

~~Jack~~

He sat down on his stairs, close to the left side near Mulder. But once he was settled, Mulder hopped down on his shoulder, and Scully joined him on his other shoulder again. He almost told them to get back up on the railings, but based on their reactions, they wanted to be close to him while he had this conversation. They were picking up on how freaked he was.

“I can’t believe you’re alive.”

Mary smiled her usual, big smile, and sat down in the middle of the stairs, almost close enough to touch him.

“Only happened an hour ago. We snuck into a store to get me some clothes before coming here.” She gestured down at herself, and the jeans and t-shirt.

His mom sat down on the stairs too, beside Mary, and she made sure to sit close enough their hips were touching.

“She’s alive,” his mom said. “She has a pulse. She breathes! And she remembers everything.”

“You do?” Jack asked. No point in trying to hide his shock anymore, so he just stared at his sister, wide-eyed and frozen.

“Yeap. I remember all the times you guys visited me at home. I remember... being a ghost. I remember how crazy it was, and how hard it was to control my thoughts and actions. I remember you,” she pointed at Jack, “being mean about who I was and what was going to happen to me.”

“I... I... was just trying to be realistic.”

Mary laughed and shrugged. “I know. You’re an asshole, Jack. I appreciate that.”

Damn, it really was her. Same mannerisms. Same cheeriness he saw in his mom before Mary died, and often found in Fiona. Bubbly. Excitable.

“Jack is an asshole,” Triss said. She grinned at him as she leaned back against the closed mansion doors, Jen beside her wearing the same proud grin.

“I am not...” He threw up his hands. “That doesn’t matter! What happened? How... How!?”

Mary and his mom looked to Beatrice, and the Nosferatu shrugged and pushed off the doors to come closer.

“You probably know I’ve been up to some nasty shit for a while.”

Jack forced himself to tear his eyes off Mary and looked at Triss. “Yeah, but it’s not like you’ve been stepping on any toes or doing something horrible. Not horrible by Kindred standards, at least. Right?”

“Right.” Thank god she didn’t wince when she said it. “But things did get pretty bloody and gruesome. Took time, but we got a body ready with Black Blood’s help.”

Of course, Black Blood. Jack winced and sucked in a breath between his teeth.

“You really have to work with him?”

“Yeah. I know you got a thing against him, Jack, but he hasn’t done wrong by you. Last I checked, he saved you from Angela and Jeremiah. Twice.” She held up two fingers. “Besides. It’s not like we trust him completely. Fucker has his own agenda for sure, but for now, he’s willing to help us with this.” Before Jack could respond, her two fingers turned into an open palm, silencing him. “We finally got everything finished tonight, and Mary slipped into the body. Bam. Puzzle pieces, clicking together.”

Jack groaned as he processed the info bomb. “I... guess that’s...” It took a second, but he wiped the bad thoughts away and flicked himself in the chin hard enough to jolt his brain out of negative spiral. “I shouldn’t judge what you did. Stupid of me.”

“We’ve been through Hell together, Jack. You don’t think I’m being careful about this?”

“She is, Jack,” his mom said. “And... And look!” She squealed, causing both crows to flutter their wings in surprise, as she hugged Mary again, earning a squeak from her. “She’s alive!”

“Alive!” Mary hugged their mom back, and the two of them rested their heads against each other’s. “Oh my god I’m alive. And every thing’s so different, I—” She slowly turned her head and looked up the stairs. Oh shit, Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel were poking their heads out from the wall down the hall on the second floor, where the railing connected. “Jack?”

“They’re my thralls.”

“You built a harem.”

“It’s not a harem!”

“Jack my dear,” Jen said, grin turning absolutely evil. Just like Elaine. “Of course it’s a harem.”

“It’s... none of your business. And—” A giggle from above. He snapped his head up and shot a glare at his three thralls, and they squeaked and disappeared. “Okay, Mary. I assume Mom has been filling you in on a lot more than she probably should, about the Masquerade?”

Mary nodded. “You mean the secret nightlife stuff? Yeap.”

“Ok, good. I mean, I want to be happy and hug you and take you out to celebrate, but—”

“But you want to make sure that a, uh, ‘kine’,” she air-quoted kine, “isn’t running around Dolareido breaking the Masquerade, and getting you in trouble, or worse, getting us all killed.”

Jack leaned forward and looked past Mary at his mom. She whistled and looked away, which was actually a little weird. Yeah sure, his mom was brimming with energy and joy to the point she looked like she’d explode, but the whistling and looking away was silly behavior made her seem younger. Much as the whole situation with Mary could be connected, he got the feeling her relationship with Jacob had something to do with the change in her behavior.

The idea of Jacob making his mom behave like a young woman felt really fucking weird. But, she was smiling.

“Mom. Did you tell her absolutely everything?”

“Not absolutely everything! But... a lot.”

Jack groaned and ran his fingers over his buzzed scalp. “Ok, I guess that saves us the trouble of explaining the Masquerade and everything it contains.”

Mary’s grin was quickly mirroring Jen’s. “Yeap.”

“Okay okay. I... I don’t know what to do, honestly. We don’t let kine go around knowing about paranormals unless they’re bound to someone by the Vinculum.”

“That won’t happen.” His mom stood up and looked down at him, balancing happy and stern on her face. “After everything that’s happened, Mary—”

“It’s not about Mary, Mom. It’s about the Masquerade and the hundreds of vampires it protects in this city alone.”

Triss waved her hands through the air a couple times, like steering a landing plane. “Dude, she knows what’ll happen if she opens her mouth. After all the shit that’s happened, I’m pretty sure we can trust her to not go talking about vamps.”

That was true. As dangerous as it was to have a kine going around free without a leash of some kind, Mary had been neck deep in the worst the paranormal world had to offer.

Sighing, Jack waved a placating hand. “You’re right, you’re right. But what about... you know, life stuff? Mary was pronounced dead. Her body’s buried in a graveyard. The only way she can go back to living a normal life is if she gets a new identity.”

Mary frowned as she looked down and rubbed her palms on her knees. “A new identity probably wouldn’t be enough. People knew me. If I ran into someone who knew me, it’d be... like that time I ran into Jack.”

Jack winced again. Wiping the memory of his encounter with his sister from her mind, only for her to find it again as a ghost, had sucked. He’d apologized to her, but she’d been a pretty damn angry ghost at the time, and had smashed him halfway through a wall.

“Then you have few options,” Jennifer said. “You can either leave Dolareido and start a new life elsewhere.”

“I don’t want to leave Mom.”

“Or you can stay here and become a Kindred. There will still be the threat of being found out by people you once knew, but you will be able to manage them.”

Jack, Mary, and their mom all exchanged glances.

“You’re... not going to yell no, Jack?” their mom asked.

“I want to. But I’m a vampire, and you’re a vampire. Mary knows exactly what she’d be getting into if she agreed.” And try as he might to find a better way out of the situation, he couldn’t. His mom wouldn’t let Mary go, not now after she’d just gotten her back. But it wasn’t a good idea for a young vampire to leave the city, even with their mom; sunlight was a bitch. And if she got a new identity in the city, while still having to live a normal life, it drastically increased her chance of getting found out.

It wasn’t like vampires didn’t have this problem. Jack avoided the firm he used to intern at. He avoided the school he’d been going to before that. He avoided the neighborhood he used to live in. And thankfully, as a vampire, his skin was paler and tighter, making him look different than he used to in general. Plus, he didn’t exactly have a large ring of friends.

Mary didn’t have to become a vampire to live that life, but it’d be much easier as a vampire. Ventrue could wipe people’s memories. Mekhet and Nosferatu were natural at Obfuscate and its child Disciplines like Cloak of Night and Face in the Crowd. Gangrels and Daeva weren’t exactly good at hiding, but they could use Obfuscate too if they had to, and Daeva could turn people into doting slaves if the circumstance called for it. A human couldn’t do any of that. Plus, the superhuman strength and speed went a long way, when vamps needed to clean up a mess.

Mary raised a hand triumphantly. “I think—”

“I think,” Jack said, and he lowered her hand with his, “that you should think about it. If you wanted to stay human, we could make it work. If you wanted to become a vampire like Mom and me, we could make it work, if we can find you a sire.”

“I thought Mom—”

“Mom is about a year embraced. Siring isn’t easy, for a bunch of reasons. She shouldn’t be embracing anyone. And I can’t, not with this curse in me.”

