

~~Jack~~

Thick, dripping gold leaked from the tear, near the bottom, like someone had sliced a gash through a bag full of barely molten gold metal. Gold mist joined it, and gently flowed out over the black water until it nudged up against the crowd of people watching. It was warm.

The glow increased, but it didn't burn his eye anymore. For just a split, wishful second, he thought maybe the soothing warmth would heal his injuries. Nope. It felt nice though, calming, and a glance back showed everyone relaxing. Danger over. Whatever these flying orbs were, it certainly didn't seem like they were gonna hurt Jack and the gang. They were the reason Black Blood was now locked up below, or something. And whatever this gold water leaking out of the tear was, it was good.

Everyone came a little closer, except his mom. She stayed with Mary's ghost, stroking the monster's hair. A couple times she glanced toward the singed robe Jacob had worn, still half floating in the shallow water where he'd died, where she'd killed him, before she looked back down at the ghost and whispered soothing things to her. Jack wanted to go to his mom, to calm her, help her, something. But the gold light called to him, literally, with a voice.

"Jack," the gold aura said. "Jack."

"Antoinette," Jack whispered, "am I—"

"I hear it, as well. It beckons you," she said. Not a voice in his head, then, thank god.

"Jack." Avery came up beside him and gave his shoulder a small tug. "I recognized some of the words those things spoke before. First Tongue." She gestured to the glowing orbs. "Those things are old, Jack. Very old. They were talking about... something about a great game. Or, machine. No clue what they meant."

Black Blood had mentioned something about a machine. Jack had assumed the giant god was being metaphorical. Maybe not.

"Think we should, uh, run away or something?"

Avery snorted and shrugged. "None of us are in any condition to run."

Jack gulped on a dry throat, and looked back up to Antoinette. Antoinette shrugged as she set her eyes back on the gold tear ahead, and the gentle flow of gold it released. The gold continued to spread out, pushing the black water aside. It was so beautiful, glittering and hypnotizing, Jack drifted closer toward it anyway. And so did the others, though they had the good sense to stay behind him. Like

penguins waiting for one to fall off the cliff first, to know if it was safe to swim. He couldn't blame them.

The flowing gold water came up to his feet, and Jack dipped his toe in it. No reaction. He put his foot down on it, until it sank up to his ankle. No reaction. It felt more than soothing though, it felt wonderful, like someone was caressing him. Like, drinking hot chocolate and sitting by the fire; not that he'd ever done that, but it'd certainly looked comfy in the movies and videos he'd seen.

He came closer. The tear's crazy rainbow colors were gone, replaced with an endless gold that glowed in gentle waves. He came closer. The aura shifted and altered slightly, not changing in any major way, but responding to his presence. Well, he wasn't on fire. It wasn't vampire bane. So, he came closer.

A hand, a very human hand, reached out from the tear. And Jack took it. It was solid, and as warm as the gold water around him. He half expected the hand to pull on him, but they didn't. Jack pulled on them.

Mary stepped out of the tear.

"I... I..." Jack stepped back as he let go of her hand, and looked her up and down. Mary, looking very much alive, and very much naked. The gold glow didn't just come from the tear, it came from her body as well, conveniently hiding her private parts, somehow without hiding any of her features. It was Mary, with her shoulder-length brown hair, soft face, and bright eyes, all gold tinted.

"Jack," she said, smiling. "Wow, right?"

"Um, yeah... wow. I, I uh... I don't understand, what's—"

Mary pat him on the shoulder, her beautiful smile paralyzing, and she walked past him. He managed to force his head to turn enough to watch her, and see how everyone else was as frozen as he was, as Mary approached her mother.

Mary's ghost and her mom stared at the oncoming figure of gold. If they noticed the audience of hypnotized onlookers, they didn't show it. No one noticed anything or anyone else anymore, except for the gold figure walking toward her mom, and her own ghost. Even the giant seven glowing orbs had become an afterthought.

Where she walked, the gold water followed, staying just ahead of each step.

"Mom," Mary said, once she got close, smile slowly changing from its usual playful shape, to something more serious. But still a smile.

“Mary?”

Mary giggled as she sat down, with absolutely zero grace. If she'd had grace, it wouldn't have been Mary. She sat just across from her mom, with her ghost between them.

“She doesn't have much time, I don't think,” Mary said. “Let me talk to her.”

“She's... dying?” her mom asked.

Mary shook her head. “No, but she'll keep changing. There won't be much left of her soon. I can't believe she's lasted this long, after everything that's happened to her.”

Jack dragged himself closer. No one else so much as moved a single finger, every one of them staring at Mary.

“It's okay,” the ghost said. “It's okay. Mom's safe. Safe! That's all that matters.”

“That's not all that matters,” Mary said.

The ghost let out a little whimper, raspy high-pitched shrieks underneath it, loud enough to be heard but quiet enough they sounded more like distant screams in a forest. Echoes on the wind.

“Mom should go,” the ghost said. “Go. Don't stay. I don't want her to see me like this.”

“Mary,” Mary said, and she leaned in close to the ghost and her panicked, wide, empty black eyes, “it doesn't have to be that way.”

“It... It doesn't?”

“No.” Mary smiled warmly down at her ghost, the same smile Jack had seen their mother use so many times, when she wanted to be soothing. The mom smile.

“I don't understand.”

Mary set a hand on her ghost's shoulder. “You can stay here, and change into something... big, and scary. Or, you can come with me.”

Mary's ghost tried to sit up. It didn't work. She collapsed again on her mom's lap, and her long centipede body splashed a few times as she tried again. She gave up, and relaxed on her mom's lap, head tilted to keep looking up at her original.

“Go with you?”

“With me. Truly with me.” Mary put a hand on her chest.

The ghost looked up at her mom, but she was speechless, eyes slowly sliding between her two daughters.

“I... I can feel... weight, pulling me down. I don't know how I can—”

“Ghosts can crossover, and join us, in there.” She pointed to the gold tear. “But, they... they almost never do, when they come to the Great Below. And they never, ever do, when they get this deep, lose their lantern, and... do this.” She gestured to the long, hideous body coming out of the ghost's waist.

Mary's ghost sniffed, as if she was crying. “What will happen to me?”

“You'll join me. Together, here.” Again, Mary pat her own chest. “Together as one. I've seen it happen to others in the great river, when ghosts manage to cross over. It's always so beautiful! It's just, never happened like this.” She gestured to the tear. “But that just means it'll be even more special.”

“I won't disappear?”

“Nope! Your memories will join mine, and we'll become one. And believe me, Mary, the great river is a much better place than this dirty, cold cave, filled with angry ghosts who'll try and eat you.”

“But... Mom...”

“Mom will be fine. I...” Mary sighed as she looked over at Jacob's robe, then back to her mom, resummoning her smile. It was a sad smile. “You and I, we can talk with Mom after. But right now, you need to make a choice before things get any worse.”

Jack came closer. He knew what'd happen, once he got close enough. Much as Mary, and Mary's ghost, looked to their mom for everyday, normal advice, Mary knew to ask Jack when it came to the heavy hitter problems. Sure enough, the ghost looked up at him as Jack got close enough to almost touch her.

“What should I do?”

Jack smiled down at her. “It's not even a question, Mary. Go with her.” The craziness of the situation could wait. For now, logic mode. “You saw what those other ghosts were like. You saw the one in the hole.”

The real Mary nodded. “You lost your lantern, right? You'll never get out of the Great Below without it.”

So that's what the lanterns were for. Something ghosts needed if they wanted to get out of the Great Below. Something they lost, if they went deeper, and changed.

“Lantern?” the ghost asked. “I... I never even... tried to use it. It’s gone.”

