

~~Jack~~

He left Harcourt with the monsters. Athalia said she wanted to talk to him, in private, and Harcourt agreed the same way a scared child might agree to something. But Jack knew the monsters wouldn't hurt him, not while he was still under the Prince's protection.

A part of Jack wanted to stick around, be a part of the conversation, maybe build some sort of bridge between him and Athalia, like she and his mom had. A much larger part of him knew he'd rage and snap, talking about Angela, and that wasn't what Athalia needed. The woman needed closure, not an enemy. And as much as she'd nearly become one, Athalia wasn't an enemy. Better to leave her be and let her recover without his interference. It wasn't like Beatrice was going out of her way to talk to Athalia; far as he knew the two hadn't talked to each other since she killed her daughter.

He wanted to fix things. It ate at him, like a fucking ant in his shoe, when he couldn't fix something. The problems with the Invictus and Carthians, the problems with Begotten and Athalia, the problem with Mary being a ghost, and now the problem with his mom dating a bastard who might actually be trying to destroy the fucking world or something. The shit he would do for a magic wand, so he could just zap away and fix the problems.

"Jack," Sándor said, "I wanted to talk to you."

"Yeah, gathered that, from you coming with." He kept the words light, playful, testing Sándor's disposition.

The gargoyle didn't so much as smile at the comment.

"And don't worry. Harcourt will be fine."

"I know."

"I... wanted to ask about Beatrice."

Right, cause the man was a masochist and was determined to make himself feel even more guilty than Jack did about his mom. What a pair they were.

"Alright. Hit me."

Sándor nodded. At least the two of them understood the value in being straight with each other, and not dancing around bushes.

“She and Julias. I understand they were a close couple. A bit of a... two wayward souls finding solace in each other situation.”

Jack sighed. “Ah, you want to talk about Julias too.”

“Sorry. But—”

“It’s ok. We can skip the typical back and forths, the apologies and creeping on eggshells stuff. I’m guessing you’re sick of it.”

“Sick is a strong word. But... I appreciate your candor.”

“Same. And yeah, Triss was your typical angry Nosferatu, and Julias was depressed with his second life. They really helped each other out. He helped her with her anger, she helped him find happiness again.” Jack put up his hands. “I’m quoting him, by the way. These are the things he told me. Though really it was the whole Circle that helped Triss get over her issues with her Nos deformities. They don’t care. Julias can’t take all the credit for that.”

“You were close with him.”

“Pretty close. Becoming a vampire put a strain on the relationship. But yeah, even when things got heated, we were still friends. Close friends. We talked to each other about almost everything, Triss included.” Ah fuck, that brought up the memory of the conversation in the hospital, the last normal conversation they had. “He was going to marry her; propose, anyway. She would have said yes.”

Sándor only barely flinched, but with this guy, that was essentially running him over with a train.

“Julias was... You were there, at the end. I guess I don’t need to say how amazing he was.”

“No... you don’t.”

Nodding, Sándor took a breath, pushing past the pain, same as Jack was.

“And Beatrice now?”

“We don’t talk as much as we used to. She’s probably doing some ritual shit that I’m happier not knowing about.” Jack looked Sándor’s way. If what he said meant something, Sándor didn’t react to it. “So, you want to know about Beatrice? She’s an angry punk on the outside, but on the inside she’s a normal girl, right down to fantasies of being a princess. When she was alive, she wasn’t anything special, just a really pretty, athletic girl who liked attention. Would be an instagram ass model if she was alive today.”

“Instagram... ass model.”

Jack grinned at the man. Yeah, made sense Sándor wasn't exactly up to date with online stuff.

"Internet, self made model, showing off her ass."

"I see. She was that... bold?"

"Ha! Vain is the word you're looking for, dude. And before you defend her, she admitted it to me herself. She was a vain bitch when she was alive, and hey, if a girl wants to show off her ass for clicks and likes, or whatever they did back in 1990, by all means. But she got the attention of a stalker, a Nosferatu asshole. Course the Prince killed the fucker for siring without permission, but, yeah, waking up from death with a new set of big nasty teeth, that left her pretty angry. Down in the bones angry, you know?"

Sándor slowly nodded, eyes ahead and on the tunnel tracks. He knew. He probably knew better than anyone in the whole damn city.

"And Julias helped her overcome that?" he asked.

"Yeah. Julias was great at helping others. Not so good with helping himself."

"Who is?"

"Good point."

"And Beatrice. She's taken to the Circle well?"

"Yeah, really well. I don't trust Jacob, but I guess he called it right, getting her from the Carthians. And I guess I see it, now that she's neck deep in it. Triss will make a good witch."

"You didn't think so before?"

"Nah. Before I knew her very well, I thought she was kinda like Jessy, loud and angry. But they're nothing alike. Getting sired against her will really fucked her up, and that proud pretty girl she used to be shattered and turned into someone with a lot more rage and... depth, I guess. Depth she probably didn't want, but she got it anyway. Jessy isn't like that. Deep as a plate. Awesome, in her own way, but yeah."

That managed to get at least a small smile out of the gargoyle.

"That's good."

"What, that Triss has depth? Why? You kinda gave me the impression Jen's attempts to seduce you with TNA was a failure." Jack put up a hand again before Sándor could ask. "Tits and ass."

"I see. I... guess I am interested in Beatrice, yes. We've talked, and she's intriguing."

“Don’t mind the crocodile teeth?” Jack pointed at his cheeks.

“No.” A complete lack of explanation. Typical. But it made sense. Dude was a Begotten, and probably met a lot of monsters who looked fucking horrible. Just another day for a nightmare creature.

“Well, from what I can tell, Beatrice and Jennifer are best friends, and friends with benefits. If you want one, you get the other. Which, I mean, Jen’s ridiculously hot, so I imagine most guys would be happy with that arrangement. But something tells me you’re more of a vanilla guy?”

Even wording it like that, hoping to poke the guy’s ego a bit and crack his shell, got nothing. Pure deadpan face.

“My life with my wife was... not vanilla.” Jack’s words didn’t crack Sándor’s shell, but his own did, for a split second at least. He flinched, just barely. Interesting.

Jack chuckled. It felt good to laugh, after everything he’d been through lately.

“If you want to ask her out or something, I say go for it. Just... just be careful. Julias’s been dead for a while, but not so long it doesn’t still sting.”

“I’m not sure dating is what I had in mind.”

Not sure? Dude had something in mind.

“Triss is awesome, but probably a little fragile right now. Julias was her pillar, you know? She leaned on him, and she isn’t the sort of girl to do that lightly.”

“I hear a lot of people relied on Julias.”

“Yeah, that’s true. He was a Right Hand of the Invictus before I was, and the Invictus relied on him heavily. Then his sire died, and Julias replaced him on the council. Everyone was happy about it, cause yeah, people trusted Julias to not only do his due diligence, but he also didn’t have ulterior motives. Usually. Of all the Kindred in the city, he was the only damn one you could trust to not screw you over.”

Sándor nodded as he took it in. “Dolareido is worse for his passing.”

“Yeah, it is.” Jack almost launched into a ‘it’s not your fault’ speech, but Sándor had made it clear he didn’t want to hear it. And Jack was happy to oblige. “I’m not entirely sure what you’re aiming to do, Sándor, but there’s no way you can replace Azamel, be a protector and teacher for all the younger Begotten, and simultaneously replace Julias, you know? If anything, replacing him is my job.”

“You’re a little busy to replace him, don’t you think?”

“I guess.” The turf war was definitely something Julias would have handled, and better than Jack was, but the shit with the tears, Black Blood, and potentially Jacob, was a twist he doubted his sire would know how to handle any better than he did.

“And I suppose I’m not looking to replace your sire. But I am looking to heal the wound as best I can.”

“So you can fix things.”

“Yes. I have to fix things. Even if they’re not my fault, they’re still my responsibility. I... have to fix what I can.”

Jack smiled at him. “I know the feeling.”

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It’d be sunrise soon. A bit over an hour. Tomorrow night he’d pay Antoinette a visit, and see what they could do about... about everything. In the mean time, he had one other thing to check up on, one other thing he was trying to fix.

He stepped into his old house, his mom’s old house, and let the darkness and cold envelop him. The house was officially haunted, and all those old movies made a lot more sense. Haunted houses weren’t just creepy, they had an aura. You felt death when you entered them, in a way only a ghost could cause. Unnatural death.

