

~~Beatrice~~

Their first stop was to go get Aaron. And, shit, he wasn't there. They checked for ashes, but didn't find any, except the ones his limbs left.

Aaron was stronger than a Gangrel his age had any right to be, and apparently, maybe even stronger than he'd appeared to be when he fought Athalia. Regenerating limbs was difficult, even for elder vamps, but the dude was a Gangrel, and they could do it better than anyone. Maybe he had a Crúac ritual set up to allow himself to do that, too, or get yanked across the realms back into some secret hideaway? Or maybe he'd run off, and was now trapped in the Great Below?

Well, shit. Enemy? She fucking hoped not. Dude turned out to be a thousand times scarier than she ever expected of him. Hopefully he'd be happy they let him live, and return the favor. Either way, once they were back to the cave, she was going to either find a new place to sleep, or set up some defense measures with rituals of her own.

Sándor dropped them all off at the Elysium Tower, and from there they went their separate ways. Triss had been tempted to talk to Sándor, to maybe ask him about how his conversation with his wife and kid went, but something told her to leave it be. So, she gave him a very manly 'let's talk later' nod, and got Jen from the tower.

Jen wanted to know what happened, but she quickly figured out Triss was way too fucking tired. They got a quick drink, and went to one of their hideouts to sleep.

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The next night, they made the trip to Jacob's cave, and Triss explained what happened. She explained about Aaron, and what Athalia, Triss, and Mary went through to get to Jack and Sándor. She explained about Jack and the Ripper, and the werewolves he'd killed. She explained about what they found deeper in the Great Below, the crazy ghosts down there, the standing stones, and what Jacob and Black Blood were doing. Who lived, who died, Antoinette's random arrival, what Elaine did, what Samantha did, everything.

"I can't believe he's gone," Jen said, standing outside their headquarters cave in the canyon, on the city's edge.

“Yeah, me neither.”

“And Samantha—”

“I can’t even imagine how fucked up she’s feeling. She cut off his head, Jen. Like... slice...”

“Good god.” Jen rubbed her arms and nudged herself into Triss’s. “I can’t even wrap my mind around it. Jacob, gone... Are you sure—”

“I’m sure, Jen. He’s dead.”

“Jesus. I... didn’t want him to die.”

Triss nodded, slipped her arm around Jen, and gave her a sideways hug.

“Yeah, but at the same time, I... I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s happier where he is now.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. After what Julias said, about a great river and shit, I think... eventually, Jacob will be happier where he is.”

“Uh, I’m sorry, what?”

Triss leaned in, and gave her girlfriend a quick kiss on the cheek. “I got to speak to Julias.”

“Julias?”

“Story time part two.”

Triss went into detail about the gold souls, about Julias and Mary in particular, about the things they said, about Mary saving her ghost, about Julias and Triss finally getting to have that last conversation, about all the other souls who showed up, everything. Even Margaret and her kid, Theo, and even Angela.

“You couldn’t have explained this last night!?”

“Jen, I was exhau—”

Jen threw up her hands, pouted some, and crawled into the cave. Triss couldn’t help but chuckle as she followed her in.

Othello was there, but Madison wasn’t. And neither was Aaron. Triss continued on, and went in detail about what happened last night, close enough Othello could hear. The big lug didn’t say anything, but he listened with wide eyes and dropped jaw. And when they moved to Jacob’s den, he followed, not saying anything, still listening like a confused child.

“What... What was it like, seeing Julias again?” Jen asked.

“It was amazing. It was... sad. We got to say goodbyes, apologize. We got to... to... have that final conversation lovers are supposed to have, you know? That’s what he came for, so we could have that talk. That’s what they all came for, all the dead people.”

Jen sat down on Jacob’s furs, and lifted one of his many big scary witch books. The ones he’d left in the Great Below were confiscated by Daniel, but the Prince said she might let Triss have them. Emphasis on ‘might’.

“You’re doing a bad job telling this story, Triss.”

“Well fuck you, sorry I’m not a storyteller.”

“Not forgiven! You got to see Julias! You got to see... Julias...” Jen’s head collapsed, and she threw the book aside.

Shit. Triss sat down beside her, and hugged her. A proper hug this time, full on, Jen’s head against her neck and everything, complete with some back rubs.

“He was pretty sad he didn’t get to see you, too. He wanted to.”

Jen let out a pitiful groan and nudged her nose into Triss’s neck. “And Mary?”

“Super happy and cheerful, just like she’d been when we... you know.”

Nodding, Jen slipped out of Triss’s hug, and they got back to work, checking for any weird traps or rituals Jacob might have left behind.

“I’m glad Mary’s ghost got to join Mary, then,” Jen said. “I thought, after what happened, after what... we did to her...”

“It only got worse. Mary’s ghost was a monster by the end of it. She was gonna become one of the other freak monsters we ran into. If the real Mary hadn’t saved her, it’d have been fucking awful. Sam’s worst nightmare.”

“Jesus christ.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

After a few minutes of more exploring, they got up and headed back out to the main room. Othello followed.

“I can’t believe Margaret talked to you,” Jen said. “I can’t believe she... encouraged you.”

Triss laughed again as she poked her head in Aaron's alcove. No changes. The two of them started digging through his stuff, but considering how minimalist Aaron was, they didn't find shit, except some reading material, all fiction.

"More than encouraged me. She basically told me — us — how to seduce Sándor."

"Oh! Do tell!"

"Well apparently, you were right. Or at least, more right than I was. When Sándor is in human form, we should... basically just seduce the guy. Like, directly. Like, very directly, in his face directly."

Jen clapped her hands. Sure, Jen felt bad about Jacob, but no chance she was going to put that out on the surface for long. Excitement about romance and sex, on the other hand, Jen was all too eager to indulge visually.

"I can do that."

"The whole city knows you can do that."

Scrunching up her nose, Jen yanked out some of Aaron's fur blankets and threw them out into the main cave, looking for hidden ritual symbols and whatnot.

"But," Jen said, "if he just talked to his dead wife and son, I think maybe we should wait?"

"Yeah. We should drop by and say hi soon, but maybe wait a week or two before trying to seduce him."

Jen grinned at her, and hugged her from behind. "With Julias's blessing."

"Yeah."

"Which is all sorts of strange, you know. Very strange."

"Yeah, it is," Triss said. "Very fucking strange. But, it was... it was weirdly... perfect. It wasn't like it was some creepy scene with ghosts or anything. It really felt... amazing, you know? I don't know if it was the gold water we were all standing in, but it... it was calming, and soothing, and... every word those souls said hit home. It was like one giant therapy session, where everyone was completely committed. Christ, even seeing Angela again, I couldn't get angry at all. And seeing her come to some kind of... understanding with Athalia? Everyone walked away feeling better."

"I wish I'd been there."

“Yeah, it was fucking terrifying, but... amazing, you know? You should have seen the look on Sándor’s face when he got to talk to his wife and kid again. You could practically see a hundred thousand pounds get lifted off his shoulders. Dude even cried, a little.”

Jen sighed dreamily into her ear. “I can’t imagine what sort of meeting that was, for you or Jack to not want to kill Angela... again.”

“It was the sort of meeting that gets written down and turned into a religious text some idiot cult misinterprets for the next five thousand years. It was the sort of event someone paints a painting about and then it gets copied a thousand times across a dozen cultures. It was... It was powerful.”

“Are you going to do either of those things?”

Triss laughed. “I mean, maybe some stick drawings and some shitty notes? If I’m gonna keep doing this witch thing.”

“Jacob would want you to.”

“Yeah, he would.”

“I am sure I can write poetic witch verse, and draw detailed pictures better than you,” Jen said, grinning.

“Then I guess you’ll be my ghost writer. Though, I doubt Jacob ever used one. I’ll... never be as good a witch as him.”

“Give it a few centuries and I bet you’ll change your mind. And Jacob, he was the villain in this story, wasn’t he?”

“No, he wasn’t. Neither was Aaron. Hell, neither was Black Blood.” She plopped down in the middle of Aaron’s alcove, and gestured around. “It was a giant asshole thing for Jacob to do, to decide the fate of the world for everyone. But... good intentions, right?”

Jen nodded as she sat down beside her. “Do you regret helping stop him?”

“No.” And because she said it instantly, she knew she didn’t sound sincere. Fuck. “I mean, I... I do, but it had to be done. It’s better this way. It is.”