Mary sighed. “You lost it, because of the resurrection, and... Never mind, it doesn’t matter. All that matters, is I’m here, getting to make a special exception.”

“Go with her,” Jack said. “Special exception.” And he dug up the best smile he could find. This was really happening. Mary’s ghost was getting a chance at happiness. Finding a smile wasn’t all that hard.

Mary’s ghost looked up at him again, giant black eyes heavy with a sorrow and uncertainty only a ghost could show, before they looked back up, this time to their mom.

“Go with her,” their mom said, stroking her daughter’s ghost’s hair, and she sniffed. She couldn’t cry without Blushing, not really, but she sniffed like she was anyway. “Please, go with her. You deserve it.”

Mary’s ghost looked down, her long, slashed and broken centipede-like body wriggling a little, before she looked back up at the real Mary.

“Okay.”

Jack, their mom, and the real Mary, all sighed relief.

“Okay,” Mary said, and she set her other hand on her ghost’s shoulder. “Okay.”

Mary, already a gently glowing body of gold, glowed brighter. Jack’s vampire instincts told him to back off, or at least cover his eye, but he didn’t. He needed to see this. His mom did the same.

The giant, horrific creature that was Mary’s ghost, melted away. Her shark mouth settled into a soft smile, and her giant freaky eyes closed, as the white mist of her body changed color. More gold. It flowed slowly and gently up toward Mary, the ghost’s features disappearing, like an ancient statue getting worn down by a desert storm, but far more softly. Despite the almost blinding light, Mary’s ghost didn’t flinch or twitch or anything. She wasn’t in pain. She was calm. She was at peace.

It wasn’t long before her giant body was completely gone, now a cloud of gold dust that flowed onto Mary’s chest. It siphoned into her, slowly disappearing into her, every grain of sand following suit. No rush to it, no tornado or harsh siphon. The whole process was as gentle as someone tenderly pouring sand out of one palm into another.

And then there was one Mary. The bright light settled until it was only a soft glow again, and Mary opened her eyes with a small squeak, and set her eyes on her mom.

“Mom?”

Their mom blinked at her. “M-Mary?”

“Mom!” She threw herself at her, and almost knocked her over as she embraced her.

Their mom blinked down at her daughter, then up at Jack again. Jack could only shrug. Don’t ask him, he was just as confused. But with a few seconds to accept what just happened, their mom hugged Mary back, and let out a quiet whimper as her arms found something solid. And warm.

“It worked,” Mary said. “I... oh god, I... I didn’t know.”

“I don’t understand,” their mom said. “I thought—”

“It worked! Her memories are mine. Mine are hers. I... oh my god.” She giggled, a lot, and squeezed her mom so hard she earned a squeak out of her, too. More than that, she helped her stand up, and resumed hugging her. A solid body, but not flesh or skin. Something their mom could hug, but Jack knew it was only going to make things sting even more, when Mary went back to wherever she came from.

It didn’t matter. This was perfect.

He came in a little closer, and Mary giggled and jumped and yanked him in for a hug, too. Which may have been a mistake, considering how much it hurt to get squeezed, fucked up as he was, but it didn’t matter. He got to hug his sister again.

“Jack, you asshole.” Mary eventually let him go, and punched him in the chest. She had no more strength than a regular human, but that was more than enough to make him grunt and stumble back. Only their mom holding Jack with an arm behind his back stopped him from falling over.

“Hey! What’d I do?”

“Don’t tell me you weren’t hoping to leave me—er, Mary’s ghost, behind here! I saw the looks you gave me.”

He winced as he looked down. Shit. Ghost Mary was unstable and not right in the head. This Mary very much was.

“I mean—”

“It’s okay it’s okay.” She groaned as she let go of their mom, and hugged him full on, putting her face in the crook of his neck. “I was... I’d lost my lantern. There was no saving me.” She kissed his cheek, giggled some more, and before their mom could say anything, she hugged her again. “I was so jealous.”

“Jealous?” their mom asked.

“Yeah, of me, the um, the ghost Mary. She got to see you again!”

“You could see?”

“Yeap. You can watch the realms below, from the great river. Everything.” She giggled as she grinned at her mom, but the giggling died away as she glanced back to look over at Jacob’s singed robe. “I... I’m sorry, Mom. I think you did the right thing, I do! But I can’t imagine—”

“It had to be done,” their mom said, and she hardened her expression a little before looking to Jack. “Right?”

“It did,” Antoinette said, filling in for Jack as she came closer. “He had to be stopped, permanently. I would not trust myself to stab his heart perfectly in such a circumstance, either. The only option was what you did, my childe. And we are all thankful.”

Mary nodded and hugged her mom again, before turning enough to look at the rest of the crowd. Everyone had drifted a bit closer, and we’re all looking at the gold figure, and her mother. Everyone took a quiet minute to just stand there, and stare at what was happening. It was a minute too long, and Samantha’s expression started to crumble.

“I killed—”

“Don’t!” Mary hugged her again, as if she could protect her mom from her own thoughts. “Don’t. Don’t think like that. You heard the Prince, it had to be done. Okay? Okay? I told you I didn’t want what Black Blood was trying to do, and you listened. You made the right choice.”

Their mom sighed as she hugged her daughter back, and stroked her hair as she kissed her forehead.

“Okay.”

“Agreed,” another voice said. “It had to be done. You can always trust a Terry to do what needs doing.”

Jack spun so fast he almost fell over, only his mom’s arm keeping him up.

A tall man stepped out of the tear, as naked as Mary, but again with a gold, glowing body conveniently hiding private parts with the gold glow. He had broad shoulders, a decent amount of muscle, and short-ish hair combed back. If everything hadn’t been tinted gold, his hair would have been blonde.

“Julias?”

The man winked at him as he walked up to join Jack, and set a hand on his shoulder.

“Kid, I have to admit, it looked pretty bad from where I was looking. Can’t believe it worked out. I—”

Jack threw his arms around him, and squeezed.

“You fucking... you fucking asshole.” He squeezed harder. His body didn’t want to, muscles crying, and his jaw screamed at him for risking breaking it again, but he didn’t care. He pressed his forehead against Julias’s sternum, and held him.

“Not exactly Ventrue behavior, Jack.”

“I don’t fucking care.”

Julias laughed and pat him on the back. Of all the things Jack had expected, he hadn’t expected this. And even in his fantasies of getting to meet his sire again, he never expected to hug the man like this. The two of them were a lot of things, had been a lot of things, but the hugging bros type? Never.

But he was here, and no way in fucking hell was Jack not going to hug him.

“Fuck me, I’m sorry kid. I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No one knew what Jacob was doi—”

“Not that. The curse. The infection. I knew Viktor and I had something dark in our blood, but I didn’t know about the curse.”

Jack sighed as he stepped back. “Only one person knew.”

Slowly, with a little more malice than a gold being from the afterlife should probably have been able to muster, Julias set his gaze on Elaine.

“So I’ve gathered.”

Elaine winced as she came closer. Her face had managed to regenerate enough she could see again, but she was still a broken mess, worse than Jack. The only reason she was still standing, was all the damage was above the waist.

“I am sorry, grandchilde.” She looked down, before her eyes looked to the glowing tear. “Is... is Maurice...”

Julias shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. His shadow is there, but the rest of him isn’t, not until...”



Elaine sucked in a quick breath, nodding. “Do you know if—”

“There’s no rush, grandsire. No rush.” Nodding, Julias stepped past Jack, up to Elaine, and pat her on the shoulder, too. “And after what you’ve done tonight, I think he’ll be okay with waiting. You’re not the woman you used to be, if the other souls I’ve talked to are any indication.”

It was like someone had lifted a ten-tonne weight off the elder’s shoulders.

“Other souls...”

