

~~Antoinette~~

High within her tower, Antoinette perused the latest information she had acquired through her network of spies. Pictures of Terra Den and its enforcers were cropping up, far more than she wished, as were pictures of the various Xnomina thralls and ghouls, moving against them during daylight. Forever a frustration, that a Kindred's movements and actions were limited to the night, while their far less capable thralls and ghouls could move about freely whenever they desired. Every night come dusk, she had to examine the latest reports, and see what silly maneuvers the enthralled humans performed while she slept.

Garry, was likely the reason Terra Den continued to be aggressive toward Invictus and Xnomina. If this aggressiveness continued unabated, soon thralls would be shooting each other. Once that occurred, the insulted covenant would argue it was damaged property, and demand recompense. The other would not agree, and make a similar argument. Kindred would argue with each other in dark alleys and behind closed doors about the loss, and these disagreements would escalate into violence. The moment a Kindred died, it would escalate further, to skirmishes; nothing more than an appetizer to outright war.

As she acquainted herself with the details of the previous twenty-four hours, thralls had appointments to visit her. Each night, several of her thralls stepped into her office, eyes down in reverence, and she performed the routine of maintaining them as a resource. Those she had bound with the Vinculum were given a taste of her blood, to ensure the addiction and affection continued. Some were bound with only Majesty, though these thralls could not be trusted with vital information, or more impressive weaponry. Some were bound with both, those she trusted with handling the most deadly weaponry and deadlier information.

None of them were told anything about her experiments. Let them live in ignorance of it, lest an unruly thrall divulged information they should not. For all the squabbles of the covenants, and her need to manage them, they were secondary to her true goals of mastering the rules of ephemera, spirits, and what else may lay beyond.

Sometimes she still wondered if it would be better to leave Dolareido, continue her experiments where no one knew her, and no one knew what sort of science she pursued. Jack would be with her of course, and her new childe.

Samantha Terry. Antoinette smiled as she brought up yet another report about covenant activity; Samantha was not in the report, and yet Antoinette's mind drifted to her nonetheless. Her childe had departed to visit her old home, and say her farewells. Jack had gone with her. She had been tempted to join them, but no, it was far too personal. Let the two of them bond, reforge their relationship, and move on from the death of daughter and sibling. Antoinette would be there when it was time for Samantha's funeral. A month was quite a length of time to wait for such an event, but Samantha's new life took precedence.

Bless her heart, Samantha was simply too adorable. While mother and child shared much in common, such as their penchant for honesty, Samantha was soft, resilient in that she would bend when forced, but far too passive to strike back at whatever bent her. The sort of woman who would stay with her husband, even if the man proved abusive and aggressive. Delightfully fortuitous of the woman, to have wed a loving husband and bear two loving children. Or perhaps, not fortuitous, but diligent, to have raised her children as she did, to have raised Jack into the man he had become.

Daniel stepped into the office, and she gestured to him with a gentle hand as she leaned back upon her throne. "I assume you know of Terra Den's new aggression. They continue to poke at Xnomina."

"Did it come up at the Primogen meeting?"

"It did, but Garry did not admit to the severity of his actions, and the Invictus refused to admit how damaging those actions are. Strange, is it not? It is usually Garry who refuses to show weakness, while the Invictus claw at his domain."

"It is strange. The power balance has been upset, and Garry continues to take advantage."

Sighing, Antoinette caressed her jaw with a single finger, and scrolled through the various pictures her thralls had taken. Garry's thralls were never subtle. While the Invictus knew to operate quietly, in secret, establishing many plots with a dozen avenues each, the Carthians were content to operate openly, burning down whatever they felt was an obstacle. In the past, Garry would force himself to hold back on his more reckless Carthian urges, due to the dual power of the First and Second Estate. His rise to greater power continued after the purge, and had only continued to grow in more earnest after the death of Viktor and Tony. Naturally, now that Maria had decided to focus her efforts on the revival of the blasted Lancea et Sanctum, leaving much of the Invictus duties in Michael's lap, Garry would continue to push to expand his territory, in retribution for the Mirrden district, but also with an inevitable desire to rule the city for himself.

Perhaps, instead of fleeing Dolareido for a more private life, she should simply kill all the Carthians and Invictus in her beloved city? A tempting thought, but ultimately it would undermine her goals. If she wanted Kindred to cooperate in preparation for the future, Dolareido and the truce it maintained between covenants were her greatest chance.

“The Uratha,” she said, “are a factor in this. Garry feels comfortable being aggressive, because the infuriating Gangrel is friends with Avery. How far have the Invictus come in... seducing, the werewolves into their arms?”

“Not very.” Shrugging, Daniel walked behind her to stand at the enormous window looking over her city. “Clara and Carter continue to sleep in the Invictus hotel, and while the First Estate has offered other incentives to the Uratha, Avery has been slow to take the bait.”

“She is intelligent. I... have to respect that.”

“She killed Minerva,” he said.

“She killed Minerva at Simon’s order, and because my... old friend, had crossed a line.” A line of which she had yet to be informed of. “You do not trust her.” She could practically see the frown through the back of Daniel’s head. Which was quite surprising, considering how rarely the man frowned.

“I think... you have been unusually forgiving, as of late.”

This again. Antoinette sighed, got up from her chair, and joined her old friend at the window.

“Did you enjoy the purge, sheriff? Did you enjoy walking in the ashes of dozens of Kindred?”

“We have a responsibility to the Ordo Dracul, Ann. Being Voivode of this city has provided you with the resources to pursue your experiments.”

“You know very well my goal is not only my experiments with ephemera, Daniel.”

She expected a sigh, but that was her mistake; Daniel rarely made such noises. He stared out the window, adjusted his glasses, and shook his head.

“You expect too much. The Carthians will stir violence with the Invictus, sooner or later, and Jacob will throw gasoline onto that fire. The werewolves will get involved. And, because tragedy is an avalanche that does not stop until it has destroyed everything, the Begotten will become involved. Do you not remember the damage Azamel caused the last time she was here?”

“I... cling to the peace we have. It is the only hope our kind has, Daniel.”

As if God had decided to make a statement, Daniel did indeed, sigh. “Then you have more hope for these Kindred than I. It will come to violence, Ann.”

“You believe we will be forced to choose between the Carthians and the Invictus?”

“No. I believe, when the time comes, everyone will be at each other’s throats. We will be forced to leave, or...”

Or kill them all, and purge her city of all meddling forces. The issue with that approach, was that, for all the strength she possessed, her and Daniel, it would not be possible for them two of them to defeat two hundred Kindred in battle, when the enemy would have the support of several ancilla, Maria, Michael, Garry, and now perhaps the Uratha. In the worst case scenario, Jacob would become an issue, and that was not a battle she was sure she could win.

She was more confident that she could defeat the Uratha, than she could Jacob. But then she remembered Simon, and the others of his pack, and the powers they possessed. While all Uratha could transform into fierce beasts of legend, it was the Uratha that wielded special abilities upon that, that were truly frightening. Some could disappear, in a similar manner to Kindred. Some could summon flames to their claws, which would be especially problematic for her kind. And some, she knew, could unleash roars that could render even a Kindred catatonic.

Daniel was right, of course. With time, the habits of Kindred would lead to violence, and Avery would find herself involved; Azamel as well, considering Dolareido’s luck of late. All of this, and they still had the hunters to deal with.

“No,” she said at last. “If it comes to it, we will act with violence, but not only do I believe these Kindred can learn to coexist, but that you and I can deal with the troubles that arise in pursuit of coexistence.”

Large words. She had become more passive, accepting, and forgiving of the transgressions of her fellow paranormals as of late. The sheriff and her had had this conversation before, and at the time, she had felt that perhaps her relationship with Jack had softened her; Daniel felt the same way. With time, she was not so sure it was simply her being in a loving, healthy relationship that had softened her heart, but hope. Hope that, perhaps, the covenants could grow to cooperate, and the Lancea et Sanctum, with the reforged

Burksen within, could become something healthy for her city, instead of the ludicrous traditionalism and totalitarianism of Lucas's approach.

Alas, perhaps she was being naive. Perhaps, given time, Daniel would prove to be correct, and the two of them would be forced to deal with the covenants, the Uratha, and the Begotten. She had measures in place, should such a battle happen upon the horizon, but she would not engage such tools unless absolutely necessary.

