And the Rest is Silence

by astrothsknot

Summary

The destruction of the Saviour wasn't the end. Too many people had too much invested.
The following assumptions are made-
Dante is an American, living in Italy. The Devil May Cry is also in Italy. I mean, he can't even get pizza without olives.
Based on the architecture, the whole series takes place in the Mediterranean and this includes Fortuna.
The lack of surnames has always annoyed me, but the ones we do know seem to be Italian in the main (with some exceptions)
The main language spoken in Fortuna is Maltese and so are the surnames. Balzan actually means white-haired.
(If you are actually Maltese please correct the gratuitous Maltese. I'm not a native speaker)
Chapter 1

It’s eight days after the Saviour and the rescue people are packing up. They don’t think they’re going to find any more survivors after the earthquake – that still hasn’t got old. Even in the midst of the disaster, the Order pulls together and begins damage control. There’s a lot of damage to control.

Kyrie has taken to wearing jeans like the tourists. It’s angering the traditionalists, but Kyrie doesn’t care. She’s made it through worse than their comments and their sneers. Maybe there always was a rebellious little badass in there or maybe she’s trying to redefine herself in the face of everything she knows collapsing. Nero has to admit, he likes the curve of her ass in them and glint in her eye when she wears them.

He likes the curve of her ass and the glint in her eye when she’s out of them.

It’s late when Nero finally makes it home. Kyrie reheats the stew she’s made while Nero hangs up his jacket and pulls off his glove. He pulls Kyrie close and hugs her with a deep sigh. “You smell so good.”

“What was this meeting about?” she asks. Her voice is muffled against his chest.

“Same as the other 8000 this last week. What happened, what did I do, what do I know, who the fuck am I to Dante and how’d he catch on to it and what they’re going to do with me.” Nero sounds and looks exhausted and Kyrie pulls back to stroke his face.

“Sit down. That stew won’t take long to reheat.” she looks over to the bubbling pot. It smells delicious and Nero is starving.

“I don’t know how much longer I can keep it up,” he admits. “Keeping my story straight.”

Kyrie pulls away to dish up a large bowl of the stew as Nero cuts doorstep slices of bread to mop up the thick gravy. His rebellious little badass is a badass cook. “Well, be careful,” says Kyrie. “One wrong move and you’ll mysteriously disappear.”

“I’m not stupid, Kyrie. I know that,” he says a little harshly. He tries to take the sting out of it with a kiss, but Kyrie wasn’t offended in the first place. It’s wearing on all of them and her threshold for
annoyance has rapidly shot up this last week.

“Sparda’s balls, but the sooner we can get out of here, the better,” says Kyrie, dishing up a small bowl for herself.

The door crashes open and Nero’s on his feet, Blue Rose drawn.

“What in all the nine hells has been going on here?” demands the dark-haired woman, dumping her bags in on the floor. She’s wearing a gold on white dress like Kyrie hasn’t worn all week. “I had to charter a boat back from the Mainland and why the hell can’t any of you pick up a phone? I’ve been worried sick! Where the hell is Credo? Still at HQ? Damned idiot works too hard. No good to man nor beast if you don’t rest.”

“Empty night, Violet. It’s so good to see you!” Kyrie’s glomped the woman and they hug each other tightly.

Nero holsters Blue Rose and catches Kyrie’s eye. Their peace has been shattered and now they’re about to shatter Violet.

Violet pulls back from Kyrie and looks her over properly. “Why are you dressed like a tourist?”

“It’s easier for getting about while the Island’s like this.” The lie trips off Kyrie’s tongue too easily. Violet nods before turning her attention to Nero, drawing him into an equally warm hug.

“I’m so glad you’re safe. I’ve been trying to call, but the phones are down, even the tourist phones.”

Nero pulls his sleeve down over his right hand. “It’s a mess, Violet. The entire Island’s a wreck. The Order’s going to have its work cut out fixing it and they’ve got to elect a new Sanctus.”

“I can imagine how that will go. I take it you’ve been getting lobbied left, right and centre? Kyrie, any more of that stew on the go? I haven’t eaten since Naples.” Violet eyes the pot hopefully.

Kyrie gives a weak smile and gets her a bowl and some of the bread Nero hasn’t inhaled. “I imagine when you report tomorrow, you’ll get the same.”
“More than likely,” replies Violet. “I’ll be able to vote though if Credo stands. I imagine he would, being the Supreme General. One of the advantages of not being married to him.”

She’s too busy eating to notice the loaded look that passes between Nero and Kyrie.

“Do you think Credo will be home tonight, Kyrie?” Asks Violet.

“Probably not,” she replies smoothly. It should bother her, but she can’t deal with Violet tonight. It means dealing with her own feelings and Kyrie doesn’t know if that day will ever come. “Violet, don’t think me rude, but it’s been a long week and I’m shattered. I just want to have my supper and go to bed.”

“I take it Nero’s been staying the night?” asks Violet.

Kyrie nods. She doesn’t offer anything further. Nero just keeps his head down and mops up gravy that’s so thick it’s practically another food group.

The silence stretches out until Violet’s finished her supper. “I’m going to go to bed now,” she says as she gets up. “It’s been a stressful time for all of us in our journeys, but the Saviour is with us always.”

She leans down and kisses both teenagers on the cheek and wishes them goodnight.

Nero opens his mouth to speak, but Kyrie shoots him a dirty look. He goes back to removing the pattern from his plate with the last of the bread.

Kyrie moves the pot from the stove to the fridge. Nero stacking the bowls in the sink and setting them to soak. He chuckles as a thought hits him. “It’s like we’re married already. Next we’ll be decorating the nursery.”

His smile fades as he realises they very well could be decorating the nursery in 9 months. “Kyrie –”

Kyrie gives a small smile as she shakes her head. “I had that taken care of when we were first
Nero kisses her. “How did you get to be so crazy-prepared?”

“I’m just that awesome,” she smiles, kissing him back.

“I’m a little bummed. I’d love to have a baby with you. Gotta pass on these good looks.” Nero’s face and voice goes hard. “One thing’s for sure, at least our baby isn’t going to be dumped on orphanage steps.”

“If I get pregnant here, Nero, we’ll probably never get out. And I’m not having a baby here. We can’t have a baby here. We definitely can’t have a baby here. When we go, we’re never coming back. We’re cutting all ties. I’ll change my fucking name if I have to.”

It’s the vehemence in her voice that gives him pause. She hasn’t raised her voice, but the look in her eyes makes his blood run cold. He knows where part of it comes from – it’s not the sacrifice of their potential future to raise their baby in the place they were raised – but the precariousness of their situation in a society that holds them partially responsible for destroying 30 years of careful plans and the resulting power vacuum. But there’s something else underlying it and he doesn’t know what.

“I’m tired, Kyrie,” he says. He’s hit his limit for bullshit today and just wants to bring his world back down to him and her. “Can we just go to bed?”

Wordlessly, Kyrie holds out her hand and leads them to her room.

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Violet walks around Credo’s bedroom. There’s a fine layer of dust that hasn’t been cleaned up and there’s a faint musty smell, which is to be expected if the windows haven’t been opened for a week. She’s just glad that the house clearly escaped damage in the earthquake. She’s seen the centre of town and it’s wrecked. It’s going to take millions to rebuild. She’ll see about that tomorrow, especially now the rescue people are going back to the Mainland.

She goes to her side of the room and pulls out a nightgown from a drawer. She changes and gathers
up her clothes to take them to the bathroom and put them in the washing basket. Credo’s uniform that was there from before she went is still in the basket and his shaving kit, the one she had made specially for his birthday several years before is still there. It’s bone dry.

Violet begins to feel a sense of dread as she looks around the room. No one has been in this room for a week. Credo has not been home for a week and much as he trusts Nero with Kyrie, he would not have left them home alone for that long. Kyrie would have been ordered to a friends’ house and Nero would have gone to his rooms in HQ. Credo’s had to deal with emergencies before that lasted several days and he’d always found time to come back for his shaving kit. He said it was the most precious thing that anyone had ever given him and keeping it with him was a little piece of home.

Credo is vain, almost as a vain as a woman and Violet has teased him about it on numerous occasions. He is always perfect and precise in his manner and appearance, even when, especially when disaster strikes. Credo’s ability to impose order on chaos is the reason he’s Supreme General a full decade younger than any other leader. It’s why he’ll probably be elected Sanctus.

With a mounting sense of horror, Violet goes to Credo’s wardrobe and counts the uniforms she finds there. He does have rooms at HQ, with fresh clothes, but he would still have found time to come home. The musty smell in the room has amplified in the confines of the wardrobe and it smells like something is decaying in the row of pristine white clothes and gleaming boots.

Violet gags with the strength of it and falls to her knees. In her heart she knows. She knows. The grief wells up and she cries out with the mass of it. Dimly she hears Kyrie’s door open – she knows the sound of all the doors in this house and she only heard one door open and two sets of footsteps come running.

They burst into the room, Nero with his gun drawn and only wearing his boxer briefs, Kyrie wearing Nero’s t-shirt. She dimly notes Nero’s right arm, but that’s not important right now. Kyrie drops to the floor beside Violet and hugs her tight as she sobs like the world’s ending.

Nero just sits down on the bed, Blue Rose beside him. Kyrie, he notes, doesn’t cry. There’s not even tears. “Get some coffee,” she mouths to him as she holds Violet close against the sobs wracking her body.

By the time Nero’s come back, Violet has calmed down. Her face is red and blotchy and Kyrie has got her a glass of water. Nero passes both women their coffees and Violet gasps as it burns her.

“Watch, it’s hot,” he jokes and she smiles weakly.
“Thanks for the warning.” Violet sets the cup down on the carpet. Credo would have had kittens at that. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure on the details,” says Kyrie. “But I’m told he died when the Saviour statute fell over. He was trying to save people there.”

“That’s Credo. Did you know he proposed again before I left? He gave me your mother’s ring, but I’ll give it back to you if you want.” Her face crumples in tears again as Nero marvels at Kyrie’s straight face.

“No, Violet. He meant that ring for you and I want you to have it.” Kyrie cast a look up to Nero. He can see it pains her to pass up that ring, but he can see the undercurrent from earlier in her face. “You were married in all but name and I’ve always thought of you as my sister in law. I want you to wear that ring and my mother’s wedding ring.”

Violet wipes her eyes. “I will. So you don’t want me to move out? I don’t have any right to live here, legally this is your house.”

“You can stay as long as you want,” says Kyrie. She glances at Nero and Violet catches it.

“I’m not going to dictate to you and Nero. If you’re together, you’re together. I can’t comment. 15 years with your brother without benefit of clergy.” Violet sighs. “Just remember, not everyone here is going to be understanding. I had to put up with being called all the whores under the sun and accusations that I bewitched Credo.”

Violet tries to stand up and Nero holds out his right hand to her. She takes it and lets him pull her upright. She makes no sign about it being demonic, but there is something on her face. Recognition? Nero brushes the thought aside – she’s just lost her common-law husband. She’s not really going to be caring about anything.

“I’m going to sleep, now,” she says. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Kyrie gives her a final hug and she and Nero go back to Kyrie’s room. They’ve just settled down when it hits Nero. “Violet never asked about Credo’s body.”
He feels Kyrie stiffen beside him. She’s still ambivalent about her brother, but Nero’s not putting any barriers up between them. “And you think?”

“She knows there isn’t one. She knows about the Ascension Ceremony.” Nero turns to face Kyrie. In the dark, he can just about see her face. What light there is catches her eyes. “She knows Credo was a demon.”

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Kyrie has gone to work as Nero and Violet stand in front of the Opera House with the statue of the Saviour lying prone before it. The Opera House has been shored up by scaffolding and they’ve begun to clear up the fountain. There are piles of dead and dying floral tributes left by those grieving and a hijab belonging to each dead Fortunese is tied to the fence. Some of these have a simple message and a name. Some have full prayers or poems written on them.

Nero’s seen it before, so he watches Violet’s reaction to the scene. She’s solemn as she walks slowly around the plaza. It’s almost as if she’s reading every prayer and every message. Nero doesn’t rush her. He’s happy for the legitimate excuse of escorting Supreme General Credo’s fiancée. He’s in no rush for the latest round of questioning.

Finally, Violet comes to the head of the Saviour. “Where was the last place you saw him?” she asks and again, it strikes Nero as a strange choice of words. Not “Where is he lying?” He’s not sure if she’s subtly hinting that she knows he knows but Nero isn’t biting. He can’t take the risk.

Nero walks her over the rough place where Credo fell. Violet lays a single white rose and he notices that she’s wearing Kyrie’s mother’s wedding and engagement rings. Though simple and elegant in the Fortuna style, they’re ostentatious for Violet, who favours plainer dress and jewellery than the standard Fortunese. The only piece of jewellery she wears that’s remotely flashy is the gold bangle with elegant scrollwork engraved on it. It’s set with small red stones, but he doesn’t know what they’re called. He’s never seen her with it off, though he’s never found the significance of it. He knows Credo didn’t give it to her – she has photos from before Fortuna and she’s wearing it there.

Her plain dress and pious demeanour belie the wild past she must have had. Her body is covered with scars and tattoos, which she’s always explained as her wild youth before Fortuna and meeting Credo.

His musings brought to an end when Violet walks over to him. She’s been crying, but she hasn’t bothered to wipe away the fresh tear tracks. “You OK?” He asks.
She shakes her head. “I thought I’d feel better when I saw it, but I don’t.” Violet looks around. “So many people.”

“Fortuna will rebuild, Praise be to the Saviour,” Nero says carefully.

“Ever be it so,” she replies, rote and flat. She gestures to the Castle. “They’re waiting on us.”

Nero looks up at Lamina Peak and sighs. Neither speak on the journey over.

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They part ways in the entrance hall of the castle. There’s Holy Knight staffers and bureaucrats everywhere. Most are in uniform, but there are more than a few in suits and they’re not wearing hijabs. Violet catches Nero’s eye and he shakes his head, just a very small movement. “It’s been like this all week,” he murmurs. He makes it look like they aren’t talking.

A young woman walks over to Violet, clasping her hands in the Holy Knight salute. “Alchemist Alighieri, Madam, if you would follow me,” she says. She isn’t dressed in an order uniform and her heels click on the marble floor. She steps aside and waits for Violet to follow her. She’s got a lanyard that identifies her as Ms Kye, Umbrella - Ouroboros EU PLC. There’s a logo of a red and white umbrella on it.

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“May the Saviour be with you on your journey,” Nero says as he clasps his hands and exaggerates the bow more than he normally would. His skin is crawling with the eyes he imagines on him.

Violet repeats the movement and the blessing before following the woman with the clicking heels silently across the floor. Nero watches her go before the Leader of the Committee for the Protection of the Faith comes for him. He was third in Command under Credo and Credo hated him. Called him a rat-faced weasel who cared nothing for Fortuna that would sell his mother to advance his skin.

“Ah, Knight Balzan. We’ve been waiting for you. You’re tardy today,” General Falzon says in his oily voice. He reminds Nero of Agnus and it makes his flesh crawl. He feels like a mouse being played with by a bored cat.
“Supreme General Micellef’s fiancee returned to the island last night,” replies Nero. Godspit and shit, but it’s hard to tamp down his natural impulse for snarky remarks and be more circumspect. “She was unaware of his fate. I escorted her to his place of passing.”

“Fiancée? She finally agreed to marry him?” Falzon is slightly taken aback. It clearly bothers him that he didn’t know this important tidbit. Nero hopes he hid the small flair of smugness at even scoring this one small point.

“Before she went to attend business on the Mainland. They were going to announce it when she returned.” Nero can’t help but stand straighter so he towers over the Leader. He’s only 19 and 6 foot 1, so he figures he’s got a few more inches to go.

Falzon recovers his composure - Credo’s engagement wouldn’t have been earth-shattering news and it doesn’t matter now anyway. “Well, we’re late enough as it is.”

He walks at a fair clip towards an ornate room, Nero having to walk fast to keep up with him. The groups of people around the hall part and still their conversations as he passes. Nero catches some of their pitying looks and some of their suspicious looks, especially from those more senior who know more of the story.

Nero feels like he’s walking to his execution. To be fair, he could be.

The door shuts behind him with a sense of finality.

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Violet is bid to sit at the only empty seat at the committee table. There’s about nine other people there. Some Violet recognises from Fortuna, some from the Mainland. They aren’t wearing hijabs. Ms Kye offers her tea or coffee and some cakes from the stand. They smell delicious, but Violet isn’t hungry. The other woman goes to the other empty seat and prepares to take notes.

The others seated at the table chat amongst themselves for a bit, before welcoming Violet. A man with a similar lanyard to Ms Kye speaks and everyone else falls silent. “Alchemist Alighieri, so good of you to join us. Our condolences on your loss.” He shuffles some papers and Violet can see her photo on the top page. “Your record is impressive and Agnus spoke highly of you. You are aware of the events of the last week, I take it?”
“The earthquake, sir? How badly were the labs damaged?”

“In this room, we don’t need to lie about these things.” He smiles. “But I do like that you are straight to business. This is indeed the kind of qualities we would require in Fortuna’s new Chief Alchemist.”

“Chief Alchemist? Is Agnus dead as well?” Violet casts her eyes down. “I shall miss him. He was a truly talented man and I learned an awful lot from him. He’ll be hard to replace.”

“But not impossible,” cuts in another of the suits. They’re all wearing lanyards with that red and white umbrella on it. He leans forward. “Sadly, the nonsense last week has set back much of our research. We need someone who can pull the project back together while moving forward.”

“All of his projects?” violet says, slightly aghast. “He was working on many things right across the board. What about the rest of the staff? There were many talented alchemists who were higher than me.”

“We think you would be the best man for the job, so to speak. Will you take it? You’ll have a blank check for your work, even the ones Agnus diverted for his own research.” The first man speaks again. He’s got a strange accent and is overly theatrical. The other panel members are rolling their eyes at him, but they aren’t questioning him, so he’s clearly very powerful.

The Order members are watching her intently. None of them have broke their gaze to look at papers or computers. It unnerves her, like they’re waiting to catch her out.

Violet looks down at the table, then at Credo’s rings. She doesn’t touch the bracelet, even as she twists the unfamiliar rings that feel so strange on her fingers and she’s reminded of something her climbing instructor said to her once. Mountains are more dangerous on the way down, because everyone focuses on up so much, they forget that down is just as dangerous.

“I think that Credo would have been delighted at this opportunity and in his honour, I accept.” Violet says it in a steady voice, with just a slight tremble. She’s careful to make herself sound scared, but resolute.

“Excellent!” says the theatrical man. “Ms Kye will become your assistant and shall arrange anything you need. Tomorrow, you start your new life, but today, you celebrate your good fortune. You must take lunch with us. I insist!”
The men from the Order don’t cut across him and remind him that Violet is in mourning and that’s interesting in itself.

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Nero’s meeting feels more like a court martial than an investigative committee meeting. He’s escorted to a vacant chair sitting in the centre of the room, away from the top table on the raised dais. There’s a banner with the insignia of the Faith Committee hanging on the wall behind the table, mirroring the insignia on the chests of the Committee members and their staff.

He remains standing until ordered to sit between the massive Knights who flank him. He’s not made to give up Red Queen or Blue Rose, so that’s something in his favour, he supposes. His right arm is burning under his sleeve, but at least the glow isn’t showing through his thick purple longcoat.

Falzon ignores Nero for a full 15 minutes while he consults the other 8 panel members. It takes every ounce of Nero’s self-control to remain still and expressionless, but he’s under no illusions. The Committee for the Protection of the Faith have the power to run him through where he stands. There’s faint brown stains in the marble floor under his feet. Nero hasn’t come this far to fall now. He wishes Dante was here and he indulges in a quick fantasy of the two of them hacking up the Committee. All of them are Sanctus’ men.

And there was him thinking that kill Sanctus, kill the rot. He didn’t appreciate that men like Sanctus don’t work alone. They’re like fucking Hydras. Kill one head, get another three free.

Nero isn’t used to playing the long game. But he recalls the latest contributor to the brown stains he’s standing on. Falzon took a fancy to his wife, she tried to report him for harassment, Falzon had him up on heresy charges that didn’t even have that good a standing. Credo had been the man’s Speaker, but hadn’t been able to stop Falzon goading him so much he tried to attack him. Falzon had challenged him to a duel on the spot. Falzon was a master swordsman, the husband just a merchant. Falzon engineered it so Credo couldn’t be his champion, could only give him his sword and watch helplessly as Falzon played with him for a full five minutes until he ran him through.

The wife was now in Falzon’s bed, terrified that she’d be turned out with her children because of the heresy charges had forfeited her home and business.

Nero stands wrapped in his inner thoughts until one of the guards coughs. He snaps his attention to
Falzon and visibly swallows. He sees Falzon notice and smile. Good. Let him think he has his foot on Nero’s throat.

“Holy Knight Nero Balzan of the Order of the Sword, the Committee for the Protection of the Faith has reached its conclusions of your involvement in the events surrounding the demise of His Holiness and the destruction of the Hellgates and the plan to purge the sin from this world and lead all to glory at the hand of the Legendary Dark Knight Sparda.”

Falzon did that all on one breath. Nero has to admit he’s impressed.

Nero draws Red Queen from his back, rests his clasped hands on her pommel and bows his head, but not so much he can’t see Falzon through his bangs. “I am in Sparda’s hands.”

“This Committee finds His Holiness was unwell and placed under the thrall of Chief Alchemist Agnus, who persuaded him to meddle in forces that were beyond his ken. Funds meant for our research projects were inadvisedly appropriated for projects that put the True Faith of the Dark Knight Sparda at risk from blasphemies of those outside Fortuna. Should the Statue of the Saviour have left this island, Lord alone knows what would have happened. We are a simple people and our magic could not have stood up to the might of our neighbours on the Mainland and the British bases on the neighbouring islands.”

Nero doesn’t look up as Falzon pauses.

“In this regard, Knight Balzon, Fortuna and the True Faith owe you a debt of gratitude for preventing an even bigger disaster than the one we’re facing. However, you did bring about the death of His Holiness and have a hand in the destruction of the city and the disruption of our projects. I still haven’t ascertained your involvement with the staff of Devil May Cry. It’s clear that someone brought them here, someone who knew enough to place Gloria high within our ranks to bring His Holiness’ plan to fruition and if not you, then who?”

Nero hopes his face remained expressionless when Falzon mentioned Devil May Cry. He must have come up against them when he’d been on the special jobs of acquiring the Devil Arms, demons and other artefacts for the Order. Strange fate, indeed.

“Howeover, we have no proof of treason and we cannot condemn a man without proof.”

Nero stiffens. “He’s going to sentence me to trial by ordeal. He’s going to rig it. Oh fuck, Kyrie.”
“Nor do we know why you and Sister Kyrie Micellef were able to power the Saviour and we feel this needs further investigation.” Falzon is building up to his judgement. “I’m given to understand there where very specific conditions for this to happen and while I have my suspicions as to how this concerns you, I am not in a place to utilize them.”

Nero tries to look innocent, but it’s not a look he’s good at.

“The judgement of this Committee is thus,” Falzon takes his time, ensuring he’s racking every last ounce of fear from Nero’s nerves.

Nero realises though, he’s not as scared as he should be. He’s oddly calm about the whole thing, considering he could be about to be sentenced to death. It’s taking every ounce of strength to hold the submissive pose and keep his fool mouth shut.

Falzon frowns a little, as if he can sense Nero’s not quite playing the game. He continues. “At your young age, you have already given good service to the Order, despite your suspected apostasy. Your talents as an engineer and swordsman are not in question and will prove valuable to this Order in the times to come, particularly as we face a shortage of skilled adults in the recent disaster. Nearly a third of Fortuna’s skilled population have passed over.”

Falson pauses and he’s sure he just heard Nero mutter, “Get to the fuckin’ point, man.” One of the guards is trying to hide a smile. Falzon doesn’t let it bother him, just files it away for future reference. “Credo Micellef – “ and Nero does look up here, taken aback by the use of the name without the title – “gave you far too much leeway and freedom. This served us well on the special missions you were sent on. However, your experience is more valuable to us here. From tomorrow, you will wear your uniform and not this clown outfit. You have a lot to prove to us, young man, but you may make a fine Knight of Sparda yet.”

Nero says nothing. He’s just latching onto the fact they’re not executing him.

Falzon’s waiting for a response and his eyes narrow when he doesn’t get one. “Credo’s relationship with that Mainlander was unseemly, but I will rectify it posthumously for him. I declare that they were married on the date she first shared his bed and never left it.” He turns to another member of the Committee and instructs him. “See to the paperwork. Doubtless, this will be of comfort to our new Chief Alchemist, that she has a home to call her own.”

“You’re disinheriting Kyrie?” Nero gasps, incredulously. “It’s her parents’ house!”
Falzon looks like he’s ignoring him, though he clearly isn’t. He’s seen out the corner of his eye Nero’s hand move from the top of the hilt to the body, as if in readiness. Falzon rates his chances, even against this…boy. “It’s been drawn to my attention that Sister Micellef’s response to her brother’s death is to reject the teachings that her beloved brother died for. This cannot continue. We must all pull together in a time like this and find comfort in the Saviour’s gentle teaching.”

“You can’t do this to Kyrie! She’s done nothing wrong!” Nero’s stepped forward, just one foot, though the point of Red Queen hasn’t left the floor. Maybe that’s what saves him. “Calm yourself, you’re no good to anyone dead.” It’s not his voice, but he knows it somehow. He feels genuine fear as Falzon smiles his predator smile. It’s the most genuine thing he’s ever seen on the Leader’s face all week.

Red Queen scrapes the floor and it’s the grating noise that makes him look down and see the brown stains on the pristine white marble. “Kneel, boy.” Nero drops to his knees, placing Red Queen in front of him. He speaks and he’s not even sure it’s him. “My Lord, I beg your indulgence in this difficult time.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off the stains and speaks so quietly that he’s not sure Falzon can hear him.

Falzon carries on like he hasn’t heard anything. “A woman, particularly a young woman, is no good on her own. She needs the guiding hand of a male figure in her life. I may appoint myself her protector.”

“No, please,” Nero whispers. He’s honestly, genuinely terrified, more than he was inside the Saviour. “He’s trying to goad you. Hold your tongue, boy.”

One of the other Committee members, General Agius, clears his throat and Nero wants to hug him. He was a friend of Credo’s. “We’re issuing judgements that don’t relate to the boy directly. Let him speak. He might have some ideas of his own and it is our wish to mould him to a Knight worthy of Sparda himself.”

Falzon stalks over to him to Nero, looking at the kneeling teen. Nero keeps looking at the floor and Falzon’s boots. He wonders if Falzon’s going to have him kiss his boots. He’s heard enough about him that killing a man to get to his wife wasn’t the worst thing he’s done. Falzon puts his hand under Nero’s chin and forces him to look up. Nero’s usual reaction to something like this would be to put the guy on his ass, but that would get him killed here and clear the path to Kyrie. He’s sure Kyrie must be Falzon’s endgame.
“Do you have something to say in your defence, Knight Balzan?” Falzon asks mockingly.

Nero doesn’t know where the words come from, but they’re surely not from him. He thinks he can hear the voice in the back of his mind speak and he’s just repeating it. “A woman needs a child to steady her, General Falzon. Kyrie and I would have been wed now, were it not for Credo wanting us both to be 20 before I put a ring on her finger.”

It’s not even Nero’s speech patterns, even in these formal circumstances. It’s also a lie. Credo had just about got his head around them dating, much less raiding his wine cellar and fucking on her bedroom floor.

Falzon looks like he’s mulling the idea over. “A wedding, hmm? Might just be what Fortuna needs in this time of crisis. Very well, as soon as we’re able, you and Sister Micellef will be married. It should boost morale and persuade more parents to let loose the reins. We need the young to have children and bind them more fully to Fortuna. Disasters like this can often cause them to seek a new life on the Mainland. I knew I saw something in you, Knight Balzan.”

He returns to his seat and bangs a gavel on the desk. “You have heard our judgements. Go forth and may the Saviour be with you on your journey.”

“Get up and get out of here, boy. Make sure you look grateful. You have no power here and don’t let them forget it.”

Nero painfully pulls himself to his feet, sheathes Red Queen and bows in the direction of the Committee. He walks slowly out of the chamber, hearing Falzon say something to Agius, but he’s not sure what.

He has no idea how his legs don’t collapse.

***

Violet is sitting in the graveyard watching another funeral take place down the bottom end. They’ve had to knock down the wall and move into the next field and they still haven’t moved the Saviour yet. There’ll be more in this cemetery when that monstrosity gets hacked up. Speaking of which, no one has explained to her yet how it got from HQ to the Town.
The world is spinning and she grips the arm of the bench for a moment.

“Alchemist Alighieri are you alright? Public drunkenness isn’t something you’re known for, even if you do have good news.” General Agius sits down beside her. He’s holding a wilted bouquet.

Violet looks at it. “I’ve thrown up in that bin, so maybe best in that one,” she slurs, indicating a bin the next bench over. “Ar..Ar…Areeeoush from that company moted me and dint unnerstan how I can’t chew steak. Kep plyin me wit really fucking good French wine. And I know my wine. Had to, living with Credo.”

“Well, you’ll be getting some news about that soon. I don’t know if you should sober up before going home or get drunker,” Lord Agius sits down next to her, tossing the flowers into the bin with a high arcing throw. “Still got it.”

Violet makes a concerted effort to at least sound sober. “What’s going to happen with Nero? Why is he under inves...investigation anyway? Earthquakes are part of living here. I wasn’t here for the fun,” she reminds Lord Agius when he gives her a quizzical look.

Lord Agius looks around to make sure they’re completely alone. “They got the Saviour working.”

“You’re fucking joking.” Violet sounds completely sober now.

“The way you said. The Sparda bloodline. Not the son, though.” General Agius has dropped his voice so low, he’s mouthing the words. “Someone else. Nero.”

“He was born here, though,” replies Violet. “Sparda lived here for centuries. I’m probably the only person on Fortuna who’s not descended from him.”

“And the amount of souls from Fortuna flowing through it hadn’t worked so far. It had to be something about Nero.” Lord Agius is insistent.

Violet shakes her head and immediately wishes she hadn’t as she throws up in the bin. Lord Agius offers her some of the water he’d used for his fresh bouquet. She accepts gratefully and rinses out her mouth. “It could be that it had to reach a critical mass and Nero was the one that tipped it over. It’s not something we’re going to know until I get into the labs and see what I’m working with. And you’re assuming General Falzon will want us looking at it. He might want us to concentrate
She swigs the water. “They’d be the ones I’d concentrate on, particularly until he’s fathomed out who’s going to be installed as Sanctus.”

“Sanctus is a free vote,” protests General Agius.

“Once Falzon’s vetted the runners,” replies Violet. “Any clue as to who’s running?”

“Not yet and, no, I’m not even considering it.” He looks at Violet oddly. “What’s it like, not having a past?”

“I don’t know,” she replies. “I haven’t got one. What’s it like not having a future?”

“I don’t know,” he replies. “I haven’t got one.”

“She’s not even in that grave you keep putting flowers on every day.” Violet gestures in the general direction of the Agius family vault. The wine’s making her garrulous. Violet is normally far more reserved than this. “You don’t even know where the fuck she is.”

“She may as well be dead, could be for all I know. Nobody vanishes for 20 years without leaving some kind of trace.” General Agius looks at the grave. “I just needed somewhere to go. I talk to her more now than I did when she was alive. But she listens better now.”

Violet smiles as General Agius turns back to her. “Answer my question. What’s it like having no past?”

Violet draws a deep breath as she considers her reply. “I’ve been Violet Alighieri for as long as whoever I was, so it doesn’t feel as much like a void as it used to. No one’s looking for me. I’m on every database on the Mainland, so if they were looking they’d have found me by now. Sometimes that still hurts. There’s a lot of inconsistencies about myself I’d like to know. I’d like to know how old I really am. That said, considering the state I was found in, sometimes I think it’s better not to know.”
Lord Agius looks thoughtful, before patting Violet on the arm and leaving the cemetery.

“This day could not possibly get any stranger,” Violet mutters before she throws up in the bin again.
Chapter 2

*Fortuna, 2 decades ago.*

He walks down the empty street in Pilgrim’s Robes, marking him out as a foreigner. The breeze blows the hem aside as he walks, revealing flashes of blue trousers, brown riding boots and an expensive blue leather coat. He walks with the quiet, confident nature of a man ever watchful, but confident in his ability to take on life.

The demons come and he smiles like the predator he is. He flicks up his sword from her scabbard and it’s all the warning they get.

***

“It’s research, not heresy,” says Verity, shuffling the tarot cards. “I have to have a working knowledge of magic systems, even if they aren’t compatible with the Saviour’s Word.”

Peter and Credo look at each other. Peter shrugs. They’re wasting time until Verity’s much prettier sister Aggripina is finished her studies for the day. Both young women have gone to train as Archivists, but 18 year old Pinny is a few years further on than 16 year old Verity.

Peter has been making sheep’s eyes at Pinny for weeks now and she’s not biting. “Maybe you’d be better off making a love potion. Something that’s actually useful,” says Peter.

“I’ll be making more than love potions by the time I’m finished,” says Verity. “Alchemy is where magic meets science. I just have to get through my Archive training first.”

“So which one of us are you going to do first?” asks Credo.

Peter snorts at the unintended innuendo. Credo colours, but Verity hasn’t noticed, head down over her cards and their book of meanings. Peter motions towards Verity and makes an unmistakably sexual symbol. Credo pushes Peter off the table.

Verity looks up in shock, pushing back her chair and dropping to her knees beside him. “Are you
alright, Knight Falzon?"

“Sparda’s Balls, Credo – what the hell was that for?” snaps Peter, springing to his feet. He puts out a hand to Verity and helps her up. “Your forgiveness, Miss Agius for my language. Simply horseplay between friends.”

He kisses her hand and it’s a lingering kiss that’s inappropriate for the situation. Verity gives a nervous laugh and tries to pull her hand away. Peter holds on to it for just longer than he should.

Credo clears his throat and Peter lets Verity’s hand go. She hides her discomfort by shuffling her tarot deck. Credo tries to watch without staring. Her fingers are long and slim and very deft as they shuffle the outsized cards. They have a slight bend in them, she’s shuffled them that much.

“So what are you going to do?” asks Credo.

“I’m going to shuffle the cards and then lay out a spread that will cover the next year,” Verity explains and begins to lay them out on the table, face down.

“Why are they face down?” asks Credo.

“So I don’t confuse their meanings until I’ve gone through the whole spread,” she replies, intent on her work. Her head’s bowed, but Credo can still see the curve of her cheek and the dark sweep of lashes as she lays out the cards. She bites her bottom lip as she concentrates and Credo wonders why his collar suddenly feels tight.

Verity picks up her book to be ready to interpret their meanings when she realises she’s brought the wrong book. “Be back in a minute,” she says as she runs off down the street.

She doesn’t run far. Fortuna is warm and she wears a long red dress with a white hijab covering her dark hair, so nobody runs much anywhere and especially not her. Her father’s instilled that she must act like a lady in all things.

That’s when she sees him.
Head down in his Pilgrims Robes, she can still make out his sharp features and his generous mouth.

Deep in thought, he doesn’t notice her as he passes.

Verity notices him, though and she turns to watch him go, eager for every little detail about him. She looks after him until he’s lost in the crowd.

She never does pick up that book.

***

She wanders back, eventually, to her cards. Credo is still sitting there, scanning the crowd and checking his watch. He looks relieved when he sees her. He stands up as she approaches and gives a small bow.

“What kept you, Miss Agius? I was beginning to become concerned.” Credo pulls out her chair for her and she sits down. “Did you retrieve your book?”

“I-er-met a friend and we began talking. She’s been having problems with the comments made by some of those workman they’ve brought in to convert that warehouse into a-“ Verity struggles for the unfamiliar word and an unfamiliar concept. “hanut kbir, I think they call them. I bought us these.”

She sets down a bottle of Farrugia from one of the cafes on the plaza. Her bottle is already open and she’s sipping through a straw. Credo doesn’t have one. Straws are for ladies, so that they may be ever graceful in thought and deed. He tries to ignore the purse of Verity’s lips around the red straw she’s chosen, but he can’t look away.

“I think they call them supermarkets on the Mainland. They’re so big you could fit the whole Castle in them,” says Credo.

“Sparda’s balls! Really?” Her mouth drops open in shock at the concept. It’s clear she can’t visualise it.
Credo’s lips thin at the language, but he reminds himself, he’s seen them, she hasn’t. “Really. They’re horrible. Noisy things. Too bright and everything in boxes. Even the shops themselves are like boxes.”

They’re disturbed by a light and click as a woman in jeans and shirt takes their picture. She thanks them and walks off into the crowd, oblivious to the looks of the townspeople at her attire and loose blonde hair.

“Tourists!” Credo makes it sound like a swear word. “I don’t know why Sanctus persuaded the Council to let them in.”

“Money, hanini,” says Verity. “Like that big company that’s doing all the sciences at HQ. I’ll probably end up working there when I’ve finished my training.”

“They aren’t so bad,” says Credo. “At least they follow the laws. But I don’t understand why the tourists get dispensations from wearing Pilgrims Robes. It’s indecent. And some of what they wear down the beach. You can’t tell the difference between them and the pros…ladies of the night down at the docks. I couldn’t take my sister to the beach anymore.”

“Knight Micellef, you don’t have a sister,” Verity laughs and it’s like a crystal stream to Credo.

“If I did, then I shouldn’t take her. It’s causing problems when the workmen and the fishing crews can’t tell the difference and proposition the women. There’s fights left, right and centre and never mind the behaviour of some of the younger ones.” He stops when he sees Verity looking at him and smiling. “I’m sorry to go on, Miss Agius. Knight Falzon and I broke up a fight in one of those new bars last night while we were on Patrol.”

“It’s fine,” she says as she goes back to sipping her drink.

Credo can’t take it anymore. “Miss Agius, is there anyone courting you?”

“Sadly. No. Pinny draws all the attention of the opposite sex. It’s alright,” she says, holding up a finger to silence him. “It’s alright. I know you only waste time with me while Knight Falzon chases Pinny. I rather think you would stand a better chance with her.”

Credo colours. “No, no. You misunderstand me. I wish to court you.”
“Me?” Squeaks Verity. “But why?”

Credo never says what he should have said, that her smile lights up a room, that the sound of her voice makes his heart sing, that one day he dreams of her crushing his hand while their child comes into this world, that she’s pagun fil-qasam tat-tigieg. He says none of this.

“You’re clever, studious and you have the most excellent needlework skills I’ve ever seen. That tapestry you stitched for the Castle was beautiful.” Credo tries to come up with more compliments for her to bolster his case. “Sparda’s Victory Over Mundus is one of the high points of the Castle tour. No one believes that it was done just by one person and so young at that.”

Verity’s smile becomes forced, but she’s used to wearing a mask. “Yes, tapestry is an excellent training medium for the mind. It involves seeing the finished piece in your mind, planning it, executing it, dealing with the problems, adjustments and setbacks and incorporating them into the overall finished item. You learn the patience and persistence to stab something a million times.”

The Chimes for Third Prayer sound and Verity gathers her things. “Papa will be waiting on me.”

She’s gone before Credo knows what’s happened.

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection

Phase One
Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.

Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef

The Twin Sons of Our Saviour have been identified. Their differing viewpoints have been exploited based on information supplied by our Information Division. This has led to a massive argument between them and the breakdown of the fraternal relationship. Our Agents continue to direct either Son towards Fortuna, so that they may play their part in the Resurrection of Our Saviour.

His Lordship has indicated that the production of an Heir to Our Lord Sparda after the discovery of his living Sons is desirable, so that we have our own Flesh and Blood of the Saviour, bred and raised in Fortuna.

Knight Falzon has indicated to His Lordship that he has identified two suitable females for this purpose. It is to our advantage that Captain Edward Agius' ambition outstrips his ability. Knight Falzon postulates that an offer of promotion and authority will smooth over any objections he may have in the great honour that will be accorded one of his Daughters.
Chapter 3

Nero goes to the docks with some bread for the ducks and gulls that make their home on the water. He sits on the edge of the quay and dangles his feet off the side as the birds flock around him. He’s always liked to come down here as a child and watch the boats and the birds and it’s something he still does when he needs to think. The water’s so clear he can see schools of fish darting in and around the seaweed, dodging the odd bird that swims down to catch them.

He starts to become engrossed in the scene around him. The sun’s warm and sparkling on the water and he starts to relax as the ducks and fish go about surviving. He’s been sitting there quite a while before Kyrie comes, ignoring the lewd comments from the fishermen. She looks beautiful in the soft evening light, jeans showing off her slim legs, the crystals on the blue rose on her tee-shirt twinkle with little stabs of blue and green, brown hair bouncing in her pony tail. She’s carrying a basket and Nero can see her face break out into a broad smile as she sees him.

She sits elegantly beside him, kicking him affectionately as she swings her feet and leaning into him. He just takes a second to enjoy this moment before he has to spoil it. The salt on the air and screech of the birds mingle with the weight of her pressed into his side and the warm honey smell of her shampoo. They kiss slowly and gently, taking their time with each others’ mouths. Nero raises a gloved hand to her face and delicately strokes her hair.

“How bad was it?” she asks finally, turning slightly to get the fish and chips out the basket and the bottle of farrugia, the fizzy orange sharp-yet-sweet cordial that’s a Fortunese specialty.

“Bad.” He doesn’t look at her while he opens his newspaper wrapped dinner. “Can we do it after dinner? I don’t want to spoil this.”

Kyrie shakes her head. “Nope. Let’s get the worst out the way and it can only get better.”

Nero snorts. “Ya think?”

Kyrie gives a deep, contented sigh. “You’re not dead and we’re not in a death statue. How much worse can it get?”

“How was your day?” Nero asked, trying to head off the inevitable.
“I got fired for dressing like a whore,” Kyrie says nonchantly as she salts her chips.

“Did you bring forks? I can’t eat with this glove on – the fuck?” Nero looks at her sharply.

“Here you go,” Kyrie says as she hands him a fork from the basket. “I’ll just use my hands. You can lick them clean later.”

“What did you say?” Nero catches Kyrie’s wrist as she passes him the fork.

“I’m going to use my hands?” She looks him straight in the eye.

“Before that.” Nero hasn’t let her wrist go.

“I got fired. Not everyone likes the new me.” Kyrie pulls her hand free and pops a chip in his mouth. “We’ll be leaving soon anyway.”

“Weren’t you the one telling me to be careful lest I mysteriously disappear?” Nero’s voice is muffled as he eats the chip. He swallows. “You didn’t think any of that applied to you too?”

Kyrie just pops another chip in his mouth, she’s got another ready and waiting. He grabs that hand, holding tighter now.

“Godspit and shit, Kyrie. This is serious. Falzon’s throwing his weight around and he’s in charge now Sanctus and Credo are dead.” Nero hisses. He’s careful to keep the noise down. The port’s busy and he doesn’t want more getting back to Falzon than necessary. Empty Night, why can’t he get her to see that? “Kyrie, we can’t draw attention to ourselves or we’re fucked! Don’t you get that? Falzon is watching us!”

“You’re hurting me!” Kyrie snaps, trying to pull her hand free. Nero drops his grasp and Kyrie rubs her wrist and glares at him, more annoyed than frightened. “What the hell happened today?”

Nero punches the wall beside him hard enough to crack it. “Falzon’s ordered that we have to get
married, he’s declared Violet and Credo married, so you’ve been disinherited, we’re both to get with the Order programme and we’re still under investigation. We made it worse, Kyrie. Sparda alone knows how, but we did. He spent most of the meeting trying to goad me into a fight."

“Empty Night, Nero – you didn’t!” Kyrie gasps in horror.

Nero shakes his head. “No, Agius stepped in and, -. “ He leaves off mentioning the mystery voice in his head. “He made it easier. Managed to keep Falzon in check.”

“We can’t rely on that though,” says Kyrie. She squares her shoulders and that hard glint is back in her eye. Nero feels his dick stir at it. “When we go, I’ll sell Violet my half of the house. It’s just a house and there’s nothing I’m taking from it.”

She wraps her chips up and begins taking off her trainers and her jeans.

“Kyrie?” says Nero, half amused, half horrified.

She looks back at him, the glint in her eye mischievous now. “That water looks lovely, doncha think?”

“Going skinny dipping?” Nero grins.

“Well, let’s give Falzon something for his reports.” She’s down to her underwear and the fishermen are looking at her, gesturing and shouting. Her body is covered in yellowing bruises.

“What about your chips?” asks Nero. It’s hard for him to ignore the catcallers, but he does for her.

“They’re burning. They’ll be fine,” she says before she steps off the quay and plunges gracefully into the water. She surfaces in a mass of bubbles and treads water. “It’s lovely, Nero.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Nero says, mock annoyed. “Who’s going to watch our chips for these marauding seagulls?”
“Look in the basket,” she calls back up.

Intrigued, Nero finds a small glowing bottle, some towels and a neoprene sleeve with a glove.

“Set the bottle in the middle of our stuff,” Kyrie says. “It’s supposed to make us less noticeable. Anyway, it’s Fortuna. Who’s going to steal our stuff?”

Nero laughs and takes off his shirt, carefully rolling up the sleeve so he can get it on with the minimum of fuss and lessen the likelihood of someone seeing his arm. There’s only a little scaly patch above the top of it. He spreads his jeans over the top of the basket, just in case the bottle only works on humans and not seagulls.

“How’d I look?” He calls to Kyrie. He flexes his arms in a muscleman pose.

“It’s a good fit. Now, jump off that cliff, you gotta land somewhere!”

Nero laughs and jumps in.

By the time they get out, the fish and chips are stone cold and the sun’s gone down.

They eat them anyway.

***

Kyrie can’t sleep and as she figures that she doesn’t have to be up for work the next day, she doesn’t need to. She quietly moves Nero’s arm aside and he settles into her space with a soft murmur. For a quick moment, she considers settling back down with him, but she doesn’t. She just enjoys the sight of him truly relaxed and free from his cares.

Kyrie ruffles her hair which is still stiff with sea salt. She’ll have a shower later when everyone is out. She goes down to the kitchen and begins setting up the slow cooker with the oatmeal for breakfast. She’s always loved taking care of other people and she’s glad she shares that with her mother as much as her brown hair and hazel eyes. Her mother had been an alchemist and her father a Holy Knight, so public service had been instilled into her and Credo from a young age.
Good thing really. She’d never have met Nero otherwise and she dreads to think where he would have ended up if hadn’t been for the close interest they’d taken in him as a snotty nosed five year old.

She goes over the massive dresser in the kitchen that’s taken up one of the walls for as long as she can remember. Kyrie remembers her mother telling her about how it’s been in her mother’s family for centuries, linking the Micellef women down the ages through actions rather than genes. Kyrie had used to find it comforting that she was kneading bread on the pullout table on the left side above the drawers. Now she finds it stifling and part of her is glad that her mother isn’t here to see her reject that long history.

Still, tears prick Kyrie’s eyes as she realises she’s the last Micellef to own this dresser. It smells like her mother, beeswax and lemon. Kyrie, like many younger Fortunese buys bottles of shampoo from the tourist supermarkets that Fortunese work in but get fined for buying in. She just factors it into her costs. Her mother made her own soap and shampoo. Kyrie can, but it’s so much bother and she’s usually busy. That said, the tourists pay through the nose for the “Artisan Soaps” and it’s worth a pretty penny for those so inclined. Keeps the women employed. Men won’t do it, women’s work. Maybe she’ll get a job there now they’re not wanting her near the refugees anymore.

She pulls out a drawer and moves the muslin bags she uses for baking. She was really just making sure Credo never found her package, but he wasn’t likely to look in here anyway. Credo only cooked - badly - on high days and holidays and Violet wouldn’t have bothered if she had found them. Her mum used to hide stuff in here as well, little hidden drawers here and there where the menfolk of the family would never think to look.

Kyrie takes a pen from a jam jar stuck with sea shells she did when she was 6 that no one has thrown out yet. She tips out the glossy prospectuses from universities on the Mainland and begins to leaf through them. Like most Fortunese, Kyrie is fluent in several languages and well read, but her formal education is lacking. She has no qualifications that are recognised in Europe and she’s trying to find a workaround that will get her on a social workers’ degree.

She puts the pen down with a sigh and gets up to put on some milk for hot chocolate. She really fancies some from her secret stash that she keeps hidden from everyone. She’s hunting about in the drawer where she’s sure nobody but her goes, but she can’t find it. It’s the really expensive Swiss stuff as well and it tastes like Heaven.

Kyrie tries to pull out the drawer to see if her tin of coco powder has fell down the back. It has happened before when Credo or Nero would stuff things in here for safekeeping or for her to find and do something with them later. Mostly they just clogged up drawers till she cleared them out and chucked them, both men long since forgotten what it was she was meant to do with them.
She tugs it harder. Nope. Stuck fast.

She even tries to pull out the drawer underneath, but it’s stuck fast as well. Her milk bubbles over on the stove and she hurriedly turns it off, but it’s still burned on and it stinks, but she’s on a mission now. She digs out the linseed oil from another drawer and the turkey baster. Methodically she works all round the joists and the grooves of the runners. Kyrie is having to contort herself in all manner of strange positions and her knees have gone numb, but with 15 minutes she’s worked enough oil through both drawers that she can begin to work one free. She gently begins to jiggle and rock the bottom drawer free. She doesn’t get it out, but she puts her hand in and feels something small wedged vertically between the drawers.

Kyrie peers up, but she can’t make it out in the dim light. Of course, the torch would be in the drawer which is jammed. She makes an exasperated humph and goes back to trying to pull the drawer out. She thinks she can hear Violet starting to stir and she doesn’t want to have to explain this to the older woman.

Kyrie is actually pretty strong for her situation, even though she’s not a Knight. She swims every day during Ladies Hour at the lido and her singing has given her a strong set of lungs. She’s used to humping boxes of supplies and breaking up fights at the refugee hostel. This drawer is coming out.

She grabs hold of the drawer and braces her feet against the dresser and pulls.

For a moment nothing happens.

There’s a loud crack and the object breaks, sending the freed drawer shooting out. Kyrie smacks into the kitchen table, sending a chair flying. She ignores her thumping head to gather up the pieces of the object. It’s black plastic and it’s in bits. She shoves them in her dressing gown as she hears Nero’s footsteps on the stairs.

“What the hell, Kyrie? Are you ok?” Nero’s down and checking her head, strong fingers gently ghosting through her hair. He helps her up and rights the chair before he sits her down on it.

Oh, Kyrie feels sick. She doesn’t answer as Nero busts out some of Violet’s heavy-duty painkillers – heavy duty to Kyrie, regular use for Violet – and hands them to her with a glass of water. Nero sees the drawers and the burned milk and guesses what she was doing. He has the grace to look shame-faced.
“Was that can of chocolate yours? I finished that a few weeks ago.”

Nero’s got seriously good reflexes, Kyrie thinks later. He shouldn’t have been able to dodge that drawer.

***

Violet has the nightmare again. It’s the one she always has when she’s stressed and it's the one she has even when she's not.

_No sword shall touch you, lest it be mine._

She’s falling. It’s dark, there’s screaming and crying and she’s falling. She doesn’t want to die.

_Where is he? He's coming for her, but what if he misses her?_

There’s so much pain. She’s been in pain for days.

_Vee sabiha, says the Blue Man, as he strokes her hair._

There’s men in white and they’re doing things to her.

_“La Sirena Spezzata! La Sirena Spezzata!”_

There’s bright lights and more people in white, different people and bleeping machines.

She strokes her stomach.

_S’ok baby. Mama's here, Papa's coming._
No sword shall touch you, lest it be mine.

There’s so much pain. She’s been in pain for days. She doesn’t die.

Vee sabiha.

***

“I’ll buy you some more! Nine Hells, Kyrie, it’s fucking chocolate!” Somehow the drawer hasn’t smashed but it’s left a nice big dent in the wall.

“I was looking forward to that! It was the only thing nice thing to happen all bastard week!” Kyrie screeches so loud, it’s amazing she doesn’t have the Knights at the door.

“Thanks a fucking bunch, Kyrie! What the fuck am I, then? Chopped liver?” He should be horrified at the fact he’s yelling at Kyrie, but it actually feels good to let fly, even if it is over something so trivial.

“I JUST WANTED A HOT CHOCOLATE! SPARDA’S BALLS, WHY IS THAT SO MUCH TO ASK THE FUCKING UNIVERSE AFTER THIS HELL-CURSED WEEK!?" Kyrie throws the other drawer at Nero and this one connects.

Luckily, it's his right arm.

Kyrie’s hand flies to her mouth in horror and Nero stands stunned as he slowly lowers his arm. The silence lengthens until Kyrie busts out the Good Man Kryptonite.

She bursts into tears.

Nero can’t help himself and goes straight to Kyrie and wraps his arms around her. He strokes her stiff, salty hair and murmurs nonsense, trying to calm his ferocious beast.
“It w-wasn’t m-meant to h-hit y-you,” she sobs.

“I know. It’s OK. Gonna have to give you a new pet name, huh, Killer?” He holds her tight and rocks her.

“I could have really hurt you!” she wails.

“But you didn’t. We’ll need to get you in the Knights. Falzon would be shitting himself against you,” Nero soothes her and despite herself, Kyrie giggles.

“Feeling better?” He asks.

“No. I still have no hot chocolate and a thumping head.” She mock pouts. “You’ll need to make it up to me.”

“I need to make it up to you? Who was throwing drawers at their boyfriend? No wait, fiancé?”

Kyrie looks up at him.

He shrugs. “Hey, it’s happening. We’re as well just rolling with it. It’s not how I wanted to marry you, but I do want to. Marry you.”

Kyrie pulls him down for a kiss. There’s nothing gentle about it as she slides her tongue along his, dragging it along the roof of his mouth. Nero shivers and the feel of it just does things to Kyrie. He’s only wearing his boxer briefs, jumping out of bed so quickly he never had time to put on some jeans. She can feel him starting to get hard as the kiss continues. She sweeps past the space where his wisdom tooth will eventually come in and he yelps and tries to pull away, but she holds him firm and concentrates the point of her tongue round there.

It must be a hot button that Nero never knew about, because he’s got her backed up and sitting on the table. She reaches for his shorts, but he catches her hand and intertwines their fingers, pulling her hand behind her back. The mild dominance of it has her panting now and she’s turned on as fuck as she imagines where this scenario could go.
With his free hand Nero pulls over a kitchen chair she hasn’t sent flying and slides down her body to sit on it. She catches his lip in her teeth and sucks it gently to fullness. Gasping, Nero pulls away and pushes her down with a hand in the centre of her chest. He’s dropped Kyrie’s other hand and is pulling down her pyjama bottoms, while holding her supine. His bicep ripples under his skin as he keeps her down.

When they’re off, he takes a moment to look at her spread before him, panting and open. Her top is still on, a little vest top, with spaghetti straps and her light cotton dressing gown is open to the sides. Nero’s always loved half-dressed women in his fantasies, especially if the bra’s on and knickers gone, but Kyrie like this is steak after hamburger and better than any fantasy. He so close to her cunt now, he can smell her unique tang.

He knows what she’s expecting and unconsciously gives a little one-sided quirk of his lips. It’s the same one he does when he’s about to get into a fight. She’s expecting a quickie on the kitchen table. Nero slides his right hand, just two fingers, the middle two right inside her and it’s instant. She gives this broken moan and he’s really got to fight to keep focused on what he’s doing. He can feel his Devil Trigger start to push, but he fights it down. Now’s not the time to experiment that hard.

Mind you, the way she’s squirming, he could do with the extra hands. He files that thought away for later and concentrates on pumping that clawed hand slowly, but firmly in and out. He makes sure that he’s coming down hard on her clit and well, isn’t she just reacting already? Kyrie’s trying to shut her legs against the sensation and he has to change the position of his arms so he can pin her legs down and open.

Nero’s beginning to think she must like being restrained, because every time he’s done it, Kyrie just goes boom that much faster. His Devil Trigger pushes really hard to the fore and he can see the blue aura start to glow. She’s fighting to breathe just now – great sighing gasps and that’s just his hand.

“Gonna have to tie you to the table when I really get going,” Nero says in a low voice and Kyrie does that broken moan again. But the way she puts her arms over her head and grips the table is definitely getting her tied up when they’ve more time.

He curls and twists those claws deep inside her and yeah, he’s digging in a little, but Kyrie seems to get off on it. In her own way, Kyrie is as dark as he is.

Bearing in mind their probable future, that’s not a bad thing.
Nero makes sure he’s got her legs pinned down as much as possible as he moves in for what he really wants to do. Otherwise she’ll most likely knee him in the face and he’s not in a mood to explain that one to Falzon.

He changes his hand position so her little nub is free and licks.

It’s just as well he changed position. Kyrie bucks so hard, a full body convulsion that knocks her head off the table and makes the salt and pepper mills topple.

“What’re…d-d-doing?” she stutters out.

He doesn’t answer her. He’s never done this before and it’s taking him a moment to get used to her taste. It’s sharp and salty, but not unpleasant and it sure doesn’t taste like the fish the barrack room Casanovas claim it does. He tries to remember some of the stuff he’s read in the women’s magazines he’s sent her. He was always shocked by how open the Mainland is about these things, but yes, he did read all the articles in them. He’s always wanted it to be good for Kyrie and damn, who wouldn’t when you’re looking up your woman’s body and getting the view he is?

He licks again, from the top of her core to her little button, enjoying the sensation of her delicate membranes on his tongue. Kyrie’s giving these broken sighs and he never knew she could make that sound. He takes his time getting to know the shape of her cunt, from the soft triangle between her opening, her inner lips and the apex that hides her sweet little clit, to the lines of her lips as they disappear beneath his twisting fingers.

He’s a good student in this practical, remembers to kiss and suck her clit, tonguing it as he takes it into his mouth, feeling it swell as he sucks it full, mirroring the throbbing lip Kyrie left him with. He plays with it a little while, working his sucks and twists and flicks of his tongue in tandem with his curling fingers.

His fingers find a spot that feels different and concentrates his claws there, keeping the timing of his mouth consistent with it. He looks up her body and oh there’s not a sight more beautiful in all the realms as this. Her top’s ridden up to just under her breasts and her soft stomach rises and falls like a stormy ocean as she breathes with those shallow, broken sighs. Her body is writhing as if her flesh is escaping her bones and there’s a constant broken stream of pure filth dripping from her lips.

Nero really doesn’t want to wind this up, but he can hear movement from upstairs and Nine Hells does his sister-in-law sound like an elephant in the morning. Anyway, he can feel the tremors in Kyrie’s intimate muscles pick up speed, so he goes harder. As far as he can tell, it’s the gentle nips on her clit with his teeth that really pull her Devil Trigger and he smiles that little quirk at his own
terrible joke.

Kyrie comes hard, shaking and sobbing as her cunt spasms around Nero’s fingers and he keeps it all up for as long as he can to milk each last twitch out of her. He does drop her clit at the last minute and stand up to watch her face as the bliss sweeps over it.

She’s the most beautiful thing in the universe.

***

Violet wakes up in a panic, sweat soaked and struggling to breathe, tangled in the sheets. At some point, she’s managed to knock over the lamp that’s never turned off. Credo bought it for her side of the bed the first night she had the nightmare with him and never complained that he had to sleep with the lights on for the next 15 years.

It takes her a few minutes to separate the racket in the kitchen from the racket in her dream and even longer to get her bearings against the wall of pain that greets her every morning. There's the weird sensation of her hair being stroked and it does help her calm down. Violet listens as the yells about Swiss chocolate turn into giggles and moans that she tries to blank out. Her tablets and potions are downstairs in the kitchen and she really needs to get them into her system at least an hour before she has to do anything important and today’s the first day of her new job, so it’s really damn important.

That said, she really doesn’t want to walk in on the horny teens going at it. She’d got used to distracting Credo when she heard them before, because none of the rooms in the house are big enough for a sword fight and there’s a lot of antiques she didn’t want damaged.

There’s a flare of pain as the pin in her hip stabs her and she pants against it. Her jaw’s hurting where they changed the wire last week and the latest bone graft. She’s pretty sure even her hair is hurting. That’s the problem with being drunk – she gets so relaxed that when it wears off all the pain hits her afresh.

On the plus side – no hangover.

Violet hauls herself to sitting and gets the notepad from the side of the bed and tries to write down her impressions from the dream. Maybe the smallest detail will jog her memory or add a little something to the time before La Sirena Spezzatta pulled from the ocean became Violet Alighieri.
The dream is always the same. The fall. The fear. The men. The loss.

*Vee sabiha.* Always the same voice. *No sword shall touch you, lest it be mine.*

The same words are engraved on the inside of her bracelet, along with initials. If it’s a quote, she’s never found it, in any language. Violet shuts her notepad with a frustrated thump and realises she can’t hear Nero and Kyrie anymore.

She decides to chance it and moves slowly and carefully from the bed. She moves like an old woman and she’s careful to make a ton of noise to give the lovebirds plenty of warning. They’re just about finished as she gets to the kitchen door. “You decent?”

“Just about!” Calls Kyrie with a giggle and her face is flushed. She’s pulling up her pyjama bottoms and Nero’s found a cloth to wipe his mouth. He’s got a smug look as Kyrie walks funny.

“On top of everything else, you’re going to make me blind,” Violet mock complains. “I hope you’ve found time to get my breakfast.”

Nero looks even smugger as Kyrie walks awkwardly towards the slow cooker to get the porridge ready. He pulls out chairs for the two women after righting the one Kyrie had knocked over and starts trying to put the drawers back in the dresser. “Kyrie threw it at me when she found out I finished her hot chocolate,” he says to Violet’s quizzical look. “I don’t want to marry her. She’s violent.”

“It was the good stuff!” Kyrie protests. “It’s extortionate. I got it for Midwinter Night!”

“It was bloody good,” agrees Violet. Kyrie looks outraged. “Everybody knew where it was. Even Credo dipped into it.”

“How come it never went down then?” Kyrie demands.

“Because Credo kept replacing it. Did you not wonder why you had the same tin for four years?” Violet doesn’t flinch as Kyrie bangs down the bowl of porridge and a spoon in front of her. “Can you pass me my box of tricks?”
Kyrie passes her the drug box. It’s got a small Umbrella logo on it and has all Violet’s vitamins, painkillers, nerveblockers and steroids measured out for her. Violet openly takes them in front of Kyrie and Nero, but she’s only comfortable with admitting the level of pain she’s constantly in with family. She’s not prepared to give Fortunese society another reason to judge her.

“Shit!” Her hands are shaking badly and she drops one of the tablets and sends it skittering across the floor. Nero tracks it and retrieves the escapee. “I’m bad today. I wish I wasn’t starting back. I could have done with another day to get used to everything.”

He’s handing her back the tablet when his right arm begins to glow, just as Violet’s bracelet shines bright. Their fingers touch as she takes the pill from him and both recoil with the static charge.

“What the Hell?”

“Ow!”

Violet rubs her wrist where it burned as Nero shakes his shocked fingers. An intense feeling of longing that’s not his wells up inside him. Vee – but it cuts off as soon as it comes.

“What just happened?” Asks Kyrie. “You could feel that across the room.”

“Hell if I know,” replies Violet. “Kyrie, could you tip these out into a bowl for me?”

Kyrie busies herself with helping her sister-in-law take her meds. Nero spots an Umbrella lanyard on the floor and passes it to Violet. “Your ID must have been in the drawer when Kyrie punted it at me.”

He’s cautious when he hands it to her and she when she takes it, but nothing happens.

She looks at it. “That’s not mine. It’s Dorcas’. It’s Kyrie’s mother’s pass. Funny that should turn up now.”
Kyrie hopes that no one saw her face as she passes Nero his breakfast.

“Anyone know where my official uniform is?” Asks Nero. “I honestly can’t even remember the last time I wore it.”

“Oh yeah, you’ve that fun and games ahead of you,” says Violet. “Have you actually looked for it?”

“No, I just stood in front of the wardrobe and tried to summon it. You’re funny, Violet.”

“I know what you men are like,” retorts Violet. “Unless it jumps out and attacks you, it’s not there.”

“Do you actually have a uniform here?” Asks Kyrie. “You’ve got clothes here, yes, but maybe not a uniform. That could be back at your room in HQ.”

Nero shrugs and looks rueful. “I’m never going to be able to sneak in and get changed before reporting for duty. I don’t have enough favours for a blind eye.”

Kyrie looks thoughtful. “You’re not too different in size from Credo. Go try his uniform on and if it fits, I’ll pick the embroidery off. No sense in wasting them.”

She glances across at Violet who merely looks at her empty bowl.

Kyrie takes it as assent. “Go and try one on then.”

Nero looks unsure and looks at Violet for guidance. She doesn’t look at him, but she does nod. He sees Kyrie come across to hug the older woman as he leaves the room.

He never came much into Credo’s room. He maybe came in here when he was younger, playing hide and seek with Kyrie, but not other than that. It feels strange. His things are still around and look like Credo’s about to come in and ask Nero what he wants. He can’t help but have a little nose around and picks up Violet’s notepad. It’s a plain back hardcover that looks like the antique books sold in Fortuna’s many book shops. It falls open at the latest entry and the quote catches his
eye. The bedside light is still on, but Nero knows better than to turn it off. Credo had told him that it drove him insane, but he didn’t want to upset Violet and her utter terror of the dark.

Nero sighs, opening Credo’s wardrobe and pulling out a pristine white uniform, the gold embroidery glinting in the light. Nero’s only wearing his boxer briefs, so he doesn’t need to change out of anything as he dresses. He doesn’t look at himself in the full-length mirror until he’s popped the last button.

He has to admit it’s a good fit.

Nero looks completely different in the Order uniform.

He doesn’t slouch in ordinary life, but something about how he looks now makes him want to stand up straight and to attention. He seems taller, somehow, as if he is Supreme General Nero Balzan of the Holy Knights of the Order of the Sword. On a whim, he picks up Violet’s book and materialises Yamato and stands as if he’s channelling his inner Credo.

There’s a brief overlay in the mirror of a man who looks very much like Nero, but with more of Credo’s austere, yet gentle manner. He seems very familiar, but Nero can’t put his finger on it. He’s not wearing Nero’s uniform, but an elegant blue leather jacket. It’s only a brief flash, gone as quick as it’s come. So quick that Nero isn’t sure he’s imagined it.

It wouldn’t be the weirdest thing this week.

“Wow.”

He’s startled by Violet and before he’s even known he’s moved, Yamato is out her saya and aimed at her throat. She doesn’t look scared though. There’s a guarded, curious look on her face as she pushes aside the blade with a finger on the groove.

“You look very regal.” She pauses for a moment. “You reminded me of someone there.”

“Credo?”
“No, someone…else.” She sounds hesitant. She rubs her wrist, but can’t hide that the bracelet is shining and Nero’s arm is glowing again. She shakes her head. “Ignore me. I must be imagining it.”

Nero sheathes Yamato. *Not like that, wipe her off first. Didn’t they teach you anything in this God-forsaken hole?*

Nero can’t hide a small smirk at the exasperation in the voice. Violet looks confused.

“Are you ok, Nero?” she asks.

“I’m fine. Hey, maybe I remind you from someone from before?” Nero says hopefully.

Violet’s mouth quirks a little. “After 20 years? I doubt it. My memory’s had plenty time to come back. It’s not going to do it now.”

“You never know. Where’s Kyrie?”

“She’s getting the sewing kit out.” Violet turns to walk downstairs. “You should get a move on.”

“What does *No sword shall touch you lest it be mine* mean?” He asks suddenly.

*It’s an Old English lovers’ oath. It means I’ll protect her from anything, as long as she’s true, and if not, I’ll kill her myself.*

“I don’t know. I’ve never been able to find out where it came from.” She’s looking at him strangely again. Nero realises she’s actually en garde. She’s shifted into a fighting stance. It’s not enough that a non-warrior would see it, but Nero can’t miss it. “But I hear it all the time in my dreams.”

Nero repeats what the voice told him, but couches it as something he heard in the last week. “Must have been from the aid workers or something.”
“Probably. Look, pass me a uniform from the wardrobe, Kyrie can pick that while you have a shower and faff about with your hair, cos Godspit and shit, are the men in this family vain.” Violet holds out her hand for one of the uniforms.

“I’m not vain! There’s nothing wrong with looking sharp,” protests Nero. “What about you and Kyrie and 2 hours to put on enough make up for the natural look?”

“Bullshit. Kyrie and I can shit, shower and shave in 30.” She carefully folds the uniform over her arm, mindful of creasing it.

“What? Years?” it’s worked and they’re grinning at each other. She playfully thumps his arm and he hears her go downstairs. He lingers at the top so he can hear what happens next.

“You got the uniform? Does he look ok?” Asks Kyrie as Violet hands it to her. She’s got the threadripper ready.

Violet nods. “It’s a really good fit. It’ll need some adjusting, but tiny really.”

“I’ll measure him up tonight. How many’s up there?” Kyrie’s begun the fiddly task of unpicking the gold thread. She reckons it’ll take about an hour to turn it into the lower ranked Knight. “Red Queen’s a bit big for a scabbard, so I’ll quickly stitch in a sheathing magnet for it.”

“Ten.”

“Ugh, really? Well, now I know what I’m doing today.” Kyrie settles herself into a more comfortable position as her deft fingers pick up speed.

Violet decides to go for it. “Kyrie, have you noticed anything…different about Nero?”

Kyrie stays focused on her task. “Define different.”

Nero ducks back a little as Violet looks up the stairs to make sure he’s not eavesdropping. She doesn’t see him. She pauses as she considers how to put it. “It’s like there’s two of them in there. He was listening to someone I couldn’t see.”
Kyrie’s fingers still. “There’s been a lot happening this week and you haven’t been here for it. I know it’s not your fault—” she cuts across Violet as the other woman’s about to protest – “but I’ve been here for all of it. It got rough, really fucking rough. By rights we should all be batshit insane.”

“I’m not being funny, Kyrie, but maybe that’s why I can see it – you’re too close to it. He’s got a rider. He’s coming out with stuff that doesn’t sound like him and that arm? I’ve seen it before. I’m sure of it.” Violet’s dropped her voice low, but he can still hear her.

“You think he’s possessed?” Kyrie sounds sceptical. “You don’t know the half of this last week, Violet. There wasn’t an earthquake. The Hellgate opened, there was death statues and everything. Did you not wonder how we ended up with a giant statue in the Opera House Plaza?”

“Well, yeah, because the last time I saw that it was at HQ,” admits Violet. “Anyway – this is Fortuna. There’s always demons.”

“He’s not possessed, Violet. Wait, you knew about the Saviour? We’re going to have a talk about this last week and you had better not hold anything back.”

Even from upstairs, Nero can hear the steel in her tone. He can’t see her face, but he can imagine it.

Kyrie, his sexy little drawer throwing badass.
Fortuna, two decades ago

Verity makes it to Third Prayer in plenty time, though not enough time to sit by her parents. She can make out the shape of Pinny sitting between Papa and the Knight that Pinny is actually seeing, though they aren’t courting yet. Papa looks up and sees Verity in the back row and nods.

She scowls. Credo is sitting there as well. He waves to her and she ignores him.

Verity prefers the back row of the Opera House. She can see everything from up here and get on with her work, both her research and her latest tapestry. She can see the tourists who want to catch a bit of culture come in with their children. It’s funny watching the kids run about the Opera House in their Pilgrims Robes pretending they’re flying and shouting about the X-Men. Sometimes the people or the kids will ask about the Order of the Sword and she’ll tell them about it. She’s so good at interacting with the tourists, she takes tours and classes for them for extra credit at the Archive.

There’s no one else in the row, so Verity takes out her tarot cards and absent-mindedly shuffles before laying out a 12 card spread. Technically, it’s 13, as she lays out the card that represents her – Princess of Wands in the centre. She lays out the rest of the cards face down. Under her Significator Verity lays out another three cards – the influence of the year and then 9 cards in a horseshoe.

She hears a slight noise as someone sits down on the other side of her cards. Pilgrims Robe, so she assumes tourist. She ignores them to concentrate on getting the cards to tell a story.

She turns over the 1st card in the horseshoe – Four of Cups.

2 & 3 King of Swords and Magician

4 & 5 Eight of Swords and the Hanged Man

6,7,8,9 the Moon, Five, Death, Ten of Swords
Middle three – Devil, The Lovers, with Knight of Swords stuck to it, The Tower.

There’s a sharp intake of breath from across the cards. Verity glances up and meets a pair of icy blue eyes in a sharp face. He turns away, but not because he’s embarrassed, but because he’s finished looking. Verity drops her eyes and sees blue trousers and brown boots. There’s a sword resting against the bench in a lacquered scabbard, with a gold dragon on the pommel. It’s clear that the sword isn’t being carried for show. Verity’s Papa is a Captain in the Holy Knights, so she knows her swords.

She turns her attention back to the Tarot spread, but she can’t get it to form a story. She just keeps getting flashes of images in her mind that make no sense. None of them are good. The cards she drew are some of the worst in the deck.

Frustrated, she puts them away. She thinks she sees her mysterious pilgrim look at her as she puts her cards back in their box and gathers up her notes.

The sermon is winding down, so rather than find Mama and Papa, Verity lets herself out a side door that opens out into the street rather than the Plaza. She really doesn’t want to run into Credo.

Excellent needlework, indeed!

The evening is lovely and warm, with the sunlight bathing everything in gold. There’s music thumping from one of the new bars that are popular with the tourists. They’re mostly English and she can hear phrases like, “Next Ibiza,” “Way better than Tenerife, but it needs to get better pubs and DJs.”

Verity has no idea what any of this means, she’s just fascinated by the clothes and painted faces on the women. The skirts, the shoes, the jewellery and their unbound hair curling down their backs. She’s even captivated by the white tan lines on their shoulders. They’re beautiful and exotic. She’s never seen anything like it in the year since the Council allowed the Tourists.

One of the men drinking sees her and calls over to her, “Hey Sexy! How about a drink?”

Verity colours and walks away.

Verity can dimly hear one say, “Little cow’s just ignored me!” and then, louder, “Come on Sweet
 Stuff, show us what’s under your burka!”

They’re following her. She can see them in the shop windows.

She walks quicker, but they’re faster and they corner her in a side street.

“I was talking to you,” says the ringleader. “Why did you walk off? I only wanted to buy you a drink.”

“I don’t want a drink,” says Verity in English. She keeps her head down, demurely, but she’s really looking at them in a shop window. There’s four of them and they’re drunk. It’s not even night and they’re drunk. “Would you let me pass, please?”

“I only want to talk to you. Stuck up bitch in your burka. Too good to talk to me?” He grabs hold of Verity as she tries to pass. Verity’s tall, but she’s skinny, so she looks more delicate than she actually is. She’s also a Knight’s daughter and Captain Agius taught both his daughters what to do if there were no Knights around to save them.

She swings her arm round, breaking his hold, then slamming the palm of her hand into his nose. The effect is instant. It explodes. Verity bolts or tries to as another one trips her and sends her flying with a “Fucking bitch!”

She smacks down into the pavement and a shooting pain rachets up her arms with a horrible sick feeling. He straddles her as Verity ignores the pain in her arms to grab her book heavy bag and clouts him full in the face with it. The force throws him back a bit, enough for Verity to scramble forward enough to get her feet out from under him and kick him off.

She hauls herself to her feet, standing on her dress and nearly pulling herself back down, before she grabs the hem and runs.

The men don’t follow, just start grousing about the unfriendly little bitch and kicking her bag about.

The Pilgrim in blue jumps down. He’d been watching the fight, ready to cut in, but Verity had been handling herself well enough.
“Fuck off Luke Skywalker!” Snaps the one who’d grabbed Verity first in a very thick voice. His shirt is covered in blood and The Pilgrim can tell that nose is definitely broken as he slumps against the shop window.

“It’s another one of those medieval wierdos.” says the one going through Verity’s bag. He’s dumping all the books and cards out disgustedly. “No fucking purse.”

The Pilgrim watches him for a moment. “Pick those up.”

“Fucking make me, King Arthur,” he snarls, squaring up. Nine Hells, how much had these guys had to drink that they’re still fronting up when they’ve just had their asses kicked by a girl?

“That wish I’ll grant,” he says, walking up to him and punching him with the fist holding the sword in her saya. He follows it with a knee to the stomach and a roundhouse to the face. The tourist goes down like a ton of bricks and some teeth are lying on the cobbles.

The Pilgrim turns to the remaining man and cocks an eyebrow.

He hurriedly begins picking up the books and putting them back in the bag. When he’s finished, the tourist hands him the bag. The Pilgrim turns and vanishes.

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection
“Honestly, I think the younger one is the more likely candidate,” says Peter, passing the report to Supreme General Scerri.

“And you base this on?” he says in his cultured tones. He’s from an old Fortunese family, like everyone in this room, except Peter. “Surely not the fact you have a sweet spot for the elder one?”

Peter glares at Credo. Credo meets his look. “It’s not me who’s sweet on a sister.”

“Credo will not forget his duty to the Cause. His family have never failed Sparda or this Order yet,” points out Lord Scerri.

“I merely seek to remove competition for her affection and keep the path clear for whichever Son of Sparda does come to the Island,” Peter says, calmly.

“As do I, with Verity,” replies Credo. He’s got a hard look on his face.

“You still find this distasteful, Credo?” asks Lord Scerri.

“I do, My Lord, but it is a necessary sacrifice.” He pauses. “Considering the nature of what we’ll require the Agius girl to commit to, I think the older one is better. She’s more mature than the younger one and dare I say, more voluptuous. She’ll be more likely to conceive.”

Lord Scerri pats his arm. “Excellent reasoning. When the time comes make it so.”

Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef
Knights Micellef and Falzon will court the Agius sisters to remove other suitors from their attention and will bow out when the time comes. Though either sister is suitable, Agrippina Agius is more suitable due to the likelihood of carrying a pregnancy to term.

Knight Falzon considers Verity more psychologically suitable due to her intelligence, quick wit and determination. Our Intelligence reports show that this meets the psychological profile of the woman that both Sons of Sparda will find attractive.

Supreme General Scerri has ordered that Agrippina’s name goes forward for when circumstances are right.

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Verity does her best to slip into the house unseen. She really doesn’t want a fuss, she couldn’t tell who the tourists were and her hands and arms are killing her. She’s lost her books though and that bites. They weren’t all hers. Her skirt is ruined from rolling around on the street.

She sighs and puts it in her scrap bag. If she can’t fix it, she’ll turn it into something else. She’s missed dinner, but Mama says nothing to her and Papa is at the Castle. She wants to sew to calm her frayed nerves, but her hands hurt too much.

Verity stands in front of her mirror in her corset and chemise and drops her hair down. She brushes it out of its tight chignon and it waves gently to her waist. In the soft light of her bedroom, the waves shimmer and shine as she changes her position, trying to catch her best angle. As she turns she imagines she’s one of those exotic girls in their miniskirts and earrings. Her chemise and stays look a little like the gypsy look that one of the girls in the bar was wearing.

Verity doesn’t have tan lines, nothing shows enough to catch the sun, so her skin is still a pale cream. Her eyes are dark in the sharp planes of her face and in the soft light, she’s almost pretty, if she says so herself. She bites her lips a little to make them fuller and pinches her cheeks to put a little colour in them and even she has to admit, she could pass.

Verity is tall, but she moves like a newborn colt – all gangly, flailing legs. She has none of the easy grace of Pinny, sitting gracefully down at the table, sashaying along the street with a dancer’s grace. Pinny looks like a fine cut china doll. The features that in Pinny’s face are fine boned and delicate, in Verity are sharp and angular.
Verity’s always in motion, always burning with nervous energy. It’s the reason she stitches and deals cards. It stops her excess fire leaking out. Verity is too young to see that her beauty comes from the truth of who she is and who she’s meant to be. When she moves, when she speaks, her body is language. She’s soul and fire.

Not the china doll conformity of Pinny.

Sadly, it’s not something they’ll ever see in Fortuna.

Sighing, Verity loosens her stays and wriggles out of them. She breathes a sigh of relief as they stop constricting her chest, damned things. She hadn’t seen the Mainland girls wearing them and they had good figures. And Verity isn’t fat by any stroke of the imagination.

She doesn’t know why her mother insists on her wearing them.

There’s bruises forming on her arms and legs, but there’s no scrapes, her sleeves took the brunt of it. There’s giggling coming from the bedroom next door as Pinny imagines that no one can hear her sneaking out with her Knight.

Verity locks her door and dims her light and thinks about the music, loud and pulsating, they play in the new bars along the docks. She closes her eyes and starts to dance the way she had seen the beautiful girls with their hair loose and their skirts short. She can feel her hair brushing against the skin of her back and suddenly she’s aware of the cool night air from her open window settling on her skin. She keeps dancing.

It’s nothing like the elegant balls she’s attended with Mama and Papa, with their rigid, predetermined steps, but wild and sensual and natural as she loses her body and her senses in the act of the movement. Her steps get more abandoned as she twirls and lunges, shaking her hips and her hair to the beat in her head.

All the while the cool night air caresses her skin.

She thinks about the girls in their shiny dresses and their heels that made them look so elegant and Verity imagines what such a dress might feel like. She calls to mind a blue dress that she’d seen one of the Tourists wearing. It looked like it had been made of velvet and she knows what that feels like against her skin, soft and sleek and luxurious, like fur.
She imagines what it will feel like as she moves, stoking her body like a lovers’ caress and follows that impression with her hands. Verity feels a wetness between her legs as she moves and sensations start to flow out from there along her body. She keeps moving to the beat of the drum in her mind. It’s quickly starting to throb to that beat between her legs as Verity trails her fingers along her sensitive skin, drawing gasps and small moans from the pleasure remaining from the path of the trace.

Verity has a fantasy when she touches herself. It’s not just physical – she’s got a story to accompany her fingers swirling along her flesh. Normally, it’s Credo, though his features are slightly too severe to be handsome, piercing blue eyes, long black ponytail loosened in combat, and that uniform that fits him so well, the long lean legs in those form-fitting trousers and the jacket that glides around the muscles of his torso. She’s seen what he's got to offer under that uniform when he's trained topless or swam out to the islands in the Bay. Verity knows what Credo feels like pressed up against her - she's danced with him often enough and they’ve stolen enough kisses at balls and parties. The only reason it's never gone further is Verity was too young for a dalliance. Besides, everyone has always known that for Credo, it was Courtship or nothing, where Verity is concerned. It's a saying in Fortuna that a man should fuck as well as he fights and a woman dances as well as she doxes. Pinny calls it all the Bs - Bedroom, Battlefield, Ballroom, Bedroom. She swears it's true when she's teasing Verity about Credo.

But tonight, it’s not him she’s thinking of. It’s icy blue eyes in a sharp face and a generous mouth just made for kissing. She can feel the cool night air hit the sweat on her body, feel it pooling in the dip of her stomach. He doesn’t speak, because she hasn’t heard his voice yet, just that hiss when he saw her cards, but it still sends a shiver down her spine when she thinks of it.

She’s trapped, in her fantasy, held prisoner, maybe at the Castle. She’s in the Master’s Bedroom, tied to the massive four poster they got there, writhing on the smooth sheets as she tries to escape. She’s only tied by her wrists, so she can still move around, but the binds hold her good and fast. Her hair’s loose and spread all over the pillows, dark and luxurious. Verity loves her beautiful thick dark hair, it’s easily her best feature.

She’s not naked, though, she’s wearing a long, blue silk dress, more like a nightgown than a dress, but she’d seen it in a magazine a Mainlander had left on a table and she kept it. She can feel it slipping over her stomach and her breasts, drawing her little nipples to peaks, shockwaves rippling out across her skin to join up with the waves running out from her throbbing core.

On her own bed, Verity arches her back and feels the sheets under her too-sensitive skin. She slides her fingertips lightly over her peaked nipples and oh-so-sensitive ribcage and down her stomach to her clit and squeezes her legs together, feeling a flash of lightness race over her body.

She uses the pressure to push her fingers harder onto her clit, covering her mouth with her free hand to hold her moans back.
In her head, Verity can hear sounds of combat, swords ringing and men’s grunts of effort. She can see him, a blue blur on the terrace outside, a silver flash followed by lines of red on the white uniforms of the Knights.

The door opens and he slowly walks in. The guards stationed at the fireplace have no time to even draw their swords before their heads roll.

He does that sharp intake of breath as he sees her bound and it goes right to her clit as in her real bed. Her fingers stroke and twist her little clit, just as she imagines his fingers in his gloves do. She doesn’t imagine him to be gentle and she isn’t with her squeezes that have her hips raising off the bed with bursts of pleasure that leave her lightheaded and her heart hammering in her chest.

He draws his sword and traces it up her body from her foot, trailing up her leg. She shivers, feeling the cold of the steel long after it’s left her skin. He carries the swords path up her hip and her side until he reaches her bound wrists and slices the ropes, freeing her.

Verity can feel she’s close and her hands are hurting too much to drag it out, so she opts to leave him dressed as she pulls him down on her. His gloved hands hold the back of her head, twisting in her hair as he presses those lips to hers and his tongue invades her mouth, sliding along the roof and making her moan into her pillow to muffle her ragged breathing. His lips work against hers and it’s not gentle.

Her legs wrap over his leather clad waist and his coat is warm under her thighs as she tries to thrust up against him. He’s unbuttoned the fly of his leather trousers and pulled out his thick shaft. She can sense it nudging against her vulva, ready for her command. Verity can feel the warm weight of him, pinning her to the bed as her hands cling to his shoulders.

His free hand roams over what he can reach of her body. His lips and tongue kiss patterns over her face and throat, always returning to her mouth, kisses getting harder and more frantic.

Verity’s just about to have him enter her, when a tidal wave builds up and breaks over her body, sending sparks flying across the back of her eyes. Her cunt pulses so much she can barely take it as her body convulses with each tight throb. She grips the pillow so hard her knuckles are white. She tries to push the orgasm as far as she can, but her little nub is so sensitive that it makes her cry out.

She dimly hears footsteps on the stairs and her door rattle. “Verity! Are you alright in there?”
“I’m fine, Papa! I stubbed my toe on my bed,” she calls back in a slightly breathy voice.

There’s a pause and Verity waits with bated breath to see if her father will demand to see her.

“I love you, Verity. Don’t forget that.” His voice sounds strange. She’s half-tempted to open the door, but she doesn’t want him seeing her like this, hair dishevelled, face flushed and eyes shining. “Go to bed. Your sister’s been there for a good hour now.”

“Yes, Papa,” she says as she rolls her eyes.

Verity pulls on her nightgown and falls into a sleep with dreams of the blue coated stranger with ice-blue eyes in a sharp face.

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection

Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS

Reporting to Supreme General Scerri
The Eldest Son of the Saviour is believed to be in Fortuna. All new requests to the Archive by males of the right age group are attached to Agrippina Agius. We will endeavour to allow a relationship to develop naturally. Captain Edward Agius has assented and will be promoted to General and the Committees of his choice in the result of a live heir.
Chapter 5

By the time Nero comes back down, Kyrie has told Violet everything about the last week, from what actually happened to her theories on things. Violet listens, mostly without interruption and only speaks to clarify the odd point. Even when Kyrie brings up Credo’s involvement, Violet doesn’t ask much and her face gives nothing away.

If Kyrie thought she was getting an explanation from Violet, she’s wrong. The door goes and Violet answers. It’s Ms Kye.

“I’ll get my bag,” she says turning back in, Ms Kye doesn’t follow.

“We’ll finish this tonight,” says Kyrie, finishing the last stitch. Violet looks at the blank jacket for a moment. Nero comes down in the trousers and boots at that point, regulation white shirt half buttoned. He’s found a black leather holster for Blue Rose. His hair is teased to perfection.

“Finish what?” He takes the jacket from Kyrie and puts it on. It’s almost like Credo’s been removed from it and it’s become just a jacket again. The literal changing of the guard.

“I’ve brought Violet up to speed. It’s her turn tonight.”

Violet nods, though she has no intention of revisiting this conversation and follows Ms Kye out to the car.

“How’d she take it?” Asks Nero. He’s found the matching black glove for his left hand and he’s glad that they’re actually part of the uniform.

“She was really quiet, but she knows way more than she’s saying.” Kyrie looks Nero over as he fixes himself. “You actually really suit it. You look like Credo used to when he was younger.”

Nero laughs. “I’m nothing like Credo was.”

“Why not? A Knight is sworn to Protect and Defend Those Who Cannot. You’ve done more than that,” replies Kyrie. She brushes imaginary lint off his shoulders and kisses him, sweetly. “All that
Nero takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders as the Chimes for First Prayer ring out. “I’m meant to report to Falzon at First Prayer. Wish me luck.”

“He’d better not be expecting to see me.”

“Kyrie, you’re going to have to bite the bullet soon or it looks bad.” Nero sighs. She’s picked this hill to die on and he knows damn fine that there’s no getting her down from it. He fingers the angel pendant she hasn’t taken off in a week. “Anglu tal-qalb tiegħi, for me?”

“Tell him I’m finding it difficult to walk.”

Nero snorts and gives that little half quirk. “Kyrie, we have to play their game for now and usually you’re the one keeping me on the straight and narrow. Tomorrow, please?”

Kyrie sighs and glances away. “I don’t want to lie anymore to myself, Nero. I just want to be me.”

“And we will be. Just a little while longer.” He kisses her and rests his forehead against hers, looking into her eyes.

She gives a slight nod. “For you, Qalbi li thabbit barra mieghi and only for you.”

“Thank you, teżor tieghi,” he whispers as he reluctantly tears himself away.

As he shuts the door and walks towards the temporary Kapella, the feeling of dread that’s been with him all week settles back around him.

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“Would you like to go straight to the labs or around the island?” asks Ms Kye.
“I’m not long back, so let’s go around the Island and see the damage,” replies Violet, fastening her belt.

“As you wish, Chief Alchemist.” Ms Kye sets off on the road. She drives well, avoiding the holes and the cracks. “If you wish me to stop or go back to something, let me know.”

“Why am I getting picked up? I could get myself there,” asks Violet. The City is wrecked, but drivable. “Is it this bad all over?”

“Once outside the City, it’s not too bad, but HQ is badly damaged.” Ms Kye doesn’t take her eyes from the road.

Violet sits silently as they drive. Ms Kye doesn’t look at her or talk to her.

“Why am I being driven? You didn’t answer that.”

“Lord Arius gave me orders to make your life easier so you can concentrate on your work,” replies Ms Kye. “Whatever you require, simply ask and I shall see to it.”

“I’m surprised I haven’t been requested to move into the labs.”

“Lord Arius considers the reason that Agnus was able to divert the resources he was due to his having no oversight or family life.” Ms Kye stops the car as a group of demons that look like toys made in a children’s art class waddle in front of it. “He prefers it that you have a family. Would you remain in the vehicle please? I will deal with this.”

Ms Kye picks up some blades from down the side of her seat and exits the car. Violet watches with interest as she throws some small throwing knives that appear to be conjured from nowhere at them. The first one recoils and bursts in a cloud of black soot as she skips over it in a tumble of heels and strikes the next one with her sais. She catches the sword arm and sparks fly where the contacts’ made. She rolls away from one creeping up behind her, slicing it as she jumps backward. There’s a thump as one makes it to the car. Violet simply continues to observe and make mental notes as Ms Kye throws one of the sais in a boomerang arc, taking three down at once. Ms Kye is a blur of motion as she takes down all of the demons, never seeming to use the same move twice.

The one at the car continues to pound, but Ms Kye’s attention is taken up elsewhere as one comes
up behind her.

It hasn’t started on the window yet and Violet watches it in the side mirror. She raises her left hand at her shoulder, never looking behind her. Her bracelet shines with a blue aura that flows out over her and it’s not unlike Nero’s Devil Trigger. She opens her hand wide and it looks like she’s concentrating intensely.

A ball of blue aura surrounds the scarecrow as it continues to whale on the car. Violet gives a small half smile that’s the mirror of Nero’s and shuts her hand tight. The aura contracts and crushes the hapless demon into a sphere the size of a tennis ball.

Violet makes a small tossing motion and the sphere smashes on the road in a cloud of soot. Ms Kye takes care of the last demon and walks back to the car. She gets back in the drivers seat and belts up before starting the engine. She carries on driving as if nothing had happened.

“Are you natural or created?” Violet asks eventually. There’s nothing behind it other than a scientist’s curiosity.

“Created.” Ms Kye answers matter of factly and continues to drive.

“What race, because you feel like a demon to me, but I don’t think you’re one of mine,” continues Violet.

“Demon, I was created in Ouroboros Labs proper, using techniques you developed under Agnus,” replies Ms Kye. “It does seem that you are responsible for many of the advances that Agnus was credited for.”

“Agnus was a man of great talent,” Violet says, careful to defend her former boss. “His research opened the door to many possibilities.”

“His research diverted resources that were not his to projects that have severely dented UO’s productivity and competitiveness,” Ms Kye responds as if she’s presenting a meeting. “In every team there is someone who holds the people together to keep them working for the common goal. You were identified as that person within the Order Alchemy division. The reports and presentations submitted under his name were written by you, according to our analysis. You have the hard and soft skills required to keep the Division running through and past this time. Fortuna would have been mothballed were it not for your expertise. That may still happen.”
“That would be disastrous for the island, especially with this nonsense.” Violet fiddles with the rings she can’t get used to wearing. “We’ve had enough problems keeping people here as it is. Could you stop here, for a moment?”

Ms Kye does exactly that, obeying Violet instantly and without question.

Violet gets out the car and Ms Kye with her. HQ has come into focus and Violet stares at the building. HQ B is wrecked. She’s known it would be bad, as the Advent Chamber would have been obliterated. But near enough the whole building’s gone. She stares briefly at where the top floor used to be, her eyes resting on a certain spot. It’s blink and you’ll miss it.

“As you can see,” says Ms Kye. “You have a large task ahead of you.”

The labs are even worse. Equipment, papers and records are everywhere. Flies circle the cracked cases of dead Knights and Angelos lie in heaps of armour everywhere. Glass and electronics crunch underfoot. The smell is horrendous.

“How bad is the Castle facility?” asks Violet of Ms Kye. Even the demon finds the smell awful.

“Just as bad.”

“Why hasn’t clean up already begun?” Violet is already making assessments as she looks around her.

“The Facility is short on high enough level staff to make accurate risk assessments. You are one of the few people left at this level,” replies Ms Kye. “How might I serve you?”

“I take it the rescue crews didn’t go through here?”

“They were told of environmental hazards – health and safety reasons.” Ms Kye stands like a butler, Violet thinks.
Violet looks across to her. “Organise a clear out crew of Knights and Sorcerers. I want Power Users on hand if we encounter resistance. Once both facilities are cleared, we’ll look at the damage and how it will be fixed.”

Ms Kye begins to tap on her pad. “I’ll make the necessary requests to Lord Arius. I imagine it will take around a day to arrange.”

“We have Knights here. It’s simply power users I’ll need,” Violet flinches as a machine falls off the wall. “I’ll worry about construction crews when we’ve got this sorted. I’ll need to get into the Records Room as soon as possible and see about the files.”

“We will aim for the server room first,” says Ms Kye. “And I don’t believe you have power users on staff. I imagine Lord Arius would prefer to send you his own people.”

“Many of Agnus’ records were never on PC or at least not on the server. He was paranoid about his research falling into the wrong hands,” says Violet, carefully. “It’s not how I will run things, but under Agnus I had no say. I’ll also need alchemists to categorise the files as we find them, so I’m going to need to know the state of the personnel as soon as possible.”

“Of course, I will make the arrangements.” Ms Kye taps more into her tablet.

Violet watches her for a moment. “Ms Kye, whom do you work for? Myself or UO?”

Ms Kye raises her head in an almost birdlike fashion and regards Violet in much the same way. “We both work for UO.”

“That we do. But those are not always compatible.” Violet steps into Ms Kye’s space. It doesn’t intimidate the demon, but it does send the message that the human isn’t intimidated either. “So, whom do you serve? Who holds your Name?”

“I serve Lord Arius. But he has instructed me to serve you in any way you see fit.” There is a small measure of deference in her voice, but the rest of her demeanour is steadfastly neutral.

“So you’re bound over to me?”
“Yes, Madam.” Ms Kye goes unnaturally still. It’s like she’s been carved from stone. “In all respects, I am your Creature.”

“Tell Lord Arius I want that power user team here by this afternoon.”

Ms Kye steps away so she can make a slight bow. She’s told Violet everything she needs to know by that small act. Whoever created her is very, very traditional and they’ve obeyed all the correct forms for a demon who’s never seen the inside of Hell.

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Nero is sure he’s died and gone to Hell.

He makes it to First Prayer within the final few chimes. There’s standing room only, so he stays at the back with a bunch of his age cohort in the Knights. He doesn’t stand out in the sea of white uniforms, even with his white hair. He can see Falzon watching out for him down the front row, with a scowl on his face.

General Agius steps forward to take the Prayers and offer a short sermon to inspire everyone to go through their day.

Nero doesn’t pay much attention to what’s being said, but wishes he could listen to his headphones, but they’re long since gone. Shame, they were sweet and they cost a bomb when he’d gone to get that last devil arm from that museum. He unconsciously pulls at his collar. He hates things at his throat and feels like it’s choking him.

He feels the nudge in his ribs and shoots an annoyed “What’s your damage, Josh?” at the nudger. The other Knight gives a quick nod towards Falzon, who looks like he wants to stab him. “What’s his damage? You steal his scone?”

“Fuck knows,” murmurs Nero. “But you just know he wants a piece of this pretty ass.”

Josh Agius sniggers just as there’s a lull between prayers. Falzon’s face goes from pissed off to murderous.
Nine Fucking Hells.

After First Prayer, all of the ordinary townspeople filter out while the Knights remain. The Kapella has become their HQ A as The Committee for the Protection of the Faith feels that having a visible symbol of the Order within the Town will make the Fortunese population feel reassured and protected as the town is being rebuilt and there are still demons out there that are still a risk to Fortuna, particularly as the rescue workers are leaving.

They have a quick prayer before daily assignments are handed out. The younger cohort are being paired up to patrol round town – Fortuna has no police force proper, that’s what the Knights are for, while older, more experienced Knights are sent up to the Castle, where there’s more admin and planning to be taken care of.

Nero stands next to Josh, having a quiet banter with him. “So when you coming home? I miss you, pupu.”

“You miss nicking my hair wax,” replies Nero. “Or is it my body?”

“Yah big stud, all hot and sweaty after training. I’m going to challenge Kyrie to a duel for your sweet, sweet dudu.” Josh pinches Nero’s ass.

Nero jumps.

Don’t you have anything better to do than make crude comments?

“Kyrie’s got no complaints, dude.” Nero says smugly, and stamps on Josh’s foot. His yelp is audible all the way down the front.

“Knight Agius and Knight Balzan – while I hate to get in the way of your true love, we do have work to do,” says General Agius. “Are you ready to patrol or –“

“I must interrupt you there, my Lord Agius,” says Falzon. “Clearly Knight Balzan is wasted on mundane duties and would only cause Knight Agius embarrassment as he tried to keep up. I need a personal assistant and I couldn’t think of anyone better than you, Knight Balzan.”
Nero looks to the Heavens in askance, as Josh mutters, “Sorry, dude.”

“S’ok,” Nero replies as he slowly moves down to Falzon. Seriously, dude, #justshootme.

No. Wait, this is Fortuna. #juststabme.

Serves you right for your nonsense. Now buckle under and make it believable.

“Yes, Dad,” Nero replies, sarcastically.

The voice says nothing for a moment.

Don’t get cocky.

Falzon looks at Nero like he’s lower than the worms Josh was joking about. His eyes flare at the slight bulge of Blue Rose under the jacket, but he says nothing. He salutes General Agius and smartly turns on his heel. Nero has to rush to keep up.

Damn, but he’s fast.

The day passes in a blur of meetings and standing to attention – arms behind his back, legs just past shoulder-width apart, stand ram-rod straight for hours on end looking at the wall, but ready to spring to Falzon’s attendance at a second’s notice, at Falzon’s right shoulder, one metre back – Sparda’s balls, does the Order have a protocol for everything? – running for this and running for that.

Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full sir, Godspit and shit sir.

Falzon must have a finger in every pie in the Order and on Fortuna. Even when he’s not in a meeting, there’s constant calls and paperwork and Nero’s there for all of it.

Even Nero’s got to admit the man’s got some stamina. Falzon isn’t old – mid forties, maybe and he’s clearly packing some muscle under that uniform. He moves like a dancer, light on his feet, but
strong. He carries daggers where Nero has a gun. It’s not standard Knight uniform – Credo never had a second blade and he can’t think of any Knights that do and openly display them.

Falzon sees Nero looking and nods at him, then points at the wall. He stifles the sigh and turns his gaze back to the paintings on the wall of the previous Sanctus and Credo.

He’s got an aura of power around him. Not just from his position, but the quiet confidence of a man who can handle anything that life throws at him. His face is thin, hawkish, eyes constantly watching and assessing. He’s the kind of man that misses nothing. There’s several scars down his face from past battles that do nothing to diminish his presence.

Falzon is one of those people who works so hard, he forgets to eat, which means Nero doesn’t eat either. It’s nearly four before Falzon realises and has a simple lampuki sent up, with coffee.

The smell is torture, but to his surprise, Falzon sets out two plates and two mugs. He doesn’t look at Nero as he invites him to sit opposite him. Nero waits for a moment, unsure if he heard him right. “Knight Balzan, are you not hungry?”

“I guess…yes, My Lord,” he says as his stomach growls and the hunger’s as painful as a punch to the gut. He still doesn’t move though. He doesn’t trust Falzon, doesn’t trust it not to be a trick.

“Nero,” says Falzon, softly and indicates the chair opposite him.

Nero stiffly breaks stance and tries to stretch without being seen. He sits a little too heavily in the proffered chair. Falzon dishes out the pie and pours the coffee, before asking Nero if he would like to say a prayer of thanks for the food. It throws Nero for a moment before the voice in his head says the traditional Fortunese prayer *nirr-ingrazzjawkom ghall-ikel li gie ppmovdu ut l-idejn li hejjew l-ikel. jista jsostmi jsahhah il-korpi, l-imhuh ut l-erwieh taghna ghall-provi li ġejjin.* It prompts Nero to recite it after him. He manages to hide that he’s shocked that the voice knows it. It’s not like Kyrie and he ever bother with it.

“I didn’t have you down as a man of tradition,” says Falzon approvingly. He taps Nero’s plate with his fork. “Eat. You should know that a soldier should eat whenever he has a chance, because he doesn’t know that he’ll get the chance again.”

It’s hard for Nero to eat slowly, as Falzon is doing. Falzon eats as if each bite was a religious experience, putting his fork down between bites, savouring the flavours on his tongue. Nero
doesn’t have quite that level of self-control, but at least he doesn’t inhale the food like he normally would. It’s still torturous to go this slowly, but he forces himself. Falzon looks like he’s lost in the seemingly ecstatic experience of dinner, but Nero’s not fooled. The bastard could hear a fish jump at sea.

“So, what’s your impressions of your first day?” asks Falzon.

Nero silently curses him. They’re not even halfway through the meal.

_Play along, you fool._

Nero sets his cutlery down and schools his face into what he hopes is a neutral expression. He takes a deep breath as he plays for time. “It’s been hard. I’m not used to standing about for that long.”

“Credo should have taken you in hand a long time ago,” says Falzon. “We’d be further along than we are. He’s done you no favours.”

Nero says nothing.

“We’ll rectify that though, I think we’ll have enough time and you seem to be a quick study,” Falzon takes another bite of the pie. Nero has to admit it is delicious. Maybe not as good as Kyrie would make, but more than enough. “You’ve not missed many cues when I needed your attention.”

Nero doesn’t answer. He chances a sip of his coffee and rolls it on his tongue. It’s one of the finer blends, bitter, but smooth and deep. It’s got a strong caramel taste. Credo used to drink it and Nero knows it’s bloody expensive – Violet used to bitch about how much it cost.

“You seem surprised by the coffee,” says Falzon, watching him like a hawk watches a rabbit.

_Watch yourself._

“No, my Lord, I’m just enjoying it. It’s been a long day and I’m not used to the duties, so the coffee is hitting the spot.” Nero hopes that’s the right answer and rolls his shoulders for emphasis.
Falzon smiles briefly. “We’ll fix that over the coming days and weeks. I know you think I’m being - how you youngsters say? – a hard-ass, but it’s only because I see great promise in you and I want you to to fulfil it.”

“This’ll be the bit where he tells me I remind him of himself when he was younger,” thinks Nero.

Most likely.

“I know when I’m being spun a line of bullshit,” replies Nero.

Good. Bear it in mind for the future.

Falzon’s waiting for Nero to say something. He makes up for his stumble by looking Falzon right in the eyes without any trace of irony. “Thank you, my Lord. I’ll try my best to learn from you.” He drops his gaze down to the lampuki. It’s so hard to push down his natural impulses and his smart mouth.

Impressive. You’re learning already.

“Good, Knight Balzan, I’m glad.” Falzon leans back in his chair and sips his coffee. “I’m where I am today because Sanctus took me under his wing. He saw something in me. I fought it hard at first – who the hell did he think he was, but he was right. It’s one of the hardest things I’d ever done, but he tempered me, moulded and refined me. He wasn’t Sanctus then, of course, but he was Supreme General Scerri.”

“I wasn’t aware of this, General Falzon.” Nero actually looks like he’s genuinely interested.

“I was like you – smart mouth, issues with authority, no respect for anyone or anything. Raw energy with no direction or precision. No finesse. But we’ll work on that. We’ll need young men like you in the difficult Time to Come.” He has another bite of the Lampuki. “It’s the simple things that matter, Nero. You’ll find that out as you get older. Good food, a good woman and doing the work of Our Lord.”

“I already have a good woman, My Lord,” says Nero, uneasily.
“So you do. Micellef, a fine old Fortunese family. She more than makes up for your questionable origins, so you won’t pass that shame onto your children.”

It’s hard, but Nero controls his anger. It helps that the wave of cold fury that’s not his is drawn back quickly. He has a flash of Yamato sending Falzon’s head bouncing across the room, but it would be a shame to waste the lampuki.

“My own mother was a prostitute also, touting her wares down the docks for a sailor’s coin. I saw things no child should, so at least you were spared that,” continues Falzon. “But I was an outcast, and that made for an angry young man.”

Nero nods thoughtfully.

“We’ll talk again, Knight Balzan. You are dismissed.” Falzon goes back to his work.

Nero stands, clasps his hands and bows. “May the Saviour be with you.”

***

Nero’s waiting at the shuttle stop for the bus back to the Town when the voice speaks again, almost cautiously. He’s not wrong. You could learn a lot from Falzon, if you wish to.

I wasn’t much for studying at school, Nero replies.

The man holds the power of life and death over you and you’re cracking jokes. You’re nearly as bad as my brother and that takes some practice.

“Who are you?” Nero asks in exasperation. The other people at the stop turn and look at him. Nero holds a finger in his ear and takes out his phone. “Bluetooth,” and the others nod and turn away. He wonders how many have the discouraged tech hiding under their hijabs.

Nero’s phone starts ringing and some of the other people giggle. The voice is laughing.
Flustered, Nero nearly drops his phone as he answers. “Hey.”

“Hey Kid, how’s it going? Figured you’d been radio silent long enough.” Dante’s light tones almost dance down the wire.

“Yeah, it’s been …eventful.” Nero begins to walk away from the bus-stop.

It feels too good to hear Dante’s voice.

The walk down is only around an hour, but Nero doesn’t want any eavesdroppers and anyway, after a day of standing around, it feels good to be in motion. He gives Dante the cliff notes for the week he’s been having, but leaves out the mystery voice in his head.

Dante’s quiet for a moment, but Nero can hear him talking to Gloria in the background. There’s a noise as the handset is picked back up and Dante’s voice is clear again. “There’s nothing much happening here right now and you keep telling me how good a cook that girl of yours is, so I figure we can take a break. After all, you’ve had an earthquake. Holidays will be dirt cheap to get the tourists back.”

“Y’know, when I asked if I’d see you again, I didn’t mean next week.” But he’s smiling.

“Tough shit.” And he just knows that Dante is smiling too.
The bruising on Verity’s hands and arms has come out now and they’re swollen enough to make fine movement difficult. She’s clumsy all through breakfast. Mama doesn’t notice and looks like she’s been crying.

Papa notices, though and takes her hands, turning then to and fro. “What happened to you?”

“I tripped on my hem coming out of the Opera House at Third Prayer.” Verity says, pulling her hands back. “I don’t think I’ve broken them.”

“You should have said last night and we would have taken you to the doctor,” replies Papa. “You girls are precious and I need to take care of you.”

“I’m fine, Papa, truly,” says Verity. She looks at Pinny and says wickedly, “You need to worry about Pinny. She looks so tired. She’s clearly not getting enough sleep.”

Pinny gives Verity a murderous look. “It was just hot last night, Papa and I found it difficult to sleep.”

“And yet you went to bed so early last night. Mama and I will just have to keep a close eye on you.” Papa takes Verity’s toast and spreads the butter on it for her. “And you need to eat more. You’re like a rake.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Verity replies drily.

“So what do you young ladies have planned for today?” Asks Papa.

“Verity has a research project to enhance her magical skills and I have a Pilgrim who’s paid for an exclusive Tutor. He’s paid for a month, with an option for further, should his studies require it.” Pinny steals the last slice of toast, sticking her tongue out at Verity. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out her notebook, flicking through some of the pages. “Ah, here, we go – a Mr Tony
The Chimes for First Prayer are ringing out and Papa walks them as far as the Archive. Papa is about to take his leave of them, when he hugs them just a little longer than he normally would. “I can’t help but think, you are both growing up so fast. Soon, you’ll be courting, marrying, children. It’s all gone by so fast.”

“I might be courting soon, Papa, but I fear you’ll be waiting a lot longer on Verity. If not for her hair, she’d be taken for a boy,” Pinny says, impishly.

“Your sister moves faster than you, Pinny, for Credo Micellef has already asked me what manner of Courting Gift she’d find suitable,” says Papa. “What say you, Verity?”

“I should say no gift at all,” retorts Verity, hotly. “If he should send me all Sparda’s magic in a pendant, I should send it straight back. I will never entertain Credo Micellef as a suitor and none of your grandchildren will carry his name. I promise you that!”

“Why, Vee, harsh words! Did he steal your scone?” teases Pinny.

“Pinny, now stop taunting your sister,” admonishes Papa, seeing Verity’s face looking darker and darker. “Go in now, both of you and work hard. But first, kiss your Papa.”

Both girls smile and kiss him on the cheek. Captain Agius watches them both run in. Some young men in Pilgrims Robes walk past him and he wonders which one is Tony Redgrave. He takes a deep breath and hurries to First Prayer, walking past a young man carrying a bookbag with VA and white and purple flowers embroidered on it.

They pay each other no mind.

***

Verity is sitting at the reception desk, ostensibly reading and making notes for her studies.

What she’s actually doing is willing the books Pinny’s reshelving back off the shelf and onto the
cart. She’s timing herself to see how long it takes each book and whether it floats or apports and keeping a tally of which.

Pinny hasn’t caught on yet. She just keeps checking the clock for her appointment. So far she’s put each book back four times.

The Pilgrim is in the Archive, but he’s observing for a little while. He’s mostly observing Verity. He’s worked out her ploy with the books and he’s curious to see how she handles herself when she’s the aggressor. He’s got time to kill, even though he’s late for his appointment. He’s paying for it. They can damn well wait for him.

He’s also intrigued that she’s openly Power Wielding. He didn’t think a place like this would allow it. That or she doesn’t care. He has the idea it’s the latter.

The doors open at the other end of the hall and he sees a young Knight stride down to the desk with a small nosegay of white and purple flowers. He stops in front of the desk.

Verity makes no indication that’s she’s noticed him, at least none that a human would see.

The Pilgrim notices though, the slight tensing, the very subtle tilt of her head to listen.

“Miss Agius,” says the Knight, affection warm in his voice and his face.

Verity turns to Credo. “Can I help you, Knight Micellef?”

“I was wondering when you would be able to break for coffee,” he says.

“Are you not on patrol? Surely Knight Falzon is waiting for you?” replies Verity.

He’s impressed that she isn’t looking to anyone for help. He’s seen other women in similar situations begin to look wildly around, but not her.

“Captain Agius has sent me on an errand. I have a little time before I need to return,” says Credo.
He holds out the posy. “I saw these and thought of you. I know that violets are your favourite flowers.”

The Pilgrim looks down at the bag and the flowers embroidered on it. They are, indeed, violets.

“Sadly, I have nowhere to put them, as you can see, my desk is covered in books,” replies Verity.

“I can watch the desk for a little while. I’m waiting on this Tony Redgrave anyway,” Pinny says as she comes over.

At the mention of his name, Tony looks up, just as Verity looks past Credo to him.

Their eyes meet and both of them think just one thing.

*Finally.*

Tony walks over and introduces himself, adding, “I found this bag in the street after Third Prayer and I recognised it as belonging to the young woman I was sitting next to.”

“Thank you. I must have dropped it when I fell and forgot it with the shock,” Verity replies smoothly as she takes it from him.

“You wouldn’t be Agrippina Agius, if the initials are VA,” says Tony. “I’m her Pilgrim Student, but I wonder if it’s not too late to have you as my tutor. I had to go through your bag to find any identification and I think our interests will align better.”

“I don’t see any problem with it,” says Verity, looking at Pinny, who shakes her head.

Credo cuts in and there’s a look of alarm on his face. “Absolutely not. Our Archivists have an extremely tight schedule and once their projects are decided, it really can’t be deviated from. I do apologise, but I must insist that you use Pinny, as has been previously arranged.”

“And yet, she has enough time for coffee with you,” Tony says, drily and not a little mockingly.
Credo clenches his jaw and a muscle works in it. “I must insist that you avail yourself of the young lady chosen to assist you.”

“Knight Micellef, are you alright?” asks Pinny. “It really doesn’t matter which one of us tutors him and Verity’s more than able to keep up with her training.”

“Besides, it’s not for you to arrange my schedule, Knight Micellef,” snaps Verity. “It’s not for you to arrange my anything. Now, leave me!”

“But at least take the flowers. I got them for you,” says Credo, managing to be both crestfallen and flustered.

Verity looks at Credo with murder in her eyes. “Get. Out.”

A look of fury passes over Credo’s face before he turns on his heel and storms out.

He walks to the café where he’d hoped to take Verity and sits down heavily on a chair, heart thumping and runs a hand over his face.

“Fuck.”

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection
Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS

Reporting to Supreme General Scerri

Peter actually laughs. He wipes tears from his eyes as Credo stands indignantly over him.

“I should have made a bet,” Peter almost sobs. He’s rocking with laughter.

“Control yourself, Peter. Such mocking is unbecoming when you call each other friend,” Supreme General Scerri, rebukes them gently, but it’s enough.

“I’m sorry, Credo. I know your Courting Suit is genuine. I’m sorry she didn’t accept it,” says Peter, seriously.

“What are your orders, My Lord?” asks Credo.

Scerri strokes his beard and considers the options. “It’s a clear preference, you say?”

“It seems so. He walked right past Pinny to get to Verity. Dismissed her outright,” replies Credo.

“He may yet change his mind,” says Peter.

“I doubt it. You didn’t see how they looked at each other,” groused Credo. He sounds miserable.

“Well, Credo, I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” says Scerri, leaning over to pat his hand. “Once she’s with child and Vergil Sparda leaves her, your Courting Suit will be accepted then, regardless of Verity’s view on the matter. You’ll get the girl in the end.”
“And the honour of calling the Heir to the Saviour, a Micellef,” points out Peter.

Credo smiles. “I’ll raise a fine Son of Fortuna.”

“Just remember, I’m your best man,” grins Peter.

**Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef**

_Vergil Sparda has thwarted our efforts to pair him with Pinny Agius and instead has formed an attraction for Verity Agius. Whilst we have concerns over her ability to conceive, we must continue on the path, lest we alert the Son of Sparda to our plan._

_Every opportunity for them to be together will be provided._

_Knight Falzon will remain attached to Pinny, who is now our alternate. Knight Micellef will continue to oversee Vergil Sparda and Verity Agius. Supreme General Scerri has ruled that once The Son of Sparda has left the Island (we do not see him caring that he has left a young girl with child) Knight Micellef will wed Miss Agius and provide a suitable upbringing for the child._

***

“So, Mr Redgrave, do you have a plan for your studies or would you prefer to follow your own path and see where it leads you?” Asks Verity. She’s actually shocked she’s keeping her calm and her professionalism, though as she reminds herself, in the future she’ll face many situations that will impose similar requirements on her.

Undoubtedly, they will be less pleasant.

_Nine Hells, but he’s gorgeous._ She catches Pinny’s eye over Tony’s shoulder and her sister gives Verity the thumbs up.

“A combination of the above, I should imagine. I’m not yet sure where my studies will lead,” he replies in accented Fortunese. He has a soft voice, but it’s the only soft thing about him.
“I can speak English, if you’re more comfortable with that,” she says.

Tony has taken off his robe and draped it neatly over the chair. “I understand lots of languages. Fortunese is fine.”

“Do you have an ear for language then?” she asks.

“It would seem so, growing up in the house I did. Human language…” Tony pauses for a moment, gauging Verity’s reaction, considering how much he should open up to the young woman before him. Something about her tells him that she’s different from the others and Tony trusts his instincts.

Verity caught his eye for a reason and Tony believes in his Destiny.

“…and Demon tongues.” Tony continues, watching Verity’s reaction intently. It’s almost if he’s testing her, like there’s more riding on this than there really is.

Dark brown eyes meet ice blue as Verity gives a small sideways quirk of her lips. “That will widen your studies somewhat.”

Tony doesn’t look away from her, even as he smiles his own deadly little predator smile. “I may need to extend my stay then. Would you be available?”

“I’m sure that can be arranged. I’m one of the few here who is fluent in Demon languages, so there’ll most likely be a high price to pay for my services.” There’s almost...challenge in her tone and the look in her eyes.

“I’m sure I can meet it,” he replies, amused and not a little intrigued. If he was testing her, she’s passed.

“Well then,” Verity says, sitting back in her chair. Neither has realised they’ve leaned in towards each other. She gives that little twisted smile again and Tony can’t take his eyes from her mouth. “This could be fun.”
“So, where do we start?” Tony asks and it’s almost like they’re duellists in a tourney dancing round each other, sizing the other up.

“Wherever you’d like,” she smiles, not a little saucily and Tony realises there’s no almost in any of this. “But I’d suggest a guided tour first.”

“That would seem wise. Let me get a feel for the island,” agrees Tony, leaning back in towards Verity. She unconsciously mirrors him. Their arms are on the table alongside each other, forming a barrier between them and the room and they’re giving each other their undivided attention.

“I find it’s best to start a study partnership that way,” says Verity. “Let’s each party see if they can form a working relationship.”

“I somehow doubt that will be an issue,” replies Tony.

“And the day is far too nice to spend sitting in a dusty library,” says Verity, firmly.

“Education is never a waste,” protests Tony.

“Get your robe, Mr Redgrave,” she says, standing up. “Your education is about to begin.”

She walks off and doesn’t wait for him, leaving him scrambling to grab his things and get after her.

It’s not something Tony’s used to.

***

“Fortuna began 500 years ago,” Verity begins, turning on the spot in the Opera House Plaza, arms wide to encompass the whole City.

Tony watches her spin, amused. He’d thought it would be irritating, but he’s drawn in by her
enthusiasm for her subject, as well as her unorthodox delivery.

“The demons were terrorising Malta, all of the armies occupying her at that point, both Christian and Muslim stopped fighting each other and banded together to defeat the demons. But the demons were too powerful and so a hundred of the families from Malta and their vassals and the Knights of St John who owned the Island fled to another island that was believed to be uninhabited, but for the monster.”

She’s perfectly balanced on the edge of the fountain while she declaims this. It’s even more impressive because she’s constantly moving and gesturing while she speaks. Her skin can’t contain all her energy.

“They landed on the beach and found the area to be perfect for rebuilding their Town. At first there was peace for the first time in years for the Maltese, who called their new home Fortuna, because of their good luck in finding it.”

She gathers her skirts and jumps onto the second level of the fountain. She still doesn’t end up in the water.

“How do you do that?” wonders Tony aloud.

“Mr Redgrave, you’re paying good coin for my skills – do you not wish to see your money well spent?” Verity says, mock seriously.

Tony gracefully backflips up beside her and he’s gratified to see she looks impressed. He’s careful to land far enough away that she doesn’t overbalance, but close enough that he can pretend he is and grab her hand.

Verity winces and he drops it with an apology.

He doesn’t ask how she did it. He motions for her to carry on.

“But there was a reason the stories said there was a monster on the island,” she says dramatically.
“Sparda?” Tony says as he cocks an eyebrow.

“Really, Mr Redgrave, must you keep interrupting? I fear it will be a long tale if you persist!” Verity scolds him, but she’s smiling and Tony is finding himself smiling back.

“I’ll either have to extend my stay or you’ll have to get to the point quicker,” Tony replies.

“Which would you prefer?” she teases, coquettishly.

Tony throws her a coin and in her surprise, Verity does lose her balance.

She topples off the fountain, towards the pavement. Tony doesn’t think, flash stepping towards her fast enough that he grabs her mid fall. They land gracelessly in a tangle of limbs on the slabs below, shocked but unharmed.

They both sit there for a moment, until they get their breath back. “Am I given to understand then, that the coin was payment for me to continue, Mr Redgrave?”

Tony’s actually speechless for a moment. Then he bursts out laughing and her eyes sparkle under her hijab.

Verity caught his eye for a reason, Fate, Destiny, Cupid with his damned arrows, because Godspit and shit, that’s the moment when Verity Agius catches Tony Redgrave’s heart in both hands. Everything that follows, because a young woman with a quick wit and sharp mind, burning with soul and fire, didn’t catch a coin.

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret
Operation Resurrection

Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS

Reporting to Supreme General Scerri

Credo watches Verity and Tony from the Opera House and knows he’s lost.

Supreme General Scerri sees where Credo is looking and places a comforting hand on the shoulder of his Assistant. “Don’t forget, Credo. You’ll be the last man standing. She’ll come to love you in time.”

“Yes, My Lord,” he replies, even while thinking she won’t.

“Go home, Credo. Take the next few days off. There’s no need for you to torture yourself,” says the Supreme General.

Credo nods, clasps his hands and bows. He leaves without saying a further word.

“Peter,” says Scerri and Peter steps out of the shadows.

“Yes, My Lord?” He comes to stand beside the Supreme General. They watch the couple fail several times to stand up because they’re in fits of laughter. Even when they do stand up, Tony seems reluctant to drop Verity’s hand and she’s in no rush to remove it.

“I’m delighted with the insight you’ve shown on this matter. I want you to know that I find your judgement has been invaluable.” He turns to Peter.

“Thank you, My Lord. I live to serve.” Peter bows his head. “I know you say Credo will do his
duty…”

“Heaven hath no Rage, as Love to Hatred turned and Hell hath no Fury, as a Credo scorned,” quotes Scerri. “You believe that he would?”

“I do, My Lord. At best, I believe he’ll selectively ignore orders and worst, actively defy them,” says Peter.

“And that is why I have you, Peter,” says Scerri, putting his arm around the younger man’s shoulders. “You have my permission to do anything and everything you have to do to make Our Saviour’s Heir be born.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Peter inclines his head. “I will be ruthless in my task.”

“Oh, I know you will and you will be well-rewarded when the child is born. Captain Agius has also agreed that when he accepts Credo’s Courting Suit, he will accept yours for Pinny. But only Pinny, am I clear on this, Peter?” Scerri turns to look Peter directly in the eye and the Knight knows better than to argue.

“Pinny always was my personal preference, My Lord.” He pauses. “One thing concerns me. We’re relying on teenage hormones running over ingrained moral codes. Verity has been well-raised. I don’t like leaving it to chance like this.”

Scerri strokes his beard. “I heed your point and that is why I give you free reign to achieve our goals. And as for the other matter, my dear boy, we need to move quickly once we have that Heir. Are you sure you wish to commit such treason?”

“It’s better for Fortuna that you be Sanctus when the time comes and that time needs to come sooner, rather than later. If I do it, at least I know it’ll be done right,” replies Peter, firmly.