“We should go see Samantha,” Jen said. “Last time, she was upset we didn’t talk to her after her daughter’s resurrection failed. And now that Jacob’s dead, she... she doesn’t have any friends anymore, not really. Jack’s her son, and Antoinette’s her sire. Neither will ever really qualify.”

“Yeah, we should. But... let’s make another stop, before we do.” Slowly, she dragged herself back up to her feet, and blinked a few times at Othello. Dude stood in the door of Aaron’s alcove, jaw still hanging open, staring at them. “You okay, dude?”

“Jacob’s dead?” he asked.

“Yeap.”

“Samantha killed him?”

“Yeah...”

“And Aaron—”

“Mary’s ghost fucked him up bad, put him in torpor. Or at least, so we thought.”

She took a few minutes to clarify shit for Othello, each word making his jaw drop more and more. It was strangely satisfying, seeing the normally calm and collected playboy look so utterly confused. She wished she could have enjoyed it more, but thinking about Jacob kinda ruined it.

And what she was about to do next, ruined it more.

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Elen wasn’t in the cave. The Prince had her. The book and knife were still hidden away, but Triss didn’t even entertain the idea the Prince would let her keep them. She might even confiscate all of Jacob’s other stuff, probably in hidden caves and tunnels and shit Triss didn’t know about.

Would she give Elen back, if Triss asked? Without her, Julias’s body would eventually die and rot away.

No reason to even think about it. No point.

She yanked the tarp off Julias’s naked body. There it sat, unchanged, eyes closed, breathing in only the slow, methodical way someone in a coma could. The body was completely oblivious to everything that’d just happened. To the soul that’d paid Triss a visit. And to the shitty news that souls in the afterlife weren’t ‘life compatible’ or whatever. The body was useless. Unless she found some way to do a genuine godly act of divine power, to somehow bring a piece of that other domain along with Julias’s soul back into the physical world, it was never going to work.

And even if it was possible, Julias wouldn’t want it. And, neither did she.

She held out a hand, and Jen handed her a knife. Othello stayed behind at their headquarters cave, and that was for the best. This was too personal.

“Triss, we could just—”

“No. I’m not going to leave him... it, here, to starve to death and rot.”

“But it’s empty. It’s just flesh.”

“It’s not just flesh. It’s...” Sighing, Triss gently pressed the knife against the body’s chest, where the heart would be. She didn’t push it in, not yet. “Every night, I feel like I know what it means to be a witch, more and more. I feel like... like I get where Jacob was coming from with all those stories and shit. The Ordo Dracul might treat everything impartially, scientists filling out numbers in a fucking spreadsheet, but... the Circle of the Crone know better.

“Everything has weight. Everything has meaning. This isn’t just a body. It’s a representation of the shit I’ve gone through, the stupid decisions I’ve made, and the shitty, brutal reality we all deal with. In the past, I’d say sure, that’s all true, but it doesn’t make this empty body special, like dealing with it is now some kind of rite I have to push through. But it does, and it is. It really fucking is. It’s all... connected...” She could almost feel the electric tingle of something magical with her knife resting on the body’s flesh. Magical and personal.

Jen came a little closer, and stuck her head in front of Triss enough so Triss saw her cock an eyebrow as they met eyes.

“You don’t need a ghost writer, Triss. That sounded exactly like the sort of thing Jacob would say. The sort of thing you’d read in one of his books.”

Triss managed a weak chuckle. “Yeah. Guess you’re right. I thought about maybe talking to Garry and going back to the Carthians, but... fuck me, there’s no going back. I can’t even talk without sounding over-the-top dramatic anymore. Jesus christ, I really do sound like Jacob sometimes.”

“It’s warranted.” Jen straightened up a bit, and ran her fingers back through the empty body’s blonde hair. “So, I guess... the meaning of this act, this rite... is obvious...”

“Yeah...” Triss gulped on a dry vampire throat, and set her free hand on the body’s head, next to Jen’s.

There were some things about life you couldn’t get around. Eternal truths, even to vampires. The body sitting in front of her, empty and waiting, was the result of her trying to break the rules.

No, that was only half the truth. Sure, big magical rules and realms of existence, the afterlife, the inevitability of death, crazy shit like that, it was all very real, and impossible to ignore. But the witch in her knew that was only half the puzzle, half the lesson to learn. The other half was far more personal, and far more real. After letting her suffer in ignorance and confusion for a while, Jacob would have told her straight up exactly what the lesson was, and he'd have told her to suck it up and use it. It was the perfect lesson for a witch, complete with permanently scarring trauma.

You had to let people go.

She pushed the knife into Julias's body, straight into his heart. He was dead in seconds.

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They buried the body deep in the rocky sand, near the cave. Triss half expected it to crumble and melt away on death, but nope, it really was just a perfectly normal body, which made burying it a hundred times harder. It was like life wanted to rub it in just how much she'd fucked up. But at least digging up a big hole wasn't hard, vampire strength and all.

Once they were done, Triss looked down at the crow skull necklace dangling from her neck, and gently flicked it a couple times with her index claw. There was no going back. She was a witch, now.

After the burial, and a few painful words, the two of them went to the Elysium Tower.

Daniel met them at where the Elysium Tower's front stairs met the big hedge maze front lawn, and what do ya know, Athalia was with him, hanging out. It was weird. Neither of them had the hanging-out personality, so seeing them just standing around, chatting, was very strange. Seeing Daniel wear a small smile, stranger.

"Athalia," Triss said, and she gave a small wave.

"Beatrice." And, holy shit, Athalia returned it. Just as small, but still.

"Sheriff."

"Miss Damor." Daniel's smile vanished, and he adjusted his glasses, single finger against the bridge. God forbid the dumbass let anyone know he actually had feelings.



They went silent. Not an awkward silence, but a calm silence, complete with some real eye contact full of acceptance and understanding. It was super out of place for them, and Jen picked up on it instantly.

“I really missed out, didn’t I?”

Triss shrugged and kissed her girlfriend on the cheek. “Yeah, you did. Sorry.”

“Five people died,” Athalia said. “Maybe six, if Aaron’s dead. More, if you include the ghosts.”

“Yeah, I know. But you all got to have something so special.”

Daniel nodded slowly as he sat down on one of the hedge maze’s very Gothic stone benches, and Athalia sat with him.

“It was,” he said. “But Athalia is right. Five people died, and many of us nearly died. I am sorry to say, a young Ventrue like yourself wouldn’t have survived.”

“Jacob wouldn’t have hurt me,” Jen said, “I don’t think...”

Triss slipped her arm behind Jen and pulled her in so she stood hip to hip with her.

“He didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

“No,” Athalia said, “he didn’t.”

They all looked down, even Daniel, and let the shitty reality of what happened last night sink in. Jacob was dead, and sure, it needed to happen, but that didn’t change that the guy wasn’t some evil fucker who deserved it. And it sucked that he was gone.

Triss spoke up first. “How’s Samantha?”

The sheriff managed the smallest shrug she’d ever seen.

“She hasn’t come out of her room.”

“Eesh, really? I mean, she sounded fine when I texted her. Asked her if Jen and I could visit, and she said yes.”

Daniel shrugged again. Ugh, the dude was useless.

Triss turned and made for the stairs, stopped, and walked over to Athalia.

“Athalia, I—”

“It was wonderful, getting to talk to my daughter again, Triss. I want my last memories of her to be of... of what happened last night. My daughter, in my arms, crying. She told me she loved me, you know? Whispered it.”

“I... wow.”

“So, don’t worry about it, me, us. I don’t want to think about the stuff that happened between you and her, if you don’t mind. Let me have my last memory of her as... as what you saw.”

“Yeah, yeah sure.” Nodding, Triss gave Athalia a smile, and Athalia returned it. That was what last night gave people. Closure. Sure as fuck Triss wasn’t going to ruin that for Athalia, who’d had it worse than any of them, save for maybe Sam.

Jen and Triss walked into the tower, where one of Antoinette’s thralls waited, some dude in a suit with the bulge of a pistol hidden under his jacket.

“This way, please.” The thrall bowed, and headed to the back stairs, past the elevators.

Jen and Triss rolled their eyes. It wasn’t like they were a threat to Antoinette, or could sneak around and steal Ordo secrets. But whatever, they followed anyway, as the guide took them down into the tower. It was a pretty awesome tower, and as much as Triss had grown pretty damn fond of dark, scary caves lit with candles and covered in ritual symbols, the black marble walls with their cool white lighting lines were very cool. They fit Antoinette well.

