

One Step at a Time

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One Step at a Time

by [presidenthomewrecker](#)

Summary

Just because they escaped Rapture doesn't mean their problems are all taken care of.

Jack just wants to make sure his girls know he's there for them.

Notes

heyo nobody gives a fuck about bioshock anymore so i'll give enough of a fuck for an entire fandom

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Ceecee

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jack always finds it hard to sleep.

He escaped Rapture physically, but he knows that he'll never truly escape. His nightly routine, more often than not, consists of tossing and turning for five hours before drifting off and sleeping for another three.

Tonight, however, he's greeted with a little interruption.

"Papa?"

Beside his bed is Cynthia, his youngest. As she likes to proudly proclaim, she's six.

"Ceecee, why are you still up?" Jack sits up. "What's wrong?"

It was always nicknames with his girls. He never calls them by their full names, even when they're in trouble. It's the most he can do for them to help them put the past behind them.

Their names were chosen in the least thoughtful way imaginable, plucked off the baby registry of most popular names and assigned to the girls in sequence.

It made it so hard to find information. There were so many Marys, so many Susans, it was impossible to know who was who—and that was if the orphanage bothered to record birth dates. So the girls got to pick their own birthdays as well.

Ceecee chose her birthday to be the second of January. Not the first, so people could still celebrate New Years and go out the next day to buy her presents.

Out of all the girls, she been the one least exposed to the firsthand horrors of Rapture. She'd been fresh out of conditioning, having spent only a few months gathering ADAM before Jack rescued her. The thought of splicers—and people in general—still terrified her.

It was a good three months before she even let other people near her. No one but Jack and Brigid was allowed to touch her. She still clings to them both, but it's Jack she'll come to after a nightmare.

"Come here, Ceecee," he says. His voice is rough from sleep, and the sudden strain causes him to cough. His voice is still raw. Brigid did what she could to restore his voice box, but he still has trouble speaking at times.

He plucks her up and into his arms. With a whimper, she folds herself into his chest. Her bony little elbows dig into his chest as she makes herself as small as possible.

Jack simply holds her, letting the seconds tick by in silence.

He knows his Ceecee, and he knows that all it takes is a little bit of cuddling and quiet for her to talk about all the things that are bothering her.

“What if the bad people followed us?” Ceecee asks. Her voice is so small and scared, muffled by his sleepshirt. “I don’t have Mr. Bubbles anymore.”

Jack runs a hand through her fine blonde hair, smoothing out the flyaway hairs. “That’s right. You have me instead.”

If anything, that only makes her more upset. She shakes her head, her little hands curling into fists around his shirt. “I don’t wanna lose you like I lost Mr. B.”

Jack frowned, choosing to rub her back instead of responding.

The Big Daddy she’d been bonded to when Jack saved her had been her first. Some of the girls had at least a cursory experience with losing their guardians. Ceecee understood in concept that if her Big Daddy were to die, she had to run and never look back, but she hadn’t actually realized what that meant until Mr. Bubbles stopped moving.

Most of the girls are taking strides to forget Rapture, but Ceecee is the one who can never truly let go of her assigned Big Daddy. Half the pictures she draws are of him, and sometimes Jack can still catch her crying over her lost friend.

He wishes he hadn’t had to do it, but it meant saving the lives of dozens of little girls, and he’d do it again, a thousand times over. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel a twinge of guilt every now and then.

“You won’t lose me,” he promises. He shifts his hold on her and stands. “I fought through way too much to go down now. You couldn’t lose me even if you wanted to.”

“I’ll never want that.” Ceecee folds her arms, looking at him very seriously.

“It’s settled, then.” He stands with her in his arms. “I’m glad we’re in agreement.”

He can tell without looking that she’s frowning, her lower lip puffing up in a pout as she tries to put together a counterargument, but Jack left her no room for argument. He just hopes it’ll be enough to dispel her fears for the night.

He begins to walk around the tiny space, hoping the motion will help put her to sleep.

There isn’t much here for her to look at. Aside from his weapons, which are secured in a locked cabinet, he has a box of medications Brigid assigned him—to wean him off ADAM without completely destroying his genetic code.

Thumbtacks pepper his walls, holding up hundreds of pictures his girls have drawn for him. Sometimes it’s the only sign anyone’s even living in this room, he has so little.

As they pass by, Ceecee hums happily and hugs him a little tighter. She must’ve seen her latest picture hanging, right over his dresser. It’s the spot where he puts the best picture, right where he can see it every time he pulls open his dresser.

She hasn't caught on that he always moves her newest pictures to that spot.

Jack pulls the rocking chair from the corner up to the window and sits.

The stars are unusually bright tonight, casting a peaceful glimmer on their little farm.

It's a small farm, relatively close to the nearest small town. Nothing too big, but big enough that they never have to go far for what they need. The girls only have a ten-minute walk to school, so that's really all that matters.

He doesn't even mind being out here all by himself. The stars always put him at ease. It's the water that makes him wary.

"Papa, will you do my hair in pigtails like Leenie's?" Ceecee asks. Her cheek is smushed against his chest, her eyes barely open. It won't be long before she drifts off.