Nodding, Julias pat her on the shoulder a second time, before he turned, and looked through the watching crowd, until his eyes settled on someone specific.

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~~Beatrice~~

Oh god oh shit oh god.

She didn’t know what was happening. None of them had any fucking clue what was happening. Black Blood crossed a line, so now some giant glowy orbs showed up to do damage control? Sure, whatever. But then Mary, the real Mary, her soul walked out of the tear and saved her ghost from what would probably have been millennia of torture, down here as some sort of fucked up monster.

So, sure, Triss could accept that. Mary’s ghost deserved help. But Julias, her Julias, glowing all gold and naked and shit walked out of the tear, and was now walking toward her. Her Julias. The dude whose body she had ready in a cave!

She froze.

Superman smiled at her as he came in close, and closer, until he set his hands on her shoulders. Warm, warmer than vampires ever were unless they were Blushing Life.

“Triss,” he said. She forced herself to look up, and meet his eyes. “It won’t work.”

She sighed, finally finding the ability to move, at least a little, and she set her hands on his wrists.

“It won’t?”

“No.” He gestured beneath them, at the glowing gold water. She’d barely noticed it. “This is just a piece of the river, and I can’t leave it.”

“River? I don’t—”

“It’s all metaphorical crap for the afterlife and stuff. This, the gold body, all of it. I can’t leave the river. If you wanted your plan to work, you’d have to be a god, and bring the realm with you, maybe ruining everything for everyone, like Jacob and Black Blood nearly did.”

Shivers worked up through her body, and she lowered her head. She was crying. You didn’t need tears to cry.

“I... I missed you, so much. I—”

He leaned down, and kissed her. Her eyes went wide, and she stared into his, but they were closed, doing one of those classic, big time romantic kisses that were always so over the top, they made her feel like she was on a stage. And god damn it, the memories grabbed her and grabbed her hard. She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him back.

“Sorry,” he said eventually, pulling his head away a bit. “That was dumb. Couldn’t help myself.”

“Dumb? I—”

“You know why.” He nodded his head toward Sándor slightly.

“But, I... you...”

“Triss, I spent every moment in that river, hoping to God you’d let me go and move on. It was fucking killing me — no pun intended — seeing you trying so hard to not let go. I want you to move on.”

“But we—”

“Triss.” He sighed as he hugged her, and kissed her forehead. “I’m dead, alright? I’m dead. And that’s okay.”

Fire shot up through her hands, and she punched the man in the chest. He stumbled back.

“It’s not okay! You shouldn’t be dead! That wasn’t fair! You got yourself killed trying to help Jack! You think that’s okay? You fucking shit! You asshole! You fucking—”

He hugged her again. She squirmed and fought against him, but he held her close, and god damn it, she gave in.

“I couldn’t let Jack die. And I couldn’t Samantha die, either.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“But you’re right to be angry with me.”

“I know.”

He laughed and stroked her hair. She relaxed against him, and sobbed a little longer.

Noises grabbed her attention, and she turned her head enough to see back to the tear. More gold shapes emerged from the glow, more and more, a whole bunch of people she didn’t recognize. And a few she did.

The gold souls stepped up to the group, each of them never leaving the gold water that leaked out of the tear. Each of them, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, sometimes more than one, found someone in the crowd. And the crowd was, predictably, frozen with shock. None of them expected to this. How could they?

Laughter grew from the gold souls when they realized they had to be the ones to break the silence, and they ran up and joined whoever it was they came to see. Some dude ran up to Clara and hugged her. A woman Triss recognized ran up to the werewolves and hugged each of them: Stephanie, the one who’d died to an azlu a few years ago. The other werewolves came, too. Carter, Monica, and Caleb. Others Triss didn’t know, came up to Avery, and the old woman broke into tears. Old pack mates?

A woman came up to Eric, and hugged the stunned man.

“Mom?” Eric said, so quiet Triss had to read his lips to hear it over the growing sound of dozens of people talking.

The woman squeezed her son, and kissed his cheek, before hugging him some more. She gestured to Jessy, too, and gave the woman a quick hug before starting a conversation, which had Jessy squirming. Apparently, she was scolding the Gangrel, and she gestured to Jessy’s... breasts, on a couple occasions, and mentioned Eric’s dad. Weird.

Two people came up to Natasha, a man and woman. The little vampire was reduced to sobs instantly, and she hugged them like they’d vanish any moment. Probably not far from the truth.

“Julias,” Antoinette said, “I... I do not understand. Please, tell me what is happening?”

Julias shrugged as he stepped away from Triss. She was tempted, so damn tempted to hold on, but some piece of her, the wise part maybe, told her it’d be a mistake.

“Black Blood’s tear managed to reach across the chasm. Just a little, a tiny sliver. And the guardians”—he gestured up to the glowing orbs—“figured, after what you guys managed to do, you’d earned a quick visit from us.”

“The chasm?”

Julias put up his hands. “Sorry, can’t talk about it. But the guardians there gave us what we needed to cross it, and visit for a bit. Those of us that haven’t sailed on past the horizon yet.”

Sailed on? Past the horizon? Was the afterlife a pirate adventure?

“How long is a bit?” Triss asked.

Julias smiled down at her, but it was one of those somber smiles he used when he was about to give bad news.

“Enough time to say hello, goodbye, and maybe a few things in between.”

“Right.” She gulped down her guts that were trying to jump out through her throat, and forced herself to nod. “I—”

A squeal forced her to spin around, ready for whatever suddenly made someone scream. But, it wasn’t that kind of scream. It was a kid’s scream, the excited kind.

A woman stepped out of the tear, and a small kid ran ahead of her, a boy. Whoever the little boy was, he didn’t give a shit about anything else, except one thing: Sándor. And the poor guy was struck dumb, eyes wide, and mouth dropped. He did manage to at least get down on a knee, and catch his kid, before the little guy could tackle him.

“Theo?”

“Dad!” The kid squeezed, and Sándor’s eyes, still open wide and staring past the little guy, looked to the approaching woman. Tears were in his eyes. Sure, part of that was probably because his kid was crushing his fucked up arm and shoulder, but from the way he was looking at his wife, Triss knew the reason for most of them.

“Sándor,” the gold woman said, and she got down on a knee with him. Slowly, she leaned in, and set a kiss on his forehead, before running her fingers over his short hair, and giving him a proper kiss.

“Margaret, I—”

“Shhh.” She kissed him again, and shook her head.

The two adults went quiet, and rested their foreheads against each other, while their kid squealed with joy. It was so damn beautiful, Triss had to look away. Sándor was crying, same as her, same as everyone.

Damien wandered over, eyes drifting between everyone and the tear, before coming to Julias.

“I don’t suppose—”

“Sorry, Damien,” Julias said. “The older people are, the harder it is for them to get around, in the river. And elders vampires are very old.” He pointed at his own neck. “Carrying anchors, you know? Takes them a long time to let them go.”

“I see.”

“But, I did speak to him. He’s... open to the idea, that he might have been wrong. And an asshole.”

Damien laughed. “Music to my ears.”

Julias laughed with him, and motioned for Damien to come in closer. Damien raised a brow, but came in anyway, and Julias leaned in to whisper a few things to him. Each word had Damien’s eyes widening, and eventually, a smile, the same sort of heavy, overwhelmed smile everyone else was wearing.

“Thanks,” the Mekhet said. “I will.”

Julias nodded as he winked at him.

Elaine and Antoinette chuckled as they looked at each other, before they both nodded, and stepped back. No one was coming to visit them. Why? Triss looked up at Julias and nodded toward the two elders.

He grinned, and nodded toward the tear.

Sure enough, a couple of new squeals joined the chorus of happy voices. Two women ran out of the tear, and went straight for Antoinette.