Down and down, the staircase grew wider, and a glance down hallways showed some of them led into very large rooms filled with furniture, or electronics. One of them had a pool.

“I wonder,” Jen said as she poked her head into the giant underground pool room that’d probably cost a billion dollars, “what sort of antics Jack gets up to in these rooms.”

“Probably everything you’re thinking, considering Antoinette is... you know, Antoinette.”

“This way, please,” the thrall said, and they continued on, earning a pout from Jen.

Eventually he stopped in front of a big metal door down a hall of black marble, bowed again, and walked back the way he came. He stopped at the hallway entrance, and waited. Yeah, Triss and Jen weren’t allowed to go roaming alone, and apparently the Prince and Jack weren’t around to play chauffeur.

Triss knocked. She expected to hear a quiet, meek ‘come in’, but instead, the door opened, and Samantha smiled at them from inside her room.

“Hi Triss. Hi Jen. Come on in.” She wore a business suit, which Triss most definitely did not expect. Pajamas, maybe, or something super comfy, the sort of clothes anyone wore when sinking into a pit of despair. But nope, the woman was looking okay. No jogging pants or loose hoodie to be found.

Triss and Jen blinked at each other a couple times, but followed the woman in. Big room, with more black marble walls, but there were curtains hanging from them too, very mature sky blue curtains. Her bed was the same color, and damn it was a big bed, with a night stand beside it with three pictures. Jack, Mary, and James.

There was a bandage on the nightstand, too. Jesus, that was Jacob’s eye bandage.

“Sam.” Jen came up to her, and held out her arms. And to Triss’s surprise, Sam didn’t hesitate to return the hug.

“Jen. Did my sire hurt you too bad?”

“I can’t say a stake in the heart is fun, but the pain dies pretty fast when torpor pulls you down in seconds.”

“That’s good. I wasn’t too happy when I learned what she did.”

Triss shrugged as she came in and stood beside them. “I can’t blame the Prince. She didn’t know if she could trust us.”

“I can certainly blame her,” Jen said, putting a hand over her heart. “Ow.”

Triss laughed, which of course made Jen frown at her, which of course got Sam between them to play peacekeeper. She pulled them down until all three were sitting on the foot of her huge bed.

“How’s Jack?” Triss asked.

“Sleeping. Er, torpor. Now that the curse is gone, healing all those wounds is going to take him a long time. A week or two.”

“That’s definitely a good thing,” Triss said. “Well, you know, about the curse. Sucks that he’s down for the count for so long. I bet he got used to recovering from injuries like that in record time.”

“He did. But, he’s happier now. Much happier. The little we’ve talked, it was like... I could see he didn’t look so heavy.” Sam smiled as she looked down, and set her hands on her knees. “I owe Elaine a lot, for that.”

“Maybe,” Jen said. “But she bet a lot on things going a certain way. It could have easily backfired, from what Triss told me. And from what else she told me, it sounded like Elaine wouldn’t have been all too disappointed if Jacob had actually succeeded.”

“Maybe.” Sam nodded as she pat Jen on the leg. “Maybe. Jacob promised... something really amazing. But, Mary was right. It wouldn’t be fair to everyone who didn’t want that. And, more importantly, it wouldn’t be paradise, would it?”

“No,” Triss said with a heavy sigh, and collapsed back on Sam’s bed. Big ceiling. “No, it wouldn’t have. It might have been, at first, but give it some time and I bet everyone woulda kinda just... stopped. Without death, there’s no life. Without down, there’s no up. All that crap.”

“It’s not crap.” Sam reached out and gave Triss a pat on the stomach; on the abs, considering Triss had a cropped tank top on. “Mary made that clear. And Julias made it clear, right? Enjoy life while you can. It’s special.”

Holy shit, this woman was unbreakable. Triss lifted her head enough to smile at Sam, before relaxing back on her bed again.

“You’re right.”

“Samantha,” Jen said, “you okay to talk about it? I missed it, and Triss talked about it with me, but I wanted — we wanted — to know how you felt about everything. But, if—”

“I can talk about it.” She nodded as she got up, fetched Jacob’s eye bandage, and sat back down between the two women. “James really... really helped me.”

Triss sat up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Jack takes after his father. James was a logical man, and he helped me see things in a way that was... painful, at first. But he knows... knew, how to say things in a way that I could understand. I’m not smart like him or Jack, or my sire, and sometimes I think they’ll never really figure out how to talk to me so I can understand things. But James knew.” She held the bandage in her hands and along her lap, and stared down at it as she ran a finger across it. “He was happy for me, you know? But he was also sad, because he knew what I’d do, once I realized... what I had to do.”

Fucking christ. Triss slipped an arm about the woman’s shoulders, and gave her a sideways hug as she looked down at the bandage, too.

“James knew you pretty well.”

“We were married for a good while, before he died. He knew me better than anyone. And he... helped me understand.” Nodding, she slid the bandage onto Triss’s lap.

“You want me to have this?”

“Yes. I thought about keeping it, but James was right. Everything that happened, Jacob, Black Blood, the ritual, me... killing Jacob, it was all a... different Samantha.”

“Different? I don’t—”

Sam shook her head as she laughed. “When I first woke up as a vampire, everything just kept... happening. I didn’t get to make any decisions. All I could do was hold on as everything kept happening around me. The only decision I got to make was trying to bring Mary back, but that wasn’t really a decision either, that was just me running away and trying to get things back to the way they used to be. Last night, when I killed Jacob, that was... the first time... I’ve made a real decision.”

Oh. Triss nodded as she took the bandage, and admired it in her palm.

“You changed.” More than changed. Sure, Sam wasn’t the smartest cookie, but now, she was talking with a degree of self awareness Triss doubted most vampires had. You didn’t get to thinking in those terms until life chewed you up, spit you out, and you had the will to get back up.

“Looking back at it, I can’t even understand how I wound up in such a situation! And Jacob, he...” She shook her head as she frowned. “We used each other. We were both running away from our pains, and... I don’t think either of us would have agreed to Black Blood’s plan, if we hadn’t been.”

Jen rubbed Sam’s back and rested her head against the mother’s shoulder.

“You did the right thing in the end, I believe.”

“Agreed,” Triss said. “Just, holy fuck it sucks that... that you had to do that.”

“It does.” Sam managed a solemn nod, before she pulled a gentle smile out of some deep reservoir of will Triss doubted she’d ever be able to match. “But James was right. I’m not the person I used to be.”

Triss hugged her friend, nice and tight, before wrapping Jacob’s bandage around her wrist. Whether Sam knew how ‘witchy’ it was to hold onto something like this, from someone she’d killed, Triss didn’t know, but it was pretty much a given the bandage would have power. Dangerous witchy power she could investigate later.

Triss felt bad Jacob was dead, but, not as bad as she thought she would. Sure, the dude had been awesome in his own way, and if it wasn’t for him, she’d still be that punk Carthian, raging at the

Invictus for being assholes and controlling everything. Now, those problems seemed petty and pointless.

She flicked her crow skull necklace a couple more times, looked at the bandage wrapped around her hand, and smiled.

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~~Eric~~

He was in a dream.

He was getting a lot better at figuring out when that happened. Lucid dreams, maybe. He was in wolf form, sitting on the edge of a river, Dolareido on the other side of it and a forest behind him. It was an obvious metaphor. And kinda comforting, now that he'd seen it so many times.

Beside him was another wolf, white, and she let out a long, wolfish sigh as she lay on the ground.

"You won," she said. Her voice sounded so normal, it was almost frightening. She didn't usually sound like that.

"I guess we did."

"Your mother had some interesting things to say."

Eric frowned down at the white wolf beside him, as much as a wolf's face could do that.

"You were eavesdropping."

"Everyone watched. Me, the old crone, others."

"Crone?"

"Beatrice can explain, if she wishes."

Slowly, Eric lay down as well, and looked up at the moon shining overhead.

"You sound disappointed," he said. "I figured you'd be happy. The Gauntlet's still up, and everything's normal."

"And I am still separated from your father."

“My fath—oh. Father Wolf. Christ, I hadn’t even thought of that.” He pawed at the ground a little. “I’m surprised you didn’t help Black Blood, then.”

“I will not remake this world for my own selfish reasons. Urfarah will be beyond my reach until the end of days, and so too will Mictecacihuatl remain beyond Mictlantecuhtli’s reach.”

“End of days?”

She shrugged. “Should such a day ever come.”