“I would, if I had to,” his mom said, leaning forward and putting her elbows on her knees so she could look past Mary and back at him. “If no one else will, I will. I don’t care how hard it is.”

“You’ll care if Antoinette does. She’s Prince. Just because she’s your sire doesn’t mean she’ll give you a pass if you embrace someone without her permission.”

“She certainly didn’t for mine,” Triss said, shrugging.

With a purposefully loud sigh, Jack shook his head and dismissed everything with a wave of the hand. “Please, no one commit to anything yet. Let’s just... just be happy for the moment. Mary’s alive.” He poked her shoulder for good measure. She poked him back. Instant smiles. “And she can keep it that way for a good long while. I’m sure Antoinette will let you stay in the Elysium Tower, and you’ll have access to anything you want.”

“Good idea,” their mom said. “We should go back to her place, and relax. It’s safe there.”

Relax. Jack smiled at her and nodded, and she returned it, her eyes giving him a tiny hint of the shit she’d been through lately, before she looked away. Hell. She’d gone through Hell, since Mary died, and had been stuck there this whole time, working with Triss and Jen, and Black Blood, to get her back.

And Jack was getting in the way of her happiness with unwanted doses of reality. Well, reality could wait, at least for a night.

Jack raised a finger. “So, uh, we going to Antoinette’s first? Or did you want to see Jacob, Mom?” That, was a question he thought he’d never ask. Felt gross in his mouth.

“I’ll send him a message.”

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Sure enough, there he was. It was a strange thing, Jacob having a smartphone. It was easy to think of Antoinette and Elaine, and even Daniel, using smartphones, considering how much they relied on technology. The witches didn't give two shits about technology, though.

But Jacob was, as always, a fucking weird guy. He sat there on one of the stone benches, dressed in a burgundy suit and a burgundy tie, complete with black sunglasses that hid his eyes. He looked really good in it, honestly, and filthy rich. Jack bet the dude was filthy rich, and probably never touched a dime of it, except on ridiculously expensive suits no one else would be able to pull off.

The man stood up as they approached, smile growing as he saw Jack's mom, before vanishing as he saw Mary.

"Clarice! Long time no see. And Samantha! And who is..." He sucked in a breath as he came closer. "Is that... Casper?"

Casper? What the fuck? Jack folded his arms over his chest and glared at Jacob, but before he could say anything, his mom ran past Jack, and threw herself at him, full on hard enough to knock him over if he hadn't been expecting it. But Jacob stood his ground and caught her, and wrapped his arms around her as she buried her face in his neck.

"It's Mary!" she said, voice muffled by the Nosferatu's suit's shoulder.

Jacob looked — pointed his head anyway — at Jack, and then at Beatrice and Jennifer as they rounded the corner.

The group of them were standing at the entrance of the hedge maze, one of them anyway, where it opened up to the front of the Elysium Tower. While the tower itself was Antoinette's private home, the whole area was considered an Elysium zone: no violence of any kind allowed, to Kindred or kine. In the maze, maybe half a dozen young Kindred hung out, usually. Jack didn't sense any right now, but they could have simply been suppressing their presence. Or they'd bailed when they realized one of the most powerful Kindred around for dozens, probably hundreds of miles, was only a couple hundred feet away. Which meant the group had some privacy.

Mary came forward, and she looked Jacob up and down a couple times. Yeah, that probably happened with everyone the first time they saw Jacob.

"Mary," their mom said, once she let the man go, "this is Jacob. Jacob, this is Mary."

Jacob again looked at the group of them, before he finally settled his hidden gaze on Mary, and held out his hand.

“Well holy shit. You look great, kid.”

Mary smiled and shook his hand, leaning back and forth slightly as she brimmed with energy.

“I feel great! It’s amazing, having a body again. You have no idea what it’s like to just… float.”

“That I don’t.” Jacob walked around Mary, and looked her up and down a few times, too. Mary posed, no hesitation at all. “I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it,” Triss said. “We went through Hell to make it work, and it only worked cause Mary was still hanging around and—and stop looking at your girlfriend’s daughter like a piece of meat.”

“She is not meat!” Jacob threw up both hands. “She is a living wonder! And a precious gift.” Big smile returned, Jacob walked up to Triss, and hugged her, hard.

“Boss, don’t hu—urk!”

Well, dude was an ancient elder. If he wanted to squeeze Triss hard enough to pop her like a balloon, he could. He nearly did.

“Can’t believe you did it,” he said. He gave her a few more squeezes, the last one pulling a tiny very-not-Beatrice squeak from her, before he put her down. Then he aimed his sunglasses at Jen. “And you—”

“Observed. I don’t deserve hugs.” Jen put up her hands and stepped back. Twice.

Mary giggled, and so did her mom. Contagious laughter. If Fiona had been there, they’d probably have triggered an unending laughter train that’d kill anyone who needed oxygen.

“Sorry honey,” his mom said to Mary. “Jacob is a little eccentric.”

“Putting it mildly,” Jack said, rolling his eyes. “I’m surprised we’re meeting here.”

His mom nodded to the tower. “I didn’t tell Jacob why. I wanted to surprise him. But I also wanted to get Mary somewhere safe.”

Safe was a good idea. There weren’t any hunters anymore, save for the three that were getting along with Dolareido’s paranormal world. And the Carthians and Invictus were getting along again. The only dangers Jack was worried about, were Jacob and Black Blood, and they were big dangers. Black Blood was part of the reason Mary was alive again, and Jacob was standing right there in front of him. And Jack was the only person in the group who knew Jacob might be someone he’d have to confront in the future. It made it damn difficult to look at the man, and let him be so close to Mary.

“You came without knowing why?” Jack asked.

Laughing all the merrier, Jacob came over to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Samantha asked me to. What, Antoinette wouldn’t go somewhere you asked her to go?”

It took effort to not wince at the comparison. A lot of effort. Jacob knew Jack didn’t like thinking about him with his mom, and comparing their relationship to his with Antoinette really hit that nerve. Worse, the bastard winked at him. Hard to see considering he was wearing sunglasses, but the eyebrow and cheek muscles moved enough.

“If she wasn’t busy.”

“Well, I wasn’t busy. And I’m glad I wasn’t. Holy shit I never thought Triss would actually do it. I never thought... well, fuck me. Shows you what I know. Figured an old man my age would learn to never assume.” He came back over to Mary and Sam, and clapped once. “We need to celebrate!”

“We need,” Jack said, “to give Mary a break.”

His mom sighed, but nodded, and gently touched Jacob’s chest once. That was an intimate touch, a knowing touch, and Jack ground his teeth into powder. Silently.

“Jack’s right, that’s why we came here. My sire needs to know, but we also want a quiet, safe place for Mary to recover.”

Triss stepped in beside her. “And because, as much as we’re all happy as shit, we’re not stupid. Keep expectations realistic, right?” She elbowed Jack’s mom in the side, gently, but enough to make her oof. “Something could still go wrong. Everything seems good, but the fuck do we know, right? Something could still go bad.”

“Way to jinx it!” Jacob shoved her in the shoulder. “Come on! She’s breathing. She has a pulse. Looks like she remembers things, right?” Mary nodded. “Then—”

“No,” Jack said. Maybe a little harder than he meant to, because everyone looked at him, faces serious. “Beatrice is right. Everything is great so far, and I’m damn happy Mary’s alive. But we can’t assume it’s a perfect, happy ending for all quite yet. Realistic expectations.”

His mom looked like she was about to say something, but sighed and nodded as she lowered her head. Before Jack could say something, Jacob came in beside her and hugged her with one arm.

“You are one cold knife to the gut, Jack,” Jacob said.

“I’m just—”



“I know, being realistic.” The elder smiled at him, even as he rubbed his mom’s arm. “The world needs realists. Keeps the rest of us from jumping off cliffs, thinking we can fly.”

“That’s my brother.” Mary laughed again as she gave Jack a gentle punch in the shoulder. “I don’t know anything about anything, but if this doesn’t last, well at least I got to hug my mom again. And you.” And again, before Jack could say anything, Mary swooped in and hugged him.

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“Young Miss Terry?” Antoinette asked.

Mary nodded, hands at her sides and plucking idly at her t-shirt hem. “Me.”

Antoinette sat upright at her desk, red eyes a fair bit wider than Jack was used to. Shock. He knew the feeling.