Her phone began to ring. Only her two ghouls, Jack, the sheriff, Natasha, and Samantha, could pull a ring from her phone, and she smiled as she reached for it upon her desk. She had chosen a gentle song to play, when Samantha called; it fit her.

“Yes, my childe?”

“Antoinette, I... um... something's happened.”

Antoinette froze, and felt her fingers tighten on the phone. How long had it been since she felt the fear of a guardian, that perhaps something horrible had happened to someone she cherished? Not since the death of her previous ghouls, at Lucas's hand. Tony's death had been a sad night, but not for the same reasons.

“What has happened, Samantha?”

“Um... it's personal. Can we talk, in person? It... might involve some of the things we... we do.”

Without Antoinette saying a word, Daniel nodded to her, and left, leaving the Prince smiling at his back. Her old friend was far too wise.

“Oui. Come, see me in my main office.”

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Samantha came to her tower, alone. Jack had dropped her off, and had sent her a text explaining that he had to meet with the other Right Hands to pursue covenant business. She acknowledged, and watched through her window as her love walked off. How she wished she could help him with the weight on his shoulders. Her poor little Ventrue.

She trusted him to manage the stress being laid at his feet. And at the moment, she had her own situations to manage.

“Samantha, my dear childe, come sit.” She gestured to one of the chairs near her desk. There was no glass table in this office room. Instead, there were several large, cushioned chairs, black leather.

With trembling hands, Samantha sat down, and slid in closer to Antoinette’s desk. She had a wooden box in her hand, a foot wide and a few inches thick, with a split down the center. A jewelry box?

“Something... happened, at the house.” The look of fear on her face was blatant. If Jack wore his emotions on his sleeve, something he struggled to manage, Samantha put them up in lights.

“Are you alright, my childe?”

“I think so. I didn’t know what to take, so I grabbed my old jewelry box; lots of gifts from my family in here. Some things from James and Mary, and Jack. Other people too. Some of them are... important to me, in memory, you know?”

Antoinette smiled. “I know indeed. But, I do not understand. You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

Her childe blinked at her, several times, and clutched the box tight on her lap. “That’s... that’s what happened.”

“Excusez-moi?”

“Jack and I, we were walking around the house. It was cold, strangely cold, and it got dark, and it felt strange, and... heavy.”

“That does sound unusual.”

“And... and then...” Samantha looked down, and her shoulders started to shake. “She attacked Jack.”

“Someone attacked Jack? But, I witnessed the boy’s departure moments ago. He looked unharmed.” But then, as she examined the memory, she did notice he looked heavy. She had thought it was the stress her poor little Ventrue must bear, but perhaps it was more?

“He says it’s the curse. It heals him pretty quick. He’s still hurt, but he’s up and moving around.”

So Jack had confessed to his mother of the curse. Smart of the boy to break the news to her himself, before a ruthless rumor did it for him.

“I do not understand. Who would attack Jack in such a location? Was it the hunters?”

“No! No no, it was... it was... Mary.”

Antoinette peered at Samantha closely, squinting for a moment as she sifted through the emotions pouring out of her childe. “Your daughter.”

“My daughter. She... she’s a ghost... and she’s haunting our home.”

So, she had seen a ghost, then. Were the situation not so terrible, she would have laughed at her previous deduction. “I... I do not know what to say, Samantha. That is an extreme situation to be caught in, and one I have not seen in many decades. I cannot imagine the horror of seeing your daughter return in such a fashion.”

“It was... it was hard. She attacked Jack, because Jack wiped her memory of an encounter they once had. To preserve the Masquerade, you know?”

“Indeed.”

“And, and... Mary remembered it, as a ghost, I guess.”

That was a disturbing portion of knowledge to discover, that a ghost could recall memories they had lost in life, those wiped away by a Ventrue. It stirred questions about memories, about the soul, and whether the two were connected. Her experiments suggested events left lasting impacts on ephemera, that could manifest given the correct stimuli, but memories were a different creature, than events themselves.

“I calmed her down, and she apologized,” Samantha continued, voice wavering. “It was really her, Prince! My daughter, a... a... ghost. Oh, it was terrifying. She was so angry, and not... not herself.” Slowly, Samantha opened the box, exposing some of her old jewelry. It was delightfully juvenile, old fashioned and inexpensive, necklaces with broaches and pictures, bulky gold rings, and loop earrings.

“I can only imagine, if she felt the need to attack her brother.”

“She threw him around! It was like that movie Carrie, you know? She threw Jack around, and plates, knives, and the couches. Two couches were ruined, and both televisions.”

“That... is a powerful ghost, my childe.” For a ghost to lash out with destruction force of such magnitude was rare. Normally they haunted an area, but their influence was subtle, distorting paintings or knocking over glasses. Their occurrence was so rare that sometimes she wondered if her few encounters with spectral entities in the past couple centuries had actually been, indeed, ghosts at all.

Nodding, Samantha set the box on Antoinette's desk, and withdrew one of the necklaces. A thin gold chain, one of the more elegant pieces, and timelessly fashionable.

"Mary got me this." Ah, yes, it made sense that it was the daughter that acquired the jewelry that a mother would wear. Bless the men and their failed attempts at purchasing jewelry; twice bless her silly childe, for keeping the gifts, and not trading them for store credit. Juvenile, and ultimately emotions misplaced. But then, she was not Samantha. Do not judge, Antoinette.

"It is lovely."

"Thank you!" Samantha, still shaking with what must have been the aftereffects of overwhelming fear, elation, and heartbreak, beamed. Forever weak to compliments, her childe, a weakness Antoinette was hesitant to train out of her. "I... I... I don't know what to do! My baby girl is back, Antoinette. She's back. She called me Mom." The word 'Mom' had her shaking all the more, and she had to clutch the necklace on her lap before she could settle. "Jack insisted this is bad, that she shouldn't be a ghost, that... that..."

"Your son is wise, Samantha."

"I... know."

Antoinette took a deep breath, and sighed. "I had not foreseen this, but perhaps I should have."

"You said you hadn't seen something like this in decades. You've dealt with... ghosts, before?"

Nodding, Antoinette got up, and walked over to her window, before gesturing for Samantha to follow. She did a moment later, necklace still in her hands. The two Daeva stared out over the city, and Antoinette held her hands behind her, in the small of her back, as she considered her words.

"I have had the good fortune of never having to deal with a specter from someone I knew, my childe. But, a couple times, ghosts have likely haunted places in my city. They hide well, and only expose themselves when they feel the need. Normally they hide in Twilight, and only emerge either to pursue resolution, or to let their emotions boil over into the real world."

Samantha looked from the city to her, eyes widening, and lips parting. "You know a lot about this sort of stuff."

"That I do, my childe. Studying aspects of Twilight, and the peculiar entities that lurk within, and beyond, is what I do for the Ordo Dracul." And for herself, naturally.



Samantha gasped. It was so joyfully typical, it were almost if Samantha did stock sounds for old television.

“You’ve never told me about what you do, for the Ordo. Not in depth, I mean. You mentioned spirits before, but I... didn’t really know what that meant.”

“With this unexpected situation, perhaps it is time that changed.”

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She guided Samantha down into the depths of her tower. Her childe had her own room within the maze and luxuries of her tower’s underside, but Samantha did not have the courage to explore without Antoinette to guide her. Perhaps that would change, if the woman began to feel a connection to her new role.

It was Antoinette’s duty as sire to teach her childe the basics of her covenant. An easy task for the Carthians or the Invictus, whose purposes were clear, and who dealt with tiers of information as many normal societies did: with rank, or respect. An even easier task for the Lancea et Sanctum, who felt content to strip away skepticism and critical thinking from their recruits, and only give them enough information to pull them deeper into the pyramid scheme.

She frowned at herself as she walked. Her opinion of the Second Estate did not need to be so harsh, but it was difficult to release. Not all who were devoted to religion were needlessly traditional, and blind to scientific reason, or weighing evidence, or pragmatic conclusions. Perhaps Damien could be such a soul, or Maria could learn to be.

To learn the basics of the Circle of the Crone, to enter its dark embrace, would not be as easy as the first three. They did not have the mindless worship mentality of religion, but that did not change that they were a dark cult that encouraged treating each other as a family. They openly pushed for their members to go out, explore, dive deep into dark arts, and to test the limits of pleasure and pain. It was not a group you could test the waters with first. You must dive in deep, and learn to swim.

