

~~Jack~~

Everything happened so fast. Too fast. If someone was sick, they didn't just spontaneously fall over and die, right? And they didn't start bleeding like that!

But Mary had done just that. Five minutes. In five minutes, she'd gone from laughing and chuckling and drinking, to puking up blood. More than puking, the blood had come from her eyes, and fingernails, and everywhere. Her body lay on his mom's lap, soaking her in more blood as she shook.

She managed one final smile for him before looking back up at their mom, who clutched her head on her lap snug to her waist.

"I got to... hug my mom... again."

Her limbs went limp. Her breathing stopped. Her heart stopped. Her empty eyes stared on, blood lining where tears should have been.

Jack stared at her body, identical to the one he'd said goodbye to a year ago. In the hospital, she'd been cold, pale as a vampire not Blushing Life, with cheeks sunken in. He hadn't dared look under the sheet to see her wounds. This time, she was a mess of crimson on her skin and revealing dress, blood that coated him, and utterly drenched his mom. Warm blood. It'd been so warm.

He looked at Beatrice, and she looked at him. A billion words in a single glance, but they all boiled down to three: what the fuck.

His mom burst into sobs, and clutched Mary's body close. "Mary... please don't go. Please... please... please don't... leave me again..."

Jack winced and looked away. Christ, not again.

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

A ear-piercing shriek erupted from Mary's body, and everyone fell back on their elbows. He knew that shriek. He remembered the pain it put him through when it threw him through a wall like he was a paperweight.

Him, Triss, his mom, the whole fucking ball, everyone stared, frozen and unmoving as the ghost of Mary flowed out of the bloody corpse. Mary, but different. It was her ghost, the same creature he saw haunting his old home, but any semblance of calmness or sanity was gone. Worse than the time she

tried to kill him. Her empty eyes were wide to an extreme, and her hair thrashed around like it was alive.

She circled above, screaming louder, until it broke the petrification of the crowd. Everyone covered their ears, and drinking glasses shattered as they hit the floor. A moment later, every glass that hadn't been dropped shattered anyway, as the rising shriek of Jack's sister buried the ball in fury and misery. It was beyond loud. People groaned and screamed too, some falling to their knees and clutching their heads, Jack included, but their groans and yells were completely buried under Mary's.

The windows shattered, and while they were hidden behind enormous, thick black curtains, the explosion of glass was enough to stir them like sails in a hurricane. Bits of glass went everywhere, and the crowd dropped to their knees, either dodging the flying clear blades, or doing their best to keep their eardrums from popping.

"I'm not her! I'm not her! I'm not her!" She yelled and shrieked as she circled overhead, clutching her face and dragging her nails down through it, cutting through her see-through skin. The wounds healed instantly, but she tore at her cheeks again and again anyway, each time letting her jaw hang open further and further until her mouth was open almost an entire foot.

The ballroom filled with mist as it cooled, white fog pouring from ceiling corners like someone had set up a hundred industrial dry ice fog machines. In seconds, it flowed over the balcony down onto everyone below, before the ballroom pit was filled with mist up to the waist of anyone still standing. The cold came next, cold that bit into the bones, cold not even a vampire could ignore.

"Mary!" Jack yelled as he forced himself to his feet. "Mary! Enough!" He looked his mom's way, but only her head was visible in the mist. She was staring up at her daughter's ghost, eyes wide. Shock.

"I'm not her! I'm not her!"

"What do you mean you're not her!?" He snapped his gaze left and right as he tried to get some sort of bearing on the situation. The drapes still covered the windows, thank god. No one could see in. But nearby kine would be able to hear what was going on. Hell, half of Dolareido probably heard the opening scream.

He looked Antoinette's way. She was staring up at the ghost as well, but unlike everyone else, her mouth wasn't agape. She was processing, and looked around to start damage control at nearly the same time Jack did. She caught his eye, nodded, and looked to Michael. Of course he was still standing, and being an obvious presence while doing it, posing in just the right way he could see everything going on

around him, and let everyone know he wasn't spooked by some ghost. Luckily Mary didn't seem to notice him. He'd be more than spooked if Mary decided to ram glass shards through his eye sockets.

Michael met the Prince's eyes, nodded, and pulled out his phone. The expression on his face said it all: phones weren't working. Of course not, not with a raging ghost around. But Michael thought fast, and made a small signal with his hand to someone in the crowd. Another vampire, a Mekhet, quickly vanished and disappeared.

They'd get out of the Black Hall, and contact the Invictus thralls and ghouls in the city government. They'd make sure the police and fire department wouldn't arrive any time soon, and hopefully get the guards outside to stop anyone from getting close.

"I'm not her! I'm not her!"

"Mary, stop!" Beatrice jumped up and waved her arms in the air. "Fucking stop! What happened!? Tell us what happened!"

Jack winced as the inevitable shriek followed. Triss didn't know how hard it was to talk to Mary when she was angry, but she found out quick when Mary swooped down over them, close enough to nearly touch their heads, and screamed. They both fell.

"I knew it! It was the dreams! Empty dreams. Wandering in nothing. Nothing! Should have known. Should have known! But I wouldn't see the truth! Couldn't accept it. Couldn't... couldn't..." Her screams faded, and her insane expression settled as she finally turned her empty eyes from Jack and Triss, to their mom.

His mom had one hand out, and was holding it open, palm up, toward Mary.

Jack looked at his mom, and stared through the mist as both he and her slowly got back to their feet. She took special care to lay down Mary's body before she did, and she stood up with no fear in her eyes. Only sadness.

"Baby," she said, voice so quiet Jack doubted anyone else could hear it with their ears still ringing. "It... didn't work."

"No! No... no it didn't." Mary shook her head violently as she hovered in place. No legs, and instead of the fancy dress, she had back on the simple clothes she had when Jack first found her. "It didn't. It didn't. It didn't."

“I know, sweetie. I know.” Their mom steeled herself, and Jack stared on as she reached out, and gently ran a hand down the place where she should have been able to touch her daughter’s cheek. “But you remember, right?”

“Re... member?”

“What you said, just... just before you died. Just now.”

“I got to... to hug my mom again.”

Samantha nodded, took a deep, useless breath, and lowered her hands. “And it was worth it, right?”

“It... was.” Mary the ghost swam back up in the air. Thank god their mom was there, or she’d have been ripping the whole ballroom into a mess, with probably more than a few casualties. “It was. I was... happy.”

“Then... then it was worth it.” Nodding, Samantha gestured around them. “This isn’t your home, is it?”

“No! No it’s not.”

“Then you should go home. It’s safe there. I’ll come visit you again.”

Mary lowered herself down even closer to her mom, until they were face to face. While Mary’s face had returned to normal, ish, it was still a ghost’s face, with empty eyes and hair that shifted and moved with a breeze that didn’t exist.

“You’re not angry at me? For not telling you?”

“About your dreams? Honey, you couldn’t have known this would happen, not like this. No, I’m not angry. Now please go wait for me at home. I’ll come visit you before the night is over.”

Jack stared at his mom. It was crazy how calm she was, how strong she looked. It was his mom, standing in front of a raging ghost, talking with her usual gentle mom voice, a voice he’d heard a million times before. She’d used that voice even when their dad died. Hearing it now, it was like someone hit Jack upside the head with a baseball bat, just how much strength it took her to use that voice.

He looked around at the crowd. Everyone had gone silent, and were staring, either at the mist that flowed around them, or at the ghost Samantha was soothing. No one moved, not even the people on their knees in the chilling fog. And despite how deadly silent it was, Mary didn’t seem to notice, or care.

Because it wasn't Mary. It was something else.

"Okay. Okay, I'll..." Mary the ghost stared down at her flesh body through the mist, and her whole body shifted and twitched, like a bad signal on analog cable. Jack got ready to get thrown around like a baseball. But slowly, her image returned to normal, and she nodded as she smiled at their mom. "Okay."

"Cya later, baby. Don't worry, everything will be fine." She nodded, smiling, and blew her daughter's ghost a small kiss.

Mary smiled, a little wider than humanly possible, before she sank into the mist, into the floor, and was gone.

