

~~Jack~~

“Mary?”

No answer.

“Mary, you there?”

No answer.

His mom sighed and shook her head as she pulled out a chair and sat down at their old kitchen table.

“I talked with her last night. She... She’s pretty angry. Not at anyone, except maybe herself. She thinks she’s not Mary.”

No one thought she was Mary anymore. Everyone at the ball heard what she said, and considering her body had gone from perfectly fine, to dead, in five minutes flat, it was pretty obvious there was something wrong with whatever his mom and Triss had done. Or, if not wrong with the process, wrong with the target. And as much as it hurt to think about, it was probably the latter. She wasn’t Mary. She was an afterimage, an echo, some ephemera remnant, and the body had rejected it.

“You know what I’m thinking,” Jack said as he pulled out a chair and sat beside his mom.

“I know.”

“And I know what you’re thinking. That it doesn’t matter that she’s not Mary.”

His mom nodded, eyes hardened and pointed down at the table. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“You’re wrong.”

Jack opened his mouth, but closed it after a few silent seconds. There was no arguing with his mom when she was like this. Logic, out the window. Evidence, out the window. As much as he loved his mom, her absolute refusal to use her brain and break things down into cold hard math, ever, was infuriating. Antoinette did cold logic with everything, even the things Jack wouldn’t. The Prince and his mother were polar opposites.

“Alright, we’ll do this your way. What do we do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mom, you have to know your next step. You can’t just blindly drift through your second life reacting and never planning. You’re going to catch a sunrise like that. You have to figure out what you’re going to do.”

“I am going to make sure Mary... Mary’s ghost, is given everything she needs to be happy.”

“She’ll never be happy, Mom. She’s a ghost, and an angry one.” No need to recount what happened yesterday. If his mom hadn’t been there to stop Mary’s ghost, she would have done some real damage to the people in the ball. Even a vampire would struggle to survive getting cut to bits in a tornado of broken glass, which he was pretty sure Ghost Mary could do.

“It’s better than being alone,” she said, “haunting an old house with no one in it, until she turns into some sort of... local legend that turns out to be real, and hurts people.”

Jack raised a brow. That was a specific example. Probably some horror movie his mom saw at some point, with teenagers breaking into a haunted house at night on a dare, only for some of them to die. She never could handle horror movies. Horror anything.

“You said she talked to you yesterday?” he asked. After the incident, he knew his mom went to visit her. He also heard Jacob went with her, which made him nervous as all hell.

“She did. She was... crying. She...” His mom took a slow breath and looked behind her, at the stairs up to the bedrooms. “You heard her, at the end. She was happy she got to... to see us again.”

Lowering his head, Jack reached out across the table, and set a hand on his mom’s. She turned it enough to hold it, and the two of them looked down.

“Mom, I... I don’t want you to tear yourself up over this. Mary’s gone, and her ghost... Maybe she’s just like Mary, whole enough to even be considered Mary. She certainly seemed like her when she was in a body, and... Fuck me, I should have told Sándor to check her dreams, or Fiona.”

“She got three days with us again. I spent every moment of those three days with her, and we had fun, and we talked and cried and laughed and...” Her voice caught in her throat, and she squeezed Jack’s hand as she shuddered for a moment. “I’m not going to lose her again.”

She was already lost if Triss’s ritual didn’t work. His mom knew it, too.

“I guess we’re back at square one again. It’s easy to keep this house locked down, so Mary’s... Mary can stay as long as she wants.”

“Yeah...”

“But, what’re you going to do? Are you going to try again?”

She shook her head. “We had to do some... bad stuff, to make that body, and to do the ritual. And we’re pretty sure we did it right. Doing it again will lead to the same result, and I... I can’t do all that, just to spend three days with her again, and see... see that again.”

Jack squeezed her hand back. “No one would expect you to, Mom, especially Mary.”

“Then I guess we go back to the way things were. I’ll talk to Mary again later, maybe tomorrow night. Me and her, we can... figure something out.”

It was like watching a desperate rat try and figure its way out of a maze. No matter what path his mom took, she wouldn’t be able to get free. The shit reality that Mary was dead and gone was closing in around her, and watching her struggle against it made Jack want to puke like he was still kine. Everything sucked.

“Sounds like a plan.” Nodding, he got up, and pulled on her hand. She resisted for a bit, but he was determined, and eventually she got up. He didn’t let go of her hand until they were out of the house.

In the driveway, Beatrice and Jennifer waited. They must have shown up while Jack was inside with his mom. Beatrice in her usual white tank top and jeans, Jen in a casual suit, and both of them looking like they’d just put their dog down.

“Sam,” Triss said, taking a small step forward. “We... We were... We didn’t know if...”

His mom ran the fifteen feet between her and Triss and Jen, and hugged them both, squeezing them both in her arms.

“Why didn’t you come visit last night, after what happened!?”

Jen blinked at the woman between her and Triss, and then at Jack, who of course could only shrug. If they thought his mom would blame them for what happened, they didn’t know her very well. But, they probably thought she’d be too upset to be reasonable at the time, which was actually a good bet.

“We just thought you’d want space,” Triss said, and she hugged his mom snug and tight, before Jen did the same thing. “She in there?”

“She is, but she’s hiding. She’s thankful though.”

“Not angry?”

“Not at you or anyone. Just... mad at herself.” Samantha sighed as she relaxed her hug, and let both ladies go. “But she’s thankful, super thankful, for what she got to have.”

“She react to Jacob well?” Triss asked.

“She still remembers everything that happened when... when in the body. She reacted to him just fine.” Jack’s mom smiled and nodded, and took another step back. “I’m going to see my sire, and... I don’t know, talk about stuff I guess. You two, you um—”

Triss put up a hand. “Everything’s on pause until we figure out what to do. But...”

“But it’s not looking good,” Jennifer said. “And, you already know that.”

“I do.” Nodding, Sam gave each girl another quick hug, before she pulled out her phone. Probably texting for a ride. “We should talk, later, in the future. What’re you gonna do, Jack?”

“Not sure yet. I got some time.”

Triss stepped up to him and managed a quick look in his eyes before she looked down and away slightly. Shame? Guilt?

“Let’s hang for a bit, then.”

“Yeah, we can do that.”

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“So Jacob really had nothing to do with it,” Jack said.

Triss shook her head as she sipped her blood. Back at his mansion and in one of the smaller dining rooms, they had some privacy, and a nice table to sit at. Plus, he had blood in the fridge, so he got the bottle before they sat down. Jen insisted he get his ‘pets’ to pour their drinks, but he wasn’t that lazy. Jen also insisted getting ordered around would turn them on. He insisted that did not apply to orders a rude customer might give a waitress.

“Not really,” Triss said. “I mean, yeah, he’s a witch and he’s helped me become a witch. He’s taught me a lot. I’ve done some pretty intense shit, thanks to him. But resurrection? He’s pretty much told me to give it up, multiple times. And I’m pretty sure he knew it’d fail, even with Sam’s situation.”

Jack sneered, but Jen reached across the table corner and gave him a firm shoulder slap.

“Jacob has treated your mother well, and is one of the few joys in her life, Jack,” his fellow Ventrue said. “You may not like him, but he is very sweet, kind, loving, and tender with her.”

“Tender?”

“Indeed. After he and Othello have fucked her into a near coma, he often spends time hugging and cuddling her, and asks if she’s okay. It’s very sweet.”

Jack slowly pushed his glass aside, and let his head fall against the table, hard enough his forehead made the whole damn thing shake.

Triss laughed halfheartedly as she sipped her drink again. “Jen, that was mean.”

“Well, he was being mean.”

“No kid likes their stepdad. That shit takes time, you know?”

“Oh god kill me now,” he said into the table.

“Alright, I think we’re avoiding the serious shit,” Triss said. “I know the Invictus, and the Prince, track murders in Dolareido. I bet you know we’ve scooped up some assholes from Devil’s Corner, and killed them.”

Slowly he sat up, groaning as he rubbed his temples, trying to scrub away the image Jen put there. No such luck.

“You’re not the only vamps who do that. More than anyone else lately, sure, but... but I know the Invictus, and the Ordo Dracul, occasionally kidnap kine, and either kill them, or lock them up for experiments or blood. People the world is better off without.” Though he said that with a little hesitation. It wasn’t a healthy habit to go around playing God.

“Your mom was... involved in some of it,” Triss said. “I’m not happy about it, but she insisted. She’s seen... and done, some pretty dark shit.”

“Fuck...”

