

~~Jack~~

Usually the dreams vampires had during their daily torpor weren't extreme, just small flights of imagination or memory, like any kine's. Torpor dreams only got super vivid and extreme when a vampire went into deep torpor for months, or even years, to settle their blood lust. Jack's dreams last day were unusually vivid, and they were all of the same thing: Elaine, betraying him in some fashion or another, usually with a damn evil grin plastered all over her face.

“What do you think? Should I trust her? Fuck me, it's so hard to trust her. She's smart and conniving and she plans ahead, same as Antoinette. Christ, it wouldn't surprise me if she had that ritual lined up to do on Viktor, and maybe even Julias, but couldn't get the situation for it. Maybe she needed cooperation for it to work? Maybe she waited all these years just so she could get one of her childer on her side. Or maybe she realized she couldn't get what she wanted with the curse bound by that Sanctified dude's binding ritual, and she knew it'd break with time?”

Jack paced back and forth in one of the rooms of his mansion, a large one with hanging red drapes on the walls, with several couches of red and gold. The typical, usual fancy room for entertaining guests and whatnot.

“Of course, I'm letting my dick get in the way of thinking straight. But I mean come on! Look at her!” He held up his phone, and flicked to one of the many, many images he had of Elaine; none had been taken by him. This particular one had Elaine full on posing for a closeup, hands squeezing her breasts, with his cum filling the space between her fingers and dripping down everything. Naturally it'd been Ashley who took the picture and sent it to him later.

“God damn her. Stupid... fucking... blonde...” He groaned again as he struggled for a good insult, failed, and sighed as he put the phone away. “And hey, I love Antoinette, and she's so hot it's unreal. But I'm not gonna lie. I'm a guy, and with a tall busty woman flirting with me twenty-four seven, fucking with my head as much as she fucks me and my lover, it's damn hard to think straight whenever she's the topic. And fuck me, now she's got a vial of my blood! Or, the curse's blood. Something. And she's gonna do something with it.” Sighing, he flopped down on the couch next to his two friends, and yanked out the phone, and flipped to another file in the gallery. A video, Elaine indulging herself with him, this time filmed by Antoinette.

Scully cawed, hopped down from the back of the couch onto his shoulder, and pecked at the phone a couple times.

“Sorry. You ever get laid, Scully? Ever raise any chicks?”

“No,” she said, full on emulating a human voice.

“I’m sorry. Sensitive topic?”

“No.” She hopped across his shoulder a little closer to him, and nestled under his ear. “Familiar, master. Don’t want children, master.”

Yeah, there was that. His crows weren’t crows anymore, they were familiars. Undead familiars at that. Maybe they’d learn to Blush Life over the years, and go on to live fulfilling sex lives... if birds actually cared about sex for sex’s sake. But they’d never have children, ever, and any biological desire for it was gone. His pet crows were zombies, sorta. The only thing they genuinely craved was vitae, and to serve their master.

Hopefully, with time, he could find ways to restore some of their old bird desires, or maybe help them discover new ones.

Mulder hopped down onto his shoulder too, and pecked at the phone a couple times. “Lei.”

“Lay?”

“Leilani. Veronica.” Damn, Mulder was getting good at enunciating.

Jack blinked at the crow on his shoulder, and flipped through more of the vids and images on his phone until he found one of the two thralls.

“Shinies,” Mulder said.

“Shinies? Wha—oh.” Laughing, Jack flipped to an image of the two girls playing with each other’s breasts, the two of them wearing some rather large and, indeed, shiny piercings in their nipples. Like full on fancy earrings, except on breasts.

“Shinies.” Mulder pecked at the phone. Jack couldn’t hold it anymore, and burst into laughter hard enough he dropped the phone.

“Ah, shit.” He picked it back up and showed Mulder the picture for a little while longer. Hopefully it was the piercings Mulder was attracted to, and not the fact they were piercings on breasts. It’d be pretty damn weird for a bird to be into tits, let alone an undead bird. Both had gotten eyefuls of his thralls, naked and whatnot, and Jack hadn’t really minded, because why would he? Not like ghoulish crows would be embarrassed or care about human sex, or real crows for the matter.

He chuckled. It'd make things awkward real quick if Mulder tried to pluck at errant nipple piercings while the girls were in the middle of sex.

His phone rang, and the sound announced it was Antoinette. He answered, video call.

"Hello Antoinette," he said.

"Jack, my love. How do you fare?"

"Alright. Just fed Mulder and Scully." He pointed the phone at each shoulder.

"Master," Scully said, and she pushed her head against his neck under his ear.

Antoinette smiled slightly at Scully. "Your servants adjust to their new lives well. Though I suspect I will become jealous if — I believe that is Scully? — continues to flirt with you."

"She's not flirting. She's... bonding."

"She is undead, my love, and already bonded to you by the Vinculum. She is as obsessed with you as your thralls are."

"But she's an undead crow, not a person. I... don't imagine she has sexual feelings for me." Raising a brow, he looked down at the bird beside him. Scully cawed a couple times, fluttered her wings, and sent him a couple images into his mind. Very flattering images of Scully basically being the center of attention of Jack, his thralls, and even Antoinette. Gifts were included, each of them shiny trinkets that could be carried by a bird's claws or beak.

"Jack?" Antoinette said.

"Just get her a ring or necklace and she'll love you, too."

"Ah, a whore for jewelry."

He shrugged. "Aren't we all?"

She laughed. "I wanted to ask about last night, my love. I know you and Elaine were doing something dangerous."

"Yeap. That's why I told you she was here." After a second to think about it, he scrunched up his nose and leaned in toward the phone. "You get jealous of Scully but not Elaine?"

"Elaine would never try and steal you away from me," she said. Jack froze. Yeah, she just might, physically. "At worst she would attempt to seduce you, and allow me to watch as I watch you now."

Ah, streaming sex. The future! A million new ways for people to indulge sex sex sex and more sex.

“Well, I promise you I won’t let that happen.”

Her smile turned evil. “Not with Elaine. But I would not mind watching you engage with your pets.”

“Mulder and Scully?”

“Non! Silly boy. You know I meant Veronica, Leilani, and Rachel.” Antoinette leaned back in her chair, having called him from her office, and she teased her lip with a finger as she smiled at the phone. “I think I would much enjoy watching you indulge your masculinity with your servants, be it in person or through video.”

Jack rolled his eyes. His lover was a succubus, through and through. Whatever she could do to indulge him sexually, she’d do it, and love every second of it.

“I’d prefer to have you with me, you know.”

“If, and when, I descend into torpor for some years to calm my blood lust, I do fully expect you to satisfy yourself and your thralls, my love.” She licked a fang. “Though do make sure to record what I miss, so that I may view your sessions at my leisure.”

He hadn’t really thought about that, honestly. Kindred could enjoy the Kiss to a sexual degree without actually having any sex. Far as he knew a lot of vamps, especially Nosferatu like Maria, did just that. When Antoinette went for one of those multi-year torpors, he just expected he’d abstain from sex, and satisfy his Kindred urges with the Kiss alone.

“You know I don’t need to do that.”

“Oui, I know. And I adore that you would gladly give up sex for such a time for me.” Again her smile turned serpentine. Really similar to Elaine’s evil smiles. Those two had more in common than he realized. “But come now, we are both Kindred, not kine. As long as you recorded the event for me to view later, and did not indulge in the touch of another Kindred, I would be happy to let you fuck your thralls and ghouls as often as you wished.”

“Eh I dunno. I think I’d feel pretty awkward.”

She leaned in closer to the phone. “Then picture vice versa. Me, naked, in bed, with Ashley between my legs kissing my sex, while Julee caresses and suckles my breasts, the three of us anxiously awaiting your rise from torpor in several months. I grab the camera recording us, bring it close, and whisper how much I miss you, as I climax.”

That, was a strangely arousing image. Jack was sure he'd get jealous if Antoinette started fucking a guy thrall or ghoul while Jack was down and out with an extended torpor. But two girls Jack and Antoinette slept with often? Two ghouls at that, completely bound and addicted to Antoinette by the Vinculum? The psychology of sexuality was a strange thing, especially when mixed with Kindred shenanigans.

“Um, let's cross that bridge when we get to it. I'm still not sold on the idea.”

