



Byronesque

haruka x jean





Meanwhile... somewhere where dog-sized spiders were not trying to scurry back to their hole in the wall, or some facsimile thereof in an attempt to escape fiery matters they did not want to be the brunt of...

The old grandfather clock that sat between the two doors behind the rounded and elevated bar, the two doors that led two halls--one to a music room and the other a library--bonged loudly as its large gears shifted and clicked into place. The reverberation due to its size, as it was a relic of the Old World, swam across the cathedral hall. It bounced from one arch to another along the vaulted ceilings, across colored glass that leaked in glowing moonlight, and tempered off in waves of hallowed music. It mixed the song already present, beast that it was covering the space of six feet with carvings that looked wrought out of hand by the careful ministrations of an eccentric clock maker.

Natural light glowed and sewed its way through the dim beams of magicked candlelight that would not burn at the touch. It gave the hall an ambiance of something Other and Before. The combination was sensual when added to the tune blending into the room via a record player than sat on the bar at the hour of nearly three a.m.

Hold me close enough to drink my rose

The devil in my pocket turned to gold

Sorry to warn you, you're in a daze

Tonight I'll love you, but tomorrow go away

Laughter escaped beyond the passage of palen lips, almost dulled and barely hued in a tinge of pink; perhaps a master painter had thinned out the soft rose of his pallet and swept it over in a gloss--as if to say, 'There, finished.'

Sky-blue silk that matched her eyes coiled around her legs, sweeping through her ankles as she listened to the whimsy song, still grinning as the darker-haired male spun her in his arms. The robe almost swallowed long legs like a gown, material caressing with every bare foot pad along the zebra-wood floor; though, the upper part hugged her thin and muscular frame as if it were made for her and only her.

Cool blue twinkled with something as she danced, fingers twining through one of his hands as the other gripped his shoulder. She could feel the heat of his caress on her lower back, itching to go lower as she came back to him--chest to chest. "When I said indulge me I wasn't certain you would give so easily to the request."

"Don' like the tune, Casanova? Or didja wanna to lead instead?"

She chuckled as they moved, separating once more. When they came back together her back was pressed into his front, her head on his shoulder, and her cheek to his while they swayed with some snap. The bumping jam of a trumpet, the beat of the drums, it all reminded her of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gatsby... what a fun novel if not a little droll.

Saint was anything by droll. "Not at all," she replied as they pulled away, moved two, three, four steps to one side, and then came back together front to front, "I rather like pulling the the Victorian Gentlemen out of you once in a while, even if it means letting you put me through my paces."

He smirked back at her as the song ended and they came to a stop. "Wicked bitch," he quipped back, not an ounce of malice present.

She chuckled and gave his cheek a pat. "Now be a good boy and go to bed."

"Not gonna tuck me in?" he asked as he moved towards the record player to grab his drink.

"Not tonight. I'm sure you can find other ways to amuse yourself." Her fingers danced a pattern along his back, his spine, lower, as she came up behind him and passed him. She slid up to the bar, seating herself before grabbing her silver cigarette tin. "You're very well versed in such matters, after all."

"You know, Cal, sometimes it wouldn't kill you to say fuck once in a while," he informed her, slamming the rest of his whisky.

She smiled as she lit up, tin replaced on the bar. "Goodnight, Saint."

He gave her a wave before shoving off and going up the stairs, beyond the door to where his bed lay in wait. Ruka watched, smoke curling up her features. Her elbow rested on the bar, the limb holding the fag, as she leaned into it. One leg crossed over the other, blue silk spread to reveal a series of scars and pinkened burns. A tumble of silver strands hung in her eyes, though they didn't shade them.

She found herself leaning over, moving, and taking another record--replacing it. Her smile was genuine, serene, as she put the needle in place to the turing black disk. It 'staticed' once... a pause.... and then the sound of a violin pierced the air.

[Gustav Holst -- Jupiter](#) accompanied by piano.

She sighed, settling in, closing her eyes as the hymn of the instrument wove into the air in such a way that was so unlike the upbeat sound before. It settled into her heart, her blood, overpowering her and with a peace that was almost unmatched.

And thus, she waited.



The streets were dark and surprisingly empty, the moon was high and bright, and there was little noise to speak of but the tapping of Jean's cane on the pavement. It was not a long walk from Tsundoku to the Inverted Cathedral, but he'd rather have his cane and not need it than – well.

A change of clothes and a shave, and Jean had taken his hair out of the braid he'd adopted to maintain a veneer of professionalism. Black hair fell in waves and curls over his shoulders, a carefully cultivated wildness that did not match the fastidiousness of his clothing.

It was not as elaborate a suit as he usually preferred to wear when he was trying to impress – and he was usually trying to impress – but somehow the occasion seemed to call for something a bit less stiff. As far as clothing was concerned. A shirt red as his roses was only just visible above the collar of his black coat, resembling the bloom of blood against a throat as white as the moon.

He'd been compared to a marble statue, before, by those who did not know that the marble of statues had usually been painted. Only a statue incomplete would be so lacking in color, have so many sharp edges to its features.

White gloves had been switched out for black, more for effect than for function. He'd threaded a rose through a buttonhole on his lapel, which was almost as cliché as the volume of Pablo Neruda he'd brought with him. But there was a certain something about '*plena mujer, manzana carnal, luna caliente*', cliché or no.

The taste of Ruka was faint but felt outside the door, and he let himself in, steps deliberate and no faster than they needed to be. His mouth crooked at the music, filling it away in his mind, curious if he'd be able to reproduce it later.

"If I had known you had such an affection for that particular instrument," he said as he approached, "I might have brought mine. Alas, I have only this." He held aloft the book with an expression less apologetic than it could have been. "And what instruments I cannot leave behind, of course."



Kohl lashes lifted slowly as he spoke, as the warm timber of his voice washed over her and somehow mixed with the loud-quiet tune she allowed to breathe into her; she let his presence breathe into her as well, smiling slowly as she blinked once – languidly. Every movement appeared lazy – lucid. It was half a guise and half of what she was, what she once was.

It felt appropriate.

She had moved her position during the instrumental, leaning forward more as slim digits wove into her hair; her cheek in her palm as the fag sat betwixt two fingers. That elbow was still on the bar top. Her other arm hung, rested, on the arm of the stool. The sleeve on the former had slid down eventually, revealing another pattern of pinkened scars. More still covered the body beneath that lacked undergarments; she was nothing if not prepared.

The soft smile remained as she took him in, as if affectioning her eyes across *The Pieta*. It probably wasn't the best comparison; however, that particular work was her most beloved piece in this realm. It had an anguish about it – all those drapes of fabric bending over broken limbs. It was stunning, even so.

He was.

She let her hand fall from her cheek and tapped the ash of her smoke out in a nearby tray. Her eyes slid from him to the record player as the tune went on. "I love to hear it sing," she said idly, smile leaving her. "The human voice is almost infallible, but the violin is..." she trailed off, thinking though not showing it. "...It makes you ache," she mused, soft smile returning as she looked back at him. "Mayhap I am incapable of explaining it," she admitted as she leaned into the backing of her stool, pulled the cigarette to her lips and drew inward. She exhaled through her mouth, lips pursing at the action until it was gone and misting above her in a dissipating cloud.

"Perhaps a different sort of duet can be arranged upon your next visit, one with an instrument you did leave behind," she offered with a slow and tugging smirk, pausing as he drew closer. "But, what have you brought me, *mon Seigneur des coeurs*? Besides your presence."



Jean tilted his head just slightly to the side as his eyes raked over Ruka's skin, her scars. He had none, only ever broken or whole; nothing ever left its mark. Even his leg—

—well. That was special circumstances. And certainly nothing so lovely as memories written on skin. His suit was not as revealing as her silk, clinging to skin and soft as a whisper, but somehow he didn't think she'd mind.

"You explain it well," he disagreed. There was enough arousal in the vicinity that his eyes were bright as the sky in summer, and he tossed his cane a little upward, caught it and held it more like a dancer than an invalid. "Do you think we would play well together?" The tilt to his mouth took a wistful air. "I would like that very much indeed."

He stopped an arm's length from her, let the book rest on his palm in front of him. "Shall I show you, *valet de coeur*?" He turned it to rest on its spine, and let it fall open to the most visited page, where eager readers had cracked the spine. He'd not read aloud the whole thing, not just yet, but a passage of a passage instead.

"Ay, *amar es un viaje con agua y con estrellas*," he began, his voice low, and it was indeed an instrument in whose playing he was well-practiced. "*Con aire ahogado y brucas tempestades de harina: amar es un combate de relampagos y dos cuerpos por una sola miel derrotados.*" He shut the book with a grin, looking up from the page and letting his eyes travel over her figure as he did so. "I hope I have not disappointed your expectations."



Had she done it a purpose, she wondered as his cerulean gaze caressed her scars. Allowing him to view that flesh of hers by donning the blue robe that was wont to fall open with every breathy movement due to its wide sleeves and gown-like bottom? Mayhap it was a test, she mused; though, not a harsh one, and certainly not one many people would expect given what scars did to the minds of the victims that bore them. No, maybe she just wanted to see if he'd ask – *how* he'd ask. She liked her suits for a reason beyond the obvious attention they garnered; listening to some drunken frat boy ask her where her boobs went and why she looked like butcher and metal worker had taken a liking to her skin was not the most eloquent of experiences. No, not at all. Mostly, it got annoying, for lack of a better term. But... maybe she wanted him ask... maybe.

"You explain it well."

"Do you think we would play well together?"

"I would like that very much indeed."

"Indeed... but perhaps you should bring your... instruments over more than once. I hear it takes careful practice to find the right... *harmony*," she told him softly, daringly like the siren she wasn't. As he tossed the cane it made her wonder about his own... annoyances. She could sense perhaps an injury? Under skin... in his bones... kneecap? She wasn't sure. But, she wanted to know. She wanted to know a lot about *Jean Cernunnos*, the man with the French name and French finesse, before her. That would come with time, mayhap.

"Shall I show you, valet de coeur?"

