

~~Jack~~

“There’s going to be a lot of vampires there, Mary,” Jack said.

“I know.”

“They know you’re a resurrected person. They’re going to be watching you all night.”

“I know.”

“Some of them might even try and corner you, and, uh, ‘convince’ you to come with them.” He air-quoted convince.

She laughed and shrugged. “I know.”

Him, his sister, and his mom were in a limousine, currently on the way to the Black Hall, with a loyal thrall driving them. His thralls weren’t coming. Maybe next time, but he didn’t feel entirely secure with his three girls coming to the ball, not when Jacob was still an unknown factor. Antoinette wasn’t bringing her ghouls, either.

Mulder stayed back at the mansion, playing watch duty with the girls. They’d gotten used to the undead familiars, and were probably playing with Mulder right now, making puzzles for him to solve with their shiny jewelry and stuff. Find the ring under the cups, dig in the couch for a bracelet, things like that. The birds’ minds were never the same after being turned undead, but there was still a sliver of crow in there, and Jack was thankful his thralls were happy to play with them.

Scully, on the other hand, flew overhead, following the limousine, sending Jack updates about whatever she saw. She’d stay outside once they arrived, his scout. Maybe in the future he’d invite her into the ball, but for now he wanted her outside and doing recon, hopefully without anyone noticing.

“Not to mention the dress,” he said, gesturing to Mary.

“Hey! I picked a nice dress.”

It was a nice dress, white, with tiny straps that hooked around the neck and hugged a snug front to her chest, before ending in a skirt that went long, and split at the thigh. It could have even been a normal fancy dress, and not hyper sexual, if not for the fact the chest was really thin, width-wise. Her breasts were almost popping out the sides, held in only by the extra strap that pulled on the chest and went around the back, almost like a swimsuit. Topped with some fancy, but subtle jewelry, she looked great. Too great. Surrogate father instincts kicking in, maybe? Or just brother instincts.

“A little more revealing than I’d like,” their mom said.

Mary gestured to their mom. “Pot calling kettle black, don’t you think?”

Jack groaned as he glanced at his mom, and looked away. Yeap, Mary was right, their mom was dressed in an even more revealing dress, black, and pretty much the same as Mary’s except the chest also split down the front to show off an absurd amount of cleavage, all the way down. Like, now he knew his mom shaved her privates smooth, all the way down.

At least they were wearing underwear, tiny thongs, but he wasn’t happy being able to tell the color of them matched their dresses. That was information no man should ever have to know about his sister or mother, vampires or not.

“You know you could wear suits,” he said. “Lot of ladies wear suits.”

“To the ball?” Mary asked.

“I mean, a few... jackets open and shirts undone to only the bottom button... with no bra.” Still, slightly more conservative than the dresses they were wearing.

“That does sound pretty sexy, honestly.”

He groaned and shook his head. “Mom, please keep her out of trouble.”

“I will... try.”

“Mom!”

Their mom giggled, reached out, and gave his knee a slap.

“Come on, Jack! Mary’s alive, and it wouldn’t be fair of me to tell her she’s not allowed to enjoy herself the way we have.”

Jack put up a hand. “She’s been alive for three nights. How about we ease her into things?”

“No!” Mary slapped his knee, much harder than their mom. “I’ve been a ghost for so long, I have a lot to make up for. I’m going to enjoy myself tonight, in whatever way I want. And unlike you two, I can get drunk.”

The idea of his sister getting drunk at a Black Hall ball sent his mind spiraling into some very disturbing imagery. Disturbing for him, at least. He didn’t want to stumble onto his sister getting fingered and Kissed by three vampires while lying on a table naked, like a meal. Which was exactly what a lot of vampires there would think the moment they saw her.

“Mary,” their mom said, “I know I don’t have to give you the sex talk. And I know it’s not an issue with vampires anyway, but at least be careful? You can drink, sure. You can... ‘socialize’, if you want.” She struggled hard with the word socialize. “But remember, it’s a room full of predators. All of them will be looking for a meal, and that can be a fun time for both parties, but not all the predators play nice.”

“Then it’s a good thing your sire is the Prince, and she’s going to make sure everyone gets along.” Grinning like an evil imp, Mary nodded and drummed her palms on her knee. She was excited. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave the Black Hall without at least one of you.”

Jack sighed, but nodded. That was a good compromise. Unfortunately, it meant she had the entire ball’s duration to get herself into trouble, and she was good at that. Very good.

The limousine pulled up to the building, and he watched Mary’s eyes light up as she looked out the car window. Their mom was right. He should lighten up and let her enjoy herself however she wanted.

Christ, she really was alive. This was his sister, a reckless, bubbly girl who never thought more than five minutes ahead. And she’d been happy back in the day. And she was happy now.

He smiled as he watched her, and for the first time in a long time, let himself imagine what it’d be like to have his mom and sister back together and in his life again. Terrifying, considering his mom was dating Jacob, and had become intimately familiar with Black Blood. Horrifying, because he knew it was likely Mary would want to become a vampire, and join the nightlife.

But maybe...

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“Now presenting, Mister Jack Terry, Right Hand of the Invictus. Miss Samantha Terry, childe of the Prince, and young dragon. And... Miss Mary Terry, biological child of Samantha Terry.” The presenter, dressed in a suit better suited for a penguin, actually did a double take at the card in his hand. Someone — probably another one of Antoinette’s thralls — must have given it to him at the last minute.

“Holy shit,” Mary whispered, leaning over to Jack. “That’s... wow.”

The Black Hall was a ballroom, but Mary apparently hadn't quite prepared herself for what that meant. It meant chandelier. It meant a huge floor filled with talking people, and tables with expensive and pristine white cloths over them. It meant lots of fancy clothes. It meant a second floor that you walked up to with either of two, giant, curving staircases that spread out and turned into a balcony that circled the ballroom. It meant a small orchestra playing live music up on the second floor, with the ceiling acoustics making sure everyone could hear it. It meant an entire building filled with black marble; it didn't have the same white lightning veins the Elysium Tower did, but it wasn't far off. It meant luxury.

Jack held out his elbow, and nudged Mary with it. She nudged him back.

"No, you idiot. Take my arm."

"Oh, right!" Giggling, she hooked his arm, and walked with him, their mom right behind them and closer to Mary as they moved toward the crowd. They had a small staircase to go down, a circular one that opened up in the ballroom, and Jack made sure they took each step slowly so the people could get a good look. A show of confidence.

Bella was nearby. They spotted each other instantly, and Jack held her gaze for a few moments. Friend? Foe? She looked at him, his mom, his sister, and frowned as she disappeared into the churning crowd. Neither then. Well, that was good enough for him.

More than a few people stared at Mary, leaning over to whisper to each other as Jack came closer to the crowd. Some actually stopped what they were doing to look at her, trying to discern if she was a vampire or not. It didn't take long before everyone realized she was not. The only non-paranormal in the ball not bound by the Vinculum, save for the hunters, and thus a huge Masquerade threat. But also deeply connected to the Prince and Jack, two people no one wanted to cross.

Jack didn't know if Mary knew how weirdly, quietly tense the whole night had become because of that, but if she did she didn't let it show. She was all smiles, genuine, big smiles, as she looked at the tables near the walls of the giant building.

"No food?" she asked.

"No, dear," their mom said. "I told you to eat something before you came."

"I did, a little."

"Good. The only food that'll get on those tables is other kine."

"Ooooh."

Jack bit down on his groan. Sex was everywhere in Dolareido, and he had to accept that his sister was going to get into it faster than his mom did. Like, maybe tonight fast. Hopefully she wouldn't end up getting involved with Jacob or witch orgies, but knowing Mary, she'd end up getting involved with some 'bad boys' or something.

Don't think about that, just focus on having a fun time at the ball.

Yeah right. He hated these things. Even with all his new found money, physical, social, and political power, he still hated these things. Too many people, too many shoulders to dodge, too many eyes to consider, too many everything.

But at least he was better at it. Socializing was a skill, and it was useful. So was wearing a good suit that made him look professional and sexy. He had both. The suit he wore now was silver, with a silver vest, black tie and white shirt, and all sorts of bits of flair, including a silver chain that connected from a vest button to a genuine handheld antique watch in his pocket. It was the sort of suit Viktor would have worn, fabulous and imposing.

"Jack!" Out of the crowd came a bouncing redhead in a green dress. A genuine ballroom dress at that, no cleavage or anything, with a big fluffy skirt made of a dozen layers. Her hair was straightened too, and bounced around her shoulders in waves.