"First thing tomorrow," he tells her.

She squirms to get comfier, and Jack has to fight not to grunt as her little foot jabs him in the thigh. She settles down quickly, and Jack doesn't want to do anything to rile her up all over again.

It's a long while before she speaks again. "I like the stars, Papa."

Jack runs his hand through her hair. "Me too." He lets his voice drop low, knowing it'll help her off to sleep. He doesn't make a habit of it under any other circumstances, but if he drops his voice low enough and Ceecee's tired enough, he'll sound close enough to a Big Daddy that she'll feel a little safer and drift off. It's murder on his throat, but a little extra warm tea with honey never hurt anyone.

Ceecee's finally nodded off, but he can't bring himself to take her back to her room. He doesn't want to risk waking up Leenie, who shares a room with her. Leenie's difficult enough to get to sleep as is.

As carefully as possible, he stands up and heads back to his bed. He doesn't like to risk waking her up, but his back wouldn't forgive him if he slept in the rocking chair another night this week.

Ceecee immediately grabs a handful of blankets the second Jack lays her down, and he can't help but rolling his eyes. He loves Ceecee dearly, but she's a bed hog if he's ever met one. And that's really impressive, considering how tiny she is.

But he'll put up with it tonight, for her sake.

btw i've got a [tumblr](#) if you're interested

Feel free to join [the Bioshock discord server](#) my minecraft wife and I mod if you wanna chat!

Kay

The girls are usually home from school by the time Jack finishes with his farm work for the day, and today is no different.

He washes up to the best of his ability and goes to start on dinner. It's almost four, so he'll check up on the girls before he gets started with dinner.

It's routine for him to check on his girls. Even if they're fine, it's just something he needs to do.

In the kitchen, he finds Kathleen—the older one. She goes by Kay. She and Patsy can usually be found playing tag, but Patsy's spending the afternoon playing at a friend's house.

Kay has seized the entire kitchen table for her art supplies. An array of crayons, markers, and colored pencils sit spread out in front of her. She's so absorbed in her work that she doesn't even acknowledge his presence.

Jack lingers in the doorway, craning his neck to get a better look at her picture. It's an immediate cause for concern.

She usually goes for the bright colors—to make happy suns, grinning flowers, and various cute animals—but there's a surprising excess of blacks, browns, and blues in this piece. He'll have to talk with her.

"Kay?" He sits in the chair next to her, sure to give her her space.

When she glances up, there's a faraway look in his eyes, one that he can only return with an uneasy smile. "How's it going, kiddo?"

She shrugs and turns her attention back to her drawing.

That can't be good. He reaches to the counter, grabbing a pair of apples. Kay is always a little more receptive to talking if he bribes her with a snack beforehand. "How about a break?"

She doesn't even glance at the apple, just continues drawing.

Jack switches tactics. Kay's normally quiet, but she's never this quiet. This is the point where Jack gets worried. He'll have to do a little bit of prying. With any of his girls, excluding Mary, he'd take it that they wanted to be left alone for a bit, but he knows how Kay gets.

He leans in. "So what are you drawing?" he asks, even though he already knows. He should recognize his girls' drawings of Big Daddies by now.

There's a flash of hesitation in her eyes, a split second before she discards the truth and shrugs.

Yeah, that's not good. And it's not something Jack can ignore. The other girls are fine for now—Patsy's with her friend, and last he checked, Mary, Ceecee, and Leenie were curled up on Mary's bed while she read to them. Kay needs his attention.

"Can I color with you?"

"Mm-hm." She's still utterly focused on her drawing as she slides him a blank piece of paper.

He takes a blue crayon and begins to scribble.

His drawings always end up looking like they were made by a five-year-old, and while they technically were, Jack chooses to view it as a positive rather than a negative. Most of his girls, but Kay especially, pride themselves on their art abilities. He can't describe how happy he feels, seeing the pride in their faces when they're teaching him to draw a flower or a puppy.

He draws Rapture. Every tiny thing festering in the back of his mind. Splicers. Ryan. Fontaine. Big Daddies. Losing his girls. Losing Tenenbaum.

He doesn't mean to. In fact, he picked up the blue crayon specifically to draw a nice skyline, but that's not what came from it. It's not his fault. It just happens. Every time he allows his thoughts to drift, they find their way back into Rapture.

The more he tries to avoid it, the more buried memories rise to the surface. Bits and pieces of his childhood hit him the second he lets his walls down. They usually aren't much, just flashes of Suchong, Fontaine, or whoever else had been documenting his growth. His mind still doesn't give him specifics, and he thinks it's better off that way.

Suddenly exhausted, Jack props his chin up with his hand and continues coloring.

After twenty minutes of silence, Kay finally glances up.

"What are you drawing?" Kay furrows her brow and shuffles closer. It doesn't take her long to realize what's depicted. He can tell by the way her eyes widen. "Papa Wynand..."

Her tiny hand folds over his, gently guiding his hand away from the page.

"It's okay to draw things that aren't happy." Jack tells her. "For me, it makes things less scary."