She rather liked the nickname he writ into her, she decided. And the more he said it the more she wanted to hear it.

Though, she closed her eyes as the song came to an end on the record player and he began one of his own, his voice like warm white chocolate pooling in her lower abdomen as it knit a pattern into her veins... making her want to let him sink into her... to sink into him. Could one find release in voice alone...? It was an idle... lazy... lustful query she almost wanted to voice for him to hear.

"I hope I have not disappointed your expectations."

Cool blues slowly revealed themselves as he finished and she found herself wanting more. The next thought was not one she would hold back; after she took one more drag off her cigarette she put it out with a final exhale and spoke, meeting his gaze head on – telling him through her eyes alone what she wanted as she spoke with tone that boarded on wanting – it did... darkly so, "Would you recite to me French, Spanish, Italian, perhaps even Latin while you brought me to release, *Jean*?" When she spoke his name for the first time it didn't feel as odd as she imagined, as she rolled the title with a French combination of vowels and consonants. "Whispering the script from memory as you would a mantra in my ear while you found your own thricefold? As you pulled moistened lips from my sex – wanting, sweating, panting, and giving as I give onto you in the most profoundest of ways two bodies swathed in lust can?"



He stepped closer, closer, and when he leaned forward to gently set the book down on the counter he very nearly wrapped his arm around her. "I will come as many times as you require, *habelle valet*, until you are satisfied with our performance." And then he took a step back, leaving just enough room for the mind to wander.

It was very difficult not to be more aggressive, when this building was so very sweet. Chocolate liqueur and mulled wine and mead, honey on brie. There was a time when this was the sort of place he would have frequented often.

Literally, in fact, but this building was full of nuns then. Memories, memories.

"*Francais, naturellement; espanol, claro que si; italiano, con piacere. Latin...*" He stopped to smile. "Latin is better suited to sodomizing pretty young men. Which I was not *planning* to do, but I have always thought of myself as flexible." He twirled his cane idly, and let the end of it rest on his shoulder.

"If you asked it, *valet de coeur*, I would say many things, and only some of them would be lies. But my preference, my dearest wish – insofar as it is relevant, and perhaps it is not – would be for you to speak instead. Sweet things and filthy things, desires obvious and not, fantasies long-held and passing whims. I would hear your clever tongue and I would hear you incoherent, and I would have trouble hearing you with your thighs wrapped so tightly around my head. I would please you until you could bear to be pleased no more, because nothing could be so pleasing as to please you.

And if I spoke at all, it would be to coax you to soar higher, to marvel at the wonder of you."

He paused thoughtfully, tapping the cane against his shoulder. "Or if that seems excessive," he said with a shrug, "we could always just fuck."



She watched him as he moved toward her, as he set the book down and half draped his arm around her... coming oh so deliciously close. She let her arms move to fall to both armrests then, the one on the bar dropping to hang as the other did with some lazy planned action.

"I will come as many times as you require, habelle valet, until you are satisfied with our performance."

As he pulled away she couldn't help but feel the tug to move her body towards him, but she restrained herself. Ruka enjoyed the dance – his humor. Every response was taken as if they were delicacies on a tray, one more devious and sweeter than the next. He reminded her of...

"Francais, naturellement; espanol, claro que si; italiano, con piacere. Latin..." A pause. "Latin is better suited to sodomizing pretty young men. Which I was not planning to do, but I have always thought of myself as flexible."

She stood then, finally, sky blue silk swathing her legs once more as she grabbed her cigarette tin and zippo in one hand. Her smile was wicked; but she was sure he would appreciate that, being wicked himself. "Latin is most affectionate to me..." she admitted easily as she came closer to him, looking up into his eyes as her left hand was made to settle on his right bicep. "It is called The Old Tongue in the realm I left behind in pursuit of... *hospitalities*." She let it hang on that as her thumb rolled over the muscle beneath. "Sodomy is such an interesting topic I take great pleasure in intercouring," she went on as she took one step closer to him, moving to his side so she could loop her arm through his, her hand resting

on his forearm in a way she hadn't done in some time. Her cheek came to rest where her hand had once been, eyes closing as she once again soaked in the smell of him.

"If you asked it, valet de coeur, I would say many things, and only some of them would be lies. But my preference, my dearest wish - insofar as it is relevant, and perhaps it is not - would be for you to speak instead. Sweet things and filthy things, desires obvious and not, fantasies long-held and passing whims. I would hear your clever tongue and I would hear you incoherent, and I would have trouble hearing you with your thighs wrapped so tightly around my head. I would please you until you could bear to be pleased no more, because nothing could be so pleasing as to please you. And if I spoke at all, it would be to coax you to soar higher, to marvel at the wonder of you." A pregnant pause. "Or if that seems excessive," another pause, "we could always just fuck."

As he spoke she mused a great many things that would dance on her tongue in reply, as her cheek pressed into his bicep and as she soaked in his preventing warmth. However, as he came to end of long and winded speech about all the things he wanted to do to her, all the things she would let him to do her – gladly – he said something else.

And she couldn't quite help it. Were her free hand not grasping her zippo and cigarette case she would have made the natural attempt to cover mouth. Instead, she shook with the laughter that escaped her mouth, made her shut her eyes, and stitched her ribs. It came out genuinely, with a rare richness and only died out when she couldn't quite manage it anymore.

"Seigneur des coeurs," she began, regaining her breath and equilibrium as she urged him to walk with her towards the back of the great hall and beyond the rounded bar, "you are Chinese puzzle box with your lies, I imagine. Each one weaving into the other like compartments that cannot be opened.

"I would not ask you to be honest with me; though, it would please me greatly – if you are truly interested in doing so – if that is not a lie. I believe I am far too old and far too long-played at this game to be bothered with such whimsies or pleasantries you would offer others to smooth a bruised ego; any promises you give me would fall on deaf ears, after all.

She stopped walking as they reached the door next to the grandfather clock, opting to look up at him with unusually serious ice blues. "Would you grant some honesty for one night, more than one if you are willing? I will grant you my own honesty as well, in return.

"If nothing else, *Seigneur des coeurs*, you need not worry about my heart or the care you feel you must take with it – if you feel you must. It has been broken but once; as it stands, I now I keep it in a box, dust long gathered on a tidy shelf," her voice was softer than before, but no less strong. One couldn't fault it with a hint of vulnerability – for it would not be present. But, there was something... bare about it regardless, the admission.

Perhaps it was too honest, she admitted to herself. But Ruka only really wanted one thing from him. She didn't need the extras. But, if he would grant those, the honesty she wanted... perhaps a few stories that were not lies, she would grant him the same courtesy. But, if he was wont to do so... she would not be wounded.



Her laughter was the contagious kind, though he did not laugh with her. But his grin grew wider, impossibly wide, far wider than he might ordinarily allow himself. He was well aware the effect such a smile had, with teeth such as his own. Generally, excepting special circumstances, he liked to avoid reminding people that he might rip out their throats. Somehow, he did not think she would take it that way, the lovely woman laughing on his arm.

There was a taste to it, laughter like that. It was not quite sweet, it was not quite the intensity of an orgasm, but.

He kept his arm bent obligingly so that she could hold it with ease, though she hardly required it. Very nostalgic, strolling along with a cane he did not need and a woman on his arm. All that was missing was the top hat. The cane twirled, and the smile faded to something more reasonable as she spoke – of lies and of honesty and the games that they played.

The cane was tucked under his arm so that he could face her, take her chin in his hand as her eyes met his with newfound sobriety. "I try never to make promises," he admitted easily, "and my lies are more of words assumed unspoken. Honesty is the greatest lie of all, for who believes the man who warns with a smile that he is a dreadful fiend? I would not insult you with such things, you who would see through all I said to all the things I did not."

"I would like very much to be honest with you, valet de couers, but I can say only that if I lie to you it will not be intentional. Old lies become remembered truths in minds better suited to stories than to facts; I am human in that much, at least." He might have kissed her, then, because that was what he liked to do with vulnerable-looking women. He released her chin to hold his cane again, setting it on the floor as if he was actually planning to use it.

"I would be honored by your honesty, though it is surely wasted on me. But for my ego, you may lie all that you would like. I will not believe you, but I will be wonderfully touched that you bothered to try." He grinned, with a lift of his eyebrows that was too quick and too dignified to be called a waggle.

"Was your interest in honesty primarily a concern for my bedside manner, or did you have something in particular in mind? A question, a request? A fear that I might feign an unfeigned desire to explore the interesting topic of sodomy? The latter would be disappointing."



"I try never to make promises.

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His words warmed her, washed over her once more as he praised her unexpectedly – her ability to see beyond the veneer of others – him; that was something her sister was good at, but his assessment filled her with a secret joy nonetheless. As he continued, she felt his voice caress her with the promise of his hands and what he would give her, perhaps more than once – perhaps. She didn't mind the way he captured her, held her there by her chin as if she were a man to be caught; the idea was laughable, at best.

"I would like very much to be honest with you, valet de covers, but I can say only that if I lie to you it will not be intentional. Old lies become remembered truths in minds better suited to stories than to facts; I am human in that much, at least."

She almost wondered if he were apologizing for what he could not help about himself – because of time and age. As he released her chin she spoke, though not with the softness as before; she'd come back to her own, though it still had a quality about it that was perhaps gentle. Her smile was soft, once again warm as she continued to gaze up into his cobalt blues. "Stories are off best told when they do not hold the same ring as they once did. Memoirs, for instance, are rarely an exact copy of

the original moments. Writers penning their life must blend the facts, for every detail is not entirely as they recall.

"There is a beauty in that, the Persian Flaw – as it were. Mistakes, especially those made unintentionally, bring a blanket of color to the world," she went on earnestly, "No, *mon seigneur le plus aime de coeur*, I would not fault you for such – not when even I cannot help that which I do not recall with perfect clarity."

"I would be honored by your honesty, though it is surely wasted on me. But for my ego, you may lie all that you would like. I will not believe you, but I will be wonderfully touched that you bothered to try."