“Mary, you here?” He took off his shoes and set them beside the side door on the mat. Habit. The side door took him into the kitchen, and he walked through it as he looked around. “Mary?” She usually hung out in her room upstairs, but no reason to not ask out loud for her before he got there.

Sure enough, no response. But the place felt cold, weird and in the bones cold, and that seemed to be an indicator she was around. So he headed upstairs, and knocked on her door.

“Mary, you there? I’m coming in.” The memory slapped him in the face. He’d said those exact words before, when he was young and she was still alive.

He stepped into her room, and the cold bit into him like knives. Not real cold. A vampire didn’t really give a shit about temperatures outside of absurd extremes, but something about being around a ghost made that defense moot. It was painful cold in Mary’s room, and mist flowed over the floor up to his knees.

Course all that was forgotten the moment he saw his sister sitting on the edge of her bed, looking through a photo album. It sat beside her, not on her lap like Jack figured she'd hold it. Then again, ghost.

“Hey Mary. You uh, learned how to touch stuff?”

She shook her head. “Mom helped me with this. It's... it's taken a lot of time and effort, but I can turn the pages. Barely.”

“Anything else? Open drawers or anything?”

“No. Not without either doing nothing, or throwing it across the room.”

Nodding, he came over and sat beside her, picture album between them. “Been talking to Mom lately? Guess you have, if she put this together for you.” Looked like a new photo album, a big one, and full of pictures his mom and Mary had taken. Even his dad was in there. The memories of the Terry family in one place.

“Yeah. She's happy!” The ghost opened her eyes wide as she snapped her head up, the motion a blur. Jack almost jumped back. Those empty eyes. “I'm glad. Mom should be happy. It's been so hard on her.”

“Hard on you too, Mary.”

“You're right, you're right. But I'm dead, and... and that's ok. Mom has you now, right? And that Jacob man.”

Fuck Jacob.

“Yeah, I guess she does. Not really a fan of Jacob, personally.”

“Would you be a fan of any man Mom dates?” Well, Mary was being surprisingly clear and articulate. He didn't know if that was a good thing, or a bad thing.

“I guess not. But Jacob is a dangerous guy, scary dangerous, and—”

“Mom says a lot of vampires say that about you.”

Fuck. “I'll fix that.”

“You can't fix everything, Jack.”

“I can try.”

She laughed. A little too shrill to sound nice, but it was a lot better than angry Mary throwing him around with telekinesis and whatnot.

“Mom’s been pretty shy about it, but I think she’s getting laid, too.”

Ugh, he wasn’t old enough for this conversation. The idea his mom had to have sex, twice, to have two children still irked him. Give him another ten years and maybe he’d be able to think about it without cringing, but not yet. Mary definitely had a one up on him in that aspect of maturity.

“I guess she is.”

“Some pretty nasty, kinky sex, too.”

“What? Oh come on, Mom doesn’t tell you about that stuff.”

Mary grinned at him. Spooky. “She does, at least a little. And it’s not hard to guess what she means when she says something else. You know Mom, and how much she likes to undersell.”

“I guess.”

“Which means Mom is enjoying some pretty big sex fantasies. Like, orgies and stuff.”

Jack plugged both his ears. “La la la la la la.”

Laughing, Mary swung out to bat away one of his arms. But her hand past through it, sending a harsh jolt of cold up into his shoulder. Somehow, he managed to not yelp, but it wasn’t enough to stop her from dropping her empty eyes. He got ready to jump out of the way if she flipped out and decided to throw the bed or something, but she only sighed, and turned the page of the photo album. It took her a few tries, fingers passing through it again and again, but she managed.

Jack lowered his hands, and looked down at the pictures as well. Better to ignore how fucked up the situation was, that Mary was dead and couldn’t touch anything. Hell, with Beatrice doing crazy ritual stuff and flirting with Death herself, maybe she’d help his mom and Mary out? Which would undoubtedly end horribly, and probably make everything worse.

“I remember this picture,” he said. “Banana Bananza Waterpark.” Samantha, James, Mary, and Jack. Jack was a scrawny little kid, pasty white, and shivering. Water cooled him down a little too well.

Mary nodded, and pointed to the picture beside it. “There’s us when we went camping.”

“You hated it.”

“You were supposed to hate it, too. Didn’t think my nerd brother would like climbing trees.”

“I was ten. It’s a boy thing. Climbing or digging snow forts.”

Her smile returned, and she flipped to the next page. No need to describe any of these pictures, they both knew what they were. The last birthday Jack had when his dad was still alive.

“I’m happy Mom’s happy,” she said. “Every time she visits, or every time I…” Her fingers paused over a picture of their mom, her hugging their dad’s arm and smiling for the camera. “It hurts, seeing her hold onto me so tight.”

“I thought you didn’t want to… you know…” Die. Leave. Pass on. Cross over.

“I don’t know!” She snapped her head up again, empty eyes wide, but Jack didn’t react this time. “I can feel something in me, and it wants to latch onto… onto anything. But I’m scared of the dark places I can see! That place where that… that thing comes from.”

“Black Blood?”

“I think so. I told Mom, but she’s…” Mary sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know. Something’s going on, and I don’t know!”

“Me neither. But I’m working on it, and so are a bunch of vampires. Mom’s sire, she’s—”

“Your girlfriend?”

Jack turned away. “We got in a fight.”

“Bad?”

“Pretty bad.”

“Don’t let her go, Jack. She’s good for you.”

“How do you know? What’s Mom been telling you?”

Mary smiled as she turned the page. “That Antoinette’s super smart, and assertive. Two good things for you, I think.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I think a more normal girl would probably bore you after a while, you know?”

Clara wouldn’t bore him. Would she?

“Well, that super smart, assertive part of her is part of why we’re in a fight.”

“Fights can be ended, you know? You can fix them and—” Her head twitched, fast enough it left a hazy afterimage that it snapped back into after a moment. “Sorry. It’s hard to… to keep thinking.”

“Antoinette and other people are working on this weird thing with tears, the things you’re seeing. We’ll get it figured out, and then you can… I don’t know. What do you want to do?”



“I don’t know either.” Slowly, Mary closed the book, and her body shimmered, like flickering TV static as she struggled with it. “I got a visit from that other ghost again.”

“Oh shit. Sabrina?”

“Yeah. She wants to get in. But you said to stay away from her, so I won’t let her.”

“Good! Good. Christ she was a scary fucking ghost. She’s dangerous, and not just for me, but you too.”

“I’m safe here. It’s my home. She can’t get in.”

The fact Sabrina was roaming around, not tied down like Mary was, was god damn fucking terrifying. The last thing Jack needed was that psychopath ghost learning Jack killed her master.

“Alright. I’ll go now.” He got up, but she got up with him, and floated in front of him, blocking him off from the door.

“Jack, I... I don’t know what I’m going to do. M-Maybe, if things change in the future, I’ll go. Maybe if... if things go differently, who knows. I know I can’t stay here forever. I’m... I’m lucid now, but I know I’m not always like that. Something has to change.”

He couldn’t look her in her empty eye sockets, not from this close, not with what she was saying. Not with what he knew Triss was doing.

“I know.”

“But whatever happens, you can’t die, ok? Mom won’t be able to handle it. I don’t care what happens. I don’t care who you have to fight, or... or kill. I don’t care what enemies you make. Don’t die, ok? It’s the best thing you can do for Mom.”

Don’t die. Just don’t die. Honestly, with the curse poisoning everything, him dying wasn’t what he was worried about. It was him killing everyone else.

The memory of Maria’s nightmare echoed in his mind, like a speaker shrieking with feedback, until he thought his ears would bleed.

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~~Antoinette~~

Once upon a time, in an age long past, Antoinette had given up on the idea of love. The very thought of sharing true intimacy, physical, intellectual, and emotional, with another Kindred was a silly, juvenile thought, something most elders had given up on. And while Antoinette often avoided meetings with the Ordo, as she much preferred to work on her projects without interference, she had met plenty of elder Kindred deep in the recesses of the organization who had also given up on romance. The elder mind struggled to think in such terms.

Jack. Silly yet mature, cynical yet optimistic, logical yet emotional Jack, had dug up a part of her she had long thought dead, and she would not give it up easily, especially not for some plebeian mongrel. Jack was hers. If she had to kill Clara to keep it that way, she would. Illogical as it was and likely to doom the relationship, she would.