It only took moments for the ball to return to normal. The mist faded into the ground, and stopped seeping from the ceiling. The bone-chilling cold went with it, along with the heavy presence Jack had grown all too familiar with over the years.

Which left a ballroom full of confused and shocked people. They started talking again, but no one dared talk loudly, as if their voices would resummon the ghost who just thoroughly thrashed their good time. Jack threw a glare their way, and everyone shut the fuck up quick, before he walked over to his mom. She'd already gotten back on her knees, and was closing Mary's eyes.

No, not Mary. Just a vessel, a failed one.

"I'm... sorry," he said. "I told Sándor and Damien to wait until after the ball, to check her dreams. I... I didn't want to... I was avoiding..."

His mom smiled up at him, nodding. "Thank you. I'm glad you did. It was... It was good, while it lasted." Not sobbing anymore, not crying, not shaking. She'd turned to stone.

"Fuck me fuck me fuck me," Triss said, pacing in place. "I don't fucking understand. I—"

"She said it," Samantha said. "She said she wasn't her."

"Not her? I—oh fucking shit, you mean she isn't Mary?"

"Maybe... maybe." Nodding, Jack's mom stood back up, and looked to Beatrice. "Can you take the body back to Elen? She might be able to do something with it, but... but I... but I don't think it'll ever work, if Mary's right."

If Mary was right. If Mary was right, Mary wasn't Mary.

"Mom, you—"

“I don’t care if she’s not Mary.” She looked Jack’s way, and her steady, steel gaze struck him still. “She’s my daughter, and she’s in pain, and I’m going to go make sure she’s okay.” After another slow nod, she clenched her hands into fists, and walked up to Daniel, who still stood between the crowd and the stairs to the front door. “I need to get clean, and change clothes. Can you take me back to the tower?”

Daniel blinked down at her, mild shock still in his eyes, only half hidden behind his glasses. He looked back to Antoinette and Athalia, got confirming nods, and took Samantha up the stairs leading outside. The moment the front doors opened, they vanished in his Cloak.

“Triss,” Jack whispered, “you—”

“I’ll be fine.” She managed a weak shrug for him as she knelt down and picked up the body. More clack clacks of high heels announced Jennifer’s approach, and Jack stepped aside to let the witch join her friend.

But before they left, Jack spoke up. “Jacob—”

“Had nothing to do with this,” Triss said, eying him with her green snake eyes. “Neither do Othello or Aaron. You got questions, you come to me. But this was—”

“I’m not judging. Really, I’m not. Just... wanted to know if there was anything I could do.”

It took a few seconds for her to realize he was being serious, and her expression broke into the same sadness he knew was on his face.

“Nothing. There’s nothing. I’m... fuck me, I’m so sorry, Jack. Your sister... christ.”

“You heard her,” he said, sighing heavy and shoulders slumping. “She’s not her.”

“Fuck me.” Groaning, Triss looked past him, and scanned the crowd. Not for Jacob or the other witches, they were still there and she kept looking. Sándor? Jack looked back, and sure enough, the man was gone.

Oh shit, Sándor. Poor bastard was going to need a therapist after this. The one fucking thing that someone had managed to fix, something the hunters had broken, something he blamed himself for, and it went down in flames.

Triss sighed, probably coming to the same conclusion, and walked to the door with Mary in her arms. Weightless to a Nosferatu’s strength.

Jen paused at the base of the stairs for a moment, before leaning in to whisper to Jack.

“I appreciate your need to fix things, Jack. I appreciate your need to force people to accept truth and reality where you can, as well. But listen to me. Do not push your mother on this, not tonight. She’s worked toward this goal for months, and has bloodied her hands in ways you can’t imagine.”

“I can imagine a lot.”

A quick snarl from Jen gave him pause. She was serious.

“Give your mother space, and let her accept this reality on her own terms. Okay?”

“Okay, I get you. I won’t push her.”

“Good.” With a small nod that looked as heavy as an anchor, Jen left with her girlfriend.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Antoinette said, voice raised slightly, and she stepped up to stand beside Jack. “Tonight, we have seen... something unfathomably horrible. Please forgive me, but I must dismiss you all. Expect another ball in the future, but for now, the pleasantries must end.”

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Jack stuck around as people left. He wanted to go see his mom, but knowing she’d be with Mary, and Mary would be unstable as fuck, it was a bad idea. No one calmed Mary down like his mom, and his presence could send her into a proper destructive mood. Anyone’s presence could right now, save for his mom’s.

The Carthians and Invictus left, and so did Aaron and Othello. The Uratha stuck around, but even they eventually left, except for Eric. Him and Jessy remained, Fiona and Damien too, and they joined Jack as he pulled himself up to sit on one of the tables along the walls.

“That... was fucking horrible,” Jessy said.

“Yes,” someone said. Everyone looked up when a voice they didn’t normally hear in their friend conversations jumped in. Jacob. “It was horrible.”

Jack glared at the man. Everyone at the table knew Jacob was a threat, and possibly working with Black Blood to fuck up the whole city, and worse. He should have been trying to avoid letting Jacob know that Jack suspected him. But with how shitty the situation was, he had a good excuse to glare at the man.

“You...” Jack clenched his teeth and looked away. Don’t blame him, this was on Triss. Her words. But holy fuck, it was so much easier to want to blame Jacob than it was his friend.

And Jacob knew it, too. Jacob shook his head as he sighed, and took off his sunglasses. Everyone at the table winced and looked away, but Jack lifted his eyes and stared the man straight in the empty eye sockets.

“I gave them the tools, Jack. And a fuckload of warnings, too. I told them this wasn’t going to work, but they deserved to try, right?”

“You warned them?”

“All the fucking time, kid. But I knew they’d try something. And I... all I can do is make sure my witches’ mistakes don’t kill them, so they can learn from them.”

“You sound like a parent who thinks the best way to teach his kid to not get electrocuted, is to let them get electrocuted.”

The old Nosferatu shook his head again. “It’s not the same, and you know it.”

“I—”

“I’m going to go check on Samantha, and Mary.” He put the sunglasses back on, and walked away, leaving everyone at the table to stare after him. Only once the front doors closed behind him, did people relax.

Jack looked to Antoinette. She stood in the center of the ball, arms folded under her breasts, red eyes pointed down as she went into think-tank mode. She’d be there for a little while, processing how best to handle the situation, how to manage the response from the government and media, and how and when to set up the next ball. Forever planning. He loved her, and normally he’d be right next to her, obsessing over details and planning. But at the moment, the only thing he could think of, was Mary’s bleeding eyes, and the utter fucking despair on his mom’s face when Mary fell over.

He looked over at Eric and Jessy. The werewolf had an arm around her shoulders, stroking her, while she leaned into him. Both looked troubled. He looked over at Damien and Fiona. Same situation, though Fiona pressed her face into Damien’s chest to cry. Natasha stood in the pit with Antoinette, nodding whenever Antoinette whispered something, and took notes in her smart phone. But she spared a glance for Jack, and the look in her eyes was heartbreaking. She’d been getting along with Mary, quite a bit.

Everyone got along with Mary.



Jack leaned down, picked up a piece of broken glass, and held it in front of him, high up, between him and the chandelier. What a shitty fucking night.

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~~Beatrice~~

The trip out of the city was a quiet one. Jen stuck with her, but didn't say a thing. Better to stay quiet until they were out of the city, even with how good Triss was getting at her Cloak. But that wasn't the main reason neither of them were talking.

Thirty minutes later, thirty really fucking long minutes of carrying a corpse she never wanted to carry again, they were outside city limits, and out in the desert on the way toward their hidden little cave.

"Sándor left," Jen said. Thank god she said it first.

"Yeah. Kinda bailed on us, didn't he?" Which was kind of a dick move on his part, and very out of character for him. "Probably went somewhere to brood. Maybe cry. Maybe rage a bit."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. As a recovering brooder, I should know. If I had to guess, he's back in his lair, sitting on that big throne in his castle, and just... being a statue, collecting dust, tearing himself up over this." Because no matter what anyone said, the dude would never stop blaming himself for Sam's pain.

Jen sighed, but nodded as she touched Triss's shoulder. "Probably."

