Leave the Day

by Cinis

Summary

If Bridget had a heart that still beat, it would be beating quickly.

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The vampire coven of New York City is slowly succumbing in its fight against the Holt clan and their rot. After Meg Jackson's murder, Inquisitor Bridget Westfall is sent to help Erica, the coven's newly-promoted and dangerously inexperienced Governor, put down the Holts' insurrection, by blood and by fire if she must. Caught in the crossfire, at first by way of her relationship with Erica and then because of a relationship with Bridget as well, a human Franky is dragged into the treacherous world of the undead.

Notes

Thank you to my team of beta readers including generalantiope, Cherepashka, and Krisslona. This fic doesn't use vampire rules strictly from any particular source, though its approach is heavily influenced by Vampire: The Masquerade. Other major influences are Underworld, We Are the Night, and Blutengel.
Anxiety.

It rolls off Erica in sharp, bitter waves, tangible to Bridget and to no one else in the sterile boardroom. The other members of the New York coven whom the Governor has chosen to be present at the meeting radiate similar emotions. Vera’s nerves have a sort of twitchy feeling to them. William exudes a moody mixture of hope and resignation. All three of them are tired.

Early morning sunlight, darkly filtered through glass designed to leech away its life and its warmth so as to protect their kind, sets them in unnatural shades. Thirty-six stories above the earth in a building of concrete and steel, the room, filled as it is with the dead, feels like a crypt.

The trio all wear dark suits and fabulously expensive watches; they are decorated in the trappings of modernity. A casual observer might think them lawyers or investment bankers or corporate executives.

The are executives, of a sort.

Every coven has its own customs and Bridget likes to dress to fit in. In a blue blouse and black suit with understated silver earrings and a simple silver rope necklace, Bridget thinks she prefers New York to many of the covens she’s visited recently. Some covens, despite being young, aspire to a past from before when Bridget was born—and that was a long time ago indeed. It’s nice to wear a modern style.

Bridget leans back in her seat at the table and tilts her head to the side slightly, reading the situation. Her blond hair is fastened back in a bun, but a few strands left artfully free brush against her cheek. She enjoys the slight hint of the untidy. It makes her feel human.

Some with Bridget’s gift for emotions and in Bridget’s position might let Erica stew in her own nervous hell, but that isn’t Bridget’s way. Erica has made many mistakes, but she is young, the youngest Governor of all the New World covens. She has potential—impressive potential, beyond what Bridget is accustomed to encountering. That much is plain. Her potential needs at least another century to mature though, possibly longer. Against the forces that she’s been fighting, in the fight that she inherited from her predecessor, it’s not surprising she hasn’t won.

Erica is the New York coven’s fifth Governor in five years. She doesn’t deserve the mess that she’s found herself in.

She hasn’t won.

But, Bridget thinks, Erica could, with the right assistance.

The situation limits the promises that Bridget can make, but she knows how to work within her means. For Erica, she’ll do what she can.

“The Council has ordered me to see to the Holts and their rot, not to you,” Bridget says. It’s hard not to make it sound like a threat, but Bridget manages. She has the authority to call upon the Council to decimate the coven if she feels it is warranted. Removing a Governor is a small thing in comparison.
For a brief moment, sharp anxiety cools towards relief.

Seated next to Erica, Vera has a different reaction. Her tense worry cycles to a similarly tense anticipation. Bridget glances at her, briefly. It’s the barest flicker of her eyes, but it’s more than enough to let Vera know that Bridget noticed.

When Jacs Holt eliminated New York’s previous Governor, Vera wanted the succession. By rights it should have been hers. She had been Second to the previous Governor and thus her claim had been stronger even than that of Meg’s consort William, also seated at the table with them now. Nevertheless, the Council passed them both over for the less experienced, Erica—the Erica who is now in such desperate straits.

The succession, the players in the coven’s politics, the coven’s many troubles—all of the facts were given to Bridget by the Council. What the Council did not give to her was its reasoning.

Bridget is not old enough and not cruel enough—and hopes that she never will be—to sit on the Council. But she knows its workings well enough to think that Erica’s promotion and fall were orchestrated. Erica is a pawn, Bridget is, perhaps, a knight, and somewhere deep in the shadows are the entities that move them about the board.

In any case, it’s clear to Bridget that Vera’s ambition has colored her interpretation of Bridget’s words. Vera hasn’t done anything to suggest disloyalty, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t ready to make another bid for Governor when Erica falls. She’ll have to be watched, closely.

“Our resources are at your disposal, of course,” Erica says. As she speaks, she holds her posture perfect, and she holds perfectly still as well. It’s the preternatural stillness of a body that isn’t quite alive. It suits Erica. She is a creature of appearances. Dressed in red and in black, blonde hair slightly curled, grey-blue eyes piercing, seated in a tall chair at the far end of the long boardroom table, she certainly looks the sort of woman who could command the allegiance of every vampire in the sprawling mass of modern New York.

There’s a beauty about her and her masterful projection of control.

What Erica is not, however, is a creature of substance.

Not yet, at least.

Bridget hasn’t come to remove Erica, but Erica will not be long in her role as Governor regardless. Once Bridget’s work is done and the Holts have been taken care of, the only continuing help that Bridget will be able to give to Erica will be to push her to step down peacefully. The Council promoted Erica beyond her competence and there’s no reason she should die for that. Someday she’ll grow into such a station, but only if Bridget can make her succeed now, and only if she survives.

Bridget nods to Erica. Keeping her voice warm, she echoes, “Of course.” Then, “Why don’t you tell me what information you have now?”

Erica’s eyes shift to Vera. Catching the signal, Vera takes charge. “As you know, the Holts are an old clan mostly extinct now due to infighting. The remaining members have been sworn to our coven since their arrival from Sicily a hundred years ago. They have always been involved with certain elements, against which neither we nor the Council have any law, but over the past six years the previous Governors came to suspect that they were tainting the blood supply with synthetic opiates as well, against the Council’s proscription.”

Here, Vera pauses. She watches Bridget carefully as she says, “I am under the impression that you
need no briefing on the nature of that matter.”

As she speaks, she exudes wariness. Her words are a test of sorts. She’s seeking confirmation that Bridget is… worthy, perhaps. Good enough.

Vera is old, older than Erica though not as old as Bridget. She is smart, but, above all, she is competent. It was a misfortune that she was sired with thin blood from a poor line. In the hundreds of years since, however, she has steadfastly marched her way up the conventional hierarchy of her coven. She’s good at what she does.

Tilting her head to the side slightly, Bridget feigns a smile, even though a smile is the farthest thing from the nature of her thoughts. “You might say that I am an expert,” she says.

Vampires cannot eat food and they cannot drink wine or spirits. They cannot smoke, snort, or inject as humans do. What vampires can do is drink from human veins that have been laced with intoxicant. Since time immemorial this has meant stalking drunks in dark alleys. In the past hundred years, as humans have dreamt up new ways to take themselves to other places, vampires have followed happily in their wake. In that past hundred years, neither Council nor covens have cared. In the past decade though, the experiences available have become viciously potent, beyond anything else, and different in character.

The effects on humans have been unfortunate. The effects on the covens have been devastating.

With her gift for the emotions of others, Bridget thinks that the feeling is something that can’t be described as rapture because rapture isn’t a strong enough word for it.

It’s like being made of sunlight.

It’s living in the memory of everything that death stripped away.

And when it’s over—

When rapture ends—

In the aftermath, the desperate need to immediately chase the sensation of life to the point of self-immolation is understandable but, in the eyes of the Council, not desirable.

Many grave matters never rise to such a level.

Questioning the Council’s motives, however, isn’t something to be done aloud.

As an Inquisitor for the Council, a problem-solver of a sort, Bridget has traveled the continent patching some covens together and watching as others fall apart. There are more like Bridget, rushing from coven to coven, from Pensacola to Amarillo to Jackson, at the Council’s behest, but despite their best efforts the devastation marches on. The New York coven is too large and too diverse to simply dissipate from the rot like others have before it, and for that reason it is of vital import that order be restored. The only other option is a true purge.

Vera offers a curt nod.

William joins the discussion now. He is a very large man and all of him is muscle. It’s never been clear to Bridget if the blood of his line grants physical prowess beyond the norm, in the way that the blood of Bridget’s line tends to attune its bearers to the residue of emotion, or if his clan just has a preference for a certain look. “Meg,” he starts, naming the previous Governor. Then, he pauses.
It’s obvious to Bridget that his stew of fury and despair has momentarily silenced him. She gives him his time.

“Meg,” he starts again, “She was investigating Jacs Holt. Jacs had her people selling on the streets but the Governor before Meg had found she was working out of the blood houses too. Our houses. It started out with just the ones that already paid tribute to the Holts, but they were moving in on the rest, and some were setting up operations independently. Meg issued an interdict on the Holts and then the Holts put out a hit on Meg.”

William’s raw grief hits Bridget, sharp and sudden, more intense than even what he’d been wrestling with just moments before. Muscles in his face tense as he tries to imitate stoicism. Meg went to her rest months ago now, but, to beings without heartbeats to keep time, months and years are grains of sand on a beach.

Bridget keeps her composure.

She’s had many, many years of practice.

He doesn’t want sympathy—or, rather, his pride requires his pain go unseen.

Vera takes over again. She has worked with William for a very long time. They are, in Bridget’s estimation, a good team. “The sites operate like normal blood houses except that humans can pay extra for a hit and vampires can pay extra to bite a human on a high. It is a very lucrative business model. The Holts are using a combination of money and intimidation tactics to keep the human authorities from closing their operations down.”

Bridget nods slightly. She’s seen this before and she wants to remind her audience of that fact. Her authority here is a complex thing. She has respect by virtue of her age, and the coven fears what her affiliation with the Council means, but she needs more than that in order to be effective. The centuries have taught her that covens will take whatever rope they can. When they take too much, they hang themselves with it.

Like covens, the blood houses are as old as vampirism. They have existed in nearly every culture that vampirism has touched, sometimes at the fringes of what mortals will tolerate and sometimes fully worked into the fabric of society. They are, after all, significantly more civilized than the alternatives. In the present moment however, amongst humans, they are… controversial.

For humans, the bite of a vampire is its own special ecstasy and, for vampires, willing blood lessens the moral weight of dead existence. For the people running the houses, a pretty penny can be made off of everyone. So long as the vampires control themselves and the houses refrain from less benign variants of the trade, it’s a victimless exchange that leaves everyone sated. Adding to the blood, however, is a common and commonly dangerous way to change the equation.

“To their credit, the minders at the Holts’ houses seem to do a good job of preventing human fatalities,” Erica offers. “It’s a form of regulation through the free market. The humans are safer in the houses than on their own. For the human police, that may be enough to look the other way.” The way she says it, it’s almost as if she supports the whole enterprise, at least, on the human side. Her emotions waver, dangerously.

If her loyalties are compromised—well, that’s something to keep in mind. A Governor is meant to keep the balance between human and coven, but sometimes Governors stray from their allegiances.

“Is that so?” Bridget asks, letting her tone suggest strong skepticism.
In her experience, vampires drinking from junkies don’t stop and human bodies don’t deal well combining various forms of intoxication with blood loss.

“The Holts have trained their people well,” Vera says. Her approbation, similar to Erica’s, is obvious. Or perhaps she’s just trying to make the problem seem small. Manageable. Not something that requires drastic measures. “There are problems at the independent houses, but the Holts have a very clean operation.”

“It’s a business,” William adds.

Bridget shifts slightly in her seat. Unlike Erica, she likes to keep herself moving and projecting life, even if her heart isn’t beating. She’s an Inquisitor for the Council. She may sometimes need to seize respect from wayward covens but she doesn’t have to pretend to have power. She has it.

Every coven spawns its own novel problem.

Most novel problems can be solved with age-old solutions.

“I’d like to meet the Holts,” Bridget says.

Erica, Vera, and William don’t move—they’re dead—but the boardroom is immediately soaked in the rotten stench of fear.

The New York coven, the third oldest on the continent and by far the largest and richest, is weak.

Erica, Governor of her coven, speaks. “Inquisitor, I—“

“Call me Bridget,” Bridget cuts in, keeping her voice pleasant. “If the Holts do to me what they did to Meg, the Council will have no choice but to destroy this coven root and branch. You may wish to protect me.”

Silence hangs in the air for a moment and then Vera clears her throat. “With the Governor’s permission, we can facilitate this.” Finishing weakly, she looks to Erica for confirmation.

A quick flare of alarm precedes Erica’s rush to pick up where Vera left off. “Of course,” she says. “We’ll need to initiate contact, arrange security…”

“Would tonight work?” Bridget suggests. She is a new and unexpected guest in the city and she’d prefer to push forward quickly. If the coven is half as functional as it needs to be to survive the coming days, it can do as she asks.

More alarm, and now dismay—but followed by a brush of steel.


Bridget smiles for Erica. “And I the coven,” she replies.

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That night, it rains—because of course it does.

There’s some law of the universe that says that vampires can never conduct business in anything but the worst weather.

The coven supplies a large vampire, probably one of William’s cousins, with a black umbrella to hover next to Bridget, but she takes the umbrella from him and directs him to give her space. The
vampire, Matthew-but-call-me-Fletch, shrugs and retreats back into the downpour where Vera immediately moves to let him share her umbrella.

It’s dampened by the rain, but Bridget gets a strong whiff of affection from them.

The New Yorkers are all dressed in near-identical long black coats over their black suits. They don’t need coats—vampires are creatures of cold—but, like silk ties and crystal-faced watches, it’s part of their style. The men wear black oxfords and the women wear black heels. The most color among them is Erica’s vibrantly red lipstick.

New Yorkers.

Bridget herself has chosen a white shirt, a white jacket, and matching pants. She doesn’t have enough trust in the coven’s ability to protect her to wear a skirt. She’s let her hair down but not a strand is out of place. She’s finally working with a coven that lives in the twenty-first century and she’s going to enjoy every delicious moment of modern fashion. Her heels click against the wet concrete sidewalk.

The heels were a compromise. They’re low and she can run well enough in them, though they’re not ideal. She has to wear them though. She’s short. After hundreds of years being short, it’s just something she’s had to accept about herself.

Two black SUVs pull up to the curb outside the Governor’s residence in Brooklyn and drivers step out to open doors for their party. Vera, William, and Fletch climb into the first car. Erica gestures for Bridget to join her in the second. Much like in a limousine, a barrier has been installed between the driver’s area and the rest of the vehicle.

As the cars rejoin traffic, Bridget glances back at the Governor’s residence. Someone some number of years ago had a sense of humor and it is a de-consecrated and repurposed church. For all their black suits and corporate airs, the New York coven does have personality.

“Bridget,” Erica starts, cutting into Bridget’s thoughts.

“Hm?” Bridget prompts.

There’s an earnest sincerity in the air as Erica meets Bridget’s eyes. It’s endearing. “Dealing with the Holts ends your mission but it won’t stop the problem here,” she says. “There are too many of us who’ve become dependent.”

“You have an idea,” Bridget says, anticipating that this is a pitch of some sort. Erica may be a bad hand at keeping control of her coven and she may care for humans too much, but she’s very, very intelligent. It’s something her line, famous for its members’ premonitions of the future, prefers in its siring. If she’s thought of something new…

“I’ve reached out to the human clinics,” Erica says. “They won’t help us. But if we take the Holts’ houses and convert them, run our own clinics, combine them with human services as well—it would be expensive and no one else has done it, but our coven has the resources. We could. You’ve been across the continent following this—have you seen it? Have you seen it work? Could it work?”

Bridget crosses her arms over her chest and leans back in her seat. Her seatbelt shifts uncomfortably, digging into her neck, but she ignores it. “Methadone for vampires,” she says, half-question, half-statement.

“Yes,” Erica says. The manner in which she says it, the taste of her in the air—she is full of anticipation both for an answer in the affirmative and for Bridget’s approval.
Erica does not lack for ambition, or, Bridget thinks, for a good heart.

Bridget frowns and looks to the car window.

Erica’s wanting stirs up an answering desire to give.

Bridget will have to manage *that* carefully.

Outside, they’re passing by tall skyscrapers of glass and steel, buildings that just two hundred years ago would have been impossibly high. In the early night, every window is lit as humans go about their business, locked in the brilliant frenzy of life.

She’s seen vampires put down like rabid dogs. Like monsters. She’s seen vampires locked in cages by their brethren and fed cold blood until they feigned sanity long enough to slip out into the sunlight. She’s seen every violence imaginable, and it’s left her tired. And she’s seen— “Once,” Bridget says. “And not through any sort of organization.”

Erica smells of excitement and of hope. The mix of feelings rolling off her are of a kind that Bridget hasn’t experienced in... some time. “And it worked?” she asks.

“Doubtful,” Bridget replies. She tries hard not to become caught up in Erica’s disappointment. It’s difficult. Though Erica keeps a steady face up, she emotes profusely to Bridget’s senses and they’re in an enclosed space together. The end result is that Bridget feels somehow personally responsible for her bad news. “I didn’t stay long, but vampire and human romances rarely end well and I can’t imagine that dependence and withdrawal made it any easier for them.”

Erica’s mood shifts to... something else.

Intriguing.

“They loved each other?” Erica asks.

Bridget shrugs as she looks from the window back to Erica. “Maybe.”

“You don’t think so,” Erica says, attempting to read Bridget’s answer. “You’re one of the ones who thinks we don’t love.”

“You’re seeing a human,” Bridget concludes, voice neutral. It’s the only logical reason for the strange mix of emotions Erica is exuding and her near-defensiveness. Erica has a consort, a man whom Bridget met briefly upon her arrival in the city and then promptly forgot, but vampires, especially the younger ones, aren’t known for fidelity and Erica’s consort was *unworthy* of her.

From Erica, *chaos*.

Bridget can hardly make heads or tails of it, and she doubts Erica can do any better. That tends to be the way of things when humans and hearts are involved.

“Yes,” Erica says, wary.

Bridget tries adding a touch of warmth. “Tell me about him?”

A sudden spike of anger. Or, rather, it’s too weak to be anger… resentment, perhaps.

“Her?” Bridget tries again. “I didn’t mean to assume.”

But she had, assumed, that is. Almost all vampires who live past their first century experiment. Most
vampires who live past their second century find something they like and become set in their ways. Erica being… Erica… Bridget leapt to certain conclusions. Unfounded, it would seem.

“Her name is Franky,” Erica says. There’s a genuine fondness in the way she says the name. The contours of it, the quiet strength—the feeling comes from Erica, Bridget is sure, but it reminds her of something familiar but not quite close enough to remember. “She’s a cook,” Erica continues. “We met… at a club… a while ago.”

Bridget reads Erica’s embarrassment and knows better than to press. If she does press, she risks provoking rank hostility. Interesting though that the Governor of the New York coven would be embarrassed about the circumstances in which she met someone. It’s this sort of thing that made Bridget assume Erica’s human would be male, and generically so. That said, the feelings radiating from Erica, the ones that aren’t embarrassment, give Bridget an idea. This Franky could be one way to push Erica to take a step back from her perilous role trying and failing to run the vampires of the city.

That will be a task for a later date, however.

For now, Bridget is merely gathering information. She doesn’t want to embarrass Erica. There are other ways of provoking someone that are more constructive.

“You seem quite fond of her,” Bridget says. “Perhaps when this is all over, I could meet her?”

It’s not a true suggestion. Bridget merely means to plant the idea in Erica’s mind.

Erica bristles. She doesn’t reply immediately. She’s looking for a polite way to strenuously object.

Bridget intervenes, offering Erica a way out of the predicament Bridget created for her. “I’ll likely be called away quite quickly though,” she adds. “So I doubt it would be possible.”

Erica forces a polite smile. The red of her lipstick reminds Bridget of blood.

Blood from a human is life.

Blood from a vampire—

Blood from a vampire is power.

“Great minds think alike,” Erica says, stiff.

Bridget smiles back.

The conversation lapses into silence.

It’s an almost peaceful silence. The car is one of the luxury models that muffles the sounds of both machine and city. The drive from Brooklyn to the meeting point is long—the traffic is heavy and Bridget wonders how it is that humans, vampires, anyone can live in such a place—but their mode of travel is so insulated that she feels distant from it all. When they arrive though, stepping out of the black SUV and into the rain snaps the world back into dark and dreary reality.

Bridget has targets to meet, goals to accomplish.

The location that’s been chosen is neutral ground, or so Erica and her lieutenants say. Neutral ground was a concept that meant more before the days of horseless carriages, steam engines, and helicopters. Bridget is uncomfortably aware of how much she is depending on the protection of the coven and
the threat of the Council as she walks into this... negotiation.

The neutral ground is, to Bridget’s eye, some sort of homage to late medieval architecture. It brings back memories. “What did you say this place was?” Bridget asks.

“It’s the Cloisters,” Erica answers. “It’s an arm of the Met. It’s a mix of pieces of old European monasteries and churches. Imported. Nothing here is still sacred enough to keep us out, but there’s a touch of consecration still about and no one wants to pick a fight here.”

Bridget revises her opinions. It seems neutral ground does still have meaning after all.

Well-dressed security guards open the gates and let their party in without comment. Bridget doesn’t ask how it is that the meeting could take place here. A coven as rich and connected as that of New York can open any human doors it pleases.

Within the compound, Vera leads, Erica and Bridget walk side by side behind her, and William and Fletch bring up the rear. They pass by statues on pedestals, blocky and colorful figures in glass, figures of Jesus on the cross—all things that remind Bridget of childhood and adolescence. Her skin crawls. It’s not just because of the ghostly cobwebs of ancient sanctity that they disturb as they traipse, dead, through the world of the living. Childhood and adolescence are a time she’d rather not remember.

Vera takes them to a courtyard, surrounded by columned walkways. Here, they wait. As they wait, Bridget reaches out and runs her fingers over one of the columns. It’s made of pink marble. Its capital has been carved to show some inhuman monster that Bridget doesn’t have a name for.

The medieval monks had vivid imaginations.

Their party stays under the covered walkway. In the courtyard—it’s a garth, Bridget supposes, if all this is a fragment of a monastery—the rain continues to fall. It’s a hard and steady rain. There’s little wind about and so the sound of droplets hitting stone and grass is almost peaceful.

Peace is not something that Bridget has ever associated with church, with religion, with God.

Her family wished her to be a nun.

She was ill-suited to be a nun.

But, in the eyes of her family, she hadn’t been much suited for anything else either.

If Bridget entered a convent now—a dead creature formed from the absence of faith and the sacred—she would burn to white ash from the inside out.

“They’re here,” Vera mutters, drawing Bridget from her thoughts. Vera is holding a hand to her ear where she has an earpiece wired to a radio kept inside her coat. “They’re on their way through the building.” She pauses, then, “It’s Jacs and it’s Brayden. Vinnie hasn’t come.”

“Thank you, Vera,” Bridget returns.

It is good to have something to focus on that isn’t the past.

Bridget’s companions are tense. She’s tense too, if she’s willing to admit it to herself. Little will directly ride on the outcome of this meeting—Bridget only asked for it to have an opportunity to read what she can from the Holts—but first impressions are important.
If Bridget had a heart that still beat, it would be beating quickly.

“If you hear a voice in your head,” Vera mutters, “It’s Jacs. Don’t listen to it.”


Surprise comes from the entire party but it’s Erica who speaks. “You have?” she says. “You’ve come to our coven before?”

Bridget’s response is measured. “I knew their clan in the Old World,” she says.

She has no intention of revealing more, and there’s no pressure to—as she finishes speaking, footsteps approach. Five figures advance down the covered walkway alongside the courtyard. Only one of them is a woman and Bridget assumes that one, then, is Jacs. Brayden is the one who looks to be a teenager. The other three are grown men. They’re not as muscular as William and Fletch, but look able to handle themselves in a fight and were probably brought in case of that possibility.

Like Erica, Vera, William, and Fletch, Jacs and her group are dressed for New York. They wear black.

The five of Bridget’s party and the five of Jacs’ party fall into lines facing one another.

No one speaks.

Whoever speaks first admits submission.

Even without Bridget’s gift, she’d know that the tension in the air is thick to the point of suffocation.

It’s a pissing contest and it’s ridiculous.

“If you’ve nothing to say, I think we can conclude here,” Bridget finally announces.

Jacs sneers. “Did you think I’d come and beg?” she asks. She’s a tight ball of hostility and paranoia. There’s little in her that Bridget can work with. “Did you think we’re scared of you and the Council?”

“I thought we could have a discussion,” Bridget replies, avoiding any tone that might provoke unnecessarily. Jacs, no doubt, will provoke herself. She’s already started.

Bridget lets her attention shift, as briefly as she dares, to Brayden. He has the same hostility and paranoia as his sire, but beneath it Bridget thinks she senses doubt. It’s a weak glimpse though, and it may be wishful thinking on her part. More likely than not, he’s both useless and dangerous—an unfortunate combination.

“What is there to discuss?” Jacs asks. “I’m running a business. Are you going to interfere?”

Bridget answers Jacs’ question with a question. “Is there a reason I should?”

It’s bait. It’s *obvious* bait.

Jacs takes it anyway.

“I killed the last Governor,” she snarls. “Turned her into a bloody mess.”

The surge of red fury from slightly behind Bridget is, without a doubt, William. It nearly drowns out Vera’s panicky dread, muffled as if she’s consciously attempting to suppress it. An odd reaction for
one of her age—but Bridget can’t spare Vera her attention at the moment.

“Vengeance for that is entirely a coven matter,” Bridget says. “I am here representing the Council.”

“So what does the Council want?” Jacs asks. In Bridget’s mind, another voice, ‘What more does the Council want? You killed my brothers and sisters, bitch. Are you here to kill me too? I’ll kill you first. I’ll make you suffer before I do it.’

In the same way that she can, if she so chooses, shutter herself away from the richness of emotion around her, Bridget could shut out Jacs as well.

She doesn’t.

“The Council commands you to stop supplying heroin and the rest... All of your trade in such substances is to cease, and you are to abandon the trade in blood.” Bridget can’t stop her distaste leaking into her voice as she pronounces the syllables of addiction. It doesn’t matter that she doesn’t continue her list. The Holts won’t comply. “Your other operations may remain.”

Jacs’ eyes narrow.

‘I remember you, Westfall,’ the voice in Bridget’s head echoes. ‘I remember you. And they say I don’t have a heart?’

“Or what?” Jacs asks, using her physical mouth, fangs barred like a fledgling as she defies the Council like the short-sighted and arrogant fool she is. “We’re as rich as the coven. We’re as powerful as the coven. We have more guns than the coven. What can you do to us?”

Bridget doesn’t like intimidation and she doesn’t like people who employ it. She doesn’t like herself when she employs it. Sometimes though, it’s important to make herself understood.

“I asked for this meeting as a courtesy,” she says. “I came to let you know the Council’s orders. I’m not here to answer questions you already know the answers to.”

“This meeting is over,” Jacs says. She raises a hand, gesturing to Brayden and her guards. “We’re leaving.”

Neither Bridget nor any of her companions move until Jacs has gone out of sight. Even then, they wait another few minutes for good measure.

Finally, Erica, sighing, “I don’t like that woman.”

“No one does,” William chimes. “Did you see the way Brayden was squirming this whole time? He doesn’t like her either.”

Bridget resists frowning to herself. Whatever Brayden was doing, she was so focused on Jacs that she missed it.

She hates making mistakes.

Erica crosses her arms. “So, Inquisitor,” she says, wary but not hostile. “What now?”

“Jacs is going to strike,” Bridget replies. It’s a foregone conclusion, to the point she’s stating the obvious. “You need to strike first. Pick one of the houses under her protection and burn it.”

The four members of the New York coven, the four leaders of the New York coven, immediately radiate fear and uncertainty.
Bridget is beginning to find their timidity trying. The Council wouldn’t have sent Bridget if Erica and her lieutenants had been willing to do what must be done of their own volition. Even before Erica, if Meg had moved against the Holts immediately instead of trying at some sort of long game, order would have been preserved. And what was it that they thought Bridget had been sent to do? Negotiate?

Surprisingly, Erica finds enough backbone to argue. “I prefer a more peaceful approach,” she says. She’s starting to dig in her heels. She intends to put up a fight.

“And what is that more peaceful approach, Governor?” Bridget asks. She asks mildly, but her choice of words is pointed. This is not the first time Bridget has done this work for a coven. It is dirty, bloody, and painful work. Peaceful approaches—if there is any such approach to rooting out a vampire cartel that could merit that adjective—don’t work.

“Well,” Erica starts, “We could—”

Whatever else Erica was going to say, a loud buzzing from her coat pocket cuts her off. Annoyed, she pulls out her phone, glances at the caller, silences the call, then shoves it back into her pocket. It’s hard for Bridget to evaluate any emotional read in the split second, but she has eyes. She saw the glowing name on the screen. Franky.

Erica starts again. “We could summon an Assembly. With you here, the clans will be willing to sanction the Holts. Coming from the Assembly instead of the Governor, the rest of the coven—”

Again, Erica’s phone rings. Already agitated, this time a spike of sharp anger flares from her. She makes to reach for her phone again.

“Why don’t you answer that,” Bridget suggests. It’s not a suggestion. It is unmistakably not a suggestion. A suggestion would not have served to prove the point Bridget intends to drive home.

Vera and William understand Bridget’s play immediately. Both of them shift, on edge, tense, ready to support their Governor. A beat behind them, Fletch catches on and adjusts his posture as well. He’s the youngest of the group by far but he’s a very quick learner.

On their part, it’s a bold move. Bridget is an Inquisitor of the Council. One does not rise to her position without age and power. That the trio of them are willing to risk themselves for Erica speaks of admirable, and unexpected, loyalty.

The phone continues to ring.

Erica though—

Erica’s emotional flicker is easy to read—it’s fear because she’s just as aware as her companions that Bridget’s words amount to a thinly veiled threat. Still, reluctant, Erica swipes the screen of her phone and raises it up to her ear. Whatever fear Erica may have on behalf of her human, fear for herself has surely won out. At her side, her officers exude a combination of relief and dismay. “What?” Erica snaps.

Vampire hearing is only somewhat more acute than that of a human, but standing so close to Erica, Bridget can hear the staticky other side of the conversation perfectly well.

“Erica, I need help,” the person on the other side says. It’s a woman’s voice. Presumably Erica’s Franky. She has a noticeable accent to Bridget’s ear. In conversation with Erica, it’s clear from how they both speak that Erica moves in the circles of the New York elite and Franky does not.
“I’m busy,” Erica says tersely. She glances to Bridget, then looks away towards the courtyard beside them. The rain has eased to the point of a mere drizzle now. “I’ve told you not to—”

“I need help,” Franky repeats, angry, “And it’s a fang thing.” When Erica doesn’t immediately cut her off, she keeps going, “You remember my friend Allie? Allie Novack? You said she was nice? She’s taken off from Kaz’ shelter and gone down the road to one of your houses.” There’s a pause, then, “Come on, Erica. They drag bodies out of that place.”

Again, Erica glances at Bridget. Her voice, now, sounds pained. “Franky, I can’t. I—”

Bridget raises a hand and makes a gesture for Erica to cover her phone.

“Hold on,” Erica says. She taps the screen of the phone, then, scowling, holds it out to show she’s hit the mute button.

Bridget doesn’t bother reading Erica. Erica doesn’t have any sort of poker face to speak of and she’s clearly upset. How was this woman, of all the candidates, chosen for Governor? Politics. “Get an address. Tell her you’re on your way,” Bridget says. “Reassure her that her friend will be fine.”

Erica hesitates.

Bridget offers an encouraging nod. She thinks this is what Erica wants to do. The only reason Erica is hesitating is that she suspects some trap on Bridget’s part.

Erica’s wanting wins out.

Unmuting her phone, Erica raises it back up to her ear. “Franky, are you still there?”

“So are you going to help or what?” Franky demands.

Erica’s voice is wooden. “What is the address?” she asks. “I am on my way. Your friend will be fine.”

Franky gives an address, Erica offers another stiff reassurance, and then they both hang up.

As soon as they hang up, Vera speaks. “Will, Fletch, and I can wait for another car,” she says. She is both assuming that Bridget will not be accompanying Erica and also pushing for it.

“No, it’s fine,” Bridget says. “I’ll go with Erica.” She starts to move towards the door that they came to the pink marble courtyard by. Judging by the sound of their footsteps, the others fall in behind her.

They’re discontent, but even Erica doesn’t try to argue.

Outside, the black SUVs that brought them are waiting. Bridget goes to the second car, slides into one of the seats, and waits for Erica, who is only a step or two behind her, to speak with the blond woman driving their car and then get into the vehicle as well.

After she closes the door and before she reaches for her seatbelt, Erica turns to Bridget. “What are you doing?”

Bridget buckles in and doesn’t answer until she’s heard the satisfying click of the safety lock. More than half of car accident fatalities involve persons not wearing seatbelts. She’s far too old to die in a traffic incident. Vampires, especially those of Bridget’s experience, are stronger, faster, and far more durable than humans. Still, they are not invulnerable. When she’s finished she answers with a question of her own, “What do you mean?”
Glowering, Erica sees to her own seatbelt. “What do you want with Franky?” Erica demands as the car revs up and starts to move.

“Your human?” Bridget asks, pretending she doesn’t quite remember woman’s name. Humans are human. There’s no reason she should remember, though, for her own reasons, she does in this case. In truth though, Erica’s demand has taken her by surprise. She’d expected an objection to her exercise of control rather than one centered around Erica’s Franky.

“I don’t want her dragged into this,” Erica says, blunt.

Through the car windows, the view of trees gives way to unending cityscape once more. The address they’re headed towards is in the Bronx.

“You brought her into this when you fell for her,” Bridget says. She says it like it’s a fact. It is a fact. “You can’t protect your people by ignoring their calls and refusing your help.”

Erica bristles. Bridget has hit a nerve. “You think I don’t try to help her?” Erica asks. “Franky doesn’t know what to do with help if you slap her in the face with it.”

It’s a metaphor choice that says quite a lot. It also doesn’t invite exploration at the moment. Bridget redirects the conversation. “The coven needs to trust its leader.”

“You don’t like my leadership style?” Erica asks. As she speaks, her lips curl just enough to show a hint of fang.

“Is it working for you?” Bridget replies, voice mild.

“Yes,” Erica returns, not hesitating at all.

And this, from the woman who wants to shut down the Holts through the power of social ostracization.

Bridget keeps care to maintain a neutral face as a tense silence descends.

The drive from the Cloisters to the Bronx is mercifully short. When the car stops moving and the engine cuts, the view from the window is… Bridget knows better than to assume she’ll ever know what she sees when she goes to a new place. That said, she has been traveling between covens for centuries and she is rarely surprised by the landscapes she sees. This occasion is no exception.

The street is residential, a collection of brick buildings set back from the edge of the sidewalk by tired concrete stoops. Rusty fences protect small patches of bare earth. Down the block a ways is a run-down but still functional gas station with a couple men sitting outside it and drinking.

Erica doesn’t wait for the driver to open the door. She opens it herself and steps out into the street. The drizzle has subsided to nothing and the clouds are starting to clear to reveal stars, but the air still smells of rain.

Bridget follows Erica out of the car and then towards a person leaning up against one of the nearby fences. The figure is wearing dark jeans and a hideously vibrant blue-green hoodie. The color isn’t anything in particular except offensive to the eyes, but teal might describe it well. There are times in unlife when vampiric vision, the ability to see near-perfectly in all but complete darkness, is an unfortunate blessing.

At Erica’s approach, the person by the fence pushes forward and moves towards them. It’s a woman —Franky, Bridget assumes.
Under her vile hoodie, she has brown hair and very pretty eyes, accentuated with heavy makeup. They’d be pretty even without the makeup.

“What took you so long?” Franky hisses. Her hands are jammed in her pockets and she glances up and down the street as she speaks. There are a few other humans about, but they’re not quite within easy earshot and they seem to be minding their own business. Even if Bridget couldn’t feel Franky’s radiant nerves, the human is acting as if she’s about to be mugged.

Erica has her arms crossed. “It’s a big city,” she replies, defensive. Standing next to Franky, she’s the taller of the two, though she’s wearing heels and Franky isn’t. “What did you want me to do?” Her tone is terse and suggests only a fraction of the smoldering stew of emotions she’s leaking into the night air. Desire, affection, confusion, fear, anger—everything that can be felt, she’s feeling all at once.

Whatever Erica’s relationship with Franky is, it is not easy.

“Can’t you fangs fly?” Franky says. As she speaks, she’s sort of bouncing her weight on the balls of her feet. Perhaps she’s cold. Bridget can’t feel the cold very well, but it’s getting to be the time of year for it. Franky nods her head in Bridget’s direction. “And who’s that?”

Erica drops her voice as if by dropping her voice she can stop Bridget from hearing. She can’t, and she knows it. “Don’t mind her,” Erica says. “Where’s your friend?”

“Other side of the street, five down to the right, blue door,” Franky says. “Get her out. Please, Erica.”

The way Franky looks at Erica, earnest hope and real fear mixed together—if Franky were to look at Bridget like that, Bridget doubts even she’d be able to say no. That is to say, Erica, utterly trapped in her tempestuous mess of an unliving heart, doesn’t stand a chance.

Erica melts. Her stiff posture breaks and, shifting forward, she reaches out with one hand to brush her fingers against Franky’s elbow.

“I’ll take care of this,” Erica murmurs, soft. She glances, quickly, to Bridget. It’s a warning and there’s enough bite in Erica’s eyes that it’s respectable. Bridget returns a small shrug. She won’t harm Franky in Erica’s absence. Erica then looks back to Franky. “Thin, blonde, ponytail, yes?”

Franky nods rapidly.

Erica leans in for a kiss, the briefest brush of contact, and then turns, striding with purpose towards the building Franky singled out.

In Erica, conviction.

In Franky, trust.

Bridget feels the faint ghost of lips against her own.

Strong enough emotions don’t always have clear sources. The affection lingering all about like a sickly sweet cloud could be from Erica or it could be from Franky. By the intensity of it, it’s probably some combination of both of them.

As Erica marches down the street, Bridget meanders closer to the human. If Franky knows how to locate Erica’s wayward spine, she’ll be more useful than Bridget anticipated. And… Franky does
have very pretty eyes. “You have a lot of faith in her,” she says.

Franky shrugs and sort of dances again. Definitely cold, despite the ugly teal hoodie. Now that Bridget looks at it, it looks rather wet. Franky’s been outside watching the house for a while. “You’re wearing a bad color to be in this part of the city,” Franky says. “In this city,” she amends. “White’s shit for New York.”

“You look cold,” Bridget says. Moving smoothly, she takes off her white jacket. As she moves, Franky watches. *Keenly.*

When Bridget offers the jacket though, Franky leans back slightly. As she leans back, Bridget gets a glimpse of several fresh bite scars, accompanied by dark bruising, on both sides of her neck. “Hey, I’m experimenting with monogamy right now.”

With that many bites, if Franky weren’t *experimenting with monogamy,* she’d probably be dead. Not killing during a feed is hard enough even when the vampire knows how much has already been taken. Even *monogamous,* it’s a small miracle Franky is still breathing. Erica’s restraint is admirable and entirely in character.

Bridget cracks a half-smile, intended to put Franky at ease. She doesn’t withdraw the jacket. “I respect that. You do look cold though.”

Franky hesitates, then takes the extra layer and pulls it on overtop her damp hoodie. The combination doesn’t fit particularly well, but she does look warmer and Bridget’s feel of her is that she’s slightly less stressed. “Thanks,” Franky mutters.

“I’m called Bridget,” Bridget offers. Hands now empty, she slips them into her pockets, mimicking Franky’s earlier posture.

“I’m Franky,” says Franky. Beginnings of a grin tugging at her lips, her eyes travel over Bridget’s now jacket-less body. Catching the look, Bridget raises an eyebrow. Completely unapologetic, Franky shrugs. Apparently she’s still allowed to flirt.

Bridget raises her other eyebrow and Franky lets out a short laugh.

Not as cold but still not warm, Franky wraps herself in a hug before looking away from Bridget to go back to staring at the house down the street. Erica is standing just outside the open door, arguing with whoever’s on the other side. They haven’t raised their voices so, at such a distance, Bridget can’t make out what they’re saying.

What she can hear is a very aggressive sigh from Franky. “So who the fuck *are* you?” Franky asks.

Across the street, Erica steps into the house and the door closes behind her.

“I’m a visitor to the coven,” Bridget says. It’s not a lie. She’d rather not get into the details with the human though. She deflects away from herself. “Erica says you met at club?”

Franky grins. “And she didn’t tell you what kinda club, did she?”

Bridget replies with a soft hum. Franky’s grin is infectious and there’s not much to be gained from fighting the way her own half smile is trying to turn into a full smile. As Bridget smiles, she feels Franky’s stress further ease. “No, she left that part out,” Bridget says.
Franky’s grin widens. “Well if she’s still not saying, I ain’t gonna.”

“Fair,” Bridget says, shrugging.

“Okay, my turn to go fishing,” Franky says. She continues to grin, but there’s definitely something mischievous about her now. It’s attractive and… it’s too bad about the monogamy thing. “Erica’s some kind of bigwig in the coven?”

Bridget controls her expression very carefully. It wouldn’t be surprising if Erica hasn’t told Franky much about the coven or about coven politics. Given Erica’s defensiveness about Franky being drawn into Bridget’s work, it would make sense.

Erica is more assertive about her human than she is about her coven.

Thus, as for Bridget’s answer—

“I suppose,” Bridget says. Franky already suspects something. Bridget is free to confirm the suspicion, as long as she doesn’t elaborate on it. Given that Franky refused Bridget’s inquiry only a few moments prior, it seems rather equitable as well.

Franky’s anxiety flares.

Perhaps Bridget misread the situation and gave the wrong answer.

“She’ll be okay in there, right?” Franky asks. She tilts her head towards the house.

Bridget’s eyebrows rise before she can think to stop them.

If Erica can’t handle a few thin-bloods and fledglings, the New York coven has bigger problems than the Holts.

“She’ll be fine,” Bridget says. “Trust her.”

Franky lets out a short laugh. “I do trust her,” she says. She pauses, then adds, “More than I trust me, for sure.”

Bridget is about to reply when, across the street, the door of the house opens again. Erica walks out with an unconscious woman in her arms.

Franky immediately begins bouncing on the balls of her feet again.

As Erica nears, Bridget asks, “Franky, do you have a lighter on you?”

Franky pauses her bouncing. “Yeah, why?”

“May I see it?” Bridget asks again.

Without further questioning, Franky pulls a plastic lighter from her pocket and hands it to Bridget. Bridget takes the lighter, then steps back. Erica has nearly arrived.

Franky doesn’t wait for Erica to get to them. She darts forward, swearing under her breath.

Awkwardly, Erica transfers the woman to Franky. The woman is not entirely unconscious, but she’s in a stupor. Erica, a vampire, had the advantage of preternatural strength in carrying the woman down the street. Franky has no such blessing and the woman ends up propped up against her instead of in her arms.
Even from a few yards away, Bridget can smell fresh blood. Erica probably had to disentangle and remove someone while retrieving the woman.

“I can’t tell,” Erica starts, “How is she?”

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Franky shoots back. “This is bad. Fuck. I think she’s been worse before?”

The both of them are anxious, and their anxieties are feeding off each other.

Bridget grimaces. She walks back towards them. The woman is just as she was described earlier, thin, blonde, hair in a ponytail. As Bridget nears, she can feel an intense contentment radiating from her and encroaching on the fear and worry of Franky and Erica. The continued strength of the feeling, even after an aborted feeding, suggests to Bridget that the woman won’t die, though these things are never certain.

Often, when drugs alone won’t kill a human, vampires will.

“If you want to be certain, you should take her to a hospital,” Bridget says. “But I think she’ll live regardless.”

Unsure, Franky looks from her friend to Bridget, then back to her friend.

“Bridget knows what she’s talking about, Franky,” Erica says. To Bridget’s sense, Erica doesn’t feel genuine confidence, but she certainly manages to project it in her voice. “If she thinks Allie will live, Allie will live.”

A voice in the back of Bridget’s mind—well, now Allie had better live....

Bridget reaches out with the hand that isn’t wrapped around Franky’s lighter and gently touches her fingertips to Allie’s forehead. The near-unconscious woman twitches, slightly. “If she stops responding, you will have to get help,” Bridget says. “And not the kind of help that vampires can give. Where is she staying right now?”


Erica, cynical, a side of her that Bridget hasn’t seen before, interjects, “Kaz loves broken women nearly as much as she hates men and vampires. She’ll take care of her anyway. And she almost certainly has naloxone stockpiled.”

Franky makes a face. Hopeful, annoyed, scared, conflicted—hers is an expressive demeanor.

Gingerly, Bridget shifts her fingers to push Allie’s head to one side, exposing the fresh bite marks on her neck. The wounds have mostly stopped bleeding. Vampire saliva is powerful stuff.

A bit of blood comes away on Bridget’s fingers as she pulls back.

It smells good.

Bridget ignores her hunger. She’ll feed later, probably on blood from a bag, microwaved. Not half as appetizing, but a hundred times more polite than licking her fingers now.

This leaves her with the problem of sticky crimson on her skin. She holds her hand away from herself, waiting for the blood to dry. Franky was right. White really was the wrong choice for the night.

“Take our car,” Bridget says. “The driver will drop you off where you need to go.”
Franky hesitates. “What about you?”

Erica, suddenly nervous, smiles at her human. “We’ll call for another one.”

Bridget joins in the smiling. “Go on,” she says, flicking her bloody fingers encouragingly.

Franky’s eyes narrow as she looks between Erica and Bridget, then she shrugs as best she can with her friend leaning up against her. “Okay,” she says. “Thanks.” Then, for Erica and Erica alone, her voice drops slightly. “I owe you.”

“I know,” Erica replies in much the same tone. “And I intend to collect.”

With Erica’s help, they load Franky’s friend into the coven’s car. Erica tells the driver, Linda, to take Allie to the shelter first and then to take Franky home. Linda doesn’t seem particularly surprised at the instruction. If she’s the driver who normally ferries Erica about, she’s probably encountered Franky and Franky’s problems before.

Bridget waits until the car turns the corner at the far end of the street before turning her full attention back to Erica.

Their eyes meet.

A wave of fear rolls off of Erica. It is eased, slightly, by a sense of accomplishment, but it is still unmistakably fear.

Bridget holds out Franky’s lighter. In the soft glow of the nearby streetlamps, its purple plastic body, half-full of lighter fluid, gleams.

“There’s a gas station down the block,” Bridget says, eyes never leaving Erica’s. “Burn the house.”

Erica starts, “It’s not one of the Holts’ houses. I—”

“Burn it.”

Chapter End Notes

While drugs are present in this fic and form part of the underlying plot, this story will not be focusing on them or delving too deeply into the details of the human cost or nuances of policy—which, I think, is in keeping with how the show handles issues of this nature (which is to say, the show likes drama more than it likes details). I do want to be careful with this topic though, for obvious reasons. The characters all have their own ideas about drugs and drug control, based around what felt appropriate given who they are in canon. Their ideas should not be taken as reflecting mine. I’ve got opinions—we all have opinions, let’s be honest—but this fic doesn’t represent them. I’m writing about lesbian vampires here, not, like, things that matter, ya know?
The smell of black smoke is thick in the air.

The screams, too, are thick.

It’s impossible to block out the agony of sunlit fire. Standing in the shadows, Bridget watches monsters burn and she burns with them. They’ve been nailed to crosses and left out to enduring blazing desiccation by her order. She can’t not watch, just like she can’t not feel. Arms crossed, she holds herself.

She’s in a dream, or a memory, or a dream of a memory—something unreal.

But it feels real.

It feels like yesterday.

“You’ve done excellent work, Westfall.”

Bridget makes a half-turn to glance at the balding man beside her before returning to the scene on the hill. The name he uses for the moment is Derek Channing, but Bridget has known him as several other things over the long centuries. He is a representative of the Council. He may even be on the Council for all she knows. He’s personable, but he’s not so personable that Bridget ever feels quite at ease around him. To her senses, he is utterly unreadable in every way.

“Thank you,” Bridget says. She attempts to smile, but there are people who called her a friend screaming and burning on the hill above them and she doesn’t manage. Her skin feels like it’s on fire. The second-hand pain is near to crippling.

It wouldn’t be right to block it out.

“There were some on the Council who doubted,” Channing continues. “I was a believer. Don’t forget that. I believed in you. They said—they said get her out of there. Let’s just let that coven go. Sanctify the city! Burn them all! Purge the place! But I convinced them to wait and now you’ve cleaned house splendidly. All those lives you’ve saved...”

Something in Bridget breaks. “I intend to retire.”

Channing’s body language speaks of astonishment, but he’s far too inhuman to ever feel something so mundane. “Inquisitor, I really don’t think you want to do that.”

A chill runs down Bridget’s spine. She knows a threat when she hears one.

“You have such a bright future,” Channing says. “Much brighter than those blokes up on that hill, even if they are on fire.”

Channing laughs. Bridget doesn’t.

Vampires don’t need to breathe and so they don’t suffocate and fade away as they burn. They just scream and scream and scream...
“Maybe you could relocate though,” Channing suggests. “There’s a need for someone with your talents in the New World—or, I believe they’re calling it the United States now. It might suit you. I could speak with the Council on your behalf?”

Bridget inclines her head slightly. “I’d appreciate it.”

Now, a new voice, one that’s not from Bridget’s memories, enters. “I appreciated it.”

Bridget looks away from Channing to Jacs Holt.

She doesn’t look much like herself, but that’s the way of dreams. In this unreal place, she’s an entity that is beyond human form, dark and malevolent with rage.

In her sleep, Bridget forgot to guard herself. It has been nearly two centuries since she last dealt with the likes of Jacs. Bridget’s ability to reach out and feel the hearts of others can leave her unconscious mind particularly vulnerable to Jacs’ ability to rip her way into heads.

“I’m going to appreciate stuffing you in a church and locking the door,” Jacs continues.

Now that Jacs has shown herself, Bridget finds that the burning of the vampires on the hill has faded out. Her mind is clearer, though she doubts that was Jacs’ intent. “Have we met?” Bridget asks. “I think I’d remember you if we had.”

Jacs points up to the hill. “That was my family. My blood. You don’t remember me, but I remember you. You’re a—”

“Bridget! Bridget!”

Bridget’s eyes fly open as she lunges for the person shaking her. Erica’s delicate throat is in her hands before she’s remembered where she is, when she is. It’s the feel of sharp and cold steel just below her chin that brings her fully into the here and now.

“Bridget,” Erica says, trying to sound soothing even as she leaks panic into the still air of the guest room of the former church that the coven’s Governors call home. The fingers around her throat aren’t pressing so tightly that she can’t speak. “It’s just me.”

Bridget doesn’t release her. “Put down the sword and I’ll let go.”

Bridget is angry, but being angry at Erica is unfair. In her old age, she’s become a heavy sleeper even though vampires normally need very little sleep. By some miracle it hasn’t ended her yet, but every night it still could. If Erica had meant to finish her, Bridget would not have woken.

Taking care to avoid sudden movements, Erica maneuvers her sword away from Bridget’s neck. The Governor’s blonde hair is in a sloppy ponytail, she has a tactical vest strapped overtop of a black silk blouse, and there’s a military assault rifle hanging from a strap over her shoulder, complementing the empty scabbard on her belt. She’s got an earpiece in her left ear and the corresponding radio is in a pocket of her vest.

Something is very wrong.

Bridget releases Erica and moves to slip out of the bed the coven has provided her with. She’s headed straight for her dresser. Loose fitting blue pajamas are less than ideal for fights. “What’s going on?” Bridget asks as she yanks a pair of heavy black pants and a grey t-shirt out of a drawer. She can feel Erica’s eyes on her as she starts to change.
“I had a premonition,” Erica says. Her voice is tight and her words are efficient. “We’re going to be attacked.”

“I see,” Bridget mumbles, more focused on checking the safety on her pistol than on the conversation.

The pistol and a second magazine go into a holster on her left hip. Her own short sword goes on the right.

The fifteenth century was a miserable time for more reasons than Bridget could ever fully enumerate, but she does sometimes miss the days before firearms. It was easier to leverage the gradual accumulation of strength and power that came with age. Skill was a factor too, but by and large she knew when she could win a fight and when she couldn’t. Bullets are unpredictable levelers and make humans far more dangerous than they have any right to be.

Seeing how Erica had to wake her up, Bridget assumes they’ll be dealing with humans.

“Morning?” Bridget asks. “Afternoon?” The living quarters of the Governor’s mansion are all underground and so there are no windows in the guest room. Though some vampires have taken advantage of specially treated glass in order to live in high rise apartment buildings directly over subway stations, most still prefer the daytime security of the earth.

“Just past nine in the morning,” Erica answers. She slips her sword back into its scabbard.

“Jacs was planning this before the meeting last night,” Bridget concludes. “It’s a good thing you struck first.”

Erica glowers but doesn’t argue. She spent the entire trip back to the mansion sulking, even though Bridget allowed her time to drag everyone out from the house before burning it. She still hasn’t accepted that Bridget’s way is correct, but she’ll come around eventually. Or she won’t. It doesn’t matter much in the end so long as she doesn’t put up a fight about it.

“There’s a tunnel out, I assume?” Bridget asks.

“You want to run?” Erica asks.

Bridget tilts her head to the side, quizzical. “You don’t?”

Erica bristles. She sets one hand on the barrel of her rifle. “This is my house,” she says. “This is my coven.”

Bridget smiles. Erica’s answer is a good answer. The flicker of emotion in Bridget’s chest—it might very well be pride. Erica’s Governorship could be salvageable after all.

“Also,” Erica adds, “This property has been used by the coven Governor for over a hundred years. It has no secrets. It’s easier to defend here than fight through whoever’s coming. I’ve called Vera. She’ll have Will and Fletch round up a force, but it will take them time to get here. We can’t count on the local police. Jacs will have paid them off to drag their heels about a response.”

Satisfied that her weapons are properly secured, Bridget grabs a pair of boots, shoves her feet into them, and starts lacing. “Do you know when the attack will start?” Bridget asks.

“No,” says Erica, her newfound confidence diminished. “Premonitions aren’t that specific. Sometime today before the sun sets.” She pauses, then, tone an odd mixture of authority and desire to please, “Do you have a ballistic vest?”
Bridget finishes with her boots and stands. “No, I don’t,” she says.

Erica turns and gestures for Bridget to follow her. “Come on. We have an armory here. It’s mostly things we get from our police contacts. You wouldn’t believe what the military gives them…” As Erica moves out of the room and into the hallway beyond, she mutters under her breath, “No lesbians being shot on my watch…”

“What was that?” Bridget asks, following close behind. As she moves, she reaches up to tie her hair back.

Erica glances back towards Bridget as they jog down the richly appointed corridor. Unlike the coven’s boardroom, the Governor’s mansion is an antique. Its interior decorating is something from the nineteenth century, though a few pieces of cutting edge modern art can be found hanging from the walls at infrequent intervals. “Do you watch much television?” Erica asks.

Bridget shakes her head. “Do you watch much television?”

Erica shrugs. “Franky does,” she says. “She really likes cop shows, but she’ll watch anything that’s even kinda gay.”

They quickly reach the stone stairs at the end of the hall. A group of three guards are standing in the stairwell, focusing on the stairs leading down. Down is probably where the building’s tunnel entrance is. One of the guards nods to Erica as she and Bridget pass, but the other two keep their attention trained on their mark. They’re professionals.

The residential area is on the second level of the basement, likely where the church’s crypts used to be. Erica takes them up to the first basement level. “I’ll take that as a no,” she says once they’ve left the stairwell and the earshot of the guards. “There’s this thing that happens on a lot of shows,” Erica explains. “All the gay women get shot and die. It’s a thing.”

“Do you watch much television?” Bridget asks.

Erica shrugs. “Franky does,” she says. “She really likes cop shows, but she’ll watch anything that’s even kinda gay.”

They come to a stop outside a door with a number keypad set into the wall by it. Erica punches in a code to unlock the door. “Five, seven, oh, twenty-one,” Erica says. “Then pound.”

On the other side of the door is what looks to be a mid-sized military arsenal. Assault rifles, riot shields, grenades, body armor… At the far end of the room are boxes labeled as containing rocket launchers. “No tanks?” Bridget asks.

“We keep those out by the docks,” Erica says. “They’re not very useful.” She turns down an aisle lined with swords, knives, and a few maces and halberds. No coven ever truly abandons the old ways. It’s not in the nature of beings as long-lived as vampires. And, even in the modern era, a few of the Traditions still call for blades. “Women’s sizes are this way,” Erica says.

As she passes by, Bridget takes one of the knives, awkwardly adding it to her belt while walking. Part of her wants to take one of the assault rifles as well, but a live firefight is a poor time to deviate from her skillset. “So you think I’m gay?” she asks.

Erica pauses to fix Bridget with a pointed look. There is definite skittish hostility about her. “She was still wearing your jacket when they left.”

Bridget shrugs. “She looked cold and she told me she wasn’t interested before she took it.”

Mostly mollified, Erica goes back to leading the way. She stops in front of a rack of camouflage ballistic vests, grabs one, then tosses it to Bridget.
Bridget catches it easily. There’s weight to it. It would probably be heavy for a human, but Bridget is old and such things are hard to gauge. Putting it on is somewhat awkward—it was made for someone a bit taller than Bridget—but Erica helps and it doesn’t take long. As they get it secured, Bridget searches her mind for the name of Erica’s consort, her partner of lower standing who doesn’t reside with her in the Governor’s house. What was it? Matthew? Luke? John? No… Mark.

As Erica steps back, Bridget asks, “Does she know about Mark?”

There’s normally little expectation among vampires of perpetual fidelity, so long as through the centuries partners find their way home again. Humans, as Bridget understands and as Franky suggested, are different.

The hostility that had ebbed when Bridget assured Erica that Franky hadn’t reciprocated any advance comes back in an instant. “That’s none of your business,” Erica says, voice frosty.

Put another way, no, Franky does not know about Mark.

Bridget is about to take the ill-thought out action of telling Erica that, generally speaking, emotions are her business when a blast rocks the room. Dust from the stonework ceiling falls down, coating them both in a thin grey powder. Erica raises a hand to her earpiece.

“They’ve blown off the front doors,” Erica says. In a blink she’s gone from deeply annoyed at Bridget’s encroachment to professional and calm. Even if she’s apparently allergic to violence under normal circumstances, she handles herself well when directly threatened. Bridget’s estimation of her rises several notches.

“Upstairs then?” Bridget asks.

Erica nods. “Upstairs then.”

Together they leave the armory and head for the stairs at a sprint, their boots nearly silent on the thick red carpet covering the stone floor. Gunfire and shouts echo in the stairway. Below, the guards watching the tunnel haven’t moved from their positions. Erica takes the steps up to the main level of the residence two at a time but pauses by the door. It’s a solid oak door without a window. Erica readies her rifle before she pulls the door slightly open. “It’s me,” she shouts.

“Clear,” a woman calls back.

Erica darts through the door and Bridget follows.

On the other side, squatting behind an overturned table, the woman who told them it was clear is the driver from the night before, Linda. Like Erica and Bridget, she’s armed and armored. In addition, she’s wearing sunglasses and gloves. Her hair is pulled back in a bun. “Governor,” she says. “Inquisitor.”

It’s hard to hear her over the sound of gunfire. The air is thick with the feel of adrenaline and terror.

Erica and Bridget both move to join Linda behind her table. The stairway has left them behind a stone wall that used to be the back of the church’s altar, screening the stairway from view. Where the wall opens to the rest of the building, sunlight lays across the floor. From what Bridget remembers of the layout of the old church, the coven left the nave and aisles at the ground level open as a reception area while turning the space over the aisles into a gallery. There’s little to no cover on this floor except for the altar wall.

That said, the tight corridor that the wall forms is a very strong defensive position.
“Status?” Erica asks.

“Day squad is engaging at the doors,” Linda says. “Jacs’ crew blew them clean off, there’s sun everywhere. Rest of us are hiding out in the hall here.” With her head, Linda indicates another two vampires behind the shadow of the old altar wall, each with their own makeshift barricade.

“How many human guards do you have?” Bridget asks.

“Four,” Erica says.

From the direction of the entrance hall, there’s a particularly awful scream. To Bridget’s senses, it is accompanied by exploding agony that slowly fades to nothing.

“None,” Linda corrects, voice flat. “Governor, Inquisitor, you shouldn’t be up here. It’s safer—”

“Bridget Westfall!” someone shouts from the other side of the altar wall. It’s a man’s voice. “Give her up and the rest of you live.”

