

~~Jack~~

“So, uh, what’re you gonna wear to the ball?”

Elaine laughed as she lit another candle. “Obviously whatever I can that is both luxurious and fashionable, and scandalous.”

He watched her as he paced around the mansion’s basement’s basement. Viktor had several large rooms carved deep into the Earth, offshoot rooms from the empty cells and the secure sleeping room. Torture rooms. Something about blood got into concrete and changed it, altered the color. You could never quite get it out, far as Jack knew. Doubtful Viktor tried. Fucker probably enjoyed sleeping down the hall from the smell of death.

Well, either way, the room was useful, once he removed the chair Viktor had probably tortured people on. Now it was just a big, empty concrete room. Was empty. Candles sat in the room corners and in the corners of the symbol Elaine drew on the floor, which she of course drew with blood because why the hell not.

“You could wear something not scandalous, you know.”

“Where is the fun in that?”

“Elaine, come on. You’re five hundred years old. I seriously doubt you get excited by wearing something scandalous anymore. You could strut naked in a packed football stadium and not even blink.”

She grinned at him over her shoulder, before dipping her small, dark brush into a black jar filled with blood, and working on her symbols again.

“I could.”

“Then why bother with scandalous?”

“Just because I have played the game for hundreds of years, does not mean I no longer enjoy the game. We go through phases, young childe of mine, we all do. Antoinette knows what it is like to be filled by half a dozen men, at the same time, while another half dozen coat her in white. And yet I have seen her enjoy some of her most fulfilling sexual moments with you, a single, small man.”

Jack frowned, but it just made her laugh.

“What I mean,” she continued, “is that Antoinette is now in a phase in her life where she finds her greatest joys in fulfilling your sexual desires. Perhaps in a hundred years, you will wish to do the same with her, and she will enjoy that you will enjoy satisfying her with a myriad of kinks.”

“What’s this got to do with scandalous clothing?”

“Phases. Your lover and I show off our bodies for different reasons than your younger companions, now that we are as old as we are, but we still wish to show them off. I am blessed to have been sired at the height of my beauty, and I am blessed to have had the genetics to be so lovely a creature.”

“Not lacking for confidence, that’s for sure.” Ventrue she was.

Again she laughed. “Well, unlike your lover, I am all natural.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Dressing scandalously is, for Antoinette and I, a game about making other people squirm. The goal is not to show off, but to force reactions from others. Surely you noticed how many times Antoinette has done something, not with the intent of drawing the eyes of others, but to make specifically you wriggle?”

Jack groaned and paced faster. “Yeah, that happens a lot.”

“After centuries, you learn to accept reality, and stop seeking validation. She and I are beautiful, and no longer look to prove it. We look to tease others, and indulge in this mischief.”

“That’s what you matured into? Teasing people? Cause I knew more than a few girls in high school who thought the best thing in the world was teasing young guys. A little flirting, a boob smooch, anything to get the guy to blush or squirm.”

“As I said. Phases.”

“I don’t buy it. I think you’re both just a couple girls who’ll always be a couple girls, using tits and ass to flirt and tease cause you like causing, as you said, mischief.”

“That would imply Antoinette and I are quite young at heart. Do you believe that?”

He eyed her, even gave her his best stink eye, but Elaine just laughed as she drew another line on the concrete floor. No, he didn’t believe that. As much as he loved Antoinette, there was no denying that was she was old, right down to the soul. Hell, that was part of the reason he loved her.

“Think of it as nostalgia, then,” she said. “Antoinette and I are indulging our nostalgia, when we act like young women. Forgive us old monsters our guilty pleasures.”

That did make a lot more sense. Nostalgia was a powerful force, and even Jack, in his mid twenties now including his nine years, found himself occasionally listening to old songs or watching old movies from his childhood for a taste of it.

“I suppose of all the silly immature habits an elder could have, being outrageously flirty is pretty reasonable.”

“Indeed.” Laughing, she stood up, walked over to another corner, and continued expanding the symbols below. “I suppose you told Antoinette that I was here?”

“Yeah.”

“You do not trust me?”

“I trust you enough to try this. Not so much that I won’t tell Antoinette you’re here. I’m a pretty trusting guy, Elaine, to a fault, and I didn’t tell her anything about your past or what we’re up to. But I made sure she knows we’re up to something, in case you stake me, throw me in a box, and ship my ass to Europe.”

“Come now my childe, I would never use something as dull as a box. An expensive coffin, on the other hand, would be far more comfortable.”

“Pretty sure there’s issues with shipping dead bodies across borders.”

“Then it is a good thing the Ordo can make such issues disappear.”

He hadn’t considered that. In Dolareido, the Invictus had their fingers in every aspect of running the city, from the mayor to the police to its criminal groups. A lot more than that, considering how big an organization the Invictus was. The different cities normally ignored each other, but when they had to, Invictus had ways to help each other out, and that probably included getting into other countries without issue. No reason to think the Ordo Dracul didn’t have the same systems in place.

“So, um, are you gonna stake me?”

“It is always a possibility. Will my great grandchilde be so valuable a prize, I steal him away and lock him in a dungeon somewhere, where I can experiment upon him in peace?” She shrugged, laughed again, and lit another candle, as if she hadn’t just threatened to basically be his undoing. “I suppose it will depend on developments. But, for what my word is worth, it is not my plan. It is clear the curse you bear is not a blessing.”

“You did remove yours for a reason.”

“Mine had been bound, eating away at me as a whisper I could never quite define. You said the same of yours, before my grandchilde’s death broke it free.”

Jack winced. “Julias’s death didn’t break it free. I did.”

“Regardless, your tales of your time with the curse before then were quite vivid, while my memories of it are blurry scars.”

“But...”

“But now, your curse is no longer bound. It is free to run amok in your mind, instead of some insidious part of your subconscious. I do wonder if it could somehow be extracted.”

Jack paced some more, if only so Elaine wouldn’t see the moment of surprise on his face. Yeah, Black Blood had suggested that very idea, and Black Blood gave the impression of a villain who liked telling the truth, so he could make people suffer with it. The idea was there, an option Jack considered every night now, letting Black Blood extract the curse. No way he’d do it knowing the spirit-not-spirit was performing some kind of ritual the size of the damn city, but still.

“I assume,” she said, “you will be wearing a suit to the ball?”

“What dude won’t be?”

“I suppose that is true. How many variants can you make of a suit, before you retread ground? Suits three hundred years ago looked closer to penguins than they do to the suits of today, and yet, still suits. Women have so many more options.”

“Yeah well, guys don’t wear suits for how they make the guy look visually.”

Elaine smiled, like a teacher glad her student figured something out.

“Correct. The world of fashion for men is an entirely different beast, filled with social posturing and silent proclamations of power and control. I do not envy the fashion game men play. I am quite content to be judged solely on my looks, particularly when it comes to a ball.”

“Easy to say when you’re thin and have huge breasts.”

Licking a fang, she came closer, walked past him, and scooped up a book from the floor.

“Do not forget my ass.”

He rolled his eyes, even as he took a couple peeks at her ass and the suit skirt snug to it. Anal sex had become pretty norm for them, because Antoinette liked burying him in kinks, but wasn’t a fan of

anal herself. So Elaine was a tool Antoinette could use to treat him, an ass for him to fuck. Which Elaine seemed to enjoy, being treated like a sex toy by her friend. Elders were weird.

It really was a great ass, though.

“I wonder,” she said, “about your friend Beatrice.”

“Triss? What about her?”

“I’ve come to understand she and Sándor have spoken to each other several times over the past few months.”

“I know, but—”

“And several more times besides, when pursuing the dark path your friend follows.”

Jack winced again. “Really? I was hoping she... fuck, I don’t know. Beatrice and Sándor are nothing alike, but then so was Triss and Julias. Maybe... Maybe she and Sándor could get involved, romantically, and help each other be a little happy.” If that was even why they were hanging out. If Sándor was hanging out with Triss because of the whole resurrection rumor, Jack wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

“You do not hate Sándor for his role in my grandchilde’s death?”

“You know I don’t. He wasn’t in control of himself. And fuck me, if Triss can get past his role in Julias’s death, I can.”