"Fiona?"

"Aye! Ye like?" She spun around for him as he came down the last step.

Oh. The dress was plenty covering from the front, but it had no back. At all. The back cut so low he could tell she wasn't wearing any underwear.

"Nice ass," Mary said with a wink.

Fiona burst into giggles. "Damien said I should wear a dress that was nae so focused on my tits. I went with ass."

Jack looked past her to the crowd. A lot of people were still watching, but a lot had gone back to their conversing, too. One man stood there looking their way, and when he noticed Jack noticing, he nodded as he came over. Damien, wearing a far simpler black suit, but without a tie, and with many of the shirt buttons undone, exposing his lean body.

A few women were wearing the same sort of suit, but Damien had that pretty boy look to him that really sealed the deal, according to Antoinette. Romantic vampire mystique. Jack could see it.

"Hello," Damien said, nodding to the group. "Antoinette didn't come with you, Jack?"

“Nah. She’s gonna arrive fashionably late, probably with Elaine. Anyone from the Circle here yet?”

“No.”

“Uratha?”

“All here.” He gestured around. “Mingling.”

Jack had half expected them to group up. But apparently they’d gotten used to Dolareido enough to socialize with the vampires individually, many of them sipping alcohol while talking. Comfortable enough to get drunk, which meant comfortable enough to let their guard down, mostly. Not that werewolves would get drunk from just sipping wine, but it did look like a few of them were doing more than sipping. Hopefully they wouldn’t get loose tongues.

Eric he expected, of course. With Jessy on his arm, slipping him more glasses, the man was going to get at least a little drunk. She was wearing a fancy blue dress, but of course it had a lot of skin showing. Marge, for some reason, stood with them, smiling and laughing as she sipped her own drink. It wouldn’t take much alcohol to get a small kine like that drunk. And considering her history with Isabella, probably Kissed before the night was done.

Natasha was there with her boys. They were both wearing silk shirts, partly see-through, with most buttons undone. One in black, the other in white. Both in pants of the opposite color. Either they were playing off the fact they usually went everywhere together, or Natasha was.

The tiny Mekhet wore a black dress, something that hugged her body damn tight with laces along the sides, from thigh to armpit, no underwear. Latex? It was shiny, that was for sure, and it wasn’t like vampires could sweat, so they didn’t have a problem with the material. She turned to face Jack and waved to him from a distance, and he waved back, cocking an eyebrow. She smiled and shrugged. The latex also had a window between her small breasts, almost completely revealing them. God damn, she’d changed.

“You two look great, by the way,” Damien said, nodding to Mary and Samantha. His socializing skills were getting better. Jack doubted his mom or sister could hear the likely dozen rehearsals in it.

Both women smiled bright.

“And you,” Mary said, “look like the main character in a novel I read not long ago.”

Jack shot his mom a glare, and she whistled innocently as she looked away. She’d heard that from Antoinette, and told Mary. And Mary naturally saw the opportunity for a joke.

“I know!” Fiona burst into giggles again as she hooked her man’s arm. “But he’s mine. Go find yer own.”

“I think I just might.” Nodding, smile growing larger, Mary looked around at the room. “This really is less a ball and more a night club with an orchestra.

“Vampires,” their mom said. “It’s, uh, a weird balance with vampires.”

Her daughter nodded. “Pretentious but obsessed with sex. Sounds about right.” Before their mom could stop her, Mary scooped a glass of red wine off the tray of a nearby serving kine, and downed it.

“Mary!” Their mom took the glass and gave it back to the server. “That could have been blood!”

Jack snorted on a laugh as he imagined his sister downing a glass of blood. Vampire humor.

“Nah, I could tell from the consistency.”

Their mom gasped. “Don’t tell me my daughter is an alcoholic.”

“Wine connoisseur,” Mary lied as she rolled her eyes. “Come on, Mom. Introduce me to some people.”

“You don’t want Jack to—”

“Jack can do it later. But I don’t think he’ll be able to get away from the... official capacity of his position.” Mary snickered and grinned at him. “Everyone knows him, apparently.”

“That’s... true.” Jack groaned and waved her off. “Yeah, she’s right. Go have fun. But please don’t drink yourself into a really stupid decision.”

“I plan to do just that.”

Their mom elbowed Mary in the hip, hard enough to get a small yelp out of her.

“Don’t worry, Jack. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Keep an eye on her until Jacob showed up, sure.

His mom and sister walked off and disappeared into the crowd, and were immediately swarmed by people asking questions, mostly about Mary. Mary managed to handle it with her typical social enthusiasm, and any worry she might have had about saying the wrong thing, or that she was talking to literal killers, didn’t seem to affect her. How the hell could she be so good at socializing naturally, when Jack had to spend years training at it?

Jack looked up. On the balcony, behind the thick marble railing, stood Daniel. He wore a fancy suit, nothing sexy about it, and he kept his gaze on the crowd below, scanning left to right. Usually the

man preferred to be completely unseen during these events, or in a less obvious position. But there was a woman standing beside him, this time.

Athalia. And her eyes were pointed at Mary.

“Oh shit,” he said.

Damien looked at him, and followed his eyes up to Athalia. “Oh shit.”

“I fucking forgot. Christ, with all the shit that’s been happening, I fucking forgot.”

“Think she’ll be angry?”

Jack winced as he stared at Athalia, but the Begotten’s eyes were transfixed on Mary.

“I... think she might be. Fiona, Athalia say anything about Mary since she got a body?”

Fiona shrugged as she moved to stand in front of them both. “No, but I have nae talked to her much the past few days. She’s been hanging with her lad, Daniel.”

“Hopefully,” Jack said, “he’s been helping her stay calm. She’s probably furious that Mary’s alive while Angela... yeah.”

“Ye think?” Fiona frowned as she shook her head. “I dunno. I think Athalia’s a lot calmer these days, and she’ll be happy for Sam.”

“Or she’s still deciding,” Damien said, looking to Jack. “What do you want to do?”

“Let’s just leave her alone for now. Daniel’s with her. He’ll keep things cool.”

“Aye,” Fiona said. “Good idea. Come on then! I want to show off.” Smile unwavering, Fiona grabbed Damien’s arm, and pulled him back into the crowd.

Poor Damien. He hated this shit as much as Jack did, and he looked to him with begging eyes. If it’d been anyone else pulling Damien, Jack would have saved the man from the unwanted social situation. But his girlfriend? Jack just smiled and waved, and Damien managed to glare at him before disappearing behind bodies. He’d pay for that later, probably. Ah well.

Mary and Fiona, and probably the Uratha, were here to have fun, socialize, get drunk, etcetera, while every vampire in the place was looking for a way to uncover some information that’d give them a leg up in the Danse Macabre. Balls weren’t had for fun. They were had as a political arena free-for-all, where everyone got to engage and try and walk away from skirmishes with more information than the other person. Not coming wasn’t an option, because even if you gave away more information than you earned in the arena, it was usually worth it for the information gained, anyway.



Which meant every political player would be here. Sure, some of the tunnel dwellers, particularly the more deformed Nosferatu, would stay out, despite the open invite. But any vampire who gave a shit about the city and their place in it was here. Sure enough, Jack spotted Michael, chatting with Maria. He spotted Garry, chatting with Isabella; no idea what that was about. He spotted Bella and her Carthian buddies talking with Avery and a few Uratha. He spotted Garry's childe Jeremy Long talking with Parker and Vicky, probably about their brothels in the seedier corners of Dolareido. Business propositions. Even the younger vampires, Tash's childe Vivienne, Gloria's childe Amanda, Jordan, Garry's boyfriend Mike, and even the Carthian Cory, had gathered to talk, probably to play the politics game at a more ground level, where young vampires lived.

Cory glanced over his shoulder, spotted Jack, and inched himself away until a random body stood between them. The guy would probably never forget what it'd been like to have someone punch a hole in his guts, literally.

Jack sighed, and stepped aside as a few more people were announced at the door. He found a corner to stand in, and sure enough, the corner opened up with more space as nearby vampires drifted away. They didn't want to look scared of him, but they made sure he had at least eight feet of free space in any direction at all times.

At least until Garry came up to him. Jack raised a brow at the man, but Garry just laughed as he parked beside him, a wine glass full of blood in his hand. He wore a suit, but it wasn't especially fancy or anything, soft blue with a blood red shirt under the blazer. Interesting choice.