“As long as we understand one another, Peter.”

“We do, My Lord. We do.”
**Update: Knight Peter Falzon**

*Knights Falzon was correct in assessment of the correct pairing re Vergil Sparda and Verity Agius.*

They have now met and appear to be forming an attraction towards each other. It would appear to be the first time the Son of Sparda has felt this way, as he’s slightly out of the character that our Intelligence Unit has led us to believe he has, however, this can be attributed to his attraction to Miss Agius.

*Knight Falzon has been given consent to do whatever is necessary to achieve the mission, if Nature takes too long to take her course.*
“How was your day?” Kyrie’s going round the table trying to get a conversation going. She’s still in her jammies as she sets down handmade pizza for her and Nero and a ratatouille for Violet. Violet looks longingly at the pizza.

“She’s Falzon’s personal slave, so I stand at his ass all day while he takes meetings. He doesn’t eat, so neither do I. I’m fucking starving, my feet are killing me and I hate this goddamn uniform, it’s strangling me and I’m fucking starving.”

“You’ve spilled – is that lampuki sauce- on it.” Kyrie peers at the stain.

Nero looks down. “Empty Night! I’ve been walking about like that. To cap it off, tomorrow Falzon’s got that Town Hall with the Tourist Business Guild and the Fortuna L-ewwel crowd and you just know how much fun that’s going to be.”

He quickly takes the water and salt from the table and rubs it into the stain. Kyrie and Violet exchange amused looks.

“Definitely a keeper, Kyrie,” grins Violet. She sneaks a piece of pizza off Kyrie’s plate. “Sorts out his own washing.”

“Makes a difference from blood,” says Kyrie. “How was your day, Violet?”

“Shit. Half my workforce is dead or refusing to come in till the labs are cleared out and stable, I can’t get damage reports till we can get into the labs and I don’t have the people who can clear out what we’re going to find in the labs because they’re all dead. I’ve been given an assistant who gives me the fucking creeps and tends to my every whim, because I’m pretty sure she’s spying on me and I’m not sure who to. How about you, Kyrie?”

“I spent all day in my jammies, eating sweets and watching British soaps on that new telly we’re not supposed to have.” She looks for the piece of pizza she was about to eat then scowls at Violet as the latter nearly chokes eating it. “Sabiha eh, that’s why you didn’t get pizza. Only people with fully functioning jaws get pizza.”

“Muck off, lil mitch,” chokes Violet. Her eyes are streaming as she’s caught between choking and
Nero’s bark of laughter is lost in the nonsense in front of him.

“I did have General Agius come round today,” says Kyrie.

“And you in your jim-jams, you slut. You’ll be accused of bewitching him when he takes you to wife,” Violet wipes tears from her eyes.

“Violet! That’s disgusting – Edward's is in his 60s!” Nero protests in almost mock horror. “You kept your courting gift out, right?”

“He’s a fine figure of a man even now. Mind you,” says Violet. “He’d have had a woman years ago but he has really shitty luck with them.”

Keep her talking.

“What?” says Nero.

Violet catches the confused look on his face, but says nothing. She tries to get Kyrie’s attention, but Kyrie is too busy stealing bits of the ratatouille.

“I never knew the complete story about Edward. I know the basics, but not all of it. Josh is cagey about it all.” Nero says the last bit by way of explanation.

Kyrie looks across at him, fingering her pendant. “I think it’s just assumed that we know everything. But I’ll second. What the hell actually happened?”

“It’s nothing earth-shattering,” says Violet. “He had two daughters, aging with you pair, maybe a little younger. Anyway, it was just after the Council were first allowing the Tourists in, so 20, 21 years ago? I think the younger girl, Verity ran off with a tourist and he wasn’t best pleased, told her
to never darken his door again, so she didn’t and from that day to this, he’s heard nothing from her. Then, a couple years later, the elder girl, Penny or something did the same thing, but he told her she’d always be welcome. Anyway, when Josh was about five, she got cancer or something and they came home. Edward got custody of Josh because the tourist was long gone. They say he started up all the homeless initiatives and refugee things because he wanted to atone for throwing Verity out in the clothes she stood up in.”

Violet shrugs, unconsciously rubbing her bracelet. It’s shining ever so faintly. “That’s the story, anyway.”

*Is that what Agius tells people?*

There’s an unmistakeable wave of hatred behind the voice. It nearly hijacks Nero’s body and has him standing abruptly, as if he’s about to fight. His chair falls back.

“Sparda’s balls, Nero!” Yelps Kyrie as she and Violet jump back from the table.

Nero starts rubbing his leg. “Cramp! I got a charley horse.”

He sits back down.

Violet and Kyrie exchange looks. “*That what you meant?*”

“Yes!” Mouths Violet.

“*OK, that was weird.*” Kyrie mouths back.

“So, Kyrie,” continues Violet. “Tell us the rest of the story. Did you bewitch Edward with Hello Kitty jammies and how much should we ask for your bride price?”

“He couldn’t resist them and suggested he buy me for 2 bottles of Farrugia and a KitKat.” Kyrie smacks Nero’s hand as it tries to steal her last slice of pizza.
“Ow! We’re courting! We’re supposed to share our bread!” He lifts the pizza anyway. “I’m starving and this is delicious. Just one KitKat, Anġlu tal-qalb tieghi? Selling yourself short there.”

“I’m holding out for three KitKats and Josh on alternate nights. Then we’ll hatch a nefarious plan to poison Lord Agius with my awesome cooking disguising the toxin. No one will ever suspect us.”

“That’s great, hanini, but I don’t want to have to fight Josh to the death for you,” Nero chuckles as he finishes the pizza.

“Aw, Nero, I thought you learned to share your toys at the orphanage?” Kyrie has that glint in her eye.

“Three things a man never shares, his shorts, his sword and his woman,” Nero states firmly. “Violet, help me out here?”

“One word, Kyrie. Twins.” Violet and Kyrie swap oh yeah looks at each other.

They’re worse than men. I don’t know if I should be fascinated or horrified by this window onto the female psyche.

“They can be much worse than this,” thinks Nero. “They were merciless with Credo.”

I dread to think.

“Imagine two Neros,” sighs Kyrie, clearly doing just that.

“Doesn’t work like that. They try to be different, so you’ll get the one that runs off at the mouth and the quiet one.” Violet takes a drink and waves her glass in Nero’s direction for emphasis. “The mouthy one is easier to get in bed, but the quiet one is dirtier.”

Kyrie and Nero look at her. “I had a life before Credo.”
As informative as this is, we need to move on. Ask Kyrie about Agius.

“Oh, yeah?” Kyrie smirks.

“It was when I was doing my foreign study year at college and I did mine at Raccoon City in the States. Umbrella was my sponsor. Anyway, there was some nonsense happening and there where these two guys, and the youngest one was really tall, but quiet and the elder one, was blond, but had the patter down. Apparently when they had a really bad job, to blow off steam, they shared a woman and I was the really lucky lady that night.” Violet shivers as she remembers. “Good times.”

_Do you have any idea how to make them stop?

Nero can’t help himself. “So how does that even work?”

Nero’s companion actually laughs, great hulking guffaws. Nero could almost see his head thrown back and shoulders shaking.

Kyrie and Violet just stare at Nero. There isn’t really anything either could say.

Nero says nothing, just blushes scarlet and looks at his plate. The voice’s laughter is still rolling round his head. If he could breathe, he’d be gasping for breath by now.

Nero peeks up through his bangs at them.

“I’m not explaining it,” says Violet, firmly. “So Kyrie, why _was_ Edward here?

_That…was nicely done. I’m almost impressed._

“Came to offer me my job back at the refugee centre and told me I could wear what I wanted. Left you a book that Pinny had and he’d just found.” Kyrie sips her water. “It was weird, actually. Asked about you a lot, so maybe we should be asking about bride price for you.”

“I’m worth at least a white Toblerone. No, two white Toblerones.”
“I’ll get dessert,” says Nero standing up and collecting the plates. “Who’s got what?”

“We have apple pie and cream, Violet’s is the rice pudding and stewed apples,” replies Kyrie.

“I’m not going to choke on shortcrust pastry, Kyrie,” points out Violet.

“I’m not taking that risk,” and for a moment Kyrie’s mask slips and the grief shines out. She’s not losing another family member.

“Just take the skin off the pudding,” says Violet.

“But that’s the best bit,” protests Nero.

Violet throws her napkin at him.

Nero uses his Devil Bringer to catch it.

They’re all still laughing as Nero goes into the kitchen and begins sorting out the bowls of dessert. He checks to make sure they can’t hear him, but they’re too busy sorting out the grooms’ price for Josh and giggling insanely.

“So who are you?” asks Nero.

The voice stays quiet, but Nero is aware of him on the edge of his conscious.

“If you’re sharing my brain, I deserve a name.”

You can call me…Tony. Tony Redgrave.
Maria Cecilia Hospital in Cotignola, Six months previously

“I have to admit, it’s not the usual place I’d meet a client,” says Lady. The green scrubs pick out the olive in her complexion and make the bruises on her face more blue than violet. She sips her tea and adjusts how she sits so that the firearm doesn’t show against the scrubs.

“I would have thought in your line of work, hospitals would be your second home,” says the client. “I’m told the tray baked chicken with all the trappings is really good and it’s coming out of my pocket.”

“You not having anything?”

“No,” says the client. “I’m scheduled for surgery in an hour.”

“I’m surprised we’re meeting somewhere this public. Most of my clients are worried about their privacy.” Lady sits back in her chair, but she still speaks in a low voice.

The client indicates the lit candle on the table and for the first time, Lady’s aware of how the hum of conversation has stopped. She can see the clock on the wall and the hands aren’t moving.

“Time-stopping magic?”

“More magitek, but I do use powers I’ve developed where I need to,” the client replies.

“Are you a demon?” Asks Lady.

“I’m a paying client and that’s all you need to know.” The client waits for a moment.

Lady waits, but the client simply regards her coolly.
Lady nods.

“You’re familiar with the Order of the Sword?” says the client.

“Yes, I am. Been causing me a few problems of late,” says Lady. “Why? Been giving you the same problems?”

“Hardly. I gave the order for collection – or rather, I suggested to the right ears what needed to be done. How would you like to be paid –“ the client passes a piece of paper to Lady “- that much to raise a little hell and probably save the world?”

Lady chokes on her drink when she sees the money on the cheque.

“I can arrange for it to be in your bank within the hour you deposit it.” The client smiles a tight-lipped smile, that quirks slightly to the left. “I can’t promise you’ll live, but I can promise you’ll be well paid.”

“Why?” asks Lady.

“Reasons. I’m not in a position to do it myself.” The client takes out a photo from her pocket. “I understand you know this young Knight of the Order.”

It’s a picture of Nero and Kyrie.

“I’ve had several run-ins with him, yes,” replies Lady, gesturing to the bruising on her face. “Should I watch out for him?”

“Yes, but not for the reason you think. He’s not to be harmed. He’s an heir of Sparda, carries his blood.” The client leans forward and taps the cheque. “That’s doubled if he’s unharmed.”

“Why is he so important?” Asks Lady.

“Because I’m paying you.” The client stands up. “Blow out the candle in 30 seconds. Keep it,
what’s left could be useful to you.”

The client seems to vanish, but it’s not the first time Lady’s seen a flash step.

She picks up Nero’s photo. On the back is a safety deposit key and a number. When she goes there, she finds identity papers for someone named Gloria and a spell that can alter an appearance.

***

*Devil May Cry Present Day*

“Devil May Cry? Sorry, we’re closed for staff vacation. Yes, that’s the password and we’re still closed for staff vacation.” Dante hangs up. “That was painful. That was good money they were offering.”

“That’s not our immediate problem,” says Trish, hitting treble 20 on the dartboard.

“I know, how do we not get caught when we go back to the place we just fucked royally without getting royally fucked?” Dante’s got the news on. They’re doing a piece about the end of the rescue efforts in Fortuna and how Fortuna is keen to get the tourist industry back up and running, despite the devastation on the island.

“They’ve cleaned up a fair bit already,” says Lady, pointing at the TV. They’re showing shots of the City, mostly the Plaza, which has had the fountain cleared away and the Tourist Business Guild is pressing for the Island to be reopened immediately.

Fortuna L-ewwel is demanding that the Island stay closed and stop the rot that began 20 years ago that’s led to the cancer of modernity that’s stealing their youth. Some religious nuts are claiming the entire thing is Sparda’s punishment for turning away from him.

Dante turns the sound up.

***
Falzon checks himself in the mirror before leaving his office for the Grand Hall in the Castle and turns to Nero. “Conduct yourself with dignity, Knight Balzan. The eyes of the world are upon us. Stand up straight and -“ Falzon tugs around Nero’s uniform and takes a clothes brush to his shoulders. Nero tamps down his annoyance and keeps staring straight ahead as Falzon nearly overbalances him. His expression isn’t as neutral as he hopes it is, according to the mirror.

Did you look like that when your mother got you ready for Kapella?

“Probably not. I didn’t have a mother.” Nero replies. “I was left on the steps of the children’s home.”

Tony’s voice loses its sarcastic quality and becomes sadder, softer. My mother died when I was eight.

Nero can feel the grief from the unhealing wound that Tony still carries within him. It’s mingled with regret at what should have been, but tinged with the knowledge that Tony would have done it all again. She was the first woman I couldn’t protect. I thought I had done better with the second and my child would’ve –

Nero feels Tony pull the overwhelming agony back into himself and crash a lid back down on it. Pay attention to what’s happening Tony snaps.

Nero realises that Falzon is standing back and looking at his handiwork. “Sister Micellef does take good care of you, Knight Balzan. You and she will be a shining beacon to the youth of Fortuna in the Times to Come.”

“We’ll try to be a credit to you, My Lord and the Order,“ says Nero, clasping his hands and giving a small bow. “How’d I do?”

“I have no doubt you will, Knight Balzan. No doubt at all.” General Falzon picks up his papers and waits for Nero to open the door.

Nero opens it without missing a beat and falls into step slightly behind him.
Falzon has taken an interest in you. You’d do well to take an interest in him.

***

“What does Fortuna L-ewwel mean?” asks Lady.

Fortuna First, I think,” replies Trish.

“Shhh, you two, there’s Nero!”

“Are you sure, Dante? It really doesn’t look like him,” says Trish.

“They got him all gussied up, but it’s him. Look! Can’t you tell he’s a chip off the old block?”

“I don’t know, Dante,” says Lady, turning Dante’s head too and fro. “Age hasn’t been kind to you.”

“You’d know,” says Trish. “You’ve known him since he was that age.”

“I never recovered from her shooting me in the head.” Dante grabs hold of Lady’s hips and moves her firmly out the way of the TV.

“Why are they covering this anyway?” Lady asks the room, as much as she’s craning to see Nero. “They wouldn’t normally be covering this nearly a fortnight later?”

“You’re joking, right?” replies Dante. “Natural disaster on a local holiday island, chicks in bikinis, local tensions, hallucinations, religious weirdos and a giant fuckin’ statue that just appeared out of nowhere. It’s aliens and Illuminati all the way, baby. Conspiracy freaks on the net are loving it.”

“I’m not saying it’s aliens, but it’s aliens,” giggle Trish and Lady in unison.
The atmosphere is tense in the Grand Hall. There’s standing room only and even with the two sides separated by the aisle. The portrait of Santus has been covered by a massive curtain. It billows in the drafts, like it’s breathing.

The table has been placed where the gyro arm had been held. Nero follows Falzon to the centre seat and takes his place behind him. He briefly nods to Josh.

“Who’ve you got?” Nero mutters.

“Gran-Agius.”

“Didn’t think they’d allow that,” murmurs Nero.

“Needs must.” Josh flicks a warning glance towards their bosses. Falzon has turned slightly, so Nero knows he’s picked up the exchange. Bastard could hear a fish jump in the ocean.

Don’t you find it strange that most of the Faith Committee make up the Tourism Committee?

“It never used to.” Nero looks along the table. “Needs must, huh?”

Precisely.

The buzz of conversation is low and menacing in the room. There’s scowls and death glares abounding at the main people on each side and the Committee. Lord Agius’s face is tight, Falzon is watchful, but not unduly concerned. It’s nothing he can’t handle.

The Knights around the room discretely test the draw of their blades.

Nero is facing directly down the main aisle and even he’s got to admit, it’s as intimidating as hell. He shares a brief glance at Josh, who nods anxiously. Both of them would rather face a room full of Mega-Scarecrows than the angry townspeople.
The buzz of conversation has risen to the level of a smashed hive.

Nero picks up on Falzon’s cue and leans down for his orders.

***

“There’s the Kid again,” says Dante. “Who’s the guy he’s talking to? Falzon?”

“Must be,” says Lady. “Camera crew must love him, they’re constantly showing shots of him and that other Knight.”

“It’s cause he’s behind the Big Bad,” says Dante.

“No, it fucking isn’t. Look at the Twitter feed.” Lady points to the screen. The feed started by showing #FortunaEarthquake, then #fortunaformyhols and #hecanarrestme #BFS. The last one is lots of screenshots of Nero and Josh, but especially Nero, extolling his virtues and how good he looks in uniform.

Dante cackles and saves the hash.

***

Falzon leans across to General Agius for a moment. Nero can’t hear what they’re talking about, but General Agius stands up and bangs a gavel on the table. “Come to order! Come to order, please!”

The angry drone dies down and General Agius announces the meeting in session. “We all know why we’re here. I’d remind all to remember that there are still dangers that face Fortuna that we do not wish to expose outsiders to.”

He turns to the Tourist Business Guild Chair and invites her to make her case. “Outsiders have always come to Fortuna. From when we followed The Legendary Dark Knight Sparda to Fortuna to – “
“When the Nine Hells did you follow Sparda to here, you lying bitch?” Yells someone from the Fortuna I-ewwel side.

“Silence! Let her speak!” Commands General Agius, banging his gavel. “Continue, Lady Speaker.”

***

“Hell is she wearing?” asks Lady. “She looks like a ghost.”

“Pilgrims Robes,” replies Trish. “Foreigners are meant to wear them outside the designated areas. Like covering up in Muslim countries. She doesn’t normally wear them. She thinks Fortuna’s backward and needs to join the 21st Century.”

“What was your excuse?”

“Lips, Hips, Tits, Power, Mary.” She dodges the notepad Lady throws at her. It hits Dante, but he doesn’t notice.

The news shows Nero and Josh again, both their hands going to their swords. It’s more noticeable in Nero’s case. #howbigisyoursword seems to lead into a discussion of left handed swordsmen, that quickly goes down on to their other swords #fallonYOURsword

***

“Fortuna has benefited greatly from the influx of Mainland money. It’s brought prosperity that’s been spent on the arts and our history. Mainland money has meant that Fortuna doesn’t need to rely on foreign aid to keep this Castle fully restored and maintained. It means the Festival of the Blade can be ran at a level that showcases the best of Fortuna. It’s allowed Fortunese citizens jobs at a time when Fortuna’s traditional industries are dying and means the youth don’t have to leave the Island.”

“You’re killing Fortuna’s traditional industries! You and all the other leeches!” The speaker stands up and Nero recognises him as one of Sanctus’ personal Guard. He’s been demoted this last week
as Falzon seeks to get his own people in place. He turns round to the audience. “We used to have people coming to find out about Our Saviour! Good people, studying our ways and the knowledge we hold! What do we have now? Mainland youngsters dressed like whores and drinking, falling all over those lovely old streets! Fighting! I can’t go out at night for them puking and fighting and whoring!”

“Silence, Matthias! You’ll have a chance to comment after the speeches!” Lord Agius bangs his gavel hard on the table. The Knights behind him wince.

Matthias ignores him. “How many of Fortuna’s young men and women have left Fortuna for the Mainland and never come back? How many do we lose each year? How many children are born here each year? The birth rate’s dropping and it’s all Mainlanders retiring here. They’re bringing their blasphemies and killing our children. They’re not even giving them the chance to be born.”

Lord Agius is hammering the gavel and shouting at Matthias. The Tourist Guild Speaker looks smug, she’s aware exactly how he’s presenting to the world. Falzon looks across the table at the audience, judging their mood, then at the cameras.

“Your own daughters, Agius? Where is Verity and Pinny? You’ve only got him because she died and where’s Verity, Agius?” Matthias then throws something at the Tourist Guild Speaker.

“Nero!” yells Falzon.

Nero leaps the table, Red Queen drawn, Josh not far behind. There’s screaming and shouting as Josh pulls the Speaker down, while Nero tackles Mathias, hauling him to the ground and pinning him down with the flat of Red Queen’s blade.

The knife Matthias threw at the Speaker clatters to the ground.

General Agius stands chalk white and silent.

Falzon merely sits, unperturbed and secretly amused.

#NerotheHero
“I wish the Business Owners’ Association meetings were that much fun,” laments Dante.

“Our Association meetings have cake. I don’t think theirs do,” replies Trish.

“Gotta have cake,” agrees Lady. She looks down at the file under Dante’s hand and catches Trish’s eye. The title, *Operation Resurrection*, is partially obscured beneath his fingers.

Trish nods.

“When are you going to tell him?” asks Trish, gently.

“When we get there.” Dante looks at the TV without meeting their eyes.

*It’s only the rain.*
Chapter 8

Fortuna, two decades ago

“Aren’t you going to continue, Miss Agius?” asks Tony. “I did save you from certain death, after all.”

“That you caused by throwing projectiles at me, Mr Redgrave,” she fires back. They’re standing in the Opera House, on the stage as the sounds of the masons building the statue of the Saviour ring through the building.

“It’s bigger than you think it is from up there,” he says, walking around the stage. He crisscrosses over the centre design, listening to his footsteps echo as he moves.

“It seats 1500 people and was built in 1720 after the City was last beset by demons. It’s based on a design by Christopher Wren, who designed St Paul’s Cathedral in London.” Verity says from one of the pews.

“Can you dance, Miss Agius?” asks Tony, standing in the middle of the floor.

“Of course I can, Mr Redgrave,” says Verity, as if it’s the most stupid question he could ask. “Can you?”

“Not as well as you, I would think, but I’m a quick study,” he replies, as he casts off his robe and throws it to a pew. He walks over to her and bows, holding out his hand. “May I have the pleasure of this dance?”

Verity places her hand in his and Tony taps his foot to get the rhythm and then off they go in a quick, lively Scottish Reel. Tony adapts it somewhat to account for the two of them, letting Verity force a lead where his memory of the steps falter, which is a fair amount.

They bounce and spin across the floor, somehow reading each other’s next move before the other makes it.
“I’m impressed, Mr Redgrave,” says Verity as she twirls under Tony’s arm. “You pick up very well and you don’t make it obvious I’m leading you.”

Tony sets his arm back around her waist as they skip in tune to the imaginary beat, travelling across the floor. His long blue coattails swirl around them as they go, giving the impression they’re dancing in blue light, separate from the rest of the room.

Verity doesn’t wince when the coattails smack hard against her legs, even though she can feel it through her petticoats.

“I have a good teacher,” says Tony, moving into a rosette without warning. There is barely even a pause in Verity’s movement as she follows his spin, even though she’s not much under him in height.

“I think you’re used to working with a partner who’s relatively unpredictable within their moveset,” replies Verity.

Tony’s so surprised at this that he misses their next turn and stands on Verity’s foot hard, tripping her up. He catches her quickly and sets her right, then carries on dancing, forcing Verity to move with him.

“I am,” he says, his face darkening. “I was.”

But he notes that Verity was smart enough to notice that and nimble enough to keep up with his stumble. He stamped on her foot hard enough to make her limp, but she isn’t.

“Should it become relevant, I expect you to tell me,” she says. Her face has gone serious, but she’s not cowed or embarrassed.

Tony stops dancing and they stand there in waltz grasp. It’s on his lips to tell this impertinent jig it’s none of her concern.

“It won’t and I will,” he states plainly, surprising himself. He hasn’t taken his eyes from hers, nor she from his, but he does see a quick flicker as her eyes drop to his mouth, ever so briefly.
He’s almost tempted, but that impish sideways smirk is back on her face and she twirls him to an
almost impossibly fast beat before he can kiss her. She’s making him work to keep up. “As you
seem determined to kill me, Mr Redgrave and you have paid extra, shall I continue with Fortuna’s
history?”

There’s a slight cracking underneath them and they dance off the central design. They don’t step
out of their embrace, instead dropping to a crouch in unison at its’ edge and reaching out in concert
to touch the raised lip.

“I didn’t think you were that heavy, Mr Redgrave,” she says, lightly.

“You move with the grace of a limping elephant, Miss Agius,” he replies with a provocative,
teasing tone. He looks at her quickly, but she’s taking it as it was intended.

“You do seem intent on injuring me and destroying our architecture,” she replies. “It’s definitely
dropped.”

“Should it?”

“No. It’s a solid floor.” She stands up and offers him her hand.

Tony takes it, amused at the role reversal. He tries to drop it when she bites her lip to hold back the
wince, but she tightens her grasp and he doesn’t argue.

“Where next?” he asks.

“The Castle, I think. You can see my tapestry and compliment my needlecraft,” she says, still
looking at the floor.

“My name is Tony,” he says, but there’s a slight stutter on the name. It strikes him that he doesn’t
like lying to her.

“Of course it is,” she replies, looking up at him and they both know he’s lying. “I’m Verity.
Peter doesn’t believe in leaving things to chance. That’s why he and Credo are standing in Tony Redgrave’s room in the Archive’s Lodging.

Their credentials as Supreme General Scerri’s Assistants got them in with no issues.

Credo is ashamed of how little persuasion he needed to be standing here. It hasn’t stopped him, though.

The room itself is plain, but clean and comfortable. The furniture is a dark, heavy wood that’s seen a lot of use, but the bed is firm and the comforter is soft and bright.

“There are they?” asks Credo. The last thing he wants is a pitched battle with a man who even at ten-and-eight years is recognised as a master swordsman with demonic powers to boot.

“At the Castle, I believe,” says Peter as he opens the wardrobe and looks through the handmade jackets. There’s several blue leather longcoats with a stylised serpentine design, as well as some other frockcoats that could be worn to a ball. They’re in burgundy and purple velvet brocade, with gold embroidery and matching trousers and long waistcoat.

They’re all neat on wooden hangers.

He has several pairs of heavy silk damask trousers with a pattern on them that makes them look like reptile leather and again they’re expensive – they’re soft and pliable and tough. Peter expects that they cost more per pair than he sees in a month.

A glance to Credo, who grew up amongst the finer things in life, confirms it.

There’s other clothing items, silk shirts and waistcoats, all carefully folded or hung with cedarwood to keep out the moths.
Even his boxer briefs are fine silk and carefully stored.

“Sparda left him well off,” says Credo.

“Sparda was alive for centuries. He had plenty chance to acquire the kind of wealth that would make your eyes water,” observes Peter.

Credo checks the bathroom while Peter goes through the drawers of the desk. His sword cleaning kit is off to the side, next to but separate from, his toiletries.

Tony has a lot of books, papers and notes with him – they make up the bulk of his luggage. It’s mostly related to Sparda’s myths and legends, demonic power, the kind of high order magic that Verity Agius would find fascinating. It’s still gratifying to him that his instincts were right.

“These make any sense to you, Credo?” he asks, handing him some of Tony’s notes.

“Not a lick, Peter. They tried to make us do it in school, but it went right over my head.” Credo leafs through the papers, but it’s perfunctual at best. “I’m a soldier, Peter, not a poet. Anyway, you know the rules. You’re a warrior or a wizard. You can’t be both. The divide is there to prevent any one person becoming too powerful.”

Peter takes them back and carefully returns them to where he found them. Credo is his best friend, but sometimes he despises the man for wasting the advantages his position as a Son of an Old Family gave him. Peter’s had to fight twice as hard to do half as well as Credo.

Fortunately, Supreme General Scerri doesn’t share that view towards soldier or sorcerer and neither does he.

“The division is preposterous,” says Peter, sourly. “Even if Sparda set it there himself.”

Credo’s looking at Tony’s shaving kit, granite with silver accents engraved with the snake from his jackets. The brush is as soft as a kitten’s fur. It’s been handmade and has his initials on it – VS. There’s no date and he wonders if it was a gift or he bought it himself.
Credo’s going to have one like that someday. He’s decided. But it will be a gift. Something that intimate, next to his skin and blood, will be from a lover.

Who knows? In time, maybe Verity….

“Back to the matter at hand, Credo,” snaps Peter. “We have no clue when they’ll be back.”

Peter rifles through Tony’s top drawer and finds a box. It’s got a few photos in it, family pictures of two white haired identical boys, a photo of a man who looks like the boys and a blonde, fine featured woman. There’s a family photo of the four of them and the boys look about three or four.

“Look, Credo, we know what your son’s going to look like,” jokes Peter.

Credo looks at it for a moment. “Rodan Micellef’s going to be a handsome fellow.”

Peter pulls out a second box. It says Durex and has lots of small packets with circles inside them.

“Sparda’s Balls!”

Credo takes them from him. “What are they?”

“They’re sheaths. You wear them on your phallus during lovemaking to prevent pregnancy.” Peter takes a deep breath. “The tourists have them in their bars.”

“Why would you not want to have a baby?” Credo is genuinely confused.

“It’s different on the Mainland.” He rubs a hand over his face. “I need to think of a way around this. I may need your help with this.”

Credo nods. “Of course. You know you’ll always be able to rely on me, Peter.”
Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection

Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS

Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.

Update: Knight Peter Falzon

Vergil Sparda and Verity Agius’ relationship continues to develop, quicker than I dared hope.

However, there has been an intrusion of modern, Mainland culture into our Mission that I had not accounted for. I will have to consider my options and use all at my disposal. I am hesitant to use the spells I’m considering, but needs must when the Devil drives.

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It’s cooler up here.

Lamina Peak is an old volcano, with the Castle set into the culdera. It provides a natural shape to the Castle and environs, as well as protection from the sometimes inclement weather. This early in spring, even in the Mediterranean, it can still be cold and frosty.
Sometimes, like today, there is snow.

They’ve walked up to the Peak, mostly so they can chat. Their conversation is quick, lively and skirts from subjects serious to small. They are people of ideas and finding a like mind is the Holy Grail of such people. One small spark lights a fire.

“Are you not cold, Verity?” Tony has dropped her name into the conversation as often as possible. He loves the way it sounds on his tongue. He loves the animated, excited look on her face as her mind leaps from one thought to the next, seemingly unrelated till she draws them together in way he never imagined. She treats ideas like lesser women view shoes.

If she’s sharp now, by the time she’s finished her training, she’ll be giving Yamato a run for her money.

“I’m wearing five hundred petticoats, Mr Redgrave. One thing I am not is cold.”

“Your skirt’s getting soaked. I don’t want you freezing before you’ve taught me anything,” says Tony.

“At the rate you’re destroying my body and our buildings, we’ll have nothing left to teach,” retorts Verity.

Tony shrugs off his coat. “Put this on, Verity.”

Verity looks at the proffered blue coat, then back at Tony. “Then you’ll be cold. As my skirts are already wet, then we’ll both be cold and what would that serve?”

“Damn you, woman! Why are you making this so hard?” Tony groans in exasperation. “The cold won’t affect me as much as it will affect you.”

“Why, Mr Redgrave, I think you’re simply looking for an excuse to show off your wares.” She indicates Tony’s well-toned arms, as he wraps the coat around her shoulders.
“Perhaps I’m looking for an excuse to pull you close,” he not quite teases her. His hands on the lapel of the coat create an exclusive, intimate circle as he traps her against him.

His breath moves the little wisps of hair escaping her hijab as he drinks in her face and notices that her breathing has quickened. It’s a novelty, he thinks, to stand toe to toe with a woman nearly the same height as him. She’s five ten in her stockinged feet.

Tony moves in to kiss her only for her to drop to her knees and roll away under the jacket, giggling and leaving a Verity-shaped track in the snow.

“I’m not chasing you,” he says. “Put that down. Don’t you dare throw that!”

Verity has got to her feet a little way along the path and she’s made a snowball as she does so.

She throws it and catches him square in the face.

Tony stands there spluttering at the cold in his face. The *indignity*! The sheer *gall* of this bold-faced jig!

Then his deadly predator smile curves his lips as he deliberately folds his coat over his arm and gathers up a handful of snow.

She dodges the first one and he allows hers to land on his shoulder.

His hits her square on the shoulder and his second on her stomach, but he’s careful with the force he uses.

Verity skips off through the snow as she gets him on the belt. Some slides down under his waistband and he takes off after her, mock-threatening Verity as he goes. “You’re wearing this jacket, Verity Agius!”

Tony is prepared for snow in the face as he catches her.
Instead Verity kisses him.

Neither are exactly sure how his hand on her arm turns into her hand on the back of his head and her lips pressed against his. Her mouth moves against his once, twice, thrice before she breaks it off. His hold on her isn’t tight, so it’s easy for her to pull away, taking his jacket with her as she does so.

“ ‘You’re wearing this jacket!? ’ Tony, is that seriously the best you can say?”

Verity is a massive tease, he thinks. “Short notice,” he replies.

“You do leave me unusually flummoxed,” he admits. “I can’t get a beat on you.”

“I’m not complicated, Tony. I play none of the games my sister might, because Mama has taught us that’s how a Lady lands a husband.” She’s serious and he loves the look on her face. “No Sir, I am not looking to be tamed. I want to find someone to run wild with.”

“Besides,” she says and her teasing tone is back, both in her voice and on her face. “Surely the point of Temptation is that the Goods be worth the Price?”

She turns on her heel in a swirl of blue.

Tony follows behind in her wake.

“At least, you’re not chasing me, Mr Redgrave!”

“You’ll be the death of me, Verity,” he shoots back, but there’s no anger in his tone.

***

Tony opens the door and lets Verity pass him. He hears her thank him and then they’re in the Great Hall of the Castle.
He’s been in big, grand places before, and in that sense, the Hall is nothing impressive.

*Where* it is on the other hand, is impressive. A Gothic Castle of this size in an Island that’s worked hard to get itself forgot is no mean feat. He’s seen smaller Castles in the Mainland that guarded strategic passes.

It reminds Tony of a smaller Stirling Castle. He’s got a sudden desire to see her there with him, rediscover all his favourite places with her, watch her face light up at the libraries and the museums. The discussions they’ll have as she reads his favourite books with him.

He’ll need to see if she has a passport. He doubts she does, but he has enough money to sort that issue when it arises.

The Great Hall is busy. There’s people walking about, both Tourists in their robes and Order officials. He looks at Verity, who briefly explains the Order have offices here and people who are clearly servants running around with flowers and food and laying tables.

“There’s normally rows here, like pews,” says Verity, indicating, “but there’s a wedding later, after the Castle closes.”

“At night? Strange time for a wedding.”

“It was so the demons wouldn’t attack people through the day,” she replies, stealing grapes from the tables.

“I don’t think demons are particularly bothered by the hour on the clock,” replies Tony.

Verity gives him a withering look. “A big party was easier to be repelled if they did attack and they would be expecting us to be sleeping.”

“At a wedding?”
“I don’t make the rules,” she says and pops a grape in his mouth.

He nearly chokes and she thumps him hard on his back, before he turns and catches her wrist. He’s exasperated, infuriated and amused all at once and she’s smirking at him.

“Was that for your foot?”

“No, that was for the fountain. Beware, Mr Redgrave, I have the patience to stitch that tapestry up there, so I most definitely have the patience to lull you to a false sense of security before I strike.” She speaks in jest, but there is a definite air of menace about her.

“In a few years, I have no doubt you’ll be deadly, Verity,” replies Tony and he isn’t joking. “I told you to call me Tony.”

“It amuses me to vex you so,” she replies and that sparkle in her eyes is back.

His jacket almost touches the floor on her and it’s slightly too big, but she wears it well. He’s not going to ask for it back. It almost looks like a robe over her red dress.

“What?” She says, confused. “You’re smiling at nothing.”

“I was just thinking, my jacket over your dress makes you look like the High Priestess from your Tarot set,” Tony says. “Blue over red, knowledge over passion, souls over fire.”

“My last reading was terrible. Apparently I’m doomed,” she replies. “Anyway –“

She indicates *Sparda’s Victory over Mundus* and they’re right.

It’s amazing.

More accurately, it’s a cross stitch rather than a tapestry, though there are many areas where she has embroidered to achieve her effects. The colours in her threads, particularly on his father, shimmer as he changes position. They stage through various rusts, bronzes and coppers and
shadowey midnights and bruise violets.

She’s even managed to give expression to Sparda’s demon visage. She’s captured the sadness of turning against his brethren, his regret at the sins committed against the humans and his disgust at his part in it.

She’s captured his stoic desire to atone in a world that has no obligation to fete him.

Tony’s doesn’t want to say she’s captured his humanity, but she’s captured his nobility.

He almost feels like he is by Sparda’s side in the fight, capturing the monstrous and the divine dual nature of the demon knight.

*This* is a person to be followed through all the Nine Hells and Realms Beyond. This person is worthy of praise and loyalty, because he will give you his trust and loyalty.

She’s stitched in a motto. *If there is a Heaven for the Merciful, though I may not see it, I will see through the Task at Hand.*

“Sparda calls us to be nobler than we are,” says Verity, quietly.

Tony looks across at her and intertwines his hand with hers. She gives him a sweet, gentle smile and he can’t help but return it.

“I’d follow you into Hell,” he says.

“And then best make sure you deserve me,” she replies.

***

They wander round the rest of the Castle and it’s like no Castle he’s ever seen.
It’s almost like it’s someone who’s never seen a Castle’s idea of what it should look like. It’s built more like a Cathedral.

There’s something off about it.

Verity gives him the history of the Castle as they walk towards the Master’s Bedroom. They’re stopped by the lack of a floor in the upper story of the torture chamber, but Verity smiles.

“Am I about to see what you’re capable of, Verity?” asks Tony. “Are you going to apport a floor?”

“No, I’m going to summon a floor,” she replies. “Don’t let go. I fell down here last year and broke my arm.”

There’s a blue pedestal on the other side and he can feel the power building up in her. He watches the focus build in her face as the pedestal begins to glow and spin. A wave of power explodes out from it and it shatters.

“Nine Hells! I’m still using too much!” she curses, but a rattling is heard and a grated floor drops from the ceiling.

Tony tests it before he’ll let her walk on it, but it’s firm enough.

“What’s through here?” He asks.

“The Master’s Bedroom, where they say Sparda himself slept,” she replies. She knocks on the door and she’s shouted through.

“Just showing my student around,” she says, indicating Tony.

“Alright, just stay away from the bed, it’s been prepared for tonight,” says the Order Priest.

Tony can feel the spell under it. It’s dark and evil and instinctively he places himself between it and Verity.
The room is huge and opulent, with a four-poster bed occupying a raised dais in the centre. It faces a massive fireplace that’s already lit. There’s nine chairs around the bed and several more in front of the fire.

Tony looks at her for an explanation.

“We practice live coverage,” she says.

Tony shakes his head.

“The wedding night is witnessed, to ensure consummation and emphasise the community role in maintaining marriage and family,” Verity says as if it’s the most normal thing in the world.

“You’re not serious,” he says, horrified. He looks back at the bed and the chairs.

“Witnesses from both families,” she indicates the chairs at the fire, “and the Committee for the Protection of the Faith around the bed.”

“You are serious. And the spell?” He gestures towards the bed.

“What spell?” Asks Verity, bewildered. “I can’t feel a spell.”

“Miss Agius won’t feel the spell on the bed. It’s a variation of a compulsion spell we use to ensure conception.”

“Why won’t she feel the spell?” Tony demands, making doubly sure Verity is away from the bed.

“It’s meant to compel reluctant couples to consummate their union.” Supreme General Scerri says as he comes into the room. Everyone bows or curtseys, giving the genuflection he’s seen them do here. “I have time to answer your questions, young man. Miss Agius.” Lord Scerri nods to Verity.
He notes how the Son of Sparda guards her, keeping an arm between the room and Verity, because there’s no way the youngest Miss Agius would hide behind him. She’s far too - what do they say on the Mainland? – bolshy to let someone protect her.

“My question stands,” says Tony, uncowed by Lord Scerri.

“Tony!” Verity hisses.

He cocks his head slightly towards her, but he doesn’t take his awareness away from anyone in the room.

“Miss Agius, he’s not from here. He doesn’t understand our ways. Make allowance for him, dear girl.” Lord Scerri turns to Tony. “It’s a Purity Trap. It will drain the lifeforce of a virgin unless she has her virginity taken. The spell will detrigger once her husband shares his essence with her. It ensures consummation and proves a husband’s love for his wife.”

“That’s barbaric,” Tony says, coldly, calmly, mindful of Verity, warm against him. “But why do I feel it and she doesn’t?”

“Miss Agius is clearly still pure.” Lord Scerri says smoothly, almost amused. He leaves the inference about Tony hanging. “And now, excuse us. We still have much to prepare for tonight.”

Tony doesn’t need to be told twice and all but frogmarches Verity out the room and the Castle.

He doesn’t lessen the pace until they’re nearly back in the Town.

They haven’t spoken all the way down.

Tony was expecting some protest or an argument. He’s almost worried that there isn’t.

He stops and looks at her.

Verity looks like she’s in shock. “I didn’t know about the spell.”
“What do you really think about…” his voice trails off and he doesn’t want to say it.

“I think it’s horrible. My father is joking about me accepting a Courting Suit from Credo, but he’ll accept it on my behalf sooner or later. I can ask for the wedding to be postponed till I finish my training when I’m 21, but usually it’s 13 turns of the moon and then you get wed.”

“Was that Credo with the flowers?” His voice sounds normal, but inside he’s furious.

Furious for her, for him, for the whole damned perverted, backwards situation.

“Yes.” She looks at Tony. “I’m not a brood mare. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life here. I see the tourists and I want to travel and see things. There’s so much to learn and do, but all the Order sees is Daughter of an Old Family – Breeding Stock. Trumps any training or education I have.”

She humphs and she’s almost like a little girl. “And I was having such an amazing day, too.”

“There’s still quite a few hours of daylight left,” says Tony. “What would you like to do?”

“I’m famished,” says Verity. “Want to get some fish and chips and eat them on the quayside? We could even fish for crabs.”

Tony offers her his arm and she slips her hand into the crook of his elbow.

***

He’s laid his Robe out on the ground so they can sit on the warmed cobbles of the Harbour wall without getting dirty. They’re eating fish and chips with bottles of Farrugia. Tony no longer finds it charming that he was asked if one of the bottles was for a lady and being handed a straw when he answers in the affirmative.

He’s bought at Verity’s urging, a couple of small wooden frames with black twine around them
and a sharp hook tied to it. He’s also bought offcuts of fish that are in an iced tray.

“So what do I do?” Tony asks, holding the frame and a piece of fish. It’s pretty obvious what he should do, but he wants to take her mind off earlier.

“You take the fish,” she digs a small piece out of the ice, ”and you take the hook and stick it on firmly.”

“The smell is objectionable.”

“Stop whining.” Verity puts her hands over his and helps him pierce his fish on the hook. “Like that, see?”

“And then?” He doesn’t think he’ll ever tire of watching her expressions dance across her face.

“You unwind it, but just enough to cast out and get to the bottom.” She’s unwinding hers and swinging it round their heads, before casting it out. She does it from a seated position.

Tony does the same, but hits Verity in the face with it. “Maybe I should stand up.”

“No! What if you fall in?” she says in alarm.

“I can swim, Verity. I’ll be fine,” replies Tony. “I’ll rescue you if you should tumble in.”

Verity lies down on her stomach on the quayside, pulling her dinner beside her. She rests her chin on her hands and watches the creatures in the water.

Tony lies down beside her, their bodies touching.

They lay there for a little while, enjoying the sun and gulls and the weight of their bodies pressing against each other. They feed each other their chips and she playfully bites Tony’s fingers.
He makes dire threats against her person.

Verity gets a tug on her line and they excitedly pull it in.

“You pull it in gradually,” she says. “You want the crab to keep tight hold because he doesn’t want anyone to steal his dinner, so he’ll follow it in.”

“I can see him. There he is!” Tony can’t believe how excited he’s getting. He’d normally be dismayed at how undignified the whole situation is, but he can’t help himself and secretly doesn’t care, not really.

Between them they pull up the twine and there’s a small crab hanging on.

“Careful!” scolds Verity, when Tony pulls a little too hard, the crab spooks and lets go. They see it float back down to the sea bed and walk off around the wall.

“We lost him!” she nudges him with her shoulder in annoyance.

“He was only out the water three feet,” he replies, calmly. He’s looking her straight in the eye and he decides to chance a kiss, find out if her lips are still soft in the sunlight, the way they were in the snow.

He leans in towards her, when his line tugs. He’d ignore it, but she pulls it in, she’s practically bouncing like a child. “I wanna see what we’ve got! I wanna see our crab!”

Again they pull it up, carefully, slowly and they get further this time, to within a metre of the top, before again, the crab realises the temptation is not worth the price.

Verity mock pouts and Tony chuckles. They bait their hooks again and throw them out.

Tony doesn’t know how she does it, but Verity gets the drop on him again.

She’s closed the gap between them and kisses him. It’s soft and gentle, as she tentatively presses
her lips to his. They fit perfectly. They don’t even bump noses.

Tony’s closed his eyes as soon as her mouth touched his. He lets the sensations flow as he kisses her back.

Her mouth is even softer in the sunlight.

They lean a little harder into the kiss, letting it become a little deeper. His hand slides round the back of her head, over her hijab, keeping her in place. He can feel one of her hands slide round to a similar position. She’s not quite in his hair, but her long, slim fingers rest across his jaw and his nape. He relishes the contact.

Their lips move and press over the others’ and there’s tingles radiating out from it over their bodies. Verity gives a soft moan that just twists something inside Tony. He slides his tongue into her mouth, curling it around hers and he feels her fingers twitch along his jaw.

Verity responds just as enthusiastically, if without the art of Tony’s kiss. She runs her tongue around his teeth and the inside of his lips, as his tongue draws patterns and swirls along the roof of her mouth.

It draws the most wonderful little squeak from her and he smiles against her mouth.

He’s going to do everything he can to hear that noise again.

He rolls onto his back, pulling her with him and with the better access, made bold by their current success, the kisses become much deeper and he’s able to wrap his arms around her, because she’s meant to be there.

He breaks off from her mouth to kiss her face and along her jaw. He doesn’t have a lot of leeway because of her hijab and he gets the ridiculous notion that she’s a present for him to unwrap.

Her hands are in to the side of his head and he’s beginning to think his brother has a point if it means his women can run their hands through his hair.
“Tony…” she whispers and her tone sends shivers down his spine and makes him catch his breath, but the name’s wrong.

He presses his lips to her ear and his hand to her head, so there’s no escape and no mistake.

“Vergil,” he whispers through the cloth, rough against his lips. “When we’re together, my name is Vergil.”

Verity pulls back a little and searches his face. His eyes are almost as dark as hers, the pupils wide enough to edge out the blue. A muscle in his jaw works and he’s ready for her to slide off him and walk away. His arms are tense, but nothing she can’t break.

“Vergil…” she whispers in that same tone as she licks his lips and the tension melts as they kiss each other hard enough to bruise.

He gets that squeak from her again and neither of them notice that a crab’s crawled up the line and is nicking their chips.

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection

Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS
Peter looks around his library for a spell, an idea, anything.

“We could get her drunk,” suggests Credo. It’s clear he finds the idea repellent.

“I don’t know if that would work with him, though,” replies Peter. “And we don’t want him too drunk to perform.”

“if only we were dealing with the daughters of Sparda. This would have been so much simpler.” Credo looks through a spell book. He doesn’t mention that Peter shouldn’t have these.

“Not really. Mainland girls are different. They have things they can take to not get pregnant and you’d never know.” He pulls out a book and leafs through it. “They don’t want to get married either. Different way of life completely.”

“I’ve been to the Mainland, but I was never there long enough to appreciate how different it is.” He puts the book back. “We need to get ready for the wedding. Wonder if Verity will bring Redgrave?”

“I doubt it. You know the laws on foreigners at rituals, unless there’s Courting Gifts exchanged.”

Peter pauses. “Verity isn’t the problem here. He is. We need him to make love to her with no barrier.”

“I know that, Peter. I’m familiar with how breeding works.” Credo replies, sardonically.

Peter takes a deep breath. “There’s one way, but I’ve never set it and I don’t know how I could get it to happen. Are you a virgin, Credo?”

“Godspit and shit, Peter! What the hell kind of question is that?”

“An important one, if you want to live long enough to call Verity Agius wife.” Peter is deadly
serious.

Credo looks at the pile of papers in Peter’s table. His face is scarlet and he’s barely audible as he replies, “Yes.”

“Forgive me, Credo, but we need to fix that as soon as possible.”

Credo closes his eyes as he fights nausea. “The Wedding Spell.”

“I can’t see another way.” Peter has the grace to look disturbed. “But at least in our temptation, the goods are very much worth their price.”

“That spell should be a sin.” Credo has got up to look out the window. He always thought there were lines he would never cross and the knowledge that he’s wrong, that he’s not the man he thought he was, weighs heavy on him.

“We can give them a week, fortnight at the outside to get together naturally. I counted the sheathes, so we’ll know if he’s used them.” Peter joins him at the window. “But if not, we will have to do our duty to Sparda. We’re aiding in the creation of his grandchild, after all. And surely, such a sin is forgivable?”

Update: Knight Peter Falzon

There has been some issue with the Son of Sparda and our wedding customs.

However, it has inadvertently provided us with our solution of how to practically conceive the grandson of the Saviour.

Knight Falzon will continue to ponder this problem for the next few weeks. If there is no progress within the next few weeks, we will proceed with the Wedding Spell.

My only concern is my inexperience in casting it and where will be appropriate, as I only wish to aim it at one person. I cannot run the risk of exposure.
Chapter 9

Violet sits opposite Captain la Valletta of UO’s PMC division in his smart black UO uniform.

“You…were not what I asked for,” she says. She’s still respectful to him – the man has a good reputation as both a soldier and a leader to his men.

“I understand you wanted…a different kind of soldier, Ma’am,” Captain la Valletta replies, without any sign of rancour. “But we have extensive experience in unorthodox combat situations, as I’m sure you’ll have seen in the briefing.”

Violet scrolls through the tablet in front of her. Every member of the team has cleaned up an Umbrella mess at least twice, not to mention T-Virus enhancements where required. “I appreciate that you’ve had considerable experience within UO’s biological divisions, but we’re dealing with Extra-dimensional Xenobiology here. It’s not the same.”

“With respect, Ma’am – we’ll only get experience in the field if-“

“-if you go into the field to get experience. Of course.” Violet smiles as la Valletta inclines his head. “I merely wish you to be aware of the differences to previous situations.”

“Of course, Ma’am and we’ve been through the briefing notes you’ve furnished us with. Considering the conditions you’re dealing with here, I appreciate how detailed your reports were and how quickly you pulled them together.” La Valletta sips his coffee. He’s dragging out this meeting and Violet is sure it’s Ms Kye’s coffee. One thing about the Order, there is no cheap coffee anywhere.

That, or he’s not as confident as he’s making out he is. Violet’s been through an Umbrella fuck-up when she was a student and as effective as their PMCs had been, their objectives hadn’t been the civilians caught in the mess. It hadn’t even been the scientists. If it hadn’t been for the brothers – not twins, she’d lied about that, but her point still stood – who’d been extraordinarily well-armed and unperturbed for the occasion, Violet doubts she’d actually have got out.

“They should be thorough. We’ve done nothing else for the last week,” Violet says, unguardedly.
La Valletta laughs. It’s so genuine, that even Ms Kye joins in. It’s a nice, unexpected moment of camaraderie.

“Paperwork, the bane of our lives,” says the Captain, scoffing a cake.

“It certainly is,” agrees Violet. “One good thing about this mission, is that you’ll be fairly uninhibited by lab personnel.”

La Valletta does blanch a little as he catches her meaning. “So I’m given to understand, Ma’am. It does make the mission that bit less complicated.”

“Indeed.” Violet stands up and comes around the coffee table to shake the Captain’s hand. La Valletta takes the hint and stands. Luckily, he’s finished his coffee. He shakes her hand. “So, 0800?”

“I’ll see you then for your briefing,” she agrees and Ms Kye escorts la Valletta to the door.

The door closes and Violet pours out the rest of the coffee into her cup. Ms Kye scowls just ever so slightly and Violet catches it. “I don’t need you to pour my coffee, Ms Kye.”

“No, Madam Alighieri.”

“Have a cake if you want,” Violet says, indicating the tray. “I can’t eat them.”

“Thank you, Madam.” Ms Kye sits down and delicately picks up a cream horn and eats it just as carefully.

“Thank you for your help this last week with the briefing files. I genuinely couldn’t have done it without you.”

The strangest thing happens. Ms Kye colours, puts down her cake and bows her head. She touches her fingers to her heart, then her lips and clasps her hands on her lap. It’s a demon sign of respect and deference to a feudal lord and given freely the way it was, speaks to the esteem to the vassal holds the fuer in.
“Lord Arius trained you well,” says Violet. “So, what do you reckon fly-boy’s chances are?”

“Limited.” Ms Kye finishes her cake. “I’d recommend you get a good night’s rest. You’ll need it to deal with tomorrow.”

Violet bursts out laughing. “Was that a joke, Ms Kye?”

“Yes, Madam.”

***

Kyrie’s standing in front of her wardrobe. She can genuinely say she has nothing to wear.

“Guess I regret that bonfire now,” she says as she irritably kicks a box. She’s either got jeans or evening gowns and neither of those were suitable. She’s got some of Violet’s dresses, but she’s taller than Kyrie and two sizes smaller. Kyrie couldn’t get it over her hips and had to cut it off. She pulls out the pink sundress that she’s never worn and looks at it for a moment.

It’s a long, pink floral maxi dress, thick enough that if she’s in front of a light, it won’t show her legs. The top is fairly high, to her collarbone and edged in a sleeveless frill that sits where her shoulders meet her arms. In any other culture, it would have been a lovely, if slightly modest dress, that sets off Kyrie’s brown hair and hazel eyes.

Nero has an excellent eye for colour and especially for what suits Kyrie.

She looks for a top or jacket she can put over it and can’t find one. She goes to Nero’s room, though his clothes do seem to be migrating to her wardrobe, going through his shirts and tees until she decides on his purple jacket.

It’s even got the Order symbol on the back. Must be Fate.

She looks around Violet’s study for something she can use. What is it Violet says? Alchemy is
where science and magic meet? Violet’s always been open about teaching Kyrie spellwork, though she’s not a natural sorceress and has to rely on spells and rituals that don’t need a power user like Violet to wield them. She finds a blue and white stone set in a bracelet and puts it around her wrist. She’d worn something similar the first time she’d performed and Violet and Credo had given her the pendant because she had been so nervous and told her it would calm her down and everyone else around her.

Credo told her that if she acted calm and in control, everyone would believe her, even if it was a lie.

“You mean you get frightened?” she’d asked him. She’d been so much younger then and she adored her big brother. Credo was a Knight! He fought demons and dockers – he must be brave! It had rocked her tiny little world for him to say he was pretending.

He’d nodded. “All the time, but because I pretend I’m not, people don’t get frightened either.”

“I’m going to be like you,” her five year old self had said resolutely. Credo had hugged her and kissed the top of her head. She went out and sung her first solo at Midwinter Night Third Prayer.

When she finished, she walked right past her family to grab hold of Nero Balzan, kiss him right on the mouth and declare she was going to marry him when she grew up. Josh Agius had burst into tears and punched Nero because he’d wanted to marry her when he grew up. Nero punched Josh back and got into trouble because Josh’s mother wasn’t long dead. So he punched him again the next day for getting him into trouble.

Kyrie’s going to the meeting. She’s sat about in her jammies long enough.

***

It’s been a contentious meeting and Nero’s been run off his feet.

At least this time nobody’s tried to stab one of the Speakers, but it comes close several times. Nero, Josh and the other Assistants and guards have been working the room hard. Josh has had to place hands on several of the more argumentative members of each faction and Nero’s had to draw Red Queen twice and place her between protesters and Falzon.
Falzon had looked impressed.

Nero’s told people to *Sit back down* with more authority than he feels. He’s seriously hoping his voice doesn’t crack. He’s nineteen, it still does sometimes. Oh, Empty Night, not today. Please not today.

He’s felt his eyes flash red a few times and that’s dissuaded some of the potential knifethrowers. Falzon has excluded the cameras from the meeting as he feels it was merely inciting further illegal behaviour and to allow people to speak *freely*. He’s also banned any mention of the Agius sisters. It’s not stopped anyone and Josh is finding it hard to keep his cool. He’s already been quietly reprimanded by General Agius for being a little too enthusiastic in his duties.

*He should have excluded the swords as well*, observes Tony.

“In Fortuna? They’d have stabbed him first,” replies Nero, getting to the latest Fortuna l-ewwel member screaming about Verity before Josh does. She tries to struggle out of his grip as he grasps her upper arms and drags her kicking and screaming about vanishing teenagers out a side door. She gets him good in the shin and stomach with her knees and elbows. He grunts as a sick pain shoots through him from his shin.

*Might controls everything, Nero*. Tony is having far too much fun with this. *Don’t you have a healing factor?*

“Doesn’t mean it doesn’t fucking hurt when it happens. *Oomph!*” Nero grits out as she manages to catch his jaw. “*You* try being fucking stabbed.”

He manages to pass the screeching banshee off to the Patrol Knights. “Watch that one, she’s a hell cat,” Nero says, rubbing his jaw. The mark’s already fading and the receiving Knight laughs until she clocks him too.

Both Nero and Tony laugh at that one.

She’s still screaming about knowing Verity and how she was a good girl who would never have ran off with anyone when the receiving Knight punches her hard in the head, knocking her unconscious.
“Hey! The fuck? You’re twice her size!” Nero’s about to rush back when he almost feels Tony put a hand on his shoulder. At any rate, his feet still. No, Nero. Falzon’s watching, even when he isn’t.

Nero takes a deep breath as he fights against his natural instincts, but he’s slowly turning back to go into the Hall. Shut up and turn around, you damned idiot. I’ve not come this far for you to wreck it.

He reluctantly walks back into the Hall, pushing through the crowds. They try to part as they see the white uniform, but there really isn’t enough room for them to move aside. Even with his height and strength, it’s like moving through molasses. Nero hopes he doesn’t have to draw Red Queen here, he’d never get her out.

He can hear the main door open and a hush falls on the room.

Josh catches his eye and motions for him to look down the aisle.

“What the fucking hell?” Nero breathes, because Kyrie, his Kyrie is walking down the aisle in his jacket and her sundress and she looks like a fucking Queen in a ballgown. She’s walking down that aisle like she owns the place.

And she does fucking own that place. That Hall can fit a thousand people and it’s full to bursting and there’s isn’t a single man or woman in that place who doesn’t stop, shut up and look at her as she passes. His jacket brushes her ankles and he can’t get the thought out his head that it’s almost like a robe that’s going to elongate and sweep behind her. Nero finds it easier to move through the press of people as he hurries to get there before she reaches Falzon, even without Tony’s urging in his head.

He reaches Falzon a little before Kyrie does and as he turns round to stare at her coming towards him, it doesn’t escape him that this is what their wedding will be like. He stands in front of Falzon and unthinking holds out both hands. She takes them and for a brief moment, all he can see is her as he feels the warmth of her hands in his.

Falzon has had his watchful, secretly amused look on his face all through the Town Hall, just like it’s exactly what he was expecting, while the other Committee members look they’re about to fight duels to the death.

Kyrie’s arrival and the effect she’s having has driven the slight smirk from his face and he actually
looks a little apprehensive as she turns from Nero to Falzon. She has the air of someone who expects to be obeyed and Nero notes that there’s a tightness around Falzon’s eyes. So there’s anger there as well as apprehension.

Falzon shoots a quick look to Nero, who gives an imperceptible shake of his head. He’s as surprised as everyone else.

“I am a Sister of the Order of the Sword and I demand my right to speak. I will be heard,” she says in clear, ringing tones. She’s using her singer’s voice to modulate her tones to be authoritative, but comforting and even without a mike, she’s heard all round the massive Hall.

“Of course, Sister Micellef,” says Falzon in his oily voice and sweeps his hand to indicate the room. “The floor is yours.”

Ever since she walked into the Hall, the only sound has been her footsteps. She walked into that room like Credo did, light, assertive and brooking no dissent. She drops Nero’s hands and that same light, firm step echoes through the Hall as Kyrie moves to the centre floor.

“People of Fortuna, why are we fighting? We share this Island.” She looks across to Fortuna l-ewwel. “You speak of traditional values and yet, you’re the first to forget them. The refugees from distant wars and famines come to us with nothing, just like the Old Families did when my ancestors and yours fled the demons to come here. Sparda, Our Saviour could have turned us away.

Did he?”

The leader of Fortuna l-ewwel opens his mouth to speak, but Kyrie walks over to him and takes her hands in his. He looks at her like she’s a Goddess passing out blessings. She says something to him that only he can hear. He kisses her hands when she’s finished. Kyrie smiles and touches his forehead in a very traditional blessing that isn’t used anymore.

Kyrie walks over to the Leader of the Tourist Business Guild. The woman is transfixed.

“The modern world comes for us, even as we hide away. Would it not be better to for us to meet it head on and find our own way of adapting that which makes us uniquely Fortunese? Our children leave because they see no opportunity here. Or maybe they just wish to explore the wider world, just like the Saviour did, leaving us to find their own way, for that should be all a Father wants for his children, to find their own way in the world and bring what they’ve learned back home.
If we want our Children to come home, we need to make Fortuna somewhere they’ll want to live and raise their children.”

Kyrie is unconsciously rubbing her stomach as she speaks. She turns back to the congregation.

“I stood in that Opera House not three weeks ago and sang about coming out of the darkness. Maybe it wasn’t just demons that song was about. Humans can be just as bad – look where greed and hubris have got us –“ Kyrie sweeps her arms to encompass the whole Great Hall “- I’ve heard it said that it’s only through adversity we find our nobler selves. Look how we’ve pulled together in the last few weeks and yet as soon as things begin to clear up, we’re back to petty squabbles.

We can be so noble when adversity strikes. I want us to be noble when we’re not in danger, too.”

Kyrie walks back to Nero who places an arm around her. He looks back to Falzon who’s staring speculatively at Kyrie, like he’s never seen her before.

*He’s thinking he’s watching the wrong one. But it’s bothering him he underestimated her. Tony’s voice has an edge to it. You can use that.*

***

The Tourism Committee votes to allow the tourists back in as soon as possible.

There’s no other way the vote could have gone, given the mood in the room once Kyrie spoke.

The Tourist Business Guild Speaker walks over to the Fortuna l-ewwel Chair when it’s over and people are filtering out and Nero’s ready, but to his surprise, he can hear her offer to work with him to change the demographic of the tourists – families seeking culture, not teens seeking clubs.

“What did you do?” Nero whispers to Kyrie, who hasn’t left his side.

“Magic, teŻor tieghi.”
“I’m beginning to wonder, Sister Micellef,” says Falzon. “Knight Agius, can I borrow you for a moment when the General is ready?”

General Agius nods. “Be ten minutes, General Falzon.”

Falzon nods. He turns back to Nero and Kyrie. “How is Chief Alchemist Alighieri? I haven’t heard from her since she was promoted.”

“She’s really busy,” replies Kyrie and again Nero sees Falzon make that mental note. He’s misjudged Kyrie and for some reason that angers him. “She’s out before First Prayer and she’s not back until 8, 9 at night. We’re only really seeing her at supper. Have you tried calling her office?”

“I was rather expecting a call to my office,” replies Falzon, lightly, but pointedly.

“Was it about anything in particular – I can speak to her over dinner if you like,” replies Kyrie, pleasantly, but there’s something about the way she’s saying it. There’s politeness in her tone, but there’s none of the usual deference that people have when they talk to him. She’s not even talking to him like an equal, but as if she’s superior to him. She isn’t talking down to him, but rather like a Queen who treats everyone equally well, be they prince or pauper.

“It was merely to find out when she required the services of the Holy Knights to begin clearing the Labs. The Captains have been holding men back for the purpose and haven’t heard. They-“

“-need to know whether or not to release the men for other duties,” says Kyrie, with the grace of a woman twice her age. “Of course. I’ll bring it up with Violet tonight. It’s my understanding that UO are sending their own Contractors in. She was looking at the files last night.”

“I see.” Falzon’s thrown, but hides it. “We’re needing to talk about the Wedding, Sister Micellef. You have a lot to plan.”

“I certainly do, but we need to get Fortuna up and running first,” replies Kyrie, stretching up to kiss Nero, who blushes.

“Of course. Thank you for your help tonight. You got the vote to go exactly the way I wanted it,”
“I’m only thinking of Fortuna,” replies Kyrie. “We need the tourist money so we can afford to rebuild.”

“If I could borrow your fiancé for a few minutes before I dismiss him and Knight Agius, Sister Micellef?” He gives the bow and clasped hands.

“Of course, My Lord,” she says as she reciprocates the gesture. She gives Nero a chaste kiss on the lips and goes off to wait for him.

Josh has finally finished with General Agius and comes over. He salutes to Nero and Falzon and they return it. “Saviour be with you.”

“I imagine that Knight Balzan will understand more of what I’m about to say than you, Knight Agius,” begins Falzon. “But on your phone – do you ever use Twitter?”

“What’s Twitter?” asks Josh, genuinely confused. “I only use it for calls.”

“I’m sure Knight Balzan can introduce you to the wonderful world of the Internet. Do it quickly, Nero, we need to strike while the iron is hot.” Falzon seems very earnest and the two Knights are thoroughly bewildered.

“I’ve been speaking to the News Channel and the Tourist Guild. Apparently, you two were quite a hit and there’s been a lot of interest in you both on the Mainland. The Tourist Committee and the Guild want to use you both in our advertising campaign.” Falzon looks from Knight to Knight. “I’m told you need to start a Twitter that shows you going about your day and remarking on it. Pictures are also good. Get it set up by tomorrow. Dismissed.”

“But who would want to read strangers talking about their day?” asks Josh. “It sounds really boring and, well, weird.”

Kyrie is walking over to join them as Nero puts his arm around Josh’s shoulders and grins. “Oh, we have such sites to show you.”
Fortuna two decades ago

It’s late when Verity and Vergil finally saunter up to her front door, arm in arm, chatting and giggling. At least, Verity’s giggling, Vergil’s saying anything he can to keep her doing it. She’s still wearing his jacket and he loves that she’s wearing something that smells of him.

The house is dark. “They’ll be at the wedding.”

“Wish you’d gone?” He’s wrapped her in his arms, loving the fact that he doesn’t get a crick in his neck from looking down at her. He leaves a trail of kisses trailing down her nose to her mouth. She meets his lips in a strong, deep kiss, sucking his bottom lip and swiping her tongue across it.

He makes a small hun sound into her mouth and pulls her even tighter into him. He traces the roof of her mouth and hits somewhere that makes her shudder.


Vergil rests his forehead against hers. “Two more minutes.”

She gives him another kiss, deep and long, full of lips and teeth as he playfully bites her lip, then soothes it with his tongue. She traces her fingers over his arms and it’s his turn to shudder and catch his breath. She turns to look at her fingers’ progress and marvel at the shape of them and the gentleness overlying the strength he could turn upon her if she wanted.

He can’t tear his eyes from her face as her fingers travel. He’s thinking of them somewhere else when they’re further along the track and exploring each other’s bodies.
Vergil can’t wait to worship her.

“I have had just the best time these past few days,” says Verity.

“Even though I’ve tried to kill you twice and a crab ate our dinner?” Vergil grins against her mouth, trails licks and kisses over her cheeks and jaw.

“That floor shouldn’t have sank like that, Vergil,” she says, suddenly serious.

“It should have stood up to your elephantine grace,” he agrees.

Verity looks mock indignant and punches his arm.

Vergil leans in close and says in a low tone that he’s come to learn makes the shivers run along her spine, “Every time you strike me outside of battle, will be the longer I’ll keep you on the edge when the time comes.”

Verity, despite her inexperience, controls the shiver to just a tremble. “You perhaps have too much faith in your abilities and no knowledge of mine, Mr Redgrave.”

“Is that so, Miss Agius? Is that the best you’ve got?” He teases as he bites her lip with just enough pressure to be painful, but not break the skin.

Verity controls the flinch and her eyes shine with a mix of defiance and desire. “It’s better than what you’ve got, Mr Redgrave,” she says as she pinches the sensitive skin at his elbow.

Vergil yelps, because he really wasn’t expecting it and just because she can’t really hurt him, doesn’t mean he can’t feel pain.

And it bloody hurts.
She spins away from him into the house, laughing as she goes.

Vergil walks away, rubbing his arm. He chuckles and wonders if this was how it was for his father when he realised his mother was more than a match for him.

***

Verity sneaks through the door, though she doesn’t think anyone will be in.

She smiles as she touches her throbbing lip.

“Little gropecunte!” The blow across her cheek catches Verity unaware and her head snaps back, striking the wall. Her vision shorts out and the pain makes her sick as she drops to her feet.

“M-mama?” Verity struggles to make sense of what’s just happened as her eyes tear with the pain.

“We’re making excuses for you at the Calleja wedding, while all the time you’re whoring yourself on the docks!” Verity covers her head while her mother rages at her. She strikes the girl several more times and Verity cries out as the blows connect with her bruised hands. “Common ridden jade!”

“Mama! Mama! Please!” Verity sobs. “Papa! I haven’t done anything! Mama! Papa!”

“Abigail! Godspit and shit! Abigail!” Captain Agius has come in to see what the screaming is about and hauls his wife off his daughter. “Pinny! Tend to your sister!”

Pinny runs to her sister, hand over her mouth as their father drags their still ranting mother to another room. Pinny holds Verity as they hear Captain Agius snarling at his wife.

“She’s a shitten whore, Edward! You’ve turned our daughter into a slattern - ugh!” Abigail’s voice is choked off as Captain Agius grabs his wife by the throat and smacks her head off the wall several times.
“You raise so much as your voice to either of them again and I will rip out your tongue,” he growls.

Abigail whimpers as she struggles to breathe.

“I’m not going to have you ruin this for us,” he snarls in her ear, face contorted with rage. “How the Nine fucking Hells am I meant to explain this to Lord Scerri?”

“I’m saving her! You think he’ll want her if she’s damaged goods?” Abigail gives a choked cry as Captain Agius slaps her.

Pinny and Verity muffle their shrieks as they cling to each other, looking at each other and then back at the room where their parents quarrel.

“One word to Falzon and Scerri will have you on a Trial of Possession, just to make the point. They can do anything they want as long as it’s not permanent.” Captain Agius’ voice is low and full of rage. “You’ve never seen one, but I have. It’s Trial by Ordeal, judicial torture and do. You. Know. How. Bad. It. Will. Look. For. Us?”

Abigail is sobbing by now and Captain Agius throws her disgustedly away from him. “I’ll speak to Scerri tomorrow. This will never happen again. If you raise so much as your voice to either of them or try to otherwise wreck this opportunity, I’ll put you in the ground myself.”

Captain Agius comes out the room and crouches in front of Pinny and Verity. They shy away as he reaches for Verity, pulling her hand away from her face and turning her face too and fro. “Pinny, take your sister to bed and ice that bruise. You don’t need to go to the Archive tomorrow. Pinny will take word to Mr Redgrave that you are indisposed.”

Verity tries to nod, but it makes her feel sick. Pinny sets her to bed with an ice-pack on her throbbing face.

“Pinny, stay through here tonight. I don’t want to be alone.”

Pinny nods and climbs in beside her little sister. “What do you think they were talking about, Verity?”
“I don’t know. I know I missed the wedding, but I was having such a good time with Mr Redgrave,” replies Verity. “But none of that sounded like it was to do with the wedding.”

“I’ve never seen either of them like that. It was so scary, Verity. You’re right, there’s something else going on and for Mama to beat you so!” Pinny soothes her sister, as much as she soothes herself. “So, you and Mr Redgrave have been very…involved these last few days. Have you been a good girl?”

Despite herself, Verity smiles her little sideways quirk. “Not in the least, Pinny.”

Pinny gives a little squeal. “I knew there was a reason you were wearing his jacket today! Oh Verity, you’re catching up to me! Will I have to dance in a pig trough at your wedding?”

The girls talk of their beaus long into the night and for a while become normal teenage girls again.

***

Verity doesn’t really sleep. Her face and head are throbbing too hard and she can’t stop thinking that she’s missing something. She pulls a cover from the top of the bed and wraps it round her as she retrieves her Tarot cards.

She goes down to the drawing room and sets herself up on one of the settees there, with a card table next to it. Her hands are stiff and painful as she shuffles, but she doesn’t drop or bend them.

She can see the mess of her face in the brass ornamentation around the fire place. Her left cheek bears a livid purple bruise the shape of her mother’s hand, even down to the fingers and rings. Her right cheek is cut and swollen in dark midnights where she hit the wall.

Even the bones in her face throb, so she wouldn’t be surprised if they were bruised as well. There’s no tell-tale dimple on either cheek to suggest a break.

Between her cheeks, her dark eyes are puffy and enflamed as the staining from her bruises spreads across her face.
She lays out her cards after asking – “Is something being hidden from me?”

She sets down her Significator in the centre.

Princess of Wands.

Above that she lays

King of Swords, the Moon, The Magician.

“Who is hiding this from me?”

King of Staves, The Emperor, Knight of Staves.

“Why?”

The Devil, Lovers, Empress.

“Why?”

Tower, Judgement, World.

“Am I alone in this?”

Knight of Swords, Princess of Cups, Knight of Staves (reversed) but it’s not a card from a set she has. Verity looks up the spread again and gasps.

Several Knight of Swords cards have been attached to her Significator and lying across the Devil and the Lovers.
Again, they are not from sets she owns.

Alice, the family’s maid is getting up, which means her father is not far behind.

She’s not looking forward to the rest of the day.

“Miss! Your face!” gasps Alice, as she comes to light the fire.

No, Verity is not looking forward to the day at all.

***

If Captain Agius thought he could keep Verity’s condition under wraps, he’s mistaken.

The doctor has just arrived at the house, when Peter and Credo come to pay their respects to Verity.

“Godspit and shit! How the hell did they know?” mutters Captain Agius. “Now I have a lecture to look forward to from Scerri’s ladybird on how to keep my own daughters.”

“You could speak to the ladybird or you could speak to Lord Scerri,” says Peter as Alice shows them in. “Is the Young Miss Agius receiving?”

“I’ll ask her, but I doubt it,” says Captain Agius. “How did you know, anyway?”

“I have many talents,” replies Peter. “And by making the best use of them do I find myself in the position I’m in, as opposed to yourself who has squandered his many advantages to the point where he must leverage his daughters’.”

Captain Agius’ face goes stone. “Once the doctor has spoke with me, I’ll ask if she wishes to see you.”
They don’t notice Pinny sneaking out the door, picking up her hem and running along the street. She’s so focused on where she’s going, she crashes into Vergil.

“Pinny – Miss Agius! Are you alright? I was just coming to your house to walk Verity over to the Archive.” He hauls her upright and waits for her to get her breath back. He must read something in her face. “What is it? What’s wrong? Is it Verity?”

Pinny’s out of breath, but nods. “Mama lost her mind last night and darkened Verity’s daylights most ill.”

It takes Vergil a few moments to catch Pinny’s meaning and even then he isn’t sure, but he realises it’s nothing good. “Take me to her.”

It doesn’t take them long to run back to the Agius house, where it’s easy for Pinny to sneak back in with Vergil. They shrink back against the wall as they hear Captain Agius is in the dining room, speaking to the Knight he sees constantly with Credo and another man with a doctor’s bag. “She’ll need plenty of rest for a few days, but there’s no concussion.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t call for a doctor last night, Captain Agius,” says Peter, his voice hard. “This could have been far more serious if she hadn’t been discovered when she was.”

“Just as well we came back from the wedding when we did,” returns Captain Agius, low fury in his tone. “I’ll have the carpet repaired this morning.”

“See to it. We all have far too much riding on your daughter for even the slightest setback.” Peter walks over to the table and helps himself to a croissant and coffee. “I might recommend to Lord Scerri she be removed from your care and commended full-time to the Archive. She has not reached her majority yet. Neither of them have.”

“Watch yourself, you toad eater. You’ve had my cooperation thus far. Don’t remove the only reasons you’ve had to count on it.” Captain Agius sits at the table. “You know you’ve no grounds and you’ve hope of being my son in law.”

Pinny clamps her hand to her mouth and looks at Vergil. He returns her alarmed look.
“Where is she?” he mouths.

“In here,” Pinny mouths back. She turns the knob on the door and lets herself and Vergil in. Credo stands up as the door opens and bows to Pinny.

“Miss Agius,” he begins and falters when he sees Vergil. “Mr Redgrave.”

Vergil tamps down his reaction to seeing Verity’s face. He’d understood correctly what Pinny had meant. “Knight, Miss Agius. I had heard you were indisposed. I came to see for myself.”

“As you can see, Mr Redgrave, the rumours are true,” replies Credo. “Miss Agius needs to rest. I’m sure Pinny can take over till Verity’s recovered. It will only be a few days, should you wish to wait.”

“I’ve paid good money for Miss Agius’ skills and I mean to have my money’s worth.” He pulls up a chair by Verity and her Tarot cards. “I’m sure our books can be sent over.”

Peter and Captain Agius hear Vergil’s voice and come into the room.

“Mr Redgrave,” says Peter.

Captain Agius can’t take his eyes from Vergil. “Can I help you, sir?”

“Mr Redgrave is insisting on his rights to his lessons from the tutor he’s paid for,” begins Credo, looking between Peter and Vergil.

Vergil crosses his ankle over his knee and makes a show of cleaning a mark off his boot with his thumb. It’s Peter’s gaze he meets. He can read where the power lies in this room.

“If Young Miss Agius feels up to it, I don’t see why not,” says Peter. He doesn’t even look at Captain Agius.

Credo shakes his head and looks at the floor.
Verity and Vergil exchange a small, very brief glance.

“If Papa is alright with it, then how can I not be?” Verity says quietly. She’s looking at her father as she speaks and everyone can see she’s pleading with him to disallow Vergil’s request.

“Pinny, when you’re at the Archive, have Mr Redgrave’s work sent over,” says Captain Agius. “Mr Redgrave, I’ll have breakfast sent in for you both and then you’ll be left in peace.”

“Thank you,” Vergil says as if he’s every right in the world to make demands.

Everyone says their goodbyes and once a breakfast tray has been sent in, they are left in peace.

As soon as the house is silent, Vergil drops to his knees in front of Verity and takes her face in his hands, checking her injuries. “Pinny told me what happened. How are you really feeling?”

Verity puts her hand over one of his and kisses it. “Like my Mama skelped my face off a wall.”

He smiles. “What happened?”

“She started calling me all the whores under the sun and when Papa pulled her off me, she started screaming about how she was saving me and no one would want me if I was injured.”

“Don’t you think it’s interesting that a Knight basically told your own father you were working, even when the doctor said you needed to rest?” Vergil says, stroking her hair. She has beautiful, long, thick hair, and he loves that in a woman.

“I was thinking that even before you said that.” She indicates her Tarot spread.

He nods. “It would seem then, Miss Agius, that we have a mystery to solve. What’s your favourite book?”

She points to the book shelf on the other side of the fire.

Vergil finds it quickly and brings it over, as well as a book of fairy tales. He sits down on the settee so that Verity can rest her head on his lap, but he’s barely started reading when she sits back up.

“I can’t breathe,” she says.

Vergil tuts, pulls her cushion at his back and swings his leg over her, so he’s reclining on the settee, Verity between his legs. He pulls her against his chest, arranges her blanket over them and begins reading aloud to her.

Verity is asleep in minutes. He kisses the top of her head and carries on with the book.

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*Committee for the Protection of the Faith*

*Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy*

*Designation: Beyond Top Secret*

*Operation Resurrection*

*Phase One*

*Status: IN PROGRESS*

*Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.*
“So what did you think of that?” asks Peter as they walk up to the Castle.

“It’s the greatest work of fiction since Lord of the Rings,” replies Credo. “Staircases don’t usually wear rings on their hands. They don’t tend to have hands, either. Neither Agius nor Pinny wear rings on their right hands.”

“The mother then. She might need to be dealt with if this keeps up,” says Peter. “She’s cost us a good few weeks with this shit.”

“We’re going to have to set the Wedding Spell, aren’t we?” Credo keeps his eyes on the path. He doesn’t trust himself to look up.

“Yes,” says Peter, quietly, regretfully. “I wish we didn’t, but the Devil is driving. The Devil will be driving her, soon.”

Credo stops and glares at him.

“I’m sorry, Credo. That jest was in poor taste.” Peter sighs. “You do realise this means —“

“Yes.”

“We’ll sort that out within the next day or two. Do you want one who looks like Verity or totally different?” Peter asks.

“I can’t believe you’re being so matter of fact about this all. This wasn’t how I saw this happening,” snaps Credo. “I know you were born in a brothel, but lovemaking means something special to me.”

“I’m going to assume you’re upset and didn’t mean anything by that,” Peter says and there’s a warning in his tone.

“I’m sorry.” Credo takes a deep breath and rolls his shoulders. “Find me a girl who looks like
Verity and isn’t a streetwalker or from a piss-a-bed brothel on the docks."

“I’ll find a nice girl. I can do that for you,” says Peter.

Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef

Verity Agius and Vergil Sparda have been seen kissing at length on the docks, so a relationship has developed quickly, taking less than a week from introduction to now.

Unfortunately, Miss Agius has met with an accident – we suspect assault by her mother to thwart our plan for her. We have impressed upon Captain Agius the importance of this operation and that nothing will be allowed to impede it.

Due to the loss of time as a result of Miss Agius’ injuries – she has a battered face and is clearly in some pain – we will set the Wedding Spell within the next few weeks, once she has sufficiently recovered. I have some other arrangements to make regarding Knight Micellef, but we will be ready to proceed soon.
“This is stupid,” complains Josh. “Why would someone want to see a photo of my breakfast?”

“We need to pick a name first or we won’t be showing anyone anything,” huffs Nero. “You’re probably the only 19 year old with a smartphone who can’t fathom the net.”

“I’ve not been on the Mainland like you have. I never got picked for the special assignments you did.” Josh protests. He tries a name @FortunaJosh. “Oh! It did it. I have a Twitter account.”

“Your grandad doesn’t let you out the door, never mind going out on assignments,” snorts Nero. “He just about lets you on patrol to fight the dockers in the pubs, never mind the demons.”

“Credo was just trying to kill you without getting in bother with Kyrie,” says Josh as he bites into the plate of shortbread Kyrie’s just ran up for them. “Sparda’s Balls, Nero, you’re a lucky man.”

Kyrie kisses Nero. “He knows it, Josh. Don’t you Anglu tal-qalb tieghi?”

Her pendant falls forward as she leans over to put down a pot of coffee. It catches the light as it swings.

“Oh, is this it? I haven’t seen it since before the Saviour.” Josh leans over to hold it and look at it. “Your Courting Gift? What does it mean?”

“She’s the Angel of my Heart,” replies Nero. He doesn’t act tough in front of Josh. They’ve been almost brothers since that Midwinter Night fight over the woman wearing the pendant. What else could they be, two motherless outcasts as they are? “Have you thought about yours or are you waiting to see what’s special to the pair of you?”

“Grandad’s said I can give her Gran’s rings. I can’t give her Mami’s rings and I wanted to give her something special that’s got family history,” says Josh. “We just have to work out some of the finer details, like not giving a Muslim ham and cheese sandwiches.”
“I think that’s lovely,” says Kyrie, sitting down on Nero’s lap. “OK, Qalbi, what’s your Twitter… handle, I think they call it.” She turns to Josh. “I’ve been getting an education these last few weeks.”

“@NerotheKnight.”

“Wow, it must have taken all night for you to come up with that one,” Josh deadpans.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” says Nero, seriously. “I put more thought into that than my firstborn’s name.”

“What are we going to call our first born?” asks Kyrie, curiously, but there’s still a giggle in her voice.

“Sanctus.” Nero yelps as Kyrie thumps him. "Alright! Daffodil!"

Josh takes a photo of the pair of them and posts it. @NerotheKnight @FortunaJosh #knightoff #hecanarrestme #BFS.

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It’s 0800 hours and time for the briefing.

“I need to get into two places – the Server Room and the Records Room. Knowing how Agnus worked, there’ll be a spell in there to shut off the demons or bring them under my control,” says Violet to the assembled soldiers. “The staff protection spells in place before must have been channelled by Agnus, hence why even I can’t just walk down there.”

“You have the schematics on your HUDs,” takes over Captain la Valletta, tapping the yellow tinted glasses they’re all wearing.

“Remember they will respawn after a certain time, so you need to move out and through quickly,” Violet continues. “I’ve provided magic bullets and weaponry to your requested specs. You won’t be able to move back through, because of the respawn. Once you start, you need to finish. I need
you to understand that.”

“We do, Madam Alighieri,” says Captain la Valletta. “Don’t worry. We’re all veterans of unorthodox combat situations and I know you’ve been through some of them yourself. I was at Raccoon City at the same time as you, so you know we’re on the same page.”

Violet’s pretty sure there’s dismissal under there. She’s a civilian and he’s not. She clasps her hands and bows to him. “Saviour be with you on your journey.”

Captain la Valletta smiles and salutes her.

The doors are opened and the team moves out.

Violet and Ms Kye go back to Violet’s office to watch the feed.

“Should you not go with them, Madam? Once they get to their destinations how will they know what they’re looking for?” asks Ms Kye.

“Not until they’ve had more experience, Ms Kye,” replies Violet. She gets her phone out and sends a text. *Hyacinth*. “When I go through, I’ll go through with my own people, not UOs. Like the man said, we were both at Raccoon City.”

Ms Kye looks at her, but says nothing.

“Can you hear me, Captain la Valletta? Over,” asks Violet, over the feed.

“Loud and clear. What’s the visual feed like? Over.” Captain la Valletta doesn’t sound bothered by Violet’s lack of faith in his men. He doesn’t need to prove anything to her anyway. She ain’t paying his mortgage.

“It’s fine, over.”

“Say, ‘loud and clear,’ Ma’am,” La Valletta corrects her. He exchanges a look with his Sarge,
Nero’s settled into his role more now. It’s still hard keeping his waiting posture, but he’s not as tired now. Funny how quickly you get used to things. He’s more receptive to Falzon now, better at reading him.

Today, Falzon is irritable. Oh, he’s hiding it under his usual calm façade, but he’s pissed off at something.

Nero’s phone isn’t helping. It has been buzzing constantly all morning, ever since he posted his details on the Tourist Guild’s website. He checked his messages when he was goffering somewhere for Falzon and had a message from Josh saying the noise was driving General Agius crazy. “He keeps looking for the bee. It’s hilarious.”

Nero had texted back Gonna hav 2 tch u txt. EZR in NGLS.

Josh: What the hell is that?

Nero: TEXT IN ENGLISH, IT’S EASIER.

Falzon: Attend to your duties with more speed, Knight Balzan.

Nero sighs and so that was that.

He’s spending an inordinate amount of time looking at that phone.

“He’s willing Violet to ring him. He was really thrown yesterday when he spoke to Kyrie.” Nero considers the idea forming in his head. “You reckon?”

Do it. Tony’s actually starting to sound…approving.
Nero walks around to Falzon’s side and drops to one knee, hands clasped, head bowed.

Falzon sees him move, but makes no motion. Neither a flinch nor a recognition.

Nero waits, but Falzon doesn’t make him wait long. He finishes the line he was typing before he turns to Nero. “Yes, Knight Balzan?”

“My Lord, may I suggest going to see the Chief Alchemist herself, rather than second hand information from the mouth of a girl?” Nero’s careful to keep the subservience in his voice.

Falzon looks at him. “That, Knight Balzan is an excellent idea. Go fetch the car.”

This is going to be interesting.

“I’ll call ahead to Madam Alighieri, so she can have everything prepared ahead for your arrival, My Lord,” says Nero, rising.

“No,” says Falzon. “Let’s retain the element of surprise. Doing something unexpected lets us see how the foe handles themselves under pressure.”

“Yes, My Lord,” says Nero. “I’m sure it will be a learning experience.”

“That it will certainly be, Nero. I’m delighted that you’ve proven to be such an apt pupil. You’re surpassing my expectations.”

So am I, agrees Tony. But be very, very cautious around him and don’t overreach yourself.

“I understand, My Lord,” says Nero. He clasps his hands and bows. “I’ll get the car.”

“I wish I could call her, but I can’t risk it,” thinks Nero as he goes to Falzon’s outer office and makes the call to the garage. He’s chewing his lip.
No, agrees Tony. *Violet can hold her own. You concentrate on yourself. Want motivation? Think what Falzon would do with Kyrie, given half a chance. He’s furious and someone’s going to suffer.*

“*Violet’s been through a lot,*” Nero replies.

*Haven’t we all?*

***

Captain la Valletta and his team work their way along the metal corridor. They’re watchful, but ready. They’ve seen nothing so far.

“It’s seriously quiet, Sir,” says Sarge. “I thought we’d have seen a hostile by now.”

“She did say there’s no zombies down here, just the security system,” says Decker. All they’ve done so far is just walk down a long, wide corridor.

It bothers la Valletta there’s no cover here. On the other hand, there’s no place for an ambush.

“Disappointed you haven’t seen a real live spook yet?” teases Blake. She looks around, pointing her weapon back down the corridor.

“Demons sounds like religious bullshit. I still reckon it’s some T-virus thingy,” replies Decker. “Is that a door up there?”

“Schematics says yes. Madam’s files say there’s EXBEs there as well. They’ll be triggered when we pass that arch there.” La Valletta points at a join in the metal ceiling.

“What’s the nature of these…EXBEs?” asks Blake. She’d rather just call shit shit and say demons.

La Valletta taps his glasses. “It’s not saying. Madam Alighieri? Over?”
“Could be anything where you are. Probably cutlasses though. Maybe Angelos. But it could attract other demons, that could happen. Over. Oh! Remember the Vital Stars if you’re injured. They’re similar to Green Herbs. Do you still use them?”

The soldiers look at each other with smirks and headshakes.

“Yes, Ma’am we still use them. Thanks for the heads’ up,” says Sarge. He looks at la Valletta. “Ready when you are, Sir.”

They do a final weapons check and nod to each other. They step forward and a ringing sound is heard as a portal opens and three Mephistos drip out of the walls. The demons shoot their fingers out like lasers, just missing the team members.

They’re seasoned troops, they don’t hesitate, but open fire. Short bursts, like they’ve been trained to. The Mephistos just slip back into the walls.

“Did we damage them?” says Sarge, urgently. “I can’t tell. Did we get a hit?”

The soldiers move so they’re back to back in a circle. They’re scanning the walls of the corridor frantically.

They don’t see the Mephisto that comes out the floor amidst them, spearing the head of Archer, bursting his eye as it comes through. His body twitches and shakes for several seconds as the demon pulls him up with him as it rises.

Blake screams and opens fire. She doesn’t need to understand what she’s seeing. She just needs to kill it.

The Mephisto’s cloak dissolves as she empties her clip into it. She doesn’t pause as the scaly little lizard runs round looking for cover. She jumps on it, knife drawn and starts stabbing it. It struggles under her, bucking for its life, raking her body armour. It catches her face and her arms, red mist spattering the walls and mixing with its own dark ichor. It nearly slips out her grasp, but she holds on for grim death and keeps stabbing its head.
Eventually it goes slack under her and dissolves, leaving her panting in a pool of their blood.

She looks at her arms and sees right down to her bone where the muscles have been shredded off the skeleton.

She can hear the sounds of battle behind her as the other two Mephistos come out the walls. There’s screaming and gunfire and Migenes’ head lands in her lap.

“Fire at the cloak! The cloak!” yells la Valletta as he fires at the second Mephisto still holding the body of Migenes on the extended fingers of its other hand. His heart’s blood is painting the ceiling in bold splashes and the smell of copper and cordite is sweet on the air.

The third Mephisto keeps sweeping in and out of the wall. It takes a few shots and then vanishes, before reappearing several seconds later.

The second Mephisto spins and sends Decker and Sarge flying. Decker’s P90 goes sliding up the corridor. She’s too dazed to crawl after it, she’s smacked her head on the metal wall. Sarge tries to get up, but his knee is at an unnatural angle.

Grolic and Yang keep firing at the second one until the cloak dissolves. La Valletta grabs it and rips at it as it rakes him. It catches his face and he feels the flesh shred, dimly wondering where the blood is coming from. La Valletta’s enhanced and he manages to rend the demon to pieces, damaging it as much as it’s wrecking him.

At some point, in his adrenaline blood lust, he’s aware that it’s stopped struggling and has vanished. He’s clawing at a pool of blood and ichor.

The third demon stabs Grolic and Yang through the head while they’ve ran to help Sarge and Blake.

It pauses as a shot rings out and there’s a young, fair haired man in a white uniform holding a massive revolver. It melts into the wall and comes back out, heading for la Valletta before there’s the sound of a revving sword and the extending fingers are knocked aside by a man in his forties and the same uniform.

“Tend to the injured!” Falzon shouts to Nero.

She looks at him through unfocusing eyes, she’s going into shock and tries to speak. Nero scrambles through her pack and comes up with a couple of small Vital Stars. He cracks them against her teeth and the liquid fills her mouth, gagging, even as Nero bids her to swallow. It’s foul and bitter on her tongue, like syrup of ipecac.

“I know, I know, it tastes like ass,” soothes Nero. “Look.”

Blake’s bleeding stills and her muscles start to knit back to her bone. Her flesh closes over it. She grabs Nero’s arm. “What the fuck?”

Before Nero can answer, his attention’s drawn to the Angelos that appear and attack the Mephisto. Falzon’s already got rid of the cloak before it can restore itself and it’s powerless before the Angelos.

There’s an Alto and two Biancos and they’ve just turned their attention to the downed soldiers.

Nero reaches for Red Queen before Tony stops him. Guard the injured. I want to observe Falzon in battle.

Ms Kye runs in to the Captain, fending off a blow from a Bianco with her sais. She speaks to him and Nero sees her hand la Valletta a Vital Star. He grimaces as he drinks it.

Decker has crawled to the Sarge and looks like she’s trying to get his firearm and aim at the Angelo, but Ms Kye shouts for them to stand down, lest they hit Falzon and Violet.

Falzon looks across to the Alto and back to Violet. She nods, powering up her blue aura and making swords appear out of thin air at the Bianco on la Valletta. It blocks with its shield and revs its lance.

It charges at Violet, who flash steps out the way.
Nero’s never actually seen her wield her powers and it’s spectacular.

The Bianco throws a ball of dark energy and she just smacks it back with a blue blast of her own that would have sent it airborne if it hadn’t flown up. There’s a smoking hole in the wall where it was standing.

All the while she’s flash stepping around it as it flies overhead to get the drop on her. The second Bianco circles around her back. Violet conjures a spinning ring of the glowing swords and the air begins to reek of ozone as they hit the shields of the demons and disintegrate. She’s constantly flash stepping and firing off the swords.

*She’s magnificent. Her body is language,* Tony says in awe.

Violet is constantly in motion, moving like a dancer, directing the blue energy into glyphs and firing bolts from them.

It’s hard for her to concentrate between the two of them and one spins into her, anticipating where she flash steps next. It sends her flying into a wall, but she buffers the blow with a large blue glyph and jumps to her feet.

They charge their lances and rush her and for a moment, Nero holds his breath. He can feel the tension in Tony as well, before there’s a blue explosion and the Biancos are flung aside.

She fires off more swords and a glyph begins to appear at the rear of one. He realises she can’t flash step when she’s concentrating on forming a glyph as big as the one she’s creating.

Nero notices that the other Bianco has recovered faster than she thought it would and before Tony can even tell him, Nero’s fired Blue Rose at it.

It turns and comes at Nero. Decker lets off the P90. The bullets get it in the back and stun it for a bit.

By now, Violet’s glyph has powered up and she makes a motion with her hand and it fires off a massive blue screaming beam. The Bianco tries to shield itself from the blue beam, but it’s useless and it begins to disintegrate under the onslaught.
It shines whiter and whiter in the light and it’s blinding.

There’s an explosive flash that knocks everyone along the corridor.

The Bianco is nowhere to be seen.

The second one recovers from being shot and flies up above Violet. She flash steps and just avoids the lance stabbing down in to the floor with a clang. She’s stepped slightly behind it as she fires off the blue swords at its back.

It drops and swings at her with the shield and she deflects the blow with a series of small glyphs coming off her hand motions. She flash steps behind it, but she has to drop her glyphs to do it and it makes a lance stab that gashes her left shoulder.

She actually grabs the lance and closes her eyes as the blue aura swirls and gathers around it. It’s like the Bianco’s frozen and much as it tries to move, it can’t even manage a twitch.

Violet looks down, eyes closed and the blue aura swirls round it like a tornado. It’s pulled Violet’s hair from her bun and it’s whipping round her face. The air and the aura spins faster, stretching up to the ceiling. The souls and demons animating it are pulled out and flung shrieking to the ceiling as the tornado twists up into it with a flash of blue fire.

The Bianco stands for a moment, then dissipates.

Nero thinks he can hear her say, “one less piece,” as she drops the vanishing lance.

Violet comes over to him and he can swear she’s ablaze. The power is roiling off her in waves.

She drops down beside him and closes his mouth with a single finger under his chin.

The Alto ceases to hover and comes in for the attack, but Falzon is there, sword drawn and revved.
It flies at him from a steep angle and makes a wide slash, but Falzon’s already guarding above his head. Their swords spark and slide apart as the Alto’s momentum runs it further ahead.

Falzon spins and guards the combo of slashes that comes his way as the Alto rushes him. His sword quivers under the assault, but holds firm, the force from the blows being channelled down through his body.

Falzon crosses swords with it’s last blow and pushes it nearly twelve feet back. He brings up his guard again and stands ready for it to attack him.

The Alto rushes at him and Nero isn’t exactly sure what happens next.

At some point in the Alto’s rush, Falzon jumps across its unguarded side, an arcing, elegant leap over its’ shoulder, spinning as he goes. Nero hears Falzon’s sword rev and smells the accelerant catch fire. He thinks he sees the sword swing out as he leaps, even before the Alto is in range.

But the sword is in perfect range, just as it makes contact with its neck joint and the head goes bouncing down the corridor.

The body’s already buckled into parts as Falzon lands lightly on his feet, jumping back to face it and guard instantly in place.

Nero’s disappointed. “I thought it would go on longer.”

It didn’t need to. He’s told you everything you need to know about him as a fighter, replies Tony. He’s prepared for any fight, observed his enemy’s style, saw a weakness and went for it. He didn’t make a move without knowing where he was going to hit before it landed.

“I’d have killed it already. I’ve fought these things before.” Nero recalls some of the battles he’s had with them.

Relying on brute strength will only get you so far, chides Tony. Your fighting style is a glorified temper tantrum. A skilful, adaptive fighter like Falzon will kill you.
Ms Kye is already gathering the party together as Violet creates a portal that takes them back to the main hall.

***

Captain la Valletta and his men are medevac’d from the helipad where Nero had fought Credo.

Ms Kye and Nero hang back as Violet and Falzon see them off. La Valletta actually salutes Violet as the bird gets ready to fly. She smiles and salutes him back.

As it disappears off over the top of HQ, Falzon turns to Violet and speaks with quiet fury. It’s in every line of his body. “I had rather been expecting a request from you to cover this very instance. I didn’t expect to find foreign soldiers defiling our most sacred temples.”

Violet regards him in the same way she’d treat a rabid dog she’s about to club on the head. “UO took the whole situation out of my hands. Until I get consent, I can’t allow Knights back on the premises, unless they are also UO employees. And that includes you, My Lord General.”

“There would be no UO Facility here if His Holiness hadn’t allowed those Mainlanders in to begin with and you’d do well to remember that, Madam Alighieri,” Falzon almost spits.

“How sad it would have been to miss out on the protection all that money and research brings, particularly at a time when the Order of the Sword was about to die out,” retorts Violet. “And yet you wasted it on death statues on the whim of a lunatic and a sick old man. They wrecked this island and killed a third of the people for Agnus and Scerri’s batshittery.”

Falzon’s face contorts and it’s a look she hadn’t seen for a very, very long time. She still finds it frightening, but she holds her nerve. He looks like he wants to strike her.

She looks at him with undisguised contempt.

Nero can hear some of the exchange, but Ms Kye rests a hand on his arm. She shakes her head.

Tony is buzzing with anger in his head, but stays silent.
“I never agreed with The Saviour. The worst thing we ever did was to allow outsiders in. Mainlanders, tourists, UO. We should have closed off Fortuna long ago and I won’t be dictated to by Credo Micellef’s witch whore,” snarls Falzon.

“Tough shit, My Lord. I’m a UO employee, so you’re scuppered there.”

Falzon’s hand twitches at the mix of hatred and defiance in her face. “You’re untouchable, yes. But Kyrie isn’t. He’s not.” Falzon indicates Nero.

Violet doesn’t blanch, at least not visibly. “Thank you for your help here today, My Lord General. UO will be very grateful for the learning experience you gave their operatives.”

She grabs his clenched fist and shakes it, pulling him in close enough to give him a closed mouth kiss on the lips. It’s a few seconds’ press and nothing more, before she turns on her heel, Ms Kye scampering after her like a small dog.

She doesn’t look back, nor acknowledge Nero as she walks across the helipad and down the stairs.

Falzon stands there in stunned silence, before convulsively wiping his mouth.

Nero’s equally stunned, remaining rooted to the spot.

Even Tony is silent.

Falzon marches back to the car, without looking for Nero. Nero has to run to keep up.

He still doesn’t know what the fuck just happened.

***

Ms Kye catches up to Violet. Without breaking stride, Violet orders her to draw up a standard
employment contract for Kyrie Micellef, while she pulls out her phone. There’s a message on it which makes her smile grimly.

Accepted.

Ms Kye pulls out her tablet as she walks and taps a few details in. “The contract will be printed by the time we get to the office, Madam. She’ll be able to sign it tonight.”

“Good. Call Lord Arius and get those funds released. The team I spoke about have accepted the assignment.” Violet’s mind’s spinning as she runs through the possible consequences to her warning shot.

“Yes, Madam. Shall I have the car brought round? I imagine you’d like to go home now.”

“Yes, Ms Kye, I imagine I would.” Violet stops for a moment and looks at the demon. “Do you have an actual name?”

“No, Madam. Just Ms Kye.” The demon returns her gaze. “Only the spelling differentiates me from the others of my kind.”

“Would you like one?”

“What. Madam?” Ms Kye is confused by her question.

“A name of your own.”

Ms Kye gives her a smile that looks like breaking sunshine as she realises what Violet means. “Yes, Madam, I should like that. What will you name me?”

“You pick your name. You have my consent.”

“I would like to call myself…Tyuule. I was reading a novel with a character of that name in it before I was sent here and I liked her.” She again makes that fingers to heart and mouth gesture to
Violet.

Violet nods. “Tyuule Kye you are then, Ms Kye.”

Violet turns and hurries. She needs to get home.

***

Falzon dismisses Nero early and the feeling of dread that’s never truly left him, has settled back in the pit of his stomach. He walks home. He needs the motion to calm his nerves.

Tony finally speaks and Nero can actually visualise him in his mind’s eye, as if Tony’s walking beside him. Blue coat, dark clothes, brown boots. He’s holding Yamato, oddly enough. Nero dimly notes the very strong resemblance between them. Has this been coming for some time?

“I guess. Falzon’s a powerful piece of shit, but he’s still a piece of shit.” Nero sighs. “Credo hated him, but he couldn’t do anything against him.”

_Falzon strikes me as a planner and spiteful. I don’t think he’ll actively harm you if he can subvert you against Violet._ Tony is the same height as him and looks about the same age.

“You think he’ll just carry on with what he’s already doing?” asks Nero. He feels sick and his head’s reeling. It’s as bad as the first week after the Saviour.

_Yes. I need you to trust me, Nero, even if it doesn’t look like you should. But I promise I will not steer you wrong._ Tony sounds grave. He casts a concerned look at Nero.

“Who are you, Tony?” asks Nero, suddenly bone tired. “Who are you, really?”

_I have my own agenda, yes. But our aims coincide._ Tony’s voice is no less serious, but it has gone softer. His expression matches his tone. _When the time is right, I will answer all your questions, Nero, I promise._
Nero sighs. “Do I have a choice?”

Yes, but that doesn’t make it a good choice. Without power, without strength, you can’t protect yourself. If you can’t protect yourself-

“I can’t protect anyone that matters.”

Exactly. And we’ve both come too damned far to fail now.

The determination and resolve in Tony’s face remind Nero of someone else. Dante, maybe. Trying to get Yamato back in the Ascension Room.

“Let’s do it. My options are kinda limited, anyway.”

He walks up to the front door just as Violet’s car turns into the street. There’s a guitar case in the hall, pride of place among the other bags. A thought occurs just as he hears male laughter at the story Kyrie’s telling, followed by two women clamouring for details. The smell on the air tells him that Kyrie has a stew cooking. It’s her go-to when she ends up with more people than she’s expecting at her table.

“And then, he punches Josh the next day for getting him in trouble. And here he is, Qalbi li thhabbat barra mieghi,” Kyrie says as he comes through the door. She gets up to kiss him and without meaning to, Nero kisses her a little more deeply than he would in company.

Trish jumps up to shield Lady’s eyes, while they start clapping and whooping.

“So, Kid, you saved the world and got the girl?” Dante’s got that shit-eating grin on his face as he gets up to hug Nero. Nero holds on a little tighter and longer than he should before both men slap each other on the back and pull back slightly.

“Sparda’s balls, it’s good to see you,” grins Nero.

Trish chokes at the look on Dante’s face.
“Maybe not mention my Dad’s balls when we’re this close. People might get the wrong idea,” he quips, lightly, but he does look slightly uncomfortable.

“Hey, Dante, if Sparda’s God, does that make you Jesus?” says Lady, mock-innocently.

“The amount of times he gets impaled? Jesus ain’t got shit on him,” replies Trish.

“Bless you my child,” says Dante as he makes the sign of the cross over her.

Trish screeches and pretends to shrivel up. “I’m meltiiiiiiiiiiiiig.”

The front door slams and Violet shouts, “Kyrie? Whose bags are those?”

“We’ve got houseguests,” calls Kyrie. “I’ve told them all the really bad stuff about you!”

“And it’s all true,” Violet replies as she comes in the living room.

As she sees Dante, all the colour drains from her face as she faints. Her last sight before it all goes black is the white-haired man rushing towards her to catch her. She thinks she feels strong arms grab her, but she’s into the welcoming darkness all too soon.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings: Dubcon and new tags added to reflect content

Fortuna, two decades ago

It's not the next day, but the next when Peter comes to Credo’s house.

Peter is not wearing his uniform and Credo knows he would have been rota’d on, particularly as he himself isn’t due back till tomorrow. Lord Scerri can make do with one Assistant, but protocol allows for two.

Credo’s heart sinks as he gets the door.

“It’s time,” says Peter, simply.

Credo nods and gets his things.

***

They walk to Peter’s house.

Castle Town has never seemed so big.

It takes Credo several goes to speak. His mouth feels so dry.

“What’s she like?”
“Tall, dark, skinny. Sounds quite a bit like her too.”

“Close my eyes, I’ll never know?” Credo says bitterly.

“Whatever you feel better doing, Credo,” replies Peter, exasperated. “I tried my best to get as close to her as possible. I’m sorry it’s come to this, but did you really want the Wedding Spell and the Master’s Bedroom to be your first time?”

“Is she…” Credo’s voice trails off. “Nice?”

“She’s clever and funny, well-travelled. Clean, no Mainland diseases.”

“Sparda’s balls!” Credo exhales and shakes his head. “I never even thought about anything like that.”

“And you’ll never need to again,” Peter assures him. “This time next year, you’ll be a husband and father and this will just be a distant memory.”

“How old is she?” Credo is desperately trying to find an upside to this.

“23, so only a few years older than you.”

“Maybe I should have gone for a girl who’s nothing like Verity,” says Credo as he kicks a stone in the road. It hits a car tyre.

Peter stops and glares at him. “Then I’ll dye her hair back. Stop stalling, Credo.”

Credo sighs and starts walking again.

“Have you thought about how you would approach this?” asks Peter. “Perhaps you would like to have a date with her, if that makes it easier.”
“I’ve thought about nothing else and I still have no clue.” Credo looks alarmed. “I can’t be seen out with her!”

“I know that! I meant have a nice lunch or something beforehand,” replies Peter. “I can have something brought over. There’s no reason why this can’t be a pleasant experience.”

“What’s her name?”

“Credo, are you trying to spoil the illusion?” They’ve reached Peter’s door. “Try her as Verity first and if that doesn’t work, then try her as someone else.”

Credo walks into Peter’s house like he’s about to be run through.

***

It isn’t going well.

It’s not the girl. She’s lovely enough, but she’s not Verity.

They share a meal and discuss books they’ve read and the places they’ve been, but she’s not Verity.

Credo’s enjoying the conversation more than he probably should and keeps it running longer than he definitely should. To her credit, Edith – Credo asked, because she’s not Verity – doesn’t push him faster than he wants to go.

Another place, another time, maybe he would have been delighted to squire Edith about town, even with her profession. It’s not illegal in Fortuna, though no family would want their daughters reduced to such circumstances. Certainly enough Knights have taken to wife a former doxy or a ladybird, even in the Old Families. His own grandmother had been his grandfather’s mistress and he’d married her when his first wife had passed from a long illness.

“Do you do a lot of this?” he asks, because he’s ran out of ways to play for time. “Purchasing gentlemen’s run goods?”
“Every gentleman gets my undivided attendance and my future discretion,” she smiles. She’s dressed like Verity, long gown, hijab, dark hair pulled back under it.

It strikes Credo that until yesterday morning, he didn’t know how long Verity’s hair actually was or even its real colour. Even at parties, it’s been pinned up and under something.

Edith isn’t as tall as Verity and her eyes are blue, but it’s a good match. She doesn’t sound like Verity, though and that’s really vexing Credo.

He stands up abruptly, suddenly just wanting to get this over with.

“So how do we do this? Do I just strip or –” his hands are on his shirt buttons, but Edith rises and quickly places her hands over his, stilling them.

“Let me,” she says. She runs her hand up to his face, tracing her fingers over it.

“Such a handsome man,” she whispers. “Don’t be afraid to ask for what you want. I’m here for you and you alone.”

She sounds enough like Verity when she whispers, that he can fool himself if he closes his eyes. He turns slightly and catches the palm of her hand, kissing it. It smells like her hand lotion, the one she makes herself, like his mother does.

He’s always loved the smell in the kitchen on the days she makes it and he’ll love the smell in the kitchen Verity will make when it’s their kitchen.

He just has to get through this first. The thought nearly jolts him out again.

Credo keeps his eyes closed, stroking down her arms and up to her head, drawing her in for a kiss. She finds him easily and their lips close on each other, just a little press and purse to begin with, seeing how he reacts.
Credo takes a deep inhale through his nose, sweet violets strong across his throat. It makes him gag, just a little, because the scent is slightly wrong on her. He pulls back, just little, but enough that he can’t feel her next to him.

“I’m sorry, I can’t seem to hold the thought,” he murmurs, but she pulls him back round with a soft hand and a gentle kiss.

This kiss is longer and Credo can’t help but respond to it, now he’s getting used to the smell of the lotion on her. His arms slide around her back and pull her flush against him. He opens his mouth a little more and chances a brief sweep of his tongue over hers.

She makes a small sound and a small shudder, prompting Credo to become more daring. He holds her tighter, a hand on the back of her head pressing her mouth to his as his lips work against hers harder and his tongue tangling with hers as he explores her mouth.

He can taste the Qagħaq tal-ghasel they had earlier, making her mouth sweet, but it nearly throws Credo off again as he remembers Verity doesn’t like it.

Just today, then he never needs to taste it on a woman again.

He breaks away again, resting his forehead on her shoulder, cheek against hers. Credo’s breathing more heavily than he should be as he marshals his thoughts.

He finds her mouth again and kisses her a little harder than he intends, but she doesn’t make a sound or push him away, so he carries on. He works his tongue around hers, despite the situation trying to learn what makes her shudder, if faster makes her tremble, if slower makes her sigh.

He’s only ever had eyes for Verity and he’s well-versed in her preferences. While he seems to leave her pleased enough, it's strange to kiss another so.

They carry on like this for a little while, before she pulls back a little. Credo opens his eyes, but she keeps hers cast down as though she understands they are not Verity’s. She places his hands on her hijab and waits.

Credo pulls it over her head gently, hoping it doesn’t catch on any pins in her hair. The amount Verity has means it must be pinned to an inch of its life, if his mother’s hair is anything to go by.
The way she has it arranged means it tumbles free as the hijab is tossed aside, unravelling in a dark, glossy river, untwisting to a waterfall. It’s not as thick or as long as Verity’s, but it’s beautiful nonetheless.

Credo gently lifts his hands to the sides of her head and runs his hands down the length of it. It’s smooth under his hands and there’s another strong waft of sweet violets where it’s been confined in the hijab. Credo takes a deep breath and inhales the scent for a few moments. He combs his fingers through it, loving the feel of it slipping through his fingers. It’s not a sensation he’s felt before from another’s hair, so he takes his time.

He’s definitely going to learn how to pleat hair – from the way she’s reacting, it must feel so good.

And of course, once Verity and he have more children, he’s hoping for a daughter to spoil, so he’ll need to learn how to style her hair.

He spends a little more time fanning out her hair and feeling her squirm and moan against him before he kisses her again. She fairly melts into the kiss and now Credo has a better idea of what she likes, so he takes some time to experiment and enjoy her mouth and the press of her body into his.

Credo must admit, he’s beginning to enjoy pulling the reactions from her that he is – all the little moans and hitches and the flush that’s appearing across her cheekbones.

She reaches for his shirt, undoing the buttons, one at a time, slowly, but there’s a definite snap as they slip through their buttonholes. Credo feels like a crack in a wall is opening with each snap that he’s going to walk through and be changed, that nothing will ever be the same again.

That he will never be the same again, like it’s the last day he will be honest with himself.

She intersperses each undoing with her kiss, softly, gently blessing his lips.

He kisses her just as gently. His kisses are deep and strong, but they’re slow. Credo takes his time with her, kissing along her jaw, her throat, even around the nape of her neck. Partly it’s because that’s forbidden territory and partly because the sweet violet smell is strong again there.
She pauses for a moment before she slides the shirt from Credo’s shoulders and tosses it aside. She gasps and he gives a small smile as she looks at a torso that wouldn’t shame a Greek God, a dark sprinkling of hair across his chest and trailing down under his waistband. She’s careful not to look up as she palms his muscles and keep the illusion she’s someone she’s not.

Credo shivers under her touch, taking her by the hips and gently walking them backwards to the bed as her hands ghost over his chest and shoulders. His legs hit the bed and he sits down more heavily than he meant to. She kisses him, harder, deeper and he responds in kind, tongues almost duelling as Credo starts to lift her dress up. She helps him remove the garment – he’s never realised how big dresses actually are – and she’s standing before him in petticoat and stays.

He takes a moment to look at her in her undress, like she’s a gypsy with her frilly underskirt, stays accentuating her figure and her hair cascading over her breasts. Her chest is heaving, as much as it can captive within her stays and there’s a flush over her face and décolletée. Her lips are red and swollen with his kisses. Half-closed, her eyes look dark.

She is amazingly beautiful right now.

Credo keeps his eyes on her as he pulls off his boots and then his trousers, standing fully naked before her. He watches as her eyes trail over his body and a little look of confusion forms on her face as he sees he is still limp.

“You’re beautiful,” Credo says. “But I can’t pretend you’re her and I can’t make love to you, because I know you’re not her. I wish I could. You’re lovely.”

“There’s still other things to try,” Edith assures him. “Help me with these stays. I can’t get them myself.”

“How did you get them on?” Credo asks, instinctively working out how to unlace the wretched garment.

“I was laced into them. I thought I would have help getting them off.” She raises her arms as he slides it up over her head. It doesn’t take her long to shimmy out of her petticoat and shift.

Despite himself, Credo can’t help but stare.
Edith does a twirl. “Do I suit you, sir?”

Credo looks down at his limp phallus. “You please both my eyes, but not my little Credo’s one.”

“I still haven’t pulled out every weapon in my arsenal,” she says coyly. She walks over to the bed and makes a sweeping step-this-way gesture. “If Sir pleases?”

“Stop with this Sir nonsense,” says Credo. “Both of us are here because we have to be, so we are equals in that matter, at least.”

He comes and sits on the bed next to her and she begins playing with Credo’s cock. He watches her face while she does so and wishes he could feel it stir to the way she bites her lip. He’s enjoying being with her on a physical level, but it’s not enough to send the sensations to his poor, sleeping shaft.

No matter how much she polishes the blade, it stubbornly refuses to unsheathe. It does begin to swell a little, but not enough for Edith to perform her magic. Even as they lie there on the soft bed, kissing and exploring each other’s bodies, nothing much happens.

“I really don’t think I’ll be able to draw my sword,” says Credo eventually. “As much as I’d like to.”

“Truly a pity,” smiles Edith. “I was enjoying myself and I do believe you were too.”

Credo kisses her. “I was. Truth be told, even if she was here instead of you, I don’t think I’d be able to perform.”

Edith nods. “That often happens when a man has a lot on his mind. Stage fright, if you will. You’ll just have to wait till your marriage to please her when you’re relaxed and in your own bed.”

He looks at her. “What did Peter tell you?”

“That you had entered a Courting Suit, you feel true for the girl and wanted to be able to leave her well-pleased when you finally shared a bed.” Edith kisses him again, stroking her hands over his
Credo returns the kiss, more relaxed now as he explores her mouth with his tongue and her body with his hands. He feels a hand take hold of his shaft and begin to stroke, hard and firm. It takes him a moment to register that the hand is wrong.

It’s too big, skin’s too rough and it’s too strong to be Edith’s.

Credo can feel her hands on him, one on his nape, the other on his back.

He’d start to panic, but he’s feeling a creeping warmth that makes him feel drowsy and his limbs heavy. He pulls back far enough from Edith and both register the interloper at the same time. The adrenaline from seeing Peter’s hand on his cock nearly gives him enough energy to pull away.

Nearly.

There’s a light, an energy, *something* coming from Peter and flowing over Credo.

“No…” slurs Credo. “I don’t want…”

He can’t seem to muster the energy to resist or move away from that caressing hand as it moves up and over his length. The muscles in his buttocks and thighs spasm at the sensation and it comforts him that he’s got some movement.

He can feel sensations running to his cock in a way he couldn’t when it was Edith’s hand upon him and thinking of her makes him look at her.

She looks sad.

*No, frightened* thinks Credo. *Why is she frightened?*

Everything feels so warm and faraway.
“Don wan this,” Credo’s words all run together and he’s not even sure he’s saying them outside his head.

And still that hand, rubbing and squeezing in all the right places, like he knows how Credo likes it. Of course he must know. They shared a barrack room for long enough – Peter was older than the average Knight when he joined and so he’d been paired with Credo. Being paired with the son of an Old Family would instruct him in how a Knight conducts himself as a Gentleman.

Credo’s body is betraying him, fire burning through his nerve endings and something dangerous coiling itself in his back as his shaft begins to swell and lengthen.

Peter’s voice is low, rough when he speaks and Credo could see it bringing his women to their knees – he can move his head enough to see Edith shudder, even with the fear fighting the fascination on her face.

“I’m sorry, Credo,” says Peter, in that low, rough, husk. “It was taking too long and not even you will stand in my way.”

Credo’s back arches at a particularly sensitive sweep over his glans and a drop of precome is starting to form. Peter’s thumb pokes at the eye and Credo gives a strangled moan.

“What did you stop for?” Peter snaps at Edith. “Earn your fuck, girl!”

Edith pulls Credo’s mouth back into a kiss. She’s picked up how he likes to be caressed and she concentrates on that and he can’t help but respond to her as her tongue dances over the roof of his mouth in long, slow, easy slides that mirrors Peter’s hand on his shaft.

Peter’s other hand is playing with Edith’s ass and cunny, dipping into the second to spread into the first and she’s squirming and writhing against his touch, against Credo.

He’s almost fully erect now.

There’s something underlying Edith’s kisses now, something dark and nasty and it’s leaving a sour taste in both their mouths. Credo tries to hold on to it, fight the torpor that’s come over him, but he
can’t. All he can do is respond.

“All he can do is respond.

“Please don’t fight him,” she whispers in his ear, fear creeping through her gentle tone, even as her words hitch with Peter’s fingers in her ass. “We can still enjoy this, but don’t make it hard for him.”

“Not givin in,” Credo murmurs, as Edith undulates across his torso.

“Please, Credo. It won’t be you who’ll suffer,” Edith pleads. Peter scissors her ass particularly hard to make the point.

Despite himself, Credo nods.

“So, Credo,” says Peter, same tone, same speed. The shivers are running all over Credo’s skin now and he’s full hard now. “Your little Credo does you proud, finally.”

Peter smacks Edith’s buttock and she squeals. “Mark that, girl. Just as well you’ve had practice, he’d split you in two otherwise.”

“The girl in his Suit is lucky. She’ll have no complaints,” agrees Edith. “He’ll pain her first though, with that girth.”

“He won’t be her first, if all goes to plan,” Peter says, still in that same tone. His hand has never stilled, nor sped. Credo can only move to shudder under the touch.

“Don’t talk about Verity like that,” Credo manages to grit out.

“Let’s talk about her,” says Peter, indicating to Edith that she should carry on with her courtesies to Credo’s chest and stomach. Edith leans over and begins to kiss and lick and suck over his chest, her hands ghosting a trail over his shoulders and stomach.

It should be too many hands, but Peter seems to know exactly how to control his reactions, timing it with Edith’s movements.
“Tell me what you like about Verity,” says Peter. “Close your eyes if it helps.”

Credo doesn’t close his eyes. He’s not going to give Peter the satisfaction. Credo meets his eyes and he hopes some kind of defiance is clear in them.

He doesn’t want to talk about Verity, not here and not like this, but he can’t help himself. He can’t stop himself from speaking, just like he can’t tamp down the shivers along his skin and electric pulses in his muscles as they tighten under his skin.

“I like her eyes, I like how dark they are.”

“Tell me more. She has lovely lashes.”

Credo gasps as Edith sucks on his nipple, running round it with her tongue.

“I love the shape of them. I love how you can read everything in them, she can’t hide anything in them.”

“I think that’s the Arabic heritage, when only the face is shown, only the eyes can speak.”

Edith has one hand running through Credo’s hair, scratching his scalp and he presses into it with a groan. It feels so good. Her other hand is running over his abs and down to his balls, after each touch, slips it to the crease of his thighs.

Credo jerks up in to that touch. “I love her energy. I love how clever she is. I love how strong she is.”

“She’s going to need it when she’s married, raising a child and training at the Archive. She looks like she’ll be insatiable – work all day, then fuck all night. You’ve seen her dance, Credo, I think she’ll throw herself into it.”

Peter takes his hand away and tugs on Edith’s hair, indicating she mount Credo. “If we fuck like
we fight, a woman fucks like she dances. All that dancing means she’ll be tight. No wonder she’s so skinny. She never stops.”

“I’m sorry,” she mouths, as she kisses him sadly, sweetly, fully. Credo responds, fully returning the kiss. He wants to move his hands to touch her, but he can’t.

“Tell me, Credo, tell me about Verity,” says Peter.

Credo can hear the sound of buttons popping on a fly and he jerks as much as he can when he feels the weight on the bed change as Peter kneels over his legs. He’s still wearing his trousers, Credo can feel the fabric against his legs.

“Relax, Credo. I want to hear about Verity while we share her here.”

Edith stiffens with a cry and her eyes widen as Peter’s prick pushes against her ass, but doesn’t enter it, not yet.

“Tell me, Credo,” he says as he stokes Credo’s dick before lining it up with Edith’s wet entrance.

“She’s got strong, nimble fingers, they’d be so firm and strong on my shaft and body as they stroke and trace over me.” Credo can’t help himself now and part of him hates himself for it. “Like she’s done already. Tracing over my stomach. I can’t help but push into her touch.”