She grinned at him genuinely, so unlike the smirks she'd given him the bookstore. "You delight me, *Jean* – uncommonly so. But, perhaps I would like you to believe me? Perhaps I would like to unravel you as I would a spool of thread?"

"I disagree; I believe very little is wasted on you. You take advantage of that which you were given so graciously by whatever god manifested your presence." Her grin shifted to a smile before she turned back to the door and took his arm again. The locking mechanism present was the original for the old cathedral; she was a romantic that way, and in many more. One didn't appreciate the past not being thus.

Her mind wove through it as she stood there, as an invisible tug of energy left her and moved towards the door; at the same moment a tumble of mechanisms clicked and the engraved brass knob turned – the door opening to a long hallway lit by candlelight and decorated in framed oil paintings. Again, she urged him forward, door shutting behind them. The stone floor was cold under her bare feet, but she didn't mind.

"Was your interest in honesty primarily a concern for my bedside manner, or did you have something in particular in mind? A question, a request? A fear that I might feign an unfelt desire to explore the interesting topic of sodomy? The latter would be disappointing."

She chuckled softly this time; her hair was down though, so the sound didn't have the same sheen it always did with others. No, again, it was genuine – a timber in her chest as her lips curved just so. "I traverse worlds, different planes – universes – you might say. I collect stories from my paramours and pen them down to look back on with fond memories of what I will not allow myself to have. Some," she went on, voice soft and slightly bare again, "are more precious to me than others."

"I adore love stories the most; some are outrageous, in truth... but, others are more..." She tapped her chin, tilting her head just so as she thought it over when they came to the new door at the end of the hall – stopping once more. "...well, they make the heart ache--wish for a blissfully different ending for those involved."

She looked up at him again, hand dropping from her chin as she met his gaze once more. "If you want an honest answer – as honest as you might believe me to be – I would ask for that which you may not be able to give, that which I cannot take without permission."

"Though, I will settle for pieces at a time, as it were. Your leg, for one. I am curious about that – the story, not simply the reason. In turn, I will tell you whatever it is you request of me – a story in turn, to keep or to toss away as you so desire." And then she turned back to the door. Again, it unlocked by the will of her mind, opening, and again, she led him through – making it so it shut behind them both.

Her library... it was the thing she loved most about the building. The first time she'd laid eyes on it, even in shambles, it had taken her breath away. The tower that housed the books was veritably tall and wide – perhaps a good ten stories. It was open air all the way to the top, books lining the shelves in an array of leather bound colors and then some. Wrought iron balconies replaced what would have stifled the room, what once had been many rooms – levels. But, now those levels were open. A set of stairs on each wide balcony went up to the next until one made it to the top where an outdoor balcony of stone awaited them. Paned glass at the top was glossed over by a light of hundreds of dim frosted scones littered about the room higher and higher; each one of the panes was separated by stone and wood supports.

Furniture included a few varnished wood tables on one side of the room, chairs to sit and work--read. But, on the other was a comfortable couch from the Victorian period she'd had reupholstered to match the blues, reds, and greens in the room. Another couch to match sat on the other side of it and between them a widened coffee table. Rugs covered the bamboo floor stained in green, some of them overlapping others in their number.

She paused for only a moment to take it in before leading him towards the couches. "As for the topic of sodomy," she went on finally, wondering if he'd think she'd missed his pun with all the time it took for her to come back to herself, "I would not insult you by imagining you are anything but *flexible* – as you so beautifully told me this eve already."



He let her speak, followed her and let his eyes wander over the path she lead him down. It was a lovely building, and she had changed little. His thoughtfulness was focused mostly on her words, on the taste of her that accompanied them. Picking apart motivations was second nature, reverse-engineering the answer someone wanted from the way they asked the question.

He wasn't supposed to be doing that this time. That was the whole point. But it was astonishing how quickly his instinct turned to flippant lies and half-truths, despite his claimed disinterest in such games. He did not particularly want to be unraveled, it seemed.

This probably indicated something unfortunate about his essential character.

It was probably also indicative that his quiet musings on how exactly to be honest without making himself uncomfortable lead him to ignore her otherwise quite impressive lockpicking methods.

"Lovely," he sighed finally, admiring the design and the organization of a library more sensible than his own. The books, not being organized by his more obscure methods, were a riot of different tastes – faded, in most cases, little more than background noise. It was unfortunately reminiscent of an old refrigerator, that way. But that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate it aesthetically, even just for the fact that they had any memory in them at all.

"More flexible in some ways than others, I fear," he mused, a sideways reference to the wretched leg that intrigued her. He would have said such stories were too recent to be relegated to stories yet, but he supposed it only seemed that way to him. Old to just about anyone else. But she tasted like someone who would be able to empathize with the feeling.

How long had it been since he'd been so close to so many people, feeling so intensely? Intoxicating, invigorating, sweet as swimming in honey. He could probably sweep Ruka off her feet, if he were so inclined. There was no reason for his leg to twinge, but it did, anyway. His concession to his state was to turn on the heel of his good leg and let himself fall backward onto the nearest couch to which she had lead him. Years of practice meant that it was more graceful a gesture than it had any right to be, unbuttoning his coat as he fell so that he could stretch his arms out along the back of the couch. The cane he let rest on the floor behind the couch, propped against it.

"The trouble with stories," he said, crossing the ankle of his good leg over his bad, "is that they generally have a beginning and an end, and the one leads to the other in a very tidy way. And the trouble with my stories is that I find myself telling five others before I can tell the one I intended." It may have been easier if it had been a story he had given any thought to telling. His mouth crooked ruefully. "Would you mind terribly if my stories are... *comment dit-on?* Third person. It might work better that way, I think."



Ruka was accustomed to not knowing what people thought; which, seemed rather ironic considering she was wholly able to crack open a mind, pour out the yolk, and sift the contents under a microscope if she so pleased – from as many angles as she pleased. She was masterfully good at it and didn't mind the fact that she didn't get to indulge in it often. People had a right to their privacy, their secrets; she didn't mind. Though, she loved it when they gave some of that privacy to her to hold onto for later like an heirloom that had been passed but once. Verbally, though... not with mental images. Few gave her that and she never asked for it.

But, that wasn't the case with the man on her arm, now moving to sit on the couch after he'd commented so wonderfully about her treasure trove – a comment that continued to leave her feeling like heated honey in his presence. No, for the very first time in her life in a very long time she found that she wanted someone to open their mind to her and she to them, to let her hear their feelings, their thoughts, their inner reactions as she spoke to them--as they spoke to her. And not simply during the act that would leave her breathless, him breathless; but while she conversed with him about nuances, silly things, and their mutual passing of stories. She didn't want to just see him smile – she wanted to *feel* it.

She wasn't certain if she were delighted by the realization when it hit her, or, if perhaps a little frightened. But, as with all things she felt, she accepted.

She moved smoothly, footpads almost silent, as she made her way behind the opposing couch across from him. She only stopped, her back to him, when she reached the wall where a dinner cart sat flush against it. Two glass mugs made with short and stout stems set on warming plates. She removed them to a tray and then took hold of the coffee pot, pouring steaming brown liquid into them both. She wasn't sure if the weather was cool enough for it, but it was traditional for a nightcap and that seemed to suit her. Next came the brown sugar, stirred with a spoon until it dissolved in both drinks – then the whisky. A chink was heard as she tapped the liquid off. A small carton of heavy whipping cream came after; it was poured into the drinks as it washed over the back of the spoon she held. The white of the dairy settled at the top of the warm glasses as its buoyancy deflected the coffee; she was careful not to slosh them as she picked them up and turned around, moving back to her guest. Carefully, she handed him one before she took a seat next to him.

Her body angled so she faced his side, her shoulder pressing into his arm. One leg draped before her while it was bent, making her robe open to reveal a long alabaster limb coated in aged-pink burns and cuts as her shin brushed his thigh; the other leg hung, toes pressing into the floor. Both hands remained on her mug as she took a sip, savoring the warm burn while she looked at him over the rim. When she pulled it away her tongue darted out to lick her lips, though it didn't mean anything.

She was smiling again in that earnest way he brought out in her. One hand moved to rest on the thigh her leg was brushing, just past the knee and not any higher as she leaned in only slightly. "You seem distraught with idea of not giving me what I want the way you imagine it should be. Are you?" she mused aloud, really wanting to know as her eyes danced with something. "Would you like me to help you keep your story tidy? I admit, I am not always good with being tidy when in the presence of a man whose very aura reminds me of an unlabeled dark brandy I have not had in a very long time." Slowly, she pulled her hand back and took another sip.

"Not at all," she responded to his request, still smiling as she leaned into his arm again, this time resting her head on it as she held her drink to sit on her the thigh closest to the back of the couch. "My own tales are generally told in the same way..."



A strange variant of desire, not physical but not quite emotional either. Intimacy was what she seemed to want, a curiosity familiar to someone who cultivated an air of mystery the way Jean did. But it was neither girlish fascination nor the notions of understanding that came with youth; something older, something unique to her.

He watched her as she moved around him, tilting his head against the back of the couch to watch her upside-down as she made drinks. It was the sort of playful gesture that was not quite undignified, a habit he'd held on to even over the years. It helped that in doing so, the curve of his neck left his throat open and exposed, an unspoken gesture of trust that tended to be quite attractive.

Of course, in Jean's case, it had nothing to do with trust and everything to do with confidence. Even his body language lied.

He accepted the mug she handed him graciously, holding it with two fingers against the rim as he took a dainty sip. Jean leaned nearer to her on the couch as she did the same, and he could not guarantee that the gesture was unconscious. His eyes had been an impossibly bright shade of blue since he'd arrived, and the arousal in the air made him want to taste her regardless of circumstance. Having her closer didn't hurt in that regard, and it was astonishingly tempting to bury his face in that lovely white hair.

Probably best not to examine that particular desire too much.

"I admit to it being something of a habit, giving what is wanted in the manner most wanted." His mouth crooked faintly, though less crooked than it sometimes was. "I shall do my best to keep myself tidy, nonetheless.

Alas, I fear your assistance might lead me instead to make even more of a mess than I do on my own."

