"All human actions have one or more of these seven causes: chance, nature, compulsions, habit, reason, passion, desire." Aristotle. What if LaCroix were a little older? A little more desperate? What would happen if the staunch Ventru cast every ounce of reason on one act of blind, feral passion? This is that story. A look into LaCroix’s biggest impulse and how she survives.

**TRANSFER FROM FFNET COMPLETE**
She pushed her way out of Studio 904 and into a balmy summer evening, making her way up First Avenue South toward the Pioneer Square District. The news had blathered about an uncomfortable daily high of the upper eighties, but she didn't mind as a temperate sixty-seventy-something hung in the air and clung to her skin. While the day had started out sunny, the rain had swept in and as the air cooled, turned to subtle fog in its attempt to evaporate.

She hummed to herself as she passed Occidental Park, hands in her pockets drumming to the sounds of deconstructing Art stalls. The first Thursday of the month usually ended this way…local, culturally-inclined disciples holding their incense-scented, cláirseach-resounding Masses for all the world to see. A pity she rarely attended. Then again, Art was not a genre within her resume of skilled dispositions. Though, tonight, she paused against a tree as various families and couples meandered past her and into the thickening darkness of First Avenue. Most of the stalls were gone and pockets of two or three stayed up only because the vendors were speaking amongst themselves, clapping each other's shoulders and throwing their heads back in laughter.

One of the standing stalls caught her attention enough for her to push away from the tree and draw...
nearer to investigate its wares. Her approach startled the women packing up. She was middle-aged with greying-blonde hair clinging to her cheeks and neck. Drumming her fingers in her pockets still, her head tilted as her eyes scanned the variety of handmade silver jewelry. She saw the woman's mouth moving, finger pointing to a few pieces inlaid with turquoise. While she could understand and appreciate the hard sell, she wasn't going to pay for the woman's mistake in pressing the silver, then trying to cover it up with smashed-in, unrefined pieces of turquoise. In a quick gesture from pocket to display, she rested her finger on a simple band with a twisting, interlacing design.

"I want this one," her voice, direct but soft, cut the air between them.

"O-Oh. But that one is-

She plucked up the bracelet and turned it this way, that way in the light of a lamp on the display table. "Twice as much, I know. I can read."

"But wouldn't you rather-"

"No, I'd rather not." She held the bracelet out to the woman. "I know what I want and I want this one. The design is simple, clean and well-made. Perhaps the best made of the lot. You put more effort into this one, so I want this one."

The vendor sucked in a breath but whether it was from the small insult or directiveness of her customer was to be left a mystery. Taking the bracelet, the woman turned to bag it up and grab a small three-ring binder labeled "Sales". She waved her hand at the box the vendor chose.

"I'll just wear it. Saves us both." She shrugged as the woman's face contorted with suspicion. How she hated that look, but the stony nature of her façade displayed little more than indifference. She knew the vague ideas bumping the woman's brain: Does she even have the money? If so, where'd she get it? If not, is she doing this for laughs or poorly attempting a theft? Another quick movement slid an antique silver cigarette case from her back pocket. Clicking it open, she pulled two hundred dollar bills from a slim wad on the right.

The woman's eyes went wide as the bills were held out to her with one hand while the other plucked the purchase from its creator. With a snap and a slide, the cigarette case was replaced and her hand free to fasten the claspless trinket onto her wrist. She looked back at the woman's face, bemused as her middle-aged eyes darted from cash to customer. Her head cocked to one side, as if begging the woman to inquire. That never happened. The woman stiffened and swooped up a leather pouch from beneath the table.

"So I owe you-"

"You don't owe me anything." Another stiffened pause. "Consider the extra fifty a tip."

"Oh…uh, no, I couldn't do that." The woman was blushing, which was lost on her. "Really, I appreciate it but that isn't worth a fifty dollar tip."

"I agree." The blush drained. Sobering punch to the pride. "But I was feeling charitable since I held you up from closing up shop for the night."

She turned from the woman, facing First Avenue once more.

"Wait! Take this then!" Before she could get too far the woman had grasped her wrist and plunked a silver ring into her palm.
Confused, she looked down at the thing in her hand. It wasn't badly made, but not great either. It looked too big for her ring finger, otherwise occupied anyway. She rolled it in her palm and looked at the woman, who just stood there.

"Um…why?" her tone was as if the woman as plopped a clod of dirt there.

"I can't take a fifty dollar tip, I…I just can't. I don't need charity." The woman summoned something as she squared her body up. "So, you can take the ring instead."

She scanned the ring in her palm and looked back at the woman. Eyebrow raised, questioning *Is this a joke?* "This isn't worth fifty dollars."

"I know. It's worth thirty-five," the woman asserted with a smirk.

She smirked in return and slid the ring on. "I see. A fifty dollar tip is too big but fifteen is just fine?"

The ring hand slid its thumb into her front pocket and drummed the fingers, new ring sliding ever so-so, against her jeans.

"Something like that," the proprietor justified with no justification but her own pride. The woman nodded a goodbye and turned back to deconstructing her stall.

Chuckling at the attempt at shrewd business, she continued her journey down First Avenue. Her pocket vibrated about ten steps down the street. She slid her cell out of her pocket and stared down at the screen blinking "Steinbeck" in and out of rhythm with the vibration. Her thumb slid beneath the received and flicked it open as she continued walking.

"I got my hair done," she started without letting the caller speak.

"Went through with it, huh?" His voice was cool. Degrees cooler than the air around her but that was his way.

"I figured if I didn't like it, I could always dye it back. Or wait until it grows out."

She referred to the newly hued strand of silver in the front of her face. A purely hedonistic expenditure. Curiosity more than statement. "I bought jewelry too." To go with the hair? No. Well… perhaps. Sibling purchases born from a singular, spontaneous desire.

"And that is significant because?"

"It's silver…It's handmade and I bought it at an Art exhibit." Her nose crinkled as his chuckle echoed in her ear.

"Look at you, supporting the local industry little people," he patronized. "Is it pretty?"

"It's not hideous, if that's what you meant."

He laughed, "You didn't tell the salesperson that, did you?"

She glanced down the street. A gaggle of familiar faces widened their stares and Red Sea parted as she passed and turned onto Yesler Way. "I used more words," she answered in an emotionless, painfully truthful way.

"Surprise, surprise," replied a dry chortle.

"Is there something I can help you with?"
She could count on one hand the number of times 'Steinbeck' called her since the seventies. It was always the same tit-for-tat kind of request, double entendre not included. Though he loathed reaching out for any kind of assistance, aid from her was especially nauseating for him and reserved for only the more dire of circumstances.

"Not right now."

"Then you're calling because…?"

"Triggered by nostalgia tonight. Let's say that."

"Hmph…intriguing," she lied.

There was very little between them to be nostalgic about. In fact, she could conjure a hundred better words to describe the memories surrounding the two of them. Aggressive. Venomous. Pompous. Just to name a few. But not nostalgic. The word was too sweet tasting behind her teeth, too romantic by design.

She stopped and stared at the Smith Tower, just across the street, while finishing this spontaneous conversation.

"You going to let me see it?"

"Hm?"

"Your hair. I'm imagining some skunk-like tail on the front of your face."

She smirked and laughed a bit, "Oh, Little Boy Blue…Your sheep're in the meadow to look after."

"Is that a no? Or a nursery rhyme way of saying you'll blow my horn if I do come?" He must have been alone to say something that bold.

Her smirk turned a little darker, a little toothier, her eyes a little more narrow. "You can go blow your own horn, Little Boy Blue."

She listened to him laugh and found their crude exchange refreshing for the night ahead. She looked down Yesler Way and grimaced with a sharp, "I've gotta go. I have investments to check up on."

"Catch ya later then," he parted with a lie of his own.

As if they would catch one another 'later'. He would be catching gunpowder plots from the depths of his brain while she would be catching the serpents in her garden with a club in one hand and sword in the other. The click of his line dying was relieving. Speaking to him dragged up muscle memories of scorched earth, murky seawater and knives slicing off pieces of flesh.

She winced.

Her fingers snapped the phone closed and replaced it to the pocket from whence it came. Smith Tower loomed behind her as she made her way further down the street and down 4th Avenue South to poke her head into Caffè Vita, her newest acquisition.

Tonight was a night of check-ins before meetings, meetings and more meetings. She appreciated nights like this because they started off in a dressed-down, unassuming manner that always caught someone off guard. In her everything Old Navy look, from jeans to her black tank-top, she appeared little more than a strolling student from the nearby University campus. To the trained eye, she was
She merely sidled into an unoccupied outside seat and waited. She edged the menu more toward center with a constant tapping of her nail as the smells of pizza, coffee and smoke filled her senses. A presence beside her garnered her attention for a moment as they slid a small folder before her then departed to attend a waiting table. And as easily as she appeared, so she disappeared with the folder beneath her arm. She gazed back at Smith Tower then hailed a cab for downtown.

She closed her eyes for a moment as the cab, driver weary of his cargo, pulled onto I-5 Northbound for the Central Business district of the city.

She had dozens of holdings littered throughout her vast domain, but most of them were centered in that particular area. The Stimson-Green Mansion off of Seneca Street, the Lindeman Pavillion on Terry Avenue, the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation station at Minor and of course, the tactfully named Kindred Hospital Seattle down the street from Lindeman. And those were just a few…the hospital being the most important for multiple reasons.

She mostly invested in buildings when she wasn't investing in specific businesses or stock. Nostalgia had her investing in the historic and meaningful, hence the preservation trust. She considered it her duty to be philanthropic to a history she had seen grow over so many years. While she hadn't been here at its birth, she had certainly been here during Seattle's boom and every year since. Gold rushers, jazz music and Mt. St. Helen's ash rumbled in her veins as easily as the tires of this cab and if she could preserve one building from any of those eras, she would. If she could turn a major profit from tourism at the same time, that was even better.

The only begrudging part of these investments was the folders she returned with. Every stop meant a contact. Every contact had a folder. Each folder was a specific color No folder, no good. Wrong color, wrong night to be you. And that didn't mean for her. Though there were fewer and far between nights when she returned to the Smith with ruddy paste beneath her nails.

The good thing about litters of investments was that it expanded her domain beyond a singular building and title. Everything south of Richmond Heights and north of Riverton-Boulevard Park on this little isthmus was essentially hers. Essentially. Investments made essentially metamorphose into concretely…indisputably. She wasn't greedy, though, nor voracious for domain. She just liked to make a point that this was her city. Her compatriots were more than welcome to claim all the dance studios, law firms and pubs they wanted so long as she got what she was do.

Philanthropically dropping money on buildings wasn't the only way she expanded her influence in the city. She didn't centralize herself. Most of her investments nestled in the business district, but she did the night-to-night running of politics within the toppish ten floors of the Smith Building in Pioneer Square and spent the days and early evening hours in a sprawling, palatial residence in the Queen Anne borough.

Never mix politics and pleasure. The Russian accent lilted through her memory as she thought about the difference between her interactions between Smith and West Galer Street. Her fingers drummed the rainbow pile of folders in her lap as her phone buzzed in her pocket. She slid it out and furrowed her brow. A reluctant finger lifted the receiver to answer the call from the Smith.

Patrice Whaler, low totem pole secretary and loyal lapdog, chirped in her ear about her appointments, beginning to line up, and a slew of meetings with Mr. So-and-So or Ms. What's-Her-Face. Their names blended together in a smoothie of "she could care less".

"I'm five minutes away. I want the Michael Kors crepe dress, black. Jimmy Choos. I expect
appropriate accessories. And I want a glass of my favorite...warm," she hung up. At this point in their relationship, she didn't have to tell her how or from whom she would get these things. She trusted they would be ready for her when she got there....in ten minutes. She said five and enjoyed walking into the tension those extra five minutes caused. After all, no one would tell her she had said five minutes instead of double that.

She had the cab stop where it had picked her up across from the café. She forked over more than an appropriate amount for the round trip from her cigarette case.

Up Fourth Avenue South she went and turned toward the Smith building. Her sandals clacked against the stone, seemingly attracting attention from friends feeding in the shadowed nooks and alleyways. Silent, respectful regards for her movements from the darkness. Her hand came up to brush away the silver strand from her eyes. It would take some getting used to, but she wasn't at all unhappy about the decision. She looked down at the folders in her hand and counted the colors one more time. Compulsive mannerisms ingrained from long before all this.

She stopped beside a lamp post as she stared at the front entrance of the Smith. Tiny, icy crawlings moved up her back as she watched a business suit speak into a cell phone, his back to her. A palm rested on the roof of his car, charcoal black as the suit he wore. Charcoal was blocking her entrance to her building. More importantly...he wasn't supposed to be there. A quick, mental review of her calendar told her he was supposed to be here...at all! Whatever conversation he was having was less important when compared to where he was at the moment. She shifted from one foot to the other as she considered her alternatives. She could simply walk across the street and move to the back of the building via First Avenue. But that would put her two minutes behind. Twelve minutes was just ridiculous and served no purpose. Ten...ten was nice and even. Waiting here would do the exact same thing.

Though she didn't need to, she exhaled and moved forward. She tucked the folders beneath her opposite arm and ran her fingers through her hair as she glided passed him. Charcoal spoke a foreign tongue, harsh and biting words, into his cell phone before ending his conversation. She had only just walked ahead of him when his body turned to face the building and his hand jutted out to grasp her upper arm.

"Stop." His command sounded similar to an owner training his dog.

It elicited the same reaction. She stopped. Difference was...there was no treat at the end of this obedience.

She glanced at his face, not his hand as if he were any other ignorant person off the street or in her court. The glacial blue of his eyes were disapproving and she couldn't yet figure out if it was about the silver strand of hair, the pedestrian way she was dressed or the undignified manner in which she carried herself in the 2.5 seconds it took for her to pass him by. Though, she had a strong hunch which one it was the harder he stared and the more he sneered.

"Absolutely not."

She frowned. "I'm going to be late."

"Fix it!" He hissed and moved with her to the entrance of the building. "And what are you wearing? I doubt I raised you to display yourself with so little decorum."

She almost snarled. You didn't raise me at all. "I was merely checking on investments," she made a motion with the file folders.
That was a mistake, because he foraged his hand out so they could be humbly delivered into his grasp. Goodness, this was exhausting, but she did it since she did not want to be late by her own standards.

They rode the elevator up to the 25th floor, where her spacious office and conference area was located. True to form, shoes and appropriate accessories were set beside her desk (luxurious slippers tucked neatly beneath). She opened a closet door and there hung her dress, perfectly pressed. If Patrice kept up this up, she would undoubtedly be forced to promote the girl to something with more responsibility. However, that would require finding another gopher to get her attire for her and she wasn't sure she had the patience to get them up to snuff.

She didn't even have time to move her hands to the bottom of her shirt before he was tearing it up over her head. She resisted making any sound as he reached for the dress. At least he had the decency to let her remove her own jeans. He ignored the embellished undergarments as she stepped into the crepe dress…A-line and business-like. Zipped in, he studied her from back to front and still had a look of dissatisfaction. She followed his eyes down to her pale legs and she rolled her eyes.

"I'll be sitting behind my desk. No one will notice," she moved to slide her shoes on and replaced the newly-purchased silver with something a little more pricey and couture.

"It's inappropriate. And they will notice when you stand to show them out," he pressed, following her like an unwelcome shadow.

She hung her head and let out an agitated groan before buzzing Patrice and requesting a pair of hose - as if the girl should have had them in here in the first place. He pulled her chair out and she sat down, starting up her computer with a flick of her wrist as he turned his attention to the humble jewelry she had removed.

"What are those?" he picked up the bracelet and studied it in the same manner she had, hours before. She shrugged and fixed her hair back, "Spontaneous buy." She could have easily answered in a snarky manner, but she had to go home with him and the same hand holding the bracelet was capable of many things.

"From whom? And why?"

"Local artiste, and because I'm a natural born philanthropist," she joked at the end, attention on her email now.

"Not exactly beautiful, is it? If you wanted silver jewelry-"

He was abruptly cut off by Patrice sliding into the office. One hand held her hose and the other, a glass of her favorite…warm. She hadn't realized how she needed it until it was set in front of her. She looked at him, then at Patrice, who merely nodded and went off to fetch a second glass. That's how well he was known to her staff. She took a long drink, not wanting to wait for his to get there. She felt a small bit dribble from the corner of her mouth and a handkerchief swab it away.

"Such a messy eater..." he fussed, affectionately, and sat across from her with the rainbow of folders. "So, how are you?"

She was distracted by an uncomfortably long email. Eyes fixated on the screen rather than the man in the chair before her. She had five minutes until her first meeting. Five minutes, and an email and the man. She heard her name being called and snapped her attention back to pale blue eyes.

"Louisa?"
Tidbits:

"cláirseach"- Pronounced (or sounds to me like) "Clar-shuck" or "clar-shugh" ; this is the Irish word for a Gaelic harp.

Enjoy the rest of the story and leave a review!
He is born around five in the evening, in the already dark of December twenty-ninth at the Chateau d’Olhain. The ink of the Treaty of Picquigny is only four months dry, the tensions between France and England simmer. Cesare Borgia is already three and a half months old by the time he enters the world. He is the third son and fifth child of the Grand Veneur de France. He is named Evroult d’Olhain Nielles, to honor the Saint whose feast day this third son is born upon. As is tradition with his family, the third son is consecrated to the Lord to give thanks for all the abundance and good fortune that has been set before their family.

In 1491, he turns fifteen. Though he was raised in a moderate level of comfort and was afforded a good education, his adolescence sees him preparing for the robe while his older brothers prepared for politics, and his older sisters married off to anyone who would increase the ever-growing power of the Olhain family. In early February, he is sent to become a member of the Brotherhood of the Cross. He will now live in the heart of Lorraine: Metz. Nighttime boredom compels his eyes scan the heavens. He believes the stars never let the loyal and supplicant down.

February twentieth, his faith is rewarded when a star, brilliant beyond all other, races across the night sky from Metz toward Savoie. Evroult takes this as a sign…a sign of great things to come that shall start in Metz and end in the East.

When he arrives in Metz, he finds The Brotherhood of the Cross is the oddest monastic order he has ever seen, and he had seen plenty accompanying his mother's pilgrimages. He can only come up with their being the by-product of Benedictine doctrine and Knights of Hospitaller mannerisms. His luxurious traveling clothes are replaced with heavy, dark cloaks of wool. A massive, wooden rosary is given to him before the tour begins. Already he feels the weight of his disdain, jealousy and guilt.

The brothers reside in an outcropping of the future St. Etienne de Metz, which they are helping to build and manage. The cathedral is a looming beauty, awe-inspiring and great in his sight. He cannot imagine what else it needs, but if this is where Heaven shall begin his destiny; far be it from him to shun it. He has never been a part of architecture before though. The softness of his hands barely knew chores, let alone hammers and chisels.

His days are as regimented as a soldier’s. Evroult wakes long before dawn for individual prayers and supplications. From there he enters a silent, reflective breakfast before daily Mass, which comes before hours of transcribing, reading and learning of doctrine…this is the life of a priest-to-be.

And he hates it!

He hates the smells of old men living together. He hates the feeling of old, delicate paper beneath his fingers. He hates getting up early to say prayers with no answers. He writes to his father (when he is supposed to be transcribing), pleading to release him from this torment and send him somewhere more useful. No letters are ever returned to him. So, he plunges forward, determined to find the great things his shooting star promised him. Evroult does not want to be a nameless priest or quiet monk
for the rest of his life. If he must be condemned to a life of cloth, then he shall rise among the ranks as soon as possible. He decides to become Bishop of this beautiful cathedral that will, no doubt, be even more magnificent in but a few short years.

To entertain himself from the drudgery, he uses wooden broom handles to practice the sword strokes his elder brothers had taught him. When the brothers are not looking, he strikes at imaginary rouges and ne'er-do-wells in the barn instead of milking the cows or mucking the stalls.

A year later, as Rodrigo Borgia becomes Pope Alexander VI, so Evroult becomes a full-fledged member of the Brotherhood. A year of appearing as they wished him to, ignoring his carnal desires for wanderlust and grandeur, and he is given a new name. A name to suit him…a name the brothers hope he will live up to: Sébastien; the saint martyred twice. They hope Saint Sébastien's great bravery, humility and piety are virtues Evroult will embody. They hope he will serve the poor, perform miracles and devote himself to God. They hope many things for their youngest brother. Evroult is no more; now he is a brother of the Cross: Sébastien, frère de la Croix. The name is the only thing he truly likes about this place.

The monastery with its grand cathedral will not keep his attention for much longer. While conducting an Alsace Mass in the cool of November, a star falls from the heavens. The impact is so hard that the church walls shake. The statue of the Blessed Virgin nearly falls over, saved only by the quick hands of a curate. The crash is so loud, it imitates thunder. The parishioners are too terrified to leave the church, too frightened to do anything besides cross themselves repeatedly and murmur Latin 'Hail Mary's or 'Our Father's. He, alone, is sent to inspect and whether that is because he is the priest or a visitor, he is not sure.

Among the smoldering rock, he finds his fire fed once more. He takes this as a second sign. Soon, his path will fall into his lap…he only needs to be patient and take some of the fallen star. Heat wafting up from the piece of heaven warned him. Sébastien would come back later. After the parishioners would be filled with guilt, when his dagger wouldn't melt nor his skin scorch, Sébastien would return to claim what he believed to be rightfully his.

Young and dreamy, he allows his chunk of the heavens to encourage him through the next two years. Just when he begins to think he can bare the monastic life no longer, Charles VIII writes to all cathedrals. He requests good priests to accompany himself and his soldiers to war, and victory, against Italy. Without hesitation, Sébastien "humbly" offers to go. He wants be a part of Charles' grand army, regardless of the church duties he will have to complete. After all, Savonarola eagerly waits to welcome them into Italy in exchange for reform. So Charles will grab some priests, monks, bishops or whomever and hold Masses while moving masses of soldiers for the sole purpose of taking back what was always his: Naples. And if he had to frighten a Pope to do it, Charles would.

Sébastien is marching into Florence. It's been three years since he saw his first sign shoot across the skies and two years since the heavens fell at his feet. Neither he nor soldiers see much battle as Italians flee for fear of rape and siege. It would be months more until they enter Naples…unchallenged and as boring a trek as if he were still in the cathedral. But he is not in the cathedral. There are no saintly statues nor Virgins vigilant to shame him out of his grand and glorious desires. He forms a plan and in the dark of the night no one notices his transformation from priest to soldier when he fits himself into an abandoned military uniform, leaving the irritating wool in a heap near the make-shift privy.

This is where his life begins, he feels it.

Their trek across Italy ends and after the lackluster capture of Naples, Charles returns to France, but Sébastien does not return with him. Long forgotten as a priest of few words, and even fewer
confessions, Sébastien has managed to matriculate into the remaining army as if he were always one of them. The feeling of the sword at his side, a dagger up his sleeve...Yes, the cool and power of metal belonged to him.

He becomes ferocious. All that hatred born from heartless prayers, effortless transcription and epic boredom explode into vicious swipes of his blade. Though they are only training exercises, Sébastien emerges as someone passionate enough to be of use but smart enough to mold into a proper corporal. Gilbert de Bourbon sees the potential first and raises Sébastien up to be a favored corporal for his own uses. He teaches his protégé as much Italian as he can, smoother moves of the sword and cunning. Unfortunately, May brings not only a change in season, but of favor. The French are ousted from Naples and sent into a scrimmage against the Spanish in Calabria. Beside de Bourbon, Sébastien receives his first real taste of warfare and sheds his first batch of enemy blood. This is the first time the deep red of another's life force imprints itself so powerfully into Sébastien's mind:

The gendarmes charged first. Headed by an ailing, but determined, Bernard d'Aubigny, their heavy lances - strong, sharp pikes - pierced Spanish frontline forces. As Spaniards flung themselves out of the way - or into, as some unfortunate souls make the mistake of doing - of stampeding horse hooves, de Bourbon gave the command for the archers to take their aim. What enemy troops were not impaled or stamped to death rushed themselves into a flurry of French arrows. From his vantage point at Bourbon's side, Sébastien watches successive waves of Spanish soldiers crash into the ground of early graves.

Those not slaughtered by spears or arrows were now victims of the sword and head-to-head combat. Sébastien gallops into the fray alongside his master, never considering himself inexperienced enough to be unhorsed so quickly. His pride chalks it up to the skiddish beast spooking, but the reality was that he had never learned to pay attention to every side well enough to defend them all. Bourbon's protégé was busy with his right and attacked on his left. He was sent toppling from the saddle and thudded against a corpse hard enough to knock the wind from his body. From that point onward, it is a melee of in-the-moment dodges and slashes between Sébastien and a Spaniard not much younger than him. The boy had a terrified look on his face once the helmet was removed by the grappling between him and de Bourbon's favorite corporal. There is chaos all around them and both use the disorganization to their advantage. Sébastien exhausts de Bourbon's knowledge and ends up resorting the rough dueling techniques his brothers had taught him so long ago when the Spaniard manages to slice cold steel along the length of his rib cage. All he can think to do is stab.

So he did.

He forced the Spanish arm down against his side. He dropped his sword. Sébastien slid a dagger out and pierced the man's flesh at the weakest points in his armor until the youth spits up blood into his face. Sébastien let him fall to the ground. Something churned the contents of his modest breakfast over and over inside his stomach. The porridge threatened to spew up but he managed to hold it down.

He had never killed anyone before.

Sébastien had prepared on potato sacks, hay bales or men made of wood but never the real thing. He had never watched the life drain out of someone's eyes before. He wanted to be deeply disturbed but there simply wasn't time. Not if he wanted to live, anyhow. So, he shoves the perturbation deep down and continued scrimmaging until he finds another horse to mount.

After all was said and done, Calabria is littered with the corpses of everyone. Hundreds of Spanish
and Neapolitan men laid in their own entrails alongside their French enemies. Dozens Sébastien took down. He returned to de Bourbon's side a very bloody and different man than when he rode away from it. The searing pain along his ribs is hastily stitched and sanitized to the best of their ability. To keep it from festering, he made the wiser decision to sear the flesh while everyone slept. Bearing a scar was far easier than dying of gangrene.

The Battle of Seminara shoulders its way into the Battle of Fornovo and he begins etching away the last remnants of his past life. Marching, bearing armor and swinging swords reshape him from a soft, fleshy adolescent to a more hardened, sculpted young adult. If only his family and the Brotherhood could see him now! His feats, blood and bravery earn him a small trove. Gold is the reward for flesh wounds and death...three times the amount if you were seen killing the enemy, or brought back some Italian trophy as proof. Sébastien has several. Necklaces and rings, their daggers and other trinkets as testimony to his savage abilities. He is lucky, no destined, to have live through such bloody affairs and now he returns to France with money to his name. His name... Sébastien la Croix.

With his earnings, he buys a better horse and carries himself back to the North. He takes his time. Sébastien is in no hurry anymore. There is no master to please but himself, no timeframe to follow but his own. In all honesty, he sees no need to rush because he isn't entirely sure what he wants to do with himself. He cannot return to his family. How would he explain this substantial change? What words could he choose to convince his mother (if she still lived) that abandoning a life of ecclesiastical works for glory was perfect for him? It didn't concern him...there would always be another third son to take his place. The small chunk of star in his coin purse refocuses his attention; reaffirms that heavenly prophecies are proving true. Small things have happened for him, not grand things.

Not yet, but soon.

He crosses from Italy into the Rhone region and breaches the boundaries of Savoie. After weeks of seemingly endless travels, he rests in the commune of Barby. This area is a part of France he had never seen nor heard of. But an encounter with a drunken man at an inn thoroughly educates him. The man is Charles de Seyssel, Lord of Aix and Bordeau and master of the Château de La Bâtie-Seyssel. At the foot of a nearby mount, the small estate welcomes Sébastien for his good Samaritan ways of bringing the drunken, whoring, way-ward lord back to his lady and land. As thanks, they keep him for days and regale him with tales of a Crusading ancestral forefather who rode beside Richard the Lionheart, give him the best wine for miles and probe him for details on this invasion of Italy.

Sébastien knows he cannot stay though their flirtatious daughter, exuberant nature and noble lifestyle fit everything he believes he is owed. Walls such as these, power such as this will belong to him one day. He will continue his rise among the ranks until he can go no higher. Just as the chateau looks down upon the modest commune, so he shall look down upon...upon... He cannot think over who he will be, but his power will be absolute.

The turn of the century has come and gone. The end of all things did not happen. The French have reclaimed Naples, with stipulations from Aragon...who eventually receives it all. Exploration of the New World continues. Michaelangelo has erected a statue of a naked David, Isabella I of Castile has died, and war brims between France and Spain. Meanwhile, Sébastien has taken up residence in Sedan, under the employ of Robert II de la Marck. With his knowledge of architecture from his way-gone-by priestly days, Sébastien helps Marck finish construction of his family's grand Chateau de Sedan. On permanent employ to de la Marck, Sébastien is given the privilege of dwelling in the palatial space.
This was not the step forward he was hoping for. He wanted to be master of the house, not keeper of the keys. He missed the days of war and battle. His sword or scabbard now only served to scare off would-be bandits and wayward drunks. He also serves to protect important bodies during important gatherings.

Master of the guard, keeper of the keys, marches around the house in the black of night and encounters a most peculiar man. He is a little taller than Sébastien, with black hair and dull eyes. To Sébastien, the eyes look dead. Dead and piercing. The stranger is also terribly pale. Robert's glorified gate keeper would comment how the man looks sick, if he cared to speak to anyone tonight. Apparently not one for the luxurious party inside, the man follows Sébastien for a short time before striking conversation since de la Marck's man won't. His name is Archambaud de Croÿ and he is from Belgium, or so he says. He looks to be Sébastien's age, but there is something else...his young features have a very hard, weathered disposition upon closer inspection. Though contemporaries, Sébastien gets the uneasy feeling this man has seen much, much more than he.

Preying on Sébastien's utter boredom, de Croÿ lures the glorified gatekeeper from the safety of the chateau walls and windows. The Belgian looks him in the eyes and says, "Follow me," and he does. A sensation overcomes his body. Sébastien feels devoid of any mistrust. He has only just met this man and yet is absent of any fear the Belgian's intentions are nefarious. Even if he wanted to doubt the man, there is no desire to. An incapability to. He walks alongside the man, deeper into de la Marck's expensive gardens and further from safety. Sébastien was never a heavy drinker. He can count the number of times he has been drunk on two fingers. There's a kindred drowsiness fogging his brain after Archambaud requests him to follow. What happens next, he could never have expected, propels him down the star-riddled path he dreamt for himself all those years ago...

A/N: Hope you enjoyed this updated version of the chapter. I was thinking of writing a one-shot in the future of a more in-depth look at LaCroix's embrace and the years immediately following but that will have to go on the way back, back burner.

Historical Facts:

**Treaty of Picquigny** - Ended a feud between France and England after Edward the IV (White Queen/War of the Roses king) invaded

**Grand Veneur de France**: Literally, the Grand Huntsman of France. This title was created in 1413 and simply implied that this man was responsible for the royal hunt (which was, apparently, a BIG deal). This does not imply that the person holding this title is noble, but highly regarded. And we all know Mr. LaCroix wants that noble blood!

**Savonarola** - Radical Dominican friar responsible for "The Bonfire of the Vanities". He believed Medici wealth, along with Borgia papacy, was bringing great sin and indulgence to Italy (especially Florence). When France invaded, he was in support of the French King because he believed Charles would aid in reforming the Catholic church.

**Gilbert de Bourbon** - A French Count who was made Viceroy of Naples after the French king returned to France. His vicarious rule was short, as he lost Naples to the Spaniards in 1495 (the same year France won Naples...aka he sucked!)

**Battle of Seminara** - small battle of the First Italian Wars. It allowed Spain to reclaim Naples and force French soldiers into isolation in south Italy.

**Battle of Fornovo** - First MAJOR battle of First Italian Wars. This resulted in the French being
expelled from the Italian peninsula entirely, thereby undoing the work Charles VIII's work a year or so prior.

**Archambaud de Croÿ**- last name pronounce Croo-e. Legitimate historical figure who died at the Battle of Agincourt. (obviously for these intents and purposes, he was Embraced on the battle field)
She is born at the end of the summer of 1555. Her mother labors with her for hours in the cool of the night, the dawn of the morning, until she emerges at the height of the afternoon. All sunshine and warmth on a crown of black hair as she breaks into this life with strong, piercing wails.

She is the second daughter and last child of three to the Marquis and Marquess of Aix and la Chambre, born in the beautiful Château de La Bâtie-Seyssel. She is baptized three days after her birth and christened with the name Louisé Aliette Françoise Seyssel-Chambert.

Like her elder two siblings, she possesses her mother's good looks and father's wit. Marie, elder by two years, has the greater portion of their mother's visage combined with their father's fairer hair. Jean, eight years older, is quite intelligent but sickly. Louisé falls somewhere in between. She is harder to read than the other two. There is a wrinkling between the eyes. A crinkle of the nose. Minute movements in facial expression that made it difficult to discern what is boredom from agitation, fatigue from frustration. Positive emotions are easily spotted. The negative ones, the warning signs before a terrible, little temper are not so clear.

Louisé is pretty, but the blue of her eyes held a curiosity bordered by cunning. When she wanted something, she wanted it, and usually found a way to get it. She is a clever little problem-solver but impatient and intemperate in contrast to her siblings.

Marie, with temper not foreign to her, could remain docile and obedient for longer periods because she had learned that, by doing so, she got what she wanted. Jean, on the other hand, was too sickly to garner anything but sympathy from those around him. He did not have to fight or fuss to get what he wanted when a well-placed cough could do it for him. Louisé was not so lucky. She had been her father's last hope at a healthy son and when not being fussed at by him, was overlooked. Charles Guillaume Seyssel-Chambert does not know how to relate to his children in any way besides tending to their education. Louisé doesn't care though, for she loves her mother above anyone else in the world, and the lady loves her children back.

Things become more complicated as France explodes into a civil war in 1562 over religion. The staunchly Catholic family of Savoie is now constantly on edge. Fear of Protestant ruffians gives Louisé nightmares, which her elder sister only provokes. Massacre brings more than just fear. It brings strangers and soldiers to their little commune. A bang on their fortified doors in the middle of a stormy night draws Marie and Louisé from their sleep. From their room, they can hear the guardsmen bring someone into the grand hall. Louisé is almost seven, Marie nine, as they descend the cold stones to spy who is bothering their father this late at night.

There are two of them. Damp hoods thrown back as they introduce themselves. Too far away to hear, the sisters do not catch their names but make quick work of taking them in. They are roughly the same height, the blonde a little taller perhaps but not enough to make much difference. The blonde man is like one carved from stone. Even from a distance, he appears hard and sharp, unforgiving and unrelenting with his hand ever on his sword. His eyes are icy, like the lake after its
first thin layer of frost. He is probably just as warm.

His companion is a bit different. Longer brown hair with honey eyes. He is the warmer of the two. He apparently knows how to smile. Traveling in this weather has made both pale, which makes their eyes sharper and while Marie seems drawn to them, Louisé hangs back.

"Marie, don't..." she whispers, unsure, "We will get in trouble!"

Marie ignores her sister and makes the brave first steps toward the strangers, easily drawing attention to herself. That is what Marie does, after all. Like Sunday Mass choir synchronicity, the heads of the strangers snap to take in the newcomer. This was far from the lord they were expecting. Louisé stays put, like a stone herself until her father strides in with her mother following behind. Like a bolt of lightning, Louisé darts from her hiding place on the stairs to her mother's skirts. She doesn't like either man but is too full of curiosity to stray away now. They don't seem amazed that another popped out at all.

The dark-haired stranger laughs and shakes his head, kneeling his body down to look at both girls. Louisé feels uneasy beneath his gaze and tugs for her mother to pick her up. At seven, though, her mother knows she can stand for herself.

"Pauvre et douce petite fille..." the dark haired man coos and before she can react, his cool hand is patting her head. He straightens himself and bows a little to her father. His compatriot follows suit, but says nothing.

From this vantage point, Louisé can hear the lulling tone of the man's voice as he explains who they are and what brings them to the chateau. Nobles from Belgium, they had been traveling back from Italy when they encountered hostile Protestants. The blonde was motioned to, but by this time, Louisé's eyes are feeling heavy and her fascination in them has been lost. She leans against her mother's leg and considers the honey she saw one of the field servants bring in.

She feels a tingling sensation on her neck and brings her gaze back around. The blonde man is staring at her and she can only stare back. She is incapable of looking away. Her hand tightens on her mother, who is busy watching her husband walk away with the dark-haired gentleman. Her father's voice calls back from the entryway for her mother to get some servants and rooms ready. A quick, but gentle, slap to the hand releases her mother from Louisé's grip as she moves to do what a lady of the house does. She leaves her daughters in the presence of a strange man to get servants.

Marie is teetering between following them and the stranger left behind. She opts for the latter and moves in between her sister and the man, breaking the unwavering gaze with her larger-than-size presence.

"Sir, what is your name?" Marie asks as polite as she can, since it is painfully obvious she wasn't paying attention the first time this was explained.

He appears frustrated by this question, and corrects a quick sneer to answer it for Marie, "Sébastien." His voice is the same shade of ice as his eyes. His fingers are drumming against the pommel of his blade as he looks between both girls, shifting uneasily in their chemises. He is as unsure of what to do with them as they are of him, but the staring contest continues until Marie opens her mouth again to display her deficit in attention, "Where are you from?"

Her eyes are growing wider. She is voicing the curiosity Louisé is too afraid to make known.

"Belgium," he spits it out like a piece of cooked gristle. He stares hard at Marie and cocks a brow,
relaxing a little. "And what is your name, pretty little miss?"

Compliments are Marie's Achilles heel.

She beams and recites the long name bequeathed to any noble-born child, "Marie Hélène Joséé Seyssel-Chambert." Louisé’s chatty sister ends with a customary curtsy.

It is a sentiment the nervous baby of the family does not copy.

"Lovely name," he replies. Louisé can hear the boredom in his voice. All adults become bored with children eventually, only most pretend to be otherwise for longer. This man does not pretend. This man is not that polite.

"You do not sound like you're from Belgium," Louisé murmurs, toeing the ground and waiting for her mother to come back.

Perhaps her nursemaid. When she lifts her eyes, the man is staring at her again. His brows are lifted but his eyes are unhappy.

"Pardon?" he brings himself slowly down to their level. Like a hunter drawing back their bow, the move is slow and purposeful. "What did you say?"

Marie is looking back at Louisé in a manner most instant. Speak! Her sister's eyes command her but for fear, Louisé clamps her mouth shut and tries to look down at her feet, which have grown cold by now. She just wants to go to bed.

Cool fingers tap insistently on the bottom of her chin, compelling her to look up into those discomforting eyes. "Tell me what you said." His command is soft as feathers, but strict and cutting. Her bodies tightens as she tries to resist, but she cannot. She feels utterly compelled to answer his request, even if it comes out a whimper.

"I said you do not sound like you're from Belgium." Louisé can feel her bottom lip trembling.

"And what makes you say that?" his voice has changed a fraction. He is reacting to her quivering lip and voice.

"Your friend, he sounds different from you. You sound like Henri…" Louisé scoots until she is behind her sister, nothing more than a dark crown of hair in his line of vision.

"Henri?"

Marie is slow to catch on, but fast enough to answer the man's question in her sister's stead, "Henri is our cousin…He's from the North. He lives in Reims."

The man makes a sound and Louisé looks toward the opening of the hallway. She can hear her father coming back. From the other direction, their mother is returning with servants. Marie opens her mouth, asks another question but Louisé is preoccupied on getting back to her mother. The tingly feeling at her neck draws her attention back to the man. Marie's eyes are locked there too.

"Go to bed." And that is that for the night.

Sébastien does not like children. He never has. Of all the things he grieved losing once he was embraced, children were not among them. He had considered the necessity of passing his name along to a healthy son, but only when he had gotten his due…his title, his land, his everything the
fallen stars promised. A necessity which would have required the deplorable state of marriage to an
unworthy woman with no definite guarantee of pregnancy, much less a son, after the first attempt.

The very act required for such things was never as satisfying for Sébastien as it had been for the vast
majority of his fellow soldiers. Crying Italian women, overdone French whores…none of them
satisfied beyond brief relief from the toils of campaigning. He was constantly accused of being too
rough, too cold…too something. All Sébastien heard was whining, excuses for poor performance
and technique. In the end, after countless teasing from other men at arms, Sébastien emerged the
victor after hundreds were crippled with syphilis.

He had always been more interested in improving his skill with a sword of steel, not flesh, anyhow.
That skill is what got him where he was now. Immortal. Forever young with strength and abilities to
crush the skulls of his enemies. However, instead of developing those skills to be as sharp as the
blade at his side, Sébastien and his Sire were relegated to being missionaries for the great gospel of
the Camarilla. In an effort to strengthen the original following convened at the Convention of
Thorns, lower level Kindred were given the opportunity at glory and prestige by spreading the word
and securing converts. Given his ecclesiastical background, Sébastien was a natural choice for the
job. Being a leech, de Croÿ though it "best" to join his youngest Childe in this task.

A task that had brought Sébastien back to a place he has not seen, nor thought of, in over sixty years.
The flirtatious daughter is long since married away and elderly, if not dead and gone. Her elder
brother's grandson is now the lord and as Sébastien watches his Sire speak with the man, he can see
the vague similarities between him and his antecessor, between him and the small, pale things he
shooed off. Oh yes, his task had brought him back to a very familiar home with a completely
unfamiliar cast of characters. Charles is not so jovial, not so alcoholic as his predecessor was and
these qualities earn Sébastien's speck of respect. Charles is welcoming though, especially when they
offer a façade of proof of their dedication to the Holy Roman Catholic Church. Sébastien receives his
own room and spends an hour covering the windows, make shifting a layer of curtains to surround
his bed. Until they return to Belgium, with lavish rooms sans fenestrella, he is paranoid of the dawn.

The remainder of the night is his to contemplate upon.

Though they fed before arriving, Sébastien uncorks a bottle of his finest and pours himself a quarter
of his glass. Something to sip in time with his reflections as he enjoys the crackling of a small fire.

Simple pleasures, he tells himself as he inhales the bouquet of his crimson refreshment…youth with
notes of discipline, finery and dedication. Superb, he thinks as he sips again and takes another breath
to get the full taste of it on his tongue.

The blood catches in his throat as a very different scent invades his senses. He swallows and sneers,
running his thumb along the lip of the glass as the aroma of that little girl hovers on his soft palate.
She had been in this room sometime today, for a great stretch of time and now she has soured the
delicate, delicious taste of the Italian duchess.

Sébastien has never liked children. For a number of reasons mostly centered around their disgusting,
needy ways, Sébastien avoids children at all costs. He is a strict disciple of the progeny between
"spare the rod, spoil the child" and "children are better seen, not heard". He wanted to stab de Croÿ
for leaving him alone with those two. A dirty-blond with a never-ceasing mouth, and a pale, shy but
impertinent imp with a coal-black crown…At least they were not unattractive and at least the
younger had the correct idea of keeping silent. He gripped his glass as a ripple of unexpected
excitement ran over his stomach. Predator by nature, Sébastien could not deny the intense pleasure
he found in forcing that child to talk.
His eyes slid closed. He inhaled again as the tip of his tongue ran along the back of his right fang. Her pale skin, her downcast eyes of mulled cerulean and that trembling lip. His stomach tightened and he clenched his teeth. The fear in her eyes as he compelled her to look into his eyes, the heart that pumped faster as he obliged her to answer his question, the hopeless realization that she could not fight him…all these things formed a delirious libation that did not quench, but thoroughly aroused the beast in him. The part of him that enjoyed the hunt for fame and fortune as a soldier, that marauding essence of being a vampire was stirring. Sébastien had worked hard to reign that in, make it as uniform and disciplined as the rest of him. He drank from goblets and glasses, not fleshly throats. He didn't want the skin spoiling the taste of the blood. Therefore, he had become skilled at cutting and healing without tasting. But this place…he pitched forward and downed the contents left in the glass. This place with its people was threatening the resolve he had spent his Kindred career creating. No, not people…person. He snarled and stood. That little girl with her perfect, submissive disposition was undoing him quickly.

No, Sébastien did not like children. He did like prey. And now, he had found the perfect prey to entertain himself with until they were on their way.

They were never on their way. Two years seemed to have flown by in a swirl of intensifying religious unrest and petty torment for Louise. She didn't understand her father's sudden willingness to endorse two strangers after countless denials to fellow nobles. They were wealthy enough to endorse dozens but her father was so private and contemplative that he would rather money sit and gain interest than risk losing it because it was attempting to do something. That changed, like Summer to Fall, with the arrival of barons de Croÿ and LaCroix.

Louise's stomach tightened into a horrible knot. The quill in her hand shook, sprinkling ink all over the paper she was practicing her letters on. Baron de Croÿ she could handle. He tried too hard to be overly gregarious with everyone in the chateau and patted her like she were a pet of his. The other baron…that was an entirely different story Louise hated playing a character in. For two years, he seemed to make it his personal mission to torment her as he liked. It wasn't blatant, like the way the field hands trained horses with whips; no, this was far more subtle and invisible to anyone who wasn't she nor he.

Her writing, her riding, clothes, hair, attire…all of it was up for his unwanted criticism. And what baffled her the most is how a man she only saw once a week, for an hour or two at the most, could be so effective at making her quiver with fear. It wasn't just the critiques, however. Her sister often criticized her, especially once she began putting on weight that hadn't existed for Marie when she was Louise's age. Her father assessed her, too, though his perspective was more academic. No…Monsieur LaCroix also touched.

He liked to wait until they were alone, until Marie had darted from the room. Then he would do it. He would touch under her chin, or grasp her jaw, or curl his fingers about her shoulder and squeeze. Every time he did, Louise couldn't help but look at his face.

She dropped the quill and looped her arms around her middle, feeling the poke of her chubby stomach through the gown. Even the memory of his glacial stare had her frightened. He didn't do anything beyond making her recognize him. Once she did, he would say something, release his hold and she could breathe again. For those few seconds he touched her, though, it felt like he were suffocating her with a pressure unknown to her. This unseen force pushed her down, tightened her up and held her captivated for his discretion.

As a result, Louise began keeping to rooms she knew he would not enter. She began rushing through her meals and prayers, all in an effort to get to bed before they got to the chateau. Sometimes she
would be lucky, sometimes she wouldn't. Regardless, Louisé now suffered from nightmares at least once a week. Claws and fangs, pain and blood...horrible scenes she couldn't explain and could talk about with no one else besides her brother. Jean, for his part, listened with intent but his ill disposition left him as little aid. They shared a mutual dislike for Baron LaCroix, but these siblings were at the mercy of their own demons in keeping him away.

Louisé abandoned her practices as the sun waned in the sky. She trotted herself down to check on dinner and hide among her mother and maids, in the event the men showed themselves tonight. She was glad she never saw them during the day, and unlike Marie, never questioned why.

She was unlucky that evening. Dinner had been pushed back, which meant prayers were pushed back, which meant he was striding down the hallway by the time they emerged from their private chapel. Marie, overeager for his attentions, practically rushed him once she saw him. He had learned to tolerate her more, indulge her a little and expand the length of his patience but even he had his limits. Sébastien was not up for placating a young girl who flirted with death itself. No, his eyes were on the prey that managed to escape him.

"That is lovely, Marie, but if you will excuse me," he tugged his arm away and continued walking, leaving the pouting girl just behind, "Your father asked me to fetch him something."

She would have followed, had her mother not called her. He was grateful and free. Free to pursue the hunt he had left off since five days ago. He took his time walking, since the weighty nine year old had a third, or less, his stride. He caught up to her, rounding a corner in time to see her ducking into the study. Unfortunate babe, he thought and smiled a wicked smile as he entered in behind her.

She was curled into a chair, trying to make herself so small as to not be seen by anyone. Poor her, that she looked larger the harder she tried to contract. She was focused too, as he saw the quill moving as fast as she could make it without completely botching whatever she was working on. The beast swelled within him as he moved up behind her chair, gazed over her shoulder and took in what she was doing. He heard her swallow whatever lump fear had created in her throat. And her fear smelled delicious.

"What are you doing, Louisé?" he loomed and moved his hands down to the arms of the chair. She clutched her arms to her side, as if afraid he would burn her.

"Nothing," Louisé stilled her quill, hesitated in lifting it then dipped it into the inkwell.

"Tut, tut, tut," he clucked his tongue and kneeled down so he was eye-level with the profile of her face. He could hear her heart begin to race, and the sweet blood just beneath the surface dash about her body. Oh, this was too easy and too satisfying for words! The more structured part of himself knew he should stop. She was becoming pudgy and that was hardly attractive but the beast... the beast wanted this. That fraction of his person enjoyed too much the way her eyes teared up when he stroked the soft skin beneath her chin and forced her to look up. Yes, that predator enjoyed her helplessness and unwilling obedience. "You should not fib, Louisé. You are obviously not doing nothing."

He watched her tiny fist clench and relax as she began writing once more. Her blue eyes were zeroed in on each letter, but the rest of her was fully aware of how close danger was. He leaned in a little and she paused, sucked in a little breath and tried to fidget away from him.

"I am writing," she acquiesced.

"Writing what?" he rewarded her with a miniscule amount of space.
"A letter…" she dipped the quill again. Ever on edge.

"To whom?" his fingers began to flex and she tensed. He knew she knew what was coming.

She did not answer. She just continued writing, which was not especially easy for her. He felt the prickle of irritation in the back of his skull and pressed forward. She stiffened, but continued her task as undeterred as she could in a very deterring situation.

"I asked you a question, Louisé. It is quite rude of you not to answer me," his fingers drummed. She swallowed. The beast growled.

Still, she remained resolutely silent. He wanted to laugh. His doughy, little hind was attempting to fight back. Too bad for her that only stags have antlers to battle with. His fangs throbbed as he moved a hand for her shoulder.

"No!" she shrieked and spun. She hadn't fully thought out what she was doing as the hand, still holding the quill, came flying at his face. The next sound she heard was him roaring as his hand flew to his face.

No…does don't have antlers. But she was no doe. She was a frightened nine year old with a freshly sharpened quill.

She didn't want to wait around to deal with him angry. She had dealt with him enough in whatever unsavory mood he was usually in. Louisé toppled out of the chair, scrambled and made a beeline for the door. Behind her, he made a hissing noise and before she got too far, she felt a solid grip on her shoulder. She cried out, something sharp stinging her skin in a few places and forcing her to turn around.

Just when she began to fear he had her, the door to the study flew open and her mother stood in the doorway. Louisé's nurse was behind her and neither looked happy about the sight before them. Like a toddler, Louisé broke down.

"Mama!" she cried and shrugged off his hand enough to run for her mother's waist.

"What is going on in here?!" For a delicate woman refined by courtly teaching, her mother commanded a surprising amount of presence.

"I am afraid I may have startled your daughter," she heard him half-lie. Louisé partially turned her face from her mother's gown to look at him. A red kerchief was pressed against the right side of his face and two thin lines of red ran from between his fingers.

"I can see that," Louisé felt her mother's reassuring hands on her shoulders. "My question is how did that happen?"

"She was so immersed in writing this," he paused, turned and looked at what she had created, "letter, that when I reached for the book your husband was lending me, I must have scared her out of her wits."

"And your cheek?"

"Will be fine," he answered curtly.

"Well, then, have a good evening Monsieur LaCroix. Louisé, it is well past time for you to be in bed."
Louisé was never so happy to be led to her bedroom by a curt mother. She didn't even give him a backwards glance as she trotted between the protection of her dearest Mama and nurse.

He waited until they were gone, and out of earshot, to curse soundly. He pulled the stained piece of cloth from his face and traced the healing scrape with the tip of his finger. He snarled as he looked down at the letter. A letter to her blasted cousin, detailing what a devil Sébastien was. A letter that took her considerable time to write. Out of spite, he crumbled up the letter and threw it into the fireplace to watch it burn with relish.

He glanced down at his other hand. Blotches of red decorated three of his fingers. He hadn't meant to prick the girl with talons normally unused, but she had provoked him and deserved some punishment. He lifted his hand to sniff at the blood. He had never bothered being interested in her blood, since she was still a child. She hadn't enough vintage to herself to be anything but bland, though the aroma was mouth-watering. For the hell of it, Sébastien licked the blood off his fingers.

He stiffened as the taste danced on his tongue. She was sweet...oh, so sweet. Her blood reminded him of the thrills of war, of the excitement of seeing that star race across the heavens. He groaned and wiped his fingers with the clean part of the handkerchief. Sébastien LaCroix was now very hungry.
Taste and See

They called it a "peace" between the Catholics and Protestants of France, but Louisé knew better. She may not have been the politician her father was, or the warrior her Crusader ancestor was, but she knew the difference between peace and this joke of a treaty between the crown and rebels.

Peace meant lying in her bed without fearing a knife at her throat come morning, it meant visiting the town priest without praying to the Virgin not to be jumped and killed going either way. Most of all, peace meant not living within a horseback ride's distance from one Baron LaCroix.

Where LaCroix had been teasing for self-satisfying reasons before, ever since her quill scraped his face he had been nothing less than malicious. Before he had simply poked her pudgy side for the sake of touching her and making her shiver with fear. Now he made cruel remarks for the sake of watching her cry. Sometimes she believed the sting of a Protestant's blade would be easier to endure than the presence of a man now bent on making her suffering Hell a reality on Earth.

No, this was an armed peace…a militant reconciliation facilitated by the bastard daughter of England's eighth Henry, who sat upon the English throne while her troops occupied Le Havre. Louis de Bourbon, prince de Condé had his Treaty of Hampton Court, the Huguenots had a champion in Elizabeth and the Guise family was forced to dispel with their tails between their legs.

The only benefit to any of it was that a large portion of men return to the commune of Barby. Good, strong Catholic men enlisted by her father who made Louisé feel the littlest bit safer, but she imagined the surrounding woods to be filled with as many Protestant ruffians as it was wolves.

The only person more unnerved by the War of Religion other than Louisé was her mother. Beatrice de Foix-Seyssel-Chambert is as Catholic as rocks are hard, as gentle and honorable a lady as merino wool is soft but above all these things, she is like a hawk over her children. Filled with indelible guilt over Jean's seemingly constant maladies, Beatrice had taken it upon herself to know her children's comings and goings with the dedication of a Florentine banker. Her nervousness that this war places her darlings in direct danger is the source of many arguments between she and the Marquis, who does not understand why she would want to leave the semi-fortified walls of Château de La Bâtie-Seyssel for the unknown of her sister's house in Reims. This bellicose armistice has as much merit to Beatrice as it does Louisé, for both can see the end nigh and danger around every corner.

In his eyes, Louisé had every right to double look around every turn of her chateau. Sébastien had never been one to forgive easily, and even when he took it upon himself to bend to the ways of mercy and forgive, he did not forget. In Louisé's case, the forgiveness was a fragile one and though no scar lingered, the burn of her quill enraged him every time he glanced at her chubby form. The memory was a constant reminder of how Beast or no Beast, he had failed to make a lesser being bend to his will. His well-planned strategy had failed him and resulted not only in a sting to the pride (as well as the flesh) but a hunger taboo, even to the most unscrupulous of Sabbat.

He thirsted for the blood of a nine year old girl!

A child, of all tragedies!

While the innocence of children oft provoked a bloodlust in their kind unimaginable to the rationally minded, it was so strictly forbidden that to indulge oneself in the act would put the perpetrator on equal pedestal with Amaranth. His head would roll faster than an unrepentant Lasombra's. Still, while he could not yield to his desires with fang or blade, he could cosset the hunger with an imagination so delectable, so gratuitous, it would make Toreador blush.
The most unhinging aspect of any of this was the fact that Sébastien was unhinged. All those years of resolute determination that pulled him through a brief priesthood, hours of strict discipline to make him an adept soldier and decades of meritorious service to the Camarilla and ladder climbing were being rusted and compromised by the sapidity of a pre-adolescent female.

Therefore, while he may have gratified the hunger in the wee hours of the eventide with a shameful fantasy of draining Louisé, he punished himself the way a commander would a corporal for unproductive behavior. Like a flagellate monk, he would beat himself with his belt until the images dissolved into nothing more than ashy rage. This was training forged through discipline.

He could no longer fill her with fear, lest it continue to provoke the bestial famine frothing in his stomach. Instead, he filled her with pain. He spat careless insults at her face and back, gestating hatred and tears in her. Hatred was easier to bear than sumptuous, silky fear. When she hated him, he could be in a room with her all night long and think of her as nothing less than another kine overpopulating the world. With hatred tainting her blood, salted by anger or injured tears, Louisé was as appetizing as her sister or sickly brother. Hatred made her no one special, and that kept the beast chained where it belonged. But who knew how strong those chains were...how long they would hold before they snapped and like Charybdis, swallowed Sébastien's sanity whole and left Louisé nothing more than a husk of skin and useless organs, several pints filling his belly?

So, Louisé had a reason to be afraid.

"Make him go away, Papa!" Louisé whined.

"Keep silent until you are spoken to, child! I do business with the Baron and until that business is concluded, he will come and go as I please!" Charles snapped at his youngest child, rubbing a temple.

Not one to usually give into whining, Louisé had reached an all-time low in her patience for LaCroix's presence in her home.

"But what does he do for you that another noble could not?"

Her father let out a long, exaggerated sigh and caught his daughter's eyes. His countenance softened a fraction when he saw the pained determination in Louisé's expression. While not a nurturer, like Beatrice, Charles was not cruel and strove to give all three children better than he had had himself. Still, business like politics and religion were spheres only weakened by the grasping fingers of women.

"Louisé, if you find yourself bored then I highly suggest you continue to practice your reading or writing. For heaven's sake, go pray to the Virgin or patron saints to remove Baron LaCroix from your path but do not ever again meddle in my business with him or presume to have the influence to sway my disposition toward him, as he has made me an even wealthier man!"

Louisé pouted out a bottom lip, mimicking Marie's mannerisms that often won her father over, "Father, he is cruel to me! He calls me fat!"

Her chubbier cheeks, in contrast to Marie's sleeker facial contours, reaped poorer results than her sister. Charles winced and leaned back in his chair, setting down the quill he had been using to scratch out financials. Louisé recognized the wince. It was the same one her nursemaid made when the dresses became a little tighter, when the bodice wouldn't tie the whole way shut and new fabric needed to be bought to make Louisé something new that would fit. Some girls might appreciate new dresses, but not Louisé because they were being made to accommodate her new width in the wrong
place, not the new height or bust or hips girls acquired with age. Charles drummed his fingers then looked at his daughter full in the face.

"Louisé…perhaps the manner in which he is saying these things is inappropriate, but their veracity is not."

A cold air rose between Louisé and her father as she stared at him for several silent seconds. Her mouth trembled and eyes burned as she turned and left the room. She heard her father call for her to stop but she ignored him and marched to find her mother.

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His words still rang in the hollow of her ears, centuries after they'd been spoken. In this modern era with of psychology, Oprah and Dr. Phil, Louisa was able to gain perspective on the exact extent of the damage wrought by her father's words. Poorly timed, though as tenderly delivered as a man of his time could accomplish, Charles planted the seed for Louisa's obsessive behaviors from that day forward. Weight was no more an issue for her now than breast cancer or liver failure, but that didn't free Louisa from painfully preoccupying over board meetings, character files or real estate.

"I believe I've said all I need to on this matter," her nails, with their seventy dollar white tips, stop their drumming to add a minute dramatic flair.

Four bodies at the table stiffened. She couldn't just see it, she could smell it. Hormones polluting the blood, forcing muscles to contract out of a desperate plea for self-preservation…it was an exhilarating aroma. It wasn't until she inhaled that aroma for the first time that she fully understood why he played the games he did when she was little. Fear was to the blood for some Kindred what chocolate sauce was to ice cream for kine. Her first taste of fear-laden blood had been the smallest step to forgiving the Baron for his antics. And just like he had thought back then, she thought now. They had a reason to be afraid. One of their members was tap-dancing on her last available nerve for the evening.

A fifth, last body at the table was smirking. Out of the corner of her eye, Louisa saw the final primogen turn the pages of the proposal with a talon, "Perhaps my colleague's passion has overridden their better judgment in a matter this sensitive."

"My judgment is as sharp as it has ever been!" a palm smacked the table, breaking the tension in the room and snapping her last nerve in two.

"And I will remind each and every member at this table that the only judgment that matters at this point in time is mine," she closed her copy of the proposal and folded her hands in front of her. This time, all bodies tensed. "Someone, anyone…tell me what I'm thinking right now."

Five throats swallowed. Five bodies fidgeted in their chairs. Five shells of blood filled with fear, titillating the royal nasal cavity. At face value, it was an unfair question since not a single member had permission to poke her cranium for the answer. Nor could they compromise their own perceived standing in her eyes by carelessly guessing. Their fear, her impatience…either could be responsible for her posing them the seemingly catch twenty two question.

One, quivering mouth opened to answer her question, "That this is a subject we should put to bed until the need arises for us to give it deserving attention."
Though the youngest primogen of her court, Lorelei O'Hara, made a point of understanding her prince as well as she possibly could. She was old enough to be primogen but young enough to know how close her head was to the chopping block if she screwed up. Therefore, though a painful suck-up behind the backs of her colleagues, Lorelei knew best how to answer the question thrust at them. Louisa closed her eyes, set her hands on the arms of her chair and nodded. Five chairs squeaked as five bodies rushed, as formally as they could, out the door. Oh yes, they had reason to be afraid.

Louisé thought she knew fear, understood it from a privileged point of view afforded her by Baron LaCroix. What she thought she comprehended as fear when she woke that morning was a watered-down, pale comparison to the fresh knowledge she gained by the end of the night. The world was an utterly different place by moonrise.

The day started like any other. A cool breeze was in the air to signify Summer's progression to Autumn complet. The leaves finished changing their colors and the grapes on the vine were plump and ready to be harvested. The chill in the air may have been the cause, but for whatever reason Jean's health took a turn for the worst. The chateau echoed with the chorus of his hacking coughs. Louisé spent the better part of morning and afternoon shut within the family chapel. Her knees throbbed and thumb ached from hours of bead-moving prayer. What could not be guaranteed by medicines or doctors' traditional remedies, Beatrice firmly believed could be accomplished by fervent prayer.

Whilst they prayed, doctors besieged her beloved brother with leeches. When she groaned or complained, Beatrice ordered her to consider the agony of her brother or the holy passion of their Savior before she groused any further. Believing she only had one parent still pleased with her, Louisa shut her mouth unless to murmur in sacred Latin.

By late afternoon Louisé could see the toll of unanswered prayers undoing their mother. Wanting to stay as close to her first born and maintain her role as the strong spiritual support of the house, her mother made the reluctant decision to send Louisa, Marie and one of the men-at-arms to ride to Barby's church that they may light a candle, pray to the Virgin and bring back the priest. Excited to leave the chateau and fear of death, Louisa rode with vigor but little did she know what she would be riding to.

They entered the church and found it quite empty. The setting sun created an ominous lighting throughout the sanctuary. The statue of the Lady looked less full of grace and more filled with menace. Her downcast features, which usually inspired a sense of maternal mercy, now only made Louisé feel judged.

Judged for being too heavy, for not praying enough, for whining while her brother suffered...a hundred guilts thrown on her from the eyes of a single statue. Louisé's hand shook as she lit the candle. She watched Marie's shudder so much the flame went out. They sent the guard to find the priest so they could get out and go home as quickly as possible. Louisé kneeled and raised her hands to pray, sensing her sister's uneasiness as much as her own. The footsteps of the guard interrupted her prayers. He grasped her upper arm and told her they needed to leave immediately.

"Why?" she and Marie asked in unison as she rose to her feet.

"The priest is dead," he hissed, drawing his sword as they headed for the door.

"What?! But how?!" Louisé felt her stomach tighten and listened to Marie squeak beside her.
"It is an omen!" Marie collapsed to her knees and crossed herself.

"Get up you little fool!" the guard turned and bent to raise Marie up.

Louisé cried, the guard grunted and spat a mouthful of blood into Marie's face before collapsing beside her. An arrow stuck out of his back like some murderous agent of a vengeful Cupid. The archer stood in the doorway of the church, bow lowered and visage shadowed by the last sliver of dying sunlight. He was not alone either. There was a man on either side of him and they were advancing.

Kindred or kine, the fragrance of death was never a pleasant one. It was possibly worse for Kindred with their heightened sense smell. The boy was clearly dying but LaCroix estimated, and de Croy confirmed, Jean had a few years left in him. By the time LaCroix and his sire arrived at the chateau, the hype of bloodletting had thinned and the anxiety of the still-absent daughters was at its height.

LaCroix allowed his socially flamboyant sire ease their benefactor's fears while he took a more practical approach and rode off to the church to find the girls for himself and bring them back. He didn't have to ride long before finding Marie, who struggled to guide her horse properly. An absent younger sister roused a brow and his curiosity.

"Marie!" he grabbed the silly girl's reigns and jerked her horse's head forward. "What's happened? Where is Louise?"

"Protestants!" Marie spat at him. He was repulsed by the tears and thin line of snot running down her face. Noticing that brought his attention to the sticky substance dousing her face. It smelled distinctly familiar. "At the church!"

"What?!" he could put together why that would scare her, but left one question unanswered. He grabbed her chin and forced her to look into his eyes. "Where is your sister?"

"I left her at the church," her voice was listless, characteristic of anyone responding to vampiric domination.

"You left her there?" he disgust was palpable as he fought not to squeeze the face between his fingers.

"I was scared…I just wanted to get out of there."

He abandoned Marie where her horse stood and kicked his own into a gallop toward the church. He always knew Marie was of baser substance because she was pompous and vain, but her cowardice brought her to a new low in Sébastien's eyes. Fury filled his stomach as he dismounted from the horse and strode up to the front of the church. They had been smart and sealed the doors from the inside and rather than make a brazen scene and imitate some Arthurian idiot, Sébastien stole himself to the back of the church. His ecclesiastic resume endowed him with a greater familiarity to the common construction of churches than a normal lay person or noble. Memories of Metz and Alsace swarm as he creeps into the church from the rear. A feminine keening narrowed his eyes, quickened his pace and sharpened his fangs.

One of the men grabbed Louise's black hair and yanked. Tender-headed and terrified, Louise bawled. One smacked her to make her stop. Louise felt her bottom lip split and bleed but she stopped. The man with the bow sat on the steps of the bema, pulling on the string like a homicidal lutanist, staring at her.
"Do you pray fat, little Catholic?" the archer questioned.

Louisé stiffened with a mix of emotions. Terrified and angry, she didn't know how to respond. Her tongue came out to lick her lips and the blood that came with them but she said nothing. The same man yanked her hair again but she did not cry this time. Instead, she looked back at the man with his bow. The flickering light of the candles all around him, some in fancy red-glass containers, made him resemble like what she imagined Satan to look like. Dark shadows cast behind him were the leathery, black wings of a fallen angel and the red lambent reflecting on his skin the flames of Hellfire. She shuddered as she imagined a shadow move behind him…another demon joining his master.

"I will ask you again," the man rose, drawing an arrow back with his bow as he took a step closer to her. "Do you pray?"

Starring up at what was surely her death, Louisé assumed she would be crying. Not a single tear dared well up in her as she squared her body and glared at the man. Perhaps this was the mercy of the Lord…finding bravery in the face of heretics. This was the substance saints, accepting their torture and death with an incomprehensible fortitude that paved the way to glory. Yes, Louisé told herself as her back straightened, I shall be canonized for this. I shall be patron saint of all fat, Catholic girls, honey bee fields and apple orchards.

"A fair bit more than you, I would say," she finally responded. Her voice frightened its owner with how cold and careless it resounded in the space around them.

"Audacious, Catholic whore!" she watched the man who hit her raise his fist. Out of the corner of her eye, a shadow darted and before the man's knuckles touched her skin, gloved fingers tightened around his wrist. A blade rested against his throat.

For the first time since meeting him, Louisé's chest swelled with relief. Baron LaCroix squeezed the man's wrist until he cried out, "Protestants…how abhorrent."

A flurry of activity happened. The man with the bow jumped sideways and aimed his arrow at Sébastien's throat or heart…Louisé couldn't quite tell. The man holding her hair moved too. He yanked Louisé to her feet by her lockes and forced her face upward as cold metal was pressed to her throat. She made a mousish noise.

There was a growl. Inhuman. "I would not do that if I were you, heretic," LaCroix menaced.

"There are three of us and only one of you. The girl dies unless you release our friend, Catholic," her captor threatened.

"Louisé…close your eyes," the baron requested. She blinked, utterly confused by this and did not immediately shut her lids. Taller, he could see this. "Do as I say!"

Louisé's eyes slid closed. Sounds of terror and agony filled the sanctuary, bounding off the stone walls and stained glass windows. The sound of an arrow loosed mixed somewhere between the cries of men and gurgling. Louisé felt a hot, stinging pain at her throat and the man release her hair.

The man was begging. Begging and then screaming, muffled screaming. Louisé heard a sickening splash close behind her and a huffing approach. The sound reminded her of the wolf hounds her father hunted with…the way they heaved and panted with blood-stained muzzles. Once, one had tried to lick her face when father returned with a dead deer and her nurse had yanked her away but not before the scent of warm claret and death wafted into her nose.

That same scent rose up now as someone moved and kneeled in front of her. This was no wolf
hound, but a beast nonetheless. Louisé felt her body shaking, a pain jolting through her nerves as leathery fingers stroked her throat.

The cut wasn't deep but it didn't have to be on a thin-skinned creature like her. All children seemed to have parchment paper-thin skin and thin veins just beneath that fragile veneer. Louisé was bleeding and steadily, though not quickly which was his advantage. Without hesitation, he scooped her body into his arms and fled out the front door, flinging it open with an brusque kick. His horse, stupid and frightful creature in the dark, galloped off when the door swung open and he was left with little recourse but to run with her in his arms.

This lasted a minute, maybe two, before the perfume of her blood reached his nostrils. She had been terrified, up until the arrow faced her heart, and that was long enough to sweeten her crimson blood. Vitae debited while ripping the men away, Sébastien felt a bestial hunger rise up in him he could not fight. He no longer wanted to, anyway. He slowed to a walk and turned to the woods flanking the road. Entering them, he kneeled against the cold earth and repositioned Louisé.

Facing her, his fangs burned in his mouth. Her eyes flickered at the foliage around them and he heard her heart beat faster, smelled the fear. He lifted a hand to brush black hair from her face. He even removed his glove as gesture of comfort and uncharacteristic tenderness.

"Ssshhhhh, Louisé. You have nothing to fear. I am going to take care of you," he cooed, staring into her eyes.

Her heart obediently slowed and he felt her body relax in his arms. He licked his lips and lowered his head. His tongue snaked out and traced the cut on her skin with expert skill. The wound healed and he groaned as her taste teased his tongue. When he was finished, he drew his head back and stared up at the sky as he mulled on the flavor blooming in his mouth. It was so sweet…so heavy…He groaned. So hungry!

She whimpered and squirmed in his arms, her body unaccustomed to the stinging pleasure of being healed by a vampire. That weakling noise broke the last of his resolution and unleashed what he had been trying to protect her from. He snapped his attention back to her face, his thumb rubbing her cheek. He lowered his face, gliding his thumb to press against her lips, while he kissed her cheek and whispered into her ear.

"Forgive me."

Then he bit.

Her body was flooded. Flooded with such unfamiliar sensations, she couldn't even place names to them! Pleasure? Pain? Ecstasy? She didn't know! What she did know was he kissed her cheek, her neck and a sharp, quick pain followed. Some part of her body arched, her lips parted and eyes slid closed. She had no idea what he was doing but he was doing it well. Was he kissing her neck or sucking her into a dark void of pleasure? Someone around her was making a sinful noise and he was holding onto her tightly, groaning into her skin. She was slipping…

She flooded his mouth like a crimson tide. Bloody ecstasy. The delirious taste of the absolutely forbidden. He should have felt bad, guilty or abashed by his actions, especially when the ten year old in his arms made sounds similar to a well-trained courtesan. He knew full well what passions he had unearthed in her unprepared body, but the beast needed satisfying. He fed only a minute, closed the wound and pulled away. The straight-laced, seasoned soldier emerged once the last swallowed hit
his stomach and he stared down at her newly enraged by his barbaric behavior.

He cradled her in his arms and resumed his journey to the chateau. She murmured and blinked up at him, stars reflecting in her blue eyes. Sébastien paused to observe them there and felt his gut tighten as flashes of earth-ground heavenly recollections dominated his mind. Decades ago the stars had fallen. Decades ago heaven had promised him a great reward and divinely appointed him by falling at his feet. And here they were again, hosting in the shreds of innocence that were her eyes.

No…he thought. He had to get away from this girl.
Allowing herself to reminisce but a minute, she simultaneously let her guard down and he took the opportunity to seize the strand of silver highlighting her crown of black. Her body tensed, half-expecting him to yank the hair right out of her head but that never came. Her eyes slid from the moving horizon of the Puget Sound to the pale hand holding even paler hair. His fingers were messaging the hair while the ire in his eyes unsettled the atmosphere of the car ride. Louisa couldn’t decipher: was the ire a result of this perceived indiscretion or precursory events? Curious, she wondered if he was reminiscing too…if something about the silver stripe provoked dormant memories.

"You look like a skunk attached its tail to your face," he sneered and released the hair.

Well…that killed her theory mercilessly. She leaned into the upholstery of the Bentley. Honestly, Sebastian had such a thing for appearances. Insisting on this car was only one of many ways he demonstrated power through wealth. Louisa appreciated sportier material; something faster, bolder in color, was more her taste. Taste that had impulsive moments every decade or so, not that he ever approved of any of them. Smirking, she decided to take a smart-aleck approach in response to his insult.

"Didn’t I tell you I’d gone all Daniel Boone and use dead animal pelt in lieu of real hair? Really is much easier to manage. I save on shampoo. Very economic and aren’t our beloved politicians pushing for that now? Coupon clipping, scrimping and frugality?"

His glare was palpable but she didn’t stop smirking, just shifted barely out of his grasp. He was never one for anything but dry humor. The topic of politics was also low on his list of acceptable conversation material given the constant race running between Democrats and Republicans. Louisa knew LaCroix was anxious for Old Regime policy and leadership the same way he was anxious to get rid of the silver streak in her hair.

"Honestly, Louisa, whatever possessed you to do it in the first place?" his eyes became scrutinous toward her bangs.

"To accommodate the rest of the skunk," her banter partnered with a fanged smile.

Sebastian responded with little more than a growl. Her first warning. He wouldn’t ask the question again. She rolled her eyes at his old-school mannerisms wrapped in modern, three piece Prada.

"I wanted a change. Something to make me look," she bit the corner of her lower lip in pause; this habit he endured for personal reasons. Truly, she had done it out of impulse but to say that may inspire a sense of disciplinary education in the man across from her. So, she stuck to a tried and true reason why she did anything he perceived as frivolous, "Older."

He leaned back and sighed as if he were exhaling all the air in his body. It was a sigh she’d heard before and seemed to accompany some anecdote about the inescapable. "Louisa, there is absolutely no reason for you to look older. Honestly, people wished they could look as we do for as long as we do."
The attack, as horrific as it had been, was cloudy and inconsistent when she attempted to recall it the next morning. The details of everything were recited to her, as the story had been told to them by Baron LaCroix. Her remembering what had happened was not important. The incident served only one purpose: as fodder for her mother's campaign against remaining at the chateau. Beatrice felt like her prayers had been answers and since she had always believed the Lord answered in mysterious fashions, she pushed aside her maternal fear for the greater spiritual treasure of obedience. Any rebuttal her father could have formed died quickly. Charles acquiesced to his wife.

The move wasn't a quick one. First, they needed actual permission from their aunt to relocate and that took about a month to obtain. From the way their mother read the letter, Marie interpreted their aunt as thrilled by their impending arrival. Louisé heard a strain of her famous begrudging attitude hidden deep within the writing. Her wit determined that something had gone afoul at their aunt and uncle's estate for Aunt Paulette to be thrilled about them coming to stay in a home little more than half the size of their chateau.

Regardless of Beatrice's zeal, their departure was not immediately. It took weeks to plan their route and pack their things. Weeks spent enduring Marie's fawning over the bravery of Baron LaCroix, which Louisé was forced to point out only accentuated her sister's own cowardice. Marie's return ammunition was no less biting: teasing Louisé for her heavier appearance. A bitter rivalry erupted between the siblings. The elder's absolute abdication in the face of Protestant heathens cultivated special resentment in Louisé toward her sister. All she could see beneath the thin frame and pale hair was fainthearted selfishness. Equally disturbing was the fact that Louisé was now indebted to the very man she loathed more than anyone. Mild satisfaction came from the knowledge he was not expectant for compensation.

"Neither you nor your family owe me anything Louisé," he clarified days before her aunt's letter came.

"But you saved my life, so I'm told."

"You were a child in danger. I would have to be barbarian not to have attempted to save you."

He hadn't talked with her anymore since. To her recollection, she had not seen hide nor hair of Baron LaCroix since that brief encounter. Her self-esteem appreciated the absence but her curiosity was not so sated. Like a fire tended with an iron, her peaked interest considered the sudden change in his disposition toward her. One day he was cruel and the next apathetic to her presence. The only connecting factor she could find was his saving her life. Her childish mind inferred something had happened that night which altered his impression of her. What happened? She wondered in dull moments. Had she stabbed someone? Had he come upon her covered in blood? Murderous? Or as cowardly as her sister, hiding among church pews? A sinking sensation crept into her stomach. Had she wet herself? Whatever it was that made him distant, she imagined to be some shade of embarrassing.

Ten days! It took the lady and her daughters ten days to ride from their home to the estate of Guillaume de Dormans III (Louisé's uncle by marriage). Louisé could never understand the spite their grandmother must have had toward her elder daughter by marrying her to a man so completely opposite. If Beatrice was religious, Paulette was zealous. Her aunt was also austere, plump and
subdued in fashion. On the other hand, her Uncle Guillaume was bombastic, joking and as full of laughter as he was the wine his estate was famous for.

Though smaller than their chateau, the main home was surrounded by vast rows of braided vines full of grapes. While her family focused producing red wine and a variety of cheeses, her uncle Guillaume made heavy profit from the champagne he imported to other nobles. Even the royal family had been known to buy from Dormans. For all his success, Guillaume did not utilize his earnings by expanding his estate beyond its basic needs. Louise's suspicion was Paulette's antagonistic attitude toward lavish displays of wealth had something to do with their borderline monastic abode.

Another unfortunate drawback from being so successful in the champagne industry was her uncle greater pride in the grapes he grew than the two daughters his wife bore him. It showed in the way he thwacked his barrels with whoops of laughter and smiles as soon as they arrived, but glossed over his daughters as a painful formality. Louise felt the tension between her aunt and uncle once she stepped from the carriage.

"Beatrice! Welcome to our home!" Guillaume strode and hugged his sister-in-law tightly. Louise was sure her uncle knew only one volume when it came to speaking, "And what lovely ladies you have brought us!"

Her uncle's booming voice and swooping movements made Louise tremble. He swung Marie up, the attention making her giddy. Louise's pudgy status made her nervous about being hefted into the air. Her uncle, unlike her father, didn't seem to care as he swung her just as easily. Perhaps moving barrels of wine and heaving baskets of heavy grapes was not much different than twirling her. While not giddy, Louise admitted it made her feel special.

"Good to see how you girls have grown," Aunt Paulette's voice was soft and terse. Her hugs were similar in nature. She paused to size Louise up. In Paulette's smug eyes, her niece heard this: While my daughters might be plain, even boring, at least they are not their cousin's size. "We'll have to put you to work, my dear!" Her Aunt exclaimed with two quick pats to the sides of her arms.

Work was precisely what she was put to. Work gave her a precise understanding of why Aunt Paulette was so "thrilled" for them to come. In an effort to support the Catholic King, their uncle, cousin and half their male work force had gone to battle on behalf of the true faith. While Guillaume and Henri returned unscathed, the same could not be said of the others. They were not alone. The whole area suffered from depleted human resources, so Paulette used who she could to help collect the almost over-ripe Pinot noir, Chardonnay and Meunier grapes.

Louise had never exerted so much energy in her life! A basket strapped to her back, tossing grapes over her shoulders, Louise felt more like a servant than a noble. She was never supposed to sweat this much, ache this badly and only after one day... How many more days would be like this? What kind of road did they pave before her? Louise's coddled, privileged lifestyle did not accommodate for the demands of manual labor. The strain of servitude left her whiny and ungrateful.

"Mother, will we be doing this every day?" she asked before bed.

Beatrice smoothed her daughter's hair, "Ma chérie, we must remember the blessing in all this. God has provided our safety with our family, but we must not inconvenience them. If completing these chores is convenient for them, then that is what we shall do."

Louise did not argue the issue further, since it was arguing her safety. And as her mother put it, perhaps arguing with The Almighty. She decided to change topics to something she was far more interested in: the only reason she had been excited to come here at all, "Where is cousin Henri? He
was not here when we arrived and I did not see him today."

She watched her mother tense and look away. In the bed next to hers, Louisé watched Marie's eyes pop open and body incline to observe their mother's response. Beatrice chose her words carefully, "Your cousin is a tender subject presently. Please do not bring his name up around your aunt. Remember, we are not to inconvenience our family."

Henri fils de Dormans was not the son of Guillaume and Paulette. He was the result of Guillaume's carnal relationship with an unknown woman just before he married Paulette de Foix. The woman's family sent her to a convent. The nuns sent the baby boy to Guillaume once he was weaned. Guillaume accepted Henri without pause. Henri was the proof he seeded well, the evidence that his lack of legitimate heirs lay in his wife. Paulette viewed him as an abomination conceived by the sin of unholy lust. Since Paulette only gave his father daughters, Henri was her bane. Two stillborn boys made Henri his father's pride and joy.

His half-sisters, plain and pale, told him often they prayed for his soul and that he would find the righteous path meant for children out of wedlock. As testament he was kinder, their brother often replied that he prayed their future husbands wouldn't be half as ugly as they were. Paulette held back the urge to spit in his face. Henri fought the desire to call her "barren wench" instead of "my Lady mother". Neither liked the title for the same reason and as he grew, Henri settled on calling her "Tante"…to her face, anyhow.

Henri's relationship with his father was entirely different. Guillaume taught him to handle a sword, ride a horse, make wine and choose fine women when the time came. Money was put toward a more expansive education for his son than his daughters. Dormans wanted a well-rounded heir for the day he won the battle to legitimize his favored child. While physically capable, Henri struggled academically and felt the first sting of his father's disappointment when he failed to perform as aptly at philosophy as he did dueling. Scholastic setbacks did not sway Guillaume's preference for his son or the indulgences afforded Henri. The natural result was the way his son toed the line between respectful and cocky. He knew he was handsome, having been blessed with good looks from both parents. Father and mother's noble blood inflated his head even more. Whether or not he was recognized for it, Henri behaved every bit like the aristocrat he believed himself to be. He was flirtatious, carrying his father's same weakness for pretty faces. Guillaume's son also had a penchant for gambling. But, worst of all, Henri was ambitious. Almost seventeen, Henri craved fame and glory.

He knew if Paulette had her way, their eldest daughter would inherit and he would be shipped off to the abbey with his uncle. If he had it his way, he would continue fighting for the king. He would take his sword and fight the Protestants all the way to Martin Luther's feet. He would prove his worth with feats of strength; Henri would use glorious battle to secure his inheritance. Then he would dispatch his sisters to nunneries and his "Tante" anywhere else. That was the future. For now, Henri would endure this abbey in Reims.

"Tell me why I'm here uncle," he demanded as he stalked after Lemoine de Dormans, Abbot of Saint-Remi.

"Your father believes you need to hone your ecclesiastical senses as much the sense for battle or drinking."

"My father bel-" He grabbed his uncle's arm and pulled him to a stop, shocking passing priests. "My father's wife believes it's better to shut me behind abbey walls so her two-sack daughter can inherit my father's land instead of me."
Lemoine looked appalled. The Abbot recovered himself. Two fingers pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh, "Henri, there is no definite guarantee of you inheriting given the nature of your parents unwedded relations."

"There is no guarantee of either of his daughters inheriting either. Alais has the face of a horse and Danielle is constantly convinced she's going to be a nun. And if neither of them wed, neither can inherit and until it becomes acceptable for humans to marry livestock," he smirked inwardly at the wide-eyed reaction of his uncle to his brazen illusion to bestiality, "I think my chances are good!" He ended with a smile.

"My child," Lemoine patronized with pats of his nephew's arms, "Lessons in humility and sensibility would not be a poor edition to your education."

"I've been here for a month and haven't flirted with a single girl, played a single card nor thrust any blade to provoke needless quarrel. I would say that's proof of an abundance of humility and sensibility," Henri argued. Abbot Dormans was not so amused. Not at all convinced.

"Tell us again, Louisé!" Alais demanded as her feet stomped into the grapes below.

Louisé looked over at her sister, whose pretty face was contorted into an ugly expression of contempt and frustration. She wasn't sure if that was because, unlike Louisé, she had not found an easy slide into physical labor or that their cousin was asking to hear the story of Louisé's rescue for the hundredth time. In the weeks following their arrival, the fogginess surrounding the details of her deliverance from the hands of evil began to recede. While she nowhere remembered perfectly, the lines were defining themselves around the faces and circumstances surrounding the church, the Protestants and Baron LaCroix. The natural consequence for remembering fine details was reciting them over and over to feed her cousins’ curiosities.

"She's told you enough times now! Let's talk about something else, like the King's procession," Marie snapped as she climbed into the vat to stomp grapes with Louisé.

"You're just upset because you ran away like a coward," Danielle murmured from where she stomped.

"Shut up!" Marie snarled.

Louisé sighed and wiggled her toes as the juice from the grapes rippled around her ankles. The skins beneath her toes tickled and slid with little pressure. They made this kind of chore potentially dangerous. Each girl sported an array of bruises from knocking knees, elbows or other appendages against the wooden frames of the vats.

Louisé lifted her knees high and came down on the grapes with an almost diabolical satisfaction. "I probably would have run if I had had the opportunity. For some reason, I didn't."

"God meant for you to be there, Louisé…Those Protestants deserved the punishment they received. They needed to die to prove God's divinity and the righteous path of our faith," Danielle proselytized, bringing a cold silence to the conversation.

Louisé watched Marie narrow up her eyes as if she couldn't fathom how she was related to such a person. She decided to intervene before Marie opened her mouth and regretted whatever came out, "Honestly, Danielle, I don't believe God ever needs to prove His divinity. He especially doesn't need to prove it through the death of insignificant, spiritually confused hands for hire."

The other three girls stared at Louisé. Danielle blushed with embarrassment that a cousin she had
always considered borderline pagan smite her on a profound spiritual level. The other two just smirked at her, refreshed that someone had shut Danielle up for once.

Six months passed before Lemoine released his nephew back into the custody of his father. No matter what Paulette may have wanted, or paid him for, Henri's unruly behavior and passionate disposition was no good for the political and spiritual wellbeing of his abbey. He loved his nephew, but saw something in his eyes. Something that prayers, Scripture and meditating upon the asomatous questions of life would never quench.

"You have my blessings, my child." He crossed Henri and kissed his forehead. "No matter what battlefields life takes you to. Go with God, Henri."

"Thank you uncle, you will be in my prayers." With a kiss to his uncle's hand, Henri was off for his father's home.

The ride was easy, the air still crisp in the early mornings of late Spring and he arrived home just as the buzz of dawn-based chores were coming to a close. Servants he did not recognize sat near the barn, eating pieces of bread and cheese on hay bales. Henri dismounted and handed his horse off to one of the new hands before turning his attention to the manor. No one asked who he was and he was glad. He did not need to explain a family situation so early in the day. Not when more energy intensive confrontations were ahead. Three snakes lay in wait for him but watching the men eating made him more aware of his own hunger. He strode into the manor, fully prepared to decapitate some vipers if needed.

"Father!" he called as he burst into the kitchen, hoping Guillaume would already be sampling some of his wine. He startled the cook instead and was disappointed to hear his father had go off to hunt.

"Your cousin is here, though. She said she was not feeling well enough to go riding with the others," the older woman explained. Then she shooed him toward the very door he exploded from.

"Cousin?" Henri asked. He grabbed a bowl of oatmeal and honey before being barred from further discussion. He had quite a few cousins, barely any of which he liked for the same reasons he did not like his sisters. His silent prayer was that this cousin was one of the three he did like.

Louisé watched Henri scoot into the library like a rogue on the run. He looked over his shoulders as if half-expecting the Inquisition to come bursting in after him. She always loved her cousin Henri, suspicious behaviors aside, because he was honest, kind and braver than anyone else she knew. He had more passion in his small finger than most people did in their entire bodies and he lived that passion without apology. Henri held a special place in her affections. He was the only one who made her blush. While she knew his bold flirtation was withheld from very few, Louisé liked to imagine he was courtlier with her.

"I don't think anyone else wants that oatmeal you're eating, my beloved cousin," she pointed out while leaning against the back of the daybed. Her ankle elevated at the other end.

Henri jumped and shot a look at her that morphed into a broad smile. He moved over to her in the bounding steps inherited by his father, "Louisé! I'm glad it's you and not any of the others." He dropped a kiss to her cheek.

Warmth spread from that wanton cheek to the rest of her. She asked, "Any of the others?"

Henri scooted her legs to one side to sit beside her. He groaned, "My other cousins. They aren't as
nice as you. Not as pretty either." He flashed her a handsome smile and Louise fought what Danielle would consider sinful thoughts about him. Between two mouthfuls of oatmeal, he wondered, "What are you doing here anyway?"

"Mother fears the Protestants. I was attacked by some months ago. She petitioned us to come here where things are safer."

She watched Henri's eyes darken. His lips curled back with a snarl, "You were attacked by Protestants?!"

"Fear not, I was rescued and they were slain."

"How? By whom?" He shoved oatmeal into his mouth.

For the one hundred and second time since she arrived, she recounted the story for her favorite non-immediate family member. All the while, he spooned his breakfast into his mouth. He exemplified a startling childishness contrast to the weaponry he wore. But that wasn't what Louise paid attention to. Honey dribbled down Henri's chin. Burgeoning stubble made him look older, rugged and more handsome. Her cheeks felt warm. Selfishly, Louise reached out to brush the honey from his skin. He watched her pop the fingers into her mouth to lick the honey off. She smirked at him. Henri grinned.

"And this Baron LaCroix… where is he now?" he asked.

LaCroix returned to Belgium, to the lucrative and expansive estate owned by his sire under the guise of needing to continue his sire's influence in that region. This gave him both an excuse to live away from de Croÿ and a means to distract himself from the weight of his unspoken, hidden sin. He threw himself into managing the estate, earning currency and political latitude among his peers and continuing his slow climb up the Camarilla ladder.

"Why did you leave? I hear that area is prime for Camarilla growth," a brunette murmured from across the room. His elder sibling, Elena, was perusing the endless categories of tomes owned by their sire.

"I left because I was needed elsewhere. Why are you here? I thought you lived in Spain. I thought you were charged with monitoring the uprising of the Sabbat."

"I'm here because, like you, I am always welcome in my sire's home. He had wanted me to procure some local fare and bring it back." Her back was to him, but he could hear in her voice she was smirking and he hated her for it.

"Then deposit your wares and be on your way," was his insistent response. LaCroix finished balancing the estates ledger and stood while the ink dried. He felt a hand creep over his shoulders and fought the urge to break the bones in her hand.

"Aaawww, what's wrong Bastien? Don't like having me around?"

"Your own shadow doesn't like having you around." He plucked her hand off his shoulder.

"Now that isn't a very nice thing to say to your elder sister, especially after she received a very colorful letter for our benevolent and wise sire."

Ink dry, Sébastien closed the ledger and ignored the bait she hung on a flimsy lure. He didn't care what de Croÿ scribed to his vapid middle Childe. The only thing he cared about was acquiring his own domain. Everything around him stunk of his insipid sire, was tainted by the Archambaud's
frivolous attempts to maintain his precious ties to a long-gone humanity. Behind him, Elena swayed from side to side with an all-too annoying eagerness to reel him in. Since all he wanted in the immediate future was for her to leave, he bit.

"What did he write you, Elena?" LaCroix turned to face her, fingers drumming against the wood of his sire's desk.

Her smirk was sinister. Her tone matched, "Only that you found yourself a delicious little honey. Oh, what did he call her..." She snapped her fingers to the tune of LaCroix's tightening insides. "Louisé? He said she's quite pale, lovely, and young."

"I haven't the slightest idea what he's talking about. You know how he enjoys creating something out of nothing." Sébastien slowly unwound the knot in his stomach.

"Yes, all we have to do is look around us to see how he can make something out of nothing," Elena implied while she motioned to the expanse surrounding them.

"You know what I mean. Yes, there is a girl named Louisé. She's the daughter of the man we were doing business with and that is all."

"Oh, Bastien, lie to me all you want but never lie to yourself. De Croÿ said you wanted her. He speculated you had already tried her but I think we all know that would be beyond taboo," his sibling chastised. Her eyes slid up and down his figure. How he hated her, her assumptions, the way she called him Bastian and the fact that she was Spanish. She had been about forty, near fifty, when de Croÿ had sired her while touring Castile in the 1450s after a failed first Childe met their tragic Final Death. She was as boring as any other Ventrue female he had met. Unassuming brown eyes, mousy matching hair with traditional Spanish features and accent, but there was nothing unassuming about the way she angered or annoyed those around her.

"I don't appreciate your accusations that I am being anything but truthful with you, sister," he hissed into the space between them.

Elena took a step toward him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I wasn't accusing you, Bastien, just making a simple observation. Your whole body went rigid when I mentioned her. Is she really that special? Our Sire also said she was fat; we all know you don't care for anything visually unappealing. He also described a golden-haired beauty... Maybe she's more your type," she intimated, "A little prettier. A little older. I would hate to think my sibling is tainting our bloodline by slipping into the depravity of becoming aroused by a nine year old."

He lost it and without putting much of his blade-sharp consideration into it, his hand flew up to wrap around her throat. In a movement too fast for mortal eyes to comprehend, he had her slammed into the wall behind the desk. The sound of her body careening into stone echoed around the room and her eyes widened with shock that he would be so brutish with her. Later, he would savor the look on her face. When LaCroix dwells on this scenario in the near future, he will enjoy a sick satisfaction from the sound her body made when it collided with the wall. But right now, the once-upon-a-time soldier is too loosed by anger.

"She isn't nine!" he growled close to her ear, squeezing her throat. "And if you ever mention her again in my presence, or the supposition that I drank from her or she aroused me, again then I shall do all Kindred a favor and remove your head from your shoulders with my bare hands. And make no mistake, Elena, I will relish every moment of it."

She grabbed his wrist and bared her fangs. Her only comeback was, "I have fifty years on you, boy!" He felt her attempt to push him back, but he had the strategic advantage of nine inches on her five
foot, four inch frame.

"Fifty years to do nothing but cling to our sire's coattails like a second shadow. You haven't honed a single discipline inherent to our clan because you are, at your basest, insubordinate and common."

He watched her eyes ignite with rage as he purposefully threw in her face the most unsavory aspect of her human background. She was from no great noble family. No, she had been the daughter of a mediocre banker who managed to clutch a minimally better husband to wed. Meeting de Croÿ was most likely the result of accident than hand selection, no matter what their sire said or did to prove otherwise.

"At least I'm not aroused by children!" she shrieked into his face.

Rather than slam her into the wall once more, LaCroix spun and flung her body. She hit two chairs like a cannonball. Splinters of wood and fabric sprayed around that section of the room. A jagged leg of one chair came to a sliding stop at his feet.

"Get out, Elena. Before I feel compelled to act in such a way only one of us would truly regret," he warned with his threadbare sense of control.

She stood and laughed. It wasn't a small laugh or diabolic giggle, either, but a full-blown, throwing-her-head-back, body shaking, open mouthed guffaw. She brushed wood and wool off her arms and torso. "You're so transparent," she criticized, "It makes me pity you, Sébastien. You confirm your own guilt with your thoughtless actions."

He tensed once more and rewound the last ten minutes in his mind to dissect where he could have possibly given the impression he was guilty of anything but loathing her very existence. "I have no idea to what you are referring."

"Would an innocent man bother attacking me because of a few salacious words?" Hands on wide hips, she grinned at him with a quirked brow. "Hmph…I bet you grieved over it, didn't you?"

"Stop it, Elena." He felt sharpening fingers puncture his palms.

"Bet your dreamt about her chubby little neck, her blood in your mouth, her-"

She didn't have time to finish her statement. He picked up the broken chair leg. In a rushing act, he ran at her and fought until the chair leg drove through her chest. She gargled something else, perhaps a plea for her worthless life before her body became completely still. Sébastien stood and rubbed his face, three open wounds languidly bleeding down his neck. His arms were the same state of tattered. He stumbled back to the desk and laughed, drawing up a piece of paper that had sat beneath the ledger's weight for most of the evening. LaCroix looked down at his elder sibling's frozen form.

"Here's the funny thing, Elena. You weren't the only one our sire wrote. Seems you made quite an enemy while in Grenada. He's very concerned for your safety," he teased before crumpling the letter in his hand. "What a wonderful, merciful and benevolent sire we have! Too bad he couldn't save you from the wide-spread spider's web that is Hug de Empúries."

LaCroix strode to heavily curtained windows not far from his sibling's prone form. "Do you know that this room has a magnificent view of the lake?" He looked back down at Elena, sensing her panic rising. "No? Well, allow me to open these troublesome curtains for you."

He flung the curtains open, moonlight spilling over him as he looked over the property owned by his sire. Perhaps he was being rash, but once angered Sébastien LaCroix took time to return to something not wicked, resentful or brash. He would correct this recklessness tomorrow…after
sweeping up his sibling's ashes.
Time is a constant feature of life for Kindred and Kine, but inconstant between the species. For instance, years passed for Louisé and LaCroix but neither could attest to feeling their passing the same way. Louisé felt the years pass in a slow drudgery of vineyard tending, traveling and war. By age fourteen, she had lost the pounds of baby fat that caused her so much anxiety and made her an easy target for the predatory misgivings of Baron LaCroix. Louisé took a firm interest in the rearing of young vines to fruitful development and then stomping the harvest to court-worthy wines. She brought what she learned from an eighteen months with her aunt and uncle and helped apply it to her father's own lands.

LaCroix, on the other hand, experienced the passage of time much like a pedestrian watching a ship go by. Time was a leisurely activity for Kindred of a certain age. To the smart and ever-conscious fang bearer, time was a commodity earning interest...a potentially endless harvest. So what were a few years but the blink of an eye to a creature who could, perhaps, live centuries?

De Croÿ never suspected Sébastien's sorricide, or at least never confronted him about the issue. LaCroix was not undone by his choice to murder Elena either, as she was neither a crucial component to their bloodline nor a profoundly contributing member of their clan. Elena had always been something of a leech in Sébastien's eyes, toving the line between groveling and bellicose whenever he encountered her. His sire did not seem to acknowledge these deficits in character, opting for an emotional closeness rather than an expeditious coalition with his second Chile that baffled LaCroix.

Regardless of its usage, time moved forward for both of them. Whether fast or slow, it moved and as it did, the sands in the hourglass brought them back into contact after almost four years.

Louisé brought more than barrels of champagne to Barby after eighteen months away. Henri chaperoned his cousin's return to her chateau since Louisé's mother and sister had returned home nearly a year prior. More traumatized than anyone considered, the thought of returning to home left Louisé with nightmares and bed-wet-stained sheets and acting on her most maternal conscious, Beatrice left Louisé in her sister's care until such a time that her daughter was healthy or needed. Henri came into play after Guillaume lost the long-fought war on his son's behalf as an inheritor to his estate when a dumpy, pox-marked son of a low-level noble agreed to marry his horse-faced daughter and left Henri subsequently disinherited and forever marked as de Dorman's bastard.

Though Reims kicked him out on his behind, Louisé and her family welcomed him with open arms as an experienced warrior and distinguished member of the Catholic faith. Louisé was glad to have her cousin by her side since she would need all the support she could get to survive the tumult that was preparations for Marie's impending nuptials.

"She's so giddy over the simple son of a Viscount," Louisé bit into a piece of apple and smirked across the table at her cousin, sharpening and polishing his sword.

"Don't tease too much, Louisé, for you shall be next," he grabbed the last slice of apple and popped it into his mouth, eyebrows waggling at her.
"Not anytime soon."

"And why is that?" he sheathed his sword and faced his cousin.

"Ask my sweet Lady Mother for distinguish qualifications of a noble bride, but I warn you that you may not be able to stomach the details," Louisé rose from the table and sauntered off to help her mother fold the regalia that would constitute part of her sister's trousseau.

Her mother handled the silk and fine wool with softer hands. They shook a little as she folded the chemises Marie would wear to her marital bed. Louisé frowned at the sight, since her mother had not displayed such malady when in Reims and whenever she brought the subject up, she was shut down immediately or ignored completely with a tender smile and kiss to the cheek.

"Don't indulge him too much, Louisé," her mother chided.

"What do you mean?" Louisé took another chemise and followed her mother's hands in how to fold it.

"I love Henri for the many good things he has done for my family. I do not hold against him the unfortunate fact that his parents were not married when he was born and think my sister cruel for manipulating him out of any financial or provincial concessions her husband may have provided him as his only living son. However, I also know Henri's ambitious tendencies and dreams overshadow his better judgment. He finds nothing wrong with openly flirting with you or leading you on under the pretenses of familial tenderness," her mother stared into Louisé's eyes, a paler shade of blue.

"Mother, there is nothing between Henri and I than a bond wrought by trial and tribulation. Aunt Paulette treated him with contempt because of her husband's sins, and came to regard me as her daughter's competition. She was not cruel," she quelled the silent storm brewing behind her mother's eyes, "But she was cold, especially after Danielle had her way and joined a convent. Visitors began mistaking me for their second daughter and passed Alais over. Henri was a great comfort to me during the times when aunty's words stung a little too much to bear."

"Regardless, I only want you to be mindful Louisé. You are growing into a beautiful young woman," her mother paused, pursing her lips and brows. "Which raises another concern for later, but do not be seduced by Henri's looks and earnest promises."

Louisé flushed. She knew the concern her mother wished to address and would hold that conversation off as long as possible, "Lady mother, I promise you the only seductions Henri tempts me with involve stealing second or third helpings of sweet meat pies."

"Hmph… I won't have anyone questioning your purity when it comes time for your own trousseau to be folded."

When the invitation arrived, written in the best calligraphy, Sébastien turned the paper over in his hands many times before making the decision to attend. He had cut his ties to the Seyssel-Chambert family before leaving for Belgium and had not thought of any of them since washing away Elena's remnants with a bucket of scalding water. De Croÿ formally concluded business with Charles and returned to Belgium in time to relieve Sébastien of his commitment to maintain the estate. From there, Sébastien migrated southward to the burgeoning metropolis of Lyon as a means to carve a niche for himself and continue to distance himself from the indulgences of his past.

For the past few years, he had settled into his position as aide to the Scourge of the Prince of Lyon.
He relished each night he was given the opportunity to pry into the private lives of unworthy Kindred who defied their prince by thinning the sacred blood with even more worthless Childer or disrespected protocol by believing they could fly amongst the shadows without paying proper tribute. With the expanding realm of Lyon, Sébastien's nights were full of tag-team hunting missions, kicking, screaming and dragging full-grown men before their betters to be rebuked like petulant children. As exhilarating as it was to have minute power over others, he admitted to himself he needed a break. So, for nostalgia's sake and the possibility of establishing his own small domain close to Lyon, LaCroix sent a letter back to Charles announcing his presence at the post-wedding festivities.

Catholics and Huguenots continued to wage war throughout France, the Armed Peace nothing more than a ghost in the country's mirror but within the walls of Charles' chateau, laughter and mirth radiated from the propitious union of Marie Seyssel-Chambert and the impending John III of Foix, Viscount of Narbonne and distant cousin to their mother. Louisé found it hard to hold onto the bitterness she held against her sister when she saw how happy Marie was by being wed and the pride her parents swelled with at making such a fortuitous match.

What Louisé found hard to swallow was the presence of a man she had not seen in years, nor thought of fondly when she had the predisposition to dwell on her childhood. His one action of life-saving benevolence no longer outweighed the numerous instances of cruelty and badgering. No longer short and chubby, Louisé hoped any rapacious appetites LaCroix had would be directed elsewhere. If they would not be, she had Henri to protect her with sword and dagger. Her body unconsciously tensed as his icy eyes scanned the room, landed on her and directed the rest of his body on a path stopping feet from her.

"My, my, my…little Louisé has certainly grown up," her took her hand and kissed the top, out of what she suspected was obligation to public etiquette and not sentimentality.

"Time has that effect on people," she took in the details of his face, "Though you seem unscathed by the hands of Father Time."

"You're far too kind. It may not always show on the exterior, but rest assured time affects even me."

Louisé nodded and motioned Henri over from across the hall. Her cousin excused himself from the two young women he was speaking with and crossed the throng to stand beside her. Louisé hated to admit she felt a pang of jealousy over those girls. "Henri, this is Baron LaCroix."

"Ah yes, the one from the stories," Henri gave LaCroix's hand a firm squeeze.

LaCroix returned a quizzical look, "Apparently my reputation precedes me?"

"You rescued my cousin years ago," Henri replied. "Louisé was asked to recount the story numerous times while staying with us in Reims. It seems my sisters enjoyed the essence of chivalry you embodied, though Louisé now pities the men you killed."

Louisé watched the hired chamber ensemble gather their instruments together, "Retrospective mercy and pity, I assure you cousin."

"And I can assure you both, if it had been me to the rescue I would have done exactly the same thing," Henri nodded sharply, hand on the hilt of his sword. His eyes already swam with the conjectured scenario.
LaCroix smirked, amusement apparent to the two he conversed with, "I doubt that but no less appreciate your enthusiasm and support of your cousin."

Before the subject could continue, the first ensemble member struck their instrument and a renewed excitement burst through the crowd as young girls squealed. They were prepping for a Volta dance and Louisé felt her stomach tighten and share in the collective anticipation, her eyes taking in Henri.

Sébastien had been prepared to shrivel up from boredom. He was thankful to find distraction in the very person he had wanted to escape. She had hit a much-needed growth spurt, shot up six inches and shed all the bulging weight that made her such an easy target. Whatever she had done in Reims had done her wonders. She was svelte, almost angular had it not been for the pallor of her skin that made her come across as soft and fleshy where she ought to be. LaCroix could sense she had an awareness of her new-found allure but found it fully entertaining she was throwing it all at this cousin of hers. If she didn't understand he wasn't interested, or only interested to the extent it served him, then she was just as asinine and silly as her elder sister. The doe-eyed look she directed at Henri made Sébastien ill.

"Well, I promised that Baron's daughter the first dance. If you'll excuse me, Baron LaCroix," Henri nodded to Sébastien then lifted Louisé's hand to kiss, "Cousin."

He watched Louisé deflate when he walked away, jealousy rim her eyes as Henri took the hand of another young girl mere years Louisé's elder. The music began picking its pace and before his better judgment could say anything, LaCroix took Louisé's hand and led her onto the floor with the other men and women.

"What are you doing?!" she whispered with unappreciative surprise. Her reaction didn't stop her from flowing into the steps.

"It looked like you wanted to dance. You seemed upset when your cousin did not offer you his hand and it would have been completely ungentlemanly of me to just walk away," he wrapped his arm around her back, his palm against her hip and he clenched as he lifted her into the air and turned the both of them in sync with the other dancers.

"Pardon my saying so, but you have never fought hard to present yourself as a gentlemen," she moved away from him to twirl with the other women.

He wasn't able to comment and didn't care to. It was true, he never felt compelled to be a gentlemen since he was more concerned on establishing himself as solid businessman and politician. Abiding by the flippant ways of romantics made him nauseated and he would rather be called ruthless than chivalric any day. Even dancing with her now made him feel foolish and doubt how well he had buried the conduct of the past. Her aroma wasn't the same now that she was entering womanhood, but still not changed enough not to be mouthwatering. After more cycles of the dance, holding her to his side and lifting her like a feather, he took her hand and led her back to the outskirts of the dance floor.

"Thank you very much," Louisé folded her hands in front of her, a noticeable tint to her cheeks.

"My pleasure," LaCroix gave her a small bow, excused himself and turned to find someone appropriate to feed from.
Louisé went to bed well past midnight, after the last of the drunken nobility either stumbled to their carriages or were shown to their rooms. In the new found emptiness of her room, Louisé was left to speculate the state of marriage, the frivolity it engendered and its future usefulness to her. Her sister's bed had been removed and place in another room for a guest, creating a spacious blank space in the room that would be filled in soon enough. She thought of her sister, giddy and squealing, preparing for her first night as a married woman and for a journey that would take her far from home.

Her heart tightened when she considered her future could take her equally far away, unless Jean passed away before marrying and siring a son of his own. This could be possible, as Jean's condition was no better and no line of lovely or unlovely ladies waited in high hopes of marrying him. Then again, she was no closer to matrimony since she had yet to cross the first threshold to womanhood and this fact, alone, caused such concern in her mother that Louisé worried her lack of development was a source of her mother's apparent ill health.

A knock at her door distracted her from finagling her hair out of the design would about her head and any future thoughts of her mother's health, her own body or marriage. Right fingers stuck in black tresses, she opened the door with her free hand and frowned at Henri's drunken, sluggish body as it leaned in her doorway with a sloppy smile.

"There's a drunk man in my bed, I was wondering if I could stay in here tonight…"

"Henri, I think we both know that wouldn't be a good idea," she did not move from the doorway, lest she encourage his idea of remaining with her.

"Louisé, you know I won't hurt you," his hand came up and brush hair from her eyes, trailed its fingertips down her cheek. "You looked so lovely tonight…you look lovely now." He bent his head, intentions clear and Louisé's head turned to catch his lips with her cheek.

"Really? I wouldn't have guessed you thought that, given the wealth of your attention went elsewhere tonight," the venom and petty jealousy in her voice surprised her.

"Would you see me kicked to the streets then? If I attended to you the manner in which I desired, your mother and father would kick me out faster than my own dear Papa," he said close to her ear. She could smell the wine and ale on his breath. "Louisé, please. I'll sleep in the corner and be out before dawn."

Louisé licked her lips and stared into the darkness of the hallway beyond her room. Adjacent was the remainder of the hallway and a spiral staircase leading to a back entrance to the grand hall and kitchen. Anyone could be standing there, spying on them. She felt hundreds of eyes watching and judging her actions, sitting ready to condemn her should she let him stay or praise her should she make him go. Henri leaned away from the doorframe and into her to use his inebriated coordination as justification for quartering himself in his virgin cousin's room.

"Henri, I think you better go kick that man out of your bed because I would be breaking a promise to my mother if I let you stay," her hands pressed him backward, but he didn't budge much. She watched the expression on his face sour when he realized his smooth talk and handsome façade weren't getting him what he wanted.

"And what promise did you make exactly? Not to sleep with your bastard cousin Henri?" his tone became vicious and his hands gripped her shoulders. She chalked this snap in temper to his drinking. "Is being with me that damaging to your precious chastity? Are you so like Paulette that you'd treat me like a leper for simply wanting a place to sleep?"
Louisé didn't get an opportunity to answer before someone yanked him out of the room and into the hallway.

LaCroix couldn't stay in his designated room one minute longer. The snoring of old men, groaning of intoxication and squeaking of beds as sleepers turned hacked at his patience. He had no business to distract himself with, leaving him only to wander the property and chateau as a means of entertainment. Dawn was hours away and he still had the pungent taste of a Count on his palette. He contemplated finding something of better substance within his sanguine preference, even made his way through the kitchen to the back door when his ears captured the sound of conversation.

A spiral staircase amplified the voices that, to mere mortals, may have been nothing but whispers. For LaCroix, it was like a chorus and he could hear the changing inflections and tones as the conversation moved from pleading to accusing. The fact that Louisé and Henri were the choir whetted his interest and he climbed the stairs at a leisurely pace, stopping to watch them from the stretch of corridor neither were paying attention to. When Henri's hands moved out of Sébastien's line of sight, he felt a sensation prick his chest. When Henri pushed himself further into the room, LaCroix all of a sudden had enough. Neither knew what to think when he grabbed Henri and dumped him on his behind outside the room.

"I do believe the young lady told you to go," he towered above Henri, fighting a snarl.

Henri stumbled to his feet, swaying slightly, "No one asked you to interfere. This is a family matter."

"Be silent and stop embarrassing yourself more than you already have," LaCroix ignored the boy and turned to look at Louisé. His muscled cramped at the sight of her standing in her chemise and nothing else. Her hair was down and she had pulled it to one side, accentuating her neck. She toyed with the strands nervously. His mouth watered. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, "No, he didn't hurt me…he's drunk and won't remember this in the morning."

"Insobriety is no excuse for reckless and wanton behavior," LaCroix explained and turned his head, coming in contact with Henri's fist. It felt like being hit with a pillow, or perhaps a broom and he had to concentrate hard to create the proper facial expression a normal man would display when punched.

Henri understood his mistake immediately, eyes going wide with pain and confusion…but mostly pain. Sébastien guessed it must have felt like punching stone. For appearance sake, he rubbed his cheek and watched Henri cradle his hand. Henri's knuckles were bleeding and LaCroix fought an urge to bite him as retribution for the attempted attack. He grabbed Henri by the collar of his shirt and made sure the boy was staring him square in the eyes.

"Go to your room. Go to sleep."

He commanded. Dazed and incapable of disobeying his orders, Henri retreated down the hallway and disappeared around a corner.

Sébastien turned to look at Louisé once more. She had moved out of her room and stood beneath moonlight spilling in from a nearby window. The rays returned to her the childish innocence he craved years ago and, paired with her subduing shocked expression, he remembered the ideal prey she made.

"Seems I do nothing but rescue you," he half-joked with his dry humor.

"I'm sorry for that. I shouldn't have opened the door."
"No, you should not have. Perhaps you will remember this for future encounters with your cousin," his voice was curt. He wasn't the same man since his previous, impetuous actions bred mild paranoia in his brain and he needed only recall the encounter with Elena to know his paranoia was not unwarranted. De Croÿ had suspected Sébastien's transgression, perhaps even bared witness to it and he couldn't give anyone else an opportunity to call taboo on him. No matter how she delicious she looked in the pale, midnight stream of radiance. He placed his hands on her upper arms and stared into her eyes. "Go to sleep."

She turned from him mechanically and walked into her room. She closed the door behind her and he could hear the squeak of her bed as she climbed beneath the covers. He cracked his neck from side to side and sighed, "Sweet dreams."

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Neither Louisa nor Henri spoke of the events that took place that night or even looked at one another in such a way as to recognize the situation had transpired. LaCroix did not apparently speak of the endeavor to anyone because Louisé did not feel the sting of castigation from those around her. Henri did not apologize either, which created a wedge between the two of them made of mutual anger, mistrust and shame. Louisé knew Henri felt slighted by the thought that she viewed him no better than his step-mother and sisters had and she feared he regarded her only for the sole purpose of accomplishing the ambitious dreams her mother accused him of having.

"You've been awfully quiet, Louisé…Is everything alright?" her mother reached across the table and gave her hand a squeeze. This broke her from the deepening hole of thought she found herself in.

She gave her mother a smile and kissed the top of her hand, "Just feel a little ill is all."

Beatrice, who looked unwell herself, frowned and lifted a hand to her daughter's forehead, "You don't feel feverish."

"My stomach is unsettled, mother," she closed her eyes and relished the cool of her mother's palm against her skin. It reminded her of when she was little, her mother stroking her hair through stormy nights and telling her grand stories of the royal court.

"Perhaps it's something you ate," her mother pulled her hand back and returned to peeling the apple she had been working on before interrupting Louisé's ruminating. Louisé watched a distinctive look rise over her mother's face. It was the notorious stare of every all-knowing maternal figure who suspected their children, or children in their care, were delivering aversive answers to significant questions. At the same time, it was a look that let the child in question know that the figure before them knew and wanted them to know they knew. Beatrice's lips quirked, her eyes sliding to the elongating peel of the apple she skillfully created with every movement of her knife, "Or perhaps it has something to do with a certain cousin of yours."