"Oh." She still won't make eye contact with him. Her eyes continue to roam over his drawing, lingering on the Little Sister vent in the background. Honestly, it looks more like a weird brown lollipop, but it gets the point across. "Why are you scared of the hidey holes?"

Jack chuckles. "It's a little silly, but I was so scared whenever I'd see one of you girls go back into those vents. I always felt a Splicer would jump out of nowhere and take you away."

Kay nods, her face somber, as if the thought had never occurred to her. With nothing more to say, she blurts out the first thing that comes to her mind.

“Sometimes I miss Mr. Bubbles.”

So that’s what’s been on her mind. How does he respond to that? What can he even say? Jack forces a smile. “I know, Kay. We’ll see him again someday. It’s alright.”

She frowns, finally making eye contact with him. It’s somehow worse than her staring down at her drawing while she talks. “I know he’s dead.”

Jack tries not to flinch. That word didn’t come up often between them. *Dead*.

He wonders what the word even means to his girls, if they can even comprehend the idea of someone no longer living. Sometimes he still catches Ceecee murmuring about “the angels,” but he’s never caught anything similar from the other girls.

“I know he was bad, and he was in a lot of pain, but he played with me and kept me safe.”

Jack doesn’t answer, instead trying to focus on not looking utterly heartbroken. He doubts he’ll ever escape that conditioning facility completely, not with what he’s learned there.

Humans crafted into suits, men grafted into their coffins without a way to scream and strung up like puppets to do Andrew Ryan’s bidding.

He hopes that their deaths were a mercy, but he can never be sure. It’s one of the many things that keep him up at night.

“It wasn’t his fault he was bad.”

Jack nods in agreement. “It wasn’t.” What does he do? Does he hug her? He doesn’t want to push her over the edge and make her cry, but he doesn’t want her to be denied comfort either. He can tell just by looking at her that this has been on her mind for a while.

She returns to her drawing, dragging the crayon across the paper in methodical, rhythmical strokes. “Do you think he’d like the surface?”

“I think so.” Did those men ever even know the surface? Did they remember? Or was there nothing left in a Big Daddy’s mind except their orders? Which one is worse: knowing the freedom they’d lost or never realizing they weren’t free in the first place?

Kay nods. She swaps her dark blue crayon out for a sky blue crayon. “I think so too.”

“He’d be happy to see you doing so well.”

Kay grins. “He’d be mad that I failed my spelling test, though.”

Jack balks. “You *failed* a spelling test?”

Kay’s eyes widen. “No.” She drops her gaze and fidgets with her crayon. “But I need you to sign it to prove you saw it.”

“Kay...” he sighs, but his tone has no real bite to it.

She still flinches. “Please don’t be mad.”

“I’m not, honey. I know you try your best.” He swipes a stray hair from her forehead, hating the way her body goes tense. “Why don’t you teach me how to draw Mr. Bubbles? That way both of us can remember him.”

Kay glances up at him, her wide eyes scanning his features. The suggestion is innocuous enough, but it carries a clear message. *I am not Suchong. I am not a Splicer. I will never hurt you the way they tried to hurt you.*

After a long pause, she grabs a fresh piece of paper and climbs into his lap. She’s gentler than Ceecee, but that doesn’t stop her bony knees from digging into his thigh as she gets situated.

“Okay, so first, you gotta start with a circle...”

Leenie

Jack's routine is thus.

Whenever the thoughts start to get to him, whenever memories of Fontaine or Andrew Ryan or whoever wanted him dead start to creep into his head, he stops working for the day and goes to check on his girls.

He starts outside, out front. Usually at least one of his girls is playing outside, and it's enough to calm his brain for a while. Next, he checks the living room, then the kitchen, then their bedrooms.

And finally, when four out of five of his girls are accounted for, he goes to the back porch. It's almost a guarantee that she'll be there, exactly where he's looking for her.

Kathleen—Leenie. Kathleen was a popular name for a few years.

The last thing Kay and Leenie want is to be known as the Kathleens, so they took every possible precaution to make sure no one could ever lump them together. They wanted their birthdays as far away from one another as possible, so Brigid recommended the summer and winter solstices. They even modeled their hobbies around being two separate people.

Kay likes to color; Leenie likes to read.

On any given day, Jack can find her curled up in the porch swing. She needs her alone time more than the other girls, so he tries not to bother her too much. Today, however, is not one of those days.

He greets her by tousling her brown hair, and while she initially jumps, she takes her nose from her book to grin at him. Her glasses are a bit askew, so Jack takes the time to adjust them.

He sits beside her. "How ya doing, Leenie?"

"Good. Susan finally finished the new *Nancy Drew* book." She tilts her book so he can see the cover. *The Mystery of the Fire Dragon*.

She looks so happy that he can't resist smiling back. "That's great."

To think she could barely even read when she'd arrived on the surface. The orphanage gave the girls a cursory education, teaching them enough about language so they could read the propaganda around them, but all of his girls came to the surface far behind their peers.

Brigid warned him as much, so since they made it to the surface, Jack has gone out of his way to make sure they didn't struggle alone.