Antoinette sighed and relaxed back into her big leather office chair. “Very well. Last night, you and Elaine did something relating to the curse.”

“We did.”

“But you will not tell me the details.”

“I uh, wasn't entirely sure of the details honestly, when I agreed to it.”

She raised a brow. “You trust my friend that much?”

“There's been some developments. So, I mean, I guess I trust her more than I used to.”

“With your life?”

“I... think so.” And christ, after the shit Elaine told him, she was basically trusting him with hers.

“You play a dangerous game, my love. I trust Elaine in many regards, but in matters of our pursuits in the Ordo? Dangerous indeed.”

“That's why I told you we were up to something. Insurance.”

“Make sure to keep me informed. Though I must say, I do wish you would tell me more about what you two are planning.”

“It's... It's kinda private. I'll leave it up to Elaine to tell you more, if she wants to.”

His lover frowned at the phone, but let it go with a sigh after a while.

“I trust you, but this curse that haunts you affects more than just you and her, my love. The next time either of you intend to do something involving the curse, I would like to be involved.”

“Yeah, ok, I agree to that. But you'll need to convince Elaine more than me.” And that wouldn't exactly be easy. Elaine wanted to make sure Antoinette never found out about what she did to get rid of her curse, and she'd probably jump through some hoops to keep every encounter Antoinette now had with the curse, or with rituals affecting it, to a minimum. The Ripper had a nasty habit of spilling secrets when he thought it'd create some chaos.

And she hadn't even shared her worst secret yet. Who the fuck did Elaine commit diablerie on? She wouldn't have brought it up if it wasn't relevant. But what connection could whoever she committed diablerie on have to Jack's situation? Someone she knew? Someone important to her, or important to someone else? If not a random vampire, then—

Then another vampire with the curse. That was the only relevant connection Jack could think of. And the only vampire Elaine had access to do that to back then, would have been Viktor, and she certainly hadn't killed him. Then either she'd committed diablerie against a childe of Viktor's no one knew about, or maybe one of Susanna's, or... she'd committed diablerie on one of her own childer none of them knew about.

The only person alive today with the curse, as far as they knew, was Jack. If he did the ritual Elaine did to remove the curse, that meant he'd have to sire someone first, and kill them. No fucking wonder she said she didn't want him to suffer what she'd suffered.

“Jack?”

“Sorry. I... gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow night?”

Antoinette eyed him, making no effort to hide that she suspected him of something. “Very well. I trust Elaine to an extent, but please, if you believe my old friend is up to something devious, likely involving her role in the Ordo, bring it to my attention. If not me, then Daniel.”

“Will do.” If Daniel found out Elaine was a diablerist, or had been, it could end badly. In a straight fight, Ventrue were hard to kill, but Mekhet were fast as fuck, and one as old as Daniel could probably trick even elder eyes with Obfuscate. There was a reason people sometimes called Mekhet assassins. Damien and Daniel were perfect examples.

He hung up, and called Damien.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Damien~~

Hanging upside down was interesting. Even when Blushing Life, he didn't need to worry about blood flow or anything like that. He was perfectly free to watch and admire how strange everything seemed when upside down, even if it was a spooky, haunted hospital room.

Fiona's blood pulsed through him, strange, alien, forbidden blood that had him and his Beast hungering in a way it didn't really understand. Drunk and horny, was the best way he could interpret it, with hints of something else, something dark and monstrous. When Fiona's blood filled and fueled him, a part of him wanted to go on a hunt, but not for more blood. He wanted to get out there, and scare someone, hunt them and terrify them until his role as living nightmare was fulfilled.

But mostly it just got him drunk, horny, and aggressive. Probably because of how the blood interacted with the Kiss.

Fiona liked it when he got aggressive with her. She liked it when he pinned her down, or tied her up. Sometimes she even liked it when he picked her up and threw her down on the bed, or couch. Spanking, hard fucking, or even forcing her to give him a blowjob, hand on her head. It all tickled something in the tiny redhead that always had her delirious with arousal.

Vrall, on the other hand, liked it when he got aggressive, cause it meant she had stronger prey to trap. Even now, with Fiona's blood telling him to fight and hunt, he struggled against the webbing encasing him. No good. Vrall had cocooned him shoulder to feet an hour ago, and had loved every minute of spinning him in her web as he struggled. She'd loved it so much, she was dripping wet by the time they'd moved onto sex.

But now they were done, and the spider monster hung upside down beside him, several of her very sharp blade-like spider feet balancing on razor tips on spider silk. She was pressed up against his cocoon, and gravity made sure her huge breasts pulled up toward her shoulders, and his, since they were face to face.

Vrall was beautiful, in the exact opposite way Fiona was. His human girlfriend was a shining ray of light, with soft features that matched her unending giggles. A gorgeous ginger that was very huggable.

Vrall had skin the color dark steel, a sharp chin and tiny, sharp lips that were often curled in an evil grin. No eyes. Instead, she had black horns that curled back from where eyes should have been, giant ones that melded into her forehead before curling back over her head, along with several other horns, covering her bald head like hair would have, or a crown. Two claw fingers and a thumb, and instead of feet, her shins ended in sharp blade-like points, same as the eight enormous spider legs coming out of her back. She was tall, with a ridiculously tiny waist, but with a large ass and huge breasts like Fiona's. Inhuman, feminine features exaggerated, almost like her strange beauty was the drawing light of an anglerfish. It wasn't hard to imagine some human she'd drawn into one of her

nightmare chambers stumbling onto her, getting hypnotized by her curves, and walking straight into a web.

She kissed him with her black lips, and smiled.

“You do not visit me enough.”

“Fiona would get jealous,” he said.

“I am Fiona.”

“So you say.”

“I am Vrall, and Fiona.”

“She says she’s Fiona, and Vrall.”

“Then, I am afraid you are dating the both of us, vampire. And I demand my fair share.” She hugged him with her human arms, hard enough her huge breasts, still hanging upside down with her, squashed against his web-covered chest and nearly hit his chin.

“Never took myself for a polygamist.”

She laughed. “To Fiona’s chagrin.”

“You think?”

“Indeed. She is like the vampire Jessy, in a way, addicted to sex and seeking to experience it in greater thrills.”

“Oh. You mean she wants to have a threesome.” He rolled his eyes. It was a lot easier to think clearly now, now that Fiona’s blood was finally beginning to settle within. “Those can get pretty awkward, I do believe.”

“Less of a problem for vampires, I do believe.” Laughing again, she kissed him more, and rubbed the base of her two biggest horns into his forehead. “One bite of Fiona and you’d be hard as stone, even in front of an audience.”

“Maybe.”

“Imagine it. Sweet little Fiona, sitting atop you while another woman holds her from behind and plays her body like an instrument.”

He rolled his eyes again. “You watched that vid Ashley sent Jessy, didn’t you?”

Vrallar’trakla of the Eight Blade Arach grinned like a schoolgirl. “I did.”



“Is it just me, or are all the women in Dolareido out-of-their-mind horny? Figured that was usually male territory.”

“Dolareido encourages sexual freedom. I think the women here overcorrect.”

“Overcorrect?”

The beautiful spider monster nodded. “I have seen it in cultures before, over the ages. When something has been enforced or restricted for a long time, and is suddenly given the opportunity to not be, people will first dip their toes in water to test, and then almost immediately after, people jump into the deep end of the pool. Overcorrection.”

“Example?”

“I knew a tribe that feared the color blue, and—”

Damien raised a brow. “Blue?”

She chuckled. “In their past, they’d lost ancestors to it. Blue tree frogs, and certain blue plants, all poisonous. It became part of their culture to fear deep, powerful blues, including the ocean. They avoided it, considered it evil, and would paint their weapons with it, assuming it would kill their enemies. Of course, they painted their weapons in the blood of blue tree frogs, only perpetuating the falsehood, now that a single wound from their weapons caused severe illness.

“But, after some centuries, they realized it was not blue that was deadly, but the blue tree frogs, and the blue plants. This understanding came when they accidentally created a blue paint that caused no harm. Before long, the tribe had painted everything blue. Their clothes, their tattoos, all of it.”