Oh thank god, she wasn’t predicting the end of the world. He couldn’t stomach an Armageddon prophecy, not right now anyway.

“I’m... sorry,” he said, “that your mate is still separated from you, then. I—wait. Spirits like you, big, important spirits, were watching Dolareido, weren’t they? A bunch of... gods, have been watching, because of what Black Blood was doing?”

She nodded.

“This whole time,” he said, “we’ve been stuck in some sort of game, or experiment, or fucking something! You all have been watching, waiting, to see how Black Blood’s plan would go!”

She nodded again, eyes still pointed to the city across the river. If she wasn’t going to say anything, he sure as hell was.

“That spirit I ran into years ago, in the prison, the tiny young spirit that looked a lot like Black Blood. What was that?”

“One of the many spirits of death that grow from the tainted ground Dolareido was built on. It was called to the violence and death of the old prison.”

“Jesus. The city really is on cursed ground?”

“In more ways than one, as the vampire Prince knows. She uses its strange nature to fuel her experiments, just as Jacob did. And just as Black Blood did. His past, his essence, the ruination his existence brought to those who lived here before, has made this land a part of him. And...” She sighed as she gave a wolf shrug. “It doesn’t matter. The guardians have bound him. His new chains will last a cycle. And even when he does return, his presence may lead to millions of deaths, but no damage to the tapestry itself. Such a task must be done by someone in the great game.”

Tapestry? Great game? Guardians? There wasn’t any point in asking.

“How did those souls visit us? I—”

“The tear was powerful, and the guardians decided you and your companions deserved a small reward.”

“A small reward for saving the universe.”

Luna laughed. “Indeed.”

“It was... pretty amazing, getting to talk to Mom again.”

“She scolded your mate for tempting your father with pictures of her breasts.”

It was his turn to laugh. “Yeah, she did. I thought maybe she was jealous, but nah, I think she was just teasing Jess. Mom was happy that Dad got himself in shape, and is finally enjoying his golden years.”

“I am glad.”

He wasn't so sure about that. Luna sounded torn, maybe a little bitter. Considering Samantha had stopped her from being reunited with her mate, he couldn't blame her. But it was for the better, according to her. It was a victory.

“Are you going to leave Dolareido? I mean, I don't know if you've truly been here, but—”

“I am here more than elsewhere, in a sense. But now that Mictlantecuhtli and Malachi's plot is broken, I shall return to where I used to be.”

“Does that mean, uh...”

Luna lifted her head enough to look directly at him, and give him a small wolf grin.

“I have blessed this city for my forsaken children. The spirits of sexuality remain in the city as well, and will obey my order. You will be able to continue your carnal indulgences, but only within its walls.”

“So Dolareido really is the sex city capital of the world.”

She laughed again. “It is not only I that has set my gaze on this city. Many spirits come and go, and many more will come. Some as powerful as I. Dolareido remains a... hub, for many forms of interaction. The very soil beneath it has forever been altered.” Slowly, as if mulling the words over, she looked at him. “My children must remain, to keep this place under control. You must herd the flock, and cull the herd, as is necessary. And... since so many spirits of sexuality exist here, and you have earned my aid, it seemed simple enough to bless it so. A reward for Uratha that remain here and do my bidding.”



“Jessy certainly appreciates it.”

Again, Luna laughed as she sat up. Still a wolf, so, sitting on her hind legs with her front paws between her knees.

“I like her.”

“Jessy? My girlfriend?”

“Indeed.”

“The super brazen punk, Jessy? Hyper sexual, no shame, no guilt, Jessy?”

“Quite.”

“Why?”

Luna shook her head as she chuckled. Okay, no explanation then. Maybe she saw something of herself, or itself, in Jessy? Crazy to think of a god spirit like the moon ever behaving like Jessy.

Or maybe, Jessy behaved like Father Wolf.

“Your father,” Luna said. “Were you considering asking a Kindred to sire him?”

Well, fuck, that was a hard question. He shrugged wolf shoulders as he stared off to the distant city.

“I’d considered it, yeah. Mom’s happy Dad’s finally moving on. But...”

“Your father is old, and alive. To become Kindred at such an age will be difficult, and while he may be moving on from your mother’s death, a part of him will not be able to, not after the strife the three of you faced together. It may be best to let age take him.”

“Yeah... maybe...”

“And after everything that happened last night, I hope you’ve come to understand, young Uratha. Your mother’s words were wise. Be happy while you can.”

And of course, the god didn’t beat around the bush when it came to the big, life altering questions.

“I... think I understand.”

“Will you tell your father what she said?”

“I’d thought about it. But he’s... happy. That’s what she wants. I’m not necessarily happy knowing that he’s seen my girlfriend’s breasts, a lot, or is apparently getting laid quite a bit...”

“The old still enjoy sex.”

“Yeah, apparently.” He shuddered. It didn’t matter how much he’d grown up or would ever grow up, he’d still have trouble picturing his dad having sex. “If I tell him I talked to Mom’s soul, that might ruin things for him. But before that, I think... I think I’ll ask him, if he wants to become a vampire. He’ll think I’m kidding, but now that we’re talking again, I think I can get an honest answer out of him.”

“Be careful, young Uratha. You would not be the first soul to ruin someone’s life, by having them become Kindred.” Before he got to ask, Luna stepped onto the water. And in classic fashion, she walked on the water, because of course she did. “I take my leave. I am glad to have spoken with one of my children, about more... normal things. But we will not speak again.”

“We won’t?”

“Mictlantecuhtli will not be back for some time, and my interference, and the interference of others, were only balanced by his own. My gifts will remain, as will his, but you and I will speak no more. From now on, you are on your own.”

“I... see.”

The wolf looked back at him over her shoulder, and nodded her head slowly.

“The power of the wolf will always threaten to drown you in the lust of the hunt, young Uratha. But it is a desire only. It is not who you are. Breathe, child of the city, and it will not control you. Breathe, and...” Laughing again, her tail wagging slightly, she managed another shrug. “If you do not understand yet, you never will. Goodbye.”

With a quiet shimmer, the white wolf faded away, but instead of floating up into the sky to join the moon, she dispersed into the water below her like mist. The mist settled, coalesced, and disappeared into a white circular shape in the water. The reflection of the moon.

“I understand,” he whispered, “... I think.” How long ago had she told him that word? Breathe? At the time, he didn’t get it. It took a long time before he realized Luna was telling him how to be... aware. Aware in the big sense, in the ‘I’m alive’ sense, in the sentient sense.

Very guru, very yoga or Buddhist, and very much not him. Probably why she felt the need to tell him, or he’d still be that raging Uratha who’d killed and eaten three humans. Sure, Avery probably understood it intimately, and she’d taught it to her pack. Eric didn’t have a pack, and he doubted he ever would. Too stubborn, and too dumb.

He owed Luna his life.

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~~Damien~~

“I have seen crushed insects in better shape than you.”

Damien managed a weak chuckle as he sat down by Maria’s new piano, in her cavern beneath the Grand Cathedral.

“I never did heal very quickly. One night is not enough.”

“Indeed.” Maria got up from her desk and sat beside him on the piano bench, facing forward, same as him. “Why didn’t you visit me last night? A single phone call was hardly enough of a report.”

He frowned slightly as he looked down. “I had to think about how to... best tell you about what happened.”

“How best to tell me?” The corpse woman, dressed in one of her fuller, fancier white gowns, eyed him with a raised eyebrow. “What happened?”

His report last night had simply been: ‘Black Blood is defeated, and Jacob is dead. We’re safe.’

Now, it was time to explain everything, and maybe bring his boss to emotional ruin.

He spared no details. Maria was the definition of methodical, and she listened with focused eyes as he detailed Jacob’s trap, the battle with the azlu, the intervention of Sabrina, the Ripper’s slaughter, and finally, the encounter with Jacob and Black Blood.

“Samantha killed Jacob? Oh... Lord help her. Is she alright?”

“I texted Jack a moment ago. He’ll be spending the next couple weeks mostly in torpor, but he assures me his mother is doing well. She’s... grown, for the experience.”

Maria did something the corpse vampire almost never did. She trembled.

“I cannot imagine... doing such a horrible thing. I am glad she did, but...”

“She surprised everyone. And I mean everyone. Jack, Antoinette, her daughter’s ghost.”

“She is a stronger woman than I had considered.”

Damien smiled at her, and leaned in a little as he set his elbows on his knees.

“When the dust cleared, we heard a voice from the tear. It was Mary’s.”