Louisé felt nervous beneath such a countenance and averted her eyes to the bowl of peeled apples she was supposed to be cutting up for the cook, "What do you mean?"

"You and Henri, until today, have been attached at the hip. Where you go, he is not far behind. Where he goes, there is some surety you will follow unless expressly told otherwise."

Louisé felt a salty taste rise to her mouth, her stomach church. "We had a disagreement of sorts. He hasn't moved passed his pigheadedness enough to apologize for his part in the spat."

Beatrice found this an acceptable answer, "I see. And what was this disagreement about?"
"We…I…" Louisé swallowed several times, felt the color drain from her face. She twisted from the table, watched Beatrice rise from her seat out of the corner of her eye and vomited over the kitchen floor.

After she finished emptying her stomach onto the stone floor of the kitchen, her mother had sent her upstairs to change out of her clothes and remain in bed the rest of the day. Louisé felt an awful pain in her lower abdomen and worried that she had contracted some awful illness from someone at the wedding. She refused any food offered her, too afraid eating would provoke another wave of nausea. Her mother pressed the cool of her hand and damp cloths to her face until Louisé was fast asleep.

When she woke, the moon was high in the sky and shining through the glass of window. She had rolled onto her stomach somewhere between different dreams and a tingling feeling rolled over her arms as she pushed herself up. The pangs from earlier were gone and her stomach roared with hunger. She wasn't sure there would be anything available to eat, but that had never stopped her from rummaging in the past. She slid from bed and wrapped in a dressing gown before trekking down the spiral staircase to the kitchen. Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness and as quiet as she could be, she searched for something to eat.

"What are you looking for?" came a voice from behind.

Louisé about jumped out of her skin and swallowed a scream. She whirled to face LaCroix, whom she did not even know was still staying with them. Hand pressed to her chest, she inhaled a large gulp of air, "Don't do that! Where did you even come from?!"

She couldn't make out his face in the darkness, but somehow knew he was smirking at her. He stepped closer and motioned in the direction of where her parents' room was located, as well as a few guest rooms, "I heard something and came to investigate."

"From all the way over there? I can't hear anything from the kitchen and my room is almost directly above," her eyes narrowed a bit.

"My ears are better than yours, perhaps."

"I think you're lying," she said before she could stop herself or consider the ramifications of the statement.

Closer now, she could see his eyes narrow. He took another step toward her, "I don't appreciate my character being challenged." When she did not respond, nor contort her facial expression to one of contrition, LaCroix sighed. "Fine, I couldn't sleep so I decided to gather my things for my return trip to Lyon."

"Oh, I didn't know you were that close. I thought you had returned to Belgium," Louisé resumed scavenging.

"I did, but only for a little while before business called me to Lyon. What are you looking for?" Louisé felt him close behind her. An icy sensation went up her back.

"Food. I was sick earlier today and haven't eaten since breakfast," she managed to find a meat pie and something made from the apples she had been helping her mother cut when she threw up.

"Yes, your father informed me. I'm glad to see you're feeling better but do you think it wise to eat those if you're still ill?"
Louisé turned and almost jumped a second time. LaCroix was directly behind her and if she had to put a label on the way he looked at her, she would say hungry… the same way she was looking at the pies in her hand. "I feel much better. And very hungry. You look the same...would you like one?"

"No, I don't care for meat or fruit pies. Are you sure you feel well? You don't look well at all…” He motioned downward. Confused, Louisé followed his moving finger.

She squeezed the two pies in her hand, feeling their gooey insides spill into the crevices between her fingers. A large, dark stain ran down the bottom length of her chemise. Panicking, she dropped the crushed pastries and gripped the stained material with shaking hands. There was no foul smell to accompany this stain, so she had not soiled herself in her sleep. A firm grip on her arm guided her from the cimmerian state of the kitchen to the soft glow of firelight in his room.

Now she could see that the stain was red and when she lifted the stained linen, the ruddy material dyed her legs as well. She dropped the cloth and looked up at Sébastien, tears brimming in her eyes. He panicked and patted her awkwardly on the head. To her, it looked like he was fighting revulsion and amusement.

"D-don't cry, Louisé."

"How can I not cry?! I'm bleeding to death!" Louisé stiffened as she felt a trickle slowly progress down the inside of her thigh.

Baron LaCroix suddenly stepped backward, hand moving to his face. He glanced nervously about the room, seemingly anywhere but at her, "Y-you're not bleeding to death. Hasn't your mother," he coughed, inched toward the door, "discussed this with you?"

"N-no! I heard her mention something about bleeding to my father years ago…Is this what she meant?" she wiped tears from her cheeks. She was so thoroughly embarrassed, disgusted and frightened that she wasn't sure which of the three to feel more. Somehow she knew this was not how this situation was supposed to happen. "Can you please go get my mother?"

It was like she had granted LaCroix absolution. Relief came over him and he was out the door faster than she could conceive capable, but she didn't care as long as he brought her mother to her just as quickly.

Chapter End Notes

...Blech.... I probably need to do something with this one. I'll get around it. I'm sure...
The entry into womanhood is for Louisé what she supposed the Sistine Chapel was for Michelangelo: a concept dream and discussed with glorious anticipation until the moment of arrival when all humanity's vices rear their ugly heads to spoil the dream, chief among them self-preservation and avarice. A health red flow not only confirmed Louisé's on-going development, but simultaneously made her marketable to all prospective sons-in-laws. It baffled Louisé that a condition distinctive to her sex, leaving her bed bound and bleeding for five days (in which she does not die), somehow makes her exponentially more attractive to the opposite gender, when nature clearly dictates they should run to the hills screaming.

Baron LaCroix was gone by the next day and with him, all the humiliation of her unfortunate discovery that she was no longer a girl, but bridal material. He had brought her mother to her, as promised, then left them to their discussion and said not one more word to her. She could only conceive her own embarrassment, not how he must have felt but it must have not been so great a chagrin that he felt compelled to apologize or offer his sympathies. As a man of stone, she imagined him to take it in stride the way he appeared to take everything else.

For Louisé, though, it was not the hand LaCroix had to play in her biological graduation that was most unnerving but the sudden decision of her parents to send Henri from their house. No details were given to her, aside from the fact that it was impressed upon Henri to conduct himself on a religious pilgrimage by his uncle in Reims. Instead of fighting the issue, Louisé watched Henri acquiesce without so much as a whimper of complain. The sun hadn't risen, not even become a thin warm line on the horizon the morning he left and abandoning propriety, Louisé left her bed to see him off in the darkness before dawn.

"You cannot go and leave me here all alone," Louisé pulled her dressing gown tighter around her to ward off the cool of lightless morn.

"You are hardly alone, Louisé. You have your mother, father and brother. And soon," he hefted a saddle from its stand and carried it outside, "You shall have a husband to care for you."

She watched him saddle his horse, feeling her heart crushing and pumping in every beat. They had been partners in the most wondrous of exploits, possibly even crimes, for years now to the extent that he had even managed to usurp the precious pedestal her brother usually inhabited. "Is that why you are leaving so defeated? Because I may be married some day?"

"So defeated?" she heard him laugh to himself as he saddled the horse. Then he turned to her and took her hand, "My uncle has secured me a place in the home of the Medici family upon the completion of my excursion to Rome. Cosimo I de' Medici has an order…The Order of St. Stephen, approved by the Pope, himself. Louisé," he squeezed her hand. "I serve the Medici family, do their bidding, protect them from harm and I get a clean slate. I have a chance to put this bastard past behind me for good! And then…"

"You will come back?" her eyes stung.
He cupped her face, a thumb wiping her cheek with one stroke, "Of course. You are the only family I have." They stood there, silent and staring as the horizon behind them paled at its base. Love and romance never occurred to them who are busy with life, its joys and tragedies and even in their frivolity, she and Henri barely dared conceive feelings for one another beyond innocent flirtation… petty jealousies.

Henri bent his head and kissed her lips. His lips were warm, tasting of the remnants of honey and apples. Behind her eyelids burst the light of a hundred stars, stringing into constellations like none she had ever seen in the night sky. He pulled back from the kiss, stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, and just as the sun rose to chase the stars away, she opened her eyes to his departure. She swallowed some alien lump in her throat as he mounted his horse. He smiled down at her, "I will come back for you."

She laughed, encouraged by the idea even though she suspected he would find his own way in Italy. She smiled at him and nodded, "Go with my blessing and love."

The sky behind him lightened and she watched his face contort with ghastly shadows, ripping across his face like black blades. A shiver came over her and somewhere around them, an owl cried out one last call before disappearing to its bed. "What is it, Louisé?"

"Either my eyesight fails, or you look pale," she walked to the side of his horse, petting the animal's neck before looking him in the eyes, "As one dead in the bottom of a tomb."

Henry shifted in his saddle and reached down to stroke her cheek a final time, "And trust me, love, in my eyes… so do you."

A year passed and the closer to sixteen Louisé became, the larger her father's delusions of grandeur grew. Neighboring sons of counts no longer made the cut according to Charles' illustrious status quo he shared with no one else but God. Her father began reaching out to families tested, and found favorable, by the hands of time and etches of history, like the glory-hungry Guises. Handsome as their sons were, Louisé would rather remain a virgin than submerge herself in the political melodrama that came with that family.

Circumstances changed though, when a freak snap in the weather caught an abnormally athletic Jean off guard. A rebound in his health sported her brother a long desired opportunity to go hunting with Charles. The sun had been high in the sky, air warm and the surrounding forest teaming with bucks in rut, does in heat and the elk that got caught in the middle of their distant cousins' sexual frenzy on their own migration to safe breeding grounds. It was for everyone concerned, a perfect day to hunt and to hope or ask for better was tantamount to heresy. That made it all the more heartbreaking when a rush of cold breeze brought ugly, dark clouds over the land not two hours into their trip. Too far away to turn back and in too deep to find shelter, the whole party suffered through an hour of torrential rain and wind gusts that dropped the temperature while simultaneously knocking limbs off trees.

The only reward for their soggy state of affairs was a medium buck too stupid to bother taking shelter from the storm some place where men with bows and arrows would not find him. The men returned soaked, chilled and shivering. Jean took to bed that night with a fever and three days later, he was dead.

Her mother's grief was absolute: a black pitch of depression centered on the fact that she had not only had her child predeceased her, but her first born child at that. Louisé could no more console her mother than she could bring her brother back to life. Her father, pale and stupefied, holed up in the library with his thoughts and revelations that now he had no living male heir to pass his wealth, land
and title to. Louisé suspected he not only mourned the loss of a child, but the dream that went along with him. For Louisé, there was comfort in the notion that her brother was no longer in pain; that somehow, his long enduring ailments in life granted him a cushy spot in Heaven somewhere between martyr and saint. There was a subtle ache in her chest in the days that followed as the heaviness that her closest sibling was gone. The only constructive action she found able to take was writing to Henri that Jean was gone. Without so much as a word from him since he departed, she was unsure he even cared now that he had achieved all he wanted in seizing the opportunity to rise above what birth provided him.

They made the trek to Lyon, to the Cathédrale Saint-Jean-Baptiste where her family's bones took up residence in a section of catacombs beneath the awe-inspiring sanctuary, as an eternal gratitude for the money they provided in constructing the monolith centuries ago. Relatives and fellow gentry came to pay respects to her deceased brother, kissing her mother on the cheeks and speaking in grave tones to her father who appeared as absent from the funeral as he had when Jean initially passed.

She was touched by all those came, sad that her sister could not be there due to being ripe with child and surprised when Baron LaCroix showed up to give his condolences. When she was told a visitor had arrived, her heart fluttered with the hope Henri had come. The glow of that hope must have shown on her face because LaCroix gave her an odd expression, complete with raised brow when she felt her body deflate.

"Not who you expected?" He handed his cape and cane to the butler.

"No, not quite. I suppose you're here to give my father and mother your sympathies," she walked with him toward the study where she assumed her parents were.

"I am and extend them to you, as well. I am sorry I was unable to attend the funeral. I, too, have lost siblings and understand the great grieving their absence creates."

She nodded, "There is a hole in my mother I fear shall never be filled. The thought of an impending grandchild, which once brought her so much pleasure now barely brings her solace. Father is not much different. He throws himself into work and when that offers no distraction, he hunts but catches nothing of worth."

"I cannot imagine the loss of a child," LaCroix's voice sounded hollow, bordering on unsympathetic. "And what about you? If memory serves, Jean was quite the support for you when you were little."

"Yes, he taught me to read and write better than my own tutors. He read me stories from Chaucer and wrote the most beautiful poetry."

"Chaucer? And, pray tell, which is his stories did you favor?"

"The Merchant's Tale," she smiled, perhaps the first time since Jean passed.

LaCroix's presence had nothing to do with passing along an impractical emotion as sorrow because a mortal's sickly child had finally died. The death, however, served his purposes perfectly as he needed to renew the business with Charles as a means to expand his own domain in Lyon. Without an heir, Charles' estate and wealth were now in a perilous predicament and if he could, Sébastien had an opportunity of profiting of the man should he meet his own end, untimely or no. All that stood in his way was a pregnant daughter on the other side of France and her idiot husband.

"What will your father do now that he has no heir?" he looked down at Louisé.

She stared out into space. When she responded, her attention was clearly elsewhere, "That is
something you will have to ask him. There is always my sister's husband. If my sister had a son…"

"And what about you?"

"Hopefully I will be married."

Charles looked like a man devoid of purpose and his wife, a creature better suited to wander the halls of an abandoned graveyard than those of a noble chateau. They stood to greet him and he kissed the lady's hand, wrinkling his nose at the putrid aroma rising from her skin. He offered his played-up consolations before asking to speak with Charles the next evening. Neither seemed to care enough to refuse him.

Sorrow is a heavy-handed and ravenous beast. Louise came to believe in the following weeks that it would not be sated until it devoured her heart entirely. She watched her mother waste away, day after day, with nothing but prayer and repentance to feed her since she found no sustenance in the food brought to her. Her chest tightened every morning she came to her mother's side and swore the circles around her eyes darkened overnight. If she didn't understand her mother's strong faith better, Louise thought her mother was purposefully withering away as penance for allowing her eldest child, and only son, to die before herself. To make matters worse, Louise was robbed of any expectation she may find strength and support in her cousin Henri…everything stolen by two sets of penmanship.

LaCroix found her in a disregarded room on the opposite side of the chateau from where he and her parents slept. She sat on the bed, shoulders rising and shuddering while her head hung low against her chest. Never good with human emotions, nor one to care for them when displayed to his person, LaCroix found himself at an absolute loss with how to comfort Louise's tears. These weren't the same kind of tears he had once tempted from her eyes when she was little to feed his beastly desires. No, these were the raindrop tears of a broken heart. Sébastien never loved anyone in his life enough to cry over them the way she did now. Love was a labor lost upon him.

"Louise, what's wrong?" he approached where she sat.

She looked up at him, cheeks soaked and eyes glistening with more rain. His muscles tensed, something beautiful in her tears. She bit the corner of her bottom lip, "Henri is dead."

"What?"

She looked down at her lap, two letters open there. Her throat delivered a choked laugh while her right hand stroked the paper of one letter, ink smudged by fallen tears, "They brought me two letters. One was from Henri. He said he was leaving Italy…that he was coming back to me. He said I was beautiful and that he loved me. Then I read this second letter from someone he worked for." She stopped talking and LaCroix could see the pain in her eyes, her mouth afraid to form the words.

He kneeled and slid the second letter from her lap. She didn't bother to stop him, just bit the same corner of her bottom lip and cried silent tears. Sébastien scanned the letter and read it out loud so she would not have to say it herself, "To the dearest cousin of Henri de Dorman, loyal servant of the de Medici family. It is with a heavy heart I inform you our servant, Henri, has been slain." He felt her feather-light hand on his wrist, pale fingers wrapping around the cuff of his shirt and stopped reading since it was clear to him she had memorized the letter, or always stopped after absorbing that word.

"S-slain…He went to make a better life for himself and he ends up dead," she choked again, gripping his wrist. LaCroix felt the core of his being unsettle itself the longer he watched her tears.
and heard her pain. "H-he told me they would wipe the stain of his parents sin away. He wouldn't be a bastard anymore," she hiccupped, "Do you know they can't even find his body?"

"Y-yes, I read that," he avoided her eyes by looking back down at the letter. Seems all they found were his bloody doublet, two dead compatriots among the streets of Florence and left to conclude Henri had also been killed but left somewhere else.

"I can't even say good-bye to him…can't bury him with his family. I won't ever see him again."

LaCroix was struck by the hopelessness in her voice. She acted as if someone had told her she had little time to live, that live was meaningless or her prayers had no response. He wondered if she mustered this kind of grief for the passing of Jean, but suspected not since Jean has always lived with one leg in the grave while Henri had been robust and a constant example of life. Tears surged in her eyes once more and flowed down her cheeks like tiny creeks. With minds of their own, his fingers lifted and brushed them away.

"She had a girl!" Charles' fingers practically pulled out his hair as the frustration, which had been building since they laid his son to rest, erupted through his body.

"A beautiful baby girl," Louisé commented while opting to ignore the dissatisfaction swallowing her father's outburst.

"A useless girl," Charles stalked away from his daughter and the Baron, choosing the solidarity of his study over the communal feeling of the hall.

Louisé shook her head and took her mother's hand. It felt like a small bird in her palm, soft and hollow with a pulsing heartbeat. "She is beautiful and they are both doing well. Marie wishes you could have been there."

Beatrice smiled at her youngest daughter, rubbing her thumb over Louisé's fingers. For a moment, Louisé allowed herself to believe her mother was disrobing herself from the outfit of maudlin she had dawned since Jean's burial. At the same Louisé had to embrace the conclusion that her mother would never be the woman she once was and not just because she had lost a son, but because whatever malady weakened her mother at the time of Marie's wedding had overtaken the beautiful lady. She had lost significant weight, her hair thinned and the shadows around her eyes now seemed like ink stains. Instead of the halls resounding with her mother's music or management, putrid melodies of retching echoed.

Louisé forced a cheerful smile, though she was finding many things not to be cheerful about, "They named her Elizabeth and they said they would try to bring her when they come for the Christmas season."

Her mother sighed, "Wonderful. Don't mind your father, he is happy on the inside." She stretched her hand out to LaCroix, "Thank you for going with Louisé. It brought my husband great comfort to know someone we trust was caring for our daughter."

"It was nothing, my Lady," Louisé watched LaCroix kiss her mother's. "I was doing business there and to be honest, it was more my men taking care of her than I."

"Still…" her mother took a deep breath, giving Louisé and LaCroix their cue.

"You ought not to have lied to her," LaCroix rebuked as they watched her mother head for her room.
"What would have me do?" Louisé looked up at him. "They said they would try and if that gives her hope then why not tell her?"

"If you say so."

"Baron," LaCroix heard her voice tighten, "You have known my Lady Mother for years now…She's not going to get better, is she?"

Sébastien closed his eyes, not wanting the pleading in hers to influence him anymore than they already had as of late. He especially did not want to look into those cerulean spheres as he told her the inescapable truth of her mother's condition. LaCroix opened his eyes and looked down the hall where the lady disappeared, "Not without a miracle."

"Then I shall pray for such a miracle," and off she walked.

LaCroix didn't watch her go, deciding to go after Charles instead. Finding him was as much a chore as drinking blood. At least he displayed more vim and vigor than he had in weeks passed with his uninterrupted pacing. Sébastien took a seat on a couch and waited for Charles to stop.

"A girl…she had a girl. Useless, useless, useless!" Charles chanted.

"But the child was healthy, which promises healthy sons for the future," LaCroix commented.

"God willing!" Charles spun to look at a man he perceived as a friend. "I may not have the time to wait for her to produce a son, who would be his father's heir before mine! I cannot trust my estate and fortune to a child I may never meet, or who may never exist!"

"There is another way, Charles," LaCroix cooed.

"What?! What way?!" he answered like a thirsty man at a well.

"You still have Louisé."

"Louisé…who is barely a woman, unmarried and untested! Making her my heir would be as risky as naming Marie's future son my heir…"

LaCroix smirked, weaving his influence into his words and working his master plan, "Be rational, Charles. Marie could have a son, but she could also have nothing but daughters. She could also die in childbirth, or of illness and then what?"

"The same could happen to Louisé," Charles voice was soft as he sat beside LaCroix, never breaking the gaze.

"But consider what Marie already has, what her sons will have. Everything her husband has, she has. If, Heaven forbid, you were to die before Louisé was married…she would have nothing to broker a marriage with, if everything is willed to her sister's unborn child. She and her husband would be the managers of the estate until said possible child comes of age. And then that is no guarantee they will take care of this estate, or even come to see it again. But Louisé is tied to this place, invested in it and can continue making this estate profitable once you have passed. Her inheriting will ensure her prosperity and the prosperity of your descendants as remaining Marquisates."

"She has no idea how to manage this estate…no concept of business," Charles bit his lip, wrung his hands.

"Then, perhaps, you should make sure she has proper tutelage should you pass before she marries."
All you need so is write a clause in your will stipulating a guardian preside over her education and marriage proposals until such a time she can manage for herself."

Charles began nodded, a haze over his demeanor, "Yes, that makes sense. But who would I choose for such a task?"

Sébastien smiled, near menacingly at him, "Charles, you and I have been friends and partners for years."

"Yes, but you're not family."

LaCroix gripped the man's wrist, "Look at me," Charles stared into LaCroix's face after darting his gaze about the room, "Tomorrow, you will meet with your priest and other appropriate participants and construct your will. You will name Louisé your heir and me as her guardian."

Charles nodded and repeated what he was ordered. LaCroix grinned and released his grip on the man. He stood, leaving the man dazed while he filled a glass with wine. He had one last thing to do this evening. Sébastien took his dagger from his side and punctured a small hole in his wrist, allowing a single drop of precious vitae to splash into the wine. He swirled the glass, cleaned his wrist then returned to where Charles sat, regaining his will.

"Now, give this wine to your wife."

"Why?" Charles rubbed his eyes and stood to take the glass.

"Because she is sick, probably thirsty and your youngest child is praying earnestly for a miracle."

Her mother looked better, but not by much. This did not stop Louisé from taking the perk in her health as a sign of good faith from the Man Upstairs and believing miracles could happen. Beatrice made it through the Christmas holiday season, whereupon she encountered her first grandchild. Elizabeth brought a renewed joy to the eyes of her mother and Louisé was resolute she should never see that kind of light fade from her mother's eyes until the woman was near a century old.

But for every light, there is a dark. And for every life, there is an end. Beatrice's came toward the end of February. It started after she could no longer eat, then no longer drink but small sips of water or broth, followed by the bloody vomit. Her very appearance seemed to decay to a shallow shell of her former self. Louisé's heart snapped with each deterioration until it was nothing but broken pieces within her chest the night she said her goodbye.

Beatrice was propped on pillow, face made more pale by the purple rings around her closed eyes. But when she opened them, Louisé could see where her own blue irises were born. Her father, a priest and Baron LaCroix stood just inside the room, giving the two enough space. Louisé sat on the edge of her mother's bed, leaning to stroke her mother's hair and hold her dainty hand.

"Remember to pray for your father, your sister and her husband, and for little Elizabeth," her mother's voice was so soft.

"I will," Louisé nodded, her eyes stinging. "And I will pray for you and you will get better, like before." Her voice sounded childish, quivering but stubbornly hopeful.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw all three men bow their heads. Beatrice smiled and lifted her hand to her daughter's cheek, "Not this time, mon bébé."

"No, please…Maman," Louisé turned her head and kissed her mother's palm.
"I love you, my sweet Louisé. And I shall always love you."

Louisé heard herself choking down sobs, felt her throat tighten and her chest burn with pain. She looked back at her mother through tear-filled eyes, "Please, please, don't leave me."

Beatrice simply smiled on, wiped at her daughter's falling tears and drew her close to kiss her forehead, "God bless you, sweet baby of mine."

Louisé felt her mother fall away from her and panicked, "No…No! No! Please!"

She felt strong arms wrap around her waist and lift her away from her mother to give space to the priest. She fought violently, scratching with one hand and reaching out to her mother with the other, "Mother, please don't go!"

Sébastien carried her away from her mother as gently as he knew how to do, though she fought like a feral cat the entire time. She didn't need to see it…the gruesome and undignified way her mother would depart from this world. Not with a simple shutting of her eyes, but with a despicable release of the bowls. No, he wanted her to remember her mother with a faint smile on her face and blessing on her tongue. She writhed and scratched and he twisted her around to carry her like an infant to her own room. When she realized he was not going to carry her back, when she would not see her mother alive again, she broke down into awful sobs against his breast.

He could hardly explain the wrenching sensation he felt inside, but he had little energy to concentrate or scrutinize what it was or where it came from for the girl wailing in his arms. Left with little recourse, he settled himself onto her bed and held her there, allowing his eyes to take in the slowly dying fire across the room. Sébastien felt her fingers clutch the fabric of his jacket as if it were the only thing anchoring her to this world. She screamed. She screamed into his clothes and dampened them with her tears while his fingers, mindlessly and methodically, ran through her hair. He honestly didn't know what to do, so he didn't stop his fingers and he didn't say anything.

After she was finished screaming, her body shuddered in his arms with violent, wave-like motions born of the sobs and wails eating away at the interior of his ears. He did not stop her, though. There was no comfort enough he could offer her that would blanket the pain she was experiencing. He wasn't sure he wanted to comfort her.

"I did not pray enough! Not hard enough," she was choking on her words and tears. Sébastien smacked her back lightly then pulled her away from his chest.

"Louisé! Listen to me," he gave her a shake to get her attention then cupped her face in his hands so she focused on his eyes. "There was nothing you could do for her. She was sick and sick for a long time. She needed more than prayer. Do you understand me?"

She closed her eyes, shook her head, and sobbed, "How am I going to do this without her?"

He felt her tears warm the skin of his hands. His thumbs brushed her tears away. He would get nowhere with her through Socratic methods after so fresh a loss, so he allowed himself to give into what came naturally. One hand slid its fingers into her hair, the other disappeared around her back and drew her against his chest once more.

"I cannot live without her," her voice cracked, snuffling.

Sébastien bore his gaze into the flames, as if to will them to grow, swell and rise. He lost himself in their flickering, her words lilting through her ears like a supplicant's prayer. In the stillness of his
thoughts, he saw the stars in the sky, at his feet in his eyes. From there, he had one singular though: *Then you will not have to.*

It comes in threes, they say. Sorrow, joy and other emotions Louisé didn't think she ever wanted to feel again. Happiness, anger, thrill, jealousy…they all bled together in a muted shade of grey. She finally understood how great her mother's pain had been at losing Jean. It had never been about losing a first born, losing a child…but about something greater, of more substance: losing an irreplaceable piece of yourself.

Louisé felt broken. Her chest ached with the throbbing of someone yanking her heart from its cage and crushing it before her eyes. Everything was a blur of tears and black. The funeral, a mere mosaic of stained glass, black lace and cold stone. She did not rise from bed if she did not need to, and ignored the food placed before her. What would sustain her, she could never have again. Louisé knew her muscles didn't need meat or milk to grow strong, but the touch of her mother's hand to her forehead, the gentleness of her voice to soothe her fears. Nourishment unobtainable. So she slept until death returned her to the embrace she longed for.

A week after such behaviors, she felt rough fingers force her mouth open and shove stew inside, "You will eat, Louisé!"

Why was he here? That was all she pondered as she thrashed and rolled out of his grasp, falling to the stone floor with a pitiful thud, "No!"

Caught in her sheets, she made easy prey and he was upon her like a wolf. He seized both wrists in one hand and held them behind her back while the mass of his weight pushed her down against her back. Blonde hair fell into his eyes as he pivoted his upper body to grab the bowl of stew. She clamped her lips together and turned her head. She heard him sigh, feeling his frustration.

"Be a good girl, Louisé and eat. Don't make me force you," he uttered.

She grunted, wriggling beneath him and tugging on her wrists. He responded by tightening his grasp and forcing her face look at him. For such cold, icy colored eyes…she felt like she was melting, "You will eat now." And she ate.

When she was finished eating, she carried her downstairs and dumped her into a tub of hot water. Two maidservants stripped the chemise from her body and scrubbed her, untroubled by LaCroix's presence.

"You have made your petition quite clear, Monsieur LaCroix and I have told you, the Prince is considering it," the grey-haired Seneschal responded to Sébastien. "He has many more requests before yours that require his utmost attention. I promise you, though, I will let you know as soon as a decision is made."

"And how long might that be?"

The man, who obviously hated his job, rubbed the bridge of his nose and shook his head, "However long it takes. If you hadn't noticed, we are having a small Lasombra invasion to deal with first. All requests to sire, come second."
At some point, I am going to overhaul this chapter until it is up to snuff by my standards and my version of LaCroix

Her eyes flew open at precisely eight o'clock, as they had done every night since the first. She didn't immediately rise. Her cheeks were wet and she sighed as the back of both hands raked across her face to dry them off. She hated that memory and it seemed the more she attempted to distance her mind from it, the stronger it rebounded. The details became clearer, voices sharper and sensations stronger. One thing never changed, and that was her mother's survival.

Louisa sat up and triangulated her knees, allowing a perch for her forehead as she conjured other memories to make that one fade away. When that didn't work, she ran through the logistics of the evening ahead. The sound of her door opening and movement around the room meant there was no more time to wash away residual pain. She slid from her bed and stopped in front of her vanity to fix her hair into rollers. Boxes of varying shades of black hair dye speckled one side of the vanity and she rolled her eyes at the not-at-all subtlety of her Sire. Ignoring the boxes, she lifted her hand and cupped a cross that hung on one corner of the vanity mirror. She ran her thumb over the cross, whose Jesus was so worn down by the ritualistic practice at the beginning of every night He barely had a face. The rosary long ago lost her scent, but she didn't need to actively smell it to know it through and through.

His hand came out of nowhere, or rather out of the unexpected, and stopped her thumb. She looked at his reflection in the mirror. She tugged her fingers from his and began popping large-barrel heated rollers into her hair. He lifted the boxes of hair dye and held them up to her head until he found a color matching enough not to bother him.

"What's wrong?" he lifted a knuckle to the edge of her eye and dabbed at the remnant tear lingering there.

"Bad dream."

"About…?"

"My mother."

His reflection’s jaw stiffened, eyes moving to the fatigued rosary. His fingers touched the cross and in his eyes, she could see he was remembering the lady who wore it with as much reverence he could give Kine. She also knew he was remembering the necklace's ulterior significance in their long history. "Remember her well," he looked at her now, turning her away from the vanity with a heavy hand, "And think on something else."

The way he pushed his hand into her back, guiding her to her closet while talking her into reconsidering her chosen attire for the evening pressed a long-ignored nerve. His fingers pressed
against her spine to emphasize his words physically, in addition to audibly. She suddenly had her 'something else' to think about.

The grey-haired Seneschal slapped a tri-fold piece of paper onto LaCroix's desk, the composite of hemp and linen creating a thwumping sound amid the crying and groaning of LaCroix's most recent victim. The man noted that LaCroix's immaculate office, with its equally spaced furniture and neurotically ordered documents, was askew. By piling his furniture to one corner and throwing cheap fabric over books and papers, Sébastien had managed to finagle a make-shift dungeon out of his cramped professional quarters. The Seneschal stood rigid by the caddy-corner desk while watching LaCroix lean over his latest victim with a pair of bloodied pincers in his hand. When LaCroix straightened up, he held an elongated tooth between two fingers against the pale light of a candelabrum. The Seneschal felt the slightest quake disturb his spine as he realized Sébastien had ripped out one of this Kindred's fangs immediately prior to him stepping into the room.

"Now, you will tell me who your other compatriots are, or I am afraid I shall be forced to remove your other fang," a clinking sound succeeded his threat as he set the fang onto a plate beside where the sorry fellow was strapped into a chair.

Sébastien slid his eyes toward the grey-haired man in the corner, then back toward his prey, "Looks like you have a little time to alphabetize those names for me while I see to my guest." He strode toward Seneschal, wiping his bloodied hands on a handkerchief before shaking the man's hand, "To what do I owe the honor this fine evening, sir?"

The Seneschal's eyes avoided Sébastien's to focus on the man behind them. His lips quirked, "Fine work Monsieur LaCroix, but is it all necessary?"

"Oh, you know it's not a true confession without torture. He's just making it harder for himself," LaCroix smiled and since the Seneschal knew him to be a man of no more than a smirk, he was disturbed. "Care for a souvenir?"

"No, thank you," the Seneschal motioned to the sealed paper, "Congratulations Monsieur LaCroix."

Sébastien followed the man's eyes and set blood-caked fingers upon the paper. If the grey-haired man had to name the emotion he saw, he would have to call it relief. It reminded him of the way people looked when they felt their prayers had been answered.

"In honor of your dedicated service to our Prince, we as his Voice are happy to extend to you the privilege of siring. Additionally, as a reward for your exceptional part in abolishing this Sabbat uprising, the Prince would like to extend to you the position of Scourge. This, naturally, expands your domain and provides to you the property used by the former Scourge within Lyon."

Sébastien gripped the paper, awash with new entitlement and turned his gaze back to the man tied to the chair, "Deliver our most earnest thanks to our gracious Prince."

"I will indeed," the grey-haired man headed for the door. He gave LaCroix a departing look, "Whomever it is you have chosen, I hope they are worthy of our clan Sébastien."

"They are. If not immediately, you can determine by my handiwork - " he motioned to his prisoner, "That they will be."

Dour. That was the only word proper enough to describe Louisé the months following her mother's funeral. She refused any of the bright colors she had once garbed herself with and replaced them
with varying shades of grey or black. She appeared more a young widow than a grieving daughter, but her father hadn't the heart to fight with her on the issue. He only requested she make herself more presentable when it came to company; his implication to look more attractive for the young men or widowers he was luring to the chateau. Marriage was stored far back in her mind, the suitors were more likely to find the Ark of the Covenant than her eagerness or matrimonial hand.

She woke to misty rain and dressed in her lackluster attire. She sat, fingers pushing her mother's rosary beads in prayer while a maidservant tended to her hair. She tied the sacred necklace about her waist, emulating her mother's sacrosanct behaviors. The sudden religious fervor frightened those around her, but they also accepted it as a fact of grieving and a means for her to connect with her mother on a spiritual level since she no longer could practically.

Without his wife, Charles relegated most of Beatrice's chores and duties to his remaining child in the hopes she would not only take a weighty burden off his shoulders, but acquire the necessary skills to manage the feminine elements of the estate. She had yet to disappoint his expectations and he was beginning to feel less guilty and indecisive about making her his sole heir.

"Is everything prepared, Louise?" Charles came upon his daughter tucking fresh sheets into a guest bed. A chore reserved for servants, Charles appreciated Louise's sense of dedication to things being up to her standard. She reflected her mother in that way and he suspected, Louise knew that. "You can let the servants finish up his room."

"Yes, father," she abandoned the bed with a final tuck and followed him from the room. Her wrist wiped her forehead free of sweat. The rising temperature and misty conditions were creating an uncomfortable humidity within the chateau. "When is Baron LaCroix due to arrive? The cook wants to know what should be made for dinner."

"Oh, he usually arrives late in the night, Louise. He told your mother and me long ago not to fuss with having a meal prepared for him."

She accepted this without much care, "What does he want, father?"

Charles' expression hardened. As a friend, LaCroix had encouraged him to include Louise in the business side of the estate, but she was not entirely sure he was ready for that since he couldn't entirely remember the circumstances of the conversation leading to that encouragement. "He has some business with me."

Louise made a noise, "Is he bringing a friend?"

Charles crooked a brow, "I'm not sure. I assume as much since he asked for two rooms downstairs to be prepared this time instead of his usual one, but I haven't a clue who they are."

"Very well, I will tell the maids to prepare the one beside his."

"You don't like him much, do you Louise?"

Her lips pursed in a way that made Charles recall his late wife's reaction to salacious gossip, "If you recall, father, he was not particularly kind to me as a child."

"I was under the impression he has been quite kind as of late."

"I wouldn't call it kindness, so much as obligatory civility."

"Well, whatever it may be, make sure you extend better to him and his guest while they're here with us. Are you off then?"
Louisé paused mid-step and looked back at her father, "Yes. I plan on attending confession, prayer and then the evening Mass."

"That will last until after dark," there was concern in his voice.

"I will be careful, father."

LaCroix planned it as precisely as he could, save for one glaring detail. Tucked into a comfortable-enough trunk within a windowless carriage, he slept the length of his journey from Lyon to Charles' chateau. A ghoul rode on either end of the carriage for daytime security's sake and grunt labor for when they arrived. The sun wasn't quite setting when they arrived, leaving the ghouls responsible for carrying him to his indoor quarters. Their minimal domination abilities would provide enough to overpower the mortal company around them from becoming too suspicious about his lack of presence. While he rested, he ran through each component of his plan until his brain was dizzy with excitement.

First, he will sequester Charles to the spare room he requested and there, bind him. Then he will dispatch of superfluous staff to needy Kindred homes in Lyon. After that, he would find her. She will be in her room, most likely, and kneeling in prayer. He will open the door and she will turn her head to look at him in surprise, perhaps confused concern and rise from her knees. Her hair might be down and cascading over her shoulders, or behind them, or off to one side and her eyes may widen and be alight from the fire lighting the candles. He will dominate her into a calm submission before having her bathed and dressed in a new chemise he brought with him from Lyon. Once clean and dressed, she will be placed on his bed where he would make her wait in anticipation. He waits until her anticipation raises to a pleasant place between craving and anxiety before entering the room. He locks the door and covers the window to camouflage the intimacy of this process, speaking things to her to provoke her anticipation and fear.

Then he settles his hands on her. Her shoulders, to start. He encourages her lay back against the bed and become comfortable. Her legs, next, to part at his very command. From there, he brings her body to a decent peak, but not climax. He wants her blood sweetened by means she could appreciate with her newfound womanhood without leaving him feeling like a deviant. Then he bites. So sweet! First the inside of her thigh, his ears drawing in the sounds of her satisfaction and surrender as each successive bite brings more and more of her into him. He has never wanted blood or body as much as hers, as much as now. He saves plenty for his final bite into that precious neck of hers. He drinks until he hears her last whimper die. He runs his thumb over her lips and parts them. He bites his wrist and presses it to her open mouth and releases himself into her.

After that, he will clean her and tuck her into the bed. He shall wait for her to rise from a chair across the room. To sate her ravenous first moments, he will allow she feed from him. To bind her to him, she will feed from him for the first few nights in addition to other, proper sources. Charles shall be her first blue blood meal, he has decided, as a means to symbolically replace himself as her new father of the night. She will obey and Charles will be found dead. Louisé will inherit, thereby expanding Sébastien's domain and increasing his revenue.

His fangs her throbbing by the time he rises from the trunk at sunset. His beastly mind caught in the loop of his draining her and brain changing the details ever slightly until he is near delirious with structured excitement. He sets out the chemise she will wear and instructs his ghouls to prepare a bath for her while he hunts Charles down. Everything goes smoothly until he opens her door and finds the room dark and empty. Rage doesn't quite exemplify the explosion in his brain as he stalks down to Charles. He no longer bothers to hide the animalistic canines or feral growl in his voice.

"Where is she?!" he roars.
The priest would not let her leave hungry. Impressed by her sudden spiritual growth and inclination, partnered with his respect for the family who contributed additional salary toward his comfort, he insisted Louisé share dinner with himself and a singular, resident nun. Louisé could not refuse his charity, but dinner came with conversation that delayed her intended return home. He sent her home with the nun as a companion, who returned to the church once Louisé was deposited at the front door.

The first thing she noticed was the uncomfortable atmosphere of the chateau, which had nothing to do with the humidity. She anticipated quiet when she returned, but not an eerie silence settled like a fog throughout the hallways. It was the silence of a forest when a predator roamed, all animals still as statues in the hopes of being bypassed for something better. Any move could mean certain death. Louisé felt her chest tighten and stomach roll. What predator was after her to make her feel so afraid?

Gripping her mother's rosary and enlisting the Saints for protection within her own brain, she moved down the hall to let her father know she was home, safe and sound. This late probably meant her father was in his room, so she dared knock on the door even if it meant rousing the sleeping bear her father was always accused of being. Nothing stirred and no one came. She broken the golden rule of the house and opened the door, peeking into the dark for a long while until her eyes adjusted. No one was in the room. Louisé closed the door and headed for her room instead, feeling clunky and glaring in her dark dress.

Her door was ajar, flooding the small space of the hallway in front of it with an ominous light. Louisé swallowed and dismissed a rising anxious thought with a simple explanation of her maid having prepared her rooms hours ago. She entered the room and found nothing out of order. She dressed down to her chemise and dressing gown. For some reason, she felt compelled to keep the rosary on her person instead of replace it to the prayer stand by her bed. Feeling guilty for staying out late and determined to confirm her presence for her father, she left her room to find him. Surely he would be in his study.

Her father presented himself well since her mother's death, but behind the scenes he was a nervous wreck. For reasons she could both understand and not comprehend, her father feared for her very life. He made sure to know where she would be at all times and did not participate in any action that may threaten her. And while she knew she had explained her whereabouts thoroughly to him, she would not place him under undo anxiety. She suspected he would be in his study, balancing ledgers and responding to a mass pile of letters in an effort to quell any angst. She knocked on the study door and pushed it open.

"Father," she stared at the desk chair, its back to her while it faced the fire, "I'm sorry I arrived so late. I wanted to let you know I'm home and that I am going to bed now." Her fingers fumbled with the beads on the rosary.

The sound of tongue clicking responded. She had heard that clicking before, in a time gone by that was decorated with side pinches, teasing and quills. Her stomach tightened when his voice arose, "You've been a very, naughty girl, Louisé."

He turned to face her and every muscle in her body froze with fear. The light of the fire made his mouth and chin glisten. She knew the red around his mouth was not wine, but she was too frightened and sickened to accept what she knew it was. She looked around the room and spotted a pair of legs sticking out from behind the desk. They looked feminine...at least they weren't her father's. A pounding sound snapped her attention back to LaCroix. His fist had crushed the wood of the desk beneath it. He was madder than she had ever seen him.

"I set specific conditions in place and I expect those conditions to be met! You were supposed to be
here! How dare you defy my explicit instructions!” he took steps, slow and rapacious, toward her.

She backed up, heart pounding, "Stay away from me!"

He laughed, "What's wrong, Louisé? Have I frightened you?"

She didn't answer him. A rational voice in her head said 'Close the door!' and she obeyed. She slammed the door closed and ran down the length of the hall. She heard him screaming, the sound of splintering wood and cursing. Her feet pounded against the cold stone and sent sharp pains up her ankles. Something rose out of the darkness as she turned a corner for the stairs and before she knew it, her face smacked into the floor. She heard a crunching sound and a wave of nausea hit her stomach. Warm liquid rushed down from her nose and dribbled into her mouth as she huffed while pushing herself up. She struggled, her legs fighting to overcome the lump she tripped over. Looking at what was in her way, she heart sank at the still body of her father. His lifeless eyes gazed back at her, and the gash at his throat looked like a vulgar smile depositing its red saliva into a pool. She screamed and jolted up to stand. A figure moved around the corner.

"I was very hungry, Louisé…If you had been here, this would never have happened and your father would still be alive. Oh, are you crying now, Louisé?” he was reacting to her quiet, terrorized sobbing.

"No, please…T-this is just a dream,” Louisé reached out to touch her father's cooling face. She pulled her fingers back, sickened and wiped her nose. Her arm was stained with a dark streak and as soon as she touched the tip of her nose, her face erupted with profound pain.

"Then you better keep running until you wake up, my dear. I'll evening give you a ten second head start. One…two…” he counted tauntingly slow.

She didn't hear 'three’ as she pumped her legs and ran up the stairs. She lost her footing halfway up and crashed her knee into the corner of the next stair. The stone cut her skin and she felt a weak trickle, compared to her nose, slink down her leg. She had no time to consider this fresh wound. Cold fingers weaved their way into her hair, twisted and yanked. He began dragging her up the stairs without a care to whether she accomplished climbing them with her feet or knees.

"Disrespectful! Unacceptable, Louisé! How dare you make me wait! I won't tolerate this kind of behavior, do you understand me?”

"My intention is never to hurt you, Louisé but you must understand…I won't tolerate insubordination,” his other fingers, cold, stroked her cheek.
"But I don't understand what you're talking about," she whimpered.

"You will," she felt the cold trail of his fingers from her jawline down the side of her neck. Her heart hurt from beating so hard for so long. His fingers pressed against her skin, rubbing, "Ssssshhhh, this won't hurt a bit."

She gripped the beads of the rosary, praying this was swift but when his mouth widened toward her throat, flashing canines like a beast she prayed for strength instead. The halls echoed the sound of her voice as she screamed, yanked her body back and threw her arm up.

"No!"

Instead of the supple flesh of her neck, Sébastien sunk his fangs into the sinewy texture of her lower arm. He didn't even have the pleasure of catching her wrist or vein. That mattered a little less compared to the searing pain that slapped into the front of his face. He heard two sets of screaming: hers as he bit into her arm, and his as he released her. There was thrashing, and in an attempt to get a grip in his runaway doe, he dug sharp nails into flesh. He felt warm blood spill over his fingers and her peel out of his grasp. He couldn't open his eyes for the two burning spheres sitting just atop his flesh.

Everything went topsy-turvy after that. She must have shoved him and in his incapacitated stated, he fell backwards over the stairs. Everything stopped once his back smacked into the hard, cold stone of the floor at the stair base. He felt sore, embarrassed and incensed that a Kine got the better of him. He staggered to stand and let out a roar of frustration. Both ghouls came running, capturing the sight of their Master scraping at something attached to his face. The braver of the two moved closer, albeit out of reach of his rage, and saw glistening prayer beads seared into LaCroix's flesh. He would ask later how such a simplistic object could cause such damage for the vampire.

"M-master?"

"Get this off of me, you simpleton!"

The man, name unimportant, approach and took hold of the dangling cross to begin removing the beads from his master's face. His stomach knotted when Sébastien's eyes flew open to narrowed slit, fangs bared with undiluted anger. The burn marks from the beads healed quickly once the entire rosary was removed. The servant held the necklace in his hand and stepped back from LaCroix, who stared at the conduit of prayer with disgust.

"What are you doing just standing here?!!" he snapped, more at the ghoul behind them.

"W-we heard you-"

"I know what you heard, you thick-headed gopher! Where is Louise?!!"

The ghouls stiffened before him, instigating his temper further. He gritted his teeth as the closer answered him, "W-we thought you had her."

"We shall go search for her," the other squeaked. Sébastien held up a pale hand.

"Your incompetence has caused me enough this evening. I can find her on my own." He left them stupored and stalked for the front entrance. His precisely constructed, time devoted plan was in tatters at his proverbial feet. There was not enough discipline in the world to reign in the beast tearing through Sébastien's consciousness.
"You better run! Run, Louise! I will find you! You cannot hide from me!" he yelled into the damp air of the night. On the wind, he could smell her blood.

Crying was useless. That didn't stop Louise's eyes from producing sufficient tears as she maneuvered herself out of the chateau and into the surrounding forest. She had thrown the rosary into his face, in the hopes their divine power would intervene on her behalf in a more physical, than spiritual, capacity. She never expected them to work as well as they did. A bite to the arm was well worth watching him scream in pain. Then Louise had done what came naturally and fought to get away, not expecting him to claw her back. The searing agony paralyzed her for an instant. Vengeance gave her the strength to shove him backward but she didn't stay to watch him topple, just listened to the sound of him falling fade behind her as she ran the opposite direction.

Her legs betrayed her twice before she reached the tree line, collapsing once into the dirt and stumbling over a misappropriated piece of farm equipment. All the while, she could feel blood drip down her back and the backs of her legs. Feeling cumbersome in her weighty dressing gown, Louise abandoned the article of clothing amongst the trees as she ran, disturbed by the size of the stain and slash marks. How bad was the condition of her back? She had no idea, only that every lift of her knees sent another bolt of pain throughout her body.

But she couldn't stop running until she was far enough away, or somewhere safe. She felt the leaves crunch beneath her feet, slick from the drizzle that day. She slid through the undergrowth, arms flying up to smack branches out of her face. Her lungs burned, forcing her to stop so she could feast on air. Her brain was swimming and once she was stopped, she could feel how hard her arms and legs her shaking. Stomach rolling, Louise gripped a tree and vomited into a pile of leaves and decaying undergrowth. The air now stunk of sour regurgitation, mildewed foliage and iron. Louise huffed, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and whimpered when her nose reminded her of its fragility.

Messy fingers brushed tears, sweat and clinging hair from her face as she turned around in an effort to get her bearings. Which direction had she come from? Which way was forward? Backward? Her heart constricted and she sobbed, realizing how completely lost she was. She had been taunted, assaulted and now stood bloody, if not still bleeding, in the middle of a forest because she believed it would save her life. This must be how the deer felt when hunters came for them, lodging arrows in their pelts with whoops of excitement.

Clouds drifted overhead, revealing the near fullness of the moon. With newfound, pale light Louise could better see the extent of her state. Both arms were bloodied, one from an open bite mark that throbbed with a dull discomfort and the other from when she had wiped her face after kissing the floor. Her knee ached and stung from having the top layer of flesh scraped off but there was nothing more than a thin trickle, dried up from running. She didn't even need to both with her nose, which ached and swelled from what she could only identify as break. The real damage laid on her back. Gingerly, she navigated a hand backward to make a sightless assessment of the situation. She counted four gashes of varying sizes. The topmost started at her left shoulder blade but didn't extend very far or deep. The two subsequent wounds were worse, creating deep gorges in her muscles. The last wound was barely a scrape, but still stung like all small, seemingly innocuous cuts tend to. Her fingers followed the trail of sticky solution down, over her backside and thighs.

Louise lifted her dirty nightgown to glance at the back of her legs. They glistened the same way LaCroix's face had. She choked down more vomit but failed to hold it for long. Pitched forward, groaning from her discomfort, she almost didn't catch the sounds of the forest die…become suspiciously still. Louise raised her eyes and in the distance, among the trunks of the trees darkened like spectres, she saw a figure move.
No…she thought, her mind resuming its panicked disposition. She teetered backwards, spun and continued running though her legs felt more like cold honey. She hear someone crashing through the leaves somewhere behind her. She screamed, a heart-wrenching blend of begging and prayer. Her foot caught a stone, or maybe a root. Tripping, she flew forward and the only insight she had was to cover her face this time as her body hit the ground and rolled down a steady slope. She felt twigs poke her in the side, snap in her hair and leaves tickle her arms as she spun down. She came to rest against a fallen tree trunk. It smelled of moss, dirty and damp. Louisé shook and pressed her face into her arms as she sobbed. She did not move from where she lay. The approaching footsteps told her how futile running was at this point.

"Honestly, Louisé…How far did you think you would get?" LaCroix's taunting broke the silence. The intensity of his presence loomed close over her, a hand pulling her away from the tree, "You're coated in your own blood. I could smell you a mile away."

She kept her arms clutched over her face, which was insignificant to him or his intentions. Without a single consideration to her comfort, he forced his arms beneath her body and hauled her from the ground. She cried out in pain and arched her back away from his arms. Her body felt sticky, smelled sour and was now caked with a combination of blood and dirt that made her unappealing to his increased appetite. As payback for striking his face with her prayer beads, his took his time walking back to the chateau, savoring each and every whimper or sob.

He dumped her on her bed with no ceremony and barked for his ghous to get a fresh bath ready for her. The amount of blood she had lost in addition to running for hypothetical freedom made her weak. She could no more fight against him than could bring the cold corpse of her father back to life. His hands flipped her over onto her stomach and tore the flimsy material covering her body. The cuts on her back had stopped bleeding, but left a mess in the process. He couldn't have any progeny of his immortally scarred. Lowering his head, he pressed his tongue to each of the wounds and became the tedious process of both cleaning and healing.

Much as he wanted to listen, he ignored the sounds she made as he sucked on her skin and stitched her flesh back together. Her muscles jerked and spasmed as he trailed his tongue along the ridges of the open wounds. So close to her body, he smelled her sweat and dying panic. He was so hungry but could accomplish nothing satisfying with her tonight. He would have to postpone. With one last, long groan from her, he finished reconstructing her back to pristine alabaster. He gripped her shoulder and rolled her over, watching her flinch from pain she supposed would wash over her. Her pretty face was made hideous by the purple-black bloat of her broken nose. Saying nothing, he pinched her nose between his fingers. She screamed, fresh tears swelling in her eyes, and gripped his wrist. She resumed her pleading, but he ignored her and with a precise movement, snapped her nose back into place. He had seen it done, and subsequently performed it, upon many soldiers during his brief stint in the military. Her nose was nothing compared to one smashed with the butt of a gun or sword handle.

He pricked the pad of his thumb with a fang and smeared blood over the cut on her nose ridge, massaged it into the side of her nose and waited for her skin to absorb, and appreciate, the healing power of his vitae. Sébastien took her arm, frowning at the wasted opportunity his teeth marks reminded him off. By closing his mouth over the wound, he repeated the process used on her back to close the wounds. The blood dried there was unappetizing, having been tainted by taste of dirt and flora. Then he abandoned her to the care of his ghous.

Louisé's eyes felt heavy when next she opened them. The last thing she remembered before everything turning black was skilled fingers separating her hair to remove bits of leaf and wood. Her
body was so exhausted and covered in patches of bruises ranging in blue, purple and black. The
room she was in was warm and she was dressed in a silken, soft chemise…a welcome reprieve from
what she had been wearing before. She groaned and sat up, but not much since her head began
swimming. Forced to lay back down, she drew the blankets closer and focused on what she
remembered. Blood…there had been lots of blood and Baron LaCroix, he became some sort of
accursed beast. Clearly she was ill and haunted by feverish dreams to recall such an inhuman
experience.

"My servants say you slept all day," his voice came out of a corner of the room.

She didn't respond with words, just sluggish groans. She tucked her fists beneath her chin and went
back to sleep. She didn't dream, however. No monsters to scare her this time and when she woke
next, LaCroix was sitting on the edge of the bed. He was staring down at her. Her eyes felt lighter,
but not enough to warrant her staying awake if she didn't want to. He said nothing to her as his hand
grabbed the blanket and tugged it away from her. The rush of air chilled her skin and she shivered,
her left hand reaching for the blanket. He snatched her wrist and pressed it back against the bed,
angling her body uncomfortably. She was now wide awake. Louise tugged on her wrist but his grip
was tight and cold.

"What are you doing? Let me go!" her voice raised.

He ignored her and slid his other hand beneath her head, his fingers pressing until she was looking at
the wall to her right. She mewled and he pressed his lips against her cheek. As his lips moved,
Louise could feel the scrape of the fangs from her frenzied imagination. She started thrashing and he
pressed the fullness of his body weight against her to stop her movements. It was the equivalent of
laying a slab of rock on her. This may not have been a dream, but it was no less a nightmare.

He lifted his eyes to her, "Just relax." And she had no choice but to do so. Drugged by his words,
Louise sensed her muscles become slack and obedient. When his face disappeared, she felt tears run
from the corner of her eye and drip over her nose. His mouth, perhaps the warmest part of him,
covered the crook of her throat and an instant later, she felt a sharp piercing. She squealed a second
then moaned, her free fingers tangling the sheets beneath them both. He was close enough to her ear
for her to hear each lusty noise he made.

He didn't unlatch himself for over a minute. When he rose, she was laboring to breathe. Every
mouthful slowed her heart and now he heard it every so often, a few more mouthfuls and she would
be ready. Her eyelids fluttered and lips moved painstakingly slow. He licked his lips and tipped her
face in his direction.

"What is it, Louise?" he rubbed her cheek with his thumb.

"A-am…I…dying?" she struggled, her voice so soft.

He lifted her left hand to his face, rubbing his cheek into the soft palm, "Oh yes…" He listened to her
sniffle, whimper in fear before shutting her mouth tightly. He pressed his lips to the skin of her wrist.
"Don't be afraid. You won't feel a thing, I swear." He bit into her wrist and began drinking the last of
her, listening cautiously for her fading heartbeat.

Finished. He set her arm down and looked at her face. Nose healed, eyes closed and mouth shut as if
she were sleeping. He sunk his fangs into his own wrist and sucked, but did not swallow. He lifted
her head with a hand and pressed his lips to hers, parting them with his tongue and forcing his blood
inside. A small amount dribbled out and down her chin. His tongue forced the vitae farther down her
throat before he pulled away and left the bed. He walked to a small table and poured water into a
wash basin. Sébastien splashed his face repeatedly, rubbing the water over his mouth and chin. He dumped the ruddy water out the window then poured a fresh source and soaked a cloth.

He cleaned her body where his mouth smudged claret around and straightened her gown before settling her body back against the pillows. As he planned, he tucked her in and left to use the remaining hours of darkness to find her an appropriate food source for when she awoke. All nature's babies are hungry, after all.
Drink

When it was clear Louisé would not be rising in the remaining hours of that night, he tied the Kine he had found for her part of her first meal in the basement then collapsed on the bed in the room beside where Louisé's comatose body lay. Sunset satisfying beneath the horizon, he woke the next night with a distinct awareness he needed to intercept the ravenous and vicious behaviors of a neonate. He strode straight to her room instead of changing or washing. Louisé did not stir, nor was there any evidence she had moved during the day and he felt the core of himself sink low. Having never Embraced before, Sébastien wasn't confident he had not simply killed her instead of drinking just enough or that she required more time. He understood some needed only hours to raise while others, a night or two. He exhaled unnecessarily and departed to find his ghouls, feed and take Charles' will to the appropriate individuals. He had taken the liberty of writing them about Charles' death two days ago so they would travel from Lyon to Barby a full day before him.

Advanced preparations did not mean he would not still be completing hours of paperwork to finalize the transition of Louise's inheritance. Charles' body lay in state on his own bed and he had easily concocted a reasonable story for his death, even gone so far as to have his neck stitched and body dressed properly to cover the fatal cut. He knew they wouldn't even want to see his body, but that didn't mean Sébastien was any less magisterial toward the duties before him. He was Ventrue, after all. His part in the man's murder did not forgo his responsibility that the noblemen receive due funerary arrangements. He left his ghouls to conduct any affairs until he returned.

Cold. That was the first sensation she awoke to. A blistering cold tightening each muscle, goose bumping her skin and coiling her insides. Next, she had an awareness of great emptiness. This wasn't just hunger, but a recognition that there was something (if not many somethings) missing from her body. One of those things was her heart. It's funny how people don't notice their hearts until they absolutely must. In the case of the night before, she completely perceived the power of her heart as it ran ragged throughout her chest. She most definitely noticed it tonight because it was not doing a thing. There was no beat, ragged or otherwise, stirring in her breast. No matter how panicked she became (and she was certainly panicked) nothing disturbed the lead heaviness between her ribs.

Then came the pricking pain inside her own mouth. She opened her mouth and winced. Her bottom gums had a dull throb to them, like they had been knicked. She prodded the inside with a cold finger and paused when one tooth ran longer than she believed it should and ended with a sharp point. Yanking her finger out, she threw off the covers and jumped from the bed. She had little time to consider what happened to her teeth when a crippling hunger pitched her forward. This was something akin to the pain of her courses, but the burning traveled from the pit of her stomach to her throat.

She swallowed, panted from the awful burden overpowering her body. She had to drink! Her eye caught a wash basin in the corner of the room with its spousal water jug. Brief relief washed over her as she grabbed the jug and drank down the contents. She took one step before everything she just swallowed stormed up out of her and splashed onto the stone floor like a violent rain. She groaned and hugged her arms tight to her abdomen. If water would not quench this substantial thirst, she would have to search elsewhere for relief. Staggering to the door, she moped down the hallway to the kitchen in the hopes there was someone left who had the forethought to cook.

Her eyes adjusted easier than they ever had to the dark around her, the moonlight more glaring than subtle now. The house didn't seem so silent either. She heard the animals outside, ranging from crickets to owls in the distance. Simultaneously, her ears rang with the work and movement of bodies
in the chateau. Someone was thrashing about in the wine cellar below, another drumming their fingers against wood rooms away and a third scraping paper with a quill. It was maddening.

Her throat tightened, reminding her of the great hungry beast inside. She found a pot of cooled stew hanging and scooped the last of it into a bowl. She took a bite out of the stew, but didn't even manage to swallow before spitting it out. It tasted of some misbegotten child between bad meat and ash. Sniffing the bowl, the contents smelled as they had tasted. Did the cooks have stomachs the same making as the pot that they could not recognize how rotten the meat had become? Perhaps bread or an apple would suit her appetite better. She was wrong. The bread smelled moldy and tasted like swill. The apple soured in her, like cream in the summer heat. By the time she was done experimenting anything and everything available, the floor of the kitchen looked relative to a pig's trough.

A fierce rage overcame her normal stable sensibilities. With strength she never had, she threw the kitchen table across the room and watched it snap and splinter. Pain shook her belly and she cried, whining like an infant. She tugged on her hair from unprecedented frustration. Nothing was satisfying. Nothing even tasted good! Pounding built up between her eyes; the warnings of an oncoming headache. Her fingers gripped tighter on her head, nails scratching her scalp. She pulled them from their black ropes and looked down at the scarlet dotting her nails that seemed longer and sharper than before…like her teeth.

It wasn't the elongation or pointy tips that disturbed Louisé. No, it was the blood at ends of three fingers. She could smell the aroma, like someone waving a rose beneath her nose. It was a welcome smell to the refuse of the food at her feet but she wanted to know why. Why did it smell so much better than stew cooked with care? Better than that, why did her mouth water…temptation demand she lick at her own sanguine? She lowered her hands and wiped her nails off. She distracted herself with the sound of footsteps approaching and moved to meet them. Perhaps they had the answers to her debauch questions and inexplicable malady.

Sébastien felt a prominent rhythm building behind his eyes from hours spent listening to the unrestricted stuttering of an old man and constant wheezing of his son. The one relief was that they had found no roots to trip him up over declaring Louisé heiress. They only wished to see her that they may pass their sympathies and congratulations in one swoop. The problem arose for him in the fact that his Childe had not.

He dismounted from his horse and handed the reins to a field hand, a dominated remnant from the original estate servential stock. The man possessed a fidgety, if not entirely frightened, disposition that had not been there when Sébastien left. Not particular caring about the servant's mental state, he abandoned the man to his chores and entered the chateau. A cacophony of chaos smacked his ears and he strode to the kitchen to find its source. What he found was hard not to appreciate as comical, had his Childe not been the conductor of such a fuss.

Louisé straddled one of his ghouls, arms flailing to scratch the man to bits while the second ghoul tried to hold her back. Considerate about the damage she could do, the second man simultaneously protected his face by burying it into Louisé's back. That left his own arms victim to her wrath, however. When she wasn't swinging at the man on his back, she was scraping at the one holding her from her furious intentions. Her fangs were bared and the noises she produced so feral, she could pass for Gangrel. Around them was scattered a cornucopia of half-eaten food. The bottom hem of Louisé's chemise was stained from the refuse of wasted plenty. He allowed himself another ten second to enjoy this farce of three.

"That's enough now," LaCroix stepped into the room and took hold of Louisé's upper right arm.
Dragging her away from her intended prey was not so easy now that she had shed her human fragility and embodied the Herculean strength of neonatal Kindred.

Louisé’s eyes snapped onto him. The predatory heat dissolved into an intrinsic recognition of her blood parent. Sight alone would have calmed her, but the added touch flooded her with relief. She softened in his grip and rose from the ghoul. He noticed the way her jaw fumbled to accommodate their sharp, new residents. He released her arm and stilled her jaw with the same hand, eyes moving to the ghoul.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"S-she just attacked me! We were talking and the next thing I know, she's trying to claw my eyes out!" he took several steps away from them, face budding with blood from the superficial scrapes she had managed to land.

"He called me a monster!" Louisé complained. His hand wobbled with her words.

Sébastien narrowed his eyes on the ghoul. The man fumbled for words, pointing a finger at his Childe, "No! I called her a vampire. She was crying about how hungry she was, about how she couldn't eat or drink anything. So, I tried to explain to her-" Sébastien held up a hand to silence him.

"It is not your place to explain to my Childe her new station of being," he looked at Louisé. "When did you rise?"

"I woke up about an hour ago. And I'm not your child. I am Louisé Seyssel-Chambert! I am the daughter of the Marquis and Marquess d'Aix! I am of noble blood! I am not a vampire!" her hunger-born temper was rearing its Hydra head once more. This time it was filled with overinflated pride. Very Ventrue.

Sébastien reached out. Massaging her jugular would calm her until she could feed. But Louisé would have none of it and drew away from his touch. He frowned and motioned the ghouls to the wine cellar, "I am going to speak privately with my Childe. Bring our guest in five minutes to my room, understood?" He walked for his room. Louisé did not follow him, instead slipping into the angry stubbornness of her kind. He stopped and looked back at her. She would have to learn quickly, if she hadn't already, that he would not tolerate blatant disobedience, "Louisé…come."

Bereft of her own will, her body fought itself as she followed after him. Her face displayed the perfect look of someone entirely confused and enraged by what they did not understand. He held the door open for her and motioned to the bed. She sat in the manner of a petulant toddler: with a huff, frown and clenched fists. He closed the door.

"I won't tolerate this behavior, Louisé. You will settle yourself or I shall make you. The choice is entirely yours," he grabbed a chair and sat across from her. Her seat on the bed gave her minute height over him and a perfect angle for her to look right into his eyes. Her mouth fumbled again, her shoulders tensed and her fingers clenched the bedcovers. The beast in her was winning this battle. She could no more control her actions than walk in the sun at this particular moment in time. No touch would calm her where blood would.

"I'm hungry!" she shouted at him. "My stomach hurts, my mouth hurts and my throat won't stop burning!" She sobbed, head thrashing from the mentioned pain.

He touched the sides of her knees and drew her attention back to him, "You need to feed."

"I tried! I drank some water and ate some food but it just kept coming back up! It tasted awful!" he
knew he ought not be amused by her pain, as it was his own once, but he couldn't help it.

"Food will not sustain you, Louise. It is but rubbish to your body. You need something else… something better," he stroked her hair, using his tone to soothe her.

"W-why can't I eat? What's wrong with me?!" he watched her clench her mouth then cry and open it up, pain in her eyes. Frustration was there, too, "What did you do to me!"

She began fighting him. She raged with her fists and shrieked, unhinged by her starvation. It was not a long or hard-won fight as he grabbed one arm and twisted it behind her back. He wrapped his other arm around her body to still the remaining taloned weapon. He lifted her off the ground so that the only thing she could kick was the air. He settled them onto the bed, carefully abandoning his hold on the arm behind her back to constrict her with a second grip. Her legs swung and struck the air with angry strokes while her torso clobbered and wriggled against his body. She screamed with hiccup sobs as the only interruption. Sebastien set his chin atop her head and waited for her tantrum to die down. She didn't have much vitae to work with, after all.

He spoke up once she slumped in his embrace, "I have made you better. You are a superlative creature now, compared to what you were. You are vampire… Kindred. You are my Childe."

"I am not your daughter! I am not a monster!" a second wind caused a resurrected conniption.

"No, you're not a monster. What you are is starving," he wouldn't even touch the difference between daughter and the concept of Childe. Not now, at least. Louise displayed too much mental fragility and stubbornness to explain anything besides her own hunger. If she kept this up, she might not even learn that before he was exhausted. Sebastien felt relieved by the soft knock at the door. "Enter," he ordered.

He kept his focus on controlling Louise while the ghoul brought in the woman who had been tied up in the wine cellar. She was the newest member of his herd, the bottom tier of acceptable flavor required to sustain his nocturnal activities. By no means exemplary, she needed to be broken in to develop her supply but she would do for Louise's first meal. This woman's purpose was diminish hunger, which his Childe needed, not provide the full-bodied pleasure of Louise's experience with the first member of her inborn blood preference.

The woman had an unacceptably feisty temper, hence being tied up. Simple domination would have sufficed in securing her, but he wanted to teach her a lesson. (Seems he would be doing an awful lot of teaching from now on!) She was his property now, his personal blood cow and he wouldn't tolerate salacious behavior or back talk. He dismissed the ghoul with a wave of his hand and gave the woman a hard stare.

"You will provide my Childe sustenance. You will not speak to her or even make eye contact. If I find any behavior of yours to be displeasing, I will have you returned to the cellar. Is this understood?" the woman nodded, a thick regret spreading over her eyes as she began to realize this was not the arrangement she had imagined. He drew her close with the crook of his finger.

Louise had little clue what was going on around her. There was a pounding in her head, an ache in her stomach and an incessant burning in her throat. They kept telling her she was different now. They said she was a vampire, but no sharpened teeth, keener senses or lack of heartbeat convinced her enough to want to believe it. By no means did that mean it wasn't true…she just couldn't accept it. LaCroix had stolen her humanity and replaced it with a damnable, hollow existence confined to the binding of superstition. Superstitions people couldn't stomach whispering. That's what she was now: a nauseating whisper.
She thrashed in LaCroix's iron tight grasp, his words dissolving into the mire of her anger and hunger. When she felt her energy escape, she stillled in his arms. The door opened and a woman came into the room. Everything changed. The smell in the room sweetened and Louise became aware of an erratic heartbeat. Her senses squared on the woman: her ears listened to the haunting rhythm of her pulse, eyes navigated the viae of her veins and how they plumped, mouth watered with the expectant taste of her and her brain became a conflagration of guilt that she was experiencing these other sensations.

The woman came closer and Louise jerked her head in another direction, dug her palms into the bed and used them as leverage to crush her body against the stone wall that was Sébastien LaCroix. Her scent intensified the closer she came which left Louise little recourse but to assault the woman or tear out her own throat. Dignity demanded she execute the latter decision, but Baron LaCroix had other plans. She felt the cold force of his fingers grip her jaw and turn her face toward the woman. His other arm coiled round her waist and pressed her pelvis back toward the bed. She was little more than a marionette under his control.

"Louisé, this woman is going to give you what you need to make you feel better," his forefinger moved from her jaw to her mouth, attempting to coax it, "Now open your mouth and I'll show you how to feed."

Feed. The word was a grotesque abomination in her vocabulary. He may have forced this life upon her, but she would not give him the satisfaction of obedience. She snapped her chin in the opposite direction and clamped her lips tight, forcing the sharp points of her fangs into her gums.

"No! I will not!"

"Look at me Louise," his nails dug into her flesh. A tiny voice inside told her not to. Don't look, it whispered with a knowledgeable caution. He forced her face toward his and she shut her eyes tightly. She heard him exhale…frustrated. He relinquished his hold on her face. They sat in their stalemate until he spoke again, "It seems I am rushing you. Perhaps if you were to watch me, you would not feel so frightened."

She opened her eyes and glared at him, "I'm not going to do it. I won't do what you do! I won't!"

"Yes, you will," he insisted. "Even if I must force you, you will feed. Now watch and learn."

He kept her secure against him with one arm. He readjusted the two of them toward the top of the bed, giving space for the woman to sit before both LaCroix and her. Louise watched the woman loosen the material of her collar and lean forward, offering her neck to him. LaCroix made a face, like he was grieved to bite this woman. He certainly wasn't winning the argument with a face like that! He looked at Louise, "Watch carefully. A precise enough bite and you won't spill too much." He leaned in.

"No!" Louise screamed, LaCroix stopping with a nasty snarl on his face as her reward. She looked down at the bedcover, fingers splaying over the fabric, "This was my mother's, from her trousseau. I don't want you ruining it."

With considerable patience, LaCroix allowed to Louise fold the cover. Once she was finished, he made them all resume their positions though he did not keep such a tight hold on her. She watched him bite into the woman, listened to her groan and felt her own insides quiver. A blood tear ran down this victim's skin and Louise picked up the unencumbered scent with guilty pleasure. She turned her head, disgusted by her recently perverted appetites. Louise listened to him swallow twice and no more.
Stubborn was hardly the word to describe how his Childe dug in her heels about the concept of feeding. He tried to understand it from her point of view, but just couldn't. If you were starving and offered a way of ending that starvation, then why not take it? His concrete way of thinking did not blend well with Louisé grip on sentimentality. Her agoge had not yet begun, so Sébastien took solace in the time he had to pry that thinking from her hands.

After he finished drinking from the woman, he turned and expected Louisé to be waiting in anticipation of her turn. He was further frustrated to find her eyes planted on the opposite wall, mouth tight in refusal. He released her and slid off the bed.

"I have shown you what must be done. This woman will remain here until you feed," he grabbed up a stack of papers from a bag and sat down to work while Louisé resolutely curled into a ball on her side and stared at the wall.

He became immersed in his work, leaving the room once to retrieve the estate's financial ledger and list of business associates. He had a ghoul stand outside the door until he returned but Louisé had not moved an inch. Hours passed but he did not relent. The sounds of her hunger pains echoed around the room, but he would not comfort them unless she ended her childish resistance to his wishes. He needed her to feed so he could strengthen their bond. He would not reward her with his blood until she vanquished the flames of her voracious needs. Sébastien couldn't risk her draining too much from him simply because she refused to accept her altered appetite.

"Why did you do this to me…?" her voice whispered.

He set down the quill. In the fluster of the inheritance and comic tragedy of her first night, Sébastien hadn't planned an exact method of explaining himself. There was no one answer to give her. Mercantilism was certainly a factor. Charles' vision for his ancestral wine industry was regional, but Sébastien believed in his ability to expand and reap. His assignation to guardian made him sole proprietor of this estate (and its money) until Louisé came of age or married. Too bad she would never, technically, come of age and she most certainly would never marry. He only gained in this venture, further securing himself above less enterprising Kindred of his clan.

There was also the component of it simply being time. Seventy years a kindred, almost one hundred on the planet, warranted his consideration to procreate. He had not done so while human (and hardly lamented over that) but could not deny himself a protégé forever. And coming from a weak lineage himself, he had taken the opportunity to Embrace from legitimate, well-established nobility; vicariously guaranteeing him a stronger slot within the Kindred peerage. Why a simple barony (which was his Sire's anyway) when a marquisate was so much greater? Not to mention the added benefit of severing him from the malingering long-arm of Archambaud de Croÿ. Logically, Charles would have been the better pick but he would have had to wait for Louisé to be married and gone to do it successfully. Anything could have happened to Charles, or Louisé, between now and then to jeopardize his ambitious desires. Ventrue never took that chance.

Then there was the complicated issue of Louisé's appeal. Her blood was delicious, perhaps the best he had tasted outside of his herd or the boisterous generosity of flamboyant peers strutting their own wealth. She did not fit the characteristics of those in his herd, however. He gravitated toward intelligent, disciplined and tenacious Kine of society. Louisé's history was pocketed with rebellion, whining, and day dreaming…a trifecta repellant to his sensibilities, yet honey to his inner beast. She also cried more than he tolerated. So many things to fix, he thought. One thing he did not have to fix was her Embrace shed the pesky pudge she acquired from sexual maturation and mourning. Additionally, redistribution of childhood fat to the lines of her hips and breasts added a certain physical appeal. He would never entertain that kind of attraction or recognize it existed for him though. There was a reason he didn't mourn never marrying or the pub-talk benefits that went along
And last, but not least on his list, was the sign from the heavens. An indulgent part of himself believed his fate was shown, if not blessed, by the starry host and the night he saw them reflecting in the hue of her eyes, he knew. At the time, he didn't want to accept it because Louisé was ten and completely unappealing (save for the blood he stole in secret). Watching her slowly mature was some consolation. Her near death experience and mother's death sobered her. Anyhow, he could never explain this astrological part to her. This was an intimate, personal consideration for her Embrace… that and for a Ventrue to believe in such superstitions would tear away at the credibility he'd spent seven decades amassing.

He looked at her bent frame and abandoned his work, "You would not yet understand my reasons, Louisé. Is this why you will not feed?"

"I hate that word…" she uncoiled and sat up.

"Drink, then. We shall say 'drink', but whatever we call it, you must do so before you get worse," he walked to the foot of the bed. The Kine had fallen asleep. Her even breathing provided filling for the silence of Louisé pause.

"What do you mean worse?" Louisé appeared frightened and concerned.

"You will lose control of yourself and turn into the monster you fear you are," he pursed his lips, "You will be a nearly uncontrollable killer. Is that what you want? To kill?" Louisé shook her head, biting the corner of her lower lip. And so he found the prod he needed to make her obey for the time being: guilt.

Louisé hated the thought of turning into something she could not imagine…capable of atrocities. At the same time, she barely stood the inferno building each moment she refused what her body knew she needed. She accepted a crumb of what she had become. She moved on her hands and knees to the slumbering figure of the woman. Her tongue ran along the back of one fang, anxiety building. She looked back at Sébastien.

"What if I hurt her?"

He smiled a little, "You won't."

She sat like a cat, knees tucked beneath her as she stared at the woman. All nerves, she wasn't sure what to do first. She rolled the woman onto her back and stared down at her neck as longing built in her stomach. Her jaw waggled from side with indecision. A reassuring hand rested on the back of her neck, thumb massaging the side of her throat. Her jaw stopped.

"You know what to do. Even if you refused to watch me, something inside is telling you how," LaCroix encouraged, his tone one she had never heard before.

He was right. The same, small voice that told her not to look into his eyes was instructing her on how to bite this woman. A small part of her was disappointed about giving in to what he wanted from her. But she was exhausted, too exhausted to fight and too afraid of what would happen if she did. And she was so hungry!

He did not rush her but stayed close that she might turn to his expertise if need be. Louisé lowered her head and opened her mouth, hovering less than an inch above the skin. Her mouth lowered and closed a few times. Her tongue licked along her bottom lip. Out of nowhere, she made a pathetic,
mewling noise. It wasn't distress or refusal, but agitation though she couldn't place what about this woman was annoying.

Without speaking, Sébastien slid his other hand beneath the woman's shoulder blades and lifted her up, seemingly understanding her better than she understood herself. She wrapped her mouth around the woman's neck and heard him chuckle. She felt the cold of his hand disappear from her neck and reposition her head with tender movements. Her fangs needed no such aid. They sunk into the warm of the woman's skin and Louisé felt heat flow into her mouth. It was delicious! It was manna from heaven…her body's respite from a desert journey. Her ears heard the woman whine, not out of pain, but it was nothing compared to the sound Louisé heard herself make.

He was prepared for the intensity of her reaction as starving as she was. What he was not expecting was the rush of pride. He was overcome with it. Watching her drink successfully left him feeling accomplished in jumping the first hurdle of her new life. Though, she did make it much more complicated than it needed to be. He stilled his hand on her neck, counting the number of swallows. He couldn't have her killing one of his herd. With subtle movements, he eased his fingers beneath her jaw and tugged her backward. He felt her cling to the skin, heard her growl at him with bloody gurgling.

"That's enough, you'll drain her dry," he added force and she came loose with a whine. He understood she was still thirsty. Six or seven swallows was far from enough to meet her needs. Sébastien had intended it that way. His plan included her drinking his blood to strengthen the natural bond between them. He didn't just want her inborn adoration, he wanted her absolute loyalty.

"I want more," her voice was ragged with need, her teeth and chin dyed red. Her tongue darted out to lap around her lips, fought to extend down to her chin.

"Then you'll have more. In a moment," he rose from the bed. He kept his eyes on Louisé, who eyed the woman like a wolf ready to pounce. He knocked on the door to alert the ghoul on the other side. The ghoul entered cautiously, collected the woman then left. Sébastien couldn't allow Kine to be present for the intimacy of this moment.

Louisé growled again, "You said I would have more!"

He smirked at her tenacity and returned to the bed, "Yes, I did." He sat and offered his wrist to her. Her nose crinkled. He watched her confusion.

"But…It's not the same. You're like me," Louisé sat back, her voice disappointed. "Bring the woman back, I want her.

He forgave her rude pickiness. He, too, would snub a cold wrist if a warm neck had just satisfied and been taken away from him. There was no heartbeat to tantalize her senses, nor pulsing veins to seduce her. All he had was the blood that bound her to him until Final Death.

"You'll have this or none at all," he lifted his wrist higher.

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She looked down at the wrist then back up at his face, "Can I have your neck instead?"

Such an innocent question, from an innocent babe that meant far more than she could imagine. Necks were not asked for, they were given and he would not be giving his to anyone. He felt the muscles of his stomach tighten at the mental image. It made him sick. "No, you cannot. My wrist or nothing," his voice constricted.

She groaned, but bent her head and covered his wrist with her mouth. His stomach did not loosen,
only tightened. He felt her fangs piece his skin and held back a moan. He thought of balancing accounts and adjusting numbers while her tongue flicked back and forth over the wound that oozed blood. He concentrated on the deplorable days as a priest as she sucked. Before he lost control, he tugged his wrist away.

"T-that's enough!" his body shuddered hard, throat trapping whatever unacceptable noise it wanted to make. He watched her curl into a ball like a cat with euphoric haze. At least one of them would rest peacefully during the day. "Pack your things, Louisé," he rasped. "Tomorrow, we travel to Lyon to find you someone else to drink."

He threw words at her the entire ride to Lyon. Camarilla. Ventrue. Agoge. Kine (the new kind). Terms that meant nothing to her but, he promised, would very soon. He explained how she now belonged to a great and powerful clan. Louisé saw a legitimate satisfaction in LaCroix's face as he explained the exclusivity of their clan. Kings among Kindred, he said. That was the word Ventrue. That's what she was now. She wasn't just a vampire, she was Ventrue. She was also his. His Childe and he took the time to explain this to her. The more he spoke of the clan, the less she understood until he brought up the issue of blood. Her ears perked, throat tightened.

"That is why we must go to Lyon. There will be a greater number of Kine and therefore, a greater likelihood of your finding your choice," he emphasized the last word with a smirk.

"My…choice? Can't I just drink from whomever I like?"

"You could, but you might not appreciate the results of such capricious feeding decisions."

"Drinking," she corrected him.

"Pardon?" he looked confused.

"We said we would call it drinking until I become comfortable with the other term."

She watched his eyes roll and felt a prick of anger. He tapped his knee, "You may have noticed when you drank earlier…the flavor of her blood was significantly less than it had been last evening. Bland. She may have been what you needed at the time, but she is far from what you want. That is why you cannot just drink from anyone. Not everyone will satisfy your refined, Ventrue palette."

Louised bobbed her knees anxiously and bit the corner of her lower lip. She had to agree with him, yet again, that the woman's blood was more like lukewarm soup than the fine wine it had been the night before. "How will I know? If the woman you supplied me tasted great one evening, then plain the next…How can I be sure I'll make the right choice?"

"The reason her blood had no vintage to it is because she is what I prefer. Sire and Childe may be bound in many things, but for Ventrue this does not include blood preference. When you find yours, you will know. The best way I know how to explain it is an impression you will sense when around the right person."

The right person apparently hid. For nights, Sébastien walked her along the streets of Lyon in the hopes of aiding in her search, but fate was against them. He was granted permission by supportive Ventrue kin to take her throughout their domains until some Kine piqued her interest. They had no such luck. The most they accomplished was her finding a few that 'smelled good'. Since she could not starve and they had permission, he permitted she feed from them in the shadows. She always parted with a half-frown. Tonight was no different.
"We will find someone, Louisé. A Ventrue without preference is unheard of, impossible even," he tried to comfort his flustered Childe. She stalked ahead of him, clenching and releasing fists as her side.

"Things are only impossible until they happen!" she snapped over her shoulder.

"Nothing," he picked up his pace and grabbed her elbow to stop her, "has happened. This just goes to show how selective you are. Yours is distinct and," he added a small smile to soften her demeanor, "Proof of your greater refinement compared to your peers."

"I don't care about that! I care about the fact that no matter how much I give my body, it is never good enough. I am in a constant state of hunger with nothing to satisfy it," she tugged her arm back.

"Patience, Louisé. In all things, we Ventrue must display decorum even when nature demands we do otherwise. Consider this no more than a test of your newborn ability," his hand held her throat, thumb rubbing her jugular until a stupor glazed over her. "You need only rise above and work harder to claim what is yours."

"How am I supposed to do that when I feel so discontented?"

"Use it to fuel other things, such as study. You have quite a lot to learn after all," he guided her back to their Lyon home.

Hope springs just when people need it and answers come when they are least anxious about the outcome of the question posed. Louisé certainly wasn't expecting any answers to her current vexations. She wasn't expecting anything, what with constant disappointment. She wasn't even expecting to enjoy herself during the Toreador engagement LaCroix dragged her to. She didn't even understand what Toreador meant beyond classifying another vampire clan. From the way Sébastien's face contorted when he said the word, it wasn't any good.

Louisé felt drowned beneath the yards of lavish fabric of other Kindred as the meandered about the party. Their movement created a nauseating spiral of colors, like someone taking a stain-glassed window and spinning it in their hands. The court of Burgundy had nothing on the competition these women and men engaged in with their attire. Soon, though, she became less concerned with the fashion than a subtle scent hanging in the air. So many people packed into the elegant home diminished the aroma luring Louisé from her Sire's side.

He didn't want her fraternizing too much since she was not an officially accepted member of the Ventrue clan, though the Prince of Lyon (apparently a Toreador) avidly took her admission to his Camarilla cadre. In all honesty, Sébastien was more concerned about the number of bad habits these characters could soil her with, in just a few hours, than whether she was unchallenged part of the clan. His solution: keep her by his side from the time they arrived until the time they left. When the dancing started, LaCroix tugged her close instead of allowing her to participate.

"Ventrue do not degrade themselves in public by participating in such lurid displays of indecency," he murmured in her ear with a pat to the hand, reassuring her that she was making the prudent decision in remaining by his side. In fact, when she looked around the room to distract herself from the dance she was not allowed to participate in, she noticed all her supposed clansmen decorating the walls. All present Ventrue seemed to have the same idea: cling properly to the outskirts of merriment and whisper scathing judgments upon participants. Louisé had other plans.

The bouquet swelled and receded as the dance progressed. She knew her Choice was mingled in the bodies of spinning Kindred and Kine. Her mouth watered and she fought to maintain the dignity her
Sire and clan expected from her. As the dance concluded, she dislodged from Sébastien's grasp and disappeared into the throng of guests descending from the dance floor. He wasn't even able to scrape his nails against her fleeting hand.

It was so strong. This pull was like a rope dragging her against her will. Every step made the tang stronger, more irresistible. With manners and a tight smile, she maneuvered through the bodies between her and her Choice. Now she understood what another Ventrue had told her the evening before. The Choice was something you could fight or dismiss. The Choice was an indisputable longing within all Ventrue, the only true solace for hunger and to not do whatever was required to take The Choice made for weak clan material. Sébastien had gone on to qualify that crumb of wisdom with his opinion that the stronger the pull, the greater the Choice which denoted a worthier member for clan Ventrue. Whatever it was, she didn't care. All she wanted was to sink her fangs into it.

Rounding a corner, Louisé left the gaiety behind her in pursuit of this person. She was maddened with hunger, struggled to maintain an appropriate pace. Ahead of her, she heard comforting talk and two sets of footprints disappear. She stopped outside a room, the scent disappearing behind the door. There was a rage. Someone else was taking her Choice and she wouldn't have it. Her mind went foggy with red. She heard LaCroix's terse voice hissing her name from down the corridor, his boots cracking against stone. Louisé looked at him but deliberately ignored his demands and entered the room.

A fellow Kindred looked up at her with his handsome face soured by his glare. She pegged him for one of these Toreadors by his flamboyant outfit. Frankly, she didn't give a damn! She wanted him away from the older woman he'd draped against a couch arm. Her senses were invaded by the woman's aroma…or rather the aroma of her blood just beneath the fragile veneer of skin this competitor threatened to pierce.

"Pardon me, friend, but you're interrupting," he flashed a charming smile, "I forgive you, though. You seem confused about where you are. The celebration is down the-"

"Get off of her," Louisé took a brazen step forward. Behind her, the door open and she smelled LaCroix's scent. It was angry, but so was she.

"Forgive her, she hasn't fed properly this evening," Sébastien's fingers seized her wrist but she did not budge.

Louisé stared into the Toreador's eyes. He stared back, nose upturned in insult. Somewhere deep down inside Louisé there stirred a force demanding its way. Whatever this force was, it surged up through her chest and burned her eyes. Her voice was strong and uncompromising, "Get out. Forget this woman and find another."

Just like that, the burning disappeared. It took with it Louisé's remaining resolve. LaCroix had frozen just behind her. The Toreador's demeanor transformed. He appeared to stiffen, his gaze become distant and he moved like a wooden puppet. He left the woman where she draped and stood. When he answered, his voice was dreamy, "I will get out and find another." He strode from the room after that and Louisé broke Sébastien's hold to settle over the woman.

"Do you even realize what you just did?!" her Sire looked at her, but his voice was not angry as it had been in the hallway. There was a pride in his tone which tingled her insides.

"No, and I don't care. I'm assured you will explain it to me later," Louisé smiled down at the woman, stroking her face with tenderness. She was already subdued and offering neck, saving Louisé time. Without another thought, her mouth descended and sunk its fangs into the welcoming skin.
She set the glass down. Haunting memories of her first Choice made the blood she was drinking less. Less flavorful. Less substantial. Cooler. The blood had lost fifty percent of its heat after a few sips. The glass was now half-empty with lukewarm, room temperature sipping material. Sipping for show. This is why she never understood her kin's preference for utensils instead of hot flesh. This made her less of a snob in her own, humble opinion. She didn’t feel the need to put-on-airs by drinking from elaborately designed goblets when sinking her fangs in was so much better. This led her to never starting business in the city until half past nine each night. She could drink at home in peace and comfort instead of beneath the always judging glares of fellow Ventrue.

She made for a messy drinker when a glass was forced into her hand. Example one, the night she dyed her hair and her Sire made a surprise visit to the Emerald City. Gulping down her favorite flavor sent stray vitae down her face, threatening her couture attire. Honestly, this is why she fed in American mall brand pajamas. It saved her thousands on handmade clothes and Mafia-style dry cleaning liaisons.

She tinked the bottom of the glass with a restless finger and made it more center. One ear stayed open to the business before her, the other deaf with the voices from the past. My, how bored she was tonight. Usually, she enjoyed her position as Praetor Emeritus because it jostled the usual night-to-night duties of a Prince. Tonight was not one of those nights. When Winston Zettl called last Tuesday to let her know he would be tending to his New York investments following the mass blackout over the Northeast, she was looking forward to more drama than this.

The entire Board meeting had been nothing but dull. There were no great messages to pass down from the powers that be. And she ought to know, she was one of those powers. She crinkled her nose in displeasure, toyed with her pen then straightened up once Sebastian's glare caught her attention. Appearing on her right, an Associate slid a last-minute addendum to the schedule before her. Her two Foremen and Managers looked at her as her eyes scanned the typed up paper. They must have just received the complaint and printed out the brief history for her to review. The paper was still warm to the touch. Her Gerousia waited for her decision. She nodded and the Associate ushered two men before the raised dias.

"Before we begin with these proceedings, I must ask both you gentlemen how you wish me to govern. From the brief explanation of the situation, it is apparent to me that in an effort to solve this quarrel yourselves, you have dispensed your own forms of justice." The two men fought fidgeting. She continued, "So, I must ask you what you honestly expect of my judgment: justice or mercy?"

After she was finished feeding, Louisé and her Sire took the time to question the Choice for factors that separated her from others she had fed from. Well, Sébastien did most of the questioning while Louisé sat back and observed. What he was able to pull from the woman was thin. She was a fervent Catholic, much like Louise (and ninety-percent of France) and mother of two. Without another member to confirm a trend, they had nothing more to go on. At least she had one to feed on.
One became two, then two became five following Louisé's trip to the Lyon cathedral to visit her mother's grave. She left the catacombs at the end of a Mass and encountered three more women with the same alluring scent as the one from the party. She didn't get to enjoy all three, however. The very next night, Sébastien closeted the two of them away to begin Louisé's formal training as a Ventrue neonate.

Agoge. That's what they call it, this official training where Sire and Childe secluded themselves for the sole purpose of the Childe's education. Traditionally, Sébastien would have done the secluding before she was even presented to the Prince. As he explained it, the Prince was all too eager to meet his Scourge's first Childe and, lest he forever get on the bad side of a powerful Toreador, Sébastien obliged him. This same Prince had been the one to throw the party where Louisé found her flavor. Her Sire had no choice but to bring her along, since he didn't trust her to simply sit and study when her appetite was so dissatisfied. This meant her unofficial presentation to members of her clan, but not all local Ventrue had been invited by Prince Vermandois. So, Sébastien acquired a second, official presentation for her before all Ventrue of Lyon and the areas immediately surrounding.

Agoge had a different meaning for her. It was torture! If she had ever thought her father's strict hand with education was bad, then Sébastien's was a shade of horrible foreign to her. He stacked books for her to read when she was not writing or reciting her lineage. Not all the names were French and so they didn't stick in her mind easily. Eight names she had to remember. Two of them she couldn't. And for every wrong guess or mispronunciation, Sébastien stood ready with a whip or thin tree branch. He smacked her palms, the backs of her hands or just her back.

He drilled her constantly. He wanted names, Traditions, dates and Ventrue virtues. When she could not deliver, he beat her. He did not raise his voice, he did not use his hands and he never struck more than five times. When she mixed a Tradition with a clan virtue, he poured a line of small pebbles on the floor and made her kneel on them for hours. He put a book in her hand before sitting to sip on his meal.

There was a frantic pounding on the door. He stopped his methodical pacing to glare at the wood separating him and his Childe from the distractions of the world. In his periphery, he saw Louisé go still. He brought the riding whip down on her shoulders, listened to her suck in a breath then watched her resume the scribing of her bloodline as he opened the door. He glared at the ghoul before him who held a letter in his shaking hand.

"I specifically told you we were not to be disturbed. What about the word 'sequester' do you not understand?" Sébastien snatched the letter from him and slammed the door in his face. He tore open the letter and resumed his militant walking. "Pause again, Louisé and it shall be ten lashes this time."

"I can't concentrate. I am hungry."

"Very well," he crumpled the letter in his hand. "Pause again and you shall not feed for three nights."

"We have taken the liberty of securing your Childe to a room, saving you a trip to fetch her and leaving us rest assured you had no time to speak with her. We would hate for you to influence her testimony too much. Shall we begin?" Sébastien watched the old bat fiddle with her fingers, which were gnarled with bulbous joints. They gave her the distinct impression of being the witch he heard she'd been in life.

"Yes. Monsieur LaCroix, do you know why we have brought you here this evening?" The grey-haired Seneschal, now playing the role of Praetor, began.

"No. Your letter left me wondering," he fought the urge to tap the arm of the chair. He was no longer
in their place of judgment over problematic and unsatisfactory brethren. Tonight, he was one of those disappointing clansmen.

"Sébastien LaCroix, you have been accused by your peers of siring a Childe of Passion. How do you plead to the aforementioned charges?" the Praetor folded his hands before him.

"Preposterous! I would never do anything of the sort! What is the basis of this allegation?"

"She is noticeably younger than any other members and has a certain physical appeal," the old bag chimed in. "It is the opinion of some members that your sole intention in embracing this young girl is to meet your own physical satisfaction."

His blood boiled but he maintained his marble exterior. "I have a feeling if you were to inquire with anyone, they would tell you I have a distinct propensity to bypass physical satisfaction in lieu of political or financial expansion. The only satisfaction I need is the blood I drink every evening. If some, he met the eyes of the older woman, "Are undone by the greater aesthetic appeal of a neonate, then that seems more a reflection of their own vanity than my mentality."

"There is also the fact that you did not bring up your desire to Embrace this girl with your clan," the bag accused.

"I believe if you were to inquire with the Praetor, he will say otherwise. He was fully aware of my desire for progeny." Sébastien motioned to the grey-haired man. A man of many hats, as LaCroix understood.

The Praetor nodded and answered, "I was the one to inform Monsieur LaCroix he had the privilege of siring. That does not disqualify his need to explain his choice, of which I was not aware."

"Which raises the question: What was your purpose for bringing her over? I heard she had a father, why not choose the father instead?" a Questor inquired.

Sébastien was nothing if not a superlative liar when necessary. He just wished they had asked him material to make it harder. "Do you think he was not my first consideration?"

"Obviously we think that since you have trooped a sixteen year old, unmarried, supposed virgin before us and asked us to accept her without a second thought." He truly hated this Aedile with her withered sixty-year old face scrunched in conservative disapproval.

"I had chosen her father first." Sébastien trained his eyes on the Seneschal. "I was waiting until Louisé had been married off, so she was no longer in the home and suspicious of her father's change. Charles had asked for my aid in procuring his daughter a husband. I had found a suitable, worthy man for the daughter of a Marquis and traveled to their home to deliver the news. Upon arrival, Charles was sick with worry that Louisé had not returned home from Mass. I settled his anxiety by going to find the girl myself. When we returned, however, we found Charles collapsed in a hallway. He was dead."

"How convenient for you."

"I would hardly call being dragged here and accused of clan taboo convenient."

"Then why the girl, Sébastien? Surely there was a brother, a son or someone else more suitable than a daughter," a mild-eyed Questor pressed. He knew this woman. She was meek, unassuming and he was honestly surprised she'd accomplished securing this barely above bottom rung position.

"His one and only son died a year ago. Charles has no surviving brothers, only a brother in-law
through his late wife's marriage to a man outside of Reims. Because of this reason, Louisé was recently declared as Charles' heir. Since Louisé is, as you have mentioned, unmarried…Charles established me as her guardian since she had no living relatives close enough to care for her and the estate. The whole purpose of Embracing Charles was for the acquisition of his lands and fortune as a means to expand my own. With his death, I was left with two recourses. I could forfeit personal expansion and industry or seize the opportunity placed before me."

Several heads in the Gerousia nodded, their grasp and appreciation for capitalism all but absolving him of his apparent sins in the eyes of others. He was not off their proverbial hook quite yet. Gautier's hawk-like expression was not so forgiving, not with her strict sensibilities about Embracing or the recent slight against her non-existent beauty.

"Thank you for your explanation, Monsieur LaCroix and again, we apologize for disrupting the sanctity of her agoge. We shall return her to your home post haste after we have questioned her."

Two bland, middle-aged men escorted her from her Sire as soon as their carriage arrived at Collège-lycée Ampère. She read a book while she waited in the cold, quiet room she'd been abandoned to. It was titled *De Proprio Procreatio*. In English, it meant On Proper Procreation. It was a book Sébastien had accidently incorporated in the stack assigned to her. What he did not know, Louisé would not reveal to him. The book was not particularly thick, being divided into only five sections. It tightened her stomach to read the words, which came across more as Commandments than suggestions as the text implied:

For this is the proper method of Siring, according to the good and noble wisdom of our Forefathers:

1) Thou shalt chooseth of a strong and proper Man, for men exemplify the unblemished perfection of Creation. Man is the head of all things: family, business and politics. He is the creator and ruler of strong cities, lord of his household and controller of the purse. He is the honor of his father before him and the carrier of his noble name. He containeth strong Phlegm and is ruléd by his mind. Therefore, any true and loyal Ventrue shalt first look uponeth Man for thine ideal Childe.

2) If nought a noble or virtuous Man is to be found amongst a Ventrue's domain to chooseth from, then they shalt chooseth next from an able-bodied and learnéd youth. They are but lesser Men and containeth all humors to make an ideal Man. Noble Ventrue are warned that youth are ruléd by Sanguine, and weaketh to the wiles of Glory and Lust. With a steady, gentle hand their Sire may gaineth much in domain and riches.

3) If Ventrue of dignity feareth the weakness of the Youth and have nought a noble or virtuous Man amongst their domain, then good and noble wisdom sayeth turn thine eyes amongst the noble and virtuous flocks of Women. True and loyal Ventrue may Sireth a Woman without first looking uponeth Man or Youth if thou art also a Woman. Lesser than Man, and bringers of Sin, Women are stainéd with the weakness of their sex. A Woman must manage of her house, respecteth her husband, bear strong sons, and be-th full of Faith, noble blood, and many seasons. Let good and noble Ventrue be wise that Woman is ruléd by Melanchole and requirith of a strong hand by her Sire to manage.

4) True, good and loyal Ventrue shall turn thine eye from the weakness and debauchery of Female Youth. For theirs is the eyes of Eve and in their hand, they holdeth thine Fruit of Destruction. Ruléd by Choleric, Female Youth are servants of anger and wrathful temper. Daughters of Lust and Jealousy, Female Youth shalt be the bane of their Sire. If brethren feelith the lure of Female Youth, thou shalt lean uponeth the wisdom of thine Forefathers and dispatcheth this Female lest they shareth in her imperfections.

Good, noble and true Ventrue shalt remember thine own dignitas and gravitas in all matters of
procreation. Thou shalt honor thy clan in all thine Childer. These art the words of wisdom of our Forefathers.

It couldn't have been written more than three hundred years ago, and yet the words read as if they had been spoken by God, Himself. She would have liked to believe this was a book for radicals, but the fact that Sébastien had one lent credence to the notion of it being commonplace amongst Ventrue archives. The room door swinging open was welcome distraction from the awful words. She left the book behind and followed the two men. They took her from the room, down a candlelit hall and to a circular room. There was a singular chair in the middle of the room and balcony where a few Kindred sat.

Louisé sat in the chair when they directed her to. It was daunting, being in the middle of emptiness. Though the eyes were few, all were on her and there was, perhaps, a shred of mercy between them all. She hadn't been sure such cold an existence could become colder. Now she was sure it could.

"Do you understand why you are here, Childe?" an old woman asked her. Her appearance made her think of that particular line of the book: *of many seasons.*

"No," she shook her head.

A grey-haired man spoke up, brows drawn together, "Do you know who we are?"

"No."

"You mean to tell me your Sire hasn't yet reviewed clan station with you?" the old woman seemed insulted.

"He won't teach me anything until I can recite and write my bloodline perfectly. He says until I know where I come from, I can never know where I am going." That was a small fib. She just didn't want to admit she couldn't remember.

The old woman opened her mouth, but the grey-haired man spoke in her place, "Wise words. Childe, we are the Gerousia. We govern the Ventrue of this municipality, hold council on important clan matters and endeavor to oblige our brethren to uphold the virtues of dignitas, prudentia and severitas. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes, I think so. Why am I here? Have I done something wrong?" she looked cautiously away from him to the other members.

A subdued woman leaned forward, "No. We are inquiring as to the manner of your Embrace. Your Sire, my apologies," her eyes darted to the other members of the council, "Has been accused of committing a great taboo according to our clan's traditions and statues."

She needlessly swallowed, "I'm afraid you have me at another loss. What has he been accused of?"

"That in Embracing you, he has created a Childe of Passion."

She had read the phrase briefly in that awful book, practically glanced over the thing so there was no true recognition of its meaning. "And what, pray tell, is that?"

"It means that instead of siring prudently and bringing to our clan a perfect representation of our virtues, he has produced a Childe out of lustful predilections and self-centered physical needs," the crone interrupted. She straightened her back to appear the arch-dame she believed herself to be.

"You believe Sébastien LaCroix Embraced me that he may lay with me?" the thought disturbed her.
"That is a component of it, yes. Another is that he Sired to suit his own needs rather than providing our clan with material to make us stronger," the grey-haired man rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

"Now. Your Sire has provided us with an account of his choice in Embracing you. We would like you to do the same." Another man spoke, eyes bearing into her with curiosity rather than malice, like the crone.

"Explain why he chose me? How should I know? The finer details of that night are secluded to the cloud of his mind."

"Then tell us about that night. Your Sire said he collected you from a Mass to calm your father. What happened when you got home?"

Louisé's chest burned. How dare he lie like that! At the same time, she was not naïve enough to contradict his statement and believe there would not be substantial consequences. She went to her most immediate memory after she returned home, "I went to find my father and apologize for returning so late. Ever since my mother passed, he became very anxious about where I would be. I found him in the hallway." She bit the corner of her bottom lip, "He was dead."

"What did LaCroix do?"

"He said there was nothing I could do for him. He said he would take care of it and sent me into the care of a servant…" her jaw tightened as she glossed over the heap of terrifying events between her finding her father and being released to the two ghouls.

"Then?" the dull woman asked.

"I felt so weak with despair that I slept the whole next day. When I woke, Monsieur LaCroix was in my room. I was quite anxious about that."

"What did he do?" the curious man questioned.

"He told me 'Just relax' then bit my neck. He told me not to be afraid. I just stared at the wall until everything went black."

"He didn't say anything suggestive to you or act inappropriately?" the crone was fishing.

Louisé narrowed her eyes, "I know you all, being so far separated from your humanity, don't consider it so…but how appropriate is sinking your teeth into someone and draining the very life from their body?"

None of them spoke. They just stared at her. Perhaps they were in awe of her infant bravery or insulted to silence by it. The grey-haired man nodded, "What about when you rose?"

She squared her attention on him since he was not entirely witch-hunting in his approach, "I was hungry and cold."

"Hungry?" The crone's tone made it clear what she assumed Louise meant.

"Yes. Well, now I suppose it would be called thirst. My stomach ached and my throat burned. I tried drinking water and eating, but made a mess of things since it all came back up."

"What did your Sire do about this? Why did he not stop you?" the curious man was smirking, finding amusement in her new born starvation.
"He was not there. I awoke and the room was empty. His servants said he had been gone for hours."

"Sébastien was not even there to support you when you rose?" The smirk faded from his face, replaced with a grimace.

"He said he had business and was unsure when I would rise since I had not done so by sun down."

The grey-haired man held up a hand to silence any future questions. He looked at her, offering her a slim smile. "Thank you for your cooperation Miss Seysell-Chambert. We will return you to your Sire now. Best of luck on your agoge."

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So, here she was! Over four centuries later, sitting in the very position of power that grey-haired man and his crone held over her. She certainly wasn't presiding over such a taboo case as hers had been, but it was grave to be sure. She stared at the two men, chin resting happily against the bridge her fingers made. One of them was talking and she was trying very hard not to let her predetermination show.

"You drained two of his herd?" one of her Managers emphasized the number, unable to hide her shock. The way she leaned forward added an unnecessary bit of flare. Louisa forgave her for it though, since she had yet to accumulate the silent, demanding presence of her Prince.

"It's symbolism." The offensive man smirked.

"It's illegal," Louisa corrected. "Not to mention cruel and tactless."

She watched him swallow, her Board stiffen in their seats and her Sire smirk from where he sat in the audience. Her chin never left the bridge. Her eyes slid closed as she mulled over what to do about this. Oh, there were so many things she could do…but which to choose from? A dangerous smirk spread her lips and she opened her eyes.

"At this beginning of this, I asked which you wanted me to rule by: mercy or justice. You two firmly decided upon justice, and so I shall not fail you in this. It is most unfortunate for you, however, that I am both Praetor and Prince this evening. Were it not so, your judgment may have been lighter." She lifted her chin from her fingers and lowered her hands to her table. The audience slumped forward to hear her every word. My, how she could feel their excited anticipation!

"Mr. Livingston, a fellow Ventrue came to you seeking aid. You chose to turn your back on the Ethic of Succor, which is inviolable. You showed him your thumb to get him out of your house and failed in your duty as a Ventrue. Therefore, I shall take your thumb from you and flay your back that you might never again turn it upon the traditions and edicts of our clan." She watched the man, whose herd decreased by two, clench his fists but nod in acknowledgment of his punishment.

The murderer smirked and made the unfortunate mistake of allowing Louisa to see it. She narrowed her eyes, her lips creeping into a feral smile, "Mr. Cavanaugh. You seem so happy. Let us not forget you, too, wanted justice and so I shall dispense it. While Mr. Livingston may have snubbed Succor, you broke the Camarilla tradition of Domain. Mr. Livingston rules his Domain, and everything in it, absolutely unless his actions affront my decrees. You did not deliver Ventrue, but Camarilla, action in killing those Kine…action reserved for only one Kindred here."
Cavanaugh looked around, his undone nerves showing now. She continued, "You drank what was not yours. You took life that did not belong to your hand. Therefore, I shall remove the instrument you used to bring unwarranted death upon those defenseless creatures."

Cavanaugh stumbled over his words, "Y-you're what?! You don't mean-" It was Livingston's turn to smirk.

"Oh, yes, I do. Your fangs, sir. One for each victim. And my! How convenient! There are two victims!" Her humor wrought laughter from around her. Laughter sharp as blades. Laughter hungry for blood. She looked Cavanaugh in the eyes. "Because you have made it twice as hard for your brethren to feed, so I shall make the same for you."

She waved them away with a hand. One of her Associate's took them to a side room for completion of their sentence. She picked up her half-empty, half-full glass and sipped from the cold blood inside. Her eyes closed and her hand swirled the liquid around. No one moved. All eyes on her.

"Let tonight's proceedings serve as a reminder to our community that we must adhere to the traditions that bind our clan, lest we endanger our own dignity and clan's reputation. We are adjourned." She set down her glass.

Once everyone had filed out, she opened her eyes and slouched in her chair. Only fools ask for justice, said the grey-haired man to her once. She heard his voice in the booming silence around her. Wise ones ask for mercy for they know they are masters of their own fate. Her reflection was disturbed by the precise clack of her Sire's loafers. She didn't look at him when he came up behind her chair. She was not about to step down from her throne…not just yet.

"Find my Sheriff." Yes, only fools ask for justice.

Chapter End Notes

Fun History Facts!

Humorism: An ancient medical belief of the make up of the human body. Ancient and Medieval physicians believed the body was divided into four fluids: Blood (Sanguine), Yellow Bile (Cholera), Black Bile (Melancholy) and Phlegm. These four, in turn, it was believed affected internal organs and temperament and were associated with specific seasons and elements.

Blood- Spring; Element of Air; Ruled over the liver and was associated with a temperament that was courageous, hopeful and amorous

Yellow Bile- Summer; Element of Fire; Ruled over the spleen and was associated with a temperament that was bad or easily angered

Black Bile- Autumn; Element of Earth; Ruled over the gall bladder and was associated with despondent, sleepless and irritable (hence melancholia)

Phelgm- Winter; Element of Water; Ruled over the brain and lungs and created a calm
and unemotional temper

And yes, I took full literary privilege with the book quote and its nonsensical, more-than-likely incorrect attempt at Elizabethan translation of Medieval text.
Anxiety

It was like a slowly rising river. Each time he looked at her, the river rose a little more. This river of disgust and guilt was highly influential. He couldn't look at her the same now that he had been accused of such a taboo. His disciplinary hand wrought more than just discipline from the moment they returned from the inquiry. Now he beat to punish her for her indiscretions because that seemed most logical. His heavy-handedness served to eliminate his frustrations that a justified and perfectly reasonable Embrace was being torn to shreds by an undead Inquisition. After, he was wracked with interior guilt. He couldn't stand her tears and he couldn't understand why their insubstantial accusations got beneath his skin.

"Can I rise now?" She'd been kneeling for hours while he sat distracted by his thoughts.

"If you can recite your own bloodline perfectly." He was running out of things to test her and find fault with. She had exceeded his expectations for ability to learn, since she had never been so sharp while alive. He wanted to believe there was great promise for her, but his anger prevented him from seeing anything but a potential mistake. For now.

"I did recite it perfectly," she argued. He took the belt in his hand and smacked it across her back. No Childe of his would speak to him in such a way and he felt he ought no longer remind her of this fact.

"You were too slow. Do you think they are going to be prouder because you took ten minutes to recite it without stuttering instead of five with a few? They want it perfect and so do I!" His tone reflected the frustration that made him stand and pace the room.

"I don't even take five minutes," she murmured. He watched her wince as she moved her bloody knees over the stones in an effort to find comfort.

"You took three minutes last time. I want half that. Stop fidgeting!" he snapped at her.

She stopped. He saw anger rise up in her face, felt a prick of it through his connection to her and frowned. He knew he was sowing seeds of bitterness and fear, if not hatred, between the two of them with the heaviness of his hand but he would rather she fear him and show it than display any sort of affection that could compromise their lives, or his livelihood. He worked too hard to live this long and gain independent success to be forced into crawling back to de Croỹ. He shuddered at the thought of ever again having to rely on that man for anything. Besides, he felt fine with the idea of her fearing him. He believed Childer needed to fear their Sires more than he often discovered they did.

As Machiavelli aptly pointed out, it was better to be feared than loved. Childer would be less inclined to attempt permanently undoing a Sire they feared. A healthy fear, which he hoped he was instilling, would provide a firmer foundation for a respectable relationship between the two of them. He didn't want to be a Sire like de Croỹ, smothering his Childe with a constant, leeching presence. Too in love with his own schedule, he had no wish to be permanently responsible for her…no matter what Clan Ventrue expected.

He focused his attention back on Louisé, who was staring at him with a quizzical expression.

"What?"

"What time was my recitation?"
He frowned. Distracted by the thoughts of their divergent relationship, he hadn't heard a name she said. Yes, this taboo issue was getting to him too much for this liking. He hadn't spared a single thought to their relationship before this and now he was wasting precious instructional time on it. His knuckled squeezed over the belt and he saw her flinch away. "Do it again."

"You weren't listening, were you?" Her tone was snide and earned her smack with the belt. He was a little too forceful and she fell forward, bracing herself with her hands. Too bad he had placed broken pieces of glass in front of her to avoid her using her hands to ease pressure off her knees. He smelt her blood as the glass cut into her hand and felt his stomach tighten.

"I lost interest because you took so long. Now straighten up."

They threw question after question at her. Hundreds! Or so it seemed. She hadn't noticed this kind of enthusiasm for other neonates. This left her to determine their ripe interest was resulting from the scathing rumor still fluttering. It soured her appetite to think of Sébastien LaCroix embracing her in order to sleep with her. It soured her to think of LaCroix sleeping with anyone. From all the years of knowing him, she didn't believe he had a passionate bone in his body. He was stiff and cold with unattractive pale eyes of a miser.

She pushed that away for now, though and focused on the eyes burning into her. The grey-haired man was in the midst of his Gerousia, chin on the bridge of his fingers and staring at her. So far, he had only asked her bloodline and left all other question to other present members. He gave little indication of whether she was doing well or not. Save for the arch of his brows after she finished reciting her bloodline. She finished in three minutes, but that with the inclusion of Childer she could remember from the drawn family tree LaCroix provided. That silenced the crowd for another full minute, which gave her time to settle for the barrage to follow.

The harpy sat, gnarled fingers moving with agitation as she had yet to trip Louisé with a question she could not answer. The crowd was losing their energy but a tension in the air maintained their attention. Louisé and the hag stared each other down. Then she watched a twisted grin creep up the wrinkled face.

"Tell me Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert: If you were forced to decide, which would it be…clan or Camarilla?"

There was a sound. The sound of a Ventrue audience sucking in a single breath as one body. They knew what she knew: there was no perfect answer to this question, only a better one. Everyone knew the better answer, but it wasn't about knowing the answer. It was about wording the answer in such a way as to make one infallible in their loyalties. Wording wouldn't be easy either but the longer she stood there, the unsure of her loyalties she appeared. Unfortunately for the crone, Louisé didn't know the Camarilla well enough to have an established loyalty. That didn't mean she was tightly bound to her clan either, since they were responsible for ending her brief life and thrusting her into an unwanted one.

She could feel her Sire's eyes burning into the back of her neck. His nerves must have been greater than hers for her to feel such a gaze. She, however, never broke her stare with the gnarl-fingered hag.

"The only way I might answer this question properly is by posing another. Which came first…Ventrue or the Camarilla?" The tension squeezed, leaving the undead waiting with baited breath. She watched the hag's eyes widen a fraction too much, giving away her surprise. Louisé continued, "Ventrue existed long before the Camarilla was even conceived, and should the Camarilla ever fail, Ventrue will persist long after. We are the Kings of the Camarilla, its founding fathers…It cannot exist without us! Therefore, how could I ever choose a substance that is insubstantial without us?"
She puffed herself up for show, feeling the audience leaning forward for her finishing statement. "I was embraced by a Ventrue, not by a Camarilla...Camarilla is not blood, but how blood aligns. I am always loyal to my blood. I will always choose clan."

Applause is not generally welcome for such occasions as formal presentations. This consideration seemed wholly abandoned when she finished. She listened to their thundering, synchronistic clapping but cared nothing for it. What she cared about was the bitter, defeated look this hag sported as she slumped back in her chair. The grey-haired man allowed a shred of a smile to escape his stoic face.