“Lana? Darlene?” the Prince said, staring.

Triss was seeing lots of firsts tonight. First time seeing Jacob get emotional, and now first time seeing Sándor get emotional, and Antoinette too. The Prince hadn’t seen it coming. They’d all been blindsided by the dead coming out to say hi, but Antoinette looked utterly confused, like there was no way a dead person would actually want to see her again. Vampire guilt, probably, over how the

Vinculum bound ghouls. But considering how devoted Sabrina had been to Viktor, post death, it was nice to see a couple of more normal girls doing the same for the Prince. They hugged her, and she hugged them.

Triss glanced Athalia's way. Daniel was with her, talking with a man Triss didn't know, some ghost from Daniel's past. Athalia was the third wheel in the conversation, and she inched away a bit to let the two talk as she glanced toward the tear a few times. Jesus christ, it hurt to watch. Go talk to her? Nah, not a good idea. Much as Triss and Athalia could actually talk to each other now, that was a far cry from—

“Mom!”

Another voice came out of the tear, and everyone shut up instantly, as a woman emerged. Even without the glass eye anymore, it was a face Beatrice would never forget. A face that shot heat up through her body until her Beast roared.

Her skin didn't shine quite as bright as everyone else's. No, that wasn't it. It was glowing, but it wasn't glowing the same color. Some different shade. Bronze? Whatever the strange color was, it also pulsed out of the thing hanging from her neck.

A stone, the size of her head, hanging from her neck by a black chain. A quick glance to Julias got the nod she was looking for. That was one of the anchors he'd been talking about.

With the rage in the woman's eyes, Triss half expected the soul's feet to taint or burn the gold water underneath her into the same black water the rest of the cave was covered in. But no, no change at all. She came closer, coughing a few times, and struggling with each step. She looked exhausted.

“Angela?” Athalia took a couple steps toward her daughter, but the look in Angela's eyes stopped her.

“Mom.” Angela managed a few more steps before she fell to her knees. The anchor hit the gold water, and the splash that followed made it clear just how heavy the thing was.

Athalia didn't hesitate. She was down on her knees beside her dead daughter in a second.

“Angela, I—”

“Jeremiah,” Angela said, grinding her teeth, “was... an asshole.”

“What?”

“Jeremiah was an asshole!” She snapped her hands out, and grabbed her mother by the shoulders. “He took a little girl and twisted her. Made everything worse. Lied and used her. I didn’t deserve that! I didn’t... deserve that...”

Athalia tried to keep back her tears, but there was no point. Everyone was already in full emotional breakdown mode, and even with the craziness happening, this was still a surprise.

“No, you didn’t,” she said eventually, voice wavering. “And you didn’t deserve what I did to you, either. What... What my Horror did to you.”

“No, I didn’t! You ruined my life, my childhood! The nightmares your stupid Horror put on me! I didn’t deserve that! But...” She clutched her mother’s shoulders tight, the both of them on their knees in the gold water, and the daughter visibly trembled. “It wasn’t fair of me, to blame you for everything. It wasn’t... it wasn’t all your fault. I know that. I know that, and... and I came here, dragged myself here, with this stupid thing around my neck! Because... I had to... I fucking had to... I had to say I’m sorry.”

Athalia blinked down at her daughter, before looking around until she spotted Beatrice, and without her usual look of anger or frustration, or even icy daggers. She looked at her like she was looking for help on what to say. And Triss didn’t have a god damn clue, so, she shrugged, and gestured back to her daughter. Talk to her, you dumbass.

“You’re sorry? But I—”

“I know you’re sorry! You said you were sorry a hundred times. And... And I...” Angela broke down, and hugged her mother. Everyone went from silent, to stone silent. Whatever bug was going around and getting everyone sick with the sobs, they hit Angela hard. A murdering psychopath. A broken child, who never really got to have a mother.

The stone hanging from Angela’s neck shrank. Hard to see, considering she was hugging Athalia, but the stone lost half its size, and the weird glow it gave off half died with it. All these dead people, dead souls, came here to say something to everyone alive, and it seemed pretty obvious now they were doing it because they wanted to help those unlucky enough to still be alive. Angela came for a different reason.

Triss looked away. From the way Julias and Mary were looking at Angela, nodding knowingly, they weren’t surprised. Hell, from the little smile Triss noticed on their faces, they’d saw this coming, maybe even talked to Angela and convinced her to do this.

Triss spoke up. “Should I—”

“No,” Julias whispered. “Angela’s made a lot of progress, but she’s got a long ways to go before she can sail.”

Sail. Considering all the talk of a river, she had to wonder if that was a metaphor at all.

“I suppose y’all don’t hate each other up there, do you?” Triss asked.

Superman shook his head. “No, we don’t. But I can’t talk about it. Literally. Part of the deal for getting to talk.”

“Oh. I guess it’d be bad for business if Heaven gave up its secrets.”

Laughing, Julias gave her another hug, before stepping back. “I’m gonna go talk to someone.”

“But—”

“I’ll talk to you again before we go. Don’t worry.” He winked at her, gave her his usual suave, confident jackass grin, and walked toward Sándor. Sándor!? Oh shit. She walked after him, but managed three steps before one of the gold ghosts came her way.

Sándor’s wife. Tall, slim, long dark hair, and a couple of hard eyes pointed right at Triss with the sort of direct confidence only women who chewed up business proposals for breakfast had. Sándor did say she was a hardass, the sort of woman who demanded things when she wanted them. Which was pretty awesome, honestly, but right now those determined eyes were pointed at Triss, and they were more than a little scary.

Margaret came in close, put a hand on Triss’s shoulder, and pulled her away from the group, leaving Sándor behind with his kid, and Julias. Julias laughed and joked with the obviously paralyzed gargoyle, no doubt doing his best to help Sándor get over the fact he was a big part of the reason Julias was dead. It was painful to watch Sándor squirm, but Triss couldn’t help but smile seeing it. It’d taken a long time to get over the fact Sándor had been involved in Julias’s death, and seeing Superman laughing and clapping the man on the shoulder was strangely... easing.

“You’re interested in my husband?” Margaret asked.

“I uh, um...”

“Beatrice, I’m dead. Have been for years. He’s not. It’s okay if you’re interested in him.”

She winced. “Is it? I mean, after what I was doing, and—”

“You learned your lesson. Right?” Damn, her voice was hard.

“I... I did.” Triss gestured around her at everything. “I—”



“I don’t mean because it turned out you can’t resurrect Julias. I mean because you’ve realized how fucked up it is, to do something so selfish. You don’t get to break the rules because you think life is unfair. Right? Or did you agree with Jacob?”

It was like getting slapped in the face. Double damn, this woman could be cruel.

“No, I guess I didn’t agree with him. I thought, maybe, I did, but... no, I didn’t. I don’t.”

“Good.” Margaret smirked as she leaned in, and put her arm over Triss’s shoulders so they were inches from each other. “Now, I don’t know if you’re a good fit for Sándor. Maybe you are. I’m no match maker. But... you know about his Horror. You know about the worst of it.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Sándor had to kill people to satisfy his Horror’s hunger, absolutely had to, and probably in very brutal, terrifying ways. It was territory vampires were familiar with, but that was like comparing swimming in the shallow end of a pool to deep sea cave diving.

“Azamel’s helped him with controlling his hunger, but it’s still a problem. He dealt with it on his own when he was with me, despite my shitty attempts to help him, but I was just a human. You’re not. I expect you to try and help him out, okay? Even if he pushes you away, push back.”

“But what if—”

“I don’t mean right now. I mean, if you two hit it off, see if you can help him find a good way to feed, okay? You’re a vampire. Figure something out.”