But seeing the damn woman walk the street, alone, struggling to not sob even as tears ran down her cheeks, ripped a hole clear through the bubbling anger in Antoinette's chest. Why? The damnable woman was her enemy, and all was fair in love and war.

And yet, something about seeing the werewolf struggle with her sadness as she walked the street pulled at something inside Antoinette. For the life of her, she did not know what, or why, but she released her Cloak, and walked toward Clara.

“Wha—shit!” Clara jumped back as she stared at the Prince. “The fuck? What are you... oh shit.”

Sighing, Antoinette held up a hand and shook her head. “Peace, Miss Moreno.”

“Peace? Why are you even here? You—”

“I saw you, entering Jack's apartment. I saw you leave Jack's apartment, a while later.”

Clara's eyes widened, and she took another step back. “You came here to kill me, over that? You... fucking psycho.”

Antoinette ground her teeth as she glared at the woman. “I came to parlay.”

“I don't believe that for a second.” With a sniffle, Clara wiped her nose with her wrist, her eyes with her fingers, and took another step back. “And don't think I'll go down without a—”

“Clara Moreno, cease your incessant prattling! I am not here to kill you.” Though with the way Clara insisted the conversation go, she was making it increasingly easy to return to that plan. “I am here to talk... about whatever happened tonight.”

“Yeah, go fuck yourself. I—” She spun around, hand out, and the back of her hand collided with air.

Elaine stepped back from the backhand, wearing a toying grin as her Cloak faded, and idly rubbing her cheek where Clara had hit her. “Impressive.”

“Two elders for one wolf? You two really that scared?”

“Of course not.” Sighing louder, full dramatic effect intended, Antoinette waved Elaine off, and her old friend stepped around Clara to join her again. “Forgive the Ventrue her... mischievous ways. I wish to speak to you Clara, about Jack.”

“I didn’t fuck him, calm down.”

“I gathered.”

“Ha, how? Cause I’m crying?”

“By the time frame. Half an hour? Please.” A small attempt at a joke, to lighten the mood. She had indeed thought, for a furious moment, that perhaps Clara had seduced her little Jack. That idea had shattered upon seeing the woman’s tears, and now Antoinette did her best to recover the situation. It earned a surprised, raised brow from the woman, and Antoinette could not help but mirror Elaine’s domineering grin. But she suppressed it quick enough, and took another step toward Clara. “If I wanted to kill you, Clara, I could have arranged it, easily. No need to dirty my hands.”

“Unless you wanted to bloody them. You come across as a cold bitch, but I’ve seen more than a few vamps just like you. When shit gets personal, you freak the fuck out and get vicious.”

Antoinette glared at the woman, and a small part of her hoped the stupid creature would shatter into a hundred shards of frozen blood and gore, there on the street.

“I admit that, perhaps, I originally wanted a rather terse word.”

“Terse? Gimme a break.”

“I swear you will not be harmed, Clara. But I do wish to speak.” She almost worded it as an order, but she knew Clara, like any of the Uratha in Avery’s pack, would respond to even the most logical order with resistance. Better to ask, and save herself the headache. “Please.”

Clara eyed her suspiciously, but after another snuffle, shrugged and nodded. “Fuck it, fine. The fuck do I have to lose.”

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“Bloodlust? Really?” No doubt the woman felt self-conscious about her clothes.

“It is a secure location. We may speak privately.” Antoinette nodded to the bouncer at the door, and walked toward the side staircase. Kine ceased chatting to stare at the tall white-haired woman in the business suit, before their eyes fell to the tall blonde in a similar suit, and then eventually to the tan-skinned woman with box-braid hair, wearing a t-shirt and jeans. The kine knew better than to interfere.

Soon, Antoinette sat upstairs in her usual booth, far in the back. Elaine did not join them however, nodding before departing to find another booth. On the hunt, no doubt.

Clara eventually sat down across from Antoinette in the large, circular booth, eyes locked on Antoinette. Her tears had stopped, though Antoinette could see she was holding them back to save face. Such a child.

“I assume Jack has told you about the situation with Black Blood, and my order about Samantha.”

“You’re lucky he did. I was thinking about dropping by and giving Samantha a check-in, see if she’d put some distance between her and that asshole Jacob. At least I was until Jack said you told him to not tell her about the situation.”

“You disagree.”

“Course I fucking disagree. She’s your childe, isn’t she? The fuck—”

Antoinette held up a hand. “I did not invite you here to speak of Samantha. Know that if you warn her, I will consider that an act against me. And not a personal attack, but an official one, orchestrated by your pack.” She leaned in and glared daggers into the wolf. “Respect that you are guests in my city. Do not make me remove you.”

For all Clara’s bravado, for all her strength and rank as second-in-command of her pack, Clara was a gnat compared to Antoinette’s power. The wolf tried to hold Antoinette’s gaze, but failed, and looked down and away after several seconds.

“No idea what Jack sees in a bitch like you.”

Well, if the woman had no issue making this as personal as possible, Antoinette would stoop to her level.

“No doubt you assume the only thing he sees in a vampire *comme moi*, is the size of my breasts.”

Clara snorted as she finally regained her confidence, enough to glare at Antoinette at least. “I think you’ve got the whole ancient seductress thing down pat, yeah. I think you’ve got Jack all twisted up inside, so he can’t think straight when he’s around you.”

Not entirely an unwarranted opinion. Antoinette had indeed gone out of her way to become a seductress, physically and intellectually, even resorting to strange, forgotten measures to ensure her unusual body. To an outside eye like Clara, Antoinette's actions must have seemed terribly shallow. But Clara was a young fool who did not understand her own heart, her own desires, or the reality in pursuing them. Antoinette took no more offense in her ignorant views about the Prince's body than she would if a four-year-old child had insulted her shoes.

"We discussed my relationship with Jack once before. You thought I was selfish, that I was putting my desires before what was healthy for him."

"I still think that."

"Even after what Jack has told you, about my order about his mother?"

A hole in Clara's opinion, that Antoinette would risk Jack's anger instead of tricking him. Naturally, the werewolf sneered and looked away again as she realized it.

"You probably think he'll come back to you like a dog on a leash, coming back to its master no matter how many times the master beats it."

It took more effort than Antoinette wanted to admit, to not reach across the table and tear the damn woman's eyes out.

"He will come back to me, because we love each other, Clara. And while he and I are quite different, and it is through those differences that we have found synergy."

"You know all that shit about two opposites attract is just that, shit, right?"

Antoinette found herself smiling. "Oh?"

"You think Uratha can't read about things? Fuck you. Yeah, I read stuff sometimes, and what do you know, turns out that shit about opposites attract is just romanticizing. You need to have common ground, or it's a doomed relationship." Well well, the woman was smarter than she seemed.

"And you think Jack and I have no common ground? That we are opposites? Surely he has told you otherwise."

She turned to her other side, now facing out toward the club and the other booths closer to the stairs and railing. "So he says. I can't see how a young guy can really have common ground with an ancient bitch."

"Then you do not understand Jack at all."

That earned a surprised glance from Clara, before she leaned back, folded her arms across her chest, and glared at Antoinette. “Enlighten me, then.”

“That is why we are here... partly.”

“Partly?”

“Later. For now, let us speak of Jack then. You think Jack is a young man, a silly boy thrust into circumstances that have hardened him, and sculpted a man. Oui?”

“I guess, yeah. Dude was what, twenty, when he was embraced? That wasn’t even four years ago. He’s grown up into a pretty awesome guy.”

“Clara, I was attracted to Jack long before any of the events that molded him befell him. If anything, I have worked to undo the effects those traumatizing moments have had on him.”

“Uh huh.”

“I do not lie. The first time I met Jack, I thought him nothing more than an unusual choice for Julias Mire, nothing like him at all. I met the boy later at Bloodlust, in this very booth, and he displayed unusual courage, and unusual wisdom.” Clara did not need to know the details of that conversation. Jack, a young man with utterly no world experience, had remarked that Antoinette was lonely, even as the boy trembled beside her in fear. “I was attracted to him when he was... unknown, when he was simply a young man with a mind that did not fit such a simple description.” Antoinette leaned over the table toward the wolf woman. “Jack is an old soul, Clara.”

“Old soul? And if I don’t believe in reincarnation?”