The voting took ages. Sébastien sat beside other nervous Sires, eyes on the flock of neonates who stood waiting on the Gerousia's decision. The majority of infant Ventrue were pacing but Sébastien looked past the movement to watch the steady frame of his Childe. She was one of two seated. She leaned just a little over the arm of her chair, listening to the words of the young man beside her. They were the most confident of the two, though LaCroix did not believe the boy had means to be so confident. Rumor or not, taboo or not, Sébastien could feel little more than absolute pride in Louisé, and himself for choosing her. From the second she spoke her last word, he (and all others present) knew of her solid, confident place within the clan. No one could steal that from her now. Yes, the only one who deserved to be at peace during this wait was his Childe. His slowly rising river dried up as a drought came through.

Sébastien's attention snapped to the door, along with everyone else's. An Eiren shuffled through the doorway, holding a platter of envelopes. No one needed to count to realize there were fewer envelopes than neonates. LaCroix posited this Eiren enjoyed the prolonged agony as he set the platter down and began extracting envelopes to hand out. One by one, he handed neonates their envelopes. For those who received one, he excused them from the room to join the impending celebration. Sébastien felt his nerves fray each successive time his Childe was bypassed.

By the time the Eiren was finished, four Childer and Sires remained and LaCroix was mildly enraged to be one of those. His ears went deaf as the Eiren offered up heartless apologies to the remaining that their Childer had not been selected. Sébastien heard something about how he could petition to the Gerousia for specific details but his rising river knew it was that insufferable label. The Eiren went to the three Sires other than Sébastien and offered his apologies before excusing them through a different door. LaCroix stood abruptly. He wouldn't have some pandering idiot apologizing to him. He strode to Louisé, gripped her arm and yanked her up. His actions visibly jarred her, but he didn't care.

"We're leaving," he hissed into her ear and forced her toward the second door, blatantly ignoring the flustered Eiren. Apparently leaving before accepting their condolences was not part of protocol.

"What did I do?" Her voice reflected the fleck of pain from his fingers and deflated confidence from the last five minutes worth of events.

"You didn't do anything!" the Eiren shouted from behind them. Sébastien forced himself and Louisé. LaCroix looked down at his Childe, whose crinkled nose let him know she was holding back a snarl. She jerked her arm from his fingers and turned to look at the Eiren.

"Then would you kindly explain this Limbo I'm in?" Louisé retained just enough confidence to sound appropriately Ventrue.

"I can assure, my Lady, you have been undeniably accepted into our distinguished clan. But not unanimously. The Praetor permitted I tell you all but one of our members accepted you with enthusiasm. The Aedile maintains the belief that you are a Childe of Passion and was unwilling to
put forth her vote to accept you. She raised quite a fuss, to be honest with you." The Eiren seemed nervous, as if he had crossed a line with divulging the finer details. "The Praetor put her in her place, though. Made the point of reminding all present that there was no evidence substantiating the claim and chalked the old woman's refusal up to you besting her with your answer to her question. He made her vote null on the basis of extreme personal bias."

Sébastien wrapped an arm around his Childe, who had become so tense her shoulders touched her ears. She didn't respond to his touch the same way she had when she was only hours old. She resisted calming beneath his embrace and he didn't blame her. His hand had been far from gentle these past few nights. But he wasn't entirely sure her resistance was due to his disciplinary actions…The fact that she had failed to impress, or even somewhat sway, the mind of that old woman was more likely the culprit. Sébastien looked at the Eiren and questioned in Louise's behalf, "Then why did she not receive an envelope like the others accepted? Is she to be accepted but not attend the celebration?"

"Fear not. She will most certainly attend the festivities." The Eiren smiled. "The reason she did not receive an envelope is because the Praetor wishes for the both of you to ride with him. He wants to present her, himself, as a gesture of good will…and to take another stab at the Aedile's pride, I suspect. I need not tell you how great an honor this is for any neonate."

The Eiren turned to leave the room, motioning them to follow him. That same pang of pride assaulted Sébastien's senses. Louise did not understand the honor, because she had only just learned what the word Praetor meant but he would not waste precious time explaining it to her when she could simple pretend, smile and be grateful for the gift extended to her.

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Extravagance knows no bounds when a band of very wealthy people get together. And who is wealthier than Ventrue? Blood flowed like swollen rivers from bottles, wrists and necks. Glasses were raised and clinked with fraternal congratulations to the newly inducted members of the clan. The Praetor clinked his glass against Louise's. It was filled with the warm vitae of her personal preference. She sipped from it while bodies of her clanmates swirled and twirled on the great stone floor below.

"I must apologize, again, for the anxiety we caused you back at the Collège-lycée Ampère. I honestly didn't expect my colleague to be so grounded in her unfounded beliefs." He offered her his arm. She took it and walked with him through the upper level of his home. "You must understand the gravity that this particular taboo has in our clan. As Ventrue, we believe ourselves to be examples of propriety, discipline and self-control among the Kindred community. A Childe of Passion represents a blatant abandon and disrespect for these virtues and therefore, a blatant disregard for our clan and their identity as a Ventrue. By embracing for carnal satisfaction, a Ventrue impairs their judgment and sets an abysmal standard…it's too Toreador for our liking."

"I understand. But what made anyone believe I was such a Childe? Monsieur LaCroix has been nothing but strict and circumspect with me. Forgive me, for I do not intend this to come across disparagingly, but my Sire does not display any carnal intentions…ever."

The Praetor, now identified as Denis of Portugal, Lord of Cifuentes, chuckled, "I'm afraid your age and beauty worked against you in this matter. The clan of this area was shocked to see LaCroix strolling down the night streets with a young woman at his side instead of a middle aged man. Rumors couldn't help but reproduce from there."

Louise held up her gown as they descended stairs. "Rumors that he was bedding me."

"Yes." He coughed, "Though I never believed them. I've known Sébastien for some time. And like
you, I have never known his purposes to be confined to the bedroom. My experience had been that what brings Sébastien LaCroix joy can be limited to few words: money, domain, blood and reputation."

"I agree. Though it does raise the question for me," she hesitated and stopped walking. No one was around them. Cifuentes looked down at her with a raised brow. "Forgive me, again, if this sounds imprudent but if one can be accused of Siring or being a Childe of Passion, does that mean we are capable of...of..."

"Ah. I see," he chuckled a second time, easing the uncomfortable air between them she'd created with the question. "The brief answer to your question, Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert, is yes. I shall save the extended explanation for your Sire, but I would caution you to maintain an appearance of strict decorum and modesty. You may have been accepted, but as you have just experienced, there are those who will hold this accusation over you for years to come. Until you fully prove yourself in either confirming their suspicions or, as if my hope, forever dismissing them."

Louisé nodded and absorbed his words as they joined the throng of fellow Ventrue. She drank her blood with relish before enjoying the distinct pleasure of dancing with Praetor Portugal. Afterward, he returned her to the merriless arm of her Sire. Sébastien LaCroix looked undeniably uncomfortable in a setting of such revelry. The opulence suited his personality just fine, but not the multitude of people with their garish ensembles, loud banter and uncharacteristic frivolity. She met his eyes, feeling a cold sensation bind stomach muscles. All these accusations, trials and minor tribulations had worn on him more than she had let herself consider. Though she knew he would never admit it, he was exhausted with the politics of the last fortnight. She may have born the burden of his frustrations with her flesh, but he bore the Atlean weight of their suspicions and all the anxiety that came with them. In her blood, she knew he had been terrified they would rule against him...kill them both, or (as she had heard in whispers) force him to kill her as penance for his actions. Sébastien LaCroix shared none of this with her, perhaps himself, never would and she was glad of it.

She slid her fingers from the crook of his arm until they mingled with his. With everyone so distracted by the carousing, she felt him allow himself something and he tightened the tangle. She smiled and took a step toward the floor, "Shall we dance, Monsieur LaCroix?"

Ramon Devereux never thought himself right for this life. Oh, he was just perfect for the role of vampire, but not clan Ventrue. He liked lavish things, extravagance, and theatrics. He swore, gossiped and had it on record as being the teller of many a bawdy joke. No...Toreador life spoke to him much more than Ventrue but he worked with what he had. And what he had was a lot of money, big homes and a nose for business. What he didn't have he could take by force, but instead used influence because that's what was politically correct. Though, he hated politics and tried to stay out of it unless provoked. He was provoked a lot.

Like tonight. The only reason he was even here was because some harpy had accused him of tip-toeing into her domain and stealing business. For one thing, Ramon never tip-toed a day or night in his long life. He took big strides. And another, he didn't like Lyon enough to warrant doing, or stealing, business within it. He chalked it up to a weak, albeit successful, attempt to get him to show his face in Ventrue society. A celebration for successfully complete agoges would not have been his first choice, but Lyon seemed to know how to throw a decent party. He stuck around, allured by rumors of a Childe of Passion. She wasn't hard to find.

She was a lamb in a pack of wolves and he would tell her so if he met her. He watched him circle her with hungry eyes and sharp teeth. He didn't feel immediately compelled to join the fray.
There are few things Ramon Devereux cannot afford. One of those is patience. He never had it and since he never had it, he cannot buy it back…or at all. He was impatient to come into the world, impatient to live and impatient with what his vampiric life had to offer him besides meaningless Jyhad and clan traditions. For nearly five hundred years, he has managed to play a wonderful façade of patience by reenacting intimate, sacred moments in his head he can never gain back but knows still give him peace in these nights of monotonous boredom. He entertains himself with a one-man game of chess until Cifuentes invades his piece and settles himself on the black side of the board.

"You are awful at this," he said as he refilled Ramon's glass.

"I am playing myself, Denis. Thus, I am both best and worst. It is your own fault you sat on the worst side of the board."

"Leave it to you to seclude yourself when a perfectly acceptable celebration is going on right behind those doors." Denis moved a knight.

"Says the host who joins the hermit. What is her story Cifuentes?" Ramon asked, changing the subject. He moved a piece of his own.

"I figured that is the only reason you were here. They do not trust the two of them. No matter how their stories align and validate nothing but business," he paused to sip from his glass, "The elders do not trust their relationship will not degrade with time and scandal the reputation of the clan."

"Hmph…I doubt they have anything to worry about, in truth. Sébastien seems hardly interested in her." He studied the board, looking for a good move now that Denis had turned an awful side of the board to a decent one.

"Besides being his mentor in brief, what makes you so sure?"

Devereux shrugged. "Maybe I believe all the scandalous gossip floating about the clan concerning him."

"Which is?" Denis moved another piece.

"That she would have to lose her tits and grow a prick between her legs for him to make a go of it." Denis choked on his blood and gave Ramon a severe look. He could only smirk back at his old friend and offer a shrug of a shoulder. He took a swig from his glass and waited for Denis' body to stop shuddering from muffled laughter.

"Do not worry so much, Denis, your great oak doors are closed."

"You would say such things about a former protégé?! I wonder what you have say about a friend?"

"That he serves a damn good vintage and plays a hell of a game of chess," Ramon laughed.

"Oh, my old friend…In all honesty, you cannot believe those awful rumors."

"Maybe not, but you could not blame me if I did what with de Croÿ as his Sire and a name like Sébastien!" Ramon stole one of Cifuentes' pieces. "It's a right proper name…for a Sodomite."

"Yes, whereas a name like Ramon…" Denis' voice drifted as his fingers snatched one of Devereux's
pieces. "Wets the Netherlands like a summer squall."

"Absolutely. But I am a saintly man, as you know, and not victim to the lusty penchants of sinners."

"Oh yes, as saintly as the Gomorrans. If LaCroix could hear you now," Cifuentes' voice droned off as he focused on the game.

"That is precisely Sébastien's problem. He's not nearly as concerned about what people are saying about him behind his back as he should be. He has always been too eager to create a name for himself that he forgot to make sure the whispers behind his back are created by him and him alone. And now he's gone and muddied his water with this girl…"

"And I suppose you plan to clean it for him?" Denis sounded intrigued.

"Dost thou taketh me for a servant that I should clean his messes?"

"You are awful at theatrical speech too." And with that, Denis checkmated him.

Louisé took the Praetor's advice and asked her Sire about a more detailed explanation of how Kindred consummated relationships. She did not do this immediately, since he had labored enough to look pleasant through the party. She waited until there was privacy between them to impart upon his wisdom. What she received was unexpected. She anticipated a silence, then educated explanation accompanied by a dismissive wave of his hand. Instead, he stared at her with eyes wide and mouth curled in disgust. He straightened and rose from his chair.

"Did your mother not explain these details to you before she passed?"

She shook her head, "No. Since I was not engaged to be married, she felt no need to educate me."

"And I feel no need to educate you either."

"I was accused of being sired for the sole purpose of consummating a relationship. I at least deserve to understand the mechanics behind how such an accusation has substance," Louisé countered.

"The mechanics do not concern you! You are Ventrue! You do not lower yourself to the carnal whims and satisfactions of lesser clans! You are neither whore nor courtesan that this issue should concern you. You are to fix your mind and efforts upon material that matters. Dignity, domain and reputation…those are what matter, Louisé. Those are but a few of the elements that make for a long Kindred existence."

She could accept this, if she were older and had been married and mothered several children. But she was young…eternally young, unblemished and curious about parts of the world she had not yet experienced. Being robbed of the right to experience these parts left her curiosity more than blooming. She wanted to know. She felt she at least had that right. "And what about pleasure?"

He strode to her and grabbed her face. He stared into her eyes, his words cold and frightening, "Are you Toreador?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Are you a whore? Hm?"

"No!"

"What are you?"
"I am Ventrue," she whispered.

"Say again? I barely heard you."

"I am Ventrue!"

He released her face. "The greatest pleasure we shall ever know is the blood we drink. Do not go looking for it between the legs of men." And that ended the discussion.

Ramon's fingers danced along the hilt of his sword as he sat back and listened to the crone prattle on about her business being taken away. He was never so bored as when he had to defend himself against the slings and arrows of fellow Ventrue. He went deaf to the crone's accusations and instead amused himself with the most recent melodies of the Burgundian court. Melodies of troubadour, instrument and, best of all, gossip. This is how Devereux made himself the self-proclaimed impenetrable man he was, by listening for the sweet tune of loose lips and using it likes currency. Gossip bought a lot more than most Ventrue cared to admit, but he made a fortune (and destroyed those of others) with it. He collected juicy tidbits like some collected fine fabrics or jewels, and he exchanged them on his own Silk Road. Burgundy ran hot with the mass of burning ears he lived amongst, and he wouldn't have it any other way. He enjoyed the way the throng of Kindred clambered through his doors, or to his agents, more often than they did their own Prince.

The more he thought about gossip, the more he ignored the shaken youth off to his side. The Italian was a once upon a time protégé, now released to his own fortunes and the source of all this trouble. Apparently, he had attempted to expand his own domain and revenue by stepping into a potential business venture. Too bad the prospect resided within the hag's domain and was incapable of moving. Devereux wished he cared more, but he didn't. He wanted to leave to find better prospect for nocturnal entertainment. Or, at the very least, surround himself with people of prettier facades than this harpy. Ramon craned his neck back and turned it to each side so the bones cracked and gave him brief relief from the physical discomfort he experienced while sitting in the beautiful, but completely dysfunctional, chair the Prince had offered him. The Prince looked about as interested in this preceding as Ramon was, but that was hardly surprising as Toreador were rarely interested in anything unless a shiny object was dangled in front of their faces.

Ramon stood as the hag sat. His fingers drummed on the handle of the sword as he straightened himself up and flashed the Prince a charming smile. "Sir, I will not waste anymore of your precious time this evening. I have no need to explain myself when the culprit of this crime is no more attached to me than my long dead wife! May she rest in peace." The Prince straightened and Ramon continued, "Secondly, the wealth of my business is tied into the Duchy of Burgundy…therefore, I have no interest in Lyon for business sake."

The Prince brightened with a smile as wide as an excited child's, "Did you say Burgundy? Oh how I adore Dijon! The art, the fashion, the court!"

"Ah! Then you understand why I wouldn't dare stray from there for here. But this is all contending upon the fact that Madame Gautier believes this lad to be an agent of mine." Ramon snapped his left fingers, summoning the youth to his side. "Now, while it is true he was a protégé of mine whilst he lived in Dijon, he chose to strike out on his own. And, as I have already mentioned, I released him of any connection or obligation to me as a mentor."

"Hm?" The Prince seemed to snap out of the trance that was Burgundy's lush court. "Oh, yes. Cifuentes mentioned something like that. I told him coming here would only be burdensome to you, but he insisted that you would want to represent yourself!" A nerve in Ramon's face twitched. So, Denis was to blame for all this. The Prince continued, "I would scarce want to leave Dijon either,
though you must admit the silk in Lyon is much finer! And our literature..." He drifted off then snapped back to when the three Ventrue in the room simply stared, thoroughly unamused. "But... C'est la vie!" The Prince clapped his hands together and dismissed them after dueling proper consequences to the youth.

Ramon strode down the hall, turning a deaf ear to his former apprentice's apologies. He watched the old bat wear her semi-triumphant smirk upon her pox-marked visage and fought an ungentlemanly and un-Ventrue urge to punch her in the face. Entering the chilling night air was a welcome relief from the over-perfumed Princely quarters. He gave Denis of Portugal a smug look when he saw the man standing, presumably waiting for him, across the street. "You did this on purpose, Denis and I am not sure how amiable I shall be toward you now," Ramon faked his anger well when his impatience reached an uncomfortable boiling point.

"Oh, bide your temper, Devereux...it was the only way to get you here in such a manner as to avoid your whining or games of hide and seek. You ought to join society more instead of sending grasping protégés to do it for you," Cifuentes chided.

"'Tis what they are good for! I do not like society. At least not ours in its entirety," Ramon defended himself. "And I do not whine! I object passionately."

"Oh, my mistake. Pardon me for failing to distinguish your passionate objections from the sounds my dogs make when they need to take a piss."

Ramon took offense, but laughed anyway because that was a damn good response. "This is why I like you, Cifuentes! You are nowhere as stuffy as that cankered old prune who works with you. You know how to be bawdy with the best of them!" He slapped Denis on the back.

He noticed Denis roll his eyes and smirk. "She knows how to get a job done, though. I have never met anyone quite as attentive to detail and tradition as her...always out and about making the community and clan stronger."

"Well, with a stick as big as that up her arse, I doubt she can sit down."

"You are going to get yourself in trouble with a mouth like that. Besides, she had no legitimate knowledge you had released that boy. She catches him by the bollocks and the first thing he sings is your name. Can you blame her for thinking you were encroaching on her domain?"

"Yes! And no," Ramon admitted. "I did not think the boy was such a coward. And for all the hard work you claim she does, she could have pressed him a bit more to discover I have already released him. You could have done that, too, and spared me a trip."

"Well, as you wisely discovered, I did that on purpose." Cifuentes' hand disappeared into his cloak and when it came back out, it held an envelope. He held it out to Ramon. "Nice has written me."

Ramon's brows drew together. He plucked the letter from Denis and scrutinized it. "What does Nice want?"

"A Sheriff."

Ramon slapped the letter against Denis' chest, making sure to give it a good press with his palm, "No."

"Come now, Devereux! I have neither need nor want of their offer and I can think of no better man to meet their interests than you!"
"I have explained this to you before, Cifuentes but it appears as though your head is as thick and ears as clogged as ever. I have sworn off the court!" Devereux felt his pace pick up with his agitation. Thoughts long buried deep with himself surface with a painful punch to his chest. Denis met his tempo and shoved the letter back into Ramon's hand.

"I care not that you have sworn it off!" Denis grabbed Ramon's arm to stop him. He glanced down either way of the street then backed himself and Ramon into the shadows of the alley. "My friend, I know of your deep distain for politics and have never abashed you for those sentiments, but you would be a fool to refuse Nice," his whispers were harsh and eyes ever darting for eavesdroppers.

"What is Nice going to do, Denis? Come and kill me in Burgundy? I doubt Nice would dare such an insult."

"'Zounds, but you are a sincere frustration! I care not what you do with the letter so long as Nice is satisfied." Denis stepped back from his friend and exited the alley. Ramon waited for the nerve in his neck to stop pulsing. He stared down at the letter and contemplated what to do with it because he certainly was not going to be the reason Lyon, Nice and Burgundy dragged each other into meaningless quarrel, nor was he going to uproot his satisfying life to gratify the selfish needs of Denis' Sire's greedy sibling.

Louisé went from student to errand runner with her acceptance into Ventrue society solid and unwavering. She hated it and, perhaps, would not have been stuck running around the streets of Lyon had she not posed her Sire such a sensitive question as one concerning consummation. It also did not help that immediately concluding her agoge, he resumed his demanding position as Scourge. Court positions and politics still confused her. She thought the Sheriff was responsible for conducting executions, tortures and the handling of unsavory Kindred. Louisé desired to know why her Sire was doing the bulk of the Sheriff's work but did not want any more work to do than she wished as consequence for asking him such a question. She hardly had to wait long for an answer though. One of her first errands brought her to the steps of a fine Toreador home, and as her Sired had warned her, Toreadors loved to gossip. Even more than that, they loved intrigue and Louisé was not released from the extravagant home of this Toreador count until she had experienced both. Her small amount of suffering fed her curiosity completely. A great reward for a small inconvenience. She learned there was little love between the Sheriff and LaCroix. The former believed his Prince misguided by assigning LaCroix the position of Scourge, which had been previously held by a great friend (possible former love) of the Sheriff. Unfortunately for her Sire, the Sheriff was a favorite of the Prince long before, and after, appointed to his station so there was no room for Sébastien to complain.

Thus, it trickled down this way: the Prince gave tasks to the Sheriff, whatever work the Sheriff did not wish to conduct was assigned to LaCroix and whatever aspects of his personal business he could not complete, because of the Sheriff, were delegated to her. Her nights were filled with menial tasks, leaving her very little personal time or progression. Her Sire's strict eye left her no room to whine about her load lest the sting of his belt reacquaint itself with her backside. She was left to make the best of an unsavory situation until she had nudged herself far enough out of LaCroix's grasp to live the nights for herself. Until then…until then…until then she was stuck beneath his cold thumb and joyless gaze. Until then she would be severed from her estate and finances. Until then she would deliver his messages, carry his letters and sort his documents while he balanced her inheritance. Until then she would be as passionless as him, forced into dresses so tight in the collar and ruff it would have choked her had she needed to breathe.

Yes, the secondary consequence for her question was a dramatic change in wardrobe. She returned from delivering messages to find her elegant gowns of jade, amethyst and sapphire removed from her
quarters. Just when she had allowed herself back into the colors of youth, he snatched them away and replaced them with the shades of grey and black of mourning. When she demanded them back, he shoved books to read into one hand and letters to deliver into the other. He declined explanation or return of the dresses, though he did say she could have new ones made so long as they met with his prior approval.

She felt like she was wearing darkness as she moved down the alleys and cobblestones. Perhaps the only benefit of such drab attire was that no one saw her coming. She was a shadow. A shadow sentient of duty, boredom and hunger. A shadow with a shadow of its own is what she had become and it only became more complicated when she gained a second shadow. For a full two weeks following the formal celebration at Cifuentes' estate, she swore someone had been following her through the streets. She often passed, or was passed by, fellow Kindred but this one stayed just far enough behind and ducked when she turned her head to be anything but distressing.

Tonight would be different though. This is what she told herself when she rose at eight and dressed herself. She fed from a member of her herd (now permanently stationed in their home), took the pile of messages and left to complete her duties. There was very little time between leaving her home and gaining her second shadow as she strolled along Rue de Pierrevive then connected with Rue Saint-Jean. She turned three sharp corners then pressed herself against the stones of a building and waited. She ticked the sands of time away in her head, but no one rounded the last corner. Perhaps she had been imagining it all. Perhaps it was nothing more than a troublesome adjustment to life of the night. Louisé crinkled her nose and drummed her fingers against the smooth stone of the corner.

She fought a violent scream when strong fingers closed over her own. She swung her body round the corner to gaze at whom was holding her fingers. He was a tall man of some years with large green eyes, black hair streaked and patched with grey and rough, untended stubble along his strong, square jaw. She might have found him attractive were it not for the mischief in his eyes, audacity in his smirk and unapproved grip on her person.

"I was not quite sure when you would begin to suspect someone was following you," he said to break the silence.

"I am not inclined to waste precious time questioning why someone is walking behind me when the streets are not mine to own." She tugged on her hand. He did not release the fingers.

"Oh yes, we are quite the exemplary Ventrue, are we not? Talking in such a way as to make anyone feel lowly compared to thee. Too bad for you I am a Ventrue of more years and greater stature, so I highly encourage you speak to your elder with all due respect neonate," he spat out the last word. She flinched.

"Pardon my-" she stopped when he held up a hand. He moved his fingers beneath hers and lifted her hand to his lips to impart a customary kiss to the top of her hand.

"A Ventrue never apologizes. Your flinch was consequence enough."

He dropped her hand and she took a step back, never breaking their gaze as that may be considered rude by his standards. "May I have the pleasure of knowing to whom I am speaking?"

His eyes left hers to run from her head to her toes. He began to walk around her slowly, like a predator before he strikes and Louisé was not sure which was safer: staying put or fleeing. He did not spend much of any time behind her, since he had seen plenty of that side of her body while stalking her down the streets. Once his round was complete, he stroked his budding beard and rumpled his brows. It did not appear as though he had any intention of answering her question. Frustration bubbled somewhere low in her but she maintained an appropriate veneer of compliance.
He closed his eyes and bobbed his head from one side to the other. His eyebrows rose and fell, lips contorted a little and fingers stroked more. What in creation was he doing?!

She clenched the letters in her hand. "Forgive me, but I have tasks I must complete or my Sire-"

"Sébastien LaCroix, correct?" he interrupted. How undignified…

"Yes, sire. Monsieur LaCroix is my Sire and-"

"He has you frolicking about the city, delivering vapid little letters that he may feel accomplished in his menial task as Lyon's Scourge. Though! As I hear it, he seems to play the role of Sheriff's servant more than Scourge, no?" She just stared at him instead of reply. "Well, not all of us were embraced for greatness. Enjoy thy evening, Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert."

And so he departed, leaving her at that corner with little more than vapid letters and wide eyes.

Ramon was not entirely impressed, nor entirely disappointed by the girl. From far away, she was quite intriguing. Or had been, during the celebration. She lost some appeal up close. He couldn't entirely fault her. What she wore hardly flattered the figure he presumed she had stuffed beneath that dull fabric. The worldly part of himself had a distinct dislike for dressing the same shade of dark as the shadows. Just because they had to live in the night didn't excuse dressing for it. But he wasn't surprised, given her Sire and what he was running from. Devereux figured Sébastien was too frightful to put her in anything more colorful than ash, lest someone assume she was luring suitors to their bed of impropriety. In the end, his judgment was that the girl had potential. Her ability for allure under the right circumstances left something to be desired…or experimented with, at the very least. Ramon laughed to himself before raising his sword to knock upon the door of his former protégé. A ghoul answered.

"I need to speak to Sébastien LaCroix. Inform him Ramon Devereux is here to speak with him."

The ghoul looked confused, but allowed Ramon into the foyer and departed to find his master. He did not reserve himself to the foyer. He walked down the hall as if the home were his own and nearly collided with Sébastien as he rounded a corner. There was no better sight to him than watching a man as serious and put together as Sébastien LaCroix, flustered. With five inches of height over LaCroix, Devereux did little more than smirk down at his former protégé.

"Good Evening, Sébastien. My, what a lovely hallway you have!"

He watched LaCroix's face fight a snarl. It manufactured a smug grin instead. "Devereux. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"Have you anything to drink, Sébastien? This Lyon air has me absolutely parched!" Ramon flashed him a grin with his purposeful dance around his question.

Further flustering LaCroix was as enjoyable as initially doing so. Sébastien dawned a hospitable nature and led Ramon to his study. After offering him a seat, LaCroix poured two glasses of blood and handed one to Ramon. His old apprentice did not sit with him.

"What brings you to Lyon, Devereux?"

"Oh…a little of this, a little of that." Ramon took a sip of the blood and mentally congratulated Sébastien on choosing a good vintage. "Had to clear up a little misunderstanding between myself and the local Aedile. And, of course, to lay eyes upon this rumored Childe of Passion."
Sébastien's look became so dark, it surprised Ramon. He always knew there was a part of LaCroix the world ought to never see, he was just incapable of describing it. Every Kindred has the beast to soothe now and then. Sébastien was no different. But the part that concerned Ramon was somewhere between the frenzied beast and Sébastien's manicured exterior. It was vicious, unpredictable and never satisfied. That is what Ramon, believed, anyhow… that there was this perverse aspect of Sébastien LaCroix he controlled and managed far less than the beast because, at face value, there seemed nothing wrong with it.

"Imagine my surprise when I learned she belonged to you." Ramon drank.

"She is nothing of the sort and I would kindly ask that you never repeat that phrase in my home."

"My apologies."

"Why are you in my home, Devereux?" Always Devereux…never Ramon. Honestly, Sébastien was never friendly.

"I came to make you an offer."

"Offer?" Sébastien's tone improved, but the suspicion did not entirely lift.

"Yes, I have had the distinct pleasure of receiving," he paused to pull Cifuentes' letter out, "A letter from Nice."

Sébastien's brow rose. "Good for you. How does this concern me?"

"Well, you see they are currently looking to fill the role of Sheriff, and if what I heard is correct, you seem fairly qualified for such a position," Ramon kept his tone free of any sarcasm.

"While this, I assure you, is most certainly true," Sébastien drank from his glass. Oh yes, LaCroix was always so humble. "How would uprooting my current lifestyle to move to Nice be of any real benefit?"

Ramon rested the letter against his thigh and ran a finger along the rim of his glass. He would have to choose his words precisely and with care for this to work. "Are you aware of your current standing within our clan?"

There was that dark look again. "Not definitively, but I am sure you will tell me."

"I have it on good authority that the elders are not satisfied with this choice. While I have been informed there is no solid evidence proving of physical intent on your behalf-"

"Of course there is none!" he snapped at Ramon. Ramon drummed the edge of the glass with his fingers to avoid doing something else with his hand that also involved Sébastien's face.

"There is no evidence disproving the possibility that there could be in the future," Ramon concluded.

Sébastien balked. "You cannot be serious!"

"How serious I am has nothing to do with the matter. This falls entirely upon the seriousness of the elders, who are willing to forfeit their presumptuous beliefs and possible consequences, if they have valid proof she means nothing more to you than a profitable acquisition."

"Pray tell what proof do they desire?"

Ramon lifted the letter and gave it a lazy wave. Sébastien rolled his eyes, took a step closer and
snatched the letter from Ramon's fingers. His eyes scanned the letter and her frowned. "This was intended for Praetor Cifuentes…Why do you have it?"

"Because I am an old friend of his, he does not wish to step down from Seneschal to Sheriff and assumed I may want a change of venue." He finished off the blood and continued, "But I have no such desire. Praetor Cifuentes assured me I am well within my rights to send them a suitable stand-in. My rights, in turn, assured me that you would much rather prefer the station of Sheriff to being the marionette of one."

"So, were I to accept your offer, move from Lyon to Nice and take up the position of Sheriff…the elders will believe me infallible once again?"

"Not exactly." Ramon flashed LaCroix's third dark look a handsome smile. "There is a catch. A very slight, hardly trifling catch."

"Speak directly, Devereux for I do have other demands for my attention this evening."

"You would have to leave the girl behind."

Sébastien hesitated before handing the letter back. "No," he replied and finished his own glass. "You want a way out, there it is! You want a way up, I have provided one for you. I do not need it. I have done it all and enjoy the luxury of Burgundy to any throne I could ever be offered. Burgundy is ideally located for any business I wish to conduct in Switzerland or Italy and has a scenic beauty I can still appreciate at night." Feeling well-executed sentiment might do the trick, Ramon drew on old memories and allowed his eyes to become distant, "If I had my Juliana, I would fight the world for her. There would not be any title too high for my ambition, too great that I would not seize it to secure her somewhere safe. But it is pointless now. Do yourself and she a favor and take this opportunity, Sébastien."

Sébastien refilled his glass and took a drink, resuming a bored expression. "Who do you anticipate that diatribe moving?"

"You wound me! You think me unauthentic in my emotions?" Sébastien's stony exterior did not crack. Ramon sighed and raised defeated hands, "I had hoped it would move you."

"That hope is based on your conjecture of my having feelings for her."

"Do you?" Ramon threw his lure in the hopes of a snag. "None more than a Sire ought."

"And yet you are under such speculation…"

"My abilities and decisions, both past and present, speak for themselves! I am blameless of this accusation! It is defamation, pure and simple!" LaCroix roared.

"Sébastien," Ramon's response was soft as silk, "I was your mentor. Trust in my belief of your abilities. So, believe me when I tell you this is for the best. You must distance yourself from the girl, if not for her own personal development as a Ventrue, then for the sake of both your lives."

LaCroix stared at Devereux, fighting back a snarl. "What are you talking about? If you had been at her official presentation you would have seen their reaction, they loved her!"

"Who are you trying to convince with such passion? Me or yourself? Perhaps the locals loved her
and love her still, but don't be fooled into believing those that matter still do not consider her a Childe of Passion. The only reason they let her live is because it will be more interesting to see what she is capable of providing for our clan than simply lopping her head off. Personally, I do not give two figs about the motivation behind your siring her but politically speaking, our clan cannot take the risk of you two becoming closer than you ought and causing a scandal."

"Ridiculous! I told you before, I have no interest in her that way. She's a child, for Heaven's sake!"

"Hardly a child," Devereux murmured. "Then why Embrace her at all?"

Sébastien shrugged, "She was heiress to a significant fortune and estate. Her marquisate would advance me socially and there is great revenue potential for her vineyards and fields."

Devereux smirked. "I would rather plow her fields than own them."

"I will not remind you again that you in are in my home and I will not tolerate such vulgarity here."

Ramon raised hands, surrendering. "My apologies to your fine sensibilities."

"Besides, you hate women… if memory serves." LaCroix smirked.

Ramon pointed a thick finger at Sébastien, "By your own admission, she isn't a woman." Devereux waved a hand when Sébastien opened his mouth to no doubt recant previous statements. "Anyhow, I only hate them politically. I do not, however, hate them conjugally."

LaCroix set his glass down and folded his hands behind his back, eyes staring into the fire crackling. He returned their discussion to their primary subject, "The potential for personal gain in embracing her was too great. I wasn't about to let the opportunity pass me by and settle into the hands of someone else."

Ramon stood up and took one of LaCroix's wrists, slapping the letter into his hand. "Then don't let this opportunity pass you by."

Sébastien's eyes looked down at the letter and Ramon knew he was beginning to waver. If not for wanting to wipe this mess clean completely, then most assuredly to make himself better. Ramon needed to push him only a little more to result in total compliance. LaCroix murmured, "And what if I do?"

Devereux whispered, "If you do not take this, then the elders may bar you from rising in the ranks as punishment. They will pass you over for someone less deserving at every opportunity until they believe you have learned your lesson or it no longer amuses them to make you suffer. And they never need to explain their actions to anyone, as you know, so complaining would be fruitless. But, if that is not enough to convince you...there is always the looming possibility of cutting both your heads off and pretending neither you, nor she, ever existed. I mean, if one does not exist, their sins certainly do not."

LaCroix closed his eyes and sighed, "What of Louise? She is hardly ready to go it alone. I would be remiss in my duties as her Sire if I left her now. She will think I'm abandoning her."

"One day she will understand you did not."

Sébastien leaned into his chair, eyes distracted by the flickering flames in the fireplace while his mind whirred with Ramon's offer. The letter rested in his lap. Though it had been decades since he was in Devereux's employ, the man still knew him well enough to whet his ambition with a generous
He was so immersed in his own thoughts that he didn't notice movement in the room until she was at his side. He looked her over. With dawn but an hour away, she had taken the liberty of disrobing down to her dressing gown. The soft lave of her chemise poked through the V-shaped neck of her gown. How fragile she still appeared to him...fragile, naïve, young, tender. The list continued on in his head, replacing Ramon's proposition for but a little while. Deep in his chest, something tightened as he watched her tilt her head. Black hair fell into her eyes. He hesitated before lifting his hand to brush the stray strand behind her ear. Poor thing didn't have anyone in the world. What death had not claimed before, Sébastien had taken fully with her Embrace. The tightening in his chest told him he shouldn't go. He dropped his hand, listening to the letter crinkle.

"I placed the responses to your letters on your desk. Do you need anything more from me this evening?"

"No, child, I believe that will suffice it for this evening. Dawn is coming soon, so you may entertain yourself before retiring to bed."

She nodded and turned to go then paused and looked back at him. "A Toreador count extended an invitation to me to attend a party he is throwing two nights from now. May I attend?"

Sébastien's eyes looked down at the letter from Nice. "If you conduct yourself appropriately and complete your tasks, then yes, you may attend."

"Thank you, sir." He heard her walk to the door.

"Louisé?"

"Yes, sir?"

He turned his head to look at her, offering her a small smile. "Sleep well."

She left and he was once more abandoned to his thoughts. Yes, she was a pitiable and fragile creature indeed. Unfortunately for her, LaCroix was not her father, nor required to be responsible for her now that she had completed her agoge. The tightening in his chest disappeared. Indeed, unfortunately for her, his ambitious desires were greater than any vampiric paternal connection he had with her. Ramon was right. He would be a fool to give up this offer and Sébastien LaCroix was no fool. Why remain pressed beneath the thumb of a disgruntled Sheriff when he could be the Sheriff instead? And with Nice's proximity to Italy, he would no doubt have more to do now that the Lasombra were pushing out of their traditional Mediterranean domain and into the Camarilla spheres of greater Europe. A ghoul assumed the place Louisé had abandoned moments ago. He spoke to the man without so much as glancing his way.

"We will be leaving for Nice in two night's time. Make sure my things are packed but do not disturb Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert in the process. In fact, do not even inform her of the move, as she will not be joining us. Send your partner ahead of us to secure a residence for me...perhaps something close to the beach, yes?" The ghoul nodded. LaCroix stood and moved to his desk. He quickly scribbled a note on a piece of paper. He folded a rough envelope and held it out to the ghoul. "Take this to Monsieur Ramon Devereux. He is residing at the estate of Seneschal Denis of Portugal."

When the ghoul was gone, LaCroix walked to a window and looked out onto the still-dark streets of Lyon. He folded his hands behind his back and closed his eyes. Yes, something near the shore would suffice...the fresh sea air would do him good.
Interesting Historical Tidbits :D

**Contractions**- Some of you may have noticed the dialogue contains no contractions. Originally, it did, but Early Modern English grammar did not use contractions except among lower social classes. Landed gentry and nobility, like Ventrue, would most likely have spoken without contractions as we know them now.

**Burgundy**- The Duchy of Burgundy was a powerhouse of Medieval Europe. It was originally granted to the son of the French king. This son married Maragret of Flanders, which incorporated the land of Flanders to duchy of Burgundy and separated the duchy from the remaining kingdom of France. The Burgundian court was famous for art, literature, fashion…making it, perhaps, the most illustrious court of its time.

**Lyon**- Immigrants from Florence made this a wealthy city during the Renaissance. By that time, the city is also quite dense! Apparently, Lyon was so popular that it became the site for the first printing establishment. Hence, the Toreador's reference to Lyon's literature. With its own printing establishment, they more than likely received literature, from other European cities, before any other French metropolis.

"Zounds"- Pronounced "zoonds", literally means "God's wounds!" and is a general Medieval and Elizabethan exclamation of frustration.
Louisé learns a great, many things with the sudden, unexplainable, ghost-like disappearance of her sire. One of these things is the realization that much of her worth and clout along the byways of Lyon has little, if anything, to do with her and everything to do with Sébastien being the sole barrier between many Kindred and the cold, unforgiving steel of the Sheriff. Everyone in the city knew she was his Childe and no one had it on good, or even remotely correct, authority that he did not absolutely adore her and could not, therefore, take the chance of insulting her for fear of hilted retribution. Without LaCroix's presence, Louisé received her first real taste of how brutal, how cold and how self-serving the Kindred world was. Sans Sébastien resulted in the Prince hiring a new Scourge, which meant the previous Scourge's domain and residence were theirs if they wished to own them.

There was small fortune for her that the new Scourge, a Toreador, preferred their own home to LaCroix's and had about as much interest in the remaining domain. This did not apply to would-be comrades and two-faced neonates, not much older than she, who began picking away at her Sire's parcel of land. She didn't even have the authority to call the section of businesses and streets hers! No Camarilla law or Ventreue tradition upheld the belief of inheritance. Nothing about being LaCroix's Childe gave her privilege to anything but his blood in her veins. Everything else, she would have to fight for. She would have to bleed that precious Ventreue blood for a meter of cobblestone to call her own. And that is precisely what she did.

She gave a pound of flesh for a square foot of Lyon. A tooth for a stoop, some ribs for a corner and a clump of hair for an arc of yards right outside her door. She cut her teeth on the arms of backstabbing neighbors. Some of them cut their teeth on her, decorating her snow white skin with half-moon markings. She did find some satisfaction in the fact that she sent three Toreador fledglings cowering away with parts of their faces in wrong hands. Eventually, night after night of returning to the three-floor on Place des Terreaux with bloody ribbons down her arms taught Louisé another fine lesson about life with LaCroix.

This lesson was introspective, rather than physical in nature. The wasted energy healing herself gave her time to reflect upon the fact that she hadn't protection, income or space to call her own. The more she reflected, the more she was forced to confront the issue of her own lacking. Louisé had never wanted for anything her entire life. Her father provided everything she had wanted or needed: roof, food, education, recreation and clothing, all of them luxurious in nature. Prior to leaving, LaCroix offered a lukewarm version of the same. With him gone, she had nothing but a creaking roof over her head, a luck luster wardrobe, minimal Kindred knowledge and claw marks down her back. Her only financial provision was a discarded purse of livre Sébastien decided to leave her as an allowance. Somewhere between the wound in pride and anger about her inheritance being reduced a tiny, monetary gift, she felt the fear of poverty...the weight of want. It scared her.

Everything frightened her. Things she didn't even notice now flared alarms in that paranoid muscle known as her Ventreue brain. The sharp creak of wood throughout the black silence of the house. Snaps of enemy snarls from the shadows of narrow alleyways. She took for granted the gauzy layer of ignorance LaCroix's presence provided his Childe concerning the new world she lived in. Now the world was uncovered and unsheathed gnarled teeth that were doing their best to tear her apart. Her weak aptitude for Dominate gave her little ability to stop it, while novice Fortitude prevented only the most major damage if her mind were focused enough for such an endeavor. Her paranoia left her little else to focus on. She was losing her land, her inheritance and the once firm foundation of her mind.
The last lesson she cared to think on learning since LaCroix left was loneliness. Being abandoned by Sébastien gave her an authentic taste of loneliness. She believed herself lonely after her mother passed but she now realized that she had her father, the servants, even LaCroix's unwanted presence to distract her and numb the rawness of her mother's death. Immediately following LaCroix's disappearance she was elated. There was relief from no longer being pressed beneath his demands for perfection and absolute obedience. The nights were no longer used moving to the rhythm of his demands, but entirely hers for the taking. Too bad taking the nights implied more physical violence than the pleasure she was hoping for. Pleasure wasn't entirely hidden. For the first three nights, she enjoyed herself carousing with affluent Toreadors intent on improving her wardrobe. That is when she discovered her poverty…when she found her tiny purse of coins would barely buy a single dress, let alone the ten these Artisans planned. The hallow state of her financial affairs made her pause in the emptiness of her home. The echo of her own feet taught her loneliness…abandonment. Elation faded into a dull, throbbing ache of panic. Where did he go?! Why did he leave?! What was she supposed to do now? Why was she on the receiving end of condoling glances from all other Ventrue (Aedile aside)? She had no answers for any of these questions. All she knew is that so soon a separation of Childe and Sire resulted in near physical pain for her. She never imagined she would miss Sébastien LaCroix, or ever be in a situation where she was forced to miss him.

Missing him didn't last long. Separation anxiety, after nights of fighting for life and land, became anger. She was furious that he abandoned her. She was incensed that she got beat up for scraps of domain. She was angry that he never taught her what it took to defend herself properly or hold onto domain because he was too focused defending himself and holding onto his own. She was infuriated that he took her inheritance and family land. Yes, now Louisé was just angry and that anger fueled her just fine.

"P-please! Not my face!" the Toreador whined.

Louisé snapped out of her reflective process and looked down at the porcelain cheek her sharp nails drummed against. Honestly, so vain…Louisé thought, feeling the oozed blood dry and crack on her own face as she snarled. "Then you best answer my question. I even feel charitable, so I shall ask again…Who is the man who claims to own my domain?"

The neonatal Toreador, young and abandoned like her, winced. Their bottom lip trembled as she squeezed their face. They gave in, "R-Ramon Devereux!"

Ramon Devereux decided a few things in the past two weeks. First, he decided it was apparently a wonderful idea to leave the luxury of his Dijon estate for the less glamorous metropolis of Lyon. Then he concocted in his head how sensational it would be to witness a true Childe of Passion…only to be let down dismally by the blue-eyed girl from Barby. After that, though, he made smarter decisions. For example, he decided that he would make a much better educator and Sire for the girl than Sébastien LaCroix. Therefore, he killed two birds with one stone. He got rid of Nice by giving it to Sébastien, and got rid of Sébastien by giving him Nice. He preyed on Sébastien's lust for power to meet his own needs. He imagined he ought to feel bad about that…perhaps ashamed at cheating a previous student out of his own Childe, but he just didn't. He just didn't have time to feel undignified in the matter when he was subsequently claiming Sébastien's domain. It wasn't that hard. The poor girl barely had the talent to acquire anything more than a few square feet surrounding the tiny thing they called a home.

Taking the domain took two nights for him. After that, he simply paid fellow Kindred to stumble around the parcel of land and provoke her. He watched their antagonizing from the depth of shadows, wanting to see what material she was hewn together with. Would she be like so many other Childer, too afraid of the sudden independence to do anything but what they're told? Or, would
she be made of stronger substance? He was not let down. When pushed between a rock and hard place, she bared her fangs, claws and got down to the dirty work of survival Kindred-style. She earned a crumb of respect and ounce of worth in his eyes. Perhaps this was worth getting rid of Sébastien after all, though she left much to be desired. When he became bored with watching her cut and bite as much as she was cut and bit, he took it upon himself to sneak into her home and wait in the darkness for her. She screamed when she found him sitting on the edge of her bed. He gave her a pearly-white grin.

"So, we meet again my dear girl!" He whistled, looking her own, "My, you're a sight...aren't you? All blood and dirt these nights, eh? Tsk tsk tsk," he waggled a finger from side to side, "Not very Ventrue of you. Dignitas, dear girl. *Always* dignitas."

She snarled at him. It was almost frightening with her face caked in a mixture of blood and street sludge. He hated to think what else her fair skin was stained with, but the aroma gave him a good idea. "I do not care for people sneaking into my home. Please leave."

"Why so hostile?" He stood and uncorked the bottle of blood he had brought with him. "I come bearing gifts of good news...And good blood." He filled a glass and held it out to her. When she reached for the glass, he drew it back to himself. "Uh uh uh...first we calm ourselves and apologize for being so rude."

Her nose crinkled, her mouth tightened but she managed to relax enough to accommodate his request. "I am sorry for speaking in a rude tone." He offered the glass back and she took it with haste. She drank the entire glass in two gulps. She licked her lips, handed the glass back then smiled at him, "Now please leave."

The pup had guts. He laughed, refilled the glass and forced it into her hand while filling a glass of his own. "How are you enjoying your independence Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert?"

Her eyes narrowed over the lip of the glass. She drank slower this time. Apparently she took the time to form her words to something less belligerent, "I would be lying if I said it was nothing less than unexpected and unappreciated."

"Oh? When we first met you came across as resentful about being a little mail carrier. I assumed you would be overjoyed at having the evenings to yourself." He drank from his own glass.

Her nose crinkled again. "I do not have time to enjoy myself."

"Whyever not?" He used an ounce of Dominate, just to relish in her perspective of the trial he created for her.

He watched the classic glaze form over her eyes and her voice become more monotone. That wasn't a drastic change for any Ventrue, who tended to speak with monotonous quality anyhow. "I have to fight to keep this domain. When my Sire left, it did not pass to me."

"How sad." He broke his influence and continued drinking from his glass. "Perhaps my news shall cheer you up!"

She shook her head a little, shaking off the effects of his domination. "How might it do that?"

"I have heard it through the Ventrue community here how Monsieur LaCroix just up and abandoned you...rather than left. This is a cruel world, Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert, and judging from your appearance, you know firsthand just how cruel it can be." He walked around the tiny room, inspecting her once more just as he had the night they met. "So, what I am here to offer you is not
just clemency…but the opportunity to transcend the fate Monsieur LaCroix has woven for you.”

"What do you mean?" She took the seat he abandoned.

"Do you know how many fledglings survive their first year without a Sire?" She shook her head, so he continued, "Less than half. I think we both know our world is that cruel. Sébastien abandoning you is not only selfish on his behalf, but damaging to our clan. He may have been blind to it," he murmured, "but your potential is quite apparent to me." Ramon began planting seeds. Seeds of bitterness, doubt and anger (though those may already be sprouting) that would grow and spread her further from her Sire. This wasn't anything personal…just good politics.

"What exactly is it that you are offering Monsieur-"

"To be your mentor," he cut her off. "Good Ventrue, the Ventrue that last for centuries of nights have proper mentors. Ideally, your Sire if your first mentor but we can both see how egregiously Sébastien LaCroix has failed in that avenue, if you pardon my accusation." She shrugged, grimaced at the dried blood on her arms and drank her blood. He continued, "If you don't mind my saying, my dear, you have nothing."

Her brows drew together and he saw the snarl begin to creep back into her lips. "Excuse me?"

"My dear, it doesn't take an expert to see that not only are you impoverished, but weak and vulnerable in your current state of affairs." He moved and sat beside her. He even took her hand as a gesture of compassion, "Allowing me to be your mentor would once again establish, for you, a proper home to live in, ample finances for your disposal and a precious opportunity to hone our clan's innate disciplines, which I can tell your Sire forgot to properly educate you on. You would want for nothing."

He could tell that struck a chord in her as she looked away from him and at a pitiful fabric purse resting on a nearby table. His curiosity had already peeked into the bag and found a dwindling pile of livre: Sébastien's farewell gesture. His former student ought to have known better than to leave his Childe so little. It insulted Devereux's sense of opulence and stout Ventrue pride. He knew it just plain scared the girl. Daughter of nobility, he doubt she'd seen a single day where she had needed anything money could not but. She looked back at him, pulled her hand into her lap and sighed, "What exactly would happen to me? Do I have time to think about this?"

"You, technically, have all the time in the world. I, however, will be leaving Lyon in two night's time. So, while you may choose to think on this for however long you wish…I require an answer by tomorrow. Send it to the home of Praetor Cifuentes."

She nodded, "Very well. I thank you very much for this, Monsieur…?"

"Devereux." He stood and grinned at her. His grin widened when he watched her face fall and tense with suppressed rage. Oh dear, it seemed as if someone let slip his little secret. He gave a sweeping bow before exiting. "Ramon Devereux."

Louisé was stunned where she sat. She could feel her face contorting, the dried mess on her face cracking and irritating her skin. So he was the bastard scooping up LaCroix's domain from her! He came across as arrogant enough to pull off such a scheme with little to no effort. This afforded her a view of the power and influence Monsieur Devereux sported, qualities she was in desperate need of since Louisé had none of her own to use. She hadn't been Kindred long enough to be overflowing with Ventrue pride. This made it far easier for her to accept his offer. She could leave this dingy home behind and return to natural state of luxury her noble blood deserved. No longer would she be
required to stress over finances, if what Devereux implied about his own fiscal standing was true. And best of all, she would have a like-minded companion in the criticism of Sébastien LaCroix.

She did not want to come across as desperate as both she and Devereux knew she was. She had some pride, after all. Therefore, she took time in replying to his proposition. Her greatest priority was not replying to him, anyhow...it was taking a bath. Something moral inside her disliked the idea of ghouls. Maybe it was the fact that two had a hand in ending her life, perhaps observing the degraded manner in which Sébastien subjected his own to, or the desperation behind a ghoul's eyes when blood was offered to them. Louisé was used to servants, but ghouls represented a distinct genre of subjugation she didn't care to associate herself with just yet. Instead, she left the drawing of her bath to a live-in member of her herd. The woman was a common wretch off the street, fairly unappealing to look at but when Louisé probed her history, found an array of noble families in her lineage. Apparently, she became pregnant from wedlock, was kicked from her home and left to the streets. The child didn't last long in his mother's arms and Louisé found her not long after that. Louisé considered bringing the woman into her home as her good deed of the year, though Sébastien had initially protested the venture. Regardless, the woman took a more righteous place as her servant than a ghoul would (in her mind, at least) and served a greater, secondary function as food.

Submerged beneath the heat of fresh water, Louisé allowed the blood, dirty and waste of the streets soak off her skin. The greatest benefit of not breathing...completely sinking into a hot bath. It gave her the opportunity to drown out all sounds and distractions and simply soak long-desired heat back into the cold death of her flesh. The length of her legs and arms, the smooth plane of her abdomen and the bulge of her breasts were all stone cold as the grave. Hot baths gave her as much time for reflection as they did the opportunity to harness the warmth of life, false though it may be. The splash of hands broke her concentration on both body and business. Her blood ewe's gentle hands eased a layer of scented Marseilles soap over her legs and feet as she lifted them, one after the other, from the water. Louisé sat up the higher the woman's hands traveled and offered her arms to be washed while she tended personally to her stomach and face. The disgusting dye of the water irritated Louisé, even as the woman's nimble fingers massaged soap into her back and neck. She groaned from pleasure and the staggering, dirty reality staring her in the face. As the woman wove her fingers into Louisé's hair and rubbed her scalp. Like a dog being petted, her eyelids slid half-closed and she moaned. She didn't want to imagine the filth in her scalp.

"Patricia?" Louisé murmured.

"Oui, mademoiselle?" her kine asked.

"I need you to deliver a letter for me."

He did not receive her response until the following evening. Well, that's a slight inaccuracy. He received the response immediately before dawn, but did not read what it had to say until he woke and drank the following evening. He had no doubt the girl would agree to his proposal, especially after witnessing her sullied physical appearance and the minimalistic way she begrudgingly lived. He supposed he ought to have written her right away, but he became too immersed in a game of Primero with Cifuentes and two other Ventrue gentlemen. One of them laid his cards down and stuffed more Spanish tobacco into his pipe. Devereux scrunched his nose to avoid the foul smell as it wafted from the pipe. This was not his home, though, so he had little standing to tell the man exactly where he ought to stuff that pipe instead of stuffing it with dried, fetid leaves from Lisbon. He traded two cards, drew two more and watched Cifuentes side glance slanted eyes at the man. It would be his only warning, non-verbal or not, to forfeit his hand and go smoke elsewhere or snuff the pipe out entirely. This man was not the sharpest knife around, unfortunately. They played a few more rounds before Cifuentes yanked the pipe from the man's mouth, smacked him in the back of the head with it
and tossed it into the fireplace.

"I won't have you stinking up my home with the smell of that detestable leaf, Jacques!"

Jacques bit his embarrassed tongue behind his teeth, though Devereux could tell his pride was wounded at being publicly corrected by his Sire. He took the immediate opportunity to change the subject as he traded a card. "So, I find it interesting that you've chosen to amass LaCroix's abandoned domain, Devereux. Especially when you're returning to Dijon tomorrow evening."

Ramon said nothing for a moment as he concentrated on his hand, fingers drumming against his chin for dramatic flare. He looked the man straight in the eyes as he laid down a winning hand, "Glad you find it interesting."

The man beside Jacques huffed and slapped his cards down, "I, too, find this interesting. What are your reasons? Going to have business here in Lyon then?"

"I have quite a few reasons for doing the eccentric things I do. No, though, I am not going to have business here," he replied as Cifuentes shuffled the cards. Ramon slid the last round's winning to his chest and began stacking the coins.

"What about that girl, though? I hear she's acting like a wild animal!" Jacques snarled like a wolf hound then laughed, "Tearing Kindred apart like some Sabbat underling. No wonder LaCroix abandoned her. I think I would also avoid those Kindred anyway I knew how."

Ramon and Denis shared glances. It was a silent exchange of request and permission between two long-time friends. Cifuentes relinquished his right to correct his Childe a second time. Ramon organized his cards. "Personally, I find those Kindred to be the ones who live for centuries worth of nights. They learn not to take the orders of others, but give them. They cut their teeth on the savagery and malice those first nights offer them, instead of being broken by them. Someone like her takes the tragedy of being abandoned by her Sire and uses it as fuel for growth instead of shrinking away from the challenge. If you ask me," he paused to trade two cards and glance at Denis' building smirk then his Childe's shocked silence, "I would rather spend a thousand years in the company of those Kindred than the kind I always encounter."

The man beside Jacques asked in a whipped voice, "And what kind of Kindred would those be?"

Ramon gave them a broad grin, "Glad you asked! Those kind of Kindred are the ones who cling to the heels of their Sires, too afraid to encounter the cold of our world and see what kind of character they're really made of. They're the kind of Kindred who ride upon the prestige of forefathers instead of creating their own. Those kind of Kindred believe their immortality to be everlasting instead of accepting the fact that their nights are limited by their own cowardice. Trust me, those kind of Kindred only weaken the character of the Camarilla. Ventrue such as those leave a stink on our clan's reputation. Ventrue like you." He stared at the two men. Ramon was glad they were stunned into silence until they left.

Cifuentes laughed as he slapped cards down, "You have such a way with words, Ramon. I think I almost pity this girl and the trap she's fallen into."

"Trap? What trap? Sir, I am insulted!" Ramon leaned back and tapped out a song with his empty glass. Denis rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers for a ghoul to refill the thing. "I was just trying to do my clan duty by extending charity to this poor, orphaned girl in need."

"Oh, spare me Ramon. While you may be delivering her from the shadow of tragedy, you're hardly delivering her into the land of milk and honey. She hardly realizes the inferno her Virgil is leading
"Such a poetic way to insult me, Denis. I'm touched...really." Ramon drank from his glass. "I suppose I should be grateful you didn't call me Satan."

"You didn't let me finish," Cifuentes said, not at all hiding his smirk.

"Staying with you is always such a treat, Denis."

The carriage ride was a quiet and steady one, though long and broken up between two nights for safety's sake. For a man who came across as predominantly, if not entirely, effusive, Ramon Devereux was surprisingly boring. He waved away her thanks time after time, telling her she didn't need to thank him. The man ran his book when he wasn't waving her away. Louisé felt as though she was reliving any given carriage ride with Sébastien LaCroix...silent, staunch and cold. There were no broad, toothy smiles from Devereux the entire ride or upon arrival. It was like he snapped back into truer version of himself, dressed into proper attire...or, perhaps...A more sinister consideration entered her thoughts. Perhaps, instead of snapping or dressing, he was shedding the ill-fitting skin of a façade personality.

Devereux exited the carriage and strode toward the centuries old chateau. Louisé scurried behind him, trying to absorb the wealth of information he was throwing at her. Hours of silence and now he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Too bad for her that he was speaking too fast for her to really catch much. She grabbed onto a few Kindred terms like domain, power, Dominate and boon. She stopped as abruptly as he did when they entered a long, overly decorated hallway. There were portraits of people she was sure she would have to learn, though she suspected a few were of him throughout different ages. He gestured down the hallway toward a set of double doors.

"Those are your quarters. Your kine will be relocated to the servant's quarters. I expect you to be prepared at an appropriate hour each evening. I don't accept tardiness or slack attitudes in my home. As much as I am your mentor, you still have a great debt to me for the privilege. You will work until I am satisfied the debt has been paid off. Understood?"

Louisé felt her throat tighten. Yes, she had been returned to luxury but she was no less impoverished. "What am I to do for you?"

Devereux was already striding in the opposite direction. "You're to stand where I tell you, when I tell you," he shot over his shoulder, departing her to her new quarters.

"How is that to do either of us good?" She felt secure enough to sneer, with him leaving, and turned to enter her new room. It was like lightning out of the corner of her eye, a flash of movement that struck her cheek. Her face snapped to one side, quickly followed by a familiar stinging sensation.

"Did your Sire never strike you?" She realized he was reacting to a shocked expression she hadn't time to cover up. He stood in wanting for response. Mention of her Sire made her stomach curl with rage. Her mind ignited with the awareness she had traded one tyrant for a worse breed of the same thing.

Her gaze rotated with her face until she was staring into the ivy hue of his eyes, "Not with his hand."

"And not across the face, either, I would presume from your wide eyes." He grabbed her face and squeezed. "Think yourself too good for your task?"

Yes, she did but she could never say that. She shook her head. He must have sensed she was lying or asked the question to enough neonatal Ventrue to know the honest answer because he squeezed
harder. "I don't care who your daddy was or how royal blue your blood was when your heart was still beating. You're nobody now, and you'll stay nobody until you prove to me you're worth being somebody. So," he released her face, "you'll stand if I tell you to, you'll sit if I tell you to, you'll even get on your knees for the men if I tell you to because you don't do anything until I say you do and you don't become somebody until I say you are."
It was akin to a hell she imagined some dreams went when they died; a laborious, boring torture against her refined senses and educated mind; a Jultagi tight-rope-walk, strappado pull and pit-and-pendulum swing between the poles of utter rage and frightened submission. This student-servant dance was a paranoia ignition salted with provoked anxiety and anger…a bitter sweet pastry she shared with two others. Two barely older clansmen, who found no better delight than to lick Devereux’s boots clean and brown their noses with his pompous derrière. She may have suffered tears and lashes since arriving three months prior, but she would rather that than debase herself by kissing his behind. Every night was a battle, a struggle to please a temperamental liege with an overt bias against the opposite gender. Yes, Ramon Devereux could charm a woman right out of her fortunes and make her believe he was doing her a favor, all while recoiling from the touch of her hands and stink of her breath. He could cripple Joan of Arc replicas in their climb up the socio-political ladder. Charming as he could be, handsome though he was, Louisé came to know Devereux more as a louse who believed the best place for a woman was supporting the ladder, not climbing it. She was faced with an internal conflict of becoming someone of good repute beneath the tutelage of a man whose mission was to keep her sex dawdling and subservient.

In the midst of this vicious circularity, she could feel her Sire prickling against the surface of her skin. His strict principles, cautious personality and passionless mentality oozed from her blood like an odorless vapor altering her perception of Devereux. Everyone around her lauded him as gregarious, charitable and inspiring while her more realistic perspective (heightened by the LaCroix blood in her veins) saw him for what he was: intimidating and over compensating. Louisé silently rebelled by embodying a staunch disposition and appearance, one her Sire would have chosen for her. Grey and blue shades of conservative reservation to flout the flashy manner in which Devereux lived while simultaneously masculating her feminine form to counteract his gender bias. In her drab attire and out of nothing more than spite, Louisé mentally criticized Devereux for his ostentatious sense of lifestyle. Down to the last gaudy candlestick and shiny button, she judged him guilty of frivolous excess and a poor representation of Ventrue standards. Yes…Hundreds of miles away and Sébastien resumed an iron-clad influence on his Childe’s attitudes and outlooks, all without trying or knowing it was happening. Everything a Sire could ask for. Too bad he would never have the pleasure of witnessing such imitation.

His sexism only further provoked her ire. She couldn't fathom why a man who hated women brought one under his wing. One night, she dared to ask him instead of reproducing brusque, one-word commands to dominate staff. He had glared and smacked her upside the head with the book in his hands.

"How dare you question my motives when I have brought you up from the depths of poverty! I don't owe you an explanation for my ways. I owe you nothing. You owe me everything, so get to work."

And work, she did. She honed her disciplines and stood where Devereux commanded, when he commanded it. She traveled to the parties, conferences and functions he demanded her presence at. She made inane conversation with guests and trained her ears to decipher the sweet melody of gossip. So far, it was in vain as she found she possessed an unrefined talent for idle chatter or flirtation. Women and men, alike, lost interest with her not too far into conversation once the attraction of her "being new to Dijon" wore off. Her sister had been the sociable one, not Louisé. A chubby childhood had taught her to perch against the wall, not blossom in the midst of crowds, and no amount of slender transformation could reteach those lessons when she was far more interested in learning to break weapons with her body or dominion over living (and undead) creatures instead of inspiring those around her with feelings of addled affection. This is not what pleased her mentor,
unfortunately, as he believed the one thing women ought to be good at was flirtation or presence. When her two housemates were capable of procuring the gossip (albeit of mediocre quality) Devereux required to keep his influence secure, but she was not, he was left with little recourse than the make an example of her. And he chose to make an example of her as soon as they returned from their individual assignments.

"So, what did you hear tonight?" He asked once they were all lined up.

Her two housemates reported before her with significantly less stuttering than when they began months ago. What they had seemed to please him because he did not look up. Louisé opened her mouth then froze when his hand shot up to silence her before she even began.

"Don't even bother. I know you don't have anything worthwhile."

"Sir, if I may beg your pardon-"

"You may beg. You may beg until Kingdom come, but before you do, I highly encourage you to first question how I can already value the worth of your information without even hearing it." Now he looked up at her and she felt sick. Sick with confusion and sick with embarrassment. All she could do was shake her head. "Why am I not shocked? I know you don't have anything because I watched you prattle with a gaggle of empty-headed, disinteresting women among a sea of men!"

Her stomach flipped. When he had been there?! Had he followed her the entire evening?! Panic was accumulating and she knew he could smell it. She was losing her composure and her train of thought, "The men didn't seem interested and-"

"Can you blame them?!!" The two next to her snickered. Her mentor went on, "You look like you belong in a convent! I want you to hear their greatest secrets, not take their half-hearted confessions!"

She stiffened and like a dart, he was in front of her. Without a shred of consideration, he gripped the material of her dress and tore in opposite directions until the outer mantel was cleaved in two. He tore the lace collar from around her throat giving her, perhaps, a second to draw her arms up and collect enough of the destroyed garment to cover the thinly dressed breasts her bodice pushed up. Disgusted by her perceived, if not apparent, cowardice, Devereux snatched her arms down and left her feeling exposed, borderline shamed. Her only salvation lay in the fact he had chosen not to tear her undergarments, which at least left something to the imagination of her housemates.

"You have a neck, breasts and hips! Use them! You aren't a statue carved of marble! No one is admiring your virtuous nature and sober choice of attire. I want men to undress you with their eyes, not the woman next to you! I want them whispering titillating little details into your ear, not the ear of the girl working for someone else!"

She fought budding tears. "I'm not a whore!" She shouted into his face.

He looked both taken aback and impressed by her sudden, albeit shaken, shot at bravery, "I'm not asking you to spread your legs. I'm asking you to embody their fantasy and tease their desires to tease out what is useful to me!"

"My sire taught me that was disgraceful and only Toreadors succumbed to such base and carnal behavior," she quoted Sébastien.

Devereux leaned in and sneered, "Your Sire is a prude." He released her and took a step back, his eyes daring her to move and cover herself again. This was a test she didn't mind failing. "And even if he weren't a prude, you don't work for him anymore. You work for me and as I told you before,
you'll do as I say until I'm satisfied. And you are the only one not satisfying me, Louise. Continue to fail me, and you shall suffer the consequences."

She clenched fists by her side. It was creeping up from her stomach: an awful temper accentuated by the vampire blood in her veins. She could feel the two beside her preen a little like idiot birds by the cheaply won comparison their master made. She could no longer take the gender-based preference of lower-class, thinner-blood men over herself. She narrowed her eyes and snarled at Devereux, "Only beggars would be sated by the drivel those two eke out." Her head nodded toward her housemates, who were insulted enough to finally move. Devereux merely returned a glare as she continued, "If you want a feast to feed your needs, then stop demanding I prostitute myself for material such as theirs and start treating me more in the manner you treat them!"

She watched Devereux compose himself from the rage she saw brimming beneath the cold, dead marble of his skin. His hand wrapped around her throat and lifted her off the ground so that he could look at her eye-level. "Here is the first of many things you need to learn. You are a woman!" he emphasized. Then he paused, made a swirling gesture with his fingers, "Correction, you are not even a woman. You are a girl. And this is very much a man's world. If someone led you to believe that becoming a creature of the night means equality between the sexes... think again!"

He gulped down the last of his pre-sleep drink as his mind played, over and over, her progression from shock to bravery. Only part of him enjoyed it. That Toreador-ish streak in him relished cleaving that dress in two while his Ventrue nature found it tasteless. Well, perhaps his Ventrue nature enjoyed it a little since the girl needed a sincere slap of reality concerning her progress beneath his teaching. He hated having to debase her, lump her in with the overwhelming majority of female Kindred he found distasteful. He found her a possible exception to her sex, but could not overtly tell her this and deny her the opportunity of proving it to herself. This is what he told himself in the moments when he doubted his decision to take her in. While not at all capricious, choosing her was a gamble. His reputation was at stake and while he appreciated a challenge, it unnerved him that she made so minimal progress. Where was the fight he had witnessed in Lyon? The cut-throat, dirty politics she played on the streets? Where was that kind of initiative?

He saw remnants of that brand of fire the second her fingers curled into fists by her sides. He saw the shadows of a special breed of beast that would rather scratch their claws to bloody stubs than roll over and take it. She showed a feminine wild ready to decapitate the two sycophants to her side and emasculate Devereux with her bare hands. It renewed his hope that he hadn't misplaced his attentions and wasted other investment opportunities; gave him a viable excuse to continue jabbing her with sexist commentary since that seemed to be the straw that broke the camel's back of her complacency. If she continued channeling the Lyonian Aedile or Sébastien LaCroix, he wasn't sure how inauthentic his commentary would remain. While it was no secret he found women politically inferior to men (if not also intellectually) he wasn't completely against making a once-in-a-century exception for the truly exceptional. He hoped he had chosen that centennial anomaly.

A smell in the air told him he wasn't going to be let down. Now he only needed to play his part. He handed his ghoul the empty glass once the thick black paneling on his windows were secured. He stretched and cracked his neck from side to side, feeling a small relief from tension run down his spine. He pulled down the covers of his bed and slid into the soft texture of expensive linen. He rested his head on his pillow and closed his eyes, waiting for blissful sleep to drag him to dreams filled with schemes and plans for Dijon... uppity Princes needed bigger and better pleasing each evening. The churnings of his house were a familiar lullaby, but there was sharp quality hindering the pitch this time. Ramon went still. He stayed that way for several moments.

Then everything happened very quickly. In an attempt at sleuth coordination, a pale hand threw back
the curtains of his bed while throwing their body against his. They pressed a pointed piece of wood against his chest. There was that fire! From the moment he smelled her hiding in his wardrobe, he knew what she was up to. Her hair flew around her face like a black flame while the hand that threw the curtains met its partner to try and drive the stake into his chest. Poorly made, probably in a hurry, this weapon was no match for his ability to shield his body from potentially fatal attacks. Though, he didn't even need those abilities to stop her. He may have appreciated her sudden surge of vengeance, but he was hardly going to let an insult like this slide without due discipline. Ventrue pups unsuccessful in ventures like these deserved the sharp lessons they received.

Ramon snapped his fingers around her wrist and pressed his other hand against the flat of her stomach. In one, whooshing movement, he flipped her onto her back in the space of bed beside him. Her eyes were a wide, frightened azure as he twisted her wrist and used her own hand to drive the stake into her heart. Her body froze with eyes still wide and fingers wrapped around the stake. She looked like a stone cold Thisbe committing an unsuccessful suicide. Ramon removed his hands from her and pressed them into the mattress on either side of her head. He leaned over her and smirked down at her frozen face.

"So…we have claws do we? Such a pity you don't know how to use them. Does it hurt? If memory serves, it does!" His smirk broadened to a grin. "Now, be a good girl and get some sleep. We have a long night ahead of us, oui?" He gave her cheek a pat and returned to his side of the bed. He shut the curtains she carelessly tossed aside and snuggled into his expensive linens like a cat.

There was pain, hot and throbbing around her breast. The sensation radiated outward, but the further from the stake something was, the less pain she felt and more a tingling numbness. Pain was accompanied by an awful pressure. A cold, tight squeezing of a boulder on her chest. Her mind was fully aware of what was going on, but her body was totally unresponsive to any of her commands. She couldn't move the fingers from around the stake, pull it from her chest or even close her eyes. Louisé's mind cried out desperately, but her throat was unable to produce so much as a squeak. Her eyes began to burn. Sunrise. It was maddening! Was she to endure hours of this…this marriage of agony and squeeze?! The entire day nothing but an unrelenting weight and suffering…all because she could no longer tolerate his monarchial hold over her and chauvinistic favoritism for mollycoddled protégés with penises; all because she had miscalculated (or blatantly forgotten) Devereux's abilities amidst the white hot rage of her brain. This was a blunder Ramon was not going to let her forget anytime soon. The stake rising from her chest was fact of that.

Then everything went black. In the darkness, she dreamed. She dreamt of circumstances long gone and intangible. Louisé dreamt of her heart beating, sun on her skin…of Henri's face the night he left and never returned. She dreamt of the only kiss she had ever experience, the innocent press of warm lips against each other in a brief dance that meant a world of things to her. Maybe she dreamt this because she was lonely or because she missed him or had her first kiss with him but because he was the only person who allowed her to be exact what she was and loved her for it. Louisé was not required to be too thin or more sensual for Henri because he was satisfied with how she already was. Maybe that was it.

Weight rose off her chest…Atlas removing his load from unprepared, Herculean shoulders. Then the darkness lifted like the removal of a soft shroud. The room came into focus, his face grinning at her from a chair across the room. He was already dressed and halfway through a glass of blood. He spun the stained stake in his other hand, looking at it then her without breaking his grin. It was kind of frightening. She noticed how stiff her body was when she rose from the bed. Her stomach muscles felt like someone had punched her a few times and she began to wonder if he was grinning from the
fact that he had done just that. She groaned and rubbed her eyes. When she pulled her hands away, they were smeared with red paste. She frowned and looked at Devereux for answers. He gestured to the large mirror he owned. She slid from the bed to inspect herself and found dried rivulets of blood running from her ears and eyes, marking her as a cryptic weeping Madonna. There was a hole in her chemise from where he had staked her and she shuddered when her fingers grazed over where the wood had jutted out. She turned away from the hideous image and looked for something to wash herself with.

"Not a pleasant sight, is it?" Devereux crooned. "That's what happens when the body is forced to stay alert during the day. I'm sure you blacked out, but not soon enough for it not to happen. You will go clean yourself then come straight back here, understand?" His tone became less playful. Louise imagined her real punishment was just ahead of her.

Devereux did not trust the girl to come back to him without wearing one of those dowdy dresses, so he sent a ghoul with her that she might return to him appropriately dressed for the occasion he had planned for her. It would cut down on the time, too. Ramon amused himself with ordering the other two around. He stuffed their nights with humdrum tasks, activities they could not screw up even if they tried…busy work while he made the decision to devote time on his gamble. The men had only been gone a few minutes when the girl was ushered into the room clean and dressed in nothing but a fresh undergarment and dressing gown. He had to admit the attire made her appear more vulnerable and her vulnerability made her more attractive. Maybe this wasn't such a gamble…maybe he had something to work with after all. She stood before him waiting for what she undoubtedly believed was her own final death. Instead he offered her a glass of blood to drink.

"You certainly have some bollocks to try and stake me right before dawn."
She tensed and took a sip. "I was angry. Please forgive my disrespect."

"Were you going to leave me for the sunrise, too? Or had you not thought it all the way through?"

"That was a strong consideration. I also thought about cutting your prick off and shoving it down your throat but I've never handled such things and forgot to bring a knife with me."

Devereux burst out laughing, his whole body shuddering from her blatant honesty and abandoned sense of shame. He didn't doubt for a second that had she had a knife, she would have done exactly as she intended. "Then let us both be thankful you didn't have such a weapon, as I have an affinity for my prick being firmly attached in the same way you have an affinity for your head being attached to your neck."

"It would have been worth it, though. To silence you with the very object you believe makes you superior to me." She drank more.

Devereux arched a brow and leaned forward, intrigued by her comment enough to spare a few seconds of thought. "It isn't just my penis that makes me superior, girl. I am centuries older, generations younger, richer, stronger, wiser…What makes me superior are the qualities one can only acquire with age. Qualities I believe you have the ability to gain if you weren't so damn sensitive to what I have to say about your gender."

"I am a woman. How can I not take offense to the things you say?"

"Because you're not a woman," his response was curt. He saw the flames rising back into her eyes and held up a hand to quench them before they both burnt up in their rage. "You are a girl, and there is nothing deliberately wrong with that unless you forget you are a vampire and above that, you are a
Ventrue." He watched her cool and stiffen, that calculated part of her new personality snapping into place. "If you don't want what I say to be hurtful, then don't let it be about you. Remember, you are above most simply because you are a Ventrue. When you remember that, you will become impervious to my generalized insults about women. The more you let them bother you, however, the more you become like those women I'm talking about."

"Why are you deciding to impart this wisdom on me instead of punishing me for trying to stake you?"

"Because that would be a waste of an evening, and without the wisdom I would be wasting an investment too. So, let me not waste anything and just appreciate the fact that you are neither flayed nor so out of favor I will not continue to educate you. Though, honestly, I feel like I should spare us the Aristotlian lesson and just try to manage your temper."

"I wouldn't have a temper if you treated me the way you treat the other two."

"Believe me, you do not want me to treat you like those two." He waved his hand, changing the subject, "But we aren't here to talk about those two. We're here to talk about you and how help you improve yourself."

"According to you, all I need to do to improve myself is bare my breasts and show my neck."

"No, according to me, what you need to do to improve yourself is engage your audience."

"That isn't what you said last night after your destroyed my dress."

"Your dress was ugly. It offended my sophisticated senses and had to be destroyed."

Louisé exhaled and he could practically taste her frustration. The game continued and it was fun. He filled a glass for himself, swirled the contents around and drank. "You have to remember you're in mixed company at these functions, both by clan and pulse. The best thing to do for yourself is tell them your first name and let them fill in the rest. Ventrue, who don't know you, will think you're Toreador. Toreador may think your Ventrue or Tremere and mortals won't give a damn if you look like you belong. All I want them thinking is What do I have to do to get her attention?"

"I told you, I'm not a whore," Louisé pressed.

He smirked at her, "My dear, we are all whores for somebody. How do you think we get anywhere in this life? By pleasing someone else with whatever we have that they want. I'm not asking you to sell yourself, but I am asking you to create the illusion that you would for the right price. Your price just happens to be valuable information. Consider yourself your own procurer, or auctioneer, if it pleases you. Make them bid for you," he took a sip from his glass. Louisé licked her lips.

"You mean my body," her displeasure was rife at the concept.

"Not necessarily. When it comes to the mortals, yes. They will be under the assumption they can earn you physically and you may have to dominate a few into believing they did for the real fun to begin."

Interest piqued, she quonedred, "Real fun?"

His glee was all too apparent. "As I've told you before, Kindred don't naturally trust one another. But when they hear how successfully you get information from mortals, they'll begin to barter for your attention and knowledge. And-"
"Whoever has the better bid, wins the auction," she completed.

He nodded. "Now you get it. And those who lose will inevitably attempt to collect better information for the auctions to come. Though, as you are probably aware, you are as much auctioneer as bidder, being as young as you are. But one day you may be like me and simply be a pimp."

Her brows drew together as she tried to find harmony between the Kindred world as Sébastien LaCroix painted it and the one Devereux intended to exposure her to, "But, my Sire always said…"

"Forgive me, my dear, but your prudish prick of a Sire has probably told you many things and while I hate to be the bearer of bad news, I feel as your mentor, I must take it upon myself to enlighten you to the truth that much of what Sébastien LaCroix has to say stems from the fact that he had to make himself sound wise to cover up the truth that, in almost one hundred years, he has accomplished very little. And the little he did accomplish can be summed up into three words that almost lost him his head."

He didn't have to say them for her to know what they were. A blood born tug obliged her to defend her Sire, "He was an evangelist for the Camarilla. He's fought off Sabbat and established Camarilla presence in new territories."

Devereux rolled his eyes. "Oh good, just what the world needs…more preachers and Crusaders," he paused and took a long drink, "Because that's been so successful in the past."

"My ancestor was a Crusader." Her eyes narrowed a touch.

"And mine, a King. I don't see that doing either of us immediate service now."

"Well, Monsieur LaCroix was also a very successful Scourge in Lyon and, according to you, is a Sheriff." It was hard not to continue holding up the LaCroix Aquila. As angry and damaged as she had been by his abandonment, their connection compelled she man her battle stations, even though she could hear the desperate, childish tone in her voice and it repulsed her.

"He was Scourge for all of a month, if even. And there is no guarantee he became Sheriff…they may have offered the position, but they could have offered it to many in the hope someone amazing rose out of the pond they were fishing in. For all we know, Sébastien arrived at his destination only to discover he wasn't as qualified as they wanted him to be and has been reassigned as a glorified mail carrier."

Devereux watched his words wash over his protégé. Childer only know exaltation of their Sires. Resentment and reality rarely settle in immediately. It takes decades, perhaps centuries, of small things building up before the Childe sees the numerous flaws in character and mistreatments. Louise didn't have that luxury since Sébastien's selfishness trumped his dedication to raising his Childe through the formative years. That suited Devereux just fine because he had less praising mire to work through in reconstructing her view of the world she lived in. Regardless of LaCroix leaving, Ramon didn't doubt Louise maintained a core hope her Sire would come back for her. She could reach immeasurable potential if he could break those final baby fingers holding onto that childish fantasy. And by the way she was taking time to absorb his words, eyes making small darts while her brain analyzed new information, breaking those fingers wouldn't be as painful for her as it had been for others. Deciding that was enough revelatory content for the night, he changed the subject.

"Enough of the past, though. We ought to concentrate on the present and future!" He resumed a broad grin. "I don't doubt you've been wondering why I have you wearing so little."
Her nose crinkled and she fidgeted in an adolescent way. "I assumed I was either dying or being whipped."

"Not a terrible assumption, but no." Devereux rested his chin on a bridge of his fingers and used his pinky to motion to her attire. "If we are going to get people to take you seriously, then we have to update that awful stack of fabric you call a wardrobe."

Louisé's face brightened. There was an excitement brimming beneath her skin that was entirely telling of her youth. If Devereux found things precious, he might have labeled her anticipation as such but Ramon Devereux didn't suffer things to be precious in a world as animalistic as theirs. He stood and walked over to her. He grabbed the dressing gown and yanked it off her body. This time, he didn't admonish her for wrapping her arms around her chest. He simply folded the dressing gown and walked to the door to send a ghoul for the seamstresses he had hired.

"I know LaCroix stuffed you into those dresses out of the dull belief people would take you more seriously if you dressed for the grave you narrowly avoided, and it might have worked if you were older and matronly. Since you are not, the effect is totally lost."

"Actually, I believe he did it because I asked him how vampires consummate their relationships. I think he worried I was being too influenced by local Toreadors."

Devereux laughed and took his seat, finishing off his drink. "Sounds like something entirely LaCroix."

Their attention was broken by the additional presence of three women. Kine of great reputation for the dresses their family had been responsible for creating for ages. Skilled hands and eyes with incomparable talent. He was surprised they hadn't become someone's ghouls by now, or perhaps they were just that good that they were and he didn't know. Since he prided himself on knowing just about everything in Dijon, if not Burgundy, he found that unlikely. Regardless, they moved for their target without many words of introduction and began taking their measurements.

"Is there something specific you are wanting, sir?" One of them asked.

He looked at Louise and thought for a moment. With the hue of her eyes, a richer blue was a must. Her black hair and unnaturally white skin allowed for any color, really, though yellows, golds and any array of orange would look hideous in his opinion. He grinned a little and leaned into his chair, "My daughter loves the color blue. Nothing too pale, though, as you can see the child's skin favors milk more than anything else. If only her mother were here," he feigned fret and loss. Louise spared him an irate glare softened only by the hands working hard to provide her with new dresses to feed her childish need for fashion. "I believe jewel tones would be best for her. Nothing in the yellow family, however, unless it is to decorate the fabric. Reds may also be on the dangerous side unless of a darker nature…like wine."

Louise said nothing until the women were done taking their measurements and information. She looked at Ramon and reached for her dressing gown, "I assume you're paying for all of these."

He toasted the air, "But of course. You hardly have the funds, and I consider it an investment in my protégé. The only thing I ask is that you speak of none of this to other to. Don't parade around here like you're my favorite because I have no favorites. This is a mere gesture to advance your progress, nothing more. Tomorrow night I shall resume my regime, understood?" She nodded and he was satisfied. Now they were getting somewhere.
Weaving

There was no sudden fabulist transformation for her. Expensive silks and fabrics could only recreate an exterior largely ignored for intellectual pursuits, not rebuild an entire way of thinking. Louisé's greatest struggle came not in fitting into her new attire, but in formulating an entirely novel identity to match the task at hand. Devereux reminded her that she had neither age nor reputation to precede her in Dijon. LaCroix left her with no such popularity to glean from. In fact, only one out of every bulging handful of Kindred knew who Sébastien was without reference to his Sire, Archambaud de Croÿ. Ramon pressed her not to rely on either of them, since de Croÿ had long ago abandoned the bloodlust necessary to be independently successful at Jyhad or clan-based politics, and LaCroix was only doing minimally better with his own underdeveloped sense of wanderlust. Years as a Camarilla chevalier, bouncing to sectless province after province only to return to France seemed to grate against the campaigning nature Devereux insisted every neonate needed to spread their reputation and gain the foundations of centuries-long power. Neither LaCroix nor de Croÿ had accomplished much of this, and Louisé was too far separated from, and unknown to, her great-grandsire to benefit from their fame. Louisé became her own Hesiod, establishing herself in her own cosmogony.

Together with her mentor, Louisé reinvented herself. She lowered her collar, ampled her bosom and fashioned herself into a courtesan's doppelgänger, the manifestation of men's dreams. She wove a Scheherazade tapestry of her past to tantalize the senses of mortal company and pique the interest of nearby Kindred. This time around, she followed Devereux's suggestions and abandoned any other notion but the singular fact that she was Ventrue. She was better albeit without much power. Anything else, any other idea or anxiety had to be pushed away, to be identified as a hindrance to her success. Her insecure childhood? Burnt. The socially superior sister? Forgotten. LaCroix's insistence upon nothing less than monastic propriety? Blatantly ignored. If the streets of her mind were not paved in the one and only direction of accomplishing her goals, then they were barren byways by the next evening…even if this meant sacrificing her preconceived notions of integrity at the altar of ambition now for the luxury of power later. Only her mother…only that solitary relic of her former life was allowed to remain, erected as some Demeterian statue in her mind beside the Virgin Mary. Her mother, full of grace, love and benediction…her muse toward righteousness and true faith, in constant conflict with the vampiric nature demanding moral sacrifice.

Then the Ventrue beast inside reminded her that Beatrice de Foix-Seyssel-Chambert was dead. Dead and lying in a stone sarcophagus back in Lyon. Dead with a gisant pressing effigy hands together in the hope of a peaceful afterlife, in the hope of redemption for her undead daughter. And then Louisé's heart broke all over again, mourned anew and guilted over the person she was forced to become in order to survive. But that's what mothers want, don't they? For their children to survive. *How many hours, days did you spend, mother, praying and grieving for a sickly child to survive?* And in those intimate moments within her own head, at the feet of her mother's statue, she remembered Jean. She remembered his numerous health scares, his intelligent brain trapped in a frail body, and his untimely death. He couldn't survive. He couldn't become what was required not to die the age he did, the way he did. This was not Louisé's case. She had it in her. She could etch out her own longevity bit by bit, fang by fang.

Devereux felt a little more peace with his decision to take such a risk of a neonate under his wing as he saw, night-by-night, Louisé push herself to intellectual and physical limits to become something beyond what she had ever considered. He would have felt proud, were it not for the fact that she vacillated between the new her and her old self for weeks before finding a comfortable middle ground. Well, perhaps it wasn't so much "middle" ground as a plot of land closer to the new identity he helped weave with her, demanded of her. And what weaving they did…Arachne and Athena at
their looms, sans competition. He had been worried about her hesitation to erase Sébastien LaCroix from her past, but in her greatest moment of maturity she simply shrugged and replied: *If no one knows him now, I'm sure they won't notice he's missing.*

There were some things she would not abandon, however. Her mother was one of those things. Her Catholic faith was another. Pressing her on this issue was less successful than convincing her not to ignore the Protestants nobles dotting the gatherings she attended. Ramon had never encountered a Kindred still so clung to their faith and, therefore, had no way of rebutting her insistence that she maintain those virtues. He simply groaned, chalked it up as an insignificant triviality and moved on to more important issues like the fact that a eunuch might have more talent for flirtation than she did. While she certainly had improved the awe-factor of her speech, or the dread in her gaze, he feared she would never move beyond that with the golem like rigidity of her body. She was less frigid, but tensed right up whenever touched. He saw her ripping out the threads of her confidence when men leaned closer to her. Her discomfort with attempted intimacy was undoing all their shuttling.

"Honestly, my dear, if you keep this up then we will be back at square one with me ripping your clothes in half," he had confronted her one morning before dawn.

"I'm sorry. I…I just don't know how to do this. They touch me and I can see in their eyes what they want. And then I hear a voice in my head saying it's wrong."

Resuming a heavy-handed approach with Louisé reminded her why she needed to reconcile those morality issues on her own time. And he was not entirely disappointed with the result. She softened up and became the first to make the move. She was the one to touch, never touched. She was the leaner, never the one leaned into. She invaded space. Hers was never invaded. Very Ventrue of her. She would be the one to make the puppets dance now, even if the dance was novice at best. Until she was better, more natural, he still only trusted her with bottom-of-the-barrel noble functions. While he certainly didn't have her rubbing elbows with beggars and prostitutes, he didn't have her peddling her 'wares' among visiting dukes or the Prince just yet. Out-of-favor marquisates and overly drunken counts presented the right amount of challenge for Louisé because they were trying just as hard as her to climb their own social ladder. After a month she managed to bring him a duke with intriguing news. He promoted her. And at just the right point in history for growing Ventrue.

Their country was brimming with the excitement of a royal wedding he didn't need protégés to inform him about. It was no secret the king's sister, Margaret of Valois, was planning to marry the Protestant King of Navarre, Henry. Ramon supposed this was royal effort to create a détente between the Catholic and Huguenot factions determined to tear France apart. The same could be said of his own home whenever the subject was brought up around Louisé. Devereux watched her crinkle her nose with displeasure and argue how improper it was for a Catholic princess to be marrying Protestant trash, emphasizing how she ought to marry a member of the House of Guise. Ramon didn't care who Margaret of Valois married. What he did care about his systemically monopoly over the textile and wine industry of Burgundy. A royal wedding would demand new attire for attending nobility with wine to celebrate a successful union. And if what Louisé's mortal informants said was true, the wedding could expect upward of thousands of Protestants rushing to find something to wear. With Burgundy so popular in both wine and fabric, Ramon anticipated a heavy financial return that would solidify his hold over the region and have his own princely puppet dancing to the sway of his strings.

Louisé was not as interested in the aesthetic approach to the wedding as her mentor was. When she heard thousands of Huguenots flocking to the wedding of their beloved Henry of Navarre, first she fought the image of plague-like locusts descending upon Paris and focused on the smell of discord she knew would not be far behind. There was no way the Catholics of Paris would allow such a
flagrant display Protestantism in their nation's capital. Louisé couldn't help but feel her own cold blood boil at the thought of those degenerates polluting both royal blood and the Parisian streets her ancestors fought hard to win back against English forces. Aside from the embedded religious beliefs she held, she also knew she wouldn't see a single livre from the trove Devereux was likely to make as a result of this ludicrous celebration. And she certainly couldn't dip her toes in his financial pools without them being chopped off, regardless of how badly she needed to accrue financial independence. This was only emphasized more by the embarrassing, if not infuriating, monthly "allowance" Devereux received (via Lyon) from one Sébastien LaCroix as he continued to manage her estate from Nice.

"Louisé? Louisé! Snap out of it!" A hand gripped her shoulder and shook her back into focus. Catherine de Beaufort, Ventrue clansman and surrogate 'sister', gave her friend a questioning look. The same look was replicated on the faces of the rest of her coterie. Formed a few months after arriving in Dijon, Louisé had risen to rank of leader following her drastic fashion alteration and now they waited until she gave some sort of hint about what they ought to be doing.

Composed of two Ventrue, two Toreador and one wayward Brujah (who Louisé imagined didn't know any better), she found some company in the naturally lonely nights of Kindred life. Catherine fed her need for maintaining connection to her noble blood and Catholic roots. Catherine was from an off-shoot branch of the powerful de Beaufort family of southern France. Catherine's fortunes soured when Huguenots sacked her ancestral home, leaving her a dead husband, minimal fortune and a shared bitterness for Protestants. Only her bluest of blood attracted her future Sire. Her story was not entirely unlike Louisé's, save for the husband, Catherine's physical age and the absence of accused clan taboo polluting her reputation. The Toreadors were of no great accomplishment or name. Poor dears had been abandoned by their sibling Sires in the all-too-common habit their kind had of losing interest for the next best thing. They provided Louisé with minimally (in her humble opinion) better expertise on improving her seductive ability. The Brujah, named Javier, was a refugee neonate from Madrid.

Louisé and he shared a sense of displacement and dishonor. Though he didn't speak much about it to the others, in the privacy of the two of them, he confessed that he had been sired by a Brujah antitribu. The word hadn't meant much to Louisé, since she had only heard it a handful of times between LaCroix and Devereux's teachings on the Kindred world. What she did know was that it wasn't anything good. The way Javier's face contorted with an impassioned rage when he talked about it reminded her of Sébastien fury over being accused of siring her for physical gain. The fact that anything antitribu synonymously meant Sabbat meant nothing good for those afflicted in Camarilla company. Louisé didn't hold it against him. She found him brave to abandon everything he had ever known in Spain to flee somewhere and start anew. He had only a rough handle on the French language and an even rougher exterior since he didn't have the benefit of a mentor, Sire or rich, artistic benefactor to meet his physical needs the way she and the others did. Javier hardly demanded pity from them, though, since he was the best damn grappler she had yet to encounter. His hand-to-hand combat skills were beyond compare and he wasn't too poor with a rapier either. He had everything he had because he won it. The roof over his head, the domain he stalked, the herd he drank from…all acquired through sheer brute force. He was a perfect representation of the Brujah iconoclast…all bark, bite and body. His younger age and poor finances hardly afforded him the opportunity to sit around and philosophize about the nature and purpose of his clan.

This benefitted Louisé just fine. She hadn't been raised to fight or even know how to hold a blade. That was a man's job. Louisé's job had always been to learn what was required to be a good wife to a future husband, and perhaps the indulgences that would make her stand out in court. Barely any of that mattered in the Kindred world and she had learned a harsh lesson back in Lyon concerning her drastic lack of physical education. For the nominal sum of half her allowance, Javier tutored Louisé in the hours after she feigned carnal interest in men she wouldn't have been required to give a
second-glance in life. He forced her to improve upon her Fortitude and taught her common weak points in the vast majority of those she would fight face-to-face. When language failed, Javier used his hands to guide the movements of her body. Louisé would never confess this to Devereux, but Javier was the reason she became more comfortable with the touch of men.

Now here the five of them were. Meandering the streets of Dijon in the pre-dawn hours in the hopes of finding final meals or opportunities to practice the disciplines their survival required be refined. Catherine released Louisé's shoulder when her blue eyes narrowed a bit and looked down at the hand with mild irritation. A Ventrue would never admit to doing anything that required 'snapping out of it'. Louisé certainly wasn't going to go and mess that time old tradition up now. She gazed down either side of the street and nodded to a group of gentlemen heading their way.

"They seem acceptable." She looked at Odette, the female Toreador and smirked. "Go and demonstrate your supposed superior seductive skills." Oh yes, Louisé hadn't been so distracted by her thoughts that she hadn't heard the woman slide that snide comment into conversation.

Odette smoothed her hands over the silk of her gown and glanced down at her breasts to, Louisé imagined, determine they were as plump and exaggeratingly pronounced as always. Then she strolled out into the street and began to work her magic on two men separated from the rest of the group. Sheltered by the shadows, Louisé observed her every movement and listened to every inflection of her voice until an aroma on the air altered her attention from Odette to one of the men. It was an earthy musk rising from their direction didn't match the moderately handsome, affluent exteriors both men possessed. Her brows drew together and she bit the bottom corner of her lip. "Something is not quite right."

"What do you mean?" Javier's Spanish-accent murmured in her ear. It sent a sharp shiver down her spine.

"Something's off," she responded.

"I agree. I think something's wrong with the one on the right. He seems jittery, eyes looking all over the place like he hears something we can't," commented Félix, Odette's cousin-companion.

"Oh…do you think he could be a Malkavian? My Sire told me they act that way and when they talk, it's even worse," Catherine murmured.

"Smell the air. Most of the noble men I know have a perfumed scent, but one of them smells like dirt and moss." Louisé inhaled again, the others followed suit. They nodded in silent agreement. She jabbed Félix in the side. "Use your abilities! What does their auras look like?"

She reclined in her chair and wondered how different things would have turned out had she not bothered to ask that question. What would have happened if she had chosen to be more interested in the man at her side than the smell in the air? Louisa turned her attention to the Primogen before her and heightened her attention to the news he was delivering her. He was one of her most trusted, and longest-lasting, Primogen and one of the best at collecting the secrets throughout her domain. How many dirty little deals and back alleyway coups had crumbled at the feet of their progenitors because of this man? She thought…it must have been approaching the hundreds by now. They were comparable in their expertise for unraveling the sweet little secrets fellow Kindred thought were safely contained by the blankets of Seattle shadows. The only reason Louisa relinquished rank in this area was because of the unfortunate fact that, as Prince, her behind was all but super glued to the leather of desk chairs. At least hers swiveled.
It was almost boring, not being able to stalk the streets the way she had centuries ago...even a century ago! This Primogen and she had found one another only a few years after her arrival in Seattle. Had he been there even a month earlier, their roles would be reversed and she might not be so bored or nagged by a grasping Sire. Yes, if dear William Abbott had landed on Seattle soiled even a week before her then he might be Prince and governing the city not from the lofty heights of the Smith Tower but the dank halls of Seattle's touristy underground.

"Something stolen your brain, the Prince formerly-known-as Louisa?" Abbott humored as he crossed an ankle over the leather of his knee.

She smirked his way. "Maybe. I can't help that the substance of your information isn't more attractive, William."

One fingerless-gloved hand covered his heart. "You wound me and insult the skills of my people," there was a slight irritation in his voice.

"I didn't say it was there fault. That's the price we pay for peace, my friend...nothing juicier on the streets than a squashed banana."

"Now that's either clever metaphor or poor humor," he chuckled. "Mind if I inquire as to what stole your brilliant mind in the first place?"

Ah...asking permission to peek into the sacred space that was a Prince's mind. Had it been anyone else, even Sebastian, she would have said no. But there was enough history between the two of them that allowing a privileged look at one memory was neither giving nor revealing too much. She tapped her pen more vertical, more center as her shoulders rose a simple shrug. "Just recalling the first time I came across one of your clan."

"Oh, I can only imagine what that tasty encounter looked like. A juicy little neonate version of you, flavorful morsel ripe for the picking," he cackled. She allowed his crude sense of humor since his clan was famous for it and the lack of tantalizing gossip demanded something fill that void. "Humor me...was it like popping a proverbial cherry?"

"Could it be anything less?"

How can someone explain it? How can someone describe the first time they encounter various components of their nightmares hewn together in a single being? They can't. Louise had no words for the first time she encountered a member of the elusive, yet notorious, clan Nosferatu. She had heard plenty about them and their grotesque features, but words can't prepare someone for meeting them face-to-face.

It had been the one dressed in blue, the one whose aura Félix described as dirtied purple. It had been the one who lost their attention as soon as the other man began speaking in rhymes and riddles that spooked Odette. Yes, that one had definitely been a Malkavian. It occurred to Louise that might have been the first time she encountered a Malkavian so closely. She had seen some of them speaking with Devereux, and Devereux subsequently rub his temples while trying to decipher what they had said. But the Malkavian had never been the one to worry about. No, it was the other that Louise should have been more concerned with because he was the one who accosted her.

She had just left the coterie and was making her way to where Devereux's carriage. The temperature of the air dropped around her and a noise drew her attention to the end of the alleyway at her back. It
was grotesque…a swarm of bulbous rats scurrying over the ground toward her, a flock of mangy crows perching overhead with caws shrill as a baby's wail and all their eyes on her. It didn't frighten her so much as make her nonexistent stomach churn with repulsion. She backed away from the furry onslaught and smacked against someone's front. Or, at least she thought she had but when she turned around, there was no one there. Louisé had to remind herself that Ventrue don't panic.

"What's the matter, deary? Looking for something?" came a raspy voice from behind her. She whirled but found nothing there. The voice continued, "Still can't find it, can you deary?" It purred in her ear, sending a shiver of a different breed than Javier's down her spine. This twisted game of cat and mouse continued until she smacked her back once more into a solid figure. Frustrated, she took a few steps forward while minding the hoard of rats watching her dance with an invisible man.

"Going somewhere, deary?" He chuckled.

She spun and caught a scream in her mouth. While the voice certainly belonged to the man Odette had attempted to seduce, the body was anything but. His skin was as leathery as the boots he wore, but an ugly shade of mossy puce. He was emaciated throughout his face and though most of his body was covered by, she imagined the rest of him was too. He grinned to reveal two rows of misshapen teeth, all fangs. Louisé was disgusted and captivated all at once, incapable of looking away while simultaneously being overwhelmed by the nightmarish appearance. The only thing she found to appreciate about him was his eyes. They were a shade of amber made more brilliant in comparison to the repugnant body they lived in. Taking advantage of her being frozen, he lifted a hand and twirled her hair around two, too long talons.

"You're Devereux's girl," he purred again. "My, my, my…a pretty little cunny, aren't we deary?"

Extremely crude statement aside, it then occurred to Louisé how similar this meeting was to her first encounter with Devereux. Her nose crinkled, "Pardon me?"

"Don't know how to accept a compliment, my little cunny?"

"Don't call me that. And I don't believe I need to ask how you know who my mentor is." Louisé took another step back and out of his grasp.

"And why would that be, sweet cunny?" He smirked and took a step closer, fingers tightening on her hair.

Louisé winced. "Your clan is well known for their sleuthing and information gathering. How exactly can I be of service, Monsieur…?"

"Gawain. Sir Gawain, at your service!" He removed his hand to give a bow.

"Forgive me, but you appear more the Green Knight than Gawain."

He laughed. "Now I see what Devereux finds secretly enjoyable about you. A sense of humor will get you far in this unkind existence."

"Sir Gawain, what is it that you want?"

"Perhaps I just wanted to introduce myself to you formally."

"Or perhaps you had something more specific to say than just an introduction."

He grinned and bared those extra fangs. "It has come to my attention that your mentor is methodically possessing our region's textile productions and vineyards."
"Is he?" Louise had no choice but to feign ignorance.

"He is. And his pretentious, Ventrue ass forgot about the domain I have locked up in some of those textiles. So what I really came to do was tell you to tell him to back off and return my domain or I'll barricade his Silk Road and he won't see a cent of profit."

"Why tell me? You seem brave enough to tell him yourself."

"Ah. Well, because I wanted to see you up close and personal, my sweet cunny. And because a little birdy told me you're looking to invest and break free of the financial shackles of one, Ramon Devereux." His glee was palpable. Louise narrowed her eyes as his putrid breath purred close to her face, "Wouldn't it be a shame if Devereux found out one of his own was going behind his back?"

"How is my obtaining independent financial success going behind his back?" Her naïve, neonatal mind wasn't putting the pieces together.

"Oh, my sweet little cunny doesn't understand her place, does she?"

Yes, this was quite reminiscent of meeting Ramon for the first time. There was a sibling amount of irritation, an adolescent anger provoked by his assumption she had no idea where her place was. Devereux used a special brand of mental, emotional and physical manipulation to remind Louise every night that she was in a unique caste of indentured servant, and he enjoyed reminding her how she would continue to remain in that caste until such a time she truly proved herself a worthy Kindred deserving of independence. She hissed, "I understand my place just fine."

"Oh ho! Then my pretty, little cunny already knows not to receive express approval from her mentor about financial investments that could affect her reputation, as well as his, would be a smack in the face and a grave deception. I believe you Ventrue shun that kind of behavior, do you not?"

"There isn't anything to smack him in the face with. I don't have any investments going on behind his back."

"Not yet," his tone was enticing, the kind people have when they know something the other person wants. Louise sighed. Local avenue politics were exhausting to her since it only added more balls for her to juggle between her amateur hands. "Sir Gawain, are you offering me something?"

"But of course! A small reward for the small inconvenience of an uncomfortable conversation with your mentor as a result of passing my warning along. I'll wait at this very spot for no more than three nights. If you return here between now and then with a written agreement on Devereux's part to retract his presence from my domain and profits, I will give you a brief list of investments worth your attention. Though, I doubt I have to tell you if you fail..."

"You'll tell Devereux of my intentions."

He nodded. Honey-coated words from a walking corpse. She had to take them with a grain of salt since things were never that simple in the Kindred world. Still, Louise had no idea where to begin with developing her own finances. Any little bit would help. She bit the bottom corner of her lip and nodded, "Very well. No more than three nights? I'll see you between now and then."

He hooted with glee and took her hand, kissing the top of it. Louise fought off cringing. "Wonderful doing business with you, my sweet cunny!" And before she could respond, he disappeared before her eyes.
Baiser

She wouldn't know for years, centuries why her having financial independence on the sly was a slap in the face to Devereux. She wouldn't know for many nights how she teetered a fine line between maturity and liability, how responsible for her actions Ramon Devereux really was simply by providing a roof over her head. She wouldn't know these things until she was in Ramon's position, until some fledgling Kindred attempted to go behind her back and invest for themselves on her own coin—put her reputation on the demolition lines, threatened its foundations with incipient ideas of solidarity and grandeur. No… For now she existed in a blissful ignorance where she still believed her actions were her own, that she was simply establishing her own reputation and paving the way to her personal freedom.

The whole carriage ride back to his estate was devoted to analyzing Sir Gawain's threat. If anything, having a plentiful income would endow her with the ability to pay Ramon back for the financial investment that was her room, clothing and other comforts only Ventrue could afford and appreciate. Besides, Kindred existence depended on the ability of a vampire to operate predominantly, if not entirely, from the shadows behind the backs of friend and foe alike. Louise was only being true to her nature, then, by leaving Devereux out of her future financial plans. For all Gawain knew, Ramon might even be impressed with her initiative and success enough to promote her to something more useful than fooling Kindred and kine out of their secrets. It was becoming oh so boring for her now that the only thing occupying anyone's mind was the impending nuptials of the French princess and Navarrian kind. She was in desperate need of something more stimulating.

However, when the carriage ride ended and she sauntered into the main hall, Louise captured a perfect reason why going behind Devereux's back was nothing less than foolish, childish and naïve. She didn't need to walk any closer to understand the words coming out of Ramon's mouth. His voice boomed like claps of thunder, bouncing off stone hallways in waves moving to the rhythm of their owner's undulating rage. While the sneaking side of Louise felt a twinge of fear, the vast majority of her person was relieved that, for once, his anger was directed at someone else. Regardless, she tread carefully as she made her way to the commotion. She entered the expansive library and witnessed Devereux shouting into the face of another protégé. He had the poor man backed up against a bookshelf and Louise could tell the man was fighting ever fiber in his being not to quake beneath Devereux's ire gaze.

To distract herself from the brutal reprimand, Louise pondered on the fact that Devereux used this library more as a den for covert conferences than a bastion of knowledge. Not the case for Louise. Always a struggling writer and reader, she devoted an hour each evening to study quietly and improve upon herself in a manner befitting her clan. A dull mind is nothing less than a Ventrue's Achilles heel, a Ventrue elder imparted upon her following a monthly board meeting. Whether it was an attempt to foster camaraderie (unlikely) or to discern promising ancillae from inadequate neonates, Louise took the advice somewhat to heart and the end result was an hour of studies in silence. How ironic that the library was now the loudest room in the building. Louise snapped out of her reflection just in time to hear Devereux's final jab at the man.

"And the next time you think of using that bean-sized brain of yours to improve upon the directive I have explicitly given you, remember the only reason you have influence enough to speak in this city is because of me! So stop thinking for yourself and do what I ask! Now get your sorry face out of my sight and so help me, if you don't fix this tomorrow night, you'll get a most excellent view of the sunrise from my rose garden!"

Louise straightened her body as Ramon turned. The man fled from the library like any good Ventrue
whipping boy would. Devereux turned volatile eyes her way and her stomach froze. She felt as though he knew her intentions, saw her secrets and was about to tear her apart. Gawain’s threat was starting to have more merit, more substance now that she saw the angry fire in Devereux’s eyes. She didn’t even know what the other man had done, but he had gone behind Devereux’s back impulsively and received a watered down death threat. She was strategically planning her own financial success, even if it meant acquiring investments that directly threatened Devereux’s. What would he do to her then? Would sunrise even be an option or would he simply rend her head from the rest of her body with his bare hands?

"You’re late!" He barked and snapped his fingers for her to approach the desk he sunk his body behind.

"My apologies, I was held up by a rather unsavory character." She approached the desk with appropriate hesitation. His brow arched and beckoned a more thorough explanation. "A Nosferatu accosted me on my way to the carriage."

"Oh, really?" His mood changed almost immediately. The entire atmosphere of the library subsided from anger to a sense of amusement. "A Nosferatu, you say? What did they look like?"

There was no need to be polite now. She was in purely Ventrue company. Louisé’s nose scrunched and her voice shuddered, "Like a walking corpse."

Ramon nodded. "Yes, an unfortunate characteristic their entire clan shares. Be glad you weren’t Sired by one of their kind, my dear! I would take being a Childe of Passion any night to being a hideous creature like that."

Louisé fought the urge to glare at him for bringing up an issue she thought was comfortably buried in the dust of Sébastien’s Lyon home. She nodded instead. "Yes, I completely agree."

"Well, what did they want, girl? A Nosferatu never shows their true face if they don’t intend it to intimidate their target." His eyes narrowed, but his lips remained smirking. "What did this sewer rat use their intimidation for?"

She really did not want to be yelled at in the same fashion as her counterpart, but could not risk being killed because she was too afraid to follow through with Sir Gawain’s seemingly innocent request. "He said you were encroaching on one of his investments through your constant acquisition of textile businesses and vineyards."

The air in the room began darkening once more. Louisé stiffened as Ramon leaned back against his chair and let his gaze go distant. A less knowledgeable individual might think this was a look of consideration, but his protégés knew better…this was the look of a man trying to figure out how best to express his irritation. His tongue came out and licked along his lips. "And just who was this individual?"

"He introduced himself as Sir Gawain." His look hardened. Louisé wanted to leave but hadn’t finished her task. "He says he wants your written word you’ll stay away from his domain or he’ll block your other investments and sabotage your profit."

"Wants my written word?" Ramon started laughing. He laughed so hard he almost cried. Louisé swallowed a lump in her throat. He looked at her, sneered then shouted, "Get out!"

It was a dance of sorts. Devereux twirled about his property, fists shuddering with rage at circumstances he didn’t care to share with her. And her…she sauntered after his shadow with a piece
of parchment in her hand. The only thing Ramon found solace in was the fact that he was the one leading this Volta between mentor and protégé. Yes, he fully understood that some Sewer Rat king was threatening his investments and potential earnings. Yes, he grasped that all he had to do to avoid such an outcome would be to sign the piece of parchment his protégé was pushing into his face every moment she had the opportunity. Still, he declined his signature not because he found it amusing that she stalked him, albeit cautiously, around his home but due to the fact that there was an overwhelmingly greater situation inflated by another protégé. Ramon had stacked too many cards and maneuvered too many strings to have one idiot neonate under his roof undo them all by insulting an even more idiotic neonate with equally strong, and substantially more annoying, connections.

"I told you to resolve this, did I not neonate?!" Devereux couldn't even be bothered to use the man's name; he was so angry.

"And I tried! I promise, I tried just as you asked but-" the man's quivering voice cut off when Ramon raised a shuddering fist.

"Your excuses do little but minimize your already small intelligence and fan the flames of my rage. I gave you a task and you failed. Give me one reason why I shouldn't either kill you in the rose garden like I threatened, or offer you a mustard seed of mercy and throw you onto the streets." Devereux pinched the bridge of his nose and slumped in his chair, avoiding the leaning feminine figure in the doorway.

"I…" Devereux heard the man swallow.

Ramon growled. He hated cowardice in the same fashion he hated ugly people or poor taste. It was lucky for his protégé that his attention was needed elsewhere immediately. Yes, this infantile vampire was lucky his schedule was too packed for him to do anything else but give him another night to fix his mistakes. He cracked his neck from side to side and waved to the doorway. "Consider yourself lucky I feel abnormally merciful tonight. Or, rather, abnormally busy and too repulsed by your incompetence to want to do anything else but be away from you. You have one more evening to smooth things over with Monsieur Bertrand; I don't care how you do it, but get it done. Fail again and I'm sure I don't have to expand upon the consequences any further than I already have."

He was the glad the man didn't feel inclined to thank him repeatedly for the second opportunity, since both parties were assured by the fact that this was no show of generosity. This was Ramon being lazy and distracted tonight, but having a more open schedule tomorrow. This was Ramon not wanting to conduct the work of fixing this problem himself, even though he could do it quite easily in far less time than this fledgling needed. This was Ramon wondering how long it would take before Louise sauntered into the room with that damn piece of paper of hers. He smirked. Too bad for her that he had appointments and meetings lined up from this very moment 'til nearly dawn. He watched her shadow retreat just as primogen voices rose from the opposite direction. Ramon rose to greet them and offered them chairs.

"Good evening gentlemen, shall we get to work then?"

"It's so damn frustrating!" Louise hissed. There was no need to be proper in present company, no need not to curse for fear of judgment. She lunged and thrust her rapier at Javier's chest. He parried with very little effort. She was a beginner, so anything more than very minimal effort and he'd send the blade sailing from her hand.

"I mean no offense, querida, but it sounds as though you are not being direct enough with this Señor Devereux," Javier replied as their blades connected. The clash echoed around the room as they circled one another like good predators.
Louisé narrowed her eyes a bit as she lunged and nearly struck his arm. She was sure he was
humoring her every time she nearly scratched him. The more they practiced, the better she got but the
more evasive he became. She found him becoming comfortable enough with her to begin speaking
Spanish instead of continuing to struggle with French. She understood nothing beside "No" and
"Yes", so Spanish benefitted only him. In fact, if she were to devote more thought to it, he was
becoming more comfortable with other actions as well. "What does that word mean? And I will have
you know I am being as direct as I can possibly be with this man."

"It means 'dear'. We use it in…um…" he paused and snapped his fingers, "la buena sociedad."

"What does that mean?" She felt more frustrated by her poor grasp of Spanish than her equally poor
performance with the rapier. Louisé backed up as he lunged, moved her blade to block and nearly
cursed again when he changed direction last minute and almost caught her other arm.

Javier smirked. He stepped back and rested his blade against the ground. His head cocked to one side
as he considered her question. She could see he was struggling to come up with a comparable term in
French. "Good company."

She laughed softly, it taking her a moment to figure the appropriate term. "Ah, you mean polite
society…la société polie," she translated for him. He nodded and attacked her suddenly. She
shrieked and flung her blade up sloppily, but it did the job of deflecting his attack.

He made the same sort of 'tsk'ing noise Devereux made when he found something about her
appearance, speech or overall conduct displeasing. He spent the next few minutes positioning her
properly and guided her arm through the appropriate motions of guarding herself. Louisé felt her
insides stimulated from a sensation she thought as dead as the rest of her. A lightning bolt went down
her spine as he trailed his fingers from her wrist to her shoulder, urging her to loosen up. He said the
blade needed to become more an extension of her body than a piece of metal in her hand. Then he
asked out of nowhere, "How do you seduce men, querido?"

That didn't help her relax. It did distract her, for a second, from the fact that he was touching her, that
he was so close and whispering in her ear. Her Ventrue brain pushed aside any girlish exhilaration to
concoct an answer for his question. She wasn't really sure how she seduced the men beside the
disciplines that came naturally to her kin. She turned her head to look at him. "I tell them what they
want to hear. I charm them, disarm them from their worries and cares," she said. She had become
more comfortable with the seduction that came along with having Presence, but still preferred
dominating to get her way. "And when that might not work, I make them do what I want."