The Ordo Dracul, on the other hand, were different. Everything was about a Kindred’s ability to learn, decipher, and adapt. The Ordo used mentors to prepare students for the many phases of rising through the

ranks of the secret organization. It was not dissimilar to a secret university, with ranks of knowledge and mastery, with students pursuing doctorates in specific topics. The topics ranged from learning how to read society at large and how it responded to various zeitgeists, to more arcane or deadly interests, such as her own.

Some of the more brutal Kogaion demanded studying dragons performed heinous acts, in order to observe the change, and master the art of study. Kill one of the kine, and document the results, analyze the fallout, and report. She felt no need for such a barbaric tactic to teach Kindred how to analyze.

Tonight, she would test some waters with her childe, and see if the ripples piqued Samantha's interest. Perhaps she would be interested, or perhaps she would not be. Natasha had been terrified of the secrets Antoinette offered, once upon a time. Lesson learned then, to go slow with Samantha. Not everyone devoured this knowledge with the voracity of Minerva.

Deep within the tunnels of her tower, surrounded by black marble and metal, she opened the door to her primary experiments room. She motioned for her childe to follow her, and smiled back over her shoulder, as she watched Samantha's jaw drop.

"Wow." Samantha stepped over to the table with the tablets, the laptops, and the various artifacts sitting about. Above her hung the chandelier, though it cast no light at the moment, room lit with the usual white LEDs within the ceiling. They did not rob from the majesty of the chandelier, the priceless artifacts, or the many symbols drawn into the floor, the walls, and ceiling.

Unlike Jacob and his archaic ritual symbols, Antoinette had found patterns that allowed her to peer into Twilight. Trial and error, hundreds of years of experimentation, and reading through every ancient text she could find. Information had to be assembled painfully, pieces of a million-piece puzzle, of which she did not have a final image for reference. It would have been easier to complete a puzzle of featureless glass.

The discovery of Twilight was not the highlight of her career. The concept of ghosts and other creatures that hid in a realm between, but were part of the physical world in sense, was an idea as old as time. But that she could touch its hidden depths, test them, and fish for interaction through a combination of mathematical patterns, symbols, resonance, and light spectrums, was her contribution to the Ordo. Since she first proposed the idea, and demonstrated repeatable results in the past century, visiting members of the Ordo took to her idea, and had begun to explore it as well. Perhaps Elaine would ask for an update on her progress?

“I have mentioned that I explore the existence of other realms before, have I not?” Antoinette, smiling at her childe, stepped out onto the giant, spiraling circle within the center of the floor.

“Y-Yes, but I didn’t really... know what that meant.”

“As a Kogaion for the Ordo Dracul in Dolareido, all dragons in this city must report to me. But I also pursue my own interests, as a Sworn of the Dying Light. Perhaps, in the future, these titles will mean something to you, but for now simply listen and absorb what you can.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Delightful.

“The Ordo Dracul pursue mastery of many facets of existence, as I have explained before. I have dedicated much of my second life to experimenting with Coils focused on exploring the soul, as well as that of the flesh, particularly vampire flesh.”

“Right, yeah. I don’t really know what Coils are, though.”

“Coils are techniques you may learn, that draw upon your abilities as a vampire to summon forth. With willpower, you may perform acts outside the realm of standard Disciplines, and the Coils are unique from Disciplines in that they do not drain your vitae to enact. Some may resist the damage of sunlight. Others resist the nightmares of torpor. And others may allow your blood to be more addictive, so you may bind others to your will far more quickly than normal.” How and why coils behaved the way they did, when performed by Kindred, was a great riddle that the Ordo explored with utmost conviction. An answer to the question ‘what are the Coils’ still remained a mystery, however.

“Wow.” Such an interesting student, her childe. Whereas Natasha would absorb information, and then question what she did not understand, Samantha listened and absorbed what she could, which, did not seem like all that much. Bless her heart, teaching her to master the Coils would be difficult.

“But tonight, it is not the Coils I wish to explore with you. Due to your encounter with your daughter, I believe it will be of... value to you. Ultimately, you do not need to join the Ordo Dracul, my childe, or become one of the Sworn, but perhaps tonight will intrigue you.” She held out her palm, smiled at Samantha, and nodded to the necklace in her hand.

Samantha raised a brow, blinked at her several times, and handed her the small chain. “Why wouldn’t I join?”

“The Ordo explores the mysteries of existence, my childe. Many of these mysteries are terrifying. I do not blame others for preferring to keep their feet firmly upon the Earth. But for those who acquire a taste for secrets, they often become quite addicted.” She set the necklace upon the center of her summoning circle, and rejoined Samantha at the table. Nodding to her childe, she grabbed the primary control tablet, and used it to turn off the lights, turn on the chandelier and its unusual blue light, and turn on the resonance machine and its gentle hum.

Such objects normally only left an imprint on Twilight ephemera, if the emotions suffered by those near it were extreme. Samantha was the sort to overflow with emotion though, and perhaps something as simple as a gift from her daughter would affect it.

She gave the tablet to her childe, and pointed at the summoning circle within the center of the room. “Using the resonance tool, select the filter, and observe the circle through the device.”

“Ok.” Obviously confused, Samantha managed a small shrug, and did as instructed. Soon she was looking through the orange filter of the tablet, aiming the large device toward the center of the room, and her necklace, sitting under the chandelier.

Samantha gasped, as if the woman had seen far too many soap operas. She opened her eyes as wide as they could go, lowered the device, peered at the necklace and blue light, and raised the device again.

“Oh my god! That’s... that’s... that’s me, and Mary!”

Antoinette suppressed her grin. It was true then, that Samantha overflowed with such emotion, that something as simple as receiving a necklace from her daughter would leave an imprint. Stepping around the desk and looking through the screen did indeed show a woman, hugging another woman. The hazy images were blurry, without as much definition as she found on artifacts oriented around murders of passion, or the collapse of civilizations, but that did not detract from the power of the scene.

“This necklace must be important to you.”

“It... it’s... a gift Mary got me, not long after she came back from running away. See? She looks shorter than... than... she is now. Was... now.” Samantha pointed at the tablet, and beamed up at Antoinette with a precious smile. “Is this real?”

Antoinette returned the smile as she analyzed the two women on the screen. “In a sense. It is what we call ephemera.”

“Ephemera...” Samantha tapped her nose several times, before smiling at the repeating image of her past self hugging her daughter.

“A material, no different than solids, liquids, or gasses. It exists in many manifestations, but most importantly, it hides among us and the physical, in a place, or state, that some call Twilight.”

“Right, you mentioned Twilight. Is it like that—”

“No, silly childe, not as per the books or movies.” Forever she would be tormented by such media. “It is a place that surrounds us, permeates us, but we cannot touch. Spirits from other realms hide within its shadows; the werewolves hunt them. Ghosts rest within, and emerge when disturbed. Understanding the nature of ephemera is one of my goals.”

Nodding to her childe, Antoinette walked over to the circle, and stepped next to the necklace. Samantha blinked at her, but looked down at the tablet, and gasped once again.

“W-What? They... they see you! But I don’t understand. I thought we were looking at a memory.”

“The nature of ephemera is strange. It feeds on essence, an invisible energy that I also study to understand. Ephemera seems capable of evolving into entities, or perhaps essence itself is what births ephemera into an entity, I do not know. Such are the mysteries I explore. A property of ephemera that I have researched to a grand degree, is what you see, that it seems capable of both retaining the details of powerful events, but also capable of interacting with the physical present.”

“Wow. I thought... the Ordo Dracul would be focused more on things like, vampire stuff.”

“Many are, and many explore the boundaries of our existence. There are realms beyond our borders, Samantha Terry, entire realms, filled with alien entities upon the edge of reason. I spend much of my time exploring how our physical realm interacts with our sister realm, that we call the Shadow Realm. The werewolves, Uratha, call it the Hisil.” She left the circle, and by the time she returned to Samantha and peered upon the tablet, the ghostly images were repeating their everlasting moment of joy as if Antoinette had not disturbed them.

“Ephemera can act like... like it’s alive, but it’s really just replaying memories?”

“Indeed.” She sat with her childe, and watched the painful realization dawn upon Samantha’s face.

“So, the ghost at my home... might just be a memory of Mary, and not actually Mary.”

