

~~Jack~~

“Not long after I sired Viktor, I left him, and disappeared.” Elaine held his eyes, for a while, but eventually she looked down. “I was not proud of abandoning him. I do not think he ever forgave me, even after my return.”

The two of them were still on the stairs in his mansion. The stairs were the best place for a conversation, and their magic powers could hopefully disarm an elder vampire.

“I wondered about how you could have been his sire, without anyone knowing.”

“It was not an easy feat. I met Antoinette after I returned, and avoided Viktor. When the man realized I had returned, he wanted nothing to do with me, and I had to make concessions to him so he would keep our connection a secret.”

“But you never told him about the curse.”

“No.” She flinched.

“He never found out about what you did? To get rid of your curse? He never found out you were ever cursed, or that he still was?”

“No.”

Jesus christ, that was cold.

“Julias told me diablerie marks you. Makes you... easy to notice. Like, you become tainted.”

Those words hurt her a lot more than he thought they would. She winced. Elder vampires didn't wince, unless it was acting, or someone just sucker punched them hard in the emotions. Making an elder wince was tantamount to cracking them over the head with a steel beam. It felt bad, doing that, but he needed to know.

“It does. I avoided contact with everyone for years, hiding in caves, terrified a Kindred would find me. It was quite some time before the darkness left my mind and Beast, and before the... the addiction left as well.”

His turn to wince. Being terrified made sense, considering how diablerist were pretty much a kill-on-sight situation in cities with a Kindred presence. And then there was the whole addiction thing. A diablerist around other Kindred was a meth addict surrounded by... meth.

“You remember?”

“No. Only small details, certain memories that burned themselves into my mind, while most are lost.”

“But you remember killing another vampire. You remember breaking free of the curse.”

“I do.”

“You told me you didn’t remember. You told me—”

“I lied.” She smiled weakly. “You can understand why.”

“If Antoinette knew—”

“Antoinette is not the concern. The Ordo, is. I violated the third law. The Ordo would not suffer a diablerist to live.” She laughed and shook her head. “Not one so stupid as to admit to it, at least.”

“You... think there are diablerists in—”

“There are diablerists, vile and putrid beings, who continue to commit diablerie regularly, who are in positions of power, young Ventrue. While a curious Mekhet may discover them, they...” She shook her head. “Do not worry. None of the Primogen here in Dolareido are tainted. And neither am I any longer.”

“Does anyone else know? Antoinette?”

“No.”

“Jesus fuck. You told me, but not her?”

She smiled at him, gaze steady, eyes carrying a billion hidden meanings he could barely scratch the surface of. “You are my great grandchilde.”

“But you two have been friends for centuries. Plural.”

“She does not know what it is like to have something vile inside, poisoning her every action. I do.”

“Your curse was still bound.”

“And yet I can still remember its claws, deep in my soul.”

Jack shuddered. “It... it’s better now for me, in a way. Now that the curse is free, at least it’s distinct from me. Before, it felt like it was me, slowly becoming some sort of violent psychopath. Christ, I was fucking convinced I was turning into Viktor.”

“You were, in a way. How Julias managed to stay above the curse’s influence, I do not know.”

“Julias was... he was one of a kind. He—”

Nodding, Elaine stood up. Apparently she didn't want the conversation to go down that road.

“I have shared with you a dangerous secret, my childe. If you somehow convinced my peers, or even others here in Dolareido, about what I have done, it could end quite poorly for me.”

“That's part of the reason you told me, right? That I can't exactly prove it. Whatever you were before, you seem pretty normal now. The Begotten say you look normal.”

“Indeed. But there are ways.” She shook her head as she slowly paced. She was uncomfortable. Hell, Jack would have been too, dropping a truth bomb like that. “I have not told you the worst of it.”

“Oh christ.”

Chuckling, she shook her head again. “And I will not. For now.”

“You're... gonna dangle a carrot in front of me, information, about something even worse you've done?”

“Quite perceptive of you, childe of mine.”

“And the thing you want me to do? The reason for the carrot?”

“You, are going to join me in a ritual.”

Frowning, he looked between his two pets.

~Do not trust her, master,~ Scully whispered into his mind.

~Do not trust her, master.~

“What ritual?”

“In my hunt to find a way to remove the curse, I discovered a ritual that will... let me take a peek within.”

“Within... me?”

“Precisely. I wish to take a look inside, Jack. I want a peek at the curse.” She stopped pacing, and smiled down at him as she hooked her hands behind her back. He knew that look. That was a happy business look, like someone excited to make a contract, a binding one. The look of a Ventrue delighted with the way negotiations were going.

“You can't expect me to agree to that.”

Her smile didn't waver. “I do.”

“Why?”

“Because it is connected to how I removed the curse.”

“You committed diablerie to get rid of the curse.”

She flinched, just barely. “Yes, I did.”

“You might do it to me, to get the curse back, now that it’s unbound, out and swinging.”

Her smile slowly faded, and she came closer to him. “You trust me that little?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You told me, sweet childe of mine, what the curse is like. I have seen its disturbing rage and sick fetishes with my own eyes, as well. I have...” With a heavy sigh, she gestured back toward the door. “Do you know what I spend much of my time researching, for the Ordo? The dark secrets I have written and stashed away into the depths of records hidden from all eyes? Terrible mysteries I have not shared even with my good friend, your lover?”

“I... The Strix. You’ve been researching the Strix.”

“Naturally, and I am sure my old friend suspects. I am known as an Architect of Terror, in the Ordo Dracul.”

“Right, I remember hearing that title, the night I met you. I never understood what it meant. You said once it meant researching the Beast?”

“Indeed. We dragons keep our secrets, young Ventrue. But I feel comfortable enough to tell you that I research the Beast, this creature that exists inside all vampires, and that I delve into uncovering its mysteries. Why is there a creature inside us? Why does it have its own desires, its own instincts? How is it awoken in us, when we rise from our first death? My research into striges is proxy to that research.”

“I guess that makes sense. You had to learn about them, if you were going to remove their curse.”

She sat down beside him again, close enough her shoulder touched his. “That necklace you wear is one of the results of my research, something I found in my efforts.”

Sighing, Jack reached under his suit shirt and pulled out the necklace. “I... do owe you a lot for this.” Owe didn’t even do it justice. She taught him how to pull his thoughts away from his Beast, separate him from it, and gave him a necklace to force it to shut up. If it hadn’t been for Elaine showing up, the curse would still have been running rampant in his mind, fighting him for control every night.

He owed her his life. And Elaine did seem to take his warning to heart, about how awful the curse was, especially now that she'd seen it for herself after his fight with Avery. It'd be pretty damn strange for her to suddenly betray him now, unless her goal was to lull them all into a false sense of security.

Look at you now, Jack. Thinking like a true Kindred. Fucking lovely.

"Jack," she said, "it has been centuries since I committed that vile act. I stowed myself away, knowing what it would do to me. Only after the horrible taint fled my being, and the voices stopped, did I—"

"Voices?"

Nodding, she looked down again, and leaned into him a little. Not a sexy lean. He expected sexy leans, sexy touches, sexy anything, flirtations she knew would go nowhere but enjoyed teasing him with anyway. This was a weary lean. A tired, even exhausted lean.

"I can barely remember them. And I did not record anything of my time hiding from the Kindred world. Any record could be used against me. But there had been voices, of the vampire I killed. They lingered in my mind, and they were... unhappy with me."

"Just like—"

"I do not know if the voices are similar to the curse's voice. Perhaps they are related. You said the curse was created by the Strix, with an act of diablerie as the sacrifice, confirming my suspicions."

"Yeah."

"Then I can only assume there is a connection. This curse, this taint, it is connected to the Strix, and to the devouring of souls."

Devouring of souls. Amaranth. Diablerie. Yeah, no wonder diablerists were a 'kill on sight' situation.

"So, I would look like a diablerist, if someone with Auspex looked at me? Cause I'm pretty sure I've been thoroughly examined by peeking Mekhets."

"Indeed. The curse is... unique. Striges have ways to infect, to take hosts, and the marks they place upon the soul are similar to those left on a diablerist before the taint dissipates. And how this is connected to our Beasts is of great interests to me. The fact you are not tainted is another unique element I wish to learn of."

"Christ. This is... all pretty fucking terrifying."

“I know. I have waited to bring this idea to light because I was not sure if I could trust you.”

