The Doppelganger, he was a purebred demon. His mind was a meat grinder; it mangled anything that was unfortunate enough to be fed into its saw-toothed maw. It disfigured and mutilated human emotion beyond all recognition. Twisted them into things that were violent and cruel and completely unrecognizable.

Love, Dante's love for Nero, had its skin split open and bones cracked to pieces, rearranged and played with, darkened and made into something so much worse.

Notes

This fics told for the POV of Dark!Dante or Doppleganger!Dante, not the Uncle Dante we all know and love.
Gift of Taste

I love him…really I do.

I love him the way a predator loves its prey, as he prefers pain over pleasure, an absolutely delightful trait. To feel him writhing in my arms, tears streaming down his beautiful face, overwhelmed by being taken by one he could never bring himself to love.

Even though he may have demonic blood, he is still human enough to feel me touching him, to feel me inside his warm soft body, his muscles tightening around me with each hard thrust that is driving him towards the edge. I am happy to say that I was the man who was given the gift to taste what has never been tasted before.

My dear sweet Nero…

He is so petite in comparison to my grand stature; naked and vulnerable, while I remained fully clothed, my trousers pushed down just enough for me to impale him. He is on his back, facing me, his trembling legs spread wide. I smile impishly as I brush my fingers through those mercury locks, massaging his scalp as I leaned into the crook of his neck and breathed in his candied scent. I get a muffled whimper as he tried to pull away, but I had a nice grip and managed to keep him in place.

Before all this began I had tied some cloth around his mouth to keep him from making too much noise, screaming and yelling would ruin the mood for me. I also have never cared much for flailing either, and had tied his wrists together as well…

His hands clasped together as if in prayer, powder blue eyes shut tight, I can almost laugh at the irony. A demon praying to a god for deliverance from another. Saliva dripped down his chin from attempting to speak but being unable to do so, his skin rosy and flushed from my lustful actions, his bare shoulders trembling violently from suppressed sobs. I grinned as I heard his breathing deepening, pleasure building in places he never thought was possible.

Needless to say I continue my assault, my breathing becoming uneven as I treaded on enchanted ground, my heart beating out of rhythm. My calm composure shatters as I throw my head back with a strangled yell, releasing my seed inside of him.

I closed my eyes as I heard him moan, felt him squirm, clenching his hands into tight fists as my warmth enveloped him completely, that devils arm casting off a radiant blue hue. I unthreaded my fingers from his mercury tresses, massaging his scalp lightly before pulling my hand away.

He lay motionless after a few moments, his ragged breathing the only indication that he is still alive. He whimpered in pain as I pulled myself out of him, his blood and my semen staining the sheets with droplets of red and white. I smirked as I shook myself off before pulling my trousers up.

The boy turned his head to the side to get a better view of me as I gently leaned down and planted a kiss on the side of his neck, causing him to shudder and flinch at the unwanted contact.

His sterling hair strewn across his prepossessing face like some seductive Narcissus, I smiled as I untied the cloth from around his mouth, flinging the fabric to the side before doing the same to the bindings around his wrists.

I watched as he refused to move from his place on the bed, his arms lying limply next to his body like a broken doll, his legs trembling uncontrollably, saliva dripping down his chin. He looked up...
at me with such malice and actual hate that, had I been any other man, I would’ve wilted under his gaze.

But no, I simply smile and cross my arms firmly over my chest, content with what I had just done. He looked up at me, still glowering as he wrapped his arms around his trembling shoulders, tears of rage streaming down his cheeks. He hated me, that much I knew from his body language, he didn’t have to say a word, his expression alone told me everything I needed to know.

I brought my hand out to brush some of his hair out of his eyes, but he swatted it away with his demon arm, those eyes locked onto mine, teeth gnashed together. “Don’t you fucking touch me!” He snarled at me through clenched teeth, his voice broken and high-pitched. He wiped his eyes with his shaking fist, but still more tears fell. He looked so small lying there, then again, I was twice as big as he was…

Hell, I might as well have fucked a child.

I snatch him by his devil’s wrist and he panics, sobbing as he beats my chest with ineffective blows as I pull him into a tight embrace, pressing my mouth against his forehead, shushing his sobs the way a parent would comfort their crying child. He pushes vainly against my chest to get away, but due to either exhaustion or my assault or both, he stops, his hands falling to his sides as he lies almost limply in my arms, and cries. I smile as I lick my lips with my tongue.

Battered and broken, he burrows his face in my chest and cries, because even though I was the one to cause him so much pain, I’m the only person in the world he can run to for compassion. I plant a tender kiss on his forehead, and he in turn bites my chest, his hands clutching at my shirt to keep from trembling. “Shhhhhhh…it’s okay.” I coo as I breathe in the scent of his skin, stroking his head softly. He continues shaking as he lays his head against my chest, letting out a trembling breath, not saying a word.

How long we remained in that position I’ll never know, it wasn’t until I unraveled myself from our embrace did he manage to dry his tears. I got up off the bed and stepped back to get a better look at him.

He kept his head down, silver locks falling across his bloodshot eyes as he crossed his legs in an attempt to cover his private places. I couldn’t help but smile, for I had done this more than once and yet he still felt self-conscious about his lovely little body. I let out a soft sigh as I slowly strip my black long-coat from my shoulders and handed it to the shivering boy who hesitated before taking it between his shaking fingers.

I turn to leave as he wrapped it around his naked body as a makeshift blanket. Out of the corner of my eye I see him snuggling into it for warmth, and I couldn’t help but smile as I walked out, leaving him alone with his thoughts and my deeds. As I walked out the door I remember hearing a very soft sob followed by a very faint whisper I’m sure he had not meant for me to hear.

“Dan…te…”
Sapphire Flare

After those little sessions of ours, Nero would go into a near catatonic state, lying on the bed, curled up like a fetus in the womb. This wouldn’t last for very long as he would snap out of it in an hour or so. I will admit that I still don’t know why he does that, I’m not for certain if it is intentional or not. Perhaps that’s his way of coping with my particular interest in him, as I’m sure no other had shown him before, man or demon, and certainly not an abomination like that damned half-breed bastard.

I remember the very first time I had shown Nero attention and made my intentions obvious, it was very different, for I was unprepared and he had put up a fight. I still have the faint scars on my person where he had attempted to snap my neck with that devil bringer of his, but I had put a quick stop to that, it was very simple. I would like to go into detail, but I’ll save that story for another night, I need my blood for my cerebrum as opposed to my masculine organ, thank you very much.

As I headed downstairs I noticed that my trousers were still undone, and buttoned them before heading into the kitchen to wash my hands. I stepped to the sink and turned on the water, cleaning them with soap and warm water, getting under my fingernails to scrape away the dried blood. I then turned my attention towards the coffee maker that had been rarely used until I got here.

I leaned against the counter, flexing my fingers, smiling gently as the black liquid bubbled into the pot, filling the air with its aroma.

I paused when I heard the sound of a door opening on the second floor, and brought my gaze up towards the ceiling, listening intently. I heard the sound of his footsteps, soft footsteps that staggered down the steps, followed by a few murmured curses, like he knew that I was listening and didn’t want me to hear.

I smirked, crossing my arms over my chest as Nero came into view; he was clutching the soiled bed sheets and limping slightly, doing his best to hide it. He was dressed sloppily in a loose-fit pair of grey sweat pants, and had no shirt on. He seemed to be heading to the washroom to clean the sheets, as that was his bed that we were together in after all.

Needless to say I was a bit surprised to see him, as I’ve grown so accustomed to him just lying wherever it is I leave him for at least an hour or so. Maybe he’s getting used to my treatment of him; if that’s the case, I’ll have to change that. “Hello Nero.” I purred, trying to soften my voice after our little get-together.

“Don’t talk to me…” he snarled through clenched teeth, his voice was broken and trying to mend itself, to sound hostile and defiant, but even then it was so thin I could snap it in two if it were tangible. I shrugged my shoulders as I smiled kindly at him, letting him know that no matter what tone he took with me, it would not change my good mood.

He continued to glower at me even as I turned my back to him to pour myself a cup of coffee, taking a few sips of the scalding hot liquid, but it didn’t bother me.

Without breathing another word, Nero turned and headed into the washroom. My red eyes followed his movements, that faltering limp that he tried so very hard to hide, probably not wanting to show that I had hurt him so badly in such an intimate place. Or maybe he thought that if I saw him limp it would give me some form of satisfaction, and it does.

He hasn’t even taken a shower yet either, I could tell that by the greasy stain blossoming on the
seat of his pants, getting a little bigger with each step he took. He limped out of my view, and I heard the door to the washroom opening and closing.

I set my mug down on the counter and walked out of the kitchen, heading towards the washroom. I opened the door to a slit and peered inside, watching Nero fumble with the washing machine. He crammed the soiled sheets into its mouth before taking the cap off a large container of bleach, soaking the fabric until the odor was so strong that it overpowered any taste I had in my mouth. He closed the door to the washing machine and turned it on before taking a step back, wrapping his arms around his body, shivering as if he were cold.

I entered the room, and he was either too preoccupied with the machine to pay me any mind or he simply did not realize that I was there. It seemed to be the latter as he let out a soft gasp as I wrapped my arms around his waist. He tried to turn his head away but I grabbed his chin, holding him in place as I leaned in and pinched his earlobe between my teeth, causing him to shudder violently in my arms, blue eyes fluttering shut.

“St-stop…stop. Please.” The weak aggression he had addressed me with before had died away like it always does, leaving him whimpering as he tried to pry my hands from his body.

At first I could not understand for the life of me why Nero hardly ever fought back.

He was more than capable of doing so. He owned a revolver and that broad sword, and from the few fights I’ve seen him in, he’s very skilled with them both, and he’s especially creative with that little trick up his sleeve. He is at least partially human; however, if he was more or less than that half-bred devil hunter then I’m not so sure.

From my understanding, when it comes to two different bloodlines intermingling with each other, there are going to be some conflicts, as one will be stronger and try to overpower the other. You know, dominant genes and what-not. In this case, what I think keeps him from fighting me off and outright defying my advances is his devil’s blood.

Demons, at the most basic level, especially young ones like Nero, wish to become mates to older, stronger demons, for protection and to not get eaten, although for someone like him these urges would more than likely be subconscious.

In other words, Nero’s devil’s blood is making him open himself up to me, probably because I smell similar to that mongrel son of a bitch that he seems so fond of. And since he does not understand this, he hates himself for it.

Also, in all honesty, both demons and humans are all just petty animals right down to the very core, with self-preservation being one of the most basic needs of all living things.

I couldn’t help but grin as I turned him around to face me, pushing him up against the washing machine. He hung his head to avoid looking at me, bringing his devils arm up to my chest in a wasted attempt to push me away. I grabbed his demon arm, which flashed brightly when I touched it, holding it in my hand, running my thumb over the rough reptilian hide.

Nero sank his teeth into his bottom lip as I looked intently at the light in his arm, watching it shine brilliantly like a sapphire flare. He seemed surprised to say the least, but dared not to move, his human hand clutching at the edge of the machine.

“How’d you get this arm?” I questioned as I ran my fingers down his hand and up his wrist, tracing the glimmering trail of light the way I would follow a vein under the skin. Nero swallowed uncomfortably,
“You don’t know?” he murmured, disbelieving, watching every move I made with my hand.

“I don’t know because you never told me.” I remarked as I took my hand away, gazing in hidden fascination as the light died down to a soft flicker of a candle. Nero scoffed.

“A fight, I got it in a fight. I was protecting…someone. The demon was about to get her in the face but I got in the way, it got my arm instead. Next thing I know, this happens.” He flexed the fingers of his appendage.

“Really? And how did you feel about that?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. He looked up at me with a twisted expression, teeth gnashed together, the claws of his demon arm clenching together in a tight fist.

“What are you, my fucking therapist?” He snarled. I could tell now that it was a sensitive subject, but I did not appreciate his tone, at all.

Nero cried out in shock as my hand shot out and snatched him by his human wrist, yanking him towards me, wrapping my arm around his shoulders to keep him in place. He tried to pull away until he felt my teeth brush up against the sensitive skin on his exposed throat. I could feel his heart beating rapidly as I held him close to my chest in a position that may have looked loving to outside spectators ignorant of the situation.

“Nero…” I sighed heavily into his neck, my breath feeling hot against his skin. “I only asked you a simple question; there is no need for words like that.” The boy was silent, flinching as I pressed my lips against his jugular vein. “No need at all…” I whispered.

He jerked when the loud buzzer went off and the washing machine shuttered to a halt. I looked at the now inert device, “You have some laundry to do.” I sighed as I ran my fingers through his hair before letting him go.

He staggered away from me until his back met uncomfortably with the washing machine, hiding his devil arm behind his back, his human hand pressed hard against the spot on his neck where I had kissed him, acting as if I had bitten him hard enough to break the skin and was trying to stop the flow of blood.

He was still in that same position even when I turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind me.
Interesting

I walked back into the kitchen, picked up my mug of coffee and headed into the main room; sipping it though it had long since gone cold.

Judging from the sounds coming from the washroom, Nero was stuffing the sheets into the dryer, and after a few hissed curses had managed to get it to start working, only to have it give out a few minutes later. I chuckled when I heard him beat his fist into the machine, hissing obscenities at it as if it were animate and was malfunctioning intentionally just to upset him.

I continued drinking my coffee as I walked over and sat at the desk, leaning back into the chair, my feet flat on the floor. I set my mug down and glanced over the desk, my attention settling on a small picture frame that I had seen over one hundred times yet never paid any mind to before.

I reached over and picked it up, eyeing the woman in the photo. She seemed refined and young, with long golden-blonde hair, wearing a coat the color of red wine. I suppose you could say that she was attractive, if humans could even be considered attractive.

This was the woman who tainted a powerful devil’s blood with her own weak lineage, only to produce an atrocity.

I growled bitterly, anger boiling inside of me as I set the picture face-down on the desk with a hard slap, not wanting to gaze at it any longer.

What could a demon possibly see in a human? They were so fragile and easy to break, both physically and mentally, that they may as well have been made of glass. They allow their emotions to run rampant and dictate their choices, in very few cases for the best, although in most, the absolute worst.

They kill and maim and destroy one another, and yet believe demons to be the evil ones.

I shook my head, drinking the rest of my coffee before heading towards the billiard table and picking up a pool cue. As pool was a fine way to pass the time.

 Nero didn’t come out of the washroom till much later with the sheets bunched up sloppily in his arms, with the way he treated the fabric I was surprised he didn’t just drag them across the floor.

He did his best to ignore me as he walked across the room and headed up the stairs. “Sweet dreams, Nero.” I purred as I leaned on my pool cue, a few shots away from finishing another game.

The boy paused momentarily, his face twisted into a hard mask of anger, before bringing up his devil’s hand and making an incredibly rude hand gesture at me. I couldn’t help but chuckle, many times I forget that he’s still so young and prone to the immature use of hand gestures since he’s unable to express his emotions properly.

He headed into his bedroom, slamming the door and locking it with a hard click.

I clicked my tongue before turning back to my game, hitting the cue-ball dead on, cracking it against another before falling into the pocket. I leaned back up and exhaled as I rested the pool cue on my shoulder, looking down at the colored spheres on the table.
It was hard to believe that this was once considered a game fit for kings and nobles, many of whom I myself had played against, masquerading as one of their own. But then again, it’s been played by people from all walks of life since its inception.

And look how far both it and I have come, alone in a dingy little shop off in some nameless city.

I curled my lips into a bitter sneer as I snatched the dusty piece of cue-tip chalk from the edge of the table, applying it to the tip of my cue stick before returning to the game, dusting the blue powder onto my trousers. I hit the rest of the billiard balls into their pockets before taking them all out again and starting a new game.

It was nearly two in the morning, and I’ve never had any real need to sleep, only choosing to do so when I’m so jaded from my waking life that there is nothing for me to do except sleep. But since this game has my attention and is bringing back many fond memories, I see no harm in entertaining myself until either Nero wakes up or that phone rings.

-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

It was about ten o’clock in the morning when Nero trudged down the steps, he was fully dressed, massaging the drowsiness from his eyes with his clenched devil’s fist.

I was sitting at the desk, disinterestedly flipping through a gentleman’s interest magazine that I had found stuffed in one of the drawers. I can hardly see the appeal of these women; they all looked so artificial, exposing those ugly little holes between their legs as if trying to enchant the viewer.

All I felt was infinite disgust as I turned page after page. The fact that human males find these plastic monstrosities attractive was something so ridiculous that it made me want to throw my head back and have a hearty laugh.

I stuffed the magazine back into the drawer as Nero brushed passed me and headed into the kitchen “How’d you sleep?” I questioned before rising from the chair, stretching my arms above my head, listening to my bones pop.

Nero turned and glowered at me, his lips twisted into a half-hearted grimace, pale blue eyes fighting to stay awake.

“I didn’t. And you playing pool all night sure as hell didn’t help.” He growled out before glancing down at the empty coffee pot. “Hey, where’s the coffee?” I shrugged my shoulders, having drank it all the night before. “It’s gone.”

“Shit!” He whined in frustration before shoving passed me and leaning against the desk, crossing his arms tightly over his chest, his devil’s arm emitting a harsh blue glow.

I stood staring at the appendage in interest. It seems to be connected to his emotions, both positive and negative, and was extremely volatile as Nero is a very passionate person.

I chuckled as the youth huffed, glancing at the rotary phone every now and then, drumming his fingers in impatience. I snickered softly as I noticed several bruises I had suckled into his neck the night before had not faded in the slightest, as he hasn’t been healing nearly as fast as normal lately, and I’m not really certain as to why, but it’s alright with me.

Nero tried to ignore me, turning his attention down to the picture frame that lay on the desk, face-down, the woman in the photograph out of my sight.

Nero looked up at me as if I had horribly insulted him by displaying it in such a way, his eyes
sharp and filled with unspoken resentment, his devil arm ablaze with a burning blue light, expressing what he felt so vividly that no words were needed between us.

The boy swallowed dryly before reaching down and picking it up carefully with his human hand as if he were handling something fragile and precious like a dove’s egg. He licked his dry lips as he set the photo of the blonde woman back up, in my plain sight.

Any shred contentment I felt before flocked away when I set my eyes on that woman’s face. A sudden feeling of anger swelled in my chest at the sight of her, infuriating me. I clenched my hand into a tight fist as I walked over towards him, chuckling bitterly as the boy swallowed uncomfortably, visibly insecure as I stood in front of him.

He turned his face away as I leaned in close to him, brushing my lips over his cheek gently. His lips curled back into a demented grimace, porcelain teeth grit together tightly as I sank my teeth into the soft skin, breaking it, blood weeping out of the wound.

A broken sound rose and died in his throat as he pressed his hand against my chest to push me away. I kissed the open wound feverishly, the anger that burned in my chest slowly died down as his warm blood tingled deliciously on my lips. I looked down to see the light in his arm dying down to a dull glow, soft and weak like a dying blue candle.

“L-let go...Dante…”

I don’t recall what happened, what I had done when he said that name, but I know it was because he had said that half-bred bastards name so close to me.

I looked down to see Nero doubled over in a mixture of pain and shock, his devil hand pressed hard against his mouth, blood seeping through his fingers and down his chin where it dripped onto the carpet.

He looked up at me with hurt and bewildered eyes, his mind struggling to comprehend what it was he had done wrong to deserve such a blow. I assume that he didn’t realize what he had said, he looked so bewildered.

I grit my teeth; even now that son of a bitch was still on his mind.

I made sure the boy was watching as I snatched the picture frame from the desk and slammed it face down, hard. Nero flinched at the sound of glass cracking, wood splintering, and paper tearing. He gasped, horrified, the throbbing pain in his mouth and cheek forgotten as he glared scornfully at me, but did nothing.

The boy was silent, swallowing constantly, tears stinging his eyes. I couldn’t help but smirk, as his expression was that of an angry child, helpless, vulnerable, and furious.

I let the picture drop to the floor with a crash, shards of glass scattering at my feet before walking passed Nero, licking the blood off my lips as I headed up the stairs, glancing back at him as he knelt down and picked up the shards of glass with trembling hands.

I narrowed my eyes when I noticed him stealing glances at the phone in such a desperate way that it almost seemed like he was expecting for it to ring.

I headed into his bedroom, finding my coat crumpled on the floor in a heap, and picked it up, folding it nicely my arms.

I was about to leave as I looked down at his unmade bed, noticing the ugly brown splotches that
stained the sheets. It reminded me of an ancient practice that husbands used to perform upon their new brides. On their wedding night it was expected of the woman to lie with her husband, filling out the first of her many wifely duties.

The blood that stained the sheets was proof of her virginity, that she had been with no other. In some cases they would even hang the bed sheets for all to see. I shook my head, humans and their pitiful social constructs, creating such an idiotic notion that should have been slaughtered the moment it was conceived.

Nevertheless, looking at those splattered stains, it seems like Nero’s excessive use of bleach did not produce the results he had wanted.

I walked out with my coat in my arms, and headed into my own room at the opposite end of the hallway, glancing down at the first floor to see that Nero had cleaned up the shattered pieces of the picture frame, and was folding up the ripped photograph, sticking it in his pants pocket.

The boy sighed heavily as he ran his human hand through his disheveled silver hair before leaning against the desk, wiping away the blood that stained his face.

I entered the barren bedroom, laying my coat across the unused bed before sitting down beside it. I drew in a deep breath as I looked around the sparsely furnished bedroom, it was small, but I hardly spent any time in there, so that did not bother me.

My gaze fell upon the old phone that I had set up on the dresser across from the bed, hardly touched but functional. I had found it stuffed in the closet of this room, covered in dust and forgotten.

When I had plugged it in and heard a dial tone, it worked perfectly fine, but it won’t make any noise at all. It’s line is also tied in with the one downstairs.

My eyes widened in surprise as the piercing ring of that phone echoed throughout the shop, but was quickly silenced as Nero answered it.

“Devilmaycry!” I heard him blurt into the receiver. No more sounds came after that. I tilted my head to the side before rising from my seat on the bed and picking up the soundless phone out of curiosity. I held it close to my ear, but slanted enough so that my breathing could not be heard.

“Nero, I’m sorry we haven’t been calling.” I heard a woman’s silky voice, warm, honeyed, almost...motherly. Who is this?

“Th-that’s okay Trish. You find anything? Anything at all? I…I can’t take much more of this.” Nero’s voice was hushed to a trembling whisper.

“Lady and I’ve been working on this non-stop, Nero. And from what we’ve found, things aren’t looking very good for Dante...”

I heard a sharp gasp from Nero, but he quickly cleared his throat.

“Uhhh, yes ma’am, so you’re having a problem with some demons that are w-wandering near your property...” I heard him say louder than necessary, his voice echoing throughout the shop, trying to put up a front. My goodness, he sounded so artificial and fake.

The woman continued. “There’s a lot to go over, we can’t do this over the phone, Nero. Look, Lady and I are in town, is there some place you want to meet up so we can talk?”
There was a pause, Nero was thinking.

“Fredi’s diner…” I heard him mumble into the receiver.

A diner?

“Okay, we’ll meet at Fredi’s. Try to keep yourself together Nero. Lady and I can’t come here often, we need to stay as far away from him as possible.”

“Yeah, too bad I don’t have that option.” Nero spat bitterly, before saying aloud. “Alright, I have your address, anything else ma’am?” I had to sink my teeth into my bottom lip to keep from laughing, this boy is a terrible liar.

The woman chuckled warmly. “Alright Nero, hang in there. We’ll be waiting.” She hung up, and Nero did likewise a few moments later.

I set the phone back in its cradle, not at all alarmed at what I just heard, but more curious as to how long these little gatherings have been going on. I heard Nero’s footfalls as he traveled up the steps and entered his room.

I smirked as I rose from the bed and headed out into the hallway, leaning against the wall. I was silent as I listened to the sounds he made as he rustled about in his room, grabbing his weapons to make his lie more authentic.

I smirked as the boy came into view, his sword was slung over his back, his gun holstered on his thigh. Nero’s confused and somewhat panicked expression told me that he did not expect to find me standing there.

“So where’s this job at Nero?” I questioned, looking at the boy. He lowered his gaze and scratched the side of his nose with his glowing devils hand, wincing when his hand brushed up against the wound on his cheek.

“Job?” He mumbled, as if he didn’t know what I was talking about. “Oh, the job! It’s not serious at all. Just a few marionettes. I’ll handle it myself. I’ll be okay.” He fumbled terribly with the sentence, gritting his teeth, his facial expression saying that even he didn’t believe his own words.

He almost let out a sigh of relief as I nodded my head in a nonchalant manner, “Alright. Go on ahead.” He brushed passed me quickly without another word, taking the steps two at a time before nearly sprinting across the carpet and heading out the large double-doors of the shop. I smiled as I took in a deep breath and headed back into my room, grabbing my coat off the bed, slipping it on over my shoulders.