“It is a grand, difficult question, my childe, and one other dragons have attempted to answer. Attempted, and failed. For all our knowledge, centuries upon centuries of research and experiments, no one has ever managed to define a soul. We have evidence the soul exists, but what a soul entails, is beyond our current sum of knowledge. Whether this ghost is your daughter’s soul, or a rather powerful memory of her, I do not know.”

“That’s... painful to hear.” Her childe forced down an oncoming sob, but soon a bittersweet smile sat upon her lips once again, as she watched the precious past through the tablet. “I should have listened to Jack.”

Antoinette shook her head. “My love is doing his best to protect you from the unusual circumstances that surround him. From what you have said, this ghost has demonstrated far more emotion and awareness than any ephemera I have exposed with objects such as your necklace.”

That earned a larger smile from her childe. “I think it’s her. But... but, she’s still a ghost. She’s still dead.”

“That she is, my childe. And the unfortunate reality, is that no one has ever managed to achieve resurrection. Or if they have, it has been kept secret.” She loathed to mention the word ‘resurrection’ to her childe, for fear of implanting the idea at all, but it was better to crush any hope she had, before hope shattered into destructive remorse. If only Maria, and the witches could understand that.

“What do we do?”

“Ghosts are a conundrum, my childe. Dealing with them can often simply be a case of ignoring them, and letting them fade. I suspect such is how most are dealt with. But the few I have been forced to deal with, their ends did not come lightly. In the circumstances I can remember, one of the specters had to achieve revenge on who murdered him; I was but a distant witness to this event. The other two, I was forced to destroy the building they haunted.”

“Destroy!?”

“Indeed. Though, I suspect it was not destroying the building itself that dispersed the specter, but the fire destroying an object the ghost was connected to.” She shrugged, and held out a hand. With a sigh of disappointment, Samantha handed the tablet to her, and Antoinette turned off the resonance machine before setting the lights back to normal.

“What happens to ghosts destroyed like that?”

“I do not know, little Daeva. If they are ephemeral remnants, memories left behind by powerful moments, then I assume they were destroyed completely. If they are, instead, the souls of those who have died, I believe they are forced to move onto wherever it is that souls normally arrive upon death.”

Samantha nodded, looking down, lost in thought. “That does sound like a mystery I’d like to know the answer to.”

“Oh?” Smiling wider, Antoinette leaned in closer to the small woman. “Such secrets do not frighten you?”

“They do. But, it’s better to know, right?”

“You do not consider it blasphemy?”

“Blasphemy? No. It’s just knowledge, right? What’s wrong with learning about things?”

There were many things wrong with knowledge, in the grand scheme of things. Samantha’s naivety was quite cute though, and Antoinette could not help but chuckle at how adorable it was.

“Indeed, knowledge is knowledge, a tool. Sometimes it is a deadly tool, but only a fool blames the tool for the intent of those who wield them. And yet, sometimes a tool is an accident waiting to happen, my sweet childe. Kingdoms have been lost in calamity, to the wandering fingers of curious souls.”

Samantha nodded, smiling some more. Antoinette’s words were going in through one ear and out the other, mostly, but perhaps traces of them would be left behind, grains of sand Samantha could ponder upon until they became pearls. She truly was Natasha’s opposite.

“Prince.”

“Samantha?”

“Jack, he um... told me about a lot of things at the house, before Mary attacked him. He told me about... Julias.”

“That is a sad story, my childe, and I am saddened that you had to learn the details of it. But please, do not feel guilty. Julias Mire made his own choice.”

“And... he also told me about something people call the curse?”

“Yes, as you mentioned. Of that, I am quite surprised he shared with you.”

She frowned at Antoinette. “I’m his mother.”

As expected, the fledgling was more than capable of summoning some fierceness to her, if her children were in danger. A useful trait, but not well managed.

“You are his mother, but that was a previous life, Samantha Terry. You must accept that your role has changed.”

“I... don’t think I can do that.”

Again, Antoinette laughed, and offered her childe a more gentle smile. “You would not be you if you could, my childe. As for Jack and his curse, it is a strange circumstance your son has found himself in. We do not know what will happen to him, but I trust him and his friend Damien to monitor the situation closely.”

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~~Damien~~

The sheriff left the Elysium tower, and Damien followed. He tapped deep into his vitae, summoned excessive amounts of it, of willpower, of determination, and hid himself with the Cloak of Night. While Daniel walked the sidewalk of South Side, surrounded by people, Damien kept to the rooftops. Following him in the crowd would be both easier, due to all the bodies, and harder, due to the needed proximity for visual contact. Up here, he could follow the man from a distance. Even if Daniel managed to sense him, Damien was nothing but a black silhouette at the edge of rooftops.

He wasn’t sure why he was doing this. Perhaps if he managed to sneak up on the sheriff, he could prove worthy of training? It was an absurd notion, that he could convince the sheriff to train him, but Maria saw the value in it. It was a way to maintain peace between the reborn Lancea et Sanctum, and the Prince. It was also a way for Damien to acquire skills no other Mekhet in the city was old enough to teach. Those reasons didn’t resonate with him though.

Daniel was the sheriff, a man who’d killed dozens of Kindred and many bishops during the purge. He defeated Lucas’s rebellion, but only after Natasha was safe from Lucas’s clutches, a place Damien had put her. In the end, Daniel had spared him when he had every reason to kill him.

Perhaps all Damien wanted to do was apologize? He'd seen the error of his ways, and was turning over a new leaf. But the thought felt shallow. Words, were shallow. Actions spoke loud, and Damien thought he had acted in the best interest of the covenants since Lucas's death. Twice now, he had fought alongside Jack, once against a strange monster, and another time against hunters. He had rushed to Jack's aid when the man had summoned an army of crows to the hospital.

Perhaps all Damien wanted, was simply a mentor, a fellow Mekhet and someone he could talk to about the trials and tribulations of their blood clan. There were Mekhet older than Damien in the Invictus and Carthian covenants, one each he believed, but neither had acquired the experience Damien had. The Kindred of Dolareido were soft.

Daniel wasn't soft. Daniel was a brutal, efficient killer. An assassin, a perfect example of a Mekhet at the height of their power. And Damien looked up to him. Perhaps that was the reason then, simple idolism.

Damien froze, and stared through his binoculars at the sheriff. Keeping track of someone among hundreds of shifting bodies was difficult, but Daniel had stopped moving, making trapping him much easier. Any moment now, the elder was going to look Damien's way, and catch him in the act.

Except, no. Daniel was looking at something ahead of him, or someone. He recognized the someone. Athalia.

Right, Daniel knew Athalia. Apparently, the two knew each other from before Angela's arrival at the city. Romance? Judging from the way Athalia was glaring at him, probably not. If only he could read her lips. It was a skill he should have developed, considering his many decades of observation, but he hadn't.

The two were exchanging words, and Athalia seemed heated. She was always heated. There was an appeal to her, dark skin, long, smooth black hair, tall and thin. Unfortunately, he'd never seen Athalia not look upset, and if he had to pick between the fieriness of someone like Athalia, or the joviality of someone like Fiona, there was no question which he found more appealing.

His phone buzzed. Cursing under his breath, he pulled out his phone and turned off the ring and buzz. Who had messaged him? Ah, Fiona, speak of the devil. And she'd sent him a picture.

Look at the picture, or focus on the mission. A terrible, difficult, horrible choice to make.

He looked at the picture.

Fiona, on her bed, wearing some purple boy shorts, and nothing but. She was facing the camera, kneeling on the bed, and cupping each breast as she smiled for the picture; a picture taken by her laptop, apparently. There were multiple pictures, and each had Fiona exploring her body with increasing indecency. She knew she had large breasts, and she enjoyed showing them off. She knew she had a large butt, and she enjoyed showing that off as well.

He forced down the rising urge to indulge, and quickly texted her. ~Please stop, you're killing me. I'm on a mission.~

A moment later, he received another picture. Fiona stood in front of her laptop, leaning forward, frowning. The angle caused her breasts to hang heavy underneath her, and in her hand, she held a vibrator. Good Lord, give him strength.

He put the phone away, and looked back to the street. Naturally, Daniel had vanished. He could see Athalia, walking off, and he could see her frown steering nearby pedestrians clear of her path, but Daniel was nowhere to be seen.

“Why are you following me?” The sheriff's voice came from behind him, quiet, and cold, maybe slightly irritated.