Jack read to the girls all the time in those first few months. He was never any good. Even though his reading ability is fine, he easily gets tongue-tied and struggles with larger words

from time to time. Not that the girls minded. Aside from Tenenbaum, who spared quality time with her girls where she could, they'd never been read to before.

All his girls love stories, but Leenie latched onto them most. She was a chronic hider for those first few months, hiding under beds, in closets, in the spaces under the sink. Jack still had all the cleaning supplies in higher cabinets, in case something got to her so badly that she reverted to her old ways.

"We can go to the library tomorrow." Jack tells her. She only has a small chunk of the book left, so she'll probably have it finished before dinner.

Leenie instantly lights up. "We can?"

The local librarian is an absolute sweetheart. She seems to know Jack's out of his depth, especially when it comes to books, so she's taken it upon herself to be Leenie's reading guide. And she makes sure to sneak Leenie a couple candies whenever she visits.

She promised Jack she'd put a couple of *The Hardy Boys* novels on reserve for when Leenie finished *Nancy Drew*. Apparently they're similar enough that it's easy to transition kids from one series to the other. As if Leenie needs any incentive to keep reading.

"Of course. Ms. Wilson told me she's very excited for you to read *The Hardy Boys*." He ruffles her hair, causing her to laugh. She tries to duck away, but Jack playfully holds her in place until her hair is properly messed up.

He's so unbelievably proud of how far she's come.

Half of her problem was that she couldn't see. The other half was that she'd never been given a chance. Leenie was one of the first of the girls to come out of her shell—not only to Jack, but to her sisters, her classmates, and academically.

Leenie had gone from struggling to keep up to being one of the top two in her class, the other being her best friend Susan. The only complaints Jack ever heard from her teachers was that she'd rather read than do her times tables.

It makes him feel a little dumb, but in a good way. The idea of being the smartest person in the room is terrifying, especially when he wants so much more for his girls than what he got. He takes it as a good thing that she's already reading circles around him by age seven.

"Papa, will you read to me?"

Jack's automatic reaction is to chuckle. "You read faster than I do." In fact, she'd told him a week ago that he wasn't allowed to read to her because he read too slow.

"That's okay!" Before he can react, she shoves the book into his hands. "I can help with the words you don't understand."

She's bargaining. Jack frowns, wondering how long she's been feeling lonely. He knows he probably doesn't check on her as much as he should—not just seeing that she's in one piece,

but actually talking to her—because she always seems to invested in her books. He silently vows to do better.

“Alright, then.” He slips his hands under her armpits and places her in his lap. “Watch the feet.” Leenie isn’t as squirmy as her sisters, but he warns her just in case.

Leenie giggles. “Okay, Papa.” As usual, she settles right where he placed her. The only moving around she does is shuffling a little closer, so she can rest her head against his chest.

He fumbles a word almost every paragraph, but Leenie is swift to correct him. Her voice is barely above a murmur, which makes him all the more reluctant to announce that he has to get up.

“What?” If his own guilt hadn’t been enough, the puppy eyes she’s giving him would do him in for sure.

“It’s almost five. I need to get started on dinner.”

“Can I help?”

She must really be pining for attention if she’s willing to pass up finishing her book.

He picks her up, setting her on his hip. The book sits abandoned on the porch swing. Jack makes a mental note to retrieve it later.

“Can you set the table for me?” he asks.

Leenie nods and begins wriggling to get out of his arms.

She stands on the counter to get the dishes. Jack has to keep one eye on her as he goes about washing the dishes, because as much as he wants to pluck her from the counter, she asked to help.

And who is he to discourage her?

Patsy

Chapter Notes

hey i'm sorry i disappeared i have no excuses so here you go!

Sometimes Jack goes out of his way to check on his girls. Sometimes, his girls find him first.

Patsy offers him a giant gap-toothed grin. “Hi, Papa Wynand!”

“Hi there, Patsy.” He glances behind her and can’t help but notice the other girls aren’t anywhere in sight. “Where’s Ceecee?”

Patsy scoffs. “She and Leenie are reading some dumb princess books together.” She makes no mention of Mary or Kay, so he can only assume they’re still at their friends’ houses. She tugs at his sleeve, a little more insistently this time. “If you love me, you’ll play soccer with me.”

“Well, how can I say no to that?”

She beams. “Yay!”

He keeps an eye on her as she rushes over to retrieve her soccer ball, searching for a sign that something was off.

She hasn’t been acting like anything’s wrong—not that Patsy ever acts like anything’s wrong. In fact, that’s the problem. She could be sitting there with a broken leg and still only care about what’s for dinner.

“Watch this, Papa!” She hikes her dress up above her knees and swings her little leg as hard as she can, kicking the ball to the best of her ability. She manages to dig her toe under the ball, causing it to rocket through the air.

Jack barely has time to duck. “Patsy! Watch the windows!”

“Come on! Wasn’t that neat?”

“You’re getting very good at kicking, but I’d like to avoid replacing the windows every week.”

She sighs loudly. If she didn’t hate dress-up so much, Jack is sure she’d be getting the lead in her class play. “Fine.”

“Thank you.” He retrieves the ball and bowls it back to her. She kicks it back a touch more gently this time around.