“My men were wondering why Jacob stood at the base of my tower, and yet did not come to see me.”

“That was me,” Jack’s mom said, and she raised a hand. “We wanted to get here fast, so we could put Mary somewhere safe, but I also wanted to see Jacob.”

“Understandable. I assume he was quite surprised to see your daughter alive.”

“He was!” Sam giggled and gestured to her daughter beside her. “It worked! Can you believe it?”

“I... do find it difficult to believe. But I am beyond glad. Terrified, perhaps, but beyond glad. I am sure you must have had access to powerful tools to achieve such a feat.”

Powerful tools? Jack raised a brow and looked beside him at his mom and sis. They both squirmed.

“Beatrice and Jennifer did not join us, I see,” Antoinette continued.

“No, sire. They figured we’d want some quiet time, just the two of us. And... I’m pretty sure they’re afraid of you.”

The Prince grinned. “At it should be.”

Slowly, Antoinette pushed herself up to her feet. Ghost Mary had seen Antoinette before, but she still quivered a little at the sight of her. No two ways about it, Antoinette was very tall, and the white

hair and red eyes were intimidating as hell. Combined with the black suit and skirt that looked like they cost as much as a car, Mary seemed a bit overwhelmed.

“I have to admit,” Antoinette said, “this is unprecedented.”

“That’s part of the reason we’re here,” Jack said. “It’s safe here, in case things go... wrong.”

“Wrong, my love?”

“Yeah. Like, this happened only a bit ago. We don’t know what might happen.”

“Your son is forever the pragmatist,” Antoinette said, grinning at his mom, before grinning at him. Cute, making him look like the cold voice of reason in all this, when Antoinette was the colder one when it came to it.

“Yeap,” his mom said, aiming her own grin at Jack. “Jacob said the same thing.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “We thought maybe you could check and see if Mary’s ok, too? Like, with your dragon tools and stuff.”

“You would like me to prove that Mary Terry is alive and well.”

“I mean yeah, if it’s possible.”

Antoinette set a hand on Mary’s shoulder, and looked down at her with a serious gaze.

“I am sorry, but I can do no such thing. At least, not in regards to whether Mary is truly alive in the sense of the soul and self.”

“You can’t?” their mom asked.

“Non. And while I cannot discuss the fine details of my work in front of Mary, or Jack for that matter, I feel comfortable enough explaining this. My machine cannot pierce into the inner chamber where the soul resides. I am afraid the best you could hope for, is to ask a Begotten to monitor her dreams, should she have any.”

“We thought of that,” Samantha said, “but Sándor says he can’t, uh, reach the soul.”

“But he will be able to tell if she dreams, non?”

“Yeah, I believe so.”

“Any entity with a brain can dream in some form or another, but the dreams of someone with a soul should be quite distinct versus those without, to a Begotten, I imagine. After the ball, we should arrange such a test. Though, I do think that with Mary’s current state, we can currently ask the most

basic, and perhaps most powerful question, as a test.” She looked down at Mary, and his poor sister quaked. “Do you feel alive, Mary?”

They all looked at her.

“Do I feel alive?”

“Oui. Do you feel alive? A... je ne sais quois. A feeling. A kernel of awareness and desire inside you, something hidden inside emotions.”

Jack raised a hand. Well, this did suddenly feel like class.

“Emotions aren’t enough?”

“Non. Emotions can be found in anything with a brain developed enough to respond to chemicals and stimulus, same as dreams. But a soul? We know it exists. We know it affects us. But to understand it, quantify it, and measure its effects? It is how we know we are more than robots simply responding to stimulus or following processes and routines, and yet, we cannot define how we know.” She nodded as she tapped a finger on her chin. “One of the many areas of study in the Ordo.”

Jack nodded as his eyes drifted away. That made sense. The debate about whether people were sentient, or self aware, or had souls, it was all still-running debate among philosophers and scientists alike. Determinism and the nature of a soul seemed to disagree with each other, but at the same time, it was hard to dismiss that Jack felt like he had a soul, some sort of hidden spark inside him that was impossible to define or quantify. And considering the crazy shit Jack got to see in his four years of being a vampire, crazy shit even by vampire standards, he was pretty confident souls were a thing.

“I... think I do?” Mary said. “I’ve never really thought about it before.”

“I would like to say you would know instantly, but I have no way to know such a thing. Take your time, child of my childe.” Antoinette softened her smile, and gestured to the door. “Explore the tower as you wish. There are many rooms where the contents are sensitive, but they will be locked. You need not worry, so wander freely.”

“Thank you! I uh, was kinda worried you’d lock me in a box, to keep an eye on me.”

Jack grinned. “Or do experiments on her.”

Her own grin slowly turning sly, Antoinette walked over to him, leaned down, and kissed him. Deeply. Jack blinked at her when she pulled away, and then at Mary, who kept glancing his way with wide, surprised, sheepish eyes.

“I would never do experiments on someone so precious to my own childe.”

Jack chuckled and rubbed his head. Conveniently, Antoinette didn't say she wouldn't do it, just not to him and his family. And she said it knowing they'd pick up on it. Crafty.

His mom spoke next. "Mary and I are free for the rest of the night, then?"

"Indeed. Go, celebrate. This is truly a wondrous occasion. Perhaps in the future I will implore you let me examine Mary in detail, but nothing serious, and it can wait. If you decide to go out into the night, remember that she still looks exactly as she did as kine. Be careful and remember the Masquerade. I trust your discretion."

The two girls cheered, literally, and made for the door. But before they got out of the office, their mom turned around.

"Jack, you want to come too?"

Jack took a moment thinking about it. The look in his mom's eyes was so full of joy, it was almost overwhelming. Mary met his eyes too, and unlike his mom, she knew Jack well enough to know he really wouldn't like getting dragged around playing tour guide, not with the two of them bubbling with excitement and chatting nonstop. No judgment, it just wasn't his thing. Well, maybe a little judgment between brother and sister, him judging her chatty ways and her judging his hermit ways.

Back to old habits between the two of them. That made him smile more than anything that'd happened tonight.

"No, you two hang out and have fun. I know you're dying to." He winced. Fuck, that was a poor choice of words. "I'll catch up with you later, Mary."

"You sure, Jack?"

"Yeah. Go crazy. Mom's a millionaire now, or near it. She'll buy you stuff."

"Oh my god she is!" Mary hugged their mom around the shoulders and dragged her out with her excitement meter cranked to eleven. "I want ice cream! And then shoes!"

Jack and Antoinette looked at each other and waited until the door closed. A soundproof room meant they couldn't hear the elevator ding, but they waited anyway until they were confident Mary and his mom were on the way down.

"Jack," Antoinette said, and she motioned to the chair in front of her desk.

Jack sighed heavy as he sat in it, and Antoinette sat on the other side of her desk, waiting. She knew he'd want to have this conversation, and she was happy to wait for him to get to it. The Prince was too damn smart.

“I’m terrified,” he said after a bit.

Antoinette sighed, mimicking him as she leaned back in her chair. “Understandable.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. Your dead sister is alive once again. The implications alone are massive. I will not be able to keep this secret, and can guarantee witches and dragons from other cities will come to see your sister. Her life will be in danger, as others will be tempted to wisp her away for their own experiments.”

Jack stared at her, until he knew his mouth was hanging open. “I meant because she seems to be alive, but might not be! She might just be a body walking around with a ghost possessing her.”

“Ah yes, that.”

He threw up his hands. “I hadn’t even considered all that other stuff!”

“I will handle that element of the problem. Dolareido is my city, and while I am embarrassed with the sheer chaos that it has suffered these past few years, be under no illusion. I control my city.” She tapped a finger against the table a couple times.

“Hey you don’t need to convince me. I know you let Garry and Michael bash heads. You could have stopped them.”

She grinned. As powerful and deadly and ancient as Antoinette was, even she wasn’t completely immune to an ego stroke.

“I could have. At great cost, but I could have. My point is not to boast, my love. What I meant, is that I have control of this city in ways not even the Invictus understand. Were it not for Jeremiah and Elen and the magical abilities they brought with them, I would have easily crushed their invasion. I can keep your sister safe from outside threats.”

Jack winced and looked down. “Right, Elen. You think... she was involved in Mary’s resurrection.”

“Undoubtedly. Your mother stole Elen’s knife and book from my many artifacts.”

“What!?”