Damien turned his head enough to see that a long sword was being held an inch from his throat. He had half expected this excursion to end like this, with Daniel sneaking up on him, turning the tables; it did nothing to ease the shock of being ambushed. He hadn't expected Daniel's sneak attack to succeed because he was distracted by his sex life. And damn, he was happy to have a sex life, but not happy to have a sword at his neck.

“Sheriff. I was... limit testing.”

“Limit testing?”

“I wanted to know if I could follow you without being spotted.”

Daniel stared at him through his glasses, a stone, without emotion or surprise. His right hand still held the sword, and he used his left to adjust his glasses, pushing on the bridge to get them closer to his eyes.

“I'm almost half a millennium old, Mister Burksen. You're what, fifty-one-years embraced?”

“And that's... part of the reason I'm following you.” Damien stood up, and Daniel kept the sword where it was. The blade was steady, and Damien frowned for a moment as he checked the metal. Zero

adornments of any kind, a blade meant for killing and nothing else. “Maria tells me she’s announced the revival of the Lancea et Sanctum officially, and that she’s going to be running it. I’m going to be her right hand, her sword, and... I wanted your help.”

“My help?” With brow raised, a moment of emotion Damien had not expected from the statue, Daniel slipped his sword into his jacket into a hidden sheath starting behind his neck. His face returned to its stone solidity in seconds, and he stared at Damien with all the interest and urgency of a wall.

“Yes, your help. There aren’t any Mekhet I can come to for training.”

“Training.” Daniel stared at him, a blank expression Damien could only assume was the man’s surprised face, before he started walking away. “Are you serious?”

Damien followed after him. When they got to the edge of the rooftop, Daniel dropped off it, as casual as walking down the stairs. He landed like a feather. Daniel was a tall man, a bit lanky, but big enough to hit with impact, except he didn’t. He didn’t make a noise, didn’t roll with the impact, he simply landed, and started walking. And it was a five-floor drop.

Damien tried to mimic him. It was stupid, juvenile, and very much not like him to do something like this, but he tried. His Kindred body could handle the impact without too much issue, but he heard the sound of his boots hitting the concrete of the dark alley, plenty loud. And it hurt, falling that far. It took a few moments for the shinsplints pain to pass, before he limped, and then walked after the sheriff.

“Yes, I’m serious.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Why did you spare me?”

The two Mekhet merged into the crowd. Daniel moved through it like water, turning his shoulders only just enough to graze by the dozens, hundreds of people walking past. If Daniel collided with a single shoulder, Damien didn’t notice it.

“Natasha wanted to spare you.”

“And you agreed.”

“I... did not see Lucas, in you.”

“Exactly.” Damien forced himself in close so the two of them could talk, getting in behind the man until his nose was almost touching the back of Daniel’s neck. “You trusted me enough to leave me alive, even after everything that happened, everything I did.”

“If you need training, ask Mister Templeman.”

“Ryan is... ancilla, but he hasn’t developed the skills I’m looking for, the skills everyone knows you possess.”

“And?”

“And I’m asking, help me. I am a valuable asset to the city, and to the Prince’s efforts.” Maybe some cold reasoning would be the way to sway this man of stone.

The sheriff looked over his shoulder at him. The expression was unreadable, as it almost always was with the man.

“How are you a valuable asset?”

“Because I’m doing all I can to catch these hunters. And because I don’t want the Second Estate to be what Lucas wanted it to be. I... I am against the idea, in its entirety. And if Maria ever pushes it toward Lucas’s end goals, I’ll steer her back, or refuse to help her.”

And it was true. As much as he believed Maria’s views on the Lancea et Sanctum were far less conservative and vile than Lucas’s, that did not mean she wasn’t capable of pushing the Second Estate toward a totalitarian regime with aspirations of domination. He didn’t want that. He was happy with the way things were going, with his role as Maria’s Right Hand, but also with the truce the city was experiencing. Dolareido was a good place for a Kindred to live, he’d come to realize, and he was willing to fight to keep it that way.

“Natasha was right about you.”

“She was.” Maybe a little confidence would also help convince Daniel. Or it would backfire horribly. “And, honestly, things are going to get bad. You know they are, and I know they are. Something’s going to happen, and I want to be prepared. I’ll be a lot more help than most Kindred in this city.” He was tempted to ask about Athalia as well, but there wasn’t any need to pull at that thread.

Daniel pulled into another alley, Damien followed, and the two of them came to a stop once they were in the darkness, away from the street light, the vibrant lights of casinos, and the bustling noise of the crowds.

“If it weren’t for the Prince,” Daniel said, “and her goals for this city, I would say no. As far as I’m concerned, we dragons have our own goals, and this city provides us with the resources to pursue them, nothing more.” He adjusted his glasses again, and looked to the crowd walking past as he set his back against the brick wall. “But my friend is convinced we can keep the peace, and make something of this. Alright Damien, I will train you.”

Progress. Damien did his best to suppress his smile, but a small one came through. Maybe in a few hundred years, he’d be as cold as the sheriff, but even Damien, who he knew some considered a cold person, experienced emotions in abundance. Maybe Daniel did as well, and was simply better at hiding them.

“Thank you.”

“I have a few hours to spare every Tuesday, at dusk.”

“I’ll be there. Can I tell anyone about this?”

“Maria only, and Jack.”

“I see. Very well.”

Daniel sighed, a small thing, terribly out of place on him, and he even shrugged a little. “This is highly unusual, Mister Burksen. If I suspect that you are abusing my kindness in any form, I will not hesitate to scatter your ashes to the wind. Understood?”

“Understood.” Damien suppressed his smile. This was going to be like boot camp. Daniel was going to be harsh with him, cruel, intense, and try to break him. Damien would survive, as he always did, and would come out of their exchanges stronger for it.

Or he was going to die.

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~~Beatrice~~

Slowly but surely, she could feel her sex drive returning. That sucked, because she didn't plan to sleep with anyone for a long time. Othello felt differently of course, and he and his ghoul were fucking up a storm almost every night. He pulled the hanging furs closed though, in respect for her. But tonight, she didn't feel like being so lonely, so she pulled the fur aside.

Maybe if Jen was around, Triss might have slept with her, enjoyed a quick orgasm, and gotten back to working on her ritual. But Jen was out on a hunt or something, making connections, getting to know some kine probably. Doubtful that she was sleeping with any of them. The girl seemed honest about her reluctance to return to her old sex life, and any time the conversation turned to Julias, she seemed genuinely bothered. Not as sad as Beatrice, but sad nonetheless.

"Triss," Othello said. It was just him and his ghoul in his alcove, carved into the cave wall. As usual, they were having anal sex, with his dark-skinned, beautiful ghoul sitting on his lap, facing away from him. She had her legs spread, and was masturbating, while Othello choked her. Madison was a gorgeous woman, with her super short curly hair, and her tremble breasts on display.

"Othello. Madison. Don't mind me, just... yeah, keep going."

Madison may have, once upon a time, been shy about the whole situation with Othello, but that had long passed. She was a regular in their dark cave of occult wonders, knew about vampires, and Othello made sure she enjoyed herself any night she was around. Such a beautiful woman, and Othello had probably seduced her using his Discipline Majesty the first time he met her. Or maybe he didn't, and had seduced her with his natural, I'm-a-lazy-fun-loving-idiot charm.

That presented an interesting question. What sort of man was Othello? She never really hung out with him; hell, she hung out with him even less than Aaron. He was a handsome man, handsome as fuck, tan skin, average height or maybe a little taller, shredded and covered in muscle. With his long dark hair, she wouldn't have been surprised to see him surfing on a beach closer to the equator, drawing onlookers over his beauty. His brown eyes looked like they held depth, but what little she knew of him suggested otherwise. He was a pretty boy, a pretty dumb boy.

He had a huge dick though, and Madison was enjoying it thoroughly.

"Othello," Triss asked, "who sired you?"

The man raised a brow, but didn't stop fucking his ghoul. Sex was in the man's genes, probably.
"Why do you want to know?"

"No reason, really."

"I was sired by a woman, a hundred years ago, not far from Puerto Rico."

"Tropical weather? You must miss it."