Javier stepped away from her, taking the rapier from her hand since their training session was
drawing to a close. "Then why not use the same approach with Devereux?"

"Seduce Devereux?!" And all sensuousness was gone. What that remained was the tepid feeling of
nausea. Devereux's attractive, middle-aged features did not cover up either his predisposition toward
cruelty and humiliation or unnerving obsession with fashion.

The Brujah shook his head, displaying a sly smirk. "No, what I meant was tell him what he wants to
hear. Or, if he is as stubborn as you say, tell him what he needs to hear."

"I have!" she defended.

"Then tell him what he needs to hear with more," he paused and met her eyes, thumbs running over
the handles of the rapiers, "Pasión."

That stimulation returned. Before she said or did anything that might damage her Ventrue pride,
Louisé turned to leave. Javier walked ahead of her to get the door. "I will take your words into consideration." He nodded. "Thank you for tutoring me. How much do I owe you?"

Brazen as any other Brujah, Javier smirked. "No money, querido."

"These services are not for free. You made that point abundantly clear during our first meeting."

"No money. Un beso," he crooned. He took a step toward her. Her brow rose. He read her uncertainty and lifted a finger to tap his lips just as he took another step toward her.

"Oh," she stammered. Un baiser…A kiss. He wanted a kiss in exchange for this lesson. Weeks and weeks of taking her money without so much as a wink of interest and now he wanted a kiss. Where did this come from? Louisé couldn't conjure a single moment where either of them had been flirtatious enough with one another to warrant his wanting a kiss from her.

A juvenile craving rumbled in her belly. Kiss him…a brutish voice commanded from deep within. She took a step forward. No one would know. It was only a kiss. Only one kiss. She circulated a number of similar excuses in her head. His hand was on her shoulder, sliding up her neck and cupping her cheek. Cold fingers were stroking her skin. Her insides buzzed and whirred like a thousand tiny bees. He was lowering his head and in that moment, her Ventrue brain shocked the rest of her body into submission.

"Don't you dare!" it hissed. Her stomach sickened at how suspiciously similar this voice was to Sébastien LaCroix's. Are you a Toreador? A whore?! You are Ventrue…you are better! Start acting like it! And instead of sampling whatever her lips might taste like, Javier savored the cold, metallic flavor of a hard livre. "Forgive me," she murmured and rushed out of the room with only her inner LaCroix to praise her for her chaste behavior. The beast grumbled like a petulant child.

She didn't have much time to worry over the consequences of spurning his kiss. All she could hope was that Javier's Brujah nature would find her chastity admirable instead of infuriating. In secret, the beast hoped the militant blood of his clan would Javier to pursue her relentlessly and with absolute pasión. Countering the beast was Ventrue pride, who wanted a specific explanation for Javier's audacious request. What she did not secretly think about was her plan to get Devereux to sign that flimsy sheet of parchment. She was two nights down and no closer to reaching her goal but entirely nearer to a possible Final Death if Devereux found her financial scheming to be worthy of treachery. Tomorrow was the last night she had to get his signature and Sir Gawain had not let her forget that fact. Even beneath the sophisticated veneer of handsome nobleman, she could feel the weight of his eyes on her. She shuddered when she saw similar eyes as she crossed the threshold of Devereux's study.

"Good evening Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert," the man greeted.

"Good morning, more like, sir. Dawn is near now," she responded with a small smile. She kept her eyes on Devereux, who appeared to simmer somewhere between disgruntled and bored.

"Indeed, so it is. Then I take my exit now while I still have a sunless sky to travel by." He gave a small bow to the both of them then left. His manner of speech left her to assume he was Toreador, though Devereux's lack of enthusiasm made her consider the possibility of Tremere as well.

"And just where have we been this evening?" Devereux inquired.

"Improving upon myself," she replied.

"How very vague of you. You're late again! As your mentor, am I inclined to know what kept you out later than I like." Louisé noticed an edge to his voice that unnerved her.
"You have never cared before so long as I completed my tasks."

"Have you completed them?"

She approached his desk and reported to him everything he had asked her to listen for. He drummed his fingers against the desk. She straightened up when she finished. "Did I miss anything?"

"Only an explanation as to your tardiness." He was resolute, so it seemed.

"I explained already that I was improving myself."

"How exactly? Whatever you've been doing obviously hasn't improved your sense of time and if you don't answer me directly, I will punish you accordingly for your disrespect." Yes, he was very on edge. The only thing she could think of to make him this irritated was failure on the part of the other protégé.

"I was learning how to handle a rapier," she admitted.

Devereux stared at her for a long moment. The corners of his lips began to lift and Louisé saw the mirth bright up his eyes again. The gregarious side of Devereux was emerging from beneath the weight of his stress. "And how exactly are you coming along?"

"I'm certainly more skilled in other areas." She listened to him laugh.

"And which of our clansmen has undertaken this Herculean task of teaching a woman to fight?"

Louisé stiffened, fought fidgeting. Lying to him was useless, as he would only pursue thanking whichever Ventrue she falsely named. Since she was already avoiding steeper consequences for plausible betrayal, she didn't need to add to the pile. "A Brujah named Javier."

Devereux made a face. "While they are certainly predisposed to a warrior lifestyle, I'm not sure I can approve of you associating, so closely, with one of their clan. They are a little too impassioned for the scrupulous essence of Ventrue society."

"Says the man who acts and lives like a Toreador," she whispered.

He smacked her faster than she had time to fear it happening. She winced and stared at the wall ahead of her, counting numbers in her head to avoid her rising anger. He grabbed her chin and made her look at him. "I wouldn't insult a way a life you've been enjoying with enthusiasm. And I certainly wouldn't insult the man who makes that life possible, neonate!"

"My apologies, sir," her voice was flat.

"Now, just what's gotten our little princess in such a defensive mood? Hm?" Devereux lowered his head near hers and Louisé jerked her face away. She knew it was an intimidation tactic but that selfish, adolescent beast wanted to preserve the few seconds Javier had been that close. Unfortunately, her reaction was a dead giveaway to her mentor. She spared a glance at him and savored the foreign expression of wide-eyed surprise on Devereux's face. His face melted into a broad grin and he threw his head back with a howl of laughter before releasing her. "Exactly what kind of rapier have we been handling, little virgin Louisé? Or should I even call you a virgin anymore?" he taunted once he calmed.

"Of course I am! Nothing happened!" she snarled. She felt a twinge of exhaustion from his severe fluctuation in temper. Things could never be easy with Ramon Devereux.
"And what if it had?" he asked. His tone was even, eyes square on her face.

"W-what do you mean?" she stuttered.

"What if something had happened?" Devereux walked to a side table and poured two glasses of blood. He handed her one, thereby opening the door for one of their few philosophical chats. This was how they always began: she said something, he asked a question intended to make her consider her view more deeply and while she thought of this deeper something, he poured them both glasses of blood.

"But it wouldn't because that would be-"

"Be what? Wrong?" he interrupted with a chuckle.

"Well, yes. I think we have already had a conversation on my view of such things." She drank from her glass, not realizing how thirsty she was until it touched her tongue.

"No, I believe we had a conversation regarding Sébastien LaCroix's view on such things. And besides, that conversation concerned you selling your body to men for intangible profit. We haven't yet had the pleasure of discussing your view of mutual, physical satisfaction between two Kindred." Devereux once again brimmed with a sort of childish glee. The fact that she might have succumb to sexual gratification reignited his favor toward her. She wasn't sure this was a good thing.

"Because those views do not differ from one another."

"They must though. Otherwise, you would not have felt remotely tempted to defend your Brujah lover from my mediocre insult to their clan," he paused to drink. "What did he do for you to defend him? Touch you? Fondle you?" His excitement disturbed Louisé.

"No! Nothing like that…" she sighed. "He tried to kiss me. I wanted to pay for his instruction, like I had a dozen other times but he didn't want money this time. And he isn't my lover," she ended with a growl.

"He tried to kiss you? That's all?" He was back to laughing. "You didn't let him?" Louisé shook her head. "Why not?"

"I wanted to, but this voice in my head told me it was wrong…told me it wasn't Ventrue to behave in such a way. So I paid him and left."

"Poor lad. I'll wager a year's earnings that voice was your Sire's." He ran a finger around the rim of his glass.

Louisé nodded. "I didn't want anyone to think less of me, or our clan, for allowing things to go too far. Besides, I haven't completely escaped clan taboo and don't need anyone thinking I've confirmed their ardent beliefs about my character. I'm working too hard for that."

"Let me give you something to ponder on," he said to catch her gaze. Devereux looked at her with amusement. "What Ventrue do behind their own walls is their business. The only difference between us and Toreador is that Ventrue know how to conduct themselves in public in such a way as to make everyone, even themselves, believe they are above such acts of carnality. Toreador flaunt themselves like peacocks as if the more debauch, expensive or artistic their actions, the more medals of honor they're awarded. At least they enjoy themselves! I am loyal to my clan, girl," he responded to her noticeable facial expression. "But I've never encountered a group of individuals so stuck up their own behinds that the minute they indulge themselves, feel compelled to beat themselves to second death for the shame of it."
"Then what do you suggest I do if this happens again?" Louisé asked as the encroaching dawn sucked her energy away.

"Enjoy it!" He concluded before sending her away for the day.

Down to the last few hours of Sir Gawain's deal, and riding on the energy of sultry dreams, Louisé follow Devereux relentlessly. At every opportunity, she shook that piece of parchment to get his attention. For hours he snubbed her and that was during the moments he wasn't pretending she didn't exist. Her temper rose like a summer heat. She didn't have time for his pride and arrogance! Regardless of the friendly chat they had the evening before, she needed to look out for herself first and succeeding in Gawain's quest was one way of doing just that!

"Don't you understand?! He's going to blockade your vineyards and textiles if you don't sign this! He'll send your distributors to your competition and you won't see a single coin of profit!" She shouted at his back around midnight, causing a small scene for only household staff to enjoy.

He turned slowly and she steadied herself for a smack in the face, or worse. Instead, Devereux snatched the parchment from her hand and stormed off. Louisé followed him to the nearest desk with an inkwell and quill. He scribbled a hasty signature and shoved it back against her chest. "There! Take your blasted agreement, get out of my sight and leave me to more immediate concerns! And when you return, I shall deal with your disrespect."

He was on edge once again, but she didn't have time to ask herself what made his attitude rebound so sharply since the night was still young (for all intents and purposes). It did take holding the signed parchment to lift the fog of oblivion from her eyes enough to see this was no small matter…no annoying gnat flying about Devereux's face. No, this was something more substantial to undo the stone-strong resolution of Ramon Devereux. Louisé would have time to be curious later. For now, she had parchment to deliver. And she was fast as lightning off the estate grounds.

Half an hour later, Louisé was sauntering down the alleyway and slapping the parchment into that grotesque hand waiting anxiously for it. Sir Gawain unraveled the piece of paper and read over it carefully. A sickening, mangle-toothed smile let her know her task was complete. Gawain emitted pleasure from every inch of his appalling appearance and Louisé maintained a healthy distance from him. He rolled the piece of paper back up and slid it somewhere beneath the cloak covering him.

"Well done, well done my pretty, little cunny!" He hooted.

"I'm glad you approve. Now, I believe we had a deal and you owe me something in return," she replied, maintaining her capitalist, Ventrue disposition.

"Ah yes, yes, yes!" His hand, once again, disappeared within the cloak and pulled out another piece of parchment. "I can save you time reading this," he said as he handed her the miniature scroll, "Your best investment opportunities are in artillery: weaponry, ammunitions and armor. Promising, secondary investments are in Catholic, military textiles. My sources inform me Devereux is largely focusing on high end textiles for seamstresses and tailors, not the industries who focus largely on fabrics meant for war."

Louisé had opened the parchment while listening to him. Her brows drew together in deep consideration. "Your sources anticipate…war?" She looked at him with curiosity.

"Don't you, good Catholic, cunny?" he hummed. "Think about it…thousands of Protestants flocking to the French-Catholic bastion of Paris. You don't honestly believe this wedding is going to end well, do you? If you were in Paris…would you let the Protestants leave unscathed?"
Louisé narrowed her eyes at the thought. "What I believe isn't anyone else's concern. I just want to be assured that these investments aren't a smoke and mirrors plot to take advantage of a young vampire."

He cackled and reached out to pat her hand. "I would be insulted if I wasn't experienced in the vigilant self-preservation of Ventrue. Rest assured my dear, I won't cheat a pretty face like yours."

He threw his hood over his head and moved down the alleyway. Before disappearing completely, he imparted one final piece of advice, "And if I were you, I would hurry up and invest. The wedding is a mere month away."

Louisé watched him disappear into a late night fog. She gripped the parchment and let herself bask in the glow of her own accomplishment. Small though it was, it was entirely her own and done with minimal suspicion from elders. She knew some form of grueling or physically painful punishment awaited her once she returned, so she decided to make them most of the night before that happened. She secured the parchment within her bodice and moseyed herself to banker who managed her meager funds. The man was all-too accustomed to handling midnight transactions with Kindred, and since he was paid more than handsomely by others, did not ask questions about why they couldn't conduct their financial affairs in the daylight. The man did not care enough about her paltry pile of money to dissuade her from investing all of it in Gawain's suggested manufacturers. The banker didn't even bat an eye at the fact that nearly all of them had to do with components of war. Leaving the man, Louisé was now the proud Kindred co-owner of several militant businesses.

The night was not over yet. She had one last thing to do before she retired to the consequences Devereux intended for her. Mimicking Gawain's earlier actions, Louisé cloaked her face with her hood and maneuvered herself down the streets of Dijon. She made only one stop to feed before her knuckles rapped upon a door in a quiet, albeit more impoverished borough. The master of the house opened the door with a blade pointed at her. After she moved her hood back, he lowered the weapon and stepped aside to allow her entry into his home. She wrung her hands within the shadows of her cloak. Louisé turned to watch him sheath his blade and scan her with curiosity in his eyes.

"Did you want a second session for this week, querido?" Javier asked.

"No," Louisé responded, somewhat shy. She fidgeted. "I came to collect my coin."

Now very confused, Javier lifted a brow and dug in his pocket to produce the coin she gave him last night. "This?"

She took a step toward him. "Yes."

"Why do you want your coin back, querido?" Javier asked, flipping the coin over and under his fingers. His tone was intrigued, not insulted and she appreciated that.

"Because I want to trade you."

"Trade for wh-" Louisé didn't let him finish before she closed the small distance between them, slid her hand to the back of his neck and brought his lips down to meet hers. She listened to the beast, took Devereux's advice and enjoyed it. His lips were rougher than the only other pair she kissed, but he was certainly more impassioned than Henri had been so long ago. She felt his hands on her hips, gripping her body while his mouth probed for more. Both young vampires, both attached enough to their humanity to waste their time with it, inexperienced enough to make a mess of it. However, Louisé was not separated enough from her clan or internal moral moderators to let the kiss go beyond anything but a drawn-out press between two pairs of lips. Louisé pulled back and removed his hands from her waste, sliding her coin out of his hand in the process.
"I hope that was an adequate trade. I shall see you next week for my next lesson." She left without saying another word or giving another kiss. All she wanted was a taste, a way to satisfy her curiosity and she accomplished that. She enjoyed it and now it was over. She wasn't looking for romance or partnership or a lover. She wasn't searching for the pain of Kindred life disappear by allowing someone to explore her mouth with their tongue. She had made her trade, gotten what she came for and found it pleasing but not spectacular. This is how she rationalized her impulsivity.

She justified her actions the entire ride home. Louise quelled the LaCroixish voice in her head with the excuse that kissing Javier had been nothing special. It hadn't even been anything clean. In the moment, it was perfect. But in retrospect, she could find many flaws with the kiss they shared. His lips were too thin, too wet from his ravenous (but unrewarded) tongue. He smelled of something she couldn't put her finger on. His hands squeezed too hard, wanted too much. Then there was the missing piece of information, the crux of why he wanted a kiss at all. The unknown nagged her. Oh it was awful! Awful how her prickly Ventrue personality picked apart what should have been, for intents and purposes, a perfect, impulsive kiss. And to dig the knife in deeper, she was reminded of the fact that he was Spanish and there was no love between France and Spain.

But it served its purpose nonetheless: finishing off a successful evening. Her Ventrue discipline didn't ruin that. She walked into Devereux's home like she owned a small piece of the world. Louise expected Devereux to pop up somewhere behind her with a whip in hand for the scene she caused earlier, but there was no Ramon to be found. It was just as well. She could retire early and spend the rest of the evening doing whatever pleased her most. Louise decided to dress down and read. She summoned a servant to get her a glass to drink and sashayed silently to her room. She drank while the servant undressed her. They were halfway through removing her clothing when Devereux burst into her room. All she could do was growl and cover her chest.

"I'm not looking, girl, so stop making that brutish noise," Devereux grumbled as he sauntered into the room.

"How may I help you, sir?" Louise inquired as the servant slid her arms into a dressing gown before removing the rest of her bulky outfit.

"You can start by cheering up," he suggested.

"And what do I have to be cheerful about?"

He smirked. It was a disturbing sort of sideways smile. "We get to participate in wedding festivities."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Pack your things, Louise. We're going to Paris."
Regardless of her family's nobility, Louisé had never been to Paris. Her sister had often, and loudly, complained over the fact that they never went to Paris or attended court like other noble families. Their father had ignored Marie during incidents like those. He had been the only member of the family to brave the journey to and from Paris. As a Marquis overseeing a large acreage, her father was still responsible to deliver the state of his marquisate to the King. Her father's greatest responsibility came in the form of taxes, which was the only reason he went to Paris and to the court. Otherwise, Charles Seyssel-Chambert was content to manage his personal estate without the flare of Paris meddling in his affairs. Louisé hadn't really cared, either. Reims had been metropolis enough for her, even though she had visited less than a handful of times. She found the seclusion of rural life to be freeing. She believed it offered appropriate distance from the court drama that appeared to add years to her father's face. Too bad for her that her Kindred life was nothing but riding the whirlwind of Camarilla drama. However, as soon as the words left Devereux's mouth, her insides were atwitter with childish excitement. Not only was she going to Paris, but would get a few days reprieve from the demands Devereux intended of her in Dijon. It would be a two day journey so Devereux could stop off in Troyes to meet an old friend of his.

Like their last carriage ride together, it was a relatively silent one. This time Louisé came prepared and drowned the boredom away with one of the many books she swiped from Devereux's library. He didn't even seem to notice or care. He appeared distracted, eyes staring out the window and onto the horizon, fingers of one hand stroking his stubble while the others drummed against the open book in his lap. She had never seen such a thoughtful expression on his face without something loud or violent immediately following. Louisé didn't really want to talk to him anyhow, since she didn't entirely trust herself not to confess her financial exploits to avoid him finding out on his own. Not striking up conversation gave her more time to contemplate the glaring absence of the other two protégés. If there had been a third carriage, she would have assumed they were riding behind she and Devereux, but as it happened, they just weren't in attendance. The only thing behind them was a luggage carriage, filled to the brim with clothes and items Devereux firmly believed they would need during their anticipated lengthy stay in Paris. He informed her they would be there until after the wedding, which was still a month away. While others might have been thrilled at the prospect of residing in pre-wedding Paris for an entire month, Louisé could only imagine the list of things Devereux had for her to do. Which brought her back around to the question of why he was taking her at all? She could understand why Simon, with his apparent faults and talent for angering Devereux, would be left behind, but surely Antoine's boot-licking qualities would be more of use.

"Could you quiet your thinking a little? I'm trying to concentrate," Devereux murmured.

"Pardon me?" Her brow went up. "How can my thinking be any louder than yours?"

He glanced her way and smirked, though it disappeared quickly once his eyes returned to the horizon she could not see. "You tend to give off certain energy when you're thinking about something important...Like you're struggling to push a boulder up a hill. I can't help but be affected by something like that."

"My apologies. How come I can't feel it from you?"

He sniggered into his palm, "Because I'm much, much older than you. Or I don't care about what I'm thinking of half as much as you care about your thoughts."

"Forgive me for saying so, but I would disagree with the latter explanation." She looked back down at her book.
"Oh? And why is that?"

Louise had to consider her answer for a moment. She shrugged her shoulders and turned the page. "If you didn't care about it, you wouldn't be thinking of it at all. And that distracted look on your face plus the way your fingers stroke your chin tells me you're considering a singular, important thought instead of an onslaught of trifling ones." She looked up and met his gaze.

Devereux was quiet. He readjusted his position to stare at her more fully. "It seems you have refined your skill for reading people, Louise."

He only used her name during times of praise and satisfaction. She chose to feel happy about this and also readjusted her posture to give him due respect and consideration. "How do you mean?"

"Because you gave me observable proof of where my mind was, instead of attempted to flatter my pride by reciting from trivial patter about how wise and contemplative I am."

She shrugged. "I don't honestly find you contemplative." Louise watched his lips twitch and she continued, "From what I have observed and experienced, you are more reactionary than anything. Something happens, you react…that's just the way you are and given the nature of our existence, a more prudent way to approach things."

"How wise of you."

"Maybe, or perhaps the result of a stark difference between you and LaCroix."

Devereux chuckled, "Not the first time I heard that. So, you find Sébastien more pensive than me?"

"Again, I can only draw from what I've experienced," she said. "To be honest, I don't know him well at all. I not privileged the way others are. I didn't spend years with my Sire before choosing to leave him and stake my own independence. I was dumped in a mediocre house in Lyon after only a couple of months with him. But in those months, yes, I would have to classify him as more thoughtful than you. He liked to think of everything before making a decision. I suppose he gave off the same energy I do when he thinks too hard."

"Quite possibly. There are always traits we inherit from our Sires that we did not have before. We can't explain them. But, I wouldn't disagree with you about Sébastien. Though, I can say I was the same way when I was his age…your age." He nodded, agreeing with himself. "Younger vampires are generally more thoughtful. They haven't built up the years of wisdom necessary to make a good, incontrovertible decision. That and younger vampires are terribly afraid. Afraid of dying, afraid of offending, afraid of losing what they have, afraid of losing favor…"

"So, are you saying that you're no longer afraid now that you're so old?"

"Yes and no. I'm saying my fears are different because I'm older, but because I am older I enjoy the privilege of not being afraid as often."

"Must be nice…" her voice drifted off as she opened her book back up.

"Don't worry," his voice was encouraging, "One day, you'll be like me and fear nothing you don't choose to fear."

"I have to survive another four or five hundred years first."

"Well," he returned to gazing out the window, "You're almost through your most difficult year. If I can keep you alive another ten or so, you'll be on solid ground."
"Ten years?! Is that how long I'm going to be with you?"

He laughed, "You make it sound like torture! Have I been so awful to you?"

Louisé swallowed, "I suppose, overall…no. But you do have a foul temper."

"Another privilege of old age, I assure you. Besides, it hasn't been you provoking my temper lately, so find some solace in that."

They were quiet another few minutes. Him, looking at the distance. Her, reading her book. Then Louisé broke the silence to ask the obvious, "What did he do?"

"Who?"

"Simon."

Devereux didn't answer right away. "He caused a problem with someone he ought to have been more careful around."

"Is that why they aren't coming?"

"More or less. I thought about dragging Simon along, but realized he might do something equally foolish in Paris and I just couldn't have that. His recent actions also left me unable to leave him without proper supervision, and since he would never listen to or respect you in my absence, I was forced to temporarily promote Antoine."

"That might go to his head," Louisé murmured and Devereux laughed. "Are we going to Paris because of Simon?"

Devereux sighed and they looked at each other, "Yes, Louisé. I can't tell you everything now, but suffice it to say: Simon's situation needs immediate resolution and that can only happen if I am in Paris."

"Why bring me along, then? I have nothing to do with what he did."

"God's bones! You are full of questions," he groaned. He rubbed his face with his hands. "I chose to bring you along because I need someone of your…talents for the task I am to complete. Since you have just proven yourself an adequate judge of character and keen observer, I feel confident in choosing to bring you along rather than leave you behind. Do not make me regret my decision by continuing to ask me inane questions. Our philosophical chat was enjoyable, but now it is done and I need to concentrate my energy toward the task at hand. So, read your book."

Their break in travel was brief. They rendezvoused with Hugues de Payens, a Ventrue elder and longtime friend of Devereux. They havened with him outside of the city on his estate, planted right in the middle of a forest. Payens was a gracious host and practiced entertainer. Louisé enjoyed him more for the fact that not only did he co-founded the infamous Knights Templar, but he rode into battle alongside her ancestor during the First Crusade. It was an otherworldly experience to hear stories of a man she had seen portraits of, whose armor she touched almost every day growing up, who showed through his descendants in the cheekbones and large big toe. She wanted to treasure the experience, but Ventrue don't value the intangible metaphysical parts of the world that don't directly improve domain or status. She opted, instead, to enjoy the fleeting moments and tales in the same manner she enjoyed her kiss with Javier: it would be perfect while it happened then lose its value as time went on, and as she overanalyzed what went wrong. Regardless, Payens was yet another acquaintance to be filed away for later use and a jovial one at that. Louisé appreciated Devereux's praises of her
character, no matter how forced they came across. Having a good reputation with elders like Payens was everything, especially if she ever planned on leaving Dijon and acquiring power for herself. Or, if she ever planned on securing a more powerful mentor than she believed Devereux to be.

They moved on after a night of rest and were in Paris soon enough. She could smell the water from the river Seine as they rolled into the city: cold, dirty water with rotting wood and refuse churning together beneath the hulls of boats and cargo ships. That wasn't the only aroma she caught. The air around the city was mixed. Louisé felt the pressure of religious unrest in odd marriage with the felicity surrounding equally odd nuptials. She felt comfort from their surroundings as a large, elaborate palace rose into her sights. She looked between the building, the weak light on the horizon and her mentor's face.

"The Conciergerie," Devereux answered her silent question. "It's where the kings of old used to live, but have since moved across the river to the Louvre." He waved a hand behind them.

"We're going to stay in a palace?!"

"Well, it's not much of a palace anymore. Part of it is used for a prison, another part as the chancellery, and yet another for the royal guards of the city."

"Then why are we staying there?"

"Because I have connections there and until we can get to where we shall be staying for the length of our term, we need somewhere out of the sun that is still worthy of housing my refined person."

Louisé rolled her eyes, but hardly objected to his standards since they were going to lodge her in, what was once, a royal residence. She was exhausted too! The rising sun was burning in her veins, lulling her toward sleep. Her eyes slid closed for a few moments but the jostle of the carriage stopping woke her. She didn't need to be told how fast she needed to move. In the rush, she heard her mentor say something about not needing their trunks. She followed Devereux down winding passages and spiraling staircases until they came to a large room where another man waited. She needed no proof that this man was a Kindred. All he did was nod and continue leading them into the depths of the old palace. Her body began aching and just when she thought she couldn't take another step, they arrived at their rooms. Devereux said nothing more before disappearing into his room. She did the same and was more than grateful that she didn't have windows to worry about. Everything went black as she collapsed on the bed.

Paris was a whirlwind! The first night there was spent traveling to the Château de Vincennes. Though a royal residence on the surface, it had long since passed into the hands of powerful Parisian Kindred once the royal family was offered the opulent Louvre to hold court inside. The fact that they were already constructing yet another palace made it easy for Louisé to determine which of the Camarilla clans were pulling the strings in this city. In fact, she wasn't surprised at all to find out the Prince of Paris, obviously Toreador, lived in the Château de Vincennes permanently and held court there as if he were the Roi de France. The abundant thoroughfare of courtly humans made it easier to cover up the Kindred machinations brewing in the lower levels of the castle. The atmosphere was anything but courtly when Devereux and she arrived. The stretched smiles and fawning conversation did not comfort not welcome Louisé. Rather, she became on edge and saw through their smiles to the sharp fangs beneath, saw how the eyes narrowed the more the smiles stretched. These kindred did not want them there, but were being forced to suffer their presence for a reason unknown to her.

But this prepared Louisé for the reason Ramon Devereux packed them up and trekked to Paris. Simon's problem extended not to just anyone in Paris, but to a key member of the Prince's court...a popular figure that had many others wrapped around their fingers. This person must have been
valued, because even the local Ventrue were reluctant to welcome them with enthusiastic, open arms. So it was that Devereux dragged Louisé around Paris to meet the whims of an affronted Prince. These whims weren't terrible, though. Being a Toreador paradise, most of the things they become involved in are also directly tied to the festivities of the impending wedding: ferrying around items, entertaining higher-up nobles and attending parties so lavish they frightened the staunch senses of every Ventrue within a mile radius. Louisé found herself slowly detesting the touch of others as night after night she stuffed into gaudy dresses and paraded about dance floors like a new lap dog. And Devereux had no intention of diving into the fray to save her. All he did was narrow his eyes and jerk his head toward the crowd.

"We please these people until we hear the words 'What offense?!'" he hissed into her ear as he led her through the single most awkward dance of her life. Devereux was banking on the flitting attention of Toreadors while these same Kindred whores in their extravagant whore houses beamed at the sight of the two Ventrue spinning. Scandal was a Toreador's bread and butter, and Louisé became convinced half of the Toreadors in court were using any, and all, opportunities to make something scandalous happen between she and Devereux as means to get even for whatever Simon did to one of their own. An eye for an eye.

"These people are insipid and absurd!" she retorted through a fake smile. Once the dance ended, she marched toward the cluster of Ventrue. Devereux followed right behind her. Louisé scratched at her neck where dyed feathers tickled and irritated her skin. A costume ball of all thing. A masquerade for the Masquerade. How truly unimaginative it was for a clan so self-secure in their own artistic ability. All around her paraded flamboyant costumes attempting to capture the nature and visage of wild animals, mythological figures and chivalric heroes with their distressed damsels. Louisé has been assigned, not *chosen*, the role of peacock, which made no sense to her since peacocks were male and she was clearly female. The only benefit was the beauty of her outfit, save for the bothersome feathers on her open ruff and the mask clinging to her face like a second skin. They splayed out like a rainbow of blue, green, purple and gold and truly gave the image of a peacock opening its feathers. Devereux had had it created for an effect yet to be determined.

Louisé accepted a glass of blood from a fellow Ventrue and looked around for Devereux, who had disappeared. Being assigned the unfortunate role of ass, Devereux was denied the pleasure of dressing in his beloved jewel toned colors and instead was relegated to the drab shades of brown and grey. She had laughed when she found out what animal he was to play. His smack to the back of her head was entirely worth it. However, the fact that he portrayed such a dull animal meant he was hard to find amongst a crowd. Not everyone was dressed in eye-catching colors like her. Some wore the foresty ensemble of Robin Hood, or the demure dress of an Arthurian knight. Sipping from the glass, she paused as a man with pale hair, back to her, moved through the crowd. Her stomach tightened. Unconsciously, she handed her glass off and moved after the man. Could it be…?

She didn't get to pursue him very long before finding Devereux and having to decide between following a ghost or deciphering the plans of her mentor. She opted for her mentor and watched the pale head of hair disappear into the onslaught of Kindred and kine. Sighing, Louisé turned and waited a few feet from Devereux while he finished a conversation with a man dressed in the cardinal colors of a fox. The man certainly had the face of one. Their conversation ended and Ramon turned to her, raising a brow and offering an arm before she got pulled into another ridiculous dance.

"Is everything fine?" she asked as they maneuvered themselves back to their Ventrue cousins.

"Much better, in fact!" His tone sounded cheerier than it had been since they left for Paris.

"Why? What did he say?"
"Hm?" He looked down at her.

"The fox," she responded, "What did the fox say?"

"That we will finally be able to make personal amends with the Kindred who was offended by Simon's actions and...blah, blah, blah, blah, buh-blah."

"Who was offended, exactly? And when can I take this ridiculous costume off?"

He chuckled and offered her a fresh glass of blood before taking one for himself. "We'll be leaving shortly. And to answer your first question, I ask you another: Is there anyone at this party you feel stands out more than others?"

"A bizarre question as almost every guest is attempting to outshine the other."

"Use those keen skills of observation I experienced on the way here. The answer to your question is in this room, though you may have made the personal choice to avoid them because of the crowd they attract."

Louisé sighed and reluctantly turned her attention to the entire room. She drank her blood as her eyes took in the garish scene around her. The center was a swirl of colors as people danced and spun each other. There were so many people pocketed around that finding a significantly sized group was a chore. But...then again, Devereux hadn't said that this person had a huge crowd around them, just that she was avoiding them because of the crowd attracted. That narrowed the list down to a select group of Toreadors who had made it their personal mission to terrorize Louise in the most saccharine way possible. They gave her back-handed compliments, blockaded her attempts to at solitude and outright insulted the Ventrue virtues she tried to uphold. The fact that she was a virgin was both delightfully tantalizing and disgusting to their nature. Their hands wandered and lips came too close to her person for comfort. They stunk of overused perfume and excess make-up. What pale pallor death did, or didn't, give them they made up for with slather of lead and egg whites. Their cheeks were a devilish red; they attempted to do the same thing to her. This was the group of deviants she avoided, that she was now looking for and once she accepted this, she found them without difficulty. Their ring leader, the center of their small world, was a person she had only ever heard whispered of. She had never met the elusive Gossip Queen of Paris, but heard just enough not to want to. Somehow, though, Louise knew the woman when she saw her.

She was the most opulent thing in the room. The skirt of her gown was a bright pink, fabric gathered to create the illusion of a flower while the trunk of her body and arms created the butterfly. Dyed lace formed golden wings while her black hair was styled into a bizarre formation that matched an even weirder painted face. She was far from ugly, but not exactly beautiful to Louise. Beauty was an insubstantial quality Louise could not put her finger on, but knew it when she saw it and she did not see it in this woman. This woman certainly worked hard at achieving beauty, as every female in the building did, but that hard work detracted from the overall goal in Louise's humble opinion. It may have been because of the past she no longer turned to, or the black-and-white nature of her Ventrue thoughts, but she honestly believed beauty was not something to be worked on; a person either had beauty or they did not. This didn't mean she believed people couldn't be lovely, handsome or pretty. Others didn't hold her philosophical beliefs, as proven by the hordes of admirers buzzing around their queen.

"Augustinia Cervantes," Devereux whispered in her ear, sending a chill now her spine and breaking her from the profound nature of her thoughts.

"She is the one, then?"
"Yes. That is the venomous serpent whom we offended," he answered.

Louisé smirked and looked at her Mentor. "I haven't offended anyone. It is Simon and by extension, you, who have offended."

"And yet you shall be instrumental in cleaning us of the blemish that is this perceived offense."

"How am I to do that?" Louisé emptied her glass. She continued to stare at the swarm of garish bees. No doubt feeling her eyes, Cervantes snapped her gaze around to meet Louisé's. Louisé felt the muscles of her abdomen tighten and chill. This was no woman to be messed with. A smile crooked Cervantes' lips, something sweet and sinister, and she broke free of her gathering mass to saunter in their direction. Louisé felt the chill grow and backed up until Devereux was in front of her. This woman made her too uncomfortable for words.

"My dear Ramon!" Cervantes' voice was lower than she expected, but hard, refined and sprinkled with a Spanish accent. "How delightful it is to see you in Paris again! I wasn't sure we were going to appreciate your presence. Then again, I know how dearly you love your festivities and what has more cause for celebration than a wedding?" The woman barely broke speech before staring at her. Augustinia's tone was honeyed, temptingly alluring save for the feral light in her eyes, "And what a comely thing you have brought with you! How did you manage to find such a delicious treat, Devereux? If memory serves, you prefer the company of only yourself. She must be something special to garner your attention." Cervantes took a bold step forward and reached out to stroke Louisé's face before Devereux could do much about it. Not that he would, for fear of compounding the insult this woman felt she'd been dealt. The fingers on her skin were as tempting as the cloying words had been but didn't linger long on her face before snatching her hand and pulling her forward. "Let us get a better look at you, deary! Ah…what a face. You must have been pale as a piglet before being Embraced for you are fair as crème. And those eyes…so blue!" Cervantes shot a smirk to Ramon, now behind Louisé. "Like the jewels I wear! Were I younger and less disciplined or secure in my own ravishing beauty, I might be jealous!" She laughed, a cocky sound, and released Louisé after squeezing her hand tightly. "What is her name?"

"My name is Louisé," she answered for herself. Louisé squared up her body in an effort not to be intimidated by this woman and her Presence.

"She speaks for herself! How entertaining!" Cervantes chuckled and met Louisé's eyes. "And are you here for business, like him?" She motioned to Devereux. "Or for pleasure's sake?"

"Business," Devereux intervened, finally. "She is my protégé and here to learn from me."

"Or here to help your cause?" Augustinia was no longer feigning hospitality.

"Perhaps she is, perhaps she isn't. We'll find out soon enough, now won't we?" Devereux retorted.

"I will be interested to see how this plays out, Ramon. Enjoy the rest of your evening, both of you." She gave Louisé a departing look upon and down before waltzing back to her admirers.

"I don't like that woman," Louisé hissed at her mentor.

"Neither do I, but until she feels a debt is paid, we'll suffer her presence."

"Can we leave then? This costume is uncomfortable and I dislike the people here."

"Yes, I quite agree with you. Let's be on our way."
Cervantes proved to be a fickle mistress. There seemed nothing specific she wanted to feel unslitghted. That was just as well to Louisé, who felt no compulsion whatsoever to meet the needs of such a haughty individual she was not blood bound or obligated to. Instead, she focused on keeping her personal, religious beliefs to herself as more and more of her clansmen talked about their numerous investments and patronages of the high level nobles that followed Henry of Navarre’s shadow. She focused on keeping any and all correspondence with the Jewish banker back in Dijon a secret from Devereux. And lastly, she tried not to focus on the pale blonde hair she'd seen at the masquerade and a few nights since. She fought against considering whose face lay on the other side of that hair and what it might mean if it were Sébastien. She contained the wiles of her mind as they conjured scenarios where she met her sire once again, the things she would say to him, the explanation she would try to pull for his abandonment. Apparently he was not as forgotten as she wanted him to be, not quite dead enough to her not to still provoke some sort of anger in her chest and veins but not present enough to warrant wasted energy either.

Days before the wedding, Devereux left her little time to consider any of these things. He has her rushing about to collect various items he believed would appease the serpent. Expensive lace and fabric, silver combs and jewelry. Louisé was almost jealous with the extravagant lengths Devereux was going to. The fact that he could afford items of this quality had her rethinking ever having to pay the man back, since this didn't seem to put the slightest dent in his wealth. The jab in the side, though, was when he sent her to deliver them instead of doing so himself. The woman didn't even live in Paris. She resided in an expansive and lush estate outside the city, owned by a wealthy human noble. Louisé did not doubt this man had been ghouled, along with his staff, for they were the ones who answered the door and ushered her to Cervantes' receiving room. The woman wasn't even polite enough to be present when Louisé arrived and based on the sounds resounding from a hallway branching off from the room, she might not be present for some time. Louisé took her absence as an opportunity to both properly arrange the gifts in an aesthetically pleasing fashion and move around the room. She took in as much as she could to determine what she could about this woman. Two books lay open in the room: *Lancelot, le Chevalier de la Charrette* and Chauncer's story of January and May. Beautiful illuminations glared up at Louisé and from this she determined what a hopeless romantic Cervantes must have been. The expensive tapestries and fabrics decorating the room suggested both the Toreador's natural lean toward art and expensive taste she could not afford on her own.

"Beautiful aren't they?" Cervantes asked from behind.

Louisé jolted before collecting herself and respectfully turned to her host. "Yes," she answered.

"I like to be surrounded by beautiful things," the woman's tone was whimsical as she sat down in a chair bordering throne-like.

"Apparently." Louisé smiled and quickly recovered, "But who doesn't? I hear even the Nosferatu decorate rooms in such a way, as to grasp at even the shadow of beauty."

"You have quite the poetic tongue, youngling."

Louisé shrugged. She wasn't about to get drawn in by this woman's sweet talk when she had no idea what kind of venom brewed just beneath the surface. "So I have been told. My brother often read to me from Chauncer and my mother preferred the Psalms, so mayhaps I got it from there."

"Hm…And what has our little poet brought us this evening?" Cervantes flicked a wrist toward the gifts.

Louisé moved over to her display and pointed to each of the gifts, explaining each in turn. Augustinia did not display much interest in any of them, which irritated Louisé since she hated
feeling like she was wasting time and even more, hated being in the presence of those who wasted that time. "My master hopes these gifts meet the approval of their mistress and that by this gesture of generosity, the waters between us shall be fair and clean."

"It's certainly a decent start!" Cervantes smirked and stood, turning to leave.

And that was it! She may not have known this woman more than a handful of minutes, but she was already tired of her and her entitled attitude. She wouldn't see her hard work, and Devereux's money, pissed away on a snob like her. "Excuse me?"

Cervantes paused and looked over her shoulder. "I said it was a decent start, but we're not clean quite yet, little poet."

"And just why not?" Louisé glared. And that was a mistake.

The woman turned her body slowly to face Louisé. Her movements were slow but predatory and she stalked up to the young Venture until they were inches apart. Louisé was surprised by how much taller Augustinia Cervantes seemed tonight than the night of the masquerade. She had several inches of height on Louisé but that didn't stop the Ventrue was straightening herself. Cervantes smirked, slowly and said, "Because I said so."

"That's not much of an answer at all! There isn't any reason why such a lavish gift shouldn't erase whatever bad blood is between the two of you."

"Since I'm the insulted party, I don't really need a reason. I just need to feel better."

"But you weren't even the one insulted!"

"No, but my Childe was."

So that's how it was. This roundabout way Kindred handle their problems, the way decisions made echoed through the generations. Louisé wasn't sure Sébastien would have the same reaction if someone insulted her. He would probably tell her to get over it and stop wasting his time with things that didn't concern him. But this unnamed Toreador Simon disregarded came sobbing to the skirts of his maker and she coddled him. "Then I'll take these gifts to your Childe and tell Devereux to direct all further efforts their way!"

Louisé turned and began gathering the items back together. A tight grip on her elbow stopped her and squeezed. Natural reaction prevailed and Louisé bared her fangs at Cervantes with a growl, "Get your hand off of me."

"Then get your hands off my things!"

"They aren't yours anymore," Louisé spat back. "If you aren't going to be grateful enough to my master for what he's done to satisfy your selfishness, then I'll not have his efforts wasted!"

With exceptional strength, Augustinia yanked on Louisé and sent her flying into a chair. Louisé grabbed the arms of the chair as it rocked back then thudded onto its front legs again. Cervantes, with speed she could barely perceive, snapped her own hands down to trap Louisé's and keep her from going anywhere but through the woman. Her pretty face was contorted with a mix of excited and enraged, as if this kind of roughing around aroused a particular part of her character. She snarled close to Louisé's face, "You have some nerve coming into my home and calling me selfish!" She squeezed and dug her claws into Louisé's skin, who felt no desire to show any pain and feed the secret desires of this wannabe courtesan.
"What would you call a person who demands and takes according to their own whims without an ounce of giving back or agreeing to the terms of a spoken agreement? But you're not just selfish, you're incredibly rude and haughty!"

"I ought to tell Devereux and the Prince about this," Cervantes hissed through her smirk. "I wonder what would happen to your pretty face when I tell them how you've insulted me?"

"Go ahead," Louisé replied. Panicking would never do a Ventrue good. Forcing an opponent's hand always would. The best way to force a Toreador's hand, from observation, was to tell a skillfully painted lie.

Augustinia's rage died down as her eyes widened. She studied Louisé for a moment before removing her hands and backing away from the Ventrue. "Your actions will damage Devereux's reputation, possible sour the relationship between him and both the Prince of Paris and Dijon. And you'll no doubt suffer."

Louisé shrugged, "Perhaps I grow weary of the demands of Kindred existence. Perhaps I don't care." She stood and held Cervantes' gaze. She was older and incapable of being dominated by someone as inexperienced as Louisé. "Either way, you won't get anything out of Devereux."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll both spin our own version of what happened tonight. You'll make yourself out to be some damsels in distress and I'll tell Devereux the truth. Devereux, in turn, will tell a story that will mean nothing good for you. For all the Prince of Paris knows, these gifts were hand chosen by the Prince of Dijon and merely transported by Devereux to you. You treating them so casually would no doubt be a graver insult than anything I may have said, don't you think?" Louisé began the rough weaving of a lie she hoped would cover up this shameful, un-Ventrue submission to emotion and frustration.

Cervantes glared. Louisé smirked, felt Augustinia beginning to take the bait and continued, "I think we both know what Devereux's role in Dijon is and how much power the Prince really has. Do you really want to risk exposing this to my mentor and your Prince only to have it come flying back in your face like a bad wind?"

"Not just a poet, but quite the performer as well. Why should I believe anything you say or be bothered by such words? I'm older and more powerful. I could crush you right here and be done with it."

"Then you'd definitely be insulting Devereux! Not to mention the money you would owe him for killing me while I already have a heap of debt against him. Not to mention that killing me without just cause would secure yourself a bitter war between Dijon and Paris. Besides, you love your luxurious life too much to have anything compromise those comforts. And I know, for a fact, that this estate isn't owned by your, nor the things in it. You won't gamble with your beautiful things, now will you?"

Cervantes drummed her fingers against the fabric of her dress, her eyes darting around to the tapestries and gilded candelabras. No, she wouldn't dare open her mouth if the words that came out threatened the royal lifestyle she was trying to achieve. She didn't trust her instincts enough to challenge the on-the-spot self-preserving story Louisé had just spun. But, she also wasn't going to let this go unpunished. She glared at Louisé and demanded, "You will apologize for what you said."

"I'm not sorry for saying it, though. You were acting arrogant and I found that insulting to both myself, for taking the time to deliver these gifts, and my master who acquired them for you."
"Honest to the very end, aren't you Ventrue? The least humble creatures I have ever encountered."
She was becoming agitated now. "Very well. Then I want my pound of flesh." And before Louisé could ask what that meant, the woman disappeared only to reappear with a whip in her hands. Where she got the whip was Louisé's guess but she didn't need any lengthy explanation of what Cervantes intended to do with it. Louisé began backing away from the woman. With that same indecipherable speed, the Toreador shoved Louisé against a table. Images of her embrace flashed in her mind as the woman's hands maneuvered the gown off Louisé's shoulders and pushed it down until her back was exposed. How callous Toreadors could be! Louisé wasn't sure if she ought to feel violated or jealous of how unnaturally fast this woman was.

Louisé didn't count how many times the woman struck her back with the whip. All she knew was that this woman hit for blood and meant every word of the whole "pound of flesh" euphemism. If this settled Louisé's slip in decorum, then so be it. She was still amazed her fabrication had worked to jostle the woman's confidence, but then again Toreador's were wholly concerned with their appearance and comforts; if even the most diaphanous of threats endangered those two things, they would do anything they could to protect their trove. The image of a dragon guarding piles of gold and jewels came to mind as Cervantes finished the agreed upon punishment. Louisé just stood still, waiting for the wounds to close and throbbing to subside. She felt Cervantes' fingers slide along two of the open cuts and arched her back from the pain, biting down on her bottom lip to keep from making a noise. She turned her head to watch the woman lick the blood from her fingers.

"Sweet," she murmured and looked down at the soiled whip. She met Louisé's eyes and smiled that same honey-venom smile. "We're even now…And tell Devereux all's well between us."

"Really?" Louisé couldn't hide her surprise.

"Yes, if you come back tomorrow and the night after for some of the same." And there was the venom, seeping into the skin of Louisé's back like slow poison ooze.

"What?!" Louisé cried as she fumbled to reposition her dress.

"Oh? Did you think that was enough? Aawwww," she cooed and reached out to stroke Louisé's face. Louisé recoiled from her touch, repulsed by her attitude and actions. "How precious. No, tonight sufficed to wipe away your insult. The gifts, plus the next two nights will cover the offense dealt to my Childe."

"Fine," Louisé snarled.

"Wonderful! I look forward to it, my pretty, little poet! Au revoir!" And she flounced from the room, whip in hand, leaving Louisé to wonder what just the hell she got herself into.
"This isn't how I wanted things to be," the man, the youth, the king said.

"Who would have wanted something like this?" she responded as she listened to the screams echoing from outside. Gun shots exploded in the distance. Somewhere, a child cried.

"Catholics. They prayed for this. They plotted this." He gave a sad chuckle, "My in-laws planned it all."

She looked at him. A pang of guilt struck her abdomen. His words stabbed her. Had she prayed for such a thing? Was this the price paid for feeling right? Feeling justified? "You married a Catholic."

"Yes, for peace! Or, for the hope of peace," his voice faded.

She frowned. "You didn't marry for peace." She watched him gape and looked away, looked into the night igniting with gunpowder. Her gunpowder. "You married for power. You married for convenience. You married because your mothers told the two of you to. Peace was only an afterthought scribbled onto the treaty that bound your fates together...a sentence squeezed in at the end."

He was silent beside her. Silent and staring into the dark chaos resounding around the city louder than the cathedral bells for matins. She watched his eyes search the darkness. They were probing for what they could never see. Out there, somewhere, the Guises were slaughtering nobles and commoners while Coligny loyalists riddled the night with the smell of sulfur and iron. "I promised to convert," he finally broke the silence with that weak confession.

Why he was telling her that, she could only guess. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

She would remember forever the times she lowered herself. Lowered herself to raise herself up. Cervantes' handle with the whip was only one of the first stepping stones to a greater future than she could ever imagine. But she hated it! She hated being physically reminded of what a low position in society she still maintained. She hated that Cervantes seemed to enjoy beating her the way some humans enjoyed a fine wine, or Kindred enjoyed that perfect blood donor. Louisé told herself it was all worth it in the end. Devereux was satisfied, if not joyful, that the bad blood between the he and Cervantes was buried; he was none the wiser that Louisé had almost ruined everything with her temper and immaturity. Cervantes was pleased she had a new, temporary toy. And Louisé...well, she was thankful her two extra nights were paid in full and she could focus on slightly more important things, like the impending wedding.

Paris became a dangerous city. While no one could argue it was the safest city to live in, there were aspects of Paris that made it safer for the nobility than others. The centralization of the royal family meant an influx of French soldiers and Swiss guards roaming the streets. An impending wedding coupled with religious unrest meant more soldiers around the royal family. Everyone who couldn't afford private protection was on their own. As Kindred, Louisé had little to physically worry about in a Camarilla strong city like Paris. But the abnormally high summer heat of mid-August made and abnormally high numbers of Huguenots in the city put Louisé on edge. She had sidled into parish churches in time to hear to the booming voices of priests decry the Protestant pollution of Paris during midnight Masses. They reminded the faithful of the Pope's own derision toward the upcoming union between Margaret and Henri and urged the flock to pray for divine intervention on the matter. Her fingers wrung her mother's rosary beads as she hung on the edge of every word that came out of
these zealots' mouths. It was a growing anticipation: this need for a purge and cleansing of the city.

Lodging at Château de Vincennes separated her from much of the brewing angst. Walled like a fortress, the old royal residence kept out anyone not invited by their host. Louisé was limited to the company of her mentor and a score of prominent Ventrue of Paris. She found more excitement in the chateau's personal chapel, which supposedly housed a relic of the Crown of Thorns. Though something inside told her this relic was probably a fake, even a falsified religious icon seemed more thrilling than the political prattle of elder Ventrue. Louisé had little choice in her political leanings. She was bound to Devereux, therefore bound to whom he displayed his loyalty to. She was bound to his political state of mind and could do little more than smile and nod in agreement with whatever bold bureaucratic statement he chose to spittle forth during "courteous" discussion. Religious ties were not even a consideration to Devereux, who had long abandoned any form of faith other than mercantilism. He found the feud between Catholics and Protestants amusing at best, annoying at worst. Catholic and Protestant simply translated as differing investment groups, different ways to go about earning money and spreading his influence. He was Catholic for the Catholics and Calvinist for the Huguenots. He didn't understand his protégé's adamant loyalty to Catholicism and Louisé didn't find it necessary to explain herself since being French, by definition, used to equate with being Catholic.

The evening of August 16, 1572, they left Vincennes to attend pre and post nuptial celebrations. The deeper into the city they traveled, the more the invisible tension in the air overcame her body. Paris was a thunderstorm waiting to happen. It was one lightning bolt, one clap of thunder, one spark away from all-out war. No amount of extravagance could cover that up or make it go away.

Henri III of Navarre and Margaret of Valois married on August 18, 1572 against the wishes of good Catholics and the Pope. Louisé was delighted the wedding occurred during the day, so there was no way she could be forced to attend. Residing in La Conciergerie meant Devereux and she enjoyed a short carriage ride across the Seine to La Louvre, where the royal family lived and all post-wedding celebrations would be conducted. It was an awful juxtaposition to behold; the extreme affluence blatantly exposed to the surrounding poverty of the city. The vast population of Paris was composed of commoners who, based on word of the street, condemned the marriage not because of religious differences (unless they were traditionalist Catholics) but because taxes had been raised on food to supply the luxury Louisé, Devereux and select others were allowed to appreciate. Luxury that the commoners, who paid the taxes, could only imagine if they were not hired (or forced) to serve as manual labor. It was something made only apparent to her because of her brief experience with poverty and her family's earnest attempts to minimize it in their own marquisate.

Unfortunately for the poor, Ventrue blood is attracted to power and Louisé was full of it. She wrote this staggering discrepancy off in her head as a future endeavor, a future investment opportunity when she was able. For now, Louisé allowed herself to enjoy the fireworks, the dances and the abundance of noble blood to drink from.

Ventru appreciate wealth. Ventrue value dignity. Ventrue do not condone public displays of excess. Or perhaps Sébastien LaCroix's blood in Louisé felt that way. The sire Louisé fought hard to keep buried seemed to enjoy remerging from the mental grave during moments Louisé would otherwise find enjoyable. But Sire's blood side, even Louisé became bored with the festivities when they went on for four solid days and nights. At some point on the 22nd, Louisé walked away from the Louvre to hunt on blood less rich. Louisé blended into a crowd traveling home, a crowd of kine in various stages of slump from the wine they overdrunk. She walked along the shadows of a man with a heavy head, a man who smelled of extreme weight on his shoulders.

She wasn't interested in feeding from him. She'd already decided upon an older woman who was
staggering down the street with her equally inebriated husband, or who Louise assumed was her husband. The man was just a curiosity to her. She had overheard people whispering about him behind his back in the courtyard. Her brain scrambled for a second to find the name: Gaspard de Coligny. Something else fired off inside her head, but it was so flimsy that she couldn't get a firm grasp on it. It was something important too! She came to a fork with the crowd with Gaspard going off in one direction and her meal strolling the other. Louise groaned, her stomach growled but her piqued curiosity won the battle as she turned and continued seven paces behind the man's shadow. What happened next would serve as the foundation for war.

Louise watched Gaspard turn a corner and followed suit, cautiously. She stayed a good distance behind him and frozen alongside him when a cloaked man jumped from the shadows and leveled a gun on Gaspard. His voice was nasally, high-pitched for a man as he screamed, "Die Protestant filth!" Louise jumped back into the shadows as the man fired two shots. Gaspard started screaming, the crowd screamed and flew around like a disturbed bee's hive and Louise's mouth watered from the aroma of freshly spilt blood. She fought her hunger as she walked closer to Gaspard. Poor marksman ship had saved the man's life, though the same could not be said for the life of one of his fingers or his shoulder. Louise's eyes darted upward as three men burst out of a home on the street. They all held guns. Two of them ran to Coligny and carried him off toward the house while the third held a gun up and scanned the area for other enemies. Louise sniffed and walked back into the shadows, waiting there until the street was silent and empty. Only when she was sure she was alone did she dare move toward the small mess Gaspard's wounds had left. She stooped down and let her fingers graze the stones, sweeping up blood. She popped the fingers into her mouth and turned to walk back the way she came. He had a good taste to him, but was definitely not something she could handle in great quantities. The beast growled somewhere deep in her gut. She had a drunk couple to find!

News spread like wildfire that an assassin had attempted to take Coligny's life. Huguenot nobles, present for the wedding now passed, were in an uproar. Though Louise had been present, even she could not substantiate who the assassin had been or who possibly hired him to carry out such an incendiary task. From the time she rose, all she heard were varying rumors of who could have done it. The Guises were the most popular choice, as they were the prominent leaders of Catholic faction of the religious wars and held onto the belief Coligny had hired an assassin to murder their father, Francis. Five years older than Louise, Henri de Guise was handsome but too headstrong and passionate for good politics. He was famous for his battlefield exploits, but the now nervous monarchy did not have time to waste on another war. The Queen Mother's hands weren't bloodless in this though, as many in the nighttime courtyards whispered she was the perpetrator. Louise didn't really care since the man was not dead. What she cared about was the uproar it caused that prevented her and Devereux's return to Vincennes. The Conciergerie became busy. Too busy for them to remain there and Catholic soldiers were barring carriages from exiting the city center. This forced the small Kindred party in the Conciergerie to take up temporary residence in the Louvre until everything blew over.

"Isn't this rather risky?" Louise asked as she covered up the windows to keep the hours-off sun from breaking into her room.

"Incredibly, but it's better than having anxious soldiers bursting into our rooms searching for gunpowder during the day," Devereux explained as he covered the windows on his side of the room.

Shoved into a room with Devereux was more unnerving than the brewing political storm outside. They were lucky their room had a bed large enough for the two of them, otherwise Louise would have been sequestered to the stone floor. She wasn't entirely sure she wouldn't be sleeping there since she had no desire to brush up against her prickly mentor beneath the sheets.
It is August 23rd and Louise worries about accidently touching her mentor's skin. Meanwhile, lightning is preparing to strike. Snakes writhe in their dens. Somewhere in the Louvre, the King, Queen Mother and cabinet are plotting. They are scheming and their schemes are born out of a well-deserved paranoia. Jackals and false Catholics whisper in the ears of easily-manipulated royalty. Orders with no signature are sent out. They are sent out about the time Louise's hunger reaches its peak. La Louvre may have been more glamorous lodgings than Conciergerie or Vincennes, but there were slimmer pickings that hadn't already been picked off by older, more powerful Kindred. Louise has no palate for kitchen wenches, scullery maids or chamber boys.

She is a predator on the hunt when she slips out of the palace and into the thick darkness of nighttime Paris. She is cloaked and following an internal drive. There is no herd here, but she can smell her preference on the wind. Somewhere out in the Summer's night fog, there is a blood cow out too late. She follows the scent down the streets she wove the night before. Though the marching soldiers and whispers of assassins have scared most people into their houses, she can hear the chatterings of two women. They are gossiping. How droll. And yet, how opportunistic for her. If she isn't smart about this, she will be forced to beg a glass of blood from the bottle Devereux opened right before she left. Louise stand against a wall, letting the wisps of fog and shadow wrap around her as she watches the two women. She waits until they part from one another and is silently thankful that the one disappearing into her house is not the one she smelled from afar.

Her prey meanders the streets and Louise can smell the anxiety building in the woman. The darkness, the streets, the murmurs of death may have been causing this woman's sudden increased heartbeat but Louise imagined her stalking did not help. She paused when the woman paused, walked when the woman walked but did not turn when the woman turned to look at her. Louise smirked as she walked closer to the woman, who backed up against the stone wall of the dead alleyway. She certainly didn't need this woman screaming and ruining her hard word. Her fingers tugged back the hood and she stared into the woman's eyes.

"Sssshhh, don't scream," she dominated her prey through a cooing sound. She even lifted a hand to cup the woman's cheek, her thumb brushing across the skin in a calming gesture. "Just relax." The woman did as she asked. Louise felt the muscles beneath her hand ease, watched the woman's shoulder slacken. "Close your eyes." The woman obeyed and Louise double-checked that no one was around before enjoying her meal. She pressed herself against the woman, closing her mouth against the warm throat. She enjoyed the feeling of heat against her icy lips before stroking the vein with her tongue. The woman moaned as Louise sunk her fangs in and drank. She drank only enough to subdue the hunger pains. She couldn't completely enjoy this woman without leaving her in the alleyway for scoundrels to take advantage of.

She stayed by the woman's side as she led her home. The woman was wobbly and had vomited when Louise pulled away from her. No one had ever reacted that way, so Louise felt it only fair to assure herself the woman returned home safely. Her generosity cost her more than she cared to endure.

She rounded a corner and there was a gang of them. Ten or so, cloaks and daggers, standing around a home that looked familiar. Louise couldn't place it with incompletely satisfied hunger booming in her head. All she noted was the group of men. They reminded her of a pack of street dogs and she was surprised they were baring fangs of their own. She hadn't attracted their attention yet, but she didn't care. They were in her way and that's what she cared about. There was enough tension in the air that she knew if she walked that way, they would want explanations. **Always uphold the Masquerade, Childe, Sébastien's voice whispers in the crevices of her mind. As if he were standing beside her, ordering her, Louise remained perfectly still.**
A shrill scream broke the strained silence. Louisé lost interest with the men in exchange for the window that burst open, one of the panes breaking and falling to the ground with a sick crack. A body, blood staining the front of his nightshirt, was shoved out the window with no ceremony. The body, who she could not recognize for his head being turned, smacked against the ground the same way the wooden window pane had. A man threw his hood back and Louisé was not surprised to see the scarred face of Guise sneering down at the body. He spat on it and kicked it over with his foot. Admiral Gaspard de Coligny's dead eyes stared in her direction. Others followed their leader and removed their hoods.

Louisé's eyes went wide and her fingers cut into the stone she hid behind. It wasn't the dead man that shocked her. The Huguenot was before his maker now and beyond her help, even if she had chosen to help him. It wasn't the way Guise lifted his sword and chopped off the man's head that left her aghast. No, it was the young man who stood by Guise's side. heart didn't need to beat in order to tighten so painfully. She turned away and stared up at the night as the men scattered. Reinforcements were coming and fast. Louisé had no time to consider anything but how to get back to the Louvre.

While she slept the day away beside her mentor, the war that scarred her childhood reignited with the death of the respected Protestant leader. Guise and his men had piked Coligny's head before fleeing to kill other prominent Huguenot leaders. What followed would go down in history as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. As she dreamed of the youth she saw, hundreds were being slaughtered by her Catholic brethren beyond the walls of the Louvre. Louisé awoke to an uneasy Devereux and the sound of gunfire echoed in the space between them. The smell of blood wafted on the breeze, but it was hardly tantalizing to the Ventrue.

"What's happening?" she asked. Her voice was small as she studied the stony expression on Devereux's face.

"What do you think?" Devereux shook his head and drank. "De Guise is an idiot! Reckless and without check…"

Louisé walked closer to the window, her muscles tightening as another scream pierced the night. "Is this all de Guise?"

Devereux shook his head. "No. Charles has sent his own men into the fray. They are cutting down the Protestants like a scythe does wheat."

Louisé did not need to know anything more. She drank her blood, pulled on a dressing gown and left the room to distract herself from her thoughts. The screams and gun shots brought up nightmares from the past she wished she could make disappear. Images of candlelit chapels and arrows in her face, a symphony of cries and split throats. There wasn't a sufficient amount of reading that could distract her and she was too distracted to write. The palace air was thick with fear and paranoia. The Kindred were obviously antsy, hungry from the blood they could smell spilling just outside their walls and with few means to quench the thirst. Humans she could smell were trembling in their rooms. The clatter of Swiss guards bounced off the stone walls as they made their rounds. While she was certain everyone inside was safe, she was not certain everyone wanted to be inside. She came across a lonely figure in the hallway. He was staring out the windows with sad, tired eyes and a wine bottle hung from his hand.

Her presence startled him. He rubbed his face and took a swig of wine. He wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand. "My wife hasn't sent you, has she?" he slurred.
Louisé cocked a brow at the man. "Who is your wife?"

He studied her with his tired eyes then laughed. "How are you here and yet you do not know?"

Louisé pursed her lips. He was no Malkavian but he certainly favored one in his drunken state. She didn't have time for a drunk man's riddles. She walked by him and he stopped her by grabbing her wrist. Louisé licked along the back of her teeth, glancing down at the hand then the face of the man who owned it. He had blue eyes, a hawk nose, a tiny mouth and the ghost of a beard growing. He wasn't the most handsome man she had ever encountered. "I've been busy doing other things."

"I was married but a few days ago and yet you do not know me?" He was still chuckling.

Louisé gawked (as much as a Ventrue can) at the man only a few years older than she. "Henry of Navarre," she whispered.

He smiled and nodded. "Now we understand, do we? So...has my sent thee?"

"No. I do not serve Margaret of Valois," Louisé admitted. She removed Henry's hand from her person. "What are you doing here, Your Highness?" There was no excuse not to be polite.

"Finding my muse for sleep." He lifted the bottle of wine and drank again. Caring nothing for drunks, Louisé took the bottle from his hand and tossed it down the hallway. The shattering of the glass was a welcome sound to the cacophony of death resonating from outside. Henry just stared at her, as if he could not believe someone would act that way toward him. His face contorted into sloppy anger. "How dare you!" It would have sounded more threatening if he weren't drunk and she weren't capable of killing him in a near instant.

"There is no excuse for a king to be slovenly drunk when he has a wife to comfort," she lectured. "Really, there's no excuse for a king to be slovenly drunk ever."

"I don't need a sermon," he hissed and turned his attention back to the window.

"You look like what you need is sleep." Louisé looked around and wondered why there weren't any guards around. "Where is your entourage?"

"I escaped them. I felt suffocated," he groaned. "And there is no sleeping with that woman. She is obnoxiously Catholic and I can't stand any more of her self-righteous commentary at the present."

"Hm, still eloquent enough for a drunk," Louisé chided as she walked closer to one of the windows. "Don't you think you'd feel safer with a guard nearby, Your Royal Highness?"

"I feel quite safe right here, thank you very much." His bleary gaze settled on her silently. He was probably pondering how a member of the court he had not met could speak to him so casually. If only he knew what kind of court she came from, then he might not feel so safe. If only, if only..."What is your name?" he asked.

Distracted by gunfire, Louisé did not answer right away. "Should not his majesty know that already?" She smirked at him. Henry was lucky she had drank the entire glass of blood before deciding to wander.

"Should not a subject know better than speak in this manner to their king?"

"You're not my king," she put it bluntly. "I'm French. Charles is my king. And you-"

"Are the Protestant bastard who married his sister," he interrupted her.
Louisé frowned. She hated being interrupted, especially with drunken babble. "If your parents were married when you were conceived, I don't see how you can be a bastard," she responded.

Henry laughed for a second time. He ran fingers through his strawberry blonde hair. "Who are you? It is rare for me to encounter someone as humorous and impetuous all at the same time."

"Maybe it would be better if I remain a mystery," she answered. She looked out the window. The glow of fires added a hellish light to the night sky. Somewhere in the distance, de Guise was cutting someone open and spilling their blood onto Parisian stones. And beside him was a young man. A young man with dark hair that... Someone was touching her. Louisé pulled away from her thoughts to watch the drunk fingers of Henry push hair behind her ear. How curious drunken men were.

"My wife hasn't sent you. You have no idea who I am. You speak to me as though you have no fear of the consequences. There is enough mystery there. How can giving me a name damage any of that?"

Louisé stepped away from his fingers and considered his request. "Louisé," she said.

"Louisé...?" He wanted something more.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter, Your Majesty. Tonight I am here, tomorrow I may be gone. Names won't matter because you won't come looking for me. You have no reason to."

"You don't know that. You are very appealing to my eyes and easy to talk to."

Louisé drew her brows together and looked him up and down. "You are drunk and I had no idea who you are. And, though I mean no offense Your Majesty, I don't care who you are. We shall never see one another again, so there is no reason speaking with you should not be easy. There is no one to make sure I say what I ought to."

"Uhg..." Henry grabbed his head and bent over at the waist. Louisé stepped back in case he decided to empty his stomach onto the floor. He took some deep breaths then straightened. "Maybe this is all a dream. Maybe I drank too much and have passed out in my bed." He stared at her. "Perchance I am dreaming this conversation because there is no one else to talk to."

Louisé shrugged. "Perhaps." A scream, close to the Louvre, shattered the silence and Louisé felt her body tense. She spared a look at Henri, who appeared pale and ill. She knew it wasn't the wine that caused that look. He was Protestant and she imagined the hundreds of pictures that flew through his mind. Here they were. Catholic Kindred and Protestant King standing side-by-side while their counterparts slaughtered one another outside their walls.

Henry pressed his forehead to the cold stone, "This isn't how I wanted things to be."

No one was sure how many had been killed during the Massacre. There were thousands. When Louisé and Devereux rode their carriage back to Vincennes, bodies were stacked in piles. Blood clung to the streets like red sludge. Nocturnal crows and owls picked at the dead. All forms of nighttime beast enjoyed the feast of corpses. Louisé covered her nose until they were well away from the city center. She thought of her conversation with Henry, how her sister would have been jealous to know she had spoken with a King, how her Sire would have smacked her about for speaking so casually or threatening the Masquerade. Devereux thought it humorous. He had no high opinion of Henry of Navarre aside from the fact that he was not as easily manipulated as Charles IX of France.

Louisé never imagined she would long for the drudgery of Dijon. Paris held too many extremes for her. She didn't want to think about how many innocent people had been slaughtered in the name of
her faith, or how her investments had help the Catholics do it. She didn't want to know how much
money she had earned at the expense of so much wasted blood and lost life. Louisé never wanted to
be that kind of Ventrue. She didn't want to become the kind of Kindred, like Cervantes, who
enjoyed the thrills of physical pain inflicted on others. She wasn't entirely sure what kind of vampire
she wanted to become, or would be, but she knew she did not want that. Maybe time would build a
stronger substance out of her, but only time would tell.
By the time they'd returned to Dijon, news had already spread to the Four Corners regarding the slaughter in Paris. Louisé chose not to talk about it. She had nothing good to say. She thought she would have. She thought she would display blatantly Catholic loyalties by giving de Guise a metaphorical pat on the back, but she didn't. The part of her that wanted the Protestants out of Paris had been grossly unprepared for what that might mean. It taught her how naïve she still was, how she lacked a certain ruthlessness needed to drive out one's enemies. But the Protestants heaped unceremoniously against one another's corpses were not the Protestants in her mind. They weren't war-stricken, arrow toting degenerates who assaulted Catholic children in chapels because there was no one better to pay the price of their anger. They weren't cowards who murdered elderly priests and smacked young girls around to feel justified. They weren't the fiery-faced monsters she that haunted her mortal dreams with their hellish crusades. No, the martyrs decorating the streets of Paris with their blood had been frightened, passionate and rightfully wronged. They hadn't been looking for the war de Guise ignited and threw in their faces; they just got burned as a result. They had been looking for political justice for the slaughter of their most admired Admiral. They had been looking for the attention of a royal family too paranoid to consider their demands.

It is the only time in her life Louisé is ashamed to be Catholic; one of the few times she thinks to herself how much more civilized Kindred are compared to humans. The callous, Kindred nature in her finds it repugnant that she ever attended those nightly Masses or clung close to the words of mortal men on a pulpit. The part of her holding onto her humanity simply holds the broken pottery pieces of guilt, disappointment and shame. But she, as a whole, doesn't ruminate on it long. There's no time. In short succession, mini-massacres sprout up throughout France: Toulouse, Rouen, Bordeaux and Lyon. Twelve in all and Dijon is spared. That is until the refugees sweep into the city: displaced Kindred whose herds and financial livelihoods are destroyed by the fatal conflict between faiths. And amongst them is the once-upon-a-time Seneschal, Denis Cifuentes. But that was a little later. For now, immediately, Louisé receives urgent correspondence from the Jewish banker who had been so bored with her modest financial decisions. She responds by riding into the city and gracing the steps of his business. He sits her down and shows her the number. Louisé will not be so wide-eyed again until an Englishman offers her an opportunity she couldn't possibly refuse.

Louisé made a fortune. She took meager allowances and turned them around more than twenty-times over their worth. This is the first time she feels she accomplished something Ventruesque besides her Agoge. While those around her have invested in buildings, wine or textiles- the meat of modern Europe at peace- Louisé reaps her worth from gunpowder plots and warfare. The substantial amount, she assumed she would care nothing for because it was earned by the blood of many, leaves her feeling secure. She is too Ventrue not to feel intensely satisfied with her decision. She is too Ventrue not to easily put her religious considerations behind her when the opportunities prosperity affords her begin to reveal themselves. Pride and commerce are too muddled in her blood. And in this silent revelry, a speck of her mind begins to understand why Sébastien would be so willing to abandon his Childe for the prospect of Nice. There is nothing emotions or religious loyalty can promise that cold, hard coin can't many times over. There is no sentimentality so strong between Kindred that when opportunity presents itself, they won't abandon one another to seize it. This was the case between Sébastien and Louisé, subsequently Louisé and Devereux. There was no guarantee for LaCroix that his Childe would prove profitable or accessory to his climb to power. He could not count out nor measure her potential. What he could count was the number of Kindred who would fear his role as Sheriff of Nice, the percent of revenue he would accrue by way of seafaring trade. He could part, parcel and calculate his status serving under the Prince of Nice. And Louisé could do the same in Dijon. Her mind could already picture her enterprise after a few months, a few years. She had LaCroix blood in her veins, and with it, his industrious nature for mercantilism. She saw, as he
always did, how having fortune could help overcome the basic hurdles of Kindred society. When one is wealthy, one is influential. Influence breeds power and power, like blood, is life to their kind. In Louise’s immature mind, she feels minimal regret for what she had done to make herself better. In her naive mind, she believes Devereux will understand and praise her for her initiative and success.

"You tell me how this happened!" Ramon barks into the face of the man responsible for his investments.

"I don't know what to tell you Monsieur…they were destroyed!" the man whimpers.

Devereux takes this news and his body turns it into anger. He takes his anger home with him and lets it sit in the hollow of his abdomen. He leaves it there: a seething, brooding mass of black, half-cocked and ready to strike. Ramon secretly hopes one of his protégés fumbles, that he might unleash his anger in one, tyrannical wave. But they have become efficient ferrets. His anger makes him loathe them because he doesn't want efficiency these nights. He wants an excuse to fight and claw and rave. He wants to dig his fingers into the fleshy substance of lower Kindred and listen to them whimper. He wants to watch them writhe beneath his volatile presence as the black pile of burning anger is dumped inside them. Devereux wants to poison someone with his rage and watch them crumple. But most of all: he wants his money back.

It is an ugly snake that slithers and churns inside him, becomes a cold-blooded, hot knot in his chest when he calculates his lost revenue. While he had made a tidy sum as a result of the wedding, it meant nothing when three of his textile mills are razed by furious Huguenots. Two vineyards are burned by Catholics and Devereux feels inclined to strangle the Pope. While, by no means impoverished by the situation, Devereux is handicapped and incapable of investing with a war threatening the country. No investment bound to land is safe. Everything is in artillery. And the most profitable of those opportunities have been recently bought up. Without knowing the investors name, Devereux cannot be sure he isn't breaching Kindred-owned domains. His anger, fed by frustration, grows inside him for well over a month as successive massacres continue to threaten his financial assets not tied directly to the city.

The night Denis Cifuentes of Portugal arrived on his doorstep is a night the knot in his chest is pulled tightly. Devereux is a rational man in his own mind and saw nothing wrong with holding the Jewish banker upside down over his balcony for half an hour until the man answered Ramon's question. He wanted to know who bought up artillery and possessed a hefty share of metal trade for armor, sword and other military regalia. Cifuentes' arrival saved the man's life and bought him time to consider his answer. Usually jovial in response to the arrival of long-time comrades, Devereux did not bother to cover his irritation when greeting Denis. Denis' haggard appearance took Ramon by surprise but not enough to ease on the coil of his anger. Denis wasn't to be blames, though; he was an unsuitable candidate to unleash his wrath upon and, more than likely, not the party responsible for the destruction of his investments. Even the servants had already tended to the basic needs of their guest in order to avoid the scathing fire in their master's eyes. Devereux needed an outlet for his petty rage soon, before he erupted like Vesuvius and turned everyone around him into ash.

"Good grief, man!" Devereux exclaimed as he dropped into a seat across from Cifuentes. "What's become of you?"

Cifuentes sipped on the blood offered him. His face contorted as he answered, "These damn religious wars. That's what's become of me."

Devereux leaned against his chair, allowing his mind to focus solely on his friend instead of the Jew upstairs. "What happened exactly?"
Denis sighed and rubbed the middle of his forehead. He had obviously told this tale numerous times and was at the point that saying 'These damn religious wars' ought to be sufficient. "The Protestant faction of Lyon went up in arms over what happened in Paris. They started by attacking Catholic-owned businesses then progressed to assaulting some of the smaller Catholic churches. The Catholics responded by doing likewise to the Protestants, only they raised their wagers and dragged Protestants from their beds to kill them in the streets."

"Where do you come in?" Ramon didn't need Denis telling him what he already knew was the basic start to every massacre that erupted over the country. He needed to know what happened to his friend to bring him to such a low appearance. Disheveled was not a look Ventrue sported well, and nor should they.

"What we didn't realize until it was almost too late was the Sabbat were behind the Catholics, especially the nighttime attacks and slaughters. The Nosferatu figured out they were disguising themselves as priests and supplying Catholic citizens with weaponry in time for us to mingle amongst the Protestants and drive the Sabbat out, but at a cost."

"What was the cost? By your appearance, I will wager your finances and home were directly affected. And if you are here in Dijon, it wouldn't be presumptuous of me to assume you've lost your seat as Seneschal."

Cifuentes nodded and drank more from his glass. "Our Prince, who had never been a particularly war-minded personality, was taken out by a few Lasombra. I didn't even get a chance to claim the title for myself before Sabbat overtook my home. I fled to save my life and as consequence, have been barred from the city and the wealth of my resources."

"Who barred you?" Ramon narrowed his eyes.

Denis snarled, "That grey-haired harpy with her gnarled fingers! That back-stabbing wench assumed role of Prince as soon as she could. I don't know how she accomplished it, but I'm not foolish enough to believe she had nothing to do with the Sabbat finding my home. With our Sheriff also dead, I was the only person in her way."

"Told you to get rid of that cow ages ago, my friend." Devereux ignored the glare from his friend. "Still, what other motive would she have to try and kill you besides the obvious allure of power?"

Cifuentes shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. I know relations between us soured considerably after the situation with LaCroix and his Childe. But she was never bold enough to say anything to my face about it. I only found out about what she truly thought of me from whispers on the street."

"I imagine she believes she can turn Lyon into a bastion of discipline and Old Ways Ventrue philosophy."

"Perhaps," Cifuentes murmured.

"Well, fear not my friend! You may stay here until you get back on your feet or gain access to your funds in Lyon, whichever comes first." Devereux stood.

"Thank you, my friend. Hopefully, it will not be long."

"Let me know if I may of service in his endeavor. Unfortunately, I must tend to business matters of my own but my servants shall show you to appropriate quarters." Devereux took Cifuentes' hand and gave it a strong shake.

He then returned to the banker, sniveling and shuddering in a corner of the room as far from the
balcony as was possible. Devereux approached the man and kneeled in front of him. "Good man, I
have given you considerable pause to answer my question. Do understand your ethics and scruples
about compromising those ethics mean nothing to me. Also understand that, should you choose not
to answer my question forthwith, I will not hang you over the balcony but take my time breaking
your fingers and toes until you rethink your choice. The decision is entirely yours, my friend."

"W-will you let me go home if I do? Will you let me live?" the man blubbered.

"You are no use to me dead, fool. You manage my funds and while I could certainly find someone
else to do this task, finding someone as discreet as yourself would be cumbersome," Devereux
responded, the black knot tightening more.

"F-fine. I will tell you." He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his shirt, causing Devereux's stomach to
roll with disgust. Humans could be such disgusting creatures. The man took a shaky breath, "I can't
give you a full name because she didn't give me one."

"She?" Devereux interrupted. "So it was a woman?"

"I wouldn't call her a woman. She was more like a girl. One of your kind," the man hesitated,
refusing to say the word "vampire". But that wasn't what concerned Devereux. It was the girl he was
talking about. His insides were boiling, veins hot. The man continued, "She came in a few months
ago with a list and pittance to invest. I told her she ought not get her hopes up but she insisted.
Nothing happened to her funds then suddenly, they exploded! She came in a few weeks ago to
review her earnings. Then she chose to buy up more until she owned majority amounts of the
companies or investments."

"And this girl...what did she look like?" Devereux couldn't immediately jump to conclusions. He
had seen quite a few youthful Toreadors roaming the streets of Dijon these nights and Malkavians
were known to embrace whoever the voices led them to, regardless of age (children aside).

"Black hair, blue eyes, medium height. Lovely, all things considering. She was very serious for her
age. May I leave now?"

"And the name? What name did she leave you with?" Though Devereux needed no further
confirmation, he liked to have all things clarified.

"Chambert. Mademoiselle Chambert. That's all I was left with."

Devereux ordered the man out of his presence and stood in the middle of the room, feeling the black
beast raging inside him. One of his own had gone behind his back and with their naïve, self-centered
intentions, destroyed property of his. He gnashed his teeth and fumed about the room. The burn of
betrayal gnawed in his blood. At least he had his answers and appropriate outlet for his anger.

It was a bad night. It was a mosaic of events that on their own, were nothing but a drop in the bucket,
but put together designed an evening of fresh hell for Louise. Her favorite gown was mysteriously
stained with either blood or wine. It didn't really matter since it rendered the dress unsalvageable and
her out a bit of money to replace it. She found a Lyonian refugee dining on the favorite of her herd
and entered into a deliriously exhausting battle of words with the Gangrel. When words failed, she
bared her fangs, snarled and dominated him out of her domain. She carried her irritation and mildly
satisfied appetite to Javier's door. And it got worse.

What Louise had done out of sheer self-gratifying curiosity, Javier took to mean genuine interest or
mutual, physical lust. His brazen, frequent attempts to press his lips to hers only fed her frustration.
Over a month with no combat training rusted any skills she'd acquired, so she had no patience for romance. Louise shoved him. When he pulled her to him, she smacked him and demanded he be serious. He got mad, Brujah passion enflamed and insulted, and punched her. She caught his knuckles with the edge of her jaw. And so it ensued: an impromptu grappling match of claws and fangs. She had injured his pride and rekindled some ancient blood feud notorious between their clans. When he called her a "damn, dirty Ventrue", she smacked his face and left.

Whatever hopes she had for the evening improving were dashed by two events occurring back-to-back of one another. She had a job to accomplish after Javier that required her first, solitary, unsheltered encounter with a Malkavian. Devereux dealt more directly with the primogen than Louise believes the Prince did. As a result, Devereux often sent his protégés rushing about the city with correspondence. Ghouls work, truly, but Devereux had recently shed his genteel skin and dispensed all trade of demands to his wards in the hopes one would complain, fail and give him just cause to tear their skin off with his nails. Tonight had been Louise's turn to be put to the test and she refused to fail. Refusing to fail meant withstanding the Oracle at Delphi speech the Malkavian primogen muttered with unblinking eyes. Louise entered the haphazard dwelling, her stomach churning from the smell of mold and incense imbedded in the walls. Delphi, indeed. She held the letter out to the woman when she answered the door. The primogen took Louise's wrist instead. Her grip was as dry and soft as a child's, her eyes searching Louise.

"The blue-eyed daughter of Eros brings us words from the puppeteer?"

Louise blinked. Her mind tried to piece that apart, to little avail. "Um…no? Devereux told me to bring this to you. He said it was important."

"All strings tied to the marionette are important, especially if she holds the knife that cut them and with the other hand, offers them up to another." The woman nodded in agreement with her own words.

"Yes, well, have a good-evening," Louise replied and turned to leave before her headache worsened. The feather-light grip tightened and forced Louise's eyes to the primogen's.

"This blue-eyed daughter of Eros, a feather pillow for thy head shall soon be a rock instead," her tone was grave, full of warning.

"What? I don't understand," Louise pressed, irritation rising.

"I am Philomela and you, Procne. Why do your ears not see the beautiful tapestry of my words?"

"Because I have limited exposure to your clan," Louise admitted.

"A pity, a pity! This child of Malkav finds interest in the daughter of Eros. Be weary! The thorns and poisonous caresses of the Spanish carnation bar thy journey home."

The headache she had when she left was a foggy bastard-child of hunger and confusion. What little she knew of Malkavians shed light to nothing. She understood not all of them spoke in a jumble of lyrical and prophesy, but luck had not been with her tonight in terms of decipherable conversation. She would have spent another hour with the Malkavian, though, if it had meant she could have avoided the final, foul encounter of the night.

Augustinia Cervantes' overdone cackle stabbed knives into Louise's aching head. Bereft of her Parisian comforts following the murder of whatever noble patronized her, Cervantes caravanned from town to town until she settled in Dijon. Here less than a fortnight, the Toreador not only managed to further knock Devereux from favor but steal two members of Louise's coterie. Like the
bees they were, Odette and Félix flew to the bitter-sweet nectar that was Cervantes. Discontented, Louisé made a point to avoid the woman and her troupe of outlandish disciples. Cervantes must have been well aware of Louisé's hard work to dodge interaction, because she all but pounced on the young Ventrue as she made the miscalculation of turning one street too early.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't my favorite amateur poet!" Augustinia trilled as she forcibly took Louisé's arm in her own.

A chill traveled up Louisé's spine, temporarily numbing her throbbing head. "You are too generous with your words. I'm no poet and unfortunately, in a hurry."

"In too great a hurry to even say hello? Perhaps ask 'How are you?' or 'Are you finding Dijon to your liking?? I'm beginning to think you're avoiding me, Louisé," Cervantes made a tutting noise. "And I thought we had such a lovely time in Paris!"

A lovely time was it, you fat, awful cow? Louisé narrowed her eyes for a second. Then she offered up a small smile as she extracted her arm from the forced embrace. "Why ever would I have a reason to avoid you, Augustinia? My nights are just packed with business, I'm afraid," Louisé explained. She was disturbed by the how close to a pack of wolves this gang of Toreadors resembled.

Cervantes pouted. "That Devereux is such a bully! Running you around like a slave! I'm sure there are ways you can earn your keep that don't require you be on your feet so much." Augustinia smirked and her followers, previous companions included, cackled. She continued, much to Louisé's chagrin, "Or, perhaps, he is afraid you would not perform satisfactory enough with such immobile work."

Louisé clenched her teeth together as the laughter increased. Yes, tonight was a very bad night. Once they were quieter, Louisé loosened her jaw and shot back, "Not all Kindred use that kind of currency. And since such tasks require very little intellect or talent, it's the default career of select clan, of which Ventrue is not one." And she walked away from them after that. "Good evening to you all."

Cervantes wouldn't be outdone. She shot at Louisé's back, "Do find time in your schedule, Louisé. I have a wonderful vintage to share. But don't wear that color, dear. It does nothing for you!"

It was a bad night. Louisé nursed wounded pride, head and jaw the entire carriage ride to the estate. She formed imaginary scenes in her head where she rips Cervantes' throat out before doing the same to Javier's shirt. She was overcome with bloodlust and irritation. All she wants is a glass of blood and hot bath. What she gets is a smack in the face.

He watched her hang by her wrists from chains on the wall while sipping casually from his glass. He had converted the so-called torture chamber to a cellar ages ago but maintained a small space in the back for torture if he needed it. Devereux hadn't been forced to resort to torture for well over a century since he found it barbaric and insulting to his refined senses. Exceptions could always be made, however. Louisé became that exception as soon as her last name passed the lips of the banker. Killing her had never crossed his mind, since that was the surest way to never see his money again. Staking her in the study and ordering the day servants to open the curtains every ten minutes was a strong consideration. And he had had time to consider her punishment. Closing his eyes, Devereux replayed the events of that night three nights ago.

The first thing he did was smack her across the face when she entered his home. Caught off guard, she stumbled sideways and nearly knocked over a two hundred year old suit of armor. She held her cheek and stared at him with wide, deer eyes. Her lip trembled and she asked:
"Why did you hit me?!"

"You traitorous, backstabbing whore!" he screamed into her face.

"What are you talking about?! Ah!" she cried out as he grabbed a fistful of hair and began dragging her down the hall. Oh, what Ventrue do behind closed doors. Noblesse oblige was for public spectacle alone.

"I raise you out of poverty! Shelter you, clothe you and care for you as though you were my own Childe and how do you repay me?!" he yanked, causing her to trip over her own feet and land on her knees. "With betrayal!"

"I don't know what you're talking about! Please! Let me go!" she begged.

Her whining provoked his anger. He wrenched her to her feet, feeling the nails of her hand sink into his skin in an effort to pry his hand from her hair. He released her hair and shoved her up against a stone wall, almost nose-to-nose with her. "You've been working awfully hard, haven't you? Quite the busy bee, aren't we?"

"I've been doing everything you ask me to do! So, yes, I've been quite busy. Sir, please," she fought not to sound as frightened as she appeared, "Tell me what's wrong. Why are you so angry with me?"

"Tell me what you've been doing behind my back, busy, little bee." She just stared at him, silent. By the tightening of her jaw, Devereux knew she wasn't confused about the question. She was just refusing to answer and implicate herself. He hissed, "Shall I refresh your memory, Louisé? Does the word 'artillery' mean anything to you?"

"I can explain," she started but he stopped her with another smack to the face. This time, all she did was flinch. He grabbed her arm and continued to haul her behind him until they reached his study. He threw her to the floor and slammed the door behind them.

"I am quite confident in your ability to explain yourself, Louisé. If I weren't, I obviously would not have asked you to. So, go ahead and explain yourself. I look forward to your excuses." When she tried to rise, he used his foot to shove her back onto her hands and knees. He loosened his belt and held it in his hand, letting the buckle suspend in midair.

Louisé looked over her shoulder, licked her bottom lip then replied, "I have no excuses. I did what I did because I wanted to."

The air cracked with the snap of his belt. The buckle whipped across her back and he watched her clench her body. Even her clothes were little protection against the strength of his hand. The fabric tore, caught in the metalwork of his buckle. "I know that already! I want to know why! Why you assumed it was an intelligent decision to skirt my authority in this matter?"

"I did it because I wanted my own wealth! I was tired with the small sum my Sire was sending and frustrated by the fact that he's living off my family's fortune!" She glared back at him. "I wanted some independence. I wanted something of my own!"

"You aren't independent, though, child! Everything you do and have is under my direct supervision. I am responsible for your behavior and what you do reflects upon me!" He snapped the belt again.

"No!" She surprised him by throwing her arm out to catch the belt before it hit her. With considerable strength for her age and frame, Louisé managed to rip the belt from his hand and throw it across the room with a tink-tink-tink of the buckle against stone. Louisé rose to her feet and
glared at her mentor. "I will not be beaten for doing what every Kindred does, what Ventrue are expected to do!"

Devereux stepped up to her and shouted, "Not if they compromise the domain and dignity of others! Especially if they affect me!"

Full of fight and defense now, Louisé snarled back. "How has it affected you?"

"Your gunpowder barrels blew up two of my mills and your weapons make our enemies stronger!"

Her eyes went wide. "What are you talking about?! I can't be held responsible for the way the products are used! If that were the case, you'd be held accountable for the actions of every drunk!"

"And that's why you are too naïve to make these decisions! You have no experience and received no approval from a wiser elder before acting on your own. Your self-centered ply for power was for very little, Louisé. I told you once before that you are nothing until I make you into something!"

And that is precisely what he did. He made her into an example and the object of his animosity. He dragged her down to the cellar and chained her to the wall until her only her toes grazed the floor below. Stripped to little more than her shift, he had her beaten with an array of items until she either passed out or begged him to stop in the most pitiful voice she could muster. He made the other two watch so that they understood how weak his tolerance was for betrayal, how replaceable they were, how fragile his favor was. Louisé groaned and he opened his eyes to stare at her. She hadn't fed since that night but even the beast was too weak to frenzy much. Being suspended made it no easier. He ran a thumb along the lip of his glass and drank, eyes glancing sideways at Denis' figure as he stepped up beside Ramon's chair.

"Far be it from me to criticize my host's actions, but don't you believe this to be a bit much?"

"She betrayed me. She deliberately went behind me back, knowing full well the proper protocol for fledgings of our kind. I cannot turn a blind or gentle eye to this, lest it encourage her to do it again and put my reputation on the chopping block. It is bad enough that Paris massacre brought Cervantes to my doorstep; I don't need her making it worse. I need her to be loyal!" Devereux huffed.

Cifuentes was silent, fingers stroking his beard. When he spoke, it was yet again to the defense of his protégé, "I'm sure her intentions were hardly to mar your good name."

"You're awfully protective of a girl you barely know," Devereux hissed.

Cifuentes shrugged. "Not really. She was impressive and if she caught your attention, worthy to some degree. Just seems a shame she's beat for doing what comes naturally. Besides, I believe there are more influential means of securing loyalty without pummeling it out of her."

"Oh? But this is so much fun!" Ramon finished his meal then stood and approached Louisé. She groaned, her eyelids fluttering before she caught sight of him. Like a rabid dog, she snarled and pressed her feet against the wall so she could reinforce her weight while her arms tugged on the chains and swung talons at Devereux. He stayed just out of reach of her and stared into eyes that were more animal than Kindred.

"You are my friend, Ramon, but I cannot agree with you in this. You do her a disservice by continuing this," Cifuentes lectured from behind him. "She will only learn to hate you and if she grows in potential and power, you will have a formidable enemy on your hands someday."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Devereux snapped.
"She's learned her lesson. If you want her loyalty, to ensure this doesn't happen again, I suggest a
blood bond."

Ramon sent a look of surprise to Denis, who simply shrugged. Blood bonds were something he
reserved for making ghouls and had never felt compelled to use on another vampire. Devereux was a
man who enjoyed the favor of people, but was not entirely comfortable with the thought of another
Kindred overcome with love for him. Though, in Louisé's case, he was sure the overcoming emotion
would be the hate Cifuentes had mentioned. Still, he could not have a Louisé becoming a loose
canon on him and threatening his hard work. He had assumed his teachings and sprinklings of favor
had been enough to instill a since of dependence and fidelity in her, but apparently it hadn't. There
was too much Sébastien in her, too much of something always trying to strive for better before it had
the clout to accomplish the task, too much dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. And while
that was certainly admirable for their existence, it would be all for not if she got killed so soon in this
life for angering or insulting the wrong people. Devereux was one of those people. The fact that her
investments supplied means to destroy other Kindreds' homes or financial resources meant the list of
others out for blood could get very long. Devereux was left with little recourse: if he wanted to
weaken the LaCroix blood in her veins, he would have to replace it with some of his.

"Fine. Fetch a bottle of blood for me before she tears me to pieces."

She didn't feel the way he pulled on the chains to yank her wrists up. She didn't feel how her mouth
was pried open or the bottle forced inside. All she knew was the blood that slid down her throat and
pooled in her abdomen. The haze her mind had been drifting in thinned with each gulp until
Devereux and his cellar came into focus. He lowered her feet to the ground and held the bottle of
blood until she sucked it dry. Being more aware was not necessarily a good thing. Now she could
feel the hot throb of pain all over her body from where Devereux had had his fun and taught her his
lesson. Everything she drank would work toward the single purpose of healing her broken body.
Devereux must have known this, because he uncorked another bottle with a 'Pop!' and held it out to
her once she was unshackled. Louisé snatched it from him and drank it down in little time.

"You will repay me for my lost industries, Louisé."

She lowered the bottle from her lips, one last swallow before she responded, "I cannot repay
imaginary sums never earned." Oh yes, the Ventrue resumed control easily once the frenzied beast
was fed.

"I realize that. You shall pay for the expenses to rebuild my mills." He stood in front of her.

Louisé's eyes focused on the blood-caked color of her shift, the vertical tears in the thin fabric and the
bruises on her wrists where shackles dug in; bruises that would take a little longer to heal. She looked
at him. "No."

"Excuse me?" he snapped at her and she flinched instinctively. "You'd dare refuse my orders? Did
being bound teach you nothing about who has the power here?"

Louisé ran her tongue along the back of her teeth to keep from saying anything. Being shackled had
taught her she needed to find someone else to manage her money, that she needed to be smarter
about hiding her personal actions from her mentor, that she was incredibly tired of being someone's
whipping girl. He stepped forward and thrust a finger against the center of her chest.

"I am only going to tell you this once: you are loyal and obedient to me or you are nothing. There
isn't a single person in this city who would miss you if you disappeared, Louisé. And your Sire
certainly wouldn't care. I will not continue going back to step one with you, child! So your choices
are thus: comply on your own will, I can make you comply and if you continue to refuse, I shall make your life such a hell that you will wish I had killed you instead."

All sinew and stubbornness, Louisé felt more enraged by his words than afraid of them. Her fingers clenched into fists then relaxed, repeating the process three more times. "I could just run away. I don't have to stay here."

Devereux laughed, a hollow sound. "I would love to see you try. Now, be a good girl and do as you're told. Tomorrow, we will go and settle the matter of my mills. You will provide the funds and we shall put this nasty business behind us. You will also give up majority hold over one of your investments and transfer it to my possession as restitution for betraying me, yes?" And then he gave her a pretentious pat on the cheek.

"I will pay for the mills, but I will not hand over my assets to you."

Devereux looked at her with an expression of confusion. Frustration brewed just beneath his skin, as if he couldn't possibly comprehend how or why someone with no influence of their own would dare refuse his request. "You will relinquish-"

"I will not!" she cut him off. She refused to allow him to steal her hard earned capital just because he felt impugned by a fledgling. It was not her fault humans blew up his stupid mills. She didn't put the barrels in their hands, tell them where the mills were or light the fuse. She just reaped the benefits of good business.

He narrowed his eyes. His lips curled into a lethal smirk and he nodded. "I see. Well," he sighed and clapped his hands, "If you refuse to obey, then you leave me no choice." Louisé felt her muscles tighten. So, this is how her life would be: shuddering beneath the hands of a grown man throwing a toddler's tantrum. "I will make you obey."

Louisé didn't need to understand what he meant to completely disagree with it. She took a step away from him, fully believing he intended on shackling her back up to the wall and starving her until she acquiesced. And she couldn't let that happen. Devereux didn't give her much room to fight or flee. He lunged forward and wrapped an arm around her waist. The other hand attempted to wrangle her arms, which flung around the air and scratched. He managed to pin one arm down to her side before she elbowed him ruthlessly in the stomach. She might not have been as strong or powerful as him, but she was lithe, recently fed and incredibly angry. She heard him grunt and hiss in her ear, his arm jerking just enough for her to dash out of his embrace and make a break for the cellar door. Louisé didn't get far. A history of warfare and physicality in life allowed Devereux a quick recovery and he was on her.

There was no ceremony or grace about what happened between them. Angered by too many things in his head, Devereux shoved her to the ground and used her legs to flip her onto her back. Louisé kicked and struggled as he climbed atop her and used his weight to keep her still. The amount of fight she put up was admirable, but useless. Devereux held both wrists above her head with one hand and sat on her leg to keep them immobile. He lifted his wrist to his mouth and bit into the skin. Blood oozed out and before any was wasted, he pressed the open wound to Louisé's mouth. Her head snapped to either side, smearing the blood around her cheeks.

"Open your damn mouth or I will break your arms and open it myself!" Devereux barked, frustration mounting as his wrist closed. Why did she have to make this so unbelievably hard? Ramon squeezed her wrists to get the point across and bit into his wrist once more. He continued squeezing until Louisé opened her mouth and cried out. He slapped the bleeding wrist to her mouth and released her wrists to hold her face steady. He caught her teary stare and said only one word to get the job done, "Drink!"
Bound

Being blood bound to Devereux was an experience she embraced in a manner similar to how humans embrace pestilence or taxes: with fear and fits of anger. The events of the cellar had been enough to numb her protests and weaken any physical attempts to stop him. Even the smallest craving for another taste had been sewn in her belly. Two nights after, he needed only ask her open her mouth to feed her more. A third sip the next night and the bond was complete. Bound to him by invisible chains, Louise did what he wanted with no quarreling. At first she felt no sense of love or adoration toward him. She didn't really hate him either, though she had after his use of excessive force in the cellar. Perhaps she had hated him so passionately that the amorous effects of his blood brought her to a comfortable place of indifference with the inability to disobey. Time would change this comfortable place, and minimal time at that.

Regardless of her affections (or lack thereof) toward him, Devereux took complete advantage of his successful stripping of her will. He trotted them to the Jewish banker and simply asked that she transferred majority share of one investment to him. She was screaming inside, but nothing came out except her submission. And then she felt it: the twang of satisfaction from pleasing him. It frightened her. He took her asset with a chunk of her pride, gave her a smile and patted her cheek; inside her chest a vicious storm was brewing. It wasn't just that her free will had been stripped away. It wasn't that he had forced himself on her to do it, either. It was that her mind was now tricked into believing there was nothing more important than the whims of this man, nothing more pleasing than the feel of his hand on her face. She both wanted more and to vomit. Her mind was a kerfuffle, a brouhaha between her independent nature and the personality bred from Devereux's blood. She watched him with eyes that cherished, blue windows to a force of nature waiting to strike.

What fed the silent tempest was how he treated her. What gave the gale more power was his exploitation of her inescapable youth, the condescending coddling that came along with that. What drove her mad were the waves of pleasure she relished and detested whenever he indulged her with his attentions. The way he patted her cheek, clutched her arm or tut-tut-tutted her attempts to improve upon his wishes were reflections of his reaction to her adolescence. He treated her like a child. He treated her like she was five, ten or the age Sebastien LaCroix had frozen her in forever, not as a creature capable of living for centuries, never as an equal. And she hadn't the will to react with anything but appreciation.

Devereux had been angry over his mills and vineyards; yes, it was proper for her to reimburse him for the reconstruction since she had not only dishonored him but disregarded "proper protocol" in manners such as investments. But she found through discourse with elder clansmen that proper punishment would have been immediate dismissal and social expulsion for a set amount of time no one elder could agree upon. The same conversations revealed that Devereux was famous for such punishments, that many a hopeful and prospective Kindred entered Devereux's doors only to be kicked out for being too grasping. When the topic of blood bond was raised, she received derisive looks and curt responses amounting to the fact that Devereux abstained from binding anything to him that lacked a beating heart. Louise was left to conclude there was some significance to him breaking his own tradition to blood bind her instead of kicking her out the back door to flee the sunrise.

There was nothing so outstanding about Louise that she believed herself valuable enough that Ramon Devereux, losing favor or not, would secure her to his side with a blood bind. She might never know the real answer, either, but the pats and condescending smiles led her suspicions to believe this binding was the vampiric equivalent to her father restricting her to her room. He wasn't just angry over the mills or the money; he was angry that she was young and uncontrollable in his eyes. He was anxious that she made decisions as capriciously as a child but instead of
experiencing the consequences of such careless activity, he saw her rewarded. To circumvent future endeavors, Devereux wounded her pride by regarding her as a toddler to be corrected and corralled. He would rap her knuckles, tut at her words and remind her exactly what she was without bluntly saying it. He would patronize her in public to guarantee she never felt so bold as to make a move without his symbolically parental opinion. Devereux was going to simultaneously draw on and punish aspects of her youth that made Sébastien LaCroix silently regret her embrace and give him more motive to abandon her. And she could do nothing about it since she could not disobey or harm him without causing excruciating pain to her own body. And no matter how incapable she was of fighting the way he treated her, no matter how overtly adoring she appeared, she was still capable of feeling insulted. After a month, she could take no more. What little free will still remained, she conjured up for a confrontation between thrall and regent.

"Why did you do this to me?" she asked him.

"Do what to you?" Devereux gave her a smile.

Louisé felt her body melting at the sight of his smile. Something inside cracked in order to keep her resolute. "Blood bind me."

His smile faded. He narrowed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "You left me no choice, Louisé. You refused to obey, refused fidelity to me."

"Then why not dismiss me? Why not do what my Sire did and abandon me somewhere? How is there any benefit to binding me to yourself?" She tried her best to ignore the fact that his glare cramped her body with pain.

"Dismissing you would make an enemy of you for me, and I have enough enemies in the world without adding to the sum. And I could not dismiss you without having to explain to the court the reasons why. As reckless as your decision was to sneak around behind my back, I would be an idiot to deny the financial success of your investments. If I kicked you from my home, I couldn't be absolutely sure no one else would take you in and give themselves a fiscal advantage over me. You can never let your enemies find a reason to become more powerful than yourself, girl." He shook his head. "No, no! That would never do. Binding you to me secures your allegiance and the steady stream of income needed to reassert my authority in this city."

"Then might I make a request?" Louisé asked with considerable bravery.

"You are not in a place to do so, but I feel like humoring someone this evening. Request away," he responded.

"Stop treating me like a child," what sounded like a glaring demand in her head came out the meekest of appeals.

He laughed and her stomach flipped with bliss; the rebelliously independent portion of her mind exploded with rage. Devereux rose from his seat. Her body went tight with expectation. "And what makes you believe I'm treating you like a child, hm?"

"The way you choose to behave toward me."

He took a step toward her. "And what do I do that leads you to believe I treat you like a child?"

"You pat my cheek and chastise me in public. You use a voice that sounds like you're talking to a toddler and I don't appreciate it."

He moved closer and Louisé felt her resolve chip away, disappear into the haze of affection his blood
compelled she have for him. "That isn't very sound evidence, Louisé. As your mentor, I am obliged to correct you. You are here to learn and grow into a proper representative of our clan. I can't have you going around acting heedlessly like you did before," and his voice gained the tone she mentioned prior, "Now can I?"

She barely had anything to draw from until he asked that. Once her ears captured that autocratic question with dulcet coating, a spark ignited in her belly. "Well, you can certainly do it without regarding me as though I were seven! I don't hear you speaking to the other two in this way or treating them like they are incapable of thinking for themselves." Actually, no matter how he vouched differently, Devereux had never treated her quite the same as the other two.

Her mentor simply smirked and reached out to lay his hands on her shoulders. Once upon a time, Louisé would have dodged his touch. Now, she just succumbed to a sensation little duller than ecstasy. He knew that too. Devereux knew his touch reduced her to little more than a fawning simpleton, that she would want it like a drunk wants his pint. "You are just tired. And it's no wonder, how hard you've been working…how hard Cervantes has made it for you to accomplish your tasks."

His hands moved from her shoulders to cup her cheeks and she was in Heaven, like all that had been missing from her life was this moment. She was too enthralled with this situation to feel disgust and disappointment for herself, to notice the LaCroix blood howling in her veins. Devereux looked into her eyes, "Your hard work has pleased me. You want me to pleased, yes?"

"O-of course," she responded in a voice tempered by the bond.

He lowered his head and whispered in her ear, "Then we won't speak of this again. Do you understand?"

Louisé, incapable of coherent speech at this point, nodded emphatically. Devereux released her face and gripped her shoulders again, steering her toward the door. "There, now! All is well and you are off to bed. The dawn is approaching." And that was that.

Power is everything to Kindred who have earned the right to wield it. Power comes by many roads: wealth, age, ability, generation and charisma. It is easy to gain power when you can make people fall in love with you on the honeysuckle promises dripping off your tongue. It is not, however, easy to maintain power when the foundation of your throne is the good opinions of a race constituting self-servants, degenerates, sycophants. Moths looking for the brightest flame. Devereux used to be that flame. His strut, with confidence in spades, captured the attention of many while his wealth and pomp held their spheres of praise in perfect orbit around himself. What he rarely relied on using with the populace, not including his protégés, was fear. What Louisé had always suspected as a weakness of his was confirmed: Devereux believed himself powerful enough to maintain the favor of Dijon through charm alone. Now that the rabble was no longer so enamored, Louisé watched her mentor grasp at a skill he hadn't been inclined to use for ages. It is easy to instill fear in the marrow of yearlings too weak to do anything about it, too dependent to want to; it is another to attempt to recurry favor among a throng with no immediate or foreseeable ties to oblige they give into their fear.

Louisé watched Devereux scramble and fume. She felt the sting of his frustration in her temple. Her blood ached with his anxious fits as her tightened the reigns of what connections weren't fluttering away to the warm glow of Cervantes. And Louisé wished she could care more, but she was too tired from ferrying his sweet charms in one hand and threats in the other. Louisé was not one of those lofty elders paranoid about the state of their authority. She was one of the lowly descendants clawing their domain out of scraps left behind. She had nothing to be more paranoid about than the paranoia of her master.
Cervantes provoked that paranoia with skill and pleasure. Her rise to favor and influence in Dijon was quick, like infection spreading throughout the body. Cervantes was the drop of ink spreading over the masterpiece Devereux had painstakingly spent years creating. It seemed to Louisé that Augustinia’s acquisitions were mostly people; people who, originally, rooted around Devereux in the hopes of being watered by his good graces. Those Devereux chose to ignore were the first to sidle up to the skirts of Cervantes. Then went the Kindred that had never liked Devereux, but cozied up to him because of his connection to the Prince. Then, out of nowhere, Cervantes went for the jugular; Augustinia captured the Prince’s attention and everything went downhill into the bog of paranoia for Devereux. No one wanted the waters of his good graces, no one wanted to cuddle and he had a weakened connection to the Prince. Yes, Cervantes was like a flea bringing the plague. Too bad Devereux was the only one infected.

The only individuals Cervantes seemed disinterested in and who, naturally, despised her in return were the Nosferatu. It was no hidden secret, the conflict between the Nosferatu and Toreador clans. Everything was superficial in nature: decaying, gaunt and nightmarish, the Nosferatu hated Toreadors for their faces, faces they might have had in life, and the Toreadors hated Nosferatu for the very same reason. And ever overly vigilant about her appearance, Cervantes made it abundantly clear Nosferatu were as welcome in her presence as the rats they fed upon. The decision was a poor one, as even the self-claimed Gossip Queen had nowhere near the information gathering skill as Nosferatu but social isolation prevented them of being use to anyone but Devereux; without the ear of the Prince, Devereux was about as useful as hay in a storm.

And none of this would matter to Louisé if her purpose as both thrall and student did not wrap around the acquisition of titillating material that Devereux could manipulate into cold, hard power. Cervantes blocked her, and the other two protégés, at every turn, every venue, every opportunity to grasp a little of what had been taken from their master. But she was never overtly rude about it. Augustinia handled barring Louisé like she had accidentally stepped in a puddle, with ‘Oh, what was I thinking?’ or ‘How could I have forgotten?’, a smile and slamming of the door. Sometimes she would get a fan in the face, feathers sweeping over her cheek and nose as Cervantes bid her adieu. Louisé bristled and returned empty-handed with only the ramifications of the blood bond to look forward to.

He was frustrated. Frustrated and sick of how quickly tides turned. Devereux was sick of the Spanish woman with her too crimson cheeks and ridiculous laugh. He was sick of insufficient apprentices ambling around to no profit. His only entertainment lay in the blood bound girl desperate for his attentions. Devereux found pleasure, and he admitted it might have been perverse in nature, in the way she writhed from his vicarious emotions. But that could only hold his amusement for so long. Failed attempts to meet with Prince and a steadily shrinking pool of loyalists had him entertaining the thought of returning to the west coast of France. Ancestral lands tended to by disappointing blood cousins became more tempting the brighter Cervantes’ flame grew.

And it only got worse once the Nosferatu became involved. His headaches brought physical pain to all his mental considerations; Gawain's stench of earth and rot brought him to a new low.

"This is your fault, chum," Gawain hissed as he paced before the fireplace.

"I fail to see how. If you haven't noticed, friend," Ramon was being generous with that title and his even tone, "I'm not exactly in a place to be at fault for anything, especially anything related to that harlot."

"You're inability to please the prick that is the Prince is not my fault. We should have realized he wasn't so stupid as to refuse the tight space of a new cunny in town."
Devereux winced. He was bawdy at times, but not that much. "And what would you have me do, eh? I could march into the Prince's bedroom and he would still pretend not to see me. Whatever web this woman has woven in his head won't be undone anytime soon."

"I don't care about webs, Devereux," his raspy voice hissed, "I ain't a spider and don't intend on becoming one. All I care about is getting my lad back!"

"And why should I be the one to assume responsibility for his safe return?" Devereux sipped from the glass in his hand. He held back a flinch when Gawain rushed his chair and got in his face.

"Because you're the reason he's gone!" he roared without consideration to the flecks of spittle hitting his host's face.

Devereux narrowed his eyes and slowly extracted a handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped his face. He took another sip. What Gawain shouted was not entirely untrue, though it hurt Devereux's sense of self-preservation to admit it. Once it became clear that the claws of Cervantes were only sinking deeper into the meat of the city, Devereux had enlisted the aid of the Nosferatu to dig up something salacious on the woman. Something lewd enough to tip the balance of power back in his favor. The Nosferatu obliged (almost for free) by sending one of their best. Their best just happened to be Gawain's Childe. Cervantes caught wind of the plan and orchestrated a successful plot to have the man banished from Dijon. Devereux had to hand it to the woman that when she needed something done, she got it done in a timely and beautiful merciless manner.

"I will do my best," Devereux replied.

And his best constituted sending all three of his charges to Cervantes' home with gifts and other means of supplication. Entering in on a party of some kind, Cervantes found their attempts amusing at best, annoying at worst. Louise allowed the other two to do the talking since she didn't want to be in the woman's presence, much less talk to her. The only reason she was even there was because she couldn't disobey. That didn't mean she had to be an active part of a plan she knew had a snowflake's chance in hell of being successful. Cervantes had gone to lengths to protect herself; she wasn't about to undo all of that for some measly furs or jewels she would find unfashionable three weeks from now.

"As generous as I find this outpouring, I'm afraid I can't undo what a Prince sanctions," she said with bitter-sweet venom.

Muscles tense. Ventrue do not appreciate the shirking of responsibility. Ventrue do not appreciate the clogging of politics aqueducts by the excuses of the weak-willed. And in this moment, three nascent Ventrue stiffen at the smell of cowardice. Their ears perk at porcelain shoulders cracking beneath the weight of power completely incapable and unprepared for the power they've enjoyed collecting. It wasn't a large or loud crack. It was more like the popping of a joint. But it was loud enough to attract their attention and incensed their sensibilities.

"You were the one who formulated and carried out the plan. Everyone knows this!" Simon, never especially tactful, blurted out.

"What I do is not the concern of a bunch of fledglings working for the antiquated dark horse of Dijon. Now, seeing as I have a house of guests to entertain, I bid you farewell." And off she flounced, meeting Louise's eyes for a second.

Antoine and Louise felt satisfied with the answer. Neither of them wanted to be there and both of them knew that Cervantes' ties to the Prince made whatever she did all but signed off in ink by him.
They had known, as their mentor probably had, that Cervantes was not going to acquiesce to their request. Devereux sending them there was all for show, to get the Nosferatu off his back onto the harlot's because now he couldn't be blamed for not trying.

Simon, on the other hand, seemed bent on the mission being a success. Where his compatriots had accepted defeat, Simon saw an opportunity to continue fighting until he was indulged, until he could return to his master with something worthwhile. Simon's greatest fault was wanting to be something worthwhile, something of merit. That is, perhaps, every Ventrue's goal if not their duty, but poor, poor Simon never seemed to sum up the discipline needed to accomplish the lofty goals he set before himself. And in his striding after Cervantes, Louise could see Simon's undoing and while she certainly wasn't going to prevent it, competitive creature that she was, she wasn't going to allow his ineptitude endanger threads of influence Devereux had left in the city. Unfortunately, Simon's mouth moved faster than Louise's legs could carry her.

"Do you even realize the consequences of your actions?" Louise winced at how he raised his voice. First rule of Ventrue conduct in public: never make a spectacle of yourself! "We don't have time for your frivolous self-indulgences and thoughtless decisions!"

Antoine breezed past Louise and grabbed the back of his neck, but no apology that he gave could wipe the simmering anger from Cervantes' face. Louise could tell from the way Augustinia held her body that she wasn't so much insulted by his words as by his belief that he was free to say them. From the moment she saw the whip in her hand, Louise understood Cervantes as a narcissistic superintendent of social structure. In Augustinia's world, there were clearly defined echelons of vampire society. Ventrue understood and upheld this belief, as they saw themselves the embodiment of that upmost echelon. Augustinia, however, could have cared less what clan people came from or their leadership potential. What she cared about was appearance, age and social protocol. Augustinia was older, prettier and a face-value practitioner of proper manners and conduct. Louise and her companions were young, varying degrees of attractiveness and stiff, but easily offended due to their old age and weak skin. Simon's outburst represented his attempt to put himself on the same level as Cervantes and this offended her structure of the world more than a fledgling's angry words ever could.