Bridget shifts. Immediately, Erica has a hand on her shoulder, clutching tightly.

“Don’t worry,” Bridget says. “I don’t like you enough to die for you.”

One finger at a time, Erica lets go. She touches her earpiece again. “There’s a firefight by the tunnel,” she says.

“Everyone up here, go downstairs and help them,” Bridget says softly. “We have a good position here and I can stall.” Raising her voice, “Who are you?” Bridget shouts as she edges towards the edge of the altar wall and the sunlight on the floor. She needs to hear better than she can cowering by the stairs.

Erica nods to Linda, confirming Bridget’s order. Linda and the other vampires hurry to the stairs and vanish, going to reinforce the other guards. Erica stays.

“You know who the fuck we are,” the man shouts back. “Now give her the fuck up!”

Focusing on where the man’s voice is coming from, Bridget thinks she can pick out the speaker from the chaotic mess of fear and pain in the room. Her best guess is that there are five others with him, making holding onto her sense of him difficult. He’s the most agitated of the lot of them.

“How do we know you’ll keep your word?” Bridget shouts back. She’s unholstered her pistol and she’s ready to shoot, not that a pistol is likely to do her much good if they took out four guards already.

There’s a brief flare of hope from Jacs’ thug. He doesn’t want to risk his neck trying to fight a basement full of vampires. “We’re the fuckin’ Holts,” the man shouts. “You callin’ us liars?”

“What are you going to do with her?” Bridget calls.

The queasy unease that ensues is more confirmation than Bridget needs to know that she does not want them to catch her.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” the man yells. “Jacs wants her.”

Bridget waits several beats before responding again, as if she’s discussing with someone else.

“What are you going to do with her?” Bridget asks.

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“Don’t know, don’t care,” the man yells. “Jacs wants her.”

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“What are you going to do with her?” Bridget asks.

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deceit to truth. “Jacs sent a whole gang through the tunnels. They need to fall back—now.”

Grim, Bridget nods. If ‘downstairs’ means the same place where they saw the guards before, she and Erica don’t have time to fall back with them. A change of tactics is called for. “She’s in the basement,” she shouts out to the men in the nave. “If you don’t shoot, we won’t.” Quickly, Bridget points to one of the barricades the other vampires left vacant. Erica ducks behind it. Bridget chooses another.

There’s a long pause on the other side of the wall. Then, “Fine.”

Nearby, Erica is quietly issuing orders over her radio.

Out in the nave, Bridget can feel the press of tension getting closer. It’s only a piece of the ball of emotion though. Only one man.

Bridget moves her hand to get Erica’s attention, then holds up a single finger.

Erica, understanding, winces.

Two or three would have been much better.

When humans learn to shoot, they’re taught to shoot between heartbeats.

Vampires don’t have beating hearts. It’s how they sit utterly still, utterly silent. In lieu of the pulse of life, their blood flows through arteries and veins by the steady power that animates them. It goes constant and slow.

With just one man—

Bridget stands, rising above her cover. Legs braced, she points her gun towards where the man will have to come around the corner, using one hand to aim and the other hand to support the first. He’ll be ready to shoot. She has to be faster.

She’s a vampire.

She’ll be faster.

She can hear his footsteps on the stone floor and she can feel his terror approaching.

He’s almost—

Bridget adjusts her aim and pulls the trigger.

The bullet hits the man in the center of his face, right at the bridge of his nose.

He drops.

The poignant smell of fresh blood fills the air.

Bridget drops down under her cover again. If she were human, her heart would be pounding and she’d hear nothing but blood rushing in her ears. She’s not human. She’s calm. On the other side of the wall, there’s shouting and the pounding of feet as the other men come running towards them.

This time, when they start to come around the corner, Erica takes over. On one knee, leaning out from behind Linda’s table, she sends bullets spraying wildly. Her fangs are bared and there’s bloodlust in her grey-blue eyes.
If Bridget weren’t preoccupied with blotting out her sense of all the second-hand death and adding her own shots to the firefight, she’d very much like to pause to admire the Governor.

Erica keeps shooting even after the four men who’d tried to rush them are dead on the floor.

So that’s five down.

But Bridget had counted six.

One of them is still—

Panic, terror, desperation—

Bridget stands again, swings her gun to aim true, shoots the sixth man in the back of the head as he breaks from cover and tries to run.

Slowly, she lowers her weapon.

Out in the nave, she feels nothing but the residue of life. Six assailants, six bodies. The only ones still standing are herself and Erica.

“Door,” Bridget says.

Moving in unison, she and Erica both shift to the other side of their cover so that they’re now crouched facing the stairway door. With steady hands, Bridget replaces the magazine of her pistol.

“You're a good shot,” Erica says.

“I’m glad you brought the rifle,” Bridget replies.

Erica lets out something that’s reminiscent of a short laugh. “Never leave home without it,” she jokes. “What do you think those giant black overcoats are for?”

“You can fit a rifle and a vest both under those?” Bridget asks. “I should get one.”

“It might not work as well for you,” Erica replies. “You’re so short that—” Cutting herself off, she raises a hand to her ear.

Bridget waits.

“Will and Fletch broke through downstairs,” Erica says. “They’re starting a sweep of the compound for anyone who got missed, but we’re almost clear. Linda and three others made it.”

Breathing isn’t something that vampires do, but Bridget takes a big breath in just so she can exhale it again. “That’s not bad,” she says.

Erica makes the same relieved sigh that Bridget did a moment before. Then, “You’re not bad.”

Slightly startled, Bridget looks at Erica just as Erica looks to Bridget. Their eyes meet. The corners of Bridget’s mouth curl up. “Same to you,” she says.

There’s a knock at the stairwell door. “It’s Will,” Will calls from the other side.

“Clear,” Erica calls back as she points her rifle down towards the floor. Bridget also lowers her gun but doesn’t holster it. The point is to avoid accidental friendly fire, not to drop their guard.
The door opens slowly and Will sticks his head out. He takes the situation in quickly, eyes passing over the bodies of the humans, before fully stepping out of the stairwell. Carrying a rifle and wearing body armor, he looks even larger than usual. “Governor, Inquisitor,” he greets. “We’re securing the building. Fletch is waiting with a group waiting to take you through the tunnels to one of the safe houses. Can’t stay here with no front door.”

Erica stands from behind her cover. “Very good, Will,” she says.

Even as she says it, doubt flickers and she doesn’t move.

Under attack with the path clear, she could act decisively and mow down an entire squad of assailants. In the more open arena of strategy, she doesn’t know what to do.

It’s not because she’s not intelligent. She’s very intelligent. She’s too intelligent. Bridget’s best guess is that Erica finds herself overwhelmed by the possibilities and would prefer to evaluate each and every one several times over before choosing, and even then she might never be comfortable with her choice.

Erica is nothing if not fascinating.

Bridget rises and starts for the stairway door. “We should move quickly,” she says. “Do you know the Holts’ location? Can you retaliate?”

Will holds the door for Bridget and for Erica behind her. “No ma’am,” he says. To Bridget’s sense, he’s still full of adrenaline but there’s also a quiet approval in him.

The stairwell smells of blood, fire, and death. Bridget leads the way down the stone steps. Her boots sound heavy. “Then start hitting the houses,” she says. “Tonight. As many as you can.”

“No.”

Bridget stops, suddenly, going entirely still. She turns, looking behind her and up slightly to Erica. “What was that?”

“No,” Erica says again. Her grey-blue eyes are steady. Defiant. “My coven is not your collateral damage.”

Bridget chooses her words carefully and she makes sure to keep her tone conversational. “I am doing my job,” she says. “The job that the Council sent me to do.”

“You wanted me to protect my people,” Erica replies. Like Bridget, she is holding herself perfectly still, perfectly dead. In posture, she hides her terror well.

Bridget bites back whatever words immediately rose to her tongue. She wanted Erica to find grit. She shouldn’t complain now. “Think of something better then,” Bridget says. “But act.”

She turns on her heel and continues down the stairs.

The price for Bridget’s failure will be the destruction of the coven and every vampire owing fealty to it.

The Council will come and they will purge.

If some die to prevent that outcome—

Bridget is trying to protect Erica’s people too.
Farther down the stairs, Fletch and six heavily armed guards are waiting for them. The bodies from the firefight have been stacked in a pile in a corner. Bridget notes that Linda does not appear to be among them. That’s good. Though not one of Erica’s lieutenants, Linda left Bridget with the distinct impression that she was a particularly competent coven member.

Erica departs briefly to collect some belongings while Bridget waits on the stairs with the guards. Will has volunteered to transport her various things later. She doesn’t have keepsakes and, as much as she enjoys her wardrobe, it’s not necessary to her job.

When Erica returns with a heavy-looking purse and a black briefcase, their party heads into the tunnel that provides the residence with a daytime exit. As tunnels go, it’s broad and has ample headroom, especially for someone as short as Bridget. Many prosperous covens have created tunnel networks beneath their cities, some quite extensive. New York is one such coven.

They walk the tunnels for a long time. Without a watch, Bridget can’t be sure how long. The occasional rat scampers along with them and, at intervals, the earth will shake from the passing of a train. Otherwise, they go in silence. Walking alongside Bridget, Erica is, in typical fashion, a tumultuous mess of emotion. The guards around them are relaxed. They assume that the tunnels are safe. The only exception is Fletch. He’s alert and there’s a tension in him like a coiled spring about to release. Bridget knows little about him except that he and Vera are on the edge of becoming involved with one another. From his bearing and mood though, she’s left with the sense that he has been trained and trained well. He’s an asset to his coven.

As for Bridget—if she were to turn her examinations inward, she’d find herself in a similar state to Erica. Her options are limited as to what the coven can accomplish and to what she personally can add to that. Most covens are centralized enough and with great enough concentration of power at the top that smashing problems quickly and then picking up pieces is efficient and effective.

Erica had a point on the stairs.

When you have a hammer, every problem is a nail.

New York is a not a nail.

The Holts were in motion long before Bridget received her assignment.

She’s not fond of playing catch-up.

“We’re here,” Fletch says from ahead. He points to a side branch of the tunnel they’ve been traveling, then leads the way into it. The smaller tunnel slopes upwards quickly and terminates in a ladder. Above the ladder is a trapdoor and beyond that is a sparsely furnished basement. A long and narrow room, it has the bare essentials for an early twentieth century surgical theatre—or a torture chamber—and not much else. Fletch leaves two of the guards at the trapdoor and then goes further into the safehouse.

The upstairs of the compound is dressed as an upper class residential space. Thick curtains cover windows that probably look out onto a sunny street. From the outside, the building would look like any other, and for that reason the windows are probably normal glass, not treated to protect the residency’s occupants. Bridget notes, however, that there’s a folded wall at the side of the windows that can be pulled across for a second layer of protection from the sun. Fletch puts another two guards at the front door and then sends the last pair into the upstairs levels to check for intruders. Meanwhile, he goes to the kitchen of the residence.

The entire house is modern, but the kitchen is especially so. Granite countertops and stainless steel
appliances, all looking never-touched, gleam. Fletch goes to an enormous refrigerator and opens the
door to show that it is entirely filled with bags of blood. “We can get more,” he says. “Transportation
around here’s a bit tricky though. Too many cars will give this place away. The tunnel downstairs
goes to a janitor’s closet in a subway station, but it takes transfers to get anywhere useful and some
lines go up in spots. There’s a—”

“Fuck.”

Bright panic, momentary, pushed down into anger.

Bridget can’t recall having heard Erica swear before.

“Fuck,” Erica says again. She’s holding out her phone and staring at something on the screen.
Realizing that she’s drawn attention to herself, she glances up at Bridget and Fletch. “No reception
underground,” she says. “A bunch of places were hit...” Her thumb flicks, scrolling. Even as she
holds the device, it’s buzzing at irregular intervals. “The Mayor wants to talk...”

Erica looks up from her phone to Fletch. “Does this house have an office? A desk?”

Fletch nods. “Yes ma’am. This way.”

Fletch takes Erica up to a higher level of the house. Bridget lingers in the kitchen. With no one there
to see her, she hangs her head and pinches the bridge of her nose.

She’s still wearing the vest that Erica strapped onto her in the armory.

No lesbians being shot on Erica’s watch.

The Governor’s instinct to protect is… touching.

Bridget doesn’t find the vest heavy, but it’s bulky and she’s tired of its weight on her shoulders.
Getting it off alone is difficult. She manages though. She leaves it on the floor next to a pristine black
pedal-operated trash can. Her sword goes next to the vest, though she keeps her gun and her knife.

Bridget opens several cabinets until she finds one filled with glasses and mugs.

Whoever stocked the safehouse—that person’s taste in coffee mugs was interesting.

She takes two mugs out. They’re both slightly larger than average. One of them reads, ‘hey baby,
you’re just my type.’ The other one features, if she’s not mistaken, the face of Edward Cullen.

One bag of cold blood fills both mugs nearly to the top. It takes Bridget a moment to figure out the
microwave, eventually settling on just using the pizza button and manually stopping the process after
a minute and a half. Taking the mugs back out, her method seems to have worked. The blood smells
warm enough that she wants to drink it, even though she knows that bagged blood, no matter what it
smells like, tastes stale and dead with a bitter aftertaste of anticoagulant.

One floor higher in the safehouse, it’s easy to locate Erica. She’s hunched over a broad wood desk,
picking at her phone with one hand, clutching a cheap ballpoint pen in her other. A yellow legal pad
full of chickenscratch scrawl sits before her, and there’s an open laptop as well. Unsurprisingly, Erica
is one of the rare vampires who manages to stay abreast of human technology. Fletch is nowhere to
be seen.

Erica looks up as Bridget enters. “What—?”
Bridget sets the Edward Cullen coffee mug down on the desk for Erica before taking a seat in one of the two poorly padded visitor’s chairs across from Erica. After their morning, Bridget is edging towards peckish. Erica, centuries younger, must surely be craving. If Bridget were to open herself, she could be certain, but she’s disinclined to share Erica’s hunger at the moment.

Erica has enough control to slowly set her pen down and stare at the mug for a moment. “Vampires don’t sparkle,” she pronounces. Then she picks it up and drains half of it in one go. A bit of blood stains the soft skin above her lips. Her tongue darts out and she licks it away.

Sipping from her own cup, Bridget takes the whole scene in.

Erica sets the mug back down on her desk and leans back in her office chair. “Bridget,” she says.

“Erica,” Bridget replies.

Erica picks her pen back up and taps it once, twice, against her mug. “I’d like to ask a favor,” Erica finally says.

“What would you like me to do?” Bridget asks. She’s intrigued. What plan has Erica come up with? Deciding that second-hand hunger is worth whatever she can glean from Erica’s emotional stew, Bridget focuses on the Governor.

Unsurprisingly, Erica is mostly nerves.

Erica uses her pen to point to her phone. “All of this mess,” she starts, “Nothing from Franky since she got home safe last night.”

“You think something’s happened to her,” Bridget says. “Or that something will happen.”

Erica sets the pen down on the desk, then spins it. The persona she’s presenting now is a far cry from the dead thing that Bridget encountered only a few days ago in the coven’s boardroom. “She’s a human,” Erica says. “She’s vulnerable. She probably hasn’t texted because she thinks I’m still asleep. She’s probably still asleep. It’s probably nothing. But… I have a feeling…”

Erica shakes her head.

Bridget says nothing, waiting. Given the blood in Erica’s veins, her ‘I have a feeling’ could very well indicate something far more than a feeling, but, from what Bridget has been told, distinguishing premonitions from mundane paranoia can be difficult.

In any case, Erica is still making her pitch, still winding up for an ask.

“I can only be in one place at a time,” Erica continues. “Mark was also attacked. He’s fine but… he has requested to see me. He… wants to confirm that I am unharmed.”

“That’s thoughtful of him,” Bridget says.

There’s a pulse of tired warmth from Erica as the corners of her lips pull up. “It’s who he is,” she replies. Returning to a more somber mood, she goes on, “It would put my mind at ease if you could stay with Franky until I’m done cleaning up today’s mess.”

Bridget going to Franky—it won’t make Franky safer. It will draw Jacs’ attention to her. Bridget’s protection will act as a sure substitute for the uncertain protection of anonymity and, at best, the balance will remain as it was. Even so, the more Erica’s human is drawn in, the more Erica will act.
“You don’t trust me to help cleaning up the mess?” Bridget suggests, focusing on Erica carefully.

Erica reacts to the barb, but not by much.

“If I didn’t trust you, would I ask you to look after Franky?” she asks in answer.

For Erica, Bridget smiles. “Where am I going then?”

Erica nods. “Fletch will take you,” she says. “He knows how to get there without hitting sun. And I’ll let her know you’re coming.”

There ends up being on the other side of the city in Harlem. After changing into a dark blue blouse that she found in one of the bedrooms of the residence and pulling a black jacket on to hide her weapons, Bridget joins Fletch by the trapdoor in the basement. They start out with the short tunnel from the safehouse to the nearby subway stop, then take a transfer at a later point to avoid being trapped in a car going over a bridge instead of under the river. There’s still another transfer after that. Moving through the stations, Fletch doesn’t look at maps. He knows the city and its grid extremely well.

Sitting next to him in a car, Bridget asks, “How long have you lived here?”

It’s not polite to directly ask how old a vampire is, but all the various proxies are fair game. Bridget can get some idea of age from the feel of an individual’s emotions, but it’s only enough to tell generally if someone is young, mature, or very, very old. Though… what Bridget can glean is not quite age but power. Some, like Erica, are naturally stronger than their years suggest. Others are lesser. And there are methods to gain power without letting time take its course.

Fletch shrugs. “A while,” he says. He crosses his arms.

Bridget could read Fletch’s signals and respect them. Or, as their subway car rattles down miles and miles of track, she could keep pressing. “Where were you before?”

Fletch regards her warily. Then, “Nam.”

Hiding her surprise with distracting movements, Bridget leans in slightly and props her chin up on her hand, elbow resting on her knee. “That wasn’t such a long time ago,” she says.

Fletch leans back in his seat. “Maybe not to you,” he says. “Whole lifetime to me.”

“Were you sired here?” Bridget asks.

“Yeah,” Fletch says. “Will did it. Found me gettin’ thrown out of a bar, picked me up, turned me ‘round.” The tone of his voice is somewhat gruff—it seems to just be the way his voice is—but there’s a lightness in Bridget’s sense of him.

“It sounds like you look up to Will,” Bridget says.

Fletch lets out a grunt. “You a shrink or something?”

“We have been in this subway system for a very long time,” Bridget replies.

“You’d be good at it,” Fletch says.

Bridget gives Fletch a half-grin. “I’ll keep that in mind if I ever retire from my current occupation.”

“You even allowed to do that?” Fletch asks. “Will said…” He trails off, recognizing that it might not
be best to repeat whatever it was that his sire told him.

Bridget waves her free hand dismissively. “If I retired, I wouldn’t collect a pension,” she says.

This gets a laugh out of Fletch. “You know the government’s still sendin’ me pension money?” he says. “No one can get shit outta the VA for disability, but paper pushers in Washington haven’t figured out I’m dead yet.”

Shifting, Bridget joins Fletch in leaning back in her seat. She folds her hands over her stomach. “God bless the bureaucrats,” she says.

“God bless,” Fletch echoes.

They don’t talk much for the rest of the way, but their silence is companionable. When they finally reach their stop, Fletch leads Bridget into a service area that leads to a tunnel that, after several turns, leads to a basement.

“This is her building,” Fletch says.

“When was the last time you paid to use the subway?” Bridget asks.

Fletch smiles. “About six years ago,” he says. Then he points to a door on the other side of the basement. “This way.”

“Have you been here before?” Bridget asks as they climb a windowless concrete staircase.

“No,” says Fletch. “Don’t think anyone but Erica has been here. And don’t even know about that. But Will made me memorize how to get here when she became Governor.”

“She was seeing Franky before Meg died?” Bridget asks.

“I figure,” Fletch answers. “We’re enforcement and she’s from legal. Didn’t know her much before.”

Franky’s apartment is on the twelfth floor. The hallway outside it is not filthy but it doesn’t strike Bridget as particularly clean either. Stepping into the lead, she reaches out and knocks sharply on the grey door of the apartment.

There’s noise from the other side of the door, but it takes a while for the noise to become words.

“We don’t want any!”

It’s not Franky’s voice.

Concentrating, Bridget gets the sense that there are four humans inside the apartment—or maybe just three. One of them is a strange fuzz that isn’t quite anything in particular. Another one seems to be asleep.

Fletch shifts in the corner of Bridget’s vision, shrugging. According to the door number, unless he’s taken them to the wrong building, this is Franky’s apartment.

Bridget knocks again.

Annoyance flares on the other side of the door.

“I said we don’t want any!”
“Excuse me,” Bridget calls out. “I’m looking for Franky.”

The door whips open, revealing an older blonde woman. Her hair is a frazzled mess and she smells slightly of alcohol. “I said—”

The woman’s words die on her tongue when she gets a good look at Bridget and Fletch.

There’s a moment of quiet.

Then, “We don’t want your kind here,” the woman says. “Go away.” She starts to close the door.

“Wait,” Bridget says. She can’t do anything to stop the door from closing except use her words. Stepping into a human home without an invitation is akin to walking into a fully sanctified church. “Is Franky here?”

The woman pauses. “Are you Erica?” she asks.

“No,” Bridget says. “Erica asked me to come check on her.”

The woman scoffs. “More’n she’s ever done before.” Resentment emanates from her in waves.

Bridget tilts her head to the side and brings her eyebrows together, projecting concern. “What do you mean?”

The woman opens the door slightly wider. Her free hand goes to her hip as she leans forward—but not so far forward that she crosses the threshold of the apartment. “That tart has her stumbling home half-dead every week, you know?”

Bridget winces for the woman’s benefit. “I didn’t,” she says. It’s not quite a lie. She easily inferred it from just looking at Franky, but this is the first time she’s heard anyone outright say it.

“Yeah, well,” the woman starts. She trails off, not sure how to conclude her outburst. “Now you do.”

Bridget raises her empty hands in a pacifying gesture. “Look,” she says, “I won’t ask you to invite us in. But can I talk to Franky?”

The woman glowers. “She’s sleeping. Late night.”

“Please,” Bridget says. She refrains from saying more. The woman is on the edge of agreement and it’s best if she walks herself the rest of the way there.

Finally, “Fine,” the woman says. “I’ll ask her.”

Instead of leaving the door open, the woman finishes shutting it in Bridget and Fletch’s faces.

“That went great,” Fletch quips.

“It could have been worse,” Bridget replies. “So you don’t know how long Erica has been seeing Franky?”

“You know Erica’s got a man?” Fletch responds.


“I’m gonna let you do all the talking,” Fletch says. “Don’t want to touch this shit with a ten foot pole.”
Without warning, the door swings open again. Franky, wearing sweatpants and a close-fitting white tank, stares at Bridget and Fletch. “What the hell are you here for?” she demands.

Franky’s brown hair is a mess but her eye makeup, the same heavy flourish as the night before, is apparently quite smudge resistant. Her sweatpants, Bridget notes, are the same hideous teal as her hoodie. They probably came as a set. She’s wearing a small silver kite on a necklace, which does nothing to distract from how the bite marks on her neck, some old and some new, stand out against her otherwise unblemished skin. A tattoo winding up her arm catches Bridget’s eye and she finds herself staring for a moment before dragging her attention back to the matter at hand.

“May we come in?” Bridget asks. She told the other woman she wouldn’t ask her for an invitation. She said nothing about asking Franky.

“Hell no!” Franky responds. She keeps one hand on the door as she waves the other back and forth. As she waves, Bridget gets a noseful of the warm, inviting scent of human. “No! No vampires in apartments! And answer the damn question!”

“Erica asked us to check in on you,” Bridget explains. “She was going to call you to tell you we were coming.”

“I saw. She’s never done that before,” Franky says. Disbelief and suspicion radiate from her, and just a tiny speck of hope too.

The best way to defeat suspicion is to confirm it. “Last night,” Bridget begins, “You asked who she was in the coven.”

“Yeah,” Franky says, still wary.

“Erica is… we would say that she is the Governor of the coven,” Bridget says. “The highest ranking member.”

It’s not much beyond what Franky already suspects and so it’s a small thing to trade for a bit of trust. Indeed, in Bridget’s reading, Franky’s surprise is minimal.

Franky’s eyes narrow. “Yeah? So what’s that got to do with anything?”

“She was attacked this morning,” Bridget continues. Again, it’s not valuable information. A hole was blown through a historic church facade and, even if the police declined to attend the firefight, the media surely swarmed it once the gunshots quieted. Still though, it provokes a wave of worry and fear from Franky. “As were several others. She was concerned for you.”

“So she ordered you over here?” Franky asks. She pauses, then, “Hang on, you said you weren’t part of the coven.” Her eyes flicker up to Fletch. “And who’s that?”

“Fletch is a friend,” Bridget says. “And a member of the coven.” She’s not sure what Franky knows of the coven or what membership in the coven means. It’s clear Franky understands that it means something.

“Hi,” says Fletch.

“And no, I’m not a part of the coven,” Bridget continues. “Erica asked me to come here to keep you safe. She asked me because she knew I’d say yes.”

“Yeah?” Franky asks.
“Yeah,” Bridget echoes, “You still have my jacket.”

Franky chews on her lip. She crosses her arms, keeping the door open with her foot as she stares at Bridget and Fletch. Finally, she relents. “Okay, Bridget, you can come in,” she says. “Big guy stays in the hall.”

Bridget smiles at Franky. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi. Thanks for reading. Hope you enjoyed! Thank you to my betas. I have the first six or so chapters of this fic drafted but I’m not following an update schedule because I like to have several chapters of buffer so I can go back and change things when I need to, haha.
The interior of the apartment is a mess and it smells strongly of human.

The layout is simple, a central living area with a small kitchen room, a bathroom, and two other rooms adjoining. The living room is, in a word, packed. There are two couches, one of which, judging from the pillows and blankets, is frequently used as a bed, and a television on a stand. Over in the kitchen, which appears as if it was furnished in the sixties, cardboard containers of coffee and the like are piled up to cover nearly every inch of counter space. It looks like someone has been fighting to keep enough space clear to cook, and it looks like that person has been losing.

The doors to the other rooms, presumably bedrooms, are closed.

Bridget is left with the impression that the apartment would be perfectly nice if it had fewer residents. As it is, it feels overstuffed.

The one visible window is in the kitchen and it’s mostly blocked by a tower of cereal boxes. Afternoon sun comes through it, lighting up a bit of counter and then turning part of the yellow linoleum floor gold. It doesn’t extend so far that it reaches out into the living room.

The woman who wanted Bridget and Fletch to go away is sitting on one of the couches, watching local news where a woman with red hair is giving some impassioned plea about a missing daughter. In the apartment, the woman on the couch looks up as Bridget enters and immediately glowers. She shifts, raising herself up without actually rising from the couch. “Hey, Franky, what’d you let her in for?”

Franky’s shrug is aggressive. “Can’t leave a guest standing in the hall, can I, Liz?”

“You’re not the only one who lives here, you know,” the woman, Liz, argues.

It’s a pointless argument. Too little, too late. Only a death, either Bridget’s or Franky’s, will revoke the invitation.

“Yeah, but I pay more than my share of the rent,” Franky snaps back.

Liz points to a closed door across the room. “Doreen’s got a baby,” she says. “What if… what if it catches?”

Bridget refrains from sighing. Since the creation of the Internet, vampire myths have only gotten worse. Humans adore conspiracy theories and Bridget thinks that they understood more about the dead a hundred years ago than they do now. That bored vampires often like to engage in mythcrafting and sometimes end up believing their own stories does nothing to better the situation either. Towards Liz, she tries a small smile, tight lipped. “You can’t catch vampirism,” she says. “It’s not like the flu.”

Liz pauses. She’s interested and her interest is quickly winning out over her agitation. Bridget will count that as progress. “How do you get it then?” she asks as Franky goes over to sit down next to her on the couch that isn’t someone’s bed.

Not seeing any chairs, Bridget leans up against a beige wall. She tucks her hands into her pockets.
There are many ways to describe siring or, as the Council and especially stuffy conservatives still call it, the Embrace. Humans find some descriptions more traumatizing than others. Bridget chooses a mild one, so scant in detail that most relatively informed humans likely know more. “When a human at death’s door consumes the blood of a strong enough vampire, the blood raises them as they die.”

At Liz’ side, Franky crosses her arms aggressively. As she shifts, one of her bra straps, bright neon pink, pokes out from under her tank. “Yeah, fine, everyone knows that. If we’re doing fang trivia, what happens when the vampire isn’t strong enough?” By the tone of her voice, she is trying very hard to sound nonchalant even when she’s nothing of the sort. Agitation leaks from her and fills the room, though its cause isn’t clear.

The answer to her query is ‘nothing pretty.’

“Erica could sire you,” Bridget says. She thinks this is where the questioning is headed. The pointedness of Franky’s morbid curiosity is enough to make her wonder if the topic is something she and Erica have discussed, recently. “She has power enough.”

What Erica couldn’t do is put Franky in such a state where it would be possible—at least, not intentionally.

“Wouldn’t want it,” Franky says, immediately and forcefully. Her knee starts bouncing as she taps her foot against the floor. “Not interested. And that wasn’t what I asked.”

“If Wikipedia doesn’t say, I shouldn’t tell you,” Bridget replies. She tries to make herself sound playful. She’s not fond of letting anyone, especially humans, see when she is uncomfortable. She wasn’t expecting Franky to call out her diversion.

“Well you’re useless,” Franky says. She pushes herself up from her seat on the couch and heads towards the kitchen. “I’m gonna make breakfast. I’d offer you some but...” She makes a tch noise and shrugs.

Liz doesn’t even wait for Franky to leave the room before dropping her voice to a very loud whisper and asking, “So what does happen?”

Bridget smiles, lips staying closed, and shakes her head. Even if she were inclined to share, truth or not, whatever she says to Liz will become gossip. As she shakes her head, a book lying on the floor catches her eye. Leaving the wall, she walks over to it and picks it up.

“It’s Franky’s,” Liz provides.

Bridget looks over to Liz and arches an eyebrow.

In return, Liz chuckles.

Bridget replies by going through the motion of sighing.

Taking care to avoid the stream of afternoon sunlight still coming through the kitchen’s lone window, Bridget goes to lean against its door frame. Franky is standing at the clear spot on the counter eating Lucky Charms out of the box. A half-finished blueberry yogurt cup sits nearby with a spoon sticking out of it. Her right side is turned towards Bridget, giving a good view of the tattoo on her arm. It’s... interesting, it’s eye-catching, and it expresses certain priorities in her life. Briefly, Bridget wonders if Franky has any others like it. Probably.

Making a point out of not staring, Bridget holds up the book she picked up from the floor. ‘Interview With a Vampire.’ “This is not a reliable source of information,” she says.
Franky finishes a mouthful of cereal before responding, “Yeah? Neither are the vampire AMAs on
reddit, and Erica gets weird about talking about this shit.”

Bridget lowers the book to her side. She makes a peace-offering. “What can I tell you?”

“How ‘bout you start with what I already asked you?” Franky says.

Bridget winces, possibly in some vain hope that her expression will deter the question and possibly
just on reflex. So much for hiding her discomfort.

Franky fixes her with a forcefully expectant look.

Holding the book in one hand, Bridget mimes smoothing the air with the other. “The human
becomes trapped in a half-dead state, continuously dying and continuously rising, unable to move but
able to feel everything,” she says. “The vampire’s blood never finishes its work and the ghoul can’t
be killed by anything except sunlight. They never rose, so the burning takes days. Attempting to sire
another before your third century or not destroying a corpse that failed to rise are high crimes. Next
question.”

To say that Franky is unsettled is an understatement. She tries to hide it by shoving another handful
of Lucky Charms into her mouth and chewing loudly.

Bridget waits.

When Franky finishes her cereal, she ventures, “So how old is Erica?”

“That’s a rude question,” Bridget answers. Judging from Franky’s non-reaction, Bridget would guess
that she was perfectly aware it wasn’t polite to ask. Maybe she’s even gotten the same response from
Erica in the past. She’s sharp—she’s targeting Bridget for what she knows she can’t reliably get
elsewhere. Maybe that even had something to do with why she let Bridget into the apartment.

Bridget finally sets the book down, finding a home for it on a scrap of clear counter space. Then, she
crosses her arms. “She’s in her third century.”

“Seems young,” Franky says, finally giving off a whiff of something that feels a bit like surprise. “I
guess.”

“Age is relative,” Bridget replies.

“So how old are you?” Franky asks.

Bridget shakes her head slightly and shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “That is still a rude
question.”

“Yeah?” Franky says. There’s a murmur of aggression in her. She’s curious but she’s also trying to
rile Bridget up—for no apparent reason except that she likes riling people up, perhaps. Attempting to
get under Bridget’s skin, combined with her lifestyle choices, suggests a breathtakingly compromised
self-preservation instinct. “So you’ll tell me shit about Erica but not about yourself?”

“Erica is relevant to you,” Bridget replies. “I’m not.”

“How do you figure?” Franky asks. She’s moved on to finishing her yogurt now.

“I’m a visitor. I’m only passing through,” Bridget answers.

“What’s that mean?” Franky presses.
Here, Bridget hesitates. Her role is not something that should be spoken of to a human.

“Why’d you offer to answer questions if you weren’t gonna answer any?” Franky asks.

Bridget looks away from Franky towards the sunlit kitchen window. When she stands in the shade and watches humans going about their lives, she can feel the warmth of the sun second-hand from them. It is bright and it is good. Even now, she wishes Franky would take a step to the left to stand in the sun. “As old as Erica is, I am several times that,” she says. “We didn’t keep years as well then as we do now.”

“Huh,” is Franky’s reply to that. She finishes her yogurt and tosses the cup into a trash bin.

It’s a recyclable. Humans are going to kill the planet.

“So is it true that all you vampires get personal superpowers?” Franky asks next.

“It’s complicated,” Bridget says.

“Is that Gidget for ‘I’m not gonna tell you’?” Franky asks.

Bridget’s eyebrows rise. “Gidget?”

Erica’s human doesn’t have a compromised self-preservation instinct, she has a death wish.

“It suits you,” Franky says.

Unsure what kind of response Gidget ought to get, Bridget attempts to ignore it. “I’m trying to decide how to explain.” She shifts her weight back to her other foot again. “It depends on your sire—how strong they were and what line they were from. An old sire from a strong line and the child will have all the characteristics of that line. A thin-blooded sire from a weak line will give nothing. The former is far rarer than the latter. Traits can be developed over the centuries, but few can rise above their birth.”

Franky pushes the plastic bag inside her cereal box down and then folds up the top of the box. “Erica sees the future or something, right?” she says. “What do you do?”

“I can feel what others feel,” Bridget says.

Franky stares. “Weird,” is all she has to say, and she says it like she doesn’t quite believe it. The Lucky Charms go on top of a stack of other cereal boxes. Then, Franky slips a hand into the stream of sunlight coming through the kitchen window. The hour is growing late and there’s not much of it left. “So does that feel like something to you?” she asks.

It feels like life.

Bridget finds herself smiling.

“Yes,” she says.

Franky opens her mouth to say something else but she’s cut off by a weird mechanical music sound coming from the pocket of her sweatpants. She pulls her hand out of the sun to take out her phone and turn off the alarm. “Time for work,” she says, heading for the door out of the kitchen.

The door that Bridget is still standing in.

Bridget turns herself to the side to let Franky slide past.
They don’t touch, but the smell of Franky is rich, deep, and forces Bridget’s eyes to the healing bite marks on the human’s neck.

Erica’s handiwork.

Neat little puncture points, created with care.

Bridget closes her eyes and by the time she opens them again Franky has disappeared into one of the rooms adjoining the living room and closed the door behind her. Liz has also gone elsewhere, leaving Bridget alone for the moment, waiting. When Franky reemerges, she’s wearing jeans, a black shirt, and green flannel shirt left unbuttoned overtop the black shirt. Her hair has been mostly tamed and her makeup looks reasonably fresher. She has a slightly over-packed black duffel bag slung over her shoulder. “So are you following me to work too?” she asks.

“Yes,” Bridget says. “Until Erica says otherwise.”

Franky catches a thumb under the shoulder strap of her duffel bag and tugs on it, adjusting the way it sits against the base of her neck. “You’re older than her and not part of the coven. Why are you doing what she says, Gidge?”

“Gidge?” Bridget replies. The nicknaming has escalated rapidly. “Really?”

Franky’s tongue pokes out from between her teeth for a moment as she lifts her eyebrows. “You gonna do something about it? Gonna stop me?”

“For someone experimenting with monogamy, you do a lot of flirting,” Bridget replies.

Franky shrugs and raises her empty hands. “As long as we’re both on the same page,” she says. She moves across the room to her front door and puts a hand on the doorknob. “You coming or what?”

Out in the hallway, Fletch is playing with his phone. He puts it away when he sees Bridget. “Where to?” he asks.

“I’m going to work,” Franky announces. She rolls her eyes. “You have my permission to stalk me.”

The three of them get as far as the ground floor of the apartment building before the problem with stalking Franky becomes apparent. The sun, on the verge of setting, isn’t quite gone yet. Franky, leading the way, slows slightly then stops. She looks back to Bridget and Fletch, then to the glass door. She’s lifting a foot to start towards the door again, vampires be damned, when Fletch speaks.

“Hey,” Fletch says. “You use the subway to get to work?”

“Yeah?” Franky replies.

Fletch beckons back towards the stairs. “Come check this out.”

After Fletch shows the way down to the subway from the basement, skipping the turnstyles, Franky announces, “Well shit,” and doesn’t attempt to lose them again.

By the time they surface near Franky’s place of employment, a nice-but-not-too-nice Italian restaurant, the sun has fully set.

“You can’t follow me into the kitchen,” Franky says. She holds up a finger, “First, health hazard.” She holds up another finger. “Second, this is my job and you’ll get in the way.”

“Not a problem,” Bridget says. “We’ll be nearby. Scream if you need anything.”
Franky snorts. “Scream for you Gidge? Sure thing.” She flashes a grin before she turns and heads through the back door of the restaurant.

Bridget and Fletch go to the front. A conversation, a smile, and a generous payment to the hostess and a waitress secure the two of them a table next to the kitchen door and a promise to be left alone.

Pushing a fork around on the white tablecloth in front of him, Fletch leans back in his chair. “I used to love Italian food,” he says. “Favorite thing to cook. Wish I could still eat it.”

Setting her cellphone out so she can keep an eye on the passing of time, Bridget gives a hum in response. All around, the restaurant's human patrons are trickling in, sitting down, sipping water, picking at appetizers. Some of them are pausing to enjoy the taste of cheese, of mushroom, of sage. Most are eating just to eat. Bridget ignores the latter and focuses on the former. Idly, she wonders which ones of them are enjoying food that Franky touched.

Minutes slip by, then hours.

Vampires are very good at waiting.

Eventually, across the table, Fletch shifts in his seat. He’s still playing with his utensils, but as the night passes, he’s becoming nervous.

Why is he nervous?

Bridget lets go of the sensations of taste around her and looks up at Fletch. “Is there something on your mind?” she asks.

The nerves flare, then steady. “I’ve been thinking,” Fletch starts. “When I was in the hallway and now here. Why are you here? Not here as in New York, but here as in right here?”

Bridget catches his meaning. “Babysitting?” she suggests.

“Yeah,” Fletch agrees. “That. Getting Erica to burn that house last night—that’s what our coven needs. That was great. You did that.”

“I am here,” Bridget says, “Because this will motivate Erica to burn more houses.” On the table, Bridget’s phone vibrates. She glances at it. “Speaking of Erica…” Quickly, she answers the call.

“Bridget,” Erica greets. There’s a faint crackle of static in her voice. Reception is good, but not perfect.

“Erica,” Bridget responds.

“Did you follow her to work?” Erica asks. She sounds tired.

“Of course,” Bridget says.

“I’m on my way there,” Erica says. “I think that… never mind. I shouldn’t be long. Let me know if you leave.”

“I will,” Bridget says. She’s barely finished the last syllable when she hears the click of Erica hanging up. As she lowers her phone, and slips it into her pocket, she can’t help but frown. Something about Erica’s tone was off. “The Governor is coming,” Bridget tells Fletch, though she’s sure he heard.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “If she’s here, she’s not out there, burning buildings,” he says.
Bridget returns her phone to its place in front of her. “Erica was appointed by the Council,” she begins, speaking slowly and softly. Fletch, she knows, is involved or about to be involved with Vera. Vera wanted to be Governor. “Until and unless they replace her, she has their full support.”

Fletch harrumphs. “You seem supportive,” he says.


Fletch looks over to the kitchen doors. “And is that about her or about you?”

Bridget blinks.

“Gidge?” Fletch asks, drawing out the nickname to emphasize his point.

Bridget tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She’ll be the first to admit that she’s fond of the human woman in the kitchen nearby, but what Fletch is unsubtly suggesting is somewhat beyond fondness. If Bridget felt that way, it’s doubtless something she picked up second-hand from Erica and nothing more. “All of this is about Erica,” Bridget pronounces.

Fletch is opening his mouth to tell Bridget what a load of shit she just recited when a sound like a firework echoes from the kitchen nearby.

*Sharp, sudden, intense pain.*

Bridget is on her feet immediately, drawing her gun and sprinting the few steps between their table and the swinging kitchen doors. On the other side is chaos.

*Fuck.*

She should have been paying attention to the eddies of ill-intent, not to the restaurant goers eating, not to Fletch, not to her own… whatever it is.

How did she miss this?

“Guns down! I’ll shoot the human!”

The speaker is a man, a boy, Brayden, Brayden Holt. He’s holding a handgun and pointing it at a human. At Franky.

There’s another human, a man in a white chef’s uniform, lying on the floor of the kitchen. He’s the source of the pain Bridget felt. He’s been shot.

Three more vampires are standing with Brayden, all of them holding handguns pointed at Bridget and Fletch. They came in through the restaurant’s back door.

Moving slowly so as not to startle Brayden and his goons, Bridget bends towards the floor and sets her gun down on the red tiles. She doesn’t raise her hands as she stands again. She still has the knife she took from the coven’s armory on her belt, hidden by her jacket. She wants to be able to reach it quickly. Behind her, as best she can tell, Fletch has also set down his weapon.

Bridget has two goals. She has to keep herself alive. That’s first. That’s always first. She also has to keep Franky alive.

What does she know about Brayden?

He’s young, he’s dangerous, he’s scared of Jacs and he doesn’t like her.
What does she know about the situation?

There are, at most, two people in the room Jacs would want taken alive. Definitely Bridget. Perhaps Franky. Fletch is expendable.

“Brayden,” Bridget starts. She finally raises her empty hands, reinforcing the lie that she isn’t armed and drawing attention to herself. Under her breath, “Fletch. Run.”

“Him!” Brayden shouts. He holds his gun with one hand, still pointed towards Franky, as he points with his other at Fletch. Panicked anger flares. “We don’t need him!”

“Fletch, run,” Bridget says again.

There’s a moment of hesitation.

He wants to stay. He thinks he can help. He can’t. Not as much as he can by getting across the street and pulling out his phone. It’s a strategic choice. He has to run.

Fletch doesn’t run and the moment of hesitation costs him.

Another gunshot.

Fletch grunts and drops. Without looking, from the sound of it, he went to a knee instead of all the way down. He’s been shot somewhere that won’t be fatal. Bullets can and do kill vampires, especially young ones like Fletch, but not as easily as they kill humans.

Bridget can only hope that Fletch, without the sense to run, at least has the sense to stay down.


“Shut up!” When he shouts, this time he uses his mouth and his head at the same time. His order echoes in Bridget’s mind, loud and sharp and demanding but without the power to compel. It is unlikely that even Jacs and Vinnie could command her if they worked together. Brayden attempting the feat alone has no hope of it whatsoever.

Even so, Bridget doesn’t say anything else.

Brayden is volatile. Scared out of his mind. Too much resistance and he might act rashly.


“Who the fuck are you calling a chew toy, fuckwit?” Franky snaps. She’s scared, terrified even, but more than terrified, she’s furious.

*Death wish,* Bridget thinks. Franky has a *death wish.*

“Get over here!” Brayden screams.

Franky’s hand jerks towards a pan on a nearby stove and Bridget feels the flicker of intent a moment before Franky’s hand wraps around the handle. *No time.* Bridget throws herself forward, trying to cover an impossibly vast distance before Brayden can react to the hot oil flying for his torso.

Gunshot.
Pain.

Blood.

Screaming.

The bullet hits Bridget’s left shoulder and the impact sends her stumbling back, crashing into Franky but managing to stay on her feet. Pain, sharp and piercing and all the things that pain ever is, all at once, radiates outwards, feeling like it’s going to engulf her everything. She just—she just has to remember that the pain, an artifact of life, isn’t proportionate to the injury.

She’ll heal.

The important thing is that Franky, swearing and scrambling for cover now, wasn’t hurt.

On the ground, the human chef who’d been shot is writhing, clutching at his face. He was collateral. The oil hit its target—Brayden is being dragged backwards by two of his men as he screams.

That leaves just one—

The window of opportunity is vanishingly small. Bridget doesn’t have her gun anymore, but that doesn’t matter. She has the knife she took from the coven armory and has centuries of power in her blood. Drawing the knife, she lunges forward, trying to close the distance between herself and her target as quickly as possible, to get to a place where she can’t be hit.

More gunshots, but too late.

Bridget slams the pommel of her weapon into her opponent’s chin hard enough for bone to give way. Blunt force is faster than getting a blade stuck going for blood. Even as she moves, pain—bright, hot, white-light-in-her-vision, agony—explodes from her injured shoulder.

The Holt vampire lifts off the floor a few inches from the force of Bridget’s blow, then crumples, skull hitting the floor with a crack.

“Bridget! Down!”

Grunting, she drops to the floor and rolls, sending more waves of fire crashing through her as her shoulder grinds into the ground. In the space where she was a moment before, bullets fly. Fletch has grabbed his gun again and he’s firing at Brayden and Brayden’s two remaining thugs who are trying to drag him out of the kitchen to safety.

One of Brayden’s men goes down before they get to the back door. The other doesn’t. In the moment when Fletch runs out of shots, the two survivors stumble out of the kitchen and into the alleyway behind the building.

With a grunt, Fletch tries to shove himself forward to give chase. He gets about two steps before he crashes down to the floor, clutching his side. Blood soaks his shirt, beginning to pool on the floor. He’s breathing hard, a human instinct he’s too young to have lost. Fighting past his pain, he manages to look towards Bridget and grin before squeezing his eyes shut against his pain. “Glad I… didn’t run?”

“Delighted,” Bridget groans back.

In the aftermath of gunfire, the kitchen, for all the sounds of stoves still running, water still boiling, food slowly burning, sounds eerily quiet.
Still on the floor, Bridget closes her eyes. She closes off her sense of feelings around her as well. Fletch is in pain, the human chef is in pain, everyone else is in some kind of shock state…

Her shoulder really hurts. It’s a good thing she doesn’t need to breathe. Every movement sends flares of brilliant agony through the rest of her, so she makes herself still. If it’s like the last time she was shot in the shoulder, the bullet has gotten lodged in the joint and her entire arm won’t move right again until it’s out. There’s no good place to be shot, but some spots are worse than others.

“Franky?” she calls.

“Yeah, Gidge?” Franky answers from somewhere across the room. Her voice, wavering, is a good half-octave higher than it usually is, at least.

“What happened to screaming if you needed us?” Bridget asks.

Franky’s voice manages to go higher. “Forgot.”

Bridget opens her eyes again. She’s staring up at the grimy off-white ceiling. It used to be white, she thinks, before it endured years of kitchen smoke and splatter. There’s some blood on it now too.

“Can you call Erica?”

The kitchen doors leading to the rest of the restaurant slam open.

“Never mind,” Bridget corrects. The vampires of Erica’s line are known for many things: intelligence, premonitions of the future, excellent dramatic timing. The timing, Bridget has always suspected, is related to the intelligence and the premonitions. A good sixty seconds earlier, however, would have been better timing by far.

Bridget tilts her head around in time to see Erica, followed by Vera and Will, storming into the kitchen. The three of them take in the scene before them quickly.

Will and Vera go to Fletch.

A tempest of incandescent rage, Erica marches to Bridget, ignoring Franky. Her heels sound sharply against the tiled floor. She hesitates for a half-second, then bends down and hauls Bridget up to her feet by the front of her shirt. Bridget’s shoulder screams in protest at the rough treatment, to the point she loses track for a moment of how it is she came to be standing again.

“I told you to keep her safe,” Erica hisses. Her grey-blue eyes are dark with fury, all of it directed at Bridget.

Bridget briefly closes her eyes, steadying herself against the dizziness of pain. Then, having composed herself, she takes her right hand and grabs one of Erica’s wrists. She squeezes, hard. Erica cannot overpower her and, Governor or not, she would do well to remember that.

Erica doesn’t let go.

Good for her.

“As you can see, she’s safe,” Bridget says.

There’s a long pause and then Erica murmurs, so softly Bridget almost misses it, “You’re not.”

Bridget smiles slightly, as much reassurance as she can summon, under the circumstances. “It wasn’t on your watch,” she says, speaking softly as well. “It doesn’t count.”
Bridget isn’t listening to the emotions around her so she can’t be sure, but she thinks she sees a shadow of guilt cross Erica’s face.

Erica finally releases Bridget and steps away. She glares at the human kitchen staff still cowering in the corners of the room. “Out,” she snarls.

The humans flee.

Erica then turns to Franky. She’s sitting on the ground, knees hugged to her chest, behind a stainless steel food prep table. Her eyes are fixed on the human man on the tiled floor. His screams have reduced to whimpers. If he’s lucky, one of his fleeing compatriots will call an ambulance.

Erica kneels down and sets a hand on Franky’s shoulder.

Franky pulls back at first, then leans into Erica’s touch.

“Franky?” Erica asks.

“Shit,” is all Franky says in reply.

“Franky, are you hurt?” Erica tries.

Franky bites her lip and doesn’t say anything.

“Franky, can you get your things?” Erica suggests. “I’d like you to come with us.”

Franky jerks away again and slides her fingers through her hair. Then, “What the hell is this, Erica? What the fuck did you just do to my life?”

Erica stiffens. “This is coven business and I won’t discuss it with you.”

“We won’t discuss it here,” Bridget amends. Using her right hand to hold her left shoulder still as she moves, she’s come to stand behind Erica.

Erica hesitates, then nods.

Still, Franky doesn’t answer.

Before, she didn’t believe the danger was real.

Now—

Even now, she needs a push.

“Franky,” Bridget says gently. She knows what she needs to say and how she needs to say it. She shifts, going from holding her left shoulder to sort of cradling the entire arm, drawing attention to it. For good measure, she allows herself to hiss in pain as well. It doesn’t matter that she’s not subtle about it. Franky’s in no state to object to the manipulation. “Please.”

It’s for her own good.

Just like putting her in harm’s way was for Erica’s good, for the good of the coven.

Franky clenches her jaw so tight Bridget can see the muscles of her face twitching. Finally, she nods too. “Yeah, fine,” she says. “I’ll go with you. Fuck.”
“Thank you,” Bridget says, stepping back and allowing herself to fade as Erica helps Franky up to her feet and they go to Franky’s locker together. Bridget turns her attention to Will, Vera, and Fletch.

Fletch is still on the ground. Bridget doesn’t see any reason to doubt her first instinct: he’ll live, especially now that Will and Vera are hunkered over him, doting.

For all its dysfunction, the New York coven looks after its own.

Bridget’s next order of business then is the Holt vampire whose face she smashed in. Hopefully, he’s still alive too. The one that Fletch shot—five times in the upper chest with military accuracy and precision—is definitely dead.

“Will,” Bridget calls. “Or Vera. One of you, come here.”

Will and Vera exchange a look and then Will stands and walks over to Bridget. “Yes, Inquisitor?”

Bridget doesn’t bother to correct him. She tilts her head towards the downed Holt vampire, trying not to jostle her shoulder as she moves. She doesn’t succeed, pain flares, but she presses on. “Take that one and make him talk,” she says, voice low. “Whatever it takes. Find out where the Holts are hiding. Keep everyone ready to move for when I—” Bridget pauses, catching herself, then corrects, “For when Erica gives the order. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Inquisitor,” Will replies. He bobs his head slightly before turning and heading for the unfortunate vampire passed out on the floor. There’s no chance he didn’t hear her slip, but he doesn’t mention it. In Bridget’s sense of him, there’s uncertainty and reluctance. She trusts, however, that he is old enough to understand that what needs to be done, needs to be done.

All through the exchange, Bridget feels eyes on her. Vera is watching. As soon as Bridget looks away from Will though, Vera looks away, back to Fletch. It’s the way of these things that Vera’s attention is indicative of *something*, but Bridget doesn’t have enough pieces to tell if it’s an important something or not. For the time being, she’ll leave it be. Erica and Franky have retrieved Franky’s things and are ready to leave.

On the street, there are four cars. Erica, Bridget, and Franky take one. With her injured shoulder, Bridget takes one of the separate seats at the front of the passenger compartment. Erica takes the seat next to her and Franky slides onto the bench seat behind them. Outside, Vera, half-supporting and half-carrying Fletch, takes the second car. Will goes into the third, dragging along with him the Holt vampire that Bridget incapacitated. The fourth car is a decoy.

In their car, the drive starts out in silence. Erica breaks it first.

“Franky, I’m sorry,” Erica says. She says it facing forward towards the partition separating the driver from the passengers.

“Yeah?” Franky prompts from behind Erica.

Although she refrains from joining the fray, Bridget shifts to watch them both as she extends her senses to listen to the tumult of emotion pouring off both her companions. Her shoulder is less than happy at the additional movement, but her shoulder is complaining far more at every slight bump in the road than it has any right to. By the standards of things that a vampire can suffer, it’s a flesh wound and even now she thinks that muscle and skin have finished knitting themselves around the metal projectile lodged in her.

“I’m sorry you’ve been dragged into this,” Erica elaborates. “I didn’t mean for…”
“We had something good,” Franky cuts in. There’s an undercurrent of anger in her. “I liked it.”

Erica finally finds it in herself to turn around. “I liked it too,” she says. “Circumstances changed.”

“So—what?” Franky asks. “That’s it?”

Bridget feels Erica’s resignation like it’s a black hole trying to suck down everything in the car. Erica, Franky, neither of them deserve the rocks Erica is about to hurl them headlong onto in a dazzling display of senseless martyrdom. “No,” Bridget cuts in. “When circumstances change, you adapt.”

Surprise, from both of them.

Franky opens her mouth to say something but Bridget raises her good hand to silence her. “Don’t talk,” she says. “Just think about it for a while.”

She’s too damn tired to actively steer a stubborn human and an even more stubborn vampire out of romantic troubles. As long as neither of them has the chance to talk the other out of it, they’ll arrive at the proper conclusions, she hopes.

Minutes, marked by the passing of city blocks, go by.

Erica undoes her seatbelt and climbs back through the car to sit down next to Franky. A beat passes and then Erica sets an arm around Franky’s shoulders as well.

Franky doesn’t try to push her away.

When the car finally arrives at the safe house, the other three cars they departed with have vanished, gone off with their passengers towards different destinations.

As they exit the car, Erica moves to help Bridget. Her help is unnecessary. Bridget’s shoulder hurts, and it hurts with every step she takes, but she can still walk.

“Franky, my room is downstairs, the first one on the right,” Erica says. She offers the two guards by the door a curt nod and then ignores them. On the street, their car pulls away.

“You’re assuming a lot,” Franky replies. There’s a bite in her voice and there’s a slender current of resentment in Bridget’s sense of her.

“Well, I’m right, aren’t I?” Erica counters.

After a moment of hesitation, Franky grins, slightly. The resentment isn’t gone entirely, but, for the moment, affection has mostly displaced it.

“I need to see to Bridget’s shoulder,” Erica says. “Make yourself at home.”

“Don’t,” Bridget interjects. “Until you’ve invited us and the rest of the coven in. I don’t want to wake up on fire.”

It doesn’t quite work that way—the rules of host and guest when a human moves into a vampire’s residence are arcane and the original vampire residents are usually safe—but having Vera or Linda walk into the safe house only to burst into flames would be inconvenient.


Franky does an excellent job of presenting a brave face when she’s not feeling all that brave.

Franky hoists her duffel bag up. “I’m gonna go put my stuff down and pee and shower. Don’t enjoy yourselves too much while I’m gone.”

As Franky heads down the stairs to the garden level, Erica watches with bemusement. “Did she forget you have a bullet in your shoulder?” she asks.

“I hope she didn’t,” Bridget says. “Since it was meant for her.”

Bridget doesn’t add any rancor to her words. She knows a coping mechanism when she sees one. Erica’s human is a razor’s edge away from a breakdown.

Erica sets a hand gently on Bridget’s back, near her uninjured shoulder. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s fix you up. There’s a first aid kit in the basement and I’ll get blood from the kitchen.”

Bridget recalls, as if from a long time ago, the look of the basement when they arrived in the safe house the previous day. “Right next to the shackles?” she asks.

“Right next to the shackles,” Erica replies.

The first aid kit, as it turns out, is in a cabinet on the opposite side of the room from the shackles. Erica opens it and hunts for what she needs while Bridget takes a seat on the steel table in the center of the room. She notes that there are places to attach restraints to the table. It was probably custom made for the coven. Or maybe they got it, like their guns, from the police. Bridget wouldn’t be surprised.

Bridget divests herself of both jacket and shirt with some difficulty on account of having only one functioning hand. They’re ruined beyond repair. Her bra, even though it’s soaked with more blood than will ever come out of it again, stays on. There’s a trick to getting modern bras off with one hand, she’s seen it done before, but she’s never bothered to figure it out and sitting on a table with a bullet in her shoulder is not a good time to practice. Injury has shot her dexterity to hell.

When Erica finally fishes a scalpel and forceps out of the kit and looks up, Bridget, not having thought to fence herself off from her sense of Erica’s mood—

“Are you forgetting I have a bullet in my shoulder?” Bridget asks mildly.

Erica gives Bridget a half-smile and shakes her head. She sets her tools down next to Bridget on the table, then slips out of her black suit jacket, which she sets down a distance away on the floor, beside a small pile of blood bags. Underneath her jacket, Erica’s black blouse fits her figure impeccably well. “It’s a good thing the coven owns a dry cleaning chain,” she says, offhand. When she turns and heads back to Bridget, her eyes linger on the slope of Bridget’s neck before moving on to her shoulder. “You’ve healed fast,” she says.

“I’m old,” Bridget replies. “What else can I say?” She glances down at her shoulder. There’s still a bullet in it, she can feel that there’s still a bullet in it, but on the surface pale skin has grown over the entry wound. Just looking at the shoulder, it looks fine. If there weren’t metal in the joint, they could leave it be. “You’ll need to cut the bullet out,” she says. “Don’t worry about anything else in there, it will grow back.”

“I’m not a fledgling,” Erica says, picking the scalpel up. She has a point. Vampires tending towards violence and then healing as they do, cutting out foreign objects is a more common procedure among them than it is for humans. “Are you going to do this sitting?”
Bridget shakes her head, then twists, bringing her legs up onto the table so she can lie down. The steel on her back is, perhaps, slightly cool. For a human it would probably be cold, but Bridget is room temperature and so is the table.

Erica holds the scalpel, hovering just above Bridget’s skin. “Thank you,” she says. “For taking care of Franky.”

Bridget smiles slightly.

The scalpel touches skin, parting it, and then sinks into muscle.

“My don’t you tell me about your day?” Bridget suggests. The bullet hurts, the scalpel hurts, there are times Bridget wishes to god that drugs worked on vampires. The discovery of nitrous oxide set humans far, far above their dead cousins in a single stroke. The knowledge that the pain is momentary and permanent injury is next to impossible can only dull the feeling of being cut open by so much.

As Erica works, she talks about all the things she did since Bridget and Fletch left to check in on Franky.

She went to see Mark. She doesn’t say much about it. Bridget gathers it was an uncomfortable experience. Erica cares for him, but not nearly as much as he cares for her.

She spent the rest of the day and the night hurrying across the city trying to coax support out of the people who matter, often meaning the oldest member of a particular line in the city. Most of them prefer not to get involved but the small handful who remember the Old World, who remember London, are worried that the Council has sent a representative to the coven. Erica thinks that with their backing, the coven may at least have numerical parity with the Holts though an accounting of the vampires in New York is a near to impossible task.