“Metaphor. Jack is not a young man, or rather, not young in many regards. Surely you have noticed that.”

“I have. Kid’s definitely got an inner grumpy asshole.”

“Quaint. Oui, there are aspects to Jack that allow him and I to communicate in meaningful, deep ways. I am sorry if that offends you”—though they both knew very well that she was not—“but in truth, Jack is not the sort of man you could spend the rest of your life with, Clara.”

“Says you.”

“That I do. Could you truly imagine discussing the minutiae of music or the acting techniques of the older versus younger generation? Could you spend hours discussing how dialog was written in older movies, versus the movies of now? Or how terribly modern movies insist on balancing audio?”

“I—”

“Can you imagine spending three hours comparing the writing techniques of authors? Or perhaps indulging Jack one of his hour-long rants where he does nothing but insult social media?”

“I—”

“Do you have any topics that could engage his mind? I have spent hours explaining to my love the intricacies of Mozart and the tragedy of Beethoven. I have detailed the rise and fall of communism in Stalin’s Russia. I have regaled him with talk of economics, the complexities of law, and techniques to manipulate stock and taxes. I have discussed the emergence of languages over the course of history, the discovery of spices by different cultures, and the psychology of genders, all to his utmost interest.”

“So you’re both nerds, so what?”

Antoinette leaned in closer, and forced Clara to hold her steady gaze. “Jack does not dance. Jack despises social gatherings, and only engages at my request. Jack did not indulge in alcohol in his first life, or drugs of any kind, and not because of any sort of fear, but because the idea of not being in total control of his mind at all times did not sit well with him. Jack’s perfect night includes solitude, perhaps an intriguing film, and hours of discussion.

“You,” she pointed at Clara, “are a social creature, non? Your best nights undoubtedly included enjoying the company of your pack, perhaps joyful nights on the town, full of alcohol. Your most joyous days — something Jack will never see — were probably when you and your group hunted in the woods, or perhaps when engaging in a rough brawl with dissidents? Your most treasured memories likely include the sheer joy of sharing an experience with a group of others, likely often your pack, but also perhaps your family from your first life? I can easily picture you sharing in elation with fellow students when you were young, cheering over a sports team or some such. Perhaps even now. While Jack does not know the name of most sports teams, and not the name of a single player of any of them.”

Again, Antoinette leaned in closer, continuing to hold the frozen Clara’s gaze. “Be under no illusions, Clara. You and Jack would greatly enjoy each other’s company, for a time, but I have seen better matches than you two, who saw perhaps two months of shared bliss. The two of you would be nothing more than a temporary relationship shared between the young, full of short lived passion. But Jack and I will survive ages together. And while our differences are great, we connect in ways you do not appreciate, in the ways a husband and wife do. Our connection is not only sexual and emotional, as yours would be, but also intellectual, the ability for us to speak about what interests us, and to spark the genuine interest of the other.

“You would not connect with Jack in such a way Clara. Your relationship would be doomed before it began.”

Clara broke their gaze first, leaning back and looking down. And despite her attempts to hide it, the werewolf sniffled. If not for the music of Bloodlust, other booths would have heard her.

“You really are a bitch, you know that?” Clara forced down a snuffle, but it did not last, and she sniffled again as she struggled to control her tears. Those too fell, and she wiped them away quickly.

With a heavy sigh, Antoinette slid along the booth, closing the distance between the two until a single foot separated them.

“Clara, I... apologize, for how I managed this. I admit learning of your time with Jack tonight left me... infuriated.”

“Yeah well, you were right. Jack doesn't want me. Even when he's pissed at you, still doesn't want me.”

“Do not be absurd. Of course he desires you, Clara.”

“What?”

“If Jack were not with me, he would happily succumb to your flirtations. You are an amazing woman, Clara, strong and beautiful. Not the most intelligent woman—”

“Hey!”

“But intelligent enough. Do not think you are unworthy. But do not be so childish as to not understand the difference between true romance, and a passionate desire.” Slowly, Antoinette offered the woman a gentle smile. An olive branch. “I am happy that you are so concerned for Jack, to the point you are willing to anger me. But I do suggest you be careful with Jack from now on, and do not tempt him further. Not because of him, but because of me.”

“That a threat?”

“It is.” She said it with no malice. The tears in Clara's eyes robbed Antoinette of what anger she looked for. They would not have, in years past. “But you and I need not be enemies, Clara. Leave Jack be, and—”

“You don't even know what Jack is gonna do, after this shit you're pulling.”

“And the idea of losing Jack because of this development with Black Blood haunts me to my very soul, Clara, in ways you do not understand. You, who bursts at the seams with emotions. You who will



never know centuries of..." Antoinette leaned back, pulled her hair over her shoulder onto her chest, and combed it with one hand as she looked out to the other booths. "I will do what I can to ensure our relationship survives. I know Jack will as well." Now that the fury in her veins had calmed, it grew easier to see that, and to trust her love. Their relationship would survive this. It would.

"You got a lot of faith in him to still want you after this."

"I do."

Clara sniffled again before taking a deep breath and silencing her sobs. "Christ, I don't even know why I'm crying."

"Emotions are not always logical. And while it has been ages since I have shed tears, I am sure I shed plenty when I was your age." She shrugged as she continued to offer her peace smile to the werewolf. "And if those feelings are of guilt, due to your budding relationship with the hunter Harcourt, do not be so hard on yourself. Your relationship with him is young, while your interest in Jack far older, and deserving of investigation."

"Fuck, does everyone know I'm dating Brace?"

"Of course."

"Ugh."

"And, if I may be so bold, your future with Harcourt holds more potential than with Jack. While the hunter and my love share little in common, they do share some similarities in personality, similarities you undoubtedly find appealing." His emotional forwardness, his deep rooted desire to do right, his adorable awkwardness.

"Yeah well, that may be true, but Harcourt doesn't seem interested."

"Oh? If you are willing to tell me, by all means."

Clara wiped her nose, gulped down her tears, and sat up straighter. "Fine. I guess if anyone knows a thing or two about romance, it's an ancient Daeva."

Antoinette knew far more than most, about typical romantic interactions, true. Countless interactions from her youth that, while faded, had sharpened her social instincts into a scalpel. Countless books read. Countless young kine and Kindred seen, monitored, and documented. Her own romantic woes were strange, absurd things, and not easily understood, but Clara's would be far simpler and easier.

Sure enough, as Clara explained the situation, the solution was clear. Brace Harcourt was a passive man, and a moron. Two hundred years ago, a woman would drop her handkerchief near a man she was interested in, and the man would return it, creating the avenue for conversation. If the man had the wherewithal to recognize what the gesture meant, he would pursue the woman with romantic interest. Signal sent, received, and the chase began.

In the modern age, the tools of the game had changed, as had the overall game itself. But in some ways, nothing ever truly changes, and the desires of those involved in the game of romance remained the same. Women enjoyed being chased, desired, even fought over. There was hardly any shame in that, but the modern world had most definitely altered the ways such a game was played. Women had to adapt.

“I will speak to the man.”

“What? Oh god, please don’t. I—”

“Clara, trust me to know how to be graceful, and discrete. The man will not even know what I am doing.”

“This is really fucking weird.”

“Perhaps, but as I said, I do not want us to be enemies.”

“We’re... we’re not enemies, ok? Enemies are the fuckers I had to deal with in Tijuana. Enemies are the assholes that made Art’s life a living hell until we got him outa there. You and I aren’t enemies.”

Antoinette gestured out toward the booths nearby. Heads were visible over their backs, making it a simple task to see who was engaged in romance with others.

“You act as if romance is hardly a reason for enemies, young werewolf. I have seen houses destroyed over romance. I have seen atrocities you cannot imagine, over romance.”

Clara snorted on a chuckle, the sound mixed with her suppressed sobs. “Sounds like a soap opera.”

“Indeed. I have known kine to kill each other over romance, as I am sure you know. I have known kine to go to war for the love of another. Battles that flooded the streets have been fought over romance. Learn your history, and you will find romance has been at the heart of many wars.”

“Yeah well, I’m not that sort of person.”

Antoinette glared down at the werewolf, and Clara stopped sniffing. “Few who find themselves slaughtering others in a fit of passion and rage think themselves capable of it, Clara Moreno.”

Clara stared up at her as realization set in. “You... you’ve killed people, over romance?”