"You really hate these things, don't you?" Garry asked.

"You don't?"

"I can enjoy a party. Maybe not this one, with everyone looking to stab each other in the back."

"They're not looking to stab each other, just... get an advantage over each other."

The Gangrel shrugged and sipped his drink. "Whatever, same idea. At a proper party, no one's looking to fuck each other over. Just fuck each other."

"I guess that's better."

Garry laughed. "Though, at the Prince's parties, I guess it's both. She coming or what?"

"You know her."

“Right. Gotta be fashionably late and shit.” Chuckling again, more than Jack had ever heard the man laugh at a ball, Garry looked around them at the empty space that’d been created. “You really scare people.”

Jack reached under his shirt enough to pull out a sliver of his necklace for a moment. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine if a necklace is the only thing keeping you from going on a killing spree.”

“I wou—”

“You wouldn’t. The curse would. Sometimes I think I shouldn’t have listened to Azamel, and just killed you instead.”

Jack sneered at the man. “You would have anyway. She stopped you, remember? Unless you think you can kill me now.”

Garry grinned at him and took another sip. “Nah. And besides, you got work to do, right?”

“I do.” The ritual wouldn’t stop itself.

“Gonna let me help?”

“If a problem comes up where I think you can help, I’ll let you know. But it’ll probably be a too-many-hands situation.”

“If shit hits the fan, and I could have helped but you didn’t get me, then I’ll really kill you, you know.”

Wincing, Jack looked out to the rest of the crowd. “If that happens, I’ll probably already be dead.”

Sighing, Garry took another sip of his drink, and pat Jack on the shoulder. Jack froze. He didn’t expect physical touch. No one did. At least twenty vampires took notice, and stopped talking as they stared at Garry give Jack an almost buddy-buddy shoulder tap, before walking off.

Having Garry talk to him personally like that was weird, but it was weirder that he didn’t ask about Mary. He wanted to, that much was obvious. Everyone at the party was sneaking glances at her, walking a little closer than necessary so they could see past the other vampires and check out the girl who got resurrected. A glance up showed the sheriff still watching her, Athalia too, so it wasn’t like anyone was gonna try anything.

Thankfully, his mom was still with her, and entertaining people’s questions. More vampires were happy to watch from a distance and not give away that they didn’t understand how someone could ever get resurrected, but a few of the braver vamps were comfortable enough walking up to his sister and

mother and actually asking. Jack couldn't hear with the music and crowd drowning him out, but the peeks he managed between the moving shoulders showed his mom deflecting questions as best she could.

Go over and help them? Maybe when an ancilla or elder decided to question them. Until then he—

“Garry chatting with you and patting your shoulder?” a woman’s voice said. “That was odd.”

Jack turned, and nearly jaw dropped. He didn't, because he'd gotten pretty good at controlling his expressions compared to who he was four years ago, but it was damn close.

Clara stood there in a white dress, her dark box-braid hair done up in some weird, top-heavy tower thing with a small metal rod stabbing through it to keep it up. The dress was very, very revealing, lots of lace straps that crisscrossed and held a couple white triangles over her breasts before connecting to a long skirt with two splits that went very high. White thong, very tiny, which according to the dress, she wanted everyone to know she was wearing. It all matched her tan skin perfectly.

“Jesus,” he whispered.

Her smile brightened. Oh shit, he said that out loud.

“It’s a nice dress,” she said. “Elaine helped me pick it out.”

“Of course she did. Did she, uh... accomplish her mission?”

“Mission?”

He gestured to her. “With you and Harcourt.”

“She—oh. Christ, she’s still trying to get us into bed?”

“Yeap. I’ll take that as a no?”

“Nah, she hasn’t succeeded. Yet. She’s been flirting with me incessantly, and... after that time she Kissed me, I gotta admit, it’s been harder to say no than I’d like.” She grinned and scrunched up her nose like a squirrel. “And Harcourt is a guy. If I showed him another woman’s tits, giant tits, in the palms of yours truly, I’m pretty sure he’d break instantly.”

Jack gulped and looked around desperately for a drink. A server walked by, ten feet away, and Jack scooped up a drink, almost startling the server, before he went back to Clara.

“Elaine’s pretty convincing.” The memory of Elaine holding Clara’s naked breasts and Kissing her in front of everyone was seared into Jack’s mind. The thought of her riding Clara while Harcourt

fucked them had naturally come up in his mind, too. The thought of Jack fucking Clara and Elaine together, instead of Harcourt, had come up a lot more.

“I hear she managed to seduce Mason,” Clara said.

“Yeap.”

“And, uh, I hear she even managed to get him to transform for her, for sexy times.”

He choked on a laugh. “She’s pretty adventurous, sexually speaking. Every werewolf trying transforming now, for sex?”

“Most. I haven’t.”

“But...”

“But Harcourt is open to the idea.” She laughed and shrugged, and sipped her own glass. “I have no idea how it’d go, you know? I mean, with a guy werewolf and a normal — or vampire — girl, I can kinda understand. But a girl werewolf?” She held up her hands, created a ring with a thumb and index, and then penetrated the ring with her other index finger. Then she increased the size of the hole using her whole hand, and again penetrated it with just a finger, now much smaller by comparison.

Jack laughed until he had to reel it in before he spilled his drink.

“Maybe. You’ll never know unless you try.”

“I suppose. We’re all pretty new to this whole sex thing. When transformed, I mean. There’s something damn weird about this city, that we can transform and not feel a need to go berserk, assuming we transform where there’s no fighting or hunting.”

“Sure it’s the city doing it?”

“Double sure. You don’t understand, Jack. Gauru form is all aggression and a need to hunt, claw, bite, shred, and kill. It takes over you and—”

“Vampires have Beasts, you know.” Not to mention Jack’s unusual circumstance.

“Yeah but that’s only a problem when you’re literally starving, right?”

“Yeah, and when you get a little too used to... hunting, clawing, biting, shredding, and killing. Beast instincts get louder and louder until they take over. Then you’re just a mindless draugr that needs putting down.”

“Then I guess being draugr is kinda like Gauru form, mentally. It’s not something you fuck around with.” Clara nodded as she looked out to the crowd. “Never met a draugr.”

“Pretty big Masquerade risk. No draugr in Dolareido while I’ve been a vampire, but they do sometimes pop up.” And were taken down by vampires. Jack did not look forward to joining a hunt like that.

“Happier thoughts!” She sipped her drink and nudged him with her elbow. “Your sister’s alive. No one saw that coming.”

“No one tell you?”

“We knew. Matt and Art told us because Tash told them. But we were all a little... scared.”

“You’re telling me,” he said. “Mom is beside herself with joy, and Mary is right behind her. They’re both so happy, and all I can think is: this is too good to be true.”

“I don’t know about too good to be true. She was a ghost, right? And she has a body now, right? A ghost possessing a body isn’t unheard of.”

“I guess. It’s... not really the same.”

“I guess not. She really seems alive. And, um, excited.”

Jack winced as he managed to get another peek at his damn sister. She was working on another glass, and was getting a little too close to a vampire that’d approached her. Zack, a Daeva in Isabella’s troupe. Behind him was, speak of the devil, Isabella Leauvion and her lover Hella Vendram. Hella wore a nice white dress, but Isabella wore black, tight black, with a long tight skirt. Hell, she had a black under bust corset on, tight enough it’d be a breathing hazard for a human. She wasn’t saying anything, just watching as Zack chatted up Jack’s mom and sis, probably on his boss’s orders.

And Mary was responding, giggling even as she smiled at Zack and nodded about something. She was flirting with him.

“You’re nothing like your sister,” Clara said.

“We’re... similar in some ways, I guess. But no, we’re not.”

“Almost seems like Natasha would fit you better as a sister.”

Jack laughed. “She’s a lot more similar to me than Mary, yeah, but that’s not really what you find in family members, you know? You’re similar over... less obvious stuff.”

“So where do you and Mary overlap?”

A deep need for honesty, even when it was dumb.

“I’d rather not say.”

It was Clara's turn to laugh.

"Where's your harem?"

"I—it's not a harem! Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel are back at the mansion. I'll bring them to a ball when I feel comfortable about it."

With an evil grin, Clara nodded toward one of the nearby ghouls, a man, who was slowly getting herded toward the one of the tables by two women, looked blatantly nervous. Two Carthians having fun with one of their ghouls, and judging from the look on a man's face who was watching nearby, it was his ghoul. He was having fun letting a couple other vampires prey on him.