Damien laughed. That was so strangely innocent. It’d probably been the cause of a lot of unfortunate misunderstandings, and likely got a lot of the tribe killed before they realized blue wasn’t evil, but the image of a remote culture suddenly deciding to paint everything they had in blue in some sort of celebration, was delightful. It was the sort of story that’d have Fiona laughing herself to stitches, and as she slipped ‘awwws!’ between her gasps.

“It is a common thing in culture,” she said. “In Dolareido, all women are actively invited to be as sex obsessed as the men, with no fear of judgment. Some women were bound to overcorrect. Female vampires are probably the perfect example.”

Ah yes, female vampires, coming into their power and realizing no other vampire gave two shits how many people they slept with. Just part of the hunt, or the politics, after all. He could see it, a female

vampire realizing just how free they were now to fuck and fuck and fuck, and get a little trigger happy. Especially with Jessy going around telling every girl she met that they should.

“I think Jessy was a little nuts before she was embraced, honestly,” he said.

Vrall laughed again, and kissed him again.

~~~~~

Coming out of a nightmare chamber was an interesting thing. The Begotten had ways to get around that didn't involve opening and closing their lair's exits, burrowing through darkness and whatnot. But generally speaking, if a Begotten wanted to bring others into or out of their lair, they had to merge one of the chambers with a place in the real world. A hard thing to do, supposedly. They had to open up the chamber over top reality, and the more similar the place in the physical world was to the nightmare chamber, the easier it made the process. Which was why Begotten often used rooms that were utterly pitch black. Lot of places in their lairs were pitch black, too.

According to Vrall, that wasn't an option for some Begotten. Some of the monsters were aquatic, and all their lairs had to support an aquatic environment. Those kinda Begotten lived near rivers or coastlines, and had to trick prey into coming close to the water, often when it was dark.

But the Begotten in Dolareido all shared a chamber across their lairs, the Dolareido nightmare chamber, and that made getting around the city easier for them. Lucky that such a chamber existed. Vrall seemed convinced the chamber was a little weird compared to others, in how perfect it was for Begotten to travel Dolareido. Azamel told her the chamber was unusual because Dolareido was unusual, in a way they didn't understand yet. Almost as if there was something about the city that amplified things that affected the other realms.

Which of course made more sense than Damien liked. There were too many strange things about Dolareido, affecting way more than just the physical world. At this point, they had no choice but to accept that the city was special, for a reason none of them knew. Which made figuring out what the fuck was going on particularly difficult.

Damien sat up in bed. He'd had sex with Fiona in bed, then she'd opened her lair overtop them and onto, or into, the nightmare hospital Sándor shared with her, in one of the empty patient rooms. Hard for her to do when someone was with her; she said normally you'd lure a person into crossing into

the chamber, not open it on them. But considering they'd made the room pitch black for the process, it'd been doable.

Then Vrall had hung him up from the ceiling and cocooned him, and had enjoyed every minute of his struggles; her blood had him fighting like a drunkard. But now that they were done, she opened the haunted hospital chamber back into his bedroom, and closed it. She stayed behind to recover, leaving him alone in his bedroom, and his phone on the nightstand blinking a tiny blue light, the only light in the room.

He checked the phone. A message from Jack.

~I'm starting to trust Elaine more, and less.~

~Sounds like an oxymoron.~

~Just keep an eye on her for me, would you? I'm getting into some deep shit with her, and I don't trust myself to be smart about this.~

~Jack, she's one of the oldest vampires around. I doubt I can keep an eye on her without her realizing it.~

~Then keep an eye on me.~

Damien blinked at his phone. Keep an eye on Jack? He was already doing that, considering the kid was basically a walking bomb if he ever took off his necklace. But the text message was so straightforward, Damien sensed the urgency in it. Something new was happening.

~I will.~

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Beatrice~~

Triss braced for flying projectiles, fueled by a ghost's wrath. But it didn't happen. Mary stared at Sándor with her empty ghost eyes for a few moments, everyone else watching and waiting, but she didn't attack. Eventually her frown faded, and she smiled. A creepy ghost smile, but at least she didn't smile from ear to ear, literally.

"Mom's told me about you."

“Has she?” he asked.

“She says you’re trying to make up for all the things that happened.”

Slowly, the man nodded. “I am.”

“Why?” Say one thing for the ghost, she didn’t pull punches with her questions.

The man took a breath, which in itself was a huge emotional expression for the gargoyle. “I—”

“You were brainwashed, right? Straight out of a movie. Brainwashed and forced to do bad things.” The ghost’s head twitched, one of those freaky twitches that were instantaneous.

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Don’t be dumb. Don’t blame yourself because other people are evil.” Mary nodded, like what she said was the most true thing in the world. She might have been dead, more dead than even a vampire, but Triss could see the Jack in her expressions. Conviction. “You want to help people, sure, do that. But don’t think bad things happened because of you. You didn’t stab me.” The words pulled another scary smile out of her, and she looked at Beatrice. “Thanks again, for killing Angela.”

“Don’t mention it,” Triss said, wincing slightly.

Killing Angela had not been satisfying. Vengeance wasn’t satisfying. Sure, it’d settled the part of Triss that’d been willing to burn the planet to cinders if it meant killing Angela and Jeremiah, but it did absolutely nothing to make her feel better. The pain, misery, all the cliché tropes she thought would never apply to her, applied to her in spades, and killing Angela didn’t do jack shit about them.

There was no way a ghost would get that. One thing Triss picked up on her last visit, and from her conversations with Sam about her, was that Mary the ghost was unstable as fuck. They had no idea if a single thought ran through the girl’s head, or if she was a bundle of memories given a ghostly body, ready to pop and snap at any stimulus that crossed a line.

Tonight was going to be terrifying for Sam.

“So don’t be dumb,” Mary said, looking back to Sándor said.

“I... I’ll try not to,” he said. And god damn, he even looked down, and looked a little sad. Triss had only ever seen him look like that two other times: that night he got drunk, and when he was behind a guitar.

Shit, no wonder he hadn’t taken the opportunity to speak to Mary until now. If he blamed himself for her death, this would be the first time the guy got to talk to someone that died because of him. That

was the really fucked up thing about ghosts. Not that they were crazy, unstable, couldn't be touched, and could throw shit around with their ghost powers. It was the fact they were dead, truly dead, murdered and gone, and yet they got to stick around and have their say. Vampires weren't the same; well, usually.

But Sándor was a trooper. He looked up and stepped back, giving the vampires the floor, his face steady once again. Now Triss wanted to either get a glass in his hand, or a guitar, since those seemed to be the only ways the dude could express himself. Practically the opposite of her. Practically the opposite of Julias, for that matter.

Christ, stop comparing him to Julias. That is all manner of fucked up.

"Mary," Samantha said. "I have the... the crystal ball." She held up the black bag, and only now did Mary notice it was moving slightly. Judging from her reaction, Sam had already described to her daughter everything about the ritual, or at least that it'd make a crystal ball that liked to jiggle.

How much did Mary know about the dark shit Sam was getting into? If there was one thing that'd make ghost Mary flip the fuck out and start attacking and destroying shit, it was learning her mother was a murderer of kine by accessory, and was engaging in dark witch magic. Considering the shit Mary was about to see, hopefully her mom had prepared her for at least some of it.

"Can I see?" Mary asked, staring at the bag.