This woman’s personality could smash through a brick wall. Maybe instead of her and Sándor falling in love, she’d basically bullied the man into romance? Judging from his reaction to seeing her, he did love her, though. But aggressive as Triss knew she could be, she couldn’t see herself hopping a semi and driving through Sándor’s boundaries and into his personal life like this woman probably had.

Then again, after the shit that’d happened, she kinda already got to see his personal life, up close. Maybe she wouldn’t need the semi.

“I’ll try.”

“Good. Now, sex.”

“What!?”

“Shh! Jesus.” Margaret snapped her eyes around before leaning in closer so their foreheads touched slightly. “My husband deserves to be happy. I don’t know how much of a fit you two will be, if at all, but just in case, I figure I should give you a tip.”

This conversation was not happening.

“I—”

“Sándor is at odds with his Horror all the time. He hates being aggressive, because of how much it reminds him of his Horror. So, you and your ‘girlfriend’”, she air-quoted girlfriend, “will have to take control, when he’s not with his Horror. He’ll be pretty passive, usually. Take charge, and it’ll go smooth.”

“Wait, when he’s not with his Horror?”

Margaret smiled. “And when he is, it’ll be the opposite. He’s a giant monster, Triss. Be prey. Run away, hide, squeal and have fun, and he’ll chase you and fuck you into oblivion. It’ll be great. Just, don’t do it if he hasn’t fed in a while, for reasons you already know.”

Triss gulped. Sándor’s dead wife was giving her sex tips on how to fuck the man, and on how to fuck the giant gargoyle, too. Damn, the woman would have fit in Dolareido perfectly.

“Jen, she uh, she wanted to know if—”

“Yes, he does.”

“Holy shit.”

“Just, be careful, okay?” Margaret said. “You know what the deal with his Horror is, how dangerous it is.”

“Definitely.” And if Margaret was watching her husband from Heaven, or whatever it was, she knew about the time Sándor had nearly eaten her and Jen.

Margaret grinned at her, and looked her up and down a couple times.

“I think you’ll be good for him. Sándor and I loved each other, but like I said, I was human. I could only help him in so many ways. Maybe you and Jen will do a better job.” Cue oddly evil grin from the woman. She knew she was making whatever she was talking about ambiguous. Jen would have loved this woman.

“You know Sándor and I aren’t actually dating, right? This advice sounds a bit premature.”

“Well, now you’re getting his dead wife’s blessing, and... and I want him to be happy. The man deserves to be happy. He’s got a thousand anchors on his neck, and it’s not fair. And I’ve seen enough. You and Jen can make him happy, in a lot of different ways.” She leaned in closer again. “And I know my husband. He likes you a lot, but you’ve probably noticed he has a hard time showing his feelings. So, this is cheating, but that’s fine. You’ve earned it. Get him alone — well, not alone if you’re bringing Jen — and bully him a little to get in his pants. A little! He’ll be happy you did.”

“But—”

She gestured back to her husband. “Dude has trouble hurting a fly. He needs help.”

Beatrice couldn’t help but smile. “He really is a nice guy.”

“To a fault.”

“Apparently I seem to like that quality in men.”

Margaret laughed. “Julias is a pretty great guy.”

They both turned to watch Julias. He’d moved on from Sándor, and was chatting with Natasha and Jessy, his oldest friends. Tash was pretty much sobbing nonstop, and even Jessy was struggling to stay strong. But once Julias gave them both a hug, the Gangrel broke into sobs, too.

Triss smiled and looked back to Margaret. “You—”

The dead woman winked at her, and walked off to rejoin her husband. As she walked past Julias, the two gave each other some quick, knowing grins, before Julias came back and joined Triss again.

“Do I even want to know what you said to Sándor?” Triss asked.

Julias shook his head. “Nope. I told him all your worst secrets.”

“Asshole.”

He smiled at her, and she tried to return it, but it didn’t last. Before she could stop it, tiny sobs worked their way through her throat, like hiccups, and she ground her teeth as she looked down.

Julias hugged her again, and stroked her hair.

“Tell Jen I love her, too, in that strange way only she seems to understand. You got a weird friend in her, but she’s great, and I hope you too stay together for a long, long time.”

“I will.”

“And... I’ve got to go.”

“I know.” She buried her face in his chest again, and squeezed him again. Part of her thought she should be freaking out, screaming at him to not go, to stay with her. She would have, if this had happened not long after Julias died. But, much as it sickened her, she had to admit, time helped heal the wound.

Look at her, getting wiser every night.

“And—” A quick gasp from someone else cut him off.

A new person came out of the tear, someone Triss didn't recognize. But from the way Jack and Sam got up and dragged themselves over to the man, and hugs were had, it was probably James, Jack's dad. Handsome guy. He chatted with his family, and the look on Sam's face was amazing. She looked happy. The Terrys, all together again.

“She's going to hate herself,” Triss said, nodding toward Sam. “The moment you... you guys leave, and all she has left is Jack, she's going to hate herself.”

“Maybe,” Julias said. “But Jacob had to be stopped. Black Blood can't do the ritual without someone else's help.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And maybe he'll find someone, next cycle. But for now, Sam saved the world. She'll need a friend to remind her of that.”

“I'm not sure she'll think of it as saving the world.”

Julias sighed, and stepped back from her. “She will. Once she's thinking clearly, she'll understand. In the mean time, be her friend.”

“You know I will.”

Nodding again, Julias half turned, ready to walk away. But he stepped back in toward her, and kissed her. Good, because if he hadn't, she'd have made him do it anyway.

“No regrets, Triss. The time we had was wonderful, and I hope you cherish the memories. But it's important that—”

“That I move on. I get it already, okay? You sound like a fucking therapist.”

He grinned at her, and hugged her tight one last time, before letting her go, and slowly stepping back.

“I love you.”

God damn it. She choked down another sob, but it still came out as a trembling squeak.

“I love you, too.”

He smiled, winked, and walked back toward the tear. Right on cue, as if Julias was leading the pack, all the souls gave their loved ones some final hugs and kisses and tearful goodbyes. Caleb and Monica gave Jack a drive-by pat on the shoulder. Antoinette’s ghouls, the other dead werewolves, Sándor’s wife and kid, Eric’s mom, whoever that was with Daniel, Tash’s parents, everyone eventually moved on.

Mary and James gave Samantha extra hugs, Mary in particular, before she took her dad’s hand and made for the tear. She didn’t get far, of course, before she turned around and gave her mom one last hug. They both cried and squeezed each other until James had to interfere, and gently pry them apart. Sam got one last quick forehead kiss from James, before the two souls moved on, and James gave Jack a knowing pat on the shoulder, and a quick hug, too.

Before he left, Julias walked over to Athalia, and squatted down beside Angela. The two women were still locked in a hug, not talking anymore. After the sort of tense life they had, and then the tense confession Angela just gave, talking probably wasn’t the best idea. Just, better to share some ‘I love yous’ and hug it out.

“It’s smaller,” Julias said, gesturing to the rock hanging off Angela’s neck.

“Yeah.”

“Glad I convinced you to come?”

Angela, trembling and crying, managed to nod as she smiled up at him. “Yeah.”

Nodding, he held out a hand, and helped her stand up, while also giving Athalia one of his perfect, infuriating winks. Athalia came up with them, and before Julias could react, she hugged him.

“Thank you, Julias.”

Julias returned the hug, before slowly guiding Athalia off him, and into Daniel’s arms instead. The two men nodded to each other in typical manly fashion, before Julias put his arm around the back of Angela’s shoulders, and guided her toward the tear. The woman who’d killed him, and he was helping her.