Erica is shifting into an incredibly dry territorial breakdown of the city when she’s interrupted—

“Holy shit.” Franky is on the stairs, staring at the both of them. “Where the fuck did you go to med school?”

“I didn’t,” Erica says, not looking away from her work.

“Yeah, that’s obvious,” Franky replies. “Fucking fangs… Jesus...” She makes a disgusted noise, then turns and vanishes back up the stairs.

A moment later, still digging in Bridget’s shoulder, Erica pauses. “I found it,” she says. She switches from scalpel to forceps and the bullet comes out. It’s complete and whole; there’s no evidence that it broke apart during impact. Erica drops it onto the table. “Is there anything left in there?”

Bridget closes her eyes. The itch of flesh knitting together at inhuman speed is disconcerting. “I don’t think so,” she says. “Blood?”

Almost immediately, she feels the slick weight of a plastic bag of blood in her hand. It hasn’t been heated and so it’s cloying to the point she has to fight a gag reflex, but it’s blood. Sitting up now with her legs dangling over the edge of the table, she drains the first bag fast, then a second, then gets halfway through a third before she slows to a more reasonable pace. Healing takes energy and it’s been a long night.

Bridget is setting the third bag down empty when Erica lays a bloodstained hand on her knee. Bridget follows Erica’s gaze to look down at the hand.
To Bridget’s sense, Erica is a tight blaze of nerves and wanting.

A long pause follows.

Erica removes her hand.

She folds both of her hands behind her back and looks up to meet Bridget’s eyes. “I… when I called… I had a sense that…”

“You knew Franky was in danger and you didn’t say so on the phone,” Bridget says, speaking for her. She uses a neutral tone. It’s a fact, not an accusation, not a condemnation.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Erica says. “I didn’t think it was anything. I didn’t know the premonitions could be about other people.”

Strange.

Perhaps there was something deeper to Erica’s unease at talking to Franky about the workings of their kind.

Bridget watches Erica’s face closely and she listens to Erica’s emotions with intent. “Your sire didn’t explain?” she asks.


“Explain what?” Erica answers.

Why did the Council choose Erica as Governor?

She shouldn’t be Governor.

“Blood is power and blood connects,” Bridget says.

Bridget feels the moment that Erica understands.

Clarity, and more pain.

Deep pain.

Whatever Erica’s relationship with her sire was, it wasn’t perfect.

Few such relationships are.

“I see,” Erica murmurs. She’s avoiding Bridget’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Erica,” Bridget says. She reaches out and gives Erica’s shoulder a brief squeeze.

Erica shakes her head. She pauses, then shifts focus, points to the empty bags of blood on the table. “Do you need more?”

“Are you offering yours?” Bridget answers.

It was… supposed to be a joke.

From the sudden blaze of desire, Erica didn’t take it as such.

Bridget holds very still.
Seconds pass and Erica’s blaze burns brighter still.

Erica’s wanting—what she wants and the way in which she wants it—is *unbecoming* of a Governor.

Finally, Erica fights her way to the same conclusion. “No,” she says. “That wouldn’t be appropriate. I can go up to the kitchen for you.”

Bridget slides off the table to stand. “I can go myself,” she says. “Thank you though.”

A sudden, brilliant, flare of confusion is all the warning Bridget gets—and it’s barely any warning at all—before Erica leans down to kiss her.

Bridget doesn’t think—

If she were thinking, she wouldn’t—

She kisses Erica back.

It’s a slow kiss, gentle and more hesitant than most.

Bridget regrets that she must taste like old, dead blood.

She wishes—

She wishes she tasted of Franky. And she wishes Erica did too.

Is that her wish? Her desire? Or is it Erica’s?

A shiver runs down Bridget’s spine and she pulls back.

Like a coiled spring released, Erica immediately darts for her suit jacket left on the floor. She picks it up and holds it across her chest. “You know where the kitchen is,” she says. “And I’m sure you can find the shower.”

Erica has followed Franky in fleeing up the stairs before Bridget can reply.

Collecting her ruined clothes, Bridget takes them and dumps them into the kitchen trash can. She heats more blood for herself in the microwave, this time in a mug that reads ‘*talk shit, get bit.*’

The warm blood goes down easier than the cold stuff.

As Erica predicted, Bridget finds the shower without difficulty. It’s still damp from when Franky used it. It still smells like Franky.

Closing the bathroom door behind her, Bridget inhales deeply.

If her heart beat, her heartbeat would quicken. Instead, her blood meanders through her veins according to the slow existence of her own power.

Close by, she can feel Erica and Franky both. For the moment, they are two quiet pools of peace surrounded by storm. They’re not doing anything, Bridget thinks. They’re just lying beside each other. They might be sitting, it’s hard to tell. Bridget prefers to think of them lying down.

Bridget pinches her nose.

The feelings in the basement were definitely Erica’s.
Bridget is old. She is done with the short-lived, the transient. This, she knows.

The feelings in the basement had to have been Erica’s.

Bridget showers, washing the scent of Franky out of the bathroom, then wraps herself in a towel and goes to her own room. As promised, someone has delivered her belongings from the Governor’s mansion where she left them what seems like an impossibly long time ago, though it has been barely the blink of an eye in the scale of Bridget’s lifetime.

She dresses in pajamas, double checks that the curtains covering the windows of her room are fully closed, and then retrieves her phone from the pocket of her pants to plug into a charger. The screen indicates a message.

Bridget frowns as she unlocks the device. She’s not young enough to be in the habit of constantly checking it—and not enough people have her number to make such a habit worthwhile anyway. The ones who do rarely find it in themselves to work out how to place a phone call. She still receives more messages by courier than she does by email.

The message is a voicemail from Channing.

Fighting down dread, Bridget presses to play the recording.

“Westfall,” Channing’s voice starts. He sounds warm. Friendly. “I heard you got hurt tonight. I know you’ll be fine but I’m an old friend and old friends worry. Call me when you have a chance?”

It’s not a request.

Bridget glances at the door to make sure that it’s closed. Nearby, her sense of Franky and Erica indicates that they won’t be moving any time soon.

She presses the callback button.

Channing picks up nearly immediately. “Westfall,” he says. “It’s good to hear from you.”

“And you,” Bridget answers. “Always. Though I’m under the impression that this is a business call?”

“So straight to the point,” Channing says. “One of the reasons I like you, you know. And I do like you. That’s why I called earlier—they said you got yourself shot?”

Bridget winces at the choice of words. The difference between ‘got yourself shot’ and ‘someone shot you’ is subtle but meaningful. “The situation called for it,” Bridget replies.

“Another reason I like you! Always willing to do what needs to be done, to take one for the team.”

“Thank you,” Bridget says stiffly.

“A bit of professional courtesy,” Channing starts, “You might want to know the Council has been considering its options for New York. Today was a bad look. Civil war spilling into the streets? If you want to leave, the Council would understand. That coven was rotting a long time before Governor Jackson bit it.”

Bridget closes her eyes and listens to the pieces click into place.

“The Holts were planning a rebellion before you sent me here,” she says. “And you chose me because you knew it would push them, push Jacs, over the edge. And you chose Erica because you
knew she’d fold. Why?”

“There’s a coven in Montgomery that needs you and that brilliant mind of yours,” Channing says.

Bridget allows the conversation to lapse into silence.

It’s Channing who breaks the silence. “I’ll stall as long as I can. Don’t fuck this up, Westfall. Sooner or later you’re going to be playing God like you always do and realize you’re not Him.”

Chapter End Notes

Yup. That was Chapter 3. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not that Erica and Franky are loud in the sense of that which can be heard. If it were a matter of hearing alone, Bridget wouldn’t notice and certainly wouldn’t stir from slumber. Rather, it’s their own experience of sensation that wakes the dead.

Desire, pleasure, hot breath along the curve of her ear, fingers moving—

Orgasm.

Erica’s?

Franky’s?

It doesn’t matter.

Bridget is awake now.

Rolling out of bed, she pauses to sit for a moment at the edge, head hung low, fingers massaging the bridge of her nose. In her mind, she very firmly shuts the part of her that feels what others feel. It’s not enough to quite quell the resonance of what she’s already experienced, but it’s all she can do.

Among her bloodline, there is a difference of opinion on their particular brand of voyeurism. In most ways, sex isn’t any different from the other forms of intimacy she and her kin borrow from others. Still, Bridget dislikes intruding without invitation.

A glance at her phone shows that it’s late afternoon. She has no new messages.

She wouldn’t, she supposes—she doesn’t think Will has her number.

Once she’s on her feet, Bridget dresses quickly. She goes with dark grey jeans and a forest green blouse. Her hair goes into a bun, though she leaves a few strands carefully out of place. What makeup she applies is light, just enough to keep with current fashion. Death does wonders for the skin. For shoes—Bridget enjoys the texture of hardwood floors against her bare feet, but her line of work can be unpredictable. She opts for her boots.

Stepping into the hallway outside her room, Bridget glances at the closed door to the bedroom across the hall from hers. The likelihood that either Franky or Erica realize, much less understand, the extent of Bridget’s sense of them is vanishingly small. Given the intensity they were leaking out all through the house, however, she wonders if such comprehension would have even slowed them.

The previous day, Bridget spent very little time in the safehouse before Erica asked her away to watch over Franky. She’s not fond of staying in a building that she doesn’t know.

It’s a tall house. All told, it has five floors, all of them long and narrow. At the bottom, the basement is utilitarian and designed to accommodate the violence of undeath. The bedrooms are on the garden floor, partly below and partly above ground. Above the garden floor, the parlor floor is dominated by a reception area that might be termed a living room, the kitchen, and then a formal dining space that no doubt serves as a meeting room more than a place for meals. Above that is the floor with Erica’s office. Down the hall from Erica’s office is a door with the same kind of lock mechanism that the
coven’s armory at the Governor’s residence had used. Bridget doesn’t bother with it, but she suspects there’s more weaponry on the other side.

When Bridget reaches the highest floor, she finds it occupied. Linda, sitting in front of a bank of monitors showing exterior security footage, is playing on her cellphone. She startles at Bridget’s entrance and quickly shoves her phone into her pocket.

“Don’t mind me, I’m just exploring,” Bridget offers, trying to settle Linda back down. She adds a smile as well. “What were you playing?”

Linda frowns a little. She’s weighing her options in terms of avoiding disclosure.

“Candy Crush?” Bridget suggests, naming one of only two cell phone games she can remember. Then, naming the other, “Angry Birds?”

Linda crosses her arms, somewhat standoffish. “Online poker,” she replies.

Bridget continues to smile. “I’ll leave you to it then,” she says, then ducks back down the stairs.

Online poker?

What will the humans think of next?

Descending down to the kitchen again and on her way to the refrigerator, Bridget opens herself again to the ebb and flow of emotions around her. It’s been long enough, she thinks, that Franky and Erica ought to be done.

Bridget’s step falters.

Franky and Erica are done, and whatever feelings of pleasure and desire they’d had have been replaced by a tumultuous storm of anger and frustration and fear.

Grinding her teeth, Bridget reverses direction and heads for the stairs. When she reaches the garden level, she hears the arguing.

“—fucking cops!”

Franky’s voice is raised and she’s radiating fury like an industrial space heater. There’s a current of pain too, of the physical sort. Franky seems to be the source of the fear as well.

For fuck’s sake.

“The coven will handle this, Franky,” Erica replies. She’s trying to sound calm, but she’s raised her voice too, as if she thinks she can drown out Franky’s agitation.

“What the fuck are a bunch of fangs gonna do about police at my apartment? Let go of—”

Bridget steps into the open doorway of Erica’s room. “Is something wrong?” she asks, cutting in firmly even as she keeps her voice pleasant.

Quickly, she surveys the scene. Franky, wearing the same clothes as she was last night looks as though she was on her way out of the room when Erica grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. Wearing one of her usual black suits and heels that put her taller than Franky, Erica is still holding Franky’s wrist and that’s doubtless the source the pain coloring Franky’s anger.

Bridget finds Erica’s eyes with her own, then very deliberately shifts her gaze down to Erica’s
Erica lets go immediately, doing a half-jump backwards at the same time. She looks away. Shame and embarrassment and self-recrimination press to the forefront of Bridget’s sense of her.

Good.

Erica will likely do a better job of censuring herself than Bridget can.

There are angry red marks across Franky’s skin where Erica’s fingers were.

Bridget positions herself so that she’s casually leaning against the doorframe while also taking up too much space for either of the room’s occupants to escape. She goes ahead and crosses her arms too, just to discourage any attempts. Not too aggressive, she thinks, but aggressive enough to project herself into the conversation.

Stalking a few steps away from Erica and massaging her wrist, Franky snaps, “Yeah there’s something wrong—my roommates called and a bunch of cops are at my apartment looking for me and my boss and his shitty girlfriend want to press charges!” As she goes on, her volume rises and she’s shouting by the end of it.

“Well, you did throw a pan of hot oil at him,” Erica mutters, sullen. She mimics Bridget’s pose, crossing her arms. When she does it though, she doesn’t project. Her shoulders hunch and she seems to become smaller.

“I wasn’t aiming for him,” Franky shouts back. “And it was self-defense from a bunch of thugs trying to get at you, for reasons you still haven’t fucking told me! And he was a dick!”

Her last insistence is coupled with a surge of panicked guilt. Leave it to Erica to find a human with a conscience. A scared human with a conscience.

“Which the coven’s lawyers will explain to the police, the prosecutors, and the Mayor’s office,” Erica responds. Her emotions are near to sulking. “You are under the protection of the coven and the coven will take care of this.”

“My roommates are freaking,” Franky bites back. “I have to go.” She enunciates every syllable like she’s speaking to a child.

“You can’t do that,” Erica says. “You accepted our offer of protection. You—”

“It’s a free fucking country,” Franky snaps.

“Franky,” Bridget starts.

“Oh, you’re on her side, aren’t you?” Franky says, rounding on Bridget now. Her eyes, accentuated as always by heavy makeup, are wide with rage.

Bridget uncrosses her arms but doesn’t vacate the doorway. Attempting to sound soothing, Bridget tries, “I’m not on—”

Franky advances, crowding Bridget’s space. “Then get out of my fuckin’ way, fang.”

In an instant, Erica’s terror overpowers Bridget’s sense of Franky’s anger. “Franky, don’t,” Erica hisses.

Erica’s fear for Franky is unnecessary and if she weren’t already upset, she’d probably realize the
irrationality of it. Many people have called Bridget far worse things than fang in her long life. She’s not about to kill a human over such a mild insult. That doesn’t mean it’s not time to assert herself though. Franky is trying, badly, to intimidate her—and Erica is watching.

Bridget crosses her arms again and then goes very, very still.

Erica relaxes marginally, though, as she bites her lower lip, it’s evident she’s still on edge. Good. The show isn’t just for Franky.

“You gonna move or what?” Franky demands.

Bridget waits in silence.

Proximity to death is not something that humans ever truly become accustomed to, even when they spend as much time as Franky has near to the dead. What’s more, it’s hard to rage against a stone.

Franky backs down. Frustrated now, she goes and she sits on the edge of Erica’s bed, elbows resting on her knees. She glares at Bridget, then, as Erica moves to sit next to her, she glares at Erica too.

Erica retreats. She straightens again and takes two steps back.

“Erica,” Bridget says, “Why don’t you tell Franky what the coven will do on her behalf?”

Fidgeting now, Erica clasps her hands behind her back. “The coven will see to it that the police do not visit your apartment again,” she says. “They will not look for you. They will not pursue any matter in which you are involved. Any record of you in their cases will disappear. I used to work in the coven’s legal wing. This isn’t the first time we’ve made a case go away.”

Franky sets her elbows on her knees and rests her head in her hands. “And how’s the coven going to do all that?” she asks.

For a moment, a pained expression crosses Erica’s face. In the way of these things, some of the coven’s methods are no doubt less than reputable. Then, “Do you trust me?” Erica asks.

Franky groans. “Fuck,” she says, running a hand through her hair. Then, “Yeah. You know I do.”

“I’m going to go make the appropriate calls now,” Erica says. “Then, I have to work. And you’re…” Erica makes a throat clearing noise, visibly bracing herself before continuing. “You’re going to stay in the safe house. Where it is safe. I had Linda stock human food here last night.” She looks over to Bridget, still standing in the doorway. “Can you…? I’ve summoned Vera and Will to confer again tonight, but until then?”

“Of course,” Bridget answers. She steps aside, clearing the way out of the room, and as she steps aside she wonders if Will has achieved as she asked and whether Erica knows.

Erica likely does not know. If she did, she’d have brought it up and possibly attempted to obstruct. What Bridget asked of Will isn’t Erica’s style.

Franky stands, jamming her hands into the pockets of her jeans. She doesn’t try to head to the door, even as Erica walks out. “Didn’t realize I was signing up for prison,” she says.

“Vampires don’t like prisons any more than humans,” Bridget remarks.

“No one likes being locked up,” Franky says. “Who would’ve thought.”

Bridget smiles, just enough to show a bit of fang. “I was going to say that prisons interfere with the
Franky scowls. “Just like a fang to think with your stomach first,” she says.

“I can’t help it,” Bridget replies, shrugging. “I haven’t eaten yet today. I was about to when I felt you arguing.”

Franky doesn’t fire back a retort immediately. Her face slowly goes from somewhat sullen to startled. “Did you feel…?”

“Yes,” Bridget says.

Staring at Bridget, Franky blinks once, then twice. She clears her throat, buying herself time as she scrambles for something to say. Finally, forcing a smirk, she asks, “And did you like it?”

Bridget smirks back. It’s the natural thing to do. “Yes.”

Having found her footing again, Franky’s smirk begins to look less forced. She pulls her hands out of her pockets and crosses her arms as she cocks her hip out to the side. “Jealous?”

Bridget offers a shrug. “A little.”

“Get any ideas and I’ll sic Erica on you,” Franky warns, though the way she says it sounds far too suggestive to be a warning.

“Mm,” Bridget hums. “If I wanted you, Erica couldn’t stop me.”

Franky scoffs. To Bridget’s sense, Franky’s scoffing does nothing to hide the shiver of excitement that runs electric through her. Despite her argument with Erica, she’s still keyed up. “Gidge! And you were calling me a flirt?”

“As long as we’re both on the same page,” Bridget replies. She lets her eyes settle on the curve of Franky’s neck, mostly hidden by the collar of her flannel shirt, and briefly considers if she’s teasing Franky or herself.

The important thing is that she’s distracting Franky from being trapped in the safe house.

That’s what matters.

“Know what, Gidge?” Franky starts. “I don’t think we are on the same page.”

Bridget startles before she can reign in her reaction. Careful, she asks, “What do you mean?” As best she can tell, Franky was, and still is, somewhat impish. There’s an undercurrent that she missed before though, one of intention. Franky wants something in particular and she’s flirting as a way to get it.

So much for distracting her.

“I mean you know who’s trying to kill my girl and I don’t,” Franky says. “So are you gonna spill or what?”

Bridget grimaces.

Franky waits.

“It’s complicated and I still haven’t eaten yet,” Bridget finally says. “A proper account could take a
while.”

Franky shifts into motion, walking across the room towards the door, towards Bridget. “Breakfast time then,” she says, deciding that Bridget’s words amounted to an actual offer to explain rather than a dodge. “Gonna come?”

“That depends,” Bridget says, hastily stepping backwards to create distance between them as Franky and her delicious scent of humanity pass on their way to the kitchen. “Are you breakfast?”

Franky pauses a few steps down the hallway, glancing back at Bridget. She saw how quickly Bridget moved out of the way. And she wants Bridget to know.

Bridget forces a wry grin, shakes her head, then falls in behind Franky as they both go downstairs. When they arrive in the kitchen—

“Fuck yeah, Lucky Charms!” Franky announces. She takes a box and then goes to sit on top of the nearby dining table as she rips open the packaging. She eats the cereal straight from the box.

There are a total of six large boxes of the sugary cereal sitting on the kitchen counter. Inside the refrigerator, blood bags have been pushed aside to make room for an array of vegetables, a large parcel of meat from the butcher’s counter, a box of salt, a bag of uncooked rice, seven boxes of different kinds of tea, a tub of butter, and a birthday cake.

This time, Bridget chooses a mug that reads ‘blood of my enemies (jk, just coffee).’

As Bridget leans against the kitchen counter waiting for the microwave to work its science upon her breakfast, Franky asks, “What did you do before refrigerators?”

Bridget looks over to Franky and raises an eyebrow. Speaking with her mouth full, Franky replies, “Good point.”

Modern vampires are much more peaceable than they were even a mere century past.

When the microwave beeps, Bridget takes her steaming mug out and holds it in her cool hands. It’s a pleasant sensation and it gives her an idea. “Franky, there are windows in the front room,” she says. “If you sit in the sun for me, we can talk.”

“Yeah?” Franky asks. She slides off the kitchen table and moves to put her Lucky Charms back. “Sure.”

In the front room, Bridget settles down on an armchair well out of the way of the windows as Franky pulls back a curtain. Late afternoon sunlight falls on her face and Bridget immediately feels… content.

Warm.

Right.

A smile spreads across her face.

“I feel like a cat,” Franky says, pulling back the curtain farther. “Chasing sun around.”
“You’re my cat,” Bridget murmurs. “Would you mind—”

Franky shifts, getting herself fully in the sunlight coming through the window. She lays herself down in it, flopping out on her back against the hardwood floor as she basks. Her head is near the window, her feet point towards Bridget. The soft sunlight on her skin is golden. “No idea how you can live without this,” Franky says.

“We don’t,” Bridget replies. “That’s the point.”

“Sounds depressing,” Franky says.

“Most vampires kill themselves,” Bridget remarks. “Or—that was the case a hundred years ago. Modern cities and hospitals and refrigeration have changed things, somewhat...” Trailing off, Bridget finds her eyes drawn to the window. Outside the world is bright. It’s full of life.

“The angst is the one thing all the books got right about you guys,” Franky says.

Dragging her attention back into the room, Bridget tilts her head to the side. “How did you become involved with vampires, Franky?”

Franky sits up, propping herself on her elbows to look at Bridget. “What now?”

“Erica isn’t your first,” Bridget says, simply.

“Liz tell you that?” Franky asks. Her tone approximates a lazy nonchalance. She hides the hard tension that’s suddenly crept into her mood, disrupting the warmth and light, behind a lopsided smirk. She can’t hide the intensity in her eyes as they bore into Bridget though.

Bridget shifts in her chair, leaning back. Now isn’t the time to be acting dead. Her idle curiosity has lead her into something that perhaps she should have left alone. The velocity at which she blindly slammed into one of Franky’s walls was spectacular. “No,” she says.

“Did Erica?” Franky asks again, still pretending she’s not deeply invested in Bridget’s answer.

“No,” Bridget repeats. “No one said anything.” She pulls the corners of her lips up into the hint of a smile as she meets Franky’s eyes coolly. She needs to play along with Franky’s show of control if she wants Franky to believe her. If she doesn’t do things Franky’s way, it will seem as though she’s lying or, even worse, judging.

“So you can just tell by looking?”

“Yes,” Bridget says. What she doesn’t say is that it’s not Franky that she read it from. She read it from Erica. Erica isn’t Franky’s first vampire but Franky is Erica’s first human, or something near to it.

Did Franky teach Erica to feed gently?

“How’d you become a vampire, Gidge?” Franky asks.

Bridget says nothing. She lets her eyes flicker, very briefly, to a corner of the room though. It’s time to let Franky win.

Franky confuses. One moment Bridget will think that things are calm, light, smooth—and then everything goes to anger and discontent.

Flirting with Franky is easy. Anything other than flirting is… fraught.
“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Franky says, reading Bridget’s silence.

Bridget makes a throat-clearing noise. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Okay,” Franky says, still on edge.

“Okay?” Bridget echoes.

“Okay,” Franky says again. She uncrosses her arms, then crosses them the other way. She finally looks away from Bridget.

“I was going to tell you about Erica’s situation,” Bridget offers, attempting to seize the conversation and alter its direction towards something more agreeable.

Franky looks back again. “Yeah, you were.”

Bridget takes a long draw from her mug. When she finishes, she licks her lips. Leaving visible blood on her face is unsightly. “What do you know of what the coven is?” she asks.

Franky scowls. “That’s not an answer, Gidge, that’s a question.”

_Gidge._

At some point, Bridget must have decided to just… let it be.

It’s not even entirely objectionable, she supposes.

“I want to answer with context,” Bridget explains. “It’s cleaner. Fewer wrong conclusions and less miscommunication. I need to know what you know.” As she finishes speaking, she sips again at her blood. It’s starting to cool. On the floor, the warm afternoon sun is drifting off of Franky.

Franky shrugs. “The coven is some kind of vampire power trip with politics and money.”

Bridget shifts in her chair. “That’s one way of putting it,” she says. She pauses, then, “The sun is moving.”

Franky doesn’t move immediately. It’s like she’s weighing how Bridget might react if she refuses. In the end though, obligingly, she scoots over, following the puddle of sunlight across the floor.

“The first covens were families,” Bridget starts. “Modern covens are… they’re a method of preserving balance. What few laws we have, the covens administer them. The Governor of a coven is charged with carrying out our justice. When there is rot, the Governor cuts it away.”

“Dramatic,” Franky says. “Angsty. Didn’t realize you fangs had laws at all.” As she finishes speaking, she moves a bit to stay with the light, then lays herself back out over the floor. The way she’s positioned, she’s almost entirely in sun.

Mostly, we don’t,” Bridget says, leaning back into the soft armchair and crossing her legs. “Covens may create their own laws, but the only laws that bind all covens are the Traditions—and those are older than I am. They only pertain to our conduct amongst ourselves. They say nothing of how we treat with humans.” Bridget pauses as she focuses all of her attention on Franky. “You know about the… I believe you humans are calling it an opioid epidemic?”

“Fucking everyone knows about that,” Franky says. “Except the people who’re supposed to do something about it.”
In one go, Bridget finishes her blood. “The covens have decided that that plague should not touch us. Houses such as the one that your friend Allie went to must be cleansed.”

Franky makes a face. “No shit?”

“Those who profit from such places are pushing back. Erica is the fifth governor of this coven in five years,” Bridget replies. “The other four were all killed in pursuit of this goal.”

“Shit,” is all Franky has to say to that.

Bridget goes silent now. She watches and she waits.

Franky stays lying on the floor, mostly still except for the rise and fall of her breathing chest. Outside, the sun is setting. Inside, the light has crept across the floor and started to climb up the far wall. Franky doesn’t follow it and Bridget doesn’t ask her to. Quietly, she accepts the coolness that settles again in her in the absence of Franky’s warmth.

It’s not until the entire room has fallen again to shadow that Franky sits up. She fixes Bridget with a stare that suggests a woman of far greater years than her own. There’s a calm in her—the kind of still calm that killers use when they stalk prey. “So what are you doing here?”

Bridget responds with a small, slow, smile. “I could tell you,” she starts. “But I would have to kill you first.”

“Hah,” Franky says. She pushes herself up to her feet, then advances on Bridget in her chair. When she’s close enough, she sets her hands on the armrests of the chair to loom as her clear green eyes bore into Bridget. “You’re some kind of old and powerful fang from out of town? If you let anything happen to Erica, I’ll fucking end you.”

Against her better judgement, Bridget inhales deeply.

Franky smells delicious.

However cold and dead she may be, part of her isn’t.

“Franky,” Bridget says, voice carefully controlled. A part of her wants to play Franky’s game and respond challenge for challenge, even though the better part of her knows to disengage. Challenge for challenge wouldn’t be fair. They’re not on even footing and forcing the point won’t end well. Bridget finds a middle way. “I’m not scared of you.”

Franky doesn’t fade back. She just leans in closer. “You gonna try me, Gidget?”

“Erica means a lot to you,” Bridget replies. “Why is that?”

There is a single precarious moment where Bridget thinks that Franky might actually answer.

It passes.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Gidge,” Franky says. Her warm breath tickles Bridget’s face.

Bridget is considering her next words, her reaction, when, upstairs, in brilliance, a conflagration of fury.

Bridget stands up from her chair immediately. The motion brings her precariously near to Franky, who only leans back barely in time to avoid letting Bridget bump into her. She only ends up barely a foot away though. Still close. Bridget starts, “Excuse me, I—”
Storming down the stairs, Erica doesn’t wait to finish her descent before she starts her snarling.
“Explain yourself.”

If Erica won’t be calm, then Bridget will have to be calm for the both of them. “Governor,” she starts slowly.

“You are undermining me,” Erica hisses. On the bottom step of the stairs now, standing tall, she rests one hand on the rail. Although she is taller than Bridget by a significant measure even without her heels and the stairs, she doesn’t charge forward and attempt to bully by size and power. Unlike Franky, it’s not Erica’s style.

“I am not,” Bridget says. Turning to face Erica more fully, she clasps her hands behind her back and stands tall.

Erica’s eyes move between Bridget and Franky.

Bridget finds that she’s half-surprised she can’t hear Erica actually growling.

“Franky, get away from her,” Erica snaps. It’s unclear how much of her demand is driven by anger towards Bridget, and how much of it is simple possessive jealousy.

Franky hesitates. “Erica…?”

Under Erica’s hand, the wooden stairway rail begins to splinter. Bridget is reminded of Erica’s grip on Franky’s wrist before. Whether Erica’s gesture was intentional or not, and regardless of who it was intended against if it had been intentional, Franky takes a step back from Bridget—or maybe it’s a step back from Erica. Meanwhile though, Erica’s attention has returned to Bridget. “You ordered one of my officers to torture a man in cold blood,” she says. “Why?”

Behind Bridget, she hears Franky quietly moving away. “I did it because you wouldn’t,” Bridget says.

“You have no right, not even as—” Erica starts. She cuts herself off though, glancing over to Franky. Bridget follows Erica’s gaze, turning towards Franky as well. Franky’s eyes have narrowed. She’s confused but alert, trying to parse through what she’s witnessing. It would be to her advantage to stop trying.

Bridget looks back to Erica. “So did he get the location?”

“No,” Erica says. “He couldn’t do it. Because my people aren’t monsters.” Finger by finger, she releases the remains of the railing. “He’s bringing the man here. They’ll arrive soon. You can do your own dirty work.”

“I can,” Bridget answers. She finds herself… disappointed, though not surprised. Erica’s weakness is one that the rest of her coven shares. “But now we’ve lost time.”

“You’ve lost time,” Erica replies. “I’m handling this. My own way. And if you’d just let me—”

“You can’t afford that, Erica,” Bridget says. “And if you want to continue this conversation, we need to do it privately.”

“Don’t mind me,” Franky cuts in sharply. “I’m just the human getting shot at because you can’t figure your vampire shit out.”
Erica closes her eyes and tilts her face up towards the ceiling. “Franky,” she starts.

“Erica,” Franky answers.

“Bridget and I need to speak—alone,” Erica says, opening her eyes and looking at her human again.

“Hey,” Franky replies, throwing up her hands and then dropping them to her sides. “I can entertain myself. Do your mysterious bloodsucker thing.”

Franky’s tone by itself, nevermind Bridget’s sense of her mood, cuts bitter.

Before she can stop herself, Bridget turns back to Franky. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“Sure,” Franky bites back. There’s a moment of pause, then she adds, “Well, what are you waiting for? Go be vampires.”

Saying nothing, Erica turns and heads back up the stairs, presumably towards her office. Bridget lingers a moment longer, then follows. In their wake, Franky stands alone.

In Erica’s office, Erica goes to sit down behind her desk. In her brief occupancy, a great many papers have piled up, most with her elegant cursive script covering them. Instead of sitting down across from Erica, Bridget closes the door and leans against it, arms crossed. She intends to let Erica start.

Erica picks up a pen and taps it against her wood desk. “This is my coven,” she says.

“Why?” Bridget asks.

“Because I am Governor,” Erica replies.

“Why did you want to be Governor?” Bridget clarifies.

Erica hesitates. Then, her face tightens. “That’s immaterial,” she says. “The point is, whether or not the Council sent you, you cannot give orders in my coven.”

“I can call on the Council to decimate your coven,” Bridget says.

Erica flinches.

Erica’s flinch—Erica’s belief—cuts deep.

“Erica, hear me when I say that I want you and your coven to survive,” Bridget says, attempting to approximate a soothing tone. “And I will do whatever I think is necessary to achieve that.”

Erica twirls her pen, spinning it over her knuckles even as she continues to stare at Bridget. She does this several more times. Finally, “I do believe that. But that doesn’t mean I can allow it.”

“If I make this Holt man give up their location, will you order an assault?” Bridget asks.

For a long time, Erica stays utterly still. She’s fighting with herself. When she makes her decision, “I will not condone torture.”

Bridget pushes off from the door and takes two steps forward towards Erica and her desk. She keeps her arms crossed. “I didn’t ask you to condone anything. Torture isn’t the only way to elicit information. I asked you what you’d do if I gave you a target.”

This time, Erica’s pause is short. “I’ll give the order,” she says. “But I have conditions.”
Instead of prompting Erica for her terms, Bridget waits.

“You will not be part of the attack,” Erica says. “And you will relocate to another safe house. Away from Franky.”

Bridget raises an eyebrow. “Yesterday you trusted me.”

“That was yesterday.”

Bridget raises her other eyebrow. “I took a bullet for her.”

“You took a bullet for your own agenda,” Erica says. “Why are you fighting me on this?”

“Why are you insisting?” Bridget asks.

Erica’s lip curls, showing her fangs. “Because you’re an extremist with a god complex, Inquisitor.”

Slowly, deliberately, Bridget unfolds her arms. She goes and she sits in one of the two chairs across the desk from Erica. She leans back in it. Her feet are planted wide and she spreads her shoulders so that her hands drape over the armrests of the chair. “I was contacted by the Council last night,” she says.

That one sentence sends a sharp knife of fear through Erica.

Erica says nothing.

“It was suggested that I leave this city,” Bridget continues. “Would you like that, Erica? For me to go?”

Erica remains silent.

Bridget takes it as her cue to lay her remaining cards on the table. “I’ll accept that you don’t want me in a place where I might try to give orders contrary to yours, even if you need me there. What I won’t accept is you thinking that Franky is safer on her own. I don’t like it when people endanger those I’ve decided to protect.”

Erica’s eyes narrow. Her pen twirls across her knuckles again. “And you’ve decided to—”

A loud buzz from Erica’s pocket interrupts her. She pulls out her phone, looks at it, looks at Bridget, then answers. “Vera?”

“Governor,” Vera greets.

“Yes?” Erica says, tone clipped.

“We’re arriving,” Vera says. “We’ll be putting the prisoner in the basement, unless you have another direction?”

“The basement is fine,” Erica says. “Is that all?”

“Yes, Govern—.”

Erica hangs up before Vera can finish her last syllable. She shoves herself up to her feet. “My terms remain.”

As Erica walks out, Bridget remains seated. She closes her eyes and tilts her head back to rest on the
Does she have a god complex?

It’s only a god complex if it’s unfounded.

It will be unfounded when she’s proven wrong.

She has yet to be proven wrong—and she won’t be.

Bridget opens her eyes. Above her is the ceiling. It’s white. She stands and leaves the office.

When she descends to the main floor of the house, she arrives in time to see Will dragging the Holt man down the next flight of stairs. Erica is standing by the door, speaking with Vera. The Governor’s eyes flicker to Bridget as she finishes coming down the stairs.

“I’m going to have a word with the guest,” Bridget says. “Just a word.” She waits for Erica’s tentative nod. Given their conversation, it’s the polite thing to do. It’s the thing that will keep Erica content to stay in line.

As Bridget circles around to the stairs down towards the lower levels of the house, she passes by the entrance to the kitchen.

“Hey, Gidge, wanna give a girl a hand with something?” Franky calls.

Bridget hesitates. She looks over towards Franky. The human has made herself a mug of tea and is leaning up against the kitchen counter. She looks comfortable, but, then again, bravado is part of her aesthetic.

Erica needs to give the order to go on the offensive against the Holts. Bridget can’t spare Franky if it comes at the cost of undermining the coven’s position.

Bridget offers Franky a small smile even as she shakes her head. Preemptively, she shuts out her sense of the emotions around her. She doesn’t want to feel Franky’s hurt. “There’s something I need to do right now,” she says.

For a split second, Franky’s eyes narrow. She recovers quickly though. “Yeah, okay, it wasn’t that important,” she says, shrugging. She looks away from Bridget and towards Erica’s turned back.

Bridget nods. “Thank you for being understanding.”

“Anytime,” Franky calls out, sounding almost distracted now. She pushes off from the kitchen counter, heading towards the front door where Erica is.

Whatever Franky does next—it’s no concern of Bridget’s.

Descending towards the basement, Bridget passes Will on the stairs heading back up into the house proper. He doesn’t meet her eyes.

The concrete room at the foundations of the house smells slightly of dried blood from its use the previous night. Coming down into it, Bridget closes the stairway door behind her as she opens herself to the furious terror that overflows in the enclosed space. Her step falts, briefly, as she separates out what the man shackled to the far wall of the room is feeling and what she, Bridget, is feeling. It’s not any easy thing to do but, with only the two of them and without any distractions, she manages.
The prisoner has the look of an older man, grizzled and violent. He’s wearing what he was wearing the night before, jeans and a now blood-splattered black leather jacket over a t-shirt. Will has left him chained, but the way he’s holding himself suggests that there’s significant slack in the chains and Bridget would do well to keep her guard up if she gets close.

She takes up a place several yards back and clasps her hands behind her back. “What’s your name?” she asks.

The Holt man doesn’t answer immediately, but Bridget thinks that he will if she waits long enough. Vampires, humans, people—everyone wants to speak and be heard. If she acts the willing audience, the man will talk eventually. Soon, even.

Vampires are very good at waiting.

But so too, without hearts they are poor keepers of time.

Forever can feel like a moment and a moment can feel like forever.

In a dark room, disconnected from the rest of the world, Bridget won’t have to wait long.

“What’s it to you?” the Holt man growls.

“I don’t like not having a name for you,” Bridget says. “It’s not respectful.”


“It’s Spitz,” the man finally says. “Name’s Spitz.”

“Spitz,” Bridget says. “I’m Bridget.”


The scared lash out.

The powerful refrain from retaliating.

Bridget says nothing and an answering wave of panic is her reward.

She just has to wait for him to do her work for her.

“So what the fuck do you want?” Spitz demands.

“I want what the Council wants,” Bridget replies. “I want an end to this blight on our covens. No more drug-induced self-immolations.”

“Just the normal sober ones?” Spitz asks.

“You can’t save everyone,” Bridget says.

“And this is the part where you ask me for my help?” Spitz asks.

“If I asked, would you?” Bridget inquires. She already knows the answer, but it’s important to go through the motions.

Spitz scoffs. “No.”

“Is that because you think the coven can’t win and whatever we do to you, the Holts will do worse?”
Bridget asks, naming the most likely reason. The fear from Spitz doesn’t increase nearly as much as it would if she were correct. Bridget tries again. “Or are you protecting someone?”

There. There it is. Sentiment and dread.

“Holts’ve offed the last four Governors,” Spitz says, attempting to divert Bridget’s attention back to her first proposition. “Tinkerbell ain’t gonna last.”

“Is it a lover?” Bridget asks.

The dread grows, but she can’t tell if it’s a sign that she’s guessed correctly or not.

“A child?” she suggests.

The dread morphs into a yawning chasm, black and endless.

There may be a lover and there’s definitely a child, either sired by Spitz or his partner. It’s hard to tell, but Spitz doesn’t quite feel old enough to have a child. So it’s likely the child of his partner. Male or female? People like Spitz—to evoke such feelings in him, Bridget thinks female.

“Your child, what’s her name?” Bridget asks.

“How the fuck do you know about her?” Spitz snarls.

“Is she involved with the Holts too?” Bridget pushes.

Desperation.

So, in a word—yes.

“And what about your lover?” Bridget continues.

The chains binding Spitz to the wall clatter as he lunges forward, straining. Bridget is out of reach though. “Don’t bring my fuckin’ family into this.”

“When the coven wins, your family will have a way out,” Bridget says. “And… you and I both know that these people aren’t vicious and they’re not vengeful. You saw how William couldn’t bring himself to hurt you.”

“Fuckin’ pansy,” Spitz mutters. “Shit like that’s why they ain’t gonna win. Weakest Governor yet—Holts weren’t gonna bother with her ’til you showed up.”

“She’s not weak,” Bridget says, words escaping her before she remembers that they’re not true.

Strange.

Perhaps she just wants it to be the case?

Setting the thought aside, she narrows her focus back to Spitz. She’s made a mistake in breaking the sense of alliance she was building with the man and now she’ll need to correct.

“That your expert opinion, Inquisitor?” Spitz challenges.

“She’s an idealist with a vision,” Bridget says. “She’s not weak, she’s just operating in a slightly different world than the rest of us.” She lingers on that last word, us, before shifting the dialogue. “Did you know she’s already making plans for clinics? Finding ways to use methadone with
vampires like the humans do? She has a way to repair this coven, if she has a chance.”

Spitz’ interest piques.

Unusual.

Unexpected.

Bridget forges ahead, watching him closely and listening to her sense of him closer still. “This could be the first coven to recover.”

She didn’t make a mistake. He’s interested.

What does that mean?

The lover or the child. One of them has a problem. Maybe even both.

“You want to protect your family?” Bridget asks. “Where are the Holts?”

A long silence follows.

To Bridget, Spitz’ internal conflict is thick and smothering.

Finally, Spitz shakes his head. “I ain’t tellin’ you shit.”

Bridget doesn’t say anything. She just waits.

Another push would be too much.

He has all the pieces he needs to trust her and to trust in his own hope.


And he does. The address he gives is, to Bridget’s understanding of the city, in Manhattan. Gramercy, Spitz calls it. He has reasons he might attempt deception, but she doesn’t sense anything from him that suggests a lie. She records the address using her phone and, in the process, checks the time.

It’s getting late.

She achieved her ends quickly, all things considered, but not quickly enough to make up for the time Will lost.

Bridget looks up from her phone. Spitz is sitting on the floor now, head in his hands. “What are their names?” Bridget asks.

“The fuck does it matter to you?” Spitz replies. “You have what you want.”

This time, Bridget doesn’t press. Leaving Spitz alone in the dark, she goes to the stairs and climbs back up into the house. As she passes through the garden level where the bedrooms are located on her way up to the main floor, she feels a ball of anger sitting inside Erica’s room behind a closed door.

Turning to ascend another flight of stairs, Bridget leaves Franky be.

Bridget finds Erica, Vera, and Will seated around the house’s dining room table, arguing. At
Bridget’s entrance, the three of them stop and shift to look at her.

Bridget accepts the attention and she uses it. “I have the Holts’ location. They’re operating out of a brownstone in Gramercy. Are you ready to move?”

Erica’s mouth tightens as she leans back in her intricately carved wooden chair. She sets her palms flat on the table before her. “Will,” she says. “Go. Finish the preparations. We’ll hit an hour and a half before dawn.”

Will pushes back from the table and stands. He gives Erica a small nod. “Yes, Governor.”

As Will leaves, Bridget takes his seat. She folds her hands in front of her, leaning her elbows against the edge of the tabletop.

“What makes you so sure this isn’t a trap?” Vera demands.

“I’m not,” Bridget answers, honestly. It wouldn’t do well for her to be caught in a lie at this point in the game. “But this is the correct decision.”

“Are you participating in this attack then? Your strength would be a valuable asset,” Vera says. Despite being dead, she fidgets in her seat, nervous. She’s not comfortable challenging Bridget, but the strength of her convictions is such that she’s forging ahead regardless.

It’s an admirable display.

“I intend to, but that’s up to the Governor,” Bridget replies. She looks to Erica at the head of the table. If Erica is a fraction as intelligent as Bridget knows she is, she’ll give her assent.

Bridget can feel Erica’s inner turbulence. Their previous conversation never truly found resolution. In front of both Bridget and Vera, however, Erica has to make a decision. “You’ll stay here,” Erica pronounces. “With Franky.”

“Governor, I don’t—” Vera starts.

At the same time, Bridget, surprised, “You changed your—”

Erica raises a hand to silence both of them. “Inquisitor, your survival is too important to the Council,” she says. “I will not see you risk your life. If something happened to you, that would be a disaster for…” Erica pauses, glances quickly between Bridget and Vera, then finishes, “A disaster for the coven. And… Franky and I spoke while you were… preoccupied. I don’t have the right to say who she does and does not see. Even if it’s for her own good.”

Bridget blinks. That Erica thinks to protect her is… ludicrous. But genuine.

Hopefully it won’t get them all killed.

At the corner of her awareness, the strength of Vera’s disapproval catches Bridget’s attention. She can’t decipher, however, what it is that Vera is disapproving of, exactly. The coven’s Second deserves more of Bridget’s attention than she’s had occasion to give since arriving in the city. For the moment though, Bridget isn’t sure how to orchestrate an interrogation. She’ll have to continue to wait and continue to watch.

“And the Iman Farah problem?” Vera asks.

“Our human relations team are working on it. It can’t be a priority at our level yet and hopefully it
never will be. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone will nuke North Korea tonight—or the damn Twitter servers,” Erica says. There’s a flicker of doubt in her as she speaks. Still, she stays doggedly focused on the task at hand. “Vera, can you ask your rats to confirm that our targets are present?”

Vera stands. “Yes, Governor,” she says. “I’ll see to that immediately.”

Raising an eyebrow, Bridget cuts in before Vera can exit. “You’ve inherited the strength of your line?” she asks, tone carefully conversational. Vera’s bloodline, when strong, allows its bearers to speak with certain animals. Or, perhaps not speak, but somehow communicate. Her line’s general poverty and thinness, the result of many centuries of weak sires and weaker children, has left the skill all but extinct. Based on what Bridget knows of Vera from her briefing before coming to the coven, if Vera has the talent, she wasn’t born with it and she’s come to it over the years by virtue of her own growth. An exceptional achievement.

“Yes, Inquisitor,” Vera replies stiffly. “Is that all?”

“Yes,” Bridget says. “I was simply curious. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“By your leave then,” Vera says. Like Will before her, she offers Bridget and Erica a small nod before going on her way.

With Vera gone, only Erica and Bridget remain.

Erica drums her fingers once against the table. “Bridget,” she says.

“Erica,” Bridget replies.

Erica drums her fingers again. “You and Franky,” she says, then pauses. She’s looking at her fingers rather than at Bridget. “While you were speaking with our guest, she… expressed certain thoughts to me,” Erica starts again, voice pained. “She belongs to herself.”

The bleak longing doesn’t emanate from Erica, rather, it seems to pull all else towards itself, like a black hole.

“You wish she belonged to you,” Bridget says.

It is not quite the truth as Bridget perceives it, but to say what she sees would go too far.

“I wish for a lot of things,” Erica replies.

“I know,” Bridget says. “And I understand.”

“You understand wanting her?” Erica asks, bitterness creeping into her tone.

Bridget gives a slow shake of her head. “I feel what you feel, Erica. It’s in my blood.”

Erica makes a face. “Is that how this happened?” she asks.

A long pause in the conversation follows.

Yes. The answer to Erica’s question, surely, is in the affirmative. Transference is not uncommon among Bridget’s kin. But saying as much seems… wrong.

“If you could feel what I feel,” Bridget begins, careful, “Then you’d know that I don’t want to come between you and her. Can you trust that? She trusts you. Don’t you trust her?”
Erica finally meets Bridget’s eyes. “I have to,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, for reading :}
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Erica and her officers have been gone several hours before Franky emerges from downstairs. She prowls out onto the main floor like a large cat on the hunt, eyes flickering about. They finally come to rest on Bridget, sitting in her armchair in the living room. Wearing socks without shoes, Franky pads over, picks another chair in the room, and flops into it.

“Where’d everyone go?” Franky asks.

“Coven business,” Bridget answers. She shifts, crossing her legs as she adjusts to a more comfortable position from which she can better converse.

She’s spent the time since Erica departed sitting in her chair, contemplating every grisly possible outcome of Erica’s venture. She’s glad for a distraction.

“The kind of coven business where Erica’s gonna come back dead?” Franky asks. She’s concerned, yes, but there’s an undercurrent of bitterness crawling under her skin too, and a sharp resentment that stabs into her concern, needling. It might be a leftover from the argument before, but Bridget would hazard it may also be because Franky doesn’t like being left.

Tilting her head to the side, Bridget raises an eyebrow. The short answer is yes, but Bridget isn’t going to say that. “She’s been dead for a very long time, Franky,” she says.

This draws a snort from Franky. She stretches, settling deeper into her seat, protected from the uncertainties of life as she works to bury her misgivings in a show of nonchalance. Then, “Where do vampires come from, Gidge?” Franky asks.

“Existentially?” Bridget asks, slightly taken aback at the apparent non sequitur.

Franky pulls an exaggerated frown and shrugs. Against Bridget’s sense of her though, she can’t really shrug away her discontent.

“You really think I know?” Bridget replies. “I’m flattered.”

Franky shrugs again. “Worth a shot.”

“When I was a child,” Bridget starts, “Our priest said that vampires were the absence of faith in God made manifest, a scourge sent by Him to cleanse the world of heathens and blasphemers.”

“How’s that goin’ for ya?” Franky asks.

“Several years ago, a Satanist with sufficient faith in herself hit me over the head with her statue of the Baphomet,” Bridget replies. She remembers the incident in vivid detail. It was an unfortunate sequence of events. “My face caught fire. I don’t think my existence has much to do with God.”

“I never got that,” Franky says. “Why do crosses work but circles don’t?”

“Anything works if the human bearer believes in its sanctity,” Bridget says. “Some people suffering from severe schizophrenia can burn vampires with their touch. Mostly though, it’s only certain religious symbols that evoke enough faith to be effective.”
“What about churches? Homes?” Franky asks.

“Probably the same idea,” Bridget says. “I’m not sure. No one actually knows why we are what we are—why our blood flows without a beating heart, why we don’t feel the cold. These things aren’t knowable.” When Franky doesn’t immediately ask another question, Bridget takes her turn. “How did you meet Erica?”

Franky rolls her eyes. “We told you,” she says. “We met at a club.”

“A club that Erica, Governor of the largest coven in North America, is too embarrassed to elaborate on,” Bridget says. “You can hardly blame me for being curious.”

Franky answers with a short laugh. “It was a hookup spot for humans and fangs,” Franky says. “She looked so out of place, I don’t know how she even got in. She was so busy acting like she wasn’t staring that she tripped over some dude on a leash, crashed into me, made me spill my drink. Figures she still doesn’t want to talk about it.” A grin stretches across Franky’s face. She seems rather proud of herself. “I made her buy me another drink.”

Whatever Bridget was expecting, it wasn’t that.

A vision of Franky, Erica, and a leash dances intrusively through her head.

She attempts to shoo it away.

In a single explosive moment, Franky propels herself up from her seat. “I’m hungry,” she announces, stretching her arms wide. “Time for lunch.”

Bemused at the sudden turn of events, Bridget rises and follows Franky the short way to the kitchen.

Franky works quickly to assemble a collection of human food items from the refrigerator. She moves around the room with confidence and Bridget backs up against a wall to stay out of her way as she works.

“Shame you fangs don’t actually eat,” Franky says as she wields a knife against a sizable head of lettuce. “Missing out on the best part of life.”

Bridget smiles a lazy smile as she tucks her hands into her pockets. “We do eat,” she says. “We eat people like you.”

“I have it on good authority that I’m delicious,” Franky replies.

Bridget swallows, hard. Suddenly very aware that the kitchen is not a large space, she manages, “I’m sure you are.” She made certain representations to Erica and she has no intention of failing them. She leans more forcefully into her wall. “That was the impression I got from your girlfriend.”

Franky twists to look over at Bridget. In her hand, she twirls her knife with an expert flourish. Bridget’s eyes are drawn to the light glinting off the sharp steel as it moves through the air. “So how’d you meet Erica?” Franky asks.

“The normal way,” Bridget says, a certain amount of amusement leaking into her tone. “We shook hands.”

This is somewhat of a lie.

They did, eventually, shake hands. The first thing that happened though—Erica, Vera, and William
all knelt. It was the formal greeting of a coven to a representative of the Council, dictated by Tradition. In its own way, it was normal.

Franky goes back to her food prep. “Boring,” she says. “I gave you a story. And you’re giving me ‘we shook hands.’ Come on, Gidge.”

Bridget shakes her head. “Franky, if you’re going to be with the Governor of a coven, you need to understand there are some things our laws say that you cannot be told. The nature of my presence in this city is one of those things.”

“Vampires,” Franky says, half-exasperated, half-playful. “Angst with a side of mystery, and then some more angst for dessert.” She puts her cabbage in a bowl and she does other things with her vegetables as well. Bridget has not been involved in human cooking in… a very long time. What Franky is doing all looks very impressive, and even more so considering she continues to talk while working. “You know lots about me and I know shit about you. You gotta give me something.”

Adjusting her posture to find a more comfortable way of leaning against the wall, Bridget wracks her mind for something to satisfy Franky. She lights on, “I’m French.”

Franky pauses mid-cut, knife hovering dangerously near her pinky, and twists to fix Bridget with a disbelieving stare. “You’re French,” she repeats.

“I was French a long time ago,” Bridget amends. She keeps one eye on Franky’s pinky. If Franky loses a finger on Bridget’s watch, well, suffice to say Bridget would rather not have to explain to Erica. Not that Bridget is particularly well-equipped to prevent kitchen accidents. “There wasn’t quite a France yet. I think the area may actually be part of Germany now…” Attempting a diversion, she asks, “Where are you from?”

Franky rolls her eyes before going back to her vegetables. “Jersey,” she says. “So you like sleeping with women, yeah?”

Bridget raises an eyebrow at this particular shift in the conversation. “I thought you enjoyed bad vampire novels,” she says. “Didn’t they tell you we’re all depraved queers?”

“What did you call Anne Rice?” Franky starts. She moves her hands, continuing her magic, and the sound and smell of sizzling meat fills the air. “Not a reliable source of information? Hella good read though.”

“If you like trash,” Bridget replies.

“Hey, watch your language,” Franky fires back. “Erica’s not trash.”

Bridget chokes on a laugh. Then, slowly, she shakes her head. “No, she’s not,” she agrees.

Having finally gotten her cooking to a point where all there is to do is wait, Franky turns away from the stove, leans against the kitchen counter, and crosses her arms. “I meant what I said. You better not get her hurt. Or hurt her.”

Bridget suddenly finds herself unable to meet Franky’s eyes. She looks over to the closed door of the stainless steel refrigerator. If Erica fails to return, that will be Bridget’s fault.

The looking away is a bad move.

Franky misreads it and her mood shifts.
“There something going on with you two?” Franky asks. She phrases it like a question, but it’s clearly no such thing.

Bridget mimes taking a deep breath. She forces herself to go back to looking at Franky instead of the refrigerator. “Would that bother you?” she asks. She already knows the answer, somewhat. But Franky’s constant anger is like an overlay protecting her from the world, and it’s difficult to dig past to whatever else she feels. Among those Bridget has encountered in recent memory, Franky can be one of the harder people to read.

“You and Erica?” Franky responds, dragging a smirk across her face. “Hot.”

“But does it bother you?” Bridget asks again. It occurs to her that she’s as much asking herself as she is Franky.

“You’re the one with emotional superpowers, Gidget. You tell me,” Franky says.

“It makes you angry,” Bridget answers. “But everything makes you angry. Erica telling me to stay away from you makes you angry too.”

Franky shrugs aggressively. Her voice becomes bitter. “Yeah, well, life’s shit, you know? You and me? You’re great, but we’re not anything. Just like you and Erica aren’t anything. I trust her not to screw you or anyone else. Wish she’d trust me back.”

Bridget’s thoughts turn to Erica’s consort and she flinches.

She doesn’t mean to—it just happens.

And as soon as she realizes what she’s done, she freezes. She goes still as death.

Franky catches it.

There’s a silence, broken only by the hissing and popping of whatever it is that Franky has on the stove. If she doesn’t see to it soon, it will likely burn.

Bridget forces herself to move. She brings a hand to her forehead and grimaces. “I haven’t slept with Erica,” she says. Understanding that she’ll have to say more than that to elicit belief, she continues, “We kissed once and that was on me. I made a mistake. I know your position on this and I made a mistake.”

Abasing herself to cover for Erica’s dubious choices isn’t anything Bridget ever thought she would do. It’s not comfortable, for more reasons than can be said succinctly.

That Erica kissed Bridget and that Erica has Mark—these are things that Franky ought to know.

And yet here Bridget is, participating in Erica’s mess.

Franky spins back around to face her work and starts furiously moving things around on the stove.

“Franky, I’m sorry,” Bridget says. She says it like she means it because she truly does.

“Okay,” Franky says, not turning to look at Bridget again. “That’s cool. We’re cool.”

Shit.

Franky’s been hurt—Bridget has hurt Franky—and what the hell now, Westfall?
Maybe—

Maybe space? Maybe Bridget should give Franky space?

*Retreat* is certainly an enticing option.

Bridget makes a throat-clearing sound as she pushes off from the wall she’s been leaning against. “I should… I’ll be in the next room if you need me,” she says.

“Kay,” Frankie says, not turning around.

On her way out of the kitchen, Bridget grabs a bag of blood from the refrigerator. She’d heat it, but that would require lingering and now is not the time to linger. Her armchair is waiting for her in the living room. She sits down in it, tears open a corner of her blood bag, and takes a swallow of blood mixed with anticoagulant so cold it nearly makes her gag as it goes down.

She manages another mouthful of the stuff before she decides that it’s not worth it. She’s got an opened blood bag now though, so she can’t exactly set it down on the floor. Using her palm to cover the opening she made, she holds it in her lap.

If she were human, the warmth of her body would seep into the blood.

She’s not human, so the best the blood will ever be without a microwave is room temperature.

*Humanity.*

Vampires live, or at least shamble about in their semblance of life, for a very long time. Over centuries, fidelity becomes a nuanced thing, unmoored from time. Vampires do not stay; rather, over long years, they return.

The vampires of the Old World knew this well. The American covens, Erica’s kindred, sometimes think to do things differently, for lack of sufficient age to fathom themselves.

Like all newly risen, they’d rather be humans.

And they understand the humanity that they want for themselves quite well.

From the way Erica reacted when Bridget asked if Franky knew of Mark, she sees perfectly well what she’s doing.

Bridget barely remembers Erica’s consort. He was passive. Bland. Entirely unobjectionable. Bridget can’t fault Erica for growing bored. Telling knowing lies by omission on a double standard, however, is problematic.

But it’s not Bridget’s problem.

So why does she care so much?

What is she doing with Franky?

With Erica?

Erica, who’s across the city fighting a battle Bridget sent her out into. Alone. Not alone—the coven is with her. But Bridget isn’t.

If something happens to Erica…?
And—

*When* something happens to Franky…?

Bridget came to New York with a job. With a mission. When she’s done with the Holts and their abortive uprising, she’ll be on her way. That’s the nature of her vocation. Franky, Erica, Franky and Erica—they’re attractive. They’re young and full of life, burning bright and fast. They’re *transient*.

They’re—

A lamp in the corner of the room turns on.

Bridget glances over to see Franky, holding a bowl of human food, coming to sit down in another chair. The way she just sprawls out in the chair in a great boneless flop, very nearly but not quite spilling her lunch, mitigates Bridget’s sense of tension in her. “This house is boring,” Franky says by way of explanation. “And the vampire brooding in the dark act was killin’ the mood everywhere else.”

Pushing herself back into the imitation of life, Bridget raises her blood bag and takes another mouthful of the stuff. It’s not as cold as before and it goes down marginally easier. “I thought I was the one who felt other people’s feelings,” she says.

“Kinda hard to ignore the moody-broody, Gidge,” Franky replies. She shoves a spoonful of human food into her mouth and chews. She swallows, then, “So what’ll cheer you up?”

A smile pulls at Bridget’s lips. Unless she’s read Franky wrong, she’s getting a second chance. “World peace?” she suggests.


“Franky, I didn’t mean to hurt you and I’m sorry that I did,” Bridget says.

Franky shifts in her chair, finding a way to slouch even more than she was slouching before. “So how many women’ve you been with in however many centuries you’ve got?” Franky asks.

Bridget makes a face. “You changed the subject,” she says.

“I’m helping you apologize,” Franky responds. She takes another bite of her lunch.

Bridget rolls her eyes. “You cannot possibly expect me to answer that question,” she says.