"I believe I have said farewell. Escort yourselves out," Cervantes hissed.

Antoine didn't give Simon an opportunity to say anything else. He shoved the other man toward the nearest door and Louise followed, avoiding Augustinia's heated glare. After weaving through the halls, they emerged into the cool of the night. The stones were slick with low hanging fog. This made Simon skid as Antoine threw him toward the ground. Louise had never seen the two of them fight, so she stood back to enjoy whatever may come of Antoine's attempt at superiority. Simon gathered himself up and glared at Antoine, fangs and anger bared for the world to see. They said nothing at all, just stood glaring and growling. It reminded Louise of dogs defining the dominant male in the pack. The scene might have been amusing if there wasn't for the fact that they still had Devereux to report to, if there weren't eager Nosferatu awaiting good results of their hard work.

"We don't have time for you two to growl at each other all night until a victor emerges," Louise broke their meaningless competition as she moved into the street. "We need to figure out what we're going to tell Devereux."

"Why do you need to figure that out?" a raspy voice asked from the shadows.

Ventrue tense, but they do not jump. The three tensed and turned in direction of the voice. He stepped from the alleyway, cloaked and covered except for the hood he had thrown back. His hideous appearance gave away whom he worked for, why he was there. Louise looked away from
"Things did not go as expected. She refuses to repeal whatever has been done to isolate your clansman." Antoine was always elegant with his speech and stoic in behavior; a perfect representation of clan Ventrue.

"Well, that is unfortunate. I suppose you will have to work harder to get our boy back," the Nosferatu responded.

Simon murmured under his breath and turned to leave. Louisé glared at his back, keen hearing catching every word he said. And she wasn't the only one.

"Mind speaking up, friend?" the Nosferatu shot at Simon's back.

"I said you all can-" he started.

"Shut up, Simon," Louisé cut him off. He glared at her and she glared back, fangs bared. "I think you've done enough damage tonight."

"I don't need some girl telling me what to do!" he snapped.

"I think you'd better listen to your pretty, little friend. Wouldn't want to say anything to ruin what relationships Devereux still has in this town," the Nosferatu goaded.

Simon growled, "We're the ones doing the work here, so unless you have something constructive for us to work with, why don't you crawl back into the sewers you came from?"

Second rule of Ventrue conduct in public: do not flaunt your superiority unless you have the power to back your actions! Louisé felt her fingers curl into fists. Simon seemed a far better candidate for blood binding than she did, with his ill-restrained temper and loose tongue. He was so sure of his being better than this Nosferatu that he would endanger the already tenuous relationship between them and their mentor. Louisé hoped Devereux tore his eyes out before kicking him into the oncoming dawn.

"I suggest you remember what a fragile and dangerous position Devereux is in, boy. He doesn't have many people left that value him as they once did and he certainly can't afford to lose Nosferatu support."

"It isn't Devereux's or our fault your compatriot was incompetent enough to get caught! And if that is what your group deems as 'the best', then perhaps our master is better off without the lot of you!" Simon barked before anyone could stop him.

Having had quite enough, Louisé grasped his arm and shoved him toward one of the alleyways. She looked back at the Nosferatu and shook her head, "Please, please excuse my companion. Dealing with Mademoiselle Cervantes carries with it the inherent risk of frustration and wounded pride. I believe you all have unfortunate, lengthy experience with this and so I ask you pardon for his outbursts. I can personally assure you, it will never happen again."

The Nosferatu looked at her. He was silent for an agonizingly long period before nodding slowly. He said nothing more before leaving, giving Louisé the uncomfortable sensation of uncertainty. She wasn't confident he had nodded in agreement that he would pardon Simon's rudeness and not say anything, or nodded because he had finished taking everything in and was prepared to report it back to his superior.
It had been the latter. At some point in the nights that followed the fiasco in and out of Cervantes' house, Devereux descended upon his adopted brood with a wrath unseen thus far. Well, Louisé had experienced something akin to what he dispensed but that was before the blood bond, before she felt the temperature of his rage drumming in her veins and pounding in her head. Being so close to him when he was so very angry was physically painful for her. His shouts sent waves of pain throughout her body, like she was walking over shards of glass with bare feet.

"It is your fault!" he spat venom at all three of them. "Because of your blunders, I am worse off than ever! A city that has loved me for over a century and a half hates me! Ce que je pensais à l'aide d’un groupe de bons pour des riens?!" He took a turn walking behind them, smacking each in the back of a head with the book in his hand.

Her patience waned. The bond between she and her mentor waned. That nascent Ventrue pride flared at the fact that she was being held accountable for the negligence of another. "This isn't our fault!"

Devereux smacked the back of her head again. "And whose else would they be?! I didn't realize I had three other apprentices under my care that I sent out to pacify the rabble!"

"I b-believe she means that it is not shared fault, s-sir," Antoine stuttered, bless him.

"And I d-d-don't want your excuses!" Devereux mocked, smacking the back of Antoine's head next.

"It's not an excuse! Simon can't keep his mouth shut!" Louis growled, sending a glare down to the, ironically, silent one.

Devereux grabbed Louisé's face as he moved around to look at them. It was a complicated feeling that overcame her. Her body was physically excited he was touching her, but his current temperament made it painful as well. She was in an agonizing bliss. "And why didn't you keep him from embarrassing us all? Hm?!!"

"He is not my brother and I am most certainly not his keeper! He's an adult and fully capable of controlling his actions!" Louisé struggled to respond as she handled what was overwhelming her senses.

Devereux released her and moved to Simon. "You are nothing but a grievous disappointment to me." Louisé saw Simon wince, fail to meet his mentor's eyes. Devereux continued, "You will remedy this situation and then you will leave my house!"

"B-but sir!" Simon started, only to bite his tongue at Devereux's glare.

"You will go to the Nosferatu and do whatever they ask of you to fix this! Because of you lot, I have lost too much of this city!" He slid right back into his tirade. "I bring you fools into my home, instruct you on the ways of our clan and kind and how am I repayed?! By betrayal," he glared at Louisé, then Simon, "by incompetence, and by complacency," his ended with a final glare to Antoine. "A city I have spent years reigning in and disciplining, tailoring into an example of stability has thrown me into the gutter of disfavor and all because I brought three chaff of the crop neonates under my wing!"

Louisé felt it building behind her eyes; pressure, a fight between her independent nature and compelled obedience. Her old self was breaking the thin film of Devereux's blood. "Don't pretend like this is something new or attributed to our actions," she said suddenly, "This city hates you
because you have done nothing but hold daggers at people's backs. There is no difference between you and Cervantes. You manipulate the populace by pulling the strings of a simple-minded Prince. You're just angry because you can't control what's happening. That isn't our fault! It isn't our fault you've acted like a pompous ass for decades and now you're getting your due!" And then it was gone. The old Louise lost strength and submerged beneath the influence of the blood bond in time for her body to be wracked with spasms of pain.

Her housemates froze. He spun. He strode. Her smacked her in the face with the back of his hand. "How dare you even imagine you have the right to speak to me in such a fashion after everything I have done for you." What he ought to have said is 'everything I have done to you,' as she assumed he was equally surprised she had the will to erupt with a statement like that.

Maybe it was instinct that did it, or the fraction of LaCroix in her veins. Whatever it was, it was something she had little influence over. She couldn't control it. If she could have, or if the blood bond could have, then she would have stopped what happened next. Her hand flew from her side to deliver a return blow. Aged reflexes, Devereux caught it a mere inch from his face. He squeezed and she could hear the bones snap, crack and pop out of place. Fire ran down through her wrist but she didn't give him the satisfaction of a wince. She didn't have time to. He threw her back and released her hand like a piece of putrefaction. She stumbled and cradled her broken hand without ever breaking gazes with him. He sneered.

"Go to your room," he hissed.

The command struck her worse than his physical assault. It wasn't that he dominated her, because he didn't. It was because he had once again taken advantage of her chronological impairment. He could have called her a whore and not offended her as much. No, he looked down at her, swelled himself up and spoke in a tone directed precisely at the one knick in the stony Ventrue armor, the knick she had inadvertently revealed to him over a month ago to little success. Ramon Devereux spoke to her like she was a child. Spoke to her like she was his Childe instead of a temporary tenant in his home. Spoke down to her in this way before her housemates, one of whom he had just dismissed because he couldn't keep his mouth shut. For the exact same crime, Devereux chose to demean her the best way he knew how. Dismissing her would have afforded her new found freedom. Speaking at her as though she were six, well that cut her off at the knees and reinforced the concept of her dependence on him. He spoke to her and it left her feeling small.

She clenched her teeth, trying to find the essence to make herself big again. She could come up with nothing more than a resolute, "No."

"I said go to your room! I shall deal with you later."

Louise took what little pride, all in tatters, she had and left the room. The door was slammed beside her and it didn't take Devereux long to start ranting once again. Her hand throbbed, her body weakening from the effort to heal it. She knew she ought to go to her room but she didn't want to. She wanted to feed and take her pent up aggression out on someone else. To accomplish both goals, she fed from one of the servants. Rough, borderline savage, bites filled her mouth with a bland flavored blood but it would do until she could feed from one of her own. Then Louise made a tough decision, an exhausting one: to go against Devereux's orders, fight against the chains of her blood bond and seek out a means to an end. She would accomplish what Simon's blundering hands never would.

While Cervantes was seducing the Prince, while Devereux was scrambling to salvage his strawcastle kingdom and while fledglings shuddered beneath the yoke of their master's burdens, men in black cloaks met in secret. Snug within the heart of Dijon, hooded figures glided along the shadows
to the door of a compatriot. They didn't need to knock. The home's owner had been waiting for them, anxious about their arrival and his place amongst their cadre. He opened the door and let them in before prying eyes and gossipers could see what was happening.

They wasted no time. This wasn't a social gathering between friends; it was a meeting between superiors and agents, patricians and plebeians to accomplish the goals of bloodthirsty imperators. One of the figures threw back his hood and gazed around the dingy, cheap home with an attitude of derision. The home owner notes the youth, his handsome features with dark hair and light eyes, noble features with the attitude of a noble's bastard. Their eyes met and the meeting began.

"We haven't heard word from you in weeks," the handsome youth accused. He had a similar vein of intimidating presence as his Sire, but wasn't enough like them to actually cause fear. The home owner was no afraid of this person, merely stressed by the demands of his attendance implied.

"Things have been complicated here, if you hadn't noticed," the host responded, fingers drumming against the hilt of his blade as constructive use for his nervous energy.

"Oh, we've noticed. We aren't as far separated from this situation as you naively believe," the youth hissed. "I was referring to your work with your target. It seems correspondence regarding them has stagnated."

"There was a situation…a complication of sorts that I am working out."

"See that you work them out within the next two nights. We need to take advantage of current political quarrels if we hope to unseat the powers that be permanently."

"I am doing my best," the host pressed. "Maybe if I had more resources, this would be completed more quickly," his accent came out harsh under the stress of the confrontation.

"Charm and deception require no extra resources," was the answer he received. "Ass a little false humility and your complication with this person will be taken care of."

"Very well," he sighed. "And my reward?"

"When we see your target, when the blue bloods burn in the castle they built, then you shall get your reward. I just hope, for your sake, you chose wisely with this target."

"I did, indeed. Their complaining has revealed more than they could ever imagine. Their youth makes them susceptible to my charms, as you put it. By this time next month, you'll have your burning castle."

"Well, well, well…look what the encroaching dawn dragged in," Gawain cooed from his faux throne. "What can I do for you, my sweet little cunny?"

Louisé was too tired from healing her hand and losing herself in the network of tunnels to be offended by him. She was too exhausted from fighting against the blood bond in order to get off the property, to get here. Her body almost shook from the exertion of pushing against the physical pain as she disobeyed her mentor's express orders. She had thrown up just before entering the catacombs where the Nosferatu called 'home', a frothy puddle of red paste as reward for her defiant efforts. She was hungry, tired and filthy from trudging through the wilderness to get here. She wiped hair from her eyes with dirty fingers and smeared muck over her forehead. "What do I have to do?" was the first thing to blurt out of her mouth.

"Come again, precious?" Talons danced against his knees, his raspy voice asking between rows of
kinky, mismatched teeth like blades.

"Your clan was insulted by an imprudent compatriot of mine. In little time, you've manage to orchestrate an embargo against Devereux and what little he has left to call his own. However, I hear you are willing to propose a solution to this unfortunate situation we've found ourselves in…what is it?" Louisé ran her tongue around her mouth. It felt like linen, so dry and thirsty. Talking made it all the worse.

"Indeed I did, but yours is not the person who offends me, my little cunny." He stopped tapping and tilted his grotesque face, questioning, "Why should you do this labor when you aren't the Hercules it is intended for?"

She felt her adolescent temper being chipped away. She didn't have time anymore these nights for people to remind her she wasn't what they were looking for. But she couldn't be rude to a Nosferatu primogen in a Nosferatu den miles from Devereux's estate mere minutes before sunrise. She could already feel the internal clock burning behind her eyes and weighing down her limbs in a bid for sleep. She sighed, "Because your Hercules is more of a Narcissus, and he will never lower his pride enough to surrender to your labor. He isn't good at cleaning his messes up, either." She watched his eyes widen and continued, "And I need to prove myself."

"Prove yourself? How gallant, my honey," he purred, "And what will that do?"

"Stop Devereux from using me as his whipping girl. Stop giving him excuses to keep me trapped in a status of perpetual inferiority." She was so tired, she couldn't stop herself from airing dirty Ventrue laundry. The combination of hunger and fatigue made it easier for her not to care about proper Ventrue decorum when it came to talking to others about one's personal situation. But, at least she was going to sound as articulate as possible when breaching protocol.

Something about Sir Gawain's features become indecipherable. A muscle tightened. A finger twitched. An eyelid semi-narrowed but she couldn't tell. She couldn't tell if he was angry and offended by the notion of Devereux beating her or merely entertaining a theoretical, perhaps perverse, image of such an encounter in his head. For now, she chose to believe he was as chivalric as the name he wore and his knightly sensibilities were greatly offended.

Sir Gawain leaned forward, "So, my little cunny is tired of being pushed around?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I don't appreciate his brand of physical punishment," she seethed, "He has enjoyed the heavy-handedness of his approach a little too much. Therefore, I wish for nothing more than to have something to lord over his head."

"You may yet prove to be a genuine talent, my cunny," he chuckled. "Lucky for you, I appreciate a pretty face with a feisty ambition. Maybe if you gave me a view of your tits, I would remove the embargo for free."

Louisé narrowed her eyes, held her lips in place to keep from baring her fangs. "I prefer hard work to a whore's path," her voice was cold.

"It was worth a try!" He laughed again, "Very well! Tomorrow I shall dispense your labor. Let us hope I have not placed my faith unwisely into the hands of an overeager neonate, no matter how much I appreciate their physical appeal. For now, you will sleep here," he paused. Louisé had made a face. "Oh, I'm sorry princess, it may not be the luxury you're used to, but it is out of the sun's way. Be isn't enough darkness left for you to get back to Devereux's and I certainly won't be wasting my good time waltzing to his house when I can yank you up at sunset and send you on your way." He stood and guided her toward yet another tunnel opening.
The bed was hard and uncomfortable, if it was a bed at all. Louisé really didn't know because her eyes stayed open long enough to watch Gawain close the make-shift door. In the future, she would have to remind herself, exhausted or no, not to implicitly trust any of her kind. They could have done anything to her while she slept and she wouldn't have known. The fact that she was unscathed when she woke was a blessing. What wasn't so blessed was the raging hunger in her throat. She needed to feed and soon. Scrambling out from under the scratchy, woolen blankets, Louisé attempted to put herself together. Her clothes were filthy, a fact she could do nothing about. She needed a bath but shuddered to think of exposing her naked body to the bathing facilities and wanton eyes of the Nosferatu. The only thing she managed to do was wipe her face on the cleanest cloth she could find and somewhat tame the crow's nest that was her hair. Feeling wholly disgusting, but eager for success, Louisé maneuvered her way back to where Gawain had been the night before.

"Aren't we a pretty sight first thing in the evening?" he chuckled from across the room.

"Nothing a fresh bath and clean clothes won't improve," she responded and strode his way. "Let us to business then."

He held out a goblet for her. She didn't take it immediately. He snorted, "Don't worry, prissy cunny. It's from a bottle I swiped from Devereux some time back. As amusing as it might be to watch you try and feed on rats, I don't believe either of us wants to waste time on you vomiting again."

She winced and took the glass. Louisé managed to be mannerly enough not to down the entire thing in one gulp, but she emptied the container in record time. Licking her lips, she handed the glass back to her host. "Thank you very much for your hospitality."

"I wouldn't consider it generosity so much as my investing in your success," he cooed, fingers drumming against his thigh. "Now, to business, as you put it." He leaned back against his chair and motioned for her to sit across from him. Louisé obliged but didn't quite relax the way he did. Picking up on her anticipation, Gawain jumped right in, "I want you to dig up dirt on Augustinia Cervantes."

Louisé balked and said, "You want me to accomplish a task even your best agent couldn't achieve?"

"Trust me when I say it pains me to send you on such a suicide mission, but she already has it out for my clan and I don't need to give her any more reason to pit the Prince against us."

"Yes, I'm sure you grieve greatly over the thought of Cervantes sharpening a pike for my head instead of yours," Louisé grumbled.

He sniggered, "Take it as a compliment. Obviously I have some faith in your ability to get a job done. Not everyone can shove a piece of paper beneath Ramon Devereux's nose and get his signature without losing the hand they shoved with. Your ambition enables you to forget convenient little sensations like fear or regard for one's personal safety."

"Trust me, my ambition or want for more does not nullify my desire to remain on this earth. I have no death wish here, Sir Gawain and attempting to infiltrate the deeply held secrets of a person like Cervantes will severely compromise my desires."

"You and I have a mutual enemy in her. She is steadily sucking the precious life blood of power away from Devereux, which means your ability to progress up the proverbial ladder will be compromised. She makes my existence more of a hell than it already is and what small comforts we had when Devereux had the Prince in grasp are all gone. We need something so scandalous that she will never social recover. That is the task. If you want to take it, then do so but if you are not the ambitious kindred you make yourself out to be, then don't waste my time. Go back to Devereux's
skirts and await whatever Fate has in store for you."

Louisé closed her eyes. She felt Gawain press a second glass of blood into her palm. She took it and drank, slower this time. Of all the things she had to do. She weighed the benefits and consequences of carrying out this ordeal. She didn't know enough about Cervantes to know what she liked that Louisé might charm her way into Augustinia's inner circle. And Cervantes certainly didn't trust the Ventrue fledgling enough to want to bring her in. Additionally, Louisé had no desire to get to know the woman. She wanted the woman gone and that was all. She wanted to be able to walk the streets of Dijon confident she wouldn't run into that harlot or her gaggle of witless sycophants. All Louisé had to work with was the intensity of this wish, her dislike for Cervantes and a standing invitation to join the woman for blood.

Louisé opened her eyes and met Gawain's eyes, echoing her mentor. "Very well. I shall do my best."

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Cloaked as much as she could be, Louisé stalked down the street to Javier's door. She couldn't go back to Devereux's, since she was fairly sure he was standing ready to chop her head off. She could feel the throb of his anger. She couldn't bother Catherine, since she didn't need any Ventrue brethren knowing what state of filth she was in. Only Javier seemed to be a decent compromise between familiarity and secrecy. They hadn't exactly repaired their relationship after the confrontation, but a Brujah's passion could swing both way and Ventrue could feign apology when it suited their needs. Javier opened the door and gave her a stony look. Louisé looked back at him and pulled back her hood. The state of her hair cracked a smile into his face and he stepped aside.

"Laugh if you must, but all I ask is that you do it out of earshot of me," she said as she entered the home and pulled the cloak off.

"That may be hard to do, Louisé. I take it you're not here to practice the rapier." He closed the door and moved to face her.

"No…I am in need of a place to freshen up. I can't exactly go back to my mentor's in this state of dress so I was hoping I could entreat your sense of honor," Louisé spoke with charm, trying to use all those feminine wiles Devereux worked so hard to draw out of her.

Javier looked at her for a moment, eyes wandering up and down her dirty frame. "And what exactly is my reward for helping you? You tend to send varying messages, querida."

That was a fair accusation. Louisé put her hands on her hips and sighed, "I know I offended you, but you must understand I am trying to understand the specific components of our affiliation."

"You kissed me, querida." He answered with a cocky smirk. "I prefer you clean anyhow, so I will get my ghoul to draw you a bath. It may take time, unless you prefer cold water."

"Whatever gets me clean quickly."
"And your dress?" He motioned to the stained attire she wore.

She sighed and ran her fingers over the dirtied material. "Catherine may have a dress I could borrow. While I bathe, if you could find her and acquire a dress for me, I would be in your debt."

"And how do you intend to pay this debt off?" His tone became husky, suggestive.

Louisé fidgeted. "We'll talk about that when the time comes." He seemed to accept that vague response and left Louise in the care of his ghoul.

The bath was cold but refreshing. It made her more grateful for the only fire Javier had burning in his home. When he came back with not just a dress, but Catherine in toe, Louise began to fear what kind of compensation he would ask for. She figured it was worth far more than a kiss. Catherine asked well-tailored, very Ventrue questions in fast pace, but Louise held back answering too much. She didn't need anyone knowing what she was planning so no one else could be held accountable for her actions should she fail. Gossip was an additional enemy she didn't have time to fight. All Louise gave to Catherine was a flimsy story of having errands to run for Devereux. Familiar with Devereux's demands, Catherine did not second guess her friend's explanations as she fitted her into one of her own dresses and fixed her hair. Indebted to them both, Louise left Javier on Catherine's arm and parted with Catherine halfway to Cervantes' home.

Nerves were something Louise assumed she would be accustomed to at this point in her life. Her history was littered with so many anxiety-provoking moments that she didn't fully understand why standing outside Augustinia's home caused her such trepidation. She swallowed and squared herself up. She was a Ventrue. She was better and had little to lose, especially if she managed to flee the city before anyone killed her. Summing up her courageous ambition, Louise knocked on the woman's front door. A ghoul answered and gave her a haughty look.

"May I help you?" he asked, tone matching his face.

"You may. I am here to see your mistress," Louise answered with fake confidence and total Ventrue pride.

"Is she expecting you?"

"She awarded me a standing invitation to her home to sup with her."

The ghoul gave her a suspicious look. "I don't recall Mademoiselle informing me of any standing invitations."

"You assume too much of yourself. You are a ghoul, a servant. You are not privileged to everything your master does. And your keeping me here instead of politely inviting me inside is insulting and we wouldn't want your mistress to know her servants are insulting her peers, now would we?" She snapped back at him.

It was enough to dislodge this ghoul from his presumptuous attitude. He stepped aside and Louise walked into the overly decorated domicile. The ghoul ushered Louise into an anteroom where she proceeded to sit for hours. First, it was 'The mistress is busy with other guests', followed by 'The Prince has made an unexpected visit'. Eventually, the ghoul stopped ferrying excuses to Louise and disappeared to do whatever work Cervantes had for him. Louise wanted to distract herself by searching through the woman's things but there was nothing worth searching; her intentions would be made entirely obvious if she wandered the home. Louise chalked this impolite gesture to a residual streak of immaturity in Cervantes, inspired by Simon's actions. The next time Louise saw the
ghoul, dawn was an hour away and Louisé's patience was threadbare, moth-eaten.

"My mistress apologizes for the long wait, but she just isn't going to be able to see you this evening. She is presently bathing, or she would come and speak with you herself. She asked me to invite you back tomorrow night in the hopes her schedule will be less demanding," the ghoul said as she was led back toward the door.

She had no patience left to give this ghoul or Cervantes, no Ventrue exterior to cover up the anger boiling in her blood, she had nothing but the absolute want for revenge. She grabbed the ghoul's face and made them meet her eyes. The poor simpleton didn't know not to, after all. Her voice was low, cold and direct in its domination, "Sit down! Do not move! Be silent!"

Void of any means to disobey, the man plopped into the nearest chair and became rigid, his eyes fixed onto a picture hanging opposite him. Louisé looked at him, thinking through a brief plan. What was she going to do...burst in on the woman bathing and demand she speak with Louisé? Well, that was certainly a start. She could search through all the rooms until she found something dirty on the Toreador, but the likelihood of that was low. Toreador may not have been the most intelligent of individuals, but they weren't absolute simpletons either. If they had secrets they didn't want another soul to know about, they wouldn't go hiding them in rooms just anyone could break into. They probably wouldn't be in writing or something tangible, either. Secrets were formless, diaphanous substances bouncing around the minds of their owners, not baubles stuffed into crevices behind locked doors. Louisé went with the barging in idea and abandoned the ghoul to his stupor.

Finding Cervantes proved less difficult than she imagined. Augustinia was a woman in love with her own voice, so Louisé followed the sound of soft singing. She encountered two more servants and dominated them both in turn before they could give her away. All this dominating was draining her energy easily but she figured she had enough to for an intimate confrontation with Cervantes. Leaving propriety behind her, Louisé grasped the doors to Cervantes' room and threw them open. It opened up to a small foyer and beyond that, she heard Augustinia make a frustrated noise and splash some water.

"I told you to get my lavender oil, not take a stroll through the garden! Get in here! My back needs scrubbing," that arrogant voice ordered.

Louisé marched into the room, "Sorry, I didn't bring any lavender but I brought plenty of bile!"

Cervantes had been standing, back and bottom to Louisé as she reached for something just beyond her grasp. Louisé's sudden appearance had her spinning to glare at the intruder she didn't quite recognize off voice alone. Their eyes met, went wide and both voices sucked in a gasp. Louisé's hand went to cover her mouth. Cervantes stood shaking in the tub, naked and mouth gaping. She was shocked that it was Louisé in her room and not a ghoul. Louisé was shocked by the prick dangling between Cervantes' legs.
"Louisé…" Cervantes' voice was little more than a whisper.

"Oh my God!" Louisé gasped and backed out of the room. She turned to leave, riddled with disgust by what she had just seen. The image was burned into the eyes of her mind and disturbed her on many levels.

"Louisé! Stop!" Cervantes yelled from somewhere behind. Her…*his* voice sounded distant, flimsy from the fog of disbelief Louisé found herself in.

Bumbling, stumbling, Louisé made her way into the hall and proceeded to walk back the way her anger and confidence had carried her. Noises kicked up behind her but she couldn't pay attention to that now. Now, all she wanted to do was sit somewhere and make sense of what just happened.

"Louisé!" Cervantes grabbed her arm and Louisé instinctually smacked at his face.

"Don't touch me!" she shrieked, backing away from the person she now considered an abomination. "You're a man! But you dress like a woman? Why do you dress like a woman?!" She shouted at Cervantes, whose body was tensing and eyes darting in plot.

Then it turned into a tussle. Louisé noted the panic in Cervantes' gaze just before the elder Kindred launched their body at Louisé, sending the both of them toppling over chairs and small tables. Items shattered when they hit the floor but it wasn't a concern for the two vampires struggling against one another. Louisé wriggled her body and kicked Cervantes in the stomach to get free of his clawing fingers. Thin lines of blood ran down Louisé's skin as she scrambled up from the floor and darted for the exit. It was clear Cervantes didn't mean for Louisé to live, let alone leave.

Hardly an idiot, Cervantes scraped for Louisé's ankle and when that didn't work, grabbed hold of two fistfuls of her dress and yanked. Louisé was jerked to a brief pause then resumed the fight by moving forward as hard as she could. The sound of tearing fabric echoed around the room; Cervantes came up from the floor while Louisé tripped forward and caught her balance on the spine of a couch. Louisé became keenly aware of the sound of splintering wood and looked over her shoulder to see Cervantes wielding a make-shift stake. This was the threat to her desires she had mentioned to Gawain. She had no intention of allowing this wo…*man* to drive that piece of table leg into her chest. That didn't mean Cervantes wasn't going to try with all his might. He darted with that incredible speed and drove them both toward the nearest wall. Louisé focused on nothing else but her opponent's wrists. One hand caught the upper arm wielding the stake while the other shoved its palm into Cervantes' face, forcibly angling his face away, nails tangling into scalp and hair. Concentration on her hands allowed the vengeful man to thrust her up against the wall. Tit for tat, so it was.

Cervantes looked more like an animal than the prettied-up courtier he had pretended to be. Fangs bared and eyes wild, he pushed with all his might against Louisé's grip. Moments like this made her thankful for a practical mind, for money well spent on defense lessons and hours honing the fortitude intrinsic to her clan. Presence was all well and good for seducing lecherous men out of information, but it couldn't protect her from would-be assassins. Dominate could hold the assassins at bay, but not render their weapons useless. No, junctures like this required an abandonment of fear and a confident, clear mind to literally harden her exterior. But, after dominating three ghouls without a proper meal, Louisé could only thwart Cervantes' attack for so long. She was tired and fatigue was making it harder for her to hold back the pressure Cervantes put against her hands. Louisé's hands were shaking like branches in the wind, bones aching and begging for relief. When it became clear
the stake was moving closer and closer to her chest, Louisé resorted to down-right dirty fighting and swept her right leg up to knee him between the legs.

Cervantes gasped, dropped the stake and grabbed his crotch before crumbling to the floor in agony. And men thought penises made them so superior! Louisé didn't take time to gloat. She grabbed up the stake and used what physical strength remained to drive it into Cervantes' unprotected chest. Her opponent's body went limp, but his eyes never lost their feral anger. Cervantes subdued, Louisé took a moment to just let herself calm down, to collect her thoughts and figure out what in the world just happened. Ventrue need little time to do this and after a moment, she looked down at Cervantes with contempt.

"I don't know what makes me angrier: that you just tried to stake me or that you're actually a man."

Her head throbbed, eyes burned and she didn't need to look outside to know the sun was starting to rise. Tempting as it was to leave Cervantes there for the dawn, she did not want to have to go the trouble of killing three, for all intents and purposes, innocent humans to cover up the homicide. There was also no guarantee she wouldn't be connected to her murder, or Devereux from suspicion's sake. Neither Louisé nor her mentor needed a blood hunt on their heads. What Louisé needed, she already had: she needed something so scandalous on Cervantes as to shut her up forever. And now she did. She just didn't expect it to be this foul. Louisé also needed a good day's sleep and plenty of blood to drink. Priorities…priorites…

Grabbing Cervantes' wrists, Louisé dragged his limp body back toward the bedroom. She offered soft apologies every time Cervantes' head inadvertently knocked against a corner or thudded on some other hard surface in their way. It was exhausting, hauling the heavy body from one end of the home to the other with the sun draining away any remaining energy she might have had after the scuffle. She wanted to pause, but couldn't. She wanted to leave the effeminate man to burn, but couldn't do that either. So, she thought on happier things until the garish trappings of Cervantes' room surrounded them. Louisé dropped Cervantes' wrists and locked the door. The remaining minutes of night were spent finding a way to keep Cervantes secure. Supposing she could bind her with sheets, Louisé yanked the covers off the bed. Red fabric glaring against the white of the sheet linen near the headboard caught her attention. Louisé grabbed the material and pulled. Somehow, she just wasn't surprised to find silk ropes tied to the head posts of Cervantes' bed. Whips, ropes…honestly, what did this man do all night? Louisé asked herself.

The young Ventrue didn't dwell on that scenario long, she just used her new found resourced to her advantage. She hauled Cervantes' body onto the bed, careful not to dislodge the stake and went through the grueling process of trying to tie his wrists. Staked and securely bound, Louisé did nothing more but close Cervantes' eyes and collapse at the foot of the bed, allowing herself to slip into inky unconsciousness.

A constant knocking drew Louisé from her dreams rife with phallic symbolism and hunger. She hissed, head pounding, and slid off the bed to answer the door. When she opened the door, an impatient servant stared back at her. The poor human didn't get to speak so much as a word before Louisé yanked her inside and bit deep into her neck. Not at all her preference, Louisé sucked on the blood only to end her hunger, not satisfy it. She fed until the woman was unconscious. Then she dropped the servant, with a thud, to the floor and moved back to the immobile owner of this domain. Paranoid, she double checked that the ropes pulled Cervantes tight before she dared to remove the stake from his chest. Cervantes threw open his eyes and hissed, kicking at Louisé with furious strokes.

"Calm down or I shall stake you again!" Louisé threatened, holding the stake up to give her words
merit while dodging the legs.

"Vicious little whore! Let me go and perhaps I will make your death a swift one!" Cervantes shouted.

Not needing more drama to this, Louise straddled Cervantes’ thrashing legs and used her weight to still them at the knee. She held the tip of the poorly made stake against Cervantes' healing chest and glared at the man. "I'm no whore! But, yes, I am very vicious and I don't intend on dying anytime soon."

Cervantes yanked on the ropes to little avail. He bared his fangs and laughed in his captor's face, "Do you honestly think I'll let you live?"

"Do you honestly think I won't kill you if I think you'll kill me? Do you think I won't ram this into your chest and tear out your throat with my fangs?"

Cervantes chuckled, losing all femininity in his voice, "Then why haven't you killed me yet, darling? Too afraid to end the life of a fellow Kindred?"

Louise growled and pressed the stake harder, "I'm not afraid. I just don't see the point of it when we can all get what we want." She watched suspicion bleed into Cervantes' eyes. He relaxed, but probably because of how hard she was pressing the stake. "Just listen to what I have to say and how you react will determine whether or not I shall be required to take your life."

Cervantes sneered. "Go ahead, then."

What Louise really wanted to know was why he was dressing like a woman. She wanted to know what compelled him to conduct himself in such a way. She wanted these things, but Ventrue in precarious positions don't waste times on wants. They use their time to get what they need and what Louise needed was to convince Cervantes not to kill her now, or anytime in the near future. "I came here to find something dirty about you. Needless to say, I believe I have what I need but I also recognize how using this information threatens my life. I don't want to die and you don't want whatever reputation you've built up to be destroyed, so I suggest a truce between us."

"Why would agree to a truce with you when I can simply have you killed to keep my secret?"

"Because, right now, you're at a huge disadvantage. I can stake you again, leave you tied up and go straight to whomever I want and tell them all about your sordid little mystery. All they would need to do is come and check for themselves to see that it's true. A penis isn't exactly something you can hide when you're pretending to be a woman and I doubt, very much, any of the men you've been courting in this city would appreciate knowing they've been seduced by a man." Cervantes jerked forward and Louise shoved him back with her free hand. "But that wouldn't guarantee you wouldn't hire someone to end my life in the future. And what I want I can accomplish without necessarily telling anyone about your extra appendage."

"Oh? And what is it you want little, black bird?" Cervantes asked, eyes on the stake. Louise felt his leg move beneath her and pressed down more to keep them in place, squeezing them together with her thighs.

"I want you to give Devereux a break and quit isolating him from the power he was accustomed to before you moved to Dijon. I want you to stop making it so difficult for me to do my job!" Louise hissed. As an afterthought, she added, "Also, I want you to end to banishment of the Childe of Sir Gawain."
Cervantes' brow arched up, punctuating his silence as he considered the rough terms of Louisé's agreement. "What Devereux did, he did to himself by sitting on his laurels for too long instead of constantly cultivating. What should have been a very difficult challenge for me was no more than a chore. Now, what does that say about him, hm?"

Louisé licked her lips, her loyalties bound by blood but frail in comparison to reality. "I know that. I am not disagreeing that he should never have assumed his influence was built out of stone. But that was then and this is now. And now, I want the scale tipped to a balance. I would be an idiot to ask you to give everything up and I am no idiot."

"Sitting astride a scantily clad man isn't the smartest thing you could be doing. Neither is holding that stake," Cervantes murmured.

"I'm trying to make a point!" Louisé said, ignoring the glaring pun. She huffed, "Everyone knows you've monopolized the sources of meaningful information in this town. Where Devereux once held pride and power in acquiring the secrets and profitable information from both kindred and kine, you now own that right. It makes for very poor business and very bad nights for me."

"I don't particularly care how difficult your nights have become."

"You will if you want your prick to remain between us. Though," Louisé smirked, "From your choice in personal companion, observation suggests you prefer your prick to remain between yourself and other men."

Cervantes jerked again, returning his face to close proximity with Louisé's. His hips bucked and Louisé was completely unsure what to make of such a move. "Who is between me and my prick is not your concern. Male or female, all I care about is my pleasure. Now quit using your Ventrue monologue before I tear these ropes, use them on you and give you a taste of what it really means to be between me and my prick," he growled.

"I understand you can't just throw people's favor back to Devereux. You earned their admiration for a reason, devious as those methods and reasons might have been. What I am asking is that, in exchange for holding your secret to the death, you share with me a portion of those you acquire rich and meaningful information from."

"And what portion would you like exactly?" Cervantes smirked.

"Half should be reasonable," Louisé answered.

"Half?!"

"Yes. I don't see how this is a problem."

"Louisé, I don't keep track of the numbers of people sliding me juicy tidbits. I get the tidbits and make use of them. I don't do math," Cervantes groaned.

Why someone wouldn't keep track of prime informants was beyond her. But this wasn't a Ventrue she was dealing with, after all, so Louisé let it go. "Very well. Then, from now on, you shall invite me along to all social gatherings, kine or kindred, where you will disclose to me the most useful information collected. I will choose what I take back to Devereux and leave the rest to you, thereby allowing you to maintain some of the control you rightfully earned while repairing the damage you inflicted upon my mentor."

"You Ventrue talk too much," Cervantes commented before snapping one of his legs out from under Louisé with celerity. Caught off guard, Louisé wobbled and grasped Cervantes' shoulder to
reestablish her balance. Without wasting time, or caring for decency, Cervantes drew on ages of experience and skill to wrap the free leg around Louisé's waste and with one, powerful, snapping motion, flipped their bodies so their places were reversed. Cervantes, arms crossed at the wrist above his head, used his heavier body to pin Louisé down. Cervantes leaned his face down and smirked, lifting a knee to press her chest down. Louisé's hands pressed against one shoulder to give distance between the two of them, and his knee to try and free herself. "Speechless works much better for you. Now, you listen to me. I could scream right now and end you. I could rip these cords, stake you and take full advantage of your limp body."

Louisé shoved up against his knee. Cervantes just pressed more. She growled, "You could, but I'm expected by someone. If I don't come back, they'll know you killed me and then Devereux will have perfect reason to kill you in return. A Prince can't ignore a murder, you know that."

"Aaahhhh, good girl. Now we get to the root of why you were here in the first place. Taking me up on my offer? Please, we both know you don't enjoy my presence enough to place yourself in it willingly. So, someone sent you. From your ramblings and intentions, I gather Gawain is the culprit. His Childe failed, so he sent you in thinking your pretty face would get you farther."

"I am not at liberty to divulge-"

"Shut up, Louisé," Cervantes purred, his toes moving and fluttering in all the wrong places. Louisé squirmed, thankful for the thick fabric of her dress. He continued, "I'm no fool. I doubt Devereux cares enough about you to mourn your passing, but you are certainly correct that it would give him cause to end my life. Since he and Gawain are in alliance, that hideous creature would jump at the opportunity to see my ashes. Yes...you don't show up and he would undoubtedly report to Devereux of your death. Such a hassle you cause." Cervantes moved his foot from side to side, pressing it down. Louisé jerked her body up and he pressed his knee down more. Finally, he said, "How do I know I can trust you?"

"Vampires can never trust one another," Louisé said, voice tight. "What we can trust is our paranoia. You will always be paranoid that I will tell your secret. Every ear I whisper into, you'll be wondering if I'm revealing your great mystery. In turn, I'll constantly be worried about you ending my life. Until this no longer matters, my anxiety will have me looking over my shoulder. This insanity we find ourselves in keeps us accountable to one another. So long as you never receive scathing glares or hands up your skirts, you'll know I never broke our agreement. And as long as you're at peace, I will be confident you aren't plotting my final death."

"What an exciting life we lead, little black bird," Cervantes said before removing his weight from her body. Louisé scrambled into a kneeling position, never breaking gaze with the Toreador. Cervantes tugged on the ropes and sighed, "Oh, very well. For now, I shall agree to the terms of this agreement. I will choose to trust in your paranoia, Louisé but make no mistake, I will make you pay for this egregious intrusion upon my person."

"I have no doubt you will think of something deprave to inflict upon me in the future...Now, what about Gawain's childe?"

"What about him?" Cervantes sneered.

"End his banishment. That's the only reason Gawain is out for your blood."

"Not necessarily. But, fine," Cervantes growled. "First thing this evening, I'll talk to the Prince. Now release me."

Louisé slid from the bed, taking the stake with her. Cautiously, she untied one of Cervantes's wrists.
The first thing he did was backhand her across the face, splitting Louisé's lip. She cursed quietly and licked over the cut as she made her way to the door.

"I hope you found these ropes useful, Louisé! You may become acquainted with them soon enough," Cervantes shot at her back.

Louisé, as she had said, didn't doubt whatever Cervantes had in store either involved gratuitous amounts of physical pain or incredible depravity Louisé wouldn't willingly involve herself in. She left the room and walked toward the front door. She passed nervous ghouls, who shot her dirty looks. She wanted to wonder why none of them bothered checking on their mistress, but didn't care since it had provided she and Cervantes undisturbed time to make their incredibly conditional truce.

Gawain's childe returned to Dijon two nights later and his Sire lifted the embargo he had placed on Devereux. Louisé didn't go back to Devereux's house until then, until she was sure there was a buffer between her and his anger. He was gone when she returned home and that suited her just fine. She soaked her aching body in a hot bath and pondered over her first year as a vampire. She had been bitten, beaten, shackled, threatened, armed a war, ended a war, and spoke to a king. She was amazed she'd survived this long. She wasn't naïve enough to believe it got better from here but hopefully, it would become easier to handle.

"How did you do it?" came Gawain's raspy voice out of nowhere.

Louisé screamed and curled her body up to cover herself, "What're you doing in here?! How did you get in?!" her eyes scanned the room, but saw nothing. Obfuscation at its worst!

"I've already seen it all, cunny. No need to cover up now," he chuckled before materializing before her eyes, right at the base of her tub. What a splendid vantage point.

Louisé snarled, "How dare you!"

"Oh, quit your squawking. It wasn't as if I touched you…I just wanted a peek at the wares this merchant has to offer."

"Well the merchant isn't selling," Louisé responded, tightening her arms over her chest. "Now what do you want?"

"How did you get my boy back?" Gawain toyed with the surface of the water, his talons raking slowly back and forth.

"Who said I'm responsible for your childe's return? And if I am, does it really matter how I did it? He's back and all is well in the kingdom," Louisé murmured, eyes darting as a servant rushed in a minute too late. She spotted Gawain, choked a scream. Louisé hissed, "Get out!" And the servant was gone.

"I just find it interesting. If it was you, one wonders how you accomplished the task. Especially since we never discussed the reinstatement of my childe. I asked you dig up something delicious I could use against Cervantes. Did you do that?" Gawain held her gaze, hand gliding back and forth.

"I'm afraid those vaults are too tightly sealed, but I'm working on it," Louisé lied.

"So you can get my boy back but not dig up anything on the one who sent him away? How could you hav-"

"First," Louisé interrupted. That wasn't entirely Venttrue of her, but decorum went out the window.
when he decided to watch her bathing nude for who knows how long. "I never said I was the one who got your childe back. As you can see, Devereux isn't storming around. His absence tells me the tides have shifted. Perhaps he made a deal with the devil and got your boy back to end the blockade you'd formed."

Gawain narrowed his eyes, not entirely buying into what she was saying. "Perhaps…But when have you known Devereux to do for himself what he can make his protégés do on his behalf?"

"When he no longer trusts them to be competent enough to accomplish the task. What is it people say? If you want something done right, it is better to do it yourself?" Louisé offered with a shrug.

"This changes nothing, my sweet-cheested cunny," he purred, sending nausea up Louisé's throat. "I want my dirt."

"The Earth is full of dirt, Sir Gawain," Louisé said, "Grab yourself a handful."

Gawain laughed. He could have done something else, said something else but he laughed. His emaciated chest rattled and his beastly fangs parted so he could laugh. He stood, fingers dripping with water. "Bold, bold, bold. I should come to watch you bathe more often, the conversation becomes so much more inspired, oui?"

"Inspired is not the first word I would choose." Louisé fidgeted. "May I bathe in peace now?"

"Bathe away, I take my leave! Just know, I have no intention of abandoning my desires for Cervantes' destruction. Deliver on our agreement, Louisé, but take your time…I suggest more hot baths to dwell on the best possible manner to approach this task." Gawain grinned and like the gentlemen he was, strode out of the room. He closed the door behind himself, giving Louisé some assurance he wouldn't enter again without her knowing. Louisé began to consider dressing like a nun for all the inappropriate attention she was receiving.

Devereux wanted to be mad at her. He wanted to wrap his fingers around her throat and drag his nails through her skin. He wanted to watch her bleed and beg at the same time. But recent situations confirmed Devereux was rarely getting what he wanted. The return of Gawain's childe gave him mild relief. The task was accomplished much too quickly for Simon to have done anything about it. Coupled with Louisé's mysterious absence, Ramon was left to infer she had a hand in this miraculous reunion. He didn't ask her about it, lest he give her the impression he was proud of her actions. Because he wasn't, not entirely. What she did was convenient, but deliberately disobeying the blood bond to do it negated any pride he might reward her with. But he couldn't entirely punish her either. Such a difficult disciplinary conundrum Devereux found himself facing.

In the end, he chose to ignore her. He kept her at several arms length and corresponded through written word or ghoul. Still blood bound to him, it would be agonizing not to at least hear his voice. That was punishment enough. It required no extra work out of Devereux but fulfilled his goal of teaching her a moderate lesson. He chose to quit ignoring her when she delivered profitable pieces of information that succeeded in helping him return to prominent influence within Dijon. Dangerous liaisons, illegal embraces, trade routes, etc…The strings were being retied to his marionettes.

"How industrious you've become, Louisé," he said to break the long silence between them.

He watched her shrug. "Would you have it any other way?"

"Not at all. I'm just curious how you've come to be so successful?" Devereux asked. He slid liquid peace offering in her direction and offered her a seat.
Louisé took the glass but did not drink right away. "Fear inspires many avenues of change. Perhaps the avenue I chose was a constructive one."

"Perhaps it was," Devereux murmured. "It wouldn't happen to have anything to do with the amount of time you spend with one, Augustinia Cervantes, would it?"

He watched her run a finger around the rim of her glass. "Yes and no. I figured if she was the honey to the bees, then I needed to find a way to become a bee. Compromise has its advantages," she answered.

"And what did you compromise?"

She looked him in the eyes, her blue gaze narrowing a little. "Does it really matter? You are getting what you want, she seems to be getting what she wants and I get what I need."

"How very adult of you," he chuckled.

"I should like to think so."

"Well, consider this a gift then. Our monthly board meeting is tomorrow. Other than that mandatory activity, have the night to yourself."

"Pardon?" Her look of confusion was…cute. It softened her features back to that of a young girl instead of the stony cadet he'd trained her to be. Devereux made a mental note that he preferred this look on her.

"Do whatever you like. Spend time with that would-be lover of yours, go buy fabric for new dresses, invest in something of your choice…spend the night doing whatever you like without being late for the meeting."

"Thank you…I think. But why?"

"Because I feel gracious at this particular moment in time, because rewarding you will only make you do better, because you are still entirely too boring and need more excitement in your young nights," Devereux answered with a smirk and a shrug. "Take your pick, but take it now; I might feel inclined to repeal the offer later."

Louisé's head lulled from side to side. A stream of blood oozed down the back of her neck, its source hidden beneath the black of her hair. Thunderous pain, red, bright and hot, radiated out from the base of her skull. It jolted her awake. Her eyes fluttered while trying to take in her surroundings. She didn't recognize where she was, the haze in her eyes obscuring most of the peripheral details. It made her nauseated to look too long. She closed her eyes and tried to recall the events that led up to this unfortunate situation.

She woke up, dressed and left the estate to feed. She had the evening to herself, except for a riveting Gerousia gathering around two in the morning: plenty of time to do as she pleased. And what she was pleased to do was daring by her own standards. Secure in Devereux's favor, comfortably paranoid with Cervantes, Louise decided to be indulgent. It took weeks of slow progress, soft kisses and innocent touching, but she believed herself ready to repay Javier for his great charity. That was to be how she spent her evening, or how she wanted to anyway. Louise had checked in with Cervantes, informing him of the informality of her evening and how they would both enjoy a night without one another's company. Cervantes seemed as pleased as Louise for the break.

Following Cervantes, Louise went to the Jewish banker. Receiving Devereux's indirect permission,
Louisé decided to bid on a Bordeaux-based trading company dealing exclusively with New World spices and sugar; two other bidders from Bordeaux wanted it too. Louisé cared nothing for spices. Money was in the sugar produced in mills of the New World. Ironically, the mills' needs for cast iron gears, levers, axels and other mechanical accoutrement made Louisé wealthier as her hold on the metal trade for war was expanded to the industrialization of the Americas. So, she felt entirely comfortable telling the banker to bid double the highest amount offered, then to increase the bid by fifty percent more than what the others bid by if they dared bid above her. Intensely satisfied with her non-combat related plan for financial expansion, she headed for Javier's. Entering his home was the last thing she remembered before her vision exploded with stars and faded to black.

Louisé groaned. Ice cold water splashed her full in the face and startled her awake once more. The room came into clearer focus this time around but there was still a patch of grey fuzz in her right eye. The figure before her lowered the bucket and Louisé glared at her captor. Louisé glared at Javier. He took a few steps closer to where he bound Louisé to a chair, stopped when she bared her pair of pretty, fledgling fangs. He was glad he had roped her hands behind her; the murderous look in her eyes told him she wanted to claw his face off. He had hated to hit her at the back of the head, but better than the face he had become accustomed to enjoying. Javier just looked at her for a few minutes. The glow of the fire behind him cast his shadow over her figure, giving her an ominous aura that left him amused, not afraid. He anticipated she would struggled more, but she didn't. That wasn't too surprising given the injury. An injury that wouldn't have happened if she was more surprising.

She had become so predictable. Even her showing up unannounced was predictable. Louisé followed a strict schedule each evening. She arrived in the city, fed, went to social or political engagements, managed her money and came to see him on, what she believed to be, a whim. Nothing about what she did could be called a "whim" unless someone was doing it to her, against her consent. No, Javier had come to understand and appreciate Louisé for the good, little Ventrue that she was. She didn't even know how routine her life was until someone, like him, stepped in to mess it up. Her predictability made her an ideal target.

Louisé had not been his intended victim, however. Catherine had caught his attention soon after he arrived in the city since she physically portrayed the standard Ventrue better than her counterpart: older, plainer, staunch and boring. Catherine, unfortunately, was too attached to her Sire, too distracted by filial love for him for Javier to afix his charms. Louisé was different: no Sire, no binding attachment to blind her from his tactics. A quick story of a socially unacceptable Sire gained his entry into the lowliest circle of her trust, kindred circumstances that made the world they lived in that much harder. His skill with sword and fist provided the perfect avenue for gathering information and gaining more trust. Kissing her, both a personal and professional tactic, unbalanced her from her rigid routine. Accusing her of leading him on guaranteed confusion and guilt; it caused a fight, which led to her rejuvenated return to his home. All the while she chatted. Louisé opened her mouth and in doing so, gave Javier privileged insight to the workings of Ventrue society and the Camarilla kingdom of Dijon. She told him much without realizing she'd said anything at all.

"You're probably wondering what's going on? Why I did this to you?" He broke the silence as he took a step closer.

"No. I'm wondering how to best remove your head from your shoulders. I thought of simply cutting it off but why not gnaw through your neck before I rip your head off with my bare hands?"

Javier chuckled and squatted down to her level, "You forgot you're tied up, querida." He lifted a hand to her cheek as he spoke, fingers brushing hair behind her ear. She turned her head and
snapped at his finger, breaking the skin. Blood dotted up. He wiped it off on his pants.

"I won't stay tied up for long," she hissed.

"We'll see. Before that, you will answer some questions for me. You've been very helpful with all your ramblings...it gave me a good outlook on the political temperature around the city."

"My, how good your French has become," she said, voice laced with obvious sarcasm. "I haven't told you anything an idiot with one working eye couldn't see."

Javier grinned. "Oh, I've always been fluent in French. I'm not as young or unlearned as I seem." He clucked his tongue and patted her on the head, avoiding her teeth this time, "You've been careless with your words, Louisé. Since you didn't know I knew your language, you chatted to your hearts content while assuming I didn't understand. You exposed a great deal of your clan through your childish rantings and ravings. And here I was led to believe you Ventrue held your tongues in public." He watched realization wash over her, followed by guilt. Javier's experience with the self-deprecating nature of Ventrue assured him she would never forget this and never let it happen again. If she lived. "Now, I have a few questions I need you to answer."

Louisé sneered at him. The venom in her eyes told Javier this was going to be a fight, which he had anticipated with disturbed relish. She spat at his feet and hissed, "I'm not going to tell you anything!"

He ignored the spit on his boots. This wasn't the first time he had been spat upon, though he considered her above such actions. Apparently he was wrong. "Oh, I think you will. I just hope for your sake, you choose to do so sooner rather than later." Javier grasped the sleeves of her dress and ripped them off, tossing one to the side. When Louisé began raising a shrieking fuss, he stuffed the other sleeve into her mouth. Taking the base of her skirt in his hands, he cleaved the fabric in two up to her hips. The fabric spread like wings to reveal her pale legs. For decency's sake, he left her undergarment intact. It wouldn't be much help anyway. Without saying a word, he turned from her and strode to the fireplace. He grasp the handle of a fire iron he had set in the flames. The pointed head of the iron glowed with hellish shades of red, orange and yellow. The colors of soon-to-be searing pain.

He returned to her and pulled the sleeve from her mouth. Javier watched her eyes take in the iron. He took her face with the hand holding the iron and made her look at him before he spoke, "Here is how this will go: I ask you a question. If you do not answer or if I believe you are lying to me, I will set this iron against your skin. If you don't wish to be burned, I encourage you answer my questions. Do you understand?" When she did not answer, he stuffed the sleeve into her mouth and brushed the tip of the iron over her thigh. Her scream was muffled by expensive fabric. He yanked the sleeve out and asked again, "Do you understand?"

"Yes!" She cried.

"Then let's begin."

Whether it took thirty minutes or three hours, she wasn't sure. Her mind was messy, thoughts uncoordinated from the excruciating pain he inflicted on her body. Louisé's arms and legs were speckled with burns, bite marks: wounds that would take weeks to heal but left an inerasable impression on her memory. Beneath the bodice lay claw marks and other inventive methods of torture. Screaming had ravaged her throat. In the end, Louisé hadn't been strong enough to withhold answers from Javier. The longer he held the iron against the skin, the more her resolve had crumbled. Her Ventrue pride, any pride, laid somewhere amidst the stains of blood and shredded clothing, a torn-apart victim of her own shortcomings.
He had fed her blood to keep her alert, to keep her from frenzying and ruining his hard work. She supposed that was the only reason she was awake now. Respite came when Javier abandoned her when someone else demanded his attention. Taunting her, he rested the fire iron against the back of her chair. Louise could feel the heat on the back of her neck and rested her chin against her chest to avoid being burned. She heard his heavy footsteps disappear. Her ears could help but pick up the sound of soft conversation. The inflection of tones told her this wasn't a pleasant conversation between friends. Louise could care less. All she could think of was getting out, surviving.

Her attention became two-fold. She fought hard to concentrate on the conversation rooms away while she struggled to make use of the fire iron. She twisted her hands until her fingers grasped the length of fire iron and began maneuvering it down toward her wrists. The iron wobbled as her hands moved, threatening to fall over and alert her captor. Louise went painfully slow until she felt the burn against her skin. It wasn't as hot as when Javier first drew it from the fire, but it still hurt. Ignoring the pain, she fought to keep the iron secure while her wrists moved the coarse ropes over the heat and blade. Louise could smell the charring hemp and feel the fibers loosen their hold on one another. Approaching footsteps made her pause. When they stopped, she continued. The discussion picked back up as the rope gave way. She tore her wrists in opposite directions. Binding hit the floor.

"Hurry up and finish. We will wait at the corner of Rue de Saint Armour and Plaza Saint Michel before we begin the assault," a somewhat familiar voice said. The conversation faded as she focused her attention on more important things.

One hand gripped the tire iron and brought it around to her lap. Then she tore at the ropes around her legs. Those came apart more easily. She spat hemp out of her mouth, kicked her legs free and stood with the fire iron in her hands. Her body wobbled, exhausted. Her ankles hurt from the constraint of the rope. She hobbled to hide just out of view. Louise heard footsteps move away. She gripped the handle of the iron, waiting for Javier.

He opened the door and walked in, not suspecting anything. Louise watched him walk further into the room, snap his attention to the empty chair. Javier met her gaze just as she swung the fire iron into the side of his head. Louise heard bone shatter, smelled the blood pool out of his temple. He stumbled sideways and fell. She hit him over and over. Blood and body bits decorated the floor. With a primal yell, she stabbed him through the center of his chest with the poker and stumbled out of the room so his rigid body didn't see her sob.

She composed herself in cycles. She sobbed horrible, hiccupping noises from the back of Javier's house to the front, where she wiped her eyes and smacked herself into the austere Ventrue she was expected to be. Cloaking herself, she left the house behind and struggled her way down the streets of Dijon until she found someone reasonable to feed on. Only filled with blood could she piece together the important information she needed. Javier was Sabbat. He tortured information out of her regarding the Gerousia. Sabbat did not work alone. Javier was supposed to meet someone near the Plaza Saint Michel. The cathedral bells rang. Half past midnight. If the Sabbat were planning an attack on the Ventrue of Dijon, then she didn't have much time.

Louise knew where the Plaza was, so she wove her body through the dark alleyways to get there. The stones were cold and slick beneath her bare feet, toes still sensitive from Javier smashing his boot against them. She was fairly sure two or three were broken but couldn't waste time and energy tending to them. Bare feet, broken toes or no, were easier to run with than those stuffed into shoes. And after feeding on another somewhat decent human, that is precisely what Louise did. She clutched her cloak and ran.

She slowed the closer she came to the plaza around St. Michael's church. Sticking to the shadows,
she scanned the area for bodies waiting since she didn't know where Rue Saint Armour was. She picked up the sound of conversation once she was still. Slowly, as quietly as possible, she slid her way along buildings until she was close enough to make out what was being said without being detected. Her body tensed when she heard the speaker; an unearthed sadness swam in her stomach. How was it possible…?

"Where is that idiot Brujah?! Are we to wait until dawn for him?" his voice was frustrated, as it had often been when he spoke to her.

"He's probably enjoying his new bauble a little too much. You should have just made him come with you instead of allowing him to finish the girl off," replied another voice, deeper and older.

"I'll deal with him, myself, later. We can wait no longer. If we don't act now, we will miss our opportunity to take down those Patricians in their own nest," he said again, ending with an exasperated huff. Louisé pressed against the cool of the building, fumbling with the front of her cloak as she tried to recall the last time she had heard that huff. Her ears never let go of his voice as he continued, "You have been given your orders, yes?"

A feminine voice responded, "Yes. I am to carry the information gathered to our first ductus. He will give me the location of the second and I will continue the process until I regroup with you and Signore Mancini."

"Bishop Mancini, neonate!" he snapped. "Make sure you are not seen and be as quick as possible. We do not need them to become aware of our presence. Keep that rosary visible…this tells them you are not some Camarilla simpleton. You have the stake?"

"Yes," the female replied. Louisé tensed. Too many recent experiences with stakes and pain.

"Good. If you run into trouble, use that and the dagger." His voice sounded so cold...so different from the last time she had heard it. Her chest constricted. A gloved hand. Sad eyes. A soft goodbye and never to return. "Remember! Be quick!" And with that, she heard two pairs of footsteps disappear in the opposite direction of where Louisé positioned herself.

She did not move. Her head swam with his voice; her eyes stung from an unwillingness to show weakness in a time of desperation. Louisé did not have time to feel this confused, not when a priceless opportunity had fallen into her lap. Well, perhaps she had stolen it out of the hands of others but it was this, or forever be labeled a blood traitor to her clan for unwillingly abetting in the destruction of an entire pack of Ventrue. Movement caught her attention and she watched a hooded figure emerge from the alleyway and progress across the plaza. Louisé swallowed and pushed away from the wall, stalking after the figure with fatal intent. The Sabbat agent didn't realize someone was following her until she turned onto another street. Louisé rushed the figure as they turned.

The Sabbat growled; the ugly, guttural sound of feral animals. Louisé responded in kind with a more elegant, entirely deadly, hiss as she used her bodyweight to slam the female against the nearest wall. The girl huffed and snarled, reaching back to scratch at Louisé. The unarmed hand was not Louisé's concern; she ignored it and the surface level scraps it caused. She was more interested in whether or not that poisoned dagger would make an appearance. The Sabbat snapped her head back. It slammed into Louisé's nose. A fire erupted over her face and she released the girl to grab her nose. Blood dribbled out and it stung to the touch. The agent whirled around to smirk at her anticipated first victim; her hand was sliding out the dagger. What she got was the full stare of a Ventrue who had entirely too much to lose and too much anger in her body to feel any fear.

"Stop! Do not move," Louisé ordered. The neonate, as he had called her, stopped mid-movement. Louisé felt her muscles relax as she took a step closer to the snarling, utterly confused, Sabbat beast.
The agent opened her mouth to scream, but could not break eye contact with Louisé. "Be silent." The girl's mouth snapped shut so hard her fangs pierced the skin of her bottom lip. Louisé pried the dagger from the girl's hand and tossed it a safe distance away. Her eyes drifted just a bit to make sure she knew where the blade landed. It would be of use later, but not now.

The girl took full advantage of the break in eye contact to pounce on Louisé and slam her into the cobblestone avenue. Her jaws snapped like a wild dog. Louisé managed to get a fistful of the girl's hair and yanked her head back, exposing her neck. The beast inside Louisé swelled up at the sight of unprotected, porcelain skin. Louisé shoved up against the girl and her frantic assault on the young Ventrue. Ignoring the scratching at her forearms and chest, Louisé struggled with her assailant. She twisted the hair in her hand and forced the girl to look into her eyes.

"Be still!" she demanded and the girl went limp. Louisé rolled on top of her. "Honestly. Your kind are nothing but uncivilized animals. Now, I believe I need something from you."

"I'm not giving you anything, Camarilla whore!" The agent snarled. Louisé hadn't asked her to be quiet, after all.

"You won't have a choice," Louisé chided. She concentrated hard on doing this right, feeling some of her energy draining into the fog around them. "Tell me where the first ductus is."

The girl gurgled, attempting not to answer the question. Her response was slow, painful, "Rue des Forges, beneath the golden anvil."

"Tell me what you were doing to tell them," Louisé pressed, bringing on a sharp pain she couldn't distinguish was the result of her healing blow to the rear of her skull or the effort demanded for dominating the enemy agent.

Again, the girl's jaw cracked as she tried her hardest to refuse obeying. She actually whimpered before answering, "When the Ventrue would be meeting. Where the Prince is located."

Louisé tightened her grip on the girl, bearing deep into her eyes, "Tell me what they're planning to do."

The girl smirked and said, "Burn them all." Then she started to laugh. Entirely tired of the Sabbat, their torturous hands and snide laughter, Louisé snapped her mouth around the girl's neck and sunk in her teeth. She heard the agent gasp before ripping her throat open. Blood pooled out as Louisé spat the hunk of skin and muscle from her mouth. The Sabbat started flailing but she wasn't finished. She bit down, tore again. The girl went still. Louisé stood.

Louisé had never killed a fellow Kindred. She had never even seen one die, so she was a little horrified by the way the girl's body decayed into ash. But not so horrified that she ignored the bigger picture. She took full advantage of what the girl left behind. After wiping her face clean with her own, she traded cloaks and wrapped the belt around her waist to hold the stake and newly acquired dagger. Remembering his words, Louisé swiped and prominently displayed the rosary around her neck before pulling the hood down. She abandoned the bloody mess of ash for Rue des Forges. As before, Louisé wasted no time with displays of ladylike elegance. She gathered her skirts up and ran.

The man who stood beneath the golden anvil was gruff looking and Louisé hesitated before approaching him. Thousands of worries regarding the success of this plan clouded her mind, threatened to compromise the resolve she had built. The Sabbat ductus noticed Louisé's lingering presence and snarled. Honestly, she thought, don't they know how to make any other sound?
"Took you long enough!" he snapped at her as she moved closer to him. "Well?! When are those blue-blooded Camarilla trash meeting?"

Louisé suppressed the rage in her chest. She had thought hard, in the few minutes run from the murder to here, about what she could say to derail their plan of attack. It was something that had to be insignificant enough not to raise suspicion but still believable. "We were informed a situation has arisen with their Prince. They have postponed the meeting by another hour."

"What?!" He cursed and Louisé shrugged her shoulders. "Then what's the plan? What did Mancini's boy tell you?"

"Gather your men and bring them to the Abbey Saint Benigne at a quarter past three. We will assault them there and wipe them out."

He nodded, apparently invigorated by the idea. Louisé concealed her hate. He spoke once more, "Good! I'll let my men know. Now hurry," and he gave her the next ductus location.

And so she continued, on and on, for four more stops conveniently circling the Abbey Saint Benigne. Once a true abbey, the Ventrue had long ago convinced its religious inhabitants to relocate and instead used the building as the location for their monthly meetings and whatever other informal business gatherings they needed to conduct. During the day, it was tended to by a rotation of Ventrue ghouls who handled the small number of pilgrims that came to view the sarcophagus of the saint. And her mouth had almost compromised it all. The Sabbat had gathered and bred quietly in the shadows of Dijon, waiting for a time when they could wipe out the political strength of the city's Camarilla: The Ventrue. Their plan might have worked, if the bulk of those responsible for leading the attack weren't thick as bricks. None of them questioned her, none of them assumed the words coming out of her mouth weren't anything less than absolutely true. They took what she said, expressed their frustration then gave her the next rendezvous point before stalking off to inform their witless followers. The only snag Louisé seemed to encounter was the final ductus. He had no rendezvous point to give her.

"Why are you still standing here?!!" he barked.

"I…Bishop Mancini. I-" she stuttered.

"Can't remember?! It figures. An empty-headed neonate can only remember one thing at a time, apparently," he growled and shoved her in the direction of the abbey. "The bishop is waiting in an alleyway west of the abbey! Now hurry up before he wastes his time!"

Louisé needed no more encouragement to leave the ductus' presence. He smelled foul and spat when he spoke. She just wasn't sure her guise would deceive this so-called bishop. She couldn't be so naïve as to think he wouldn't possibly know the face of his underling but she had no choice but to risk it. She crossed the few streets between her and the abbey. How long ago had the half-past bell rung? She didn't know. It had been sometime right before she encountered the last ductus. Her insides knotted. She didn't have much time before her clansmen began to arrive. Louisé headed for the western side of the abbey, feeling exhaustion creep back into her body. She didn't want to run anymore and she hoped she wouldn't be placed in a situation where she would have to dominate again. Her body had just enough for a moderate scuffle. A set of voices made her pause outside the only alley on this side and cling to the wall; a well-earned break from all the rushing about.

"The neonate is running a little behind schedule," came a raspy voice that made her skin crawl.

"Perhaps she ran into some trouble. We prepared her, however, so I'm sure it is nothing but a few minutes delay," came the voice she had longed to hear since leaving Plaza Saint Michel.
"We cannot afford delays. You said this is where the Ventrue gather each month and this is approximately when they gather. If we delay, we lose," the other, presumably the bishop, scolded.

"I understand, sir. If you want, I can go hunt her down."

"No!" the bishop flared. "You need to go tend to the ducti leading the charge against the Prince of these Camarilla fools. They are waiting near the Rue de Chatillon to the North. Tell them I want him alive, that I may kill him myself. Then return and join us in this triumphant massacre."

"Yes sir," he replied and Louisé could hear his footsteps approaching. She moved further down the street and hid around a corner. As much as she desired to see him, as much as she craved and longed for such an opportunity since…She couldn't afford him seeing her and destroying all her hard work. She didn't need to see him to know he wasn't the same since last they parted. Still, she stole a glance as he emerged from the alleyway. She felt tears sting her eyes. He had changed so much, and yet so little since she saw his face that night. His back turned to her as he progressed up the street.

She was still for some time, then walked down to the alley he had emerged from. A figure paced back and forth across the cobblestones. Louisé had no more time to spare but had equally no idea what to do with this bishop. While she wanted to tell him the same lie his followers had easily accepted, she knew that he would see the flocks of Ventrue entering the abbey and flee to gather his forces. And she would have no means to convince her elders and peers that danger was coming. She squared herself up, pulled down the hood and walked toward the pacing bishop.

"Do you have any idea how late you are?!" he roared.

Louisé flinched and lowered her head to play the role of supplicant. "Forgive me, I met with an unexpected interruption," she murmured softly to both appear humble and muffle the sound of her voice. Within the cloak, her fingers fumbled for the stake.

The bishop drew near. "Your mistakes will cost you dearly neonate! Now tell me if anything has changed." Louisé muttered something, gripped the stake in her hand. She felt the bishop grab her hooded hair and yank her face up. "Look at me when I speak to you, wretch!"

Louisé lifted her face and watched rage color the bishop's face. He knew. He knew she wasn't the person he had been waiting for and he bared his fangs at her. How he knew was not her concern at the moment: his death or, more likely due to her exhaustion and inferior skills, his injury was paramount. Taking the chance, Louisé threw her arm out to pierce the man's chest with the stake. She wasn't afforded such luck. Old, smart and quick, the bishop caught her wrist and squeezed the bones. Louisé cried and dropped the stake. The bishop kicked it away with a grin and yanked Louisé's head back further. She began to fear she was going to meet the same awful fate she inflicted on her Sabbat counterpart earlier.

"Well, well, well…What do we have here?" his voice purred, deadly fangs far from her neck for now. "What are you, girl?" He wasn't even concerned why she was there.

"Ventrue," she answered without a drop of shame.

He laughed, "How appropriate. A Patrician whelp to start the festivities. Brave but stupid, like the rest of your clan. And you shall die, like the rest of your clan."

Louisé watched him lower his mouth and growled. Her other hand grasped the hilt of the dagger and she slashed the man's chest in a desperate move. He shrieked and shoved her away. Louisé saw that she had managed a decent cut and clutched the dagger like it was her salvation. A foul stench rose in the air between them. Whatever his blood was hewn from, it offended her sense of smell. The bishop
glared at her and howled. She pushed her heels against the stones and ran for the alley exit, but he was on her quick enough and she felt her side crunch against the street. Broken ribs? More wounds to tally. If she survived this, she would do nothing but soak in hot baths for the next month. If she survived.

Having no desire to be eviscerated, she made the executive decision to throw the dagger away from the both of them. To pay her back, the bishop bit deep into Louisé's shoulder. She screamed as he continued to bite her. She wrestled beneath him to keep him from biting her neck, continuing to scream. The bishop threw her against the wall to silence her. Louisé slumped. He approached, ready to kill and all Louisé could do was crawl backwards from him. Palms slid against grimy stones and gripped the spaces between to help pull her along. She had no fight left in her. As he lunged for her, she squeezed her eyes shut.

A shot rang out. Her face dampened with foul smelling rain and jagged pieces of hail. She opened her eyes. Louisé was splattered with the blood and bone of the bishop. He dropped to one knee and shrieked, one hand covering what used to be his shoulder. Footsteps echoed around them. Louisé remained frozen.

"Get up Louisé," Devereux's voice ordered. Louisé rose. Devereux's eyes never left the bishop. He had his sword out and held it at the man's throat. A Ventrue behind him lowered his gun. Louisé never felt so glad to see Devereux in her life. She limped to his side. Devereux's voice was rough, "Explain yourself."

And explain herself, she did! Eventually… At the end of the alley waited the rest of the Gerousia. Their faces expressed the inanimate intrigue common to most Ventrue: an eyebrow twitch, glazed over stared or quick tweek of cheek muscle as Devereux led the bishop from the shadows. Dirty and fatigued, Louisé silently followed behind her mentor and local governing body to the interior most room of the abbey. Built about St. Benigne's sarcophagus, the rotunda proved an ideal location for their meetings, a perfect place to interrogate their prisoner. Before they gave due attention to the bishop, they listened to Louisé's recounting of her exploits that evening. She fibbed, a little, at the beginning, hardly wanting the Gerousia to know her prattlings had aided this plan. So she lied about Javier. Everything beyond Javier was the absolute truth.

"So, according to you, their amateur soldiers are going to assault this abbey an hour from now based on the belief we will all be here and vulnerable," Devereux summarized, keeping his eyes on the wounded bishop.

Louisé nodded, "If I was successful."

"And what was your hope in doing that?" asked another member. There was no malice in their question, just pure curiosity.

"They cannot be allowed to live, let alone leave the city. I assumed by telling them to come an hour later, we could turn the attack on them…destroy them as a single unit."

Not necessarily the front-line fighters of the Camarilla, her Ventrue superiors looked at her with wary expressions. But Louisé could see the inner workings of their minds turning, weighing the benefits and consequences of such action. They agreed, in their silent consideration, that the Sabbat couldn't be tolerated but there was hesitation in their eyes. Devereux turned away from the bishop, leaving him in the capable hands of his compatriots.

"We will take care of the situation from here. I suggest you return to the estate and tend to your injuries." The gentleness in his tone frightened her. Devereux was many things: charismatic, bold,
intelligent. But not gentle. She didn't argue with him, however. She knew she looked like something discarded behind a butcher's shop with her bruises, broken nose and overall disheveled appearance. Louisé hardly appeared the Ventrue she ought to be and since her clan clung to the idea of keeping up appearances, she wasn't even tempted to feel insulted.

Devereux sent for a carriage and someone for her to feed on while they waited. The two of them sat off to one side, in a shadowy alcove, as Dijon's Ventrue filed in for the meeting. Devereux snapped Louisé's nose into proper place and she sunk her teeth into her bottom lip to keep from crying out. He left her to feed on the two humans brought to her then escorted her out to the carriage.

"We are indebted to you, Louisé," he said, holding the carriage door open. She just looked at him, feeling nothing in particular about that comment. He continued, "Go home and rest. We will send someone to take care of the Prince and we will see to the devils here." Then he shut her in and the carriage drove off.

But Louisé did not want to go to the estate. Not just yet. She had someone she needed to find. It may have been an impossible wish, but a Ventrue's need for closure was overpowering, especially when that closure was emotional in nature. Louisé poked her head out of the carriage and gave the driver a new directive.

"Get me within one block of Rue de Chatillon!"

She would never remember the way the Sabbat were driven from Dijon, because she had not been present for the massacre at Abbey St. Benigne or the slaughter that spilled from the quiet street of Rue de Chatillon. The bruises would fade, the burns disappear, the bones mend themselves with time. What Louisé would remember a little more than the torture was going to great lengths to save her clan only to turn around and the save the life of their great enemy. What she would never forget was stepping out of the carriage and standing in the fog, feeling the cold beneath her feet and believing it had all been a dream. His voice, his face…all of it had been a trick from some vicious part of her mind, punishment for being so careless and causing so much damage.

Louisé walked away from the carriage, away from Rue de Chatillon. She felt the cold of the stone, the weight from unpredictable circumstances and unbelievable outcomes. She understood that she should have been ash hours ago, or minutes, or however long it had been since this crusade of hers began. It was nothing short of a miracle that she was still standing. A Catholic upbringing told her she should want for no more, be grateful for what had been given and she was. But she did want more. Louisé wanted to see him. She wanted to hear his voice again. Perhaps touch. A cruel twist of fate brought them close…close but not completely together again. So she walked in hopes the fog and chill would steal this wanton desire from her.

Then came cursing. Sharp, angry curses in a northern dialect. It was distant, coming closer, but it was his. And from what she could decipher, he was mad at being looked down upon. This was latent anger; anger carried over from a former life. Louisé stopped walking, pulled the cloak close to keep out the chill. He rounded a corner some ten feet back the way she had come. She turned her body and watched him tramp her way. He came to a stop five feet from her and Louisé could see a different kind of outrage in his eyes.

"Did the bishop send you?!" He was exhausted too, she could tell. He advanced on her. "I told him I would be as quick as possible!"

"The bishop didn't send me," she replied, looking away from him for now. Could she expose herself? After all this…was she brave enough for it?
"Then why are you here? We don't have time to waste standing on street corners!" He shoved past her and continued in the direction of the abbey.

"You can't go there," she said to his back.

He stopped, his fingers alternating curling and relaxing as he tried to manage his frustration. Her cryptic behavior certainly wasn't helping. He turned and walked back to her. He grabbed her upper arm and squeezed. "Don't even think of ordering me around, neonate," he spat. "Who do you think you are?" She kept her head down, adding to his discontent. "Are you listening?" His tone raised as one hand grasped her face, forced it up and the other yanked back the hood. "Look at me wh-" And he stopped.

Louisé looked him full in the face, swallowing the lump that built in her throat. His expression was shock; it was pain, it was disbelief. He released the tight hold he pressed against her jawline. His fingers hovered above her skin. She lifted her hand but only managed to brush the hair from his eyes. Her eyes stung as she touched his face, felt the cold. Louisé felt his jaw trembling; it was trying to form words he couldn't say. "If you go back, you will die Henri, " she told him.

"You're dead. You're not real," his voice was so small. She could hear how his throat tightened. He cupped her face in his hands, brushed a thumb across her cheek. "You are not here," his shock said.

"I am very real," she answered and covered his hands with her own, slid them down to his wrists. She was terrified he would slide away from her like the fog did in the morning. Louisé felt a few of his fingers slides in her hand, push it back. His other hand disappeared behind her and drew her close. And in the shadows, she embraced Henri fils de Dormans in return; she enveloped herself in the smell and feel of him and let their reunion wash away the horrors of the night.
Sébastien LaCroix was irritated. He was frustrated by a year's worth of unsatisfactory circumstances that led him up to where he currently was. Nice had been a lesson in the risks of political gambling. He spent approximately three months in the city by the sea, three months as Sheriff over a gang of vapid, salt-water brained bellyachers. Unlike Lyon with its more sophisticated inhabitants with more sophisticated crimes, Nice sported a heavy load of sea faring tradesmen that were as about as creative with their infractions as the lifeless fish sold in the marketplace. The smell was another foul consequence of his ambition; everything had the taint of dead fish. The aroma lingered in the air all night after long days of hauling weighed down nets onto docks and stuffing market stalls with their gilled wares. It made Sébastien sick, reminded him of chunked up bleak in bowls to attract northern pike. Nice inched that much closer to being unbearable. A close unbearable he didn't have to bear long.

After three months, sleek Venetian ships sailed up along the coast carrying more than merchandise. Crates filled with Sabbat soldiers burst open at sundown and flooded the city with brief warfare. The Prince was killed in his home, their Seneschal on the streets and Sébastien fled with a pouch full of money and the clothes on his back. There wasn't a single square foot of the city worthy of him fighting for. His sword was slick with blood of those who got in his way. From Nice, he spent ten nights traveling back to Lyon but found nothing and no one waiting for him. Unable to find Louise or obtain much information on her, he presumed her dead. With that in mind, he took a large portion of her inheritance and left Lyon spent the next few months hopping from one Camarilla territory to the next: Montpellier, Carcassonne, Toulouse. He finally settled in Bordeaux where he used the remainder of his funds to invest in trading companies.

Temporarily abandoning political aspirations, Sébastien focused on building a monetary fortune that would afford him prominence in the community and briefly threatened nascent accomplishments. Following Paris' post-wedding massacre, a religious uprising exploded throughout the city. He kept his eye out for Sabbat and a hand on his sword. Bordeaux was too lucrative to abandon. He acted decisively and effectively when the need arose, spilling enemy blood on avenue stones. LaCroix inadvertently saved the life of the Praetor's Childe. He can't help think, as he watched the man cower from rabid Brujah scratches, that Louise would never have been so weak. Sparing this complimentary thought for his departed Childe makes him uncomfortable. The massacre ended soon enough, taking a few Kindred with it. Protestants were driven out of the city and corpses littered the streets. Sébastien bought a better home amongst other nobles to distance himself from the gore. LaCroix's reward for the unintentional heroism is the position of Aedile recently vacated by its previous owner thanks to Sabbat savagery.

Being Aedile is boring and unimpressive, but necessary to build himself up once again. Every now and then, however, he spared a thought for what could have been had he never left for Nice in the first place. News from Lyon crippled those thoughts; the fact that that shriveled hag now ruled the city convinced him he had done the right thing all along. He has a steady flow of income from both Louise's ancestral vineyards and newly acquired businesses. He has carved out a comfortable niche for himself within Bordeaux and even contemplates embracing again. His frustration mounted, however, when he decided to invest in a New World trading company, sugar and spices to add to his fortune from the slave trade. What was supposed to be an easy procurement turned into a nightmarish ordeal as someone from Dijon ups the ante by double. Before this person sneaked onto the scene, the only other competition had been a mortal human. Had that man become a problem, Sébastien planned to send a ghoul his way. Accidents could happen easily on the streets of Bordeaux. LaCroix could do nothing to a man hundreds of miles away in Dijon. What did Dijon want with west coast companies anyhow?!
While this went on, court of Bordeaux received word of epic courage from the same city where his competition lurks. LaCroix listens to the tale of a single fledgling crippling a Sabbat attack on both the Ventrue and Prince of Dijon. Though he is hardly entertained, as he cannot fathom the possibility of a Kindred so young unraveling the schemes of bloodthirsty heathens in mass, he feigned a listening ear when one was required. If he didn't have to listen, then he changed the subject and in doing so, never heard how the fledgling was had the appearance of a young girl, black hair, blue eyes and originated from Lyon. He wouldn't know for years that the fledgling in the story, he did not like, was his own Childe. No, Sébastien LaCroix was too busy being engrossed in investiture wars with Dijon to care about fledglings there. All his captivated attention could not get him what he wanted, however. Whomever was in Dijon was wealthier than him and with gritted teeth, LaCroix was forced to bow out from the battle and watch the profitable company slide into the hands of another. Now, Sébastien was just irritated.

Nothing extraordinary occurred between Louisé and Henri after they slid from their embrace. Louisé offered no thorough explanation to why she was there, only reinforced the fact that Henri would die if he returned to the Abbey St. Benigne that evening. Henri appeared hesitant to accept the warning, but a second embrace to confirm Louisé was neither ghost nor figment of his imagination convinced him to leave the city. They rode in Devereux's carriage. They talked like they had never spoken before. She learned he was a Lasombra and something in the back of her mind grew hot and angry. Had either LaCroix or Devereux mentioned something about Lasombra? When she told him she was a Ventrue, Henri revealed he was no better at hiding his disgust than when he was alive. He asked her how it happened and she told him what she remembered about the night LaCroix embraced her. Louisé watched her cousin seethe with silent rage. Then he grabbed her hand, held it tight and they said no more.

Henri stayed the night with her at Devereux's estate. He muttered something about dwelling amongst Ventrue swill and she fought not to snap back at him. She was too exhausted, too thrilled to fight with him. All she wanted to do was soak in a hot bath. Louisé wanted the water to melt off her skin so she could build a new one, a stronger one without all the visible reminders of her physical and mental weakness. Henri stayed out of sight of servants and she didn't ask why. She didn't need to. No one needed to know Louisé had someone in her room, someone that could be identified as an enemy, someone that would make her choose between which loyalties were stronger: clan and Camarilla or Henri, the one whom she had loved. Still loved? She didn't know. What she knew was that Henri was supposed to be dead, but wasn't (so to speak) and now that she knew he wasn't, she wouldn't do anything to contribute to the possibility of ending his life.

While she bathed, Henri leaned his back against the tub and sat in silent contemplation. Louisé didn't bother to cover herself. If a Nosferatu primogen could see her naked without her consent, then why not Henri with it? He did nothing more than trace cool fingers over her wounds and ask what happened. She frowned when she told him and he turned away from her, expression only partly affected by shame. Being Sabbat, Louisé understood he would never fully regret the tactics used for the success of a mission. As a Camarilla, she would feel the same way if the situations had been reversed. The fact that he appeared to feel even an ounce of regret for what happened to her was surprising.

"I will kill him," Henri murmured.

"I think I already have," she replied.

"You think?" he chuckled and turned his head to look at her. "I…" then he stopped, lost for words. He lowered his head and brushed his lips against the back of her hand. "Sorry."
Louisé watched him, curious about whether he was sorry it had happened, sorry she was in her current state or sorry about something else entirely. She shrugged, "It's in the past, no matter how recent that past is."

"You sound so different," he said.

"How do you mean?" Her brow rose.

He shrugged and turned fully so he could play with the water. "You sound more like an adult, more mature."

"I sound like a Ventrue is what you mean," she accused with a soft tone.

Henri looked into her eyes and frowned. "Yes." He lifted his fingers from the water and traced her cheek, leaving a wet streak along her skin.

Louisé closed her eyes, leaning into his fingers. Her chest tightened when his hand cupped her cheek. The last time he had held her face like this was right before he left. Her voice sounded shakier than she had wanted, "I thought you were dead."

"I know," was all he could answer. He kissed the back of her hand again. "Now you know I am not."

He traced her wounds again, the length of her arm, and the flat of her stomach. Even though it was Henri, Louisé felt uncomfortable about being touched in a way that toed the definition of intimate. Louisé doubted if she would ever feel comfortable being physical with someone following Javier's torture. But Henri went no further with his fingers. His stare was distant and his irises swam with the churnings of his mind. Louisé wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know his thoughts; she didn't want to be responsible for the weight of them if they were foul in intent.

They slept together. In her bed, they slept beside one another with the curtains drawn and faces turned toward each other. From the outside looking in, one might have thought *How innocent...how in love they look*. But there is nothing innocent about Kindred. There was nothing innocent about Henri before he was embraced. Certainly nothing innocent after. Louisé was probably naïve and naïveté bred an odd form of innocence that resembled ignorance. And they were not in love. The love between them was familial. It was a love from a time that felt forever ago. This love was neither passionate nor lustful. This love was timid and perplexed. It was not lingering kisses. It was hesitant touches and fear. It was unspoken but entirely understood. It was something dangerous.

When she woke, Henri was already finished dressing and sat staring at her. She stared back, groaned and slid from the bed. There was a knock at the door as she pulled on a dressing gown. Henri was up and tense and she was no better. She motioned for him to hide somewhere and answered the door. A ghoul stood on the other side with a tray that contained a glass and a bottle of blood.

"Master Devereux said you would require this to start your evening. He asked that when you dress, to meet him in his study," the ghoul said as they entered. Louisé couldn't respond. Her body was tight, worried that Henri would be found and revealed to her mentor. But the ghoul didn't look around. He simply set the tray on a table, turned and left as quickly as he arrived.

Louisé's sigh of relief was loud. She shut the door. Her body jumped when Henri touched her shoulders. "Don't scare me like that!"

"Louisé, I cannot stay. I have to go," he muttered beside her ear.

A sadness crept up from her chest. She turned to wrap her arms around him and bury her face in his
chest. She didn't want him to go and needed him to leave at the same time. Louisé was terrified that he would dissolve into ash like the beast she killed in the alley and blow away on the wind. Crying was useless but she couldn't help it. Henri comforted her as best he knew how: with a tight hold and a hand cradling the back of her head.

"Louisé..." he said her name in the same way he could have said 'Don't cry'.

"Drink something before you go," she replied as she pulled away from him and wiped her eyes. She would compose herself after he left; Louisé would reapply her Ventrue armor and austerity before meeting Devereux. He nodded and opened the bottle Devereux had sent. He filled the glass three times before appearing satisfied.

"At least Ventrue know how to pick a good vintage." He shot her a smirk, blood dribbling out the corner of his mouth.

Louisé lifted her finger to wipe the blood away. Henri turned and bit her finger. She felt a rush of pleasure, brief and sharp. In a flash, she pulled her finger away and glanced at the blood that dripped from the bite. Henri licked the blood off his bottom lip and smiled that charming smile which left girls weak in the knees. Louisé's knees were not weak. "You can't walk out the front door, you know."

"Well, then there is good fortune in the fact you have a balcony," he crooned and strode off.

Louisé followed him. "Write to me Henri."

He paused, hands against the stone of the balustrade. He gave her a queer look. "I doubt that would be wise."

"Maybe to you," she snapped. She was hungry and anxious. "But the last time we were in this position, you never came back. You died and we received a letter then. I doubt if you die this time, I'll earn such a courtesy."

"I am not going to die, Louisé." He held out one hand. She took it and he squeezed. He tugged her into a final, one-armed embrace and sighed, "I will write to you when I am able. I suppose I just send it to wherever this place is."

"No!" Louisé's whisper was harsh. "There is a banker in Dijon. Send it there." And she gave him the name of the Jew who managed her money and where his business could be found. A neutral locality that endangered no one. She only hoped he would remember the address.

"Very well." He kissed her forehead, lingered there.

Louisé heard a knock on the door hundreds of miles and years away. He kissed her cheek and the knocking continued, a glaring interruption to this tender farewell. Louisé closed her eyes. There was a breeze. There were noises of the night: the melody of crickets and tree branches and peril. The perfect melody for a kiss. "I hear a noise from within, dear Hen-" and she was stopped by his lips. It wasn't as warm as the last one. It wasn't unenjoyable either.

He pulled back. "It is the sweetest of sorrows, leaving after fate has intertwined us once more. I swear, I will not fail to write to you." He swung his legs over the stone banister and reached for the vines Devereux's house grew almost decoratively.

"Stick to the shadows. If any of my kinsmen find you here-"

"Louisé," he cut her off. He was smirking. "I am the shadows."
Devereux was sitting in an arm chair by his fireplace when Louisé entered his study. A pile of curling parchment and broken wax seals grew around his feet, more unopened letters rested on a table beside him with a few in his lap. Louisé found it humorous since Devereux hadn't been this popular in weeks. Even after she made the uneasy bargain with Cervantes, letters came in at a crawling pace; a good reflection of peoples' hesitations with trusting Devereux again. Tonight, the well seemed to spring forth but Devereux didn't look as happy as she expected he would.

"You wished to see me?" Louisé asked. It broke his concentration.

Devereux looked up, motioned to the chair across from him. "Yes. I wanted to see how you were," he paused and squinted at her when she sat, "You still look frightful."

She hadn't had the pleasure of glancing in a mirror before strolling to the study, but she imagined she wasn't entirely pleasant to behold. Her fingers felt the swelling in her nose had gone. Since it was still tender to the touch, Louisé pictured the bruising taking its dear, sweet time to disappear. She didn't want to know what other features had been compromised in the events of last night. Her lips pursed. "I imagine it will take a bit more time to mend, but that is the price one pays for heroics."

"Indeed," he murmured. Devereux moved the parchment letters off his lap and onto the table at his side. "Which begs the question why you went to such lengths in the first place?"

Louisé blinked at him, unsure of what to say. A burgeoning anxiety in her core told her to tell her mentor the truth. Restored Ventrue pride told her to keep her anxious mouth shut. She opted to shrug her shoulders; a neutral response of, "It was for the good of the clan."

"Earning prestige is for the good of the clan. What you did went far beyond the good of the clan," Devereux expressed.

"So, you're disappointed in what I did?"

"Not at all, just confused why you didn't take an easier route. Why not find an elder clansmen or me? Why act so brashly and rush into action without proper support?"

"Because I didn't think there was time," Louisé answered, fumbling for reasonable explanations to completely reckless actions. She was coming up short.

"Oh? Depending on when this jaunt of yours started, I'm sure you could have found someone."

"I didn't know where anyone was. I didn't want to risk wasting time finding the wrong people when I could stop them myself," she countered.

"But you could just as easily been killed. You had no guarantee your efforts would prove fruitful."

"Believe me when I say I know how miraculous the result of those circumstances were."

"There is no doubt some form of miracle occurred. But, I still don't understand why a Ventrue would act in such a Brujah manner when-"

"Because it was my fault!" her shout interrupted him and managed to startle her mentor. Louisé swallowed and looked away from Devereux. "I'm why they knew anything at all. The reason I overheard Javier speaking to anyone was because he tied me up and tortured me," there was a thick layer of shame in her voice. "I accepted him without ever testing his loyalties, trusted him without considering he was lying. I walked around his home, complaining and prattling without ever stopping to think he understood what I was saying. Because of that carelessness, I let small things
slip out. Small things that he used against us, that he relayed back to his Sabbat superiors and I was none the wiser." She sighed and looked back at Devereux, "I acted brashly because I wouldn't have been able to bear the disgrace my inadequacies wrought. I thought if I could stop them, it would make up for my failings."

Devereux was silent. His fingers drummed the arms of his chair and Louise wondered how quickly they would move to remove her head. But they didn't do anything but drum. It was the sickening tempo her heart might have beat if it still worked. When he spoke, his fingers stopped, "Do you remember what I told you when I brought you here a year ago?"

At one point, she would have said it was hard to forget but after months of more life threatening or arduous situations, she could honestly say that night was hard to recall. She shrugged.

"That you were nobody until I said you were somebody." He stared at her. "As reckless as your actions were, they managed to save many Kindred. Your self-preserving sense of selflessness has rewarded you greatly. It is the decision of the Gerousia that you be nominated for a placement in the Peerage."

Louise was dumfounded. "The Peerage? But why?"

"Because you exemplify what it means to be a great Ventrue," he explained.

"I don't see how. I compromised the safety of almost every Ventrue in this city because I couldn't control my tongue. Then I lied to you about how it happened."

"Mmmm… I would say you hid the truth. You couldn't have honestly believed we would never find out," Devereux teased.

"At the time, I secretly hoped you wouldn't," she confessed.

"Then I suggest you do a better job of covering your tracks."

"I don't understand…"

"We knew you lied to us."

"How?" Confusion clouded her mind.

"Javier. He was a little less dead than you had hoped. Your maiming succeeded in crippling him greatly but not enough to ensure his ashes." Devereux smirked at his protégé's expression. "We figured it wouldn't be a poor idea to track him down once you mentioned his name. We found him bumbling around his home and it didn't take much more for him to start talking."

Her stomach muscles tightened to think of Javier. "I take it he is dead now."

"Perhaps. It all depends on how long one of our Foremen wishes to torture him."

"Then why aren't you angry I lied?"

"The benefits of your actions outweighed your little white lie."

"I still don't see how this qualifies me as a 'great Ventrue', sir."

"Do you know what the difference between a good Ventrue and great one is?" Devereux asked, leaning into the comfort of his chair.
Louisé's brow arched. She wasn't sure this wasn't a trick question. Even if it wasn't, she couldn't fathom an answer. "No."

"When good Ventrue make mistakes, they use their resources and skills to throw the blame onto someone else, thereby avoiding consequences that might otherwise compromise their standing in the clan. Great Ventrue acknowledge the bigger picture their mistakes cause and remedy the situation themselves. They spill their blood to guarantee the only one to suffer from their mistakes is themselves. Great Ventrue never take the easy way out unless that is the only way to go. Good Ventrue wait for elders to define their worthiness. Great Ventrue define it for themselves, carve it out of stone with their claws and sheer will. And you, Louisé, have demonstrated the makings of a great Ventrue."

"So what does this mean?" She was flattered, but always wary when Devereux dispensed compliments.

"It means that you are valuable, that you finally understand what it means to serve to the greatest extent that you can. For you, thankfully, it means you are somebody worth my time and efforts. Now I can finally promote you from grunt work."

"Thank you, sir. What am I being promoted to exactly?" she hesitated to ask.

"How does Harpy sound?"

"I…excuse me?" Louisé tried not to gawk at him. "I thought only Princes could assign court positions."

"Then it is very fortunate for you that I am Prince of Dijon and at liberty to dispense such honors."

"What do you mean? What happened to the Prince?"

"Your warning was enough for us to hold off the Sabbat near the front of his home. We managed to get a few of men into the house where the Prince was meeting with some Primogen. The Sabbat were waiting when they emerged out the back. Toreadors aren't famous for their fighting skills and as fast and he might have been, the Prince was caught up in the fray and killed. I think one of the Primogen died as well."

"Which Primogen?"

"Not sure. We haven't tallied everyone since we're still settling from the chaos."

"How did you become Prince? Not that I was expecting his death, but I assumed Cervantes would swoop in to steal the title."

"She almost did. But, I think she realized how much work would be required. Cervantes loves the freedom and indulgence of her nights too much to give it up. I appeased her want for power by offering her the position of Seneschal. She keeps her nights, I secure myself as Prince and you become my Harpy."

"But I thought you hated the idea of being Prince. I thought you preferred to manipulate people from the shadows."

"That was true before but Cervantes' appearance made me realize I care too much about my position and power in the community to ever compromise it again." He smirked at her. "Do you accept the position or no?"
"O-of course!" And she shook his outstretched hand.

"It smells like there's been a man in here," Cervantes said as Louisé opened the door.

Louisé wasn't surprised Cervantes would lack the prudent sensibilities that kept most people from waltzing into others' rooms. Perhaps this was karmic retribution for her own intrusion upon Cervantes' privacy. "Well, you are in here. Maybe you smell your own scent," Louisé replied after closing the door.

She received a glare from the man in woman's clothing. Then Cervantes smirked and rose from his seat at the foot of Louisé's bed. Louisé plopped into a chair and grabbed the half empty bottle of blood. Cervantes stepped within an arm's length of Louise and chirped, "No, this smells far muskier. Found yourself a lover who likes it rough?" He extended his hand and grazed fingers around her tender nose.

Louisé smacked his hand away. Cervantes grabbed her wrist. She shot the Spaniard a dirty look. "Let me go..." He no longer smirked but the curiosity hadn't quite left his eyes. He turned Louise's wrist, peering down at the yellow-brown bruising ringing around the skin.

"I see you've become more acquainted with ropes," his humor was not appreciated. It wasn't without a hint of disgust, either.

"Not by choice, I assure you," Louisé hissed. Cervantes' grip was irritating the burn marks hidden beneath expensive fabric. "Why are you here?" She tugged her wrist back.

"To accept Devereux's offer, of course!" Cervantes grinned and released her wrist.

"Then why are you in my room? How did you even get in here?" Louisé poured herself a glass and sipped on it.

"Seducing ghouls isn't a hard task, Louise. I thought it would be fun for you to feel what it's like for someone to invade your personal space without consent. That," he paused, toyed with Louise's hair in a way that began to shred her patience, "And it seems we have you to thank for diverting this whole Sabbat fiasco."

"I wouldn't go thanking me when the Prince lost his life."

Cervantes shrugged, a perfect display of Toreador flippancy. "There are inherent risks to the position of Prince. Assassination by Sabbat is only one of them."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" there was a hint of irritation in Louise's voice.

"No," he answered and walked to her door. "If you want a more pleasant experience with ropes, you know where to find me. I believe you still haven't received due punishment for your previous infraction upon my person."

Louisé closed her eyes and sighed. The thought of being tied up by a second deviant male made her sick. "Let me recuperate."

"Suit yourself. Wait too long and you give me time to come up with something truly... unforgettable." Louisé heard him open the door with a parting word, "Oh, and I would open a window unless you want someone else asking who you've had back here."

Louisé didn't care if anyone smelled a man in her room. No one came to her room enough to think it
could be anyone but Devereux or one of the other protégés harkening her to some nightly task. Only she would know who the lingering aroma belonged to, only she would care about keeping any windows closed so she could loiter in that scent. She sunk back into the bed and wrapped the blankets around herself, breathing in Henri. A month later Louise would receive his promised letter and enter into one of the most dangerous liaisons of her life.

The promotion to Harpy fit with Louise's personality. The need for order and accountability (born from noble lineage, fostered by Ventrue blood and violently provoked by Javier's abusive hands) fed Louise's practical, mundane desires. Her tutelage beneath Devereux adequately prepared her for keeping records of other Kindred's doings. The additional favor from each of Dijon's primogen sweetened the already saccharine situation. Gawain's favor was the most satisfying for her. While she would have eagerly accepted his death as an adequate solution to the whole Cervantes predicament, her new status as Harpy had Gawain's mannerisms shifting. He was not wholly reformed in his licentious conversation, but appeared to mind any demands he might have had of her. The favor he bestowed upon her was repealing the remaining obligation Louise had to him. This meant she no longer needed to dig for excuses as to why she still hadn't discovered defamatory material on Augustinia Cervantes. Even if that hadn't been his gift to Louise, Cervantes' new position as Seneschal would have compromised Gawain's plan anyhow. Secondary pleasure came from the fact that the aforementioned Seneschal abandoned aspirations for retribution against the new Harpy. No one wanted to be on anyone's bad side, especially the Harpy's bad side and that afforded Louise a comfortable place in everyone's anxiety.

As the years went by, ten to be exact, Louise found the role of Harpy losing its original luster. It was certainly prestigious and people feared her but she couldn't keep her mind from wandering to the numerous other possibilities open to her or settling in the ever deepening pool of her paranoia. She was no longer a neonate. Now a decade into her Kindred life and apt at both political and financial aspects of this existence, she wondered what more she was capable of. For years not, it was just she and Devereux: Harpy and her Prince abiding together, one aiding the other in running an efficient government that balanced favor and fear. The other two protégés had been dismissed. First Simon was sent away, as Devereux promised, due to his incompetence and tactless nature. Then Antoine followed suit five years later under more fortunate circumstances. There was no love lost for Louise when either left. Simon was an agitating pig and silent jealousy spoiled the once amicable relationship between she and Antoine, who couldn't understand why 'some girl' had been appointed Harpy instead of him. Louise's reluctance to elect him as a secondary Harpy, and Devereux's refusal to force her to, undid the cords of cordiality between him. His departure was a relief in the end. Consequently, Louise hadn't been inclined to think of them for some time. Satisfied he had secured a protégé with absolute loyalty and bureaucratic wherewithal, Devereux hadn't invested in replacing the others with new protégés. There was no one for Louise to compare Simon and Antoine to, thereby limiting her need to drag them from obscure memory. But after ten years as Harpy, she wondered where there were and with a spark of paranoia, feared they had been sent off to do better than she. Keeping tally on other Kindred had its drawbacks and what Sébastien's blood had seeded in her veins, court position nurtured into a healthy, functional dysfunction of her personality. Indeed, as the tenth anniversary of the whole Javier-Sabbat scandal reared its head, nightmares and trauma-based stress had Louise considering her promotion was nothing more than a plot by Devereux to keep her grounded in subservience forever. Ill supporting evidence encouraged her confrontation with her mentor and Prince just before dawn.

"Five years! Five years since you've sent Antoine to bigger and better things while I toil away at the same task night after night!"

Devereux's brow lifted, "Bigger and better? I believe you're mistaken, but that's not surprising given
women's tendencies toward hysteria. I didn't send them anywhere but to behind-the-scenes lifestyles where their total lack of vision won't hurt anything but their own sanity. No…I began to see night after night that they were satisfied with delivering the same genre of material and instead of using you as inspiration to impress me, they used it as an excuse to never better themselves because they honestly believed, in their naïve little minds, that they would always be better than you and you would always cease to amaze me. I don't need mollycoddles like that wasting my time or taking up space in my precious home."

"Then what does that mean for me?"

"That you don't have the pungent odor of mundanity….That deep inside; deep, deep, deep down, there is a shred of hope for you yet."

Far be it from him to give her an actual compliment, but she would take what she could get.

Devereux had noticed it soon after the Sabbat situation was taken care of and he assumed the throne of Dijon. Usually employed by compulsive nocturnal rituals, Louise's ticks that expressed an aberrant, but not unexplainable, need for control became more frequent. Where she once double counted or ordered things in a particular manner, Ramon could now see the demands of her new post illicit more aggressive preoccupations. Devereux had been sure after the public execution of Javier that Louise would feel a sense of vengeance and relief. The sudden outburst had him second guessing his Harpy and protégé's mental stability, but he supposed one outburst every ten years wasn't such a bad thing. As Prince, he didn't want to have to worry about such things and insisted she use her energies to more productive means of control and perfection. Devereux hired tutors to teach her foreign languages: Spanish, Italian and English. Louise had attempted German but fell out of love with it immediately. Instructors advanced her handwriting (which was scratchy), literacy, philosophy and Mathematics. Additional hires rounded her off by attending to her musical potential. When she was not excelling as the city's Harpy, Louise was a proper student and Devereux saw the displays of anxiety lessen.

After a while, he left the balancing of ledgers and management of his home to Louise since the demands of Prince outweighed the need to maintain a too-tight grip on his estate. Devereux determined she needed to practice managing an estate since he figured Louise would one day have a home of her own. Now she had control over something more tangible than boons and scandals; Louise settled into a more comfortable disposition that complemented her mentor's rebounded gregarious nature.

"What did you hear tonight?" He leaned against the doorway of her new study, watching her move beads of the abacus over with a tap of her nail.

"Absolutely nothing…Nothing of worth, nothing spectacular, nothing even mildly titillating." She looked back down at ledger, balancing his accounts before he harped on her to do it thirty minutes from now.

"So you have nothing for me?"

"I didn't say that." She motioned with the quill's feather to a small pile of papers on her desk. Papers she had been fully prepared to deliver to him.

"What's that?"

"What I heard."
"I thought you just said you didn't hear anything!"

"Anything of worth. I didn't want to be accused of not doing my job, either."

He trooped to the desk and picked up the score of papers, scribbled upon with her quick strokes. "You expect me to read this?"

"Well, I certainly don't expect you to decorate your room with it." She continued balancing the account.

"I can't be bothered to read this, Louise." He headed for the door.

"Your illiteracy is not my problem," she responded. He promptly whacked the back of her head with a thin book.

Sébastien LaCroix rubbed his temple as the wheels bounced him and his companion around his carriage. An invitation to a Parisian gathering of Ventrue lay on the seat beside him. He found the invitation both curious and inconvenient since French Ventrue had gathered earlier that year. LaCroix saw no purpose behind calling a second gathering when the first forum had concluded any plausible unfinished business. The requirement of mandatory attendance irritated him in the same manner the highly successful sugar trading company did every so often. Sébastien had finances to reap and a court position to keep secure. Long winded absences compromised both of these prominent components of his life. While he had been tempted not to attend and make excuse later, serving a Ventrue Prince blocked off any actual intention of following through with those temptations. LaCroix leaned into the padding of the carriage and sighed. The traveling companion across from him tensed. He waved his hand mid-air, encouraging them to relax then pointed at the letter in their lap.

"Let me do the talking when we arrive. I'm not sure what this is all for, but I don't suspect we shall be there long," he stated. His companion nodded.

LaCroix tapped his chin and looked out the carriage window. His eyes narrowed some as he rethought his directive. "I shall introduce you. Do not waver from how I introduce you to those who matter. If you must converse with others, I would prefer you to attempt to find the Ventrue from Dijon. I want to know if they might be able to shed light as to the owner of this so-called LSC Antilles trading company." Another nod from across the carriage. For thirty years, the loss of that trading company had gnawed at Sébastien. While he had ended up investing in other successful ventures, nothing in Bordeaux was quite as prosperous as the monopolous LSC Antilles company with its hold on sugar and spice trade. It had even been so bold as to break into the slave trade. To Sébastien, it felt like salt being rubbed into an open wound. LaCroix spent the next thirty years attempting to uncover the identity of the company's owner without completely diving into the realm of obsessive. The interests of Bordeaux preoccupied most of his energy but there was always spare deposits for the occasion search or inquiry. Perhaps this mandatory gathering wouldn't be such an inconvenience after all.

"Are you sure it was wise to leave the entire city in the hands of Augustinia?" Louise asked as they milled about the other Ventrue present for the gathering. The purpose of this assembly was still a mystery to her. Devereux didn't appear to know much more but if he did, he hid his knowledge well.

"She is Seneschal. It is her responsibility to attend to the city when the Prince is not present. If this meeting had not been mandatory, I would have sent you by yourself and stayed in Dijon. These past thirty years have proved your ability to accurately report information. Though," he paused to flash
her a charming smirk, "sending you to Paris alone might mean you venturing off to see your dear Henri again."

Louïsé tensed for a second. How did he know?! She had made sure their correspondences stayed locked tight within a vault in one of the city's mausoleums. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she answered.

Devereux laughed. "Don't be so stiff, Louïsé! Surely, by now, you should know when I am teasing! King Henri is too old now to interest you! Though I would find it hilarious to see what would happen if he encountered you again."

Louïsé relaxed. Not the same Henri. She hadn't spared a thought to the once and future king in decades. Humorous as the picture of meeting him again was, she was glad the relationship between herself and her Henri remained secret. She ran her tongue over the back of her teeth. "I'm thirsty. Shall we get something to drink?"

Devereux nodded. "Yes, though I'm afraid they aren't serving anything spectacular …just good enough to feed the masses."

"And that is why I never go to any of the national gatherings. Boring talks without the benefit of great sustenance."

Devereux chuckled and led the way to the main room where guests chattered and drank. Ventrue were not exactly sociable. Even amongst their own, there was a rigidity about the way they interacted with one another. Stiff handshakes and icy kisses on the cheek respected tradition but did nothing for affability between kinsmen. Louïsé, in moments like these, appreciated Devereux's social nature. His presence abounded and as they entered the room, the temperature went up considerably as men and women shook their hands and kissed their cheeks with genuine camaraderie. Louïsé sipped from her glass and answered innocent questions regarding her three decade old claim to fame. The fact that others were still interested in the mechanics of that night were astounding to her, but Ventrue never let anything go and a good story could be passed around for centuries if it had enough followers and glory.

"Did that really happen?" asked a wide-eyed neonate.

Before she could answer, Devereux sidled up beside her and smiled. "Of course it did! You are standing in the presence of true bravery, young one."

Louïsé was again cut off, but by the neonate this time. "I have to get my Sire! She has wanted to meet this person for some time." And off she went.

"What are you doing?" Louïsé hissed at Devereux. "You know I don't like bragging about that incident. It was thirty years ago. Why is anyone still talking about it?"

"Because it is a wonderful story," Devereux responded. His tone was glib and she wasn't sure she welcomed that. "You did something beyond honorable and now you get to enjoy the fruits of your honor."

"Why do I get the feeling you-"

"Annalise!" Devereux boomed and stepped forward to collect the hand of a handsome woman in her late thirties, perhaps early forties. Louïsé watched her Prince kiss the woman's hand and offered a smile of her own as Devereux introduced them, "Louïsé, this is Annalise de Lanpre. She is Prince of Bordeaux. Annalise, this is my protégé."
"Louisé Seyssel-Chambert," the woman said. Now it was Devereux's turn to get caught off. Prince de Lanpre smirked at Devereux, who returned her look with equal mirth. "My Childe tells me you were the one from the story...The one who saved Dijon?"

Louisé took a second to decipher if the Prince's tone was acerbic or intrigued. Figuring a Prince wouldn't risk being blatantly rude to another Prince's charge, Louisé accepted the woman's curiosity. "I am afraid so, Prince."

The woman held up an immaculate hand. "Wait! Before you go any further, I have someone who needs to hear this story." De Lanpre turned and waved to someone just out of Louisé's view. "Charlotte!" The Prince's voice was authoritative but not so loud as to be impertinent. "Charlotte, there is someone you must meet," Annalise pressed when the woman, called Charlotte, walked over to their small group with both hands clutching glasses of blood.

The woman, plain and pale, seemed frazzled by the sudden interruption in her journey. "I would love to but I must get this back to my master," she answered with the lift of one glass.

"Oh, he can wait," Annalise disregarded her excuse. "I doubt he would want you to refuse your Prince, anyhow." De Lanpre looked back at Louisé and grinned, "Do tell us everything."

Louisé obliged and when she was finished, looked over at Devereux who was grinning like a child. De Lanpre looked satisfied, her Childe displayed amusement and Charlotte had a layer of disbelief over her face. Bordeaux's Prince turned to Charlotte and said, "You should aspire for such greatness." Then waved her off so that she might finish her task and deliver the blood. Annalise looked back at them when the woman was gone and murmured, "Not quite a year old that one. Not sure what to make of her yet, but I hope she won't disappear." The Prince took a drink from a glass her Childe nudged into her hand then looked at Devereux and asked, "Do you mind if I borrow your little heroine for a moment? I'm not the only one from Bordeaux who has been eager to put a face with a story."

Devereux shrugged a shoulder, patted Louisé on the back and eased her forward with the same hand. "I don't see why not. I will need her back soon."

Annalise made a sound and smiled at Louisé. "That our lives are dictated to by men. Prince, girl! Aspire for that and you shan't have to deal with the schedules of our opposing sex," she jabbed at Devereux as playfully as Ventrue can. She took Louisé's arm and led her down the same path Charlotte had taken.

They weaved their way past other clumps of Ventrue from other French cities who told other stories and whispered behind their backs as Louisé passed. She ignored them as Annalise drew closer to a larger group of Ventrue. She recognized the side-standing Charlotte, her profile revealing the unfortunate protrusion that was her nose. She held up a glass of blood to a man with his back to Louisé, a man with blonde hair...a man who smelled entirely familiar the closer she drew. Louisé felt her muscles tense. Annalise stopped walking and coughed. The group looked at her. The man tilted a glance over his shoulder, but Louisé was outside his line of sight. He was not outside of hers and nausea clamped her throat. She remained rigid as Annalise introduced her.

"Everyone, this is Devereux's girl. The girl from the story," she added to the end of her introduction. That seemed to inspire interest in the group and they uniformly migrated to form a circle with the Prince and Louisé. The man did not migrate, he merely rotated around one foot. He and Louisé exchanged mutual, stunned expressions. Expressions Annalise de Lanpre did not ignore. "Do you know her, LaCroix? Have you met before?"

Sébastien, the Sire she had striven to wipe from her conscious and assumed to be dead, stared at her
for a second before answering, "Yes." One finger tapped the side of his glass, a sign of irritation… displeasure? She couldn't remember anymore. "She was a protégé a long time ago."

His answer cut through the core of her, tore it apart. His voice was so cold, so precise with its explanation that it made her hollow. Louise's tongue whipped frantically around the inside of her mouth. It formed objects her voice would not, pressed against fangs he gave her. The group looked at Louise for confirmation of this miniscule truth. "About thirty years ago," she said.

"Did you hear that Charlotte?" The Prince said. "He knew her before she was great."

"Great?" Sébastien asked. The woman called Charlotte fidgeted at his side. Her gaze went down to the ground. Louise sensed embarrassment steaming off the woman. LaCroix noticed Louise's gaze and motioned to Charlotte. "Forgive me, I've forgotten proper introductions," he said as he looked at others beside Louise. "This is Charlotte, my Childe."
Louisé didn't have time to be shocked or hurt. Someone else had questions for her. Their Southwestern accent, sprinkled with Spanish, reminded her of emissaries Devereux received from Toulouse. "So, you saved your city from the Sabbat. Remarkable! I hear you are also a very wealthy young lady?"

"Pardon?" Louisé broke the stare at her Sire and smiled at the speaker. "I suppose, but seeing as we're all Ventrue here, I'm sure 'wealthy' is a word that could describe us all." The group chuckled in unison since it was a well-known fact that, of all the Camarilla clans (perhaps all clans period), Ventrue were the richest.

"True," Annalise de Lanpre said. "However, it is quite impressive and worthy of note that one so young was able to monopolize the lucrative and competitive industry of New World trading."

Louisé tightened her grip on her glass. She valued a high level of anonymity when it came to her personal endeavors. Her behaviors reflected a strict faithfulness to the virtue of prudencia; she let fellow kinsmen express dignitas on her behalf. Instances like this made her reconsider this policy. She lowered the glass from her lips, running its contents over her tongue before responding to Prince de Lanpre's compliment, "You flatter me too greatly."

"Have I?" The Prince asked, eyebrow perked with intrigue. The circle of Ventrue looked at the both of them. Center stage was the last place Louisé liked to be.

"Indeed. I'm not so able as to control the entire trading industry with the New World," Louisé explained. "I am quite satisfied with my portion of sugar and spices." She caught Sébastien LaCroix's body constricting with a hint of anger coloring his face.

"Would Ventrue be happy with anything less?" Louisé questioned and the group chuckled again. "Honestly," Louisé felt herself settling into the ease of conversation Devereux found so naturally, "Owning such a behemoth can be more taxing than my demands as a Harpy."

"How do you mean?" Charlotte, his new Childe, dared to ask.