Triss dragged herself over to Sam and Jack. For a second she’d been tempted to go to Athalia, but Daniel was doing cleanup duty for her, and from the way she was snuggled up under his shoulder as she watched after Angela, tears streaming down her cheeks but a smile there too, she was fine. Sam, on the

other hand, was having a rougher time than anyone. She wasn't sobbing anymore, but it was damn clear from the look in her eyes that her face would have been soaked in tears if she'd been Blushing.

"Bye! I love you!" Mary waved, pausing by the giant tear as other souls stepped through it. "I love you Mom! I love you Jack!"

"I love you baby!" Sam said, waving in the exact same, exaggerated way.

"I love you," Jack said, with only a pinch of the stand-offish behavior Triss expected of an introverted guy like him. "And I love you too, Dad."

James nodded in that firm, proud father kinda way as he gave them a final wave, and disappeared through the tear with his daughter.

Julias paused at the tear, and waited for Angela to step in. She gave her mom one final look, and a small wave that said a million words, before she followed the others in. Only Julias was left.

He looked to his childe, and Jack returned his gaze. And, because Julias's cheese knew no bounds, he gave the kid a thumbs up. Poor Jack. Everyone in the crowd laughed quietly as Jack returned it, but Julias maintained the most dramatic, intense, cinematic and proud gaze, before locking eyes with Triss. He smiled at her, one last time, before disappearing into the tear.

The glowing orbs got to work. They hovered around the tear, and shot what looked like gold lasers at it. It was almost like one of those scifi shows where machines used lasers to cauterize wounds. Maybe that's what they were doing, burning the wound closed. Not much noise, either. All in all, a very anticlimactic end to all the work Jacob and Black Blood had accomplished.

Then they left, without a word, probably to deal with the other tears. No explanations about who or what they were, their relationship to Black Blood, or how they managed to use the tear to let dead souls come for a visit. Assholes.

Triss looked around. Everyone was stunned, not by what had happened, but by what wasn't happening. The world wasn't ending anymore. And, they weren't talking to the people they'd lost anymore. All they had anymore, was silence. And memories.

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~~Antoinette~~

“I believe,” Antoinette said, “that we may... return home.”

Everyone sighed, tension melting away, replaced with melancholy. It was only natural, after being given such a gift, only to lose it so soon. While it was a beautiful, and cathartic moment to speak with her ghouls Lana and Darlene again, it was also true that she was an old creature, and used to moving on when those she cared for died. And Daniel, who got to speak with his dead child from so long ago, was also not as emotionally exhausted as everyone else. Elders were used to death.

Beatrice, Samantha, Jack, Athalia, and Sándor, were the ones most obviously drained by the experience, but also fulfilled. Goodbyes that were not said before were said, and final moments exchanged. Perhaps the most powerful, was Athalia's conversation, an interaction Antoinette could not help but watch, overwhelmed with interest, and perhaps empathy, as the woman reconciled with her daughter. Or rather, partially reconciled. The weight around the troubled daughter's neck had diminished, and with Julias as a strange friend in the afterlife, it was likely the girl would eventually be free of her burdens.

The idea that a psychopath, filled with hate and cruelty, could go to some great 'river', and slowly release themselves of their sins to become free to roam it, left her with a strange feeling. Did someone like that deserve such forgiveness?

She frowned as she looked down. How pathetic had she become, to suddenly subscribe to the idea that the compassionate enjoyed their afterlife, while the cruel were doomed to suffer? A religious view, and not her view. Julias had said Lucas could not visit, as he was still weighed down by his burdens. She had to admit, the idea of that lunatic trapped by his sins as anchors around his neck, unable to sail some mystical river, was pleasing, and her frown shifted into a smile.

“Prince,” Natasha said, joining her side after a quick conversation with her sire. “What do we d-do now?”

Antoinette touched her chin as she considered. Ask her student about her conversation with her dead parents? No, too soon. Little Vola would speak of it when she was ready.

“Jacob is... dead.” She scooped her old friend's robe from the shallow water. “And Black Blood has been indisposed. What those strange entities did with him, I do not know, and they did not have the decency to explain what a cycle was to give me a time frame for his next appearance. But, I believe it is safe to say, we may return home, and worry about destroying this another time.” She gestured to the standing stones.

“Agreed,” Daniel said. “We’re too injured to do it by hand tonight. If a Begotten provides me passage, I’ll destroy the standing stones with explosives tomorrow night.” One of his arms held Athalia to his side. Such a display of affection was not normal for her sheriff, but it was clear Athalia needed it. And, perhaps Daniel’s conversation with his young childe Torrence, had softened him a touch. Perhaps he would even speak of him to his living childe some night.

“Elaine my dear, if you would join me for a moment?” She looked to her old friend, one of her few remaining, and offered her a cold, neutral expression.

Elaine tried to return her gaze, but her face was still a broken mess. It had healed enough to function, but only just. With a few moments to consider it, Elaine joined her, and the two elders stepped aside from the rest of the crowd, who had begun to isolate themselves to absorb what had just happened.

“Elaine,” she whispered. “You... made quite the gamble.”

“I did.”

“I do expect you to tell me the details of your plan.”

Elaine managed a grin with her split and ruined lips. “After you lock me in a cell, and turn me into a prisoner, I assume?”

Antoinette returned the grin. “No. I trust you to not disappear. And besides, you... did try and stop Jacob.”

“I suppose I did.”

“And if Jack had not arrived at all to trigger your trap, and your trap against Black Blood?”

Elaine looked away. “Then... maybe Maurice...” Sighing, she shook her head. “I grow sick of this place. Let us go.”

“Daniel,” Antoinette said, loud enough to summon him. “Help Elaine, would you? She is gravely injured. And... do keep an eye on her.”

Elaine choked on a small laugh. “By all means.”

Nodding, Antoinette walked past the others, on her way back to her lover and her childe. The mix of sadness and joy in the crowd was palpable, and no doubt poor Jack wanted nothing more than to separate himself from the powerful aura the group radiated. Such was the way of any introvert, when emotionally overwhelmed.



“Antoinette,” he said. “I uh... I’m not sure—”

She held up a hand. “Let us go, drink, and sleep. It would not do to speak of these events so soon, and as injured and exhausted as we are.” Slipping an arm about her injured lover’s body was easy enough, as he sought her touch.

Samantha was not so easy. Her childe appeared more torn now, than she had been when Antoinette first arrived through the flesh tunnel.

Poor, dear Samantha. She spoke at last.

“I... I was... going to let Jacob—”

“Samantha, my childe, you were thrown into chaos you could not have even begun to appreciate, and told by a... by a wonderful man, that you could be with your loved ones again. Anyone would have been seduced by his words in such a circumstance.”

Jacob had been, for all his chaos and strange, primal views, truly a wonderful man, and she did not regret calling him such. But in that moment, the words hit Samantha with more weight than Antoinette could have anticipated, and her childe broke into sobs once again. Jack, battered and barely standing, slipped an arm about his mother, and hugged her as best he could.

Antoinette looked back, and found Beatrice nearby, close enough to hear what she had said. After a heavy moment, Antoinette offered her old friend’s student a solemn nod.

Beatrice stood strong, and nodded in return.

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Antoinette had been tempted to speak to the others, but she knew her own advice was true. There would be time to speak of the realities in the future. For now, they needed rest.

“Sleep well,” she said to her childe, and pet her shoulder as she gently ushered Samantha into her room, deep within the Elysium Tower.

“You too,” Samantha said, and she sat on her bed in the grand room of black marble. While her room and bed were not as massive as Antoinette’s, it was still quite vast, and her blankets a beautiful shade of sky blue. Antoinette had half expected her childe to acquire stuffed animals for her bed, but Samantha was not Natasha.

Antoinette nodded, and turned to leave, but stopped and set a hand against the door frame as she looked to her childe.

