

~~Beatrice~~

“I am amazing.”

Triss blinked at her boss. “Uh, what?”

Jacob stood in her alcove’s entrance, and leaned his shoulder against the stone as he grinned at her. Jeans and a black shirt, compared to her jeans and black t-shirt. Weren’t they quite the pair of witches.

“I’m amazing.”

“Because...?”

“Because I knew just who to pick to be my best witch.”

She rolled her eyes. “You gotta be shitting me.”

“Nope.”

She grumbled as she looked around for Jen. Nowhere to be seen. The Ventrue did still have two ghouls to take care of, and while she didn’t fuck them anymore, she did take them out for training and stuff. Probably doing that, then. Given a few years, or decades, ghouls could get pretty damn strong and do some impressive shit. Something to do with vampire vitae being in their blood.

“And I suppose you want me to explain how I did it?” she asked.

“Nah. Black Blood filled me in on the details. And while I would love to know how you learned that crúac ritual, the one to turn a body into a perfect vessel, I know you won’t tell me. Yet.” Wearing his usual grin, Jacob sat down in the small room of curved stone across from her, the typical bandage wrapped around his eyes. “Witches do love to keep their secrets. Just make sure to write it down before you die.”

“Die?”

He shrugged. “We all die eventually. You’ll do the Circle good to give us some hints about what you did. Make it cryptic, though. Only members of the Circle should be able to figure it out, and make it hard for even them, too.”

“Hard for other witches to figure out? Why?”

“Gotta make ‘em work for it! A good fifty years of deciphering some weird riddle or puzzle, maybe?”

She laughed and put her book down. It was some sort of encyclopedia about ghosts and stuff, the weird accounts seen through history, the different religions and what they thought about ghosts, and the different ways ghosts could supposedly interact with the physical world. It was the sort of shit Triss wouldn't have cared about before, but now that she was a witch, every word was oddly interesting. Like, really oddly. Like, she was actually enjoying learning about shit nerd style. Oh how she had changed.

“Yeah, I guess I can do that. Write it in a book soon, lock it away in a bank safe and tell them not to open it for a hundred years. It comes out, goes into a museum, some witches steal it away, yada yada.”

“Exactly.”

“Though if Antoinette's right, a hundred years from now we'll be worrying about spaceships and trying to navigate an absurd amount of tech that's bound to expose the whole vampire race.”

Jacob's smile went through a few phases. Defiance, disbelief, then acceptance. He had a lot of smiles.

“That is a possible future.”

“You don't think it's guaranteed humans will eventually go all Star Trek on us and shit?”

“You mean the full cooperation between all nations? Fuck no. But sure, lots of technology. It'll be Hell for vampires. But there are other options too.”

“Such as?”

Jacob held out his hands like he was preaching to his congregation. “So many possibilities! Which one would you consider? Maybe post apoc? Or maybe something weirder.”

“Weirder?”

“Weirder. I—ah never mind. It doesn't matter.” He shrugged and flicked a dismissing hand. “Antoinette is convinced vampires won't be able to weather the coming storm of technology. Instead of just cameras everywhere, it'll be infrared cameras. Instead of paying for shit with credit cards at the cashier, it'll be gates we walk through that auto-read the credit cards embedded in the back of our necks, and it'll scan for life signs, too.”

“Think our Disciplines will let us get past them?”

“At first. Eventually the technology will get good enough it'll spot a vampire doing anything. And after that, the technology will be updated to actively find vampires, so they can wipe us out.”

“That... is a pretty fucking terrifying idea. Hard to imagine it happening any time soon though.”

“Ah ben oui,” Jacob said, pulling a French accent out of his ass, “zat is why we must prepare for ze future!” It wasn’t a good accent.

“Ok, stop scaring me. Good thoughts, boss man. Talk to Sam since last night?”

“Just a quick message. She wants to hang with her daughter, ‘til the ball tomorrow, and I’m happy to let her have that chance.”

Beatrice smiled at the man. “You’re such a softy.”

“I am a cuddly teddy bear.”

“Something tells me Sam will wear something fit for a sexy mom like her.”

“Don’t think she’ll dress a little more reserved, with her daughter there?”

“She’s Daeva, dude. She’s happy and excited right now, and that means she’ll want to show off.” Because that’s what all Daeva did, pretty much no matter their mood, but especially when they were happy. “And honestly, I think we’ve successfully destroyed most sense Sam’s sense of shame. She’ll wear something slutty, and I bet Mary will too.”

“Oh my,” Jacob said in a very sleazy way.

“Dude. Gross. She’s your girlfriend’s daughter. You... You haven’t actually slept with a mom and daughter at the same time before, have you?”

Raising a brow, the man looked up in an exaggerated attempt to remember. “Honestly? I couldn’t tell you.”

“Dude!”

“What!?” He laughed as he shrugged. “I told you, I used to have orgies with entire groups of people under the full moon. Entire villages!”

She frowned. “Villages. You sure you’re not exaggerating?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

She threw up her hands. “Ok, well, in the modern era, it’s pretty gross to expect sexual activities to be shared among family members. Assuming Mary becomes a vampire, maybe in a thousand fucking years when Mary and Sam don’t see each other as mom and daughter anymore, maybe! And only maybe then!”

“Aw.”

“Christ I hope Sam knows how much of a pervert you are.”

“I’m pretty normal by Dolareido standards.”

“That’s not saying much.”

Laughing again, Jacob reached out, grabbed her book, and popped it open as he leaned back.

“What’re you gonna wear to the ball, young witch of mine?”

“Not sure yet. Jen’s got something lined up, and I’m sure it’ll be as revealing as she can get away with. And well, considering how much skin was on display at the last ball, ghouls getting sucked off or fingered where everyone could fucking see, I could probably go naked and no one would care.”

Her boss’s laugh was warm. She expected a snicker or some stupid, childish laugh, but nope, the man’s voice softened, and so did his expression.

“Sometimes I think my old friend wants to capture the feeling of her youth, discovering all the ways her body can enjoy sexuality without worry of disease or pregnancy, or having to recoup.”

“Well shit, I don’t know what the Prince’s motivations are, but being a vampire is pretty damn sexually freeing... you know, for the other blood clans.” Nosferatu didn’t have it so easy. Triss and Jacob were lucky, compared to a lot of them.

Jacob sighed and nodded. “Poor Bob.”

“Bob? Oh, right, Nos in the tunnels. Dude looks like he walked out of an old vampire movie.”

“Don’t forget Liliana, with a dozen too many eyes.”

Triss shivered. “We got off easy in comparison. Especially compared to Maria.”

“Yeap.”

The two of them sighed, and their eyes slowly drifted down. Jacob was probably just doing it to empathize with her; not like he cared about his deformities anymore. But Triss still did. She was over them, mostly, but sometimes it still sucked that she had to make sure no kine ever saw her face. Vampires often socialized with their prey before enjoying the meal. She couldn’t. She wasn’t much of a socializer, but she wouldn’t mind taking a stab at it every now and then.

“Either way, we should be damn happy about how things are going,” Triss said. “So I’ll wear whatever Jen has lined up for me. Our second lives are good, and I just did something no one else has managed. I wanna celebrate and show off how fucking awesome my ass is.”

“Ha. I’m sure Sándor will like that.”

She blinked at her boss. “Uh, what?”

“Dude is clearly an ass man.”

The alcove echoed with the slap sound of Triss’s hand hitting her forehead.

“I—”

Jacob laughed and shook his head. “Don’t be an idiot. He likes you, Triss.”

Shit.

“You think?”

“Yeap. I’ve seen him looking at you. Dude is obviously tied down by all the nasty shit attached to him, and to you, but somehow you’ve managed to pierce the dude’s stone exterior.”

“I... I mean, I have talked to him... a few times.”

“More like a dozen times.”

“Dude, you following me?”

Jacob put up his hands in surrender. “Nah. You’re just very readable.”

“Fuck.”

“I gotta ask though, Triss. It’s clear you seem interested in Sándor, and—”

“I barely know the guy.”

“Is that right? Cause Jen tells me you got him drunk once, and the man talked about his dead family with you. Doesn’t get much more personal than that.”

“Fuck.” Damn you, Jen.

“And for the life of me, I don’t see what you see in the man. He’s basically just Daniel with a pulse.”