This should be interesting.
The Lioness and the Tigress

I shook my head as I headed down the steps of the shop, thinking back to the conversation I had heard over the phone. It’s apparent that Nero has been speaking with these women for quite some time, although their visits to this town may be very infrequent if they see me as a threat and feel the need to stay away. I turned and headed across the carpet towards the double-doors, pausing for a brief moment as I noticed the scratches carved into the damaged surface, looking as if it had been kicked open innumerable times. What’s the point of doing something so needlessly reckless like that? I thought to myself as I opened the doors and headed out into the cold, frigid air.

I inhaled deeply, picking up Nero’s scent and the direction he had headed in down the street. I looked in the path he had taken, the lonely little sidewalk that he had treaded on not moments before, and proceeded in that direction, walking slowly. I sighed heavily as I stuffed my hands into the deep pockets of my trench coat, my breath visible in a cloud of mist. I looked up at the sky as I followed Nero’s smell, watching the clouds roll along across the brooding gray sky like wrathful and sullen souls drowning in the Styx.

It wasn’t long until I came upon a small one-story building that looked like it could use some reconstruction in certain areas. A large sign stood above the building reading ‘Restaurant Fredi’ with ‘Fredi’ looking like it had been spray-painted on as an afterthought in a repulsive green color. Yes, it most certainly was a diner, I could tell by the stench of greasy fried food. I stood quite a ways away from the diner, but the plethora of smells assaulted me as if I were actually inside the kitchen of the establishment. I shook my head as though I could shake away the smell, that odor of grilled meat, fried potatoes, and fresh strawberries that seemed ever-so out of place. I paused as I inhaled deeply through my nostrils, simply to make sure that I was not mistaken.

Of what use would strawberries be in a place like that?

I looked on to see Nero entering through the front door, heading towards a booth where two rather unique looking women sat, both of whom stood up upon sight of the boy and walked over to meet him. One of the women bore an uncanny resemblance to that wretch in the photograph, so much that if it weren’t for her devilish scent, I would have thought of them as being one and the same. She dressed differently as well, not nearly as reserved, her black garments were tight-fitting and placing a very heavy emphasis on her womanly figure. She smiled sadly as she took in the boy’s disheveled appearance before pulling him into a comforting, almost maternal hug, and after several moments she unraveled herself from him and turned to her companion.

I looked the other woman, a human, a noirette who patted Nero affectionately on the arm, her appearance somewhat contrasting the she-devil beside her. Her dark hair trimmed short, her apparel white and wearing what looked like a leather holster of some kind strapped to her waist, a pair of brown spectacles resting on the bridge of her pert nose that was tainted with a fading scar. Both women led Nero back to their seat with a waitress following close behind, as business seemed nearly nonexistent and no other customers were in the diner.

“I’m really glad to see you two,” Nero said as they all sat down, him sitting by himself on one side of the table while the two women resided on the other side.

“It’s good to see you too, kid.” The raven haired lady said warmly, the blonde woman nodded in agreement. Nero smiled weakly as he scratched the side of his nose with his human hand.

“Thanks lady, I haven’t had anybody call me that in a while.” He murmured, a small twinge of hurt was evident in his voice, but the ladies picked up on it easily, the both of them glancing at one
another sadly before turning back to the boy.

“Nero, your face.” The blonde woman murmured in concern.

“Huh?”

“Your cheek, there’s a cut, it’s not healing.” She said.

Ah yes, he hasn’t been healing nearly as fast as normal lately, and I’m not really certain as to why. It’s gotten to where a simple bite mark on his shoulder would take hours to fade when normally it would take only seconds.

“I got it from while out on the job. It’ll heal on its own like it always does, Trish, don’t’ worry. Now what did you bo---”

“Really? And how did you get those bruises on your neck, from a demonic vacuum cleaner?” The raven-haired woman cut in as she removed her glasses, rising from her seat and leaning across the table for a better view. Nero grit his teeth as he quickly zipped his red hooded sweatshirt up defensively, twisting his body away from her as if she were out to cause him further harm.

“It’s nothing, lady. I’m fine. I said I’m fine.” He whined in helpless frustration as he crossed his arms tightly over his chest.

The lady wasn’t bothered in the least by Nero’s defensiveness and reached out fearlessly, yanking his zipper down, exposing the plethora bruises that I had left there the night before. The women gasped in unison before Nero managed to swat her hand away, his teeth sinking into his split lip, his face burning in embarrassment and shame. “Just what the hell has this guy been doing to you Nero?! You look like a rape victim!” The lady whispered fiercely, eyeing the small marks with harsh disdain, her quick actions and stern demeanor giving me the impression that a tigress was lurking about underneath her exterior. She said nothing more as she sat back into her seat with a huff, crossing her scarred legs.

Nero was silent as he averted the gaze of both women, hanging his head low, falling into shame the way a suicide throws himself into the path of an oncoming train. Tears burned in the boys eyes but he blinked them back, sniffing as he rubbed his nose with his devil hand, trembling lips pressed tightly together in a thin bloodless gash. The lady’s expression softened, her mouth hanging open in a silent gasp as she realized the truth behind her careless words. She back in her seat, unsure of what to say to take back her outburst and comfort the boy. “…Nero…” Trish said his name delicately; as if she were speaking to a dangerous animal that was both wounded and frightened, choosing her words carefully.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” the boys soft voice quaked as he kept his head down. “please, just tell me what you found…” The women looked at each other, unsure of how to proceed, but gave into his wishes.

“Dante’s alive.” The she-devil stated.

Of course he is, I’ve made sure of that. He would be useless to me dead.

Nero sighed heavily in relief, but seemed to keep his guard up. “And you know this because…”

“As long as the doppelganger looks like Dante, that’s reassurance in itself that he’s alive.”

Well, I’m not so sure about that part, my lady.
“What makes you say that?” The boy questioned, not understanding, his voice was low and pricked with irritation. The woman was about to answer but closed her mouth as a waitress came up to their table, asking for orders with a forced grin that’s prevalent throughout the working-class.

“We’ll both have coffee.” The blonde woman said as her companion nodded in agreement.

“And for you sir?” the waitress questioned as she looked at the silver haired boy with that false-pearl smile.

“I’ll…I’ll have a strawberry sundae.” The two women across from him paused and looked at each other as if Nero had said something haunting. The waitress gave him an odd look before writing down his order, thinking that it was a bit strange that someone would order ice cream in the middle of winter.

“Coming right up, I’ll have your orders ready shortly,” She said as she headed off into the kitchen behind the counter.

“Nero…” the lady murmured softly.

“I…I just haven’t had one in a while, okay lady?” Nero muttered defensively at the dark-haired woman, “Anyway,” the boy continued, “what were you going to say, Trish?”

“Nero, I’m not sure if you’re aware of this but, all throughout history, doppelgangers are known to be harbingers of death. Once a person see’s one, it won’t be long until they succumb to their own death. There are numerous records of people seeing who they believe to be are copies of themselves foreshadowing their deaths. What humans are unaware of is that what they have been calling doppelgangers all this time were actually very powerful shape-shifting demons who took on the form of whoever they wanted to kill, be it by illness or accident or some other tragedy. These demons are so insidious that there’s no known record of what one actually looks like.”

Nero nodded his head, “Yeah, I know he’s a demon, but I thought doppelgangers were supposed to look exactly like whoever it was they were copying. Like you, Trish. You could be considered the doppelganger to Eva…” Nero pointed out, seeming to have calmed down, but I could still sense him bristling.

“I suppose I could, but Eva has long since passed, and I did not appear to her to warn and cause her impending death.” The boy was quiet as he placed his hand on his pocket, where I watched him put the torn photograph.

“And this guy,” Nero sneered, “he has Dante’s physique right but everything else, the color of his hair, eyes, skin, it’s all the opposite of Dante.”

“You’ve told us that before. As to why he looks like that may actually be a conscious choice, as he has the ability to copy Dante’s appearance perfectly, but simply chooses not to. Although as to his reasoning for this, we just don’t know. Perhaps he has something against Dante like nearly all demons do…” The she-devil stated. Nero was silent as he pondered her words, most likely wondering what kind of grudge I would hold.

“Unless of course, you want to ask him yourself Nero,” The lady cut in to his thoughts as she folded her gloved hands daintily in her lap. Nero shook his head,

“Yeah, like I’m just gonna waltz right up to him ask him. No way in hell. He…he flips his shit if I do so much as say Dante’s name…” the teen growled bitterly.

I’ve started to lose interest at this point, wondering if they were going to tell him anything useful
that he could actually use against me, or if they were simply here to give him false hope and comfort. Sadly, it seemed like the former.

“So what about Dante? You guys called me and told me you found out something about Dante. What is it?” Nero’s patience was obviously beginning to wear thin at this point as he eyed both women. The blonde she-devil massaged her eyes, visibly frustrated, looking as if she were an inexperienced mother dealing with a whining, impatient child.

“Look Nero, all we know is that Dante’s still alive. And we’re getting close to finding out where he actually is but we’ll need more time, we can’t let him find out. And anything about doppelgangers that we’ve come across has hardly been of any help, but we’re trying as hard as we can, both of us. All of us.”

Nero was about to say something else when the waitress walked over towards them with a metal tray in hand, their orders on top. “Careful ladies, it’s hot.” She said aloud as she set two mugs of steaming black coffee in front of the women. “And here’s your sundae.” She had that false-pearl smile on again as she set a rather large strawberry sundae in front of Nero, laying down silverware wrapped in a napkin beside it. Both women were silent as they picked up their mugs and took quick sips, keeping watch as Nero unwrapped a silver spoon from his napkin and quietly scooped a bit of ice cream coated in strawberry syrup into his mouth.

Something inside of Nero seemed to break as he struggled to swallow, a pained expression on his face, the sound of a wounded animal caught in his throat. “Nero?” the dark-haired lady murmured in concern as she and the blonde she-devil watched the boy intently. Silent tears streamed down his pale cheeks as he ate another spoonful, his breath trembling in between bites, as if what he was eating was making him physically ill but he still couldn’t bring himself to stop.

“Me and the old man used to come here after a job…” He murmured quietly. Both women set their mugs down, listening. “He’d always order the same damn thing every single time, a fucking strawberry sundae. I’d just get a soda or a water, sometimes a burger. I told him that if it weren’t for devil hunting he’d be as big as a house. And he’d just sit there and laugh, every time.”

The lady scoffed, smiling at Nero warmly. “That sure sounds like him. For as long as I’ve known him that’s all he’d eat. Sundaes and pizza. I mean, Dante is just one big kid after all.” The dark-haired lady took a sip of her coffee as she finished her sentence. Nero’s smile at her words was genuine, I had never seen any expression like that on his face before, but I suppose there are good reasons for that.

“Look, Nero, if there was a way to help, we would do it. But…right now….there’s just no way. We’ll keep looking, you have my word, but just keep him busy before then..”

Keep him busy, Nero seemed to think.
I stopped listening soon after that, apathetic to the point of near obliviousness.

Those women were obviously close to Nero if they are going so far as to try and help him in his predicament and to speak so fondly of old memories. The ties that bind them together must be strong. And that blonde she-devil... she must be of some importance, especially since she bears such a resemblance to that crossbreeds bitch-hound of a mother.

I could see the three of them so clearly through the window, the women speaking in between sips of their coffee as Nero gulped down the rest of his sundae, its sweetness provoking his gluttony. Just as I was about to leave I saw Nero reach into his pocket and pull out the damaged photograph of the cur’s mother, handing it carefully to the black-haired lady with cautious human fingers, looking as if he were entrusting a coveted jewel into her possession.

“Take care of it, please. Make copies. It’s not safe at the shop anymore.”

I heard him say as I turned and walked away from the diner, satisfied with what I had seen and felt not even the tiniest need to stay any longer. Those women were of no threat to me as long as they felt that it was necessary to stay away, and if there was even the slightest possibility that there was a change of heart in either of them, I’m sure that I would have no trouble bringing about their untimely demises.

But…

The word had clawed its way to the forefront of my mind, loud and guttural and wanting to be heard.

But…

Who were they exactly? And what sort of relationship did those two have with him?

In all the time I had spent observing Devil May Cry before I came; neither of those women were ever mentioned. Had I been careless? I had watched Sparda’s son so closely, followed him onto missions and observed his way of exterminating our kind. How quick he was to use that sword like an extension of his own arm, none too different from how an artist uses their paintbrush to create their magnum opus. So wild and reckless with hints of (dare I say) controlled elegance to it. The only difference between the painter and the hunter was their medium; the painter used colorful pigment whereas the hunter used a kind of savage violence fit for an usurper. Turning carnage into a carousel the way only a human can.

I sighed heavily as I stopped in my tracks, my hands clenching into tight fists at my sides.

Just what the fuck am I doing, admiring him?! I felt a harsh grimace tug at the corner of my mouth, but no such expression came into fruition as I stood alone in the snowy street, biting back the semblance the way one would bite back tears after an especially upsetting experience.

He’s gone now and I saw to that. There’s no need to waste another thoug-

I paused, breathing in deeply through my nostrils, the stench of snowdrop flowers and wet straw invading my senses like the stink of pitch-black smoke. Demons.

I was on a nearby rooftop after one swift leap, then another, following the smell like a trail of
breadcrumbs. As I wandered closer I licked my lips in urgent anticipation, already tasting blood, already feeling bones and muscle coming apart in my hands. There is no romance in the way I fight, no glamour; no florid and unnecessary movements. Dante would spin and gallivant around like a rose petal tossed to a violent breeze, so very fond of song and dance. I fight for the sickness, the fear, and spiteful wordlessness that comes with the death of either a human or a demon. I feed off that pain.

The demons that I smelled, they were Frosts, more than appropriate for this time of year. Visitors from Calcytus? I could see the three of them now, those reptilian creatures encased in their crystal armor, standing at attention in the middle of a barren street like soldiers waiting for their commands. No, just three lost little snowflakes.

Without Nero, I felt a strange sort of grotesque restlessness. I had nothing to crush between my fingers, no porcelain-doll skin to kiss and bite with my mouth. No ample tears to lick. No blood. I smirked as I leapt down onto the street, welcoming their alarmed bellowing with open arms. The devils stepped towards me cautiously, their frozen claws drawn back like the swords wielded by fairy-tale knights. “So I guess that you will have to do.” I said simply.

---

The bell sang sweetly as I entered the small coffee shop, snowflakes falling from my hair and eyelashes; my boots crunching as I wiped them on the rug. I could feel the shopkeepers eyes on me as I dusted my trousers with hard slaps, my hands wet with ice crystals. “Was there a snowstorm?” I heard him ask good-naturedly, I didn’t have to look up to know that he was peering out the window, wondering if he should have brought a hat or an extra scarf in case the weather got volatile. “No sir; just took a small tumble through the snow, frost can be deadly at this time of year.” I made my voice sound polite and warm, nodding at the man who reminded me of an owl, his spectacles magnifying his brown eyes as he watched me head towards the back of the shop.

I walked among the rows of coffee, the kilner jars carefully arranged, their labels written by hand. Baron Goto Red, Blue Mountain, Columbiana. I took in the pleasing smells and settled on an Italian roast, carrying the brown bag towards the register where the owlman stood. “To be honest, I can’t drink this stuff anymore.” He grinned sheepishly as he worked the register, his fingers looked so blue-veined and swollen as he punched away at the keys. “These are whole beans. Do you want me to grind them for you?” He asked after I handed him the money. “Please.” I smiled.

---

I walked through the doors of Devil May Cry to find that Nero had since come back, sitting quietly at the edge of the front desk, keeping his head turned towards the floor, the glow from his arm dim like a dying firefly. I looked over to see that his sword and firearm were tossed haphazardly onto the sofa, forgotten and abandoned like a toddlers lost teddy bear. He swallowed as he played with the chord of the phone, curling it and uncurling it in the index finger of his devil bringer, his lips pressed together hard, his expression deep and bitter. “Back already?” I placed the bag down beside the phone before stepping away, crossing my arms firmly over my chest.

The boy’s nose twitched as he looked down at the coffee before snatching it up with his human hand, the chord laying forgotten at his side. “…I’m not saying thank you.” He growled as he shoved past me and headed into the kitchen, the smell of coffee filling the air moments later.

I would consider it strange if you did.

“So how was it? The job? I didn’t expect you to be back so soon.” He didn’t answer, but I could easily guess what it was he was trying to do; weave together a lie. I wondered what he would use
for his thread. The diner and the sundae, those two women, the false-hope conversation. How he would try to intertwine it all together into believable deceit. Could he do it?

“The job was nothing.”

Of course not.

“Just some dumb fucking prank call. I’ve been getting a lot of those lately.” He sniffled and wiped his pale eyes with that clenched devil's fist. “So you went and there was nothing.” I said.

Nero shook his head, his eyes as dull and lifeless as ice. “Nothing at all.”
The front door to the shop opened, followed by a soft yet tired voice. “Hello? Is there anyone here?”

I changed, faster than any eye could follow. My black hair turned silver, scarlet eyes to glacial, copper skin to porcelain. I turned to smile at the woman with a resplendent flourish, my red coat billowing behind me like that of a magician; smoke and mirrors and doves dipped in blood. “Yes ma’am! How may I help you?”

I tried so hard to not grimace, to gag. I felt like I was wearing the skin of a slaughtered pig, slick and hot with its foul smell and entrails. I wanted to puke until there was nothing left in me. But alas, appearances need to be kept where they count. Suspicion from a human is the absolute worst thing for me at this point in time.

“This is where I go if I need help with a… demon, right?” She questioned, glancing nervously around the shop, her gaze lingering over the various trophies on the wall; demon skulls with their weapons stabbed through them. The Hell Vanguard, the Death Scissors, the Assault, the Scarecrow. All slain by his hand and mounted in such a humiliating fashion, hanging limp like rag dolls. No peace after death for these poor fiends. Although, I am quite familiar with the appeal.

“Yes, that’s right. Welcome to Devil May Cry! We’ll do everything we can to help you! Just say the word, lady, and we’ll deliver!” I gave her a Cheshire-cat grin. I spread my arms out as if they were wings of a scarlet tanager, a wild songbird that was vivid with excitement. Mirth is the first word in the half-breeds language when it comes to his interactions with others, even if it is just a facade. She gave an uneasy grin at my theatrics as I led her towards the desk and asked for her information; name, address, phone number, etc. as I had watched the mutt do countless times with other clients.

‘How may I help you?’

‘Just gimme your info and we’ll be squared away, no problem!’

‘Really? These guys? I could kick their asses with a rubber chicken and a paper plate.’

Just as I was to ask her to continue I was rudely interrupted by the sound of a mug shattering on the floor. I looked over to see glass shards scattered around Nero’s feet, black coffee staining the scuffed wooden floors near his boots. He stared at me with uncomprehending, clouded eyes; lips moving soundlessly like a fish impaled on a spear. It was then that I saw how much Nero missed the mongrel; with every atom of himself, every drop of blood that gurgled through that hideously bruised heart of his.

What did he really expect to see? What was it that he really wishing for?

That it really was Dante who was talking to the client, smiling with exuberant warmth. Still right here, hadn’t gone anywhere. That just this morning they had breakfast with those women at their beloved diner, ordered their favorite foods and talked, talked away. And that everything I had said, everything I had done, was really just some god-awful nightmare that could be laughed about over the pizza they would inevitably order for dinner later on.

Hey Dante, I had the craziest dream that you were gone...

Gone? Pffft! That’s a stupid dream. You’re not getting rid of me that easy, Kid!
“Sorry about that. Please make yourself at home; my partner here will be with you in a sec.” I chuckled apologetically at the woman before walking towards the youth. Nero’s face flared with embarrassment as he bent down to pick up the broken pieces, his hands shaking violently as I stepped closer, twitching and fearful. “Hey, there’s no need to worry about that. I’ll get it up for ya, butter fingers!” I chuckled warmly as I gripped his shoulder gently, my touch as welcomed as the tingling legs of a spider. He pressed his lips together tightly, almost as if he were expecting me to grate his face across the shattered glass as punishment for the interruption.

He turned his head away as I leaned in closely, snaking the glass shard from in between his devil fingers and clutching it in my own. I whispered, my voice low and soft. “If you would be so kind as to assist that woman with her troubles I would very much appreciate it.”

“E-eat shit, fuck head.” His teeth clenched hard, his tone tight and sharp though brittle, like a knife made of spun sugar. I let my hand fall away from him with an exasperated breath, biting back the urge to throw him against the wall.

“Or would you rather I send the sow away? And use this time to-”

He quickly rose to his feet without another word, glass cracking like animal bones under his boots as he made his way towards the woman. Cautious pleasantries were exchanged between them; from what I have seen, Nero was never any good with people. Always so shy, rubbing his nose and avoiding eye contact as if one fleeting look would turn them to stone. He could hold entire conversations with their shoes or his hands, their hips or the wall behind them, and never spare a single glance.

I slowly began to pick up the pieces of the broken mug, letting the voices of Nero and the client blur and bleed into one another, sentences sloppily stumbling over each other, disembodied and susurrant as the lost thoughts of a ghost. I noticed only a few stray words here and there. Family plot. Float. Tails. Red.

As I caught sight of the reflection staring back at me from the steaming coffee stain on the floor, their voices trailed off into nothing, as meaningless as white noise on a dead channel. Silver bangs falling across eyes that did not belong to me, a brawler’s jawbone riddled with stubble due to laziness and age. The missing man in red; Nero’s dearest imago, bathing in the black.

Perhaps I should check on him, see how well he’s faring. It has been quite a while.

I looked up to see the woman rummaging through her purse and place something small in Nero’s human hand, giving him her most pleasant smile, though the quiet twin of pity lingered there as well. “I’m sorry, these are the only kind I have but go ahead and take them.”

“Uhhh…thanks.”

Hesitation was followed by the small rustle of paper being torn. When Nero turned towards the couch I saw what it was that she had given him. A band aid covered the cut on his cheek, colored a newborn baby blue. “Hey, looks good on ya, sport! Really brings out your eyes!” I joked with an amused laugh that did not reach the rest of me.

She only wanted to help soften something that she knew nothing about, as sensitive human women often do.

Nero said nothing as he grabbed his broadsword and firearm from the couch and slinging them over his lean shoulders. The lost teddy bear reclaimed. “I’ll escort you back to your house and take care of the problem there, okay?” He tried to sand his hard voice down to something even and
approachable, the voice of an old friend, a pleasant neighbor, a good and obedient son.

As Nero and the woman headed out of the shop I rose to my feet and cooed caustic words of good luck from the tip-top of my heart.

“Fingers crossed, Kid.”

The reverberating echo from the slammed door was the only response I received.

I paused and listened intently as their footsteps faded away. Relief nourished my insides like mothers milk as I changed back to my more comforting form; trading the pigs’ bloody skin for a black silk robe. I quickly cleaned up the mess, sopping up the coffee with an old rag and throwing the glass away, though I saved the one piece I had taken from Nero; clutching it in my hand as I headed towards the restroom in the back.

I clicked my tongue as I filled the sink with water, tapping the fingers of one hand along its faded brim and rolling the glass piece across the knuckles of my other. Only a small trickle of blood is necessary.

I slipped the glass into the soft skin of my thumb, slicing it open as easily as an overripe fig, tiny pricks of pain as inconsequential as a paper-cut. I watched as my blood seeped out of the wound, thick and black as toxic paint, letting it drop down into the sink; turning the water as black as ink in a matter moments. I leaned in closely as an image began to appear, morph and ripple in the water with incoherent flashes of color; with a dull red being the most prominent on display.

Has the Minotaur found his way any further through the maze? Perambulated the area for an exit?

“Still alive, I see. And exactly where I left you.” I sighed, relieved.
Visiting the Bastard

You irksome dilemma, how are things?

When I laid my eyes on him I felt a change in the air, reality warping within itself, feeling heavy and temperate, his fervent energy radiating all around as if he were standing in this very room with me. Instinctively, innately, I felt a kind of hot panic rising up within me, swelling in my limbs and chest, tightening almost painfully against the inside of my skull, ripping out the sliver of relief that I had been feeling only moments before. Fight or flight, freeze or fawn; which option will I choose to face a threat that is not even in this plane of existence anymore?

I watched as the half-breed tilted his head up in the darkness, eyes darting to and fro, fingers twitching in restlessness; sensing me but not seeing me.

“So, back again Mr. Copycat? When was the last time you checked up on me, an hour ago? Maybe two? Look, I appreciate the concern, but I just want to get out of here. The Kid’s countin’ on me to pick up dinner, wouldn’t want him to go hungry.”

He has no idea how long it’s been…

I watched as he shook his head in disdain, sucking his teeth as he looked about irritably; narrowing his shaded blue eyes at the black lifelessness all around him.