“Franky, I didn’t mean to hurt you and I’m sorry that I did,” Bridget says.

Franky shifts in her chair, finding a way to slouch even more than she was slouching before. “So how many women’ve you been with in however many centuries you’ve got?” Franky asks.

Bridget makes a face. “You changed the subject,” she says.

“I’m helping you apologize,” Franky responds. She takes another bite of her lunch.

Bridget rolls her eyes. “You cannot possibly expect me to answer that question,” she says.

“Oh come on,” Franky presses.

Bridget grimaces. “I don’t know. The 17th century is a blur.”

Franky laughs. “So you don’t know how old you are and you don’t know how many women you’ve fucked,” she starts. “What about times you’ve been in love? You seem like a romantic.”

Bridget takes another drink of blood. Then, “Erica is the romantic,” she says. “I’m the one who broods in the dark.”

It can probably be argued that brooding in the dark is a Romantic quality of a kind, but that’s rather beside the point.

“Oh wow, and you call me out for changin’ the subject?” Franky responds.
“I was more subtle about it,” Bridget says.

“Not by much,” Franky scoffs.

“I am a master of subtlety,” Bridget replies.

Franky shakes her head. “Nope,” she says. “That? Right there? That was not subtle. So come on. Spill. Or are you going to say something depressing like you don’t believe in love?”

Bridget forces a smile. “I don’t,” she says. “But I take it you do?”

Franky makes a face, eyes widening in exaggerated shock. Her tone is light, even if she feigns horror. “Gidget! Why don’t you believe in love?”

Sensing that her options of avoiding the direct question are few and mostly undesirable, Bridget attempts to minimize. “I’m a vampire,” she says. “If I loved someone, I’d probably burst into flames.”

*Love*, after all, is the state of holding another being as sacred.

And what are vampires if not the absence of sanctity?

Mid-chew, speaking with her mouth full, Franky responds, incredulous, “You don’t believe in love because of spontaneous combustion?”

“Spontaneous combustion is a very real concern for people like me,” Bridget says.

Franky swallows her food. Then, “You’re fuckin’ nuts,” Franky replies.

“My view is… becoming a minority one,” Bridget says. “Liberals like Erica tend to think differently. They want to be like you humans are.”

“Vampires have liberals and conservatives?” Franky asks. “Is no part of the world not fucked up?”

Shrugging while answering, Bridget says, “You’re the one who called the coven a vampire power trip with politics and money.” She raises her bag of blood and tips the last lukewarm drops into her mouth. Similarly, Franky finishes her own human lunch. She rests her empty bowl in her lap.

“So are you ever going to tell me where Erica actually went?” Franky asks.

“She went to lead an assault on the renegade faction running the blighted blood houses,” Bridget says, simply. Franky *deserves* to know. She deserves to know more than Bridget can rightfully tell her. And if she should find out only after something has gone wrong, that will be a disaster. “If she’s successful then she’ll come back and you’ll be free to go back to living your life however you choose to live it. If she fails, she won’t come back.”

Franky is on her feet so fast that her bowl goes crashing to the ground where it shatters, pieces skittering outwards over the hardwood floor. Fury radiates from her. “And you let her do that?”

Bridget remains seated. “Erica is Governor of this coven,” she says.

“You let her go by herself?” Franky demands.

“She has the coven with her, she—”

“Yeah, but you’re not with her,” Franky snarls.
Bridget winces. “She didn’t give me a choice,” she says.

“Like fuck,” Franky snaps. “You coulda gone if you wanted. Clearly you didn’t want to enough!”

“It’s more complicated than that, Franky,” Bridget starts. Even to her own ears she doesn’t sound terribly convincing.

“Hell it is,” Franky replies. She turns and stalks towards the kitchen. “Where’s the damn broom closet?” she exclaims.

Bridget closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. She could have handled that better. Strange, though, that Franky has decided to hold her accountable for Erica’s decisions.

When Franky returns with a broom to clean up the broken bowl, she does so in silence.

Bridget doesn’t want silence.

She misses the sound of Franky’s voice.

“Erica needs to lead her coven, Franky,” Bridget tries. As she speaks, she stands and makes to reach out, but then thinks better of it and withdraws her hand again.

Sweeping up the floor, Franky glances up at Bridget and scowls. “So you put her in harm’s way to make her grow up?” Franky asks. “Good thing you’re a vampire. You’d be a shit parent.”

Bridget tries again. “Franky, Erica is—”

The sound of the front door opening interrupts her.

Franky freezes.

Reflexively, Bridget stands, hands dropping to her sides where, were she in the field, she’d have weapons. Her fingers grasp only air. There are guards outside. How did anyone get so far without the commotion of a fight?

“Hello?” a man calls out. He sounds too lost to be dangerous. “Erica?”

Moving silently, Bridget dodges around Franky and heads towards the entryway.

A man in a black overcoat with a shoulder laptop bag steps into view. Fair skin, short hair, sort of forgettable face… but he still looks familiar to Bridget.

“Mark?” Bridget asks.

“Bridget,” Mark greets back. He pauses, then, hastily starting to bend at the waist and the knees at the same time like he doesn’t know if he should bow or kneel, “I mean, In—”

“Don’t,” Bridget cuts in, putting a stop to the awkward attempt at genuflection. She can feel Franky’s intensity, watching. “Bridget is fine. Why are you here?”

“Vera said—I’m looking for Erica. Vera said she was here,” Mark says, visibly relieved at being excused from ceremony.

“Who’re you?” Franky asks. She’s standing in the arching doorway to the living room, holding her broom as she sort of leans on it.
Marks eyebrows snap together in confusion as he looks at Franky. “Who are you?” he says in reply. “You’re not a member of the coven. I don’t recognize you.”

“Mark, this is Franky,” Bridget says. “Erica’s human.”

“Erica has a human?” Mark asks. His head tilts to the side as he continues to stare at Franky. “You’re a woman?” Recovering his manners, he quickly shuts the front door behind him and walks over to Franky, extending a hand and smiling. It doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’m Mark,” he says. “Erica’s husband. It’s nice to meet you.”

Bridget’s brow furrows. Erica hadn’t told Mark about Franky? Why did Mark put such an emphasis on the word ‘husband’?

Franky’s smile looks as tortured as she feels. She takes Mark’s hand and shakes it. “You too,” she says.

Behind her smile, she’s furious, aching, and numb.

The handshake lasts too long and, though Franky hides it well, Mark squeezes too hard.

Oh.

Erica hadn’t told Mark about Franky not because it would be inconsequential to him, but, rather, the case is quite the opposite.

Erica’s running of the coven has, in a limited way, earned Bridget’s grudging respect.

Erica’s handling of her personal affairs has not.

“Mark, why are you here?” Bridget asks again, verbally forcing him to let go of Franky and refocus to her. At the same time, Bridget brings the full force of her own attention to bear on Mark. That he’s trying not so subtly to intimidate Franky—it is reasonable, especially given that, against Bridget’s expectations for their kind, he considers himself and Erica to be married, but that doesn’t make it appropriate. “Why did Vera give you this location?”

For Mark and Erica to have settled on calling themselves husband and wife is… utterly American.

For now though, Mark isn’t Bridget’s problem. Franky is. And, for Franky, Mark needs to leave. Bridget can’t start damage control until he is stowed somewhere out of the way and every second that ticks by, she can feel Franky collapsing in on herself further.

“Erica’s under a lot of pressure,” Mark says, speaking with genuine concern. “I was worried about her. Vera’s my blood-cousin. She told me how to get here when I asked.” He pauses and looks around. “Is Erica here?”

“She’s away on coven business,” Bridget says. Erica, it would seem, has an unfortunate habit of trying and failing to compartmentalize her life. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Erica is my partner,” Mark says. “Of course I should be here. Actually, I shouldn’t just be here, I should be with her.”

Bridget tries a different tack. He’s worried about Erica. He cares what Erica thinks. “Do you think she’d want you in danger?” Bridget asks.

Mark smiles. “No,” he says. “But that’s not really up to her, is it? I swore to stand with her, and
that’s what I’ll do. And what are a few bullets? I’m nearly four hundred. They attacked me yesterday and I was fine.”

He says it with the confidence of a mediocre white man.

There’s a short pause during which Mark adjusts the way the strap of his laptop bag sits on his shoulder.

Again, Bridget shifts strategies. Clearly Mark won’t be leaving of his own volition, so she’ll settle for disengagement. Resorting to force would cause more problems than it solves. “Your wife asked me to stay here to look after her human.” Her eyes drop to Mark’s laptop bag. “Did you bring work with you?” she asks. “There’s an office upstairs.”

Taken aback, Mark follows Bridget’s line of sight, then pats his bag. His smile looks uncomfortable —like he wants to project confidence and doesn’t realize how badly he has failed. “I did,” he says. “No rest for the weary, as they say.” He starts to turn, continuing, “Upstairs, you said?”

Bridget nods at his now mercifully departing back. “You can’t miss it.”

Nearly four hundred?

Mark, however, is neither here nor there.

Franky.

Bridget looks over to the living room, but Franky has vanished. The shards of the broken bowl still sit in a heap on the floor. To Bridget’s senses, there’s a flicking knot of injured fury, striped with confusion and betrayal, somewhere beneath her feet on the floor below.

Well fuck.

The broken bowl, like the wreck of Erica’s life, they’re not Bridget’s—

Bridget wastes no time in descending to the garden level, making a great clatter as she quickly clambers down the stairs. She shouldn’t and can’t leave Franky alone to ruminate in the dark. She leaves behind the jagged pieces of the bowl on the floor.

Franky has gone to Erica’s room. The door is closed, but Bridget can feel Franky behind it, stewing in her turbulence.

Bridget pauses a split second to compose herself before she raises her fist and knocks twice sharply against the door. She wants to just open it, but she knows better.

There’s a long silence. Then, “Go away,” Franky calls out. Her voice sounds close to the other side of the door.

“Franky,” Bridget calls back. “Can we talk?”

“You knew, Gidge,” Franky snarls.

Bridget lays her palm flat against the wood of the door. Even downstairs from Mark, she lowers her voice to just what she thinks will carry through to Franky. “She doesn’t feel for him what she feels for you.”

Really, Westfall?
That’s what you lead with?

“Yeah, they’re married,” Franky snaps back, anger undiminished. It’s a diffuse anger, not entirely directed at Erica, Bridget thinks.

Or maybe that’s not Franky’s anger Bridget is feeling.

“Have you ever seen her wear a wedding ring? I haven’t,” Bridget says. She pauses. When Franky doesn’t reply she continues, “When the coven was burning, it wasn’t my idea to look for you. You’re special to her.”

“I wouldn’t be stuck here if it weren’t for her,” Franky says. Her fury is changing now, morphing into a trapped energy about to explode unpredictably.

“Who would you be if you’d never met Erica?” Bridget asks.

Erica wasn’t Franky’s first vampire. Or, Bridget thinks, her second.

In front of Bridget, the door swings open. Franky stands on the other side. She’s removed her flannel over-shirt, leaving her tattooed arm and scarred neck visible. The silver kite necklace she wears gleams slightly, even in the low light of the basement. Her eyes, accented by her heavy makeup, look red. “Why do you care, Gidge? Was it your idea to stay here with me now?” Franky demands.

Bridget opens her mouth to answer but Franky immediately cuts her off.

“Nuh-uh,” Franky says. She takes a step forward, pressing into Bridget’s space and forcing Bridget to look up. It’s just a slight tilt of her chin, but it’s clear who holds the power. Franky’s voice is a low growl. “You thought about that for a half a second and you’re about to spin me some bullshit.”

Bridget closes her mouth with a sharp click of her teeth. She holds perfectly still. Leaning back, she’d be ceding. Leaning forward, even the slightest amount, and they’d be touching.

Finally, Bridget answers with a question. “What should I say that you’ll believe then?”

The way Franky looks at her, there’s intent in her eyes and it crashes over Bridget like an ocean wave, swamping her as it hits and then pooling in her core instead of receding.

They’re so close.

Bridget clasps her hands behind her back. She can feel Franky’s gaze roving over her body, physical.

Bridget should probably walk away, should probably leave Franky to her anger and frustration.

That would be best for everyone.

She should.

“You want me, yeah?” Franky asks, dragging her eyes back up to meet Bridget’s.

Bridget tightens her grip on her hands behind her back and still doesn’t retreat. She shakes her head, but then forces herself to meet Franky’s eyes again. “Franky, coming on to me because you’re mad at Erica won’t help anything.”

Keeping eye contact, Franky moves slowly enough that Bridget would have ample time to step back even if she were human.
Bridget doesn’t step back.

Franky’s hands settle on her hips.

“What if I come on to you because I want you? Hm?” Franky asks.

Bridget unclasps her hands and moves them to cover Franky’s. Franky’s skin is warm—and it’s not the sort of second-hand warmth that Bridget gets from being near to humans, it’s the feeling of true life, vibrant and immediate. She shakes her head again and wills her voice to stay steady. “I told Erica I’m not—”

“I told Erica to fuck off about that,” Franky murmurs. She leans in, setting her mouth close enough to Bridget’s ear that her breath tickles the sensitive skin there. In the process, her scarred neck hovers precariously close to Bridget’s mouth. Their bodies are pressed together now. “She’s the one with the secret husband. She can’t say who I can and can’t be with. She doesn’t own me.”

“She’d like it if you owned her,” Bridget replies, voice soft to match Franky’s.

Franky smells of shampoo and of kitchen and of blood.

It’s right there, just underneath delicate skin.

The simple concepts of want and hunger don’t do Bridget’s thirst justice.

It’s a fire that reminds her of a time when she wasn’t dead.

“Yeah, I know,” Franky says. Her hands, still covered by Bridget’s, drift lower and back to cup Bridget’s ass. “You want that too, Gidge?”

Bridget inhales, filling her senses with Franky.


The muscles of Franky’s upper back flex as she rolls her shoulder. “You gonna do something about that?”

Bridget takes another deep breath and closes her eyes. Warm skin brushes against her lips.

Bridget wants, so badly.

Erica.

“Franky,” Bridget breathes. “I can’t do this.” She opens her eyes and shifts to set her forehead against the hollow of Franky’s neck. It doesn’t get the smell of Franky out of her nose or the taste of her out of the frazzled mess of Bridget’s sense of emotion, but she needs distance, even this small portion.

Franky pulls back. “Why not?” she demands. In an instant anger and bitterness have swept over everything else again. She throws her hands up. “I’m hot. You’re hot. I’m full of hot blood. That’s all you fangs care about, yeah?”

Bridget takes a step back as well. She raises a hand to smooth her hair and then crosses her arms, building another barrier. “I’m not going to help you lash out at Erica. Provoking me won’t change my mind.”

“A year,” Franky hisses. “A year and she didn’t say shit about being married.”
Bridget’s first instinct is to point out that she doesn’t think Erica sleeps with Mark very often. It’s not the right course of action though. Franky doesn’t need to be argued with, she needs to be affirmed. “I’m not condoning what Erica did,” Bridget says.

Franky’s anger falters. She pauses, grasping at what to say next. She settles on, “Sure seems that way.”

“I’m sorry she hurt you,” Bridget says.

“Yeah?” Franky challenges. “That’s cool. What’re you gonna do about it?”

“You need to talk to Erica when she gets back,” Bridget replies.

So does Mark—but Bridget knows better than to mention him now. Mark, Franky—if they can just find a holding pattern until Erica returns…

If Erica returns.

Fear spikes in Bridget, but she pushes it away.

At the moment, she has no time to spare for the dread of things that may never come to pass.

“The fuck would I do that?” Franky snaps. She turns away and stalks back into Erica’s room to sit on the edge of Erica’s bed. She drops her head into her hands. “Fuck. That was fucking dumb. Sorry.”

Bridget moves to stand in the doorway, leaning up against it. She’s hesitant to follow Franky into the room, much less towards the bed. She slips her hands into her pockets. “Because you don’t want to lose her. Especially not like this.”

Franky scoffs. “You think love would make you burst into flames,” she says. “What the fuck would you know about this?”

“I know about hurting people you care about,” Bridget says. “It doesn’t make the pain stop.”

“Right back to the vampire angst,” Franky snarks, bitter. Bridget takes it to be an improvement.

“A thousand years is a long time to make a lot of mistakes,” Bridget replies.

“Is that how old you are then?” Franky asks.

Bridget shrugs. “A bit older,” she says, welcoming the shift in the conversation. She hopes Franky will follow it onto more stable ground. Anything to distract from the subject of Erica. “And that’s still not a polite question.”

“Old lezzo Gidget,” Franky says. She flops backwards onto the bed, throwing her arms out to sprawl. “Is that old for a vampire?”

Bridget sighs. Like most of the things that Franky asks about, it’s complicated—Franky has a curious personality and it would be odd, Bridget supposes, if she asked simple questions. The vampires of the Americas are young. Few from the Old World willingly suffer the fraught voyage across the Atlantic. Sun-drenched seas are perilous for Bridget’s kind. She thinks though that even in the Old World she’s reached such an age that...“Yes,” she says. “Yes it is.”

Franky raises her hands and pulls them over her face, then runs them through her brown hair before tossing them out to her sides again. She takes a deep breath, then sighs equally deeply. “Fuck,” she
says. Then she lifts her head up to look over at Bridget. “So why’s it not a polite question?” Franky asks, voice tired.

“Age is a proxy for power,” Bridget says, and assumes Franky can make the deductions to reach understanding. Pushing off from the door finally, she walks over to the bed and sits down next to Franky. She crosses one leg over the other and leans back, propping herself up on her hands. Franky seems quiescent enough, inert enough, that the gesture is unlikely to provoke anything. It’s like she’s finally worn down to exhaustion. “Franky, why are you so caught up with the coven? With fangs?” Bridget asks. If they are trading questions, it’s her turn.

Franky didn’t want to answer the first time Bridget asked, but maybe she will this time.

“Why do you care, Gidge?” Franky returns.

“Is it really so strange that I do?” Bridget asks. It’s a dodge, and not a terribly artful one at that. Dodging is easier than answering though. She doesn’t have a good answer.

“You’re a thousand-year old vampire running around telling covens what to do,” Franky says. “So yeah, it’s weird as fuck.”

Bridget tilts her head back to stare up at the ceiling.

What can she say?

What’s the truth?

Bridget twists around to look down at Franky on the bed. “You’re anger and hope, Franky,” Bridget says. “You’re alive and you burn very, very bright. It feels good to be near you.”

The noise Franky makes communicates disbelief, but the pulse of warmth from her tells a different story. “Just hope I don’t burn out,” Franky says. She adds in a mirthless laugh. “Live fast, die young.”

“If you wanted to be one of us, that option could be open for you,” Bridget says, speaking slowly, drawing out every syllable, voice rich in hesitation. She is not any more prepared than Erica to bring Franky, still vibrant and in her prime, into their way of being.

“Nah,” Franky replies. She brings her hands back to tuck them under her neck, supporting her head as she lays sprawled in Erica’s bed.


Franky’s sigh is aggressive. She frowns up at the ceiling. “What do you think, Gidge?” she asks. “You’ve got some kinda theory about it, yeah?”

Bridget uncrosses her legs and then crosses them the other way. Any speculation she ventures into will, no matter how true, doubtless be the wrong thing to say. She forges ahead, though she treads carefully. “A perceptive woman like you?” Bridget starts. “You thought you’d be hurting someone by hurting yourself. Someone who cared about you. And you probably succeeded.”

Franky simmers for a moment. She’s still dull coals but an errant breath could bring the anger back to full fire. “You reckon I did?”

“Yes,” Bridget says.
“How’s that?”

“My empathy comes from blood,” Bridget says. “Yours comes naturally.” A smile pulls at her lips. “It’s part of your charm.”

Franky’s hands move to cover her face. “If you’d bit me, that woulda fucked Erica up bad.”

“Yes,” Bridget says. She hesitates. Then, “It would have interfered with the coven.”

“The coven?” Franky repeats, tone laced with disbelief. Then, again, “The coven.”

“The coven,” Bridget replies.

“That the best you can do?” Franky asks. Squirming, she wriggles up into a seated position, pulling her knees in to sit cross-legged on the bed. There’s a grin stretched across her face.

Franky’s grin is infectious. Bridget smiles back even as she shakes her head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Franky rolls her eyes. “I’m perceptive, remember?”

Bridget tilts her head to the side. “So what are you perceiving, hm? Do you—”

Bridget cuts herself short. There’s someone coming down the stairs, tense and alert with a sort of professional anxiety. Someone else, full of bemused confusion, is following the first person as well. Rising to meet the two of them, Bridget stands just as Linda, holding her phone out, rounds the corner into the bedroom. Mark comes into view after, hovering behind Linda.

Glancing briefly at Franky, Linda greets Bridget. “Ma’am.” She offers the cell. “Will needs to speak with you.”

Bridget takes the phone. “Thank you, Linda.” Raising the device to her ear, Bridget answers, “Yes, Will? Mark and Linda are here with me.”

Bridget doesn’t mention Franky. Franky is human. While Mark and Linda will hear what Will says, Franky won’t.

“Inquisitor,” Will says. His voice is full of static. It’s likely that, similar to Bridget, he’s at least partially underground. “We killed Vinnie Holt but the other two got away. Erica’s been injured.”

Bridget goes very still.

Erica’s been injured.

Erica’s been injured carrying out Bridget’s plan.

Bridget should have been there.

In the doorway to the room, Mark becomes a bright flare of concern and Linda… Linda feels distant. Calculating.

Linda’s reaction is the one that most coven members will have if Erica has been hurt badly and if it becomes widely known.

Reacting to everyone else’s mood, Franky stands and crosses her arms, tense. Her eyes dart between the three vampires, watching for some indication of what’s being said on the other side of the call.
“How is she?” Bridget asks, doing her best to filter out from her voice the emotions of the others and her own self-directed rage.

Now Franky’s concern peaks as well.

“How holy water,” Will says. Bridget can’t help but flinch at the phantom agony that the words conjure up. Around her, Linda and Mark recoil as well. “Torso, legs, an arm. She’s stable for now, but she’s not pretty. Vera’s having her sent back to the safehouse via the tunnels while we finish securing the building.”

Mark intrudes even before Bridget can reply. “Is she there with you?” he says, voice loud as he steps forward, pushing Linda out of the way. “Give me the phone. I need to talk to her.”

Franky too speaks up. “What the hell’s going on?”

Ignoring Mark and Franky both, Bridget fights to keep her face and tone neutral. Business first. Always business first. That’s how it has to be. “How many survivors do you have? Who else knows?”

“Maybe three quarters,” Will says. “We can’t keep this quiet. It’s not just our people—the ones who got away from us saw. We can—”

There’s a scuffling sound on the other end of the line and then Vera’s voice takes over. “Inquisitor,” she greets.

“Vera,” Bridget answers.

“As the Governor’s Second, I am formally assuming control of the coven until she recovers,” Vera says, voice clipped. “Thanks to your intel, this operation was a success and we are currently sweeping the compound for information pertaining to Jacs’ and Brayden’s location. Can you give the phone to Mark? We haven’t sent his wife into the tunnels yet.”

Bridget glances to Mark.

Mark, earnest in his worry, holds out his hand.

If Bridget capitulates, then she capitulates. If she doesn’t, then she’ll set in motion a fight with Vera that won’t produce anything but grief. She hands over the phone.

“Erica?” Mark asks, worry coloring his tone. “Erica, honey?”

Tuning out Mark, Bridget turns to Franky. She’s still standing, arms crossed, immersed in a swell of anxiety and anger.

“Franky,” Bridget starts.

Franky’s eyes dart to Mark and Linda before meeting Bridget’s. Instead of speaking, she waits. It’s clear enough what she wants.

Bridget lifts her hands in a calming gesture, preempting the coming storm. “Erica’s been injured and it’s severe. She—”

“Franky,” Mark interrupts. His mood is fast shifting from simple concern to mirror Franky’s turbulence. There’s an anger building in him. Petulant, he holds out the phone reluctantly. “She wants to talk to you. Don’t know why.”
Franky snatches the phone out of Mark’s hand before he can change his mind. “Erica? Babe, what happened?”

On the other end of the line, Erica’s voice is so weak that Bridget has to strain to hear her.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Franky,” Erica says.

“I never do nothin’ stupid,” Franky says back, voice soft. “What’s going on?”

“I never do anything stupid,” Erica corrects. Then, “I need to go. Listen to Bridget. Do what she says.”

Vera’s voice takes over again. “We’ll have her there within a few hours,” she says. “We’ll be in touch if there are further developments you need to be made aware of.”

The line goes dead with a click.

Numb, Franky hands the phone to Linda. Taking her phone back, Linda points upwards. “I’ll be going back to my post,” she says. Having thus excused herself, she clears the area at speed, keen to be away from whatever unfolds next.

Linda’s barely taken three steps when Mark snaps at Franky, “Why’d she want to talk to you? Instead of me?”

“How the fuck’s that your business?” Franky snarls back.

“My wife is always the fuck my business,” Mark yells. He advances towards Franky, menacing. Franky has the sense to take a step back. Her body is tense, ready for a fight that she can’t win. Mark, if he wanted, could snap her like a twig. “Why the hell’d she tell me to give you the phone? You’re some human she found on the street and hid in a closet.”

Bridget rounds on Mark. “I have two questions for you, Mark,” Bridget says, forcing her tone to be something resembling pleasant when she feels nothing of the sort.

Mark turns to Bridget, fury building. He understands that Bridget means to intimidate him, but not that he should be intimidated. He is, after all, not entirely in the wrong in his anger, even if wrong is how Bridget is about to treat him.

Bridget doesn’t normally enjoy this particular tactic, but she’s making an exception. “If I wanted to hurt you, could Erica stop me?” she asks. She pauses, long enough to feel the first satisfying flicker of fear from Mark that indicates his comprehension, then continues. “And if Erica could stop me, would she decide to?”

Bristling now, Mark bites back, pointing at Bridget in an attempt to drive home his point. “I’m older than she is,” he says. “And I’m her husband and she’s my wife. I’m not afraid of you.”

“You’re lying to me and to yourself,” Bridget says, still forcefully polite. “You children of the New World may have your human customs, but by Tradition Erica is not your wife. She is your better and you are hers, to sleep with or to forget. That is what it means to be consort to power.”

Not yet sufficiently cowed, Mark opens his mouth to say something in return.

Bridget closes the space between them, balls her fists in his shirt, and lifts him up off his feet. It’s an awkward maneuver because he’s so much taller than she is, but the fact that she does it all before he can react more than makes up for what’s lost in the height difference. Without guns, without blades,
all that matters is the raw strength of centuries, and Bridget has far more of that than he does.

Like many male vampires in their third and fourth centuries, he has no doubt lived as long as he has because those around him simply assumed he was powerful and competent. Compared to many of his peers, he is weak. Compared to Bridget, he is nothing.

Mark pulls at Bridget’s hands, to no effect.

“Get out of my sight,” Bridget says. “I don’t want to see you again until Erica arrives.”

Bridget lets go and Mark drops to the ground, landing heavily on his feet.

He straightens his shirt with shaking hands. Finally, there’s terror in his eyes. Saying nothing, he walks out of the room, back impeccably straight.

“You couldn’t have done that when he showed up?” Franky asks. During the confrontation, she retreated into the far corner of the room. She’s now leaning against the wall there, arms wrapped around herself. Her emotions are chaos.

Bridget opens and closes her hands, flexing her fingers. “It wasn’t necessary when he arrived,” she says. “He didn’t threaten you before.” Only realizing what she’s said after she’s said it, Bridget looks away, quickly. She tries to force her tone to soften as she changes the subject. “How are you?”

“I don’t know what the fuck is going on. You tell me,” Franky says, not moving from her corner.

Bridget flinches. “Erica will survive,” she says. “She’s been burned by holy water. The burns hurt and take a while to heal, but she’s very strong for her age. The coven is bringing her here to recuperate. She will recover.”

Holy water.

In Bridget’s mind’s eye, she sees Erica consumed by flames, skin blackening and peeling as she claws at herself, trying to smother devouring fire that rises from inside her chest, turning her body into its own pyre.

Holy water and its sacred flames are the stuff of nightmares.

Bridget remembers every time she’s encountered it. In excruciating detail.

Franky doesn’t say anything.

Hesitant, Bridget starts to move towards Franky. She goes very slowly, focusing to catch any sign that her presence is unwanted. When she’s finally close enough, she raises a hand and sets her fingertips lightly on Franky’s shoulder. “Franky,” Bridget says. “I’m going to make this right.”

Franky clears her throat and shakes her head slightly. “Hey, Gidge, can you do me a favor?” she asks.

“Yeah?” Bridget prompts.

“Gimme some space for a bit?” Franky asks.

Bridget withdraws her hand. “Of course, Franky.”

“Thanks, Gidge.”
Chapter End Notes

sorry that took a while to post, a lot of editing had to happen. and a lot of editing has to happen on the next several chapters. sooooo yeah. major thanks to my betas for putting up with me; i have been a bit neurotic about this.

anyway, hope you're enjoying it!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

fyi, i added a warning tag for violence. this chapter is fairly mild but looking ahead things may get gory at times. vampire fic and all, you know?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waiting for Erica seizes time, normally near to invisible to Bridget, and stretches it, twisting it until it runs in a loop rather than linearly. After cleaning up the broken bowl in the living room and then attempting to sit quietly in what seems like every room of the house, she makes her way to the basement, a mug of heated blood in one hand and a bag of the cold stuff in the other.

Her chest, filled as it is with an unbeating heart, feels very hollow.

Spitz, sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall he’s shackled to, looks up as she enters the room. He was starting to hunger before her arrival, but when the smell of warm blood hits him his hunger becomes a near-desperate yearning. Still though, he stays seated. Pride, Bridget supposes. Most vampires have a good deal of it. “You gonna share?” Spitz demands.

Bridget lobs the bag to him and then goes to sit on the steel table halfway across the room. Watching him rip into the bag, she sips from her Alice Cullen mug.

It’s odd—deprived as he is, the exaltation Spitz experiences from gulping down cold blood bitter with anticoagulant dwarfs and drowns out whatever sensory pleasure Bridget derives from her own, objectively better, meal. Holding her mug before her, both hands wrapped around it, Bridget stops drinking and just experiences.

It pushes thoughts and worries out—for a while.

When Spitz has finally dragged every drop that he can from the plastic, he tosses it to the floor. “You’re one of those emotion leeches, aren’t you,” he says. He drags the back of his hand over his mouth to mop up the crimson left there, then licks the back of his hand.

Hiding surprise, Bridget lifts her mug to her lips, sips, then lowers it again. She raises one eyebrow and tilts her head to the side. “You can tell?”

Spitz shrugs. “You’re not psychic because you ain’t a Holt,” he says. “But you’re real good at gettin’ in my head. There’s one of you feeling creeps over in Manhattan near Chelsea. Vinnie deals with her sometimes. Fuckin’ manipulative psychopath. Sadistic cunt. Resemblance is striking.”

Bridget ignores the barb. “Does she have a name?”

Shifting, Spitz reaches out and picks up the empty blood bag again. He starts tearing at one of the corners. Bridget doesn’t have to be an emotion leech to see how bored he is. “Calls herself Ferguson.”

Again, Bridget takes a draught from her mug.

The sociopaths of her line are, each and every one, unpleasant people. They are also, relative to the
other lines, disturbingly numerous. The best idea that Bridget has of them is that they are objective empaths of some sort, able to perceive without connection. It makes them highly adept at the less savory instincts that death births.

That there’s one in New York will hopefully never become important information.

“You’re not a Holt,” Bridget says, changing the subject.

“I’m nothing,” Spitz growls. “Can’t all be fancy.”

Bridget finishes her blood and then sets her mug down on the table beside her. “Everyone is something and someone,” she says.

“You actually believe that bullshit?” Spitz asks, letting his head tilt back until it hits the concrete wall behind him. “Fuckin’ motivational speakers… My sire could bend spoons with his head. Matrix shit. Me? I just drive Vinnie around and get mind fucked by crazy bitches in tight pants.”

“Drove,” Bridget corrects, ignoring the remark about crazy bitches in tight pants.

“What’s that?” Spitz asks.

“Drove,” Bridget repeats. “Vinnie is dead.”


“Now the coven hunts down Jacs and Brayden and kills them too. Then we rebuild,” Bridget replies, distant. The air is rich with the complexity of Spitz’ feelings. Good and bad all mixed together, they have a depth and a richness that she savors in her sense of them.

Spitz grunts but doesn’t say anything more.

Bridget doesn’t say anything either.

She didn’t actually come to the basement for conversation.

Listening to the currents around her, Bridget senses Franky and Mark arguing somewhere above her. There’s enough hesitance in Mark and enough caution in Franky that, so long as she feels no escalation, Bridget judges they can be left alone.

Time, still twisted up into a tangled mobius strip, passes.

Spitz turned traitor for the sake of a partner and a child. Would Erica ever do such a thing? Bridget knows that Erica cares for those she’s surrounded herself with. How she acts on that care, however, is a tortured affair.

Trying to push thought away, Bridget listens harder.

Eventually, Bridget’s listening rewards her with the approach of the coven through the tunnels. There are several of them, though she can’t distinguish exactly how many from so far off. One of them, she thinks, might be Will. She hasn’t been near him enough to be sure, but the resonance seems familiar.

Will, however, isn’t the one she wants.

Bridget wants Erica.
But Erica is… either too weak to feel or unconscious or both.

Nervous, Bridget picks up her empty mug and turns it this way and that in her hands. From nearly every angle, Alice Cullen smiles up at her.

Bridget has always found her disturbingly chipper for a vampire, even a fictional one.

As the coven approaches, the mass of them separate out into three people. Still, none of them are Erica. As they stop near the two guards left in the tunnel beneath the brownstone, Bridget stands from the table and puts her mug back down.

Spitz looks up. “What now?”

“It doesn’t concern you,” Bridget answers.


Bridget barely registers the insult. All her attention is focused on the trapdoor leading down to the tunnels. Maddeningly slow, it opens. Will is the first up, dressed in soot and blood-streaked combat armor. He glances at Bridget but doesn’t greet her. Kneeling over the opening in the floor, he reaches down. Gently, he pulls Erica’s limp body up, holding her underneath her armpits. He gets her entirely up into the basement room before his two companions, both women similarly dressed and dirtied, emerge from the tunnel as well.

Most of Erica’s clothing has been burned away. What skin she has is red. What skin she doesn’t have—in some places exposed muscle has turned black and cracked. In other places, yellowish fat that normally supports the outer skin has melted. Her right forearm is so ravaged that the shape of bone is visible. A smell of cooked meat pervades and Bridget gags.

Before, Bridget told Franky that Erica would recover. In most cases, given blood and rest, what doesn’t kill a vampire immediately never will. But there are exceptions. Bridget hopes that she didn’t lie. Even under the best of circumstances, it could take Erica well over a month to recover.

Torso, legs, an arm, Will had said.

Over the phone it had sounded extensive.

In person—

“Jesus fuck,” Spitz exclaims as he scrambles up to his feet. “Someone get taken to church?”

“Put her in her room,” Bridget orders. She glances at the two other members of the coven. “Your service is appreciated. There’s blood for you in the refrigerator upstairs.”

Holding Erica cradled in his arms, Will grimaces. “Yes, Inquisitor,” he says. The two other guards nod as well but say nothing.

A part of Bridget—a large part—wants to reach out and take Erica from Will. However gently he holds Erica, Bridget could do better. She controls herself and moves to follow him to the stairs. “How did this happen?”

“They were ready for us,” Will says. To characterize him as unhappy would be an understatement. He is frustrated, angry, scared. “Had some humans with them. Holts got in her head and she walked out from cover right into it.”
Bridget is snarling before she can think to stop herself. “They got in her head?” she snaps. “How?”

She knows how—in her head at least. But she’d thought Erica would be… She’d thought Erica would be made of sterner stuff.

Almost at the top of the stairs, Will glares down at Bridget. “You think she got the Governor job by flashing fang and cracking skulls? She got called up from being the head of our legal department.”

“You think she’s weak,” Bridget says, heat sparking in her chest. If Vinnie and Jacs chose to work in concert on him, Will would have certainly succumbed as well.

“I think no one else volunteered for a bath,” Will replies, prickly. His attitude will need to be dealt with. With Vera claiming command in Erica’s incapacity, the balance of power in the coven could quickly prove precarious. Bridget has invested in Erica, has chosen Erica, and she’s uninterested in working through anyone else.

“I’d like a word when you’ve set her down,” Bridget says, letting her tone convey that she is giving an order, not making a request.

Will doesn’t reply, even though he has surely heard. He opens the door up to the next level and steps out into the hallway there.

Franky and Mark are both waiting.

“How is she?” Mark demands, arms crossed and shoulders slumped, while Franky, one hand running back through her brown hair asks, “Erica?”

“Out of the way,” Will growls at them.

They obey immediately. To Bridget’s awareness, they are twins in their anxious terror. Watching Will and Erica pass, Mark’s face is a frozen mask of horror and Franky retches.

Will takes Erica to her room and sets her down on the bed.

Unbreathing, she looks like the corpse she is.

Following them in and moving towards opposite sides of the bed, Franky and Mark glare at one another. Their tension suffocates.

When Erica wakes, it will not be to Franky and Mark fighting for her attention.

“Mark, get out,” Bridget says.

Mark bristles. “What? But I… I have a right. I have more of a right than the human.”

Watching things play out, Will sets his hands on his hips. He’s got an opinion, but he’s sensible enough to keep his mouth shut about it.

“I won’t repeat myself,” Bridget says. Is she playing favorites? Yes. Does she care? No. She has no patience for Erica’s man. Not anymore. If Erica wants to resuscitate his pride, that will be her prerogative when she wakes and Bridget will have nothing to do with it. For the time being, he will fall into line.

Mark grits his teeth. “Of course,” he says. He stalks out, as angry at Bridget as he is worried for Erica. There’s not enough fire in him, however, to overcome his common sense or his inclination towards self-preservation.
If Bridget tried to throw Franky out the way she dismissed Mark, she thinks that Franky wouldn’t fold nearly so easily.

Bridget turns her attention to Franky. She works to soften her tone, ignoring the feeling of Will’s eyes on her. “Franky, it looks worse than it is,” she says. Given Erica’s appearance, Bridget isn’t even sure what that means, but it sounds reassuring.

“Looks pretty fuckin’ bad, Gidge,” Franky replies. She’s chewing on her thumbnail.

Stepping around the bed to get to Franky, Bridget puts a hand on her shoulder and squeezes gently. “She’s strong,” Bridget says. “I need to handle something, but I’ll be back when she wakes.”

Given Erica’s condition—Bridget almost hesitates to leave Franky alone with her, for Franky’s sake. But at the same time, Bridget has a… responsibility to Erica not to let her coven go to pieces in her absence.

“Yeah,” Franky mumbles. “Sure.”

Withdrawning, Bridget and Will step out into the hallway. Bridget closes the door behind them. It’s thick and she thinks that it will muffle sound well, especially against human ears. Even so, she lowers her voice. “At the Cloisters, you were willing to fight for her.” She takes care to project bemused curiosity rather than aggression. Aggression is very rarely Bridget’s preferred method of getting things done.

“That was different,” Will says. When he crosses his arms, it’s likely no coincidence that the motion draws attention to his muscular build. The strength of his line lies in their physicality and Bridget, old though she is, is even more averse than to brawling than she usually is when it comes to them.

“How so?” Bridget asks.

When Will hesitates to answer, Bridget sets her hands on her hips and tilts her head to one side. “If you have a grievance with how she runs the coven, I’d like to hear it,” she says. She says it gently, hinting that she might be persuaded to his view of things.

Will shifts, considering Bridget’s proposition. Like most people, he wants to be heard and she’s offering him an ear. Finally, he says, “She’s bad at her job.”

It’s a bold opening, to say the least.

“Has she been cheating on Mark?” Will continues. He sounds personally afflicted. “Did he not know about the human?”

“You were the consort of the previous Governor,” Bridget starts. She suggested that Will might have a chance to speak his mind, but she intends to keep control of the conversation. She’s going to pointedly ignore his question about Mark. Americans and their peculiarities are starting to make her miss the Old World.

Staring her down, Will says nothing.

“Meg was a very successful Governor, as I understand it,” Bridget continues. She moves to lean back against the closed door to Erica’s room, shifting to tuck her hands into her pockets, half-lounging, casual and at ease—even though she’s nothing of the sort. “And Erica isn’t anything like her.”

“You didn’t know Meg,” Will says. Bitter pain colors Bridget’s sense of him, far more intense than
she’d expected.

“I didn’t,” Bridget concedes. There are many conclusions she’s drawn from their brief exchange so far. She offers one of the least treacherous of them. “She wouldn’t have asked you to make the Holt man talk.”

The muscles of Will’s face twitch. Doubt swirls around him.

“But let’s talk about Erica,” Bridget says. “Maybe you can help me understand. You support her sometimes, sometimes you don’t. Why is that?”

“She’s a lawyer, not a leader,” Will says, blunt. “Me, Vera, Fletch,” Will starts. “Linda. Meg. The girls upstairs. We’re the coven’s enforcers. Erica is coven, but she’s not one of us.”

“So you’ll stand up for her but you don’t trust that she knows which end of the gun the bullets come out of?” Bridget asks.

Will shrugs. “Something like that. I have a job. I do my job.”

“If you’re an enforcer, why couldn’t you do as I asked?” Bridget replies.

Will goes stiff. He doesn’t answer. Bridget has, after all, questioned his pride.

“Fletch is your child,” Bridget says. “So you must be old enough that you’ve gotten your hands dirty before.”

Instead of anger or shame or resentment, Will leaks fear. It doesn’t really suit him, towering as he is. Interesting.

He was too young when he sired Fletch. The raising was successful, but he was too young. Not by much, but by enough. Bridget follows the curve and arches an eyebrow. “I see. I can look the other way though,” she says. She pauses long enough for Will to fail to respond, then continues. “I’m not asking for much. Erica is stronger than you think. You care about this coven? So does she. You do your job and you let her do hers.”

Will shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “She’s half-corpse in there,” he says, tilting his head towards the closed door that Bridget is still leaning against. “And that happened because she was playing your game.” Wills hands ball into fists. “She wasn’t the only one who—we lost six men in that raid.”

Bridget pushes herself to remain stoic. Will is right though. *Her fault.* “This is war,” Bridget replies evenly. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“You’re not,” Will growls.

“I am,” Bridget says. She pauses and takes a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment. Will is more angry than he is grieving, but the heartache is very much present beneath the roiling surface of his emotions. The anger—he didn’t lead with it. It’s not directed at Bridget. “You’re angry at yourself. You feel like you failed them. And you feel like you failed Meg.”

Will bristles. “What gives you the right to—”

“I’ve failed people too,” Bridget says. She takes care to meet Will’s eyes. “It’s an inevitability of… life. And our lives are violent. When we fail, our… the people we care about… die. Most of us… the
ones who survive as long as I have did it by—they stopped caring.”

“But not you,” Will concludes.

“You have a heart, Will,” Bridget says. She lets her lips tug upwards into the suggestion of a smile. “Don’t lose that. But don’t let it destroy you either.” Bridget pauses now, just long enough for Will to grasp a part of her meaning, before turning the conversation again in a direction she chooses. “You do your job. Let Erica do hers. Let me do mine. Do you understand?”

Will’s expression is unreadable and his emotions, even to Bridget, are unreadable as well. If she had time she could pick them apart, but, at her back, she feels a pulse of confusion and the prickling beginnings of agony. Erica is awake. Slowly, Will nods. “Yes, Inquisitor.”

“Why don’t you go eat something upstairs,” Bridget says, her tone conveying that her words are far stronger than mere suggestion. “I need to speak with Erica now.”

Again, Will nods. Saying nothing more, he turns to leave.

Despite her intention to turn immediately back towards Franky and Erica, Bridget lingers in her pose, leaning against the door.

The swell of pain and joy and terror in the next room—Bridget can’t intrude yet. They’re not done. They need more time.

As Will vanishes up towards the kitchen, Bridget closes her eyes and waits. Patience, of late, has been difficult. With no one there to see her, she drags a hand through her hair. It’s a human gesture, but it expresses perfectly how she feels.

Her thoughts churn.

She feels as though so much has happened in the past…

It hasn’t even been a full night.

Mark.

Bridget frowns. Mark is really and truly Erica’s problem. Bridget has no right to interpose herself as much as she has already, and even less so more than she has already. If he hadn’t started in on Franky, she wouldn’t have said anything against him, much less done anything against him.

That said, Erica’s failure to mention Franky to him for so long bodes poorly for their… whatever it is that they have. It bodes poorly for their marriage. It also suggests other difficulties were at work even before Franky.

But again—that’s Erica’s problem.

And then there’s Franky.

Franky.

Bridget pushes off from the door, turns, then sets her palm flat against it. She can tell from the ebb and flow of Franky and Erica that they’re talking. The door is thick, but Bridget could make out words if she focused. She chooses not to.

Just as Mark is Erica’s problem, Franky is Erica’s human. In a matter of days, however, she has made herself Bridget’s as well. The speed at which she accomplished this is remarkable. It’s… the
only explanation must be Erica. Bridget let her guard down and Erica’s feelings seeped into Bridget’s. This must be what transpired. And, equally, Franky must be the source of whatever it is that Bridget feels for Erica.

In her head—

>You sure about that, Gidget?

No. No she’s not sure. Thank you, Franky-voice. Your input is appreciated.

How it happened is no longer important. The point is, what is she going to do now?

Bridget inhales just so that she can sigh. Then, she knocks.

There’s a long pause before Franky calls out, “Yeah?”

“It’s me,” Bridget says. “May I enter?”

There’s another long pause. Then, Franky again, “Yeah.”

Moving with care, Bridget opens the door. In the room beyond, Erica is as they left her before, set out on top of her bed. The lights are low, but to Bridget’s eyes Erica’s injuries are still gruesome to the extent that Bridget has to fight her reflex to recoil. In the time that she’s been in the room, Erica has filled it with the smell of charred flesh.

Franky sits next to the bed. She’s holding Erica’s good hand. Her eyes are red and there are tear tracks running down her cheeks but her makeup has survived. Waterproof and smudgeproof, no doubt. The miracles of modern technology.

Erica herself is conscious. She twitches as Bridget enters. She makes no attempt to raise her head though.

Bridget closes the door behind her. She glances to Franky. “Franky…”

Erica stirs. Her voice is weak but clear enough to be understood. “Don’t,” she starts. She pauses, gathering herself. When she inhales to speak again, Bridget is struck by how small she seems, stripped as she is of so much flesh. “Don’t menace.”

“I was only going to ask for her discretion,” Bridget says as she approaches. She goes to stand beside Franky’s back.

“Bridget’s cool,” Franky says, making her own contribution to Bridget’s effort to reassure Erica.

Erica slowly opens her eyes and looks towards Bridget and Franky. Her gaze lingers on Bridget’s hand, but she says nothing.

“Will said they were ready for you,” Bridget says. “I sent you into a trap.”

Erica’s reply is mumbled. “Killed Vinnie. More than the last four Governors.” She closes her eyes once more and tries to pull a smile. Her face is near to the only part of her that hasn’t been melted down by divine fire. “That’s a win. Tired now. G’night.”

“No. I need you awake and aware,” Bridget says. She pitches her voice to be that of command. She gave Erica to Franky for a while. Now, it’s her turn.

Franky shifts. “Gidge…” she starts, wary.
Erica opens her eyes again. She meets Bridget’s gaze. “Yes, Inquisitor?”

“Inquisitor?” Franky echoes. “What—”

“Your discretion, Franky,” Bridget says. She turns her attention back to Erica. She reaches down and sweeps a stray bit of hair from Erica’s face. Bridget’s fingertips brush against Erica’s cheek. Erica’s skin is soft. “Erica, I offer you my blood.”

Erica is silent. Her eyes remain on Bridget’s. From her—fear, reluctance, desire.

Bridget’s proposition is not without consequence.

“Do you understand my offer?” Bridget asks, pulling her hand away once more. She hopes that Erica does. The kind of understanding she needs isn’t the kind that can be gained in a few minutes or a few hours or a few years, rather, it’s the sort that builds over centuries. Erica has lived those centuries but… she has proved uninformed of these things in the past.

Finally, Erica replies. “I understand.”

Under Bridget’s hand, Franky stirs. She’s about to ask, so Bridget starts first. “My blood can help her heal,” Bridget says. As she speaks to Franky, Bridget continues to watch Erica. “Far faster than yours could.”

“Didn’t realize you fangs could bite each other,” Franky says. “Wikipedia said it didn’t work.” She speaks slowly. She’s demanding more information.

“We can but, in most cases, we don’t,” Bridget says. She selects her words with care. She plots out what it is that Franky needs to know. “We’re not alive. The blood of our own kind can’t sustain us, it’s not any safer than feeding from one of you, and whatever it is that masks the pain for a human…” Bridget finishes with a shrug. Alcohol, cocaine, caffeine, vampire bites—these things cannot touch the minds of the dead.

“Sounds straightforward,” Franky replies. “So why’s the internet wrong?”

“I couldn’t say,” Bridget answers. Knowing that her answer is unsatisfying, she tries, “I suspect though—the matters of power and their consequences that would make it a worthwhile undertaking are more pronounced among those of us too old for… Wikipedia.”

“Consequences?” Franky presses.

Bridget draws her thumb in a circle against Franky’s back. She frowns. “If I thought I could explain it well to you, I would.”

Erica shifts slightly. “Franky,” she says.

“Yeah?” Franky answers. “I’m here.”

“Don’t let me make a mistake,” Erica says.

Franky shifts and doesn’t reply immediately. She understands Erica’s intention. She’s spent too many nights with Erica’s kind not to understand. In this instance though, she’s not comfortable with what Erica is asking.

Erica’s grey-blue eyes find Franky’s green ones. “I trust you.”

“Do you have an answer then?” Bridget asks, though Erica has already as much as given it. She doesn’t want to read between lines. She wants clarity.

“Yes,” Erica says. She closes her eyes, then opens them again, looking up to Bridget now. “And yes.” She pauses and her brow furrows. “It’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Bridget takes care to keep her expression neutral. She wouldn’t have made the offer if she hadn’t wanted Erica to take it. Erica’s reasons, however, are Erica’s and Erica’s alone. She is her own sovereign.

“Franky?” Bridget asks.

Franky sort of huffs and drags a hand through her hair. Her face crosses between several expressions before settling on a sort of frown. “I’m here for… both of you,” she says. She pulls away from Bridget’s hand on her back and crosses her arms.

She won’t veto—she can’t—but her assent is not a trivial thing.

Bridget settles onto the bed and moves so that she’s sitting, back supported by the wood headboard, and then pulls her legs up so that they’re crossed in front of her. Once she’s stable, she starts to shift Erica. She needs Erica propped up, mostly upright.

Moving Erica sends a lance of white-hot agony through Bridget’s sense of her. As Erica clamps down on a scream, Bridget slams shut her awareness of the emotions around her. She can’t afford to be incapacitated by second-hand pain at the moment.

Hopefully Erica won’t pass out again.

While Bridget moves Erica, Franky continues to hold Erica’s hand. She’s chewing on her lip.

“Franky,” Bridget says. “You don’t have to trust me. Just trust Erica.”

Bridget is about to trust Erica a great deal.

Franky grimaces. Then, “I do trust you, Gidge. Trust doesn’t mean not getting upset, you know? I’m okay though. Just worried ‘bout you two.”

Bridget finds herself with a small smile on her face. “Wise words about trust,” she says.

“Read it in a fortune cookie,” Franky replies. She pauses, then, “Fortune cookies are, uh, they come with… never mind. Some other time.”

“Another time,” Bridget echoes. She’s gotten Erica into as comfortable a position as she can manage, lying in Bridget’s lap, head against Bridget’s shoulder. “Erica, are you still present?” Bridget asks.

After a delay, Erica mumbles, “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Bridget echoes, repeating the slang that Erica used. “Your human is rubbing off on you.” Doing her best keep Erica supported, Bridget shifts, bringing her neck to press against Erica’s lips. It’s… much the same way that Franky tried to offer herself to Bridget. “I can’t do this part for you, dear,” Bridget says.

There’s a moment of stillness where Bridget wonders if Erica won’t—

Erica’s lips part, Bridget feels teeth—
Fangs sink sharp into skin and muscle and Bridget has to kill the instinct to fight. Her hands clench tight around Erica, spasming. The end result is that she hugs Erica even closer to herself. Her breath, though she does not need it, catches.

If Bridget were human, she wouldn’t experience the pain. She’d just have the… the everything else. She knows what it feels like for humans. It’s hard to describe. But she’s not human and so Erica’s bite hurts very much.

Beside them, Franky shifts, uneasy.

Dragging herself through the growing haze that grabs at the edges of her vision, Bridget forces herself to turn just enough to meet Franky’s eyes.

Franky has soft eyes.

Bridget smiles.

Then, she leans into the pain. You don’t fight the tide. You can’t. You just experience it. A shudder runs through Bridget’s body. She can feel everything. The pull of Erica’s lips mingles with the pull towards black, turning it into something else entirely. Most of all, she can feel all the blood in her veins, moving, shifting inside her, flowing against its natural course. It’s all for Erica. She’s all for Erica. The feeling of giving of life to another is potent and it’s primal and it roots her in the world.

But the blood of a vampire isn’t life. It’s power. That’s all it is.

It’s the power that raises and it’s the power that binds.

For the moment, it’s what Erica needs.

Erica has life enough. She needs the strength to heal.

Bridget has strength. If she so chose, she could drag herself out of the haze of Erica’s bite. She could take her strength and use it to tear Erica away from herself and stop it all.

But Erica is hers.

For Erica, Bridget will give.

Part of her wants to open herself and to feel what Erica feels. Bridget wants to taste herself in Erica’s mouth.

She could, but—

A poor idea.

Bridget must not become entirely lost. One of them has to stay as anchor and Erica is in no position to do so.

The sensation of connection lasts for forever and still it doesn’t last long enough.

As Bridget has less and less, the world starts to slide away. Her awareness of herself is slippery and going towards darkness as well. Speech, under such conditions, is challenging. “Erica,” Bridget mumbles.

Erica doesn’t release her, doesn’t respond at all. Letting go is hard and it’s unlikely she even heard Bridget. Where before there was blackened, burnt muscle, there’s now the pink of new skin, though
deep cratering suggests that there’s much left still to be regrown underneath the surface.

Molasses slow, Bridget drags her eyes to Franky. She’s still halfway absent and the concept of motion, of movement, is alien to her. “Mmm,” she begins. “Franky?”

Franky understands. She puts a hand on Erica’s shoulder and shakes her gently. “Erica? Babe, you gotta stop now.” When Erica doesn’t react immediately, Franky changes her tone. “Erica. Stop.”

Bridget feels the moment Erica obeys Franky.

The blood in Bridget’s veins stops. It lasts just long enough for Bridget to feel utterly frozen. And then her blood returns to its proper flow and Erica’s fangs are sliding out, her tongue lapping up the little that’s left on Bridget’s skin.

Erica is a very tidy eater.

But Bridget already knew that.

Erica settles her head against Bridget’s chest. It will take her time to find her way fully back to herself. Power can be more heady than life.

Bridget closes her eyes. She wishes she could get her arms around Erica, but her arms aren’t moving for the time being. She needs rest.

The bed shifts.

Warmth—living warmth.

Franky, smelling of blood and life and light.

Bridget feels Franky’s arm drape over her shoulders as her human settles in beside her.

“I told you I’d make it right,” Bridget mumbles.

Franky’s response is to hold Bridget tighter. She kisses Bridget’s forehead as well.

Bridget smiles.

“Erica, how you doin?” Franky asks.


Bridget hums. She keeps her eyes closed. “You already knew that. And age is relative, dear heart.”

“I’ve tried to ask her how old she is like ten times,” Franky says. “Keeps dodging the question.”

“It’s a rude question,” Erica says.

“I’m somewhere in my fourteenth century,” Bridget says. “I was young when Charlemagne made his kingdom. Now hush—I need to rest.”

“Okay, grandma Gidget,” Franky snarks. Without prompting, she squirms around, tugging Bridget down into a reclining position and getting a pillow under her head. By the time Franky is done rearranging things, Bridget is lying with Erica on one side and Franky on the other.
It is a not unpleasant way to drift off to sleep, and sleep finds Bridget quickly.

At first, Bridget doesn’t dream. She is much too tired.

In time though, she finds herself climbing the steps of a great white chateau. The sky above is lit by moon and stars. Torches burn, but they’re faint imitations of the heavens. Masked revelers wearing bright colors wander the grounds of the sprawling manor house and their light laughter flits about, bathing the scene in warmth.

Bridget raises a hand towards her face and feels the cool, smooth surface of a mask of her own.

A frown tugs at her lips.

She remembers this chateau and this night.

Bridget continues up the steps, her dark blue gown whispering about her.

The great hall of the house is crowded with men and women dancing, all in masks. Between the musicians on a stage, the noise of movement, and the chatter of those who are idle, the entire room overflows with commotion. It also overflows with the intoxicating scent of fresh blood. The French aristocracy at its decadent height included a great many vampires and at this ball they mingle freely with their debauched human cousins. There are even a few clerics among them, men of the cloth wearing crosses, but there’s not enough faith in all of them put together to make their crosses burn.

Working to avoid tripping over any unconscious humans, Bridget begins to thread her way through the sea of dancers and diners. She hasn’t come to the chateau for the ball.

Away from the brilliance of the party, the hallways are comparatively quiet. Thick tapestries mute all sound. The house is enormous and there’s more than enough room for everyone who wants privacy to have it, especially as Bridget advances further into the maze of corridors that she once knew like the back of her hand.

When she comes to the oak door of the library, she knocks.

A man’s voice comes from beyond the door. “Enter.”

In this dream, her sire is as she remembers him—hard and uncaring. He is alone in the room, seated on a low green couch, feet planted wide and his arms draped across the back of the seat. Long dark hair cascades over his shoulders. His flint-cold eyes watch her every move as she closes the door behind her. Except for the flicker of his eyes though, he is still as death.

Bridget curtseys. “Your Eminence,” she greets. The room smells of wood and the old books that line its walls. It would be cozy if not for its primary occupant.

“My child,” her sire replies. “Or, rather, Inquisitor Westfall. Take off that ridiculous mask.”

Dutifully, Bridget removes her mask. Without it, she feels exposed. She doesn’t try to hide her trepidation. As skilled as she’s become at controlling her emotions near her kin, against her sire the effort would be futile. At best her attempt would amuse him. More likely, it would draw out his violence, always near at hand. He can’t harm her here, but old habits die hard.

“You shared your blood,” he says, voice dripping with contempt. “Recklessly. With a girl so young she’s practically human. You disrespect our line.”

Bridget crosses her arms, though it feels less like defiance and more like hugging herself. “You have
no say in our line. You’re dead,” she says. “I was at your execution.”

“You engineered my execution,” her sire sneers. “You were mover and the instrument both.”

“It was a duel, under the laws of Tradition,” Bridget replies. It’s not a denial. A denial would be a lie. “You defied the Council.”

Her sire rises from the couch and advances towards her. Bridget stands her ground. Her sire is not a small man and when he’s near he looms over her. He reaches out and grabs her chin, forcing her to look up at him. His smile is unpleasant. “We’ve been over this, child,” he says. “I may be dead, but I’ll always be with you. I’m in your blood. Now I’m in hers too.”

Bridget pulls back from him, shaking her head. “No,” she says, voice steady. “The blood that I gave was mine, not yours. It obeys my will and no one else’s.”

Her sire leans down, bringing his face near to hers. His breath smells like rot. “If that’s the case, then why are you so scared?”

Bridget fixes her sire with steady eyes. “You scare me,” she says. “You always have. Killing you didn’t change as much as I’d hoped.”

“Killing me?” her sire snarls. He reaches out and shoves Bridget, sending her stumbling backwards until she hits the door behind her. Stalking forward, he corners her against it. “You put it so nicely, Inquisitor. You betrayed your own blood. But that’s what you do, isn’t it? You sell out your friends, your family, your lovers. You’d leave your new pet out to burn if you convinced yourself it was for the greater good. Just like you did to the Holts.”

Bridget closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Then, “Jacs.”

When Bridget opens her eyes again, her sire is gone and Jacs is standing a few feet back, sneering. “Little empath too weak to defend her sleep?” Jacs asks. In the illusion of the dream space, she appears as she wishes to be perceived. She’s younger, leaner, her hair is glossy with only a hint of grey. She’s a vain creature. “That conversation looked trying,” Jacs continues. “Daddy issues?”