Nodding, Sam reached into the bag, and pulled out the small, glowing crystal ball. Everyone froze as they waited for Mary to flip out over seeing something a living person would never be able to see: their final moments etched into a magical object.

Mary leaned in, empty eyes wider than humanly possible. "That's... me?"

Sam smiled. "It's a part of you. Can you see the things it's showing?"

"I can. I can... I can..."

Staring into the crystal ball was a hypnotic experience for all of them, considering how seamlessly it showed Mary and Sam in the alley before they were stabbed, and the thoughts going through Mary's mind at the time. For Mary, the crystal ball must have been like staring into the heart of the universe. She didn't move, didn't say a thing, for entire minutes. Just sat there, the only thing letting everyone know time still moved being the ebbing mist around them, and Sándor's slow breathing.

"That's me."

"Just a part of you," Sam said. "Just a blueprint."

“I don’t understand the blueprint part,” Mary said. So Sam had told her some stuff already.

Well, time to be the witch in all this, and take charge. Beatrice stepped forward, and the ghost looked at her.

“There’s three things we need to get someone up and walking around,” Triss said, doing her best to look the ghost in the eyes. There was a reason Jacob usually covered his empty eye sockets with a bandage: empty eye sockets were freaky as fuck. And Mary’s empty eye sockets were enormous and far too expressive. “A body and a soul, everyone knows. But the blueprint part, that part was a little more abstract, and we had to figure it out.” No reason to tell them about her visit from the Crone. “It’ll be the glue to keep everything together. Makes sure the body and soul fit together snug and in the right places.”

It took effort to not shudder. The fuck would have happened if they’d tried to jam a soul into a body without the blueprint, or glue, or whatever? A fucked up abomination probably, something snarling and drooling and stumbling around, all twisted and shit, except all the twisted parts would be inside where no one could see, until the abomination jumped someone and bit out their throat in some pointless attempt to devour their flesh and soul and fix their own body. Yeap, nightmare fuel.

Or maybe instead of being Mary, it’d be whoever’s brain was in the skull of the body waiting for them back in the cave? Also a shitty outcome.

“I see,” the ghost said. “I... I’m scared.”

Sam put the crystal back in the bag. “Don’t be scared, baby. Even if this doesn’t work, you’re still my baby girl. Nothing is—”

“If it doesn’t work, then... then does that mean I’m not Mary?”

“Mary, don’t talk like that. You know you’re—”

“Mom!” Everyone froze like ice when the ghost shrieked, everyone except Sam. The sudden sound washed over her like a shrieking baby’s routine crying washes over any mom’s back, after a while. “Mom, you don’t know that. I might not be her.”

“How can you say that?”

“We talked about this, mom! Jack told me I might not be me. He visits sometimes, and he said... he said...”

Oh fucking shit Jack. Stop being so damn honest with people.

Triss gulped as she looked between everyone in the group. A glance Sam's way showed her looking at Triss, letting her handle the question. Well, she did decide to take charge. Time to follow through.

"We don't know, Mary. None of us know a thing about ghosts. No one really does. And we're not going to lie to you. If resurrection was a sure thing, something people had figured out before, then my boss would know about it. He'd know about it, and so would other people in the Circle. Someone, somewhere, would have written about it succeeding. They haven't." She squatted down in front of Mary, maybe a little closer than was safe, and looked up at the kid. "There's a lot of ifs in all this. But your mom and I are in this shit deep. Me for Julias, her for you. She's got an advantage though, cause the hardest part, the soul, it could be right here, in front of us."

Mary looked between them, spending some time on each, before her empty eye sockets settled back on Triss. "I don't want to be a ghost anymore. I don't want to... to be seen by that dark thing anymore."

"Thing?" Jennifer asked.

"The dark thing. It goes to a dark place, and it's watching the city, and waiting. It... oozes. It draws lines everywhere, and it's... scary."

Holy fucking shit. Black Blood, what the fuck are you up to?

"Not gonna lie," Triss said, "this ritual needs the help of Elen."

"I know."

Triss looked Sam's way, and Sam slowly shook her head with a wince. She hadn't told Mary this part, yet.

"Yeah, but you don't know we have a friend who helps us force Elen to do what we want. Black Blood, a spirit."

Mary shrieked again, and jumped back. Jump turned into hover, and she pressed her back against the wall as she crawled up it until she was half against the wall, half pressed to the ceiling. Mouth open wide like her eyes, she stared down at Triss, head occasionally twitching in that freaky fast way ghosts apparently did. Whatever movie director or SFX dude who first thought those crunchy body motions for ghosts was a good idea, fucker had probably seen a real ghost sometime in their life.

"Black Blood! It's out there! It's... it's tearing at things, drawing lines and cutting them. It's dark and death and—"

“Has he ever hurt you?” Triss asked.

“... n-no.” And like her panic was a balloon someone had popped, she deflated. “No.”

“But he can see you?”

“It... he can! He can. He moves through the city, in that... place between, where I hide, where we can't touch things. He can see into that place. And everywhere he goes, it's like... like he leaves a trail of... of...”

“Yeah, that sounds like Black Blood.” Triss shook her head as she stood up. “This is all dark magic shit, Mary. And Black Blood is willing to help us.”

“Why?”

Because Triss sold her soul to the spirit. Well, not really, but pledging to work with him for who knew how many decades or centuries, to be a student and partner, was pretty damn close.

“It's complicated. But you don't have to worry about Black Blood, he's on our side. He's also going to be the one controlling Elen. We'll want her up and aware in case... something happens.”

Slowly, the ghost hovered back down to the bed.

“I've taken a peek at Black Blood,” Mary said. “From inside the house, I mean. He's scary.”

“He's fucking terrifying,” Triss said, laughing. “But, same could be said about us, you, and the gargoyle over there, to a normal person.” A flick of the wrist to Sándor helped draw a small smile from the ghost. “He helped us build your body. He is a spirit of the dead, and deals with dead stuff.”

“Like me?”

“I... don't know. You said he can see you, even when you're hiding in your, uh, ghost place?”

She nodded. Ghost place, or whatever the proper name for it was, was a place ghosts could apparently hide in the physical world. Far as Triss knew, spirits could do the same thing. But if that was true, then Mary would probably have something to say about spirits other than Black Blood, cause there was probably a few spirits roaming Dolareido, hiding out of view. Black Blood was no ordinary spirit.

Triss stood up. “He'll be there, when you enter the body. Your body. Are you ok with that?”

“Mom?” Mary asked.

“I've seen Black Blood,” Sam said, “as much as anyone can see him. He's very, very scary. But he's only helped... and made jokes. A lot of stupid jokes.”



Triss and Jen laughed, which soon had Mary smiling too. A creepy smile, ghost and all, but a happy smile.

“Ok,” Marry said, “let’s do it.”

Sam smiled bright, turned on the bed, and faced her child full on. “Ok. If you think something’s wrong and you want to stop, you can stop anytime you want.”

“I know.” Nodding, Mary turned to face her mom, and leaned in toward her, almost like she was going to hug her. And Sam held her arms open to her, like she was going to hug her back. When the two touched, Triss froze, for the umpteenth time that night, because it almost looked like the two were able to touch. But before any weight or impact could sink in, Mary’s body broke apart into mist, glowing a soft blue.

The glowing mist tightened, shrinking, and at the same time, floated into Sam’s necklace. It was a quiet, almost anticlimactic thing, how easily and smoothly Mary flowed into the necklace, almost like she’d done it dozens of times before. It quickly left the room empty of mist, and lifted the crushing cold. No more ghost. No more haunted.

Wait a minute.

“Uh, Sam,” Triss said, once Mary was completely gone, and the mist around their feet was gone, too. “You uh, you wear that necklace a lot, and—”

Sam scrunched up her nose at Triss as she stood up. “She’s never in it when I’m with Jacob.”

“Oh, good. Cause that’d be weird.” No kid, no matter who or what, should ever have to see their mom in the middle of an orgy.