He shrugged, let go of Madison's neck, and slid his grip down her body to her breasts. Cupping them, he tweaked her nipples, hard enough to earn a squeak from the woman, before softening his touch. The bastard knew what he was doing. Madison didn't stand a chance, and she leaned back against Othello's big chest as she writhed in orgasm. Her slit dripped a couple drops of juices onto the furs, and Triss breathed the smell of sex and life. It was making her hungry, for blood and sex.

"Sometimes."

"Why'd you come up here?"

"My sire did. I followed, and joined the Carthians. She left after a few decades, annoyed with the Invictus and the Lancea et Sanctum. I stayed."

Ah, things were starting to fall into place. She was surprised he was telling her all this so freely. Then again, the Circle really was a family, in a twisted sort of way, why wouldn't they share information like this readily?

"Jacob picked you up, then?"

"Yeah."

"Hard to imagine a lover boy like you, getting into witchcraft."

Othello laughed, and gently pushed Madison forward until she fell to her hands and knees, facing Triss. A moment later she collapsed, shoulders and cheek to the furs, ass in the air. Othello sank his grip into her hips, and continued to fuck her, thrusting in hard, but pulling out slow. Each thrust made the trembling ghoul squeak or groan, and her toes curled as she kicked the furs a few times, before succumbing. Well, Othello had been fucking her for quite a while. Poor girl was lit like a match. Gotta love that vampire stamina.

"Sometimes," Othello said, "I think I'm just here, in the Circle, because no one tells me what to do."

“Understandable. Much as Garry was my friend, it was a pain having a boss.”

“Exactly.” Grinning, Othello smacked Madison’s ass. It jiggled, in a very pleasing way. Madison wasn’t shredded like Triss or Othello. She had a touch of softness to her, just a bit, just enough to make a toned ass particularly large, and hypnotizing. It rippled with each impact, and Triss licked her lips as she watched.

“Though, I’m surprised Jacob let you stick around, if you all do is lounge about.”

Othello shrugged, reached down, and grabbed Madison’s wrists. God, the sight of Madison being pulled up, torso suspended by the tension of Othello holding her arms back, was candy for the eyes. The girl was in a daze, mouth open, eyes glazed, and head bouncing up and down as Othello fucked her. Watching her breasts bounce around underneath her was amazing, and Triss squatted down so she could get a better look.

If she’d been blushing life, she’d have been soaked. But she didn’t. Without Julias, she wasn’t going to be enjoying sex any time soon, no matter how much her hunger demanded it. Maybe with Jen, but even then it’d have been something short lived, to take the edge off her desires.

“I’ll have you know,” the Daeva said, “that I’ve been Jacob’s eyes and ears for decades. The witchcraft stuff was never important to me, but the freedom of the Circle is. I believe in its views on... governance...”

Triss raised a brow, and felt herself smile as Othello’s gaze became focused on the whimpering ghoul. He let go of her hands, let her flop down on the furs, and he sank his fingers into her waist as he pulled his cock out of her. Dripping with lube, he set his huge shaft on the girl’s ass crack, and slid his grip down to knead her ass cheeks with his hands, pressing the huge mounds against his cock. Cum gushed down the woman’s back, white fluid along her dark skin, that soon trickled down her spine, between her gorgeous shoulders, and down her ribs to trickle onto her breasts.

Poor Madison. She wasn’t getting rest any time soon. Othello sank his cock back into her ass, pulled her back up to him, and sank his fangs into her neck. The result was instant. Madison shuddered and squirmed, and the juices trickling down her thighs doubled in volume. Triss and Julias used to have fun with the thralls sometimes, but never like this. Seeing the woman cum from the Kiss, from having her blood drained and fangs sunk into her neck, was quite the sight, especially from only five feet away.

Othello, being the sex-obsessed animal that he was, started to fuck his ghoul, as he Kissed her. There'd been times where Triss had Kissed one of Julias's thralls while Julias fucked her, and good god that'd always been amazing, the combination of sexual bliss with the pleasure of life blood trickling down her throat. But most of all, she missed just being in another person's arms during sex.

She lightly flicked at the necklace sitting against her sternum, and the crow skull it held. "Thanks."

"For what?" he said, smiling at her from over Madison's neck.

"For telling me stuff without me having to pry it out of you like most Kindred. And for letting me watch."

The man winked at her, and set Madison back down. She collapsed once again, chest down and ass in the air, and her squeaks and groans turned into weak whimpers and mewls as Othello continued to fuck her. Best thing, the absolute best thing about the Kiss, was how it left the target exhausted and sensitive if the vampire didn't drain them to comatose. Which meant that poor Madison was going to cum until it hurt, as Othello did not stop. Lucky.

Beatrice left, pulling the fur curtain closed as she headed back toward her cave. Except, Aaron crawled in from the tiny entrance of the cave, and made a small wave at her as he headed toward his alcove. She returned it, and followed.

"How goes it?" he said.

Shrugging, she stepped into his alcove, and flopped down onto her back on the furs. "The ritual I was shown is hard to wrap my mind around. Still struggling with how to execute it, without royally fucking myself up.

"I'll help however I can." Aaron sat down next to her, back against the cave wall, and a book in his lap. He didn't pop it open yet though, ready to talk. "But, you and Jacob are the only two witches who have figured out how to use Crúac, in Dolareido at least. Not sure if I can help."

"I'm surprised you guys stick around if it doesn't interest you."

"Who says it doesn't interest me?" Aaron reached over the small room, under a rug, and pulled out another book.

"Heh, what's this?" She scooped it up and checked the cover. "Dark Mysteries?"

“Jacob says it’s one of the more accurate journals, written by a human who discovered some pretty dark stuff back in the 1800s.”

Triss wasn’t a reader, she was a doer. To read about dark magic didn’t hit her with anything, didn’t teach her anything, and she doubted she’d ever be able to get value out of a book like Aaron or Jacob could. And this one didn’t even have pictures, bleh.

“You’re interested, then?”

“In reading about it, sure. Academic interest. But I’ve seen you and Jacob perform some rituals, and I can safely say that it’s not for me. That doesn’t mean I won’t help however I can though. Need anything?”

She shook her head. “No. The ritual to force open the door is all me.” And she wished it wasn’t. It was going to be painful, and she’d lose a lot of blood doing it. So it was a good thing Jack would be there when it happened, to keep her going. No way in hell she was going to stay back after the ritual was complete. “You really don’t think you could do a ritual?”

The Gangrel shook his head as well. “No. It seems to require a mindset, the ability to... feel, as much as think, about something.”

“And what, you’re all thinking, no feeling?”

“I suppose. There’s a reason witchcraft has typically been a female occupation.”

Laughing, she gave him back the book, and scooted in closer to him so she could sit beside him, back to the wall as well.

“No, I’m pretty sure that was just sexism from the medieval ages. Oh no, this woman seduced me! Clearly she used evil powers to do so. She must be a witch, burn her! Oh hey the priest gets to absorb all her possessions. How convenient.”

Aaron nodded, a very scientific nod, the sort of nod one made when discussing the latest medical journals, or philosophy papers. “That’s true, but I think there might be a hint of truth to it. Not the seduction part, but that women have a capacity for witchcraft men don’t.”

“Totally explaining our boss.”

Aaron smiled, a rare occurrence, and shrugged. “Jacob the warlock. Do you think our boss is a typical man?”

“No, I suppose not.” No one could figure out Jacob, except for Minerva, a dead woman. “Did Othello ever talk to Minerva?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Damn. It’d be nice to learn something about her. Learn about her, and we might learn about him.”

Predictably, Aaron disagreed. “Let sleeping dogs lie, Triss.”

“Not sure I can do that.” Not only was it a favor the Prince had asked for, but Beatrice was genuinely curious about her boss and his past. What had driven him to become the man he was? Given his age and how torpor affected the mind, especially when elders took to it for decades to let their bloodlust settle, she doubted he remembered his neonate years with any clarity. But damn, it’d have been amazing to get to learn about the psychopath that was Jacob, and how he got so involved with the Circle, with Crúac, and the Crone.

“You don’t think maybe it can wait? This talk of Jacob and Minerva,” Aaron said.

“Wait? Until what?”

The Gangrel sighed, looked down, and ran a finger along the spine of his book. “Until your own wounds have healed?”

She winced at that. Fuck him for bringing it up, and fuck him for being worried about her. She didn’t want worry or pity or sympathy, she wanted revenge. And in the meantime, she could learn about the man making it possible.