“So what’s your plan exactly? Are you living at my shop, eating my food, stealing my customers? Is this some sort of Invasion of the Bodysnatchers bullshit and you’re just mimicking me without emotion? I mean c’mon!” He laughed loudly with that absurd cheerfulness of his, his voice carrying along the empty corridor in a booming echo. “Throw me a bone here, dude!”

No, I will not throw the dog a bone.

…

Though yes, I am currently residing at your shop, living your life; playing house in your precious little domicile. A skilled actor immersing himself in the role of the infamous demon hunter, a stepson of Sparda. Everything that you thought was yours is mine now, outcross, even if your life is not what one would call enviable, or even livable for that matter. But I am managing as best I can, and you needn’t worry, your office is in good hands, I am taking special care of it.

(And even better care of the boy.)

“So is this like, an evil underground lair or something? I can hardly see anything! Maybe instead of putting me here you should have lured in an electrician or at least a flashlight salesman…”

Oh hardy har har, you’re hilarious.

Even with his enhanced vision, there was not much of anything to look at there, one roundabout glance and you will see everything that needs to be seen. A single endless hallway, identical doors on either side, all of them locked; all of them consistent in their sameness. An empty circle of endless repetition.

I watched closely, my face inches from the reflection, as Dante slammed a clenched fist against one of the innumerable doors, powerful enough to cause the water in the sink to ripple, but not enough to cause any actual harm to the door. Were he in the human world that wood would have flown off
the hinges and splintered into nothing against the wall, and he would have used the doorknob as a makeshift footbag.

But it doesn’t matter at all how strong he is, not in that place anyway. It’s only in there he can be considered a ghost of sorts, a living phantom trapped in a small black world frozen in time. Minutes and seconds stumble and stagger over one another, stretched and malformed. Though he has no idea, and is not the type to be fickle and let panic blind his set objective. But due to his inability to tell time, he feels as if everything is fine. Like nothing particularly damaging is going on in the outside world, that Nero can take care of himself if I were to misbehave.

“Still nothing. Is this some sort of weird demon blood ritual shit? Is this whole place made out of adamantium? Why the hell are all of these doors locked?” He tested the doorknob before shaking his head, looking about in fractious impatience before walking further down the hallway and testing another door, then another.

“Your favorite band is the Doors isn’t it?”

Those doorways are not there for aesthetics sake, or some esoteric little jigsaw puzzle that needs to be solved. They are reminders, not sentimental, more like mementos (A lock of hair, an article of clothing, a body part) of those whose forms I have copied over these years. It really isn’t too different from the corpses slain by Dante that hang like oil paintings on the office walls.

And so he is stuck. Stuck with such a minute chance of ever escaping; as lonely as a penny lying forgotten at the bottom of a wishing-well. We never fought, never battled. Unlike what Nero and those women think, I never laid a finger on him, nor he I. I know that to challenge him was to run wildly into the open arms of death itself chanting ‘I surrender. End me.’

Dante had to be worn down slowly, the way water carves its path through hard stone. The way a harmless little seed sleeping in the soil will one day grow into the tree from which a corpse will hang. Instead of challenging him, I watched him, studied him for months as if he were a single-celled organism slithering beneath a microscope.

I had examined him intently from dark places at Devil May Cry. Crouched in the corner of a poorly lit room; a shadow that creeps into edge of your eye then slips away the moment you turn to look at it, a trick of the light, something easy to push aside and ignore. I was half-formed, a black ghost; a man made of darkness. I had to alter my scent so that he did not know that I was there, adjusted it carefully to the familiar smells of the shop. The hardwood flooring, the molded bathroom, the stale gun smoke and rock-salt grease of an atrocious American diet. The office was dingy and poorly lit, pieces of it always cloaked in shadows no matter how many lights were on, there were innumerable places to hide and listen; to hide and look.

I had witnessed the innocent jocularity between him and Nero; the playful insults and juvenile competitiveness not uncommon among close friends. The half-breed would rustle Nero’s hair while touching his arm or shoulder or hip, snickering and laughing like a schoolboy with a crush. Nero would usually curl into himself and scratch his nose, not at all accustomed to being the object of such attention, let alone affection. Though the boy was as shyly receptive as he could be, yet was always firm when he wanted to be left alone and untouched. And the cur respected those boundaries and would back away, holding his hands up.

I saw all of this and vowed to do the opposite.

I had followed the two of them out onto missions more than once, though only long enough to witness the fray, never the aftermath as I was far more interested in Dante’s fighting style than his habitual idiosyncrasies at that time. I had seen enough of that at the shop.
“I gotta say,” His voice sliced its way through my thoughts like a knife throwers blade. “real cheap shot pretending to be my big bro like that. I’m talkin’ pullin’ my hair below the belt kind of cheap.” He paused for a while after he spoke; his open palm placed on yet another locked door, his fingers tracing meaningless patterns over the wood, shapes or letters. “How…how did you even know about him?” He questioned softly in a voice that was not used to asking such things aloud.

Isn’t it obvious Dante? I wanted to say to him. I didn’t conjure up your precious ani out of thin air using black magic and bits of luck as my main ingredients. You showed him to me without realizing it, that gaping wound that ate away at half of your soul, you might as well have been dangling a piece of your heart on a butchers hook right before my eyes saying ‘Look! Look!’.

I remember that night; he was gulping down whiskey and beer in the quiet stillness of the witching hour. Swaying on such unsteady feet, though he never faltered, never fell; even as he was drowning in oblivion. Standing up and speaking coherently with enough alcohol swimming in his bloodstream to stop the hearts of ten men, he had his demonic heritage to thank for that. I had observed this sort of behavior before, not only in him but in other men, men who were wounded; men who were weak.

‘Happy birthday…happy fucking birthday…’ His voice was tuneless and stained with melancholy, like the last song played on a music box before it broke down completely. He looked terrible and unkempt, his lank silver hair faded to the color of spoiled milk, his clothing lying in tangles near his feet, his underwear hanging low off of his hips. Feral. Wild. Unloved.

He had brushed his hand through that mess of hair, slicking it back, out of his face, his bloodshot eyes. It was strange, that one miniscule gesture and he looked like another person entirely, a solemn stranger. As different as the blistering sun and the evocative moon, the grinning faces of comedy and the sorrowful frown of tragedy. It was then, staring hatefully at his reflection in the mirror, half-naked and half-insane; that he would speak. Not in his normal voice, but in a tone far different from his own, colder. Or rather his pitiful, drunken attempt at stoic vehemence.

“to us…”

The hair, the voice, I had initially thought that this was some sort of alternate personality that came to the surface only after severe intoxication.

But I was wrong.

His hair fell loose front of his eyes and he would bury his face in his hands, his shoulders trembling with quiet, choked sobs. “Miss you bro…” He’d whisper to his haggard reflection, thinking that no one was there to hear.

That was what it was. A long lost brother who he only spoke of when he was hopelessly, sloppily drunk. Whether this brother was dead or simply missing, I do not know. Other demons only ever spoke of Dante, the son of a traitor who possessed the strength of a god, never once entertaining the possibility of another mongrel gallivanting about.

It was that ugly side of him that Nero had ignored, either out of respect for the elder hunter or mere reticent tolerance. After that night of heavy alcohol consumption, (the unbirthday of birthdays) Nero had cleaned, tight-lipped with quiet enervation, fighting to keep his hands steady as he picked up each bottle that lay scattered around as Dante lay unconscious on the hallway floor. The younger wanted to hit him with his devil bringer, I could tell by the way his anger emanated off of him like smoke from scattered coals that still had the potential to ignite.

But for whatever reason that I will never understand, he did nothing. The boy did not make any
mention of the incident, and dutifully fed Dante aspirin and water as soon as he woke up. They had even used those same alcohol bottles for target practice later that day, though Dante’s foolish behavior from that night had placed a blemish of black bile on that time. This is a pity for the mutt, as those are Nero’s last memories of him.

“Listen you! If I get out of here only to find the shop on fire and the Kid runnin’ around hopped up on dope, I’m gonna be pissed!”

At that point I knew how to lure him away.

Some demonic activity at the edge of town, (A flock of Scarecrows) and just enough luck for him to answer the call by himself. Dante was reckless, arrogant, and I knew that he would not bother to leave an address or recite his mission even if Nero were standing in the room with him.

I remember him speaking to the shopkeeper when I made my move. The flash of a glaucous grey long coat, silver hair combed back, emitting an odour that was both familial and familiar, a scent identical to his but peppered with other smells; bitter almonds and white oleander. I headed towards a clearing, small and isolated from everywhere else, my steps quiet and harefooted. He followed, leaving the befuddled shopkeeper mid-sentence and dashed off after me as if I were a piece of shredded meat and him a starving dog, hungry for what he thought was salvation.

He was fast, dizzyingly so; he almost caught up to me before I got him precisely where I wanted him. It was a clearing that was once a cemetery, the stones were gone but the dead were still there, asleep under the earth, under our feet. I remember the both of us standing there, demon brethren, Dante looking into my face and seeing his own. My expression was unreadable, but then I frowned and straightened my posture, narrowed my eyes, looked away. That seemed to be the proper thing to do. There was a strange hum in the air as he stepped closer towards me, almost staggering, almost falling, almost crying. Almost.

‘…Verg? Vergil?’

It was the odour that clouded his senses, drove out reason and rationale. You can shut out sound, you can close your eyes and no longer see, but smell is different. You breathe it in deep inside of you; it gets into your lungs, your heart, and your blood. Even if it’s unpleasant, even if it makes you retch and heave and you try to block it out, it remains. Smell is powerful, nearly magical; it conjures up memories, both forgotten and unforgettable.

The cur was so focused on my face that he did not notice what I was standing in, a black stain, a pool of blood, pure doppelganger blood, an entrance into another realm entirely; my home. He grabbed both of my shoulders and repeated what he thought was my name, his teeth clenched, nostrils flaring, poisoning himself further. I glanced down and saw that his feet were planted firmly on the stain, which was turning into a puddle that soaked his shoes, but he did not notice. Then I made my final move, I placed my hand on his shoulder, almost in reassurance as I whispered to him. ‘Hello Brother.’

And I smiled.

Then we were swallowed, the both of us, as if the earth had opened up beneath our feet and welcomed us into her gaping maw. But it wasn’t the ground, it was the blood that swallowed him, first his ankles, then his knees, and me as well, but I allowed it. It was my blood after all.

I kept my eyes on his face, my grin like a knife to his throat as we both fell down into the darkness, a different kind of darkness, the kind that cradled me but strangled him. Still, for whatever reason, he held on to me tightly, his fingers like claws digging into my skin, bewilderingly desperate as he
held me close to his chest, trying (I surmised) to protect me from what he thought was a threat beyond our control. No, it wasn’t me that he frantically tried to hold onto, it was Vergil.

Dearest brother. Dearest smother.

“You bastard.” Dante snarled at me from his shadowed prison in the water, “You…”

What I had done, what I had taken from him when he embraced me as if I were his dearest imago… it wasn’t noticeable or easily missed. It was small, a coin taken from the hoard of a sleeping dragon. A piece of his power, as small as a tangled spool of red thread, that fragment of his half-soul.

Power is just like anything else, too much of it can be fatal. It could change you; warp you into something cancerous and unrecognizable. Overloading every sense you possess until you lose your mind completely. Dante is a battery, fuel, food kept in a freezer for later consumption. Something that needed to be digested one piece at a time, chewed thoroughly then swallowed.

“You’re a real asshole you know that Mr. Copycat?”

He isn’t too badly affected by it. He still has the lions share after all.

I remember how I shoved him away and watched him fall down into that different shade of black. He had a strange look on his face as he fell, eyes glazed with heavy sorrow and astonished recognition (something like this had happened before) as his empty hands reached out for me as if I were his lifeline, his savior, begging. His form became smaller and insignificant, the red of his coat becoming duller, fading away.

And so it was finished.

I pulled myself back out, onto that clearing, on my hands and knees, my blood draining down into the soil like rainwater or motor oil. I rose to my uneven feet and smoothed out my garish red trench coat, brushed my hand through my lank silver hair, and mouthed the words ‘the demon’s been taken care of, Sir. It was a walk in the park. Whatever you got on you is fine by me.’

“I’m gonna find my way out of this boring-ass shit hole,” I saw that he had his hand on another inert doorknob. “and when I do, you’re gonna pay a damn steep price!” Then he coughed, and coughed again.

I’m looking forward to it.

I smirked as I unstopped the drain, the black water swirling, the image of the demon hunter distorted like a photograph printed on wet tissue paper as it gurgled down into the sink, into oblivion, gulped down completely.

And then I was alone again.
I ran my tongue over my lips, tasting meat as I wiped up the tiny black droplets in the sink with my thumb, careful not to leave any sort of trace behind; momentarily reassured by the half-breeds helpless confusion and relaxed nonchalance that he would not be coming back any time soon. ‘A damn steep price’, his irritated threat echoed inside of my head as I exited the washroom and tossed the glass sliver into the garbage with the other shards.

I smiled through a small twinge of instinctual uneasiness; telling myself that it was an impotent threat from an impotent man and nothing more. He was there and I was here, it would take something worth far more than any miracle for him to find his way back from a place where time was lost to the living. I exhaled softly, my attention flickering back over to the washroom for only a moment before heading over towards the billiard table and snatching up a pool cue. The striped red billiard ball was the first to be knocked into the pocket, the solid yellow sphere followed close behind, then the striped blue.

I paused when I heard the unmistakable sound of Nero’s boots crunching down into the snow, heavy and uneven as if he were staggering in vertigo after being dealt a heavy blow. I leaned back from my game, the wooden pool cue resting on my shoulder as the office doors were thrown open. A frigid flurry of winter air swirled in to greet me, along with a very nauseous demon boy.

I watched with quiet interest as he tossed his sword haphazardly aside where it clanged loudly on the floor, no doubt leaving its teeth marks in the already ragged wood. He quickly pushed his way past me in a flash of white and phosphorescent blue, his glimmering devils hand pressed hard against his mouth, his human hand clutching at his stomach as he ran into the washroom where he started to vomit. It was not the odour of Nero’s puke, the stench of fruit and cream and stomach acid that caught my attention, I pushed that aside; it was another smell entirely that clouded my senses.

Almost…Lilin in nature.

I set the pool cue down and walked towards the bathroom, listening intently him retching, coughing, choking, heaving. The stench became stronger with each step I took. Split nightshade and lemonade candy so sweet that it stung my nostrils and made my tongue twist across the back of my teeth.

It was a feminine scent that caressed the air with her long nails, wafted all around like the heavy perfume left behind by a woman long gone. It was something else entirely, something oddly familiar that made me want to twitch. I frowned as my red eyes widened in silent recognition, the images of black leather clothing and long blonde hair bolting through my mind in a quick flash of onyx and gold.

That lioness. That she-devil.

What was her name?

Trish?

I pushed the door open and peered inside, finding the youth curled up against the toilet, clutching both sides of the brim as if to keep from collapsing into a limp heap on the floor. I scoffed and shook my head, eyeing the chunks of half-digested food that floated in the bowl before settling my attention on the boy. His silver hair dulled to the tint of dandelion floss; the blue band-aid that the
client had given him was gone and had not been replaced. Blood and mucus and frothy saliva smeared across his face, his beautiful mouth; panting and dripping.

Am I the cause of such sickness?

As I darkened the doorway I wondered, did the she-devil and human lady meet Nero at the job, or was it afterwards? Did he notify them somehow or was it a serendipitous coincidence? Regardless, she did embrace him; I can smell it in spite of the vomit, in his hair, in his clothing. It is very dangerous for a demon to have the kind of scent that lingers on like that, after they are gone. I sniffed the air again.

Very dangerous.

“That woman hugged you.” I said in a tone so dull it sounded as if it were a stray afterthought. The boys’ bloodshot eyes fell on me and narrowed in anger; but alas, he was too ill to say anything, to do anything as I stepped inside and closed the door softly behind me.

“What?” Nero croaked out, his voice sounding irritated and scraped sore as he rested his forehead on the porcelain brim, saliva dribbling down his chin as he spoke.

“The client,” I lied as I smiled kindly at him. “she hugged you before you left did she not?” I knelt down beside him and met his gaze. The youth swallowed dryly after a few moments then looked away, perhaps wondering how I knew. Or maybe he just did not want to be close to me.

“Well yeah,” He sniffled and wiped his rosy pink nose with his clenched devil's fist. “they kinda do that sometimes. It’s nothin’ new. She was nice.”

“Ah, I see.” I breathed in deeply once more to commit the smell to memory, to lock it away in the vault of my mind, stored among countless others.

Nero coughed as he struggled to stand as well, flushing the toilet then leaning onto it for support. When I offered my hand he only shook his head and pushed it away. I watched as he swayed like a tall stack of pale teacups, ready to tip over and shatter.

Oh Dante, if you could see your beloved boy now it would shred your heart to ribbons.

“Make sure to have a good wash.” I said plainly as I turned to leave.

“You smell awful.”

=-=-=-=

It has been two days since Nero had been with those women at the diner, at the job. He would not look at me, careful to keep his head down as he mumbled one excuse or another before wandering off by himself. The office phone would ring sparingly, and Nero was always so quick to snatch it up, and would run out the door without a single glance to spare in my direction. I did not follow him, had no desire to as each time he came back, his own scent clung to him like a shroud, a funeral pall of loneliness.

He also had difficulty sleeping, tossing and turning on his mattress at night, or pacing here and there in the early hours of the morning; his naked feet scuffing across the floor. Each morning he would begrudgingly trudge down the stairs, his steps a little slower, his head hung a little lower, drained.

I kept my hands to myself, well-behaved much to Nero’s wordless relief I am sure. I would sit at
the half-bloods desk, in his chair, turning the she-devils memorized scent over in my mind; like an antique coin with some unknown calligraphy etched into it. Needing to be deciphered, to be known. I thought back to the diner, to the lioness’ human companion, their fruitless search for answers.

I could go out and find them, figure out if they had found anything useful against me, anything at all. One can never be too careful about such things, and I’ve been incredibly comfortable as of late, having been solidified after I had checked up on hapless Dante.

It is nightfall now. Nero was resting, wrapped in his security blanket, his life-support system; figuratively speaking anyway. The boy was sprawled across the couch; his headphones pulled over his ears though no music of any kind was playing. He had covered his eyes with his human hand, his unkempt black shirt riding up past his hips, exposing the silver pubic hair on his stomach. The aroma of fresh black coffee filled the air from the bubbling pot in the kitchen. A children’s animation program was airing on the television in front of him with the sound turned down low. A yellow kitchen sponge was talking to a robot crab and they were- I really don’t understand any of it at all.

I swallowed dryly as I took a quiet moment to observe Nero’s sleeping form, his delicately handsome face, his pink lips chapped and peeling like paint. His demon arm was slug carelessly over his chest, glistening in harmony with his heavy breathing, his pulse.


“Nero…” I cooed his name as softly as a whisper, nearly reached out to tousle his hair but stayed my hand. I watched as the light from his arm started to flicker, glaring brilliantly in tune with his quickening heart rate. He whimpered and cringed in his sleep, compulsively yanked his shirt down over his stomach, pressed his thighs tightly together. It seems as if comfort is a stranger to him now.

Are you dreaming about me?

I chuckled as I walked across the foyer towards the double doors, heading out into the cold winter night. The she-devil’s smell still fresh on my mind. Even if Nero woke up right then, he would not dare follow me.

The streetlamps illuminated the snow on the street in a soft amber glow, as faded as the light from a heavy-eyed sunset.

I inhaled deeply as I walked, licked the air for any trace of that devilish familiarity. I shook my head as I made my way towards the diner in harefooted steps, moving quickly, flawlessly through the darkness. I stopped in front of the old brick building, blackened and lifeless; I let my eyes flutter close.

Breathing, just breathing.

Reaching out for any sort of trace, a remnant, a left-over fragrance of lemonade and nightshade to rip out of the air and grab hold of. I could smell other things, things that were of no importance to me. The exhaust fumes from vehicles long since passed, cooking oil used to fry foods within the walls of the diner, the rock salt poured across the sidewalks to make them easier to stroll along for the uncoordinated humans. Useless little stenches. I sighed heavily as I turned and continued down the street, moving just a bit slower, feeling the need to be thorough. I licked the air once more then
stopped in my tracks, startled.

There it was.

I broke into an abrupt run, clearing one street, then another, chasing that poisoned echo to its very source. Streetlamps and gutter-rat buildings blurred together in an incoherent haze as the smell became stronger, more vivid, more alive. Unkempt neon bars and boorish gentlemen’s clubs gave way to introverted book stores, quiet cafes and small family owned shops. I slowed to a light saunter, and soon stopped entirely, finding myself glowering at the front doors of a small inn that was tucked away like an old book lost in a dusty cupboard.

Uncertainty nibbled on my insides as I quietly circled the building, stepping through the empty parking lot. I eyed each darkened window, listened intently for the women’s voices, and inhaled deeply again to pin-point which room it was they were residing in and…-

Ah.

After one swift bound I was balancing on the ledge just outside of a second-story window, peering into the small unlit room, my hands placed flat against the smooth frosted glass. It was void of life though the she-devils’ smell was still there, along with what I assumed was the scent of the human lady, incredibly strong; they had departed from here not too long ago.

A slow smile tugged at the corner of my mouth as I stepped inside, through the icy window, past the threshold and the glass, finding myself inside of their layer. It is an ability that I was born with, though not at all unique to me, other demons can do this as well. To be able to soundlessly enter any sort of room as long as it is dark or at the very least poorly lit; in and out as easily as black smoke through the eyelet of a lace curtain. I simply can’t go about kicking open doors and smashing windows like a clumsy oaf every time I wish to arrive or depart, now can I?

As I stepped in the cramped space I saw that the room was in a state of chaotic disarray; windblown and lived-in and human. Innumerable books, printed documents and notes of all kinds were scattered about on a small table, along with three handguns and a cartridge bullets that glittered like silver jewelry. A portable computer lay closed on the tangled sheets of the single unmade bed, an envelope set beside it. Outer clothing and salacious undergarments littered the floor in splashes of fabric as quietly colorful as pastel candy. A pink brassiere latched itself onto my foot when I moved through the darkness and headed over to the cluttered table, I kicked it off as I picked up a coffee-stained slip of paper; sending other pages fluttering to the floor in a heap as I read its contents. Fax numbers, phone numbers, and electronic mailing addresses to hospitals and universities were scribbled in a hurried feminine scrawl; some were highlighted while others had been scratched out in angry harsh marks.

I picked up another page, a picture this time with ‘Where is Dante?’ written at the top in capital letters. It was a map of the entire city with various locations circled in red. All of which I recognized to be a number of previous devil-hunting jobs that the cur had taken up shortly before his disappearance, though none of them were anywhere near where I had lured him away. Perhaps the women had gotten this information from Nero during one of their prior visits, and were trying their best to look for any sort of pattern or clue or lead. Anything at all.

I sighed heavily, the papers falling from my fingers as I made my way over towards the unkempt bed and sat down on the twisted sheets; next to the computer and manila envelope. The smell that invaded my senses right then was potent enough for me to nearly cover my nose. The scents of both women, the nightshade of the she-devil and a strong floral perfume worn by the human lady; spiraled into one another, as feverishly sweet as poisoned blossoms.
They…are mates?

I picked up the sticky-hot smell of sweat, the fragrant wax of smeared lipstick, saliva left over from opened-mouth kisses, and that female honeydew of arousal. They were together in this bed, writhing, pleasuring one another. (What did they use, a tongue, a finger, or a foreign object?) Was it a simple need for comfort that drove them into each other’s arms, or was it a sort of wild desperation that stemmed from the growing hopelessness of their situation that could only be quelled by physical release?

I smirked, pleased (and disgusted) with this new information as I reached over and opened the manila envelope; pouring out photographs onto that odious bed. The half-bloods mother was smiling gently at me again and again from numerous copies, all differing in size. Some were larger than the original, meant to be hung from walls; while others were small enough to be carried around snug in a billfold. I scanned each picture briskly for creases and tears, noting that the original was not among them. It seems as if the human lady made good on her promise to Nero.

It’s almost touching.

I rose from the bed; a copy of the photo clenched in my fist as I headed towards the window and looked out onto the empty parking lot.

It seemed like all these women had to rely on were themselves and these few resources. Going to the police and reporting the half-breed missing would get them nowhere. It is simply improbable when he’s safe and sound at home. This is not a situation where they can point their painted fingers at me and say ‘That’s not him, that’s not the real Dante; that’s just a copy. He took him away. You have to believe us.’ They would be buried under a sanitarium before they could murmur another word. And I would just stand there and laugh with my silver hair and blue eyes and garish red trench coat.