~~~~~

“Sure you don’t want Jacob here?” Jennifer asked as they entered the cave, buried nice and far on the outskirts of the city in the desert rock.

“I thought about it,” Sam said, following behind her as they worked past the rocks and stone. “But you said it yourself, you and Triss, that Jacob thinks this can’t be done. I... I don’t know. I sorta want him here, but another part of me thinks it’d be better if we do this without him. It’s a part of his life he’s abandoned, right? You said he tried to revive Minerva decades ago and couldn’t.”

“Yeap,” Triss said.

“Then maybe we shouldn’t involve him. Don’t want to get his hopes up.”

Triss chuckled. Jacob get his hopes up? She didn’t even know if the dude was capable of hopes anymore, with how old he was, and all the crazy shit that’d happened to him over the centuries. If he managed to find some happiness with Sam, and it seemed like he had, that was likely the best the dude could hope for.

Did he tell Sam he was thinking about leaving Dolareido? Would she go with him? Would Antoinette even let her?

Sam paused in the entrance to the cave, and looked back past Triss. “Sándor, did you want to come?”

Slowly, the gargoyle shook his head. “I’ll stay out here. I don’t want—”

“Don’t be like that. You heard what Mary said. And besides, no offense to Beatrice or Jennifer, but... it’d be nice to have someone else nearby who’s been a parent. You... you might have some... I don’t know, insight, into whatever happens?”

Triss looked back at Sándor and watched. What would the dude do? Close off? Walk away? Shake his head, say nothing, turn around, and wait, like a gargoyle?

Sándor took a deep breath, and looked to Triss. Eye contact. Christ it was hard to look the dude in the eyes. Look at him anywhere else, sure, he was a stoic dude who didn’t express much. But the blue eyes had hints of more, a lot more.

She’d hung out with him several times, since that night she saw him playing guitar. Talking to Sándor was easy, no awkwardness at all. Great listener, and was happy to do it, too. But looking him in the eyes was a whole other beast.

“Come on,” Beatrice said, after a few seconds. “We don’t know what’s going to happen. It’ll be nice, having a strong Begotten around in case shit hits the fan. And besides, you’ve met Black Blood.” Nodding, she took out her phone and turned on the light.

“Met is a strong word. A couple of very short encounters in the dream.” But he nodded, and walked in. “Alright.”

The next part was going to be a little rough. She glanced back at him a couple times as they took him through the small passage, and she gulped on a dry throat as madness came into view.

Somehow, the man didn't say a word, as he entered the flesh cave, but the look in his eyes said a million things.

Elen hung from the hook over the giant metal bowl, but at least Triss had made her some cuffs to dangle from, instead of having the metal skewering her wrists. She dangled high and was bound with some extra rope, too, just in case she suddenly turned hulk strong and tried to fling herself off the huge hook. No chance, but still. And fuck, the woman looked awful, as emaciated as ever. The only reason her arms weren't popping out of their sockets was because of whatever strange magic that made her immortal. But considering she was in a deep sleep, she couldn't have been that uncomfortable.

Sándor stared at the walls covered in markings, most in blood, some fresh some old, some etched into the stone. He stared at the candles Jen lit, and then down beneath the bowl, and the carved — or maybe real and petrified — skeletons that held the bowl up. He stared at the pile of bodies in the back of the cave, covered in a tarp. He stared at the body of Julias and Mary, both sitting in a chair, and both covered in tarps of their own.

“A terrifying sight,” Jennifer said.

“It... isn't the first time I've seen something like this,” he said, after a few more look-arounds.

“Oh?” Jen raised a brow before leaning over and lighting another candle. Enough light for Triss to turn off her phone's.

“Long life. Met a few witches in the past, other side of the ocean.”

“Like her?” Samantha asked, nodding to the dangling, sleeping Elen.

“Maybe. Dark hut deep in the woods, a book, a cauldron.”

Triss laughed. “A cauldron? No shit, really?”

Sándor nodded. “I've served witches before, as a guard.”

“Any interesting stories for me?”

He met her eyes again, and holy shit, she saw the faintest hint of a smile there. “Yes. I can share them... later.”

“Yeah, later.” Nodding, Triss walked over to the two bodies sitting in chairs. One of them was breathing.

Slowly, like it... he, might jump up and bite her, Triss lifted the tarp up and took a peek at Julias. She glanced back at Sándor, and sure enough, the dude took a peek at Julias as well, before he looked

away. No need for words, that hurt him. But she did offer the guy a small nod and smile, before looking back at Julias, and gave the body a couple pokes and prods. Still living and breathing, still just sitting there, waiting for a soul. Black Blood was poking at that idea for her, and assured her Elen wasn't an issue; even if she did lose her mind, the magic keeping the bodies alive would keep ticking, and Black Blood could possess her and make her do things, too. Which meant Beatrice had time to focus on the more immediate concern.

Triss set the tarp back down over Julias, and pulled the tarp off Mary. Nah, not Mary. The body was a corpse, not living or breathing yet, and didn't look like Mary when you looked closer. At least the body parts they'd sewn together to look like Mary didn't have seams, magic and all that.

Sam stared at the body, and clutched her necklace. "Should I... ask Mary to come out now?"

"Not ye—actually, maybe you should."

Sam tilted her head to the side. "You hesitated."

Triss came up, and whispered into Sam's ear. "Mary hiding in your necklace is a secret, right? If Black Blood can't see or hear us right now — not sure about that — then let's keep it a secret as long as we can. If we summon him first, he'll see how Mary got here."

"You... really don't trust him, do you?" Sam whispered back.

"Scorpion and the frog, you know? Let's be smart about this." Triss had no idea what sort of dark shit Black Blood was up to when he wasn't with them, but she knew he was definitely up to something. And had probably been up to somethings for a long time, centuries even. Plus, considering he was a spirit of death and the dead, she didn't like the idea of him knowing how to get his hands on Mary when she wasn't protected in her home.

Nodding, Sam stepped back, lifted her necklace, and whispered to it. Quiet, tiny whispers Triss strained to hear, and failed.

Sure enough, the presence of Mary the ghost was obvious. Cold, mist, the usual, it all built up in the small cave. With the half dozen candles Jen had lit, it really gave the creepy mist a whole new level of scary factor.

Mary rose from the mist, no color except for hints of white and blue and compressed fog, and she was see-through, same as always.

"Oh my god," Mary said, and her head snapped left and right rapid fire as she took in the sights. "It's a... a witches cave."

“Literally,” Jennifer said, smiling as she gestured around. The marks and lines, the ritual symbols, the candles, the big bowl, the hanging woman, the dead bodies, the two sitting bodies, all of it. An unsuspecting kine stumbling onto the cave would have said the same thing.

“Literally,” Triss said. “You can take a second to get used to it if you want, Mary. We don’t know what’s going to happen. Better you get comfortable with your surroundings, I guess.”

That might have been a mistake. Mary drifted over to the back of the cave, and shrieked when she realized the mound was a tarp over bodies. Everyone — save Sándor — threw up their hands and covered their ears as the ghost screamed. Uh oh.

“Baby! Baby, don’t worry!” Sam ran over to her, and got between her daughter and the dead. “It’s ok! It’s—”

“They’re dead! Dead dead dead dead dead de—”

“Baby! I told you about... about what we did.” Wow, Sam had told her daughter more than Triss figured she would.

Triss, a lot slower than Sam, joined the two of them at the pile. “We were careful, Mary. Very careful. It’s why it took so long to get everything ready. The only people we killed were absolute shitholes who deserved it. Rapists, murderers, abusers.” She didn’t think they’d have to have this conversation, but the closer they got to this day, the more apparent it became it couldn’t be avoided. They needed Elen for the ritual to put the crystal ball into the body, and no way in hell were they gonna take the flesh witch or the bodies out of here. Too dangerous, too risky. Acclimating the unstable ghost to a room full of bodies and body parts was their only option.

After seeing Mary now, body twitching hyper speed and shifting in place left and right, again at hyper speed, maybe it wasn’t the better idea. Maybe take the dangerous flesh witch out into the world, maybe to Sam’s home, set up a hundred different ritual symbols in her basement, summon Black Blood, give Elen the knife and book, surely that’d be perfectly fine. Compared to a ghost flipping the fuck out, maybe.

“Dead! Dead dead—”

“Mary!” Triss swung her arm and pointed at the bodies. “These were people like Angela and Jeremiah! Okay? You sad those two are dead?”

The ghost snapped her head and glared at Triss, panic and rage in her big empty eyes. But sure enough, saying Angela’s name brought a spark of awareness to her, and she stopped doing that weird

ghost-snap thing. Hovering there, mist pouring off where legs should have been, she slowly looked from Beatrice to Samantha, then back to the bodies.

“I’m not sad those two are dead.”

“Damn right,” Triss said. “Look, Mary, yeah, this shit is nasty. We’re witches. But you trust your mom, right? She helped us prepare. She was there, when we killed the people we used to make this.” She gestured to the corpse woman sitting in the chair. “You don’t need to trust me, or Jen or Sándor, but you trust Sam, right? She’s been with us, every step of the way.” And that journey had been one fucked up mess of guilt and murder. Every person they killed, Triss had to make damn sure they deserved it, and convince Sam of it. The only reason Sam agreed to any of it, was because now she had Kindred instincts telling her killing kine was fine. She didn’t agree with those instincts of course, but it was a shit load better than how she would have felt about it before she was a vampire.