“Perhaps. I wonder if Sándor’s guilt, and Beatrice’s resentment over his part in Mire’s death, has led to a strange connection between them. Perhaps he aids her in her ultimately futile goal, to settle his guilt? The poor fool reeks of it.”

Slowly, Jack sucked in a breath as he shook his head. “I trust her. She’s smarter than she seems. Same for Sándor.”

Elaine raised a brow as she met his eyes. “I am surprised. Ventrue normally prefer to control their friends, and meddle in their lives.”

“I get that. Part of me really wants to get involved and say something about what Triss is doing, and Sándor’s involvement. But I won’t.” He gestured to the circles drawn into the floor, and the candles at the connecting points between lines between the circles. “Ready?”

“Indeed. Kneel in the center, if you would please.”

“Kneel.” Yeah, he hated this. “Reminds me of the vision I had, of Susanna, and the priest binding the curse. You ever find that dude?”

“No. There was much chaos during the 1500s. Upheaval, death, communities ruined by flame or disease. I have no idea what happened to my sire, as you know. And I have no knowledge of the priest who bound her curse. If she told me of him, it is too far a faded memory.”

“He was in the vision, but I can’t really remember what he looks like. Like trying to remember a dream, but he was there, casting the spell on Susanna. And he was there, watching, when Susanna sired you.”

Elaine nodded as she flipped through the pages of her book. Her very old, very creepy book.

“Shadows of my past.”

“Think they’re still alive?”

“No. They would be ancient elders by today, and I have not discovered any elder Kindred older than I, few as they are, that could be those from your vision.”

“Damn.”

“As I said, the time period was fraught with dangers for Kindred. With the curse bound and weakened, Susanna and her extreme tastes — as described by you — would likely have led to her exposing herself, but without the power to defend herself, not against an entire mob armed with pitchforks and torches.”

“But those urges were because of the curse... right? It didn’t have any visions from before Susanna cast the ritual and got the curse.”

“Naturally.”

“I... remember what she was like when it and her were in full bloom together, slaughtering people by the thousands. It was just like when the curse gets a hold of me, that crazy blood lust that’s psychopathic. Like... rage, and eroticism, mixed into some kinda gorefest.”

“Then the question is, how much of the curse’s personality is a product of the Strix, and how much of it is a remnant of Susanna?”

“Lot of questions about Susanna.”

“Indeed. If only my sire would reappear, and answer all our questions for us in a dramatic storytelling moment.” Elaine looked to the concrete tunnel stairs, and waited. No one appeared. After a minute, she sighed and shrugged. “Alas, we are on our own.”

Jack chuckled and knelt in the center of the circles. The chuckles vanished, and he gulped on a dry throat as he looked down. He felt it. Holy shit, he felt it, felt the invisible lines in the air circling him and tugging on him. He felt the power in the blood, the dead life used to tear down the barriers between physical and otherworldly. He felt wind swirling around him, even though the air was still.

It'd always be a shocker that magic actually existed. For some reason, it was easier to believe in vampires, werewolves, and stuff like spirits and other realms and dream monsters. But magic? It felt too silly, too ridiculous, but kneeling in the center of a ritual circle smashed him the face with the truth of it. And it was terrifying.

Elaine stepped outside the circle, and fetched a knife from her purse. More like a curved piece of stone that looked like it'd been chipped out of a bigger piece of stone, complete with a wooden handle bound to it by leather strings. Just looking at it was enough to put images in Jack's head of someone getting sacrificed under the full moon, having their heart cut out or something.

His great grandsire looked the book over a couple more times before she set it down, and walked over to him. Face steady and unfazed, she nodded, and slowly dragged the knife across her palm. Kindred blood resisted leaving the body naturally, so Elaine had to focus, eyes locked onto her split palm, until a thick, heavy, dark droplet of vampire blood fell and splashed onto the floor beneath her in front of him.

White lightning cracked across his vision, silent, and blinding. He closed his eyes and looked away, but when another one of her drops of blood fell, it hit him again. Not actually there then, but inside him. He ground his teeth as a third droplet summoned a third bolt of lightning, brighter than the others, blanketing his vision in white until it was all he could see.

And then he wasn't kneeling. Standing, naked, in white, endless white that curved at edges beyond any distance he could ever reach. A dome, not endless, but it certainly felt like it.

He'd been here, multiple times. As far as he could tell, it was some sort of interaction point in his head, some place his mind created when it needed to communicate with other entities at a level deeper than dialog. If psychics existed, true telepaths, and he assumed they did with all the other shit that apparently existed, they probably had their visions or conversations in this place.

Elaine stood there as well, also naked. As much as seeing the tall blonde naked would usually send Jack's mind into the gutter, it didn't seem to be how this place worked. Naked meant as much as clothed in this place: nothing. Plus, there was a ravine between him and her, some sort of pit carved into the white, exposing endless black, a canyon that couldn't be crossed. It was maybe ten feet wide, and Elaine and him were maybe twenty feet from each other, but he just knew, no matter what they did, this canyon couldn't be crossed.

"It has been some time since I have gleamed the inside of a mind," Elaine said. "Someone else's, or mine. I rarely cast such rituals, even at the height of my experiments."

"I see it far too often."

"Oh?"

"Something the curse does, I guess. Whenever we Dominate, it lets me see this." Jack gestured around him. "Dominate didn't let me do that before."

"Indeed. Dominate does not let you meld minds with your victim. It is predatory, not an exchange." Elaine folded her arms under her breasts as she came closer to the edge and looked around. "If the curse allows you to see this part of your mind frequently, it is perhaps using your mind in ways a vampire cannot normally."

"Yeah, maybe. It was in here I... I freed the curse." And as if his subconscious was intent on torturing him, a sledgehammer materialized in his hand, dangling and half resting against the nothing floor. A moment later, the chains appeared on the floor too, giant and broken, surrounding him.

He tossed the hammer aside. Fuck his subconscious and its masochistic desires.

"Then... perhaps it is not that the curse is using your mind in a unique way, but rather it is letting you see into it in a way not normally possible. Perhaps the curse is letting you see what the Beast sees, when it attacks someone's mind."

"You mean this room isn't mine? This isn't my head? It's the Beast's?"

"I imagine there is overlap. But to Dominate someone is to use the power of the Beast, as is all acts of using our Kindred Disciplines. It is not you, but the Beast that makes true contact with another's mind, in order to Dominate. After a fashion, at least. Thus, if you are seeing this room when other Kindred do not, you are being shown something the Beast normally cannot show you... or perhaps simply prefers to not show you. That is until it is cursed by the Strix."

"You make it sound like it's an animal guarding its own interests."



“I would not be the first Kindred to come to such a conclusion. The difference now, is that your curse connects both your Beast and your consciousness.” She looked down, chin in her fingers. It was easy to see now why she was a dragon. It wasn’t just the lust for power, cause she could have easily been Invictus if that was all she wanted. But in her eyes, he spotted some real hunger for knowledge, as if everyone else vanished and questions and answers were the only things that mattered anymore. “Perhaps it—”

A heavy growl silenced the both of them, and Elaine stepped back as a growing black mist seeped up from the white floor near Jack’s feet. Up, and up, and up, until a cloud of smoke stood twenty feet over Jack, twisting and swirling on itself. Red eyes flowed within, occasionally joined by a beak, or set of fangs, or a snout, or mandibles. Claws occasionally reached out from the cloud to touch the floor, sometimes talons, and sometimes a tail or a black feather.

Elaine blinked at Jack, and blinked up at the Beast and the curse melded to it.

“Extraordinary,” she whispered.

“So here’s the bitch, finally paying a visit.” The Ripper snorted, a guttural sound mixed with rasp and bass. Here, inside Jack’s head, the curse felt like a Goliath. Standing beside it... him, was enough to have Jack trembling, and he had to force himself to stop shaking as the curse hovered closer to the canyon edge.

“You are the curse.”

“I am Jack the Ripper.”

Elaine squinted at the giant creature. “You are a Strix creation, infecting my great grandchilde’s Beast.”

“And you’re nothing more than a whore Susanna pulled off the streets, cause she knew you’d make a valuable asset.”