Bridget attempts composure, though she knows it will do her little good—she remembers from old experience that she can’t keep the Holts out of her mind when she’s drained and slumbering. In the absence of her fully conscious mind, the way the power of her blood interacts with the power of theirs puts her at a disadvantage not easily overcome. The best she can do is dwell on nothing of consequence and make Jacs want to leave. “Vinnie is dead,” Bridget says.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” Jacs asks.

Bridget shrugs. “He was family. I thought family meant something to you.”

“More than it means to you, apparently. He was a ball and chain though,” Jacs says. “I should send the Governor a gift basket. How is the tart doing? She looked a tad upset the last time I saw her.”

“If you’re here to trade insults, you’re wasting your time and mine,” Bridget replies, immediately steering the conversation to something that won’t raise thoughts she’d rather be private.

“Then I’ll do something else,” Jacs says, unbothered.

The dreamworld twists and Bridget finds herself alone, standing on a vast and empty plain. Dry grass crunches under her bare feet. The starry sky above is the deep blue streaked with purple that heralds a rising sun. Terror, ancient and primal, thrums through her. There is nowhere to hide.
The sun is coming.

Jacs is gone but her voice lingers. “I suggest you dig, Westfall.”

Bridget falls to her knees and starts to scrabble at the hard dirt. She tears up the grass and her fingernails scrape against small rocks in the earth. The sky is growing lighter. She needs to get to safety.

No matter how she claws at the ground, she makes no headway. Every time she rips up a handful of dirt, the dream erases her work and she’s bent over unmarred earth once more.

Her fingers ache and then they spasm, unwilling to obey her.

Still on her knees, snarling, Bridget presses her palms flat against the plain.

This is her mind.

This is her dream.

Bridget grasps at the threads of memory and illusion that constitute her prison and she pulls.

Nothing happens.

She pulls again, yanks harder, forces her will upon the world around her.

Once more—nothing.

A growl rises from deep within Bridget’s chest and her hands curl into fists. The far sky has turned to a light blue. If, in this dream, she burns, then so be it. Jacs can win a few battles so long as Bridget wins their war.

And—in her burning, there is a small part of her that whispers that fire is a fair price for life.

Bridget looks out to the horizon.

So be it.

A hand touches her shoulder.

Bridget twists to look at Erica. Or, rather, the part of Erica that has become lodged in Bridget. While Jacs can trapse through the minds of others, Erica cannot. “Blood is power and blood connects,” Erica echoes. “Bridget, it’s time to wake up.”

Bridget closes her eyes, and then she opens them.

Erica is leaning over her and, judging from how her hands are on Bridget’s shoulders and her expression is pulled down into a severe frown, she seems to have been trying to rouse Bridget for some time. She’s wearing her customary black suit and red lipstick, geared for war in her own way. Black gloves cover her hands. Beneath so much clothing, it’s impossible to tell how much she’s healed. Or how much she hasn’t.

Hovering, she radiates stress and anxiety.

“I hope this time you’re not disturbing my sleep to report an impending attack,” Bridget says, not without humor. She still feels weak and depleted, like she’s been asleep for a few moments rather than however long it’s been. All the rest in the world won’t fix that though. She should eat soon.
Erica’s response is a deer-in-the-headlights look, as if she’s suddenly lost faith in herself and whatever reason she had for waking Bridget.

Standing behind Erica, Franky shrugs. She’s tense and edgy with anticipation for... something. “We were about to go out but she was convinced something bad would happen if we left and you stayed asleep. You’ve been out for a day and a half.” Franky’s going out clothes aren’t much different from what she’s been wearing around the house. The main difference is that she traded her green flannel shirt for Bridget’s previously-donated white jacket. It’s a bit short, but it looks good on her.

Probably anything would look good on her.

Bridget is tired and weak. Franky, full of life, smells delicious.

Pushing herself up into a sitting position, Bridget pinches the bridge of her nose. “She was likely correct,” she says, still groggy. She lowers her hand and smiles at Erica reassuringly. “Thank you.”

Erica backs away from the bed and towards Franky, who wraps an arm around her shoulders. “I had a feeling,” Erica says, still hesitant.

“With your blood, you should trust those feelings,” Bridget says. She doesn’t get up from the bed. She’s not ready yet. For the moment, her attention is turned towards Erica. “I’m a little… depleted. I wasn’t in a position to defend my sleep. Jacs was in my head. You pulled me out of a very bad dream.”

Erica briefly pulses a warm contentment, her response to praise. It is fast replaced, however, by sharp curiosity laced with fear. “Jacs was in your head? How? She’s not here. And you can normally keep her out?”

“Normally, yes,” Bridget says. “But I was—am—very tired and the nature of my line... attracts such intrusions...” she trails off as the gears turn and she understands the cause of Erica’s anxiety. She meets Erica’s eyes. “Keeping her out is something I can teach you,” Bridget says.

“I’d like that,” Erica says. She glances at Franky, who is still anxious. “But—later.” Erica crosses her arms. For a moment, the steel that she prefers to keep hidden shows itself, manifesting mostly as annoyance mixed with justified superiority and grim intent. “We took care of all of the immediate legal consequences from the restaurant but the girlfriend of Franky’s supervisor is causing trouble for the coven on social media. I hate Twitter. We’re headed to the hospital where he’s admitted. We’re going to sort this out.”

Bridget tries to hold back on the doubts that Erica’s announcement trigger. Even so, she can’t block out all the disaster scenarios that spring to mind. She chooses a diplomatic approach. “That’s your wheelhouse, isn’t it? Negotiations.”

“More than shooting at drug lords,” Erica says, somewhat defensive. Her discomfort grows as she continues. “Vera is taking point on tracking down Jacs and Brayden. Mark… I spoke with Mark. Mark is staying here and coordinating asset seizure of the Holt’s properties between the coven and the city. Will has gone to work with Vera and Linda is coming with Franky and me. Fletch is heading security while they’re gone.”

In the day and a half that she’s slept, Bridget has missed much and she’ll have much catching up to do. Unfortunately, it seems that catching up will have to be through Mark. When Erica mentioned him, Bridget felt a wave of... regret is the closest word Bridget has for it. But there’s fear in it too. And guilt. And a sense of things left undone.
“Erica,” Bridget starts, slowly. In her head, she can hear how her weariness leaks into her speech. She pauses, considering whether or not she truly wants to say her next words. She does, she thinks. “Did you speak with Mark or did you speak to him?”

Franky and Erica both stiffen, as good as answering Bridget’s question.

Erica, Mark, and Franky—much may have happened but, still, they haven’t dragged themselves through the hell of resolution in the brief time that she’s been asleep. Erica’s mishap seems to have bought her a period of grace from her entanglements, but it won’t last. Never before has Bridget thought to consider someone burned by holy water as... fortunate.

“He understands that the coven comes first,” Erica says. “And now isn’t a good time.”

Bridget’s eyes flicker briefly to Franky. Her jaw is set with a stubborn tension. So Mark understands that the coven comes first. And Franky understands… Bridget can’t help but wonder what it is that Erica has said to Franky to keep her willing to sit in limbo as well. If Erica has any sense at all, she hasn’t made promises she won’t keep.

Though—it wouldn’t surprise Bridget in the least if Franky has set herself to fight Mark to the bitter end, Erica’s current wavering be damned.

“It sounds as though you have everything under control,” Bridget says, speaking words that she knows no one in the room believes. Bridget says them kindly though, and she says them as if she believes them.

“I do,” Erica replies, stiff. “You rest. I...”

As Erica trails off, Franky, so subtly that Bridget almost misses it, gives Erica’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Like Bridget, Franky is propping Erica up, even as she herself has deep doubts. It’s hard not to support Erica.

And, every time that Franky can be there for Erica, that’s a point in her favor over Erica’s husband.

Erica continues. “I’m in your debt. And you need to be strong enough when Vera finds Jacs and Brayden.”

Bridget smiles at Erica. It will be some time before she feels strong again. “There is no debt,” she says. Then, she shifts her attention to Franky, even though she continues to speak to Erica. “Go take care of your public relations problem. Don’t let me keep you.”

As Erica and Franky move to leave, it’s Franky who lingers at the door of Erica’s room, looking back. Despite her other worries, she manages a small smile. “Glad to see you up and among the living again, Gidge.”

“As among the living as I’ll ever be,” Bridget replies.

“I made Erica sit down and explain what vampire blood is,” Franky says. “It took half an hour and it got metaphysical.”

“Only half an hour?” Bridget says. “I’d love to hear her explanation when there’s time. That’s better than I could do.” Bridget thinks that she would like to hear Erica’s explanation someday. She doesn’t doubt that Erica’s faction of progressives have come up with something that fits with the modern world far better than Bridget’s understanding.

Franky shrugs. “It was interesting.” Then, she makes a clicking sound with her mouth, flashes her
signature grin, and she vanishes around the corner.

After the two of them are gone, Bridget stays seated on the bed for an indeterminate length of time. There’s no clock visible in the room and it’s not until she’s stiffly getting up and heading towards the door that she remembers her phone functions as a timepiece as well.

Though Bridget acquired her first cell phone over a decade ago, she’s still not… whatever the phrase is for a person well-adjusted to technology. Millennial?

In any case, she goes across the hall to her own room to collect a clean set of clothes, which she then carries to the bathroom. Her neck is clean—Erica saw to that—but her blouse is stained with dried blood. In the bathroom, she showers, enjoying the hot water. When she’s done, she changes into her clean pair of jeans and a light blue top. With some reluctance, she puts her boots back on too. She’d rather feel the floor under her bare feet, but that’s for times of peace.

On the next floor up, Mark is sitting at the dining room table with a laptop open, surrounded by a sprawl of paper. He has white earbuds jammed in his ears and indistinct noise, reminiscent of the weird electronic sounds humans are passing off as music of late, leaks out from them. Apparently he was either not allowed to use Erica’s office or didn’t think to ask. Across the table from him, at the far end, Fletch is sitting, tilting his chair back and looking terribly bored.

Bridget microwaves a mug of blood—her mug this time features a very pale woman with striking blue eyes wearing tight black leather and dramatically posing with a gun in each hand—and immediately drains it. Underworld the cup says. After a certain point, all Hollywood vampires look the same. Bridget goes through another serving of blood before taking her third cup over to the table and sitting down halfway between Mark and Fletch.

“Asset seizure?” Bridget asks.

Startled, either at being addressed or at the sudden presence of another person within his workspace, Mark looks up. He recovers well enough, taking out his earbuds. “We’re confiscating all real property owned by the Holts or their agents, as well as laying the groundwork to freeze accounts.”

There’s a brief flicker of pride in him. It’s not enough to cover up Bridget’s sense of his pain though. He’s hiding himself beneath words, lots of words, words that, to Bridget, resemble gibberish. Everyone hides from their life in a different way.

“I’m coordinating with the city government. We have good relations and they respect that this is a coven matter so long as no properties held by human agents are affected without human due process, but they have to process our filings to preserve chain of title in case of eventual coven resale and also for tax purposes.” He pauses, then adds, “The coven is a very important tax payer.”

Bridget winces before she can think to stop herself.

Mark sees her wince. He bristles. “Our coven is—”

“Your coven is the essence of New York City and the modern world,” Bridget interrupts, heading off whatever lecture about government integration was coming. The more she plays to the chip in his shoulder, the more he’ll distracted he’ll be from his more melancholic thoughts. “It’s impressive, though somewhat beyond me.”

“Me too,” Fletch chimes. “You know we’ve even got day traders? Vampires working in day jobs. Weird, huh?”

“They’re humans and we don’t have as many as we used to,” Mark says. “Well, actually it’s mostly
about auto traders and algorithms these days.”

Bridget and Fletch exchange a horrified look.

Mark picks up a pen and twirls it in his fingers, clearly annoyed at the cave people before him. “You know Erica used to work in our joint legal and business department too?” he asks. “We’re the ones who make this coven run.”

Bridget makes a throat-clearing noise. “We didn’t mean to imply—”

Not waiting for her to finish, Mark cuts in. “It was about time Erica became Governor. After four knuckle-draggers, we—”

Now it’s Fletch’s turn to bodily throw himself into the conversation. “Hey! Meg was—”

“Boys,” Bridget says, stern.

“I was just making a point,” Mark grumbles. Then, “The one before Meg was an idiot.”

Fletch hesitates, then, “Yeah.”

Attempting to push the conversation towards something more useful, Bridget makes a pivot. “Mark, you’ve clearly been brought into the coordination,” she says. “Why don’t you catch me up?”

Mark sets his pen down and squirms. He’s either collecting his thoughts or he’s hoping the question will go away.

Bridget waits.

Finally, Mark starts, “After you helped Erica…” Trailing off, he forces himself to meet Bridget’s eyes. Bridget’s sense of him swallowing his pride is strong enough it seems almost physical. It tastes bitter. “I wish you’d told me before… But thank you. I know we have our differences but…”

Bridget chooses her words carefully. She didn’t do it for him, but she has no personal interest in fighting with Mark over trivial matters. “It was the least I could do,” she says, diplomatic.

“I’m in your debt,” Mark says.

Bridget responds with a thin smile. She won’t take Erica’s debt, but she’ll accept Mark’s.

“Erica and Will both spoke with Vera…” Mark trails off and frowns. Like Erica, he’s a negotiator by trade. He’s not at her level but he’s not wholly inept. “Vera was starting to fight Erica for control but Will talked her out of it.” He pauses again, then, “Which was unexpected.”

“Good for Will,” Bridget remarks, blandly.

“Erica and Vera decided to split the cleanup from the attack on the Holts. Vera is running the ground operation to find Jacs and Brayden and Erica is covering the soft work. They’re playing to their strengths,” Mark continues.

“And what’s this about an angry girlfriend and Tweeter?” Bridget asks.

Mark winces. “Twitter,” he corrects. “Iman Farah,” Mark says. “She’s the girlfriend of Michael Pennisi, the cook Erica’s human burned a few days ago. She’s gone on Twitter and Facebook and Reddit and Instagram with pictures of him at the hospital and a narrative about how we’re a bunch of monsters killing the city.”
“Humans have been calling us monsters for thousands of years,” Bridget says. “What’s different about this that Erica has to be involved?”

Bridget has her suspicions, but she’s curious how Mark will explain.

Mark’s reply, however, surprises her.

“The difference is that Farah is a brown person with a tragic story and the media are eating it up,” Mark says. “She knew all the right words to say, she’s gone viral, and we have an election soon. It’s a nightmare. All our PR people are scrambling, but short of hiring Russians, if Erica can’t sort this out, we’re probably fucked. ‘Burn the vampires’ always plays well with a certain demographic and you’d be surprised how many city residents manage to own pitchforks.”

Bridget leans back in her chair and frowns. She is… out of her depth. Most covens have some level of understanding with the humans of the cities that they inhabit, but the New York coven’s enmeshment with local government and politics is complicated and deep. It is likely no small part of the coven’s singular wealth and size among other covens that would claim to be its peers.

“Good thing Erica’s at the helm and not one of the usual shoot-first-questions-later meatheads who run covens,” Mark grumbles. His grumbling does a poor job of disguising from Bridget his pang of longing.

Bridget glances at Fletch quickly to see if he’ll protest. He doesn’t look inclined to, so she goes ahead, “As one of those meatheads, I find myself agreeing with you,” she says.

“Well, I’m right so that’s good,” Mark says. He points to his laptop. “Now I need to go back to supervising the asset seizure process.”

Bridget lifts her mug of now decidedly room temperature blood. “Don’t let me distract you,” she says.

“I won’t,” Mark replies.

“Good,” says Bridget.

“Good,” Mark echoes. And then he finally returns to his paperwork.

Chapter End Notes

hi. so. i spent a lot of hours editing this chapter due to some issues, so, couple things that i want to address--

Some stuff went on here that involved consent. I care about consent and I care about getting it right in fic, even if it derails the narrative. I dragged my entire squad of beta readers through fairly involved discussions as I was working on this chapter. There were differing opinions on the level of need for consent here, and also then on what affirmative consent should look like in this situation (the issues were about capacity, what counts as "informed," situational duress, and the relevance of medical consent doctrines--ultimately, the way I wrote this was driven by trying to get things right by the community standards I'm familiar with rather than any sort of codified policies or legal rules). I did my best to address all concerns that were raised in hashing this out with my
betas but I understand if it still feels problematic and I apologize. On the upside, all the participants would have consented even if you removed the complicating factors, so there's that. Also, based on my current projections, there's gonna be a more straightforward acquiring of consent in Chapter 11.

Next issue is chapter length. At one point this chapter hit 10k before one of my betas revved up a chainsaw and handed it to me. I am aware that these chapters are too damn long (like, I literally do not have the attention span to get myself through this particular chapter in one go? but i also have had to read this thing like ten+ times at this point so idk). I will be trying to keep things more under control in the future. Sorry.

Final issue is scheduling. My hope is to get Chapter 7 out around the end of this month and then go on a planned hiatus for the month of July on account of irl work stuff.

and on that note, hope you had fun with that chapter, if you have thoughts about consent, chapter length, or anything else, lemme know
Bridget wants to know what transpired between Mark and Erica, but pressing for that information isn’t something she can justify, to herself or to Mark, so she says nothing. She passes the time by working her way through several more bags of blood as she watches Mark work and Fletch sit about, just as bored as she is. Outside, early evening passes to night and then night begins to edge towards dawn.

In a rare occurrence, Bridget is at a loss as to what to do next.

Her mission when she came to New York was to eliminate the Holts. Vinnie is now dead and Jacs and Brayden are, at the very least, on the defensive. With Vera and Will leading the coven’s efforts to track down the two remaining Holts and Bridget, for the moment, depleted, there’s little value she can add to that operation.

The remaining difficulties facing the coven are not things Bridget was sent to see to, nor are they things that she is particularly equipped to handle.

Properly understood, whatever is transpiring with Franky, Erica, and this Iman Farah—it is not Bridget’s problem.

But she can’t help but feel that it is.

And, there remains the… issue that Bridget cut herself short from fully considering before.

Neither Franky nor Erica can be fully blamed for the feelings Bridget finds herself harboring for both of them.

In part, at least, their origin lies in Bridget herself.

Giving her blood to Erica—

So long as it does not transpire again, the effects will be limited and will fade, but even now Bridget thinks she can feel something of Erica from across the city. There’s a sort of distant agitation that’s not from Bridget or from anyone else nearby. Or is that just wishful thinking?

In her dream, her sire called her actions reckless because that’s what they were.

Bridget’s not even sure what the consequences for Erica might be beyond that now Bridget too is a subject of her prescience. The unknown is as frightening now as it was when she was young.

But she’d do it all again in the space of one of Franky’s heartbeats.

In her hands, Bridget spins her mug this way and that, watching the way the light from the fixture above the table gleams on the mug’s glazed ceramic surface.

All this turmoil over a child not even done with her third century and, of all things, a human?

Bridget is fucked.

Or, rather, she’s not fucked and that’s a related problem in and of itself, she supposes. Maybe it’s the
solution to her problem? The sort of distant agitation that Bridget had thought before might be some sense of Erica shifts towards a motive decidedly carnal in nature—like the ghost of a hand sliding up her thigh.

Probably not Erica then.

Probably just Bridget processing herself badly.

But—

Bridget has had over a thousand years practice manipulating the power that her blood gives her. There are the emotions of others. There are her emotions. And there are the emotions that started out belonging to others but that she has acquired and made her own—though, at any level deeper than the purely intellectual, the origin of these particular feelings creates no meaningful distinction against those that were hers in the first instance.

This distant… whatever it is.

It is something else. Something different.

She’s sure of it.

A whirl of tempest distracts Bridget from her thoughts, pulling her back to the world.

Across the table, Mark leans back from his work, removes his earbuds, closes his eyes, and runs his fingers through his short hair. “Shit,” he says.

Bridget raises an eyebrow and Fletch stirs. “What is it?” Bridget asks.

“I told her not to take the human with her,” Mark groans.

“What do you mean?” Bridget presses, voice mild and hopefully hiding her sudden worry.

“According to Twitter,” Mark starts, “Erica broke Farah’s nose. It’s the middle of the night and the coven is already getting questions from reporters.” He pauses and opens his blue eyes, fixing them on Bridget. There’s accusation in his tone. “Erica doesn’t just break noses.”

“I’m sure she had a good reason,” Bridget says without thought, almost as a reflex.

"And of course you take her side,” Mark replies. The stare he fixes Bridget with chills.

Bridget only barely manages not to flinch. Equivocating, “I don’t think there are sides to take here.”

Mark lays his hands down on the table, palms flat against the wood. “That’s some bullshit,” he says. He glances to Fletch. “Fletch, would you give us a moment?” he asks.

Fletch hesitates, then shrugs and stands. “Sure,” he says before ambling out of the dining room and towards the stairs up to the security booth on the top level of the brownstone.

As soon as Fletch is gone, “What do you want with my wife?” Mark demands, voice hot with frustration. The frustration, Bridget thinks, is just a veneer, fragile and thin. Frustration is, generally, a weak emotion. It doesn’t last and it doesn’t sustain. Underneath Mark’s frustration is hollow rage mixed with a poignant sadness.

Bridget lets his words sit in the air for a moment as she considers how to respond.
Does she respond for Mark or does she respond for herself?

Well—

There’s nothing quite like commitment. She’s fallen this hard, she might as well keep falling.

She shakes her head slightly, a small smile tugging at her lips—a motion of chagrin. She does not pity Mark. She understands him. Even without the power of her blood, she understands him. “I’m fond of her,” Bridget says softly.

Mark’s hands clench, then unclench. His rage builds, then fades. He slumps. He’s silent for a while. When he responds, his voice sounds wooden. “If I asked you to stop, would you?”

Bridget shifts in her seat, avoiding the question. Then, “How long have you been with Erica?” she asks. She tries to ignore the guilt that is forming like a lead weight in her stomach. Mark deserves better.

Better than what?
Better than Erica?

Probably.

She has not been kind.

In answer, Mark frowns. His brow furrows. He has to consider before he can reply. Finally, he says, “Two centuries, I think. A bit more, maybe. Maybe two and a half centuries.”

Bridget hesitates. Erica is in the later years of her third century. Two and a half centuries would mean that she’s been with Mark for nearly the entirety of her dead existence. And Mark himself isn’t that much older than she is. “That is… a long time,” Bridget says. “For both of you.”

“I’ve never left her,” Mark replies. Elbows on the table, he slides his hands over his face and then back to cradle the nape of his neck. “Not once. Never.”

“Have you ever thought about it?” Bridget asks. She finds herself genuinely curious. And her asking forestalls, for a few brief moments, whatever questions he intends to turn towards her.

“Of course I have!” Mark says. “But why would I do that to her?” Mark looks up to glare at Bridget. “And where do you get off showing up and chasing a married woman? However old you are—why Erica?”

“Are you married?” Bridget asks, again dodging.

There’s a flicker of uncertainty in Mark, though it lasts for only the briefest of instants. “It wasn’t a church wedding,” he says. “For obvious reasons. But we still took vows. There’s no reason not being able to set foot in a church should mean we can’t love.”

“Does love mean never wanting another?”

This time, Mark’s response is self-sure. “It does if you promised not to.”

Bridget inhales and exhales in a sigh. “Mark, we are very, very long lived.”

“The least she could have done is told me,” Mark says.
“She probably didn’t want to hurt you,” Bridget says.

“And look how that turned out,” Mark bites. He leans back from resting on his elbows. Now slouched against the back of his chair, he continues, “I don’t understand. I’ve always been there for her, from the day her sire walked out on her.”

Bridget winces. “Her sire walked out on her?”

“She decided Erica bored her and then went to Boston, then to Portland. We never heard from her again,” Mark says.

The conversation lapses into silence. The... poor conduct of sires is a recurring theme in the world that they inhabit. The violence and terror of raising is all too often toxic to whatever tenderness there could have been between sire and child, even when all parties were willing.

“Inquisitor,” Mark finally says. He makes eye contact. “If you do to her what her sire did to her, I’ll make you wish you’d never risen. I’ll find a way.”

Bridget fixes Mark with a steely look. “That threat is coming from a good place, and so I will allow it,” she says. Her posturing, her reasonable need to defend her authority, makes good cover for her unease at Mark’s words.

She is stronger than he is in a physical and immediate sense, but he is enmeshed with modernity in a way that, perhaps, gives his warning meaningful substance. That is not, however, why she is uneasy.

“Your time here is limited, Inquisitor,” Mark says. “So maybe you should think long and hard about what it is you’re doing with her.” He sighs. “I still have assets to seize and a PR campaign to engineer.”

Bridget nods. “Of course,” she says, understanding a dismissal when she hears one. She rises from her seat. Before she goes though, she hesitates. “Mark, are you asking me to stop?”

“No,” Mark says. “I’m not.”

Taking her mug with her, Bridget walks out of the dining room. She microwaves another bag of blood and retreats to the living room across the house from Mark. Then, she begins to—what was it Franky called it?—return to the moody-broody.

What an utterly human thing to call it.

Utterly human and more than a little endearing.

Thoughts of Franky, however, can’t drive out Mark’s misgivings.

There has never been any expectation that Bridget remain longer than is necessary to complete her mission. There is still no such expectation.

No matter if, for the moment, Erica is hers—

When all is said and done, if Bridget were to linger, even if she were to wish to stay—she has no power to do so. Not in the face of the ones who command her.

The collateral consequences of sharing blood with another vampire are many, and they can be unpredictable. Bridget didn’t foresee acquiring some sense of Erica that extends beyond her normal reading of her immediate surroundings, but she’s also not terribly surprised by it. That Bridget might
now be some sort of sire to Erica—this is also not a great revelation. It is rooted in social relations rather than blood. For Bridget to leave though—for that to be abandonment surely takes the metaphor a step too far.

So why has Mark’s insinuation cut so deep?

Bridget is thinking herself through circles still when she feels the approach of two familiar stars in her sense of the emotional sea around her. She thinks that she recognizes both of them well enough to tell them apart, even at a distance, even as they both have a very particular satiety about them. For the moment, Franky isn’t angry but there’s always the sense of the edge of anger lurking about her. And Erica... Erica is feeling especially protective.

It doesn’t take much deductive skill to guess at what transpired between Franky, Erica, and the Farah woman. Farah said or did something against Franky and Erica reacted appropriately. In all likelihood, knowing Erica’s self-control, it was a did rather than a said. Bridget can’t think that Erica would strike a human lightly.

Bridget finishes her blood and sets her mug down on a coffee table. She motions at smoothing out a few invisible wrinkles in her shirt and adjusting her jeans so that they sit more evenly on her hips.

The front door opens and Franky and Erica enter in a storm. Erica practically hurls her black overcoat into the coat closet. “Franky was right,” Erica says, exasperated, glancing over to Bridget who’s now standing in the wide arching doorway to the living room. “Her former supervisor is a dick. And so is his girlfriend.”

“Told ya,” Franky says, rolling her eyes.

Bridget’s takes in Erica’s form before shifting her attention towards Franky, who has put a hand on Erica’s ass. Erica has made some attempt at tidying up, but her hair is badly mussed and she’s left lipstick on Franky’s scarred neck. Considering the circumstances, considering Erica and Franky both, the lack of discretion seems purposeful—and likely more attributable to Franky than to Erica.

“So you broke her nose,” Bridget says to Erica, letting a hint of disapproval creep into her tone. Erica is smart enough to know Franky’s intentions and their consequences—she’s just a poor hand at resisting when her desires lead her elsewhere. “Good job.”

“Now I have to fix her nose,” Erica groans.

Nearby, Mark clears his throat loudly. From the tightness of his lips, Erica and Franky’s state hasn’t escaped him.

Erica looks towards Mark, makes the mistake of meeting his eyes, and flinches. Dropping her gaze slightly, she takes a step away from Franky, pushing Franky’s hand off in the process.

“The social media problem, Governor,” Mark says, determined to soldier forward.

Erica produces a throat-clearing noise of her own. “Yes,” she says. “The social media problem. What are the key posts? What have the media picked up?”

Mark beckons for the group to follow him back to the dining room. “It’s not good,” he starts. “There’s a video running of you punching Farah. Several local news groups have contacted the coven for a statement, but we’ve been holding off until you had a chance to review the options we’ve drafted. It was pure bad luck this all happened on a slow news day.”

“What’s the best statement?” Erica asks as they pass through the kitchen.
“The truth,” Mark answers. He sounds pained. “We tell them you’re the new Governor and you’re a lesbian. The human... Franky is your human girlfriend, and you were protecting her. It’s what happened. Lesbian—it’s not brown or refugee, but it’s in the same space. It can’t fix everything, but it’ll distract the media circus. You’re going to have to give an interview, of course...”

“Mark, I’m not a lesbian,” Erica says. She sounds every bit as pained as Mark does. “You know that.” They’ve reached the dining room now and they’re crowding around Mark’s laptop, all reading the statement that the coven’s office staff have come up with.

“Do I?” Mark snaps. “You just let a woman fuck you in the back of a car, Erica. That’s gay.”

“You can do social media but you’ve never heard of bisexuals?” Franky asks, sharply sarcastic.

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” Mark bites back, glaring at Franky.

Franky’s about to respond, no doubt in kind, but Erica cuts in.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Erica orders. Heat colors her tone. “Mark—we’re married. The moral guardians are going to bring out the pitchforks for adultery long before anyone starts up on the...” Here, she waves her hands to indicate vagueness. In stark contrast, her voice is sharp. “Gay rights thing. I’m surprised you’re not fighting this more.”

Mark meets Erica’s eyes. “I do what’s best for the coven. This is what the department decided on,” he says. “We gamed it out. We’re creating a distraction so the hint of scandal is a good thing. If we do need to minimize, we’ll double down. If they ask about me—if they even know about me—we’ll just say ‘lesbian vampire’ louder.”

Erica bristles. “I’m not a—”

“Your sire, and now these two—I’m starting to feel like I’m an exception and not the rule,” Mark says, gesturing towards himself. “And maybe I’m not even an exception.”

Erica stiffens. “That wasn’t—” she starts. Then, “I’m not—” She pauses, again, changes tack, looking towards Bridget somewhat aghast, “We’re not—”

Bridget interjects, interrupting Erica’s stammering. “Are labels really that important?”

“No, they’re not,” Erica says, grasping for her composure. “Thank you, Bridget.”

“Grandma Gidget to the rescue,” Franky drawls.

Bridget casts her gaze towards Franky and shakes her head. More provocation is the last thing that the room needs at the moment. Franky has done more than enough already. Franky sees the gesture and pulls a face, but she also goes silent.

Erica clears her throat. She turns back to Mark. “I trust your judgment,” she tells him. “I trust you. I’m going to redline some of the tone on this before sending it back to PR to finalize and distribute.” Practically pushing him out of the way, Erica sits down in front of the computer. “What a shitshow way to come out as Governor,” she mutters. “I wanted to put this off for at least another month.”

“This is what you signed up for when you took the job,” Mark replies, snide.

Erica taps the keys on Mark’s laptop with enough force Bridget worries for the frail plastic under her fingers. “We’re not relitigating that,” Erica says.
Mark crosses his arms and looks away towards an empty corner of the room. “Litigation implies I had a chance to be heard.”

As she works, Erica is scowling at the computer screen, arrowing around the word document, striking words and replacing them with language more to her liking. “You said—and I quote—you said, ‘Whatever makes you happy, Erica.’”

Mark uncrosses his arms and then crosses them in the other direction. He finds it in himself to look from the empty corner of the room back to Erica. “What was I supposed to say? I was trying to be supportive.” He pauses, then, “Did you do this to hurt me? Does that make you happy?”

Lips pressed tight, quiet rage in her grey-blue eyes, Erica wordlessly glares at the glowing screen before her. Pressing to send her email, she leaves a dent in the trackpad. She leans back from the computer, setting her hands, both curled into fists, on the table in front of her. She continues to stare at the laptop.

“Erica…” Mark starts.

“What, Mark?” Erica snaps, still not looking away from the laptop before her even though there’s nothing of particular interest on the screen.

“I…” Mark starts. He looks up to the ceiling for a moment, then back down to Erica. “I wish you’d talked to me. I wish you’d said something.”

Erica bristles and glares up at him. “I asked you—”

“Not about that,” Mark says. “About us.”

Erica looks back to the laptop. She takes her time in responding. When she finally does speak, she’s talking to the laptop instead of to anyone in the room. “Maybe I did,” she says. Anger still lingers about her. “Maybe you weren’t listening.”

“No,” Mark says. “You don’t get to do that. And for fuck’s sake, will you look at me while we’re talking?”

Erica crosses her arms and looks at Mark. “Fine. I don’t get to do what?”

“You don’t get to fucking blame me,” Mark says. As he speaks, he raises both hands up to his head, then runs them over his short hair. “You were cheating on me. You’re leaving me. This is—”

“I’m not leaving you,” Erica cuts in. “I—”

“Aren’t you?” Mark asks. “It feels like you are.”

Erica’s face in a moment becomes a mask. Even to Bridget, with her sense of the savage seething underneath the mask, the distance of it feels disturbing. After a long pause, Erica’s tone edges towards bitter. “You’re the one who decided I should get in front of a camera and tell the city I’m a lesbian.”

“You decided,” Mark replies. “Governor.”

Withing breaking eye contact with Mark, Erica asks, “If I were a lesbian, would that make you feel better?” The steel that Bridget has seen from Erica before is present now and the way that she’s turned it on Mark, effortlessly and in an instant, sends a shiver down Bridget’s spine.
Having called Erica out for avoiding him, it’s Mark who looks away. “Yes.”

The steel retreats and the mask softens.

Erica drops her head into her hands, closes her eyes, and exhales a long sigh. “Mark, I’m a lesbian.” She opens her eyes. She sounds tired. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Mark moves from standing to take a seat across the table from Erica. He glances over to Franky and Bridget. “Do you two mind?”

Trying to get out ahead of whatever it is Franky will say, Bridget starts, “We—”

“Mark, just say what you want to say,” Erica cuts in, pleading. Her head is still in her hands.

“Fine,” Mark says. “I want to transfer to our Albany office.”

Erica snaps to attention, head coming up and back straightening. She radiates alarm. Shaking her head, “You what? No.”

Mark fixes Erica with cold blue eyes. “Really, Erica?”

“Look, I know I’ve been…” Erica starts. She trails off though. She reevaluates. Then, she blinks rapidly, and presses her lips into a tight frown. “The coven needs you,” she says. “Here.”

Mark shakes his head. “Then let’s go back to the coven’s problems,” he says. “Since you prefer them.”

“Mark…”

“No, Erica,” Mark says. “You want to run the coven—so run the coven. Go on.”

Erica stiffens. Her face returns to its distant mask. “You know what the coven means to me,” she says, quiet warning threading through her tone.

“It means more to you than I do,” Mark replies. He tilts his head towards Franky. “Does it mean more to you than her too?”

Erica glances at Franky, briefly.

Franky’s features are tight. She meets Erica’s eyes for a moment, then looks away, biting her lip slightly and crossing her arms.

“I know what your priorities are,” Mark says. “So what’s next for business? What now, Governor?”

Erica sets her head back in her hands. She’s quiet for a moment.

Then, Erica takes the escape route Mark has offered.

“This is only an immediate damage control strategy,” Erica says. “It won’t build out well as a long term plan. We’ve got a month until the November election and we need to do something with excellent optics between now and then to keep local politics under control.”

Silence descends.

As the silences lengthens, tension grows.
“Erica, what about your idea for clinics?” Bridget asks, desperate to relieve the pressure in the room. She’s throwing in for the escape route as well. “You just need a way to show good will, right?”

“Don’t have control of the houses yet and the humans who would work with us don’t want the backlash,” Erica mutters, shaking her head. “It’s too politically sensitive.”

The silence starts up again and it seems about to spiral out of control once more when Franky steps in as well. “Is this about your idea for vampires and addiction treatment?” Franky asks. “I can talk to Kaz. She’s running a major shelter and she’s got connections.”

Lips pressed in a grim line, Erica looks up at Franky, shaking her head. “Kaz hates vampires.”

“I can go over and talk to her,” Franky repeats. “Might as well try. I volunteer at her shelter sometimes and you helped Allie. Allie’s her girl. Plus you’re about to come out as the most powerful queer woman in New York. Kaz’ll dig that shit.”

Mark speaks now. His tone is terse. “I’ll have the department start on planning messaging and checking financials.”

Erica turns in her chair to look at Franky, Mark, and Bridget. “You all think this is a good idea?” she asks. She seems dubious. She’s expecting to be shot down and doesn’t want to get her hopes up.

Bridget tilts her head to the side and shrugs, and Franky says, “Yeah.”

“This has been your pet project for years,” Mark adds. He sounds like he feels—distant, tired. “First steps.”

There’s a brief moment where Erica lights up.

“And we’ll get the PR boost from helping the shelters even if the rest of it doesn’t pan out,” Mark finishes.

And with that the moment is done and gone before Bridget has a chance to savor it. Erica’s light is replaced by a sharp annoyance.

Glancing back to Mark’s laptop, Erica shakes her head. “With Kaz’s hours, we’ll have to wait until early tomorrow night to speak with her. Where are we with the Holts? Have Vera or Will checked in yet?”

“No one has contacted the us with updates, so I assume we’re exactly where we were before,” Mark says.

Leaning back in her chair, Erica crosses her arms. “So that’s on the back burner for now,” she says. “If… when I do an interview, if the national media doesn’t have anything better to do, they might pick this up. It will be a headline. We’ll have to be careful.” She looks to Bridget, questioning.

“But say anything you wouldn’t normally say,” Bridget says. “I know you’ll be careful. The coven’s business is the coven’s business.” As new to her position as she is, Erica might not even know enough of what the Council prefers remain unsaid to make a mistake and say it.

“If we keep things on your salacious personal life, there will be fewer questions about everything else,” Mark says, more than a little snide. He glances at Franky. “The human should interview with you.”
Erica shakes her head. “Mark…”

“What?” Mark asks.

Erica looks over to him. “You don’t have to…”

“Don’t I?” Mark asks. “Because I don’t know what else you want from me.” Without giving Erica a chance to respond, he turns to Franky. “So will you do it?”

Franky glances at Mark, but then looks to Erica. “Yeah,” she says. “Of course.”

Erica frowns at Franky. “Are you sure? There’s no pressure if—”

“You just broke a bitch’s nose for me,” Franky says. She sounds almost plaintive. “I’m in. So let me be in, ‘kay?”

Erica offers a hesitant and relieved smile. “Of course,” she says.

Mark reaches for his laptop. He shuts it and then draws it close to him like a shield. “I’ll go use the office upstairs,” he says, stiffly. “Do you have a decision on location and timing?”

“The coven building in Manhattan at four-thirty this afternoon,” Erica says, decisive. “Going to and from is easy, we have security, everyone knows it’s ours—making this too personal might undermine legitimacy; the coven building will balance that. And it’s partway to Kaz’ clinic too.”

“The pile of steel and concrete that you took me to when I arrived in the city?” Bridget asks, dubious. Her first meeting with Erica, Vera, and Will in the coven’s conference room seems like far longer ago than the bare week that it’s been. As she understands it, the building Erica is referring to is the coven’s public face, one piece of its campaign to pass itself off as a modern corporation instead of a cabal of monsters. She remembers seeing it briefly from the dark tinted window of a car when the coven took her there from the train station.

It was hideous.

“That pile of steel and concrete was designed by an award winning architect,” Mark objects, sounding outright offended. “That pile of steel and concrete has won awards.”

“It’s the crown jewel of the coven’s properties,” Erica adds, matching Mark’s tone exactly. “It’s a Brutalist masterpiece.”

“I’m with Bridget,” Franky chimes in. “It’s ugly as fuck and the whole city knows it. Whole sixties vibe fits in with the living in the past thing you fangs’ve got going though. And it has, what, three windows? Four?”

Exasperated, Erica sighs. “It hasn’t aged well.”

Mark moves, finally heading for the stairs. “Let me know if you require anything else, Governor,” he says, voice flat. “Though I suspect you won’t.”

Erica grimaces. “Shit… Mark…” she starts. “I’m sorry. I know an apology can’t—”

“I understand that you are sorry,” Mark replies. At the foot of the stairs, he pauses and looks back. “By your leave?”

“You don’t need my permission,” Erica says.
Mark’s face is carefully blank—like if he acts unhurt then he’ll be unhurt. “Of course not.” Instead of proceeding up the stairs though, he hesitates. Then, “But I do need your permission for Albany?”

Erica doesn’t reply.

Mark runs his hand over the splintered wood of the stairway railing that Erica crushed a few days prior. “I really don’t care how you punish yourself,” he says. “But I’d prefer you not punish me while you do it.” Then, he heads up the stairs.

Erica watches him leave.

Franky shifts, drawing attention to herself. She opens her mouth to say something—

“Please, Franky,” Erica says, getting in first. Instead of looking to Franky, she looks up at the ceiling. “I can’t right now.”

Franky tenses, then settles. She glances over at Bridget. Then, “Hey, I get it. Let us know if you need something, yeah?”

Erica relaxes.

It’s a subtle change—her shoulders don’t slump, but they do lower. The small wrinkles in her forehead smooth away to nothing. She looks over to Franky. “What about you?”

Franky, slightly confused, “Me?”

Erica glances down at her silver and crystal watch. There’s a bit of dried blood on the face. She wipes it away. “It’s getting very late,” she says, a bone-weary exhaustion evident in her voice. “Do you… need to sleep?” From her hesitation, it’s a genuine question.

Franky starts to answer, but her answer is swallowed up by a yawn. When she’s done yawning, “Nah.”

“Franky,” Erica says.


“I’m not human,” Erica replies.

Franky responds by rolling her eyes. “Must be nice.”

A smile tugs at the corners of Erica’s lips. “I’d like a word with Bridget,” she says.

“Super secret fang shit?” Franky asks.

Erica keeps smiling, but the wave of anxiety from her gives her away. So does the way she glances back towards the stairs Mark just vanished up. “Something like that,” she says.

Franky raises her hands in a gesture of defeat. “The human will make herself scarce then. Just gonna twiddle my thumbs.” She too starts to move out of the dining area. She seems more amused than angry.

Bridget chooses to speak before Franky is entirely gone. “Erica, she won’t wait for you forever.”

Near the stairs now, Franky hesitates, looking back.
Erica shifts, uneasy. “When this business with the Holts is over…”

“What then?” Bridget asks.

Erica looks to Franky. “Things will be better.”

“You’ll still be Governor,” Bridget says.

Erica’s grey-blue eyes flicker back to Bridget. “And I’ll stay Governor,” she says. “I can improve this coven for everyone in this city and I will.”

Still some distance away, Franky finally cuts in. “Gidge, that’s what makes her Erica. Don’t make her sad.”

Bridget bites back her first response, which is that she wasn’t going to make Erica sad. Having been called out, she supposes that, given her direction, she probably would have. She revises. “I don’t mean to.”

“Yeah?” Franky says. “Well—just watch it.” Having said her piece, she vanishes down the stairs.

Bridget, to Erica, “She’s as protective of you as you are of her. Everyone’s protective of you—you have that effect on people.”

Erica takes the conversation and pivots with it quite hard. “I wanted to talk to you about Mark.”

Bridget crosses her arms and goes to lean against the wall. Erica remains seated. “Why?” Bridget asks.

Nervous, Erica shrugs, playing at nonchalance. “You’re good at talking to people. I thought maybe you could…”

“Why would I do that?” Bridget asks. She’s not going to proxy for Erica to salvage her marriage. If such a thing can be done, Bridget is not and cannot be the one to do it. Erica is the only one who can resolve things with Mark, one way or the other.

“You do it with Franky,” Erica replies.

“I like Franky,” Bridget says. “I don’t dislike Mark, but I don’t like him either.”

“You don’t want to fuck him,” Erica says, flatly. “But you do want to fuck Franky.” Her monotone doesn’t match her emotional storm at all. Some of her thoughts are less than pure.

Bridget doesn’t respond at once. It’s hard to tell whether her read of Erica has pulled her mind to sin, or if it’s gone there of its own accord. Whatever the case, she’s idly imagining pinning Erica to the dining room table now and running her hands under Erica’s shirt. Erica would like it.

“It’s not that simple,” Bridget says.

Erica holds deathly still, but Bridget can feel the way her mood spikes towards anticipation. “Why don’t you?” Erica asks. “There’s nothing stopping you.”

“When I met Franky, she told me she was exclusive,” Bridget replies.

There’s a moment of tense silence. Then, Erica raises a hand to push her hair back from her face. “If… If I talk to Franky, would that…?”
Even with Erica trailing off, Bridget understands her meaning. “For me? Probably yes,” she says. “But if you avoid Mark, if you push him to the side without resolution—in the long run, that will hurt you, Erica.”

Franky—

Mark—

When all is said and done, Bridget will leave the coven. Franky and Mark, no matter if he goes upstate to Albany for a few years or a hundred, will not.

Erica pushes away from the table and stands. “Your concern is noted, Inquisitor,” she says.

“I’d like my concern to be heeded, Governor,” Bridget responds.

Erica’s forced smile is less than reassuring and the same goes for her words. “I make no promises.”

Erica starts to head towards the kitchen and ultimately the stairs, but Bridget stops her with a word. “Erica.”

Erica, standing tall, meets Bridget’s eyes. “Bridget.”

Without moving from her place leaning against the wall, Bridget says, softly, “Come here.”

Erica has the presence of mind to hesitate, but she doesn’t hesitate for long. Taking slow steps, she closes the distance between them.

Bridget pulls her lips up into a small smile. “I’m not going to bite,” she says. “Give me your hand.”

Erica pauses and looks down at her hands. One of them is gloved. It’s sheathed in black leather, armor against the world. It’s the hand that was burned. The other hand is uncovered and whole. It’s the latter that she holds out, palm up.

Erica’s fingers are delicate, she has no calluses, and when Bridget takes Erica’s hand in both of hers, Erica’s skin is soft. Bridget swirls the pad of her thumb over the center of Erica’s palm. “Is this the hand you used to punch Farah?” she asks.

In Bridget’s head, Erica’s mood feels and sounds like white static. “I…” Erica starts. “I, ah, I don’t remember.”

“Give me your other hand,” Bridget says.

This time, Erica doesn’t hesitate at all. Her gloved hand rises up to join its partner.

As gently as she can, Bridget works the glove off. There’s an evanescent brush of pain through her sense of Erica, but it’s gone before she’s fully aware of it, replaced by even more white static.

Erica has healed very well.

Unlike her unburnt hand, her burnt hand is covered in a webby mass of reddish scarring, raised above what should be the surface of her skin. This is far better than the alternative, which would be the deep cratering of missing muscle that Bridget remembers from barely a day prior. That any scarring remains at all is only because of the instrument of the burn, and all signs of past injury will fade over the coming weeks. Vampires do not scar forever. Such is not the nature of the eternal.

“This is better than I thought it would be,” Bridget says.
Erica withdraws her hand and pulls her glove back over it. The static in her lessens, slightly. “Your blood was very powerful.”

Bridget finds Erica’s eyes and watches them carefully. “You’re unusually strong for your age,” she says. “Your sire gave you that much.”

Erica stiffens. The static frosts over into stillness.

“I can’t replace her for you,” Bridget says.

“I wouldn’t want you to,” Erica replies. “Is that all?”

“You have a presence in my mind,” Bridget starts. “Even at a distance. I think it will diminish in time.”

“You think?” Erica questions, brow furrowing. She’s not one to miss words.

Bridget shrugs. “I haven’t shared my blood in a long while. And I’ve never done so willingly before.”

“Do you regret having done so now?” Erica asks.

“No,” Bridget says. “Do you regret having taken my blood?”

Erica lifts her gloved hand so that it’s roughly eye level. “No,” she says. “So I think we’re on the same page.”

There’s a moment of quiet between them.

Bridget looks up at Erica.

Erica looks down at Bridget.

Bridget pushes off from the wall. “I’m still quite tired and I think I’ll take a nap,” she says, effectively killing whatever potential the conversation had to continue. “When do you plan to leave? I’d like to accompany you and Franky to the coven building. It’s been a while since I stretched my legs.” As she speaks, Bridget gestures to indicate the bounds of the house. By her reckoning, it’s been three days since she went out, though, given how much of that time she’s spent sleeping, it hasn’t been so terrible. She’s been less confined than, say, the Holt vampire still chained in the basement.

Erica takes a step back and looks down at her watch again. Calculating times, she thinks out loud. “It’s just past seven in the morning now… Fifteen minutes to get to the covered garage from here… Three then, I think. There’ll be prep work once we arrive.”

Bridget pulls her phone from her pocket and gestures with it. “I’ll set my alarm accordingly then,” she says. “Thank you.”

Acknowledging, Erica bobs her head slightly. Then she takes a step back and sweeps her hand out towards the rest of the house. “After you.”

Not seeing reason to argue, Bridget takes Erica’s invitation and moves towards the stairs down to the garden level. As she walks and Erica follows, she feels Erica’s eyes on her through both her sense of emotional currents and in the physical sort of way that threatens to send a shiver down her spine.

Was that Erica’s intention when she motioned for Bridget to go first?
It doesn’t seem quite Erica’s *modus operandi* in these matters, but, well, when they first met, Bridget assumed Erica was straight and, as it turned out, that assumption was not correct.

And, in the end, no matter her submissive tendencies, Erica is a schemer at heart.

The sense of Erica’s eyes on her continues until Bridget has gone into her own room and closed the door behind her, and even then it lingers for a moment.

Alone now in the cool and quiet dark, Bridget goes to her bed and lays herself down without changing into more comfortable clothing. When she told Erica that she was still quite tired, she wasn’t exaggerating. What Erica took from her—what she gave to Erica—was a substantial thing. She likely gave Erica more than was necessary, but at the time it had seemed right.

Across the hall, she can feel Erica and Franky both, their moods shifting with the ebb and flow of conversation. She doesn’t take the effort to sort out their emotional swirl and reason her way to what it is that’s being conveyed. Whatever transpires there, what will be will be.

Bridget is tired.

Too tired.

She only barely manages to set her phone to go off at two-thirty before she drifts to sleep.

What seems like only seconds later, Bridget wakes for once in a normal fashion—to the dulcet scream of her alarm.

Suppressing a groan, she kills the head-splitting ringing and pushes herself up from where she fell asleep on top of the sheets. A quick examination of the currents around her shows that there are no disasters in progress. Collecting a towel from her belongings, Bridget moseys out into the hallway and then over to the bathroom.

The water in the shower is hot, the pressure is good, and Bridget allows herself a chance to luxuriate. All too soon though, she thinks that she’s probably running out of time. She left herself only half an hour between waking and leaving with Franky and Erica. She cuts the water, towels off, dries her hair with a hairdryer stashed in a cabinet over the sink, then returns to her room. For the evening, she chooses black boots, black pants, a dark blue top, a shoulder holster for her gun, and then a jacket in an even darker shade of blue than her top to hide the shoulder holster. Her knife goes on her belt. It’s not a firearm and so it’s less threatening to carry openly. Her light makeup goes on last.

Blending her foundation, briefly, Bridget ghosts her fingertips along her neck. All evidence of Erica is gone.

She leaves her hair down.

Bridget finishes preparing herself with fully five minutes to spare, according to her phone as she tucks it into a pocket. Her pants fit snugly enough that the outline of her phone is visible against her thigh, but the pants aren’t so snug that she can’t readily move if she needs to. She has accumulated a good deal of wealth in her long existence and one perk of money is the ability to purchase clothes tailored to her body and her needs.

Upstairs, Franky is lounging in a chair in the living room, playing with her phone. She sits in the chair, slumped over and half folded in on herself, like she doesn’t know how to sit in chairs. In the kitchen, Erica too is on her phone. She’s dressed in one of her black suits, though this one seems to have been dry cleaned very recently. It doesn’t have a single wrinkle. Unlike Franky, she’s using her
phone as it was intended and having a conversation with someone.

Cellphones.

Twenty years ago, Bridget would never have thought humans and vampires alike would be such slaves to the things.

Out of habit, Bridget listens in to Erica’s conversation.

“—is what he says,” the person on the other side is saying. It’s a man’s voice, though not one that Bridget recognizes.

Erica’s reply is barely louder than a whisper. She doesn’t want Franky to hear. “Keep him out of the way,” she says. “What did you say his name was?”

“Alan Doyle, Governor,” the man on the other side answers.

“See if his story checks out,” Erica orders. “And let me know.”

“We already have,” comes the reply. “It does.”


“Yes, Governor,” the man answers.

Erica hangs up. She looks over at Bridget. The look says it all. Whatever is going on, it’s complicated. But—everything since Bridget arrived in New York has been complicated. Why would whatever this new problem is be any different?

“We need to head out,” Erica says. “I’ll explain on the way.” She turns her head over towards the living room. “Franky? Let’s go.”

Together, the three of them head for the stairs down to the basement. Mark will meet them there. Erica intends for them to follow the tunnels a short distance to a shaded garage where a driver is waiting with a sun-shielded car to take them over to Manhattan and the ugly Brutalist masterpiece that the coven uses as its public-facing headquarters.

In the basement, Spitz watches them pass without saying anything.

Franky, clearly unsettled by the thin vampire chained to the far wall, manages to wedge herself between Bridget and Erica as they cross the room.

They get to the bottom of the ladder and just past the guards in the tunnel that connects the safe house to the coven’s subterranean network when the problem with bringing a human along becomes evident.

“I can’t see shit,” Franky complains.

Erica and Bridget exchange a look. Then they both look down at Erica’s perfectly pressed suit. Then, Bridget moves just behind Franky. “Hold on,” she says. Effortlessly, she sweeps Franky up into her arms, cradling her.

Being a vampire has many perks. Being able to see in the dark is one. Being preternaturally strong is another.
“Hi Gidget,” Franky says. Her warm breath tickles Bridget’s ear. She brushes her nose against Bridget’s neck. “A girl could get used to this.”

Bridget glances back over to Erica again.

Erica has a sort of half-smile playing across her face. She inclines her head, a small nod.

Bridget responds with a smile of her own. To Franky, she hums, “Happy to be of service.”

Bridget continues to carry Franky all the way to the car. The driver waiting for them is, again, Linda. When she sees them coming, she barely twitches. The woman has an amazing poker face. Her emotional reaction is muted as well, a sort of uncaring observer state.

It’s not until the three of them are sitting together on the black leather bench seat in the back of the coven SUV and the car is pulling out of the garage that Erica clears her throat.

It’s an ominous way to start a conversation.

“Franky,” Erica says. She twists around in the seat so that she can look at Franky as she talks. “I got a call from security at the coven building…”

Franky wriggles, tugging at the seat belt that’s digging into her neck. Wary, she asks, “What’s that got to do with me?”

“There’s an Alan Doyle come to see you,” Erica says.

The volume of Franky’s reply is close to a shout. “The fuck?”

“He showed up shortly after we released the interview location and he’s demanding to speak with you,” Erica says. “He tried to charge the metal detectors in the lobby and now security is holding him out of the way until we get there.”

“Tell him to fuck right off,” Franky growls. “I’m not fucking talking to that fucker.”

“Franky, he’s your father,” Erica says. “Maybe—”

Watching Franky and Erica interact, Bridget raises an eyebrow. Franky’s back is turned to her, but she thinks that Erica saw the movement.

“I ain’t talkin’ to him,” Franky bites.

Erica waits a beat, giving Franky a chance to feel secure in her position. Then, she tries again, “That’s your decision to make,” she says. “I know how you feel about your family, and I want to respect that. But maybe if—”

“I said no, Erica,” Franky says, acid creeping into her tone.

Bridget can’t exactly fault her hostility. For someone being respectful, Erica is pushing very hard.

Bridget lacks context, lacks enough knowledge to understand the conversation unfolding before her, but she can read Franky’s anger and Erica’s hope and she makes her decision. Sheer age can give a certain perspective. “Franky, I don’t know your story, but some chances for reconciliation only come once.”

Franky clicks her tongue aggressively. She glares at Bridget. “When I imagined y’all doubling up on me, this wasn’t what I had in mind,” she says, a hint of bitterness creeping into her voice.
“We want you to be happy,” Bridget says. She speaks for herself and for Erica and she means it.

“And I want you both to back the fuck off,” Franky says. “I said no.”

Erica sighs. “We can’t let him go until after the media clear out,” she says. She sounds resigned but Bridget can feel her plotting. And when Erica plots, not her hair-trigger desperation planning that gets her into more trouble than it gets her out of, but really, truly, plots—Bridget would bet money that Franky will be speaking with her father before the night is over.

“Fine, whatever, I don’t care,” Franky says.

“So if you change your mind...” Erica finishes.

“Nope,” Franky says. “Nope, not gonna happen.”

Erica sighs again. “Alright,” she says. “Let’s go back to practicing for the interview then.”

Bridget puts a hand on Franky’s shoulder and gives a reassuring squeeze.

Chapter End Notes

So that was a lot of Mark and a lot of Mark/Erica and I’m sorry. It was a bit unavoidable. But now that Mark with his kicked puppy eyes and trembling lower lip has thoroughly overstayed his welcome, we get to put him on a bus and (almost) never speak of him again, so at least there’s that. I viewed chapters 5-6-7 as an arc and this arc is now /done/.

Due to a foreseen irl work crisis this month, this fic is going on hiatus until at least August. This seemed like a nice place to take a pause since, after almost 60k words, Franky, Bridget, and Erica are finally all on the same page about this OT3 situation. The next chapter is kind of one of my favorite chapters too, so I think it’ll be worth waiting for?

As always, hope you enjoyed and thank you for reading! (and dear god thank you to my beta readers, i made them slog through this 2+ times with me because erica is a /mess/ and it was brutal)
Chapter 8

The coven building looks just as hideous as Bridget remembered. Through the specially tinted glass of the SUV windows, it looms like some washed-out dystopian government center. Given its owners, the comparison isn’t entirely inapt.

The media are camped outside of the garage doors at the base of the structure. Security, humans who work as agents for the coven, push them back and make way for Erica’s car to pass. Though cameras and cellphones are pointed at the vehicle, in addition to protecting its occupants from the sun, the darkened car windows also stop photographs.

That vampires don’t appear on film? Myth—and one that no one has believed in a century at least.

When Linda pulls into a reserved parking spot near a set of elevator doors, Erica gets out of the car first. Her heels click sharp on the concrete pavement. She offers Franky a hand, which Franky ignores. Erica quickly moves her hand to her pocket instead. Bridget exits the car on the other side.

Linda stays in the car and pulls out her phone.

Erica leads the way to the elevators. Although the outside of the building is unmistakably from the sixties, the interior has been renovated recently and the elevator they step into is a modern stainless-steel box with blue lights around its floor buttons. “We’re on the fortieth floor,” Erica says. She sweeps a keycard across a scanner, giving her access to the contraption. “Bridget, you’ve been to the conference room before. Franky, I think you’ll like the view.”

The elevator shoots them up, traveling what must be hundreds of feet in seconds. For Bridget, it’s a disconcerting feeling, like flying, almost. Vampires are, by nature, terrestrial. Subterranean, even. She’s not afraid of heights, just… wary of them.

When the elevator doors hiss open, they reveal a white hallway. The floor is white marble and the walls are white as well, with near-identical pieces of framed modern art hanging on them at regular intervals. Red circles against a near-imperceptibly different shade of red background. The doors into various conference rooms and assembly areas are frosted glass with steel fixtures.

“This floor wasn’t original to the building,” Erica remarks. “We built it recently to… ah…”

“Not be ugly?” Franky suggests. From the way her head is swiveling this way and that, she’s clearly impressed, even if she’s trying to hide it with her words.

“We use it for business meetings with people who have a particular aesthetic ideal,” Erica says, diplomatically. “The media are waiting downstairs for permission to come up. If you want to use the bathroom before the circus starts, it’s down the hall that way.” She points to their right.

Bowing to the eminent reason of Erica’s suggestion, Franky makes an inarticulate noise and then meanders off towards the bathroom.

Erica waits for the bathroom door to shut before turning to Bridget. “You shouldn’t be here when the media arrive,” she says. “It raises questions that I’m sure the Council wouldn’t want. I thought perhaps…”
Even though Erica trails off, Bridget senses that Erica knows exactly what she’s going to say next. She’s only trailing off for the effect, to make her request seem more like a suggestion.

“Hm?” Bridget prompts.

“Alan Doyle is being held on the tenth floor,” Erica says. “Talk to him and get his contact information.”