“Samantha. I... I cannot even begin to imagine the agony you must be suffering. But—”

Her sweet childe looked up from her netted hands, and smiled up at her.

“Mary told me to live, sire. That’s what I’m going to do. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“That... That she did.” Antoinette nodded to her, and left.

The Prince went to bed, where her love waited.

Jack sat upon the edge of the bed, wearing only his boxers, his hands between his knees and his head hanging. His body had not healed, despite a quick trip to find food. His crows rested at the mansion, and Antoinette did not need to be a master of Animalism to know the crow Scully was not happy with her. The memory of the small bird cawing at her with frustration as she released Jennifer, was strangely amusing.

She sat beside her love, and set a hand behind him along his lower back, where his injuries were few.

“You are in pain,” she said. “The injuries, I mean.”

“Yeap.”

“The curse would have healed them by now.”

“Nah, not completely. Those werewolf claws hurt.”

She nodded, and rubbed the man’s spine. “Still, they would have mostly healed by now. I believe this is proof enough that the curse has truly been removed.”

He nodded as well. “Yeap.”

“Are you... content? Not about the other insanities that befell us this night. But about what Elaine did, for you.”

“Not sure. The curse is gone...” He raised a fist, and squeezed it experimentally. “My body feels like it’s on fire.”

“And yet you sit there, as if under no pain at all.”

“I’m getting used to pain.”

With a heavy sigh, she reached out, and slowly turned her love to look to her. He still had but one eye.

“Without the curse, it will take you weeks to fully heal from these wounds, my love.”

He managed a small grin. A stomach full of fresh blood had, at least, mostly healed his broken jaw.

“You won’t mind if I just, relax here, all that time? Sleep a bunch? Maybe you could tell Michael to fuck off and leave me alone? Business reports can wait?”

She returned his grin, and gently slid her fingers back over his hair, against the grain. It would likely be a gesture that soothed him for the rest of time. He melted back into her touch, and she rewarded him with a kiss upon his head.

“The Invictus and Carthians leave each other be, thanks to you. You have earned rest.”

He nodded, and crawled back on the bed. He moved with more solidity than someone as injured as him should have.

She sighed as she watched him, and disrobed. Once she was naked, she crawled over to him, and pulled the blankets over the two of them. For the unluck of her, she wanted to pull his head to her breasts and let it rest there, but the position would be awkward and painful to him.

“It’s a strange sensation,” he said. “The curse, it... it was power, you know?”

She turned to face him, and continued to lightly stroke his head.

“You wish to speak of it?” A strange topic. She thought he would wish to speak of Julias or his sister, but perhaps he felt those topics could wait until he felt better.

“It’s g... He’s gone, now. Lot more comfortable talking about it.”

“Then, by all means.”

He nodded, and turned so he could rest his back against her breasts. He wanted to be the little spoon, and she happily obliged.

“When the curse started to get it hooks into me, before Julias died, it hit me with some of the most twisted, sick desires you can imagine. Real psychotic shit. When I released it, it... I don’t know. I guess it copied a part of me, and created its own intelligence? But that part was also part Susanna. And it was part Strix, it had to be, to be that fucking vile. It was like... having a really, really powerful horse between the legs, one I’d raised from a foal. When it worked with me, it was amazing, thrilling, and

empowering. When it fought against me, it was terrifying. This creature had zero sympathy. It hated the very idea of empathy. It was, fucking stupid as the word is, evil. But..."

"But?"

"But I still... feel like I'm missing a part of me. Or maybe, like I'm missing something important to me." Again, he slowly clenched a fist in front of his face, curling and uncurling his fingers. "It's like, someone's taken my crazy horse, a horse I've been driving for years, shot it dead, and told me to walk."

"Quite the malevolent horse, though."

"Yeah. Good thing it's gone, I know. But it still feels weird. Feels like... losing something that, yeah sure it was horrible, but it was still mine. It's gone, and it feels... empty. I keep trying to put my hands on the reins, but they're not there, because the horse isn't there anymore."

An interesting dilemma. She kissed the back of his head, and risked a hug, a gentle one.

"It was 'your' horse." She emphasized 'your', sealing the meaning.

"It was. I thought maybe an extra limb was the better comparison, or maybe a car. But, no, the curse was alive. It... He had his own personality, his own desires, and life. He was mine, and now he's gone. I know I should be happy, and I am. I fucking am. But... it feels... strangely lonely. And I even feel... a bit guilty, about him dying. He was my horse. He killed so many people. He killed Monica, and Caleb. But... he was my horse."

"You would be surprised, my love, how many people have felt similar feelings, over similar circumstances. Someone with a violent dog. Someone with a violent friend. People have followed their destructive companions into misery and worse, in some misplaced need to help them, or feeling bound to them in some way."

He let out a quiet chuckle, and groaned with pain.

"Toxic relationships."

"In a sense. Even mutually destructive, forced companionship, is still companionship. But with time, you will forget the sensation of the curse beside you. You will move on."

"Yeah, I guess." He nodded, and relaxed into his pillow.

She dare not say what she thought. Jack was convinced the Ripper was truly evil, and perhaps it was, but her love thought that neither he nor anyone else were capable of such levels of evil. He was convinced only the Strix, or similar, soulless creatures, could be capable of such total lack of empathy, and the ability to indulge and enjoy in cruelty of biblical proportions.

For all her love's wisdom, he was still naive. Even a human was capable of becoming a monster who could enjoy such cruel indulgences. A Kindred, more so. It was quite likely the Strix curse did not carry any Strix desires at all, and was merely Susanna's own personality, twisted by hate and rage, carried onto Jack. Or perhaps even worse, simply Jack's personality, from an alternate world where he had suffered whatever horrible betrayals Susanna had.

It was better he continued to think such things impossible.

Day came, and torpor took them.

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"There were many flaws with your plan."

Antoinette stood in front of her grand office window, and looked below to her city. Safe, secure, at least from cataclysmic events brought on by gods and witches.

"There were." Elaine stood beside her, both of them dressed in their usual business suits.

Antoinette's insides still felt quite pained, Mary's ghost claws having left lasting injuries. Elaine had suffered no magical injuries, but had been beaten ten times worse. She looked much better after a night's sleep, but she moved as an old woman suffering arthritis might.

"How long had you been working with Jacob?"

"Not long. We had talked on several occasions, and once he finally explained to me what he and Black Blood were doing, I sensed an opportunity. I used the blood I had withdrawn from Jack, infused by vitae tainted by the curse, and placed my trap for him."

"All so it would force the Strix curse to fight Black Blood."

"Yes," Elaine said. "I realized that Black Blood could control ghosts. I also realized that Black Blood, ghosts, and the Strix curse had much... overlap. The curse would not be able to possess a piece of a god's mind; Black Blood was neither Kindred, nor had a physical brain. It would instead force a direct confrontation. Which I needed, if I wanted to stop Jacob. Black Blood could control ghosts, and had summoned an army of them to help power his ritual. I needed the god of the dead distracted, or he would simply do what he did to you, and use a ghost to stop me."

"Stop you from killing Jacob."

Her old friend sighed as she nodded, and lowered her head. “Yes.”

“You did not think to come to me, and you and I, and my sheriff, could have—”

“Jacob had contingency plans upon contingency plans, Ann. Do you know what sort of magic Crúac rituals can accomplish? No, the only option I had, was to make sure he died when he was most vulnerable: performing the ritual. And even that was... risky.”

“Risky does not even begin to cover it! What if Jack had not come?”

“I knew he would come.”

“You knew no such thing.” Antoinette forced herself to keep her eyes on the window, and to not stomp her foot. “The chance Jack would not find his way to Jacob was high, and then you would have had no way of stopping Black Blood. Then what? What would have happened? Would you have tried to kill Jacob? Perhaps when Daniel and I arrived? The three of us, against Jacob and Black Blood’s ghosts?”