“What makes you think it’ll ever heal? I doubt Jacob’s wound has.”

“He knew Minerva for decades. And—”

“And what, because I only knew Julias for a couple years, I’ll heal faster?” Don’t cheapen her love of the man, you fucking asshole. Grinding her teeth, she looked down, and tapped her claws together in her lap, feeling guilty for the thought. “It’s still raw. Fuck me, it’s still so damn raw.”

“It hasn’t even been five weeks, Triss. Give it time.”

“I am! I am...” She didn’t spend her nights crying anymore. A sob might slip out of her in the few minutes before dawn, but the nightmares weren’t so vivid the past few sleeps. She still dreamed of his face,

his warm kisses and gentle touch, and she still dreamed of him disintegrating into a pile of ash. She didn't hear his screams anymore though, or dream of ghostly images taunting her for not being there.

One night at a time, the pain would fade. She knew that, and she wasn't sure she liked that. She needed that pain, a fire under her feet to make sure she got revenge. And once she had it, the screams of her dreams would pale compared to what she'd pull from that bitch Angela.

“If you ever need my help, just ask, ok?”

“Don't make a promise you can't keep.”

“What makes you think I won't keep it?”

“Because, of the two of us, I think you're a little less likely to do something insanely stupid, and throw yourself into the fray on a whim.”

A small chuckle later, Aaron shrugged. “I'm smart, Triss, all the time. Maybe I'd like to do something stupid every once in a while.”

She returned his chuckle, louder, until she was outright laughing. God damn it, Aaron was smart and wise. Lucky fucker.

“I'll make sure to remember that, Aaron. But don't complain when you're buried neck deep in bullshit.”

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~~Jack~~

Tonight would be his first night working with the Uratha again, doing sweeps. A visit to see Avery was a good idea, to keep up to date on how they were doing, and to do his job of preventing conflicts. Much as he wanted to forget about his responsibilities, and spend another year or two resting in Antoinette's bed, he had responsibilities. Maybe doing them would keep his mind off of Julias. And maybe he could learn something about ghosts.

Jacob probably knew a lot about ghosts, considering the nature of the Circle of the Crone. They dealt with death as often as undeath, and ghosts fit right between those two concepts. He wasn't sure he wanted Jacob to know about Mary, but Jacob had probably dealt with specters many times in his fucked up life. Maybe if he talked to Beatrice about it, she could learn something about it for him.

"Can't believe you met your sister!" Jessy threw her hands up in shock; there was way too much television in her life. "Fuck me, that must have been weird, and painful."

"It was definitely painful." He shook his shoulders out. The fact he was used to the sensation of breaking bones and popping joints was not a good thing, and he closed his eyes as he tried to let the memories go. Not easy to let those memories fade away, at least not without Antoinette at his side, stroking his head and helping his mental wounds heal.

Jessy and Jack sat in one of the Invictus cars, driven by a thrall. You could always trust a thrall, at least more than a Kindred, considering their vitae addiction and the Vinculum. This one's name was Matthew Kensworth, a thrall of Michael's, and the man would know better than to repeat anything he heard in the black vehicle.

"What're you gonna do?"

"Not sure. She's dead, Jessy. There's not much I can do for her, except help her pass on. And I don't have the faintest idea how to do that."

Jessy, dressed in an Invictus suit same as him, looked at him with complete empathy. With every word he said, he could see she was envisioning his words, and suffering them as he had suffered. So he didn't go too deep into the worst parts, the physical damage or the emotional trauma. No need to bring her down, too.

"Did you get to talk to her, at least? Maybe say things you wished you could have said?"

Jack smiled. "I did."

"Good! Nice to know there's some silver lining to such a shitty situation. But, god damn, I can't imagine the pain your mother is in." Leave it to Jessy to cut through the bullshit and get straight to the heart of a situation. His mother was all too happy to have Mary back in her life, and that was not a good thing.

"Yes, she is. Maybe Antoinette can help."

"Or Jacob."

Of course Jessy would think of him, same as Jack had. “I’d prefer to keep him out of this.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He blinked at her, several times. “Because it’s Jacob.”

“So? Dude’s only ever helped you. He’s taken a liking to you.”

That, Jack wasn’t so sure about. ‘Taken a liking to’ implied something a little different than ‘being intrigued by’. Maybe Jacob foresaw all the shit that’d fall on Jack’s lap, and just thought he was interesting for it, the unpredictable factor that Jacob once applied to both him and Damien.

“I’m surprised you’re wearing a suit,” he said.

“Yeah well, this is official business. Michael doesn’t like it when I dress casual on business, even with the werewolves. Besides, it’s Eric I’m friends with, not Avery.”

“Just friends?”

She laughed, but avoided his eyes. There was something there, something in her gaze, a spark of joy, and a hint of a smile that betrayed her. She liked Eric, a lot.

“Speaking of Eric,” he said. “Ask him about Luna.”

“Luna?”

“Yes, Luna. I... heard the name mentioned recently, so I’m pursuing a lead.”

“Hmm. Is it ok if I tell him it’s you asking?”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure.” Because he might not mind if Jack was asking, but he probably would if it was a witch, one who heard the name from a mythical entity. Avoiding telling the whole truth like this was a key skill of a good manipulator. Look at him, learning.

“So what’re you gonna talk to Avery about?” she said.

“I’ll mention Mary. The werewolves know about spirits, so maybe they know about ghosts. But mostly I just want to know how the sweeps have been. And, if I can, see if they’ll let slip some indirect information about how their relationship with Garry is going.”

“Good.” Nodding, Jessy leaned back in the car seat and stared up at the ceiling as she hooked her fingers behind her head, into her short blonde hair. “I hope we catch these hunters soon.”

“We all do.”

“Yeah but I mean, really soon. If we take too long, you know what’s going to happen.”

“What?”

She snapped her head back up and blinked at him. “We’ll get used to it, and the covenants will stop working together. They’ll stop setting aside their squabbles, our squabbles, and just accept the hunters as a way of life. And they’ll do this because I’m sure the elders would prefer to be protecting their asses from each other, than dealing with the hunters. It’ll be us out on the streets, risking our necks, while our bosses hide behind walls, giving orders.”

Each word earned a wince from him, and he did a triple take at the driver to make sure he wasn’t listening too hard. No doubt the thrall heard every word, but Jack didn’t notice any sparks of surprise from him.

“So we’re under a time limit before this bullshit becomes normal, and our bosses go back to focusing on the wrong things?”

“Exactly. When shit goes from a surprise to a common thing, we stop treating it with the respect it deserves.”

Damn, Jessy was smarter than she let on. When a problem went from acute to chronic, people did stop treating it like the crisis it was, despite how it being a chronic problem was actually worse. She saw it, when others didn’t.

It was hard to know how much to trust Jessy. She was becoming a good friend, and she had a head on her shoulders, despite all evidence to the contrary. But she wasn’t exactly quiet, and he didn’t know how good she was at lying, or at least not telling Michael what she knew about things. He’d involved her in a lot of stuff, and told her about how he killed Viktor, Lucas, and Tony already. But letting her know about the mysterious threat Azamel insisted remained, was still a concern, and probably a step too far, at least until he knew the cause.

How would she take that, when he finally did tell her? Probably angry, understanding but angry that he kept it secret. And maybe he actually could tell her that something was up, since she hadn’t told Michael about what Jack did to Viktor. Then again, maybe she had? The better he got to know Maria and Michael, the more it became apparent they were happy Viktor and Tony were dead. Lucas, on the other hand, Maria still mourned.

He should trust her more, he should. He really should, just, not right now.

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Avery and Clara were the only ones in the apartment this time. Both of them frowned, looking at him and Jessy, and he could see it was because of the suits. But after looking at him for a few seconds, their frowns deepened, and it wasn't because of the suits.

"Jack," Clara said, blinking at him, "you smell... different."

Both wolves, who were sitting on the couch, stood up. The muscles in their bodies tensed, and both of them sniffed the air a few times as they stared at him. He doubted the curse actually made an odor, but it made sense that werewolf senses could pick up on more than biological stuff, if they could hunt spirits.

"I know you two know about the curse," he said. "Natasha knows, so Matt and Art know, so you know. And everyone knows."

"We do," Avery said, still frowning as she looked him up and down. "We didn't know what to think. Sweeps started, and we figured we'd learn that way, but you've been avoiding working with us."