He sipped again at his drink, musing quietly on the important matter of what constituted the beginning. "If this story is to begin anywhere but the very beginning," he said finally, "then I suppose it must begin with a girl. A girl who was never born, who lived in a very nice house with her two uncles. There was the uncle who had found her - the pretty uncle, who made her fine clothes and taught her to sing. And there was the uncle who wanted to keep her safe - the idiot uncle, whose singing was as dreadful as his fashion sense." Jean sniffed disdainfully at the very thought, tapping a finger against the side of his mug.

"So: the pretty uncle and the idiot uncle lived with the little one they loved, and they were all very happy, for a time." He smiled wistfully, glancing back to Ruka out the corner of his eye. "Stop me if there is any point on which you would like clarification."



She was right in her estimation of a dark brandy, it seemed. But, not entirely right... perhaps. No, not entirely. There was a way about him that couldn't help but be likened to a liquor; something old and aromatic people had long forgot the name of; the kind of wine that you inhaled through your mouth after taking a sip to get to the heart of the taste, a wholly more potent flavor that was a little unlike the liquid boiling in your gut and inevitably heating your insides to a relaxed state. And then, on the other side, the side that wrinkled his sharp nose at the cell phone in his grasp when he couldn't seem to figure it out as he'd tried to in the bookstore... *that* part was a little more like... Well, it was *unplanned*, to say the least – messy and beautiful all at once; perhaps more so than smooth and deft-fingered gentleman who eased himself into other's wants and needs to easily. Those fumbles, those little mistakes that made him forget himself nonuniformly, and then that image he was so accustomed to showing the world.... Both of them were the real man in their own right; and yet, neither were who he was entirely. His story was broader, fuller, woven will millions upon billions of of multifaceted threads she couldn't begin to totally unwind. And yet...

Perhaps the Chinese puzzle box was not so impenetrable.

She was still smiling as he spoke, unable to stop. Though, it was softer and not an expression that made her show teeth. Her lids half shut over her eyes, kohl lashes hooding them just enough as he moved in closer on the couch with her – adjusting and relaxing.

As he was halfway through speaking of messes and keeping things tiny when something shifted in her eyes; the color darkened from cool blue just enough that would only be noticeable to some; the pallet arranging so the more cobalt shades that existed in her irises were more prominent. Her body stilled – tensed with just the barest of motions as the grip tightened on the mug in her her grasp.

Her aura, that one that expanded throughout the building like a wash of invisible mist and something else more liquid, felt something... primal. The smile was gone from her features almost instantly as the man next to her mused on before speaking again. Through his pause her brow knit as she lifted her head and looked to the rounded wall as if she could see through it straight to where Saint was.... *Seri*. She could feel Asher and Setrin... but, that didn't bother her. Part of her wondered if she *should* be worried; though, the thought, the feeling, was more separate from her than actually there – like a logical statement with no affliction in the tone of words should they be spoken.

The bridge to his mind allowed her to see quite a bit, especially if she pushed her presence there. She did not. She kept it all concealed before pulling back just enough that she could only monitor the danger. None would notice her, not even Saint or the Beast in his mind that was accustomed to her poking around at will.

She closed her eyes, letting out an exhale at the heat of that power that reminded her of... Too much. *Far* too much. But, fear did not swath her, nor did anxiety despite feeling a little overwhelmed by it all; again, she accepted. A hand pressed to her chest as if to still the unconscious beatings of her heart; she hadn't felt it rise to that tempo and took a deep breath – exhaling once more. It all released with that as she opened her eyes when he began to speak again.

His story, yes. Her eyes shifted back to their cooler shade as she moved to rest her head back on his arm and let her body relax into the couch again. She took a sip from her drink once

more as he finished, angling a look at her. She rolled the tale around in her head; of the unborn girl and two uncles, before speaking.

"It sounds rather like half words to a poem, a song," she admitted with a softness that existed only in the spaces between their conversation. "The literary in me wonders at what you mean by 'never born'. Is it an analogy or merely a way to say no one knew of her? Did she exist at all or only in the minds of those who were besotted with her?"

"I think I rather like the idea of a girl who was never there, loved by those who made her ghost come to fruition by will alone."



The sudden strange shift in her emotions gave him pause. Something external to them was affecting her, though she did not seem surprised by it. A little startled, maybe, but not surprised. He wondered what it was that so touched her mind – and some small part was perhaps possessive, annoyed that anyone or anything had stolen attention from him.

There was a hint of heat to some of the sweetness he was tasting, which he supposed might have been it. There was none of the bitterness of fear, and so it had not occurred to him to consider it a problem. "Is there something wrong?" he asked with a tilt of his head, instead of simply wondering quietly.

But then it hit him, his irises turning white as someone found their release. His touch on the mug became more careful, and by instinct he stilled – because to remain motionless was easier than to be careful. "... hm." They had only just begun to darken to the lightest blue again when another sent them white once more.

And another. And *another*.

Goodness gracious. That was distracting.

"Ah. I was being frightfully literal, I fear." He blinked, trying to distract himself from the veritable feast flooding his mind. "Born things create a purpose for themselves, grow and change and age. But she was made with a purpose given, and looked ever as she did on the day of her creation. Her hair always curled and her cheeks always flushed, and her tail was always just a little too large for such a tiny doll of a girl."

He sighed, and his eyes might have been vacant from memory or meal. "Never taller and never older, could never even cut her hair. And it was all very cute in the beginning, you see, when the pretty uncle brought her home. She had the mind of a child, and it suited her, being doted on as she was. He made her a dollhouse and a swingset and tied bows in her hair, pretty as a picture she was."

"She was not made to be clever, but she was not made to be loved; and perhaps the one lead to the other. She was not made to be a child, either, and she did begin to notice. The idiot uncle would entertain her while the pretty uncle entertained guests, and she began to wonder. The way he entertained his guests was very different, after all, from the way he doted on her."

"The pretty uncle knew, of course, the thoughts that she entertained. But he did not want to know, and he did not want her to think them, and so he pretended not to notice in the hopes that it would resolve itself somehow."

No reason at all for his leg to ache when he was so well-fed, and yet.



She waited for him to continue his story as she came back to herself, but then she noted the change that overcame him. It was akin to the change that overcame her, but not. Some part of her could smell it on him. And as his eyes shifted... she might have caught it – yes, *she did*. She could sense the moment of their release, the second time for the night as he aligned with it--his outward motions and changes. Perhaps like Naomi some part of him fed on that.

My.... Saint was having a fine time, indeed. If only it didn't come along with something dreadfully more... *dangerous*. But then, perhaps all the best kinds of fun were dangerous? At least for her ongoing paramour and companion that seemed the case; she was far more interested in the moment like the one occurring just then. He was an entirely different flavor than what she usually folded into – her vampire. Unlike the man in her library, Saint reminded her of the most caustic of beers in the most run down of taverns. To look at it you would turn your nose up; however, once you popped the cap and took a swallow... that dust on the bottle was but a fond memory.

It wasn't like her to hold back information when with someone to knew about such things. Mortals she would have washed it over with something else. But, no, he knew. She most definitely knew that he knew. Her lips quirked and she rubbed her chin, deciding to reply to his story first. After all, that was the more important matter here. Well, if Seri wasn't going to blow her home into oblivion, that was. Then she would definitely have to excuse herself. At least mentally. Her body would remain where it was.

He did tell a lovely story; so many colors and images. Her mind was quickly filing each bit away as if it were stenographer. Later, she would pen it down. It would go onto her shelf, secreted away and treasured.

"It reminds me a bit of that awful book conjured by Anne Rice," she mused before taking a rather long swallow of her drink. It was half empty by now and cooling. Perhaps she'd get a spot warmer.... perhaps. She sighed. "Children should always grow. It is not wise to trap someone thusly in such a cage, nor kind." She could feel the patter of the conversation, the story. Or at least she imaged she could. Part of her couldn't help but ache with it, though she felt no pity. She knew well enough about old scars to know pity was the last thing wanted or desired. If anything, she tried to empathize.

"And yes, something is – could have been, rather," she went on, answering his previous question. "My resident paramour with fangs and my barkeep with a hellgod – for lack of a better word – under-not-so-lock-and-key are having a nightcap of their own." She smirked as if amused, mug close to her mouth in both hands. "Though, you knew that already.

"It would not bother me thus if I were not so inclined to take care with those under my roof... and those in the city, for that matter. Absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely; not always metaphorically, in my experience.

"I tend to like nipping things in the bud before they waver out of control; at least, when *I* can do something about it." She gave him a look at that before taking a ginger sip of her drink. "But, my momentary distraction is not entirely relevant. I merely meant to explain.

"You were saying?"



Jean tried not to feel defensive at her observation. The only cage, after all, had been one of his own making; no one had decided she ought to be a child but he. And it was perhaps unfair that he chose to blame her creation, instead of accepting that she was not meant for the role he had chosen for her to play.

He sipped at his beverage rather than voicing these musings, allowing her to explain what exactly he'd been sensing. Aside from the obvious. "Is that what that was?" he murmured. The vampire he had been able to identify with ease, but there had been something else to him, something else to the other. Difficult to place, when he was not focused entirely on placing them.

They were clearly both of them possessed of gifts, he and Ruka, though neither of them had gone so far as to explain them. Strange things, wild things, magic things. Mysteries in their eyes and their blood, puzzles they would take their time solving because neither suffered any lack of it.

"As I was saying," he agreed, continuing at her suggestion, "the trouble came when she tried to kiss him. And the pretty uncle, though he tried, could not hide his displeasure. So she fled, and under other circumstances he might have been able to find her and explain."

"But who she found, instead, was... hm. The idiot uncle's sister, let us say, to whom the pretty uncle was less than kind. She whispered cruel words in the girl's ear, and she was very good at it, because she had learned from the best."

"It was the idiot uncle who found her, when the sister had long gone. The girl had hurt herself quite badly, tried to carve herself into something she thought the pretty uncle would prefer. The idiot uncle fixed her, that being one of the few things he was good at. But being an idiot – as has been established – he assumed that the pretty uncle had told her these things. And having given an ultimatum in this regard, it left him in something of a temper."