Louisé looked at her. A jealousy and twisted enmity spoiled the blood in her veins. Emotions that hadn't existed when first meeting this woman surfaced, no thanks to their mutual progenitor, and tainted her opinion of her; it made Charlotte's question irrationally irritating and cumbersome. She kept her tone in check while answering, "The Dutch, I'm afraid. The Netherlands are quite tired of Portugal holding primary custody over trading routes to the East Indies so they're making a push to form their own fleet. They've created nothing but trouble. A real headache."

"So, you trade out of where exactly?" LaCroix asked. She could tell he was trying not to glare.

"Bordeaux," she said, cold and curt. Louisé smiled at Prince de Lanpre. "It has one of the best ports in France for that kind of industry."

"One of the best ports in France, period," Annalise corrected with a gentle tongue. "A pity you let her go, LaCroix," her chide was humorous, "For now we will all be at the mercy of Devereux's big head as he, undoubtedly, will take all the credit for producing such an upstanding and ideal representative of our clan."
"Are my ears burning for fun or did someone mention my name?" came the smooth voice of Ramon Devereux as he sauntered up behind his protégé and fellow Prince. Louise watched him flash his charming smile at the group, watched it flinch for a moment as his gaze caught LaCroix.

"My goodness, Sébastien! How good it is to see you again," Devereux's honeyed tone was forced. The pressure of Devereux's arm went across Louise's shoulder blades. His fingers pressed into the side of her arm as he continued, "How is Bordeaux treating you?"

"Well enough, Devereux," his former protégé answered.

"Prince Devereux," de Lanpre corrected, no humor in her voice this time.

"Oh, it's nothing Prince de Lanpre. He and I haven't seen each other in…what? Thirty years? I don't blame him for not knowing the political rigmorale of a city ages away." Devereux looked down at Louise. "My dear, I have someone I insist on you meeting. If you could wait for me in the room across the hall? I will only be a moment." He turned her in that direction with his arm and nudged her off with a palm to the middle of her back. Louise spared only one glance back and it wasn't for him. She appeared to need no more incentive to leave.

"Such a girl you have, Devereux. And that is saying something since I have never known you to care much for our sex," Annalise teased from just behind him.

"What I care for is excellence, my dear. And if she were not in some form excellent, I would not have wasted my time," Devereux stated. He turned to face the group once more, giving full attention to LaCroix. "Speaking of worthy causes…is this one yours, Sébastien?" He motioned to the homely creature at his side.

"Yes. This is my Childe, Charlotte Favreau," Sébastien responded without glancing at the woman.

"I see. I hope she brings to you the wealth of dignity and pride Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert has bestowed upon me," Devereux shot back. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to steal your Prince for a mere second."

"If she'll deign to speak with you in private," de Lanpre feigned arrogance to entertain her masses who offered a final, subdued chortle before migrating off to the other side of the room. Princes didn't move to accommodate their needs, after all; their court did. Annalise looked at Devereux. He smiled back, took a sip from his cup. "You could have mentioned Mademoiselle Charlotte was his."

"To what end? What would knowing her Sire's name change?" Annalise asked.

"Whether or not I would have let my protégé amble over here to entertain you," his tone was sharp. "Now is not the most opportune time for her to be distressed."

"She didn't seem distressed to me. Why does she care who LaCroix embraces?" de Lanpre's curiosity was growing.

Devereux gave her a look that explained the situation better than words. His fellow Prince's eyes widened then closed as she drank from her cup. Ramon looked in the direction LaCroix moved. "What's done can't be undone and you are right, she may not care at all. But that's not why I wanted to speak with you."

"I figured as much. What is it, my dear Ramon? What do you need of me?"
"You make it sound like all I ever do is call for favors from you," his words dripped with faulty offense.

"Not at all. I just want you to get to heart of the matter so that I may continue to enjoy myself."

"I trust I have your support."

"Support for…?" Annalise smirked. Devereux shot her a different kind of look and received the pleasure of her snigger. "Ah. Yes. Of course you do. If you didn't, I wouldn't have wasted my time dragging her over here. Do you honestly think I enjoy hearing that platitude over and over?"

"I believe you enjoy hearing it as much as she enjoys telling it," he admitted. "Though, I must say, you play the role of eager admirer very well."

"Funny," her answer was flat. "Off with you, Devereux and don't worry. You'll have all the support I can muster if they still intend on following through with this plan of theirs."

Louisé was tired of meeting people she wouldn't remember or care about in a fortnight's time. The manner in which Devereux led her about the various rooms was annoying. Princes, Seneschals, Praetors and other slightly higher ranking Ventrue enjoyed the distinct pleasure ofnumbing her ears with repetitious questions regarding her exploits. It was all very dull and reminiscent of her Agoge. Except this time, there was no clear explanation for why she ought to humor these questions. There was no longer need to prove herself to a clan that had long ago installed her as a member of their Peerage. The exhausting tedium served only one valuable purpose: to distract her from the throbbing sensation of sullen madness. Sébastien LaCroix's offhand answer to their relationship, coupled with his icy attitude, left a sore on her mind that she gnawed at until it was raw and red. It was a plague to her senses. It was a whirlwind of mental chaos tearing away hinges of the doors separating her doubts from the firmer foundations of her psyche. His words destroyed one bedrock of her identity with a single, nonchalance cannonball.

"If you don't start to look more enthusiastic, you're going to bore them to ashes," Devereux commented as they settled into their suite of rooms at Château de Vincennes.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I am tired of answering the same question ten times. I have other things on my mind."

"Oh? Like what?" he asked but immediately thrust a hand into the air for her silence. "Don't tell me. Could it be…Sébastien LaCroix?"

Louisé didn't respond. She strode into her adjoining room to undress. Devereux wouldn't give her the courtesy of privacy. "Best your put him out of your mind, child," he spouted behind her.

"I would if I could!" she snapped. She wasn't lying. Louisé had attempted shoving her Sire from her mind as though he were standing on ice, but to little avail. He slid right back in.

He ignored her irritation. "Why can't you? You have before. You wouldn't be as successful as you are now if you hadn't."

"Last time was different," she explained more to convince herself than him. "He didn't completely disregard me as his Childe last time."

"No," Devereux cooed while looking at his nails. "He just abandoned you without so much as a farewell."
"I cannot concentrate on those elders until I have an explanation! I am Ventrue…I do not like unresolved situations," she confessed.

"I wouldn't advise that, Louisé," he responded. "It won't do you any good."

"How do you know that?"

Devereux's stare was hard. His voice was harder. "I know Sébastien LaCroix, have known him for some time. You won't get any explanation from him because he believes he has nothing to explain. Your feelings are inconsequential to him. Seeking him out and demanding this of him will only hurt you."

"Careful Devereux, you almost sound concerned for my wellbeing," she jested without a jester's jovial attitude to match. Louisé frowned and sat. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that, but I can't help how his words wounded me."

"He called you his protégé, Louisé. That is not entirely false," Devereux responded as he leaned against the doorway.

"But not entirely true either," Louisé's fingers alternated between picking at themselves and tugging at loose strands of hair that fell to the floor. "He's ashamed of me." It was the only conclusion her pockets of mental fragility could come up with.

She felt the strength of Devereux's grip still her fingers. So absorbed in the churning of her suspicions, she hadn't heard him move. It was comforting in an odd way. While not a comforting presence a majority of the time, even Devereux had his moments of selflessness that stilled the waters of her anxiety. His larger than size presence could only envelope her when it was just the two of them. He held her hands between his fingers and her attention with his gaze. His voice was authoritative, but not domineering, "He would be a fool to be ashamed of you. As it stands, Sébastien LaCroix does not matter. If these past thirty years have taught you anything, let it be that you don't need him! Was it LaCroix that rescued you, us, from the Sabbat? Was it LaCroix that guided your financial hand? Was it LaCroix who taught you how to claw and bite to maintain your domain?"

Louisé shook her head. Her mind was clearing, settling. Her small voice spoke, "No. It was me."

"Sorry? Say again? I'm old Louisé and you will have to speak up if I am to hear you."

"It was me!" she shouted to appease both spoken and unspoken demands of her mentor.

"Yes, it was." Devereux smiled. His cheekiness was returning. "With some help from a wonderful adviser, but it was you. So what if he doesn't acknowledge you? It is his loss and your gain. LaCroix is useless to you. Wash your hands of him and give his words the weight and merit they deserve…nothing!" And he spat at the ground to the side of them. Louisé bent her head and spat.

LaCroix had not expected many things of this Parisian summit. Much was left to everyone's imagination on why they were there at all. Those who knew were not talking. Of all the things he was not expecting, however, his first Childe's presence was among the implausible. Their shock was a mutual one. Sébastien gathered from her expression that she had assumed him deceased. He had convinced himself of her final death decades ago. It certainly provided justifiable means to steal a portion of her inheritance for his own gains. When tight spots had arisen in the past, the title that came with the funds proved useful. Marquis LaCroix had an awful nice ring to it. The appearance of
the rightful Marquess made that note go sharp. To discover she was the proprietor of the company he had once, and still, longed for was an ironic crescendo that ruined the melody. Having never told anyone in Bordeaux about his elder Childe, even the second he embraced, Sébastien experienced a second’s worth of anxiety. He saw no reason to muddy the waters now. Protégé was an apt enough explanation. An unfortunate, covert denial of her vampiric paternity, but if she was as "great" as they claimed then she would get over it. If she wouldn't, he would make her.

The unsettling fact remained, though, that she enjoyed abundant spoils from her trading company. LaCroix found his long-sought opponent with the added benefit of being able to exert some control over them. In his mind, he saw no reason for someone from Dijon with no prior connections to Bordeaux to have ample financial domain there. Domain that ought to be in the hands of local Kindred. Domain that ought to have been his. This was something he and she were obliged to discuss. Clearly Devereux had failed to teach her appropriate etiquette when it came to investiture. Unfortunately for Sébastien, finding time to speak with his eldest was no simple task. Not only was she blatantly ignoring him but was being paraded before elder members of their clan under the watchful stare of Devereux. It became a skill: avoiding Devereux’s scouring eyes. In the end, he resorted to cornering her. While much had changed about her, one thing remained constant: her limited ability to stand the throng. He waited for her to dislodge from the masses then stalked her down a winding corridor. LaCroix kept a reasonable distance to dodge obvious detection. Eventually, he heard a door close up ahead.

His ears listened for any sound of her. The space behind the first three doors was silent. Only one offered noise; the sound of a moan. Not hers. He took a chance and opened the door. If it wasn't her, he could always excuse himself and keep searching. The black mass of hair, slight body beneath yards of expensive fabric and familiar scent told him his brief hunt was a success. Her back was to him, body straddling some figure on the couch of the cozy study she'd secluded herself to. Sébastien’s face contorted with disgust. He had never been one for feeding right from someone. Louise was the only exception he could conjure and that had been brief, not repeated ever again. Even if he did choose to feed by biting, he would never feed in a pose that suggestive.

"That is quite enough," he said without holding back his judgment.

She lifted her head but did not look at him. There was the faint sound of her tongue licking around the edge of her mouth. "It is unspeakably rude of you to interrupt my meal," her voice was a marginal hiss.

"I need to speak with you," LaCroix insisted, "now."

"Now is not an option," was her answer. "If you wish to talk, you can wait outside until I am finished." Then she bent her head and he listened to her kine give an encore moan.

Such insolence! He would not tolerate it from anyone, especially his own Childe. His stride was sharp and quick. His grip was iron as it fastened to the back of her neck and squeezed. Louise growled, gurgling blood in her throat. She detached and the woman she'd been feeding on gave them a stupefied look. Sébastien held onto his Childe and glared at the matronly kine. "Get out," he ordered. And she left.

Louise was a seething, claret-chinned mass beneath his hand. The last time she'd glared at him in such a way was her near frenzied first night. She was not so uncontrolled tonight. Her anger was measured and restrained like an animal pacing its cage. She was waiting for him to release her while giving him perfect reason not to.

But Sébastien LaCroix didn't fear animals and he wouldn't fear his Childe. If anything, she should be afraid of him. "We are going to talk," he said.
"Let me go," was her frigid demand. He released her and stepped back as she straightened herself. She wiped her mouth with a handkerchief then resumed her glare. "How dare you manhandle me!"

"I will handle you any way I see fit," he snarled. "And I believe the only one in this room who need feel outraged is me. Your complete disregard of and impertinence toward me will not be permitted, Louisé."

"What you do or do not permit is of little concern to me," her conceit retorted. And before he could counter her, she continued, "You said you wanted to talk. What precisely do you wish to discuss?"

LaCroix pressed his tongue against one fang to keep his anger unexposed. Their mutual acrimony for one another mingled in the zephyr above their heads, mated and begat an insidious tension between their bodies. Domain was more important than ineffectual emotions. He drummed his fingers against the arm of the couch. "I wish to discuss this trading company of yours."

Louisé's head tilted. "What about my business would you like to discuss?"

"For someone who has never set foot in Bordeaux, it is highly inappropriate for you claim domain there," he replied.

"For someone who did not realize I was alive, how are you so sure I've never set foot there?" She dared to smirk at him.

"I have been there long enough to know the faces of my fellow Kindred. Yours was not among them."

She shrugged. "Your argument is what, then? That my company insults you?"

"That your possession of it insults the sanctity of domain!" he snapped.

Her look was amused disbelief. She had the gall the chuckle! When she spoke, her tone was sober, "Did I steal this domain from someone?"

"That depends entirely on the definition of stealing," he said. His fingers squeezed the arm of the couch.

"By any definition, did I steal domain?" She glanced at his fingers and smirked again. "Or," Louisé left him no room to speak, "Is it more likely your bruised pride desires I fear I have stolen that you may have cause to challenge my ownership?"

Sébastien glared at her arrogant face. His fingers stopped and relaxed. "I can assure you my pride has neither bruise nor anything to do with this. I might also remind you watch your tongue when speaking to me, girl," he hissed.

"And I shall remind you, you have no authority to question or challenge my personal affairs, kinsman," her bile shot back. LaCroix opened his mouth, but she beat him to it, "As I, and records, recall: The company in my possession was acquired through legal avenues by means of bidding. I offered the highest amount for the company. Therefore, I earned the right to possess it. The fact that it is located in Bordeaux is but a trite concern of logistics. Its presence neither hinders the domain of fellow Kindred nor aggrandizes my influence there."

"Its growth directly compromises others' abilities to expand and secure their financial dominion in their own city!" Sébastien countered, refusing to be lectured to by his own offspring.

"Excluding all the other financial opportunities in Bordeaux, my company's growth has everything to
do with the demands of its customers, not the ambitions of the undead," Louisé rebuttaled. "The financial limitation of others is not my concern. If you cannot afford to compete, then you have no room to complain."

"The issue still stands-

"Your issue is a philosophical one," she cut him off, "And the nature of your concept of domain is irrelevant to-

The sharp smack across her face echoed around the room. Louisé was stunned into silence. Her body was rigid with its head snapped to the side.

"You will not interrupt me!" LaCroix barked into her ear. Everything was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You will pay me the respect I deserve and apologize for your egregious behavior, Louisé. And then we shall discuss your resignation from this trading company as restitution for your breach of political etiquette."

Louisé lifted her hand to the cheek he smacked. She looked at her Sire slowly and with full ire. Her posture became straight and proud. "I will not."

"Excuse me?" LaCroix sneered.

"I will do none of those things. I will apologize for nothing I have said or done."

"You will do as I command!"

"No, sir, I will do no such thing," she did not raise her voice.

"As my Childe, you are obliged to obey my directives without question," he growled into her face.

Louisé made the bold move to step back and to the side, putting the couch between them. Her eyes looked beyond him. "Funny," her snigger was biting, "According to you, I'm not your Childe. Or have you forgotten, so soon, I am merely your former protégé?"

She watched LaCroix go wide-eyed and deflate. The mistakes we make often come back to haunt us. For her Sire, the ghosts appeared sooner than he would have liked.

"As far as anyone else is concerned, we are strangers." That hurt to say; she stuffed the feeling with others of its kind. "And as for Bordeaux, the Prince has addressed neither I nor Prince Devereux concerning any infractions on my part by owning my company. Prince de Lanpre's authority is the only one that matters, and she isn't obliging I give anything up. You, Sébastien LaCroix, have no authority. In this, you do not matter."

Her Sire became stony. The fissure he created between them transformed into a gorge with her words. "You will be sorry, Louisé," he threatened. Then he turned and strode from the room.

He was sorry he asked. Devereux rubbed his face with both palms and watched his protégé storm, back and forth, across the room through gaps between his fingers. Louisé had blown into the room like a hurricane and when he idiotically inquired about her distraught state, she opened her mouth and spewed forth a torrential downpour. For fifteen minutes he would never get back, she fumed about the altercation with LaCroix. Ramon tuned her out after five minutes and merely waited for the eye of the storm. She stared at him; a real force of nature.
"I told you not to seek him out," he reprimanded, his voice muffled by his hands as they slid into his lap.

"Were you listening?" she hissed, "I didn't seek him out, he trapped me."

"I know the feeling," he grumbled to himself. Ramon stood and plunked a hand to the top of her head. "Don't fret before you must, Louisé. As you deftly pointed out, LaCroix has no authority here."

"He threatened me," was the growl he got back.

Devereux removed his hand from her head and ran it through his hair. He sighed, "Sébastien is many things. Fool is not one of them. He knows if he were to act on that at a time such as this, without reasonable provocation from you, his head would roll faster than a downhill cart. Stop worrying and calm yourself. I will speak to him, if need be, and clear this up."

Louisé's shoulders slouched. She huffed and shook her head, "That would make me look weak."

Devereux shrugged. "Perhaps, but as Prince, I cannot allow members to be threatened within Elysium. His argument is unwarranted, thus making his warning somewhat unlawful. But I'm sure he was out of things to say and meant nothing more by it than to unsettle you to the point of capitulating to his demands. Now! If you will excuse me, my dear, I have a meeting to attend."

He left her to whatever activities she chose to distract herself with. Though he exuded a calming disposition to his charge, the truth was that he was more anxious than she. Devereux had quite a bit to worry about and didn't need Sébastien LaCroix's style of drama mucking anything up. If he had to, he would use a few threats of his own to shut down the narcissist's grasps at revenge. Ramon was not above brute force either. LaCroix was wile. He also appeared uncharacteristically perturbed by the presence of his elder Childe. Devereux grunted and turned his mind to more important matters when who should stride into his sights but the devil himself!

"Prince Devereux. A word, if you please, sir," LaCroix demanded with no real respect.

"No," Devereux said as he stalked passed LaCroix.

"Pardon?" Sébastien always managed to sound offended. It was annoying, truly.

"You asked for a word. One. I gave you one," Ramon kept his attention forward as the younger Ventrue fell into pace beside him.

"You know what I meant," LaCroix jeered. "I need to speak to you about my Childe."

"Why would I want to talk about Charlotte? I have no opinion of her at present and have no time to take on another protégé." Devereux smirked at Sébastien and joked, "I am not an orphanage for your unwanted Childer."

Sébastien's glare reminded Ramon of thoughts he had long ago, of a precarious animal lying dormant in the cavernous being of LaCroix's pneuma. His tone was wintery when he responded, "I believe you know I was not referring to Madam Favreau. I am displeased with Louisé's apparent lack of political tact."

Devereux stopped and stared at Sébastien's face. It was an indirect insult aimed at Ramon's capabilities to instill proper Camarilla behavior in his students. He licked his lips and chose his words carefully, "I assure you that of all the pupils I have ever had the pleasure, or displeasure," he made sure their eyes were locked on that word, "of instructing, Louisé is the most educated and careful
when it comes to the concept of political tact."

"Then explain to me the appropriateness of her possessing domain in a city she hasn't so much as seen, let alone set foot in long enough to enjoy the privilege!"

"This is what I am going to say and then we shall speak no more of it," Devereux hissed. "It is my understanding you bid for the company and lost to her, though you did not know it at the time. Instead of moving on appropriately, you have bottled up this jealousy until it turned into a pulpit for you to stand upon to both berate your Childe for her success and grasp for what is not yours. You are not displeased with Louise's 'lack of tack'; you're bothered by the fact that she is more successful than you."

LaCroix flushed with rage. "That is the most ludicrous accusation I believe I have ever heard you spit!"

"And yet, what wondrous truth it holds," Devereux continued. "You assumed she would be the same, scared little girl you left behind thirty years ago. It never occurred to you she would rise above the fray and secure her own pebble of glory. You thought she would die and that status-hungry part of yourself was satisfied."

"You told me those above believed the lie about her," he growled. "You gave me no choice."

"You always had a choice, Sébastien and you chose power. I told you before that leaving would be best and it was," Devereux pressed. "But you cannot fault Louise for achieving the best she could just because things did not pan out the way you hoped."

"I do not need to be lectured by you, Devereux. Those days are long behind me." Sébastien turned and strode away from him.

"Let it go, Sébastien! She has committed no crimes or broken any statutes. You won't have her company," Devereux shouted at his back.

Once LaCroix was out of sight, Devereux marched the remaining length of the hall. He disappeared behind a tapestry and into the open door hidden by its threads. Dozens of heads snapped in his direction and he excused himself.

"Thank you for finally joining us, Prince Devereux. We were just discussing the timeline of the situation," the Lictor at the head of the room stated. "$\text{The English will arrive in two days' time. They are due to land in Calais at dawn and begin their trek at dusk. Here is how things shall be handled upon their arrival,}$" and the Lictor continued to talk.

Devereux listened, meeting eyes with a few members sitting around the room. De Lanpre gave him a nod the closer it came for the Lictor to stop speaking. The Lictor sat and an uneasy disposition fell over the crowd of Princes.

"I trust everyone is in agreement about those chosen?" The Lictor asked.

"Actually, if I may," Devereux said, "I would like to submit a fourth candidate."

"What?" another Prince snapped. "$\text{We have already chosen and voted on three candidates. We do not have time to deliberate on a fourth.}$"

"We voted?" Devereux faked his surprise. "$\text{I didn't vote! De Lanpre, did you vote?} $"
Annalise shot him a smirk then looked at the Lictor. "I never voted. I only heard of these three a week after it had already been decided. I, personally, see nothing wrong with considering a fourth and then agreeing upon them if they are found to be worthy."

Muttering picked up among their colleagues. Other Princes complained, in the most Ventrue manner, of not having been consulted to vote either. Devereux watched the Lictor squirm. Revealing his preference for favorites easily upset those who had not been consulted. He gave in easily, his hands waving downward to calm the fuss, "We shall hear Prince Devereux's suggested candidate. If majority agrees the candidate is worthy, we shall allow their participation. If majority disagrees, then the matter shall be put to rest and only the three shall be used."

There was murmuring, agreement. The Lictor looked relieved and motioned to Devereux. "Well then, who do you suggest?"

"Louise Seyssel-Chambert," Devereux said.

"She is your own! We agreed no immediate blood connections shall be put forth for consideration," argued someone closer to the Lictor.

"She is not my Childe," Devereux corrected. "Only my protégé and Harpy."

"Then validity of this submission stands," the Lictor said.

"She is too young. She has zero inexperience in this matter to be a good choice," said another Prince. "The other three are more qualified."

"The other three are boring!" barked Devereux.

"They are wiser in matters of diplomacy. They are older and more acquainted with international politics."

"They are not just older, they are old," Devereux insisted. "I mean, has anyone in here seen them?"

New murmurs erupted. Someone spoke up, "We cannot be concerned about aesthetics with more important matters to attend to."

"Are you mad?" De Lanpre spoke up. "We have to be about aesthetics. Do you know who they have chosen as their representative? The reputation they have?"

"Louise may be young compared to the others. But her allure will add variety. We are not getting rid of the other three, just adding contrast to the elements. The decision is ultimately England's," Devereux said.

"We cannot have France present to England three boring, middle aged choices and nothing else. They shall laugh in our faces and renege on the agreement for peace," Annalise admitted.

"We do not know that," said a Prince to Devereux's left.

"True, but it's best we have all of our avenues covered. If they choose one of the older, more experienced candidates then so be it," the Lictor agreed with Annalise. "Any other objections to this proposed participant?" No one spoke. The Lictor nodded. "To accommodate custom. Who seconds the nomination?"

Annalise de Lanpre raised her hand, "I second."
Devereux felt a small sense of relief invade his body. He was far from being able to relax, but this was certainly a start.

Sébastien dipped the quill into more ink and continued to write his letter. If Louisé would not listen to his words, then she would read them. Charlotte sat somewhere behind him. She was reading, or something of the like; what was important to him was that she was quiet and undemanding of his attention. Simple and plain, Charlotte attracted less than a quarter the attention Louisé had. A widow and mother of three adult children who had no time for her, no one had noticed when she disappeared. Not at all from the prominent kind of family as Louisé, LaCroix gained only what he needed: an attendant to carry out his orders, someone who wouldn't attract unwanted regard. He didn't expect much from Charlotte though she had her uses.

Movement drew his attention toward his Childe. He stood when he saw Prince de Lanpre in the doorway. LaCroix bowed his head a little. "My Prince. How may I be of service to you?"

"Charlotte, leave us," the Prince ordered. His younger Childe questioned nothing and left with her book in hand. De Lanpre closed the door and took Charlotte's empty seat. "We need to discuss your Childe."

LaCroix turned his chair sat slowly, glanced at the door. "Has Charlotte done something to displease you?"

"Not that Childe," De Lanpre's tone was curt.

Sébastien tensed and laid his hands against the arms of the chair. "I see. What would you like to discuss?"

"I shall pardon your lie regarding the nature of your relationship with Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert," she started. "In exchange for your withdrawal from this pursuit of her industry."

"Prince, I meant no disrespect. Yes, she is my Childe but we spent only a few months together before I departed for Nice. Enough to cover her Agoge and-"

"Yes, yes, yes I know. Devereux informed me. I don't really care. Clan taboo and politics bore more if they have nothing to do with my city. Which brings me to my point. Her company brings great wealth to Bordeaux, so you will understand I do not care that she has never seen so much as the border of the city."

Sébastien nodded, licking the back of his teeth. He detested her attitude, so similar to Devereux's. LaCroix found her weak and annoying but since she was Prince, he did not openly question or ridicule her. "I understand. Please know I was only thinking of what was appropriate. I felt she had broken decorum and as her Sire, I felt the need to correct this. I never meant for it to be an affront to you."

"Of course you didn't. Now you know she has broken nothing and I fully endorse her ownership of the company," de Lanpre said.

"Very well, Prince. Anything else?"

"Try and cheer up, Sébastien. You don't do so poorly in the market, either." De Lanpre stood and opened the door. "You should be proud to have a Childe with a good reputation. Especially with Charlotte being," she stopped. "Well, it may prove incredibly beneficial to us that she is your Childe and you are proud of her."
"I understand, Madam. A good evening to you, then," he said as her back disappeared around the corner. He turned and looked at the letter he’d been writing. Cursing under his breath, he tore it to shreds and rubbed his face.

Louisé turned the page of her book and reclined on her bed. The servant fanning her stopped when Devereux marched into her room with a smile on his face. She found it strange, a disconcerting kind of smile, and closed the book with a snap. Two fingers motioned for the servant to leave and she sat up.

"Something has made you very happy, it seems," she said.

"Yes, my dear!" he asserted before sitting himself on the edge of her bed. "First, I would like to assure you that the situation with Sébastien has been resolved. He’ll abandon these desires for your company."

"Well, that is good news." She looked him over again, "But I doubt that is what leaves you overjoyed. What else has lifted your spirits?"

"A bit of other business. But before that, I have a question to ask you."

"Ask away, Devereux, that I may get back to my reading and fanning. It is unacceptably hot."

"What think you of marriage?" Devereux grinned.
Chastity

Louisé stared at Devereux for an eternity's worth of silence. His smile had been disturbing for sure, but she could never have thought it was because this was the question that lurked behind it. Then she started laughing. She ignored Devereux's offended face and continued to laugh. She couldn't remember the last time she laughed so hard. Fingers wiped at tears. "No, Devereux," she stuttered another chuckle, "I shall not marry you."

He glared at her. The timbre of his voice was more disgusted than offended, "Not me, you stupid girl!" His irritation peaked when she laughed again. "I did not propose to you. I merely inquire what your thoughts toward marriage are. What do you think of it?"

"I don't think of it," her answer was somber. "And I don't believe I need to explain why." Louisé moved off the bed to replace the book. It didn't seem as though she was going to get much reading done with Devereux throwing nonsense questions at her.

Devereux watched her with new excitement shining through his eyes. For a man entirely in control of his actions, he was practically bouncing. "You might need to explain."

"The thought of marriage was stolen when LaCroix embraced me. It's not as if some nobleman would be interested in me, now."

"Maybe not of the mortal kind," Devereux mused.

Louisé narrowed up her eyes and stressed, "Marriage is for the procreation of children," her tone became sad as she smoothed her gown, "And I won't be having any of those."

"You really wouldn't want them anyway. Now!" He stood and clapped his hands, "Pushing all that aside, how stands your disposition toward marriage?"

Louisé sighed, "Pushing it all aside…I think marriage is an honor I dream not of."

Devereux made an irritated noise, "God's teeth, you are frustrating! Well, dream of it from now on for I have secured you a wondrous opportunity for fame and glory."

"Do I want to know what you have done?' Her brows drew together.

His grin was cunning, full of glee. "I have proposed you as a possible bride to a certain groom to help solve a particularly old and difficult problem."

He could not have been more vague if he tried. She groaned, "What kind of 'certain groom' are you talking about?"

"Oh a handsome, wealthy man!" He grin spread, became more strained.

"What kind of man?" She pressed him. The stench of his trickery was thickening in the air.

"A Ventrue."

"Obviously. What else? And why?"

"The why might take some time," he skirted the other question.

"What else about this man can you tell me?"
"He has quite a bit of land. A lovely home, so I hear."

"Devereux!" She snapped at him and got his attention. "What aren't you telling me? He's handsome, wealth, has plenty of land, Ventrue and…?" Louisé would allow him to fill in the rest.

Devereux's tongue ran along the front of his teeth. He sucked in air and responded, "English."

Louisé's face contorted with revulsion; her voice was rife with objection, "Absolutely not!"

No matter what anyone tells you, there is a loyalty more primal than that of the clan. Loyalty to one's country, one's Mother or Fatherland is never spoken; it is never needed to because it is silently understood that whatever tribe, empire or country one is born, they innately pay homage to. Unless those places no longer existed and then the loyalty was moot. The Old Ones, the Methuselahs, who could remember the sound of Augustus' voice or how Ramses sneezed had long ago said "Adieu!" to their imperial loyalties because there was nothing left but memory and clan and conquest. Modern Kindred didn't have that luxury.

Yes, before more factious clans like Malkavian or Toreador, loyalty as a Ventrue was absolute. Appearance was everything and as leaders of the Camarilla, it simply wouldn't do to appear divided. But take away the pretense, look closely enough and anyone could see the hairline fissures that fractioned the Ventrue clan every now and then. Germanic Ventrue hated the Spanish and Holy Roman Emperors with their Hapsburgs; Portuguese hated Spanish Ventrue for backing Pope Alexander VI and securing a majority of the New World for themselves, and the French hated the English. Actually, everyone hated the English but it was no secret that when it came to intra-clan conflict, French and English Ventrue were as nasty as their human counterparts.

Only the very old can say when it happened exactly and each one is exactly sure of something else. Popular consensus is that conflict started when French Ventrue financially supported William the Conqueror in 1066. While the stealing of domain is frowned upon, incredibly faux pas for Ventrue, the pre-Camarilla feudal society saw French Kindred usurping their English brethren out of lucrative lands under the pretext of human warfare. To keep the peace and appearances, the Ephorate sent their Strategoi to remedy the situation. All lands acquired by French Ventrue where the previous English owner was not killed by enemy warfare were to be returned and the culprits heavily fined for breaking clan ethics. If the Englishman had been killed, the French Ventrue could maintain ownership at the expense of any and all domain in France. Some returned to France, some agreed. Those that stayed behind forfeited French identity and became, for all intents and purposes, staunch English Ventrue.

Power spats from the Crusades led right up to the biggest conflict thus far: The Great War. Spanning one hundred twelve years, the Great War gave English Ventrue seeking justice from the William debacle, or those that just hated the French, the perfect opportunity at vengeance. Using the guise of warfare, like their French brethren, English Ventrue filled the minds of English kings and noblemen with the delusion of their right to the French crown and subsequently pilfered domain from their kinsmen in the ensuing battles. And while the spread of Black Death or tepid peace agreements sent English troops back home, their vampire masters became comfortable in their stolen properties. At the peak of their power, English forces controlled French land from the Channel to the Loire and from Brittany in the West to Burgundy in the East. Scores of French Ventrue, French Kindred, were ousted from ancestral or hard-won lands as English cousins sacked them from the shadows of their troops. And even after France pushed back their assailant to their own shoes, English Ventrue refused to budge, and skirted attempts to be forced out of their newly won domain by either embracing Frenchmen for the sole purpose of holding their French acquisitions or dispensing their English property to awaiting English Childer. Their paid their fines and avoided losing anything the
way their French fellows did; they would not be so foolish.

And the French. The displaced and ruined. They never forgot. They never forgave.

None of that mattered to Louisé. In fact, she didn't know any of this. Devereux trumped her animosity toward being linked to an English man up to two reasons. One, she had been raised to hate the English because she was the descendant of those who spilt their blood defending France and its priorities from England's grasp. And two, the English were Protestants. Ramon Devereux thought her refusal was stupid and ignored it like so many foolish, immature things she had done over the years. Ventrue do not pass at opportunities for glory. Ventrue do not refuse the reasonable requests of their elders. Devereux did not hit Louisé for her outburst. He knew the only way to attract flies was with honey, not vinegar. So, he smiled and sat back down.

"I know. Ugly business, really, but what you ought to focus on is the whole 'fame and glory' part of it," nectar flowed from his mouth; a hook to lure her in.

"Forgive me, but I seem rather incapable of moving past the 'marry an Englishman' bit!" Her rant snapped his lure in half.

A frustrated beast ambled inside Devereux. Why? He thought. Why is she capable of big picture thinking for everything but this? He shot him a scathing look. Combining that with the way she laced her arms over one another to girdle against her ribcage, Louisé already had the makings of a fine, distempered wife. Devereux sucked his teeth. Pacifying her inflexibility seemed the best route to go now, "Naturally, you aren't the only prospect we've put forth."

"Naturally," she chastised. Her brow lifted, a mirror visage of her Sire- though he wouldn't tell her that any time soon. "And who is 'we'?"

"A consortium of French Princes and a representing Lictor," he told her, as though it were some small thing.

That seemed to distract her from the pungent reputation of the English. The rational workings of her Ventrue mind were churning. Devereux could see it in her eyes: the piecing together of this puzzle. She begged the obvious, "What is going on, Devereux?"

"It is quite the lengthy story," he informed her.

"Then you had best become comfortable."

A lover of History, Louisé had a hard time wrapping her mind around the vampiric underpinnings for many crucial events that made the continent what it was. There was something sickening; the thought of her ancestors riding alongside or battling against her Ventrue progenitors. What she was not surprised by was the underhanded nature of the English. Their fraudulent ways, in her humble opinion, were something to be expected and perhaps the only thing you could trust about them. Stories of crusading ancestors were just as popular in her home as those that drove the English knaves back to the white shores across the channel. The lesson was always the same: The English were not to be trusted, not even to be suffered.

"I can see why the French would be angered. What I don't understand is why we're deciding to resolve the issue almost one hundred fifty years later? And, most importantly, why I have to be involved?"

"It isn't so much resolving the issue from back then as what not resolving it back then resulted in,"
Devereux answered.

"Sir," Louisé stressed, "Please avoid being vague with me. This trip has irritated me enough without my having to pick through your Malkavian-like speech. Why is this argument being brought up once again? And why am I being involved?"

Devereux clucked his tongue. "Most of us thought we had put this hogwash to bed. Granted, the French clansmen still alive from that period of time – myself included – wish for more formal resolution to the matter, we weren't in a place to push it up higher on the Ephorate's schedule of issues to resolve within the clan. That was until a troupe of French Ventrue, en route from Paris to pay homage to the Prince of London's millennium celebration at the behest of their Prince, came to blows with some mouthy English cousins."

Louisé took a brief pause to process his words. First, she had never actually asked Devereux how old he was. She knew he was older than her Sire, but that was a generic assumption and could include anything from ten to five hundred years more. The next glaring item was the word 'millennium' and the fact that it was attached to a Prince, to a person, was mindboggling. Louisé knew her kind had the potential to live forever; she just had never actually encountered one that had lived so long. "Came to blows?" her question broke her from deeper thinking and back to the task at hand.

"Yes. An English Childe said something about either the French, or France in general. Before anyone knew it, guns were drawn!" He made a dramatic flair with his hands. "Except only the English fired since we French are more sensitive to displays of political etiquette…to a point. And only a Frenchman was injured."

She felt incensed for no other reason than that the English had bested her French clansmen. "What happened after that? We surely didn't allow that insult to stand!"

Devereux smirked. "Of course we didn't. I am happy to report that the English Childe, who insulted them, and shooter met with rather creative punishments." He chuckled, "One got his tongue cut out and the other is missing a hand."

Her eyes went wide. "How is that maintaining political etiquette?"

"No one saw who committed these heinous acts, though we were obviously accused. It was most likely a Brujah for hire." He clapped his hands, "Which brings us to the whole marriage question. That little stunt, which neither Prince was willing to set aside their pride to resolve, finally attracted the attention of the Ephorate. This drug up the whole Great War fiasco. The Ephorate leaves implementation and messy business to the Strategoi. England has a Strategoi, as does the portion of the continent including France, Spain and Portugal. I'm assuming they were told to solve this problem however they saw fit and what better way to force cooperation between two hostile countries then by binding them together."

"Through marriage?" Louisé's brow arched, indicating her reluctance to accept this explanation.

Devereux grimaced and rectified earlier comments, "Perhaps 'marriage' is too strong a term. In reality, it is more of Medieval hand fasting; a symbolic gesture and physical representation of both countries' willingness to put aside their differences for the greater good and appearance of the clan. As I have learned, it will only last a year and a day."

"How is a year and a day supposed to accomplish the task of resolving more than a century's worth of conflict?"

"It wouldn't. But that's not the conflict the Strategoi are solving…not overtly, anyhow," Devereux
murmured. "What they are solving is the whole gunfire-cutting-off-body-parts conflict. It just so happens that the reward for successful completion of this 'marriage' revolves around the French lands the English stole during the Great War."

Louisé groaned; the conflict of countries was something she cared very little for since her allegiance was all but set in stone. Lands that had nothing to do with her were equally superfluous. "Reward? For two people being forced together? How lovely," Louisé mocked. "Tell me why I am being entangled in this mess?"

"Everyone needs a little incentive to make this work. Simply forcing us together would only lead to a revolt and Strategoi, their Lictors, none of them have the time to fix that. The exact reward for compliance and success has not been specified," Devereux explained. "And the reason you're being involved is because I suggested you would be a superb candidate for the bridal position of this alliance. An opportunity to represent your beloved homeland."

"Why did you suggest that? Especially without my knowledge or consent? I have no desire to be married to anyone, let alone a heathen Englishmen with the temperamental tact of an ass!"

"As your mentor and Prince, I don't actually need either your knowledge or consent, Harpy," came his stern streak. His face became shrewd, "But you do have a desire to be better, to be more...Don't you?" her mentor interrogated. "Do you honestly believe you will rise to the rank of Prince, or better, by staying in Dijon and serving me?" Devereux badgered.

Louisé glared at him. Her mouth worked a variety of unspoken words she wished she could spit into his face. No, she did not believe she could become a Prince by staying at his side. Then again, she never intended on staying by his side forever. At the rate he was going, Devereux was encouraging a homicidal hand in his Harpy. There were many ways to become Prince, after all. If she were capable of such things and wanted it badly enough. Honestly, she didn't. It wasn't as though her plans were perfectly laid out like a well-aligned cobblestone street, but what was certain was her intention to eventually move on. She just didn't believe she had to marry a man to do it. Marrying had not be a conscious thought since the night LaCroix stole the sun from her. But if it gets me that much closer... she considered. "You mentioned others being proposed for the role as well?"

"The other reason why I suggested you!" his tone was reminiscent of a giddy girl about her physical age. "There are three other prospects. They are older women. I believe each of them is close to forty physical years, if not older. Proper Ventrue. Boring as dirt! Plain as milk."

"So you suggested me for this because I'm young?" The bite of the question was sharp as the fangs in her mouth. Were there no other remarkable qualities to set her apart from the others? No other significant distinctions? No?

That anger must have shown through her face because Devereux flinched. "I will not lie to you, Louisé. The fact that you are young and lovely of face is only to your benefit. We needed something more than three aging biddies with grey hair and severe, Ventrue features. We needed something softer, a little more appealing." His hands went up, reacting to her rising temper, "Now, now, now! We don't know who he will choose. The consortium just wanted to make sure we addressed whatever appetites this English 'groom'."

Her stomach felt tight with indignation. So, he didn't suggest her because he wanted to help her...he chose her because of her exterior. The flimsy veneer of a girl; the illusion of a budding adolescent; a blossom frozen mid-bloom, if even. All the hackneyed metaphors elders spewed to coat with nectar the degrading. Young, softer, appealing were roundabout phrases for the less acceptable, less Ventrue, truth that they wanted someone who appealed to whatever carnal inclinations this man might have. Louisé didn't know whether to be insulted or flattered. Vanity might be the greater
Achilles heel for other clans, a lesser heel for Ventrue. The fact that Devereux, and others, found her lovely stroked her ego, that underdeveloped and immature part of her personality which was still very human and very sixteen. The forty-seven year old brain, on the other hand, was roused and sullen. After all I've done for you, you lecherous old man, hissed her thoughts. Of course, she resumed a stony exterior to keep this interior dispute hidden. The knowledge that others were in her position revealed the fact that...

"So, there is still a chance he won't choose me?" Louisé felt relieved. She reminded herself she didn’t want to be married. That and she would rather walk barefoot across broken glass than be touched by an Englishman. Mentioning 'appetites' did nothing to charm her toward the prospect Devereux submitted her for.

"There is always the chance he won't choose you, yes," Devereux didn't sound happy at that thought.

Weighing the prospects and consequences in her head, Louisé humored her Prince, "What exactly would I have to do?"

Sébastien LaCroix did not know what to make of the English when they arrived some fifty strong to this conclave of French Kindred. Their envoy had arrived the night before to scathing looks of ice from silent mouths pulled taught with hate. LaCroix still wasn't absolutely sure of why the English were here, but from the expression on powerful faces, it wasn’t anything to be glad of. The English came bearing gifts that were entrusted to a man de Lanpre identified as the French Lictor. The French gave nothing in return but cold, austere kisses and reluctant grips of Anglo-Saxon wrists. Formalities aside, the leaders of both countries disappeared and the lesser Ventrue, unimportant visitors, were left to mingle in the bleak fraternity.

The French stayed with their cities, their regional kin while the English loitered on the outskirts as a scrutinizing aggregate. Sébastien trusted their stares as much as he relied upon Sabbat not to attempt taking his life. Despite animosity in the air, his Prince did not seem as unnerved by their presence. No, Annalise de Lanpre watched her English cousins with orbs hungry, eyes weighing worth and calculating benefit. Concoction swirled in those spheres. It was something far from disgust.

LaCroix approached her after they had retired. De Lanpre acted as she always did, as though she had been expecting whoever visited her. She spoke like she had foreseen them coming to her. Annalise looked over her shoulder and threw a smirk his way, "I thought you would have come much sooner, Aedile."

"I had personal matters to attend to," he lied since he had had no real reason to come sooner, but he indulged her egotism.

"How may I help you in these waning, pre-dawn hours, Aedile LaCroix?"

"You seemed to be among the meager minority not unsettled by the presence of our cousins across the Channel." He watched her eyebrow peak, lips quiver into a knowing smile. He inquired, "I was wondering if you were privy to information that apparently gives you peace about their appearance here?"

Prince de Lanpre lifted her glass of blood and sipped, mulling more over his question than the flavor of her meal. Her thumb skimmed the rim as she minded him, "Do you know why there is such great animosity between our countries? Between the Ventrue that live in them?"

Images of English occupants in Calais flashed through his mind. Drunkards with slobbering,
southern dialects and pox-marked faces that could have been the result of either plague or frequent visits to filthy brothels with cheap prostitutes. Trading with them made his family wealthier, but not at all endearing toward the English. "I am afraid the only knowledge I have is my own and vulgar gossip between kinsmen," LaCroix admitted.

"Then settle in, for I shall reeducate you on what you think you know."

Alexander Rothey scratched idle fingers over his beard as he stood in the room with conspiring Lictors and Princes waging war over semantics of a contract not yet written out. He was less interested in the specifics than the reward and the women France had lined up. Since first hearing this was to be the solution to their political woes, Rothey found the whole thing repugnant. Of the French women he had briefly examined, he found them boring. They were only the slightest fraction more attractive than the English counterparts he was acquainted with and only because of noble bone structure. They were less Germanic, little Saxon in their delicate features. Yet, something was bland about the personalities that not-quite-shined through. He found similarities between the women and dead carp: both absent of luster, watching with lifeless eyes from skin rigid and frigid.

To say he disliked the French would be a gross understatement. Alexander had been born about thirty years after the start of the Great War and Embraced roughly fifty years before it ended. His was a privileged opinion of the whole debacle. He became Ventrue a day after the Battle of Shrewsbury, following heroically taking of an arrow for the future Henry V (only for the blundering fool to get another in the face). Alexander wasted little time in proving himself an apt Scion for his English brethren. Agincourt, Rouen, Verneuil...this was not Rothey’s first stint in France. To climb the ladder of Ventrue society, he had taken up his sword from Shrewsbury and paved a bloody road for his English masters. He didn't stay to see or enjoy the domain they plundered from French kinfolk, but he certainly bore a brunt of French malice. And they repaid the kindness shown to them.

He could still remember it. Self-proclaimed Englishmen throwing off their Albion masks to fly the fleur-de-lis and red, Lancastrian rose on the banners above their homes and troops. Men he assumed as English as himself regained their fluent French tongues and adamant French loyalties. Barons, Princes, Gerousia and Seneschals he called ‘brother’ betrayed English Ventrue causes with every piece of currency they donated in support of Margaret of Anjou and her half-French whelp.

"If we could stop arguing over the little things and get to the heart of the matter. I think everyone would be happy if we got this over with as soon as possible," he grumbled. The fussy men with fancy titles, English and French, murmured in agreement. "When do we meet these women?"

"It seems there has been a slight change of plans," their Lictor informed.

"How slight?" barked one of Rothey's companions. Alexander smacked a fist against his chest and pierced him with a severe look.

"Nothing to be disturbed over," the French Lictor stated. "We added a fourth candidate. That is all."

"Another woman? Oh, good," was Rothey's lackluster response.

"We thought adding a little variety would appeal to English taste," the Lictor responded. His tense posture created terse diction which reflected inflamed offense.

"Variety among Ventrue women is already a paltry commodity," a third Englishmen joked. "Is this fourth more or less serious than the others? The least drab of them all? Perhaps she was embraced at the tender age of forty instead of fifty-five!"
There was a strained laugh by the English only. The French held back sneers while their fingers indented the wooden arms of their chairs. The Lictors coughed simultaneously, quieting voices and tempers. The French half of their duo spoke, "I think you will be pleased with the choices we have made."

"They honestly assume that making two Kindred marry each other is going to wipe away the smears of the past?" LaCroix's incredulous inflection couldn't be hidden.

"Of the recent past, yes," de Lanpre confessed.

"Nobody is going to buy this as anything but a staggering theatrical performance; a poorly scripted idyll turned bathos," Sébastien criticized.

"It doesn't matter what anyone outside of England or France thinks that are not the Ephorate. There is too much dividing us, too much that can be lost if we do not try," de Lanpre admonished with weak severity.

"What would be lost my Prince that has not already been gone a century?" he intimated.

"The lands in England," she stressed. "If France fails in this theatrical performance, as you call it, then we can say goodbye to the lands we fought and earned during the great conquest by William of Normandy. If France fails, we will never reclaim the domains lost to us during that terrible century of war with England."

LaCroix watched her, letting the heaviness of those words sink in. While the domains she spoke of meant nothing to him now, were they to be wrenched from English hands then his future could be greatly changed. The domains stolen by the English were more numerous than the French Ventrue who had once owned them. "And if England fails? Or if neither fail?"

"If England fails, then they shall part with their lands here in France and forever renounce their claims to the domains on their own shores. I am unsure what will happen if neither or both fail, but I'm sure the latter would only widen the schism." Annalise de Lanpre rubbed her forefinger and thumb together in refreshed contemplation. LaCroix stayed silent while she thought so loudly. "I would greatly appreciate your reconciliation with this elder Childe of yours."

His brow went up. His response was hesitant. Anything concerning Louisé was to be proceeding with cautious hesitation these days. Well, he considered, these and days past. "If it pleases you. May I ask why, though?"

"I would be concerned if you didn't, Sébastien. Especially given the current state of affairs between your two," Annalise de Lanpre's retort was accompanied by a smirk. Her shoulders shrugged in dismissal of the glare he instinctively threw her way. "To answer your question, I must ask you another: Who do you believe controls that young girl most?"

Sébastien sneered. His fingers, for lack of anything better to do, drummed a steady rhythm for his observation of, "Louisé is quite attached to Prince Devereux. She has been with him these past thirty years and it seems as though loyalty to him is near absolute. It would appear he controls her the most, both as Prince and mentor."

"That's what I feared," she sighed and pouted. "Who ought to control her most? Eh?"

He pursed his lips. His sulking Prince was rubbing salt in a wound he didn't care having. "As her Sire, the privilege should be mine."
"Thus, my desire for accord between you two."

"Might I inquire as to purpose behind this control you question?" Sébastien asked.

Now the Prince smirked. "It would behoove you to know that Devereux has submitted Louisé as the fourth contender for the role of bride."

Sébastien did not hold back an uncharacteristic cursing at the news. He did not know what he found more abhorrent: his own Childe being wedded to an Englishmen or, yet again, being outclassed and outshone by said Childe. The second reason was stronger and more potent. It boiled in his abdomen; anger and envy. More glory, fame and favor for this Louisé so young? While he grasped at scraps and rescued abject Ventrue pups for meager praises? LaCroix might have to suffer her expanding wealth from her Bordeaux investment, but he refused to flex beneath her inflated reputation all because she spread her legs for some heathen.

Oh, Sébastien was no ignorant worker bee. Marriage, kine or Kindred, meant nothing without its consummation. A topic he was not entirely sure Louisé was unfamiliar with. She had asked him ages ago; this question of intercourse he had refused to answer on the basis that it was distracting and offensive. At the time, he did not question her ineptitude on the subject. Why would he? Her upbringing had been as strict and Catholic as his own. Back then, he doubted she'd ever seen a naked man...let alone know what to do with one. Besides. Feigning ignorance was not Louisé's strong suit. Feigning, in general, had been a weak skill of hers from his experience. As LaCroix recalled, Louisé either knew something or didn't, could perform or couldn't. Black or white, little grey area when it came to his eldest. But what had these thirty years taught her? From recent encounters, he noted: to be cunning, ruthless, stealthy and conniving. Traits either passed to her by him or drawn out by time. How much of this intercontinental plan did she know? Had she colluded with Devereux to promote herself? Perhaps she figured employing some nubile sensuality was her next great step?

His mind awashed with memories thirty or more years old. Memories of her plump phase, her sense of security stolen by Protestant hands, and the innocence she had exuded before his departure to Belgium and hers, to Reims. LaCroix felt a muscle in his stomach twinge, his jaw tightened and out of de Lanpre's line of sight, one fist curled. Her beloved cousin Henri the Bastard came out of nowhere. A character so brief in his own story that LaCroix had forgotten him as soon as he met him. Henri rose to the forefront of his thoughts: young, tall, strapping (according to some) and shamelessly flirtatious. Another twinge. Recollections became faster, clearer. Louisé's doting attention, obviously amorous stare and the barbed jealousy when Henri's dalliance went elsewhere. Their touchings that could be no more than grazing of flesh when they thought no one was looking. Late night rendezvous gone awry. So obvious! Then it occurred to him...Perhaps she can feign. After all, Henri was awfully familiar with Louisé's room. Putain...he thought. Louisé et Henri: l'amour entre une pute et bâtard. Sébastien was incensed. Disgusted and incensed.

"LaCroix?" De Lanpre's voice broke him from his memories.

"Forgive me," he muttered. His mind whirred as he considered the Prince's request and his own suspicious theories. Sébastien refused to endorse a crown for that harlot of a Childe of his. Not for free, anyhow. Reconciliation with Louisé could be but a semblance, a flimsy shroud covering sunderous intent. And it would come at a high price. He avoided looking in de Lanpre's eyes as he stood. "I thank you, my Prince, for informing me thusly. Rest assured, I shall work tenaciously on what divides my Childe and myself."

LaCroix took the wave of de Lanpre's hand as leave to go.

Ever the loyal spaniel, Charlotte stood waiting for him outside. She lacked imagination to spend her
free time with. If he did not give her something specific, then Charlotte was deficient in ambition. Not that he disapproved. She believed and agreed with every word that came from his mouth. Charlotte questioned nothing and he hoped it was for fear she did so. She would be the perfect conduit for his intentions.

"Is everything well, Sire?"

"As well as can be expected, Madame Favreau. It seems our beloved France is to be united in matrimony to England," he explained as he strode toward their quarters.

"M-matrimony? Is that possible?" her political ignorance was brilliant.

"Anything is possible in the realm of government, Charlotte. Be assured, this is a union of bureaucratic and economic nature. Romantic notion, emotion or pleasure have nothing to do with our kind. France will supply the bride, England the groom. Nothing but a simple transaction of goods and services," he commented with innuendo lost upon the bland woman two steps behind him. "It is a pity, however…" he trailed off to lure her in.

"A pity, Sire? What is a pity other than the ludicrous ploy of this marriage?" she took the bait so willingly and even supplied humor of her own.

"Have you ever heard of the term, Childe of Passion?"

It started with whispers. Crippling hisses of rumors from the forked tongues of gossipers piqued her interest by the way these tongues sealed themselves behind silent lips whenever she walked by. The suggestive buzzing accompanied by scathing looks. Walking the halls became more of a trial than a chore but when the backs started turning and civil conversation faded from her presence, Louisé was left to assume the competitive aspect of this connubial proposition had begun. Devereux's sour expression spoiled whatever brave display she might have adorned in the face of such trying camaraderie. When it became rage, she became worried. Asking him the cause of his distemper would only provoke its growth, so she relied in the fact that dispositions of this nature usually encouraged action on Devereux's part.

"I hear she whored herself to her Sire before she was Embraced," Louisé heard the voice of a man from Nantes she'd met but a few days ago. She stopped herself from rounding the corner that she might here the rest of this sordid tale.

"No!" whispered an older woman Louisé could not place. "And they wish her to represent France? To represent us?"

"No Childe of Passion would be allowed the privilege of this opportunity," the man assuaged his companion. Louisé's vitae froze…no, became stone in her veins. "That raven haired abomination shall be cast out of this assembly if there is any true dignity within our clan."

Oh dear Lord in Heaven…Louisé could not think. Her mind was white hot and clouded with anxious fog. The inflection long buried and forgotten for thirty years reappeared a many-headed hydra at this most pivotal and inopportune moment in time. But she did not have time to faint, weep or otherwise succumb to feminine weakness. Ventrue did not wither at the echo of rumors, for they would always reproduce behind their backs. Her body rounded the corner and the two talking became still as the grave. She wanted to smack them, to spit in their faces but all she found she was capable of was a smirk. They averted their eyes as her steps drew her closer. The one thing she would not allow them to do is turn their backs. She arraigned the duo, "What? You have no words of greeting for the whore you so easily speak about in the shadows?" They fidgeted as much as Ventrue
were able. "Do not fear kinsmen. My armor is stronger than the fiery arrows flung at my back by scandalmongers better suited for Toreador brothels than such portentous affairs as these."

Her way with words elicited one flinch, one sneer. As she passed, the sound of spitting rang behind her. Louise spared one glance back in time to watch the man wipe his mouth. They shared a glare and he growled, "Your kind besmirch the good name of our clan and such hubris betrays your apathy regarding our illustrious blood and sacred traditions, cousin."

"Rest assured, the only apathy I display is toward your squalid banter and," she paused to observe the spittle staining the train of her gown, "Rancorous behavior. I leave you with this final consideration, sir…I never forget a face and yours I have seen twice now. Good evening to you both." And she said no more before abandoning their company.

Brazen, maybe. Hubris, perhaps. But her bold move was salve to her wounded confidence. It was the gust that carried her more than her feet could from that unpleasant confrontation to sanctuary's door. The suite of rooms shared between Prince and Harpy of Dijon rattled and resounded from the slam of that door. Devereux jumped to his feet. He was alert, if not alarmed, by her aggressive debut. Louise jabbed an enraged finger at her mentor, jerking the hand from one side to another without words to accompany the gesture.

"What? What is it?" he demanded.

"I oblige myself to your motives and how am I repaid?" she barked at him. "With knives at my back, held by serpents!"

Her Prince gaped at her. Rarely had she seen Ramon Devereux at a loss for words. She doubted she would forget this moment, doubted it would ever happen again. He curled and unfurled his fists many times yet had nothing comforting to say to his charge. Louise waved her hand dismissively.

"They are whispering. About me!" She advanced on Devereux, hands flailing into the air. "The same black accusation that they flung into my face when I was dragged into this existence they now try to spear me with from behind."

"…I know," he finally confessed. Prince Dijon slid back into his chair and rubbed his face with both hands. A Prince dejected. "Prince de Lanpre came to me. Twice in two nights, actually. First, she wished to inform me of Sébastien's willingness to reconcile to you. Then she came late last night to inform me of this vocal plague."

"Reconcile? Never," she spat. "Mark my words, LaCroix is father of these lies."

"What makes you so sure? You might be sore toward him but that is no basis for accusation, just as he had no grounds to accuse you." Devereux did not, however, sound as though he disagreed with her assumption.

"Of the faces I have taken into account here, there are only four who have knowledge of this allegation against me prior to now: myself, you, LaCroix, and Prince Cifuentes. I suspect the other Gerousia or Lyonese members from back then are either dead or have abandoned France for greater fortune." Louise began to pace, her suspicion spilling out like yarn, "You and I obviously have no reason to spread such churlish talk given the goal we are seeking. Cifuentes gains nothing from these intrigues but a throne he would lose if it traced back to him. LaCroix, though…"

"Has much to gain," Devereux finished. "He has already denounced his true association with you publicly, though small the audience might have been. Therefore your origins become harder to trace
back to him. Prince de Lanpre knows the truth, but because he agreed to reconcile with you, she may doubt him capable."

"Sébastien LaCroix is *always* capable," Louisé hissed. "He is insulted by my success in Bordeaux and my refusal to either give it up or bend my will to him as my Sire. My potential for further success through this possible union with England no doubted incensed him further." She turned to accept a glass of blood from a frightened ghoul. The glass was emptied in a few seconds. "Since he could not force my obedience, he shall ruin my reputation to bring me to my knees instead."

"But he still has the power to undo this. He could speak on your behalf, concoct some story addressing your Sire's honorable character. It would come at a price, but..." he trailed off in thought.

"He could just as easily weave the tale of *my* Sire as a lecher," she groaned. "To keep him from doing so would also cost me."

"Maybe you ought to give him the blasted company and be done with it," Devereux suggested.

Louisé glared at her Prince. Her words were cold and adamant, "I will give him nothing. I will not pay for him to wash clean a stain that does not exist. For I could just as easily expose him as my Sire; a fact which both you and Cifuentes can attest to."

"Then you are deadlocked, Louisé. One of you must move." Devereux was regaining his wisdom and the tongue that came with it, "If we are to turn this back in our favor, Louisé, then you must make the first move."

"And what am I to do? All I am capable of is boiling and writhing and snapping at those who perpetuate this rumor."

She felt Devereux's hand on her shoulder. The muscle and bone were so tense; her mentor was forced to massage the joint until it fell. "Louisé, I shall appeal to your reverential Catholic nature. Calm yourself by remembering your Lord, His suffering and His words for times of trial. To the Ventrue in you, I say fixate your mind on the ever-present goal at hand. Turn your cheek and bite your tongue that we might prove successful in our venture. The Lictors will no doubt come for you to question you on this matter," he explained, hands continuing to massage anger out of her shoulders and his words into her mind. "Maintain your propriety. Display prudence and patience. This, too, shall pass."

Her back hurt. The chair they'd supplied for her was so uncomfortable. From the gloom to the interrogators to the blasted chair she sat upon, Louisé was reminded of her trial before the Gerousia of Lyon. She never imagined returning to such a predicament. At least she was not fighting for her life this time; just a halfheartedly desired marriage to a not-at-all desired Englishman. The jury of Lictors and Princes afforded her ambivalent deference.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Mademoiselle," started the French Lictor. His English counterpart offered her a nod. "We are grieved to meet under such circumstances, but I believe you are wise enough to appreciate our attention to this matter that we might determine its validity, your reputation and continued participation in our alliance."

"If you are grieved, then know I am exponentially so. I wish nothing more than to aid your endeavor and reaffirm my commitment to the virtues and intentions of my clan," Louisé answered.

"You stand accused of sexual perversion both prior to and after your Embrace. It is claimed that is the reason you were sired at all. In fact, some say you are no Ventrue at all but a Rose in disguise,"
started the English Lictor. Louisé appreciated the lack of disgust in his voice.

"Oh my," she feigned surprised for the laughter of a few. "That is truly disturbing. I shall address the last accusation with this: If I were a Toreador, then I would feel no obligation to defend myself against such claims since they would, no doubt, be a testament to my alluring prowess." There were murmurs and nods of agreement. She posed them a question, "Have any of us ever known one of their kind to work so hard for something so opposite their nature?"

"That is true," said the Anglo-Saxon Lictor.

Louisé nodded and asserted, "Besides, I am proficient in the ways of domination. What Toreador is capable of that who is not far older than myself or acquired so through illegal means?"

"Prove it," demanded a Prince. To do so, a servant was brought in. Louisé used little effort to make him do various things against his will: dance, sing, kneel to her and finally, leave. Convinced of her clan, they moved on to the heart of the matter.

"And what say you to accusations of sexual promiscuity as the impetus for your Embrace?" inquired the French Lictor.

"They are rubbish," she sneered. "My chastity is unwavering. Unchanged since before my Embrace."

"Then why would anyone accuse you with this slander?"

"If you could tell me from whence, from whom, it originated then I may better shed light on the reasons. Originally, I suspected that it was one of the other candidates but realized they would never debase their honor or integrity with such underhanded tactics."

The French Lictor watched her then said, "Our investigations have determined the innuendo arose from a member of the Bordeaux company. The source, whom we shall not reveal, informed us their Sire was well acquainted with yours and they were told of your Sire's debauch manners."

Louisé squeezed the arms of her chair to keep from cursing. So it was you, LaCroix! Her thoughts screamed, I shall repay this, I swear! "Though not impossible, I can think of no one in Bordeaux so well informed of my Sire," she lied. "Based on what I knew of my Sire, this sounds like a fabrication."

"Tell us about your Sire. Who were they?" asked a Prince.

"If I were to believe every word he said, he was a Baron from Belgium and associated himself with a man named de Croý. He called himself Dormans, Everard de Dormans," Louisé borrowed her beloved Henri's name to further her story. Everard, her precious brother's middle name. "That was the name he gave my father, the only name I knew him by though he demanded I address him as 'sir', 'Master' or 'Sire'. He came to my ancestral home when I was but a child, with de Croý, to strike up business with my father. Accomplishing that, he visited frequently over the years but he never revealed much of himself." Memories rose from the mist of her mind. They disturbed her since she was reminded Sébastien had not always been so cruel. He had been kind. He saved her life, danced with her, comforted her when her mother died…

"Why not embrace your father then, since he provided a beneficial financial opportunity?" a distant voice asked.

Louisé emerged from the fog and bit her lip. "He died. My mother passed away from illness and not soon after, my father followed her out of grief. Having no living son, I was named his heir as
Marquess of Aix and la Chambre. My Sire took the opportunity to embrace me before I married and my inheritance passed to a husband, thereby securing the fortune for himself."

"That seems very convenient," muttered someone. His disdain revived nasty images of a harpy decades ago.

Louïsé sucked her tongue to stop its writhing with anger. Her words were carefully chosen, "I humbly disagree. I cease to understand the convenience of being force into this life."

Stillness descended on the small group. Out of the corner of her eye, Devereux shifted uncomfortably. The inquisitors stared with neutral expressions and Louïsé stared back.

She swallowed and broke the silence, "Who honestly wants this? This life of shadows and blood?" No one answered. Her fingers rubbed the wood beneath them as she accounted her lost desires, "I wanted to be married. I wanted children. I wanted to manage my estate and represent my noble house in the French court, not a Kindred one."

After a long silence, a Lictor spoke, "That is all well and good. But how does that dispute the indictment against you?"

Her temper rose. She was tired of this! Her patience, adolescent in so many ways, withered. "I am the legitimate heir of Charles Guillaume Seyssel-Chambert. I am the rightful marquess of Aix and la Chambre. And as such, I would dishonor neither the parents I adored nor the Church I love by spreading my legs, like a whore, for someone lower than myself."

"He could have dominated you to."

"Then that is his sin, not mine. And I shall suffer and pay for it no longer," Louïsé stood. The men stood out of respectful custom, but were not finished with her.

"We did not give you leave, Mademoiselle," the English Lictor reminded her. "Should you retire now, you give us license to withdraw your candidacy."

"Then take it. I have no need of it," she threw back at him. Then she strode out of the room through creaking double doors. Her composure, so impregnable under scrupulous interrogation, began to fray as she walked down the hall.

A figure emerged from the shadows and Louïsé stopped. She narrowed her eyes and held onto enough resolve for him. LaCroix wore a smirk for his eldest. "Having a difficult evening, Louïsé?"

She sneered. "I think you are well acquainted with the difficulties of my evenings as of late."

"Yes, these rumors must be quite heavy to bear. I can't imagine the agony of watching such favorable circumstances slip through your fingers," he taunted.

"Forgive me, but I don't have time to spend on you." She walked passed him then felt his iron grip squeeze her elbow and jerk her still.

"I strongly urge you to make time," he growled.

Louïsé wanted to strongly urge he do something to himself. Instead, she yanked her arm out of his icicle fingers. "I would sooner take the route of Pontious Pilate and wash my hands of you." She stormed away from him before she did something worse.
"Prince Devereux, this is not how we assumed these proceedings to end," his Lictor badgered.

"I indulge your forgiveness then, Lictors and fellow Princes. I am sure you can imagine the stress this has caused her; her patience is unraveled, her temper provoked."

"You have our forgiveness but if she wants her reputation to be pristine once more, you will bring her here to defend herself before the night's end or we have no choice but to assume these allegations true," England's Lictor explained. "And I don't believe we need to expand upon the devastation that would cause."

"I will seek her out now and bring her as swiftly as possible," Devereux guaranteed before striding from the room to find his charge.

Who he encountered first was Annalise de Lanpre and LaCroix, mingling not far from the room.

"How goes it Ramon?" de Lanpre asked.

"It could be better. My Harpy has flown off somewhere. Have you seen her?" His agitation made him antsy; he kept walking. They followed.

"My Aedile informs me she fumed down that hallway," Annalise pointed toward an adjacent path. Devereux wanted to curse. There was no time for this! "Thank you," he said and changed course.

"Of course. Anything to help a friend. Before you go, however," de Lanpre cooned, "I wondered if you could spare me a moment."

"For you, my dear," Ramon buried his annoyance for formality's sake, "Two moments. How may I help you?"

"I lament with you, Ramon, for this obscene situation you and Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert have been thrust into. I come to offer you respite, if you are willing to discuss such matters," Annalise stated.

Louisé meandered. She wandered through a haze accentuated by tears clouding her eyes. A vicious cycle of memoirs played over and over in her head and gave her no rest. She wiped her eyes and kept walking. Louisé reminded herself, in between thoughts, that she was Ventrue: made of iron, hard as stone and brave as Daniel. She wasn't sure when she arrived in the library, but that is where she was when her head cleared. Books, scores and scores of various titles surrounded her. Manuscript Trojan walls blocked out vexing thoughts. She heard no one else in the room, but a chessboard with disturbed pieces suggested someone had been there recently. Louisé approached the game board and picked up two pieces: a pawn and a King. Just holding them enraged her and she slammed them down with such force that many pieces toppled over.

"I hope you plan on rearranging those," came a voice that startled her. She spun to look at a man with a book in hand. He was handsome, older. His hair was brunette with ruddy undertones here and there. The beard, wide and full with an integrated mustache, was the same color. When he drew close, Louisé could distinguish the amber hue of his eyes. His nose was elegant, lips thin and jaw square. He bore the broad chest and strong arms of a man of war. He smirked and gestured to the chessboard. "I wasn't finished playing."

"Do you delight in playing on your own, sir?" she asked, turning to reset the pieces.

The man walked up to her side. "Delight, no, but it is an excellently long way to pass the time."
"Does this mean you don't find the current events worth your attention?" Louisé raised a brow at him.

"Some, yes. I could do without the majority." He stared at her. His lips quivered with a smirk. "If I am not mistaken, aren't you the girl everyone is talking about?"

Her frown was prominent. "I came to find solace here, not more gossip." She turned to leave. He stopped her with a few fingers to her arm.

"Forgive me," he said. "I don't care much for gossip, myself. The accusations are intriguing but unoriginal. Sit with me?" He sat on the black side of the board.

Louisé sat behind the white and allowed him the first move. "Unoriginal? I don't hear anyone else being accused of this often enough for it to be unoriginal."

"A pretty, young girl being blamed for having sex with her Sire? For having sex at all…" he drifted off and shook his head. "What's original about that?"

"Perhaps," she answered the stranger. "But that is easy for an outsider to say. For the pawn in the midst," Louisé said as she moved such a piece, "It is a completely different story."

"A pawn you say?" he moved a piece of his own.

"Oh yes," she responded as her dropped a gentle finger to the top of each pawn she spoke of, "A Sire's pawn for a family fortune, a mentor's pawn to steal secrets, a Sabbat-in-disguise's pawn for information, a Prince's pawn for a marriage and a rival's pawn for reputation. Same pawn, many roles. In the end, still pushed around the board to the benefit of others."

"Hm," he grunted and lifted his queen off the board. His thumb ran over the intricate carving of the piece. "Then you had better master the game until you can play it better than they can. Then you won't be the one pushed around, but the one pushing."

"Wise words from a kind stranger," Louisé humored. "How does the chaste person, accused of lechery, beat this game, good sir?"

He chuckled and replaced his queen. His hand reached across the board for hers and plucked it up. The stranger rolled the piece in his cradled palm before holding it out for her to take. He said, "Push the pieces. The board is before you. Use your hand and push."

Louisé took her queen and thought a moment. "What is my hand that pushes?"

"I suppose this chastity of which you spoke." He shrugged unbiased shoulders. "I don't know you and have no idea whether or not you are virgin or whore. And it doesn't really matter to me. But if you want to win this game, then your move is to convince those in your way of what you must."

Louisé hummed and set the queen down. She nodded; his words made sense but didn't kill the anxiety in her veins. She looked at him, smirked and asked, "Does this sage have a name?"

"Alexander Rothey," he answered with a bow of his head.

"Pleasure. Louisé Seyssel-Chambert," she introduced herself. He reached over and picked up her hand. His hand was large, almost swallowing hers. The fingers a little rough. Rothey's thin lips kissed the back of her hand as clan decorum dictated. Louisé felt a shiver run through her stomach; a completely inappropriate reaction for such a time.
Alexander smirked. "I know."

Louisé entered her quarters with less thunder than before. She was surprised to find Devereux with company instead of alone. Her expectation had been his fury when she came back, but he appeared docile. Sébastien LaCroix's attendance filled her with ire and she avoided looking at him by turning to accept a glass of blood. The three of them: Devereux, de Lanpre and LaCroix, sat around a small table. Parchment rested on the table. Ink scribbled writing on the parchment and two signatures rested beneath that.

"I did not realize we were expecting company," Louisé said before drinking.

"Neither did I," Devereux responded. "Your sudden disappearance left us wanting. Prince de Lanpre and Monsieur LaCroix satisfied that want."

Louisé did not like his tone. It was distant, born of full thought and colored by anger. She assumed the anger was because she left the council so abruptly. "Oh? And how did they accomplish such a great task?" Her eyes scanned the room before coming back to rest on the trifecta.

"They have provided us with an opportunity to put this scandal behind us."

"Have they? How generous of them," there was venom in her voice as she walked closer to them.

"Don't sound so skeptical, Mademoiselle," Prince de Lanpre interjected. "We only mean to assist our friends in eliminating this rumor against you. My Aedile assured me he will vouch for you before the council if our terms are met."

"Your Aedile?" Louisé snapped a glare at her Sire. "Tell me, Prince, has your Aedile informed you of his role in this rumor?"

"That is a weighty accusation," de Lanpre warned.

"I won't insult your intelligence, Prince de Lanpre, by assuming you have no knowledge of the relationship between he and me."

"Why would I implicate myself? If I spread this rumor, I would bring my own reputation down. Besides, I agreed to reconcile with you, Louisé," LaCroix said.

"You denounced me publicly…technically. There is security in that. She," Louisé pointed at Prince de Lanpre, "Would not endanger herself by revealing what she knows. Therefore she would not attest to knowing you are my Sire if I implicated you as the perpetrator. Though, even if you weren't involved, I have no desire to reconcile with a snake."

"Be still, Louisé," Devereux ordered. "People only care about the substance of the rumor. No one cares where it came from. Not in the grand scheme of things," he stressed in response to Louisé's glare. "We have a goal in mind and there is an impediment to that goal. We need to move the impediment and LaCroix's cooperation will do that."

"At what price?" she asked.

"Your company in Bordeaux is all we ask," de Lanpre answered.

Louisé felt sick. She watched the three of them with intense malice. Her teeth pierced the inside of her cheek. She tasted iron and licked it away. "Absolutely not."
"Louisé. Be reasonable," Devereux said. "What is one company compared to the wealth this union would bring you?"

"If he chooses me," she snapped. "He may not and if he doesn't, then I am that much poorer."

"But without my affirmation, your ruined reputation will impoverish you worse than losing this company ever would. After all, there are other companies," LaCroix taunted at the end. A joke she did not understand?

"Sign the parchment Louisé," Devereux suggested. "He might take your company but you will maintain your pride."

Louisé had never felt so betrayed for so petty a reason. Her bottom lip trembled and she forced the lip of her glass to her mouth to cover it up. She drank and turned away from them. If she was going to cry again, it wouldn't be in front of these Judases.

"Even your tears are as stubborn as you," LaCroix mused.

"Tears," Louisé scoffed. She wiped her mouth then spun and hurled the quarter-full glass at LaCroix. Everyone was up! De Lanpre scuttled closer to Devereux to avoid the blood while LaCroix jumped with a hiss. "I haven't tears enough for what you've taken from me!" she shrieked, never taking her eyes off her Sire. She punctuated each statement that followed, "My children. My husband. My inheritance. My future. You stole everything from me and now you are attempting to do it again."

She shook her head, disturbing the path of dribbling tears. Oh Lord, she was crying. They painted jagged avenues down her face. "I won't let you ruin me again. I refuse to stand aside and watch you bankrupt me to gratify your own misguided arrogance or appease the anxiety of Princes with their machinations."

The Princes in question looked bitten. They were insulted, to be sure, but the hysteria of the moment kept their tongues in cages. LaCroix's was not so bound. "Your future? Hah!" he ridiculed with a guffaw. "Let me tell you what your future held: a stupid husband, grueling pregnancies, obnoxious children and a painful death from childbirth. Or maybe," his pitch raised and became accusatory, "Had he lived, you would have been stupid enough to marry Henri the bastard of Dormans!"

"Don't you dare speak of Henri," she growled.

"Why? Because you loved him? Oh please, Louisé. You are naïve and a greater fool than I feared if you believe he loved you too."

"Shut-up!" Louisé yelled. Her profound vocabulary was running thin. The boulder of anger made the river run dry of words to throw back into his face. Henri made her words weak.

"You meant the same to him as you did to me: The means to an end. The only reason he showed you any favor is because he figured you would inherit something and were silly enough to marry him based only on his weak flirtation. All he wanted was to erase the black stain of illegitimacy from himself. Though, I'm sure, he didn't have to wait for marriage to have what he wanted from you," Sébastien suggested.

Her eyes went wide. Fingers curled into fists and cut the skin. "I would never give myself to anyone not my husband."

"Really? Then why did he skulk outside your room like a puppy? Why would be beg to get inside?" LaCroix advanced on her, "I think he had himself a taste and came back for more. You can maintain this little act as a virgin all you want, but beneath I know the whore you really are."
'Virgin?' Devereux's question was soft and wholly drowned out by the smack of Louisé's hand across her Sire's face. De Lanpre played the regal lady, hands covering a wide mouth. Whether her shock was legitimate or not was ignored.

"You are the vilest creature I have ever met," Louisé struggled. Her eyes stung. "I curse the day I met you."

LaCroix rubbed his face. "That makes two of us," he shot at her. "I should have let you die all those years ago..."

"I wish you had. Better to die young and be in Heaven with those I love than in this hell with you." Childe exchanged painful glares with Sire.

"Virgin!" Devereux beamed as he sprang from his chair. Louisé and LaCroix looked at him in utter confusion. De Lanpre was just frozen in awe. "She's a virgin!" Devereux laughed and strode over to his Harpy, slapping kissed to both her cheeks with wet smacks.

Louisé resisted. "What is wrong with you?"

"Oh, thank Heavens," Devereux sighed. He looked at Sébastien and smirked. "We don't need you or your testimony." He grabbed Louisé's hand and dragged her to the door.

"Wait. What?" De Lanpre asked, surprised fading as she moved to her Aedile's side. "What are you talking about?"

"The girl's a bleeding virgin, Annalise! How could I forgotten? Been so blind and deaf? She's a virgin," he hooted.

"What about our deal? Our contract?" LaCroix demanded.

Devereux laughed, "You can take your contract, Sébastien, and shove it up your arse!"

Ramon Devereux never felt so light. It was like he walked with Hermes' winged sandals. Behind him, he dragged Louisé and made for where the council was still gathered. There was still time before dawn. Devereux could save this plan. He could put out the fires LaCroix started.

"What are you doing?" Louisé insisted.

"Making you a bride," he replied.

"How? And what if I don't want to?"

"You'll see. And I'm not acknowledging your other question." Without a thought about who might be speaking on the other side, Devereux barged into the council meeting with Louisé in toe. The Lictors rose from their chairs and the Princes on either side of them tilted their heads curiously.

"To what do we owe this interruption, Prince Devereux?" France's Lictor requisitioned.

"My apologies, but I would not dare if I did not have most important news," Devereux huffed as he yanked Louisé to his side.

"Ah...Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert. Good to see you again." The Lictors sat. One of them waved away the befuddled man who had been defending himself a moment ago.

"I suppose," Louisé murmured as she bounced a confused look between the council and her Prince.
"You never finished your defense. With respect to your frustration, we allowed your Prince to go fetch you. I assume, by doing so, you are ready to explain to us how these accusations have no merit."

"She's a virgin," Devereux asserted with joy. So much for Louisé doing anything.

"Pardon?" a fellow Prince asked.

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked another.

"It has everything to do with everything," Devereux insisted. He looked at the Lictors. "You all have attested that the rumors she must defend herself against claim she was lecherous with her Sire before becoming a vampire and that was the reason she was Embrace. Is this not the truth?"

The Lictors nodded. One said, "Yes. Those are the claims against her. She is accused of being a Childe of Passion because her licentious behavior prior to her Embrace encouraged her Sire to turn her for his own physical pleasure."

"But how can that be true if she is a virgin?" Devereux's question sparked an intense silence. He felt exhilarated. He could see the revelation turning their minds. Then the silence broke into chattering and discussion.

One Lictor waved his hand. "Excuse us while we deliberate for a moment. We will be with you shortly."

Relieved, Devereux dragged Louisé back out of the room and waited beside her. Louisé didn't look at him though and he didn't make her. Her hands rubbed theirs back against her face to remove the tears and trails they'd left behind. He needed no words from her to understand how much pain she was in. Betrayed or not, Sébastien was her Sire and the most important figure in her life as Kindred. She could no more truly hate him than she hated herself, but there was a fine line between angry resentment and hatred. Louisé would only ever remain on one side of that line. LaCroix could hop back and forth as he pleased. It seemed he always had.

The sound of a creaking door distracted them both and brought their attention solely on the approaching Lictors.

"We want to believe in your professed chastity," one said. "To fully exonerate you from these charges, we must confirm this virginity you claim to have."

"Confirm? How do you plan on confirming?" Louisé's voice was a nervous kind of sick.

"By examination. It is the easiest method," the other Lictor explained.

"W-what?!" Louisé looked between Devereux and his superiors. "So, to clear my supposed violation of clan taboo I, myself, must be violated?"

"Not violated. Examined," Devereux stressed, attempting to calm her. "If I understand this process, they will visibly check to make sure you have not been penetrated."

"If your maidenhead is intact, we will remove all charges and make an official declaration of your innocence. Never again can you be accused of this slander," France's Lictor assured his protégé.

"Will you two be doing the examination or someone else?" Louisé asked.

"If you are more comfortable with a female," started the other Lictor.
"I am," she cut in sharply.

"Then we will assign this task to one of the female Princes."

"Not Prince de Lanpre," Devereux added. "She might be a little biased as of late."

What color would someone assign total and complete humiliation? Louisé pondered this during her examination. She had been red with anger, green with envy, and painted a bleak shade of gray with depression. But this…This degraded feeling; she couldn’t attribute a color to it. It was too many things rolled into one. Anxiety when she laid back against her bed. Shame when one of the women examining her dragged her hips downward so her bottom rested on the edge of the bed. Disgust when they pushed her legs apart. There were no words for the examine itself; there was only an empty feeling and the truth that if LaCroix had not been so vicious, she would not be enduring this now. Having strangers, women or not, splaying her private parts to look inside had no description words could do justice.

Her innocence may have been proven, but she could not have cared less. The women left her room. All Louisé did was fold her body to one side. Her eyes watched the fire flicker in its place. The bridge of her nose and apple of one cheek felt wet. She didn’t even notice when Devereux came in, only that he produced a shadow on the wall.

"I am so sorry, Louisé," he confessed.

"Are you happy now, Devereux?" There was no life to her voice. She was too exhausted by the drama and colors and feelings to give it any. "Are you satisfied that we won't lose our goal?"

"Louisé…" And that was all he could say. Her name.

"I hope this endeavor is worth its price."

The weight of her bed shifted, sank to one side. Cold fingers tried to brush hair out of her face, tears from her skin. She was too repulsed to endure his apologies and attempts to comfort her. They were poisoned by his ambition.

"Don't touch me. I've been touched enough this evening."
Bride

It was a mistake; a small slip occurred in the words given versus the words used. The mistake was innocent, seemingly insignificant but the ramifications were substantial. LaCroix knew how it happened but knowing was far from comforting. The story of scandal he carefully wove for Charlotte's ears was regurgitated almost perfectly. Almost. One mistake stood between him and perfection. Where he had told Charlotte the girl had been embraced for physical purposes, Charlotte told everyone she was embraced because of those purposes. Such a small switch cost Sébastien everything. He seethed beneath the booming voice of both Lictors as they proclaimed Louisé's innocence. Never again could this taboo be thrust in her face or against her back as a hot iron for resigned obedience.

"From this day hence," resounded the Lictor's in polished unison, "We, hands and feet of the Ephorate, do so find Louisé Seyssel-Chambert, Marquise of Aix and la Chambre, innocent of all accusation and taboo. We, the Ephorate's proclaimers, remove the slander of Childe of Passion from her for now and until the end of her days. Let it be known she is of true virtue and honest, steadfast chastity. We give her thanks for her loyal service to our clan, proclaim her plenus gratia et dignitas and grant her dispensation for necessary acts of carnality."

They paused to turn and offer half-bows toward the object of their proclamation, who sat off to one side with her mentor. LaCroix glared knives at his progeny but her ocean blues gazed into the distance above everyone's heads. Devereux appear beside himself with joy but Sébastien couldn't help but notice a distinct air of frustration in his Childe. Louisé hardly shared Ramon's glee; her stoic disposition told him she was bored. Her distant stare was looking for something more entertaining, not avoiding embarrassing, center-stage showmanship.

"As she has been found innocent by us, so too, shall she be in the eyes of her kin. What the Ephorate has deemed worthy and upheld, let no one put asunder. Those that try, through rumor or physical attack, may find themselves accountable to the wrath of the clan and anathema."

Sébastien gritted fangs until they pierced his lower gums and oozed the flavor of iron into his mouth. He would appreciate this one day, his rationality told him but right now he boiled. Louisé's gaze moved and locked with his. Though not a single muscle twinged out of place, LaCroix felt her triumphant smirk. She was untouchable for the foreseeable future…immune to the slings of others, if anyone would be so bold as to sling at all.

"Now we ask that all non-involved kinsmen excuse themselves to other rooms as we conduct the choosing of our French representative," England's Lictor instructed.

His French counterpart help up a hand for pause. "Forgive us, brethren," he spoke to the confused looks pocketing French faces, "some have been privy to more information than others." His eyes darted sideways to his companion. "It may come as no surprise to any of us that tensions between England and France are straining." Bitter chuckles and murmurs broke throughout the crowd. The Lictor coughed and continued, "Strained to such an extent that even the accord between cousins has been soured. To prevent schism and champion harmony, the Ephorate – in their great wisdom – has declared there shall be a union between our two factions. A man from England and woman from France shall so be joined together and by doing so, settle the disagreements that divide and threaten our clan.

His explanation left out key pieces, but the ignorant masses didn't seem to care. The glaring news of a marriage made the tension thick. So great was the controlled animosity between countries that when excused to leave, the French watched the English file out through slit-stares. Sébastien
couldn't care about the English, their groom or France's bride. His agitation was peaked not by *personae non gratae* but the blundering second Childe at his side. His cold temper ignored her the entire march from the basilica to the chamber where those from Bordeaux tended to gather. Prince de Lanpre displayed a smug countenance as she took her usual seat.

Yes, regardless of how Sébastien faired from their failed attempt to snag Louisé's investment, de Lanpre was still successful. Like any good Ventrue, she had probably formed some alliance with Devereux to benefit from his petition for Louisé to be considered matrimonial material. For her, the confrontation with Louisé had been a win-win situation at best, win-lose at worst. It was lose-lose for Sébastien. Not only was he still lacking the abundant wealth of those trading routes, but his prince saw fit to snub him at every opportunity since it had been him who caused all this trouble in the first place. He unknowingly compromised whatever arrangement she might have had with Devereux; that earned him her scorn and narrow glare. Such regard only compounded his own irritation and increased his furious frigidity toward his younger offspring.

Pawns don't always realize their pawns. In fact, *most* don't know their pawns. Does a hammer know it's a tool when in the hand of a man? Does a puppet believe itself any less of an actor because a hand determines its voice and movements? Unlike her yet-unknown elder sibling, Charlotte lacked the self-awareness to understand LaCroix's intent behind the fabricated lament for the girl she known little more than an hour. She was as capable of deciphering his scape-goat tactics of lining her up to take blame as she was thinking ill of or disregarding him. What she had in spades was loyalty and obedience. Madame Favreau's feeble curiosity had wanted to know why her Sire had chosen to tell her what he did, but her solid fear of him kept her from asking. Because he told her to be "thoughtful" when sharing the information she'd received, she didn't inquire about the purpose behind spreading the story, she just did it. And now he was angry with her!

Madame Favreau could only shrink beneath the ire of his glare whenever he deigned to glance her way. It was a piercing cold that left her ill; an illness that stemmed from disappointing him, much in the way a child writhed in worry after disobeying their father. Sébastien had never been cruel to her. He had never been affectionate, either. LaCroix's stewardship was one of stony discipline with specific rewards and benefits. Charlotte did not need to worry about money, lodging, or other basic necessities so long as her Sire required her novice capabilities and was satisfied by them. Icy moments like this reminded her how fragile a position she was in...how easy she was to replace if he so desired to replace her. And LaCroix never hesitated to remind her of that fact.

Charlotte de Dampierre Favreau was not nobility, not born from the stock and castes that produced the vast majority of her Ventrue brethren. Her family was a cadet branch of the Dampierre line but hadn't been noble, or wealthy, in over two hundred years. It was embarrassing, in an internal sort of way, to hear elders murmur 'Oh, Dampierre! I knew them once…' in whimsical tones wrought on by nostalgic flints. What a drunken father always howled about, now undead patriarchs reminisced over with pretentious fondness and in so doing, reminded her of her place in their world. Charlotte was a fledgling. Perhaps not even that since she was still bound to her Sire, still dwelled in the same home as him. She inhabited the grey limbo between neonate and protégé. Too old to be a newborn, too dependent to be an apprentice. Her role was a simple one: do what you're told. Her fingers scribed rough messages, her feet carried her down streets to deliver letters sealed with wax and her ears stayed ever vigilant for information that would benefit her master. Charlotte took canes and coats from visitors, held doors open and walked three to five paces behind Monsieur LaCroix. These were the things she understood about her Kindred life.

Of the many things she did not understand about this new existence of hers, why Monsieur LaCroix had chosen her was toward the top of the list. Never a man to share his mind with others if he wasn't mandated to, Charlotte knew better than to ask him why he had chosen her. Prior to her embrace,
their encounters had been brief and few in nature. Monsieur LaCroix, or Marquis LaCroix as he had introduced himself, struck up business with her eldest son only six months before he embraced her. In those six months, she calculated three times they had met and spoke. During their last conversation he had asked what she planned on doing now her son and his wife were expecting a fifth child. In other words: What was she going to do with herself now that there would be no space for an aging woman in the house? Charlotte threw out the vague possibility of entering a convent. That seemed like the right answer to give, though she hated the idea. She had wanted to present the picture of a devout woman, so this noble would think the same of her son and continue doing business with him. Charlotte hoped, in her naïveté, that the wealthy Marquis's business would lead to more money, to a bigger home that would solve the aforementioned problem.

Her hopes were dashed and she rode off to a convent she never arrived at. She woke in the dank and cold of a Bordeaux cellar with a burning in her throat and a goblet of claret to quench it. LaCroix appeared two hours later and explained their new relationship, their tie to one another without a single hint of emotion in his voice. Her stomach tightened to think of that night...How she felt an inescapable fondness for him, how his tone never wavered or warmed, the feeling of blood filling her belly.

"I am your Sire. You are my Childe, my progeny. You will do what I ask without question, and you will do it well. Obey me and I will reward you. Fail me and you will be punished. Should there ever come a time when you continue to disappoint me, then our relationship will cease," he had explained as he led her out of the cellar.

Charlotte wasn’t foolish enough to not know what he meant by their relationship ceasing. And that was precisely what had her so worried tonight. It was not her fault the gossip mill was no different for Ventrue society than any other; just because Ventrue thought themselves levels better than their Kindred peers didn’t mean they repeated words any less poorly when intrigue and reputation were involved. Honestly, Charlotte had been conflicted about loosening her lips: desperate to obey and please her Sire while bearing the burden of ruining the reputation of a girl she had met only once. Why should she care if the girl had bedded her own Sire? Clan taboo meant nothing to someone who hadn't even undergone an Agoge.

"Charlotte!" Prince de Lanpre's voice snapped Charlotte from her regrettable thoughts.

"Y-yes my Prince?" she stammered to ask. All eyes were on hers, including the angry pair of her Sire's.

"Perhaps if you had been this considerate of your thoughts days ago, we could have all been spared the liturgy of our Lictors this evening," the Prince sneered. De Lanpre's fingers beckoned her closer, "I asked you: What did you think of her?"

Charlotte darted one look to her Sire, who ignored her silent plea. Sébastien certainly wouldn't come to the aid of those who disappointed him. Madame Favreau scuttled closer to Prince Bordeaux and swallowed before speaking, "Of who, Prince?"

Annalise de Lanpre sighed heavily, agitation flavoring her voice, "Louisé! The raven-haired virgin they vindicated. What did you think of her?"

Charlotte licked the back of her teeth and finished, "I also think she looks remarkably young. I can see why someone might think those rumors were true."
"Oh can you? And tell me something about these rumors, Charlotte…where did you hear them?"
The Prince's eyes narrowed up and she laced her fingers into a bridge for her chin to rest on. De Lanpre had entered into an inquisitorial frame of mind; a deadly disposition for a Prince's victim.

Charlotte's muscles tightened. Sébastien had falsely reassured her that no one would ask her this question. It went without saying that she couldn't tell their Prince that LaCroix had been the one to spin this yarn for her, but could she lie well enough for Bordeaux to buy her alternate explanation? "I heard some brethren from Lyon whispering about her one night. When I inquired, one of their company told me about the rumor that had circulated around their court years ago," her answer came out before she had time to consider every angle of it. This was a part-truth. The night following her initial spread of LaCroix's original tale, she had heard a group of Lyonnais recounting the story to one another and entered into their telling as though she'd never heard it before. By then, it had already warped into something unfamiliar.

De Lanpre's eyebrows shot up for an instant before narrowing back down. Her eyes closed and another sigh escaped her lips. "I see," she mused. "I am glad to hear that, since fingers were pointing at you for a moment." Fear tightened its grasp about Charlotte once more. The Prince released her fingers and waved her hand as if swatting a gnat from her face. "As if anyone can pinpoint where gossip springs from! Humor me a moment more, Charlotte," Prince Bordeaux soughed before the younger could move so much as a little finger, "How old are you now? Nine months…ten?"

As a Kindred, Charlotte thought. She nodded and replied, "Thereabouts, my Prince."

"Interesting…do you know what she had accomplished when she was only nine months?"

Charlotte shook her head like a dumbfounded child. The back of her skull burned with her Sire's glare. The Prince only grinned and drummed eager fingers against the arms of her chair she perched upon more like a throne. "I don't like bragging on people, even my own Childer. Something about bragging, I believe, creates an undo entitlement in the young. And then there is something so horribly cliché about what one hears regarding those who are bragged upon. No, I leave bragging to the Toreador because it always ends in amusement," she explained with an absent look to something beneath her fingernails. Her gaze suddenly snapped to Charlotte's dull, puddle-water eyes, "But," she continued, "in this case, I shall make an exception. By the time she was nine months, Louisé had not only rescued her city from the conspiracies of the Sabbat, but managed to amass a personal fortune at the expense of those bothersome religious disputes. Ammunitions…" Prince de Lanpre went back to staring distantly. "And that was well before the trading company she secured in our ports."

"No one doubts she is quite impressive, Prince," came the voice of her irritated Sire. "Doubt was in her integrity, not her abilities."

"Integrity that ought to have never been in doubt in the first place, Aedile," snapped the Prince. She glared at Charlotte and demanded without the expectation of a decent answer, "And what have you managed to accomplish in your nine months?"

Charlotte deflated. There was tension in the crowd, but none of it was pity for the place their youngest compatriot was in. No one would trade places with her, not even LaCroix. Annalise softened suddenly and snapped her wrist in a dismissive way. "Consider that, Charlotte, as time goes by…what a true Ventrue can do in nine months. As I said before, I suggest you aspire for such greatness one day."

Greatness was far from the mind of Louisé as she watched the throng of Ventrue file out of the basilica like sheep free of their pen. She was bored. Bored and irritated by the childish excitement all but bouncing beside her. Ramon Devereux was not at the top of her list of favorite people currently
and she believed the longer she maintained her granite composure, the more she was sure he would remember that.

"Did you see his face?" Devereux nudged her with an elbow and laughed, "I've never seen Sébastien so sullen!"

"Mph," was the apathetic grunt she responded with.

In truth, Louisé had fixated her attention on the stained glass window high above the heads of her audience to avoid the temptation of observing her Sire's bitter defeat. Her boredom took in the intricate detail of varying colors illuminated by moonlight rather than the swirl of wrath in LaCroix's eyes. Meticulous patterns of green and blue served as decent distraction from the equally annoying pardon the Lictors declared with almost ecclesiastical zeal. She was grateful to be pardoned – for something she wasn't guilty of to begin with – but their grandiose style of delivery struck an irritable cord within her. Much like Devereux's nudging.

"You cannot ignore me forever, my dear," he cooed into her ear.

A growl and flash of thirty-one year old fangs had him jerking back. He settled down with a huff. No, Louisé couldn't ignore him forever but she would settle for a century or two. At the very least she deserved the next hour for having her knees sprawled open against their will so cold fingers could probe at her. Remembering made her stomach curdle, her affection for Devereux sour even more.

After all this, Louisé's secret, petty desire was that she wouldn't be chosen. If for no other reason, then to see Devereux's stupid face fall with disappointment. There was nothing disappointing at all about returning to Dijon and resuming her business as Harpy. Not for Louisé. All this drama reminded her of the simple pleasures that made her Ventrue nature so happy: rigid schedules, influence over others, and financial superiority. As inglorious as Harpy may have been in Devereux's mind, Louisé couldn't be more content. Or, rather, she couldn't have been had it not been for her princely mentor's abundant scheming.

Once the unnecessary crowds were gone, Louisé rose from her seat and followed the Lictors to where the other candidates were seated. Three women all roughly late thirties to early forties turned their attention on her as she took the last chair in a row of four. Of all the times she ever felt out of place, this was one of the most punctuated. The others, whose names she had forgotten, exemplified all the desirable traits for a female Ventrue: age, austerity and circumspect disposition. Intangible characteristics like those manifested palpably as greying hair – turned thin by stress – pulled too tight, eyes always a smidge on the narrow side that made their faces come across hawkish, skinny fingers that either never stopped writhing or drumming depending on their frame of mind and lips that were either already or made to be so from constant, judgmental pursing and sucking. Such was the contrast between her own form: glossy, black hair that was thin but in abundance, supple skin, fuller lips, hips and chest without time's narrowing wear on her eyes. An understated shade of beautiful. Marquise la Chambre was an unfriendly reflection of these women in their prime and they, who she could have become. A realization that made her shiver.

No one could call them ugly, because even Ventrue appreciate a certain level of ascetic appeal. Some appreciate it more than others, as was not the case with the Sires of these women. It was easy to imagine how average looking they had been in life at their age; the fact that vampirism washed out rosiness to their cheeks and vitality from their eyes did nothing to improve their appeal. For these reasons, Louisé could understand why Devereux felt the need and confidence in her candidacy. She knew nothing about this 'groom' but enough about men to know only one more plain and disparaging in looks would be excited about these three. Unless visage meant very little to him and in
that case, all four of them had equal chances of being chosen. But when was that ever the case where a man was concerned?

More to the point: it wasn't as if the Ephorate was interested in the physical compatibility of this couple. They cared about what kind of picture the two produced, what kind of abstract concepts they represented when in public, not to what extent they felt desire and lust toward one another. Those were the things Devereux considered in their stead. What clansmen were too fusty and prudish to consider, Devereux gave deep examination. Or, this is what Louisé imagined he did when he heard the news. He wanted a solution to this problem – and the rewards that came with it – as much as any other person but was willing to get dirty and feed the licentious appetites of his sex as much as political ones.

Youth was a rare quality among female Ventrue and Louisé had yet to meet a kinswoman her own 'age' or something reasonable comparable. The next youngest she had met was twenty-five and, like those beside her, plain and simple. The Marquise – as far as she knew – was a commodity of sorts with an almost unfair advantage over the others. The way they looked at her gave her that impression, at least. Resentment in the eyes also scolded her for pride in her appearance, disgust at her youth and reminders that she wasn't the loveliest thing around.

But what had they been when only sixteen year old saplings? Had they been vigorous for life, beautiful and dreamy? Did love and romance dominate their minds as it had hers? Did it now? Was there a subtle hope in any of these women for a love now they might not have had as kine? Louisé didn't know, but wondered and lost herself in the stories she scribed for them.

Louisé afforded only a nod to each before distracting herself with yet another window and the stories in her head until this 'choosing' was over. The French Lictor stood before them, explaining the process but Louisé barely heard him. Boredom was creeping back into her body and dragging her attentive nature into a bog of indifference. The doors of the basilica creaked and groaned, drew her sideways eyes away from dyed glass and onto four figures striding toward them. She straightened her body, eyes widening a hair at the man walking ahead of everyone.

"Chessboard..." she murmured, because his name had flown quite from her memory.

"What?" Devereux asked from behind her.

"Nothing." Louisé answered, breaking her own decision not to speak to him.

The handsome man from nights ago – the one whose chessboard she had accidently mangled with her frustrations and who, subsequently, engaged in philosophical discussion – led his pack of Englishmen to where the women sat in the center of the basilica. To Louisé, he did not seem as amiable as he had distinguished himself during their first encounter. His brows were furrowed with anagnate type of displeasure as Louisé's moments earlier. The hands at his sides were not quite fists as one wrapped around the hilt of a sword and the other swung as he strode. When he stopped a good ten feet from them, he hesitated before crossing his arms over the breadth of his chest. His was the presence of a man who had better things to do and wanted nothing more than finish this business, so beneath him, as quickly as possible. The French Lictor motioned the man closer and in three long strides, he was by the Lictor's side and towering over the man by considerable inches and build of body.

Without the distraction of chess, Louisé now formed a decent idea of the man's wealth from his attire: dark, wine doublet of satin, a fur-lined robe with riding boots up to his knees. The detailing of gold embroidery, alone, would have cost a fortune though she wagered a mental fortune this man would have felt military apparel a more suitable second skin than the current, courtly attire he wore. But it wasn't the expense toward wardrobe that Louisé found alluring. The almost too-tight fit, she
imagined, was purposeful. The press and taut of the muscle below caught her attention, like it had the evening they played chess. Though he was twenty or more years her physical senior, the Dijon Harpy could not help admitting to herself – in the quiet of her mind's secret places – she found this man quite attractive.

"This is Alexander Rothey," the Lictor explained. "This is the man chosen to represent England in this prestigious endeavor."

"Chosen?" snorted a man from the group behind Rothey. His English heavy and guttural, "More like forced."

"And whose fault is it that I am forced in such a way?" Rothey's own accent was more sophisticated. Hearing him speak in his native tongue was much more pleasing than his impure French.

Louisé smirked and just barely held back a small laugh. It seemed everyone was paying the price for someone else in this treatise forged by higher powers. Her shoulder burned a second as Devereux flicked his fingers against bone and hissed in her ear to be still. Such small interactions caught the attention of Rothey. He stared straight at her, inquisitive. It sent a shudder down her belly. The Lictors seemed less interested, more annoyed that this was taking so long.

"Is something wrong with your charge, Prince Devereux?" their Lictor asked without holding back his agitation.

"No, sir," her mentor responded. Louisé felt his hand roll over her shoulder and squeeze…hard. "She just seemed distracted by their banter and needed to refocus."

"Little tart is probably confused by our foreign tongue," commented the same glottal voice.

Louisé narrowed her eyes. "This 'little tart' is not so confused by your foreign tongue as by your obvious lack of manners, Monseiur," she responded with fluent ease.

The English party went stiff; save for Rothey, who burst out laughing with such thunder that everyone else shuddered. He turned his broad shoulders in the direction of the man who'd insulted her and jabbed a thumb in her direction. Suddenly, Louisé felt inexplicably uncomfortable.

"If I didn't tell you months ago, let me remind you how that unruly tongue of yours shall get you into trouble. You assumed, like an idiot, she didn't know English. You would be wise to remember not all Ventrue are as lax in their personal education as you are, Childe," Rothey lectured before rotating his attention back to the women – specifically Louisé, which did nothing to improve upon her discomfort.

He walked…no, his steps were too gaping to be called walking – he strode toward her and stopped but a foot away. Without asking, he permitted himself to grasp her face between the cold, dry clutch of his thumb and four fingers and turned her face from side to side. "What other languages do you know?" he asked in French.

"She knows-" Devereux started.

"I didn't ask you," Rothey cut him off. His eyes bore in Louisé's. Her stomach did a jester's flip. His fingers softened from a clutch.

"In addition to English, I speak Italian and Spanish fluently. Business has required me to learn a smattering of Portuguese and Dutch. Good for only brief conversation. I have no fondness for German, though do not deny it may be of importance one day. Anything else you wish to know?" Her brow went up, as did her attitude. Haughty was a good mask for how nervous this man made
her. A giddy nervous that had come back to bite her thirty years ago.

His other hand stroked the bearded sides of his jaw. Snapping his head to his left, he spoke to each woman beside her. He even went so far as to jab an index finger their way. "What about you? Languages?"

"Spanish," said the woman beside Louisé.

"Spanish and Italian," answered the one by her.

The last woman did not answer. Only French. Which meant she was either too young to have become fluent in another language – which Louisé doubted – or, she had never expected nor been required to leave France and have need of bilinguality.

"But no English…" Rothey trailed off.

He looked back down at Louisé.

She shook her face free of his fingers and somewhat came to her companions' rescue, in a backhanded sort of way, "Your language is not the easiest to learn. It has few Latin roots and inconsistent grammatical rules. It's a marvel you all learn to speak it, either."

There was no booming laughter at that remark. Only a subtle contraction of eyebrows. "Have you ever managed a household?" he asked.

She nodded up and back toward Devereux. "I manage his estate entirely."

Again, Rothey investigated the abilities of the other three and found them comparable. What Ventrue couldn't manage a household? Weak ones, Louisé assumed. A Ventrue's ability to manage their household was a direct reflection of their ability to manage finances and business investments. Poor management skills translated to a timorous capacity for leadership and stability. Rothey had only one more question, which was not a question at all – more of a statement absently spoken.

"And you are a Marquise…"

"In my own right, yes," Louisé commented.

The other women answered without being asked but nothing was owned by them quite like it was by Louisé. Daughters or sisters of a duke, count and cousin of a king. Meaningless associations that died the second they did. Lands, titles and affluence that had passed to living siblings – most likely living sons – and left only whispy connections to noble names.

Rothey looked away from the women and at the stain glassed window which had captured Louisé's attention moments ago. One hand returned to resting on the hilt of his sword, fingers drumming while its twin stroked his chin. His eyes narrowed with consternation. No one spoke for at least two minutes. Silence for a grand man to think.

Then he dropped his hand, stilled his fingers and looked at Louisé. It was a good, hard look that was judging but not judgmental. His eyes started at the crown of her head and worked their way down to the feet covered by the skirt of her dress. Then they traveled back up and stopped on her face. Small movements told her he was taking every aspect of it in: chin, lips, nose, cheeks, ears, forehead and last, the eyes. Nothing definitive told her he was displeased, though he did not seem complete in his satisfaction either.

"I will take her," he announced to absolutely no one in particular. Then he looked at Devereux and
said, "Decide your terms and we shall draw up our contract. I want this wedding and bedding done as quickly as possible." Then he turned and strode from the room without another look at Louïse.

When Sébastien is summoned to the Prince's chambers, he has two thoughts going through his mind: First, he ponders to what degree she will either punish him or make him grovel so that she does not; his second consideration is an apt punishment for Madame Favreau for displeasing him. Simply ignoring or shooting scathing looks her way was not enough since, in his mind, those were natural reflexes when one is disappointed in another. No, LaCroix needed to find another way Charlotte would best understand the consequences of her actions. Sébastien broke from his thoughts in time to give a swift, half-hearted bow to the Prince, whose favor he did not reside within. De Lanpré nodded and he shut the door behind him.

"How may I be of service, my Prince?" he asked with genuine curiosity. He was having difficulty summoning the will to beg if she required it.

"You needn't be so anxious, Aedile, my anger has passed," the Prince responded with a flippant hand gesture to the seat across from her. "You passionately pursued something with near dangerous consequences but let no one say we are without our mercy."

LaCroix avoided commenting on the fact that he wasn't the only one who attempted to coerce Louïse that night. He licked the back of his teeth and feigned a thankful – perhaps relieved? – smile. "I am grateful, then, for your generosity in forgiving me angering you."

Annalise's mouth twitched at one corner. "I did not allow myself to fully believe you'd been the hand behind such slanderous gossip. In the brief moment I did, however, I was comforted by the knowledge you are a man of careful planning. Imagine my surprise when something as small as semantics unraveled everything. I feel sorry for Charlotte," she needled.

"To hear you say those words would be punishment enough for her," Sébastien commented.

"That's encouraging. Now!" she clapped her hands and grinned. "The past is past and not worth our consideration. The future deserves our attention presently."

"The future?" His brow rose and he acknowledged an acorn-sized anxiety in his stomach. Was this where the conversation turned to whatever she had in store for him?

"Yes. As before, I am most keen on reconciliation between you and your youngest."

LaCroix's face hardened. This again. For a woman who'd just abandoned the past, she had a funny way of returning to it. "Back to Louïse, then?"

"Is there any other direction?" The Prince's face was an annoyed kind of curious.

"Many, in fact. Louïse is a bridge better left burnt, Prince," LaCroix pressed.

De Lanpré pushed back, "Permit me to disagree with you, Aedile. Tell me something, Sébastien: Why did you want that company so badly?"

"The reasons were numerous-"

"Don't waste my time with loftiness. Cut to the heart of the matter."

He shrugged. "Because it is lucrative."
"Indeed it is. But how much more lucrative would you say a powerful noble estate or city is?"

Sébastien narrowed his eyes. What was she getting at? "Forgive me if I don't follow, Prince."

"I believed you would like to know…She's going to marry him," De Lanpre said with a smirk.

Not just his face, but LaCroix's entire body went rigid. The acorn of anxiety was crushed by a boulder of black disgust. Surprisingly, it wasn't direct at Louisé – like so much else had been – so much as the nameless Englishman she was to wed. His eldest wasn't free from his anger, but the fact that his Childe would marry an Albion was sickening. All he managed to say was, "Oh?"

"You seem less than elated. Word is that he chose Louisé with little hesitation. But the contract has yet to be drawn up," she murmured at the end.

"So…she may back out?" he ventured to guess out of selfishness.

"No. She will marry him; as sure as the sun rises in the morning."

"Then what do you need me for? What good would a second attempt at reconciliation do?"

"Provide you with means to earn much more than a measly trading company," Prince Bordeaux answered, whetting LaCroix's enterprising appetite.

Louisé's appetite was thrown completely out of its normal schedule. The bursts of anxiety and anger had twisted her stomach so badly these past nights that she hadn't fed as properly as she ought to of. Now that it was entirely certain, but not set in stone, that she would marry this man, all Louisé was capable of feeling was hungry. All Devereux did from their first step to arriving at their chambers was plan what should and should not go into this marriage contract. All Louisé did was give him a cool shoulder and slouch into a comfortable chair with a full glass of blood in her hand. She drank to avoid talking to him, but couldn't completely drown out his prattling. Once the glass was empty, she cut into his devising.

"This is my marriage. Leave the specifics of my contract to me."

Devereux stopped his excited pacing to stare at her. Anger flickered over his features but soon softened into something akin to paternal amusement. "I know you're anxious to get this resolved, but allow someone who has more experience with these sorts of things to take care of the bothersome logistics."

Louisé narrowed her eyes. She didn't know if it was the lingering sensation of violation or this newfound engagement, but she felt incredibly powerful. "I am not anxious for anything but a stint of silence and time to myself. I will say it again: This is my, not your, marriage, Devereux. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but when I want your input in this matter then I shall ask for it. Until then, all I require from you is decent protection from the onslaught of fair weather proponents offering crooked tribute."

"I beg your pardon-" Prince Dijon started with a dangerous voice. Years ago, the edge of his tone would have made her shrink and tremble.

She wasn't so easily shaken now. "And I beg your silence," she cut him off.

She felt the weight of the glass increase as a ghoul refilled its contents. To avoid an explosive argument, Louisé rose and strode to her room. Devereux remained where he stood, rocky and seething. He wouldn't say anything. He needed her willing participation too much to demand she
apologize or adjust her demands. If he wanted any share in the glory and reward, whatever it may be, of this union…he would keep his mouth shut.

With only the faint crackle of firewood as her companion, Louisé was free to abandon herself to deep, personal contemplation. She neither regretted nor feared the words she'd thrown at Devereux. For once, hers was the hand that made the first move. And it felt incredibly euphoric! The more she chewed that realization, the more the pieces came together. It wasn't that women's dead, icy fingers spread her wide open in search of a useless, flimsy piece of flesh. It wasn't that LaCroix – her Sire – had stooped to cesspool levels to make a point, or that Devereux never consulted her before thrusting her in politically precarious territory. What undid her so much about each of these situations was that she hadn't had an ounce of control. As she had explained to Rothey before, she always embodied the roll of pawn. Foolish pride and contentment had made her forget for about thirty years, but now she remembered and felt all too well the sting of being used.

Things were changing though. Louisé – not Devereux or LaCroix – was the one in control of this situation. Rothey could say all night 'I'll have her' but unless Louisé reciprocated and agreed, then he might as well have not said anything at all. And unless he acquiesced to everything she desired in this contract, she would not agree and he could find himself a bride out of one of the three remaining candidates he hadn't so much as spared a hopeful look. Louisé felt confident, perhaps prematurely so, that he wouldn't. Alexander Rothey – in the little time she'd spent with and observed him – presented himself as a man who knew exactly what he wanted and would not waver until he got it. She could benefit greatly from that breed of stubbornness.

Prince Bordeaux's kind of determination was another matter entirely. While Devereux was more than able to filter those that came to her with 'congratulations' and 'Oh, by the way…', Annalise de Lanpre was one that slipped through the cracks of his attention. Or he flat out refused to keep her from bothering Louisé as retribution for his Harpy standing against him. Regardless of what it was, her presence at Louisé's door was both unexpected and unwelcome.

"Prince de Lanpre. What a surprise!" Louisé muttered in a bemoaning fashion. "To what do I owe this visit?"

Louisé did not stay at the door, nor offer the woman drink because she didn't want de Lanpre to stay. She wanted the woman, and the man who worked for her, to leave. Leave Paris. Leave her alone. She didn't care which, so long as they happened.

"I just wanted to come by and offer my congratulations at your impending nuptials. I know you must be thoroughly excited," de Lanpre teased.

Louisé sat and watched the Prince. She said nothing immediately before expressing, "Thank you. It is an honor to serve my clan in such a magnanimous way."

"Louisé, if I may pass on a bit of practical advice," de Lanpre mused, wasting no time in jumping head-long into Louise's business.

She considered the woman's request. Her wounded feelings – and nearly wounded economy – did not feel in the mood for this Prince's sprinklings of alleged wisdom. But to dismiss an elder so hastily was a suicidal decision. Memory served that Louisé could listen to the word of others without acting upon them. She nodded her head. "Of course."

"I do not blame you for bearing so cold a disposition toward Sébastien or myself. He attempted to take advantage of your precarious situation and I did not stop him." She apologized in her way, "You have my sincerest regrets."
Louisé felt her face tense though she did not sneer or glare, as she might have years ago. She corrected the woman's attempt to skirt accountability, "With your signature on the bottom of that contract, I daresay you did a little more than not stop him. But your apology," she softened the blow with presupposition, "Is appreciated and I am relieved that my current attitude does not offend. Now, what advice would you like to leave me with?" She placed subtle emphasis on the word 'leave'.

Annalise fought a snarl, chose a cold smirk instead. "It would be foolish of me to suggest your forgiveness at this time."

"I agree. That would be a very unwise suggestion to make," Louisé interjected with the most venomous, neutral tone she could find.

"But what I will impart upon you is the necessity of one's Sire. Hate him, if you must, but an uneasy reconciliation is better than nothing." Prince Bordeaux paused then said, "You will want someone who shares your blood on your side when you travel to England."

Louisé would rather have had a serpent on her side than her Sire. She was sure Sébastien must feel the same way. As it was neither could be in a room with the other without the tension riding to an uncomfortable – dare she assume, dangerous – level. LaCroix's rage was a thick substance in her own blood; a nagging pang through the generation that had her feeling sorry for Charlotte, if only for a fraction of a second. No, she was certain her Sire was not on her side. That wouldn't change anytime soon.

"So," her own voice broke her from trailing thoughts, "if not forgiveness, what are you suggesting?"

"A truce?" de Lanpre's shoulder shrugged with her inflection. "One does not have to love their Sire to use them to their benefit. And it seems to me," she continued, "The only party in this act of international diplomacy without an alliance is you."

"I have Devereux," Louisé answered without much thought or emphasis.