After a few seconds of cold staring, Elaine growled. “What do you remember of my sire?”

“More than you.”

“Tell me.”

“Why the fuck would I tell you anything? You’re nothing. How much power did you have hiding under your nose, but instead of releasing it like Jack here, you fucking removed it?” The curse laughed, and his titanic body of compressed black mist vibrated.

“You are an unseemly creature.”

“And you’re a waste. Susanna saw potential in you, you know? She groomed you, prepared you, because she thought your tits combined with your aggressive personality and quick reasoning, she could get some real value out of you. Not exactly a lot of women like that five hundred years ago. But what did you fucking do? You ran from power, and then spent the rest of your life chasing it again.”

“Chasing it?” Jack asked.

“Chasing. You heard it yourself, Jack. She’s an Architect of Terror, and according to her, that means she’s spent her time with the dragons studying the Beast. Now why would someone do that, someone who used to have power, power attached directly to their Beast?” The cursed laughed, a heavy rumble that shook the metaphor room. “She wanted the power back, of course. She did everything she could to find a way to get the curse back without the Strix influence.”

Laughing all the more, until both Jack and Elaine were wincing, the curse extended an arm, something covered in feathers and ending in claws. He pointed it to the endless, infinite wall behind Jack, and waved an arm. The wall disappeared under an image, blurry colors that danced over the white, and both vampires watched, intrigued, and maybe a little terrified.

And then the projection came to them. Both vampires jumped back, startled, as the image the Ripper summoned became 3D, and surrounded Jack. It didn’t cross the canyon, leaving Elaine to look on from a distance, but she had no trouble seeing with how defined the blurry images slowly became.

“Now that she’s here,” the Ripper said, and gestured to Elaine with a freshly sprouted black arm, “I think it’s time to show you what sort of person Elaine really is, Jack.”

Viktor. Elaine. A party. Jack winced as he stepped back from the images sitting around fancy tables drinking wine and whatnot. Not this again.

“Beast,” Elaine said, “you cannot scare me off with a simple memory.”

“But this isn’t your memory, is it? You showed up out of nowhere after disappearing for years, and now look at you, watching Viktor, after a failed attempt to get back on his good side.”

It was true. This was Viktor’s memory. This must have been not long after Elaine showed back up in Viktor’s life, and the man didn’t want anything to do with her. He sat at one end of the table, and Elaine sat near the other. Jack didn’t know anything about the party, who the people were, or how Elaine could show back up years later and just invite herself into their home. But she had. She chatted with the kine, the ladies in their gowns and bodices, and men in their penguin suits with lots of trim, from probably the 1700s. The rich people of Europe.

Elaine, the past Elaine, kept glancing Viktor's way, and every so often, she licked a fang. Not exactly a big tell, and easily mistaken for someone just being hungry, especially a vampire. But combined with the hunger in her eyes, the mad scientist hunger, it was obvious what was going on. It was a look she'd given Jack many times when they talked about the curse. She wanted to experiment on her childe.

The memory changed, this time to Julias.

"Ripper," Jack said, "don't—"

"Shut up." The creature chuckled as he slammed a hand against the white floor, before it again changed into a different floor. A street, Dolareido, maybe eighty years ago. People walked it, but not packed to the shoulder like today, and the clothes were kinda drab. Right after the industrial boom in Dolareido then, maybe?

Julias walked alone, face unreadable; probably on a mission for the Invictus. Slowly, Jack's sire looked up and then left, toward the road and across it. Old cars drove by, slow as hell considering it seemed to be the 1940s at night, and the city wasn't glowing so much back then. Someone on the other side of the street had caught Julias's attention.

Elaine. She met Julias's eyes, before disappearing into the crowd.

The Ripper sliced the image in half, and Jack jumped back as the creature's claws slammed into the street. The street vanished, and the images faded, leaving the three of them in endless white once again.

"How many times did you come to Dolareido, to see if you could somehow capture Viktor or his childe, and lock them away so you could experiment on them, hmm?" The mocking tone was palpable.

Elaine wouldn't be deterred. She stood her ground and stared at the monstrosity across the ravine, and even tapped her foot, like some kinda impatient mom.

"I admit it," she said, "and I know the others have surmised as much. I had great interest in the curse, and sought a way to isolate it."

"Isolate it, or reunite with it?"

"I never wanted you back, monster! Disgusting, abhorrent, vile creature. You are a tool to be harnessed and nothing more!"

Jack winced as he looked Elaine's way. Was that the first time she'd ever raised her voice? Hearing her get emotional like this, loud, angry, was strange as all fuck.

“Oh really?” The Ripper formed a head, a crow’s head, enormous, and it reached out from the giant ball of mist with a snake’s body for a neck. “And this ritual we’re in? This isn’t some little magic circle to let us just talk, is it?” Bird head still attached to the weird, long, black snake neck, the Ripper pecked at the space over the canyon, and his beak collided with the air. There was a wall there, invisible.

“I have no intention of telling you anything, creature.”

The Ripper snarled hard enough Jack felt it in his throat. But after a few moments, the curse purred. “Then how about a trade?”

“A trade?”

Uh oh.

“You want to know more about Susanna, and the Strix gift. I want to know more about how you removed the gift from yourself. The ritual. Who you killed. All of it.”

“Why do you want information? You are a tool. A magical tool, but a tool, and one to eventually be disposed of.”

Another growl. “Says you. But either way, I’ve been here, digging through the memories hidden in the echoes of the Strix. And I have images that will interest you.”

Before Jack could say anything, the Ripper summoned up another image. Not a memory from Viktor or Julias, but Elaine.

“Don’t,” Elaine said, eyes growing wide as she realized what was happening. “Don’t.”

But the Ripper just laughed, and the Beast creature hovered out of the way so they could see what he wanted them to see. Elaine, naked, covered head to toe in blood. She was in a hut, some sort of wooden cottage or something, and there were three corpses around her, two men, one woman. One of the men was in her arms, Elaine sucking the man dry, her arms wrapped around his chest and holding him to her.

Her eyes were wide and crazed, like a hungry, rabid animal.

Elaine dismissed the image with a swing of the arm. “This isn’t—”

“Oh it’s very real. The Strix gift still flowed through your veins back then, and any moment where you brought me out, the memories are vivid. Would you like to see another?”

“I—”

The Ripper didn't wait. It pulled up another image, with a similar result. Except this time, there were two people, a man and woman, and Elaine was currently in the process of drinking the man mid sex, with the woman behind her, pressed against her back lovingly. Another wooden home from easily nearly five hundred years ago.

The image fast forwarded quickly, showing the violence as a rapid display of carnage. Elaine, ripping the man's throat open with her teeth, still mid sex. The woman screaming in shock. Wolves, literal wolves, breaking into the house. Wolves eating the woman alive.

Meal complete, Elaine stood up, smiling widely as the dying man's fresh blood dripped down her jaw, neck, and her naked body.

Jack looked away. "She got rid of the curse for a reason, Ripper. You're not showing us anything we don't already know, or will fucking sway us about anything." A peek Elaine's way showed stubborn defiance, but he recognized the guilt he saw last time they talked, when she explained some of her past to him. To have it rubbed in her face by someone as fucked up as the curse, must have fucking sucked.

Jack knew the feelings, too. He knew what it'd been like to have fucked up, thoroughly twisted thoughts running through his mind. The things he wanted to do to Angela would have landed him in a psych ward as much as a prison, if he'd been human.

"Then how about this," the Ripper said.

The image swirled around Jack, but not all that much. Still some sort of wood building, but no snow outside. Elaine gone, wolves gone, corpses gone. No, wait, Elaine was there again, in bed, with another woman, and Susanna.

Elaine gasped. This was Susanna's memory. Or was it Elaine's, from the moment of her embrace?

"There she is. The first vampire to hold me." The swirling mass of black smoke drifted over top now, and pointed down at the hallucination that surrounded Jack with a myriad of his flowing claws. "Look at her. Tiny, and unassuming. How'd she seduce you?"

The elder Ventrue snarled. "That does not matter."

"Uh huh." Laughing, the curse pointed again, this time at the man watching them from the side of the room. The Sanctified vampire. "Recognize him?"