“Trust me? You’re the one who committed dia—”

She put a hand over his mouth, long enough to shut him up before lowering it. For a moment, she looked angry in a way he had never seen, but it faded quickly.

“I have danced around this issue long enough. I had to tell someone, and it makes sense for it to be you. I have a black mark upon my soul, for all eternity I imagine, but the infection, the taint, has faded to nothing. I ensured it did, before I returned to the world, and met your lover, her sheriff, and returned to my... abhorring childe Viktor. Years of fighting against an addiction so powerful you cannot imagine, while hiding in caves.” She nudged her shoulder into him again. “Is it truly strange that I would hide such a past?”

Things clicked into place. She wasn’t being sneaky — or at least not entirely — because she was trying to maneuver Jack into a position she could use to kidnap him, or somehow remove his curse. She was being sneaky because if Antoinette or Daniel, or hell maybe Jacob, found out what she did, they might do something about it. Maybe even kill her. They’d certainly be ashamed of her. And on top of that, she looked ashamed, too.

“I still can’t believe you told me.”

“The others do not understand. Could you truly live with this curse for an eternity, Jack? Would you not do all you could to remove it?”

He would. He damn well would. No matter what Jack said or did, the Ripper was a psychopath killer, always riding some weird edge of rage and sick fetishism for gore and death. You didn’t get much more fucked up than that.

“But... but diablerie...”

“It is beyond vile, childe of mine, and yet you will be more disgusted with me when you learn who I devoured.”

“Oh god.”

“But that is a secret I will keep for now, to share later, after you have indulged me. Will you allow me to perform this experiment upon you, without your lover or anyone else knowing? I cannot risk them tracing the ritual to its roots. It is... connected, to my past.”

“You—”

“I swear I will not kill you, Jack, in any capacity.” She sighed, still leaning against him, like she had an anchor around her neck, pulling her down. He knew the feeling. “But we flirt with such dangers. It must be done in secret.”

He wanted to trust her. The look in her eyes was genuine, as far as he could tell. If she’d tried to look overtly pained or guilty, he wouldn’t have believed it. Elders didn’t get to be centuries old by regretting their decisions until they self destructed. Whatever regret or self-loathing they had, they repressed it and grew into monoliths of power and will. He could see it in her eyes, the will to push past the shitty things she’d done, and it didn’t get worse than being a diablerist.

“You think this will help us get rid of the curse?”

“I do. While it will not remove the curse, it will garner us knowledge. Intimate knowledge.” She said ‘intimate’ with a glint in her eye. Not the sexy kind of glint. The mad scientist kinda glint.

Was he stupid enough to trust her? She was going to put him in the center of some kinda ritual, just him and her, no Antoinette, no sheriff, no back up. But after everything that’d happened, and all the help she’d given him...

“Fuck me, I’ll do it.”

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“I will be hosting a ball soon,” Antoinette said. “Tempers between the Carthians and Invictus have settled well enough.”

“You think?”

“Oui. Do you disagree?”

He shrugged. “Eh, I’m fifty fifty on it.”

“That is as good as it ever gets between covenants.” Chuckling, Antoinette reached up and pat him on the head.

They were in one of the bathrooms in her tower, lying back in a huge tub, Jack half sitting up half lying while Antoinette leaned back against his chest, between his legs. Bath time. Completely unnecessary for vampires, but still damn relaxing. And it was one of the places Jack and Antoinette had their best conversations.

It might have had something to do with the fact it was a comfy way for Jack to play with Antoinette's breasts. At this point it wasn't even sexual, he just really liked the feel of heavy, soft, supple flesh filling his palms. Case in point, his hands were cupping her breasts at this very moment, and gently bouncing them in his palms so the water's surface slipped above and below the tops of them over and over.

He had a problem. They'd tried those squishy stress balls, but it just wasn't the same. Antoinette had even gotten him a giant stress ball that looked like a boob, nipple included, with a similar texture and malleability and everything. Still wasn't the same.

If the rest of the city knew how much he was obsessed with tits, it'd have probably damaged the whole image he was cultivating for himself. The man in the black suit, the guy with two undead crows, the Ventrue with a mansion, imposing but intelligent, deadly but reasonable, tiny and terrifying, stuff like that. It was all true he supposed, but only half the time. The other half of the time, he just wanted to sit in a tub with his lover and play with her boobs.

“So everyone's coming?”

“Ben oui. Avery and her pack are invited, as is Eric. The Invictus and Carthians. Sándor and his monsters. And the Circle.”

Jack frowned. “Ugh, really?”

“Of course. Do not be silly, my love. You cannot seriously imagine I would not invite them.”

“I was hoping.”

“Despite the fact the city is mine, and I rule it, Jacob is as responsible for this city's original growth as I. He will always be invited.”

“Damn.”

“And besides, he is dating your mother,” she said, making him groan. All that did was make her laugh. “Come now, my love. Their relationship has lasted for some time. Surely you do not still hold it against him.”

“We don't trust him.”

“We do not trust Jacob with grand affairs that affect the city. But I trust him with your mother's heart.” She hesitated for a moment, before chuckling again. “And body.”

“Please don't.”



“You do not want your mother to enjoy sex? She told me you explicitly told her to ‘get laid’.”

“That was before Jacob.”

“If it is any consolation, I believe she is enjoying Othello’s touch nearly as much as Jacob’s.”

Jack lifted Antoinette’s breasts high, let them go so they hit the water with a splash, and set his hands on the sides of the tub, grunting. It took a lot to break his desire to fondle. Antoinette drove over that line with a truck, and she laughed.

“Yeah,” he said, “I know, but I’m trying to not think about her that way. She’s my mom.”

“Well, I am afraid you will be forced to think of her that way. I will be encouraging a friendly environment at this ball, with thralls and ghouls to be shared, and skin to be laid bare.”

He groaned and squirmed underneath her, making her laugh again. Maybe in a few hundred years, he’d have an easier time thinking of his mom as a sexual person, but not yet. He told her to get laid, but he hadn’t expected his mom’s sex life to suddenly be a part of his life. Healthy separation! He didn’t want to be in one of those creepy families where everyone was so comfortable with each other, they didn’t mind seeing each other naked.

Unfortunately, that was exactly the sort of environment Antoinette wanted. Well, she didn’t have living family from her first life anymore. He did!

“Can we... at least avoid having mom and I see each other naked, and especially avoid us seeing each other, uh, sexually occupied?”

“I doubt your mother will be having sex at the ball. Though I would not be surprised if Jacob pushes her into some delightfully erotic situations.”

“Oh god.”

“But she is just as squeamish about the idea of seeing you naked and having sex, as vice versa.”

“You haven’t shown her any of those films?”

“Non, of course not. She is your mother.”

“Thank you. Know if anyone else has?”

“I do not believe they have, though Jessy and Fiona seem intent on showing everyone.”

He was getting more comfortable with the idea of half the city having seen him naked in the movies. He looked good in them, and the ladies looked amazing in them. But if his mom ever saw them, that’d be a whole new level of awkward he doubted he could handle.

“Different topic. Beatrice. She... she uh... she make any progress?” He was terrified to ask Beatrice about it. Better to think she’d never succeed at whatever she was trying to do. Or maybe succeed beautifully. No. No, it was too tempting to get his hopes up, too good to be true.

“I know little,” she said, half lying. For his benefit, he knew. “Perhaps Sándor knows more?”

“Sándor? Why him?”

“I know the young Nosferatu has been visiting a lounge the man frequents. I have come to understand Sándor is a musician.”

“Wait, really?”

“Indeed. I have not had the fortune to visit myself, but my spies say he is quite the marvel.” She raised a leg into the air, long, milky white, and ran a finger down it before settling it back into the hot water again. “Musicians will forever be attractive, my love. And mastering an instrument expands the mind in powerful ways. Learn to play one.”

“I will I will.” Procrastination was easy when he was alive. It was twice as easy now, with eternity for a lifespan. “But, uh, Beatrice is visiting him?”

“She is visiting the lounge. I assume she is speaking to him, but I have not informed my spies to confirm. Such activities are quite personal, non?”

“Yeah, yeah they are. But I could ask her.” He knew Sándor had been asking about her, and Julias, months ago. But he also knew the man hadn’t acted on it. With all the rumors about dark rituals and resurrection going around, Jack found it hard to talk to her sometimes. They still did, but there was a wall between them they couldn’t quite tear down.

“Perhaps. I would approach the subject... not delicately, but perhaps indirectly. Beatrice likely has Jennifer pushing her toward the man, or any man, in a desperate attempt to have the girl penetrated.”