Antoinette put up a settling hand. “Beatrice is not stupid, Jack. She asked your mother to steal the items, so she could pursue resurrection to help your mother, and herself. I am sure that was partly because she was afraid I would say no, if she or Samantha asked me directly. But, perhaps even

unknown to Beatrice herself, she wanted to know if your mother had the commitment to follow this dark road to its end.”

“Well, damn. I can’t believe... Holy shit.”

“It is worse than that. Beatrice and your mother paved that road with corpses, though with your connections in the Invictus, I expect you suspected.”

Jack sucked in a breath through his teeth and looked to the side. “I mean, a little. Invictus get reports of kine deaths that are strange, or people who go missing that fit that ‘nobody will miss them’ bill. There’s been more of them than usual, the past few months.”

“Indeed.”

“And Mom, she... she’s changing. A lot. Faster than I can even understand.”

“You suspect the witches are responsible?”

“A little. I mostly blame Angela.” And like someone cracked a whip along his back, pain shot up his spine and into his skull. “But, yeah, knowing Mom’s been involved with murdering kine — shit kine, but still — and getting involved in witch business, is terrifying. Mom isn’t hard enough to... well, I guess I was wrong about that.”

Antoinette smiled at him. “I had thought that with everything that has happened, you would understand that your mother is resilient.”

“I do. She’s also sensitive.”

“And you are not?”

Jack squinted at her. Too damn smart.

“I am, too, but I’ve gotten pretty good at putting a wall between me and other people. She hasn’t.”

“Which makes her resilience all the more amazing. She marched through the valley of death, and felt every horrible thing she did, all so she could give her daughter a second chance at life.”

Another whip crack on Jack’s back.

“Fuck, I am so fucking terrified, Antoinette. Mom’s so deep in with this witch shit, and... and she’s so fucking happy! So fucking happy, that all I can do is think about what’ll happen if she loses Mary again.”

“Then it is a good thing her mother’s sire is the Prince, and her brother is a powerful Invictus. Assuming Beatrice’s ritual is a true success, Mary will be safe from outside influence.”

There was that. He could see things from his mom's perspective easily enough, that Mary was her daughter and their mom could protect her. It was as blind and stupid a belief as when a mom holds their arm out to stop their kid from going forward in their car seat when about to collide with another car. An instinct that wouldn't do jack shit in the modern world. But, with a Prince's resources and Jack's resources helping her, it was a lot more doable.

Until it wouldn't be.

"I know Mom is going to ask if someone can sire Mary."

Antoinette nodded slowly as she let her eyes drift. "Indeed, and such a thing is not uncommon for family members who become vampires."

"I wanted my family to grow old and live normal lives. Neither of them are cut out for the Masquerade. Or... Or at least I didn't think they were."

"Julias sired you because he knew your tenacity would ensure you would deal with your second life and carry its burdens no matter what. But not all Kindred who succeed do so because the skills they had in their first life translate well. Many rise to the occasion, a painful and horrible experience, but a defining one. Nosferatu are almost always embraced this way."

"A lot of Nos are unstable, hateful, and suicidal."

"That is true. I do not make these points to disagree with you, Jack. I make them, because I wish for you to understand that people change, and can adapt. Your mother has been a prime example." Before he could say anything about his mom and her happy nature, she put up a hand. "Finding a sire for Mary is not something to be rushed. Spend time with her, and speak with her about it. There are ways she can continue her life as kine, if need be, but I suspect your sister will follow in your footsteps."

"And be the first Terry to become a vampire willingly."

Sighing, Antoinette shook her head. "I did not realize you hated your second life so much."

"You know that's not true. I wouldn't have met you otherwise, and that makes all the Hell worth it." He smiled at her, and she smiled back. "But, there has been Hell, and a part of me would be much happier knowing Mary wasn't involved in any of this. Maybe get her into another city with a new identity and a fat wallet. Away from me, away from the curse, away from the Masquerade and the Danse Macabre. Away from hunters and monsters and ghosts and—"

“Jack. Those elements exist in other cities. She may go through life without them finding her. She may not. But no matter what happens, she will be well aware of them now. Unless you know a Ventrue strong enough to completely remove months of her memories, memories forged as a being of ephemeral matter?”

“I... don't.” Ripping out specific memories was one thing. Wiping out entire months? Not a chance. And he had no idea if he could even try, since she'd made the memories as a ghost.

“No matter what happens, your sister is now intimately familiar with the world of darkness. She will notice it, whether she wishes to or not. And vampires notice when others notice.”

Shit. Shit shit.

“It's just... she's alive, you know? Alive, I think. And I want to keep that going, if only for Mom's sake. You saw the look on her face.”

“I did indeed. I have never seen her so happy. And while I am sure she carries some concerns over the ritual, and the nagging fear that her daughter's resurrection was not entirely successful, she is happy.”

Jack looked up as he ran a hand over his head. “I still can't believe it.”

“Neither can I, little Ventrue. Neither can I.”

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~~Natasha~~

“Oh my g-g-g—”

“Everyone says that.” Samantha smiled so bright, Tash feared everyone in the room would burst into ashes. She stood beside her apparently very alive daughter, arm behind her and hugging her tight. And Mary smiled in the same way, so bright it was dangerous.

“I d-don't understand. I... I knew Beatrice was—”

“You knew.” Samantha nodded sternly. “I'm sure every vampire in the city with, um, an ear to the ground, knew Beatrice was up to stuff, right?”

“That's... true.”

“We’re all super shocked,” Mary said, holding on Tash’s gaze for as long as she could before looking up and around to drink in the sight of the tower. “Oh my god this place must have taken tens of millions of dollars to build!”

“It was the t-time to build,” Tash said, “that was the bigger problem for the Prince. It took decades.”

“I can imagine! It’s a giant underground palace!”

Well, maybe not the size of a giant palace, but it was a huge underground complex. Only someone who planned to live for hundreds of years would sink the time into building it.

“I... I um, I d-don’t know how I should... um... Are you...”

The two women giggled. They had the gigglefits, as if they were drunk. Neither of them were.

“I’m alive!” Mary swung out both arms and came for her. Tash froze, not sure what was happening until Mary hugged her as tight as she could. They’d never met.

“I’m h-happy for you!”

Without missing a beat, Mary set her down and spun around a couple times like a ballerina. Unlike a ballerina, she tripped, but her mom caught her before the poor girl could smash open her head on the black marble. Vampire reflexes putting in quick work.

“Sorry Mom.” Mary bounced in place a couple times before tugging on her mom’s arm. “Show me all the clothes you bought!”

Samantha laughed and laughed, and directed Mary in a new direction, toward her room. Their conversation devolved into the typical stuff women — not Tash — talked about when they were so excited and joyful they fell into abject mindlessness: clothes. Whatever heavy conversation moments that would normally follow having your daughter get resurrected, it seemed the two had already had.

“Want to come, Natasha?” Mary asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Um, I don’t want to intrude. You two m-must have things you want to talk about.”

“Mom and I talked a lot when I was a ghost. And we’ll talk more tomorrow! And get ice cream. But I want to have fun right now, and meet Mom’s friends.”

Tash squirmed in place, but she knew she was smiling. “Okay.”

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“You really think it’ll be a problem?” Mary asked. She was standing behind a changing screen, with both Samantha and Natasha sitting on a nearby couch. Samantha had her own room, and the Prince didn’t skimp on the extra bedrooms. It was huge, with a huge bed, walls and floors of Antoinette’s beloved black marble, and a giant walk-in closet where Mary perused her mom’s selection. Natasha and Samantha got to watch from nearby, with mother and daughter occasionally switching positions.

Under normal circumstances, Natasha would have found this clothes game silly and boring. But watching the two women overflow with happiness and practically bounce as they switched off and both tried on Samantha’s clothes — they were similar size — was too heartwarming to not enjoy.

“I d-don’t know about problem,” Natasha said, “but it will be something that needs to be done. The Masquerade is very important, and this situation is extremely... extremely extremely unusual. W-When people learn about someone coming back from the dead, they’ll come to investigate.”

Mary peeked around the screen. “But not when I was a ghost?”

“Ghosts are rare, b-but not so rare we haven’t heard of them. There are people out there who d-dedicate themselves to dealing with ghosts, either because the ghost is hurting people, or... b-because they want to help ghosts move on.” It only took a second to see the dismay cross Mary’s face. Tash looked away. “But no one’s ever heard of a resurrection.”