Elaine shook her head. Of course she couldn't recognize the face, considering it was blurry.

"I suppose you can't sharpen the memory," she said.

“Nah. Sorry. Reaching across five centuries of time, through memories that have echoed in the veins of the Strix gift, isn’t exactly easy. Moments where I came to the surface, moments where I was called, used, or where my beloved Beast was called, those are moments I remember. But even then, five hundred years is too damn long to keep the memory crisp.” He chuckled again. “With time, and maybe a little help from a smart dragon with some crazy rituals on her side, I might be able to recall more.”

“If...”

The Ripper shrugged. Considering he was currently a giant hovering ball of black smoke filled with swirling, disappearing and reappearing feathers and claws and beaks and fangs, shrugging looked weird as fuck.

“You know what I want, old bitch. You know I want control of Jack’s body. I want it, the body, the mind, the soul. I want it all, and I want it now.” Oh fucking god he even sang it to the tune. “But if you’re not willing to help me with that, then tell me about the ritual you used to destroy the strand of me that lived inside you?”

“Tools do not live.”

Another cackle. “I’m not a tool. Christ, I sound like a broken record.”

But all he earned was another snarl from Elaine. “You can’t conjure up the memory of how I removed my curse?”

“Can’t remember things I wasn’t there for. This strand of me split off from you when you sired Viktor. But if you come over here,” he gestured to the floor near Jack, by where Susanna, Elaine, and the third woman were having sex on the bed, “I can delve into your memories on my own. Might be able to sharpen up some of these blurry images, too. Maybe even remember some names we’ve both forgotten.”

“I think not.”

“You wanted to talk to me. You wanted to see what I’d be willing to share. I’m willing to share a lot, if you’re willing to tell me — or show me — what you did to remove your gift. I figured you committed diablerie, but what I need are the details.”

“You will learn of it eventually, but not until it is too late to do anything about it.”

The Ripper laughed. “Nice bluff. If you remembered exactly what you did, you’d have shared it with Jack by now.”

“Not everyone is as eager to embrace Amaranth as you, vile creature. When Jack is freed of you, it will not be over the ashes of other Kindred. I will not have my child suffer as I suffered.”

Jack blinked at Elaine. That sounded altruistic, and much as he knew Elaine could just be acting for the Ripper’s benefit, there was something about this place, this metaphor room, this endless white space in his skull, that stripped away a lot of the bullshit. He believed her.

With an annoyed growl, the Ripper slashed away the image, and Jack ducked as the Beast’s claws sliced right through him. They passed through him like knives cutting through fog, thank god.

The projection faded, but another replaced it almost immediately. Oh fuck not this one. Jack stepped away from it, but the metaphor room didn’t react to his feet on the ground. Efforts to walk away didn’t do shit, and he stopped trying as the image around them grew, and grew, until they were in blackness.

Susanna, on her knees, with a vampire in torpor beside her. A huge, withered tree, deep underground. And glowing yellow eyes in the darkness, a dozen of them at least, bodies hidden in the black around the tree branches.

“You forsook their gift, vampire. But I have a shred of a few memories I haven’t shown Jack, a few things I’m sure would be of use to you.”

Elaine paced the canyon as she stared at the tree, and what it represented. Answers. To someone like Jack, he was happy to leave dark dirty secrets to die in black caves that meant nothing but death. But to a dragon, answers to something like how or what or why the Strix did anything was borderline existential. After all the history she had with the curse, and now the fuzzy memories she had of it teasing her, combined with the Ripper taunting her with power she didn’t know she’d given up, Jack couldn’t blame her for staring with hungry eyes at the image the Ripper conjured.

“And if I cannot remember the details of the ritual I used?”

“Then do what you can to help me take over this body. Get rid of the necklace, and keep the Prince and her boring sheriff out of my way. Do that, and I’ll show you more than I showed Jack. I’ll show you what it was like in Susanna’s mind, when she first used the curse, when she first used me, when I was free. I’ll show you everything I know about how she learned about the Strix, how she knew where to go, what to do, everything.” Two arms of black mist erupted from the Beast’s sides, and crashed into the ground hard enough the entire endlessness around them shook, shattering the image. It decayed into nothingness around them. “All yours! If you give me what I want. And I want my freedom.”

Jack gulped as he stared up at the monster, before looking back to Elaine. If she either gave the curse information about how Elaine got rid of her curse, likely allowing the Ripper to prevent such a thing from happening to him, the curse would help her. Or, if she helped the Ripper take over Jack permanently, he'd help her. Either way, Jack would lose the battle for his body, and probably switch places with the Ripper, a voice with no control in his head, while the Ripper got to do whatever the fuck he wanted.

Elaine looked at the curse, the Beast it infected and controlled, and then looked to Jack. They met eyes for a bit, neither of them looking away, and Elaine gave him a small smile and nod.

“I did not begin this ritual to barter with you, curse. I am here, to understand my enemy. And now I do. You are no bastion of ancient power. You are a child, a cruel and sick thing without a shred of humanity, wielding power you do not deserve. Strix indeed. Any bargain we made would be tainted. The moment you had your freedom, you would rain destruction on everything around you, including me.” Elaine swiped an arm through the air. “And besides, the conversation was mostly a distraction while the ritual took hold.”

“What are—” The Ripper sucked in a snarling breath as he stared across the canyon.

Chains snapped out from Elaine's side of the ravine, and crashed into and over the curse. The Ripper's snarl turned into an ear piercing shriek of fury, and Jack covered his ears as he watched the giant thing come crashing to the white floor. More chains snapped out, more and more, crossing the uncrossable canyon, and wrapping around the creature.

The Ripper roared and shrieked. Any attempts at words were nothing more than garbled curses mixed with guttural sounds.

“Holy shit,” Jack said. “You bound it?”

“Only for the moment.” Sighing, Elaine reached behind her, and pulled out her ritual book from nowhere. Metaphor room, right. “This ritual you sit within, Jack my childe, can be used to suppress the Beast in draugr, if only momentarily. At great cost to the caster, I might add. But it should suffice long enough for my purposes.”

Jack winced as he tried to hear her over the sounds of the Ripper screaming. “Uh, purpose? I thought you wanted to have a chat with the curse?”

“That was part of my purpose. And now for the other part.”

“I didn't agree to—”



“Of course you did not.” Elaine looked down at her book held in one hand, while her other hand pointed out at the curse. The chains had come out of nowhere before, but now that she had the book in hand, the chains were coming out of it now. “Rest assured, this will be of no issue to you, Jack.”

Jack eyed his great grandsire, but said nothing. The fuck could he do? She was on the other side of the canyon, and far as he could tell, the only way she was able to do anything across it, was cause Jack was currently sitting in the middle of a fucking ritual circle, powered by her vitae and her weird book. If it wasn't for the Ripper, Jack doubted he'd even be consciously aware of any of the shit that was happening in his skull.

Another chain shot out from the book, this one tipped with a spike. It didn't surround and tie up the curse like the others. It sank right into the giant pile of black smoke's flank, and ripped out a chunk of it. Again, the curse screamed.

And then it was done. Elaine smiled, closed the book, and the dream ended. The screaming disappeared, she disappeared, and Jack disappeared. It all went away like someone blowing out the candle in an otherwise pitch black room.

Jack opened his eyes. Back in his mansion, in the basement. Back with Elaine. Groaning, Jack tried to stand up. No good, his body didn't want to listen, as if he was human again and had just gone back to the gym for the first time in years.

“Elaine, the fuck did you—”

Elaine stumbled back, dropped her book, and almost crashed into a wall. Only a snap of her left hand stopped her skull from getting cracked like an egg. She didn't use her right hand, cause it was holding something.

A tiny vial. He saw only a glimpse of it before it disappeared between her fingers.

“Elaine.” After another groan, he forced himself up to his feet, driving vitae into his limbs. “You took something from the curse.”

Elaine peeked over her shoulder at him, and stumbling even worse than he was, she gave him a small grin before she grabbed her purse and put the vial inside.

“Do not think me so altruistic I will risk my life for zero gain, childe of mine.”

“Thought the gain was learning more about the curse, Susanna, and the Strix.”