Jack coughed on a laugh. “I thought—”

“I doubt Beatrice would ever let Othello touch her, or Jacob. And Aaron would not be interested in their sexual affairs. Non, I believe Beatrice has enjoyed the hands of Jennifer many times, and perhaps your mother as well.” Oh god. “But not another man’s, except maybe a fleeting moment with a kine she and her friend have hunted. Knowing Jennifer, she would delight in nothing more than having Beatrice penetrated by a man, while Jennifer pleasures her.”

“Elaine and Jennifer. I’d swear they were Daeva.”

It was Antoinette's turn to laugh again. "Agreed."

Jack slipped his hands back under Antoinette's breasts, and resumed the most therapeutic form of stress relief known to man: playing with a woman's boobs.

Tell her about Elaine? No, definitely don't. As much as Elaine and Antoinette were good friends, she was his great grandsire, and she'd trusted him with the biggest secret she probably had.

He was taking a hell of a risk trusting her, but Elaine had pulled through multiple times, especially with the necklace. If he told Antoinette what she'd done, it'd probably lead to a confrontation, and then Elaine not helping Jack. Christ, just thinking the thoughts put holes into the idea. He couldn't trust Elaine, not completely.

But he saw the look in her eyes, when he'd finally gotten through to her about how horrible the curse was. There'd been something there, something real, and after last night, he did trust her. More, at least. Hopefully his habit of trusting people wouldn't get him killed.

Besides, he had a few contingency measures.

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~~Beatrice~~

She threw up her hands. "It's hard with claws!"

"Trim the claws." The stupid Mekhet shook his head at her like she was brain damaged.

"Dude this ain't like most things. It's part of the Nosferatu shtick. If I trim them they just come back." She eyed him, and pointed a claw at her right cheek. No cheek there, just giant crocodile teeth. "See these?"

Damien leaned away from her slightly. "I do."

"One of the first things I did when I realized I was a vampire was try and rip out the extra teeth. They grow back."

"Everything a vampire has grows back."

"Not like this. The deformities can't be suppressed or plucked. They just come back, quick as the body can remake them. Being a Nos fucking sucks."

Sighing, Damien took her right hand, and gently set it back down on the piano keys. “You’re playing the piano, not typing on a keyboard. Or tenderizing a steak, for that matter. Stop hitting the keys so hard, and use more of the underside of the tip of the finger. Relax your wrists.”

Ugh, why did she agree to this? Two weeks of this shit and she still struggled to play Mary Had a Little Lamb.

“I’m fucking trying, but it feels nicer to just hit the keys with my fingertips. Must smash.”

“Yes but you’ll... I suppose you’ll never strain a muscle, but you will make it harder on yourself to get the patterns and flow between them. You’re playing an instrument. It’s a dance for your fingers.”

“I don’t dance. I headbang.” Beatrice leaned back, let her head fall back over her shoulders behind her, and groaned. “I suck at this.”

“Yes, you do.”

Arg, this man. She sat up straight and glared at him, and Damien met her gaze with the tiniest smile. Somewhere along the line, he’d developed a sense of humor. Triss wasn’t sure she liked it, but at least he had one.

They were in his apartment. Apparently the dude had gotten a piano, which seemed kinda weird to Triss considering he had one of those keyboard pianos on the shelf. Maybe he just preferred a real piano; Maria probably did.

He had a really nice apartment. Fucking Invictus money. Just like Jack’s old apartment, it was all streamlined and modern and fancy, lots of black and silver, and she fully expected a serial killer had lived in it at least once. They were in his living room, the piano near the giant window, drapes closed, with some couches behind them pointed at the nice TV.

On the couch was a little redhead, flipping through stuff on her smartphone and occasionally looking up to giggle at Triss. She wore jeans and a t-shirt, like Triss, and neither of them really fit the apartment’s look. Damien did. Dude was dressed in a casual dark suit, something Maria probably insisted on.

Well, whatever. The man seemed to be doing pretty well for himself, considering only four years ago he’d been a sewer rat hiding from everyone.

“You’re a shitty teacher.”

“Probably. You could ask someone else for help.”

“I can’t ask a kine to fucking help, jackass.” She pointed at her teeth again, and her snake eyes, and her claws. “And I don’t want to go around asking people who know me. I just wanna do this privately, you know?”

“Aye, we know.” Fiona beamed at her, big smile on, before looking back at her phone.

Damien looked back at Fiona before back to Triss, eyebrow raised. He didn’t know why Triss was here learning this shit, or he did a good job hiding the fact he knew. Considering Fiona was Fiona, he probably did know, and was just pretending he didn’t for Triss’s sake. Nice of him, if annoying.

“Listen here, red tits.” Triss threw a glare and pointed finger at Fiona. “I’m doing this for me, okay? Jacob says I should expand what I know about things, cause it’ll help me be a better witch. Learning an instrument is mind expanding, right?”

Fiona nodded, eyes still on the phone. “Aye, but I bet there’s something else yer looking to get expanded.” As if she’d made the wittiest joke ever, she burst into giggles, but kept her eyes on the phone anyway.

Damien smiled, too, but Triss shot him a glare and the smile vanished.

“Beatrice, learning to play an instrument as a vampire is difficult. You’re constantly fighting your Kindred biology.” He pointed at his skull. “I told you. Your brain is influenced by the vampire curse.”

“Yeah yeah, but”—she gestured at her tattoos and piercings—“I can use the Kindred part of me to adapt, right? I got this shit after my embrace.”

“I told you it’s possible, but it’s... difficult, to narrow down the focus.”

“Sounds like the same problem I’d have if I was alive and trying to do this. Just exercising a different muscle.”

“More like, the same problem kine would have, plus a whole new problem on top of it.” Damien shrugged, and played a short tune.

Triss scooted close enough on the piano bench to hit the man with her shoulder. “You think I don’t have focus?”

“I—”

“You have any idea how much focus it takes to do witch stuff? The fucking... ugh, never mind. My point is, I got focus. It’s just these damn claws!”

Fiona giggled again. “Why don’t ye ask Sándor for help? He knows how to play a lot of instruments.”

Triss eyed her. “Maybe I will. If—”

A phone rang. Damien sighed as he stood up and pulled a phone from his pocket. “Yes Natasha? I... oh.” He looked to Triss and Fiona before nodding. “Yeah, I’ll be right there.” He hung up. “I have to go. Important business.”

Triss eyed him, too, but not the same eye she gave Fiona. No, Damien was serious, and he immediately walked to the closet and put on his trench coat without so much as looking Triss’s way again.

“Alright, guess I’m outta here.” She stood up and—

“Stay, with Fiona. Practice. She can help.”

Slowly, Beatrice sneered as she glared at Fiona, which Fiona returned with a big, bright grin. The wonder child had started learning to play along with Triss, and unlike Triss, was a natural.

“Sure you trust me alone in your place?”

“I don’t.” Damien nodded to Fiona. “Vrall could easily beat you in a fight.”

Fiona’s grin grew absolutely maniacal as she hopped off the couch and joined Triss on the bench. “Ye think ye can take me, lass?”

Triss rolled her eyes, especially when she saw the smile on Damien’s face as he closed the front door behind him. Ugh, they weren’t wrong. Beatrice was plenty strong for her age, but the Begotten were strange, and strong. Fiona, aka Spider-Woman, would probably win any fight the two of them got into, especially if she got the drop on Triss. Well, give it a couple hundred more years and the tables would turn, assuming Fiona was still alive.

“So!” Fiona pulled down the cover for the piano keys, set her elbow on it, chin in palm, and smiled at Triss. “Ye like Sándor?”

Oh god damn it.

“It hasn’t even been a year since Julias died, Fiona. Gimme a break.”

That earned a small flinch from the girl, but Fiona recovered quickly. She shook her head and gave Triss a gentle shove with her free hand.

“Aye, but ye know Julias would want ye to be happy.”

This girl. She was blunt like Jessy, but none of the aggressive was there. To Fiona, there was a silver lining to everything, and joy hidden everywhere. All you had to do was go looking for it. The fact the girl had lost her adopted grandmother only shy of four months ago, didn't seem to put a dent into that personality at all.

"Fiona, you're what, twenty? You don't know. You haven't experienced enough shit."

"Aw come on, that's... only a little true. Damien and I love each other."

"You're a kid."