“Then they should read the bible.” The dismay vanished, and Mary giggled as she stepped out completely into view. “How about this?”

Samantha sat up straight with a jolt. “I don’t think so! I won’t have my daughter wearing that!”

“Mom, it’s your dress!”

“I’m a vampire.”

“That doesn’t mean you get special exceptions on how much skin you can show!”

“It’s different when you’re a vampire! It’s normal.”

“Uh huh. I don’t believe that.” Mary came closer, out of the giant closet, and did a little twirl in front of them.

It was a very revealing dress, black, with a skirt only just barely long enough to cover the ass and privates, and a single strap behind the neck to hold the flimsy chest somewhat in place. Mary had modest breasts like her mother, and that was good, because anything larger would be a liability in that dress.

“Samantha is p-partly right,” Tash said. “Vampires don’t worry about sex. Usually. It’s fun, a way to hunt, b-but it’s not as important to us as it used to be. Romantically, I mean.” Despite herself, Tash grinned. “B-But cuddly time is still as romantic as ever.”

“Tash gets two boys to cuddle with, at the same time,” Samantha said with a laugh. “She gets all the cuddles.”

Mary burst into even louder laughter as she disappeared behind the changing screen again. “You’re a lucky woman, Tash.”

So that was how Samantha wanted to play it? As Antoinette would say, en garde.

“W-Well, I mean, your mom has lots of people to cuddle with t-too. A lot lot.”

Mary, only halfway behind the screen, stepped back and blinked at Tash. “Um, what?”

“Natasha!” Samantha turned and gave Tash a begging look. “I haven’t told her everything.”

Uh oh.

“Um, f-f-forget I said anything.”

“Oh I don’t think so! I know Mom’s been having a healthy sex life with that Jacob man. And she’s right, he’s definitely got that terrifying but sexy, handsome older man thing going. But she hasn’t told me anything about other... cuddles.” A second later, Mary came back out in her jeans and t-shirt again, yanked her mom off the couch with some effort, pushed her toward the closet, and sat beside Natasha. “Gimme the scoop!”

Tash gulped and looked to Samantha.

The Daeva shook her head. “Tash, don’t tell her a thing.”

Mary’s grin turned huge and evil. “Oh, so there is something to tell?”

“This is a classic case of do as I say, not as I do, advice from mother to daughter. So Tash, don’t tell her anything.”

“So Mom’s been having more fun than she’s told me about!” Giggling and half bouncing on the couch, Mary got back up, pushed her mom further toward the closet, and sat back down. “Mom, tell me! You told me Kindred have active sex lives. You were sparse about the details.” Oh thank god she was going to interrogate her mom, and not Tash. Tash would probably have cracked.

Samantha rolled her eyes and dug through the hanging dresses. The goal was to find something to wear when the two went out tomorrow night to find her daughter some clothes, but when Mary had

found her mother's rather revealing dresses among the others, the goal had naturally diverged. Despite Samantha's efforts to keep it from doing so.

"Well excuse me for not wanting to talk about sex with my dead daughter!"

"So there is sex going on with these multi-person cuddles."

Samantha groaned, and plucked a rather plain but elegant business suit with a skirt, and held it up against her body. "How about this?"

"Ugh, a suit?"

"You saw your brother. He wears half a suit even when he's home alone."

"I just figured that was 'cause he has mansion, and has to keep up appearances or something."

"Nope. He's been seduced by the rich life now, and the life of titles and power. And I'm sure you will be too." Nodding in that 'mother knows best' sort of way, Samantha disappeared behind the changing screen with the suit.

"Hey! Don't change the topic! I want to know what my mother's been up to!"

"Your mother is a responsible adult, who also can't get pregnant or diseases." Conveniently, she left out that if Mary slept with a vampire, neither of those things would apply in that scenario either.

"And Othello is r-ridiculously handsome," Tash said. The words came out before she could stop them, and she snapped a hand up to her mouth, as if she could reverse time and stop the words from escaping.

"Natasha!" Samantha said, peeking out from behind the changing screen.

Mary looked at Tash like a hungry dog. "Othello!?"

Ah well, too late now. She'd find out who Othello was eventually.

"He's a witch. W-Works for Jacob."

"I know about him, but, what's he look like?"

"Um, he's average height, but really muscular. T-Tan skin. Long dark hair he's had in dr-dreadlocks lately."

"Sounds like a man you'd find on a romance novel cover. Milf finds romance in Hawaii!" Mary waved both hands high in the air, like she was dancing in the tropics.

Natasha burst into giggles. She couldn't help it. As much as she felt for Samantha, who was probably dying of embarrassment over this, Mary was just too happy for Tash to not pick up on it. Was she always like this? Samantha had said her daughter was a happy girl, before she died, and Jack had confirmed. Jack had also said Samantha and Mary were similar. Fiona-lite, he'd called her. It was easy to see why.

"N-Not to... ruin the fun," Natasha said, "but have you thought about what you're going to do? Not about p-people finding out about Mary, but that Mary's... alive. The... personal stuff. What you want to do with your life now."

Samantha came back out from behind the screen in her suit, smile only slightly damaged by Tash's words. She posed, as if she was the woman in stock photos of the 'woman in office' category, and Mary golf clapped, subduing her bursting joy so she could tease her mother about her reserved choice of clothes. Tash had never been this comfortable with her family, way back when.

"We haven't," Samantha said. "She's only been alive a few hours now. We thought we'd get here where it's safe, and then we could talk about it."

"But... you're n-not talking about it."

Both women sighed, and Tash winced. Calling out the thing they were avoiding wasn't very tactful of her. Jessy was rubbing off on her.

"It can't wait a few hours?" Mary asked.

"Samantha and I will b-be asleep in a few hours, and won't be up until sunset. And the P-Prince won't let you leave until we know what your plans are."

Samantha sat down on the couch beside Mary, opposite of Tash, and slipped an arm behind her daughter so she could rub her further arm.

"What do you want to do, Mary? I know Jack would want you to live a happy life as a human."

Mary frowned and leaned into her mother. "Yeah. Asshole didn't come get us when he got changed. Or, what's the word? Embraced?"

"In his d-defense," Tash said, "he wasn't allowed. He didn't have much power back then, politically. And the Prince hadn't allowed siring back then either. When he finally got the power and p-position to do things like ask about siring, things were... v-volatile."

The hunters. The curse. Even the stupid azlu showing up. It hadn't been an environment where Jack could sire, or get someone to sire his family. Convincing his family, or failing to convince them

and siring them against their will, would have been problematic. Failing to convince them and then wiping their memories would have been horrible and traumatizing for him too, after what he'd done to Mary before.

Jack's introduction into his second life hadn't exactly been smooth, either. Stabbed. Killed a kine on his first night. Killed more Kindred. Fought a giant spider monster in the sewers. Only a moron would have wanted that for his family.

"She's right," Samantha said. "Dolareido's calmed down a lot, but only recently. But that's fine! You're alive again, and now you can make a choice. And as much as Jack has a good point about how dangerous it is being a vampire, things are so much better now. Antoinette does everything she can to keep the peace in Dolareido, and it's worked."

Mary leaned into her mom for a moment as she sighed, but it was a happy sigh.

"I don't know. But, a life as a vampire does sound like it could be a good life."

Samantha held her daughter's head and cradled it into her chest and shoulder, and looked to Natasha, waiting. Hoping.

Natasha gave her a smile. "I like b-being a vampire. Yes, there's a lot of dangers. Yes, you lose the sun, and food. F-Fire can kill you so easily." Mary, still half hiding in the nook of her mom's neck, turned enough to look at her with scared eyes. "But if you can handle it, it's a great second life! The Kiss is wonderful. It's great, being p-powerful. You live forever. You never grow old. Live long enough and you get to be rich; b-but with the Prince as your mom's sire, that's taken care of. And, um, as a lot of p-people in Dolareido already know, the sex is constant, and everywhere."

Mary perked up and sat up straight. "Constant, you say?"

Samantha pulled her daughter's head back down to her and pinned the girl's head against her shoulder, frowning at Natasha the whole while. But her frown vanished and she giggled as Mary tried to get away from her. Unfortunately for Mary, her mom was a vampire, and easily held her in place. That led to some wrestling, before they burst into giggles again and Samantha let her daughter go.