Now, Patsy isn’t the most talkative of his girls. That has to go to Ceecee. But by no means is Patsy a quiet kid. So that’s exactly why he’s worried when they delve into silently kicking a ball back and forth.

“How’s it going, Patsy?”

Jack is geared for the worst from her answer, but she only looks up at him with wide, confused eyes. “Good?”

“You’ve been doing alright?”

“Yeah?” She blinks at him, eyes still wide. She doesn’t understand.

“You’re okay, then?”

It would be so much easier if Jack could read her, but he can’t. Out of all his girls, Patsy is the hardest to gauge. She doesn’t show her emotions on her sleeve like Ceecee, and she say it without really saying it like Leenie does. She’s his little enigma.

“Of course, Papa.” She furrows her brow, the slightest hints of suspicion seeping into her voice. “Did something happen?”

“No, no. Nothing like that.” He’s quick to wave off her suspicions. “I was just asking.”

When the ball rolls back to her, she doesn’t kick it back. She can clearly sense something is wrong, but he isn’t sure how much she knows.

She doesn’t need to say anything; it’s the look on her face that gets him to crumble. “I know some of the girls are having trouble...” He draws his words out, slow and deliberate. It’s easier for the girls to talk about things if they know they’re not the only ones. “...when it comes to... what happened?”

Patsy furrows her brow at the ground, like she does when she doesn’t understand her homework. She’s always had the most trouble in school, mainly because she didn’t care for it as much as the other girls. Everyone else was so excited to learn. Patsy just wanted to make friends.

“The people from Rapture?” He says “Rapture” like a dirty word, the wince clear on his face.

Patsy lifts her chin, and for a second, he can see the fear in her eyes. It’s there and gone in a flash. “They’re not coming back, right?”

“Of course not,” he says, like the fear isn’t always gnawing in the back of his mind, like he doesn’t scan the news for any sign of deep sea expeditions for the tiny inkling those poor explorers might come back with more Splicers.

“Good. Mr. Fontaine was ugly.” She kicks the ball back in his direction.

Jack chuckles. “He was pretty ugly.” He kicks the ball back.

“I’m glad I got to stab him.” She stops the ball, rolling her foot over top of it. Her face pinches, a spark of something in her face that isn’t exactly human. Despite his best efforts, the Little Sister parts of his girls can never be entirely eradicated.

Jack’s body goes cold. “Don’t talk like that.”

“What? He hurt my friends and stole their ADAM. Then he got uglier. I’m glad he’s gone.” She kicks the ball, this time harder, and it smacks into Jack’s ankles.

Jack tries not to let it shake him. She probably can’t understand. He’d only had to stab Fontaine four times, and each one was just about the worst feeling he’s ever experienced. Desperation. Fear. Hurt. Hopelessness.

How can she be so jaded? Maybe she’s just at the point where it doesn’t bother her anymore. Maybe it never did in the first place. Either way, the thought makes him sick.

He kicks the ball back in her direction, using that as an excuse to take his time answering. “It’s just... a lot to have someone else’s life in your hands.”

She shrugs, saying nothing. She lowers her gaze to the soccer ball and nudges it with her foot. It’s a long, long second before she finally kicks it back. The ball only clears half the space between them.

He has to remind herself that she’s only nine. She probably doesn’t even understand the concept of death. And maybe it’s not the best idea to convince a nine-year-old that she should feel bad. Maybe it’s best to let it go for the time being.

He approaches the ball and swings his leg, only for a spike of pain to absolutely obliterate his ability to stand. With a cry of pain, he doubles over, trying to balance on his left leg instead.

“Papa Wynand?” Patsy is beside him in seconds. “Papa? Papa, what’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m fine, honey. I just can’t kick like I used to.” He frowns, knowing he’ll definitely be feeling this in the morning. “I just need to sit down.”

Patsy takes him by the hand, wrapping her little hands around his fingers. If anything, it puts more strain on his leg, because he’s so worried about tripping over her, but he can’t tell her that.

She leads him over to the front porch, where he lowers himself onto the front stair. She joins him, rubbing his knee in attempt to comfort him. It’s what he does for her when she’s hurt.

“Thank you, sweetie.” He ruffles her hair and brushes the flyaway strands from her face.

Patsy dares a glance up at him. “Do you miss Mr. Fontaine, Papa?”

God, how could he? In some ways, it was like the bastard had never left. Fontaine visits him in his nightmares almost every night, and if not him, then Ryan. The two of them always seem to find a backdoor into his egg salad.

“I’m... sad he made the choices he did. Because the things he did hurt a lot of people.” His hand seems so massive against her tiny shoulder. “Like you.”

The silence hangs heavy. Jack is approximately five seconds away from launching a distraction. Patsy isn’t one to get bogged down with weight subjects like this, so maybe it’s best for him to challenge her to kick her soccer ball as hard as she can and spend the next hour cleaning up whatever she breaks.

Her fingers tighten around his knee. “Like you.” Patsy lifts her chin to look at him. Something sparks in her wide brown eyes. Recognition? Understanding? Jack isn’t sure; she’s never looked at him like this before.