I paused when I heard a low rumble, like the godless gunfire of thunder rolling off in the distance, getting closer. A motorcycle, fresh cherry bright, rolled into view. I watched as it shot across the snow and into the parking lot with a deafening roar; two figures huddled together on its back, one blonde and the other a noirette.

So they’re back. I looked on as they dismounted, the human lady taking a moment to grab something that was mounted on the side of the bike, a gigantic metal tube that she slung effortlessly over her shoulder as if it were a small grey satchel. Together they began heading towards the building. The she-devil hooked her arm around the humans’ waist, pulling her close, both of them glimmering under the bronze colored streetlights; swaddled in their long black coats trimmed with white fur. Wherever they had gone did not give them the hope nor information that they were looking for, I could tell in how slowly they walked, how tense they looked, how exhausted.

Then the human lady, she slipped; the icy sidewalk had caught her heeled boot. She would have fallen if it were not for the she-devils arm wrapped strong around her waist, holding her up, keeping her steady. The two of them stopped, clutching onto one another, as still as any dead thing frozen mid-stride.

I watched as they began to chuckle, softly at first, almost tearful, then a sirens song of girlish laughter left the both of them, taking me by surprise; and for a moment I wondered if they had gone mad. The she-devil leaned in and silenced her companion with a kiss on the lips, passionate yet chaste; a disgustingly human symbol of their union. Something that I would never do.

“Have a look at this, Unholy Mother.” I said to the dead woman in the photograph as I held it up to
the window so that she could see. “Isn’t it horrid?” She did not answer me, and did not scream when I let her fall to the floor.

The women were out of my sight now, having entered the building. I paused and wondered briefly if I should leave out through the window, and head back from whence I came, back to Devil May Cry. I shook my head. No, I will not leave. No, I will not retreat.

I am not finished here just yet.

I smelled them, perfume and nightshade. I heard them, womanly voices and high-heels cantering across the floor like marbled deer hooves. I sighed, licked my lips, and closed my eyes just as the door opened and the light turned on.
A buzzing electric light spilled across the cramped room as pus would drip from a wound, chasing away that dearly held darkness. A moment of stillness was broken by the sound of firearms being withdrawn, supple as leather and hummingbird-quick. I opened my eyes and peered into the looking-glass surface of the window, seeing that over my shoulder, two sets of handguns were aimed in my direction; teeth and claws cradled in the aroma of toxic flowers.

This duad was very still, petrified; the heels of their shoes fastened to the floor like century-old tree roots. I noticed that the blonde demon held weapons that looked similar to those wielded by the cur, but they were not the same. (His were with him when he fell.) Whilst her mate only held her human handguns filled with human ammunition, that absurd metal tube still fastened to her back. It looked as if it would take no more than a light gust of wind to knock her over.

I breathed in to taste the flavor of the air, and I knew that they were not the types to retreat once a dangerous threat had made itself known.

Oh no, not them.

Still, something about them seemed as if they were shifting and fluttering with panic just under their skin. I could hear their hearts beating as rapidly as the crooked wings of rib caged birds, evoking the memory of Nero’s flashing devil bringer clutching at his chest.

“Turn. Around. Slowly.” The she-demon commanded me with a queenly iciness and primeval class of anger, to obey her without question.

For what is perhaps the first and last time in over a millennium, I am not the only being wearing a face that does not belong to me. I suppressed a smile at the thought and circled leisurely away from the window; stepping so that the photocopy of the Unholy Mother crinkled and tore under my foot as I turned to face them.

A gunshot erupted and my head snapped back, eyes towards the ceiling, throbbing with the pettiest kind of pain. A single bullet was planted in the center of my forehead, smelling acrid, smoky and copper metal-sour. Blood as warm as a humans seeped down my scalp towards my ears; where I felt it drip. Drip. Drip.

That was awfully rude…

Though in response, I only cleared my throat as if I had been interrupted by a stray word as opposed to a fired gun, bringing my head down to gaze at them; mildly irritated yet entirely unconcerned.

“Well, hello to you too!” An impish kind of geniality danced in my voice as the tiny steel seed was pushed out of my skin and dropped harmlessly to the floor. “Is Dante normally treated like this by his friends?” I chewed on his name as I glanced from one cosmetically daubed face to the other, drinking in their worn out auras and dismal, wine-dark demeanors like nectar.

The way they were staring at me; Trish and her mate, was so contemptuous, so unbelieving and masklike; reminding me of the very first time Nero had laid eyes on me. I was a stranger wearing the skinned hide of a dear friend; an imposter painted ten shades darker, a bastard oddity that was wrong in every way.

“Where’s Dante?” The blonde devil’s voice was as even and hard as a sharpening stone, her quiet
fear disguised with a well-practiced, feminine animosity. I noticed how she strived to not breathe in through her nose, nostrils twitching like that of a hare that had sensed the presence of a nearby snake, ever so watchful. She swallowed in light, shuddering gasps of air as if she were trying not to vomit, her insides twisted and wrenched.

She looked so pale, almost ghost-white, her lips as red as a gash; a moving wound that could talk. Her eyes glimmered with rage; it was easy to see how badly she longed to strike me. To savage my skin to shreds and open me up to see what horrible thing lurked underneath.

I decided to play along.

“Dante is in a safe place. Alive and well at the very least, though both of you are aware of that; I’m sure. After all, isn’t that what you told Nero to soothe his nerves at the diner?”

They seemed to falter internally at my words, with nowhere to perch and nothing to grapple onto for support besides one another. With their weapons drawn it seems as if they had expected the absolute worst from me; outrageous combat and grisly demonic violence. Leaping and shooting, hitting and kicking; the entire room devastated beyond repair in the process. (To maim or be maimed, to be or not to be.) It must have seemed peculiar that I would let them wound me without opposition, as I chose only to look down the barrels of their guns; armed with nothing but a sardonic grin and my own blood circling my skull like a crown of black thorns.

“What did you do?” It was the human lady who spoke this time, words dripping like venom from her teeth, her tone acidic and heavily contrasting the stoicism of her mate. I said nothing; my easygoing, tomcat-strut expression irritating her further, catching her by her tigress tail and not letting go.

“What did I do?” I overcame my desire to laugh as I pressed both of my empty hands against my chest, an animated gesture none too different from something the cur would do if confronted by a question that he believed he could charm his way out of. They seemed to notice this.

I’m only doing what Nero’s letting me do…

“Nothing, I haven’t done a single thing.” I said innocently as I let my hands fall carelessly to my sides, horns holding up my broken halo. “Nero’s at the shop now, sleeping like a baby. I didn’t fuck your whereabouts out of him if that’s the gutter where your mind is swimming. I simply followed him to where you had your little gathering the other day, at that diner. His head has been quite hazy as of late, far-off and distant. You really should talk to him about that, such carelessness can get him killed.”

A literal shot of pain ripped its way through my insides and I could only gnash my teeth in response. Biting back an agonized grunt as I leaned from one foot onto the other, attempting to alleviate that splitting pang…there.

That gaping wound, my rule of three gored into a rule of none; an appropriate punishment. Blood stained the middle of my trousers and ran hot down my legs like fresh piss, along with the bits of sticky meat, burnt cloth and a single sweltering bullet. I felt my legs spasm and tremble as my eyes began to water.

Eye water, that surprised me more than the wounding itself.

Eye water. (Not tears)

“Is this a present for Nero? Or rather an…apology?” I managed to murmur in a shaky tone that
was neither angry nor particularly upset. I blinked back the wetness in my eyes; my ruined organ already in the process of mending itself. The fabric as well, though it isn’t really fabric at all.

“It’s a present for you, asshole.” Snarled the woman with the gun.

I smirked, swallowing dryly as I heard the she-devils voice, a quiet yet ruthless whisper say.

“Lady, stop it.”

Trying to get her to ceasefire, are you? I know it isn’t empathy that makes you say that, nor morality or ethics or whatever such maladies you’ve been tainted with by choosing that woman to be your mate. Is watching her harm me the same as seeing it done to the mutt himself? Or is it that you simply don’t wish to provoke an attack and your only desire is to keep her out of harm’s way? Is that why you stand so close to her? (Guard now, undress later.) Humans are fickle little thorns. They don’t think, they only react. She’s your mate; you should know this better than anyone.

“Feeling better, kitten?” I let out a cheerful little laugh that sounded strange and dark even to my own ears. I don’t believe that I have ever come across anything quite like this one, bristling and fearless; she looked like the type who would scald her tongue just to lick my blood from that smoking gun of hers.

“Fuck you, bitch!” The human lady spat, pink painted lips (smeared scarlet at the corner) exposing an armada of clenched teeth, the pupils in her mismatched eyes dilated. (An intriguing little detail that I had missed before.) Garnet and sapphirine fruits born from the same tree, likely a congenital gift from one of her parents.

Still, she did seem disappointed, my reaction not bringing about the fleeting catharsis she was expecting. It looked as if she were waiting for me to double over with a scream, beg for mercy, and spill out every single detail that they wanted to know.

“Why is Dante so important to you? What sort of bond did you share with him?” I questioned as my attention flickered over towards the blonde devil, modeled so carefully after His mother; that diaphanous, dead thing. A counterfeit Jocasta to the half-blood’s Oedipus.

“Nothing you could even begin to understand you sick fuck.” The human hissed at me.

I pretended that I did not hear her, focusing instead on the demon that was oh so quiet; it was as if she had not heard me or her mate or anything that had been said at all. She was focused so intently on my face.

I saw something in her shaded blue eyes, a maelstrom; a spiraling force of nature that could grab hold of you and drag you down below. In her depths I saw not only the quiet exhaustion and helpless dread of not knowing what happened to her friend, but I also saw the inability to make things better for Nero. I saw guilt. I saw short-comings.

I saw failure.

“You’ve tried and tried taking Nero away with you, haven’t you? But he just won’t leave, will he? He probably tells himself that he’s doing it with your best interests in mind as opposed to his own. Such a sweet boy, isn’t he? Perhaps he feels as if he’s powerless and has no choice at all in the matter; though it will be a beautiful day in hell before he admits to that. Most young devils are like that after being bested in combat by a…potential mate. After all, who could say no to Dante?” My tone was almost sympathetic, though the devilish grin I gave was anything but.

I realized that her mouth was closed, her lips pressed into a thin hard line, breathing through her
nose. Perhaps memories were playing on the inside of her mind like an old home movie, flashing images that were safe and known and most unwelcome at the present moment.

She and her mate sitting with Dante and listening to music on that old jukebox, licking grease from their fingers as they fought over the last slice of pizza, late night talks when everything was dark, and sleep was gone even though the lights were off. Poor devil, trying so hard to look for some familiar, intangible thing that was good-natured and leather-red. Something for her to smile softly at in recognition and say ‘There you are’.

“And just what is Nero to the both of you anyway? Is this boy a close friend to assist in his time of need, or is he a stray cub for you to nourish and take care of? I’m not forcing him to stay with me, you do know that; yes? He isn’t a pet that I have collard, clipped, and leashed. He’s free to come and go whenever he wishes, and believe me; he snatches up every opportunity he can. Yet he comes back on his own accord, _always_. I have no han—”

Metal exploded in my mouth, scraping the inside of my cheeks stinging and raw.

“Oh my god, shut up! Shut the fuck up! It’s _not you_ that he keeps coming back to!”

From the noirettes voice alone I felt the sinews under her pale skin pull taut like piano wire ready to snap, feral and twisted with full-blooded human rage.

I pressed my hand to my mouth hard enough for my teeth to dig into the back of my lips. My breathing was a wet and heavy spray through my nostrils, mucilaginous and thick. I flicked the hot bullet back and forth over my tongue like a piece of penny candy or a loose tooth, before gulping it down with a swallow of blood.

Don’t you…

“Don’t you think that I am aware of that?” I brought my hand down and wiped it on my now-repaired trousers. “Devils blood is persistent, steadfast, and stubborn in what it wants; its desires running thicker and deeper than the capricious butterfly milk of human logic.”

That made me sometimes wonder about Nero and the half-breed…

I thought back to those sacred acts of defilement; my insensitive habit of leaving the boy unfinished, half-eaten and gutted. Just how deep does their bond go for that troubled child to stay put like he does? What happened in his life for him to cling and hold with such needy desperation onto the shadow of a man who only had half a soul to give?

Then I thought of the piece that I had taken from him…

Not even half, anymore.

“It’s easy to see why you fell for that one.” I clicked my tongue as I smiled warmly at the she-demon with a mouth full of black teeth.

“Tell us where Dante is…” She said in a voice that was surprisingly monotonous and still-water calm; her eyes unblinking and as glossy as gossamer in a pale moonlight. “Or we will kill you.”

Oh?

“You can’t kill me.” I said rather plainly, almost bored. “Sparda’s own son couldn’t lay a finger on me. Neither could Nero, and he tried his absolute best. I think you would have been so very proud of him. So what chance do the both of you have, really?”
“We’ll level this whole goddamn building if it means bringing an end to you. If you’re not going
to talk, then what are you good for?” The human tightened her grip on her firearms, her gloved
fingers curled over the triggers like drawn talons.

“What am I good for? Nothing, I suppose.” I shrugged my shoulders, careless and insouciant,
acting as if the thought had never once crossed my mind before. “You are more than welcome to
try, though I will not surrender so easily. And here’s a pretty penny for your thoughts, just what
will you do if you succeed? Take Nero out for some medical treatment and ice cream afterwards?
Maybe sprinkles if he’s been a good boy?” I let out an amused snicker. “Peruse these same
documents ad nauseam with another set of bloodshot eyes? Kill me, and you will lose the only
chance of Dante ever coming back. Send me marching towards the gallows, and he’ll be right by
my side with the same noose around his neck.”

“You’re full of shit!” shouted the human virago.

“Amen? Have you ever known a man to live without his shadow?” I gave them a slow and crooked
grin.

“Tell us why, then. You can do that much can’t you? What’s in it for you? Is this a grudge?
Revenge for other demons that Dante’s hunted?” The blonde woman’s voice was low and
unthreatening; not a whisper, but it possessed the feather-soft tone of one.

I nearly scoffed. All of this simply to avenge the slain souls of my demon brethren? Those corpses
hung from the walls of the shop like wild game? All of this for them? Oh please, nothing as
Romantic as that.

“Satisfaction in all its forms.” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“Why Nero?” The devil boy’s name was safe in her mouth, rocked gently in the satin cradle of her
voice, coddled.

Why Nero? I had to fight the urge to speak to her in her own voice, to mimic and mock. I chose
that boy because he was convenient. He was there, living at the shop. Were he not, I would not
have had any reason at all to stay. But I will not say that…

“Tell me, what’s the worst thing you can do to hurt someone? You bestow pain not upon them,
but on the one closest to them; the one they adore and cherish most. If you want to wound a loving
husband, you hurt his wife. If you wish to bereave a mother, you attack her child. And to destroy a
demon in the most intimate way possible without taking its life?”

I eyed the human lady and gave her a false-pearl smile.

“You take their mate.”

In the time it took to take a single step, I had already closed in on her.

Gunshots cracked through the air and were sown into my skin, my chest, shoulders, and thighs.
Discordant. Jarring.

Not my face, not my face. Not His Face

Every hit from the she-devil. Every hit non-lethal.

Scorching and painful, but not enough to hinder. Not enough to slow me down.
Not enough to get me to stop.

I grabbed hold of the human, her coat twisted in my hands, tearing like butchers paper.

Her firearms fell. No, she threw them down. Knew they were useless.

I winked at her, turning one eye blue and for a moment we matched.

Something sharp impaled my throat, pierced through. The bottom of a shoe hammered into my chin, cracking my teeth together.

The she-demon.

I grimaced with a mouthful of bone fragments.

I snatched her ankle and threw her off of me.

The human, she had something in her hand.

Something small and fragile that she shattered against the side of my face. Wetness splashed into my eyes and soaked my skin and—

I felt it.

The boiling. Blisters forming then already popping, weeping.

The ripping.

(It’s in my eyes I can’t see.)

**Holy water**

I felt it. *(I can’t see.)*

My face…my face was…

Dropping

off

in

chunks.

The human. The demon. They saw me. I know it.

Saw a piece of what I really was. A glimpse. A wisp. Shadow and smoke behind the curtain.

(I can’t see.)

I tried for her neck, her glass neck. Break it. Smash it to pieces.

Just one hit, *just one.*

It was a groping blow, a fumbled strike. A shot in the dark.

Bones that did not belong to me were splitting, cracking.
And then finally broken.

An odd noise left her, strange and ragged. Not a cough or a scream.

Just a threadbare gasp.

I released her and she fell.

Then she wheezed and choked.

There was still sound where there should have been silence.

Only human.

_A blow like that should have killed her._

Only human.

Something bright took over the room. The demon mother is on me.

I felt the tingling heat. From her skin. From her strength.

The sound of cackling electricity coiling all around and—

_Oh._

A thunderstorm. A brontide rattled my skull, lightning struck my jaw, burning it away.

A window smashing into my back. The rush of winter air. I opened my eyes and saw the orange light of the world spinning.

Falling

    Falling.

    F
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The snowy street met me. (Or did I meet it?)

Lying on the frozen pavement. Quite a ways from the building. A heap.

It took me a few moments to manage to my feet.

My jaw splintered; swinging and hanging by black threads of meat, bits of my teeth splattered and loose across the snow near my feet, torn from my gums, leaving little holes.

I held my mangled jaw in my hands and pushed it into its rightful place at the proper angle, that grinding sound of bone against bone crunching loud in my ears. (I don’t want to make another jaw.)

I paused, letting my muscles snake and thread within themselves, a latticework of raw meat and skin pulling itself back together.

My tongue dangled useless and twisted like a hacked umbilical cord; chewed nearly in half. I slurped it back into my mouth once the dead skin peeled away and I had lips again. Albeit, still crusted with open sores.

Fucking holy water. Fucking horse piss.

I finally looked up at the window and saw her, the she-devil. Her hair wild and falling in front of her face, unbleached silk set alight. I could see the whites of her eyes. Everything within her was screaming at her to come down and eliminate me.

But alas…

“Your mate needs you.”

I blew her a kiss from my bloody, blistered mouth.
I looked down from the white rooftop quite a ways away; invisible to everything in the cold darkness of the night, melded as one within its hungry stomach. I peered in through that broken, jagged window from whence I came; staring into that blinding piss-yellow light. Innumerable shadows were dancing along the walls; police officers, paramedics, and of course the blonde she-devil.

Down below law enforcement vehicles were parked haphazardly in front of the little inn; their red and blue lights flashing and twirling against the building, the snow. A lone ambulance was present as well.

Everything was silent.

Human police officers and health care workers. No doubt alerted by whatever frightened proletariat worked down on the ground floor of the inn. Perhaps they were young, dozing away at the front desk with their chin resting on their knuckle; only to be startled awake by the sound of gunfire and thunderous lightning which had forced their hand to scramble for the phone.

I massaged my aching jaw in irritation, scratching and picking at the outbreak of blisters that ate away at my chin and both corners of my mouth. My wounds weeping, pus trailing down my chin like a thin sap; disturbing my concentration.

Out of an instinctual need, I tried to inhale to get any hint of their scents, but alas the only thing I could smell clearly was my own blood. Its odour was burning and acidic; stinging to my nostrils and throat. Soiled to the point of unfamiliarity by the holy water.

I grimaced, still feeling the crack of the vial shattering against my face. My skin lying in chunks amongst the broken glass at my feet. Through my aching skull my thoughts fumbled, cutting themselves on the fragments as they crawled slowly towards the human lady with her delicate, crushable bones.

I wondered, would she survive the night? Or would her fire die out into nothing and leave her mate stranded in the darkness?

I imagined her lying wilted on the floor; still gasping and choking, helpless. Her mismatched eyes alive with the purest kind of pain; deliciously lustrous and rheumy with tears that she could not stop. The tails of her torn ebony coat splayed about like the curled petals of a withering black iris. The victim of a demon (not my first and not my last) who was at the mercy of those around her.

Was the she-devil crying? Not eye water (that means nothing) but actual tears? Were they streaming down her face, ruining whatever cosmetics she was wearing? Was her hand pressed hard against her mouth to suppress her sobs, her maquillage staining her palm as red as a pomegranate that had been trampled open underfoot?
I could almost see the she-devil whispering to her mate that everything was going to be alright, her voice as broken as her heart. Nauseous with worry and hating herself for her own weakness as she would brush her mate's hair out of her face or smooth it down. Fretting, fretting, fretting like a lioness steeling herself for yet another oncoming attack.

For many demons, the well-being of their mates often takes precedence over all else; not only their own health, but also the need for food, shelter, or rest. I've seen many a demon wither away to nothing when their mates were fatally wounded. Frosts and Blades would maim themselves, slicing open their own flesh, feeding their dying mates their own skin and blood in a useless attempt to get them to live for just a little longer.

(Some would even sacrifice their own cubs.)

I knew then that she would not pursue me. Both Nero and I were the farthest things from her mind.

Having seen enough, I stepped away and left them behind; heading out into the night.

I feel no shame for what I had done. If the human did not wish to be in that situation, she should not have attacked me so recklessly. Letting her emotions run as rampant as they had, letting her anger boil over; that’s no different from praying for death.

The same can be said about Nero.

=-=-=-=-=

Down on the empty street, I had nothing but the sound of my own footsteps for company.

I clenched my teeth together, clicking them once, twice, thrice; to make sure that all were there. Though it still felt as if my face were torn apart; my muscles shredded and pulling. My tingling jaw swinging to and fro like a pendulum made of ivory.

Tic-tok. Tok-tic.

It’s funny in an odd way, had any attack even remotely similar to this occurred a little over a month ago, just one day before I had taken that tiny piece of Dante’s soul…

It would have been the end of me.

Thinking back, it felt so strange (but not at all unwelcome) that such a small piece of a soul came with such godlike power. Hardly a mouthful had fed me so well; I haven’t had any desire to eat ever since then…

After I had taken the mongrel, when I knew for certain that he was gone; there was a light feeling in my chest that I have trouble articulating; even now.

I remember how giddy I was with that strength, almost ludic as I made my way back to the shopkeeper, cantering up to him like an eager dressage horse clothed in red. At that time I was not at all troubled to be wearing the mutt’s skin, I suppose one could say that I even relished in it, if only for a little while. The man had paid me for my services, more than just a bit irritated after my flippant Dante-esque apology for leaving him mid-sentence and dashing off.

I took the approach of an idle flaneur; a man who acted as if applause and admiration were due to him with each and every movement that he made, no matter how mundane or banal they were. That the mere flick of his wrist was meant to be met with all the oohs and ahhs of the world.
“You killed all of those things right? Every last one?” The shopkeeper had asked in a serrated tone that heavily contrasted the rubicund nervousness of his plump face; staring at me. It seemed as if he could hardly believe that one man could obliterate an entire group of demons without any sort of trouble at all. This was one of the few instances where the mongrels reputation did not precede him.

I recall having to smirk to stifle my laugh, for I had taken care of that flock of Scarecrow since before that hybrid bastard had even gotten the call.

“Yes sir! It was no problem at all. A little too easy if you ask me!” I remember saying to him with a wide smile that seemed to unsettle him greatly. Even though I had meant him no harm, (he meant nothing to me) that man was still fearful, masking his fright under his saw-like anger and American tough-guy masculinity.

The shopkeeper shoved a bit of money at me, his hand clenched into a tight fist to keep from shaking; silently telling me to leave.

I moved away from him, as satisfied with the encounter as one could get, and headed back into the city.

Everything was drowned in the phantasmagoric delirium of the religious holiday season. The streets were alive with color, as it was the time of year where petty materialistic chaos reigned king of all.

I remember the motley decorations; the sparkling fairy lights; red and gold and white were strung up in doorways and strewn across windows, flashing like multi-colored fireflies. Streetlights were wrapped in garlands, decorated with angels and stars. Cookies, candy, clothing, and toys visible each and everywhere one would think to look. But the thing that stood out the most were the people.

People, humans, mortals.

Nothing but pathetic sacks of souls, covered in meat and gristle; ripe with blood.

So, so many of them; it had made my head throb.

The young and the old hanging onto each other’s mitted hands as to not lose one another in the frenzy. Those little fledgling boys and girls that would look up at the clouded sky every chance they could, their tiny tongues poking out, greedy to catch the first snowflakes that had yet to fall. Whilst the busy adults above them carried in their arms bags and parcels whilst chattering away on their wireless cellular phones.

So many scents. Sweet peppermint, cardboard, leather, and the winter coldness of the day.

So many sounds. I could still hear their laughter and chatter echoing around me, the memory of that time nipping at my heels with its teeth, hanging onto my coat tails like a child tugging and whining for attention.

I was in the center of all of that, one of them, or pretended to be. (That was nothing new)

Though the half-breed was always the type who stood out no matter where he was; the personification of heavy emphasis. (Look at me! Look at me!) And even at that particular time of the year when there were men on every street corner, dressed in bright red clothing with white hair, eyes would still manage to turn towards me as if I were the one ringing the bells.
How strange it felt to be recognized and acknowledged fully by others, for I had never taken the form of someone so well-known.