"Mmm... indeed.." she murmured when he commented yet again on the scenario going on under her roof. Her mind was making quick work of trying to figure out how much he could sense. But, it would be for naught unless she could actually get into his mind. And that, for the pretty man who was not quite a man at tall, would be far too easy. If Jean was a locked box made by a master locksmith, then Ruka was perhaps a thief with more picks in her arsenal that she knew what to do with – one that was overskilled and underworked by the standards of the worlds she waded through and traversed. She wasn't aware of the challenge he presented her just by sitting on her couch and offering his company to her. No more than he was aware of perhaps of just how much she appreciated his presence above all things – reminding her of how beautiful life could be with what appeared to be nothing more than simple conversation.

Some people loved trinkets, toys, baubles – flowers even. Money, above all else, was prized by many. And while Ruka had spent a lifetime amassing the wealth she possessed.... she was in no way enthralled by it. That could very well be because she had it when others did not; it was easy to ignore that which you had when you had it – to take it for granted where others did not have such a luxury. It was easy to forget what dirt tasted like, what it tasted like when at one time it was all you had to eat. But no, if that were the case – if she were so accustomed to it that it became but an afterthought – it was not a purposeful flaw. Though, a flaw it was.

In either case, the point was that she would probably give every ounce of wealth away--all that she had – if she had to choose between the money and the stories she was given. More specifically, the stories the man sitting next to her would give. This too, she was mostly unaware of.

She listened intently as his tale took more shape, more color. It was hard for her to imagine the people. Though, it was vastly easy to see when he spoke of 'the pretty uncle' that he meant himself. She wanted to grin at that ego he slotted for himself. And yet again, she wondered if *that* too was on purpose. Did he truly think himself as such? Of course, in some way he must – he would but look in the mirror and know. But, was it three layers? That is to say, the topmost layer was the ego he swept about for others to see – the mask and the gentlemanly exaggeration; then, the second layer, the one that was fully aware that he was pretty, but didn't think too much on it; and then, the third.... was the layer that had more... depth to it – perhaps even hated the beauty he was bestowed? No, that was thinking too much on it. Still, she couldn't help it.

"I take it this led to quite the problem for you, or rather," she said right before she took another sip, "The Pretty Uncle.

"I can see why he would dislike the Idiot Uncle's sister so much, given that she was so inclined to whisper unkind things to prompt repercussions that were unnecessary."

It was starting to make sense to her. They were not brothers – the two uncles. Rather, they were uncles because they shared the girl. They were *her* uncles. She wanted to ask him more – wanted to know more details about all involved. Yet, she held her tongue. It would come after. There was no need to derail his story when he was so apt to keep on track.



He shrugged, his eyes looking almost absent. "All women were once girls, and she was a girl who thought she could not break. She was hard but she was brittle, and when she shattered she came back together with all her sharp edges on the outside. But – this story is not about her. Although it is, a little."

"So: the idiot uncle came home in a rage, as he was wont to do. And he accused the pretty uncle of many things, some of them accurate and some of them vague. Because he was vague, the pretty uncle assumed he was being accused of debauchery. While this was accurate in most cases, it was not in the case of the girl; but his denials, to the idiot's ears, sounded like a confirmation of a particular disdain."

"The pretty uncle had no fear of the other, though he was far stronger, because the pretty uncle had a particular durability about him – particularly when the idiot was as angry as he was then. Perhaps he would have felt differently if it had occurred to him that he might be made to heal incorrectly, an injury ongoing."

"It was not until it was too late that the pretty uncle realized what all had occurred, having noticed the sister was in town. The idiot might have fixed what he had done, when these facts were made clear to him, if he had not been asked to leave. He never came back, and neither did she, and the wound never healed. Which is, I suppose, a bit anticlimactic and unsatisfying."

It didn't seem anticlimactic at the time, all yelling and screaming and cracking of bone. But these were details left out, because they did not suit the tone he had taken, a tone necessary to establish distance between himself and all that had occurred. There were other ways to have told it, perhaps better ways, but this was the way he had chosen. The path of least resistance, the path he always took.

"And now that you have the shape of it," he said finally, taking a small sip of his drink, "which spaces would you best like filled?"



Ruka listened carefully, one word rolling over into the next. It wasn't terribly hard to understand what he was saying; though, it was more what he wasn't saying that she picked up on – about the little girl not coming back right. As far as she could... he was being reluctant. It niggled at her, but she wasn't really bothered by it. It was more that she knew what he was doing and acknowledged it in her own unique way. It wasn't her place to push for more, not unless he offered for her to do so with some indication – verbal or otherwise.

She rubbed her glass with her thumbs idly as she kept her cool gaze on his, absorbing and trying not to think while he spoke. Listening wasn't a skill many truly possessed; they thought they did. Many did. But, emptying one's mind from one's thoughts was a fretful practice you had to be aware and actively do.

And thus, she did, letting his words wash over her in much the same fashion as she had been everytime he spoke. However, when he came to the end up it she began to think. She lifted her glass and mildly savored the burn of the coffee blended with whisky.

Her mind naturally went back to the little girl. It was hard not to when so much of his story encompassed her.

“At the end, you said she left – the Idiot Uncle and her. The little girl left with him? Or were you referring to the sister?” That part was a bit muddled simply from the way he'd explained it. She stood then. “I suppose the only other question I might have would be... how did the girl come about? You told me she was made, but you never said how.

“A refill?” she asked in last, offering her hand to take his drink. Hers was nearing empty. She had no real intention of getting drunk, but stories sometimes were better with a little light-headedness.



"Ah – yes, I can see how that would have been unclear." Things always seemed more obvious to the storyteller, and this effect was worsened in Jean's case, with so few details given. They were barely characters, as he'd described them, and certainly not people.

Easier, that way.

"The sister left as quickly as she came, and it was rare for her to have stayed even that long. The girl and the idiot did not leave together; they might have, if he had stayed with her instead of giving her time to leave on her own. She wanted nothing to do with any of them, who had known her as she had been. I cannot say I blame her for that." He wasn't sure that knowing they were together would have made him happier. He knew that it should have, since she almost certainly would have been safer. Nonetheless, to imagine them continuing the life they'd had, but without him, grated. These petty thoughts he kept to himself, as he always did.

"Better not," he said to the offer of another drink, though he handed her his empty glass. "It really would be wasted on me." He smiled, anyway, because he appreciated the offer.

"As to the girl... hm. I do not know the details, I fear. Anyone who might have known died the night it happened – save for the girl, who knew nothing at all. Messy business, the making of a person. A uniquely human thing, the fusion of magic and science, and it seems to end often in fire and shrapnel. I do not know if he would have called himself an alchemist, but that is what I would have called him; that is the word I know."

"Why such a man would desire to make for himself a mindless woman, half an animal and half my height – that is a question I am willing to leave unanswered. But for a time, at least, she was a child and loved as such."



She stood there, listening to him speak just before he handed her the glass. They were details that helped make it clearer for when she wrote it down later, but she couldn't sense anything about them that did anything beyond the latter. So, he'd been left alone then. The Idiot Uncle he'd shared a home with; the flaky sister who sounded as though she adored playing sinister words game – at least from his telling of it; and, the little girl who was not made to be but a few things had all run off on him.

In one way it felt rather sad. She felt that emotion sweep through her quite keenly, observing as she would a creature beyond the glass of its own cage. She refused to let it be pity.

She found herself turning away and stepped back to the cart where she made drinks. Again, her back was to him and she went about mixing herself another in much the same fashion as she had before.

It was funny, to her. He called the girl a mindless woman. She thought the title of woman fit the girl so much better than girl. For that is what she'd become despite her inception, was it not? She could not tell by the tone of what he meant by how the girl had been put back together, but she didn't think he meant she'd come back together the way she'd wanted. Maybe; maybe not. The details were not obvious.

But, there was something wholly vague about his story; even so, it went beyond that. Something prickled at her senses. She could sense... no, it wasn't like Saint and his unique ability to smell what one person was feeling because of damned hormones. She didn't feel a skip in his heartbeat either – the natural tentative detail that told her when someone wasn't being completely forthcoming. No, what she felt was more like a second sense that she just didn't have a name for. Maybe it came from being one of Draco's children; she didn't know. But, it was there all the same, cutting through her aura that pervaded everywhere she went, the one that encompassed the cathedral. Like... bad notes in a song. Only the very keen could hear them the way someone who tuned an instrument could. Maybe that's what it was.

Maybe.

"Very little is wasted on you, Jean," she felt the need to repeat herself and she took hold of her glass once more and made her way back to him, sitting this time with her back to the sofa. She relaxed into it and crossed her legs, arranging her robe around them so it covered her for now. Her eyes shut as her neck rested on his arm. She took a sip as her mind wandered, thinking of precisely what to say. She looked over everything he'd told her, arranging the words in her head like one would look at files – his actions as well.

"You said..." and then she trailed off, eyes open while one hand held the glass mug and she looked upward at her books on the shelves. Though, she did not seem them. She only say the information in her mind in a kaleidoscope of colors, words, and omissions. "You said she was not made to be clever, loved, or a child..." It didn't wholly ring right, even as she spoke aloud... almost not speaking to him at all as her free hand touched her chin – curled around it.

"And yet... despite it all her creator wrought into her.... She became clever to what you did with your guests that was not being done to her... She desired to be loved as you would have loved her were she the woman she so wanted to be..." Her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed, thinking carefully. The last part of it hung her up a bit. Perhaps she initially would have thought he meant to woman when he said child. As in, she was not made to be a woman. Saying child was perhaps a way to distract the listener from what he truly meant if he'd been too obvious.

“Perhaps she was not made to be woman,” she went on anyway. “The intention had been for her to be a child always. But, one cannot be a doll forever with curls and a tail far too long for one’s body...”

She was thinking openly as she spoke, it seemed, lost as the words came out of her.

She took another sip of her drink. “You cannot help what other people want you to be, wanting to be exactly what pleases them, can you? And yet, she was not what you would have wanted because you did not love her as she wanted you to love her.