"Once we get the body back in Elen's, uh, aura or whatever, we should go check on Sam. I... I guess she'll be in Mary's room, with her ghost again, and... crying, maybe." They couldn't get teary without Blushing Life, but she could sob and cry just fine. Funny enough, Sam hadn't sobbed or cried, back in the ballroom, once Mary's ghost appeared. If anything, it was like something had suddenly cast her out of iron.

She didn't want Mary to see her cry. She wanted to make sure Mary, or Mary's ghost, didn't freak out and make everything quickly go from bad to worse. Christ, what sort of fucking person did you

have to be to be a... a mom? It wasn't the same as being a sire, not at fucking all, and Triss's stupid vampire brain couldn't understand it.

They stepped into the cave, and set the body on the chair next to Julias's. Thankfully his body was still breathing, and hidden under a blanket. Made it easier to not picture him with blood gushing out of every orifice and then some.

"Oh dear," Elen said. Dangling from her hook, her emaciated body hadn't changed much in the past few months. Maybe she'd stay like this for the rest of time? Pretty shitty situation, but one she deserved.

Triss snarled. "Don't."

"The ghost and the body didn't agree with each other. What a shame."

"I said don't." Triss came up to the bowl and glared up at the flesh witch with enough venom to kill an ox. "I didn't come here to talk to you. Just make sure the body doesn't rot. We can still use it, fix it up, and do the ritual again."

"All flesh in this cavern is safe from decay." The old bitch offered a cracked, evil smile, and met Triss's eyes with all the care and concern of a retired granny watching her favorite TV show, while high as a kite.

"Good."

"But no matter what happens, no matter what magic you use, you cannot bind a ghost to a living body for forever."

"That..." Growling, Triss kicked the metal bowl hard enough the room echoed with the impact, before she stormed off.

Getting out of the cave took a bit, but once she was back out with Jen behind her, she screamed. Full on roar screamed. Tore up the voice screamed. Screamed until it fucking hurt, screamed.

Jen said nothing. She stood beside Triss and waited, wearing a weak, patient smile.

"You could rub it in my face, you know," Triss said. "Say 'I told you so' and shit."

"I didn't tell you so."

"You basically did. All the times you tagged along, I could tell you never really thought this would work."

“I... was routinely surprised at how much you accomplished, Triss.” Jen came up behind her and hugged her, not caring about the blood she got on her hands. “I stuck it out because I knew you’d accomplish something amazing, the same way Jacob knew. And I stuck it out because I love you.”

Triss sighed, and leaned back into Jen. Jen eventually became turn and hug, and hug eventually turned into kiss.

“You love me?”

“Don’t be stupid. Of course I do.”

“But you don’t want me to yourself.”

“I...” Jen frowned a little as she looked up slightly, thinking. “We’ve had this conversation before. I’m just not interested in some sort of dove pairing. I don’t want a relationship with one person to be my significant other. The idea has never interested me. I love you, I know you love me, and I want you to find someone else to love, too.”

“You are so weird.”

“Yes, well, so are you.”

Triss chuckled, which of course was Jen’s goal. Christ, how much shit she did, just for Triss. How little Triss did for her.

“Alright, let’s go see Sam.”

Jen shook her head as she stepped back. “I got a text from Jacob. He’s visiting Sam.”

“Really? He’s comfortable being around Mary?”

“No idea. But he feels compelled to go to Sam, and you saw how quickly he got along with Mary when she was... alive.”

“She got along with everybody,” Triss said. “But... it’s weird. I guess I had trouble thinking of Jacob really loving someone else to that point. Always got the impression Sam was kinda like a fling for him. Some fun.” Even when earlier evidence suggested she was more.

“Apparently not.”

Triss looked down at the desert rocks as she weighed her options. Go see Jack? Nah, nothing to say to the kid, not really. Go see Othello and Aaron? Nah, they’d be back at the cave, Aaron reading, Othello... doing whatever he did when he wasn’t fucking Madison.

“Sándor,” Jen said before Triss could. “You want to find out if Sándor’s okay.”

“I... I guess I fucking do.” Before she could stop herself, Triss threw up her hands and paced back and forth. She’d taken off her heels at a certain point and tossed them; you can’t pace in heels. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“You like him.”

“I like Julias! I love Julias! I—”

“Triss, your chances of seeing Julias again are slim to none, and you know that.”

Triss cut into Jen with a harsh glare, but Jen stood her ground.

“Then why am I still hoping to bring him back?”

“Because you loved him, and you cherish those memories, and being teased by the possibility of having him back is a lure most people wouldn’t be able to ignore?”

A deadly lure Triss had read more than few stories about, a lure that’d destroyed plenty of people, like prey to an anglerfish.

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Because you’re self-destructively obsessive?”

Triss laughed. A weak, shitty laugh, but at least it was a laugh. “Aren’t we all?”

“Because you’re afraid of letting go and moving on? Afraid you might find happiness again without him? Afraid of how horrible and guilty you’d feel if you actually managed to find happiness again, when Julias was the first taste of it you had in twenty years?”

“I... Fuck.” Triss walked up to Jen, and hugged her again, tight this time. “I am so fucked up.”

“Yeap.”

“Why am I... stuck in this stupid high school romance drama? Fuck me, after what happened tonight—”

With a tender chuckle and soft hug, Jen wrapped her arms around her again, and gave her neck a quick kiss.

“Worry about what we can affect in the moment. We can talk to Samantha tomorrow night, unless she contacts us before then. For now, let’s go see Sándor and see how he’s dealing with this.”

“Alright. You’re right.” Nodding, they both got underway. “You know, I just realized something. Mary was alive for exactly three days and three nights.”

“That... is rather disturbing, isn't it?”

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Beatrice stepped into the big, empty room that once served as some sort of boarding room for a subway train, maybe for workers down in the tunnels. A prototype maybe or something, from a century ago, because it'd obviously never been finished. The train tracks went past a big concrete stage, but otherwise, all that was in the room, was the room.

At least until Azamel showed up. She put a bunch of shit on the boarding platform, crap furniture that looked far more homely than it had any right to. The old lazy recliner was still there. The ash tray was still there, too. The bed, the changing screen, the couch, a few other chairs, it was all still there, shit anyone could have lifted from a flea market. Not that there was a reason to shoplift from a flea market when everything cost less than dirt.

No Mark, thank god. No Fiona. Probably with Damien, crying her eyes out. They'd only seen each other like, once, but it was obvious they'd have probably become best friends if they'd gotten to spend some time together, considering how similar they were.

No Sándor. Shit. But there was someone there, sitting in a chair beside Azamel's, and reading a book. Athalia. Shit shit.

“Sorry,” Triss said, glancing up at Athalia only long enough to see Athalia was looking at her. “I'll go.”

“Don't,” Athalia said, voice solid and steady. Well, that was a lot better than the shriek full of fury and agony Triss expected to hear from the Begotten. They'd had more than enough of that tonight.

Triss blinked at Jen, who blinked at her, before they both looked back at the deadly woman on the stage. She'd changed out of her ballroom dress. Triss and Jen still hadn't.

“You uh, don't want me to go?” Triss asked.

“No. You want to see Sándor, I assume.”

“I... do.”

Nodding, Athalia set the book down on Azamel's chair arm, and leaned back in her own.

“I'm not going to attack you, Beatrice. Calm down.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t quite believe you.”

Athalia rolled her eyes. “It’s been... painful, these past months. For you, for me, for Samantha, for a lot of people. But the past is the past... for most of us.”

Triss winced. The past was quite suddenly and painfully very much not the past for Sam.

“Yeah, I get that.”

“I’ve had a lot of time, and help, to come to some... realizations. I don’t hate you, Beatrice, and I can’t blame you for what I did.” She shook her head as she looked to the side. “I can never forgive you, but I can’t blame you, either.”

Triss blinked at the Begotten, and again at Jen who returned the same, shocked expression.

“I—”

“Don’t. We’re done chatting. You want into Sándor’s lair?”

Okay, no chatting, but at least her relationship with Athalia had jumped a few rungs, up from ‘potential murder victim’.

“That where he is?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes, I’d like to see him.”