“He’s...” Much as she wanted to disagree with him, there was some truth in that. A little. “I like him. He listens. You can understand why a woman would like that in a man.”

He snickered. “I’ll listen to a woman when she has something smart to say.”

“You mother fu...” She rolled her eyes and laughed. This asshole. “How the fuck does Sam put up with you?”

“Not sure. I think she’s after my money.”

Damn it, she laughed again. “Well, I like Sándor. Daniel is a ruthless, cold monolith, you know? And maybe Athalia likes that, cause sure, Daniel is stable and direct and probably everything Athalia wants, or needs, in a man. Sándor is... not that. He’s just quiet. And there’s a gentleness in him that pokes out sometimes.” Especially when the man had a guitar in his hand. Or a drink.

“Which brings me to my point. You like the guy, but you’re intent on bringing Julias back.”

Triss snapped her head to the side. “Don’t.”

“I think I will.” Jacob leaned forward and gestured to her before setting his hands on his knees. “Julias has been dead for what, almost a year now? And now you’ve put yourself in a weird spot. You’re trying to resurrect your dead boyfriend, the man you love, but you’re also moving on. That’s pretty fucked up.”

“My personal shit is—”

“Not fucked up for you, you fucking dumbass. Sándor. Dude is doing everything he can to make up for his contribution to what happened to Dolareido, to you. And for some reason, you’ve decided to flirt with the guy, while trying to undo the damage he caused.”

“I haven’t been—”

“So imagine things from his point of view. You’re doing everything you can to bring Julias back from the dead, a guy Sándor helped kill, but you’re flirting with him? How fucked up is that?”

“It’s not like that!” She slammed both hands against the furs underneath her. “It’s not like that. I’m...”

“You’re learning to play the piano.”

She stared at him and ground her teeth together, causing the large crocodile ones to shift and click.

“You have been spying on me!”

“I spy on everyone. Get over it. You’ve been learning to play the piano, ‘cause you want to connect with the dude.”

“I... He... He’s not Daniel, ok? Give him an instrument and suddenly I’m having a conversation with a normal guy. Normal-ish. I like that. He’s a friend.”

“Well, poor guy is probably ripping himself apart in that quiet, stoic way he seems to love, every time you smile at him a little longer than you should. So why don’t you back off and leave the man alone. Stop torturing the stupid fucker.” He leaned forward again, and stared straight at her with his

covered eyes. “Or, and this is probably the much healthier option, let Julias go. Dude is dead, and his soul is gone to wherever souls go. You want to pluck it out of some realm we’ve never reached, not even the Begotten have reached, not even Black Blood? Might as well be chasing one very fast goose. So how about you do yourself a favor, and do that poor bastard a favor, too. Forget about Julias. Forget about this resurrection business. Enjoy a happy life with Sándor. Get married. Get a house on the prairie. Have two point five kids.”

Triss flexed her hands, careful of her claws, and stared at Jacob so hard she felt her whole body shivering. Vitae pumped through her. Her Beast, which normally and rightfully cowered in the presence of Jacob, very much wanted her to take a swing at the fucker and see if she could at least hit him. But god damn it, the image of her living on the prairie with Sándor, and a few kids, was just too fucking hilarious. She laughed again, and Jacob let her, his smile returning as she laughed and laughed until the room eventually grew quiet again.

She looked down, and slumped. “Fuck me, Jacob. I don’t know what to do. I want Julias back, but... but you’re right. I keep trying to convince myself I can do it, but I know a part of me doesn’t believe that shit. The chances I can bring him back are slim to none. Fuck me, why didn’t he stick around, like Mary?”

“You know why. He died happy, thinking of you, you dumbass.”

Triss squeezed her claws into the fur she sat on, and sighed. “Fuck me. Fuck him. He left me.”

Sighing, Jacob got up, and gave her shoulder a pat before he made for the exit.

“Things will change soon enough. I’ll ask you again, when the time comes.”

“What? Jacob, what?” She raised her head and watched Jacob, but he kept walking, and didn’t look back.

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“Like this,” Sándor said, and he played a simple tune.

Beatrice grumbled, and tried. But just like with Damien, her fingers refused to hit the keys the way she told them to.

“Fuck. Fuck!” She slammed her hands on the keys, before glaring at Sándor.

Sándor chuckled, a quiet sound, and he again played the simple tune.

“You treat the keys like enemies.”

“They are enemies!”

“The keys are your friend. You need to relax and treat them kindly.” He set both hands down on the keys, and played a nice harmony with his left while playing a melody with his right. “I don’t know what it’s like for a vampire, but for the living, we need to play it slowly at first to create the muscle memory.”

He talked so calmly and smoothly, he sounded like a music teacher, happy to teach an idiot kid like her. She loved and hated it.

“I mean, it’s a bit different for vamps,” she said, “but my teacher insists you still learn the same way. Just do it slow and often.”

Mary laughed, and Triss threw a glare at her over her shoulder. She was sitting on the couch with her mom, scrolling through websites on the laptop on the table, and giggling up a storm as they watched funny videos, or swooned over videos of cats. Jennifer sat nearby on another couch, scrolling through her phone, likely updating herself on whatever was happening in Dolareido. Parties, plays, new movies, any place that’d make for interesting hunts.

The group of them were in Sándor’s apartment, but it wasn’t much of one. Sándor had only moved in recently, and sure, the crazy expensive apartments in Dolareido were gorgeous and sleek and all black and metal and shiny, but he didn’t have anything in it. A couple gray couches, and that was it. Except for one particular interest: music. He had several guitars on their stands, two acoustic, two electric, one of them a seven string. One bass guitar, too. There was a metronome on the table between the couches, and some sheet music for some Romanian piece none of them could read, staff or language. Plus, the electric piano Triss and Sándor sat at.

Apparently the man’s interest in music was deeper than Triss originally thought when she first saw him play.

It wasn’t the first time she’d been in the apartment, and she’d tried the piano on her last visit. Apparently the man could play a lot of instruments. It was why she was trying to learn — secretly — from Damien, because some stupid part of her thought it’d be cool to impress Sándor with something that was clearly one of his interests.



Jen came tonight because they were best friends and did everything together. Mary and Sam came because Sam had become their friend, somehow, and Mary followed Sam. And honestly, Mary was hilarious.

It wasn't a date. She would not think of it as a date.

"Triss, come on." Mary got up, and leaned over Triss's shoulder. With her right hand, she played the tune, Mary Had a Little Lamb, with a big jackass grin on the whole time.

"Oh fuck off." Triss shoved her away and glared at her with as much hate and rage as Hell could summon. "You don't get a pass just 'cause you have a pulse, now."

Giggling, Mary jumped back onto the couch beside her mom.

"Maybe it is a little easier," Sándor said, "for people with pulses to learn to play instruments."

"Tell that to Maria," Triss said, groaning as she slumped. "Girl can play... well, anything, far as Damien says."

"Been hanging with Damien?" Jen asked, lips curled into the tiniest grin.

"He's mentioned it before." Triss rolled her eyes, but she knew Jen caught her. Thankfully her best friend wasn't one of those jackass friends who liked to screw each other over for laughs, usually. Instead, she nodded and looked back to her phone, like Triss's explanation had been fine. No need to explain Damien's connection to the piano lessons.

"It could be because you're undead," Sándor said. "It might have something to do with your mind, and your Kindred body. If you never touched an instrument when you were young..."

"I didn't."

"Then maybe the stepping stones aren't there. You'll have to build them. It could take time."

"Ugh. I'm only early twenties, in vamp years. I don't think in terms of centuries yet."

Sándor laughed. Actually laughed, too. It wasn't nearly as happy as Mary's, or as full as Julias's would have been, but it was a laugh. It made her smile.

"That is, unfortunately, a painful truth about playing an instrument. It takes time." He set his fingers to the keys again, and played something stupid complex. Like, really fucking fast complex. His fingers were a blur, and at several points his right hand actually moved over his left hand as his fingers danced over the white and black keys.

"I know that song..." She stared at the keys as she racked her brain. "That's... Symphony XI!"

The man nodded as he came to a stop. "I never learned to use a pitch wheel, so it won't sound the same." He gestured to the electric piano. "And regardless, this doesn't have one."

"Dude, still, that's thirty seconds of awesomeness. Fucking christ how long did it take you to learn that song?"