“And you know we have Elen.”

“Yeah.” Which was pretty fucking terrifying.

“Well, she’s been helping us.”

“Not sure how you’re forcing her.”

“Black Blood. We got Elen at the center of a ritual room. Basically gives him the clear to, uh, half possess her. I don’t think he can full possess her, or anyone with a pulse. But close enough.”

He shivered. Okay, yeah, Black Blood being involved so directly was pretty fucking scary. Forcing Elen to work for them? Scarier.

“And Mom was okay with this?”

“Nope. But she was desperate. Very desperate.” Triss sighed as she looked down and sipped her drink again. “Seeing her daughter’s ghost all the time was getting to her.”

“Of course it fucking was.” Jack rubbed his temples harder. “I told her. I fucking told her she had to let Mary go.” Before the women could say anything, Jack put his hands down. “I said I wasn’t judging, and I meant it. I’d have done the same thing. I’m just... fuck me, it’s just such a shitty situation.” The fact he had to dodge around saying he was basically plotting to undermine Jacob and Black Blood made it a hundred times worse. He couldn’t tell them. He wanted to, christ he wanted to, but he couldn’t.

“But after last night,” Triss said, “I think... I think she’s going to let her go. You see the look on her face?”

Jack shook his head. “I think she’s going to give up on the idea of getting Mary back, but now she’s going to adopt her ghost like a homeless cat she found on the street who reminds her of her dead cat.”

“That a bad thing?”

“Considering what we know about ghosts? Yeah. It might take a year, or two, or a hundred, but Mary’s ghost is going to snap and start breaking the Masquerade eventually.”

“Proving ghosts exist doesn’t prove vampires exist,” she said.

“Pretty damn close.”

“He’s right,” Jen said. “As much as it’d be nice to let Samantha take care of Mary’s ghost, it’ll not only be a problem in the future, it’ll keep Samantha from ever truly recovering from Mary’s death.”

Triss winced, and downed the rest of her drink. “Yeah, you’re right. Fuck me, I know you’re right. And you heard Athalia, Jen. Accepting what happened has really helped her.”

Jack raised a brow as he looked between the two ladies. “You talked to Athalia?”

Jen nodded. “We did.”

“And... it went well?”

“It did. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

Triss cut in. “She’s never going to forgive us, or me especially. But at the same time, she doesn’t want to hate me, and she doesn’t want me to hate her. She... She’s moving on. Painful as all fuck for her, but she’s moving on.”

“I’m sure Daniel played a part in that,” Jen said. “She’s a volcano, but he’s a sturdy mountain. They go well together.”

“Opposites attract,” Jack said, “and have a habit of destroying each other.”

Triss laughed as she poured another glass. “Dude, you are too fucking young to say smart shit like that. Be dumb like the rest of us.”

“Sorry. Having a 500-year-old girlfriend rubs off on ya. But honestly, yeah, I can see Daniel being good for Athalia. And maybe Athalia’s... spicy attitude, will spice Daniel’s life up a bit.”

“Ha, maybe,” Triss said. “My point is, if Athalia can move on, Sam can, too. Just... we need to be careful about it. Sam already knows what we’re all thinking, and she’s thinking it too. So convincing her will be problematic. And maybe unnecessary, if she eventually accepts it on her own.”

“My mom isn’t exactly good at confronting her own biases and changing her mind about stuff.”

“Then let’s give her time before we poke at her and see if we can get her to let Mary’s ghost go. Agreed?”

Jack let out a heavy sigh before taking a long drink from his glass. “Agreed. I’ll give her space.”

“Good.” Triss leaned back, and set her eyes on her drink on the table. “Fuck me, why can’t things just go smooth? First this shit with Mary, now with Sándor.”

“Something happened to Sándor?”

Triss and Jen traded a few looks, before Triss got back to drinking.

Jen took over. “Sándor’s powerful. Very powerful.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Only thing the Ripper’s taken on who could manage it.”

“And, well... his hunger is powerful, too. I don’t want to get into details, it’s very personal. But—”

The door knocked.

“Come in,” Jen said, as if she owned the place. Jack rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help but smile.

Veronica poked her head in. “The hunter Harcourt is at the door, master. Should I bring him in?”

That was strange. Jack looked to the other vampires, but they shrugged.

“Yes, bring him in.”

Veronica smiled, bowed slightly, and left.

“Veronica,” Triss said, once the thrall was gone, “is a very pretty young lady.”

“You’ve seen her before.”

“Yeap. Still. She legal?”

“She’s as old as I was when I was sired.”

“But you were five years old when you were embraced. I remember.”

Jack frowned at Triss, which of course only made her laugh.

“Veronica, Rachel, and Leilani were all old enough to drink when I bound them.” He didn’t like the word bound, but every time he used it around his thralls, they seemed to like it very much. In fact, Antoinette encouraged use of the word. Jen probably would, too.

“Uh huh. Well, she’s got the tits you like.”

Jennifer grinned as she nodded, and shook her chest from side to side a bit, just enough to make sure she created a little jiggle. “Indeed. I should know.”

Jack glared at the two of them, and an extra glare for Jen. “Don’t even start.”

“Imagine it.” Chuckling with the haughty air Ventrue did love, Jen leaned in and winked at Triss. “Those three lovely young ladies, struggling for a turn on Mister Terry, while Antoinette rests his head on her lap and strokes his hair, and Elaine hogs him all to herself.”

That, was entirely too accurate an image, and he almost asked her how she knew about the video. Unfortunately, he knew his expression changed enough to say it all anyway, and both girls erupted into laughter.

He smiled. Honestly, if teasing him let them laugh again, he was okay with that.

“Careful, Jack.” Triss said. “Sex like that will warp your mind, you know. Inflate the ego.”

“He’s Ventrue,” Jen said. “What fun would there be in his sex life, if he was not trying to inflate his ego at every moment.”

Jack threw up his hands. “Tell that to Antoinette. She’s the one—” A quiet knock on the door ended the conversation, thank god. “Come in.”



Rachel came in, then Brace Harcourt, followed by Veronica and Leilani peeking in through the door. Harcourt nodded, waved, in a predictably goofy way, and sat down without waiting to be asked. Any other Invictus would have been offended. At this point, Jack could only chuckle. It never even dawned on the man that it might be offensive to do that.

“That will be all,” Jack said, nodding to his thralls. “Thank you.”

The thralls all returned his nod with a deeper nod and bigger smiles, and left. Which of course gave everyone the opportunity to admire the way they walked when they left, because they made damn sure to sway their hips when they did.

Triss licked one of her crocodile teeth as she looked at Jack. “Dude—”

“No,” he said, and she grinned as she shut up. “Now, Harcourt, how can I help you?”

“Uh, hoping to be the one helping out, actually. Wanted to talk about your sister.”

“Mary’s ghost? We were just talking about her and my mother, and what to do. Or, basically, not do.”

“Not do?”

Jack nodded. “We were going to leave them alone for now.”

“Oh. Well, I mean, I can tell you later then.” And with the most honest ‘woops guess we’ll talk later’ expression on his face, Harcourt got up and headed for the door.

Jack gently slapped the man’s wrist as he walked by. “Sit down you moron. Tell us what’s on your mind.”

“Sure sure.” Harcourt shrugged and sat back down. “I was talking to some hunters out in the world. Told a few of them Dolareido is a pretty calm situation, the few vampires here are damn committed to not killing people, shit like that.”

“The Prince will be happy about that... assuming a hunter doesn’t think you’ve become someone’s thrall and are just trying to dissuade hunters from coming here.”

“Ha, maybe. Could happen. But I think I convinced them. Anyway, I also called up an old gal I know who specializes in ghosts.”

Triss leaned in, and she did not look happy. “You told them about Mary?”

“No. I just wanted to know what Francene was up to, how she was doing, was she in the state, yada yada. She’s close enough we could get her here if we wanted. And she could help.”

“Help how?” Jennifer asked.

“With... doing that thing we want ghosts to do? Move on, and stuff? Francene hunts ghosts, and has ways to, uh, kill them, however that works. But I heard she also has ways to help them pass on if she can get them to cooperate. Supposedly.”

The three vampires looked at each other, and all leaned back in their chairs. They hadn’t considered that possibility, at least, not for a while. Getting Mary to ‘pass on’ on her own had been an option, but if she wouldn’t, then making her pass on was also an option, but a shitty one. And they didn’t know how to do that. If a hunter could come along and force the situation, that could be the way to do it.

“No idea how it works?” Jack asked.