Sighing, Athalia stood up and jumped down from the platform. “I can get you into his lair. We’re connected, here in Dolareido. But Sándor made it clear he didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“He can’t lock the door to his lair?”

“He can, but won’t. He... doesn’t like the idea of us not being able to come to him for help, if we need him.”

Triss winced and looked down. “Of course he doesn’t. Dude just... really wants to be helpful, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he does. He’s one of the few.” Athalia eyed her, and didn’t hide her sneer. “So if you hurt him, we won’t be on such good terms anymore, vampire.” And back down the ladder to potential murder victim again. “Alright, come with me. I’ll open up a path to his castle.”

“Thanks.”

Athalia snorted, less like a pig and more like a deadly giant skeleton nightmare titan, all raspy and shit. Beatrice and Jennifer both shivered a little as they followed her. For her age, Beatrice was a damn strong Nosferatu, and Jen was an impressive Ventrue too, but Athalia in her Horror form could probably rip her in half like a phone book if she got her hands on her. And despite what she said, she'd probably enjoy doing just that.

So naturally, Triss and Jen both brought their vitae up in their bodies and readied for a fight, as Athalia took them down the tunnel, around the corner, and into absolute darkness.

“We really need—”

“Yes,” Athalia said. “I need darkness. It makes it much easier to open a path.”

Darkness. Far more darkness than the tunnel should have had, considering they'd just come from a room with flickering, old, but still functioning lights. But this wasn't the first time she'd gone into a lair with the help of a Begotten, from Athalia specifically, so she was used to it. A little.

Sure enough, after a minute, they weren't walking in darkness anymore. They were in some sort of old fashioned medieval room, complete with shitty old tables, shitty old chairs, plates with no utensils, and some some cracks of light coming through that what looked like some shitty old wood door made of planks.

“There,” Athalia's Horror said. Beatrice suppressed the urge to squeak. “Goodbye.”

“Wait, goodbye? What if we... fucking hell.” Triss spun around and looked for any hint of the giant black skeleton monster, but now that they had a few shreds of light to work with, her eyes adjusted enough to tell her that Athalia was already gone. Fucking freaky.

“I guess we're stuck here,” Jen said. “We... really should have changed clothes first.”

“Running out of time before daylight. Besides, least you still got your heels.”

Groaning, Jen took a couple steps on the hard stone, took her heels off, and set them on one of the tables.

“Uneven floor and stones filled with cracks and grooves? I'd break an ankle.”

“You know that's always a concern with heels. Stop wearing them. They fucking suck. If you weren't a vampire, they'd be ruining your feet and fucking up your spine.”

“A worthy sacrifice in the name of fashion.”

God damn it. Triss laughed, and opened the shitty plank door. She recognized this place. It was the hallway she'd chased Jeremiah through, the one that led into some sort of big main chamber of the castle. She'd followed him through that too, out into some sort of big, haunted village, high up on a cliff edge. This time though, she guessed Sándor would be in the main chamber of the castle. His castle.

Careful to avoid the metal gargoyle braziers on the walls and the flames inside them, she and Jen made their way down the hall of what could only be described as a medieval castle. Like, not one of the fancier castles from the 1700s and shit, with lots of pretty marble. No, this castle was old as dirt, with walls made of stacked stone, and ceilings made of ridiculously thick, solid, ugly boards. Some walls were made with wood, too, and every room she bothered to peek into as they made their way for the big door at the end of the hall, had some kind of big wood pillar holding up the floor above. This was the sort of castle you'd find a thousand years ago, and a thousand years later.

The big fucking door at the end of the hall was a pain to budge, but with a little muscle, she and Jen slid it open.

The absolutely fucking massive main chamber looked like it'd taken a major earthquake up the ass. The giant pillars that used to hold up the ceiling, way way way up, were knocked over. Not one, not two. Dozens of them. They were big pillars too, ten foot wide pillars of stone. And around them were the destroyed statues of Sándor. She didn't really get a chance to explore this place, last time she was here, but she remembered the statues standing on top of some pillars, holding up the massive stone roof overhead that she could barely see in the darkness. Some of the statues stood between two pillars, vertically, so they held up a pillar to the ceiling.

Just a bunch of rubble, now. Some pillars still survived, which was a good thing because the castle — this ridiculously massive room in particular — would probably fall right on their heads otherwise.

“What the fuck happened here,” she said.

Jen walked over to one of the huge piles of rubble, and looked down at the stone and ruined statue.

“Claw marks.”

“Ah shit, really?” Triss joined her and stared down at the mess. The big fire braziers on the walls cast a lot of firelight, but the place was just so damn fucking huge that they didn't do a good job lighting the room. Still, once she got close she could see claw marks. Big claw marks. Bigger than an Uratha could make, claw marks.



Slowly, Triss turned around and looked at the other pillars. Some of them had been pushed over, and some had been slashed down. No Uratha was strong enough to do this, and even fucking Jacob would struggle to break one of these big-ass pillars. But as Triss inched her way toward another pile of rubble, it was clear the big gargoyle had done this. Some of the claw marks were too high for anyone else to reach.

“You think...”

Shivering, Triss rubbed her one naked arm as she looked down the big room toward where she knew the throne was. Too far to see, too dark, but the giant door leaving the castle was behind her, and she knew from what Jack told her the throne was in the other direction.

Much as it was easy to think of Sándor as the stoic guy she'd really gotten to like, it was also true he didn't talk about his Horror much, or even let them interact with him while merged with it. They knew he had some pretty nasty hungers that were hard to satisfy, relative to other Begotten, but otherwise he kept all that shit to himself. Whatever hunts he did, he did alone.

The memories of the time she'd seen him in that form came flooding back. It hadn't been him. Jeremiah had somehow gotten control of the Horror without Sándor, and without him, the Horror was a monster in the classic sense. Mindless and hungry. And really fucking powerful. Challenged Jack the Ripper and survived powerful.

God fucking help her if she had to deal with that thing. Athalia said Sándor was in his lair though, which, far as she knew, guaranteed he was merged with his Horror. But then, what the fuck was with all the destruction?

“Jen... I'm going to do something really stupid.”

“And you want me to leave in case something bad happens, so I don't get hurt.”

Triss looked back at her girlfriend and blinked at her. “What? No. We're way past that phase. You're coming with. If I die, you die with me.”

Jen laughed, but shut herself up quick when the laugh echoed in the giant room.

“Alright.” Grinning at her, Jen came up beside her, and nodded toward where the throne was supposed to be. “Think he's there?”

“Might as well check there first.”

“Cloak of Night?”

“Probably not a good idea. He’d see through it, and if he’s doing this,” she gestured around at the destruction, “then he might slash first and ask questions later.”

“Right.” Jen gulped and rubbed her arms a bit. “Right.”

And with that, the two women started the walk down the giant chamber toward the supposed throne. It was such a big room, shaped like some sort of titanic hallway. Jack told her it reminded him of the Mines of Moria. Naturally, she’d called him a nerd for saying it, but she’d seen the movies, and she admitted the imagery had been fitting. Not nearly as big, but still.

And now it’d looked like that big fire demon thing in the movie had run through the whole place and destroyed it.

It wasn’t just the pillars. The floor had talon marks from where the huge gargoyle had gripped into it with his big raptor feet. It had some claw marks, too, like he’d sliced down at the floor, or maybe fell to his knees and tore at it. The walls in some places were covered in claw marks, as if Sándor had drifted around randomly looking for anything solid to take a chunk out of it. Literal chunks. Bits of stone half as big as her sat beneath some braziers with giant claw marks in the walls, before a few talon marks on the floor led to another pillar. This one was still standing, but four enormous claw marks ran halfway around it, from Triss’s side toward the side in the direction of the throne. It was like he’d just casually dragged his claws on it while moving along.

Christ, she really wished she’d thought to change clothes. But the night was going by at breakneck speeds, and she just wanted to make sure people were okay. Mary was a ghost again, so there wasn’t anything Triss could do about her. Sam was probably a wreck, but Jacob was with her. Fiona had Damien. Jack had Antoinette and other friends. Sándor had... who? Fiona was with Damien, Mark seemed as personable as a trashcan, and Athalia made Isabella look warm and fuzzy.