Peter’s placed the tip of Credo’s sword into her sheathe. “Just a moment separates youth from man. Take him right to the hilt, girl. Let him have first thrust, you’ll be duel wielding soon enough.”

Peter pushes her down and she takes Credo all the way, too fast and her head rolls back against Peter, a mix of pleasure and pain rolling over her face.

Credo arches up from the bed with a hoarse cry. He manages to move his hands with the shock of it, but he can only get them to her hips.

Peter stays pressed to her as she moves as much as she can, setting up the same speed that he’d used with his hand. She gives little cries and hitches as she moves. Credo can feel the muscles in
her thighs shift and ripple under her skin as she pushes up and drops down.

“I want her to shake when I enter her. I want her to sob my name because it’s all too much for her,” Credo continues, breath catching and his voice shaking as his shaft is enveloped within her hot, tight wetness.

It’s so much better than he ever dreamed, even the way it’s happening. He can’t help his hips trying to thrust up into her, trying to brace his legs for more leverage. His fingers are going to bruise her hips and legs tomorrow, he’s digging in so hard.

“So tell me Credo, tell me how you’ll have Verity,” croons Peter. “She’ll be double sheathed soon, she’ll come apart under us.”

“Verity’s so slim, my hands will span her waist, I’ll run my hands over her ribs and thumb her little nubs till they stand proud. I’m going to trace all over her ribs, under her stays. I might even have her keep them on as I take her,” Credo stutters, breathlessly. He can’t get enough air in his lungs and he doesn’t know why Peter wants him to keep talking.

She keeps up her rhythm, rolling her hips alongside her thighs’ motion.

Peter’s been pressed against her ass the whole time and now he pushes in, with a quiet groan. She goes taut at the pressure and the intrusion, her mouth a large, silent O as she can scarce breathe. Credo draws blood on her hips as he feels Peter’s cock through the thin wall that separates both sheathes.

Peter gives her a moment to adjust to the fullness she must be feeling. She’s trembling uncontrollably.

Credo’s panting, huge hoarse rasping breaths. He can’t talk anymore. He doesn’t have anything left now but for what comes next. He wants it to be over. He doesn’t want to stop.

Peter has one arm wrapped around her chest and one hand against her nub, rubbing the join where Credo’s thick within her core. She’s got one hand on Peter’s ass, as if she’s trying to stay him and the other is intertwined with Credo’s strong fingers.

Peter tenses his thighs and starts to thrust.
There’s not even any point in her trying to syncopate the rhythm, Peter is too strong for her and the pace he sets is brutal.

Trapped in her tight, wet heat, pinned down as he is, Credo can only hang on as Peter’s cock slides hard against his, it’s a new sensation when he’s been overwhelmed by it all. His skin feels like it’s crawling off his body. He manages to reach up enough to pull her down onto his chest, Peter keeping her there with a hand on her back.

Credo’s arms wrap around her back, binding her to him, holding her steady into Peter’s thrusts. He can feel her hair draping over him like a silk scarf and her body’s slick with sweat as she’s forced to take them both. Credo can feel her pert nubs rubbing against his chest with each of Peter’s pounding drives into her ass. Her breath is sob-sighing into Credo’s ear, as her face is buried into his neck.

Pulling on her hair, till her face meets his, Credo kisses her hungrily, sweeping his tongue around her mouth. She’s not so far gone she can’t return it, pulling on his hair enough to make him hiss.

That low coiling in his back starts to tighten and Credo knows he’s close.

He feels her walls pulse around them, stretched around them as she is and she tenses up through her whole body.

The grip, the clench and Peter’s slide is all too much for Credo and the coil in his back snaps.

It’s like an earthquake’s gone off in his spine as he spurts deep inside her.

He bites back the name on his lips. It’s not right to say anothers’ name when she isn’t the one he’s with and Edith has endured so much for him.

Peter’s rhythm quickens even further and loses its beat as he draws near to his climax.

Credo holds on to her even as she’s too sensitive and squirms to escape it all.
Peter drives her on and manages to bring her off again, squealing and gasping as she comes. Credo feels the ripple of Peter’s orgasm along his cock as the other man spurts into her ass with a growl. He falls forward on his elbows and sees Credo’s fucked out face and nods.

Credo nods back as he strokes Edith’s face and hair. She’s panting atop him and she can’t stop shaking. They both groan when Peter pulls out her ass, cleaning himself on the bottom of the sheets and putting his still hard dick back in his trousers.

Edith gives a small sobbing sigh, breath hitching as she comes back to normal and it distracts Credo. It takes him a good few moments for him to get himself together enough to ask Edith how she is.

She doesn’t move and doesn’t meet his eyes. He makes no effort to move or make her move, simply stays lying there and stroking her hair.

“I didn’t hear him come in,” says Edith, finally.

Credo looks around the room. “I never heard him leave, either.”

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“Watch her face! Watch her face.” Kyrie says as they get Violet to the settee. Violet can feel strong arms carefully pulling her into place, semi-reclined on the chair.

“I wish I had that effect on all the ladies,” she hears him say. He catches her shoulder and the pain brings her round. Violet hisses as he withdraws his hand and sees the blood.

“That looks nasty,” he says.

“I’ve had a busy day,” Violet slurs. “Where’s Kyrie?’”

“I’m here.”

“Inma bag. Get it signed. Don’t question. Ask Nero.” She puts a hand to her face, touching her jaw.

“You didn’t hit your face,” says Nero. “And yeah, Kyrie, just sign whatever it is she’s got. I’ll tell you why in a minute.”

Violet can hear someone rummaging in her bag.

“UO Contract with my name on it?”

Someone must confirm it, because Violet can hear a pen scraping across the paper. She breathes a sigh of relief. Someone presses a glass of water into her hand. Violet can focus better and there’s a well-built man kneeling next to her, supporting her to sit and a hand on the glass.

“Easy now.” He accidently smacks the glass into her teeth and Violet squeals.

“I can manage,” she says, hand to her mouth. She looks round the room and her eyes widen when she sees Lady. “When’s dinner ready, Kyrie?”
“I’ve just sent Nero to dish up. You having it with us or not?” Kyrie doesn’t even know why she’s asking. She knows what the answer is.

“Not. I’m going for a shower and then I’ll come back down when dinner’s over.” Violet casts a longing glance at the kitchen. That stew smells delicious.

“I’ll leave a plate in your study. What about dessert?”

Violet shakes her head.

“Aw, c’mon,” says Dante. “How can you pass up that stew? You need to get meat on those bones. You’ll fall down the cracks in the pavement.”

Violet gives Dante a pained look, while Kyrie glares at him. “You can explain it. Get it over with.”

Violet goes to have her shower, while Kyrie takes a deep breath.

“Did I fuck up? I get the feeling I fucked up,” says Dante.

“Do you remember the teenage girl who got hauled out the Med about 18, 19 years ago? Every bone in her body broken and her face smashed in?” says Kyrie. “They tried to find out who she was but she didn’t have any memory?”

Dante thinks for a moment. “Vaguely, but I was…kinda busy then. I didn’t really watch the news.”

Lady and he exchange a glance and Kyrie doesn’t notice the slight catch in his voice.

“It was all over the news at the time – it was huge. La sirena spezzata, she was called,” says Kyrie.

“Broken Mermaid,” translates Dante. “Like I said, I was busy. That would have been around the same time as the earthquake that exposed those ruins and I was caught up with that. I’d just set up
“Well, that’s who Violet is. They’ll never fix her jaw, it’s held together by plates and wires and she can’t eat solid food. She doesn’t like eating in front of strangers and she hates having to explain it to people, because they won’t shut up about it. It’s like they think they can help her jog her memory and it’s upsetting for her.” Kyrie looks at them sternly, as if she’s daring them to say something. “We still get news crews at the door every time there’s an unexplained mystery programme on.”

“Like we said, Kyrie,” says Lady. “We had other stuff to think about then. We won’t mention it to her.”

“Oh,” says Kyrie. “It’s just that strangers usually make a big deal of it. But I guess you aren’t really strangers.”

“I hope not, after saving the day,” grins Dante. “Hey Kid, you’re a shitty waiter! My belly thinks my throat’s been cut!”

“God, Dante, you’re a walking fucking dustbin,” chides Trish. “At least wait till everyone’s been served.”

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Violet can hear them chatting downstairs and looks at the mess of her shoulder in the mirror. She’s had worse and it’s missed the gnarly scar on her left shoulder that looks like an animal bite. She traces her fingers over it for a moment, before sighing and getting in the shower.

What a fucking awful day.

She feels a bit more human when she comes out, but the gash from the lance is deeper than she thought. She can’t quite get the gauze pad positioned right and she needs to, it’s still raw and seeping.

Violet sighs. That stew smells gorgeous and she is missing the banter round the table.
She gets up and goes to the study, collecting the plate of beef stew and mashed potatoes Kyrie’s ran up and goes down stairs.

The conversation at the dining table falters as she struggles with the door and she nearly drops the plate. “Some help here?”

“We’re not asking you to juggle!” Call Nero and Dante, drawing groans from the three women.

“Do I have this to look forward to?” Kyrie holds a hand to her face in growing horror.

“He’ll get worse as he gets older,” Lady says, soap opera serious, with a hand on Kyrie’s shoulder. “I’ve known him since he was that age and it’s a progressive, incurable disease.”

“Oh, Empty Night, how can I escape the madness?” Kyrie wails, flinging her arm over her eyes like a Southern Belle.

“There’s nothing else for it, Kyrie,” says Trish. “You’ll just have to kill him.”

She picks up a Sundae spoon.

“Do it, Kyrie. It’s the only way,” says Lady.

Nero hides behind Dante. “Save me! She’s a violent devil behind that pretty face! She beats me up! It’s only a matter of time before she kills me!”

Dante’s trapped holding the door and the dinner plate for Violet as Kyrie grabs the spoon from Trish and starts chasing Nero around the room. He’s jumping over settees and dodging around the table as Kyrie clambers after him, whooping and yelling threats.

Dante somehow manages to get Violet to the table and sat down without dropping her dinner on the floor. The spare seat is between him and Kyrie.

“That gash is still weeping. Do you have a bandage or something?” He asks, sidestepping Trish
trying to grab Nero. “Is it always this mad here?”

“They’re not usually this bad,” replies Violet, handing him the gauze pad. She’s wearing a pair of pyjamas with a spaghetti strap vest top, so it’s easy enough for her to pull aside the strap.

Dante takes his time positioning the pad so it covers the whole gash. What he’s really doing is looking at the animal bite.

“Nasty scar you’ve got back here,” he says, casually, carefully.

“I’ve got a lot of nasty scars. You’re going to have to be more specific,” replies Violet. “Which tattoos has that gash gone through?”

“It’s gone through the top of – it looks like a glyph or a sigil,” Dante says as he pats down the edge of the pad over the damaged tattoo.

“That one’s fine, I’ll get it sorted when it heals. That one’s just decoration,” she replies. “I was worrying it had gone through the one next to it.”

Dante pats the pad a final time. “That’s you.”

“Cheers,” she replies. She turns to the lovebirds who are now having a mock fight for their lives, though Kyrie is losing. Nero’s got behind her and has his arm around her waist and he’s holding both her wrists so she can’t smack him with the spoon. They’re yelling and giggling. “Nine Hells, will you pair pack it in?”

Nero sets Kyrie down, stealing a kiss as he does so.

“What are you two like?” grins Dante and ruffles Nero’s hair.

Nero yelps and knocks Dante’s hand away, trying to smooth it down.

Dante looks at his hand in disgust at the sticky hair wax on it and rubs it on his jeans.
“You need good hold in the heat of battle,” says Nero, totally serious. Everyone just looks at him, before bursting in to fits of giggles. “What?”

Violet nearly chokes on the tiny bit stew she’s eating. “Worse than fucking women, the men in this family.”

“Wonder where he gets that from?” Laughs Trish. Lady kicks her under the table.

“My brother,” says Kyrie. “Credo was vain, wasn’t he, Violet?”

“Sparda’s balls, was he ever,” says Violet, covering her mouth as she swallows. “That beard. That beard drove me nuts. He used to measure it to get it right.”

“No!”

“S’true, right Kyrie?” Violet sips her wine. Kyrie’s brought up some of the really good bottles from the cellar. It’s been flowing rather freely through the meal and everyone is pleasantly tipsy. Even Dante’s a little buzzed, though that’s from the company, rather than the alcohol.

It’s pleasant to just be, for once. Before all the bullshit starts again.

“Beard rash! You just be glad he shaves, Kyrie,” says Trish. “That goddamned stubble is the bane of my life.”

“Thank fuck for aloe vera gel,” says Violet. “My thighs are burning just thinking about it.”

Nero’s head’s on the table with his hand over his ears. “Make it stop,” he groans.”

“You ain’t complainin’ when I’m down there to start with,” purrs Dante in a tone that even makes Kyrie look a little hot and bothered.
“Just so you know,” giggles Kyrie, a little breathlessly. “This is a really old house and the walls are really thick.

“They’re not that thick,” says Violet, this time really choking at Kyrie and Nero’s horrified looks.

Dante leans across and thumps her back, before handing her her glass of wine. She glares at him.

“Can’t have the client dyin’ on me now. We haven’t been paid yet,” he jokes and everyone at the table looks at him, then Violet.

“What?” snaps Kyrie. She scowls at Violet.

“We already here when we got the job,” says Dante. “We were always coming to see you. Already spoke to the Kid.”

He looks across to Nero, who nods confirmation.

“Things went a little west today at work and I need independent contractors that I can trust,” Violet says smoothly. There’s not a hint of explanation or apology in her tone.

“West?” Nero exclaims, incredulously. “You kissed Falzon. It’s so far west, we’re off the fucking map!”

It’s Violet’s turn to have everyone look at her. “It was rather more effective than shooting him in the face, tempting though that was.”

“What the fuck? Why were you kissing Falzon of all people? Credo’s barely cold in his…he’s not even in a grave and you’re kissing other men? And him? You hate him! We all hate him!” Kyrie is actually standing over Violet as she rages. Nero actually has a grip on her arm and is trying to pull her to sit down.

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time,” replies Violet, serenely drinking her wine. “And it completely threw him. He didn’t know what had hit him. It was beautiful.”
“He’s gunning for us, for Nero! Are you fucking insane?” Kyrie isn’t stopping.

“And your little stunt at the Town Hall the other day didn’t paint any targets?” Violet replies, gesturing with her glass. “Did you put my blue agate bracelet back, by the way?”

“It worked! We got the tourists back!” snarls Kyrie. She tries to shake Nero off, but he’s holding fast and pulls her to sit. He keeps a hand on her shoulder so she can’t get back up. “He said he got the result he wanted!”

“Is that what you think?” says Violet. “Yeah, Falzon got the result he wanted, because Falzon always gets the result he wants. What you did was persuade everyone else that was the result they wanted.”

She takes another gulp from her glass and refills it as she empties it.

Dante catches Nero’s small headshake and tries to take the bottle from her. She twists away from his grasp so he can’t get her glass. “Fuck off, it’s Haut Brion and 2000 was spectacular!”

He raises his hands in surrender and sits back in his chair.

“What’s more to the point, dear sister-in-law, is why in all the Nine Hells is Falzon pushing for more tourists when he fucking hates them?” Violet has another gulp.

Trish and Lady look at their desserts.

“Kyrie, shut up,” says Nero, hanging on to Kyrie’s upper arms as she tries to stand.

“You didn’t have to goad him by fucking him off and kissing him, Violet!”

“He’s raped enough women, one lil’ stolen kiss won’t make a blind bit difference,” snarls back Violet.
“Doing something unexpected lets us see how the foe handles themselves under pressure,” says Nero, trying to help. “And it was really fucking unexpected.”

There’s a quick look between Dante and Trish, but only Lady sees it.

“Aw, fuck this for a game of soldiers,” says Violet, standing up and throwing back her glass and grabbing one of the bottles off the table. “I’m going for a walk.”

She storms out of the room, weaving a little unsteadily. A moment later the front door bangs.

“Isn’t anyone going to go after her?” says Lady. “She’s drunk and in her jammies.”

“You go, Nero,” says Kyrie. She’s still angry, but she’s calming. “You might be better at talking her down than me. Credo had the magic gift for diva taming, just like you do.”

Nero doesn’t want to leave Kyrie despite Tony shouting in his head to get after her, for the love of God, before tonight gets worse!

Dante sees his hesitation and decides to save the day. “Don’t sweat it, Kid. I’ll go. I’m neutral. She’ll maybe talk to me and if she doesn’t, well, I’m a big boy. I can take it.”

He stands up and gets his coat, thinking for a moment before taking Rebellion. “Where does she go when she’s thinking?”

“Graveyard,” replies Kyrie. “She says the dead can’t hurt you, so it’s the safest place in town.”

“Not in my line of work it isn’t,” says Dante.

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He tracks her to the graveyard, where she sits on her usual bench. It’s the one where she ran into General Agius.
“Hey, Boss,” he says, trying not to startle her.

Violet shoots off a few half-hearted summoned swords at him, that he dodges easily.

“I bet you can do better than that,” says Dante, as he sits down at the other end.

“I bet you can too,” she replies.

“You wanna share that bottle?”

“Nope. It’s a 600 euro bottle of wine and worth every cent.”

Dante leans across and takes the bottle out her hand anyway. He very quickly knocks back the half bottle left, easily fending her off. “Damn straight. I’ll hand it to Credo, he had taste.”

“Course he did. He had me,” Violet nods with the certainty that she is, indeed, amazing, as she shivers.

“I’m getting the feeling you had him, not the other way around,” says Dante. He takes off his red leather jacket and puts it round her shoulders.

“You drunk my wine,” says Violet mournfully, pulling it close.

“You’ve had more than enough,” says Dante.

“You’re not Credo. You don’t get to tell me what to do.” She thinks for a minute. “Credo didn’t tell me what to do either. Kont mandra siehbi, when I met him.”

“I’m guessing that means shitfaced?” says Dante. “How’d you meet him?”
“No, shitfaced is Hara, but we don’t add the -faced because you’re too far gone,” she replies. “I’d got a job at UO and come to here with some friends to see what it was like, got mandra in one of the dockers’ pubs and I was dancing on the tables and the Knights got called and Credo was the Sergeant of the patrol that came and he’s hauling me out the pub and I puked all over him. He arrested me and sat in the cell with me all night and held my hair.”

“Goddamn, but that’s so romantic,” says Dante, drily. “Beats getting a motorbike thrown at me.”

“I get the feeling women throw bikes at you a lot,” giggles Violet.

“Only the important ones.” He figures he’ll risk it. “So you wanna tell me why we were killing death statues for you last month?”

“Because I was paying you?” Violet guesses. “Why’s your password Hyacinth?”

“My mother’s favourite flower. And yeah, that’s one reason and it’s a good reason,” says Dante. “Just, next time, pay Trish cos we never see it if Lady gets it first.”

“I’ll do that,” she slurs, getting her phone out and tapping a few things. “There, done.”

“You’ve probably summoned Chthulu, state you’re in.” His phone pings. “Huh, you didn’t.”

“I can’t summon demons. Not on my phone. I got a friend in America who can do it. I am so patata.” She holds her head. “It’s spinning.”

“You’re making about as much sense as one,” smiles Dante. “I’m not surprised it’s spinning.”

“No, that gravestone is spinning,” she says as she points.

Dante turns and looks. An Angel is indeed, spinning on the spot, before it vanishes. There’s a discernible ripple around it, like a pond. The ripple ricochets around for a little, before smoothing out.
He draws Rebellion and walks cautiously up to it, mindful of Violet following him. She’s still staggering with bravery and the last thing he needs is her to blunder into this…whatever this is.

There’s an aura of power coming off it. Dante would say a wrongness, but as he gets closer, he realises that’s not quite right. It’s more an otherness, like it’s ancient and natural. He’s felt it before with fey and yokai, minor local deities. It’s earthy and elemental.

Dante runs a hand round it. It’s like water on a beach, shallow and getting deeper the further you go in. He doesn’t flinch when he feels the hand on his shoulder, at least he knows where the lush is. He glances down at her, but she’s entranced by it.

“What can you see?” he asks her softly. She’s seriously chemically altered right now and that’s pretty much the same as a trance.

Violet looks like a child watching something wonderful. “It’s all light and energy. It’s beautiful. It’s elsewhere. It’s an Elsewhere. I haven’t seen one since…The last time I saw one.”

“An Elsewhere?”

“A door to Elsewhere. Portal. Gateway. Fairyland. TARDIS. An Elsewhere.” She hasn’t stopped looking at it. “I can see the equations and spells that make it work. They’re amazing. It’s like Stargate. I can see numbers and languages that haven’t existed for thousands of years and don’t exist yet. That one-” she points to something Dante can’t see, but he can feel “-that doesn’t exist on this plane and it never will. That one’s emotions, because they don’t have words there. It’s all colours and sounds.”

He slowly pushes Rebellion’s tip into the Elsewhere. It feels like the sword’s going through jelly and the energy’s singing up it, making it glow and ring, like a tuning fork.

Violet’s bracelet is glowing and as she reaches her hand towards the Elsewhere, he can feel the energy part.

Alarmed, he grabs her wrist, touching the bracelet. There’s an audible click as the bracelet unlocks and falls open. It’s only the safety chain that stops it falling off her wrist entirely.

“What the fuck?” Violet gasps and she sounds sober. She very quickly and carefully draws back
her arm and snaps the bracelet shut again. “Nobody should be able to get that off me. Who are you?”

Dante doesn’t answer her. His attention’s taken up by the change in the energy in the Elsewhere. He grabs hold of Violet and rolls them both away from the portal.

“That’s a big fucking bear,” says Violet, stupidly, staring at the massive bear that’s burst out the Elsewhere. It’s followed by Knights, but they’re not like the one’s he’s seen around Fortuna. They’re shouting in some Arabic language he can’t understand and it looks like they’re trying to co-ordinate an attack.

Dante’s seen smaller houses.

The bear is too fast for them and can’t get over or through the high walls of the graveyard. It rounds back on them, sweeping them away with its metre long claws.

It doesn’t feel right. Not demonic, but not right.

One of the Knights sees Dante and Violet, shouting at them in that Arabic gibberish. He does make out one word, “Sparda!” but that’s it.

Neither of them get much of a chance to reply, because the bear decides to take its chances with the dinner on the floor.

Violet flash steps through a wall as Dante summons a glyph that he bounces off and over the bear, shooting it as he goes. The animal bellows and slashes at him, gashing his leg. Dante swears and lands badly, but he lets himself drop into a roll and by the time he stands and jumps lightly round, it’s healed.

The bear rumbles towards him, surprisingly fast for a creature that size. It raises a paw the size of a small car, swiping at this new irritation. Dante parries the claws, knocking the paw away.

It stumbles a little and Dante swings Rebellion down over his head, crashing a helmbreaker on the leg of the creature. It cuts open the leg of the animal down to the bone.

Maddened now with pain, the Creature lunges forward to snap at Dante, but he’s already leapt off
the nearest wall, landing on its back. The animal stands on its hind legs and it’s all Dante can do to hold on. He drops Rebellion and shoots the bear in the head.

The bear’s injured from the demonic bullets in its brain and drops to all fours again. It rolls to rid itself of the attacker on its back and Dante jumps onto its stomach, grabbing up Rebellion from the grass and stabbing it so hard and fast his arm’s a blur.

The creature’s stomach opens in an eruption of blood and viscera and it finally passes out with a confused look on its face. It looks peaceful as it goes onwards.

Dante gets up, panting and looking round for Violet, as the Knights come running over to Dante. They seem in awe of him and one of them speaks to him, but still he can only make out “Sparda.”

One of the other Knights brings Violet over to them. He’s got a firm grip on her upper arms, as she’s still staggering with bravery. He’s speaking to her and she’s hesitantly answering. She looks across at Dante.

“I think he thinks you’re Sparda. Do you look like your Dad?” she asks. She’s still drunk, but she’s sobering up enough to concentrate.

“As far as I know, spitting image.”

“They’re delighted they’ve found you and they want to know how you found yourself in this place.” Violet’s Knight hasn’t let her go. “They miss you, since you left a few years ago.”

Dante’s Knight speaks again.

“They’re confused how you don’t understand them,” says Violet. She replies something to them and points back at the Elsewhere.

The Knight shakes his head and points at Dante.

“Godspit and shit, stop fucking complicating things,” she says in that same tone.
She looks like she’s about to vomit and begins to heave. The Knights understand that and step backward, except for the one holding her up. Violet smoothly turns in his arms and projectile vomits Credo’s expensive wine and Kyrie’s excellent dinner all over the Knight’s chest and stomach.

He drops her in disgust, swearing as he does so. Violet steps with him, pushing him over, before stepping back to Dante and grabbing hold of him. He doesn’t push her away, but grabs hold as the glyphs form under their feet.

They see confusion on the Knights’ faces and an outstretched hand as blue flashes and they’re suddenly in the back garden of Credo’s house.

Violet steps away from Dante and sits down heavily on one of the garden chairs. He stays leaning against an orange tree.

“I don’t think I’ve got your jacket,” she says, brushing it down.

“it’ll clean. What was that back there?” He asks.

“That bear was ors tal-Gandlora. It’s a Maltese thing, from before we came to Fortuna. Those Knights were speaking a Fortunese dialect of Maltese that’s five hundred years old. I’ve only ever read it and even then.” Her voice trails off as she throws up behind the seat.

“So the difference between Shakespearean English and now?” he asks.

She nods.

“Normally, someone says I don’t look like the kind of person who would like Shakespeare,” says Dante.

“I don’t judge. We’ve all got hidden depths. And The Bard has everything. Drama, love stories, the human condition. He even has dick jokes.” She throws up again. “Sparda’s fucking balls. I should not drink.”
“So, that Elsewhere must be a portal to Fortuna five hundred years ago,” he says.

“This time. Those Knights could step back through and find themselves a thousand years in the future. Or it could fizzle out and leave them here. Like I said, doorway to Elsewhere.” She stands up unsteadily. “I can puke in my own toilet.”

She takes his jacket off and leaves it on the bench and starts to walk to the back door.

“What’s your favourite Shakespeare play?” Dante asks suddenly.

“Othello. I’ll watch any version of it. I love the Bollywood version that came out a few years ago. You?”

“MacBeth.”

He hears the door open and Trish say a few things to her, before goodnights are exchanged. The door clicks shut and Trish comes out. She curses as her heels sink into the grass.

“Everything OK? Nero has mad diva taming skillz.” She brings him out a strawberry Sundae. “You missed dessert with all the fun and games.”

“Fuck yes,” says Dante, happily as he tucks into the dessert. “Kyrie lives up to her advertising. I have diva skills as well. I have to with you two around.”

Trish snorts and brings out a second spoon. “How complicated is this job going to be?”

“I think the expression is *hafna liba ttir*.”

“Fuck,” replies Trish and steals a strawberry.
“Oh, you’re still here, Mr Redgrave,” says Captain Agius when he comes in. “Will we be seeing you tomorrow or will Verity have a well-deserved rest?”

“I was rather thinking that I would stay for dinner,” replies Vergil, ignoring the Captain’s pointed comment. “Verity’s already told Alice to make a little extra. I was hoping to meet Mrs Agius.”

“She remains indisposed,” says the Captain. Through gritted teeth he tells Vergil he’s welcome to stay for dinner. “Though I do think that Verity does need a rest now. Perhaps, my dear, you would prefer to have dinner in your room and have an early night?”

“No, Papa, I’m fine. I’ve lain around enough,” says Verity, her voice sweet with a steel undertone. “I’m fine now the stair carpet’s been repaired.”

Both men see it for what it is – something went very wrong in the Agius household the previous night and Verity means to reproach her father with the bruises on her face. She doesn’t flirt with Vergil at the table, but she draws attention to her face every opportunity she gets.

Pinny says nothing, only giving one-word answers when she’s asked anything, before she can’t help herself. “Papa – have you accepted a Courting Suit for me?”

Agius stops eating and throws a look at Vergil, before looking back at Pinny, considering his answer. “I have been asked what Courting Gift would be suitable. I informed him that when it becomes material, he can ask you himself. I have also turned down one on your behalf.”

“You always said we would be consulted when the time came,” says Pinny accusingly.

“And you will be, for the time has not yet come, Agrippina,” warns Captain Agius. “You still have three years left on your training and Verity has five, so there will be no Courting for either of you until then. And now we will not discuss this in front of our guest.”
“So you haven’t accepted one for either of us or did you just tell them to wait?” asks Verity. Her bruising has come out worse now and the bleeding in the sclera of her eyes makes it look like her upper face is veiled.

The way she rushes so smartly to her sister’s defence makes Vergil think of Dante with a pang.

“Verity, we’re an Old Family and it’s different for us,” Says Captain Agius in a gentler voice. “I’ll give you as much choice as I can, but it may not be as much as you’d like.”

“So you’re not marrying one of us to Peter Falzon?” Pinny cuts across him, eyes blazing.

“As I said, Agrippina, we’re not discussing it at the dinner table,” Captain Agius growls and he has the same look in his eye that he had when he took his hand to his wife.

Vergil leans back in his chair with his glass of wine while the discussion rages. “Pity, I’m finding everything about Fortuna’s customs extremely-” he swirls the red about his glass, as if he’s considering his words “-interesting.”

“So I’m told, Mr Redgrave,” replies Captain Agius, sipping his wine. “Just remember, you will leave eventually. These girls will have to remain here, so I’ll thank you not to fill their heads with Mainland customs. That life is not for them.”

“I’m in no hurry to leave, Sir,” says Vergil. He can’t help his eyes flick to Verity as he speaks. “I’ve found I’ve become quite entranced with the mysteries of Fortuna.”

Captain Agius looks between them for a moment, before erupting in huge, thigh-slapping guffaws.

“That, Mr Redgrave, will upset the apple-cart and no mistake.”
clear that Mr Redgrave should return to his lodgings within the hour.

He and Verity snuggle up on the settee, as Pinny pours the remains of the wine between their three glasses. She sits down with a thump on the other settee. “So what we heard them talking about this morning is true. He’s accepted Peter Falzon for me.”

“It’s not a shock, Pinny, he’s been chasing you for weeks and Credo asked after me not a fortnight before today,” says Verity.

Vergil’s arm tightens around her, but he says nothing.

“I wonder who he turned down for you?” continues Verity. “Cassius, perhaps?”

“I doubt it. I dally with him, but that’s all it is,” replies Pinny. “But Falzon? Empty Night!”

“What crime is Falzon guilty of?” Asks Vergil. Whatever mystery that surrounds Fortuna, his instinct tells him Falzon is at the heart of it.

“He makes my flesh crawl, Mr Redgrave. There’s something…unsavoury at best and well…”

Pinny’s voice trails off and she looks uncomfortable.

Vergil cocks his eyebrow. “At worst?”

“Evil, Mr Redgrave. Anke l-dubbien ma hara fuq lilu.”

Pinny finishes her wine, before storming off to her room.

“She’ll be sneaking out the window soon enough,” says Verity. She turns her face up to Vergil and he gently kisses her. Her skin is hot under the bruising and he’s more careful than he would normally be, even as she tries to deepen the kiss.
“Do you feel well enough to start solving our mystery, Miss Agius?” he asks, a little mischievously.

“I should think so, Mr Redgrave,” she smiles her little smile. “Bring some trousers and a belt, if I must climb out of windows, for skirts are so ungainly.”

“Count on it,” he grins and kisses her hard. He tries to pull back as she hisses, but her hand’s on the back of his head and holds him firm. He loves that she’s comfortable with being uncomfortable - if she stays in his world, she’s going to need that.

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Two nights later, Verity is wearing a shortgown, boots and his jacket as she shimmies down the drainpipe between her and Pinny’s rooms. She hasn’t bothered with her hijab, just pleated her hair into a long rope that snakes down her back.

From the angle he’s standing at, Vergil has a fantastic view of her legs and ass. They’re long and toned and from how she’s contorting herself to get down that pipe, she’s really flexible. He helps her the last few metres and hands her the trousers. Verity holds on to his arm as she changes, but there’s nothing flirty between them and he approves of the way she understands that this is business.

Except when he puts his belt on her, their eyes fixed on each other as he slides it quickly through the loops and buckling it at the front. Vergil tells himself that there’s no flourishes nor flirting so she can tell when a companion is suiting her up for battle.

“Where first?” is all she says.

It’s like she’s passed another test and he almost feels a sense of relief as he slides the snakeskin closed in the clasp of the buckle.

“Opera house,” he replies.

Neither make any move to kiss the other, just small nods as they break contact and move off into the night.
They’re not troubled by Patrols while they’re still in Top of the Town, where the Old Families and well-heeled citizens live. There’s not even that many tourists wandering around at this time of night. It’s chilly, just enough to frost, as it’s still only early spring with warm days and cold nights.

Once they get down towards the Business District and the Tourist Quarter, however, the Patrols increase. Music thumps from the bars and coffee houses frequented by citizens during the day when the tourists are too hungover to be abroad that early. At this time of night, the Patrols don’t enforce the dress code, even though legally, it’s in place. They’re much more concerned with keeping order with young drunk foreigners from an alien culture.

Verity can’t help but gawp at the women with their big hair and skimpy dresses. Vergil looks to where she’s watching one group of girls shouting and swearing at each other in skyscraper heels and drunken English. They’re drawing the attention of some Knights.

One of the girls notices Verity looking at her and calls something to her and beckons. One of the Knights looks across and shouts something at Verity. He looks like he’s about to come over to her before Vergil hauls Verity into an alley. He can hear the Knights come running over and pulls her close before flash stepping onto a roof and pulling them both down, a hand over her mouth.

“Shhhhh,” he whispers in her ear and she nods. He doesn’t pull his hand away.

They wait, lying on the roof as the Patrol searches the alley for them. They’ve got their swords drawn and they’re stabbing the rubbish lying about it.

“I don’t understand where they went,” says the one who’d spotted them first. “I know I saw them come in here.”

“How’d you know she was a local?”

“She was over-dressed compared to those qahb. She knew damn fine she shouldn’t be here, not even her headscarf on.” They can hear him looking in the dumpsters and swearing when a rat jumps out at him.
“You’d better clean that sword before you resheathe it,” says the other Knight.

“There’s nowhere she could have climbed up,” says the first one. They can hear him trying to climb up the wall.

There’s a screech from outside and girls screaming at each other. Vergil raises his head to look over the street and several of the girls from earlier are hauling at each other’s hair. The Knights swear and rush to break it up.

Vergil hauls Verity up and they continue running across the roofs, jumping across the gaps and flash stepping across the wider breaches.

And then the Opera House is before them across the street from the roof of the Fortuna Inn.

Vergil looks like he’s contemplating the distance when Verity puts her hand on his arm.

“Let me, Mr Redgrave,” she says, almost playfully.

“Then you need to focus, Verity, and not be distracted by frivolities,” he replies, sharply. “I’m not going to die for a pretty dress.”

Verity’s dark eyes meet Vergil’s ice blue and he swears they flash with anger at his reprimand. That little sideways quirk plays briefly on her lips and she looks like she’s about to argue with him.

“Not dying sounds like excellent motivation to me,” she scowls as she straightens to her full height and looks over to the Opera Houses’ side door. Vergil can feel the energy begin to coalesce around her and he steps behind her, pressing himself against her. He can sense her work through the spell in her mind, separating the portals from here to there.

He can tell the moment when she begins to pour her will into the spell and manipulate the energies across the void. The power starts to pull at his feet and he can see the light from the glyph that’s forming and spinning.

“Show me your motivation,” he whispers in her ear, enfolding her in his arms.
She shudders and then there’s so much light and colour and they’re not on the roof anymore. They’ve ported into a storeroom. His thumb is ready to flick up Yamato, but there’s nothing. They step away from each other, expecting an ambush or Knights busting down the door to arrest them.

Verity’s breathing is loud in the dark room, like she’s ran a marathon. “I’m fine,” she replies to Vergil’s quizzical glance. “That was the first time I’ve ported that far.”

“You’re very powerful, but very raw,” observes Vergil. “We’ll need to practice more.”

“You sound like my tutors,” frowns Verity. “I spend hours every day practicing and studying. I’m so much better than I used to be.”

Vergil begins to move off. “You need to refine that power, but we’ll work on that together. The idea is to push your limits, not blow them out completely. You need to leave something in reserve.”

She walks faster to keep up with him. She is annoyed. “You speak as if you know magic and you forget my young age.”

“I know power and how to use it,” he retorts. “I’m only two years older than you. Don’t be such a child, Verity.”

Verity blinks rapidly to hold back the sudden sting of tears. “I was asking for allowances, not making excuses. You aren’t paying for the right to insult me.”

She storms off ahead of him into the next room, leaving Vergil knowing he’s right, but that he’s somehow done something wrong. Part of him is infuriated at her and the other part wants to mollify her.

It strikes him how little experience he has with women.

But he’s not running after the foolish little chit.
She can wait on him till she calms down.

He’s so intent on his righteous anger, that it takes him a while to realise that he can’t hear her.

What he *can* hear is the sounds of battle somewhere above him and the inhuman giggling tells him it’s probably not Knights. The cold clutch of fear in his heart speeds his feet up a broken staircase, flash stepping and changing his form as he goes. He bursts into the room and Yamato is out as he takes the first scarecrow easily. He’s already on to the second and third, slicing through them before they even know what’s hit them.

*He still can’t see her.*

They’re smarter than the average scarecrow and they just keep coming. He slides rapidly through them, slashing as he goes, surrounding himself with Summoned Swords to control the horde. He fires them off as he leaps over them and as many as he takes out, more come.

*Where the Hell is she?*

He’s able to tamp down his panic for the job in hand – it’s not that different from being aware of his brother’s position when they worked together, but Verity isn’t Dante - and his strikes ring true, not one hit landing that wasn’t seen before Yamato leaves her saya or Force Edge his back, but his ears still strain for the sound of her beyond the doorway.

Another wave comes as he’s bounced back against a strike he didn’t see coming, smashing into shelves and sending boxes flying. It’s all props and clothing for the Opera House and it’s hard not to get entangled within them on the rough paved floor. He goes down, but has enough time to pull off a teleport and summoned swords at them.

He pushes his will into sending a spiral of dark energy from Yamato and it clears enough of a path that he has breathing space. Still they come, another wave, but the exit’s blocked, so he can’t get out and he’s not leaving without her, infuriating, obstinate, beautiful devil that she is.

If *he* couldn’t get out that way, then neither could *she*...

He feels the spell before he sees it, sees the mix of glyphs and sigils overlying with more runes and symbols, many of them not meant for what she’s trying to do, but she’s forcing it anyhow. The
energy spins and twists on the floor and ceiling. As he looks up, Vergil sees her perched on the rafters above the door. The power twists and spins round her like an aura and he can almost see it tearing across the void between the dimensions to pour into the physical spell she’s weaving.

The overflow from it is making it more and more difficult to hold his devil trigger.

He can sense her reaching a crescendo and powers down his Trigger just as she casts.

The two glyphs smack together in the middle of the room, disintegrating the scarecrows as they come together. There’s an explosion of blue light and sound that ricochets around the room like a bomb.

Even Vergil feels nauseous and weightless simultaneously, but there’s searing pain as he’s thumped into the wall, smashing another set of shelves. He’s dimly surprised there’s any still standing.

He forces himself to his feet, readying for another attack and pulling deep from his reserves.

Almost drunkenly, he makes his way over to her as he can feel her losing consciousness. He just about catches her as she falls in a flutter of blue leather. She’s bleeding out her ears and nose and she’s burst almost every blood vessel in her eyes. Her sclera is crimson with black irises.

“Verity! Verity!” he says urgently, as if his voice alone can bring her round. There’s blood on his fingertips where he’s touched her face. “You’re bleeding from your eyes, you little horror. What did I tell you about reserving your powers?”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a Vital Star, just a small one and crushes it against her teeth.

The effect is immediate. Verity comes round choking and spluttering. “What the hell is that? It’s disgusting!”

“Something you should get used to,” says Vergil, voice harsh and face soft. “Even a devil may cry for the fear of your next trick.”
“Dan ix-xitan ghandu icun mara,” she grins weakly and there’s blood and green fluid on her teeth.

“Credo will be unable to resist you,” says Vergil as he helps her stand.

She pouts and thumps his arm.

“I can’t wait to make you pay for that,” says Vergil, with a glint in his eye. “Can you go on?”

She nods. “Credo won’t get a choice and neither will I.”

Verity begins to walk off, but Vergil stops her. “What happened to getting off Fortuna and seeing the world?”

“Don’t fill my head with Mainland nonsense,” Verity mimics her father. “We’ll be left behind when you’re long gone.”

Vergil laughs and lets her go. Her jest disquiets him far more than it should. He sets it aside for now, it’s nothing to do with the job in hand.

They move on through the door and find themselves on a balcony. They sneak along it, hoping the Patrols don’t look up. At this time of night, the town is buzzing with revellers, mostly drunk and arguing with each other. Vergil catches sight of a small woman knocking a large Knight out cold and thinks that that would really have amused his brother.

They come to another door and find themselves in a large, church like room with a crystal floating in a blue light down the front.

“This is our second Kapella, when the Opera House is in use,” Verity explains. “And that is a confined demon that’s been split up and placed around various points on the Island. It tries to reconnect to itself. It gives people the power to port without needing to know how to do it.”

She points out the platform on the balcony underneath them. It looks like a design on the floor.
Vergil leads her down the stairs and stops her just before the twisting pillar that encases the crystal. He walks the final few feet towards it and pulls it from the energy. He feels it react to his devil trigger, light twisting and circling around him in a white aura before settling back within him.

“What kind of work are the Order involved in?” asks Vergil. He finds the idea of splitting a demon, either physically or its essence abhorrent.

“All kinds, especially since that big chemical company opened here a few years ago. Most of our Alchemists were taken on by them and they’ve brought in a lot of their own people. They share their work with the Archive, so it’s literally a big –” she tries to think of the word she’s heard used “-skola kbira, faċilitajiet ta ‘tahriġ...”

“University?” suggests Vergil.

“University,” she nods. “Most of our and their Alchemists pass through it.”

They’ve walked back up to the platform with the design on it. It’s spinning and alive now, like it was one of Verity’s glyphs. Vergil feels it respond to him as he stands on it and hears a spot open up on the balcony above him. He glances at Verity, who gestures to the grim grip. “See if it works for you. It doesn’t work for everyone.”

Vergil concentrates, then marks the spot with a summoned sword. He flies through the air like he’s been catapulted, so it’s not teleporting. He turns to Verity and holds out a hand to her.

“I don’t know what to do with these,” she says, uncertainly. “How’d you do the sword thing?”

“Vee,” he says, surprising himself at using the contraction of her name. “Close your eyes and I’ll talk you through it.”

Verity looks doubtful.

Vergil huffs in irritation. “Do you feel able to port up here quickly?”

“No, I’m tired.”
“Then it makes sense to use these grim grips and conserve your powers for when we need them,” he says, trying not to sound as if he’s explaining to a child. He’s quickly working out where it comes to love it’s not right or wrong that matters, it’s right or left. He wishes that he had Dante’s ease with the opposite sex or better yet, that his parents had been able to tell him what to do.

Being with Verity drives home how alone in the world he is and it shouldn’t matter, but it does. Other than her, right now he has no one.

“Close your eyes and stand on the platform,” he says, voice low. He sees Verity suppress a shiver, but she stands on the platform.

It’s why Verity’s joke about Credo bothered him so much. It’s only been a week, but he can’t imagine her without him nor him without her.

She gasps as it reacts to her and she looks up at him. “There’s a grim grip forming beside you.”

“Can you feel it?”

Verity nods.

“Then imagine it’s pulling you up towards me.”

She doesn’t close her eyes, but locks her gaze with his. Vergil thinks he can make out her eyes in the mess of her face. He forms a sword so she’s got something to work from and holds it point down, the way the Knights do when they stand to attention.

She bites her lip as she focuses, forming the sword out of the ether beside her.

Vergil says nothing, but lets her work.

She fires it off and it hits. Suddenly she’s flying through the air and Vergil grabs her as she lands, the momentum spinning them a little. She clutches him just as hard.
“It worked,” she says, as if she can’t quite believe it, exhilaration shining on her face.

“It did,” and he can’t help but return her smile and suddenly he’s got her pressed up against a pillar, mouth against hers.

She returns it just as forcefully, tongue duelling, slipping and sliding around the other, circling over the roofs of their mouths. There’s no art, nor teasing to their kiss, it’s just raw need as their hands trace as frantic a path as their mouths.

Vergil breaks off from her lips to kiss over her jaw and throat, hand twisting in her braid, pulling her head back so he’s got more access. Her fingers dig in to his neck and scratch, marking him. It doesn’t stop either of them.

A particularly loud shriek of laughter from the revellers outside bring the couple to and they part slowly, breathing heavily.

“We need to keep focused on the task at hand, Mr Redgrave,” says Verity, breathily, but even through the blood in her eyes he can see they’re shining.

“Then you need to stop distracting me, Miss Agius,” Vergil says, mock sternly as he sucks her lower lip. He grins as they part. “Where next, you think, Vee?”

“The Opera House. I want a look at that floor,” she replies, breaking away.

They make their way back to the Opera House.

It’s like all such buildings that see public usage and performances, a cross between tired and expectant. Their footsteps are loud and echoing in the space.

Vergil watches Verity as she walks around the outside of the dropped floor.

“Says to me no one’s been down there yet for a look,” he says.
“I think I can unlock it,” she replies. “Or port us under, but I don’t like porting into places I’m not familiar with. I don’t want to port us into a wall.”

“You could always unlock it and port us out,” suggests Vergil.

“Alright,” Verity says as she holds out a hand to him. He comes over and takes it.

Her breathing changes as she mentally follows the mechanisms of the floor and how they fit together. Vergil can almost see a blue aura tracing along the floor, as if it’s lighting up a glyph. She works out where to hold back and where to press and there’s a ringing sound as the dropped floor lights up. They give each other a surprised look before stepping on to it.

Verity clutches at Vergil as the floor begins to descend.

It lowers into a cistern with a raised walkway in the centre. There’s lit braziers along the wall.

Vergil’s thumb is on Yamato as he listens and looks around. He glances over to Verity, who’s closed her eyes. There’s a fine blue mist flowing out around the room, but she shakes her head and the mist withdraws.

They move out to the end of the walkway, mindful of an attack coming from the water.

“Can you feel that?” asks Vergil.

“I feel like I’m walking into a thunderstorm,” agrees Verity. “There’s a huge build-up of power in here. Stone and water channels magical energy like nothing else.”

“It feels like a battery,” he agrees.

“Stone tape,” she says as they reach the end. They look at the metal design with its carved pattern.
“Are we right under the hellgate?” Asks Vergil.

“I think so.”

“That pattern is designed to spread power around, isn’t it?” He says, crouching down and touching the metal. “I think that’s copper.”

“I think you’re right. I think it’s a magical battery to power the hell gate. Someone must be down here everyday to keep the fires burning.” She walks around, mindful of the edge. “So I suppose they make the connection by putting something magic in the centre.”

“What do you think it could be?” he asks. “It’s narrow, whatever it is.”

“Sword maybe? Staff?” Verity frowns for a moment. “I’m sure I read that one of Sparda’s swords powered the Hell Gate. One of them had the power to cut through dimensions. I can’t remember the name, though. Something Chinese, I think.”

“Yamato, it’s Japanese,” says Vergil, carefully watching her reaction and pulling Yamato more into her field of vision. “What else do you know about them?”

“It was a nodachi, I think,” she says. “It’s quite long. I know more about Western swords than Eastern ones.”

“Anything else?” He twists Yamato back and forth in his hand and the fact that it’s an unnecessary move should clue her in, but Verity doesn’t catch it.

“I think we’ve seen everything here,” Verity says, moving past him to go back down the walkway. “I’m sure both swords could do it. The other one, Sparda, Force Edge or something. We’ll go over it tomorrow, I’ll get the pass for the Caged Library and we can look at the more obscure legends.”

“More obscure?” He hurries to catch up to her.

“Yes, Temen-Ni-Gru, Sparda and Thekla, some of their adventures defy belief and it had to end when she sacrificed herself to close the Portal between the worlds. It’s heart-wrenching – they were
so in love.” Verity’s face is becoming more animated as she recites the tale. “It’s even more romantic than Romeo and Juliet.”

She clasps her hands together as she speaks.

“Sparda had a human lover?” Cuts in Vergil, grabbing Verity’s hands.

“Well, yes,” responds Verity, confused. “It’s a common tale – a reprobate falls for a virtuous woman and to win her heart improves himself. It seems to be at the heart of love-based treasons as well. Cupid really needs to consider his arrows more judiciously.”

“You forget the counter to that tale, Vee,” says Vergil. It’s taking all of his strength to conceal his agitation at Verity’s revelation. He feels like the ground’s shifting under his feet and won’t stop.

“Counter, Mr Redgrave?”

Vergil hasn’t let go of Verity’s hand. He’s squeezing it tightly and hasn’t realised how much it’s hurting, given her bruising from her fall the previous week, but she makes no sound nor sign he pains her. “So many reprobates ruin a good woman.”

“Then I would counter that either she deserves it with her lack of wit or she wished for it to happen and so will turn it to her advantage to win her freedom,” she replies with her sideways quirk.

That smile cuts through all his whirling thoughts and he thinks “At least I still have you.”

“Which are you, Miss Agius?” he teases, cocking an eyebrow.

“Which are you, Mr Redgrave?” she asks, eyes glinting. “We should go on. The morning draws near.”

They use the floor to return to the Opera House, to conserve Verity’s energy.

“Vergil!? What the fuck?”
A tall, well-built man is standing by the far door, shocked recognition on his face. He looks almost horrified. He’s drawn his gun and the way he’s got it aimed, it’s trained on Verity.

Vergil doesn’t hesitate, pushing Verity out the way and drawing Yamato in one smooth move. He flash-steps towards him and swirls Yamato in a swift slash.

The man in red parries it with his handgun and he’d draw his sword but for the blue glyph forming under his feet. He leaps away from it before it goes off, landing on the railing round Sparda’s statue. He jumps away, pulling his own red glyph up so he jumps higher onto the statue’s scaffolding.

Vergil bounds up after him and hesitates for just one second as he thinks he recognises his father.

“Vergil! Wait!”

The man has to draw his sword and Vergil admits to himself, it’s a good replica for Rebellion. He calls a rain of summoned swords, forcing the other man to leap off the half-clad statue. He lands near the front row of pews and draws his other gun, shooting at Vergil.

He doesn’t land a hit, Vergil’s too fast, flash-stepping to close the distance, as he lets off a barrage of glowing blue swords. The man in red steps off a forming glyph, but it doesn’t matter, it powers down as Vergil reaches him in a clang of steel.

They have a brief, clashing fight as each man slashes and parries the blows, with the man in red just gaining the upper hand, jumping away and over him, another red glyph giving him distance. He turns mid-air and shoots at Vergil.

Vergil spins Yamato so fast she’s a blur and only stops to lay some of the bullets on the ground, flicking them back at the man in red.

He moves just as fast to deflect them, ricocheting them into the wall and pews near Verity. She summons a glyph that absorbs them.

Vergil Devil Triggers and striking Force Edge on the floor, sends a swirl of dark energy at where
the stranger will land. It hits him and knocks him flying, but he recovers quickly, meeting the next swirl with a well-timed arm block. Red energy ripples across the shield he’s summoned.

He doesn’t see the blue glyph form beside him that absorbs the shield and explodes. He’s hurtled across the room and into the benches, breaking them. He lies there dazed.

Vergil vaults over the railings of the pulpit, somersaulting in an elegant indigo flash, Force Edge ready to bring down the stranger’s head in a battle ending helmbreaker.

At the last second, the stranger draws his sword and blocks it with the blade, one hand flat against it.

Vergil’s sure of two things – the man thinks he recognises him and the man is a dead ringer for his father.

“Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“Dante.”

Vergil kicks him in the stomach. “Liar!”

The stranger grunts. “I can’t explain it either.”

He swipes his foot under Vergil’s legs, bringing him down. He distantly hears a woman shout “Vergil!” and sees him ported away in a blue glyph to the other side of the room.

It’s done so forcefully that Vergil breaks the benches when he’s discharged from it. He grunt-groans when he hits and he’s staggering a little when he gets back up. He’s lost his Devil Trigger and is back in human form.

“I don’t want to fight you,” says Dante, chest heaving.

“Then you’ll be disappointed,” replies Vergil and swings back in for the attack.
Dante meets the slash with a low swing of his own and both men grunt at the contact.

“We don’t have to do this again,” says Dante.

They’re caught in a blade lock, but Vergil twists his way out of it. it’s the kind of blow that should have sent the stranger’s sword flying out of his hands, but he recovers it well enough. He punches Vergil in the face with the hilt, knocking him backwards.

Vergil turns it into a backwards roll, leaping backwards over the railing and onto the arms of the statue. He nearly loses his footing as the tarps covering it slips and he’s only saved by stabbing Force Edge into the marble.

Blue glyphs form under the bricks sitting on the scaffolding, launching them at Dante.

He shoots them out the air like clay pigeons before turning on Verity and firing at her, but the bullets don’t hit her. She’s got a shield up to deflect them.

But it looks to Vergil like he wasn’t aiming at her, but by her, just enough to look good. The younger man’s certain if he wanted to hit Verity, the stranger could.

So why isn’t he?

He aims another heavy rain of summoned swords down on the stranger, forcing him to block them, but at least he’s not shooting at her. He keeps up the rain of blue swords as the stranger stands up, keeping his shield in place, red energy rippling over the surface with each blade striking home.

It’s an effort for the stranger, but he’s not tiring the way Verity is. Vergil looks across to her and she’s bleeding out her nose again. She looks across to the platform above the stranger.

Vergil follows her gaze and sees small glyphs form on the join of the metal skeleton of the horn. He looks back to her and nods. He flash-steps up the frame of the scaffolding and in one hard swipe strikes the horn clean from the head.
The glyphs pull it down the front of the sculpture and down on the man in red, the planks of the scaffold coming down with it, raining onto him. He shouts, but it’s cut short.

“Hold your weapons! You’re under arrest!”

The racket’s brought several Patrols in to the Opera House and one set are heading for Verity. All of them have their swords drawn.

Vergil’s not looking at the ones demanding he come down and starting to climb up. He’s looking at Verity.

She points to a piece of empty floor without looking at him and her fingers are beginning a countdown. She’s looking at the floor by the Knights who are approaching her.

Vergil gives his cold smile. He knows exactly how this is going to play out.

He throws Yamato like a boomerang just as Verity blows up the benches in front of the Knights who are coming to arrest her and flash steps over to her, grabbing her and porting to where she indicated.

Yamato twirls through the air, cutting the wooden uprights of the scaffolding and sending them crashing down on the Knights.

The sword comes spiralling back into his hand as Verity runs through forming the glyph that will port them several streets away from the Opera House onto somebody’s roof.

Vergil would talk about it with her, but Verity is dead on her feet and it’s nothing that can’t wait till tomorrow.

He doesn’t take her back to her house. Instead he takes her to the Archive Lodgings. He tells himself that he’d have taken her home if she’d said. Vergil considers most humans beneath him, he’ll never admit even to himself that he’s soul-crushingly lonely and misses his brother like meat misses salt.
Maybe that’s the reason Vergil Sparda fell in love with Verity Agius so fast, maybe it isn’t.

Truth be told, he doesn’t want to be parted from her, not now he’s seen her in combat and how well they meshed as a team. He knew he’d seen something that set her apart from all the rest and his heart sings to know he was right.

Vergil tells himself, as Verity lies against him wearing one of his silk shirts, the curves of her body warm and soft against his, that this is the reason that when he leaves Fortuna, she’s coming with him. It would never occur to him that her soul, her fire, the fact she can go toe to toe with him in every respect add up to I love you and have since the moment they fell off that damned fountain.

Maybe it doesn’t matter how you meet your Soulmate, just that you do.
Chapter 15

Violet’s already up when Kyrie comes down. They don’t look at each other for a moment.

“Rough night?”

Violet looks over at Kyrie. The younger woman is sorting the table for breakfast.

“Yeah. I had a lot of nightmares.”

“Same thing?”

“Isn’t it always?”

Kyrie pauses, stands upright.

“I’m sorry,” they say in unison and the tension in the room evaporates.

“I’m not giving you it back,” says Kyrie.

Violet looks puzzled.

“The bracelet. There’s something about it,” she replies. “I shouldn’t have been able to get that meeting eating out my hand the way I did.”

“You’re just that good, Kyrie. Shit, we’re out of everything.” Violet looks through the fridge. There’s enough for three, but not six people.

“Want to chance a big shop run?” Kyrie comes over to look in the fridge. It doesn’t miraculously
fill up. “It’s early enough the Knights won’t be down there.”

“We’re going to have to. I’ll get the robes,” says Violet, rooting in the cupboard for blue Pilgrims Robes. “Here we go.”

“Got the cash if we get fined?”

Violet pulls notes from a tin. “Yep. Let’s get to work.”

***

The supermarket in the old warehouse is 24 hours, but it’s still pretty quiet in the car park, maybe just ten or twenty cars. Almost everyone is in Pilgrim’s Robes, except for the few Knights nearly finishing a Night Patrol.

Everyone looks steadfastly at the floor or to the shelves. Nobody meets anyone else’s eyes, unless they’re in with someone. The Knights make extra sure they aren’t looking, unless a Captain appears and they have to start fining people on the spot.

“So, eggs,” Kyrie says in English. She’s put jeans on under her robes, Violet’s still in her jammies. “Do you have no shame?”

“I’m wearing robes, who’s going to see? Eggs are down there.”

“I hate when they move things. Takes longer to get round.” Kyrie scowls. “It’s like they’re getting kickbacks if we’re fined. Bread.”

“Next aisle. Look left. Knight on the right.”

The Knight in question turns abruptly to look very interested in the ingredients of a tin of soup.

“What did you mean earlier? About the meeting?” asks Kyrie, quietly.
“You’re used to holding an audience and making them feel things. You’re an internationally known
singer, that’s what you do on stage. It’s taught you how to use it for other things.” Violet picks up
the milk as they pass it.

“Greek yoghurt as well. I just remembered that you told me that certain stones channel certain
emotions.”

Violet picks the yoghurt up as they pass. “Right, Kyrie. You had a thousand angry people eating
out your hand because of the pretty blue stone. What’s next on the list?”

“Fruit. Fresh, frozen or tinned? That’s what Nero said.” Kyrie looks at Violet and then past her.
“Godspit and shit. Captains.”

Violet looks. “Well they’re only sealing the doors. We might as well get the rest of our stuff.”

The young Knight they’d passed earlier is looking for a way out the shop, muttering in annoyance.
“I just want to get something to eat. I hate night patrol.”

“Do we need to get much more? And Nero is right. Just next time, have your debate a little less
loudly? The walls aren’t that thick,” Violet says as she takes the shopping list from Kyrie.

gel. Conditioner and Nero’s hair stuff. Veg. Oatmeal. Flour and butter and then that’s us.” Kyrie
recites the list from memory. “Same stuff as usual, just more of it.”

She pauses for a moment. “Why did you never marry Credo? And don’t say reasons.”

Violet gives her an appraising look, like she’s considering her answer. “That’s left field.”

“Violet!”

“I wanted him to bin me off for someone who could have children. He wanted to adopt, rather than
be without me.” Violet’s eyes tear and she stops herself blinking so they don’t fall.

“So why didn’t you?”

“I’ll tell you in the car. I’m not baring my soul in a Tesco.” She looks down the aisle to the door so Kyrie doesn’t see the tears fall. “Are they coming in, because we might be able to avoid them if they are.”

Kyrie peers up the other aisles. “No, they’re just IDing everyone at the door.”

“Get a receipt for the fine, then. UO’s started paying it after Sanctus withdrew the protections for Fortunese UO workers.” Violet looks mischievous. “Unless you get us out of the fine.”

Kyrie glares at her, then looks speculative. “You think I could do it?”

“I think you should have a go.”

They’re through the till with Violet packing as Kyrie loads it on the conveyer belt. They keep glancing at the door, while the young Somali Muslim shop assistant makes small talk with Kyrie, whom she knows from Kyrie’s job at the refugee shelter. She’s speaking in Somali, which Kyrie has a working knowledge of. The young woman gestures at the door a bit.

It sounds like gibberish to Violet.

“Any suggestions about how I should start?” asks Kyrie.

“I don’t know. How do you gear yourself up for a performance?” replies Violet.

“I go through the scales.”

“I don’t think that will help right now. Unless you sing and I make a run for it with the trolley.”

Violet fiddles with the bags to make them easier to get into the car quickly.
Kyrie fiddles with the bracelet and then takes a deep breath. Her whole demeanour changes as she takes hold of the end of the trolley and Violet pushes.

They’re just walking through when the Captain stops them. “ID please, ladies.”

“We’ve got frozen stuff and our digs are over on the bay,” says Kyrie, pleasantly, but with a hint of urgency.

“I’m dreadfully sorry, Madam. Of course.” He steps aside so that they can leave.

They’ve never loaded up that car so fast in their lives.

***

“Before we start today, Knight Balzan, I should like to make one thing crystal clear.” Falzon pours himself a coffee as Nero stands to attention before him, Red Queen drawn, but her blade resting on the floor, his hands on the pommel. “I hold you in no way accountable for the disgraceful behaviour of your female relatives. I can only shudder at how Supreme General Micellef ran his home. I’m delighted that you have proven to be above that nonsense.”

Speak. You need to acknowledge him, Tony says from beside him. Nero can see him out the corner of his eye, but he can keep his focus on Falzon. He’s had enough practice with Kyrie chattering nonsense while he works.

“Thank you, my Lord.” You could never have imagined that it would have turned out as it did. “I had no idea the day would turn out as it did.”

“Of course you couldn’t, Nero.” Falzon rubs his mouth again and it’s an unconscious move.

It’s still bothering him. Good. Tony’s a quiet speaker, but the malice in his tone is so loud Nero wonders how Falzon can’t hear it.
“However, if you can rise above the disorder of your home, then so can Madam Alighieri and Sister Micellef.” Falzon sips his coffee. “We will take them in hand for the Times to Come and restore some dignity to Fortuna. I have faith that you and Sister Micellef will be shining examples of the best of Fortuna to those who will be sharing the island with us. Have you discussed your upcoming nuptials with her?”

“Yes, My Lord,” Nero pauses as Tony prompts *She wishes to wait a decent time to mourn her brother.* “We’re holding off setting a date because of Credo.”

“Of course, however, while we give the dead their due, we cannot pause our plans for them. Time waits for no man.” Falzon adds more cream to his coffee. “And it certainly won’t wait for us.”

“My Lord?” asks Nero, uncertainly. Tony frowns and Nero does have to fight to ignore him as he glances at him.

“You must come to dinner with myself and some other members of the Guild and Committees. I should like to give your wedding plans a prominent place in the Tourist’s Guild’s new campaign for the renewed Fortuna.” Falzon pulls out his diary and motions for Nero to do the same. Nero pulls out his phone.

“Not always a man of tradition, Knight Balzan?”

“In some things, you have to move with the times,” replies Nero.

“Indeed. You built that handgun yourself, did you not?” Falzon motions towards Blue Rose.

“Yes, My Lord,” says Nero, aware of the comforting weight of the sidearm against his leg.

“Does it not bother you that it’s against the dictates of the Order?” Asks Falzon.

*He has a point. Ranged weapons are unbecoming of a warrior.*

“Because Sparda didn’t use guns?” says Nero. “I’m pretty sure he didn’t use a motorcycle sword either.”
Falzon laughs. “True, true. You can justify anything if you think about it hard enough.”

*I’m sure* Falzon can and again, Nero can feel the malevolence seeping from Tony. He points at Nero’s phone. *Dinner. You’ve a wedding to plan.*

“My Lord, what date suits?” Nero prompts.

Falzon picks a date in ten days’ time and Nero really hopes that neither Kyrie nor Violet have something on. That sorted, Nero takes up his appropriate stance behind Falzon.

*For someone who’s so married to tradition, Falzon seems very keen to push this wedding through,* says Tony as he lounges against Falzon’s desk. He casts a casual eye towards Falzon, but the older man is intent on his work.

*People marry young in Fortuna. I guess it’s the demons and most of the work around here is dangerous – mining and fishing.*” Nero replies, thinking of everyone he knows. Very few didn’t wed and begin a family by 21, 22. Credo was an outlier, but it wasn’t for the want of asking Violet. Dorcas and Alexander, must have married at about that age to have Credo, who was already early 20s when Kyrie came along.

*Even so, to ignore the mourning period for Credo. Is it still 13 turns of the moon?* Persists Tony as he gets up and starts to walk round the office. Nero can hear his boots tap against the stone floor.

*“I think so. I never paid much attention to it. I mean we hadn’t even planned on getting married.”* 

*Because you’re together, you’re as good as married?* Tony sounds just a little bit mocking, but there is an underlying tenderness there.

*“Well, yes. Piece of paper doesn’t change that.”* Replies Nero.

*I can assure you it makes an awful lot of legal difference. Stroke of a pen and Kyrie lost half her house and her mother’s wedding ring.* Tony pauses so that his words sink in.
Nero doesn’t reply.

And that angel around her neck – is that not your Courting Gift? That gift starts the clock ticking to the Master’s Bedroom in 13 turns of the moon. Do they still have Wedding Nights in the Castle? He turns from examining Falzon’s shelves, his fingers skimming the books.

“Old Families and Members of the Order,” Nero has to think for a moment. “It’s still mandatory.”


It falls to the floor with a thump, making both Nero and Falzon jump. Tony gives a small smile and vanishes.

***

People tend to be creatures of habit. They tend to do the same things, in the same ways, most days.

It makes it easy for them to function, reduces the brain power needed for daily tasks and freeing up more space for difficult undertakings.

All creatures do it. Humans, demons, mice. They all have a pattern to their days.

Dante isn’t a morning person, so he misses breakfast. He figures that Violet would have woke him up if she needed him and the bed’s so comfy as Trish lies against him. He snuggles down closer, listening to the sounds of the house as it moves and creaks. He can feel by the way she’s lying that Trish is awake and listening just as intently to the noises, familiarising herself with the family routine.

It’s the first thing they do in any new place.

They wait for a bit once everyone’s out and it doesn’t sound like Lady’s up either.
“You’re on my hair,” mumbles Trish.

“It smells so good,” he murmurs back, stroking the hair he’s not lying on. “That coconut?”

“Mmm-hm.” She squirms a little as Dante takes his hand past her hair and down her side to the top of her leg and back up, lazily stroking.

Dante’s got some morning wood working and it seems like a shame to waste it. He’s snuggled up that close against her that it fits neatly in the crease of her ass. There’s no danger in the touch yet, either one could break off or it could go nowhere, stay a comforting snuggle between partners.

It could go everywhere.

Dante’s been on edge since Lady had first brought them the job. Part of Trish wishes she’d passed on it. Trish will never forget his face when he saw that photo.

Dante’s moved slightly, enough to free her hair and his hand’s still making that lazy trail along her skin. He’s moved so that he can watch her face, get a gauge for if she’ll say no and get up for breakfast.

She never says no, she can’t say no to him. Not to Dante.

Not if it means she never has to see that look again.

His hand’s trailing across her stomach, running along where her top’s ridden up. He’s not moving his hand off that narrow band of flesh between her shorts and her top, but she’s sensitive there and she shivers. Trish bites her lip and suddenly she’s aware of Dante’s huge chest, huge dick, huge legs, huge everything looming over her.

Trish isn’t small, but she feels tiny right now against him. He drops a line of wet, open kisses over her nape and shoulders. Trish gives a small moan as he blows over some of them, the cool sensation making her shiver. Dante smiles against her shoulder.

She’s aware of every slide of his chest against her back. She can feel the impression of his amulet
into her skin. He slides his bottom arm under the pillow so he can embrace her and Trish intertwines their fingers. His top hand slips up under her top, stroking over her ribs and stomach, gentle traces and spins that make Trish catch her breath. She turns her face up to him so he can see her respond.

Dante likes to watch, likes eye contact.

*An heir to Sparda. The blood runs inside him, too.*

*Lady looks at Trish first, then hands Dante the photo and all the jokes about museums and zoos die on his lips.*

*He looks stricken.*

*There’s no denying it and neither of them even say it.*

*His lips move, like he’s trying to speak, but he can’t make a sound.*

Dante leans down, his mouth moving up her throat and her face, licking and kissing as he goes. Trish holds his hand tighter and her top arm reaches up to the back of his head, burying her hand in his hair. It’s Dante’s turn to moan against her cheek as she grips hard enough to hurt, just ever so slightly.

She pulls him down and they both sigh as their lips meet in a deep but gentle kiss. It’s a little sour, morning breath, but that soon passes as their tongues curl and slide around each other, teasing more gentle moans from them both. Dante starts to go a little harder and he clacks his teeth against hers.

“Who...Mine?...How?” Dante eventually gets out. *He can’t stop staring at the picture. “I-I-I’ve never been to Fortuna. How old is he?”*

*Lady doesn’t speak.*

*Dante looks up at her and she’s seen that look when he was denying his tears over his brother. “What’s his name?”*
“Nero, I think.”

Trish jumps and Dante teases her lips with licks and kisses in apology. His hand pushes up her top so he has access to her breasts and her back arches as he palms them with callused hands, deliciously rough against her sensitive skin. He’s surprisingly gentle this morning as his hand strokes circles that finish with his palm running round her nipples. Trish squirms a little and makes a sound of pleasure that has Dante breaking off his kiss to rub noses with her, it’s just that cute. He moves back over her and licks her lips.

She’s wriggling her ass against his crotch and he’s relishing the pressure on his dick, trapped as it is between them. It’s a different sensation, rubbing against her cotton boyshorts. His hand gets just a little harder, a little rougher as it roves over her body. Trish’s breathing gets a little shallower, a little faster.

Trish can feel the precum dampening small patterns on her skin and she reaches behind her to take his dick in her hand. Dante grabs her hand and slides both hands between her legs, pressing against her clit. Trish twists her legs together, trapping their hands against her clit.

_Dante traces the lines of the youth’s face. “How old, Lady?”_

“He looks late teens? We’ll find out when we get there.”

_Trish walks over and looks at the photo. “He could be a brother, rather than a son.”_

“He’s a tough little fucker,” says Lady. “I’ve ran into him a few times.”

“He was the Order muscling in on your jobs? And you never fucking said?” Trish snaps.

“I didn’t make the connection. He’s a cocky little bastard. I knew he reminded me of someone – you when you were that age.” Lady is truly apologetic. She’s not her usual abrasive self.

Even just lying there with their hands tight against her clit and her lips, the pressure’s building and spreading out across her skin. Dante bites her shoulder, hard enough to mark her and Trish jumps. He’s not in Devil Trigger and it’s not been discussed, so it doesn’t count, but still.
Dante for his part, gives a short, sharp cry when her ass grinds against his dick. He must like it, because he bites her again, same place.

It’s Trish’s turn to cry out.

“C’mon, Babe, you got more in the tank,” Dante growls in her ear and begins to move their hands back and forth in the tight, damp clench of her thighs, till Trish picks up her rhythm in the movement of her hips.

The sensations hitting both of them makes all the joking stop.

“And you still never guessed? Lady, he’s the spit of Dante, for fucks sake!”

“Trish!” Dante’s voice sounds like glass, easily broken. They’re his family and he hates it when they fight.

Lady walks over to the bar and pours three drinks. Dante doesn’t notice the one she places in front of him. Trish gives her a shy smile when the brunette passes the whisky to her and Lady ducks her head slightly. They are each other’s family too.

“I truly didn’t realise,” she says softly.

“Who hired you?” Asks Dante.

“I don’t know the name. But she was adamant that he wasn’t to be hurt and she said he was -and this was her exact words – “An heir to Sparda. The blood runs inside him, too.”

The heat builds up all over Trish’s skin, spreads out molten along her nerves, like she’s being seared from the inside, Dante’s mouth on hers swallowing her cries and moans. She can’t settle with the sensations, can’t stop shaking as it builds and her heart pounds harder than she thinks possible.
She breaks the kiss, eyes dark with passion. “In me,” she grits out. “Want you in me, b-before I -ahh!”

It hits Trish hard, she always goes quick this way and Dante knows it. Half-Demon’s got mad skills from somewhere, because he flexes his hips and he’s at her entrance, ready to push in.

“What?” Trish damn near pleads and he smiles that lazy, playful, deadly smile and pushes in, timing it with the spasming of her walls. He does lose it for a second and groans her name, during a really hard pulse, but Trish knows what’s behind this, knows that he doesn’t want to lose it, that this fuck is about making her lose it.

He’s under more pressure from this situation than he’s letting on.

Way more.

“So Nero’s important to someone. Why do they want this job done?” says Dante. “No one’s heard from Sparda for years and I don’t recall him, but he wouldn’t have left my mother, so I don’t think this Nero is my brother.”

“You definitely think Sparda’s dead?” asks Trish.

“He wouldn’t have left my mother.” Dante’s tone brooks no dissent. He traces the frame of Eva’s picture. He doesn’t look at Trish and that tears her up. He’s never told her, but she knows that sometimes still he’s freaked out by the fact that he’s fucking a woman who looks exactly like his mother. It’s why he’s never Marked her and he never will.

Dante’s all the way in now and he pauses for a moment to enjoy the movements he’s wrenching from her body, from her clenching cunt, her shivering body, to their intertwined fingers, grasping so tight her knuckles are white. He could just keep her on the edge and he wouldn’t need to do a thing, she’d get him there.

Trish’s hips rock against their hands, keeping up the pressure on his dick. She can feel him deep inside her. Dante’s big and he’s filled her to the brim, touching every part of her as she moves. Trish’s clit is so sensitive from coming, it’s almost painful.

It just drives all thought from her brain as her body takes over and just reacts to the feel of Dante in
and around her.

She hopes he knows how much he means to her.

 Mostly she doesn’t, not after all this time. She’s got a different personality to Eva, so her mannerisms and expressions are different, in the same way that identical twins don’t look the same to the people who know them.

 She glances at Lady and realises she’s thinking the same thing.

 “Dante….” Lady begins. He looks up at her. It’s beginning to occur to him as well.

 “You’re a massive flirt, but you’ve never been a whore. You don’t do casual and what you do scares off most women. You have to be really committed to sleep with someone,” says Lady. “Before you met Trish, there wasn’t that many someones and there was only one chick at the time Nero must have been conceived.”

 Dante starts to move, as much as the position they’re in allows and Trish just breaks. She just gets so desperate, like she can’t contain the sensations rocketing through her body and she’s dissolving. But he’s in her and around her and it’s a question she can’t even begin to answer and she anchors herself against him.

 Every touch, every movement sends her higher, breaks her further apart.

 It’s the closest to Heaven that a Devil like her can hope for.

 “And I know where she is,” agrees Dante. “I don’t know where Vergil was all the time, even when we were talking.”

 “You didn’t speak to him for a year before Temen-Ni-Gru. Nero’s the right age for it.”

 Dante knocks back his drink and Trish gets him another one. He starts to laugh and the women look at each other uncertainly.
Dante laughs till the tears run, but he’s smiling. “I’m the brash, flirty, skanky ho, but it’s Vergil, the methodical, cautious, reserved one who knocks someone up. Cracks my shit up.”

Dante’s movements get harder, faster, erratic and dimly Trish knows he’s close. His grip on her tightens, not that she’s going anywhere and he’s going to coax one final orgasm out of her exhausted body.

She can feel it building, like a dam’s about to burst and everything that’s gone before was just the floodgates being opened in warning. There’s a burst of electricity as Trish loses her control on her Devil Trigger and it flairs over her like an explosion as she comes.

It goes white behind her eyes and she’s floating in the void.

She feels Dante come and the sensation of his dick pulsing deep inside her feels far off. She can feel through it all he hasn’t lost it, not the way she has. She can still feel him against her, like he’s the rock and she’s the ocean.

He keeps her running through it for as long as he can, but he has to let her down eventually. He holds her through her final tremors and cries fading to sighs, the colour comes back into her world.

Dante kisses her tenderly. “You good, Rocket Queen?”

Trish licks his lips, catching his lower lip in her teeth. She doesn’t bite though.

“You’re still on my hair,” she smiles and it’s the closest she can get to I love you.

They lie there a little longer before they decide they really do need to get up. The chimes for First Prayer are ringing out across the Town.

Lady’s already downstairs, sitting at the breakfast table. She’s already on her second helping of Greek yoghurt and granola and there’s a veritable cornucopia spread before her on the table.
“Making yourself at home, I see,” grins Trish, reaching for the coffee pot. She can tell by the smell it’s not the cheap stuff. She refills Lady’s cup, before she fills Dante’s. “They have real cream for the coffee?”

“Credo’s got a cellar full of 600 euro wine, they aren’t going to have cheap shit,” says Dante. “Violet was very reluctant to hand over her wine last night.”

“You find out why she hired us for the Saviour, yet?” asks Lady, eyeing up the toast rack. “Kyrie’s making me work for this. We’ve been left with the dishes.”

“Fair enough,” replies Dante. He has a huge helping of nearly everything on the table on his plate.

Trish shakes her head. “We probably should lie low for today, until Violet’s sorted out passes.”

“Probably,” replies Dante. “But let’s face it, no one will recognise you with clothes on, Gloria.”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll recognise you, asshole, ‘specially since you shot Sanctus in the face.”

“You never see The Godfather?” mumbles Dante through a mouthful of toast and jam.

“No.”

“We’ll need to fix that. Classic film.” He swallows. “There’s a scene when Michael has to shoot someone in a diner and Clemenza tells him that when he shoots the guy, it won’t matter that he’s not wearing a mask, cause no one will recognise him anyway. All they’ll see is the gun.”

“Did he smash his way in through the roof to shoot the guy?” asks Lady, sitting back in her chair with a bowl of grapefruit chunks.

“Well, no, Clemenza hid the gun in the bathroom,” says Dante.

“Was he wearing a bright red leather duster and cowboy boots?”
“Of course not, he was in a suit. It was 1950s New York.” Replies Dante, a little exasperated. He takes a bite of a croissant. “What is this, almond paste? God, that’s delicious.”

“So he was less…Italian?”

“He was from a Mafia family. He couldn’t get more Italian if he tried.” Dante stuffs the croissant in his mouth. “Muph lishes.”

“God, that’s so attractive,” says Trish, voice dripping with sarcasm. “No wonder I can’t resist you.”

“Dante,” says Lady. “I’m betting that Michael didn’t leap through a ceiling, in full view of a thousand people, wearing a bright red leather coat and shoot the Pope in the face in church, then get in a swordfight with his bodyguards.”

“Well, no, he just ran out the front door after dropping the gun.” His face is still full of almond croissant, so it’s hard to tell if that’s what he actually said.

Lady and Trish mentally divide up his body with a look. There’s no way that they’re keeping Dante indoors, not even if they tied him to the bed. There isn’t enough food on the island to keep him occupied all day.

“There’s Pilgrim’s Robes in the closet. Just don’t wear the red coat under it,” says Trish. “And keep the damn hood up.”

“So, hitting up the Tourist hotspots?” asks Lady.

Dante looks down at his croissant. “Let’s just say, I got a guidebook.”

“You want company?” asks Trish.

Dante shakes his head, turning it away as he eats his croissant. “Pass me the jam, Lady,” he says
and can’t quite hide the catch in his voice.
Chapter 16

Fortuna two decades ago

Lord Scerri stands in the Opera House with Sanctus, surveying the damage.

It’s wrecked.

“How in all the Nine Hells was this able to happen, Scerri?” asks Sanctus, but both men know it’s rhetorical. “Why?”

“I will have my best men on this, Your Holiness,” Lord Scerri assures him. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Captain Agius approach and maintain a respectful distance from Sanctus. Credo stands slightly behind him.

“I find it difficult to believe this damage was caused by just two people, despite what the witnesses say,” says Sanctus. “I never dreamed when you persuaded me to let foreigners in, this would be the result.”

“Clearly, this is the work of locals enraged at your wise decision to allow in the foreign craftsmen to adapt the island to provide the amenities that the Mainlanders are accustomed to,” replies Scerri. “None of our people have the skills and the island has to adapt quickly if we’re to reap the same benefits as Ibiza and Ayia Napa.”

“I’m wondering if it’s worth it.” Sanctus looks at the damage to The Saviour.

“We wouldn’t have the money for that, without the cash the Tourists have already brought in, Your Holiness,” Scerri says. His voice is calm and reasonable and doesn’t echo the irritation in his eyes. “The engineers tell me the structure of the building is unaffected, so repairs should be speedy.”

“See to it,” says His Holiness, sweeping out of the Opera House followed by his Assistant.

“That man is insufferable,” mutters Lord Scerri. “Captain Agius. You have something for me?”
“I’ve rounded up some of the local troublemakers and I think we can get some of them to accept responsibility for this mess,” says Captain Agius. “Your-“ and he almost says Ladybird “-other Assistant is speaking to some of them and convincing the Knights in the Infirmary they didn’t see what they saw.”

“Remind me what they saw, good Captain,” Lord Scerri says and both men pick up the danger in his tone.

“A young man and a young woman battling with a man in red, My Lord,” replies Captain Agius, carefully. “Unfortunately, the man in red escaped when he was being arrested.”

“A young woman who meets the description of your daughter, my good Captain.”

“I very much doubt that, Lord General. Verity is in no fit state to be attending her studies, much less be traipsing about with boys.” Captain Agius hopes his face is straight.

“Credo, do you have anything to add?” asks Scerri.

Credo comes forward before he speaks. “The young woman in question displayed the same powers as Miss Agius, was very tall and had black eyes, as if bruised. There’s very little doubt it was her.”

“I refute that, Knight Micellef. Verity was in bed when I left this morning and I’m sure her tutors will tell you she hasn’t the finesse to cast and keep casting to cause the damage we’re seeing here. She has power enough for three, but the control for none.”

“There’s truth in that,” agrees Credo. “She tends to waste all her magic on one spell and then she can’t perform for the rest of the day.”

“Tell me Credo, do you think it was Mr Redgrave and Miss Agius?” asks Scerri.

Credo pauses, like he’s considering. “I believe so, though I have my doubts. May I remind My Lord General that there’s really nothing we can do, given that it is your wish they…”
Credo’s voice trails off. He doesn’t want to state the obvious in front of the girl’s father.

Captain Agius tries not to look triumphant. “If I may, My Lord, get back to my duties?”

“Yes, go, go,” says Scerri. He watches Captain Agius’ retreating back.

“I’m beginning to have my doubts about this whole operation,” says Scerri.

“My Lord?” Credo can’t keep the break out his voice.

“Are you alright, Credo?”

“I’m fine, My Lord.” A muscle works in Credo’s jaw and his fists clench. “Why would you say that?”

“I thought that Vergil Sparda would do some investigating with an Agius and have a holiday romance. I didn’t imagine that he’d cause this level of disruption.”

“Might I suggest something, Lord Scerri?” says Credo. “The question we should be asking is ‘What are they investigating?’ “

Credo looks down.

“I checked the cistern when I heard. It’s still powered,” says Lord Scerri.

“They may well find The Saviour and the labs. I’d say we proceed with that in mind and let them discover them. Then we can get a better sense of what the Son of Sparda will actually do. It also means we can steer him towards what we can afford to lose and away from what we can’t.”

Scerri looks approving. “I see the merit in your argument. Give them an adventure to bond them and direct them. I always thought you’d rub off on Peter. I should have thought he’d rub off on you too.”
*Sparda’s Balls, never,* thinks Credo. “Your plans are at such a tender stage, Lord General. You cannot save this world from its chaos without a Son of Sparda to rule in your name.”

Lord Scerri considers this for a moment, then pats Credo on the shoulder. “My dear Credo, I do believe you’re right. Go and tell Peter of your plan. I will draw the attention of His Holiness so that you may work unmolested. It will be interesting to see what the Son of Sparda thinks of our plan. He may well choose to join us.”

Credo grits his jaw so hard, he’s surprised he doesn’t break his teeth.

Scerri notices, but misinterprets Credo’s ambivalence. “You worry that you may lose out on wedded bliss with Verity?”

“Among other things,” Credo says carefully. “I’ve worked hard to serve your dream.”

“Sacrifice is the nature of service, Credo. You’ll be fending off the Courting Suits from other suitable young ladies.” Scerri smiles and it’s ugly, like a grimace. “Perhaps you’ll marry a Tourist.”

Credo smiles weakly, then takes his leave.

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Verity comes to slowly. She’s warm and cosy. She’s in pain like she’s danced all night or been concentrating in the Practice Room, leaving another hole in the wall, but she’s cosy, so it doesn’t matter.

It starts to hit her in increments.

The bed feels wrong under her.

The noises and the smells are wrong.
The light streaming in through the window is coming in on the wrong side.

There's a hard, warm and very *male* body pressed up tight against her, his breath soft against her hair.

Verity tries to rise in alarm, but the arm draped over her tightens and the legs entwined with hers become just a little more entangled. Vergil's so tight against her that she can feel his heart beat against her back.

"*Don't you move,*" he whispers, sleepily.

There's nothing she can do but settle back down as the Chimes for First Prayer peal through the air.

Wait, no. Those chimes are wrong for First Prayer.

"Vergil, that’s Second Prayer.” She’s starting to panic slightly as she tries to get up. “We’ll have been missed.”

“Miss Agius,” says Vergil, holding her firm as he snuggles against her. “Let’s see exactly who misses us.”

Verity huffs, a little annoyed, but he fits so perfectly against her. “Mr Redgrave, I’ll remind you of the truth of my father’s words.”

“I should think that after last night, they’ll already be setting the date for you and Credo. I’m clearly a bad influence on you.”

Verity giggles and turns in his arms. “We wrecked the Opera House last night, didn’t we?”

He smiles and brushes some tendrils of hair that have worked loose from her braid off her face and behind her ear. “We did. *You* improved quickly.”
“Your words stung me. I wanted to make you eat them,” she replies. Her hand reaches across his back and she almost whips it back with a gasp. “You’re naked!”

“You certainly did that.” He holds her elbow so she can’t pull back her arm. “Not quite naked, though it’s how I’d normally sleep.”

It’s then she realises that she’s not as dressed as she should be. “Where are my clothes?”

“Away for cleaning. Who sleeps in their clothes?” Vergil’s got his lazy, deadly smile playing on his lips. He starts brushing his fingers up and down her arm, elbow to shoulder, over the silk sleeve.

Verity shivers at the sensation of the silk sliding against her skin.

The covers have slid down to their waists and she glances down at Vergil. He’s toned, muscular and even his small movements are graceful. His eyes watch her examining him like he’s a priceless piece of art or an artefact for a ritual. She touches him, hesitantly at first, running her hand over the ridged muscle of his chest, the dips and hollows of his back. She bites her lip as she feels them flex under his skin as her hand passes.

Her hand passes over an especially sensitive spot and he flinches. She’s about pull her hand away, when he growls, “Don’t you dare,” and with one arm under her and the other at her elbow, Vergil rolls onto his back, pulling Verity with him.

She’s only clad in his black silk shirt and her underpants, so she can feel every line of his body against hers as the silk slips along her suddenly too-sensitive skin. Their breathing’s quickened as they’ve both become hyper-aware of the other. She’s too young and too inexperienced to control her reaction as all that covers her sex from his, is thin cotton gliding across his silk boxer briefs.

The space between her legs feels empty, wanting to be filled. She can feel Vergil’s cock hardening underneath her, pressing into places only her fingers have been. Her heart thumps like it’s trying to escape her chest and it’s echoing the throbbing where Vergil’s cock’s straining against his boxers.

He’s barely breathing as he waits to see what she’ll do next. He wants her so badly, but he’s not going to make her take the final leap from girl to woman. She’ll come to him.
And she does.

She kisses him hard and fast and desperate, her eager tongue sweeping over his, along the roof of his mouth, hard circles as she can’t get enough of him.

Vergil can’t get enough of her.

The hand at her elbow slips to the back of Verity’s head, pressing her to him as their lips work against each others’.

She can’t help but instinctively rock her hips against him, seeking ever more friction against his cock. He pulls her closer, tighter, as if he could get right inside her. Her body writhes atop his and through the silk, he can feel her perfect little nubs hard and round against his chest.

He sweeps his hand along her back, hearing the hiss as it strokes down the silk. His hand never goes anywhere that isn’t covered, not yet. He uses the sensation of the material gliding over her body as if it was extra hands touching her and he’s getting the most gorgeous moans and sighs from her.

Vergil can hold himself in check more than Verity can – this isn’t new to him the way it is to her. He’s not sorry that he’s using that control against her, just a little bit. She’s beautiful when she’s turned on and frantic and can’t contain all that emotion, all that sensation. It’s like her skin can’t contain her soul and he knows how it feels, because this is Verity. It’s skewing his usual detachment in bed, but he wants this to be amazing for her. It’s not that he’s a selfish lover, he’s not, but there’s never much emotion involved for him. He enjoys sex, like he enjoys and savours fine wine and expensive clothes, but this is the first time there’s someone whose needs and desires align and overtake his own.

Verity pulls back from their kisses and she’s struggling to speak.

His hands keep up their ceaseless stroking, not wanting to lose their contact or her reactions. His eyes take in her flushed and shining face and the way her eyes keep dropping from his face.

Vergil says nothing, just waits on her to speak.

“Pl-please, can y-you,” Verity stutters out. “Please, I-I need you, need you to…” She can’t meet his
eyes with her request. One of her hands has reached for his and she’s half-heartedly trying to pull it to where she wants it, but not enough to make it clear.

“No, no,” says Vergil, hitting the notes that make her shake. He takes the hand she’s holding and forces up her chin. “Look at me, Verity. Meet my eyes.”

Her face is scarlet, she’s blushing. She raises her eyes a few times before she meets his and swallows with a shudder.

“You’re my woman,” says Vergil and his voice brooks no dissent. “My woman does not ever beg or plead. You demand, you order, you tell, but you never, ever beg. Do you understand me, Verity?”

She takes in a shuddering breath, before answering. She nods, as much as his hand under her chin allows her. “Yes.”

“So, Vee, command me,” he says in a low growl.

Verity casts her gaze down as she clearly struggles with articulating something so intimate. She swallows several times.

Vergil makes no move to push her on, just waits, watching her out his ice blue eyes.

Then, suddenly, Verity looks up and finds her voice. “I want you to touch me the way I touch myself.”

Vergil’s predator smile plays along his lips.

“Show me, Verity,” he says, still in that low growl.

She colours even deeper, but she takes his hand and puts hers over the top of it. She slides their hands under the waistband of her pants and parts the thick black curls until she reaches the little nub underneath the apex of her inner lips.
Vergil’s eyes flick between their fingers disappearing between them and her face. She’s biting her lip again and he thinks she’ll actually draw blood.

She presses his fingers down on her clit harder than he thought she’d like, starting off with little rubs, straights and circles. She varies the movement, but not the pressure. It doesn’t take him long to get in the rhythm of what she likes, pressing strong fingers down on her clit. When it’s actually time for them to make love fully, he thinks, he’ll play around and tease her a little, but for now, he learns how Verity likes to be touched.

He pulls her in for a kiss, timing it with their fingers, tongues slipping and sliding against each other as much as their fingers twirl around her clit. He thinks that she’s going to come quickly because of the novelty of the situation and she’s already had a lot of build-up. She guides him to start adding mixes of little and hard twists of the poor little nub to their foreplay and it doesn’t surprise him that she likes a little pain mixed in with the pleasure.

He starts to tease her mouth in the same way, sucking on her tongue, running his along the inside of her lips before hard and gentle bites.

Verity moans deep in her throat and returns his kisses in kind, so it’s almost a contest between them as she rocks into his hand.

He cannot wait till she’s ready for this to be foreplay to the main event. When they know each other’s bodies’ better and he can make good on his promise to keep her on the edge, knowing she’ll fight him every inch of the way.

Vergil praises what ever Gods there are that he met Verity at the start of his life, not towards the end like his father and mother.

There’s a cry against his mouth as Verity stiffens and nearly breaks his fingers, her orgasm’s that strong. Vergil works her through it, doesn’t break either their kiss or their contact. Her other hand’s in his hair and she nearly rips it from his head.

He bites her lip and he does draw blood, laving the teeth marks with his tongue to soothe the sting.

She’s gone as far as she can with this climax and Vergil entwines their fingers as he takes their hands out of her pants. She collapses against him, panting and giggling. Vergil can’t help but grin
at her reaction.

“So, Mr Redgrave,” she says, as Vergil traces the lines of her face with his free hand. “Am I worth your money?”

“All of it, Miss Agius. Every single penny I’ve got and my soul, too.” He’s about to kiss her again when there’s a knock at the door. “That’ll be lunch and your clothes.”

“Nine Hells! You can’t open it!” she says in alarm. She gestures to herself and to his impressive erection that’s barely contained within his boxer briefs.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Vee. After your recent performance, you need to eat and keep your strength up.” Vergil opens the door to the maid who tries very hard not to look. She does, however, look past Vergil to the bed where Verity is sitting cross legged and red faced.

“Oh, hello, Miss Verity,” she says in surprise. “Alice brought over a dress for you from Miss Pinny. How did she know you’d be here?”

“We train at the Archive, Marta,” replies Verity.

“Oh, yes, Miss, so you do. Have you heard about the Opera House?” Marta says as she lays the table and sets Verity’s clothes on the chair. The maid is clearly bursting to tell her the gossip.

“What’s happened?”

“Oh, Miss! There was a riot in there! Workers from the Mason’s Guild blew up the seats and smashed up the statue of Our Saviour in protest at all the workers from the Mainland coming and building that new supermarket at the West Docks.”

“No!”

“Oh yes, Miss, it’s crawling with Knights. Captain Agius has arrested half the Mason’s Guild, Miss. Oh, it’s ever such a mess.” Marta looks like she’s settling in to give all the gory details.
Vergil hands her back the tray and opens the door. “Back to your duties.”

Marta looks at him in confusion before remembering herself and jumping up. She clasps her hands and bows, before sneaking a final look at Verity.

Vergil shuts the door before setting out lunch and pouring the coffee. Verity collapses back on the bed, pulling a pillow over her face. “Sparda’s Balls! She’ll tell everyone I’m in here.”

“Good,” says Vergil, sitting down and helping himself to mutton pie and cheese.

“Good?” squeaks Verity.

“I’ve nothing to hide and neither have you.” He pushes a plate towards her. “Come and eat. You’ve hipbones sharper than Yamato.”

Verity gets up and flops down on a chair. “You won’t have to live here after you’re gone.”

“Neither will you. Drink your coffee.”

“Vergil, it’s different for girls.” Verity looks at him as if she’s wondering how he doesn’t understand this basic fact. “You’ve got money and freedom. I don’t have any of that. I have… pocket money. I have enough to keep myself in fripperies and pretty dresses, but not enough to say… buy a house. I’d never be allowed to go on holiday by myself like the Tourists. I’m not even allowed on half the Island. I’ve never left this Island.”

“I thought you were determined to get off it?” Vergil hands her a coffee. “Or are you all talk?”

He sounds challenging, more than disappointed.

“I will get off Fortuna, but I have to be clever about it. I can’t just leave.” She sips her coffee. “I have to have a good reason to leave, money to set up, so a job. That takes time. And then I have to be very careful about it. I’ve seen some girls, and yes, boys, especially from Old Families try to get
to Italy or France and they had Knights come after them and drag them back. Rosanna Calleja, the bride from the other day, she tried to get away on the Tourist ferries. Faith Committee sent some of their Knights, her Suitor and her father after her, caught her in Palermo. She was confined to her room and starved until she consented to her Courting Suit.”

“And I told you,” says Vergil, evenly. “It’s nothing you’ll need to worry about.”

“Because they seem intent on pushing us together?” she says. ”Clearly there’s a nefarious plan afoot.”

“You heard Marta. Your Father’s arresting half a Guild, when he must know damn fine it was us, we’re neither of us wallflowers,” points out Vergil.

“Papa is protecting us. Mostly me, but that means he has to protect you too, lest you turn your coat about me,” she replies.

Vergil looks at her and decides that at the moment, this is not a hill he needs to die on. She hasn’t got all the facts surrounding him and he doesn’t have all the facts surrounding Fortuna and his Father.

“So what are our plans for this afternoon?” he asks. “Though my shirt will miss you.”

She smiles that crooked half smile. “I was thinking Caged Library at the Archive. Some research that doesn’t involve blowing up half of Fortuna.”

They eat their lunch in a companionable silence.

***

“You’re absolutely sure?” Peter says to Marta as she serves him soup and coffee. “Thank you. I’ve missed lunch with the nonsense in the Opera House.”

“It was definitely Miss Verity, Peter. He was clad in naught but a prison for his John Thomas and she was in his shirt and on his bed, a pure doxy!” Marta makes it sound so much more scandalous
than it is, but it’s something Peter encourages. Marta works in the Archive Lodgings for the access to better gossip more than the better money.

It’s something that’s stood Peter in good stead in the past. She trades in information and so does he. “And they make out they’re so proper too.”

***

Credo opens Vergil’s door. They haven’t bothered to straighten up the bed and the smell still lingering in the air makes him worry about what he’ll find.

He should have accepted Peter’s offer to come up here instead. Why’s he torturing himself like this?

Credo walks through to the bathroom, sees the shaving brush hung up to dry and he wonders if Verity shaved Redgrave before they went out. He can almost see her, sitting on the counter, hair pouring over her shoulder, wearing one of the black silk shirts, long legs lazily swinging, Redgrave shirtless as she starts shaving him, laughing her crystal laugh.

It’s a beautiful shaving kit, granite bowl and brush handle, silver tipped badger hair. Sterling Silver stand. Credo can’t help but run his fingers over it.

He notices a black shirt in the washing basket and something tells him to look at it. He pulls it out the wash, holds it to his face and inhales it. The scent of sweet violets is strong, the way it is when he’s danced with Verity at balls and parties. He knows that scent as well as his aftershave. He breathes in her scent again, building himself up to check the drawer with the sheaths.

Credo resists the urge to smash up the room, the shard of jealousy through his heart’s so sharp he can scarce breathe. He takes a moment to collect himself again, before he opens the drawer on the bedside cabinet and takes out the Durex box. It says 40 XL and Peter had counted 38 before.

Credo tips them on the bed and counts them three times, just to be sure.

It’s still 38.
So either they aren’t using any and Redgrave doesn’t seem like the type to let passion get in the way of caution or they haven’t gone all the way yet.

He puts them back, careful to make sure he’s left the room exactly as he found it.

He takes the shirt with him.

***

“Same with all the Old Families. In and out of beds like any hedge-whore, just a better quality of sheet to lie on,” she agrees. “Miss Pinny’s no better. Dallying with Cassius Calleja and no Courting Suit in sight.”

“Cassius Calleja? He’ll never offer one. Everyone knows he and his brother will wed Chetcuti girls, so he can dally as much as they like.” Peter dunks his bread into his soup. “So did your sister say what happened when they found out Verity wasn’t there? I thought she was supposed to be dying a death after tripping on the carpet?”

“You’d think so after the mess her face is in, but no, she’s climbing down the drainpipe in the middle of the night, like her sister,” says Marta. She’s loving the attention. It’s not often she gets to hold court like this with Knights, even if it is Peter and she grew up with him.

Peter knows how to flatter. He learned from the best.

“I cannot believe that Pinny Agius is such a little hellion. She looks like butter wouldn’t melt,” he declares.

“You know what they say - Beware a pretty face,” agrees Marta. “Alice says there was such a kerfuffle when they found that Miss Verity wasn’t abed. Hauled Miss Pinny upstairs to check Miss Verity’s wardrobe to make sure her clothes weren’t missing, in case she’d ran away like the Calleja girl and Madam Agius got up from her sickbed - sickbed my arse! Captain-Sir cracked her a good one same night Miss Verity tripped on the stairs – and started screaming all manner of filth at him, so he planted a few good facers on her. Alice says her nose is broke and the doc can’t set it.”

“Is it really that bad?” Peter leans in.
“It gets better than that, Peter,” says Marta, conspiratorially.

“No!”

“Oh yes,” she nods. “The Captain told everyone to act like nothing’s wrong.”

“Well he doesn’t want anyone knowing she’s run off,” says Peter, setting Marta up for what comes next.

“No, Peter. He doesn’t want anyone acting like anything’s wrong when she *comes back*.”

Peter doesn’t answer as Credo comes back down, still holding the black shirt.

Marta notices it, because of course she does.

Peter turns back to her, taking one of his daggers from its sheath and some money from his wallet.

Marta goes silent.

“Remember, Marta. Mouth shut, ears open,” says Peter as he stabs the remaining bread and leaves the money on the table.

“Well?” he asks Credo outside. He offers him the bread from the dagger.

Credo looks at him, but takes it.

“I think she’s still pure, but she won’t be for long.” Credo looks at the shirt. “What do we need for the Spell?”
Peter thinks for a moment. “Her hair and knowing when she last had her monthlies.”

“We need to get in her room then,” says Credo. “I know Verity keeps a diary. She’ll probably record it in that.”

“Other than that, we just need a location,” says Peter. “He’s come to find out about his father, where next would he go?”

“Well they went the Castle when Verity was showing Redgrave around. My guess is back there.”

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection

Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS

Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.

Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef

Our plans to set the Wedding Spell have taken a state of some urgency.
Verity is recovering – or can suppress physical discomfort – faster than we anticipated and is moving into a physical relationship faster than we predicted with Vergil Sparda. We don’t want to lose the advantage that her virginity offers re conception. It’s the only point where we can accurately predict and manipulate the Son of Sparda’s uncovered coupling with Verity.

Our major concern is where to set the spell – we cannot risk it being triggered by someone it was not intended for. Knight Micellef thinks the Castle. Knight Falzon considers this too risky and too obvious.

Vergil Sparda is aware of the Spell being cast there and will likely be looking for it.

They have been carrying out some sort of investigation, which has resulted in considerable damage to the Opera House, so we may plot a possible route for the laying of the spell there.
Chapter 17

Dante reluctantly leaves his red duster behind. He’s got a blue coat that he can wear instead. He takes Ebony and Ivory in their holster that sits on his ass, so they’ll be hidden under the Robe. He decides to use his guitar case for Rebellion. That way, he’s got her, but she’s not obvious.

The last thing he takes is the Operation Resurrection file that Trish had stolen first. It’s not left his side since she brought it. He’s re-read it so many times the words are burned into his eyes, but he can’t stop, like picking a scab.

Neither woman has tried to get it off him. Dante has very few hot buttons, but his lost family is one of them. He flexes his left hand, looking at the palm. He’s often wished there was a scar there, so there’d be physical proof that Vergil had been in this world, had left his mark on it.

Dante sets off on his tour of Fortuna, walking in the footsteps of the brother he lost so long ago.

He goes first to the graveyard to see the Elsewhere. He’s cautious when he goes, far more circumspect than he’s used to being. This recce shit is not really in his nature, but he has too much riding on it.

There’s a funeral going on way down the bottom and it strikes Dante how big this graveyard is for such a small place, even allowing for the Saviour’s death toll. They’ve finally started dismantling the massive statue and that’s revealed the poor bastards crushed to death beneath it and more hijabs appearing in the Plaza.

Dante reaches where the Elsewhere had been the night before, but there’s nothing. He picks a few flowers and throws them over the gravestones where it had been, figuring that the locals would just figure flowers were a custom where he comes from. He’d probably get lynched if he throws stones and he doesn’t need that now.

They land on the grass on the other side of the grave. It’s closed and he hopes the Knights made it back. There’s no trace of the massive bear and no, he’s not even going to try to pronounce it.

Dante wanders round the graveyard, noticing the ages that most people died – fairly young. Not many seem to have made it to their 80s. Most seem to be forties or younger, even coming into the modern age. It surely can’t all be demons, even allowing for the main industries on Fortuna.
He walks past the grave of Agnus on his way to the tomb he really wants to see.

Dante stops for a moment at the Micellef plot. They haven’t done anything for Credo yet, though it gives him a start to see that his name is on a stone alongside his parents, with just a birthdate for him, but no second bracket closing off his life.

Violet’s name’s underneath, with a date of birth that he knows to be arbitrary. The fact that Credo had a stone with her name on it tells him all he needs to know about the couple – Credo Micellef truly loved her, but Dante’s got his doubts it was as strong on her side. What’s the poem - *If equal affection cannot be, Let the more loving one be me.*

From what he’s seen of Credo he very much doubts *Were all stars to disappear or die, I should learn to look at an empty sky.*

Dante puts a hand on the grave and says in a low tone, lest anyone overhear, “We saved them. Thanks for keeping him safe all these years.”

He straightens and turns to look for the Agius plot. He sees an older man in a General’s uniform and Dante thinks he recognises him from the news. He steps close enough to listen to the General tell the girls in the grave about his day and how well Josh is doing. He asks the grave how well Josh’s cousins are doing and how he’d really like to see them before it’s too late.

He tells them his future plans and that Falzon won’t like it, but someone needs to put some decency back in Fortuna.

He wipes tears from his eyes and tells his dead daughters that he’s sorry and that he wishes he’d been a better father. He picks up the previous days’ flowers and takes them to the bin. He nods to Dante, but it’s clear he doesn’t really see him.

Dante watches him go, making sure he’s left the cemetery before he approaches the grave. There’s a date for a woman who’s identified as Abigail Eliza Agius, beloved mother of Agrippina Thekla and Verity Eliza Agius, adored daughters, dearly missed. There’s a bouquet of violets and of lupins on the younger and elder girls’ grave.

“I’m so sorry,” Dante whispers to them. “I’m sorry you both got dragged into this shit. Other people can’t stop turning my family into a drama.”
He pauses for a moment.

“I promise I’ll get him for you, for Vergil. We already got Scerri. I’ll get Falzon and Agius too.” He speaks quietly. This is for Pinny and Verity’s ears only. He knows they can’t hear him, but he says it anyway. A couple of tears roll down his cheek and he wipes them away, trying not to remember the last time he cried.

It doesn’t work and he remembers anyway.

*It’s only the rain.*

He stands up abruptly and turns round to see General Agius standing in front of him.

“I knew you’d come.”

***

Nero and Falzon stare at the book on the floor like it’s about to bite them.

Nero goes over to it cautiously, Falzon watching him.

Nero doesn’t feel anything coming off the book as he picks it up, but it falls open to what be a well-thumbed page – *ley lines in Fortuna.* Nero closes it as he doesn’t want to look like he’s snooping, but he still reads the title as he puts it back. *A History of Time Anomalies in The Eastern Mediterranean* and as he puts it back in its space, he can see the shelves are filled with similar books on subjects as diverse as science, history and the supernatural.

“There’s no way that book could have fallen, My Lord,” says Nero. “It’s just gone back in its space. It’s solid.”

Falzon’s watching him, but Nero can’t get a beat on him. “So it would seem, Knight Balzan. Seismic activity or ghosts, do you think?”
“I didn’t feel any tremors, so it must be a ghost,” says Nero, completely straight-faced.

Falzon comes to stand beside him, looking at the bookcase. “What do you think, Knight Balzan?”

“I think there’s a lot of people who would be haunting you, My Lord, even though we’re in a Castle that’s seen a lot of action,” replies Nero.

Tony reappears beside Nero and he jumps with a shout.

“Are you alright, Knight Balzan?” Falzon is looking at him like he’s mad.

“Wasp!” shouts Nero. “Ow! Ow!”

He starts hitting his arm. “Consent for Dismissal?!?”

Falzon waves at the door. “Go, go!”

Nero runs out holding his arm.

Tony walks after him, shaking his head in askance.

***

Nero checks the toilets to make sure they’re empty. “What the hell, Tony?”

_I was going to ask you what you thought of Falzon’s reading material, before you decided to remind the man who wants your sister-in-law’s head on a stick of all the things he’s done that are bad enough to get him haunted. Tony leans against the stalls. Falzon was actually asking about his books, you clod._

“Oh.”
Empty Night, Nero. Sometimes you can be so insightful and quick, you astound me and then you can be so moronic, you astound me. Tony’s shaking his head, but he looks exasperated, rather than outright angry.

“You pulled a book out, dude! You’ve gone from being the voice in my head to dropping actual books on the floor, so excuse me for being a little shocked!” Nero hisses. “How did you even do that?”

I have no idea. Your reaction was somewhat amusing, though. I may experiment further with my new-found condition. Tony raps on the wood of the stall and it echoes through the bathroom. You got out of it well enough.

“I’d better get back before Falzon wonders what’s happened to me,” says Nero.

I think he’s already doing that, smirks Tony.

Nero gets the sense that if Tony’s smiling, he should be worried.

Falzon’s sitting at his desk when Nero reappears. He gives Nero a brief nod as the younger man takes up his allotted place, but Nero notices him glance at the bookcase every so often.

***

“So what are we doing?” asks Kyrie, looking in dismay at the pile of paper and computer records in front of her.

Ms Kye looks up from the records she’s collating. “You are reporting on what was ordered, what was spent and where it went. Until Madam Alighieri can get to the various Records Rooms, this is how we can get an approximation on what went where, so we can see what the Black Budget was. We’ve a rough idea what went where, but often patterns can be picked out that show other indications.”

“Indications of what?” asks Kyrie.
“Any anomalies, unexplained wastage, machinery wearing out too fast, high production costs in materials and resources, lab space requisitioned that can’t be explained for what they require it for.” Ms Kye gives Kyrie a tablet with a map. “So you can identify physical areas with their numbers so we can check the figures after you. There’s rough formulae for use of resources, so you can do approximations.”

“I don’t science,” says Kyrie. “I’m only doing this job so I’m protected by UO. Can’t I just type letters and make tea?”

“You think I actually do any science?” says Violet, coming in with more records. “Ms Kye, that’s the Devil May Cry Team’s passes and visas organised and signed off. Have them ready for me by the time I leave.”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Only time I ever actually did any real science was college,” continues Violet. “Further up the ladder I go, I spend more time managing budgets and people than actual research. The science just means I understand where the budget’s going.”

Violet glances across to Ms Kye. “Go on, you can say it.”

Ms Kye puts down her stylus and clears her throat. “Make a cup of coffee, Kyrie. Milk and two sugars, please.”

Kyrie laughs. “How long have you been wanting to say that?”

“Since I found out I was getting an assistant.” Ms Kye turns back to her screen.

Violet comes out to the staff kitchen with Kyrie. “I’ll give you a hand.”

“I don’t know what to make of Ms Kye,” says Kyrie.
“Neither did I, at first, but I’d still be cautious what you say in front of her,” replies Violet.

“I’ll just put the whammy on her,” grins Kyrie as she mimics casting a spell. “I still can’t believe we got away with the shopping this morning.”

“Me neither.” Violet points out where things are kept as Kyrie makes drinks. “I’d had my suspicions for a while though. I just didn’t say it to Credo. You know what the Orders’ like against magic they can’t control.”

“I know it’s-“ Kyrie searches for the right word. “-doubtful about it.”

Violet grimaces. “You have no idea. Anyway, I’ve thought for a long time you were defensive magic. I’m offensive.”

“That must have been fun when you found that out,” says Kyrie, pouring the water into the coffee machine.

“It was. It was even more fun for the hospital staff when they had a big hole in the wall.”

“What happened?” Kyrie pours the milk into Ms Kye’s cup. She doesn’t bother with Violet, who takes hers black.

“I’m not sure, it was only a few weeks after I’d been found, so I was still in a medical coma,” Violet frowns. “Some reporter or something got in past the carabinieri and because I must not have recognised them, even though I was out of it and apparently all my alarms and body monitors went sky-rocketing as I panicked. I’d even managed to get out of bed, which considering my legs were shattered was impressive.”

She turns back to the coffees and loads them onto a tray. “Enough of me, we need to get you fight ready.”

Kyrie takes the tray from her. “Does that get me out the number crunching?”

“No.”
“So, the knicker seller is having an affair with the hairdresser?” Lady’s tucking into the croissants she can’t get into the fridge.

“But the hairdresser’s married the mechanic, the one with the 70s tache.” Trish has her feet up with a coffee as they watch one of Kyrie’s beloved British soaps. “Oh my God, he’s just murdered the barmaid’s husband! But he’s the baby’s father!”

“Which baby? The one the gay couple are having?”

“No! the knicker seller’s mother’s baby!” says Trish, pointing at the character. “The one she’s having with the mechanic.”

“I’m lost,” says Lady as the old time trumpet begins on the theme tune. “So who was the woman with the toy-boy then?”

“I’m not sure, but she had great hair.”

“She looked like a cat’s ass.”

“But with great hair.” Trish drains her cup. “Now what? I don’t think I could take another soap with weird accents and pretty women oddly attracted to those Neanderthal looking brothers.”

“I liked the Manchester one. Those chicks look like they could take on a pile of demons, then drink the fuckers under the table,” says Lady. “Oi, oo d’fink yor speakin’ to, Layday?”

“That wasn’t bad,” agrees Trish. It was actually terrible, but they’ve no way of knowing that. “I think we should be really bad houseguests and see if we can find anything that tells us what the hell Violet’s playing at. It was definitely her who hired you?”

“I think we’re past any doubt now, Trish,” replies Lady. “She’s High Order, so unless she wanted
Agnes out the way so she could get promoted, I cannot see a reason. She didn’t even really bother to hide it from me when I took the job. What did she say to Dante?”

“Her cellar is full of expensive wine.”

“How the other half live,” sighs Lady. “I’ll do the bedroom, you do the study?”

“Sounds like a plan,” says Trish, standing up and stretching. She turns the TV off and closes it back into its cabinet. Kyrie had been insistent about that. “What the hell kind of place makes owning a TV illegal?”

The two women head upstairs to the bedroom and Violet’s study.

Trish opens the door, but she can’t get in. There’s a ringing sound and a blue barrier appears as she tries to step over the threshold and a sharp pain shoots through her head. She drops to her knees with a cry, clutching her head.

Lady comes running, crouching down next to her friend. “Trish! You OK?”

Trish pants through the pain until it goes. “I think so. I think she’s got it warded.”

Lady cautiously puts her hand over the threshold, but there’s nothing. Her hand is in the room from her elbow.

“You’re brave,” says Trish, still wincing.

“Put your arm in again,” says Lady.

Trish glares, but does it again, with the same result. Lady is still unaffected.

Lady comforts Trish till the pain subsides, then helps her up. “We’ll swap.”
Trish nods painfully. “What are we looking for? Anything specific?”

“I have no fucking clue. I have no fucking clue about any of this. It just gets weirder and weirder.” Lady throws her hands up. “How is he? Really?”

Trish looks at the master bedroom door. “Coping. Just. We fuck this up, I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive us. And I can’t lose him.”

Lady squeezes Trish’s arm. “We won’t.”

They swap rooms.

Trish looks over the room and through the drawers, feeling a little guilty as she does so. She doesn’t really find anything, but lots of books on subjects as diverse as quantum physics and xenobiology to folklore and the supernatural. There’s books on portals, both supernatural and theoretical interdimensional physics.

She shouts as much to Lady, who replies with the same. “She’s got a lot of fucking books.”

“Look through them,” calls back Trish. “See where she’s read the most or if she’s hidden anything in them.”

“She keeps a journal,” says Lady. “There’s like an entire bookcase of them going back twenty years. There should be one in there.”

Trish looks by the bed, but it’s easy to find. She mouths a silent prayer of apology to whatever God is listening and reads it. It’s mostly the same, details of the nightmares that Violet has on a regular basis or things that occur to her, to-do lists. She’s scary organised.

Some of it Trish can read, where Violet has written in English or Italian, but she’s no hope with the Fortunese. It looks like someone’s stole all the vowels. She’d picked up enough to get by when she was masquerading as Gloria, but this is handwritten by someone fluent in the language and Violet’s got old-timey cursive going on. It could be a recipe or a demon-summoning ritual she’s written and Trish has no way of knowing.
Her latest nightmare was all of last night. There’s several entries, but they’re all largely the same.

“Trish! Come here!” It’s Lady’s tone that brings Trish running.

Lady brings the journal out of the study. “It was in with the other notebooks.”

Trish takes the notebook from Lady. The pages are yellowing and the date on it is 20 years earlier.

*Diary of Verity Agius - KEEP OUT PINNY!* proclaims the fly leaf.

It’s not the writing they pay attention to, though they’ll get to that.

It’s where the pages fall open to photographs she’d used as markers – the strips of passport photos that all lovers seem to do, an ultrasound and about ten standard photos, showing the couple from the strip, separately and together. A couple are fairly intimate, without showing too much.

One shows her laughing as his ice cream cone falls down his front, while he looks less than impressed, but won’t say it to her. A couple of the photos show what’s clearly a wedding photo – they’re showing off their rings, a stylised snake braided round the band- she has flowers in her hair and a posy. They look so happy. There’s a bump under her summer dress in one of the wedding pictures.

The man’s looking at her like she’s descended from Heaven and there’s a soft look on his face that neither woman thought they’d ever associate with Vergil.

“He looks so like Nero there,” says Trish, voice shaking. “He looks at Kyrie like that.”

Trish can’t read the writing on the back, other than a date and their names.

The ultrasound she can read though.

*Bambino Sparda, 20 settimane*
“That’s an Italian hospital,” says Lady, quietly, reading the name. “And that wedding photo is outside an Italian City Hall.”

“When was Temen-Ni-Gru?” asks Trish.

Lady works out the dates quickly. “About six months after that ultrasound.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Trish covers her face with her hands.

“Two questions, Trish,” says Lady. “What the hell is Violet doing with that journal and how the fucking hell do we tell Dante?”

***

“I knew you’d come,” says General Agius. He sounds resigned.

Dante says nothing. He doesn’t trust himself.

“Twenty years come Midwinter Night.” Lord Agius looks back to Verity’s grave. “Seems fitting you’d come back when he was of age. I knew we’d never hide it forever. After all, it’s the slow blade that penetrates the shield.”

Dante looks down on Lord Agius from his full height and he knows the look in his eyes would chill the Sahara.

“I won’t stop you, Vergil,” says General Agius, quietly. He speaks as a man who has met his fate and some measure of peace with it. “Just let me see Josh right first and know that there hasn’t been a day since she…he…it happened that I haven’t regretted it with my whole being.”

General Agius looks back at Dante. “If I can I have one request? Consider it the request of a man who knows he’s dying.”
Dante nods. He still doesn’t speak.

“Kill me last. I want to see Falzon suffer. Kill me last.”

Dante says nothing, just offers Lord Agius his hand.

To his surprise, Lord Agius takes it. They shake on it and Lord Agius walks off without another word.

***

General Agius goes back to his car, Josh opening the door for him and driving just like he’s a normal Assistant. The man’s raised him, so he can tell when something’s different about him.

“Are you OK, Grandad?” He asks.

General Agius seems, not happier, but less troubled than usual.

He turns to his grandson and hugs him. It takes Josh by surprise as Grandad is usually more reserved when in uniform and is careful to observe protocol.

“Yes, I am.” He breaks the hug off and steps back, but he’s still got his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “I’m so proud of you, Josh. Your mother would be too.”

General Agius gets in the car and Josh eyes him in the rear-view mirror.

“Take me to the Castle. I need to speak to General Falzon.”

Josh nods and starts the car.

* * *
Dante’s surprised he’s got into the Castle, but they’re desperate for the Tourists to return and all they see is his money. Euros, dollars, pounds, they don’t care. All money is green when it hits the bank.

They don’t even really look at his face, though he figures he’ll have a problem when he’s been around a bit longer and they recognise him. All they see is the blue robe. It’s not even required here, it’s a DTA, Designated Tourist Area.

It’s all different from the last time he was here.

They’ve fixed the wall that hid the staircase, but from the way the curtain hiding it billows, he thinks there must be a door now. He looks up and the heavy wooden chandelier has not been replaced.

He wonders what *Sparda’s Victory Over Mundus* looked like when it hung on that same wall.

“Hey, Dante. Dante!”

He’s lost in thought when Nero comes across with Josh and some coffees and sandwiches. Dante startles a little, but luckily doesn’t reach for his firearms or Rebellion. He must register Nero as *safe* now.

“Hey, Kid. How’s it going?” He takes a proffered coffee from Nero, who sits down beside him. He looks at Josh pointedly.

“Oh! Josh, Dante.” He gestures his hand between them as they nod to each other. “Dante is that Dante, so keep it quiet.”

Josh’s eyes widen, but then he shrugs. “I’m just chatting to a Tourist. It’s what they want anyway.” He looks at Dante and says proudly, “We’ve got Twitters.”

“I saw that,” replies Dante. He looks at Josh, noticing how much he takes after his mother, tall with her defined features.
Dante doesn’t just have Trish’s stolen file. Dante has one of his own combined into it.

“So, hitting up the Tourist sites?” asks Nero. “You want to split this sandwich?”

Dante shakes his head. “I’m good. Kyrie puts on a massive spread for breakfast.”

“Just as long as you did the dishes. It drives her nuts when the kitchen’s untidy.” Nero sips his coffee. “And she’s got a good aim.”

“We’re pussy-whipped and proud, Kid,” grins Dante. “Price we pay for home cookin’ and a warm bed.”

“Trish and Lady don’t strike me as the cooking type,” grins Nero.

“A Man doesn’t live on pizza alone,” smirks Dante. “You hear that?”

The younger men listen for a moment and there’s the sound of distant yelling. The whole Great Hall quietens.

“Is that?” Josh says.

“Sounds like it. No wonder we were sent on a coffee break,” replies Nero.

Dante cocks an eyebrow.

“Grandad and Falzon. Grandad’s been weird since going to see Mami today,” confides Josh. “He’s decided to run for Supreme General, but that’s between us.”

Nero chokes on his coffee and gets it down his uniform. The sound of him brushing it down is the loudest sound in the Great Hall.
“You make anything out?” Dante murmurs. Demon senses are super sharp.

“A bit.”

Josh shakes his head. “Just the voices.”

“You agreed, Agius. I kept to it. I stayed away, I backed you in Committee every turn and now you’re throwing 20 years out the window? Nine fucking hells, man!”

Nero mouths Falzon to Dante.

“Fortuna’s suffered at the hands of power-hungry scum like you for far too long, General Falzon and look where it’s got us!” Lord Agius fires back.

“You’ve no fucking room to talk about power-hungry, Agius. Your greed destroyed your daughters.” Falzon snarls.

“You and Scerri destroyed my daughters. I never agreed to going as far as you did.” General Agius retorts.

“You never turned down your promotion on principle, did you, Agius? Everything I did, I did for Fortuna. Everything you did, you did for yourself?”

“I stopped lying to myself about that a very long time ago,” says Lord Agius, so quietly that Nero and Dante strain to hear him.

“It didn’t stop you holding her down while she screamed. Maybe I’ll let that drop next time you’re asked where’s Verity?” There’s the sound of Falzon recoiling from a blow and Nero’s on his feet and running, Josh hot on his heels.

Dante follows, even though he’s expecting to get stopped any moment.
The three men burst into Falzon’s office, but Dante hangs back behind the door.

“General, are you alright?” asks Nero.

Falzon is clutching his stomach and from the way he’s looking at General Agius, the older man has signed his death warrant.

Everyone in the room can see it.

“You get precisely one of those, Edward,” Falzon says in a voice so cold they can almost see their breath. “Knight Agius, take General Agius home.”

“Yes, My Lord,” replies Josh, clasping his hands and bowing his head, before looking between Falzon and his grandfather, burning with curiosity.

General Agius doesn’t come immediately. Never taking his eyes from Falzon as he straightens his uniform, Lord Agius moves in his own time.

Josh and Nero exchange shocked, incredulous looks with each other as the darker young man follows his General from the room. Josh says something to someone outside the room, who replies in accented Italian.

Nero sees Falzon’s face and steps outside. “Everything’s fine now,” he says quietly, before continuing in a normal tone and in Italian, “You’ve made a wrong turn. The Gallery is out those doors and right. This area is restricted to Tourists.”

The voice thanks him and they can both hear footsteps receding.

“Tourist took a wrong turn,” says Nero, dropping back into Fortunese. “Are you alright, my Lord?”

Falzon comes round the desk and stands up with an effort. “I will be, Nero, I will be.”