“The ghost—”

Damien shook his head. “Mary, the real Mary, her soul stepped out of the tear. A being of gold.” A shiver went through him, not of fear, but of awe. “I’m sorry you weren’t there to see it, Maria. Gold poured out of the tear, liquid gold. It flowed over the stone and caressed our ankles, and it... soothed everyone and everything it touched.”

Maria’s mouth fell open.

“Mary,” he continued, “asked her ghost to join her in the afterlife, and the two merged. The ghost’s memories went into Mary. According to Mary, that’s what happens when ghosts cross over, and apparently, most ghosts do not get to do so. But, that moment was just the beginning. More souls stepped out of the tear. First, Julias.”

“Julias Mire!?”

“Yes. Then, others. Many of Avery’s dead werewolves, including those that’d just died that night, came to say goodbye. Jack’s father came. Sándor’s wife and son. Eric’s mother. Clara’s brother. Natasha’s parents. Others I didn’t know. Even the two ghouls Antoinette lost before the Purge came to say hello and goodbye.” He looked to Maria again, and she stared at him, desperate to hear her lover’s name. “But not Lucas.”

“Oh...” Her posture sank.

“Apparently the truly old have trouble abandoning their anchors, according to Julias. It weighs them, traps them, in the afterlife. Which is why I suppose some individuals didn’t appear, such as Viktor or Tony, or Azamel, or Lucas. But... Julias had a message from Lucas.”

“Oh?” Her posture returned, and she leaned in, eyes so wide he could see into her soul.

“Lucas... apologized. He admits that, toward the end, he was mad with conviction, not thinking straight, and obsessed.” Before Maria could look away, disappointed with the lack of her in the message, Damien lightly pat her leg. “And, for you, Lucas had another message: he was a fool. His biggest regret, is doing what he did, and asking you to betray Natasha to him, instead of re-seeking the love you two had.”

Lucas had spent fifty years in torpor, with Damien ready to revive him the moment the political situation in Dolareido made it possible for Lucas to rebuild his power. Fifty years was a long time, even

for a vampire. Fifty years of Maria, wishing Lucas was with her, only for the maniac to basically ignore her as he went mad with his quest for revenge and domination.

Apparently death had been the wake up call he'd needed to realize how stupid he'd been to neglect Maria. A fool to the end, then. After death was far too late to realize a mistake.

“Is that... that all?”

Damien pulled up a smile he'd been saving for exactly that line.

“And he said that he loved you, loves you still, and that you should find happiness in your second life while you can. Don't forget him, but move on, as well. And don't do anything stupid like challenge an entire pack of werewolves to a fist fight again.”

Poor Maria. She should have been there, if at least to hear the words directly from Julias, but Damien had recited them accurately enough.

She broke. First, a small laugh over the last remark, but it passed quickly and turned into a quiet sob. Elders did not cry, and yet there she sat, body trembling lightly as she struggled to contain the noise.

“He said those things?”

“According to Julias.”

“And I suppose we can trust Julias, can't we?”

“I suppose so.” He nodded again as he put his hand back on his own leg. “Not everyone got to see someone. Elaine didn't. I didn't. But most did.”

“Truly a wondrous scene. I... am sad that you did not fetch me to aid you in this battle, Damien.”

“I—”

“I know. Jacob trapped you, and you were catapulted into extreme circumstances.” She sighed as she let herself slouch forward, elbows on her knees, same as him. “Daniel got to speak with his childe, Torrence?”

“Is that who that was? A tall man, skinny, short hair.”

“Indeed. And Antoinette spoke with her dead ghouls?”

“Lana and Darlene?”

“Indeed.” Maria sighed as she smiled, and stood up. “We must chronicle this event, Damien. But we must do so carefully.”

“It shall be done.” The proper word choice, for as big a deal as this.

Maria stepped behind her work desk and got to typing. Damien joined her. It was the first time Maria had smiled like that in a long time, and he was determined to see it continue.

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Fiona burst into tears the moment Damien stepped into her apartment. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him as hard as her little body could manage.

“I talked to Sándor!” she said.

“You did? Do I... need to hurt him? You look upset.”

The tiny redhead burst into giggles, and they mixed into her squeaky sobs. Happy crying.

“Sándor told me Julias talked to him. And Julias had a message from Azamel.”

“Oh?”

She nodded excitedly as she let him go and sat down on the edge of her bed. Small apartment.

“Aye! She wanted to tell me that I... that I...” The giggles vanished, and Fiona broke down into proper loud sobs, full-on crying.

Damien slid off his shoes, joined her on the foot of her bed, and slid an arm around her. It’d take her a while to stop crying, he knew that. He also knew from the way Fiona was smiling between her sobs, that Azamel’s message had been good.

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~~Natasha~~

“Your parents were really cute,” Jessy said. “I mean, you know, for glowy gold people.”

Tash couldn’t help but laugh as she pat her best friend on the leg. The two of them sat together in Tash’s apartment, Eric on the couch watching the news while Tash and Jess sat at the kitchen counter. Tash was typing up a report on her laptop for her boss, and Jessy was trying to steal ideas for her own

report. Considering how insane it'd been, two nights ago, she couldn't blame her. And considering Michael hadn't been there, Jessy couldn't cut corners. She needed help, especially with Jack on sick leave.

"They were! Oh god, I was s-so happy t-to see them together. The way Dad died, I wasn't sure he'd..." Sighing, she tried to type a few more words, failed, and leaned in toward Jess. "I never really believed in... Heaven."

"I don't think it was Heaven. At least, not the kind I think you're talking about."

"Ugh, d-don't even get me started on that! The Prince told me it's my new job t-to cross reference what we learned, with every text that talks about the afterlife."

"Every text?"

"Every text."

"Damn. That is going to suck."

Tash giggled as she shrugged. "I like reading."

"Nerd."

Rolling her eyes, she gave her friend a gentle shove. Jessy was about to return it, but her expression softened, and she rested against the counter top instead.

"No soul came to visit me. But I guess, yeah, never really was close to anyone when I was alive. And as a vampire, there's... well, you, and..."

"Julias."

They both sighed, and despite their efforts, it was a heavy, sad sigh.

"It was great to talk to him again."

"It w-was."

"And in typical Julias fashion, it seemed like he was trying to help everyone. Jesus fucking christ, he was even helping Angela."

Angela. Even as a gold soul, Athalia's daughter had been absolutely terrifying, and had looked like she was going to strangle her mother, the way she'd dragged herself forward with that big rock hanging around her neck. Everyone in the cave had stared, dumbfounded. Even Jack and Beatrice, two people who had enough reason to hate Angela more than anyone in the world, had been paralyzed and unable to look away.

Tash was glad they didn't interfere, and they probably were, too. Much as Angela deserved to suffer, no one deserved to suffer for eternity; if that was even how the afterlife worked. And more importantly, Athalia didn't deserve to suffer for it. Sure, Athalia betrayed Jack and Triss at the end of their attack against the hunters, but who could blame a mother for doing what they could to save their daughter?

Poor Athalia. Poor Samantha. Tash looked down, and a tiny shudder worked through her.

Which Jessy must have recognized, because she got off her stool, and hugged Tash, nice and tight. And Tash melted into her.

"It was nice," Tash whispered, "to... t-t-talk to Julias again. I miss him."

"Me too. We owe him a lot."

Eric peeked over the couch. "Should I—"

Jessy waved him off. "Girl moment. You're good."

"Roger that." And the man seamlessly went back to watching TV, without a doubt in his mind that Jessy was telling him the truth. Those two were strangely perfect for each other.

"I w-wonder," Tash said, "if the souls are together, in the afterlife, that river place Julias was talking about. I mean, like... d-d-do they socialize? Maybe be romantic with each other?"

"Oh fuck me, if there's no sex in the afterlife, I'm not going."

Tash laughed. Leave it to Jessy to make her laugh, no matter how serious the topic, or how sad she felt.

"Mom and Dad d-did seem like they were together. And happy." Every time she summoned the memory of her mom and dad walking out of that tear together, it felt wonderful, and she made sure to smile brightly so Jessy could see it, as she guided her friend back onto her stool. "And Julias looked happy too. Like, m-maybe... maybe—"

"Like maybe he was getting some pussy in the afterlife. Maybe from that Margaret woman?"

And of course, leave it to Jessy to ruin a deep moment, too.

"That's not what I was thinking!"