But Triss had some blood on her dress, and was currently walking toward a potentially crazed twelve-foot gargoyle. Yeap, this was dumb.

Sure enough, the end of the room eventually came into view, just a blur in the darkness before they got close. A giant stone throne, big enough for even Sándor to sit on. Except it was on its side, and cracked in half.

The gargoyle sat in the now empty spot where the huge throne used to be, a sort of relaxed sit with one elbow on a knee, palm holding his chin. His two — no, four — gigantic wings were limp and hanging to the floor, and his tail was dead still where it lay between them. His head hung between his shoulders, with two giant fucking black horns sticking out of it. Each arm was a slab of muscle, almost

as big as Triss's entire body. His torso was human shaped, save for the four arms and wings, and he had the muscle definition of a professional bodybuilder; on a giant gargoyle monster, that was a hundred times more intimidating.

He looked maybe as big as a car, until they got closer, the trick of perception faded, and they realized he was actually as big as a truck, literally. A dark blue truck, like some sort of steel color. The only clothes he had on was some sort of leather loincloth thing. Not even any shoes to hide his giant raptor feet and their talons.

He turned his head, looked at her, and stopped, going statue mode on her, expression locked in something blatantly morose. She wasn't sure if she was just fucked up in the head from looking at her own reflection so many years, but his gargoyle face was handsome, human-ish too, with a very hard, defined chin and eyebrows that crossed into hyper-masculine-demon-skull territory.

He didn't say anything. The gargoyle stared at them, down at them, despite the fact he was sitting. It was hard to get a read on his eyes in the dim firelight, but they were dark.

Triss gulped on a dry throat, and looked to Jen. Jen gulped, and looked from her to Sándor.

"Sándor," Jen said, "you disappeared after the... the..."

Sándor let out a deep, slow rumble, a growl in his chest so low it was more like a mini earthquake coming from directly in front of them. Triss shifted her weight onto the balls of her toes, ready to bolt. But the big monster didn't move, only slowly turned his head back to stare off to the side at nothing.

His breathing was super slow, maybe one every ten seconds, and each one made his chest and abs slowly increase in size before deflating. It was like that fucking scene in Jurassic Park where the paleontologist dude rested his head on the tranqed triceratops.

"Sándor," Triss said, after a healthy amount of silence. "Come on, man. You just upped and vanished, and I... I guess we were kinda worried about you."

Another heavy rumble. The vibration went through the stone floor and into her feet, until her teeth nearly buzzed.

"We were worried," she continued, "because of what Jen said tonight. You know, that you always think about other people? And hey, we get it, we're feeling pretty fucked up, too. Like, holy shit what happened tonight was fucking awful, and I feel awful, and Jen feels awful, and we'd be with Sam right now if Jacob wasn't running damage control with her."

Jacob's name managed to get a small turn of his head, and a furrow of his very heavy brows, before he looked away again.

"And," Jennifer said, "we thought, if we felt horrible, then Sándor is probably feeling miserable. We thought you'd go full statue mode, and collect dust." She shivered as she glanced beside the gargoyle at the giant, cracked, stone throne.

Another rumble, but otherwise, Sándor did exactly what Jen said: pretended to be a statue.

Well, fuck that. Sándor was one of the damn few good things to happen to Dolareido, after Jeremiah and Angela fucked everything up. Triss wasn't going to let him turn into her, younger her, brooding in a crypt somewhere.

"Dude, come on, talk to us." Triss stepped around in front of him. Christ, she really did have to look up at him, even though he was sitting. Must have been twelve feet tall when standing, at least, more with the horns. "If it were anyone else, I'd say sure, give the dude his space. But you've been doing the stoic, 'give me space' routine ever since I've known you. Time to come out of the box!" And for some stupid reason she didn't understand, she kicked the giant monster in the foot. Might as well have kicked the tires of the dark blue truck the gargoyle matched. Didn't budge at all.

"She's right," Jen said. "This is an intervention. We're worried you're going to..." She looked behind her at the destroyed pillars. How the fuck had the gargoyle managed to destroy that much solid fucking stone, in such a small amount of time? "Going to close up even more. We don't want that. You may have noticed, we like you."

No response.

Triss steeled herself, and stepped forward, between the monster's legs.

"So, why don't you come with us? Or we can stay here, whatever. But let's... talk, I guess." Christ all fucking mighty, how did Jack do this? Be all honest and direct and shit, but also reasonable and meaningful? She could do direct and honest, sure, if it involved yelling and breaking things. But being honest and open was a shitload harder when it was time to be quiet and gentle.

Samantha wouldn't have had trouble. She'd be all tender, stroke Sándor's shoulder, pet his head, and hold it to her chest.

Triss couldn't do that shit to save her life. What she could do, was yell at people until they listened.

“Sándor!” She took another step, now between his knees. “You wanted to make it up to Dolareido for what you did while the hunters controlled you. Well guess what, you asshole!” She gave his thigh a kick, for good measure. “People like you here, so that means when horrible shit happens, you can’t just go running off to be alone and brood. You have friends now, and friends are supposed to do this thing where we talk to each other, and bond over horrible crap like this. We’re supposed to go get Sam, and hang out and get drunk — that ship’s sailed — and cry over how awful what happened to Mary tonight was! That’s what people do! So fucking wake up! Wake up and—”

One of his giant arms snatched out for her. Fast. Damn fast. The titanic hand wrapped her waist, and lifted her. Holy fuck it was nearly big enough to completely wrap around her.

“Triss!” Jen managed a single step before one of Sándor’s other hands snatched her up.

And then the juggernaut got up.

With a heavy rumble, the titan got to his feet, using his two free hands to help push his huge weight off the floor. Slowly, he walked forward, aimed toward the other end of the giant chamber, pace leisurely but at the same time, heavy as all fuck, like the dude was dragging a dozen iron balls and chains behind him.

He brought both Jen and Triss closer to his face, and growled down at them. The rumbles earlier were enough to make her body buzz, but a growl was like trying to swim in a wave pool with a huge bass speaker strapped on her back, blasting R&B. She froze, and stared at the monster as he took turns glaring at each of them.

“I wanted to be left alone,” he said, “because sometimes I can lose control, and the gargoyle’s hunger... leaks out.” Holy fuck the voice was deep, and it reverberated through Triss and everything nearby. “I stay quiet, and keep my thoughts to myself, because I could kill someone if I let them out!” A heavy shake had Triss beyond disoriented, and she struggled to figure out where up and down were as the gargoyle stomped along. Each step made the floor vibrate, like a fucking scene from Jurassic Park, again. He could probably walk quietly or stalk if he wanted to. He didn’t want to.

“Sándor!” Jen screamed. “Stop! Please!”

The gargoyle didn’t listen. He roared. Triss and Jen both covered their ears — thank god their arms were free — as the booming sound pulsed through them and out against the giant chamber’s walls, only to echo and slam back into them.

“For hundreds of years, I have seen nothing but pain. When I finally taste joy once again, I lose it. Always I remain, watching. I thought this place would be different, but snakes in the shadows plot our

doom, and every effort we make to find some peace, is destroyed!” He lifted them both, and stared up at them as he again roared. His hot breath poured over them. Triss had no idea if it smelled bad; she’d stopped breathing. “Centuries of…” He looked down and away before letting out another growl. “It doesn’t matter. It is my pain, and I will bear it. But you two poke and prod and absolutely persist on invading my world! You two are so determined to rip the wounds open and bleed me dry!”

Holy fucking shit, the first time the man really let out his feelings, and it turned out he wanted to destroy everything around him? Triss knew that feeling, and a part of her wanted to tell him to calm down. But she also knew her pain was probably just a penny in a jar compared to his, and if she said something like ‘I know how you feel’, she might just get deservedly smashed into pulp. A shred of wisdom showing through, a bit too late.

“We’re not!” Triss pushed down against the huge fingers wrapping her waist and ribs. No good. Trapped like a mouse. “We just want to help!”

With heavy steps, Sándor walked by one of the giant pillars still standing. He raked one of his free hands against it as he leaned into it, the muscles of the giant arm bulged, and his claws ripped through the stone. Giant chunks of pillar crashed into the floor, heavy enough they broke on impact.