Tony stands in the corner of the room, clapping. There’s a deadly smile playing on his lips.
Falzon decides to leave early, but he doesn’t go home.

Instead, he has Nero drive him to a brothel near Port Cerula. Falzon looks at it for a long time, saying nothing.

Nero watches the punters come in and out. Tourists don’t come here, unless they’re asking for trouble. It’s the roughest pub in the roughest part of the port. The car attracts tacit glances, but the local gang lords won’t touch it.

There are Knights patrolling, but they don’t really do anything other stop brawls breaking out between drunks fighting over the same whore.

“I was born in that room there,” says Falzon and points to a room high in the attic.

Tony’s sitting in the passenger seat. Both he and Nero look up at the window.

“I slept in a box under my mother’s bed until I was too old, then I was moved to a group nursery. She could spend the time she wasn’t working with me, but the rest of the time, I was in the nursery. We were looked after by whores too old to get any clients.”

Falzon is quiet, with almost no emotion in his voice. Nero turns in his seat to face him.

“It was better than some of the others. The children were used most cruelly. We were not. We earned our keep, cleaning, fetching drinks, whatever other services were required. It was hard, but the harder you worked the more you could earn. Even then, the organised crime groups on the Mainland were moving their filthy velenu through Fortuna and we turned a blind eye. We were not and still aren’t set up to deal with smuggling.”
Nero can almost see the child Peter running between ships and bars with messages and goods for drug smugglers.

“But it was a hard life for the girls, for the women. There was only one route for them – maybe the pretty ones could find a patron to take care of her. But for most, like my mother, there was only one way out for her. To make the men bearable, they would drink or take the velenu and soon it would be all they cared about. My Mother began spending less time with me and when she did, she would be less and less caring of me. I could see her getting sicker and sicker. I worked hard and had nothing to show for it, as I gave it all to her, because she said she needed it.”

Nero can see it all in his mind’s eye, the drug-addled whore, whose life was so miserable that she sought to escape it any way she could, slowly separating from her bewildered son. Even Tony listens quietly.

“She spent it on velenu. I would bring it for her and the men, I’d walk in on them doing the most debased acts while I was their errand boy. She dropped any standards she might have had to feed her addiction.”

Falzon looks Nero in the eye as he says, “I’m glad that you were spared that.”

Nero’s throat is dry. He can only nod.

Tony’s lip curls at this and the look he’s giving Falzon promises damage.

“She ended up on the street. Her looks were gone, her body was failing and she had nothing left. She was thrown out of the brothel for stealing from the other whores and sowing discord. I was allowed to remain. I was a hard worker and I was stronger than I looked. I worked doors from the age of 14. It led to other work for the same scum that smuggled the velenu.”

Falzon looks over to the boats. “I worked hard, kept my mouth shut and learned how things worked. My only fault was my temper, like you. I never let a man slight me or get one over on me, no matter how long it took to avenge myself. I was an angry man, Nero and what drew my ire more than anything was the likes of the Old Families sponging off Fortuna like leeches, when there were people such as myself and my mother, trapped in our poverty and hopelessness.”

Falzon’s voice is barely audible as he continues and it’s clear only his body is in the car as he remembers.
“I broke into Supreme General Scerri’s house. I hadn’t just stolen, I had smashed and damaged as much as I could in my contempt for him.”

He pauses for a moment at the traffic jam on memory lane. It’s clearly a very painful, but a very precious remembrance for him.

“Lord Scerri could have called the Knights, could have ran me through on the spot – he would have been more than able. But he didn’t. He sat me down and said the strangest thing to me.”

“He asked me who I served. And I told him I didn’t know who I served. I don’t even think I served myself.”

Even Tony’s transfixed at this telling.

Nero can feel a chill sweeping over his skin.

“I asked him who he served and Lord Scerri said something greater than himself. He served Fortuna and he served Sparda. I said we all served Spada.”

Falzon pauses. He’s overwhelmed by the memory.

“Lord Scerri said he served Fortuna as much as he served the Saviour. Fortuna existed because of the Saviour and the Saviour existed because of Fortuna.”

Falzon places his hand on Nero’s shoulder. “He said ‘I offer you the chance to serve something greater than yourself. I offer you the chance to serve Fortuna.’ ”

“And then I heard myself say ‘Yes.’ I was 17 years old and sooner or later I’d’ve ended up at the bottom of the harbour. I don’t know what he saw in me, Nero, not really, but I will always be grateful that he did. I served Fortuna out of duty at first, but I’ve come to love her, more than I’ll ever love any woman. I’ve done terrible things for her, but I do believe that my sacrifices were for the greater good of Fortuna.”
Tony’s slowly shaking his head, but whether in disbelief or denial, Nero isn’t sure.

“I think you understand, Nero. You took up arms for Fortuna in her time of need, when you took on the Saviour statue. You put Fortuna before yourself.“

Nero doesn’t correct Falzon, that he put Kyrie before himself.

“Fortuna’s changing, Nero. The modern world, with its drugs, warfare, its crime and its corruption. The African refugees, Umbrella Ouroboros is coming for her. She’s dying.”

She damn well needs to die and you along with her, says Tony.

Nero resists the urge to glance at Tony.

“But know this, Nero. The things I’ve done, if there’s a Heaven for the Merciful, I’m not going to see it.” Falzon searches Nero’s face, as if he’ll find the answers there.

Well, Nero, this is your in.

“I’ll always serve something greater than myself, My Lord,” Nero says, as he nods.

Falzon nods slowly. “Take me home, Nero. It’s been a long day and we both need to rest with our families.”
Chapter 18

Fortuna, two decades ago

The walk down to the Archive is interesting.

The various construction trade Guilds are demonstrating outside the Opera House and they’re taking up most of the street. Knights ring them so they’re contained and it’s difficult for Vergil to push his way through the crush, his arm around Verity to keep her close.

“What are they protesting about?” Vergil asks over the din. His language proficiency isn’t up to the demonstrating workers.

“What Marta was saying. They’re angry about being blamed for the Opera House and they’re angry about the foreign workers coming in. They want their colleagues released.” She glances at Vergil and she looks a little guilty.

“Is anything likely to happen to the prisoners?”

She picks up his inference and blanches. “No. Papa wouldn’t do that. He always says that when you put a man to the question, you can’t trust his answers. Why, should we confess?”

“As interesting as that would be, if I’m right, I don’t think it’s wise to show our hand this early, Vee,” he says, looking back at her.

“Show our hand? I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. Mr Redgrave.” Only her eyes show confusion. “I’ll see if I can get us through faster. Hie, Knight Calleja!”

Pinny’s Knight spots her and makes his way over to her. He raises his eyebrows at her bruising, but steers a path for them. He passes on much the same gossip as Marta, though he’s heard the rumours about a young couple fighting in there. He expresses the usual anti-tourist feeling that Vergil’s used to hearing.

“I’m surprised, Knight, that one as young as you would think that. Not that I think the Mainland is
any kind of Utopia, but there, such views tend to be related to an age group."

“It’s not easy, seeing what they’ve got, against that we lack,” he says. “But respect for culture and tradition is not a lack to be proud of.”

They’ve reached the Archive and he bids them farewell.

Verity collects the Key for the Caged Library and takes Vergil up a flight of stairs into a huge, old-fashioned Library. It’s like something out of a museum.

Verity and Vergil both take deep inhales at the same instant of the scent of ink, vellum and wood.

“I love that smell,” grins Verity. She automatically talks in a low voice.

Vergil grins back. “It’s beautiful.”

They aren’t alone in there, there are other Pilgrims and Archive staff bustling quietly about, speaking in hushed, low tones.

“So, where shall we direct our studies, Mr Redgrave?” she smiles.

God, she’s beautiful.

“You mentioned Thekla and Temen-Ni-Gru, so let’s start there,” he says.

Verity nods and walks over to the far side of the Library. She claims a desk by a huge, dark shelf that already has two chairs and a pile of books on it. She looks at the pile. “Some of these are what we’re looking for, but I can’t see Temen-Ni-Gru – Legend, Theory and Practice. It’s over at that shelf somewhere.”

She points at a shelf a little down from where they’ll be sitting.
“Verity!” Pinny’s waving from across the Library. There’s a tall, bald man in black with her.

“I’ll have a look for it while you talk to your sister,” says Vergil. Verity’s about to walk off, when Vergil pulls her back, planting a sweet little kiss on her lips. She nearly skips off to see her sister.

She nods to Pinny’s companion, who bows to her. She can see Pinny’s hidden look of distaste from behind him. Neither woman can truly hide their feelings from showing in their eyes.

He turns to her and waits.

“Mr Arkham, this is my sister, Verity Agius. She’s a trainee Archivist like myself. Verity, this is Mr Arkham, my Pilgrim Tutor,” says Pinny.

Verity and Arkham bow to each other.

“I understand, that like myself, you are students and practitioners of the Dark Arts,” he says in a deep, slow voice.

“We make no distinction between Light and Dark in the sense you intend, Good Sir,” says Verity. “We see simply Art. The how of its Practice lies in the heart of its Practitioner.”

“Even fire may burn the furnace keeper,” he replies. He bows to her. “If I may take my leave of you for an instant, Young Misses?”

Verity and Pinny bow and he turns on his heel, walking slowly towards the shelving where Vergil is standing.

“Well, what to make of that?” says Verity. “Why is it you always attract the ones the flies won’t shit on?”

“You sidestepped that blade, Vee,” says Pinny, repulsion upon her pretty face. “They had intended him for your gentle teaching, as he’s a foremost scholar of Demonic Magic and History and they see big things for you. I’m simply the pretty face for the pretty boys.”
“The weight of expectation can be crushing, Pinny,” replies Verity.

“I imagine the weight of Mr Redgrave is crushing, you dirty stopout,” says Pinny, with a tease in her voice.

Verity blushes and her smile quirks her lips. “Not quite yet, but I am well-pleased nonetheless.”

They giggle, hushing themselves lest they attract the censure of the Archivists. Pinny fills her in on the hullabaloo her absence had caused that morning.

“And so we are to ignore my absence? I am to face no censure, no repercussions?”

“It puzzles me while it relieves me, Verity,” agrees Pinny. “Mama is again taken to her bed because of Papa. Every time I close my eyes, I hear the blows. Perhaps Papa thinks that if he lets this dalliance run its course, he won’t be chasing you to Palermo. Particularly with Credo waiting in the wings.”

“You know what they say – Nothing like a child to steady a woman.” Verity shudders. “How do you avoid it?”

“The Tourists have ways. We have no time just now, so seek me out before he does purchase your run goods,” says Pinny, her face going carefully neutral as Arkham walks back over to them with his measured, careful steps.

Vergil’s looking through a book detailing the life and times of Thekla, quietly horrified and enthralled simultaneously at the encroaching realisation of his Father’s long passed paramour and her children – his brothers. He feels all the realities in his life tilting again.

But not so much distracted that he doesn’t hear the footsteps approaching. He takes his fingers from the page he’s reading and detaches Yamato’s saya from his waist.

“So, you’re looking for the book of ancient legends, the tale of the demon warrior Sparda?” Arkham says as he approaches Vergil with a measured, cautious step. He carries a book as if it were a tome of such reverence and the burn that covers his neck and jaw flares and dances with
He doesn’t have a manner as much as a miasma. Verity’s observation regarding the flies is not far wrong.

Vergil doesn’t give him the courtesy of a glance as he puts the book back. His tone is low and dangerous. “That’s not what I’m looking for. Leave me.”

He lowers his arm to his side slowly, hand open, ready to draw.

“Then what are you looking for? A demon that impregnates a woman, who then bears twin sons, that’s the story, isn’t it?” Arkham glances at the shelved books, noting the titles for what comes next. He continues his slow advance.

There’s a peal of metal as Vergil draws Yamato. He still doesn’t so much as look at him, yet Yamato’s point is scant inches from Arkham’s face.

“Leave me. I won’t tell you a third time,” Vergil says, never raising his voice or varying the menace in his tone.

Arkham doesn’t flinch. He merely caresses the gleaming, deadly blade before pressing his thumb into her and running it down as he walks towards Vergil again.

“People inherently fear evil. However, occasionally, a person may become seduced by evil,” he says as the blood splashes onto the floor.

*This* gets Vergil’s attention.

“What are you getting at?” he says as he swipes off Yamato and reverently re-sheaths her. He’s frowning.

“Share with me the story of Sparda,” says Arkham.
Vergil turns on his heel in a swirl of blue leather, his face hard.

Arkham looks after him as he goes, but doesn’t follow him. He turns and walks back to the giggling teenagers. He’d have preferred the younger one, but he is a guest here. An honoured one, but a guest, nonetheless.

Arkham knows how to wait.

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Captain Agius himself lets them in.

“No Alice? Asks Peter. “There may have been questions I would have asked her.”

“You want your business spread across the town?” replies Captain Agius. “Even a discreet maid like Alice knowing is a danger to us.”

Credo nods. “The best way to keep a secret between three peoples’ to kill the other two, so to speak.”

Captain Agius looks at him. “Falzon here, might well do exactly that.”

“I’ve no animosity towards you, Captain, why do you insist on fostering it?” Peter stands at the bottom of the stairs. “Shall we?”

Captain Agius makes a this way gesture and both Knights climb the stairs ahead of him.

“We’re both conscious, Captain Agius, that this particular mission is exacting an unusual toll upon you and Lord Scerri is beyond grateful for the sacrifices you make in his service,” says Credo. “As am I.”

“Neither of us need to be your enemy,” agrees Peter. “Not considering the eventual nature of our relationships.”
Captain Agius sighs, while looking, if not mollified, at least less confrontational.

He stops in front of two doors, with the girls’ names in ornate plaques upon them. Each girl has a design with their favourite flowers on them and mythological creatures sitting on the writing.

Neither girl has locked their doors, but Peter doesn’t push to gain access to Pinny’s, merely gesturing to Credo to do the honours.

Credo takes a deep breath and opens Verity’s bedroom door.

It’s not what he was expecting, but it’s everything he was expecting.

It’s a large room, larger than Pinny’s, with enough room for a calling circle on the floor. There’s no rugs on the floor, so nothing to trip on when dancing.

“It’s plainer than I thought it would be,” says Credo, stupidly.

“She’s been trained to connect spellwork to physical movement as a focus,” says Captain Agius. “So she eschews anything that hinders movement.”

Peter nods in approval.

The wooden furniture in the room is blond, rather than the dark oak popular through Fortuna, with pretty tracework burned into it. It’s still very traditional. One long wall is completely covered in books and a short wall is shelves of fabric and threads with a frame set up for her tapestries.

The lived in part of the room with her furniture is plain, practical and comfortable. Verity doesn’t have a dressing table, merely using a small portion of her desk for her toilette. Her brush sits on the wicker tray that keeps everything confined to that area.

Peter has been looking at Verity’s books, looking for her diary. It’s hard amongst all the plain fabric hardbacks, grimoires and notebooks to identify something that could be a journal.
Credo runs his fingers over Verity’s desk. Where she sits and writes is shinier than the rest of the surface. He picks up her brush and there’s long strands that haven’t yet been cleaned out. He picks it up.

“Peter.”

“Oh good,” says Peter, as he walks over. He takes the brush and looks at it. He brightens. “She’s got some roots on this one. She must have tugged a knot. That’s so much better than just the strands. Makes it way more powerful.”

“Any joy in finding the journal yet?” asks Credo.

“The women I grew up with hid drugs, not diaries,” says Peter. “You knew she had one, so maybe you’ll do better than me.”

Credo walks over to the wall-wide bookcase. He stands in front of the section that’s nearest the bed and the desk.

Peter watches with interest.

Credo lifts his hand and runs it over some of the spines. The books are all different sizes and there’s nothing to clear exactly what they are – text book, novel, grimoire, diary.

Credo smiles and pulls one out with his index finger. He opens it and nods.

*Diary of Verity Agius – KEEP OUT PINNY!* Proclaims the flyleaf, the date given on it is three months previously.

Peter comes over and reads over Credo’s shoulder. Credo smiles as he reads her witty observations on her tutors and colleagues, straight out laughing at some of them. There’s more than a few where Credo colours and Peter raises his eyebrow, while glancing at Credo.
“That’s some torch she’s carrying for you, Credo. I think you should have your Courting Gift ready once our Mr Redgrave leaves. I doubt you’ll have much problem getting her to wear it.” Peter slaps him on the back. “What is it, anyway?”

“A compact with violets engraved on it, inlaid with amethysts. It’s still sitting in the box at home.”

And then they turn to Credo asking to Court her and his face drops, because it's all Redgrave from there.

“So he told her his first name, but not the surname? She still has no idea who he really is? Interesting,” says Peter.

“How so?” asks Credo. He’s cautiously pleased after reading what she’s said about him.

“Doesn’t matter. Now you’ve finished reading her deepest, darkest secrets, have you found her symbols for her monthlies?” Peter takes the book and leafs back through it. “That must be it.”

He points to the capitals in the right-hand corner of the entries dated from 12 to 7 days previously, PE. He leafs back through the diary, snatching a pen from the desk and making notes on the back of his hand. He mentally counts back before frowning.

“Godspit and shit. She’s fertile now, or she’s about to be.” Peter looks at Credo. “We have only a few days to pull this mission off, or we’ll miss our window, given how fast she and Redgrave are moving. They fuck, we lose our advantage.”

Credo’s heart sinks. He glances at Captain Agius. He’s looking at the floor, face grim.

Credo looks back at Peter and sets the diary back upon the shelf. His face is resolute. He is a Knight of the Order and he will do his duty.

“Then we’d best get started.”

***
They’re sitting in Peter’s rooms with his books laid out all around.

There’s a knock at the door and it’s the Head Priest.

“Lord Scerri sent me over with this,” he says. His voice drips with disdain for Peter and this whole sordid situation. “Why have I been ordered to consort with Scerri’s Ladybird? This spell is sacred! It’s not to coerce some young chit abed for your amusement, Falzon. And you, Micellef? You’re from an Old Family. How can you condone this base amusement?”

“Is it all there?” Peter asks, coldly.

“Yes!” the Priest almost spits. “Heed this warning, Ladybird. Assuming Our Lord doesn’t set it awry, have the utmost care when you set it up, lest you drain her too fast and you kill her. Micellef – do you know women? It was my belief you hadn’t tasted the delights of love yet. You may find yourself the unwitting victim of this spell, otherwise. It would be your just desserts for the blasphemy.”

“Concern yourself with your own mortality, Priest,” snarls Peter.

“Why would you impregnate her anyway?” The Priest pauses for a moment. “I would have thought you would wish to avoid that.”

“My reasons aren’t yours to question, Priest. You’ve discharged this duty and now need never consider it again.” He opens the door and all but throws the Priest out.

Credo looks through it, but it’s all Greek to him. “We’re truly leaving nothing to chance, then, are we?”

“No. Just because she’s fertile doesn’t guarantee conception, we’ve a spell to compel it, damn straight I’ll use it.” He runs his hand over his face and his normally pristine uniform is dishevelled and undone. “I wish we could have done a trial run with a lightskirt’s first night. I’d intended to, but Verity’s been quicker off the mark than I anticipated.”

Peter takes a deep breath. “Now, where to set it.”
Credo thinks for a moment. “The Ruined Church.”

“It’s a spot for Dalliances, Credo. Half of Fortuna got their start there.”

“In the summer, Peter. Not in the spring, it’s too cold and it’s too fiddly to get to this time of year. You’d have to be seriously determined. We only need it active for a few days. There’ll be some pretext to get them there.” Credo’s unconsciously doodled a map of the Castle, through the Labs and out across the waterfall.

Peter nods slowly, speculatively, as he can see a plan start to form. “It is the middle of the week. Everyone is at work.”

He claps Credo on the back. “You know, Credo, you’re starting to scare me.”

Credo stands up. “Then we have no time to waste. Let’s set this spell and begin the life of Our Saviour’s Heir.”

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Committee for the Protection of the Faith

Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy

Designation: Beyond Top Secret

Operation Resurrection

Phase One

Status: IN PROGRESS
Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.

Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef

It begins.
Dante follows on with his tour using Credo and Falzon’s Operation Resurrection report as his guide. It’s much the same as the path he’d taken the previous month.

The rainforest is already dying. Without Echidna’s influence to maintain the microclimate this high in the mountains, it is beginning to return to typical, drier vegetation.

Didn’t mean that there still weren’t chimera seeds still ready to pop though and Dante gets out Rebellion from her case and folds the Robe away in its place. She clips into the magnet in his jacket, almost annoyed at being confined so.

He’s at the ruined Church and he hears the tell-tale chittering.

He knows this place from the Operation Resurrection File and knowing what happened here suddenly makes him angry.

Luckily, there’s chimera seeds to take it out on.

Better than that. Chimera Assaults.

He grins and lets them bound close to him before backflipping over the top of them, shooting as he goes. He hits a couple and he hears them dissolve. One of them shoots its blades at him and he twirls Ebony and Ivory around the flat of his hand, deflecting them. He hears them clatter uselessly into the wall to his side.

They’re smarter than they look, fanning around him and waving their blades.

His blood’s up and he wants to feel the bite of his sword into flesh and he pulls Rebellion from his back. He draws the blade to the side, like he’s taking a golf swing and brings her round hard. It takes the nearest demon’s head straight off.

Dante feels the rush of air at his back as the assault just misses him with its claws and blocks with Rebellion at his back. He feels claws snag and twisting the sword, he flings it over his head into a
couple in front of him, knocking them flying. He slides across the ground, impaling them both on a stinger.

He summons a glyph that sends him over and behind the dwindling group and shakes his ass at them, spinning round fast enough to knock the flying blades out his way.

Not as elegant as Vergil would have been, but gets the job done.

One of the blades hits the assault and kills it and he has to admit, he’s impressed by that.

There’s two left and he rushes the first one, twirling his sword round rapidly, never letting it rest as it tries to defend itself. There’s only so much damage it can take before it collapses.

The final one, he just slashes at for the visceral thrill of hacking something to death.

Dante’s panting as he finishes, but he feels better.

When in doubt – hack it out.

***

Dante has a few further skirmishes as he moves towards where the last Hell Gate was and as he walks around the ancient temple, he busts a few seed pods that must have made it through from last time.

“Round-Up the whole damn place,” he mutters. “That’ll fix it.”

He comes to stand in front of the where the Hell-Gate had stood, when he feels that sense of otherness. It’s not taking the place of the Hell-Gate, rather it’s about five metres to the left of it, off the plateau of the temple hill, above the tree line.

Dante throws some stones into and the tree line ripples as they vanish into the air. He sits down on the smashed slabs he left from the Gate and waits.
Nothing comes out and the birds pointedly fly around it.

There’s even a sparrow being chased by a hawk that does an impressive almost 90 degree turn when it’s almost on it to avoid it. The hawk manages to break for the other direction and flies away when it recovers. Dinner isn’t worth that much.

As he waits, Dante pulls the Guidebook with the helpful foldout map he got from the Castle Tourist Office and a pen. It’s an older book, from earlier in the year and they haven’t mentioned the earthquake that destroyed the Hell Gate in the Town yet.

The other three Gates are marked on it and Dante looks at them, really looks at them.

They’re in a straight line.

He takes Rebellion, because even alone, he has a flair for the dramatic and rests the map on his knees and places her along the line of the Hell Gates.

He even draws her point first along the line, Castle Town, Castle, Ferrum Mining Village, Ghorna tal-hija Lifgha and even given the size of Fortuna, he hits them dead on, like dominos. He uses Rebellion as a ruler and when he resheathes her, the black line remains.

Dante examines where the line runs, independent of the Hell Gates.

It passes right through the top of the graveyard and the tip of the plateau, not far from where he’s sitting.

Dante pulls up the app that works as a compass and walks around the arena. All the openings correspond with the points. At some points, there’s the jumps that indicate geopathic stress. Keeping an eye out for demons, he maps them on the rough rectangle he’s drawn on the guidebook to represent the arena.

“Huh,” he says when he’s finished. “Fucking ley lines.”
Dante makes it through the rest of Mitis Forest, with plenty incidents, but nothing he can’t handle.

He’s covered in demon blood and ichor, but it’s the cleanest he’s felt since he got back to Fortuna.

Dante’s a man of simple tastes and there’s something cathartic about reducing everything down to life or death, feeling your sword cleave a crime against God and Man apart.

He’s feeling better about the world when suddenly he’s standing on Grand Album Bridge looking at Head Quarters and his blood starts to boil again.

He really hopes tomorrow is difficult.

When in doubt – hack it out.

“I remember coming here when I was little,” says Kyrie.

“Stop trying to get out of your work,” says Violet as she sits doing paperwork. She’s frowning and comparing something.

“I’m not. I’m just saying.” She puts down the fresh coffee cup.

“You’re making coffee every half hour. Ms Kye is bouncing off the walls.”

“No, Madam Alighieri, I am not bouncing off the walls,” says Ms Kye, sitting working at her desk and not bouncing off walls.

“See? She’s so excited, we can’t tell.”
“I came to see my mum at work and she took me into a couple of the labs she was working on.” Despite her protests, Kyrie puts down two cups of coffee and some biscuits she’s found in the good cupboard. “One of them was around here, I’m sure of it. But I can’t find it.”

Violet looks up from her figures and reports. “It’s probably not wise to go looking round the building for mystery doors.”

“It’s not a mystery door. I know exactly where it was,” replies Kyrie, a little put out. “There was a lion on the wall next to it. A carved lion.”

“How old were you?”

“I was about eight or nine.”

Violet sighs. “I don’t get that it matters, but that was a long time ago, Kyrie. Maybe you remembered it wrong or it got bricked up.”

“I just wanted to stand somewhere me and mum were together,” scowls Kyrie. “I don’t expect you to get that.”

Even Ms Kye knows Kyrie’s gone too far. “Madam Alighieri, I need your signature.”

“Violet, I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” Kyrie stutters, aghast.

Violet just looks at her with a mixture of disdain and disappointment, before going out the room to do something else.

“Violet!”

“That was wrong of you,” says Ms Kye.
“She can be a cow sometimes as well,” says Kyrie defensively.

“Does that make a blow at her past acceptable? I’m given to understand she had as much a hand in raising you as Madam Micellef.” Ms Kye speaks in a flat, neutral tone, which is worse than being shouted at.

“She did, especially once Mum and Dad died. She’s always been there. I don’t remember her not being there,” Kyrie says with a small smile. “She’s like a big sister.”

“Shall we look for this door?” Asks Ms Kye. “After all, it’s caused a quarrel. It seems a shame to waste it.”

Kyrie takes Ms Kye to where the door had been. “It’s exactly as I remember it, but no door.”

She runs her hands over it, but it’s smooth. It’s a continuous part of the wall, rather than having been bricked up. She turns to Ms Kye. “Tyuule, I know it was here. I’d swear on my unborn child’s life.”

“Perhaps you’re correct on the door and wrong on the location,” says Ms Kye.

“Maybe,” says Kyrie, doubtfully. She eyes the wall and the carving of the lion, thoughtfully.

“What was in there?” asks Ms Kye.

“Science stuff. I don’t know how to explain it,” says Kyrie. “It looked like that thing that’s been on the news. The one in Switzerland. It’s just opened and they think it’ll cause black holes.”

Ms Kye frowns.

“The Large Hardon Collider,” says Kyrie. “I saw it on the news on the telly.”

She strokes the wall.
“And it was through here.”

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“I can’t believe you people get up at this time,” says Dante as he finally makes it down to the breakfast table.

“Pity your clothes didn’t get up with you,” says Violet, drily, though it’s clear she’s enjoying the view. So’s Kyrie and they’re whispering to each other and giggling.

Dante catches the word, “Twins!” and stiffens, but they don’t mean anything by it. He stretches and rolls his shoulders with a loud crack, letting the two women enjoy the gun show.

“Fucking tiġieġ fil-qasam tal-paguni,” snorts Trish.

Violet and Kyrie burst out laughing.

Dante looks confused. “I’m usually wearing less when I get that reaction.”

Nero brings more coffee and toast through. “She called you a chicken in a field of peacocks. It’s an insult to someone who’s full of themselves.”

Trish laughs. “Wasn’t actually what I meant, but yeah it fits.”

Violet swallows painfully. “It also describes someone who feels…drab, nothing special. There’s a flip of it - pagun fil-qasam tat-tiġieġ – that means someone who makes you feel like you’re the only light in the room.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” says Lady. She doesn’t mention she’s seen it in Verity’s diary, along with some love letters Vergil had sent her or where he’s read the diary and put his own comments in. She didn’t understand most of it – Verity had written in Fortunese, but Vergil had written in Italian to her and Lady understood that. She’d never thought Dante’s straight-laced brother could even
think about such elegant filth.

They haven’t put the diary back yet.

“You’ll need to hurry if you want to make First Prayer,” says Nero.

“Why the hell do we need to make First Prayer? We never go. We’re usually working.” Violet asks.

“That’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it,” agrees Kyrie.

“You’ll want to go to this one,” says Nero. He looks out the window. “You’ll want to get the door first though.”

There’s a loud knock and Josh is making faces at the window. Kyrie goes to get it.

The table falls silent as General Agius comes into the room. He bows elegantly to the ladies and cuffs Josh, who quickly does the same thing.

The women round the table follow Violet’s lead with the clasped hands and head bob.

“Forgive me, Madam Alighieri, for interrupting your breakfast. I have a matter I require your counsel on,” says the General. He’s carrying a monogrammed leather document wallet.

“Of course, Lord Agius,” replies Violet. “You’ll have time for coffee, if not breakfast?”

“Coffee, Madam, we’ll take it out to the garden,” smiles Lord Agius. “I’m sure Josh will enjoy some of Kyrie’s cooking.”

Kyrie pours out some coffee for both of them and Josh takes Violet’s place at the table. Lord Agius carries the coffees out to the garden and sets them down on the table, alongside the wallet.
“I always loved this garden,” he says as he looks around. “All the fruit trees you have. Did Credo manage to bottle his wine this year?”

“Sadly, no. Kyrie and I will probably sell the vineyard. We’ve no interest in making wine, just drinking it.” Violet fiddles with her cup. “We do have last year’s aging in storage.”

“I’m going to announce my run for Supreme General, Violet,” says General Agius. “I’m going to announce it at First Prayer and I need a Second. You’re a full Order official. You can Second me.”

Violet nods. “Of course, Edward. I’d be honoured. Do you have the paperwork?”

He pulls forms out the wallet, alongside an elegant fountain pen and hands them to Violet. She takes a second to read them, then signs. She sorts the papers as there’s another form underneath.

“Edward, this is your will,” Violet says, her tone questioning.

“I need you to witness that I signed it. I also have some codicils within it I’d ask you to ensure are carried through, dear Violet,” he says.

“I don’t want to be your executor,” she says, bluntly. She signs it, though.

“I’m not asking you to be. I merely want you to look out for Josh for me, when I’m gone,” Lord Agius says as he takes her hands. “My sins are catching up with me and they are many.”

“What? Edward, what the hell are you talking about?”

“I can’t tell you that, my dear friend and be grateful for it,” General Agius says as he drops Violet’s hands. “I’ll be around long enough to take Fortuna to steadier waters, but not much more than that. Falzon will see to that.”

“I thought you and he were friends?” Violet shakes her head in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m bound to Peter Falzon by blood, not love. I’m tired of pretending otherwise. I’ll spend my last
years being truthful, even though he’ll kill me in the end for it,” says Lord Agius as he sips his coffee.

Violet looks at him as if he’s gone quite, quite mad. “Is this your roundabout way of telling me you’re Falzon’s father, because he’s as much chance of finding his father as I have?”

General Agius empties his cup. “I’ll see you at First Prayer, Violet.”

He bows to her and walks back into the house.

By the time she comes back into the house, Agius and Josh have gone.

“What in all the Nine Hells happened out there?” asks Kyrie. “You should see your face.”

“Nero’s right. We’re going to want to go to First Prayer,” she says as she turns to Dante and the two women. “We’ll leave from there. Wear your passes and robes. Fortuna is about to go boom.”

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The Kapella is no busier than normal, but it’s still fairly busy for the time of day. Dante, Trish and Lady pull their Pilgrim’s Robes close around them and the hoods down over their faces.

Violet leaves them with Kyrie as she goes to sit down the front row with the rest of the Order officials Nero goes to stand with Josh and his age cohort. There’s a whispered conversation between the two Knights and they work their way down to the front, as close as they’re allowed to stand.

Dante regards it all with interest. He’s never been one for religion – he’s got memories of people trying to exorcise his father after he’d helped them and he’s never usually around long enough after a job to actually do the tourist thing. Considering his jobs usually involve a metric fuckton of damage, that’s not a bad thing.

He already lives in one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and there’s not many people who can say they walked the same streets as their father, 2000 years apart. He wishes
he could have walked them with his father and heard Sparda’s tales. Dante isn’t a history buff by any means, but he’s learned that it’s not sharing the interest that’s important, it’s showing the interest.

“Who’s Falzon?” he asks Kyrie. They’ve got seats at the back and there’s not many people around them, so they’re not disturbing anyone.

She points out a hawk-faced man of average height. There’s scars on his face, the kind picked up in combat. His face is expressionless, apart from his eyes. He looks like he wants to murder the room.

Falzon looks up at that point and nods to Kyrie, frowning as he tries to see who’s under the hoods. Kyrie smiles back, open and gracious.

General Agius takes the podium and before he gives the service, he runs through any announcements.

Dante watches Falzon. The man’s looking like he’s spoiling for a fight and Nero and Josh don’t look much better. They’re probably about to jump on their boss.

“And now I have a more personal announcement,” begins General Agius. Violet comes over to the podium and they nod to each other. Violet looks worried, but she hasn’t clocked Falzon.

“Since the tragic demise of Supreme General Credo Micellef, the Holy Knights have been without a leader. General Falzon has carried the burden bravely – Falzon smiles and bows his head to Agius – “but he has his own role within our Order, keeping the Faith pure. He must focus fully on that. To this end, I propose to stand for election to Supreme General and guide Fortuna through its difficult time. Some of you will rightly point out my age. I’m 65 and I’ve served Fortuna since I was 14. I don’t have the energy of a younger man. But I do have the experience and a listening ear. I welcome the younger Knights come give their counsel.”

“Who Seconds?” calls out Falzon.

“Madam Violet Alighieri Seconds,” replies Violet.

“No objection,” responds Falzon.
Nero and Josh relax, though they’re confused he just accepted it. Dante can see them having a quick conversation and Josh indicates Falzon. Nero shrugs.

“I would only stand for five years at the outside, simply to provide a steady hand till I can pass over the responsibility to another and I have no intention of going for Sanctus. Let that role be filled by another.” Agius is looking directly at Falzon.

Falzon stands up. “I for one, can think of no better hands than Lord Agius for Supreme General. I find it a fitting tribute to Credo’s long service to Fortuna. In my capacity as Leader of the Committee for the Protection of the Faith, I accept General Edward Agius’ nomination. I declare a hustings open for 48 hours so other Knights can be nominated, with a vote to be taken by the Holy Knights, beginning when the hustings close. In three days hence, we shall have a new Supreme General.”

Nero looks over to Violet, then across to Kyrie.

“That went way easier than I expected,” she says to Dante.

“I didn’t think he’d give in so easily,” he replies.

“No one will stand against General Agius. He’s well respected, everyone loved Credo, so Violet seconding him’s like an endorsement from Credo,” says Kyrie, thoughtfully. “Getting endorsed by Falzon seals the deal. But why?”

“They’re old friends, right? And Agius does seem to know what he’s doing,” Dante lowers his head to at least look like he’s praying.

Kyrie snorts. “And bet your ass, so does Falzon.”

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They wait until First Prayer is over before Kyrie leads them down the front to get Violet.
“Wouldn’t it be better to wait for Violet to come up to us?” asks Trish. “It’s probably better that the higher-ups don’t see us.”

“No,” Dante replies. “Let him see us.”

Lady and Trish exchange concerned glances, but Dante is already down the front, guitar case in hand. Violet is talking to Falzon and Agius, when both men look like they’ve seen a ghost over her shoulder.

Falzon recovers quicker and he can’t stop the furious look that’s gone as quick as it’s come.

“Madam Alighieri, I see you continue to persist in your folly,” he says. “Will I need to rescue your team again?”

“I doubt that,” cuts in Dante. “We managed fine last month.”

Falzon’s jaw tightens, briefly. He holds out his hand to Dante, who takes it. “I have you to thank for this mess, then.”

“You do.” Both men squeeze each other’s hands, neither willing to give. Dante has to hold back from crushing Falzon’s.

“You lanced a boil for me, so for that I thank you,” Falzon says smoothly, but there’s no mistaking the malice in his tone. “It answers one question I had – who hired you in the first place.”

“I don’t know who hired us last time – I didn’t deal with that. But it was how Violet heard about us and our services.” He looks to Lady and Trish, who nod. He drops Falzon’s hand, now he’s made his point.

“My door was always open to you, Violet,” says Falzon to her. “But the time where it will shut approaches.”

“I was never going to walk through it, Peter,” she replies.
“I’m a good friend to have, Violet, in the Times to Come. I’m not someone you should have as an enemy.” He unconsciously rubs his mouth again. “You of all people should know that.”

Violet’s fists clench and she does that little sideways quirk. “You’ve had your fun with me three times, Peter. Rules say you don’t get a fourth.”

“For a barranija you know the rules better than some born here.” Falzon bows and clasps his hands. “Credo taught you well. But he’s not here to protect you anymore. Consider that.”

He turns on his heel, with Nero scurrying after him with a wave.

“What did he mean, ‘The Time to Come’?” asks Lady.

“I guess he just means the future of Fortuna. It’s changing and the old guard don’t like it. That was the point of the Saviour, restore Fortuna to its glory days and impose it on the rest of the world,” says Violet. “Course, I’m pretty sure the French and British armies would have ended it pretty quickly, but I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

Lady drops her voice. “So was that why you hired us? Why’d you let it get so far?”

“Like Falzon said, it was a boil that needed lancing. Any sooner and it wouldn’t have worked, it’ll be years before they get it up and running again, assuming they even want to and they’re getting watched by the parent company now, because Daddy wasn’t happy with the kids getting up to shenanigans behind his back.” Violet leads the way out of the Kapella.

“People died. Doesn’t that bother you?” Asks Trish as they walk towards the car.

“Less people died than if the French invaded or if the Saviour got to the Mainland and suddenly demons and magic get out into the open.” Violet meets her eyes coolly.

“Trish, it really doesn’t matter now,” Dante says and there’s an unsubtle warning in his tone.
Trish gives a small nod and Lady gives her shoulder an affectionate bump.

They share a small smile as they make their way to the car.
Chapter 20

Fortuna, two decades ago

“Might we study with you? It would seem our interests co-incide.” The ponderous voice cuts across Vergil’s reverie. He looks up to see Arkham, with an obsequious young man behind him and Pinny mouthing “Sorry.”

“How so?” asks Vergil. He doesn’t need to look at Verity to feel her dismay.

“Miss Agrippina gives me to understand you to be studying the life of Lord Sparda.” Arkham over pronounces the nouns, Agraa-pee-e-naaa, Spaaardaana. “It would seem prudent to study together. There may be questions I can answer.”

The briefest of glances passes between the couple and Verity nods. Arkham nods to the young man and sends him for chairs. He introduces him as his assistant, Agnus. He overpronounces that as well, Agnoooooose.

They’ve accumulated a fair pile of books and notes between them in the few hours they’ve been there. Vergil has tended over to reading about Thekla and his Father, but after the first few books, the stories and biographies are much of a muchness.

It gives him a dark, if gratifying amusement that his Father and he share a type. He steals the occasional glance at Verity as she studies. Her slim, deft fingers flick pages back and forth and her pen scratches the paper as she writes. She bites her lip when she’s thinking and Vergil finds it particularly endearing.

“So, you’re studying The Chronicle of Thekla and Sparda?” says Arkham, picking up one of the books.

Vergil indicates the pile. “So it would seem.”

“Young Miss Verity, share with me what you’ve learned, if you will,” says Arkham.
Verity controls her unease at Arkham, her gaze flicking between her sister and her lover. She recites from memory, though she makes it look like she’s reading from notes.

“The Demons, under Mundus, decided to invade and enslave the Human Realm, sometimes outright, sometimes working as the figures behind the major historic civilisations. His most trusted warlord was Sparda, a demon who was ruthless, yet had some measure of compassion and honour. He was intelligent, enjoying scholarship and the finer things in life, as his just rewards for his service. He was a skilled strategist and a fearsome warrior.

Until he met Thekla, a Phrygian Priestess from Iconium, a young woman known for her bravery, wit and intelligence. She had a strong sense of justice and was willing to put her money where her mouth was. It was this last that led to her drawing the ire of the demons, as she was heavily involved in the resistance against them, becoming a major thorn in the side of the Demon Lords.

Sparda made it his mission to capture her and in studying his opponent, became obsessed by her, fascinated by her before he’d even met her.”

Arkham holds up his hand. “Yes, that is the story.”

Verity stops, confused.

Again, notes Arkham, the eye flick between the couple. There’s a whole conversation in that brief glance.

“You might read this story in any of these books,” he says, sweeping his hand over the table. “And retell it many times. But what is the story telling you?”

“I have always taken the meaning to be that True Love conquers all,” says Pinny. She looks just as puzzled as her sister.

“Romantic hornswoggle,” rebukes Arkham. “So typical of young girls.”

Both young women bristle, but Vergil squeezes Verity’s hand under the table.
“Then might Sacrifice is Necessary in pursuit of a higher goal be the meaning?” asks Vergil.

“I believe it to be exactly that, Mr Redgrave,” says Arkham. “The greater the goal, the greater the sacrifice or the gift means nothing.”

“I disagree,” says Verity, pushing her hijab back enough to show her hairline. “I would argue the true meaning is the nature of forgiveness.”

Arkham looks interested, no, curious, as if he’s finally about to get the challenge he was promised. “How so?”

Verity can only gesture with one hand, Vergil is still holding tight to the other.

“Sparda was a Demon Lord, Mundus’ right hand. In his name he committed many atrocities,” she says. “He was perhaps fairer and more honourable than his brethren, but he still slaughtered and tortured in both Mundus’ and his own name.”

“What do you mean?” Vergil can’t help himself. His world shakes under his feet to hear his Father denounced so and from the lips of the woman who’s going to bear his children, Sparda’s own blood. He’s gripping her hand so tight he can feel the bones grind.

Verity frowns slightly and it’s the only sign he’s hurting her. “Do you believe that his betrayal of his brethren and of his Lord undo the real barbarities he both commissioned through others or committed by his own hand?”

Arkham is silent, but watchful.

“The massacres? The sacrifices? Entire villages and tribes lost to genocides Sparda ordered? The books here but touch upon them and would bid people to forget they happened, and only recall the merest details to impress upon us Sparda’s agony of heart as he woke to justice.”

“He wasn’t like that! Not in the stories I’ve heard. E-She couldn’t have loved someone like that!” It’s out Vergil’s mouth before he can stop himself.
“It’s always the common people who are forgotten by history,” says Pinny.

“We should honour those he slaughtered and know every detail of what he did. Would we be so quick to worship him if those details were common?” Verity continues, heatedly. She’s gesturing to emphasise her words and it’s obvious Vergil still has her other hand.

“Almost blasphemy, brave girl, in a place such as this,” notes Arkham.

“We’re taught Sparda embodies justice and protection and we honour him by promoting those values within our actions and our society. We should recall those who were sacrificed to bring him to that state and give them their place.” Verity returns, hotly.

“We can give honour for their sacrifice,” says Pinny, trying to calm Verity. “Vee, your actions reflect on us both. It wouldn’t do to have such a renowned tutor regret the time spent educating us.”

“Education is never a waste, Miss Agrippina. I see why your tutors originally assigned me to your sister,” says Arkham.

Whether he meant it or not, Pinny is chastened.

“He spent the rest of his long life atoning for his crimes,” says Vergil, stung and trying to defend his father. “He more than made up for it. We don’t have to gloss over what he did before, but we can understand Sparda and what he went through to betray his people.”

“And he didn’t come to that conclusion by himself, he fell in love. It wasn’t so much a change of heart as wanting to impress a woman, the price of her love was to stop slaughtering her people.” Verity is not for stopping. “One might argue, that for his future actions in here and other places, whether it was a true turn or not.”

“Verity!”

“But it was! Ev-she wouldn’t have stayed with him. She couldn’t have.” Vergil reasserts.

Arkham’s noticed the slip of the tongue, even if the others haven’t.
“I agree with you, Mr Redgrave. Thekla had her own catalogue of rich and varied exploits before falling for Sparda and bearing his sons. I believe that he wished to make himself worthy of her love. Perhaps she merely spurred him to actions he was already considering and in that light, if not love conquers all, then at the very least, love can inspire us to serve a greater purpose.”

“One could also argue that after she had set her course, she would have found it impossible to return to her life, as she would have earned the suspicion of her people, so her only option was to carry on.” Verity’s gritting her teeth against Vergil’s grip. Her hand is going blue.

“If you’re so opposed to Sparda and Thekla, Vee, why do you say it’s a lesson on the nature of forgiveness?” asks Vergil. The best way to sidetrack her, he remembers, is intellectual arguments.

“Because when all is said and done, knowing what we do about what he did, for Sparda to atone for all he did, tells us that even the worst among us are not beyond redemption,” says Verity and her voice is gentle. “But they must show atonement, not just pay it lip service.”

Everyone jumps as Arkham applauds. “Excellently done, Miss Verity. You’ll make a fine Priest or Scholar when your training is complete.”

“I’m going to be an Alchemist,” replies Verity. “So still magic, but more science-based.”

“I don’t doubt that, though it is a loss to the academic world,” says Arkham, with a hint of regret. “Now, Miss Agrippina, what else does Sparda’s story tell us?”

“I’m going to agree with Verity and say that he was so deeply affected by his actions that he didn’t just save humans and remain to guide them,” says Pinny. “He never loved again, his heart was so broken. He never took another woman to Wife or Mate, never Marked her and never fathered any children, even with his dalliances.”

“Is that so? Are you sure?” says Arkham, looking right at Vergil.

Pinny and Verity look at each other, thoroughly confused.

“As far as we know, Sparda never dishonoured Thekla’s sacrifice by taking another to wife or
“begetting more children,” says Pinny. “After all, a human who can hold their own in the Demon World, is truly a person to be feared and respected. By the very nature of the role, such people are rare as hens’ teeth.”

Vergil’s about to do...something. He’s not sure what, when Verity pulls her hand to her. Vergil’s still grasping it so tight, it’s easy for her to slightly overbalance and distract him from Arkham’s goading.

“Much of Sparda’s life and disappearance is unknown to us, despite our best efforts,” says Verity, giving Vergil a strange look.

Arkham notes the guilty, almost hurt look she receives in return.

“My issue, Mr Arkham, is that we have the histories, we have the adventures, but there’s nothing in the tomes and grimoires about the magics and rituals used. There’s only the barest mention of them,” says Verity, moving the conversation on. “Sparda and Thekla used a bespoke ritual to both close Temen-Ni-Gru and bind the Guardians –“

“Could you imagine being stuck down there for 2000 years? They must have been so bored,” says Pinny.

“Thank you for demonstrating why your sister is considered to hold more promise than you, Miss Agrippina,” says Arkham, dryly. “Continue, Miss Verity.”

“-and the Guardians came from all over the known at that time world. Yet, there’s very little reference to the actual spellwork involved,” says Verity. “That is of far more interest to me than romance and adventure.”

“You think that such tomes should be freely available? With the damage and the consequences it could cause?” counters Arkham.

“I imagine there aren’t that many people who could enact it, so what difference does it make?” she replies. “In my limited experience, those with the talent to write bespoke spells or override others’ spells, are few and far between. The spells and rituals themselves often tend to involve items that are a trial equal to their purpose to acquire. They often require a considerable physical or spiritual cost to the caster.”
“You underestimate the desire for power, Miss Verity and the lengths people will go to obtain it. They consider the reward worth the investment.” He leans back. “When you have completed your training, you will be capable of such feats, though likely you’ll be given over to a tutor such as myself to refine your skills.”

“Good luck with that one,” Vergil mutters under his breath.

“I’m sorry, Mr Redgrave?”

“I said that I could see why such literature is hidden away, but this is a Caged Library. I would have expected to find such works in here.” Vergil covers quickly.

“And so you will, but there are some that are considered so dangerous, so forbidden, that even their very existence is kept secret, known only to a select few.” Arkham’s scar throbs with colour, belying his calm demeanour.

Vergil gives him his full attention. “If there was such a repository on Fortuna, where would it be?”

“I’m sure your Princess of Wands can aid your quest,” replies Arkham. “My time grows short. Do you have any other questions you would put to me?”

“Demons have a fascination with the Human World? Why? What’s so compelling? Wouldn’t it be better if humans went over there – more power, more magic?” Wonders Verity. “Imagine what could be done with that.”

“Indeed child – what glory, what riches would await one who held true power within their grasp?” says Arkham. “And here you raise the question while doubting what people would do for such dominion over all.”

“You answered your own question, Vee,” says Vergil, with just a hint of a tease in his tone.

“And now, I will take my leave of you,” says Arkham. He stands and Pinny and Agnus stand with him. Both men bow. “I’m glad I was able to have this short time with you, Miss Verity, Mr Redgrave and I hope that we can have more before our business in Fortuna is concluded.”
Verity and Vergil rise and bow as Arkham turns on his heel and leaves, Pinny and Agnus running to keep up with him.

“Well, now, what to make of that?” says Verity. “Might I request you leave go of my hand? I’m afraid to find it reshaped.”

Vergil doesn’t let go, but takes it in both of his and begins to massage the feeling back into it.

“My Princess of Wands,” he says, a small smile playing on his lips, his face tender. He frowns slightly. “That’s your significator for your Tarot cards. Do you have them with you?”

“Of course I do,” she replies, pulling them out her bag. They’re inside a simple cotton toilette bag, with her initials and violets standing out against the fabric. She reaches inside and pulls them out, handing them to Vergil. “Shuffle them, it’s your question.”

“What’s my Significator, Miss Agius?”

She pulls a card from the pack. “Knight of Swords, a man that’s tough, brave and very intelligent.”

“You flatter me, Vee,” he replies as he steals a quick kiss.

“Not at all, for it describes almost every man in Fortuna.” Verity has a mischievous glint in her eye. “I have used it on occasion for Knight Falzon.”

“Not Credo?” He teases. “Shall I lay them out?”

“Credo is Knight of Staves and I tend to use King of Staves for Peter.” She nods to the cards he’s shuffling. “Ask your questions, then lay the cards down.”

“Is there such a book in Fortuna?” he asks and lays down three cards, looking up at Verity.

“Yes.”
“Where?”

“Castle.”

“Where?”

“Library. So is this to be where our escapades take us next, Mr Redgrave?” Verity’s eyes are twinkling and Vergil’s glad it’s business as usual. She hasn’t noticed anything untoward during their impromptu lesson with Arkham. He can put off telling her for a little while longer.

“So when should we embark on our next adventure, Vee? Are you well rested after last night’s endeavours?” He’s put the cards down and is unconsciously massaging the hand he near crushed again.

“I think if my father is set upon indulging me, then I shouldn’t disappoint him,” she smiles her half smile.

Vergil kisses her palm. “The devil may cry if our daughter is as dutiful as you.”

***

It’s not too muddy at the Ruined Church and for that they’re grateful. They’ve changed into their civvies lest their uniforms be ruined and the Purser Sergeant fine them for going over their clothing quota. It’s chilly in the evening as the sun sets low.

Credo can see his breath on the air as they hike in.

Neither man speaks, instead each lost in their own thoughts as the reality of what they’re undertaking weighs heavy on them, though for different reasons.

Peter looks at the church and then back at Credo. “Are you absolutely sure this is the right place to lay it?”
“It’s secluded and difficult to access,” Credo replies. “We’ve been through this. They’ll be expecting it at the Castle after the fuss Redgrave made there about this very spell.”

“I’m all ears to know how’ll you’ll send them up here,” says Peter. “Have Marta pack them a nice lunch?”

“And I’m all ears to learn your suggestions, Peter,” retorts Credo. “For they’ve been thin on the ground. Perhaps you would have me poke a sewing needle into his sheaths? All 38 of them?”

Peter makes an exasperated huff and fiddles with a button on his shirt.

“Do you have a better idea, Peter?”

“No, I don’t,” he admits. He shoulders his backpack and draws his sword. “Let’s make a clean sweep of the area and begin our work.”

Credo draws his sword and they advance like they’ve been trained, but there’s nothing.

“It’s almost like Lord Sparda is smiling upon us,” says Peter as they enter the church.

“Where shall we set it? We only need the size of a double bed,” muses Credo as he looks around the church. There’s candles, bottles, blankets and other detritus from generations of courting couples. “It’s bigger than I remember. Up the stairs?”

He points to a landing with a door.

“Works for the Chetcuti girls,” snorts Peter. “We can’t guarantee they’ll go up there. It’s not like they’re sheltering overnight.”

“Which one did you end up having in the end?”
“Kristina. So Cassius is picking the fruits of my labours. Wasn’t here though.” Peter shudders. “I like a proper bed.”

“The bawdy-house boy has standards,” jests Credo. He thinks. “Peter, go out and come back in.”

Peter looks baffled, but does it anyway. He walks down the stairs and into the centre of the space before stopping and turning. “What?”

He looks down at the area in front of the steps and back up at Credo, nodding slowly as he realises.

“Let’s get started then,” he says, putting down his bag. He crouches as he opens it and pulls out the ingredients the Head Priest gave him along with the spell work for the ritual. He reads through it again, with an apprehensive look on his face.

“What is it?” asks Credo.

“Nothing, it’s just the weight of what we’re doing and this is a precise spell. It’s easy to fuck it up, as the Tourists would say,” Peter says. He takes some deep breaths to centre himself. “I need you to follow my directions exactly, Credo and without question.”

“Of course,” Credo assures him. “What do you need me to do?”

“Find north for me, then after that the quarters and mark them with the chalk.” He hands Credo a piece of chalk and a compass.

“How big d’youb need the circle?” Credo’s made the first mark.

“8 feet,” says Peter, looking at the design of the circle. There’s three on it and the spell separates them out. “Then at 6 foot and 4 foot, same thing.”

The sun is dropping in the sky, but it’s not set yet. The iron work in the roof is creating delicate tracework shadows over the floor. It’s almost glyph-like.
Peter lights a bundle of dry twigs. “Stand still.”

Credo’s about to make a joke, but it dies on his lips as he sees Peter’s face. The other man is deadly serious, intense concentration on his face.

Credo’s transfixed and there’s a prickling over his spine and scalp.

The energy in the church changes. It’s thick and alive and time itself feels like it’s slowed, almost like they’re outside of time.

Peter walks around Credo, waving the smoking twigs around him, first all over the height of Credo and then back around, weaving a pattern as he does so. He recites a formula that’s written under the first illustration of the circles. He stumbles a little over the pronouncing of the words, they’re old and in an unfamiliar language.

He walks round Credo three times.

Peter steps back, counting three steps exactly.

The air in the church billows and boils like blood in water.

Peter speaks and his voice is strange, distorted.

“Take the black candles and walk the innermost circle, say this chant as you do so. Repeat it to me first.” Peter hands Credo the candles and has him recite the chant until his rhythm and tone are as accurate as the words themselves. “Don’t light them till the second pass.”

“Many times do I walk?”

“Three.” Peter passes a pouring decanter with the stopper still in it to Credo. “Pour this thinly on the third pass. Walk around the outside.”

Credo walks carefully, chanting until the it’s just a noise ricocheting in his head. He feels curiously
peaceful as he walks. He’s conscientious to follow Peter’s instructions to the letter, even when the third candle won’t light at first.

As Credo joins the end of the first poured circle, there’s a sound like a bell ringing somewhere in the church.

There are no bells in the church. Credo looks at Peter in alarm and the other man looks nervous. They look towards the centre of the circle and the air’s taken on a thick, twisting shimmer. It’s like a tornado is writhing within it.

“Peter, should we really be doing this?” says Credo, in a low voice.

“We’ve come too far, Credo,” he replies in his strange, distorted voice. “Once we start, we have to finish.”

Peter hands Credo the second batch of candles. These ones are red. “Same thing as before, but recite this.”

Again, Peter makes him recite a phrase until he’s perfect with it. Credo goes through the same motions as before, with an almost meditative slowness.

As the circle closes between the lit candles, the tornado of energy in the central ring begins to move excitedly. Its beginning to take on different colours now, discordant sounds like glass breaking sounding among the ringing bells.

Peter jumps as a breath sounds near his ear.

There’s a wave of energy that swirls along the second ring. It blows Credo’s hair from its ponytail.

Peter can feel hands sliding along his back and around his chest.

Credo can see the shape the hands leave on Peter’s shirt, see the fabric moving and twisting. There’s a light laugh from around them, a tinkling giggle.
From the shadows, there’s a low growl.

Peter jumps.

Credo doesn’t feel real.

“Tell him,” the growl can barely form words, like it’s not used to manifesting on this plane. “Tell him to continue.”

The shadows detach from the corners of the church and coalesce into a creeping shape. The light disappears around it and it skulks around Credo, slithering over him.

Credo closes his eyes. Even through his trance, this phantasm feels wrong.

“You would have been a tasty morsel,” it says. “You would have been a meal. Could you not wait for your marriage bed?”

A light voice that sounds like a champagne glass comes from Peter’s direction.

“Ah, but that ritual powers up this one. Did you have fun when the whore took your virginity? The energy from that one would have ripped open the veil between the worlds or summoned gods.” She tweaks Peter’s ear. “He used it for this spell instead. Where did you learn to trap energy, Peter?”

Peter’s sweating and his face is white.

“Bid him continue,” the shadow phantom says in a ground-glass voice.

Credo realises that Peter is terrified.

“Keep going,” says Credo. It’s like he can see all the secrets of the Universe, all the planes, all the dimensions, when he looks into the rings they’re setting up. He almost makes a step towards it, it
so beautiful and he so badly wants to partake of its mysteries.

The only thing stopping him is the black beast that’s holding him in a steel web.

There’s other shadows and mists flying around in a wind that ruffles his hair, but nary a flicker from the candles.

Credo senses that the spirits that hold them are losing patience.

“Peter.”

Peter looks at him, his hands gripping the book so hard, his knuckles are white.

“You need to carry on. Now.”

Peter nods and holds out the last batch of white candles and he’s about to put Credo through the recitation of the chant, when the black creature recites it for him. Credo says it back and he’s perfect, down to the intonation.

He realises as he looks at the energies in the circle and the words he speaks intonate to his heart’s blood moving through his body.

Peter is reciting something in a language that sounds too guttural to be human and it’s got the rhythm and flow of a poem or a prayer. The female spirit’s still trailing her hands all over him, as if she’d rather he was the subject of the spell.

The creature recites it with him and as the circle closes, the colours and the lights and the energies take on the shape of a double helix swirling low in the final enclosure. The wave in the middle circle isn’t so much a wave as a single spring like strand.

As Peter recites the verses, the decanter is torn from Credo’s hand and a shadow and mist together pour into patterns in the air that sink down on the floor, forming lines that constantly shift, glimmering and rippling like moonlight on water.
“The bearer? What binding do you bring for the bearer of the spirit to become flesh, so we might know her when we see her?” The female asks as she licks up Peter’s face.

He passes her a small twist of paper. She opens it and the dark brown, almost black hair is knotted in the folds.

She leaves hold of Peter, laughing as she goes. “Oooh, she’s a feisty, powerful one. She’ll fight hard.”

The black creature lets go of Credo and takes a hair. “I hope he’s equal to the task or I’ll finish her before he does.”

They fly around each other, making a double helix spiral of black and white, before crashing down into the centre of the circle.

It shudders once, twice, thrice, almost as if it’s through water that’s rippling, before it’s gone.

Both men drop to their knees, panting. Peter falls over onto his back, as Credo vomits. There’s nothing in his stomach but bile. He feels weak and exhausted, like he’s ran a marathon.

“Godspit and shit, Peter, what the hell was that?” croaks Credo. His puke tastes rank on his tongue and his throat burns.

Peter rolls a bottle of water towards him. It’s all Credo can do to open it and rinse out his mouth.

Luckily, he puked down the vents in the floor, so there’s nothing on the surface, just the tracework patterns.

He thinks for a moment how pretty they are and then it hits him.

They are on the wrong side and the light in the church is a cold silver.
“Is that sunrise?” Peter says in astonishment. “Have we been here all night?”

“We must have been,” Credo replies.

There’s a low hum buzzing through the church, like a wasps’ nest. They can feel the power of the spell and it’s a base, dangerous thing.

“Sparda’s Balls, Credo, I didn’t know it was like that.” Peter sounds young and unsure. “What have we done?”

Credo gets up painfully.

Even the candles have gone.

“We’ve done our duty. We’re bringing the Heir to Lord Sparda into the world, to Fortuna,” says Credo, pulling Peter to his feet. “Pinny Falzon, Verity Micellef. Say it.”

“Pinny Falzon, Verity Micellef,” repeats Peter. “For Fortuna, we’ve done our duty to Fortuna. There’s no sin to creating life. Our actions today will bring peace to the world twenty, thirty years from now.”

“Can you hear that?” says Credo. He thinks he can hear the sound of an arguing couple approaching.

“Yes, I can,” replies Peter, picking up his things. “We can go through the forest and get to HQ.”

***

“How could you not have told me?” snarls Verity as she storms through the gate.

“It wasn’t important and then it was and I didn’t know how to tell you! Vee!” Vergil catches up with her and grabs her arm. “Vee!”
“‘My name is Vergil Sparda and my father is the demon you worship.’ Wasn’t exactly hard.” Verity is actually crying with rage, she’s so incensed. “You managed to give me your first name.”

“You’re lucky you got that! I wasn’t going to tell you anything -“

“I’m not a damned hedge-whore! Is that what you think of me? I’m sorry you didn’t get your money’s worth then!” She fires back. “Sweet words and a nasty tongue! Was this all a game to you? To make a slut of me?”

She breaks free from his hold.

“After what you said about my father how was I supposed to tell you? The implications about my mother?” Vergil growls at her retreating back, rushing to keep up with her. “Don’t you walk away from me, Verity Agius. I’m trying to talk to you, you foolish little wench. Verity!”

“Stay away from me, Vergil! Treating me as nothing but a dalliance! I wouldn’t have minded if you’d been honest!”


He’s nearly able to grab her as she reaches the door.

“’I’d go through Hell for you,’ “ she mimics, avoiding his hand with a quick pirouette.

He feels it as she opens the door and time slows.

“Verity, no!”

The anger in her face switching to terror as she steps into it.

“Stop! Vee!”
The spell triggers instantly.

“Vergil, I don’t feel very well,” Verity says before she collapses.
“I’d never have guessed there was actual roads here,” says Dante as Violet’s Land Rover bounces over a pot hole.

“Trish was here for months and you didn’t know we had roads? We’ve got farms and vineyards on the other side of the island!” Kyrie giggles as she turns round in her seat.

“I wasn’t here for a traffic report,” Trish laughs.

“What was the hardest thing, being here?” asks Kyrie.

“The language. I can’t believe you all speak, like, five different languages, but your own language is so different. I picked it up, but the writing it was worse. How did you find it, Violet, when you first came here?”

“I didn’t have much of a problem,” she replies, not really paying attention. “I find written languages easier than spoken, though.”

“I remember,” says Kyrie. She turns to the back seat. “I asked her what her name was -X’jismek? - and Violet replied with the right gender - jiena jisimni Violet. Credo was so surprised. Most people don’t.”

“Kyrie, we’re speaking Italian, it’s gendered.” Violet is definitely elsewhere. She seems almost annoyed by Kyrie’s casual conversation. “Anyway, you can’t remember that, you were three.”

“Italian is common. Fortunese isn’t.” Kyrie hasn’t noticed.

“I knew I was coming here. I studied it beforehand.” There’s frown lines between her eyebrows.

Both Violet and Kyrie’s phones chirp.

“Nero says Falzon is waiting for us,” says the younger woman. “And your phone is Tyuule asking
if she should have Nero and Falzon removed.”

Violet huffs in annoyance. “No, let them stay. Today’s going to be enough fun as it is - woah shit!”

The car screeches to an emergency stop that has the belts digging into everyone.

There’s a huge purple fog sitting across the road.

“What the hell is that?” Kyrie asks no one in particular.

Dante catches Violet’s eye in the rear-view mirror. He raises his eyebrows…is it?

She nods. “That, Hanini, is a big ball of timey-whimey shit that you don’t want to mess with.”

“What are we going to do about it?” asks Kyrie. “Are we going in it?”

“Sparda’s Balls, are you drunk? I’m going to drive around it and report it when we get to work.” Violet puts the Land Rover in gear and backs up.

Lady puts her hand on Violet’s shoulder. “We could chop down some trees in front and behind, so cars wouldn’t accidentally drive into it.”

“What with? I don’t have any chainsaws in the boot,” replies Violet.

“We have magic swords,” says Trish. “I’m betting they could cut down a couple of trees either side.”

Trish looks at Dante, who replies, “Sounds like a plan.”

“Let me drive the car round, so we’re on the other side then,” says Violet. She sees her passengers hiding giggles. Dante’s shoulders are shaking and then he can’t hide the mirth bubbling up. His
rich laugh fills the car as it takes over everyone.

Violet shakes her head and grins ruefully. “I can’t believe I fell for that one.”

***

Ms Kye’s phone bleeps and she inclines her head to Falzon. She’s kept him in the meeting room that staff have taken to using, rather than Violet’s office. He’s not getting anywhere near that.

Her face doesn’t change, but he can see something in it.

“Does Madam Alighieri have a problem, Ms Kye?” he asks.

Tony perks up from where he’s sitting next to Nero.

“You might say so, Lord Falzon. There appears to be a giant Elsewhere on the coastal road. She’s asking if you would send Knights to deal with it.”

“An Elsewhere, you say? I will send a Patrol, but I’ll head them myself,” he says as he stretches. He looks almost pleased.

“What’s an Elsewhere?” asks Nero. He ignores Tony keeping pace with him.

“I’ll explain on the way,” replies Falzon.

***

The five of them are spread either side of the Elsewhere, keeping a watchful eye on the road and the fog. He’s mindful of what happened with the last one he came across.

He catches Violet’s eye
“Hey, at least I’m sober this time,” she says, eyes crinkling with her smile.

“The last few times I’ve seen these things,” he says. “I couldn’t see them, not like this. They were like this when I was going through the ruins, though. Is this how you see them?”

“No,” she admits, like she’s just realised something. “I only saw that one in the cemetery because I was drunk. And I only knew what I was looking for because Dorcas showed me.”

Dante cocks his head. “Oh, yeah?”

Kyrie’s caught the mention of her mother’s name.

“Dorcas was a quantum physicist on a par with Stephen Hawking. If she’d been in a Mainland University, she’d have been a household name.” Violet twists the wedding rings she can’t get used to wearing. “A lot of her work was on natural fields within the Earth, space-time and how they interrelate.”

“Sounds a bit New-Agey,” says Lady.

“Yeah, her books sold well, but because she was here messing round with Alchemy, rather than in an actual University, she was seen as that.” Violet looks up the road, towards HQ. “But it’s no different to astronomers proposing the same thing around black holes. She didn’t get the disconnect.”

They’re interrupted by a Patrol of Knights arriving, with Falzon’s car at the head.

Dante doesn’t sheathe Rebellion as he approaches, but balances her across his shoulder. He stands, watchful as Falzon ignores him and goes straight to Kyrie and Violet.

Trish and Lady come to stand beside him as they watch Nero wander round the swirling mass with Falzon.
“Is it not beautiful, Nero?” says Falzon, gazing at it in childlike wonder. “I’ve never seen one so big.”

Nero shares a glance with Tony.

“I wouldn’t go in it, My Lord,” Nero says. “You don’t know where you could end up.”

“Quite, quite,” agrees Falzon. “We will remain here and co-ordinate the Patrol entering the Elsewhere.”

Violet looks like she’s about to say something, when a minotaur-like creature wanders out.

It’s huge.

Dante’s about to move to a fighting stance when he sees Kyrie bow her head and look away from it.

She looks like she’s concentrating hard and there’s beads of sweat on her brow.

Stay very still, he thinks he hears in his head, because she’s too far away for him to actually hear her say it, supersenses be damned.

He glances at Trish and Lady as they do the same.

Nero and Falzon are on the other side of the Elsewhere with the Patrol.

The minotaur ambles about with its snout sniffing the air, for all the world like it’s out for a Sunday stroll. There must be so many scents it can’t place, but it doesn’t seem worried by them. Its horns and teeth are terrifying and its humanoid torso is rippling with muscle under the thick, shaggy coat, but the beast itself seems calm, almost bovine as it wanders about the road.

Its hooves clop on the cobbled surface and it looks down at them like its never experienced anything like this before.
Violet has inched her way to Kyrie and she’s got a hand on the young woman’s shoulder.

It strikes Dante then just how close they are as a family – and he feels a pang. He’s going to have to tell them soon and he wonders how they’ll take it.

The clopping beast is testing out the cobbles and seems to be jumping around different ones, like it’s playing.

It goes back to a patch that made a better noise and starts skipping and hopping on the spot.

Tony walks ahead of Nero as they come around the other side of the Elsewhere and without thinking flings an arm out to stop him.

Kyrie frowns as the animal stops dancing and sniffs the air again. It tilts its head like a massive dog, sniffing all the while. It moves round towards Nero who stands stock still. His hand twitches as he fights the urge to move for Blue Rose or Red Queen, but Tony counsels him quietly that the animal isn’t actually aggressing.

The beast sniffs all Nero, paying particular attention to an area to the right of him. The shape it makes is almost humanoid and the same height as Nero.

Dante tightens his grip on Rebellion and Ebony, ready to react.

Kyrie is on her knees, sweat pouring down her face and soaking her hair. Her face is screwed up in concentration and she whispers something to Violet, who looks around.

The minotaur steps back, finally and stands up. It gives a last look around, and then ambles off into the forest.

Nobody moves for at least five minutes. Kyrie’s ragged breathing is the only sound heard above the birds in the forest.
She nods and calls out, “It’s clear.”

Nero runs over, dropping to his knees and checking her over. “Kyrie? Kyrie?”

“I’m fine,” she says as Nero helps her up. “That was a *Waħx il-baqar*. They’re a myth.”

“They weren’t a myth when we first came from Malta,” says Violet.

Everyone looks at her. “I’m a *barranija* shacked up with an Old Family Son. I had to study harder than everyone else to get half as far.”

Kyrie looks past Nero, directly at Tony. He freezes.

“You know the weirdest thing?” says Kyrie. “I can feel someone else here. There’s another… consciousness here. Like a ghost. That’s the only way I can describe it.”

She looks at Violet. “It almost feels like Credo, but it’s not him.”

“How interesting, Sister Micellef,” says Falzon, coming over. “Can you tell me anything else about this… ghost?”

Nero squeezes her hand. She doesn’t react. “I’m sorry, My Lord, I think I’ve hit the limits of my current abilities.”

“How your current abilities are considerable in their own right,” replies Falzon. He bows and clasps his hands. “I bid you remember dinner tonight and I wish you good hunting, Madam Alighieri. Good day.”

Nero gives her a final check and a quick kiss before walking after Falzon.

Tony follows after him, with a last, speculative look at Kyrie.
“Well, we heard the man, we have a job waiting for us,” says Dante. He looks at Violet. “Everything OK?”

She nods. “Let’s go.”

She lets them walk back to the car and hangs back with Kyrie, making a show of helping her back to the car. Kyrie’s tired, but not that much.

“The ‘ghost’? It’s attached to Nero. You were right.”

“Empty Night.”

***

Ms Kye is waiting for them with maps, cameras and Captain la Valletta.

Violet makes the introductions while Ms Kye cams everyone up.

Dante looks at her quizzically. “This for Youtube?”

“Training purposes,” she says as she tilts her head to Captain la Valletta. “It also lets us see what you see, for observation purposes.”

“I hear you did good for never having done this before,” says Dante. “Credit where it’s due.”

The Captain smiles. “Thank you. But let’s be honest, my team would have been completely tango uniform’d if it hadn’t been for your son and his colleagues.”

“I don’t have a son?”

“I thought the one called after that Emperor was your kid? He looks your spitting image,” says
Captain la Valletta, confused.

Dante bites back the reply he wants to make, because Kyrie is here and he’s not ready yet. He’s not going to say anything until he knows for sure about Nero’s mother.

She’s definitely not in that fucking grave Agius makes a big deal of every day.

The doors to the restricted parts of HQ are opened and Dante can’t help himself.

“Ready, Babes? Let’s Rock!”

***

7 Months Previously, Devil May Cry office

“The Order of the Sword, huh? Sounds phony to me.” Dante sips his Scotch.

He fingers the papers on the massive oak desk. The photo is propped against the photo of his mother. It strikes him as strange none of the Sons of Sparda ever look like their mothers.

“Is that everything your contact gave you, Lady?” asks Trish, leafing through the file.

“She was very comprehensive,” nods Lady. “Massive construct, studying a demon they’ve captured, who’s who, social structures, and they’ll likely take a Devil Arm that belonged to Sparda as an in. The construct has been designed so that it’ll only run on items directly related to Sparda.”

Lady knocks back her Scotch and pours more from the bottle. She’s just brought it over from the bar and they’re not even bothering with ice.

“Like an heir to Sparda. The blood runs inside him, too.” Dante quotes Lady’s client, as he looks at his probable nephew. Who’s he kidding? There’s no probable in it and he knows it.
“So it’s the standard ‘cooking up something awful?’” says Trish.

“Pretty much,” agrees Lady. “Creation and destruction. They’re trying to become Gods themselves. We’ve got to stop them. I don’t think I’ve ever had a single payout this big from one job.”

“So which one of you is going with the spell?” asks Dante. “I don’t think I’ve got the legs for it.”

“I can’t run the risk of identifying the client,” says Lady. “And I’ve ran into this Nero a few times, so same thing.”

“I’ve never met her,” agrees Trish. “And Sparda’s mine, so it makes sense for me to go. Where’s that spell?”

Dante hands her the page with the glyph she’ll have to have tattooed and the incantation to use. “The spell work that goes with it is nasty, but it’s solid.”

Trish looks at it. It’s a mix of Wiccan, Demon and Arabic, but even on the paper, it’s been woven together so well there’s a subtle flare of power glowing along its lines and loops.

She looks apprehensive. “This is gonna hurt.”

Dante looks at her and he’s got that mix of grief and hope on his face.

There’s love mixed in there as well, as if he knows what he’s asking of her and there’s no way she can deny him.

“I’ll do it,” she says, like there was ever any doubt.

***

It’s agonising.
She’d known it would be bad when the tattooist had told Dante to tie her down good, so he wouldn’t smudge it when she struggled.

They glyph has power in its’ own right, but there’s an incantation to power it up? Seal the deal?

Trish doesn’t know, but she feels like she’s on the rack from the second they start it.

She tries to stay still, Dante and Lady trying to laugh and joke with her.

“You’ve already died at least once, Rocket Queen,” he tries to grin, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Can’t be that bad!”

“If I can get up a building with my quad wrecked, you can do this,” Lady says as she strokes Trish’s hair.

Trish tries to be stoic and laugh and joke with them, but she can’t. It’s too much and the tears flow freely.

He holds her and brushes away her tears, but he can’t take the pain for her.

Trish screams and cries and she tries to struggle to get away from the anguish, but they’ve got her lashed down tight to the tattooist’s frame.

She feels like she’s being flayed, that her bones are breaking and reforming and she can see her face changing forward and back as the spell’s woven.

“I thought this was meant to be an overclocked glamour?” Lady snaps at Dante. “She’s being tortured!”

Trish tries to say it’s ok, she’s choosing this, but she can only whine softly.
Dante glares at Lady, before going back to stroking Trish’s face.

Except it’s not Trish’s face.

Instead of the pale blonde, there’s a dark-skinned woman, with a sleek white bob and blue eyes.

The tattooist hands Dante a towel to wipe her off.

“You have a devil trigger, yes?” He asks.

Dante nods, as Trish is in no fit state to reply.

“Then she should be able to go between this body and her own. It will survive a deep scan if someone tries to read her mind and if they put her through a Witch Trial, she should make it through.” He spits into the trash can and makes a warding sign.

“A Witch Trial?” repeats Lady.

“Where she’s going, my wife came from. The stories she tells me would curdle the milk. I recognised the language,” he says as he begins to pack up his equipment. “Ridiculous that somewhere that backwards’ tolerated in the EU.”

“That bad?” asks Lady.

“Yes,” he says, shortly. “Stay on your stomach till tomorrow, when you can practice moving between forms. You’ll have a rough night. The spell will need redoing in a year. Only you will see it on your back.”

***

Trish’s first night with the sigil on her back is excruciating.
She’s feverish and shaking so hard she nearly falls off the sofa. She had been in bed, but Dante figures she’s better in the more open area of the shop. It’s cooler down here and she’s closer to the bathroom and kitchen anyway.

The sigil on her back continues to shift its lines overnight, flaring with various colours as it does so.

Dante holds his hand over it as he mops the sweat from around it and he’s shocked to feel heat enough to scar coming off it. She’s still writhing in distress from it and when he holds her hand, she nearly breaks his.

She looks almost holy in her suffering and it's the most like Eva she’s ever looked.

He wipes the tears away from her face, following the lines of it almost reverently.

He tells her he loves her. She’s too far gone to hear him.

The fever breaks some time in the morning as the traffic noise gradually gets louder.

Dante wakes with a start, stiff and sore from sleeping sitting on the floor at Trish’s head. She’s sleeping sounder now, the sweat that’s soaked her hair hardened into salt sculptures. She’s still frowning in her sleep, but it's clear the worst is over.

He moves painfully on to his knees and looks at her back.

The glyph is still there, but it’s raised slightly, like a brand. It’s colouring with energy running along the lines, getting faster and faster, before it explodes. There’s no sound from the small blast, no shockwave, only light.

Instinctively, Dante shields his eyes.

As he lowers his hand against a shockwave that never comes, he sees the glyph become skin coloured and sink into her back.
It’s gone.

He hesitantly reaches out, but he can’t feel anything.

Even as he lightly strokes her skin, it’s smooth, if sweat-slicked and salty. He presses a kiss to her back, where the centre of the design would be, as if he were blessing it.

Blessing Trish.

He covers her over and goes to make coffee.

***

It takes her several weeks to get comfortable in the new body and longer to hold it long term and under stress. Dante and Lady ride her ass hard and tempers flare more than they should, even between her and Dante.

It takes a lot for them to argue and that’s a clue more than anything how much this is getting to Dante.

Trish can’t take much more of it, so when she’s ready, she decides she’s just going to duck out. No goodbyes.

The kicker for her is the night before she goes.

Dante’s inside her after a particularly hard practice session. They’ve fought all day as she’s held the Gloria form and she’s exhausted, both from the intense training and effort of holding the form.

It feels like she’s trying to mesh two different bodies into one soul and it’s painful on a spiritual level she’s not sure Dante comprehends. It’s heavy, heavy spellwork and it makes her worry for what they’ll be dealing with. Short of a demonic invasion or the apocalypse she doesn’t think she’s ever dealt with anything this intense.
He doesn’t even let her shower, just hauls her to their bedroom, stripping off their clothes as they go. His kisses are desperate, like he’s dying and she’s oxygen and she’s kissing him just as madly.

The sheen of the sweat on their bodies slicks his movements against her and his skin is salty on her tongue as she swirls her it across his chest. Her legs are locked over his ass as he pounds into her and they’re breathing each other’s air, gasping like they’re drowning. There’s no thought, just need and sensation driving all reason before it.

Dante stops and he’s heavy lying atop her.

It takes Trish a minute to work out that he’s not moving and she rocks her hips to keep the feeling going.

It takes him several tries to find his voice before he says something that twists her heart in two as she understands exactly what this means to Dante.

“You do whatever you have to bring home Vergil’s boy. I’ll never ask any secrets if you tell me no lies.”

“Anything for you, Dante. You know that.”

“Anything?”

She understands in that moment exactly what he means and part of her breaks at what he’s asking of her.

And what it means when she assents.

“Yes.”

As he kisses her to seal the deal, rocking her to a climax that makes her sob with its intensity, they both know the answer was never going to be anything else.
Lady’s come over to make sure everything’s in order for the job and while they’re arguing and Dante’s letting Lady steal the pizza from his hand – there’s only a handful of people who can do that and they’re all female – Trish slips away.

She does it with style, she’s Trish after all, writing on the wall a cheeky note in her lipstick and of course she manages to get into a fight with demons she recognises from the client’s notes, but she goes.

Anything for love, right?

***

Fortuna Present day

It’s taken the best part of a day, but they’re outside the Records Room.

It’s been tough but largely uneventful. Nothing’s presented an especially difficult challenge. A few hairy moments, but nothing to write home about, even the multiple waves guarding the Records Room haven’t really presented a challenge the way they did before.

“What feels weirder?” asks Lady. “Being back here or wearing actual clothes back here?”

Dante snorts, then laughs straight out. He’s enjoying himself, no, he corrects himself, they’re enjoying themselves. It’s good to have a job that’s plain and simple and just works. He’s got his family along with him, even better.

“I’m a sexual being, Lady. It’s possible to embrace your femininity and kick ass,” replies Trish in her Gloria voice. “I thought you’d realised that with those short-shorts you were wearing.”

“They were practical.”

“Practical for showing your ass off?” Trish reaches round the back of Dante, ducking under the sword on his shoulder and skelps Lady’s ass.
Lady yelps and tugs Trish’s hair and the two have a mock slap fight as they giggle.

“See what I have to work with, Captain?” Dante shakes his head.

“It’s amazing you get anything done,” replies Captain la Valletta.

Despite the joking, they’re still watchful, but nothing more comes.

“That’s all?” says Trish, warily. “Last time I was here, this place was guarded up the ass. Angelos, Cutlass, the sword things. It was loaded. There was a tsunami of demons.”

“That should all still be there, according to the computer,” agrees Violet. She frowns as she checks her tablet and her computer. It shows the three Devil Hunters on the plan of the building.

“There wasn’t anything inside the Records Room last time, just Admin staff,” says Trish. “My Gloria credentials – are they still active?”

Trish can hear a keyboard over the earpiece.

“Yes, try them. If not, I can override them from here,” says Violet. She checks the UO lanyard she’s brought from home and taps in the details from it.

“Can you see what files Gloria accessed?” asks Ms Kye quietly.

Violet shakes her head. “Agnus and Sanctus did everything on paper. Even the logging system was paper-based. They based it on the Caged Library in the Archive. I’d have to see the actual logs to see what’s been accessed.”

And even then, she’s betting that Trish found a way of getting the files she really wanted without anyone being any the wiser.
Trish shifts into Gloria, though she’s in Trish’s clothes and runs through the ID process.

The door opens and they walk in.

Nothing happens.

“Are you seeing this, Violet?” Says Dante. “I don’t think we’re in the Records Room.”

“I’m seeing it and no, I don’t think that’s the Records Room, either.” Violet and Ms Kye are both looking at the screen.

Ms Kye mutes their side of the feed. She speaks in a lesser known Demon tongue. “According to this map, they’re in the wall.”

“So it would seem,” replies Violet, in the same language. She unmutes the feed and tells the hunters, “Look around, but don’t touch anything.”

They’re walking around a control centre, banks of computers and screens. None of them are on at the moment.

It’s a fairly large room and they circle it several times, looking under the desks.

“Did you know this was here?” asks Lady.

“No and it’s not on the plans,” replies Violet. She turns to Ms Kye. “Get Kyrie.”

Ms Kye obeys immediately and returns several minutes later with her.

“Recognise any of that?” Violet points at the screen. It shows the feeds from the three cameras and Dante sitting spinning on an office chair.
“Mum’s lab! You found it!” Kyrie is entranced. “Where was it?”

“Not where you think,” replies Ms Kye.

“Were we looking in the wrong place?” asks Kyrie. “I was sure it was where the carved lion was.”

“In a manner of speaking,” replies the demon.

“What else do you remember about Dorcas’ labs, Kyrie?” asks Violet. “Guys, can you walk around the room slowly?”

They oblige, with Kyrie coming up with memories of her mother at work.

“It’s like it, but it’s not the same lab,” says Kyrie, finally. “It had that thing from the news, though. The Large Hadron Collider. I walked around it.”

There’s a burst of laughter from the feed. “If the balls touch, we all die.”

“Ignore him. He’s stupid,” says Trish. “Hadron Collider. It’s a physics thing.”

“Well, duh, my mum was a physicist.” Replies Kyrie. “Is it true that it’s going to send us all into other dimensions?”

“Probably not,” replies Lady. “I don’t think the world could take two Dantes.”


Violet snorts, then looks at another feed showing the outside of HQ. Falzon’s car is pulling up on the camera. “OK, guys, leave a camera in there, come out of there and go back through the door. Humour me.”
Confused, the hunters do so, as Violet hits some keys.

They go back through the door and they’re in an Archive.

“The Records Room?” asks Dante.

“Yes,” replies Trish. “What just happened?”

“Hell if I know,” says Violet. She turns to Kyrie. “The last ten minutes never happened.”

“I can’t tell Nero?” I don’t want to keep secrets from him.” Kyrie isn’t happy at not being able to speak to Nero about it.

Violet sighs. “Tell him tonight, after we’ve been to dinner with Falzon.”

“OK,” Kyrie nods and she seems happier. She looks at the Records Room feed. “You going down there?”

“I’m going to have to, they won’t know what they’re looking for. You stay here with the Captain.” She looks over to Ms Kye. “Got your stuff?”

Ms Kye taps her sais. “Ready, Madam.”

They port in and it doesn’t take long for them to find Agnus’ private notes.

“Can you read that?” asks Dante, turning the pages on an angle and squinting. It looks like hieroglyphics.

“Agnus was terrified of people stealing his work, so he wrote in code,” says Violet as she gets together the items she needs to take control of the demons. “Then he taught most of us to read it so we could work with him. We all stopped trying to work out his logic.”
“I thought it would be this big spell,” Dante says as he hands her the notes. “Specially after the mess of Trish’s back.”

“Nah, setting it up was the biggest ritual. This is just handing over the keys.”

It doesn’t take her long to work the spell and there’s a flare of energy that flashes out, billowing out their hair and clothes. Violet nods to herself and is about to step out of the makeshift circle when there’s a much stronger flare that blows loose papers around the room in a maelstrom. Their coats are whipped around as the energy twists about the room before blasting out through the walls. The lights dim briefly and then come back on.

Violet drops to her knees as the spell dissipates.

“What the fuck just happened?” says Lady as Dante helps Violet up.

“I-I don’t know and I’m pretty sure that wasn’t supposed to happen,” she replies, uneasily.

“Let’s hope the spell was just more powerful than you thought,” he says.

Kyrie comes over the feed. “All the computers in the other room just came on.”

“Godspit and *fucking* shit,” mutters Violet as she facepalms.

***

6 Months Previously, Devil May Cry Office

It’s the first file Trish looks for.

She doesn’t find it in the Records Room. They wouldn’t have hidden something that sensitive in such plain sight.
She finds it in Peter Falzon’s house, in a secret room.

Operation Resurrection.

She’s seen and done many terrible things in her life, on both sides of the Demon Realm.

This is the worst.

Dante goes on a three-day bender when Lady gives him the file.

When she finds him, he’s sitting at his desk, with the file, the photo and glove that Vergil had slashed.

He doesn’t look like Dante.

The look on his face and the ice in his eyes makes him look like Vergil.

“Have you read it?” His voice is clipped and quiet, just like his brother.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to kill them all.”
It’s as cold as any winter night as they trudge up Lamina Peak. The slender warmth of early spring is a distant memory. The Castle looms across from them and in the light of the full moon, it’s even more imposing. It’s coldly beautiful as the moon reflects a million different diamonds. There’s mist floating over the water in the base of the culdera, spectral tendrils climbing up the side of the Castle.

They pause for a moment while Vergil works out how they’re going to get down to the bridge and across to the castle. The fresh snow obscures the edges of the road. They’re not obvious the way they were in daylight and it’s a long way down.

It gives Verity time to appreciate the scene.

She’s not unfit, she dances too much for that, but the cold wind’s hurting her lungs and Vergil’s setting a quick pace, he’s so intent on getting the Castle to give up its secrets. He’s not exactly short with her, but he’s far more focussed than he was the previous night. Verity’s sure she can sense an impatience with her slowness, but he’s working with it.

There’s none of the playfulness and flirting of the last time they were here.

But that goes for Verity, too.

“Trousers are far more practical for running about in the snow,” he says to her, suddenly.

“Far better than 500 petticoats,” she responds.

Vergil gives a brief smile. “How far is the beach from here?”

Verity looks out to where the beach meets the forest. “About half an hour.”

“It’s the shallow side, there isn’t it?” He looks out. “I wonder why it’s quiet there?”
“It’s a little too far for the Tourists to get to on foot at this time of night, but I shan’t be surprised if there’s bars and hotels down there in 20 years.”

“What’s that building?” he asks, pointing out to the opposite side of the island. There’s two buildings that look almost monastic, set apart from the Island by an ornate bridge. They gleam a ghostly white in the moonlight.

“That’s HQ. The Order have barracks, offices and labs there. They share them with Umbrella. There’s residences there as well for the-“ she uses the word _alchemists_ instead of _scientists_ “-who choose not to live in the town or the villages. Credo’s mother works there. They have libraries there too and —“

“Like a university?”

She nods. “It’s deep there and the currents are wicked. Fall off that side and you’ll wash up in Italy. There’s some secluded beaches there and over the mountains there’s good beaches, farms and vineyards.”

“It _is_ a beautiful Island,” says Vergil. He glances at Verity.

“It is,” she agrees. She blows her breath out, like she’s a dragon. She catches Vergil looking at her, an expression between amused and exasperated on his face. With the ease that the lines form on his eyes and brow, she thinks that he wears that expression a lot. She wonders about his partner with the unpredictable moveset.

“You look thoughtful, Vee,” he says, almost gently and not a little curious, like whatever she’s thinking must be the most fascinating thing in the Universe.

“I was just wondering why you’ve defaulted to ‘Vee,’ rather than Miss Agius or Verity.” She pulls his coat around her to control the shivering. She was warm while they were walking and now the cold is getting to her. “I don’t mind people I’m close to calling me it, but you’ve started using it all the time. You seem like the type who’d say only incomplete people have incomplete names.”

Vergil barks a surprised laugh as he looks at the sea before looking back at Verity. “My brother says I have a stick up my ass. You remind me of him, somewhat. You have the same … irreverence and unpredictability.”
Vergil looks away out to sea quickly, lest Verity see the pain on his face. She catches it anyway.

“What caused the distance betwixt you?”

Vergil looks at Verity in surprise. “I forget how sharp you are, Verity.”

“Is that to be my answer?” She speaks lightly, but he can see there’s nothing in it.

He keeps his gaze out to sea as he considers his answer. “Ideological differences.”

“I couldn’t imagine falling out with Pinny,” she replies, sensing she shouldn’t press him.

“I hope you never do, Vee,” says Vergil softly, cupping her face in his hand as he kisses her gently. Her teeth are starting to chatter and Vergil pulls her up as he stands. “Let’s continue our adventure, Miss Agius.”

“A capital idea, Mr Redgrave,” she replies, walking off ahead of him past the bell tower. “I hope you didn’t do everything with your brother as you’ve done with me.”

Vergil just shakes his head as he follows.

But he’s smiling.

“I’m sure we didn’t come this way before,” says Verity as they stand overlooking the staircase leading down to the bridge that crosses the culdera lake.

“I think you’re right,” agrees Vergil. He turns and looks at the cliff rising above them. “I think we’ll have to go up and around.”

“There must be an easier way,” says Verity. She walks towards the edge of the stairs and peers over the edge. “There’s so much snow I can’t tell what’s step and what’s space.”
“I don’t think this is it,” Vergil replies, looking down dubiously. The stairs have been built on top of an earlier structure. “What happened to the road here?”

“It’ll be earthquakes. It’s always earthquakes.”

He looks at her. “You’re filling me with confidence, Verity.”

There’s a rumble and they grab each other’s arm as the bell tower collapses. They don’t have time to move as the stairs give way under their feet.

He tries to pull her closer and break her fall, even as he sees the blue glyph spinning under their feet.

They still land with a thump, Vergil on his feet and Verity on her ass, but the only thing hurt is her dignity. He dusts her down, not even bothering to hide his small smile as she frowns at the pain in her backside.

“Experience is an excellent teacher,” he says to Verity’s indignant look.

A shadow falls across them.

“What in all the Nine Hells is that?” Vergil hears her mutter as he automatically positions himself in front of her.

The frosts regard the interlopers for a few moments, as if they’re mentally working out which one’s the easier prey.

They materialise behind Verity and slash at her and Vergil only just fends them off from her, ice claws clanging against Yamato. Verity flips backwards and one frost leaps over Vergil in pursuit of her.

Vergil’s foe fires an ice bolt at him, before going after Verity again. They release their attacks on her, but not aiming for her, boxing her in with rains of ice spears. They try to jump into their makeshift cage, but she’s put a lid on their box.
Vergil wills a swirl of dark energy and slashes it at the demons, knocking one away. Verity bursts out the back of her ice cage, only to get knocked aside by a wave of ice. She barely just shields herself with a massive blue glyph as shards of ice fly from the frost’s hands.

He gets to it too slow as it goes into an ice cocoon and he swears as Yamato rings uselessly off the side. He focuses his attention on the active one, summoning Beowulf and going hand to hand with it. It works, keeping it busy, but it’s not long before the first one breaks out of its cocoon and knocks Vergil flying as it materialises next to him, slashing at him with a vicious uppercut.

They both turn back to Verity, forcing her to dodge and shield ice attacks, arranging them so she can’t catch her breath. Vergil can’t get in properly without risking her, despite his best efforts. At best, he’s barely drawing their heat as they work to wear them down.

They’re not leaving him any option and he prays he catches her at the right moment. He can’t get into a line of sight with her.

Verity’s working hard, but she’s starting to tire.

She’s down again and his heart’s stopping, but she’s got a shield up and he goes for it.

He tries to recall the mantras that his Sword Masters taught him and the only thing that springs to mind is “Down you go!”

To hell with it, that’s the one he’s going with. She can give him a good chivvy later when it’s worked.

Clearing his mind and calling everything he’s got into it, he unsheathes Yamato and leaps into the air, flash stepping into the midst of the frosts, slashing with her so quickly and with so much mental force, the very air is cleaved asunder.

“Down you go!”

The edges laser through the frosts, and he’s never sure if it’s the void or the blade that cuts.
The frosts disintegrate over the top of her as she drops her shield.

Verity sits up, hands sliding in the snow. Vergil shakes off Yamato and resheathes her, before pulling Verity to her feet. She’s panting and trembling, though with cold or adrenaline he can’t tell. He guides her over to a fallen pillar, bidding her sit so she can catch her breath and digging through his pocket for a vital star.

Verity shakes her head. “I’m just winded. We need to save them in case we have ill-luck.”

Vergil puts it away. “Can you go on?”

He doesn’t touch her, but the way he looks at her when their eyes meet is sweeter than any caress.

She nods and stands up shakily. “I hope it’s warm in there, for there’s a damned chill settling on my bones.”

“After you, Vee,” Vergil says, sweeping the arm holding Yamato in a *this way* gesture.

“*Down you go, Empty Night,*” he hears her mutter as she passes him, but the corner of her mouth is crooked up in her smile.

The massive door is locked and Vergil rattles it uselessly. He looks at Verity, “This one suits your talents more than mine.”

She crouches down to look at the lock. “A pity that I don’t have a Dead Man’s Hand amongst my bag of tricks.”

“I thought you were cold, Vee,” says Vergil, trying to keep the irritation out his voice.

“Not so cold I won’t chance to vex you,” she snorts. She sets her hand on the lock, closes her eyes and concentrates. Vergil watches as the keyhole glows blue, Verity biting her lip as some bits get a little more pressure than others. The clicks are small and quiet as the mechanisms turn and the door
jumps ajar.

“I don’t sense anything on the other side,” she says quietly.

Even so, Vergil goes first, Yamato flicked up slightly.

There’s nothing, so he pulls her in as she shivers. It’s still chilly in the hall, but it’s better than out there.

The tables have gone and now it’s just rows of seats on the bottom floor. He looks at Verity.

“It’s a glorified waiting room most of the time.”

“What’s that coffin?” He asks. “I never noticed it first time round.”

“Sanctus Primum, the first leader of Fortuna,” she replies. She bows to it.

“Which door?” Vergil indicates the doors on either side of the Hall.

Verity picks the one on their left.

They’re no sooner out the door when a dog-like demon lunges at them. Vergil sends it flying with an upper slash that sends it airborne. Another one’s about to run and take its place when there’s blue spinning under his feet and a hand grabs his arm in the noise and colour and they’re further up the corridor, outside a door.

They can hear the dogs coming as they stumble through the door. Verity hauling him almost bodily through it. Vergil slams it shut, leaning against it, but it holds. The dogs jump and scratch at it for a minute, but soon give up when they can’t get in.

Vergil peers through the keyhole, but the dogs seem to have moved off up the corridor.
He turns to Verity, who’s already moving out past a fully laid, long dining table. Vergil wanders around the room, taking in the usual decorations such old castles tend to have, suits of armour and antique furniture.

He pays particular attention to the armour, because he’s been down that road before.

They sleep and he’s not picking up anything that suggests otherwise.

He joins Verity, who can’t go any further because the hall has fireballs hurtling down it. She’s looking out and down as a fireball shoots down one end to the other. He resists the urge to pull her back, instead asking, “Possible?”

“Even porting we wouldn’t be quick enough,” she replies. She forms a barrier glyph further down the hall, but the fireball just tears through it. “I can’t form it quick enough.”

Verity points down the bottom. “It’s not hitting the wall though, there’s something down there.”

Vergil waits for the next ball to pass, before chancing his head round the corner. He’s got better eyesight than Verity and he can make out some kind of statue down the bottom.

“We’ll have to go back out into the main corridor,” says Verity.

The dogs see them and come running down, one of them shooting its head at the couple. It hits Verity’s glyph and bounces back up the corridor.

It gives the couple time to reach the next closest doorway.

“I hate this room,” says Verity, looking up at vicious spikes on the underside of the metal walkway. “The water always makes me want to pee.”

Vergil bursts out laughing, shaking his head. His smile fades as the doors are sealed.

“Godspit and shit!” Verity sounds more annoyed than alarmed. He’s gratified to see her already
forming blue swords – just a couple, she’s used to defaulting to glyphs for spells and magic – and hurling them at the demons already porting in.

It’s not as bad as the storehouse, there’s more room to move here, but there’s nowhere for her to hide to prepare a spell large enough to take them all out and he can’t do Judgement Cut for the same reason.

“Let’s have some fun!” he yells, casting an eye over to Verity. Her brow is knotted with concentration, but she’s smiling. “Good test for her skills, as well as her recovery,” he thinks.

There’s a group of scarecrows and some flying demon the like of which he’s never seen before, not that it matters. They’re all just fodder for Yamato, Vergil lets loose. He needs to get used to fighting alongside Verity and she with him.

He begins to treat it as practice, streaking through them, slashing as he goes. He has to somersault up and over as he nearly crashes into Verity, but he’s aware enough of her that he reacts in time. It gives him a chance to take out some of the flying ones, which are scarily adept at keeping up with the couples’ changing position.

He’s got his Summoned Swords firing off at them in the air, damaging them enough that Verity can take them out with a single shot of her own.

For her part, she’s forming her own blue swords, not holding them in a pattern yet like Vergil can, but she’s shooting them off at a fair rate. She’s more athletic than he thought she was, backflipping and somersaulting away and around their targets, rather than relying on her powers.

Not that she isn’t using her glyphs. As well as shielding them both and giving Vergil a platform to launch from to hit the higher ones, she’s blowing both sets of demons into the brutal spikes on the ceiling. Sometimes she alternates and rams them against the walls and ceiling instead.

Like Vergil, she starts to experiment a little and they begin to fight more in tune with each other, one shielding, while the other attacks. Verity tends to shield more than Vergil does, but that’s only because her glyphs lend themselves to defense better than Vergil’s sword play.

“Didn’t you mention something about putting holes in walls, Vee?” Vergil asks, flash stepping up to her and slicing a demon in half as it launches itself at her.
“You keep telling me to pace myself, galbi,” she replies, bouncing a flying demon off a glyph and into several scarecrows. “I have a better one. Stay on that glyph.”

She forms a glyph beneath his feet, then touches the floor, sending energy into the spell her flips and pirouettes have been tracing all this time. It’s similar to the spell in the storeroom, but both more powerful and more focused. There’s a bright flash of light and both all the demons and the seals on the doors are gone.

Verity sits shakily down on the steps and digs in her pockets for a Vital Star. “It’s safe to come off it now.”

She grimaces and chokes at the fluid, washing her mouth out with the water that’s flowing through the chamber.

“Are you trying to poison yourself?” he asks, coming to stand in front of her. “God alone knows where that water’s been.”

“I like to keep my immune system on its toes,” she says, lightly. She holds out her hand to him.

He takes it and pulls her up. He keeps hold of her hand, ice-blue eyes searching her face. “You ok?”


Vergil’s about to lead her out, when Verity shakes her head. “I can port us.”

Vergil embraces her as the portal spins and glows under their feet and they’re suddenly up in a small hallway. They walk through the door and they’re in the balcony level of the Grand Hall.

“See that blue?” Vergil points out the faint luminescence running along the top of the guardrail. He taps it with Yamato’s hilt and a shimmering pattern appears briefly above it. “Forcefield?”

“I suppose,” replies Verity. “I’ve never been in the Castle at night before, under these circumstances.”
“Rather robust security system for a tourist spot, Vee, when all’s considered.” He’s trying to see where the barrier extends to.

“It’s not just a historical landmark,” she reminds him. “It’s the HQ of the Holy Knights. All their offices are here, Faith Committee, Supreme General, Law and Order Committee, Tourist Committee, Foreign Business Committee are the important ones. The Generals and Captains all have their offices here, it’s the admin centre for the Knights.”

“I see why you would protect the Castle in that case. What’s that HQ on the other side of the Island for then?” He thinks they can get out the door by the tapestry that’s on the same side as them and begins walking towards it.

“Order proper and barracks for the Knights, but mostly there isn’t much crossover administratively,” she replies, following him without thinking.

“Have you ever known any admin section protected by demons, Vee?” Vergil asks as they reach the door. “In my experience, demons beget demons or someone has some very sensitive information they’re protecting. What’s on the other side of this door?”

“Top level of the courtyard.” Verity is quiet again the way she was when she found out about the Wedding Spell.

Vergil cups her face, turning it up to him so their eyes meet.

“I can take you home now, Verity and we forget all of this,” says Vergil.

“All of it?” she asks. Her hands come to rest on his arms, just below his wrists. She could tear his hands from her face if she wanted.

“No,” he shakes his head. “Nothing’s changed between us.”

He kisses her, slow and deep, showing her the truth of his words.
Verity pulls back, frowning and Vergil’s eyes roam her face. “What?”

“If I can’t follow you, then I can’t be in your world,” she replies as Vergil shakes his head in denial. “If I asked you to stop this, for me and stay with me, would you?”

He struggles for a moment, trying to speak and dropping his forehead to hers. He takes a deep breath and pulls back slightly to look at her.

“No.”

He can’t read the expression on her face, but she’s not pulling away. He waits for the question he can’t believe she hasn’t asked yet and he doesn’t know how he’ll answer.

She kisses him, soft and deep, in front of the massive tapestry of his Father.

“Come then, Mr Redgrave,” she says, stepping away and opening the door. “Let’s continue with our adventure and solve our mystery.”

Vergil glances up at his Father and he’d swear that there’s approval on Sparda’s face.

They walk carefully up the stairs, sheltered here from the wind, but not the bitter cold. The moon’s full and bright when they come out onto the walkway and this high up they don’t seem to be facing any snowdrifts.

Vergil looks down into the courtyard. There’s snow piled up in the corners and a layer along the flagstones, but it’s not deep. There’s a sense of wrongness radiating out from it and there’s a large, black monolith, almost like an altar. The magic emanating from it is palpable.

“Vee, what do you make of that?” Vergil tries to get her attention to look at the monolith.

“That doesn’t concern me at this time,” she replies, looking up the walkway to where frosts have just spawned in.
“Damn and blast! I don’t sense any seals, do you?”

Verity looks beyond the advancing frosts and shakes her head. “Are we fighting them?”

“Not if we don’t have to,” he replies. “Can you port us?”

Verity doesn’t answer as she forms the roughest and readiest glyph she’s ever done and prays she makes it to the door before the frosts do.

They land right in front of the door, just as the frosts port to their previous position. Vergil can’t help it. He runs his fingers through his hair and shouts at the frosts, “You’re wasting my time!”

Verity hauls him through the door just as the first frost ports behind them.

“You’re stronger than you look,” says Vergil.

“I’m going to assume that your ideological differences with your brother are that you’re a moron and he isn’t,” she scowls.

“Oh, he’s far worse than I am,” he assures her. “You make me reckless, Vee. I only live, but to impress you.”

He makes a low dancer’s bow.

“Sparda’s Balls! I dread to think what he’s like.” She walks down the steps, past a frozen fountain and towards a sculpture. “Papa told me once that there’s secret tunnels all over the island. And I do believe we’ve just found one of them.”

She points past the sculpture to the massive waterfall. The end of the walkway is an open bridge to nowhere.

“Why would there be sluice gates on a waterfall?” Vergil agrees, walking to the end of the walkway and looking down. “How do you call the bridge?”
“There’ll be a mechanism, but I can’t see it,” she says, looking around.

He turns to the sculpture. “There’s something up there.”

He jumps up on to it, jumping up a little further to come back down with a vital star. “You’d best take this, seeing as you’re so insistent on damaging yourself.”

“It’s not me taunting demons when we should be getting out of their way,” she retorts as she puts it in her pocket.

“I don’t drink dirty water,” he returns.

“Water’s only dirty when there’s blood in it.” Verity looks up at the door on the other side. “Do refrain from molesting demons we don’t need to engage, Vergil.”

“We could just port past them, right into the Hall,” suggests Vergil.

Verity concentrates for a moment, the glyph tentatively forming, then disintegrating. It happens several times and sweat’s forming on her brow when she shakes her head. “Something’s blocking me.”

“We’ll just have to fight them off or make a run for it,” says Vergil.

“You could just intimidate them with the power of macassar oil,” Verity says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’m sure they find you more fearsome than Sparda himself.”

Vergil looks like he’s about to say something, but instead grabs Verity’s hand, bidding her open the door. Then he runs, forcing Verity to keep up with him, as they dodge the frosts, jumping and spinning as they leap aside and over the creatures’ attacks. Little breezes tell them when they’ve just missed a swipe of claws as the demons port, trying to get ahead of the couple.

One nearly gets them at the top of the stairs, porting and swiping before it’s even fully formed.
Verity ducks, feeling a prickle of power and a smell of ozone as it materialises, pulling Vergil with her. There’s barely a pause before he moves with her, wrapping himself around her as he moves them into a forward roll.

Too late, he realises they’re at the top of the stairs, but he’s enclosed her enough he takes the worst hits from the steps, until there’s blue under them and the bangs are cushioned. The wind’s still knocked out of them as they drag themselves to their feet, Vergil shoving her half-standing through the door as the frost ports right by it.

They lie in a crumpled heap on the floor on the other side of his Father’s tapestry. This time Sparda’s face looks amused and there’s not a small amount of sympathy mixed in. *Yes, Son, I’m sorry you like the same type I do. Wouldn’t want you being bored, now.*

“Yes, Son, I’m sorry you like the same type I do. Wouldn’t want you being bored, now.

“Thanks, Dad,” he mutters.


“What did I tell you?” he says, helping her to her feet, but she’s mostly standing under her own steam. “Experience is an excellent teacher.”

“I’m getting plenty of that,” she scowls. She points up to one of the Minstrels’ Boxes on their side. “There’s something up there.”

Vergil jumps up and comes back down with holy water. “How fortunate that people here are so paranoid they leave random items everywhere, just in case.”

“Failing to prepare is preparing to fail, Mr Redgrave,” she replies. “Where next, *qalbi*?”

“I think I saw a blue pedestal round the corner and in my experience, they tend to be switches,” he says, tapping on the forcefield. It lights up blue under the pressure. “Which of us is doing the honours?”

“You can do this one,” she says. “I want to watch you be all masterful with your blade.”
Vergil cocks an eyebrow at her tone. “Have I disappointed you so far, Vee?”

She giggles. “I’m sure my run goods will be well purchased when the time comes, Vergil.”

“I’ll endeavour to be worth my price,” he smirks, drawing Yamato and repeatedly striking the pedestal. Flames begin to glow on it as it spins, before a wave of light flares outwards.

There’s a ringing sound as the barrier flashes blue and falls. The door nearest the pedestal is unshielded. He offers her his arm and squires her through the door.

They walk cautiously through it and into the small entry hall of the Gallery.

Nothing happens.

“Maybe we’ll get through a room without incident,” says Verity, hopefully.

They’re barely into the room proper when red seals appear and portals begin to form.

“You’re a damned jinx, Vee,” says Vergil.

Verity just smiles as she begins to form a glyph around Vergil’s feet. “Do the slashy one, but hold it until I say. I want to try something.”

“Judgement Cut?” He asks as a scarecrow tries to hit them, but there’s a forcefield that blows it backwards. He’s taking a wild guess, because with a sword, all attacks are slashy.

“If that fits…”

She crouches behind him, but not in the line of his arms. Verity has a hand on his back and one on the floor, powering up the glyph as Vergil powers up his attack.
“3,2,1, release.”

It’s devastating. The whole room is filled with the clashing sword cleaving the air and everything within it apart. Thunder deafens the couple as the air smacks back into place and there’s not a thing left standing in the room.

They stand up slowly as Vergil swipes off Yamato and he can feel Verity leaning heavily on him. “Do you think it worked?”

“Yes,” replies Verity, more than a little shocked. “It worked better than I thought it would.”

He walks over to the strange statue in the room, which is the only thing that wasn’t destroyed. “What is this?”

Verity touches it cautiously. “There’s power there, but it’s inert. I don’t know what will activate it.”

“Library next if I recall from our tour,” he says. He takes her hand. “Don’t jinx us, sabiha.”

They walk in cautiously and there’s nothing but books.

“A tad small for a Castle library, don’t you think, Vee?”

“You’ve more experience than I in that regard, qalbi,” she replies. “Perhaps they only keep the more sensitive material up here.” She points to the locked door that’s right inside the library, behind a bookcase. “And the even more sensitive material in there.”

The library door slams shut behind them and locks with the same symbol as the interior door.

Vergil just looks at her.

“I didn’t do anything!”
Vergil looks at some of the books in the shelves, just to see if they really are restricted, while Verity goes to look at the two locked doors. It’s sheer chance that has him look up when he does.

A suit of armour, the like of which he hasn’t seen before is advancing on Verity, lance out. She’s intent on the lock and really, they’re going to have to work on that. He makes it just in time to block the lance with a clang.

She doesn’t even notice, she’s so absorbed. She doesn’t even hear the clang or notice the rush of air.

“Any joy, Vee?” he grunts as he parries the next thrust of the lance. He’s limited in his movement, as he can’t leave her open. He’s able to make a hard strike that sends the Angelo reeling back and he presses his advantage, trying to land a hit, but it guards too well with its shield and a well-timed hit has Vergil knocked into the bookshelf.

It’s a sturdy bookshelf and holds. He dodges the Angelo’s next rush, backflipping on to the mezzanine and it’s the first time he’s seen one of his own moves used against him.

“So, you’re a demon, then,” he says to the Angelo. He glances down to Verity, who’s still trying spells and brute magical force against the barrier. “Come on!”

“I’m trying my best!” she snaps. “It’s just not responding to anything I’m doing. I wish I had something magical, Dead Man’s Hand or something.”

“Vee, I wasn’t talking to you, sabiha.” He grunts as it flies up and tries to strike at him on the mezzanine. Vergil holds his summoned swords in the pattern his brother christened Blistering, because of course his idiot brother has a dramatic streak so wide you could race a Ferrari on it. Vergil goads the demon into landing on the mezzanine and fires wave after wave of swords at it, till it’s stunned against the wall.

He streaks in and runs it through, twisting Yamato in it several times. It shakes with the motion, before dissolving in something that looks like escaping souls. He looks down to Verity, who is currently kicking the plate across the door, though more in frustration than actually believing she’ll break through it.

“It’s no use, Vergil,” she calls up, irritation plain in her tone. “It will just not budge.”
She pauses and Vergil wonders how she hasn’t heard the other Angelo dropping out of its portal. It’s loud enough.

“What is it, Vee?” he asks as he somersaults down on top of the latest one. It stuns it and he presses home his advantage by unleashing a volley of quick, precise slashes upon the shield. It’s not so stunned that it doesn’t defend itself.

“There’s something beyond this door. I can see it in a pillar like that grim grip demon thing. And there’s so many books! I think it’s all the grimoires and spellbooks we were talking about with Arkham!”

There’s a pause and Vergil glances away from the recovered Angelo, who’s just tried to fly over the top of him. Vergil vaults over its head and slashes quickly at its back. It drops to its knees and falls off the mezzanine with a clang.

“Mr Redgrave, I’m trying to concentrate. How noisy are these books you’re looking at?”

“Godspit and shit, Verity – what the hell kind of reading makes this much noise?”

Number two Angelo’s head falls off and then it disintegrates.

He pants with the exertion as he waits on the next ones to come in. “Two seems rather on the low side,” he mutters.

Verity’s staring intently at the item in the pillar and looking at the statue. There’s sweat on her brow and she’s biting her lip as she frowns with the effort she’s putting in the spell. There’s gossamer fine blue strings between the statue and the pillar and more forming every second. She’s got her hand on the door and a glyph under it, which seems to be the conduit for the strings. She’s clutching her head.

Vergil knows better than to go to her.

He looks at the statue and there’s a blue flame burning atop it, getting stronger each second. It’s beginning to rock to and fro.
He hears portals open and he’s aware of the two Angelos that materialise into the room near her.

Vergil summons his Gauntlets and Greaves, spin-kicking the nearest armour as he leaps from the mezzanine.

He knocks it into Verity, sending her flying, but she doesn’t let go the glyph on the door. Her arm’s twisted at an odd angle and she’s contorting her body to relieve pressure on it.

The Angelos close in on her and Vergil’s never going to move quick enough, when there’s a shriek of metal scraping the floor as the statue begins to move towards the armours.

It’s also heading straight for her. She’s got no energy left to control it or shield herself.

He fires off summoned swords and it begins to float as it moves. He flash steps in front of her and strikes at it with Yamato to deflect it.

Verity moves her free hand, gesturing as if to call the gyroblade to her and it comes spinning towards her, smacking off every wall and pillar in the room, books flying in a cloud of pages from massacred tomes. It’s got some wicked looking blades that have suddenly projected from it.

It confuses the Angelos no end, and they begin fighting with each other.

Vergil stays before her to knock whatever threatens her away. “Just don’t hit me, Vee.”

“I’ll try,” she breathes and makes a second gesture with her hand.

It swirls into the Angelos. The effect is instant and the Angelos fall apart in a shower of freed souls and fluttering pages.

It pulls itself back for a run at the door. She glances at him. “You’ll need to hit it here. I need to concentrate on keeping the energy running.”
“Will I hit your arm?”

“Not if you aim at the door. If you bounce it, I can’t shield it.” There’s a slight note of panic, under the calm instructions, but she doesn’t waver.

“Keep it floating, then.” He walks around it, working out his angle of attack. “3-2-1, Slash.”

There’s a clang of metal and it hurtles towards Verity, who turns her head away from her spinning doom.

There’s a crash and a shriek and he runs towards her with a cry.

“Verity!”

She’s crouched down, hand outstretched to where the glyph used to be, other arm over her face.

The gyroblade turns itself off and sits itself down in front of the door. All the power that animated it snaps back into the room with a thunderclap.

Vergil drops to one knee, smiling despite himself. “Vee. Vee.”

He taps her hand and she squeals. “Did I die?”

“No, you’re still in one piece. Door’s not.” He indicates the smashed doorframe.

“Oh.” She still hasn’t dropped her hand. “It was loud.”

Vergil tuts and grabbing her by the wrist, pulls her towards him. She overbalances and falls onto her knees and against his chest, as one arm wraps around her back, the other cupping the back of her head. She allows him to draw her in, closing her eyes as their lips meet.
Their lips move against each other, gently, reassuring her she’s still here. It’s a brief moment before his tongue slips into her mouth, delicately touching tip to tip. There’s a sweet slide as she responds to him, twisting and turning her tongue along his as they dance along each other, tracing patterns on the roof of their mouths.

They continue for a minute, before Verity breaks off, gently touching her lips to his.

“So, Vee, still think you’re dead?” he asks, rubbing noses with her, ice-blue eyes drinking in her wine-darks.

“I think, *qalbi*, you’ve restored me to life,” Verity says, stroking Vergil’s face, with her long, delicate fingers. She looks back into the room, under the gyroblade. “I’m going to see what in all the Nine Hells I was channelling.”

She breaks away and still on her hands and knees, crawls under the gyroblade to reach the pillar with its floating artefact. As she realises what it is, Verity’s by turns awed and excited. “I’ve heard about this. It’s an Amina Mercury, an artificial soul, created by alchemy. I’ve studied how it’s done.”

Vergil takes it from her, this blue flame in glass. “Will you do that in due course?”

“Possibly. I wonder if that’s what was animating those Angelos – that’s the Knights’ armour. Those were Biancos. Captains and up wear Alto colours, gold armour.” She looks around. “We didn’t come here for this and I think we’ve found our Forbidden Books Repository that Mr Arkham referred to.”

They check through the books and she’s right – it’s all high-order spell and ritual work that could tear open dimensions and call gods. Some of the rituals or collection of the ingredients are trials in their own right.

“So, what’s the area of interest, then, Mr Redgrave?” she asks, nodding at the pile of books she’s holding. She’s picked up titles on rituals, binding and Temen-Ni-Gru. “Because we can’t carry all of this out of here.”

He bristles at the surname, even though it’s taken on a pet name for him that she’s not going to use for anyone else. “I think you should find another endearment for me.”
“What do you suggest? I can’t very well use your real surname, as you haven’t shared it with me yet,” she retorts. “Have you, qalbi?”

“Let’s stick to Temen-Ni-Gru,” says Vergil, turning away so she can’t see the look on his face. He looks at some books to hide his discomfort. Verity isn’t looking at him, she’s already looking at books that may fit their bill.

She pulls her Tarot Cards out again, separates out their Significators and shuffles. She looks like she’s meditating as her hands move the cards deftly and quickly.

Vergil stops what he’s doing and watches her. Her lips are moving as she shuffles.

She finishes and ignores him when she opens her eyes to lay out her cards.

“The next book you touch will be the one, so listen to your instincts,” she says, looking at her spread. ‘That which is hidden by the Devil will be revealed by the light.’ I wonder what that means.”

“Rather vague,” he agrees. His hand’s burning as he runs it over the books, before walking over to the other side of the room and picking up one he hadn’t even considered. He can’t read the language, but it’s old and unfamiliar. He feels like he should have cotton gloves on to even touch it.

She’s picked up another book and it looks just as old. She turns it over reverently. “I wish we had time, just to go through these for their own sake,” she says, regretfully.

“I know,” he replies, crouching down to help her tidy away her cards. “There’s other libraries and museums, with books that are just as ancient and rare. We’ll visit them wh-“

There’s a noise from outside the room and beyond the gyroblade, the thud-thud of feet walking towards them as the white shoes of another Angelo come into view.

“That’s our cue to leave, Vee,” says Vergil. It doesn’t come into the room, as it’s being blocked by the gyroblade. They put the books back – there’s some sacrileges they won’t commit – and Vergil strikes the blade, sending it spinning into the Angelos that have just ported in. He hits it again and sends it into the outer door. It hits with such force that this door is smashed open as well.
They run out before they can be surprised by any more. Far too much time has been lost to this room.

They have to go back through the gallery and they’re no sooner through when the doors seal and an assortment of demons appear.

“Stay behind me,” he tells her, grabbing her arm and running over the inert gyroblade at the other end of the room. He waits till it doesn’t look like any more’s coming in and activates it.

It motors through the demons and he can’t resist shouting, “You’re finished!”

There’s a few outliers it didn’t hit and it doesn’t take him and Verity long to pick them off. Even though she’s laughing at him, she’s still a threat.

They’re just leaving when a massive electric demon appears and bounces about the room so fast, it’s all Verity can do to shield them both from it.

“What the hell is that?” shouts Verity.

“And you mock my mantras?” he replies, trying to brace her against its onslaught. He’s watching it as it goes. It’s wasting a lot of energy trying to attack a stationary target, as they crouch in the corner behind Verity’s shield. She looks exhausted trying to keep the glyph strong. She can’t attack when she’s defending so hard. “Show me your worth, sabiha.”

“I prove myself to you?” Verity grits out. “Surely it should be the other way around?”

“Don’t get cocky, Madam Sparda.” Vergil’s predator smile is back as he times his somersault for the gyroblade with one of the ports of the blitz. He lands behind it as it unleashes a powerful beam on Verity’s shield, keeping her busy with a sworn “Sparda’s fucking Balls!”

He lines up the gyroblade and puts all his strength behind the blow. He ricochets it so hard off her shield that it ploughs through the blitz, spinning so hard, it’s ripped apart. He’s destroyed her shield as well, but she’s fine.
He walks over to her and pulls her up. “Do I pass muster, Madam?”

“Mistress. A married woman is called Mistress until she has children or she’s over thirty. Madam Agius is my Mama.” Verity wipes her face with her top. “It’s confusing for Mainlanders.”

She straightens herself up and walks off. Vergil shakes his head, waiting for her to catch what he really said. She doesn’t and he stares after her in astonishment.

They come back into the Great Hall and Vergil points out the Gyroblade to her.

“I can’t see what it’s meant to hit, unless there’s monsters who haven’t yet chanced upon us,” she replies, looking around the room.

“Jump down,” he says, doing just that.

She does so, as Vergil walks over to the gyroblade and hits it. It floats and sets out its blade. He knocks it down the steps and lines it up with the central aisle.

“Vergil? What are you about to do?” Verity asks in alarm.

“Following a hunch, sabiha,” he says and hits the gyroblade hard, sending it flying into the coffin, Verity’s shriek echoing round the Hall.

“And it was right,” he says, gesturing to the seal that the coffin was covering.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “There’s no one buried there?”

“We solve one mystery and find another,” he replies. “He could very well be under that seal, but he’s not above it. Put that to one side and tell me what you think, Vee.”

She still looks horrified and indignant as she concentrates on it. “It’s magic, needs activated, but we
don’t have the thing that will activate it.”

Vergil looks up and notes the chained central chandelier. “Pretty substantial, don’t you think?”

“I suppose. Where now?”

He considers for a moment. “There were a few of these things in the corridor. Let’s go and look at that.”

It doesn’t take them long to find it. There’s two already there in front of a seal across the door. “I think it leads to the courtyard,” says Verity.

“I wonder what’s in there that they’ve gated it off,” says Vergil. “I definitely want a look at that monolith.”

“Where did we see some?” she asks.

“There was one down behind that fireball machine and I’ll bet it’s not the only thing hidden down that hallway,” Vergil says as he looks at her. “Still having fun, Vee?”

She grins. “I’m having the best time.”

She sets off to the dining room and the fireballs.

Vergil looks after her for a moment then follows.

They quickly deal with the Angelos in the dining room and they edge carefully out into the corridor.

“You have a plan?” she asks, looking doubtfully down the hall. “I mean are you sure it’s a gyroblade down there?”
“I have better eyesight than most humans, you vex of a chit,” he responds.

“I should imagine so, xitan tedjanti.”

Vergil looks at her in surprise. “You knew?”

“You’ve transformed in front of me several times and made no comment, so I thought I would make no comment, either.”

Vergil runs his hand through his hair. “You keep finding ways to surprise me, Vee.”

“I think I can port us behind it, now I can see what I’m aiming for.” She holds out her hand and there’s a knowing look in her eye.