“I doubted the curse would ever share such knowledge. If I gained it, then I would be a terribly happy dragon, but I knew I would not. Instead, I intended to acquire some of its vitae.”

“Its vitae?”

“When the curse takes control of you, it fills you, yes? Dominates every inch of you, and alters your vitae.”

Jack walked over to her, eying her closely with each step. “Yeah.”

“I had two choices, if I wished to acquire some of that vitae. Wait for you to lose control to the curse, and somehow acquire vitae from it in some ridiculous battle that could very well spell my doom. Or, extract it via ritual.”

“Extract it? How the fuck does that work?”

“In the same manner Dominate allows us to penetrate the minds of others with merely eye contact.”

“Magic.”

“Precisely. Though far be it from a dragon to use such an archaic term.” Chuckling, her own energy returning, she scooped the book back up, and motioned for Jack to follow her.

Jack wasn't so keen on following her, considering she'd lied to him about the ritual. But then again, she had to lie, cause the Ripper heard everything they said. Couldn't exactly plot behind his back when he got to eavesdrop on everything.

“You really do whatever you wanna do, don't you?”

“Of course. It is the prerogative of elders.”

“Uh huh.” Rolling his eyes, he followed after her as she walked up the stairs. He looked behind him at the ritual circle, and how the marks in the floor were now black, as if they'd been burned to ash. Did all rituals do that, or just ones that dealt with horrible shit like Strix curses?

Jack locked the door to the basement behind him. The real one, the thick metal one with giant metal bars. After that, he closed the wooden door that hid how ridiculous and obvious the giant metal one was. Much as he trusted his thralls, he didn't want them stumbling onto information they shouldn't have. Last thing he wanted to do was mentally scrub his own thralls' minds of any secrets they were better off not knowing.

He felt a little guilty blocking off chunks of the mansion from his thralls, but only a little. The Prince did the same, and didn't let her ghouls into her room during the day while she slept, either.

“So what, now you have a vial of the Ripper’s vitae? I thought the vitae part of our blood didn’t last when outside the body.” Plus the whole burning away to cinder and ash part.

“It would not, normally. But we of the Ordo Dracul have measures to keep things in the state we need them.”

“And what’re you going to do with it?”

“I cannot tell you. But do not worry. I plan to help you deal with this curse, Jack. That has not changed.”

He wanted to accuse her of lying, get in her face about exploiting him and making him drop his guard. But, again, it was hard to fault her for her tactics.

“Could you stop acting like it’s no big deal?” he asked. It was, however, much easier to fault her smug attitude. “You make it so damn hard to trust you.”

“Never trust me completely, young Ventrue. All decisions must be calculated. But…” Sighing, she stopped walking and turned to face him. “I do hope you will trust me, perhaps more than I think you should.”

Fuck, she was doing that thing with her face again, little hints of guilt showing through. And for the fucking life of him, he couldn’t throw it out as some sort of trick. It looked, and felt, genuine.

“You came to the city years ago, to take a look at Julias.”

Her lip twitched. “I did. The curse did not lie to you.”

“You wanted to get him under a scalpel, didn’t you?”

“I… wanted to explore possibilities. I was visiting my good friend Antoinette, and—”

“Was that the main reason, or was seeing if Julias was a candidate for you to steal and operate on your primary reason?”

“Can it not be both?”

Jack folded his arms across his chest, and tapped a foot on the floor. Full on frustrated parent stance.

“What stopped you?”

“From what?”

“From abducting the man. I can understand being careful around Viktor. He knew who you were, was a powerful elder, and had the curse feeding his power. You were afraid of him.”

“I... was.”

“But Julias? In that memory, he was still a neonate, and I doubt Antoinette would have gone to bat for him at that point. Why didn't you kidnap him? Afraid Viktor would find out? Afraid it'd cause an incident?”

After a few quiet moments, Elaine slowly shook her head, and set a hand on the front door of his mansion.

“Perhaps I was hesitant to acquire a power I once nearly destroyed myself to remove?”

“Maybe.”

“Perhaps... I did not wish to see someone who was nothing like myself or his sire suffer.”

“Again, maybe. I admit, I do like that second reason quite a bit.”

She smiled. “You look for the best in everyone.”

“I used to. But everyone's been telling me that's a bad idea. Antoinette, you, even Julias told me to be careful about it.”

“Then I suppose you will have no choice but to trust in your judgment. Can you trust me? Will I betray you? Antoinette does not think so, but she also knows to listen to the old lesson: trust no one. And Daniel has never trusted me. That leaves you, childe of mine, with only yourself to believe. What do you do?”

“I... don't know.”

With a wicked grin and a small wave, she walked out of his mansion, and under the watchful eyes of his two crows perched on a nearby statue, left. Jack watched her go, and idly flicked at the necklace around his neck, the only thing keeping his Beast down and the Ripper down with it.

If there was one way he was going to die, it'd be from trusting the wrong person.

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~~Eric~~

Every hair on his body stood up. His heart rate jumped. Adrenaline flooded his system. Breathing quickened. Every faculty he had prepared for war.

But nothing came. They stood still, looking around, listening so close Eric could hear Begotten and Uratha heartbeats, along with his own. Nothing.

“Can you smell it?” Sándor asked.

Eric shook his head as he squatted down next to Natasha at the ravine edge. “Only traces. If an azlu has been here, it’s been gone for days.”

“Days,” Art said, “but it’s been months since the last one died.”

Avery groaned as she joined them. “Which means there’s another one. Fucking christ.”

“There’s been some disappearances,” Matt said, “of people who work in North Side, over the past few months. But I hadn’t seen anything to imply azlu.”

Art nodded. “It’s getting sneakier.”

Avery shook her head. “Azlu don’t get sneakier. It’s a creature as old as Father Wolf. It can’t get any sneakier than any real spider does.”

“If it’s th-that old,” Natasha said, “then m-maybe it’s evolving? Some real spiders are... very sneaky.”

Eric shuddered. All the Uratha did.

The boss woman groaned again. “Terrifying thought. I’m going to assume it’s been doing the same thing it’s been doing for the past million years, and just hiding until it thought we’d leave. They are smart enough to do that, sometimes. Then it got hungry and only recently starting feeding.”

Art nodded. “I suppose that’s more likely than it suddenly getting smarter at how it hunts.”

“So this is its lair?” Eric asked, gesturing down at the small canyon. “I’m not seeing any bodies.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Maybe it was hiding out here? Might have a lair somewhere else, and relocated here? Here, because...” He gestured back to the path they came from. “Because it has a new tear to try and sew up?”

Right. Azlu were driven by some sort of great, ancient instinct, to plug holes between the spirit and physical world. They also took it too far and covered the Gauntlet in so much webbing that all flow between the two realms stopped. And when flow stopped between the two realms, the area died. Not

died as in death, which the spirit realm was perfectly equipped to mimic or embody. Death as in, void of everything. Life, death, all of it, like turning a color movie to black and white.

The tears were why the azlu were in Dolareido, according to Avery. Sure, azlu showed up in places with a lot of human activity to do their thing, since human activity was one of the strongest forces for punching holes through the Gauntlet at a large scale. A big, active, lively city like Dolareido was bound to attract azlu. But three, or more, in only a few years? No, they came for the tears, driven by their instinct to sew them up as best they could.

Eric stared down the path they'd walked. Natasha did too.

"Why is there a t-tear here, then?" Natasha said. "W-Wouldn't the azlu be here, trying to close it?"

Avery shrugged. "Maybe that's why there's only a few traces of the azlu being here. The tear is new, and the azlu only stayed for a little while, trying to sew it up, gave up and left and started feeding. It might come back bigger, stronger, and better equipped."

"Either way," Eric said, "I guess we have something to hunt, now."

Natasha shook her head. "We're b-busy! We have to stop the ritual."