He stomped along, picking up a little speed, and Jen and Triss yelped as they came to a sudden halt when Sándor again raked his claws against another pillar. With his huge body giving him inertia, the claws sank deep, and bits of rock flew everywhere. Triss and Jen covered their heads and faces with their forearms as stone chunks rained down.

Triss knew what he was doing. She’d done it a million times before, when she had something in her hands she didn’t want to break, usually her phone, but at the same time, really really wanted to break something because she was super angry. So she’d break something nearby instead. It did not feel good to be a smart phone right now.

“Vampires,” he said, voice quiet, half growl half rumble, “do not understand. I do not speak of this, because it isn’t your burden to bear. Your Beast is a quiet thing, whispering in your minds. A Horror is…” His voice trailed off as a heavy growl replaced it, and the giant beast lifted them high again as he bared his huge teeth and fangs. “Why can’t I simply be left alone!” His four wings flared out, stirring up air hard enough to have Triss’s hair blowing around violently, and his wings dwarfed everything in shadow, like he’d opened a ship’s sail big enough to block out the stars.

Jen and Triss managed some quick peeks at each other as they stared down at the gargoyle. Say something say something say something, and make it smart.

“Because we like you.” Apparently the best she could come up with was a Disney line. It’d only have been worse if she said they were family or ohana or something. Dead. They were so dead.

Slowly, he lowered them both back down until they were chest level with him, and he leaned over them. His dark eyes glared down at them with something a little more than just rage, and it sent a chill through Triss’s spine.

That was hunger.

He rumbled deep, very deep, a cross between growl and purr, and he held them both only a few feet from his chest and head as he brought in his two other hands. He wrapped their legs in two new sets of fingers, and stared down at them as he licked his giant fangs.

Triss had asked Damien a few questions about Begotten during their piano lessons, questions about horrors, because she knew Sándor would dodge answering them. Apparently, Horrors came in a bunch of varieties, and came with a specific hunger. Fiona’s Horror hungered to punish people. He wouldn’t tell her about the others, maybe out of respect, maybe because Fiona wouldn’t tell him, but he knew all Horrors hungered to make people afraid of them. It was, according to Fiona, literally how they fed. Vampires drank blood, and Begotten drank terror as long as it was directed at them or the things they did.

Sándor didn’t talk about his Horror much, almost never with Triss, and according to Fiona, almost never with her or her weird little family. But they did know a few things: he rarely ate; when he did it was something he did alone, away from the others; and it was brutal. How they knew it was brutal, Triss had no idea, but it was, according to Fiona, not exactly a common hunger for Horrors.

Triss’s mouth dropped open, and ice shot up through her limbs, as the gargoyle tightened his grip on them. Not hard enough to hurt yet, but panic set in as Triss struggled against his grip, and couldn’t move. She tapped into her vitae and put Nosferatu strength into her limbs, and managed to get his fingers to shift a little, but not nearly enough to get her free.

She was trapped, and from the look in the gargoyle’s eyes, she felt pretty sure she was two seconds away from getting eaten.

Sándor rumbled again, much closer to purr than growl, and brought both vampires up closer to his face. Not in punching distance, but close. But of course Sándor saw that coming, and slid his hand around her torso up, forcing her arms up, where he clutched them together in the hand. With one hand holding her hands together over her head, and one hand holding her feet together underneath her, she felt like a shish kebab.

“Sándor!” She squirmed and wriggled, and got nowhere. “Sándor, you asshole, we were just trying to fucking help!”

He wasn't listening. His hungry eyes slowly slid down from Triss and Jen's eyes, to their chests.

Triss looked down. In the commotion, she'd completely forgotten she was wearing a loose dress, and not only had one breast come out, the shoulder on the other side had fallen enough for both breasts to come out. And a quick glance at Jen showed she was in the same circumstance, hands trapped over her head, feet trapped underneath her, breasts out. Two hands for each vampire.

The nightmare monster rumbled, eyes dilating, and he brought them both in closer. Now he was very much in punching distance, but Triss couldn't get her hands free, even as she pumped more vitae through her.

“Sándor, the fuck are you doing?”

He didn't respond. He didn't even look up to meet her gaze. He just brought her in closer, both of them, and again licked his big teeth. His breathing quickened, and as Jen and Triss both went dead silent, they could hear something going thump thump, and getting faster.

A peek down showed a very, very, very large bulge in his leather loincloth. Oh fucking shit.

Someone else's voice cut through the sudden silence.

“Sándor!” Jen screamed, and not a girly scream. That was rage. Triss snapped her eyes back up and looked at Jen, and found her friend glaring at the giant, hungry, and apparently horny gargoyle. The titan turned his head to look at her, eyes blasting one message: you're my prey. “Sándor, you will not touch us! How dare you cross that line! We are not your prey, in any way! Our bodies are not yours to do with as you please! Now put us down!”

Triss and Sándor both stared at her. Jen didn't normally yell or scream, and she never talked with that harsh 'I'm going to fucking kill you if you don't listen to me' voice. And the way she said 'in any way' spoke volumes, like she'd said it before.

Triss and Jen didn't talk about their sires all that much. Triss's was a stalker who died not long after siring her. Jen's was a bastard who was going to use her and her sex appeal as a tool in the Danse Macabre. Not much to say, really. They both had a shitty past on that topic.

Sándor froze. Both vampires stared at him, waiting. Triss gave up squirming, and found her gaze drifting between the giant gargoyle and her girlfriend, who was looking at Sándor like she'd rip — or bite — his dick off if he dare touch her with it.



Apparently, she got through to him, because Sándor's eyes closed for a few seconds. When he reopened them, something closer to human was in them again, and he took deep, heavy breaths as he forced himself to look away. He put them both down, let them go, and took several steps back, refusing to look at them as he did.

Triss and Jen fixed their dresses, came up beside each other, shared some quick affirming nods, and looked to Sándor. Of course the giant gargoyle closed in on himself, took several more steps back, and blocked their view of him with his wings, like a curtain.

"I am sorry," he said, quiet, deep voice rumbling. "The Horror, it... it's... hungers can get... vile." His voice died away, let out as a long, rumbling sigh.

Wincing, Triss looked to Jen. Her girlfriend was scowling, but when she noticed Triss looking, she shook her head and wiped the scowl away. Getting touched without permission set her off pretty hard.

"It's... alright," Jennifer said eventually. "Or rather, it's not alright, but I understand. Your Horror is a greater presence in your life than the Beast is in ours."

Sándor sighed again, and took another step back, still blocking their view of him with his giant wings.

"Please, go."

Triss and Jen shared a look again for a quick silent conversation. Leave? Don't leave? Jen sighed as she looked down, then back to Sándor, and then gestured to him. Yeah, them showing up had probably just made things worse, but if they left now, there was a good chance the damn idiot would lock himself up in a cell somewhere out of some need to punish himself.

Things could have gone worse. A lot worse. Triss and Jen were stupid to just violate the dude's personal space like this, and stupid to prod and poke him. Of course that didn't justify him nearly eating them, or killing them, or doing something else, but still, he was a nightmare monster. You don't walk into a lion's den and complain when the lions attack you. Christ, Sándor would probably kill himself if he woke up from some rage-fueled rape and murder fest, only to realize he'd killed them.

"Okay," Triss said. "No harm no foul, okay? Your Horror is... intense. And, uh, a little volatile." Apparently the image of the quiet gargoyle, perched and watching silently, didn't always apply. "But we weren't lying. Shit happened tonight, and you shouldn't be here by yourself, brooding about it." Though, looking around again at the destruction, maybe a little time brooding by himself to calm down was a good idea. "What happened to Mary tonight is not your fault. We know you think it is, because of

what happened before, with Jeremiah. But it's not. It's not anyone's fault. Tomorrow night, we're going to go visit Sam. And then maybe we'll visit you again, if you'll let us."

The gargoyle squatted, lowering his height to maybe seven feet, and he lowered one of his wings enough to peek over it at her. Then at Jen. And then he disappeared behind it again as he let out another one of those pained, rumbling sighs.