He takes her hand and kisses the back.

Verity closes her eyes and breathes out. There’s light and colour and then they’re behind the gyroblade as fire hurtles down the hall. The gyroblade is protecting them, to both of their surprise. It does take both of them a little while before they stop flinching at each fiery hit.

Even so, they take turns hitting it and giggling until they smack it into the fireball machine. As they do so, a door unseals.

“Why would you even seal that? It wasn’t like anyone was getting up here with that flame thrower.” Verity’s looking at the door and the wreckage of the machine.

“How are we going to get this back?” asks Vergil.

“How’d you think?” She looks at him in amusement.

They open the door carefully and send the gyroblade through, but there’s nothing there as they go through the room. They’ve destroyed the railings that had gated it off from the large hall and they smack it back towards the other two gyroblades. They massacre a horde of scarecrows before they
even have chance to get near the couple.

It settles down next to the other three and the door unseals.

“There was only two there before,” says Verity, smile vanishing.

“There’s a rhyme,” says Vergil, reading the slab that’s still blocking the door. “What puts out fire, but water? What dries up water but fire? Tell him to give her a kiss!”

He looks at Verity in confusion. “What the hell does that mean?”

She looks at him, equally confused. “That’s lines from Through the Fire, mine and Pinny’s favourite fairytale. It’s about a star-crossed couple and they send someone to ask the Man at the North Pole what they should do. That’s his answer and they can only ask him one question.”

“Why just one question?”

“Because he was evil and untrustworthy. But he would answer the first question true.” She puts a hand on the door and closes her eyes. The fine blue mist flows out from her and through the keyhole of the door. A few minutes pass and it flows back. “It’s safe. There’s nothing out there.”

There isn’t, but they’re still on alert as they go. Vergil takes the opportunity to look at the monolith.

“I have an idea what that is, Vee, but what do you think?” he asks her.

“I think it’s a Hellgate,” she replies. She looks around it. “It’s not powered up, though. Someone who was powerful enough and smart enough could bid it open.”

“Someone like you?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not a Summoner. I think you might be able to, with your heritage or someone like Arkham. That is his reputation.”
“I think we’re being observed,” Vergil says to her quietly. “I don’t know if that fairy tale was a warning or playing with us.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Carry on. Like you said, for each mystery we solve, another pops up,” he replies.

Verity walks over to a gate and concentrates for a moment, before the railings retract into the ground. They run through cautiously into the graveyard, but there’s nothing of import that happens as they make their way up the steps and into the Master’s Chamber.

Vergil makes Verity wait outside while he checks the room, mindful of the spell that had been laid there before. “There’s nothing I can feel. Stay away from the bed, just in case.”

“I haven’t stopped thinking about that spell. I don’t know why I’m surprised. If Rosanna Calleja can be tortured into accepting a Courting Suit, I don’t know why I’m surprised at a Fuck or Die spell.”

She shivers and it’s not the cold.

Vergil raises an eyebrow at the language, but not the sentiment. “It’s evil every way you look at it. How many women die on their wedding day?”

“At least two or three a year, sometimes, men as well. It explains how they knew when a woman’s not a virgin.” She shudders again. “Still, better that than dying. Even if this is just a dalliance, I fully expect you to help me with that particular issue.”

He enfolds her in his arms and kisses her hair. “I will, when you’re ready and if I can only assure you of one thing, this is no dalliance, not for me.”

She returns his hug and his kiss. “Let’s carry on. We’re not done yet.”
They step through the bedroom door and onto the balcony in the Torture Chamber.

“Another gyroblade,” she says. “It lines up with something down there.”

“You’ll need to lower the walkway, then,” says Vergil, nodding at the blue pedestal. He strikes the gyroblade. Verity sets the pedestal and the walkway falls.

“That was so much better than the first time,” says Vergil. “You’ve so much more control even in just this brief few weeks.”

“Down to you, putting me through my paces, qalbi.”

Vergil smacks it hard and true. It streaks across the walkway and hits the sculpture that was standing there. The whole thing falls and smashes through the floor.

When the rumbling and crashing’s died away and no one’s come to investigate, they cautiously make their way across the walkway and down the stairs, coming to stand on the edge.

“That’s a big hole,” says Verity. She listens for a moment. “I can hear water. It must be where the torture chamber drains to.”

“indeed it is,” says Vergil. “I can see something glinting down there. The way it's built, it must have been an actual water source for the castle at some point. Water makes it more defensible if there’s a siege. I’m going down.”

He leaps off the edge before Verity can say anything.

Verity sighs and jumps, glyph under her feet slowing her descent.

She lands across from Vergil in a spacious, deep well with several streams emptying out into it.

He’s looking at a large root that surrounds a red lit pillar. There’s some kind of emerald cut red crystal brick in there. He doesn’t turn around as she lands.
“Still landing on your arse? We are going to have to work on your descents, Vee.”

“My dignity has handed in it’s notice,” she replies, dusting herself off.

She looks around at the strange little platforms floating just over the water. She looks up and sees similar ones. They don’t move or react to her when she tries to fiddle with them. Vergil pays her no mind as he walks around the root. It’s sealed itself off.

“That’s strange,” he says, running his hand through his hair. “Usually, when that happens there’s something to unseal it. Demons guarding it, for instance.”

He looks around and sees Verity analysing the metal frames. “Vee, I need you to work out this.”

“Hit it with your sword. That usually works.”

“That’s such a constructive comment. I have no idea why I didn’t think of it.”

"I could ice a cake with the sarcasm dripping from your voice, qalbi,” she replies, lightly.

Verity turns round and there’s a lizard in a blanket floating in front of her and it seems as surprised as she is to see her. She throws up a shielding glyph that cuts between them as it begins to circle her.

That’s when she sees the other one and it’s very interested in Vergil. The shield she conjures between them nearly breaks off the finger it’s shooting towards him. She waves her hand and crashes it against the wall.

It’s winded, but it melts into the wall.

Vergil spins round and Yamato is out as he flash steps over to the one by Verity. She’s dropped her shield against this one to concentrate on the other and she gets caught by its tail when it spins. She’s agile though and she’s able to flip herself over when she gets thrown by the blow.
She lands on her feet, pirouetting like a ballet dancer and contorting to avoid a strike of its finger rapidly extending into her back. She knocks it back with a glyph, but it melts into the floor.

Vergil’s already taken his down – he caught it quick enough that it couldn’t reform its cloak and it was an easy matter for him to rapidly stab it to death.

He’s looking for hers to come out the wall.

Verity quickly calls to mind the symbols she needs for the glyphs that will do what she wants to do and begins forming them.

It drips out the wall and she quickly catches it in the glyphs and sets them running. They spin and flash, faster and faster, sucking away the cloak, before exploding and taking the lizard-thing with it.

Verity looks around her as Vergil goes to the seal. It’s not opening.

“So we’re awaiting another one?” she asks. She’s already forming a larger version of her previous trap. She hasn’t brought it into being yet and she’s making it so fast, she doesn’t even know if it will work properly.

“It would seem so,” he says.

It happens so quickly that Verity doesn’t really know what she did or how she did it.

All she knows is that a bigger version of the demon appears near Vergil and they’re both dodging some kind of flying, extendable lance and she fires everything she’s got into the glyphs and they’re big enough to take over the lower level of the well. They twist and glow and suddenly there’s an explosion that’s knocked Vergil off his feet and into the pillar through the seal.

He sits dazed amongst the wreckage, with the red brick thing sitting on his lap.
She runs to him, a little drunk, a little wobbly after unleashing that much power, and drops to her knees beside him. “Vergil, Vergil qalbi. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“What did you do? I feel awful.” He draws his knees to his chest and looks like he’s going to vomit.

Verity digs through his pockets for a vital star and cracks it into his mouth.

“It was an anti-demon blood spell and I worked it so fast I overpowered it and didn’t put in an allowance for you.” Verity strokes his face. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’ll forgive you, sabiha,” he smiles weakly as he begins to recover, vital star and his own demon blood kicking in. “We really need to work on your control. I thought we’d need the stars for you, not me.”

It takes another few minutes and another vital star for him to fully recover and it’s like her spell was never cast. Verity is still apologising and he kisses her hard to make her stop talking and understand it’s alright.

They’re still going to have to fine tune her casting, especially if she’s pulling spells together on the fly.

He pulls her over to the floating frames and they suddenly fill with red energy. He looks at the lowest one, following them up to the top.

“What are they?” asks Verity.

“Cuddle in, Vee,” says Vergil, picking her up. She wraps her legs around him. “And hold tight.”

Even though Vergil’s strong, it’s still an effort, though one he can manage. It’s more that he’s not used to moving while carrying another person, at least not outside the bedroom, even if her hair’s soft under his hand and her legs tight around his waist.

“Don’t let go,” he tells her and jumps onto the first pad.
It’s got one hell of a spring on it and it takes him a few goes to get to the next one – he’s definitely unused to jumping holding another person and it’s screwing up his centre of balance.

Worth it, though, in the way she gasps and squeaks, holding on to him ever tighter, not once entreating him not to drop her. A look at her face tells Vergil she’s by turns terrified and exhilarated.

He imagines he looks the same.

They make it back to the Great Hall without incident, Vergil reluctantly patting her legs when they reach the top of the well and land back in the torture chamber. She slides down him and it’s torture for him in another way.

“Look, the seal over the coffin,” says Verity, suddenly and pointing at it.

It’s glowing red. Vergil looks up at the chandelier directly above it, notes the chain again.

“That which is hidden by the Devil will be revealed by the light.”

“How long did your tapestry take you, Vee?” he asks.

“Exactly? 14 months, two weeks and four days,” she says proudly. Her smile drops when she looks at him and realises what he’s intending. “What? No! It’s just a wall! I was here when they hung it!”

“I’ll make it up to you, Vee, sabiha, on my honour as a Son of Sparda,” he says quietly as he kisses her.

She’s so busy ranting at him about what he’s planning, that she misses what he’s told her. He picks her up again and she instinctively wraps herself around him and she fits like a glove. He jumps onto the seal and it propels them upwards onto the chandelier. He kisses her as they rise, as much to silence her raging as for the novelty.
They land on it and he breaks the kiss.

“Let me do it,” she says.

“You don’t have to, Vee. I’ll take the blame,” he replies, trying to dissuade her.

“I created it, you’re going to wreck it anyway for your ridiculous hunch, so let me do it.” She holds out her hand for Yamato. He hands her the sword and he’s strangely proud of her.

Verity sniffs and brushes away angry tears.

Vergil takes the hand that’s holding Yamato, meeting her aggrieved look. “a) you don’t have the strength to break the stem and b) I refuse to let you do this alone.”

“Stem’s already broken,” she replies.

“And yet it still supports our combined weight easily.” He draws back their arms. “Ready?”

She nods.

Together, they slash Yamato down hard on the broken stem. There’s a pause as the base realises it’s free and gravity takes over, swinging it into Verity’s tapestry with a resounding crash. Vergil jumps neatly down just before the impact, Verity still pressed tight against him, Yamato in her hand.

The chandelier bounces over them and as the dust clears, the massive hole in the solid stone wall reveals a staircase.

Verity drops her legs to stand under her own steam, gawping at the stairs.

She hands him back Yamato and walks over to the hole, slightly dazed. “Why is there a staircase behind a solid wall?”
“Emergency exit?”

“To where? It’s a solid wall!” She gestures. She looks thoughtful. “In the storeroom, there were steps to nowhere.”

“Probably rooms that have been bricked up, Vee,” he replies. “Not every coincidence has to mean something.”

“Says the man who wrecked a tapestry that took a year to do on a hunch,” she retorts. She looks so angry she could vomit a flaming car.

Vergil has no response, but to kiss her, slowly and deeply, taking his time with her lips, putting every ounce of his considerable expertise into the press and push of his mouth onto hers.

Verity can’t help, but lean into him and return the kiss, licking the inside of his lips, tongue dancing along the length of his, sighing as the tip of his tongue traces his name on the roof of her mouth. She can feel the caress long after he’s moved to trace the shape of her teeth, every little snag.

They reluctantly break apart and Vergil kisses her forehead.

“It vexes me how deftly you quiet me,” she says.

“Clearly we’re meant to be together, Vee,” he says as he takes her hand, leading her through the hole and down the stairs. “Shall we see what other mysteries Fortuna has in store for us?”
Because Falzon is having his party that night, Violet doesn’t linger, instead sending everyone home after an eventful day. They’re already in the car and waiting as Violet finishes up a few final tasks.

It delays her enough that she meets Falzon on the helipad and the way he rubs his mouth without realising brings that little quirk to her lips. “My Lord General. How did your business go to-day?”

“It was fascinating, Madam Alighieri. I have no time to tell you of it just now, as you’ll recall my party tonight,” he replies. He looks excited, but he’s trying to keep it in. “Was your mission - ?”

“It was,” she replies. “I’m now the focus of the staff protection spells. So we’ve a double reason to celebrate.”

“Will your team be leaving us soon, then?” asks Falzon. “I can’t imagine there will be much for the Son of Sparda to do now.”

Violet cocks an eyebrow in surprise.

“I know who he is. I just don’t know who he is to you, though clearly he’s related to Nero in some way,” says Falzon.

“I couldn’t possibly answer that, other than to point out that I’m possibly the only person on the island who isn’t descended from Sparda,” she replies. “But I do know they have no plans to leave at the moment.”

This does throw Falzon for an instant and his mouth thins as his eyes narrow. He nods, filing away this information and Violet doesn’t doubt he’ll work it into the still-active investigation.
“In that case, I extend my invitation to all within your household for tonight’s party,” says Falzon. He offers his hand and Violet tenses, but takes it anyway. There’s a buzzing sound past her ear and Falzon smacks her arm, with a shout of “Wasp!”

She rubs her arm suspiciously, but there is a dead wasp lying on the ground. “That’s the worst thing about autumn. They’re everywhere this year.”

“They’re time is at an end and they’re waiting to die, starving and angry,” says Falzon. “One can feel almost sorry for them.”

“They’re a pain in the ass,” says Violet. Still rubbing her arm, she pulls her hand away. “We’ll see you tonight, Lord Falzon.”

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Violet decides on a bath, rather than a shower as she’s plenty time and she feels like relaxing. The puzzle of those mystery labs and the overly powerful spell can wait. Today was successful and that’s a cause for celebration.

As she’s taking her hair down, she feels a lump that’s scabbed over, just behind her ear.

“Fucking little rage bastard got me after all,” she mutters.

She peels the dressing off the gash in her shoulder and clucks in annoyance at it still being open and seeping. It stings as she lies down in the water and she winces a little.

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Falzon sits at his desk in his study and unwraps the strands of long, dark brown hair. He treats them like they’re precious artefacts.

He carefully cuts one up and puts the rest away.
Violet’s not one for doing anything in a bath, she just likes to lie in it and not be in too much pain as the water takes the weight of her body.

She sighs contentedly as the hot water flows around her and blows the bubbles off her hands.

Falzon sets the hair in a candle and places the candle on the glyph.

He says a few words and the glyph begins to glow.

The candle lights itself.

Falzon vanishes.

Violet looks like she’s sleeping as she lies truly relaxed in the bath. She looks peaceful and her hair floats around her in the water.

Falzon leans against the wall, watching her.

Her guard’s completely down as Falzon ghosts across to her.

“Don’t worry, I won’t touch the face,” says Falzon as he grabs her throat.

Falzon’s strong, much stronger than she is and he’s squeezing.
Violet freezes with the shock, just for a second, but it’s enough to lose her any advantage and she’s at a bad angle to kick at Falzon, try and break his hold. She just slides in the bath, can’t get any leverage, can’t scream, can’t take the pressure off her throat.

Water splashes over the floor, soaking Falzon, but he doesn’t let go.

His other hand slips between her kicking legs, and he pushes his fingers in her cunt, hard and stabbing. He never takes his eyes from her face.

He punctuates his words with cruel hands at her throat and her sex.

“Do you think I’ve come this far to be stopped by the likes of you?” He hisses, thrusting hand hard inside as she winces and struggles for breath.

Her hands try to prize his from her throat.

“Let foreigners into Fortuna to suck us dry?”

Her feet scrabble for purchase against the smooth sides of the bath.

“Don’t you think we have enough monsters of our own?”

He smacks her head off the bath.

“Always wondered what Credo saw in you. Too much like a boy for my taste.”

There’s an explosion in the bedroom as Violet’s always on bedside light explodes and a flash of blue just as Violet’s bracelet starts to sing.

Get your filthy hands off her, you bastard!
Tony’s picked up Credo’s beautiful granite shaving bowl and smacks Falzon across the back of the head twice. Falzon lurches forward, taking his hand from her throat in confusion and puts his hand to the back of his head.

The pressure’s off Violet and she contorts enough to knee him in the face, bursting his nose. Falzon roars like an angry bull and he’s about to resume when the door bursts open.

Falzon vanishes.

“Oh my God, Violet, what the hell?” Trish has Luce drawn.

The shaving bowl drops to the floor and Trish shoots it.

Violet’s feet catch the side of the bath and she hauls herself over the side, falling onto the floor, gasping and panting, chest heaving. Kyrie pushes past Trish to get to Violet, trying to help the taller woman up.

“You shot Credo’s shaving bowl,” says Violet, blankly.

“Yeah, it’s dead,” says Trish.

There’s bruising on Violet’s throat, but that’s not what Trish is looking at.

It’s the scratches at the top of her thighs.

“Come on, up you get,” says Kyrie, grunting with the effort. Violet can’t seem to get her legs to work and Trish gets her other arm. Together, the three manage to get through to the bedroom and they set Violet to sit on the bed.

“I’m ok,” murmurs Violet. “You’ve got blood on your dress, Kyrie.”

Kyrie pulls away and as she does so, she sees the red stain on her shoulder and sleeves. “Empty Night! I’ll need to change and my make-up doesn’t match the other dress I could wear.”
Trish looks at her quizzically.

“Falzon’s Faith Committee, so we tend to be more conservative at parties he hosts,” Kyrie explains. “This dress is already ruined, so I’ll clear the bathroom if you sort Violet out.”

She glances at Violet for consent. Violet nods and Kyrie goes to get cloths and a bucket.

“Don’t leave,” says Violet, quietly.

“I need to get a medical kit,” Trish protests. “You’re a hot mess.”

Violet actually giggles, but she can’t really hide the edge of hysteria creeping in. “There’s a full kit in the bathroom. I had to patch Credo up often enough.”

Trish retrieves it, careful not to step on the water and blood. She brings a towel for Violet’s hair and a glass of water.

Violet hasn’t moved from the bed and Trish is careful as she wraps the long, dark hair up in the towel, piling it into a turban on her head. “Long hair is an asshole to take care of.”

“Nine Hells, isn’t it just,” agrees Violet, sipping the water. “The conditioner I go through.”

“And the oil soaks for the ends,” says Trish. She’s looking at the animal bite and the glyph next to it as she patches up the gash from the lance. “That glyph looks like the one you gave me for Gloria.”

“It’s not quite the same,” replies Violet, calmer now. “It doesn’t change my appearance, but makes me unremarkable, so you don’t notice me. I had it done because I didn’t want whoever left me for dead in the first place to come back and finish the job. You’re not telling me it was a reporter who tried to get into my ward when I was first found.”

She turns to Trish and pats her hand with a small smile. “I’m ok now. You go and get ready for the
party. And thanks.”

Trish returns the smile. “De nada.”

“What was that noise?” asks Dante, holding out his wrists so Trish can fasten his cufflinks.

“Violet’s light blew up and she slipped getting out the bath and that was the second noise,” Trish says. “Then I shot Credo’s shaving bowl.”

“Why?”

“Because it was floating and covered in blood,” she replies. “I patched up her shoulder and saw the bite and the glyph.”

Dante freezes and looks at her. His mouth’s gone dry and his voice is thick. “And?”

“You’re right. That bite is a Demon’s Mark and it’s Vergil’s.” Trish takes a deep breath. “We were poking around the house. Lady found it in her study. She’s got the study demon-warded. We’ve only had it a couple of days.”

She roots in her bedside table and hands Dante the diary.

“That’s a couple of days too many, Trish,” he says to her as he opens it. His hands shake ever so slightly.

“There’s no doubt,” says Trish. “Violet Alighieri is Verity Agius. And I really don’t think she knows it.”

***

Kyrie’s back with cleaning stuff as Trish is leaving.
“How is she?” mouths the younger woman.

“She’s ok,” mouths the demon.

“You want a hand with your hair?” asks Kyrie as she comes in the bedroom.

Violet’s moving stiffly as she’s pulling on her underwear and her voice is hoarse. “Nah, I’ll manage. Might need you to zip me up though.”

Kyrie nods and goes through to the bathroom.

There’s blood on the floor and she’s about to mop it up. Without thinking, she grabs a towel that’s lifted itself off the counter when she realises.

You’d best save that blood

“I can feel you,” she says. “Show yourself.”

A hand forms holding the other side of the towel and the rest of the body materialises to a handsome young man in blue who looks like Nero.

“Who are you?” asks Kyrie, calmly.

My name is Tony Redgrave.

“What do you want?”

Answers. And after that? Revenge.

“Who on? Why are you using Nero?” Kyrie demands as she wipes up the blood and picks up the shards of the bowl.
Kyrie hanini, you remind me so much of my wife and my mother. Strange how that works. Tony looks at her almost fondly. Silk hiding steel. Go to the party. I have unique talents that will be useful to you.

He nods at the towel. That’s Falzon’s blood, by the way. Not Vee’s.

He vanishes.

Violet comes into the bathroom, holding up the top of her dress. “Need zipped. Who were you talking to?”

“No one,” replies Kyrie, zipping up the dress. “Your throat’s a mess. I’ve got a scarf that’ll match. I don’t want to have to redo my make up, so I was thinking the ivory organza.”

Violet nods. “It’s a bit wedding-y though.”

“How appropriate,” says Kyrie, drily.

***

Falzon ports back to his study, landing in a heap. His chest heaves as he tries to stand up and fails.

He rolls onto his back and winces as the back of his head touches the floor. His fingers are covered in blood as he pulls them away.

It’s the hand he had buried in Violet and he smiles. He sucks the blood off his fingers and under the copper, he can still taste her.

***

“Nice of Falzon to extend the invitation to us,” says Trish as they get out of the car at Falzon’s
“Isn’t it just?” agrees Lady. Neither are fooled. “Nice digs, though.”

“Very swish,” he concurs. “We’re in the wrong job.”

There’s not much time to say anything else as Falzon opens the door, wearing a suit that wouldn’t have been out of place in Regency times, though with trousers, rather than breeches.

“And suddenly, I feel underdressed,” says Dante, wearing a modern, double breasted suit in a claret crushed velvet. The slim fit and bespoke tailoring accentuates his build in all the right places. It shimmers across his body in the light from the door. “Shit, what happened to his face?”

Trish has chosen a green silk dress that looks like she’s been stitched into it and black strappy stilettoes. It’s rather more circumspect than Trish is used to wearing, but it clings in all the right places.

Lady’s picked a white dress with a flared skirt to her knees. There’s a wide black band running round the bottom of it. She’s having a little trouble walking in her heels. Nero is being a gentleman and letting her lean on his arm.

Kyrie and Violet are wearing evening gowns of a Regency design that manages to accentuate their very different figures. Kyrie’s is a beautiful flowing organza with a beaded bust that runs round to the back. The Order of the Sword symbol sits in gold on the line of her cleavage. Violet’s is a form fitting silk that emphasises her height and her slimness. It has white violets stitched around the hem and the bust line. She has the Sword symbol on her sleeves and wears a scarf hiding her throat.

Nero is wearing the similar Regency style of suit to Falzon and he’s so similar to Sparda that it’s like looking in a mirror. He’s chosen purples, though without the ascot that Vergil had worn. Shorter hair and he’d be the spit of his father.

But there’s no more time for such considerations as Falzon steps aside and welcomes them into his house. His manner is far more cordial than they’re used to.

“Violet!” he says, kissing her on both cheeks. “It’s been a while since we’ve had the pleasure of your company.”
Dante, Trish and Lady accept drinks and appetisers from a maid standing with a tray and move off to the side to watch the proceedings. Trish keeps a continual, if quiet commentary as to who’s who and what Committee they’re on or Guild they’re a member of. It’s mostly the top brass of the Tourist Business Guild, Fortuna L-ewwel and the Faith and Tourism Committees and their spouses. There’s enough people that they blend in with little problem.

“I believe the last time was just after you had moved in with Madam Buhagiar,” replies Violet, handing a bottle to him. “Is she available?”

“She’s supervising dinner and seeing the children to bed. I’m sure she’ll be through in a moment to join us.” He hands the bottle off to the maid.

“And how does fatherhood suit you?”

“It suits me well,” says Falzon. “My only grief is that I could never have my own, but that’s a grief I know you understand.”

Violet smiles tightly and Kyrie pulls her away. “Madam Campbell! How are you!”

The Speaker of the Tourist Business Guild comes over to Kyrie and air kisses her. “Sophie, please. I’m delighted that you’ve allowed your wedding to be the highlight of Midwinter Night. It will really showcase Fortuna as a winter holiday destination.”

Kyrie looks over sharply at Nero, who’s standing with the husband of the Speaker and Falzon.

Nero smiles at her and looks uncertain when he sees her frown.


“No, we’re looking forward to it,” says Violet, squeezing Kyrie’s hand. “Who doesn’t love a wedding?”
“Sadly, we never had the pleasure of celebrating your own, Madam Alighieri, though I suppose it should be Lady Micellef now,” replies Falzon, coming over with Nero and Master Campbell. He bows slightly to Madam Buhagiar as she passes him a glass of Cassar de Fortuna. He sniffs it before drinking it. “One of Credo’s?”

“I’m saving the others for the Toast in the Master’s Bedroom, when all’s said and done,” nods Violet. “Hello, Edith.” She hugs the other woman, who hands her a glass.

Edith goes to stand at Falzon’s side and he puts his arm around her shoulder and kisses the top of her head. She flinches.

Kyrie is trying not to look about her as she sits down next to Nero.

Out the corner of his eye, he can see Tony sitting on Falzon’s desk. He watches Nero’s reaction when the Master’s Bedroom is mentioned, but Nero’s looking back and forth between Falzon and Kyrie.

Mostly he watches Kyrie.

“I’ll not lay claim to Credo’s title in death, when I never used it in life,” says Violet. “I owe him that at least.”

“Credo wouldn’t have minded,” protests Kyrie. “I don’t think you realise how much he truly loved you. I’d be honoured if you’d use his name.”

Tony watches Dante and the two women watching the exchange intently. He’s following this far more than Tony thinks he should.

“You’ll be changing your name soon enough, Kyrie,” says Falzon. “Mistress Balzan, then Madam once there’s little Neros and Kyries running round the house.”

“I might change my name,” says Nero. “Keep Micellef going. Balzan’s just a name someone in the orphanage gave me. I’d rather honour the people who gave me a home and a family.”
“Dorcas and Alexander were always good at taking in the waifs and strays,” says Madam Campbell, blithely. “Look at yourself, Violet, when you met Credo.”

Even Falzon looks in askance at her.

“Excuse me,” mutters Violet as Falzon bows and clasps his hands.

Violet takes her wineglass and grabs a full bottle and stalks off out of the room. She doesn’t see Kyrie shake her head and facepalm.

Dante’s about to follow her out, when Trish shakes her head. “I’ll go.”

On a whim, Tony follows her out to a terrace, fully expecting to be tugged back or disappear. He makes it about 30 feet from Nero, when he feels a tug and can’t go any further. He can’t go further than the door to the terrace. He glances back at Nero, who seems to have been kidnapped by Sophie Campbell. Josh Agius is standing behind him with his Grandfather. Kyrie’s Somali friend from the supermarket is standing next to Josh. She refuses wine and accepts an orange juice and clinks glasses with him. They’re holding hands and getting dirty looks from Faith Committee members.

As if to make the point, she moves closer to him and they share a quick kiss.

Tony can hear the sound of quiet sobbing from the corner of the terrace where Violet is sitting.

“You’ll wreck your make-up,” says Trish, gently. She hands Violet a napkin.

“It’s waterproof,” Violet replies, pulling a gold compact with amethyst violets inlaid in it. She dabs her eyes in the mirror, before attempting to repair the damage with the powder puff. Her hands are shaking too much and she can’t hold them steady enough.

“Let me,” says Trish as she takes the compact from her and gently pats the puff on her face, fixing the damage from Violet’s tears. “There. Fixed. All pretty again.”

“Yeah,” says Violet, with a sardonic little laugh. “I wish Credo was here. I felt safe when he was
around. I don’t mean physically safe, I mean *safe*, like everything was going to be OK.”

Trish smiles and looks at Violet’s wineglass. “You’ve not even really touched that wine.”

Violet looks down at it and then at the bottle, pouring some into Trish’s glass. “Falzon has the good stuff as well. I’m trying to take it easy. I get drunk and run off at the mouth. Right now, that won’t help anyone.”

“You do?” says Trish. “I hadn’t noticed.”

They both giggle.

“Be on your guard, though, Trish,” says Violet. “Even though the Saviour is still technically done, a lot of powerful people are really fucking pissed off at this family – and I include you three in that. They’re like a wasps nest in autumn. All that energy and no direction.”

“Dante’s the Son of their God. That’s got to count for something, right?” protests Trish.

“Only if they can control him and that’s as likely as slamming a revolving door,” points out Violet.

Trish concedes the point and decides to chance it. “So, Nero…”

Violet takes a deep breath. “Yeah, Nero. There’s no doubt they’re related and very closely. I’ve consistently argued that Sparda didn’t just have the kids with Thekla. He was around for thousands of years, so he must have had more than just four kids, 2 millennia apart.”

“Thekla?” Trish chokes on her wine.

“Priestess he closed Temen-ni-gru with, had twins with her. Anyway,” Violet pulls the conversation back round to the point. “There’ll be descendants from them and that’s just the ones we know about. You’re not telling me he was around here for two hundred years and didn’t produce offspring. I’ve been arguing that Nero simply tipped the balance of all the people sacrificed to the Saviour construct.”
Trish leans in closer. “You singled him out. You know he’s closer to Sparda than that.”

Violet nods. “I don’t think he’s Dante’s. There’s rumours that Dante’s brother, Vernon, Victor, something was cutting about here at that time and I think he left a little someone behind. Credo would talk about it really vaguely when he was completely mandra.”

Trish decides if she’s going for it, she’s going for it. “Do you think Vergil – that was the brother – is Nero’s father?”

Violet nods. “I think Nero’s worked out something like that, but not the full details and if he has, it’ll be Kyrie he’ll talk to about it.”

_Oh, well, fuck it_, thinks Trish. “Do you think Verity Agius is Nero’s mother? That Vergil was the tourist?”

Violet snorts with laughter. “Sparda’s Balls, no! I think it was some whore or doxy who got up the spout, probably didn’t even know who the father was, and knowing how much fun life is for those kids, dumped him on the steps of an orphanage. Maybe demons were after her and she had to run, so she left him and drew attention away.”

She makes to pick up her wine glass, then sets it down again. “No one gives a shit about the whores in this place, in case you hadn’t noticed. Peter Falzon’s a piece of shit, but he’s risen above that environment, but he’s still a product of it. Maybe she didn’t want that for Nero and did the next best thing for him. Blue eyes and white hair in a place like this? His ass would have been grass once he hit three.”

“I was born in the Demon Realm,” says Trish. “And I’ve never come across anything as bad there as I have here. I sometimes wonder if humans aren’t worse than Devils.”

“I think there’s good people and bad people wherever you go, species has nothing to do with it.” Violet looks back at the house. “No, I think Verity Agius just doesn’t want to talk to her father and I can’t say I blame her. Blood of battle is thicker than the water of the womb.”

Both women jump when a bottle of wine comes flying through the air and knocks theirs off the table.
Tony smirks as Falzon walks past him to come get them. He’s walking quietly, as if to catch them in their conversation, but the bottle put paid to that.

“Violet! Madam Sparda! You’ve been too long away from the party and I have taken Madam Campbell to task for her careless words,” he says, bowing as he reaches them. He offers both women his hands and escorts them back to the party.
Chapter 24

Fortuna two decades ago

They walk cautiously through the corridor. Verity’s looking at the equipment running through it with more than a hint of recognition.

There’s an opening up ahead, but she doesn’t register anything dangerous.

Still, Vergil goes first, walking around the edge of the - he thinks it’s a ventilation shaft as he can see a massive fan down the bottom. Anyway, it’s a brick-lined structure and it’s deep. He thinks he can see some of those frames from the well, but they’re not active. He looks back to Verity, who’s examining the pipes with a professional’s fascination, to the extent where she’s forgetting her safety. A couple of times he has to flash step to her lest she fall off the edge.

“At least tell me what these are before you kill yourself,” Vergil says. There’s a hint of both humour and warning in his tone.

She looks up, towards where the roof should be and then around the walls as she touches the pipes. They’re fairly roasting and she frowns. She looks around.

“It’s a factory cooling tower. Those holes on the sides—‘ she points out levels and levels of regularly spaced channels around the structure, both above and below them ‘-are drawing in the cold air from the Peak. This way they do it without ruining the scenery. I studied something similar with lead smelting in Northumbria last year.”

“What are we under, Vee?” asks Vergil.

Verity bites her lip as she works out what they’re under. “The Courtyard, I think. Those holes in the wall could actually open out miles away. That’s how the smelting flues worked at Allendale.”

She looks at him. “What on Earth is a factory doing under the Castle?”

“It’s a dormant volcano, yes? Perhaps it’s a geothermal plant,” suggests Vergil. “For the
“No, we have hydroelectricity for the towns. I thought HQ used *that,*” she replies. “I swear, for every mystery we solve, another two jump up.”

“Well, the only way we’re solving this one, is by jumping down there.” Vergil pulls her close. “I’m capable of holding you up and jumping.”

“I swear you’re taking advantage of this situation, Mr Redgrave.” She cuddles into him, but doesn’t allow him to lift her up. She readies herself.

Vergil chuckles into her hair. “On 3-2-“

“-1, go-“

They jump down, Verity familiar now with the work needed to slow their descent. They land on the wire mesh that keeps the fan clear from falling debris and shockingly, Verity keeps her feet.

Vergil holds on to her tightly, just in case. They head through a door and into a huge corridor.

It’s clad in thick, heavy duty steel, coloured and styled in Art Deco. It’s beautiful. Even the access ports have an elegance about them.

A door opens up ahead and they dodge back behind the turn.

“What do you think of our facility so far, Mr Arkham?” says a heavily accented, theatrical man.

“Very impressive, Lord Arius,” Arkham replies. “But I fail to see how machines can ever replace true power.”

Verity watches them in a reflection.
“What say you, Mister Agnus? You seem all agog with what you’ve seen.” Lord Scerri treats Agnus with the same deference that he’s treating Arkham.

“The p-p-p-possibilities, the p-p-p-potential is boundless, the application of s-s-science to m-magic. My mind is d-d-dizzy with it all, My Lord,” replies Agnus, looking around with wonder, pen flying along the page as he takes notes.

“You embarrass me, you romantic fool,” says Arkham and Agnus wilts under the rebuke.

“I ap-p-p-pologise for m-my r-ramblings,” he says as he bows deeply. He keeps his eyes down, lip trembling like he’s been slapped.

“Nonsense,” Lord Scerri assures him. “Why would we show you our achievements, if not to scale the next peak? I find the opportunities intoxicating, don’t you think so, Lord Arius?”

“Indeed, indeed, Lord General. And now come see why science can go where magic can’t.” Arius opens a door and ushers his guests through.

Verity sees them first in the reflection, swimming through the metal like sharks. Vergil’s about to move them on, when he sees her staring at the metal. He can’t see what she’s looking at, but he realises it’s not good.

The air starts to smell of ozone and he realises that Verity’s working a very quick, very powerful spell as he can see a black distortion like a bow wave in front of a …sail?

It’s not a sail, he realises, it’s a fin.

Verity fires off her spell, a barrier, but the fin just drops into the metal and resurfaces in front of it.

She’s tired, but she’s still in her work-flow and she forms a barrier like a lining along the corridor. It thrums as it activates and there’s so much overspill of power that it makes Vergil dizzy and nauseous.

Verity’s physically shaking with the effort of holding the lining and she braces for the impact as
the fins hit the glyph.

They move right through and circle the couple.

“Sparda’s Balls!”

Vergil draws Yamato and strikes at the nearest fin.

It moves right through.

One of the fins drops down into the metal.

Vergil’s so attuned to Verity that he already knows where she is as he rolls them both aside.

It’s leaping up even as they’re moving, crashing through where they stood, landing back into the metal with a splash. The other two creatures break off and swim around the corridor, up the walls and the ceiling.

Vergil and Verity are up on their feet and moving. The creatures have them on the defensive, constantly making them dodge and roll. It’s hardest on Verity, she doesn’t have Vergil’s moveset and she can’t flash step like he can and he can’t always get to her.

One of the creatures gets the drop on her, falling out the ceiling. It doesn’t catch her with its teeth, but it knocks her flying. She’s winded, but she’s scrambling to her feet even as Vergil’s hauling her upright.

It tries again and this time Yamato connects. The creature’s injured, but not stopped, as it falls back into the floor.

“What the hell are they?” mutters Vergil, flash stepping as it jumps back out again. “How are they going through the wall?”

“Interdimensional?” At least, that’s what he thinks Verity says as she backflips past him.
He flash steps to her and she quickly pulls up a barrier as one drops out the ceiling again. It hits it with a solid thump, but splashes into the floor. “Not when they’re hitting us.”

“Then the timing’s going to be tight, ix-xitan tieghi,” she says, porting them slightly up the corridor as one tries to attack, jumping out the floor and almost hitting the ceiling. The creatures are already following.

One submerges under the steel and the distortion appears under their feet.

They’re already jumping apart as the beast leaps up, trying to snap at Verity as it goes up. She’s already forming a shield over her as it’s coming down.

Vergil drops a rain of summoned swords upon her, the force sending her down as hard as the beast’s falling impaled and dying atop her shield. There’s no time for her to recover as another sees its advantage and leaps out.

Vergil fires more swords at it and puts his will into a swirl of dark energy that pulls it apart. It also pulls apart Verity’s shield.

They look around for the final one and see occasional distortions appearing in the metal, but no beast appears.

The pattern so far with nearly everything has been that they’ve aimed at Verity. Rightly or wrongly, they’ve marked her as the weaker prey and so, like all predators, they’ve concentrated on her first.

It’s still taunting with distortions without an appearance, but Vergil doesn’t see any reason why it would change its attack pattern.

He takes a deep breath and readies his will.

The distortions have stopped.
Their ragged breathing is the only sound in the corridor.

Verity glances at him anxiously, but he doesn’t return it.

He doesn’t need to, she’s following his lead and calling up her powers, ready for him.

The distortion forms under their feet and they only just edge aside as it bursts out.

Vergil works the fastest Judgement Cut he’s ever done and the void is opened.

“You’re finished!” they say in unison as the materialised creature falls between dimensions.

Verity strikes, her power lashing out in a blue aura that covers the creature and traps it there.

The void snaps shut and the creature’s screech is severed.

They wait for a moment, their breathing loud and hoarse, filling the corridor.

There’s nothing.

Vergil pulls her up and they’re both shaking, but for Verity, it’s exhaustion. She can barely stand.

“He’s cut off,” says Vergil, grinning, but his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. If he wasn’t holding her up, she’d collapse. She struggles to stop her head dropping on his shoulder. Shifting Yamato to his other hand, he roots in his pocket for a Vital Star.

“Take this,” he says, trying to force it in her mouth.

She turns her face into his shoulder, hiding her mouth, registering her annoyance with an irritated whine.
“You don’t even have the strength to push my hand away,” Vergil scolds. “Stop being ridiculous and just take this.”

“Don’t wanna.” She tries to stand, but fails to take her weight. “We need to save those, in case we need them.”

Vergil looks at her for a moment, then checks up the corridor to ensure they’re still alone. He places the Star carefully in his mouth, before tilting Verity’s face up to his and locking a hand around the back of her head.

He kisses her gently, making sure he’s got the right angle and the right hold, before he crushes the Star with his teeth and pushes it into her mouth.

Verity chokes and struggles against him almost immediately, trying to pull away or spit it out, but his hold on her is iron, even when she’s starting to recover as the foul liquid drips down her throat.

Vergil’s grunting with pain from some of her kicks, but he holds on, tongue pushing the clear container against her palate until it’s dissolved and there’s no fluid left. He almost thinks she’s going to bite his tongue, her jaw’s so tense.

He wants to carry on kissing her into loose limbed compliance, but as he drops his hold on her head, Verity breaks the kiss. He read her right, she’s furious. She’s still grimacing at the taste of the fluid and he’d lick it away if she’d let him, but he needs to get what’s at stake through to her.

“I said I was fine!” She snarls. “You had no right to override me!”

Vergil looks at her coldly. “Don’t you dare plead your age, Vee. It’s no crime to be inexperienced—“

She’s about to protest, but he silences her with a finger. “—but it is when you don’t recognise you’re an amateur and refuse to defer to those who know better.” He brushes a stray lock of hair from her face. “And I do know better. I’ll not permit either of us to die for your pride. I’ll not apologise for keeping us alive.”
“Vergil’s voice is still hard as his eyes grow warmer and his ice-blue eyes meet her wine-darks. She’s brought her temper under control, if just barely and there’s restrained fury in her voice as she replies, “Rest assured, when I have more proficiency behind me, neither will I.”

“Good.” Vergil leans in to kiss her, but Verity turns her head.

Vergil drops his arms and steps away.

Verity draws herself up to her full height and sweeps past him to the door at the other end of the corridor.

Vergil rolls his eyes.

***

There’s nothing in the next few rooms, but there isn’t any way out of the last one.

It’s a large room, with a huge glass window and a raised vent in the middle of the room. It’s every bit as ornate as the corridor and the previous, if empty, room.

Vergil looks at the raised vent. “What do you make of this, sabih?”

Verity shoots him a venomous look. “You return to sweet so soon after sour, qalbi?”

“Of all the grudges to hold, is-sbuhija tieghi, there are better ones,” he says and there’s both amusement and annoyance in his tone. “What do you make of this?”

Verity sighs, coming over to him and looking at the vent. “It’s an electrical generator. This entire room can conduct it and this is the origin point. The middle should be non-conductive. I think it’s made of glass or plastic.”

Vergil walks over to the window, but he’s not tall enough and there’s nothing he can get purchase on to climb up. “Stand on my shoulders, Vee and tell me what you see.”
He crouches down and Verity steps onto his shoulders. Vergil stays close to the wall so she can steady herself against it as he unsteadily rises up. He can hold her weight, but it’s still an effort and he’s not used to holding someone like this.

“Don’t stand on your jacket,” says Verity.

“Window.”

Verity huffs as she looks through. “It’s very thick glass. It’s a good thirty centimetres.”

“They definitely want to keep whatever comes in here, in here.”

She turns her attention to the room on the other side of the glass. “It’s a huge lab of some kind. It’s very high-level alchemy. It’s above what I’ve studied so far. It looks like jars for the Amina Mercury, but there’s so many of them!”

She ducks down as a door opens in the opposite wall. “Get down! It’s Arkham and Lord Scerri! Nine Fucking Hells!”

Vergil crouches back down, letting Verity drop. She rolls to break the noise of her fall and looks round in panic at an escape route. She and Vergil both see the ornate maintenance hatches at the same time and grin at each other. She starts trying to undo the hatch and he stops her. “We have no time!”

“I’m not porting into a strange place!” she hisses back.

They can hear the voices of the men as Arkham asks about a piece of equipment.

Verity huffs and cuddles in to Vergil, porting them into the maintenance space.

It’s big enough to crawl in, but both of the couple are tall, so it’s a little cramped in there. There’s coloured tape indicating various routes and they follow one that guides them toward the lab.
There’s vents all along the passage.

They stop at a vent where they can see both the lab and the glass room.

“And this is one of our most prized labs. Here, we make the Amina Mercury. It’s also where we have the machinery required to distil the spiritual energy for Our Saviour,” Lord Scerri sweeps his arm around, displaying the room. He pays a particular gesture to a massive piece of apparatus in the centre of the room.

“Th-the collections of w-w-hich we saw from the p-p-p-previous room?” asks Agnus. He’s utterly fascinated.

“One of Umbrella-Ouroboros’ most prized Special Projects,” says Arius, like a proud father. “And as you will see, a project of such scale, such ambition, you will understand how science will always outperform mere magic, Mr Arkham.”

Lord Scerri notes Agnus’ rapt attention, his pen flying across the pages of his notepad so fast, it’s as if the writing is appearing by magic. “I think, perhaps, Mr Arkham, your apprentice will find a stay with our Alchemists most illuminating with regards to the enhancement of his skills.”

Agnus lights up, though he tries to hide it from his master. “I-I-I would, i-i-if it p-p-p-pleases you, Mr Arkham.”

Arkham looks between the two other men. “Perhaps it would do his education some improvement. I tire of his obsequious mewling.”

“I apologise most humbly, My Master, if I displease you.” Agnus bows deep and from the sudden glittering in his eyes, it’s clear he’s stung by Arkham’s words.

“I am sure that young Agnus will be an asset to our endeavours,” says Arius. He puts his arm around the young man. “I will take you under my own wing and we will learn so much together!”

Agnus looks between Arkham and Arius, but Arius is not truly asking and Arkham knows it. Still, he has no real reason to refuse the request and it doesn’t hinder his plans in the least.
“If it is your wish to remain here, I have no objections,” says Arkham, walking around the lab, looking at the Amina Mercuries slowly forming.

“Thank you, Master, th-thank you!” Agnus looks like he’s about to prostrate himself before Arkham.

Arkham turns away, contempt all over his face. He moves to look closer at the central apparatus.

“For all that you criticise ritual and magic, you still need the use of it for your Special Projects, gentlemen.” He meets Lord Scerri’s cool gaze.

“Alchemy on an industrial scale such as this, is repeatable and reliable. Magic and ritual, as you have found, sir, is oftimes not,” replies Lord Scerri. “Even the most carefully planned ritual can go awry.”

Arkham’s scar flares. “A mistake I shall not make again.”

Arkham looks past the apparatus, straight at the vent where Vergil and Verity are concealed.

Verity clamps her hand over her mouth and looks in panic at Vergil. He puts a finger over his mouth and shakes his head slightly.

“Even magic is subject to the dictates of modernity, Mr Arkham,” says Lord Scerri.

“I find that true power is ageless, Lord Scerri,” replies Arkham and it’s a challenge. “And a good spell, gone right the first time, is oftimes, all one needs.”

“Indeed, sir, ‘tis all in the planning,” agrees Arius. “Far better to spend years laying a plan down and preparation for its implement, as we have found with our facility and the generosity of the Order. One might foresee the circumstances in which a plan may be derailed and design for them.”

“Wise words, Lord Arius. You’ll do well to listen to your superior, Lord Scerri,” says Arkham, pointedly. He looks beyond the men, back to the vent. “I found the Collection Room most remarkable. I should like to see it again, so that I might make fresh observations.”
This time, it’s Vergil who looks at Verity, mouthing, “Which way?”

“The way they’re going, I suppose,” Verity mouths back. She looks at the coloured tape on the wall and points.

Vergil nods and follows her.

***

They reach the next room at the same time as Lord Scerri and his party.

Verity audibly gasps and Vergil has clapped his hand over her mouth before he can think.

“What the hell?” he gasps.

The room is filled with glass cylinders, connected with tubes to a mechanism that runs to a large glass globe, pulsing with an energy. Another set of tubes seem to be taking the energy out of the globe and out of the room. The wall it cuts through looks like it’s the party wall of this and the previous room.

There’s people in the cylinders.

Arius keeps talking to Arkham about his plan for the Fortuna facility. The magician nods politely in all the right places. Lord Scerri looks around the room, frowning.

Vergil keeps his hand over Verity’s mouth, holding his breath as Lord Scerri leaves the group to look more intently at places where someone could be hiding. He doesn’t come close to the vents.

Verity’s gripping onto Vergil’s arm like she’s about to fall off the edge.

Vergil’s got a thumb on Yamato’s crossguard, but the room to draw her is limited.
Arkham calls back Lord Scerri. “So, this is the raw energy for the Saviour construct?”

“It is sir. The distillate from the processing goes to form the Amina Mercuries, as we haven’t yet perfected the artificial process.” Lord Scerri indicates the globe.

“Can you meet the energy requirements?” asks Arkham.

“We have population management down to a fine art, Mr Arkham,” replies Lord Scerri. “Have no fear on that score.”

“Speaking of which, do you have the book I requested?”

“Indeed I do, it’s in my office.” Lord Scerri says smoothly. “I must thank you sir, for leading our young lovers to the Castle. A little adventure, I think, will manage to bring the latest member of our population into being.”

“It’s been mutually fruitful, Lord Scerri, as long as our aims don’t cross,” replies Arkham. “When can I expect my final piece of the puzzle?”

“When we have who we need for our future plans,” says Lord Scerri. “We will have no need of the Son of Sparda when we have confirmation of our goal.”

Vergil feels his heart stop. He’s almost afraid to look at Verity.

She hasn’t made any connections yet, transfixed as she is with the scene before her.

Arkham looks like he’s considering something. “It concerns me that you may not be able to deliver your end of the bargain, Scerri.”

“What gives you concern, Mr Arkham?” Asks Lord Scerri. He has all the sincerity of a cat toying with a mouse.
“The girl I was meant to be tutoring. The Son of Sparda has developed quite an attachment to her.” Arkham isn’t fooled.

“This matter should not trouble you, Mr Arkham. The Order will keep its pact with you.” Lord Scerri strokes his beard, but there’s a coldness in his voice. He’s not used to being questioned and he doesn’t like it. “And we both have alternates, though it may push both our plans back, somewhat.”

“Dante and Pinny, yes,” agrees Arkham. “I still wouldn’t underestimate the girl. She and Vergil are a formidable pair. Should my plans be too disturbed, I may come looking for their blood.”

Lord Scerri has a tight smile on his face. “That will not be necessary.”

“I should like to see him in action against a major threat,” says Arkham. “I’ve been impressed with him so far against smaller prey.”

“That can most certainly be arranged, Mr Arkham,” says Lord Scerri. “This is Fortuna. There are always demons in Fortuna.”

He gestures for Arkham to proceed him. “Now, let’s get that book.”

Vergil and Verity stay frozen for several minutes, until they’re sure that the other party won’t come back. He hasn’t taken his hand from her mouth nor she released her grip on his arm.

Vergil can’t speak. He doesn’t remove his hand until Verity tugs it away.

It takes her several tries to speak and when she does, her voice is shaky. She looks shocked and horrified, like she’s trying to process what she’s heard. “Do you think they’ve gone?”

“I think so.”

“I want to see those people. I want to see what they’re doing to them,” she says, panic creeping into her voice.
“Vee –” he begins, but she’s ported them out onto the floor. She’s about to walk over to the rows of cylinders, but Vergil grabs her arms and turns her to face him. She can’t focus on him, but keeps looking at the cylinders and the globe. There’s a growing sense of horror rising up in her and he can see it in her eyes. Her wine-darks can’t hide anything. It’s a legacy from her Arabic heritage.

“Verity,” he says sharply, moving a hand from her bicep to her face, forcing her to look at him. He needs to stop it before it overwhelms her. “Vee, look at me.”

“It wasn’t meant to be like this,” she whispers. “We were –“

Vergil cuts her off. “It doesn’t matter. It is what it is.”

She startles at the harshness of his tone. “I-I-“

“You wanted to follow me into my world, Vee sabiha, well here it is.”

It’s not his hand on her face that holds her fast, it’s his gaze to hers that pins her in place.

It’s almost like Vergil can feel something break inside her and he scarce dares to breathe.

Verity bites her lip so much it’s ragged, before letting out a stuttering breath and her voice is thick as she says, “Where you walk, I follow.”

He’s heard that line before and even without context, he understands its significance.

Vergil kisses her, a quick press and push of lips that she returns.

Verity breaks it off first. “I’m going to look more closely at this equipment,” she says, repressing a shudder.

She walks around the lab, taking mental notes at the equipment. She follows the tubing back from
the globe to one of the cylinders. She examines several of them, trying not to look at the contents.

Vergil watches her as she works, quiet and methodical. He stays on alert, hand on Yamato because she’s lost in her own world and as usual, she’s left nothing for her awareness. There could be fifty Angelos closing in on her and she wouldn’t notice.

Verity gives a strangled cry and he’s by her side in a flash. Vergil follows her gaze and sees a middle-aged man floating in the cylinder. Her horror-struck face tells him all he needs to know.

“I-he’s o-one of my t-tutors, Monsieur Dupuis, m-my Dancing Master,” she says in a small voice. “He was taken ill last week, we weren’t allowed to see him because he was indisposed and not receiving well-wishers.”

“You can’t help him. You need to keep to the job at hand.” Vergil’s blunt, perhaps blunter than he should be, but he has a hand on her shoulder to soften his words.

“I have what I need,” Verity says and her voice is hard. “I know what they’re doing, but I don’t know why.”

She looks Vergil dead in the face and he’s right. Something has broken inside her, leaving her dangerous and sharp several years too soon.

“The people in the cylinders are having their life-force drained.”

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They don’t dally much longer, wanting to get out of the Castle as quickly as possible.

As they run through a door that leads them to the outside, the sky is starting to lighten in the east, streaks of cold blue and silver along the top of Lamina Peak, Foris Falls a liquid gunmetal ghost against the dark rock in the silence of the morning. The roar of the Falls is the only sound.

Verity looks up at the scene. “I can’t believe that even amongst the horror, there’s still beauty.”
Vergil puts his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close and kissing her hair. “A place is just a place. It’s the people in it who make it Heaven or Hell.”

She shivers.

“If that’s the waterfall, then we must be under your bridge to nowhere, Vee,” says Vergil, pointing up to where it’s jutting out above them.

There’s a blue pedestal by the edge of the cliff face and Vergil takes his sword to it. There’s something satisfying about just hitting the living daylights out of something.

“Qalbi, look!” Verity’s pointing at the sluice at the top of the Falls. They slam down and dam the flow, leaving the cliffs bare. “Is that a cave?”

A mechanism begins to turn and a runner with a walkway slides out and connects with the stone.

“I’m not going back through all that Castle,” says Verity. “I’d kick Sparda in the balls first.”

Vergil laughs. “We don’t know how long the bridge will be out for anyway. Are you able to port us?”

“Soon find out,” she says as she begins to form a glyph and then they’re on the lip of the bridge.

Vergil takes her hand and they run through into the cave. They’re only a couple of metres in when the bridge retracts and the entrance in cut off by the Falls.

Verity stops abruptly and Vergil turns to see what’s wrong. He wonders if it’s about to hit her and he readies to pull her close.

“Arkham was talking about us. He called you the Son of Sparda.” Verity pulls her hand away. “I don’t even know your real surname.”
She looks at him and the expression on her face stabs Vergil through the heart.

“Who are you, really?”
Chapter 25

Fortuna 7 months previously

“Can’t we just cry off tonight? Plead your indisposition?” Credo says in annoyance as he searches for the back of the cuff link. It’s fell down the back of the counter after bouncing out the trinket bowl when he threw it there. “I’ve no desire to breathe the same air as that bastard, much less eat his food.”

“I daresay Edith shares your view, but she needs to know her friends are there, no matter how limited their capacity.” The water sloshes as Violet turns around to watch him.

He abandons the search for the errant jewellery and finishes undressing. “Move over. For one so slight, you’ve appropriated the entire bath.”

Violet moves over carefully, so the already full bath doesn’t overflow as Credo steps cautiously in and sits at the end. He visibly relaxes in the hot water and then holds out his arms for her. Violet slides back over to him and settles against him.

“L-anglu sabih tieghi,” she says as she rests against his massive chest.

She feels Credo smile against her hair as he takes out her butterfly clip and sets it on the side. Violet’s already brought the shower head over with her.

His finger tips ghost over her jaw. “How did it go? You were on the Mainland for longer than usual.”

“There was a slight problem with one of the wires. They were having problems aligning the top arch bar. We’re discussing next time using a new technique to encourage bone growth extra to the site of the graft.” Violet turns onto her knees. “And this side has shown no re-absorption.”

She smiles wide, showing the wires and posts on her teeth. “If it keeps up, I might be able to get the bands off and actually chew food.”
Credo can’t help but return her grin. “Can you remember ever being able to eat properly?”

“You know I can’t. It’ll be so strange.”

Credo taps her shoulder. “Shampoo bar.”

Violet huffs and reaches past him to pass him a white bar of soap. Credo gives it a quick smell. “Honey and almond?”

“I know you like it and it was from that new traditional crafts shop, so we’re supporting local business.” She wriggles happily against him as he wets her hair and begins working up a lather, rubbing the bar against her hair as it rests in his hand. He lies the strands over his shoulder to keep them out the water. Credo massages her head and plays with Violet’s hair far longer than he needs to, but it’s worth it as she relaxes against him with a sigh.

“You do love playing with my hair.”

“You’ll forgive my indulgence, Madam, for I’ve been denied this pleasure this last fortnight,” replies Credo. He rinses it off, careful to monitor the level in the bath, then picks up another bar with the same smell. “Conditioner?”

Violet nods and Credo repeats the steps with it. He takes even longer this time as the conditioner can stay in her hair for the rest of the bath. “I think I can honestly say I’ve never met a man with such a fascination for my hair.”

“You have beautiful hair.” He kisses the top of her head and promptly regrets it with the taste of the slime on his lips. “It’s easily your best feature, besides your eyes.”

She turns round in indignation. “And so the rest of me is chopped liver? Should I shave it off so you can have a wig and I’ll take myself back to the Mainland?”

Credo carefully twists the hair back into a chignon and secures it with the butterfly clip. His hands rest on her shoulders. “The true beauty of the hair lies in the woman it’s attached to.”
Her eyes flick to the clock on the wall and then back to Credo. His breathing’s changed, it’s shallower. Violet picks up the cloth and washes the parts of his body above the water, slowly and carefully. She traces the lines of his face with the cloth. Credo’s hands have dropped to her back, to rest on the scars there. They’re raised and angry underneath his hands.

She washes and rinses his hair just as slowly and fluffs it up so it waves around his face. It softens his severe features.

Violet takes the cloth again and runs it over his chest and stomach. She goes slow, outlining the muscles as the rough cloth traces along them. Credo shifts under her touch, sitting up a little straighter and arms a little tighter around her back.

For his part, his fingers ghost gently along the lines and jagged corners of the scars on her back. The maze they form wanders across the sensitive areas of her back and Violet trembles a little. She bites her lip slightly, so Credo concentrates his touch there. He experiments with light fingertips tracing the labyrinth puzzle she’s been left with on her skin and heavy strokes to alternate broad sweeps across her back.

Her back arches under his touch and her already dark eyes are liquid with desire.

She doesn’t stop washing him with the cloth, his breathing stuttering as it rubs over his obliques, his abs. Credo’s tall and built like a Greek God with a body made for worship.

They tease each other for a while, knowing exactly what brings the other pleasure and still finding joy in it after all this time.

His hands keep tantalising her body while Violet kisses along his face, dragging the tip of her tongue over his cheekbones and leaving tiny nibbles along the line of his jaw, just little nips of pressure leading up to his ears and over his throat.

One of Credo’s strong hands reaches across her low back and takes hold of the opposite hip crest there, across the top of the latest scar. He anchors her down with a firm hold and drops the other hand into the crease of her thighs, so near, but not touching her clit or up inside her sex yet.

He knows she’s sensitive here and he’ll get a good reaction as he tickles between the thigh and lips and tormentingly over her asshole. He’s right, it sets her right off her stride and she cries out, breaking off her little teases and resting her forehead on his shoulder as she tries to compose
herself. Credo smiles against Violet’s cheek at her reaction.

Her hand’s in his hair and she’s gripping hard. It does hurt, he won’t deny that, but it’s a good hurt.

She recovers herself and begins slowly rubbing Credo’s dick with the cloth. It’s a deliciously rough sensation from the usual firm pump of her hand and she can’t tickle and nibble at it the way she normally would. Credo’s teasing stutters to a stop and he grips her thigh.

It’s Violet who gives her little sideways smile as Credo’s been derailed. She puts her lips to use by kissing over his face again.

Credo surprises her by lifting her up with both hands spanning her waist and running his legs under hers, so Violet’s now sitting on his thighs, rather than in between them. She makes a sound somewhere between a sob and a moan as he lifts her over. He sets her back down, his muscular thighs forcing her legs open and leaving her sex unguarded.

He’s fully hard now and Violet’s always impressed by his size, even after all these years. He tries to stay her, slow her down a little, but Violet’s having none of it. Credo pulls back to watch her face as she mounts him. It’s hard for him to control his shivers and his moans as her tight cunny envelopes him, but he does to see her shake hard and bite her lip as there’s suddenly too much sensation in a such delicate area. She always takes a moment, panting through the pressure and adjusting to him so deep within her.

Violet’s head drops back to his shoulder and she whispers his name between broken moans that sends shivers down his spine. One arm rests on her shoulders to keep her there and that soft spoken mouth next to his ear. His other hand intertwines with hers and he brings it up to his lips and kisses it.

She’s slumped against him, thighs trembling with the pressure against her intimate nerves and panting hard with the effort.

“Alright, it-teżor tieghi?” he whispers.

Violet nods.

And then she moves.
Credo grips her hand and her shoulders tight, so she’s not able to raise herself up along his shaft. She can roll and rock her hips, though and so she does, body trembling even harder. Credo’s not sure how she hasn’t shaken herself to pieces.

He’s not sure how he’s not combusted as his shaft is gripped within her hot, pliant core. The bath water’s warm and silken against his skin as the sensations flare out and over him. He’s so aware of her body against his as the eddies from her movement caress their skin, he feels almost like they’re dissolving into each other.

Credo can feel tremors and pulses start to run along his length as Violet’s body begins its build-up towards her climax and Credo knows it’ll set him off too.

Her hips rock him hard as she tries to build up more friction along his length and nudge her clit against his pubic bone. He knows by the way she’s moving that she isn’t thinking any more, isn’t planning how she’ll do this or try to spin it out.

She’s just a wanton ball of aching need as she grinds against him. The way she’s brokenly sighing into his shoulder tells him she’s desperate to come. She’s frantic and beautiful and his and it makes his heart clench that she’s here and he’s the reason she’s like that, that it’s his body that’s the vehicle for so much pleasure and he tells her this, all of it, his rough, low voice, rumbling through his body to hers.

She’s moaning wordlessly now and it’s a harsh, ragged, sound that’s tearing itself from her throat. The tremors are rippling along her cunt faster and harder now and the pulses more rhythmic. Credo doesn’t want for it to end, but he knows Violet’s very, very close.

There’s a strangled sob of “Credo!” and she nearly tears his hair out by the roots as everything in her body tightens. The tremors caressing his dick turn into full fledged spasms that grip him tightly and sweetly.

She’s still running on as Credo comes with an explosion of light and sensation behind his eyes.

They stay like that until the water’s cooled enough it’s starting to chill them both. Credo rinses the conditioner out Violet’s hair with shaky arms and she nuzzles into his touch. She still looks a fucked-out mess and he’s glad he’s walking into Falzon’s party with his woman’s face flushed and shining fresh from the bedroom.
Falzon will pick up on it and it’ll irk him no end that he’s not putting that look up on Edith’s face.

Violet pulls the plug and nearly falls out the bath, her legs are so wobbly and Credo doesn’t even bother to hide his smirk.

Not that his own legs are any better. Violet throws him a towel and he nearly falls back in the bath.

“Has Kyrie come home yet?” he asks.

“Credo, it’s only 6pm. She’ll just be finishing her shift at the refugee centre and her, Nero, Josh and that Somali refugee Josh is keen on will probably go out for dinner.” Violet points out. “It’s not like there’s going to be anyone here.”

“What were they doing today?” Credo asks, his mouth thin with disapproval.

“Taking the kids from the refugee centre for a picnic at the Forgotten Church, so they’d have shelter if it rained. Teaches the kids their new history as well. Xaali - I think that’s her name - was the translator. Poor thing will be starving if Josh has made the picnic.” She wriggles into an over the bust corset. “Lace me up. They’re teenagers, Credo. This isn’t the easiest place to be young. Let them have some fun.”

“So many of our children got their start at those ruins and I’d prefer it if my niece or nephew wasn’t one of them.” Credo expertly laces Violet into her corset. “What did Josh do?”

“Made her cheese and ham sandwiches because he didn’t know that Muslims don’t eat pork. You’re only delaying the inevitable. Kyrie set her cap for Nero when she was five and you should know by now that when a woman gets the bit between her teeth, you either get up on the carriage or out of the way.” Violet steps into her dress and turns for Credo to zip her up.

“And what of us? Can that be said for us?” Credo pulls on silk breeches and fastens them. “I haven’t had an answer yet.”

Violet rolls her eyes in exasperation. “I will not be entertainment for Peter Falzon. You know he’ll get the Faith Committee to decree that the whole night be witnessed for the sake of ‘legitimacy.’ ”
Credo’s found another set of cufflinks and he holds them out with his sleeves for her to do them up. “Remember when these were my Courting Gift from you? You thought the Master’s Chamber worth it then.”

“How dare you cast that up to me, Credo.” She glares at him. “If we’d been allowed to adopt Nero, I would have slept with the whole damn Faith Committee in that bedroom.”

Violet tugs Credo’s sleeves together more roughly than she should as she pins the cufflinks through. “You know more than anyone what I’ve suffered for this family. You, Kyrie, Nero are the only reasons I’m still here.”

Credo catches her hands and pulls her close, kissing her carefully. “I’m sorry, qalb ta’ qalbi. I shouldn’t have said that. Did you look at those brochures from those Mainland clinics?”

“Yes,” she replies. “I need to think about it.”

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“Must we?” Credo looks at Falzon’s house and then back at Violet.

“Credo!” she snaps.

“I really don’t think I can sit and make polite conversation over dinner, all the while knowing what that monster has done.” Credo says softly.

“He’s done many things, Credo. This is no different. Objectionable, but no different.” Violet sorts his ascot and checks his waistcoat. There’s nothing to sort, but she just needs the motion.

“I’m culpable in so much of it,” he replies. “This is just the latest incident.”

“Credo, hanini. He knows how to use the law. There was nothing you could have done,” says Violet.
The door opens and Falzon has his most unctuous smile, Edith Buhagiar on his arm. She looks like a robot, face carefully blank. Her eyes meet Violet’s and that’s the only place where there’s any life.

In a veiled face, only the eyes can speak.

Violet wonders what hers are saying.

“Credo, Violet, dear friends, do come in,” Falzon says, ever the genial host. He takes the wine Credo offers. “Ah, Credo, one of your own Cassars?”

“Only the best for you and your new situation, Peter,” says Credo, through gritted teeth. Violet elbows him.

Credo does his best to pretend to smile.

Falzon’s maid takes their jackets and they walk through to Peter’s living room. “Your Holiness,” says Credo as he and Violet bow to Sanctus.

“He indicates a woman sitting on his left. Credo nearly chokes. She’s flamboyant and unashamedly sexual and Credo doesn’t know where to look.

The woman herself seems to home in on his discomfort and makes a bee-line for him. She’s wearing a white lace catsuit and skyscraper heels. It’s barely there with just lace and crystals in strategic areas. “My Lord Supreme General!” she says in a voice more oily than Falzon’s. “I’m delighted to meet you at last! I’ve heard so much about you!”

She takes his hand and almost wraps herself around him, all hips and tits as she saunters over to him. Still holding his hand she takes the back of hers up to his lips, forcing him to kiss the back of it. He tries to drop it and politely disentangle himself, but Gloria is determined to stay attached.
“You do live up to your advertising,” she says, still holding his hand and draped all over him. Credo is bright red and trying to carry on a polite conversation with her, while not looking at her and not looking away.

The other wives are looking at her like they want to burn the witch and try to steer their husbands away. A murmur of paguna fil-qasam tat-tiġieg runs round the room.

Gloria for her part, clearly doesn’t care about the stir she’s causing and neither does Falzon. He merely looks quietly amused at this little tableau.

Gloria is running her hand on Credo’s chest, complimenting him on how he fills his suit, because it can be so hard for muscular men to buy suits. Credo is scarlet and tries to extricate himself politely, though clearly he’s dying to cast her off, but can’t do so courteously in company.

He looks to Violet for help, but she’s gone to talk to General Agius. She’s waylaid en route by another member of the executive.

“Praise be to the Saviour that Agnus chose not to come,” says Alchemist Calleja, looking at Gloria’s fawning over Credo and General Calleja. She’s currently demonstrating some of the finer principles of fighting with her weapon. “I have no idea how you can work with that man.”

“I manage to find enough to keep him busy, but something came into our possession in the last few days,” says Violet. “Sparda’s Balls, she’s flexible.”

“Is it juicy Violet? I’d put up with that…man for the opportunity to work with the Special Projects you have access to.” Lady Calleja looks at Gloria. “What did she just do?”

“It’s indeed juicy and you aren’t on the team dealing with it, so don’t ask any more. I can’t discuss it.” They tilt their heads at Gloria. “She must have been a gymnast. That’s quite an acrobatic move. Oh. I don’t think she intended that reaction.”

Lady Calleja’s face goes tight, whether at Violet’s refusal to engage or her husband’s wandering hands, Violet isn’t sure. “Well, we can’t all use our husband’s connections to advance. Oh, I’m sorry, you’re a glorified Ladybird, not a wife.”
Violet merely smiles her little smile. “I don’t need to use any connections to advance, My Lady. Not even yours could get you any further, could they?”

Credo’s watching them, while trying to ignore Gloria, who’s trying more for his attention than General Calleja’s.

He notices that for all her fawning, Gloria’s watching them too.

“Madam Buhagiar,” says Violet, loud enough to be heard by Edith. “In your previous marriage I don’t imagine you had to cater for such a large company. I have considerable experience in that regard. Would you consider me remiss if I offered you the benefit of it?”

Sanctus looks approvingly at Violet and then back to Credo. “If only you could persuade her to become Lady Micellef, she’d be perfect.”

“It’s not for the want of trying, Your Holiness,” replies Credo, trying to remove Gloria’s leg from atop his.

“I do love a true romantic,” laughs Gloria. She tugs Credo’s beard. “You’re making me so sad a delicious hunk of a man like you is off the market.”

Credo’s got a long suffering look on his face as he removes Gloria’s hand from his beard.

Falzon indicates to Violet that she should speak to Edith. “I’m sure she should find the benefit of your experience invaluable.”

Violet inclines her head to Falzon and goes through to the kitchen where Edith supervising the maids in there. “Of course, pasta is a better bet for such large company.”

Edith flies into Violet’s arms when she hears her voice. The women embrace and Edith tries not to let anyone see her face crumple. The staff turn down the meal and discretely leave the kitchen.

“Oh, Violet!” Edith sobs. “If it wasn’t for the children-“
“Hush,” says Violet, wiping Edith’s tears. “Did you get the speech? He can be a very good husband or a very bad one, the choice is yours?”

“Don’t tell me this is a blessing for me, I’ve risen far more than I’ve any right to,” says Edith, brokenly.

“Lady Calleja?”

“How’d you know?”

“It sounds like something she would say,” says Gloria sashaying into the kitchen. She holds out her hand, but she’s toned down the flirting a notch.

Edith and Violet break off their hug and shake it.

“She blames me for not getting promoted,” says Violet. “You want a hand to get dinner ready, Edith?”

“I think she’s more to blame than you,” says Gloria. “She’s extremely unpleasant and I’ve only known her these last few days.”

“No, she’s right. I tell people not to use her because she’s a bitch,” says Violet, picking up a pot to drain.

Despite herself, Edith laughs and Gloria joins in.

“Sit over there,” says Edith. “You wouldn’t want to get your pantaloons wet.”

“They’re not pantaloons,” says Violet. “It’s a catsuit. They’re popular on the Mainland.”

“You’d suit one, Lady Micellef,” says Gloria.
“Wouldn’t I suit one?” demands Edith, laughing.

“I think you’re a bit too voluptuous, Lady Falzon,” Gloria says tactfully.

“I think Madam LaSalle is saying that you’ve got a fat arse, Madam Buhagiar,” says Violet, lightly, but there’s a warning in her tone. She pulls down a colander to drain the potatoes.

Edith turns away to stir a pan, hiding her tears. “And you’re so skinny you’ll slip down the drainpipes, Madam Alighieri.”

“That’s her way of saying I look like a boy, Madam LaSalle,” says Violet, mock mournfully. “I’ve never had the kind of figure that turns heads.”

“Now, there’s a lie, it-teżor tieghi,” says Credo, coming into the kitchen and wrapping his arms around Violet, licking up the side of her neck. She hasn’t heard him come in and jumps, dropping the pot. Luckily, it’s just into the sink and the colander catches everything.

“Credo! I damn near scalded the pair of us!” she snaps. “Are you fucking drunk? Grabbing me like that when I’m cooking?”

Credo lets her go instantly and tries to help Violet pick up the potatoes from the sink, but his Order Ring catches on the rim of the colander and tips everything out.

“Godspit and shit! Just put it down! What did you want anyway?”

“I-I only came in for another bottle of wine – I-” he stutters.

Gloria delicately hands him a bottle of wine, amusement in her bright blue eyes.

Credo goes scarlet, bows and marches back through.
“We could just have talked about periods,” says Gloria. “He’s too sweet to shout at.”

“He is, but I’m annoyed at him. He’s flirting with me to send you a message,” says Violet, rescuing the potatoes. She casts a glance back through to the living room. “Falzon and Sanctus are looking through here and conferring, aren’t they?”

“Quite a few people are looking back in here and conferring. Lady Calleja is one of them.” Edith takes the pot from Violet. “Call the staff back in.”

“I’ll get them,” says Gloria, sashaying to the door, but there’s less wiggle than when she’s got male eyes on her.

“I’d hit it,” says Violet, staring after her. “Twosome, threesome, foursome, not fussy.”

Edith nearly chokes. “Credo’s no innocent in that regard.”

“Down girl, you’ve had your shot.”

They giggle and just for a second, Edith’s forgotten her situation.

The maids come back in and Violet takes charge of the kitchen.

Edith doesn’t look so alone, especially as Gloria stays in the kitchen and chats.

The first few courses pass without incident, as Violet walks Edith through the finer points of catering a High Order dinner.

Sanctus watches approvingly.

Falzon just watches.
“So, even a man’s title changes when he has children?” asks Gloria. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

“Children are _that_ important within our culture, Gloria,” says General Agius. “Life is precarious on this island. We’ve resisted much mechanisation and the principal industries are extremely dangerous. That’s even without the demons that range here.”

“Iż-żwieġ mingħajr tarbija ma fihx tgawdija,” says Lady Calleja. “Don’t you agree, Edith?”

“My children are my treasures,” says Edith to her plate. Her voice and face are carefully blank.

Gloria looks to Violet, who translates for her - _a childless marriage cannot be a happy one_.

Gloria and Falzon see everyone’s eyes flick to Credo. He looks down at his plate. “Mine and Violet’s struggle to become parents is not fodder for your gossip, Lady Calleja,” he says, quietly, clearly, coldly and no one at the table is in any doubt as to why Credo is Supreme General of the Holy Knights.

Lord Calleja hushes his wife, who gives the most insincere apology anyone’s ever heard.

Violet switches out her water for wine and a muscle in Credo’s jaw tightens. However, he doesn’t stop her.

“I would have known motherhood and marriage these 10 years hence, had I been permitted to adopt Nero Balzan,” says Violet, knocking back the glass and facing down everyone at the table. “And not been subjected to my third Witch Trial because Dorcas and Alexander Micellef’s Ascension went wrong. If it wasn’t for them, I’d never have had a hand in raising Kyrie and Nero at all. That’s the closest to motherhood I’ve ever got.”

She knocks back a second glass. “Half the people round this table are the reason I don’t have children. I’m still here because I love this man and because I believe in the dreams of His Holiness.”

Lady Calleja can’t help herself. “It’s witchcraft that’s got you that man in the first place and your job, so if I had a hand in your Trials, I’m glad!”
“Well, I was pregnant for the last one, so thanks for that.” Violet knocks back another couple of glasses. “And at least I now know who my accuser was.”

There’s a horrified silence around the table. Credo’s hand squeezes his glass so tight, he crushes it.

“Madam Alighieri,” says Sanctus. “I have never doubted your loyalty to Our Saviour and this Order. I am mortally wounded that High Order Members from Old Families abused our laws for petty revenges. Your service to Fortuna and your support of Lord Micellef has been the major reason our aims have advanced thus far. Chief Alchemist Agnus holds you in the highest esteem and has deemed you invaluable to his work.”

“No – I never meant – I didn’t know – Peter, help me!” Lady Calleja looks round desperately as all eyes fall on her. Even her husband is shying away from her. “I only did what you asked! Peter!”

“I merely enacted the laws based upon the evidence you presented me with, Lady Calleja,” replies Falzon, sipping his wine. “I never believed the charges levied against Violet and I resented that you used me to settle your petty jealousies, when you had the good fortune to accept a Courting Suit from General Calleja, once Credo had rejected yours.”

“Your actions shame us all,” says Sanctus. “I wonder if your Envy, Hatred and Pride have not possessed you and driven your actions. I wonder if a Trial of Possession might not be in order to purify you of these evils. What say you, Violet? You’ve been sinned against after all.”

Everyone at the table is transfixed.

Violet reaches for Credo’s hand and he kisses it. They look between each other.

General Calleja tenses. Credo is within his rights to challenge him to a duel and he knows he’ll lose it.

Credo leans over and kisses Violet on the lips. She nods as he pulls away.

“I will leave all judgements in your hands, Your Holiness, as the representative of the Saviour,” says Violet.
General Calleja releases his breath.

Sanctus looks at Falzon. He nods.

“Lord Calleja, bring Lady Calleja to the Office of the Committee for the Protection of the Faith on the morrow,” says Falzon. He looks across to Violet, who’s keeping her face decidedly solemn and demure. His eyes are calculating. He knows exactly what’s happened. “You are indeed most gracious, Madam Alighieri.”

Lady Calleja starts screaming and pleading, when there’s a knock on the door and a young Knight runs in with a panicked look.

“Lord Micellef, Lord Agius,” he pants, he’s run all the way from the Infirmary. “There’s been a demon attack at the Ruined Church…the Knight Escort repelled them, but they took heavy casualties.”

Lord Agius pales and dashes off without taking his leave.

“Nero, Kyrie,” Violet gasps in horror, grasping for Credo’s hand.

He’s on his feet as fast as she is. “I’ll report back as soon as possible, Your Holiness.”

“Go, go,” agrees Sanctus.

“Credo, move!” says Violet desperately.

The party empties out not far behind them, including Falzon and Sanctus.

Gloria and Edith are left sitting at the table.

“Dessert?” asks Edith.
“I’d love it,” replies Gloria. She pauses and Edith catches it.

“What do you want to know?” asks Edith. “This will be your only chance.”

“Where’s his secret room and how do I get in it?” asks Gloria.

Edith smiles darkly and stands up. “Come with me.”
Fortuna, two decades ago

“How could you not have told me?” snarls Verity as she storms through the gate.

“It wasn’t important and then it was and I didn’t know how to tell you! Vee!” Vergil catches up with her and grabs her arm. “Vee!”

“My name is Vergil Sparda and my father is the demon you worship.’ Wasn’t exactly hard.” Verity is actually crying with rage, she’s so incensed. “You managed to give me your first name.”

“You’re lucky you got that! I wasn’t going to tell you anything -“

“I’m not a damned hedge-whore! Is that what you think of me? I’m sorry you didn’t get your money’s worth then!” She fires back. “Sweet words and a nasty tongue! Was this all a game to you? To make a slut of me?”

She breaks free from his hold.

“After what you said about my father how was I supposed to tell you? The implications about my mother?” Vergil growls at her retreating back, rushing to keep up with her. “Don’t you walk away from me, Verity Agius. I’m trying to talk to you, you foolish little wench. Verity!”

“Stay away from me, Vergil! Treating me as nothing but a dalliance! I wouldn’t have minded if you’d been honest! I’d have been fine with a dalliance if you’d never made out this was anything different!”

He’s nearly able to grab her as she reaches the door.

“’I’d go through Hell for you,’” she mimics, avoiding his hand with a quick pirouette.

He feels it as she opens the door and time slows.

“Verity, no!”

The anger in her face switching to terror as she steps into it.

“Stop! Vee!”

The spell triggers instantly.

“Vergil, I don’t feel very well,” Verity says before she collapses.

He’s by her side before she hits the ground and she’s dead weight in his arms. Vergil lowers them both to the ground, leaning her against his knee.

“Vee, Vee,” he says uselessly, brushing the hair back from her face. Her lips are going blue. “No, no, no. What spell is it? How’d I break it?”

Verity swallows, then groans in pain. Her skin is cold and clammy, like she’s bleeding out and she’s breathing shallowly. She’s shivering so hard that she feels like she’s going to come apart in his arms and he unconsciously holds her tighter.

“No, no, stay with me, Vee, stay with me,” he says and he’s aware how young he sounds. He digs through his pockets and hauls out several vital stars, dumping them on the ground. He crashes the first one against her teeth and even as she gags, it rallies her temporarily and she’s able to speak.

“It hurts,” she sobs. “I’m being torn apart. Don’t go, please don’t go.”
Her fingers dig into his arm, but he doesn't notice.

“What spell is it?” he asks her desperately as she clutches her head with a scream that’s muffled by his chest. “Vee, sabiha, I won’t leave you, I won’t go. Tell me the spell.”

“I don’t know, I don’t,” she pants, tears streaming. She makes a sharp cry that tears at his heart and convulses. “I feel cold, so cold. Please don’t go, Vergil, qalbi. I’m scared, I’m scared.”

Verity’s breathing is raspy, laboured and he’s heard that before and it terrifies him.

And then it hits him.

Where he’s felt this malignant pulse and throb of power.

The realisation makes him sick, but maybe, just maybe, he can save her.

She’s losing it again, breath getting shallower and he crushes another star against her teeth.

“Just as well you had me pick them up, Mr Redgrave,” she says weakly.

“I know you so well already, Miss Agius,” he says, trying to make light of it, kissing her. “It’s the spell from the Castle.”

Verity looks Vergil dead in the eye and begins to shakily unbuckle her belt, but her hands can’t grip the ends properly. They’re trembling too hard and she doesn’t have any strength in her grip.

Vergil takes several deep breaths before closing his eyes and nodding.

He reaches for her belt and quickly undoes it, giving her a gentle, sad kiss on her lips, he can feel the tears begin to sting his eyes.
“Not like this,” he whispers, and the tears fall. “I didn’t want you like this.”

“I don’t care,” she whispers brokenly. “I don’t want to die. Just do it.”

He’s got her unbuckled now and she’s trying to help as much as she can to pull them down her legs, but she’s shivering with the cold and her body spasms with the pain. She’s starting to fade again and he cracks another of the vital stars against her teeth.

Verity can barely breathe with the pain she’s in and Vergil reaches down to at least get her wet, rubbing her clit the way she showed him the day before – Godspit and shit, it wasn’t even twenty-four hours ago – but Verity grasps his wrist and pulls his hand away.

“I don’t have time.”

She drops his hand and pulls at his zip, trying to get her fingers inside to pull his dick out, but she’s not used to it and can’t find the hole in the flap of his boxers.

Vergil catches her hand and pulls it away, kissing it quickly, before pulling his cock out. It’s limp and he pumps it to bring the blood to it.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, not now,” he mutters over Verity’s, pained, ragged breathing. He tries to pretend she’s gasping with desire, but he can’t fool himself, not when she knows that she’s dying. He can see it in the pallor of her face and the blue of her lips, her unvarnished fingernails. The bruising on her face is livid against her pale, cold skin.

“What is it?” she stutters out, seeing his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t, it won’t. God, Verity, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Vergil’s heart is breaking, not again. He’s losing the woman he loves. Not again, oh God, not again. He kisses her, hard and deep and slow and her lips are cold, so cold.

Verity pulls away.
“There’s no way in all the Nine Fucking Hells I’m dying here,” she grits out, but there’s steel under all the agony. “Do what you need to, just fuck me, but get it done quick. I don’t have time for…I don’t have time.”

Her voice trails off with the effort and she digs in her pocket for a vital star, but her hands are trembling too much and she drops it. It shatters on the stone floor and she’s somehow still got the breath to curse, “Sparda’s Balls!”

He can’t help it. He starts laughing and she giggles along with him, before spasming and crying out.

“No, the most appropriate curse under the circumstances, Miss Agius,” he tries to joke as he gropes around in her pocket for a vital star. “No wonder I’ve stage fright.”

“I’m thinking you don’t love me,” she gasps, trying to smile, but grimacing instead. “Wasn’t that what Lord Scerri said?”

He finds the star and shatters it into her mouth. She chokes on it, but rallies, just a little.

“It’s not working the same,” she pants. “If you’ve got a trick up your sleeve, now’s a good time.”

Vergil positions himself between her legs and places his limp cock at her entrance, he’s breaking inside at what he’s going to do.

He looks at her, entreating permission. He wraps a hand around both her wrists, gripping hard.

She nods, even though she has no idea what he’s about to do to her.

“What’s Fortunese for I love you?”

“Inhobbok,” she replies, looking even more frightened, but resolute.

“Inhobbok, il-Vee sabiha tieghi,” he tells her and he devil triggers.
He goes fully hard as he does so and thrusts.

Her cunt feels like it’s splitting in two as he pushes in hard and the agony in her virgin muscles overrides everything else. She screams and he’s not sure if it’s the monster atop her or the act itself. Her shriek echoes round the church, ringing in his ears long after it’s died down.

Vergil keeps going, setting up a brutal rhythm. He’s never fucked in devil trigger, never been close enough to any woman and now he is, but it’s like this and the knowledge makes him feel heartbroken.

Verity is sobbing as he thrusts into her, dark hair catching on the stone floor as her head moves with the force of his rhythm. Cruel as it is, she’s revived a little with the pain that’s ripping through her body. Her hands are balled into fists and she’s driven her nails into her palms so hard he’d smell the blood even if it wasn’t dripping onto the stone floor.

It seems to excite the spell, draw it back a little. It’s still dark and powerful, but it’s not drawing her life-force from her the way it was. He’s glad of that, in human form, Vergil’s got stamina and he hates to think how long it’ll take in demon form. He’s terrified the spell will outlast him and Verity dies. He’s not sure how many vital stars they have left, even with the extra he made her pick up in the Castle.

The fear makes him drive home ever harder into her sensitive core, trying to hurt Verity as much as he can. Bruises heal, he tells himself, dead people don’t.

He’s going to rend asunder whoever set this abomination. This should have been an act of love, their first time, her first time, not this, never this.

This is something unholy and profane. He’s committing blasphemy against her body and her soul and her heart. He has no idea how she’ll ever look at him again.

It doesn’t occur to him that he’s been sinned against as much as her. A malevolence has been perpetrated against him also.

He’s trying to enjoy the sensations from his dick, from the feel of her body being forced to yield under him, the dark, demonic, masculine desire to possess and conquer his woman as she writhes and gasps underneath him.
He can’t.

God in Heaven, he just wants to come so he can end this torture.

She’s flagging and he lets her wrists go to scrabble in their pockets for more stars, even though he’s worried she’ll try and push him off.

Verity doesn’t, instead wrapping her arms around him and pulling him tight against her, her hands running over his face and the double crest on his head. She only breaks her caress to smash a vital star against her teeth.

She’s not pushing him away. Somewhere in the back of his mind, it makes this hellish act more palatable.

She’s not pushing him away.

It reminds him though, she’s still hurting, still dying and he renews his efforts. She’s paler than ever and her lips are stone cold, like a corpse.

Their eyes meet and he can see she knows.

Knows she’s not going to make it.

Vergil moves faster, driving into her tight, tense core, pain wracking her body. He tries to build as much sensation as he can. He can feel the pressure in his back and in his balls start to build, finally

She reaches for another vital star, but her hand scrabbles uselessly, frantically, empty.

The vital stars are gone.

No, no. God no.
Vergil tries not to break his rhythm, tries to think – detrigger for his pockets or keep going?

“Must be the only time an early finish is a virtue,” he hears her stutter, weak half smile, before she’s wracked by a convulsion.

Vergil keeps going, pulling her hair, scratching her flesh, anything he can think of to hurt her, keep her awake.

It isn’t working and she’s fading. No, no, no.

PleasenoVerity.

“Those last words are awful,” he tries to be light, make a joke, but his voice catches in his throat.

The pressure’s building to tingles in his spine and connecting up to his balls, his dick. Oh thank god, finally. Just hurry, please god, just hurry. You owe me one, you bastard, you stole my mother, you can give me my Mate.

She runs her fingers over his face, a ghost light touch that burns into his skin as it passes, id-xitan sabih tieghi he thinks he hears her breathe through lips that barely move.

The light goes from her eyes and they close. Her breathing’s so light, it’s barely there.

And then it isn’t.

“No, no, Vee, Vee. Stay with me, stay with me, I’ve got so much to show you, so many places to go. Don’t leave me, please, please. How can I take you away from this goddamned place if you’ve already gone? I can’t run after you, if you’re already gone, don’t leave me, please don’t leave me,” he babbles, desperate entreaties to uncaring Gods.

His hips piston a few more times before everything connects and time stops as his climax explodes round his body. His cock twitches as his essence passes from him to her.
Vergil collapses on top of her, panting.

His heart’s stopped, his breath’s stopped, everything’s stopped and underneath Verity’s head, he can see lines start to form and shift, almost unravelling as he watches. Vergil scrambles to his feet, dick retracting back into his body. He pulls the dead weight of Verity with him as he goes, trying to back out of the circles he can see, but there’s a crack like thunder and a flash of light as he hits the outer ring.

Light and sound, rainbow-hued light, is twirling and spinning around the circles and their designs, even as they shift and reform under and around him. The maelstrom whips Verity’s hair and coat around and it’s the only sign of life from the girl’s ruined body.

The scent of her sex and her blood are pungent on the air.

Vergil’s strong enough in both his forms to hold Verity to him with just one arm, her head resting on his shoulder and he draws Yamato with the other, ready to cut his way out.

The lines unravel still, but faster now, patterns appearing more and more frenziedly. He can’t keep track of them and they’re making him nauseous to look at them. He raises Yamato ready for a slash, when a double helix of black and white erupts from the middle of the circle and he realises it was where Verity first turned to him in terror.

The double helix spirals round itself in a column, rising to the top of the church, energy pulses ascending and descending along its length, pulling everything into it. Vergil can feel it trying to draw them in as well.

It’s all he can do to stay in place.

When the floor’s been picked clean and there’s not a line or light left, the double helix unpicks itself into a strand of dark and a strand of light.

They spin about the outer circle opposite each other.

“Come stand in the centre, Son of Sparda,” says a tinkling voice, like crystal breaking. The white
line pulses.

Vergil doesn’t move. “Let us go. Give me Verity back.”

“We will,” says the ground-glass voice. It sounds like it’s unforming and speech is growing difficult. The black line throbs.

“Time grows short, Son of Sparda,” continues the white line.

Vergil takes the few steps into the centre and the lines travel in and reform a loose helix.

“We consider this an honour, Son of Sparda,” says the white line in something like reverence.

“She was quite a meal, quite an energy,” says the black line. “I’m well fed.”

“You killed her!” he snarls, choking with grief and rage.

“She is, as are you, between the Tick and the Tock,” says the black.

“As Life was taken, be it Returned Twice Over,” says the white and it sounds like an intonation.

Light shoots through Verity, stirring her limp arms as it passes.

“You are honoured, Son of Sparda, we do not often return the Virgin to her Husband if he fails in his love for her.” The white light hums.

“Know this, Son of Sparda,” growls the dark and it is barely recognisable as language. “The ones who called us, did so with Intention. They had as much skill as priests, but were not priests.”

“Do not waste the New Life granted unto you,” says the Light.
They link back together again, spinning around in that expanding and contracting column, the couple standing in the centre. All at once, there’s light and sound, too loud, too bright, and he can barely cope with the assault on his senses.

Then the column pours down into the ground beneath his feet, a portal he can’t follow.

It shuts and they’re gone.

*Everything’s gone.*

*Everything’s still.*

Vergil de-triggers as Verity takes a shuddering breath and her eyes flutter open.

She tries to speak, but he shushes her as he grasps her tight, kissing all over her face and laughing.

Verity’s arms come up around him slowly as she returns his kisses.

*She’s alive.*

Verity’s alive and in his arms.

To hell with everything else.
"You look thoughtful, Madam Sparda," says Falzon. "Or do you prefer Madam LaSalle?"

"Madam Sparda is fine, Lord Falzon," replies Trish. "Where’s the guest bathroom, My Lord?"

"Oh, I’m sure you know your way around my house," he says and there’s a tone underlying. "It’s not the first time you’ve been here."

"I wasn’t here that often, Lord Falzon," points out Trish.

"Were you not? I understood you and Edith to be particular friends," he says. "Perhaps I was a little harsh with her on the subject. It’s up a floor and 3rd left."

Trish looks as if Violet’s going to come with her, but Falzon delays her with a hand light on her elbow. Trish pauses, but Violet waves her on.

Trish goes, but the way she looks back says she’s unhappy about it.

Falzon offers Violet his arm. "Let’s return to the party, Violet."

She takes his arm, with some hesitation.

"I’m so looking forward to the next few months," says Falzon. He pats her hand. "I feel like Fortuna’s…fortunes, so to speak, are looking up."

"What did you find in that Elsewhere?" she asks, voice a ragged whisper.

"All in good time, my dear friend," he replies, holding onto her hand. "Just know, I didn’t send
Nero into it. I have a fondness for the lad, when all else is considered.”

They’re back at the main party and he turns, kisses her hand slowly, eyes on her face and bows, before moving off to mingle.

Kyrie passes her a glass of wine and Violet sets it down.

Kyrie looks at her strangely.

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Trish is looking around for Falzon’s room, but she’s having no luck.

She feels all around the wall, even carefully moving the bookcase in the hall, but she can’t find it.

“What the hell have you done with the door?” she mutters. She pulls a jewel out her bag and runs it all over the hall. There’s nothing.

“He moved it,” says Edith from behind her. “I don’t know how he did it, because he comes up here and then vanishes.”

“Can you find out for me?” asks Trish.

Edith shakes her head. “You lied to us. To me, Gloria. I had to ask who you were and where you’d gone.”

“I would have stayed in touch, I’ve only been away a month.”

“A month to you is almost a year to me.” Edith stands aside. “You’ve no reason to be up here, Madam LaSalle.”
“Edith, please,” begins Trish.

Edith cuts her off, her voice polite and robotic. “I have nothing but my children, Madam LaSalle. He threw me out for a week and kept my children from me. Told me the next time I betrayed him, I wouldn’t get back. Please go downstairs.”

Trish sighs and walks back downstairs in front of Edith.

Tony appears in the space and looks around, paying particular attention to where Trish was first looking. He walks about the hall, listening to his footsteps.

“Vee was better at this,” he mutters.

He looks around the bookcase that Trish has moved and pulls it aside, before tossing it against the next wall, hard enough to break.

He waits.

***

Everyone hears the crash.

Conversation stops dead and Edith’s children run screaming from the floor above, straight to their mother and Falzon. He’s remarkably tender with them, almost as if he was their father.

“Ladies,” he says. “I bid you stay down here, though I imagine all we’ll find is a shelf has dropped from the wall. Pass out their swords to some of the gentlemen, Maris.”

The maid hands out swords to the Knights who’d brought them with them and Falzon leads the way up the stairs.

He walks past Tony, indicating to the other Knights what rooms and halls to check, before he examines the bookcase and hall for himself.
The Knights aren’t exactly quiet as they search the house, calling back and forth to each other.

Falzon looks over the smashed bookcase. It’s a huge, solid oak set of shelves, dark against the yellow stone of the walls and the floor. He moves some shelves aside with the tip of his sword and some of the books, but nothing happens.

Tony watches him from the side of the hall.

Falzon kneels down and rummages carefully through the wreckage of the books, before he pulls one out and opens it slightly.

There’s a small purple mist that wafts around the edges of the book. Falzon smiles and nods to himself before placing the book in another room, which appears to be a library.

“It was nothing to trouble yourselves with, ladies and gentlemen. There must have been a small earthquake that we didn’t feel with our preoccupation that’s caused one of my bookcases to fall.” He looks at the children, who’ve been sitting with Kyrie and Xaali while Nero and Josh look on. “You look remarkably at home, Sister Micellef and Miss Mataan. Getting in some practice for this time next year?”

“Daddy, Kyrie was telling us a story about a Fairy Prince who falls in love with a lady and she has to hold on to him while his Mummy turns him into hot snakes,” says the middle one. She looks in confusion at Nero. “Daddy, who’s that blue man behind Nero?”

Edith flinches when she hears the word Daddy on the lips of her child. She meets Trish’s gaze, then away.

All eyes turn to a space behind Nero, but there’s no one there the party can see.

Tony disappears, but his voice remains as he speaks in Nero’s mind. Ask to see Falzon’s library. It’s very educational.

“Violet used to tell it to us when we were little,” says Kyrie. “I loved that story.”
“Mami used to tell me that one as well,” says Josh. “That and the one about the Fire Princess. She said they were her and Auntie Verity’s favourite stories as well.”

“I loved the Fire Princess – what puts out fire but water -” says Kyrie.

“-what dries up water but fire – “ picks up Nero.

“Tell him to give her a kiss!” The three finish in unison.

“Did they live happily ever after?” asks Xaali.

“U għammru u tgħammru, u spiċċat,” says Falzon. “They lived together and they had children together and the tale is finished.”

*Not if Peter Falzon’s involved, they don’t.*

Falzon claps his hands and the children kiss Kyrie and Xaali good night and thank them for the story. Their mother takes them back to bed.

“Lord Falzon,” says Nero, making his way to his General. “If your library here is anything like the one in your office, I’d be honoured if you’d show me it.”

Falzon looks at Nero for a moment, then smiles, an actual, genuine smile.

“Of course, Nero. That was my intention tonight, but I’m delighted the suggestions was yours.”

He steps aside and extends his arm. “After you.”

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Falzon leads Nero up the stairs and past the smashed book case. Tony follows after him.

Nero looks at the book case. The marks on the wall of where it usually stands and the chunks of brick where it landed are clear. He resists the urge to look at Tony.

*It thought it stood a chance.*

Nero can’t help the quick quirk that crosses his lips.

Falzon opens the door by the bookcase, as proud as an expectant father. There’s a quote on the door, *All Knowledge is Worth Having.*

The room is huge, with high ceilings and massive windows. There’s so much natural light streaming in, the lamps round the room would hardly be necessary. There’s a fireplace at the end of the room, with settees and armchairs scattered around, particularly down by the fire. There’s a large writing desk in the centre of the outer wall.

There are books everywhere.

They’re piled on the chairs and the low tables. The large, dark wooden book shelves that line the walls and stand free in the centre of the room are crammed with books. The room is as large as the library at the Castle.

“Wow,” gasps Nero, in awe. “I thought there were loads of books at home, but there’s at least three times that in here.”

“Nearly thirty years of collecting, Nero. It was the first thing Lord Scerri impressed upon me was to educate myself. “We stand on the shoulders of Giants,” he said. “We can access the wisdom of the Ancients, when we read.” “

*For a private house, I’m impressed,* says Tony, walking around. *Murdering bastard aside, those children are fortunate to be growing up with this library.*

He looks at some of the titles. *Feed his ego.*
“I’ve been thinking about what you said the other day, My Lord,” Nero begins, shyly. He fingers a book, noting that it’s about quantum physics and time travel.

“You’re welcome to read any of these books, Nero,” says Falzon, pulling the book out and putting it in his hand. Nero leafs through it. “But carry on.”

“How far you’ve come, with the whole weight of Fortuna against you. I know what they say about me, so it must have been worse for you,” he says as Tony indicates a book about scientific explanations for ley lines and timeslips. Nero wanders over and picks it up.

“It’s been difficult, I don’t deny that,” says Falzon. “But I bid you recall what I said to you – our situations were similar. You are slightly ahead of me, in that the Micellefs oversaw much of your upbringing and you’re marrying into an Old Family. People will always be suspicious of you, but you’ll find it easier to be accepted.”

*It grieves me you never had that luxury.*

“I’m sorry you never had that, General Falzon,” says Nero. “I don’t want people to say I’m relying on the Micellef name.”

“They’ll say that anyway. I realised a long time ago, that it was better to be feared than loved,” says Falzon. “I worked hard to become the head of the most feared and influential Committee on Fortuna. It meant essentially changing myself into someone I wasn’t.”

He looks directly at Nero. “Much like I’m working to change you. Teaching you the discipline to tamp down your natural tendencies to run off at the mouth and act without thinking, to begin with.”

“I hope I’m learning, Lord General,” says Nero, looking quickly behind Falzon as Tony taps the book with the Elsewhere in it. *Remember this.*

“Your firearm – did you follow a design for it or reverse engineer it?”

“A bit of both,” he replies.
Tony taps a book about the Large Hadron Collider. *Kyrie’s spoke about that a lot.*

“So, you have engineering skills? You’re fairly intuitive?”

“It would seem so My Lord,” replies Nero, picking up the indicated book. “I don’t think I can work people out the way you can.”

Falzon looks at him for a moment, then laughs. “Is that your polite way of saying I’m manipulative?”

*Nine Hells, I never thought he’d actually acknowledge that.*

“I guess so,” says Nero, carefully. “But you use it for good.”

Falzon laughs and claps him on the shoulder. “I don’t think you have my talents in that regard. But you’ve plenty talents of your own and those we can work with. Now let’s return to the others. I’m sure dinner is waiting for us.”

“My Lord –“ Nero pauses. He could be about to blow everything and Tony’s stiffened as he’s read what Nero is about to ask.

“Yes, Nero?” Falzon has paused mid turn.

“Why did you never marry into an Old Family? You’re powerful enough that I couldn’t see any of them refusing your Suit.”

*Godspit and shit, Nero. When you get the sense you shouldn’t say something, it’s because you shouldn’t say it.*

“I did, Nero. She died.” He looks squarely at Nero and there’s ice in his eyes. “Now, never, ever bring it up again.”
The soup is out as Edith comes to sit at Falzon’s side with a quick smile and a kiss for him.

“You waited on me?” she says.

“I can’t say the Prayer of Thanks without you, qalbi,” says Falzon, kissing her hand.

Everyone bows their head as Falzon intones the same traditional Prayer Nero had said at the first meal he’d shared with Falzon. “Nirringrazzjawkom għall-ikel li gie pprovdut u l-idejn li ġej jew l-ikel. jista ’jsostni u jsahhah il-korpi, l-imhuh u l-erwieħ taghna għall-provi li ġejjin.”

He unclasps his hands. “Let’s eat.”

“So, Kyrie,” begins Madam Campbell. “You must have thought about your dress.”

“Not really,” she replies, frowning. “I’ve not had much chance with my brother’s death.”

“Why this Midwinter Night, Madam Campbell?” Violet hands the rolls to the left of her. Dante is trying very hard to eat with polite grace, but he’s not really managing. He takes a few rolls out the basket and uses them to mop up his soup.

Lady shakes her head as she butters her roll and eats it separately from the soup.

“We need to strike while the iron’s hot, Madam Alighieri. Nero and Josh have proven extremely popular on Twitter and Facebook. Everyone loves a wedding and there’s a huge market in being a wedding destination.” Madam Campbell salts her soup.

“My brother is only dead this last month. I-we’ve had no time to grieve his loss,” says Kyrie. She sips her wine to hide her tears. “We’re supposed to grieve for 13 turns of the moon, which is how long our Courtship is meant to last.”

Madam Campbell looks at Falzon. “13 lunar months, roughly a year and a day.”
She nods. “You’ll be familiar with the festival of Christmas on the Mainland? It’s very much like Midwinter Night, but a few days after.”

“Is that the thing with the trees?” asks Josh. “I’ve seen the trees up in the ex-pat Mainlanders houses.”

“It is, Mister Agius, and it’s a prime holiday time for Mainlanders.” She nods towards the Leader of Fortuna l-ewwel. “Particularly the families that we would aim to encourage.”

Dante’s aware that most of the table keep giving him and his two colleagues surreptitious glances. There is a low undercurrent around the table directed at them, he can’t quite put his finger on. His back itches for Rebellion.

Lady catches his eye. She’s noticed it too. She carries on eating her soup and paying attention to the table.

Kyrie looks at Violet and Nero, seeking reassurance. She rubs her head.

“There’s no one in this room who’s ever doubted that Nero and Kyrie were meant for each other, but I still feel like it’s rushed and disrespectful to Credo,” says Violet. One of the maids goes to fill her glass and she puts her hand over it. “Fresh orange, please.”

Dante watches Falzon notice. Falzon frowns slightly. “Are you alright, Violet? You normally appreciate a fine red.”

“I have to work tomorrow, Peter, but thank you for your concern,” she replies. “I reiterate my point. This wedding is rushed and I’m not happy with it being leveraged for money. Next year, not a problem, but not this year.”

“It’s not for money, Violet, it’s for what that money can bring to Fortuna and Nine Hells, do we need that money now,” says General Calleja. “We need - what do the Brits say? – bums on seats.”

Nero takes Kyrie’s hand and a loaded look passes between them. He leans across and whispers something to her. She shakes her head and fiddles with the blue agate bracelet.
“And it would seem that our first course is finished,” says Falzon. “Please be excused from our table and treat my home as yours until our second course is ready.”

He stands up and bows to the table, who return it.

The guests leave the table and head for outside to smoke, to enjoy the night air, to stand around in their own groups and talk.

Edith and Falzon circulate around the room.

“ Weird custom, leaving the table between courses,” says Dante, standing with his family group.

More dinner guests drop their voices as Lady leads the way to the terrace where Violet’s sat down again. She catches their comments anyway.

“We’re getting a lot of side-eye,” says Lady.

“Yeah, I expected that,” he replies.

“Those passes are good, right? They can’t touch us?”

“You’re technically UO employees,” says Violet, hearing as they’ve reached her. “They may try, but they can’t touch you.”

“You’re filling me with confidence here,” Lady replies.

“You came back here, before I’d even hired you,” points out Violet. “Why, I don’t know, but were you seriously just going to hide in the house all day?”

“So, who’s all here? And how devout are they?” Dante asks.
“Faith Committee, Fortuna L-ewwel, Tourist Committee, Tourist Business Guild and spouses of,” Violet points out various shakers and movers in each. “As for how religious, well, it varies. But it’s more how the Faith is used that matters. You should know that one.”

“There’s a reason me and religion don’t mix,” says Dante.

“When they find out for sure who you are, you may not get a choice,” she says.

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“You never mentioned that Falzon wants us married by the end of the fucking year? Godspit and shit, Nero!” Kyrie’s raging. They’ve gone right down the bottom of Falzon’s garden so that no one can hear them, but they’re still keeping it down. They went off giggling, so anyone paying attention will think they’ve slopped off to smooch.

Peeping Toms’re going to get a fright.

“I know it’s shorter than you wanted, but we were getting married anyway,” Nero hisses back. “What difference does a year make?”

“I want to marry you in my own time, in my own space. I don’t want our wedding to be a spectator sport!” she snarls back. “I didn’t want our wedding to be here at all!”

“We haven’t got a choice, Kyrie! We have to play nice doggie till we find a rock and I’m fresh out of fucking rocks right now!” Nero tries to reason with Kyrie’s back. He tests out the waters for holding her, but she shrugs him off.

“Kyrie, it’s you who keeps telling me we have to play their game till we can get out of here, but every turn it’s you who keeps trying to game the deck.” Nero’s becoming just as furious as she is. “Are you forgetting the power Falzon’s got over us, over this island? You lost half your house to your brother’s girlfriend. If she’d wanted to marry him, Violet had plenty time and she didn’t.”

“How dare you! Violet’s as much family as Credo, and you, while we’re on it!” The sound of a slap echoes sharp across the garden.
“I think working for Falzon’s rubbing off on you, Nero,” Kyrie says coldly.

“Good,” he replies. “He worked for what he got. He didn’t inherit it.”

“My parents and Credo worked hard for what they had and they worked hard for Fortuna! Micellefs have done nothing but serve Fortuna and most of them have died for it!” She turns as if to storm off, but he grabs her wrist. “Let go of me!”

Nero hauls her back and she stumbles into him. He grips her arms hard.

“Can you still feel them?” Nero whispers.

“We’re alone,” she replies.

Nero rubs his face, the handprint bright against his pale skin. Kyrie brushes her fingers across it, feeling the heat under their tips. It’s already starting to fade and she keeps her hand there while it goes.

"I'm still annoyed you never told me that they wanted us married that quick," she says."You should have hit me.”

“No one would believe I’d hit you. You’re known for domestic violence,” he replies. The mark might be gone, but the stinging is still there.

Kyrie holds her head as if she’s in pain. “It’s so quiet here.”

Nero takes her head in his hands and kisses her forehead. “We have twenty minutes before we have to go back.”

She groans. “It was so noisy. Like everyone was shouting.”
“Do you think you’re getting more sensitive?”

She looks slightly exasperated. “Empty Night, Nero, I have no clue. I just know it hurts inside my head. It started as soon as I got into the house.”

Nero doesn’t say anything, just massages her head, careful to avoid the pins in her hair. She’d kill him for real if he messed up her hair. She sags against him and groans. It’s the same groan she makes in bed and Nero’s touch turns seductive. His fingertips are still firm on her head, but he begins to kiss her cheeks and her chin, working his way around her jaw and her throat.

Kyrie drops her hands to Nero’s hips, as the pain in her head drops down to a drowsy pressure. She’s starting to look slightly spaced as the pain subsides. Nero’s rigid fingers move down to her neck, alternating between palming the muscles and digging his fingertips either side of the bones.

She’s so tense, Nero’s touch is more pain than pressure. Her head rolls back and she sighs as she moves her head slightly to catch Nero’s lips. Both of them unconsciously move their lips in concert with Nero’s fingers, tongues gliding sensuously around each other.

She balls her fingers slowly into his jacket and pulls him backwards against a statue of an angel or a demon or something with wings. She’s trapped between the warm, hard stone and Nero. They take their time exploring each other’s mouths, still in time to his pressing fingers.

Kyrie feels giddy as her tension eases, a creeping languorousness stealing along her spine and spreading through her legs. She feels almost...altered.

She can feel all of Nero pressed against her, big and looming over her as she can’t stop the sensations of melting slipping out along her skin. She feels drunk and she’s sure that she hadn’t had that much, she hasn’t had more than normal. She’s usually pretty good with wine, growing up in a wine-making family.

She wants to stretch this out, take the whole night exploring Nero’s body in this new awareness. She wants …she doesn’t know what she wants…she just wants.

She needs to be…she has no time…and all she has is time…why does she need time?

There’s something pricking at the back of her brain and she knows it’s important and there’s time
and no time and all the time…

No time at all.

She breaks off the kiss from Nero and he’s as far gone as she is, as he struggles to remember what he’s meant to be doing when he could be rocking her to a lazy orgasm.

It’s the light that’s the first sign.

There’s far too much of it and it’s all the wrong colours.

It’s all the colours.

***

The gong calls out for the next course and the groups come back to Falzon’s table.

All but two.

“Should we hold off for them, Violet, do you think?” Asks Falzon.

“I think we should just start without them. They’ve probably just lost track of time. They are teenagers,” says Violet as she considers.

“Ah, to be young and in love,” says Madam Campbell. “I was hoping we could continue the wedding discussions, as we really do want to make them the centrepoint of our Midwinter Festival.

“I’m technically Kyrie’s next of kin and I guess since we consider Nero part of the family, I’m his too,” Violet says as she looks at her dinner. Edith’s arranged for her to get a slow-cooked curry that falls apart as you look at it. “I think I can speak on their behalf.”
Madam Campbell nods. “How old are they, by the way?”

“Kyrie is 19 next March and Nero is 20 on the 25th of December, I believe,” says Falzon. “Please, eat. Edith will have theirs kept warm for when they return with unkempt hair and apologies.”

“Pretty specific thing to know about someone,” says Dante.

All eyes are on him as Falzon merely has that amused, calculating look upon his face.

“I’ve had reason to be familiar with his file, lately. I like to be informed of the comings and goings on Fortuna, Mr Sparda,” he responds. “There is very little that escapes my notice.”

“I’ve gathered that. Awful lot of power to be concentrated within the hands of one person,” continues Dante. He cuts up his swordfish steak, careful to eat the way the rest of the table is, fork in the left hand.

“It’s a burden I bear for Fortuna. However, I and the rest of the Faith Committee would disagree that I hold any more power than any other High Order member.” Falzon indicates for the Ħobż tal-Malti bread to be passed down to him. “Sanctus and Supreme General are above Speaker of the Faith Committee, so when he’s elected within the next few days, General Agius will outrank myself.”

“When do you think you’ll elect another Sanctus?” asks Dante.

“I don’t believe we will elect another Santus, Mr Sparda,” Falzon says as he swallows his swordfish. “I believe The Saviour himself will call his successor to take his rightful place.”

“And now Madam Campbell, please, let’s see how much we can give our lovebirds to complain about for when they return.”

The conversation turns to weddings and customs from other countries.

Falzon is very careful to steer the conversation away from some of Fortuna’s more…colourful wedding traditions.
Well, the tourists wouldn’t understand.
Chapter 28

Fortuna, two decades ago

It takes him hours to get her back.

He doesn’t know the way and Verity is drifting in and out of consciousness.

“Let me walk,” she mutters and promptly falls to her knees. If it hadn’t been for Vergil holding on to her, Verity would have been on the ground.

The effort of moving makes her vomit over herself and Vergil hauls her upright, wrinkling his nose at the sour smell. He wishes he has some Vital Stars, but he doesn’t and Vergil is nothing if not a realist.

“Come on, Vee sabiha,” he groans, pulling her upright. They’re burning these clothes when he gets her back. They’re shredded anyway from where his talons raked her flesh to keep her awake. The only items not ruined are her boots. She tries to take her weight as he pulls an arm over his shoulder, but she’s so, so weak.

“I’m thirsty,” she whispers. Her skin is still sickly pale and clammy, her pulse thready and weak. It’s too fast and her hands are cold.

Vergil looks around for water and all he can see is the fountain. It’s got lilypads in it, but it’s relatively clear, so he chances it, sitting her on the side, mindful of anything coming. He cups a hand into the cold water, testing it first. It tastes earthy, but nothing more.

He brings his hand to her lips and she nearly chokes as she tries to gulp it. He wonders if he should clean her up first, but getting her back’s more important.

Let whoever set this atrocity see what they’ve done to her.

When Verity’s had her fill, he asks her if she’s ready to go on and she gives a slight nod. “I smell,” she whispers, plucking at the top she’s wearing. Her fingers start to scramble for the buttons. “Off.
I want it off.”

There’s an edge of hysteria in her voice that rips at Vergil and he helps her get her coat off. She can’t get the top off fast enough, but her fingers have no grip for the buttons.

“Wait,” he murmurs against her hair, as he unsheathes Yamato and slices the garment in half.

It falls ruined to the ground.

Verity’s wrists are black and blue where he held her down.

She sees Vergil looking at them. “They’ll heal. I’ll heal.”

Verity begins to struggle to her feet and he pulls her upright.

“Let me carry you, Vee,” he begs. “We’ll be faster.”

Verity shakes her head. “I wanna walk. I can walk.”

Her eyes roll back in her head and she passes out. Vergil wraps her in his jacket, then heaves her over his shoulder in a firemans carry. The commingled smell of her blood and his come turns his stomach.

It’s not that he can’t carry her, it’s that she’s tall and it’s unbalancing him. He’s pretty wrecked as well, healing factor be damned. He also needs to be careful because he doesn’t know the effects that remain from the spell. She’s showing all the signs of shock and they’re miles from anywhere.

They’re miles from anywhere on a demon-infested island.

***
The thumping on the door wakes up Peter and Credo. Peter swears at it. “Fuck off. I’ve only just got to sleep.”

“Micellef! Falzon! Lord Scerri’s demanding your presence! Hie! Hie! Open up!”

“What time is it, Calleja?” calls Credo, voice thick and drowsy.

“10 am, now make haste! There’s some disaster at the Castle!”

Peter waves his hand and the door opens. Cassius stands there in surprise.

“Your father’s a General, Cassius and a Committee General at that. Don’t take me for a fool.”

Cassius comes fully into the room and shuts the door. “The Castle’s been wrecked and they’ve managed to knock a massive hole in the wall with that tapestry that Verity did. I don’t know anymore than that. Officially, it’s an earthquake. Unofficially, it’s…well, Lord Scerri will tell you more and I warn you both – he’s fit to be tied.”

Cassius leaves and the two Knights look at each other. “What the Hell has your intended done now, Credo?” Peter groans. He runs his hands over his face.

Credo rolls slowly out of bed. “Will we have time for a shower? I don’t think I can face today without a shower.”

“I feel like I’ve spent all night fighting demons,” says Peter. He pauses. “Do you think it was them? That they triggered the spell?”

“It was definitely them arguing. I’d know Vee’s voice anywhere,” replies Credo. He looks pensive. “I hope she’s alright.”

“She’ll be fine. At the worst, she’ll probably just need a few days rest,” replies Peter, pulling out a couple of towels from the drawer and heading for the bathroom. “Get the uniforms ready and I’ll leave your towel in there.”
He shuts the door.

Credo catches sight of himself in the mirror, pale, haunted, hair dishevelled. *Pinny Falzon, Verity Micellef. All for you, Lord Sparda. Keep the mother of your grandchild safe and I'll be a good, loving Papa to him.*

***

Vergil’s gone about a mile when the whimpering coming from his shoulder gets a little more focused.

“Hey, Vee, *sabīha,*” he says gently. “You’re in the land of the living.”

“Put me down for a bit, I just want to…*ahhhhh.*” Verity’s face contorts with the pain.

He gently crouches and slides her off his shoulders, propping her up against a tree. She hisses as she sits. He’s watchful – Verity reeks of blood and right now she’s easy prey for whatever’s lurking in the forest. He’s watchful of her physical state as well. Her breathing’s still shallow, but she doesn’t look any worse than she did ten minutes ago.

“I’m freezing and I just feel so tired,” she says to his unasked question. It’s costing a her a considerable effort to speak. She looks around. “We’re not far from the road. We’re maybe five, six miles from home.”

“Which direction, Vee?” Vergil asks as he strokes her face. She doesn’t wince or try to pull away, thank God.

“I can hear the sea. Can you?”

Vergil listens and he can’t believe he’s missed it. “Follow the sound of the sea?”

“I think we’re headed south. The sea’s noisier here because of the cliffs and the currents.”
There’s a squawk further off into the trees. They share an alarmed look and Vergil flicks up Yamato, ready to fight. They wait anxiously for a few minutes, but there’s only the usual birdsong and tiny murders.

“I can go on,” says Verity, trying to push herself to standing. She hauls herself to her feet, clinging to the tree for dear life.

She doesn’t fool Vergil.

He takes hold of her under her arms and taking most of her weight, they three-leggedly shuffle on towards the road.

***

Captain Agius spends the night in his daughter’s room, just sitting.

Sometimes he gets up and fingers her things, pulling books out of the shelves and leafing through them. Sometimes he comes across something from when she was younger – a drawing, a book, an early tapestry, a treasured toy.

Captain Agius remembers bringing Pinny through after Verity was born, sitting her up on the bed with Mama, Pinny excitedly asking, “Whew mah babee? Whew mah babee?”

He looks through the photograph album he found in her drawer and he finds it, the chubby, cute toddler with the squalling, red-faced infant. “Imma look aftah you, Vee,” and kissing her, silencing Verity’s shrieking instantly. From then on they were the best of friends. He often forgot that Verity was two years younger.

They shared this room till Pinny was six and even then, one would sneak into the other’s room because they couldn’t sleep apart.

It’s strange, Captain Agius thinks as he flips through the album, seeing his daughters age 16 years in several minutes, how he never noticed it. Never noticed how the furniture in the room stayed the same as the décor changed, as the toys turned to schoolbooks and spell work. The pictures on their
walls beginning to reflect their individual personalities rather than the generic childishness that all cultures mandate for their young children.

He flips to the photo of their first Tests, to see if they’d taken more than height and athleticism from his side of the family. The relentless practicing when the Tutors discovered they were both Talented, but it was Vee who’d inherited the lions’ share. Pinny got the looks, Vee got the learning.

The door opens and Abigail pads in and in the soft light she almost looks like the woman who stole his heart away from Dorcas all those years ago. It’s only the limp from where he kicked her yesterday that kills the illusion.

She sits down next to him on the bed. “Memory lane?”

“It went so fast, Abigail. I thought we’d have a few years of dalliances with Pinny and persuading Credo to extend his Suit till Verity was finished Training, then grandchildren.” He glances at her, relieved the bruises are fading. “Not this.”

“It would seem that none of us got what we wished for,” says Abigail. She looks down at her wedding ring and blue agate bracelet.

Captain Agius takes her hand and spins the bracelet. “I remember how nervous I was when I asked your father what Gift was suitable. I had such high hopes for us, sitting down across the table, with both our families, setting out our Marriage Treaty. I’ve met none of it.”

“We have a good home, money, our girls. We had a good life, Edward. I don’t know why you would have ruined it the way you have,” says Abigail, bitterly.

“I wanted more, Abigail, for you, for them, for us. I wanted you to be Lady Agius. Our girls to be Lady and not Miss.” He flicks through some keepsakes in Verity’s album, some little gifts that Credo has given her over the years. Ribbons for her hair, dried flowers from a posy he must have given her at some point. “I don’t know how people didn’t see this coming earlier. Our families being friends for years.”

“We’ve been so lucky with them, Edward, they’re good girls. Clever girls. They would have done so well in the Order. They still will. They’ll distinguish themselves without your interference.” Abigail pulls her hand away.
“Vee reminds me so much of you, Abigail,” says Captain Agius, as if he’s trying to mollify her. He strokes her hair. “Your sharp mind, your –“

“Sharp tongue?”

“Sharp wit,” concedes Captain Agius. “Independence. All the things I love in you.”

Abigail flicks to photos taken at Pinny’s Coming Out Ball, when she was 16. “Can you remember why Verity was upset?”

“Somebody said something to her? You know how teenage girls are. Someone disparaged her dress?” Captain Agius can’t remember. “I just remember that there was teenage hijinks that resulted in a duel and Credo couldn’t keep his eyes off her. I thought Credo would make an offer for Pinny, which I would have turned down. Pinny could have landed one of Lord Azzopardi’s boys.”

Abigail looks at her husband in disgust. “Cassius Calleja told her that she looked like a boy in a dress and that the only reason anyone would be interested in her was to get to Pinny. That was his answer when she asked him for a dance. Credo heard them and challenged Cassius to that duel and tanked him. Then he asked Verity for that dance and by the end of it their hearts were lost.”

Captain Agius has the good grace to look ashamed.

“You truly can’t remember, can you?” Abigail stands up. “Did you ever see them as anything other than pets or cattle?”

“Be very careful, Abigail.”

“You’re not even hiding it from them anymore, Edward. I’ve nothing left to be careful about.” Abigail stands up. “I promise you this – whatever you’ve done to Verity, I guarantee there’ll be no grandchildren resulting from you whoring out our daughters. I’ve made damn sure they eat their greens.”

There’s a hammering on the door that distracts him long enough for Abigail to run back to her
room and lock the door.

***

It takes a while for them to pick their way down the path to the road. She passes out twice and he almost drops her once, but they make it.

They sit on the side for a long time, just holding each other.

Sometimes the smallest victories are the greatest.

***

It’s the fastest shower Credo’s ever had. He’s getting a headache from the lack of sleep and his hair pulling tight in its plait as it dries.

The Castle is closed to the public and Knights, Order Executive and UO Special Projects are swarming over it.

No, not just Knights, but Faith Committee Knights as well as the shakers and movers of the Committee itself.

They’re stopped at the door to the Grand Hall and -

“Godspit and fucking shit, that’s a bloody big hole,” says Peter.

“Is that a staircase behind there?” says Credo. “Who’s that bald man with the scar with Lord Scerri and Lord Arius?”