"I learned it after our conversation in the crypt. It took a week."

"A week..." It'd take her a fucking lifetime to play like that. Which she had, assuming she dodged enough sunrises.

She blinked at him as the first part of his response sank in. He'd learned this months ago, after that time in the crypt when he got drunk? They'd talked about metal music, and how they both loved it, but he hadn't mentioned his own skill back then. Any other guy would have happily mentioned they played an instrument. She would have, too.

"I've been playing for centuries," he said. "Once we get you past this hurdle, you'll be able to learn complicated songs in a short time too."

"Pretty big hurdle."

"Evidently."

She frowned at the man, and again earned a small chuckle and smile from him. Always small, hesitant things, like it was a struggle for him to find the emotions. She was sure the man had the emotions, especially if he was capable of having a wife and kid, and feeling all the guilt he did, but he just didn't show them. His body language was stubborn. And for some stupid fucking reason, she really liked trying to draw emotions out of him.

"Let's try a different tactic," he said. "Instead of playing a song, play this." He set all five digits of his right hand on the keys, and pressed five white keys down, left to right, thumb to pinky.

"A dexterity exercise. Dude I'm not a kid."

"No, but you are undead. You said you've never played an instrument?"

"Yeah."

He nodded as he looked down at the keys, brow slightly furrowed. His thinking face.

"You need to learn the same way a child does."

"Well fuck me."

That earned another small smile from him, short lived though as he went back into thinking mode.

“Your vampire brain doesn’t know how to work your fingers in the right way. I’m confident you understand music, and you can tap your finger to a rhythm.” He gestured to her, and she demonstrated, easily pressing one of the keys in a moderately fast rhythm. She even hummed a bit of Megadeth with it. “So maybe the problem is lower down in your brain. Using individual fingers to press individual keys.”

Slowly, Beatrice did as told. Thumb, then index, then middle, then ring, then pinky finger. It did not go well. The electric piano was set to sound like a real piano, volume sensitivity included, so it was blatantly apparent when she hit some keys too hard and some too soft.

“Ugh, I hate this.” She started over, thumb, then index, then—

“Go from left to right, then right to left. Only hit your thumb and pinky down once. Like this.” He played the pattern, pressing keys in order from thumb to pinky and then back to thumb, playing the three keys in the middle twice each.

Grumbling, she tried again. And like she’d run her head into a brick fucking wall, it did not happen. She couldn’t go backward, at all, not unless she reset her fingers first.

“I fucking hate you.”

Sándor froze for a moment. “I’m sorry I—”

“Not you. My hand! Listen to me you fucker!” She lifted the stupid thing and glared at her fingers and their claws, before slamming them down on the piano. At least she had enough control to ease up before she hit the keys. Hard enough the sound made everyone jerk a bit. Soft enough she didn’t shatter the piano.

“I think,” Mary said, raising a hand. But her mom pulled it back down before she could say anything. Not fast enough for Triss to not notice though, and throw a harsh glare back at the giggling woman. Maybe giving the ghost a body was a bad idea.

Sándor made one of those tiny smiles again, and set his hand on the keys, near hers.

“Slowly,” he said, voice doing that thing it did where it got quiet and deep.

She took a peek at him, and he took a peek at her. Any other guy would’ve just looked away and back down at the piano, but Sándor did this thing where he looked straight into your damn soul. Blue eyes. She wasn’t sure if the man was going out of his way to make eye contact with her, or if he lacked the usual tick people had to avoid too much eye contact. Maybe it was because he was a gargoyle, and sitting there staring at shit was a part of who he was.

So she looked away first, ignored Jen's knowing glance, and got back to trying to make her fingers work. Mary and Sam didn't notice the shared gaze, thank god. They kept laughing as they brought up some website to check up on their living friends' life updates, and they commented rapid fire on it. Who was getting married, who got divorced, who got pregnant. It was enough to make Triss's eyes roll like it was their job.

But god damn, it was nice to hear Sam laugh like that.

Triss looked up from the piano to Sándor, but the man wasn't looking at her anymore. He was looking at Mary and Sam, listening to them. His face was doing that stoic gargoyle thing, no emotion there, pure neutrality, but his eyes were only a foot from Triss's, and she could see more. So much more, like looking into a fucking ocean.

His phone rang. He checked.

"A message from Jack. Business."

"Business with Jack?" Triss asked.

"Important. I'm sorry, I have to go." The man nodded as he got up and headed for the door. "Feel free to stay, everyone." He nodded to the girls on the couches, and then to Triss. He paused for a moment, just a tiny moment as he looked at her, and then he was gone.

Mary and Sam looked up from their laptop to the door, and then back to Triss.

"That was kinda cold of him," Mary said.

Triss shook her head as she tried to play the pattern again. "Nah. Well, I mean, I guess, but it's not cold for Sándor. That's just who the dude is."

"A lot of men like that in Dolareido," Jen said, looking over her phone to everyone. "The sheriff, of course. And Eric and Damien are pretty reserved, too. That said, they've both had sex at Bloodlust."

Mary perked up. "They have!?"

"Not with each other."

"Oh."

Triss turned around on the piano bench to face the gossiping bitches three. "Jessy's to blame." Might as well join them. "She corrupted Fiona. Fiona and Jessy corrupted Eric. Then Fiona moved on and corrupted Damien, carrying the disease from host to host." Seeing the tiny redhead on his lap, riding him despite being utterly drained and exhausted, and thoroughly spanked, was pretty damn hot.

Triss didn't really care for spanking, but that didn't mean it wasn't insanely hot seeing a little, big-titted chick like Fiona cum her brains out from it. Or watching Sam enjoy it, either.

Jennifer chuckled as she nodded. "Daniel might as well be a stone, however."

Samantha giggled and sat up a little straighter to look between everyone. "A little birdie told me Daniel was having sex at Bloodlust too, with Athalia."

Jen blinked at Sam like she'd just shot her. "Public sex? The sheriff?"

"Yeah."

"What else did Natasha say?"

"W-What? I didn't... say it was Natasha."

Jennifer laughed and shrugged. "Come now, who else would tell you such a thing?"

"The Prince might!"

"Would you ever refer to your sire as a little birdie?"

Sam sighed and slumped, earning a sideways hug from her daughter.

"No."

Jennifer leaned back in her sofa chair and gently tapped her chin with her phone as she looked up.

"The sheriff is a gorgeous man, in that tall serial killer sort of way."

Mary choked on a laugh. "Serial killers are hot?"

"To women of an age, absolutely. I'm sure your mother has watched many movies where she's found herself drawn to the killer." Shrugging like it was the most obvious thing, Jen looked back down to her phone and got to scrolling.

Sam however, squirmed and inched away from her daughter, only for Mary to pull her back in the sideways hug.

"Mom! What's wrong with you!?"

"Honey, it's not true! Jen's exaggerating."

"I know that look, Mom! Liar."

As the two women erupted into the most ridiculous argument Triss had ever heard, Jen grinned and winked at her. It wasn't a wink about Mary and Sam. It was about Triss, and Sándor.

Triss shook her head. If Sándor was interested in her romantically, he didn't show it. Friends, sure, but not romantically. And that was probably for the best. He was just a calm, quiet, reserved dude who talked to everyone like that.

So Jen sent her a message on her phone. Triss checked. A picture of a dress, the one Jen planned for her to wear to the ball tomorrow. The damn woman was going to play the game again, try and seduce Sándor like he was some sort of trophy to be earned. Damn hilarious, and impossible. Triss chuckled as she shrugged, put the phone away, and got back to trying to get her stupid mother fucking fingers to dance on the piano keys.

She wasn't flirting with Sándor. Jacob had made a good point, and she knew it was in her best interest to listen to the damn bastard. What kind of fucking idiot would she have to be, to flirt with another man while trying to resurrect her lover? What sort of stupid, useless, depraved sack of shit would she have to be?

She was just hanging out with her friends, that was all. If the man thought differently, he wouldn't have bailed the moment Jack called.

Right?

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~~Damien~~

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Jack said. "She went out looking for dresses with Mom yesterday."

"Alone?"

"Nah. The sheriff was with her. Plus I think Tash and Jessy went, and Jessy probably dragged Eric along."

Damien nodded as he circled the tear. "I can understand the sheriff going with them. Mary being alive is insane, and he can keep an eye on things."