"You don't want your girls getting Kissed by other vampires?"

"No." In fact, the idea of his thralls being rounded up and herded by other vampires grated on him, badly.

"Typical man. Doesn't wanna share."

Jack raised a brow at Clara, but she just grinned at him as she sipped her wine. It couldn't have been her first drink, with the way she tilted a little when she sipped, and the way she was smiling at him.

A part of him was tempted to ask her about them, her and Jack, maybe say something about how much he wished it could have worked. But somewhere deep in his dumbass brain, a kernel of wisdom was growing. Let sleeping dogs lie, or something like that. She'd moved on, and judging from the way she waved at Harcourt when he peeked out from the crowd before striking up a conversation with Natasha, Clara seemed pretty happy with him. Which confused him, cause the man was clearly empty in the head. But maybe that was the better fit for Clara. No accounting for taste.

She turned to ask him something, but before she could, the announcer spoke up.

"Presenting elder Jacob, leader of the Circle of the Crone, and his witches Beatrice Damor, Jennifer Denver, Aaron Jones, and Othello Manu."

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~~Beatrice~~

The crowd stared at them, more than a few of them dropping their jaws. Every single witch, coming together, after what had no doubt become the biggest point of gossip in the whole city, would attract a lot of attention.

Jacob wore a suit that looked more like some sort of hybrid between an expensive business suit, and an Indian man's dress; the suit's jacket buttons were off to the side and the jacket was snug around his neck before reaching past his hips. Purple, which he'd taken a liking to lately. Combined with the sunglasses, he looked like some sort of rich Indian billionaire fashionado. It was actually kinda annoying how well he pulled off eclectic shit.

Othello wore some simple dress pants and a black silk shirt that he didn't bother to button, and Madison stayed snug at his side, wearing a classic open back red dress. Simple, but effective, and Triss could already see a lot of eyes going Othello's way.

Aaron wore a gray casual suit, no tie. No tie, because Jen had yanked it off and threatened to garrote him with it if he insisted on wearing the most boring possible clothes combination in the history of ties. She'd also undone the first few buttons of his shirt and forced him to keep the jacket undone, also under threat of violence. Eventually, the man submitted.

Then there was Jen and Triss. Matching dresses, because Jen wanted to make a statement: they came as a pair. It was Jen's way of being romantic, Triss supposed. For whatever reason, Jen wasn't exactly interested in romance herself, but despite that, she was basically Triss's girlfriend. It was a weird friends-with-benefits-but-more situation, and Triss was happy for it. The matching dresses were almost heartwarming in that light. And sexy as fuck, when considering it basically announced to everyone at the party that they came together for sexy times, too.

They both wore black, loose dresses that hung, open back with a long skirt, split all the way up past the hip, with the waist of the dress held snug with a tight strap. Opposite of the split, the dress didn't cover the arm or shoulder or anything, saving that for the side with the split, where the dress had a shoulder and sleeve. So, left shoulder covered, right leg covered. Right shoulder naked, left leg naked. And considering how little fabric actually went into making the dresses, it basically meant everyone got to see Triss's entire left leg and left ass cheek, no underwear, and most of the right side of her torso. They got to see most of her tattoos. If the dress had been any looser, her right tit would have been out.

Jen wore the same dress. Jen and Triss did look similar, crocodile teeth and green snake eyes aside, so it actually kinda worked. It sealed the 'pair' motif. And it pulled a lot of eyes, just as Jen knew it would.

The five of them — er, six, with Madison — stepped down into the pit of doom. Christ, she hated balls, and not just because they reminded her of Julias.

“I know you’re all wondering,” Jacob said, voice loud enough for everyone to hear, not loud enough to ruin the music, “but if you want details, I’m afraid you won’t get them. Now stop bothering my girlfriend and her daughter.” And like he’d just told a bunch of children to stop being noisy, he walked straight through the crowd toward Sam, and pulled her to him.

Cue big fancy kiss, complete with Jacob dipping Sam. Cue swooning sigh from Mary.

Triss and Jen shared glances and rolled their eyes.

“Boys,” Jen said, looking behind her, “go have fun.” Her two ghouls followed in behind, dressed in some casual suits not unlike Aaron’s, and nodded with a couple of evil smiles before they moved into the crowd.

“You know some other vamp might try and poach them.”

“Maybe. But after learning that the great Beatrice managed resurrection, I think most people will be a little hesitant to cross us.”

“Heh. Fuck, people are going to bother me with questions, aren’t they?”

Jen grinned as she nodded to the crowd, who were slowly recovering from Jacob’s epic entrance. “If Samantha or Mary were stupid enough to reveal who was responsible, probably. Neither of them are exactly trained in controlling their tongue.”

“I think Sam will be fine. Mary, not so much, but she doesn’t know enough to be a problem. And I don’t think she’ll blabber... assuming she doesn’t get too drunk.”

Both girls chuckled, a little nervously, when Mary downed her drink and moved onto another. But surprisingly, Jacob stopped her from shotting the next one. A short exchange between them and Sam led to some laughter, and Mary nodded as she sipped the drink instead.

Damn, Jacob. The dude had no business being as suave as he was, or looking as good as he did in the clothes he wore.

Triss spotted Jack, and she waved at him. He returned the wave. So did Clara. Holy shit she looked good in a pretty, slutty white dress. Like, more than good. Like, now Triss really pitied the kid being forced to pick between her and Antoinette.



Instead of going to talk to the kid, Triss did a little more recon at the base of the stairs where she was still considered ‘not quite in the pit’. She wouldn’t get swarmed by curious people as long as she stayed here, before she’d inevitably join the arena. Not yet.

She spotted the werewolves, mingling, getting drunk, getting horny. More than a few of them were either looking Mary’s way, Jacob’s way, or Triss’s way. She spotted most of the vampires she knew, though Miss Tits and Miss Bigger Tits weren’t here yet. Begotten? She spotted Fiona, showing off her ass instead of her tits tonight. Mark? No sign of him, thank god. Sándor? No, she didn’t see him, but she knew he was either coming or already here. Fucker was probably hiding in the crowd, or maybe up on the balcony with—

Athalia. Oh shit. Triss nudged Jen’s side, and both of them looked up to see Athalia and the sheriff on the balcony, looking down at Mary.

“Oh shit,” Jen said.

“Oh shit, I forgot,” Triss said.

“Forgot what?” Aaron asked as he stepped in beside her. He looked up. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Othello said, voice smooth and undaunted as he walked toward the crowd, arm over Madison’s shoulders. “Athalia will be fine, now that she’s getting some dick.”

Jen and Triss both groaned as they watched the gorgeous idiot wander off.

“He does make a point,” Aaron said. “Crude, but pointed. Athalia isn’t the same woman she was before.”

“Should we talk to her?” Triss asked.

“I... wouldn’t. She’s still Athalia, after all. Changed, but still her, and probably struggling with what she’s seeing. Give her time.” Nodding, Aaron the Wise walked into the crowd after Othello; probably to keep an eye on the moron and keep him from stirring up trouble.

He made sense. Athalia and Beatrice avoided each other, for the obvious reason, and now Samantha was getting to have exactly what Athalia was denied: reconciliation and reunion with her daughter. It must have fucking sucked to see that.

It didn’t take long for Othello to find someone to talk to, with the obvious attempt of getting them in bed. Bella, the asshole. But she did seem a little receptive. Maybe it was because it was Othello, and the dumb bastard could disarm most people to get them naked. Maybe it was because Madison’s red

dress left little to the imagination, and Bella was looking at a tasty meal. Maybe it was because Othello was smarter than anyone realized, and he was trying to defuse the tension Bella was carrying out.

Nah, probably the first option.

Jen took Triss's hand, and the two walked into the crowd. Sure enough, people took interest in them. Plenty of them were a bit put off by Triss's mouth, but plenty didn't seem to mind, either. More than a few took a long time looking at her ass, and considering the dress left the whole left ass cheek completely exposed, they got to see a lot. No point in denying it, she liked the attention despite her words to the contrary, and Jen knew it. And, she had a fucking amazing ass.

So when she caught a peek at Sándor in the corner of her eye, and the man was clearly looking at her fucking amazing ass, she grinned. But before she could go and flaunt a little more directly, some vampires closed in on her. A lot of vampires, all Carthians.

"How'd you do it?"