“I… I trust Mom.”

“Good. Now, you trust me about Black Blood, and Elen?”

“I… do.”

Nodding, Triss gestured to an empty space by Sándor near the cave wall. Sam walked over there, every bit of her looking half ready to panic over what was about to happen, and what had just happened. Mary slowly mirrored the nod, and floated over to hover beside her mom. Jen stood beside Sándor.

Black Blood you fucking asshole, don’t do anything to make this worse.

Triss faced the bowl, and gulped. “Black Blood, I summon you.”

Mary’s presence was classic ghost creepy. The mist, the cold, the air of death, her instability, it was borderline cliché. Scary, but cliché. The spirit’s presence, on the other hand, was like swimming in a graveyard, and having the graveyard sing to you at the same time. It was massive, ethereal, and beyond something as simple as people. To something like Black Blood, vampires were only just slightly deep enough into ‘dead’ territory to even warrant his notice. Like, a god, only barely noticing his worshippers. And she hated the idea of thinking of that asshole as a god.

Sure enough, when his black ooze began to fill the room, everyone froze and waited, except Mary. She hovered down closer to her mom, and then behind her. Triss made a quick glance at the ghost, trembling in obvious fear behind her mom. This was going to be rough.

Mary's presence, her mist and fog, it all disappeared into the black ooze that soaked them all. The black blood dripped down from the ceiling, and up from the floor into the ceiling. It leaked from the walls. It flowed from the eyes of the skulls underneath the giant bowl the flesh witch dangled over.

"Well I'll be," the darkness said, more of that deep booming voice with an alien rasp mixed in. "Is that Mary?"

Mary looked around randomly for the voice, head snapping, body shaking.

"D-Don't talk to my daughter," Sam said. "She's not comfortable with you."

Triss grinned. Say one thing for Sam, she was a mom, through and through.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am." A thick, Southern drawl, as always. "And is that Sándor? Dolareido's new Batman?"

Triss threw up her hands. "What the fuck? Batman? You've never seen any Batman shit."

"I have indeed."

"Bullshit."

"You think a spirit can't watch a movie? I'm fixing to clock you upside the head, girl."

"I think—" Triss grabbed her hair and shook her head. "Never mind. Yes, Sándor is here. Yes, he's invested in what happens to Dolareido. He lives here now." As if Black Blood didn't already know that.

Black Blood chuckled, deep voice almost shaking the walls. "Then I am glad to have helped the man."

They all looked Sándor's way.

The gargoyle stared on, face a rock, slowly looking at random objects as he searched for the source of the sound.

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome. Now, three vampires, a monster of nightmares, and a poor lady outside her body. I imagine you're all here 'cause you're ready to start this shindig?"

They all looked Sam's way.

Sam gulped, pulled out the black bag, and removed the crystal ball inside. "I'm ready. Mary?"

"R... Ready," she whispered, still hiding behind her mom, empty eyes wider than ever.

“Ok baby. You just stay there for now. We gotta get the body ready.”

“Okay.” Mary, the deadly ghost who’d thoroughly trashed Jack in the past, now looked as meek and helpless as a little girl.

“Time to wake Elen, then.” Black Blood’s booming chuckle had them vibrating literally this time. He was like one of those jolly uncles a family might visit with their timid kids, and the uncle’s plan to get the kids more comfortable with him, was to laugh and be merry like fucking Santa Claus. It didn’t work in that scenario, and it didn’t work in this scenario. Mary stayed back and away, and drifted closer to Sándor, as Sam stepped up to the body.

“Elen,” Triss said. No response. “Elen!” She reached out and slapped the woman’s ankle.

Elen opened her eyes. No jolt or snap of life and the usual shit that’d come from getting woken up with a pinch of pain. Nope, just an old woman coming out of a long sleep with all the casualness of coming out of hibernation.

“Oh my,” she said, tired eyes drifting around the room. “Is that a ghost?”

“You,” Mary said, and she snarled very inhuman-like as she glared at the flesh witch. “You helped Jeremiah and Angela.”

“That I did, sweetie.”

“Why!?” A punch of sound, high pitched with far too much volume, and everyone winced and crouched like they’d just gotten shot. Except Sándor.

“Jeremiah wasn’t the only person who thinks monsters should die.” And again, with all the grace and rush of a slug, she looked to Sándor. “Enjoying freedom, Pavel?”

Sándor said nothing and showed nothing, but Triss did see a tiny twitch in one eye from the Begotten as he watched Elen. Dude could have yanked a shotgun out of his back pocket and shot the bitch right there, with that exact expression on, and no one would have been surprised.

“Hush you,” Black Blood said. “You’re just a tool now, Elen. See what your blood thirst gets you.”

Triss blinked around at the darkness. Was Black Blood being a hypocrite? She didn’t say it. Honestly, she didn’t even know if it was true. Had Black Blood ever killed anyone?

Before Triss could suggest it, Black Blood began the possession process. A grotesque sight, watching black ooze creep its way up Elen’s legs and into her body through any orifice it could, tear



ducts included. Mary and Sam stared, and poor Mary looked all sorts of disturbed. She looked at what Black Blood was doing the way a kine would look at a ghost.

Once Elen was possessed, Triss jumped up onto the bowl, got her down, put her in her wheelchair, and Jen armed her with the book and knife Sam stole from her sire.

“Alright,” Elen said, Black Blood’s Southern accent gone, rasp mixed into her old woman’s voice, “bring the body, and the mold.”

Right, Elen called the crystal ball the ‘mold’. Triss was sure blueprint fit it better, but whatever. She took the body’s chair, and slid the corpse over to her, all while doing her best to not look at the ghost Mary. Sam stepped up too, crystal ball in hand, and the golden glow fought against the harsh black mist that clung over everything.

Elen smiled and nodded, flipped the pages of the book with her extremely scrawny, wrinkly fingers, found the page, and hummed to herself—himself as he cut a line across the naked body’s side. That knife looked like it belonged in a museum, and was way too fucking sharp.

“Insert the mold, Samantha.”

Sam gulped, both hands clutching the crystal ball, but after a few seconds and a few seconds more, she pushed the ball into the flesh of the corpse.

Everyone watched the body expectantly. Even Mary the ghost wandered closer, eyes stuck on her potential body. At first, nothing, but a moment later Sam gasped, the first to notice the changes.

Triss glanced back and forth between the ghost and the body in the chair. Yeap, it was changing. Black Blood had used his command of death and the dead to craft them the body from corpses, and even do some magical surgery and shit to try and get it as close to Mary as they could. They’d gotten pretty close, Triss thought, but only now that the nose shifted a few millimeters, and the eyes adjusted outward a few millimeters more, did she realize just how fucking important the small details were. Things like height, hip, tits, all of that morphed with small adjustments too, but it was the head, especially the face, where the super tiny mistakes made a giant difference. The blueprint fixed them.

And then it was Mary.

“Oh my god,” Mary said, and she hovered over to the body, so close she was almost touching Elen. The corpse took a breath. “Oh my god!” She snapped back, almost teleporting as she put the big ritual bowl between her and the body.

Elen chuckled. “Calm down, deary. Empty body, empty mind.”

Sam motioned for her daughter to come back, and she did, staring at the awaiting naked body.

“It’s me.”

“No, baby,” Samantha said, shaking her head. “It’s just a vessel. You’re you.”

Triss smiled slightly at Sam. Vessel. It wasn’t the sort of word someone like Sam would use, but Jacob and Triss used that sorta language all the time. Dark magic, rituals, Sam was getting neck deep in it and was changing more and more every night because of it. Maybe she’d leave the Ordo and become be a witch? Or maybe she’d ride some kinda line between them, like Minerva had.

Hopefully Sam wouldn’t follow in all of Minerva’s footsteps.

“W-What do I do now?”

“Possess the body,” Black Blood said. “You saw how I did with this one. Though it should be easier for you.”

“Easier?”

“You’re not like me, sweetie. There’s a much smaller barrier between you and the humans. Ghosts possess people sometimes, and corpses. And considering this body has no mind or soul, and is eagerly awaiting its missing soul, you should snap into place like a puzzle piece.”

“I... I still don’t know how.”