"Not exactly the best use of his time, but..."

"But we're stumped."

Jack sighed, and circled the tear in the opposite direction of Damien. Deep in the factory basement, it was highly unlikely any kine would find it. But they would find it eventually, unlike the other tears that were extremely well hidden, the ones in the physical world at least. They had to close it somehow.

“I really have no idea,” Jack said. “This tear doesn’t match the other ones. I mean, I know Black Blood has some tears around the city not on Tash’s chart, but they’re super old, and as far as Avery and the Begotten know, they’re stable. No danger to the Gauntlet, and no unusual amounts of essence flowing through them and stuff. Am I right?”

Sándor nodded. “Yes.” And of course, the man stopped there.

“I told Antoinette I’m going to help you, Sándor. When you think shit is about to hit the fan, get me.”

Sándor let out the tiniest sigh as he looked back to Jack, but he nodded. “I expected as much.”

“Fuck. I’m damn predictable, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“If it’s as bad as we think,” Damien said, “Jack should probably be there. The sheriff too.”

Jack nodded. “And Avery, and Sándor. Damien?”

“You have to ask?”

After a quick laugh, Jack shook his head and shrugged. “Well, I mean, you are a Mekhet. Not exactly meant for straight confrontations.”

“No, but I work well when I have someone else to be a distraction.”

“I can do that,” Jack said.

“Better than anyone I know.”

“Dude, what about Jessy?”

Damien laughed. “I suppose she beats everyone for that. I have firsthand experience.”

They spent more time circling the tear, and then the area. Mason the Uratha was there, hanging by the door, keeping a lookout for eavesdroppers, and providing any extra information he could. Unfortunately, that was none. The Uratha didn’t know why Black Blood made this tear, and they didn’t know how it... he, made any of the tears. The joys of being a colossally powerful entity, you got to break the rules the little people thought were immutable.

Damien and Jack parked in front of the tear, and stared at it, both folding their arms across their chests as they peered into it. You couldn't get a good look at the other realm from this side, but anyone who saw it would pretty quickly catch on that it was a tear in the literal air, sitting there, something that could be entered. It also radiated with the strange coldness of death that the Great Below seemed to love.

The other tears, the stable ones that'd apparently been around for years, or centuries, were invisible. Only a Begotten could open one, and according to Fiona, they closed up after being passed through. So they weren't tears at all, but doors. These tears, on the other hand, were very much tears, and the Uratha were terrified of them doing exactly what tears had a nasty habit of doing in anything else. Getting bigger.

"That's objective number three, I suppose," Damien said.

"Eh?" Jack asked.

"Closing the tears."

"Ah, right. Yeah, we're pretty fucked if we can't figure that out. I mean, I suppose we could start an azlu farm, and make them work for us." He grinned at Damien and Sándor, and shifted his weight back and forth from the tips of his toes to their heels.

A distant snort announced Mason's disdain for the idea.

"We stop the ritual first," Sándor said. "Then we can worry about closing off the tears."

"I know," Jack said. "Just trying to lighten the mood." He grinned as he quickly checked his phone, weight still shifting back and forth on his feet.

The Begotten nodded. "You're a lot happier than... than the young man I first met."

Damien opened his mouth, but said nothing. Where was the gargoyle going with this?

"The curse was driving me insane at the time, literally. Plus Angela was... yeah."

Sándor shook his head. "I meant, you seem even happier now."

"You mea—oh, because of Mary. You have no idea how happy I am, man. And how happy Mom is."

Sándor nodded, a tiny hint of a smile showing through. And then a frown. Damien raised a brow as he watched the man, but as soon as Sándor noticed, he seamlessly returned to his statue stance, standing some ten feet away and leaning back against the dirty factory wall. It was all old concrete



down here, covered in dust and dirt, announcing how many decades it'd been since anyone had touched the decrepit building.

Such was Dolareido's history. The industry boom came and went, and the city evolved into a sort of Las Vegas clone. Or rather, half of it did. It was a big city, and lots of neighborhoods were far from the more sinful areas, quiet and calm neighborhoods like Jack's family's. The other half of the city built skyscrapers and embraced the advancements of technology, and sexuality along with it.

It still irked him sometimes. But even Maria found preaching against sexuality was a holdover from ancient ideas.

"I am glad your sister is alive again," Sándor said eventually.

"But," Jack said, "you're worried it won't last."

The Begotten slowly looked down and away. "I don't know. I see no reason to think Mary's not fine. I haven't checked her dreams yet, though."

"Let's... save that, 'til after the ball?"

"The ball?" Damien asked. "Why?"

Jack shrugged. "If there is something wrong with her, it can wait until after the ball to find out."

"Uh, if we can find out if your sister is—"

"No." The kid dismissed him with a small wave of the hand. "It can wait, ok? She seems fine, and we always have someone watching her. On the off chance there is something wrong with her, it can wait. She deserves it, and Mom deserves it. Besides, we're busy."

After a few heavy seconds of silence, Damien and Sándor nodded, but it was clear what was happening. The kid was avoiding a potentially very painful dose of reality. It was probably clear to Jack, too.

"Very well," Sándor said.

Time for a topic change.

"Daniel's last attempt to break the spell on Amanda's mind failed," Damien said. "Though he's pretty convinced it was Black Blood's doing."

Jack's shoulders slumped. "Which... fucking sucks."

"More than we thought?"

“Black Blood and Jacob have done some fucked up shit, I’m sure. The Prince tells me as much. But neither have ever been direct enemies before, you know? If they’re the ones that tricked the Carthians and Invictus into fighting, that pushes them over the line.”

“Ah,” Damien said, looking down. “Yeah, I guess... I hadn’t really thought of them as anything other than enemies for a while.”

“Well I haven’t.” Jack groaned as he looked up at the ceiling beams. “They saved our lives before, you know. Fuck me, am I the only one that doesn’t default to assuming everyone is an enemy?”

Damien shook his head. “At this point, I think you should change that stance, Jack. It’s going to get you killed. It’s going to get other people killed.”

Jack opened his mouth, and closed it. And the following few heavy seconds of silence were a hundred times worse than the ones before.

“Sorry,” Damien said. “That was mean.”

“Yeah, it was, but honest, and that’s why we’re friends, man.” After a slow breath, Jack looked back to the tear, watched it for a few moments, and looked back to Sándor. “How are we keeping an eye on that tear you think is going to be important?”

“Mark does quick visits, very quick. Athalia and Vrallar’trakla aren’t... sneaky enough, to risk it.”

Damien smiled. He said Fiona’s Horror’s name smoothly, no stutter or hesitation. Damien still couldn’t do that.

“Aren’t sneaky enough?” Jack asked. “They’re both, like, super darkness nightmare types, right? Jesus, how dangerous is that place?”

“It’s below where you’ve seen of the Great Below. There are ghosts there that... have been sculpted by the land, and their memories. Some are small, some are large, many are violent.”

Damien raised a finger. “Shaped by land and memories?”

“Deeper into that realm, I’ve found rivers of flowing black ice, and bridges made of bone. As always, it appears to be wrapped in a giant cave, but deeper in, the cave seems to be larger. Infinitely larger. Some ghosts, if that is what they are, fly through the darkness and fog, serpentine and dragon-like. Some crawl like spiders, and hide in the darker places. It’s... almost like the spirit realm, except instead of being shaped by its sister realm, it’s shaped by the minds of its inhabitants, their memories and emotions.” He frowned as he looked down. “Mind is probably the wrong word. You... You saw what Mary was like, when she was a ghost.”

Jack shuddered. “I did. And if the ghosts down there get warped and shaped by their memories, that is... pretty fucked up. I imagine a lot of those ghosts are angry about dying.”

“Yes. Very. I avoided them on my few visits, but it was close. Mark is much better at avoiding things than I.”

“Smart,” Damien said. “But that means we can’t keep a vigil on the tear.”

“Correct. Mark will continue risking a quick visit now and then, but it is a dangerous and draining journey. We’ve seen strange markings carved into the ground around the tear.”

“Still don’t know where the tear goes?” Damien asked.

“No. I believe it goes deeper, but... I’m pretty sure if I go through, I would die. Or something like dying.”

Damien and Jack both shivered, this time. All this realm stuff didn’t sit well with vampires. Uratha were comfortable with the idea that every thing in the physical world had a reflection on the spirit world. Dream monsters were comfortable with that realm, and dream realms, and other realms too. Vampires very much preferred to keep their feet on the ground, the physical one, made of asphalt.