"Uh huh, sure." Jessy gestured to Eric, only the back of his head visible over the back of the couch. "Question, Eric. I got the impression from Julias that people who'd recently died didn't get to visit, because of the weight around their necks. But Monica, Carter, and Caleb died that night."



“No way they’d miss seeing their family,” Eric said. “Werewolf packs are a pretty heavy bond. Soldiers in arms combined with family bonds.”

Surprisingly, Jessy didn’t make a quip about how ‘weak’ or ‘gay’ that was, or call the werewolves ‘pussy bitches’. She nodded, face trying its best to keep her smile and fight off a somber look, and failing.

“Matt and Art,” Tash said, “they were... they were so happy, you know? They d-didn’t think they’d ever get to talk to Caleb or Monica, or Carter, or Stephanie again. They were... so happy to get to d-do that. And Avery, how many souls visited her? Seven more? I’ve never seen her so happy.” Happy and Avery didn’t really fit together, not unlike happy and Athalia. But that night broke all the rules.

“It was... really nice,” the Gangrel said. “And meeting Eric’s mom was great, too. I thought maybe she’d yell at me for how I got Eric’s dad to start taking care of himself... and she did, a little. But she was happy.”

Eric got up off the couch, and hugged his girlfriend from behind. “She liked you.”

“Of course she liked me. Who doesn’t fucking like me?”

Eric nodded over Jessy’s shoulder, as if Jessy’s words were obvious truth. A few more hugs later, he sat back down on the couch. Jessy joined him, and snuggled into his side.

Tash smiled at the backs of their heads before turning back to her laptop, and tried to type her report again.

“Tash,” Eric said, looking over the couch’s back to her, “we should take a trip into the Hisil soon, when you’re up for it again. There’s someone who wants to talk to you again.”

Tash sat up straight. “S-Sanctuary?”

“It’s alive.”

Oh thank god.

“Let’s!”

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~~Jack~~

One week since the incident.

He spent almost all night of every night for a week since the incident sleeping. When he was awake, he managed to make some quick calls to his thralls to make sure they and his crows were fine, and a quick call to let Michael know he was still alive. Of course, his boss didn't show him a hint of sympathy, but did tell him Jessy's report covered the bases and Jack didn't have to do anything until he was healed. With no painkillers for vampires, the Beast knew how to draw him into the coma-like state to let him sleep the night — and day — away while he regenerated damage. And nothing in the world felt as good as more torpor sleep.

On the eighth night, when dusk came, he sat up and stretched out his limbs.

“Ow! Fucking shit.”

Antoinette chuckled as she sat up next to him, and kissed the top of his head.

“Rest, my love.”

“I'm feeling good enough to stay awake.”

“Then by all means, remain awake. But that does not mean you should not rest. Only move as required.”

He rolled his eyes, but smiled up at Antoinette, and got a quick kiss for it.

“Yes ma'am.”

“Have you spoken with your mother yet?”

“A little. We're... still dodging the Jacob topic. And the Mary topic. All the topics, really.”

The Prince nodded as she set a kiss on his bad eye. It felt healed. Her way of telling him it was.

“You should speak with her. She is resilient, my love, quite resilient, but trauma can be insidious, and leave deep seeds that take years to bloom. Best uproot them now before they dig deep into her mind. Or your mind.”

He nodded as he leaned into her, forehead slipping into the nook of her neck.

“Yeah, you're right. And I will. But holy fuck I am tired.”

“Quite so. And Beatrice is speaking with your mother, helping her come to terms with what happened, as is Athalia.”

“Athalia...” Thinking about Angela and her mom used to flood him with so much anger, it was blinding. Not anymore. Something about seeing Julias actually helping Angela in the afterlife was like a bucket of cold water dumped over his anger. And that was a good thing. He was sick and tired of being angry.

“And you, my love? Will you speak to me now?”

“About—”

“Two people died at the Ripper’s hands that night.”

He sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Yeah. But their souls visited me. So, I mean, I guess I’m still upset about it, but it’s hard to get too angry when Caleb and Monica both looked me in the eye and told me it was alright. I still feel guilty about it, but... not nearly as much as I would have.”

“That night did more than settle the deep anguish in many. It settled angers, as well.”

“You mean about your ghouls, and Lucas?”

“Oui. Knowing that Lucas regrets his actions is... a small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless. But seeing Lana and Darlene again? I was not prepared. It is such a rare thing to be given a chance to revisit the pains of our past, and soothe them so.”

“You looked happy.”

“I was. I am.” Nodding, she pushed on his chest a bit, until he was on his back again, head on the pillow. She snuggled up against his side, and rested her head on his shoulder, squashing her breasts against his stomach and waist. “Never, in my wildest dreams, did I expect that night to go as it did.”

With her head on his left shoulder, his left arm had free rein to caress her back, and she nuzzled into him more as he did. Relaxing. They were relaxing. How long had it been since they’d been able to do that, truly do that, without some looming disaster around the corner, or noose of guilt strangling him. And sure, he still had some work to do, some people to talk to, emotional conversations he knew were going to sting. But that was nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to how good it felt to not have a giant problem to deal with. Nothing that demanded his immediate attention.

It felt weird. Freeing, but weird. Almost like he was psychologically naked.

“I’m actually feeling kinda restless,” he said. “Feel like I should be fixing something, but there’s nothing to fix. Only thing I’m worried about is Mom, but you say she’s fine? Er, well, not fine, but you know.”

“Oui. Your mother is doing better than I could have hoped for. I still recommend talking to her, but it is not a pressing issue. And I have spoken to others, as well. Maria is happier for Julias’s news.”

“That’s good,” he said. Maria might have been an angry bitch, but she wasn’t as bad as all that. She deserved a bit of happiness, too. “Garry and Michael, they angry we didn’t invite them?”

“A touch, but they understand the circumstance. No doubt the two Gangrels would have liked to speak with Roland.” Sighing, Antoinette leaned in and kissed his jaw, before resting her cheek on his shoulder again. “You have not asked about Elaine.”

Elaine. He’d definitely been avoiding that topic, for a whole bunch of reasons, including her own safety.

“I... wasn’t sure how.”

“She and I have spoke at length about her dark past. Her diablerie. You need not keep it a secret from me.”

The word was enough to make his whole body tense.

“Is she—”

“It is a secret she and I will keep, as will you, I assume?”

And relaxed again.

“Yeah. After what she did for me? It’s the least I can do.”

“She has earned our trust. Though, her plan was... a problematic one. If you had not come, you would have never triggered her trap. Black Blood would have had control of the situation with his ghosts. Jacob would have succeeded.”

“You talked to her about it?”

“Mhmm. Many words were exchanged. She... She did not want for you, what she had to do to rid herself of her curse. She resented it for what it did to her. She despised it for the terrible things it brought on her.”

“From day one, I thought she wanted it because I’d released it from the weird binding spell that church dude in the curse’s flashbacks put on Susanna. I figured Elaine wanted its power.”

His lover chuckled and kissed his shoulder.

“I do not doubt the thought crossed her mind. But my old friend is not as heartless as other elders. Indeed, I think she may have quite a large heart, hidden within.”

“Elaine, a big heart?” He laughed, a proper big laugh, and regretted it as pain quickly put the laughter to an end. Okay, insides still not in tip top shape. “I gotta admit though, I’m surprised she did what she did. Sounded to me like she had good reason to let Jacob win.”

“And yet, she stopped him, and freed you of your burden.”

“Yeah, she did. I really do owe her.”

Antoinette sat up, and reached for the nightstand. With a wicked smile, she held out his phone to him. No cell signal in the tower’s deeper floors, but she did have wifi in all the rooms.

“Call her. Invite her. She has been quite anxious about how you feel about her.”

“Anxious? Her? About me?” Hard to believe Elaine, a Ventrue 500 years old, could be anxious about much.

“Of course. She cares for you, Jack, and as more than your great grandsire.”

He blinked at her.

“That sounded dangerously close to romantic, Antoinette.”

The Prince laughed and shook her head.

“Not at all. But I would be lying if I said it was purely platonic. She cares for you, but until you sire your own childe, it is difficult to explain. She is not your family, nor is she your lover. But she is your friend, and your great grandsire, a true Kindred blood connection. She is my old friend, and the two of us have shared more than friendship for centuries. She is…” Antoinette tapped a finger on her chin thoughtfully. “A very close friend.”

He laughed. Okay, close friend wasn’t a bad descriptor, especially when said with a little sly emphasis.