Lord Scerri looks down and bids them come closer. Cassius was right to warn them. He looks like he’s contemplating murder and he isn’t particularly worried whose.
Lord Arius is surrounded by several young women who look remarkably similar. One of them is holding an open briefcase with some kind of large phone that Arius is using to shout at people about security breeches.

Arkham stands with Lord Arius. The former looks mildly amused as the door opens again and Captain Agius is escorted in, flanked by two burly Faith Committee Knights. He looks grim.

“Is this her father?” asks Arkham. “I see the resemblance.”

“It is, Sir,” replies Lord Scerri. “Answer honestly, Captain Agius, for it’s not just your life at stake here.”

“Yes, My Lord General.” His voice is tight.

“Don’t insult my intelligence by telling me she’s abed and injured, Agius.” Scerri indicates the wall behind him. “Where’s Verity?”

“In all honesty, Lord Scerri, I don’t know. I haven’t laid eyes on her in two days,” replies Captain Agius. “My daughter did that?”

“Your daughter and her… companion.” Even incensed, Lord Scerri can’t bring himself to decry a Son of Sparda. “I knew there was someone watching us.”

“How do you know it was her? Perhaps it was him on his own or someone else entirely. It’s not the first break-in we’ve had in here.” Captain Agius is clutching at straws, but he’s damned if he’s going to grovel in front of Fortuna’s elite. He’s the equal of any man here. “It’s not a secret we have one of the largest Forbidden Libraries in the world. I’m no expert, but I’ll wager those books and artefacts are worth millions.”

“His point is valid, Lord Scerri,” says Arkham.

Neither Credo nor Peter can take their eyes from his ever-mobile scar. It’s active, but quietly so.

“We know they were here, Mr Arkham,” snarls Scerri.
Peter and Credo shift uneasily. Lord Scerri rarely loses his temper and even when he does, it’s more a cold fury than this visibly emotional.

“How do you know?” Demands Agius. “They set the Wedding Spell last night! She’ll be underneath Vergil Sparda, not beside him!”

Scerri’s stopped in his tracks, whether by the knowledge or a fury of a protective father, Credo isn’t sure.

“Is this true?” Lord Scerri demands, but he’s calmer now.

“Yes, My Lord,” steps in Peter, quickly. “I believe they’ll be in it even now.”

“Have you checked it?”

“Not yet, Lord General. It’s my understanding that grooms become rather emotional afterwards, as an effect of the Spell and I should not wish to encounter him if it can be avoided.”

“True,” Scerri muses as he strokes his beard. “And it does somewhat change matters if she’s pregnant.”

“Vergil might wield a blunted sword,” says Arkham. “You may wish to consider how you’ll introduce your alternates.”

Lord Scerri ignores him. “We do know that they aren’t in his rooms at the Archive Lodgings, and we have seen them here earlier in the night.”

“And at no point was there any indication they’d made any discoveries extra to our purposes,” says Arkham.

Lord Scerri looks at the wall behind them.
“It doesn’t follow that it was them,” Captain Agius reiterates, angrily.

“If he’d fell for Pinny, we wouldn’t have this problem,” mutters Credo. “You’d never have got her up here in the first place.”

“That may be so, but that is not where we are,” says Arkham and Scerri narrows his eyes as he tries to consider the angle that Arkham is working. “Surely, given our proximity to the area, we would have noticed them causing this uproar, think you not, Lord Scerri?”

“We didn’t notice when this occurred, though and that distresses and confounds me,” replies Scerri. “And with the damage done, it’s no small trifle that we could remain so unaware.”

“Perhaps, then,” begins Peter. “It wasn’t them, not all of it, anyway.”

“And we’re so focused on Verity and Vergil that we never noticed someone else using them as cover?” Credo’s not a natural liar and he’s even impressing himself.

“My Lord, what does it matter? This is no different from the Opera House. Credo’s previous point stands.” Captain Agius protests. He knows he’s taking a chance on something he doesn’t fully understand. “You need Verity pregnant by Vergil Sparda. She may be nosing into areas that are far above her, but Verity was always advanced. Perhaps this is merely Lord Sparda’s way of suggesting she be brought into the fold early.”

“I had my doubts after the Opera House,” retorts Scerri.

“The Saviour statue was the only damage, true?” Asks Arkham. “I thought it was only destroyed because they were defending themselves from this mysterious Man in Red? And I doubt after the fuss he made over the Master’s Chamber he’d have risked taking her anywhere near that part of the Castle.”

“You are a voice of reason, Mr Arkham, yet it is still a circumstance in which we must exercise caution.” Scerri mulls over his next moves. “But I do not believe it to be unsalvageable. Credo, Peter, when she reappears, arrest her until we can determine the extent of her complicity in last night’s events. At the very least we can put a stop to her gallivanting.”

“What of him?”
“What of him?” says Scerri. “He will either stand by her or abandon her. Either suits our purpose.”

“Only one suits mine,” says Arkham, pointedly.

“All in good time, Sir,” replies Lord Scerri, a little sharper than he intended. “Let us first achieve our aims. Then I will provide for yours.”

“Of course, Lord Scerri. I’m happy to provide my continued support for your aims.” The scar dances excitedly.

Credo finds himself fascinated by it. Peter is too, but he lifts his eyes at the right second, catching Arkham’s gaze at the right time and it’s as if they recognise kindred spirits. The older man nods slightly.

“Captain Agius,” says Scerri smoothly, collecting himself and considering his situation. “I understand your reward in this matter was promotion and a Committee place.”

“Yes My Lord. Not every Knight has the honour of serving a Committee.”

“Most Knights never do. There are natural restrictions on places, even amongst the staff,” agrees Lord Scerri. “You’ve already served Fortuna beyond what should ever be asked of a Father, your heritage is impeccable and your service as a Knight proves your loyalty, courage and intelligence.”

“Thank you, My Lord. I live to serve,” replies Captain Agius, heart quickening.

“I think that we may move you already to your chosen Committee, so you might learn its ways.” Scerri makes it look like he’s thinking. “You must have considered your choice.”

Captain Agius doesn’t hesitate. “The Faith Committee, so that I might assist in maintaining the purity of the Faith against modern blasphemies.”

“A fitting choice for the Grandfather of Lord Sparda’s Heir.” He bows and looks at the men
flanking Agius. “I wager the switch from their captive to their Captain is a trifle dumbfounding.”

They salute their new Captain and step back from him.

Captain Agius can’t help but push his luck - it’s got him this far, hasn’t it? - and looking straight at the hole in the wall, sighs. “Vee will be so upset when she sees her tapestry.” He looks back at Lord Scerri. “My Lord General, in light of my new position, might I become privy to the inner workings of exactly how the Order serves Our Saviour? I should like to serve in a manner as befits my status.”

It’s such an audacious request that even Lord Arius is given pause.

A look passes between the most powerful men in Fortuna’s most powerful Factions. Scerri nods and Arius shrugs. “Come then, Master Captain and understand truly what the sale of your daughters has purchased for you.”

He stands aside so that Captain Agius might go ahead of him. He pauses as a sudden thought occurs to him. “Credo, Peter, a man takes Assistants so that he might mentor his future. You’re the sons of my sword and all good fathers tell the whole truth to their children so his dreams might live on. Come now, see the dream I have for this world and see if it is worthy of your service.”

Credo and Peter look at each other, with no small amount of unease.

There are moments in life that stay with you, have a hand in forming you.

Sometimes, you realise them when they are upon you.

Sometimes, you only realise it later.

Credo and Peter walk through the wall, skins crawling with electricity as their hearts thump. Neither’s sure if it’s fear, excitement or dread.

Either way, by the time you realise a portentous moment, it’s already too late.
“Which way now, sabiha?” Vergil asks as they reach a fork in the road. He’s exhausted, but he pushes it down as much as he can.

“What time is it?” Verity grits out weakly. She looks even worse than she did earlier, but at least she hasn’t thrown up for the last hour. “Put me down. I need to sit.”

He checks his watch and looks up at the sun. It’s well passed overhead, but it’s not evening yet. “Three o’clock. We’ve been up a while, sabiha.”

“What time did it happen?” she asks quietly, rubbing her wrists.

“I don’t know, Verity. I had bigger things to think about. I wasn’t watching the clock.”

It’s out his mouth before he can stop himself and her eyes betray the newest wound he’s cut into her. He’d cut out his treacherous tongue if it would soothe her hurt. He crouches beside her, cupping her face, kissing her cheeks and her eyes, stroking her hair.

Her skin’s still cold and clammy under his lips.

Her cold hands are over his as Verity turns her head and catches his lips, a sweet, sad kiss. But the tears on her cheeks are warm and so is the breath moving Vergil’s hair. It’s flat against his head now and around his face, even as Verity smooths it back and away.

“How much further do you think?” he asks her.

“Another few miles. I think we’ll get home by nightfall.” She takes a shuddering breath, controlling her own pain and exhaustion and he marvels at her.

“Do you think I’ll have to fight your father, Vee?” he says, more lightly than he’s feeling.
“Fight Papa? Why ever would you fight Papa?”

“Because I’m not leaving you, that’s why.”

“Stop filling my head with nonsense, at some point you’ll have to go and I’ll have to stay,” she whispers against his mouth, raising her eyes to find his drinking her in.

“Fejn inti timxi, nimxi, you told me, Vee sabiha. Where you walk, I follow,” he says, gently, earnestly.

“What?” Verity says, a little shocked. “You know what it means?”

“Of course I do, Vee sabiha. The most important vow in the wedding ceremony. Inhobbok, il-Vee sabiha tiegħi,” and despite everything, he smiles at her, drinking her in.

“I wasn’t going to hold you to any of it, id-xitan sabih tiegħi,” she says, almost in wonder and it’s like she’s just realised what he means.

“Tough, because I’m holding you to everything, Verity Agius. I love you.” He kisses her and she giggles into his mouth. “I’ve been in love with you since I saw you in the Kapella so utterly irritated at your Tarot cards when they read so badly. Other women would be terrified with that reading, but not you. You looked offended. How dare they give you a bad reading?”

Verity kisses him and she’s crying and giggling.

“And I thought, I have to meet her and I did,” he’s smiling at her just as much, kissing all over her face, her throat, anywhere he can reach.

“So you think you can run wild with me, Vergil Sparda?”

“I think you can handle me, Verity Agius.” They rub noses and he kisses the tip of hers.

“Vee! Vee! Are you there? Vergil!”
“It’s Pinny!” says Verity, in astonishment.

“How’d she find us?” wonders Vergil. “Pinny! Over here!”

“I see you! Mama, she’s here, they’re here!” Pinny calls back to her mother and comes running over. “Empty fucking Night, what happened? Mama, she’s bad!”

“They set a Wedding Spell for us,” says Verity and for a moment, it all threatens to overwhelm her, as Vergil shushes her and kisses her hair, telling her she’s safe now.

“Oh, Vee, no,” says Pinny in horror and she hugs her sister. “Mama’s waiting in the car. Up you get.”

Pinny and Vergil pull Verity upright and despite wincing with the pain, the younger woman can’t stop smiling. “Are you alright, Vee?”

“I’m fine, everything’s fine. How did you find us, Pinny?” Verity asks as they walk her between them back down the slope to the car.

“Mama got a location spell from Dorcas Micellef. There’s been a hell of a to-do about the Castle and after yesterday, I thought it was you pair.” Pinny grunts with the effort of keeping her sister in a straight line.

They reach the car and Abigail is standing beside it with the back door open. Pinny helps her sister into the car and slides in beside her. Abigail blocks Vergil following her. They size each other up for a moment.

“So you’re the cause of all this shit?” she says coolly.

“So it would seem,” he replies, just as coolly.

“My daughter is in some nick for merely cavorting through the tourist attractions with you these
past few nights, Mr Sparda.”

His surprise must show on his face as Abigail continues. “Yes, I know who you are. I always did, as does Edward. Everyone knows.”

“They set a Wedding Spell for them, Mama,” says Pinny from the back seat.

“Nine Hells! I thought I’d bought you some time after the Calleja Wedding,” Abigail scowls. “No matter, we’ll have to get your stories straight. Likely they’ll set us to the question somewhat, possibly a Witch Trial in some small manner.”

“I have a spell for that, Mama,” says Verity. “Dorcas and one of my tutors taught me a good one for suppressing memories and making new ones. I think I can adjust it, I’ll just need some time, if you can keep everyone away.”

Abigail nods and stands aside so that Vergil can get in the car. Pinny wriggles back into the front seat. “Don’t worry about the wedding spell. I’ve sent Alice out to buy some extras for you girls’ usual salad just in case the power of the spell overpowers my precautions.”

“Mrs Agius, what good will a salad be?” asks Vergil.

“Women talk, Mr Sparda. They keep knowledge secret from men. It’s often our only leverage and men truly desire no other knowledge from a woman other than how she feels under him.” Abigail has no truck with niceties.

“Mama!” shriek Verity and Pinny in unison, red faced and horrified.

“You think I don’t know how you climb out windows to meet with Cassius Calleja? Why do you think you’ve not turned your ankle yet, Pinny? Good bowl of whore’s greens each night with dinner and we’ll set out a special plate just for Verity tonight.”

“Mrs Agius,” begins Vergil as he realises, reaching for Verity’s hand.

Abigail cuts him off. “Mr Sparda, Lord Scerri knows who you are. And he badly, badly wants a
child of yours for his own. I’m inclined not to let that happen. My husband might have forgotten where is loyalties lie. I haven’t.”

Vergil meets her eyes in the rear-view mirror and nods to her, a mark of respect to this woman prepared to risk everything to save her daughters as fast as their father condemns them. “I’m Vergil Sparda, Mrs Agius. Verity’s told me a lot about you. I’m pleased to finally meet you.”

“And I you,” she smiles, briefly, but sincerely. “Call me Abigail.”
“Technically, I’m Italian, but I only really lived there for five years. Did my degree and obviously, it’s where I was found,” replies Violet to Madam Campbell’s question. “But I really like the tradition of the La Serenata. The groom sings to you outside your house. You’re Scots, Sophie. You must have some amazing stories.”

Violet carefully forks a small amount of the curry between the small gap she can open her teeth before the bands pull. She can just about give it a couple of very gentle chews before swallowing it. She’s sure she can hear the bones grinding. It’s excruciating.


“Fine, Peter. Just under orders to chew some of my food,” she smiles weakly. “No improvements for 20 years and suddenly a new technique gives me a bit of food for thought.”

Dante snorts.

Trish and Lady glare at him.

Madam Campbell puts down her cutlery as she thinks about it. “We have a scramble – the bride throws money away at her door or the church and all the local kids grab it. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. We don’t go down the aisle like the Americans, attendants paired off. We go down bride and her father first, then the bridesmaids. The ushers wait with the groom at the altar.”

“We don’t throw the bouquet,” says Edith. “We put it on the coffin of Sanctus Primus. Or we will, when it’s rebuilt. A lot of traditions will depend on if you’re Order, Knight, or Old Family. I like the tradition of washing your feet. A married friend washes the bride’s feet and leaves her ring in
the water. The next girl to find the ring is next to marry.”

“The crossed swords,” says Lady Calleja. “Leap rogue, jump whore, now you’re wed for evermore. Marriage is doomed if you fall or touch the swords.”

“My Abigail’s heel hit the sword hilt,” says General Agius. “We were together for 25 years. So, Xaali, when you join the family, take the shoes off.”

Xaali colours and Josh snaps a quick admonition at his grandfather. But the look that passes between them hints that it won’t be long before Josh is seeking out his grandmother’s rings for his Courting Gift.

“I want to have some of our traditions,” says Xaali. “A Dirac, buranbur, henna. The groom pays bride-price and then comes for me at my house to take me to his. I also expect music, uninvited guests, being there until 5am, and people fighting.”

“My kind of wedding,” laughs Dante. “I bet the parties do get rowdy here. I mean you’ve got traditions like older, single siblings have to dance in pig troughs and Penny Weddings. Bet the traditions you’ve got here would leave you spellbound.”

Dante meets Falzon’s eyes. “I mean, the tradition of spending the night in the Castle is so romantic.”

Falzon cuts his swordfish just slightly rougher than he was. “The happy couple are the Lord and Lady of the Castle for the day. A Knight is Supreme General for the day.”

“I bet a lot of the older traditions are dying out,” Dante carries on, pointedly. “I bet everyone here’s got a tradition that’s got no place now.”

“A lot of traditions around fertility, virginity and children are dying out,” says Violet, understanding exactly what Dante’s getting at and sending him a warning look. “And that’s not a bad thing. Especially as we’re trying to keep Fortunese children here.”

“I hear that there are some cultures who scar their spouses as a mark of ownership,” says Falzon. He’s looking directly at Trish. “A most distasteful concept if you ask me.”
Trish returns his gaze, but she can’t help her hand rub where a Demon’s Mark would sit.

Their stand-off is broken by Violet coughing and choking violently. It’s a bad one, tears are streaming and she can’t catch her breath. Edith gets up and helps her from the room before anyone else can move, though Lady and Dante are getting up to help.

“No, no, it’s fine, I’ve got her, I know what to do if this happens,” Edith declines offers of help from round the table.

Violet’s still coughing as Edith helps her to the nearest toilet.

“He’s raiding your house.”

Violet can barely feel Edith’s breath as she whispers in her ear.

“When?”

Edith shrugs. “Could be soon. Could be now.”

She passes Violet a glass of water. The coughing passes as the piece of bone’s dislodged and Violet nods that she’s fine now. Edith hugs her and returns to the party. She takes out her compact and sorts her make-up for the second time that night. She shuts it and the snap is loud in the bathroom as she turns it over and looks at the engraved writing on the bottom.

CAMVA, il cuore conosce la verità and a date 15 years earlier. It must be the way it catches the light, because Violet sees small marks under the writing, especially under the date and the VA. Being Italian, Violet doesn’t have a middle name, so the VA is in a different, wider font to match the length of Credo’s initials.

She turns it to catch the light, dimly catching an E under the fore and back slashes of the V and A. She can’t make out much of the writing under the date, but it could be numbers. Could be scratches.
Violet puts it away and returns to the party.

The men at the table stand and bow as she takes her seat and there’s a large glass of fresh water beside her plate.

“Are you recovered, Violet?” asks Falzon.

It takes her several attempts to speak and a coughing fit before she finds her voice and even then it’s a whisper with no strength behind it. “Not really, Peter. I think I might just return home. I’m sure Nero and Kyrie can find their way back with my guests, whom I’ll trust you’ll continue to welcome.”

Falzon’s eyes flash with alarm, but only quickly. “I’m sure we can offer you a bedroom to rest in, with the hope that you’ll see fit to rejoin us soon. And should sleep overcome you, then I’m sure Edith would appreciate your company at breakfast. I know I would.”

Violet sips her water, making it look as if she’s considering. She nods and gets up shakily. “Trish, would you…”

“Of course,” Trish says as she gets up and comes down to Violet.

Falzon can’t really cut across them, but tries to within the bounds of propriety. “Edith, my dear, show Violet to a guest room. Madam Sparda, please don’t trouble yourself.”

“I’ll need a hand to undo this dress, Lord Falzon and Edith has your party to tend to. Trish and I will get along just fine,” Violet whispers and there’s really nothing Falzon can say.

“As you wish. But, please, dearest Violet, we aren’t working right now. My name is Peter and I don’t hear it often enough. Rest well and I do hope you join us later.”

Edith shows them to a small guest bedroom and waits outside while Trish undoes Violet’s dress and hair. “Are you ok?”

“Do you have anything you don’t want someone else seeing at home?” asks Violet, very quietly.
“A few things, but they aren’t there.” Trish’s mind jumps to the file and the diary.

“Maybe tomorrow, leave them at the office,” says Violet. “But they’re not at home?”

“No.”

“Good.” Violet’s hair is unpinned and tumbling over her shoulder as she stands in the soft light. Standing in her chemise, she looks very young, so much like the girl in the photos that Trish can’t believe no one else has made the connection.

Then she moves and the illusion is gone.

“Come get me in an hour, Trish, OK?”

“You want me to tuck you in?”

“Fuck off, you muppet.”

Trish laughs as she shuts the door.

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Falzon nods at Trish when she returns to the table.

“I’m to check on her in an hour, Lord Falzon,” she says, taking her seat.

“It’s really no trouble if Violet was to sleep the night,” says Falzon. “I extend that courtesy to her guests, also.”
Dante and Lady exchange surprised looks with each other, before looking back at Trish. Trish merely inclines her head to Falzon. “I thank My Lord and Madam Buhagiar for the offer and should it become necessary, we accept.”

Dante tries to catch Trish’s eye, but he’s on the wrong side of her.

Lord Agius is speaking to Josh, who’s surreptitiously trying to make a phone call and shaking his head. There’s an agitated whispered exchange going between them and Xaali.

“Is something wrong, Edward?” Asks Falzon. “I’d hate to see more upset at my table.”

“The only upset, Peter, is that Nero and Kyrie are not here for my grandson’s announcement. I’m sure that it would cause them great amusement to see the reactions of some round this table,” replies Lord Agius. There’s a twinkle in his eye.

“You look exceeding pleased, Edward,” says General Calleja. “What’s the secret? Finally got yourself a Ladybird?”

Lady Calleja continues eating, steadfastly keeping her eyes on the plate.

Falzon still has that amused, calculating look on his face that Dante would dearly love to smash off, but there’s something underneath it.

Falzon is nervous.

Dante recalls the altercation between the two men in the Castle and now, he’s curious as well. He doesn’t know if the others can see it, but Falzon looks like a man who’s finding things beginning to spin out of his control.

“No good, Grandad, I can’t raise them,” says Josh, disappointed. “I’ll just get them when they come back. He knows, pretty much, anyway.”

“Well, we’re all intrigued now, Edward,” says Falzon. He can’t take his eyes off Josh, who’s nearly bouncing with excitement.
“As Head of the Old Agius Family, our roots stretching back unbroken to our flight from Malta and the Demons therein, when Lord Sparda took us under his protection, in Our Saviours Name do I offer and extend that same Protection to Xaali Kadiye Mataan.” Lord Agius begins the ritual announcement. He makes a signal and a maid brings forth a tray with a candle, a carafe of water and a loaf of bread, setting it down before Josh.

Dante keeps his eyes on Falzon. He can see both him and Lord Agius from where he’s sitting.

The women present gasp as they know the significance of the statement Lord Agius is making.

The more traditional ones either look straight-out disapproving or are forcing their smiles.

“Agius – are you sure?” asks someone from Fortuna l-ewwel.

“Never surer.” General Agius doesn’t even look at him. “Josh asked me what he should get Xaali for a Courting Gift and I told him that he should give her something that represents her new life in Fortuna. Together they decided that some heirloom jewellery from within our family was the right gift.”

Lord Agius lights the candle and halves the bread, pouring water from the carafe into a crystal goblet. “I offer you fire, water and bread,” he says looking between Josh and Xaali.

Xaali looks at Josh, who whispers loud enough for everyone to hear, he’s so nervous, “Drink the water, bless the candle and eat the bread.”

“Just a sip and a bite, Xaali, dear, you don’t need to eat the whole thing,” says Lord Calleja and some of the company laugh. “Get to the Gift, Agius, the ladies are champing at the bit to coo and swap stories.”

“More damned foreigners polluting Old Blood,” mutters Lady Calleja. Only a few people hear her and Josh isn’t one of them.

“I thought there was a rope?” says Xaali, trying to force down some of the bread and spilling some of her water.
“That’s for the wedding altar, when you are actually joined in marriage,” someone at the end of the table says.

Lord Agius pulls a small, ornate wooden box from his pocket and lays it down on the tray in front of Josh. The young man’s hands shake slightly and it takes him a minute to get the lid off. It doesn’t help that the shake in his hands is getting worse.

He swears and it brings an *awwww* from the company. Quite apart from his grandfather, Josh is popular in his own right. He’s kind, friendly and funny. The errant lid finally parts from the bottom and a gold chain lies threaded through a wedding ring that looks like a stylised snake nestling on a bed of black silk.

Trish grips Dante’s hand and it’s all he can do to stay seated.

“*It’s not the time,*” she whispers and her hand on his looks like a caress between lovers. They can feel his bones grinding under her fingers.

General Agius looks down as Josh picks up the chain and fumbles with the clasp, the ring catching the light as it swings. The blood drains from his face as he sees it. He looks like he’s trying to say something, but nothing comes out.

He just about hides his reaction as he reaches for his wine and sips.

Nobody notices who wasn’t already looking.

Josh has fastened the chain around Xaali’s neck and kisses her, looking pleased and relieved. Xaali fingers the ring and smiles at him, a soft blush darkening her cheeks.

Falzon’s maids have refilled everyone’s glasses in the meantime.

“The forms have been obeyed. In 13 Turns of the Moon shall they be joined in the Arms of Our Saviour and the Eyes of This Community.” Falzon stands and raises his glass. The exquisite Cassar sparkles golden in the soft light. His eyes flick just ever-so-quickly between Dante and Agius. “To Josh and Xaali.”
The toast is echoed round the table.

The course finishes and they leave the table, everyone coming over to congratulate the happy couple.

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Violet isn’t sleeping. She’s got the covers pulled up so she’s resting, messing about with her phone.

Violet: You busy?

Ms Kye: No, Madam.

Violet: I need you to go to my house and tell me what’s happening at it. Make sure no one sees you.

Ms Kye: Yes, Madam. I’ll report back when we’ve looked at it.

Violet: We?

Ms Kye: Captain la Valletta is with me.

Violet: You saucy little devil!

Ms Kye: I am a demon and there is chocolate sauce, Madam.

Violet: I’m not having this conversation. Text back when you’re done.

Ms Kye: Yes, Madam.
Ms Kye has a quick shower to wash the chocolate sauce off her.

“Lucky there wasn’t any in your hair,” says Captain la Valletta, passing her a bag and looking in amused confusion at the items she’s putting in it. He picks up a shrivelled hand. “What do you use this for? Scratching your nuts?”

“Opening doors, Gianni. Put it in the bag,” Ms Kye looks at some herbs in jars and puts them in little bags. “Though I have a key, so I probably won’t need it.”

La Valletta shakes his head. “My life used to be so simple.”

“It still is. You just have a bigger range of creatures to shoot at.” Ms Kye braids her hair quickly and picks up a sheepskin bomber jacket. La Valletta takes the bag.

They drive to Top of the Town, La Valletta unimpressed by the conservative grandeur of the buildings. He’s spent half his career guarding the other half. He can’t enjoy anything anymore, he’s too used to risk-assessing everything. Even now, he’s not enjoying this jolly, no sorry, intelligence gathering trip.

He glances at Ms Kye. Well, some of it’s fun.

“Stop here,” he tells Ms Kye when they’re several streets away. He’s taking point on this mission. Ms Kye has many skills, but she’s no experience in this area.

She pulls up and looks at him expectantly.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he says, shouldering the bag and offering her his arm. Ms Kye slides her hand into the crook of his elbow and snuggles in. “I might actually enjoy this operation.”

They walk along the street down to where Violet’s house sits in its own patch of ground. There’s
nothing to set it apart from the other houses on the street. It’s a typical Mediterranean villa behind a high wall and everything focused towards the back of the house.

Okay. Hides them if they go in.

Hides anyone else already in there.

“Did she say anything about cameras, alarms, anything?” He whispers into her hair.

“I have never seen anything,” replies Ms Kye. “I’ve been in the house several times.”

“Are we looking for anything in particular?” He’s kissing down her neck and gently playing with her earring as he nibbles the lobe.

“No. She was vague.” Ms Kye catches his mouth and kisses him gently. They look to the world like a couple of tourists having a wander round. It’s not so late and there’s no curfew. There’s no Knights here to comment on their lack of Robes.

They stay like that for a few minutes, for all the world like they’re lost in each other.

Nobody is around to pay them any mind and nobody comes to move them on. They walk hand in hand round the back of the block, until they reach the back garden of Violet’s house. La Valletta checks again, but there’s still no cameras or other security measures he can see.

“Is there any spooky demon army protecting the house, Tyuule?” he asks. He’s dreading a repeat of his first incursion and maybe the reason there’s no physical security is because of the psychic precautions.

“I have a key to everything Madam Alighieri has installed, but so might someone else, as it’s DNA based,” replies Ms Kye. She throws the bag over the wall and La Valletta hoists her to the top. He jumps up and takes her hand as she pulls him up the wall. He jumps down first and catches her as she lands.

“Fancy a new job?” he grins.
“No,” she says flatly. “None of this appeals to me.”

La Valletta snorts and turns to look at the house. He pulls her back against the wall. “There’s people moving about in there.”

“Then we wait. We’ll have a look after them.” She pulls binoculars from the bag and he takes them from her.

“White uniforms and swords.” He says. “But I don’t recognise the insignia on their uniforms. They’ve got the stylised sword, but they’ve got another one.”

Confused, she takes the binoculars from him. “That’s the Faith Committee.”

“That the guy who was back-up when my team were ambushed by the EXBEs?”

“He is the head of that Committee.” She quickly texts Violet, who replies just as swiftly. “We’re not to go until they’re gone, if we want to go in. Apparently, we’ve answered her question.”

La Valletta gives her a withering look. “I’ve not come out my bed to sit in a garden for five minutes. We’re going in.”

***

They sit in the front garden for nearly an hour, until La Valletta hasn’t noticed any movement in at least 15 minutes.

“I haven’t heard anyone leave,” he says. “And if they went out the back, then they’ve got to go through another villa like this.”

“They must have got in somehow,” responds Ms Kye. “I think we are as safe as we’re going to be. I assume you’ve done this before?”
La Valletta stands up and offers his hand to Ms Kye. “A few times.”

Ms Kye uses her housekey to get in. Her nose wrinkles at the smell.

“What’s that sm-?”

“Ozone. Someone’s performed some magic here,” she replies. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they used a portal to come and go.”

She’s about to move off, but La Valletta stops her.

“I’ve done this before,” he reminds her. “I know you can handle yourself, but I don’t think you’re immune to bullets.”

Ms Kye rolls her eyes, but allows him to proceed her.

La Valletta’s been in much bigger houses, but there’s something about the Micellef house that’s different. It’s a home. It’s a very nice home, it’s clear there is old money in the house, but it’s warm and friendly. There’s nothing here that’s for show. La Valletta believes in reading atmospheres.

“Has anything been taken?” he asks her, as they move from room to room. He can’t tell, he doesn’t know what’s missing, he’s never been here before.

Ms Kye looks around. “Well, they tidied up after themselves.”

La Valletta looks at her.

“Nero and Mr Sparda are not the tidiest of people, according to Kyrie. These rooms are spotless.”

“That aside, does anything look out of place?” La Valletta looks at the floor, trying to see if anything’s been moved. Almost everything, by the looks of it. Until he knows what they were looking for, it’s useless information.
“There was no work-related information kept here, so confidentiality will be kept,” says Ms Kye.

“I’m not worried about that,” returns La Valletta. He sits down on Violet’s bed. “She got a library or an office?”

Ms Kye types a message and gets a swift reply. “Two, one for Credo, one for her.”

“Show me.”

All the while, Ms Kye has been sending photos to Violet, who can’t see anything amiss, other than the tidiness. “She says they can raid her house again next week.”

La Valletta laughs as they cautiously enter Credo’s study. It’s very austere, without fripperies, with many dark wood bookshelves against the walls. There’s some family photos on the desk, just a few. There’s a computer to the side of the desk, everything neatly placed. It’s comfortable and masculine. La Valletta approves of him.

Ms Kye takes some photos and gets the reply that nothing’s been taken from there.

“Nothing? She’s sure? They went to all this trouble and took nothing?” La Valletta pulls out one of Credo’s books.

“Well, if they came for work projects, they wouldn’t know that,” she replies. She taps on her phone and waits. “She says you’ll need to go into her office, it won’t let me in.”

La Valletta looks at Ms Kye strangely, but obliges. Ms Kye looks slightly pained as she approaches the door and refuses to go closer. La Valletta looks around and takes some photos that he sends to Violet.

It’s smaller than Credo’s, plainly, but more sumptuously furnished. It’s got a few keepsakes, as well as photos of the family.
Violet opens the photos as wide as they’ll go and carefully sweeps over each shelf.

She goes back over it three times, but she’s sure.

Some of Dorcas’ books are missing.

La Valletta and Ms Kye head back to the kitchen, dominated as it is by the huge, dark Welsh dresser. Ms Kye pays the main of the kitchen no mind as she helps herself to a drink of water. La Valletta accepts a glass from her as he admires the dresser.

“Thanks. My Nonna has one like this.” A thought strikes him and he looks around it. “They’ve not even tried to move it. Not surprised. These things are massive. Is it full?”

He opens a few of the drawers and the doors. One of the drawers catches. “Yep. Stuffed.”

He closes it and they leave as carefully as they came in. They don’t see anyone observing them as they leave.

Violet tries Kyrie and Nero again.

Still nothing.

Trish knocks on the door and pokes her head around. “Coming back to join us? Nero’s friend is marrying the Muslim and half the Faith Committee are vomiting flaming cars, they’re so mad.”
Violet throws back the covers as Trish comes in to help her dress. The bruises from Falzon’s assault upon her are getting darker.

“Why didn’t you come for me earlier? I can’t believe I missed it!”

***

The main course finished half an hour ago and Falzon has invited people to dance or mingle. Some are gambling.

Edith is playing a lively tune on a piano in the corner and some people are dancing.

“When do we get dessert?” asks Dante, looking longingly at the card game going on. It looks like some kind of Blackjack.

“No way.” Trish shakes her head and draws him off to dance. More than a few people watch them, as if they’re expecting them to be awful. “You’re a shitty player.”

Dante’s peacocking comes to the fore, as well as his ability to read others’ movements and he’s making a far better stab at the fast-paced Allemonde than the company thought possible, even as it slips to a version that involves multiple couples dancing together.

Lady’s dancing with Master Campbell and by the looks of it they’ll both have broken ankles in the morning. Violet’s dancing with Lord Agius, who’s giving as good as he’s getting for a man in his sixties. There were a few entries about balls in Verity’s diary and from what he can see, Verity’s inherited her father’s athleticism. She really is a damn good dancer.

Falzon’s partnered with a woman who owns a local hotel, according to Trish.

They change partners as part of the dance and Violet’s partnered with Falzon. Dante can’t help but watch them, as he dances with Lady.

“Just as well I’m shit,” she says as he trips over her two left feet. “Stop staring.”
“It’s research,” jokes Dante. “I’m watching how he moves. Maybe Trish’ll challenge Falzon to a duel.”

“You don’t want to be gay here, they think it’s demonic possession,” she replies as she turns back, to back with Dante and trying to grab his arm. She misses and ends up punching him in the back. Dante grunts, to the amusement of those nearby.

Falzon hides a smile. He’s well aware of Dante watching him. He’s a few inches shorter than his partner and Violet makes polite laughter at their differences. It doesn’t affect their dancing, it never has. Falzon dances as well as he fights, quick, light and precise.

“I am sorely missing Credo,” he says, relishing the flash of pain that shoots across Violet’s face. “I imagine you are too.”

Violet chokes down her reaction. She’s had plenty practice. “More than I can say.”

“You seem well-recovered from earlier,” he says as he twirls her.

“Well enough,” she replies, voice pleasant enough, though it’s still hoarse. “How’s the head?”

“A trifle paining me, but I’ve had much worse injuries, as you well know, my dear.” He twirls her under his arm.

“And one might pray, you will again, Peter,” Violet pirouettes around him.

“Not even hiding your contempt for me, Violet?” Falzon smiles. “I warn you once more only, I’m a good friend to have in the Times to Come.”

“That why you turned up in my bathroom?” Violet replies, agreeably. “Even though I’m too much like a boy for your taste?”

It’s time to change partners, so Falzon doesn’t get a chance to respond.
Violet swaps to Dante and it’s the strangest thing in his strange life to be holding his brother’s amnesiac wife. He holds her gaze a little longer than he should as they spin, even as Kyrie’s warning echoes in his brain. They’ve both lost Vergil and by sharing their memories they can bring him back a little. It’s not like he’s around to make new ones. He misses Vergil, despite everything and Trish didn’t know him well enough to talk about him, though she tries.

There’s a cough as Trish gives Dante a pointed look and he spends the rest of the dance looking at his feet so he doesn’t stand on Violet’s. He doesn’t trust himself not to speak, tell her the truth and this is most definitely not the time. It takes him a minute to realise that Violet is speaking to him.

“Sorry? I was just thinking I’d ended up in a Jane Austen novel.” He chances a glance up and she’s smiling. He sees the wires that hold her teeth in place and looks back down. It’s not the time.

“More Clarissa Harlowe than Eliza Bennett. It was even worse when I first came here, even the way everyone spoke was right out the 18th century.” She goes back to back with Dante and catches his hand. “The older ones are still formal, but not as much.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“With Fortuna? Ten years from now we’ll be in the EU,” she says. “Be lucky if people still speak Fortunese. It’ll be English and Italian all the way, German tourists fighting with the English over sunloungers and avoiding the Scots, because the Scots just don’t give a fuck.”

“I think Falzon disagrees with you,” he says, nodding in the direction of Trish’s dance partner.

“Can’t stop progress,” says Violet.

“I think he’ll try,” replies Dante.

Violet just smiles that crooked smile that he’s seen on the Kid and for some reason he’s glad Nero’s taken something from his mother. Sons of Sparda take after their fathers.

The dance ends and Violet goes off to talk to Xaali and look at the ring. Edith’s next tune is a slow dance and she sings a sad song in Fortunese that he doesn’t quite understand.
He doesn’t see any recognition as Violet admires the ring, commenting on its unusual design. Jesus fucking Christ. He’s no idea how he’s going to tell her.

Trish appears at his side and he pulls her in for a kiss, dancing slowly with her. “And?”

Dante leans in close to her ear, so no one else can overhear. “I’m not going to tell her. Maybe tell Nero the truth, but just about Vergil.”

“OK.”

Dante pulls back, catching the tone in Trish’s voice. “You don’t agree?”

Trish shakes her head, but General Agius interrupts them before she can reply.

“Mr Sparda, Madam Sparda, come and meet my grandson,” he says, drawing them over to some photos on a sideboard. Josh is standing there and bows as Lord Agius makes the introductions. Trish and Dante congratulate him and Josh colours.

“Any advice for me?” he asks. “I mean, you’ve been together years.”

“11, nearly 12,” agrees Trish. “Honesty, trust, a sense of humour and not sweating the small stuff.”

Josh looks at Dante, who nods. “It’s all small stuff. Just make sure you have the last word on everything.”

“And what would that be, dear heart?”

“ ‘Yes, Dear,’ ” Dante says, grinning and giving Trish a quick peck on the lips. “Seriously, Josh, just let her do what she wants, it’s going to happen anyway and at least this way you’re not falling out when she does.”
Josh laughs. “I’m there already, right Grandad?”

“True enough, hanini,” says Lord Agius. He sighs. “I’m just sorry that your Mami and Grandma won’t see you. I despair of locating Verity in time – “ he pauses at the couple’s quizzical looks “- like Nero, he’s to be married at Midwinter Night, despite what Falzon just said. Most likely be the day before, to leave the Master’s Chamber free for the next wedding. It’s Nero and Kyrie who’ll be the star of the show.”

Josh picks up one of Falzon’s photographs. They’re mostly photographs of Falzon’s career, though there does seem to be more social occasions in there as well. At quick glance there’s some of the Micellefs, particularly Credo and a family Dante presume to be the Agius’. There’s several of Lord Scerri before and after becoming Sanctus.

“That’s Mami,” he says, pointing out a tall, delicate looking young woman, dark hair and dark eyes. It’s a family portrait, taken at a ball or wedding, given that they’re in their finery. A young Falzon in his dress uniform accompanies her. Her smile looks forced and doesn’t meet her eyes. There’s a gold pendant in the shape of a locked heart around her neck and a similar pendant on a thicker chain around Falzon’s. Lord Agius stands next to them with Lady Agius.

“She was beautiful,” says Trish. “You’re her double.”

“He has Pinny’s sweet nature, as well as her looks,” says General Agius. “Comfort of my old age, aren’t you, son?”

Trish looks back at the photo. “I take it this is Verity?”

General Agius smiles and doesn’t try to hide the man she’s standing next to.

Vergil.

There’s a family photograph of his brother and his brother’s wife in plain view in Peter Falzon’s house.

Plain. Fucking. View.
It’s all Dante can do to keep himself in check and he grips Trish’s hand tight, as if the world’s going to dissolve from under him any second. Trish traces a heart with her finger and he feels a little better, reminds himself he’s not alone.

“Had a mind like a steel trap, did my Verity. She’ll have done well, wherever she is,” general Agius says, placing the photo back down. “That was taken at Midsummer Night. It was the last time my family was together. My lovely Abigail was taken ill the next day, and when she died, Verity and the young man in the photo ran off together when I refused his Courting Suit.”

Lord Agius runs a finger along the top of the frame. “I shall regret that to my dying day, but I have tried to atone for my mistakes.”

Trish reaches out her other hand for Lord Agius’. “In the time I spent here previously, no one can say you didn’t use your grief as a force for good. How many families have you fed or refugees sheltered? And now, your own grandchild will marry one.”

General Agius smiles, ruefully. “I think, Madam Sparda, you will find some of these pictures interesting, now your identity is no longer hidden.”

He bows and pulls Josh away with him, but not before the young man has seen the man Verity’s cuddled into. He looks back at Dante, as if he’s realising something for the first time.

Trish looks back at where Falzon is dancing still with Lady. Her two left feet are keeping him well occupied, though neither of them expect they’ve escaped that much of his notice.

The only other photos that really catch his interest is one of Falzon with a very young Kyrie and Dorcas Micellef – he recognises her from photos in Violet’s house – in front of a group of Order technicians, standing in a tunnel in front of a large pipe.

There’s another one of the Agius and Micellef families standing either side of a stone-faced Verity and an anxious-looking Credo, flanked again by Pinny and Falzon. Verity’s wearing her bracelet, but the ring on her finger is a plain band.

There’s a table before them with a lit candle, a carafe of water and a loaf of bread. Ilma u n-nar, u l-qsim tal-hobż. There’s a white cord tying Credo and Verity’s hands together. Fejn timxi, nimxi.
Dante can’t speak and he must be crushing Trish’s hand. He can hear the vows in his head.

“It’s one thing to read it. It’s another to see it,” she murmurs. “Do you want to go home?”

He shakes his head. “Let’s dance.”
Fortuna, two decades ago

Abigail takes the back roads into Castle Town.

“I can’t wait to get home and have a bath,” says Verity, quietly. She’s looking a little better, even as the car hits every bump and Abigail is moving at a snails’ pace. It’s just a small family runaround and she doesn’t want to damage it on the potholes.

“You’ll be disappointed then,” says Abigail. “We’re not going home in case they’re watching it and I don’t trust your father not to inform upon us.”

“Papa wouldn’t do that! Not when he sees me,” Verity protests. She’s lying on the backseat with her head resting on Vergil’s lap. He’s stroking her hair and her face.

Vergil meets Abigail’s eyes in the mirror, sees the fading bruises and the handmarks around her throat. He understands why she’s wincing when the seatbelt pulls across her stomach.

Verity looks across to Pinny for support and finds it. “Mama, surely Papa is only thinking of our best interests? It’s just co-incidence that Vergil and Verity got together? That spell could have been set for anyone! How would they know that Vergil and Vee would be there to trip it?”

“Where was it?”

“Ruined Church,” offers Vergil.

“See? Everyone goes there.”

“Not this time of the year,” retorts Abigail. She sees their faces. “We were young once, also and we dallied. But that’s not our vexation right now. We need to ensure you’ve not got your belly full and that your story’s straight.”
“Where are we going?” asks Vergil.

“Dorcas Micellef. She’ll know how much to give you and how much magic went into that spell. Why do you think I’m driving her car?”

“Can I just have a bath? Please?” begs Verity and she sounds so young. He kisses her gently, leaning over as much as the space will allow.

“There’s no point in cleaning you up, by the time you’ve eaten your greens, you’ll likeasnot be in an even worse nick. I fear the dosages Dorcas will prescribe.” Abigail’s eyes are on the road, but there’s determination in every line of her body.

Pinny and Vergil both look at Abigail in horror. Vergil’s hold on Verity tightens and she protests at the discomfort.

“Here we are,” says Abigail, as Dorcas opens up the gates to the courtyard.

“Bring her in to the kitchen,” says Dorcas. Her face is grim as she sees Verity being helped from the car by Vergil. “Alice has brought me what I need.”

“Can you trust Alice?” asks Vergil.

“I trust her more than I trust you, sir. Are you not the reason for my son’s unhappiness? Were it not for you, his Courting Gift would be on her person this moment.” Dorcas scowls. “It’s my regard for the girl and the friendship of our families that lends my powers to this endeavour. I’ll not have my son raising another’s bastard.”

“Dorcas! They used the Wedding Spell on her! Now pull in your horns and stay your pelt! Recall Verity’s my daughter, not a doxie!” Abigail looks like she’s going to slap Dorcas. “Credo should be so lucky to raise Verity’s children at all!”

“Verity, sweetheart, I didn’t know. Come, let’s fix some of this nonsense.” Dorcas’ voice has softened and she leads the way to the kitchen, Vergil and Pinny supporting Verity between them. She pulls a chair out for her and bid them place her down.
Dorcas begins to gather jars from drawers in the massive dresser, the gentle clinks loud in the quiet room. She pulls out a shelf from the dresser, dropping a leg from underneath it to stabilise it. She sets out five jars that have spices and leaves in them. One is an oil. “Last place any man will look."

“Set that kettle to boil, Abigail,” she says. Abigail picks up the cast iron kettle and filling it with water, sets it on the range. It’s nearly as big as the dresser on the opposite wall.

Dorcas pulls out a set of scales and a hand mill.

She looks at Vergil, who’s eyeing the spices suspiciously. “Stand aside, sir. I need to assess the effects of the spell for dosages.”

Pinny pulls him aside. He doesn’t protest.

Dorcas takes a deep breath and a blank look comes over her face. She places her hands on Verity’s shoulders. There’s a flash and Dorcas is flung backwards. It’s only Vergil flash stepping between her and the range that stops an even bigger grief.

“Thank you, sir,” she whispers, in shock. She allows him to set her upright.

Pinny runs to her sister, slumped over on the table and groaning. She looks between Abigail and Dorcas. “Mama?”

“I saw it,” whispers Dorcas. “We’ve all been there. I was abed for three days after the Master’s Chamber and it wasn’t with my husband’s prick.”

She looks between Verity and Vergil. “Sparda’s Balls, was your ordeal ever worse than that!”

Dorcas looks like she’s collecting herself and she pats Vergil’s arm. She looks directly at Abigail as she says quietly, “The magic’s the most powerful I’ve ever come across. It may well be beyond the herbs’ power to prevent what was intended from it.”

Dorcas takes a deep breath. “I’ll do it, I’ll brew the bitter water, though I’m afeared the cure be crueller than the disease.”
“Bitter water? I thought it was a salad?” cuts in Vergil. He’s not sure that’s better, but he’s familiar with *Bitter Water* from the Old Testament and whether it was a torture or abortifacient, it sounds hideous. He hopes it’s just the same phrasing, not the same thing.

“Would you tell all your secrets?” snaps Dorcas. “Twill be an ordeal for the maid, regardless. But centuries before Lord Sparda woke to justice was this used to free a woman from her burdens and the opportune time for that is now, afore the babe’s formed and beds in. There’s no sin in prevention.”

“I don’t want a baby, either, but I’m not putting Vee at risk.” He gestures at her. “Look at the state she’s in! She’s half dead already! This muck’ll send her the rest of the way! I’m not having it! I’m not letting her take it!”

Pinny and Verity exchange a look. Pinny moves round to the dresser, tipping several teaspoons of each into the grinder and quietly milling it. They’re too far gone in their quarrels to notice her. The kettle’s started to boil, but Pinny makes it look like she’s making tea. She sets Verity’s to steep away from the others.

“How dare you presume to know what’s best for my daughter? You’ve known her all of five minutes against those who’ve known her all her life!”

“Those self-same people set her upon me for breeding purposes, like she’s a prize racehorse!” He fires back. “The only reason she’s sitting here now is she was mounted by the wrong stallion! If it was Credo standing here, you’d be breaking out the champagne!”

Dorcas is closer, but it’s Abigail who slaps him first. Vergil takes it, doesn’t even rub his face. “That’s it, isn’t it? It’s the wrong man’s child? Answer me!”

Pinny serves everyone their tea, including Verity, who dry heaves at the bitter smell from it. She takes Pinny’s hand and downs it.

“Even were it Credo’s I’d still be setting her here! She’s far too young for child-bearing and she’s too slim to give birth, regardless of who sired upon her! I should wish she never - Pinny girl, what is she drinking? Vee! Vee! Pinny, you stupid bitch, *what have you done*?”

“Vee!”
Lord Scerri leads them down to the room with the Amina Mercuries forming. Peter’s able to ask questions of Lord Arius and Arkham, though the latter is only slightly more knowledgeable than Peter.

“As you’ve stolen my assistant, perhaps I should take yours as replacement, Scerri,” says Arkham. “Indeed, he’s wasted here as is the youngest Agius. It’s a pity you have such plans for her as you do.”

“Perhaps when she is delivered safely, you may see fit to include her in your designs, such as you’ve seen fit to share with us, be it trifling small,” says Lord Scerri, pointedly.

“I assure you, Sirs, my plans will not interfere with yours,” replies Arkham. “Have I not given you every aid, and thus shown my goodwill?”

“Of course, Mr Arkham. I mean no disrespect. I merely seek more knowledge for my task and now, gentlemen, let me share with you that task.” Lord Scerri turns to them.

“Blest as we are in witnessing such high alchemy, I do not see what we learn from it’s creation,” says Captain Agius. “Surely it’s importance lies in its’ utility?”

“And what would you see in of its utility, Master Captain, hmm?” Lord Scerri asks him. “The parlour trick of animating a statue or of the purpose of animating that statue?”

“When you live in a world of miracles, good Captain, they are commonplace,” cuts in Lord Arius. “The rest of the world does not know this joy. It has Science, but lacks Magic. It does not know the wonder of the Miraculous.”

“And there must be sacrifice for the Miraculous,” says Lord Scerri. His voice is subdued in a way they rarely see. “You and Credo, you understand this, Edward. But the rewards are beyond compare to those faithful to the vision.”

The hum of the machinery is loud between the silences.
“I see the world of the Mainland – and you have too, gentlemen, all of us here have – I see a world in pain, in chaos. It has so much choice and freedom and it’s no happier for it. Should the demons come again, as they surely will, the world will be damned.”

Credo feels the shiver down his spine. He’s seen the Mainland and the shallow antics of drunken, scantily-clad women, harassed parents, overworking and wondering where their next meal is coming from, to business people with their loud suits that cost obscene amounts of money.

“You’re a Father, Agius, that most Holy of Estates. Credo, Peter, you’ll be Fathers yourselves within the year, give or take. We all want the best for our children – what would you wish for Pinny and Verity? For the baby Verity will bear soon? What world would you see for them?”

“The noise and filth of the Mainland and it encroaching upon Fortuna is horrific to me, My Lord,” says Credo. “Whenever I return home, the peace of Fortuna and the words of Our Saviour are balm to my soul.”

“We could bring that peace to the rest of the world, make it safe and peaceful for all of the world’s children.” Scerri is still speaking in that almost hypnotic voice. It washes through them, lulling them.

“But how, Lord General? We are so few and they are so many? Their false gods?” Demands Captain Agius. “How might we turn them from their churches, their mosques? Their books of lies? Their worship of Mammon?

Credo’s younger than Captain Agius and a good Son of Fortuna. “It’s a world I’d see for my children, My Lord. But how do we fight the demons we can’t see? Their greed, their hypocrisy, their apathy, their selfishness? We can’t use Witch Trials on the world.”

“If I could show how we might achieve it, Credo, would you follow me? Serve something greater than yourself?” Scerri asks, looking directly into the younger man’s eyes. “Truly serve Fortuna? Our Saviour?”

Peter puts a hand on his best friend’s shoulder. “I gave my answer a long time ago, Credo. I have put my faith in Lord Scerri to bring the True Peace to the world.”

“The other faiths of the worlds are based on fairy tales, fit to frighten children. We know our God
is real, that his blood still runs true among us –“

“Is that why you wish an Heir, My Lord? That my grandchild might rule at your behest and take up the mantle their grandfather left?” asks Captain Agius.

“In a manner of speaking.” Lord Scerri grows ever more serious. “What I show you next, very few are privy to. And so it must remain.”

Credo and Captain Agius glance uncertainly at each other and even Peter seems tentative.

“But it is necessary to achieve the dream of the world I speak of. We are all called to sacrifice our lives in the service of Our Saviour, some more than others.”

Lord Scerri takes them through the door into the next room and the three of them comprehend fully the truth of his words.

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“What the hell have you drunk, Vee?” Demands Abigail, grabbing the mug from her. “Pinny, how much did you put in? What the Hell were you thinking, both of you? Godspit and shit, Godspit and shit, let me think, let me think.”

She paces the floor.

“How much did you put in, Pinny?” asks Dorcas, urgently. She grabs Pinny and pulls her over to the dresser. “How much and what did you use?”

Vergil feels useless, surplus to requirements. Which to be fair, now the spell’s over and the act committed, he is.

Verity herself is merely sitting, watching the action around her. She looks almost serene.

Vergil resists the urge to shake her and opts to sit down beside her instead, pulling her into a hug.
She doesn’t resist and his senses are alert to any changes in her.

“How much? Nine fucking Hells, Pinny, that’s enough to mismatch a cow!” Dorcas’ horrified voice cuts across his reverie.

“You said you needed it to be powerful!” protests Pinny.

“Not that powerful, you foolish chit!” snaps Dorcas. She gestures back at Verity. “You’ve likely poisoned her!”

“Then at least they can’t use the Wedding Spell on Pinny,” says Verity, almost defiantly.

“We need to make you vomit,” says Abigail. “Dorcas, syrup of ipecac?”

Dorcas pulls out a small decanter and hands it to Abigail. “Two tablespoons for her.”

“No,” says Verity. “I’d rather die than let them win.”

“I’d rather they won than let you die,” retorts Vergil. He holds out his hand for the decanter and the spoon.

Abigail hands it to him. “We need to be quick before the poisons take root. Don’t you look at me like that, Verity Eliza Agius! You’ll listen for once in your life and take this!”

“No! I’m sick of being told what to do! I do everything right and where has it fucking got me? I’m not a-a-a-a brood mare! Everything I can do and it just befits me better for breeding!” She’s got up and twisted away from Vergil. The way the chairs are he can’t get to her quickly anyway.

“You’re being ridiculous, Verity.” Dorcas and Abigail look like they’re about to rush her, they’re positioning themselves either side and Vergil gets ready to get a dose of the emetic down her throat.

Once bitten, twice shy, though.
After Vergil’s stunt with the Vital Star in the Castle, Verity sees them coming.

She’s also got her sister.

The look that flashes between them is so quick and so much is communicated with it, that for a moment, Vergil’s heartsick for Dante.

It’s also so quick that only he’s picked it up.

And damn, they work well together.

Pinny knocks the decanter out his hand as Abigail tries to grab Verity. She’s already ported out the room. It’s only because he’s second-guessed Verity and flash-stepped towards her, grabbing her just as she goes, that he’s carried along with her.

They land in an attic bedroom.

“What the hell, Vee? I swear you’ve got a deathwish.” He’s already checking her over as the adrenaline from her outburst’s faded and she’s collapsed on the bed. “Why did you take it before Dorcas measured it out?”

“Because Dorcas was never going to do it and you were never going to let her,” she replies and her skin is clammy. It’s as if she’s relapsing from the effects of the spell.

“I don’t want to lose you. I can’t lose you when I’ve only just found you,” he replies. “If that means a baby, we’ll cope with that.”

“Help me get these clothes off,” Verity says, trying to toe her boots off. “I don’t want to have to cope with it. I don’t have to cope with it.”

Vergil helps her strip and gets into the bed with her.
It’s going to be a rough night.

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All of the men are silent as Lord Scerri sweeps his hand out over the room, rows and rows of bodies floating in the sickly green light.

Arkham and Arius watch them with interest, like cats with birds.

“What greater gift can a citizen give to their country than their lives for its future?” asks Lord Scerri. “For the opportunity to bring True Peace to the world and its pain, drive out its chaos before us. Credo, Captain, your sacrifices are unique, but the rewards are unlimited. What say you?”

Credo feels Peter squeezing his arm so hard he thinks the bone will break. Credo’s young, but he’s not a fool. He can hear Peter whispering, “Verity Micellef, Pinny Falzon,” in his ear, standing so close his breath is moving Credo’s hair.

He knows exactly what’s riding on his next words.

He feels Captain Agius’ hand upon his shoulder as the older man speaks. “I believe I speak for myself and my sons-in-law when I say, that we vow with everything in our power to bring in a world that’s free of the chaos that haunts it.”

_Verity Micellef, Pinny Falzon._

Credo can feel his future vanishing before him.

_Verity Micellef, Pinny Falzon._

“I vow,” he whispers and Lord Scerri nods.

“I knew I chose wisely, when I was looking for good, honourable men to bring my vision to the world.”
Credo feels like he’s falling into the dark.

*Verity Micellef, Pinny Falzon.*

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It’s late into the day before they’re released by Lord Scerri, eating with him in his private quarters, forcing down the fine foods while trying not to puke.

Peter and the other three men carry the conversation, planning the future.

Credo thinks they’ve all got their own plans and he doesn’t think any one is better than the other. He wishes he could talk to his mother about it. Her particular skillset is ideal for this kind of thing.

He looks at Captain Agius, skilfully carrying his share of the conversation, as if Sparda alone knows how many people have died for that..that thing in the other tower of this building.

*How can he be so calm?* Wonders the young man. *How can he be so calm with what they’ve learned, what’s at stake?*

“You’re awfully quiet, Credo. Are you alright?” asks Lord Scerri, concerned but not unduly. It’s as if there wasn’t a room full of people dying underneath the Castle.

“Forgive me, My Lord General,” and Credo marvels at how calm he is, “I’m just very tired after setting the spell for Vee and the Son of Sparda last night.”

Sparda’s Balls, was it really only last night that they laid that abomination?

At the time it seemed so right, the only thing they could do.

Credo wishes he’d never caught the eye of Lord Scerri, never been partnered with Peter.
Never fought that hell-cursed duel at Pinny’s ball. The memory of Verity’s lips trembling as she held in her hurt angered him in a way he’d never been angered in his 18 years. He’d actually found a dress and asked Cassius if he’d dance with this man in a dress.

Everyone had laughed, until they realised Credo was serious, Cassius almost laughing at him as he accepted the challenge.

He stopped laughing after Credo’s first strike. He’d put up a good fight, but Credo was just better, even in a dress and had trounced him. Cassius’ gasped, “I yield,” had almost been a disappointment.

Until he’d looked up at Verity and seen her looking at him with that mix of awe and desire and he’d asked her for that dance. She’s told him that it was the first time that anyone had done something for her, for who she was rather than what she could do and all without expecting anything in return.

The feel of her pressed against him as they danced the rest of the night, her Shiraz eyes dark claret in the candlelight and he realised Vee was no longer the little girl trailing his every move and trying to best him every which way.

Her mouth on his, warm and soft and shy. “Do I meet your approval, Sir?”

His heart flying as he murmured back, “Always.”

No, he can’t regret that and he can’t regret this, not if it gets Verity in his bed and his surname as hers quicker than Captain Agius was going to allow.

Some sacrifices have to be made and some will sacrifice more than others. He sees the future in the Mainland Tourists and doesn’t want that for Rodin or for Charlotte, when they’re born.

At least, that’s what he tells himself. He hasn’t come this far too fail and he doesn’t want to join the poor souls feeding that monstrosity.

Credo is a Micellef and Micellefs have always served.
Maybe, just maybe, he can find a way out of this that makes everyone happy.

Verity Micellef, Pinny Falzon.

“Of course you must be,” agrees Lord Scerri. “And here was me dragging you from your beds when you’d only just fell into them. Shame on me. I’m a terrible commanding officer. You must of course spend the night here. I insist.”

“What of my daughter and her paramour, Lord General?” Asks Captain Agius.

“Let them rest this night, you can place her under house arrest tomorrow,” suggests Arkham. “It doesn’t sound like they’ll be going anywhere for a while. Might I request, that as part of her punishment for her presumed misdemeanours, she is remanded to myself for her education.”

“What of the youth? You’ve been mighty concerned for his health, might I remind you,” says Lord Scerri, sipping from his glass. “I commend your Papa, Credo. He really does have the finest vineyard on the island.”

“I should enjoy the opportunity to educate him as well,” replies Arkham. “After all, he is my main concern, while she is yours. Her skillset in its entirety lends her to your purposes and I can educate her somewhat in the time I’ll have with her. When I leave with the youth, I’ll be leaving behind a considerable asset for your objective.”

“And this was always our intention,” agrees Lord Arius. “You think you can keep them occupied?”

“They are teenagers,” Arkham says and his scar dances excitedly. “I’ll keep them about as occupied as they’ll keep each other.”

“Oh, I’m sure your occupations will be far more educational,” laughs Captain Agius.

Everyone but Credo laughs, though to allay suspicion, he does manage a smile.
It doesn’t reach his eyes.

Verity Micellef, Pinny Falzon.

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It doesn’t hit her at first and she actually sleeps for a while, pressed against him in the narrow bed. It reminds him of the Archive Lodgings. Plain, but clean and comfortable. There’s a clock on the wall and in the gloom it tells him that it’s 9.15pm.

He doesn’t want to disturb her, so he concentrates on his surroundings. He can hear Dorcas and Abigail arguing with each other and shouting at Pinny – he feels for her and their closeness reminds him of Dante. It’s a longing so sharp to speak to his brother that it brings a lump to his throat.

He’s not thinking of Dante so much that he doesn’t notice the changes in her and it’s as if they’re back at the ruined church. It’s the same symptoms, quick, erratic pulse, shallow breathing, clammy skin. She’s sweating and shivering at the same time.

She starts to moan and cry in her unconscious state, her hands going instinctively to her stomach and he can feel a stickiness on his thighs. It smells rich and ferric, meaty.

He puts a hand down to her thighs and it’s covered in a thick, deep red.

He yells for Abigail and she comes running, checking her thoroughly, discussing things that he’s absolutely ignorant about – Eva died before he could learn about any of this.

“What’s happening?” he asks, urgently. His stomach’s churning again with worry.

“The herbs have brought on her monthlies, so should hopefully stop a babe embedding within her,” replies Dorcas, setting the blankets back over her. “Bed’s ruined. Even though she eats her greens every night, it’s as well to take extra precautions with the strength of the spell used on you both.”

“I’ll buy you a new bed, Dorcas,” snaps Abigail. “This isn’t just her monthlies, she’s in too much
pain for that. She’s burning up!”

“Blame your damn fool daughter, you stupid cow! She’s poisoned her! Get her into a cool bath, it’ll help her cramps as well.”

Vergil’s already there, running the bath so it’s tepid. He puts in some bubble bath as well, recalling how Verity had just wanted to clean up. “I’m getting in with her.”

“Are you mad?” demands Dorcas.

“No, let him,” replies Abigail. “He’ll be able to hold her up in the water. When the water’s too cold we can run it in around them.”

Vergil’s in his boxer briefs and both women look at him in exasperation. “Strip boy! Would you bath in your clothes?”

“But-“ he’s flummoxed in a way he usually isn’t.

“You think you’ve anything we’ve never seen before? Strip boy!”

Vergil huffs and tears off his small clothes. He picks up a shivering Verity in a bridal carry and gets into the bath with her. He ignores Dorcas and Abigail raising their eyebrows at each other as they surreptitiously rate his lobcock. He leans Verity against his chest, keeping her head clear of the water, as she moans and cries.

“She needs a doctor,” says Vergil. “Where’s the hospital?”

“We’ll all be for the high jump if a doctor’s called. Neither of us want a Witch Trial and it’ll be Verity that’ll be hit the hardest. This will be nothing compared to what they’ll do to her. As long as it’s not permanent, they can do what they like and if she dies, then it’s Sparda’s judgement on her.” Dorcas is resolute.

Abigail is equally so. “She’s got a strong constitution, so let’s pray it’s enough to get her through this.”
“You’d put your own safety above your daughter’s life?” Vergil’s horrified. He tightens his grip on the shaking, sweating Verity.

“We have to! We have other children, husbands, we’re Order! What do you think they would do to us? To set out an example to other Old Families who would consider this?”

“I just want her to be ok,” he says plainly. He rallies. “You told me prevention’s not a sin!”

“To Lord Sparda, not to the Families Committee! Not to the Faith Committee!” snarls back Abigail. “And not when they’ve tried so hard to conceive your babe, they’d set this spell on you!”

It’s hard for him to hold Verity, she’s writhing so much and surely her crying’s loud enough to be heard outside?

Dorcas is thinking the same thing. “Cover her mouth.”

There’s a knock on the door and Dorcas squeals. “Yes?”

“Alright, it-teżor tieghi?” calls a man who sounds like an older Credo.

“Everything’s fine, Zander,” calls back Dorcas. “Just some lightskirt whose client caught her unawares.”

“Pinny wants to know if she can come in or will we need her to stall Credo?”

“Is he here?”

“No.”

“Then she can stay downstairs. It’s crowded enough in here as it is.”
“Can I go to bed or do you need anything?”

“Goodnight, Zander, Hanini.”

“Vergil,” says Abigail. “When this is over, take her away with you. Take them both away with you. Even if I never see them again.”

“I was always going to take her,” he replies. “And I know she won’t go without Pinny.”

He gasps as a particularly violent convulsion from Verity gets him in the stomach. “What about their father? She was worrying about that.”

“I’ll sort that. Just get them both safe.”

Dorcas measures out a liquid from a vial. “Hold her so I can pour this down her throat.”

“What is it?” asks Vergil.

“Muscle relaxant. Stop her convulsing so much.” She readies the cup as Vergil positions Verity’s mouth. “Keep her head up.”

The girl chokes but keeps most of the liquid down and she does relax a little more.

“It’s not Edward I’d be worried about,” says Abigail. “It’s Credo.”

“You insult me by bringing his habiba here with another man and now you’re starting on him? You’re taking considerable freedoms with my hospitality, Abigail.”

“He’s obsessed with her and you know it. Edward may condone it, but I don’t. Verity was always going to leave Fortuna. You think Credo would have allowed that?” snaps Abigail. She reaches down and smooths a lock of hair from her daughter’s face. “She was going to work at Umbrella
once she’d finished her training and get transferred away from here. Both of them were.”

“Credo loves her! He would have gone with her! He’d do anything for her, anything!” snarls Dorcas.

“Except leave her alone,” replies Abigail. “You think if they wed, it makes up for you losing Edward?”

“No! You can’t go up there! Our Mamas are busy with a poor lightskirt!”

“No, Abigail, because, my husband keeps his hands to himself. Maybe Credo and Peter made their offers to get your girls away from your home’s poisonous influence. How can they feel safe when half of Fortuna knows you hide your husband’s fists under your hijab? Order don’t need to wear them, so why do you?”

Dorcas turns back to Verity. “She’s looking better. I’m going to change the water to something warmer.”

“I just want to speak to Mama. Pinny, I’ve had a long day and I’m at the end of my patience.”

Vergil nods.

“You mustn’t! She’s in a bad way, there’s all kinds of screaming and yelling.”

“Your grandchildren will be safe in my house,” Dorcas says, contemptuously. It’s clear that whatever friendship was between them is in ruins.

“My grandchildren will never be in your house, Dorcas. Not if I have any say.” Abigail looks at Vergil and he nods.

“Pinny, you can’t tell me where I can and can’t go in my own house.”

The door swings open and Credo’s standing there, Pinny just behind him.
“I tried to stop him,” she nearly sobs.

Credo says nothing. He only has eyes for Verity.

*Verity Micellef. Pinny Falzon.*
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Yeah, this poured out today and my heart says post.
This wasn't the scene I was going to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fortuna, present day

They get back home a little after two am.

“Kyrie! Nero!” Violet calls on the vanished lovebirds as they come through the door.

Silence is the bold reply.

“Maybe they’re already home and in bed?” suggests Lady.

“I’ll check, even if I’m about to go blind,” says Violet, going upstairs.

She knocks on Kyrie’s door and waits.

Nothing.

Violet’s alarm is getting the better of her and she walks in.

The bed is empty and still made, so it’s not like they’ve got up for anything.

Dante comes up behind her.
Violet shakes her head. “This is not like them, at all.”

“Want some company while you look for them?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she nods, giving a little smile. “Please.”

“I’ll go get my weapons.”

While she’s waiting on Dante, Violet goes into her study and examines the bookcase. They’ve been careful to spread the books remaining to hide the gaps, but Violet knows where everything in this and Credo’s office is.

It’s only Dorcas’ books missing. None of hers.

There’s a space in her journal shelf and she moves the journals around in confusion as she tries to fathom out what one’s missing.

Then Dante calls and it’s a quick change and out to the car.

His eyes note the bruising on her throat. He can tell a handprint when he sees one, but he doesn’t mention it.

He opens her side for her, before walking round to his, laying Rebellion between the seats where he can get her more easily. “So where to?”

“Check the spots they usually go, I guess,” she replies. “Nero likes to sit in the harbour. Kyrie likes the North Beach or swimming out to the islands.”

She catches Dante’s doubtful look. “She’s a really strong swimmer.”

“I didn’t mean that,” he says. “You really think she’ll be there at this time of night?”
“I guess not. I’m just concerned. This really isn’t like them, but I’m just going to check everywhere anyway.” She breaks suddenly to let a cat across the road.

“Was anything missing?” asks Dante. “Trish told me.”

“Some of Dorcas’ books and a journal of mine, an old one, I think. God alone knows why, there’s nothing in them but to-do lists and nightmares.” Violet glances at him quickly. “Was your stuff ok?”

“We didn’t leave it here.” Dante notes she doesn’t ask what it is he’s hiding. “How do you think they got in?”

“Try their phones again. Blood or hair probably. Does it matter?” There’s a catch in her voice. “They got in. I’m going to have to change the wards.”

“Maybe they went to one of the bars on the Waterfront?” he suggests.

“Kyrie had a headache. A bar’s the last place they’d go.” Violet stops the car at the docks and peers out the window. “This is as close as we get.”

She gets out and the wind blows her hair about.

“Rain on that wind,” says Dante, resting Rebellion on his shoulder.

Violet pulls a heavy-duty torch from the boot of the car and begins to walk out to the quayside where Nero goes to think. “Wow. That’s a hell of a swell building up.”

She points the torch onto the water. It’s only a few feet below the walkway and the rolling waves near the mouth are several feet high. She shines the torch out to the open water and waves are several metres high and rolling over the unprotected walkway.

Dante puts a hand out to stop her, grabbing her arm.
She looks down at it and snorts. “Glub glub, Danteeee, Danteeee.”

“Just didn’t want to have to explain to my nephew why I let his sister in law go swimming,” he says, lightly, but he doesn’t drop his hand. He puts a small amount of pressure on it, enough to draw her away.

“It’s storm season now anyway and we’re due a big one. We had one last year that left fish four streets in. The waves were going over the lighthouse on Southworth Island, they were that big.” She allows him to draw her back towards the car. She looks at him. “One last place I want to try, if you haven’t raised them on their phones.”

Dante shakes his head. “Just going to voicemail.”

They get back into the car. “So, when you going to tell him? I’ve already spoke to Trish.”

“Next few days. From what you said to Trish, it won’t be a surprise.” He glances across to her. “Way I see it, both our families just got a little bigger.”

Violet just smiles as she puts the car in gear and moves off.

“I was going to do it when I’d found out about his mother,” begins Dante.

“You’ll have a long wait then,” she snorts.

“So Trish says. I’ve lost so many people in my life, I’m just glad I found him. I can see his father in him.” Dante’s trying to watch Violet without it being obvious.

“Well, if you were an identical twin, you would. He’s got your smart-ass mouth, that’s for sure.” She smiles Nero’s little quirk. “What was he like?”

“Vergil was clever, wicked cultured, quite reserved, but if he let you in, he’d move heaven and earth for you. He could be selfish and if he thought he knew better, he’d do whatever ‘for your own good.’”
“He sounds like a bit of an asshole,” says Violet. She stops to let a Wahx il-baqar past. It pays the car no mind. “I think that’s a different one from the other day.”

“He could be a lot of an asshole, but he was my asshole, y’know?” Dante looks out the window, but it’s too dark to see anything.

“What happened?”

“We fought as kids, but we were like Josh and Nero, we complimented each other, ying and yang. All that fighting meant that we made a great team. We were going to go into business together, saving people, hunting things.”

“I know about your mother and that Vergil was taken during the attack, but you got him back a little later.” Violet takes a turn up a road that looks familiar, even in the dark. “What, he was ten or something?”

“About the same age as Nero when Dorcas and Alexander died.”

Violet looks at him sharply.

“Hey, I investigated you as much as you investigated me.”

Violet makes a fair enough gesture. “You think Falzon and Sanctus left anything to chance?”

Dante chuckles. “I don’t think a fart in the wind got past that pair. They made Trish quick enough.”

“I’m still annoyed about that,” Violet replies. “That spell was fucking hard. And here we are.”

She comes to a stop outside a small path. “Ruined Church is a little way up there.”

“You really think they’ll be there?” he asks.
“I can’t think of anywhere else to look. It’s where all the cool kids have their dalliances and it’s not like they haven’t been caught up here before.” She pulls out the torch again and locks the car up.

Dante clips Rebellion on his back. “Lead on, MacDuff.”

“So why’d you and Vergil fall out in the end?” Violet pulls the conversation back to Vergil.

“Ideological differences. He wanted to look more into our demon heritage and become more powerful so that he would never be vulnerable again and I wanted to use my powers to stop other people being vulnerable.” Dante’s glad Violet’s concentrating on the path and can’t see his face.

“I guess you both wanted to honour Sparda, just in different ways. I mean as you both found, you can’t protect anything without power.” Violet’s still carefully picking her way through the bushes.

“OK, my turn,” says Dante. “Why’d you never marry Credo? He struck me as the traditional type, especially in his position.”

“I’m not down with public fucking and there’s no way around it, with his position,” she replies. She tenses and Dante realises where they are.

“I hate this place,” says Violet, looking at the church in front of them. “It’s got such an evil atmosphere. I have no fucking idea how all the kids get their jollies here.”

“You can stay out here. I’ll go in and look,” offers Dante.

“It’s just a place,” she replies, clearly not convinced by what she’s saying. “I’m not afraid of demons, I’m more afraid of man.”

She squares her shoulders and goes into the church. “Kyrie! Nero!”

There’s no answer as they quickly look around the church. She eyes the area in front of the stairs as if it’s going to attack her and skirts around the edge. “I know, it’s stupid, but I just get the feeling
that something terrible happened here and it stained the place.”

“It’s an old building, it probably did,” replies Dante. “Like that stone tape theory.”

“It’s not as weird as it sounds.” She looks around. “They’re not here. I have no idea where to go next and that wind’s getting up.”

She moves to go, but Dante stops her. “Tell me why you never married Credo and don’t give me any bullshit about fucking in public, because you’ve done way, way worse things than that.”

Violet looks down at his hand on her arm and back at him. Wine-dark eyes meet sky-blue, but she doesn’t pull away. “I wanted Credo to marry someone who could have children, but he wanted me and no one else. He wanted us to adopt or try IVF with a surrogate.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“How is this finding Nero and Kyrie?”

“You said yourself, you don’t know where to look next. Five more minutes isn’t going to make any difference.” Dante can almost hear Trish’s voice in his head telling him to shut the fuck up before he ruins everything, but he can’t.

Verity’s diary, the photos at Falzon’s, Verity’s wedding ring to a Sparda round the wrong Agius throat, he’s done. He can’t take any more. Sitting in the church where it happened. He’s going to tell her. He probably shouldn’t, but fuck it.

He just wants a little piece of his brother back. And what’s more important than Vergil’s Marked wife? What’s so wrong about that?

“So why didn’t you?” Dante asks again.

Violet could easily break free, port away, but she doesn’t. She sits down on the steps, looking like she’s struggling to speak.
“I hate this place,” she says quietly. “Not just this church, but Fortuna. I fucking hate Fortuna and the only reason I stayed was for Credo and those kids. I could have upped and left at any time and believe me, there’s plenty that tried to make me.”

She’s not looking at him anymore, but looking at the floor in front of her. “I worked so hard to rebuild my life when I woke up, all the operations, bone grafts, physio and studying so hard that I got sponsored before I’ve even got out of hospital to go to uni and work for one of the major biochemical companies in the world. I’m so excited, and I have this great future in front of me and this black hole behind me and I’m terrified that they’ll crash into each other.”

She looks up at him. “I was left for dead, Dante. My face was so smashed, the police thought that it was to stop me getting ID’d and every bone in my body was broken. Some of it had even started to heal, which means that I’d been held for at least a week and tortured to death. I’m only alive because of sheer chance and medical science. The only clue to my identity is the weird mix of languages I’m fluent in and this bracelet they cannot get off me.”

She holds up her wrist. “Other than you, I’m the only person that can remove it.”

“May I?” Dante holds out his hand for it as he sits down next to her.

Violet undoes it and passes it to him, unconsciously rubbing the gouged scars that encircle her wrist. Dante looks at it in the torchlight, seeing the engraving and the initials. He turns it, seeing the small, glittering red gems forming the eyes of the snake and some spots along its dull metal scrollwork, contrasting against the shining gold base of the bracelet.

He pulls out his amulet and compares the two. “Very similar, don’t you think?”

Violet looks interested. “I’ve never been able to identify the stones. Neither could anyone at work.”

“My father gave this amulet and its other half to my mother and she split them and gave them to me and my brother.” The bracelet tries to pull towards the heavier amulet. “Put them together and they recombine. Like this is trying to.”

Violet takes it from him and snaps it back on.
“Cool trick, Dante. I’m around magic and science all day and there’ll be an explanation for it.” She stands up. “C’mon. We’re as well going home. The pair of them can take care of themselves.”

He doesn’t move and catches her hand. “Sit back down. You didn’t answer my question. Why didn’t you really marry Credo?”

Violet tries to pull her hand free. “We should get back before the weather worsens.”

Dante tightens his hold. “Please sit down, Violet.”

She allows him to pull her back down to sit.

He doesn’t drop her hand. “When I first met Trish, she died defending me. I left my father’s sword and my mother’s amulet with her. Something that had belonged to them, been touched by them, the most precious things I had, because she had given me her most precious gift – her life for mine.”

“It clearly didn’t stick.”

“No, it didn’t, thank God,” he replies. “Has anything funny happened around Nero?”

“What like?” Violet says, suspiciously. She nearly mentions his passenger, but stops herself. “I’ve had electric shocks if I take something from his right hand with my left and the bracelet often glows and sings when he’s near me. I’m going to have burns from how hot it gets. Join the scars I’ve already got there.”

“My brother’s sword was Yamato. Let me see your bracelet.” He turns Violet’s hand around, the dull silver coloured metal catching the light. “This snake is the same design as my brother had on his jacket. It was a personal symbol to him. He had it engraved on nearly everything. Did you ever find out what this metal was?”

“Steel, I think. Magnets stick to it. Where is this going? I’m going home, you can walk.” She tries to stand up again, but Dante holds her firm.
He’s come too far to stop now. He gets more and more urgent as he speaks.

“IT’s steel shavings from the tang of my brother’s sword. He gave the woman he loves the same things I did – something from both our parents, the things they touched, the most precious things we have. I gave mine to Trish and Vergil gave his to you.”

Violet stands up, twisting out of Dante’s grasp. She storms over to the furthest staircase. “Empty fucking Night! Not this again.”

She spins round to face him, tears of anger threatening. “Do you know how many times I’ve heard this? I’m not Verity Agius! I’m not!”

“Yes you are!”

He crosses the distance in a few short strides, grabbing her hands. “You married my brother Vergil when you were pregnant with Nero, You sent letters and pictures back to Pinny. You were wearing this bracelet in them.” He raises the arm with the bracelet, shaking it in her face. “You were found at the same time Nero was born. The dates all fit.”

“The DNA doesn’t!”

She screams at him and it floors Dante.

“No, you’re wrong, you’re wrong,” and he sounds like he’s pleading.

“Lord Agius thought I was Verity come home, he thought his prayers had been answered. Pinny had just come back.” Violet’s voice is flat, defeated. “Towards the end, Pinny thought I was as well and I had to pretend I was her sister to ease a dying woman’s mind. I-I wanted so badly to belong somewhere, have a family. I wanted it so much to belong to someone.”

She takes out her compact and shines the torch on it, turning it over. “Credo gave it to me after my first Witch Trial.”

Dante takes it from Violet and looks at the inscription, his sharper eyes seeing the scratches
underneath form CAMVEA and a date of 20 years ago.

“Il cuore conosce la verità, the heart knows the truth,” translates Dante. “This was Credo’s Courting Gift to Verity – Credo worshipped you. He wouldn’t have given you his ex’s leavings. He was giving you this back.”

“Then he was wrong.” Violet breaks away and brushes angry tears off her cheeks. “Lord Agius agreed to DNA and he was so sure, but we didn’t match. I didn’t match him, I didn’t match Pinny. He was gutted and he repeated the tests four or five times till I said no more.”

She takes back her compact. “I’m sorry Dante, it’s just coincid-“ she pauses as an idea strikes her.

“I know how we can find Nero and Kyrie.” She walks past him. “I’ve got the stuff I need in my office.”

Chapter End Notes

the next load of chapters in this arc are proving fairly intricate to write and make workable together. As we're moving towards some fairly emotional parts, I want to get it right and do our guys and girls justice. You guys deserve a cracking first posted fic, rather than something half assed that i post and edit into shape.

This is also a busy month personally as most of my family were born this and next month, work is going a little crazy and I have Nationals (I'm a role-player) next week.

Thank you for all your bookmarks, your comments and kudos. they mean SO MUCH to me. If you haven't subbed already, give it a go and when I do update it'll hit your sweaty little inbox and be delivered right to you.

I'm looking at June 1st as a next posting date.

Thank you for sticking with me thus far xx
Chapter 32

Fortuna two decades ago

Credo stands there, shocked, dumbstruck, guilt-stricken. It all flashes fleetingly over his face, but
it’s the last one that stays in his eyes, clear for Vergil to read.

Credo set this. God in Heaven, Credo set this.

“What have you done to her, demon-spawned bastard?” Credo crosses the small room in three
steps, dropping down beside the bath and reaching for Verity, blind to everyone but her. Vergil
twists out the way as much as he can, knocking Credo’s hands aside as he reaches for her.

“Get your filthy hands off her!” snarls Vergil. “You’ve no right to touch her. Her soul’s so far
above you, you’re not even shit on her shoe!”

It’s like Credo focuses on Vergil for the first time. “And what are you, Demon? What are you to
tell me anything about Verity? I’ve known her since she was born, since she fell out a tree and
broke her arm because she wanted to climb up with me? When she didn’t tell her Papa for two days
because she didn’t want to get me in trouble? When she was devastated because she was told she
looked like a man in drag and I fought for her honour, just to see her smile? What are you to her,
pray tell, that your scant month wipes clean my lifetime?”

Credo tries to grab Verity and pull her away from Vergil, pulling the unconscious girl about like a
ragdoll in the bathwater. There’s a smell of ozone and a scream from Pinny as two rows of blue
spectral swords appear either side of Vergil and aim at Credo.

There’s a shriek of “Credo!” from Dorcas as everyone in the room sees him wink out of existence
and Vergil’s swords fire off in a different direction, hitting the shield Pinny hauls up quickly. The
force sends her flying backwards as Credo reappears by his Mama, falling by her feet, as if she’d a
hand on his shoulder and overbalanced him.

Dorcas is panting as she checks her son. His reply’s winded but clear. “I’m fine, Mama. What’s
going on? Why’s Verity here? You help lightskirts with broken ankles up here. He’s got things to
stop girls being inconvenienced so. What has he done to her?”
“You’ve been through my room?” Vergil’s got murder in his eyes and it’s only Verity against him that’s keeping him in the water.

“And you’re telling me he’s not obsessed?” Abigail screams at Dorcas.

“He loves her, can’t you see that? Don’t you know what this is doing to him? It’s tearing him apart!” Dorcas yells back. “Seeing her with him, the only thing keeping Credo going was when he’d be her husband and Papa to her babe! More than he’d be! You really think he’ll stay with her? Truly?”

She gestures angrily at Vergil.

“Well, at least that mistake’s been fixed!” Snaps back Abigail. “She’ll be bearing no babes after this, praise be to the Saviour, to either of them!”

“What?” Credo gasps in horror as he realises Verity isn’t here for the effects of the Wedding Spell, she’s here for the results of the Wedding Spell. “It was for nothing?”

He says this last so quietly that only Vergil hears him.

“Credo’s never wedding nor bedding any girl of mine, Dorcas, whether she cleaves to Vergil or not. You think I want your mad son near either of them?” Hisses Abigail, her voice full of contempt.

“Mama! It’s Credo!” protests Pinny. “Have a care! Watch your words!”

“Cuckolding himself for orders? If he’s no spine now, how can he protect her or my grandchildren when it really matters?”

Dorcas slaps Abigail, hard. “Get out of my house, all of you.”

“Help me with your sister, Pinny, Vergil, come with us,” instructs Abigail, thinking about what she’ll need to get Verity safe home and to bed. “You think I can’t take a punch, Dorcas?”
“Mama, no!” protests Credo, desperate not to lose Verity, not with the state he’s put her in. *No,* he reminds himself, *Vergil Sparda’s put her in.* “All but Verity! You can’t move her! She’s too ill to be moved!”

“He’s right,” says Dorcas. “Leave her here to recover. We’ll take care of her.”

“Nine fucking hells, you’ve got to be joking,” says Abigail. “I can look after her at home. It’s not the first time I’ve had Bitter Water. Pinny and I can manage.”

“Why’s everyone shoutin’?” mutters Verity, coming round.

“Hey, *sabiha,* you had us worried,” says Vergil, brushing the hair from her face.

Credo notices how soft Vergil’s face goes when he looks at her.

“She shouldn’t be coming round this fast,” says Dorcas. “She needs to stay here in case she relapses.”


“Yes, dear, it’s done. But you’ve come round too quick and that concerns me. Stay here. Credo and I will take care of you,” Dorcas tries appealing directly to Verity.

“Dorcas! Have you no shame?” remonstrates Abigail. “Vergil, get her out. It’s time for you both to come home.”

He stands, carefully pulling Verity up with him. She’s shaking with the effort, but holding up and again, Vergil marvels at her tenacity.

Abigail wraps her in a bedsheet, as Vergil pulls on his clothes.
“Then I’m going to insist Verity remains here.” Credo has found his spine, pulling himself up to his full height and becoming the Knight who breaks up fights in the Tourist Quarter. “Verity Eliza Agius. I’m placing you under arrest for Criminal Damage, Affray and Immodest Conduct. I remand you to my custody until you are well enough to be brought before a Court or a Committee.”

Vergil flicks up Yamato. “You and whose army, Credo?”

“Then the first Committee member through that door’s going to know your mother’s an abortionist,” says Abigail. “Even if I bring us all down, she falls harder.”

Credo looks like he’s about to protest, but Dorcas stays him with a hand. “All you have to do is wait, son.”

Abigail and Dorcas ignore each other.

He shares a look with Pinny, who’s as confused and upset as he is.

_It was never meant to be like this._

***

It’s only ten minutes between the Micellef and Agius houses, but it takes longer than that as Abigail draws them as close to the house as she dares.

“How are we meant to get in, Mama?” Pinny asks. “I can’t see how we’ll do that without observation.”

“The plan had been to hide Vee at Dorcas’ for a few days, pleading her recovery, but that’s torn now,” says Abigail as she rubs her brow irritably.

“Could you port us, Pinny?” Asks Vergil. Vee’s on his back and she’s easier to carry like this. Her head rests on his shoulder.
“Me?” squeaks Pinny. “I-perhaps, but at my best I can’t match Vee at her worst and right now she’s in no fit state to –“

Verity looks terrible, but better than she has done. “Mama –“ she begins and there’s no breath behind her voice. “It’s not you they’re looking for. Go home and wait. We’ll follow on.”

“No doubt they saw us leave, Verity,” points out Abigail. “And they’ll assume to give you aid. I don’t believe us followed, however.”

“Had that been so, they’d have come down on us at Dorcas’,” agrees Vergil. He shakes his head. “They’re watching for us, not you. Likely they’re just reporting on your comings and goings.”

“I think it best we come in separately.” Abigail looks at her back garden wall. “Follow on in ten minutes.”

“Do you plan in shimmying up the drainpipe, Mama?” Pinny can’t help teasing.

“You think I can’t, girl? It’s not so long ago that your bedroom was mine and I was sneaking out to see Edward.” Abigail shifts a little. “Besides, I get plenty exercise running from your father.”

“Mama!” Pinny looks upset. After all, Agius is still her Papa.

“I’m not happy about walking up to the front door, Abigail. I’m not going to get her up the drainpipe.” Vergil looks between Verity and the back wall of the garden. “I’d prefer it if they didn’t see us come in.”

Abigail thinks for a moment, before rooting through her bag. She pulls out a small bottle. “Apparently this bottle ignites when it’s broken. I’ve always hated the dead tree in next door’s garden.”

Verity snorts from Vergil’s shoulder and he turns and grins at her, as much at the joke as her reaction to it. Abigail smiles as he looks back at her. “I told you she’s strong. No, she’s stubborn. Too damn stubborn for her own good.”
“No such thing,” declares Vergil.

“Wait till the street’s full, then come to the front door. When that tree goes, it’s going to go.” She checks Verity over quickly, stroking her face, before kissing Vergil’s cheek.

They vanish into the night and Vergil creeps closer to the end of the street. There’s a little garden square across from it and he thinks he can make out benches by a flowerbed with a rich smell. There’s no streetlights on this side of the road and the moonlight isn’t illuminating through the thick cover of the trees. He flashes across the road, finding the strength from somewhere.

He can see a car in the drive that he thinks could be the Captain’s. “Might end up fighting your Papa after all,” he mutters, setting her down on the seat.

Verity murmurs something he doesn’t catch properly. It sounds like *not tonight*. She’s smiling weakly, so that’s something at least.

“How’s Abigail going to set that tree up anyway? That’s quite a throw,” he comments to no one in particular. He’s peering down the street, waiting on their signal.

Verity looks at him with just a hint of derision. “Seriously, this concerns you? Pinny.”

“How’s Pinny going to get out there without being seen?” Vergil fires back.

“Empty Night, qalbi, you’re too handsome to be so foolish. She doesn’t need to leave the building, only the bottle does.”

As if on cue, there’s a *whoomp* sound as halfway up the street bursts into flames. There’s a few seconds before yells and screams of “Fire! Send for the Watch!” turn into the entire street and probably most of Top of the Town thronging into the street to gawk and try to stop the Agius’ neighbours running back into their house. It’s been a dry spring so far in Fortuna so it’s not long before the rest of the garden is going up.

“Can you stand, Vee?” asks Vergil, readying himself to pull her to her feet.
“With help, but I’m in a bedsheet,” she reminds him, gesturing at herself.

Vergil slides off his jacket and pulling her up with a groan, wraps her in it. She puts her arms through the sleeves and leans into him. He’s got an arm supporting her under her shoulders and they’re unsteady as they walk off. It works, though, giving out the impression they’re a courting couple lost in each other as they stagger and kiss each other as they’re jostled by the crowd.

Abigail has left the door open and it’s easy for them to fall through it, kissing and giggling all the while.

“Oh Miss! What have they done to you?” Alice gasps, closing and locking the door quickly. They don’t answer her, turning back instead to watch the door. They’re still embracing, anxiously gripping each other’s arms.

Nothing happens. There’s only the noise of the crowd in the street.

There’s no bangs on the door, no Knights breaking it down and demanding their arrests.

“We’re safe? We made it?” Verity can scarce believe it. “Mama? We’re home?”

“We made it, Vee, sabiha, we’re safe,” Vergil says, kissing her lips, her cheeks, her eyes, anywhere he can reach. He’s fair bursting with relief and he’s blind to Abigail coming into the room.

“You’re home, il-Vjola tieghi,” Abigail assures her daughter, relief in every line of her body.

Verity takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I’m…fine…finally h-home? I’m h-home? I –“

The sigh becomes a sob as the enormity of the ordeal they’ve been through crashes into her and she breaks down. Verity clings to Vergil like she’s drowning, deep, wracking sobs convulsing through her body. It’s a deep and wordless grief and her agony rips through him, as he pushes his own sorrow aside to console her. He makes no sound as he rocks her. It’s all he can do to hold himself together.
He can’t stop his own tears falling, tracing silver tracks down his sharp cheeks, but still, yet, Vergil doesn’t allow himself the luxury of sound. He’s too used to punishment for the weakness. He’s an unlikely comforter, yet he’s a natural for all that, at least where Verity’s concerned.

Verity cries like her heart’s breaking in his arms and Vergil envies her that. He wishes that she’d cling to him while he cries. It hasn’t escaped him that they’re safe in her home, with her family surrounding her, risking life and limb to save her.

Vergil is the afterthought here.

If it wasn’t for Verity, there’s no one here who’d have lifted a finger to help him.

He should feel complete with the love of his life in his arms, but he feels empty, bereft, now the rush of relief has subsided. All of this aimed at creating a new life, someone who’s part of him, so important, but he’s only a tiny part of any of it. In the scheming of things, Vergil is nothing now his purpose is served.

But there’s another warm body pressing against him, an arm wrapping around him as he kneels on the floor, a soft voice murmuring nonsense into his hair and as much as he’s holding Verity, Vergil can’t help but lean into Abigail as she croons as much to him as to her daughter that he’s home, of course he is, where else would he be? Why, his family’s here, so where else should he be?

For the first time in a long time, Vergil lets someone else take the weight.

***

Vergil wakes with a start and for a moment doesn’t know where he is.

The sound of an argument raging downstairs is coming up through the floorboards. It sounds like Captain Agius and Abigail are going at it hammer and tongs. He thinks he can hear a blow being landed, but it’s not deterring Abigail. He’s angered on her behalf but her daughter is his main concern.

His next thought is Verity and he reaches out for her. His hand hits the cool space where she should be and comes away bloody and sticky.
“Vee?” he calls softly, looking around the room. He sits up, every muscle stiff and sore. He can feel bruising on his skin, so he knows the last few days have been tough. “Vee?”

His sharp ears catch the sound of her gasping in pain from behind a door he assumes is the sisters’ bathroom. He hears it even over the sound of running water. God, what state must she be in after their torment?

Vergil quietly opens the door, saying her name. She doesn’t hear him over the sound of the water as she leans over the sink, holding her stomach. Verity’s still pale, pinched and trembling, he notes. She’s trying to undo the buttons on her pyjama top, but her hands shake too much.

“Let me,” Vergil murmurs against her hair, hands coming round to rest on hers. She doesn’t jump or flinch, just leans into him and accepts his help. He strips her gently, helping her out of her stained drawers, with a folded rag as a sanitary towel.

“In that bin,” she murmurs, indicating a closed lid bin behind the toilet. “Alice likes them kept separate so they don’t stain our clothes. She’ll boil wash the rags so we can reuse them.”


“Oh. I suppose you can fill my head with Mainland nonsense, now,” she says, a baby version of her quirk ghosting across her lips. There’s a loud crash from downstairs that has them both looking at the floor, before Vergil guides her into the bath. He’d slept naked, so he doesn’t need to worry about undressing.

The water’s hot but relaxing and it’s just what their tired muscles need. “I’m aching from head to foot,” Verity admits, wincing. “Especially up inside my Jane Brown.”

“That’s normal, sabih,” Vergil soothes her. “It won’t hurt next time, but you’ll be waiting a while for it.”

She turns slightly and looks at him doubtfully.

“I took you in demon form, Vee and without preparation. I really want a doctor to look at you,
regardless of your mother,” he says, disapprovingly. “I’ll take you to the Tourist Health Centre later.”

“No, qalbi. I’m not letting anyone else up there. It hurts too much.” Verity shakes her head resolutely. She winces at a particularly bad cramp. “I’ll be glad when these pass. I never have them so bad normally.”

“Well, that’s what you get for not listening. Remember the lesson and don’t go off half-cocked next time,” he not-so-gently scolds her. “Lord, this bath is good.”

Vergil pulls Verity back against him and feels her truly unwind in the hot water. She picks up a handful of the fragrant foam and plops it on Vergil’s head.

“I’m impressed,” he says, more amused than annoyed by the childishness, he expects it from her now. “You aimed and hit without looking.”

“Tell me about the Mainland,” she says, playing with his long, strong fingers, calloused and hard from years of weapons work.

Vergil scoops up some suds and gives Verity a beard. “You’ll love it. I live in Fiorentina and the history…”

***

It’s the pounding on the door that stops Captain Agius and Abigail fighting.

It’s so hard it shakes the house. Vergil feels it through his feet as he dries Verity’s back. It’s bruised and scraped to hell, but the marks are clean, no infection. It was one of the things that he was worried about, given that it took so long to get back.

“Open up! You are ordered to open up this door!”

“Vee! Vee!” Pinny bursts into the bedroom, running past the bathroom door to the window. She draws back the curtain briefly. “Empty Night! They’re out the back as well!”
“Who are?” calls Vergil.

“Faith Committee Knights, Vergil. They’ve come for you and Vee.” She looks at them. “Mama says to come down as you are. Don’t bother getting dressed. Wrap Verity in a blanket.”

The banging and shouting on the door is getting louder and harder.

They look between each other.

Pinny has no patience for lovers’ looks. “Make haste! Mama wants you downstairs before she opens the door.”

Vergil looks around the bedroom for his clothes, but he has none, so he simply wraps a towel around his waist. Verity finds a vest top and underpants, quickly finding a fresh rag to put in. Vergil hauls the top cover off her bed, throwing it over her shoulders.

“Get down here, you pair!” Shouts Abigail, Alice is running about with breakfast things.

Verity is still having trouble even keeping upright, so it takes both Vergil and Pinny to get her downstairs.

Captain Agius is there and he stares at his daughter and her lover, almost as if he doesn’t recognise Verity anymore. There’s a grief underlying it, showing in his face.

Abigail bids them to sit Verity down at the table and she actually whimpers as she sits, even though Abigail has put a cushion down for her.

“Mama, you’re bleeding,” says Pinny.

Captain Agius has the good grace to look ashamed as Abigail wipes her split lip on a napkin. Her left eye is swollen shut and there’s a distinct handprint on her face, complete with wedding ring, but she looks resolute.
No, thinks Vergil. *She looks regal.*

“*Alice, open the door and show them in,*” she says. She quickly looks at Vergil and quickly grabs his pendant, slips it over his head and over Verity’s. She winks at him and he gives a confused nod.

“General Calleja, Madam, and Knight Falzon, Knight Micellef,” Alice says as she shows them in with a curtsey. “*Shall I put on extra breakfast for the gentlemen?*”

“That won’t be necessary, Alice,” says Lord Calleja. “I see she’s turned up. You didn’t think to notify us, Captain Agius?”

“Alice, bring through extra plates and set three extra places,” says Abigail, as if Calleja’s never spoke.

“Madam Agius, I’m not here for pleasantries, I’m here for her,” he begins, gesturing at Verity.

“You walk into my house and you won’t accept my hospitality? On duty or not, the Rules of Hospitality still apply amongst the Old Families, Caesar,” replies Abigail, her tone pleasant, but reproving. She looks past him to Credo and Peter. “*Sit down, boys.*”

They look uncertainly at each other and then the General. “Madam Agius, I’m here to arrest Verity and the Tourist she’s been gadding about with.”

“She can have her breakfast first,” says Abigail. “As you can see, she isn’t going anywhere. Sit down, Credo. How’s your mother? I’ve not seen her for a few weeks. I’ve been indisposed.”

Credo is fairly thrumming with nervous energy. “*My Lord, perhaps the information we’ve received was inaccurate or exaggerated.*”

Peter looks at him sharply.

“I’m sorry to hear it, Madam,” says Lord Calleja. He glares at Captain Agius. “You need to take
more care of your womenfolk.”

“I think the care taken of them is well enough, Lord General,” Captain Agius replies, voice hard. “But do please join us.”

Lord Calleja looks at the family and at the state of Verity and Vergil as he takes a seat, just as Credo notices that Verity is wearing Vergil’s pendant. He stumbles as he takes a chair on the other side of Verity, his face going white.

Vergil looks at him coolly.

“Are you alright, Credo?” Abigail asks, concerned.

“My chair caught the carpet, Madam Agius.” Credo can scarce get the words out.

“The carpets in this house are prone to tripping the unwary,” says Abigail.

Peter just looks amused, as if he knows how this is going to play out. He casts the occasional glance at Pinny, as if she’s a mouse in a cage and he’s the cat waiting for the moment to spring. Pinny looks down at her plate when she catches the looks.

“They do take the blame for many sins, Madam,” Peter agrees innocently.

“So, Caesar,” says Abigail, pleasantly enough. “What brings you to my house this fine morning? Surely it’s not because we’ve missed First Prayer?”

General Calleja shifts in his chair, aware he’s losing the impetus. “Has your husband not spoke with you on this matter, Madam?”

“Indeed he has not. Perhaps you might care to explain, Caesar. How is Amelia? It does seem an age since I last saw anyone!” Abigail sighs dramatically, dabbing her bleeding lip.

“Perhaps if your carpets were safer, you’d see more people,” says Lord Calleja, dryly. “Quite apart
from this shocking display at your breakfast table, Captain Agius, have you not spoken to your wife about the situation regarding this couple?"

“He’s had no chance,” replies Abigail. “As Lord Scerri had requested his presence at the Castle all of yesterday and last night. I was asleep myself when he came in and he was considerate not to disturb my slumber. Why? I hear I missed all the excitement of next doors’ tree going on fire.”

“You miss many things, Madam,” replies Lord Calleja. “Where were you the night before last, Verity? You and your young gentleman? Can you not put on some clothes?”

“Caesar, this is my breakfast table. You’re the one bringing the public sphere to the private,” Abigail reproves him. “They’re fine as they are. Vjola, are you still suffering? Do continue, Caesar, I’d like to see where this is going.”

Lord Calleja glares at Captain Agius, as if he’s waiting for him to step in. He doesn’t. He wants to see where this is going as well, because he’s damned if he knows how she’s going to get round the Faith Committee.

“We were…we…” Verity bursts into tears.

Credo makes a small move to comfort her, but checks himself as she turns to Vergil. The blanket slips down showing the mess of her back.

Lord Calleja gasps. “What befell you, girl?”

Verity sobs, tears streaming and she’s not entirely acting. “Mama….I….can’t…”

“I haven’t told her Papa of this and yet, you’d force it out the maid in front of her nearest and dearest? Have you no shame, Caesar?” Abigail’s voice drips with scorn. “Has the Faith Committee washed it from you?”

“I keep the Faith pure and there’s a price for that, which I pay gladly, Madam, but that doesn’t mean I lack compassion.” Lord Calleja looks back at Verity, notes Vergil’s similar state. “Can you tell me what happened to you both?”
“Tell the truth and shame the Devil, Tony,” says Abigail.

The irony isn’t lost on Vergil. He strokes Verity’s hair, noting the brief flashes of guilt across Captain Agius and Credo’s faces. But not, oddly enough, Peter’s. He’s remarkably composed, even staring at Verity’s back with an odd fascination.

What was it Pinny had said about him? Even the flies wouldn’t shit on him? He wonders what they’ve got on Captain Agius that he’d marry his daughter off to him.

“We were at the Ruined Church and we were attacked by demons. I tried to hold them off, but they were too many. Verity was…I couldn’t protect her.” His voice trails off. “Please don’t make me say it.”

“Would you make me say my dishonour before everyone, My Lord?” she whispers, sobs breaking her voice. Vergil pulls her closer, shushing her.

“Bodily chastity is not lost, my dear, when the sin is another’s. The minds’ chastity endures.” General Calleja squeezes her shoulder and Verity flinches.

“When did you get in?” asks Peter. All eyes turn to him.

“Falzon – watch yourself,” warns Lord Calleja.

Credo can’t hide his alarm as he hisses, “Peter, leave it be!”

“I’m distraught at your ordeal, Miss Agius, but what time did you get in?”

“Late. I honestly couldn’t tell you the time. It was dark.” Vergil answers the question.

“Why did it take so long to get from the Ruined Church to here?”

“Because I don’t know the island and the person who could tell me was switching between hysterics and unconsciousness,” snaps Vergil. “You think she looks bad now? You should have
seen her yesterday.”

“Why are you looking for them anyway?” asks Abigail.

“You should ask your husband, Madam,” says Peter.

“I’m asking you.” Abigail sips her tea and pours more for Peter and Credo. “What crime do they stand accused of other than teenage dalliances that we all could have been accused of at one time or another? Did we not dally, Caesar, before we were wed to others? Do not our own children? If you’re to make a true crime of it, then I’ll be set before the Marriage Committee by day’s end, seeking a Compel for Pinny and Cassius.”

“Our children will wed as intended, Abigail,” cuts across Lord Calleja, coldly. “To answer your question – the past few nights there’s been a spate of break-ins and vandalism at our key sites - the Opera House and the Castle. Mr Redgrave and your daughter were seen at both. Investigations have shown that they cannot be accounted for at the times events happened. Thus I’ve come to take them in for questioning.”

“It’s my understanding that the Opera House was caused by members of the Masons Guild in a protest. I doubt they’ll take kindly to the false accusation.” She sips her tea. “And if they were at the Castle as you say, then who witnessed them at that time of night?”

“I’m afraid I can’t say, but they are impeccable as a witness.” Lord Calleja looks like he’s deliberating his position. “But I confess in the light of new revelations….”

“Your impeccable source is aware that we would insist on a full Trial?” says Abigail. “I’m sure you understand, Caesar, I’ll pull out all the stops to defend my family’s honour, regardless of what may transpire.”

“Of course Madam, I’ll relay that back to Lord Scerri.” Lord Calleja stands. “In the light of new evidence, I’m not laying charges for now. More investigation is warranted.”

“My Lord!” Interjects Peter. “You do have enough to bring her in to hospital, Immodest Conduct, at least! She’ll be detained, but in comfort and safety.”

“He has accepted bread, water and fire from myself,” says Captain Agius. “I was surprised, but I’m
not of a mind to refuse, given the circumstances. We’ll perform the official rites probably at Midsummer.”

“I’ll need time to have a bespoke engagement ring made,” says Vergil. “But in the meantime, I’ve given her my pendant, which was given to my mother by my father and perhaps, one day, from our son to his beloved.”

“A ring is a Mainland custom, it can be anything that’s meaningful to the couple, but that sets them apart from the world,” says Pinny. “Are you alright, Credo?”

Credo looks like he’s about to have a stroke. He’s biting his tongue so hard to keep his silence, he’s sure he’s going to bite it off. He squeezes his teacup so hard it cracks apart in his hand.

Everyone else jumps.

“Credo! Are you alright, man?” Lord Calleja gasps as he dabs up the tea on the table with his napkin. It’s a reflex action, so conditioned that he doesn’t even realise he’s doing it.

“I’m fine,” he breathes, like he can’t get enough air into his lungs. He can’t stop staring at Verity, leaning in towards Vergil, at the pendant round her neck that’s resting against the bruising on her décolleté. “I-can I…need to go.”

He doesn’t wait for permission, but bows quickly to the table, almost running out the room and out the front door. He looks like he snaps at one of the Knights who speaks to him.

“I still don’t believe that you’ve accounted for your whereabouts,” says Peter as he turns back from watching Credo. “We’ve only your word there was a demon attack and I’m inclined to trust my source. Why were you up the Ruined Church at this time of year?”

“Your source is mistaken,” replies Vergil, ice in his tone and in his eyes.

“Falzon – I’ve warned you once.”

“Even if you were not responsible for some of the damage, you may have seen what transpired
“with another party,” says Peter, placatingly. “You wouldn’t be the first couple breaking in to enjoy the Master’s Chamber and may well have witnessed, even inadvertently, a heist. Our collection of artefacts is one of the best in the world and is truly priceless.”

Pinny looks up at Peter, catching his eye just then. He scents blood and closes in.

Verity clutches Vergil’s hand. It’s a fight to keep her face straight.

“Pinny, my ḥelwa, you can speak freely to me,” says Peter. “I wish nothing more than your safety and your happiness.”

“I-“ she begins before her voice falters. Her fingers twist her rings.

Time slows for everyone at that table.

Peter takes her hand.

Pinny swallows and Abigail tries to distract Lord Calleja by offering him more toast. He waves her aside.

“Answer me true, Peter, if I may call you that.” She looks up at him through long dark lashes and she seems like she’s struggling with herself.

“Of course. It’s no secret that one day you’ll call me more than just my name,” he says, unsure where this is going, but it’s nowhere good for the rest of the table.

“It’s my understanding that you’ve asked my Papa what Courting Gift would be suitable,” she says, and she can’t keep the shake out her voice.

“Pinny, no!”

“Hush now, Verity, I’m not of a mind to dance in a pig trough,” Pinny replies.
“I have and he said he would leave that to you when the time comes,” he says, bringing his other hand to hers. He massages the back of it with his thumbs.

“I can’t have Vee stealing all my thunder, Mama, now can I? I should like…I should like…” Pinny’s voice trails off. “I should like you to demonstrate how well you know me and choose something you think I’ll find suitable.”

“Of course, my sweet. Whatever you want. I live to please you.” Peter actually looks delighted, as if all his Christmases have come at once. “I’ll choose something that’s as unique as you.”

He kisses her hand. Pinny gives a small smile.

“Well, these are rum doings and no mistake,” says General Calleja. “My congratulations to both happy couples and my sincere condolences on yours and Mr Redgrave’s ordeal. I must still investigate the matter, you understand, though this new information raises many more questions.”

“Of course, we understand,” Abigail replies. “Thank you for your forbearance, Caesar.”

He stands and Peter reluctantly lets go of Pinny’s hand, leaning down to chance a kiss. She allows it.

“Return later, so we may begin discussions for the Marriage Treaty,” says Captain Agius.

Peter bows in his and Abigail’s direction. Lord Calleja looks directly at Vergil and Verity. “Technically, you still are both under suspicion, I’m ordering that you remain within the confines of the Town, unless accompanied by your Papa or your Tutors.”

Verity nods.

“All due respect, neither of us is in any condition to be out of the house for the foreseeable future,” points out Vergil.
“Of course.” He bows and leaves, Peter trailing in his wake.

Abigail waits until they’re well out the garden, before rounding on Pinny. “Alice, see that our guest’s belongings are brought here.”

“Yes, Madam.” Alice leaves the room, aware that she doesn’t want to see what’s coming next.

“And you! Are you making a career of foolish decisions?” Abigail snarls, as Pinny’s lip trembles and the tears fall. “First you try to kill your sister, now you’re marrying that…that Mundus-spawned gropecunts’ leavings?”

“Papa’s already accepted his Suit! I was just acknowledging it, Mama!” Pinny’s shouting now. “You think I’m going through with it? I’ll die first! I’ll chain myself to Southworth Rock first and wait on the tide to take me with the rest of the criminals!”

“So what did you think you were buying with that display?”

“Time, Mama, time. You saw how distracted he was and how Lord Calleja was sidetracked? How hard will they investigate now?” Pinny retorts.

Despite himself, Vergil leans across and hugs Pinny. “You’re amazing.”

He’s never been more heartsick for Dante.
They don’t talk on the drive over to HQ. The wind is wild now and the promised rain has begun in earnest. Violet needs all her concentration to drive. The Land Rover is big and heavy, but it’s still buffeted by the wind.

“How are we going to get across the bridge?” Dante asks, eyeing the trees as she parks.

“How are we going to get across the bridge?” Dante asks, eyeing the trees as she parks.

“Port. Take everything important out the car with you, just in case it gets lost.” She looks at the rain pouring down the windscreen. “Got everything?”

Dante can feel the file and the diary against his chest in his pocket. Their weight’s comforting against the revelation of the Ruined Church. He’s humouring her, for now. Earnest as Violet was in her denial of her identity, he’s sure she’s wrong.

The DNA is wrong. It must be. It has to be.

He can feel Ebony and Ivory in their holsters and he’s got a hand on Rebellion. “Ready when you are.”

Violet takes Dante’s hand and ports them into the entrance hall. The Knights stationed there bow to Lady Micellef.

“No lasers,” says Dante.

“I should hope not,” she replies. “Be a good time to test how well the channelling passed to me.”

“Well, if it didn’t,” he says, hoisting Rebellion onto his shoulder, “I’m ready for it. So your office?”

There’s a gust of wind that almost makes the building shake.

“Are you sure this buildings’ safe? It did self-destruct when the Saviour left the building.” Even
Dante looks doubtfully at the walls.

“It’s fine. Damage wasn’t even that bad. It was effect more than anything. Most of the damage is the labs themselves because of the power sources being cut,” she replies. “This structure’s built out into the sea and has had ships flung at it. Bit water’s nothing.”

“How big do the waves get here?”

“Five, six metres. We’ll be fine. Stuck here though, till the storm quiets down.”

They’ve reached her office and Violet starts getting her things ready for the spell. She chances a look out the window. “Sea is wild out there. I hope they’re alright.”

“The Kid almost single-handedly wrecked Fortuna. He’ll be fine. Can I help?”

“Uh…there’s a map of Fortuna in that drawer…top drawer.”

“I see it.” Dante spreads it on Violet’s desk.

“Put it on the coffee table. Might as well be comfortable, looks like we’re stuck here for the night.” Violet glances at the windows again. “There’s a kettle and cups in that cupboard. Fancy some coffee or hot chocolate?”

“I’ll have some hot chocolate for a change. You?” Dante’s already gone to make it. “Water?”

“Tooilet’s through there.” She indicates a door.

It’s not just a toilet, it’s a whole small apartment. There’s a bedroom/living room with a bathroom and small kitchen. Dante can’t help but open a few closets. There’s several Knights uniforms in one and some Order uniform dresses in the other. There’s a few photos of Credo, Violet, Nero and Kyrie around the room.

“Nice digs, huh?” Violet’s voice startles him. “I kept my old office rather than move into Agnus’
because his was too fucking cold with that plant making a big hole in the wall. They’ve patched it up now, but I don’t want anything he had. Stupid bug bastard.”

“Have you been through the Ascension Ceremony?” Dante asks, going across to the kitchen and filling the kettle.

“No, though not for the want of them trying to persuade me.” She looks round the room and starts laughing. “I remember Credo showing me his Angelo form and I fell about laughing. He looked like a giant bloody chicken. It was one of the few times he lost his temper with me. ‘I’m the next step in human evolution! I’m an Angel!’ and I’m on the floor crying with laughter at this giant chicken and then getting really annoyed at all the damn feathers, because we decided not to have a maid, so it was me and Kyrie cleaning it up and he stormed off in the end, dropping feathers everywhere and muttering about the shit he put up with for me.”

She stops laughing and Dante can tell she’s fighting back tears. “I could tell he was mad, he was swearing. Credo didn’t swear much. I’m still finding fucking feathers everywhere. Why do you think Agnus left a body and not Credo?”

Dante shrugs. “I wish I could tell you, Violet. Coffee or hot chocolate?”

“Hot chocolate, the white one. Everything’s tasting so metallic at the minute,” she says. “This room used to be Dorcas’ and I remember her showing me a magic trick. Wanna see?”

“OK.” Dante looks at her. “More metallic than usual?”

“I suppose so.” She looks puzzled at the question. “Give me your secret files. Come on, I know you’ve got them.”

Violet holds out her hand and Dante reluctantly passes her the file. The diary is inside the file, so she doesn’t see it. Violet raises her eyebrows at the title but says nothing.

She crosses over to an unusually plain Regency drop down bureau and pulling a key out her pocket, unlocks the flap. She fiddles with a couple of carvings that spin round to reveal compartments.

“OK, even I admit, that’s kind of cool,” says Dante.
Violet grins that sideways quirk and merely puts the files in the compartments, pressing them closed again. She presses them again and different carvings twirl round.

She presses the compartments to open. “Ta-da!”

It’s empty.

“OK, I’m impressed,” says Dante, putting his hand inside and looking around it. “Bring them back.”

“Nah-uh. They’ll be really safe now.” Violet sticks her tongue out.

“Where’s my file, Violet?” Dante asks, slightly exasperated.

“I told you, safe. It’ll turn up in the last place any man will ever look.” She turns back into the office as Dante tries to catch her.

“What is that? Alternate dimension?” he asks.

“Something like that. Dorcas was Head Physicist with the Order for years before her Ascension and she was amazing with timey-wimey stuff and she showed me that years ago.” Violet frowns for a moment. “Just before her Ascension, come to think of it. She said there were notes she wanted me to have, because she didn’t trust anyone else, but I never found them.”

“She didn’t give you a clue?” asks Dante, torn between this information and wondering where the hell his files have just gone.

“Just that they’ll be where no man will think to look.” She sits down at the coffee table with the map and a pendulum. There’s a plate in front of her and a knife. Dante can see the light glinting off the cutting edge – it’s razor sharp.

“I’ll go first for Nero,” he offers. “How are we going to do Kyrie?”
“I’ll do Kyrie.” Violet sprays the knife with alcohol and then lights it on fire. “Should be clean now.”

Dante slashes his palm and squeezes the blood onto the plate, grimacing. He takes the cloth and wipes the knife clean as Violet says a few words and dips the pendulum in the blood.

It begins to spin in a regular, rhythmic pattern without stopping. The circuit shows the whole of Fortuna, before coming to stop at HQ. “What the hell?”

“It could be telling us where I am,” suggests Dante. He sprays the knife and sets it aflame. A thought occurs to him and he folds the cloth over to a clean surface.

“No, then it would have gone straight to here. It wouldn’t have spun first.” He hands her the knife and Violet cuts her hand, squeezing the blood onto the plate, away from Dante’s.

Dante wipes the knife, putting the cloth in his pocket while Violet is concentrating on the pendulum. It takes a little longer and it almost seems confused about what it’s doing, but eventually it settles back on HQ.

“So they’re here?” asks Dante. “Then they can’t answer their phones. Fuck.”

“It doesn’t automatically mean they’re in danger,” says Violet. She gestures to the walls. “This building goes as many floors underground and it’s solid stone. Blocks a lot of mobile signals.”

“Can you fine tune that spell?”

“Course I can.” Violet pulls up a schematic of HQ and concentrates on the pendulum again.

Dante offers her the knife again.

“No, I think there’s still enough life in this blood,” she turns him down distractedly.
She covers the bottom of the pendulum in the blood again, Dante’s first. There’s a very definite spin round the outside of the schematic. It looks like it’s about to settle several times, before doubling back on itself each time.

“Is it supposed to do that?” asks Dante, doubtfully.

“I’ve honestly never seen it do that before,” replies Violet, equally confused.

It comes to a definite stop over a wall.

“What?” they say incredulously in unison.

Dante tries to tug on it, but it refuses to budge.

Violet writes down where the pendulum indicated, before cleaning off the blood and running Kyrie’s test.

It’s the same result, in a different location.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” says Violet, totally confused.

“Run it again?” suggests Dante.

They do and the result is the same.

“How the fuck can they be in the wall?” Violet is utterly dumbfounded.

“I got nothin’.” Dante’s no different. A thought strikes him. “How come you’re able to tune into Kyrie, anyhow?”

Violet takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. She looks like she’s gathering her courage. She tries
to speak, but nothing comes out.

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Dante.”

“You can trust me, you know that, Violet,” he says gently. “We’re family.”

Violet walks around the office and twists the end of her ponytail distractedly. She looks like she’s fighting with herself. She wipes her eyes.

“It can’t be that bad,” he says, trying to sound sincere and cheerful, but he still feels raw from her denial of being Verity Agius.

Violet looks him dead in the eye. “She’s my secret love child.”

Dante looks at her for a moment, dumbfounded. What if I’ve got this all wrong?

“Bullshit,” he replies. “Those dates don’t match for you coming here.”

She snorts. “Had you going for a minute. So, like, you actually do private dicking?”

“Only to Trish. But I do take on enough investigation work to keep my licence and my hand in.” He poses a little. “I like to exercise my roguish charms on unsuspecting secretaries.”

Violet laughs. “I have no idea how Trish and Lady haven’t killed you yet.”

“Not for want of trying,” he replies. “OK, so seeing as we’ve nothing and time, why don’t you fill in the gaps in that file you just evaporated. Tell me how you came here. Tell me what Nero was like as a kid.”

“I’m wondering what’s in that file that’s important enough for you to take everywhere.” Violet sits down and sips her hot chocolate. She makes a face. “Tastes weird. I don’t think it’s your fault. Everything’s tasting weird right now.”
Dante notes what she’s saying, but he wants to keep it to Nero. “Tell me about Nero. I didn’t have my brother, I didn’t have his kid. I’m never going to have the relationship you’ve got with him. I didn’t get to read him bedtime stories or sneak him candy before dinner. Your memories are all I have.”

Violet looks shamefaced for a moment. “I’m sorry I’m not Verity, Dante. I think it must be worse losing a past you know about, than one you don’t.”

Dante shrugs. “So am I. Tell me about Nero. I bet he was a little asshole.”

“Nero was a little shite,” she smiles in remembrance. “It wasn’t completely his fault. Do you like Whigfield?”

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Fortuna, fifteen years ago

Saturday night and the air is getting high, pretty baby

It’s party time, not one minute we can lose, pretty baby

They’re singing at the top of their lungs and dancing about the back of the car, as the dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman tries to read the street signs to see how to get to their digs.

“Sit the fuck still!” she yells through clenched teeth. “You’re fucking distracting me!”

“Aw, Violet, you spoilsport!” yells back Marianna, jiggling harder.

“Be useful and read the instructions, you daft bitch,” she says. “What does it say?”

“Tourist areas are signposted blue, locals only are brown, both are green, UO employees have
special status over the Fortunese, Fortunaysay? How’d you say this bit? FUCKING HELL, HE’S GOT A SWORD!” Marianna fairly goggles at the white-clad soldiers patrolling. “English, Italian and an archaic variation of Arabic are spoken.” She flips the pages.

“You knew that,” replies Violet. “Where are we meant to go? Marianna! You fucking moron!”

Marianna has thrown the UO primer out the window. “It’s full of crap anyway. We’re only here for a fortnight. How much bother can we run up in two weeks?”

She resumes bouncing to the Europop that’s the latest holiday hit, Cassie and Lena cackling along with her.

“You’re here for two weeks, you fanny! I’m moving here for work!” Violet considers how easy it would be to hide the body in a foreign country.

No limits, we’ll reach for the sky! No valley too deep, no mountain too high!

***

“Yes OK, we’re lost. You fucking happy now?” Marianna sulks in the front seat, arms folded like a child. “We’re on an island. How the fuck do you get lost on an island?”

“By not having a fucking map!” retorts Violet. “Because some arsehole chucked it out the window.”

“Can’t we just park the car and go get a drink?” asks Cassie. “We can argue about this over some food.”

“Where do you see anywhere to get food?” Snaps Lena. “We’re well out the places the tourists can go, because guess what? No fucking map, that’s what!”

“Don’t we have dispensation?” asks Cassie. “Violet got us special passes? Violet, those passes—”
Violet’s looking around her and sees two white-clad sword carriers. “When in doubt, ask a policeman.”

“Did you tell your policeman that you were leaving?”

“I left a message on his answering machine. We were only fucking, so it’s no big deal.” Violet drives slowly up to the soldiers or policemen or whatever they are. “What are they called here? Officers, constables, what?”

“Wasn’t it on your induction pack?” Marianna starts rooting for it. “I can’t find it.”

Lena smacks her.

They’ve drawn level to the policemen now and Violet leans out her window, calling, “Mi scusi, agente!”

One’s really tall, severe features, almost aristocratic. His dark hair is long and drawn back to the nape of his neck in a simple pony tail. He hears the car draw alongside him and his patrol partner and he turns when he hears a voice he never thought he’d hear again and a face he never thought he’d see again.

He’s dumbstruck for a moment as he stares into dark eyes that are the same inky-garnet as an Australian Shiraz.