“No. Never been my bag. You have to do rituals and place candles and stuff. I can barely speak English, let alone read Latin.” He reached out for the bottle on the table, swished it once, blinked at it, gulped, put it back, and leaned back in his chair. “Francene owes me. I can get her here, and she can deal with Mary.”

“Deal with,” Jack said, with a specific, heavy tone.

“Yeah. I know, it sucks. But you want options, right? I mean, I know the werewolves might be able to do something, since they can hurt spirits and stuff, but that—”

“Probably involves biting and tearing.”

“Yeah. And, I mean, you witches,” he gestured to Triss and Jen, “probably have something, somewhere, that could help. But—”

“Not lying around,” Triss said. “I mean yeah, if I go digging, I’m sure Jacob can find something. But it’s not something he’s ever dealt with, or is an expert on. I bet other Crone witches are, but not here in Dolareido. So, like, gimme a year or ten to learn about it, and sure, I could maybe manage something.”

Jack sighed and shook his head. “I... would prefer deal with this situation sooner rather than later.”

Jennifer stabbed a finger down at the table. “Don’t you dare do anything without telling your mother, Jack.”

“I won’t, I won’t. Just... need to figure out how to tell her. She won’t like this.”

Triss raised a hand. “Then maybe we don’t do it? Maybe we just... don’t... do anything?”

They all sank in their chairs. Not doing anything was definitely an option, just a really painful one.

“I... wonder,” Jack said. “Antoinette’s been dealing with ghost stuff, or spirit stuff anyway, for a long time. You think she knows how to do the stuff Harcourt’s talking about?”

“Maybe,” Triss said. “I’m sure she knows something. But... maybe not the sort of shit Harcourt’s talking about. She’s probably got rituals to trap Mary’s ghost, lock her in a jar, bind her to an object, all sorts of crazy shit. But just... help her move on? She’d probably have said something if she knew, right?”

“Probably.” And maybe not. Antoinette could be damn ruthless when it came to her role in the Ordo Dracul. Whatever allowed her to further her knowledge about spirits, ghosts, and whatever else lurked in that weird world, she’d pursue. And he knew what it was like to have an obsession. It was like going through life wearing horse blinders, and it got very easy to get so focused on whatever was in front of you, you forgot anything else existed. Even other people.

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~~Antoinette~~

“I am sorry, my childe, but there is little that can be done for Mary, not with the knowledge I possess, not in the manner you seek.”

Samantha sighed as she sat at the table across from her, deep in the tower in Antoinette’s primary experiments room.

“I know. You’d have brought it up months ago if you could have.” The poor child. She groaned as she leaned forward, and buried her face in her hands. “And... I suppose you know about what I did.”

“Stealing Elen’s book and knife? Of course, my childe.”

She groaned louder. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

Because it was in Antoinette’s interest to let her childe get closer to the witches, and to Jacob.

“Because it was a valuable lesson to a dragon.”

“Lesson?”

“Us in the Ordo Dracul can teach our students with many methods. A simple one is to let our students pursue a mystery to its end, and to document the path well. To understand the implications of each step upon the path. To understand the tree of causality, and how each event ripples out to create new events.” Antoinette reached out, set a hand upon her childe’s, and gently pulled it down from her face to rest it upon the table. “I am sorry. Truly. But I thought it best to let you chase this mystery, though I felt only pain waited for you in the end.”

Samantha nodded as she stared down at the table. “I... I’d say that was harsh, too harsh, but all you did was let me do what I wanted to do. I’m not a little girl who needs to be protected by their mom.”

“Indeed. Though, believe me, young Daeva, I wish such lessons could be learned in a less painful way. And I also admit, I was quite surprised to see Mary alive and well. A small part of me was even convinced you had succeeded. Jacob, as well. But...”

“But it was a fool’s hope.”

“Most hopes are, young childe, but do not dismiss them so easily. Such hopes can often lead to great change. Regardless, you are now left with the same situation you were in months ago.”

“I know. Mary... Mary’s ghost, she’s even more unstable now. I talked to her after what happened, and it... it was obvious. She can talk to me, but anyone else, she’ll probably attack. She’s... happy, about getting those three nights, but she’s also more...”

“Anyone would become erratic after going through such an experience, Samantha. I can only imagine how traumatizing it must have been for Mary’s ephemera mind, where every emotion and memory affects her body in very palpable ways.”

Samantha nodded as she leaned back, and looked behind her at the summoning circle where Antoinette performed her experiments. “I don’t know what to do. She says she’s not Mary. And... And I...”

“Even if she is not Mary’s soul, she is still an entity, with some form of strange awareness. And she has the memories of your daughter, does she not?”

“She does.”

“Then, I cannot fault you, for feeling for her as if she were your daughter, Samantha. And I cannot fault you for wishing to continue taking care of her. The house will remain off limits to kine and others, but...”

“But it can’t stay like that forever.” She looked to Antoinette, with a hardened gaze unbecoming her. “I... I can’t do anything, not yet. But give me some time, and I’ll get there.”

Antoinette kept her face neutral, but seeing her sweet childe struggle with something no one should ever have to deal with, was almost overwhelmingly painful. As with Jack, being with Samantha unearthed a sense of empathy she thought long lost. And that was dangerous.

“Samantha, you and Beatrice may keep Elen’s knife and book until you are satisfied, but I do ask that you return them once you are done. As for Elen, I suppose Jacob considers her his property.”

“I don’t know. I think so, but I think he just got her so he could use her to teach Beatrice stuff. He... He seems invested in her, you know? Like, I can tell when we talk, that he’s proud of her. Maybe even has high hopes for her. But...”

“But?”

“But, Jacob, sometimes he... he talks like... like something’s about to change. Like, he’s excited for how much Beatrice has learned, and how quickly. He’s super proud of her. But then his expression changes, he talks about the future, and then he goes quiet. I wonder if he’s thinking about leaving, but he’s hesitating because of me.”

Naturally, her childe would find the most guilt-inducing conclusion.

“Has he suggested when this may happen, my childe? As old a friend as Jacob is, he does not tell me as much as I wish he did.”

“No idea. It’s hard with him. Vampires as old as him, they...”

Antoinette smiled. “They do not think in the short term.”

“Exactly.” Slowly, Samantha looked down, and twiddled her fingers on the table. “God, I feel horrible for thinking this. But I don’t want him to leave me. He’s the first man I’ve known in a long time that can make me laugh, and makes me feel safe while also making me try new things, and... and...”

“And who satisfies you sexually?”

Samantha squirmed a bit, but nodded. “Yes.”

“Sexuality is a vital aspect of romantic connection, Samantha. Perhaps less so to vampires, but nonetheless, do not feel shame for it.” Before her childe could respond, Antoinette gently squeezed her hand. “I do not know what Jacob will do, but you are the first person I have seen him bond with so deeply since Minerva. I trust he will not casually cast you aside.”

That managed to pull a smile from her. “You think so?”

“Truly. Though, I am curious about this concern of yours, that you think he may be leaving.”

“Well, lately, he talks about changing things, the sort of way someone might if they were going to move away, you know? He wants to make...” After struggling to find the words, she shrugged. “It’s more in how he talks about things, but yes, I do think something’s been on his mind a lot lately.”

Oh sweet childe, if only she knew.

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“Black Blood, I summon thee.”

She looked down at yet another sacrifice, and sighed as all that met her words, was silence.

“It resists yet again,” her sheriff said.

“It does.”

“Then we have no choice.”

Antoinette nodded. “If Samantha’s inklings are correct, then I suppose we do not.”

“You trust your childe’s intuition that much?”

Antoinette offered her old friend a gentle smile. “Do you trust your childe’s?”

“Natasha has over fifty years of training.”

“Indeed, but we both know there is more to her success than simple training. Part of her skill is because of the blood, your blood, and I have faith in mine. I have high hopes for my childe, Daniel, and I would be a fool to dismiss her intuition. We begin tonight.”

Black Blood was a crafty entity. It had to be. Despite its immense power, something prevented it from directly intervening with Antoinette or the others when in the physical realm. According to Natasha, it also seemed blocked from directly interfering with the Uratha in the spirit realm. Whatever rules it was bound by, those rules seemed unbreakable.

Except, it did not seem to be bound by all the rules spirits were bound by. Many of them, but not all of them. Jack thought it was not a spirit at all, and Antoinette had been inclined to believe him. Quite inclined.