"But Damien's nae. He's experienced a lot of stuff, and—"

"He's a pedophile."

Fiona laughed. "And the Prince? Or Jacob?"

Triss couldn't help but laugh, too. Yeah, vampire relationships were weird. You didn't keep getting older when you were sired, you sort of half-stopped aging. Sure, you got smarter, maybe even wiser, maybe even more mature, but a lot of your personality and who you were stayed the same. It was part of what made it so damn hard for a vampire to learn to play a fucking instrument!

"Ok, yeah, vampires can be a little weird with the dating ages."

Giggling, Fiona scooted in closer on the bench until they were touching hip to hip. "I hear Samantha is getting some fantasies crossed off her bucket list."

"She... is, yeah."

"Details!"

"You know I'm not going to gossip about her behind her back."

"I get ya. But, what if I told ye I'd heard some things from another gossiping vampire?" Damn it, Jen. "And she said Samantha was getting quite full, from both ends, ye ken? Like—"

"Ugh, fine. Yeah, Samantha's enjoying sex with the Circle. Witches and orgies go hand in hand, I guess. There, ya happy?" She pulled up the cover off the piano keys, forcing Fiona to stop leaning on it.

"Aye." Giggling again, Fiona set her right hand on the keys, some octave high up, and played a simple tune. "Vrall used to have worshipers for that sort of stuff."

"Before you?"

"Aye. Musta been over a thousands years ago."

“That’s... kinda interesting, actually. I can picture it, ancient tribal people in a jungle, worshipping some scary, sexy monster of spiders.”

“Aye! The memories are blurs to me, ye ken. They’re not mine. But Vrall remembers them well enough. Folk, making sacrifices to her. Folk, mostly lads, surrounding her and filling her and covering her in white.” She licked her lips.

“Jesus, with memories like that, no wonder you’re a hornball.”

Giggling, Fiona shook her head. “Nae, I was always like this, before Vrall came to me. Masturbated myself raw the moment I figured out how.”

“Is it... a redhead thing?”

“Lass! ... maybe?” She erupted into giggles again. Damn, her laughter was contagious. No wonder Damien loved her. Just being around her was enough to have Triss laughing, smiling, and forgetting just how shitty everything had been the past year; envy over her natural piano skills aside.

“And I’ll have you know I’m not here to learn to play for Sándor. Sure, we’ve been talking more, and sure, he’s really good at the guitar... and singing...”

“He is, isn’t he?” Fiona blushed a little as she squirmed for a second. “He’s tall.”

“He’s... a bit tall, yeah. Not very—”

“And he’s lean, and has muscles.”

“Ok, yeah, he’s got a nice body. But—”

“And he’s got those eyes! Deep blue eyes that are so... mmmm.” Fiona set both her elbows on the piano keys, oblivious to the noise it made, and sighed a dreamy sigh as she set her chin on her palms.

“You have a boyfriend.”

“Pfft. Damien and I are allowed to look at other folk! I happen to know he thinks Jack’s new thralls are sexy as fuck.”

“They are pretty hot,” Triss said. Jack was probably thoroughly enjoying himself, with three sex slaves to tend to his — or Antoinette’s — every whim. “Kid really has a thing for tits.”

Fiona giggled as she sat up straight, leaned back a bit, and bounced on the bench a couple times. No bra was keeping those things in check.

“Ye think—”



“No chance in Hell Jack, or the Prince, or Damien, will ever let you get involved in any of their shenanigans, Fiona.”

“Aw, but Damien would come, too! I’d never leave him behind.”

“Pretty sure that’d be too awkward for Jack and Damien.”

“But Art and Matt—”

“Aren’t most dudes. They’re more like... me and Jen, I guess, without the bisexuality.”

“True. Tash is lucky as aw fuck.”

Triss set her claws back on the keys, and tried to relax the wrist and fingers. Not the fingertips, but the undersides. Stop smashing the keys. After a few minutes of experimenting, she managed to play a simple five-note melody with her right hand. It was so damn hard to get the volume consistent. Sometimes she pressed too hard and it was almost ear-splitting loud. Sometimes she pressed too soft and it barely made a noise. Maybe she should start with the keyboard piano?

Fiona brought up her phone, flicked through some things, and put the phone in front of Triss, between her eyes and her fingers, forcing her to look.

A video of Natasha, hands tied behind her, getting choked and fuck by Arturo from behind, her whole body on display. Matthew walked up to her, huge dick in hand, and spent some time rubbing his cock’s head against the girl’s obviously drenched, very tiny, very smooth slit, all while Arturo pounded into her ass, before Matt eventually shoved himself balls deep into the little girl.

The camera was in the perfect spot to show everything, even the small bulge on the girl’s belly. The dudes were huge, and she was very petite and thin.

Triss groaned pushed the phone aside. “I get it. Come on. Can you stop thinking about sex for a moment, and—”

“Ye ever wonder if Sándor can fuck when merged with his Horror? Cause I know.”

“You... do?”

“Aye. Sándor does nae like to talk about himself much, but lately, I’ve managed to coax a few short conversations from him. Managed to piece a few things together.”

Triss looked down at the piano keys, keys she should have been hitting to try and work some muscle memory into her stupid Kindred brain. But instead, she let out another annoyed groan, and looked at Loki incarnate.

“Can he?”

She scrunched her nose in a wicked, evil grin. “Aye. Apparently it’s very... large.”

“Oh come on. He didn’t tell you that.”

“Nae, but he said a few things about time spent with his wife when in his lair, and certain... anatomical problems because of size.” Somehow, her grin only got more evil.

Well, that’d certainly make Jen happy, if she could somehow convince the dude to indulge her.

“Your, uh, Horrors, make a habit of having sex? Can you all even have sex?”

“Vrall can, as you know. Sándor can. But I dinnae think Athalia or Mark can.”

“Heh. Well, the spider girl is pretty damn hot, admitted.”

“Aye! But she likes to tie Damien up. That’s nae fun.”

“Because you want to be the one tied up.”

Fiona nodded like accepting a gift of chocolate. “Aye.”

“Any... any idea what Sándor likes? Or what his Horror would like?”

“Nae, sorry.”

Christ, now Triss was picturing it. Big, muscular gargoyle dude, oddly handsome in that ‘oh shit please don’t eat me enormous monster’ kinda way, with a girl not even half his height on his lap. Less sex than it would be like being a sex toy in a giant monster’s hand. Which tickled the witchy part of her so damn much. Sure, she loved being pampered and being treated like a princess, but god damn there was some part of her that wanted some demon beast with a cock the size of a log to use her like a toy.

Which of course made her feel guilty again, cause fuck, she liked Sándor, and the idea of fucking someone she liked rubbed up against the part of her that still wanted Julias in her life, the part of her that missed the fuck out of him. The part of her that was getting neck deep in shit with an ancient spirit of death, a flesh witch, and some ridiculous pursuit everyone told her was impossible.

Then what the fuck was she doing here, learning to play piano? So she could impress Sándor? God damn it, she fucking hated this, and hated herself for it, too.

“Alright. I’m gonna get going, anyway.”

“Already?”

“Yeah. I stole a keyboard to play on. I’ll practice back at my place.”

Fiona eyed her, obviously suspicious. The girl made no attempts to hide her emotions; if anything, she exaggerated them on purpose.

“I know ye’ve been hanging with Sándor occasionally. Ye—”

“Don’t, Fiona. Just don’t.” Before Fiona could apologize, Triss waved a dismissing hand. “It’s fine. But like I said, it hasn’t even been a year.”

“Ok ok.” She put up her hands in surrender. “Talk later then?”

“Yeah, later.”

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~~Eric~~

“Oh my fucking god. That fucking... that fucking... fuck!”

Eric raised a brow at Jessy, but he knew he didn’t have to ask what she was angry about. She’d tell him. Say one thing for Jessy, he never had to worry about her hiding her feelings.

The two of them sat in his apartment, curled up on his couch, watching some comedy drama episodes. He wasn’t a big fan of sitcoms, but comedy dramas were a different beast, and he did occasionally laugh watching them. A guilty pleasure. Jessy didn’t feel a shred of guilt about it, but she didn’t really feel that way about anything she liked.

“Look at this!” She showed him her phone. Someone had sent her a video.

Jack, lying on his back, on what looked like a bunch of giant white pool towels. His head was on Antoinette’s legs, and she was topless, giant tits hanging right over his head. On Jack’s right was Rachel and Veronica, with both snuggled into him somehow. On the left, Leilani, and Elaine, doing the same thing. Jack had introduced them yesterday. They were all naked, and the three kine were exhausted. Elaine and Jack had probably Kissed them, and fucked them.