“You have a plan,” Bridget states, raising an eyebrow. It’s not a terribly insightful statement. Erica without a scheme would hardly be Erica.

Erica shrugs. “That depends.”

“On what?” Bridget asks.

“On what you think of him,” Erica says. “Franky hasn’t seen him since he left her and her mother, and I think that was twenty years ago. I need you to figure out what he wants. If he’s trash, we’ll treat him like trash. If he’s not, then I won’t drop this. For now, just… sound him out.”

Bridget frowns. Erica’s proposal reeks of conspiracy and if Franky gets wind of it, there’ll be hell to pay for both of them. But that’s an if, and merely testing the waters shouldn’t hurt anything. “Can you tell me anything else?” Bridget asks.

Erica shakes her head. “Franky doesn’t talk about him. She talks more about her mother than she does about him. Her mother wasn’t pleasant, from what I gather.”

“I see,” Bridget says. Even from that small piece of information, she’s starting to draw up ideas about the dynamics at work. It would be premature, however, to come to any conclusions. “Tenth floor, was it?”

“Tenth floor,” Erica confirms. “I’ll swipe the elevator for you. There should be a guard near the elevator who can take you to where they’re holding him—if they give you any trouble, have them call me. I don’t think they will though.”

Down the hall, a door opens. Franky emerges from the bathroom.

Turning so that her voice will carry, Bridget says, “That’s my cue to make myself scarce then. I’ll see you both when the festivities have finished.”

Erica presses for the elevator down. In the brief time that they’ve been on the fortieth floor, it hasn’t moved and so its doors open immediately. “Thank you for being understanding,” Erica says.

Nodding, Bridget steps into the elevator. Erica uses her keycard to activate it and then hits the button for the tenth floor before stepping back into the hallway.

Bridget hears Erica ask, “Franky, would you like some coffee?”

The steel doors hiss closed and then Bridget is on her way, the feeling of near-free-fall making her stomach clench.

When the doors open again, the uniformed guard standing across the hall watching the bank of elevators startles, physically jumping. The feeling of youth about him is such that for a moment Bridget mistakes him for a human. But, no, he’s of the blood. He’s just… baby-faced and still most definitely someone’s fledgling.
Bridget steps out of the elevator and into the hallway. Unlike the higher floor, this one is very much a concrete disaster to match the building’s exterior. She smiles politely and extends a hand for him to shake. “Hello, I’m Bridget Westfall. I’m here for Alan Doyle.”

“Uh, hi,” the young guard says. He takes Bridget’s hand and shakes it, but his handshake is weak and limp. “I’m Jake, Jake Stewart. You’re the consultant?”

Bridget buries her surprise. Among coven members of Jake’s standing, her presence shouldn’t be subject to explanation. Perhaps she misjudged his status. Young doesn’t always mean without connections—Fletch has only a few decades to him, but he’s well situated in the coven. “That’s one way of putting it,” she says. “Right now I’m just here doing a favor for the Governor. Can you take me to Mr. Doyle?”

“Yeah, right away,” Jake says. He turns and beckons. “This way. You know, I was at the raid a few days ago in Gramercy. Nasty what happened to the Governor, but I was thinking, well if...”

He keeps talking but Bridget, tuning him out, doesn’t reply. There’s something about him, she thinks, something that might be termed an *echo*. Is he of her line? If he is—he lacks the strength for it to matter. He’s a climber, not a fighter.

The bowels of the coven building are a labyrinth of locked doors that Jake has to open with his keycard. By the time they reach a hallway where another two guards stand on either side of a closed door, Bridget is getting quite tired of Jake smiling and bowing with every successive security check and the never ceasing self-aggrandizing chatter.

A brief introduction and explanation of her intent is all that it takes for the other guards to let her into the small meeting room where they’ve stashed Franky’s father. As she steps into the room, the guards close the door behind her.

Alan Doyle is seated at a small conference table with a glass of water in front of him. There’s a television, playing the local news but set to mute, installed on the fall wall of the room. Alan is a rough man, old, by the standards of humans, and beginning to show it. There’s not much family resemblance between him and Franky. Franky has a thin frame but Alan has spent his life doing some kind of physical labor, Bridget thinks. Even aging, he’s muscular and dense. Where Franky has green eyes, his are blue.

Franky, likely, has taken after her mother in looks.

There’s an earnestness in his hope when the door opens, and then too in his disappointment when he sees Bridget.

That earnestness—*that* is reminiscent of Franky.

“Alan Doyle,” Bridget greets.

Alan stands and steps towards Bridget, extending his hand. “That’s me,” he says. His eyes sweep warily over Bridget, as he doubtless attempts to calculate who, or, rather, *what* she is. He’s nervous, afraid, but he’s forcing courage.

Bridget takes his hand and shakes it. Unlike Jake, Alan has a firm grip. His hand is heavily calloused. “My name is Bridget,” she says. “I’m a friend of Franky’s. It’s good to meet you.”

“Where’s my kid?” Alan asks, getting straight to the point. He crosses his arms over his chest, subtly flexing and miming intimidation. The posturing probably serves him well in many contexts. But. He’s a human. He can’t intimidate Bridget.
Bridget nods towards the muted television. “About to give an interview,” she says. “Why don’t we sit down.”

Not protesting, Alan returns to his seat and Bridget selects a seat opposite him, across the table. Bridget has limited time to work. Once the interview is finished, Erica plans to head to the Bronx to speak with Kaz about coven support for recovery programs. Given the constraints, she thinks that a direct approach will be best.

“Why are you here, Alan?” she asks.

Alan bristles. As he shifts, Bridget notices that he’s wearing a necklace, a leather cord with some pendant hanging from it under his shirt. From long experience, she knows it’s a cross. As small as it is, it would do him little good in a fight, but such trinkets give humans a sense of security when they deal with vampires. Even the areligious like to wear them. Agitated, Alan starts, “Now, I already told the—”

“Now you’re going to tell me,” Bridget interrupts. She leans back in her seat. It’s not a threatening motion, but it projects power and control. It disincentivizes any sudden, irrational moves. In front of her, she sets both palms flat on the table. “Tell me your story. Franky doesn’t want to see you. She was very clear. We have no reason not to respect her wishes.”

“So what, if I talk to you, you’ll let me see her?” Alan asks. He’s frustrated and scared—the combination borders on anger but it has a different resonance to it. If Bridget hadn’t spent so long in the past few days picking apart Franky’s simmering moods, she might have mistaken Alan now. Like his earnestness, his near-anger is kin to his daughter’s, though he has better control, better sense, or both.

“No,” Bridget says. “If you convince me you mean well, we’ll ask her again. And if you convince me that you don’t mean well, then you leave. Again.”

That gets a spike of terror out of him.

He doesn’t crack though.

“Why should I believe you?” he asks. “You’re…”

Bridget smiles, not one of her normal close-lipped smiles, rather, she smiles enough to show her fangs.

Was Franky’s father the one she meant to hurt when she threw herself bodily into blood-slick world of vampires? He left so long ago it’s unlikely—but it is certainly a thought.

“I could say to you that your daughter is about to tell the entire city how much she trusts us,” Bridget says. “Or I could remind you that when we tell her you left of your own accord, she’ll believe us.”

Bridget pauses, letting her words sink in. She doesn’t take any particular pleasure in putting the fear of… of, well, Bridget into Alan, but the television shows that the interview is about to start and once it starts she really will be on a clock. Erica told the media fifteen minutes and not a second more. According to Erica, fifteen minutes was actually quite generous as these things go.

Once Alan has squirmed sufficiently, Bridget finishes, “Or I could tell you that she told me to tell you to fuck right off—but, here I am asking you for a reason to drag her down here. So are you going to give me one?”

Alan has broken into a cold sweat. His jaw is clenched and Bridget can see the muscles in his face
and neck straining. He glances at the television. Finally, “You’re not the girlfriend,” he says.

“This isn’t about me,” Bridget replies. She adds, “And if you have a problem with the fact that she’s gay, then we’re done here.”

“I’m not a bigot,” Alan says, testy. “I…”

On the television, Franky and Erica are walking into the conference room on the fortieth floor. Media is a performance and both of them are performing beautifully. Erica is oozing preternatural grace and authority. Franky isn’t quite grinning, rather, her lips are turned up just enough to suggest confidence and utter comfort with being alongside Erica, with being the human among vampires.

The degree to which they both appear to have their shit together, despite everything Bridget knows about them, is truly remarkable.

They make a good team.

The emotions rolling off of Alan are profound. There’s pride, fear, hope, sadness—a sort of deep sadness that Bridget might even call grief. Nothing in him reads as duplicitous.

Bridget almost feels guilty drawing his attention away from the television, but there will be many recordings of the interview when all is said and done. “Alan,” she says. “Why did you come here?”

Alan bows his head slightly. When he raises it again, he’s watching the television instead of looking at Bridget. “I saw that clip online,” he says. His voice is wavering. “From the hospital. And I just thought—that should have been me. That should have been me punching that broad. I’m her dad. That was my job.”

“That was your job,” Bridget says, needling. “You weren’t there to do it.”

“It’s still my job,” Alan snaps. He slams a hand down on the table as he turns sharply away from the television and towards Bridget. His mind catches up a moment later. He sheepishly raises his hand again and runs it over his bald head. “Uh, sorry.”

Bridget calmly waves a hand, “Apology accepted,” she says. She looks over to the television. Erica and Franky are sitting next to one another in thickly padded black chairs. Franky, as is her wont, has draped herself over her seat, completely owning it. Erica is sitting properly, back straight, legs together, as she gestures with her hands to accent her speech. She’s doing most of the talking—something about refocusing coven resources on community development projects. As she talks, Franky is watching Erica instead of the camera.

Between Bridget and Alan, for a while, there’s silence as they both watch the performance.

Alan means well.

Of that, Bridget is confident now.

But, the road to hell, as they say, is paved with good intentions.

It would be good for Alan to see his daughter and say his piece. Get whatever is on his chest off his chest. Alan’s wellbeing isn’t Bridget’s concern though. Would it be good for Franky? Does Alan have something that Franky needs? Erica didn’t give Bridget much to go on—because Franky didn’t give Erica much to go on. But Erica has a feeling that Franky should see her father, and Erica’s feelings carry weight with Bridget. That doesn’t mean they can substitute for Bridget’s own judgement.
So—what does Franky need?

It’s a question without an easy answer, especially on short notice.

“What are you planning on saying to her?” Bridget asks.

Alan doesn’t answer immediately.

He doesn’t want to say to Bridget what he’d rather say to his daughter.

He’s not in a situation where he has much choice though.

“I want to tell her I’m sorry,” he says. “That I love her and I wish I’d found her sooner and she’s got a sister and my door’s always open and I’m not gonna leave her again. Whatever she needs, I wanna be there.”

To this, Bridget is silent.

“She needs me, I’m her dad,” Alan continues. “I let her down. I know you wouldn’t understand… or… maybe you do? You folk do your weird…”

“I’ve never raised anyone,” Bridget says.

Looking decidedly uncomfortable, even more so than before, Alan clears his throat but doesn’t say anything else. As if the small cross necklace didn’t give him away, he’s neither familiar with nor fond of vampires.

Bridget doesn’t hold it against him. He’s human, after all.

And—he’s offering Franky a human life. Not the sort of half-life she has back in Harlem, working nights and spending her free evenings with Bridget’s kind, rather, a second chance at a real life among the living.

Is that what Franky needs?

It’s…

Not what Bridget wants.

It’s probably not what Erica wants either.

But it’s not really about what they want.

Humans, one way or another, rarely live out full lives when they spend their nights as Franky does.

She’s already made her choice though. Is it right to demand she make it again?

If Bridget drags Franky to meet her father, will she see that as some kind of betrayal? That she’ll lash out at someone is a foregone conclusion. The questions are at whom and to what degree. It would be best to let Franky mull things over and agree of her own volition, but that could take a very long time indeed.

Humans lives are brief.

On the television, Erica reaches over and sets her hand on Franky’s knee.
Franky grins.

It’s easy for her. She’s not acting for the camera. She means it.

Bridget’s gut tells her that even if she take’s Alan’s phone number and address and email and whatever else, nevertheless what she told Franky in the car will hold. Some chances for reconciliation only come once. This isn’t about just life and death. Bridget has to make this work.

The interview is ending now. The subtitles scrolling along the silent screen show Erica’s closing remarks. She’s got a whole speech about making New York better for everyone. Then, it’s Franky’s turn.

Franky, still grinning, looks at Erica. “Fangs aren’t so bad,” she says.

The channel cuts over to a local news anchor, commenting. Bridget ignores the talking head. “Alan, if you wouldn’t mind waiting here while I sort some things out,” she says.

Alan’s hope flares. “So do I get to see her?” he asks.

Bridget goes through the motion of sighing. With any luck, she won’t disappoint him. She can’t make promises though. “That’s really up to Franky,” she says.

In the hallway outside the meeting room, the two guards are still close by but Jake has gone, probably returned to his post by the elevators. Making sure to close the door behind her before she speaks, Bridget asks, “Can one of you contact the Governor and ask her to bring her human down?”

“Yes ma’am,” one of the guards says. He activates his radio and relays Bridget’s request to the building dispatch, who in turn promises to let Erica know. Very soon, his radio crackles to life once more with dispatch confirming that Erica is on her way. It’s not long after that that Erica and Franky, accompanied by Jake, turn the far corner of the hallway and come down the corridor towards them.

Franky understands what’s going on almost immediately. “What the hell’s this?” she demands. “I got up in front of a bunch of cameras and say how much I trust you and you pull this shit?” She stops walking, standing stubbornly in place.

“Stewart,” Erica says to Jake. To the other guards, “And you two. Give us the hall.”

“Yes, Governor,” the three of them chorus. They very quickly make themselves scarce, though Jake evacuates slower than the others.

He’s young. He doesn’t know any better. Or he does—but he’s not Bridget’s problem.

Bridget looks Franky in the eyes. “Franky, what can I say to convince you to talk to him? Or at least hear him out?”

“I fuckin’ told ya,” Franky snaps. She points at the closed door. “I ain’t gonna. So stop askin’!”

“Franky,” Erica starts.

Franky rounds on Erica. “No,” she says. “You told me you were gonna respect me and now this? You were in on this, yeah?”

Refusing to give ground, Erica straightens, standing ever so slightly taller. “I asked Bridget to evaluate him—because I trust her judgment. I think that—”

“How long’ve we been at this?” Franky snarls, throwing her hands up into the air. Her question is
obviously rhetorical. “A year? And have I ever made you think, ‘She’s a fuck up, but talking to her dad would set her straight?’”

Bridget intervenes. It’s a team effort and she’s not going to abandon Erica. “No one here wants you to be straight, Franky,” she says. “You’re not a fuck up.”

It’s Bridget’s turn to be righteously chewed out now. “So how ‘bout you fuckin’ listen to me instead of treating me like it?” Franky snaps. She points a finger at Bridget now, and takes a half-step towards her. “You think you know me better than I know me?”

Bridget doesn’t keep control of her expression. She flinches.

Franky sees it and jumps on it. “Yeah? That’s what I thought. You—”

There’s a click. The door behind Bridget opens and, on the other side, Alan. “Franky?”

Franky goes deer-in-the-headlights frozen. The emotions rolling off of her are a mix of everything imaginable all at once and all swirled together so as to be nothing except intensity.

Alan steps more fully into the hallway. One of his hands is at his side and the other reaches out. “Franky? I—”

Franky bolts. She sprints to the end of the hall and around the corner, then stops, swearing. The doors in the building are almost all locked, accessible only by coven members with proper credentials. A loud slamming noise, followed by a burst of pain, tells Bridget that Franky isn’t going to take no for an answer from a door.

“Fuck.”

The curse echoes in Bridget’s head so forcefully it takes her a moment to realize that Erica has also said it out loud.

Bridget looks to Erica and Erica looks to Bridget.

Acting on an unspoken consensus, grim-faced, Erica grabs her keycard and throws it to Bridget, who catches it even as she’s already in motion, headed after Franky.

Erica gets a hand on Alan’s shoulder and starts pushing him back into the room. “Mr. Doyle, I’m Erica Davidson, it’s a pleasure to meet you…”

Going at a jog, Bridget turns the corner at the end of the hall, slips around Franky before she can throw herself at the door again, and unlocks it with Erica’s card. “Let’s go for a walk, yeah?” Bridget says, holding the door open.

Franky storms past, going through the now open door but not saying anything.

Shoving Erica’s card into her pocket, Bridget has to hurry again to catch up to Franky. As she pulls even, she notices that there are tear tracks shimmering on Franky’s cheeks. Sad tears? Angry tears? Bridget can’t tell, and that suggests to her that Franky sure as hell doesn’t know either.

How to handle this?

“We shouldn’t have done that,” Bridget says. She raises her hands, placating, but she doesn’t try to reach out to Franky. That would be invading personal space, and Franky needs space right now—but not too much space.
“No shit,” Franky snarls.

They follow the hallway around another corner and reach another locked door. Franky pulls to a stop in front of it. Blinking rapidly, she glances up to the ceiling. “Open the door, Gidge,” she says.

Obliging, Bridget hurries to open the door.

*Gidge.*

That’s a good sign.

“Can we talk?” Bridget asks as they go through the door and into another nondescript concrete hallway. If they go too much farther, getting lost may become an issue. “I want to understand.”

Franky stops walking so abruptly that Bridget overshoots her by a step and a half. Recovering, she too stops. She turns back around to face Franky.

“It’s pretty fuckin’ simple,” Franky says. Her face is contorted with rage and hurt. Her entire body is a ball of tension. “He walked out on me and now I’m walkin’ out on him.”

“So this is about revenge?” Bridget asks. She speaks softly. She keeps her tone free of anything that might suggest judgement. She can’t fuck this up. “Make him feel how you felt?”

Franky sniffs, then wipes her nose with her wrist. “For starters, yeah,” she says, harsh. She sounds like she means it, but she doesn’t feel like she means anything at all—she just feels like confusion and pain. She feels small.

Bridget sees the work that must be done. It’s the work of building. And it will take time and it will not be easy.

For now though, she thinks, her role is to support. To give succor. To comfort.

Blinking rapidly, Franky looks up towards the ceiling as she moves her arms to hold herself. She sniffs hard, then exhales with equal force like she’s trying to force composure.

Bridget shifts, opening her arms. When Franky doesn’t pull back, Bridget closes the distance between them and wraps Franky in a hug. Franky being the taller of the two of them, Bridget ends up with her face near to the crook of Franky’s neck.

The smell of human, the smell of blood, is thick and sweet. Pressed against Franky’s body, Bridget can feel her heart beating.

It’s not the time or the place for that though.

Franky is shaking.

“I understand,” Bridget says.

Franky snorts. “You and your stupid vampire superpower,” she says.

“When I say I understand, I do mean it quite literally,” Bridget remarks. She pulls away, giving Franky’s arm a slight tug. “Let’s sit down.”

Franky plops down onto the floor in an undignified collapse. She pulls her knees up to her chest and leans her back against the concrete wall of the corridor. Bridget sits down next to her, moving with far more grace. Once she’s situated, she gets an arm around Franky’s shoulders. She forces herself to
remember to breathe. She needs to not be dead for a while.

“I waited years for him to come back,” Franky starts. And that’s where she stops. She sniffs again and, shaking her head, doesn’t say more.

Carefully, Bridget finishes for her. She knows how this story goes, but it’s treacherous work to push it along its way. “You say you waited? Did you ever stop waiting?”

Franky doesn’t answer. Instead, “Why’s he here now? Where’s he fucking been for the last twenty years?”

“He’s here now because he couldn’t find you before,” Bridget says. “And I don’t know where he’s been for the last twenty years.”

“It’s the fucking Internet age,” Franky growls. “He must not’ve been looking very hard.” She sniffs again, then violently drags her wrist against her nose and the back of her hand over her eyes. “Did he just... forget?”

Bridget bites her tongue. She knows the answer that Franky needs to hear, but she isn’t the one who can give it.

“She said he left because of me,” Franky goes on. From context, Bridget thinks Franky means her mother. “She—” Whatever else Franky was saying is cut out by another loud snuffle.

Bridget pulls Franky closer, holding her as tightly as she dares. “Oh Franky,” she breathes.

Franky opens her mouth to speak, but whatever she meant to say gets stuck in her throat. She groans instead.

“You didn’t deserve that,” Bridget says. “And if I could turn back time and fix it, I would.”

“That’s your job, yeah?” Franky says. “You go around fixing things?”

Bridget hesitates before answering. “Yes,” she says.

“And this whole thing with that fucker down the hall,” Franky says. “That’s you trying to fix things.”

“Erica too,” Bridget says. “She cares about you.”

Franky snorts. “I see what you did there.”

Bridget chooses not to respond to that. Instead, “When you’ve lived as long as we have, you accumulate regrets,” she begins. “I think we both...”

“I get what you’re putting down,” Franky says. “If I talk to him, will that make you happy?”

Bridget shakes her head. “Not if you only do it for us.” She pauses, then, “Look, Franky, if you still say no, I’ll go tell them. You can wait here.”

Franky sighs hard, and then it’s her turn to shake her head. “Nah,” she says. “I’m not a fucking coward.”

The corners of Bridget’s lips turn up into a small smile. Acting on an impulse—it just feels right—she leans over and kisses Franky quickly. She retreats again before Franky quite registers what happened. Before she quite registers what happened, really.
The whole thing makes her feel very… young.

A grin spreads across Franky’s face. “Hey now,” she says, reaching over and sliding her fingertips along Bridget’s cheek. “That’s not fair. C’mere.”

Kissing Franky is—

It’s something that Bridget resolves to do more often.

Franky is warm and soft and even as she runs her tongue under Bridget’s fangs, she avoids cutting herself with an ease that comes only with kissing vampires often. Bridget half-wishes that she would cut herself though.

Bridget is the one who pulls away first. Moving back and shifting to stand back up, it’s hard not to feel that the kiss didn’t last long enough, even though Bridget is intellectually aware that they don’t have all the time in the world. On her feet again, Bridget extends a hand to help Franky up as well.

Still grinning, Franky takes Bridget’s hand.

The walk back to where they started doesn’t take long. Bridget knocks on the door of the room. Erica answers, opening the door, stepping out into the hall, and shutting it behind her. She looks to Franky. “Will you?” she asks.

Franky shrugs, feigning disinterest, even though she surely knows she’s not fooling anyone. “Yeah,” she says, stepping forward.

Erica clears the way. “Do you want the door open or closed?” she asks.


Bridget and Erica exchange a look. It seems unlikely that Franky doesn’t care, but they’re not sure what she actually wants.

“We’ll give you your privacy,” Erica says. “But we’ll be out here if you want us.”

“Sure,” Franky mumbles. She takes a deep breath, her shoulders visibly rising and falling. And then she opens the door, steps into the room, and closes it behind her.

For a moment, both Erica and Bridget stare at the now closed door.

To Bridget, relief, both hers and Erica’s, is so strong it’s almost tangible.

Then, Erica, “I was worried.”

Small smile playing at her lips, Bridget shakes her head. “I’m very good at talking to people.” Half of her concentration is on the room—on Franky and Alan. They’re both a messy swirl of longing and anger and regret, but nothing suggests that either of them will do anything overly rash.

Erica returns Bridget’s smile with one of her own. “You are,” she says. There’s a certain quality to the gleam in her eyes that suggests her mind has strayed to other things.

So focused on reading the currents around her, Erica’s mood is sharp and unmistakable to Bridget.

Bridget’s smile grows. “Are we just waiting now? Heading to Kaz’s shelter when Franky finishes?” She lets her eyes drag over Erica, making her intentions clear.
“Yes,” Erica says. “We’re just waiting now.”

“Excellent.” As Bridget steps towards Erica, she’s not at all subtle. If she thought Erica wanted subtlety, she’d be subtle—but she’s very confident that that’s not what Erica is interested in. Even so, closing to mere inches away, she asks, “Let me know if I’m misreading you?”

Erica’s reply comes breathless. “You’re not.”

Bridget takes that as permission to push Erica towards the wall until her back is pressed against the concrete and Bridget’s body is against her. That Erica is the taller of them, especially wearing heels, hardly matters. Bridget has control, in no small part because Erica gives it to her.

Bridget runs her hands down Erica’s sides, settling them firmly on Erica’s hips.

She uses more force than when she held Franky before.

Erica is more durable, by far, and her preferences are quite different.

The top button of Erica’s black shirt was left undone for the interview to project a carefully managed casual air. It’s still undone. Bridget presses her lips to Erica’s throat. She pulls back and looks up at Erica. “I believe you said that you were in my debt,” she says.

Erica is wearing the barest touch of perfume. It smells of vanilla.

She’s not really a vanilla sort of person though.

With a lazy, satisfied smile, “I did,” Erica replies. She sets her own hands on the small of Bridget’s back, lightly, fingers lacing together. “Would you like to collect?”

In response, Bridget hums. “Maybe later,” she says. “Right now, I want—”

“Governor,” Vera cuts in. “Inquisitor.”

Bridget and Erica hardly move at all except to turn their heads to stare at Vera, and Mark standing a step behind her.

Vera’s lips are pressed into a tight, disapproving, line.

Mark looks like—

Bridget avoids meeting his eyes.

Still refusing to move from their position, Erica asks, “Yes, Vera?”

Vera’s reply is acerbic. “If you’re preoccupied, I can come back.”

Erica finally shifts to push Bridget away. Bridget complies, stepping back. Erica straightens her shirt and suit jacket. “What is it?” she asks, voice testy. She has the sense to apologize for nothing.

Vera clears her throat as she squares her shoulders and clasps her hands in front of her. “I wanted to speak with you about the Holt situation,” she says. “Jacs and Brayden have gone to ground and we can’t find them. I’d like to reach out to the NYPD.”

Even before Vera finishes her last sentence, Erica is shaking her head. “Our agreement with the NYPD is that we take care of our own business,” she says. “They won’t want to get involved in this. It’s police union rules. And they’re already upset we’ve had so many high-profile firefights in the last
few days..."

“Governor,” Vera says. “We have a window of opportunity and it is closing. We need to find Jacs and Brayden.”

“Then find them,” Erica says. “I still don’t know how you let them go in Gramercy, it—”

“You were on fire,” Vera says, bluntly.

Erica stiffens.

Bridget enters the conversation. “Taking out Vinnie was progress,” she says. “And if they’re on the run and we’re having so much trouble locating them now, the best-case scenario is that they’re too busy hiding to do anything else.”

Mark shuffles his feet behind Vera. “And the worst-case scenario is that they’re in hiding and about to retaliate,” he says, glum.

Erica’s eyes move to her husband. “Mark, are you here with Vera or do you need me for something else? How was the interview? Did it work?”

“It did,” Mark says. “Better than our projections. There are already gifs of you going viral. You’re a regular lesbian folk hero now.” His shoulders are slumped and his hands dangle limply at his sides.

Vera clears her throat, loudly. “Perhaps if we could focus on the business of the coven?”

Shaking her head, Erica says, “Right.” She turns her attention from Mark back to her Second. “Vera, the coven can’t involve the NYPD in our internal affairs. We can’t afford to cross the police union right now—we never can. That’s just politics. I’m counting on you to find a way to make this work.”

Unhappy with Erica’s decision and struggling to keep it from her face, Vera looks to Bridget. “Maybe the Inquisitor has some thoughts? I believe tracking down and eliminating the Holts is the reason you’re here?”

Vera does succeed in keeping her hostility from leaking into her tone. For that, Bridget is thankful. It means she doesn’t have to play the game of respect quite so much as she replies. “They’ll have split up,” she says. “There are very few of that line left and Jacs is old enough to think that lineage matters. Their clan in particular has always thought highly of blood-ties. She might still be plotting, but she’s probably stashed Brayden somewhere she thinks is safe.”

“Jacs is the bigger danger of the two of them. She’s shown that she’ll go after you,” Vera says. “And she’ll go after the human. If we—”

“Franky isn’t bait,” Erica snaps. “And neither is Bridget.”

If looks could kill, Vera’s would put Erica back into the grave. “Of course,” she says.

Erica did just shoot down a reasonable suggestion.

“Give it a few more days,” Bridget says. “If we still don’t have anything, I think Jacs will reliably come for me. I don’t think she cares one way or the other about Franky except as a way to get at Erica. She knew me in the Old World though, and she has a grudge.”

Erica grimaces. “Then in a few days, we can consider that,” she says. “Keep working on this. Use whatever coven resources you need, but don’t bring the humans into it.”
“Yes, Governor,” Vera says, tone clipped.

“Is that all then?” Erica asks.

Vera nods. Mark, pained, nods as well. Together, they turn and head down the hall, leaving.

Bridget waits for the sound of the hallway door opening and closing and for her sense of the both of them to fade before she says to Erica, “You’re not treating him very well.”

Erica bristles. “I’m doing my best.”

Bridget does a poor job of keeping her disappointment with Erica from her face, but, well, Erica probably needed to see it.

Uncomfortable now, Erica glances down at her watch. “We need to head to Kaz’s place very soon,” she says. “She’s not nocturnal.”

Together, Erica and Bridget look over to the door of the room where Franky and her father are. Oddly enough, to Bridget’s sense, they both feel… mellow. “You can do the honors,” Bridget says.

“Right,” Erica says, as much to herself as to Bridget. She moves to the door, then, after a brief pause, opens it.

Franky and Alan are sitting across from one another. Alan is leaning forward over the table. Franky is slouched back in her seat. Franky is scowling slightly. Alan looks to have been crying a good deal more than his daughter. They’re not mid-conversation. Bridget would guess that they haven’t said anything to one another in a while.

“Franky, we need to head out,” Erica says, voice soft.

Franky shoves her chair away from the table and stands. “Cool,” she says. “Bye dad.” She turns her back on Alan and heads to the door, slipping around Erica to get out.

Alan stands and looks about to follow her when Erica shakes her head. “Mr. Doyle, if you wait here, someone will come to escort you out.”

Alan settles again. He runs a hand over his bald head. “Yeah, okay,” he says. “Uh, can I talk to Bridget for a sec?”

Erica looks over to Bridget and shrugs. To Alan, “Just a moment.”

Bridget touches Franky’s shoulder briefly, then enters the room. “Alan,” she greets. She pushes the door so that it’s mostly closed, but not all the way.

“Wanted to thank you,” Alan says. “Don’t know what you are to her, but you’re something.”

“It was my pleasure,” Bridget replies. She pauses, then pulls out her phone from her pocket. “I’d like your number, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Alan gives his number without protest. It’s for both their benefits.

Bridget returns her phone to her pocket. “It was good to meet you, Alan,” she says. “And I do hope to see you again.”

The smile Alan gives is wry. His reunion with Franky did not go entirely poorly, Bridget would guess. “Yeah, I hope so too.”
When Bridget leaves the room again, she closes the door behind her. Franky and Erica are waiting. Erica has an arm around Franky’s waist.

“Time to go?” Bridget asks.

“Time to go,” Erica says.

Chapter End Notes

hi. i’m back. hope you enjoyed this chapter! irl is still complicated and will stay complicated for the foreseeable future. also, i get distracted and do things like write mermaid!fridget. updates will be delayed accordingly. next chapter probably late september? the next three chapters are drafted, but i like to keep a buffer and also editing takes time. anywho. haha, thank you for sticking with me, all you reader-types are the best <3
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip to the Bronx is quiet and uneventful. When they pile into Linda’s car, Franky is disinterested in conversation. Erica and Bridget leave her be. Erica has a laptop open and she appears to be working on coven business. In Bridget’s experience, most coven leaders shy away from the… less exciting elements of their duties, but Erica doubtless has an affinity for budgets and spreadsheets.

Bridget watches buildings and streets go by through the car window.

Outside, the sun has set and night has taken the city.

It’s not until they’re almost to their destination that anyone says something.

Franky pulls out her phone. “I’m gonna tell Allie that we’re here,” she says. “She said she’d let us in.”

“Let us in? Kaz doesn’t want us in?” Erica asks, an edge of bitter sarcasm in her voice.

“Dunno,” Franky says, frowning and shrugging. “Allie’s on board and she can talk Kaz into anything though.”

Erica shifts in her seat, uncomfortable. “We could also speak outside,” she says. She says it like a suggestion, but it’s obviously a preference.

“I’m curious to meet this Kaz woman,” Bridget remarks.

“A misandrist bigot with a violent streak,” Erica mutters. “She’s… gotten involved in altercations in the past—altercations the coven would have preferred not happen.” Then, grimacing, she adds, “But she runs one of the most supportive women’s shelters in the city. Part of her heart is in a good place.”

Franky shoves her phone between her ear and her shoulder, craning her neck, before the muted sound of a phone ringing fills the car.

Allie picks up on the fourth ring. “Hey Franky,” she says. She sounds tired but still upbeat—which is to say, far more awake and alive than Bridget remembers her.

“Hey,” Franky says. “We’re about there.”

The car stops in front of a squat brick building that’s been painted a sort of faded lavender. The paint is chipped and flaking. The texture of the brick underneath suggests that this structure is on its third or fourth life. It wasn’t always a refuge. A large sign above the door boldly says what the building is now—Shelter.

Kaz, it would seem, is either confident in ability to protect her facility and those within, or fearless, or both.

Bridget’s work has rarely taken her to the modern shelters that dot the landscape of America. A hundred years ago, the old poor houses were rich hunting grounds for vampires. Many were even run by the covens, which did much to get around the formalities of invitations into human dwellings. Now, shelters, often affiliated with churches, have turned themselves into bastions against the night.
Most hang crosses on every wall for easy access. Some even examine the poor souls who come to them for bite scars.

Looking at this tired lavender building, Bridget can’t help but feel she and Erica are walking into the lair of an enemy.

Linda has barely cut the engine of the car when the front door of the shelter opens. The same woman Erica brought out of the blood house on Bridget’s first night in the city leans out. Smiling, Allie waves at them. “Franky!”

Practically climbing over Erica to get out of the car first, Franky hops down to the sidewalk and waves back. “Allie!” Using long strides, she quickly closes the distance between them, going up to the doors and giving Allie a great bear hug.

Behind Franky, Erica and Bridget exit the vehicle with far more grace. They approach the shelter with caution. This is decidedly not their territory.

Franky releases Allie from the hug, but keeps a hand on her shoulder. She turns towards the vampires. She gestures to Erica first. “You remember Erica, yeah?” she asks.

Allie smiles at Erica. “Yeah, course I do,” she says.

Allie has a very earnest smile, Bridget thinks.

Erica’s polite smile, in turn, is reserved. “It’s good to see you well,” she says.

There’s an awkward pause.

Franky intervenes. “And this is Bridget,” she says. “She’s… uh…”

Bridget smiles and extends a hand for Allie to shake. “I’m a friend.”

Allie hesitates before shaking Bridget’s hand and her handshake is uncertain. She doesn’t shake hands often. When they both let go, Allie’s hand goes to her side and she sort of holds it there, not quite letting it dangle loose, as if she can’t remember what she’s supposed to do with it now.

“So’s Kaz busy?” Franky asks.

“Sorta,” Allie replies. “Bea came by again about Debbie and Kaz is talking to her. But all of you, come in!”

Allie holds the door enough for Franky to take it before stepping back inside the building. Franky follows her, giving the door a push to keep it open for Erica and Bridget.

Acting on instinct, Erica reaches out and grabs the door before it closes, but neither she nor Bridget make any move to actually enter the building. Instead, they exchange a dubious glance. It is certainly the case that the shelter is a human dwelling and if Allie isn’t inhabitant enough to properly invite them in, crossing the threshold will be… unpleasant.

Bridget steels herself and takes a step forward so that she’s just in front of where she thinks the line between the profane and the sacred is. Then, she extends a toe across.

She doesn’t catch fire.

Still moving cautiously, she gets the rest of her foot into the building and, still braced, she crosses within entirely. She can feel herself relax once she’s inside. She takes another step forward, clearing
the way for Erica to repeat the same process. The door shuts heavy behind them and Bridget thinks she hears a lock click. It’s after-hours.

A sort of choking noise catches Bridget’s attention. She looks over at Franky and Allie. Both of them are doing a terrible job of suppressing laughter.

“You both—” Franky starts. She’s grinning and shaking her head.

“Like cats afraid to step in a puddle,” Allie says.

Erica huffs. “I’ve burned enough for one week,” she says, crossing her arms defensively.

Bridget smiles and shrugs. Unlike Erica, she doesn’t see any benefit in a vain attempt to reclaim lost dignity. What’s gone is gone.

The shelter interior is beige drywall, further supporting Bridget’s thought that this building has been repurposed many times. Drywall is far more modern than the exterior facade. Unsurprisingly, a pair of crosses hang from pegs on either side of the front doors. Their presence sends a cold shiver down Bridget’s spine. When not wielded by someone with faith, the crosses are simple wood. Inert. Still, crosses, humans, and vampires all in close proximity make for a dangerous situation.

Allie tilts her head down the hall. “Kaz is this way,” she says.

The four of them traverse the shelter together. Allie and Franky lead, chatting with one another. Bridget and Erica follow, nearly rubbing shoulders as they walk side by side, so as to put as much distance between themselves and the crosses on the walls.

Erica wasn’t exaggerating when she said Kaz hates vampires. Everything about the building has been arranged to keep their kind out. Or just kill them.

There are human women about, and they stare. Several of them point at Erica and whisper. They recognize her from the local news. Dressed in her black suit and holding herself, as ever, like the righteous Governor of the most powerful coven in North America that she is, she’s rather unmistakable.

Allie takes them to an office but stops just short of it. The door is ajar and a heated conversation spills out into the hall.

“—you *have* to be able to do something! You have connections! You—”

“Bea, I can’t help you. I wish I—”

“*You can!* You’re the *only one* who can! You’ve done this before! I don’t know anyone else—”

“*Bea.*”

“I haven’t got anyone else. Please, Kaz. I need my daughter.”

“Bea, I can’t. I’m sorry. There’s nothing—”

“No. No you’re not. If you were sorry, you’d do something! You say you’re for women and you’re against leeches—”

“Bea!”

There’s a crash and the sound of fluttering papers falling to the floor. The door slams open and a
woman with striking red hair storms out, rage and desperation pouring off of her in massive waves that strike Bridget with almost physical force. Her face is gaunt. Haunted.

Everyone in the hallway springs out of her way.

Allie and Franky exchange a look, and then Allie bolts off to follow the woman with red hair. Franky starts to extend a hand as if to recall her, but then lowers it, frowning.

From inside the office, “Shit.”

Franky makes an exaggerated shrug to Erica before approaching the office and sticking her head in. “Hey Kaz,” she greets, voice chipper. “You got a minute? Or…?”

“Franky? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be selling out your race on national television?” Kaz sounds angry and annoyed, but too preoccupied to be overly angry and annoyed.

Not answering the questions, Franky replies, “Allie let me and some friends in,” she says. “We were wanting to talk to you about something.”

There’s a brief pause. Then, “Fine. What is it?”

Franky pulls her head back out of the office and gestures for Bridget and Erica to enter.

Bridget was the first of them into the shelter. She lets Erica lead the way into Kaz’s office.

Kaz is an older woman with blond hair and tan skin that’s seen a lifetime of sun. She wears her hair long in a high ponytail. Bridget’s impression of her can be summed up in a single word: survivor. She has fought the world. She hasn’t won. She’s still fighting.

There’s a moment where Bridget sees Kaz seated behind her desk, which someone—probably the redhead who stormed out—swept a lamp and papers and a small wooden horse off of. The floor, now, is a mess. Then the moment is over. As soon as Kaz sees Erica, and then Bridget behind her, she’s on her feet, her fury nearly matching the mood of the woman who just wrecked her office. Teeth grit, hand pointing accusingly at Erica, “Leeches? You brought… into my house? Allie let you in?”

Kaz’s other hand, the one that’s not pointing at Erica, has reached into a drawer of her desk. Bridget is certain that she has a cross or holy water or some other emblem of the sacred stashed there. Acting on instinct, she takes a step backwards. Erica implied that Kaz has tangled with their kind before and fared well. It’s probably no accident that she has her office inside her shelter rather than at a separate facility.

Franky shoves herself between Kaz and Erica, raising both hands up in something between a pacifying gesture and just trying to make herself larger. “Woah, hey, chill,” Franky says, speaking fast. “We come in peace!”

Ignoring Franky, Kaz finishes pulling out her cross and is advancing around her desk now. “Get the fuck out of my house,” she shouts.

Erica and Bridget both retreat back out into the hallway as Franky shifts to block the doorway. “Kaz, calm the fuck down,” Franky tries again. Her volume has risen such that she’s not practically shouting too. “They’re the ones who got Allie back last week!”

One human with a cross—Bridget can handle that. She’s faster and stronger, and humans who aren’t trained to fight inevitably fight badly, even when they manage to improvise well. That holds true for
vampires as well, though reasonably old vampires can often make up for a lack of skill with brute strength. The real problem is that the shelter is filled with crosses and humans to wield them. Against a mob, things could turn ugly.

At Franky’s words, Kaz actually pauses. Her rage wavers. Franky was right in her call that Allie was a good way to get to Kaz. It’s unfortunate that Allie went sprinting after her… friend is not strong enough a word, but all the stronger words Bridget can think of are too strong.

Franky uses her head to sort of nod towards Erica. “She’s got ideas for how to help women in shelters. And everywhere else. Figured that’s your thing.”

Kaz lowers her cross, but not enough to remove the threat. She looks to Erica. “And why would you do that?”

“Will you let us come in and have a civil discussion?” Erica asks in reply. She sounds wary, but the wariness in her tone pales in comparison to the anxiety she’s exuding. She has a game and she’s playing it, but she’s as nervous as Bridget about the consequences of a fight under such unfavorable circumstances. She won’t let Kaz know the extent of her worry though. Kaz isn’t just a survivor, she’s dangerous. If she thinks she and her women can prevail against Bridget and Erica, that belief might encourage her to try it.

Bridget has met many extremists before. They put heart before logic, often with fatal consequences for everyone.

The expression on Kaz’s face can only be described as an extremely painful grimace. She’s thinking about it. The overhead lights are fluorescent and they cast her in a sort of bluish glow.

What can Bridget do to tip the balance without disrupting Erica’s plan?

The key is to pacify Kaz without letting her feel like she has any real power over them.

“If you hear us out and aren’t interested, we’ll leave in peace,” Bridget says. “We don’t mean any harm to you or yours.”

“You expect me to trust you?” Kaz asks, sneering. “What am I, stupid?”

“I trust them,” Franky says. “Allie trusts them. They’re not gonna hurt anyone here.”

“You made that clear with that stunt you pulled on TV,” Kaz snarls. “The city was finally waking up to what those things are.”

Franky takes a different tack. “Kaz, you remember when I brought Allie back here? You remember how rough she was? Erica burned the house that did that. Right to the fuckin’ ground.”

Kaz’s anger diminishes again. She’s the righteous type, but she has awareness enough such that things that don’t fit her paradigm of the world still give her pause. Barely. The modicum of doubt, however, is enough.

Forcing Erica to burn the house, Bridget thinks, is the gift that keeps on giving.

“So let them talk, yeah?” Franky asks.

Kaz turns and stalks back to her seat behind her trashed desk. She sits down and, still holding her cross in Bridget and Erica’s direction, “You have five minutes. And then you leave.”
Erica taps Franky on the shoulder and Franky stands aside to let Bridget and Erica into the room. There aren’t chairs for guests, so they stand close to one another, Erica slightly in front but not by much. Franky hovers nearby, body tense. All three of them keep one eye on Kaz’s cross.

“As Franky explained, I have a proposal,” Erica starts. She has her feet planted slightly wide and her hands clasped behind her back. As much as she projects control, it has little effect on Kaz. The human woman isn’t easily impressed, or intimidated.

Kaz raises an eyebrow, pressing Erica to get to her point.

Bridget feels a flash of annoyance from Erica, but it quickly transforms into steely resolve. There’s a challenge in front of her and she intends to rise to it. “What’s in it for you is money. Resources. Whatever you need to improve your services here, the coven would like to help.”

Kaz continues to wait in silence, unwilling to ask what the coven might want in return.

Erica doesn’t crack. She pauses and, standing still, lets the quiet go on for what Bridget guesses to be at least half a minute before she speaks again. Her tone is steady. “What we need from you is your influence.”

Kaz finally bites. “What for?”

“We want a better relationship with shelters, clinics, public health organizations in the city,” Erica answers. “The well-being of our kind is necessarily tied to the well-being of yours.”

“Bullshit,” Kaz responds, immediately. “What do you really want?”

“For now, we just want to help,” Erica replies. She’s making Kaz work for information. She has the upper hand. “However much it takes to become one of your largest donors.”

“For now?” Kaz presses.

Carefully, Erica answers. “Our kind are susceptible to all the vices and addictions that plague you humans,” she says. “But the drugs you use to manage addiction and ease withdrawal can only be administered to us by blood. I want to build the first treatment center in the world for our kind.”

Understanding, Kaz sneers. “So you want blood from the sick and vulnerable. The people least able to spare it.”

“We would pay for whatever medications the humans need,” Erica says. “Within reason, we would subsidize other costs as well.”


Franky scowls. Her mood flickers to something dark. Kaz hit a nerve. “How ’bout you pull that stick out of your ass and hear Erica out?” Franky bites back. “She’s trying to do good.”

“Good for leeches isn’t good for humans,” Kaz hisses. Something deep in her has woken up. Someone, a long time ago, hurt her. Badly. “She’ll fuck you over, Franky. They can’t help themselves. They—”

“Stuff yourself Kaz,” Franky snaps.

“You don’t have to support this now,” Erica says, interrupting, trying to manage the situation. It’s a
futile effort. From the moment Kaz understood what Erica wanted, it was all a lost cause. “Give us a chance to prove ourselves.”

Kaz stands. She gestures with her cross towards the door of her office. Responding, Franky shifts, ready to jump Kaz if she so much as twitches wrong. “Get the fuck out of my house,” Kaz says. There’s a bit of a tremor in her hand from how tightly she’s gripping her cross. “Before I take you out.”

What Kaz feels isn’t anger, rage, fury, or any other emotion that can be reasoned with.

Her blue eyes are ice.

Kaz feels hate.

Bridget puts a hand on Erica’s elbow. “We should go,” she says. She puts just a touch of urgency into her voice.

Erica starts to shake her head. As much as this was about solving an immediate public relations problem for the coven, it was about her dream project as well. Being shot down hurts. “But—”

“Erica,” Bridget says. She pulls Erica back towards the door behind them, insistent. “We’ll find another way. Let’s go.”

“Get,” Kaz orders, teeth bared.

Erica stiffens and her nostrils flare. Her jaw is tight. “Very well,” she says. “We’ll take our leave.” On one heel she turns and stalks out of the office. Bridget follows her, and Franky follows Bridget.

Together they make it about halfway down the hall before Franky mutters, “What a fuckin’ bitch.” She throws her hands out wide. “She’s got her head shoved so far up her—”

Bridget reaches over and wraps an arm around Franky’s shoulders. Franky tenses, briefly, then relaxes as she shoves her hands into her pockets.

“Sorry,” Franky says, looking over to Erica. “I was hoping that’d go better.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Erica says, voice firm. “You can’t help that she’s a bigot. I just—for fuck’s sake, it’s 2018 and people like her still run most of the charities.”

Still frustrated, Franky growls. “I wanted—”

“Franky!”

The three of them all startle and look for whoever called out.

It’s Allie, sticking her head out from a small common room. Inside the room, the red-haired woman from before is sitting on an incredibly uncomfortable looking couch. All Bridget can feel from her is cold fury mixed with desperation, a dark hole of rage that wants to devour the world around it. She’s staring at their group. Her eyes are… there’s an intensity to them, at a level Bridget has encountered only rarely. It’s animalistic. Primal. Deeper and stronger than Kaz’s hate, and not nearly as simple.

Franky pauses her rant. “Yeah? What?”

Allie smiles nervously, like she thinks that she’s supposed to smile at this juncture but isn’t at all comfortable doing so. “Can you, uh, ask your vampires for a favor? Like you did for me last week?”
Franky makes a face, mouth sort of open, eyes glancing towards Erica and Bridget, not sure what quite to do with ‘your vampires.’

Bridget shrugs. “I don’t know what else to call us at this point.”

Allie looks… she looks a bit like a small, sad, puppy. “Please Franky? I told her you’re all good people.”

Franky looks to Erica and Erica nods slightly.

“What’s up?” Franky asks Allie.

Allie gestures back towards the redhead on the couch behind her. “Bea’s trying to get her daughter back,” Allie says, voice low. “A leech took her. Bea tracked him down but the police won’t get involved with it and Kaz said she can’t help.”

“Took?” Erica asks, eyebrows coming together.

“Uh, it’s complicated,” Allie says. “Bea can explain. She’s not crazy, I promise. Her daughter was… she came here a while ago, but she...” Allie waves a hand towards her own neck, which is littered with scars, most old, a few more recent. “And then she didn’t come back.”

In Bridget’s opinion, this daughter is more probably dead than simply kidnapped, but she refrains from saying so.

“I see,” Erica says. She steps towards Allie and the room beyond. “May I?”

Allie steps out of the way.

Erica moves into the room. She approaches Bea slowly. “I am Erica Davidson, Governor of the coven of New York City,” she says. “Our coven has laws against human trafficking. I’d like to help you.”

Given how liberal the New York vampires are, it doesn’t surprise Bridget in the least that they are one of the few covens to have taken the step to symbolically ban the more unsavory aspects of the blood trade. And that Erica, idealist that she is, would actually pursue enforcement, even when she has far more consequential issues to deal with, also isn’t surprising. It’s… actually rather endearing.

Still seated on the couch, Bea regards Erica. Watching a human woman size up a vampire in such utter coolness is unsettling. “Yeah?” Bea finally says.

“Your friend indicated that you know where your daughter is but can’t get to her,” Erica says. “If she’s being held against her will, the coven will kill whoever took her and attempt to retrieve her. That is our law.”

The cold anger in Bea flares up into a living heat. She rises to her feet. Under the blue-white fluorescent lights, she looks older than she probably is. “Attempt?”

“That’s the best we can do,” Erica says. She likely knows as well as Bridget does that the daughter is probably already dead, but, in the same was as Bridget, she doesn’t say so. “I don’t think you’ll find anyone who can promise you better. Where are they?”

Bea clenches her jaw and the small muscles in her face twitch. Her lips are chapped and there are dark circles under her eyes. She has no negotiating position whatsoever and she’s desperate. Desperate people are unpredictable. “Take me with you and I’ll show you where he is. I’ve been
tracking him for weeks.” She doesn’t trust Erica with her daughter—for good reason—and asking for involvement is the best half-way measure she can find.

Erica shakes her head once, firmly. “Out of the question,” she says. “If we have to take care of you, you’ll slow us down.”

“Then don’t take care of me,” Bea snaps. She holds her empty hands out in front of her, a cross between a demand and a plea. “I’m her mother, I have to be there.”

“How do you even know you’ve found him?” Erica asks. It’s a negotiation tactic, Bridget thinks. Erica wants Bea to doubt herself so that she’ll weaken her ask. “You said you’ve been tracking him for weeks, so what makes you think you’ve found him now?”

Gesturing strongly, Bea replies, “I put cameras on every place I’ve seen him,” she says. “He showed up at this house with a bad leg a couple days ago and hasn’t left yet. It’s where he’s based. I’m sure. And that’s where my daughter will be.”

“And why do you think your daughter will be there?” Erica presses.

Bea hesitates. She licks her lips, quickly. Then, “Debbie was…”

It’s clear to Bridget where this is going. The daughter was involved with this particular vampire. He probably made a mistake and then hid the body. It’s a not uncommon occurrence. It’s a piece of why people like Kaz exist. Bridget steps forward now. “Bea,” she starts, “We—”

“What the fuck are you still doing here?”

Speaking of Kaz—

Bridget turns but even as she turns she already knows what she’ll see. Kaz has caught them lingering. It takes her only a half-second to snatch one of the crosses off the wall in the hallway, and then she’s advancing on the small common room.

As fast as Kaz grabbed her cross, Franky and Allie get in her way, both of them advising Kaz to, in Franky’s words, “Fuck right off,” and in Allie’s words, “Please stop.” Between the two of them talking over one another, it’s hard to tell what they’re saying, exactly. The end result, however, is that Erica and Bridget are trapped in a room with Franky and Allie in the doorway and Kaz outside brandishing a cross.

It’s a less than ideal situation.

“I told you to get the fuck out,” Kaz snaps. She’s not shouting, per se, but the force of her words feels like shouting.

Composure finally beginning to crack, Erica lifts her lips enough to show fang. “You are—”

“You wouldn’t help me with Brayden,” Bea cuts in. “They will.”

Erica and Bridget turn together back to Bea. “Brayden?” Bridget asks. “That’s the name of the person who took your daughter?”

Bea’s brow furrows slightly. She knows, certainly, that something about what she’s said has caught Bridget and Erica’s attention. She doesn’t know enough, however, to do much with that. “Yeah,” she says. “Brayden Holt.”
The human is either mentally unstable—not unthinkable, given her demeanor and the setting in which they’ve met—or she’s done what Vera and the enforcement branch of the coven couldn’t. Or, quite possibly, both.

Erica brushes her fingertips against Bridget’s elbow, asking for both approval and support in whatever she’s about to do next. Bridget responds with a very small nod. If she’s learned anything in her millennium fixing covens on behalf of the Council, it’s that when fortune smiles, one should smile back. Dumb luck is real and it’s often the difference between success and a second death.

Back in the hallway, Franky, Allie, and Kaz are arguing. Kaz, it would seem, has the sense not to charge two humans and two vampires by herself.

“If you come with us now, you can stay in the car,” Erica says. “We won’t give you a gun. You’d probably accidentally shoot yourself. I’ll make the call for a strike as soon as we leave here.”

For the first time, Bridget gets something other than rage and despair from Bea. She gets a flash of hope.

“Done,” Bea says.

Out in the hall, Kaz throws up her hands dramatically. “Bea, you can’t be serious. They’re leeches. You can’t trust them.”


“I remember Debbie,” Kaz says. She takes a step back. “And even if I didn’t, Bea has been reminding me all evening.”

Sarcasm dripping from her tone, Erica asks, “May we go? We need to move swiftly if we’re going to save this girl.”

Kaz gestures in the direction of the exit and backs up further, clearing the way for them to leave. “Don’t let me stop you,” she says, in much the same tone as Erica.

Erica leaves the room first, then Bea, and then Bridget bringing up the rear. Franky, still keeping an eye on Kaz, waits until they’ve gone several yards before moving to catch up.

Hands in her pockets, Allie stays behind with Kaz. There’s a nervous smile on her face and an equally nervous flutter in her heart. “Bea, I hope you find her,” she calls.

Bea looks back to Allie. She doesn’t really smile, but she’s not cold either. “Thanks, Allie,” she says.

Franky catches it, and she tries to make a face at Allie. If Allie notices though, she doesn’t react. She’s too busy watching Bea.

Slowing slightly so that she falls into step with Franky, Bridget smiles softly at her. “I saw how you wanted to protect us from Kaz,” she says, keeping her voice quiet. Erica will hear, but any random eavesdroppers nearby won’t.

Franky shrugs. She’s embarrassed. “Yeah?”

“Thank you,” Bridget says. “This building doesn’t look particularly fireproof.”

Bridget’s response takes Franky off-guard. “What’s that?”
“I meant—if she’d gotten to Erica or me, we’d have taken the entire shelter along with us,” Bridget says. “As a side effect of being on fire.”

Understanding, Franky grins and chuckles. She nudges Bridget’s side with her elbow. “Good thing you’ve got your big strong human here to look out for you,” she says.

Franky, grinning, is beautiful.

Bridget would say that she’s beautiful even when she isn’t grinning, but the grinning adds a certain something to her.

At the front of their group, Erica opens the door out of the shelter. Single-file, they all march through. Over on the street, Linda and their car are waiting. When she gets a look at how they’ve acquired another human, the sense Bridget gets from her is a mix of annoyed and resigned—without so much as a hint of surprise.

As they head towards the car, serious, Erica asks, “Where is Brayden?” She already has her cellphone out.

Bea hesitates. It’s not the hesitation of someone who can’t deliver, rather, from the wary way she appraises Erica, she’s worried she’ll be left behind.

Something that Alan Doyle said springs to the forefront of Bridget’s mind.

“You’re a mother,” Bridget says. “Our kind have children too. I know how you feel. We want to find your daughter.”

Everything that Bridget says is true, though the way she’s strung her sentences together suggests certain conclusions that aren’t. It’s the base truth though, and her belief in that truth, that gives her a persuasive edge.

Erica and Franky both throw off sparks of surprise. They, perhaps, didn’t catch Bridget’s careful crafting. Erica has the control and good sense not to give any sign of her confusion. Franky, however, snaps her head around to squint at Bridget. In reply, Bridget catches Franky’s eye and shrugs. If this is something Franky cares about, Bridget can explain—at a later date.

Bridget’s words get the desired reaction from Bea. She shifts her intensity from Erica to Bridget now. It’s actually an unsettling experience. For obvious reasons, Bridget’s job rarely puts her in the path of desperate mothers, and they exist in a class of their own when it comes to unpredictability and violence. “Do you?” Bea asks.

Bridget forces herself to meet Bea’s eyes. “Yes,” she says.

There’s a long moment in which Bridget isn’t sure if she’s passed whatever Bea’s test was. She’s such a mess of everything that, while Bridget can certainly say that she knows what Bea feels, that knowledge is a long way from understanding, much less interpreting. Finally, Bea looks back to Erica and gives an address.

The address doesn’t mean anything to Bridget, but Erica seems to make something more of it. She’s annoyed as she swipes her finger across the screen of her phone and then raises the device to her ear.

The other side picks up on the third ring.

“Governor?” Vera greets.
“Assemble a strike force, now,” Erica says, tone clipped. “I have a tip on Brayden’s location. Bring gear and wait for me. Build a perimeter. No one gets out. There’s at least one civilian we need to safely extract at the site.”

“How did you come by this tip?” Vera asks.

“That’s not important,” Erica replies.

There’s a brief pause where all Bridget hears from the conversation is static on the line. Then, “Yes, Governor,” Vera says. “What’s the location?”

Erica repeats the address that Bea gave her.

Again, there’s a pause. Finally, Vera says, simply, “Of course.”

Erica lets out a small snort. “That’s what I thought as well,” she says. “He didn’t go far.”

“We’ll meet you there, Governor,” Vera says.

Erica pulls the phone away from her ear and taps to end the call. Their group has reached the car now and Linda is opening the back doors for them. Erica and Bridget take the forward two seats and Franky and Bea take the bench seat in the back. Leaning into the side of the car, as if she’s leaning away from everyone else in it, Bea hugs herself. Slouched on the other end of the seat, Franky watches her with no small amount of suspicion.

Bridget’s eyes narrow.


Franky pulls a face. “Really, Gidge?”

Bridget finishes securing her own seatbelt. “Yes,” she says.

Franky rolls her eyes, hard, then makes a great show of grabbing her seatbelt, drawing it across her body, and clicking it into place. In the process, she never once stops slouching. “Happy?”

Bridget smiles. “Yes.”

“Seatbelts are for squares,” Franky fires back, smirking. The tip of her tongue pokes out from between her teeth.

Now Erica twists around in her seat. She opens her mouth, no doubt to join Bridget in the defense of seatbelts, but Franky cuts her off first.

“Yeah, yeah,” Franky says. “I’m too pretty to die anyway.”

“You know there are some of our kind who like to prey on pretty women like you,” Bridget says.

Franky uses both hands to point to Erica and Bridget at the same time. “Two of ‘em are sitting right there,” she says.

Erica makes a sort of grumpy noise and turns back around in her seat to face in the proper direction. Bridget shrugs. “Guilty as charged,” she says. Quickly, she glances over to Bea.

Bea is still on the edge of fight-or-flight, still trapped between hope and despair, but, Bridget thinks, in this moment, she seems less frightened of the other occupants of the car than she was a few
minutes prior. That, at least, is something.

Bridget turns towards Erica now. “How far are we going?” she asks.

“We’re going back to Gramercy,” Erica says. “The one place the coven wasn’t looking for them was down the street from where we found them before.”

This declaration gives Bridget pause. When she speaks again, she does so slowly. “That shouldn’t have been missed.”

“When this is over, I’m going to have words with Vera and Will,” Erica replies. “You’re right.”

It’s at this moment that Bea finally joins the conversation. “You’ve been looking for him too?”