"We want to see you again," Jen said, mirroring Triss's inflection.

Another sigh, but he did stand up again, and turned to face them.

"I... didn't want you to see me like this."

"Well, we did," Jen said. "And we... were stupid, to... poke and prod you."

Triss took a step forward. Sándor took a step back.

"Okay, okay," she said. "Sorry. We'll... we'll go. But I'm serious, Sándor. We're still good, okay?"

He nodded as he took another step, and then another, before he turned and walked away, back toward the destroyed throne. Each step made that thump sound, but they faded into a quiet echo as he disappeared into the long darkness of his chamber.

With anyone else, the incessant need to blame themselves for everything bad that happened would have gotten really fucking annoying. With Sándor, it wasn't annoying, but it made Triss's insides ache seeing it. He hated himself for helping Jeremiah, and hated himself for Mary's death. Seeing her die, again, and seeing Samantha's one bit of joy crushed, pushed him over the edge.

And they'd just gone and made things worse.

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"We could have died," Triss said up at Athalia. Bitch was back in her chair, reading again, like nothing had happened.

"Oh?"

Jen snarled at her as she stood beside Triss, glare pointed at the Begotten. "He was... not Sándor."

Athalia closed her book, leaned forward, and stared at the two of them like they were children. Took a lot of effort to not jump up there and punch her stupid face in.

“You two spend a lot of time trying to play nice with Sándor.”

“Uh, yeah,” Triss said. “He’s a nice guy. A cool guy. And he seems to really care about Dolareido. Why the fuck wouldn’t we want to be his friend?”

“You’re both idiot children. He’s Begotten.”

“So are you. So’s Fiona.”

“Fiona and I are young. Think of Azamel. Think of her relationship with Jeremiah. She was old and powerful then, over a hundred years ago, and the mere act of existing meant she influenced her surroundings in extreme ways. She was a force of nature. If she had the physical youth of Sándor, and the power she had when she died? She’d have taken this whole city, because she wouldn’t have been able to help herself.”

Triss raised a brow. “Wouldn’t have been able to help herself?”

“Yes. In the...” Athalia gulped down something painful as she looked down. “In the same way I hurt Angela when she was young. I have to make people afraid, vampire. Have to. And me, specifically, I have to destroy. Azamel has... had to conquer and dominate. She had no choice. Fiona must punish those who transgress. I expect you know a lot of this already. Fiona has a big mouth.”

Triss squirmed a little. “A bit.” No need to tell her she got the info from Damien.

“And I know Fiona doesn’t know much about Sándor, because he refuses to tell her. But he has told me some things. And I’m going to tell you because you’re... closer to him than anyone else.” She sighed again as she looked down and shook her head. “He’s an ancient Begotten with hungers and urges that are absurd. Begotten don’t normally live for centuries, but his gargoyle Horror keeps him alive, like a statue. And thanks to that age, he’s become a... a slave to his hunger, in ways most Begotten don’t know. And he’s Ugallu, an incarnation of the fear of exposure.”

“Exposure?”

“Imagine approaching a church, a cathedral, and a gargoyle over the door stares down at you. You feel it staring into you, and you know you can’t escape its gaze. That is who he is. It is existential for him. He watches. He waits.”

That, was a fucking eerie feeling, and a nightmare Triss knew she’d had before. She shivered.

Athalia nodded, noticing. “What he doesn’t like to share is how deadly his hungers are. He hungers for prey.”

“For... prey? Isn’t that—”

“It is not what all Begotten do. Listen to me, you—” She bit off her own insult and shook her head again. “Sándor hungers for prey in the most literal sense. I have ways to mitigate my hunger, my need to destroy and create ruin. Fiona and Mark can do the same. Sándor’s Horror feeds off one very specific thing: the fear of being eaten. It’s the deepest, truest fear any living thing knows, and his gargoyle is so old, that hunger is massive.” She leaned forward. “You know Sándor. You know what sort of person he is. Now imagine what it’s like to have a hunger that grows so large, it eats you alive from the inside, worse than any pathetic blood lust a vampire might have. Imagine what it’s like for a man like Sándor, to be driven to hunt, and kill, and to indulge and feed on the fear the prey feels.

“Azamel tried to help him, and maybe she helped a little, but his Horror is too old and too strong. That little battle with the Ripper could have gone much, much worse. Sándor does everything he can to keep his Horror bottled away, but sometimes it gets out, and... and he has to hunt someone down, and kill them. And he has to make them fear it. He has make sure they know they’re being chased, that something deadly is after them. He has to make sure they realize they’re dying because they were hunted down, that they were prey and he is the predator that ends them. Imagine it! Imagine a creature of terror living in your fucking soul!” She slammed her palms against the chair as she stood up, and glared down at the two of them like they’d just smashed her car. “Imagine it haunting you, every moment you’re awake and asleep, driving you to hurt everyone around you! Imagine—”

Triss threw up her hands in surrender. “Athalia! We... we...” She blinked as she stared up at the woman. Her dark skin was starting to gleam with hints of sweat, like she was getting ready for a fight, and her eyes had hints of tears. “Athalia...”

Athalia clenched her fists as her eyes snapped between Jen and Triss, before she looked away again and sat down. Her arms were shaking.

“Sándor...” Her voice caught in her throat. “Sándor, he hates himself every time he has to feed.”

Oh. She wasn’t talking about Sándor anymore. She was talking about herself.

Triss and Jen slowly looked to each other again, until Jen came up to the base of the stage.

“Athalia...,” Jen said. The Begotten snapped another harsh glare at Jen, but Jen didn’t move. “Athalia, talk to us.”

“Talk to you!? You ki—” She bit her words off again, this time covering her hand with her mouth.

There it was. She cut through the bullshit, and buried them all in silence. Jen and Triss traded a somber look, for the millionth time that night, before Triss eventually came up beside Jen, and set her hands on the stage.

“You’re right. I did kill Angela.”

“You!” Athalia screamed through her fingers. “You... You...” The moisture in her eyes built until a couple tears ran down her dark cheeks, and she closed her eyes again as she looked away. “Don’t. Just don’t.”

“Athalia, I—”

“You didn’t kill Angela! I killed Angela. I fucking killed her. I fucking killed her the moment I didn’t let her go when she was born. I wanted to keep her, and me and my Horror, we destroyed her.” Athalia fell back in her chair and covered her face with one hand, but it couldn’t hide the tears that dripped from her jaw. “I killed my baby girl.”

Triss and Jen stared at each other. Jesus fucking christ, Aaron was right. She had changed.

“Athalia,” Triss said, “you didn’t kill Angela. You know you didn’t.”

“I may as well have. I... I just wanted a daughter.”

Oh fuck.

“This... is about Mary, too, isn’t it?”

Athalia took a few seconds to force down her sobs, before exposing her face again. “Samantha didn’t deserve to see her daughter die. No one deserves that.”

Triss looked down as the memories hit her in the guts. The gun in her hand. Angela, glaring at her, asking Triss to kill her. Triss pulling the trigger, with Athalia not far behind her, begging for them to stop. Seeing Mary die in front of Samantha must have ripped those memories out of whatever deep, dark hole she’d buried her own daughter’s death in. Mary, blood coming out of everywhere, on her mother’s lap, saying her last words before she went cold, only for something angry and horrific to burst out of her.

Sighing, Triss pulled herself up onto the stage enough to sit on it, legs dangling off the edge, head facing away from the poor woman.

“I’m not sorry I killed Angela, Athalia. But I am so fucking sorry it went down the way it did. Everything, everything about it was... what a fucking shit show. And now I’m just trying to put some of the pieces back together, you know?”

“You... must despise me, for what Angela did... to Julias.”

“No. I was angry at you at first, but that was then. Like I said, you didn’t kill Angela, and you’re not responsible for her choices. I don’t care how much trauma she suffered as a kid, there’s no excuse for what she did. Or what Jeremiah did.” Triss kicked her bare feet out a few times and let her heels hit against the concrete stage. “I... fuck, I don’t know, Athalia. I was just trying to help. Trying to help Samantha get back something she lost, and trying to help Sándor, cause the dude seems like a classic case of a repressed, self-loathing nice guy. And I’d prefer he didn’t blow his brains out.” Repressed, self-loathing nice guys had a habit of doing that.