She takes his hesitancy for a language problem. “Skužani stabbli?” she tries.

The accent’s slightly tinged with Italian, but the pronunciation is perfect, even as it sounds like it comes through gritted teeth.

“He’s fucking built,” says Lena, admiringly, in English. “Get his number, Violet.”

“They both are,” says Marianna.
The other Knight raises an eyebrow, but keeps his composure.

Credo recovers, not taking his eyes from Violet, but schooling his features into something he hopes is professional and courteous.

“Skužani, Kavallier,” he politely corrects her. He doesn’t slow his speaking for her and her companions clearly can’t understand his guttural gibberish. “Għalkemm jien Kaptan. Kaptan Credo Micellef, fil-fatt.”

“I’m sorry, Captain Micellef. Can you tell me how to get to…” she gives a cottage she’s nowhere near as a destination.

He quickly gives her directions to it, instead of pulling her into conversation and stalling her.

He already knows exactly where to find her.

***

Credo, as it turns out, can’t give directions for shit.

They get lost twice more, partly because Violet’s concentrating on driving in an unfamiliar place and the other three are too drunk to remember exactly what they were. Then it’s a fight over showers and lipstick and they’re ready to hit the town.

New job, new city, old friends.

Life’s perfect.

***

Credo finishes his shift and changes to his civvies, Jacobite shirt, long jacket and trousers tucked into workmans, the ankle boots worn by the lower classes. Only Gentlemen, Knights and Order wear riders. His clothes are casual, not quite a labourer’s, but something a Gentleman can wear to
The evening is warm and golden and he can see the Tourists, enjoying walks through the town with their children, sitting in the cafes. He likes this part of town. He’s not so keen on a few streets away where the bars thump a rhythmic racket and the Mainland’s youngsters dance and drink and fuck, screaming all over the place like banshees.

Credo can’t get his head round the women, their hair all down and their painted faces and their short skirts. The whores down the docks wear more.

Speaking of professional Dells, Edith walks towards him with a smile. “And how is Captain Micellef this evening?”

He takes her hand and kisses her cheek. “Still getting used to the promotion. I’m just about used to being a Sergeant and now I’m the same rank as Papa. It’s strange being the youngest Captain in the Knights, when it’s an honour usually bestowed upon a man who’s closer to his fourth than his third decade. I feel greener than a whore’s salad amongst them.”

Edith laughs. “You are too hard on yourself, Credo. Credit yourself as your men do.”

“She’s back,” he says before he can stop himself.

Edith doesn’t ask who. She already knows. “Did you speak to her? Are you sure?”

“Yes. She didn’t recognise me, I think. But it’s her. I think she’s here on holiday.” Credo pauses. “They called her Violet. I know where they’re all staying.”

“Such swift work! No wonder you blaze through the ranks, Captain Credo!” she teases. She becomes serious. “And what will you do with this knowledge, Credo? For I fear whatever course you take, your heart will be broken.”

“You know better than anyone that t’was never fixed,” he replies. “Perhaps all I can hope for its easement is for the pieces to be larger.”
They walk down towards the beach in a companionable silence.

“Your thoughts turn to her, do they not?” Edith says, stopping at the top of the beach.

“How could they not, Edith? I’m half-tempted to dress like a Tourist and go around the clubs till I find her.” He fingers the wedding rings he wears round his neck.

“And risk a court-martial or worse yet, a Witch Trial? Don’t be a fool. You’ve fought hard to get where you are. Don’t give Falzon an excuse to move against you, Credo.”

Edith gives him a sharp look, before turning back to scan the beach for the barbeque his parents are having to celebrate his promotion. Lord Scerri is having a massive ball to honour him next week – Credo is hugely popular amongst the Knights and who doesn’t like a party?

“And yet outwardly no one knows how much I despise that man,” sighs Credo. “I must pass off our coolness as pressures of work.”

“I wonder why she picked the English Violet rather than the Italian or Fortunese Viola?” says Edith. “I know they were her favourite flower, but still.”

“I’ll arrest her and ask her, shall I?” smiles Credo.

He walks down to the beach where Pinny is playing with Josh, Nero and Kyrie. His mother is chatting to General Agius, who looks a little less haunted than usual. He’s been happier since Pinny came home, bringing a grandchild who’s shy around him. Kyrie and Nero bring him out of himself a bit.

Credo sees who’s sitting on the beach making only cursory interactions with the children and groans.

“Lady Kristina seems determined to land you,” observes Edith. “How is her petition to have your marriage dissolved going?”

“She’s likely to get it through Committee. I’m still not accepting her Courting Suit. She’s a nasty
piece of work and I’ll not bind myself in covenant to her.” His lip curls in distaste as he looks at her. “I’d sooner marry you if such a state is to be enforced upon me.”

“Were it not for the ghost who follows you, I’d consider it,” she replies. “A marriage began in friendship has better potential than what awaits the man who takes her to wife. Even Cassius Calleja’s trying to avoid her.”

Lady Kristina Chetcuti sees him and waves. Nero comes up to show her something and she gives it a slightly more cursory look than before.

Credo knows the rumours, that his family took such an interest in the albino foundling because he’s Credo’s bachelor son. It’s ironic that he nearly ended up raising the child officially.

The cold flare of anger against Peter Falzon rises up unbidden. Credo stamps it down. Not yet. Especially not yet.

Nero reads her disinterest for what it is and disappointed, pulls away. He’s almost five now and a scrapper. He’s sweet and sensitive, but already he’s learned to hide this weakness from others because of the bullying he’s getting from the other children. They’re learning it from somewhere and it’s making Nero moody, aggressive and obstinate.

He shouldn’t have to hide it from his family.

And the Micellefs are his family.

He sees Edith and Credo and smiles, running towards them, excitedly holding a crab in a sea shell. Pinny sees him run off and tries to follow him, but she’s not fast enough and Nero cannons into a tall woman in Tourist party clothes, carrying her stilettos.

He goes flying and she picks him and his hermit crab up. He’s suspicious at first as the pretty lady in the sunglasses crouches down and chats to him, but soon he’s showing her the crab and she’s asking him about it. Credo sees her pointing at parts of it and pointing to the sea

Lady Kristina gets there before Pinny does, just as Credo arrives and he hears her apologise to the Tourist in Italian. “I’m so sorry for him to bother you, Miss, getting that nasty crab over your party clothes. Nero, say sorry to the lady!”
She’s grabbed Nero’s arm and is pulling him back and forth. Nero’s trying not to cry, he’s angry and bewildered. “Lemme go, you nasty bitch!”

“Hey!” snaps the tall woman in perfect Fortunese, though through clenched teeth. “Let him go! You’re hurting him! He’s doing no harm!”

Stunned, Lady Kristina stops hauling the child around like a ragdoll. Nero kicks her in the shin and runs off to Pinny.

Lady Kristina makes to strike round the back of Pinny to reach him, but Edith makes it in time to stop her.

Lady Kristina slaps her. “Jumped up laced mutton, lay a hand on me! I’ll have you leathered at the post for that!”

Edith keeps hold of Lady Kristina, so she can’t get to Nero. The harlot says nothing as she hangs on to the raging woman.

“And that little bastard! When I’m Credo’s wife that little demon’s back at the children’s home and only seen on Sundays! What say you to that, hie?”

Credo has to be careful here. The Chetcutis and the Callejas are High Old Family. The Agius’ and Micellefs, Low Old Family. Even amongst Fortuna’s elite, there’s a hierarchy.

“Lady Chetcuti,” he says as formally as possible. “You have grievously insulted my family, abused my Father’s hospitality and raised your hand to a child of this family.”

“Oh so you admit it now? Is this why she left you?” she sneers.

“No, My Lady, Sadly, Nero is not my child, if he was I would admit it,” Credo says, steely voiced. “Miss Agius did not hold me in the same affection I held her and took to heart her father’s hasty curse.”
“Oft-regretted hasty curse,” says Pinny and this silences even Lady Kristina. “Even should your family succeed in dissolving my beloved brother-in-law’s marriage, I would rather leave him my widower than your living husband. I am dying, Lady Kristina. Do you think they will deny me?”

Lady Kristina looks around and it’s as if she’s seeing herself as everyone else is. She reddens and flounces off.


“You must excuse us, Madam. Despite the public spectacle, this is a private party,” says Credo, just about keeping his face straight. “Though I thank you for defending the boy.”

Nero’s still behind Pinny, sullen and silent.

It’s Kyrie who marches up to the Tourist. “Int sabiha hafna.”

“Grazzi,” replies the woman.

“X’inhu ismek?” asks Kyrie, entranced with the tattoos on her arms and shoulders. There’s a nasty scar, like an animal bite sitting on her shoulder, but Kyrie hasn’t noticed it.

“Jiena jisimni Violet,” replies the Tourist. “X’inhu ismek?”

“Jiena jisimni Kyrie,” replies the little girl. She doesn’t notice the fluency. She’s only little. She still has her toddler chubbiness.

“Sbieh li niltaghek, Kyrie,” replies Violet, shaking Kyrie’s hand.

“Violet! Violet! There you are, we’ve got your drink here! There’s this guy who’s seen you on telly! He’s fucking hot!” Violet’s friends ambush her and draw her away.

Violet looks back at Credo and blows him a kiss.
Fortuna two decades ago

By the end of the day, Vergil’s goods and chattels are stowed away in Verity’s wardrobe and cupboards, his shaving kit in the sisters’ bathroom. His treasure box, though he’d never call it that, is stowed away in her top drawer alongside hers. He doesn’t show her what’s in it and Verity doesn’t ask.

That alone would have him proposing. His hand goes to his throat a lot, looking for His Mother’s Amulet and despite the kick Vergil’s getting out of seeing it around Verity’s throat, his feels empty. He doesn’t have a lot from Before – it’s one of those things that are so important in his mind, so much a part of his character that they’re capitalised – so what he does have, he treasures.

Likewise, Verity’s hand spends most of the time it isn’t engaged in a task at her throat, fiddling with the unaccustomed weight around it. He gently knocks her hand away. “Stop it. I don’t want you losing it. ”

“I can’t help it,” she replies, her hand back at it and she doesn’t even realise it. She leans back against the pillows on her bed, reading a book. He looks at the title and realises it’s the book they stole from the Castle Library.

Vergil shakes his head with a rueful smile. “Sooner we get a ring on your finger the better, sabiha.”

“I’m beginning to think you don’t trust me with your pendant,” she mock pouts. “It’s not even a real betrothal, qalbi.”

“Yes, it is. Your Mama said so and I don’t want to get on her wrong side,” he says lightly, but no less seriously. “It’s one of the few things I actually have from my mother and much as I love seeing you wear it –“

“…You miss having something she touched upon your person,” finishes Verity. She rubs her wrists, trying not to scratch at the scabs on the left one. His talons have left deep welts on it, where she struggled. For some reason, they’re worse than her right wrist. “These are going to scar.”
“They will if you keep picking at them. I’m going to get you mittens.” He takes her hand in his as he scolds her. He’s watching her face, waiting for the reality of the situation to catch up with her. Other than breaking down last night and the few moments when the panic almost overtook her, Verity has been calm and accepting of each new development. That dam has to break some time and he’d rather it happened when things were quiet, not in the heat of battle. “So if engagement rings aren’t given here, what is?”

“Whatever the couple agree on. It’s meant to be personal, like this pendant. And rings do often get given, but it can be pendants, bracelets, earrings, anything. Dorcas gave Xander a hilt and guard for his sword, Emmeline Azzopardi gave her fiancé a gold fountain pen.”

“Do you know what Credo was going to give you?” Vergil asks. “I don’t want to accidently get you the same thing.”

“Dorcas said it was a gold powder compact and I would have loved that, it’s different. My Mama has a bracelet, it’s got a blue agate on it.” Verity looks at the mess of her wrist and rubs it, almost compulsively.

Vergil pulls her hand away, sensing the panic and the memory underlying it. “You are such a fiddler. I’m going to get you a bracelet so you can’t fiddle.”

“It’ll be prettier than mittens, that’s for sure,” she replies, hand rising to her throat. “Tell me about your mother. What was her name? What was she like?”

Vergil opens his mouth to answer her, but the rawness of her loss and the distance from his brother stays his tongue. He chokes on the grief that the memory of her hair, or cuddling in with her on her big double bed still brings, even now. He turns away from Verity, ingrained from that fateful night when…

“I’m sorry, qalbi, I won’t ask. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Verity says as she wraps her arms around him and cuddles into his back. His pendant presses into him, reminding him that she’s warm and real and his.

“I’ll tell you one day, but not today,” Vergil says, thickly. He traces the gouges on her wrist and kisses them. He's suddenly very aware of how she feels, how she smells and he’s sure he can feel her heart thumping against his back. Her breath quickens and any other time he’d have taken up her invitation as she tentatively kisses the nape of his neck. He hasn’t styled his hair today and when Verity runs the hand he isn’t holding through it, it slides softly through. He can’t stop the shiver that runs through him.
It encourages Verity to shift her position and press her small breasts right up against him, long legs kneeling either side of him. She hasn’t dressed since this morning’s breakfast and he’s merely pulled on his soft cotton workout pants over his screaming muscles. His other hand falls down to her bare, smooth thigh and he’s surprised there’s no hair. He didn’t think they would depilate their body hair here and then scolds himself as he recalls the Fortunese are an Arabic culture at heart and he’s sure they did it for hygiene reasons. Desert cultures often do.

Vergil’s thoughts are spinning nonsense as his free hand strokes her thigh, slowly, sensuously, taking his cue from how she’s touching him. Tracing over the healing gouges on her leg as gently as he can brings memories of the previous day rushing to the fore and it makes him feel sick.

“Stop.” His hand stills, resting on her thigh.

Verity rests her chin on his shoulder, her breath moving his hair. He can feel it tickling against his skin and it sends involuntary shivers down his spine. The sensation of her lips against his nape hasn’t faded and it’s linking up with his cock. Vergil takes a shaky inhale as he’s so aware of how Verity feels pressed against him.

She doesn’t move, just lets her body rest against his, as if she’s aware of what she’s doing to him. Vergil doesn’t think she’s doing it on purpose, she’s way too inexperienced to be so calculating. There’s just the quiet sound of their breaths, the feel of her warm and solid against his back.

She’s breaking down his reserve and she isn’t even doing anything. He’s semi hard and why the hell could he not just have done that yesterday when he actually needed it?

He drops his head backwards, onto Verity’s shoulder as much to move his skin away from her sweet breath as fighting with himself. His head’s about all he can move and he feels her turning her head to look at him, then looking across to her mirror. Vergil feels her swallow and take several deep breaths. From somewhere he gets the idea she’s trying to calm herself down, control a panic response.

He looks across to her mirror and meets her eyes, realising with a guilt-stricken jolt of his stomach that the dam is breaking. No, it’s not so much breaking as she’s deliberately blowing a hole in it and directing the resulting river. Verity’s Shiraz eyes are freaked out and there is panic back there, threatening to overwhelm her, but it’s prevented from doing so by the way she’s very deliberately channelling it.
“I want you,” Verity says simply. She doesn’t move, just stays pressed against him.

“Not so soon, Vee, you don’t know the damage done,” Vergil protests. “We’re a mess. We need to heal.”

“I don’t want yesterday to be our first time,” she says. “And if I have to wait, it will be. It’ll colour every time I touch you. I want to feel desire when we touch, not disgust.”

Vergil takes a stuttering breath and kisses her palm. Her words, in her soft voice, have gone right to his dick and he’s getting harder, despite his reluctance. “I won’t fuck you.”

In the mirror, he sees her glance at him, the swearing out of character for him. His head turns slightly towards her.

“Then let me please you. Show me how to touch you, Vergil,” she whispers. Verity still hasn’t moved, but he can feel the tension thrumming through her. He can’t deny her when she’s so desperate and determined.

“I was never going to deny you,” Vergil tells her. She sighs against his back, relaxing just a little. Vergil’s not fooled by her. She’s every bit sharp and dangerous as she was in the Chambers under the Castle filled with the dying. Another man would be terrified of her, should be terrified of her if he had any sense. But Vergil isn’t any man. “One condition, Vee.”

“Name it.”

“Keep talking to me. I want to hear your voice while you touch me.”

Verity kisses his shoulder, never breaking their gaze in the mirror. “What do you want me to say?”

“Anything. Recipes. World Peace. Anything.” His hand’s back on her leg, feeling the dips and rises of the gashes under it as it moves.

“How am I supposed to talk if I’m kissing across the top of your shoulders?” she asks as she does it, her lips soft, with just a hint of resistance.
“Find a way.”

“What if I’m licking them?” Verity murmurs close to his right ear. She draws her tongue from his shoulder to his hair, before she nibbles on the shell of his ear.

His hand twitches, making her hiss. God help him, the sound goes straight to his dick. “How do you push all that pain away?”

Verity’s hands are palming the shapes of his shoulders. She can’t press too hard or use her fingers as the past few days have left them swollen and sprained, but she’s doing well with what she has. “Ease of long practice. How do you?”

Vergil shivers and he wishes he could say it was Verity’s tongue tracing her name on the top of his back and her hands stroking up and down his arms in long, smooth sweeps. “Training from Hell.”

Her hands continue their sweep along the muscles of his arms. “I was taught to meditate and I can dissociate, so I can distance myself from it. But mostly the best ones were made to practice until we were falling over with exhaustion and then keep going. We were shown no mercy, because the demons wouldn’t if we were caught. Got some fearsome scars from Training. The curse of being brilliant.”

Vergil grabs her arms and pulls her tight against him, twisting slightly so he can kiss her, feeling her lips give way to him as his demand more from her. His tongue rises to meet hers, slipping and dancing around each other as the fire sparks down his nerves and into his dick. It’s trapped against the soft cotton, the warp and weft torture against his sensitive tip.

He drops her hands to shimmy out the workout pants, toeing them off when they’re too far down his legs for his hands. He’s kissing her all the while, resisting the urge to push her down onto the bed.

Verity runs her hands hesitantly over Vergil’s chest, down over his abs, the muscles twitch under her touch and he breaks off kissing her as her hands go lower, touching his cock at the base.

Verity leaps back like she’s been scalded. “Sparda’s Balls! What the hell is that?”
“Will you stop saying *that*? Do I seriously have to explain the birds and bees to you?”

“What? No! I’ve never seen one before! Not like *that*, anyway!”

Vergil turns round. He’s got to see her look of horrified fascination for himself. Her reflection in the mirror doesn’t do it justice. He can’t help himself and bursts out laughing.

“Not even with Credo?” He can’t help teasing her, even if the thought of his rival makes – no, Vergil thinks, a rival is someone who’s a serious threat and in no way, shape or form can that be applied to Credo – his blood boil.

“What? No!” Verity snaps. “I’m beginning to wish I had! We wouldn’t be in this state!”

“They’d have found some other way, Vee,” says Vergil, taking pity on her, just a little. He lies back, leaning on his elbow. His hand creeps down to his dick and he starts to lazily stroke himself, back to teasing her again.

Ice-blue meets Shiraz garnet and Verity swallows, licks her lips. There’s a red, embarrassed flush over her face and down her décolleté, but she can’t take her eyes off him and his ever-moving hand.

“How would you please me, sabiha?” Asks Vergil, voice low and husky.

“It’s smaller than I thought it would be. It felt larger inside me,” Verity blurts out.

“Smaller-! I was in my devil trigger! Of course it felt larger, I *am* larger in that-that form!” he stutters indignantly.

“Credo’s larger than that. Is it related to height? It seems like it would be.” Verity’s still peering at his dick with that horrified fascination.

Vergil doesn’t wilt under her gaze, he’s too righteously indignant for that. He actually stands up at the foot of the bed, arms crossed and scowling. “I thought you said you’ve never seen Credo’s prick?”
“I didn’t say I’ve never seen it, ever. Just that I’ve never seen it…standing to attention.” She’s losing her expression of horror. It’s slowly being replaced by desire as she gets over her shock. She keeps biting her lip as her eyes roam over the whole of Vergil. “I’ve seen the Knights when they’ve been swimming to Southworth Island after training.”

“Including Credo?”

“Yes and I’ve felt the size of him when we’ve been…dancing.” Verity stands up, painfully and walks over to Vergil. “And yet, you’re here, not him.”

She raises both hands to Vergil’s chest, drawing her fingers down as he uncrosses his arms, dropping them to his sides. Her hands are still using too much pressure and no finesse as she moves them over the ridges and hollows of his chest and stomach. Her breathing’s quickened from having such unfettered access to him. His muscles twitch as she hits sensitive spots and she returns to probe them again, testing them out with a scientist’s methodical fascination.

Vergil resists the urge to move and pull her to him, forces himself to be still and remain her test subject.

Verity’s hands skim down his legs, chase slowly round each muscular thigh. They quake under her touch and his cock’s lacing his belly with precome. She’s trying to ignore his cock, twitching as it is as her breath hits his sensitive inner thigh. Verity concentrates for a time on his thigh, as if she’s mapping this uncharted territory and committing it to memory.

His skin’s a molten river where her hands pass and if she carries on, his control’s going to snap. Neither of them are in any fit state for that, both of them are too raw, physically and emotionally. He’s not fooling himself that she’s magically cured herself. He knows enough about spellwork and meditation that he understands the force of will she’s pouring into this act and how awry it can go if he disturbs her.

Vergil turns round slowly, so his back’s to her. It’s less tempting this way. “You promised to talk to me, sabiha,” he says, thickly, huskily.

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispers, slipping her hands up the backs of his thighs, as gentle as she can over the sensitive skin between his buttocks and his legs. He groans at her touch and she gasps in wonder. “You’re inhumanly beautiful. I can’t believe you’re here.”
“Why would I not be, Vee sabiha?” he replies, turning his head slightly as she strokes over his back and ass. “Why would anyone not want you pressed up tight against him, your long fingers tracing lines where you’ll touch me when you’re under me?”

She makes a low keening in her throat as she begins to lick and kiss his back and ass. “Make note of all the places that make me shudder, Vee sabiha. You can’t imagine how it will feel for you when you touch those points and I react, how rewarded you’ll be when I’m inside you.”

She plays around with his back for a few more minutes, hands following her mouth around to his sides as Vergil carries on speaking. “You think it feels good when you touch yourself, Vee? It’s a million times better when it’s someone else. Someone else’s hands on your back, another’s lips on your breasts, drawing them up. I can barely wait, Vee. You liked it when I brought you off, did you not?”

She pauses against him, leaning her forehead on his nape, her breath hot and quick on his back. “Yes,” she whispers. “It felt amazing. I’ve never felt release like it.”

Vergil’s hands come to rest over hers and he guides them round to his stomach, stopping between his hips and belly button. “Imagine my fingers deep inside you, pressing and pushing, Vee. You won’t be able to catch your breath.”

She rests her head on Vergil’s shoulder, meeting his eyes in the mirror. He begins to draw her hands down to his dick, watching her all the while.

She’s barely breathing as he takes her hands inexorably down, till they cross over at the base, pubic hair wiry under her palm. She makes a small hnnn sound that makes his dick twitch and his breath catch.

“Show me,” she whispers. “Show me how to love you.”

“Tell me. Say the words. Any language, I don’t care. I want to hear you say it.”

“I love you, Vergil. I love you.” Her breath’s soft against his cheek.
He presses on her hands, guiding them upwards, pushing her fingers around the shape of his dick, trying to maintain a pressure he likes that’s sensitive to her injuries. She gasps a shaky exhale at the feel of him under her hands, finally.

“Like this,” he murmurs, slowly moving his left hand – Verity is left-handed – atop hers and squeezing just the heavier side of firm as he moves their hands up and down his dick. His own breath catches at the feel of her around him and against him. He shudders as he guides her thumb over his head. When she fingers the slit in fascination, his legs nearly go from under him.

“It’s like velvet over iron,” she says softly. Verity doesn’t try to move her hand out from his, letting him guide her, the way she’d shown him what she likes.

Vergil’s skin feels huge, like all his nerves are aflame as she’s held tight against him. He’s acutely aware of the small buds of her breasts against his back, the weave of her top scratching his skin as she pants shallowly. Her breath’s taking on that sighing tone that sings along his spine, connects up to his dick as her hand moves under his.

“My mouth on your – what do you call it? – imagine that, Vee. Your skin feels like it’s on fire. You won’t know where to put yourself as you writhe under me as all you feel is this ocean of sensation you can’t stop washing over you. Do you think you’ll black out Vee? I think you will.”

“Cunny,” she whispers, face aflame and a sheen of sweat slicking the skin between them. Her right hand is interlinked with Vergil’s and gripping hard. “I thought I was supposed to be talking?”

His hand quickens atop hers as he feels the beginnings of his climax. “I like this better. Guiding you through. I can’t wait to see you fucked out and euphoric as I ring one last burst of ecstasy out of you.”

Vergil brings their right hands up to his mouth and kisses her palm before dropping her hand to twist back round to his left and cup her face. His words fail him as he sees the unaccustomed pleasure on her face and he’s seen on his at her reaction. It’s almost reverent.

Vergil draws her face to his, catching her mouth and kissing her softly at first, but harder and more intensely as the sensations in his dick become more urgent. The sweep of their tongues around their mouths, their dance around each other mirror the speed of their hands as his picks up the rate of his stroke. He’s squeezing her hand more than he should as he comes closer to his release.
It’s so hard for Vergil to resist the urge to spin round and throw her onto the bed, strip off her underpants and enter her, come clamped tight inside her. *Her injuries would make her swollen and hot,* a voice in the back of his mind goads. It’s a part of him that seeks dominance and power over others and it’s nothing to do with being a demon.

_Not yet. In due course, when she’s Marked as mine, my Mate. Then, when she’s passing out, boneless and flying. Then, so she knows the riches that await her._

The thought makes Vergil kiss Verity harder, as if he’s trying to get right inside her and possess all of her. Their hands hit the right speed and everything links up in the waves of sensation that rip through his body. It’s the feel of her hand under his, wrapped around his cock, her mouth joined to his, her body heavy and real against his back and it’s all too much sensation.

It hits him and it hits him hard. He kisses Verity deeply, passionately, but with an underlying tenderness that he never thought he had in him, but that thought’s foolish, because it’s Vee – how else is he supposed to kiss her, fuck her?

Verity makes a strangled noise as his dick swells under her hand and she can feel waves racing up it, but Vergil tightens his grip over hers. There’s a stickiness and a wet sound as his come hits the hardwood floor. He groans into her mouth as he comes, his kiss slowing as the sensation passes and the come cools.

She breaks away to look at it, examine her hand. There’s more on his hand on hers and he watches her as she looks at it. Verity brings his hand to her lips and tentatively licks the thick fluid from his skin. Her face scrunches at the unexpected bitterness.

“You don’t need to, sabiha,” says Vergil, touched and turned on in equal measure by this unexpectedly erotic act.

Her flushed face takes on a mischievous expression as she carries on, meeting his eyes as she cleans up his semen, bringing her lips into play. There’s challenge in her eyes and he can’t help but feel his own lips take on a small quirk.

She’s so shamelessly erotic, his dick’s not softening.

When she’s done, he kisses her, gently, but thoroughly, using his tongue to chase every last drop of his taste from her mouth. This kiss is fully tender, there’s nowhere else for passion to go, injured as
“Alright, Vee?” he asks her, leaning his forehead on hers.

She nods. “Will it be as good as you said, when we finally…”

“Make love?” Vergil finishes. “It’ll be better than good. I’ll make you feel amazing, *ir-Regina tieghi*.”

Her mouth quirks left. “Shouldn’t that be Empress? Your father banished Mundus and he was an Emperor?”

“Don’t get cocky,” he chides as he kisses her. He suddenly feels tired and there’s nothing more he wants to do than curl up with his *habiba* and go to sleep. A look at Verity says she’s thinking the same thing.

She snuggles down beside him as he pulls the quilt over them. “I’m almost glad that we’re on a curfew.”

“Plenty of time to recover and study,” Vergil agrees.

“Wasn’t what I meant,” Verity says sleepily.

“Go to sleep, Madam Sparda,” he whispers as he kisses her hair.

Verity doesn’t hear him. She’s already out.
Chapter 35

Fortuna, 15 years earlier

The music of the club is loud and thumping and the floor is heaving. It’s an old warehouse in a better part of the docks. Building restrictions have stopped the waterfront looking like the building site that passes for a Spanish resort, but it has put pressure on space for buildings with large open areas. The worst parts of the docks are away from the DTA of the zone, but there are still areas where they cross over and that’s where the worst of the trouble happens. Even the roughest part of the docks doesn’t cause as much bother. The gangs see to it that they run fairly smoothly.

Bad for business otherwise and most of the heavy hitters are evenly matched, so they tend not to provoke each other. It’s just those who are full of piss and vinegar who get in scraps over games, over women, over drugs and it’s odds on who gets there first, the cops or the robbers.

The amount of drugs she’s on means Violet isn’t supposed to drink, but she’s not letting that stop her.

“Tequila Slammers! And one of us has got the worm!” yells Marianna over the noise.

“You brought the bottle!” yells back Violet. “Twenty quid I get the worm!”

“What’s the word for worm here?”

“Dudu. Means dick as well.”

They take their glasses and down the gold liquid and their lemon and their salt.

“So, do you really not remember anything?” yells the hot guy.

“Nope!” Violet shouts back. “I’m like somebody who’s born on a leap year. I’m only five!”

“Is it true they came back to murder you and they blew up the equipment to get you?”
“All true!” She hauls him to his feet. “C’mon, I wanna dance!”

She takes a second to pick up the beat and threading glowsticks through her fingers, she’s gyrating and bouncing in time to the beat of the music, like it’s an ancient tribal dance. She’s lost in the music already. It’s hard for the guy to keep up with her.

“Won’t get her down now!” screams Marianna to the German guy who’s come up with his friends to buy drinks for the pretty girls.

The guy on the floor has taken his t-shirt off and tucked it into his waistband. He’s on the scrawny side, but he’s a good dancer and that’s enough for Violet. Pretty soon, they’re at the centre of the pulsing, heaving crowd. They’re just like any other young adults all over Europe on holiday.

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Lady Kristina’s antics have cast a pall over the barbeque, quite without Violet’s unexpected appearance. Edith chose not to stay, despite everyone’s protestations. Alexander and Dorcas busy themselves with the barbeque. They don’t need to have this argument with Credo again.

The children don’t notice and keep playing with each other, Kyrie skilfully pulling Nero out of his funk and Josh out from behind his mother.

Lord Agius is most undignified and allows them to bury him in the warm gold sand. He speaks to Josh in English, as the little boy doesn’t speak Fortunese or Italian and Lord Agius doesn’t speak Spanish.

The children manage despite the language difficulties.

Pinny sits with Credo, watching the children play. She looks tired.

“They seem happy,” says Credo, carefully pushing a cup of coffee into the turret of a sandcastle.
“Kyrie seems to have your mother’s way with lost puppies,” she motions with her wineglass at where Josh is smiling as Nero chases Kyrie round the trapped general.

“Save me, Josh! Save me!” calls Lord Agius in mock distress, grabbing Josh. The child wriggles free and runs to Pinny, crawling up on to her knee.

Lord Agius looks crestfallen.

Pinny sighs. “He tries so hard, but it’s too hard.”

She speaks in Fortunese, so Josh doesn’t pick up what she’s saying. “He frightens him.”

“He just doesn’t know him yet,” replies Credo. “Is there time enough for it?”

“I hope so. Poor child hasn’t had any life these last few years. All he remembers is Mami being sick.” She sips her wine. “Perhaps I’ll have some time to give him some good memories before I pass.”

“We’ll make sure of it.”

“And what of you, Credo?” Pinny holds out her glass for Credo to pour more wine into it. “Are you going to make an honest woman of your Ladybird? Officially adopt Nero?”

Credo smiles, unconsciously fingering the wedding rings. “Edith isn’t my Ladybird. While I do on occasion green her gown, she’s my closest friend and I savour that more than a wife who will never be first in my heart.”

“Verity isn’t coming back, Credo, even if she is alive.” Josh shifts slightly on his Mami’s knee, he’s fallen asleep. All the activity and fresh sea air is too much for him. Pinny kisses his head and breathes in the scent of the boy’s dark curls.

“Il-hut jiġi dar kull sena, Pinny,” he replies. “You came back.”
“To die, Credo. I came home to die,” retorts Pinny. “I can’t leave my son all alone in a foreign country. While I admit, I was afeared for what awaited me and Josh, I am more confident for his future here than there.”

She looks across to General Agius. Nero and Kyrie are dumping buckets of water with every piece of disgusting seaweed and shellfish they can lay their hands on as Agius loudly protests and tells them he’s going to have the law on to them.

“He reminds me of the father he used to be,” she says. “And he seems full sorry for-“ her voice falters.

“The mistakes he’s made?” Credo offers.

Pinny nods and falls asleep, cradling her son.

Credo covers them over with his jacket and goes to play with the children.

***

All too soon the sun is setting and they’re packing up to take the children home. Credo is gearing up for the usual fight with Nero.

“I don’t want to go back! I want to stay with you and Keeay,” he begins. His lips’ trembling, but it’s with almost-five year old anger and resolution. “An Dorcas an Sander.”

“Nero, hanini, you know you have to go home now, you’re not allowed to stay overnight on a weeknight,” begins Credo.

“Other kids do!”

“The ones who are going to join that family-“ Credo knows he’s making it worse, but he can’t cajole and plead like his mother can. He’s like his father, straight down the line. What was it he’d seen in that film he’d seen on the Mainland? “We are men of action. Lies do not become us.”
“But this is my family!” Nero insists and it’s at times like this, Credo can see his mother in him. The expressions are exactly the same. It tears him apart.

“You keep. Telling me. You love me.”

She’s in agony, can hardly breathe through the pain.

Her face is cut, her body’s broken.

“I’m not asking. For me. For my baby.”

Tears are running down her cheeks again.

The words make barely any sense through her shattered jaw. She has to sit up to breathe and the blood bubbles out her nose.

“I’m not goin’ back! You can’t make me!” He’s starting to struggle now, going limp and stiff by turns. The fists and the feet, he saves for the orphanage staff. “I wan to come home wiv you! I don’t even need a room, I can sleep under the table!”

They’re almost there and the Matron is waiting at the door, lips thin with disapproval. Credo’s never completely sure what she’s scowling at. It seems everything displeases her.

“You’re late.” That voice would freeze Hell. “We have a routine here and you seem to think you have dispensation to flout it.”

“You’re late.” That voice would freeze Hell. “We have a routine here and you seem to think you have dispensation to flout it.”

“Only a little. The child was having such a good time and he has so little in his life –“ Credo’s voice falters as she looks even more disapproving.

“We and our volunteers do our best for these poor children, but because so many gentlemen-“ she makes it sound like a disease – “tarry a while with the wrong young ladies, and hope to hide their by-blows among the poor orphans of the demon attacks. Perhaps, Captain, there’d be less demons
if there was less doxing. There’s so many children here that we can give three square meals and a warm bed, but there’s no time for a warm heart!"

She wrenches Nero from Credo’s grasp and slams the door behind her.

Credo’s last glimpse is Nero biting her hand hard and her yelling at him.

His rings sit heavy around his throat as he makes a decision.

It doesn’t make him feel any better.

***

The music’s thumping out the house as young women and their new friends pile in. It’s just unfortunate that the house is in a brown-signed FO area.

There’s young adults in every room of the house, dancing, drinking, smoking and whatever else is a sin in Fortuna, which seems to be everything fun.

It’s pretty much like their apartment in Rome, except work and study isn’t rudely interrupting the party.

Marianna knows how to throw a party. Violet knows how to party. Match made in Heaven or at least by Umbrella, as they’re both sponsored students on that company’s Future Science programme.

Violet’s managed to fend off most of the questions from her scrawny dancer, as well as his advances before he passes out. She goes outside to sit as the sun’s coming up over the back porch.

Marianna lights a cigarette and picks up her Bacardi Breezer. Her make-up’s all over her face, as she sits down next to Violet, who doesn’t look much better. Violet’s got a straw for hers’.

“It’s beautiful here,” says Marianna. There’s a fantastic view of the Castle and the sea from where
they’re sitting. “But don’t you think it’ll be too quiet? I can’t see you settling here and did you read in the primer? They still have corporal punishment here!”

Violet shoulder-checks her affectionately. “I never got a chance to read the primer, someone threw it out the window.”

Marianna laughs. “Come with me to Raccoon Citeeee. We’ll have so much fun. I’m gonna miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too,” says Violet. “But I’m getting transferred here and I think I can do really well here. I don’t think I’ll do well with the viruses. Remember when we were there when all that shit went down? I’m not up for that again.”

“Even those brothers?”

“That’s your take away from this?” Violet snorts. “Much as I’ll miss our sexcapades, I think I’ll like it here. I feel like my talents can be put to good use here. Besides, I’ll come visit you and we can get up to no good with whatever branch of law enforcement you’ve ran afoul of this time.”

"Yeah, You're the one with hot cop ex and it's me who brings down 5-0 on us, Spiderwoman,” giggles Marianna. Violet chinks their bottles.

The scrawny dancer wanders out past them and throws up in a bush.

“Besides, I won’t miss being famous. It’ll be nice to not get stopped in the street and asked if I remember anything yet by complete strangers or people trying to watch me eat.” She sips her drink, gesturing the bottle at the scrawny dancer, currently passed out next to the bush. “Guys just out to fuck the Broken Mermaid.”

She stands up and looks over the view. “I think I’m ready for the quiet life.”

Marianna’s laughter follows her all the way to the shower.

***
Credo feels strange standing up in front of everyone in Station 2, taking Prayers, handing out assignments, everyone asking him what to do.

It’s not that Captain is a difficult rank – the last incumbent had his systems down to a fine art and it’s just a case of Credo getting to grips with it. It’s different and it’s challenging in itself, but Credo’s an intelligent man. It won’t take him long. It’s just an awful lot more paperwork than he’s used to and politicking hard enough to not be put on a Committee.

Speaking of Committees, he works through the morning, he and his Assistant slowly getting to grips with their new roles. Credo’s not putting his decision off, but neither is he going to sneak in there like he’s ashamed.

Credo’s Assistant, Knight Cassla, drives him up to the Castle. He tells him to get something to eat while Credo carries out his task. Credo doesn’t want anyone to see what he’s about to do. There’s enough people in his business as it is.

Credo takes a deep breath before he enters the door, straightens his uniform and walks in there with more authority than he’s feeling.

The Knight behind the desk of the Faith Committee reception stands to attention when Credo enters and salutes, though it’s not as quick or as deep as other Knights. The Faith Committee consider themselves apart from all others.

“What can I do for you, Captain?” he says, pleasantly.

“Is Captain Falzon receiving, Knight?” asks Credo.

“I can find him for you, Master Captain,” says the Knight. He shows him into a private interview room. “If you would wait here.”

Credo doesn’t sit, even though the chairs are comfortable. There’s a portrait of Lord Scerri and Sanctus, but none of the current Leader of the Faith Committee. They are supposed to work in obscurity to keep the Faith pure, the work being it’s own reward.
Credo’s reverie is broken by the door opening and Peter’s voice saying warmly, “Credo! It’s an unexpected pleasure! Did you receive my gift?”

“I did, thank you,” replies Credo, accepting Peter’s embrace stiffly. He doesn’t mention that he threw whatever it was straight in the bin. He thinks his mother had retrieved it when he wasn’t looking.

“So, to what do I owe this impromptu visit?” Peter sits down on one of the chairs before the desk in the room.

Credo briefly debates whether to sit or remain standing. He sits.

Peter looks at him expectantly, joy at seeing his friend on his face.

Credo is no good at subterfuge. “I have a request.”

Peter’s face goes blank. “Of course. Name it.”

“Nero Balzan is to be turned over to my custody permanently.”

“They will never agree to it,” Peter says abruptly. “Unless…leave it with me.”

He pauses. Credo tenses.

“I want to see him,” says Peter, simply.

Credo doesn’t look away, even as he throws Pinny Agius off the cliff. “Leave it with me.”

He stands and he’s almost at the door when he hears Peter say softly, ”One day you will regret refusing my friendship, when once we were so close.”
Credo shuts the door softly behind him.

He doesn’t salute on the way out.

***

“Anyone seen my pass?” Violet rolls a drunk woman whose name she can’t remember off her bed and looks under a pillow.

“Where did you last see it?” Yells Cassie, causing the couple in bed beside her to groan.

“They were in that induction pack Marianna had and…threw out the window. Great.” Violet kicks the bed in frustration. “I’m going in for a pre-work meet and greet and I don’t have my pass. Do you know how fucking seriously they take that? Not just UO, but Fortuna? It’s an actual fucking law, Marianna, you drunk bitch!”

“Sorry!” Marianna retorts, sullenly. The distance between the rooms muffles her voice. “I didn’t know they were the special passes and that they were in there!”

Violet closes her eyes as the irritation with Marianna’s flightiness rises. “How do you even remember how to breathe?”

Marianna wouldn’t have heard her, but shouts back, “Socks on first, then shoes! Socks first, socks!”

Despite herself, Violet laughs.

***

Violet’s in no fit state to drive, so her new boss sends a car for her. She can’t stop staring at the place.

Everything is fine, till she’s let off in front of a seriously long bridge. It’s made of beautiful white
stone, with steps to upper and lower levels. There is a wide walkway, though, that seems to lead right to the main buildings. Violet is a little worse for wear, though she hides it well and she’s talented enough that discreet allowances have been made for her student shenanigans.

But she’s not a student any more, she reminds herself. And this is a new place. They may not be so forgiving, especially with their weird religion. She pulls herself upright, concentrates and feels almost sober. There’s a sharp pain next to the bite on her shoulder and she winces, but she doesn’t feel like a student on a three-day bender anymore.

She decides to walk along the bridge and enjoy the view.

It’s spectacular.

It’s a clear summer’s day and the white stone, almost like Portland stone, is blinding in the sunlight. Violet is glad she’s wearing her shades, she’d be dazzled otherwise. The water is a clear, cerulean blue that’s typical of this part of the Med and the heat of the day has yet to build up. There’s gulls flying and catching fish, and if she squints, she can see the seaweed thrashing in the current below. It’s a very rocky bottom, she notes. Go in that and you’re probably not coming out.

She reaches some stairs that don’t have any handrails and she’s careful to stay in the middle and watch where she puts her feet. Slowly, the helipad before the main building is revealed. Violet looks up finally, letting out the breath from coming up those stairs and gasps.

In front of her is an entrance way and behind that rises a tower, still in that dazzling Portland stone and designed like a Crusader stronghold. It’s entirely different from the Castle. It’s seven or eight stories she thinks and she’s sure that she’s read that it extends underground by as much as well.

She walks forward into the entrance, into a waiting room of sorts. There’s people, male and female, wearing variations of a white uniform with red or gold accents and the symbol she’s seen on the hijabs everyone here wears and the soldiers. She does smile a little as she thinks of the soldier - no, Knight, he’d corrected her, hadn’t he? Though he’d given his title as Captain – that she keeps seeing.

“Can fucking arrest me anytime,” she murmurs to herself.

She’s sure she was told to wait here while her new boss came for her and seeing as she doesn’t have a pass, she’s better off not pissing anyone off. She was specifically requested for this post and
she doesn’t want to stretch that goodwill.

Violet doesn’t wait very long before a tall, young, Black man, maybe just a few years older than her, comes over to her. People clear out of his way as he comes. He’s the only person of colour she’s seen other than amongst Tourists and she’s counting Marianna in that.

“Most irregular! Can’t c-c-c-countenance it!” he mutters as he looks up from the papers he’s holding and glances round, furtively. “To be out here! Untenable!”

Violet can’t help but stare.

Eventually the man sees her and points. “You!”

The way he shouts has people looking at Violet, wondering if they should seize her.

He creeps – and that’s the only word for it – over to her. “Y-y-you’re her! The very girl! The very one!”

Violet tries not to react. She has no clue which way to jump and she isn’t sure if he’s going to bite or not. “Is that good or bad?”

He stares at her, as if he hasn’t a clue either. “You’re here! Then we must begin!”

Violet’s dragged past the armoured Knights at the entrance and taken into the Tower.

***

She’s shown round in a whirl of labs and facilities, the strange man both showing her things and not showing her things, “because you don’t have that clearance yet, but oh! When you do! The delicious things you will discover!”

He mentions points from her thesis and other articles she’s written, so it’s clear he knows who Violet is, even as they discuss things that he’s showing her – Violet’s currency is ideas, like
Marianna’s is shoes.

She notices the strange way people treat him, a mixture of deference and contempt. Violet is careful not to treat him like that. She’s careful to treat everyone she meets professionally and courteously and be interested in their stories, regardless of what she thinks of them. It comes from when she first came too and didn’t know her place in the world and how she fitted into it. Her mask is second nature now, she’s so circumspect, she’d fool a polygraph.

After all, someone had made a determined attempt to kill her and tried to come back to do the job.

Violet’s been there around an hour, deep in conversation with him, when a man in a suit and a UO lanyard comes running over. He looks pissed as hell. “Agnus! Agnus! What are you doing with her! I’ve been waiting for over an hour for her! She’s got no pass or anything!”

He pulls Violet away from the other man. She quickly twirls and disentangles herself from him.

In truth, she slightly ports away from him and she knows this Agnus has noticed.

In his consternation, the suited man turns back on Agnus. “You need to stop this! You know you’ve no authority in this area! You don’t even have that much authority in your own area!”

If Violet thinks Agnus is going to be cowed by the suited man, she’s wrong. He merely draws himself up to his full height and responds, voice dripping with derision. “I don’t answer to you. I answer only to Lord Scerri.”

He storms off.

The suited man apologises and introduces himself as Paul Duffield, Head of Special Projects “and not a member of the weirdos.”

***

Credo decides to see Pinny.
He’s technically on his lunch break, so he’s allowed. Anyway, he’s a Captain now. He’s got some leeway, as long as the work gets done.

Alice opens the door and bows to him, showing Credo into the room where Pinny is reading on a daybed, wrapped in a blanket. Josh is playing with some toy that’s come with him from the Mainland, all bright plastic and noise, babbling away in Spanish. He stops as soon as Credo comes in and continues playing in silence, other than the ghastly racket from that contraption.

No one will say anything to him just yet, but when whatever it runs on fades out, it’ll be quietly replaced with far more sensible wooden toys.

Not yet though.

At least he hasn’t ran to his Mami and spend the whole hour hiding behind her, as he did the first few times Credo visited without Nero and Kyrie.

“No, don’t get up. Have you thought more about allowing him to train with the other young boys?” Credo asks. “He’d be as well to start now.”

“I’ll consider it,” says Pinny. She looks tired. The barbeque last night has taken it out of her.

There’s a knock at the door and Alice brings in lunch and a polythene box. It’s got the logo from the Tourist Health Centre on it. Alice has made enough lunch for the three of them and as Credo pours the coffee, the maid puts the tablets in a bowl for Pinny, when she indicates which little box she’s taking all those pills from.

Pinny looks nothing like the girl he and Peter waited for, five, nearly 6 years before. She’s gained an awful amount of weight as a result of chemo and steroids – who’d have thought that the cure was worse than the disease? She’s lost height as tumours spread through her spine. She catches every bug going, which Josh brings home in the way that all small children are germ magnets. She’s constantly exhausted.

But she burns. She burns with the brightness of someone who isn’t ready to die yet, even though the doctors can’t help her anymore. They found the lump in her breast too late to cure her – she hadn’t been taught to look for the signs. It was already Stage 4 when they found it. She’s 24 and she’ll be lucky if she makes 25. There’s no chance she’ll make 26. She doesn’t mince her words.
any more – she’s aware that she doesn’t have time to waste. She’s turned out to be as cutting as her sister was. She’s been given six months.

*Could be less,* she’s warned them.

*Could be more,* says her hopeful Papa, who’s suddenly become an expert on tumours and treatments.

Credo is 26. His age cohort are mostly married, with several children apiece.

He can’t help but think Pinny is Edward Agius’s punishment for their crimes. He thinks his lack of a wife and children are his.

“Stop it, Credo,” says Pinny, as if she’s reading his thoughts. “It’s not a punishment, regardless of what Papa believes. Why would Sparda punish Josh? The child’s innocent, despite his origins.”

“Are you not innocent, Pinny?” Credo tucks into the tasty maghmour.

Pinny smiles as Josh looks at it with suspicion.

“You can leave it, but no pudding,” she tells him in Spanish.

The little boy sulks. He can give even Nero a run for his money and Nero is an industrial-grade sulker.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure? You’ve been round here every day since I came home.” She gets a cheeky grin on her face. “They might think you do mean to court me. Lady Kristina will be furious.”

“I’m well-pleased to steal her scone,” replies Credo. “I can’t spend time with a dear friend?”

“Well, you’d best make good use of the time, it’s not getting any longer,” she replies.
Credo notes how her speech patterns are similar to those of the Tourists.

“That woman last night at the beach was my sister, wasn’t it?” says Pinny.

“I think so, yes,” replies Credo. “It’s almost five years since she, we…”

“I can’t understand why she hasn’t come round. She’s been hiding for years, why come back now? Did she have the baby - not that he’ll be a baby anymore – with her? What about Vergil?” Pinny’s hand shakes as she drinks her water and Credo steadies it for her. It clacks her teeth.

Josh looks up at the noise and catches Credo’s eye. He brings over the toy aeroplane to Credo.

“El avion,” he says.


Credo presses a button on the plane and it makes a take-off noise.

“Aeroplanes are interesting toys,” he repeats in English.

“I’ve been on a plane,” says Josh. “I cried when it went up because my ears were sore. They went pop!”

“They hurt my ears as well,” replies Credo. “I eat something. That helps”

“You’re tall,” says Josh.

“I can make you taller,” says Credo. He lifts Josh up and puts him on his shoulders. Josh starts to babble in Spanish about the things he can see, forgetting Credo doesn’t understand him. Credo walks about the room with him.
Pinny smiles and doesn’t ask Credo to be careful. “Took him long enough, Uncle Credo.”

“Not for much longer, if Kristina Chetcuti has any say.” Josh thumps Credo’s head to make him move a certain way. Credo grimaces, the boy’s sitting on his ponytail and pulling on the roots. “If it is Verity, then she’d best get round quick.”

“I imagine Vergil will have something to say about that,” says Pinny, missing Credo’s sudden inability to look her in the eye. “Seems strange that both of us would return home at the same time. Perhaps she’s forgiven Papa? I’d love to meet my nephew.”

“I’m going to see her later,” Credo says, taking Josh into the dining room, the child thumping his head and laughing.

“Really? Has she spoke to you? Have you told Papa?” Gasps Pinny, eagerly.

“Has he said anything?”

“Not yet, but he was busy with the children last night when all the nonsense happened.” Pinny looks wistful. “I miss Vee so much, Credo. It’s never stopped hurting that Vergil asked me not to contact them in case the Order tracked either of us down. I didn’t know if she was dead or alive. I thought that at least when I die, I’d know, if she and Mama would come to take me to Heaven. They say that, don’t they? That when you die, your loved ones come to take you home?”

Pinny turns her face so that Josh doesn’t see the tears fall or her voice shake.

“Why don’t I take Josh out for a little while? I have time and I might take him to meet your father,” Credo hears his treacherous voice offer and he marvels at how normal he sounds.

Pinny doesn’t speak, doesn’t trust herself.

Credo calls for Alice to get Josh’s things ready. He knows from Nero and Kyrie that small children practically need pack horses for all their gibbles.
“I shouldn’t mind dying alone, if Verity’s still alive,” Credo thinks he hears Pinny whisper as he leaves.
Chapter 36

Fortuna, 15 years previously

Credo takes Josh to the Castle, letting him run around the Grand Hall, playing hide and seek around the chairs. He’s psyching himself up to betray a dying woman and break a promise made in her sister’s blood.

“Damn you both for coming back,” he mutters.

“Mami said Annie Vee made curtains for up there,” says Josh, pointing to the back wall. “It’s not a window.”

“It was a curtain in a frame, like a picture,” replies Credo.

“Is Vee why you’re my uncle?”

“Yes,” he replies. “Do you want to see your… Grandad?”

“OK,” says Josh, suddenly shy. “Does Grandad work here? In the Castle?”

“Yes and he’s a proper Knight. Only proper Knights work in Castles,” says Credo. “Want up on my shoulders?”

Josh lifts his arms up so that Credo can lift him over onto his shoulders. It’s sweet to see the boy starting to come out of his shell.

“Does Grandad have a horse?” asks Josh suddenly.

“No.”
“Then he’s not a proper Knight. Only proper Knights have horses.”

Credo laughs and takes Josh to the Faith Committee office. “Are you a proper Knight? You must be – as I appear to be your horse!”

The Knight on the desk does a double take when he sees Credo coming with the little boy, but he very quickly works out who he is, quickly gaining permission to take Captain Micellef and General Agius’ new-found grandson to his office.

The child is agog at the inside of the Castle, making exaggerated ducks under chandeliers and doorways, until they come to Lord Agius’ office.

He’s clearly waiting for them behind the door, as it opens as they approach. General Agius looks delighted at the visit. Credo doesn’t know if he should feel guilty at the pretence or not.

If anyone is going to go along with it, it will be Agius.

Josh excitedly begins chatting to his Grandad in a mix of Spanish and English that Lord Agius can just about follow. Most of it is how tall Credo is and how he’s a proper Knight, because he’s got a horse and a Castle.

“Need to get you in training, if you want to become a Knight,” says Lord Agius, smiling at the child’s enthusiasm. There’s drinks and refreshments on the low table. General Agius must have rushed them in when he was told they were coming. “Regardless of what your mother thinks. You live here now and we might as well get you settled.”

Lord Agius turns to Credo. “Is Pinny…”

“Resting, fear not. Fear not on that score anyway.”

“Much as I appreciate your company and bringing my grandson to see me, I don’t imagine you’re visiting me for fun,” says Lord Agius.

Credo has the grace to look shamefaced and he’s careful to speak in Fortunese so Josh can’t
understand him. “I’m leveraging one grandchild against another.”

Lord Agius clenches his jaw and turns away from Credo.

“I want custody of Nero and this was his price.” Credo doesn’t apologise.

Lord Agius nods. “Sit down. I’m on good terms with him and we may yet see a way through this which pleases everyone.”

“Edward, have you seen the latest list from Umbrella?” says Credo.

“No, I don’t deal with that,” replies Lord Agius. “Why?”

“You should and sooner rather than later,” replies Credo.

Lord Agius looks confused, but accedes to Credo’s request.

He opens the door and tells his Assistant to fetch Captain Falzon. “Ask him to bring the latest Immigration List.”

He sits down on the settee in the office and asking Josh if he wants to draw, passes the child an exquisite fountain pen and watermarked paper.

It’s not long before Peter knocks on the door and Lord Agius bids him enter. “I have the List, General Agius,” Peter begins then trails off as he sees Credo.

Credo meets his eyes, but doesn’t bow in salute. Peter looks beyond him to Josh, happily ruining the fountain pen.

It’s one of the few times that Credo has seen him speechless.
“Why don’t you sit down, Peter? I can go over this list and you can meet my grandson, Josh,” says the General. “He’ll be staying with me from now on.”

Peter doesn’t miss the subtle warning in the information. He catches Credo’s eye, giving him a brief nod. *Well played, Credo, well played.*

“What are you drawing?” asks Peter and his voice is unusually thick.

Josh looks up, not shy for once. “I’m drawing a plane.”

Peter points to the wings. “Do you know why they’re that shape? Wide at the front and slim at the back?”

This has Josh’s interest. “No.”

“So the wind can fly over the plane and this is how they steer them,” Peter says as he takes out his own pen and draws ailerons on the wings.

Josh is entranced and starts asking questions about planes, Peter more than happy to oblige. He’s almost smiling.

Lord Agius turns from the man and child to the List. He leafs through the first few pages and then freezes, the blood draining from his face.

Peter’s not so engrossed in the child that he doesn’t notice the General’s reaction, though he bites his tongue.

General Agius runs his hand over his face several times as he tries to make sense of it. “It can’t be, it can’t be.”

“Are you alright, Grandad? Will you need to stay in hospital?” asks Josh, suddenly concerned. He gets up and puts his hand on Lord Agius’ face. “I’ll call the ambulance.”
He goes to the phone and has dialled 112 before they can stop him, ordering an ambulance in Spanish. “She’s speaking the way Mami speaks when she doesn’t want me to know what she’s saying. Can you get Grandad an ambulance?”

He holds out the phone to Peter, who cancels the ambulance. “Grandad is fine, Young Master…”

Peter doesn’t complete the sentence, as he realises he doesn’t know the boy’s surname.

“I’m fine, Josh. I’ve just had a shock,” Lord Agius smiles at Josh to reassure him. “You play with Peter, I’m just going to talk to Credo.”

“Are you going to talk like Mami?”

“Yes, son.” Lord Agius smiles despite himself. He looks back at the page and traces the lines of the photograph’s subject. “It could just be a coincidence. I can certainly see the similarity, but we know… we know.”

His voice trails off as his eyes glitter. He glances at Peter, but he’s still drawing with Josh and sneaking lumps of sugar behind his cake. He’s listening, though.

“What do we know of her, this Violet Alighieri?” Lord Agius pulls himself together and quickly reads through the profile sheet UO have provided the Immigration Committee. “Doubtless, this makes more sense to the boffins than it does to me. It’s all Interdimensional Biological Entities and Electro-Staging Hypothesis – A Scientific Explanation for Magic/Psychic Powers. She’s published two books on the subject and she’s on Umbrella’s Bright List. She’s …22 and has been brought on for Special Projects.”

That definitely catches Peter’s ear. “Could I see that profile, My Lord?”

Credo freezes as General Agius passes the pages to Peter. He sets Josh to colouring a logo for the plane as he looks at the profile. Peter’s eyes widen as they see the photo. “Born in Naples, educated in Rome. Nearly died in a car-crash five years ago and still got sponsored by Umbrella before she had even left hospital. She’s considerably skilled for one so young.”

Peter pauses for a moment, as he considers something. “While Special Projects is not directly my area, I do have an interest – “
“You’re the Faith Committee Oversight on my mother’s project, yes we know, Peter,” Credo cuts across him.

Peter ignores him. “in recruiting those with the appropriate skills into the Order. I do feel like Miss Alighieri here could be an advantageous acquisition for our interpretation of Special Projects.”

Both men are listening as Peter lets his words sink in.

“I can see a solution to your unwanted suitor, Credo,” says General Agius, thoughtfully. “I’m sure your General would say the same, Peter.”

“I can request my General order it, Lord Agius, which would negate any Compel that Lady Kristina could hope for the Marriage Committee to impose upon a union between herself and Credo.” Peter’s mind is racing ahead and considering the implications.

“It would also hold off her case for the annulment of his marriage, at least until I can encourage Lord Calleja to press Cassius to Compel her assent to an offer,” agrees the General. “One cannot deny her resemblance to my Verity.”

They both look at Credo.

“I understand that this Order may be somewhat traumatic for you, Credo,” says Lord Agius. “But I wouldn’t ask if there was any other way forward that I could see that will satisfy all concerned.”

“And believe me, Credo,” reiterates Peter, making sure he has Credo’s full attention. “This will satisfy all concerned, for all our divergent aims. I will appeal to Lord Scerri, if all else fails. Even though he is primarily concerned with the illness of His Holiness.”

“His decline proceeds? Do you still attend him daily?”

“Yes, General, alas, faster than ever. Lord Scerri fears it will only be months, if not weeks, before there will be two hustings facing Fortuna.”
“That will shake things up and no mistake. Makes sense to consolidate positions in the lead time.”

“It certainly does.”

The conversation rolls over Credo, as he realises that, once again, he’s been coerced into a relationship for the good of the Order. What can he do, though? His only hope is that this time will have a better result than the last.

Credo stands and calls Josh to him, putting the boy on his shoulders as the child puts up his arms for it. Credo refuses to feel guilty at Peter’s flash of pain as Josh laughs and commands his horsey to ride forth.

The other two men stand as Credo adjusts his hair and ensures the boy is secure.

“A kiss for Grandad?” Lord Agius chances.

Josh thumps on Credo’s head, demanding that he bend down so the boy can kiss his grandad.

Credo bends carefully at the knees, so the child can hug his grandad. He hears rather than sees an exaggerated kiss. “One for Peter?” he hears General Agius say.

“Don’t fuss the child so, My Lord,” says Peter, offering his hand to Josh and smiling as the boy shakes it. “Thank you, Credo,” he whispers, a hand on Credo’s back, the same hand that…

Credo swallows the thought down and accepts Peter’s gratitude. “Perhaps Our Lord can see to it we’ll both be Fathers.”

Lord Agius sees them to the door, having another cuddle from Josh again. “Come again tomorrow, when Mami’s asleep. What say you, Peter?”

“Capital idea, My Lord,” agrees Peter.
They wave off Credo and Josh, as General Agius closes the door.

Credo motions to Josh to be quiet.

General Agius looks at the profile again.

“Do you think it’s Verity, Edward?” Peter asks.

“Do you?”

Peter shrugs. “It’s a good likeness, but Verity died in childbirth. We were all there. I feel almost sorry for this Alighieri woman – all that’s about to befall her for her resemblance to a dead girl.”

“Watch yourself, Peter. I’ve indulged you thus far. Speak kinder of Verity if you wish to see my grandson again.” Lord Agius outranks Peter now and he’s not afraid to draw on it.

“I meant no disrespect. I was as saddened by her passing as you were,” Peter assuages the General. “Not only did her passing diminish us all, but damaged the most valuable relationship in my life. No, let Credo chase his ghosts and you enjoy the company of the daughter who yet lives.”

Credo hears someone clap another on the shoulder.

“You give wise counsel, Peter.” Lord Agius’ voice is warm. “Come back tomorrow.”

Credo runs along the corridor and out past the reception before they open the door.

***

“You’re unusually quiet today, son,” says Dorcas at dinner. She places her hand on his forehead. “You sickening for something? You haven’t been yourself for the best part of a week.”
Credo accepts her fussing with good grace. “I’m merely tired with the stress of Kristina Chetcuti’s Suit. It’s taking its toll upon me.”

“Nero says she’s a bitch,” says Kyrie in her baby sing-song voice.

“Kyrie Eliza Micellef!” snaps Dorcas. “Say that again and I’ll wash your mouth out with soap! Nero’s too!”

“Shame to punish the child for speaking the truth,” says Credo.

“It’s the manner of the expression, not the sentiment itself I take issue with,” says Dorcas.

“It would seem, Mama, that she won’t know the difference between the two,” says Credo.

“And what child have you raised, pray tell?” Dorcas dishes out salatah mishwieh onto Kyrie’s plate.

Credo hides a smile at the little girl’s disgusted face. It’s actually delicious, but Kyrie is at the age where she’s learning she’s a little person in her own right and she’s challenging everything.

“Was I as entertaining as my sister?” Credo asks, cutting up the aubergine for her and whispering that he’ll get her Mainland chocolate for her, should she eat it.

She looks at him like she’s considering the deal, before eating each morsel like it’s poisoned.

“Bribery, my son is a difficult consequence to return from,” scolds Dorcas. “Is this how you will raise Nero?”

Credo looks at his mother, surprised.

“Peter and I had a long conversation about it this morning during a progress meeting,” Dorcas explains. “Why now? You know what you’ll be admitting and upon seeing the boy, I cannot truly say he is the grandchild of my blood.”
“Could he not be the grandchild of your heart, Mama?” asks Credo. “You’ve been kind to so many impoverished foundlings over the years and yet none you’ve taken to heart or house like Nero, not even to fill the gap between your son and daughter.”

A look of pain flashes over Dorcas’ face. “I pray you never know the pain of a baby conceived, but never born. Though you’ll never have that chance while you cling to a marriage that never truly existed.”

“Mama!” Credo protests.

“You fell in love with a girl, Credo, but the woman rejected you,” continues Dorcas. “You were a boy, but you’re a man now. It’s unnatural that a man of your age and a Son of an Old Family should be unmarried. She wasn’t even carrying your baby when she absconded.”

Dorcas strokes Credo’s face. “I worry about you, son.”

“So you support Kristina’s Suit, Mama?” Credo asks in horror.

“In principle, yes, though, I’ll die before I’d assent to a union between our Families,” says Dorcas.

“Because she’s a bitch,” agrees Kyrie.

“I won’t tell you again, Kyrie!” warns Dorcas. “You need to move on, Credo. Even if you wed your Ladybird, it would be better than nothing and might yet bolster your claim to Nero.”

“I like Edith,” says Kyrie. “She’s not a bitch.”

Credo can’t help laughing, Kyrie joining in.

“Stop encouraging her, Credo! You’re supposed to set an example, not a warning!” Dorcas snaps. “Why Nero?”
Credo’s back there, in that room, trying to hold back his tears as he tries to feed her soup she can barely get down.

“You keep. Telling me. You love me.”

She’s in agony, can hardly breathe through the pain.

“Hush,” he tells her, trying to sooth her. “You need to keep your strength up for the baby.”

Her face is cut, her body’s broken.

“I’m not asking. For me. For my baby.”

Tears are running down her cheeks again.

The words make barely any sense through her shattered jaw. She has to sit up to breathe and the blood bubbles out her nose.


This time, Credo gently removes her hand.

“I made a promise to a friend, Mama,” he says softly. “It’s time to truly keep it.”

“I hope it’s not Kristina Chetcuti,” says Kyrie. “Cos she’s a bitch.”

***

Credo sits at his desk, trying to concentrate on the pile of requests, reports and requisitions before him.
None of these three things are actually holding his attention.

He’s actually thinking about a way to meet Ver-Violet that doesn’t look strange and stalkerish and is quick. He can’t get that last view of her turning and blowing him a kiss on the beach out of his mind. He’s trying to fill in an application to foster Nero and ignore the sealed papers from the Marriage Committee.

He thinks he knows what’s in them – a hearing date for the annulment of his marriage. Once that goes through - and it will - he’ll need to fend off the Marriage Committee compelling him to marry Lady Kristina.

“Come on, Lord Sparda,” he mutters. “Haven’t I suffered enough in Your Name?”

Sparda must have heard his prayers for once, as one of the Sergeants comes in with a folder with the Umbrella logo in the corner. “Master Captain?”

“Yes, what is it?” Credo asks, wondering what fresh hell currently awaits him. He squeezes the bridge of his nose.

“It’s an Umbrella matter, Sir and such things usually fall upon the Captains…” The Sergeant comes fully into the room.

“Yes, what is it?” Credo repeats, a little more sharply.

The Sergeant hands him the folder. “It was found alongside the road, Sir. You need to speak to the young ladies in question.”

“I know that,” Credo replies, exasperated. It goes as he flicks through the folder and his heart quickens. It’s a UO induction pack with Employee Passes for Violet Alighieri and Marianna Maldini with Guest Passes for Lena De Luca and Cassandra Barker. “Someone’s in trouble.”

“We’ve received multiple reports of – and I quote – ‘a damned infernal racket’ emanating from that address in Castle View, as well as Tourists frequenting the house at all hours, Sir.”
He looks rather harassed as he gives Credo all the details he can think of.

“Have the residents been chewing your ear off, Sergeant?” Credo smiles.

“For three days straight, Sir,” replies the Sergeant. “I live there, but not too close to that house. When I go home, I just want to do my garden.”

“I’ll see to it,” says Credo. “In fact, I’ll see to it just now. You’re dismissed.”

The Sergeant bows and Credo calls Knight Cassla for his car.

He looks in the mirror and behind him a print of Sparda’s Victory Over Mundus is reflected. Credo realises he looks a little less haunted and wonders if this was how The Saviour felt when he began to realise the chance to recant his sins.

***

She’s back there, in that room, the man in the shadows with the soft voice trying to hold back his tears as he tries to feed her soup she can barely get down.

“You keep. Telling me. You love me.”

She’s in agony, can hardly breathe through the pain.

“Hush,” he tells her, trying to sooth her. “You need to keep your strength up for the baby.”

Her face is cut, her body’s broken.

“I’m not asking. For me. For my baby.”
Tears are running down her cheeks again.

The words make barely any sense through her shattered jaw. She has to sit up to breathe and the blood bubbles out her nose.

“Please don’t try to escape again, I can’t stop him.”


Voices at the door and they haunt her, awake or asleep.

“…move her again…”

“…he’s tearing up the Island looking for her…”

Violet wakes up as she hits the wall.

She’s knocked over the light as she’s scrambled backwards off the bed.

“Wossat knocking? Why’s people knocking? S’loud.” Marianna pulls the pillow over her head. “Stop the loud!”

There’s music thumping out of Cassie’s room and a couple of other rooms of the house and Lena’s tuneless singing.

There’s also someone hammering at the front door. “Iftah! Inti ordnat tiftah dan il-bieb!”

Violet’s mouth’s dry and her head is thumping. She feels sick and it’s nothing to do with a hangover. She catches sight of herself in the long mirror and she looks like a ghost.

The ghost stands up on shaky legs.
Violet drags back the curtains, sticking her head out the open window.

“What?” she demands more crossly than she’s feeling. “Stop the loud!”

Credo looks up at her, squinting against the sun. “I’m to stop the loud? Madam, are you deaf to the cacophony pouring from your doors?”

“It’s not my fault you can’t appreciate a banging tune.”

“Well, neither do your neighbours.” He waves the folder. “So I must speak with you for both that and for this. Your liberty is potentially at stake with this matter.”

Credo taps the folder again, the Umbrella logo uppermost.

“Oh, fuck. I’ll be right down.” She pulls her head back in and Credo can hear shouting back and forth as the music’s turned off room by room and some surly hungover young men and women come around the side of the building, complaining about the sun.

It’s another couple of minutes before Violet appears and she’s tidied herself up somewhat, although…

“I must protest at your attire, Madam. You’re still undressed and it’s hardly suitable attire to receive a caller in Fortuna, whatever is acceptable in the DTA on the beach.” Credo averts his eyes, looking pointedly at a bush where a young man is sleeping. He’s trying not to look back at her.

“I’m just up, you banged on my door and it’s too damn hot to put anything else on. You wanna talk, I’m doing it in my jammies.” Violet stands aside to let him in. She’s wearing cotton shorts and a cropped t-shirt with teddy bears printed on them. They show off her long, lean dancer’s body, covered in scars and tattoos. Some of the tattoos are designed around the scars and he’s mesmerised despite trying not to look.

Credo huffs, shakes his head and stomps in.
Violet goes through to the kitchen to get some coffee and breakfast going. “You want anything?”

She’s shaking and despite her bravado, it’s clear everything is an effort. She moves like an old woman.

Credo comes into the kitchen with her. “Are you alright?”

“I’m just up. It takes a while for me to get going. What time is it anyway?”

“Noon,” replies Credo. “Why don’t I get everything ready for you? You direct me.”

“I’m not even sure where everything is myself,” she says and her trembling is getting worse.

Credo pulls a chair out from the table and bids her to sit. He gets her a glass of water and gets her a straw from the jar on the counter. He holds the glass for her, but doesn’t attempt to get her to drink from it, allowing her to work around him.

She looks at him oddly, wine-dark eyes almost transparent in the light. She considers for a moment, before pointing to a cupboard. There’s a safe in there, bolted to the wall. She gives him the combination and it opens to reveal a dosette box with an Umbrella logo. Credo looks back at her.

“Bring me a bowl and that box. Can you cook porridge?”

“I think so,” he replies as he gets her the requested items. “Can I help you with that?”

“Porridge,” she replies firmly, pointing in the direction of where everything lives. “There’s bread and cheese and stuff in the fridge, if you want to get yourself a sandwich.”

“I will, thank you,” says Credo, looking through the cupboards and drawers till he finds what he needs for porridge. “Are you sure I can’t help?”

“I don’t usually take these in front of anyone,” says Violet, sitting cross legged on the chair. “Clearly we’re meant to be together, Captain Credo Micellef, Actually.”
Credo drops the cup of milk into the pot.

“Are you alright, Captain?”

“I’m fine, I’m merely surprised you recalled me so readily,” he covers, fishing the cup out the pot. “And the Fortunese – you speak it flawlessly.”

“I knew I was coming here, I’ve been practising. It’s not so different to Tunisian Arabic and I already speak that. I wasn’t expecting your kids to come over, but I like being kept on my toes. They come up with the weirdest things.” Violet finishes taking the tablets. “I’ll be human again in about half an hour. How’s your little boy? What was the deal with that cow screaming at him? And when she hit your wife, I have no fucking idea how she kept her cool and never lamped her back.”

“They’re fine.” He pauses as he thinks how to put this, hiding it behind mixing the porridge while it thickens. “They’re not my children, though I’m applying to foster the little boy.”

“Oh? Which one? The blond one or the dark one?” Violet asks and he might be imagining it, but she does seem to be making more than just polite conversation. Credo isn’t the best at reading romantic signals, but he’s seen other women question like that when they’re interested. By the Saviour, he hopes she is. It’ll make this so much easier.

And it’s not like he isn’t interested in her, Verity or no. He’s never been this interested in any woman in years. Sparda’s Balls, why can’t any of this be simple? “The blond one. The dark one is my nephew by marriage. The little girl is my sister – “

“Your little sister! No way! She’s a baby! How old are you? 25?”

Credo smiles. “Close. 26. We marry young here. By your age, a young lady would have been married a few years already and have at least one or two children.” Credo sets down the porridge and a cafetière and quickly pulls together a ploughman’s lunch from what he finds in the fridge. He’s shocked there’s actual food in there.

“How’s the porridge?” He asks as he sits back down.
She’s struggling to pull a spoon through it and keeps adding milk. “It’s fine, thank you. You can come again, I could get used to this."

“You’re very courteous, Madam, but cooking is not one of my talents,” says Credo, ruefully.

“But you still tried and that’s the main thing,” says Violet. “I’m called Violet, by the way.”

“Credo,” he replies and holds out his hand. She takes it and Credo can’t help himself. He kisses the back of it, but not in a salacious way. “Your servant, Ma-Violet.”

She chuckles and Credo smiles shyly. “I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, good sir.”

She gestures to the folder. “I know that’s a big thing here. I’ve already had my ass handed to me for losing my pass when I went to work. Am I in trouble?”

“Technically, yes, but I can recommend that it be suspended if you stop the noise and partying,” he says. “When do your friends go home?”

“Another week,” Violet replies. “But I really don’t fancy my chances at keeping those three in check.”

“You’d best try, for your own sake,” Credo warns her. “We are rather more draconian than the Mainland. You could be jailed or fined.”

“Umbrella’s not going to step in if it’s my own stupidity that lands me in the shit,” she agrees.

“That’s a warning you should heed,” he tells her, seriously. His eyes catch sight of the clock on the wall and he sighs. “I should return to work. But thank you for the sandwich.”

Violet walks him to the door. “Thank you for my porridge, Credo.”

Credo has a hand on the door knob before he turns round. He gathers his courage the way he had on the day he’d first proposed to her…Verity…Violet, Nine Hells get it right until we know
different… “Violet, if I were to call upon you again, would you receive me?”

She’s stepped nearly close enough to him when he turns that he could lean slightly and kiss her. She’s tall, too and isn’t that a novelty?

Violet’s inky-garnet eyes regard him just a little provocatively. “What would your wife say?”

“I’m not married, technically.” Credo swallows, tingles sparking along his spine as he feels her coffee breath move his hair. “She left a long time ago.”

Violet leans slightly and catches his mouth with hers, just a gentle press and push, as if she’s testing the waters. The tip of her tongue plays along the inside of his lips, tracing delicate patterns. Despite the surprise, Credo feels the old, automatic response flare back up, the way it never has with anyone else.

He kisses her back, keeping it soft and light and his hands holding hers. He doesn’t chance a sweep of his tongue against hers, just enjoys the sensation of being kissed exactly the way he likes it. He can’t help the shiver as she swirls over a sensitive point.

Violet breaks the kiss and Credo slowly opens his eyes to see her mouth quirk sideways. “Did she really? She’s missing out.”

She reaches past him and opens the front door. “Yes, Captain Micellef, should you call again, I will receive you.”

Violet’s pushed him out and shut the door behind him, before he can even register what’s happened.

He touches his mouth and smiles as he walks back to the station.

Violet turns back round to see Marianna staring at her. “You kissed him! You never kiss anyone!”

“I kiss,” protests Violet. “I just don’t kiss everyone.”
“Properly! You never kiss anyone properly! Lips and tongues!”

“Well, all the nice girls love a soldier,” says Violet, walking a lot easier now, past Marianna and back into the kitchen. She throws a card on a lanyard at Marianna. “Don’t lose that one.”

“He found them?” Marianna catches hers and twists the lanyard round her hand.

“They got handed in. He was warning me that I could cop real shit for it,” replies Violet, beginning to clear up the dishes.

“Oh, I see your game,” teases Marianna. “This is pulling a Spiderwoman all over again.”

“Well, considering how well it worked last time,” grins Violet.

“And you even kissed this one,” Marianna grins back, dodging the wet sponge thrown at her.
Chapter 37

Fortuna 15 years ago

“Is Papa not joining us today?” asks Credo as he and Dorcas knock on the door of the orphanage. Kyrie has a bag of toys and games she’s getting rid of and she wants to donate them to the children here. “The children here” seems to mostly be Nero, which does cause some problems, but how do you explain favouritism and fairness to a three-and-a-half-year-old?

“No, son, he’s called to the Castle to aid Lord Scerri with His Holiness. It’s not that long till the Festival of the Blade and there’s much to prepare, with his illness.” Dorcas says wearily. She yawns and glares irritably at Kyrie as the little girl fidgets and jiggles. “Peter’s concerned that His Holiness will not see it.”

“I didn’t realise His Holiness was that ill,” says Credo. He looks more closely at his mother, noting the fine lines and dark shadows around her eyes. “And if you continue to push yourself, Mama, I fear you’ll join him.”

“Your Papa?” smiles Dorcas.

“No, Mama, His Holiness.” Credo’s voice is low with concern as he strokes Kyrie’s hair. “I almost wish Papa had never been promoted to Sanctus’ security detail. We never see him, particularly when we so rarely see you.”

“It’s a burden to be so talented, sometimes, Credo,” says Dorcas, somewhat sourly. “The alchemist is so much in demand, that the mother and wife must fight for their due. I fear that you are more Kyrie’s papa than her brother.”

“I’ve placed your photos by her bed,” Credo jokes. He becomes more serious. “She knows who her parents are and that your work is important.”

“More important than family? That’s how I feel it is sometimes. The Order comes before all.” There’s almost bitterness in her tone and the set of her mouth. Dorcas is only in her mid-forties, but she suddenly looks far, far older.

Careworn. That’s the word that springs to Credo’s mind. “Lord Sparda demands the best of
ourselves in his service,” he says, to mollify her. “And if your daughter sees more of her brother than her parents, she is none the worse for it and you set her yourselves as her best example of what Our Saviour can teach us.”

Dorcas looks at him strangely, opening her mouth like she wants to say something. There’s a small shake of her head and she looks away, scolding Kyrie for her fidgeting.

No, Credo realises. Mama isn’t looking at him strangely. Mama is looking at him like he’s a stranger. He knocks on the door again to hide his disquiet. Kyrie looks between them, understanding that something’s not quite right between the adults in her life.

The door finally opens and the moment is lost in one of the assistants welcoming them and directing them to what she needs them to do for this shift and taking charge of the several large bags of toys that Kyrie is donating. She holds out her hand for the bag that Kyrie is holding on tight to.

Kyrie shakes her head and even takes an exaggerated step back, clutching her treasures. “No, these aren’t for everybody. These are for Nero.”

“And I can give them to him,” says the Assistant, in that condescending way adults often use with young children. Kyrie can see right through the bullshit.

“I’m going to give them to him myself,” she says firmly. “I haven’t seen him for ages!”

“Kyrie, it’s been two days,” says Credo. “Is Nero any better, for I miss the lad myself.”

“He’s still unwell and cannot be disturbed. He needs his rest,” says the assistant and Credo knows a lie when he sees one.

“I’m sure an exception can be made for us,” he says smoothly, but firmly. He begins to walk in the direction of the dormitories. “Let’s go to Nero’s bunk, Kyrie and cheer him up.”

“I forbid it, Sir. You cannot go disturbing a sick child. Would you have it that Kyrie be infected alongside him?” She seems alarmed at the notion, even actively standing in front of him.
“And I’m sure she’s at the same risk as every other child in this house, for certainly children do bring all manner of illness and injury upon themselves,” he replies, picking up Kyrie and side-stepping with her.

“And Nero’s not in his usual room, Captain Micellef,” she says as she blocks his path. “He’s been moved to an isolation room.”

“Then a visit from his foster family will cheer him up, as I’m soon to put the paperwork in to make him my ward,” says Credo. “Please stand aside, Madam.”

“Why is Nero in the Bad Room?” asks Kyrie, frowning. “He’s sad, Credo.”

Whatever expression’s on Credo’s face has the woman scurrying to the side and Credo strides through the door, with her calling for the Matron.

“Do you know where he is?” Credo asks Kyrie. She points up some stairs and Credo takes them two at a time, all the way up to an attic. There’s several doors leading off the attic hallway.

He can hear heart-felt sobbing behind one of the doors. “Nero?”

“C-Credo?”

Kyrie points at a door. “That one.”

Credo puts her down and tells Nero to stand back. “Are you away from the door?”

“Uh-huh,” says a small, muffled voice.

Credo boots the lock, hard, once, twice, thrice, Kyrie screaming and covering her ears from the noise and the door smashes open, hitting the wall so hard it bounces off it.

“Captain Micellef! What in all the Nine Hells are you doing, man?” demands the Matron, the assistant standing halfway between horror-struck and smug beside her.
Credo ignores her to go to Nero, folded in on himself and pressed into the wall.

He smooths the white hair off the forehead of the child. It’s dark with sweat and his face is stained with tears, eyes swollen from crying. Even as Credo holds him, he sobs and hiccups reflexively, like he’s been weeping so long he doesn’t know how to stop.

Credo looks around the room the boy’s been imprisoned in. It’s less a room and more a cell, certainly no place for a small child. Credo funnels his rage into his softest, coldest voice. “Care to explain what you’re doing, Madam?”

He makes the title sound like an insult.

“The boy is in no danger, Captain, from anyone other than yourself,” replies the Matron. She gestures to the room. There is a bed, with plain linens and a bare desk. There is no other furniture and nothing on the wall. The window is bare and closed, even in the late summer heat.

Credo feels Nero’s face. It’s red and burning under his hands and he recognises the signs of dehydration.

He picks him up and holds out his hand to Kyrie.

She puts down the bag of toys.

“Stand aside,” he growls at the Matron.

“The boy has been fighting again, he’s broke another child’s nose and darkened yet another’s daylights. We do not strike children here, he’s been sent to Coventry and isolated until he’s learned his lesson,” returns the Matron, icily. She isn’t used to being questioned and she is furious at Credo’s gall. “He is fed and watered. His basic needs are met.”

“Why were you fighting, Nero?” Credo asks him.
Nero doesn’t have the energy to lift his head up from Credo’s shoulder. “Baxter and Jacob broke my seashell and said that a gropecunt’s unwanted get don’t have nice things. So I planted a facer on Baxter and Jacob said that I was such a little shit that that it was no wonder not even a whore could love me and even the demons didn’t want me, so I downed his apple-cart.”

The telling is punctuated by sobs and his little body heaves.

“You lying little demon!” retorts the Matron. “The boys were merely looking at his seashell and dropped it. “

“Nero’s not lying, they did say that!” snaps Kyrie. “They say things like that all the time!”

“Children can be cruel. We cannot be everywhere, particularly when young men insist on helping barques of frailty turn their ankles, without care to the result,” scowls the Matron.

“Their years are too tender for those thoughts,” counters Credo. “That belief is passed down from those who should have more care for their charges. Come, Kyrie.”

He bends down and picks up the little girl, who sticks her tongue out at the Matron. She hesitates for just a moment. “Why him?”

“What?” Credo’s thrown by the question.

“Of all the children in this building – why that shitten demonspawn? I know the rumours, but I don’t believe them.” She looks at Nero like he’s shit on her shoe. “Your Ladybird has never born a child and you’re her Brother Starling all these years. So why him?”

“Matron!” Dorcas’ voice rings out from the bottom of the stairs. “Look at yourself! Credo, bring him home, son.”

“Of course. Mama.” Credo steps sideways down the narrow staircase.

Nero gives the Matron the finger, as Kyrie blows a raspberry, joining their hands across Credo’s back.
Credo lies Nero down on the settee in the living room. He tries to pull back, but the little boy clings tight and won’t let his arms loose from round Credo’s neck. The man waits a moment, then disentangles Nero from him.

“Am I safe?” he asks in a small, tired, almost hopeful voice.

“Yes,” replies Dorcas, firmly. “I’ll make you something to eat in a minute and you can have a bath.”

“I’m thirsty,” says a small voice.

There’s a knock at the door, which Kyrie decides to answer, as the adults are more concerned with Nero.

“What changed your mind, Mama?” asks Credo. “You were so against it earlier.”

“I wasn’t against it, Credo,” she replies. “I was surprised you were going as far as that. But I saw you on the stairs with him in your arms and I knew he’s the son of your heart, if not your blood. Sparda sent you to each other and who am I to argue with His wisdom?”

“Credo! It’s the pretty lady from the beach!” calls Kyrie, leading Violet into the room. She’s holding some papers against the blue of her robe.

Conversation stops and it’s like time’s stood still.

Neither of the adults can breathe as she stands there, slightly bemused. Violet’s brows knit a little in concentration and it’s Dorcas turn to look a little confused. She shakes her head before looking back at Credo.

Credo can’t keep his eyes from her.
“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I need these papers signed?” says Violet, still holding onto Kyrie’s hand. The little girl seems reluctant to let go. “We’ve all signed this undertaking not to cause a riot the rest of the time we’re here and apparently I need a Captain to counter-sign?”

Credo stands for a further moment before Nero looks up. “They broke my shell!”

It breaks the spell as Violet goes straight to Nero and sits at the other end of the settee. “Did they? Aw, that’s crap. You’ll have to get another one next time you go the beach.”

“Can we go now?” asks Kyrie.

“Well…” begins Dorcas.

“I don’t see why not, but that depends on your Mum,” replies Violet. She looks at Nero. “You look hot and bothered. Why don’t we give the beach a swerve and get ice cream instead. I haven’t found any decent ice cream for a week and I’m Italian. We Italians love ice cream.”

Both children perk up instantly and begin demanding ice cream and pleading with Dorcas to let them go with the Pretty Lady. Dorcas looks up to see Credo and this Violet making sheep’s eyes at each other and that decides it for her. If this Violet can keep that smile on her son’s face, then Dorcas can put up with her for a while.

“We make ice cream that’s far better than any gelateria, as you’ll find, Miss – “ she turns to Credo.

“Alighieri,” he supplies. He smiles and looks happier than Dorcas has seen him in months. He’s even blushing as he looks at this Tourist. “I know just the place to prove it to you.”

He looks at Nero, who does smell rather ripe. “Mama, I’ll get Kyrie ready, if you prepare Nero.”

“Of course,” says Dorcas, trying to hide her smile and hurry Nero into a quick shower. It’s a very quick shower, he almost has to be bribed to stay in there long enough, so powerful is the lure of unexpected ice cream.
They walk together, Kyrie and Nero hand in hand between them and holding a hand of each adult. They look for all the world like a real family as they walk through Castle Town.

They do attract some looks – mostly because Credo’s well-known enough for people to be surprised that he’s in the company of a woman who’s neither his Ladybird nor a relative. Violet has her hood up, so people who know him are discreetly trying to catch sight of who’s walking along with one of Fortuna’s most eligible soon-to-be-bachelors.

He and Violet don’t talk much, the two excited children do enough talking for four extra people. She catches him glancing across at her once or twice and smiles at him. Credo tries to stay in the moment and not indulge the pretence it’s his family with Verity, because whilst there is a very strong resemblance, that’s all it is. A resemblance.

They are clearly two different women and Violet deserves his attention for herself.

He takes her to a café in an FO area, knowing he’s going to draw particular unwanted attention because of her blue robe.

Good.

The waitress tries very hard to take their orders without staring, though she nearly drops her pen when Violet’s Fortunese is perfect as she goads the children into evermore ridiculous orders with their ice cream.

“I want Qaghaq tal-Ghasel with my ice cream,” says Kyrie.

“No, I want sinizza,” says Nero. “I don’t like honey rings.”

Credo watches Violet, as if he’s still looking for proof of her origins. Don’t be stupid, man, you’ve read her file.

Still…

“I can’t eat cakes,” replies Violet.
“Why not?” asks Nero.

“Nero! That’s rude!” scolds Credo. “I’m sorry, Violet.”

“It’s ok,” she says. “It’s going to come up, so let’s get it out the way now. My teeth are all metal and I can’t open my mouth.”

She pulls up her lips to show strips of silver metal around the base of her teeth, with thin wire tied between each tooth. Beneath that, on the middle of each tooth, is a coloured metal post with thin wire running through them. Finally, Violet tilts her head slightly to show the thick, bright elastic bands that sit tightly across from gum to gum, tightly binding her jaws together.

“I’ve also got metal strips in my jaw as well,” she says, encouraging both children to gently press along her bottom jaw.

“I can feel it!” squeals Kyrie, unashamedly fascinated in the way only small children are.

“Is that why you talk with your mouth shut?” asks Nero, sticking a finger right inside Violet’s mouth and feeling a little too hard along the caged teeth.

“Mumph,” says Violet. She gently pulls Nero’s finger out of her mouth and dries it on a napkin. “I was in a car that was going too fast and it crashed. I wasn’t wearing a seatbelt and I was flung all the way from the back to the front and I hit my face off the dashboard. They found one of my earrings in the dash. I broke every bone in my body and my face was smashed. But the doctors were clever and they put me back together again.”

It sounds a little rehearsed to Credo’s ears, like it’s a lie she’s practised. He’s heard plenty of those when he’s questioned a criminal. He dismisses it. Most likely, it’ll be rehearsed so she can get the details out quickly for Snooping Jennys.

“Like Humpty?” asks Kyrie.

“Does it hurt?” asks Nero.
“All the time, but I have painkillers and they help,” says Violet. “I have pins and plates everywhere, but you can’t see them, because they’re under all my skin and bones.”

“Can you take them out?” asks Nero.

“No, but the ones in my teeth get changed out every six months,” she says. “So remember kids, always wear a seatbelt.”

They nod, enrapt, hazel and blue eyes wide.

“Are you going to have a feel, Credo?” asks Kyrie.

Violet almost falls off her seat laughing while Credo goes bright red as he stutters something and looks at the table wishing the Torta Tal-Lewz would swallow him whole.

“What in all the Nine Hells is the meaning of this?” Lady Kristina’s voice slices across the merriment at the table.

The whole café falls silent.

“You’re not supposed to be here!” She rages at Violet. “You’re not supposed to come back! Where have you been hiding? All these years and you come back now! Well, you’ve no right! You’ve no right at all!”

Violet ignores her, but Credo can see the devilment sparkling in his companions’ eyes.

“Lady Kristina, I protest at this outrage-“ Credo begins to stand.

“Who’s this muppet?” Violet asks Nero. She glances at Credo and quickly works out where the land’s lying.
“That’s Lady Kristina. She’s a bitch,” he helpfully supplies.

“She wants to marry Credo, but she’s not getting to because you’re going to marry him again, aren’t you, Vee?” begins Kyrie, actually standing up on her chair, arms akimbo, like a miniature Dorcas.

“I’m not standing for it!” Kristina leans down to scream in Violet’s face. “You can’t just walk in here after-after five years and have everything back just because you lost your Tourist! You left, Verity Agius! You can’t just come back!”

“She’s a total bitch,” Violet agrees with Nero, while noting the name, but rolling with it anyway. Her voice is cold steel, even as she makes a show of remaining seated and eating her ice cream delicately. She doesn’t even look at Kristina as she simply holds on to Kyrie so she doesn’t fall. “I have come back, Kristina. I’m back to reclaim what’s rightfully mine.”

“Lady Kristina! Consider yourself! You’re making a right show of yourself!” Credo’s arm comes between the two women as he puts himself bodily between them.

Kristina tries to push Credo out the way and she’s using more than strength to push him. There’s a slight scent of ozone in the air.

He grimaces and can almost see the aura surrounding her as she gathers her powers to damage her enemy. It’s very subtle, but it wouldn’t shock the townspeople if it wasn’t. She isn’t really known for her subtlety.

And then he isn’t sure what happens next.

Lady Kristina is screeching at Violet, the next she’s gasping on the floor going blue like she’s suffocating.

It’s very faint, but there’s a blue glyph under her, a blue snake sliding over her body.

It fades as quickly as it starts, leaving Kristina vomiting on the floor, grabbing at Credo’s leg.
Violet’s hand’s on his arm, silently forbidding him aiding her. Her touch feels like it’s burning through his jacket. He unconsciously puts his other hand over hers.

The reek of vomit overpowers the ozone and Credo pointedly ignores her as he calls for the waitress to reseat them. He yanks his foot free as Violet carries Kyrie over to the new table. Nero carries their desserts over, ever so carefully and concentrating as only a nearly five year old can. Kyrie’s whispering in Violet’s ear and it’s clearly Very Important. She pulls back and they nod at each other.

“I must apologise for your subjection to that affront, Violet,” says Credo. “Lady Kristina is rather…entitled, though I never imagined she’d lower herself to screaming the place down like this.”

“She’s giving you black looks,” says Nero. “She looks at me like that as well.”

Violet high-fives Nero.

Credo chances a surreptitious glance at Kristina, who’s been helped to a seat and is being fussed over by the staff. The other customers veer between looking at them and sniggering at Lady Kristina.

“Is she?”

“You think?”

“Remember, she’ll be a little older now.”

“Does General Agius know?”

“I’ve been getting that a lot round here – mistaken for Verity Agius,” Violet says as she sips her drink through a straw. She hasn’t noticed that all the women here use straws. “What’s her story?”

“She was a Daughter of an Old Family and we were married. For all of five minutes, I hasten to add,” Credo assures her as he sees the look on her face. “It was an arranged marriage and she was
in love with another, a Tourist. They ran off together and no one’s heard from her since.”

“I don’t blame her,” says Violet. “An arranged marriage? In the EU? I didn’t know that was a thing outside Muslims.”

“Hopefully by the time the children are grown, it will no longer be a ‘thing’,” he agrees. “That said, if both parties are willing, I see no wrong in it.”

“Yeah, I’ll give you that,” Violet says. “I take it I look like Verity?”

“Somewhat,” Credo says. “Though I see more difference than similarity as time goes on.”

“I should bloody well hope so,” says Violet, and her smile crooks off to the left. “I’m sorry I pretended to be her in front of that psycho cow. I hope it didn’t cause too much trouble for you.”

Credo glances over to Lady Kristina, who’s standing up and pushing the waitresses out of the way as she storms over their table again. “Sparda’s Balls!”

“You go away!” snaps Kyrie. “Credo’s going to marry Vee. They’ve had a proper grown up kiss, so now they have to get married!”

Credo looks at Kyrie, then Violet. “Was that what you two were whispering about?”

“Hey, she asked,” Violet snorts with laughter. “I don’t believe in lying to kids.”

“You might have won him,” says Lady Kristina, coldly. “But you’ll never enjoy your prize. I’ll see you in Hell first.”

“You think Hell holds any surprises for me?” There’s something in the way that Violet says it makes Credo’s blood run cold. Something like fear crosses Lady Kristina’s face.

She turns on her heel and storms out.
“It’s not me she’ll make trouble for,” says Credo.

“Then we’d best make it worth it, then,” Violet says as she winks and steals some of Credo’s ice cream. “Now sign my papers, so my excuse for seeing you’s valid.”

Credo laughs and then sighs because Kyrie has drawn love hearts all over the Undertaking. He ruffles her hair and laughs again as she swats him off.

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All too soon, it’s time to go home. The children are falling asleep in their bowls and the sun is setting all pinks and golds over the sea.

Credo carries Nero and Violet carries Kyrie.

Credo looks across at her, carefully picking her way across the cobbles. “You’re a natural, Violet.”

“They’ve got cobbles in Rome,” she replies.

“That’s not what I meant –“

“I know what you meant.” Her voice has gone cold and Violet stops to turn and look directly at him. “If you want children, we’d maybe best stop this in its tracks.”

“I understand that Mainland women wait far longer than is common in Fortunese society,” says Credo. “Rest assured, I have no issue with that custom should you –“

“Jumping the gun, much? I can’t have them. I was too badly wrecked in the accident.” She says it slightly irritably. She readjusts her hold on Kyrie, the little girl snuggling in closer. “Look, if I wasn’t staying here, none of this would make a difference. But I am and you don’t look like the kind of guy who does casual.”
Violet pauses and Credo nods. “I’m not.”

“I’m cool with that.” She pauses again and it’s as if she’s considering whether or not she should chance it. “I’m just gonna lay out my barrow – I think we could have the start of something, but if there’s any dealbreakers, we should just say ‘em now and see if it’s going any further.”

Violet strokes Kyrie’s hair. “Before either of us get too attached.”

Credo begins walking, Violet falling in beside him. “I appreciate your honesty. If I find you have any objectionable habits, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Violet’s raucous laughter nearly wakes up Kyrie and people turn to look.

Neither of them notice, as they wander home slowly in a companionable silence as the evening shadows deepen.

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Dorcas opens the door for them, like she’s been waiting for ages.

Too be fair, she probably has.

Credo sees the look that flicks between the two women as Violet passes her with Kyrie snuggled in her arms. He can’t help but tense for a moment, his tightening arms disturbing Nero.

Dorcas looks back at Credo with a raised eyebrow and a small smile.

Credo relaxes. Whatever test mothers do with their sons’ intended – and he does intend her – she’s passed. Violet has passed.

“Don’t bother undressing them, just put them straight to bed,” says Dorcas. “I’ve already pulled back their covers. You never wake sleeping children.”
“I’ve been getting lots of life lessons since moving here,” says Violet, lightly, but only a little pointedly.

They carefully lie down the children in the double bed in Kyrie’s room, but it’s to no avail. Nero wakes up and it disturbs Kyrie. “I wanna stoee,” murmurs the little girl, sleepily.

“Stoee, stoee,” agrees Nero sitting up a little and pointing at Violet. “I wan her to tell us one.”

“I’m sure Violet’s tired herself,” Credo tries to dissuade the little boy, but Violet’s already sat down on the bed.

“You got a favourite story I can read?” she asks the children.

“One out your head,” says Nero. Kyrie nods.

“Out my head? Oh wow. Let me think.” She looks like she’s wracking her brains. “I know. *Through the Fire* Once upon a time, there were two children, called –“

“Nero and Kyrie,” says Nero.

“Nero and Kyrie and they were sitting one night in front of the fireplace. They’d just been out for ice cream with Violet and Credo and they looked into the fire and they saw a little red man…”

Dorcas goes down to make a supper for her, Credo and their guest. She pours a glass of wine for each of them.

She can dimly hear Violet telling the children about the Man in the North Pole. “What puts out fire, but water? What dries up water, but fire?”

“Tell him to give her a kiss!” The children say in unison. They sound totally enthralled in it.
“So the wind fairy takes Nero and Kyrie home and they say to the Prince and Princess – “

“Tell him to give her a kiss!” they squeal. “What happened?”

“Well, Prince Fluvius leans in and Princess Pyra leans in and she gives him a big kiss and she tells him she loves him – “

“Did he kiss her back?”

“He does and they get married within the year. Nero and Kyrie get to go to the wedding and they live happily ever after,” says Violet and makes to get off the bed and tuck them in.

“You haven’t finished,” says Kyrie, confused.

Violet looks as confused as she does.

Credo steps in, “And they lived together, and they had children together, and the tale is finished. Now, both of you, lie down and go to sleep.”

“Will she give a us another story tomorrow?”

“Bed!” Credo’s voice is stern, but his face is kind.

Violet leans around the back of him and nods theatrically to the children. Credo pretends to not see her.

They giggle and settle down, cuddling in to each other.

Credo turns out the light and they sneak away downstairs. He’s seen the supper his mother has laid out and allows himself a small smile at Dorcas’ blatant machinations.
“I’ll be getting on now. I only came over to get my papers signed,” says Violet, looking about for her bag. “It was fun though.”

“Please, Violet, never feel that any time in my company is ever an imposition.” Credo’s quick to reassure her. “I should sign every missive in Fortuna were it to result in a day such as this one.”

“I did need the undertaking signed, but yeah, I admit it, it was just an excuse,” admits Violet. “I didn’t know how long it was going to take you to make a move, with all this Jane Austen crap.”

Credo doesn’t answer her in words. He places a staying hand on her arm, putting just enough pressure on Violet’s arm to turn her to face him. She allows it, turning her face up to his as he steps closer. Credo gives her plenty time to step back, walk away as his other hand comes round to gently cup her face.

He takes a moment to drink in her face, hair in a messy ponytail, waving down her back and her face tanned and her wine-dark eyes shining. Her lips fall open slightly as she licks them.

Credo closes his eyes as their lips meet. He kisses her gently, aware of what she’d told the children regarding her shattered jaw. Her mouth doesn’t open far, but he works with what he’s got, following Violet’s example and concentrating on her lips. He can’t slip his tongue behind her teeth and she can only tease the tip of her tongue through the small gap enforced by the bands, but it’s enough.

Somehow, a physically enforced limit is more erotic, forcing both to be more creative. Violet’s had more practice at this than Credo has, but he follows her lead, swirling his tongue around the tip of hers, like they’re waltzing.

He licks up underneath her lips as she steps up against him, arms wrapping around his back. The feel of Violet full against him just gets Credo right there and for the first time in – months? years? – he can feel his dick start to strain against his trousers, just from a kiss.

The little tip of Violet’s tongue licks the underside of his and he groans against her lips, hands finding their way to her hair and running along her back. He kisses just a little harder, but lets his hands carry on caressing her and his tongue play with hers.

Dorcas calls them for supper, smiling more approvingly than most other mothers would be if they caught their sons kissing strange women on their staircases. “You’ll be hungry after all that…sea
Credo breaks the kiss reluctantly, neither moving for a while as they both catch their breath.

“Do I meet your approval, Sir?” she breathes against his mouth, Shiraz eyes gazing into his Wedgewood blues. She can feel his cock straining against his crotch and held tight between them.

“Always,” he whispers.

He knows. Those were the very same words she’d said to him when he first kissed her, when she was but four and ten and his heart was lost.

*The Heart knows the Truth.*

Violet pulls back and looks at him, then down the stairs and then back at Credo. There’s a surprised look upon her face. “Dorcas Micellef? Dorcas Micellef is your mum?”

“Well, yes,” he replies, confused.

Violet squeals. “Oh my God. Oh my God! Why didn’t you say? She’s only the reason I came to Fortuna!”

“I-I don’t follow…”

“Oh, my God. I can’t believe it!” she looks delighted and Credo can’t help but feel a little put out he’s in competition with his *Mama.* Sparda’s Balls!

Violet breaks fully away from him, looking positively thrilled. “I met your mum at an Alternative Science Conference Umbrella held last year. She was awesome, talking about time dilation and particle colliders and alternate dimensions. We got talking about the biology of interdimensional beings, ghosts and aliens and she told me about Fortuna and I was desperate to come here and she said she didn’t deal with it, but she’d speak to the right people and oh my God, Dorcas Micellef is your mum!”
She actually does a little dance on the stairs, before running down to talk to Doctor Micellef.

Credo looks after her in askance. Empty Night, he’s been cuckolded by his own *Mama*.

“Come in, sit down,” says Dorcas warmly. “I apologise if I was offhand with you earlier. It’s been a most trying day. Also, you seemed familiar and I was trying to place you. Now I’ve heard you with Credo, I do. Thank you for the card. It was lovely.”

“I’m glad you liked it.” Violet sits down at the table as Credo comes in behind her, just a little deflated. “I just wanted to let you know I appreciated you dropping words in the right ears.”

“Nonsense, Violet,” scolds Dorcas. “Your own talents would have led you here soon enough. Perhaps the Saviour engineered our meeting so that you would already have a friend in this place.”

She glances over at Credo. “And t’would seem you’ve made more than a friend already.”

Violet laughs that raucous, genuine laugh and even as he’s blushing, Credo can’t help but return it.

“I really hope that I get the chance to work with you, at least a little,” says Violet as Dorcas sets out a simple supper of soup and bread. “Even though our areas are so different.”

“Not so different. Credo, the Prayer of Thanks, if you will,” prompts Dorcas.

Violet’s quick to copy their clasped hands, even though she doesn’t join in their prayer.

Credo notices. “It would offend neither of us, should you wish to say a Catholic Grace, Violet.”

She crosses herself again.

“Now, let’s eat,” says Dorcas. “I also hope we can work together, because as you put it when we spoke at the conference, I deal with the nature of reality and you deal with creatures that break reality with a sneeze.”

“Oh?” asks Credo.

“I study what could be termed demons, but in terms of Xeno – and Astrobiology.” Violet soaks each piece of bread in her soup before spooning it carefully into her mouth. “I’m also interested in the practical applications of the research. I was at the Raccoon City facility with Marianna – she’s my sister from another mister – but I don’t really like it there. I miss the Med. I miss the sunshine and the history and I miss the sea.”

“Sounds like witchcraft to me,” says Credo. “Something that is confusing to a layman,” he explains to her puzzled look. “I couldn’t imagine leaving Fortuna. I have been on the Mainland for…work and I can never wait to come home.”

“It’s all Greek to me,” she quotes. “Except I can understand Greek. I have a knack for languages.”

“We say that too,” he replies. “Alas, I’m my Papa’s son more than my Mama’s when it comes to the sciences or indeed other matters.”

“Oh, I take it you look more like your dad?” asks Violet.

“Indeed he does,” says Dorcas. “Handsome fella, is he not?”

“Mama!” protests Credo.

“I was talking about your father,” she replies.

Violet’s trying not to laugh.
“So who do you look like, Violet?” asks Dorcas.

Credo can’t miss the dark look that briefly crosses her face.

“Mama! Don’t pry, or we might think that you’re trying to see what your future grandchildren might look like,” Credo says as he scolds his mother, but Dorcas is unabashed.

“I’m completely trying to see what my future grandchild will look like,” she retorts. Turning to Violet, she continues,” He’ll be divorced soon, so best be quick.”

Violet does laugh at this as Credo drops his face into his palms.

“Just as well I like kids,” she grins, “though I was hoping to wait a few years before I had any.”

“Well, there’s two up there you can practice on,” says Dorcas. “They’ll be more than happy to have you left to their tender mercies.”

“Credo says he’s adopting Nero. I’m surprised that’s allowed,” says Violet.

“Why would it not be allowed? The child needs a home and Credo can give him one,” says Dorcas sharply.

“I don’t mean anything by it,” says Violet, quickly. “Just where I come from, men aren’t usually allowed to adopt children they aren’t related to or don’t already know.”

“But there are so many children in need of a loving home,” protests Credo. “To prevent adoption on the basis of gender denies a child that simple security.”

“I guess it’s a cultural thing,” says Violet, smoothly. “I’ll find so many differences.”

It seems to mollify them.
Dorcas pats her hand. “Don’t worry, hanini, I’m sure that Credo will help you navigate them.”

The way she says it has Credo dropping his head on the table with a thump that makes the crockery jump.

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Credo walks Violet as far as the DTA by the docks. He’d walk her all the way home, but she’s going to meet her friends in a club. He’s trying to clamp down on his jealousy, but the thought of those Ħara in the clubs with their hands on her is almost more than he can bear.

He only has to wait a week and then her friends will be gone, onto new jobs and new lives. Violet’s just the first one of their group to be away.

They stop on the edge of the Blue Zone and he kisses her. “I wish I could come with you,” he says, leaning his forehead on hers.

“You should, you might enjoy it,” she says, kissing him again.

“I’m working tomorrow. Perhaps in a few days, when I have a day off,” he offers, though he has no intention of actually going through with it.

“You’re 22,” he says incredulously. “How many mothers have you met?”

“A few,” she says, coquettishly. “Up to you to make sure Dorcas is the last.”
He’s got no defence against *that*, so he kisses her and watches her skip off into her alien world.

It’s then, he thinks later, that he realises that his prayers have been answered. Not in the way he thought they be answered. But answered nonetheless.

But really, when are they ever?

*Our Lord Sparda, Protector of the Weak, Liberator of the Oppressed, bring her back to me. Please bring her back to me. I beg You. Please.*

*Please.*
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

150 kudos? 200 comments? Oh my giddy aunt xx

I love you all. I love how considered and thoughtful your comments are. You truly make me a better writer and this a better story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fortuna 15 years previously

Credo wakes up after the best sleep he’s had in ages.

He can hear Dorcas downstairs getting breakfast ready and the soft, deep drone of Alexander, so like his own. He thinks they must be discussing him and his actions yesterday as he’s sure he’s heard his name and Nero’s brought up. He hears Violet’s name mentioned and Dorcas’ voice gets harder and sharper, cutting across Alexander.

Reluctantly, Credo drags himself out of bed and pulls on his uniform. He doesn’t bother with a shower as he’s going training later. He drags a brush through his long hair, before tying a ribbon round his ponytail.

Credo’s always a particular man, but he makes an extra effort this morning, ensuring he’s shaved himself as smooth as a maiden’s cheek. He hisses as he pats on some cologne, but as he looks into the mirror, he’s pleased with what he sees.

His chain sits outside his shirt as he’s not done up the top buttons, rings resting against the fabric. Because of its size, Verity’s ring usually slides inside his, slotting neatly inside him the way she never did once that Hell-cursed Son of Sparda appeared on the scene.

Credo fingers her ring, the one that still would have been on her finger while she was downstairs making breakfast and joking with Mama, Shiraz eyes sparkling in the soft morning light as she chivvies Nero to get ready for school, Charlotte – he would have called their daughter Charlotte – ganging up with Kyrie to pull Nero into some childish tomfoolery.
It’s an old familiar anger, particularly coming up on the anniversary of his ill-fated nuptials. *Hell curse you and Mundus take you, Peter Falzon and Vergil Sparda. I’d still be married if it wasn’t for you bastards and I wouldn’t be fighting off a Courting Suit from one of the nastiest bitches in Fortuna.*

“Credo?” The small voice cuts across his reverie.

He turns to see Nero skulking shyly in the doorway and realises how he must look to the little boy. He smiles and his severe features soften. This is a new day and Nero’s presence in his bathroom is proof of Credo’s fresh start.

“What is it, son?” He asks, seeing that one small word change the whole set of the boy’s shoulders.

“Dorcas says your breakfast is out.” Nero pauses. He looks hopeful. “Are you going to see Violet again?”

“I’m seeing her for lunch and she’s coming over later to see you and Kyrie,” replies Credo. “Are you hoping for ice cream again?”

Nero nods. “And a story.”

“We’re going to the beach, so that we might find you another shell,” says Credo.

“Can we have a picnic?”

“I believe that was the plan,” smiles Credo, ruffling Nero’s hair. The boy squirms and bats his hand away, before running downstairs yelling to Dorcas that Credo’s coming.

Credo puts his chain carefully back under his shirt, buttoning it up enough that it won’t fall free again unless he draws it out himself.

*Thank you Lord Sparda, for returning her to me. Thank you, Lord, for giving me my family back. Thank you, Lord, for bringing Vee home.*
It’s a day for new prayers.

“Lord Scerri’s here!” Nero yells up.

Credo pulls out the chain, the rings falling heavy against his collarbone. *Lord Sparda, don’t desert your loyal servant in his hour of need.*

Credo strolls through to the kitchen, features schooled into something like deference.

Supreme General Scerri is sitting at his Mama’s table, cheerfully listening to Kyrie tell him about her plans for Nero’s room and she’s got another ready-made big brother to boss about.

“You mean take care of,” Alexander corrects her.

“No, boss about, Papa. Mama’s right. You’re all so useless, unless we tell you what to do, you would never get off your asses,” Kyrie says in all seriousness.

“Kyrie!” snaps Alexander. “Dorcas, what nonsense are you filling our daughter’s head with?”

“Hush, now, Captain Micellef, you’d rather she was Missish? You’ll lead the young man who lands you a merry dance before he tames you,” chuckles Lord Scerri.

“Credo says the point is not finding the man to tame you, but finding the man who’ll run wild with you,” Kyrie says earnestly. Credo is the centre of her world, perhaps more so than Mama and Papa.

“Credo is indeed wise,” agrees Lord Scerri. “Wisdom gained from experience is precious indeed.”

“How is His Holiness, My Lord General?” asks Credo, passing a bowl of porridge to both children. He automatically holds Kyrie’s hand for her, as she’s still not quite steady and Dorcas won’t want it dropping all over her clothes, even though she is wearing a towel as a bib.
“Alas, his health continues to suffer, dear boy.” Lord Scerri accepts a cup of tea from Dorcas.
“Thank you, Madam Micellef. Captain Falzon fears that he has weeks left and I doubt that he will see Midwinter Night.”

“That serious, My Lord?” Credo wipes Kyrie’s nose, as her toddler co-ordination has sent her spoon up her nostril.

“I think the best we might hope for is a smooth succession for my position.” Lord Scerri carefully avoids the little girl reaching for her sippy cup. Nero passes it to her.

“You intend to run for Sanctus, My Lord?” asks Dorcas.

“I think it would be prudent, Madam, but I need to be sure that the Knights have a good leader to run for Supreme General.” Lord Scerri sips his tea. “There are several candidates, however, so I know whomever is elected, I leave the Knights in safe hands.”

“I imagine that is a relief for you, My Lord,” says Dorcas.

“A pity you’re not older, Credo, you’d be ideal. You’ve already considerable combat experience, popular with your men, solid Old Family background and your loyalty beyond question.”

“You flatter me, Lord General,” says Credo. “Will Captain Falzon follow you to your new position?”

“I feel, as does Peter, that he will serve the Order best if he remains with the Faith Committee,” replies Lord Scerri. “He told me to give his regards to you all, but I imagine he’ll see you later. I know he appreciates your current actions towards him.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, Lord General.” Credo can’t help but glance at Nero.

Scerri catches it, because of course he does. “Walk me to my car, Credo. Captain Micellef, if you will allow us a moment.”

Scerri bows to the table, making an exaggerated bow to the children. Dorcas shoves Kyrie out her
chair, Nero following as they bob bows and curtseys with their hands clasped in front of them. “Saviour be with you!” they repeat in their singsong voices.

Scerri ruffles Nero’s hair, Dorcas catching the boy’s hand before he can knock Lord Scerri’s away.

Lord Scerri chuckles. “Quite a scamp you’ve got yourself there, Credo.”

“That’s a fact for sure, Lord General,” says Credo, as he walks out with Lord Scerri. He braces himself for what’s coming next.

“Well, Credo, care to explain why I had the Leader of the Families Committee on my doorstep last night?”

“I imagine he was acting on a complaint from the Matron of the children’s home,” replies Credo, matter of factly.

“Indeed, Credo. I understand your concern for the boy, particularly when I’m told you’ve put in Wardship papers for him,” Lord Scerri pauses for a moment. “But there are processes to undergo and you abused your position –“

He holds up his index finger to silence the protest Credo is about to make.

“Whatever the truth of the matter is, you had no right to remove the boy from her care, particularly given the contentious nature of your relationship with her,” states Lord Scerri. There’s no anger or irritation in his voice, merely disappointment, like Credo should have known better.

“I’m not returning him, My Lord. His place is with me and my family. It should break my Mama’s heart if he were to be taken from her care,” says Credo, trying to keep the fury out his voice and keep it quietly neutral.

“The regrettable circumstances that kept him from your care in the beginning were indeed unfortunate,” replies Lord Scerri. “But I can’t think to punish the lad for your rashness, though the charges cannot go unanswered.”
“It’s a matter for the Families Committee, surely?” says Credo.

“The new Leader of the Families Committee is to be General Chetcuti, rather than General Agius. The Executive is beginning rearranging the membership of the Committees now so that the transfer of power goes smoothly.” Lord Scerri pauses. “I do not imagine you would wish your case to come before him. I can override the Committee by making it a Courts Martial.”

Credo says nothing as he looks back to the house where his Mama is steadying Nero’s hand to help Kyrie eat. Both children are wearing more than they’re eating.

The younger man closes his eyes and swallows as he realises he’s been backed into a corner. He can see several ways this is ending and none of them are good. His rings catch the light and for a moment, Scerri is blinded by them, the small one sitting inside the protective circle of the larger ring. It’s the small one that’s reflecting the most.

“As I said, Credo,” says Lord Scerri, perhaps a little more sharply than he intended. “I shan’t punish the boy for your well-meant, if misguided actions nor condemn you too harshly. I’m to tell you that Lord Agius has arranged a small party this afternoon to introduce your new lady to some of the executive ahead of next week’s Ball.”

Credo must look surprised, because Lord Scerri continues. “Peter tells me she’s ideal for our purposes.”

“So it would seem, My Lord,” replies Credo, trying to stop his hand going to his rings, heavy around his neck. “It’s most thoughtful of Lord Agius to consider her. Will Peter be there, if it’s at the General’s house?”

“He has found an errand to run that will sadly keep him from the soiree,” says Lord Scerri. “But it’s perhaps best given the state of affairs between himself and young Lady Agius. I see no reason why anyone should be put in the middle, when the arrangement is working out to the satisfaction of all concerned.”

“Which of the Executive will be there, My Lord?” asks Credo. He’s suddenly worrying about the Callejas or the Chetcutis being there. Whilst Lady Kristina can’t come at Violet directly, once she becomes a Member of the Order or a Fortunese Citizen, she’s subject to very different laws and she is at risk from a spoiled, vindictive and very well-connected woman. Given Violet’s bullishness, he worries she’ll walk into a trap that’s beyond his ability to protect her.
The thought of what might happen then makes his blood run cold. He can’t lose her again.

“I honestly couldn’t say. I’m merely relaying a message as I was coming to see you anyway,” replies Lord Scerri. “Though I have heard of the gelateria events. It’s not lost on me that it would be prudent bring her under your protection as quickly as possible.”

Credo knows exactly what he’s being told, no ordered, to do and he can’t help himself unconsciously fingering the rings. “It will enable our Special Projects to proceed poste haste the sooner she’s fully on board.”

Credo doesn’t say that Violet is even more obstinate than the woman whom she’s replacing. It’s not lost on him that Verity would have had the Special Projects role they hope to bestow on Violet.

“Won’t stop the dissolution of my marriage, but a new companion will block Kristina’s Compel,” muses Credo, keeping his misgivings to himself. His rings chink quietly. “Particularly if I can quickly move her to Ladybird or Left Hand Wife status.”

This seems to satisfy Lord Scerri. “I look forward to meeting her, then.”

It’s a day for new prayers.

New prayers for old enemies.

***

She’s back there, in that room, the man in the shadows with the soft voice trying to hold back his tears as he tries to feed her soup she can barely get down.

“You keep. Telling me. You love me.”

She’s in agony, can hardly breathe through the pain.

“Hush,” he tells her, trying to soothe her. “You need to keep your strength up for the baby.”
Her face is cut, her body’s broken.

“I’m not asking. For me. For my baby.”

Tears are running down her cheeks again.

The words make barely any sense through her shattered jaw. She has to sit up to breathe and the blood bubbles out her nose.

“Please don’t try to escape again, I can’t stop him.”


Voices at the door and they haunt her, awake or asleep.

“…move her again…”

“…he’s tearing up the Island looking for her…”

“…break her fucking legs if she tries to escape again…”

“Well, you’ve already broke her arms,” snaps the soft voiced man to the one outside the door.

“Is she ready yet? I’m ready if she is.”

Violet’s propelled out her bed so hard, she smacks into the wall. It’s the pain in her face that brings her round, where she’s hit it. It’s so great she vomits over herself, choking as the acrid liquid’s caught in her mouth. She lies on the floor, curled around herself, just about remembering to pull her cheek away from her teeth to let the fluid out.
She barely registers the sensation of her hair being gently stroked.

*Vee sabiha*

***

Peter sits with Violet’s file. Dorcas was right.

*She is perfect.*

He has her photo off to the side and the last photo he has of Verity Agius, at her wedding to Credo. He compares them periodically. There’s definitely a resemblance, but not enough, but at the same time *just* enough.

He lifts the phone and calls the first school Violet Alighieri says she was educated at.

He checks his watch and then recalls, Credo won’t be bringing Josh over today, because of the party. He channels his anger into the matter at hand.

“How perfect are you, Alchemist Alighieri? Let’s see.”

***

Credo bangs on the door, calling for Violet. It’s strange, because she’s not the kind of person to stand someone up when they’ve an arrangement.

He lifts up the flap of the letter box and calls through. “Violet? It’s Credo!”

He listens for a moment, thinking he can hear sobbing. His heart stops and looking around, he takes out a lockpick. It’s shocking how quickly he gets the lock opened and he makes a mental note to raise it with the owner of the house.
“Violet! Violet!”

He goes round all the downstairs rooms, anxiety growing all the while.

He can still hear the sobbing and he thinks it’s coming from upstairs. He mentally works out what room she’d stuck her head out when he’d first gone to the house and which door it’s likely to be.

He tries her door and it opens with a squeak. The smell of vomit and sweat hits him hard.

“Violet, it’s Credo. Where are you?”

That’s when he sees her, a pale ghost lying on the carpet.

“Nine Hells! Who did this? Let me check you!” He’s at her side in an instant, moving back the thick waist length hair from her face, glad he’s wearing his gloves as some of it is resting in the pool of vomit in front of her. *They’ll be going out*, he thinks absently.

He sees the livid bruise over her eye and cheek and the wet pool next to her face. Gently, he sets her upright. “What happened, *it-teżor tieghi*?”

She looks at him like he’s a stranger for a moment and there’s a flash of pure terror in her eyes. It’s gone as fast as it came, a blank look coming over her as he wipes the tears from her cheek. “Fell. Hurts.”

Credo looks around to see what made her trip, but there’s nothing. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Where’s the bathroom?”

“Dunno.”

She’s looking at him strangely, like she doesn’t recognise him or where she is.

“Let’s get you standing up and we’ll find the bathroom,” says Credo, gripping her upper arms and pulling her up with him as he stands.
She’s like a new-born foal as she stands, looking down at herself in confusion. “Not broke.”

It slurs together as one word, *nobroke*.

“Works.” She takes a halting step with Credo and he curses her height. It would have been easier if she were smaller, but he manages. He thinks there’s a bathroom along the hallway.

“Come on, let’s get you in a bath. Maybe wake you up a bit.” Credo thinks he knows what it is, night terrors or somesuch. Nero has them too.

“Not there. I’m here. You’re here too. No there.” There’s almost recognition in her eyes, but there’s no awareness.

“You’re not there. You’re safe. Safe now.” Credo prays he’s saying the right thing as they totter towards the bathroom, Violet’s legs giving out several times.

“You stopped him?”

“I stopped him.”

“Imsafe?”

“You’re safe.”

They make it to the bathroom and Credo manoeuvres her into the bath, turning on the tap and dropping some fizzy balls into the water. He leaves her in her tunic and drawers. She can take them off when she comes round.

The door bangs and Marianna calls out for her. “Why’s the door open? Violet?”

“Up here!” shouts Credo.
“Alright, alright, I lose my bet – what the fuck?” Marianna looks at Credo like she’s going to do damage.

“We were meant to be having lunch, but she wasn’t answering the door. I found her on the bedroom floor.” He pauses, trying to think of exactly the right word. It’s not one he uses often in any language and the one he would use has different connotations in Fortuna to Italy. “Possessed? Confused? I’m sorry-“

“Dissociated.” Marianna finishes for him. “Like she doesn’t know who or where she is, but she’s not where she expected?”

“Exactly.”

Nodding, Marianna reaches over and helps the drowsy woman to undress. “You can stay or I can take it from here.”

Credo sees it for the test it is. “I’ll stay. If this happens on a regular basis, I’ll need to know how to deal with it.”

Marianna nods, but she looks annoyed. “Is that my bath bombs?”

“Probably. I’m sorry. I’ll replace them.” He looks at Violet staring at the fizzy water like it’s going to eat her.

“Damn straight you will,” replies Marianna. “What has she told you?”

Credo takes off his gloves and jacket and picks up the showerhead, making sure the water’s right. “Shall we sort that hair?”