Jack is struck with a sudden, terrifying thought. How much of his history do his girls know? Because Patsy could easily be referring to when he fought Fontaine and admittedly gotten the shit kicked out of him, but there’s something in her expression that proves she knows the hurt goes so much deeper.

Patsy blinks, retracts her hand, and turns away. “Someone should’ve given Fontaine a time-out,” she says. “Maybe if he’d had some time to calm down, he wouldn’t have acted like such a weenie.”

Jack chuckles. “He did act like a weenie.”

Patsy pops up from her spot. “Let me get my soccer ball, and you can play goalie, okay?” She pats his knee one last time before rushing to fetch her ball.

Mary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The house is oddly quiet.

Jack doesn't trust it for a second.

As much as he loves his girls, silence never means a good thing. In fact, silence usually translates to something broken, stained, or—in one exceedingly rare and unfortunate case—on fire.

With the dishes done, he checks the living room first. The TV is off, thankfully, but there's still no sign of anyone in the living room. He can see Leenie in her usual spot outside, though. Maybe they're all in the backyard? He can only hope.

As he nears the back door, a glimpse of a familiar brown head of hair gives him pause.

Mary, the oldest. They've bent over backwards trying to make up a nickname for her as well, but she never seemed to want one. Just "Mary" has always been fine for her.

He almost hadn't noticed her.

She's always been quiet. The oldest of the bunch, Jack saved her when she was nine years old. By all accounts, she should still be a kid, but with four younger sisters in the picture, he knows she had to grow up extremely quick.

He hardly ever sees her alone nowadays. She's either reading to Ceecee or teaching Kay how to draw something new or patching up Patsy's latest scrape. It's almost foreign to see her kneeling on the floor, playing a game of jacks by herself.

"Hi, Mary."

Mary doesn't even glance up from her game. "Ceecee's outside. So are Kay and Patsy. I think they're playing tag."

Jack hums and lowers himself onto the floor. That accounts for all five of his kids, so he'll give everyone the benefit of the doubt for today. "And what are you up to?"

"Jacks." She bounces the ball and grabs a handful, leaving only two left. For some reason, the game calms her, so she plays it often when she's by herself. She's gotten quite good. Jack just hopes she doesn't start playing her classmates for money.

"Sounds like fun."

"Yeah. Is Leenie not in her spot?" Mary twists to look over her shoulder. The confusion in her face only multiplies when she sees Leenie where she always is, her messy dark hair

visible from the window.

“Is it really that crazy that I’m looking for you?”

Mary shrugs and stares at the floor, clearly indicating that yes, that’s exactly what she thinks. “You have a lot of girls to deal with, you know?”

Jack hooks a finger under her chin, prompting her to look at him. It breaks his heart that the girls’ first reactions are usually to drop their heads and get ready to dodge a blow. Mary’s the one that’s holding onto the habit the hardest. It’s been a journey just to get her to look him in the eyes. “No, I don’t. Tell me.”

She looks off to the side, but it’s better than her talking to the floor. “Well, Ceecee’s little, and Kay’s still sad about Mr. Bubbles. Don’t tell her I told you that, but she is. And Leenie’s quiet about it but sometimes she’s scared to be away from you. And Patsy’s Patsy but I’m sure if you talk to her, she’s admit something too.”

Jack furrows his brow. Even he didn’t know that about Leenie. How did Mary know that? “Have you been checking up on the girls for me?”

Mary shrugs, which is her way of saying yes, that’s exactly what she’s been doing. Her rubber ball slips from her lap. She watches it roll.

Jack grabs it before it can run too far away. He makes sure she’s looking at him before he places it back into her open palm. “You don’t have to do that, Mary.”

She closes her little fist, holding it as tightly as she can. “Yeah I do. They’re my sisters.”

With a touch of sadness, Jack reflects on what Brigid told him when he first took the girls. There was next to nothing in their files, but Brigid knew enough about each girl to give him a jumping off point for each. Mary was the maternal one, even with the girls in her year. She had a knack for leadership and talking people down, so naturally the other Little Sisters flocked to her. Brigid employed her as a special helper more than once.

“That time in your life is done,” he says.

“It doesn’t feel like it.” Mary mutters. “And I don’t think it ever will.” She spreads her jacks out in front of them. “Here. It’s your turn.”

Jack can tell from her tone that she’s stalling, so it’s best to just play along for now.

He takes the little rubber ball and tries not to swipe all the jacks in one turn, but it’s hard since there are barely a dozen and his hands are literally twice the size of his daughter’s.

She doesn’t look impressed. “Thanks for letting me win,” she says flatly. Regardless, she bounces the ball and swipes up the rest of the jacks.

“What? I’d never do that.”

“You’re the worst liar in the whole world. Except for maybe Johnny. He breaks down crying whenever he tries to fib.”

Jack laughs, but regrets doing so the second it comes out of his mouth. His laugh drops his voice, straining it in just the way to make Mary bolt upright. Her face fills with shock, as if she doesn’t even know why she went tense. It breaks his heart.

All the girls hate the monster noises he makes, but Mary hates them most of all. For the first few days, she wouldn’t even come near him. It was the reason Brigid tried fixing it as soon as possible. Even the slightest hint of a Big Daddy growl is enough to make her go tense from head to toe.