After a few quiet moments, Athalia’s sobs came to a stop, and she sniffed as she sat up straight, and looked down at Triss, Triss looking back over her shoulder to watch her.

“What’re you going to do about Samantha? I figured you’d be with her, tonight. So did Sándor.”

“I’m gonna talk to her tomorrow. Jacob’s with her now, and I know she wants some time with her daughter... daughter’s ghost.”

Saying Jacob’s name earned a small twitch from Athalia, and she looked away as she wiped the tears from her eyes. “You really trust him.”

“Jacob? I didn’t used to, and I still don’t, but he has come through for me pretty often. He’s surprised me a lot, especially with Sam.” Triss smiled at Athalia, her best ‘let’s not hate each other’ smile; hard to do with her mouth. “He’s really helped her find some happiness, you know? And, uh, Aaron tells me you’ve found a little with the sheriff.”

Athalia smiled slightly, probably calling up a pleasant memory of the most boring vampire in the world.

“He has.”

Nodding, Triss got up, and squatted down beside Athalia and her chair.

“Look. I don’t know what happened to Mary. I’m going to find out. But... but it’s looking pretty bad. That sucks like fucking hell for Sam. And as much as Jen and I are her friends, we’re never gonna be able to connect with her the same way you could. Sándor, too. You think you can... visit her a bit? Maybe talk about... parent stuff?”

Athalia chuckled, weak and sad, but she did, and she nodded as she met Triss’s eyes.

“I didn’t know if she wanted to talk to me. We talked those couple times, but...”

“I—fuck, I guess if you only had Jack to go off, you wouldn’t know. They’re not much alike. Sam loves to talk and socialize, and I don’t think the woman is even capable of holding a grudge.”

“She did seem... very huggy, the few times we talked.”

“Exactly. You two are basically opposites, and I’m sure you’ll hit it off.”

Athalia slowly found another smile. “Alright. It would be nice to talk to someone, about... about what it’d been like, being a mother. Sándor listens, but he doesn’t talk much, and he’s a man.”

“Sándor. You got any advice on how to puncture his shell? I’ve managed to get something out of him a few times, when he’s got a guitar in hand, or some alcohol. But usually he’s a closed book. Except, uh, right now, where he nearly fucking ate us.” And other stuff.

“You... like him, don’t you? Really like him.” Athalia asked. Triss groaned and rolled her eyes, which was apparently enough of an answer. “I’m not sure. He’s had a rough past, and I don’t mean like the rest of us. I mean... he’s lost a lot of people in his life. The family Jeremiah killed wasn’t the first one.”

“Jesus.”

“The only thing that will work is time, I imagine. And music and alcohol. And, honestly, probably simply being around him without pestering him.”

“No pestering?”

“No. Sit around with him and enjoy some silence. Stop trying to get into his pants constantly”—she threw an annoyed, but playful glare at Jen, who looked away with a whistle—“and try spending some time with him, watching the world the way he does. Avoid the drama talk. He’s too old for it. It’s all stuff he’s heard a million times before. Just, hang around him and shut up.”

Triss scratched her head. Just, stand around, not saying anything? That was surprisingly difficult to do. If she was standing around, she was either listening to music, or bitching and ranting about something, or on a stakeout and not exactly just vibing, which seemed to be what Athalia suggested doing. But if she was right about it being existential to Sándor, and she probably was, then maybe it was a good idea.

“Will do.” Triss hopped down from the stage and looked back at Athalia. “I’m serious, Athalia. I’m... I know I’m angry about losing Julias, and I doubt that’ll ever completely go away. But I ain’t got nothing against you, not anymore, and I’m hoping you don’t have anything against me.”

Athalia let out a slow sigh as she nodded. “I don’t hate you, Beatrice. I... Like I said earlier, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive you, but I don’t hate you. You have nothing to fear from me.”

Triss smiled, nodded again, and left, Jen at her side.

Once they were a little ways down the tunnel, and hopefully out of Athalia's hearing range, Triss nudged her friend.

"I fucking hope Sam doesn't hate my guts. Two daughters dead 'cause of me."

"What?" Jen shook her head, slipped an arm around Triss, and half hugged her as they walked. "Beatrice, you know Samantha isn't going to hold you responsible for this. Maybe tonight, while she's still..."

"Angry as all fuck and refusing to show it?"

"You know it'll just be for tonight. That's why we're letting Jacob talk to her and not us, right? Tomorrow night we'll talk to her again, and we'll figure out what to do."

Triss threw up her hands. "The fuck do we do? You heard Mary. She's not her."

"She's a ghost again. That means she's psycho."

"Doesn't mean she's wrong. She's... she's not Mary, Jen. We knew that was a possibility. It's not her. It's the only explanation."

"Unless—"

"I literally had a god show up in my fucking dreams and give me that ritual, Jen. It should have worked." And hopefully she'd get to have another conversation with that Crone bitch, so she could scream at her for not telling her Mary's ghost wasn't Mary's soul at all.

"Then... what do we do? Just accept that we can't help Sam?"

"I have no fucking idea. We're vampires. We got time. But if it's not Mary, and it's probably not, then there's nothing we can do, except doing what we're doing for Julias. Which..."

"Has come to a complete stop because no one anywhere has any idea of how to pluck a soul from the afterlife."

Groaning, Triss ground her jaw until her crocodile teeth clicked. "Not entirely true. Black Blood said they'd managed a peek to the other side."

"By killing mountains of people, Triss. You really want to do that?"

"No, no I don't. There is a billion other ideas out there."

"But they're all bullshit, according to Jacob. Pop-culture nonsense."

"Then we go full nerd mode, read a few thousand tomes, and see if we can dig up something."



“Something no one else ever managed to make work?”

“That we know of.” Before Jen could say anything, Triss shook her head. “I know, I know. It’s not gonna happen. But until I come to a decision, I might as well keep trying.”

“Very well.” Jen sighed as she leaned her head down against Triss’s shoulder, and kept walking. But after a couple stumbles, she groaned and looked behind her.

“What?”

“I forgot my heels in Sándor’s place. Maybe we can—”

“Nope. Dude is going through some shit and apparently that includes a lot of destroying things. You saw the look in his eyes, and the, uh, bulge in his pants. He was ready to crack and do some pretty horrible shit.”

“I know.”

“And you were ready to kick him straight in his junk if he tried, weren’t you?”

“I was.” She nodded, with a little conviction and a dash of pride on her face. “No one gets to use me like that. Never.”

“Did—”

“No, my sire didn’t. But the idea...” She growled, but kept her temple on Triss’s shoulder. “I regret yelling at him, though.”

“Fuck me, why? He was going to use us like dolls and probably break us in the process.”

“Because he’s clearly hurting. And sure, I get what Athalia is saying. I should stop prodding him, and stop trying to coax him out of his shell. But... now he’s hurting, even more. I made him feel guilty.”

Triss laughed and hugged her stupid girlfriend harder. “Better than how he’d feel if he actually, you know, ate us.”

“I know. But still...” After a long, heavy sigh, she let out a playful, quiet chuckle, and turned her head enough to lean in and give Triss a quick kiss on the cheek bone, above the crocodile teeth. “He was huge.”

“He was.”

“And muscular.”

“Very.”

“And handsome.”

“Yes, he was.” Apparently monster-fucker was a kink a lot of women in Dolareido had.

“And you saw the size of those bulges in his loincloth.”

“I... did.”

“And that there were two.”

Triss blinked at her. “I did not notice that.”

“I mean, I think I saw two. You think? He does have four arms and four wings.”

“He doesn’t have two mouths or four eyes.”

Laughing, Jen shrugged as she stood up straight, and picked up their pace a bit. “Maybe it’s just wishful thinking.”

Leave it to this girl, to be a beacon of defiance when it came to defending her personal boundaries, but still be perfectly comfortable being the biggest slut Triss knew. It was strangely amazing, and Triss grinned at her girlfriend as Jen let out a yelp. She’d stepped on a pebble.