But apparently some of the tears were cutting into realms even the Begotten refused to visit, and that was a scary thought.

“Okay,” Jack said, “I guess you should keep checking it out. The moment you think something is about to happen, let us know. I doubt whatever ritual Black Blood starts there will be done instantly. There should be a window of time to catch him in the act. Hopefully.”

“And if we miss that window?” Damien asked.

“Then I guess we’re fucked.”

They all sighed, even Sándor.

“Okay,” Jack said, “we need a happier topic. The ball. Fiona going?”

“She is. And she’s very excited to show off her new dress. She didn’t have much money in Scotland, or much access to... Dolareido-friendly attire.”

“Well, tell her I look forward to seeing her in it.”

Damien squinted his eyes at Jack. “I will. Should I heavily imply to her that you also want to see her breasts in said dress?”

Jack laughed and shrugged. “I mean, sure? I bet half the people at the ball will be thinking the same about Antoinette.”

“Antoinette is an ancient vampire. Fiona is a young, innocent flower.”

That was too much, and the two of them burst into laughter again.

They made for the door, nodding to Mason as they approached, but Jack stopped and looked behind him.

“Sándor, we’re heading out. Wanna come? I’m waiting on a call from Mom, then we’re gonna hang out at Antoinette’s tower. But until then, we’re free agents.”

Damien suppressed his smile. It wasn’t long ago Jack would have preferred to not invite someone else to socialize; the kid was just naturally introverted. Maybe he was trying to expand his views, or maybe he was just trying to keep Sándor close, where he was valuable. Honestly, Damien would have preferred it’d just be the two of them hanging out, purely because he was just as introverted as Jack. But Sándor had more than earned a place beside them. Assuming he wanted it, of course. The man seemed to be the most introverted of them all.

The gargoyle looked down slightly, thinking, before slowly nodding. “Okay.”

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Mulder and Scully perched on Jack’s shoulders, and cawed curiously at Sándor, and the thing he stood beside.

“You spied on the whole city with this?” Sándor asked.

“I did. Though I preferred weaker telescopes, things I could move easily. Now I don’t need to do that, so I set up a proper telescope.”

The gargoyle nodded slightly before leaning back into the eyepiece. It was an interesting building they stood on, tall but not as tall as others, which meant a telescope placed on the roof corner had access to multiple streets and many buildings worth of windows to peer into, up and down.

“It still surprises me a vampire hid in the city for half a century.”

“You’re telling me,” Jack said. He sat on the edge of the building on the opposite side of the roof, looking down at the streets below. “The Prince and the sheriff didn’t know what happened in the chaos

of the Purge. Lucas got away, and took a long nap. Damien spent fifty years hiding in sewers and spying on us. Pretty damn impressive.”

“If the sheriff knew I was hanging around,” Damien said, “I’m sure it would have been a different story. I was basically anonymous. I walked the streets plenty of times.” Which was technically true, but he also spent most of his time hiding in the tunnels.

“It still blows my mind,” Jack said. “About the weird place Tony had underground, that Lucas took over. The wrym’s nest, according to Antoinette, whatever that means. Place had influence, bent people’s minds. Dolareido really is a weird city, isn’t it?”

Sándor aimed the telescope down to the street. Unlike Fiona, the man was naturally gentle and smooth with the motion, any excitement he might have felt over its extreme telescopic powers tempered by his age and wisdom. Or the man was just really chill, which was Fiona’s belief.

“Places affected by essence,” Sándor said, “most likely.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, that’s what Avery said. Tony had been using it, not knowing it was giving his voice some power. Then Lucas found it and used it. A perfect storm of shit.”

“You’re telling me,” Damien said. “I still can’t believe how much things have changed. The Lancea et Sanctum is alive, again. Barely, but it is. I’m not hiding anymore. I have a nice apartment in the expensive center of South Side. I have a girlfriend.”

“I was still human four years ago. So uh, I think I got you beat.”

“True.”

“Sándor,” Jack said, “I wanted to ask you about Mom. You were helping her and Beatrice, right?”

The man stepped away from the telescope, a hint of sadness showing through.

“I did.”

“I’m not going to ask about what you did or how you did it. I’m guessing Triss would prefer to keep that information between her and Mom and the witches. And you.”

Slowly, the man nodded, face returning to its usual neutral state.

“Cool.” Jack stood up and walked over to the man. “I just wanted to ask about Mom and Triss. I mean, Jen was there too, but she’s... Honestly I have no idea about Jen. She likes Triss, romantically even, and is willing to help her in her witch pursuits, far as I know. But...”

“But,” Sándor said, “Jennifer does not seem interested in a committed romantic relationship. At least for herself.”

“Friends with benefits,” Damien said.

Jack laughed. “A good a descriptor as any. But, my mom, how was she during all this? I... I was pretty adamant she needed to let Mary go, that she was dead and gone and her ghost had to follow. Knowing she kept working at resurrecting her despite that, fucking stings. I feel like shit.”

Sándor looked down at the kid, before he sat back against the rooftop railing beside the telescope, and folded his arms across his chest.

“She was a mother. Beatrice tempered her expectations, but she was committed to helping her daughter. I think... if Mary had moved on, Samantha would have accepted it. But as long as Mary remained, a ghost, your mother would do everything she could do revive her.”

“Ah fuck. Now I feel even worse.”

“Don’t.” Sándor shook his head, eyes falling again. “You did the right thing. It’s not good for people to hold onto the dead.”

No one said a thing for a few seconds after that. The night was just filled with heavy silences.

“Which brings me to my next question. Beatrice. She, uh... she doing okay?” As if the question was a little too painful, Jack turned his attention to his birds, and scratched each of them behind the neck.

“You want to know about her progress with resurrecting Julias?”

“No. She told me that’s far off, and Julias’s ghost isn’t hanging around. Unless she can pull off some really, really freaking shit, I... I don’t think she’ll ever revive him.”

The gargoyle slowly nodded. “Perhaps. She has proven remarkably talented at... witch things.”

“Agreed. But Jacob’s a freaking master of that stuff, and even with Black Blood’s help, he hasn’t been able to bring back Minerva. Triss knows that. I think as the months have gone by, she’s accepted that, but a part of her refuses to move on ‘cause... well...” Jack shrugged as he sat down beside Sándor, and held out a hand in front of him, sideways. Without hesitation, Mulder flew down and perched on his finger, before cawing once at Sándor. “She’s stubborn.”

Damen laughed, earning Jack’s glare and ire.

“Come on, Jack,” Damien said. “You’re one of the most stubborn people I know.”

“That’s... only a little true, right?”

Damien laughed and shrugged, got up, and set his eye to his telescope. The roof wasn’t only selected for its altitude relative to other buildings, but also for its darkness. It was forever in the shadow of a neighboring building, which blocked the lights of a nearby casino. Anyone who looked out their windows, or looked up from the streets, would be partially blinded by the casino and other extravagant lights that could never quite land on the specific corner of the building with the telescope.

Sure enough, some of the windows were open. Plenty, actually, as was common in Dolareido. Many of them showed kine dancing and drinking. Others showed kine sitting upon couches and watching the television, often with an arm raised in triumph or dismay. Several had men sitting while a woman stripped, usually while standing on a table. One had women — and one man — sitting around while a man stripped on a table.

And of course, several windows showed people having sex. Three of them showed a young couple having sex. Two showed a man with two women. One showed a woman with two men. And one of them showed a couple well into their seventies having sex, which didn’t exactly match Dolareido’s tone. Jessy would probably have said it was awesome, old people getting ‘randy’ and having sex so openly. Old people simply did not care what others thought.

Damien aimed the telescope down, and scanned through the streets. Populous a city as Dolareido was, the wide sidewalks were packed with kine, going about their business in the nightlife. At this time of night in this part of the city, that business was almost exclusively some form of revelry by rich people. Suits, dresses, and nightclub attire were everywhere.

Not a single one of them knew the whole city could collapse around them at any moment due to some mysterious ritual no one understood.

“I think,” Jack said, “Triss will eventually let this go, like Jacob did. But you’ve been hanging with her more than I have lately, Sándor. Am I right?”