He coughs. It sends sparks of irritation up his windpipe, but it helps diffuse the sudden tension. “Sorry, Mary.”

“You’ve still got the cough,” she mutters. Her eyes are back on the floor, her chin pointed down towards her chest.

“It’s nothing,” Jack says, but judging by the way her brows furrow, it’s too late to pretend like that.

Mary shakes her head, making it clear that she’s not even listening to his attempts at lying. “I’m gonna fix that one day.”

“You are?” That’s a new one.

Mary nods, daring a look up at him. There’s an odd determination in her eyes. “I’m trying really hard in science class, and Mama Tenenbaum promised to teach me more.”

Ah, so that’s why. She’s still on her science kick.

Mary absorbs information like a sponge, but most of that information is for her sisters and not her. She excels in art class because she wants to learn new things to teach Kay. She’s so good at reading so she can recommend books to Leenie and read fairy tales to Ceecee. She keeps learning new games, like rummy and kick the can, for Patsy’s sake. But it’s science that she loves.

Sometimes Jack can’t fathom how she can even look at a doctor’s office, after all that’s been done to her, but maybe it’s her way of coping. Maybe making sense of the things done to her helps her move past them. Or maybe learning about chlorophyll helps her forget about ADAM.

He’s in no place to judge.

“Then I can’t wait for you to win the Nobel Prize, princess.”

Mary furrows her brow, her lip curling in distaste. “Princesses aren’t real.”

Apparently the *no gods or kings* mentality extended to princesses as well. “But we can pretend, can’t we?”

Mary folds her arms over her chest, saying everything by saying nothing.

Jack needs to think fast, distract her with something else. His eyes flit to the radio by the couch. That just might work.

“Fair enough, but I’d still like to spend time with you.” He makes a bigger deal of looking toward the radio. “How about I teach you how to dance, huh?”

Mary regards him with suspicion. “Why?”

“What, you’re too good to dance with your old man?” He turns on the radio and holds out his hands to her. “Stand on my toes.”

Mary only stares at him.

“Come on,” he urges her. “Trust me.”

She does as he asks, but there’s still uncertainty reflected in her pout. “This doesn’t hurt you, does it?”

Jack cracks a grin. Considering every Splicer, Big Daddy, and other miscellaneous maniac that’s battered him around, he can take a ten-year-old standing on his toes. “I’ve had worse.”

He has no idea what he’s doing, but he’s seen enough dancing to know how to fake it. He remembers the way the Houdini Splicers moved in Sander Cohen’s apartment, the way they moved to the music. He can fake it easily enough.

She balances on his toes, clumsily waltzing. She keeps glancing down at their feet, and Jack’s movements are stiff and jerky. They must make quite the sight to behold, between the two of them. Frankly, it’s a miracle he hasn’t tripped yet.

Mary giggles.

Jack can’t help smiling along. “What’s so funny?”

“We’re bad at this.”

“That’s okay.” Jack shifts her weight to one foot and does a little turn. “We don’t have to be good at everything.”

They dance on. He teaches her everything he knows, which basically consists of how to spin, so for the most part, they just move in time until Mary finally pulls away.

Mary slides off her feet and beckons him down to her level.

He kneels, and his knee has barely hit the floor before Mary throws herself at him, her tiny arms wrapped tight around his neck.

“I love you, Papa.”

A sense of resolve floods his mind as he hugs her back. He'd go to a thousand Raptures, take down a million Fontaines and Steinmans and whoever else wanted to try, just to keep his girls safe and happy.

Anything for his girls.

"I love you too, Mary."

Chapter End Notes

we're in the endgame, lads

Jack

Chapter Notes

Hey, it's the final chapter! Thanks everyone who's read this far! Also, I'm definitely going to continue writing Bioshock fics in the future, in fact I have one in the works right now!

The only warning that Jack gets for Brigid Tenenbaum arriving is Brigid Tenenbaum arriving.

“Mama Tenenbaum!” The girls crowd around her, tugging at her skirt for her attention.

“Ach, *mein Schätz!*” Brigid kneels on the floor, greeting each girl in turn with a hug and a kiss.

“Brigid.” Jack greets her at the door, trying his hardest not to look completely shocked. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Because I did not tell you.” She greets Mary last, prompting the girls to dash away in a free-for-all to show Tenenbaum their latest points of pride. Only Ceecee stays behind, her arms outstretched for another hug.

“How are the rest of the girls?” Jack asks. He takes her coat to hang up.

“Doing very well.” Brigid stands, Ceecee already attached to her hip. “A colleague of mine took in little Susan just last week.”

Jack does the numbers in his head. The Smiths, a couple who escaped Rapture in its early years, took in Barbara and Deborah about a month ago, which means that there are roughly a dozen girls still in Brigid’s care.

Brigid holds up a hand to stop him. He blushes to think his thoughts are written all over his face. “You have five of my little ones. I couldn’t possibly ask you to take more.”