The perspective of the camera was from whoever was currently riding the kid. The camera pilot turned it around to point at her, and lo and behold, Ashley the ghoul blew the camera a kiss, before panning the camera down her body. Julee sat behind her, hands running up and down her naked skin, before settling above the blonde ghoul’s very smooth, very small slit. And Ashley made damn sure the

camera remained pointed right at where Jack penetrated her, as she ground her body around and around on him while her friend played with her clitoris.

Jessy groaned like she'd just be run over by a semi. "She must be so tight. Like, look at that tiny waist! Probably hard to fit a single finger in that pussy."

It was true. The Prince's ghouls had skinny bodies, the sort you had if you were a professional acrobat or ballerina or something. Kinda like Natasha, but taller, average height.

"They are pretty skinny."

"I know, right? And—" She groaned again as Elaine reached out, smiled at the camera, took it, and aimed it at Ashley proper, so the video had Ashley and Julee as the center of attention. But Elaine also occasionally took time to aim the phone down at Jack and how he was drowning in a sea of huge breasts, before she aimed the phone at herself and teased her own breasts, then pointed it at the Prince and teased her breasts, before pointing it back at Ashley.

That, was one spoiled kid.

Kat sat in Jessy's lap, and she pawed at the phone, earning a laugh from the vampire. As much as Eric loved his cat, Jessy apparently loved her more, and possibly vice versa. A shame she was spayed. If he could find another cat as chill as Kat, he'd be able to have a family of cats too useless to even hunt a mouse. Which was fine. Jessy was a hunter, and he was a hunter. They didn't need a third.

"Seven girls," Eric said. "That's—"

"A lot of pussy."

"I was going to say intimidating."

She restarted the video, because of course she did. "Talk to Avery lately?"

Talking about Avery and the pack was one thing. Doing that while Jessy held out her phone for the both of them to watch the kid Ventrue get fucked, was another, and weird. But he'd gotten pretty good at just rolling with Jessy and her brazen attitude by this point.

"How'd you know?"

"Tash sent me a message about it."

He sighed and looked back to the TV, the show on pause. Try as he might, he couldn't help but take peeks at the video. It had audio, and Ashley wasn't exactly quiet. Hell, judging from the way her, and even the shy Julee, were bouncing and dancing and giggling, this was a treat for them.

“Avery wants me to come with her on some hunts.”

“Sounds like business as usual.”

“Yeah, maybe. But we talked about some other stuff, some Uratha stuff, and I get the impression she’s gonna try and include more of... that.”

“That?”

“She’s going to try and be my mentor, teach me what she knows, and turn me into her student.” Which wasn’t exactly a bad idea. Avery’s pack wanted to stay in Dolareido. Eric lived in Dolareido and didn’t plan to leave. He was going to have to get along with Avery eventually, and she knew he kept going into the Hisil on his own to do his own hunts. So naturally, she was worried he was going to fuck something up, maybe knock out a key pillar of the ecosystem, and ruin everything.

She was also probably going to try and teach him about the history of the Uratha, what she knew of it, and about Father Wolf and that shit. Considering he’d been visited by the actual moon, on several occasions, he probably should have taken Avery more seriously. But Eric knew himself well enough to know he wanted to do things on his own, his own way, even if it meant making mistakes. Got that from his dad, no doubt.

“Yeah, Avery does have that preachy kinda personality, doesn’t she?”

Eric laughed. Any other girl, or reasonable person, would have sided with Avery. Not Jessy. His girlfriend knew how important it was for some kinds of people to make their own mistakes and forge their own path, even if it meant walking over broken glass in bare feet. No wonder his dad liked her.

“Send more pictures to Dad?”

“Hell yeah. He didn’t tell you?”

“I told him to stop telling me when my girlfriend shows him her tits.”

She laughed and punched him in the shoulder. “I made a deal.”

“Pretty sure that was for one showing. Not a feed of pics.”

She shrugged as she grinned at him. “I mean sure, I can stop. But last I heard, the dude is exercising, eating well, even doing some actual resistance training, you know? My tits have healing powers.”

“You checked up on my dad?”

She waved the phone, still showing Jack in the middle of his three... four... eightsome. “I message him every so often.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. And I know you don’t, you asshole.”

“I... I talk to him.”

“Once every month on a thirty-minute visit.” Before he could defend himself, she put up a hand. “I know I know. Men. To get you dumbasses to actually talk about shit is like pulling teeth.”

“Funny, coming from you.”

“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re practically a man.”

“Fuck that! Just cause I’m awesome and speak my mind and know what I like and shit doesn’t mean I’m masculine. I talk to Tash about girly stuff all the time.” She jammed her finger into his shoulder. “You should talk to your dad more often.”

“I should.”

“Then do that.”

“I will.”

She poked him again. “Don’t make me nag. I suck at nagging. I go from zero to a hundred quick and start throwing things.”

“I’ll talk to him, don’t worry.”

“Good, because he’s probably excited to show off his new girlfriend.”

“I—wait what?”

Laughing, Jessy scrolled past the porn vid to a picture. “See?”

Yeap, that was his dad, in much better shape now, half hugging a woman while looking at the camera. A caretaker was taking a picture with his dad’s phone, and the woman under his dad’s arm was smiling bright. An older lady, like his dad, a black woman whose curly hair had started going white. She had a nice smile.

She looked nothing like Eric’s mom.

“I... didn’t know.”

“Course you didn’t. Your old man’s probably embarrassed, maybe feeling guilty over having a new woman in his life, or maybe some other reason. You’ll never know if you don’t talk to him.” Nodding at him like she’d just spoken the words of God, she scooped Kat up, and set her on the back of the couch.

Before he could say anything, Jessy pushed him onto his back on the couch, pulled his closer leg up so it was on the couch, and she climbed between his legs. Thump, she fell onto his chest with her whole body, almost knocking the wind out of him.

He rolled his eyes, but hugged her as she got comfortable, lying on top of him, her legs between his.

“I guess that vid got me thinking,” he said.

“The vid of Jack?”

“Yeah.”

She grinned at him as she inched over his chest further until she set her lips on his. “Get you horny? Cause, I mean, damn. Antoinette’s tits are—”

“Not exactly what I meant.”

“Not exactly?”

“I mean, I know you’ve been wanting more people—”

She shoved her hands down against his chest as she forced herself up, weight on her palms. Ow.

“Really!?”

He pushed her hands off his chest, and she fell down, making him wince as he prepared for her skull to dent his sternum. Thankfully her elbows hit the couch cushions instead, catching her weight.

“Yes, if you want—”

“Oh my god you have no idea how fucking much Jack’s and Natasha’s vids have been driving me crazy!” She thumped her forehead against his sternum once, like a goat. “Can we—”

“Keep it reasonable, if you please.”

“Ugh, fine fine. I’ll keep it reasonable. Baby steps. Ya big baby.” She got up off the couch, scooped Kat up, and hugged the cat tight to her chest and shoulder as she paced circles around the couch. “I gotta plan this. I suppose you don’t want another dude in the bed.”

“Probably not.”

“Probably.” She leaned over the back of the couch, Kat snug and purring into her chest, and grinned at him. “Any dudes you’d be willing to share me with? Gotta worry about that fragile male ego, ya know.”

He didn’t bother sitting up. “No, I don’t know any guys I’d be happy sharing you with.”

“Mister big bad werewolf gonna be all possessive of me? Hold me down and claim me?”

“Nope.”

“Aw, please? Jealous guys can be kinda hot, when they get all possessive and stupid and shit. Puff up their chests and—”

“Nope.”

She frowned, but resumed pacing her circle around the couch. “I know a girl who’d be happy to join us.”

“Who is it?”

“It’ll be a sur—”

“No surprises.”

“Spoil sport.” She stopped pacing in front of the couch, held Kat up from under the cat’s arms, and rubbed foreheads with her. “Marge.”

“Saw that coming.”

“Hey! She goes to Bloodlust regularly, and we talk and—”

“And you Kiss her.”

Jessy grinned. “Yeap.” Not a hint of shame or guilt there, just mischievousness. “She’s been hesitant to leave Dolareido. From what I can tell, the whole fiasco with Jeremiah broke her, you know? Might not go back to being a hunter. Might give it up.”