Sometimes their stares would linger, (especially those of the human cubs) other times they were so brief they could hardly be called a glimpse. I entered three different bars where the barkeepers shooed me out as if I were an invasive pest, grumbling about the nerve I had to show my face there before reminding me (no, Him) about various unpaid tabs.

I left His scent behind, weaving about and making a maze that lead straight back into itself like the fake plastic wreathes that covered the doors and windows around me. I walked across streets and up empty alleyways and down busy sidewalks. A jigsaw puzzle without any pieces. It was a precaution of sorts.

It was nightfall when I had finally made my way back to Devil May Cry.

I see it now in front of me.

The sign, a whorish neon pink that I still think is more appropriate for a brothel than a legitimate business of any kind.

*Devils crying...how absurd.* I remember thinking.

How confident I was when I entered in the shop, how recklessly I threw those double-doors open with my strong arms. To me it felt incredibly strange to walk so freely about inside of there without the need to huddle in and hide myself in the darkness any longer. I drowned out the silver of my hair and the red of my clothing, pushed it all aside in favor of the darker hues.

I had expected to see Nero, (*I wanted to see Nero*) but had instead found a note hand-written in his atrocious penmanship on the mongrel’s desk, folded in half and tucked under the rotary phone.

*Got a call while you were out. Be back soon Old Man.*

One could say that his style of fighting was comparable to his handwriting. Sloppy, artless, and intimately personal. Slashes and dashes half-remembered from formal teachings that had been diligently ignored and partly forgotten.

As I had walked about in the office; I remembered something strange, something that I had been curious about for a while at that time. Various scents; all demonic, unfamiliar, and absolutely powerful. It was in a room at the back of the shop, a normal-looking door, nothing at all extraordinary about it. One could pass by it every day of their life and never possess the urge to look inside.

I hesitated (shall I call it that?) for a moment before I had let myself in, immediately greeted by a flowering bouquet of demonic energy. The air was different from the office, its smell and taste, overrun by devilish puissance the likes of which I had never experienced before.

A large greeting was bellowed at me. “Who is this? A visitor! A guest!” I looked over and saw them, swords; two of them. Chattering excitedly in their deep, baritone voices.

“We must be gracious hosts!”

I ignored them as I looked about the room.

Weapons all around, (swords and gauntlets, ice-blue nunchaku, a jagged purple lute of some kind) They were demonic yes, but not at all like the empty-faced trophies that hung about in the front of
the office for all to see. This was something else entirely. The Scarecrow and the Hell Vanguard? Those were bodies.

These were souls.

A private artillery straight from Hell.

“I am not a visitor, nor your guest. You do not need to bother yourselves with me. I need no host.” I remember saying aloud, addressing either one of them. It didn’t matter which.

This information had displeased them.

“You have his form but you are not he.” The blue one had stated plainly after a bit of silence.

“You’re right. I’m not he.”

“You wear his face. You wear his skin and clothing, though darkened.”

“Yes, I do.” I sighed. “Thank you for noticing.”

“You have a weak soul. There is only darkness where there should be fire.” The red one addressed me with a low rumbling growl.

“The fire has gone with your master.”

“You are an imposter then, a fraud. An imitation. A charlatan, a—”

“Brother, what do those words mean?”

Their inane babble quickly deteriorated from there.

I know they would have killed me; (knowing such as that, takes the form of a heaviness in your bones) Not just the swords, but every other devil arm that was stashed away in that room; the way they shimmered and hummed and rattled around me. But there was just enough familiarity for them to hold themselves back; but not obey me. If I were to use them in battle, they would have not kept me safe.

 Needless to say, I have not gone back in.

I sat down at his disgusting desk and waited.

The door was opened and in the boy stomped, that red hood pulled up over his disheveled mane of silver hair. It’s color much healthier then. Simply looking at him was more than enough to whet my appetite, as I was enamored by the boyhood softness of his face, smooth and tender; undamaged at the time.

“Fuck, it’s freezing in here, Old Man. And would it kill you to turn on the lights?” His tone was barbed with a playful kind of irritation, his demon arm shooting out to flick on the weak light switch. He hadn’t even bothered to glance in my direction, as he kept his face turned away and shook his head; weary.

I watched with interest as he fussed about with his weapons, the sword and that firearm. “The job was easy but the client was nuts. Kept bitching for a discount due to the fact that I kinda wrecked her front porch. I mean, yeah okay, maybe I went a little crazy. But, seriously? Lady, I just saved your families lives and you wanna bitch at me about some smashed patio furniture? That’s so fucking stupid!”
Though he was complaining (a lot), he seemed at ease; the tension that he constantly carried around with him was loosened considerably due to the successful hunt. “So…if we get a bill in the mail…”

I sat at the desk in silence, asking myself, asking the cur: Why is this boy even here? Was he someone needed for the company, to ease your loneliness?

Or did you believe that you could love each other? Are you really that goddamn stupid?

I did not try to hide what I was. I did not pretend. “It sounds like you had a very nice time in spite of everything; I’m glad of it, Nero.”

“…The fuck?”

When he finally looked over at me, there was a long hushed moment between the two of us; an uneasy sort of silence that was as swollen as the tongues of the drowned dead. “…Dante?” I watched his limpid eyes blink slowly, his muscles stiff and uneasy as he pushed his hood down to get a better look at me.

I rose from the desk and stood out in front of it. Arms crossed firmly over my chest, my grin as fraudulent as my face.

“Is everything alright? Perhaps you should have a lie-down. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Black hair, red eyes, a dark and friendless voice; improper and wrong.

Cold astonishment flickered trice across his face, then anger clouded over and darkened it. He reached out for me, snatched me up with that giant ethereal devils hand and threw me out of the double-doors of the shop and into the cold street. (I could not have asked for a grander exit!) He had followed close behind, shooting at me with that ridiculous revolver of his.

Such a wildly insufficient gun, only three shots at a time before having to pause to reload.

I remember that he had his sword unsheathed, that beautiful devils arm of his flaming bright, ready for anything. (Or so he had thought)

“Remarkable boy!” I remember saying to myself as I rose to my feet.

Such ferocity! Demons are not the types to greet one another with a friendly smile and firm handshake, as we prefer a different form of etiquette. And unlike the blow from the she-devil, Nero’s strike was a small blow hardly worth gritting one’s teeth over. He couldn’t swat a fly.

That fight was a carnival of color. The phosphorescent blue of his spectral hand, snatching and grabbing for me; sometimes missing and sometimes not. His eyes rimmed red and blazing like the sword in his hand, his fingers twisting its handle to unleash its mechanized roar. The pink neon sign of Devil May Cry drowning us both in its harsh amaranth light.

It was a bizarre dance, a waltz of sorts, romantic only in its élan violence. I treated him the way Dante would, with a flurry of taunts and needless movements. There were times when I would dilly-dally, then behave flirtatiously. I would wink and flick my tongue at him. Pucker my lips for a kiss that would never come. And in response he would only scoff and snarl and swear, his face burning.

I had observed his fighting style more than once; his moves were unsurprising; easy to predict and even easier to react to. A puerile form of combat that was just about as effective and deadly as any
toddler's temper tantrum.

*Snap out of it, Old Man!*

*What the hell's the matter with you?!*

His voice was torn with panic. He just wanted me in my right mind.

*This isn't funny!*

But it was, it was very funny. He was like a thread of thin twine unspooling and getting tangled up within itself. Constantly tripping over his own feet, knotted and snarled and unable to wind back together again without snapping.

I was untroubled, euphoric even. There were moments when I would clap my hands or pat my thighs to excite him further like the rambunctious little pup that he was; calling out to him in the half-blood’s voice. *“Hey what’s up?”*

Come just a little closer.

For the outcross, victory has always been there no matter what. It was always as certain as the wind sings and the water runs and the sun rises. And because of that, it was there for me as well.

That boy was manic with recklessness. I was waiting patiently for him to tucker himself out.

He had dashed up to me and I felt the hot metal of his revolver under my chin, his gaze holding mine and not letting go. But he had made a mistake, had miscounted his rounds, I had not.

A harmless little click was all that was heard. A no-bullet roulette.

*Click! Click!*

As close to me as he was, I grabbed him and tore his hooded sweatshirt off his shoulder. He smashed his revolver against the side of my skull, but it did nothing to dissuade me. I remember how I sank my teeth deep into his skin, creating a happy sound that was as satisfying as crunching into the ripest of apples. It was more of an insult than anything else; as the wound had healed by the time I pulled my mouth away, wet with spit.

I cracked my elbow against his face before shoving him down onto the street, kneeing his legs apart. He was spraddled open; vulnerable. (a stern warning for what was to come.) He hissed and spat and bitched all the while, struggled and writhed underneath me. His human fingers clawing for the hilt of his sword that had been knocked away, just out of his reach.

I remember how he swore at me in a voice fractured by pain, called me every name he could think of. *“What the fuck are you doing?!”* It was panic that strangled his tone into high-pitched whine. I braced my knee right up against him, right in his middle, had pressed down hard enough to stifle him down. *“You gettin’ off on this?”* He snarled at me, his sweet blood climbing through the cracks in his teeth, spattering my mouth and chin as he spoke.

I remember smiling down at him as I licked my lips.

Yes, I was.

There was something alluringly post-coital about his heavy breathing and hateful dark eyes.

I felt a mischievous glint flicker in mine as well, similar to that of the half-breed’s when he was
getting ready to lean in close and tell Nero the punch-line to a dirty joke.

So I humbled him greatly, gave him far more than what he could endure; and I have the Son of Sparda to thank (and blame) for it.

I remember how I slapped my hand down hard against his mouth, cutting his lips on his teeth. I covered his eyes with my other, leaning my weight down to keep his head still. I let my hair tickle his nose. He had no choice but to breathe me in unless he would have rather suffocated.

He craned his neck away from me as hard as he could, his breathing ragged and heaving; his lips hot against my hand. The delicate skin of his throat exposed, pale and ripe for the taking.

Submission, surrender, from one demon to another; that was all I had really wanted from him.

I got up and away from him, stepping back.

I remember the way the neon pink light illuminated him in an otherworldly glow. His silver hair falling in front of his eyes, his coat torn and hanging off one shoulder, exposing where I had bitten him; alluringly indecent. The way the blood stained his mouth and skin, I had to pull the urge to lick it back by its hair.

The snow fell then, the very first of the winter, sprinkled down slowly from high up in the black sky. As we stood apart, my gaze held his, the whiteness powdered his face and dusted his trembling shoulders like the sugar that coated childhood Christmas cookies. He was sniffling like a child ready to cry, and in response, nothing close to pity moved my insides.

It never has.

Finally Nero managed to stagger to his feet, scrambled for his sword and gun. He turned and ran off down the street, away from the shop, away from me.

“Merry Christmas.” I remember cooing after him.

=-=-=-=-=

I suppose that one could say that I am drawn to both natural and unnatural vulnerability. But if you are not vulnerable, then I will make you vulnerable, expose you completely in a way that you won’t be able to stop. I can take what is firm and make it brittle, take a thick line of steel cable and pull it apart until it is as weak as the cotton thread taken from soiled bed sheets.

I ran my fingers over my mouth and lips, finding them smooth.

I entered into Devil May Cry to see that Nero was now awake on the couch, staring up at the dark ceiling. His lips were peeled and bleeding, as if he had been gnawing on them in his sleep. I paused as he looked at me for a moment before cutting his eyes anxiously away, questions about my whereabouts bubbling up inside of him. He yawned instead, covering his mouth with his glowing devil’s hand.

The phone rang loudly, its shrill wail choking off the silence. Nero groaned, looking incomplete; lost. He sat up slowly, his expression was one of petulance and a sleepy sort of irritability, running his hands over his face. Before he could do anything else I already had the phone in my hand, pressed to my ear, cradling it in my shoulder. I took a small moment to clear my throat, before speaking in the half-blood’s voice.

“Devil May Cry.” I murmured into the receiver, only to be bombarded by the shrieks of a terrified
woman who screamed about a frightening demon that had attacked some people at the inn where she worked.

“…Uhhhh…Ma’am?”

I began, but she would not let me speak. She complained about how law enforcement could not do anything to help since demons were ‘not in their jurisdiction.’ She told me of the room, the ruined window, the gunshots and black stains that ‘smelled like dog shit’. She spoke of how she heard a window breaking and seeing something black fall into the street.

But it was too dark, she said. Too dark and too far away to see what that thing was.

“It looked like a person, but then it disappeared.” She whispered in an uneasy tone that told me that she felt that I would not believe her.

I spoke to her with warmth and tranquility, trying to calm her jangled nerves, telling her that there was nothing to worry about.

“Yeah I’m worried about it! That thing sent a woman to the hospital! What if it comes back?!?”

But I won’t go back.

“Yes, yeah, yeah.” I waved my hand in the air as I spoke. “Don’t worry about it. Just gimme the password and I’ll be right over.”

There was a tense pause. “…A password? What password?! I’m not trying to log into a computer, I’m calling because I need your help! I don’t know! Please?!”

“Sorry sweetheart, but no password, no job. Besides, we close at 9:00 anyway.” Before she could say another word, I placed the phone back in its cradle. Nero stared at me, his expression locked in place.

“…Aren’t you going to do something? She sounded desperate…” He grumbled.

“They all sound desperate, Nero. I’m not going to waste my time with it. I’m sure that it’s only a ‘dumb fucking prank call.’”

I looked as his eyes begrudgingly rolled up to meet mine. His glower like the stones at the bottom of a deep well, leaving me unsure as to whether he was trying to crush or drown me with his gaze.

“I’m being honest with you, Nero.” I lied. “Take my words to heart, or toss them out the window. It’s your choice.”

I stretched like a cat at its leisure, and sat at the hybrid’s desk. “Go ahead and go back to sleep.” I said plainly as I unplugged the phone.

“That’s enough distractions for one night.”

Chapter End Notes

Vici is from the latin phrase Veni, vidi, vici. It means 'I came, I saw, I conquered' It was used by Julius Caesar.
Sleeping Dogs

In the past seven days I’ve rarely laid eyes on Nero.

He has confined himself up in his room, a self-imposed imprisonment; exiled from the inside of his own home. Though scattered meagerly throughout those minutes, those hours, those days, there are a few blue-moon-rare moments when I could feel his eyes looking down on me from the top of the staircase. I knew that he was scanning my face, my body, for secrets; for answers to questions he wasn’t even sure were the right ones to ask anymore. Stress rolled off of him in thick waves like a fog, wafting and souring the air with a stale salty heat.

Every now and again I would leave something in front of his door, a bit of food or water or milk. (Peeled apples or peanut butter sandwiches sliced in half with the crusts cut off) It was a half-hearted attempt at luring him out as one would a starving rat. Still, the door would remain locked, no matter how many times I rapped my knuckle on the wood or murmured his name as nicely as I could; his silence was an answer in and of itself. But I could still sense his presence, his scent so strong it melted on my tongue, feeling his weak energy like a peach bruising under my lips.

And at the end of each day I would go up to gather the untouched food. The apples; ugly and brown and stained, the bread withered and hard. Only the liquids were gone, the glasses of milk or water; dry and empty. Sometimes the cups would be broken, their shards stabbed into the apples or thrown outside of his door in childish fits of indirect aggression.

As I picked them up I would ponder if he knew about what had happened with those women, the blonde she-devil and her human mate. They were the closest thing that Nero had to outside help, an ersatz family in the mutt’s absence. The huntress mothers of the cub.

Aside from them, it looked as if there was no one else in the world that he could count on or trust; they were it. Due to his quiet melancholy, I wondered if they had managed to notify him somehow; though the rotary phone had been ringing sparingly ever since I had plugged it back in, its calls neglected by the both Nero and I.

Still, even if he were aware of what had transpired, what could he possibly do? Pay a visit to the hospital, survey the damage, and then what? Come stomping back with his weapons drawn to look me in the eye and have his worst fears confirmed by the thing he hates most?

I scoffed quietly as I chalked the tip of my pool cue with the same care a woman would give when applying lipstick, a singular motion that was gentle and precise. I glanced over at the eight-ball hanging alone in front of the pocket of the billiard table, the easiest sort of shot one could ask for.

I felt a bit at ease. As cold as it was, there were no clients walking through the doors of Devil May Cry. I kept the lights off, the sign included, colorless and dead without its electric pink glow. The office was trapped in a perpetual state of dormancy; a cold darkness waiting patiently for the red light of its rightful owner to return and warm its walls once again.

I set the chalk down and lined up my shot, one swift movement away from ending another game. I brought my elbow back and—

“So, I take it that business is slow at the shop? Cause you were gone for like, what, five minutes? Should be night time by now, right?”

I jerked violently at the sound, His voice ringing loud like an intrusive thought clattering its way
through the inside of my mind. My concentration was shattered as I did nothing more than lightly
bump the white sphere, which only eased forward a few centimeters before coming to an anti-
climactic stop.

Stepping back with the pool cue resting on my shoulder, I took in a deep trembling breath before
exhaling; slow and steady. Slow and steady.

For one terrible moment I had actually thought that the half-blood was in the room with me. That
he had freed himself (somehow); had managed to claw his way out of that hole and make it back
home again.

“You know Mr. Copycat, if you’re trying to bore me to death; I think it might actually be
working.” I glowered over to where I had kept him, in a mug I had taken from Nero’s bedroom
door in the early hours of the morning; placed at the edge of his desk next to the soundless phone. I
could hear the grin in the cur’s voice, its hollow ground edge nettling my skin with irritation. He
had been unusually silent up until just now, walking down that endless hallway with his arms
crossed firmly over his chest, his eyes closed as if he had fallen asleep or was otherwise lost deeply
within the scattered thoughts of his own head.

I had nearly forgotten about him.

I turned and headed towards His desk, tapping the wooden cue against my shoulder with each step I
took. Briefly I flickered my eyes up towards the ceiling where Nero’s room was, imagining him
asleep, or perhaps lying awake in restlessness, staring up at nothing. I settled my attention back on
the cup; confident that the boy would not be unlocking his door to come out any time soon. I shook
my head.

Dante, Dante, Dante.

Do you still think that nothing is wrong?

“Can’t you just send a few demons my way? A Hell Pride or a few of those ice lizard looking-
things? It’s cold enough for em’ right? Just pop em’ right into your dirty-ass mud puddle and I’ll
take care of the rest.” he said as he tilted his head up in the darkness, seeing nothing; but sensing
my presence looking down on him like the imperious eyes of a false god that neither of us wasted
any time believing in.

No, I refuse to entertain you. Your bloodlust is not a welcome guest there. You should know that
by now.

I took up the cup with my free hand and peered down into it; just in time to see his lips curl up to
make the strangest smirk. It was as if he had just remembered the most hilarious jest and was
delighted to see that he finally had company to share it with. Bad company yes, but it’s still better
than no company at all.

“Are you afraid of me? Is that why you dragged me down into your shitty little Bates Motel
knockoff?” He snickered as he spoke before stretching his arms high over his head, letting out a
loud animated yawn as if he were ready to fall into sleep right then. “Cause listen, if you’re scared
I’ll kick your ass, I promise to go easy on you.” He grinned wickedly. “No guns, no sword, just
good old-fashioned demon fisticuffs.” He tightened his hands into fists like a bare-knuckled boxer
readying himself for an oncoming brawl. I nearly rolled my eyes.

Please stop, you’re making a fool of yourself. And there is no one in there for you to impress.
No one alive anyway...

After several long moments with no response, I watched the mutt grimace bitterly as he let his hands fall back towards his sides, slapping them against his trousers in disappointment. “Fine then, give me the silent treatment. But if you plan on fooling anybody by pretending to be me, you’re going to have to learn to speak up. I’m not at all like my bro, you know. One wrong move and the Kid’ll sniff you out in a second.” He spoke with such finality, having the utmost confidence in young Nero.

Overcome with the urge to hurt something, he kicked the door next to him, listing to the rattling echo of the old wood; thoroughly unsatisfied.

“I mean—” His voice trailed off into nothing like a strand of smoke, stunned into silence by the sound of a voice that was not his own, nor mine.

Do you hear it?

I watched as he tilted his head from one side, then to the other, perhaps wondering if what he thought he was hearing was nothing more than the cruel trick of an under-stimulated and malnourished mind. It was a soft humming, so quiet that even with excellent senses, one had to still their breathing and strain for it.

He broke into a sprint, his coat flowing behind him like the unfolded wings of a great red dragon ready to take flight. It’s funny, he ran in the same fashion the day I took him away.

I could not help the grin that split my face, all teeth.

You are going to be in for quite the surprise, Dante.

The hybrid bastard wandered closer towards that meager sign of life with a single-minded devotion. He pressed his ear towards one door, tested its knob before shaking his head and moving towards the next. Closer and closer still.

With the tip of my pool cue I tingled the bell that hung from the cap of the dead Scarecrow. Holding the cup close to my chest.

I’ve seen your trophies Dante; would you like to see one of mine?

“Oh my god, finally!”

He located the source, heaving a great sigh of relief when he found that the door (identical to the others, completely and utterly unremarkable) was unlocked. Still the weary humming persisted, undisturbed even when the door squealed open loudly on its hinges. (I have neglected her, I have not stepped foot in there in years)

I looked to see that he had his gun in his hand. “Alrighty, if demon hunting and crappy late-night horror movies have taught me anything…” He looked in to see a woman standing with her back towards him, facing the corner of the dark empty room. “—it’s that the second this lady turns around, she’ll be ugly as hell and try to rip my thorax out.”

I shook my head quietly. All he ever seemed to look for was a fight.

She is harmless yet he is treating her like a potential threat. If he had the same attitude the day I had taken him, he would still be here at Devil May Cry.
Oh well, fool one once…

“Hey, uhhhh, lady? Ma’am? If you could point me the way out of here, that’d be great.” the cur said in mock-politeness as he sauntered carelessly into the room, glancing about at nothing as he spoke. I watched as he twirled the gun in his hand effortlessly, forwards and backwards like a metal pinwheel spinning in a harsh, sporadic breeze.

She did not answer him. (She could neither see nor hear him)

He was alive after all, dead to the dead.

She continued her tuneless humming; moving her arms back and forth, clutching tightly onto the little thing she held in her arms. Trying in vain to rock it to sleep. She loved it, that what she held. Even in death she still tended to the imagined needs of her cub.

I watched as the outcross crept closer still, now more curious than anything else, looking as if he were in the process of holstering his firearm back under his coat. I knew that he could sense my presence as surely as if I were actually down there with him, yet he could feel less than nothing from her. No energy, no warmth, no life of any kind. She kept her head down, her face turned away from him, her mousy brown hair falling in waves past her shoulders, still tangled with bits of ice and dirt and dried blood.

Instantaneously restless, I wandered about the shop, setting the pool cue down on the billiard table, knocking the eight-ball into the pocket with the flick of my finger as I sucked my teeth.

“Ugh, smells like a backed-up toilet…” I heard him grumble, looking in to see him wave his hand on front of his nose in a childishly exaggerated fashion, huffing as his pale eyes leered down onto the swaddled bundle that she held so close.

He fell into silence, his jaw clenched tightly to keep from trembling as he looked down at the thing. His thoughts struggling to process just what it was that she was cradling in her arms. He was prepared for violence, for long clawed fingers to lash out and gouge him, for a demon to scream for the blood of the son as payment for the sins of the father…

Not that.

The child…

Half-crushed like it had been smashed against a tree, then had a rock or a club taken to its remains afterwards. Unable to tell where its face should have been. Was that a mouth or an eye? A nose or an ear that had been split open or ripped off? Was that an arm or a leg dangling out of the blanket, turned the wrong way as it dripped black choler onto the floor like blood?

It wasn’t ripe when I had eaten it, still needing some time to develop, a few more years maybe. Whether it was a boy or a girl I cannot remember. (They both smell alike when they are so young like that) Its taste was nothing note-worthy, completely and utterly mediocre. It was just a tiny sip of water, as nourishing as air to an empty stomach. But it was enough for me…

That woman, the mutt realized just then, was not a threat of any kind, not another demon for him to bring to an end. (She was at her end.) She was just a victim, a soul as helpless and lost as he was.

I am not a monster, Dante. As you can plainly see, I left something for her to cuddle.

She means something to me after all.
My usual victims are rubes and rogues and laymen. Even the occasional geriatric if I am in the mood for a particularly easy meal. This woman is…was no different.

But I remember her at least, and a few others. (Though not many at all)

A few hundred years ago, at a place and time when winter was at its coldest, the birds had ceased singing, animals were scarce, and the sun had lost hold of its warmth. I had come across her by accident, happenstance; I did not seek her out intentionally on that beautifully cold night in the wilderness. What her name was, where she was going, and why she was out could each have a hundred different answers. All I had cared for was that she was alone, and I was hungry.