“No. At least... not in the way you think. My relationship with Tony was troubled, and...” She shook her head as she looked down. “My point stands. Your interest in Jack terrifies me, Clara. It terrifies me because Jack has helped me in a way I thought impossible. He has helped me find a joy I could not imagine ever finding again. And it also terrifies me, because I do not like what I imagine I might do, if I ever found myself reliving the tales I described, tales of romance and murder.”

They two looked at each other for a while. Antoinette was being dreadfully honest with someone she did not fully trust, and that was a risk. But if she was to encourage cooperation and understanding in her city, than she had to act as such.

“I believe we are done here,” Antoinette said, and she slid out of the booth.

Clara nodded, joining her. “Just so you know, I’m glad you didn’t kill me.”

“Naturally.”

“I mean it. I... fuck, I don’t know. This is the last thing I expected.”

“Then I hope this experience has opened your eyes, young werewolf. Not all elder Kindred are heartless monoliths.” With a grin Antoinette walked toward the stairs, and Clara joined her.

“I guess. There’s still a bunch of elders in Dolareido I don’t trust at all.”

Antoinette aimed her grin down at the woman. “You trust moi?”

“Fuck no. But, after tonight, I guess I distrust you a little less.”

“That is something, I suppose.”

Before they reached the stairs, Antoinette turned, and looked down at the one of the booths they walked by.

Of course, Elaine. Her suit jacket and blouse were both open, and she straddled a woman’s lap, a short creature with dark skin and frizzy short hair. The kine had both hands on Elaine’s naked breasts, along with her lips, and she devoured Elaine’s breasts hungrily. A man sat beside her, also of dark skin, shaved head. His fly was down, and he casually masturbated as he watched his wife — she wore a wedding ring, at least — kiss Elaine’s bosom.

“Christ you vamps,” Clara said as they walked past, “are all ridiculous.”

“Oh?” Antoinette grinned down at the werewolf as she came to a stop at the railing. A spot they could both watch Elaine as she indulged the touch of the two aroused kine. “You are hardly one to judge. Did you not enjoy Jessy’s ghouls? All four of them? At once?”

Clara blushed until her face looked near to bursting. “Everyone knows?”

“Naturally.”

“I was sad, and drunk, and—”

“Clara, my point is not to shame you. My point is, cease your incessant judgments, and enjoy your indulgences. Surely with how many times you have risked your life for worthy causes, you do not feel shame over drowning in an indulgence every so often?”

She looked down at the dance floor below. “I guess not. But I don’t view sex as something you just... do, like eating a fucking chocolate bar.”

“No, I suppose you do not. Though if you did, I would have said you were welcome to join Jack and I in bed, little werewolf.”

Clara blinked up at her, and gulped. “You serious?”

“Of course. You are beautiful. I would have gladly brought you to orgasm a dozen times as you rode my lover’s length. I know Jack would certainly enjoy filling you several times until it poured out of you. But, you have made it clear you do not separate sex from romance, and I will not share Jack with another romantic partner.”

The Uratha, predictably, blushed all the harder, and did not even look Antoinette in the eye as she squirmed. “Yeah. Probably a bad idea.”

Antoinette adopted her devil smile, and serpent voice. “Indeed.”

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~~Beatrice~~

The three vampires walked toward the outskirts of the city, on the way to the cave where Elen was kept hidden. Thankfully that meant roads that took them outside main city areas, desert on one side and

city on the other, and that meant no kine around. No one to stop them from having a private conversation.

“You think Sándor would take the offer?” Triss asked. “Assuming I can get this ritual working, think he’ll try?”

Jen shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe? The man is clearly depressed over the death of his family.”

“Imagine that,” Samantha said. When Jen and Triss looked her way, eyebrows raised, she winced and shook her head. “Sorry. That sounded mean.”

Jen put a hand around Sam’s hip, hugged her, and kissed her cheek. Which of course earned a smile from Sam, cause the woman was so totally empathetic, any positivity sent her way had her smiling.

“Sándor visited us a little while ago,” Triss said. “Found Elen. He... he’s not a stick in the mud or anything. Gives off that vibe, right? But he’s pretty open to stuff.”

Jennifer grinned at Triss, and then Sam. “And, he’s gorgeous.” And of course she said it without stopping her hug.

Sam’s earlier depression vanished, replaced with shy giggles. Too easy.

“He is.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Oh god, not you too.”

“He is! He’s so stern looking, but kinda dreamy too.”

“Sam, he looks like a taller, older version of your son.”

“That is not true! That... that is kinda true. But he’s not my son. And besides, Jack is a handsome man.”

Jen laughed. “He is. And Sándor is also definitely a handsome man. A bit tall, lean and muscular, with just enough gruff on his face to look positively beautiful. The deep eyes, blue, dreamy. The defined chin. The buzzed hair works well, I think. But I wonder how he would look with a full mane?”

“Fuck me I’m working with two Daevas. A full mane? He’d look like the dude on romance novel covers. Just brunette instead of blonde.”

“That does sound dreamy,” Sam said. “And... and agreed, about everything. Sándor really is gorgeous.” She squirmed a bit as she looked down. “Now, don’t be mean! But, he kinda reminds of

Viggo, you know? In that scene where they first see him, in Lord of the Rings.” She squirmed a little more. “Jack made me watch it.”

Triss laughed. “They were good movies. And yes, Viggo Somthingsen was stupid hot in that opening scene. Very sizzling.”

“Sándor does remind me of him,” Jen said. “And yes, I saw the movies as well.”

There wasn't any way around it, Sándor was fucking hot as hell. And as much as he gave off those smoldering, brooding stoic vibes, there was definitely more to him than that. Apparently alcohol worked on him, and helped bring out a side to him that really humanized him. Well, maybe not humanized, he was a Begotten. Whatever, he was a lot more interesting than he initially seemed.

Which made all that shit when Jen dragged him to the ball feel really strange now. Triss hadn't really thought about Sándor as anything other than a poor, fucked up dude who'd been royally screwed by life, back then. Now, well, dude was interesting, and hot, and wasn't put off by all the witchy shit Triss was up to. And the widower thing was, horrible as it sounded, kinda hot too.

A sharp jolt shot up from the bag in Triss's hand, right up into her fucking heart. Nothing magical, nothing crazy weird, not witchy, just plain old guilt. She was trying to revive her dead lover, and now she was thinking about Sándor in the exact way Jen had planned. But it wasn't anything Jen had done that'd really changed Triss's outlook on the guy, it was that night he got drunk with them, and talked about his dead family. Triss talked about Julias, for the first time in a long time, and it'd been... nice.

Plus, he liked metal music, and apparently had a healthy, adventurous sex life with his wife. Which pretty much made him the perfect man.

She refused to think of Sándor that way. Fucking refused. She had a mission, and it made no god damn fucking sense to look for a man for her, when she was trying to revive one. Christ, how fucked up was that? That she was even thinking it? Made her insides hurt like someone was jamming ice shards through her guts.

Jen just thought Sándor would be an awesome fuck; that was her main reason for dragging him into stuff, not romance or anything. And he probably would be. And that gargoyle form was, uh, scarousing. That'd be pretty interesting, honestly, and—

“If... if he's open minded,” Sam said, “then maybe you should ask him? About reviving his family?”

“Yeah. Yeah maybe I will. I get the impression he'll say no, cause... cause he's smarter than us.”

“Smarter...” The Daeva sighed as she stepped up close to Triss’s side, Jen on her other, and she leaned in to press her head against Triss’s shoulder. “Yeah, he probably is. But I don’t care. I want my daughter back.”

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“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” Sam said.

“... really sure?”

“Yes! Yes, I’m sure Triss.”

The three of them stood outside the cave entrance on the outskirts of Dolareido, the cave where they kept Elen, and their experiments.

“We’ve been keeping you out of this for a reason, Sam. Jacob hadn’t gotten you involved for a reason, too.” They’d talked about this before. Getting Sam involved in the nitty-gritty of all this shit was a bad idea. Hell, Sam had understood that. Maybe it was because of how long the ritual was taking that Sam wanted to get involved now, or maybe it had something to do with her ghost daughter?

“I know, but I’ve been thinking about it hard, and I... I need to know more. If I’m going to ask Mary to jump into a body, then I should know how it’s made, beginning to end, right?”