“You take to other needs as naturally as breathing comes to others. And so, you tried despite it all, to be what she wanted.

“Like oil and water...” she said the last softly, her hand moving to rest on his thigh, thumb rolling gently – idly.



He did not sigh, because that would be melodramatic in a way unbecoming of the situation. Or so he felt. He was dissatisfied, nonetheless, with the story he had told and the stories he had not. Though that may have been *her* dissatisfaction; it was hard to tell, sometimes. His gaze was vacant and thoughtful as he considered her curiosity, all the ways he had not sated it and all the ways he did not want to. It was a flattering portrait of his nature she painted, attendant to the needs of others; as of late, it was not entirely wrong. Had he been thinking of anyone's needs but his own? If anything needed correction, surely it was that.

"In retrospect," he said finally, "it is easy for me to see where I went wrong, where I might better have handled things. I am, ultimately, a creature of habit, and a relatively unchanging one at that. People come and go, but for those who stay – those few, that *one* – it is an unfair assumption of mine that they will be as consistent as I am, as we were. That they, being happy as they were, would continue to be... as they were. But she was very young, very new, and I suppose when I was both those things I was far more malleable and adventurous. But... even then, though I traveled, though I went *to* things and *from* others and *with* others, I have never been the sort to wander for the sake of wandering. Perhaps it was that same blind spot to which I fell prey."

He *did* sigh, then, and the tips of gloved fingers traced abstract patterns on the back of her hand as he leaned nearer. "It is... not a story I care for, that one. It is a story about me as much as about her, a story about my failings. Of which, I am sure, I have many. I have no doubt glossed over many things, in my desire to dwell on them as little as possible. But in so doing, I have failed to convey... well. Any number of things. I was trying to avoid, you see, having to tell one story in order to tell another. Nonetheless, it seems likely that another story will be the best solution to the problem I have created."

"So: when it is my turn again, I will tell you the story of how I found her. Which, being *delightful*, will suffer no lack of detail." He grinned his sharp-toothed grin, the glint in his eye returned. "For now, I believe that it is your turn to tell a story; dreadful though mine may have been, it was still a story, after all. So will you tell me, *valet de cœurs*, how you came to be in this fair city of mine?"



As he spoke and as she listened as she always did, her face turned to his to watch him. Her cool blue gaze was not entirely searching—no—absorbing. It was as though she could not help but swallow everything he had to say; as if there were nothing else in the room but his words and whatever expression passed over his features. She did not need to look at him; she didn't. She could just as easily feel every muscle flex in his face, every contraction that would make him smile or frown, everytime he lowered those lovely lashes to close over his cobalt gaze that was a much richer blue than hers. And yet, she wanted to; unable to wholly stop herself or keep from that desire.

Jean was indeed a fascinating creature; perhaps more fascinating than was good for her.

He did not explicitly say that he regretted what he had done, the things he might have done differently. And yet, she could hear it in his voice; she could tell by the way he arranged the words that in some way he did feel regret. Specifically when he talked about where he went wrong, or could have handled things differently. And for a moment, she wondered if she had pushed him into saying things she shouldn't have; that her very nature of wanting to understand people and their lives had somehow backfired on her.

It was never her intention to hurt anyone; for a brief moment she felt as if she had. And when that thought struck her there was a small pang of what might have been regret on her own part.

People were to tell her things because they felt comfortable enough opening up to her, not because she'd said things she'd shouldn't have when her mind got away with her and words fell from her mouth without thinking everything through well enough.

But, this was all in her own head. She wasn't sure it warranted speaking out loud. Though perhaps that feeling of regret within her was made worse by what he went on to say.

His admissions were a far cry from the man who offered his throat on her couch because painted arrogance dictated he do so. And she felt, in some way, he was perhaps being more honest with her now than he ever had been telling her the story of the little girl and the aching leg he required a cane for only half the time... sometimes less – maybe.

The patterns he traced into her hand were not taken without notice; in fact, those same chilling orbs went to his gloved digits as he drew into her skin. Briefly, but they did before returning to his gaze and holding it as he leaned in closer to her.

She couldn't help but smile as she released the hold she had on her drink, letting it float there in the air by her will. And by her will alone it set itself on the coffee table in front of them as she moved her head in closer to his, dropping her forehead to rest on his as she placed her now free hand over his – stilling his own from making warm gestures into her skin that would have felt warmer still were cloth not a barrier.

She closed her eyes as she inhaled his scent and then exhaled softly – contently.

Eventually, she moved. But not by much. Her head turned so her temple rested against his as she took his hand in her two – the one she'd covered before. She found herself speaking as she pulled at the fingertips of his glove one at a time, her eyes there – as gently and as slowly as was her nature; as if she had all the time in the world with him because time didn't exist in the space they occupied.

"That might be a long story or a short one," she admitted, thinking carefully. "But, I think the intention of how I came to be here might be more... honest." Raw. "and despite its length, less like the purest veil on a virgin's crown and more like the fraying threads on an embroidered tapestry forever hanging in a Scottish Laird's great hall – forgotten, but not unappreciated."

Her other bare hand curled over his wrist, pulling back the red sleeve of his dress shirt as she worked. Slowly, as slowly as before, the glove slid from his hand to reveal the pale skin of his hand to her without a barrier between. That too, the glove in her hand, slid from her grip and into the air only to settle on the coffee table. And her gaze remained in his hand as she moved her own around it... fingers pressing into the palm as her thumbs rolled over the top in a gentle and idle massage that she couldn't help but enforce some of her will into as a warm hum of energy – aura – that was Draco's.

She had to think of where to start... because there were many places. But, the reason she was here, anywhere she went, always started with love. "In another realm, perhaps no more than nine hundred years ago, and, no less than eight hundred... that is where it began. A place better off in books, in the dreams of others put to quill and parchment, and, sold or given for others to dream about as well. Where castles live in the clouds with dragons for council and communion; where elves hasten to draw their bow and bind it to magick while praying to Hern the Hunter – the Pathfinder – for a steady aim; where vampires are not merely made... but born." She paused thinking.

"...Aye..." she agreed with her own thoughts, speaking them aloud, "It is as good as place as any for a story of love to begin... the same place many girls read of it in this realm."



Not quite guilt, but something like it. To refuse to tell her the story she had asked for had not even occurred to Jean, because he'd always found a refusal to speak as telling as what was told. Refusing to speak at all of such a thing, under these circumstances that so well-coddled his ego, would have given it a weight that he did not care for it to have.

It may have had such a weight, regardless. But what he would give it was as important as what it took.

Pale blue eyes followed the path of the drink through the air, apparently unassisted. A woman of many gifts, Haruka. And when she brought herself close to him, he hummed low in his throat; pleased but curious, content to wait and enjoy it for what it was. He, too, closed his eyes, with the slightest crook at the corner of his mouth.

They opened again as Ruka took his hand in hers, began sliding soft leather from skin. He watched her fingers instead of her face, slender and nimble things, though not quite so long as his own. The skin of his hands was as impossibly soft as it was elsewhere, because he neither scarred nor calloused. The unnatural perfection of a man for whom all things are fleeting, on which nothing left its mark.

Except for his leg. And if he'd really wanted, he could have fixed that, too.

It had been a long time since he'd been touched by someone not overeager, someone not calculatingly well-practiced. They always went for the more obvious things, touched him in ways more overtly sexual. But he wore gloves for a reason, mundane though it was: there were more nerves in a hand than almost anywhere else. Wasting touch on trivialities, on doorknobs and desks, inured a person to it. Withholding his touch made it special, drew attention to sensuality that ought to have been inherent regardless.

Her attention to detail, however idle, was very much appreciated. There was just something about fingers wrapped around his wrists—

"You're a much better storyteller than I am," he murmured.



She could feel all, her aura like eyes. And some things were better felt than seen. Like a blind man's fingers rolling over a face, she could feel his eyes watching her as she worked that glove off his hand. She imagined he approved because he didn't pull away, he didn't ask her to stop, and he seemed intent on the ministrations she knit into his skin with her actions and Draco's aura. Her hands almost glowed with it, that white that so like the hum of the moon's halo; the white was just barely there, signifying that she was focusing her ability into his muscles, his bones, the very marrow. He'd feel it like a massage that went deeper than any normal masseuse could offer. And yet, she could not help herself. Perhaps to him more than she did others... she wanted to give. He reminded her of soft things, elegant things that swathed a person in heat and love.

That's what Jean was; love.

Love that could be borrowed because he allowed it as much as she borrowed and gave to others. His presence could likely sustain her for centuries beyond the call of his stories.

These final thoughts were brief, clandestine, and lacked the threat she might normally associate within herself.

She was so focused on her intent with her hands that she wanted to say something more before going on with her story. For his hands were soft, as soft as her body had once been when it was blanketed in draconian silk that shimmered like silver rays of moonshine. And she appreciated the way in which he enjoyed her actions on his person.

As her fingers, not her thumbs, spread down the center of his palm once more – pushing up gently – she leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to his knuckles. Her nose brushed once before she righted herself, opened her eyes slowly, and once again went back to looking at his lovely digits while she worked them.

"I remember when people wore gloves for modesty's sake in this realm and many others," she said with a smile that was so soft, so discreet, it almost wasn't there. But, he would notice because she knew, like her, he noticed everything. "The very act of pressing one's bare skin against another was something raw, invasive, and personal. Perhaps to a few... like climbing into another's soul."

She looked at him then. "You have an aristocrat's hands, Jean," she said softly and then looked at it once more. She wondered if he played violin with gloves on to keep the callouses away, the indents of the metal strings as they would press into his fingers.

So many things about this man... both curious and interesting. The man who carried love, gave love, but kept nothing for himself. Perhaps her assessment was wrong, but it felt well enough to her. It felt well enough for her to think that way about a man who had flaws he disliked showing beyond what he could not help.

His compliment warmed her. "As well as I can be," she said next as she focused on his hand, soft white glow pulsing in and out. Her thumbs moved to press and massage gently between each finger – knuckle – in and out where the bare webbing was and the dips between each knuckle.

