

A Bloody Office Romance

a Forgotten Relics short story

Scratch.

The sound of a match sputtering to life breaks the awkward tension that’s been building in the darkened employee bathroom. The tiny light swells to reveal Scott Kim as he touches the flame to the single candle perched on the edge of the sink. His heart leaps as another face comes into view over his shoulder in the smeared mirror. A combination of silly fear—Jack Alexander’s been there the whole time—and nervous excitement.

“Is all this pageantry really necessary, Agent Nineteen?” the senior agent asks. The man would never roll his eyes, but the tone of his voice is clear enough.

Scott shakes out the match and tosses it into the open toilet. “Ritual’s important to the dead,” he says to Jack’s reflection. “I know she’s been our informant for a long time, but she still counts. Her ritual calls for a dark bathroom, a single candle, and a chant—we have to do it right.”

Jack doesn’t respond, which is fine by Scott. This is his jurisdiction, his area of expertise, and he damn well doesn’t need any help. His role as deadspeaker is a naturally solitary job, and this particular facet has become precious to him. Private. Intimate. But when a Ninety says they’re sitting in, you don’t argue.

Ignoring the impatience pooling behind him, Scott takes a moment to splash icy sink water on his face, running wet hands through his black hair. His temperature’s already rising thinking about what comes next.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

“Whenever you are.”

“Tell me again what this is about?”

A twitch of annoyance. “The dossier on the Missouri breach is vague. She’s been monitoring the area, and I need to know what, if anything, she observed before I go into the field to investigate myself.”

Scott nods and lowers his eyes to the tall candle flame dancing in the space between him and the mirror. Showtime. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly to avoid blowing out the light. Then he looks into his own reflected eyes and begins.

“Bloody Mary,” he whispers.

Jack steps back and to the side, emptying the mirror’s frame. Making space.

“Bloody Mary.” A little louder this time.

A tiny flicker of movement over his left shoulder. His heartbeat doubles.

“Bloody Mary.” Her name reverberates across the cold bathroom tile.

But as the echoes die away, the mirror shows nothing except the candle flame and his own disappointed face.

After several seconds pass, Jack steps back into view behind him.

“Hello, Scotty.”

His stomach flips as the image resolves. Not Jack. Mary.

He forces himself not to smile at the crimson-stained girl grinning horribly at him from the other side of the glass. The candlelight makes her translucent skin glow and her dead eyes shine. An unholy thrill trickles up his spine as they gaze at each other. It feels like ages since they’ve talked. It was last week.

“Hello, Mary,” he says, clearing his throat to hide its emotion.

“Hello, miss,” says Jack, stepping authoritatively into view. Her eyes tear from Scott, her smile freezing into annoyed deference. “I realize your time is valuable, and I won’t keep you long. I need to know if you observed the Gauntlet breach in Saint Louis two days ago.”

She curls her lips into a cheshire grin. “Maybe.”

But Jack’s not amused. “As a government consultant, you are required to provide information requested by an agent. Do you know anything about the Saint Louis incident or not?”

Mary rolls her eyes and throws her blood-matted chestnut hair over her shoulder with a huff. “Ugh. Fine.” She turns her attention back to Scott. He leans in an unnecessary inch to hear. “That wannabe coven in Clayton opened up a doorway trying to talk to some dead rockstar with an ouija board. It’s not the first time they’ve done it, but it’s the first time it’s stayed open.” She runs her tongue over her dry, cracked lips.

“There’s a full-blown magic vortex under the beta’s house now. Don’t think she knows about it.”

Scott flicks a look to Jack. The senior agent’s eyes are half-closed, his chin tucked to his chest as he listens, but he doesn’t say anything. Scott seizes the moment to retake control of the situation. As it should be.

“Did something come through?” he asks Mary.

She looks down and fidgets with the hem of her ragged nightie. “Not something. Someone.”

Another look to Jack. Now he’s alert but still silent.

“Who?” Scott continues.