“I... do not know. I think a part of her wants to let it go. I think a part of her is determined to see this to the end. She is stubborn, and she is intelligent.”

Damien raised a brow as he took a peek at Sándor, before sticking his eye back into the telescope eyepiece. He said ‘intelligent’ with a little more inflection than the man usually used.

“She is,” Jack said. “And I really do think she’d be happier if she let this go. She’s gotten really close with Jen, and I know she’s... uh... been a little more intimate with my mom than I’d probably like.”

Damien coughed, causing the telescope to swing up. Thank the Lord it was very heavy and mounted on a tripod. Not easily knocked over. If it fell, it was more than large enough to punch a hole through a car's roof, let alone a kine's head.

Sándor nodded, as if what Jack said was the most normal thing. "All the witches I've known have been very free with their sexuality. And hundreds of years ago, that was empowering."

"It's not now?" Jack asked.

"I suppose it is. But back then, women were property. Most witches were women, and you can imagine how freeing it was for them when they broke free of their social chains."

"He has a point," Damien said. "Witches had a habit of being women. I can imagine it being very terrifying, and exhilarating, for women back then to break free and... be powerful." He had to admit, witches were an extremely popular and compelling image of female power. Then again, that was cultural, and inaccurate. Witches had always been both male and female, at least as far as vampires and the Lancea et Sanctum were concerned.

"Well, either way," Jack said, "I'm happy Triss is getting over losing Julias. Maybe not happy about her moving on by touching my mom, but still. And she's been hanging out with you, how's that going?"

"She... She seems happy. Happier than she was before. She's learning piano."

Damien raised his head. "Is she?"

"Yes. But she ran into some barriers with the basics. I think I helped her find the problem."

Damien almost asked what, but that'd give him away. And if Triss didn't tell Sándor it was Damien teaching her, better to leave it a secret.

"What was that?"

"She tried to..." He stopped. "I think I'll keep it secret unless she shares it." The gargoyle nodded to himself as he looked off into space, brows furrowed slightly. He was a heavy thinker. Damien could relate. He was also thinking about Triss more than Damien expected.

"But she's enjoying herself?" Jack asked.

"Yes. I think. She spends a lot of time thinking about what she's still trying to do, with Julias. But, she often comes out of those thoughts, and enjoys the moment. Laughs. Smiles. Your mother has helped her a lot with that, in a strange way."



Sighing, Jack held Mulder closer to his chest, and gently stroked the bird from head to tail feather.

“I know I was being an asshole, telling Mom she needs to let Mary go when Mary was still around, but... I don't think it's the same with Julias. She needs to let the man go.”

“I don't think you were wrong,” Damien said, “to tell your mom that. Resurrection is unheard of. No one could have seen Mary's resurrection coming.”

Jack smiled at him, and raised the shoulder Scully sat on in his direction. Scully flew over to Damien, making him jerk back a bit, but she hovered there for a second before she eventually settled on his shoulder. How the bird managed to fly with a screwed up wing, he didn't know, but she'd managed somehow, and she stretched the crooked thing before hooking it against her side. Other than her moment of flight, Scully's movements were not very bird-like, and far more stone gargoyle-like, just sitting there perfectly still and occasionally twisting her head around to look at stuff. She didn't breathe.

“Agreed,” Sándor said, eyes raising as he pulled himself out of whatever spiraling thought hole that'd caught him. “About Mary. As for Julias, I... don't know. Jacob and Beatrice have accomplished extreme things. And this time, they have both Black Blood, and Elen.”

They went silent for a moment with the mention of Elen. The witches' prisoner. Someone who could perform haruspex, and flesh magic. Yeesh.

“It's a pretty scary road,” Jack said.

Damien gestured up to the crow on his shoulder. “Two dead birds and two dead people sitting on a rooftop with a literal nightmare. Is the witch stuff really that scary?” Of course it was, but it was worth it to try looking at things from a different perspective.

“Heh. Figured you'd be the first one to say sacrificing people in dangerous witch rituals was a bad idea.”

“I would be, but I'm playing devil's advocate for a moment. We really in a position to be judging witches for dipping their toes into stuff like that?”

The two vampires looked to Sándor.

The gargoyle spent some time looking down, thinking, arms still folded across his chest. It was strangely easy to talk to Sándor, about anything, probably because of how much he preferred to sit and listen. Which made him the perfect man to ask a question to, if you could find the right question.

“I witnessed some of what they did,” he said. “Beatrice is trying very hard to keep her hands clean. Relatively speaking. She's well aware of the dangers of the road she walks.”

Jack nodded. “Beatrice always was smart, way smarter than any Carthian I’ve dealt with. Kinda surprises me Jacob took so long to recruit her.”

“She is special.” Again, the gargoyle nodded with his usual quiet stoicism. He’d said ‘special’ with a little more inflection than usual, like he had with ‘intelligent’ a moment ago.

The longer Jack and Damien hung out with the man, the more obvious it was becoming that he had a lot of thoughts, and just preferred to not say them. He’d mastered the art of saying less than he knew, which was a very dangerous skill.

“Yeah,” Jack said, smiling a little as he looked from Sándor to Damien. He saw it too, the way Sándor instantly went into think mode the moment they said Beatrice’s name.

It could have meant a lot of things. Maybe Sándor was still tearing himself up over Julias’s death, and how many people it’d affected, especially Beatrice. Maybe Beatrice reminded him of his dead wife. Maybe the guy was trying to find a way to stop Jennifer — and by proxy, Beatrice — from her constant flirting with him. Or, maybe, the guy liked her.

Unfortunately, Damien couldn’t navigate social dynamics to save his life, and Jack wasn’t much better. So Damien gave Scully a few strokes of the back of her head, and shrugged at Jack.

“I’m not sure what Triss is going to do,” Jack said after a while, “but with how close she is to Jacob and Black Blood, we need to keep an eye on her.” Sándor furrowed his brows a little harder, going from slight to actually noticeable, as he looked at Jack. “Which means, since you’re the only one of us that’s been involved with her, uh, extracurricular activities…”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Sándor said. He opened his mouth again, but after a few seconds of silence, he got up and turned to face over the railing and toward the streets below. Silence. Jack and Damien said nothing.

After a slow breath, Sándor leaned forward and set his hands on the railing. At this point Jack and Damien had caught on it was best to just shut up and wait until the man was ready to speak. It took a while. Sándor squeezed the railing, and looked up at the night sky, all stars hidden in the constant night lighting of Dolareido.

“I won’t let anyone else die,” he said at last. “I don’t care what I have to do. I won’t let anyone else die.”

Damien and Jack blinked at each other.

“I get that,” Jack said. “But, I mean, we’re all on that page. Right?”

It took a few more moments before Sándor eventually nodded.

“Right.”

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~~Eric~~

“No Mary or Sam this time?” Eric asked.

Jessy laughed and shook her head. “Nope. I got a few dresses I wanna check out.”

“Ball is tomorrow.”

“Yeah but I know they got a few things here in my size. Come on.”

He nodded as he looked around, and took a deep breath.

The clothing store was basically the same as the last one. A large floor filled with racks of clothes, dresses and suits, and shoes, with a few winding paths separated by walls that didn’t quite reach the ceiling. There weren’t many people in the store, but ten people was plenty when you were dealing with the crazy prices of Dolareido’s nightlife.

“Sometimes I wonder why Dad doesn’t come visit Bloodlust,” he said, “or take advantage of the money I give him and go shopping for better clothes.” Eric lifted the sleeve of a suit he passed by, checked the price, groaned, and let it go. “And then sometimes I completely understand.”

“Wasting money is fun!”

“It’s not so fun when you don’t have a lot of it.”

“You have a lot of it now.” Jessy rolled her eyes as she scooped a black dress up from the racks, and held it against her body in front of him. She was in a casual suit, like he was, because coming to a place like this in jeans and a t-shirt would have been grounds for getting arrested.

“I didn’t always.” He checked the price tag, groaned liked before, and put the dress back. Which of course just made the vampire laugh.

“Me neither, remember? Rough life and all that before Michael found me.”

“Then where’s your natural aversion to wasting money?”

She shrugged, grabbed another dress, and did the same thing. “Gone. I’d like to say it’s ‘cause I’ve got a lot more years under my belt and feel comfortable spending. But I’m pretty I’ve always spent every dime I got, even in my first year.” Her first year as a vampire, she meant. “I was a dumbass with money.”