He pulled up Elaine on the contacts list, and almost pressed dial. But his finger stopped halfway, and he stared at the phone as the shitty memories of that night climbed back up into his skull. And they were shit memories, for more reasons than he’d shared.

His arms drooped, and the phone fell on the blankets.

“I was going to kill myself.”

Silence. Look at her? No, not yet, it’d hurt too much. He sat up beside her again, blanket over his legs and phone resting on it, and he looked down.

Eventually she put a hand on his back, and rubbed his spine.

“Tell me.”

He gulped, half expecting a surge of primal, disgusting hate to scream at him from in his head. But it never came. It was just him now, in his head. He'd almost forgotten how... not angry and hateful his thoughts were, when he didn't have to share them with the Ripper.

“The Ripper killed Caleb and Monica, and he was going to kill Clara. He almost did.” A shudder worked through him, and he squeezed the blankets between his knees. “The Ripper and I had been fighting for control over my body for a while. That night, he decided he wasn't going to give it up, ever again. He pulled out all the stops. Crushed and buried me in my own mind. I had to find a way out, and... and realizing the only course of action was to kill myself, was... it was...” He squeezed the blanket harder, until his shoulders trembled. “I tried. I actually tried. I put Damien's sword against my neck and pushed with everything I had. Only reason I'm still here is the Ripper fought me until Mary and Triss showed up and interfered.”

“Oh Jack.”

“I'm sorry. I thought about you, and Mom, but... but I couldn't let it go on. I couldn't...”

Antoinette took the phone, set it aside, and gently pushed Jack onto his back again. She lay with him, snuggled into his side, and kissed his cheek as she traced lines on his chest.

“I am afraid, little Ventrue, there are no words I can offer. No wisdoms or truths. I can say your situation was dire, and you were willing to do what had to be done to save those you could. But, I know such words are meaningless.”

He closed his eyes, and nudged himself into her.

“I figured if I was gone, you'd figure something out, some way to stop Jacob.”

“I had. But I could not have predicted Black Blood would be able to control ghosts to such an absurd degree. Elen's haruspex proved that he could not interfere with us directly; a flaw in the range of her haruspex, in multiple ways.”

“Elaine knew. She could have told you.”

Antoinette nodded. “She discussed her plan with me. She made quite the gamble, assuming you would arrive to stop Jacob. Though a large part of her plan was born from fear of Jacob's abilities, fear not misplaced. She waited for the opportune moment to strike.”

“Shitty plan.”

“If her goal was only to stop Jacob. A large part of her goal, my love, was saving you, so you would not have to suffer as she did.”

Yeah, that was true. Much as Elaine’s plan had a thousand ways it could have failed, she’d set it up so she could save him. And if Jack had to kill his own childe to save himself from the curse, he wasn’t sure he could do it. You couldn’t sire someone randomly, it didn’t work like that. You had to pour will and intent into the vitae you used to sire someone. You had to put a piece of yourself into it. It was a big, big fucking deal. More than that, it was literally a magical, binding power. Childe and sire were connected.

And Elaine had killed hers, to free herself. No fucking wonder she felt like shit. No fucking wonder she went with a plan that could have failed, since losing meant undoing Maurice’s death, sorta, and freeing her from that guilt. He couldn’t blame her, considering what he’d been willing to do to stop the Ripper from killing more people.

Elaine knew. She knew he’d kill himself before doing what she did. Would Elaine even do what she did before, and kill her own childe, if she had the chance to repeat history? No, she wouldn’t. What did she say, when she was fighting Jacob?

‘I regret many of my decisions, Jacob. This is not one of them.’

“I guess even elders can change,” he said.

“To my surprise, and delight.” Antoinette kissed his cheek again, and ran a finger down back over his head. “I am glad you did not succeed, my love. You, your mother, your sister, you make decisions with such extremes of will.”

“I guess we have a habit of... either being very stubborn, or making big decisions.”

“Quite so.”

He smiled at her, and picked up the phone again. “I really should thank her. Elaine, I mean.”

Antoinette rolled her eyes. “You know very well how she will repay your thanks.”

“You’re the one that suggested I invite her.”

The Prince gave him an evil grin, and kissed him. “That I did.”

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“Ann. Childe oh mine.” Elaine stepped into the Prince’s giant bedroom at the bottom of the Elysium Tower’s basement, and once she realized Jack and Antoinette were still in bed, she closed the giant vault door behind her.

“Elaine,” Antoinette said. Both her and Jack were sitting up, back against the headboard of her ridiculously huge bed, both with blankets pulled up to their waist. And of course, the Prince didn’t bother covering her breasts.

“I have been summoned?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “We haven’t really talked, since the incident.”

“Indeed.” Elaine walked over to them, eyes spending more than a little time looking both their naked torsos up and down. “You needed rest.”

“I’m rested enough. I wanted to talk to you, to…” Sighing, Jack managed a slow shrug of his shoulders. Yeah, still tender as fuck. “You did something amazing, Elaine, for me. I owe you more than my life.”

Speaking so straight and blunt to someone like Elaine, an elder who danced the Danse Macabre and probably hadn’t said a thing plain and straight in hundreds of years, had her squirming. And seeing a 500-year-old vampire squirm was amazing. He grinned at her.

“I assume dear Ann told you the details of my plot.”

“Some of them, yeah.”

“I see.” She squirmed a little more.

Jack looked back to Antoinette, who smiled down at him and nodded toward Elaine. Looked like he was in charge of the conversation, then. Which the Ventrue part of him absolutely loved.

“If there’d been a way you could have stopped Jacob without doing something so risky, I’d have said yeah, do that. But Antoinette thinks you’re right, there was no better way to try and stop Jacob than when he was performing the ritual. Bastard probably had other rituals set up to stop anything, and if you gave up that you wanted to stop him, or that the Prince even knew what he was up to and wanted to stop him, he’d have disappeared. The smart play was making sure he trusted you, and waiting.” Which was still a tough pill to swallow. It’d meant letting his mom continue to date the man.

“The curse—”



Jack held up a hand. “You did what you did, and I can’t say I agree with it, but... god, you have no idea how good it feels, Elaine, to not have that fucking voice in my head anymore, begging me to kill and worse. It’s quiet, and it’s... it’s great. It’s so fucking great, and I have you to thank for that.”

“I... understand a little more than you realize.” She finally stopped squirming, and met his eyes with a serious gaze. “I could not let my past become your future, little Ventrue. I—”

“You already had this conversation with Antoinette. I’m not gonna make you have it again, unless you want to.”

Like he’d lifted a wet blanket off her, Elaine’s smile beamed, and she sat on the side of the bed close to him.

“No, I would not. Words were had, lessons learned.”

“Okay.” He grinned at her again, and motioned for her to come closer.

The plan was to tease her a bit and convince her to get undressed. Apparently he wasn’t very good at the teasing, coy game, because Elaine kicked off her clothes immediately. The tall, busty and fit, blonde woman crawled onto the bed, naked and huge breasts swaying underneath her as she came over to him. Without even asking, she pulled the blanket aside, and slipped under it so she could sit beside him.

“Welcome,” Antoinette said.

“Indeed. I am feeling quite welcome.” Nodding, Elaine slid down further until she was on her side, facing Jack. And with elder strength, she pulled him down until he was on his back on the bed, head on a pillow, right beside her.

“I welcome you into my bed,” the Prince said, “and you immediately attempt to steal my lover out from under my nose.”

“You let your guard down.” Nodding, Elaine pressed her body into his side, huge breasts squashing into his chest and molding against his body. She blew onto his ear lightly before setting a kiss on his neck. “My childe is—”

“My lover,” Antoinette said, frowning playfully as she scooted down to copy Elaine and lay next to Jack before snuggling into his side, “is mine.”

“He is my childe.”

“He is my love.”

Uh oh. Jack raised a brow as he looked between the two women. They were both looking at each other, and him, with a little more... animalistic hunger than they usually did.

“Uh, ladies?”

Antoinette grinned at him, and pushed her body against his chest enough for her left breast to press into Elaine’s right. His chest was completely covered in boobs.

“There is an unexpected benefit from the removal of the curse, my love. You are, once again, as weak as a kitten, compared to elders such as us.”

“I mean, that... yeah, that’s true. I... um...” Oh shit.

“That he is,” Elaine said. “I have never touched your little Ventrue, with him so vulnerable. Completely, and utterly vulnerable.”

Oh shit oh shit.