Eric gestured around. "We don't even know what the ritual is, Tash, or how to close these tears. Best we got is to let the azlu keep doing what they're doing. They'll close them eventually I'm guessing, after they've killed a few dozen innocent people." Knowing how fucked up vampires could be, especially Antoinette and Jacob, it wouldn't have surprised Eric at all if they'd be perfectly okay with that. Maybe they had dungeons full of humans they deemed 'fodder', to be sacrificed in situations just like this. But unless they had literal dozens of people tied up in cells, people that deserved a horrible fate, Eric wouldn't agree to it. And he knew they didn't. As many people as there were in Dolareido, it didn't have dozens and dozens of murderers just lying around, ready to be plucked like ripe fruit for dark rituals and shit.

He didn't even want to think about the rumors about Beatrice.

"Regardless," Sándor said, "we won't accomplish anything here. Let's leave, and leave a guard post on the physical side of the tear."

Eric suppressed a smile. Guard post. Dude talked like he was alive hundreds of years ago. Probably was.

“Agreed,” Avery said. “If we catch the azlu around, we can get here asap and burn the fucker. But we all know it won’t be that easy. Something’s going to happen that’s going to throw a wrench into things.”

Yeah, that was true. Much as Eric wanted to disagree, this was too weird. Why a tear that went nowhere, that wasn’t on Tash’s graph? There were tears many years old, maybe centuries, and none of them were on the graph, but all the new ones, all seemingly made in the past three or four years, were all on it. This new one wasn’t. The only thing it did, was lead them to the remains of azlu activity that’d only temporarily been in the area.

Easy to think the azlu had just been around for a bit, and examined the tear, before leaving. Scarier to think Black Blood created the tear to point them at the azlu. And damn it, it was too scary an idea to not share.

“I wonder,” Eric said. “Is Black Blood... actively making us hunt azlu?”

Avery spit on the floor. “I was wondering about that. Disturbing idea, that that spirit is making us chase something that’s its problem, considering it’s the one creating the tears. More disturbing because now we have to do what it wants. Ain’t no Uratha gonna let one of the Hosts live, especially us.”

Right. Avery and her pack were Hunters in Darkness, the Meninna. Their specialty was hunting Hosts, Shartha. The perfect predators to deal with azlu, and azlu were inevitable with literal tears in the Gauntlet showing up.

It did all fit together way too perfectly.

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~~Beatrice~~

“You sure you want to be a part of this?” Triss asked.

Sándor nodded, subtle, but sturdy and solid. Pretty much summed up the dude’s whole personality. Well, that was fine. She could go for some sturdy and solid right about now.

Triss sighed, and looked to Jen and Sam. Jen managed a small shrug, and Sam just stood there, shaking, eyes on the floor. Poor girl.

“I’ll stay out here,” Sándor said eventually, after a glance Sam’s way. Before they could say anything, the man moved to the center of the abandoned building’s basement, and stood there, facing the stairs. Stood wasn’t even the word. Dude turned into a fucking statue, holding so still he’d make a vampire in torpor envious. If he was breathing, Triss couldn’t see or hear it. God damn.

Nodding, Triss stepped into the walk-in fridge first, and undid the magic seal. Jen and Sam followed her in, and Triss closed the door behind them.

“W-Why is Sándor helping us?” Sam whispered, doing her best to avoid staring at the pile of bodies Triss had in the corner of the huge fridge. With the giant door closed, they were able to talk privately.

“He’s... keeping an eye on things,” Triss said. “He wants to be a protector, I guess, for the paranormals in Dolareido. He feels indebted to Jack, and me, and the others for helping him.” And he felt guilty as all fuck for getting Julias killed, and indirectly, Mary. No point in trying to convince him otherwise. Dude knew logically that Julias’s death, Mary’s, and his own family’s weren’t his fault, but knowing it emotionally was a different thing altogether. At least he didn’t keep trying to apologize for it. Triss wouldn’t have been able to handle it if the dude suddenly got on his knees and tried to say sorry for everything; she’d probably have ripped his heart out. Sándor didn’t use words, he just did shit and let his actions speak for him.

She understood that. She appreciated that.

Sam gulped as she took a step toward the bodies. “Ok, ok. So... so I...”

Triss gestured to the pile. “Grab a body, any body.” Sam already knew this, but the girl was trembling. Best to say it all again. “You need the skull and heart, and put them into a container.” She held up a small black bag, identical to the one she’d used when she did the ritual herself. “Then, you need to remember the person you’re trying to... clone, essentially. That’s what the ritual’s going to do, take the power of the dead person, trapped in the mind and heart, and combined with your memories and vitae, turn it into a... a defining blueprint, a magical one.”

“But I can’t cast a ritual, or do magic, or any—”

“I’ll be casting the ritual. Just follow the steps.” Like helping a kid jump into a pool for the first time, Triss had to help Sam with every inch, including repeating instructions, and promises of help. It fucking hurt. Sam shouldn’t have had to do this.

Christ, how did Sándor feel about this? To him, this was an opportunity to maybe help some people get back what they lost, people that wouldn’t have died if he’d just done a better job defending



himself from Jeremiah years ago. Or, it was an opportunity for him to clean up the inevitable mess Triss and Sam were going to create, when all this backfired, and they accidentally created some sort of monster they had to put down with fire.

Damn it. Now all she could think about was that fucking sickening scene in *Alien Resurrection* where Ripley had to kill her fucked up clones with a flamethrower.

“Samantha,” Jen said. “You can stop any time you want to, you know that. You don’t have to do this. We don’t know if any of this is going to work, ever.”

“I know. But... but I want to try.” Nodding, still trembling, she walked over to the pile of bodies.

She knew the deal. Much as Triss wanted to do this for her, Sam had to do it herself. It was the deal with the ritual, and all rituals. It wasn’t about the fancy symbols or the words or the tools. It was about the symbolism, and the effort put into the ritual. It was about the sacrifice. If you had that, and the mentality for magic and shit, you could cast rituals. Triss most definitely did not want to teach the rituals to Sam, especially not the way witches did, with pain and suffering.

The poor woman reached down, and grabbed a man’s body. It was fine if it was a man. The sacrifice just needed a skull and heart, while the painful part came after. And fucked up and sexist as it was, Triss had to admit, it was easier cutting up a man than a woman. She didn’t blame the Daeva when she found an older man, and got to work.

No claws. She brought a knife.

Jen didn’t watch, but Triss did. This was important, and if Sam was going to join Triss on this fucked up journey, the least she could do was watch and make sure she did it right. Sure enough, Sam struggled, but Triss watched and waited for Sam to ask for help. She didn’t. Grimacing, Sam sawed at the man’s head, breaking through the skin with the obvious clumsiness of someone who didn’t know what they were doing. She’d watched Triss tear bodies apart, and bring pieces to Elen, so they could sculpt the body for her daughter, but she hadn’t taken part in the process herself. Triss didn’t want her to, but now she could see that was a mistake. Sam was struggling, but hopefully, this would be the one and only time she had to dismantle a dead body.

It took time, and more than a few times Triss thought Sam would burst into tears. She did sob a couple times, making Jen flinch and glance over her shoulder to the gory mess before quickly looking away. But the mother pushed through, sawing and carving, until she peeled the skull out of the dead man’s torn open skin. She looked away when she scooped out the insides with a spoon Triss had given her for this exact purpose.

“Here,” Sam whispered, and handed the skull to Triss. Triss met the woman’s eyes, gave her a silent ‘you’re doing great’ smile, and dropped the skull into the bag.

Next was the heart, and that was going to be harder. Cutting open a face, ruining it, separating a skull from spinal cord, and scooping out eyes and brains was tough. But there was something absolutely guttural about cutting open someone’s chest, and Sam quickly ran into the biggest issue when she set the man between her legs, lifted the knife, and stared down at his shirt. She had to get inside him.

She slammed her knife into the sternum, and the crunch of breaking bone was audible. Everyone winced, and Sam dry heaved several times. If she’d been human, she’d have puked everywhere. She looked away and closed her eyes, even as she yanked down on the knife, and forced it through the rest of the sternum, and down through the man’s abdomen. Slowly, she set the knife down, and forced herself to look back at the body.

No gloves. It’d ruin the weight, the impact, and both were core ingredients in the ritual. So with hands soaked in the blood of a dead man, she set them into the chest cavity of the corpse, palms facing out, and pulled. More things went crack and pop, and Sam again dry heaved as she stared down into the insides of the victim. Heart, lungs, diaphragm, esophagus, stomach, small and large intestines, spleen, kidneys, liver, all of it was there.