Elen shrugged. “You’ll figure it out. Touch the body, and move into her. It should come naturally.” Chuckling, Elen closed the book, and picked at her fingernails with the bloody knife. “I could force you into the body.”

Sam glared at the old witch. “What do you mean?”

“I am a spirit of the dead. I have... some ability, to affect ghosts.” Black Blood returned Sam’s glare with a teasing grin. “But I don’t think it will be necessary.”

“Don’t touch me!” Mary glared at Black Blood, the crazy sort of ghost glare that usually announced incoming flying objects and murderous intent. From terrified of the god spirit of death one moment, to ready to brawl him the next.

Elen put up her hands, smile unwavering. “I wouldn’t dare, child.”

Jen stepped up behind Elen and rolled her a few feet away, earning a merry chuckle from the old woman. It was all a game to Black Blood, their lives, the rituals, the experiments, using Elen. To Black Blood, everything here was a side note, something he was experimenting with while he did his own shit

elsewhere. Well, whatever, as long as he did what was asked of him. If he didn't, Triss would call off the deal, and the fucker could rot. But honestly, she got the impression Black Blood was the sorta fucker to follow through on his deals. An asshole, but a trustworthy one, like Jacob.

Sam stood beside the body, and motioned to her daughter. "Whenever you're ready, baby. Take your time. If things go bad, Elen can keep the body alive. Right?"

Elen nodded. "Julias's body waits in that chair, and has for months now, without food or drink. Elen's flesh magic is connected to her own life, and she's made herself immortal, albeit in a strange way. As long as she's alive, which should be indefinitely, we can keep our vessels alive and kicking. Unless someone comes along and damages them in a way that would kill them quickly; avoid cutting off heads or stabbing hearts, please."

His joke didn't earn a smile from anyone, but Triss did have to suppress hers. Bad time for a nasty joke with Mary and Sam here, but Triss did like dark humor.

Everyone went quiet as they waited. Nothing to say anymore. It was all on the ghost, now.

Mary floated in front of her double, and stared at the vessel, its eyes closed. Eye contact would probably have been a bit much, so Triss didn't open them. After a minute of hovering and staring, Mary turned around, and sat in the chair, on, and into her body.

The mist sucked up into the body like she had a mega vacuum in her mouth. A deep, heavy, unending breath they all heard, like the cave had transformed into a wind tunnel. All the mist, hidden beneath Black Blood's presence, swirled around them like a whirlpool before flying into Mary's new body through the mouth and nose. And as quickly as it started, it stopped. No bang, no explosion of light, nothing. The ghost, the ghost presence, it was all gone. Only one candle survived.

Well, that was pretty damn anticlimactic.

"Did it work?" Beatrice asked. "It—"

Mary opened her eyes.

"Mary!?" Sam squatted down in front of her child, and looked up at her, green eyes wide.

"M... Mom?" Mary looked at her mom, eyes wide too. Green, with hints of blue, like Jack's. Like Sam's.

"Oh god, baby!?! Are you ok? Do you remember anything?" She threw herself at Mary and hugged her, almost knocking the chair over. Triss got there quick and stopped it, and Sam didn't even notice. Just a bundle of tearless sobs as she hugged Mary.

“Mom!” Oh thank god, Mary hugged her back. Not a mindless zombie, then. “It worked! It worked, oh thank god!”

Triss sighed relief, and looked around for Jen. Her friend did the same, before she went around and re-lit the dead candles.

Sam stood up and brought Mary with her, hugged her and spun her a couple times and hugged her a few times more, and finally let her go.

“I... I can't believe it worked.” Sam managed a whole three seconds before she hugged her kid again. “Are you alright? Is everything working?”

“I'm ok mom. I'm ok. I... I can think again.”

“Think?” She let her go again and stepped back. “You mean... as a ghost...”

“I couldn't think, not really. Any thoughts I had hit me so hard, like in a dream. Just... images, sounds, scents, they came and went and every second I was just trying to hold on. I—” Mary finally looked down at herself, then at the room full of people. “Ah!”

Jennifer laughed and stood beside Sándor. “After what we've been through, Mary, I think you can stop worrying about the nudity.” But before Mary could say anything, Jennifer turned Sándor around anyway. That got a chuckle out of everyone, save the gargoyle.

Triss caught a peek of the man's eyes before he finished turning around though. There was a hint of... something there. Concern? Disbelief? Whatever it was, it wasn't the unmatched joy she saw in Sam's.

Triss also took a moment to take in Black Blood's eyes. Elen's eyes were old, lots of wrinkles and sagging skin, hard to read, but she did look interested in what was happening, like a scientist making mental notes.

“So you remember everything?” Triss asked.

Mary half turned and nodded to her, big smile in full bloom. She really was a pretty lady, a bit taller than her brother, decently lean, if a bit soft. Her face had a certain softness to it too, like her mom, and she had brown hair to her shoulders, also like her mom. It was a little hard to see the similarities between the two when looking at the ghost, but they were blatant when looking at the actual body, especially now that she was up and moving.

“I remember everything. I remember... getting stabbed in that alley. I remember running home, not really knowing I was dead at first. I remember when Jack and Mom found me there. I remember—”

She snapped her gaze to Elen. Thankfully, this time the head snap didn't do that freaky instant snap thing it did when she was a ghost.

Elen chuckled, and balanced the knife on one finger over the book, teetering it so its blade tip and handle end tapped the book over and over.

"It appears the possession was a success."

"I don't feel like I'm possessing a body," Mary said. She squirmed a little, covering her breasts and privates, so Triss wrapped the tarp around her they'd used to hide her body. "Thanks. It... It feels like me. I don't think I could, um, de-possess it? Or anything like that."

"That's good," Elen said. "Then it appears this was a success. Body and soul, and the mold to fit them together."

Mary took a deep, slow breath, and leaned into her mom, who happily hugged her again, with one arm this time so they could walk together, toward the wall. They leaned their heads into each other. It was so precious, Triss thought she might just puke, in a good way.

"I'm alive again," Mary whispered. "I... I can't believe it." It was inevitable. She sobbed. And unlike her already sobbing mom, Mary had plenty of tears to make.

Sam hugged her full on again, and the two of them cried for a little while.

"It worked," Jen said, turning Sándor back toward the group. Triss made sure to watch his expression again, but relaxed as the man smiled, barely, and set his eyes on the two hugging women.

"It worked," Triss said. "I don't know if we'll be able to get back Julias's soul to do the same, but at least Mary's alive."

Mary let go of her mom, and with the biggest, happiest, tear-filled eyes Triss had ever seen, she waddled her way to her, tarp still wrapped around her with one arm, and hugged Triss as best she could with the other arm.

"Thank you."

Well, shit. Triss smiled over the girl's shoulder at Sam, and pet Mary on the back once. She was tempted to tell the girl it was all about Julias, and Mary was just a test run. But that shit wasn't true. Seeing Sam smile like that was so god damn amazing, it made the fucking shitshow they'd pushed through seem worth it.

Slippery slope, thinking it was okay to go around murdering people so they could resurrect someone.

“You’re... welcome.” She pat Mary on the shoulder, and gently pushed her away. Yeap, girl was still crying. “Fuck me, it actually worked.”

“It did!” She giggled, and for a moment there, she looked just like Sam. “Oh my god! Oh my... god...” Slowly, Mary looked around at the room again, and this time her eyes lingered on the pile of bodies in the corner. The tarp covering them didn’t do a good job covering the limbs sticking out closer to the bottom of the pile.

It only got worse as Mary, now in the flesh and a living breathing person, took in the rest of the reality. An old woman, a flesh witch, possessed by a god-like spirit of death, with a knife and weird magic book in hand. Symbols carved into the floor and walls. A giant metal bowl, where the smell of blood would never fade. This wasn’t the scene you’d expect for a happy family reunion.

Sam came close and guided her daughter toward the exit. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

“I... I’m ok, I am. I still remember everything. It’s just, when I was... dead, all this stuff seemed... I don’t know, reasonable? It...” She shivered and took another step toward the cave’s exit. “Ok yeah, I agree. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Jen came up and stood beside Mary, opposite of Sam. “My dear, you live and breathe once again! We must celebrate!”