Jen and Triss looked at each other. Yeah, it was a good idea. It was also a good idea to try completing the ritual with Mary’s ghost, before Triss jumped into the deep end and tried grabbing Julias’s soul from across the god damn universe.

Christ this would all be so much easier if he’d turned into a ghost, too. Why hadn’t he? Didn’t feel he had any unfinished business? Fucking asshole.

“Samantha,” Jen said, touching the trembling woman’s shoulder, “we don’t know if Mary’s ghost is truly Mary. We have no idea what will happen if we rebuild Mary’s body, and then ask your daughter to possess it.”

Triss and Sam stared at Jen as the woman pointed out the elephant in the room, and shot it with an elephant gun.

“I know! But... but shouldn't we try it with her first anyway? She's here! And Julias... Julias isn't. And you said yourself getting his soul will be the hardest part.”

Hard was an understatement. Jacob and BB had said they had to kill a fuck load of people for just a peek into wherever souls went, and Triss was already pushing it with how many people she'd killed for her resurrection project. If she went after a little more a little faster, she'd get the Prince's attention. And doing whatever ritual Jacob had done would take a fuck load more than just a dozen.

The only idea Triss had that could work, that wouldn't leave her a smoldering crater of guilt, was to find a large, maximum security prison, and kill everyone inside. And even that would be fucked up; not everyone in prison deserved to be there. Maybe someone like Jacob could harden himself enough to go on a slaughter spree like that, but she couldn't, and she knew Julias wouldn't want her to.

“It will be,” Triss said, shrugging. “Figuring out how to get his soul will be... a problem. Elen won't die, but she is falling apart, so we need to use her while we can. Get her to build the bodies first, and figure what to do about the souls second. Hopefully since she's immortal, her flesh magic will keep kicking, and keep our... bodies alive.” She almost said zombies.

“Then that means we should make my daughter a body soon, right? If it'll take a long time to do the ritual to get Julias's soul, we might lose Elen as our... might lose her help before she gets to make Mary a body, right?”

“Yeah, you're right. I don't know long she has left before she's just a pile of meat that won't die, so... you're right.” It was stupid of them to think they could keep Samantha out of this forever anyway.

Triss knew why she didn't want Sam to see all the shit she was up to. Shame. Butchering kine like sheep so she could pursue a ritual for purely selfish goals? Yeah, it was pretty fucked up. She could only hope Julias wouldn't hate her for it. She did everything she could to make sure good kine didn't die for this. Hopefully.

“Alright then,” Triss said. “If you're sure.”

“I'm sure.”

“Because we can't completely trust Elen, Black Blood possesses her. So you're going to be in a room with that... thing. Dude. Dude thing. Still sure?”

That got a proper shock out of her, but after a few long seconds, Sam nodded again. “I'm sure.”

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Sam covered her face with her hands when Triss pulled down a blanket, exposing a pile of bodies. Inside the cave, with Elen dangling from ropes over a giant metal bowl, the air was thick with the smell of flesh. Not rotting flesh, since Elen knew how to keep it fresh and pulsing, but there was no stopping the smell of skin, blood, and all the other smells that told a vampire wounded prey was nearby. It almost made things worse. A pile of rotting corpses might have been easier to ignore than a pile of perfectly fleshy, borderline alive bodies.

“I... I thought the ones in the fridge were the only ones.”

Sighing, Triss pulled the blanket back over the bodies, and then stepped over to one body in particular, sitting on a chair by the bowl. A blanket covered this one too, and Triss stared at it for a while before she looked down at the jewelry bag in her hand. Something shifted around inside gently, and didn't seem to show any signs of stopping, so hopefully she had enough time to get things going.

“Elen, I have a piece of Julias here.”

“Oh dear,” the old woman said. “I can sense it. I'm not sure what it is, but I can sense it.” Her voice was hoarse, quiet, but Triss didn't care. Fuck the old woman, she deserved worse than getting hung up by the wrists to dangle over a big bowl. Hell, Jacob originally had her wrists skewered with a giant hook, but the old woman's hands would probably rip off soon, and Triss needed those hands.

“You don't know what it is?” Triss held up the bag.

“I'm not a vampire. You do things differently than I would, dear.”

“Well, the ritual got the piece, and all I know is you need to... uh... fuse the piece into the body, and then you know what to do.”

She grinned at that, nodding. “I can do that, dear. I can fuse items into a body, and essence as well. I should be able to fuse whatever you give me.”

Triss eyed the old woman, before looking at the bag again. “And if it's a soul? Can you fuse a soul?”

“What is a soul? I have played with magic for a long, long time, vampire. I have never seen a soul.”

“You don't believe in souls?”

Elen smiled. “I never said that, dear.”

The damn woman was so hard to read. Her skin hung off her bones, and every look she gave had serious granny energy, but the words didn't match. Plus, the whole nearly dead but refusing to die thing made her weird to talk to, every word a scratchy, whispering mess. No wonder the hunters used to go around with an oxygen mask for her.

Beatrice tightened her grip on the bag, and looked to Jen. Jennifer got to work immediately, lighting candles in the small cave. Samantha kept on staring, looking around at the mess, the covered bodies, the dangling old woman who refused to die, and the blood. Blood was everywhere, refusing to fade or rot with Elen's magic turning the cave into one of her fleshy magic zones or whatever. All in all, it was a terrifying place to someone who wasn't used to it, and Triss wasn't used to it, let alone Sam.

It was only going to get worse.

"Black Blood," Triss said, and she held up her hands, "I summon you."

With how much death there'd been in the cave, and all the other preparations Jacob had taken to make it a summon-friendly zone, Triss didn't need to do much to call the spirit. If she wanted Black Blood to have a body to possess, so he could walk around and do shit with his own hands, she'd have to kill someone and immediately call him. But she didn't need that for a friendly conversation. And in this case, he'd have a body to possess anyway.

Black Blood crept into the room as he always did, straight out of a horror movie script. Triss tried to get used to it, hoped it'd get easier to be around, but feeling the stabbing, unnatural cold of his presence as the walls began to bleed black, was too fucking much. You didn't get used to death.

Samantha froze. Her eyes flicked around in panic, but she didn't move, didn't even turn her head. Even when the black ooze began to creep up her legs, she didn't look down, still staring ahead at Elen and the wall behind her as the creeping blackness overwhelmed everything. The candlelight turned into weak little flickers, barely brighter than fireflies, and the still air whispered with the screams of the dead. More of the black ooze flowed into the small cave, seeping out of the bowl Elen dangled from, and from the stones and bones that held the bowl.

Samantha finally squeaked when some of the black ooze literally dripped upward, falling from the floor and splashing against the cave ceiling with all the urgency of a leaky drain. She hugged herself, hands against her biceps, and she backed away toward Jen as she looked left and right. Thankfully Jen caught her, done with the candles. Surprisingly, Samantha didn't jump or freak out at a hand catching her shoulder; too busy looking at the overflowing waves of black ooze that slowly enveloped them all.

It felt like being buried alive. It felt like being trapped deep in the hull of a sinking ship. It felt like getting stabbed in the guts in a dark alley, left to bleed out alone in the darkness. It felt like being locked up in an isolation ward in a straitjacket, with all pleas ignored. It felt like dying.

No wonder Samantha eventually screamed.

Beatrice looked to Sam and motioned down with both hands. “You’re fine, girl. You’re fine. See? We’re all here, alive.”

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god.” Ok, maybe this was a bad idea after all.

“Now who in the Sam Hill is this?” a Southern accent called from the darkness. Sounded like a regular dude, probably someone in his fifties. Also sounded like an alien creature with a booming, raspy voice.

Sam Hill. It was almost funny.

“This is Samantha Terry,” Triss said. “She wants to see what we’re up to.”

“Oh my, this is Sam Terry? Howdy.” The voice came from everywhere, BB not having picked a body yet. Sure enough, Sam spun around a few times, looking for the source.

“I... I...”

Triss joined Sam and pat the woman on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about Black Blood. He can’t hurt you. Just don’t make any deals with him, no matter how small, or accept any gifts from him, no matter how small, and you’ll be fine.”

“Now Triss, you wound me.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You’d happily have us sign our souls away on a dotted line if you could make us.”

The darkness around them chuckled. “I don’t know about that. Wouldn’t be no fun if you were my slave. We’re partners. Business partners.”

“Uh huh.”

“Swear to God.”

“Uh huh.”