Understandable. That’d been one giant shitshow that’d had monsters on both sides, and got a whole bunch of Marge’s friends killed. He didn’t know what sort of history Marge, or Brace or Dennis had before coming to Slut City, what sort of things might have driven them to be hunters, but considering everything that’d happened, no one could blame them if they decided to give it up.

Well, give it up was probably an exaggeration. They were hunters. You didn’t go down that road for no reason, and no one came out of that vocation without mental scars. Marge, Brace, Dennis, they’d all probably keep hunting, but maybe visiting neighboring cities, or keeping an eye on what went on in



Dolareido. An interesting move on Antoinette's part, letting them stay in the city, but she did like to play the long game.

"Marge is pretty hot," he said.

"Fucking right? Love the tiny body and the light black skin, you know?"

Eric rolled his eyes. This girl.

"I haven't talked to her much."

"Well, I can guarantee she'd agree to it."

"I suppose she'd agree to anything in the middle of a Kiss."

"Hey! I didn't coax her into anything."

"Uh huh."

Jessy rolled her eyes, mirroring him. "I didn't! Just a talk between two ladies, a talk that came up several times, with maybe a Kiss here or there..."

"Uh huh."

"I can guarantee she would be delighted to sit on that dick."

"Uh huh."

Laughing, Jessy came over and sat down beside his hip, her ass on the edge of the couch. "Slut City's really rubbed off on her. Give her a few more years and she might even agree to become Kindred." After a confident nod, she hugged Kat snug to her chest, and cradled her on her back, like a baby. Kat made no motion to escape.

"Really?"

"Yeah. She didn't get into the whole hunter thing the way most people do. I haven't suggested it to her or anything, but I can see the signs. She's pretty surprised with Dolareido and how Kindred do things here."

"Still. She used to hunt vampires. I bet she's lost friends to them."

"Yeah, she has. But you never know."

Jessy put Kat down on Eric's chest on her side, rolled Kat onto her back, and buried her face in Kat's belly. Kat didn't mind. If anything, she liked having her belly touched, and she purred away on Eric's chest as Jessy rubbed her face back and forth in the fur.

His phone rang.

Jessy groaned, and grabbed it off the glass table. “Avery.”

“Ignore it.”

“Dude, you know Avery hates phones. If she’s calling you, it’s important.”

“How about, we go find Marge, and have some fun, and Avery can—”

Jessy laughed, but shoved the phone into his face. “Don’t fucking do that! Don’t tempt me. Come on, this is important.”

He groaned, but answered it. “Yeah?”

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Eric and the entire pack of werewolves stood in front of a tear. It was in a basement, under a factory in North Side, an abandoned one. Assuming it was Black Blood making the tears, it’d done so in a place humans weren’t likely to find it, but unlikely didn’t mean impossible. Hell, it was a wonder no kine had found one; they were a lot more hidden in the physical realm than the other realms, but still.

Jessy was with him. Natasha too. Everyone wore typical casual clothing, jeans and t-shirts and whatnot, everyone except Natasha. The little vampire wore a suit with a skirt and a trench coat, almost like she wanted to look like a tiny version of her sire. It looked good on her.

“Garry wants to get involved,” Avery said, talking to Clara. “I keep telling the dude to back off.”

“He’s committed to the city.”

“He’s going to get himself killed.”

Clara shrugged. “You ever meet an elder vamp that could take a younger person’s advice?”

“Nope.”

They continued talking, trying to find some way to get Garry to stay out of their Uratha business. Eric had a few ideas, but he doubted any of them would work. Garry was just one of those guys who liked to get his hands dirty, and see things get fixed with his own eyes instead of in spreadsheets. Eric could respect that, but it was also problematic. If Garry found a way to get involved in spirit affairs, or cross the Gauntlet somehow on his own, it’d make everything so much more complicated. No wonder Avery wanted to get Eric under her thumb.

Matt and Art both stood by a stack of pallets, chatting, while Natasha walked around the tear with phone out, taking notes. Caleb and Noah were there, talking to each other about the tear. David stood by himself, watching the tear, eyes filled with wonder. Monica and Mason, Carter and Erica, and Brianna, all there. Big crew, all to check out this one tear.

“I d-don’t know,” Natasha said. “It shouldn’t exist. It’s n-n-not in the plan...” Frowning, she scrunched up her nose as she stood in front of the large, horizontal cut in the air, and stared into its deep blackness. “It’s just... a random tear?”

Avery walked up to the little vampire, and matched her frown as she stood in front of it. “These things aren’t random. Sure, there are ways to cut holes through the Gauntlet, but the natural ones aren’t cuts or tears. They’re more like sinkholes, and they’re rare as fuck. This”—she gestured to the tear—“is made. Someone tore this open, and we all know who.”

Eric sighed as he watched from the sidelines. Jessy sighed with him, but she only did it to mimic his sigh and try and make him laugh. Didn’t work. They’d thought they had the spirit’s plans figured out, but this threw a wrench into everything. It didn’t fit into Natasha’s graph at all. The first and only mistake she’d made, when predicting the tears.

Jessy walked up and joined her friend. “So this just doesn’t fit anywhere in your calculations?”

“No.”

“Hmm. We going in?”

“W-What? No we’re not going in! We don’t know what’s through there!”

Avery stepped closer to the tear, and sniffed. Clara did the same.

“The Gauntlet is pierced here,” Clara said, gesturing to the tear, “but it doesn’t come out in the Hisil. And... and it doesn’t feel like the normal Gauntlet, almost like it’s... I don’t know. Almost like it’s brushing up against the Gauntlet, but not quite?”

Natasha sighed and put her phone away. “We n-need a Begotten to help us, then. Who should I call?”

Jessy put up a hand. “Call Sándor! Gorgeous Mr. Stoic will save the day.”

Tash frowned up at Jessy and glanced past her to Eric, but he just shrugged and offered the little vampire a sympathetic smile. As deliriously horny as his girlfriend was, he trusted her. And considering he couldn’t go a single night without her trying to get him to look at other women, least he could do

was let her look at other guys. It wasn't like Sándor was a threat anyway, considering the dude kept a brick wall between him and everyone else.

Natasha called him, and sure enough, Sándor the gargoyle came, promptly at that. Casual wear, jeans and t-shirt like the most of them. What did a gargoyle do for fun in his spare time?

"This is unusual," Sándor said. "It cuts into the Great Below."

Eric sucked in a breath. The Great Below. Ghosts, wandering weird planes of dark stone in what seemed like a gigantic, endless cave. But not an empty cave. It apparently reflected parts of Doareido, especially the older parts.

"You sure that's where it goes?" Jessy asked. "Cause, like, I'd be down for visiting a realm with something other than ghosts and shit."

"Perhaps one day I will take you to the realm of the Fae."

"Haha... Wait, seriously?"

"A dangerous place, and a dangerous journey to reach it. But it teems with life, and... interesting creatures. Dangerous creatures, but interesting ones as well, some you would no doubt recognize."

Jessy stared at Sándor like he'd just told her Santa was real. Maybe he had. A realm of fairies and shit? It'd probably make perfect sense for a jolly fat dude flying through the sky delivering gifts to exist there.

Damien stepped into the basement, expression as stone as Sándor's as he walked up to the tear.

"W-What kept you?" Natasha asked.

"Jack wanted me to check out something with the Carthians. He's still trying to patch up some problems with Bella and them."

"Bella's a bitch," Jessy said. "There ain't no fixing that."

"That does seem to be the case." Damien shrugged before looking the tear up and down. "It—"

"Goes back to the Great Below," Jessy said. "So I vote we don't go there, cause that place ain't fun. Let's just close it."

Avery shook her head. "We can't. If we could, we'd have closed the others, too."

"Then the fuck do we do?"

“Go in, like we did with the others,” Clara said. “There has to be a reason this tear exists. I doubt it’s easy for Black Blood to make them. And if it made one that isn’t on Natasha’s chart, which has been right about all the other new tears so far, we should check this one out. It’s new, too.”

Sándor shook his head. “Too dangerous.”

Avery walked up to Sándor and gave him her usual angry face. Considering how small she was, it should have been cute, but Eric had seen too much of Avery’s angry side to find it funny anymore.

They argued for a while. A lot of back and forth, Sándor saying they could die, Avery insisting Uratha could handle it, Jessy insisting ghosts were scary. Eric didn’t say a word.