She spun around, and grinned at the bald bastard. Garry. Soft blue suit with a red shirt. It looked surprisingly good on the old fucker with all his scars and shit, almost like a retired fighter enjoying his fortune or something.

"I don't work for you anymore. I'm not telling you anything. Besides, you don't know if I did shit."

"Word is out. Beatrice the witch resurrected Mary the ghost."

She groaned and looked at Jen, but Jen shrugged. Neither of them had said a thing.

"Who—"

Garry shook his head. "It wasn't Sam or her kid."

"Then..." Slowly, Beatrice looked through the crowd with a piercing gaze until she found the culprit responsible. Jacob, still with Sam, talking and flirting with her. People gave him space, but at the same time, the dude was weaving a tale for all nearby listeners, and getting people's attention as Sam listened with awe. Probably about some witchy activity in a dark forgotten jungle or something. Probably preceded with a tale about how Beatrice resurrected Mary, the bastard.

Mary, standing beside her mom, listened with just as much awe. At least at first. After a while she drifted to the side a bit, and resumed her conversation with Zack and a few other vampires. She had a lot of people's attention, for multiple reasons, judging on where they were looking. And considering the

girl looked tipsy already, she was already pretty damn receptive. If Sam didn't intervene, someone would have their fangs and dick in that girl before the night was over.

"Your boss is a scary man," Garry said, "and he seems hellbent on making sure you have a rough time of it."

"God damn it." She rolled her eyes, and gave her old boss a gentle shove of the shoulder. "How'd you ever become friends with that loser?"

"Not sure." Garry laughed as he looked to Jacob. But then his eyes changed. They settled, and the joy she saw fell away, replaced by an expression she'd never seen on the dude before. Regret? Nah, she'd seen that. Sadness? Seen that, too. Whatever it was, it was about Jacob.

"Well," Triss said, and she looked to the rest of the vampires who'd followed Garry, "I ain't telling y'all shit. And it's not like any of you have ghosts just hanging around asking for bodies, so don't even think about it."

The crowd frowned between each other. They'd been hoping for something. Fuck 'em. She grinned at the group, and pushed through them. Maybe it'd bite her in the ass later, dismissing them all like this, but she wasn't going to let town gossip bully her or make choices for her. Besides, none of them would do shit to her with Jacob as her boss, or Mary, considering her mother's sire was the Prince. It paid to have friends in high places.

Thankfully the crowd didn't follow her. They were getting more from Jacob anyway, and whatever ridiculous story he was telling. So Triss took Jen's hand, and the two of them went Sándor's way.

"Not even going to try and hide it now?" Jen asked, giving Triss a small tug so she stopped walking. They couldn't see Sándor anymore, with the crowd in the way, but good bet was he picked a spot and didn't move from it, like a gargoyle.

"What?"

Laughing, Jen came in closer and put her lips on Triss's ear. "The way you were chatting with him, at the piano?"

"I like him. He's a good friend."

"He doesn't talk to anyone else, you know. Not the way I saw him talking to you, then."

"That's just cause he had an instrument in his hands. He's like that when he can focus on music."

“Boys and their toys.” Jen chuckled again, and gave her ear a kiss. “But it’s more than that and you know it.”

“I don’t know shit.” She turned her head enough to glare at her friend, but Jen stayed close to her, pressing against her back as she half hugged her and spoke into her ear. Thank god the crowd and the music drowned out the whispering.

“You’re acting like a teenager in denial, Triss.”

That, was frustratingly accurate. Much as Triss wanted to deny it, it wasn’t hard to picture her doing exactly what that description implied. A dumb fucking girl, unable to stop herself from flirting with someone because she knew she liked him, no matter how much she told herself otherwise, or told herself it was a bad idea.

Christ, it was easier when she didn’t have a shred of awareness, down in her crypt, thinking everyone thought she was hideous. Then along came Julias, gave her a chance to think otherwise, and somewhere along the way, she started using her fucking brain and thinking about life and shit, too. Fuck, unlife really was so much fucking easier when she was just angry at everyone all the time and didn’t have a single real thought in her stupid head.

“I... still want to see him.”

“Then let’s go see him.” Jen gave her a quick kiss on the neck, took her hand, and the two of them worked through the crowd to find the man.

Sure enough, there he was. He stood there against the wall that connected up to the stair railing above, arms folded across his chest, eyes scanning the crowd just like the sheriff’s did.

He wasn’t wearing a suit. He was wearing some dark black pants, very dark, and a black shirt, no buttons, with a deep neck cut. It was partly see-through. He also wore some subtle black string necklaces, that gave his nightclub-friendly getup a certain air of mystery. Combined with the dark buzzed hair, short facial gruff, defined chin and god damn deep blue eyes, he looked fucking handsome.

Also, holy shit the abs. See-through shirt doing work.

Triss looked at Jen with a big frown. Jen returned it with a big smile. The clothes had been her choice, no doubt. She’d done her best to give Sándor the ‘dangerous man in the corner’ look, the sexy quiet guy who probably trafficked millions of dollars worth of cocaine as a hobby, and had six sex slaves at home all waiting to hop on his dick, look. It didn’t match his personality at all, but it did look really good.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hello,” he said. He kept his eyes on hers, despite how much skin both she and Jen had showing. Dude had control, that was for sure.

“Jen’s idea?” She gestured to his clothes.

“Yes.” Totally neutral voice and expression. She’d have to break past it, and she didn’t have a guitar or piano to use.

“I am a fashion expert,” Jen said, “to a point. I’m no Daeva. Speaking of, I see sweet Samantha, but not her sire.”

“The Prince hasn’t arrived yet.” Sándor took a moment to look Samantha’s way, and the tiniest sliver of a smile appeared before quickly fading.

“Lazy bitch,” Triss said, and she stepped over to stand beside the Begotten. “Athalia’s here.”

“She is.”

“In all the commotion trying to bring Mary back, I never thought about Athalia, and what she might think about all this.”

Sándor nodded as he looked down for a moment, did that thinking thing he did, before looking back up to his fellow Begotten on the balcony.

“I did.”

Jennifer stood beside Triss, and peeked past her at the man. “We know you did. You never stop thinking about other people.”

Triss threw a frown at her friend, but Jen kept her gaze on Sándor, impervious to Triss’s judging eyes.

“You’re right,” he said after a few moments. “Athalia will be fine. She’s happier now, now that she has someone. She... thinks more clearly, and is less prone to anger.”

Jen nodded as she leaned back and scooted in a little closer to Triss until they were touching hips. Triss didn’t move. It’d become pretty normal at this point, and Triss often found herself getting close enough to Jen to touch her casually like this, anyway.

Sándor noticed, and he smiled slightly at them before nodding back out to the crowd. “Samantha and Mary are happy.”

“Fucking right they are,” Triss said. “After everything that’s happened, and the work we put in? I am damn fucking happy they are happy.”

The man nodded, and looked at her. And ho ho ho, he couldn’t help but look down for a split second at her tattoos on her chest and shoulder, and how one of them was clearly a snake coiling around her tit to bite her nipple. The nipple was covered by the dress, barely, but anyone with eyes could deduce what the snake was doing.

And then Jennifer, watching like a hawk, and being an utterly evil bitch, gave Triss’s dress a small tug, right on the hip. The damn dress didn’t work with underwear, so both her and her stupid asshole best friend weren’t wearing any. Which meant, for a brief moment, Jen pulled the loose half skirt aside far enough to expose Triss’s pussy for the whole damn ball to see.

Thankfully, in the endless second it took to slide the dress back, no one had been looking at them anymore, not after Garry got his Carthians to leave her alone, and Jacob, Sam, and Mary were hogging all the attention. Sándor noticed though. Jen’s motion caught his eye, and he looked down for just the briefest second before straightening up and looking away. He’d seen.

Yes, she had a perfectly smooth pussy. Yes, she was wearing one of her clit hood piercings. Yes, it was one of the fancier ones.

Triss snapped a deadly glare at her girlfriend. “Jen—”

“Hand slipped,” the lying evil Ventrue bitch said, putting up her hands in mock surrender.

Growling, Triss looked back to Sándor, but the look on his face destroyed any anger she had. He was blushing. Barely, just the tiniest bit of rose showing through his beige skin. But it was a shit load more expression than she’d ever seen the guy give, except when he was drunk.

But she and Sándor were just friends, and she wasn’t trying to bang the dude. Totally.

“Now presenting, Prince Antoinette of the Ordo Dracul, Voivode, and her fellow dragon Elaine, Architect of Terror.”