Again the darkness laughed, merrily at that, before his voice settled. “Samantha Terry. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Sam, hyperventilating pointlessly, stared at Triss before looking around randomly again. “You have?”

“Malachi talks about you.”

“M-Mala—”

“Jacob,” Triss said. “Old name.”

“Oh. He... he talks about me?”

“I reckon he talks about you more than anything else these days.”

Despite how obviously terrified the girl was, Sam managed a small smile. “I... um... I didn’t know that.”

“Well of course you don’t. Heavens to Betsy, it wouldn’t be very manly for a man to go telling his woman how much he talks about her to his friends.”

Oh god, this conversation was going to drive Triss to drinking. Or, drinkin’.

“I guess so,” Sam whispered.

“I know about your boy, too.”

“Jack? My son?”

“I reckon so. Boy has made a lot of waves. Got a powerful force of will, that boy. You must be proud.”

Naturally, a compliment thrown her son’s way melted a lot of the ice the Daeva was currently buried in. She smiled more.

“I am.”

“Don’t let the smooth talker trick you,” Triss said. “Black Blood is an evil fucking spirit of death and the dead.”

“Well I think that’s a matter of opinion, little missy. Now, did you summon me just to trade barbs, or did you actually have something you wanted to get done?”

Triss held up the bag. “Need you to possess Elen again. I’m gonna put... whatever’s in this bag on the body. You figure out how to infuse it into the body. Supposedly it should basically create a perfect copy of his body, or something.”

“Well now, that is some mighty fine magic you’re summoning, to get that problem sorted.” Black Blood went silent for a moment, probably analyzing the bag, and how whatever was inside it never held quite perfectly still. “Crúac ritual?”

“Yep.”

“Now where did a little witch like you learn a powerful ritual like that? I can do many things with a corpse, but to craft a living body perfectly after a dead person? That’s a sneaky bit of magic right there.”

“Had a visit from the Crone. She gave it to me.”

Silence. But before Triss could speak up, Black Blood jumped in again.

“The Crone paid you a visit.”

“Yeah. Didn’t have to sacrifice people like last time or anything. Totally random.”

Silence again.

“And she gave you a ritual. Why? Out of the goodness of her heart?” The darkness scoffed. “Unlikely.”

“Hey, you wanna take it up with her, be my guest.”

“I’m fixing to.”

Triss did not like the way he said that. That wasn’t the sound of a spirit curious as to why some god entity took an interest in Triss. That was the sound of a spirit who wasn’t happy someone he knew was getting involved in his affairs.

How much of what the Crone said had been about Black Blood?

Triss gulped down her questions, nodded, and motioned to Elen. “Well either way, let’s see if it works.”

Just as Samantha got over her fright of the spirit, she froze again as the black syrup oozed up the bowl, and up the dangling Elen’s tattered old clothes. Triss half expected Sam to start screaming again, but she didn’t, petrified as the obsidian liquid forced its way into Elen’s body. Under her clothes, under her fingernails, her tear ducts, her mouth, and her nostrils.

Elen didn’t fight it. Every night, her mind was a little further gone, and now she didn’t say a word as the spirit forced his way into her. Black Blood insisted even if her mind went, he could still use her

magic, use her for years and years until she was nothing but a ball of cancer. Insisted, but also wasn't completely sure. Fucker was one of those optimistic types.

"There now," Elen and Black Blood said together, "let's try out this item you've acquired". Most of the booming rasp was gone, but a hint of it remained, mixing with Elen's voice, Southern accent gone.

Triss glanced back at Jen and Sam. Sam was pretty much a statue, but Jen stayed close to her, close enough their shoulders touched. Should be enough to keep Sam from freaking out too much. But Triss kept her in the corner of her vision anyway, as she pulled the blanket off the corpse sitting in the chair.

"Oh my god! That... that... looks a lot like Julias."

"You met him?" Triss asked.

"Only a couple times. He'd taken an interest in Jack, and was sort of tutoring, or mentoring him. He... he was a very nice man."

Sighing, Triss nodded as she looked to the corpse. "Too nice."

The body did look a lot like Julias. Considering the amount of people they'd burned through trying to rebuild him, he'd... it'd look like a fucking Frankenstein's monster if they had to do it with tools, sewing needles and thread or whatnot. But Elen was a master of flesh magic, and Black Blood was a master of the dead. Together, the two were able to merge corpse flesh like people mixed paint. Strange bedfellows.

With Elen keeping the corpse from rotting, the body sitting in the chair looked like a perfectly normal, attractive dude. Even had blood in his body, keeping his skin looking normal. Eyes closed, he sat in the chair, unmoving, no heartbeat, no brain activity, nothing. If Triss opened his eyes, they'd stay open, lifeless. Last thing she wanted to do was look into the lifeless eyes of a Julias look-a-like corpse.

She jumped up onto the big metal bowl, and helped Elen down from the rope. As Black Blood got comfortable with the body on a chair in front of the corpse, Triss opened a small safe they had in the room. The cave was a good place to store Elen's knife and book, but no way Triss was going to leave the old hag alone with it. So Triss kept a key for the safe, one key, no copies.

She gave Black Blood the knife and book, and with shaking hands, the spirit set the book on her lap, and the knife on the book.

"Alright deary, let's see what the Crone's ritual dug up for you."

“Don’t call me that. You’re not Elen.”

“Whatever you say, sweetie.”

For fuck’s sake.

“Alright. I... I haven’t seen what’s in this bag yet.”

“No time like the present, then.”

Right, no time like the present. No time like now, to reach into a bag and pull out a moving, living thing, that was supposedly the piece of the puzzle needed to craft Julias a proper body. If the vessel wasn’t right, jamming Julias’s soul into it could lead to some freaky shit according to Black Blood and Jacob. Like, anything from eyes melting in their sockets to straight up rabies symptoms.

If Triss fucked up, they might end up with a fully aware, functioning body walking around with no soul. And who the fuck knew how that’d end up? Jacob had more horror stories, about vessels without souls, constructs and shit, that could think and act but didn’t have the spark of life in them. Sometimes they did crazy shit like start eating the hearts of people, convinced they could get a soul that way.

But, fuck it. No guts, no glory. She was a witch, and that meant risking nasty shit. That meant putting her god damn heart and soul into rituals that could leave her a scarred mess. That meant... becoming like Jacob.

She reached into the bag, half expecting to get bitten by something. But her claws found something smooth, and circular, or spherical. Slowly she slipped her fingers around the shifting thing, and removed something that felt almost like a Christmas ball.

It was glass.

Triss blinked at the ball in her hand. A crystal ball, the size of a baseball, and it gave off a gentle golden light as it gently nudged around in her grip. It teetered on the edge of her hand, and she snapped her other hand up to cup it with both palms.

She was holding life in her hands. Life, or just a memory, she couldn’t tell, but the crystal ball softly rubbed against the sides of her hands as images played within it. She stared into the ball, and forced down the rising urge to scream as it showed something she never, fucking ever, wanted to see.

Julias, on his knees, with some kine with a gun behind him. Julias, smiling. His last moments, and his last memories. Scenes of her. A lot of memories of her, playing through his mind.

Her lover had spent his final moments thinking about her.

She had said she'd need to do nasty shit. Christ, how many fucking times had she told herself this ritual stuff would get nasty, in all sorts of ways? Hundreds. But words didn't mean shit when holding the literal final moments of your dead lover in your hands. Final moments, in the form of a crystal ball.

It didn't get much witchier than that. It didn't get much worse than that.

Triss gulped down more screams, silencing every one of them, as she fought against her hands' urge to tremble. Slowly, she forced her eyes away from the repeating memories, and set the bulb against the corpse's chest. The only thing keeping her from drowning in tears was she wasn't Blushing Life.

"Ever see something like this?"

"No," Black Blood said, and his, or her, eyes stared with wonder at the shiny ball. "But I can tell what it is. The last piece of Julias in this world. Not what you expected, I guess?" Grinning, the flesh mage opened her book, and scrolled through the pictures and weird text. "Elen has a spell to merge a body with a magical object. It was meant to be used for protective talismans and the like, but I think it'll work with this."

"This... This... Christ, I'm holding..." She shook her head as she gritted her teeth, and refused to look into the ball anymore. "Just hurry up."

Elen nodded, reached out, and sliced into the body with the knife, below the sternum. Message clear, Triss slipped the ball into the corpse's abdominal cavity. Didn't get much closer than being inside.