She reached down, and stabbed her fingers into the man's corpse. A stereotypical criminal, a business man, fat, unseemly, who had used his position and money to financially ruin innocent people. When his crimes crossed into darker territory, Antoinette decided to remove the ridiculous kine from the world. Not the most powerful sacrifice, but it should have worked.

Even so, she expected the ritual to not work, thus, a poor sacrifice was of little consequence. Furthermore, the kine's blood would work just as well for the next ritual.

"You sure this will work?" her sheriff asked.

Antoinette chuckled softly as she gazed into her book in her left hand, and drew lines onto the floor with her right hand's blood-soaked fingers.

"I am. It is not a true spirit. And considering what Black Blood has done in multiple realms, I am forced to assume it is something greater."

"Which means this ritual could get us killed, Ann."

"Then we finish the ritual when the time comes. When Black Blood is distracted."

Daniel sighed as he stepped up beside her, and watched her paint more symbols. Often she was forced to stab her fingers into the corpse, to renew the blood; the ritual would be weakened by transporting the blood in a container.

For months they prepared for this ritual. For months, they researched, books upon books, abandoned tomes, artifacts lost and forgotten and unearthed. For months, she dug into the archives of the order, and spoke to her fellow dragons for clues on this treasure hunt. She had been successful.

They were ready to begin.

But she would not spring the trap, not yet. What good would it be to confront a godly entity directly? They had to bide their time, and wait. And the longer they waited, the closer they came to ruin. Antoinette could be patient, and wait decades for a plan to come to fruition, but knowing Black Blood could very well destroy her city and beyond at any moment, left her forever anxious.

"Daniel," she said, after having painted one section of the floor in several hundred symbols, in exact, specific locations. It had taken three hours. "Bring me three more sacrifices."

"Alright." Daniel took a second to look at her work, made for the door, but stopped as he reached for the latch. "We only have five more kine in storage, Ann."

"Then we will need to find more."

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~~Beatrice~~

Three days later.

“A little birdie told me,” Jen said, “that the Prince has been plucking people off the street. Vanishing them.”

“Oh shit. Really?” Triss asked.

“Mhmm. And she’s not being subtle about it.”

“That’s... kinda fucked up. How she doing it?”

“I heard she’s taken some inmates from a nearby prison.”

Triss winced. That was rough shit. Lots of the inmates in jail for nasty shit didn’t deserve the sentences they got. And sure Triss and Jen made sure sure the people they killed deserved it, half because they wanted to, half because Sam begged them too, but she wasn’t so sure Antoinette would be as nice.

Triss and Jen curled on their blankets and furs in Triss’s alcove. They hadn’t seen Sándor since the incident in his nightmare chamber, and they’d only chatted with Samantha a couple quick times since. Shit was still tense, everyone still felt guilty and horrible, so everyone went into passive mode until people started to feel better.

Thankfully, as fucking horrible as Mary’s death had been, it had basically been a reset back to the way things were just a week ago. People were recovering quickly. And after three days of people lying around feeling like shit, sex drives returned. Across the cave, Othello was doing what he usually did: fucking Madison’s poor ass. And of course he did it in the entrance to his alcove, so everyone could see Madison and her spread legs, since she was facing out. Long, slow, tender anal sex, with Othello sitting up and hugging her from behind with one hand, while his other caressed and massaged her clit. It was damn romantic.

So Triss lay on her side, cuddled into Jen’s back, the both of them watching Madison melt away.

Triss almost said something about Mary, but stopped herself. Finally, a night where they didn't feel like total shit. Why fucking ruin that?

She leaned in, kissed Jen's neck, and slid a hand around her, undid a couple buttons, and slipped her palm around Jen's lower breast. This damn beautiful woman and her huge tits. Big pillows that were lovely to squeeze and fondle and caress. Girls like Triss and Sam had to get by on average breasts, while it seemed like every other woman in the city was packing giant badonkas.

"You should get some nipple piercings," Triss said.

"I suppose I could."

"Then you can know what it's like to wear a nipple chain and have people tugging on it."

"I'll have you know, I did not introduce you to nipple chains. You owned them before, no?" She turned her head enough to smile at her, before she looked back to Othello and Madison.

Laughing, Triss snuggled into her back a little harder, half holding her so she could keep playing with her huge tit, and half holding her because she still felt like shit. And thank god their relationship had long hit the point Triss didn't need to feel shy, or guilty for being clingy. She wanted cuddles.

"No word from Sándor," Triss said.

"No. How often do brooding sessions last?"

"I... suppose I would know, wouldn't I?"

"Of course."

"They can last for a few days, sure. I was hoping we'd see him soon, so we could talk to Sam together." Triss sighed, undid another button so Jen's breasts were both free of the fabric, and continued to tease and massage. It wasn't all that sexual, at least not enough to trigger a bout of sex. If they kept watching Othello, sure, it might happen, but Triss just wanted to snuggle with her girlfriend, and fondling while doing so was an idea she picked up from Jack.

According to the kid, breasts were pretty amazing as a stress toy, as long as you were gentle. Super relaxing to squeeze softly and feel how the softness molded to the fingers and palm. And of course, having a busty girlfriend who loved being touched made it all the better.

"Maybe he went on a hunting trip," Jen said.

“Yeah, maybe. I still wonder why he didn’t ask us to help him with that shit. I mean, we’ve been dipping our hands in some deep blood for months now. He couldn’t have asked for our help? Maybe we could have... locked him in a box with one of our targets?”

“From the look in his eyes, Triss, I get the impression there wouldn’t be much left of the target once he was done.”

Triss shivered, and let go of her friend’s boob. Mood ruined, even with Othello only a hundred feet away.

“Still, I think we could have helped him.”

Jen shook her head, turned over onto her back, and gave Triss a kiss. “I don’t think he needs help finding prey. He’s really, really old, remember? The problem is just what Athalia said it was. He hates being what he is.”

Sighing, Triss returned the kiss, rolled over, got perpendicular with Jen, and put the back of her head on her girlfriend’s stomach as she lay down. Without missing a beat, Jen slipped her hands into Triss’s hair, and combed it with her fingers.

“Vampires go through the same problem.”

“Not like him,” Jen said. “To vamps who get over becoming what we are, who learn to accept that we have to drink blood to survive, someone like Sándor who refuses to embrace his hungers sounds... almost juvenile. But then, he’s not a vampire, and his hungers are—”

“Massive and extreme, I know.” Sighing, Triss reached up and grabbed at the air overhead, as if grabbing butterflies. “I get it. He’s not the same as us. He has to feed and take it all the way. He has to go full... monster.” She groaned as she let her hands drop. “Christ, no wonder Athalia calls us blood leeches. Compared to Begotten, we’re just... mosquitoes.”

Jen mirrored her sigh and continued combing Triss’s hair. “I suppose they beat us in the drama, self-loathing department.”

“Tell that to Fiona. How that girl is so cheery, despite having, what, a dozen kills to her name, I have no idea.”

“No guilt, I suppose. She has to punish people who’ve done bad things.”

“I guess,” Triss said. “And Mark?”

“We know nothing about Mark.”

“And Azamel, she... she tried to make it work, I guess. I still remember what Jeremiah’s ritual showed us. She tried to make it work for her, her hunger and shit, and it backfired in the end. Athalia basically tried to ignore it, and it backfired on her, too.”

“Yes,” Jen said. “As much as vampires think we have a monopoly on second life drama, I think the Begotten have us beat. And Sándor has everyone beat. It’s no wonder he’s sad all the time.”

“I wonder what sort of woman his wife was. Margaret.”

“He said she was determined, and a pain in his ass. That’s part of the reason I thought being so direct with him would help him open up. Apparently, it was the wrong call.”

“It probably would have been the right call, maybe twenty years ago. I’m guessing losing his wife and kid to Jeremiah, and then being a slave for a few years after that, broke him.” Triss sat up with a jolt. “Oh fucking christ.”

“What?”

“Is that why I like him so damn much? He’s broken, and I want to fix him?” She clutched her face as she stared down at Jen. “Oh my fucking god, I’m eighteen again.”

Chuckling, Jen sat up and hugged her. “I like him because I feel like... he’s a kitten, who if I can coax him out of his box, he’d be a lion.” And of course, she licked her lips after saying lion. “But, after what Athalia said? Maybe we should... wait a little bit on that.”

“Yeah, probably a good idea. Maybe we should—”

Jacob came by, dressed in his evil witch robes, with a weird smile on his face, one Triss didn’t think she’d ever seen before.

“Beatrice, come have a blather with me for a second.”

“What the fuck is a blather?”