Mary shifts uncomfortably. “I’m not sure.”

“Don’t lie,” Jack interrupts. “You know what happens.”

She sneers at 97 but complies with some hesitation. “I didn’t get a good look at him. But if I had to bet, I’d say it was Loki.”

Then Jack’s at the sink, pressing against Scott’s shoulder without regard for personal space as he cranes his long neck towards the mirror. Scott has a flash of possessiveness that urges him to shove the guy to the ground, but he tamps down on it. She wouldn’t like that.

“Are you certain?” 97 says almost breathlessly. “Absolutely sure?”

The girl puts a hand on her hip. “Sure I’m sure. Been watching these girls for months, waiting for them to do something dumb. Didn’t have to wait long. Saw Mr. Tricky Britches with my own eyes.”

There’s a ringing moment of empty air following the statement, then Jack straightens up. A heavy stone drops into Scott’s gut when the thought that’s changed Jack’s demeanor occurs to him, too.

Eyes.

“Mary,” Jack says. “You were already on-site?”

“Yeah, so? They’d been planning to call me up, anyway, so it was on when they pulled out the ouija board. Loki must’ve been biding his time, too. Sealed up the gate behind him right away.” She snorts. “Why do you think I’m here answering questions instead of walking around free myself?”

“And did Loki escape before or after they summoned you?”

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “Before.”

Scott knows what’s coming. He wants to run out of the room; he doesn’t want to be a witness to her shame. But he stays put.

“Show me your hands,” Jack demands.

“No way. You’re not my mother.”

“Refusal to comply is an admission of guilt. Show me your hands.”

She snarls like a cornered wolf, then does as she’s told. Two whole eyeballs, complete with frayed optic nerves, stare back from the ends of her delicate fingers. Congealed blood trails wrap around her wrists.

“Explain yourself,” Jack says stonily. The man is never surprised.

“What was I supposed to do, let them off scott free?” she snips. Scott flinches, but she doesn’t notice. “Moronic bitches *laughed* at me when I tried to tell them what they’d done. The queen bee tried to banish me. *Me.*” She lowers her hands with an unapologetic smirk. “That’ll teach those fake-ass bimbos to tell a paragon to get out of their sight.”

Scott knows that if he snuffed the candle, it’d break the spell; she could leave and delay the coming punishment. But he’s too afraid for his own job to do it. Not many gigs out there for a fat Korean guy who speaks a dead language and didn’t finish high school.

A beat passes, then Jack exhales hard out of his nose and runs a hand over his face. “This is your third violent offense, Mary, plus you knowingly withheld intel vital to national security for personal gain—that’s treason. Report to Claudia at the Roosevelt within twenty-four hours for your room assignment.” The girl starts to protest, but he holds up a hand to cut her off. “You’re suspended until further notice. I’m going to have to clean this up, and Scott’s going to have to go to bat for you with One Hundred. Again. If you ever want to see the outside of the Roosevelt, you’ll keep your mouth shut and follow procedure for once.”

Then he turns on his heel and stalks out, muttering angrily to himself.

The fluorescent light from the hallway makes Mary’s reflection flicker, but the door swings shut quickly enough that she’s not disincorporated. Her face is a warzone of emotions, all of them angry.

Scott turns to face the blood-soaked woman with a hangdog expression. “I’m sorry...,” he starts.

She sighs, the fury draining away fast. “It’s okay. It’s my own fault,” she admits. Lifting a hand, she gazes mournfully into the blue eye impaled on her fingertip. “I really need to get a grip on this rage thing.”

He smiles lopsidedly. Their shared struggle. “Will I see you when you get out?”

Mary steps closer with a sweet grin. “You better believe it.”

His smile widens, and he leans over the sink, careful not to ignite his tie on the guttering candle, and presses his lips to the glass. He’s rewarded with a familiar, cold tingle that shoots sparks through his veins.

When he opens his eyes, she’s gone. The only thing left on her side of the mirror is the imprint of her kiss, cherry red, but not from lipstick.