“I’m guessing you also spent any money you got your hands on when you were alive.”

She laughed and shrugged, even as he pushed her ridiculously expensive dress down and helped her put it back.

“Yeah, I probably did.”

“My dad would have given you a whipping. With a belt.”

“Kinky.”

“Not so much when you’re eight and your dad’s giving you a whipping cause you bought some candy without his permission.”

“Oof, that sucks. Kinda surprised he was doing that in the... what, nineties?”

“He was old school.” Eric made no attempt to hide the contempt in his voice when he said ‘old school’. “But I’m exaggerating how bad it was. He was an ass, but not that much of an ass.”

“Good. I’d stop sending him pictures if he turned out to be a shit dad.”

Eric groaned, again, which of course sent Jessy into fits of laughter as she pulled him along.

“About the ball tomorrow,” she said. “Any expectations?”

“A little. If you-know-who is going to make a move, it might be then.”

She nodded as she grabbed another dress, did a quick test for him, and slung it over her shoulder before he could check the tag.

“Well, if the person of the hour isn’t there, then we’ll know something’s up. They’re invited.”

It was annoying avoiding saying Jacob’s name, but with how everything was building up, it was probably for the best. It wasn’t like Jacob wasn’t smart enough, or powerful enough, to spy on them. He could literally be in the room, and Eric doubted either of them would be able to sense him until he got close. They had to be careful.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“I expect to see a lot of skin, I suppose.”

“Well that’s a given. It won’t be like our little parties at Bloodlust, though, everyone topless and shit.”

“To your dismay.”

“To my utter dismay.” She nodded and stood tall and proud, before slumping and grabbing another dress. “I look forward to Mary being there.”

“Poor kid. Been alive for a few days and now she’s going to be sideline to an orgy.”

“Ugh, I wish. Nah, no orgy.”

“But there will be a few thralls and ghouls, naked, and getting drained mid orgasm, right?”

“Of course. That’s not an orgy! That’s just a banquet.”

“Uh huh.” He rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help but chuckle. Vampires were a strange bunch. “I seriously doubt Samantha will let anyone touch her daughter.”

“Yet. It’s not like Sam has a leg to stand on, with the way her sex drive has exploded since being sired.” And another dress went onto the shoulder.

They continued shopping for a bit. Jessy got ten dresses over her shoulder — so much for ‘few’ — before she was done looking around. She also checked her phone for a second, sent someone a text, nodded, grinned at her phone, put it away, and dragged Eric to a changing room. No one stopped them from sharing one.

“I got a surprise for you,” she said, smile somewhere between excited and malicious. She pushed him gently until he had to sit down on the bench in the small room of white walls, a tall mirror behind Jessy.

“You do?”

She winked at him and opened the door, just barely wide enough to reach through it, and as the smell of a new person hit Eric’s nose, Jessy pulled them in.

“Marge?” Eric asked.

“Hello! Jessy told me to come. Said she was going to buy me a dress.”

Jessy nodded, scooped the dress off the bench beside Eric, and handed it to her. “Here ya go.” Eric hadn’t gotten to see what the dress looked like, but in Jessy’s palm, it didn’t look like much more than scarf.

Marge was a small woman, with light-dark skin and tiny facial features, very cute. Her hair had grown out, and she'd straightened it so it came down in waves to her shoulders. She wore a casual suit too, no jacket, white shirt. At the last ball, she'd worn a white dress that covered her a lot more than whatever Jessy had just handed her. Chalk one up for Jessy, she'd corrupted another one.

"Thanks! I'll go—"

Jessy rolled her eyes, took Marge by the shoulders, and pushed her to the center of the changing room before sitting down beside Eric.

"Change," Jessy said, with a little more aggression than Eric expected. He blinked at her, and she grinned at him before nodding to Marge.

"Um, what?" the hunter asked.

"Change. Take off current clothes. Put on new clothes." Jessy laughed.

"You mean—oh. We're doing that now?" The small hunter gulped as she looked between Jessy and Eric, blush hitting her cheeks.

"Um, what?" Eric asked.

Jessy slapped him on the knee. "Sit back and enjoy."

Oh god. Eric groaned, but a quick glance between the two women settled his nerves. Yeah, it was pretty obvious Jessy was bullying Marge into this, probably like how Isabella had bullied her into staying with her troupe for a while. And it was obvious Marge didn't expect to suddenly have to put on a strip tease for Eric and the vampire. But at the same time, Marge looked intrigued. Dolareido had rubbed off on her, too.

"Jessy," Eric said, turning his head to look at her, but keeping Marge in the corner of his eye. "Did you really 'convince' Marge to do this, by offering to buy her a dress?"

"Dude. It's an expensive dress."

He grumbled again and leaned back until his shoulders pressed to the wall of the changing room. Which earned a small chuckle from Marge. She looked embarrassed and caught off guard, but she also looked like she knew enough about Eric to expect his grumbling. Someone had been filling her in on his personality, and he knew who.

"Hey, you!" Jessy pointed at Marge. "Get naked."

Eric shook his head. "Marge, you don't—"

Marge undid the button of her skirt, and slid it down, exposing her naked legs. Small as she was, there was muscle there, giving her legs more shape than the skirt suggested. She quivered as she did, and Eric could almost hear her heart rate pick up.

“Marge is going to be our little slave girl for the next few weeks,” Jessy said. “It’s my turn.”

“Turn?” Eric raised a brow as he blinked at the Gangrel, but when he looked back to Marge, the hunter didn’t protest. Instead, she undid the buttons of her shirt, blush showing through her chestnut skin as she exposed her small white bra. That was a tiny stomach.

“Turn! Isabella had her for so long, and—”

“Jessy, she’s not a toy.”

Jessy grumbled as she folded her arms across her chest. “I know that, I’m just playing. Marge and I have been hanging out at Bloodlust, I told you that. And Marge is a—”

“A hunter,” Eric said, earning a short pause from Marge. But a hand wave from Jessy had her resuming her undressing, and she undid the bra, slowly. She let it fall, exposing her dark, tiny, but very hard nipples standing from her small breasts.

Shrugging, Jessy got up, came up behind Marge, and cupped her breasts from behind, instantly earning another quiver from her prey. The small woman met Eric’s eyes before she looked down as Jessy massaged her breasts, a tiny hint in her eyes giving it all away.

This woman, Marge, Eric had met girls like her before. She acted shy, and maybe a little part of her was, but a much bigger part of her liked being the center of attention. The whole thing with the conservative white dress at the ball was probably her not sure how to handle herself, considering she was going into a ball full of vampires for the first time. But that hadn’t been the kinda girl she really was. No wonder she’d found herself at Isabella’s mercy; the woman was a dominatrix and probably loved dominating someone like Marge.

Which honestly made Eric feel a little better about the girl getting bullied into this by his girlfriend. Much as she looked nervous and a bit scared, and was, she was also obviously aroused. And it wasn’t long before his werewolf nose could smell it, too.

“I am a hunter,” she said, managing another shy peek at Eric. “But, it’s not... it’s not what people think. I didn’t get into it like most people. I was sort of dragged into it. And after seeing Dolareido, I can... I guess I can see why a lot of people get seduced by this nightlife.”

“Exactly,” Jessy said, and she lowered her right hand down Marge’s slender stomach, and down under her white panties. Marge didn’t stop her. The little hunter managed a tiny gasp, and another peek at Eric, before she melted back into the vampire.

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“You make it sound like you want to be a vampire, too,” Eric said, eyes struggling to not watch Marge wriggle. His willpower didn’t last. Jessy knew exactly how to have Marge boiling, and the hunter pressed back against Jessy, silently begging for more, and Eric watched with growing hunger.

“I don’t know. M-Maybe?” she said between tiny mewls.

“Isabella was trying to convince her,” Jessy said. “I’m trying to convince her, too.”

Eric looked up from the working hand in Marge’s underwear, and up to Jessy who had her chin on Marge’s shoulder, evil grin pointed at him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeap. Marge is awesome, and we know she’s got skills. I wouldn’t mind having a childe like her.” Nodding, the Gangrel raised her other hand, and wrapped it around the small woman’s throat. Instant response. Marge squirmed more, and the crotch of her underwear darkened with wetness.