“I had considered it, but with Mark helping him, I did not think it possible. And I had a sneaking suspicion Jacob had a trap set. I had expected a Crúac ritual, not an Oubliette, and an unusual one at that.”

“So, if Jack had not come? And the battle went as last time, with both my sheriff and I tossed past the barrier and no longer able to interfere?”

Elaine took a deep, useless breath, and kept her eyes on the window.

“Then... I suppose Jacob would have won. And you and I would be having this discussion in a new world, a strange ocean of anything and everything combined.”

“You were willing to let the world as it is, end. You were partly seduced by our old friend’s plan. Perhaps a small part, but a part.”

“I... was.”

“And your great crime against this fellow named Maurice would no longer haunt you.”

There it was, the words Antoinette needed, to break her friend’s composure. Elaine turned and looked to her, but where the elder Ventrue would naturally hold perfect composure, Antoinette found hints of shame. And it was not fabricated, she knew her old friend well enough to see that.

“I suppose after what Julias and I shared last night...”

“I suspected you had performed diablerie the moment I learned how Susanna acquired the curse, that you were her childe, and that you had removed the ritual long ago. Your words with Julias confirmed.”

“Ah.” Elaine forced her eyes back to the window.

Antoinette had not looked her way yet, and would not. She needed her resolve to have this conversation.

“Centuries ago, you used your knowledge gained in the Ordo to devise an experiment that would clash curse with curse, and have them kill each other.”

“I did.”

“You decided to use someone else other than Viktor.”

“I... did. Viktor was my first childe. I could not harm him.”

“You found someone else, a man named Maurice. You sired him. You lured him into a ritual circle, like the one you used upon my love. You diablerized your second childe.”

Elaine took another breath, pointless to any vampire, and yet there it was.

“I did.”

Antoinette mirrored the breath, turned, and looked her dear friend in the eyes. “Tell me about it.” Before Elaine could respond, Antoinette gestured to the chair across from her desk, as she sat down in her grand chair. It was not an invitation. It was an order.

Elaine nodded slowly, before taking the chair.

“It was long ago. The memories are blurs, many scarred by the... withdrawal, that happened after. Cravings, Ann, you cannot imagine. No drug any kine has ever tasted comes close. It was more than vitae addiction.”

“The deadly cravings of amaranth are documented, Elaine. And yet, you did not diablerize another?”

“No. Jacob found me, and... helped me. If not for him, I likely would have.”

Antoinette could not contain her sigh of grief. Yet another reason neither of them wished to see the old Nosferatu dead.

“Continue.”

“I dared not journal my experiences, lest another Kindred discover my sin. But I can remember the cravings, Ann. I can remember what it felt like, to claw my flesh off my bones, as I shuddered and trembled deep within dark, cold caves beneath the Earth. But, that was nothing, compared to... the voices.”

“Voices?”

Elaine leaned in closer. “He spoke to me, Ann.”

“I do not understand.”

“Maurice. After I... devoured his soul, he spoke to me, in my mind, for weeks. Perhaps months. There is little I can remember from those years, but Maurice’s voice is a scar centuries have done little to fade.”

“What... did he say to you?”

Elaine shivered as she leaned back in her chair, and rubbed her arms.

“Nothing but words of hatred toward me, at first. As the weeks went on, and his voice grew quieter, the hate faded, replaced with... a strange fatalism. He spoke of the end, how everything and everyone comes to ruin, and how eventually, I would too.” Her trembling grew worse. “I never released my curse, as your love did. I do not know what Jack has gone through. But when he spoke of how the curse whispered its desires into his mind, I... I could not help but sympathize. I could not have him suffer what I suffered to be free of it. Never.”

A similar shiver ran up Antoinette’s spine, and no doubt Elaine saw it. Few Kindred ever accounted their experiences with diablerie, as merely admitting to it often led to immediate execution. To hear her old friend speak of the whispers of a soul, hating her for consuming her, was a horror story told around a campfire fire in the dark of night.

Elaine did not wish to simply stop Jacob. She wanted to destroy Jack’s curse, without forcing him to go through the trials she had. Or perhaps it was simpler, a more basic need, to see the curse suffer for the sins of its earlier incarnations. From the shame she found on Elaine’s face, it was the former.

With a heavy nod, Antoinette leaned in, and motioned for Elaine to do the same. Once she did, Antoinette took the Ventrue’s hand in her own, and squeezed it.

“Julias spoke of a shadow?” Antoinette asked.

Elaine smiled, and returned the squeeze of hand, before sitting back.



“I can only assume he meant a piece of Maurice’s soul waits for the... primary piece? I do not know.”

“Ah. Peter Pan.”

“Peter Pan?”

Antoinette nodded. “If Maurice’s shadow waits in the... afterlife,” she hated herself for using such a word, “then all that remains is for the main body to rejoin it. A body that... rests within you.”

The guilt on Elaine’s face was heavy enough to drown all of Paris.

“I see.”

“Julias also told you there is no rush, non? As if telling you you should not rush to reunite Maurice with his shadow. Then, perhaps... time has no meaning, at least no true meaning, in whatever river realm he spoke of?”

For the first time that night, Elaine gave a genuine smile. A tiny, pitiful thing, but a smile nonetheless. She placed her open hand upon her sternum, and tapped it several times in a slow beat, as if mimicking a heart of flesh.

“A sick, disturbing way to learn so much about what waits for us beyond death,” she said.

“Indeed. We learned enough secrets last night to have the Ordo buried in research and experiments for decades.”

“Dangerous experiments.”

“Quite.” Antoinette nodded again, and returned her friend’s smile with a sly smile of her own. “It may, perhaps, be in the Ordo’s best interest that such information be withheld from them.”

Elaine’s smile brightened. “Thank you.”

“For what, my dear? I am only making the best decision for our Ordo.”

“Then I thank you for that.” They chuckled, as they pushed the sad realities of their pasts, and present aside. “How is Jack?”

“My love recovers slowly. Without the curse, he has but the strength of a young neonate Ventrue once again. But, he is happy. He feels a touch out of sorts, and guilty for those the curse killed, but joy bubbles within, and will rise to the surface more and more as he accepts his new life. He is free of the curse, thanks to you.”

“And we shall live to see another night, thanks to his mother. How does she fare?”

“Samantha is... both better, and worse. Her meeting with Mary’s soul, and Mary rescuing her own ghost, settled much of Samantha’s pain. And seeing her husband, knowing James is with Mary, has done even more.”

“But...”

“But, the first person she has ever killed, is not only another Kindred, but the first man she had loved and physically enjoyed since her husband. I know of no woman, none, that could have done what she did that night.”

They both sighed as such cruel poetry ripped the few droplets of joy from the room.

“The Terrys are willful people, in their own strange ways, are they not?”

“Oui.”

“Even Mary. To see what she did, what her ghost became, and yet still held onto her mind enough to fight a god of corpses, to save her mother?”

“Oui,” Antoinette said, smiling as she thought of her childe, and her love. “I am a lucky vampire, to have such intimate company.”

“Can I... also, be intimate with such company?”

“With Jack and I? After what you did? I am sure Jack will happily invite you into our bed again. But if you so much as look at Samantha with desire, Jack will never forgive you.”

“Alas, I do not believe Samantha will be looking at anyone with romantic or lustful eyes for some time.”

“No,” Antoinette said, though after a moment to consider, she smiled and shook her head. “But, she is a Terry. I believe she will recover faster than we anticipate. In fact, I think it will not be long, before she is embracing the joys of her second life once again.” The look her childe had given her last night had been a powerful one. Samantha intended to live. Truly, live.