He laughed, and held out a hand for her. “Conversation.”

“Uh huh.” She took his hand, and he yanked her up onto her feet like she weighed nothing.

“Jen, stay here, watch some porn.” Nodding, he took Triss out of the cave.

Once outside, he wrapped them in his Cloak. It was a crazy powerful Cloak, so no one would hear a thing.

“Shit’s about to go down,” he said.

“What?”

“Things are happening.”

“What things?”

“The drop has been made. Five by five.”

“Jacob!” She gave him a hard shove, but he brushed it off, chuckling as he did. “What’s going on? The fuck are you talking about?”

He smiled at her, but after a few seconds of weird silence, the smile faded.

“I wanted to know if you thought about what I asked.”

“Fuck me, now?”

“Yeah now.”

“About leaving? I didn’t even understand the question, Jacob.”

He leaned in and set a hand on her shoulder. “Things are going to change, Triss. Tonight.”

“So... you’re leaving, now?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of? Dude, you’re freaking me out. Just tell me what’s going on.”

He set his other hand on her other shoulder, and stared into her soul, straight through the eye bandage. Now, she was thoroughly freaked.

“I’m moving everyone, Triss. We’re all moving.”

“I, uh, what?”

“I’m changing the rules for this stupid game, Triss. Everything. And we’re all going. That shit I said before about leaving? I didn’t mean I’m leaving. I meant everything is. I’m changing the rules to this stupid fucking game, and I want to know if you’re okay with that.”

“Okay? Jesus Jacob, I still don’t even know what you fucking mean!”

“Oh. You don’t know.” He let her go and started walking in the direction of Dolareido. “I can’t explain everything. It’ll take too long. The Prince is up to something, and if I don’t get this stone rolling now, I might never. We’re out of time.”

No fucking way. She grabbed his hand and yanked on it, hard enough to half turn him to face her.

“The fuck did you bring me out here for then!?”

“I thought maybe you knew what was happening, at little a least, but you don’t. The Prince and her friends have been keeping secrets and keeping them well.”

“Secrets? Jacob, my head is spinning. Just tell me what’s happening.”

He let out of a heavy sigh. Whatever it was he’d planned to do, her not already knowing about it had slowed down his attempts to explain enough to the point he was just going to go without her. Well, fuck that.

“If I told you there’s another way to see Julias again, another way to have him in your life, would you take it?”

“Are you fucking serious? I—”

“Answer the question,” he said, voice cold and hard.

She froze. “I... I mean... I...”

He turned and faced her, eyebrows heavy, but it was like something had just carved his face out of steel.

“You were finally moving on, weren’t you? Finally ready to let him go.”

“Not... Not ready. But, I was getting there. After what happened to Mary, and... yeah...” She gave his shoulder another shove. “And you told me to! You told me to forget about him and move on!”

He nodded, every shred of joy gone from his body language. None of the usual chaos Triss was so familiar with, and liked. It was like she was looking at a monolith.

“I suppose I should have told you you didn’t have to move on. But, fuck me, I didn’t know if it’d work. We’re so close, and now Annie’s doing what she always does: tries to keep the status quo, keep the peace. But it doesn’t have to be like this! We can change the rules. We can tear it all down, and change everything.”

She gulped on a dry throat as she stared at him. “Jacob, you’re scaring me. What... What are you doing? What’s going on?”

“There’s no time.”

“What the fuck!?! You pulled me out here and started talking about resurrecting Julias again, and—”

He came in, came in fast. One moment he was standing there a few feet from her. The next, directly in front of her, inches from her face, and the moving air he’d pushed aside came a second later.

“I didn’t say resurrecting Julias, Beatrice. Think bigger. Think so much bigger.”

“I... I still don’t—”

“Don’t worry about it. I thought you knew, thought maybe Jack told you the little he knows, maybe you’d pieced things together. It doesn’t matter. I thought maybe we’d talk about it, maybe I’d show you, maybe... It doesn’t matter. We can talk later, after I’ve torn down the walls.”

Before she could say anything, he stepped back, and vanished.

“Jacob? Jacob!” Nothing. Silence.

She stood there, unmoving, staring, processing, and each time her slow-ass brain managed to absorb something he’d said, a shard of ice stabbed her in the back.

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~~Damien~~

Fiona recovered from Mary’s second death quickly. It wasn’t because she’d only spent a little time with Mary in the time she was alive. Fiona got attached to people in a matter of minutes, especially someone like Mary. But she also bounced back, never forgetting what she lost, but at the same time, immune to being dragged down by a memory.

They’d go visit her ghost soon. It’d probably make Fiona cry again, but she insisted.

For now, they sat on Fiona’s bed, surrounded by cute stuffed animals, with Fiona sitting on Damien’s lap. Naked, with her hands tied behind her back, she rested her head on his shoulder, legs wrapped around his waist and hips. He’d fed on her, fed deep; it being the first time they’d made love since the incident at the ball, they both had some pent up desire to spend. An hour later, Fiona was absolutely exhausted. Still exhausted from the Kiss, and she would be for many hours yet, and exhausted from an hour of Damien ravaging her, driven to almost animal aggression from the strange, powerful kick of her blood.

He peeked down over her shoulder, and grinned. Her hands were cuffed, and resting against her lower back, and her ass was bright red.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Nnnmmmn.”

He chuckled as he kissed her cheek, the rush of her blood finally settling. Mostly. He was still quite hard, so he set his hands on her ass again, and gently moved her back and forth against him.

Damien had never considered himself to be a breast man. He'd never considered himself a sexual man at all, but that likely had something to do with a healthy dose of brainwashing in his young life, and harboring resentment toward Slut City. Having a healthier second life and an amazing girlfriend certainly changed that. And the feel of her very, very, very large, soft breasts squashed against his chest, was euphoric. The werewolves were all extremely fit, and all the vampires were groomed before siring, often at a point of peak physique, always with some degree of abs and whatnot. Fiona's body, on the other hand, had a hint of softness to it that he adored. She liked chocolate.

He smiled down at her, and pushed forward a bit so she was forced to lean back, body arching as he kept his hands on her lower back. Her head dangled between her shoulders, and her chest jutted out, allowing her massive breasts to flow back and forth against her like water as he softly fucked her. Her freckles on her pale skin were utterly gorgeous, and he leaned down to kiss the ones he found along her sternum and top of her breasts.

He came inside her again, and gave her a few extra hard bounces, earning some tiny, weak squeaks from her. Fiona was borderline comatose, but he knew she was still awake, and from their conversations, he knew one of her favorite kinks was to be rendered borderline catatonic with exhaustion, and get used like a sex toy.

He slid her off, gently rolled her onto her side, and uncuffed her. She quivered like a leaf every moment, even as he slid her under the blankets, grabbed one of her favorite stuffed animals, and set it against her chest. Without thinking, she slowly slid her trembling arms around it, and hugged it against her as she melted into the bed and pillow. Why she wanted to snuggle with an octopus, he didn't know, but the stuffed animal was indeed a cute octopus, and she loved it.

It'd been a gift, him to her, but not his idea. Jessy had suggested it, because apparently despite her being... Jessy, she knew how to shop for a bubbly girl like Fiona. The Gangrel was somehow simultaneously very dumb, and very smart, and he doubted he'd ever figure her out.

Chuckling, he curled up under the blankets with his girlfriend, snuggled in behind her, and hugged her.

“You okay?” he asked again.

“Mmn... mnnn.”

He grinned down at her, kissed her neck, and slid his hugging arm higher. Big as her breasts were, with her on her side, the upper one squished the lower, and he slipped his hand between them. So soft, so heavy, he gently cupped and squeezed her higher breast, earning a couple more half-asleep groans from Fiona.

And then he squeezed and fondled it a few times, because it was apparently his right as boyfriend if the girlfriend was ever too tired to wake up in the morning, or was too tired to stop him after sex. He didn't necessarily agree, but Fiona — and Jessie — insisted it was true. And ultimately, he was a man, a weak man, and if his extremely busty girlfriend was comfortable with him playing with her breasts whenever he wanted, he had to take advantage of the offer.

A wise young man once said: breasts were pretty amazing as a stress toy, as long as you were gentle. Super relaxing to squeeze softly and feel how the softness molded to the fingers and palm. And of course, having a busty girlfriend who loved being touched made it all the better.

“Still a lot of hours in the night,” he said.

“Mmm.”

“I told you we should have waited ‘til later. What am I gonna do now until sunrise?”

“Mmm.”

“I could tie you up and leave you like that, all night.”