Hurrying, hurrying, bundled up in furs like her child, scampering through the thick snow either towards or away from something of the utmost importance. I had followed her for a while, making my presence known with the intentional snapping of a twig or the crunching of snow under my footsteps. (Made to sound exactly like hers.)

She was so frightened, constantly mumbling to herself that she was alone until I had tapped her on the shoulder. She shrieked, frightened enough to quicken her pace over rocks and fallen tree branches; tiring herself out much sooner than she would have liked. The child had been constantly fussing about in her arms. (A part of me had hoped that she would trip over and crush it so that I would not have to)

I remember how she had collapsed in the snow into a heap; her head drooped over low like a poorly-tended tulip. Her breath visible in a white mist of smoke that faded away into the darkness. She had been defeated by the harsh winter elements and her own terrible fear of that which was following her.

The child in her arms had begun to cry whole-heartedly, coughing and sputtering as it pissed and shit all over itself; fearful of things it could not comprehend; sensing that something was very wrong. That stench had made my nose curl as I stepped closer, the mother’s sporadic heartbeat and ragged breathing rattling the inside of my skull like multiple piano keys smashed at once.

She screamed at me in a broken voice, hollering to stay away as her one free hand scrambled for something to defend herself with, the crying child clutched hard against her breast. A stone was thrown at me, harmlessly tumbling towards my feet. I ignored it as I walked closer.

It was too dark out, alone together in the pitch-black wilderness; she could not see my face. She knew that she was at her end, her face as pale as the snow she had fallen in.

“Nyet…” Her voice as soft as Chantilly lace falling across ones lips, a barely-there whisper. “Nyet. Nyet.” Perhaps she had realized with horror that the infant she held was slipping away from her, even as she held it so tightly in her arms, trying to keep it warm. I spoke to her in her own voice, parroting her words exactly; almost singing a song as I closed in on her.

“Nyet.”

“Nyet.”

“Nyet.”

After that it was a kaleidoscopic blur of screaming, crying, the sound of things (bones, skin, meat?) being pulled apart. Then after that there was nothing. All I knew was that I was not hungry anymore...

The half-breeds expression was stern yet fallen. His lips pressed hard and rigid like a healing gash, his eyes as pale and blank as a freshly stretched canvas. Open to the plethora of potential emotion
swirling within him, deep and dark like a dab of cadmium red oil paint disturbed by the most thoughtless of brush strokes.

Left to the mercy of his own imagination; of what he knew and did not know and could only piece together from that tossed-aside scrap.

I watched with interest as he turned away from the woman and stepped out of the room that he had at first been so eager to enter, back into that same endless hallway. He gently pulled the door closed like he did not want to disturb her any further, and let his hand fall gracefully away from the handle.

“How…many more?” He questioned finally, looking around, his perspective refreshed; a furious sobriety gutting what was once a mere apathetic amusement. “How many lives did you rip apart you sick sack of shit!?” His voice was louder now, trembling a bit like glass ready to crack.

Oh, I don’t know, Dante. Can you remember every demon you’ve ever slain or every meal you’ve ever eaten? It’s all together impossible isn’t it? An ultimately fruitless endeavor that serves no purpose of any kind. Are you trying to make me feel remorse? Guilt? Are you expecting me to repent for my sins?

It’s my version of survival. (I’ve done nothing wrong.)

I took in a deep and annoyed breath, heading into the kitchen. My mind letting the mongrel’s voice rot away into thoughtless doggerel. Walking over to the sink, I shattered the mug into the basin before turning the faucet on in one swift motion. Alone in the kitchen, I swamped the insults; the expletives, the stern promises of a painful and deserving death (that I knew he would have no trouble keeping) under a hard spray of rust-scented water. Flooding him. Drowning both him and his words.

Enough of this…

Knock! Knock! Knock!

My eyes snapped over to the front doors of the office where that sound had come from. Someone was there, standing out there in the cold, too polite to open the door themselves. Was it a client? I wondered as I altered myself fully into the son of Sparda, trailing my red coat behind me, smoothing my silver hair down, clearing my throat as I cantered across the foyer before stepping across the threshold.

Within a moment I was standing on the empty stoop of the shop, catching an eye-blinks worth of a mail-carrying vehicle driving away through the snow, down the frozen street. I turned and looked to see a small pile of letters tucked away at the corner of the door, the only place on the stairwell where they could hope to remain dry in this frigid weather.

I bent down and picked them up, flipping through them as I headed back into the office, changing back into myself. To the astonishment of no one, it was a series of bills: heat and water and electricity. Though at the bottom of the stack there was something different, a small brown parcel.

Nero’s name written carefully in an elegant copperplate script across the center of the package; so carefully that I took a moment to imagine the hand that inscribed it. The thin and delicate hand of an ingénue; softer than silk, daintily holding a fountain pen and writing each letter as slowly as they could. Savoring the name as they would the person that it was attached to.

Someone had poured their heart out to that boy in the form of packing paper and black ink. I
noticed the stamp at the corner of it, butter cream white and gold, bearing the same insignia that was stitched into the shoulder of Nero’s coat.

Is this something delivered from his home? Was it a belated Christmas gift?

It was a small package, hardly any bigger than the other letters that were delivered with it. I brought it up to my ear and shook it, listening to the tissue paper rustle on the inside, wrapped around something thin and light.

Or a love letter?

Its smell was amiable, bringing to mind a pink tea rose spotted with dew on a pleasant spring morning, budding open to sweeten the air. I read the return address once, then again; memorizing the girl’s pretty little name.

Hmmm…

Setting the other letters on the mongrel’s desk, I headed over towards the stairs with the parcel in hand. “Nero?” I called out sweetly as I could, tracing my fingers along the banister. “Nero?” There was no answer at first, only the sound of my footfalls as I stepped in front of his bedroom door. “Nero?”

“Fuck off.” I heard him mumble coldly, his voice sounding strange and gnarled from disuse, half-swallowed and ready to choke.

Oh, don’t be like that.

“I have something for you, Nero.” I grinned as I spoke.

“I said fuck off!”

“Open the door, Nero.” I said in a way that was meant to be taken as a suggestion as opposed to a command. (Or a threat).

“Leave me alone, asshole!”

“A package came for you in the mail. From a somewhere called—“I looked down at the address again. “—Fortuna? Does that name sound familiar to you?”

There was an uneasy pause, then the springs of his bed began to groan as he strained to sit up, perhaps he had been sleeping; then again, perhaps not. I heard his footsteps, jagged and uneven. Several glass bottles tipped over on his five-step journey to the door, followed by a few muffled curses. The lock clicked, and the door was pushed open slightly, the stench of the room coming out through the slit like a river of hot grease. It was the hot stench of sour sweat and unwashed skin; of dirtied clothing and a too-soon inebriation. It was the smell of neglect.

I saw half of Nero’s exhausted face looking up at me, tense with caution. I noticed that the cut on his cheek was livid; angry and swollen like it was ready to split back open with a hard frown or a soft smile. His hair falling like long dirty feathers in front of his bloodshot eyes, heavy and stringy with oil. He was in dire need of a trim, looking even younger than usual with his hair like that. Calling forth images of scabbed knees and untied shoes and lost teeth hidden under the pillow at bedtime.

“You smell like a drunkard.” I murmured without thinking as I looked down at him, my grip
tightening on the parcel I held, feeling the paper tear under my fingers. (just a little)

He quickly moved to slam the door, but I placed my empty hand at the edge, keeping it open; teasing that I could force my way in if I had really wanted to.

It’s always an option.

The pitiful boy swallowed dryly before looking away. “What?” he muttered, bringing his human hand up to wipe his nose, sniffling like he had caught a cold. I smiled softly as I held the parcel up for him to see, watching him take one moment (then another) to focus on it.

I ran my tongue over my lips before tasting the girl’s name for the very first time.

“Who is Kyrie?”
“What the fuck did you just say?”

He took it as a personal affront; my saying that girl's name. His eyes, large and infuriated, never left the parcel I held. His attention settled upon it as if beneath its paper shell lay the key to his very existence.

Something even darker than his inborn rage rushed across his face. What was it, malaise, debility, misery? Whatever it may be, it was more than the simple everyday malcontent that he had been stewing in since my arrival.

“Who is she, Nero?” I questioned gently, though he flinched as if I had shouted in his ear; his brain beaten down into a slovenly pulp by a premature hangover. My voice slurping its way through his skull like a greedy maggot.

“None of your fucking business!” His eyes snapped up to meet mine, blackly defiant with a newfound boldness. His devil’s arm shining with its glacial light, brighter than it had been in days. Drowning out the swampy underwater darkness of the bedroom.

“Well, I think it smells quite nice.” I glanced over at the package as if it were some delectable little morsel that I couldn’t wait to eat, darting my tongue across my lips for full effect. “Don’t you agree with me?”

“Shut up!”

He snatched the parcel out of my grasp with his human hand; digging his fingers deep into the brown paper. I watched as he hugged the thing close to his chest, wrapping it protectively beneath both of his arms. Acting as if it were a swaddled infant that had been entrusted into his care, he looked as if he would lay down his life before he allowed any sort of harm to befall it.

The ridiculousness of that thought made me smile slowly, shaking my head and chuckling as I let myself into the small room, Nero stepping away and pressing his back hard against the wall. His courage had dashed off and abandoned him as swiftly as it had come to his aide.

He tried to ignore me, tried to pretend that I wasn’t there, his attention focused solely on the box in his arms. He did not look at me as he ran his human fingers across the outline of the stamps, ghosting down the lining of the delicately hand-written name that seemed to belong to another person entirely, a dead stranger who was also named Nero.

“It smells terrible in here.” I murmured quietly, pressing my hand against the side of my head, exhaling in one long breath as if it would help rid me of that stench. The air of the room feeling almost too corroded, too worn and hot, to breathe. It was so swelteringly warm, smelling of unwashed skin and undone teeth. Every piece of furniture looked like it would dampen your hand if you reached out to touch it.

“If you don’t like it then get out.” Nero’s words were as forceful as a weak suggestion that was prone to changing its mind. I pretended that he had not spoken as I looked about at the state of his bedroom, narrowing my eyes at the turbulent boyishness of the clutter.
My foot nearly tipped over one of the many alcohol bottles that littered the floor, (a bottom-of-the-barrel brand of whiskey that the cur was incredibly fond of) It seemed as if Nero had developed quite the taste for it as well, there were so many scattered about. An unintentional glass shrine dedicated to the mongrel’s absence, a fragile memorial of gloom.

Though, in a sharp contrast, his long blue coat was draped somewhat nicely over the back of his chair; his brown boots set side-by-side near his door, that sword leaning as innocent as an umbrella against the wall.

Judging by the nearly immaculate presentation of that package, something told me that sweet Kyrie would have greatly disapproved of this mess. I felt that Nero’s present state of being would have stung her eyes with bitter tears; perhaps she would have looked at him and asked in a thin mellifluous voice what was wrong, and what she could do to help him.

I glanced back over in time to see his eyes flicker achingly towards his weapon, his desire as obvious as if he had spoken it aloud. Take it, I wanted to say. Take it and cut me in half with one giving slice, to protect yourself, to protect the girl, and what she has given you.

But of course he didn’t move, nor did he speak as I walked over towards his desk that was covered in a graffiti of claw marks and coffee rings. His revolver laying as if it had been tossed there. Its ammunition scattered about, as innocuous as loose change.

I hummed as I thought of Nero spending his days here, embalmed within this reeking stink, curled over his desk like a student trapped at school. Spinning the chamber of his gun like the flip of a coin; thinking about death and dying and being dead, ashamed at how appealing all of it seemed. Fantasizing about killing me or killing himself the same way that most young human men fantasize about the fleeting pleasures of wealth or power or sex.

I traced my fingers along the curved marks on the desk, outlined black in the perfect shape of his demon hand. Gripping it just as he had done, my nails digging lightly where his claws had gouged. I looked over at him with warm scarlet eyes and a smile that was half-hemlock and half-honey, blinking slowly.

Nero only swallowed before frowning and looking away. The cut on his cheek plum-dark and glistening in the blue light, still so swollen; it graced him with the appearance of a battered cherub exiled from paradise.

We had coupled against this desk; though I can’t recall precisely what had provoked it; whether it had been a look, or an action, or a word. (or maybe it hadn’t been anything at all)

Though I do vividly remember Nero’s tattered gasping, the snarled expletives and empty warnings whimpered through his clenched teeth. My skin and coat ripping open under his drawn talons, the shimmering blue of his fingers gored to a rich black. The grind of the desk bashing hard against the wall, its wooden legs scraping across the floor. Those noises (whilst unremarkable on their own) had come together to play such a blissful song during that one-sided struggle, the soundtrack to the slaughter of love’s own heart.

I know that he would rather have gone to bed with a bull, fucked bloodied and senseless by a horse or a pig. (or a slobbering dog left to chase its own tail in the dark)

I leaned back against the desk, flicking a few of his bullets carelessly about, listening to them roll and clink into one another. “Why don’t you open it? It looks as if Kyrie had put a lot of care and effort into it. You wouldn’t want to let all of that love go to waste, now would you?” I suggested helpfully.
“Don’t.” The word came out in a floundering whisper as he raised his head to look at me with translucent blue eyes that begged to be left alone. “Don’t…”

Nero acted as if my simply knowing her name had tainted her somehow, stained her worse than his sheets, damaged her more than his desk, than himself. It was as if I had suddenly been granted some sort of incredible power to harm her, to spirit her away from Fortuna and pick her apart bit by bit to swallow her whole right in this disgusting room.

He wouldn’t move from where he was, not for as long as I would be in that room with him, his nerves pulled apart and shot, his eyes so far off and away; waiting for me to do something hurtful to justify my encroachment.

I walked up to him slowly, stepping around the bottles with ease, smiling a bit wider as he looked away from me, hugging the package tighter against his chest. I noticed how his sleeveless shirt hung so heavy and loose off his torso, he was so thin, so malnourished. If I were to take a bite out of him, I would not have had to chew.

I reached out and lightly squeezed his shoulder, brushing my fingers across his pallid skin, gifting him a too-warm smile that only made him shiver. He did not look at me as I felt his muscles flinch like shocked meat under my touch, stiff and rigid, waiting for the unwelcomed guest of pain to invite itself into his being. “I guess I’ll give you both some alone time, then.” I said simply.

I shut the door behind me gently, walking with an intentional slowness towards the stairs. I knew that Nero, fighting through that syrupy haze of alcohol consumption and deer-like skittishness, would be listening for me. His ear would be pressed against the wood to carefully track my movements, his senses set alight by my sudden yet eerily uneventful intrusion. The package still cradled gently against his chest, pressed on top of his heart that seemed to be beating purely by rote at this point in time.

I clicked my tongue as I headed down the steps.

Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie. Nero’s dearest little pigsney.

Even back when Dante was living here, I don’t believe that her name had ever been mentioned, not even once. (I would have made note of it) Her existence seemed to be a heavily guarded secret, the key to his cracking heart, another imago that he loved dearly but was no longer in his life.

I thought of Nero’s disposed silence, the bone-white warning of his teeth and quick taking hands; realizing that it was a heavily armored fortress that surrounded that girl. It protected her and kept her safe.

I sighed heavily as I sat down at the half-breeds desk, folding my hands across my lap as I tilted my head back in thought, letting my hair into my eyes.

What was the boy doing now? What was that sick, pitiful boy doing now? Trying to convince himself that it was safe enough to open her package, her gift? Staring at it almost mournfully before peeling the paper back, sliding the box out, treating it with such tender care; as if it were alive and asleep and that he did not wish to disturb it?

It was a letter; that much I had figured out. Hand-written with the same feminine script. (Though why send it in a parcel?) More than likely starting out with that age-old greeting: Dear Nero,

She would speak of the weather and the people that Nero had left behind; the lives of her neighbors
or friends. Perhaps she would tell him what she had made herself for supper or how she had been spending her days without him. Filling him in on the various happenings that he was missing out on in Fortuna.

(Fortuna, fortune, fortunate. The name was unfamiliar, I have never heard of such a place)

Then she would then ask of his time here at Devil May Cry, wanting to hear the details of the manifold of goings-on within his life. Wondering if he was taking care of himself, eating well and getting enough sleep. Saying that she kept him in her prayers, that no harm of any kind should befall him in spite of his dangerous occupation. (Oh, how nauseating)

How she was sorry that she could not be with him, nor he with her, and that she loved him. That she hoped to hear from him sometime soon.

She would dress the events up in ruffles and lace; making the mundane and uneventful sound pretty and romantic and worthwhile. Her words painting a picture of home for Nero, not in a heavy medium like oil or acrylic, but something light and soft like watercolors. Easily malleable, mistakes could be watered down and wiped away like they had never even come into being.

I felt that if I had just opened the damned thing then all these thoughts could have been put the rest, but alas, Nero would have been such a bore to deal with. Yet another one of his little conniption fits would have been inevitable.

Bang!

Or, like the weather, a conniption fit will occur regardless of how I feel.

Bang!

My eyes snapped up towards the ceiling; narrowing at the noise coming from his bedroom. It was the sound of wood being crushed; stomped down into pieces and slivers, cracking and breaking into scraps by a foot or a fist. Was it the desk or the chair that was being brutalized?

Crash!

A bottle had been thrown against the wall and shattered. Then another, and another, and another one after that. His glass shrine dismantled, crumbling like an empire, being ruined and overtaken by something stronger than his love, stronger than grief.

It seems as if Kyrie’s parcel had provoked something deep within him, stirred up some emotion from its dreamless slumber, something bottomless and ugly.

I sat up in my seat, brushing my hair out of my face when I heard Nero’s footsteps fumble loudly across the ceiling like one about to trip, struggling to find his footing as if the floorboards had become sentient and were slithering away from him. Flashes of blue light were visible from in between the cracks of the flooring. I blinked, bits of dust and debris fluttering down from the ceiling as it creaked and groaned underneath his weight, followed by the sound of metal scraping across the wood.

“Nero?” I called out after a few moments, brushing away a bit off dirt that had fallen near my eyes, unworried by everything I had just heard.

Silence was the only answer that was given to me; pure and naked, yet somehow bruised, somehow broken. In spite of that outburst, the only sound I could hear was my own even breathing, the rest of the shop having been shrouded in a complete silence like a death had just occurred. Nero did not
answer me.

With a mild frown, I left the desk and ventured up the stairs, keeping my voice steady, calling out to him. “Nero, is everything alright?” I knew for him that nothing was alright, but felt that it was an appropriate thing that needed to be asked, regardless of my lack of sincerity.

I tried the handle of his door, unsurprised to find that it had been locked. I knocked loudly, not foolish enough to expect an answer, but only a faint flutter of movement in the form of reluctant acknowledgement, his usual behavior. “Nero?” I reached out and tried the handle once more. “Nero, I want you to open the door.”

Nothing.

“Kid?” The pet name sounded stiff and unnatural rolling off my tongue, like a prayer, or words filled with remorse and asking for forgiveness. I felt ridiculous saying it in my own voice, clownish even.

I sighed heavily, my patience placed on a high-wire that was growing thinner by the moment, ready to lose its footing and fall to its demise down below. As I breathed in, Nero’s scent was as strong as it was before; a foamy ocean spray and sweat as salty as the sea, as well trickles of fresh blood. (but the mild press of his energy was gone)

I shoved my shoulder against the door. The wood giving way with a hard and splintering crack, the lock snapping free as I forced my way in. Glass shards crinkling under my boots like broken seashells as I stepped inside. The room empty, the window forced open, curtains hanging like heavy gauze in the light winter breeze; the weather outside looking shrewd and still.

He was gone.

I looked to see that the chair had been crushed to pieces, his coat rumpled and abandoned among the bloodied splinters. His sword was absent. A line cut across the floor from where it had been dragged, staggering red foot prints leading to and from where it had been kept.

I walked over to his desk, stepping around the ruined chair, finding that the parcel had been opened. The brown paper and the cream-colored tissue paper had been smoothed out like he intended to keep it. Pale pink rose petals were strewn among the ammunition, presumably having fallen out of the letter like confetti when he had opened it. (Such a mess) I paused, noticing that his gun was gone and that there were fewer bullets present than before.

The letter had been wrapped in such a way as to protect the wax seal of the envelope, something that I have not seen in years. It’s…quaint, I suppose.

I picked the letter up and only glanced at it, reading a few words before stopping, blinking, and re-reading them again.

Three words. Three simple words, well-meaning and sparkling with good intentions. Kyrie (innocently, ignorantly, insensitively) had only wanted to share her happiness with Nero, that’s why she sent him this.

You are invited!

I glanced down at the rumpled coat and ill-treated chair, smelled the salty blood in the wood and the glass in one deep breath. This letter had brought everything boiling to the surface, worldly consequences to the thoughts and emotions that Nero had been trying to drown down and ignore.
This letter was proof that he was trapped. Trapped and alone with a demon whilst the world spun madly on without him. Loved ones were getting married and experiencing the adventurous beginnings of starting a family. Life was going on and on and on while he was stagnant, frozen and fossilized and alone in the dark but somehow still alive.

I looked at the photograph that had accompanied the letter, narrowing my eyes at the happy smiling couple.

The girl, with her autumn-leaf colored hair and dream-come-true smile, was dressed modestly, wrapped in more fabric than a nun. The only shred of color on her person was a little kitschy-looking red and gold necklace around her throat. Though to me, she looked fit for the role of a flower girl as opposed to the blushing bride-to-be. Whilst the man was striking only in how unremarkable he appeared, dressed in what seemed to be a uniform of some kind; his smile almost sheepish as the girl inclined her head against his chest.

I looked over towards the open window and only swallowed dryly, letting the papers flutter down onto the desk, listening to them rustle lightly among the bullets and pressed flower petals.

It seems as if Kyrie were as alive to Nero as the Unholy Mother was to the half-breed...

You stupid little urchin.

Where have you gotten to?

-=-=-=-=-=-=-=

I followed the trail he had left behind, the tender red pools of footsteps staining the snow like pomegranate seeds on a white handkerchief. The bottoms of his feet were bare and likely impaled with innumerable slivers of wood and glass. Splinters large and small would dig deep into his heels and in the sensitive skin in between his toes, or were perhaps skewered under his nails from kicking the chair too hard.

His path was staggering and irregular; it looked as if it pained him horribly to walk.

As I ventured closer, his scent became increasingly aromatic and real, fragrant of alcohol, sea foam, and copper-metal blood; bringing forth the image of a pirate ship damned to float forever in a whiskey bottle.

As I rounded about one building and then another, I could hear him clearly. (He had not wandered very far at all)I heard the screaming and the hollering, his voice tattered and wet with a brokenhearted rage.

A triptych of gunshots exploded and that sword was swung through the frigid afternoon air. Though all of that was drowned out by a series of sincere demonic laughs that were not his own.

I found him in an alleyway, the trail ending in a slushy smear of red and white under his feet. I did not make my presence known, and only stood back to observe with more than a mild interest.

It was like watching a puppet show being performed by madmen with spastic, broken fingers. The Scarecrow were tottering about on unsteady legs, surrounding Nero in a predatory circle. Giggling and laughing like a group of schoolyard bullies, I watched as they staggered forward to attack. Twirling, cutting, slashing with their bladed limbs, with Nero as the victim of their childish taunts.

I could hear the boy’s heart from the center of the fray, fluttering and flailing. Not like a bird with crooked wings, but a crooked neck. Rattling and helpless and dying on the ground, surrounded by
feathers and speckles of blood; chirping helplessly as the foxes closed in.

Nero dodged and shot and struck back, but nothing was as it should be. His hits were erratic and sloppy; more often than not he would hack away at thin air and snow as if they were his intended targets. And in response the Scarecrow would simply hop about and laugh their cruel jesters laugh.

This wasn’t the fearless cockiness of the cur, nor was it Nero’s own confident bloodlust; what I was the lone witness to was self-destruction in motion.

He aimed his gun for their heads, the harlequin masks caving in under the bullets, but they did not die. They only kept laughing as if everything in the world were some incredible joke meant only for them. The insects (those hungry little things) that made them what they were chattered madly in what was going to be a successful feeding frenzy.

It was as if those demons found Nero’s rage to be laughable and misguided, delightful even.

I watched as one of them landed a successful hit, its bladed leg spinning, spinning, spinning right against Nero’s chest; protected by nothing but his thin black shirt. He only grit his teeth as his skin was sliced; the force of the blow knocking him off unsteady wounded feet, taking the hit as well as a human. (His body was not how it once was, not at all)

I took a step forward as he fell back onto the snow, spraying it with sickly wine-colored blood. His gun clutched tightly in his hand, he pulled the trigger.

Click! Click! Click!