It was the ultimate dose of reality. Vampires were special. Something in them kept them ticking, despite the fact their organs were withered and no longer functioning. Shoot a vamp clean through the stomach and it didn’t mean shit. Humans, on the other hand, were blood bags, running entirely on electrical signals and the flow of oxygen. Sacks of meat. Vampires needed them, but whatever it was that so was so special about life, whatever it was humans had that made them the center of so many aspects of the paranormal world, it didn’t do shit to keep them from dying. Humans were beyond fragile.

Mary had been stabbed to death. This, was a really fucking shitty way for Sam to learn what it felt like to stab through flesh and bone.

She reached between the lungs with one hand, grabbed the heart, cut the pipes with the knife, and plucked the organ. And just like Triss, she stared at the disgusting, bloody thing in her hand. She felt it too, the power, the spark of weird, mystical voodoo, something Triss didn’t know and neither did Jacob. Life. Whatever it was that gave kine life, traces of it were left in the heart and mind, something that crackled silently and sparked invisibly.

Sam took a slow, useless breath, and set the heart in Triss’s bag.

“And now... I have to remember Mary, and bleed into the bag?”

“Yeah. For me, I had a picture on my phone I—”

Sam nodded, and clutched her necklace tight in one hand, soaking it in the dead man’s blood. One of her daughter’s necklaces. And like she was clutching her daughter herself, she closed her eyes, and shuddered. Little shivers worked through her, head to toe, and she sniffled a couple times. She wanted to cry. Hell, she was crying, but without the Blush, there weren’t any tears to join it, no sniffles, no choking sobs as the throat swelled. All she had were tremors, little things that grew into larger things, until she let out a low groan.

Poor woman. Triss loved Julias, loved the fuck out of him, and digging through her memories until Julias was forefront in her mind so she could empower the ritual, had been fucking horrible. One of the worst things she’d ever done, even compared to all the painful torture she’d gone through to learn crúac rituals with Jacob. But she’d known Julias for only a few years. Sam knew her daughter for over two decades. On top of that, she’d bonded heavily with her daughter when her son disappeared. And on top of all that, Sam was her damn mother. No parent, ever, fucking ever, should have to know what it’s like to lose a child.

After a few more moments, the trembling woman settled, let go of her necklace, and faced Triss. Nodding, she dragged the knife across her palm, and held it out over the bag.

Drip.

Drip.

Triss closed the bag, and met Sam’s eyes. The woman looked destroyed. Normally Sam did a damn good job keeping her sadness at bay, same as Triss, but the girl was a little too honest for it. You could always see a hint of sorrow behind her eyes. Now it was all laid bare, and Triss couldn’t look into those eyes for long. Felt like trying to stare down a blizzard raining ice shards straight into the eyes.

Triss closed the bag and raised it high. “Be found and returned, Mary. I call to the darkness that watches and listens, that knows the dead. Find, and bring a piece of Mary back to me.” Nodding, she handed the bag to Sam, and with a shivering hand, the poor woman took it.

Death descended on them. Triss didn’t know who listened to the ritual, what spirit or god or whatever decided to entertain their stupidity, but someone or something answered the call. They stood there, looking at each other again, and the two of them gulped as the air twisted and exploded into a hurricane. Black mist swirled around them, disappeared, and reappeared, toying with them as it worked

its magic. Felt like something twisted and horrible. Not Black Blood, but not too far removed, something just as fucking death like.

Worse was the bag. The contents moved, and bounced and jiggled, as if someone had locked up a ferret in there. They knew what it was now, a crystal ball being formed and bouncing around with some sort of life blueprint, but until it was done, it seemed like it wanted to get out. Sam clutched the bag to her chest hard as it struggled, pinning it, like letting it go would mean the end of the world.

Eventually, the wind disappeared, the black mist disappeared with it, and the bag in Sam's arms calmed down. Still moved, still wiggled, half alive and looking for a body to complete and a soul to fill it, but calm. Sam nodded, her own body calming as she looked down at the bag, and then at Triss.

“Can I... look?”

Triss smiled and nodded. “Yeah, but uh, maybe outside,” she said, pointing to the fridge door.

The three of them walked out of the fridge, Sam still shaking but smiling, and Jen smiling warily, like she was afraid she'd jinx the good luck. Smart girl.

Sándor looked their way as Triss closed the fridge door behind them. “Success?”

Sam nodded, and held up the bag. Slowly, with a trembling hand, she reached into it.

The tiny crystal ball glowed a gentle gold, lighting up the dingy basement, and their four faces, each of them wide-eyed as they stared at the small moving images on the perfect, smooth surface. Even Sándor widened his eyes as he realized what the crystal ball showed.

It was evening, sun setting. There was an alley. Samantha and Mary were walking beside each other, smiling, laughing. They didn't see the woman coming toward them. No, they saw her, they just didn't think it was a woman about to stab them both, dozens of times.

More than that, other images flickered over the ball. Scenes of Mary and Sam, standing over Jack's grave. Scenes of Mary, going shopping with her mom. Scenes of Mary and her mom watching a movie together, both of them wrapped in a big blanket on a couch, eating popcorn.

Mary's thoughts. The last thoughts she'd had, before she died. The things they wanted to do that day, or week.

“We were... gonna watch one of the new Marvel movies, you know? She really likes Chris Evans.”

Likes.

There wasn't any holding back anymore. Sam stared at the ball, clutched it tight in one hand, caressed it with the other, fell to her knees, and screamed once. One very deliberate, agonizing scream.

The three of them stared down at her for a bit, frozen. But before Triss or Jen could snap themselves out of being struck dumb by Sam's too powerful, too overwhelming display of enough raw emotion to break a mountain, Sándor squatted down beside her.

"May I see?"

"W-What?" Sam said between her choked sobs.

"I would like to see your daughter's final living moments."

Sam blinked at the man, as if he'd just asked something insane, or maybe offensive. But after a few seconds, she nodded, and held out the small orb to him.

He didn't take it. He looked, and leaned in so he could look better, but he didn't touch it, as if it'd be sacrilege. As if picking it up from her hand would break the poor woman. Like, maybe killing her daughter again.

"She's beautiful," he said, a small smile on his face. "And she looks really close to you."

"She... She was. She wasn't at first, but when Jack disappeared, things changed. We relied on each other, you know? After James, and then Jack, we only had each other."

Sam went on. She held out the orb for everyone to see, and the small crystal ball gently teetered in her palm, half alive, as Sam described Mary and their time together. With one hand she clutched her necklace tight, the other the crystal ball, and her sniffles slowly passed as she described her daughter to them all. She'd told Triss stories about her before, but not these, peeks into the most private, tender moments between the two. It took a lot of effort to keep from crying with her.

But it wasn't Samantha Triss stared at. Yeah, she looked at her, and sometimes got lost admiring the memory she could see in the crystal ball, but damn it, it was Sándor she found herself looking at. Julias would have been super sad and empathetic with Sam, and would have done everything he could have to make her feel better. Yeah, it woulda been sappy and annoying, but it would have worked with some time. Julias could make anyone smile if given time.

But Sándor didn't do that. His eyes held something different. Understanding. Quiet, calm, understanding. And it was exactly what Sam needed. Who the fuck else was she gonna talk to about this? Athalia? Maybe, but Athalia wasn't the sort of person to just sit and listen. Maybe Triss judged the other Begotten too harshly, but she couldn't picture Athalia doing this, just sitting there and listening.

Sándor listened, steady face absorbing everything Sam said in a way no one else would be able to.

After a while, Sam stood up, and gently touched Sándor's chest once.

"Thank you. I know it's... it's..." Sighing, she put the crystal ball back in the bag, and held it tight to her chest as the four of them made for the exit. "It's hard to find someone to talk to about Mary. I do with Jack sometimes, and I've talked to Athalia, but it's hard." Despite herself, she smiled at the gargoyle. "It's easier to talk to you, for some reason. Thank you, for listening."