Erica answers. “He’s known to have violated coven laws,” she says. “So yes, we’ve been looking for him. Rest assured, when we find him, he will pay for what he’s done.”

Bea barely moves from her protected position in the corner of the car. “I don’t need revenge,” she says. “I need my daughter back.”

*I don’t need revenge.*

It’s an odd statement, Bridget thinks, from a woman who exists in fury. But Bea is human, and she’s a mother. Her priorities are different from the ones that Bridget has come to expect from so many centuries of dealing mostly with her own kind. She is surely not such a saint that she would turn away should she have the opportunity for vengeance, but she wants her daughter more than she wants mere justice.

“Can you tell us about your daughter?” Bridget asks.

Bea flinches.

Trust between them, it would seem is out of the question.

“What does she look like?” Bridget rephrases. “We have to recognize her.”


“If we find her, we’ll do our best to take care of her,” Bridget says.

“You’re a single mum?” Franky asks.

“So what?” Bea snaps back.

Franky makes an exaggerated shrug and frowns as if she doesn’t care. That she’s going to such pains to mime nonchalance is a dead giveaway that she cares very much. “Nothin’,” she says. “Just askin’.”

Bridget hazards that she knows where Franky’s interest lies, but she’s not going to press Bea on Franky’s behalf. For the time being, nothing good would come of it.

The conversation lapses into silence.

When Linda brings their car to a stop, it’s to park in the middle of a narrow street at the end of a column of other black SUVs. Coven vehicles, no doubt.
“Any chance they don’t know we’re coming?” Bridget asks.

Clearly the question is rhetorical.

What must the neighbors be thinking?

“None whatsoever,” Erica replies. She reaches across herself to unfasten her seatbelt. “We’re doing this the old fashioned way. As long as they think we’re only here to break the door down, they won’t think to involve any civilians they’re holding.”

Seeing to her own seatbelt, Bridget shakes her head. “You have a reputation for being too nice.”

Erica tenses and turns her head to look at Bridget. Offended, “What’s that supposed to mean? Says who?”

Bridget avoids Erica’s eyes. She shouldn’t have said anything. So say the Holts, as she understands it from her conversation with Spitz, though nice wasn’t quite the way he put it. Will said much the same thing as well. But what Erica is asking now isn’t actually ‘says who?’ so much as ‘says you?’ Bridget glances over to Franky and Bea, both of whom are watching very intently. “Let’s continue this outside the car,” Bridget says.

Erica presses her lips together in a tight frown before nodding.

Franky looks over to Bea and shrugs. “They do this,” she says, tone rich with a combination of annoyance and resignation that borders on sarcasm.

“Stay here,” Erica says to the two humans. Then, she and Bridget climb out of the vehicle and shut the door behind them. It takes Erica barely a second before she rounds on Bridget with an angry whisper. “Do you think you can run this operation better than I can?” Erica asks. Her emotions have turned to turmoil.

“That’s not what I meant,” Bridget counters. “I only meant—”

“Governor,” Vera calls out. She’s wearing a riot helmet as well as military body armor, hard ballistic plates fitted inside a black specialty carrier with side extensions. The armor hides almost all identifying features, but her brusqueness is unmistakable. She’s coming down the sidewalk towards them. “Your information was good. They’re here. We’re ready.”

Erica, finding her composure once more, turns to her Second. “You brought extra gear?” she asks.

Vera looks backwards slightly. Behind her is Jake, carrying an assault rifle and another set of body armor, already assembled. Will is approaching as well. Unlike Vera, they’re not wearing helmets and masks.

Men. Too heroic for head protection.

“Did you not bring two sets?” Erica asks.

There’s a pulse of annoyance from Vera, but her face barely twitches. She turns more fully towards Jake. “Did you not?” she asks, voice biting.

No less obsequious than Bridget remembers, Jake grimaces. “You can have mine,” he says. “It was my fault.”

Standing with the group now, Will shakes his head. He has his hands on his hips. He’s annoyed
about the mistake, but not hostile. It’s the sort of attitude that a good friend might have. Maybe Will is how Jake knew Bridget’s position in relation to the coven? “Won’t fit, mate,” Will says. “That’s not how it works.”


Bridget’s brow furrows. “What about—”

“I’m delegating this operation to you,” Erica says. “Don’t disappoint me.”

Bridget feels surprise—from everyone. She pushes their feelings, and her own, back. “Yes, Governor,” she says. “By your command.”

Jake steps forward and offers up the gun and armor. Bridget has to remove her shoulder holster that carries her handgun in order to get the armor on. It restricts movement more than she’d like, but it’s worth not getting shot. As Jake hands over the assault rifle, Erica glances at the handgun Bridget has now tucked into the built-in holster of the armor.

“How do you know how to use a rifle?” Erica asks.

“I’ve used rifles like this before,” Bridget answers. Pointing the gun down safely, she lets its weight settle in her grip. “But not often and not this model. I don’t recognize this one.”

“It’s German,” Erica says. Then, she steps forward and reaches out. As she reaches out, her fingers brush against Bridget’s hand. A shiver runs down Bridget’s spine.

It’s a good thing none of the others nearby are of her bloodline.

“Here’s the safety,” Erica says. “This one has a thirty round magazine.” Without any pause or hesitation, Erica opens a velcro pocket on the chest of Bridget’s armor. “You have a second magazine here.” She closes the velcro again, tapping it down.

Bridget raises an eyebrow at Erica. “Good to know,” she says.

Erica shrugs. “Legal handles all our arms dealing. Importing weapons gets tricky. I liked to… do quality control.”

*Hidden depths*, Bridget thinks, is a phrase that describes Erica well.

Vera clears her throat. “If you’re done playing with guns, Inquisitor,” she says, “We’re ready to move.”

Chapter End Notes

yo. sup. as always, hope you liked this chapter :D

quick note on updates—last month i said ‘next chapter probably late september’ and here we are in late september with a chapter. go me. i’ve finished the draft through ch 13 and suspect this fic will probably be between 17 and 19 chapters total, so things are coming along. because irl is unpredictable right now, my goal is to stick to one chapter per month (at the end of the month) until i finish the full draft, and then maybe switch to a more aggressive schedule, possibly every other week. it’d be rad if i could get this whole
fic posted by the end of the year, but we shall see.

so yeah. thank you to... i guess she's going by thefrankydoyles now... for doing a beta read on this chapter!
Two heavily armored coven enforcers use a black police ram to break down the front door. They aim for the lock and they smash through on the first hit, sending wood splinters everywhere. Doors that weren’t built for vampires don’t fare well against them.

Crouched on the asphalt of the street a nearly safe distance back from the door, partly covered by one of the coven SUVs, Bridget watches her men drop the ram and immediately pull away to flank the now open entryway. They take cover against the masonry walls of the brownstone, hiding from the gunfire that doesn’t come.

There’s no response at all from within the residence.

Bridget flexes her fingers against the grip of her rifle. All along the street with her, other coven enforcers are set behind cover with their guns trained on the door and the windows of the building they’re assaulting. The open and silent door is a trap, but there’s no other way in. It’s the way of these things that the first through the breach get carried back out again.

But—not necessarily.

Bridget closes her eyes and feels.

It’s almost impossible to pick out the occupants of the house from the throng of coven enforcers outside and the great crowd of humans in adjacent buildings—humans who have caught sight of the circus outside their homes and are all a great tangle of confusion and terror. In that respect, they’re not much different from the vampires. Everyone is scared and anxious. Bridget clenches her jaw and focuses.

There are at least five people in the basement of the house. There are another three on the main floor. Two or three more are upstairs. One of them might be Bea’s daughter, but which one that might be eludes Bridget. There’s just too much to sort through, and it all runs together.

Bridget stands from her place behind the black SUV. “On me,” she calls. “They’re upstairs, downstairs, and straight ahead.” As she advances on the house, she hears Vera, Will, Jake, and a whole squad of other coven enforcers fall in behind her. With every step, she forces herself to narrow her focus to just the people in the house. The three on the main floor are in a corner of the structure, probably fortified behind cover and with a good vantage on a main thoroughfare.

The chances that either of them are the human, much less a civilian, are very, very low.

The safety on Bridget’s rifle is off.

Pausing at the threshold of the residence, she takes a deep, steadying breath, filling her nose with the scent of wood varnish and old cigarette smoke that must have seeped into the walls of the building over the years. The interior is dark, but that doesn’t matter to her eyes. Vampires see very well in the dark. What she sees is the small foyer of an ordinary home. A bit dated, but otherwise nondescript except that its furnishings probably cost a pretty penny when they were new.

Bridget sets the stock of her gun against her shoulder and crosses into the house.
She can only hope that her body armor and helmet are as effective as Erica seems to think they are. Even then, a few bullets won’t kill her. But more than a few bullets might. She’s recovered well from healing Erica, but she’s not at her peak. If she’s damn lucky, Brayden and his guards aren’t strong enough that her own weakness will matter.

Firearms are great equalizers.

Anyone can kill with a gun.

The old hardwood floor creaks under Bridget’s weight as she walks forward. It creaks under the weight of the others following her too, turning their advance into a whole orchestra of telling their targets that they’re coming. Considering they smashed the front door in, this isn’t exactly new information though.

The foyer opens out into an open living room that gives way to a dining area towards the back room and it’s there, sheltered in the far corner, Bridget thinks, that the first group of guards are positioned. As soon as she leaves the relative shelter of the wall that splits the foyer from the rest of the main floor, they’ll have a clean shot at her. The only advantage she has is that they won’t know when she’ll appear and they won’t know that she knows where they are.

Bridget pauses and glances back to the men and women following her. Copying her, they’ve stopped too. Using crude hand gestures, she does her best to signal the corner where she knows the guards are waiting.

It’s not perfect, but it’s good enough.

Vera nods to her and readies her gun, as do the two other enforcers nearest to the front with Bridget.

Turning back to the room ahead, Bridget sets her finger on the trigger of her rifle. She crouches slightly, minimizing her target while still staying able to shoot well.

Then—

Bridget spins out from cover, firing. At her back, Vera and the others are firing too. They fill the far corner of the room with bullets and the scent of fresh blood fills the air, metallic in flavor.

In Bridget’s sense of the currents of the world, three lives wink out.

One moment they’re there, full of agony and terror, and then they’re not there anymore.

She takes her finger off the trigger of her gun. Behind her, the shooting stops. Slowly, Bridget lowers her weapon and stands. “Good work,” she says.

“Good work to you as well,” Vera replies, some modicum of approbation coloring her clipped tone.

Bridget closes her eyes again and focuses. There are six downstairs and only two upstairs. An… odd distribution. Grimacing at the effort, Bridget tries to pick apart each one of the beings that she feels. If she can just find the one human…

There.

The one that, to Bridget’s mind, tastes of spring. The one without the weight of years. Upstairs. Frightened out of her mind, and confused in a way that the others aren’t.

“Vera,” Bridget starts. “Do you have grenades?”
“Yes,” Vera replies, tone a bit short, as if she’s offended that Bridget would seriously think that they didn’t. “We have three shoulder-fired rocket launchers in the cars outside as well.”

This gets a raised eyebrow from Bridget. “But only one spare set of body armor?”

“Priorities,” Vera replies.

Was that… a joke? She said it in a deadpan, but it feels like it ought to have been a joke. There’s not really time to dwell on it though.

“There’s a group downstairs,” Bridget says. “Deal with them. The human is upstairs along with one other vampire. I’ll take care of that.”

Vera nods. “Yes, Inquisitor.” With barely a pause, she immediately begins issuing orders to the other coven members with them. She’s a very effective leader, when she has the chance.

Pushing the six in the basement out of her awareness, Bridget turns towards the stairs up to the second level. Just like the floor of the foyer, they creak loudly, heralding her advance. The two upstairs, however, aren’t moving in reaction to her though. Trying to pin down their locations in physical space, Bridget thinks that they’re nearly on top of one another.

Some coward had the bright idea to use the human as a shield, no doubt.

It could be worse, Bridget supposes.

Theoretically.

Bridget follows her sense of the two of them to a closed door. The key is not to spook anyone. She has to come in peace, and she has to make the vampire in the room believe it even before she opens the door. Standing far enough back that she doesn’t think she can be shot through it except by sheer dumb luck, Bridget calls out, “I want to talk. I know you’re there.”

In both of them, terror spikes up to complete, utter, mind-blanking terror.

No one says anything in response though.

So they’re trying to hide still. To bluff her away even though she’s already told them she knows they’re there.

Under Bridget’s feet, the entire house shakes a little. Dust floats down from the ceiling. Vera’s grenades, no doubt. Or maybe she went back to the car for her rocket launchers.

Against all possibility, the raw fear on the other side of the door manages to get worse. It has a nearly physical stench to it and Bridget is glad that she doesn’t need to breathe.

Bridget wets her lips. This is going to be tricky. “The girl’s mother is outside,” she says. “She asked for the coven’s help. We’re willing to negotiate. Can I come in?”

When there’s still no response, Bridget sets a hand on the antique brass doorknob. She has less control in the hallway than she’ll have if she can get herself peacefully to a place she can actually see who she’s talking to. “I’m coming in.” As she starts to turn the knob—

“Wait!”

It’s a male voice.
From inside the room, there’s a scraping noise against the floor, a soft thudding, and some scuffling. Only when it quiets does the voice call out again, “Hands up when you come in.”

Bridget moves very slowly as she turns the latch of the door. When she’s done, she raises her hands and uses her elbow to push the door the rest of the way open. “My hands are up,” she says.

Inside the room—

Bridget takes in the situation quickly. Very cluttered room. Furniture everywhere. Two people, a girl and a young man. Debbie and Brayden. Brayden has Debbie clutched in front of him and he’s holding a handgun to her head. Over in the corner is an open wardrobe. They’d literally been hiding in it, apparently hoping to be missed as the coven raided the rest of the house and fought with the guards in the basement.

Brayden is a coward and an amateur.

Debbie looks just like her mother said she would. Curly brown hair in a ponytail, green eyes, and clearly in over her head. The poor thing is just as terrified as the vampire holding her but, unlike him, she’s human and she’s fragile. Her neck seems to be a mass of poorly healing bites, swollen and no doubt on their way to scarring badly.

Not everyone is as delicate as Erica.

If the girl survives—she will survive—she’ll need an enormous amount of therapy. In the meanwhile, she’s breathing quickly, on the edge of hyperventilation, but otherwise silent. Bridget wouldn’t be at all surprised if she’s been instructed to stay quiet for fear of violence.

The vampire holding her, Brayden—

“Don’t move,” Brayden growls.

Bridget doesn’t move, not even to twitch her arms to emphasize that, for the moment, she’s not holding a weapon. “I just want to talk,” Bridget says. She remains in the doorway, not fully entering the room.

When they met before at the Cloisters, Bridget didn’t take the time to thoroughly consider Brayden. He was turned young, Bridget thinks—or he just has one of those faces that looks eternally soft and boyish to his detriment. He’s even dressed like a teenager, wearing a grey band t-shirt and jeans. According to the Council, however, he’s nearly reached his fourth century. Is he stronger than he seems? Or has he survived so long because of some uncharacteristic sentiment on Jacs’ and Vinnie’s parts? When the Holts were a strong clan in the Old World, they were ruthless in their culling of their weak, making them a rare lineage that easily slipped towards extinction when it attracted the ire of the Council. But if Brayden were some last child of that time, could that have earned him protection?

Bridget has been an agent of the Council for a very long time. On an intellectual level she knows better than to write off her enemy, but nothing about Brayden has ever spoken to her of strength. Her mental shields are in place, but she doesn’t even need them at the moment. He’s not doing her the bare courtesy of even testing them.

Brayden sneers. “Why? You’ll just get in my head. That’s what your kind do.” His tone is something between arrogance and insecurity. Whatever faith he has, it’s not in himself.

Bridget arches an eyebrow. She keeps her tone pleasant. Non-judgmental. Like they’re both in on the joke. The game she needs to play and win is delicate. She can’t afford to patronize him, nor can she threaten. “Getting into heads is what your line does. I don’t quite work like that.”
Finally, Brayden reaches out to push into Bridget’s mind. As soon as he brushes against the wall of empty calm she’s carved for herself, he withdraws fast, as if it burned him. It didn’t burn him. That’s not how these things go. He’s just scared.

Against the trigger of his gun, his finger twitches but doesn’t close. The human girl, Debbie, flinches. She doesn’t protest though, just whimpers. She’s still scared silent.

“What do you want?” Brayden asks.

“For the moment,” Bridget starts, “I’d like you to lower your gun. It makes me nervous.”

“No,” Brayden bites back. Again, his finger moves. His entire hand is shaking. He doesn’t have control, of the situation or of himself.

“Okay,” Bridget says. “So what do you want then? Talk to me.”


Beneath all the rotten terror, there’s a spark of something brighter.

*Hope.*

It’s one of the most powerful emotions and it’s also one of the easiest to bend to Bridget’s intentions, even more so than care and fear.

It’s false hope, in this case, however.

The Council’s judgement has already been passed.

Bridget can’t save Brayden.

But she *will* save the girl he’s pointing a gun at.

Bridget allows a pause in the conversation. If she promises more than she can deliver, Brayden will likely perceive the deception. Similarly, if she answers too fast, he will know she speaks without sincerity. Thus, slowly, she at last says, “Erica is the arbiter of the coven’s justice. I think she believes in mercy and second chances. You’re a child. I will vouch for you.”

Erica may be the arbiter of the coven’s justice, but Bridget is an agent of the Council and the Council has no taste for clemency.

Lest Brayden feel Bridget’s capitulation has come too easily, she adds, “Tell us whatever you know about your sire’s whereabouts. And give us the girl. Alive and… without further injury.”

Bridget’s words stir up…

It’s… it’s like...

Is he protective? Of the human?

Yes.

Yes he is—Bridget knows that feeling well of late, else she may not have recognized it in such a tenuous, withered form.
“How can I trust you?” Brayden asks.

“You have very little to lose,” Bridget replies. “Except the girl. I think you don’t want—”

“You think she means something to me?” Brayden snarls, cutting Bridget off. “With your emotion reading?”

“With my emotion reading, I know she does,” Bridget says, keeping her voice as even as she can.

Brayden lifts his lips enough to show his fangs. “She’s not important to me.”

That he says it, the way he says it—she’s important to him, but not so important that he wouldn’t hurt her to prove she’s not. Bridget shouldn’t have… thought so highly of him. If she’d just looked again at Debbie’s mess of a throat she’d have remembered better.

Brayden is scared and he’s soft. It’s his self-preservation that Bridget has to appeal to, not some kindness he doesn’t have. “What are you scared of, Brayden?” Bridget asks. “Is it the coven? Your sire? Something else? Help me understand.”

Brayden’s fear is thick in the air even as he says, “I’m not scared.”

Bridget tilts her head to the side. That’s a lie so obvious she doesn’t have to dignify it with a reply.

As the silence lengthens, Brayden presses his lips together in a stubborn line.

He’s digging in. Not good. Bridget’s mistake has cost her. “What can I do to help you?” Bridget asks. “I’m offering you—”

“Bridget?” Erica calls out from down the stairs.

Brayden startles but, against all odds, he doesn’t accidentally shoot. Instead, he shoves Debbie aside, so hard that she hits the floor, so that he can hold his gun with both hands, using one to aim at Bridget’s head and the other to steady his shaking grip. “Don’t move,” he snarls.

Bridget really wasn’t planning on moving.

She knows that riot masks aren’t bulletproof, but she still wishes that Jake had had one for her outside the building before this all started. Even without armor, she can survive a shot to her torso. If she were at her usual strength, she would be able to survive several shots to her torso. It’s painful and messy but it has happened before and she doesn’t doubt it will happen again. Her head, however, is a different matter entirely.

“Don’t come any closer, Governor!” Bridget calls. “Stay there.”

In her mind, she narrows all her focus to just Brayden. Even the slightest shift in his mood could be the difference between…

“What’s going on?” Erica shouts. Her voice is at about the same distance as it was before. Good. At least there’s that.

A second voice, Bea, “Is Debbie there? Debbie!”

Who let the human in?

… Erica…
“Brayden,” Bridget starts. “That’s the Governor. She can grant you safe passage out of the city—if you put the gun down.”

Brayden’s hands are trembling and with every involuntary twitch, Bridget feels whole decades being shaved off of her unlife.

Behind him though, there’s movement. Debbie is getting up. And she’s reaching for a desk lamp.

“I want protection,” Brayden says. Like his hands, his voice is shaking. “From mom. And from—”

Bridget pulls her head down and turns—

Debbie slams the desk lamp into the back of Brayden’s skull and a single gunshot sounds, a lone burst, deafeningly loud in the old house.

The bullet hits Bridget in the side and sends her staggering out into the hallway.

She didn’t want for a helmet after all, and she’s very glad for the body armor.

Recovering quickly, Bridget regains her feet. She doesn’t recover fast enough though. Someone shoves past her into the room. Bridget gets the impression of red—it’s Bea.

In the room, Brayden is on his knees, one hand holding the back of his head, sticky with crimson. His gun—his gun, he dropped it. It’s on the floor.

And then it’s in Bea’s hand and she’s pointing it at him. She’s got both hands on the gun and she’s shaking like a leaf.

Shit.

Humans—civilians—shouldn’t have guns. The precipice of taking a life is a perilous place that can destroy all clear thought.

Better that Bea have it than Brayden though, and all of this is an improvement to five seconds ago, but… “The coven wants him alive,” Bridget says. Bea is as much of a volatile mess as Brayden is, just guided by rage instead of terror.

“Mum.”

Bea looks away from Brayden to her daughter, who has backed into a corner, holding her now bloody desk lamp like a shield between herself and the world, to all appearances horrified at what she’s just done. “Debbie,” Bea breathes.

On the floor, Brayden has his hands up, as if by covering his face he can hide from everyone and everything. “Please… don’t shoot...”

Passing by Bridget, slowing only for a moment to brush her fingertips against Bridget’s shoulder, Erica enters the room. She walks to Bea with a steady calm. In her black suit, she naturally commands the room. Her voice is strong. “Bea, give me the gun. We’ll handle things from here.”

Bea doesn’t move. She’s still shaking. It’s entirely possible that she actually can’t move, paralyzed by her own fear of what she might do.

By now mostly recovered from being shot, Bridget squeezes into the room as well. Her side aches like she’s been kicked by a horse. Or maybe something bigger. An elephant, perhaps. She leans against a wood-paneled wall. “Bea,” she says. “Let us take it from here. You have your daughter.
You don’t want the rest of this on your conscience.”

Bea swallows. Moving agonizingly slow, she lifts her finger from the trigger of the gun. She offers it to Erica, who takes it carefully and then immediately locks the safety.

Brayden’s sniffling quiets. Somewhat.

“Go downstairs,” Erica says, voice still even. “Take your daughter out of the house.”

“Debbie,” Bea says. “Oh my god, Debbie…” Her voice is a hoarse whisper, thick with relief and guilt and fear and joy. She opens her arms a bit. Debbie drops the lamp and throws herself at her mother, nearly knocking Bea off her feet. If the girl says anything, it’s lost in the muffled sound of her sobbing into her mother’s shoulder.

Bea spares Erica another glance, then starts moving herself and her daughter from the room. She doesn’t look back at Brayden.

Neither Erica nor Bridget say anything until the humans’ footsteps have receded into nothing, even to their preternatural senses. Then, Erica, “Are they gone?”

Bridget reaches out, finally allowing herself to broaden her focus again. Bea and Debbie aren’t hard to pick out from the vampires downstairs as they make their way out of the house. One thing Bridget doesn’t expect—

“You let Franky in too?” Bridget asks, starting to scowl. It’s a bit rhetorical, as it’s clear what the answer is. Rather, the actual question is why, or maybe what were you thinking?

“I couldn’t exactly leave them in the car,” Erica says, defensive. “They were both supposed to stay downstairs. When we heard the gunshot—Vera grabbed Franky before she could run up with Bea.”

“Vera just let her go,” Bridget says, finishing her sentence only a moment before the creaking of the stairs announces another arrival.

“Franky, can you stay there for a moment?” Erica calls out.

Bridget shifts, moving to block the way into the room, just in case Franky decides to be stubborn, as is her usual habit. Her head pokes up from the stairwell. She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, sure,” Franky says. Crossing her arms, she leans against the wall. “Hey Gidge,” she says. “Nice SWAT squad you’ve got.”

Bridget lifts the corners of her mouth in a small smile but also shakes her head. “Just a moment, Franky.”

In the room, Erica has moved to stand over Brayden. “Where is your sire?” she asks.

“I want… I want safe passage,” Brayden chokes. His eyes are fixed on the wooden floor before him. He’s too scared to look up to Erica.

“Tell me where your sire is,” Erica repeats.

“I don’t know!” Brayden shouts. He finally risks a glance up at Erica. What he sees makes him look back down to the floor immediately, shaking again. “I don’t know where she is! But—but I know other things!”

“So talk,” Erica says. Everything about her demeanour is cold, controlled. The same can’t be said for
the anxious fear leaking out of her. She’s holding the gun at her side in a death grip. A casual observer might mistake the gesture for anger. Bridget sees that it is something else entirely.

Executions are hard. Far harder than killing on the battlefield or even at close-quarters in self-defense. Even guided by the law, executions tend to reek of injustice.

“We—we’ve been getting help,” Brayden stammers. “From… she calls herself Ferguson. I… I don’t know anything else. Vinnie and mom talked to her. Not me… I don’t… I don’t know… She’d know where mom is…”

“I’m going to ask you once more,” Erica replies. “Where is Jacs?”

“I don’t know!” Brayden screams. “I just want to go… please let me go…”

Erica steps back two steps.

Brayden looks up, hope flaring.

Erica flicks the safety off on Brayden’s gun.


Bridget stays still. Perfectly still.

If Erica won’t—

If Erica can’t, then Bridget must.

“This coven,” Erica begins. She pauses and corrects herself. “My coven keeps laws against what you have done,” she says. Her face is blank as she raises the gun, using both hands, and aims. She is trying very hard not to be present. “We do not take humans against their will.”

“I didn’t,” Brayden screams. “She wanted—she came to—”

Bridget’s heart twists. There’s more than a seed of truth in what Brayden says. She starts to open her mouth, then closes it. She thinks of the ugly healing of Debbie’s neck. And she thinks, too, of how only minutes ago it was Brayden with the gun, using Debbie as a hostage and a shield. She may have gone to him, but when it was time for her to go, he didn’t allow her to leave.

Erica’s heart twists too. Her hand trembles for a fraction of a moment.

Brayden, kneeling and drawn in on himself so that his forehead touches the ground, tries one last time—“Please.”

Erica pulls the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot rings loud and blood sprays.

Still in the stairwell, Franky recoils, horrified.

In the room, Brayden isn’t dead. He’s on the floor, he’s in shock, he’s twitching, but he’s not gone yet. A single small caliber bullet, even to the head, can’t so easily end a vampire with so many centuries as he has.

Expression utterly empty, Erica shoots him two more times.
Then, she locks the gun’s safety again before setting it on the antique wood desk that Debbie got her lamp from. Her front is splattered with blood and pieces of thicker stuff. Even standing halfway in the hall, Bridget has been sprayed with some of the gore as well, though almost entirely simple blood and far less than Erica.

“It’s done,” Erica says, voice quiet. She looks up and, catching Bridget’s eyes, she tilts her head in the direction of the stairwell. Her face is still a mask, but her request is evident.

Bridget responds with a small frown. Then, she turns towards Franky.

Franky cuts her off before Bridget can even start. She shrugs, aggressively. “He deserved it,” she says. Her words sound sharp in the silence that has descended. She shakes her head from side to side forcefully, as if she can shake off her conscience.

“Franky,” Bridget starts. She pauses, searching for words that can reach through Franky’s tempest. She thinks she finds them. “It’s alright to not know how you feel.”

And maybe she’s speaking to Erica as well.

Franky draws back. “Get the fuck out of my head, Gidge,” she snaps.

Bridget hesitates again. Then, “Franky…”

“You know how I feel better than I do?” Franky challenges.

Bridget doesn’t answer. In this case—no, she thinks, she doesn’t know quite how Franky feels. Franky feels like a human, and human is something that… Franky feels of fearful abhorrence, but her abhorrence has no direction to it. And she feels of shock and rage, but there’s an ineffable aching underneath it all that isn’t shock and isn’t rage and isn’t fear.

Bridget looks back over to Erica.

Motionless, Erica is still standing in the same place. Her gaze is fixed on the body on the floor in front of her.

Erica, for the moment, is calm and distant—a hundred thousand miles off, or more. And her distance is a cold one.

Returning to Franky, Bridget meets Franky’s eyes. “Why don’t we go outside while the coven finishes things here?”

Franky throws up her hands. “Yeah, sure, whatever,” she says. She spins vanishes down the stairs.

Before Bridget follows after her, she turns towards Erica again. “Erica?”

Erica continues to stare at the body. Her reply is mumbled. “Can you send the woman and her daughter home?”

Bridget hesitates. “You don’t want to…” She trails off, uncertain what exactly Erica and her liberal inclinations would do in better circumstances.

Erica finally looks up at Bridget. She speaks softly. “They… they’ve probably had enough of vampires for the time being.” And then she looks back down at the body.

Though Erica isn’t watching, Bridget nods.
And then she takes her leave.

On the main floor below, the coven members who stormed the house with Bridget are sitting around in the living room of the residence, talking and laughing amongst themselves. When they see Bridget, they begin to cheer. At this, Bridget raises an eyebrow.

Jake, smiling, answers her unspoken question. “No casualties,” he says. “The tip about the basement was great.”

Bridget briefly returns the smile and then continues on her way out of the house.

Outside, the hour is late but daylight hasn’t yet begun to brighten the sky above. Instead, the night is lit by the artificial glow of eternally wakeful New York. Bea and Debbie are sitting together on the sidewalk outside the residence, Bea holding her daughter and Debbie silent but for the occasional sniff.

Ignoring Bridget, Franky goes to the mother and daughter. “Hey,” she says.

Bea looks up. She sounds utterly exhausted. “Yeah?”

Franky shrugs, preempting her own words with uncertainty. “You need anything? Like, uh, food? Ride home?”

Bea pushes her long red hair back out of her face. “Uh, ride back to the shelter maybe?” she asks.

Franky frowns. “Kinda late?”

Bea scoffs. “Kaz’ll open up,” she says.

Here, Bridget enters the conversation. “I’ll find someone to take you,” she says. Sending them home was, after all, what Erica asked her to do.

It seems impolite to merely return Debbie and then send the two of them away, but… Bea and Debbie are humans and they are not of the coven. The coven’s aegis does not extend to them.

And why should it?

Bridget frowns to herself as she turns down the sidewalk towards the line of coven cars. So much time—or, perhaps, so little time—with Franky, with Erica, with this pinnacle of a liberal and quintessentially American coven is making her soft indeed.

She should…

She will…

When her task is done and Jacs, the last of the Holts, is taken care of, it will be time for her to leave. And she will leave. It’s the way of things. She is an agent of the will of the Council. It’s the way of her existence. So why does thinking about it make her chest ache?

Bridget finds Linda sitting in the driver’s seat of the car that brought them to the strike site. The coven enforcer has her phone out and is playing, from the looks of it, her online poker game.

“Linda,” Bridget greets.

Linda jumps a bit in her seat as she turns towards Bridget. She frowns and regards Bridget with a certain amount of suspicion. “Yes, Inquisitor?”
“We need you to take Bea and her daughter back to the shelter,” Bridget says.

Linda’s frown deepens. “That’s it?”

“What do you mean?” Bridget asks.

“The Governor doesn’t want to perform social welfare on them?” Linda responds. “Not that I care. Seems like something she’d do though.”

“I don’t think…” Bridget starts. She slows to consider her words, then finishes, “Whatever support those two need now, it should come from their own kind.”

“Sure,” Linda says. The way she says it—she’s not implying that she agrees or disagrees, she just wants the conversation to end. “Send them over.”

When Bridget returns to the small group of humans, all of them sitting on the sidewalk now, Franky is playing some kind of finger-tapping game with Debbie. The two of them are going at very high speed and, at a glance, Bridget can’t make heads or tails of the rules. Loath to disturb them, she turns to Bea. “Linda is ready to take you back to the shelter when you’re ready,” she says. “The same car as we came here in.”

Bea stands up. She’s taller than Bridget, which isn’t terribly surprising but still catches Bridget off guard. Bea has gained something in her poise since getting her daughter back. She’s a different woman, almost. There’s a hesitancy about her now though, even if she’s standing taller; it’s as if before her desperate fury was moving her and, without it, she’s directionless. Her hands hang loosely at her sides. To Bridget’s sense of her, she’s exhausted and more than a bit lost, but she’s not upset. Not anymore. “Hey,” she starts. “Uh, thank you. I just... Thank you.”

Bridget offers her a smile. It’s not a forced smile. Doing... good... doing good feels good, even on behalf of a human stranger. “It was our pleasure,” Bridget says.

Bea turns now to Debbie. She taps her daughter on the shoulder. “Debs? Let’s go. Allie’ll be happy to see you.”

Together, their exit is far quieter than either of their arrivals. Arm around Debbie’s shoulder, Bea guides her towards Linda’s car. When they’re almost there, Linda does them the courtesy of getting out and opening the door for them.

Back by the raided brownstone, Franky is still sitting on the concrete. Bridget considers her options for a moment, then decides to sit down as well. The body armor makes the action difficult, but she manages, with a small amount of rearranging. “Are you always that good with kids?” she asks.

Franky shrugs. “Don’t hang out with anklebiters much.”

“What were you doing?” Bridget asks. “With the fingers?”

Franky pulses confusion for a moment, then, “Chopsticks.” She sticks out both her hands, pointer finger extended on each. “You make the other person add fingers and when they get five exactly that hand’s out. You don’t want to be out.”

Bridget mimics Franky’s action, then reaches over and taps one of Franky’s hands. “Like that?”

Franky extends a second finger. “Yeah,” she says. “It’s a kid’s game.” Using her two fingers, she hits Bridget’s hand. “I’ve got two, so now you add two and you’re at three.”
Bridget goes up to three. “And if I…” she hits Franky’s two with her three.

“Yeah,” Franky says. “And now that hand’s out.” She closes her hand into a fist and drops it. When she smiles, it looks forced. “You know, Gidge, I can think of some better things to do with fingers.”

Bridget smirks. “So can I,” she says. “But I can’t think of anything better to do with them while sitting on a public sidewalk waiting for Erica to finish cleaning dead bodies out of a…” Realizing what it is that she’s saying, she trails off.

Abandoning the game, Franky lowers her other hand. “I know you both just killed a bunch of people,” she says. She feels prickly, defensive, ill at ease. “You don’t have to be weird about it.”

Bridget moves to rest her hands on her knees. “Does it bother you?”

“I don’t know,” Franky says, edge of sarcasm clear and biting in her voice. “Does it?”

The answer to that question is very clearly yes, but that’s not the reply that Bridget ought to make. “If I were in your position, it would bother me,” she says.

“And you being you in your position—why doesn’t it bother you?” Franky asks. She shifts to wrap her arms up, hugging herself. “Turning into a fang makes you guilt-proof? That it? You don’t kill people and then think, ‘well shit, I’m a bad person’?”

“Do you think that Erica is a bad person?” Bridget asks in reply. When Franky doesn’t respond immediately, she goes on, “If she hadn’t done it, I would have.”

Franky scoffs. “Doesn’t change anything about Erica,” she says. She doesn’t continue on. The implication is clear enough.

Bridget shouldn’t feel defensive, but she does. “Erica did what was necessary. She—”

“Pretty sure Erica can talk for herself,” Franky interrupts. Her eyes flicker to the space behind Bridget.

Bridget turns and looks up. Erica, face wiped clean of blood and wearing someone else’s shirt that looks large on her, has joined them. Despite doing away with her suit jacket and taking a borrowed shirt, she smells strongly of violence. To Bridget’s sense of her, she’s unsettled. Fear would be a strong term—perhaps trepidation is better suited. A few other coven members are trickling out of the house at her back as well. The first steps of cleaning up the mess, it would seem, are complete.

“Can we talk in the car?” Erica asks. “This has been a long night and the sun is coming.”

Bridget pushes herself up to her feet. “I sent Bea and Debbie with Linda,” she says.

Erica waves her hand, dismissive. “We’ll take a different car.”

Franky too stands, dusting off her butt and then stretching. She’s still pretending she’s not upset. “Don’t think there’s much to talk about.”


Erica commandeers one of the coven vehicles. The driver doesn’t question her, and neither do the enforcers who were about to climb into it. Instead of giving the address of the brownstone where they’ve been staying, she directs the car towards a parking garage, presumably the one that they met Linda at when they headed out for the coven building what seems like a long time ago.
Franky gets into the back of the SUV first. Instead of heading for her spot on the back seat, she takes one of the two single seats closer to the front. Erica glances for a brief moment at Bridget, then takes the other seat, leaving Bridget to clamber over them both for the rear of the car. Their driver, a sort of stern looking woman, closes the door behind her.

To Bridget’s approbation, both Franky and Erica remember their seatbelts.

To Bridget’s dismay though, Erica has brought the stink of viscera into the car and it’s an enclosed space. She does her best to ignore it. Before long she knows she’ll be used to it and it won’t be so bad. Franky, after making a gagging noise, appears to adopt the same strategy.

In fairness, Bridget probably doesn’t smell much better.

Erica waits until the car has pulled away from the line of parked vehicles to start, hesitantly, “You know that this is my job.”

“We don’t have to do this,” Franky mutters. She’s slouched in her seat and she sort of digs herself down into it as she crosses her arms.

“Yes we do,” Erica says, reply quick and voice sharp. She’s got her arms crossed too now.

“Why?” Franky needles.

Erica presses her lips together and looks away from Franky and out the window. Outside, the sun is starting to color the dark sky and there are a great many neon-clad joggers on the streets. The city is waking up, but commuter traffic hasn’t yet clogged the streets and their car is making good progress.

After a while, Erica looks back to Franky. She uncrosses her arms, shifting into clasping her hands in front of her. “Because I care what you think of me,” she says. “So can we talk about it?”

Franky pushes some of her brown hair away from her face. “Okay,” she replies. “Yeah. We can talk. How do you want to do this?”

Erica shifts, uncomfortable. “I…”

Erica falters.

A long pause follows. “Yeah, so, I’m freaked,” Franky finally says. She shrugs, hard. “That’s about it.”

Erica makes a throat clearing noise. “I’m not a bad person,” she says.

Franky looks away and shrugs again, with an amount of force that could be called violent. “I know that.”

“Do you?” Erica asks.

Franky turns towards Erica again. Anger is starting to color her mood and her tone. It’s the one feeling she can be counted to turn to when she feels pressure. It’s like she finds it comforting. Safe. “Yeah—but you make it fuckin’ hard remember to sometimes,” Franky says.

“I’m doing my best,” Erica says, heat in her voice as well. Unlike Franky, Erica’s agitation isn’t anger, rather, it’s frustration. Towards Franky? Towards herself?

Franky sweeps a hand through her hair again, then switches from slouching in her seat to slumping forward, propping her elbows on her knees. “You could have not shot him.”
“I couldn’t have,” Erica replies. “He broke the coven’s law.”

“So what?” Franky snaps. “He was begging for his life. He was—”

“Most people beg when they face their end,” Bridget says from the back seat. She keeps her tone measured. Her hands are folded neatly in her lap. “He was guilty of more than breaking the coven’s law and if Erica hadn’t shot him, you’d be having this conversation with me instead.”

“You kill people in cold blood often, Gidget?” Franky asks, turning towards the back. Her voice has venom in it, but her eyes and her heart are tired.

“Yes,” Bridget says, simply.

“You like it?” Franky asks.

“No,” Bridget says.

“It was for the coven,” Erica says, cutting back in.

“What’s that even mean to you?” Franky asks. “Coven? Governor? Why, Erica?”

It’s a question Bridget tried to ask Erica not long after they met—a question that Erica dodged without any grace or subtlety. Now, Erica sits quietly for a moment. Her emotions skitter about, like a breeze brushing across the surface of a pond and leaving ripples in its wake, before finally settling into calm. She turns away from Franky and Bridget both, to look out the window, out into the city, into the middle distance. The relatively short buildings of a residential area pass by. “Because I owe this coven everything,” Erica says.

Franky and Bridget both remain silent, waiting for Erica to continue.

“My sire left me before I was able to survive on my own.” Erica’s voice is flat. She’s just stating facts. Passionless—because underneath the facts there’s just an old, aching, emptiness in her. “The coven—and Mark—took me in. This coven is my family and I serve it in whatever ways I can, in whatever ways I must, to whatever extent necessary.”

Franky’s heart hurts—or perhaps Bridget is feeling her own old scars and projecting the sense of them onto Franky.

For a while, there’s quiet among the three of them.

“If it’s just about the coven,” Franky finally starts, “What about you? What about me? Why’d you show up to our third whatever that was with a TASC brochure? This didn’t have to be complicated. You made it complicated.”

Outside the conversation, their vehicle is slowing to a stop inside the parking deck.

Erica manages to cast her eyes everywhere except towards Franky. “I liked you,” she says. “And I thought you were smart. And I thought it was a shame you didn’t have at least a high school equivalency. And I just…I really…I have feelings. I’m a person. I thought—if I could help you, that would be a good thing. Better than… other things.”

“I’m how you convince yourself you’re not a monster? That it?” Franky asks, soft.

“You think I’m a monster?” Erica asks back, fire in her voice. She finally turns back towards Franky.

“Do you think you’re a monster?” Franky responds. She meets Erica’s eyes and her voice is steady
and calm. She settles backwards in her seat. “You’re not. So don’t.”

Erica wrings her hands. “Franky, I—”

Franky’s lips lift into the ghost of a smile. “And don’t hide behind me, yeah? You don’t need to.”

There’s a sharp knock on the car door, and then their driver opens it, cutting the conversation off.
Moving forcefully, Franky unclips her seatbelt and slides out of the car onto the concrete deck. Erica follows her and Bridget follows last. The driver merits a very brief nod from Erica before the three of them are headed to the basement of the deck where it connects to one of the coven’s tunnels.

When they reach the dark entrance of the tunnel, Franky takes Erica’s hand.

Erica leads them through the dark.

Chapter End Notes

whoops, sorry, posted this late. life is very busy. i expect the next chapter to get posted within two months. gonna shoot for mid-december, but zero promises. looking into the future, next chapter is lots of OT3, chapter after that finishes up this first arc, and then gonna move into the next arc. i think we're a bit more than halfway done with this fic. yay!

as always, thank you to my wonderful beta readers, and also all of you normal readers <3
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Upon reaching the safe house again and passing by Spitz in the basement on the way up to the garden level, Bridget and Erica announce that they intend to shower nearly simultaneously. This gets a grimace out of Erica. “You go first,” she says, waving a hand permissively.

Franky pulls a face of her own and Bridget tilts her head to the side.

Between Bridget and Erica, Erica is wearing far more gore.

“No offense,” Bridget starts, both of her hands raised palms out towards Erica, “But you really—”

“A pad this size only has one shower?” Franky cuts in. “Seriously?”

Erica shrugs and looks at a particularly interesting bit of blank wall. “We tend to get rid of bathrooms when we remodel,” she says.


Bridget smiles. “Erica, take a shower,” she says. “I can wait. You reek and I don’t think even the coven’s dry cleaner will be able to salvage your suit. Those pants ought to go to an incinerator.”

“The coven dry cleaner has a lot of experience with blood,” Erica replies, looking down at herself. “I’ve seen them work miracles before.”

“Go,” Bridget says, using one hand to give Erica a gentle push on the shoulder towards the single bathroom of the house.

Erica sighs and, shaking her head, does as she’s told.

Together, Franky and Bridget go upstairs to the kitchen.

As Franky opens the refrigerator to check its contents, Bridget snags a bag of blood and pours herself a cup to microwave. She’s careful not to bump into anything that looks like Franky might use in the course of cooking. She’s significantly cleaner than Erica, but she doubts she qualifies as sanitary for human health purposes. Franky looks healthy, but Bridget has seen one too many plagues in her long existence. Waiting for the blood to heat, Bridget looks over to Franky. “What you did for Erica was kind,” she says.

Washing her hands in the stainless steel sink, Franky shrugs. “I look after my girl,” she says. She turns back to the refrigerator and takes out the white frosted cake. The cake goes onto the granite kitchen counter and its flimsy plastic cover gets tossed into the sink. Instead of getting a plate and cutting out a piece and putting the piece on a plate, Franky grabs a fork and has at it. After her first bite, “Mm, chocolate.”

Bridget thinks that cake isn’t a normal human dinner, but she’s not sure so she refrains from saying anything about it.

As she eats her… dinner, Franky is a roil of emotions, with a thin veneer of enjoying her cake drawn over it all.
She has every right to them and Bridget is loath to interrupt. Franky, she thinks, needs time and space to process on her own. Franky and Erica have covered a great deal of ground in a short period of time. There’s still a long way to go, however.

Bridget herself has covered a great deal of ground as well, she supposes.

Standing on the other side of the kitchen, drinking her blood, Bridget finds that she’s hungrier than she realized. She was already in a weakened state when she dealt with Brayden, and the excitement of the night hasn’t made her any better rested. She downs her entire cup quickly and she’s thinking about going back to the refrigerator for more when Erica emerges from the lower level, blonde hair damp and left down, tucked behind her ears. She’s wearing a close-fitting crimson blouse and tight black jeans. She still has her glove covering one hand.

It’s the most dressed down that Bridget has ever seen the Governor, and—

Erica looks good enough to eat. And she’s holding herself like she doesn’t even realize it. Like this is just her natural state of being. It is her natural state, Bridget thinks.

Bridget swallows thickly, a very human thing to do, before she dodges around Franky to put her now empty mug in the dishwasher. As she bends down, her eyes go straight to Franky’s ass.

What is Erica doing to her.

Bridget stands up again quickly, fingers lazily flicking through the air before landing on her hip, a gesture of carefully managed distance. “I’m going to take that shower now. I smell like gunpowder and body armor.” She refrains from mentioning that, as with Erica, she needs to wash off Brayden’s blood too. Best to say nothing on that front. It’s an observation that doesn’t really fit the mood.

Bridget has, in her time, encountered vampires who… relish the blood of their murders, even when it’s hollow of life and dried from crimson to a dull brown, but she thinks Erica is not one of them.

Bridget isn’t one of them, at least.

It’s tasteless, among other things.

“Yeah,” Franky says from around a mouthful of cake and not looking at Bridget—her eyes are stuck on Erica. “Go for it.”

On her way out of the room and towards the stairs, Bridget pauses and catches Erica’s eye, then drops her gaze lower. Erica’s shirt has been tailored for her and it shows her figure impeccably well. Also, she’s left the top two buttons of her blouse undone. Bridget drags her eyes back up to Erica’s face and raises an eyebrow. A compliment, and a question.

Erica clears her throat and looks away for a moment. “Your shower, Inquisitor?” Erica prompts.

Bridget smiles. “I hope you left some hot water for me, Governor,” she says.

She’s about to turn to continue on her way when Franky calls, “Hey Gidge, make it fast, yeah?”

Bridget’s smile widens as she turns back towards Franky. “Anything for you, baby.”

“Baby?” Franky repeats, a grin spreading across her face. She has white icing smeared on one cheek. It’s cute.

“Bridget,” Erica prompts. She raises her arms to cross them, then thinks better of the motion and
drops them to her sides, to awkwardly hang. “You smell bad. And I want to talk to Franky for a bit.”

Bridget hesitates.

Erica is nervous about… about something. Bridget doesn’t have any idea as to what, but she’s not going to press on Erica’s spike of anxiety at the moment. Judging from the sudden sharp concern leaking from Franky, she’s no more clued in than Bridget.

Franky can handle whatever it is though.

“Right,” Bridget says, maintaining her smile even as she feels like frowning. She shakes her head as she turns back towards the stairs. “Shower.” As she descends from the main floor to the sleeping quarters, she keeps herself aware of the currents around her. In particular, she focuses on Erica.

Bridget pauses at the bottom of the stairs. Without being close enough to hear words, it’s difficult to discern details from just the swell of emotions that permeate the house. Erica is… insecure, in a way that seems more motive than flaw. It’s a sort of uncertain wanting that would rather be guided than guide. But that’s Erica—now and always.

Continuing on her way again, briefly, Bridget stops by her room to take off her shoes and socks and to pick up a change of clothes and a towel.

Franky, for her part, is still confused, but her confusion is starting to shift towards intent. Perhaps she’s figured something out.

In the bathroom, Erica has left her borrowed shirt and blood-splattered pants in a hamper. Despite the warm steam that still fills the small room, or maybe because of it, the soiled clothing smells strongly. Bridget tosses her own dirty outfit in to join Erica’s. Though Erica may have faith, Bridget has her doubts about whether or not the fabric will ever be the same.

Upstairs, Franky and Erica both shift. They’re… waiting.

Waiting?

Waiting.

Erica is a swirling mess of jumpy nerves now. Franky is a bit more steady, like she’s mulling something over. Plotting.

Bridget steps into the shower and reaches for the chrome valve. The water comes out hot immediately, having been running at full blast only minutes ago.

It’s miraculous how life goes—if Bridget had lived and died human and only ever human, the most convenient mode of bathing she’d have ever known would have been a not-freezing rainstorm in mid-summer. She’s glad to have survived long enough to experience the twenty-first century and all its wonders. The blast of good water pressure at that tense spot right between her shoulder blades feels amazing.

Even so, Bridget doesn’t stay long in the shower. Franky and Erica are waiting for her. That much is clear.

The clothes Bridget has chosen for herself are a loose blue shirt and dark blue jeans. She’s always liked the color blue. In her opinion, it goes well with her eyes. Clothes are another thing that have happily evolved over the centuries, another thing she’s grateful to have survived to experience. Fashions now aren’t better per se than fashions a hundred or two hundred years ago, but never
before has there Bridget had so much choice in what to wear.

Bridget would be the first to admit—she loves her wardrobe. She loves clothes.

Bridget skips socks and shoes. She also loves the feel of her toes on hardwood floors.

Reaching the main floor again, Bridget finds Erica and Franky have moved to the living room. Franky is seated in one of the armchairs, lounging, and Erica is leaning against a wall on the other side of the room.

“Hey Gidge,” Franky greets. She tilts her head towards Bridget but doesn’t rise from her seat. There’s an edge in her voice and a heat in her eyes. Her characteristic grin stretches across her face. Is that what they were discussing then? But—Bridget still feels like she’s missing something. “Feelin’ cleaner?” Franky asks.

“Much,” Bridget replies. “I hope I’m not intruding.”

“You?” Franky mock-asks, clicking her tongue and raising her eyebrows. “Never. And we were just talkin’ about you.”

“Were you now?” Bridget prompts. She moves to copy Erica, leaning against a different wall of the room. She slips her hands into her pockets, staying loose, relaxed. Between the three of them, they form a triangle, with Bridget and Erica both focused on Franky as its apex.

Not much in the feel of Franky and Erica has changed since Bridget started her shower, except perhaps that both of them have become more intent.

“Mhmm,” Franky hums. When she speaks, she takes her time with her words, dragging them out with precision. “Erica was hoping you could help her with something. Up to you though.” Franky shrugs with purposeful nonchalance.

“What’s that?” Bridget asks, tone mild.

Franky keeps her green eyes on Bridget. Her voice is easy now. Languid. Nothing like the tight buzz humming just under her skin. “Miss Davidson, tell Bridget what you want.”

Bridget looks to Erica. She’s shifted position; she has her arms folded in front of her, somewhere halfway between crossing her arms against the world and hugging herself. Anxiety rolls off her in crashing waves. She clears her throat. And then she mumbles.

Bridget hears her and understands, but—

“Erica, why don’t you speak up,” Bridget says.

“I want you to bite me,” Erica snaps. She tightens her hold on herself and looks over at a patch of empty wall. She clears her throat. Then, still looking away, “Please.”

In a gesture to create time, Bridget inhales deeply. She’s immediately hit by the heady smell of arousal that’s permeating the room. Everyone’s cards are on the table except for hers. If she wasn’t very much in the moment before, she is now. “That’s a big ask, Erica,” she says.

“There’s no pressure,” Franky starts. “If—”

“Mark wouldn’t do it,” Erica interjects. There’s a definite edge to her voice.

Franky’s eyes shift to Erica, narrowing. She doesn’t say anything though. She leans back, sinking a
bit more into her chair. She waits.

For Bridget, another piece of the puzzle that is Erica falls into place. “You’ve put thought into this,” she says. “Even before I offered you my blood.”

Erica shrugs stiffly.

Bridget tilts her head to one side. “I’m not Mark, hm?”

Erica shrugs again, like she’s trying to disown her idea, like she’s not comfortable in her own skin. She’s still avoiding eye contact too. It’s strange the way she performs such discomfort even as Bridget can feel the burn of wanting in her, backed by the steel that she likes to keep hidden.

“Well, look at me, Erica,” Bridget says.

Erica complies. Her grey-blue eyes are sharp flint, even as she continues to hold herself ill at ease. She’s a masterpiece in contradictions, beautiful in her own way. “You’re not Mark,” she says. “You’re not scared.”

Bridget’s gaze roves Erica’s body, tracing the way Erica’s tailored crimson blouse hugs her figure, emphasizes her chest. Bridget doesn’t inhale again though. She needs to actually think. To calculate the consequences of Erica’s request. Erica is strong for her age, but is she strong enough that taking her blood would carry the same kinds of ramifications as Bridget’s? Unlikely. But then there’s the other side of the coin—


Erica shifts her weight from one foot to the other, starting to bristle. “Look, if your answer is no, then—”

“I didn’t say that,” Bridget cuts in. Still leaning against the far wall, still with her hands in her pockets, she inclines her head towards Franky. “May I?”

Franky replies with a smirk. “You may.” She pauses for a second, then, “If she says stop, you stop. No means no. We’re not playing that game right now.”

There’s the whisper of a threat in her words, but it’s not needed.

Bridget nods to Franky. She turns her attention back to Erica. A half-smile plays on her face now. “Come closer, Governor.”

There’s a flicker of hesitation, a moment of comprehension rather than resistance, and then Erica starts forward. In Bridget’s sense of her, she’s a tight star of apprehension.

Erica moves with grace.

Bridget lets her go three steps, far enough that she’s standing directly in front of Bridget and Franky both, before, “That’s close enough.”

Erica halts. She doesn’t need to breathe, but her chest is rising and falling anyway, though the breaths are quick and shallow. Seeing Erica breathe reminds Bridget to taste the air as well. The air smells like Erica.

“Take off the glove,” Bridget orders. She holds herself very still. Distant. Cold. Erica and Franky have asked her to play the vampire, so she’ll play the vampire.
This particular way of going about things isn’t her usual approach, isn’t what usually appeals to her, but she’s acted out most roles in her long existence and she knows the script Erica wants. She knows power. The rest, she can improvise.

As Erica pulls her black glove from her burnt hand, the back of Bridget’s own hand prickles at the sensation of leather brushing lightly over scarred skin. Once the glove is off, Erica drops it to the floor. It lands softly. Not much has changed since the previous day—Erica’s hand still looks profoundly injured. Erica’s gaze follows the glove down to the floor, then rises to Bridget once more.

Bridget is trusting Erica to know herself.

“Sanctity purges sin, hm?” Bridget says. “Look at your hand.”

Erica hesitates again and this time Bridget senses that there is resistance in her.

“Go on,” Bridget prompts, voice gentle now.

Fingers spread, Erica raises her bad hand before her, palm towards Bridget, and looks down at it. The muscles of her face twitch in the smallest of grimaces. Mangled as it is, it is not a pretty thing. It is not what Erica wants others to see, and seeing it herself raises the ghostly memory of agony in her.

To be dead is to burn.

“You did it for the coven. Because you exist to serve,” Bridget says. As she speaks, she watches how Erica’s face tightens and she listens to how Erica’s emotions roil in a twisting mass of heat and... fear. Not fear of Bridget though, and not fear of Franky—Franky, who’s still seated, still watching Bridget and Erica, living heartbeat filling the room with the quick pulse of anticipation. Fear of herself, maybe. For herself? “You serve your coven.” Bridget’s eyes flicker to Franky. Everything she’s doing is as much for Franky as it is for Erica. “And you serve your human.” Bridget pauses, then, “Do you serve me, Governor?”

Before, Bridget wondered what it was that Erica wanted.

Now, she knows.

Erica’s tongue darts out, wetting her lips.

Bridget waits.

Erica swallows, meets Bridget’s eyes again—

Then—

“Yes.”

“Undress,” Bridget says, dispassionate, detached. “Start with your shirt.”

Erica’s hands, the one scarred and the other whole, tremble near imperceptibly as she unbuttons her blouse. She starts at the third button, the top two having been left already undone, and works her way down. When she’s done, a small shrug is all it takes for the crimson blouse to join her glove on the floor.

Much of Erica’s torso resembles her burnt hand, badly scarred. Light and shadow play across the jagged landscape of her skin. She holds herself poised though, back straight and shoulders square, having finally given up on acting out shame.
Her bra is black lace.

“You know there are colors other than black and red in the world,” Bridget remarks.

Erica raises her chin slightly. It’s a challenge, of a kind—the kind that’s too weak to merit acknowledgement. “I like black and red.”

Bridget smiles, lazy, and takes her hands out of her pockets to cross her arms instead. She doesn’t move from the wall. “They suit you. Pants now, Governor.”

Black jeans join Erica’s blouse and glove on the floor.

Bridget delays for a moment, taking Erica in. Death left her with an air of unnatural elegance about her. Ethereal, she is not quite of the world. Though she’s cloaked in steady strength, standing in her black lace underclothes, there’s a vulnerability as well—the kind of vulnerability that begs Bridget to push her into a wall and fuck her against it.

Maybe another time. For now, it’s not part of the script.

Bridget inhales again. This time, she still smells Erica, but she smells Franky and herself as well. She looks away from Erica, to Franky, sprawled in the armchair, grin stretched wide and predatory. She’s sitting with her legs spread open. Forcing her voice calm, Bridget drawls, “Franky, I think it’s your turn for a while.”

Franky pushes herself up to her feet, stretches. She doesn’t rush. “I reckon so,” she says back, in much the same tone as Bridget.

Between them, Erica’s breath catches.

Panther-like, Franky stalks forward. The force of her presence is almost physical. She circles behind Erica, before pressing against her. She drags her knuckles slow up along one of Erica’s bare arms, the one that’s covered in a mess of raised scarring. Her other hand wraps around Erica’s opposite shoulder. She kisses Erica’s neck, soft, then, breath tickling the round of Erica’s ear, “Down.”

Erica kneels fast, hitting the floor with a bruising thud. Her eyes flutter shut.

Following at a more reasonable pace, still positioned behind Erica, Franky kneels as well so she can drag her tongue along the outer curve of Erica’s ear before nipping at her earlobe.

Bridget shudders at Franky’s touch.

She’s so warm.

Both Franky’s hands are on Erica’s shoulders now, thumbs massaging Erica’s back gently. Franky’s green eyes flicker to Bridget as if to ask ‘Are you watching?’

Oh—Bridget is watching. And she’s feeling as well. Franky is focus and control, intent on building something for Erica. Her every move is deliberate. Erica’s world is narrowing down to the sound of Franky’s voice, the feel of Franky’s hands on her, and the tight heat all through her core.

To Erica, Franky asks, “You want the Inquisitor to bite you, yeah?”

Eyes still closed, Erica nods.

Franky shifts, getting a knee in the small of Erica’s back, shoving forward roughly, even as her hands continue to pull Erica backwards, forcing her chest out. Presenting her to Bridget. It’s an
uncomfortable, disorienting position and Erica hisses as her grey-blue eyes fly open again. She stays on her knees though. She is, after all, Erica.

“Couldn’t hear that,” Franky says. Her voice is low, almost a purr.

“Yes,” Erica manages. “Yes—I want the Inquisitor to bite me.”

Still looking to Bridget, Franky lifts one eyebrow, questioning.

Bridget responds with a small shrug.

Franky knows Erica better. Where Franky leads, Bridget will follow.

Focusing back on Erica, Franky asks, “So what’re you gonna do to earn it?”

Erica swallows. With a knee in her back and her chest so pushed forward, it looks painful. But that’s rather what she likes.

“You’ve been wanting this for a while,” Franky murmurs. “When you’re being *fucked* you think about being *bitten*. My teeth aren’t sharp enough for you though.” She lets go of Erica’s shoulders, and pulls away, standing and taking a step back. Without Franky holding her in place, Erica sags.