Everyone looked to the front door, and prepared for an assault of boobage.

The two ladies did not disappoint. Elaine wore a black dress that actually seemed a little tame at first glance, shoulders and sleeves and a long tight skirt with only a tiny split at the bottom. But a second look showed it had a boob window, a big one, revealing the entirety of the inside of her breasts without quite revealing the nipples, while also exposing all of her stomach. The top was damn tight, and squashed the two huge pillows together. That was a lot of underboob.

Antoinette wore a white dress with bits of gold trim that sparkled, and just like her boss Jacob, it was a dress only someone with a lot of clout could pull off without looking stupid. No sleeves, and no straps either. The top was actually more a corset, and it squashed her giant tits together until the two pillows looked like they were ready to spill out and over. The corset also had an open front, revealing almost the entirety of her boobs, and her stomach, before the corset met the long skirt with two slits that exposed both legs, completely.

Just a couple pairs of tits on stilts.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Antoinette said, and the orchestra stopped instantly. “We are gathered tonight to enjoy peace between the covenants once again. While there have been deaths, on both sides, we must acknowledge that the nightlife of Kindred society is a dangerous game. Mistakes happen.” She said mistake with a little more emphasis than everything else, but she kept her gaze steady. Michael and Garry frowned. “Let us embrace peace where we can, when we can. So feast tonight, and enjoy respite.”

Nodding, satisfied with her speech, Antoinette and her friend descended into the crowd, and immediately got to mingling. Jack joined her, and so did her little student Tash and her boys.

That was a quick speech, and not exactly all that important or impactful. Apparently Antoinette was going for casual. Considering it was the first ball since a literal war, Triss figured she'd have gone for something big and bombastic.

“I’m sensing a theme,” Jennifer said, nodding toward the two tall ladies, her eyebrows wiggling. Obviously she meant about their enormous underboobs.

Triss nodded, held up her hands, and made a squishing gesture, as if squashing two large melons together

Laughing, Jennifer nudged her hip against Triss again. “Crude but accurate. Their breasts are definitely... together. And with convenient entry points for penetration.”

“I didn’t say it out loud for a reason, you know.” Christ, this girl just couldn’t help but dial up the sexuality to eleven when Sándor was around. She did the same thing when Julias was around, too.

It was Jen’s way of trying to help Triss move on. She never really was convinced Julias could be resurrected, and even with Mary’s revival, she probably still wasn’t. She wanted Triss to be happy and try dating Sándor. But Triss was a stupid dog with two bones.

“The women of Dolareido dress with...” Sándor frowned slightly as he looked down, searching for a word. “Purpose.”

Triss snorted on a laugh, and elbowed the man in his side. “Dude, don’t be so PC about it. You ain’t gonna offend anyone here.” She pointed at Isabella and her troupe. “Sex is just a hobby time for them, and part of their plays.” She pointed at the werewolves. “All of them have been seduced by vampires and whatnot.” She pointed at Elaine and Antoinette. “Those two have probably slept with more people than Jacob. So, thousands.” She pointed at Samantha and Jacob. “And it took a whole six months before Samantha, fresh off the press, got seduced into orgies.” She pointed at Jack. “Don’t even get me started on him.” She pointed at Damien and Fiona. “Found him fucking his girl at Bloodlust, so he’s exploring new ground.” She pointed at—

Sándor lifted a hand, and gently pushed hers down. “I see.”

Laughing, Triss smiled at Jen, and Jen returned it. Ok, yeah, Triss was in a good mood, now. Hell, a great mood. It’d been so fucking long since she’d been able to laugh and smile, and seeing Mary hang out with her bro and mom before wandering off to get drunk — and probably laid — was making her feel warm. A lot of vampires were still giving Mary room, afraid of her, or her mom’s sire, but Zack was legitimately trying to get into her pants. And his courage, spurred by Isabella probably, was slowly making others more comfortable around Mary, too.

Things were good. Christ, that was a weird feeling. She still had Elen, and was still working on resurrecting Julias, but she didn’t have to worry about that right now. Her boss had said some upsetting things, about leaving and things changing and shit, but that wasn’t something she had to worry about right now, either.

Not stressing out, not being angry, not wanting to tear someone’s head off, or being worried about something, she had no fucking clue how to handle it. Julias would. Julias would have swept her off her feet and made sure she delighted in every moment.

But not Sándor. The dude stood there and watched the crowd. It was what he did. Maybe a part of him wanted to do more. She bet a part of him wanted to go upstairs and sit down with the orchestra. But dance and socialize and shit? Not a chance.

And yet, for some damn stupid fucking reason, she wanted to see if she could pull him out of his shell. There was someone in there, someone that, yes, probably liked quiet and doing nothing but thinking or reading or shit, but also probably liked engaging with another person. The musical talent, his relationship with the late wife and kid, it all pointed to there being someone underneath the layers.

Was she attracted to him just because he was complicated? Gotta peel the onion? Christ, how fucking girly was that.



Jen elbowed her, softer than Triss had elbowed Sándor, and Triss turned to look at her. She looked worried. Fuck, Triss probably had her anxious face on.

Triss gave her stupid slut friend a pat on the leg, shrugged, and looked back out to the crowd. Some of the crowd had gone quiet, And when other people noticed the quiet, more of them grew quiet. Slowly, more and more people looked to the staircase on the opposite side of the ballroom, and the person walking up them.

Samantha. Alone. Jacob stayed behind, chatting away with Aaron and Othello and some nearby Carthians. Slick of him, keeping an eye on Mary; metaphorically. It gave Sam time to do something none of them had thought about. Talk to Athalia.

Sam had probably thought about it. She'd probably thought hard.

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~~Antoinette~~

She watched after her childe, and sucked in a slow, useless breath. For all the fear Samantha likely felt, she marched toward something that would be terrible and painful, and did so without hesitation. Well, perhaps a little hesitation.

Why did the Terrys feel the need to approach their problems in life so directly? Others either avoided their problems, rationalized them away, or ignored them. Jack and Samantha felt some sort of innate need to face their problems, as if only through allowing painful realities to skewer their souls could they survive existence itself. An admirable quality, when tempered with wisdom, which seemed to vanish the moment either Terry found themselves in such situations.

“She going to be alright?” Jack asked.

“I believe so.” Nodding, Antoinette set a hand on her lover’s shoulder, and slowly guided him through the crowd. Naturally, everyone gave them space, half avoiding her, and half avoiding the dreaded Ripper. “Daniel assures me Athalia has calmed with time, and while I am sure seeing Mary alive again will be... distressing, I expect both Samantha and Athalia will handle the situation well.” To be sure, Antoinette looked up and caught her sheriff’s eye, and he nodded in confirmation. “Regardless, Daniel is there, to keep the peace.”

“Sure you don’t wanna go up there and make sure? Or maybe I could—”

“Jack.” She gave her foolish man a loving stroke of his buzzed hair, forcing him to relax somewhat. “Trust others, if you please? Not all problems must be handled by you.”

He sighed, but shrugged as he nodded. “Okay okay.”

“We are here to socialize and enjoy ourselves.”

“Mutually exclusive ideas.”

She laughed, and looked behind her to Elaine. Her friend had drifted off already, and was flirting with a certain werewolf named Mason, and his terribly cute little girlfriend Milly.

“If you make the effort to socialize and enjoy yourself tonight at my ball, I will reward you. Perhaps we shall take a journey to your mansion, after fetching my precious pets of course, and enjoy a rather long, relaxing bath, with you at the center. Elaine would come, of course. Hours spent simply resting in hot water, with seven women pressing their bodies against yours, slowly moving and massaging you with the softness of their skin.”

He grinned up at her, attempting to appear masculine and in control of his desire, but she could see how her vivid imagery had his imagination running wild.

“That does sound like a good time.”

“Indeed. And that is why we are here. To enjoy ourselves.” She nodded toward Jacob and Mary. “Have you spoken with Jacob?”

“No. Think I should?”

“I think it probably best if you wait to see if he engages you. No reason to rush an uncomfortable encounter.” And Jacob might find it odd if Jack actively sought him out. The ball was largely being held to make sure Jacob did not suspect her of suspecting him and Black Blood, thus, it was imperative they behave normally. Normally, Jack did not like her old friend, despite how Jacob managed to make friends of anyone he wished to. Even now, while many Kindred watched the old Nosferatu with trepidation, he spun a tale that had everyone nearby enamored, including Mary.