She managed a quiet, weak chuckle as she turned over onto her back. Naturally, he slid the blanket down to her stomach, so he could admire how her giant breasts squished and spread against her chest. She took the cute octopus with her, holding it on her chest.

“Mn... mmmm.”

“Or I could lie here with you, and hold you all night long.”

“Mmmmmm.” She turned into him, and snuggled into his chest. She couldn't get too close, with the octopus now between their sternums, but she tried anyway.

He slipped his arm around her back, and kissed her forehead. “I love you.”

“Mm.”

He laughed again, and—

The phone rang. Jack's ringtone.

Groaning, he let go of Fiona, and fetched the phone from the nightstand.

“Jack.”

“Damien. You ready to fight an azlu?”

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Wearing a comfortable casual suit, and a trench coat with a very long sword between his shoulder blades, Damien joined Jack on the street, and they made their way to the tear.

“I could be back with Fiona, you know.”

Jack laughed as he glanced up, likely checking to see if his crows were following. They were.

“Did I interrupt something?”

“We were finished. But sometimes I do like to cuddle, you know?”

“Cuddling is nice.”

“And I Kissed her, so she’s very... vulnerable, right now.” Damien didn’t really consider himself the ‘talk about sex with friends’ kind of man, but living in Dolareido with Fiona for a girlfriend was changing him. Plus, after everything Jack and Damien had seen of each other, and of their girlfriends, there really wasn’t much to get shy about.

Jack grinned at him. “I have to admit, that sounds nice. I can’t exactly do that with Antoinette. Can’t Kiss her. And I wouldn’t snuggle with my thralls or her ghouls. Bit too personal.”

“There is... something satisfying, about holding her when she’s so weak she can barely lift a finger. Sometimes I... never mind.” There was such thing as too much information. Talk about sex, sure. Actively describe how Damien, on a couple occasions, snuggled with Fiona after sex, found himself playing with her breasts until he was hard again, climbed onto her, and fucked her breasts while she was too exhausted or weak to do anything but smile and mewl? Bit too much.

If Fiona had her way, there’d be a full video recording of one of their longer sessions like earlier tonight. She’d share it with everyone, and point and giggle and swoon over every single thing, particularly the cuddling. And knowing his girlfriend, it’d only be the beginning. Before long, he’d be joining Natasha, Jessy, and Jack as, apparently, porn stars.

Jack grinned at him again, but it faded as he sighed, the two of them turning an alley in North Side as they headed around the building to enter from the back.

“Talk to Mary?” Damien asked.

“I tried. She hides. I know she’s talked to Mom, but I’m pretty sure she’s talked to no one else... except maybe Jacob.”

Damien glanced Jack’s way. That couldn’t have felt good, knowing the man they all suspected of concocting an apocalyptic ritual, was able to talk to his ghost sister while he couldn’t. He shouldn’t have asked. Time for a topic change.

“Azlu. We know it’s there, now?”

“Avery says she’s seen signs of it,” Jack said, “a few times, and it seems to be following some kind of schedule. Pretty normal, animals do that.”

“Azlu are animals?”

“I mean, prehistoric half flesh half spirit animals, but still animals. Avery says it’ll show up any time now. She thinks the spot’s become some sort of hot spot for them and they come through every few days. They want to seal up the hole, but haven’t, because we always have someone keeping guard.”

“We don’t right now?”

“Caleb’s been hanging out this time. He’s Irraka, whatever that means, and can stay hidden and stuff.”

“Like the Cloak?” Damien asked.

“I guess. Supposedly he’s pretty good at hiding, better than most Irraka according to her.”

“She does seem to know her stuff.”

Jack scoffed. “She tried to kill Fiona, thinking she was an azlu.”

Damien shrugged. “I mean, she is a human spider monster hybrid thing, just like azlu. A thousand times more attractive than an azlu, but still.”

“What, her sense of smell couldn’t tell the difference?”

“Maybe she thought it was a unique breed or something?”

They both shrugged as they opened the door to the back of the old abandoned building, and into the basement. As he did, Scully and Mulder flew down and perched on his shoulders.

“Sorry buddies,” Jack said. “We’re getting into some potentially dangerous stuff tonight. I can’t take you.”

Both crows flapped their wings a few times, and cawed at Jack.

“Not happening. We’re gonna fight an azlu. That means spiderwebs, and ghosts, considering where we’re gonna be fighting. Way too many ways for you two to get hurt, or maybe even left behind if something horrible happens. You’re staying here, where it’s safe... er.”

They squawked.

“No arguing! No, wait for us up on the building. I got Damien with me, and Sándor, and a bunch of werewolves. I’ll be fine.” He slid a hand along one shoulder, forcing one crow to hop onto his hand, and then the same for the other. “Now go.”

After a couple more loud caws, they obeyed.

“We could use them,” Damien said. “Where we’re going, scouts would be very useful.”

“Caleb, Monica, and Carter can be our scouts. I’m not risking my friends, not again.”

“Aren’t I your friend?”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “Hell no. You think that’s why we hang out all the time? I just need you for a shield.”

“Makes sense. Very Danse Macabre of you.”

They chuckled as they walked down the stairs into the basement of the building.

Avery and Clara were there, along with Caleb, Noah, Carter, David, Erica, Mason, and Monica. Which left Art, Matt, Brianna, and Eric missing from the Uratha of Dolareido. Sándor was with in the basement too, though it only took a small glance to realize the man was distracted by something, eyes pointed down, brows slightly furrowed. Furrowed was unique for him, a change from his usual neutral expression.

Everyone was dressed casually and ready for a fight. T-shirts, loose jeans, sneakers or army boots and whatnot. Damien expected to be the only one wielding weapons, save for Jack, but Carter had a flamethrower with him. Which made Damien and Jack extremely nervous.

“Hey,” Jack said, offering a small wave. Damien said nothing, no need.

Everyone looked up, and a few of them returned the wave. Sándor nodded, but otherwise, went back to whatever thoughts were probably torturing him.

“Where are the others?” Damien asked.

Avery spoke up first. “Black Blood’s in the spirit world. We spotted it up to something, making some kind of move near one of the tears. Brianna, Matt, Art, and Eric are investigating, along with Tash and Jessy I guess. And Flow.”

Flow, the giant water spirit that worked with Avery. It’d been forever since Damien had seen her... it, and the sight had been damn impressive. How Avery had recruited its help, no vampire knew, and the spirit Flowing Sanctuary was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

“You think he’s going to create a new tear?” Jack asked.

“I think ‘it’”—she emphasized it—“is definitely up to something. The fact I don’t know is infuriating, and I have no choice but to play the recon game. But, it’s going to do something at the same time I think the azlu are going to check out this tear.” She gestured to the literal tear in the air behind her. “So something’s up. We’re gonna catch this azlu, kill it, torch it, and the other team is gonna report back what Black Blood’s up to asap. Sándor has that Mark fellow watching the other tear, deep in the Great Below, and he can report back to us, too.”

“You think tonight’s the night of the ritual?” Damien asked.

Sándor shrugged slightly. “Mark reports nothing unusual, but that could easily change.”

“He got a way to get to here from there?” Jack asked.

“Not to this specific place, no. There will be a delay in information, if something happens. Athalia is waiting in the tunnels, in case Mark does report something. She may be able to help, and perhaps ask for Fiona’s help.”

Damien sucked in a breath between his teeth, loud enough everyone looked at him.

“Fiona...,” he said, “may not be available.”

Avery glared. “And why is that? This is kind of important.”

“I... Kissed her, a couple hours ago. Thoroughly. She’s completely drained. So, I mean... unless we fight in the dream realm, where she can merge with her Horror and help us...”

Every single werewolf groaned, and Damien shifted in place a couple times. Shit.

Clara raised a hand. “Why isn’t Daniel coming with us? He’s the sheriff, right? This seems like his kinda bag.”

“I texted him,” Jack said. “He said he was busy with the Prince.”

“Busy?”

“Busy, which is sheriff-speak for doing something extremely dangerous and relevant. Otherwise, I’m sure he’d be here.” Jack walked over to join the crowd, and Damien followed behind. “We going in?”

“Yeap. Caleb, stealth up and go in first. Carter, Monica, follow him in, scout out the area. Damien, cloak us up.”

Damien nodded, and tapped into his vitae. Deep into his vitae. He was great at the Cloak of Night, but Cloaking a whole group of people? Difficult. It was a good thing he had a belly full of Begotten blood.

“Anyone staying on this side?” Jack asked.