“Look the Inquisitor in the eye and touch yourself, Miss Davidson. Give her a reason to want you.”

Erica looks up to Bridget and her gaze is all the intensity and steel that Bridget’s grown to admire in her. Even before Erica’s hands start to move, Bridget bites her lower lip.

As Erica’s good hand slides underneath her black lace bra and her scarred hand slips lower, Bridget, for a moment, imagines her own hands making the same motions—and then she listens to the thrum of Erica that fills the room and she doesn’t have to imagine anymore what it feels like.

Erica’s fingers moving against herself, luxuriantly slow, are fingers moving against Bridget too.

Bridget takes a very deep breath, drinking in the richness of the air.

There’s such heat and it’s pooling in Bridget’s core, _demanding_ attention. It takes every ounce of her self-control to remain poised, still leaning against the wall, still trying to feign that she is somehow _above_ Erica’s lust, even as she continues to bite her lip so hard she might soon draw blood. The aching begs that she either mimic Erica on the floor before her or cut herself off from the riot of desires sparking and flaring all around, for all the good that would do—but she does neither.

She still has a part to play.

Standing on the other side of Erica, Franky is at ease. She has one hand on her hip and, though her face is flushed and her breathing is quick, she’s the picture of control. She shifts, catching Bridget’s attention, and flashes a grin. She gestures down at Erica. “When we’re done with our girl, I want to fuck ya, Gidge.”

Bridget focuses back on Erica, Erica who has started to move her body in rhythm with her hands. It feels decadent. Bridget smiles, but she takes her time in replying. For a while she savors the sensation, being an object of living desire as she continues to experience Erica. Finally, “I’d like that.”

Franky’s grin widens and she wags her eyebrows. “You’re on my to-do list then,” she says. Not waiting for a reaction to _that_, she steps back towards Erica, getting a hand in Erica’s hair and running fingernails lightly against Erica’s scalp, sending a shiver down Bridget’s spine, down to the ache
sitting between her legs. “How’re you feeling, Miss Davidson?”

Erica’s response is a frustrated grunt that Bridget feels in her very soul.

Franky squats down as she draws her fingers along the arch of Erica’s spine. “You’ve never been very good at getting yourself off,” she remarks, speaking slow and lazy. One hand travels around the curve of Erica’s ass. The other moves to wrap around Erica’s throat, squeezing gently. “Let me help you with that.”

Franky pushes Erica’s hand away and replaces it. She moves quickly, entering Erica roughly without hesitation, without pretenses. There’s a flash of discomfort and Erica jerks backwards, entire body tight, then, bit by bit, she relaxes, shifting to widen the spread of her legs.

Franky goes faster and harder than Erica. Sometimes she works a rhythm, sometimes she breaks it for a few beats, leaving Erica to grind into her, trying to recapture her attention. Franky’s grip on Erica’s throat steadily tightens. Experiencing what Erica is feeling makes Bridget want to buck her hips, but she forces herself to remain motionless, dead.

Erica is still watching her.

So is Franky.

Erica’s uneven (unnecessary) breath catches. Franky slows.

Not there yet though.

Franky grins, pleased with herself. She drops her hand from Erica’s throat, letting it trail down Erica’s chest to rest just beneath her breasts. “Get over here, Gidge. Back to you.”

Finally, Bridget pushes off from her wall. She keeps her movements controlled, deliberate, as she approaches and kneels down in front of Erica. She stretches out a hand and cups Erica’s cheek. Erica’s grey-blue eyes, clouded as they are, are gorgeous. “Are you sure, Erica?” Bridget asks.

Chest rising and falling fast, looking so near to human, Erica nods once.

Bridget leans forward and kisses her lips, briefly, chastely.

Bridget feels from Erica’s body that Franky has sped up again. Bridget shifts from Erica’s lips, tracing her mouth along the line of Erica’s jaw, then down along the slope of her neck. As she traverses Erica’s smooth skin, she can hear Franky’s heart beating, a fast and strong thunder in her ears. She can smell Franky too, not just the arousal that’s been thick in the air for some time now, but the scent of human life, full of sunlit warmth.

Every vampire has a... favored spot. Once, Bridget favored the pulse of the carotid—but it’s been a long time since she fed intending to kill. Now, with Erica under her lips and Franky in all her senses, she moves to the swell of muscle at the base of Erica’s neck instead. One hand goes to Erica’s neck, the other wraps around Erica’s back, fingers sliding over uneven scarred skin, and pulls Erica into her. Both hands hold tightly, bracing with bruising force. Bridget wants Erica still.

An animal noise is building in Erica’s throat.

It’s a demand for immediacy.

Bridget bites down.
Erica’s blood filling her mouth is exquisite.

There’s such power in it.

Bridget crushes Erica against herself as she goes for a deep draught, pulling Erica’s blood from her unliving veins. She wants more, she needs more—

Except that she doesn’t.

She’s not drawing sustenance. She’s giving. For Erica’s sake, then, she slows. She can only take so much and her bite can only last so long.

Oh, but Erica tastes of such ecstasy—

Somewhere in it all, Erica comes, shuddering in Bridget’s embrace, and experiencing it only adds to the dizzying swirl, the potent rush of Erica.

Bridget holds tighter.

“Stop now, Gidge.”

Stop…

It’s such a foreign concept, utterly alien.

How can she stop?

Erica.

Franky.

Bridget opens her eyes (when did she close them?). Slow, reluctant, she draws her fangs from Erica’s neck. There’s a bit of blood left, still staining pale skin red. Bridget laves it with her tongue, and when she’s done the skin is clean and unbroken. In her arms, Erica has gone limp.

Panic shoots like lightning through Bridget’s fogged senses, cutting through the dizzy aftermath of Erica but not quite dispelling it.

Did she—?

“She’s fine,” Franky says. Coming into Bridget’s field of vision, she bends down, hooks her arms under Erica’s armpits, and sort of half-carries, half-drags Erica a few steps away before laying her down on the floor gently. Once Erica is laid out, Franky caresses her cheek. “You’re a fuckin’ beautiful piece of work, Erica,” she murmurs. “You know that?”

It takes Erica a while to answer. When she does, she speaks in a barely intelligible mumble. “You were going to fuck Bridget.”

Franky chuckles. “I’m gettin’ to it,” she says. “Do you need anything?”

Erica turns onto her side and curls up, drawing her knees to her chest. She is both very tired and very satisfied. “Blood,” she says.

Bridget starts to rise to head to the kitchen, but Franky catches her eye and shakes her head. “I’ve got it.” Moving fluidly, she stands and heads for the refrigerator. It takes a little while to microwave a mug, but she returns quickly once that’s done. Franky puts the mug right next to the ball of Erica on
the floor, within easy reach. “Need help with it?” she asks.

“No,” comes Erica’s mumble. “Hurry up and fuck Bridget.”

Franky gives Erica a quick scratch behind the ear. “Yes ma’am,” she drawls.

Bridget, still kneeling, watches Franky turn towards her. There’s a grin on Franky’s face and mischief sparking in her eyes. Bridget can’t help but smile in response. The heat that’s been sitting in her, unattended, has built now into something far more potent than just heat.

“Kneeling is Erica’s thing,” Franky says. “Is it your thing too, Gidget?”

Like Erica did before, Bridget is breathing regularly now, swimming in the richness that they’ve made of the room. “Not particularly,” she says. Franky is approaching slowly, all confidence and poise, and Bridget is following her every movement. Though Franky may be human, she’s no stranger to dominion. Bridget tilts her head to the side. “But control is your thing, hm?”

“You could say that,” Franky replies, shrugging. “Doesn’t have to be.” She’s standing over Bridget now, looking down as Bridget looks up. There’s a wavering in her, a brief hesitation—

It is not a failure of her confidence, rather, she’s waiting for Bridget.

How polite.

Bridget stays on the floor. She sets her hands palms up in her lap. “What do you want?”

Franky lays two fingers against Bridget’s lips. Bridget can tell from the smell of them where they’ve been, and she can tell from the way Franky pushes gently what’s being asked. Bridget parts her lips and slips her tongue out to taste more of Erica, then leans forward to take Franky’s fingers in her mouth.

“You know what I want, Gidge?” Franky starts. There’s a happy hum about her. “I want to go down on you.”

Bridget pulls back so she can speak clearly again. The happiness from Franky makes her feel light. Or maybe the happiness, the lightness, is her own. “That’s what I want too.”

All at once, Franky is in motion, pushing Bridget backwards. Bridget isn’t quite as flexible as Franky perhaps intended, but she manages to sit back on her ass before she’s shoved completely to the floor. No sooner has she sprawled out on the hardwood then Franky is covering her, kissing her, sliding a thigh between her legs, running hands under her shirt and pushing it up and out of the way.

Bridget understood from Erica that Franky was good, but experiencing it herself is something else entirely. The way Franky’s fingers change pressure, sometimes firm, sometimes not, ghosting a circle in the soft hollow at the base of Bridget’s throat, pushing down there for a moment, then flickering elsewhere—it feels as if she’s reading Bridget in her entirety, utterly, completely.

Opening herself to Franky, Bridget tastes searing fire. It races through her veins as she arches into Franky’s touch.

Nearby, Erica has gotten herself mostly propped up into a seated position. As she sips her blood, her eyes are fixed on Franky and Bridget before her. Her focus is razor-sharp.

Bridget can feel Franky smiling into their kiss.
Bridget smiles back. Her control though, the careful restraint she kept on her own need as they worked together for Erica, her control is fraying, breaking. It’s exhilarating.

Franky is everywhere except where Bridget wants her and Bridget has been poised on the edge for a while now.

Bridget shifts away. Rolling her hips to grind herself against the thigh between her legs, “I’m waiting, baby.”

Franky rolls her eyes. “So impatient,” she huffs, even as her hands move to the button and zipper of Bridget’s jeans.

Wiggling free of her pants and underwear, Bridget laughs. “I’ve been waiting fourteen centuries for you.”

Franky chuckles back as she spreads Bridget’s legs. “You really know how to flatter a girl, don’t cha?”

Bridget grins. “Well, I—ah…”

Franky’s tongue silences any further words or coherent thoughts.

In Bridget’s head, there’s the rich sensation of Franky against her, in her, and Franky working on herself, and Erica watching, and all of it runs together into a warm, bright haze.

Bridget’s eyes close.

She hasn’t gone with a human in a long time.

Franky’s living heat is sin and even as Franky brings her to orgasm, Bridget wants that fire for herself.

Luxuriating, Bridget listens to Franky’s irregular breath as she too comes.

For a moment, all the sound in the room is breathing. Franky, head resting on Bridget’s thigh, is breathing because she has to, Erica and Bridget are breathing because the air tastes so good.

Bridget finally sits up in time to see Franky also sit up, and pull her hand out of her pants. Bridget tilts her head to the side. “Should I return the favor?”

Franky glances over to Erica, whose eyes are half-closed now as she sits slumped, then laughs. “Nah,” she says. “Some other time.” She stands up and pads over to Erica, then plucks the now empty mug out of her hands before heading to the kitchen. As Franky heats another cup of blood, Bridget dresses again. When Franky returns, instead of handing the mug off, she sits down beside Erica and raises it up to Erica’s lips. “Come on, Erica,” she murmurs. “Drink up.”

Bridget moves to sit down on Erica’s other side and drapes an arm around Erica’s cool shoulders. On a whim, she brushes a kiss against Erica’s cheek.

“I feel so spoiled,” Erica remarks quietly.

Franky moves the mug, now half-empty, away. “Two gorgeous women waiting on you,” she says. “What more could ya want?”

“I’d like Jacs’ head on a pike,” Erica mumbles.
“I’m working on it,” Bridget says. “Special present, just for you.”

“Just for me?” Erica asks. “No one else?”

Bridget chuckles. “Well…”

A smile tugs at the corners of Erica’s mouth. “Blood,” she says.

Franky lifts the mug again, obligingly.

Erica drains it this time, though a bit gets on her chin. Her tongue darts out and licks it away. Then, she pushes Franky and Bridget away so she can stand up. She looks unsteady on her feet for a flicker of a moment, but then it passes. She goes over to her pile of clothes and puts her pants back on. She picks up her red blouse and black glove but doesn’t don them, instead tucking them under one arm. Her free hand drifts down to the pocket of her jeans where Bridget can make out the tell-tale outline of a cellphone. “I need to go take care of something,” Erica says.

Franky lets out a frustrated noise, half-growl and half-sigh. “Really, Erica?”

Erica draws herself up, and draws her bundle of clothes tighter against herself. “It’s important.”

Bridget, instead of saying anything, narrows her eyes.

“I don’t have to explain myself,” Erica says, suddenly testy.

“There’s have to and then there’s should,” Bridget responds.

Erica shifts, uncomfortable. Then, she stills. She makes eye contact with Bridget, then shifts her focus to Franky. “I’m approving Mark’s transfer.”

Erica’s announcement is met by silence.

Finally, Bridget opens her mouth to reply, but Erica cuts her off.

“I know you’re leaving as soon as you put Jacs’ head on that pike. I’m doing this for me. Now if you’ll excuse me?”

Erica doesn’t wait to be excused. Holding herself tall, she leaves the room.

Franky and Bridget exchange a look. Franky has surprise and a certain amount of alarm written across her features. Bridget’s certain her expression matches.

“I didn’t see that coming,” Franky says. “Not like that, anyway.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Bridget begins. “Neither did I. And I’m normally quite good at these things.”

Franky frowns, more puzzled than upset. “Does this make me a homewrecker?”

Bridget shakes her head, then shrugs. “You met Mark. There wasn’t much home to wreck.”

Franky lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Fuck. Thought we were having a moment. Erica’s confusing.”

“You’re one to talk,” Bridget replies, starting to smile again.

“I’m a simple woman with simple needs,” Franky drawls. Then, suppressing a yawn, “Like sleep.”
Bridget gets up. She’s not particularly tired, despite the night, but she’s not human. If anything, with Erica’s blood, she feels better and more alert than she did an hour ago. “Then let’s get you to bed,” she says. Without asking, she scoops Franky up into her arms. It would be awkward on account of her size relative to Franky’s, and the fact that Franky is all limbs, but her preternatural strength does much to compensate.

Franky, laughing, wraps an arm around Bridget’s neck to steady herself.

Carrying Franky, Bridget heads down the stairs to the sleeping area and deposits her on her feet outside the single bathroom. “Brush your teeth,” she says.

Franky sighs, rolls her eyes, then steps into the bathroom. Glancing back at Bridget, she makes a great show of licking her lips before shutting the bathroom door.

For a moment, Bridget lingers at the closed door. Then, she goes back up to the main level. Erica’s nowhere to be found there, so Bridget climbs the next flight of stairs and goes to Erica’s office. The door is open so she lets herself in.

Erica, still without her shirt, is sitting at her desk, chin propped up on one hand. Her phone, screen black, is in front of her. She looks up when Bridget enters.

“Did you already call him?” Bridget asks.

“Yes,” Erica says. Pensive, she reaches out and spins her phone, letting it twirl on the desk’s smooth surface.

Bridget goes to sit down in one of the chairs facing Erica’s desk. She crosses one leg over the other and leans back, making herself comfortable. “How are you?”

Erica lets out a long sigh. “Sad?” she says, at first unsteady. Then, “Relieved.”

“He took it well?” Bridget prompts.

“I think he was relieved too,” Erica says. She’s gazing at her phone, watching its spin slow to a halt.

Bridget tilts her head in the suggestion of a nod. “That wouldn’t surprise me.”

For a long time both of them sit quietly and still. They could be statues. Erica, lost in thought, has forgotten to move and Bridget doesn’t see any reason to. Finally, Erica extends her scarred hand and spins her phone again.

As with her shirt, she hasn’t put her glove back on. The way light dances over the rough surface of her skin catches Bridget’s eye, holds her attention. The traces of fire extend from her hand up her arm and then sweep down across her torso, a reminder of violence. She’s still beautiful. She’ll always be beautiful.

Taking blood from her won’t have done anything good for the slow process of healing, but it was Erica’s decision.

“Why don’t you believe we can love, Bridget?” Erica asks.

Bridget frowns. Franky asked her much the same thing. The answer she gave Franky isn’t one that Erica will accept.

“My family was very devout,” Bridget says. “I think you can relate, no? Your church was the one
that called us sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

Erica shifts, leaning back in her chair and looking up to the ceiling. “The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation doesn’t slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready,” she says. She sounds weary. “The furnace is now hot, ready to receive them, the flames do now rage and glow.” Sighing, she shakes her head. “If we have no souls though, then there’s nothing to condemn.”

“Can exiles from God’s grace still experience the divine?” Bridget mulls. Then, “Maybe.”

Erica looks back down from the ceiling, over to Bridget again. Her eyes are sharp and searching. “Maybe?”

Bridget shrugs. “Maybe.”

Chapter End Notes

hi. sorry this took a while. life was busy. and i’m uncomfortable writing, like, *waves hands,* but it felt like the story required it. anyway. i’m going to try to finish this fic, hopefully in the next couple weeks. thank you to thefrankydoyles and cherepashka so much for beta duties. and to anyone who’s still reading this.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In Bridget’s dream, she stands in sunlight. There’s a patchwork-grey cobblestone road under her feet, red brick buildings all around, horse drawn carts clattering by as pedestrians weave about, and there’s sunlight. Ignoring the roar and the stench of the crowded city around her, she closes her eyes, tilts her face upwards to the clear blue sky, inhales warmth, and lives.

“Erica!”

Stiffening, Bridget turns towards the sharp voice. A thin woman with blonde hair drawn back in a bun and covered with a scarf, advanced in her years, looms in the doorway of one of the houses, arms crossed, scowling. Dressed in black mourning, every inch of her is severe.

Bridget approaches.

She feels the moment she passes from the light into the shadows of the house. The air inside is stagnant, musty. The windows are all closed. Humidity sits rank. This is a house of death.

Bridget bends down and kisses the elderly woman on both powdered cheeks. “Mother,” she says. Her tone is measured.

Erica’s mother makes a face as if she finds the greeting, or the woman before her, distasteful. “Your father is hardly ten days in the grave and you’re out cavorting.”

Straightening, Bridget presses her lips together and says nothing.

Erica’s mother continues. “That woman has come calling again. She’s in the parlor.” The way she pronounces woman—it’s clear she’d say harlot if such a word wouldn’t stain her dignity. “I wish you’d send her away. Why did you ever let her in?”

“Thank you, mother;” Bridget says stiffly. She turns and closes the door to the street behind her.
Outside, night has fallen. She bars the door against the shadows.

In the parlor, her sire is waiting.

But—

Not her sire yet.

Wearing black breeches, a white shirt, and a black vest, she sits resting, stance open, arms draped across the back of the low parlor couch. Everything about the room is perfectly clean, perfectly proper, except for her. Her dark hair is just long enough to be tied sloppily with a strip of fraying red cloth. A stiff black tricorn hat rests on the cushion beside her. She smells, ever so slightly, of salt and sea.

When Bridget enters, Erica’s sire looks up and flashes an easy smile. The gleam in her eye whispers of danger. “Du bist zum Sterben schön.”

As with the front door, Bridget closes and locks the parlor door as well. She sets the key down on a small end table.
“Bist du dir sicher?” her sire asks, quirking an eyebrow. “Hm, Erica? Locking yourself in here with me?” Speaking English, her accent is thick. She came recently to the language, perhaps, though she handles it skillfully enough—or she just enjoys having an accent. With vampires, it can be hard to tell.

Bridget regards Erica’s sire coolly, even as her living heart thunders in her ears. “You won’t hurt me,” she says, voicing a confidence she doesn’t feel. The line between herself and Erica is a blurred mess. Is she nervous now, or was Erica nervous then? Surely the latter; this is a dream and there’s no reason for nerves in such a place.

Erica’s sire stands and stalks forward, all beauty, all grace, all predator. Power and presence roll off her in waves, suffocating.

This memory…

Over two hundred years ago, when she raised Erica then, Erica’s sire was stronger than Bridget now.

By a great deal.

Bridget—or is she Erica?—takes one step back, then two, then finds herself backed up against the door she just closed and locked. Erica’s sire presses in close. She settles a hand on Bridget’s waist. She keeps her touch light. With her other hand, she ghosts fingertips along Bridget’s neck. Her smile tickles Bridget’s ear. “Really?”

Then—

Then Erica’s sire steps back, laughing, light and easy.

As she draws away, Bridget notices for the first time a silver ring on her left hand.

It’s a simple thing, crudely worked, a plain metal band set with a piece of smooth jet.

Seeing it, Bridget recoils.

If Erica’s sire notices the flinch, she doesn’t acknowledge it. She strolls back over to the couch and collapses down to sprawl out on it, knocking her hat to the floor in the process. Looking back towards Bridget, there’s a wistful look on her face. “You’ll take good care of her?” She pauses, then, “Of course you will. I know you. I know you will.”

The dream has shifted. It’s not a dream.

“She’s a good girl,” Erica’s sire continues. “She spends so much time thinking though, and not enough time trusting herself. “Sie hat ein gutes Herz.”

“You left her,” Bridget replies, speaking slow and careful. She lets a trace of judgment creep into her tone but not enough to provoke. Hopefully.

Smile playing at the edges of her lips now, Erica’s sire, still lying on the couch, shrugs. “I was not for her,” she says. “Death is longer than life, but still too short. With the void waiting for us, every moment is infinitely precious. And you were coming so soon.”

Bridget presses her lips together in a tight, disapproving, line. Then, “We’ve never met.”

“Don’t fret,” Erica’s sire replies. She waves a hand, lazy. “He does not care that I am here with you. I care that Erica never meets him. He is… mmm, what is the modern word…? Garbage.”
Bridget gestures to indicate Erica’s parlor. She means to indicate far more than just the parlor though. “And what is this?” she asks.

“This?” Erica’s sire repeats. She sits up. Her green eyes, bright with mischief and danger, catch and hold Bridget’s gaze. “When you took my child’s blood, you took my blood. But what will you do with it, Inquisitor? Hm?”

Erica’s sire sweeps both of her hands outwards and the space between her hands changes, twisting and bending and blackening. Everything changes. The two of them are now standing side by side, together in the dark. Maybe they’re in an alley. Maybe they’re in a field. Maybe they’re nowhere at all.

At their feet, Franky is lying limp on the ground, limbs limply sprawled, bleeding out.

Bridget drops to her knees, pressing her hands against Franky, trying to find where the blood is coming from so that she can stop it, slow it, do something. The blood is coming from nowhere and everywhere. It coats Bridget’s hands, thick, sticky, staining them bright crimson.

The body isn’t breathing.

Franky stares up, eyes blank and dead.

Shaking her head, Bridget’s words come out like a prayer. “Franky, Franky, Franky…”

Bridget’s eyes shoot open.

Jolted awake, she sits up in bed.

The bedroom is dark.

Off to her side, movement.

Erica has woken as well.

In silence, they look at one another, then, together, down at Franky, still asleep between them. Her mouth has fallen open and she’s snoring slightly. There’s a bit of drool on the pillow.

Hand trembling, Bridget tucks a stray bit of hair behind Franky’s ear. She doesn’t stir. She is alive though. She’s just sleeping like the dead.

Erica shakes her head, as if to clear it. Very quietly, “I… I have work to see to. I’ll… I’m going to do some work.”

Erica slips out of bed and leaves. Bridget lingers, but then follows. Grabbing her phone on the way out of the room, she notes that it’s quite early in the evening. They hadn’t been asleep for very long. She finds Erica, wearing loose black silk, at the dining room table with her laptop booting up.

Bridget pours two mugs of blood, microwaves them, and then brings breakfast to Erica. Erica takes the blood with a brief, murmured, word of thanks.

Bridget seats herself across the table from Erica. “Bad dream?” she asks. She holds her own mug with both hands wrapped around it, leeching what heat she can from the smooth ceramic.

“Very,” Erica says. Her focus is on her softly glowing laptop, not on Bridget, as she types something. The clatter of keys is overly loud. How many laptops does Erica go through in a month, abusing the things as she does? Changing the subject, Erica announces, “Repairs on the governor’s
residence are almost finished. They’ve finished the structural work.”

“That was fast,” Bridget replies. She takes a sip of her blood. In her hands, it’s starting to cool already and she much prefers it warm.

“The damage wasn’t as extensive as it looked and we’re not the government,” Erica says. “Our contractors show up and finish on time.”

Given that Bridget remembers a chunk of the front side of the building blown off, she finds the latter a more plausible explanation than the former. Since arriving in the city, she’s also gotten the impression that the coven has quite a bit of money to throw around, and that surely speeds things along as well.

“What was your dream about?” Bridget asks.

“Franky,” Erica says, blunt. “Dying. It was very vivid.” She pauses and there’s more clatter of keys. “Are you familiar with this Ferguson character? The person Brayden named?”

Bridget frowns at the abrupt change in conversation topic. “Spitz—the vampire downstairs—mentioned her. She’s of my line. He thought she was a creep.” Then, unwilling to let Erica dodge, “Do you think the dream was… a premonition?”

“She’s not on the coven roll, which is odd. Vera says she’s met her before and knows where to find her,” Erica says. “I think Vera doesn’t like Ferguson much either. She seems to be old and keeps to herself.” Agitated, she swipes a hand through her hair. It’s slightly tangled from sleep and her fingers get caught. She yanks them through aggressively anyway, pulling a strand or two loose. It’s a mystery of death that hair and fingernails are the only parts of a vampire that continue to grow post mortem. “And I don’t know what it was,” Erica says. “It was a bad dream.”

“We’ll need to approach her with caution,” Bridget muses. Though most covens make some effort to keep track of vampires within their territory, if only for tithing, given the size of New York, it’s hardly surprising that the roll isn’t complete. There are tens of thousands of vampires here, spread out amongst over eight million humans. Even small covens of only a few hundred lose track of members who have enough influence not to pay their taxes. Bridget continues, “I have a… contact with the Council. They might know something.”

She’s thinking, of course, of Channing. When she deals with the Council, she almost always deals with the Council through him. He is, as she understands it, their mouthpiece. Some form of middleman a step more important than Bridget and some number of steps less important than the Council’s actual members. She’s never seen him wear the silver and jet—

The silver and jet insignia that Erica’s sire had as a ring.

Does Erica know? Probably not.

Bridget drums her fingers on the tabletop once, twice, then takes another drink from her cup. “Should we tell Franky?”

“That she’s mortal?” Erica bites out. “I think she’s aware. No.”

Bridget peers into the depths of her mug. The blood, dark against the white of the cup, is starting to congeal. She drains the rest of it. She’s not fond of Erica’s impulse to dissemble; but maybe she shouldn’t have posed the question when she knew she wouldn’t like Erica’s answer. And if she knows something about Erica’s sire—does that make her the pot conversing with the kettle? “Everyone dies,” she says. “Not everyone dies violently.” She puts her empty mug on the table.
Erica jerks, looking up from her laptop to fix Bridget with wide grey-blue eyes.

“I underestimated you,” Bridget says. “Again. Your sire was German?”

Erica looks back down at her laptop. Her shoulders hunch. “More or less. She said she came from the court of the Holy Roman Emperor near the end of the Thirty Years’ War.” Scowling at her computer, “She liked that I spoke four languages. She always took every excuse she could find to not speak English.” Here, Erica switches over to a thick imitation of an accent, “A poor bastard child of a tongue, inelegant in every way.”

That Erica was some degree of polyglot in life is hardly surprising. It’s also hardly surprising that Erica’s sire identified herself as something other than probably as old as Rome. Or older. Even among vampires, there’s such a thing as unnervingly ancient. If she came to America when Erica says she did, she would have been one of the first of the European vampires in the New World as well. “¿Cuántos idiomas sabes hablar?” Bridget asks.

“Seis,” Erica replies. “Maybe. I only use English and Spanish regularly. The rest have faded. Sometimes there’s Latin in legal papers, but it’s not very good Latin.” She closes her eyes and exhales, a long, slow, sigh. She opens her eyes again. “She wasn’t a bad person.”

“Did she kill you?”

Erica says nothing to that, but her uneasy silence is answer enough. Bridget doesn’t need her vampiric talents to read Erica’s tumult.

“I think we should tell Franky,” Bridget says. “And I think I should give you Alan Doyle’s phone number.”

“Tell her that we both had a bad dream?” Erica snaps. “It could have been anything. It might not happen for another ten years. It might not happen at all.” Glaring at her laptop instead of looking at Bridget, “Do you know how to text a contact?”

Instead of saying anything in response, Bridget unlocks her phone and hands it to Erica.

As Erica does whatever it is she’s doing with the phone, “You’re using the default carrier background?”

“Sorry?” Bridget responds, not quite grasping Erica’s meaning.

“Nothing,” Erica amends. “I’m just surprised.” She passes the phone back to Bridget as her own pocket buzzes. “Not that I expected you to be part of selfie culture or anything.”

“Selfie?”

“Never mind,” Erica replies. “Can you meet this Ferguson? She knows something. She might even know where Jacs is hiding. I was going to go with Vera, but there’s other coven business I have to manage personally.” As Erica enunciates ‘other,’ Bridget feels a wave of annoyance and disgust roll off of her. It’s such a powerful wave that Bridget nearly misses the subtle coolness of calculation under it.

Does Erica have other business, or does Erica, under pressure of an uncomfortable conversation, have a distraction?

“What’s come up?” Bridget prods.
“The two largest clans are the only two who actually pledged to support the coven’s enforcers with this current mess,” Erica says. Her disgust ebbs, but her annoyance grows. “No doubt because they have a business stake in the outcome. They’re probably the only ones organized enough to do more than keep an eye on their own turf. But they haven’t sent anyone because they’re busy trying to kill each other. I’m dragging them to headquarters for mediation tonight. It’s been on the calendar for over a month, but I’ve been so caught up with...”

“Ah,” Bridget replies. She draws out the single syllable. Bridget empathizes—it’s what she does. But, in this case, she empathizes even more than usual.

It would seem then that even the New York coven, large and powerful as it is, can’t escape the most base of vampiric politics.

In the context of a coven, clans are collections of vampires of the same bloodline or related bloodlines. They tend to be most powerful in small, rural, European covens where one or two of them dominate the coven body, often erasing the distinction between clan and coven entirely. In large American cities, however, the power of any one clan is kept in check by either the numerosity of the other clans, or the numerosity of the clanless. In either case, the coven sits above the clans but can only function through some level of consensus, which in turn requires maintaining a delicate balance of power.

Likely, if the clans had been willing to stand with one another behind the coven, Jacs and her cronies would have been ripped out from the city root and stem years ago. But that’s not the nature of clans, whose first response to collective threats is inevitably collective infighting. Clans tend to cling to blood feuds to everyone’s detriment. It’s their nature.

Bridget has never had occasion in her long existence to herd cats. She imagines it’s easier than herding vampires.

“Time to put my three entire hours of alternative dispute resolution CLE to use,” Erica mutters.

Bridget tilts her head to the side. “CLE?”

Erica’s mood flickers. She hesitates. “Continuing legal education,” she says. “It’s... a lawyer thing.”

What she doesn’t say—what she doesn’t need to say—is that Mark would have understood. He probably would have found it funny, even.

“I can go meet Ferguson,” Bridget says. Bridget trusts that if Erica says she needs to handle the clans in person, and that if Erica is treating it as a priority, then it is a priority. Strategically, Bridget even prefers that she deal with Ferguson instead of Erica. If Ferguson is as Bridget suspects, Bridget doesn’t want Erica anywhere near her. Erica wears her heart on her sleeve. What’s more, Bridget doubts Erica can work with Vera effectively.

Erica lets out a long sigh. She looks away from her laptop’s glowing screen and meets Bridget’s eyes. “Thank you.”

Bridget finds a smile tugging at her lips. “Anything for you, dear.”

“Do you remember the way to the parking deck?” Erica asks. “Linda will be there in an hour.”

“I do,” Bridget answers. She hesitates. A priority and a distraction are not mutually exclusive. Should she push? Of course she should. “And Franky?”

Erica squirms. “I’ll bring her with me to headquarters,” she says.
Bridget inhales just so she can sigh. For good measure, she adds a touch of disappointment to her tone. “Erica.”

A burst of anxiety stabs out, then settles. Erica yields. “And… I’ll talk to her.”

“Franky has told me twice she doesn’t want to be one of us,” Bridget says. “But…”

But, as Bridget well knows, the calculus of these things can change.

She never expected to beg for a second chance at life, but she did.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Erica replies. She pauses to grimace. “But what is there to say that we haven’t already said?”

It’s not a question that Bridget has any particular answer to, so she doesn’t try to give one. Instead, she stands. “I’ll go get ready to leave then.” Erica, set on the path, will figure something out.

Erica makes a rude noise that Bridget chooses to interpret as acknowledgement.

Stepping around the table, Bridget leans down and kisses Erica’s cheek. Erica has very soft skin. “I believe in you,” Bridget says.

“That makes one of us,” Erica grumbles.

Bridget puts her now empty mug in the dishwasher and heads back downstairs. Briefly, she’s grateful that all of her things are still in her room and not Franky and Erica’s; to her senses, Franky is still asleep. For clothes, she picks out a pair of loose-fitting black pants, a blue top, and a charcoal jacket that hides her knife and gun nicely. Unsure what the night will hold, she selects boots for footwear. In her line of work, it often pays to be able to run for her life through all terrain. Hair and makeup don’t take long and she’s left with enough time to take out her phone, contemplate calling Channing, plan, and then follow through.

He picks up after just two rings.

“Westfall.” As always, his tone is a bit too friendly to be sincere. Is there a note of surprise in it? It’s hard to tell. Nothing with Channing is ever straightforward.

“Channing.”

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” he asks. His voice is staticky, as if he’s in a place with poor reception. Like Bridget, he’s probably underground. “I hear you’ve made excellent progress with our little problem. The Council is impressed—no simple feat.”

“I exist to serve,” Bridget replies blandly.

“Do you?” Channing asks, sounding knowing in the sort of way that unsettles. “But I’m sure that’s not why you’ve called. What can I help you with, Westfall?”

“Ferguson,” Bridget says. “Does the name ring any bells?”

Channing, for once, goes quiet. Seconds drag by. Then, finally, “Joan Ferguson, I assume. I’m not surprised your paths are crossing.”

Standing alone in her room, Bridget’s brow furrows. She’s not sure what to make of what Channing’s just said. “Is there anything else I should know?” she asks.
“I’d tell you to be careful,” Channing says. “But you’re always careful, aren’t you?”

“You know me too well,” Bridget replies.

Channing laughs. “You do your job and I do mine. Don’t get blackmailed.”

There’s a click and then the line goes dead.

Frowning, Bridget slides her phone into her pocket. Channing didn’t tell her much, but he told her enough. He told her enough that she’s glad she told Erica to stay behind. Whatever moved the Council to send Bridget to New York—she’d already suspected it was deeper than street drugs and blood houses, but pieces of the puzzle are still missing. For the moment though, there’s nothing for her to do on that front but continue with her job.

Casting her senses out, she feels that Franky and Erica are as they were an hour ago. One asleep, the other taking her frustrations out on a laptop that surely wasn’t made with moody vampires in mind.

Not wanting to disturb either of them, Bridget goes down into the basement. She greets Spitz in a cursory fashion, then continues on her way to the tunnels and then the parking deck beyond. There’s no sign of Linda, so she leans against a concrete wall and waits. Idly, she opens her phone to see if she can tell what it was Erica did. It looks like some kind of file attachment. Texting a contact, Erica had called it.

If their misgivings are correct—and Bridget hopes that they aren’t—there may come a time when Erica needs it.

In the course of things, Bridget doesn’t wait long.

When Linda pulls up, Vera is already in the vehicle. She’s wearing a dark green sweater and grey slacks instead of the black suit that would mark her as a member of the coven’s upper echelon. She’s also wearing a thick belt, sturdy enough to support her holstered handgun. As Bridget climbs in, Vera nods to her. “Inquisitor.”

Tension sits thick in the air.

Bridget pulls her seat belt down and buckles it. “Vera,” she greets. She adds a smile as well. She and the coven’s Second have hardly spoken since her arrival. Now that she finally has a chance, she’d prefer Vera to be an ally than antagonist. Smart and competent, powerful in her own right, and with complexities that Bridget can feel swirling about her—but that Bridget hasn’t fully picked apart yet, it’s a pity their paths are crossing so late.

As Linda starts the car into motion, Bridget ventures, “Erica says you’ve encountered this Ferguson before?” Vera feels wary rather than hostile, and Bridget can work with that.

Vera nods. It’s a very stiff motion, to the point of awkwardness. “I served as Second for the three Governors before Governor Davidson,” she says. “Governor Peters, before Dalton, before Jackson—he had some dealings with her.”

There’s more to that story than Vera is telling. Extracting the details will be a delicate task.

“Erica suggested you don’t like her very much,” Bridget prompts. Outside, the traffic is heavy and they’re making little headway through the evening city. Rush hour means it probably would have been much faster to go through the tunnels and the subway, but there’s just enough light left in the sky that taking an above-ground route in cars without treated windows could have been uncomfortable.
“She’s dangerous,” Vera replies.

“More than the average vampire?” Bridget asks.

The look Vera shoots Bridget could kill.


Vera regards Bridget. “What are you asking, Inquisitor?”

“I was briefed on you before I arrived,” Bridget starts. Flattery is almost always the fastest way to get someone to lower their guard. Rare is the person, vampire or human, who isn’t drawn in by themselves. “You’re competent, unlike some of the Governors you’ve worked for.” It feels akin to betrayal to suggest that Erica might be included in the sweep of her words, but Bridget thinks she knows what Vera needs to hear. She just mentioned she's been passed over for promotion repeatedly. And... there's something about her that feels... lonely. It's not a clear feeling that comes across with the rest of Vera's emotional mix, rather, it sits there in the background, lurking just outside of conscious perception. Mentioning such things, however, would be rude. Going in the opposite direction though? Bridget presses ahead. “You’re a valued asset to your coven. Dealing with this Ferguson will go better if we’re on the same page.”

“I wasn’t aware we weren’t on the same page,” Vera replies, voice short. Her expression is stony. “She probably knows where Jacs Holt is hiding, but we’re on a fool’s errand to ask for her help.”

“Fool’s errand?” Bridget asks. “That’s a bit strong, don’t you think?”

“Ferguson doesn’t do anything if it’s not in her own interests, and her own interests are malicious, spiteful, and—and she’s not a good person.” From the agitation in Vera’s mood, Bridget surmises that in whatever dealings Vera had with Ferguson in the past, Vera got burned. Badly.

“I can work with that,” Bridget says, speaking with deliberate confidence. At the moment, she wants buy-in from Vera. “Do you have any insight as to her motives here?”

“None whatsoever,” Vera replies. She sighs. “She mostly avoids attention. She’s one of the only members of... your line in the city. Probably the only one of significance. Governor Peters wanted to recruit her to work for the coven.”

“I take it she said no,” Bridget concludes.

“Correct.” Vera fidgets, starting to wring her hands and then stopping herself. “And then she blackmailed him into removing her from the coven rolls.”

“Do you know why?” Bridget presses. “Aside from avoiding paying her taxes.” She thinks Vera would have said if she knew the reason, but given how tight lipped she is, Bridget thinks it best to ask directly. Vera’s level of agitation would be consistent with Vera herself having been blackmailed as well.

“No,” Vera says. “I assume she wanted something else and I wasn’t privy to it. It doesn’t take blackmailing a Governor to fall off the roll. Clerical errors are cheaper.”

Bridget hums an acknowledgement. “When we get there, I think I should take the lead,” she says. “My relatives can be very... difficult.”

The corners of Vera’s mouth twitch. It’s the merest hint of a smile. Then, she looks away out the window towards the stalled traffic outside. “If we get there,” she says.
By the time they arrive at the location, night has fallen enough that they can exit the car without worrying about the sun. They pull up to a reasonably nondescript office building. From the drive, Bridget thinks they’re somewhere in the middle of Manhattan, though it’s hard to gauge distance and direction in such heavy city traffic. There was a time when Bridget could navigate by the stars. It’s not a skill of much use in the modern era. Has she seen any stars at all since she came to New York?

Linda lets Vera and Bridget out and then drives away in search of parking—or to circle the area until called again if there’s no parking to be found. New York streets are a mess and humans aren’t the only ones contributing to global warming.

Bridget regards the building, skeptical. “She’s here?” she asks.

“If she’s not here, someone here will know where to find her,” Vera replies. Taking the lead, she opens the building door and goes to an elevator, though she then presses for the second floor, making Bridget think they’re taking the elevator only because the stairs are tucked away somewhere inconvenient.

When the elevator doors open on the second floor, Bridget is immediately struck by stark fluorescent lights and a cacophony of metal brightly clashing against metal, punctuated by ear-splitting electronic beeping and the occasional shout. It’s headache-inducing. The air smells of sweat and oil.

Stepping out of the elevator and into the room, Bridget glances to Vera. “A fencing salle?”

Vera doesn’t respond. There’s not much need to. Given the white-clad figures scampering up and down raised metal strips laid on the floor, it’s very obvious what the place is. All interior walls have been taken down, leaving just the building’s support columns, to make more space for the athletes to move. Vera points to the far end of the room where two epeeists are engaged, both sort of bouncing on the balls of their feet as they wait for the other to make a mistake. “There, I think,” Vera says. “The tall one.”

Bridget frowns. “They’re all tall.”

Together, Vera and Bridget pick their way across the hall. The place is quite crowded and the metal pistes that mark the playing fields for the fencers have been packed together with supreme efficiency, leaving almost no room to maneuver without getting in someone’s way. The one good thing about so much activity is that they attract little attention, despite being dressed as they are in street clothes instead of the white and grimy off-white outfits of the athletes.

The piste they stop at has a small crowd of silent onlookers watching the bout taking place. Some of them stand motionless in a way that suggests they’re not alive. From the way Vera settles in to wait, Bridget concludes Ferguson is one of the two fencers on the strip.

Though Bridget was a competent swordswoman several centuries ago, she’s not familiar enough with the modern descendant of the practice to decipher who has the advantage. Whatever it is she’s watching is very different from combat as she knows it. For as long as Bridget has existed, dueling has been a part of the Traditions. Duels in the Traditions are to the death and fought with any blade or weapon short of a gun. They’re an expression of raw power. No matter how elegantly they might begin, they end in blood. Sport, on the other hand, is something else entirely. The two fencers are doing the same thing they were doing when Vera and Bridget first walked into the room—they’re bouncing.

From time to time one of them will tap the other’s outstretched blade, but it’s a rare occurrence.

Bridget doesn’t recall swordplay in past years having been this boring.
Waiting for the bout to conclude, Bridget tentatively examines the currents of emotion around her. With so many people all in various states of agitation, it takes no small amount of concentration to focus in on the two fencers on the strip. One of them is a messy roil of frustration and calculation. The other is… blank.

The blank one, Bridget thinks, must be Ferguson.

In Bridget’s existence, she has encountered only a few vampires who could shield themselves so completely. Her sire was one. Channing is another. And now… Ferguson.

There’s a cold feeling in her gut and Bridget recognizes it as fear.

At the same time though—

Bridget’s line has a reputation for playing mind games and enjoying them. It’s a deserved reputation and Bridget is… not an exception. There’s a part of her that looks forward to whatever challenges this cousin of hers will present.

Carefully, she pictures a white wall in her mind. She is still, she tells herself. She is dead.

There are tricks to shielding thoughts and emotions from the bloodlines who have talent with such things, but Bridget rarely has opportunity to practice against skilled and powerful opponents. She would hope that her blank wall is enough, but to hope would be to disrupt her illusion of void. Thinking while feeling nothing is an art form. Half of it is emotional control in the moment and the other half is avoiding thoughts that are sharp, jagged, likely to break through.

In a flash, Ferguson lunges forward. She catches her opponent’s blade and pushes it aside before hitting them in the shoulder with enough force to send them stumbling backwards. It looks and, to the fencer and to Bridget’s sense of them, feels, painful.

Both fencers walk to the faded yellow lines near the center of the metal strip, take off their masks, salute, and shake hands.

Ferguson appears older. Her hair is starting to silver and she has a few wrinkles on her face, the sort accumulated by a lifetime of frowning. She’s significantly taller than Bridget—which, in fairness, isn’t saying much—and somewhat taller than many of the other fencers in the room. Given her ability to shield herself, Bridget assumes she is quite old indeed—and in her mortal years she must have been considered freakishly huge. Vera wasn’t wrong to call her the tall one.

Though surely she has noticed her callers, Ferguson is unhurried as she unhooks from the wires connecting her to the fencing strip and passes them off to another fencer. Only when that’s done does she approach them. Keeping hold of her weapon, she tucks her mask under one elbow. “Vera,” she greets. Her eyes, chillingly cold, flicker to Bridget. “And you must be Westfall. You have quite the reputation. How good to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” Bridget replies.

“To what do I owe this…” Ferguson trails off, pretending to search for a word. It’s a very deliberate gesture and it doesn’t quite succeed. In addition to being an empty space to Bridget’s sense of the currents around her, Ferguson’s face has very little affect—certainly not enough to genuinely portray what she’s attempting. “Good fortune?”

Acutely aware of the humans milling about around them, Bridget chooses her words with care. “Coven business,” she says. “Is there somewhere quieter we could speak?”
Ferguson barely twitches. “I’m afraid coven business if of no interest to me,” she says. “I am a private individual.”

Bridget focuses on her white wall, forcing any frustration that Ferguson might have provoked behind it, out of sight. At her side though, she can feel Vera’s irritation mixed with apprehension. “Then can we speak somewhere in private?” Bridget repeats.

“Do you fence, Westfall?” Ferguson asks, ignoring Bridget’s request.

Briefly, Bridget glances around at the rest of the room. Their conversation has attracted a small audience. Returning her focus to Ferguson, “I can’t say that I’ve tried the modern incarnation.” Trying to force the conversation back where Bridget wants it would just cause a scene.

“The rules and the motions are different but the idea is the same,” Ferguson replies. “I’ve heard you were once quite adept. Would you do me the honor?”

Bridget offers a thin smile. If she had to guess, her wall has been somewhat effective and Ferguson is trying to bait her into distraction. “I think I’ll have to decline,” she says. “There are only so many hours in the night and there’s still business to attend to. I’m not dressed for it either.”

“Pity,” Ferguson says. “As you can see, I am busy at the moment. You should come back another time.”

Painfully aware of her lack of leverage, Bridget offers, “I could be convinced, if you could spare a moment to discuss business afterwards.”

The smile on Ferguson’s face looks forced and unnatural. “Excellent,” she says. She gestures towards a wall where there are racks of blades as well as a stack of masks and crates of white uniforms. “We have spare equipment. We can do this in the traditional manner. No need for wires.”

Bridget pulls off her jacket and hands it, along with her gun, to Vera, who is frowning deeply in a swirl of unease and worry. The worry, Bridget thinks, is for her. Vera is stern and severe, but there’s a kindness in her that’s rare among their lot. It’s touching.

Trying as best she can to reassure, even as she maintains her wall, Bridget pats Vera’s hand.

In response, tight lipped, Vera nods. Her unease persists.

In the equipment area, a human helps Bridget work out how to put on the fencer’s uniform. The process is far more complicated than the fight-as-you-are duels that Bridget remembers from centuries past, but there’s a pleasant security about knowing she won’t be one wrong move away from a piece of steel lodged in her chest.

Stepping onto the piste… something feels familiar about it, even if it’s a metal rectangle instead of a circle in the dirt. Old memories stir—ones she was intentionally avoiding in this moment.

Dueling was how Bridget killed her sire, following Tradition.

Bridget’s wall cracks.

As she salutes, drawing the guard of her weapon up to her face and then lowering it again, she sees the glint of triumph in Ferguson’s eyes before her opponent lowers her mask.

Mimicking the motion, Bridget rebuilds her mental wall, quickly, haphazardly.
Someone calls for the bout to begin and it begins.

Bridget takes her stance and doesn’t try to bounce, doesn’t try the catty game of blade work that she saw the fencers using earlier. She never trained in those things and they won’t serve her now if she attempts them. Across from her, Ferguson isn’t bouncing either. Both of them stay steady on their feet, tense, waiting. They’re playing this the old way.

Bridget extends her weapon, testing the waters.

Ferguson doesn’t react.

Bridget darts forward, aiming for Ferguson’s wrist, the only part of her that Bridget has any hope of reaching without being skewered on the way to target. All it takes is a small twitch and Ferguson blocks the attack with her bell guard. A metallic clang rings out. Sharp. Bright.

Moving fluidly, Ferguson goes from parry to riposte and Bridget only barely retreats in time to avoid being hit. Taking up momentum, Ferguson advances, constantly probing Bridget’s defense, darting from attack to attack with such alacrity that Bridget can only block and continue to retreat, every step following the tempo Ferguson has set, until her back foot catches at end of the strip.

With nowhere left to go, Bridget holds her ground. She is utterly outmatched and she knows it. She’s going to lose.

She lasts another few seconds before Ferguson scores a touch, slamming the point of her weapon into the base of Bridget’s throat.

Bridget gags and coughs. Even with the fencing gear to protect her, she feels like she’s been skewered clean through. Lowering her weapon, Ferguson backs away, returning to her starting line. She raises her mask and salutes. Much more slowly, Bridget recovers and hobbles to her own line before observing the same formalities. Neither of them move to shake hands.

Ferguson is still calm, composed, in a way that sends gooseflesh rippling over Bridget’s skin.

“I’m surprised you managed to kill him,” Ferguson states.

It’s in that moment that Bridget realizes that her wall is gone. She abandoned it somewhere in the flurry of trying to ward off Ferguson’s attacks. She tries to scramble to build it back up again but it’s far too late for that. Panic has set in, and panic is the great enemy of control. She needs to end the conversation as quickly as possible, lest Ferguson manipulate her into—

Bridget doesn’t know Ferguson’s agenda, but she has no doubt that it is contrary to the coven’s. And it’s not Jacs’ agenda. Ferguson is too old, too powerful to follow a petty warlord. Bridget is sure, too, that whatever skill she herself has at talking people into things by way of both enticement and force, Ferguson surpasses her.

More often than not, the best way to deal with members of Bridget’s line is to avoid them.

Discretion is the better part of valor, as they say.

But it would be a waste to have come this far only to give up so soon. And she can’t let Erica down.

“Can we discuss the coven now?” Bridget asks.

“We can,” Ferguson replies. “I have an office here.”
Ferguson hands her mask and blade to one of the assembled onlookers, who dutifully takes it. Bridget’s first instinct is to do the same, to give her gear to Vera, but that won’t do. Vera already has Bridget’s jacket and gun. So, instead, Bridget offers her mask and whites to the same man Ferguson had passed hers off to. Bridget offers with enough force he can’t refuse. Then, she follows Ferguson around several fencing strips towards a door in the sidewall of the salle.

Behind her, she can feel a great deal of uninvited curiosity and, from Vera, tumultuous worry.

Hopefully, Vera’s worry won’t be realized.

Ferguson’s office is spare and sterile. Nothing is out of place. There are a few shelves along the far wall that hold books, organized, at a glance, alphabetically by author. Three filing cabinets of exactly the same type stand next to one another under the shelves.

Entering the room fully, Bridget closes the door behind her.

Ferguson takes a seat behind her desk, a massive steel thing without so much as a scuff mark. With a gloved hand, she indicates that Bridget should take a seat in one of the two chairs across from her. The chairs, side by side, are aligned precisely in line with one another, and they are perfectly perpendicular to Ferguson’s desk. As Bridget sits, she notices that the only things on the unblemished desk are an empty letter tray, a pencil sharpener, and a line of yellow pencils, all exactly the same length. To all appearances, none of them have ever been used.

Bridget doesn’t need to be able to read Ferguson to know that she is being watched, being observed, being analyzed. She holds the white wall in her mind. She doesn’t let it bother her.

Slouching back in her chair slightly, relaxed, Bridget pushes a bit with her foot against the floor, sliding herself and the chair backwards an inch or two, at an angle.

Ferguson’s eyes flicker downwards, away from Bridget’s face and to the chair. Then they return to Bridget’s face.

“You wanted something?” Ferguson prompts. Her tone, as usual, is even and devoid of affect.

“You’ve heard about the dispute between the coven and the Holts?” Bridget answers. It’s a rhetorical question if ever there were one.

“What’s left of them,” Ferguson replies. “Yes. How does this concern me?”

“With as much influence as you have, do you have any insight as to their whereabouts?”

“There’s been a great deal of… disorder in this city,” Ferguson states. “Gangs. Drugs. Filth. Undesirables.” When Ferguson says undesirables, for the first time some modicum of emotion slips into her tone. The emotion is disgust. “I see the Council has finally taken notice,” Ferguson continues. “Actions finally have consequences.”

“I’m not here to reform the city,” Bridget says, keeping her tone measured.

“There’s a warehouse southwest of Prospect Park,” Ferguson says. “It’s a haven for distasteful things. If I were looking for Jacs Holt, that would be where I would look.”

It doesn’t mean much to Bridget. She assumes Prospect Park is a landmark of some sort in the area, but she’ll have to consult with Vera or Erica to determine how useful Ferguson’s advice will be to them.
“The coven thanks you,” Bridget replies.

“I’m not helping the coven,” Ferguson answers. Her face moves into a smile. “I’m helping family.”

Bridget smiles back. Do her smiles ever look as forced as Ferguson’s? She hopes not. Understanding the conversation to be over, she stands up. As she stands, she lets the backs of her knees nudge her chair a bit farther out of place. “Thank you.”

Ferguson’s false smile fades. “Please tell Vera to give my regards to her sire.”

Bridget nods. “Of course.”

Back out in the salle proper, with as much speed as she can muster without clearly rushing, Bridget divests herself of the rest of her borrowed equipment and joins Vera in evacuating the fencing hall, taking her jacket and gun back wordlessly. As soon as the elevator doors shut behind them, they both sag. Bridget leans against the fake-wood wall of the car for the short ride down to the first floor. “I can see why you don’t like her,” Bridget remarks. Then, “She said to give her regards to your sire.”

Vera goes very, very still. Horror and panic seep into the enclosed space.

“I won’t ask,” Bridget says. For the moment, she doesn’t need to know. Family, by birth or by blood, is complicated. For herself, she doesn’t know how closely she and Ferguson may be related, and the part of her that’s driven by emotion instead of the part that drives it—that part doesn’t want to ever find out.

Vera clears her throat once, twice, then, “Thank you.”

The elevators slide open, disgorging them back into the empty building lobby. They head out onto the nighttime sidewalk.

Vera reaches for her phone. “I’ll call for Linda,” she says.

“I got something.” Bridget says. “Maybe.” Out of habit, she slips her hands into her pockets. Pockets sewn into clothes instead of worn apart are one of the many fashion developments in the past few centuries that Bridget’s taken quite a liking to.

Vera exchanges a few brief words with someone on the other end of the line, then returns her attention to Bridget. “What?”

“She said there was a warehouse southwest of Prospect Park,” Bridget answers.

Vera frowns. “There are a lot of warehouses that description. Do you trust what she gave you?”

“No,” Bridget says, not hesitating. She doesn’t even know what Prospect Park is. It’s likely a literal park of some sort, but place names in cities can be deceptive. “But I don’t know her well enough to know what the trap is. She’s a spider, but I can’t see the web.”

“Governor Peters was scared of her,” Vera replies. “Not just of the blackmail.”

“Governor Peters was wise,” Bridget says.

“Governor Dalton cut off Governor Peters’ head with a letter opener,” Vera responds.

Bridget clears her throat. Yes, she remembers that. She wasn’t there for it, of course, but it’s not every decade that a leader of a major coven dies so unfortunately. Word of the demise traveled fast. “We all have our shortcomings.”
In the street, one of the gas-guzzling black cars favored by the coven slows to a stop and flashes its headlights.

Bridget, still with her hands in her pockets, uses her head to nod towards it. “That’s probably Linda.” With a quick glance for traffic, she heads towards the vehicle.

It is not, however Linda.

Jake, with his cloying smile, gets out and opens the rear door of the vehicle for them. There’s a sort of nervous panic gripping him that gives Bridget pause.

Vera pauses as well. Her pause is less cautious though, more angry. “What are you doing here?” she demands. “You don’t have clearance for this. Where’s Linda?”

Jake’s laugh sounds forced. His shoulders twitch, like he’s trying to resist the urge to cower. “Linda was running low on gas. Circling for a while, couldn’t find parking. They’ve replaced most of the spots in this area with bike lanes. Dispatch gave me the brief and sent me with a new car.”

The noise that Vera emits is a cross between a growl and an exceedingly exasperated sigh. “Fine,” she says. She waves at Jake dismissively as she climbs into the car. “We’re going to the parking deck near the safe house. I assume that if dispatch sent you then you know where to go.”

Frowning, Bridget gets into the car after Vera. Whatever is going on between Jake and Vera—Jake’s emotional disarray exceeds what Bridget would expect from a work dispute. As soon he closes the car door behind her, Bridget checks that the barrier is raised between the passenger compartment and the driver’s section, then turns to Vera and asks, “What was that?”

Vera grimaces. “Personal,” she replies.

The car shudders as the driver’s door shuts, and then the vehicle lurches into motion.

“And he’s a bad driver,” Vera adds. “He probably left the parking brake on. It’s a good thing these cars are all automatic.”

The car continues forward, still lurching, then, suddenly, smooths out. Bridget concludes that Vera’s speculation about the parking brake was correct.

“He’s young to be so involved,” Bridget prompts.

“Will recommended him,” Vera replies, sounding more than a bit bitter. She sighs, then adds, “And he doesn’t have a sire…”

“The coven took him in?” Bridget asks.

“Unfortunately,” Vera answers. She looks out one of the windows. Changing the subject, “At least the traffic has cleared somewhat.”

“Sometimes I miss the days before cars,” Bridget remarks. She pauses, just long enough for a bit of dramatic effect. “And then I remember the days before cars.”

This gets an amused chuff from Vera. “Traffic in New York has been bad for over a century,” she says.

“At least we don’t have to clean horse shit off our shoes anymore,” Bridget replies. She too looks out the window now. Her brow furrows. By her reckoning, they’re headed north when they should be
traveling south. Amongst the canyons of the city though, she could be wrong. “Are we going the right way?”

Vera shrugs. “He might be using his phone to drive,” she says. “There’s a program you can run on them that shows maps and gives directions based on traffic reports. It claims to be faster.”

Bridget hums in response. A map on her phone sounds useful. “Clever.” Then, she frowns. The hairs on the back of her neck are standing up. A spike in anxiety, so sharp it borders on terror, from the front of the car has caught her attention. The car shudders a bit, but continues on its way. The anxiety doesn’t abate. Bridget tilts her chin towards the partition that separates the passenger compartment from the driver. “Something’s wrong.”

“What’s that?” Vera asks.

“Something’s wrong with Jake,” Bridget elaborates, though, as elaboration goes, it’s not much. For the moment, it’s all she’s got. With the partition raised, they can’t hear anything from the driver’s compartment, nor can they see ahead of the car. It could be nothing. Maybe a car hit a biker. Maybe a biker hit a pedestrian. Maybe it’s something far more serious.

Vera’s brow creases. She pulls out her phone, unlocks it, and scrolls through her contacts before selecting one to call.

Six rings, and no answer.

Jake’s voicemail picks up. He hasn’t recorded a personal message. An automated female voice recites his phone number. Vera hangs up.

The car turns down a narrow one-way street, goes on fifty feet or so, then stops. Tall New York buildings loom over them. The shadows here are deep. Bridget senses tightly focused violent intent on all sides, coming from more sources than she can count. They’re surrounded. Completely.

Bridget and Vera lock eyes for a moment. Then, Bridget, releasing her seat belt and reaching for her gun, “Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my friend Lipsie for help with German. And another friend helped me with the Spanish. I trust Google with my life, but not with my fic.

As usual, thank you to my beta reader for this chapter, and to all ya’ll for reading the chapter and reading this note <3

I think this chapter was a bit *hand wiggle.* It’s a transition chapter. I’m not super happy with it, but I figured it was time to post it and move on. Trying to write Vera -- I almost feel like her strongest moments in the show are when she’s by herself and even with a superpowered Bridget it’s hard to dig into her as a minor character from an outside POV. She’s, like, too complicated to be a minor character. And then Ferguson, is, like, I sort of hate that character. Her motives in the show are such a mess. Anyway. The next chapter will be, uh, very different. Lol. Haha. Uhm. Yeah.
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