“It is delicious. He squirms and wriggles, and there is nothing he can do to stop the pleasure you force on him.” Antoinette leaned over him, and kissed him, while one of her hands slid down his body, and her other took his closer hand and pinned it over his head.

“Oh my.” Elaine leaned in and kissed his jaw, putting her mouth a literal inch from Antoinette’s, while her hands did the same. Her higher one slid down his stomach, while her other slid up and over his head, and pinned his other hand by the headboard next to his other one.

He squirmed. His body was tender and didn’t want to move, but even if it could, he knew he wouldn’t be able to move an inch. Holy shit, he hadn’t even thought about this. Not being able to defend himself out on the street against stronger vampires, yeah sure, he’d been thinking about that the moment he lost the curse. But suddenly being Antoinette’s helpless boy toy? And Elaine’s too? Hadn’t even crossed his mind.

It was exciting. He tried to lift his hands, but they pinned them down easily. He tried again. They pinned him down again, and this time, they both purred.

“You know I’m pretty beat up, right, ladies?”

“Then you will have to stay put,” Antoinette said, “while Elaine and I take care of you. Non?”

“I mean, I guess. But—”

“Stay still,” Elaine said. “That is an order.”

Antoinette gave Elaine a playful swat on the shoulder as she slid herself further down Jack’s body.

“He is my lover, in my city. He obeys me.”

Elaine returned the swat, giving Antoinette a small flick of the back of her fingers against the Prince’s shoulder, as she also slid down Jack’s body.

“He is my great grandchilde, and I do believe he said he owes me.”

Uh oh. Cat fight? No, they were both way too old, and way too friendly with each other to have a cat fight. But they sure as hell would pretend to have one, just to make him squirm. And they were completely right, he was powerless to resist, let alone genuinely stop them. He wasn’t Blushing Life, but if he had been, his heart rate would have been soaring.

Both women came to a stop once they were cuddled into the sides of his legs and waist, and their breasts were pressed to his naked pelvis. His penis, flaccid since he was still in undead mode, disappeared underneath the soft, heaviness of their huge breasts. And all four breasts were pressed together, fighting for room on his body, shapes conforming to each other. With how the two women were resting their torsos on him while still kinda lying on their sides, and considering how big their breasts were, the huge pillows nearly reached their chins.

He gulped, and stared.

“Clearly my love cares only for me,” Antoinette said, grinning like a cat.

“You seduced him when he was too young to know any better. I am clearly the better match. I am Ventrue, and his great grandsire.” And Elaine wore the same grin. This was a game they’d played with each other before, before ever meeting Jack. Silly words that read like a horrible porn script. From the 1700s.

Antoinette reached back up to Jack, took his closer arm, and pinned his left hand down beside her, her torso still fighting for space on his pelvis with Elaine.

“Jack, my love. Blush for me.”

Elaine reached out and did the same thing, re-pinning his right hand next to his hip against the blankets. Unlike Antoinette, she let go of his wrist and netted her fingers with his, still keeping the hand trapped in her grip.

“After all I’ve done? You neglect me so?” Elaine licked her lips, and Blushed, bringing color to her skin, and warmth. And with her closer hand still holding his, with a grip he couldn’t escape, she used her other to toss her blonde hair slightly. Very fashion model-esque.

Antoinette rolled her eyes, and Blushed too, before also netting her fingers into his.

For a super tiny second, he was tempted to say no, just to tease them. But the looks in their eyes told him he'd be much happier right now if he just gave in. They were in a competitive mood with each other, and a dominant mood with him. Dangerous combination, mostly for him.

He Blushed Life, and both women let out quiet, practiced purrs, as they watched his skin fill out and gain a bit of color. And, despite his injuries, his length grew hard in seconds, fighting to point up against the four breasts pinning it down.



They both smiled at him, before turning wicked, evil grins at each other, as they both adjusted so his hardening cock could come up between their breasts. Considering how big their breasts were, he was pretty happy the tip of his glans was visible at all, once it was snug between the four giant pillows.

Both women purred again as they pushed themselves toward each other, just a little, just enough to have their breasts press on his cock and bury it in gentle skin-on-skin friction. Sometimes, they looked at him, and gave him more practiced, bedroom eyes, fully intent on making him cum with nothing more than how insanely sultry their expressions could be. And sometimes, they looked at each other, and he could see they were reliving memories, erotic ones.

Antoinette's free hand near his legs slid up onto Elaine's shoulders, and the Prince licked her lips as she eased her fingers behind her friend's head, and into her hair. The two women shared another, knowing look, before they both looked to Jack again with 'cum for me' eyes. As they did, Antoinette pushed down on Elaine's head, and his great grandsire leaned down to wrap her lips around the head of his cock.

Instant wet warmth set jolts of bliss down his length, and he shivered underneath them.

It only got worse when Elaine lifted her head up from between the four breasts, and did the same to Antoinette. She pushed her friend's head down gently, and Jack's glans disappeared under Antoinette's kiss.

They took turns, each woman spending maybe ten seconds slowly working their lips back and forth on his cock's swollen tip. They couldn't reach down very far, awkward angle and all that, plus their huge breasts didn't leave their heads much room to move down, jutting up toward their own shoulders and chins as the huge pillows were. But it made it hypnotic to watch, their faces nudging

against their own breasts, and the other's breasts. Each turn they took, more warmth flooded underneath his testicles, until his cock was flexing and pulling toward his abs with desperation. He'd be soaked in precum, if they hadn't licked it all away.

Elaine won the contest. Antoinette rolled her eyes, but chuckled as she smiled at Jack, and kept her hand on Elaine's head. Not really pinning her down, since Elaine wasn't trying to escape, but it looked erotic as hell, her fingers intertwining with Elaine's hair as the elder Ventrue tightened her lips on Jack's cock. His great grandsire drained him as she slowly bobbed her head, easing her lips up and down the base edge of his glans, and milked him dry.

Eventually she lifted her head, winked at Jack, and gave Antoinette a quick kiss on the corner of her lips.

"Elaine! You sneaky little—" Antoinette stopped, and blinked down at the strand of white that connected her lips to Elaine's.

"Sorry," Elaine said as she swallowed. "I could not help myself. And I knew your lover wanted to see such a display."

Antoinette looked to Jack, as if scanning to see if he was offended Elaine had stolen a kiss from her. They did have a 'no kissing anyone else' rule. But, well, Antoinette had a strand of his cum literally connecting their lips. Last thing on his mind was taking offense.

The Prince rolled her eyes for the hundredth time, grabbed Elaine's head, used a bit of real force this time, and pushed her back down onto his cock. Once Elaine couldn't see her expression, Antoinette licked her lip free of the strand, and smiled at Jack. She'd liked whatever expression she'd seen on his face.

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They didn't drain him too much. A couple orgasms for him, and then one for each other, from each other, with him watching. All in all, a pretty relaxing bout of sex; he was pretty injured, after all. Except, there was something more to it, something more intimate, now that they knew Elaine's secrets. It hadn't just felt sexual and exciting, having her there this time. It felt nice.

He was excited about inviting her again. And he could see Antoinette was, too.

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As Antoinette and Elaine lay beside him in bed, relaxing, he held up his right hand and squeezed the fist in front of him a few times. It felt a lot better. It also felt a little strange, how his fingers squeezed a little tighter than he'd expected them to, with the curse gone.

He'd gotten intimately familiar with the power the curse gave him, and now that it was gone, he could feel it in every motion. But, he didn't feel like he did before he'd unlocked the curse either. Something was different.

He felt a little stronger than he should have been. The ritual Black Blood had been performing, he'd interrupted it before Black Blood could finish. The god had still been drawing out some of the black smoke from Jack's Beast, when Jack used Elaine's trap. It was a thought that'd been nagging him for days, and making him paranoid the curse would whisper in his mind again, or some of the old hate and rage would resurface.

It never did. He felt calm. He felt good. He felt... happy.

He felt strong. Not nearly strong enough to resist a couple horny elders, but stronger than a young neonate Ventrue should.

"Antoinette," he said, turning to face her, Elaine snuggled into his other side. Probably best to tell them now, in case something happened. He was pretty sure it wouldn't, but still, no way he was going to keep secrets about the curse. "I—"

"Jack," she said, chuckling as she kissed him, and teased a finger up his abs, "Elaine does not call me Antoinette. You should not, either."

"No?"

She kissed his forehead, before gazing down at him with longing so powerful it made his heart ache.

"Call me Ann."