Was he keeping an eye on Mary? Feeling protective, perhaps?

“I did talk to Garry for a bit.”

“And how did that fair?”

“Pretty well, all things considered. I think most of the Carthians aren’t terrified of me anymore.” He nodded with emphasis, as if attempting to convince himself.

Antoinette looked back to Jacob, and watched him long enough for him to catch her gaze between the moving heads of the crowd. He looked her away, or at least his head pointed her way, and they looked at each other for a time. What are you thinking, old friend? A second later, Jacob smiled at her, and returned to his tale of orgies in a dark forest.

Antoinette looked up, and caught her sheriff’s eyes again. Her childe and her sheriff’s lover stood with each other, talking, calmly at that, while Daniel stood ten feet off. While he did not watch the two women directly, he would have no trouble watching them through the corner of his eye. Both women stayed at the railing as well, and everyone could see that, despite the obvious tension, they were both talking openly. And, perhaps, with a little emotion. Sympathy. Perhaps, empathy? Eventually Athalia nodded to Samantha, and Samantha returned it with the language she knew best: hugs.

Less concerned the Begotten would rip her childe’s head off, the Prince looked to the Kindred of the ball. As the minutes went by, and alcohol and blood lust coursed through the crowd, it was not long before the more sexual nature she had fostered in her city began to emerge. And to her delight, Mary’s eyes went wide as she took it in, almost forgetting the rather handsome vampire Zack attempting to woo her.

A male ghoul now lay upon a table, shirt open and pants nowhere to be seen. Three Kindred surrounded him, one with hand around his hard girth, stroking, while the others leaned in and set their fangs to his neck. A female ghoul, trapped in the corner by the stairs, whimpered as two men pinned her, and fingered her under her dress as they too sank their fangs into her neck, turning whimpers to mewls. Several other thralls and ghouls were similarly trapped, and often disrobed to complete nudity and forced to stand for others to admire, before predator descended upon prey. Mary looked around with growing eyes, and tipped another glass of wine into her mouth to vanish, before she again took in the sights.

To Antoinette’s growing pleasure, it was not only her Kindred indulging in sexuality. The Uratha could no longer resist the call of the vampires of Dolareido. Mason and Tilly touched each other openly, while Elaine stood beside them, only for Tilly, brazen Carthian that she was, to reach out and touch Elaine. Elsewhere, other Uratha enjoyed the touch of vampires, especially Brianna, who found herself surrounded by several Kindred, most of them women. They watched, admired, cooed and swooned, and chuckled with envy as they sipped their glasses of blood, while Derick and Santos pressed their bodies against Brianna from both sides, and fucked her. Not humped her, as last time, because tonight both

men had their pants open and Brianna had her tiny black dress pulled aside to allow both men to penetrate her. She'd come prepared to enjoy them, together, with an audience.

Despite all that had happened to Antoinette's little Ventrue, the young man still struggled with seeing others enjoy sex. He found himself trapped, wanting to both watch, and wanting to not watch. Thus, Antoinette could not help but tease him, and point to where Isabella Leauvion, infuriating Daeva and constant thorn in many sides, had taken her far more rough-and-tumble Gangrel lover Hella, and was openly massaging her breasts under her dress, while Hella, and Isabella's childe Danny, attempted to drink from one of their ghouls.

"Even those accursed actresses relax and enjoy tonight's festivities," Antoinette said. "I am elated."

Jack laughed, a touch nervously but a laugh nonetheless. He did not enjoy Isabella's presence anymore than Antoinette did, but the woman was an influential figure in Dolareido activities. Naturally, she would come to the ball, and engage in its political activities. To see her engage in sexuality, however, was a litmus test of a sort, to see if the city's Kindred had calmed and were willing to let their guards down.

"Christ, this is a bit much, isn't it?" Jack asked.

"Oh? I do not believe—"

"For Mary, I mean." He nodded in her direction, though it was clear he was afraid to look, dare he witness his sister engaged in some of the activities on display.

"You said yourself that your sister was far more outgoing and socially adventurous than you."

"Yeah, but not nightclub orgies adventurous."

Antoinette raised a gentle brow before looking to his sister again, who had turned to flirt with Zack once more.

"I wonder."

"No no," he said, "don't wonder. No wondering. I'm much happier thinking she just visited bars, got a little drunk, and maybe slept with a few guys. No drugged orgies in her past. Nope."

Antoinette laughed, leaned down, and kissed her silly lover. "Very well. Ignorance is bliss."

"Exactly." Satisfied, he returned her kiss, and let her guide him around the crowd. They had work to do, after all.

First, a visit to Maria and Michael. Small pleasantries, nothing more, to ensure all was well, that Michael did not begin new conflicts with Garry, and that Maria was careful about her growing church. Next, they moved onto Garry, and Jack said nothing as Antoinette prodded the man to confirm he, too, chased no conflict with his nemesis. She made no mention of Roland; best to leave a painful past buried, in this circumstance.

The Kindred of the ball watched her with curious eyes, many seeking to overhear her conversations, as if she would say something sensitive in such a location. Careful words allowed them to dance around topics without anyone knowing what they meant without more context, of course. She chuckled as she noticed a few rather frustrated Kindred attempting, and failing, to decipher the cryptic messages she shared with her Primogen.

What Kindred not focused on the Danse Macabre, instead focused on the feast. Another thrall disappeared into a throng of Kindred, and her dress was ripped from her, literally, and thrown to the air. She squealed in shock, and then in bliss. And Mary, far more experienced in the ways of sexuality than her poor brother realized, watched on with wide, intrigued eyes. Every Kindred nearby would no doubt smell the rushing blood within, and notice her nipples pressing out against her dress.

So Antoinette did her best to steer Jack clear of her, but unfortunately, her final stop would take them close. A visit to Jacob, her final Primogen.

“Old friend,” she said, Kindred parting to let her come close to the Nosferatu.

“Prince,” Jacob said, smiling and nodding with his usual gusto. “Quite the night! And so many reasons to celebrate.”

“Indeed.” She returned his mischievous smile, as well as his nod, before she looked to where Mary stood ten feet away. Zack had ceased his flirtations, as had all nearby Kindred, and the group of them stared at both Antoinette and Jacob, undoubtedly expecting the two of them to engage in verbal jousting of a sort.

“Garry and Michael are getting a long again,” he said, “which is great. Lot less barking, and explosions.”

“Quite so.”

“But, much as that’s great and all, I think it’s the little firecracker right here that has everyone talking.” Jacob slid — literally — over to Mary, and hooked an arm about her shoulders. To her credit, Mary did not seem to mind at all, and she beamed a big, if nervous smile. “No one could have seen this coming!”

“My childe did,” Antoinette said, and she smiled up at Samantha, who returned the smile with one of her own. A wave, as well. Her conversation with Athalia had not dampened her spirits, then.

“True, true. Triss did, too. Crazy when students outdo their masters.”

“The cycle of life.”

Jacob raised a brow, before he burst into laughter, and Antoinette herself could not help but offer a chuckle. The cycle of life, and especially the idea that students surpassed their masters, did not apply to Kindred.

“Mary, child of my childe, how fair you this night?” she asked.

Mary gulped before giving a small bow. “Very well! I’m, um, a little overwhelmed by…” She gestured to a nearby ghoul, a man, who had his shirt undone while a male Kindred placed playful, experimental bites upon his chest.

“I did warn you,” Jack said, smirking, but also groaning. He also offered Zack a rather harsh glare, and the man, quite elegantly, disappeared into the crowd. Which of course earned a frustrated sigh from Mary, and a laugh from Jacob.

“I’m surprised by one thing,” Mary said. “There’s no dancing!”

“We dance sometimes,” Antoinette said, “particularly if it is a ball with few kine. And while I do love to dance, I enjoy encouraging my city to embrace their desires more.”

“Mom said the same thing. But with this guy?” The young kine giggled as she gestured to Jacob, which of course sent the old Nosferatu into rolling laughter that was utterly delightful. Either a master actor, or he genuinely found his lover’s child, and her rather courageous personality, hilarious.

“What about this guy?” A voice from one of the stairways. Samantha, coming down to join them. Daniel and Athalia remained upon the balcony, and a glance up showed the woman held the smallest smile as she snuggled into the sheriff’s side.

Samantha and Jack, forever able to disarm people in ways Antoinette would never be able to.

“Your man,” Mary said with a giggling snark, “is a smooth bastard.”