Elen recited words from her book, and Triss took a step back. No need to be involved anymore, and the idea of the corpse opening its eyes with Julias's eyes was horrifying. What if it spoke? What if it looked right at her, and told her she was a fool for refusing to let him go?

All three vampires gasped, as the body changed shape. Naked as it was, it was easy to see where the changes happened. The muscles, the bodyfat, the hair, all of that changed subtly, enough that it fit his big and strong, lean but not six-pack-abs lean build, but it was a pale comparison to the changes of his face. A sliver of movement for the eyes. A millimeter for the eyebrow ridge. A touch of the ears. A trace of the chin. Tiny changes that each felt like sliding a puzzle piece into place, until she froze at the sight of Julias's face.

Julias took a breath.

"Oh fuck!" Triss jumped back hard enough her head hit the cave ceiling, and she crashed into the ground with a thunk.



Sam did the same, not high enough to hit the ceiling though, and Jen caught her before she fell like Triss did.

Triss scampered to her feet and stared at the corpse. Not a corpse. A living person? Oh fuck oh shit oh fuck oh—

“Relax,” Black Blood said. “The body lives. The mind doesn’t. He is an empty shell.”

He. Oh fuck, he. Triss forced herself closer, and stared down at the body of Julias. An exact replica of him, right down to the tuft of chest hair, the waves of his blonde hair combed back, and the very, very kissable lips.

She reached out, and touched them. The body didn’t react, but it did breathe. Warm breath. It’s not like breathing was something she associated with Julias; they were vampires. But seeing the body sit there, breathing, like a comatose patient, felt real. It felt so fucking real. And as she softly slid the blunt side of her claw along his lip, the heat told her it was real.

“It worked?” Jen asked.

Elen nodded. “So it would seem. The Crone’s ritual worked. Once it was inside the body, I had the blueprint to fit the pieces together. It did a lot of the work for me.”

After a few more seconds to recover, Sam stepped closer.

“It worked? That... that does look even more like Julias.”

Triss nodded. “It’s definitely him, right down to this.” She pointed at a spot on his chin. Julias was clean shaven, but sometimes he woke up from his daily torpor with a single hair on his chin. Something from before he was sired that he sometimes forgot to prevent from regrowing.

Sam gulped as she came even closer, until she touched Julias’s shoulder too. “So... so if... if I do the ritual, and we... get the parts we need, we—”

“We can build your daughter a body.” Triss smiled at the Daeva. “I can’t guarantee anything, and we have no idea what’ll happen if Mary tries to possess it, but... but it’s worth a shot, right?”

It almost hurt, watching the understanding work through her. Samantha really wore all her expressions on her face, her heart on her sleeve. From terrified to excited to terrified and back again, all as she realized what she had to do, what they all had to do, and then what could happen if things went badly. Triss was tempted to tell her to wait until they got Julias’s soul somehow, but that could take who fucking knew how long. Mary’s ghost was still around.

But if it wasn't Mary's soul, but some weird ghostly afterimage thing, the fuck would happen then?

Christ, they were all in over their heads. Even Jacob didn't fuck with this shit, and Black Blood said souls weren't something he could affect. It was all so big, so beyond a few vampires fucking around with crap. They were kids playing with their dad's gun.

But Julias sat right there in front of her. A breathing, living body. Elen's magic would keep him preserved, giving Triss the time she needed. She couldn't waste this opportunity.

"Let's do it," Samantha said, and she clutched her necklace. "Let's do it. I owe it to Mary to try. I... I owe it to myself!"

Triss grinned. Wow, a pretty huge breakthrough for Samantha to say something as selfish as that. Good. The woman was so nice and giving, she was the last person on Earth that deserved the shit that came her way. Dead husband, dead son, sorta, and dead daughter, sorta, and woke up a vampire, not her choice. Woman needed some god damn happiness in her life. Sure, she was really enjoying being with Jacob, and the Circle was pretty damn good at soothing woes with mountains of sex, but if she could have her daughter back, just imagine how much happier she'd be.

Imagine how much happier they'd all be, if they could have their dead loved ones back.

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~~Jack~~

The next night, Jack sat in his mansion, on the stairs in the main lobby. There were much more comfortable places to sit than some big stairs; shit wasn't carpet, or even wood, it was marble or something. His ass did not appreciate. But he didn't care, he had thinking to do. And a habit he picked up when he was younger was sitting on the stairs between his living room and upstairs hallway. Mary and his mom would have to step over him or around him. And one time, his dad had tripped on Jack's leg going up the stairs, and chipped a tooth. That day ended in a grounding.

"Veronica," he said, "what do you think of Antoinette?"

“The Prince?” Veronica stood near him, wearing her modern maid outfit — with one too many blouse buttons undone — and she looked up at him from her spot at the bottom. “She’s beautiful and brilliant, master.”

“Be frank, Veronica. What don’t you like about her?”

“Don’t like? She... I mean, I haven’t spent any time with her except... sexually.”

“But?”

“But... she um, she’s definitely... not, um, like most people. Like... people. Her and Elaine, they’re so... calculated. Every word, every movement, everything is all so perfected and controlled.” She smiled as she looked down. “They’re gorgeous. But I wouldn’t want to be caught alone with them. I feel like they wouldn’t hesitate to use me as a shield if someone shot at us.”

Jack grinned. Yeah, that was one way of looking at it. Elaine and Antoinette wouldn’t give a shit about bullets, but they would definitely use a thrall as a shield if they had to for some reason. Not a ghoul though, someone they poured life, time, and energy into. Right? The idea of Antoinette sacrificing Ashley and Julee if she had to, to achieve her goals, was sickening. But if she was willing to risk his mom’s life, why not theirs?

Because there’s a difference between dooming someone, and making a calculated risk, Jack. Calm the fuck down.

Jack sighed as he clutched the necklace Elaine gave him. “You’re not entirely wrong.”

“But, you love her, right? I’m sure there’s good reasons. I trust your judgment, master.”

Ah yes, the mindless devotion of the Vinculum. That was something he was quickly getting used to, something all elders were probably completely used to, maybe even bored of. Given enough time, Jack would think and act in the same way as Antoinette, or Elaine. Or even Jacob.

But Jack would either eventually turn Veronica into a ghoul, and then a vampire, or he’d ween her off his blood, and then wipe her memory so she could go back to her old life. He didn’t have the stomach to be heartless, not when it came to people who didn’t deserve pain.

“There are a lot of good reasons I love her. But we’re having a bit of a fight, and... No, never mind. Forget I said anything. That’s an order.”

She stood up straight. “Yes master.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that. Straight to the ego. He doubted all thralls were so subservient, but Veronica definitely gave that vibe, that ‘please master I’ve been a good girl, praise me love me fuck

me' vibe. Antoinette probably figured that out before picking her as a thrall for Jack. And honestly, she had been the one to pick her, not Jack. She picked well, cause god damn, the way Veronica looked at him, the happy sex slave look, struck a chord in him he didn't know was there. Maybe it was the Ventrue part of him, or just the guy part of him, he didn't know.

"The mansion looks clean."

"Thank you master! It wasn't all that dusty, and there wasn't really much to clean upstairs. The... the basement is harder."

The dungeon. Yeah, upstairs in the mansion, it needed maintenance, but without regular people walking around, there wouldn't be much dust. The dungeon on the other hand was underground, and got damp and stuff. And there was outside the mansion, the huge lawns, the statues, the fountains, all of that needed maintenance too.

He needed more thralls.

"It's a big place."

"It is, master."

"It'll need more than only you to take care of it."

"I... You're right, master. I can try, but places like this usually have a crew working on it, I think. Yard workers, gardeners, cleaners and stuff. I don't think you'll need a big crew, unless you had humans over frequently, and a lot of them."

"Definitely not."

"I'll do what I can, master. But... did you have others in mind?"

"I don't know, but Antoinette would. She knows what I li—need."

"You trust her with everything, don't you master?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Much as he didn't want to admit it right now, he did trust Antoinette with everything. He didn't want to trust her with his mom's life, but she wasn't really his mom anymore, she was Antoinette's childe. And even if she wasn't, Antoinette wasn't doing what she was doing because she was an asshole. She was doing it because it'd potentially save her city, and the lives inside it.

He hated that he agreed with her.