Eventually they settled on a plan. Avery, Tash, the boys, Eric and Jessy, and Sándor would go in. Clara and the rest of the pack would stay behind, in case Black Blood decided to start shit while they were all preoccupied. Damien would stay behind with her.

Eric shouldn’t have answered the damn phone.

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~~Natasha~~

Sándor went in first. Apparently last time they went through a portal like this, from one of the dream chambers and into the Great Below, it’d been cut very high. Plummet to your death high. Sándor insisted he could fly even when not in the dream realm, if only momentarily, so they followed him.

Avery made a few comments about how weird it was that the Gauntlet was there, and at the same time sort of not. It probably had something to do with the location of the realms and how they connected to each other. If the Gauntlet was a barrier between the physical and spirit realms, then why would going from the physical to the ghost realm brush against it? And how did you brush against a barrier? Was the Gauntlet less like a wall, and more like a nebula? Were there other types of barriers, blocking different realms?

She needed to draw a map. Some sort of fancy, weird, alien, special map that talked about realms and stuff. Antoinette would love that, both to have the map, but also to see Natasha step outside her comfort zone of science, and look into the crazy magical world they lived in. Sometimes it was easy to see how the Prince and Jacob ever became friends, with so many overlapping interests. The Circle was

full of witches, and the Ordo was full of mad scientists who'd happily do something like try and mechanize a portal to a Hell dimension so they could harness it for fuel.

Antoinette probably had something like that in her basement already.

Natasha kept her boys close. She'd been in the Great Below a couple times over the past few months, but it was always creepy. A giant cave that went on and on and on, with all sorts of disturbing scenery. One night they found an ocean of dark water, with little glowing wisps swimming in it. Sándor had been adamant they don't touch the water. Another night they found a well, big and made of stone, with a rope and bucket pulled up. Jessy had tossed a rock in, and it never made a sound. That same night, they stumbled onto what looked like one of Dolareido's tunnels, one of the super old ones, and it went down. And down. And down. They didn't follow it much further.

And then there were the ghosts. Thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of them, in the distance. Whenever they came close, which was rare, they looked like white blurs, sometimes with more defined forms, and often wisps that faded into nothing. But at a distance they carried green lanterns. Tash and her crew had been damn careful to avoid them whenever they came here, but it wasn't all that hard, mostly. Whatever the ghosts did, they floated about doing their own thing, moving as a giant, slow-moving swarm. Like thousands of green fireflies, except moving with all the speed of turtles.

The only thing anyone could see past a few hundred feet in these strange endless, enormous cave tunnels, was fog, and floating green lights.

There were levels to the ghost realm, according to Sándor. He made sure they didn't go any lower than the top layer. His own trips into deeper layers he only talked about a little, giving them hints about 'dark' and 'mysterious' things he avoided, ghosts that transcended ghosthood, and strange places where the ghosts were bound by stranger laws. He even mentioned a river, something that acted as a barrier between the first layer and the ones below it.

A genuine journey into the pits of a strange afterlife. This was exactly why Natasha had fled the Ordo when Daniel had sired her. Crazy, horrifying things. It was so much easier to worry about real things like money and power and blood, all the Invictus ever cared about. But the dragons dipped their toes into so many strange places, and now she was dipping hers, too. And despite herself, she kinda liked it.

Her phone didn't like this place, though, and attempts to take pictures failed. Figured. If she had time, she'd get a sketchpad and draw things, but she wasn't exactly a skilled artist.

The cave went on, and they walked. Rolling waves of stone, usually smooth, sometimes not, the occasional enormous boulder bigger than a house, and then patches of sand, as if they were walking on a beach. Far as they could tell, the realm didn't change under their feet, so all they had to do was turn around when they wanted to go back. Still, it was a super easy place to get lost, and if it hadn't been for the Uratha or Sándor, Tash would have preferred they leave a trail of breadcrumbs to follow.

"This place is empty," Eric said, gesturing around, "and I don't see anything important. Maybe we should go."

Sándor nodded. "It is empty. If Black Blood tore a hole open to here, then either we can't see why it did, or it made a mistake. Perhaps the tear wasn't meant to exist, since it doesn't on Natasha's predictions."

"The predictions could b-be wrong," she said. "I mean—"

"Tash," Avery said, "you've been right about all this shit for months now. Get your head out of your ass, and stop defaulting to 'I could be wrong' anytime someone pokes at the plan. Yes, we all know you could be wrong. Congrats, that's life. But when you got a plan that seems to be working, you fucking default to believing it first, questioning it second. Get me?"

Tash squirmed as she looked away from Avery. "I-I know."

It didn't take more than a second for Jessy to march up to Avery and stare down at her. "Hey! Don't be a bitch. Christ, you like this with that Henry dude? Guy must have the patience of a saint."

Avery glared up at Jessy like the vampire was only an inch tall. "Don't bring my personal life into this."

"If you plan to live in Dolareido, don't expect much privacy." With a very evil wink, Jessy licked one of her fangs.

"Strange, cause I thought I'd done a pretty good job of keeping my private life private."

"Oh? A little birdie told me a certain werewolf bitch, short, milf body, silvery blue eyes and black ponytail — you might know her — has a thing for giving her man handjobs in locations she probably shouldn't. Movie theaters and stuff, you know? Where it's all dark and no one can see what you're doing."

Everyone stopped, and stared. Matthew and Arturo dropped their jaws. Natasha backed up, several times, until she put the boys between her and the volcano.

"You... fucking spied on me? When I was just hanging out with Henry?"

“Invictus spy on everyone.”

“We’re allies!”

“Pffft. We’re acquaintances with similar goals. Thralls and ghouls all over the city are watching you, and Jack isn’t the only vamp in the city with some animals to help him.”

“You fucking ungrateful little shit!”

Jessy didn’t back down. If anything, Avery’s anger was gasoline on her fire. God, Jessy could be such an evil bitch. And right now, Tash was glad to have her as a friend. Maybe.

“Oh get over it. We’ve got all sorts of intel on the lot of you and the sort of shit you get up to when you’re not locked up in your little apartments with drapes shut tight. I know Carter’s found himself a little kine fox who’s into older guys. I know Erica’s been exploring her dom side, whips included. I know Monica’s got really close with a kine couple. Everyone knows about Mason and Tilly, and Brianna and Santos and Derick. Bet you didn’t know Noah, your resident closed-off antisocial asshole, has become really close friends with a couple girls who—”

“I get it! Holy shit, don’t you fucking respect people’s—”

“And I know you, oh holier-than-thou bitch, not only like to take charge when fucking, but apparently you really got a thing for anal.” Without dropping the grin, Jessy shrugged like it was no big deal. “Vamps really go for anal a lot, cause there’s no clean up required, right? We’re ready for anything, all the time. But werewolves gotta eat, right? Must be a pain in the ass — ha!— to get prepped for anal sex with your man all the time.” Jessy leaned down toward Avery, full-on eye contact engaged. “All. The. Time.”

Tash stepped behind Matthew. Hopefully the width of her giant boyfriend would be enough to block the impending explosion.

“I... I... am a grown woman, vamp. I’m not going to be embarrassed about the things I like.” Which was an obvious lie, considering she was blushing. Not a lot, not nearly as much as Tash would have been if Blushing Life, but still, more than they’d ever seen the woman blush.

“Uh huh. Well, be nice to Tash, or I’ll have every dirty, sexy little secret you Uratha have, all out in the open. And I got more.”

Jessy wasn’t lying. She had a lot more secrets than that, for sure, with all the tools the Invictus had for spying on people, plus the stuff she knew about Clara and her time with Jessy’s ghouls.

“Be nice? I’m not being mean. I’m—”



Eric raised a hand. “It was a little mean.”

Avery glared daggers into Eric, before looking to Matt and Art. “What do you think?”

The boys looked between each other, before squirming a little.

“You can be harsh with us all you want,” Art said. “But, uh, yeah you kinda cross the line when talking to other people.”

Matt raised a hand. “Not that Jessy isn’t crossing a hundred lines right now—”

“Says the porn star,” Jessy said, chuckling.

“But, um... maybe be a little nicer?”

Tash smiled up at the back of Art and Matt’s heads. Aw, her boyfriends were defending her. Which normally she’d appreciate, but Avery was a dangerous bear to poke. Wolf.

Avery glared at Matt with enough intensity to melt steel. And when Tash peeked out from behind her, Avery leveled her gaze straight at her. It was like staring into the eyes of a raging storm.