"I am diverting," she admitted with a sigh as if she was pained by her own way of distracting her own thoughts.

"In this realm there lived a people, a race, unlike and like all others. Draco's blessed children – his chosen. For their kindness onto him when he was too young to fend for himself

remained with him long after he ascended to godhood. He wove into their being the gifts of telepathy and telekinesis, and forever more after they spread onto the realm. Some lived in cities, others the forests; they were both diverse and peaceful; they sought not to harm others, but would take up arms if required.

"Onto his race was born a woman from the House of Redwind – Calandra Redwind. Those who were close to her would call her Cal and seek her advice in the temple of their god. Many loved her, would leave moon lotus at her feet and draconian silks that no weapon could pierce. She was free with her affections – her smile. Her hair and her eyes were unlike all of her people; silver strands that whispered along the ground as she walked and eyes that were cold despite the warmth in their blue haze.

"Many called her Draco's as she had their Lord's coloring." Ruka sighed, pausing as her mind wove back as the thought and unearthed one image after another. As her mind broke open file after file and revealed the story to her – the one she knew so well. Even so, her gentle caress moved on his hand as she looked on, taking each finger and rolling it in her own.

"Traygons, as they are called, mate for life," she said, almost breaking her story, and yet not. "She had not mated, had not lain with another. But, she was... as you would call in this realm... betrothed to a childhood friend. It went on for a hundred years of her lifespan – theirs. This was common for her people as the joining of two of her kind could not be broken by even the most powerful of spells... it could not be broken by the very gods who made their realm.

"Marriage," she mused in a voice that held a tint of laughter, "...it pales in comparison, I suppose." She looked at him then, pausing once more – her actions on his hands did. "Nothing hidden; two minds are one – two souls.

"'Tis like losing half of yourself when they go, pass on." She shook her head, shaking silver-white strands so they hung more in her eyes and tickled her lashes and cheeks. She didn't quite feel the urge to remove them from obscuring her vision as she looked at him. "I suppose I am rambling. You must forgive me."



He had something of a predilection for people who contrasted with him, in coloring or in attitude. Dark skin, light hair, smaller or larger, softer or harder; perhaps that was why he had such a history with white hair. It was a strange thing to be fixating on where she was concerned, he supposed, but she was so alike to him in so many other ways.

There was another significant difference, of course. She had what he might call magic, though the taste of it was not quite what he was used to. Less of a spark to it, less raw. Was it affection that drove her to touch him so? It tasted similar, but again distinct. This was not a crush, neither lust nor naïveté; she was appreciating him as one might a work of art.

It was hard not to bask in that awareness. He really could be insufferably smug about that kind of thing.

"I was always rather fond of the affectation," he admitted, "for that very reason." What a delicate smile it was, as gentle as her kiss, faint and soft and sweet. This was not the sort of softness he might have expected from a woman who wore coats cut in hard lines, who left her card tucked in the waistlines of handsome young men. And such softness for *him*, besides.

"Divert, ἀοιδός," he teased; the hand not currently subject to her attentions slid behind her back, to gently urge her into his lap if she would allow it. Not as lascivious as he could have been, he only wanted to have her closer. Though it was something of a bad habit, touching people as they tried to tell him a story. "I like to hear you speak," he clarified, "and we have no shortage of time."

He kept his hands to himself after that, for the most part, save for the hand she'd claimed. Until the end, when he couldn't help but run his fingertips along her scalp, locks of hair between his fingers as he brushed them out of her eyes. "There is nothing to forgive. Ramble as it pleases you, and it pleases me, as well." Down her scalp, along the shell of her ear and then along her jaw his fingers followed. "But I will forgive you, anyway, if it makes you feel better."

Calandra Redwind. He might have told her what his name had once been, if he could remember it.



Was this what she had been expecting the moment she's invited such a creature into her bed? The library wasn't her bedroom, but it was far more intimate in many other ways. The phrase didn't ring quite the way it should in her mind saying it any other way, however. But, it did give way to the distinct wondering of whether or not they would make it up to her room. Victorian couches were quite the novelty, but a comfort for sleeping long hours they were not. That of course implied the gentlemen caller next to her would even stay long enough to wrap her in an embrace, or, to allow her to wrap him in her own.

It was best not to think of these things currently, no matter how much her mind liked to intercept for every possible scenario to come.

Her cool blue gaze encompassed by kohl black remained on his darker cobalt one, the corner of her mouth turning slightly into a barely there smirk as those same lashes lowered to a half hooded expression. All this happened while his hand slid along her back, gloved limb sliding along blue silk – the only other barrier between her skin and his own – as he urged her into his lap.

She released his hand long enough to lift up and move, briefly wondering just what position she should take up on his person. Straddling seemed so obvious, but it also urged their dance into something more devious... perhaps too soon. She had things to say still; he had a story left to regale her with as well. Not that such a tale couldn't be told after... but, it had been a while since she hadn't a need to be so obvious to others in her pursuit of them. Then again, there wasn't much of a need to pursue Jean; though, it was fun to pretend... wasn't it?

"Sing?" she implored of the 'nickname', still smirking as she shifted to take her place in his lap, her right side to his front; both legs came to bend on the other side of him – his right, to half tuck along his thigh. "I think it has been some time since I have sung for anyone, *Seigneur Des Coeurs*."

"Unless you are referring to matters of coitus; then I have no doubt I would sing quite well for you." She let her hand remain on the couch backing behind him, sliding so her arm rested just about his shoulders. The action brought her closer, but not too close. Even so, her cool blues shut as he ran bare fingers along her scalp, over her ear... and then along her jaw; she moved just so, seeking the pressure the pleasure of his touch offered. When that touched remained, stilled, and he spoke on she opened her eyes again to stare into his.

She enjoyed the way her heart jumped just so and allowed her body to feel what it may, almost drowning in it for a moment – the feeling of him and all of the attention he held pressing into her. She enjoyed being his focus as much as he enjoyed being admired as a work of art – though, the latter she was entirely unaware of.

"I believe on the matter of forgiveness there is none needed," she admitted softly, but not because there was any emotion in that; mostly, she felt the need to be softly spoken in the space of silence they occupied. "Rather, it is one of those things one says because one feels one ought to." At this she smiled just as softly as she spoke, almost grinning as she offered a tease herself. "I shall take your forgiveness though, cheaply as it is offered, for, I have no doubt you give it to many – just as often as I ask it of others for being my long-winded self."

Blue silk had sifted around her legs, swaths of the fabric folding and leaving them bare. She didn't bother to replace it, to cover herself as her free hand reached up – her left – to push loose curls along his temple. Bare fingers slid into his scalp; her thumb rolled along a single brow,

pale digit fanning over black gently. Her cool gaze focused there for a moment before she went on with her tale. Her focus, as divided as it might have been, was perhaps better at being diverted than most people he could have had this level of intimacy with. Such was the way with a mind as sorted and as sharp as her own.

"To continue..." she began again, fingers slipping through his tresses as they spread, "...A hundred years passed on in their self-proclaimed betrothal to one another, Cal and her heart's desire. After this passing of time her mother birthed another – a baby girl with hair as black as the Abyss and eyes a red as the fires of the dwarven mines.

"Draco himself was present at her arrival into the world of mortals and ancients, proclaiming her to be his paladin. He marked her thus and all knew what she was meant for; the oracles had spoken of her arrival, of the paladin's who would thwart a dark force brewing."

She trailed off slightly, once more focusing on the images her mind offered. She worked through how best to go on as her hand moved from his hair and back to his face. It cupped his cheek, thumb now rolling over the highest point just under his eye as she soaked in the heat of his skin – once again appreciating everything about him... the way he looked at her, complimented her...

"Cal was unaware of her lover's ill intent at the announcement; she knew not the brewing in his heart, the desire to have been the one who would inherit godly power when it was called on... She had no idea of what he planned in secret... not until much later... when it was much too late..."

Thinking on it now... it was almost insulting how much she had loved him, had believed in him so blindly that she could not sense the hatred in his heart. And yet... she still did not hate him for it.



"Very prettily, I'm sure," he said, as she settled in on his lap, the weight and the warmth of her as pleasing as he'd thought it would be. "Who will be the instrument, and who the player, do you think?"

It was his turn to shut his eyes and enjoy the feeling of hands through his hair, tilting his head back to rest against the couch. "My forgiveness is quite meaningless," he confessed easily, "as I have neither the memory nor the attitude for the alternative." He simply didn't care enough, was the long and the short of it, unless indignation served him in some way. He was not above informing others that they would need to earn his forgiveness, but that was almost always a lie.

He listened to her story, and enjoyed the way her fingers combed through his hair, practically petting him. His mouth crooked into an almost-smile as her palm pressed to his face, and he tilted his head just enough to press his lips briefly to the inside of her wrist. His right hand slid along the skin of her thighs, wrapped around the one nearest to his knees.

"If such hypotheticals were easily imagined, they would not be called 'unthinkable'," he observed mildly, "and there is no one more easily deceived than the very clever." Which was, surely, cold comfort. Still, he could not seem to leave the regret in her well enough alone.

Would it be rude to let his hands and mouth wander when she told such a story? It did not quite suit, he supposed, and so he settled for letting his left hand rub gently at the small of her back while the other held her near.



The smile had slipped from her face in the ongoing tale of her story, as she was wont to do. Her stories were not always serious, but this one didn't sound right with smiles or smirks. Such expressions had a way of finding their way into your voice. They broke the atmosphere, the intention – the mood. However, there were two moods going on in this space, perhaps more. One overlapped the other as she sat on Jean's lap, and she knew he was just as good as she was at that – feeling and separating things, sometimes allowing them to interlink. That is, they were both very clearly good at speaking many things, sometimes several at the same time, while reacting – interacting – in different and similar ways all at once. In that way, the dance was hardly just about sex, or, the anticipation of it to come. She liked to think she was entertaining all of those things he was entertaining for her, but she wouldn't assume it such even if it might give her a tinge of joy to think she could do that for him. She was vain when it came to a few things: her clothes, for one... maybe even the luxury she swathed herself in and shared with others simply because she could. But, she could not count herself vain about what feelings she possibly struck in others.