"I suppose," Samantha said, "that there's no avoiding it. You're alive, your mother and brother are vampires, and this is Dolareido." After a heavy groan, Samantha gestured to the closet. "Yes, it was a slutty dress. Because all vampires are sluts."

Tash frowned, which sent both women into giggles again.

“Don’t be like that, Tash!” Samantha said with a big smile. “I suppose I should just accept it. Now that Mary’s alive, she’s going to see that side of Dolareido’s night life. Aaaaaand I’d feel more comfortable sharing some of your videos with her.”

Oh no.

“Videos?” Mary asked.

“Yes. Natasha is something of a movie director. And cameraman. And star.”

“A star! Of wh—oh.” Slowly, Mary’s smile turned utterly mischievous, and she leaned in closer to Tash. “Really?”

Time for some self defense.

“Your brother is no better! There’s half a dozen videos of him floating around.”

“Oh god!” Mary threw up her hands and covered her face. “Oh god, really?”

Samantha groaned in shared dismay, and pat her daughter on the shoulder. “You made a joke about Jack and his harem, sweetie, right? It, um, wasn’t inaccurate.”

“I mean, you told me about him and Antoinette, and that they have ghouls and thralls, and that they can be, uh, close. But I was a ghost! I didn’t really picture what that meant! And the implications!” She shivered and rubbed off her legs, like bugs had crawled on her. “Oh god, now I’m picturing it! Jack is... is... Oh god, Antoinette is so tall! And....!” She held out her hands in front of her, cupping imaginary breasts the size of beach balls.

Tash couldn’t help but laugh, and trying to hold it back turned it into a snort. “She is. And she has a really... r-really good friend that often joins her, Elaine.”

Mary counted off on her fingers. “Holy shit that kid is getting pussy.”

“Mary!” Sam gave her daughter a discouraging slap on the knee.

Tash nodded. “At the same time. On film.”

“Oh god!” Mary tried to sound grossed out, but it broke into laughter soon after. “I don’t want to see that.”

“Me neither,” Samantha said, trying to hold her frown.

A moment later, both women leaned forward slightly and grinned at Tash, until she groaned and waved a hand.

“You’re both like Jack.”

Mary raised a brow. “How so?”

“Horny p-perverts.”

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~~Antoinette~~

It did not take long for Jacob to come to her. Jack had left only moments before, and the man had likely been hiding in wait. With her sheriff on constant vigil, the Nosferatu could not sneak past him, and Daniel brought Jacob to her. A formality, and a game.

She did not rise from her desk, but she did gesture to the chair in front of her desk as she leaned back in hers.

“Daniel,” she said, “if you would be so kind? I feel this conversation deserves privacy.”

Daniel nodded, eyed Jacob for several moments until the Nosferatu chuckled, before leaving. But once the door was closed and Daniel could no longer hear, Jacob’s laughter stopped, and he walked toward Antoinette in a direct line before sitting. Jacob did nothing directly, normally.

“Ann,” he said.

“Jacob. I assume you are here to discuss one of the most extreme developments in either of our careers?”

“Ha! Yeap.”

“Dare I ask how much of Mary’s resurrection is your doing?”

The man, wearing a wondrous burgundy suit and black sunglasses, leaned back in his seat and shrugged. Why could he not wear such interesting clothes more often, instead of his usual dark robes that reeked of witch things.

“Not much. Beatrice did this all on her own. Jen helped her, but she doesn’t really have the same bug.”

“Bug?”

“You know, the spark, the part of you that really drives you.”



“Obsession.”

The man grinned. “Alright, obsession. I knew Triss would have it. Jen, not so much. But she sticks by Triss’s side and helps keep her on her feet, which makes it worth it to keep her around.”

“And Aaron and Othello?”

“They have their uses. Aaron’s smart, and I talk with him about things sometimes. And Othello’s a useful walking talking bag of muscle.”

Despite the inevitable seriousness of the conversation, Antoinette could not help but enjoy the entertaining prelude. They always were with Jacob.

“My childe certainly enjoys him.”

“Oh my. She tell you more about our time together?”

“She refuses to share intimate details, but she has admitted to enjoying time with Othello and you on several occasions. Considering Othello’s tastes, it is easy to imagine your time together. I need only suggest a certain act, and she instantly devolves into a wriggling mess.”

They both chuckled. While Jack had become more comfortable with sexual indulgence, he had not always been. Once, the mere suggestion of a foursome would have had the young man squirming. Delightful. And now Jacob was enjoying a similar time with Samantha, relishing corrupting her with physical bliss, as Antoinette had Jack.

“But I didn’t come here to gossip about sex, Ann.”

“I would prefer to chat with an old friend about the physical joys he has found with my childe, than what you wish to speak of.”

Jacob’s smile faltered. “Why?”

“Because it terrifies me to know that my childe has swam in the blood of a dozen kine. It terrifies me that Beatrice has reached into a world not even you nor I have managed.”

Her old friend leaned in closer to her. “It is fucking terrifying, isn’t it?”

“Extremely.”

“And word is going to get out. People are going to come here to see if it’s true.”

“Indeed.”

Jacob sighed and leaned back once again. “She’s Sam’s kid. I’ll do everything I can to keep her safe.”

It was Antoinette's turn to lean forward. "I knew you would, Jacob. But that is not why you have come tonight, is it?"

"No. I wanted to take a poke at the mighty Prince's brain and see what she has to say about how Beatrice did it."

"You do not know?"

"Hey hey, don't go implying that a witch's boss doesn't know the details of what his subordinates are up to! Because I do, obviously. I know everything." The sarcasm was palpable.

"Except about this."

He laughed. "I know what she did. But have you ever heard of someone putting a ghost into something?"

With a heavy sigh, Antoinette stood up, walked away from the desk, and stood before the enormous window looking out over her city.

"I have."

Still at her desk, Jacob tapped on its surface with his finger. "And what happened?"

"Violence." Unfortunately, Antoinette was all too familiar with the history of ghosts possessing things. Beings of ephemera were not true beings, not in the way living creatures were, especially those with souls. Their desires almost always ended with violence, when they were given the form to enact them.

"That makes me wonder," Jacob said. "I've never seen a ghost respond to someone so well as Mary. And I've never seen a ghost respond so well to possessing a body."

Antoinette looked back over her shoulder at the man. He was not using his usual, playful voice and mischievous demeanor. His academic side was showing through. The man she had become friends with centuries ago was showing through.

"You think she is not a ghost, but Mary's actual soul."

"You ever prove ghosts weren't souls, Misses Dragon? Any of your fancy experiments with ephemera and spirits give any hints?"

"You know they have not. And it has been ages since I have had the opportunity to experiment upon a ghost."

Jacob chuckled, but it soon devolved into a groan. After a couple seconds of annoyed contemplation, he got up, and joined her at the window.

“Too late now. Can’t detect a ghost hiding inside a living body.”

“Correct.”

“And I suppose you didn’t experiment on Mary when you had the chance because she’s your childe’s daughter.”

“And my lover’s sister.”

The man grinned up at her. “Must have taken a lot of willpower, to not head over to her house and lock it all down for your experiments.”

“Do you think I am so heartless?”

“I think I know what it’s like to have answers in reach. Consuming. Really brings out the obsessiveness in people like you and me.”

She rolled her eyes, which only earned another chuckle from the man.

“Yes, I admit that I had to control myself. But it was never a possibility that I would experiment upon Mary, ghost or soul.”

“Even now, that she’s right under your nose?”

“As you said, even if she is a ghost, there is little I can do to unveil the truth, barring extreme measures.” An exorcism relied on the body and its soul fighting against the possessing ghost, or spirit. She had no idea if it would work on Mary since she did not fight against the body she possessed, and regardless, performing one was not easy, as Jacob well knew. “And I am inclined to believe she is not a ghost. The last I heard of a ghost possessing a living person, the result was disastrous.”

“Was that person brain dead?”

“No, they were not.”

“Was that person a perfect body for the ghost, right down to the genetics?”

“No... they were not.”

Jacob shrugged, and ran a finger down her window. Shameless destruction, but at least a vampire’s fingers did not leave oil.

“Then we’re both in the dark.”

“Is that why you visit this night? To taunt us both?”

“No. I came to...” He turned and placed his back against the once perfectly clean window. “It really is ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“What is?” She blinked down at her old friend. She blinked again when he removed his sunglasses, exposing his empty eye sockets, forever cursed to look as if someone had removed them, and his eyelids, with a serrated spoon.