But after a few moments, Avery took a deep breath, sighed, and relaxed.

“Sorry, Natasha. I’ve dealt with a few Uratha like you before, and... I guess I’m just falling into old habits. You’re smart, ok? Just go with it.”

Slowly, Natasha stepped out from behind Matt, and offered Avery her best apologetic smile.

“Th-Thank you. And I know Jessy is a bitch, but—”

“Hey!”

“She means well. And I’m not made of g-glass, Jessy. I can handle a little criticism. I had Maria for a boss for a long time.”

Jessy groaned and scrunched up her nose. “Christ, right. I don’t miss having that bitch in the council.”

“M-Maria wasn’t that bad. She just... w-wanted to make sure things went well.”

Avery laughed as she started walking, and everyone else followed her cue. “I get that. I hate that vampire corpse bitch, but I get it.”

Crisis averted. Everyone started moving again, Sándor at the front, with Eric and Tash’s boys behind him. The girls took the back this time.

Jessy leaned in toward Avery, walking beside her. “You’re really hot, by the way.”

“Don’t start.”

“Aw come on, don’t be like that, I’m just trying to settle the water. Besides, I wasn’t lying. You really got that milf—”

“I never had kids.”

“Cougar then, whatever. You got this tiny, compact, deadly woman thing going that is fucking hot as sin. And the pony tail down to the ass makes you look like a nineties action hero or something.”

Avery rolled her eyes, but Tash could see a hint of a smile there. While Jessy had absolutely zero tact, she had the unnatural ability to disarm people, at least when sex was the topic. Usually. Sometimes.

“Sorry if I’m not as comfortable with sex as you, vamp. Having a pulse and body hair and a menstrual cycle kinda gets in the way of that whole immortal succubus vibe.

“Then it’s a good thing you’re in Dolareido, so you can get every wax imaginable whenever you want, night or day.” Jessy winked at Avery as she came in a bit closer, and bumped hips with her. “And I know you do.”

“Fuck I hate you.”

“No you don’t. I’m delightful.” Jessy nodded, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Just ask Eric.”

“The pup might be a bit biased, don’t you think?”

“True.” Not deterred, Jessy hip bumped Avery again. “You looked great by the way.”

“Looked? You—”

“You and Henry didn’t bother closing the drapes. Not all the way, anyway.”

“We didn’t fuck against the window!”

“That don’t matter. It was an apartment building. Lots of people with telescopes, and drones and stuff. Wasn’t just my spy that saw you riding that dude on the couch.”

“Oh fucking god.” Unable to take it anymore, the poor woman hid her face in her hands. “They recorded it, didn’t they. You got me on tape.”

“Pfft, please. I got everyone on tape. It’s Dolareido.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll—”

“Watch it with you? Sure. You got no idea how hot that firm ass of yours looks with a dick in it. And the way you rode him, facing away, squeezing his legs? Poor guy was just trying to survive how much of a hornball you were being.” Jessy leaned in closer again. “Your legs were shaking.”

Natasha, standing with Jessy between her and the pack leader, gulped on a dry throat as she peeked up at her friend, and then across to Avery. She was blushing again, but at least she didn't look angry; not livid, anyway.

“I'm not making porn for you, Gangrel.”

“Too late now.”

“And I... I... I know what I like. Henry's a nice guy, and I guess I like—”

“Putting on a show? Taking a kind guy and pampering him with all sorts of kinks he never thought a girl would happily satisfy? Cowgirl anal, and then enjoying it so much you can't help but get all tingly and swollen, and everything inside just fucking boils. Before you know it, you're soaking guy's balls, hands clutching his shins as you cum.” Thankfully she whispered it, because Avery blushed a thousand times worse than before, but the boys didn't hear it. Tash did, with how close she was. “It's an interesting spin on the trope. Hardass boss still likes being in charge in bed, but likes being gentle? Dommy mommy? It's unique. Usually the hardass bitch boss wants to be submissive in bed.”

“Jesus christ, is sex all you ever think about?”

“No, but I think about it a lot. Everyone does. I'm just honest about it.” Shrugging, she gestured down at Tash. “You must have seen the vids of this girl getting stuffed with cock right up to the lungs.” This, Jessy didn't bother whispering.

Oh god damn it. Tash punched Jessy in the hip, but Jessy just laughed.

Avery took a quick peek at Tash before looking away. “I... have.”

Tash gasped. “Avery!”

“What? Everyone in the pack talks about it, about Matt and Art suddenly being porn stars. I wanted to see what the fuss was about.”

Jessy growled like she was about to sink her fangs into a fresh meal. “Tash is so small, you can actually see their dicks pushing out against her belly. Fuuuuuuuck it's so hot.”

Now it was Natasha's turn to be hyper embarrassed, but at least she couldn't blush without the Blush.

“At least she fucks them while they’re in human form,” Avery said.

Jessy grinned. “For now.”

“For now?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna break her, and get her to fuck the boys when they’re transformed at some point.”

This was ridiculous. Why were they talking about this when walking through the fog of the Underworld? Ghosts everywhere, hidden in the mist. Ghosts above and in the distance, hovering along, thousands of them, green lights on a path Tash didn’t understand. It was a scary place! But the moment Jessy saw the opportunity to steer the conversation toward sex, she did with the utmost gusto. The girl had a problem.

Avery sighed and shook her head. “It’s weird.”

“Nah, come on. What girl hasn’t fantasized about getting pinned down by some huge, oddly handsome monster, you know? And filled to bursting and—”

“Not that. I mean, Dolareido. There’s a presence here, something that calms the wolf in us. I thought for sure Eric was going to rip you in half if he transformed when you guys were intimate.”

“He nearly did.” The grin on Jessy’s face was positively filthy.

“Not... not that kinda ripping. Girl, what the fuck is wrong with you. No, never mind, forget I asked. What I’m saying is, there’s something weird about Dolareido. The whole damn city is odd. Like, I feel like there’s something... else, happening. Someone or something out there is fucking with this city in ways we don’t know about. Apparently Eric’s talked to the actual Luna, so maybe he knows something, but he doesn’t tell me shit.”

“Well stop being an ass and he’ll tell you more. Use a carrot.”

“A carrot? Bribe him?”

“I mean, kinda? I got his dad in good shape by promising him pictures of my tits. That seemed to work. Maybe it runs in the family?”

Tash groaned. Avery groaned. There was no helping this woman. The only person who was as devoted to sex as the entirety of their personality, was Othello, and Othello didn’t go around poking and prodding people with it. Far as Tash knew, the gorgeous man was content to be a sex addict in silence. But Jessy, she turned it into a game. How uncomfortable could she make people with her sheer abrasiveness and shamelessness?

“I’m not going to show your boyfriend my tits.”

If her comment had been an attempt to throw Jessy off, it didn’t. The woman was impervious.

“Nah. But Eric’s trying to do his own thing as a werewolf, right? Get this whole vigilante thing going, while you’re against that. Maybe if instead of trying to convince him to do otherwise, you actually help him out? I don’t mean physically help him on his hunts, but maybe teach him a thing or two, without trying to turn him into your bitch?”

“I haven’t been trying to turn him into my bitch. But I’m not so dumb I can just ignore—”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Let the dude do his own thing, and—”

Natasha put up a hand, and gestured forward. The boys had stopped, and all of them were looking out into some sort of ravine, complete with jagged, sharp rocks, and lots of places to fall.

Slowly, everyone came up to the edge of the ravine and looked down. Fog, but not so thick they couldn’t see it was about a hundred feet down, climbable even. Tash half expected to see green lanterns down there, but no, no ghosts, near or in it. Left and right, it was one long canyon cut into the dark rock, and weirdly enough, it looked half natural, as if time and weather had created it, but also that it’d been helped along by human hands with tools.

Tash squinted as she crouched down, tapped her vitae, and gazed into the mist and dark. She peeled away the darkness and found identifying marks as best she could, cuts in the black and gray stone, and several old chisels. As she adjusted, she found more things, more bits of metal, man made, things like shovels, and some old railroad carts. All of it was rusted and worn.

There were more than rocks and old tools down there. With what Jack and Jessy told her about the old train graveyard they found months ago, she had to assume the Great Below reflected the places it was close to in the physical realm, or was connected to them somehow. This long canyon had to be reflecting something from Dolareido, maybe from its massive expanse era, same as the train graveyard.

She sucked in a useless breath. There were enormous spiderwebs down there, many of them. God damn it, not again.