With a giggle to match, Samantha almost ran down the last few stairs to join them. She likely would have jumped, if not wearing such a revealing dress.

“He’s a dangerous man,” Samantha said, and she slid in beside Jacob. The old Nosferatu let go of Mary, only to slip his other arm around his lover’s shoulders.

“I’m not dangerous. I haven’t done a thing.”

Antoinette did not react in the slightest, and to Jack’s credit, neither did he.

“You’re always up to something,” the young Ventrue said.

“True enough. But tonight, I’m just here to party with my scorching hot girlfriend. You know, your mom?”

“Jacob!” Samantha gave the man a playful slap on the chest. “Don’t tease him.”

Antoinette grinned as she looked about. A few Kindred stepped back, perhaps expecting Jack the Ripper to make an appearance and assault the eyeless witch. But to his credit, Jack groaned in a pleasing, humorous way, and shook his head.

“I hate parties,” he said. “Or, you know, ‘fancy balls’.” Naturally, he felt the need to air quote ‘fancy balls’, particularly emphasized as he looked about at the sexual acts blossoming around them. “But, I gotta admit, things are going pretty well.” With a playful shrug, he stepped up to Jacob, and held out his hand. “You’ve been dating Mom for a while now. I suppose I should at least try and get along with you.”

Samantha’s smile threatened to scorch everyone around her, and Mary’s drunk giggles were absolutely indecent. Thankfully Fiona was off elsewhere with her lover, likely forcing the poor Mekhet to watch someone enjoy a Kiss, while naked and penetrated. She—

“Mary?” Jack asked.

“What? I—oh.” Mary lifted a hand, and touched her nose. A drop of blood above her lip, and now on her finger. “Um, nosebleed?”

Everyone nearby went quiet as they stared at her, waiting. Only Samantha mustered the will to break the sudden silence, and come close to stand with her daughter.

“You okay, sweetie?”

“Yeah, of course! I feel fine. I feel—” She swayed back, and Samantha instantly caught her hand to keep her upright.

“Mary! You sure you’re okay?” Samantha’s voice rose in pitch, and volume. Nearby Kindred took a step back.

“I said I’m fine. Just a little lightheaded.” She gestured around with her right hand. “Been drinking a lot, I’ll have you know. And…” Mary’s voice trailed off, and her eyes squinted on her right

hand. Squint grew into wide-eyed surprise, and she began to shake. “Why... why are my fingernails bleeding?”

Mary teetered once again, and her weight gave out completely. Strong as Samantha was, the angle was awkward, and she was forced to lower her daughter to the ground.

“Oh no. No no no.” Samantha took her child’s hand and held it. “Triss! What’s going on!?”

Antoinette snapped her gaze to Jacob, but the man stood there, mouth slightly parted, as surprised as everyone else. The crowd of Kindred spread and turned into a circle. The orchestra went silent. Daniel stood beside Antoinette a second later, staring down at Mary as she began to convulse.

Beatrice joined them, her running announced by the clack clack of her shoes in the now deadly silent ballroom.

“Holy shit. What the fuck is going on?”

“She just fell and started bleeding!” Samantha yelled. “From her nose, and her fingers, and—what’s going on!?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Beatrice grabbed Zack and shook the man by his shirt. “You were with her! The fuck happened?”

Zack shook in the strength of her grip, and with his own fright, as his eyes widened at the Nosferatu. “Nothing! Nothing happened!”

She snarled, threw the man aside, and slid onto her knees beside Samantha.

“Triss, oh god what’s happening to her?”

“I...”

Everyone stared on as poor Mary’s convulsions grew worse. Jack joined his mother on the floor, and clutched one of Mary’s hands close to him, smearing her blood over his suit as he tried to steady her.

“What the fuck. This a seizure?” he asked.

Triss shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense! You don’t start bleeding from—oh fucking god.”

Mary, with her head propped up on Samantha’s lap, managed to open her eyes. She continued to tremble, and her limbs shook with harsh jerks similar to a seizure. But she was awake, and aware. She looked up at her brother, her friend Beatrice, and her mother.



Blood slowly trickled from her eyes, from her tear ducts, and flowed down her cheeks.

“I knew... I knew it,” Mary said. Somehow, despite the spasms, she spoke, words broken and sharp. “I knew it.”

“Baby! Don’t talk. Don’t say anything. We’ll get you back to Elen and—”

“I knew it.” She jerked hard, head twisting to the side, and a heavy spout of crimson gushed from her mouth over the floor. “The dreams...”

Samantha clutched her daughter closer to her, pulling her up higher on her lap to bring Mary’s head to her stomach. “Sweetie?”

“The dreams were... were all wrong. They weren’t... right. They were just... empty, and cold, and—” Again, she vomited over the floor, what little food and alcohol in her stomach dwarfed by the river of red. It coated her mother’s bare leg and skirt.

Jack and Beatrice shared glances before the boy squeezed his sister’s hand to him.

“Triss, mom, get her up,” he said. Triss nodded and moved to grab Mary, but his mother did not move. “Mom!” Like a hammer smashing through glass, Jack was not gentle with his mother. He grabbed her shoulder, hard, and shook her harder. “Mom, get her up! If Elen’s the only one that can fix this, then we take her to Elen.”

“R-Right, right.” Sweet Samantha, awareness coming back to her, managed to tear her eyes away from her daughter’s gaze long enough to do as Jack commanded.

Antoinette looked to her sheriff. What to do? There was nothing they could do, except maybe rush Mary and Beatrice to the flesh witch. To save what, seconds? Magic was not something to be done in the moment, in the lightning strike of an emergency.

But it was better than nothing.

“Come,” Antoinette said, and she gestured to the front door. Immediately every Kindred between her and the exit of her Hall stepped aside. “Daniel, help them.”

“It’s okay,” Mary said, shaking her head. “It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!” Samantha said. “Don’t talk like that, baby!” Even panicked, Antoinette’s sweet childe could not help but talk gentler with her daughter than the situation demanded. Samantha hooked Mary’s arm over her shoulders, while Beatrice did the same with the other, and the two of them sprinted for the door, Daniel and Jack behind them.

But Mary fought back. She shoved against Beatrice, jerking limbs finding enough control to send the Nosferatu into a half turn and falling to the floor. Samantha held onto her daughter, but the sudden shift in weight sent her to the floor as well, clutching Mary to her chest as she fell onto her back.

“Mary, what are you doing!?! Stop it! Stop! We need to—”

“It’s okay. I got to hug my mom. I got to see Jack again.” The bleeding woman let out a jerked, quiet wail, and turned her head enough to cough up another splatter of crimson. Slowly, as the seconds ticked by, she looked back up at her mother, and reached up for her. “I got to... hug my mom... again.”

“I said don’t talk like that! We can... we can...”

Mary’s arm fell.

Where there was silence, now there was an eternity of oblivion. No one moved. The living did not breathe.

Beatrice scampered over to Samantha as Jack ripped himself out of his petrification, and again fell to his knees at his sister’s side. At the base of the stairs leading out of the pit of the ballroom, the three vampires sat around Mary, and waited. And Daniel, for the first time in centuries, looked back to Antoinette with panic in his eyes. He did not know what to do.

“Mary?” Jack asked.

His mother stared down at her bleeding body, and gently shook her several times. “Mary? Mary?”

Antoinette walked over to them, as slow as she could manage, and she looked down at her child and lover as the two of them continued to wait. No more spasms. No more sudden gushes of blood. And in the cold silence of her Black Hall, she could both see, and hear, that Mary’s body had gone entirely still, inside and out.

“Mary... please don’t go. Please... please... please don’t... leave me again...” Samantha lifted the bloody corpse of her daughter higher on her lap until she could hug her tight. No care for the blood soaking her dress. No care for the crowd staring in disbelief. No care but for the empty vessel in her arms.

“I... I don’t understand,” Beatrice whispered. “She was fine just five minutes ago! What the fuck—”

Every soul in the room jumped back, and the three vampires around the body fell to the floor, as a loud scream erupted from Mary. Mary’s eyes and mouth were still open, but the noise had not come from her.

Antoinette tensed and readied herself, as the ghost of Mary shot up into the air overhead, and released another shriek that brought the ballroom to its knees as people clutched their ears. Glasses shattered, and soon, so did the windows, as the ephemeral being screeched and clawed at her face while flying in circles above.

“I’m not her! I’m not her! I’m not her!”