But, she did smile when he spoke of instruments. The comment made her turn further towards him, not quite shifting in his lap. For many people it would take agonizing seconds to think of a reply. In a way she had to, but it never took her as long as others to sort for the right response. It wouldn't appear as though she'd had to think at all, in truth.

The hand that was on his cheek shifted to around the back of his neck. Her other moved just so as well so that both would shift through the black curls to the base of his neck. Thumbs pressed upward, sliding along skin and hair; they pushed, massaging up and down in a slow and rhythmic fashion as she looked into eyes that were darker than hers... eyes that changed hue and tone with the gathering of those around them... merely release... or more?

At the same time she spoke. "A curious inquiry," she began, smile still present, as the blue silk of her long sleeves pooled over his red-fabric colored shoulders... half rubbing along the skin on his pale neck. "One that begs I answer it by replying with the obvious: You have persuaded me into your lap, have you not?" Her voice dropped to something deeper at that while the corner of her mouth quirked just enough to be considered playful. "Though, we have time well enough to consider all angles, I imagine. How well would you sing for me, hm?"

It might be considered in Ruka's nature to give, but there was selfishness in that. In giving, she gained the pleasure of another's reaction to her. A backhanded selfishness, perhaps. And she was more than enjoying the reactions he'd had to her hands all night, the way he'd turned into her caress – seeking more of it. In turn, she enjoyed the way his bare hand slid along her thigh – hooking. She could feel and half feel between the spaces on her scars, in places where the nerves had not been so badly ruined.

His remark would have hurt a lesser being she supposed, a defensive one; one who wanted to deny any scathing mark presented to them, any that made them look less than what they were. And maybe that was her weakness...allowing it, taking it like a stoning from an angry mob, as he and few others gave it.

"My own cleverness, as weak as it was then, had very little to do with it... perhaps," she stated, breaking the tale's separation from herself as her eyes appeared to almost look beyond him... into him... seeing him or not... perhaps seeing herself in the reflection of her eyes – that day and moment. "She was in love," she amended, not bothered by her slip. Slips showed humanity;

slips where they things she adored about people who made time for her like this... who entertained her notion of something that would never be more than beyond what it was in the time it was.

"Unconditional love," she amended again, "that would love faults, frustrations, and all the ugly and filthy things about man... the kind of love that held no expectation." The only kind she knew. "That's what it was." Her eyes closed once, briefly, long kohl lashes kissing her cheeks. When they opened she was still looking at him, this time seeing him once more. "She could not see what he planned because he was brilliant – clever, much more than she was at the time... perhaps much more brilliant than anyone of their tribe at the time." And then she did smile, but it wasn't entirely there; it was the smile of one who did not hate the reverie she spoke in. A smile of acceptance, maybe – that she accepted his assessment and did not mind what could be considered cruelty.

Really, there were no regrets. But, unwillingly to her, maybe he felt something she didn't even know was there – something similar to regret. Not a wish to change it, to return and do it over, but to have that love once more. Not his, the lover in her past, but the feeling of knowing that which she refused.

Half-loving like this, that was all she had anymore. The complicated thing she couldn't call regret, that she couldn't call a desire for someone to save her from.

"Not long after her sister's eighth birthday," she went on, noting the way his warm hand rubbing into her skin heated her blood, once again made her heart skip in her chest, "her lover spoke to her in privacy, in a place somewhere from their people. He told her of what he plotted then, of all he wanted and had never gained, of his hatred for Draco in what had been denied to him. He explained the way he would turn their people to ash with something he'd concocted from what you might call modern chemistry...

"A virus, a disease... I have not a name for it," she went on without ache, as someone who'd finally come to terms with all that had happened in a way that it no longer bothered her. "He sought her to join him, to agree with him. In his madness, as some might call it, he believed she would. But, Cal refused him, she pleaded with him to reconsider, she pleaded with all the love she held for him to turn back on his plot for revenge. She implored that he was a good man, the kind being she'd fallen in love with and had known all her life. But... he would not be moved by the tears or the way she broke the cavity of her chest open and spilled into him all that she had.

"If anything, he hated her for it." She smiled wanly at that, remembering. It didn't hurt though; too much time had passed... the changes such an event wrought into her gave way to not be pained anymore. Again, there was nothing but acceptance.

"He took a knife to her then, a hot poker, and broke her body asunder so that no man would want her – or so he claimed. And she did not fight him back though she could have, being far more skilled at telekinesis than many of her kind. She could have broken him far more than he ever imagined breaking her. She could have ripped through the locks on his mind and made him nothing more than a rotting vegetable on wooden floor in the ratty shack they'd hidden away in to speak.

"Even Draco's edicts would not have made the god punish her had she done so.

"But," she went on, still rubbing the base of his skull with her thumbs, "she did not. Love made her love him still, made her imagine he would stop... that he would see she would not fight him. She imagined inaction would reach him, make him see the error of his desire to hurt others. And thus she became his focus of anger willingly.

“He left her there, bleeding and staring after him as he walked out.” Still she smiled in that wistful way, something bittersweet maybe. Some would call it foolish, not acting. Blade had called her foolish for not killing him, for not stopping him.

But, even now, she didn't consider herself foolish for her inaction. One could not control the choices of others. But, one could control their own. Had she to do it all over again she would not change any of it.



He tilted his head backward as she ran her fingers through his hair, massaged his scalp. He could occasionally be selective in who he allowed to touch his hair, but he did enjoy it a great deal when someone touched it properly. "Did I?" he murmured. "Perhaps you persuaded me to let you into my lap, by looking so as if you belonged there." His fingers drew spirals along her thigh, over her scars without tracing the shape of them. "But I play much better than I sing," he said, though his every word revealed his voice as the instrument it was. Carefully tuned, everything from timbre and accent designed to be as appealing as possible.

It was possible that he was no longer even capable of making unattractive noises, so out-of-practice was he.

She was quite willing, it seemed, to think the worst of herself and the best of others – truths cast in lights both flattering and unkind. Old enough to be set in her ways, as he was, and to tell a person what he tasted in their heart was rude besides. Very rarely did it end well when he deigned to do it, with the rare exception for desire. She did not quite translate, anyway, to his usual interpretations. Everyone was unique, but some were more unique than others.

It was not a story that required commentary, really. She had come to terms with it, long in the past for her, no emotional support needed or desired. All there was for him was to convey that she had been heard and understood. He could empathize, certainly, with being damaged by someone... dear. But most of his emotional understanding was based in how to manipulate it, and not in the actual having of the things.

"Optimism," he mused, "is often confused with foolishness." He could expound on the notion, but it would be a bit pretentious to explain how she'd been feeling in her own story, or so it seemed to him. If he had understood her, she would understand him; he would simply have to trust that he had, and she would.

"I hope she did not lose that optimism," he added with a faint smile, "this lovely and loving lady."



She wasn't entirely sure if his reaction to her ministrations on his person were a natural one, or one that had become so habitual with time that it had become second nature to respond as such. Either way, she was happy with the way he craned his neck back just so and sought the pressure her bare and nimble fingers caused.

She laughed softly at his response; it was a deeply intoned reaction, more masculine than feminine... or perhaps somewhere between the two. It was natural nonetheless – true in reaction to his comment about playing better than singing. Her mouth cracked a little with the action, presenting white teeth just so. “Metaphors never cease with the two of us, it appears, mon seigneur des coeurs. How long until you tell me once more, however indelicately, that we shall ‘fuck’, I wonder?”

“Or is it only in the presence of delicate women you curb your manners? Say things that are not entirely what they are?”

“Certainly, I am neither of those things, but I enjoy our waltz of words nonetheless.”

And then she did pause, mouth closing fully with a smile as she looked on at him, her fingers still working; her thumbs moved up to behind his ears to press gently and work as the rest of her digits did. Again, she took note of the way his hand moved, enjoying it all the same... the warm sensations it caused “An interesting notion: my persuading you to allow me onto your person. You either attempt to flatter me with an overestimation of my skills, or, you severely underestimate your own.” Truly,

Ruka was not a man who would be where she didn't want to be, but the remark begged to be stated for fun if nothing else. “Should it be a question of who plays better or sings, I wonder? I admit, I enjoy both positions quite well.

“I imagine we have time enough to confirm which one of us does the other more justice.”

Two conversations at once, it appeared. Neither one she had a problem differentiating and speaking about separately. And thus, she replied to him again and went on with her tale. “She did not have the luxury of thinking in terms of anything less,” Ruka admitted. “And so, she picked herself up after some time had passed; all the while she was not entirely certain of how she found the will to get back home and manage her people.

“The healers did what they could, but she had not the time for anything deeper than what would keep her moving – keep the rest of them moving and gathering all they could find on their way to a hidden sanctuary deep in the mountains. Time, with so little of it available, did not even warrant her the ability to let her sister know what had happened – to warn her or anyone else.

“In the end, all she could think on was moving.” Her mind wove through the memories, seeing those moments before as she went on. “Ten years passed in their sanctuary, ten years away from the possibility of her former beloved causing harm. Her sister grew and took on the menace, freeing them from the cage they gilded themselves in out of protection.

“They traveled to Vayne after that, the nesting grounds of the dragons and last city of the Traygons. Cal continued her leadership, wishing that her sibling would take on the role from her. But, the younger woman had lost something as well and had not the heart to be around people she barely knew.” Ruka sighed at this, mostly because there was still tribulation between herself and Blade. And those veins ran deeper than the loss the two of them had endured – the loss of two loves, parents, and other family members.

Still, she went on, releasing the emotion... the one staying worry she had.... and continued with her tale. "More time passed... perhaps five years at most. Cal trained several to take her place as chief and then pleaded with Draco to give her leave... to release her to go where she willed it.

"She loved her people, but..." And then she trailed off, eyes almost glassing over as she recalled that day in the floating city that forever stayed in the moonlight, the glitter of stars.