Avery shook her head. “Everyone joins the hunt. Besides, it’s not like we need someone on this side, holding a rope. Wouldn’t do anything.”

“True, I guess.”

Leave it to Jack to voice Damien’s concerns. The idea of all of them going through the portal and into the Great Below, was a scary idea, because it meant they were at the mercy of the tear. Sándor was coming with them though, and if for some reason they couldn’t use the tear, he could get them out. He was Begotten.

Damien walked around, and touched everyone on the shoulder. Some physical contact would make it easier. They couldn’t keep touching him, which would have made it even easier, but a quick touch would hopefully be enough. He didn’t need to with Carter, Monica, or Caleb, thank the Lord. Still, that was half a dozen werewolves, and Jack, and Sándor, he had to cloak.

Going through the tear was a strange business. It looked like it was thin until you got close, and then you could see the tear had a thickness to it only visible from within. Avery had said it reminded her of the gold and white you saw when crossing the Gauntlet that separated the physical and spirit realms. And it did look similar, though instead of gold, there was black. Endless black, like looking into oblivion. He thought he saw stars, but the white dots in the distance moved noticeably when he did. If he wanted to, he could reach out and touch them.

He did not touch them. Crossing the Gauntlet had been scary enough, and according to the Uratha, there was a chance things lived inside the wall separating the spirit and physical world. And, according to them, it held secrets they had no way of discovering. So he kept his hands to himself as he crawled through the tear, and got back onto his feet on the other side.

The Great Below. One unfathomably giant cave, with walls of dark rock so tall they could fit a city, skyscrapers included. Fog drifted, ebbing and flowing like a slow, lazy ocean. Swarms of ghosts miles away moved, drifting over land and through the air overhead, holding green lanterns. From so far, the lanterns were only distinguishable as green dots, surrounded by blobs of haze.

Around Damien and the group, were spiderwebs. Big spiderwebs with heavy threads. Damien was all too familiar with spiderwebs and how constricting they could be, but the difference between these and Fiona's was obvious. Fiona's were precise and graceful. These were only barely subtle, meant to catch things that had to go through the area against their will. But, there weren't enough of them to keep Damien from walking around fairly easily. If the webs were actually meant to trap something, they were doing a poor job of it. Residue, then? Something the spiders left behind as they did... whatever it was they did?

Caleb, Monica, and Carter were invisible, hidden in shadows cast by the enormous boulders or the giant rock wall. Everyone else came in after Damien, and he made sure to spread his cloak out to engulf them as they did. He wouldn't be able to hide a transformed werewolf, but as long as everyone stayed in human form and stayed close, it should be alright.

He gulped when Sándor went through. For a fleeting moment, the shadow of the gargoyle surrounded him, and the man's size dwarfed everyone. Jack and Avery, the two last, noticed as well, and they looked between each other before looking to Damien through the tear. Avery hadn't seen the gargoyle before, and its size shocked her.

Once they were through, they all turned to scan what they could see. Nothing but rocks, and webs.

"The azlu's gotten bigger," Avery said.

"How can you tell?" Jack asked.

"The webbing's spread. Used to just be in the ravine before." She walked over to the small canyon they'd found earlier. Sure enough, the webbing in the ravine was bigger, too, and a couple of cocoons lay between some larger rocks within. "We think it's been coming down from the other end of the ravine, before it comes here." She gestured to the ravine, and where it eventually ended as it collided with the colossal wall of stone near the tear, and went on for probably miles in the other direction.

Damien squatted down beside the ravine, and gestured to the two cocoons. "What are—"

"You know what those are," Avery said, growling.

It was not a Kindred's prerogative to worry about kine lives, but that didn't mean they didn't. Vampires had been human once, and if one was completely incapable of feeling any empathy for one

murdered in such a way, they were likely well on their way to becoming a draugr. And as much as Damien had a troubled history full of manipulation from the Lancea et Sanctum, even the Sanctified felt they were serving a duty to both God, and kine, by helping them, and they often did so with compassion.

Damien and Jack were visibly bothered by the cocoons. Avery looked livid.

“It’s a big city,” Jack said after several moments of silence. “There’s no way to track down how the spider got these bodies, not easily anyway. Is there another tear it’s using? We’ve been watching this one.”

“It’s azlu,” Avery said. “The Hosts do not follow the same rules as us. I’m sure it’s found many places where it can cross over between realms. Like spiders, crawling through holes in a screen door. I doubt it killed those humans here, or ate them here.”

“Pretty smart for an arachnid,” Damien said, “going to multiple locations to do its business. Not exactly common behavior for a spider.”

“Maybe they are evolving...” Sighing, Avery stood back up and gestured forward down the ravine. “I didn’t want to believe it.”

“Given enough time,” Sándor said, “anything can evolve.”

The three of them looked at him, eyebrows quirked. A strange thing for a gargoyle, who emulated statues, to say.

“Alright,” Jack said. “So we sit here and wait?”

“Yeah,” Avery said. “We—” Her head snapped up, and she looked to the tear.

Jack and Damien did the same, and froze. Time stopped. Avery stopped breathing. Every nearby werewolf turned around, an eternally slow motion, too slow, and meaningless.

That was Jacob.

Standing on the other side of the tear, he held a book in his hand, and was dressed in robes that could have been made of dead skin dyed black. He lifted his head long enough to grin at them, before he resumed reading from his book. Whatever he was reading, it wasn’t English.

“Damien,” Jack said, face still pointed at Jacob. Message clear. Stop the 500-year-old vampire who could easily kill Damien with a single punch if he got his hands on him.

Damien withdrew his sword, his pistol, and bolted forward, pouring every bit of vitae he had into his body and his speed. Get through the tear, stop Jacob from whatever he was doing, and don't die in the process. Fiona would kill him if he died here.

He pointed his pistol, and shot nine times in half a second. But he already knew what would happen. Just as looking through the tear betrayed what passing through it had been like, the bullets hit the tear, and didn't go straight through it into Jacob. They veered, and disappeared into whatever blackness awaited them in the endless oblivion the tear's sides exposed.

Something black came seeping out of Jacob's book, mist, and following it, a black, skeletal arm. A skeletal arm they all recognized, much smaller than the colossal one that could crush buildings, but they knew it. And as Jacob lifted his head to again smile at Damien, the hand of the skeleton slashed down across the tear.

And it started to close.

Damien went as fast as he could, and it only took him a few seconds to reach the tear from where he'd been. But a few seconds was enough to have the tear shrink a few inches from all sides. And Damien was forced to grind to a halt at the last moment. If it'd been a normal hole, he could have jumped through, but not this hole, not without veering off path just like the bullet.

"Damien," Jacob said through the tear, "do me a favor, would you? Tell your buddies to stay put."

Damien glared at the man through the tear. Shoot at him again? Wouldn't work. Stab him? Same problem. It'd be like spear fishing, except with the water warping the length of space itself. Make some pointless threats? No. Get as much information as possible.

"Stay put?"

Jacob nodded as he closed the book. The skeletal arm sank back into it, and once the pages hit each other, a small gush of black mist came out of it from all sides.

"Just stay where you are. Don't use Sándor to get out; he can't burrow from this spot anyway, the azlu made sure of that. And if you go roaming, you won't like what happens. I made sure of that."

"So you knew we knew you were casting a ritual."

"Of course."

"And I suppose anything I say, asking you to stop, will be pointless."

"Of course."



“Then at least tell me something!”

Jacob chuckled, crazy smile continuous, and he leaned down a bit to peek at Damien through what was left of the shrinking crack. “Just stay where you are, and we’ll see each other again.”

Jack joined them, eyes blazing.

“Jacob you fucking—”

“Be careful you don’t lose that necklace, Jack. I’d hate to learn you killed everyone before we got to speak again. Though, if you killed Avery, I wouldn’t mind.” Jacob grinned at them through the ever shrinking hole, before it vanished completely.

Jack and Damien slowly looked at each other, before turning to face the werewolves and Sándor, and the endless cave of death and ghosts.

“Trap?” Avery asked.

“Trap,” Jack said, nodding. “What’d he say, Damien?”

“He told us to stay here. He said we’d speak to him again if we didn’t leave this spot.”

Jack and Avery both half growled, half groaned, and threw up their hands. Almost like a synchronized dance for a moment, there.

“Sán—” Jack stopped himself mid yell, and quieted his voice. “Sándor. Can you get us out of here? Or to wherever that tear Mark’s watching is?”