At that, he can only nod. It’s hard enough to make ends meet as it is. He could only imagine what bringing in another girl would do, to both his finances and his children. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Coffee, please.” With Ceecee on her hip, she follows him into the kitchen. She sits, transferring Ceecee to her lap while the little girl chatters on about what she’s been learning about in science class.

“How are your little ones?” Tenenbaum asks Jack the second she gets the chance. “I see this one could not be doing better.” Tenenbaum ruffles Ceecee’s hair, causing her to giggle.

“Oh, they’re doing great, Brigid. Mary and Leenie are at the tops of their classes. Leenie’s even won a prize for reading the most books. Mary placed in the science fair last month. Then Kay’s won ‘Most Improved’ in her class for her spelling tests, and Patsy’s getting ready for a track meet in a couple months.”

“What about me, Papa?” Ceecee asks.

“And this little bugger gets all sorts of compliments for how well she plays with others.” Jack sets a steaming cup of coffee in front of Brigid and kisses Ceecee’s forehead.

“That is so wonderful to hear.” Tenenbaum says. She takes a long drink and sighs her contentment. “And how have you been?”

Jack starts. “Fine.” Why was she asking?

Brigid cocks an eyebrow. Jack tries not to cringe. How is it that she can see through his bullshit just like that? “Because you do not look it.”

“I’m fine,” he insists. Maybe that’s why she can see right through him. Because he’s as bad at lying as he is gullible.

Brigid shakes her head. “All I need is one look at you to see how little you’ve been sleeping.” She picks Ceecee up and places her feet on the ground. “Little Ceecee, can you give us a moment?”

Ceecee frowns. “Is something wrong?”

Tenenbaum smiles patiently. “Of course not. We just wish to talk about boring grown-up things.” She leans in and grins conspiratorially. “But if you would like to keep your sisters away for a while, I am sure I can sneak a candy or two in your direction.”

Ceecee nods vigorously, blonde locks flying, and rushes off to her sisters’ rooms.

Tenenbaum waits until the door shuts to speak. “I understand. I am plagued by the nightmares as well.”

“Really?”

She collects her coffee cup and stands, joining Jack by the sink. “What I have done to the little ones is not something that I can remove from my thoughts so easily.” Brigid sighs. “No matter how safe we are, I worry every day that some harm will come to my little ones.”

She runs his hand through his hair, and when Jack flinches on instinct, he realizes her concern.

He’s not used to being relaxed around others.

He doesn't feel tense around his girls, but that's because he didn't have a reason to. They couldn't hurt him even if they wanted to—or at least that's what he tries to tell himself. He tries not to think about how it only took the five of them to take down Fontaine, because he knows better than to give into his paranoia. He trusts his girls with all his heart, and if he ever so much as considers splicing again, he'd much rather be dead.

He knows how the other parents look at him, how afraid they are, and honestly, he can't blame them. He knows how he must look. Tense, angry, defensive. Like he's bound to snap at any second. And who knows? Some days, he just might.

"Trust, *mein kleiner Schützer*." Brigid says. "The world can be unkind, and the world can be fair, but Rapture is different from the world above. You do not have to be so prepared to fly into battle here."

"I know that, but..." Jack struggles for the right words. "I made a promise to protect them."

She sighs again. "You worry far too much, Jack. When was the last time you slept?"

"I've been sleeping every night."

Brigid eyes him knowingly. "For how long?"

"Long enough." Most nights, he can only sleep a handful of hours at the most, and from the look in her eyes, Brigid can see that.

Brigid wraps a hand around his bicep and gently tugs him in the direction of his bedroom. "Sleep. I will care for my little ones while you rest."

Despite the fact that Jack could easily snap her in half, he follows mutely behind her. Exhaustion rattles down his spine. It's quiet and easy to ignore, which is probably why he was able to ignore it for weeks on end. But now that Brigid has pointed it out, he can't take his mind off of it.

He's tired. He's so, so tired.

"Do you trust me?" Brigid asks. She runs her thumb over his hand, easing the tension out of his fists.

"Of course," he says.

"You do not show it," she replies. She opens his bedroom door and ushers him inside. "Four hours. I will take the girls out to dinner, buy them candies, and return to play with them after. All I ask of you is to rest. Will you let me?"

"Of course," he says again.

It's the nighttime he doesn't trust. When everything's quiet, he's prepared for the worst. At school, the girls are safe enough. If not, he knows they'd run straight here. He could protect them. At their friends' houses, more of the same. But during the night, while everyone is

sleeping, there's no one he could trust but himself. Or maybe it's his own body he doesn't trust. Either way, he and sleep aren't on the best of terms.

"Thank you." Brigid touches her palm to his face, thumbing his cheek. "This is the first step, you know."

"First step?"

"Of shedding Rapture for good. Soon that place will be even less than a memory." She takes one of his hands in hers.

They look so different, yet so similar. Jack's hands are large, rugged from farm work, while Brigid's hands are smaller, attuned to the delicate tasks of surgery. Her nails are uneven, some broken, others bitten down to the cuticle, but there's a softness in her grip.

"It all comes back to trust."

End Notes

btw i've got a [tumblr](#) if you're interested

Feel free to join [the Bioshock discord server](#) my minecraft wife and I mod if you wanna chat!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!