Oh for fuck’s sake, boy.

I found myself venturing closer as he, crumbled against the snow, floundered in his trouser pocket for more ammunition; the bullets glistened as he struggled to push them into the chamber of his gun. But his hands shook too hard, his bruised shoulders trembling with each ragged breath he managed to suck in past his bloodied lips. I watched as the bullets slipped from in between his human fingers, like water, like seeds, or flower petals, and fell to his feet.

The Scarecrow still laughed joyously, the one that wounded him hopping back and forth on its red-stained metal leg, victoriously eager to see what would happen next.

I narrowed my eyes as I watched the gun tumble out of Nero’s grasp and onto the snow, useless and inert, his hands and fingers still shaking with nothing to hold onto. He looked down at his weapon as if seeing it for the very first time, his head hanging low, eyes cloaked behind that birdcage veil of tangled bangs. When he did finally look up I saw that tears were streaming down his face, and a soft sob broke in his chest, his lips curling up into a demented red smile.

He surprised me when he joined them in their laughter at his demise.

Loud and absurd, it bounced off the walls of the nearby buildings, echoing and answering itself. It was the sound of sadness and rage being hollowed out and filled to the brim with false cheer and empty joy. It tore through his throat, a bizarre hiccupping laugh, the kind that boils up and hurts once unleashed; leaving the taste of loneliness on the tongue.

Roman Emperor Nero, alone and insane; laughing whilst his life burned to ashes. I watched as he wiped his nose with his hardly-glowing devils fist, wiping away the snot and saliva and blood.

The laugh ended in a series of ragged coughs, heavy and painful coughs. Nero put his hand to his wounded chest, over his heart, closed his eyes, tilted his head back towards the sky and smiled.
A bolt of protectiveness surged through me, a jerking tightness tingling through my muscles and down my spine like a heavy chill.

No, not protectiveness; possessiveness.

I was seized by an impulse that went deeper than my minds curiosity. I found myself in the center of the fray, the smell of moth-eaten burlap and insect shells invading my senses when I tore a Scarecrow wide open with my hands. Green bile splashed onto my arms and chest as I threw it down and headed for its brother. I was as startled as Nero by the sound of my own voice.

I roared at them in the language I had used before I learned the human’s tongue, one word. All that were present knew of its meaning.

Mine.

\[ \text{M I N E} \]

Maybe he was looking at me, mouth agape in a quiet gasp, unsure of what to do with himself, his hands twitching and empty. His red feet (that were more wood than flesh) unmoving in the snow, stagnant and chilled to the bone. Too cold to even shiver.

I shook my head as I snatched the one that had wounded him by its bloody leg and pulled until the wood snapped apart and I had my weapon.

I drove it like a stake into the chest of the Scarecrow, not bothering to watch it die as I headed for another. With a snarl I sank my teeth into the wood of its bladed arm, not caring about the splinters that stabbed deep into my gums as it broke off as easily as a brittle bone.

“You stupid little boy!” I yelled when I found my voice again, hollering at Nero over my shoulder with splinters stabbed in between my teeth; my mouth tasting thick and black. I smashed another Scarecrow’s arm like glass.

“You ridiculous child!”

“Being done in by a chain of paper-dolls? Is that what you want?!?”

Actions blurred together like ink and milk. The biting and snarling, the breaking and cutting and stabbing. There was a strange haziness to what I was doing, to what I was feeling. An intangible dreaminess shadowing around all of the edges of the world.

The red orbs, with their twisted expressions and wails, littered the snow like fallen red stars. Throbbing and shining as they seeped and bled, crying out to be claimed. I ignored them, scanning the snow for something small and green like an emerald. Alas, I did not see it.

I looked over at Nero, his eyes wild and unfocused, saw nothing as I stepped towards him. His entire person looked frayed, like bits of his soul were unraveling more and more with each passing moment.

The Scarecrow were gone, and a catharsis was quick to grab hold of me, as soothing as a lullaby, softening my voice. Without a thought in my head, I placed my hand on his shoulder, rubbing gently, trying to warm his skin. (he felt so cold) “Nero, are you alright?”

He struck me. An open-handed slap against the side of my face, his rings cutting into my cheek. It was the kind of blow gifted to an unfaithful husband by his mourning bride after many years of an unhappy marriage. It did not hurt.
“F**k you!” He shoved me down onto the snow, snarling, spitting saliva and blood into my face, straddling me. I allowed it. His devil’s hand clenched into a tight fist around my coat, pulling my face towards his. “F**kf**k you! Just f**k you!” he hollered, his voice going hoarse; illness prevalent throughout the blood that colored his face.

He punched me across my jaw with his demon hand, sending my head back against the snow; it was a meager cat’s-paw swipe compared to that of the she-devil.

“You wanna kill me yourself? Then do it! Fucking do it! Do it you goddamn pussy!” He dug his knuckles into my cheek again, then again, one side of my face then the other. Each hit digging those slivers of wood deeper into my gums and my tongue, blood staining my lips.

My concern for him, regardless of whether it was sincere or fictitious; seemed to humiliate him greatly.

The attack was minor. He was so tired, so weak, from everything. We could have spent the rest of the day in that position and he still could not have done any sort of real damage. His breathing was brief and sharp and so sporadic that it sounded as if they were going to be the last he would ever take.

“You’re not real…” He choked out, his voice slurred as saliva dribbled down his chin and onto his reddening shirt in thick fragile strings. “You’re…not real.”

Am I?

“Is all of this happening due to the letter you received, Nero? Hardly seems like someone to kill yourself over; that little human girl.” I said plainly, licking my lips as I felt a small tendril of blood trickle down my chin, carrying a few hard splinters of wood with it.

But it looked as if the boy did not hear me, he was swaying lightly above me, dream-like and trapped in some imperceptible place where my voice could not find him.

“Nero?”

I watched his brow furrow as his eyes flittered shut, seemingly unable to stay awake any longer, he was so exhausted. I reached out and held him steady as he fell forward without even a sigh, slacking and as limp as a corpse, all of his energy having left him at once.

With my hands on his shoulders, I turned over and guided his body off of mine in one gentle motion, laying him back down onto the snow; his expression reminisce of a death mask, serene and unchanging.

I wiped my jaw with the back of my fist as I rose to my feet, brushing the powdered snow off my trousers and coat. I looked down at Nero, listened to his heavy breathing, still as ragged as anything, but it had at least slowed for now.

Alright, up we go little cub.

As I reached down to pick him up I heard a strange little noise, like the quick buzz of insect wings, those of a wasp or a fly, come from where he was laying. I paused for a moment before kneeling down into the snow, almost hesitant as I heard the noise again, coming from Nero’s trouser pocket.

With a sigh I pulled the little device out of his pocket, a silver clamshell phone that was vibrating relentlessly now.
I looked at the name that flashed across the screen, and ran my tongue across my teeth, feeling a sudden and terrible ache in my jaw. I flipped the thing open as I had seen others do, and held it to my ear. Unperturbed with a false-pearl smile, I spoke in my own voice.

“Hello, Trish.”

Chapter End Notes

scape-grace
ˈskāpɡrās/

noun: archaic

a mischievous or wayward person, especially a young person or child; a rascal
"Put Nero on the phone." The she-devil did not seem surprised to hear my voice, though she did sound more than just a little worn down, more than a bit irritated. I thought of her with her fingers pressed hard against the bridge of her nose, her eyes shut tight as if to stave off a terrible headache, whispering various swears under her breath the moment I answered the call.

"I would love to, but I'm afraid I can't do that," I said as I looked down at the seemingly lifeless boy, watching his eyes and mouth twitch at the sound of my voice; that devil's arm flickering vividly for a single moment before ceasing its glow completely. "Please try to understand, Nero is a bit under the weather right now and cannot come to the phone."

That arm, what was once blue now appears an almost pale grey.

In all my life, I have never seen anything look so dead.

The she-devil's incredulous silence on the other end was nearly palpable. An undercurrent of hushed fury traveling from her end over to mine, making my jaw tingle; the slivers of wood in my mouth burning even as they were being pushed out of my gums, my lips feeling blistered and wet. She did not have to say another word for me to guess what she was thinking.

What did you do?

Still, I found her silence to be rather peculiar, as I had expected a scathing diatribe from her; a thunderous verbal attack on my person that would have made me jerk the phone away from my ear to protect my sense of hearing. But instead I was given less than nothing.

I swallowed those bits of blood and wood, wiping Nero's thoughtful gift of spew from my face as I balanced the phone on my shoulder, listening beyond her carefully restrained calm for anything as I reached down and gently took the boy by his human wrist, pulling him towards me. I watched as his head lolled back as easily as if his neck had been broken, his hair damp with cold sweat and flakes of snow. The bruises on his throat exposed completely, still dark and unchanged, looking as if they had just been given to him.

"So how is she doing? Your human? Still alive and well, I hope." I digressed with the courtesy of a good neighbor. Nero feeling as light as pyre smoke as I rose to my feet with him in my arms, his head rested against my chest, his mouth loosely open and dripping with bloody threads of saliva.

The blonde devil's response was one of empty silence. While my voice is foreign to her ears, it was perhaps my tone that was familiar to her, bringing to mind images of the mutt, grinning wide enough to show off his teeth as he nudged her on her shoulder with the innocent touch of an old convivial friend.

I could hear the clicking echo of her heels as she paced about with an animal restiveness, walking with hurried steps down what I assumed to be a corridor of some kind. There was the slow murmur of people rustling about in the background, faint electronic cries of anonymous machinery, as well as a television blaring.

"...Fine."
It was such a simple word that she whispered so quietly, a word that, like 'love' or a phrase like
'thank god', humans used so often yet never meant sincerely. Her tone was one of indignant pain, a
woman's pain, the kind that was furious and seething, damned to be smothered like a child under a
pillow. It was as if she were at a loss as to how such a horrible thing could have befallen her mate
and Nero.

"Only fine? Well, that's a pity now isn't it? Though I can't help but feel that you are more than
relieved, yes? The human took the hit well, I think." I smiled genially as I spoke, having cradled
the boy in one arm as I walked over and picked up his discarded firearm, ignoring the various
bullets that lay scattered around it in the snow.

I know that I had broken at least one of the human lady's bones. I had felt it in my fist when I had
struck her through that curtain of blind pain that she had thrown over me. Something inside of her
had cracked apart and reduced her to nothing more than a bundle of limbs and weak panting
flesh…

Though to be perfectly honest, due to the injury that she had inflicted on me, I don't believe that I
had hit her particularly hard.

I waited patiently for the she-devil to say anything else, my movements feeling a trite bit awkward
as I placed the gun under my coat with one hand, in the same location where the half-breed kept
his, before scanning the snow for the boy's sword.

Ever so stubborn, Miss Trish refused to entertain me. The sound of her footsteps having come to an
abrupt end, those murmured voices in the background even further away now, shushed behind a
door that creaked as it closed. Telling me that she was alone now, somewhere quiet, perhaps with
her human mate.

"Well then, please give her my regards for a speedy recovery, and a very good tongue-lashing as
well. I'm sure that she will enjoy at least one of those things." I spoke in such a way as to make
sure that she could hear the sharp-toothed pull of my voice.

And before she could think to retort, I let the phone fall from my shoulder, snapping itself closed
before it hit the snow. I broke the device underfoot as I made my way over to Nero's sword, which
lay abandoned near a large waste bin.

I then heard a moan and felt a slight rustle as Nero tried to move away from me in his sleep,
leaning all of his weight over as if he were trying to tumble out of my arms like an unruly child, so
meager were his actions that they could not even be called half-hearted.

"No." I scolded, twisting my fingers into his bare shoulder to gather and pull him back against me,
listening to him whimper and cough wetly, his cheek feeling damp and fever-hot against my shirt.
"You're not getting away from me so easily, child."

It is not for probity's sake that I saved you.

Devil May Cry was still fast asleep. Everything dark with only shreds of cold sunlight coming in
from the few frosted windows, illuminating the offices meager insides with their weak white glow.
The doors echoed when I nudged them shut with my boot, closing with a coffin-nail sense of
finality.

I drew Nero a bath, making sure that the water was warm and frothing it with soap; leaving him
cadaverous and silent on the couch, his weapons relinquished near the door. It was only after I had
turned the water off and pulled him into the bathroom did he manage to scrounge up the strength to move again.

"Stop boy, none of that." I murmured affectionately into his ear as he tried to wrench himself away from me; the hem of his thin black shirt tearing to scraps in my hands. I breathed in the human filth of his skin, tasting it inside of my mouth; feeling it crawl across my tongue and become one with my spit. If I had bothered to make myself a stomach it would have been churning. "You can't fight back properly, Nero." I forced a small smile against the oily dampness of his ear, pulling away long enough to force his shirt over his head before tossing it to the floor like the damp rag that it was. "It wouldn't be the same."

He wasn't listening to me, seemingly unable to. Whimpering and sniffling, but ultimately doing nothing as I tore the fabric of his jeans open along the seams, stripping them down off his thighs; along with shreds of his underwear, careful to avoid them touching his mangled injured feet.

Refusing to take in even one more moment of his stench, I forced him into the tub; where perhaps the feel of the water on his skin had caused a lamblike docility to grab hold of him and not let go. I bathed him as carefully as I could. Everything below his shoulders looking distorted and unreal under the water, making me feel as if I were polishing the marbled bust of an ancient poet; dragging my fingers over poppy milk skin that still felt so cold in spite of the steaming water he lay in.

Nero settled down into an uncharacteristic silence, even as I wet his hair with the plastic cup from the kitchen and wiped the snot away from his mouth with a rag. His breath smelling very familiar to me, like the sliced-open stomach of a dead human; pregnant with gases and the writhing young of flies.

The child had exhausted himself beyond repair, failing to do so much as wince at my fake caresses even as I scraped a bit of dried blood from the cut on his cheek; not at all gentle with the wound. Nero's face being no longer cherubic in appearance; only sickly and swollen with a humanlike ague.

I looked down and saw his naked chest still struggling to mend itself, a filigree of flesh. The wounds wide enough to where I could see the red meat of his muscles slowly pulsing their way back together in a fashion that seemed almost reluctant, like even his body was made aware of its own exhaustion and was preparing to give up on itself. To me it looked no different from worms dying in a freshly dug hole, slithering together, sluggish yet desperate for the temporary relief of wetness and warmth.

I had to fight the urge to lick at that open injury, to push my tongue into it to gauge its depth; to see if I could make it any worse than it already was. Clicking my teeth together as I watched the bloody dark slits close in on themselves, leaving behind visible pink scarring like the ridges found on Venus shells.

I pulled my gaze away from the scene, focusing instead on washing his hair. My fingers snarled through that white mess that was tinged with dirt and his scalps natural oil. It was in dire need of a trim, no hairbrush could tame that snowy wilderness of neglect. I used a dull pair of shears from the mongrel's desk to subdue it.

I cut it as close to his scalp as I could, locks falling into the water and Nero's inert shoulders, fluttering down onto his newborn scars like the feathers from a dove's severed wing. When I was done he looked grizzled and far too thin, my grooming having granted him an unsound and nearly infantile appearance.
My gestures feeling removed and insincere, as it felt as if I were doing nothing more than washing a corpse, scrubbing bits and pieces of a person that I had murdered and then pulled apart, this collection of not-so-pretty body parts. A human arm, snapped free from the shoulder, the fingers still twitching as I washed in between them, the nails soft and chewed down, cuticles torn open and caked with blood.

The devil arm came next, which I took a bit of time for, the water making those red and purple scales shine, so ophidian and lovely. Though his clawed fingers were still a dim gray, lifeless even as I ran my hand over his knuckles; the limb not reacting at all to my touch.

The rest of him I bathed without any fuss, his stomach, his legs, and flaccid bloodless prick that would not stir. His feet were the last to be cleansed, nearly staggering in how extensive the self-inflicted damage was. Toe nails cracked, wood skewed underneath and visible to the naked eye. Innumerable shards of glass and splinters of wood lodged into the bottoms of his feet, making them swell like pig lungs bloated with air.

I picked and scraped out every piece, no matter how tiny or minute, many of them as fine as dust.

I felt that time would pass for him like a dream that one would not recall until later, incorrectly, with what had actually happened being warped by blood loss and his broken psyche.

Towel in hand, I unstopped the drain and watched the discolored water seep down into the dark hole, gurgling, choking.

"Do you think that Dante is dead, Nero?" I asked him quietly, watching as he did not move at all, a bit of his hair stranded on his bottom lip, which I plucked and flung away. "Are you mourning for him?"

He did not answer me, passive and limp as I wrapped his wounded body in a towel, massaging my hands over his form to dry him off.

"And not just for him, but for everyone else in your life as well? Trish and the human lady who have been reduced to faceless voices over the phone, one simmering in her fruitful rage, whilst the other absent, wounded, and silent. And that titian-haired girl, your imago who is nothing more than a single photograph and generic words of invite scrawled across a letter that smells of a far-away home. A home that really isn't home at all anymore, yes?"

I may as well have been speaking to myself, but for whatever reason, I felt that these things needed to be said aloud, even if he could not acknowledge me.

I carried him in my arms up to the second floor of the shop, watching his eyelashes flutter as if lost in a pleasant dream. His breathing had slowed down, softened. Maybe, he was dreaming that I was Dante; holding him close like this.

Not a monster wearing his face.

Walking into the mutt's room, I continued to speak even as I pulled the covers of the bed back.

"That's why you wished to die. So much, to where you were willing to hand yourself over to the lowest of the low. Even though they were more than happy to entertain the notion of your death, I refuse to indulge you."

I covered him when I had finished speaking, and sat at the foot of the dog's bed, my hands resting in my lap, hovering near the boy like a cat with its tail tucked and swishing around its legs, body at rest but mind at work. Waiting patiently for him to wake up.
Chapter End Notes

I have nothing to say for myself
Night had fallen on us like it always has, silent and forgiving of our gentle sins of the day. The light on the bedside table cast its candle-weak glow on the wall.

Even in his sleep, Nero curled away from me, as exposed and vulnerable as a miscarried fetus. His bare form was hardly noticeable, shapeless and worn out under the scarlet comforter. The sheets twisted around him like bloody gauze. He seemed to be withering away, petal by pale blue petal, carried away by a black winter waft.

I listened to him mumble and stir in his bad dreams, riddled in such heavy misery as I cradled the wedding invitation in my lap, studying the red-haired girl until she no longer seemed alive, forever locked in her nuptial bliss. Her skin looked so flawless and smooth, like it would be as easy to shape and misshape as warm wax.

She had meant the world to him once upon a time, and still did, from what I could gather. The boy’s love for her was like an idol, or religion; something untouchable and unimaginable that the devout swore on their lives was real.

I had nothing to say about the man, but I could tell that the Kyrie was the type of person who would let a snake bite her for fear of hurting its feelings. A rabbit-hearted girl child—they were a dime a baker’s dozen, you could find them in every curve of the world.

As I stared at her smiling face, turning the photo this way and that, the sweet smell of the pressed rose petals swirled through the air; along with the delicate scent of thyme and onions, like she had slipped the invitation into the envelope just after making dinner.

There was something about her that seemed maternal to me, as if she loved children and was absolutely thrilled at the idea of having her own one day. I tried to imagine her pregnant, swollen with an infant, but the only image my mind could conjure was a little girl with a round cushion stuffed under her dress.

Behind my back, Nero tossed and turned, sluggish and sweating out his liquid poison; moaning in a pitiful way that excited me just a little bit, as I had not heard him make noises like that in a long while.

“You cut my hair.” I heard him murmur without any liveliness at all, having the sort of voice that was so frail that I had to still my breathing and listen for it. I turned my head to look at him, positioning myself in such a way so that he could see what it was that I was holding.

His words were nothing substantial, only a careless observation; like he had walked into a room and only realized that the curtains had been changed to a different hue just as he was about to exit.

“I did give you a light grooming, yes.”

“Why?” He did not care to know, he just wanted to fill the bottomless void of silence inside of him.

“Your hair was unmanageable, Nero. It wanted cutting.”

The boy’s gaze was uneven, nearly tumbling with light-headedness, sliding slowly from my face to
the invitation I held. “That’s…not yours,” was all that he said, his voice quivering and limping weak through the stale cold air, still smelling like a drunk in spite of the thorough washing I had given him.

I looked down at the thing as if I had forgotten that I was even holding it. “Yes, I know,” I folded the letter up and slowly slipped it back into its envelope, leaning over and placing it besides Nero’s inert knee, noticing how he did move to pull away. “Believe me, I don’t want it.” I patted it.

I only watched as he struggled to sit up in the bed, scarcely able to carry his own weight, as slight as it had become. The blanket slipped down his bare shoulders and ruffled at his waist, though his nudity did not seem to bother him in the slightest as he picked up the invitation; if only to keep me from fingering it again.

“Who is she, Nero?” I asked gently.

A visceral ache seemed to rattle through him and made him pinch his eyes shut, and the images that lay behind his blue eyes came spilling out of his mouth, like drool or rancid old teeth. The words were murky and sour with the memory of the half-breed’s alcohol, which had loosed Nero’s tongue to the point of unfettered freedom.

It was familiar to me, those little sounds. Half-spoken words shuddering and choking themselves to incoherency. A throat that had grown worn by despair, saline tears falling like watery stars down his pale cheeks.

He had been meaning to speak of this for a long while now, perhaps hoping to relay this to the cur when the time was appropriate, to have his heart opened up and the poisonous recollections bled out to free him of their dreadful sting. Though unfortunately for him, I am his only audience now.

He was giving her to me, freely of his own shattered will.

Kyrie…

“She…she treated me like a person.”

I could immediately tell that he was nostalgic for her presence, her delicate mortal softness. He told me how people would smile and brighten in her company, that a sunlit warmth seemed to follow her wherever she stepped, making it sound as if the girl could make flowers bloom simply by standing near them.

There was a moment of silence as I tried to make sense of what he said, reiterating each word in my head to wrench out its importance: basic decency, humane interactions, and an old-world femininity that had become quite the rarity as time takes its usual stride forward. “Is that all?” I said finally, bringing my hand to my chin and narrowing my eyes in emphasis of my confusion.

“You don’t get it, do you?” He spoke so coldly that I was actually astonished by the change, his face taut with a dissonant reluctance. “You’re just a demon.” The sudden sharpness of his tone was instantly dulled by the hypocrisy of his statement. Still, he tried to drudge up some form of proper defiance, but quickly dropped his eyes away from my face, causing my smile to widen on its own accord.

Nero quietly admitted that he was a problem child, a bad seed, the unofficial poster boy of every bastard of Fortuna whose only sin was being born. There was the constant gossip of a problematic birth, complications due to negligence from his blood mother, or even potential inbreeding. His pedigree was an eternal enigma even to himself.
“But none of that mattered to her,” he murmured, his hand habitually moving up to brush some hair out of his eyes, only to find that there was nothing for him to touch, letting it fall limply to his side.

He said that she taught him certain things growing up, things that every human knew but Nero had to learn by trial and error. Though the girl was more than happy to educate him, gentle in her ways, she was a mouthpiece for human rhyme and reason.

The things that he needed to learn were simple; to wear a coat when it was cold, even if his body could not recognize the bitterness of the temperature. To say ‘ow’ when he fell, even if the pain he felt was so slight that it did not deserve the reward of acknowledgement. He has no idea how she managed to do it, as he often found his own impertinence exhausting even to himself.

Everyone had given up on him since he had been born, except for her.

“Ah, so you imprinted onto her like a hatchling to its mother. She was the first human to treat you with genuine affection, perhaps the first to steer your hand away from a habitual incivility and succeed. That’s what bound you to her.”

“Yeah,” He refused to look at me as my words sank into him. “Yeah…”

He immediately digressed, letting the girl alone as he spoke of something completely different. A demon attack on his home, a rather large one that had overtaken the entire place, is all that I could gather from it. The event was labeled the “Savior incident” but he refused to elaborate on the deeper intricacies of the story, instead focusing on what had occurred after the dust had settled and the blood had dried.

The dead— he spoke of the dead, how it was impossible to know just how many there were, littering the streets of Fortuna in such great numbers. Looking like nothing more than piles of clothing crusted with dried blood; bodies were rendered unidentifiable due to holes burned into their faces, teeth and gums and soupy bits of brain exposed for all to see.

Blood stains trailed thick from where heads had been crushed and the bodies dragged from them. He said that he could tell how many of them died, on their knees in prayer, either in need of protection or begging for their lives from things that did not know what reason was.

He mumbled that there was much difficulty in identifying the bodies. How there was little to go on sans bits of clothing, scars or birthmarks, the occasional piece of jewelry that took the form of a necklace or a wedding band. Though more often than not, there were only parts of people left behind, a severed arm, a finger, a lone dark eye trailing its gummy mouse tail.