“Jennifer, we are most definitely not celebrating in one of the ways you like to celebrate.”

Jen laughed and leaned in front of Mary to look at Sam. “We. The way we like to celebrate.”

Triss grinned after them as they made for the exit, but didn’t follow. Neither did Sándor. Mister Gargoyle watched them go, his small smile turning into a small frown when they passed him, his eyes locked on Mary.

“I can’t see her anymore,” Black Blood Elen said.

Triss looked down at her. “Say what?”

“I am a spirit of death and the dead. I can see others who touch that realm.” She grinned up at her. “Why do you think I like vampires so much?”

“Didn’t think you liked all vampires. Just Jacob... and me, I guess.”

“Ha. Perhaps. But it is also because I can connect with vampires in a very real way. A physical way, if necessary. You are partly dead, after all.” Slowly, he handed Triss back the knife and book, grin unfading. “With ghosts, I can see them, where they move, where they flow, even when they hide out of my reach. I can’t see her anymore. As far as I can tell, she is alive.”

“I guess that’s as good a confirmation I can hope to get.”

“Indeed. Who is truly alive, when any scientist ultimately considers everyone to be robots, and slaves to determinism.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Oh fuck off, you’re not a scientist, or a philosopher.”

Elen laughed, in that quiet granny way. “True. She’s alive, and we will be hard pressed to prove otherwise.”

Sándor joined them, glancing back over his shoulder to the curve of the cave entrance, now that everyone else was gone.

“Can you tell?” Triss asked.

“No. I will be able to tell if she dreams, but vampires dream as well. Are they alive?”

She shrugged. “No fucking clue.”

“Then I consider this a success.” Elen chuckled again. Chuckled turned into a gargling mess, and black ooze poured out of her mouth. The black mist in the cave grew denser, and more of the ooze poured out of her from her other orifices. Eventually the black blood coated the floor, and oozed along the walls and ceiling again. Elen was no longer possessed.

“I…” Sighing, Triss kicked at the floor a few times, and paced around for a half minute. Fuck, she had say it. Really didn’t want to, but she knew she did. “Thank you, Black Blood. Sam’s lost so damn much. It’s nice to give her back a piece of it. A damn big piece.”

The blackness around them rumbled with a chuckle.

“That’s a mighty fine thank you, little pardner.”

Oh god. She rolled her eyes again and flipped her middle finger up at the whole cave. “Yeah yeah.”

“And I look forward to Samantha’s continued pursuits of the dark arts.”

“I—wait. You think Sam’s going to join the Circle?”

“I do indeed. She’s got the itch now, after seeing what it can do.”

“Did you fucking help us knowing that?”

The darkness chuckled again. “A little.”

Triss would punch the fucker in the face if she could.

“Please leave her alone.”

“I reckon she’ll come to me, Triss. Or Jacob. And besides, you don’t think Samantha fits in the Circle?”

“I think she does, maybe a little too well. And I think she’d probably live a happier second life if she stayed the fuck away from the Circle.”

Again the darkness laughed. “Maybe. Maybe. But witches don’t become witches easily, Beatrice. Something drives them. And you know Sam has the fuel for that fire.”

Before she could snap back and tell him to leave Sam the fuck alone again, the blackness disappeared. The mist seeped into the walls, the black ooze vanished into the cracks in the stone, and the heavy presence of death incarnate went with it. Elen slumped, exhausted, and probably asleep.

“Yeah you better run!” She threw up her hands, stomped once, paced a couple times more, and groaned. Okay, yeah, Black Blood taking an interest in Samantha was not good, but it wasn’t like Sam wasn’t neck deep in witch shit all the time. For three months she got to see the darkest, most horrible shit humanity had to offer, and then watch Triss and Jen kill that person. She watched them drag the body back to the cave, and with Elen’s flesh magic, dismantle the body like it was nothing more than a bunch of parts attached at the joints.

Much as it sucked, Black Blood was right.

Sándor took a step closer to her. His frown hadn’t left.

“What’s on your mind, Mister Stone?”

Even the hilarious and perfect nickname didn’t change his expression in the slightest.

“Nothing.”

“Uh huh. This is about Mary, right? I mean, there’s no way we could have done that without Mary’s soul floating around.” She gestured to Julias. “I have no idea what to do with him. Yet.” She gestured to Sándor, too. “How about you? This shit works. We got proof. Maybe you want to revive the people closest to you.”

His frown remained, and instead of looking at her, he looked back to the cave exit.

“I... don’t know.”

“Ch’yeah, I get that. It’s pretty fucked up,” she said, gesturing to the pile of bodies in the back.

The man looked behind him at the bodies, then Triss, then back to the exit.



“I guess I’m not convinced yet.”

“We really only killed people who deserved it, Sándor.”

“Not that. I mean that it worked.”

“Oh. I... fuck, I don’t know. She’s walking and talking and smiling. Crying. She remembers everything that’s happened to her, and she’s acting a lot more like a normal person instead of a psycho ghost. What more could anyone ask for?”

He nodded, expression softening a little as he looked down, thinking.

“I agree. “

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t feel... I don’t know.”

That was fucking unnerving. It’d be easy to chalk it up to the dude just being wary and shit, which made perfect sense, ‘cause she was, too. But Sándor was ancient, nearly as old as the Prince as far as he knew. His instincts meant something.

“Let’s keep an eye on her then.”

“Agreed.”

“And... let’s be happy for Sam, ok? Christ, did you see the look on her face?”

“I did.” He met her eyes for a second time before looking away. A second was enough. If something happened to Mary now, it’d only make things a thousand times worse for Sam.

Triss scooped up Elen’s cuffs, and put them back on the old bitch. But before she could hang the immortal witch from the hook again, Elen opened her eyes.

“Resurrection,” she said.

Triss froze, and stared the old woman in the eyes. “What about it?”

“Long have witches such as I sought for a way to revive the dead. Hundreds, thousands of years. Perhaps you’ve finally done it. If you succeeded, please write it in the book.”

This fucking bitch. Triss didn’t know if it was her age and failing mind that had her focused on her book, or if Elen had been so obsessed in life that her magic was the only thing that mattered to her. Either way, it was pretty fucking annoying, having the old hag make a request like that, considering she was a prisoner and never getting out.

And yet, Triss nodded anyway.

“Okay.”

If she succeeded. The first witch to ever successfully complete a resurrection.

Fuck.

~~~~~

She really wished Sándor came, if only to see the look on Jack’s face.

“M... Mary?” Jack took a step back, making both his crows flutter in surprise on his shoulders. But he didn’t fall, half because one of his thralls got behind him and caught his weight.

“Jack.” Mary grinned, and looked around at the big front door of his mansion. “This place is... wow! Can I come in?”

Jack stared at her, green eyes wide in that way Sam sometimes did. Total shock. Triss couldn’t help but laugh.

“Um... sure?” Jack, dressed in dark suit pants and a white shirt, suit jacket and tie nowhere to be seen, motioned for them to come in. They did. Each step had Triss and Jen laughing, Sam and Mary smiling, and the thrall — Veronica — staring. Jack took a couple steps back, still staring.

A second later, Veronica had her phone out. Three seconds later, the other two thralls came running from the second floor, and they gasped as they stared down from the top of the stairs, half behind the railings.

“Jack, you dumbass, stop running.” Giggling, Mary walked up to her brother and held out her arms.

It took a second for the reality to sink in, but once it did, Jack made a small finger gesture to the nearby railing at the bottom of the big stairs. His two crows flew over to the railings, each taking a post opposite each other, and both crows stared at Mary, too. Lot of staring.

Jack didn’t recoil when Mary hugged him. Hell, if anything, the kid hugged her a little tighter than was probably normal for him, and Samantha let out a weak sob as she came up and hugged them both at the same time.

Jack snapped to attention, pulled back, and looked to Triss as his eyes shifted from shock, to confusion, to worry.

“Does this mean—”

“Julias is still out of my reach,” she said. “And... and could be, for a long time. I put that on hold, cause your sister was around and your mom deserved help first.”

“God, I... I—” The air got knocked out of him as Mary hugged him again, his mom too. But he managed to keep looking at Triss, and the shock in his eyes melted away to something Triss rarely got to see on the kid. Joy.