“All this running around and dancing, freaking out, because we resurrected someone. We’ve done centuries of work, of research, and you know as well as I a lot of us do it for two reasons: to become truly immortal, or to bring someone back from the dead.”

Despite her best efforts to keep a straight face, she knew fatigue broke through her visage, and she sighed as she looked back to the city.

“It has become an all-consuming pursuit of many dragons, and witches I assume.”

“And don’t think the Invictus and Carthians, or even the fucking churchies wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to do either.”

“Indeed.”

“Christ, I’m just so tired of it, you know? So fucking tired of digging through the mess, all because of this hilarious life and death bullshit. I mean christ, vampires are half dead, but what’s that even fucking mean? We still don’t know.” He shrugged as he looked down and sighed in the same manner she had. “It’s just so tiresome, you know? I’m happy for Sam, I really am, but something’s gonna happen to ruin it eventually. Someone’s gonna come along and kill Mary, or Jack, or maybe Sam will die, leaving her two kids fucking broken. Maybe someone sires Mary, and then she gets unlucky and catches a sunrise or a big spark from a fucking fireplace, and then Sam’s back to square one. It’s just all such bullshit. What fucking god thought this was a good system? This stupid fucking mess of life and death. It’s like one big machine just churning out crap because the old crap breaks.”

“Jacob...” What on Earth was the man speaking of? Sick of life and death?

“I’m just so fucking tired of it.” Jacob pushed himself off her dirty window, and slowly walked for the door as he slipped on his sunglasses once again. “Whoever thought up this fucking game was a colossal asshole.”

She stared after the man as he opened the door to her office, exposing Daniel waiting outside it beside the elevator door. A quick button press and the door opened, already waiting for Jacob. He stepped on it, and offered Antoinette one of his smiles, now heavy and crippled.

She did not have the heart to stop him.

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Jack and Antoinette awoke to next night's sunset, and turned to find each other first, as they often did.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good night," she said, rolling her eyes before kissing her silly little lover. "You smile."

"Do I?"

"You do."

"I guess it's because, despite all the insane shit attached to the fact my sister's alive, she's alive."

"She is indeed. Though let us quickly check." With a nod, she slipped out of bed, and sat at her desk.

"Think she went freaky zombie on us during the day and ate someone's brains?"

She smiled at her laptop as she looked over at her lover, still in the bed. But like her own smile, his lacked genuine joy. He truly was concerned.

A moment later, Antoinette brought up a video feed on her laptop. She found the young woman in the smaller entertainment room, asleep on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. The television was on, displaying news. She had fallen asleep trying to update her knowledge of current events.

"There, you see?" Antoinette pointed the laptop at the bed, before she rejoined her love and slipped under the sheets. "And if she had done something unusual, my thralls would have messages waiting for me."

"Thank god." He sighed relief as he slid closer to her, and snuggled into her body, acting the large spoon against her back. "Still trying to wrap my mind around this whole thing."

"You are not the only one." Alas, she could not share the conversation she had with Jacob last night with anyone. The words he spoke rang in her mind, and sent her thoughts spiraling into memories

of Minerva, and how her death had affected the old Nosferatu. Jacob had never spoken with Antoinette so clearly about his misery, as the night following her death, and last night.

Jack chuckled as he kissed her neck, took a few more peeks at the laptop, and returned to kissing her. “I have a feeling she’s gonna asked to be embraced.”

“Oui, I imagine she will, after all she has seen. There are few who could ignore their own mother and brother being Kindred, and their own trials at that. I cannot imagine someone coming back from the dead after experiencing existence as a ghost, only to wish for a regular life.”

“Yeah. I mean, I hope she realizes it’s not all sunshine and rainbows.” He chuckled with his own silly joke. Two things vampires could never see again.

“I am sure whoever sires her will explain, in great detail, the hardships of our second lives. As I am sure you will on top of that.”

“I—oh, look.” He pointed to the laptop. Samantha, dressed in her pajamas — a habit she refused to break — had already found her daughter and was gently shaking her awake. Antoinette and Jack watched, and both relaxed as Mary stood up and hugged her mother. Their behavior looked normal, if terribly excited.

“All is well.”

“It... it actually kinda looks like it is.”

Laughing, she turned in bed to face the boy, and nudged her nose into his.

“Our lives are difficult, but they are not always horrible.”

“No, I guess they’re not.”

Nodding, she gently pushed her lover onto his back, and slipped onto his body. He did not resist. It had become a common routine for them to spend some time come dusk to enjoy each other’s touch, even if it did not lead to sex, as it likely would not now. But Antoinette insisted on ‘cuddle time’, as Natasha would put it, and she nuzzled down onto her lover to rest upon him.

Which of course Jack loved, as it caused her breasts to overflow his chest and shoulders, before she could reach her head down far enough to kiss him.

“The ball is in several days.”

“Ah shit, I don’t have anything to wear.”

She laughed before kissing him once again, making sure to squash her bust into him as she did.

“I will find you something, my love.”

“Sexy suit?”

“No doubt.”

Soon, her little Ventrue was the one laughing, and he leaned up to return her kiss.

“You know we’re trying to stop Black Blood, and maybe Jacob, from causing an apocalypse, right?”

“That is the most cynical view possible, but oui, I understand that.” And it gave Jacob’s words last night an uncomfortable weight.

“But you still want to have a ball?”

“Oui, that I do, to maintain appearances.” Another quick kiss. “And I have information. Sándor believes the tear at the base of the ritual, deep in the realm of ghosts, has shown signs of activity.”

“A lead!”

“Indeed. Though both he and Natasha have been distracted by a new tear that does not fit into her chart. They investigate it, and will continue to investigate it, as well as follow Sándor’s lead on how to approach dealing with the original tears.”

“So some progress on Natasha and Avery’s side. What about ours?”

“Unfortunately, Black Blood eludes my attempts to summon it. It does not appear to follow the rules of other spirits, as you surmised.”

Groaning, Jack let his head fall back to his pillow. “Should I ask Triss to summon him? It?”

“Stopping Black Blood in its entirety is our future goal. Stopping its ritual is the immediate goal. Let Avery, Natasha, and the Begotten do their work. When they are ready to act, they will come to us for reinforcements.”

“Makes me worried for Sándor. The guy is obsessed with helping Dolareido.”

Antoinette nodded as she relaxed further, letting her head come down between her shoulders so her forehead could find her love’s.

“You are quite right, but he is not only a powerful creature, he is Begotten, one of the few capable of reaching into these strange realms. And from what Natasha has proven, such a skill will be required if we wish to stop Black Blood’s ritual.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ coming.”

“But, Avery and Natasha are convinced more azlu are hiding in the realm of ghosts. And perhaps, hiding in wait.”

Jack shivered. His fear was warranted. The infernal creatures had proven to be deadly, resilient, and unhealthy for her city. At worst, they could prove to be a massive Masquerade risk.

“So, what you’re telling me, is we’re coming up short on ways to stop Black Blood himself—itsself, but we might be ready to interfere when it starts the ritual? Assuming it’s going to start at the bottom tear.”

“Correct.”

“But there are azlu around. And the two times we’ve dealt with azlu, Avery lost one of her pack, and... I went ballistic against the other one.” Again the young man shivered. “That reminds me. Sabrina make an appearance yet?”

“Non. And if she did, it would be an extremely unusual event. Ghosts linger in the world, but I have never heard of a ghost leaving another realm, this Great Below, to return and cause mayhem.”

“She did, somehow. No idea. Maybe she talked to Mary from across the realm? All I know is she talked to Mary, and that she can hurt other ghosts with that knife of hers.”

“Then it is a good thing your sister is no longer a ghost.”

“True.”

“And it is also a good thing that Avery and her pack can manage ghosts in much the same way as spirits. If she runs into Sabrina, she will manage.”

“True...”

Antoinette groaned and sat up, driving her weight through her hands into the boy’s chest to crush him into the bed. His wince told her she had succeeded. “Jack. Do not tell me you are thinking of helping them.”

“I uh, I think I am.”

Without any hesitation, she wrapped her hands around his throat and gave him a hard shake, hard enough to have the bed trembling.

“Do I have to stake you and lock you in a coffin to keep you from throwing yourself into harm’s way?” She shook him several more times, determined to sink her words into his mind. Though upon

reflection, she realized shaking him in such a way that had her breasts bouncing about in front of his face was not the best way to get through to the boy.

