jacob gargled on a tired laugh. His throat was healing quickly, at least enough he could speak.

“Of course I didn’t. You think I trust you?”

Elaine smirked, tattered and torn, suit ripped, hair a soaked mess, and body covered in what was likely Mark’s blood. She came in closer, close enough for her and Antoinette to meet eyes once again.

And winked.