The Begotten shook his head. “Not from here. Opening my lair here is difficult, and I can’t burrow. These... azlu webs, are blocking me. We’ll need to go.”

Jack clenched his fists until his whole body shook. “He tricked us. He fucking tricked us.”

Sándor came closer. “Let’s keep moving, and get away from the webbing. I can force my lair open there, and then take us to the tear deep beneath us.”

“Yeah... Yeah, okay, let’s go. Avery, sorry about—”

“The azlu can wait. If Jacob’s going to start an apocalypse, I think that takes priority.” She threw up her hands again and ground her teeth. “Fuck me I knew it. I fucking knew it, but my hands were tied. We have to kill the fucking azlu. And it’s not like I could have left someone on the other side of the tear to stop him. It’s fucking Jacob! He’d have just instantly killed whoever I left to guard it! Fuck fuck fuck fuck!” She managed to not yell, but she did put enough venom into her voice Damien kept a good distance.

He smiled slightly, but hid it quickly. As much as Jack and Avery didn't get along, they were similar in many ways. Perhaps that was why they didn't get along.

"Caleb, Monica, Carter," Avery said to the darkness. "Scout ahead. We need to get away from this area, without stumbling into any more fucking traps. We..." Her voice trailed off as she stared into the distance, head tilted up slightly.

Everyone looked up. One of those tiny, distant green dots, was moving closer.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Scully~~

~Master is through the door,~ Scully sent to Mulder.

~Master is through the door.~

They both nodded as they looked down over the edge of the tall human house. Not a house, not really, but that's what the other crows called them, and it was hard to break old habits. And with dozens of their old kin nearby, cawing and hunting, Scully couldn't help but think about things the way she used to, sometimes.

They knew their master was through the door to the other world, because they couldn't sense him anymore. Ever since he'd brought them back from the black place, they could always sense him, except the few times he wasn't in the world anymore.

~Master said wait. Wait?~ Scully asked.

~I don't know. Wait?~ Mulder asked.

~Wait?~

~Wait?~

She thought about it for a moment.

~Wait.~

~Wait.~ Mulder sent.

So they waited, looking down over the building edge of the human home-not-home.

After a long moment, a few winds, and the cooling of the night, Scully looked down. The door had opened, and was closing.

~Did you see?~

~See?~

She flapped her wings and nodded down at ground below them.

~See! Saw something... something...~

~I don't see.~

Mulder didn't see. Mulder often didn't pay attention. But she saw. She saw something move, something that didn't match the wind.

A few winds later, it happened again! The door opened, and then closed. But she saw no one! Just bits of dirt and rock moving with the wind. Or maybe, not the wind?

She flew down, and smelled the air. Someone had been through here! Someone she hadn't seen. But she recognized the smell.

Mulder flew down a few winds later and did the same thing, patrolling and pacing as he sniffed the air.

~Recognize smell?~ she asked.

~I do!~

~From where?~

~I don't know~

She squawked at Mulder a few times. He squawked back. They both looked at the door blocking the path into the human not-home. It was closed.

She pushed against it. Too heavy. Too big. It didn't move. Winds definitely wouldn't move it, either.

~Something's happened,~ she sent.

~Because we smell something? We smell lots of things.~

~We smell something we know!~ And it was weird that she couldn't remember it. She smelled the wolf people. She smelled the monster who watched and waited. What was the other smell?

It smelled like... like... skin? Old skin? And... blood?

~Wait! I know! I know! I know!~ She hopped left and right until Mulder cawed at her. ~I know!~

~What is the smell? What is it?~

~Do you remember the dangerous blood drinker? The one Master warned us about?~

~Jacob.~

~Yes, Jacob. Jacob's smell!~

Mulder hopped over and pecked at her a few times. ~Blood drinkers have no different smell. They all smell like dust.~

~Jacob smelled! I've been near him before, when he was...~ Wearing the weird clothes. The dark clothes. The scary clothes. The clothes that smelled like death.

~You think dangerous blood drinker was here?~

She pecked at Mulder a few times. ~I do! Master is in danger!~

~What do we do? Master told us to stay out of danger.~

~Master didn't know!~ She flapped her wings, and joined the wind again. With the wind beneath her, freeing her from the ground, she could go wherever she wanted, safe from the humans below with the night sky behind her, hiding her.

Mulder joined her, and the two of them flew toward the center of the big place, with all the colors and lights and noise.

~We should tell the Prince blood drinker? Master's mate?~ Mulder asked.

~I don't know. Should we?~

~I don't know. Should we?~

~I think so.~ She cawed once, and the two of them turned in over the dark ground as some warmer wind helped them fly higher. ~She can help!~

~~~~~

The Prince woman blood drinker couldn't help. Both Mulder and Scully perched outside her nest, at the top of the not-home, but the see-through wall showed she wasn't there. They pecked at the see-through wall a bunch of times, and made a lot of noise, but she didn't come.

~What now?~ Scully asked.

~Door at ground?~

~Why? Fat man?~

~Fat man.~

They flew to the ground, and pecked at the multiple see-through doors that blocked them from getting into the not-home. But there was no fat man sitting behind the small wall he usually sat behind. Was someone else there tonight? Maybe, but they weren't there now.

As panic set in, Scully flew over to the tiny, flat, weird forest near the tall not-home, and perched on top of one of the square bushes. Mulder joined her, and perched close, close enough they leaned into each other.

~Girls?~ Mulder asked. ~Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel?~

~They can't understand us.~ Unless they tried to use their human voices. And that could take time. They had to act quickly!

~Then... the other blood drinkers in master's family.~

~~~~~

Mulder and Scully perched on the see-through wall of someone the master called Jessy. No one was there. They flew to the see-through wall of Natasha. No one was there. Master had said they would be busy tonight, but what else could Scully and Mulder do?

They found the nest of the wolf humans. Not all of them went with the master, but Scully didn't know who went, or how many. Mulder squawked and pecked at the see-through wall of their nest, but no one waited inside, no one came, no one answered.

Scully and Mulder took to the air again.

~The Prince must be in her nest,~ Scully sent. ~She's always in her nest, deep where she doesn't let us go.~

~Yes. But how to get to her?~

Why had they not made a plan for this!?

~I... I... don't know what to do,~ she sent.

~We can trust master.~

~But the Jacob blood drinker is too dangerous.~

Mulder fluttered his wings. ~Do you think he's in his nest right now?~

~No. He's out in the world, doing dangerous stuff.~

~Then... maybe we should go to his nest?~

Scully looked at Mulder. ~Dangerous!~

~Yes. But, if he's not there, maybe Beatrice is?~

~Beatrice...~ The master had said they couldn't trust her, because she was Jacob's family. But, he also didn't think she was helping him with whatever he was doing, whatever it was that made everyone so scared.

~One of us should go find her,~ Mulder sent. ~Other goes to Master's pets, and try and get them to reach Prince?~

Scully cawed once, nodding. ~I will go to dangerous blood drinker's nest. I will find Beatrice. She can help.~

~Are you sure?~

~Am I sure?~

~Are you sure?~

~I think I'm sure.~

Mulder cawed once as well. ~I will go to Master's home, then. Be careful, Scully.~

~~~~~

The dangerous man and his family of blood drinkers often nested in a cave, far outside the man world. Mulder and Scully explored much of the man world, and the outer edges of it. The blood drinkers didn't try to hide the cave other than it being deep in a crack in the world, and many blood drinkers knew where it was. Most were smart enough to stay away from it.

Scully flew down into the world crack, hopped over the rocks, ducked under sharp bushes, and walked into the cave. It had a small entrance, but plenty big for her, and she hopped and hopped as she stepped into the scary darkness. Something in the rocks told her it was dangerous here, that animals didn't come here. No six-legs or eight-legs, no biters or hunters. But she had a goal and she was going to chase it.

Scary! The cave was scary! There was one of those hard bowls in the center, humans called it metal, and it was old and dirty and smelled like blood. There was a man, a blood drinker, with his family woman that he liked so much. Sex. Blood drinkers had sex all the time. Neither of them cared about Scully, so she hopped along through the large cave, looking at the alcoves, small caves inside the cave, filled with soft things humans and blood drinkers liked to sleep on.

One of them had Beatrice and her family Jennifer in it. Scully took a deep smell of the air. She could smell the dangerous man, or at least his clothes, but it was faint. Was he gone? She could only hope he was gone.

She hopped over to Beatrice and Jennifer's alcove, and cawed.

Beatrice sat up, and looked at her, eyebrow raised. "Uh, the fuck?"