"I have. Just... been trying to get a grip on things. Didn't want to... expose myself, I suppose." Uratha weren't Begotten, they couldn't see the truth behind the meat of his body, but they could still see more than he wanted.

Or maybe he just didn't want Clara to see him like this. He managed to meet her gaze, but when he did, her frown vanished, replaced with the sympathy he didn't want to see. Letting the others know that he was fucked up with some sort of ancient curse didn't bother him so much, now that he thought about it. Letting Clara see him like this did.

Pride, or something else? He didn't know.

"Don't worry about my bud Jack," Jessy said, hooking an arm over his shoulders. "We'll get his situation fixed up eventually, and get back things to the way they were."

"How?" Clara said.



Grinding his teeth for a second, Jack shrugged, and slipped out of Jessy's embrace. "The curse was sealed away once before, we'll figure out how to do so again. In the mean time, it's not a problem. It gives me power, and for now, that's all that matters." Hollow words. Clara's face said it all, that she knew he was lying, and that he was in pain. True as that was, it really didn't matter. They had a job to do, and revenge to be had.

"Works for me," Avery said. "Just avoid Black Blood, would you? He's taken an interest in you."

Jessy flinched, and looked down at him for a second. No words needed to be said. Jacob and Black Blood were both interested in him, and this curse, probably as something they could manipulate and use. Wonderful.

"I have no interest in dealing with Black Blood anymore than I have to."

Avery's frown darkened. "That wasn't what I wanted to hear."

"What do you want from me? He's close with Jacob, and Jacob is hunting the hunters as much as the rest of us."

"It," Avery said with emphasis, "is a nasty fucker that will do everything it can to spread its influence, Jack."

"Which is?" He stepped in closer, and glared at the short, sturdy woman. "What is it about Black Blood that has you wolves so upset with it, and confused by it?"

"It..." Avery met his gaze, but she was struggling to find a retort. "Black Blood's an unusual spirit, very fucked up. It's up to something, and it can't be good. You've seen it, right? Or at least the pieces of it it brings over in Jacob's fucked up rituals. You can't honestly believe it's trustworthy." An admittance of ignorance, wow. He didn't expect that of Avery. Maybe she was starting to trust him, or she was desperate about the situation.

"He, it, whatever, rescued Clara from Sándor's nightmare, didn't he? Cut him a break." Even as he said it, he poked holes in the logic. If Black Blood wanted them to trust him, the way to do that would be to do things like save one of the werewolves Jacob so despised. But to what end?

"Jack," Clara said, leaning her butt against the back edge of the dingy old couch, and folding her arms across her chest. A pondering stance. "Something's happening in the city. We don't know what, but something's happening. And now you have this curse thing, and—"

“The curse has nothing to do with Black Blood.”

“But that won’t stop it from trying to take advantage of you somehow.” Clara shook her head, sighing as she looked down, idly kicking at the back of the couch. “How... how strong is this curse?”

“Just find the hunters, and I’ll take care of them. All of them.” Before they could respond, he put up his hands in surrender. “I won’t go in alone, I’m not stupid. But at the hospital, I took down a bunch of hunters alone, and I could have taken a dozen more. The curse is... reliable, ok?”

The two werewolves looked between each other, and the doubt was blatant. God, how frustrating a conversation this would have been in front of the whole pack. Maybe that’s why the others weren’t here, so he could talk to the leader and second-in-command without that problem.

“Alright,” Avery said. “You haven’t steered is wrong, and we trust you; as much as you can trust a vampire.”

He grinned at that. “Thanks. And, I wanted to ask you about something. Who’s Luna?”

The two women raised a brow, glanced at each other, and nodded.

“Luna is mate to Father Wolf,” Clara said. “We call her Amahan Iduth. Most know her as the moon. When Father Wolf, Urfatah, was murdered by his children, it was Luna who cursed them. Ever since then, the Uratha try to fulfill the duty Father Wolf performed, hunting between worlds and keeping the balance. But, she’s not exactly happy with us. Sometimes Uratha are called the Forsaken, because of what our ancestors did.”

Avery sat down on the couch Clara was leaning against, and looked at the muted TV and the news it was playing. “By serving Luna, we have gained her favor.”

“Favor?” Jessy said.

“Yeah, but I think we’ve spilled enough of our secrets for one night,” Avery said. “Besides, it’s all mythology. We don’t know if any of it is true. Clara and I, and even that asshole Eric, are Cahalith, and sometimes we get dreams that... that suggest Luna is quite real.”

So Cahalith had dreams, special dreams. It fit what he knew about them, honestly. Werewolves were hunters of spirits, part spirit themselves, and if that included talking to the moon, or bear spirits or tree spirits, then he shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Suggest? Have any of you talked to her?”

Avery and Clara shook their heads.

“It’s been heard of,” Clara said, “but an actual conversation? No.”

Then the weird message Beatrice got about Luna was probably about Eric then. If he looked at Jessy now, to make some eye contact and let her know he was thinking about Eric, then Avery and Clara would know he was talking about Eric. Then again, he asked about Luna, and they were the ones that brought up Eric. Maybe they knew about it?

“Where’d you learn the name?” Avery said.

“Conversation with Jacob. Drifted to the Uratha.” Which, wasn’t completely a lie. Except a half truth is worse than a lie, and he knew that. A guilty conscious is a bitch. “I had another question, something unrelated, and... I’m really hoping you can help.” He could ask about Garry at the end of the meeting.

Avery frowned, eyes drilling into him, and probably trying to figure out why Jacob would be wondering about Luna.

“What’s up?” Clara asked.

He stepped in a little closer, and his eyes fell. “What do you guys know about ghosts?”

“Ghosts?” Clara looked to Avery, who shrugged and looked back to the news. The subtitles were on. What was it about older people and watching the news muted with subtitles on? “You ran into a ghost?”

“I did.”

“Holy shit. Whose?”

“My... sister’s.”

Clara blinked at him, several times, and Avery turned around to look over the couch back at him. Silence flattened the room, as he predicted it would, and everyone’s eyes fell away as the uncomfortable reality set in. Yeah, his dead sister was alive, in a fashion, a very poor, horrible fashion, making the misery of her death a terrible mess of resurrected pain.

So, to fill the silence, he explained. He explained about the trip to the house, and that his mother was with him. He explained about the strange cold, and weight that permeated his old home. And he explained about the mist, and the ghost that followed it, his sister.

Clara and Avery stared at him like he was telling a fictional but compelling ghost story, and not a literal recounting. The spark of pride over telling an interesting story vanished in seconds in the sorrow of the memory of his sister's screams. It wasn't a fun memory.

"We've dealt with a few ghosts," Avery said, "every now and then. It's never ended pretty, Jack. Ghosts don't age well. They get more and more twisted with time, and mean."

"But you can deal with them?"

The pack leader nodded, turned the TV off, and hooked her arm over the back of the couch so she could look at him more easily. "Yes, we can deal with them. Ghosts are made of similar stuff as spirits. But I've never... It's never gone well. You sure you can't convince her to leave on her own? To crossover?"

Easier said than done. How the fuck was he supposed to do that, when it was clear she didn't want to die or crossover or whatever, and his mom didn't want her to either. Being in the house with her was like being in the shadow of something that wasn't supposed to be up, out of the dirt, walking around, smelling of death. Maybe it would have been easier if she was a zombie, out of one of those really shit TV shows, and the emotional dilemma would have been resolved by forcing himself to shoot her in the head. There, problem solved. No conversation needed.

Who the fuck could convince someone that they needed to die? How the fuck was he supposed to do that? And it wasn't like he had a leg to stand on, being an undead creature. His heart wasn't beating, and his lungs didn't do shit with the air he breathed. Every word out of his mouth to his sister, about letting go and moving on, would have been borderline hypocritical.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "Mary doesn't want to leave, and my mom doesn't want her to, either."

"She's going to get nasty, Jack," Avery insisted, "they always do. She's not a spirit, like the spirits from the Hisil. Your sister is a human, with the body of a spirit. It's not right, and it's going to drive her insane."

He looked down again, avoiding yet another reason for the pitying gazes of others, and clenched his teeth. "If it comes to it, can I ask one of you to help me?"

Clara came up to him, and nudged a hand on his shoulder. "Of course, Jack. Of course. If you need anything, just ask."

He smiled up at the werewolf, and nodded.