Her eyes lingered on Sándor, and her shivering faded as the man returned her eyes with pure, solid evenness. To anyone watching from the outside, Sándor would probably have seemed the asshole, dispassionate and uncaring. Couldn't be further from the fucking truth.

Dude was a gargoyle. That didn't sound like anything crazy before, but now, Triss could see how the dude bagged a wife. He listened to people. Genuinely listened.

"So, we doing this tonight?" Triss asked, gesturing to the bag. "We can, if you want."

"No. I need to talk to Mary again tonight first. Can we start tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Yeah sure, whatever you want, Sam."

Samantha smiled at her, and started up the stairs out of the basement. "Um... did you want to see her, Sándor?"

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It was such a trip, seeing the place where Jack grew up. Sam had taken her here before once, so she and Jen could see Mary, and break the ice before they did any crazy shit involving putting the ghost daughter into a soulless husk body replacement. It'd become very obvious from the get go that Mary was unstable. She randomly yelled, or twitched in classic ghost fashion, and had trouble talking about some things.

But she loved her mom. Ghost or no, Mary loved her mom, and it was apparent in every word she said, the one time Triss had visited. Hopefully this visit would go as well.

First, the kitchen, where the side door of the house connected. The Prince kept the house on ice, so no one was gonna buy it, meaning Samantha got to keep it in the same condition it'd been the day she died, except for whatever changes Sam made on her visits.

Sándor kicked his shoes against the small steps outside before following them in, as if he'd walked into the house a million times before. Was the house he used to live in with his wife and kid like this one?

Triss watched him for a couple seconds, long enough for him to realize and meet her gaze with stoic curiosity. She looked away, and ran a finger along the counter tops of the kitchen.

"A lovely home," Sándor said.

"Thank you."

"It's... easy, to imagine your children coming home from school, and entering through this door." He slowly closed the kitchen door.

Sam looked back at Sándor with a big smile. Funny, she never smiled at Triss or Jen like that when the two of them had talked about her home. Homeowners sharing some sort of shared appreciation for home owning? Well fuck, all Triss knew was apartments and a crypt.

"On days I was home during the day, I used to give them snacks when they got home from school, right here." Sam stepped around the counter to the other side of the kitchen, the dining room, stepped behind one of the wooden chairs, and set her hands on its back as she smiled down at the table.

"They had good lives growing up."

"Musta," Triss said, and sat down on a stool by the counter. "I don't know Mary, but I know Jack pretty well. Kid is... well, you know."

Jen joined Triss at the counter, standing on the kitchen side and leaning down so she could set her elbows on it.

"Kindred are rarely as direct and honest as Jack. Those that are usually die young."

"Jack was always a peculiar one growing up," Samantha said. "He never did things... gently. Everything had to be done with conviction, you know? Do it right and do it honestly, or don't do it at all. Before James died, Jack was loud and proud about that sort of stuff. After, he got... quieter. And then angrier." Sighing, Samantha looked up and around at the empty kitchen, the wood corner cabinet, the stairs nearby, everything. "When I met Julias, I thought maybe Jack would find a father figure in him. And it seemed like that was happening, except, then he disappeared."

Julias, a father figure. Definitely a cheesy dad who'd love shitty puns one day, and then have deep, meaningful conversations with his kids the next. Triss would be the loud, angry mom. They'd balance each other out.

Jennifer came up beside Sam and put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s always a problem with Kindred, how it affects the people they leave behind.”

“I know. My sire explained it, and I don’t blame vampires for keeping everything secret. But I... I kinda wish I got to see Jack become the man he is, you know?” Slowly, she looked to Beatrice. “And I’d have loved to see how his relationship with Julias grew, too.”

Triss tried to hold her gentle, sad, eyes, but she couldn’t.

And then of course there was Sándor. For just a split second, the dude looked sad too, something in the subtle furrow of the brow, but then he went back to his usual steady self. Triss could only imagine the weird balance of thoughts running through his mind. Hopefully the guy could get it through his thick skull that no one blamed him for anything.

“Sorry about the cold,” Sam said. “The house is always cold now, and nothing I do heats it up. That’s because Mary’s here. Doesn’t bother vampires, but I’m guessing it bothers you?”

“No,” he said. Lying, telling the truth, no way to know. “Don’t worry about me.”

Easier said than done. Mary the ghost, the unstable and dangerous as all fuck ghost, couldn’t direct her hate toward Jeremiah or Angela anymore, but she could sure as hell point it at Sándor. Considering how often Sam visited her daughter, especially the past few months, she’d probably told Mary everything about Jeremiah, Angela, Sándor, all of it. Whether that had prepared Mary to be calm, or just given her time to get angrier at Sándor before their inevitable introduction, Triss had no idea. And unlike the vampires, Sándor wouldn’t survive getting a random kitchen knife in the skull from a murderous ghost.

They went upstairs. Sam paused on the stairway, looked down at it for a few seconds, smiled, and went on up to the small hallway. Bathroom on left, Jack’s room on right, then the parents’ bedroom on the back left, and Mary’s bedroom on the back right.

Triss paused in the door frame to Jack’s room. “Dude never got into posters or anything?” She’d seen the room before, but only for a moment. Now she took a good look at the double bed in the corner, the perfect spot beside the desk where a computer probably used to be, and the bare walls.

“No,” Sam said, peeking past Triss into the room. “He would get super passionate about things, extremely, sometimes for months, but he didn’t have any interest in expressing it. He used to tell me, what’s the point in hanging posters of his favorite bands or games on the walls. You can’t listen to or play a poster.”

Jen chuckled. “I thought all young boys embraced hobbies with enthusiasm?”



Triss shook her head. “Nah. I get it. Some people just prefer to experience things and don’t care about expressing them or owning them. Not a fan of wearing their interests on their sleeves.”

Sam nodded. “Unless you get him talking about something that interests him. Then you’re in for hours of chatting, and ranting.”

Chuckling turning into outright laughter, and Jen walked into the room and ran a finger along the desk.

“Boys and their toys.”

“I’m not so sure,” Sam said. “I do wonder if Jack is a little different than other people. Sometimes I’d find him listening to a song, headphones on, and it was like... like he was in another world. Or he’d be watching a movie, and get so absorbed into it, it was like the movie became his world. Books, too. Sometimes, when something would catch his interest, it’d dominate his thoughts. He’d tell me sometimes he’d have dreams about whatever it was he couldn’t stop thinking about, even if it was as random and silly a thing as trying to find a way to fit his desk against the wall at just the right angle so the sun wouldn’t touch his screen for twenty minutes in the evening.” She laughed. “It turned into a project, and soon he had new light-blocking drapes set up with a string that he could pull on and tie to the side of the bed post, so they’d block the light at the specific time of day, but then he could untie it and let the loose after.”

Before Triss could laugh, and maybe make a friendly suggestion that Jack might be on the spectrum, fog began to fill in the cold room. It’d gotten chillier as they talked, but vampires being vampires, it didn’t mean much to them. Triss only noticed because Sándor’s breath had started turning into mist.

“Sometimes,” a whispering voice in the growing darkness said, “he’d get so caught up in whatever was on his mind, he’d forget to eat or sleep. It’s a wonder the kid made the few friends he did.” The group’s eyes eventually settled on the bed, and the misty white thing that formed there. Mary, looking sweet and innocent, legs hanging off the bed side and breaking apart into mist that mixed in with the rest of the rising fog. “But if I ever came to him with a problem, something that was bothering me, like my closet door not closing all the way, or my computer doing something weird, Jack wouldn’t rest until he’d fixed it, you know? He loved to fix things, even if he got super obsessive about it.”

Samantha smiled and nodded as she sat down beside the ghost, no fear, no hesitation, but no touching either. Her hand would probably go through her if she tried.

“Mary,” Sam said. “You know Beatrice and Jennifer, right?”

Mary didn't get up, but did look up at the two vampires. Empty eye sockets. Yeesh. If only she could wear an eye bandage like Jacob did.

“Hi.”

“Hey,” they said.

“And, uh, Mary, this is Sándor.”

Sándor took a step closer until maybe five feet separated him from the ghost woman. He didn't say anything though. Instead, he did that thing he often did, and just stood there, waiting, and listening.

Mary frowned.