“Come on. We don’t have any idea on how to lock Black Blood up, or kill it. If I can put the curse to good use and help Avery and Tash and Sándor, I should, right?”

“I would prefer you did not put yourself into direct confrontation with that abysmal spirit, Jack, or azlu monsters.” Her grip relaxed, and she rested her hands on his sternum.

Sighing, Jack reached out and set his hands on hers, and held them gently to his chest.

“Antoinette. If shit gets as bad as we think it might get, not stopping this ritual is not an option. And that means dealing with the azlu, too.”

Matching his sigh, Antoinette looked to the laptop. The two women were sitting on the couch now, cuddled into each other once again, and watching whatever was on the television.

“There are three women who will be especially upset if you die on another one of your heroic adventures of self sacrifice, my love.”

Jack looked to the laptop, but when he looked back to her, he smiled.

“No self sacrificing here. I fully plan on living through this.”

Ah yes. While Antoinette’s words did not seem to resonate with the boy, Azamel’s dying words had reached him. Hopefully her death would keep her love from a similar fate.

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~~Eric~~

The sheriff was a creepy guy.

“No no no! Come on, Sam. You’re a Daeva, lean into it!” Jessy said. Eric winced as Jessy grabbed Samantha’s shoulders and pointed her to face the changing mirror. “Needs more cleavage.”

Sam looked to her daughter pleadingly, but Mary just laughed and gestured to the mirror.

“She’s right Mom. You have to lean into the sexy vamp milf thing. Don’t get all embarrassed just cause I’m here now.”

“Mary!”

Natasha groaned and rubbed her forehead with both hands. “Jessy, d-don’t corrupt everyone please.”

“I am not corrupting! Mary just said it, Sam is a total milf, with the witches under her thumb, and tits. And the city knows it too. She should lean into it and really build herself a reputation.”

“As a slut,” Samantha said, frowning softly at her reflection. Though even Eric could see the conflict in her eyes. She didn’t believe her own words.

Eric, a good ways back from the girls, glanced Daniel’s way, but the man stood in front of the window and stared out into the street. The clothing store was closed, and everyone who walked up to the store wanting in, took a quick glance at the lanky man with the trench coat and glasses, and left.

Jessy raised a triumphant hand. “Yes, as a slut. All Daeva go through that phase. Boss tells me it usually lasts a decade or three, before they ease up on the crazy sex. I say enjoy it. Now, you need something that tells everyone you are milf supreme, but you also need something that says you’ve got the special privileges of a Prince’s childe. So, lots of skin, but also maybe something really sparkly? Maybe super obvious, flashy jewelry? It’d be gaudy on someone else, but you can pull it off ‘cause of your title.”

“She’s got a point, Mom. Maybe not sparkly exactly, but yeah, go fancy.”

That got a chuckle out of Jessy, and Eric. He couldn’t help it. Jessy’s brazen attitude was rubbing off on him, but it also looked like it wouldn’t take much to get Mary on board with the sexual lifestyle of Dolareido’s vampires. There were definitely similarities between her and her mother, but some extreme differences too. Mary was definitely more outgoing.

Eric got up from the short backless bench. It wasn’t very comfy anyway, just a bench meant for changing into absurdly expensive shoes. And much as it was fun to watch Jessy corrupt people, and see ladies try on particularly revealing expensive clothes, it was probably best he get out of there before someone said something so embarrassing, Samantha burst into flames on the spot.

So he came over to Daniel, and stood beside the man, looking out the window. Eric was in a casual suit, his work clothes. It was a nice suit, dark, no tie, but it looked like shit compared to the other clothes in the place. Who needed a two thousand dollar dress that was barely more than two straps connecting into a skirt half an inch long?

“Spot any azlu?” Eric asked. He knew the answer, but maybe a little small talk with the ancient vampire would make him seem a bit less creepy.

“No.”

Ah, the natural straight man. Problem with that was Eric wasn't a funny guy. He couldn't rebound jokes off him. Which meant talking with the straight guy, especially one as scary as Daniel, would be an awkward, painful conversation.

“You're here to keep an eye on Mary, I assume.”

“Mary and Samantha.”

“Right. When this gets out, Mary's going to be the focus of attention for a lot of people.”

“Correct,” the sheriff said.

“And Black Blood? Any sign of it?” Eric lowered his voice. There were dozens of racks of clothing, and a couple of walls, between him and the girls, but they were also vampires. Good hearing.

“It hides, even from me.” Right, Jessy said Mekhet as strong as Daniel were capable of some extremely weird shit. Like, could find and spot shit hidden behind, between, or underneath anything. No one really knew how. “And you? What of the new tear?”

“Nothing. An azlu's been there, and we think it came back when we were gone. There's more webs. But it's gone again when we show up.”

“It sounds like a distraction.”

“Yeah, our thoughts exactly. But we can't find traces of it elsewhere.” Which was terrifying in its own right. Azlu killed and ate humans, and werewolves too. It'd come out sooner or later to feed, and as much as paranormals weren't human, they did like to prevent innocent people from getting killed.

On top of that, Avery didn't know how the azlu spread. They were hard to kill, but that didn't explain how they'd survived for thousands of years. They reproduced somehow, and it was a good bet they had to eat to do it, both humans and essence. Dolareido becoming the breeding ground for azlu was a big no no, and Avery considered it an existential problem that had to be dealt with.

Which meant Avery was hyper focused on the azlu, even as she tried to help Natasha stop the ritual. Which meant keeping their attention on the ritual was getting difficult. Which Black Blood wanted.

“It's vexing, isn't it?”

Eric looked up at the man. “What?”

Daniel nodded back behind him, but otherwise stayed still and continued staring out the window.

“Black Blood has been a thorn in our sides for two centuries at least. At first, we didn’t know about it, who or what it was. But it’s shown up in our lives on several occasions, interfering in our experiments. It toys with us, using its grand power, and strange knowledge. It’s taunted us, broken our experiments multiple times. It’s laughed at us as we poked and prodded at things we didn’t understand back then.

“What relationship Jacob developed with it in that time, we still don’t understand. But we do know Black Blood has never actively harmed us. It’s been a menace to us dragons here in Dolareido, and we know it’s been involved in various rituals Jacob has cast over the years. Some of those rituals caused trouble, attracted attention, but all damage to the Masquerade was repairable. And the kine that died were kine the city was better off without.

“So now we’re all convinced Black Blood is trying to bring about ruin. Even assuming Black Blood is to blame for the short war between Carthians and Invictus, Azamel caused us more harm in her first visit here, decades ago. Simon and his pack caused us more harm in his visit here, decades ago. Viktor and Tony caused us more harm. And Lucas caused us the most harm of all.” Daniel had said all of this with a straight face and monotone voice, but when he mentioned Lucas, the man finally scowled, slightly. “Fucking religious zealot.”

Holy shit, the sheriff was capable of cursing. Holy shit, the sheriff was capable of actually talking. And apparently he was pretty good at it, lack of inflection aside.

“You think... we shouldn’t be bothering with Black Blood?”

“I think assuming the spirit is trying to be our undoing is a mistake. There is something going on here, something we don’t understand, and getting in Black Blood’s way could end... problematically.”

“You should have seen him fight Red Tide. It was like watching a giant monster movie.”

Daniel sighed. The man might as well have screamed in frustration, knowing what little Eric knew about the sheriff.

“We’re walking into a trap.”

Eric winced as he looked back out the window. “Yeah, probably. But our hands are tied. We have to stop the azlu, and knowing what we know about Minerva, we have to stop Black Blood too.”

“A spirit more powerful than any of us truly understand. A spirit that has never harmed us, directly at least. We are poking the bear.”

Eric laughed. Daniel didn’t. Ok, so much for sharing a chuckle.

“We probably are, but—”

“Eric! Dude, I got three girls back here half naked and you’re nowhere to be seen!” Jessy stomped out from around the corner wall of the huge, winding clothes store, came up to him, and grabbed his hand. “Come on. I need a man’s opinion, too. The sheriff will be as useful as a paperweight for this, so get over here.”

Daniel shared only a quick glance and the tiniest grin Eric had ever seen, before Eric was dragged back to watch Jessy corrupt Samantha and her kid. But honestly, it didn’t seem like it’d take much. Horniness seemed to run in the Terry family.