He and what few soldiers were left over had to partake in the removal of the dead, many citizens lending their hands as well, if only for the terrible closure that came with it. Fires were set and mass graves dug to protect what was left of the living.

He told me of the girl, Kyrie, and how after the worst of it was over; she had gasped and pressed her face into his shoulder as they walked through the streets to their brutalized home. (There was not a single place they could go where the dead did not taint) How hard she had gripped at his arm when her boots touched limp things and wet puddles that were made of neither stone nor water.

“I waited… I-I waited until we were by ourselves…” Nero wiped his face, his damp eyes and his nose with his pallid human hand.

To tell her all that had happened during the incident that she seemed unable to recall at all. It was
as if she had been asleep, or comatose during the attack on Fortuna, as there was nothing of it in her
memory, except for…

“She asked me about her brother, Credo.”

Oh, how impossibly wide her eyes went when she asked him, desperate to know if he was alright.
He wasn’t hurt was he? When could she see him?

Nero paused and brought his hands to his mouth, seemingly unable to go on, his throat choking
down his grief, his skin reddening with suppressed trembling wails and unshed tears. I noticed that
his devil arm was even duller now, in spite of what hideous emotions lay inside. It did not glow at
all. I briefly wondered if it was dying, rotting from the inside out.

“And what of this Credo?” I asked in order to move things along, a little irritated at his prolonged
pause.

“He died,” Nero murmured from under his hand, not looking at me; so gently did he speak that the
cut on his cheek did not move at all.

Murdered during the incident without a second or even first thought, having tried and failed to
protect Nero from harm. He had bled to death from a wound given by a sword that now belonged to
the boy that lay haggard before me.

Regret rolled off of him, as real as a smell. “If only I had been stronger I could’ve—”

If. That word.

If. It is a curse that reigns over humanity. I’m sure that it plagued the girl as well. If, if only Nero
had been stronger then Credo would have lived. If only the girl had done something different then
her brother would not have met the end that he had. If only she had worn a different color, or made
him poached eggs for breakfast instead of boiled. If, if, if.

“And does that bother you at all? Carrying a murder weapon around on your back?”

“That’s not the sword, it’s a different one. I never use it unless I have to…” was all that he said,
running his hands down his now bloodless face, his scarred chest heaving with sigh after heavy
sigh, looking as if it were about to split back open.

It appeared that Credo’s death was a catalyst of sorts. Instead of bringing him and Kyrie together as
any tragedy would, it formed a permanent wedge between them. (A wedge that grew into an
impassable wall, covered with briar).

Neither of them had any time to indulge in the pleasures of their newborn relationship, had none of
the emotional vigor required to pursue such an outing. She was tired and aching, her body and
mind put through far more than what a human should be able to bear.

Still, it appeared that Miss Kyrie was rigid in her role in their household. How even after their
searing loss, she still made two lunches in the morning, and always set three places at dinner time,
cooking far too much food that ended up being given away to others who needed it so much more.

The girl’s grief was not a guest. It was not a pet. She would not feed it or make it comfortable. She
would not entertain it; it was not welcome.

She worked in an orphanage, gave herself up to good works the way that lesser beings would
surrender themselves to heavy drink. She fed and clothed the children and often would forget her
own needs in the process, placing theirs above her own just as any good caretaker would. But perhaps that was what she had wanted anyway.

Nero said that she grew to despise idleness and free time, as did he. As any moment of stillness would give their sorrow the strength to pull itself back together and begin anew, wounding them in such fresh and painful ways that it would be as if no time at all had passed from the tragedy. Throats would swell, eyes would water, and skin would redden in agony once again.

The girl would do everything from braiding her hair to pulling her pendant along its chain to keep the stillness at bay. Nero would throw himself into his devil hunting, staying out late into the night to satisfy the bereaved madness that ran through the red river of his blood.

He told me a story about her, which brought to mind an image of the girl mending a tear in the seam of her brother’s pants. But why was she doing that? Credo was gone and had left no body behind; they would be of no use to someone without form. Nero said that he tried to get her to stop, begged her to please get some rest and that she could finish them in the morning. But the little innocent was adamant, determined for whatever reason to mend the tear that had rendered them unsuitable for wear.

He did not understand it. Nero said that he felt helpless and didn’t know what to do, (that came as no surprise to me, he never seemed to know what to do) He felt that he had no choice and left her there, stitching perfect seams before angrily tearing them out again.

He found her in the morning, barely awake and swaying in her seat, quietly hugging the trousers to her shoulder and patting them lightly as if they were an infant to be belched, crying without a sound.

“I even prayed about it, asked for help. I didn’t know what to do…” Nero sighed.

“You were brought up in a religious household?” I did not know this. “What sort of deity did you worship? One of the Judeo-Christian variety?”

He swallowed and did not answer me, keeping his eyes on the Dante-shaped shadow on the wall. “Sparda,” he murmured finally.

I let out a soft chuckle, which sounded guttural and only a little mad, coming from the snake burrow of my throat.

Worship him? Pray to him like the humans would pray to any other god?

Treating the damned like the divine?

“And did the great Sparda answer your little plea, Nero?” I leaned back onto the mattress, brushing my fingers over his wounded foot, causing him to hiss and pull away from me this time. “How many innocent prayers rolled from the mouths of orphan children and down into the depths of Hell?”

That demon couldn’t protect his wife.

His own son couldn’t protect you.

“I couldn’t take it. We needed each other but we didn’t want each other and everywhere I looked in that house I was reminded of him and that I had failed him. I failed. I know she felt the same way, I know it.”
Of course, the little reminders that the dead leave behind without meaning to. Good Credo could not be gone, surely he wasn’t! Why, there are his things just as he had left them! There’s his coat and his boots, there’s that cut of meat that he wanted for dinner. Don’t touch it, don’t touch it, he’ll be hungry for it as soon as he gets home.

They are only human.

Her salt-of-the-earth empathy had mutated into a low and imprisoning kind of frustration, abasing her and Nero from a close family into nothing but careful strangers with shared memories.

She no longer regarded him with any sort of kindness when they were together; there was only a hollow expression that could hardly be thought of as one human recognizing another.

That was the final straw.

Nero left her without a spoken word. As distant as they had grown, he would not be surprised if a week had passed before she had noticed. He had done nothing but scribble his foolish reasons on a piece of paper that he left on her pillow for her to find.

The day of his self-exile was lovely and he hated every moment of it. His bag was packed with the barest of necessities, his pockets filled with his native currency that turned out to be worthless the moment he stepped off the ferry.

“I called her once and talked just long enough to give her my address, but that was it. This is the first time I heard from her,” He tossed the invitation onto the bedside table, face down in resignation.

It did not surprise me. Time and distance could make the strongest affections wane. Absence makes even the fondest of hearts wander off in search of something better. But perhaps it was not the wedding itself that had provoked his outburst, but with it the reminder of his shortcomings, his omission not only with Credo but with Dante as well.

And with the knowledge of this story making me a little wiser than before, it seems as if he had accepted this just as he had accepted his death.

Chapter End Notes

Many a heartfelt thanks to my wonderful beta reader Thorne!
That story, those people. Miss Kyrie and her brother. It was as if Nero had handed me a knife, splayed himself out before me and instructed me precisely where to start cutting.

“You’re—” He swallowed noisily, struggled to clear his throat of catarrh, and then tried again, glancing over at the invitation, worry blanching his already dull features. Once again having been overcome with a sackcloth-and-ashes despair. “You’re not going to…”

“I’m not going to copy her form, no.” I mumbled, making it sound as if the girl was not worth putting any effort into emulating. Which she wasn’t, really.

Still, the boy seemed unconvinced, a little certain that I was lying to him. But he was silent as he reached for the clothing I had brought him, salvaged from the broken glass wasteland of his bedroom.

Touch, I would have to touch her. Nothing lewd or vulgar, or anything that would have been enough to be noticed by her really. Just a quick brush on her fingers or wrist, perhaps a gentle push were I to walk passed her to make it look and feel completely accidental. So sorry, so sorry, it shan’t happen again. Good day, Miss.

I remembered how I had touched the mutt, just once. (It was all that I needed and all that I could stand to do.) It was after he had fallen unconscious in the hallway, less than two steps from Nero’s door.

I had brushed his hair out of his face, away from his eyes; slicked back just as he had had it before. I remembered how I studied him, how it made his chin and jaw look more angular, sharper and less inviting. I had decided right then that this brother he was moaning over, whoever he was, had the face and aura of an unapproachable man. Someone who wished he had been born with thorns on his skin; someone whose entire mantra in life was, “Leave me alone.”

Nero dressed with his back to me, his head kept low as he slowly worked his undergarments up his legs, the covers pulled over him in a beseeching way as to protect his modesty, but I could easily imagine the mosaic of bruises underneath. Feeling a tad impish, I shifted to and fro on the mattress, just enough to make the springs groan and squall in small rhythmic intervals. I couldn’t help but snicker at how quickly Nero had stopped moving, rigid and sweating, his demonic talons having torn into the edges of the fabric without his realizing.

Just as quickly he snapped out of his paralysis and continued to dress, pulling his wine-red shirt down over his lean and pale torso. “Am I dead?” the boy asked softly as he dropped his head to look at his chest, tugging the collar of his shirt open to reveal the scar that was more than just the suggestion of a deadly wound. “Is this what killed me? Am I still out there?” He glanced up towards the empty window, out into the eternal blackness of the night.

I noticed that Nero’s eyes were glassy and faded, blind to everything except for the image his limp body lying out on the frozen ground, clotted with thick dark blood and stinking of a dysentery so foul that it reminded him of home; coating his mind in the residue of innumerable unhappy memories.

“Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you’re alive, Nero.” Which at that moment, sounded like something of a lie. I rose only to sit down next to him, gently placing my hand on his shoulder to see how he would react, anticipating a rapid change in his breathing and muscles; quite astonished
to find that he did not seem to recognize my touch at all.

“Can I see him? Can you show him to me? I don’t care if he’s dead. I don’t care if we have to go out and dig all night in the snow to get to him. I just want to see him…” What I was touching was not a boy, but the feeling of numbness itself.

“Nero—” I sighed, but quickly cut myself off. Waiting for the cur to come back to Devil May Cry was like waiting for figs to grow from a grapevine. I ran my hand gently over the ivory horizon of his spine, my actions methodical yet somehow thoughtless, equally playful and stoic.

I did nothing as the boy twisted away from me, his movements jerky with a half-empty anger that was aimed only at himself. I watched, taking care to keep my expression inarticulate as the boy got dressed with irritated inorganic movements.

I would not lie, I thought of killing him right then.

Opening up his face into a flowering spray of tendon and bone. Starting with the cut on his cheek, that gaunt soft place, peeling it back away from his jaw, maybe with my teeth, maybe with just my hands, digging in under the skin.

I shook my head, laughing lightly, knowing that he was looking at me with worried dark eyes. His vulnerability had grown so stale.

But then I stopped laughing, growing silent. Angry? Is that the correct word?

…

Something has happened.

I grit my teeth, ground them into each other, clicked them and wet them with my tongue.

Closing the door behind me, I clenched my fists and listened to my fingers snap against my palms, feeling nothing and listening to the inconsequential wishbone breaks as they set themselves right again. I cocked my head to the side and let out a soft rumbling growl, none too different from the throat of the wounded cur.

Something was changing and I didn’t know what it was.

Oh no.

Oh no no no.

Is Dante…?

Where is he?

So painful and abrupt, so immediate and unforeseen; like an organ rupturing or a gun firing into my skull. Something inside, something deep, deep inside.

Where is Dante?

I stalked the office from one end to the other, shaking with a febrile kind of puissance that grabbed
my soul by the throat and was squeezing hard.

Something is wrong, very wrong.

The mutt, he should be where I left him.

“Nero?” The name, the word that I laced with affection like food that had been prepared with arsenic and a sick love.

It’s nothing, it’s nothing at all, isn’t it? (I hope, I pray)

It’s cold, suddenly. I shiver and pull my black coat around my shoulders, and still I tremble.

Did the roof collapse? Was it snowing? Had the flakes melted on my face, and that was why my eyes are so wet right now?

Something is wrong, very wrong. I could feel it rattling, stinging, nipping at the back of my skull, frosting over my insides, freezing my blood into a terrible stillness. What was it? What’s wrong?

I wipe my face, my wet eyes, my brow, my mouth. My hands are shaking, why are they shaking? My stomach feels so flat, so empty and unloved. An echo-chamber, a moist dark cave.

Hello? Hello?

Is anyone there?

My hands are in my hair, pulling at it, the strands changing from black to white then back again. Salt and pepper, skunk-streaked, zebra-striped, chessboard colors.

My mouth, it hurts. My teeth, there were too many of them. I needed them gone, all of them. Nails, eyes, ears - they’ve all gone bad as well. No good. Useless, all of it. Five of my teeth were in the palm of my hand, shaped like claws, then like stones, then like dead leaves as they fell to the floor.

The floor moved and it was like I was stranded alone on an unmanned ship, about to fall overboard and into the unknown waters. I staggered against the desk and grabbed hold of its edges, keeping my eyes locked onto the place where the Unholy Mother had once been.

I’m glad she’s gone. I’m glad she’s dead.

I’m glad. I’m glad. I’m glad.

She would’ve been laughing if she could see me now, hand to her mouth, eyes closed, nose crinkled in delight.

I was all sweat and quivering nerves, lost teeth and rambling thoughts. Mad thoughts. Mad as a hatter.

I’m glad that I left her crumbled under a pile of broken glass. I’m glad. I’m glad.

“Hey,” It was the boy, the boy that Dante loves. Hello there, young child, dear child, come closer and I’ll grant you a wish.

I undid his belt buckle, the only thing that was protecting all that he had left of himself. Completely and utterly overwhelmed, Nero had nothing left to fight with.

I leaned into him, my face pressed against his neck, inhaling deeply; sea-salt and an unbound
human grief. I moved down and tasted the scar on his chest, tugged on it with my teeth and felt his skin spasm under my lips, though he seemed determined to make not a sound.

Nothing but meat, something to eat, to chew and swallow. Something to drink, to gulp down and nourish myself with.

Sweat made my hair stick to the sides of my face felt like ocean spray. I push my hand down his pants, into that puckered entrance wound, making him whimper, making him writhe and moan as I had done so many times before.

I opened my eyes to see that I had not touched him, that he was still clothed, nothing but the taste of my own blood on my tongue.

I looked at his face, at his eyes, into them, trying to make sense of what little was left behind. Like trying to put a puzzle together with too many missing pieces, I could not see what he felt, what he thought, what he was going to do now.

I didn’t know what I was going to do either.

My own actions were astonishing even to myself.

I pressed my mouth against his; open and gentle. The saliva of his teeth reminded me of the film that coats an animal’s exposed intestines and makes them glisten, wet and bright. Suddenly overtaken by the strangest sort of thirst, I dipped down deeper into the pink well of his mouth, drinking his soulful taste in, savoring it with every slow movement of my lips and tongue. A moan rose up from his throat, sweetly feminine and brief in its unwanted neediness; I couldn’t help but swallow it whole.

I broke away from him with a soft sigh, still tasting of him on my breath.

Dreamlike, this was dreamlike.

The door creaked open.

I did not change how I looked, far too enamored with how I felt to make any sort of meaningful movement at all.

“Office hours are over. We’re closed,” I said in the cur’s idle voice, both lazy and flawless.

I was not answered. Neither an apology nor an explanation was given to me by the intruder.

I saw something strange then. Nero’s arm. I looked down at the appendage that he kept pressed against his chest, over his heart. My brow furrowed in mild disbelief at the sight of it.

It was glowing again, shining with a soft paltry yellow light that I had never seen before.

A sludge of irritation and confusion swirled up within me as I looked up at Nero’s face, his taste turning to bile in my mouth. The boy’s expression nearly hopeful as the light in his arm began to dim before shining even brighter than before, like the first shred of sunlight that marks the death of the deep winter frost.

I looked over, irritated at whoever had snatched his attention away from me so quickly and easily.

The mutt, alive and well, standing like an outsider in the doorway of his own home, his entire person clotted in thick black sludge.
“Kid…”

Impossible.

A hand (my hand) raised and suddenly falling.

Celerity.

An ejaculatory spray of blood from Nero’s chest, the wound cut open again.

The golden light turns to sapphire blue which dies down into nothing again.

Dante looks at me and I at him.

My red winter had finally come.
Occāsus

How long have we been fighting Dante?
A minute?
An hour?
A day?
I can’t breathe, and I know that you can’t either.
But still you try, we’re both trying, actually.
Doing our best to end each other with an earnestness that is only seen between scorned brothers with stolen birthrights.
Almost like a fable, though morals have no place here.
I can sense something though, a key difference.
That I have bitten off far more of you then I can ever hope to chew.
I feel your power pulsing through me, so great and deep that it possesses an entire life of its own.
(My skin has split itself apart from my wrist to my shoulder, a throbbing black mass of muscle forcing itself through)
Visible through my coat, it dangles, d

            r    g
            i      n
            p    p i

Thoughts and feelings and memories, none of them belonging to me; but just like the boy, I’ll take them anyway.

Our brains are cracking, the minds inside going soft; mutilating themselves.
Still, the sight of you makes a part of my soul quiver within me, bearing its fangs out of an old nostalgic fear.
Even though there is not much of anything to be afraid of anymore.
It hasn’t even occurred to you to withdraw your sword, and your guns are as quiet as ever.
Covered in black poison, we circle each other.
You gnash your teeth, foaming sputtering from your lips like some death-stalked animal, your hair long and falling into your eyes.
Your red, red eyes.
The only similarity that we’ve ever shared.

What are you thinking about? What sort of thoughts are crawling through that empty burrow inside of your head? Are you thinking about Nero? You’ve hardly glanced in his direction since all of this began.

You can tell what’s happened to him, everything that he’s been through, can’t you?

Your scent is all over him, on his lips and tongue and under his clothes...

But no.

Oh no, that’s not right at all.

Have you even noticed how pale his skin has gotten? His emaciated frame that has been haggard by bruises and cuts? His lightless demon hand grasping at the red-mouthed wound that still salivates?

Nothing on him heals anymore.

Just what are you going to do, Dante?

Tend to his injuries and lick his wounds after all of this is over?

What’s this? What’s happening?

What’s this? What’s happening?

Your breathing is getting erratic, is it too much for you?

It is, isn’t it?

You’re angry with me, I can tell.

The cause of all of this.

All of it.

ALL OF IT.

You know I am guilty, so why are you taking so long to kill me, Dante?

With every failed attack, you have been giving me time to change, bit by bit.

Have you noticed at all?

Hair and skin lightening little by little, clothes morphing in hue and style from black to ashen grey.

I’m smiling at you with a mouth that you are familiar with yet seem to have no memory of the expression that it makes. It disturbs you, shakes your heart, and I feel playful and cruel and even part my lips to let you see my teeth.

“Hello, Dear Brother,”
With a flawless movement, I brush my argent-colored hair out of my eyes.

Eyes that are frosted blue, winter blue; colored like the sky and the sea and everything else that had fascinated and frightened the small minds of humanity for eons.

They fascinate and frighten you.

But not Nero.

I look down and see his addition to this scenario.

(I’m surprised that the child has the strength to move)

His once hidden vane; a long silver sword that he has pierced through me.

Like thread through the eye of a needle.

It is an intricate blade, delicately crafted, stained with my blood.

It does not hurt.

(Pain means Nothing)

(Painlessness is Power)

I look back at the boys bewildered expression, like a child caught red-faced in a poorly told lie.

He had expected more to become of this attack.

There was a bone-cracking noise as I brought my fist against his cheek, pulping the inside of his mouth against his teeth, making it soft.

I chuckled a gentle chuckle as he fell.

It sounds just like a different version of you, doesn’t it, Dante?

Naughty, naughty.

“Look at this, Brother!” I speak to you in the voice of the beloved dead, shrugging my shoulders as I pull the blade from my insides. “He’s so happy to see you again!”

Why are you looking at me that way?

Blanching and cow-eyed.

You make me sick.

The sword in my hands feels warm, and I know that it is not due to Nero’s touch.

But something else.

My own giddiness at ending you, replaces my bile with a melody.

The stars are ringing and my soul is singing.

Tell me, Dante. How long do you think you will be able to live without your head?
What will be your first thought in death?
Anything coherent? Or will all of it be just babble?
You seem so tired. So wishful for sleep.
Don’t fret.
It’s time for bed, now.

It should have been quick.
It should have been painless.
But it is neither of those things, and you are still alive.
My arm is on the floor, still holding that sword.
A burst of blue light has made it so.
I tried to will out another appendage, just as I had always done…
(anything, anything)
A bat wing, a tentacle, the multi-jointed limb of an insect, but nothing came into fruition.
Nothing.
I’m just bleeding.
Against my will, my body starts to tremble. My skin tearing itself open. Rioting.
I look to see what has interrupted my victory.
Taking my eyes away from you and turning away.
“Near--”
Nero?
Every gesture is hypnotic.
Mesmerizing.
From the ripple of his scales to the psalm of his wings unfolding from his shoulders.
A neon phoenix back from the dead.
His hair as long as snowfall, glowing a fathomless and immaculate white.
But the true zenith of his beauty were his eyes, his aureate irises, made my own water.

Stunned to immobility, I dare not move.

(Is one allowed in the presence of god?)

I heard something made of flesh and fabric ripping loose, my body numb and jerking to one side as if someone had tugged on my shoulder for my attention.

My other arm is gone.

He took it, snapped it off as if it was never meant to be a part of me.

I start to fall.

He was holding me, cradling me in his arms, his large clawed talons supporting the back of my head, since I had not the strength to move anymore.

Nero puts my tooth into his mouth and cracks it apart as if it were the seed of the sun’s flower.

Are you enjoying the soft fleshy bits on the inside? The blood-flavored cream?

I worked hard making those teeth.

He was eating more of them the gums still attached to the hard white buds, Nero’s movements so nonchalant that it looked as if he was picking blackberries from a dying bush.

I could still see the mark that I had left on his cheek.

Biting him like that, why did that feel like it was so long ago? Still an indelible slit, even his transformation could not hide how I had hurt him.

I can only smell myself, my rot. I cannot keep up my performance any longer, the curtain to this charade is finally falling.

An unbearable force overtook me, his shark-toothed mouth was open and devouring my own. I struggled feebly, uselessly, merely grunting as he bit off the tip of my tongue and pulled it into his mouth, his throat moving as he swallowed it.

He did not stop at just the tip.

Slowly, he sucked the rest of my tongue into his mouth, slurping it in, his teeth hooking into the meat so that I could not break free. All I could taste was blood and the barbaric tenderness of being eaten alive.

Do I taste good to you, Nero?

Is that why you’re taking your time?

(No, that isn’t it)

He only pulled away to breathe and chew, his mouth open with a mindless sort of contentment on his face, his eyes still glowing a harsh yellow.

He was not tasting, only eating.
That could be the mutts flesh in his mouth and he would not know the difference. There was no relishment or thorough enjoyment in the mastication of me. Just the loud wet squelch of his mouth opening and closing.

My lips, of course, were next.. The bottom bit of flesh sucked in between his teeth as if he were giving a playful kiss, but then he kept pulling.

And pulling.

And pulling.

And pulling.

Until my bottom teeth and gums were exposed and had not skin to protect them anymore.

I shivered in his arms, my jaw quivered a little as blood and spit drooled down my chin. So much of it, I could not stop its constant flow, swallowing did nothing at all.

Then my top lip was gone, disappeared inside of Nero’s gore-drenched maw, it would be missed by no one but myself.

Who is this?

I could only stare at the thing, and walked up to get a better look.

Or rather…what is it?

What are you holding there in your claws, Nero?

Is it delectable?

You’ve hardly breathed since you started eating it. You’re biting off bits of its clothing too, gagging yourself on slivers of a leather coat before you manage to masticate it into a sludge, a bulky sludge that slithers down your chin.

Nero, my boy, you look like you’re in love.

Are you in love with this thing that you’re eating, this pathetic slosh of meat?

…Nero?

Why won’t you look at me, Nero?

Nero?

I reached out to touch him, to pull the bits of black flesh away from his shark-teeth but…

I had no hand to touch him with.

I looked down and saw that I had no feet on which to stand.

I opened my mouth, moved my tongue, but found that I was mute.
And I no longer cast a shadow.

I look over at the devil boy, at his fixed stare, his invariable gnawing motion like some demented rodent. I try to speak to him.

“Nero spit that out.”

Why aren’t you listening to me?

Now.

Spit it out.

Spit it out.

No, Nero, get rid of it. That’s bad for you.

Let go of that.

Let go of me.

Let go.

Let Go. Let Go.

LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO. LET ME GO.

You’re killing me.

Nero.

Near-

I…

I’m sorry, Nero.

I…

Oh god…

I’m sorry.

I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry
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