“I hadn’t even thought about that.” Slowly, Eric took another deep breath, and again tried to lift his eyes. Still no go. Seeing his girlfriend play Marge’s body like an instrument was too compelling, a lot more arousing than he figured it’d be honestly, and his eyes locked onto the prey in her grasp as Marge got closer and closer to orgasm. Either her time with the vampires had put her body on a hair trigger, or she naturally had one. Dolareido did seem to attract those types.

He was no different. He was already hard.

“And she can satisfy the boys for me.”

“Boys?” Marge asked, eyes snapping open wide and head turning to look up at the taller woman behind her.

“My four ghouls. They miss doing the four-on-one thing, you know? They get laid regularly, but that’s just with random kine at the club. They’d love to have a girl they can all pound on at the same time.” Jessy tightened her grip on the girl’s throat, pulling a meek little whimper from her. “Which I know you’d love.”

Marge squeaked again.



Laughing, Jessy let go of the woman, and gave her a small shove. Marge stumbled but didn't fall, some of those hunter reflexes coming into play despite how her body was clearly two seconds away from orgasm. Poor woman. Jessy was a bitch, and left her boiling.

“Ok, now suck off my boyfriend while I try on some dresses.”

Eric stared at Jessy for a few moments before looking at Marge. The hunter met his eyes, blushed, and got on her knees. He hadn't expected this.

Humming like she was working on a garden, Jessy walked over to the bench past Marge, scooped up a dress, stepped around her, put her back to Eric, faced the large mirror, and undressed. Eric wanted to watch that, and he did a bit, but Marge was between in his legs and on her knees in seconds, and slowly undoing the fly of his pants. He didn't stop her. He told Jessy he was willing to let other people join them, though he didn't expect it to happen at a clothing store, that was currently open, with kine walking by just ten or twenty feet away.

Marge grinned up at him, again giving him a peek of that quietly mischievous personality that loved being the center of attention. If, and when she got more comfortable with the nightlife, there was a good chance she might actually become a bit of a brat. He'd met a few of those types when he was famous, and they were very good at getting people to pay attention to them. No wonder Jessy had been drawn to her.

As Marge pulled his length out of his pants, and let out a quiet moan as she leaned in while looking up at him, he had to wonder how much of this relationship between her and Jessy was Marge scratching Jessy's itch to be dominant with someone, or Marge tricking her into doing just that. Women were crafty creatures.

Marge wrapped her hand around the base of his cock, pulled it toward her, and set it along her face so it pressed against her cheek and went past her eye and over her forehead. Before he could say anything, she kissed it and slid her lips up the length of it until she found the swollen tip. Gently, she wrapped her lips around it, and took her time bathing it with her tongue as she got comfortable, scooting in a little closer.

“How about this?”

“W-What?” Eric snapped his attention back up to Jessy.

“Dude. Pay attention.” Somewhere along the line, she'd already changed into a black leather dress. “How about this?” Grinning like a giddy idiot, she did an elbow-in-the-air dramatic magazine cover pose.

“Uh, looks a little plain.” And it was a little plain. Sexy as fuck, but it was just a black leather dress with a short skirt and a tight, slim top. No flair or anything.

“Ha. Better fashion advice than usual. We should do this more often.” Nodding, she stripped down to nothing but little black underwear, did a little dance for him meant to make her tits and ass bounce — they did — before she grabbed another dress, and slipped it on over her head.

“I didn’t think I’d ever be good at giving fashion advice.”

“You’re better than the boys. Probably ‘cause of your history.” Shrugging, she faced him and came a little closer, now wearing a white dress, just as short as the first, but also with a stomach window cross laced. “This?”

Eric squirmed as Marge slid more of him into her mouth. “Better.”

“Better, but...”

“Not really digging white on you.”

“I look good in white!”

“I mean, you do, but it doesn’t really fit your... vibe.” A small groan sneaked in through his words, and he frowned down at Marge. She only grinned up at him as she slowly dragged her lips back over his glans until she placed a kiss on the tip, before enveloping it again.

“What? I can’t pull off fair maiden?”

He stared at her, and gestured down at the girl between his legs with one hand. Jessy laughed, but nodded after a second and picked up another dress, and stripped again.

“Alright, how about this?” She looked in the mirror and slid the olive dress down over her body. It didn’t have sleeves, or a back, and it hugged her whole body snug. Very snug. It was also partly see-through.

“That... kinda... works.” He breathed deep as a pulse of bliss worked its way from the head of his cock down underneath it and behind his testicles. Flexing muscles built up pressure, and he let the breath go as he felt pleasure building.

“You think? The fabric is really thin. I feel pretty naked in this. Which is awesome.” Nodding, she sat down beside him, and grinned down at Marge as she reached down, and slid her fingers into the girl’s hair. “Think Fiona will wear something similar? She likes green. It’s a redhead thing.”

“She—” He shivered as the first pulse of cum shot through its length, and the hard flex of his cock in Marge’s mouth announced it. If she was going to lift her head, she didn’t even try, not with Jessy’s hand in her hair. Instead, she slowed her hand on the base of his girth, and eased how much she licked and suckled, using her grip to milk his cum onto her tongue instead.

Jessy kept her hand where it was.

“She does like green,” he said, after a few more seconds of watching Marge. She didn’t stop, gently working her hand up and down his cock as he flooded her mouth with his cum. His girlfriend continued to keep the hunter’s head pinned where it was.

Oh. That’s why she was doing this, or at least this specific act. As insanely horny and kinky as Jessy was, she was a vampire. That meant the only thing that went down her throat she wasn’t willing to vomit up later, was blood.

So she hired — sort of — Marge to do the job for her. And she did just that, her eyes drifting between Jessy and Eric as she swallowed down his cum. Unfortunately for her, he was Uratha. The moment she swallowed him down, another gush of his cum poured over her tongue, and another. She blinked up at him as she continued to stroke him, earning another pulse of pleasure down through his length and into his core, and another wave of the hot, heavy fluid into her mouth. And another. She swallowed them down again, blinking up at him a few times in surprise. And then again, because he was still hard.

Jessy outright purred as she watched, before looking back up to him. “I know, right? Fiona looks so damn good in green. But she prefers the brighter shit, and it goes well with the skin and freckles and stuff.” Winking at him, she took Eric’s right hand, and slid it into Marge’s hair, until his palm was holding most of her head and gently pinning her on his cock. Marge shivered, and smiled up at him with her shy-but-not-so-shy eyes.

Satisfied, Jessy got back up, and slipped out of the dress, making sure to sway her ass left and right as she did. It was a damn tight dress, and it hugged her snug as it pulled up over her curves.

“I was thinking,” she went on, “we can’t let Marge in on the big secrets, but she wants to get a little more involved in other stuff. She is a hunter, you know?” She grabbed another dress. Blue, this time. Not see-through, but with how loose it was it might as well have been. It was nothing more than a couple of dangling straps over the chest that tied around behind the neck, very loose, and connected at the waist before splitting into four strips for a skirt that reached all the way down to her ankle. The four strips were thin, and barely covered anything, including her underwear.

“Need to wear a blue thong with this,” she said, “or, you know, nothing.”

“Marge wants to get into... hunts?” he said. Before he realized he was even doing it, he nudged Marge’s head toward him, helping her take another inch of his cock. She didn’t resist.

“Yeap. Her, Harcourt, and Dennis. Harcourt probably ‘cause he’s with Clara now, and getting interested in whatever she’s up to. But the dress, what do you think?” She spun around a bit, fast enough the leg strips swung out for a second, and the straps on her chest swung out enough to expose her breasts for second, too. At least they settled back over them when she stopped spinning, covering her nipples, barely.

“I think I like it. It’s very fancy.”

“Ha, right? This looks more Daeva than anything, but whatever, I’m cool dressing up like a pretty bitch for a night.” Nodding, she sat beside him again, and reached between his legs as she faced him. She winked at him, intertwined her fingers with Marge’s, and helped stroke his length faster. “Isn’t this fun?”

“I do like a lady in a dress.”

She laughed. “You know what I mean, jackass.”

Before he could respond, she leaned in and kissed him. She purred into him, even moaned a little, and stroked his length faster, squeezing it the way he liked, the way she learned after being with him for months.

He came again, and Jessy chuckled into his lips as she milked him into Marge’s mouth.

Ok, yeah, he could get used to this.

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