"That is not an alliance. That is an obligation. You have no choice but to appear loyal and bound to him. I can attest, from experience, the truth can hardly be said for the other way around."

"What is it that you are implying? That Devereux is working behind my back? …Against me?" Louisé was amazed how she could sound insulted or chagrined without being either.

"Yes and no. Devereux is most likely making whatever alliance he can to guarantee, no matter the outcome of this arrangement, he gets what he wants. For all intents and purposes, that means appearing to be devoutly in support of you. Pull back the curtain, however…" de Lanpre trailed off to plant the seed she didn't know was already sown.

Louisé long suspected Devereux of spinning a web behind her back. Experience taught her that wasn't so easy for her to do to him, but she couldn't lie and say she hadn't been seriously considering it. The stand she took nights before was a physical representation of that consideration. How fortuitous for both ladies here, then.

"How would a truce with a Sire – who hates me, mind you – be of any benefit to me? Isn't he more likely to betray me than Devereux?" Louisé stared hard at Annalise. She was waiting for the woman to give her a good excuse not to rely on LaCroix. Any little crumb of doubt in him would do.

"He does not hate you," she answered with flat affect. Business tone. Ventrue speak. "He's jealous of your success and angry he won't get to share in this new one. If he were to be assured more than appropriate compensation, you would be nothing less than the apple of his eye…especially since his
other Childe proves to be so disappointing."

So…that was it. Payment for love. Could it even be called that…love? No. Payment for _favor_ that ought to be hers naturally. A premium for support. Reparation for assistance. Give and take. Supply and demand. Not love. Not affection. It would sooner frost in hell before Sébastien LaCroix _loved_ anyone. Prince Bordeaux's assertion she would be the 'apple of his eye' was nauseating, as she didn't desire such immature qualifications of their relationship. Proud was something she wanted to have again, if she bothered to investigate those kinds of locked away desires. The likelihood of that happened was…uncertain, so she took childish satisfaction that Charlotte was no more favored or enjoyed than she.

Louisé mulled the thought of 'reconciling' with her Sire. An irritated index finger tapped its nail against the rim of her glass. Her response was a huffing exhale, "I just don't know. I don't deny what you say has merit but I am not convinced I can trust him."

De Lanpre – who obviously benefitted from their accord – was quick to assuage her apprehension, "Perhaps a contract between you two would bring you comfort. Specifics outlined on parchment? There's trust in that."

A smirk tugged up one corner of Louisé's already tense lips, "You certainly have an attraction to these contracts of yours, don't you Prince?"

Bordeaux's glare was palpable, "Very little gets done or taken seriously in our world without being set in writing. As Harpy, surely you must know that."

It was Louisé's turn to shrug. "And had I not just almost been financially undone by one forged without my knowledge or consent, I would be more obliging to the concept. Anyhow, I doubt Sébastien LaCroix is capable of considering any such action at this time. It is all we can do not to fight with one another." And Louisé meant _physically_. It was all they could do not to tear into one another. It was all they could do to keep their crossings to thing glares and forced, caged-in snarls of sharp teeth. It was all they could do.

"Let me worry over Monsieur LaCroix. If you are willing to a truce, I can make him equally so."

Which was a statement no one says without having already convinced the LaCroixs of the world to comply.

"And what do you want out of all of this, Annalise?" Louisé dared to use the Prince's first name. Something she only did with Devereux if she were particularly miffed. "I am not so young, so naïve as to believe you are doing this out of the goodness of your heart or fondness for me." _Because neither exist_, she thought.

For the first time since entering the room, Annalise de Lanpre chortled, "My reward is contingent upon your success in England, my dear girl. Forging this pact gets me that much closer."

Louisé didn't doubt that. She didn't exactly understand how, but she didn't doubt it. Never doubt a Ventrue's ability to get exactly what they want, whatever that might be. "And what shall I get for making this 'peace' with LaCroix? Other than the ephemeral substance of his support…what do I get?"

De Lanpre was becoming as frustrated with her as the Marquise was with the Prince. Mutual perturbation was not without its benefits. It wore down the over eager. In Louisé's case, it strengthened her influence to make demands. Bordeaux sighed, "What is it you want, Louisé?"
"I want a signed pledge that LaCroix won't so much as look at my trading company from now on, or without my written and sealed consent to do so."

"Very well," was her terse reply.

"Oh!" Louise remembered, "And Monsieur LaCroix took it upon himself to manage my inheritance until I 'came of age or married'," she quoted three decades' old documents, "I'd appreciate him returning my inheritance to me…with thirty years' interest."

Prince Bordeaux nodded and left with the determined look of any true Ventrue. She had business to see to. A deal to strike with her Aedile that Louise was sure hadn't occurred to either party. Certainly not to LaCroix.

It is a reluctant thing Louise does when she tells her servants to open the door and allow her Sire inside a few nights after Prince Bordeaux disappeared behind the same door. A thinking-of-the-bigger-picture moment in her undead existence where she pushes her own selfishness aside even though ordeals have taught her otherwise. Annalise de Lanpre's words – her self-appointed wisdom – rattles inside Louise's ears. And the woman is not wrong. As against her as he tried to be, she has discovered he is now the one most on her side even if he doesn't know it or want to believe its true. Honestly, she doesn't want to rely on LaCroix but she needs to. He is the only one who does not have strong enough connections to England to benefit no matter the outcome one year from now. The only other person who can be demanding on her behalf without shaking other countries' hands beneath the table. If Sébastien wants so much as a livre in reward, he must be on her side only.

That doesn't make them friendly. It doesn't bury the past, patch up wounds or make mole hills out of mountain. It temporarily calms the storm. Both Ventrue are wise enough to see their tense truce is as politically appropriate as this intercontinental alliance. Their agenda is not so different from their elders'…from the Ephorate. They want what they want.

LaCroix strode into the room and Louise felt her stomach tighten. She thought she could look at him so close, be so near to him, but she was wrong. The wound was too raw. He looked back and her muscles fought every rationalization not to lunge for his throat. Dressed in a robe of blue, fur-lined silk – a gift from her 'fiancé' – Louise was a luxuriously dressed killer biding her time.

And feeling luxurious made her feel socially superior compared to her Sire. Superiority was comforting, even if it was earn through less-than-desirable means.

"I am assuming," LaCroix started, his fingers snapping for a glass of blood, "that you intend to be agreeable…finally."

Her eyes narrowed a hair, a wrinkle formed between them. He was referring to the multiple nights it took to get their own settlement in writing. He would give back her estate and all future profits, stay away from her Bordeaux companies and she would forgive his misdeeds, secure him ample reward from this marriage – if she proved successful – and grant dispensation for the financial inheritance he could not afford to pay back with thirty years compounded interest tacked on. Doing this behind Devereux's back was what took so long…that and their individual stubbornness. "I shall only be as agreeable as you are respectful."

So the lines had been drawn. There was a hitch in the air around them; a weird hiccup where both parties had been pricked but not enough to draw blood by the biting words of the other. He took the glass from the servant then, having a second thought, snapped his fingers again. The other glass he held out in olive-branch peace offering. Well, a forced offering anyhow. Louise had no choice but to accept.
LaCroix clamped a hand around her wrist and yanked her three inches closer. All without spilling a drop from either glass.

"Don't think for a second I trust you." He narrowed his eyes. "I trust you're desperation but if you give me any reason to believe you're betraying me-"

"I am not desperate," she cut him off with sharp teeth. "And I'm not the one of us with a history of betraying the other. Now, if you will kindly release my wrist, we can get this other with before Devereux returns and wonders why on Earth you're here."

Sébastien held her wrist three seconds longer before abandoning his hold on her person. "Speaking of your wondrous Prince, where is he?"
Devereux was busy. That's where Ramon Devereux, that's what he, was. He was busy ferrying missives. He was busy cooing honey-coated words into the ears of antsy Englishmen. No, I haven't seen her tonight; Yes, I'm sure she's not having second thoughts; Of course you made the right decision! Ramon was busy playing the part of poorly paid errand boy for a girl to whom he was Prince. He toted lavish gifts to and fro and swallowed the onslaught of temporarily apologetic kinsmen who wanted her good graces – and the benefits attached. This is where Devereux was while Louisé hunkered behind the locked bedroom door, tuned out his centuries' old advice and dragged her feet with finishing the demands of her contract.

Ramon was busy while Louisé seemed not and he stayed busy because he needed her happy to be compliant. Why she wasn't more so was his own fault. And this fault was in no way connected to the frigid probing for a useless, yet significant, piece of flesh barging the interior of her womanhood. Louisé was about to have a full, grown man occupy her soon enough; she might as well get over it and get use to probing. No, fault lay with him in maintaining their blood bond. Thirty years focused on bringing Dijon beneath his rule, penning Primogen, surviving Cervantes and spoiling the girl had created a veneer of absolute obedience he'd let himself mistake for true loyalty. Now he was paying a minimal price. So long as he stayed busy and didn't push her, the cost would remain minimal.

"You believe I desired this," she deciphered with a hint of sad amusement. "I wager you think Devereux and I planned this together, concocted this little scheme with snickers and wringing hands after I refused to compensate you for standing my independent ground."

Sébastien's stare didn't soften. He drank from his glass. Drank back vicious commentary, she assumed. "It would not surprise me in the slightest," he smacked. His fingers tapped precise jabs against the rim of his glass. "Ventrue should always want for more. Why would you be any different?"

"Who says I am? But this hardly the 'more' I wanted. I cannot lie and say leaving Devereux's side has not been at the forefront of my mind. Harpy lost its luster years ago. No, I wanted more. I just expected it to look different from this. What a tragedy," Louisé lamented. "All of this is a tragically comical farce."

There was a lull in the tense conversation as both vampires set their attention on the noises outside and the crackle of the fire inside. Louisé drank and stared into the flames; she could feel LaCroix barring into her – a silent, screaming demand for her attention. Her eyes met his and the sensation of the confessional sacrament struck her.

"Devereux did not even tell me why we were here until after he has offered me up like a fatted calf for this sacrificial slaughter. And that he did without my knowledge, much less my consent." She scoffed, "He barged in with puffed pride, giddy, and asked what I thought of marriage."

"How thoughtful of him to seek your opinion after it is of no use," Sébastien's remark lacked the warmth of camaraderie, but he spoke like one who knew – all too well – the two-faced, ulterior nature of mentors.

Louisé toyed with strands of her hair, twisting their silken texture over cold fingers again and again. "When he told me what he had done… I wanted to kill him. Using me like a courtesan for a reward as ephemeral as gossamer webs."
"Why didn't you refuse?" he asked with bite, more accusation than anything.

"How could I? If you are privy to means of disobeying and dishonoring your Prince without being discovered or facing consequences, I would love to know them," she shot back. "I have gone down that road of tiptoeing behind his back before. It is a road better off less, or even not, traveled."

LaCroix chuckled, a cruel kind of choking laughter caught deep in the throat of a killer. "So…little Marquise Louisé hasn't always enjoyed the favored attention of our Dijon diplomat?"

He dismissed her glare.

"I am so thoroughly glad my past hardships amuse you, LaCroix."

Now it was her turn to ignore his indignation.

"Don't call me that," he hissed.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she feigned an ounce of apology before perking back up toward criticism. "That's right! It's Aedile LaCroix, now, is it not?" The sarcasm dripping was thick, milky like venom. Eyes focused deep water blue on split ends rather than the fury across from her. It went without saying being Harpy was better for the only reason that it had Camarilla clout, not just clan integrity.

"I am your Sire, Louisé, and you will address me as such."

"My Sire…" she murmured, flicking the ends of her hair away. "How can I call one who would go to such scandalous lengths to destroy me, my Sire?" Another pregnant pause. "I have no Sire."

Another sharp smack.

"Don't you dare-"

"Speaking practically," she cut him off and lifted her gaze, "Pragmatically. I have no Sire. They think my Sire is some insignificant pile of ashes. What good would it do for me to go against that now?"

She rose and finished off what remained in her glass. LaCroix continued sitting. His temper wasn't as high or hot as it had been moments ago. Louisé imagined he was seeing the rationality, the logic she spelled out. Her words were not meant to rub salt in his wounded pride nor feast on the crippled thing that was his dignity. Louisé was no vulture. There was little to be gained by reminding him his choice of tactics has been poor when he did not publically recognize her while the chance was his. She believed herself mature enough to let that go since it proved beneficial. His underhanded, attempted sabotage was something else entirely: a fisherman's knot of resentment not so easily undone by the lacquered requests of regional monarchs. Marquise Seyssel-Chambert wouldn't be LaCroix's Childe if she forgave betrayal of that magnitude promptly.

"Humoring these Lictors and Devereux is far easier and wiser a decision than clinging to or obliging a sentiment we both know doesn't exist. They hold our fates in their capricious hands and if I am ever to get what I truly want, then playing their game is what I will do," Louisé explained more to her nervous stomach than the Sire who watched her with mixed opinion.

"Better to know what their game is exactly before you play," he corrected, albeit in the most taunting timbre he could muster. "There is no similarity between what the Lictors and Devereux want, I hope you know."

"I am not naïve, sir. I know whatever Devereux is doing centers around his own ambitions. He would not be – as you have already mentioned – Ventrue were that not the case. I will deal with that
soon enough. One game at a time."

"The marriage to an Englishman…to this Alexander Rothey," he spat. Feelings – though LaCroix was far from an emotional being – were plain: dislike…hatred?

She wasn't sure, precisely, where it stemmed from.

"Yes. A marriage you can thank yourself for," she jeered.

"Excuse me?"

She was glad he was insulted.

"It is obvious. If you had not been so determined to undo my reputation, attention would not have focused on me and another might be in my shoes."

Debilitating silence swelled between them. LaCroix's lips were the fine lines of a battlefield. Taut like long bowman's arms and strings. The putrid purple color of something dead. Lips that caged what killed, what wanted to tear into her throat right now and watch her gurgle up an apology. Ice water eyes darkened. A predator honing in on their prey. Wolves did it. Vultures did it too.

Louisé was not an exception. They had drawn their lines and she was toeing his. Her statement, slapped down like dead cod, was no less true than it was biting. But you don't always win the LaCroixs of the world with truth. Sébastien didn't have enough self-reflection – in her humble opinion – for that right now. He might know in his mind her words were right, but he would never admit it.

She sighed and with indecisive movements, plunked back into her seat, "As if that matters now." Louise met her Sire's eyes. "What does matter is assuring ourselves, one another, that we get what we deserve out of this. And while I am far from forgiving you for what you did…I would be the bigger fool for not taking advantage of that kind of tenacity." Her tongue ran a nervous track along the top of her bottom lip while incisors sunk into its flesh as she admitted what they already knew, "We need each other. You and I are all we can trust."

Sébastien LaCroix looked at his Childe. For the first time, really looked at her. He could see the adolescence as Kindred in her eyes: a fatigued, mistrustful hue that clouded everyone's stare eventually. He can see the subtle movements of anxiety for what they are: neurotic coping mechanisms stacked neatly around her. The weary burden of Ramon Devereux crept into her shoulders and made them taut…prickly like a dog before it bites. There isn't the faintest trace of desire in her person, not for the subject at hand anyhow. Then he sees it: confident confusion. Hers is a bothersome existence in the sense that she floats between worlds. A girl's body without a girl's mind. A woman's brain without the brawn to be taken as anything but endearing at first. She is his Childe and isn't. She will be a wife, but really won't. She is chimera. Many different parts misfortunately melded together in one body. His eldest is as hard to decipher as the demands of a Sphinx. What has lived for seven and forty years but is only six and ten?

And the feather weight crinkle between Louise's eyes as she studies him in return, he sees something else. He observes himself glinting back. He sees the ooze of his blood in her own form and the curve of familiar canine when her lips part. A twin hunger in her eyes for the more, the muchness their existence has to offer. It is not completely gone, this barbed spite in his gut, but the manifest strength is withered. In this reflection of himself, this need for one another…Sébastien LaCroix reminds himself: she is his. And only final death shall part them of that.
He relaxed. LaCroix smirked. Not at her, but at the uncomfortable truth she spoke and how like him – after decades apart – she really was. "You mean you don't trust dear Prince Bordeaux, Annalise de Lanpre?"

His Childe sneered. Another reflection of himself softened by feminine features. "Annalise is a snake. I only agreed to get her off my back, out of my affairs and obtain what I want. What about you? She's your Prince, after all."

"A fact I oblige but in no way enjoy. What about your Prince, Louisé? If de Lanpre is a snake… what does that make Devereux?"

Louisé chuckled, "A cockatrice."

Sébastien snorted a laugh to complement hers, "Indeed." Then he was silent again. Silent and observing.

He watched Louisé nudge a piece of parchment, that lay on the table between them, as center as possible. Sébastien could tell – because the tapping was no different than her twirling her hair or indecisively rising and descending to her seat, you know – that the fact this parchment appeared skewed to one side made her antsy. Imperfection made her anxious, annoyed…another quality of his, magnified. Sébastien LaCroix enjoyed the comfort of strict organization. There was nothing surprising or chaotic when everything was straight and lined-up appropriately, when people know their place, when things were straight, not crooked. But LaCroix couldn't say he was bothered by tilted parchment. Couldn't be bothered to make it straight when there were others whose place it was to straighten such things. Now he knew how anxious his Childe was, how undone.

LaCroix disrupted her insistent tapping by jabbing a finger against the center of the parchment to keep it still. He watched her flinch, hesitate in drawing her hand back to her lap; he watched her teeth sink into her bottom lip. Sink so hard, blood rushed to the surface in anticipation of skin breaking. With a sigh, Sébastien lifted his touch from the parchment and leaned forward to tap the underside of her chin, "Stop it, Louisé."

As if his fingers burned, she yanked her head back and sucked her teeth back into her mouth. Her bottom lip disappeared with them, but only for a second before reappearing wet from the running of her tongue. Teeth fidgeted unhappily inside. She huffed, "Let us get started. I have run out of excuses to give Devereux about why my concessions for this contract are not finished."

Sébastien drew himself back up, confident her mind was back to business instead of whatever angst burbled in her mind. He reached to his right and plucked up the quill that she supplied. He dipped it into an equally available inkwell and waited for her dictation.

They finished writing the basic outline of her demands. The final product is rough, at best, with scratch marks running through words here and there, Sébastien's contribution more than hers; his way of refining her statements without causing much conflict. He shall not lay his hand upon her person in wrath or discipline instead of He shall not hit me or He shall place no woman above her in his domain or the court, in word or deed she shall held in highest respect and regard instead of He will honor me before any others. The finesse of marital language is not hers. In fact, she is amazed LaCroix is as good as he is at writing such requirements being such a man of solidarity. What past of his she was familiar with never included a wife or vows…only business and blood. Louisé did not point this out, however, as a fine crease had etched its way between the icy waters of his eyes the more in-depth they became. It was a very familiar sight, as though looking into a masculine mirror and she would have chuckled were it not disturbing to think how much of her Sire, of Sébastien LaCroix, she had inherited or mimicked without realizing.
His eldest was adept at picking up on irritation – a life with one, Ramon Devereux, and two, Augustinia/Augustus Cervantes, had that effect – and Sébastien was nothing if not annoyed the longer they wrote. With fraudulent naiveté based on the innocent notion he was simply tired of writing, she offers to scribe in his place. One look from him was all she needed not to suggest that again. His temper was as vexing as it was tiresome. He would get his compensation for aiding her in this, so why bother to become agitated now, when it served no real purpose but to make an already tense environment that much more uncomfortable. Louisé was curious as to his pique, since she could not rightly decipher its origins but for the sake of her sanity and skin, kept her curiosity to herself.

When it became apparent to her his acerbity would not wane anytime soon, Louisé suggested they end for the night. Her response to his bitter glare was a classic shrug and reminder that everything would be re-written and scribed more professionally when she met with the English, so there was no point in being too grandiose now. He took her words for what they were worth and stopped. The crease didn't immediately soften, but at least his fingers were still. Honestly, she was glad for the reprieve in marriage talk. She was glad when LaCroix lets the quill sink into the ink and leaves it there. Louisé feels peace when LaCroix slides the parchment toward her. He does not leave though, not right away. The crease isn't gone, after all. Her Sire is still annoyed though she is relieved to be finished talking about marriage. Louisé could feel the tight knot of nerves in her stomach unwind once the ink was left to dry.

She was not lying when she told Sébastien this is not how she wanted things to be. Louisé does not want to get married, no matter how handsome she finds the man to whom she will be given. She does not want to think about the sands in her hourglass between now and the wedding night – as though her kind did anything during the day – slipping away at a leisurely pace, falling without a care or regard for her own feelings. Louisé has never longed for a man…well, that isn't entirely true. There had been a time, long ago, when she longed for a man – and it was no secret whom she had longed for – but he was not entirely a man and she, not fully a woman, nor proper in anyone's eyes but their own. Her body had been warm and supple then, had a heartbeat then. His lips, his fingers in her hair, the simple stroke of her cheek…all those things made the hidden parts of herself swell. Sensations she was not entirely sure her body was capable of anymore. Even when Henri came around – and that was not often, mind you, perhaps five more times over the last thirty years – nothing more than intimate conversation and mild kisses passed between them. And she could chalk that up to lingering memories of torture stuck in the sinews of her body, but then she would be somewhat lying to herself and Louisé has made a point never to do that again.

Javier was long since ash. She had watched his head roll off his shoulders before his body crumpled and blew away with the wind of that season. He had been handsome, too. Handsome and duplicitous. Just as easily as she had imagined what their bodies could do together, he had chosen the tools to cut hers apart. But Javier was only part of the problem, and not a large part at that. The debauchery of Cervantes was something else to take into consideration. For the past thirty years, she had been witness to his licentious capabilities and while the position of Harpy had cushioned her for a period, it did not do so forever, and somewhere around 1580 Cervantes had resumed his regime of harassing her with innuendo…silk ropes, fingers, tongues and the sort. It made Louisé ill and nourished a distinct aversion to all things sexual, sensual or otherwise requiring naked body parts coming in contact with other naked body parts.

No, Louisé had not been lying when she told Sébastien she did not want this. Of all the reasons she did not want this, the chiefest was this: it was entirely too disconcerting to consider a man on top of her.

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It's funny – to her at least – how the fears of yesterday seemed so big, so detestable and yet
required so little of her to overcome. That is the way it is, she supposes, with every glance into hindsight: how hilarious those trepidations are now, especially when compared to agenda night in and night out of far more precarious situations. Jade Invasion is something to fear. Anarch hypocrisy wafting snake venom breath down the back of your neck is another. Sabbat would be terrifying, were they not so haphazardly predictable with their genocidal mechanics. Each of these is far greater an energy expense than the parting of thighs and thrusting of hips, the breaking of a flimsy piece of flesh that both defines and falls short of capturing who she is. Each of these she has conquered, but none of them are so amusing as the first.

What were you fearing, girl? The pain? The weight? The press of skin on skin or the brush of his beard against the side of your neck? Silly creature – it was hardly that painful, that weighty or that romantic. What it was, what it inevitably culminated to was a lackluster affair with stained bed sheets and Sire playing chess in the other room. It was more tedious and embarrassing than anything else…about as thrilling as doing taxes. Louisa grinned, chortled to herself and her joke.

Her finger flicked the remote from one channel to another, finding nothing of remotest interest this early in the morning. Break of dawn newscast was not entertaining since nothing about it applied to her. Step by step instructions on how to prepare the perfect breakfast quiche had as much place in her life as birth control. Oh…that made her a little sad. She groaned as flick after flick of the remote brought up more monotonous material: Isn't this handbag the matchingest, cutest thing you've ever seen, Sandy?; Now, I only scramble my eggs for two minutes, whereas some…; Trying to push their feminist agenda into the sale of cookies, we mothers are outraged! Louisa eventually stopped for the sake of stopping and landed on some amusingly apt – for the memory looming in her brain – bridal show.

Honestly, she didn't understand it. All this money and attention devoted to picking the 'perfect' dress for a day these vapid debutantes believed was all about them. Each of them gushing for a fairy tale dream that didn't have an ounce of historical accuracy. She'd watched a few of these before, almost became ill when one such brainless creature said she wanted to 'capture the romance and chivalry of the Middle Ages'. What chivalry? What place did romance have in weddings of the past? Eras gone by were far less concerned with love than they were with wealth, property or alliance. Chivalry didn't make girls as young as twelve marry men three times their age or become ripe with their offspring before their bodies were capable of safely delivering such unhappily conceived children. Romance wouldn't require a young looking virgin to give up everything she'd ever known to sail to a hostile country without so much as an acquaintance to lean on. Whatever inspiration these heifers used, counted as gospel history, simply never existed anywhere but the dreams their simple minds concocted, minds limited by the brevity of mortality.

The bedroom door swung open, but she was too, tragically engrossed with the taffeta monstrosity one girl had chosen to pay attention while he entered with tomorrow's meetings and demands in hand. Lilting Southern accents and squeals would no doubt undo him. She found them oddly comforting. They reminded her of sweet-smelling Cajun summertime, streets strewn with beads of gold, green and purple and the bite of heavy Mardi Gras alcohol on her tongue.

"What are you watching?" his discontent inquired after promptly thwacking the stack of paper down on some artistically placed coffee table.

Louisa stretched her legs and wriggled her toes, noting to herself that it was about time to get her pedicure done. "Some show. These fussy creatures are buying wedding dresses. It's amusing."
"How? This is drivel…" he groaned and brushed hair from his eyes.

She listened to his steps thump to the walk in closet where 'His' and 'Hers' clothes hung in neat rows of color coordination and order.

She cocked her head to watch him. He had removed his suit coat and draped it over the back of a chair. Her eyes roamed over taut muscles that flexed beneath his shirt with each precise move he made as he jerked his tie undone. Yes, it's funny to imagine how she justified her fear of intimacy by rationalizing to herself that her body was incapable of reaction. How naïve, little girl, you are about yourself. He tugged his shirt loose of his waistline and she felt it stirring. Each undone button made moist a dry, desert land. His eyes caught hers…caught her. A brow crooked. So did the corner of a mouth.

"It might be tripe, but it is leagues better than current news stations," was her response, acting as though she wasn't doing what she was doing.

"Louisa-"

"I'm serious," she pressed and drew her knees up. "Besides the mental commentary," she continued as she turned her attention back to the screen and not the half-naked man ten feet away from her, "Is hilarious. Making fun of these girls for their modern day conception of marriage and weddings is almost pitiable…almost."

"Hm…" was his contribution.

When he spoke next, it was as he jerked the bedcovers down. Louisa lifted her hips to oblige some movement of one thousand thread count Egyptian cotton. She didn't stop him from stealing the remote control though he did not immediately change the channel. He observed her in her nightgown, pale legs bare and clavicle drawing attention toward sweet-heart neckline and the swell beneath thin fabric. "I never knew you to find entertainment in material like this unless you've already been considering it."

Louisa crinkled her nose at him. She did not like being so well known to someone, no matter how intimate and lengthy their relationship had been. Centuries off and on of sharing a bed has nasty side effects like that. Her face relaxed as she slid her body down and draped her arms listlessly above her head. The posture of mock prey. "I was just considering us years ago. You know…the first wedding? How we were back then," she murmured. "I pride myself on having been a virtuous and judicious bride at the time."

"Funny…I recall you scared half to death," he joked…badly!

She would have corrected him, would have become cross and defended herself had he not switched the television off, plunged them into darkness and took long, precise moments enthralling the swollen, tender parts that made her whole.

Judicious is a good word to describe Louisé. Scared is equally appropriate but Ventrue never display fear. In the same way they don't display imprudence or desperation, fear is one of those visages best left for intimate, trustworthy company only. A Childe can be fearful before their Sire because, at some point, their Sire will do one of two things: coddle and comfort, or like the Sébastien LaCroixs of the clan, brace their Childe with the cold, harsh reality of the world.
The matter of reward lay between them and completion of this contract. A matter neither she nor LaCroix knew enough about to confidently put into words. What they did know was that huge, landed and monied estates on either side of the Channel hang in the balance. Eager French fingers waited at the slightest opportunity to grab back what English brethren had stolen so long ago. The English, on the other hand, clung desperately to their claims. If their holds tightened any further, the very land titles would scream.

For any other creature but Ventrue, it might be too much. Louisé was scared to allow that kind of thought but if she were honest the burden was substantial. If she failed – and she wasn't entirely sure how to fail or win at marriage – then all her French kindred lost the dangling treasure before them and those in England would forfeit what they had, no doubt, held for centuries. She would be a pariah…in France at least. And if she won, was successful (whatever that meant), how many English hackles would she bristle? How many fangs would stand ready to tear her apart? How fast could she get out of England?

"How do you expect to gain anything if you don't even know what lies in wait to be taken?" Sébastien started.

She stared back. Dumb. For the first time in a while. Actually without knowledge.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"What you have been doing so well lately…charm him," was LaCroix's parting advice.

Charming was not on the list of words Louisé was allowing describe herself. Not lately, as he put it. Charm did not make Alexander Rothey choose her. Linguistics did. Charm didn't encourage Devereux to hoist her before the powers that be. Physical beauty did. And charm surely hadn't helped her accomplish anything of great importance these last thirty years. Pure, unadulterated ferocity and cunning got her all those things. If charm was used, it didn't make enough dent in her memory to matter in the long haul. This meant charm was one of the rusted, underestimated disciplines tucked away in her personality.

But it was precisely this rusted characteristics she dug deep down and yanked free when it came to prying information out of a sour Ramon Devereux. Louisé was not unaware of her Prince's dour disposition. He skulked about like a drunkard without his ale to quench the demons in his belly. He pouted and muttered under his breath. Maybe charming him wouldn't be so hard to do when he appeared so desperate for her to end her drought of communication toward him.

Before Louisé can be charming, she must be practical. The 'he shalts/she shalts' LaCroix scribed with careful strokes had to be rewritten. Devereux knew his Harpy's handwriting like any good Prince and mentor should. If she was going to charm him, she certainly couldn't do it by showing him all the hard work she'd accomplished with LaCroix. Devereux might have been disgruntled with how long it was taking her, but she could justify it with painstaking quill strokes. Thirty years may have greatly improved Louisé's handwriting, but it was not a skill that flowed easily. Something about writing took time for her and Devereux could see that attention to precision when he looked at what she wrote. To LaCroix, writing was like water moving down stream…too easy, too effortless and obvious to the eye it came from the hand of a militant man cut from a cloth of metal. After it was rewritten, Louisé could be charming.

And there is no greater way to charm Ramon Devereux than with some extravagant thing, some bauble that is beautiful, rare or exceedingly delicious. In this case, Louisé opted for small sacrifice and had a bottle of royal blood – another gift from Rothey to reassure her of his wealth and status – opened and two glasses full by the time Devereux strode into the room. His expression was like one who had sipped vinegar he thought wine. She held out the glass to him and received the quirk of a
wary brow.

"What is this for?" he asked with due mistrust.

Louisé sat and drew up that charm LaCroix encouraged her to use, "It's a thank you."

Devereux didn't quite sit down, didn't quite relax enough to lower his guard. He stayed standing and continued the inquiry, "For what?"

Louisé sighed. Feigned a sigh of insight about herself, "I know I have been difficult to work with the last few days and I wanted to extend this as peace offering, a thank you for your patience and apology for my disposition."

Without considering that to be a lie, Devereux sat in a chair adjacent his ward. One of his greatest flaws, and he most likely didn't realize he had one this large, was the fact that as soon as someone literally or symbolically prostrated themselves before him and admitted their weakness, Ramon Devereux was all too glad to resume where things left off. One his age ought to really be more cautious. But Louisé was playing on the repetitious history between them. This was not the first dance of this kind between protégé and mentor. And she knew what Devereux always loved to hear, what sweet nothings he wanted out of her mouth to reassure him – as false as this security really was – that Louisé had seen her prodigal ways and was returning to the fold of his greater stature.

"That," he started with the lip of the glass to his mouth, "is very reassuring to hear." And he took a drink.

Louisé continued on with her faulty apology, dabbing a bit of truth here and there, "While I cannot be blamed for the anger I felt for such a violating examination of my person, I know now you aren't the one to blame for that. I was very angry with you, because being angry with my Sire was pointless. But," she insisted when she caught a hint of glare in his eyes, "As I began writing my terms for the contract, I was forced to reflect on the truth that you were only looking after my best interests."

Devereux nodded. The slow, solemn motion of men who think themselves wiser than they are. "I am glad you can see it for what it was. I am very satisfied to hear the Louisé I know, and have come to appreciate, once more." He extended a hand and patted one of hers.

One strategically resting on her knee. Years ago this would have been a comforting gesture. A symbol that all was well between them. As a fledgling, Louisé would have gouged the eyes out of others for such a touch, for such a consolation that she was back in his good graces.

Venom tends to poison those kinds of naïve desires. Sires, too.

"It's an ugly business. What they did was ugly, too, but necessary. Like the Nosferatu, my dear," he saged, "Gruesome but imperative. And also in the past! We look to the future, to your wedding and marriage."

"Of course," Louisé agreed as she slid her hand out from beneath his to tuck a rebel strand of blackbird hair behind her ear. The same hand swooped and in one, elegant motion, slid her terms of the contract before Devereux. "Here is what I have determined is necessary for me to agree to this marriage. I believe you will neither disapprove nor be disappointed by my decisions."

Louisé gave him space and silence to read over her stipulations. She watched his eyes descend the paper with overall indifference, since he probably didn't give two shekels about how Rothey treated her so long as he got what he wanted in the end. Knowing this full well, Louisé decided it was time
to spill a little slow-acting venom of her own.

"It's incomplete, though…Now that I think about it, it's incomplete," she broke the silence.

Her Prince and thirty-year mentor seized her stare with his own.

Louisé extended delicate fingers to snatch the parchment back to her. "I wouldn't even be considering these things if it weren't for you." She allowed a hollow, vaguely-sweet ghost of a smile to cross her lips. "If you hadn't been so persistent, who knows what I would be doing right now?"

"Paperwork, if I know you," Devereux jested. "Expanding that business of yours. Making more money, or trying to at the very least."

"Perhaps, but now I am guaranteed success. I don't have to try for anything. And I have you to thank for that," Louisé coaxed. Stroking his ego was trifling. "I want assurance that you are rewarded for your hard work, Devereux. I want it in my contract that you are provided amply for your role in this."

For the first time lately, Devereux perked up. Like a cat, he became substantially more attentive than he had the past few minutes. And that is when she knew she had him where she wanted him.

"That's very generous of you, Louisé. But that may be playing it a little too demanding, don't you think?"

"I'm in a good position to be demanding, sir. Don't you think?" She smirked.

He smirked in return.

"Besides," she added, "I want to make sure you get what you deserve."

"What do you know about Annalise de Lanpre? Besides that she is Prince of Bordeaux," Louisé toyed with the old curiosity she'd used in the past with him. While fresh ink dried on the parchment between them, Harpy Dijon employed a tried and true tactic against her Prince. A curiosity that, in this instance at least, underlined her role as protégé and his, as master. It was a clever, handy trick to smooth stubborn edges off Devereux's attitude by reaffirming for him she knew her place in relation to his.

And like the strategy before, this trick worked just as well. Even though he answered her question with another question, "Why do you wish to know?"

Louisé covered a smirk with the lip of her glass, taking a long needed drink. Years now she'd been the victim of others planting seeds of doubt between her and others. Devereux and his vine seeds separating Sire and Childe in Lyon. Gawain and his thorn branches sharpening the path between protégé and mentor. De Lanpre with her bramble bushes. Now it was time to sew some of her own.

She swallowed. Then dropped her seed, "Simple curiosity. You two seem friendly and she's made a habit of coming around when you aren't here. So," Louisé situated an appropriate pause to take another drink. Devereux's brow arched just as she hoped. "I just wanted to make sure she was someone I could trust."

"A wise consideration…Tell me," Devereux requested with a nervous tapping of his fingers against his chair arm, "What has been her purpose in coming to you?"

"Oh!" Louisé started, bluffing. "Well, I assumed you knew since the two of you – as I mentioned
before – appear so close."

"I would not waste my time by asking, Louisé, if I had known." Devereux's irritation was not unnerving anymore, but it betrayed the truth that he legitimately had no knowledge of de Lanpre's actions.

"She was asking me, again, to reconcile with LaCroix."

"Of course she would," he scoffed. "And how did you answer?" he probed.

"I didn't answer," she somewhat lied. At the time de Lanpre had asked, she hadn't exactly answered. What she had done was ensure herself payment for the inevitable alliance.

"Good. Don't. I think everyone has had enough of Bordeaux, its Prince and Monsieur LaCroix."

"I couldn't agree more." Louisé drank.

What Louisé would come to encounter months late, she experiences a glimpse of in the moment of settling the marriage contract. This is what happens. This is what she learns. Alexander Rothey is a man who wants what he wants, will charm to ostentatious limits to get what he wants, and will become thunderous, even aggressive, if he does not get what he desires in a timely fashion. Luckily for her, Devereux bore the brunt of Alexander's frustrations and malcontent. Louisé might have even found it charming if she believed, for a moment, Rothey was anxious to get his hands on her. Honestly, she wasn't sure what he really wanted: her or for this affair to be over? The privileges of the bedchamber or the sail across the water? The return home to England? And she didn't really care. Ventrue aren't supposed to care about these kinds of things aside from the enterprising pieces that pop up along the way.

Marriage is only an operation, an avenue to other resources. And while Alexander Rothey might have been fuming over the fact that she was thorough, that she took her time, but Louisé refused to step into that room benighted or disadvantaged.

So she stepped into the room with parchment in her hand and Sire at her side. To say the company of English and Lictors looked surprised or confused would be an understatement. She knew they were expecting Devereux in tow or leading, but Louisé could very well having the heir to the lands she wanted sitting to her left or right when she demanded such a reward for her participation in this marriage. It was more LaCroix's scheme than hers, but one she fully supported. Just as she had discovered what Devereux wanted most, and who de Lanpre really was, so Sébastien has coaxed what Bordeaux coveted out of her mouth.

Annalise de Lanpre. Or, more appropriately, Anne of Orléans whose family had been forced out of the city by the Plantagenets. She had been an obscure daughter of the Valois-Orléans, who ruled the duchy of Orléans for generations. Even after becoming kindred and taking her Sire's name, Annalise had stuck around her home until the Great War between England and France left her orphaned, homeless and destitute. Not even Jeanne d'Arc, La Pucelle d'Orléans, freeing the city from English hands was enough to get back what Annalise lost. Ventrue cousins from across the channel had already claimed domain. Louisé was her chance to get it back. Too bad LaCroix has also set his eyes on this prize. And too bad Annalise had convinced Louisé she needed LaCroix's help and had been placed in a position where he needed to be compensated. Poor Anne d'Orléans indeed.

But that wasn't Louisé's concerns. Her focus was getting what she wanted set in official ink, signed by both parties and sealed by the Lictors. In order to do that, both Devereux and de Lanpre had to be put out of the picture. She left that to LaCroix, whose wily mind had concocted a genius plan to
distract both Princes throughout the duration of this meeting. The specifics were of little importance
to her so long as they stayed away. So far, they had.

"Who is this? I have not met him before," Alexander commented with harsh, annoyed French.

"His name is Sébastien LaCroix and I spell his role out quite clearly in my petitions of this marriage
contract," Louisé replied, even and cool.

Her extremely soon-to-be husband narrowed his eyes at the word 'petitions'.

"Yes, I can see you've come up with quite a few of those," he spoke like they were the only two in
the room.

"Consider them guidelines for this marriage. Assurances for us both that this year and day go as
smooth as silk," she responded.

Rothey grunted and slid her parchment closed to review with skeptical eye. His stony expression
never faltered. Until it came to the line she assumed was about LaCroix or the reward she stipulated
for herself. His lip twitched. He leaned back and studied her. Or both of them; she wasn't sure.

"Why would you need him in such a way?" Rothey asked.

The Lictors with their Harpies and one other Englishmen looked more befuddled. One reached for
the parchment as Louisé justified her decision.

"Aedile LaCroix will be my confessor," she almost proclaimed to set the chronicles straight,
"Because I need affirmation my needs will be made known to the community at large. He will both
hold me accountable to my end of this bargain and seek resolution on my behalf for any grievances I
may have. Should you fail to uphold to what you state you will agree to, he will be my intermediary
to the Lictors.

"We assume you will have someone of your own to complete this task on your behalf," LaCroix
assuaged at the end to the rising climate of the room.

"I do not need someone to solve my problems for me," Rothey smacked with a glare to LaCroix.

"Nor do I," Louisé impressed. "What we can solve between ourselves, we shall, but let us not jest
and pretend international wealth is not at stake. With that in mind, I believe a third party is beneficial
when considering objectivity in matters that may sway the outcome of this marriage."

Rothey relaxed and sighed, lifting a few fingers to the Harpies. "So be it, but I reserve the right to
decide my representative when we return to England. I hope this does not mean Aedile LaCroix
plans on living with us?" Rothey was back on edge.

"Of course not," LaCroix asserted. Louisé heard the faintest lift of disgust in his voice. "I still have
obligations in Bordeaux. I will travel with her to England to any necessary signatures then return to
France. I shall only take up residence, in brief, when and if she requires me to. Let us hope she never
does."

"What is your connection to Aedile LaCroix and where is Devereux?" a Lictor interjected himself
into the triune conversation.

"There is no connection," Louisé replied.

LaCroix didn't move a muscle though a perturbation emanated off him. A cousin to anger.
"He was referred by a compatriot of Prince Devereux…Prince de Lanpre, I believe?" she turned her head to look at her Sire.

Sébastien's nod was curt, military in the way it came across. "Prince de Lanpre approached me about assisting Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert as an impartial third party. As her confessor," he concluded.

"And Prince Devereux, who is otherwise indisposed, approved of such a consideration," Louisé answered the other question.

"Very well," the Lictor said. "Since Monsieur Rothey accepts the condition, we find no fault with it either. Once you two have been married, it will be the job of your confessors to hold account of his union and report to us any breach of contract on either side."

"Let us get down to the business of the official contract," the other Lictor began with a judgmental stare at Louisé's parchment. "While all of these suggestions are of good intent-"  

"They are not suggestions," Louisé cut. Now a glare was on her, but she didn't care. Beneath the table, LaCroix squeezed her leg in warning. "They are requirements or I will withdraw my participation in this matter. Those suggestions are non-negotiable."

"That is a little bold, don't you think?" the French Lictor, obviously impressed but trying hard not to appear such, commented more than inquired.

"Ventrue are nothing if not bold. What is written is neither extravagant nor arduous to accomplish," Louisé returned.

"For goodness sake!" Rothey's frustration peaked as he glared sideways, "I find no issue with anything she wrote so long as she intends to be as compliant with my conditions."

"Monsieur Rothey-" a Lictor started.

"I have waited almost a fortnight to get this over with," Alexander seethed, no longer reminiscent of the man from the other side of the chessboard. "Do not make matters worse by being fusty twits! Write up our provisions so that we may sign, say our vows and break the seal on this marriage."

He bore into Louisé when he said the last part, his intent entirely too clear. She softly squirmed in her chair. Beneath the table, she instinctively grabbed Sébastien's hand. He did not pull away.

LaCroix felt Louisé wrap her dainty, cold digits around his hand, felt the press of her nails against his skin after Rothey spoke his peace. He does not need to look at her and probe her eyes to figure this out. Louisé is not afraid of this man. No, LaCroix has a sure feeling his eldest Childe would fight this man tooth-and-nail without batting an eyelash. It is Rothey's double entendre, his innuendo that unnerves Louisé. His virgin is scared of sleeping with this man and Sébastien will not fault her for that.

He listened to the Lictors dictate both sets of conditions to the Harpies assigned to the task of compiling them into one fluid document. There were pauses for clarification that either Louisé or Rothey agreed to what the other had written. LaCroix was glad there was not much either seemed to disagree with. Marital vows would take care of the basic premises of 'love, honor and obey', all that frivolous nonsense these two would say for the sake of it being said. Sébastien LaCroix hoped Louisé was not silly enough to expect love from this relationship, because it would be neither long enough to form nor anyone's intent that love bloom. Love was something predominantly absent from the lives of Kindred. Loving people is a waste of time since you cannot trust anyone, but yourself,
enough to love them. Loving temporal things such a position or wealth is foolish since both could be
taken away in the blink of an eye if you aren't aware of those you mistrust. From his own
observation, love was too hard a thing for people to truly invest in and benefit from. No one had the
clearest sense of what love was, so it was better off left alone in lieu of things that made sense:
ambition, success and status.

Honor would not be difficult for Ventrue, whose by definition were creatures of dignity. Obey was
the only one that LaCroix was not entirely sure Louise could accomplish without being managed by
another. She was enterprising, like she ought to be, but that had come at the cost of being obedient to
Sire and Prince. Even now she was compromising her loyalty to Devereux by endeavoring to forge
an alliance with Sébastien. He wouldn't slight her for that, either, since it was the wiser of the options
but she could not afford to demonstrate that kind of compromising obedience in this marriage. It was
one of Rothey's most important conditions.

"I want her to listen to me," Rothey has said. "I don't want a woman who will talk back or challenge
my authority in my own domain. You don't have to be opinionless or dimwitted, I just don't want
you undermining me."

"And I won't so long as you never raise your hand against me. Should you choose to be a brute with
me, there will be consequences." Louise replied with ease.

Rothey just chuckled and shook his head. "What am I getting myself into? She can't even agree to
something without having her say so. Fine. I'll never strike, hit or otherwise abuse you though there's
no law against it," he commented.

Sébastien stayed silent for the most part. Louise eased her grip on his fingers but didn't entirely take
her hand away. He neither drew back his own nor tightened his fingers. She was on her own when it
came to what frightened her.

"This matter of your finances, Mademoiselle?" a Lictor asked.

"I want him out of them. No offense," she looked back at Alexander as she explained, "But since
this is a temporary situation, I see no reason for you to insert yourself into my financial affairs. I
would prefer my monetary status stay separate from this."

"I see no issue with that," Rothey replied with a shrug. "That seems practical. I assume should you
need my help with anything, you would ask."

"And this business of faithfulness?" A question that struck a silence.

Louise became very rigid since it had been LaCroix's insistence that such a clause was included.
When it became clear to him his Childe was not going to expand on that, he stepped in after a long
period of mutism.

"It ties to the condition of her being honored above all others. Unlike many fellow Kindred,
Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert is staunchly Catholic in nature. Marriage is sacred in her opinion
and she would prefer the stain of infidelity not mar this union, as bureaucratic as it is in nature. If
people are going to believe England and France have agreed to mend their ways, they cannot see
him or her involved with someone other than their spouse. Not only would others label us hypocrites,
but ruin the dignity and reputation of the faithful spouse and demonstrate obvious failure in the other
party."

Rothey's stare became dark. Sébastien refused to react since he had decided he cared very little for
this man or his preposterous temper.
"It is no secret I have an established mistress. Are you asking me, therefore, to dismiss her?" his pique rumbled.

"For the duration of this union…yes," LaCroix answered.

Rothey said something in English, but he wasn't sure exactly what it meant. Unlike he'd heard of Louisé, he had never liked the English enough to become fluent in their tongue. France was the center of Europe. Everyone knew French. It was fashionable to know French. But if he was to be visiting England, then he would begrudgingly adapt to their language.

Louisé seemed to understand. Her eyes had narrowed and her usually pretty face was hardened into something he could confidently label dangerous. Alexander Rothey became aware of this rather quickly and responded with a look of his own, but since he was thunderous by nature, his appearance lacked the potency Louisé's did. Thunder, rage and boom was not something expected out of Louisé. She had the deceptive beauty of a refined lady with the bite and snarl of a wild animal. Her temper, from LaCroix's experience, was a fierce gale that gathered strength as temperatures rose then exploded with a force that knocked everything out of its way with indiscriminant viciousness.

"I am a man and I have needs," was all Rothey could come up with.

"And I a woman. I have need and one is that I who won't be shamed by her husband sleeping with whores," Louisé snapped.

"She isn't a whore," Rothey hissed.

"A mistress is just a pretty word for harlot, for whore," Louisé countered.

And so they had come to a stalemate. Louisé refused to be dishonored, to be lower rank. Rothey refused to be bullied by a girl. LaCroix refused to spend all night in this room with the two of them snapping at each other.

"Your wife is there to meet your needs. No one in here can force you to choose whatever choice you ultimately make when it comes to this woman. Only know that should she ever compromise the union between yourself on Mademoiselle Seyssel-Chambert, it won't be her that pays the consequence. The same goes for Louisé," Sébastien added, much to his Childe's chagrin, "Should she ever commit adultery, she will face the consequences of breaking this contract."

Rothey did not relax, but he acquiesced to the request, "Very well. So long as she knows she is being held to the same standard."

"Of course I do," Louisé replied with a knife blade in her voice.

"The only remaining matter is this compensation you refer to at the end of your document," the English Lictor pointed out.

"Yes? What of it, sir?" Sébastien listened to Louisé tack on the honorific to make up for the earlier interruption.

"You are asking not only for yourself but for your confessor. A little unorthodox since the dispensing of rewards is left to the Ephorate."

LaCroix could sense the bristling between his Childe's shoulders, the irritation of lower Kindred when they were at the end of their patience with those older and more powerful than themselves.

"I am making sure that Aedile LaCroix will not be overlooked for his contribution to the success of
this endeavor. Neither he nor I are asking for grand domains or the position of Prince, but for territory that is rightfully French but stolen by those most definitely," LaCroix watched Louise's stare hard at the Lictor as she emphasized her last word, "English."

"It's simple business," Sébastien added. "Supply and demand and nothing more. We know, obviously, if the French half of this alliance fails to perform adequately, compensation is hardly a matter to fuss with. But should she succeed, then it is far better to have things settled now than go through the agony of meting out bounty to hundreds all wanting the same parcel."

The Lictors looked at one another, noticeably unsettled by how prepared he and Louise had become before coming to this meeting. They were placed between a rock and hard place. No doubt both Devereux and de Lanpre, along with scores of others, had murmured sweet nothings into the ears of both men in an effort to secure their hold on Évreux and Orléans. On the other hand, they were this close to securing Louise's absolute participation and with Alexander Rothe as volatile as he was, they could not afford denying her request and starting this process all over with another candidate without Rothe also withdrawing and leaving France and England tenser than before. The Lictors could not afford to fail the Ephorate, not when they had only really been given on task: get these two to marry! What would they tell the powers that be? We're so sorry! We were so close but we didn't think agreeing to their demands for those estates seemed prudent. We'll try again…

LaCroix could see scenarios like this churning in the minds of those across from them and like them, no scenario ended with their heads still on their shoulders. Settling shoulders and deep sighs told Sébastien everything he wanted to hear. Beside him, Louise smiled with the triumph of someone who knew how to play their hand well. LaCroix would not let his face betray an arrogance of that level but he wouldn't deny her the right to feel successful. He was just thankful he wasn't going to be denied his share of the bounty.

"Very well," the Lictors answered in disturbing unison. The French representative continued, "Should this union prove successful, or should France emerge the faithful member, we as the hands, feet and voices of the Ephorate agree to bequeath to one, Louise Seyssel-Chambert, Marquise of Aix and la Chambre, the county of Évreux, it's estate and fortune, and Aedile LaCroix will be rewarded the estate of Orléans and its fortune."

Another stint of silence followed that proclamation as the Harpies combined the approved conditions then rewrote two copies of those, one for Rothe and one for Louise so that neither could be disadvantaged or claim ignorance by not having one. Alexander and Louise signed the two official documents, one written in French and another in English, thereby agreeing no matter the language that they would abide by the conditions of this contract until the term of this marriage was over.

"Tomorrow, you will say your vows so I suggest the both of you enjoy your final night of individuality and freedom," a Lictor suggested while his partner rolled up the contracts and sealed them with wax.

She was radiant. There was no other word for the way she looked the night she was wedded to Alexander Rothe in the moonlight and candle flames lighting the basilica. Her wedding gown was a mantle of deep blue brocaded with gold and lined with fur. There was a blatant Fleur de Lis etched into her bodice and pearls decorating the hem of her neckline and wrists. The gauzy wings of her ruff almost glowed, illuminated her like the virgin she was. It was a sumptuous wedding gift from Ramon Devereux. Devereux who knew, from the moment he commissioned this dress, that Louise would be marrying this man.

Matching pearls and cloth flowers decorated her swept up hair. Jewels decorated her neck and ears, but had been completely removed from her hands. The hand Devereux held as he led her down the
aisle toward Alexander Rothey felt naked without the rings she usually wore. The hand Devereux slid into Rothey's waiting fingers was wanting for decoration, too.

She was resplendent.

She was handed off to an Englishman and Louisé could not have been more glorious. She may not have been arrogant enough to believe she was the loveliest woman in the world, but right now she was the most beautiful creature in the room. And Rothey approved as he led his bride before the Lictors. They said their vows and she was exquisite.

"I, Alexander Rothey, take thee, Louisé Seyssel-Chambert, to be my wedded wife. And I do vow before all these witnesses to honor you above all others and to be faithful to you until we are parted. I vow that where and when I am Lord, there and then you are my Lady. I vow to be your provider, protector and confidant. With this hand, I will lift you in dignity. With this cup, I share with thee my blood. And with this ring, I thee wed," Rothey concluded by sliding a ring of enameled gold onto the ring finger of her left hand. A large, polished sapphire glinted up at Louisé and she almost smiled. Alexander looked into her eyes, solemn as the rest of this occasion. "From this day until our last, you are blood of my blood and bone of my bone."

And then it was her turn.

"I, Louisé Seyssel-Chambert, take thee, Alexander Rothey, to be my wedded husband. And I vow before all these witnesses to be bonny and buxom at bed and at board, to be faithful to you until we are parted. I vow where and when I am Lord, there and then you are my Lord. I vow to be your comfort, warmth and light. With this hand, I will lift you with dignity. With this cup, I share with thee my blood. And with this ring, I thee wed," Louisé paused to slide a ring inlayed with rubies and diamonds. "From this day until our last, you are blood of my blood and bone of my bone."

Then each of their left hands were taken by their country's respective Lictors and sliced down the middle. Alexander and Louisé joined their bleeding hands and held them over a golden goblet. Into the cup their blood dripped and mingled with sanguine that had been poured before the beginning of this ceremony. One Lictor wrapped a white cloth around their entangled hands while the other lifted the cup for them to drink from. Enough of one another's blood to see them through the next few hours. If they were lucky, perhaps carry them through the next few days.

Louisé was less concerned about how she would feel about Rothey a few days from now. The singular thought in her mind was making it to the other side the next few hours. Blood swallowed, the Lictors declared them married and the ceremony complete. Alexander led her out of the basilica and into the great hall where everyone else would spend their time celebrating, drinking too much and otherwise shedding their stony, Ventrue exteriors. But celebration was not for Louisé to enjoy. Not tonight, at least. Alex secured her a glass of fine vintage then handed her off to servants and her confessor.

"What happens now?" Louisé asked LaCroix before drinking.

"What do you think?" he replied. He took the glass from her and handed it to a ghoul before leading her back down toward her room. "We have the privilege of helping adorn you for your bedchamber," Sébastien smacked like the words were too foul for his mouth.

Louisé did not bother asking what that meant, what it all entailed because it would only make her nerves worse. LaCroix was not a huge piece of her getting prepared, thank goodness. He stood outside her room to make sure no unwanted visitors bothered her. Inside, ghouls undressed her from her nuptial finery and dabbed her bare skin with oils that smelled of lavender. She would have preferred a bath but her Sire had been firm about that.
"A bath would be a wiser decision after," his emphasis said everything without saying anything at all.

Smelling sumptuous, Louisé was clothed in the softest chemise she had ever worn. The finest quality adorned her skin. Her hair was taken down and brushed until it was equally smooth. It looked like a black river down her back, so vibrant compared to the pallor of her skin and the cloth draping it. Her feet were covered by velvety slippers and over her chemise she donned the luxuriant dressing coat of blue Alexander had given to her as a wedding present. Now she was ready to be led to her marital bedchamber. At least, she looked like she was ready.

Sébastien LaCroix likes to believe he is a prepared man. He likes to believe he is a man who sets his affairs in order and thinks of every possible outcome to every possible decision he chooses to make, so that he might not be taken surprise by anything. Since being Embraced, LaCroix can count on either hand the number of times he has truly been taken aback by the circumstances of this life. Louisé being accused as a Childe of Passion – the first time – was not so much surprising as insulting and bothersome. Finding her alive thirty years after abandoning her to fate he could count as surprising, if Devereux hadn't shown up at her side minutes later. Her survival was not so shocking when he realized how great a role Ramon Devereux had played in ensuring her survival.

He thought to himself it oughtn't surprise him that Louisé would be chosen or agree to marry a foreigner. And he was surprised so much as resentful and disgusted. The ways to earn reputation and wealth were numerous in his mind, as were the options other than marriage. But Louisé had made her decision and her success intertwined with his own desires.

So, he shouldn't have been surprised when he was asked to lead her to the bridal chamber and he wasn't. He was surprised when she emerged from the room, when she stepped out a lovelier creature than when she walked in. The garish wedding ensemble had been removed and all that was left was the girl. Yes, expensive fabric and fur covered her but there was just her. LaCroix felt a sting inside, a jolt that brought him back to the moment he embraced her. The moment when she was warm, soft and helpless. Aside from the warmth, Louisé looked exactly that but instead of him, another man would be embracing her.

LaCroix squashed whatever was attempting to rise up in him. Nostalgia had no place in a man who was determined not to be undone by anything. Desire was reserved for domain, for prestige not for the soft body of a young girl who was no longer a young girl. That didn't stop the lavender from stroking his senses as he stepped up to her and took her hand. They said nothing to each other but their silence was loud and protuberant.

Holding her hand, he led her from her room to the designated chamber for the sole purpose of consummating this union. As she had the night before, Louisé gripped his hand the closer they came to this junction of her journey. Then she broke the silence and vexing clamor of shoe steps.

"Will it hurt?" her voice was so small. So scared. So unsure.

What could LaCroix tell her? There really only was one answer. "Yes," he admitted. "You are unbroken, so it will hurt."

"What do I do?"

What did she mean? About the pain? Well, there wasn't much she could do about that but bite down and bear it. If she was talking about the mechanics of it – and he hoped she wasn't – then that was simple too. "You lay back and leave the rest to him."
"…That doesn't sound enjoyable at all," his eldest murmured.

LaCroix stopped them at the door to the chamber and sent the servants in ahead of them. Charlotte, whom he assigned the task of serving Louisé this night, hesitated in separating from them. With a sharp glare, she too disappeared in the room prepared for Louisé. Alone, LaCroix could be as frank with his Childe as he chose to be. He tugged his fingers from her grip and slid them down to her elbow. He turned her to look her in the eyes, eyes of deep, seawater blue. The same blue in the sky as the last sliver of sunlight dips beneath the horizon. His were not as deep as that. His were frost compared to hers.

"Louisé, listen to what I have to say because it will save you in the long run. This act, this farce, has nothing to do with pleasure. You know it has to do with politics but are hoping you can find something else in it. You think he's handsome," he paused to take note of her wide eyes, "Do not deny it, it is the same look you gave to Henri years ago. Fine, think he is handsome but do not think for a minute he will love you. He won't. So, lay back and bear it. Bite down and grind your teeth. Cut your way through this next year but don't cut to look for what isn't there. This will hurt because he will not be gentle with you. You are not his mistress, but his wife and a political one at that. Focus on things that matter, on things more enjoyable than this."

And that was what he left her with as he led her into the chamber and handed her off to the women who would carry her the last few steps. LaCroix strode into an adjoining room where a chessboard had been set up for whatever distraction he may need. He did not see Louisé’s robe being removed or a long strip of pure white linen be laid beneath her side of the bed. He heard, but did not see, Alexander Rothey stomp into the room and bark at the women to leave. Sébastien only looked at the chessboard and the Queen he was set to protect in order to win this game. Charlotte appeared and perched just behind him. Another man, Rothey's Childe – according to rumor – also joined them and parked himself across from Sébastien. Sébastien moved a pawn.

Louisé jumped when Alexander yapped and made the women leave. Even Charlotte would have been a welcome, buffering presence to the volume that was Alexander Rothey. She had been covered by the blanket on the bed and now wanted nothing more than to curl up beneath it and hide. Why had she agreed to this? Why hadn't she looked Devereux full in the face and maintain her refusal? Devereux stalked to the door of the adjacent room and snapped the door shut. Why were all his movements…everything about him so jarring?

He strode back to the bed and looked at Louisé much the way a…wolf looks at prey? Oh, that was so cliché! And not fully captivating of the way Rothey stared at Louisé. She kept her eyes on his face, adamantly refusing to look at anything else even when he began disrobing himself. By the time he was completely nude, Louisé wasn't looking at him at all. She was staring at the far wall with its stupid tapestries while her fingers snared into the blanket for dear life.

"Look at me, Louisé," Rothey asked, not so booming anymore. His gentleness was more disturbing. It made her more uncomfortable. It was just one more reminder about what exactly, specifically was happening between them. She couldn't look at him.

The blanket was snatched out of her fingers and instinctively, she flung her attention to him. He held the blanket in one hand then tossed it to the side without breaking the lock between their eyes. Louisé had never seen a naked man before. Obviously. He was as muscled as her imagination had painted. His body was built hard and taut for and from war. His height had made him a good soldier. A strong soldier. Against LaCroix's words, she couldn't help wondering if that made him a strong lover too? Would he be as gentle as his voice attempted to convey?

Louisé's palms, for want of something to do, pressed against the bed on either side of her as she
stayed sitting up. Her legs stretched out before her but once he lifted a knee to climb up, she drew them back slowly. Alexander didn't let them travel too far. He caught an ankle in the cradle of one hand and held it still as he ascended the bed. Louisé felt panic in her stomach. The other leg had frozen out of fear, clamped its knees and thighs together, refusing to move since its twin had been captured. Her body was surrendering before the battle even began. And that terrified her. She felt his hand slide up her leg, his fingers press against the sensitive skin beneath her knee as he coaxed it toward the waist hovering above the bed.

Louisé didn't fight. Her back slid against the soft cushion of the bed and her palms relaxed, fingers curling around white sheets. Rothey's hand beneath her knee continued upward as his other hand maneuvered between the grip of her thighs and prying them apart with gentle effort. Louisé swallowed and broke their mutual gaze once he began pushing the gauzy material of her chemise away. Her naked body was something only servants had seen when bathing her and even then, compulsion required she cover her breasts. Rothey didn't care for her compulsions as he yanked the garment over her head and tossed it, too, to the side.

She felt him move, felt him shift as his hands slid down her thighs and beneath her. His fingers pressed against the curve of her lower back while his head bent to brush his lips where they wanted. His beard bristled her skin, tickled it and made her bite the inside of her cheek. Soft kisses trailed from her collarbone to her neck. His body pressed down against her. His breath whispered against her ear.

"Louisé."

One word. Just one. Her name.

Her name while his hands slid beneath her bottom. Her name to distract her as his hands cupped and gripped.

"Relax."

One more word before he pulled his lips away from her ear. One final word before there was a thrust of his hips. Only one word as he tore into her and broke the seal, cut the flimsy sinew from her body.

One word and Louisé cried out.
Sailing

In the future, wedded bliss would be rung in with the cacophony of cathedral bells and three-sheets-to-the-wind cocktail congratulations. There would be painstakingly created confections and bouquets of wilting flowers to celebrate the love-struck union between two people. Four hundred years from now. In four centuries, it would look very different. Feel very different. Be different.

But, for now, all commemoration boiled down to a few minutes' worth of grunting, a broken barrier and a red smudge on pristine, white linen.

Sébastien LaCroix heard what contemporary marriage meant while playing a game of chess. His ears caught the mousey cry of pain through the thick oak doors. His eyes stayed focused on protecting his queen from his English opponent. Charlotte fidgeted off in his periphery, unsure of her role in this situation. Sébastien didn't bother clarifying. The fine-tuned Ventrue ears could still detect the rhythmic creaking of a wooden bed frame, the labor of a man's exertion but nothing from the feminine vessel he imagined to be beneath. He was thankful for that. Thankful Louisé wasn't moaning like a brothel prostitute.

A selfish part of him was satisfied with the thought he may be the only person to know the distinct pitch at which his Childe created sounds of pleasure. So no one else would, a vicious part of his personality hoped it hurt and was glad if it did.

LaCroix didn't entertain these thoughts for long, as he rarely entertained these thoughts anyhow. He checked the Englishman then lifted his head toward the door. Rothey's frame filled the doorway as one arm yanked wide the door.

"Boy!" he barked at LaCroix's opponent. "Get me something to drink. I have been in the midst of France and am famished!"

LaCroix found his comment crude. He said nothing about it, though, because if it had been anyone else's Childe in that bed beyond the door, he wouldn't have said anything and for all intents and purposes, Louisé wasn't his Childe. Rothey met his eyes, which said what his lips wouldn't. Rothey smirked as his Childe-servant slipped away to attend to his master's need and said:

"Hand work, you know? Sailing narrow channels, plowing vestal fields. Girl!" he snapped at Charlotte as though he had the right to.

LaCroix narrowed his eyes and beat Rothey to the ordering, "Charlotte, go retrieve the sheet."

"Yes sir," his younger Childe murmured.

LaCroix stood after Charlotte left. Rothey moved to one side as LaCroix approached the door. Alexander's hand clapped itself, without permission or want for camaraderie, onto Sébastien's shoulder. LaCroix smoothed a sneer from crinkling his mouth.

"You'll tend to my wife then? I'll take the sheet to the Old Men," Rothey more demanded than inquired.

The way he said 'my wife' made LaCroix's stomach sick. A sick, twisted knot.

Sébastien looked at Rothey, shrugging his hand off. "She's in good hands," he answered.

"Good, good!" Rothey said. Then he turned to dress himself in more than what he was wearing.
Sébastien just shook his head and made his way to Charlotte, who stood by the curtained bed with empty hands. He was in no mood for poor performance and gave her a glare. The once-failed Childe couldn't afford to bungle anything and yet here she was, bungling something you couldn't screw up...charitably!

Charlotte responded with a panicked expression. "She won't let me have it!"

LaCroix growled and stepped up to the curtain that separated him from his eldest. "Madame, we need that sheet. If you would be so kind," he urged with absent compassion. Stoic. Always stoic.

"Give me a minute, Monsieur!" Louisé hissed from the other side.

"Trouble? Exhausted is she?" Rothey asked while reappearing.

LaCroix shot his comment sideway, "I don't see how, we weren't in there very long." When he looked at Rothey, he stated, "I'll send the sheet with Madame Favreau if you have other matters to attend to."

Rothey narrowed his eyes and gave a sharp nod. "It so happens, I have to arrange our return to England. See that my wife and her things are brought to my chambers before dawn."

Rothey left just as his drink arrived.

Sébastien didn't bid him farewell.

He turned his attention on the stubborn first Childe behind the curtain.

"Louisé, I will reach my hand in and snatch the sheet out from under you if that is what it takes to move this evening along," her Sire threatened.

"I'm naked!" Louisé commented with shock.

"I didn't say I would look at you," he corrected her, ignoring the look on Charlotte's face as he and Louisé dropped all pretenses.

"I asked you to give me a moment."

"I have given you a moment."

LaCroix said nothing more before thrusting a hand into the partition of fabric and feeling around for the sheet. His fingers grazed what was most certainly bare skin. Bare skin that darted away from his touch. Sébastien hissed and cleared his head while his fingers latched onto the sheet and yanked it into the open space between him and Charlotte.

The red stain glared at him.

It taunted him.

He threw the soiled cloth into Charlotte's hand. "Take this."

Louisé heard the footsteps of her sibling move from one side of the room to the other.

"Have a bath drawn while you're at it," she shot from the shadowy interior of her marital bed.

Charlotte did not respond. Just paused her steps.
When the smacking of feet was gone, Louisé relaxed. A privilege she didn't get to embrace for long. LaCroix yanked back the curtain. She struggled to cover her naked body.

"I beg your pardon!" she snapped at him, one arm covering her breasts and other arm haphazardly draping a flimsy cover over her waist. "I told you I am not dressed."

Sébastien threw her chemise into her lap with a glare then closed the curtain without a word. Louisé tugged the chemise on but barely moved. She winced as LaCroix drew the curtain back once more. Still silent, his arched eyebrow judged her perceived laziness. Louisé pursed her lips and answers his unspoken question with the embarrassing truth.

"It hurts."

Something flickered across his face. Was that relief she saw?! He snorted and weighed her with his eyes.

"I told you it would. You are… were a virgin, Louisé," his voice irked when he fixed his statement.

"Yes, but it still hurts. My hops hurt. He," she sighed and brushed mussed hair from her face, "was too rough, too eager."

"Then you'll soak in your bath and feel better enough to walk to his room," her Sire explained. Always blunt. Never empathic.

Louisé glared at him. "I doubt a soak will relieve me."

"I doubt it will either, but you have no other option."

Then he walked away.

"A little sympathy would be nice," she murmured.

He returned with a glass in hand for her.

"Sympathy is reserved for the deserving. He didn't rape you. He is your husband and he can be as rough or eager as he pleases. Your duty is to lay back and allow him. Now, drink this and stop making such a fuss."

Louisé accepted the glass and sharpened her tongue for him when he abruptly hitched up the bottom of her chemise to her stomach. She was too aghast to scream at him and only managed to smooth the material back over her knees with the aggravated gestures of one hand. Her stomach churned with the stinging sensation of violation.

"You're barely bruised," was all he said.

And he walked away again.

These are the kind of memories that jar Prince Emerald City from otherwise more constructive purposes of her evening. Recollections of times when men crossed lines, did what they pleased and snubbed their noses at social conventions that wouldn't exist for another three centuries. Modern women would never understand how easy they have it. In comparison, that is. They would never know, truly, unless they lived it, how little women had back in the day when they were still possessions to be bartered, traded and sold.
These bra-burners and seekers of so-called "gender equality" were ignorant in her eyes. She hadn't spent centuries accumulating power to be equal to anyone. Certainly not men. She didn't hate men, but she saw no reason to be equal to them when she could always be, and was at times, better.

It was dormant memories like that one that reminded her why she did what she did night in and night out. Long ago she had grown tired of the Sébastien LaCroixs of the world hoisting her skirts to judge her reality for themselves. Vivid mental spurts of that nature soured her disposition, so she didn't dwell on them long. But, sometimes, quarterly primogen conclaves to assess the state of her realm were too boring to endure mentally. So Louisa cocked her head to one side, focused on a point in a painting just beyond the speaker's head and disappeared into the vaults of her mind for something more entertaining. Why this memory came up is anyone's guess. Maybe the primogen spoke too like LaCroix, behaved too much like him or in some fashion caused her overall displeasure.

At any rate, when she felt the crinkle form between her eyes. Louisa's half-alert brain brought her attention back just in time to hear the tail end of a long-winded defense of their own failure.

"So…you wasted our precious time to basically inform your compatriots and myself that you lost them?"

Tension.

Thick like pudding.

Laced with arsenic.

A double bind: nothing he said next would excuse himself nor please her.

"Well…I…as I said-"

"Oh, stop!" she groaned.

And he did.

She waved a flustered hand in the air. "Out!"

"Prince?" someone dared ask.


"And do not return to my presence until your peer finds a solution to this glaring incompetence."

The Nosferatu was the only one to take his dear, sweet time. He seemed as dreamy with lethargy as she was irritated by boredom. The others were long gone, the dust of their rush settling, by the time he deigned to raise his decrepit features from the swivel of his chair.

"What's put a bee in your lovely bonnet this fine evening?" he ventured to ask as one gnarled knuckle grazed the underside of his overstatedly hooked nose.

"Hm…" she gave his question consideration because it would be rude not to. And she learned
long ago honey attracts Nosferatu far better than pompous vinegar. "People," she answered after a spell of silence marked by the ticking of the clock.

"People, indeed," he replied.

"Indeed," Louisa echoed.

She shared a smirk with him and leaned her chair as far back as it could go without threatening to topple over. "So when were you going to tell me you'd found them?"

"After you made my associate finish his dance in the hot iron shoes of your indignation," he jested.

"Amusing. Tell me everything."

She didn't have to hike up skirts to get a point across. Louisa never had to resort to that kind of defamation or subjugation to make those, who needed to be, feel small. Hers were the small sighs of annoyance, the crinkle between the eyes or the twitch in the corner of her lip that people never could precisely decipher is a snicker or facial motor tic.

With the lip thing…it's choice 'C': Neither. It's her saying: 'You're barely bruised' to dopey faces of disciplined neonates who can't understand why their existence is so hard, why they make it so much harder with their own ignorance and callow foibles. They came to her, primogen and fledgling alike, tears welling up and bottom lip trembling because they get smacked around by the vicious hand called 'Life' and expect her to pat their cheeks and assuage every concern. What she gives them is the cold, hard reality her Sire once slapped her with: You're barely bruised.

Get up.

Bathe yourself.

Lay back, take it inside you like a good little girl and remember:

You wanted this…what this earns you.

And

You're barely bruised.

There is, in fact, something Louisé detests more than men having unnecessary way with her. She dislikes it more than informing Devereux of unsavory news or going to great lengths to hide her ongoing correspondence with a blood-relative Sabbat. And that thing is sailing.

Never in her life did she need to travel by water and was content to believe her life would have gone just as well had she continued never having to. It was a sad fact she learned only a half hour into the subtly rocking voyage across the channel from Calais to England. The Channel was notorious for willful winds and sour water. So rough had been the waves in Calais, that her husband had tempted the idea of departing westward from Boulogne. Time wasted irritated Ventrue terribly. Louisé was vexed by the indecision of men, Rothey peeved by the turbulent seas and LaCroix… Well, Sébastien was riled for reasons his Childe couldn't place her finger upon. She had noticed it the nearer they drew to Calais. The very mention of the city had his disposition piqued without so much as an
explanation to why.

With Charlotte squared away back to Bordeaux, Louisé had marginally more freedom in being familiar with LaCroix. So, she had asked him, on the way to Calais and while staring down a pair of new shoes Rothey had bought her, why he was so persnickety: "Is something wrong?"

Sébastien hadn’t lowered the book he had been reading to give her attention. When three more pages turned, his Childe became less certain he was going to give her question recognition either. Louisé didn't have patience for LaCroix acting like she was below him. She had tucked her feet back beneath the hem of her dress and nestled back into her seat, squaring her eyes on the man who'd brought her into this life. "Apparently you have gone deaf in the last quarter hour. I asked you -" "I heard you," he'd interrupted.

The corner of Louisé's mouth quirked. "If you are going to continue being this acrid, you may ride beside my husband instead of enjoying the luxury of my carriage."

"This is Rothey's carriage, not yours and the only unpleasantry in here is your prying. Didn't your mother ever teach you it's rude to meddle?"

"Didn't your mother ever teach you how to speak to a lady?" Louisé shot back, having lost all tolerance for his snarky remarks.

The book lowered to LaCroix's lap and the look she received was too hot to be called scathing. The long index finger of his right hand tapped hard jabs into the book's cover. "You may be married, Louisé, but that will not stop be from curbing your unruly tongue. In fact, I would be doing your husband a favor if I did."

"Hmph. I doubt he would see it as such...He's a man who likes to do things for himself. And if you want to remain in my good graces, Confessor, then you shan't speak to me of such insinuations again."

LaCroix moved fast. Without displacing the book, his hand shot out and grabbed the neckline of her dress. He yanked his Childe forward and out of her seat before she could do much as make a squawk of protest. Louisé braced herself with her hands, planting them on either side of his lap as her Sire drew her face close to his. "Don't try to act as though we are not mutually dependent upon one another, Louisé. Marriage made you a bride, not a queen, so you will refrain from acting as though you have authority over me. Nothing has changed. I am Sire. You, my Childe. Now stop pestering me," he hissed.

Then he shoved her back into her seat and picked his book back up.

While she smoothed her dress, Louisé had begun plotting the different ways she could throw him overboard.

But that was before she actually stepped onto the ship. The constant rocking was disturbing and she ended up sequestered in her cabin. LaCroix avoided a watery demise and would live to see another evening only because her stomach and head didn't have the dexterity for seafaring. Had she the iron make-up of her husband, she would have shoved her Sire to the waves below. But instead of vindicating her hurt pride, Louisé became bedridden for the duration of their sail. While LaCroix and Rothey buried themselves into work, she buried her face into goose down pillows with the desperate hope the ever tilting world around her would still. The pillow pressed over her head, however, was in an effort to drown out the obnoxious conversation her husband seemed bent on having with her. Madame did not care for the one hundred one reasons Alexander Rothey scrounged for to try and
prove England was better than France or why she was lucky to be leaving her birth land behind. Louisé cared about sinking her feet into solid earth and stabilizing her body.

"Never since the Great War have I felt the crunch of such a Toreador population. Your country is swarming with them it seems. You'll prefer England, my dear, because it is predominantly Ventrue," Alexander rattled off from across the room.

"Alexander," because she had taken to saying his name. And this time, it came out wholly irritated, like a pop against a child's backside. "I Do. Not. Care," came her groan from a pee between her mouth and pillow.

There was a lull. A silence filled by wood creaking as the ship leaned off to the starboard side.

"I don't appreciate your disregard," he snorted.

"I appreciate yours even less," her words were a nauseated, hollow arrow shot back. "About as much as I appreciate this voyage."

"You're going to be English soon," Rothey smirked. "I won't have a wife who doesn't value that."

"I am going to live in England soon; that doesn't make me English. And I am more than willing to value the opportunity of living in England, but not at the expense of having my homeland openly ridiculed by the man I'm supposed to call 'husband'," she reformed his dictation. "Besides, only Paris feels the swell of surplus Toreadors. Paris is not representative of all France. And England swarms with the mildew stink of rabid Gangrel bounding over the hills," her comment kicked them into another icy stalemate.

"You've become awfully sullen since we left Calais," said husband pointed out. "I don't like it."

"And I don't like ships or sailing in them," Louisé moaned, flopping onto her back.

"Feed. It will help."

"I doubt that. I tried but it didn't settle well with me."

"How humorous. A Ventrue brought low by a little rocking boat," Rothey teased. "And one rumored to have taken lives of Sabbat single-handedly at that." He tsked. "Such a shame."

Her fingers curled into the pillow covering her face. In a singular, snapping motion, she hurled the pillow his way. There was a clamor and characteristic roar of her husband. She didn't need to lift her head to know the mess she caused. Louisé heard the dripping of ink and scattering of papers, the breaking of glass and scratch of wood against wood as Alexander kicked his chair away from the table she assaulted. The thump of boots alerted her. Rough hands grabbed the sides of her shoulder and heaved her from the sanctum of soft, linen sheets.

Rothey was a physical man. An odd trait among Ventrue, who tended to be more analytical. It was common for Ventrue to discuss things to death, to lacerate the confidence of others with the whip of scathing commentary but her English lord lacked that breed of patience. He shoved her toward his workspace, now in tatters thanks to her moment of impulsive immaturity. Alexander spoke to her like she was a child.

"This is your mess. You clean it up."

The tiny world of her cabin spun, tilted with an unforgiving tide. Louisé's lips twitched a sneer at her less-than-royal consort and replied, "Had you not provoked me, I wouldn't have retaliated.
Therefore, this mess is equal measure your own."

That, he did not like and took a solid step toward his dainty wife. History proved Louisé was past the age of intimidation, so she did not shrink away from the man who had a good foot in height above her head. She merely braced her palms on the table edge behind her and crooked her head back to level their eyes. A man of armor and action, Rothey didn't seem deterred by his wife's defiant display. If anything, Louisé wagered she saw a hint of excitement in those dead eyes of his. She was challenging him and he was a man who enjoyed challenges.

Alexander approached then leaned himself forward, clamping both hands against the wood beside her own. He moved his face close and never broke the lock between their eyes. Ventrue don't, if they're smart. There's more dominance in a stare held well, held until the end, than in the discipline itself. And neither spouse was content with abdicating anything to other. Neither would be submissive. So, it was anyone's guess how long the standoff would continue.

"Clean it up," he demanded, his tone low and slow with his deep voice rumbling like distant thunder.

"And if I refuse?" she asked with a smirk in her speech.

"Then I shall make you," Rothey warned.

"Which you will regret...I assure you," was the rather confident reply.

Alexander didn't get the chance to respond. A knock at the door disturbed their little tête-à-tête and made a frustrated husband tear his gaze away from a stubborn wife. Louisé had won this match twice over. Once since Rothey broke the staring contest and two, the skittish figure of her ghoul appearing in the doorway meant the mess behind her was longer hers to manage.

"What is it, girl? We are busy," Rothey snarled.

Louisé felt the rumble of his drumming fingers beside her own. She was tempted to cover the moving digits with her hands but opted not to, lest that send the wrong idea. Instead, she heaved a great sigh and turned her body. Her husband started, then growled. Ignoring him, Madame Rothey nudged his arm out of her way and returned to her seat on the bed.

"Excuse my intrusion but the captain wished to speak with you, sir," her ghoul murmured with her head down. Louisé was briefly satisfied but not off the hook. "And Monsieur LaCroix asked for my lady."

Rothey groaned, "He may ask for her but," his paused was marked by a deliberate look her way, "she isn't exactly obliging of requests this evening."

Louisé returned a look of her own but answered the girl, "Tell Monsieur LaCroix that I will see him but he will have to come here."

"No!" Alexander interjected, bearing narrowed eyes into a startled servant. "That man will not enter my wife's cabin. If they wish to speak, she may rise her lazy backside from her bed and meet him elsewhere. Now, I shall see to the captain." And he marched to the door, offering Louisé a parting glance. "Clean up the mess," he told his wife.

Louisé bared a glimpse of fang at his retreating back. Her hand collected the fan from beside her bed. She fluttered fresh air into her seasick face and cocked her head at the mute ghoul beside the door. "Well," she said before sweeping her fan in the direction of the table, "You heard the man."
Sébastien LaCroix groused at the plops of water sprinkling the narrow thing he called a "desk". In actuality, it was a short bench overturned and hitched upon two wooden crates to give it the height LaCroix needed to do the work he brought to distract himself. The unruly tides tossed waves onto the desk above; the result being a trinkle of salt water rain over LaCroix’s attempted penmanship. Correspondences he’d slaved over in the poor candlelight and incessant rocking were under constant threat of ruin. Unsavory working conditions thumbed a thorn deeper into his side. The march to Calais had put it there in the first place.

Kindred like Sébastien are rare and that isn't because of anything exceptional about their persons, but the oddity of their near nomadic habits. Many of this brethren stuck close to where they were embraced while the older ones returned to whence they came. Sébastien was not allured to either ancestral ground or the estate where he drew his last breath. His family's home, and the name that came with it, was a memory buried deep down, not unlike the bones of his parents. He did not enjoy drawing closer to a place he actively avoided and liked even less that it showed. LaCroix preferred stoned exterior to a malleable one.

Louisé noticing only made matters worse. Her picking up on the subtleties of his emotional character was mosquito buzzing beside his ear. Snapping at her earlier had been as intuitive as it had been imperious. After all, smashing foul insects between one's palms for annoying you with their humming was no different. But he was finished cracking his whip. Tonight, he summoned his Childe with the intent on preparing her for their arrival in London – whenever that would be. Though having never been, LaCroix had heard fellow Frenchman complain enough about England's customs to be of use to his tenderfoot, and still impressionable, eldest. Business savvy did not a strong, nor smart, politician make and while Louise was undeniable ahead of him in the realm of mercantilism, the small scope of Dijon and Devereux put her a league behind him in nomistic understanding. This would not always be the case, of that he was sick to be sure of, but it was satisfying for now and created an additional dependence for Louise to maintain on him.

This reliant first Childe appeared in his doorway, grasping the wood frame for dear life and dressed as though the most strenuous thing she had done all evening was pluck herself from bed. Given the pallor of her face – a tint of green among that undead, pasty whiteness – Sébastien felt confident that was the only thing she’d accomplished. Louise’s dark eyes scanned the room while her lips curled with a sneer, which he wasn't entirely sure wasn’t a sign of impending illness.

"Your room is leaking," she commented as much about his quarters as she did her own. His leaked. Hers did not.

LaCroix didn't allow that to annoy him. "You don't look well. I'm amazed you made it across the ship in the state you seem to be in."

"Seafaring does not fare well with me. And my husband would not allow you to come to my chambers, so I was left with no other recourse."

"Nor would I have come. I summoned you, not the other way around," Sébastien asserted.

His Childe said nothing in return for the few moments it took her to find a dry place to sit and steady her body. She drew the fur-lined dressing gown closer to her body and sighed, "Why did you send for me?"

"I want to make sure you are ready for London."

"What is there to be ready for?"

That answered his question. LaCroix rubbed his forehead and turned to face his Childe. Any writing
would have to be sacrificed to the constant dripping from above. "Do you have any idea what the Prince of London is?"

"Isn't it more appropriate to ask who the Prince of London is?" Louisé wondered.

"Not necessarily. Knowing his name is less important than knowing what he is. When you know that, you will be more prepared. Louisé," he said.

"I know he's a Methuselah," she cut him off in the most polite way possible, before he was mid-sentence with another thought. When LaCroix crooked a curious brow her way, she continued, "Devereux told me about him, indirectly of course."

"Then you also know how powerful and dangerous he is. This is no Devereux, no de Lanpre with a mere five hundred years beneath their feet," LaCroix said as though that length of time was worth naught.

"And this is nothing to me," his Childe responded, her voice full of boredom and sea sickness.

"Alexander doesn't live in London, he lives in Oxford. This Methuselah won't be my Prince and I will be as insignificant to him as an ant. We won't even see him, he probably won't even be at this welcome Alexander says they are having on our behalf."

"Just because he is not there does not mean he is not watching. You can be sure your every move, every word will be taken into consideration. So, be mindful of everything Louisé. You have a tendency to say the first thing off the tip of your tongue. Don't do that," he warned.

Louisé crinkled her nose but nodded. LaCroix proceeded to continue her education on this matter while his room rocked to and fro, water leaked and his Childe turned a mildew shade of grey.

Solid ground had never been such a welcomed and anticipated blessing as it was the night they finally landed. Would it not have been considered entirely inappropriate and uncouth, Louisé might have flung herself to the shore with open arms to kiss the damp sand. Being Ventrue meant she had to settle with a demure sigh of feminine satisfaction as someone helped her from the boat.

Though terra firm once more, the journey was far from over. Raging gales had threatened the safety of their ship. A brewing storm made them double back and land at the cliffs of Dover, their green bedecked alabaster faces coming into imposing view by lightning streaking across the sky, instead of London's busy port. The resounding roll of thunder and steadily increasing fury meant the torrent wasn't far behind.

Louisé felt wet flecks against her cheeks, but with crashing waves it was hard to tell what was premature rain or billowed sea foam. She brushed it away and made for a carriage standing ready, nervous horses and all. Somewhere behind, Sire and husband descended upon the shore. One, or both, called after her but the heavy ether smell in the air told her rain was close and she had no desire to wait for them in a downpour. Her skirt hiked, Madame Rothey climbed the slope between the beach and carriage. A drive stood ready with open door and took her hand to help her inside.

"Much better," Louisé mused to herself while settling into her seat.

"Doesn't she listen to anyone?" her husband barked in the not-too-far distance. His irritated face appeared in the carriage doorway. Louisé grinned at him. "My dear," he started with some handle on his agitation, "It isn't entirely safe to just flounce off."

"I walked all of ten feet in front of you. If you can't keep me safe at that distance, then there isn't much hope of expecting you to defend me at all," she turned with a smoothing of her skirt.
Rothe climbed into the carriage but did not sit. He loomed his great body over her, eyes narrowed. The blatant gesture of male dominance won him nothing but a coy cocking of his wife's head, complete with mischievous eyes. "We discussed this, you and I," Alexander pressed. His tone toed the line of disciplining parent and Louise wouldn't have that from him.

"What? The space at which I can walk away from you?"

"Listening!" Rothe corrected with a half-harnessed bellow. "I am your husband. You are to listen and obey, Louise."

Wife looked away from badgering husband, to the stretch of England outside her window and remarked, "I don't recall those specific vows."

His breath was by her ear when next he spoke, "To be bonny and buxom at bed and at board." Then his lips pressed a hard kiss to her cheek; more punctuation than affection.

Alexander left the carriage, left his wife disturbed. She didn't like it when he whispered into her ear, didn't enjoy the way his voice and proximity stimulated her body. The reaction caused too much internal turmoil. Wanting physical intimacy after years of avoiding the slanders those desires brought, combined with past and more present accusations, made it too difficult to enjoy the natural benefits of marriage to their fullest. The additional truth that carnal acts with Alexander hurt diminished Louise's response to her body's innate reaction to impetus. Besides the first night, they had been intimate once more and it hurt just as much. Alex hadn't cared. In many ways, he didn't care.

"Our bodies heal. It's unavoidable. So, best to push on through," was his grand advice, and double entendre, the evening following.

Caring or not, the semi-sweet smell of his breath made her recall the nakedness of his midriff, the muscles of his chest and the clasp of his hands. Louise fidgeted in her seat, her fingers toying with the fabric of her gown. Painful or not, Madame Rothe wanted her husband. Who she got, was Monsieur LaCroix. He climbed into the carriage. Her Sire shot her a strange look.

"What?" she asked him.

"That ought to be my question," he murmured as he took a seat across from her.

His very presence ruined the reminiscence in her head. The pleasurable ache was replaced with the normal discomfort. "Why should that be your question?"

"Because you look as though you are thinking of something in particular."

"Nothing beyond the pure joy of being on solid land once more," she lied.

When she wakes in the middle of the day, it isn't because the clap of thunder in the distance. In her dreams, she has seen a pair of eyes she would rather forget. They are not altogether fearsome or radiant. They aren't especially cruel. It's what they do when they look into hers. It's who they are attached to. Her husband sleeps soundly, easily beside her and she wants to kick him out of bed. Louise rubs her face.

She was glad he was taken down by the Blitz. She and several others were very glad of it. The Queen of the Emerald City would never say such a thing out loud for fear of the statement being considered seditious, but Louise periodically rejoiced in her head…at her leisure.
To understand the man, you needed to know the basic substance of his personality. On separate occasions LaCroix and Rothey had taught it to her: He is a conqueror. Land, people, it does not matter. He conquers them all.

Anything more was superfluous. Adjectives. Supporting roles to the greater reality that the man behind the eyes did what he liked with whomever he likes and there were very few on Earth who could prevent him from doing so. Therefore, it was completely natural that she – at a tender thirty-some Kindred years old – would be powerless to disobey a Methuselah Prince.

At first she thought she had. When he entered the hall and everyone dropped to their knees but her, Louisé had been confused. When both Sire and husband urged her to do the same but she was incapable, she had become concerned. It wasn’t terrifying until she looked into the eyes of the only other person standing in the room. Of all the mistakes she would make in her life, that was one of the largest. It was a mistake she had immediately attempted to correct.

"Don't look away from me," his voice had lulled in her head.

Louisé had not looked away. She had been obedient.

Mithras of London was not supposed to have been there. Even before the diplomatic party descended upon the city, no one expected its Prince to be in attendance to a party no one was really excited about. Those who had traveled had been exhausted and wanted nothing more than a good feed and soft bed. London had wanted to see the bride and French coterie. The Methuselah had not been a consideration since, apparently, he had been infamous for sojourning across the continent whenever the notion fancied him.

But he had been present, recognized by only those who knew him best. It was the first time she learned that great Princes make their faces wholly mysterious to those who would use it to the monarch’s undoing. Louisé learned from Mithras that blending into the community made for a more powerful presence than prowling a throne room. Mithras was not especially tall. Her husband had a solid two inches more. But the Methuselah seemed a mountain to Louisé and it took all her energy not to quake beneath his presence. His build was that of a warrior, a conqueror made of muscle and sinew that swung swords and decapitated foes like a child plucks posies.

"Look at me." His voice has been unexpectedly soft. The accent was something she could not place.

He descended to the kneeled crowd and chuckled low in his throat while weaving through his subjects. His image was one of a minor noble. He was unassuming. He was monstrous. And he was drawing nearer. Louisé felt sicker than when she was on the ship. She would rather have been on the ship right now. Her legs quaked, wanting to buckle to the stones beneath her where everyone else dirtied their knees.

"No, no! Don't move," the Prince subtly commanded with a lift of two fingers.

Louisé stilled. Mithras stepped over a portly man and in two long strides, was standing in front of her. His grin made her want to vomit up the creamy vintage in her gut.

"I couldn't see you properly with everyone standing. This is easier, don't you agree?" he asked with
That was the first time a sour taste flooded Louisé's mouth toward sheer dominance. From that point onward, she detested brethren who displayed callow glee at dominating able, smart people. Louisé attempted to downcast her eyes and nod. The Methuselah was not so pleased with that and grabbed her chin. Why did men always grab her chin? Why did men grab her…period?

"Don't look away from me," he soothed into her head. Two fingers created pressure beneath her chin. She was sure there would be a bruise later.

Louisé could not disobey. She locked eyes with him. He softened his touch and Madame Rothey tried not to retch all over his boots.

"Face of a Rose..." he murmured, one finger stroking the edge of her jaw. Back and forth his finger moved at the slow pace of a knife blade. Louisé did not respond to the compliment. He chuckled again, "With a scepter in her eyes and hand. Welcome to my court, Lady Rothey." And he kissed her hand like a proper Ventrue man should.
When she's able, Louise draws her hand back to her side. She manages a stiff half-bow of respect to the Methuselah Prince and is grateful to stare at the floor instead of his eyes. As she rises, so does everyone else. Whatever pressure of presence this Mithras is capable of producing extinguishes, rolls away like a large stone. Her husband takes his place at her left and LaCroix occupies the right. The rest of their party mingle behind them, perhaps to keep distance from the ancient. Louise offers the Prince a smile – one as genuine as she can form since this man would, no doubt, see through a fake one with no trouble. And she has no desire to know what he would do with fake smiles.

"Thank you for your most gracious welcome, Prince," Louise exchanged while offering another partial curtsy.

"Your English is quite refined for one so young," the Prince pointed out with neither surprise nor disapproval. Just a Ventrue stating facts.

"What good is a Ventrue mind if not put to work? But refined or not, it is not without its accent," she ventured to humor.

The Prince chuckled, a husky noise from an ancient body cavity, "Yours is preferable to many others." He turned to Alexander and said, "A lucky man you are, Rothey of Oxford, to acquire such a lovely and astute bride." There was a pause in the Prince's speech as his eyes slid back her way. They were the eyes of a man who had been a predator long before he was made one. He smirked – a look Louise did not care for – and remarked in a hushed manner, "Too bad the rights of First Night are long, long behind us."

He stepped back from the couple. Enough distance to please himself while maintaining a good reach. Plunking up a glass from a frozen servant, he hoisted it into the air. "Enjoy yourself in my domain!" He announced. "Celebrate, drink to your fill and rest as long as you like before concluding your journey. Go with my blessing," he ended before smacking another dry kiss to the back of Louise's hand.

"Thank you very much. Your generosity is exceeding," her husband responded.

"And if we might take only a little longer of your time, Prince," Louise asked permission before proceeding.

"For you, my dear, I can afford a little more than a little longer," though his tone told her he was losing his patience. Pageantry must not be the talent of ancient ones.

Louise half-turned and clapped her hands. Two, quick slaps of palms ushered in ghouls carrying trunks. She stepped out of the way as they set the heavy cargo at the Prince's feet. Mithras cocked a brow at the chests then at her.

"Gifts to you from le Prince de Paris," she explained.

Prince London smirked, "Verillon is far too kind. I will have to return the gesture."

Sébastien LaCroix is not one for parties.

There was a time when he could tolerate them better but the past two decades bore witness to his decaying patience for such affairs. Time was better spent elsewhere – in his never humble opinion.
But that was a sentiment he would hardly share in the domain of a Prince whose presence alone crushed him to his knees.

It made him sick with indignation to be forced into such a visibly subservient state. LaCroix was left with no alternative but to bite back his hatred – a habit he gave into more readily these nights than in the past. He hated the old ones because they reminded him just how low on the clan and Camarilla ladder he had climbed in his century of Kindred life.

He was glad to see the Methuselah go. An opinion shared with his Childe, whose eyes watched the Prince drift away with a tint of wariness. However else others were enchanted by London's monarch was lost on Louisé and Sébastien. Theirs was a twin distrust of the severely ancient. LaCroix knew it, not just by her eyes, from the minute crinkle of her nose. The plaster smile. Regicide burbled in the fantasies she endorsed. How did he know? Because the same theme lingered in his own. They shared blood if one needed a reason for them to be similar and it was improbable – if not impossible – for Louisé not to inherit something from him. As dastardly at it might be, murderous cunning wasn't the worst trait she could have gained.

What it really was – and he wouldn't figure this out for centuries until hot, African sand and Dutch gunpowder swirled between them – was that Louisé had lost her tolerance for being forced. The stab-in-the-dark hue of her eyes initiated the primal tear of her Ancillary cocoon. Louisé had decided she was through being a chess piece someone else dashed around the board. Sébastien saw it on her face but wouldn't feel it for years: the push back. For now, he chalked it up to mutual, disgruntled status.

"I am tired," she proclaimed. The eyes she turned on him and Rothey were cool. Irritated, not homicidal.

"You don't want to join the celebration?" Rothey asked for the sake of asking – so no one could accuse him of having not done so. His posture said he really didn't care what his wife did…within reason, of course.

"Why would I say I was tired if I did?" she snapped in French.

Rothey moved. LaCroix did, too. He grasped his Childe's elbow. "I'll help her figure out where we'll be boarding. Stay. And, enjoy the party," Sébastien suggested.

Leaving Rothey to his lonesome, LaCroix led his Childe through the throng of court jesters and fools. English bodies swarming on either side of them. It was nauseating.

"Far be it from me to give you marital wisdom," he began – since he honestly had none to give, "but it would seem more advantageous to your overall success and satisfaction to indulge his desire for your presence this evening."

Louisé lacked response. When he side glanced at her face, her mouth was making miniscule jerks. She was grinding her back teeth, trying to restrain herself from an improper retort. When she opened her mouth, nothing came out and so, she shut it again. His Childe was displaying a great deal of tact. She ruminated and would continue to do so until the right words came – if they ever did. This sudden amount of regard impressed Sébastien whether it was because Louisé fretted over the Methuselah in the proverbial shadows or a sincere intent not to cause a scene didn't matter to LaCroix. What did was that his eldest wasn't being willful or immature, that she wasn't lashing out at him because she assumed she could.

The truth was that Rothey probably didn't desire his wife's presence as much as LaCroix implied, so Louisé had little to work with when it came to counter arguments.
"I am tired," she finally asserted.

"Imagine what this court will say if you leave," Sébastien advised, plucking two glasses from a servant. He forced one into her hand while she brewed that scenario. He took a sip and continued, "Versus what they will say if you joined in on their mirth. Whether you want to or not, like it or not, your actions now make very loud statements. London is England," he pointed out while rotating them back toward Rothey with subtle corkscrew turns. "And if London is watching, England is watching. Give them the show they want."

"And, pray tell, what show would that be?" Louisé wondered in between sips.

"The exuberant new bride, of course. The fact that you are French no doubt conjures certain presumptions in their minds of opulent court practices. It is a condemning thing to be French in an English court. Do not make it worse for yourself by letting your audience down," LaCroix lectured while she was willing to listen.

His Childe was given no room to object since they had rounded back to Rothey by the time Sébastien finished. He observed her husband's crooked brow and explained, "It seems Madame Rothey has changed her mind. She told me she hoped for a dance."

LaCroix ignored the scathing sensation Louisé's volatile stare gave the back of his neck.

"Of course!" Rothey agree and took his lady's free hand.

LaCroix took her glass.

"Something with enthusiasm," Rothey suggested to a building crow. "A galliard! Or, perhaps, a volta?"

And the glasses in his hands cracked.

In the future, Ventrue would not be known for their dancing. Until the machismo of the twentieth centuries – perhaps even as early as the late Victorian period – it was expected for men and women of certain rank to know how to dance.

Women would always be expected to know. The demand for the same in men would depreciate. But when Alex is married, again, it is toward the end of the Tudor dynasty and any man daring to call himself 'noble' obeyed the unspoken rules of court where dancing is concerned. It is the tail end of the Renaissance yet the concept of chivalry from the age before lingers on. Lords honor their ladies virtue with acts of heroism. And nothing is more heroic to a flock of clucking hens than sacrificing one's self for the sake of their country. Alexander revels in the smitten eyes of an adoring London court when he arrives with his young bride.

He is not naïve enough to believe everyone views him with the same level of admiration. The Prince was a perfect example. Had he reigned in his latest Childe, there would have been no need for an intercontinental married. No need for him to be a hero. But! Whether they adored or criticized him, it could not be said he was an irresponsible man. His Childe – still under his tutelage and roof – had caused the great disrespect which drove a wedge further between England and France, as if that were hard to do! And since it was his Childe, Rothey was held accountable for the solution.

So here he was.

In the grand hall of Mithras with a pretty, little, French wife whose bothersome mouth stole the original allure he'd found attractive. Pretty, yes. But Ventrue as well and that would never change.
Her appeal was limited. The smart remarks did not help. Her seductive abilities were weak – crippled, even. And a tight space can only be so enjoyable for only so long. The fact that she had cut him off with numerous excuses since leaving Paris only added to his building intolerance for his current state of matrimony.

At least she could dance.

A true lady on her feet and one whom Alex was not disgruntled to be seen with. Yet.

"I am glad to see you came to your senses," he whispered in the space between them.

Her hand was small in his.

Cool and smooth. Like her eyes when they looked back at him.

"I came to dance. I never took leave of my senses," she smarted back before twirling away from him to stand on the outer ring while he danced in rotation with two other men.

Their feet created thumping echoes around the hall. Their hands disrupted friendly conversation with sharp claps.

The man to his left took his wife's hand and the dance continued on until both men and women had traded partners three times. Rothey took back his wife as the music faded. She smiled with mirth and Alex found the look suited her. He also felt the desire to kiss her but to do so in public wouldn't be prudent. As he led her in the final, slow circling of the galliard, Alex bent his lips to her ear.

"I want to come to your bed tonight," he murmured.

He really wasn't asking. Her bed was his right but he wanted to see what she would do with his request.

"If it pleases you," she replied.

Modern nights don't understand.

Dancing has devolved to nothing more than hips grinding hips or pelvises thrusting into buttocks.

Louisa witnessed it during the odd evenings she checked her holdings. The one night club she owned had started out a twenties jazz hall with flapper skirt Charleston and Ragtime foxtrot. She could still hear the echoes of 'Yes Sir, That's My Baby' in the sultry vocals of Lee Morse on nights when the club closed to review inventory.

It progressed from there to the syncopated rhythms of swing dance. Night after night of endless jitterbug sashay or boogie woogie wobble lingered in the wooden dance floor. Reverberations of decades gone by competed with the vibrations of what Louisa could only dub dry humping to electronica.

Sensual she didn't mind, but these moves were lewd, and though it would mean losing business, she was tempted to convert the club to a dance studio for the borderline geriatric to relive the hip cat days of their youth. The stench of Bengay was the singular reason she didn't. Cigarette smoke was easier to get out than analgesic rub.

La Volta created the same wide-eyed reaction when she was first married as grinding did when it
rose to the dance scene. But there was a key difference. Volta had taste. Modern club movements took no creativity to make and left little to the imagination. Volta, on the other hand, was a web of intricate movements that implied intimacy where none may exist. There was a proximity and intensity about the eyes of some pairs that left many a mind wondering and tongue wagging.

**Gossip bred out of La Volta.**

*And when she danced with Alexander that evening, she was sure some gossip spread about them. But not more than what traveled about she and LaCroix.*

Louisé appreciated the eagerness of her husband when he asks that question. She's amused how his disposition turns like a leaf falling. His wife could tell from the slouch of his lids that the enchantment of her person had been a brief distraction.

*Oh, a virgin!* the silly man must have thought after decades separated from the last time he'd had one.

It is a Ventrue's curse, she would say, to become so enthralled by the concept of something only to be bored with its reality. Toreador are oft blamed and criticized for frequency of this habit. But don't be fooled! Ventrue do it too. Dignity makes it easier to hide; certainly easier to justify.

He is a poor dancer.

Her husband is.

Alexander's feet could be nimble on a battlefield – perhaps while rousting Sabbat – but they were cumbersome, awkward creatures on the dance floor. His body was too bulky. His movements too harsh. Alexander Rothey was an embarrassment to be beside, though no good Ventrue would point this out. Blatantly, at least. Ventrue shrugged off chagrin, especially when it is external to them. Sires ignored Childer into exiles. Elders burned glaring holes through the chests of ancillae, driving them to the shadows of infamy. Louisé did so by asking Alexander to retrieve refreshment. On the surface, she needed nourishment to make up for the vitae used during the galliard. Covertly, his wife wanted to get rid of him while saving face for herself. She needed him distant before the music struck up for another dance for him to bungle.

He bumbled the galliard. She couldn't stand him butchering the Volta.

The lutes struck their chords and the shawms harmonized their prelude.

Louisé walked back to the edge of the other dancers, meeting the eyes of a more sure-footed partner. She took a step toward him.

Sébastien LaCroix intercepted his Childe's intentions and took her hand with the customary bow. Nervous, Louisé curtseyed in return and held onto her Sire's hand as the music swam up and the dance began. They walked two strides forward, kicked up their legs and strode twice more before turning with the other couples.

"What are you doing?" she hissed in quiet French.

"I told you before that your actions make loud statements. Dancing with your husband screamed how humiliated you were to be at his side," LaCroix exposed what she assumed she'd hidden well.

She didn't have time to worry if others had seen embarrassment on her face earlier; she worried about what they were seeing now. "Then what am I proclaiming by dancing with you?" It was a deadly
"How good of a dancer you are," he planted as he hoisted her into the air.

There is something you must understand about La Volta. It means 'turning' in Italian but there is less turning involved than fanciful spinning and lifting. The last time Louise and LaCroix danced, they danced La Volta. It had been tamer. She was still human then, still innocent. He had attempted to be gentle. When he had lifted her in the past, it had been at the waist, but that isn't how La Volta lifts. It grabs at the base of the bodice...between the legs. When LaCroix hoisted her into the air this night, his hand goes between her legs and grasps.

Thrust. Grab. Lift. Turn.

"This is inappropriate," warned Louise with a nervous glance to the gathering audience.

"How? It's only a dance," her Sire responded, his nonchalance furthering the fray to her nerves.

Thrust. Grab. Spin. Turn.

"You don't dance!" she hissed in his ear.

Thrust. Grab. Spin. He lifts and locks eyes with his Childe. Blood chilled in the pit of her stomach. Louise sinks into the ice of his eyes and he drinks in the deep water blue of hers as she lands. His face was too close.

"You don't know what I'm capable of, Louise," his voice rumbled. "You were equally stunned the last time we danced," LaCroix jabbed before releasing her to temporarily trade partners.

She danced away from him. They exchange companions and he lifts another woman from the waist.

Louise feels eyes on her. Eyes a frozen shade of blue.

She doesn't even acknowledge the hot, amber pair glaring from the crowd. Or the crowd in general. She can focus only on her partner and his movements, his eyes.

That is the curse of La Volta: illegitimate intimacy.

Two creatures, such as them, could not be more further from intimate, could not be more vituperative. Yet, here they were: oscillating between flesh-crushing proximity and fleeting distance. Louise twirled back to her Sire and grasped his hand. LaCroix drew her close, thrust his hand back between her legs and hoisted her.

She wanted to believe that it was the lifting and turning that made her stomach bubble. The idea that her Sire could have such an effect on her was preposterous. It had to be. Intimacy was not something possible with Sébastien LaCroix.

"If memory serves sir," she whispered in his ear as they came back together, "You danced out of pity for me."

Thrust. Grasp.

"You were fawning for an overly flirtatious, scheming whelp," he asserted. A hint of disgust flavored his words.

Lift. Turn.
"I am neither pitiable-" Thrust. Grab. She huffed, "Nor fawning now. So why bother?"

Lift.

"Because-" Turn. He reminded, "You are my Childe and what embarrasses you, embarrasses me."

Thrust.

Louisé grabbed his wrist and pressed her lips close to the flesh of her Sire's ear. "I am not your Childe here. I am another man's wife."

Lift.

Turn.

And the dance ended as she landed on her feet.

Rothey's eyes were a turbulent shade of anger when La Volta concluded and Sébastien steadied his Childe on her feet. The juxtaposition of Rothey's evident – yet firmly caged – temper and the serviant posture he displayed with both hands holding drinks amused LaCroix.

"So sorry to steal your lady, but she was left quite alone," said the man all too acquainted with leaving Louisé behind.

Rothey jutted a glass toward Louisé and spoke in low, harsh English Sébastien did not understand. His eldest's nose crinkled.

"What did he say?" LaCroix pestered before his Childe started a bickering match with her husband in public.

"That-" she started.

"It is entirely inappropriate for you to dance with my new bride in such a fashion," Rothey cut her off and to the chase with a stream of Parisian French.

"You should have said that to me in the first place," LaCroix undercut.

"You should learn English," Rothey hissed.

"Believe me, my friend, the next I am in England, you will not have the benefit of my linguistic ignorance," LaCroix concluded before turning to look at Louisé – who had sidled a foot or so away from both men.

LaCroix took her hand and kissed the back of it before murmuring, "Your husband is a clod-footed oaf," in the mutt language of Franco-Provençal he'd acquired while living in Savoie.

He would love to see Alexander Rothey translate that little quip.

"How dare he assume my place at your side!" her husband barked.

"I don't think he was assuming much beyond me wanting to dance," Louisé gave Alexander a lackluster defense of a Sire she was more confused with than irritated by.

"And you just let him." Rothey's seething was becoming a pebble in her shoe.
"I don't let anyone just do anything with me," her souring disposition was quick to defend its mistress. "I was encouraged by the Prince and my husband," she needled, "to enjoy myself. Therefore, I did."

"So you'll just enjoy yourself with whomever?"

It was a cold question. Not a loud one, but biting and frigid. Louisé bit her tongue to keep form grinding her back teeth flat. What is it about men? If this wasn't been slapped in her face, she would find it amusing. But it is. So, she doesn't.

What she does is shut her eyes. She releases her tongue and speaks honey-coated words to balm the wound to her husband's pride. Louisé Seyssel-Chambert Rothey injured her own self-respect to puff up Alexander's arrogance.

"Of course I wouldn't. You are working yourself into a fit for no reason," she soothed and opened her eyes to smile at her husband. "It was just a dance."

"It was the Volta, wife!" His temper stirred back upward. "There are implications with that dance and now the court is gossiping," Alexander smacked like a petulant child.

"There are infinite implications with any given decision we make, Alexander. What I am trying to tell you is that you have nothing to fear," Louisé continued to mollify. She saw an objection burbling within this mouth, being rolled over his tongue and quashed it before it could be born. She spat out a statement every man wants to hear, whether they say it or. "Perhaps he was jealous of you."

His brows darted and Louisé knew she had her husband dancing on a lure. His voice was hesitant to come down from its ire, but there was a noticeable shift. Questions always shift emotions. "You believe so?"

"Why would he not be? He is but an Aedile and here you are, a Lord in England. You display your higher intelligence with your mastery of other language and political tact. You are broad, strong and considerate for you would – surely – not have made the same misstep in dancing with another man's wife," Louisé listed off all the qualities a man like Rothey believed himself to have. She could not have been more nauseated. The words were too sweet and sycophantic.

"Surely not! It is a matter of dignity, which he clearly lacks," Alexander alleged of a man he knew nothing of.

"Clearly," his wife echoed.

Rothey jeered, "I can only wonder the fantasies that man entertained while dancing. You can be certain that is the closest he will ever come to a woman."

Louisé knew her job was done.

Once Alexander began blatantly insulting his assumption of LaCroix's character, or who he imagined Sébastien to be, the less she felt inclined to plant the seeds in his head. "Of course. Why should I ever desire a man such as him when I have a husband like you?" She paused to twirl her hair around one finger to let that little double meaning sink in. "Fear not, dear husband, he is only my Confessor and – though jealous – perhaps thought it best to dance with me himself lest I fall prey to a member of London's court and leave here with true scandal in our wake. He went about it a misconstrued way, but at least he attempted to be thoughtful in some regard."

"I do not care for his jealousies or misinterpretations. I care about your fidelity," his growl was soft.

"Rest assured, Alexander Rothey: I shall never want a man like Sébastien LaCroix."
The first nights in England are a pompous affair, to be sure. Louisé is used to the excess and pageantry of Dijon, but that city does not try to be glamorous…it just is. London's air is a miasma of over exertion. Everyone is working far too hard here but she can't blame them. A stink of death wafted from Richmond Palace and shadowy whispers of Elizabeth's impending death create a palpable anxiety around the city. A queen was dying. A queen without a legitimate heir.

The land is bristling with tension, but London get the lion's share for the only reason that Elizabeth and her parliament of self-serving nobles dwell within its borders.

For this reason – and a few others – Louisé was very glad to watch the city shrink into the distance as her carriage drove West to Oxford. Her husband is a brooding mountain across from her and LaCroix is on his way back to France – the one thing that cheered Alexander up this evening.

"Should you need me, you write to this person in Bordeaux, understand?" LaCroix had ordered while shoving a slip of parchment into her hand.

"Why not write directly to you?" A fair inquiry.

"Because, if anyone is intercepting letters in an effort to favor England by providing information from our correspondence, we certainly don't want to give them a helping hand."

"That's overly suspicious of you," Louisé had chirped in response while rolling the parchment between pale fingers.

"Which goes to show your lack of consideration for such matters," Sébastien has sighed, as if her view of their world was just too naïve to bear. "Do try to be vigilant, Louisé. These people may be courteous to your face, but they are not your friends. They are not your allies. You are French and come to steal their land. Trust no one," he had warned.

The gravity of his stare did not go unappreciated or unnoticed. She responded in kind with a promise to keep her eyes and wits about her at all times.

"Since you are my wife," Alexander's voice knifed her thoughts, "My influence and domain are yours vicariously. Use them appropriately. Until you form your own, you are welcome to my herd to the degree they suit your tastes."

"Very generous of you. I brought two ghouls in the event of such a situation," she explained with a partial lie.

She brought three to France. Only two remained. The third was Dijon-bound – stowed away on LaCroix's homeward ship – to collect essential things from Devereux, secure her bundle of communications from Henri and mail off a letter to said dear cousin that he may know she was married and settled across the Channel should he feel so inclined to come looking for her in Devereux's domain.

It was a risk. Childish, even. Every word and scribble of thought sent to her cousin was one more was she assaulted the loyalty to camp and clan. But she could not let him go. And it wasn't because she was so desperately overcome by girlish infatuation the way she had been when alive. Henri reminded her where she came from – from whose blood and womb she was born. He kept her connected to the past so it did not fade into obscurity the way so many things do for Kindred. She wanted to remember so she never what it was like to be human…to be loved. (Since it had been made clear to her – in abundance – love was next to nonexistent between their kind.)

Henri was a sinew and bone tether. She would not sacrifice that for any Kindred or clan. And in that
way – that perilous style of thinking – Louisé is incredibly selfish.

And naïve – to a certain degree.

Some part of her hopes Henri is equally selfish, but that is asking a great deal from a member of clan Lasombra. Knowing more now than she did concerning Lasombra, it would be hard (but not impossible) for imagine Henri keeping their letters to himself. His head was one good reason; a reason that convinced Louisé should could afford a small amount of trust in her cousin's judgment. In the same vein he could trust her not to open her mouth. Louisé preferred her head fasted tightly to the rest of her neck.

"We do not suffer them." Devereux once impressed concerning Lasombra – clan Ventrue's twin cousin in everything except political leaning.

Lasombra were the Ventrue of the Sabbat, but to say such a thing out loud would get your tongue removed – no matter how true it was. Both clans were stubborn, structured and placed a high premium on loyalty. For every drop of blood Louisé spent for her kinsmen, Henri would argue he shed ten. Each would shed these shells of bodies to ash if either was found out writing to the other. Louisé would not even venture to picture what Devereux or LaCroix's face would look like if they came across the weighty stack of Henri's penmanship.

"It is hope of mine that you enjoy yourself here, Louisé," her husband said with all sincerity; forking her back to the present for a second time. His eyes were amber, somber clouds. "This may be a political union, but that does not mean we have to hate each other."

