

## POKER FACE

Sasha surveyed the field of battle, plotting her foe's downfall; her arsenal was strong, potent weapons for the conflict at hand. Her eyes met those of the opposing commander; brute cunning glittered in his sunken orbs as she coolly prepared to strike. She waited for him to act, confident of her ability to turn back any assault.

Sasha's opponent gathered all of his skill, and made his move.

"...Gho fhissh."

"Damn it, Frank!" Sasha Loloche threw down her cards in frustration. "For the last time, we're playing poker!"

Frank scratched at his head - a few patches of dry skin flaking away from the scalp - and stared at the felt-covered table, chips scattered over its surface.

"...Jhhin?"

The pale-skinned woman snarled, briefly exposing long, sharp fangs, and brushed back her strawberry-blonde hair as she stood from the table. Silver chains clinked on her heavy boots as the vampire strode to the door, pulling on a leather jacket - something clanked dully as it slid on over her maroon T-shirt - and turned back for a moment in the open doorway.

Frank Parker's mortal coil still sat staring at the table, his mouth open slightly. He slowly turned his head to Sasha, a spark of animation coming into his eyes. "Bhheer?"

"Yeah, might as well grab some more." Sasha wrapped a length of rope strung with thick, heavy beads around her right forearm as she spoke, then grabbed a set of keys from the wall. "You keep this door closed 'til I get back, you hear? Don't let Ray in early, either. Let him cool his bony butt on the step if I'm not back yet when he shows up."

She waited a moment. Frank stared, something gray trickling down from his right ear. Giving up, Sasha shook her head and pulled the door shut behind her; the deadbolt and chain on the other side clicked into place of their own accord. You couldn't live forever without learning a trick or two, after all.

It had been Ray's turn to take the apartment's trash down to the lobby - so of course, an untidy bag of rubbish was sitting half-open three feet from the door. Skeleton bastard had probably gotten distracted chatting up one of the other tenants - or just lazy. At least Frank had the excuse of a rotted brain to explain his vagueness and occasional fits of furniture-gnawing; Ray Langley had none, his brain having been removed some decades before. He was just an asshole.

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Undeath brought with it certain benefits, and among Sasha's more-beloved ones was strength. Though she stood a hair under five feet and had a slim build, she would have had no trouble lifting the full, now-tied sack of garbage with one hand, but unholy strength didn't translate to leverage.

If she tried to lift it one handed, she'd tip right over, so it was a frustrated, quietly swearing vampire who thumped down the stairs, fighting the weight trying to send her tumbling down. Because of that, she was caught completely off guard when two hundred pounds of snarling claws and fur exploded from the shadow of a doorway and carried her and her cargo back over the railing into empty space.

The first swipe