"I don't hate you, Alexander Rothey," she said. "Besides what you look like without clothes on, I barely know you at all." His wife stared, intently, back at him.

A smirk cracked his lips. He leaned his broad shoulders forward and rested both wrists on his knees. "That is a fair point," he agreed, "Perhaps we would both benefit from learning more than our naked bodies."

'Learning' was a generous term for what happened between the sheets between them. Rothey paid less attention to her anatomy than he gave himself credit for. If last night was any indication of current carnal knowledge, then Alexander Rothey was keenly educated on how many gouges notched decorative designs into her bed's bannister than the contours of his wife's body. He was – perhaps – distinctly aware of the number of pelvic thrusts it took to finish him off at the expense of realizing to what degree each movement caused her pain.

And she resented him for that.

"Oh, and one, final piece of advice, Childe," her Sire had said with his cold, dead fingers clamping her own, "Whatever you do, do not trust that man. Give not a single piece of yourself away to Alexander Rothey or you will come up destitute in the end. And me, as well!"

The university causes Oxford to seem cramped and older than its metropolitan counterpart of a capital. It was cozy and smelled of academia. Louisé did not find it unappealing. The studious nature Devereux fostered in her gave her a firm appreciation for knowledge and the only disappointment she had was that Rothey did not actually live in Oxford, thereby limiting her access to the wisdom stored up in the various colleges.

When it was said that Alexander Rothey was a man of wealth, nothing about that sentiment had been exaggeration. Alexander owned numerous manor houses scattered around England, with three in
Oxfordshire alone. His main dwelling, as he had explained to her during their six hour trek to Oxford proper, was Cavershame Manor in Henley – a small, quiet town that rested along the Thames River. But when his Prince demanded he spend long stretches of time in the city, Alexander had a townhome to keep him comfortable.

"And your mistress? She will be absent from these places, oui?" Louisé had attempted to sound less insecure than she felt by asking such a question.

Alexander had rolled a sharp answer around his mouth, "She will be informed to find other living arrangements, yes."

"Very good. It wouldn't do, you know…you and I trying to portray unity if she were still living in one of your homes. As much as you want my fidelity, so I want yours, Alexander," she had said his name more as emphasis than to enjoy saying his name.

"I have agreed to be faithful and dismiss my mistress, Louisé, for the duration of this marriage. Do not meddle in my affairs or how I carry them out," he'd warned.

That had killed any friendly conversation between them until their carriage stopped in the courtyard of the Oxford Castle. Situated neatly on the western side of the city, the castle balanced tranquility with bustle as best a castle could. Accordingly, it housed the city's Prince, who with his entire court – it seemed – stood eager to welcome them.

Alexander exited first to the welcome of faces long familiar to him. Still inside the carriage, Louisé took needless deep breaths to compose herself. She was nervous, more nervous than in London. Perhaps it was because she did not have LaCroix, or any of her French retinue, to fall back upon anymore. Whatever it was, Louisé suddenly felt entirely alone. She wanted to go home. While wringing her fingers, English voices chatted in the distance.

"She is just shy. Neither of us expected such a gathering," explained her husband's voice as it re-approached the carriage. He poked his head in and offered her a confused expression. "You cannot stay in here, it's rude. What's wrong?"

"Accablé," she uttered in hushed French. Louisé shook her head and dropped her fingers to smooth her gown. "Forgive me. I just needed a moment to collect myself."

"Well, come on then." And Alexander offered her his hand.

Louisé grasped his hand and allowed him to help her out of the carriage. A multitude of Kindred stood around the courtyard, just staring at her with a mixture of expressions. Many were clearly shocked at such a young face and she fought to keep her stomach still and calm. The Prince stood in the center of them all, smooth-faced and younger looking himself, with a smile on his face. His build was similar, yet trimmer, than Alexander's which led her to assume he had an equally militaristic background. He was not unattractive but not entirely handsome either with dull colored hair and eyes, coupled with a slightly bent nose. His chin dented in slightly. The most noticeable feature was a white gash stretching from the top of his right eyebrow down to his chin: a scar from his former life.

Alexander led her closer to the court of Oxford. Their Prince strode forward and swooped up her hand to his descending lips.

"Bienvenue à Oxford, ma chère dame," the Prince welcomed with genuine enthusiasm.

"Thank you for the gracious welcome," she responded in English, much to the surprise of the Prince.
He laughed and shook Alexander's hand, "Quite a bride you've found yourself, my friend! Your English is excellent, Madame Rothey."

"And your French, superb," Louisé offered the same curtsy-bow she'd given to the Methuselah Prince of London.

"My Prince, may I present my wife, Louisé Seyssel-Chambert, Marquise of Aix and La Chambre," Alexander introduced. He dropped her hand but brought his arm around to place his palm against the back side of her hip. "Louisé, this is our Prince, Edmund de Lacy, Baron of Pontefract."

"A marquise?" de Lacy chortled, "You've married up, Alexander."

Her husband said nothing, only offered a nod with something of a snort coming from his nostrils. Louisé appreciated the compliment, as vapid as it was. Nobility was something to be cherished among Ventrue. Days were coming when the less and less Childer emerged from such ranks. Secretly, Louisé was amused by the Prince's French last name. She imagined a number of English houses dated back to the Norman Conquest. It created a comic irony, in a way. All these stuffy English Ventrue with French last names fighting very hard to keep their English lands from other Ventrue from French houses.

More figures stepped forward. All men. All serious. Serious eyes. Serious attire. Serious smiles. These were all Ventrue men. A Ventrue Prince who surrounded himself with a Ventrue cabinet of advisors. The Prince introduced them one by one. His Seneschal. His Harpy. Edmund de Lacy gestured to her side.

"Your beloved husband is my Sheriff. His Childe acts as Scourge," he explained before sweeping his hand to a rotund man at his own side. "And this is my Keeper of Elysium, Thomas Wolsey."
Thomas Wolsey is a bulbous man. His girth is a thing of fascination for Louisé and she struggles to keep her attention focused on the beady eyes watching her face than the portly extension of the man’s belly or the way it shudders up and down when he steps forward to kiss her hand. His nose is hawkish, matching the eyes in the predatory predisposition – a characteristic inherent in most Ventrue she knew. It was a stare she knew all too well. A stare she had, herself, when opportunities presented themselves.

Her husband had wandered off somewhere after the greetings and pleasantries dissolved into the balmy, Oxford night, leaving Louisé to the mercy of her English hosts. Louisé was not naïve enough to call them comrades, nor pessimistic enough to call them captors. The sheen in the eyes of Wolsey echoed every one's intentions. They saw her as a means to an end, a deal to be struck, perhaps a boon to be acquired. Louisé came as an auspicious threat. As easily as she could have domain stripped from them, she could also give it. They are all hungry jackals. Wolsey is just the fattest one of them.

A surprisingly starving jackal, too, as he gave off a whiff of desperation when he took Louisé's hand in the plump fold of his own. Keeper of Elysium was a joke. It was the lowest rung on the court ladder. The opinion of many, especially Ventrue, was that it was more advantageous to be an ordinary attendee of the court than the Keeper of Elysium. Having been a Harpy for so long, Louisé knew it was a largely honorific title. To say it was a position of prestige was being more than generous, but far be it from her to say anything of the sort now.

Devereux has often sloughed the job onto someone who couldn't do otherwise. Someone with enough scrutiny to be of use, but lack of backbone to be a future threat. Louisé had seen at least ten Keepers of Elysium under her tenure with Ramon. They scheduled meetings, kept Louisé aware of people on her books and made a habit of doing little chores for Devereux since he had abandoned the practice of taking on protégés once he had found something in Louisé that wasn't entirely disappointing to work with.

In that moment, you might assume that Louisé would smile and think to herself, "I am going to be here for a year…I shall make the best of a bad situation". You wouldn't be stupid for thinking that, but you would be wrong.

Louisé is thinking, as a bunch of wolves smile her way with glinting eyes and mouths full of glass-shard fangs: If I am forced to be here, I shall make this entirely to my advantage. Because that is a Ventrue's default way of thinking. By design, Ventrue are opportunistic and industrious. They don't pout when things don't go their way; they search for chances to spin situations back in their favor. This was a lesson she had learned before Devereux refined it in her. It was something she had learned from LaCroix, in the way he dumped her into the loneliness and desperation of abandonment that required a special kind of fortitude in order to survive. Yes, Devereux's extended hand suppressed what could have been a feral and grisly end but what endured was so much more. Only at the brink, at the edge of a cliff with frothy nothingness and black death at the bottom to catch you, can Kindred nurture the skill for taking any little thing within reach of their desperate, grasping fingers and making their lives something greater with it.

Louisé had been forced to do it by scrounging and clawing in the streets if Lyon. She had chosen to do it along the alleyways of Dijon. Oxford would be nothing more than another notch on her girdle, gouge in the wood of her history.

As Wolsey extended his hand to take hers, she saw nothing but opportunity. She hid her gluttony behind a soft, French smile and ocean blue eyes.
"It is a pleasure, Madame," Wolsey greeted, voice muffled by the lowered head.

"Ah. So you are the one," Louisé said. His name finally came to clarity.

"Pardon?" He asked, now looking her in the eyes.

"You are the reason Elizabeth sits the throne – or, if rumors are to be believed, sat the throne may soon be a more appropriate statement."

Wolsey, the entire court, looked genuinely baffled. Louisé gave a small sigh. Then she offered a cordial smile.

"You are the one who provided her mother, Anne the Usurper, to her father King Henry, are you not?"

Chuckles broke out amongst the crowd. Wolsey twitched a smirk and shifted uncomfortable since the entire affair she'd mentioned was, undoubtedly, both his political undoing and ushering into unlife.

"Do not look so glum, my intention is not to tease. After all, we cannot help the way tyrants shape our history," she said, "Cardinal Wolsey." She emphasized.

Now he smiled. "I see you were a good Catholic."

"I still am," Louisé corrected before moving down the line to greet other important faces.

While his new bride mingled, de Lacy took Alexander aside.

The jovial disposition of benevolent host disintegrated to the cut-throat Ventrue beneath. He was used to the dagger-sharp personality, had grown to appreciate it over the years since Edmund's decisive nature and lack of emotion is what had kept Oxford from the grasping reach of London.

"She's a sound choice, Alexander," his Prince started, "I knew you wouldn't let us down in France."

The fact that de Lacy had known about the marriage before him was no surprise to Rothey. "I'm glad you approve, sir."

"Yes. She'll make a good addition to the court. And she's soft on the eyes," Edmund humored a little, clapping Alexander on the shoulder. "Not that I could expect any less from you. Fine choice!"

"Well, you know my standards are high. Though, I can honestly say I was surprised when I first saw her. For a minute there, she was labeled one of those passionatas."

Edmund chuckled. "The thought crossed my mind when she first stepped out. What cleared up the scandal? I don't need that brought here," de Lacy was subtle with his warnings.

"Proved a virgin."

"You don't say!" Prince Oxford whistled into the night air. "Must have been quite a bedding. If you don't mind my asking…?"

Rothey smirked at the way Edmund's voice trailed off in expectation. "Aye. It's a narrow crossing, but not at all an unpleasant voyage." Alexander felt his fingers move of their own accord with his thoughts. It was just he and de Lacy now – seasoned warriors well acquainted with the vulgar speech and euphemisms of the battlefield. "Thighs pale as cream, soft as silk. Good hips. Shapely rump –
each part perfect." Rothey made some lewd gesture with both hands.

The Prince sniggered. "Seems lacking up top, at least compared to your mistress."

"Well, she is only sixteen – physically – who knows what another few years could have done. They aren't disappointing, I promise."

"I don't doubt. Methinks you would worn a more sour expression, had that been the case."

"Aye," he murmured.

"Pleasantries aside, Alexander – you have a job to do and I won't mince words. I know about the contract you signed and a particular agreement you made within."

Alexander harrumphed in acknowledgement.

"Then you know what you have to do. I want it finished before the week's end."

"I understand, my Prince," Rothey's tone changed since Edmund was no longer light hearted.

"Do you? I wonder. I have indulged your dalliance because of your unswerving loyalty and aid in both centralizing and maintaining my realm. This is different, Alexander, and the stakes are higher. If your indulgences compromise the success of England in this venture – you can rest assure, I will deliver the death blow myself."

"You have my solemn promise: I will not do anything to threaten our goal, my Prince."

"See that you don't. Now, if you want to take care of this business tonight, I certainly don't mind entertaining your lovely wife." De Lacy smirked.

Rothey did not return the look. "I shall spare your precious time. I will help her settle into my home here, for tonight, then take care of business tomorrow…if that suits my Prince's desires?"

Edmund shrugged. "As said, you have until week's end. That suits my desires. Anything sooner obviously suits yours."

Rothey nodded and followed de Lacy back to the gathering. He wasted no time in returning to Louise's side – and not a moment too soon, in his opinion. Wolsey occupied her other side and had been leaning toward his lady with all-too-obvious intentions. Alexander certainly wasn't going to make that snake's climb up the social ranks any easier.

"If you'll forgive me, Keeper, I am going to have to steal my wife away. The travels have exhausted us both and I still need to show her the extent of my domain in the city – lest she accidentally cross into someone else's."

"No apologies necessary, Sheriff," Wolsey replied. "It would be rude of me to demand more than my fair share of time from this enchanting lady of yours. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening and find Oxford much to your liking and satisfaction, Lady Rothey." He offered her a parting kiss to the hand and Alexander felt the fine hairs of his nape prickle.

"I'm sure I shall, Monsieur Wolsey. Bonn nuit," Louise said.

Louise wondered, while he husband enthusiastically bucked against her hips, if denying him his mistress had been a wise decision. Alex grunted in her ear and she obliged a groan. It was one of boredom, but it seemed to do the trick. Men were an easier calculation than she has once assumed.
She could think of and solve one hundred problems before he finished – probably not where her brain ought to have been, but she was honestly bored. And in this, Louisé was made to embrace the uncomfortable truth of her own lingering immaturities. Guilt was in the hope there would be something charming, if not romantic and pleasurable about such intimacies.

There is nothing charming about a naked Alexander Rothey.

He is boorish. He is predictable.

And, though she cannot be for certain – since she has no experience to compare this to – he is small.

Louisé is unbroken and therefore, there is expected discomfort. There is pain from his incessant barraging of her person as hard as he can. Yet, he does not occupy a great deal of space. She feels no grand endeavor to...accommodate him, as she assumed she would.

So, Louisé groans because she is bored. Chuckles at the personal humor she finds in a man having so great political and financial assets to have so small a physical one.

"You'll be comfortable here until I get the manor in order for your arrival," Alex said while lounging beside her.

"And by that, I take it to mean getting rid of your mistress?" Louisé asked.

Her husband became stone, his face a hard, granite slate.

"I don't say that to rub salt in a wound, Alexander. Only to imply you can speak freely and frankly."

"You won't enjoy my frankness, Louisé," he said.

"I know you hate that I made you suspend your activities with her for a year, but it was in everyone's best interest."

"Oh, do explain how getting rid of someone who brings me pleasure is in my best interest, great, political wife of mine?"

Louisé licked the back of her teeth to keep from biting him with commentary. "It creates accountability. Something by which to judge success. If there was no such clause, I could just as easily have a lover of my own and cuckold you with no repercussions because you have a mistress of your own."

"It is standard for men to have such. Not so for women," Alex objected lazily beside her.

Louisé was going to correct him. Going to tell him that it wasn't standard for all men to commit adultery, that it was not standard for men to have mistresses since it was honestly too expensive for most. She wanted to tell him that it was socially acceptable for wealthy men to possibly enjoy the secondary companionship of a mistress, in the sense that most of society might turn their heads in disapproval than cause a scene by calling them out. But, that in no way meant men were due a mistress just because they have the fortune to be born with a penis between their legs instead of a concavity.

Rather than get into an undue argument, Louisé opted for something along the lines of neutral in spirit, "My title may be 'wife', but this is no standard marriage. You are England. I am France. We are equals and must be judged so."

He had no quip for her. His eyes were closed and his wife fought the childish desire to pinch him.
"I will return for you when she is moved out," he finally said.

"What is she like?" Louisé asked, much to his surprise.

"Why does it matter if she won't be around?"

"Because you suggested we ought to get to know one another besides how we look naked. Has she not been a part of you for a significant amount of time?"

Alex ran fingers through his hair. "She's my mistress. She serves a specific purpose, nothing more."

Louisé harrumphed, "I can only hope you won't speak of me in such a pragmatic fashion."

Her husband didn't respond. He was halfway through downing town goblets of claret and paid no mind – that Louisé could perceive, at least – to the commentary of his wife, whose tender body he had just finished using to meet stated 'specific purposes'. In truth, Louisé didn't care to what degree Alexander spoke of her since what little she knew of him included a sound sense of self-preservation coupled with iron-clad dignitas that left little other recourse but for Alexander Rothey to speak, at base, pleasantly of his wife – if for no other reason, than to save face. She could be content with that arrangement, since she was well accustomed to whispers of the opposite variety flittering behind her back when they were finished bounding off the walls of damp, ill-lit, off-shoot corridors of Dijon's congested thoroughfares.

"Your Keeper of Elysium…Thomas Wolsey? He invited me to his home," she informed him as her hands slid beneath the covered to smooth down her chemise.

"What? Why?" Rothey asked between final swallows.

All she offered was a shrug. "To get to know me, I suppose."

"Yes. So he can use you later on." She barely made out her husband's critical whisper. Alex straightened a pillow behind his back, speaking sideways to the wife inches away, "Don't trust that man, Louisé. His motives are far from pure and, no doubt, rooted in the desire to see me undone."

Louisé wasn't going to comment on how egocentric that made him sound. Instead, she opted for the ignorant approach, as it would give her ample information for the true social structure of Oxford. While titles like Prince, Sheriff or Harpy were all glitter and good, there were just that: titles. Names. Letters scribed before a name only Kindred understood the depth of meaning to with no guarantee all would respect them. It is neonatal or naïve to believe every Camarilla city's echelons are what they appear to be, with their precise monikers and distinct, political separations. No, Louisé knew better. A Prince could be as absolute in authority as a marionette, enjoying the frontrunner prestige while the real work and power lay in the hands of someone more inconspicuous. Sheriffs could be purposefully impotent, Seneschals voiceless and no Elysium for a Keeper to uphold beneath the thumb of an imperial despot.

Dijon.

London.

Paris.

But what did Oxford look like beneath the parade of structure Edmund de Lacy trooped before her this night?

"Why do you think that?"
"Because the man is dissatisfied with the role he has been given and believes himself entitled to more," Alex explained.

"Then why not just hope for Seneschal or Prince while he's at it?"

"I'm sure that's the goal in mind but he's not daft enough. He knows Edmund or Percy could snap him like a twig."

"And you can't?"

Alex smirked and rolled onto his side to look into her eyes. "I never said that. I am more than capable of cleaving that plump boar in two. I'm just the next logical step up in his mind."

"Not Harpy?"

"Not if he's got them in his pocket."

Louïse craned her head back, eyes closing with mischievous thought. She felt absent fingers toy with the fabric of her shift. "If you're theory is time, wouldn't it be better to have some evidence to give it more merit than your suspicions?"

The fingers stopped above her belly button. There was a pregnant silence.

"What do you mean?"

Louïse opened her eyes and looked at her husband. "If I go over there, I might be able to find support for your conjectures. From our initial encounter, I gather similar impressions. He seems eager to secure advantages. Foreign or otherwise. It isn't hard to picture his attempt to curry favor with me or bias me toward any cause he might have. So, let me use these assumptions to our advantage."

"Our advantage?" A natural quirk in his brow.

"For the next year, my fate and success are very much tied to your own. If I can do anything to maintain or improve either of those things, I will," Louïse explained.

Alexander shook his head in slow rhythm. "I might have to add scheming, industrious or dangerous to the list of words best used to describe you."

"If it benefits you in the process, do you really mind?"

"Not at all. So long as it does."

Louïse released a serene sigh and closed her eyes again. "How could it not?"

Rather than hold off the inevitable, Alexander Rothej decided to treat dismissing his mistress the way you would an arrow to the shoulder.

Shove it through.

Break the shaft.

Rip it out.

He decided to just get it over with. He had the Prince’s command to obey, his marital contract to oblige and his own interests to secure to the best of his ability. While he did not like the thought of
getting rid of the woman who provided ample pleasure, the knowledge he had secured lucrative
domain for himself outweighed physical gratification.

That didn't make displacing Cecily Potter any easier.

Alexander knew the process was going to be more like the Battle of Agincourt the moment after he
stepped from the grand hall into the inner keep, where the ambience of the fortified manor estate
soured like milk in the sun. Cecily was classically Toreador in the way she allowed the majority of
her emotional gamut to whisp off her skin like perfume. It made it easier to determine what mood she
was in, but no easier to handle that mood were it foul.

He strode into the withdrawing chamber, where great fireplaces gave off waves of heat and the crack
of firewood was the only sound between he and his mistress. She glared at his entry, one hand
curling fingers into the fabric of her dress while the other clamped onto a goblet of something from
his reserves, no doubt. He winced.

"I supposed you've heard then," Alexander claimed half-way between a statement and a question.
He couldn't tolerate looking her in the eyes, so he poured himself a glass to enjoy instead.

"Which? That you've safely returned from France…or that you are married? Brought your new wife
along?" she spat venom at his feet.

He didn't blame her for that. Neither had expected marriage when he sailed off in search of political
reconciliation. Alexander was just the only one no longer surprised. Alexander was one of two who,
potentially, directly benefited from this charade.

"I had no choice," he stressed between gulps.

"No choice? No choice? How about telling them to -" she stopped herself. "You had plenty of other
alternatives."

"That is where you are wrong, my dear." He sighed and fell into a chair. "It was my Childe who
caused this wretched problem. So -"

"Let him be the one to pay the price!" She argued in a pitch one octave higher than normal.

"He is still under my roof and, therefore, my direct responsibility," Alexander growled.

"This is the exact reason I told you to cut him loose years ago."

"And such tone is the exact reason why you are my mistress, not my counsel," he snapped.

She quieted.

Alexander gripped the bridge of his nose, gave a precise squeeze and exhaled all his displeasure.

"Stop acting as if I wanted to get married." He looked at her cross featured. His mistress was
seething, but silent, waiting for the perfectly explanation he would not be able to provide. "She
means nothing to me, Cecily."

Amber ale eyes narrowed. "What is she like? You complain all the time of how poor in physical
quality Ventrue women are. Forgive me if I find it hard to believe that you would marry a wretch,
even if your lords asked you to. So, is she pretty?"

Alexander swallowed a mouthful then grumbled, "You have nothing to worry about."
"Did you hear me say I was worried? I asked if she was pretty," Cecily hissed.

"There are those who consider her so." He made a poor attempt to evade the question. Honesty would not be his ally in assuaging his mistress's temper.

"And you? How do you consider her?"

"Mouthy," he answered without hesitation. "Obstinate."

"What about her looks?"

"Go to Oxford and decide for yourself, Cecily." He barked at her, "I did not come here to be lectured! This is my home, do not forget that."

He watched her bottom lip tremble. Her eyes didn't soften.

"How can I possibly forget that, Alexander Rothey? Do you think I get a reprieve with people constantly whispering 'Whore of Caversham' or 'Rothey's harlot' behind my back?"

Alexander gritted his teeth. He understood Cecily's reputation only too well, but had shrugged it off and chalked it up to Wolsey's attempt to inadvertently slander him, thereby somehow acquiring the role of Sheriff for himself. Unfortunately, Alexander could only defend her to the extent it did not directly threaten him by any means of the imagination. He had enough reputation as a Scion, thankfully, to keep any threats to Cecily to the verbal minimum. However, while Rothey was more than able to directly put people in their proper place, his mistress could not so easily follow his example since she was neither highborn nor very powerful on her own. So, she was often left to bear the brunt of slings and fiery arrows with nothing more than a strong will and sharp glare if her unnatural allure failed.

"Forgive me. I am simply weary from all the ring kissing and travel."

"And your marital duties – no doubt," she groused.

"It is for but one year, Cecily. Then she sails back to France and our lives return to normal."

"A year?" The woman scoffed, "Do you know what I could do with a year, Alexander?"

He glared at her and growled, "Don't threaten me, woman."

"I wasn't. I was simply making a statement. How it makes you feel is your wife's concern now…not mine."

"Stop being a petulant child!"

His roar made her take a step back. Her body recoil as if he had struck her.

Curses echoed around his head before he felt compelling warmth, like bath water, rush over him. He wanted to please her, but he had a duty to fulfill…but he wanted her happy… There was movement. He made the mistake of looking up to watch her body seduce its way to him. The Prince's warning, Louisé's request, it all dissolved into the nothingness as he turned his face and pressed his lips against hers.

"How does my lady find England?" the Prince asked a brisk evening while walking her about the gardens of the university's New College, full of slumbering Tudor roses. "To your satisfaction, mayhaps, even your liking?"
Louisé ran fingers along the bark of foreign juniper, the other arm looped through De Lacy's crooked elbow. "My Prince will forgive me. Before now, I only heard about England through readings or the obviously biased stories of my kin."

Edmund chuckled beside her but offered nothing more in terms of commentary.

"It has certainly exceeded my expectations and those of my forebears," Louisé mused. "London, far more gracious; Oxford, rich in knowledge. The country lush…but, I fear more damp and colder."

There was another laugh, more guttural than before. "No, I don't suppose Dijon has quite the same climate. However, I am confident your new husband will supply you with fur enough to warm you through the winter."

"One can hope, my Prince."

"You have so little faith in Alexander so early in your marriage?" The Prince clucked his tongue. "This does not the future fortuitous make."

It was Louisé's turn to offer some vocal mirth. "I am not so young or naïve that I do not see the great inconvenience I have caused him by requesting – in signed contract no less – he set aside his mistress."

The Prince stopped walking, therefore stilling Louisé. "Lady Rothey," his voice was hard, "No man would place a woman before his ambition. No Prince would allow it unless that woman -" "Also laid the stones to the end goal?" Madame Rothey finished his lingering words more than interrupted him. Interrupted Princes do not sound associates make.

"Indeed. So, honored is the one whose hands hold stones…not the one who slinks along the edge of the road, like a snake with no burrow of its own."

"Honored until such a time comes for stone to trade hands. Then honor passes to the next," Louisé's voice flitted up with her hand in the air.

"I think that is the most poetic and depressing statement I have heard in weeks," the Prince said.

"Women live in a world of men. If we don't make poetry, then things are just depressing."

Edmund barked a laugh. "Leave it to a Ventrue woman to see the world in such a light."

"And leave it to her Prince to brighten that perspective."

"Flattery shall get you everywhere, my dear. Unfortunately, I must resume my regime. My hope is your continued pleasure with and in my court."

Louisé nodded. "You offer me great favor this evening, my Prince. I hope to return it with devote services as long as I lay stones."

They parted at the garden entrance, the Prince bestowing a last, cool kiss to the back of her hand before she climbed into her carriage and rolled away. Inside, her ghoul, doubling as her handmaiden, handed her a sealed envelope. Louisé smirked and turned it over playfully with her two middle and fore fingers.

"How many nights in a row does that make, Jacqueline?" She slid back into the comfort of her native French language.
"Five, Madame."

"Then I do believe it's time to pay the dear Cardinal a visit. Suffice it to say his interest is suitably piqued?"

"Yes, Madame. He appears most eager to host you. Should we skip the meeting with this…Mr. Bainbridge, my lady?"

Louise thought about that a second then hummed, "No. He's already been rescheduled twice for the Prince on both occasions. It would be imprudent to push back a Primogen a third time. And a Toreador Primogen at that."

"Very well, my lady. When would you like to visit the Cardinal?" Jacqueline asked, keeping track of scheduling in her mind.

Her mistress sighed. The first few weeks had been a blur of meetings, visitations, letters and carriage rides two and fro between Caversham manor's sprawling estate and Oxford's criss-cross, stone-cobbled streets. Though usually adept at remembering faces, Louise had to admit to more than just herself that everyone was beginning to blend together. She was becoming overwhelmed by the nascent duties of what it meant to be Rothey's wife. The lovely French lady was as much a spectacle due to her juvenile face as she was a fortuitous curiosity for the greedy.

Everyone wanted a piece of her evening and to avoid seeming snobbish or too-early sour the relational milk in a foreign court – which LaCroix has expressly warned against for their well being – Louise did her best to parcel herself out.

As was expected of her, she started with the top of social hierarchy both within and outside of her own clan. All political titles were held by Ventrue – which made that side of things easier but to prune would-be rumor buds of 'favoritism', Louise made specific point to incorporate clan Primogen, their Childer (if they any or any within city limits) and preferred underlings in the mix of the night.

Unfortunately for former Cardinal Wolsey, he still wouldn't make it on the inventory of faces this evening. He would have to wait another day to see her. From first impressions, Mr. Bainbridge was loquacious and exuberant, to be kind. She put him toward the end of her evening to allot ample time for whatever Monsieur Bainbridge might have planned.

Louise returned to her new home sporting a throbbing headache beneath her right temple. Beyond being theatrical and talkative, Mr. Bainbridge had a penchant for incense. Remnants of his long-ago mortal life smoking up nearly every inch of his house. It took a great deal of resilience and face for Louise not to break into a fit of coughing whenever a cloud of frankincense rolled into her face.

"You look like you could use a strong drink," Rothey's Childe, Richard, commented as she entering the great hall.

"Were that possible," Louise lamented. "I never drank anything stronger than wine."

"And never drank from drunkards either, I see." Though usually rough around the edges and, truth be told, not her favorite person, Richard was beginning to grow on her, soften toward her and this was one of those rare moments where they weren't staring icily at each other or dismissing one another's words.

"Unfortunately, not. Though, I certainly wouldn't resist at this point," Louise huffed as she plunked into an open chair. "Where is Alexander?"
"Off being Sheriff, I suppose."

"Dawn is but little more than an hour away."

"There's always the town home in the city if he gets himself in a tight spot."

"True enough…"

Louisé felt exhausted from the headache and lengthy carriage ride, too fatigued to put much energy into inquiring as to why Alexander would choose a cramped town home to the abundant space of his manor.

Alexander Rothey's estate of Caversham manor was a daunting stretch of medieval architecture, nestled on the banks of the Thames and fortified with tall barricades topped by crenelated battlements – purely ornamental now that England suffered from neither Armada nor Lancastrian plots. Though traditionally the home of the Earls of Warwick, her husband had seized the domain once the property was bought by the kine treasure of Queen Elizabeth in 1542. According to Richard, the man had been an easy ghoul to manage who provided valuable insight into London's operations without so much as stepping foot into the manor for forty years. The man died soon after, leaving it to the even easier manipulation of his son.

Louisé had been bequeathed an entire wing traditionally reserved for the countesses. Sixteen women had come before her, plastering the walls with expensive portraiture, handwoven tapestries depicting revels untold and precious relics which drew tenants back to a time when all of England was loyal to Catholicism. Mistress Rothey felt a duty to continue the legacy she was attached to only by marriage to their distant son of the De Beaumont family.

Louisé hadn't probed too much into Alexander's true heritage, especially since she hadn't seen him in almost two months. He neither supped with her nor sought her bed – a fact she was largely ambivalent about. The majority of her mind was glad for the reprieve from physical bombardment while the tiniest voice nagged at her from the back of her brain that something was awry.

"Let me know if he comes back before dawn," she requested with closed eyes.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Rothey's Childe nipped. "Anything else? Draw you a bath? Give your feet a massage?"

Louisé snorted and smirked. "If you think you can manage." When she opened her eyes, she received a stinging glare and snickered, "I'll settle for some of Alexander's reserve unless you have the blood of a drunkard. Tell Jacqueline I would like a bath drawn."

"I heard you are the one who had Hampton Court Palace built," Louisé stated as she ran the fingers along the bottom frame of one of his portraits. The man was appropriately cavalier for his clan, seeing as this was the third portrait of Wolsey she had encountered since arriving at his Oxford home.

"Yes. The red brick cost a fortune but I still believe it was well worth it. Did you have an opportunity to see it while you were in London?" He asked with enthusiasm for his own spent money.

"Indeed. London's Prince insisted. Unfortunately, the moonlight does it no justice the way the sun must."

"True, true."
"And Christ Church College?"

"A side project, really. I never saw it completed before I fell from Henry's favor, however."

"Hm, that is unlucky."

"Indeed."

Their discussion drew to a lull. Louisé was never one for completely carrying a conversation. If equal distribution of speech couldn't be guaranteed, then Louisé preferred the other participant to maintain the burden of continuing the flow. Since Wolsey invited her here, manners dictated – in her mind, at least – that he be the one to pick up where discussion is left off. He was doing a poor job and after a significant drink from her glass, Louisé said:

"I am sorry it took so long for us to meet. Regrettably, the Prince does take priority," she excused.

"No, no! It's quite alright," Wolsey stated as he accepted her apathetic apology. "I knew from the first night I would not be the only person fighting for your attention. I am just happy that you were able to find time."

"What do you want with me Cardinal Wolsey?" Louisé asked in slow fashion – almost seductive in its pace but lacking any lust. "Or would you prefer Monsieur? I don't want to be presumptuous."

"To the degree you are comfortable with doing so, my lady, you may call me Thomas," Wolsey assured.

"The only people I call by their first names are my husband and my servants." She sat. Her hands crossed themselves in her lap, fingers rhythmically toying with their rings. "Seeing as you are neither, I would consider it rude of me to use your first name until we are…"

He picked up where she purposefully trailed off, "Better acquainted?"

She smiled and nodded. "Oui, Monsieur."

"Then, by all means, address me as whichever you see fit."

Louisé raised a brow. "Personally? I prefer Cardinal."

"As do I."

"Now that the we have titles established, would you be so kind as to explain why you – out of everyone who does want to meet me – were so very eager, to the point you wrote me each evening?"

If the Cardinal could still blush, Louisé imagined he would be doing so right now. His face took on the contours of legitimate embarrassment. "Forgive an old man his habits. In my former life, I was so used to consistently, if not constantly, corresponding to meet a goal. I am sorry if this interfered any way in your nightly business. I am sure the duties of being a Sheriff's wife, especially a Sheriff like Alexander Rothey, mist be demanding."

She wasn't entirely sure he wasn't trying to mock her with that last statement. She jabbed a nail against her glass. "Of course. Writing between France, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire for marriages and alliances can leave a hand full of memory. So, one can only wonder what you were writing me for?"

Wolsey chuckled and leaned forward. "We are hardly Ventrue if not naturally suspicious of
everyone around us, but you truly have no need to be so with me. I was simply eager to welcome you to Oxford. And to make sure you know…should you ever need one, you have an ally in me."

Those were the words that stuck with Louisé the most as she had the carriage drive to Alexander's Oxford town home. She had no need for an ally. Not now anyway. And should there come a time when she would be in need of one, Louisé had a hard time imagining Wolsey being her first choice.

She really didn’t have time to dwell on that for long. Her schedule of rendezvous were hardly finished for tonight and she had a desire to change into something she wouldn't fear staining with muck or stink. Tonight was the Nosferatu Primogen and she had no wish to ruin a brand new dress. Luckily, she left a few spare gowns at the town home in the event she would need to spend a day or two in the city, much like she suspected her husband did.

"We will need to be quick about things. No fussing with my hair, Jacqueline. We might end up spending the day, so make sure someone tends to my bed," Louisé instructed as she stepped from the carriage and headed into the home.

"Yes, my lady," Jacqueline answered behind her.

Her mistress wasted no time. She stretched out her arms to allow the standing servants to remove her overcoat. Servants who seemed stiff, confused and anxious. Louisé could smell it wafting off their skin like fetor from the Thames.

"I don't have time to comfort your fears tonight. If all you can do is stand and quake, then do so in another room or while you are preparing my bed for my return," she snapped at them before striding off to the master bedroom.

"Madame!" chirped one of the maids.

"What? I have places to be and people to satisfy with my presence. If this is not pressing, then let me carry out my business and leave your concerns with Jacqueline."

"I…I was just going to say the master bedroom is a mess. You shouldn't -"

"What does my husband pay you for if not to do your job? If it isn't clean, that is your concern, not mine. I can go into any room I please in my own home."

Louisé left the woman choking either on her own spittle or next protestation. Either way, she didn't really care. She wanted to change and be on her way. She wanted to have not so many people to talk to each night or rushing back and forth in a carriage every other hour. She wanted her husband to have a staff that did their jobs so she didn't have to change among the mess he left when he rose each night.

When she opened the door to the master bedroom, what Louisé Seyssel-Chambert Rothey truly wanted…was for her husband to stop bucking his hips into the naked woman in his bed.
"You're turning my dogs against me," he accused from the two feet of doorway separating the library from the lengthy corridor that jointed their respective wings of the manor.

He was, of course, referring to the pack of Scottish wolfhounds languishing in brindlely heaps about the chair where she sat; their long, whiskered muzzles tucked between gangly legs. There were four that were officially: his three males and a female, whom Alex referred to casually as 'the bitch' and a fifth that was technically hers ever since she hadn't objected to his sudden indoctrination into the canine fold about a month ago. Alex was feeling slighted because his once faithful hunting companions now preferred the skirts of their new mistress to the bark of their old master.

He blamed it on her. Louisé – or, as the English anglicized, Louisa – blamed it on the fact that he was a coward who, when not purposefully staying (or hiding, whichever you prefer) away from his wife for the sake of another woman, hadn't paid the poor creatures any real mind until they started doing the same to him.

Tempted though she was to snap back, his wife huffed a sigh and temporarily unraveled herself from her coiled state in the chair to give the man she stilled called 'husband' a long, cold stare. Louisa couldn't tell – since, honestly, she hadn't really been listening so much as hearing an echo of his voice – if his statement was one of attempted jest or authenticity. The last couple of months has wrecked any gauge she might have had on his sense of humor and tone. Her right foot tapped a tiny, staccato beat against the floor, causing a few of the hounds to lull their heads and perk their ears. One yawned and sent the gradual scale of its sleepy vocal range into the tense silence between them.

"I'm not turning anything against you, Alexander. You seem to be doing a fine enough job of that yourself."

And she wasn't referring to the dogs.

"Tch," he clucked then slapped the side of one thigh and called, "Here Brutus! Here Cassius! Come boys! Casca, heel!"

The 'boys' didn't move. One of them, the girl – ironically, because she neither had an official name (though Louisa called her Ula for her ferocity) nor was included in the summons – lifted her head to cock it at Alexander. She then snuffed and laid it back down.

Louisa smirked and curled back up with her book. "Good thing your name isn't Julius," she smacked.

Four months ago, Louisé forewent the townhome and braved a ride back to the expanse of Caversham. She felt the scorch of dawn through the flimsy material of her reticella collar, igniting her nape with a healthy reminder of why she was a nocturnal creature. In the not too distant future, she would look back and realize how she had cried out in more than just physical pain that morning; how the undulation of noise from the pit of her belly was begat of her own humiliation at the hands of both the man she had wedded and her own naiveté – a factor her sire had, at deliberate measure, attempted to make her aware of….to no avail. She had trusted and been burned by more than the rising sun in its house on the eastern horizon.

Maybe that is what drew the hounds her way.
Initially, Louisé has roared, skin alight, for darkness while the dogs bounded, hooped and hollered in a giddy demeanor around her as she strode to her room. She would have shooed them away, had she not been tearing free of her clothes, barking for sustenance and wishing she had never stepped into such an agreement as matrimony.

That's how her husband's dogs managed to weasel their way into her room. Pure exhaustion was the reason they stayed throughout the day — organic creatures made abnormal by association to their monstrous master. Louisé had woken nose to nose with the male dubbed Casca. It was preferable to waking anywhere near the snake whose name she bore and ring looped her finger.

"You're angry," Richard said when she had strode into the study, dogs at her heels.

"No. I'm not." Louisé had answered while sifting through nightly correspondence. "Has anyone fed these beasts?" Louisé waved at the pack of grey mouth breathers. "They're acting as though they're starving."

"I take it back," Richard had muttered, "You're livid."

"Richard, the only thing I am is annoyed."

"Louisa," he had said, substituting her French accent for his English 'ah', "You are not as stoic as you assume yourself to be. Anger is one of the easiest emotions to pluck off your skin."

"Richard," she had begun to growl.

"We'll take them out hunting," Richard had interrupted with a smirk. "The dogs like ripping out the throats of vulnerable prey." He had stood and strode to the door, waiting for her there.

"Not so unlike their masters," Louisé had asserted with an icy tone.

"Particularly their mistress."

"You're sire is a jackass in the most literal and derogatory sense of the word," she said.

Richard clucked his tongue — the sound of a tree limb snapping. "I canna say he hasn't been called worse."

Richard was a man of thick proportions and few words. Unlike his clansmen, he lacked the elegant loquaciousness to be political. Richard was physical in nature with arms the size of pine branches, shoulders broad enough of to threaten the width of most doorframes, and legs both long and muscular that only draught breeds such as Shire or Clydesdale could serve as mounts.

His body sprouted coarse, dark hair that reminded Louisa more of fur and gave you the distinct impression Richard was embraced into the wrong clan. While Alexander — and other Ventrue males, for that matter — observed a kind of precise regimen when it came to the maintenance of facial hair that aimed to echo more bureaucratic stout than fashion forward, Richard either did not give two figs for the way his beard looked or had come from an age when the upkeep of facial hair fell low on the list of 'to do's' needed to survive. It made him look older than he probably was — an ability Louisa found herself jealous of. His brows, almost equally bushy, sat above eyes as piercing as they were indecisive regarding whether they wanted to be brown, green or both. Richard also appeared to be perpetually glaring; one quality, amongst a list, that made him a better soldier than courtier.

Another was his grating accent. Rothey's Childe, Louisa had learned, came from an area so far north that the distinction between English and Scottish had been blurred beyond repair. Richard's voice
harked to William Wallace, while his loyalties were staunchly Yorkist. He had told Louisa – more in an effort to get her to leave him be than foster comradery – that where he came from, the people were hard and unforgiving as the moors that blanketed the land, that they took to ale “the way a wee bairn does to a teat”, slammed their empty glasses against tables for more and any problems that couldn’t be solved by the Church could be with some measure of physical violence. Richard claimed his body was tattooed with the rights of what it meant to be a man – each scar a testimony to his own masculinity, worn more as badges of honor that bodily deformations.

Like his sire, Richard was bred for war. He handled just about every form of weaponry Louisa had seen mounted or collected within her family’s and Alexander’s armory, though Richard preferred and carried a long sword.

Unlike Alexander, Richard had not been blessed with equal parts social graces to combat skill. He cared little for the company of others, and when not forced to serve as bodyguard to his lord and, now – for the time being, his lady, could be found in the solitude of study or hunt. His mind and tongue were sharp, but tactless. His manners such that he could pass for gallant if observed from a distance.

Foibles aside, Louisa found in Richard the only constant companion not bound to her by blood. His stoicism was calming. His ferocity, infectious. But they were not friends. No.

Ask Richard and he would say they came to their current accord through mishap and obligation – pity, even – but not affection of any sort. Louisa just discovered Alexander between the legs of his mistress and Richard’s solution had been to take his mistress hunting.

The dogs had been hungry. Richard had been bored. And Louisa – back when she still spelled her name with an accented ‘e’ – had been incensed and capable, if not likely, of making a careless decision. So, Rothey’s Childe had strode to the stables, slapped some saddles on two horses and barely gave Louisa time to object before hoisting her onto a mount. She would swear (to this day) he smacked the rump of her ride to make him leap off on purpose.

Richard had known as soon as Louisa swept into the study eradicated with indignation and carrying the lingering scent of scorched flesh, that Alexander had dismantled the precisely erected foundations of this spectacle they called ‘marriage’. He had known before Louisa knew that his Sire had fallen prey to old habits because he had received a letter from Alexander telling Richard he would be staying at the Oxford abode and to continue “aiding our lady in her adjustment to a new home and new land” – which was Rothey’s elegant way of ordering Richard to keep Louisa busy and away from the city. Too bad for Alexander that Richard had read the letter after Louisa had already spirited herself away in a carriage bound for the heart of the municipality.

And, equally bad luck for his Sire, that Richard hated Cecily.

He had never liked her.

Other than finding it repugnant that a man as disciplined and stalwart as Alexander had a weakness as boring as carnality. Richard had been infuriated by the attitude of the woman with whom Alexander sought satiation of his flesh. Cecily Potter had trooped around Caversham as though she owned the whole building. She bossed around staff, spent gratuitous amounts of money that didn’t belong to her and attempted to decorate every inch of the place with French-style fashions and garish splashes of color that irritated the brain. Once, she had even assumed – in her own engorged sense of self – to order Richard about. The words had barely escaped her throat when Richard made it all too
clear to Cecily *exactly* what her role in this house was.

"*Yer his whore,*" he had said, "*Ye aren't his wife, nor are ya the lady of this house. Try that again and I'll cleave that pale staff ye call a neck in two.*"

Chagrined, she had wailed her way to Alexander like a made-up banshee and Richard had resumed whatever he had been doing when she interrupted him. Alexander had *attempted* – if that was even a pertinent enough word to use – to discipline his Childe but Richard's sincere apathy toward both Rothey and his lifestyle made it difficult to accomplish. His sire had eventually settled on a vague threat to throw Richard to the curb, but they both knew if it came to those extremes that Richard would simply shrug and be on his way North.

Despite appearances, Richard didn't actually care much for his sire. Do not be mistaken in believing that just because Richard afforded Alexander some indefinite measure of respect that he *liked* the man. He didn't. If anything, Richard resented Alexander for numerous reasons. Number one being that he had embraced Richard at a point when he had been all too content with the finality and proximity of death, whose breath of ice and stink Richard has felt graze the back of his neck; and number two, because the space between women's legs made Alexander weak in the knees the way war and rows upon rows of suited up, armed soldiers once made a man beside Richard piss his breeches. But, to add a layer of complexity to this situation – just because he begrudged Alexander did not mean Richard was not loyal.

And loyalty was commendable.

Unless it results in your sire being forced to marry a vampire child-bride from France and throw the whole machine of his existence into chaos.

Richard isn't ashamed to admit he was one of the rabble rousers who incensed the French visitors to London's millennial celebrations. He isn't ashamed to admit this because one of those French had opened his mouth and spewed virulent (though not apocryphal) accusations against Alexander Rothey. Weapons had been drawn, blood spilt and, inevitably, Richard's untethered tongue had been cut from his mouth. It still stung to think about how long it took him to recover from that, all the while listening to Alexander rant and rave about how "I told you that unbridled mouth of yours would get us into trouble!".

Richard is loyal to his Sire even if he thinks Alexander is a dolt when it comes to women and controlling completely impulsive desires. Richard is faithful because he doesn't know how to be any other way.

Ruiseart Bryce had been raised to be loyal.

He had been born into a *sliocht* of the short-lived royal House of Bruce that had – only after two kings – ruled all of Scotland. His father had been the youngest son who married the only daughter of landed gentry in Berwick-upon-Tweed. His father had taught him how to handle sword, bow and shield, the art of drink, and how to live by both mottos of clan Bruce and Bryce; his mother instructed him in the Old Ways of lore, the New Ways of the Catholic church and how to discern the makings of a good woman, rather than someone good in the hay. They both taught him the true measure of a Lancaster and their fervent opinion – borderline religious creed – that house of York was destined for England.

He grew up appreciating hard work and harder drink. His father had always told him *there weren't much difference 'tween swinging a sword and swinging a hoe*. Cutting a man or cutting the earth. Didn't make much of a difference to Bryce: one was bone, and one was stone, one bled red and the metallic whiff of iron while the other might ooze the rotten egg stench of peat.
He got into drunken brawls from early age and fell in love with only one woman. She had tawny hair, eyes the color of acorns, pink lips and milky skin dotted with freckles. She had a short temper and a smarter mouth than him. She hated lightning, emitted high-pitched sneezes that both jarred and mystified, and had a superstitious streak where you held scissors by the blade lest you severed the bonds of friend and family alike, always dreaded the shriek of the banshee and keeping iron close by just in case you did.

To appease this side of her, Ruiseart had proposed to her with a bundle of white heather. They had married when he was eighteen and she, just shy of the same, wore the same white heather woven into her hair. The night he laid with her confirmed for him that he would never, under any set of circumstances under Heaven, bear the same depth of ardor or devotion for another human being as long as he walked the earth. She became pregnant, and miscarried, numerous times before she finally gave birth in 1457.

And that same woman. The only woman he had ever loved, he held in his arms as she died from childbed fever ten days later. He buried her in the hallowed ground of his family's crypt beside the son whose life had only been the expanse of a few days. After that he devoted himself to the burn of alcohol on the back of his throat and keeping his skills honed enough to prevent himself from being stabbed to death in the same pubs where he drank his grief away. He was wistful for the days when a man could bear the cross divine, trek amongst Teutonic Knights and die in the dust of the Holy Land.

The years between the death of his wife and the Battle of Hedgeley Moor were blurs of ale and the pitch black of sorrow, but when there was a call to arms by the White Rose of York, Ruiseart Bruis found as good an opportunity as ever to join the one he loved in the cold of the grave. This had almost been accomplished when he took a Lancastrian dagger to the belly; Alexander Rothey had had other plans on the night of April 25, 1464, he embraced Ruiseart – whom he later re-named Richard – into clan Ventrue whilst masquerading as a military barber-surgeon.

From the beginning Childe and Sire never saw eye to eye on much except for politics, and that was about as long lasting as the lifespan of a butterfly. Alexander didn't understand Richard's undying love for a single woman, his affinity for ale or half of what his Childe said because the Berwick-Northumbrian dialect was as foreign a tongue as that which was spoken by those inhabiting the empire of Mehmed the Conqueror. Ruiseart didn't comprehend why he had to change his name, why his sire's last name was a slaughtered version of a Scottish town and duchy reserved for the first son of the High King and why Alexander had plucked him up from the muck of Hedgeley Moor in the first place.

But pluck him up he did, like a weed out of a garden or a coin from the muck that gathered in the crevices of stone cobbled streets because your eyes is always hungry for the glint of wealth. Alexander Rothey taught Richard everything he knew about this new life of blood and fangs, but only to the extent Richard was willing to learn. Bryce wasn't stupid nor his head as thick as some implied it to be. He just happened to find comfort and distraction being physical and intimidating, rather than imperious, in nature. Rothey's Childe left the business of politics and civic manipulation to the hands of those to whom it was always suited. Richard found his niche as Caversham's muscle, its stoic, bodily guardian whose responsibilities now included the preservation and tepid entertainment of the bride Alexander threw away.

Though, while he did not like Louisa in the conventional sense, he could endure her if it meant Richard maintained his desired distance from the bureaucratic heart of Oxford's domain.

The longer she stuck around, the more Richard found himself disliking her less; much in the same
way Louisa had come to begrudgingly accept her role as pack leader of the bounding hounds that pranced about the property. He and Louisa had become accustomed and comfortable with one another's presence; they had come to discern their patterns and nocturnal schedules which, ever since that faithful night four months prior, included rhadamanthine hunts with the wolfhounds. Richard escorted her on this rides both because her safety was his unspoken responsibility and kept him from having actual conversations with her that might compromise the tenuous relationship they had woven between their persons.

Perhaps – if either bothered to admit this to themselves – Louisa and Richard secretly and silently enjoyed the sardonic jabs they made at the other's expense because, at the end of the night, they both knew how utterly alone they were in the world and if you could not find communion among the forlorn, even if it meant subtle amusement at your own eccentricities, you were doomed to the gluttony of those realities which engendered your loneliness in the first place. Richard preferred to think of it as him having a fresh target for his ornery disposition. He didn't know, nor care, how Louisa perceived the situation and comforted this breed of phlegmaticism with the truth that she was only here for a year, so there was no need to fill himself with consideration for her thoughts when they ought not linger in the first place.

But, at times when he was least suspecting (and even greater still – not desiring) it, Richard saw similarities between the woman Alexander had involuntarily married and his own, long-deceased bride. There was nothing comparable about their looks. It had nothing to do with physical composition or the way Richard was made to feel in the hollow of his insides. It was in the bite of her tongue. A flash in the eyes that jolted him to a pair of acorns, judging him with equal measure mirth and solemnity. The way Louisa operated from her own creed the way his own Rona had determined her steps throughout life based on the (arguably) wise adages dispensed by old wives' tales.

These juxtapositions.

These unwanted comparisons and parallels.

They did something. They did something Richard did not appreciate and that was the fact that they tugged on the string of his loyalty. While they did not endear Richard to Louisa, they did make him marginally loyal to her.

Which is why her letters to Wolsey were such a problem.

Definitions:

Sliocht: Gaelic for 'progeny/seed', in reference to the cadet branches of major Irish and Scottish houses.

House Bruce motto is "Fuimus" means "We have been"

House Bryce is "Fiat Justitia", which means "Let justice be done"
Sometimes, when she stands in the shower…when she lingers a little too long, waiting for the heat of the spray to bring a healthy pink tint to her skin, she remembers the feel of it. The way her toes, arch and heel maneuver over the slick of grouted tile sends shivers up her spine.

Only sometimes.

But, still, it's enough to ripple nausea throughout the core of her body, tempt the first night's vintage up in an explosive, red murder scene against the spray of the shower head. If she stays too long, she begins to remember damp stone, the slick of mildew and lichen beneath bare feet, and the mingling smell of earth and corpses. Her fingers begin to rub their palms, to avoid curling into fists that clenched slick, cold bars of iron. Her throat tightens, an ancient, arid aching from ceaseless, unheeded screams.

Even listening to the fall of clean water ticks away at the strands of her sanity. She'll swallow and try to push away the memories of incessant dripping, bedraggled hair and dirty clothing clinging to her body like a stained, sickly double-skin. And, even now, there is only one name on her tongue when those memories are provoked: Wolsey.

When Thomas Wolsey sleeps, he dreams. His dreams are dominated by the ravings of a blue-eyed, whore mongering ginger who called himself King of England, and the brunette courtesan who seduced Henry from his marriage, his church, and Wolsey's influence. Thomas does not like thinking, much less dreaming, about Anne Boleyn. Regardless of what the court or his religious compatriots accused her of being, in Anne, Wolsey only saw a competitor with more to offer Henry: a fresh womb, a second chance at the son Catherine couldn't keep alive for him. If only the babe hadn't died so young, if only Mary had been born an Edward, John or William… if only...if only.

But none of that mattered now. Both Anne, with her head severed from her tiny neck, and Henry, his old hunting wound howling and completely poisoning his insides, now dead –Wolsey was left with nothing but the ghost of their memories and the same political tenacity he had in life. This son of a butcher from Ipswitch, the man dubbed "alter rex" by those who hated him and the extent of counsel he held over the king, went from practically running the whole of England to barely scraping a political existence in the heart of Oxford. From papal candidate to court disgrace, Wolsey had seen too great of highs and depths of valley lows to remain as a mere keeper of Elysium.

Just like once before: Thomas Wolsey's entire political career – in his current opinion – hinged on a marriage, a brunette ingénue and a whore mongering, power ignorant narcissist. It wasn't even a matter of if Alexander Rothey would screw up, it was a matter of when. And Wolsey was not the only mind in Oxford who anticipated this inevitable recklessness, this coming calamity of continental proportions. No, Wolsey had been privy to many a conversation who doubted Rothey's capability of putting his mistress, and his own desires, aside for the greater good of England. What was less sure was the reaction of his wife. Would she prove a stalwart Ventrue and keep her and, by extension, her husband's skeletons in the closet? Or, as some feared (and some Toreador – ever lovers of endless drama – hoped) would she toss clan conduct aside for French loyalties? While neither was certain, one thing was for sure: Wolsey was doing everything in his power to influence the girl in the right direction…for him.
"Why are you making this so difficult?" he had honestly – *honestly* – asked her when she bluntly refused an invitation, by the Prince no less, to Oxford at his side.

"There can't be three people in a marriage. Why can't you understand that?" Louisa had snapped back, like ice cracking.

"This again…I already explained myself and I won't do it again."

"No, you tried to excuse yourself and your transgressions!"

"Do not raise your voice at me, woman! Why can't you understand that I have more to worry about than your feelings and a meaningless scrap of paper?"

It was as if the entire wedding ceremony…the painstaking politics behind it, had flown freely from his memory. Louisa had wondered how selective her husband's recollection was. She had sneered at him, "Oh, you most certainly have something to worry about. You think a Sabbat torching, in this Exeter, is concerning? Try a treasury of property and titles being wrenched from your filthy, English hands!"

Then she had found her body quite slammed against the closest surface, her husband's eyes thin spears of amber, his fangs aglow in the nearby candlelight. Their bodies hadn't been this close since the first full night in this home – when he had come to her bed, not some whore's thighs, and took her lustily. Not like the night of their wedding. Perhaps it was being back in England or the masculine presentation before Oxford – that possession of something – that produced such an intensity, such a passion that she had dared, in the privacy of her own thoughts, to call it love making.

But up against the cold stone of a wall was not the same as the slick of sheets or dent of bedding. There was no give. Only rigidity.

"You won't utter a word about this." Alexander's voice had been strong and calm – a fierce demand, the strength of more honed domination.

Louisa never had a chance. All she had was resentment that he could have that kind of control over her. It drew her back to a dusty Burgundian cellar, the slick wrist of Deveraux and the forcible bond that made her mouth taste of decayed iron.

"You won't get away with this," she had hissed back.

"Richard will be your permanent escort into the city. Unless your attendance is absolutely necessary, you will stay here."

Louisa slapped him. She had nothing else to say because nothing stemming from the mouth of the feminine sex seemed to matter to him. He just looked back at her, the fingers of one hand brushing where she struck.

"I will watch you burn on your own pyre of indiscretions," her venom seethed.

He frowned, "Have a good evening my Lady."

That is how the whole fiasco really started. Alexander's choice of words had been precise, but not specific. Yes, she couldn't *utter* a word about what she discovered. Not a peep, chirp or so much as a whisper could slip her lips – tempting though it was. Good thing writing letters is a silent task, her quills sharp and she had a *Confessor* more than expectant for her correspondence.
"There are two things I detest about being Prince, Alexander. Do you know what they happen to 
be?" de Lacy asked – tone like the grinding of a blade against stone, sharpening.

"I'm a better soldier than politician, Edmund – so, I'm sure I don't, but if I had to gamble I would say 
the overly sycophantic? The two-faced? Kissing London's boots?" Alexander hazarded a smirk, but 
wiped it away when he receive the slant-eyed look of his Prince.

"Sycophants make for good pawns. The two-faced are fun to watch run around in circles. And it is 
always best to avoid the topic of London. No, no…What I hate the most are rumors and repeating 
myself."

Rothey winced, sure of where this conversation was headed and knowing it would be advantageous 
to his existence to not prompt a diversion from the intended destination. He simply steeled himself 
and focused on the movements of the horse beneath him as his Prince took a few strides lead. "And 
what ru - "

"Don't play stupid, Alexander – it makes fools of us both," de Lacy's tone kept honing itself. "I am 
not deaf and my court is not a quiet one. Did you honestly think she would keep her mouth shut?"
The Prince made a scoffing gesture as he shook his head.

"I assure you, my Prince…it was taken care of." What else could he say? It had been…hadn't it?

Edmund made a dry noise in his throat too dangerous to be called a laugh. "You think I was referring 
to your wife? Maybe you are a fool, Alexander. And if that is the case then I am made a bigger fool 
by keeping you as my Sheriff all these years. Ha! Let us just dawn our jester hats and be done with 
it!"

"Cecily knows better than to cross me in such a manner." It sounded weak even to his own ears and 
Alexander felt ill that anything so frail should come from him.

"I don't care what Cecily knows, Alexander. I care that I have to repeat myself. What part of I will 
deliver the blow that cleaves your fine, noble head from your soldier's shoulders did you not 
comprehend?"

Alexander stiffened. His horse stopped moving and de Lacy yanked his own stride around to face 
the Sheriff with a look as scathing as his voice. Perhaps Alex had relied too much on the abundant 
favor of his Prince to ever consider Edmund's threat a valid one – though he had acted convincing 
 enough when he and Louisa first arrived in Oxford. Would de Lacy use the sword at his side? 
Unsheathe it and swing before Rothey had a chance to roll from his saddle? Would the ever-loyal 
Sheriff be forced to try and unseat his own Prince in an effort to save himself?

"I swear to you, my Prince…"

"I don't want your oaths, Rothey! I don't the drama of your busy cock about my court, either! Clean 
it up! Fix this or I will. Instead of gossip, I need my court figuring out who to put on the throne once 
that old crone croaks her last. And I need your wife present. Do you hear me? No more holing her 
away at Caversham, Rothey!"

Alexander swallowed the lump in his throat – a second chance. "I'm not holing her up, sir."

"Well, you certainly aren't bringing her along! What do you think she does all day? Pick out pretty 
linens and wall drapings?! Every Primogen has this to say of her – she is a most eloquent lady in 
both tongue and pen. So, I can only imagine how she spends her evenings."

"I told you…it was taken care of," Rothey insisted.
"What did you do? Rip out her throat? Cut off her fingers? As if either would do you any good…" Edmund de Lacy did not give his Sheriff room for a rebuttal, "The Assyrians and the Greeks had a fine saying – I wonder if you've heard it – 'the word is mightier than the blade'. I need you to marinate in that, Rothey, and grasp the fullness of its impact on our domain. I mean – when you weren't indulging in your little weakness, did you ever contemplate how destabilizing one word of hers might be?"

Alexander fidgeted in his saddle then huffed, "Louisa is hardly one to bring down an empire."

"It is her words I am concerned about, you thick-headed imbecile! Empires are built and toppled on such things. Rome only became an empire because Octavian had Ovid deify his bloodline through the Metamorphoses."

"And it fell to the swords of the Goths…not the pretty words of scholars or disgruntled wives," Alex countered.

"Only after Orestes refused their request to serve as mercenaries…correspondence he did not heed destroyed a centuries old empire, brought it to its knees."

"Only in the West. I hear Byzantium did alright for itself," Rothey attempted a smirk but the cold, hard glare of his Prince crippled him again.

"And are we East of anyone but lowly, Irish hounds, Alexander? If we are Rome and France is Byzantium – then we will burn and they will flourish into a golden age! The short end of it is your wife has too much resentful time on her hands to write and a confessor eager to receive her letters as the Gospel. Fix this, Rothey…or practice kneeling before a chopping block," de Lacy closed the argument and rode away – leaving his Sheriff with little option.

To say that she hadn't written Sebastian LaCroix would be inaccurate. You would think a blatant break in marital contract, like adultery, would warrant an immediate correspondence to Louisa's confessor. You wouldn't be the only one! Alexander Rothey, a philanderer he may be, an idiot – he is not, and the interception of his wife's letters was no laborious task. A task he plopped into Richards lap. As if the fact Richard was Louisa's practical caretaker wasn't enough.

"Wouldn't it just be easier to not sleep with your mistress? Beg on your knees? Buy her territory? Richard inquired.

"Because, child, there is more at stake than my wife's feelings," Alex snapped.

"If that is your concern shouldn't you have been more concerned before dipping your wick?"

"Hoist your morality onto someone else, Richard."

"Seems like my morality is your wife's and the backbone of her portion of the marital contract you agreed to."

Alexander ended the argument with a singular command. "Retrieve her letters and burn them."

When Richard roams into the great hall – fully prepared to welcome a royal entourage in Alexander's stead – he is met with an abundant disappointment, if not disdain, at the sight of Wolsey's rotund figure. Hands pressed together in figured pyramids, Wolsey almost appeared as if a man in prayer – a visage of the Cardinal he once had been – but Richard could see the man eyeing the decorative suits of armor, weaponry and coats of arms with the same amount of hunger he demonstrated toward
those at court who had more power or favor than he. Wolsey, alone, in Caversham was enough to put Richard on edge – Wolsey in companionship with his ravenous lust for acquisition placed Richard in an even more anticipatory state of mind.

"Good evening, Mr. Bryce. Sorry to disturb you." Wolsey semi-bowed – or bowed to the extent his girth would allow his upper body to move.

"No disruption to apologize for, Mr. Wolsey," Richard lied. Really, anything that required extra exertion was a disturbance to Richard though. Wolsey's house call was nothing compared to the nursemaid position he had over his Lady. "How might I be of assistance to you this evening?"

"Ah, yes. Skip the unnecessary pleasantries and to business at hand!" Wolsey said with a clap of his tented hands. "I've been sent by our Prince to have conference with Lady Rothey."

Richard tensed. Louisa ignoring the requests of her husband was one thing, but to refuse the invitations of the Prince was another matter entirely. Ever since Alexander had dominated her both to silence and her place within his household, forced her into an agitated and resentful submission, Louisa had secluded herself to the estate – occupying her time with the business of Caversham and her trading company abroad, riding the hunt with the wolfhounds…and the blasted letter writing. It made Richard sick with frustration at how much the woman wrote, only because it meant more work for him he truly loathed. That was a complaint for another time. Presently, he had to address the bulbous personage of ex-Cardinal Wolsey.

"Of course. If you will follow the servants, they will show you to the library. I will fetch Lady Rothey and bring her to you. Do you care for any refreshment?" Richard strained to sound as polished as other Ventrue peers. The result was a pressured and insecure style of rhetoric he knew others snickered – or grimaced – about behind his back. Where was a battle ground when you needed one?

"From Sheriff Rothey's private reserve? How very kind of you! Yes, a warm glass would be delightful. The trip all the way out here does – surprisingly – parch the throat," Wolsey said.

It always amazed Richard how their kind – Ventrue – demanded and asserted their desires without even making it seem like they have done so. You could be out of home, funds and blood before realizing you never offered anything more than an acknowledgement that they were in your presence. And this is why Ventrue do not make friend. Kindred are, by nature, manipulative since that character default is required for survival. But Ventrue have honed calculation to the most intimate and violating of levels.

Case in point: Louisa Seyssel-Chambert Rothey.

With Wolsey tended to, Richard assumed the greater task of retrieving the always irritable Lady of the House. To no surprise, he found her cloistered in her personal study – surrounded by scores of curling parchment, ledgers, extra and empty ink wells and the combined melody of her own pen scratching with the scruffy, burbling snores of the hounds. Not more writing, he thought. If only she knew how futile all of her scribbling was. If she realized her inelegant handwriting was used as kindling for his fire…well, he didn't want to think of it. Truly, he didn't want to think of her but was obliged to because Alexander's infidelity fed his paranoia, and his paranoia had convinced him every word his wife scratched down was suspect.

Since she wrote exclusively in French – a language he could barely speak, let alone read – Richard ended up burning them. Some opened, some with the wax still warm from the press of her seal.

"I need you to put your fancy quill down and come with me."
Louisa paused and sighed, as if he had asked her to keep building Hadrian's Wall. She looked up at Richard and ran the feather between the fingers of her right hand. "I'm not in the mood for a ride and the dogs have been fed."

"I'm not taking ye for a bleeding horseback ride, Louisa," he huffed, "Wolsey is here to speak to you on behalf of the Prince."

She perked up in a way only irritable, curious people do when they assumed something good has come their way. "Oh? Well…if it is the Prince whom we are inadvertently hosting," Louisa responded with a surprising amount of acceptance.

Richard studied her – the ease with which she abandoned her task, the lack of bite or wit she predominantly dispensed when forced into responsibilities Lady Rothey perceived came from her licentious spouse, perhaps even a hint of the slightest smile contorting lately terse lips – and felt a sting of anxiety in the lowest bones of his spine. "I don't think I need to remind ye of how to watch yer words," Rothey's Child clipped.

Louisa exchanged her own scrutinizing look with his. "I do believe, if memory serves us both – and I know it does – circumventions have been put in place to prevent any form of – oh…how shall we say this? – compromising dialogue to exchange between myself and others."

Richard winced, recalling all too well the domineering precautions Alexander had put in place – or, to be more precise, forced upon his wife in order to secure his own longevity. "Don't snipe at me. The man's worse than Eden's serpent with that tongue of his."

Louisa chuckled, "Entertaining the Father of Lies now, am I? Should I bring a vial of holy water with me?"

Normally, Richard would accompany Louisa on the sarcastic paths she took but not this time. His voice was terse, "I'm not playing around, Louisa. No matter that man tells ye – from the Prince or no – he cannuh be trusted."

"What Ventrue can? What Kindred, for that matter?"

Feeling frustrated and his concerns discounted, he took the risk of touching the woman – something he reserved for hefting and tugging her down from the saddle. Richard's fingers attempted an assertive gripping of flimsy, feminine wrist that came across more as an insecure cinch of the skin. Clumsy and apprehensive as it was – the fact that he went to such person lengths seemed to do the trick of impressing upon Louisa the severity of his anxieties. Because Alexander was physical enough toward his wife and Richard lacked the detexerity to withstand skin-to-skin contact, he released her as soon as he had her full attention.

"I don't waste my time on words the way you, Alex or others do. Speeches and flowery language are useless to me," Richard became agitated with his own struggle to get the point across, "So – savor this moment because it won't happen again – I beg you not to give him even a hint of anything he could use to destroy Rothey. No matter how honey sweet and supportive his words might sound, they are laced with poison. He will stab you in the back…then the chest, if you don't go down from the first blow."

Louisa stared at him a long, pregnant moment – took a few seconds to examine the wrist he'd latch onto. Then, the confidence in her shoulders slumped and she sighed, "I am not an idiot, Richard – but neither are you. I neither know, nor need or want to know, the history between Alexander and Cardinal Wolsey. Since he announced he is playing emissary on behalf of the Prince, I will make sure he doesn't step one toe outside that role."
Richard relaxed. "Good...But he asks about -"

"I don't want to talk about her!" she snapped with a snarl. "I can't talk about it anyway, Richard." And she shot him a soured expression that rekindled the indignation Wolsey's arrival had temporarily snuffed.

"I am sure you are well aware of why I'm here, my lady," Wolsey said with the solemn voice of a Papal representative. He had been one in a previous life, she supposed.

"The Prince is summoning me to court? Insulted by my reclusivity?" Louisa picked up the glass by her hand.

"Insulted? No, my lady! Concerned is a far more appropriate phrase. The Prince is worried you do not feel included or welcome when it comes to the business of Oxford."

"Please, assure our Prince that my absence is no reflection of the hospitality of his domain. Demands for my attention and time, unfortunately, outweigh the supply."

"Ah! Yes, I forget you are the mistress of commerce! Regrettably, I have been tasked with procuring your time and attention as much as assessing it." Wolsey closed his statement with a swig from his own glass.

Her brow arched and shoulders clench until the blades almost kissed. "A polite way of saying you're here to forcibly collect me."

"The Prince is nothing if not polite, my lady," he answered with a grin.

"My husband has forbid excursions to Oxford without escort," Louisa explained – the contempt on her tongue barely hidden.

"Ah...yes...the Sheriff is another topic which bears analysis."

"Oh? What consideration would you like to give my husband?" She took another drink to avoid telling facial expressions.

"None, if I can absolutely help it, my lady."

"Ah. I see. No love lost between the two of you then?" She studied Wolsey, waiting for his body language to indicate what he might be too politically correct to say.

He simply shrugged. "It is well known he and I care little for each other. But, for the sake of our Prince and the peace of the land – we suffer one another."

"Politics makes martyrs of us all," Louisa commented.

"Then shouldn't you be on the way to canonization, my lady?" His attempt to praise her with mutual, Catholic rhetoric?

Louisa smirked. "Afraid not. I've not had time to perform the expected number of miracles and no one is praying to me – or I should hope they aren't. I believe they will be sorely disappointed."

"Our Lady of Sorrows, then?" Now Wolsey was smirking.

The eyes of Rothey's wife flickered a narrow. "More like Our Lady of Perpetual Exasperation."
Wolsey chuckled. Louisa thumbed at the pearls lining the hem of her sleeve. He was about to speak again when there was a rap on the door. Rothey's Childe entered with one, large stride and Wolsey felt a sudden pang of irritation. If Louisa felt the same, she did not show it – merely craned her head in Richard's direction and spoke.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Making sure all is well."

"That's a servant's job, but if you insist," Louisa smarted as she rose from her seat. Wolsey watched the exchange with a fleeting thought they came across more warden and prisoner than Mistress and...whatever Richard was. "Seems the Prince is questing my presence in Oxford – have my ladies prepare my things and a carriage," the lady of the house ordered.

The ex-Cardinal stood and spoke just as Richard let out something of a grunting rebuttal to Louisa's command, "I insist you ride with me, my lady."

"We have our own - " Richard started, but was quickly interrupted by his Sire's wife.

"It would be a pleasure, Cardinal," Louisa said. "Richard and our servants can take our carriage, my first handmaiden and I will ride with you. Quickly, now, Richard! We musn't keep the Prince waiting," she ended the conversation with another clapping directive to her guard dog and flounced from the room.

Wolsey watched Richard grind his teeth together as he passed the man. The Keeper of Elysium had great appreciation for Louisa's command of other – some unspecified balance of feminine etiquette and biting, feral authority wrapped in fine fabric. She made a fine piece on his personal chess board. All he needed to do was continue nudging the pieces until she was in alignment with him and the king was in check. If the queen lost her head this time was of no consequence to him, though he surprised himself in his confidence of Louisa's survival skills – whether that was her charm or his great desire to succeed in his endeavors was left to be determined.

He waited for Louisa, waited for her stride down the hallway to usher them to the carriage. While it could not be called frustrated, Richard was a breed of agitated similar to those of small dogs when their master won't give them scraps from the table – striding on Louisa's heels and trying painfully to make it appear as though he wasn't harping in her ear. Lady Rothey, to her credit, handled the situation the same way one might a bothersome child – cold indifference.

"Shall we, Cardinal?" Louisa said as she glided passed him to the waiting rides.

Wolsey held the door open for her, grasping her hand as she lofted herself inside. Her lady-in-waiting came next and last, he lifted his own girth into their carriage and settled himself across from both ladies. Louisa stared out the window, still and silent for a long time. Her attendant stared down at her lap – her knees covered by heaps of rolled parchment. The woman's hands rested stony and protective above the paper.

"Do you have a personal courier, Cardinal?" Lady Rothey broke the silence with an odd question.

"I...yes, my lady. Of course," he answered.

"You once offered your hand in accord to me," Louisa went on, her eyes roaming to Wolsey, "If I needed an ally in court, you would fill the role?"

Wolsey recalled thee words with a sweet taste in his mouth – the saccharine notes of a job completed
without an ounce of work behind it. "Of course! I -"

"I need your courier. Lend them to me and then we might speak of alliances."

"But why, my lady, might you need my man? Surely Alexander has a courier or two."

"Oui. He does. But I have the vexing suspicion my letters have gone…astray as of late. So, I have need of yours to guarantee they are delivered. One cannot run an industry without correspondence, after all."

"Astray?" Wolsey asked, intrigued by her paranoia. "What fate do you fear befell your letters?"

"The same as those of heathens and heretics – a fiery one. Alas! I have little proof to keep feeding my conjecture beyond anything more than poor delivery service befell them, but we Ventrue are – if nothing else – terribly dubious creatures."

"That is certainly true." He could not deny that. "Do you also fear you have need of an ally?"

"I believe you do, Cardinal."
He watched it burn. His eyes took in the work of his hands as embers rushed into the air with the whoosh of the wind and pillars of smolder rose upwards, into the cloudless night sky littered with stars – which glemmed with indifference about the way he seared away their sinfullness. He would draw the man out by burning his precious commodities. He would cauterize the member which tainted her. And then...he would come for her and purge her of all her iniquities.

In his hand, he clutched parchment months dry. He spared the inked letter a glance before crumpling it in his fist and dropping it into the waters below. The stench of the Thames rose up to hit his nostrils and he spat, cursing the English and their filthy ways. It didn't matter, however. He had followed orders and satisfied his own greedy desires with one, fiery swoop of a Davidian stone from his slingshot. Goliath was burning. His Saul would rejoice, whoop with glee just before he claimed his head and crown...if he wanted. Right now, he did not want that. Right now he would follow the river to Oxford and collect his due. The pretty, little parcel waiting in ignorance for him. Waiting for him like a Galahad, Percival or Lancelot. Did she know he would come like a thief in the night? Like a black knight? Like a Roman centurion seeking a Sabine woman? He doubted it very much. Her head was polluted by the trappings of her material world and the men who inhabited it. Thinking of those men – some fictional in nature – made his core twist with disgust and his fingers drummed irritated beats against the sword at his side. He would make her pure again...even if it cost her life.

Before the burning and purging, there is still Oxford. There is still a broken marital contract that need to be addressed. Recompense that need to be collected. Alliances that need to be made behind the backs of those who would otherwise snuff them out. Louisa is not above or below forming partnerships with those against her husband. Despite what may have been said once-upon-a-time in a marital bed now tainted by Alexander's adultery, Louisa has no intention of using any knowledge she accumulates on Wolsey for anyone's benefit but her own.

She drums her nails against her own knee. Then they stilled and pointed toward the heaps of parchment her lady protected with the intensity of guard dog. "A courier for a coalition?"

" Seems a hefty imbalance, my Lady – with all due respect."

Louisa glanced at the parchment then looked at Wolsey, a smirk creeping up one side of her mouth. "Shall we really beat around the proverbial bush, Cardinal? I am afraid I lack the sand in the hourglass for such performances. I have a feeling," she let her voice trail off as she glanced out the window and watched the dark countryside roll and curl passed them.

"A feeling, my Lady? What sensation might that be, precisely?" Wolsey asked, the heavy tinting of curiosity coloring his questions in the manner Louisa had hoped they might.

"Precisely? Only that you need my help because you are sweating from climbing the ladder of society." Her true blue eyes looked back at him with a hint of smirking superiority she might not have had the right to enjoy.

"And you, my lady, are not?"

"I am only temporarily married to a rung on the ladder of Oxford – not to the entire instrument."

"And yet, here you are – asking for a courier because you can't trust your own," there was humor in
Wolsey's voice and that superiority was snuffed.

"I never said the rung was a sturdy one, Cardinal – only that it was one," her tone was a bit icy with irritation. Being reminded of her vulnerability – after years of becoming stonier, harder against such weaknesses – struck a chord that sounded shrill and staccato in her head. "And I explained the couriers are not mine. I am entirely confident in the things that belong to me." And her eyes drifted back to the ghoul with the parchment.

Wolsey was quiet for several minutes. The only sound passing between them being that of the wheels of carriage as they ground against the terra firma. Louisa did not mind the silence. She actually preferred it, since it gave her the quiet she needed. Her nights were spent catering to the demands made on her attention, to the kissing of cheeks lacquered in lead-based smears of white on already deathly pale skin. The absence of such, the musky aroma of homely masculinity and conversations which teetered on the edge of duplicitous was refreshing. The burgeoning heaviness, the dance from lighthearted discussion to something more serious sent the slightest thrill into her stomach. It was like drinking a fine, red wine after sipping vinegar.

"Do you want to be Sheriff….or do you want to be Prince?" she asked quite suddenly, after their carriage hit a bump.

"I would never be so treasonous as to dare say Prince, my Lady."

"But we are treasonous creatures, are we not? Is not our very existence a treason against nature? Besides," she paused to exit the carriage before looking back at him, "You never said you didn't want to be."

Louisa allowed that quip to hang in the air and blanket them in a contemplative silence the remainder of the trip. When their journey concluded outside Wolsey's Oxford abode, she exited the carriage with a glance over the brick structure – imagining Wolsey grieved the loss of his spacious Hampton Court Palace; a structure Louisa had only heard tale of. Tales alone painted a drastic comparison in her mind. The interior proved Wolsey's attempt to recapture his once-upon-a-time grandeur: crests of arms, sumptuous linens, and oiled portraiture of liturgical and clerical scenes that brought the viewer back to the Catholic times of England, a time when a man like Wolsey would have reigned only slightly above the head of the King – being the voice of Rome.

Now Wolsey wanted to be the voice of Oxford….if not England, itself.

"I will not offend your intelligence by assuming you and my husband are connected by some scaffolding of camaraderie," Louisa said once she was seated and comfortable beside Wolsey's fireside. The room was not quite spacious, neither was it cramped. It was appropriately spaced for two, perhaps three, bodies if neither moved that much. "As I said, we are treacherous creatures to the marrow and it seems, if you will excuse my supposition, by the way you glare at Alexander that you believe yourself a finer fit for the mold he occupies. However!" Lady Rothey waved a dainty hand before toying with the pearls of her necklace, "Do not allow me to put words in your mouth. I barely know you, therefore you could be entirely content with your court placement. Should that be the case, I request your pardon for any grievance my hypothesizing tongue might have sown."

"I assure you, my Lady," Wolsey began after a sip from the glass in his hand, "You will find no insulted bone in this body. If anything, I suppose I should count myself surprised, even embarrassed, that you would be so observant of me. And that I would cast such an envious shadow Sheriff Rothey's way. You are right on one account, my Lady, and that is the fact that our Ventruel nature drives us ever upward in pursuit of loftier goals."

Louisa chuckled softly and swirled the claret contents of her own glass with a lazy rotation of her
"Don't you mean power?"

Wolsey's brows shot up. Then lowered when she said nothing else. The corner of one purplish lip tugged into a smirk. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"I think you will agree that goals is too innocent a word to describe what our kind claw one another for."

"Again, my lady, you are correct. And since you are, why should I not be worried about what you are scraping for, Madame Rothey?" That was the first time he had not dubbed her 'my Lady'.

"I believe I have acquired all the power I ever will in Oxford as the wife of Alexander Rothey," Louisa answered easily, and truthfully.

"So you are saying you have nothing to gain in this hypothetical alliance between yourself and me?"

"No. I did not say that." It was Louisa's turn to smirk. She snapped her fingers and the ghoul – who had been standing off in a corner of the room until this very moment – walked over with the parchment she protected. "As I said before. I am in need of a courier."

"…And what do I stand to acquire?" Wolsey asked with some hesitation.

The doubt in his voice was not unwarranted. Louisa was not lying when she admitted the limitations of her power – thereby revealing the finality of her influence. Louisa, as she currently stood, was the newest, shiniest bauble of the court. She was something to be passed about, fawned over and entertained. But she was not visiting royalty. She had no Prince's ear to whisper into, despite what more plebian members of Oxford's entourage believed. In fact, now that she thought of it, any favoritism she might have had with Prince de Lacy was withering because of her own stubbornness and attempts to punish her husband. Since her stint in England was to be brief, no matter the outcome of this marriage, she had told herself in more recent nights that losing favor was no big deal in the grand scheme of things. Because she would never return to England. Because Oxford was not London. Because, because, because… Excuses to quell her own anxieties. Wolsey's presence reminded her she had more to do than just form potentially beneficial alliances. She had rings to kiss.

"Honestly? I have no idea." Louisa answered after some thought and spins of the rings on her hand. "Give me time and ideas, and I am sure I can come up with something mutually satisfying."

"And what about your husband?"

Goodness, the man was full of questions. Lady Rothey drank long and licked her lips. "A rung on the ladder."

When Louisa finally makes her grand reappearance at Oxford's court, she attends the Gerousia and sits silent amongst other females – because the sexes are segregated. Dignitas doesn't just allow for mobility within their clan, but also seems to demand women continue to be protected from the barbarism of the world. As if they weren't the savages tearing it apart in the first place. Do not fooled, though. This chivalric display is new to Louisa. Only in England has she witnessed such sex separation. France does not employ such a model. Breasts or penis – you are seated by your ranking, if not your age.

Lady Rothey scans the crowd of men opposite where she sits, but does not see her husband anywhere. A quick glance to the head table, which all other members sit around, proves he is absent from this meeting. Prince de Lacy sits in the middle of the high table, allowing others to speak and his presence to speak for him. The meeting is a short, but serious one, as the only subject on the table
to give attention to is the rise of Sabbat attacks along the shore – now showing evidence of moving toward The Thames and London. Sister cities having to squelch flames, causing hundreds of thousands of crowns worth of damage and a building anxiety that has the Ventrue population of Oxford – sans Alexander Rothey – concerned for their acquisitions and domain. Their Prince ends the meeting with a raised hand and call for diminished panic – assuring his flock he has already taken measured steps in protecting their fair city, its inhabitants and their bailiwick.

Ventrue disburse to their individual schedules when the meeting is adjourned. Some stay back to hold whispered, nervous conversations, but most leave. Prominent members of court follow the Prince from the halls of the Bodleian Library, to his lavish home nearby. This evening, in lieu of business, de Lacy has opened his home for a social gathering of sorts. The Prince's ongoing attempt at panem et circenses, even for the more ignorant of his court, is what Louisa saw it as. She, however, had minimal time to mingle with others. Long enough to catch the eyes of the whore who had stolen her husband and short enough for the Prince to become aware of her attendance and summon her for a private audience.

Louisa is shown down a long hallway, which lost light the further one traveled. This was obviously the link between both aspects of Edmund's home – administrative and personal. There are few doors attached to the end of the corridor – to be specific, there are three and the ghoul leading her knocks on the right most when they come to a stop. The deep voice of her Prince answers from the other side and she is ushered inside, the door shut behind her. Her eyes scan the dimly lit room and find it is a spare bedroom of sorts…some thrown-together combination of personal bureau and guestroom. Whatever its purpose, it is large and filled with comfortable furniture and Edmund de Lacy occupies the largest chair there is. He is reading something, his face neutral but there is a tint to his eyes that concerns Louisa a fraction more than she was a moment ago.

"You wished to speak with me, my Prince?" Louisa asked while remaining exactly where she was. Until she was beckoned closer, she would not move within such an intimate space.

"I wished to speak with you on several occasions, Lady Rothey. Your schedule must have been a flexible one this evening…to grace us with your presence," de Lacy answered as evenly as his face belied. He looked up from the letter and whatever had colored his gaze a moment before had hidden it.

Her chest tightened. No matter how balanced his voice, Louisa knew she was being called to task and girded herself for what was to come. He enticed her closer with the curling of an index finger. Louisa obediently approached him, stopping a few feet from where he sat. "My apologies, Prince de Lacy. I - "

"It is a hard thing for a Prince to be ignored, my Lady," de Lacy interrupted with a voice still polite, but teetering on agitated.

"I am not ignoring you, my Prince," Louisa retorted as she looked away. "After all, you aren't my husband."

"Scorning marriage already, Madame Rothey?" Now he sounded amused.

"Interesting turn of phrase. I shall take the easy liberty of assuming you are already aware." She brought her attention back to him and his intense, demanding gaze.

"Aware of…what exactly, my Lady?" Edmund set the parchment, which had occupied his attention moments ago, onto a side table next to the chair – his eyes still very much on his guest.

"We are both too smart to feign ignorance, my Prince."
"But you are not smart enough to avoid even hinting at insulting a monarch," his tone edge closer to ire – quick temper of a solider, monarch and Ventrue in one – as his body rose from the chair and moved nearer to her – not that there was much space to cover.

In a world where peasants and plebes skittered to cover their mishaps, while authorities reclined and tossed blame on expendable cohorts – Louisa found herself stuck somewhere painfully in between and mentally scrounging for a way to recover. "Why would I insult you, my Prince? I rather enjoy my head on my shoulders, my freedom and whatever sprinkling of favor you see fit to bestow upon my person. All I was implying was that there was no need for either of us entertaining the hilarity that my marriage is a happy one."

Edmund de Lacy studied her a long time – his expression neutral, but his eyes searching without domineering or demanding any exposure from her. Then his lips twisted into a cruel snake and she remembered, all over again, that there really were no allies allowed to her here. He reached up and with a single finger, brushed across her lips.

"So these are sealed quite…tight, are they not?"

Louisa wanted to glare. No. Truly, she wanted to bite him but she figured that would be the fastest way to a quick death. So, instead, she ground her teeth inside her mouth and snapped back any perfidious comment she might've otherwise spat at him – had he been anyone else but who and what he was; the Prince.. But he was the Prince. She, his temporary subject. Her core was cold and hard and that, she found, was all she could rely upon to support a worthy response to his discovery. It made her wonder, though….what gave it away? What tell tacked itself upon her that her Prince could see, but she could not? Did it come with age – this ability to see the handicaps of others?

"Loose enough for pleasant conversation, my Prince," she said and averted her eyes, tucked back her face from his cold touch.

She heard him cluck his tongue. The sound of a parent scorning a child. Louisa felt his fingers touch her chin and try to coax her back to his full attention but she was having none of it. Snapping her head away from his fingers, she hissed and stepped away before glaring in his general direction.

"I have had my fill of men invading my person! I will not have you do so as well," she insisted.

There was a pause. A cold thing, like the echoing of a tree branch breaking in the minutes before dawn. After the snap but before something else, anything else, happens. Sometimes that something is as simple as a deer moving about or preparing to bound about its arboreal kingdom. Then sometimes…sometimes it is the creeping of a predator before it strikes. With Kindred, it is most certainly the latter. It is always the latter. And for some odd reason – there is always a wall. A wall behind, to be precise.

Louisa finds herself shoved – no, pinned against the wall and it is too late to regret any decision before this because all she has is this. This moment. This feeling. This Prince.

"I haven't begun to invade your person! This is my domain, my Lady. And I believe it is your pleasure, as my subject, to fulfill any will of mine – invading or otherwise." His hands squeezed her upper arms for emphasis, but she did not wince. He continued, "Your husband has made a mess of this, indeed, and here I find myself cleaning it up. Your tongue might be cinched, but he wasn't thoughtful enough to consider your hands…your lovely fingers." His hands slid down her arms to grasp each extremity. "I worry what work they've been up to, my Lady. I have a city to worry about, after all…"

It is then that Louisa recalls the parchment de Lacy had been perusing when she entered. The
nondescript sheath of paper between his fingers. That slight tinge to his eyes. That subtle gnawing of anxiety in her stomach when she saw the scene. The pieces had not fit together until now. Now, it all made sense and she ranted curses in her head. In her head, she tore apart the room and clawed the eyes out of an obese, disgraced Cardinal. Taking a breath, she said, "You can't possibly be scared by anything I have to write, my Prince." She tried to tug her hands back to herself but found them secured in his fingers.

"Scared? Who said anything about fear, my Lady?"

"Speaking frankly - "

"Are you sure that is wise?" de Lacy questioned as he closed what little distance there was between them with his intimidation tactics. Pity for him, he lacked the ample dexterity of her husband. "Did I not mention, just earlier, the dangers of mutinous tongues?"

"Would you rather I speak frankly behind your back? Now, there is something subversive to be frightened of, Prince de Lacy," Louisa smirked with her words, not her face as she wanted. "All I was going to note was your sincere apprehension at the idea of my use of time…of my corresponding with others. As if you had a great deal to lose from this matrimonial endeavor?"

"Who am I that I should entertain your suppositions?" de Lacy's tone was edgier and he squeezed her hand to the point where she winced. "I am your Prince! And I don't care if your husband has had one whore or one hundred – you come when I call," his voice was sharp and close now as he hissed into her left ear, "When I summon you – when I, not Alexander, call you forth – you had best cease whatever other activity captures your attention. Pout and scribble on your own time, Louisa Seyssel-Chambert Rothey of France. My time is the stuff of substance and your only guarantee of anything while within the bounds of this city."

Louisa was full of mistakes she might regret, but she did not regret shoving him away – even if it provoked greater anger in him toward her. She glared at him, straightening her back instead of shrinking away like a more permanent fixture at his court might. "Why do men think all women do is pout? As if we have nothing better to do than to measure the licks we've incurred and brood about it? Yes, you are Prince and I shall honor your requests for my presence but if you want to screech at someone about my absence – then go beat about my husband's ears!"

"I already have!" he barked back – creating a tense silence around the entire room, the small space between them. "Do you honestly think I have not chastised him ten times more so than you? As if there is anything special about you?" Louisa winced and constricted when Edmund advanced once more, jabbing a stern and pointed finger against her sternum. "Alexander is my subject! And a loyal one at that. You, my Lady, are his wife and a temporary one. Perhaps even more short lived than originally anticipated. However, until the minute your marriage is dispatched," as he spoke, his finger curled into the collar of her neckline and yanked her face close to his, "You will be just as loyal as he. If not, then my invading your person shall be the least of your concerns."

Richard touched the rusting iron bars – slick with their sludge and wet from water that the stones above cried. This place was dark and dank and dreary. It was the antithesis of what she was and he regretted that for her, since she probably would do it herself. As it was, she wouldn't even look at him – and not for lack of knowing he was there, but because she did not want to recognize his presence. Whether that was because she was embarrassed or enraged was to be determined. He wagered on the latter.

Though she looked crumpled and disheveled – all huddled in the furthest corner of her depressing squalid square of the world – he would be a fool to assume there was no ferocity left in her. She
hung her head against tented knees, the tangled curtain of onyx blocking any view of her face, but he imagined her to be dirty because it was impossible to envision anyone remaining clean in such fetid conditions. She was clutching her hands around her knees and he could barely make out where some fingers were missing their nails.

His stomach tightened.

Torture.

"What do you want?" the crack of the hiss of her voice brought him out of horrific illusions – to a pair of illustrious, hungry, blue eyes.

"To talk." And Richard was taken aback by how weak his voice sounded in comparison to the inmate on the other side of the jail cell.

Her laughter was hoard and borderline insane. "He wants to talk! Oh, what a luxurious request that is, my friend. If you can't tell," her dry voice paused as she lifted her hands, "I'm not doing much talking these days..."

There was no need to, really, but Richard swallowed and that was a mistake. Now she was at the bars – mere inches from him – with astonishing speed for someone beaten, ripped at and interrogated mercilessly. Now he could see the effects of her hunger, what he imagined to be purposeful starving, in the hallowing of her cheeks and thinning of the fingers where nails were missing.

"Richard," her dehydrated tone whispered, sung, "What is there for us to speak about? You haven't said anything about my new home, Richard. I haven't gotten around to decorating. Been very busy, Richard!" She kept saying his name with more intensity, more fervor and hunger. "Tell me, Richard, have you come to apologize?"

"Apologize?" Now his voice cracked and he felt embarrassed.

"Yeeees, Richard. Apologize," the sound of her voice was a hideous purr as she rubbed one cheekbone against the bars. "I do have you to thank for my new abode? My new friends?" she spat. Now she was glaring at him again.

He had no answer for her. His mind was a scramble of plausible explanations, strings of individual words that just didn't sound quite right or appropriate if he were to spit them out loud. So, he stood silent and dumb. Here he was, requesting to speak with her, absent for words. The soldier felt small and withered on the freedom side of the bars – his lady damaged but not broken, and claws ready to tear meat from his bones. If he was honest with himself, he was here selfishly but a punch of guilt to his gut stole his words. Now...now there was just crippling silence.

And the stench.

And the grime.

And the constant, now irritating, drip-drip-drip of water from above their heads. One hit Richard's nose and he shivered. Louisa spoke.

"How could you do this?"

"How could I not?" Richard hissed. "He is my sire and you - " he paused.

"Are just his wife," Louisa finished for him – hissing through the bars of her cell with the venom of a
serpent poked with a sharp stick. Her fingers slid down the slick grime of the iron bars, her nails raking dross up underneath themselves. "I'm sure this helps you sleep comfortably during the day. It is the balm to your weary conscience. Your redemptive justification for betraying me, even though I know how much you disapprove and dislike Alexander. We are so very Ventrue, are we not? Our loyalties run tree root deep, especially against our will."

"I - "

"Get. Out. Richard!"
Crazed

They say imprisonment alone can drive you mad.

What about a jail cell plus starvation? Or, better yet, try this dreaded trifecta: incarceration, famine and torture. What taxonomy of insanity would be your reward? Louisa had no answer to any of those questions, nor any for the ones assigned to strip them out of her. She could no more tell you the mental ramifications of being a prisoner than she could just who burned her husband's London business to the ground. At a point she struggled to identify, she lost what fragile, mental stability she did have to the wraiths.

Louisa could not call them ghosts, because one, solid fragment of her brain managed to remember not all of them were dead… not in the permanent sense, at least. They were shadows. Haunting vapors of former selves that taunted, tutted and – in every way – disapproved. They came with the tolls of bells, stood at the bars and rebuked her.

Or, worse, they pitied her.

Louisa could not say when she lost her mind in the wet darkness. She wasn't entirely sure she ever had one. But this she is sure of: the poisonous bite of a snake took it first.

She wasn't equipped to bear the burden of a torturous interrogation. Richard had seen with his own eyes, the tolls her body had taken, the decaying fabric of her mentality all too apparent. They had sent him down there under the assumption he might maneuver something of substance from the mines of her mind – some piece of evidence just strong enough to put an end to what was slowly emerging as a witch hunt. What he left with was the haunted images of her ghoulish devolution.

And now, he was possessed.

Lingering longer than wise or desired, Richard listened to the chorus of desperate mania Louisa cried out to no one… No one those sound of mind could see. Figments of her own, tragically warped imagination. And these wails ate whatever was left of his insides. Richard hadn't wanted her around, hadn't entirely blamed Alex for returning to the embrace of his whore, had wanted his own peace but… This was not how he wanted it. And this Grecian tragedy could end one of only two ways. One way, if Richard was loyal to his sire. Another, if he risked his ties and took a chance on her.

….

It is a litany of voices. A cacophony of inarticulate vocals that thrum the space of her ears… and between them. Louisa is no longer rational enough to prove to herself she isn't crazy. She blames it on the blood.

Rancid.

Parasitic.

Heathens…

All of it is detestable to the palette honed only for the virtuous Catholic – the loyal of faith! But, what is it they serve her? Just enough to keep her sentient for the next night of torture, mind you… still… it is the blood of England's putrid Anglicans. False Catholics. Worse still, the Lutherans they manage to rummage up. Louisa, once, was even given – the gall of it all – the claret of a Huguenot fresh from
France!

Others of her kind – not Ventrue, mind you – titter about such snobbery. For the Ventrue, their preference is life. And she was consuming less than that. Less than life to avoid death. In a more rational future, Louisa might laugh at the morbid paradox of it all, but then again, perhaps not. If she were asked to describe it now, and sometimes the shades requested such, Louisa could only liken it to drinking the varying degrees of spoiled milk. Drinking until you are choking down the curdled chunks. She is being poisoned and left with the heretical voices of those she drinks.

The first, loudest of the shades is none other than her Sire. Demanding and judgmental as ever, LaCroix sneered from the other side of the bars. He condemned her without even opening his mouth, and Louisa was infuriated by the sight of him. He started in by picking apart every decision she had made since separating from him, scrutinizing every mistake – of which, there were plenty to choose from. He seemed to find a comfortable place around the mishaps with the Cardinal and planted himself there, digging in and relentlessly hassling her.


"I don't know!" she bellowed while thrashing her head from side to side, fingers searing her scalp, "I don't know!"

"Think, Louisa!" he demanded.

"I can't," Louisa whimpered and lowered herself back to the filthy stones. "I'm so hungry."

His shadow was quiet for some time before chiding, "No! You're weak. To think I created something so pathetic..."

There was rage, but no energy to supply it when she glared back up at him, "I'm not pathetic."

"You were played," he criticized with that classic sneer of his. "You thought you had him in your pocket, all the while he was spinning you round his finger… pulling the noose tighter, tighter, tighter. Until - "

"Stop!" Louisa smacked. "Stop..." she begged.

... It is, of all people, Alexander who presents himself next. Her sanity is tested, irritated but not gone. Louisa knows it is not him because somewhere her brain is reminding her he, too, is imprisoned. Alexander Rothey might not be facing the same extremity of torment his wife does, but he is facing something. So, he cannot be here, before her, looking so smug and triumphant.

He cannot.

And, yet, he is.

He strides up to the bars, as if he has no other way of walking. The sound of it makes his wife's confidence in his own imprisonment waiver. Her anger does not. That emotion is hot, liquid metal veining betwixt the center of her chest and stomach. It is her energy, the nourishment that propels her up from the floor to meet him at the bars like the caged animal she was becoming. Louisa itched to gouge his eyes out – rend them from their sockets with the nails she had left. Her fangs – no, all of her pearly teeth, blunt and sharp, hummed to tear out his throat.
"You vile, treacherous swine!" she hissed between them, "How dare you come to me here."

Unphased, Alexander bent his head toward her and, of all things, crooned, "Poor little French tart." Louisa's eyes widened, but he continued, "My poor, naive, young wife. You played a game you thought you could win, didn't you?"

She was shaking with rage. He was patronizing her! "Shut up!" Louisa shrieked.

"Now, now, my sweet," Alexander said, "Mussn't lose all composure. That is, after all, why you lost."

"I. Didn't. Lose. Anything," she growled, yanking on the bars that separated them.

"No? Look around you, my dear. This is hardly the lifestyle you're accustomed to. And all for what?" He paused, smirked. "Because you were jealous."

Louisa raked a hand at him, but he avoided the gesture with ease. "I am not jealous of some whore! I am not jealous, Alexander, I am angry," she explained.

He cocked his head and smiled in a way that made her fingers burn. He said, "It must be hard… to come in second to a whore."

Her mouth fell open. Just a touch, but enough to steal the words from her throat. Alexander went on and, while he spoke, Louisa began a systematic retreat from the bars of her cell, "What did you hope for, wife? That I would see you and turn her aside? Pick a child over a woman? You really are naive, Louisa. Who wants a virgin who knows nothing, when they could have the skilled body of a whore?"

Louisa felt the damp wall against her back. There was no where left to retreat to… no where else to go. Her voice lacked the feral bite of a few moments ago when next she spoke, "You married me. You chose me. You didn't have to, but you did! And you signed - "

"A flimsy piece of paper," Alexander cut in, "Something a man could wipe his arse with."

"You were supposed to be loyal!" she shrieked.

Alexander Rothey locked eyes with his wife and said, "So were you."

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Louisa is not the only one plagued by immaterial specters. Richard has been wracked with guilt since the evening he was questioned by the council concerning Louisa, Alexander, his mistress and the fire. He had been honest. Brutally so concerning both Rotheyes – Alexander has, in fact, not set his whore (because that is what Richard called her) aside and, in retaliation or out of jealousy, Louisa indeed had staged a semi-successful coup of Richard's power in Oxford. As for the fire, Richard could not say. The night in question was a blur. He supposed Louisa had remained in Oxford because she said she had when he asked her. But he couldn't guarantee it because he hadn't been with her… as he was supposed to of done.

So, the council – in Richard's mind – used his doubt to lock Louisa up, to torture confessions out of her. And while Alex was fuming about being under house arrest, about his business going up in flames, Richard was the one agonizing over his wife's fate. Alexander wouldn't even speak her name. He did not care what her fate was, just as he truly hadn't concerned himself over the loss of his mistress. The fire hadn't consumed a building alone, but the body trapped inside.

You see, that's why Louisa became prime suspect. Had the wench's toasted bones not been amongst
the rubble, the fire would have chalked up to the string of random Sabbatt attacks that dotted London, the coast and the Thames. But the body of the woman Alexander had continued his affair with made this look another matter entirely. And it filled Richard with more doubt about Louisa's honesty. The council saw his doubt, felt it and seized his mistress but an hour later.

Now she was a prisoner, and ever since the night Richard visited her, he'd been haunted. Haunted by the missing fingernails. Haunted by her emaciating body. Haunted… by his wife.

"If I could, sir, remind you," he said with extreme caution, "to not put too much stalk in the ravings of a mad woman."

"They are confessions!" corrected his colleague.

"Confessions under duress," the first Lictor countered, "worse than duress. The tortures she's endured, while perfectly legal, usually compel honesty out of a suspect after forty-eight… seventy-two hours maximum?"

"That is the average," his colleague inserted, emphatic to continue.

"I agree!" he said, thus deflating the other man. "Even the most extraordinary cases don't go beyond five days. How long has she lasted?"

"Mmm… two weeks, three days and ten hours," said a Harpy from the corner.

He produced a low whistle, "Impressive. And, likely, no longer effective. Sounds as though she's been driven insane."

"She's guilty! She confessed!"

"To what exactly? And before you tell me something about secret correspondence – let's be clear: She's been talking to phantoms of her imagination, I hear, since night three. You obtained her confession after a solid week!"

"Your point?"

"My point is that she could be confessing to what she believes is a secret correspondence, but is nothing more than the delusions of the starved and extraneously tortured."

"So, what do you suggest?" asked the Strategoi.

"What I started with: Don't trust the words of the mad."

It is the visage of a noble lady that breaks her. Louisa would have taken another dose of any other shade but this one. Screaming at Richard, arguing with her sire, humming to avoid the presence of her husband. Louisa would even pay the sanity toll for a round with the wench who burned… whom they accused her of murdering.

But this… this one was beyond torture.

The woman wore an expression too emotional for words. At least not words Louisa had, which was a limited vocabulary by now, but she also imagined the only ones capable of describing the face were those who had carried, and bore, life inside them. It was the expression of a heartbroken mother – the pain of being beyond the capability to help and heal, to have to look upon one's offspring
knowing there is nothing that can be done. Hers is the face of the unconditionally loving powerless. Her eyes are pained and tired and well passed the point of tears. Her body is inclined toward the exhaustion of fighting on behalf of the child who won't, or cannot, fight for themselves. There is also the glimmer of anger and disgust as Louisa draws closer to the bars.

Louisa is afraid to look at this woman, to see ephemeral life crept back into the visage she loved above any other... to see any light in the eyes she watched Death snatch the life from. But, Louisa would never dishonor this woman. She would crawl on hands and knees until bony fingers brushed the hem of her skirts.

Black.

The lady wore the color of mourning, and Louisa guessed for whom.

"Mother..." she whimpered.

"Thou art not my daughter, beast," the woman corrected in a voice so sharp, it slit Louisa's heart in two.

"No," Louisa cried and his her face as the woman went on.

"What has thou done with my child? What evil befell you my daughter? By what wickedness did you steal her soul?!"

On and on and on. For an eternity the woman asked Louisa these three questions. Further and further into the dark Louisa sank, despondent and heartbroken. Until it went silent.

"I am your daughter..." she whispered.

No response came from the shade. Panicked, Louisa yanked up her head from the filth of the floor to guarantee she wasn't alone. She could endure the questions if only to hear her mother's voice again. The pale blue of the eyes that looked back were filled with a bottomless sadness.

"I am your daughter," Louisa repeated. The shade shook her head and, again, Louisa insisted, "I am your daughter! I am your Louise!"

"You art a beast," the woman said.

Louisa hadn't enough in her for tears, but her voice managed something akin to such, "Not by choice."

There was something stern in her mother's expression now. "We art the summation of our choices."

Louisa hauled herself to stand, to face her mother, "I cannot own the beast you see, mother."

The departed Lady Seyssel-Chambert leaned toward her youngest, cold and distant as death. "Thou art arrogant, beast, and much deceived if thoust believes thou is not responsible for what thou hast become."

Louisa felt burnt. And angry. She felt that frequently. She slammed weak fists against the bars, an involuntary growl wheezing out her throat, "What, then, do you want from me, mother? Why are you here?"

The Lady studied her daughter before responding, "What became of my daughter?"

The daughter in question had no more energy to be upright. She slid down the bars into a curled
heap at her mother's feet. Louisa tossed that question back and forth, further exhausting herself by attempting to form elaborate answers, explanations that might satisfy her mother and earn Louisa her place back in her good graces. Her head pounded with the migraine of the starved, preventing anything decent from coming out of her mouth. "...She became a monster, my lady," Louisa said, "First, by the beast disguised as a nobleman. Then..." she hesitated, reluctant to admit the words, "By my own ambition."

"All must die and stand before the judgment throne," her mother answered.

Louisa tangled her fingers in her hair, "And how do you judge me, mother? What judgment to you render for your daughter?"

The Lady was quiet for some time, making an expression Louisa could not see from her place on the ground. "I love my daughter. I hate the beast."

"You and I, both, mother," Louisa said.

"Liar," her mother scolded, "Thou loves the beast thou has become."

"What would you rather I do?!" daughter shrieked as she rose again, "Waste away? Disappear into the nothingness of my despair?"

Now there was injury in her mother's eyes and the lady began to turn away. Louisa panicked, reaching out to try and stop her mother, "No, don't go. I'm sorry, mother, I am sorry!"

Lady Chambert offered her daughter one, final look and word. The shade's hand stretched out and stopped short of touching Louisa's cheek – as if it could. "I love my daughter. I pray for her, that I see her again in Heaven. I hate the beast." Then she turned and walked down the shadowed corridor of empty, silent cells.

"Mother!" she cried at the departing figuring, pressing her shoulder into the cold, rusting iron to reach a desperate hand as far as it could go. "Mother, have mercy! Mother, stay with me! Forgive me! I do not want you to go..."

She crumbled to the cell floor, curling into a heap of a once living creature. Her sobs were dehydrated parched, but wrenching her gut nonetheless. "I am wretched!" Louisa moaned, "I am full of pride, avarice and wrath! My arrogance has brought me here. I thought myself wise and clever as a serpent, but surely I was the one bit. This is my doing!" Wailing, she tore at tangled hair. "Mercy! Mercy! Have pity on the monster that is your daughter, mother!"

But Lady Chambert was long gone, if she was ever there to begin with, and Louisa was left with the epiphany that it was her fault. The hard, lump of rock she swallowed was the onus belonging solely to her. The weight compressing her chest was her reward for every conceited notion and decision she had made. Her haughty, angry tongue had sent her mother away. Her naivete about her own political prowess locked her up.

"You asked to speak with me?" the Lictor said as he made himself comfortable in the chair Richard offered him. His compatriot stalked an agitated path just behind them. "You understand speaking with me means speaking with us," he said as he motioned to the irritated man at his back.

"Y-yes," Richard said, nervous and insecure before these secret lawmen of his clan.

"What is this about, boy?" spat the other Lictor. His tone of superiority plucked at Richard's pride, serving only to erase much of the anxiety that would have been to the Lictor's benefit.
"My testimony," Richard answered.

"Sir, there've been no court proceedings… as of yet," the first Lictor added after a quick, side glance to his partner. "Therefore," he continued, "you have only really delivered a somewhat formal report for the purposes of identifying a suspect, not proving or disproving their guilt."

"Why are we wasting precious time here?" cracked the other man, who had paused mid-stalk to glare at both others. "You provided sufficient report for us to continue our investigation. You told us she was not here in Oxford, as she had previously claimed. There is nothing more we need from you."

"But I didna say such," Richard slapped immediately.

One Lictor straightened himself. The other hunched angrily.

"Oh?" the first man inquired, fingers drumming together. Richard made out the beginnings of a smirk tugging at his lips.

"Bollicks!" the other Lictor cursed, causing the smirk on the other man to widen a hair. "You told us..."

"I told you I had doubts as to her exact whereabouts. I never, specifically said she wasn't in Oxford."

"How interesting. Tell me," the seated Lictor said, "Has something changed? Your doubts clarified? Before my companion's pot boils over, I will – myself – admit this seems suspiciously like someone attempting to spare a loved one from their due punishment."

Richard glared. "I don't love her. I barely like her. I just don't want to go on any record as a liar because someone else twisted the words out of my mouth."

"Understandable," the first man interjected before the angry one could speak. "Then I will assume you have some kind of evidence to support your begging us here."


"How convenient," spat the man behind them.

"We'll see him out and determine for ourselves the worth of the evidence he provides."

Richard stood and moved to the desk behind him – Louisa's desk for numerous nights before her arrest. Though found elsewhere, atop the desk rested a dirtied, banged-up piece of parchment. The wax seal had been snapped in two, then cracked multiple more times, probably from where Louisa had crumpled it between angry fists before doing her best to smooth it thin enough to stuff into the chink in the wall where Richard had, eventually, found it. Richard's rough hands handled it like a relic, depositing the wrinkled letter into the Lictor's waiting palm.

"What is this?!!" his companion demanded.

The first man said nothing as he carefully inspected the broken seal, tracing a finger over the impression of a signet ring. "A letter, so it would seem," he responded, neutral to his partner's anger, "Now, be quiet while I read this."

Richard watched the other man suck his voice in, then resume his agitated pacing. No one said anything for a long time. Richard sat. The angry man alternated between pacing and standing, surly and tight. His compatriot read, re-read and read a third time, the letter in his lap. At last, he folded the letter and tapped one palm with it.
"Well?" asked the other Lictor.

"Seems… we have been lied to, my dear friend," the first man said, his voice irritated for the first time since Richard had met the man.

"What, what?! Let me see that thing!"

"I think not." The seated Lictor rose and turned to his partner, who held a stupefied expression. The Lictor turned to Richard and nodded, "Thank you for this information."

Richard only nodded back. The other man fumed, "What did the bloody letter say?"

He received another scathing look from the Lictor half a foot shorter than he. "Send someone to fetch Wolsey and release Madame Rothey into the custody of her blasted Confessor."

Do not be fooled.

There is no rescue from LaCroix.

No comfort.

No balm for the pain, for the torment, for the utter humiliation Louisa has endured.

As easily as they threw her into the cell, they pluck her from it and deposit her at the feet of her Sire – her Confessor, for all intents and purposes – and she can feel the disgust contorting his face when they do this. She cannot guarantee herself the expression is without anger that someone damaged something LaCroix essentially viewed as a piece of his property, but Louisa is smart (or used to be, anyway) to assume the lion's share has to do with her appearance and stench. She cannot fathom what she has become since disappearing into her prison, but she imagines it is something more akin to a Nosferatu than a Ventrue… something deader than the reanimated Kindred. Something foul. Louisa knows her fingers are thin, to the point she might have called them talons, but has not bothered observing the rest of herself.

She knows it is horrifying.

Feral.

Too dehydrated to be decomposing.

They have granted him the courtesy of not transporting her starved. After all, LaCroix did nothing to deserve carting a wild animal back to his temporary home. So, they fed her enough for her to be of minimal risk. That, in no way, means he rode with her. He did not even touch her. Sébastien relegated that task to the ghouls at his disposal and had her not-so-daintily stuffed into a carriage while he rode beside it.

In truth, he did not appear to her until after she had been fed a sufficient diet of three, fat Catholics and scrubbed down twice by his ghouls. The tub had to be dumped and refilled each time. By the third refill, she was left to soak in the water and wash at her leisure. The smell of lavender made her head dart about for a shade that was long abandoned to the cells. Her hands shook too much for her manage any gray area of appropriate washing – she was either useless, or manically rubbing the sudsy cloth into already traumatized skin. It was a secondary consequence LaCroix believe she deserved.

"You think you would have learned not to part and parcel your fate with a snake's", Sebastian hissed
from across the room.

"It's not as if I expect it to end this way," Louisa defended. She wanted to plunge herself entirely beneath the bath's surface, but this argument was not so easily avoided.

"Pray, tell, how did you expect it to end?" Her sire sneered

"More successfully than this."

"I will tell you what you thought!" now he was barking at her.

Louisa cut him off before it went further, "I think I have had enough of others dictating to me my own thoughts." Then all went silent as she resumed the furious scrubbing – sloughing off her topmost layer of skin and all mire it that one with it.

"That, my Childe, is your problem." he smacked, "You think you know yourself, and everything else gone so well they you never have to learn from anyone!"

"That isn't - "

"Yes it is!" LaCroix sabered, "Among your strengths is one, glaring weakness present long before I changed you over. An infectious, bloated pride that has convinced you that you are special, you are above... that you won't fall like the rest of us." He approached the tub, smacking each word until he was a nose away, "You, Louisa, are a pompous, preening, grandiose prima Donna who believes our world owes you something – you, a selfish, little, self-inflated starlet – because someone hit you, smarted you and prized your legs open; because they made you marry someone you didn't love, who didn't love you. Louisa Seyssel-Chambert Rothey, Marquess of nothing because it no longer matters. Little Louisa, jealous of her pretty sister, now jealous of her husband's mistress so she thinks – no, believes - she's outsmarted them all by playing one leech against another, only to find herself the sad, blood drained marionette, jumbled in a pile of her own strings."

Louisa sucked back any retort she might have had, though the tears in her eyes betrayed her. "Is that all?" she asked.

"No," he said, "Grow up!"

He watched.

From the shadows, he lingered out of sight and sound of the imperious Lictors and other Ventrue underlings that scuttled to and fro the cells. He watched her deterioration, helping it along as best he could. Their penchant for starving their victims into submission and confession only made it easier for the shadowy figments he created to take root inside her exhausted brain. He almost pitied her... almost, were it not for the fact that she agreed she was just as spoiled and hubristic as the rest of her misbegotten clan.

He hadn't entirely finished with his fun when they swooped in and hauled her from her prison.

Then again, he didn't have to finish anything here.

After all... the lock of hair he rolled between his fingers had yet to prove its worth.