Violet looks at him and he thinks he can see some recognition in her eyes. “If you here, am I there? I don’t want soup.”
“No, you’re here, we’re both here. And you don’t eat soup in the bath.” He begins wetting her hair. “She told me she’d been in a car accident several years ago.”

“Fucking hell. She’s an idiot. I know why she’s doing it, but she’s only storing up problems for herself.” Marianna passes him the shampoo. “I’ll be gone in ten days. I won’t be able to talk her down off ledges.”

“You disapprove of her coming here?”

“Yes! I mean, you seem like a great guy and all, but…” Marianna’s voice trails off. “You cannot tell her I’ve told you. You’ll need to let her tell you.” She looks back at the dazed young woman allowing Credo to wash vomit out her hair. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Credo plays with Violet’s hair, under cover of rinsing out the shampoo. She’s actually starting to relax and push into his touch. “Vee?”

“Not my name. I’m Violet,” she replies robotically. “My face hurts. Did I dream again?”

Credo stutters for a moment as her dark hair is pulled back from her left shoulder, showing a scar that resembles a shark bite. Marianna comes back in the bathroom, hiding a journal behind her back. She nods. He notes the journal and makes up his mind to look at it later.

“You did. I found you on the floor,” he replies, gently. “Do you have night terrors?”

“Yes. I can sometimes take off running or hit people, if I’ve had it really bad. I must be more stressed out with this move than I thought.” Violet looks down at herself. “Did you strip me?”

“I’m only helping you win your bet.”

“She told you?” it’s said quietly and matter of factly. Violet sounds very, very tired and her flippancy has deserted her. “Cow. How did you know about night terrors?”

”My ward has them. The little blond boy.”
“Oh.” Violet pushes her hair out her face. “I like this bath. I don’t want to get out. Is that Marianna’s bath bombs?”

“It is. She’s not amused.” Credo smiles as he catches her hand. He sees mouthwash on the side and passes it to her as she currently looks like a bulldog chewing a wasp. “You cascaded.”

She frowns at the archaic word. It’s the same more or less across all three of her main languages and she’s pretty sure she doesn’t know how he’s using it. “She treats them like they’re gold dust.”

“We can call off lunch, if you prefer,” he offers. “I had wanted to introduce you to some people, but they’ll understand, if you cry off.”

“I’ll be fine. I just need to get myself together. Can you bring my potions up? Do you need the combination?” She asks, sliding down in the water.

“I can recall it,” he replies. “I won’t be long, težor.”

Credo closes the door and goes quietly to her room. He sits on the bed and reads the diary she keeps, the writing achingly familiar. He has very little trouble reading it. He still has the letters she wrote to him before...before.

There wasn’t a car crash.

There was never a car crash.

There’s only the nightmare of the last ten days of her life and the constant struggle to remember past them.

The fear of what could happen if she does.

By the Saviour, it is Vee, it is.
He already had the proof of her pressed against him and how no other woman made him react the way she always did, but now he’s actual, written proof in her own hand.

Credo’s heart soars for a moment, then drops as he realises, that, yes, Verity is right to be afeared.

Peter Falzon believes her dead. So does Vergil Sparda.

_This time, Vee, I’ll keep you safe. I won’t fail you again._

“Hey, slow coach! Where’s my pills? I’m dying here!” she yells from the bathroom.

“Have patience, trezor, I’ll return anon!” he calls back.

_I’ll keep them safe, Lord Sparda. Grant me that. Let me keep…_

“Today!?”

_Let me keep her._

***

“Thank you for your time, you’ve been very helpful.” Peter puts the phone back in its cradle, a thoughtful look on his face. He makes some notes on his personal headed notepaper with his beautiful fountain pen.

There’s the picture of a plane that Josh had drawn for him caught up in the bundle and he smiles as he looks at the two signatures on it. Josh has signed it the way he’s been taught in nursery, _Josh Agius 4 años_, insisting that Peter sign it as well, _Peter Falzon 31 años._

He looks at his list, each school and contact noted. Not a single one has her registered as a pupil.
Just university now, because how in all the Nine Hells did this non-existent woman pull the wool over Umbrella-Ouroboros, specifically to come here?

And more importantly, why?

There’s a cough and his Assistant is before him. “Master Captain?”

“Yes, Knight Calleja?”

“It’s almost time for lunch at General Agius’ house. Shall I bring the car round?” asks the young Knight. He’s the youngest Calleja brother and they see big things for him. As long as he keeps away from that Tourist he thinks nobody knows about and accepts the Courting Suit his Father will make next year when the Chetcuti cousin comes out.

“No. I have business on the Mainland. Book me a cabin on the ferry and a room for a few nights, Book me a car. I’m going to go home and pack. I have a phone call to make first though. Leave me be for a few minutes. I’ll be out directly.”

“Very good, Master Captain,” says the young Calleja, bowing as he leaves the office.

“Hello, I’m calling to check the veracity of the credentials of someone who wants to work in my company, could you put me through to the right person? Peter Falzon, thank you, I’ll wait.” Peter presses a button on the phone and calls his house. “Maris? Pack a travel bag for a week. Clear the second bedroom down to basic furniture. I’m of a mind to redecorate it more suitable for a child. Yes, hello? The name? Violet Alighieri, studied Biology to Masters level and was sponsored by Umbrella.”

He waits while the person on the other end checks the records. She comes back on and in clipped Italian, confirms that, yes, a student of that name, in the time given, did achieve a Distinction in their Masters Degree in Biology, did contribute to various journals and studies for innovative work in Astro- and Xeno- biology and was sponsored by Umbrella. No, she was not going to give out any further details over the phone. He could put them in writing on company letterheads and they would respond to his query.

Peter thanks her for the information and circles the University. He’s thrown by this last revelation, that she actually did attend this establishment and achieve what she’s claimed, especially so young.
Just as well he’s going to the Mainland.

He takes Josh’s picture with him, setting it carefully in his briefcase.

***

It’s not exactly how Credo imagined he’d be spending part of the afternoon, sitting in Violet’s bedroom chair in his shirtsleeves like a libertine with his Jezebelle, discussing dresses in the yellow light from the bedside lamp. He’d turned it off when he went to get her medications, but she had turned it back on with a frown when they came back after her bath.

“I’ve got two wardrobes of clothes. I can’t understand how none of them are suitable.” She holds up a pair of palazzo pants in a dark purple and a black long top. She’s wearing only her underwear and it feels so natural and domestic that Credo isn’t embarrassed at all.

“Believe me, your clothes are lovely, but F-“

“-Fortuna’s more conservative,” she singsongs along with him. “I’ve had less problems in Arabia.”

Credo sighs, getting up and digging through the overstuffed wardrobes. He pulls out a plain purple cotton-jersey dress, Empire line, but fitted to her waist where it flares out over her hips into a half-full skirt that drops to just above her ankle. It’s got a scoop neck, so it hides the scarring and tattoos on her shoulder. The sleeves are to her wrists and close-fitting.

“My interview dress? Seriously?” She takes the dress from him, as he roots through her shoes. He can see her in the mirror eyeing up his backside and she seems to like what she sees. He comes out with some black leather dolly shoes.

“Perfect,” says Credo, approvingly. “Now make haste, so that I might dress your hair.”

“How can you do hair?” she asks, suspiciously. “Is that, like, a fetish?”

“I have a little sister. She’s vain.”
“She’s three.”

“She’s still vain.”

Violet dresses quickly and twirls for Credo.

He nods, pleased. “Now, your hairbrush, if you please and your pins.”

She sits down at her bureau and hands him a wooden brush and a basket of various hairpins, forks and sticks. Violet sees Credo’s doubtful look and laughs. “We’re going to have some fun.”

Sitting down behind her, Credo carefully works through the ends, brushing out the tangles, carefully, almost reverently, until he’s clear from root to tip. It’s clear he’s enjoying this as much as Violet. “I can’t believe it, you actually know what you’re doing. And you’re not weird about it.”

“I told you, I enjoy dressing hair and surely you won’t deny the pleasure it’s clearly bringing you, Violet,” he smiles, just a little provocatively, as he picks up three strands and begins to weave them into a French braid down one side.

Violet gives a little shiver as his breath brushes her nape and his voice is soft in her ear. She catches his eye in the mirror and winks at him.

Credo colours, but keeps talking, knowing exactly what he’s doing to her.

All too soon, he’s finished her hair and holds up a mirror to show her the result, a double French braid that he’s twisted and screw pinned into a bun that sits neatly upon the nape of her neck. Credo aims for a terrible French accent. “Madame approves?”

Violet checks it from several angles, before smiling and nodding. “Madame definitely approves.”

Credo picks up his jacket and adjusts himself so he’s as impeccably turned out as always. He offers Violet his arm and she takes it, allowing him to squire her through the town. They don’t turn the
table light off as they leave.

***

It’s only an hour’s walk to Top of the Town from Castleview and it’s a lovely late summer afternoon. They take their time, looking in shop windows, Violet being charmed by all the little shops, Credo buying her a pair of earrings she’s taken a fancy to. He helps her put them on, even though she’s perfectly capable of doing it herself, sneaking quick kisses pressed to the back of her neck, enjoying her mock-scandalised glances towards the shopkeeper, who’s doing her level best to ignore them.

Along the way, Credo fills Violet in on the long-standing friendship between the Agius and Micellef families and the various alliances and enmities between each Old Family. He doesn’t lie or hold anything back, but he doesn’t dwell on it either.

He’d rather just be honest and matter of fact, hoping that it will lead her to trust him quicker. He puts what he’s learned about her out his mind, reminding himself that she’s essentially a stranger to herself and any indication to the contrary will be noticed by those who pose the most danger to her.

He’s not losing her again. He’s not losing Nero. He’s not a frightened young man, coerced into… into…

He’s a Captain of the Holy Knights now and he’ll have the family he was promised, one way or another.

“So, this General Agius is actually your father in law?” Violet asks, breaking Credo out his musing.

“Not for much longer,” he replies. “The marriage would have been dissolved soon anyway. We’ve been separated with no children for years. I’m surprised I managed to fight it off this long. The rules are strict for Old Families and Order.”

“They don’t like you unmarried, then?” Violet fingers the earrings.

“Not really. Marriage is more about perpetuating lineages. Widows and widowers can’t be compelled to remarry.” He offers her a fig from the bag they bought in one of Fortuna’s fruiterers.
“You should maybe marry someone that’s going to die and then you’ll be fine,” says Violet.

“My sister-in-law suggested that, given that she has been given 6 months to live,” says Credo, matter of factly. “I proposed to one of my friends, in jest, but not really so much and she turned me down.”

“Why? I would have thought you’d have been snapped up,” says Violet. “Or have you got a deep dark secret or a weird fetish? Your wife didn’t run away, you murdered her and she’s buried in the basement?”

Credo nearly chokes and Violet offers him her bottle of Diet Coke, which even the Brown Areas have taken to selling. “Christ, I was joking.”

“Your perception astounds me. She’s underneath the Tenuta San Guido 1988.” Credo checks his uniform, but he’s not marked it.

“As long as it’s a good year,” replies Violet, a tad suspiciously. “So, weird fetish then?”

Credo laughs. “I -we -married far too young and I wasn’t about to repeat the mistake. And when all’s said and done, I did love her.”

“Do you still love her?” she’s just asking, but women can be funny, so Credo considers his next answer carefully.

“Do you have lovers who left an impression on you, so much so, the mark they left is part of you?”

“No.”

“You said that rather quickly,” says Credo.

Violet stops and faces him. “I’ve had a lot of lovers, Credo, male and female. I’m lucky if I remember half their names. But love? No. You’re the first time I’ve even thought about anything
beyond next week.”

“I’m truly honoured,” says Credo lightly and Violet giggles.

“It’s weird, right? I feel like I’ve known you for ages.” The confession has Credo lean in to kiss her, but Violet turns her head. “My face feels like I ran into a wall.”

He laughs and they’ve reached the gate of the Agius villa. He watches her as they go through the well-tended gardens and through the front door.

There’s no recognition in her eyes, merely admiration for the elegance of the house, typical genteel Mediterranean, old money and lots of it. Alice is slightly speechless as she opens the door to Credo with his companion, but she recovers quickly and announces them.

“Credo! Violet!” yells Nero from the landing, Josh and Kyrie standing on the steps. “Are we still having our picnic?”

He runs down the stairs and jumps into Credo’s arms. Credo catches him easily, making out that it’s a bigger effort than it really is.

“I’ll have Alice pack a picnic dinner for you. I’m sure Josh would love to join you,” says Pinny, leaning on her stick. The tumours in her bones make walking difficult. “He’s already pleased he doesn’t need to sit through a party with all these old fogies, with you and Kyrie to keep him company. Credo, introduce us.”

Credo makes the introductions, stuttering over them as he notices Edith on the arm of General Agius. She waves and speaks to Lord Agius, who nods and smiles in Credo’s direction. He tries to look at Credo’s companion without being too obvious, but Pinny is blocking his view.

Violet follows Credo’s formal bow. “It’s a beautiful house, Mi-Madam,” she says, stuttering over Fortuna’s strict titling conventions.

“Oh, don’t worry, they’re confusing even to us,” says Pinny. “Technically, I’m Lady Agius, because Papa is a Lord. Call me Pinny. Credo tells me you’re a scientist, come to work for Umbrella. That must be fascinating.”
Pinny draws Violet away from him and Credo’s alarm must show on his face, as Pinny looks back and laughs. “Credo, she’ll be safe with me. You mingle, I’m sure Papa will want to talk to you. I’ll bring her back when Lord Scerri arrives. I’m sure you’ll both want to talk to him.”

Credo bows, kissing Violet carefully on the cheek, before putting Nero down and bidding him to go play with Josh and Kyrie. He watches Pinny skilfully manoeuvre Violet where they can see and be seen, but aren’t likely to disturb Pinny if she feels she needs space. They aren’t likely to ignore Pinny or speak out of turn for fear of offending her.

Pinny was always better with people than Verity, who had the subtly of a boot to the head.

“Credo, man! What’s keeping you?” General Agius fair bellows from across the room. He hugs Credo as he comes over. “I’m hosting a party for you and you can’t even come over and talk to me!”

“Steady as she goes, Edward,” says Credo. “In your cups already?”

“No so you’d notice,” replies Lord Agius, and Credo realises the act is merely that, an act. “A Ladybird has landed on my stem. I think a man might enjoy her tickles.”

Edith glides over and embraces Credo warmly. “The bed’s not even cold,” he complains, mock annoyed. “I pray she doesn’t find you piss-proud, Edward.”

“For all the time you were ever in it, Credo,” she says as she looks over to Pinny and Violet. “Is that her? It explains so many things.”

“So, you’re fending off Lady Kristina with a Tourist?” comments Lord Agius, ever mindful of listening ears. “I love it. I bet she’s raging.”

“She is and Violet shows no fear in poking the tiger,” he says as he recalls Violet’s casual dismissal of her rival in every sense. “But I think Lady Chetcuti is the one who’ll feel the claws. My divorce hearing is set for next Thursday.”

“New Leaders will be in place then, but they won’t reshuffle for another month outside of that,”
says Lord Agius. “Thankfully, I argued the case not to be moved to the Executive. I have it in writing I’m remain with the Faith Committee.”

“Don’t you want to head up a Committee, Edward?” asks General Calleja, arriving with Cassius in tow. He bows to Edith. “And here’s the man of the hour. Your parents must be so proud and I couldn’t think of a better man for it. See Cassius, what happens when you apply yourself?”

“It makes a difference who you Assisted in your green days,” deflects Credo. “And I was lucky in that regard.”

“Weren’t you just?” mutters Cassius.

“No, Caesar,” replies General Agius. “I’m much happier where I am, in light of current events.”

He gestures to where Pinny is sitting with Violet, Cassius doing a double take, before shaking his head. “Edith got a sister? You do have a type, Credo.”

“Does he?” Dorcas’ voice comes from behind them. “If his type is tall and kind, rather than vindictive and rude, then yes, my son has a type. Hello, son,” she says, kissing Credo’s cheek.

“Hello, Mama,” he replies.

Edith bows her head at Dorcas’ statement. “You’re too kind, Dorcas.”

“Nonsense, Edith. Cassius, control your tongue and your time will come,” says Dorcas, soothing Cassius’ dented pride. “Besides, if Credo has a genuine companion, Lady Kristina has one less reason to refuse your Suit.”

“That’s true,” he says as he brightens.

“Damned if I don’t know why Chetcuti hasn’t got that spoiled little nightmare of his in hand yet,” grouses Lord Calleja.
“Because she’s the youngest child of his favourite wife. A man can dote on his daughter, in a way he can’t with a son,” says Dorcas.

“We all give our youngest more leeway than we should, don’t you think, Edward?” Lord Calleja slaps a hand over his mouth as he realises what he’s said.

“There’s truth in what you say, Caesar,” says Lord Agius, choosing to ignore the comment. “And it’s led to her thinking she can have anything she pleases, if she screams loud enough.”

They’re interrupted by Supreme General Scerri arriving and the conversation is lost.

Pinny’s sat with Violet at a window seat. There’s a low table in front of them and a selection of fans. “I thought you might not have one and it’s one of the things I did miss about here. You can signal so much with a snap of a fan.”

“It’s like Jane Austen,” says Violet, warming to Pinny. “Credo says you’ve been living in Spain. Would have thought you’d have seen plenty fans out there.”

“For the flamenco? I actually took classes for a while. My sister and I loved to dance.” Pinny looks a little wistful. “What about yourself?”

“I love clubbing, I’m glad I don’t have to give that up,” she replies in fluent, if accented, Spanish. “But I’ve never done ballroom dancing that I can remember and I think I’ll miss aerobics, unless they do classes here. But I’ve brought a Combi unit anyway.”

“Well, don’t let anyone see you with it, they’ll still try to report you for it,” warns Pinny, in Spanish, with a delighted smile. “Josh is finding the loss of a tv difficult.”

“Do you regret coming back?” asks Violet. Pinny has such an easy way about her, that it feels like they’ve always been friends.

“Of course I do. Who’d want to come back to this? Fortuna is a lovely place, but it’s needing dragged into the 21st Century.” Pinny hides what she’s saying with her fan. “But Josh needs his family.”
“Choose your poison, right?” Violet follows suit with the fan, aware that both young women are drawing considerable attention. They’re using Spanish, but Violet’s already catching on with Pinny’s subtle warning can’t be too careful in Fortuna.

“So where are you from? Credo tells me you studied in Rome at Tor Vergata,” says Pinny, taking a cake from the low table. There’s a selection of shortcrust and cream pastries, the kind which Violet could eat if she’s slow and careful. Violet is handed a plate and spoon and invited to tuck in.

“Thank you, how’d you know?” she asks, grateful, but surprised.

“Your fan club.”

“Credo?!”

“Nero and Kyrie, but especially Nero. Credo says he’s really taken to you, which is good, if you’ve taken to Credo how he’s taken to you. Instant family.” Pinny’s mouth is full of millionaires shortbread. “It’s the best thing about cancer. I can eat what I like because they genuinely are trying to fatten me up.”

Violet nearly chokes as she snorts with laughter. “Well, I hope it’s a while before you die, because I think we’re going to get along.”

“We’ll be like sisters in no time,” grins Pinny.

Almost on cue, there’s a yell of Violet! As Nero runs across the room and jumps on her knee. “When are we going for our picnic? I want to find a shell for my room now I’ve got my own!”

Violet gasps as he slams into her. “Take it easy there, toots. You’re like a mini tornado.”

“He’s normally a lot more reserved than this,” observes Pinny, as Josh and Kyrie follow a little more sedately, scrambling up in between Violet and Pinny. “Violet’s a bad influence on you.”

“She’s not! She’s not! Pinny, you take that back!” Nero’s yelling in Pinny’s face, shocking everyone as they turn to see what the commotion is. ”You take that back before they take her
away! I’m not going to let you take her away!”

“Hey, hey,” Violet says, pulling Nero back up onto her knee, ignoring everyone whispering and looking. “I’m not going anywhere, Pinny was just joking-“ Nero looks at Pinny, who nods “-so you don’t need to bawl and shout.”

Not really convinced, Nero does a sullen, if genuine apology. Pinny offers her hand for him to shake, showing him she’s accepted it. Violet cuddles Nero as he snuggles into her, the fight slowly draining from the child in a way he only does when he’s around the Micellefs.

“What’s funny?” Asks Pinny.

Violet’s giggling at the spider decoration on one of the cakes as she passes it to Kyrie. “My friends call me Spiderwoman, because I got out a speeding ticket by pretending there was a spider in my car.”

“What’s a speeding ticket?” asks Nero.

“It’s when the policeman stops you for driving too fast,” says Josh. “Only ambulances drive fast, right, Mami?”

Pinny kisses Josh. “Right, sweetheart. Don’t leave it there, Violet.”

“OK, I was in Raccoon City, at Umbrella’s Virology facility, in the US,” Violet begins. “And I was driving a little bit too fast and I pulled out to overtake a police car. They put on the blues and twos and pulled me over and I thought, I’m just gonna have to go for it, because if I’m pulling a stunt like that, then I’m pulling out all the stops.”

“Oh, yeah, you gotta play it like it’s real,” agrees Pinny, motioning Violet to carry on. She’s grinning.

“Well, I slammed my car to a halt and jumped out, screaming my head off about spiders coming down from the sun visor and trying to take my clothes off. It was winter so I had loads of jumpers and scarves and stuff on and I’m stripping off and screaming like a banshee about the spider in the car and they need to get it off me.”
She’s snorting as she remembers. “I run up to the male officer and he’s trying to put my clothes back on me and trying to calm me down, telling me the other cop is going to look in the car for the spider and I’m refusing to get back in the car until it’s definitely cleared and I’d screaming at him he needs to arrest me to get me away from the spider and I’m trying to climb into the back of the squad car half-naked and he’s trying to stop me and the other one’s looking all round the car and then she’s on the other side saying she’s got it and she’s stamped on it.”

“Aww. Poor spidah,” frowns Kyrie. “I don’t think you’re a pretty lady anymore, Vee.”

“It’s ok, sweetie, there wasn’t really a spider,” Violet assures the disapproving toddler. “I was just pretending. So she’s making a big deal about stamping on this spider and he’s showing it to me – it was too dark to see anything anyway – and I’m still crying about ‘is it really gone?’ and he’s sitting me in the car till I calm down a little. Just as they’re driving off, I could hear him say ‘why do we get all the crazies?’”

Pinny’s hooting with laughter as Credo comes over to find out what they’re laughing at.

“Violet took off all her clothes and lied to a policeman,” Kyrie helpfully supplies.

Credo snorts with laughter. “Well, I hope she doesn’t do that with me. At least not yet.”

“Will I need to?” Violet asks innocently.

Lord Scerri comes over to Violet and Pinny’s seat, waiting while Lord Agius takes a photo.

“That’s a sophisticated camera, you’ve got there, General Agius,” says Cassius, a little pointedly.

“Papa wishes to capture every moment,” says Pinny, sweetly. “As he has such a limited time to capture.”

Violet and Dorcas catch each other’s eyes and smirk at each other, Violet’s lips quirking off to the left. Credo starts to sweat, just a little. Surely someone’s going to recognise her?
Lord Scerri makes small talk with Credo and with Violet, discussing her research and her university career, admiring that she could continue when so badly injured. They talk for a while about how her research ties in with Raccoon City and how they might make use of her here – combining human and demon genetics and animating constructs. Pinny skilfully holds at bay questions that get too awkward. They’ve already noticed that Violet gets uncomfortable whenever anyone brings up her childhood or her family. She repeats what’s available in her file, but anything more than that, she doesn’t remember, due to the accident that killed her parents and, yes, she’s devastated that she doesn’t recall them. She has some mementos but not many,

“That’s a most unusual bracelet,” says Lord Scerri. He holds out his hand to see it. “Not the type, though it’s very traditional for one so young, but the design on it.”

“I was wearing it when the car crashed,” replies Violet, holding her wrist to herself protectively. “I’m sorry, I don’t take it off. I think it must be a family heirloom.”

Lord Scerri withdraws his hand, a gentle smile on his face. “Of course not. One’s history is precious, when one has so little of it.”

Credo sees the look on the older man’s face and realises there’s no way he’s getting custody of Nero. He doesn’t believe he ever really was.

Crestfallen, Credo glances back at his Mama and sees something in her face that he hasn’t seen for a very long time, not since Abigail Agius’ funeral. It’s gone as quickly as it came, but it chills Credo as much as he feels a cold satisfaction.

“It’s an interesting picture you’ve taken, Edward,” murmurs Lord Scerri. “One woman without a past, one woman without a future and the hope of Fortuna in their laps.”

No one else is meant to hear it, but Dorcas does and again, Credo catches that fleeting look on her face.

The last time he saw that look, someone died.

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She’s back there, in that room, the man in the shadows with the soft voice trying to hold back his
tears as he tries to feed her soup she can barely get down.

“You keep. Telling me. You love me.”

She’s in agony, can hardly breathe through the pain.

“How,” he tells her, trying to soothe her. “You need to keep your strength up for the baby.”

Her face is cut, her body’s broken.

“I’m not asking. For me. For my baby.”

Tears are running down her cheeks again.

The words make barely any sense through her shattered jaw. She has to sit up to breathe and the blood bubbles out her nose.

“Please don’t try to escape again, I can’t stop him.”


Voices at the door and they haunt her, awake or asleep.

“...move her again...”

“...he’s tearing up the Island looking for her...”

“...break her fucking legs if she tries to escape again...”
“Well, you’ve already broke her arms,” snaps the soft voiced man to the one outside the door.

“Is she ready yet? I’m ready if she is.”

“Godspit and fucking shit! Is there nothing you won’t stoop to?” the soft-voice man snarls.

“Well, she’s your fucking wife. Why can’t you do this?” he’s coming into the room.

“I can’t do it like this!” protests the soft-voiced man. “All we have to do is wait, she’ll go into labour soon.”

“I don’t have time to wait on her fucking schedule. She’s caused enough fucking bother. Time to make you a father.”

“Not like this, please!” He begs, he pleads.

The other man pulls open his fly.

“Let’s get this labour started, sabiha.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a quiet little chapter before everything kicks off in the next one, but I just love Baby Nero.

We'll be back at present day in about another two or three chapters, for those who are counting.

And er, the thing with the spider? Actually happened. I still cannot believe I got away with it.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rome, 15 years previously

Peter walks to his hotel room from the port. He’s always loved Rome and its history, so he’s going to take some time on this trip to see the sites. He’s dressed like the rest of the tourists, if just a little smarter, a white shirt with his jeans rather than a tee-shirt. He walks with a predator’s confidence and a criminal’s ability to spot trouble before it finds him.

Peter takes a break in a pavement café and watches the world go by, pulling the photo of the Agius sisters from his wallet. He has a photo of Josh to join it. It’s been taken in General Agius’ office, sitting on Peter’s knee, while they read a book about planes.

“Aw, what a cutie!” The American accent cuts across Peter’s reverie.

He looks up to see a tall, dark-haired woman standing by the empty chair at his table. She has a hand on it.

“You wish to share this table?” He asks, in English.

“Could I?” she asks, as she sits. “Your English is really good. Visiting the city?”

She gestures to his holdall.

“Yes, I’m here for business for the week, but I’m sure I’ll find some time for sight-seeing.” Peter sips his latte as the waitress comes back out with his lunch. “Can I get you anything? It’s on expenses.”

“I’m such a bad girl, but go on, then! I’ll have a cappuccino and a – what are you eating? It looks delicious.”
“**Involtini di salmone con mascalzone e senape,**” replies Peter. “I assure you, it **is** delicious.”

She nods and he calls the waitress over, giving the bored student the order.

“I’m Diane,” offers his companion. “I’m here on vacation. I’m meant to be here with a friend, but she bailed on me last minute.”

“Peter,” he replies. “How unfortunate, to be alone in the Eternal City.”

Diane looks at the photos that Peter has put down on the table, next to his salmon. “**Handsome boy. Yours?**”

Peter feels the swelling of the pride that comes with strangers admiring your offspring and it’s a novel sensation. He’s beaming and he can’t help it. “Josh. He’s four.”

“He’s got your smile, your mouth, I think,” says Diane.

“You’re too kind,” says Peter. “I confess, I don’t see it. Fortunately, he looks like his Mama rather than his Papa. If anyone, he looks like his maternal grandfather. He’ll be tall. His mother’s tall, nearly 5’11”. I’m only 5’8’ myself, so he’ll likely be taller than me.”

“Which one’s his momma?” Diane asks, picking up the bridal picture. There isn’t much between Pinny and Verity in that photo – Verity was already four months pregnant when that photo was taken and her face was filling out, easing out the angularity of her features. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear they were twins.

“Can you guess?” asks Peter, playfully.

Diane looks between Josh and the sisters. “Her,” she says finally, pointing to Verity.

“What makes you say that?” he asks.

“Well, you were spending an awful lot of time looking at her and isn’t that her photo up there?” she
queries, tapping Violet’s photo. She looks more closely at the photo. “It looks like that girl who was on the TV last night.”

Peter frowns and shakes his head. “I don’t really watch TV.”

“Oh, my God, you don’t know about her? They call her the Broken Mermaid. She washed up on the beach about five years ago – Christmas, I think it was – battered to death. Except she wasn’t dead, she started to moan. They rushed her to hospital and used a lot of fancy new science on her, like these Russian cage things on her arms and legs. She didn’t have any memory. She’s never been identified. I think it said in the report that she went to work for a big chemical company in the end. I can’t believe you really don’t know about her!”

“I recall hearing something about her at the time, but I had other things holding my attention,” says Peter. “I had a family emergency at that time.”

“You should look it up at the library,” continues Diane.

“I will,” says Peter. “It sounds a fascinating story. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to my work. Enjoy your salmon and please, have a dessert on me. This place has never disappointed me.”

He gives a small nod and pays the bill. His next stop after the hotel isn’t the library, but where Violet and her friends live.

Peter thinks for a moment, before coming back to Diane. He hands her the card of the hotel he’s staying at. “Should you wish some company for your trip, because I should certainly wish some on mine,” he says, kissing her hand delicately.

Diane looks charmed, as he’d intended.

“And if not, I enjoyed our lunch. Good day, Madam.” He places her hand delicately on the table, bows and walks away. He can see her staring after him in a shop window, until he’s out of sight.

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Peter leaves his bags in the hotel. He’s submitted a formal reference request to Tor Vergata University before he left and that will be waiting for him when he gets back to Fortuna. But that’s not really why he’s here and he knows the best way of getting a sense of Miss Alighieri will be to slide into her life, as much as possible.

He takes out Violet’s photo again and thinks of what Diane told him. If this Broken Mermaid and Miss Alighieri are the same person, then it would explain the lack of her past, but why lie about it?

He makes a list with the hotel stationary – Josh has his pen and got it all over himself. He wondered how Agius explained that to his daughter. He frowns at the roughness of the pen and pulls out one from deep within his case. It’s in an elegant white gold case with that locked heart design from his Courting Gift and engraved with ATA-PF and the date. Peter pushes up the lid and nestled in black velvet is a white gold pen, with the same design and initials. The inside of the box is engraved in Pinny’s handwriting, *May Your Words Be A Blessing On The World.*

“Much as I adore you, Josh, you don’t get this one till I’m dead.” He writes with it almost reverently. It’s a beautiful pen. He looks at the first thing on his list – the address of the girls’ flat in Rome. It’s his first stop for the day. He’s hoping it gives him some leads as to where he can look next. The Immigration List that Umbrella provides gives only the barest details and it’s all work-related.

***

Peter passes a bookshop that seems to be frequented by students, and those strange New Age-types with the piercings and the dreadlocks and the awful taste in music. On a whim, he goes in and asks about the books and articles Violet has written. The assistant is helpful and they find the books and three of her articles.

He buys a book about an aeroplane called Bungie that comes with a metal toy plane for Josh.

***

By chance, the apartment in Rome has a for sale sign on its window. It’s in a nice, if modern and soulless, block and Peter takes a chance and arranges a viewing, explaining that he’s on a limited timescale and asking if he could possibly be fitted in today. The Agent, Alessandro is around Peter’s age, but in a smarter suit. So he should be, for what they’re wanting for this flat. Peter thinks they’ll have to drop the price before they’ll find a buyer.
“Senor Falzon,” he greets Peter warmly. “I’m sure you’ll find this apartment everything a young professional like yourself will find he needs for a growing family.”

“I’m sure it is. It’ll have to be redecorated first and is that Blu-Tac the current residents have used?” Peter sounds as scandalised as he would have done if he’d found a giant shit on the living room floor. “And re-carpeted. What are those stains?”

“I believe the current tenants are university students. But let’s look beyond that, to what this place could be like. As you can see, the sitting room is generously proportioned, with large windows letting in a huge amount of natural light –”

Peter only pays Alessandro half an ear as they walk through the flat. The young women haven’t exactly wrecked the flat any worse than any other students and it’s nothing that re-carpeting and re-decorating won’t fix. There’s still posters on the walls, textbooks on the shelves alongside empty alcohol bottles and mugs with new lifeforms residing in them. There’s corkboards with pictures of the girls partying, messing about, studying and presenting papers. It reminds Peter somewhat of his Knight Training, which was more collegiate than people would think.

There’s a lot of news clippings about Violet.

“Ah, yes,” says Alessandro, seeing Peter looking at Violet’s photos. “There’s a high demand for this apartment, over and above its location. Our Broken Mermaid lives here or did. I believe she and one of the tenants have already moved on. The other two have decided not to get room-mates and plan to move out when they’ve been given their final assignments.”

“Oh?” Peter cocks an eyebrow while looking at the corkboards.

“I believe they’re all employed by Umbrella, but only two are scientists. I think the other two are legal or business graduates.” He indicates the photos and the textbooks, most of which aren’t science ones.

“If I could see the other bedrooms?” Peter prompts.

“Of course,” says Alessandro as he leads the way. Then his phone rings and he gives Peter an apologetic look as he leaves the room to take the call.
Peter sees his chance and takes several of the news clippings. He doesn’t think the remaining girls will notice. He thinks it’s probably just wall furniture that they no longer see.

And that’s when he sees it, under one of the other photos.

It’s a couple of strips of passport photos, like many friends and lovers will have done. In this case it’s the latter - two lovers, given that they’ve got their tongues down each other’s throats. One of them is clearly Violet Alighieri.

The other is one of the other women from the flat. She’s easily recognisable, as she’s Black.

Peter quickly tucks them into his pocket.

***

Diane has left a message for him when he returns to the hotel, inviting him for dinner at hers at 7pm. He leaves one for her accepting. He has time for dinner and a shower. He hadn’t realised how long it would take to get into Alighieri’s flat.

Peter pours some wine from the mini-bar as he gives the clippings a cursory look, picking up the history of the girl who’d risen from the dead to become Violet Alighieri. It’s interesting in its’ own right, but it’s the photostrips that’re interesting Peter.

It’s from several years ago, judging by Violet’s hair, which is in a shoulder length bob tied back with a scarf. Peter’s sure it’s in the style of some internationally famous singer, though he saw many young women and girls sporting such a style. The arms wrapped around the other girl, who’s channelling another famous Black singer, are held together by metal cages that appear to go right through the bones of her arms, one entering just above her distinctive bracelet. Violet’s jaw is bruised and swollen, held together with similar apparatus.

It’s not stopping them from kissing like only lovers do.

He wonders if Credo knows what his lover is. He doesn’t think so, Credo’s a good son of Fortuna and Peter can guess his reaction. He needs to make sure that the other man’s reactions don’t derail his carefully laid plans, nor the Plans of Lord Scerri.
He needs to get that taint removed from her soul before it infects Fortuna or the Order. He doesn’t trust that love is enough to conquer all.

***

Diane is already waiting for him in the bar when Peter arrives at five to seven. He chances a kiss to the cheek and isn’t surprised when she allows it. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“I wasn’t going to turn down such a charming man! I believe in taking every opportunity life throws me,” replies Diane. “Or I’d never do anything. How was your business?”

“Fruitful,” he replies, signalling to the bartender for two of what Diane’s having.

The bartender brings the drinks and Peter guides her over to a table. “You never said what you were doing in Rome. What business are you in?”

Peter pretends to take a sip of his rum and coke while he considers his reply. “I’m in security. My department is investigating a new hire.”

“Have they passed muster? Will they get the job?” she asks, leaning forward. Her wedding ring glints as she takes a drink.

“There’s some rough edges to smooth out, but I think our training programme will take care of that,” he replies, smoothly. “Does your husband know you’re drinking with a strange man in a strange city?”

“I doubt it,” she replies. “Stupid asshole died in a work accident a coupla years ago. His insurance left me better off than when he was alive. Your wife know you’re here, drinking with rich American widows?”

“I doubt she cares,” replies Peter. “We’re separated. Genuinely.”
Diane raises her eyebrows and Peter sees his in.

“She’s dying and I’m looking for a place to raise our son when she passes,” he says, without any artifice.

Diane’s face changes as she realises he’s telling the truth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be flippant.”

Peter shrugs. “I began it. And my concern is for my son, not my wife. Cold as that might seem, there’s nothing I can do for her, but ease her passing for Josh.”

“How long has she got left?” asks Diane.

“About a year, they think,” replies Peter. “Oddly enough, I was looking at an apartment today that apparently belonged to your Smashed Mermaid.”

“Seriously? What was it like?” she asks, sidetracked. “I can’t believe you seriously didn’t know about her.”

“Like I said, I had a family emergency at the time.” Peter takes a sip of his drink that’s a lot smaller than it looks. “My sister-in-law sadly passed in childbirth.”

Diane looks horrified. “That still happens?”

“Sadly, yes. She was very young – “

“How young?” Diane’s hand is on his.

“Too young. Sadly, her baby died with her.” He’s got her attention fully now. Time to redirect this conversation to where he really wants it. “Tell me about your Smashed Mermaid, as that story seems a little happier.”

“Well, she survived, for one thing and what that poor girl survived is anyone’s guess, but it was just horrible,” Diane says as she warms to her subject. “She’s known as the Broken Mermaid, but I
guess you could say Smashed as well. It wouldn’t be a lie.”

Peter makes an appropriately interested face.

“It was almost five years ago,” begins Diane and it’s clear she loves telling stories like this. “It was the day after Christmas and a local footballer had had an argument with his in-laws.”

“Not a problem either of us have,” notes Peter.

“Oh, tell me about it. My mother-in-law tried to sue me when Brian died to get me to move in with her and take care of her. She is a nightmare. Tried to say he was working at that plant because I had an expensive lifestyle and it was my fault he died!”

She looks scandalised.

Peter waits for her to continue.

“So he’s out running along the beach with his dog when they find a young woman’s body lying in the surf. He calls the police and at first they think it’s a murder. They cordon off the beach, right? Doesn’t stop the news crews.” Diane knows how to tell a story. Even Peter has to admit he’s enrapt.

“So they’re taking all the usual photographs and the forensics, turning the body this way and that, when it moans.”

“Death rattles are natural,” protests Peter. “It’s simply the expression of the final gases from the corpse. I’ve been around a few in my time,” he hastily explains. He doesn’t say he killed them.

“But it should stop, right?”

Peter nods.

“The body doesn’t, she keeps moaning, because she’s in agony. And that’s when they realise, she’s
still alive.” Diane pauses for emphasis, but Peter’s hanging on her every word. “And all this in front of the cameras.”

Peter can picture the scene - it’s Christmas, young woman, slow news night, beach covered in police and cameras. It’s a mystery that would have shot into the country’s conscious. It would have kept the papers going for weeks.

“There’s actual footage of the forensic team working, then suddenly everyone’s shouting and they’re running with a stretcher to the ambulance, because the ambulance couldn’t go on the sand and someone shouts to the news crews, she’s alive.”

Peter’s mind’s eye fills in the details of the hectic, suddenly hopeful scene. One minute it’s a murder and the next it’s a race against time to save her life. It’s a true Christmas miracle.

Now the newspapers have something they can dine out on for months.

“What happened then?” he prompts.

Diane is relishing her audience. “They get her to the hospital and she’s rushed right into intensive care. They’re still not sure they can save her – she’s lost nearly half her blood and every bone in her body is broken. But that’s not the worst part. Oh, no!”

She draws out the oh no.

Peter’s as engrossed in this telling as much as Josh is when he reads him a story about Knights or aeroplanes. It doesn’t stop the heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach, as he realises, it is technically possible for Violet Alighieri to be Verity Agius.

“What happened then?”

“Her face was smashed, so whoever tried to kill her had tried to stop her being identified!”

“That’s horrible!” gasps Peter. “So was she something to do with the Mafia?”
“I’m getting to that,” scolds Diane. He’s messing up her story.

Peter motions for another round as an apology.

“So some top Russian ortho…ortho..”

“Orthopaedic,” offers Peter.

“Bone surgeons are on vacation in Italy and when the Italian team get her stable, the Russians offer their help, because they’ve got all these new techniques that we don’t have, so they do that and they even bring in their own face surgeons –“

“Oral-maxillofacial?” He offers.

“How do you know the big words?” Diane slurs, slightly annoyed.

“I study everything and everyone,” he replies. He’s only now finishing his first drink, she’s halfway down her third.

“I guess you have to in your job.”

“Difference between life and death in my line of work,” he confirms.

“I can’t wait to hear more about it,” she says. “So they use all these new treatments on her bones and they fix her. They were talking about amputation, it was so bad. But they did these cage things on her arms and legs and saved them. Right through the bones and held them in place. Better than traction, so they say. They look at her case a lot on medical programs on the TV.”

“Truly a wonderful invention,” replies Peter. He’s going to study orthopaedic trauma reconstruction when he returns to Fortuna. If it can prevent disabling injuries in the Knights, he’s all for it. He’d rather retain their experience than have to train new Knights. He’s sure he might actually have read about it, but his library is so extensive, he’s not sure. He’ll look when he returns
“I’m getting there,” chides Diane. “So, once they get her stable – they set about trying to identify her. She’s still comatose. She was naked when she was found and the only jewellery she was wearing is an antique bracelet. She’s got scarring everywhere and a really bad shark bite on her shoulder. I never knew they have sharks in the Med.”

“Oh, yes,” confirms Peter. “We have Great Whites, among other things. Watch your toes when you’re scuba diving.”

Diane looks concerned. “I’m meant to be going wreck diving tomorrow.”

He doesn’t say that the amount she’s putting away makes it unlikely she’s diving anywhere but a toilet bowl. “So did they identify her?”

“No, but they found out that some of the breaks were healing when she was found. Some of the breaks where at least a week old.” He can imagine her reading a scandal sheet aloud in ever more salacious tones.

“No! So she was tortured?” Peter is appropriately horrified by this fact, at least for Diane’s benefit. “Was it the Mafia?”

“They actually put out a reward for information about her.”

“You jest, surely? Something like this offended the Mafia that much?” He’s had dealings with the organisation, amongst other criminal enterprises and while something like this might offend individuals on a personal level, on a professional level anything irrelevant to business is disregarded.

That said, sometimes Organisations decide that some good press is in order. Perhaps this was one of those times.

“It was Christmas, Peter! Throwing away a young girl like she was trash!” Diane retorts.
“So, how did they identify her?” Peter redirects her.

“They started by working out her age-“

“Did they look at her wisdom teeth and growth plates in her arms?” Peter asks.

Diane looks annoyed. He’s ruining her story. “I thought you said you hadn’t seen the programme.”

“I read a lot,” he explains, to mollify her. “I enjoy seeking out new things to learn. So what did they find?”

“She was a teenager. She was just a kid. Mid to late teens, a high-schooler. She’d been well cared for until those last ten days. She should have been planning her prom dress, Peter,” Diane sounds so sad and he knows he’ll never get her to understand cultures other than her own.

“So, what did they find? Did they ever identify her?”

“She finally comes round after about three weeks and they find out she cannot remember who she is,” reveals Diane. “No memory at all.”

“Nothing?” repeats Peter, dubiously. “Surely not?”

“Nothing. All they find out about her is she speaks English, Italian and Arabic.” Diane pauses dramatically.

“Arabic?” He wasn’t expecting that.

“Arabic. Tunisian Arabic, I always remember that bit. It’s so strange. But it makes sense, coming from Tunisia.” Diane takes a large sip of her drink. “She must have been fleeing an arranged marriage and her family tried to murder her in an honour killing. It’s kinda romantic, when you think about it.”

Peter says nothing, just waits for Diane to continue. The Mainland has many such romantic notions
on the subject and all of them are wrong. He should know. There is nothing romantic about
starving a girl till she consents or holding her down screaming while you attempt to consummate
your Sparda-ordained union.

“There’s one last thing,” says Diane, gathering her powers for the climax of the tale. “Someone got
past the police guard about two weeks after she was found and tried to kill her.”

“No! They just didn’t give up!” agrees Peter in a suitably scandalised tone. “Those kind of cultures
don’t. What happened? I imagine she would have had a police guard?”

“Well,” Diane says as she builds to her denouement. “The hitman tried blowing up the medical
equipment and left a hole in the wall. She tried to stand up and run, even though she was still in a
coma and her legs were shattered.”

“She never!” gasps Peter. “It’s amazing what we can do when we have to.”

“Oh, yes,” Diane assures him. “She crawled out into the corridor on her smashed arms while the
police officer gave chase to a tall, dark-haired man in medical scrubs.”

“It must have been a member of her family come to finish the job,” agrees Peter. “She was lucky to
have survived in the water, never mind them coming to make sure.”

“What happened next?” Peter asks as Diane falls silent.

“She became an Italian and got a corporate scholarship to an Italian college.” Diane has to think for
a moment. “She used to give interviews, but now she doesn’t. She just wants a normal life now.”

“A happy ending, though,” says Peter. “Not often you get one of those. Shall we order dinner?”

***

It’s early the next morning when Peter returns to his hotel. He’s left a note for Diane, inviting her
to dinner at his hotel.
He checks Alighieri’s books when he comes out the shower and has breakfast brought up to his room. Her studies are…esoteric by standard scientific practice, but her research and papers stand up to peer review and reproducibility. Most of what she’s written is not, strictly speaking, Peter’s area of expertise, despite his own powers, but it looks fascinating and he’s sure he’s read them in the past. Peter is a wide and voracious reader and something like this is right up his alley.

He looks at her photos again, checking the dedication of the first book.

To Mazzie, thanks for working out my kinks.

Peter’s sure there’s only one way to take that statement.

The dedication in the second book is rather more vague, Thanks, Lily, it was Magic.

There’s something he’s missing and he’s not sure what.

First though, Peter takes stock of his notes and calls Lord Agius, running quickly through what he knows.

“So, I don’t understand,” says Lord Agius, utterly confused. “Why would she lie about her origins when they’re common knowledge?”

“I have no idea,” replies Peter. “It’s not as if they’re shameful or she hid it from the start, in Italy.”

“Do you think…” Lord Agius sounds hopeful. Peter knows what he’s thinking. If Pinny came back, surely Vee can, too.

“No, Edward. Verity sadly passed. We were all there.” Peter pauses. “I agree, there is something odd about her, to lie about her past like this, but I still think that our plan to bring her over the True Faith and utilise her abilities stands.”

“Have no fear on that score, Peter. She and Credo are getting along famously. She was quite a hit
at my luncheon. Violet and Pinny were quite conspiratorial.”

“That gladdens my heart,” says Peter. “Hopefully, this marriage will suit him better than the last one.”

He recovers from his faux pas to ask General Agius about Josh. He doesn’t say that he’s carefully cataloguing all the information to decorate the child’s room appropriately.

He especially doesn’t mention the photos he found. He’ll get more information on that score from the Immigration Committee. They’ll fax him the details later.

Peter wonders how he’ll use it. Witch Trial, possibly. He traces the lines of the kiss.

There’s one last thing that stands out to Peter. The languages she speaks, English, Italian and Tunisian Arabic. That’s unusual in itself. The second languages spoken in the Maghreb are English and French, with French being spoken in Tunisia.

Violet Alighieri came round able to speak Italian fluently.

English, Italian and Tunisian Arabic. Tunisian Arabic is broadly similar to Maltese, but most people aren’t familiar with the latter tongue and it’s an easy mistake to make.

There’s only two places in the world where those three languages are spoken as first languages. One is Malta.

The other is Fortuna.

Chapter End Notes

We're going on hiatus for the new few months - my work is crazy, the dog needs an op, and I have to research particle colliders.
We have another 3 or 4 chapters in the 15 years ago and then we'll be back in present day with Nero and Kyrie, but a lot's going to happen in those two chapters, so they'll take a while to write

Thank you again for your kudos, bookmarks and comments. I love you all.
In which I fail hard at hiatuses.

Fortuna, 15 years previously

“So, My Lord General, this is where we are. I have no idea of the identity of Miss Alighieri, only that she has lied about her past for no apparent reason and is as talented as they say.” Peter looks over at Diane in his hotel bed, but she’s asleep. “I do not believe, however that she is whom many believe her to be.”

“You’re alone in that suspicion, Peter,” replies Lord Scerri. “Having met her myself, I have my doubts. You never told me what happened that night and how you arranged for the –“

“You need to be able to pass a Witch Trial on the matter, Lord General,” says Peter, coolly. “Let the Sins fall upon the Faith Committee, for that is our burden to be shouldered, not yours.”

“Plausible deniability, of course. And speaking of such, the Committees should be rearranged to our satisfaction within the next few days, give everyone a month to bed in and hopefully I should have some sad news to announce at the Festival of the Blade.”

“Of course, My Lord. I’ll see to it upon my return.”

Lord Scerri clicks off.

“Should have fucking buried her,” Peter mutters to himself. He hears Diane stirring.

“Whowosit?” she mutters, sleepily.

“Just reporting to my superiors, my sweet, go back to sleep. Unless you don’t want to.” He runs callused fingers up her bare arm.
She giggles. “You’re insatiable.”

“I have been told that, in the past,” he says, voice low as he leans in to kiss her.

***

“Nero! Kyrie! Ten more minutes and it’s time to get up! I can’t have you late for school!” Dorcas yells up the stairs. Credo groans as he comes down them.

“You look terrible, son,” says Dorcas as Credo comes down the stairs.

“I couldn’t sleep, Mama and there was no point in turning over. I have a busy week ahead of me.” He’s shirtless and his rings catch the light. He’s unconsciously fiddling with them.

“I’ll come with you. Papa couldn’t get the time off, but they can spare me,” she says, pouring him coffee and bringing him a plate of croissants and jam.

“You don’t have to, Mama,” he replies. “But I’m glad you did.”

“So, what’s the order of service?” she asks.

“Marriage Committee, then Families Committee, but I’m not sure if they’re referring me for a courts martial or if the court martial is applying to supersede them.” He sighs and sips his coffee. “I don’t care as long as I keep him. I can’t lose Nero, Mama. I can’t.”

Dorcas hugs Credo. “You won’t, son. Not if I have anything to do with it.”

“Then there’s the Ball for my promotion,” he says not looking any brighter. “I could well do without it.”

“When do Violet’s friends return to the Mainland?”
“The day after the Ball.” He thinks for a moment. “I think she has another check-in day with her work and begins the week after they leave.”

“Is she coming today?”

“I believe so.” He looks at the clock and stands. “I’ll chase the little horrors out of bed.”

“Credo.” Dorcas’ voice stops him in the doorway. “This Mainlander – do you see a future with her?”

“Yes, I do,” he says, softly. “Are you going to ask me to choose between her and Nero?”

“Of course not. I’m going to work very hard for you not to have to choose. You’ve suffered more than enough for Fortuna.” Dorcas looks at him through her hazel eyes and they have that look from the luncheon in them again. “I’m just ensuring that you understand that any decisions you make will affect both of them. Nero has grown awful fond of her. Kyrie too, but Nero treats her like a mother already. I don’t want anyone to get hurt if she is to leave. Fortuna can be hard for outsiders to understand. I don’t want you both to get close, then she leaves.”

“I understand, Mama. I love how you look out for me still,” he chuckles as he comes back and kisses Dorcas’ cheek.

It doesn’t occur to either of them the other possibility – that Credo and Nero might follow Violet if she leaves.

***

All the Agius family have turned out to Credo’s hearing. They’re in their Death Blacks, Pinny and Edith wearing long black dresses and ghenienel framing their faces. Lord Agius is tall and sombre in his black Knight’s uniform, with gold and red trim.

Lord Agius claps Credo on the shoulder and hugs him, followed by the two women. “A sad day for this family.”
“Indeed,” replies Dorcas. “But the legal bonds’ dissolution, doesn’t change the bonds of love and history that bind our two families together.”

Lady Kristina and her mother are across the room. She waves to Credo. She’s holding a box and he can guess what it is.

He ignores her, instead looking around for Violet. “She said she’d be here. I want her to know what she’s getting.”

“She’ll come, don’t fuss so, Credo,” scolds Pinny. She looks pale and wan. It’s clearly costing her to be here today. But her back is straight and her walk determined. “She wouldn’t want Kristina to get one over on her anyway.”

“You always could see what everyone else couldn’t, Pinny,” agrees Lord Agius. “It’s just a pity I never listened more.”

“Hush now, Papa,” she smiles. “Regrets do no one any good.”

“Agius and Micellef!” calls the Herald. “Come forth and seek Justice in the Name of the Saviour!”

Credo takes one last look and walks slowly towards the door.

“Hang on!” There's the sound of the Castle doors being thrown open and a snapped, “Get off me!” as she dodges round the guards. Violet’s shoes echo round the Hall as she runs towards Credo. He catches her as she barrels breathlessly into him and in front of Lady Kristina she plants a kiss on him that even has Edith looking twice.

“Regret that he never kissed you like that?” Pinny teases her.

“Twas never going to be me who those kisses were reserved for,” she replies. She motions to Lady Kristina and says loud enough for her to hear. “And certainly was never her.”
“Agius, Micellef, second call!”

They’re shown into a room with a raised dais and a table with 9 Generals and Executive members sat at it. There’s two tables set opposite each other, notepads, pens, glasses and carafes of water on them. There’s seating facing the Generals for the public.

Credo sits down with Dorcas and Lord Agius, while Lady Kristina and her mother take the opposite table, with the Captain they filed the paperwork with.

Lord Azzopardi looks in confusion at Lord Agius. “Bit extreme, Edward, surely? It’s a divorce, not a bereavement.”

“To you, Marcus, perhaps. Not to us.” Lord Agius sounds mournful.

Lady Kristina rolls her eyes and sets her box in plain view on the table.

General Azzopardi bangs his gavel and brings the meeting to order. “Petition for Review of the Marriage of Verity Eliza Agius and Credo Alexander Micellef. Who brings this Petition and Why?”

“Lady Kristina Amanda Chetcuti, by reason of Dis-Union and Lack of Issue, My Lord, under the terms of the Old Families Marriage Act 1656.” The Committee Captain speaks for her. “Namely, that Verity Eliza Agius has not resided nor bedded with her lawful husband, Credo Alexander Micellef in five years and they have neither children of their blood nor children of their name between them.”

He turns to Credo. “What say you, Credo Alexander Micellef, to these assertions?”

“I cannot deny them, under the Terms of the Act, Lord General,” says Credo, evenly. He looks back at Violet, who’s watching the proceedings with interest. She leans forward and whispers something to Dorcas, who nods.

“I object to this Petition,” says Lord Agius. “Marriage within Old Families is not just for the continuation of the bloodline, but for the alliances formed between them.”
“Noted, Lord Agius, however alliances are meant to be made flesh in the children of the union,” replies Lord Azzopardi.

Lady Kristina looks smug.

Lord Azzopardi looks irritated.

“Captain Micellef, how old are you and Young Madam Micellef, currently?” Lord Azzopardi asks. It looks like he’s trying to pull out all the stops to aid Credo. It’s not lost on him that the Leader is using Verity’s married name.

“I am 26, Lord General,” he replies.

“And Young Madam Micellef?”

“22, Lord General,” replies her father.

“It strikes me that you are still both young. I feel it would be prudent to allow another review period to allow you children to be born or adopted.” Lord Azzopardi is about to bang his gavel when Lady Kristina stands up and near on screeches. “Objection! They’re not even together, there’s nothing to review!” She looks straight at Violet, as if she’s daring her to assert her identity.

Credo leans back and whispers something to Violet, who puts a hand on his left shoulder. Credo clasps it and pulls it forward slightly, kissing the palm.

Lord Azzopardi sighs. “And is Young Madam Micellef here? Can she be presented, so that she might refute this Petition?”

Credo shakes his head. “No, My Lord, she is not, nor can she be. I have no idea of her current whereabouts.”

Lord Azzopardi sighs and Lady Kristina looks triumphant.
“Then, I’m afraid I have no choice, under the terms of the Act,” he says, heavily.

Credo nods, still holding Violet’s hand. She’s scooted her chair forward to rest her chin on his shoulder. Lady Kristina frowns and some of the Committee look disapproving. It’s on the unseemly side for someone of Credo’s standing to be so *demonstrative* in a place of law, never mind Fortuna.

“Under the terms of the Old Families Marriage Act 1656, wherein a marriage may be subject to review after three years if there is no issue thereof and dissolved to free both parties to seek to form alliances elsewhere and extend their bloodlines. For the state of marriage is ordained for the raising of children and the perpetuation of their lineage Praises the Glory of the Saviour.”

He pauses, regretfully. “Under the terms of the Act, Credo Alexander Micellef and Verity Eliza Agius have failed to realise Issue. Due to their physical separation and with reconciliation unlikely, I have no choice but to declare the Nuptials of Credo Alexander Micellef and Verity Eliza Agius Null and Void. Both parties are now free agents and may live and wed as they wish.”

Lord Azzopardi bangs down his gavel.

A week ago, Credo would have been gutted at the ending of the marriage he never really had (*damn you, Vergil Sparda*), but not with Violet’s slim fingers threaded through his and her sharp chin digging into his shoulder.

He nods sadly at Lord Azzopardi and tenses himself for what’s coming next.

“My Lord! I Petition the Committee!” Lady Kristina jumps up, waving the box.

Lord Azzopardi actually face-palms.

“You have to hear me! It’s the Law!” she snaps, pouting.

“What’s your Petition, Lady Chetcuti?” He sounds tired and he’s secretly glad that he didn’t allow Emmeline to marry into this family of lunatics.
“Under the terms of the Old Families Marriage Act 1656, I seek a Petition of Compelling of Marriage.” She looks across at Violet and the latter can literally hear the implied, so there. “I seek to Compel Credo Alexander Micellef.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” mutters Violet and Credo snorts, nearly choking as he hides his laughter by reaching for his glass.

“On what grounds?” Dorcas demands.

“You object to this Petition, Alchemist Micellef?” Lord Azzopardi looks relieved.

“Of course I do!” snaps Dorcas. “She’s nothing to offer our family!”

“I’m a Chetcuti!” retorts Lady Kristina, as if it’s a complete sentence.

“And I’m a potato,” comments Violet in Credo’s ear.

“Hush,” he tries to tell her as he nearly chokes laughing. He’s got water running out his nose.

“Are you laughing at me? I demand to know what’s splitting your sides!”

“She’s laughing at your gall to presume your place as my daughter-in-law,” counters Dorcas. “I’d let the tide at Southworth Island take him before I’d call you that!”

“Some decorum, please!” Lord Azzopardi bangs his gavel. “You’re causing more uproar than Falzon v al-Burj and their Hell-cursed turnip dowry.”

“I’m a Chetcuti! What more do you need, Dorcas?” scowls Lady Kristina. “Oh, hush your mouth, Marcus! Papa says it’s your own damn fault they’re still arguing over that dowry. If you’d been firmer in the start it would never have got that far!”

“Sit down, Lady Chetcuti,” growls Lord Azzopardi.
Pinny and Edith have turned to each other, using their wide hoods to hide their laughter. They can’t hide their snorts or their shoulders shaking, though.

“Is my make up running?” whispers Pinny, loud enough to be heard.

“No,” replies Edith. “Did you use the waterproof one?”

“Yes, it’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“Marcus, they’re mocking me!” screeches Lady Kristina and actually stamps her foot.

The audience is sniggering as well.

“I really like what you’ve done with your rouge,” says Edith. “You’ll have to show me how to get that shape.”

“Ladies Agius, will you treat this proceeding with the respect due?!” Lord Azzopardi thunders.

“I refuse to acknowledge this frivolous nonsense, My Lord,” says Credo. “She has no grounds to Compel a union with her. That’s even without my grounds to refute it.”

“What grounds do you have, Credo? Her?” Lady Kristina gestures at Violet. “I’m a Chetcuti, scion of one of the most prestigious bloodlines on Fortuna. High Old Family compared to the Micellefs. Marriage to me elevates your children and bloodline permanently, unlike Pinny. She’s a Lady, but once Edward dies her ankle-breaker reverts back to Low Old Family, even ignoring his bastardy.”

“That’s enough!” bellows Lord Azzopardi. “Casting aspersions on a small child is beyond the pale, even for you, Lady Kristina! I’ll dismiss this suit if you continue.”

“I was merely going to add my name brings money and connections, Marcus,” she says, completely oblivious to the warning she’s just been given. “My connections and Credo’s drive and intelligence makes our union most advantageous for both Fortuna and the Order. Besides, it’s unnatural for a
Son of an Old Family to be unmarried and without issue at Credo’s age. The Marriage Act says so.”

She makes a dramatic pause and shuffles her papers. “And thus I make my case.”

“Your case surely isn’t ‘Because I have money’?” says Credo, astounded.

“I have my Courting Gift ready,” she says, completely seriously. “I can change it if you feel it doesn’t represent us.”

“I would not bind myself in Covenant to you for a thousand, thousand worlds.” Credo moves aside so that Violet can sit on his left and he holds her left hand on the desk, in full view of everyone. He gives her a brief smile.

“I oppose this Union in no uncertain terms,” says Dorcas. “My family is as prosperous and well-connected as we need to be. She’s repeatedly shown herself to be a cruel and selfish woman, with her behaviour towards members of my family and their guests embarrassing and rude, bordering on the reprehensible as to how she treats the children of my family –“

“You’re not talking about that foundling Credo’s meant to have fathered? Oh, don’t worry about him, Dorcas. You’ll not have to worry about him. He can come on Sundays and Holy Days, still, but Credo will have no time when our own children come along.” Lady Kristina assures Dorcas.

“What makes you think, Kristina, that I’d be able to perform my marital duties with you?” asks Credo. “Lord General, I’m going to be quite frank here – Miss Buhagiar can testify as to my...difficulties in that area with a woman I am attracted to, there’s no danger that I would beget issue with you. Three years from now, it would be our marriage being dissolved for lack of issue.”

“You don’t know what I’ve learned over the years,” scowls Lady Kristina. “I’m sure I’d give either of your whores a run for their money.”

“Lady Kristina!” Lord Azzopardi bangs his gavel. “Your father will be hearing the details of this case and I’ll have you showing the respect to Miss Alighieri and Miss Buhagiar that’s due to them. It’s bad enough that Captain Micellef’s humbled himself by his admission. I’ve had enough of this farce. Credo?”
“Yes, Lord General?”

“What’s your objections to this union?”

“Other than it being Lady Kristina, My Lord?”

“I object to that!”

“Would that it was officially reason enough, but…”

Credo takes a breath. “I’m involved with another woman – “

Lady Kristina snorts. “A Mainlander!”

“Yes, Violet is a Mainlander, who is a skilled Alchemist with Umbrella-Uroboros and their Joint Projects-“

“I’m an Order Alchemist!” Protests Lady Kristina. “A Compel’s only negated if the subject is actively Courting and a date set!”

“Only if Family Objections are not upheld,” snaps Dorcas.

“He’s not Courting her!”

“Only because I’ve just met her,” retorts Credo. “It’s not like Fortuna, where everyone already knows everyone and intentions can be clear from the start. My Lord, Violet’s a foreigner, like your son-in-law. I’m endeavouring to respect her cultural traditions on this matter. They differ widely from ours – all romances might end in marriage and they have nothing to compare with dalliances and courtships. Their romances are a mix of the two and whilst I know my heart on the matter, I’m conducting this affair in a manner that Violet’s familiar with.”

“What a load of codswallop!” splutters Lady Kristina.
“And yet, good enough for me,” says Lord Azzopardi. “Your Compel is denied.”

He bangs his gavel

“No! You can’t! I’m a fucking Chetcuti!” Lady Kristina is actually being held back by her mother and the Committee Captain.

“Well, that went better than I expected,” says Lord Agius. “Let’s go and celebrate! My treat!”

Credo kisses Violet in full view of the Committee.

“I’m a fucking Chetcuti!”

***

They keep her in the dark.

She’s never been afraid of the dark till now.

Her jaw doesn’t fit her face properly and her teeth are loose, rocking like they did when she was little.

She’s tied, but she feels the subtle energies around the ropes and they fall away.

The concentration gives her something to push the pain down.

Just like in Training.

Just like walking round with her broken arm when she fell out that tree and she was only little then.
He must know she’s missing, must do, by now.

He’ll come for her. She knows this.

On cue, he kicks.

Godspit and shit, what if he misses her?

She calms herself and feels around the room.

She finds the door and realises that the soft-voiced man didn’t lock it.

She smiles, a misshapen grimace and her belly thumps again.

“Hold on,” she whispers. “We all just have to hold on.”

Godspit and shit, what if he misses her?

***

Violet snaps awake with Nero cuddled in to her, stroking her hair. “You were crying,” he says. “Dorcas strokes my hair when I cry. But I don’t cry much,” he hastily affirms.

“Of course not,” she agrees, planting a kiss on his forehead. She looks for a clock or Credo.

“Can we snuggle for a little bit longer?” he asks, shyly, but hopeful.

“Course we can,” replies Violet.
“Are you going to marry Credo?”

“Not today.”

“How do you get married?” He’s still stroking her hair and sounds sleepy.

“You stand in front of a judge, sign a bit of paper saying you belong to each other and then you live with each other,” says Violet. “That’s usually how it works. Might be different here though.”

“Credo says you get to have a big party at the Castle and sleep in the big bedroom,” says Nero. “But I like this big bedroom.”

Violet looks around, taking in the room for the first time. It’s a plain, comfortable room, very masculine with its dark oak furniture and austere colours. There’s a space where a photo has been set face down and a white uniform hanging on the back of the wardrobe.

“Is it Credo’s room?” she asks Nero. He nods. “Can I have a little brother? Kyrie says she’s going to marry me when she grows up, so she can’t be my little sister.”

“Are you going to marry Kyrie when she grows up?” Violet cuddles the child close.

“If you marry Credo, you’ll be my Mama,” he says, falling asleep.

Violet raises her free hand and brushes her cheek. Sure enough, it’s wet. “Huh.”

There’s a knock at the door as Credo comes in carrying two cups of coffee and a bowl of cheesy pasta. “I told him not to bother you, but I see he listened.”

“He’s a kid. Course he didn’t listen,” she says as she adjusts herself to sit up without disturbing Nero. “How’d I end up in here?”
“You fell asleep when we got home and I put you in here so you’d have peace.” He tries not to speak in a way that sounds disapproving of her friends and lifestyle. It’s not that long before they’re gone and Violet begins the trip to Fortunese citizen. “Of course, I reckoned without Nero. He was determined to see you.”

“What time is it, anyway?” She takes the fork as Credo sits on the bed next to her, setting the tray so that Nero can’t knock it. She offers him the next forkful of pasta. He smiles and kisses her, holding the coffees.

“Shall we share the coffee as well?” Credo says lightly. “All we need is fire and we’ll be betrothed.”

Violet wriggles as she tries to pull something out her pocket. “A-ha!”

It’s a lighter. She lights it and he laughs, as he kisses her. He can see the three of them in his mirror and for once, he thinks, everything is going to be alright.

“What time is it, anyway?” she asks.

“About ten. Stay here for tonight,” Credo offers. He gestures to Nero. “And he’s comfortable.”

“And we can’t disappoint him.” Violet shifts slightly, carefully holding onto the tray. “I bet you sent him in here deliberately.”

“You caught my plan. I have to make haste before Lady Kristina returns for round 2,” says Credo, carefully kissing her cheek. She stuffs another mouthful of pasta into his mouth.

“You’ll be causing a riot back at my house,” replies Violet. “My mates are furious that I’m spending more time with you than them.”

“Your presence or lack thereof seems to have no bearing on whether or not your friends riot,” says Credo. “The Knights in Castleview have been receiving complaints about their entertaining again.”

“Whoops. Well, I can’t tell them off if I’m with you all the time.” Violet flutters her eyelashes like
a coquette. “Surely our association buys me some protection?”

He laughs. “No, you signed the Undertaking and so you’re as bound by it as they are. Did you read the small print?”

“No?”

“It gives custody of the Oath-Breakers to the Countersigning Captain or General and he gets to decide what penance he’ll assign to you,” Credo says as he sips his coffee. “It’s basically a piece of paper that says *Violet belongs to Credo.*”

There’s more than a little bit of challenge in her eyes, underneath the humour. “Does it now? Just how do you think you’ll punish me? Really?”

“I’m sure I’ll have absolutely no lack of imagination in how I could chastise you, should the opportunity arise,” he teases. Credo’s glad Nero’s in his bed or he’s not sure what would happen. He really doesn’t want to rush this, wants this one to be different to what Violet’s accustomed to and he’s still not sure she’s really playing for keeps the way he is. He’s also not used to being aggressively pursued the way she is nor a young woman so joyfully sexual. If Verity had the subtlety of a boot to the head, Violet is a truck through the wall.

“That bit paper might say you own me should I fuck up,” she says, voice low and sending chills down his back. “But I guarantee it’ll be me who owns you.”

“Is that so, Madam?” Credo leans in and kisses her, the taste of her coffee and the texture of the bands strong under his tongue. His hands come up to her face, feeling the plates under her skin. Violet doesn’t gasp or pull away, so he carries on. He’s going to learn her more precisely than any other woman he could have had and he doesn’t want to hurt her.

He’s hurt her enough already.

“Are you going to kiss naked? Dorcas and Zander kiss naked sometimes,” says a little voice.

“What? No! When did you see Mama and Papa…” Credo’s voice fails him as Violet falls about laughing so hard she’s crying.
“I went to find her and she and Zander were kissing naked in bed. Dorcas said that grown-ups who love each other sometimes kiss naked in bed.” He thinks for a moment. “When I’m grown up will Kyrie and me kiss naked in bed?”

“Probably,” says Violet.

“What? No! No one is kissing anyone in bed, never mind…nay….never mind. Stop encouraging the child, Violet!” He rounds on her, trying to cover his embarrassment at the whole concept. “Only married grown-ups kiss in bed. Sparda’s Balls, child!”

“Oh my fucking God, your face! I can’t…oh Jesus Christ!”

“Violet says you get a bit paper that says you belong to each other and you both sign it. You’ve got one, Credo, you wrote on it when we got ice cream,” Nero says earnestly.

“I-I…bed, young man. It’s well passed your bedtime,” says Credo, firmly, face red as Violet almost tips the tray onto the bed as she convulses with laughter. He picks Nero up and holds him so Violet can give him a kiss.

“Can I get a brother? I want to call him Ravus. If I have a sister can I call her Daffodil?” Nero thinks for a moment. “How will you put a baby in Violet’s tummy anyway?”

“Bed!”

***

Credo tries to be upbeat and cheerful at breakfast, even if he isn’t feeling it. The first time everything’s exactly as it’s meant to be and he can’t enjoy it. He’s got Violet at his breakfast table, in one of his shirts and Nero and Kyrie all over her, mixing her porridge and blowing on it so it’s not too hot. Poor woman can barely move and Credo makes a mental note to have Dorcas arrange an emergency supply of her drugs for next time. Nero in particular is chattering 19 to the dozen, something he only does when he’s feeling particularly secure and happy.

“You mix it like this,” he says and demonstrates, face tight with concentration, explaining to Kyrie
how to feed Violet. Kyrie takes a spoon and mixes it with as much deliberation and less coordi-

nation. She’s knocking the bowl about and drawing Dorcas’ ire. Credo holds on to the bowl.

“Is it right now, Violet?” Asks Nero, eager to please the woman he’s decided is going to be his new mother. Violet looks. “A little more milk.”

Kyrie enthusiastically grabs the bottle and tips it over the bowl and everything else.

“Empty Night, Kyrie! Put the bottle down! Nero, it’s everywhere, she’s too little to help!” snaps Dorcas.

“Dorcas, she’s wee. She can’t help it. Pass me a cloth.” Violet holds out her hand and it’s clear the movement has cost her. Dorcas looks like she’s about to snap at Violet, catches Credo’s eye and hands her a cloth, with a tight “thank you.”

Dorcas bustles around in the background, arranging lunches and sitters for after school, chivvying Zander about his working hours and fending off her team’s encroachment on her time. It’s fraying her nerves and she’s trying not to snap at them. “I seriously take a couple of days’ leave and everything falls apart.”

“Wondering what you’re going back to, Dorcas?” says Violet, sitting so stiffly that Credo thinks she could be a statue. “They’ll be coming to the Castle for you.”

“They’d better not if they value their lives,” Dorcas almost growls.

Violet helps Kyrie to mop up the milk. “I’m going to need sugar now,” she tells the little girl.

Nero picks up the sugar and takes Kyrie’s hand. “You’re going to be such a good brother when the time comes for Daffodil,” says Violet. Nero holds Kyrie’s hand as they sprinkle the sugar on the white mess in the bowl.

“Daffodil?” echoes Dorcas.

“Nero has already chosen the name of your granddaughter,” says Credo. “I prefer Charlotte,
Dorcas looks at Violet, waiting for her to chime in.

“Never thought about it,” she says. “But I’m thinking about the name Chicken Arrabiata.”

“That’s dinner,” pipes up Kyrie, spilling the sugar everywhere, despite Nero’s best efforts. “Are you going to eat the baby?”

“I’ll fatten it up first,” says Violet, eyeing up the sweetened slop in her bowl with trepidation.

“Like Hansel and Gretel? Are you a Bad Witch?” Kyrie asks, toddler-earnest.

“No, she’s not, Kyrie,” snaps Nero. “She’s my new Mama, so she must be nice or Credo wouldn’t love her.”

“Violet, stop jesting with the children or we’ll never get anything done,” says Credo.

Violet leans conspiratorially over to the children. “One of those things is true. Which do you think it is?”

“You’re going to eat Daffodil?” Kyrie’s lip wavers.

“Not that one.”

“Credo loves you?”

Violet frowns. “Early days, Chubby Cheeks.”

The children look past her to Credo, who nods, stopping as Violet slowly turns round. He smiles at her, mock-innocently and points at her bowl. “Time wears on. Eat up.”
Violet’s look of trepidation increases as Nero scoots closer to her and picks up the spoon. Kyrie takes her spoon, copying him. “You do it the same way you feed a baby, like you, Kyrie.”

“I’m not a baby!” she snaps indignantly. She picks up some slop on the spoon and shoves it in Violet’s mouth, tipping most of it down her cleavage.

Violet sighs and uses the cloth to clean herself up.

“What are you doing, child?” Dorcas huffs in exasperation. “Violet can feed herself.”

“No, she can’t. She’s all sore,” says Nero, very carefully spooning it into her mouth. He clacks her teeth and she shudders.

“There’s always one person that’s the lynchpin of a team,” agrees Violet. She moves slightly and it’s all she can do not to gasp with the pain. Her voice has that high, breathless quality of someone in agony. “I’m guessing it’s you?”

“So it seems,” agrees Dorcas, giving the phone a death glare as it begins to ring again. “I’m not answering it. I’m sure they can use their ingenuity. I’m giving them the chance to learn from opportunity.”

Violet opens her mouth as wide as she can to get the mess finished quicker, though most of it ends up down her front.

Credo gets up from the table to get ready, taking a last look at the scene in the kitchen. Despite his apprehension for the day ahead, he smiles, fiddling with his rings.

***

Lord Scerri is sitting at Peter’s breakfast table when he comes down. He helps himself to croissants and jam. “Good morning, Peter. Coffee?”
Peter regards him warily. “Thank you, My Lord. To what do I owe this honour?”

“I came to hear the Italian gossip. I understand you couldn’t report back last night, due to the lateness of the hour you returned.” Lord Scerri leans to the side to allow the maid to put down more pots and food. He clicks his fingers and she bows, withdrawing from the room. “How is your guest?”

“Resting, My Lord. I’m sure you’ll meet Diane later,” says Peter as he slices his croissant open and spreads the homemade red goo on it. “I don’t know what I can tell you I haven’t already. I’ve nothing to add.”

“I’ve met the girl who doesn’t exist, Peter,” cuts in Scerri. “And even I’m having doubts.”

“I have none, My Lord,” says Peter evenly. “I am as certain of events now as then. Dare I say it’s reservations over her untimely demise as her sister prepares to join her? Lord Agius has become a valued member of the Executive, as well as a personal friend. It pains me and must pain you to see him suffer so.”

“You take considerable freedoms with my goodwill, Peter,” warns Scerri.

“I’ve earned those freedoms many times over,” Peter replies, just as coldly. “If there’s a Heaven for the Merciful, neither of us will ever see it.”

He can see Lord Scerri visibly swallow down his anger.

“I have never stepped either of us wrong. Continue to trust in that fact.” Peter takes a bite of his croissant, washing it down with a sip of coffee. “Can you deny how perfect she is for your purposes?”

The lack of his titles and honorifics from Peter’s mouth are not lost on Scerri. “I cannot. I must take it as Lord Sparda’s blessing upon our endeavours. You will oversee her, I imagine?”

“I’m already creating plans to bring Alighieri to the True Faith.” Peter pauses, but decides not to mention Alighieri’s deviancy. He sees something in Scerri’s face. “Something else troubles you, Lord Scerri?”
“Even assuming our Mermaid isn’t Verity Agius returned to life, she and Credo have become close very quickly.” Lord Scerri pauses for the pain-au-chocolat. “These are delicious. Maris is to be commended.”

“I’ll tell her, My Lord,” says Peter. “What concerns you?”

“They indulged in unseemly displays of affection during his divorce hearing. That’s unlike Credo. Given that he’s applied for Wardship of Nero, I’m concerned that the family denied him will be in his grasp.”

“I don’t follow, Lord Scerri.” Peter pours more coffee for both of them. “Surely this is what we wanted for Credo? A family to bind him to Fortuna and his duty? I’d say steady him, but Credo has never required that charge.”

“While one can’t deny that Credo has been ill-used by circumstance and believe me, I am the first to wish happiness for him,” says Lord Scerri, “you haven’t seen them together. He’s as infatuated with her as he was with Verity. Perhaps more so, given the speed of his relationship with her. She’s already stayed the night, with Alchemist Micellef’s blessing. They’ve only been together these last ten days.”

“Surely this is a good thing, Lord Scerri, binding Alighieri to Fortuna and our plans? I’m sure I don’t follow your concerns.” Peter is genuinely confused.

“What if she finds Fortuna is not to her taste and takes Credo and Nero with her when she leaves?” Lord Scerri sounds a little exasperated.

“My Lord,” Peter says, equally annoyed. “She’s been here two weeks and not even that. You need to give me time to bring my plans to bear, otherwise we run the risk of scaring her off, regardless of whether Credo follows her. This lack of caution is unlike you, Lord General. You normally take such events in your stride and into your plans.”

Peter takes a moment to eat pain-au-chocolat and drain his cup. “I’m told by Lord Agius that she’s fell in love with young Nero and he with her. He’s the Overseer from the Faith Committee for the Saviour Construct, so she’ll be under him anyway. She’s become friends with Pinny, so we have ties already attaching her to Fortuna. You say Credo’s applied for Wardship of Nero?”
“He has, but I’m honour-bound to punish him for removing Nero from the orphanage. My fear is that creates a situation that forces Credo’s hand. He’s especially sensitive as the anniversary of his wedding approaches.” Lord Scerri sighs. “For the first time, I find myself at a loss as to how to proceed.”

“Then do as you would normally do, My Lord and leave it in my hands.” Peter looks like he’s considering the options. “I feel that your fears come from your suspicion as to Alighieri’s identity. I’m told by Diane and my own reading that there’s a test to establish the identity of Credo’s new ladybird. Persuade Lord Agius to ask her for it and let its’ failure ease your mind. As for her relationship with Credo, let it proceed at its’ own pace, fast as it is. I have the feeling from my investigations that Alighieri’s brush with death induces her to enjoy as much of life’s experiences as opportunity will allow.”

“And what of Nero and Credo? I cannot let his slight to the Matron and the due processes of the Families Committee stand.” Lord Scerri takes one last pain-au-chocolat.

“What had you intended to do, My Lord? Continue with that course.” Peter wishes the man would stop fretting and just go. “Let the Families Committee make its judgements and then commute the decision later.”

Lord Scerri drains his cup. “You give good counsel, Peter, as I knew you would. Carry on as you intended and bring her into our bosom.”

He pats Peter on the shoulder as he leaves.

Peter resists the urge to brush it clean when he’s gone.

***

Alexander takes the children to school while Violet and Dorcas accompany Credo back to the Castle for his next hearing. If anything, this one is more important. Despite his best efforts, the children pick up on it and are fidgety and skittish on the way to school.

“Credo?” asks Nero. “When will the Generals say I can live with you an Dorcas an Zander an Violet an Kyrie all the time? Matron won’t take me back? You promised.”
His lips’ trembling at the thought of going back to the home. He’s only four and he still knows what awaits him at the hell-hole.

Credo feels a fierce rush of love for the child and it overrides the fear of the boy being wrenched from him again. *Lord Sparda, watch over your grandson. Watch over your servant. I beg you. Forgive my wrongs and let me right them. I’ll be the best Papa a boy ever had.*

Credo crouches down and strokes his face. “I give you my pledge on my Honour as a Holy Knight, you will be in your own bed tonight, with your family.”

“Now,” Credo says as he stands up. “Remember you’re a Micellef and we control ourselves, so outsiders have no power over us.”

Nero stands up straight, standing to attention like a soldier. He gives the proper bow and marches off with Alexander.

He doesn’t look back, but Credo thinks it’s because he’ll cry if he does.

Credo isn’t sure he won’t cry. He returns Kyrie’s jaunty wave and smiles as she takes Nero’s hand and whispers something in his ear. They run ahead of Alexander.

In the Great Hall, he looks at Dorcas for a moment, who nods before placing an offering on the Tomb of Sanctus Primus.

He takes Violet aside, turning them slightly so that they’re facing the wall. “I can’t emphasise how important today is. We can’t behave like we did yesterday. You look lovely, I must say.”

He’s careful to say the last so the sting is taken out his words, but she’s still annoyed. “I get that, Credo. I do know how to behave in public, even if it is bloody Pemberly.”

“I know you do, trezor, but I’m nervous, I don’t mind admitting it to you. Just, please, my beauty, just anything I say in there, please, I beseech you, agree with.” He takes both her hands in his and kisses the backs of them.
“OK, OK, keep your hair on,” replies Violet. “I won’t show you up. Dorcas gave me the dress. I tried one of hers but it was way too short. She said she had this one in the back of the wardrobe.”

Under her blue robe, she’s wearing a delicate cotton lilac dress with stylised flowers embroidered around the neck, cuffs and hem. It’s in the Fortunese style and he can remember the last time he saw her wear it.

“It’s a little too big, but it looks ok,” says Violet.

“You look beautiful,” he tells her, kissing her as his case is called. He walks in with her, hand in hand as they’re shown to their seats. Dorcas is on the right of Credo and Violet is on his left.

“I pray Lord Scerri keeps to his promise,” Dorcas mutters, using her fan to hide what she’s saying. Violet frowns a little, but Credo puts his hand to his mouth. “He has never failed us in the past. He has always done his best for us, in his own way.”

“His best has caused today, Credo. Recall that Lord Scerri only thinks of himself and his aims and will sell his own mother to further them. Peter was well placed as his Ladybird. They are well suited. In other countries they might be more public.”

“Mama!” snaps Credo, loud enough to be heard. He looks quickly over the benches with the audience. Lady Kristina is scowling at him and Violet from the front row, one of her brothers from her father’s first marriage sitting beside her, glaring at her.

Dorcas can’t reply as the nine members of the Families Committee file in, Generals and High Order Executive. Credo gasps and his stomach drops as he remembers the Executive had reshuffled the Committees in light of the impending death of Sanctus.

The new Leader of the Families Committee is General Chetcuti.

He sees Credo and scowls, as he flicks through the papers he’s been handed.

Lady Kristina has gone back to looking smug.
Credo really hopes that Lord Scerri has kept his promise, but there’s no one from his office there.

*Godspit and fucking shit.*

For the first time, Credo starts to feel real fear. He wonders if he can make a run from the island with Nero.

“Captain Credo Alexander Micellef and his application for Wardship of Nero Balzan, four years and eight months,” reads Lord Chetcuti from the filings. “What makes you think you’d be a good father for this …” he reads Nero’s records from the Children’s Home…”hellion? I must say, that’s an impressive record for a future criminal. No record of parentage,” Lord Chetcuti turns a page and looks at the Matron in the audience.

“It’s widely believed he’s a whore’s unwanted get, Lord General. So there’s no one to claim him or oppose on his behalf except his carers since birth. It was my staff who wetnursed him, who sang to him at night, who soothed his tears when he cried.” The Matron stands as she gives her speech.

“How have the Micellefs been involved in his upbringing and welfare?” asks Lord Chetcuti.

Credo starts to feel hopeful. Right now, he’s asking the questions that would be standard for any such hearing.

“Beginning shortly after his birth, the Micellefs began visiting our Home and helping with the children, volunteering for shifts, fundraising, bringing in clothes and toys. Whilst they did this for all the children in our care, they did seem to have an affection for the albino.”

“Madam Micellef, is this so? Why, then has the application both taken so long and not come from yourself?” It’s still a standard question. Credo doesn’t realise he’s taken hold of Violet’s hand and he’s crushing it.

Dorcas clears her throat. “Older Captain Micellef and I would have done and indeed were in the planning stages of applying on Credo’s behalf, when I fell pregnant with Kyrie. My difficulties during that pregnancy and my difficulties after her birth prevented us from applying sooner.”

“But you are well now, Madam?”
“Yes, Lord General,” replies Dorcas. She chances a small smile to Credo. *It’s going to be alright, Son.*

“Young Captain Micellef, why did you not apply in your own right before your Mama was ill and Blessings be to the Saviour that she recovered.” Lord Chetcuti asks. Credo can almost feel Lady Kristina’s glare burning through his back.

His collar feels tight as he pulls his thoughts together.

“I was devastated over the loss of my wife to that Tourist. It wasn’t known to many, but she was pregnant at the time. Whilst I do not believe the child to have been mine, I would have raised them as a Micellef and loved them as one.” Credo can’t believe his voice is so steady.

“So you lost your promise of a family on that and at what age, Credo?” Lord Chetcuti is poised to write.

“I was but a youth, My Lord General, even by Fortuna’s standards. I was 20, 21.” Credo resists the urge to lick his lips or tug at his collar, instead sitting calm and in control, the way he’s known for.

“Indeed, a young age for such a heartbreak to befall you. Matron, which of the Micellefs held a particular interest in young Nero at that time?” Lord Chetcuti asks her.

“It would be Credo, Young Captain Micellef, My Lord. It’s not to say Captain and Madam Micellef didn’t, but you’d have thought Credo was his father. It was a struggle for him to remember we had other orphans and foundlings, though he was good and generous, like his parents.” She chokes out this last and Credo can see the effort it takes her. She daren’t lie though, she knows there’s plenty who’ll swear to the munificence of the Micellefs, Mama, Papa and son before this Committee. “And many times were we grateful for it.”

“And you were ever welcome to it, Glory to the Saviour,” says Dorcas.

“A free given gift blesses both giver and receiver,” says Lord Chetcuti. “So Nero is of a similar age as the child you lost?”
“Yes, My Lord, he healed my heart,” replies Credo. *It’s going to be alright. Sparda’s Balls, it’s actually going to be alright.*

“So you chose not to foster him earlier due to the mutual health issues within yourself and your family, yet maintained contact?” Lord Chetcuti pushes his glasses up his nose.

“Yes, Lord Chetcuti,” replies Credo.

Lord Chetcuti leafs through more papers. “Your earnings, statements from your General and other friends as to your suitability. One from the Faith Committee, high praise indeed from Captain Falzon I shan’t bother calling them, though I see they are here.” He indicates Credo’s witnesses and nods to Peter, who’s just come in and has sat behind Credo. Credo gives him a brief nod, but Violet gives him a smile before turning back.

Peter carefully checks through the papers he’s brought with him. He hopes he won’t need them, but failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

Dorcas clasps Credo’s other hand. “Is he about to…?” she whispers, waiting for the sound of the gavel falling.

“So, why were you not prepared to take the child when he was an infant?” asks Lord Chetcuti, suddenly.

The speed of the turn makes Credo realise this was always what he was leading up to.

“I told you Papa would get him,” he hears Lady Kristina say to her brother. He feels Violet about to turn and grips her hand ever harder. “Violet, no,” Credo whispers, desperately. “You’ll make it worse.”

“How can it get worse?” she snaps.

“My Lord, I’ve explained the circumst-“ begins Credo.

“You’ve explained that you had troubles, but all parents have troubles,” General Chetcuti says,
leaning back in his chair and looking directly at Credo. He doesn’t look at Lady Kristina and Credo’s got to give him points for that. “I worry that had you raised Verity’s child, you would have handed him to your mother, increasing her burdens. It concerns me that Dorcas says she was in the early stages of applying to foster Nero on your behalf. Either Madam Micellef was fostering him as her child or you were fostering him as your child.”

He pauses, letting his words hit the target.

Credo has to admit he’s good. He’s let Credo hang himself by his own actions, condemned from his own mouth. There’s no way he can explain why they were right at the time, because every point Lord Chetcuti makes is true. Not about Verity’s phantom child had everything gone to plan – he’d never have given up a child born into his family – but he can’t explain why he never went for Nero when he found the missing baby in the Beechwood, that he couldn’t have anyone know who the child really was, couldn’t risk it from the forces that were still seeking him for their aims.

Lord Chetcuti continues damning Credo. “Or would you have given Verity’s child to General Agius or the Matron here, if you found you couldn’t raise him, especially if your Mama had passed when she bore your little sister. I can’t help but think you would have given up your little sister by that same token. And if you would betray your own flesh and blood so grievously, I cannot help but extrapolate to Nero. A child in his situation needs stability, security. I find myself asking the question - can you truly provide that?”

“My Lord General, there were reasons beyond my control at the time and I find your remarks regarding my wife and Mama hurtful and unkind. You’re making assumptions and accusations that have no base and I cannot defend myself from.” Credo stops as he realises there is one way he could defend himself, but it would ruin his family and his chance of fostering Nero, even if he won.

“Go on, go on, make the challenge;” Lady Kristina mutters and Credo realises he was damned all along, every which way.

General Chetcuti regards Credo silently. Either man at this point could issue the challenge, but it’s more likely Lord Chetcuti would wait on Credo doing it. That would explain why the brother was here – the General would pass the challenge to the younger man, so he could say Credo was fighting someone of similar age and experience, even down to the equal rank.

“Come on, you shitten coward,” Lady Kristina says loud enough for the whole room to hear. You could hear a pin drop as everyone holds their breath to see who’s going to issue the challenge.
Credo remains silent. He’s not going to walk into their trap – Lord Chetcuti’s already painted him as feckless behind his façade. There’s nothing he can say or do that wouldn’t make it worse right now.

As the silence lengthens and no challenge forthcoming, Lord Chetcuti continues, ignoring Lady Kristina’s actual foot-stamp and huff.

“And what of your behaviour last week?” Lord Chetcuti pulls out a page from the file. “Ignoring the Matron’s reasonable requests, interfering with her good order and discipline. Breaking down doors and forcibly taking Nero from the Children’s Home?”

He looks almost disappointed as he continues. “You’re a Captain in the Holy Knights, Credo, you should certainly have known better. You should have followed the legal processes you well know. Did you call the Knights from the Beechwood Station? Did you come to myself, my predecessor or another Committee Member? And when you took him – where did you go? Did you take him to the Infirmary, call a doctor or even to the Tourist Health Centre? You went for ice cream with your new Ladybird – I’m well aware of the events of the gelataria – with a boy whom you deemed ill and in physical danger not one hour previously! Tell me Credo, which of these actions marks you as a man who is reliable enough for the responsibility of a child?”

Violet begins to protest and Lord Chetcuti turns to her. “Mark you this, Madam, and whilst I am pleased I can see you are adopting Fortuna’s ways, are any of these the actions of the man who you would choose as your husband, the father of your children? How quickly will you be set aside in your time of need, should it ever come? Let us be grateful that you have the refuge of your own culture and occupation to fall back on.”

He looks back to Credo, gesturing with his pen as he speaks. “No, Captain Micellef, I cannot in all good conscience give you wardship over young Nero Balzan. I order that at the end of the school day, the staff of the childrens home collect him from school and return him to the safety of the Beechwood Home for Foundlings and Orphans. You can continue to see him under the current arrangements you have with this institution. This is the judgement of this Committee.

He’s about to bang his gavel when Peter taps Violet on the back with the forms.

“Tell Dorcas,” he says urgently, thrusting them into her hands

Credo stands up so hard, he knocks his chair back with a loud clatter, yelling, “No, you can’t, you can’t take him back! You can’t!” while throwing off the Knights running over to restrain him. Violet’s flung to the floor by them, still with Peter’s file in her hands.
“Dorcas, you can stand guardian,” says Violet quickly, catching Peter’s meaning as she reads the top page of the bundle while she hands the papers to Dorcas from where she’s lying.

“What?” Dorcas snaps, distracted by Credo’s anguished shouting at the Committee.

“You can foster Nero!” shout Peter and Violet together.

“I petition the Committee!” yells Dorcas, standing and waving the papers as Lord Chetcuti stays his gavel in confusion.

“Madam, this was your son’s case and it is to be denied,” says Lord Chetcuti.

“So deny it,” retorts Dorcas, “but you must hear my case, as well you know.”

“Your case needs to be in writing, Madam Micellef and submitted for a hearing in the future,” replies Lord Chetcuti, confused by the events before him. Credo is still struggling with the Knights – it’s taken six of them and they’ve knocked over the table as Peter pulls Violet clear.

“Everything’s there,” says Peter, hurriedly, setting Violet beside him. “Finances, statements from friends and superiors. Your standing’s impeccable. Ask for a continuance and that it’s in Nero’s best interests to remain in your household.”

“I request an amendment to the case, Lord Chetcuti,” says Dorcas. “That the Wardship be in mine and my husband’s names. I speak for him in this matter and I believe,” Dorcas flips to the end, “that’s both our signatures there.”

“The Committee must set aside time to read your supporting documents and give you ample time to plead your case, Dorcas,” protests Lord Chetcuti.

“I have no quarrel with proper procedure, but you must grant me a continuance,” says Dorcas. “And as such, Nero should remain in my home, as a child of my family, until that hearing.”
Lord Chetcuti comprehends he’s been out-manoeuvred and nods slowly. “Knights! Hie! Stand down!”

The fight slowly stops as Lord Chetcuti repeats his order several times.

“Captain Credo Alexander Micellef, do you have any objections to the amendments to your petition?”

Credo gets to his feet, pony tail pulled out, nose and lip bleeding, blood staining his white uniform jacket. He’s panting heavily as he gets out, “None, My Lord.”

Lord Chetcuti takes a deep breath and issues his judgement. “Credo Alexander Micellef, you’ll pay a fine and damages to this Committee for this disgraceful display.”

Credo nods.

“Dorcas Charlotte Micellef and Alexander John Micellef, the Committee accepts your amendment to the case before us, a hearing will be held a month hence so that the Committee might regard your case more closely. Until such time, Nero Balzan is to remain in your custody and your household, with all the rights and privileges as a child of your family.”

He bangs his gavel down.

“So what just happened?” asks Violet, confused.

“Nero’s staying with us, but officially, he’s my Ward. It changes nothing else,” says Dorcas. She hugs Credo, then dabs at his lip. “He’s home, son, your boy’s home officially!”

“Nero’s home, Mama? Truly?” Credo still can’t believe it. “My son is home?”

He hugs his mother, before turning to Violet and hugging her, putting her down when she yelps in pain. He still has an arm around her, when he holds out his hand to Peter.
Peter takes it. “You gave me the gift of my son, Credo. Now I give you yours. I pray that it sets right some of the wrongs between us.”

At that moment, Credo would have promised Peter anything, so despite his reservations, he gestures between them. “Alchemist Violet Alighieri, Captain Peter Falzon.”

Peter takes Violet’s hand and kisses it, holding on to it just a little longer than he should. “Charmed, Madam, I’m sure.”

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Credo and Violet pick up Nero and Kyrie from school. They come out with one of Nero’s teachers, with a grim look on her face. Nero looks worried until he sees Credo and Violet and he’s got a black eye. He breaks from the teacher and launches himself at Credo, cuddling into him, before turning round to another boy who’s a little older. Credo’s sure he recognises him from the Home. He’s got a plastered up broken nose and he’s holding an icepack to his lip and face.

“See, Baxter?” sneers Nero. “I told you I was going to live with Credo and Violet and Dorcas. I’m a Micellef now, right Credo?”

Credo catches the teacher’s eye. “I think I can guess what happened,” he says.

“Did you win?” Violet asks Nero.

“Damn straight,” replies the four year old. She fist bumps with him. Both children are picking up Mainlander speech patterns and colloquialisms and Credo’s sure it’s from Violet.

“IT WAS AWESOME!” squeaks Kyrie excitedly. “Nero tanked Baxter because Baxter said Nero was going back to the Bad Room in the Home, Matron had said so. Baxter cried.”

“Did not!” Baxter vehemently denies.

“Did so,” grins Nero at Violet.
“Nero the Hero,” she pulls him down to kiss him. “That’s my boy!”

“Captain Micellef, Madam, if you would come this way, please,” says the teacher with a long suffering sigh.

Credo doesn’t have it in him to remonstrate with Violet. She wouldn’t listen anyway.

They have ice-cream when they’re done. It’s probably sending the wrong message, but Credo doesn’t care as the children get Violet into a mess again as they try to feed her ice-cream.

Even Credo has a go.

He can’t stop smiling.

*Go to Hell, Vergil Sparda. I got my family in the end.*

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Dorcas has cooked a big celebratory meal for everyone, even inviting the Agius’. It’s a boisterous, happy celebration, with a cake saying *Nero Micellef* on it. Nero insists that it should have Violet’s name on it too, as she’s his new Mama and they write it underneath in writing icing. The wine’s flowing and Credo’s glad that he’s got the next few days off. He’s going to be feeling it tomorrow.

They toast nearly everything they can think of, with the special Cassar from Zander’s vineyard, the one he saves for the *very* special occasions. Even the children have a glass, well-diluted with lemon-flavoured Farrugia.

“I think the last time we had this one was when Credo wed Verity,” he says, looking at Violet. “I’m hoping we’ll have two excuses soon to open the next bottle.”

He taps the unopened bottle sitting in the centre of the table.
“What, I get promoted?” grins Violet, cuddling Kyrie on her knee. Kyrie is stroking Violet’s long hair. Even Nero, sitting on Credo’s knee beside them, has pulled over a skein and is running his hands over the shiny, dark strands.

“No, a-“ Zander begins, but he’s interrupted by Pinny asking if she might take her leave. “It’s been a long few days and I’m tired.”

General Agius fusses over her, with Josh getting her things together with the ease of one who’s done this many, many times before. “Mami doesn’t need the ambulance today, Grandad,” he says in English. “She’s just tired.”

“I bow to your experience, Master Josh,” says General Agius. “But we will both consult with a doctor when we get home. I shall value your opinion on the matter.”

He offers the child his hand as he supports his daughter on his other arm.

Both Lord Agius and Pinny beam at each other as Josh takes it with no hesitation. Pinny glances back at Credo with a smile.

“It is late,” agrees Dorcas. “I think it’s time Nero and Kyrie were put to bed? Hmmm, Violet, Credo?”

There’s a twinkle in her eye as she drops hints large enough to hit the floor.

“I’m not tired!” wails a very tired little girl, she’s almost asleep in her Torta tal-Marmurat as she rubs her cheek on Violet’s hair. Violet stands up and an asleep Nero grabs the hair that’s sliding out his hand, nearly overbalancing her.

Credo stands and bodily steadies her as he rises, all in one move. Nero never stirs once.

“Smoothly done, Son,” says Zander. “Happen we’ll open that last bottle sooner rather than later.”

“Papa! Stop it!” remonstrates Credo, but he’s laughing despite his discomfiture. Violet looks between Zander and Dorcas, confused.
“I’m just delighted we’re not having this dinner with Lady Kristina,” lies Zander smoothly. “Take your time coming back down, Mama and I may do some celebrating of our own. Once we’ve cleared the table.” He winks.

“It’s going to take a while,” says Dorcas. “It being such a big table and all.”

The look she’s sending her husband has nothing to do with housework.

“Empty Night, Mama!” says Credo, going scarlet. “I can’t take you anywhere!”

Violet’s laughing as she’s caught their meaning. Credo puts the arm which isn’t holding Nero around her shoulders and all but propels Violet out the room.

Dorcas sticks a nearly full bottle in Nero’s arms as they go. “Don’t worry about the glasses. I’m sure you’ll improvise.”

“Mama!”

Dorcas is still laughing as she shuts the door.

The children go down easily enough. They put them down in their clothes, rather than wake them.

Credo shuts the door behind him as Violet comes out before him, dangling the bottle of wine lazily between her fingers. She bites her lip.

Credo’s got her against the wall before either of them can think and their kisses are different from the ones they’ve shared before. Both want more – more touch, more skin, more sensation. It’s the only word to fall from Violet’s lips, other than his name as he trails his mouth along her jaw. He uses her mouth as the centrepoint that all his caresses start and end.

He’s still gentle and aware enough that he’s not pressing too hard, even as his tongue swirls over the plates in her cheekbones, her skinniness robbing her face of the fat that would cushion them.
He’s listening out for her soft moans to switch from pleasure to pain.

“Credo, Credo.” Her voice is breathy and high as her hands entangle themselves in his hair, pulling a little, but he doesn’t stop. Her nails rake his scalp, pressing his face to hers. They’re both hyper-aware of the sounds they’re making in the silence of the hall, the wet sounds of their kisses, the swish of her dress against his shirt, his breeches. It’s only adding to the tingles running out over their skin. He’s not even sure she’s separate from him right now.

He never was from her.

He’s hard in his breeches, so hard it’s painful as his cock strains against the lacing. The sensations searing out from it over his skin as he presses her hard against the wall. He’s sore tempted to take her there and then, ruch up the skirt, rip her drawers and just sink in.

Credo’s fingers find the hooks and eyes that fasten the back of her dress. She’s too slim for it now and it helps him keep the right name on his lips. He knows if she’s discovered for who people suspect she may be, he’ll be set to a Witch Trial, they both will and he can’t lose her again. He makes quick work of them and Violet helps him pull it off her arms. The fabric catches on the thin sweat that’s starting to cover her skin, salty on her throat and décolleté as his lips trace their way down to the top of her breasts, where her bra’s sitting and he realises that she’s wearing Mainlander smallclothes.

The sight of it almost brings him to release, there and then. He rests his forehead against hers’, breathing through the sensation. Violet pulls his face down, kissing and licking along the sharp planes of Credo’s face and back to his lips, sweeping the point of her tongue over them and along the inside, teasing him as she changes the small shape to suit her task. She even manages to get up behind his teeth, but the sound she makes is a wince, so he stops her.

It gives Credo a chance to pull himself together, get a little control back as he helps her pull the gown over her head, giggling as the hooks get caught on her hair and cursing the amount they’ve had to drink. Credo untangles her hair and takes a moment to look at her as they toss the dress aside, skin flushed and shining. She’s in a pretty white lace bra with underwiring and a little pink bow. There’s a matching pair of delicate lace briefs sitting low enough on her hips that they barely cover her arse. He can see her dark thatch through the white material, under the pink bow.

The sight of the virginal, but to-him-exotic underpinnings against the experienced lines of her body, etched as they are in flesh and in ink, near brings Credo to the brink again. He sinks to his knees, using his lips and tongue to trace along one of the scars that’s carved into her skin and over her hip. There’s almost an energy, electric as it pulses along it and his hands splay along her lower back as one of her legs is thrown over his shoulder. He can feel the gouged scars against his skin.
He kisses the top of the lace, feeling the texture under his lips. He chances an upward glance, get the visual that’s going along with her ragged breath. She watches him through eyes dark enough to be black, with her lips bitten swollen and her hair curling down to her waist, catching in the sweat on her skin. Her chest heaves as she can’t get enough air in her lungs.

“Cr…Credo,” she tries several times, voice rough. “No, no. Don’t. I’m on.”

He hears the No, and concerned, pulls back. “Have I hurt you?” he manages to get out, sitting back on his heels as she leans against the wall, panting. His hands brace against her hips, stopping her from dropping down beside him. Violet’s hands can’t stop moving over his face, his hair, his shoulders. At some point, Credo’s not sure when, he’s lost his shirt and his hair’s caught in the sweat of his back, sticking to his face and his skin.

“No, no,” she assures him. “I’m on my period. I can’t while I’m on my period.”

Credo looks at her blankly.

She takes a deep breath. “My monthly bleed, my period. I can’t till it’s over. But there’s other things I could do.”

“You’re not wearing a rag,” he says, confused.

“I use something else, right up inside, you can’t see it,” she pants, holding his face up. “God, Credo, I want you so bad, but I can’t, not today. Let me bring you off.”

It takes Credo a moment to realise it’s not no Violet’s saying, but not yet. “What do you want to do, make my cock crow?”

“I don’t know what you call it. I’d call it a blow job. I don’t know why it’s called that, but I want to Credo, God, I want to.” She leans down and kisses him, desperate and driven, but even so, she’s lost none of her skills as her lips and tongue tease his mouth.

Credo lies back on the floor, pulling her with him with one hand, the other and one of hers unlacing his breeches and pulling him free. It occurs to him that he’s got a comfortable and private bedroom
one flight down, but he’s doing nothing that breaks the moment.

He doesn’t pull his breeches off or his boots and even as she leans back to get a look at him. He feels her eyes rove over his body and he’s suddenly shy, praying to the Saviour that he pleases her, that his inexperience doesn’t sway her.

Violet runs a hand over his chest, his stomach, her fingers rising and falling over the ridges of his muscles. Credo’s stomach jumps with the sensation of her fingers passing. Her fingers reach his cock and stroke down it, just the tips and her nails. Credo arches up into her touch, stifling the cry that’s started in his throat lest the children hear.

“You look like one of those Greek statues,” Violet says against his mouth, straddling him and leaning over him. She’s still trailing her fingers root to tip over his cock, spiralling her index finger up and down, slow and languorous. Credo’s hands range over her back, her hair, tracing the lines of her scars because he can’t see her tattoos.

Violet shudders and a moan catches in her throat as if she can’t remember which part of the breath she was on. She begins to kiss and suck her way across and down his chest, frowning sometimes when she gets a stray hair caught on her tongue and she spits it out. She carries on with her caresses and Credo’s sure she’s just showing off as she sets his skin aflame just with the heat of her breath. He’s writhing under her and it’s all he can do to control himself enough to not throw her off.

All the while those talented lips work, her fingers keep up the endlessly ghosting, drawing patterns he’s sure he can recognise from somewhere. He thinks he can feel her name traced on his dick, precome leaking onto his stomach.

Credo realises she’s reached his cock as she laps ups his precome from his stomach. She’s handling him just a little firmer as if she’s milking him.

“Oh Credo,” Violet says and her voice is husky. He leaks harder, he’s sure of it. Violet swallows, as if her throat’s dry. “I wish you could see what I see right now. You look amazing, like my beautiful angel. And this cock,” Credo looks down at Violet and wishes he could show her the view he’s got, the love of his life on all fours over him and her lovely face next to his cock, her slim hand grasping it. “This cock is one of the most beautiful I’ve ever seen. It’s probably one of the biggest and I’m worrying a little about whether or not I can take it, when the time comes.”

She strokes it and turns her face to it. He dimly wonders how she’ll do it, given that she can’t open her mouth far, but he doesn’t really care, he’ll take whatever she wants to give. Violet moves her whole body forward so she can suck the tip, tonguing the slit. Her hair spills down, molten silk
against his thigh, loud in the quiet hall as it swishes along the floor.

The feel of her mouth on his cock does make him cry out and he struggles to hold himself still against the sensation, lest he hurts her. Credo badly wants to hold her face or her hair, but he doesn’t trust himself to not jerk or pull, so his hands find their way to his own hair.

Violet stops tonguing the tip and begins to move her whole hand up and down, pumping root to tip, moving her whole body back and forth as she kisses and nibbles all along the length and the girth of his shaft, nibbling along the tube and the veins. The delicate bites are nearly more than Credo can take and his legs spasm, pitching Violet forward. He’s caught her cunny with the contact and she whimpers, but it’s not in pain.

The look on her face makes Credo seriously consider pulling her up and taking her, monthlies be damned and to hell with the mess. She recovers herself and the moment passes. She moves back to sucking and nibbling around the head, scraping the ridge with her teeth, Credo brokenly chanting her name as he struggles to keep still.

She’s tracing patterns again with her fingers, alternating between mouth and hand as her tongue echoes the designs the fingers flicker over and around Credo’s cock. Violet flattens and tenses her tongue as she goes, always the outlines of the forms trailing over the sensitive skin. Her mouth is soft and wet as she probes the slit, but never stopping long enough to bring him to climax.

Credo’s skin feels huge, like it can’t contain him, and the longer he takes to come, the worse it gets. It’s almost as if he’s melting, dissolving away from his flesh and just becoming pure sensation, light and sound. The only times he’s felt like this was his first time -and he’s not going to sully now, with Violet by thinking about that – and his Ascension. It’s almost like he’s passed into another dimension and become a creature of magic, transcendent, hyperaware of everything around him, from the floor under his back to the air on his chest and the scent of Violet’s perfume. He can understand how sex like this can power rituals or transcend dimensions.

*No,* Credo corrects himself. *Not sex. This is making love. This is why it’s so transcendent. Love is divine.*

“Violet,” he breathes and at that moment, she looks up at him and there’s almost a dark look on her face, like she’s some kind of avenging Goddess. It’s so shot through with desire and pleasure that it twists something deep inside him and he can’t help it, everything connects up, searing through his body, rippling up through his dick, landing in hot, wet spurts on his stomach.

Credo can’t move as his breath comes in great gasps, like he can’t get enough air in his lungs. He’s
flying, surely? Maybe he has inherited his mother’s powers, but they skip the men, go to the girls? He can feel the floor, like it’s grounding him, but he can feel the tree that grew the wood, the summers it went through and the birds that nested in it. He feels like he’s connected to the Universe, but mostly to Violet, her hands working him through, his right hand grabbing hold of her left as he tries to pull her up to share a kiss.

She resists the pull and stays crouched on all fours. The way she’s looking at him makes him wish he was in her head, but it can’t be too much different to his. She’s smiling her lopsided quirk, the one her son’s inherited, as she dabbles a delicate finger through the come on his stomach. She raises her fingertip to her lips and licks it clean, before cleaning up his come with her mouth. When she’s done, Violet sits up and licks her lips.

Credo almost comes again. It’s the sexiest thing he’s ever seen.

In her own time, Violet crawls up his body and cuddles into him, reaching for the bottle of Cassar. She holds it for him as they trade the bottle back and forth, till his whistle’s wet enough for him to speak. He doesn’t though.

There’s nothing the wrapping of his arms around her and opening of her mouth to his can’t say a thousand times better than all the words in the world.

***

The first thing they did was take her rings off and put his back on. The plain band is alien on her ring finger, marking her as property. The rings He placed on her finger marked her as a partner.

They’ve done something to it, she realises. She can’t port or use her powers.

She doesn’t know if it’s day or night, but she’s worked out enough of the rhythm of the day in the time she’s been here. It’s been a day and a half since she got here, she thinks, so two days since they tore her away from home.

There’s a pattern, she thinks. The soft-voice man never locks the door, the other man always does and the older man who tries to make her say that four letter word does too. She thinks they’re taking it in shifts.
Even so she’s not waiting to be rescued.

She pats her stomach and tries the door.

The light as she opens it stings her eyes.

The hallway is empty.

She creeps down it.

She listens to their handovers and she knows he’s come for her. They’re trying not to panic, but he’s more powerful than they anticipated. She hears the word ascension a few times.

“She seems to like demons, kinky little bitch. You should do it, you’ll get more benefit from it than us,” she hears the one who seems to hate her say. The one who tries to make her say the name he doesn’t deserve seems to agree.

“I’ll do it,” says the soft-voiced one. “Sooner rather than later, or we’ve no chance.”

“Don’t be so sure. We’ve been fighting demons for centuries. We’ve got more than a few tricks up our sleeves.” She can hear the one who tries to make her say that word walking round and she realises where she is.

She slips to the kitchen, using the servant’s stairs.

She’s avoiding the creaks. She knows where they all are – the two of them snuck out this house often enough for their trysts.

She almost makes it to the front door.

“Did you hear that? Go check her.”
“She won’t have gone anywhere, she’s near dropping it.”

“She’s a sly little cunt, you should know that.”

“Will you stop calling her that? I can’t see anything.”

He must see her from where he’ll be standing and it gives her the courage to make a run for it.

She sees the soft-voiced man turn away from the window.

“She’s got out!” It’s the older one and he sounds deep inside the house. He doesn’t deserve the title he tries to make her use.

“The fuck? How’d she manage that?” the one who hates her sees her in the garden as she nearly makes the gate. “Get back here, you little bitch!”

He catches her fast, too fast to be normal, appearing beside her.

He swings his sword and she raises her arms instinctively.

She feels the bones snap and she realises he used the flat of his sword.

Then the pain hits.

She’s never felt pain like it, even when he punches her face so hard she feels more of her jaw and face shatter.
Chapter Notes

I have no actual idea what women do in girly nights. I had to ask my workmates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fortuna, 15 years earlier

Credo wakes with a start, a sense of wrongness pervading everything, reaching over for her. The bed’s empty and cold. He turns the light on, calling quietly for her. Surely Violet wouldn’t sneak away in his sleep, like he was a common doxie? Not after the last few days?

Credo tries to resist the urge to check for money on the bedside table, telling himself he’s looking for a note. Perhaps she had to slip away early for her last in-touch day? It must be that. She must have said earlier yesterday and he’s forgotten. It’s been a busy few days.

It must be that.

He gets up, not bothering to pull on some underpants as he begins to check the room. Her clothes are still there and so’s his shirt, so she didn’t put them on to go out, if she did.

Pull yourself together, Credo. You’re rambling.

Then, Credo realises. Every time he’s been in her room, there’s always been a bedside light on.

Nero and Kyrie have nightlights to keep the dark at bay.

Violet must do the same thing.

Credo checks the nooks and crannies of his bedroom, in case she’s hid in the wardrobes in her…dissociated… wasn’t that what Marianna had called it?...state. She isn’t there and he fights the rising panic what if she’s got out the house? What if she falls down one of the cliffs or the stairs? The house is in Top of the Town, Nine fucking Hells. She could fall in the Ilma Ikhal that splits the town. I don’t even know if she can swim. Could Vee swim? Doesn’t mean Violet can swim.
Godspit and shit, Godspit and shit.

Credo realises he’s not tried the most obvious place – the ensuite.

He opens the door carefully, hoping she’s just gone to attend to herself and scolding himself for missing it. He nearly doesn’t see her, tucked into a space behind the toilet that even the children would have problems with. She’s folded herself in like she’s trying to make herself invisible.

Credo turns the light on and she shrinks in even further.

“Violet,” he says, softly and he sees her try to press herself as far back as she can go. She manages another inch and he’s impressed at how limber she must be to get all five-ten of her in there. “Violet? It’s Credo.”

He tries to think how to coax her out without making it worse. “Why are you there?”

“Hidin’.” It’s slurred and muffled by her knees.

“Who from?” he asks, gently. He lies on his stomach, not touching her. He thinks he knows which part of her ordeal she’s reliving. Every word she says twists a knife in his heart.

“Hurme.”

“He’s not going to hurt you. Not anymore.”

Credo hopes that he’s saying the right things to guide her gently out of her fugue. He doesn’t chance to touch her. “You’re safe, trezor.”

“Scapin’. Hidin, then scapin.”

“We can escape through the door. I can get you right out of here.”
Credo thinks he can see her relax, just a little.

“Slookinfome.”

“He won’t find you here, trezor,” he tells her.

“Keemesafe?”

“I’ll keep you safe.” Credo still doesn’t touch her. “I can get you away.”


“You’re all fixed now. All better. He’s not coming.” Then Credo hits on it. “He can’t. You’re on your period. Doesn’t want the mess.”

“M’messy? Messy safe now?” Violet’s raised her head slightly and she’s watching him through her hair.

She doesn’t really see him though, Credo thinks. “Blood everywhere. I’m going to have to clean it up or Mama will be so annoyed.”

“My Mama’s dead. Mmessy? Baby safe?” She’s raised her head and her hair’s fell away slightly. He thinks she’s coming out of it.

“Baby’s very safe. He’s sleeping. You’re messy with your period. Need to come out so we can clean up the floor. Then you need to sleep. Can’t be comfortable there, all squashed up. He’s not coming while you’re messy. Come out and help me clean so Mama won’t be angry.”

“I don have a Mama. Your Mama killed her.” She’s looking right at him and she may not know where she is, but Verity knows him.
Credo fights down his horror. “So let’s get you out that corner. You’ll be safer in bed. Look—“ he points out the door “-the light’s back. It’s not dark. You’re all fixed and he’s not coming for you. I won’t let him. You’re all fixed. Look!”

Credo moves his arms about, as if he’s looking to see if they’re injured. Violet copies the movement and looks at her arms in wonder. “Mah legs fix too?”

“Try them and see, because I need to clean in that corner, before Mama chases us.”

“Am stuck.” Violet holds out her arms to him. “Legs numb.”

Empty Night, how long has she been there? Credo takes her hands and gets on his knees in one smooth move. “I’m going to pull you out, alright?”

She nods, slowly at first and then harder, that childish sense of humour she had then showing through. She hasn’t lost it, but it’s a positive sign it’s coming out.

“On three. One, two, three –“

“Pop!”

She comes free, but she can’t even unwind her legs, they’ve gone so numb. “The light’s on,” she says, stupidly. “And my legs don’t work. But they’re normal.”

She looks round, confused, like she’s not where she’s expecting, so she’s coming out of it. “You’ve got a cobweb up there.”

“It’s Kyrie’s pet spider, Morris. Leave him be.” Credo turns to look at her. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“I can’t feel my legs.”

Credo positions himself and picks Violet up in a bridal carry as he stands.
Violet gives a little squeak and holds tighter. “You’re tall. And strong.”

“That I am. I’m able to carry you now,” he says as he places her on her side of the bed. He climbs in beside her and she cuddles in. She’s asleep in moments, tired out as she is by the episode.

Credo makes sure she’s comfortable, knowing she’ll probably not remember much in the morning.

At least, that’s what he hopes as he resists the urge to turn out the light. He kisses her forehead. “I can carry you now, Vee. I won’t drop you this time.”

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“But why can’t you stay?” Demands Nero. He’s folded his arms and he’s petting his lip. “You live here now.”

“I don’t, champ. I live in my own house and I want to see my friends. They go on Tuesday and I won’t see them again for ages.” Violet’s trying to reason with a four year old. She’s on a hiding to nothing.

“But how can you be my Mama if you stay in Castleview?” He’s about to cry angry tears. There’s so much indignation in his little body it’s almost funny. “Mamas and Papas live with their children and stay in the same house and kiss naked –”

“What on Earth? Nero, enough now!” Credo jumps in. Nero isn’t stupid, he can see the adults get flustered every time he brings it up and like all children, it just encourages him. “Violet’s friends miss her and you’ll still see her. She’ll be going to work soon all day, anyway.”

“I’ll still be over at night and when Credo stays over, he can bring you pair, if Dorcas agrees,” says Violet, trying to mollify the child.

Kyrie stamps on Violet’s toes. “You’re making Nero cry! And you’re going to eat Daffodil!”
"Kyrie! Behave yourself!" Scolds Credo. "Daffodil isn't even here yet and carrying on like this won't get her here any faster!"

Violet isn't hurt by Kyrie, she almost looks like she's about to laugh at the little girl. "So you don't want to help me decorate a room for you and Nero? You don't want all those extra toys for when you sleep over?"

"Is that what you're doing, Violet?" Asks Nero, latching on to one of the magic words in the sentence. "You're not leaving us, you're just having a sleepover?"

“Yes, I’m having a sleepover,” she agrees.

“So your house is just a playhouse?” asks Kyrie. “Can we play in it?”

“Course you can,” says Violet. “When my friends are away, you can come for a sleepover.”

“But then you’ll come home?” Nero clarifies, anxiously.

Violet hasn’t the heart to argue and she’s about to answer when Credo answers for her. “Yes, she’ll come home.”

He’s got an apologetic look on his face when their eyes meet over Nero’s platinum head.

“Good,” says Nero, climbing up on to Violet’s knee. He’s got a story book with him and he opens it at a well-worn page, snuggling in as Violet begins to tell the tale. “You’re coming to the party, aren’t you?”

He looks between Credo and Violet.

“Of course she is,” says Kyrie. “Credo is Vee’s Prince Charming and they can get married again and have lots of babies. If she wears a ballgown she won’t even need a wedding dress.”

Violet gives Credo an amused look. “What nonsense do you fill little girls’ heads with here?”
“It’s not a bad idea though,” says Credo. “Why don’t you invite your friends? Under the circumstances, I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

“None of us have anything suitable and we don’t know the dances,” protests Violet.

“We do have shops and if all else fails, I’m sure between Mama, Pinny and Edith, we’ll find something,” replies Credo. “And at least it might keep them occupied enough that Castleview gets some peace.”

***

“Well, fuck me,” says Marianna. “It lives. We thought you’d fell down a big black hole.”

“Maybe she didn’t, but I bet he did,” teases Lena. “I don’t blame you. Is he as built as he looks?”

“Fuck, yes,” says Violet. “I haven’t fucked him yet, but he’s built all over.”

“Already kicked us to the curb? Could you not have waited till we were gone?” scowls Marianna. “It’s going to be months, maybe years before we’re all back together again. This was meant to be one last girls’ holiday and you’re off with a piece of dick.”

“I didn’t plan it, Maz, it just happened,” Violet tries to mollify her. “And it’s not been every day, it’s only really been the last couple of nights.”

“All right? We’ve barely seen you through the day.” Marianna snaps accusingly. “And even at night, you’re just not into it. You’re ruining our last proper holiday!”

“I’m not going to kid on just to keep you happy, Maz!” retorts Violet. “I’m just not into getting wrecked every night anymore. You knew this was coming. We’re all growing up and wanting different things. I didn’t mean for it to move as fast as it is, but life’s too short to wait.”

“Rein it in, Marianna!” growls Lena. “Cassie hasn’t been back in three days and I’m betting that
you’re not going to give her all this aggro when she wanders back in!”

“Yeah, but she’s off partying with those Scots guys. We know she’s having fun.” Protests Marianna. “He’s got kids, Violet! You’re 22! Far too young to be weighing yourself down like that! He lives with his mother, for fuck’s sake.”

“That’s just how it is here! If it wasn’t for being sponsored, where would we live? How many of our classmates have to live at home? And two of them are married!” Lena’s not letting Marianna away with it.

“Exactly! That’s what I mean!” Marianna sweeps her hands around the room, gesturing to Fortuna. “What the fuck does this place have to offer? Yeah, it’s a great job, but it’s not just a job now is it? You’ve got to live!”

“So, I stay here for a couple of years and then move on. What the fuck is wrong with you? It’s a fuckin’ island, not a fuckin’ prison!” Violet fires back. “Maybe I want Jane Austen for a while, not Trainspotting!”

“This isn’t you, Violet – “

“What the fuck isn’t? It’s my life, Christsake. Where’s this coming from?” demands Violet.

“What if it fucks up, Violet? Have you read that Undertaking? Do you know they have capital punishment here? They tie people to the rocks and let them drown in the tide!”

“So? You believe in the death penalty,” points out Lena. “Have you found out something we should know, Maz?”

“Violet, if it goes wrong here, it’s going to go totally tits up. There’s no one here on your side.” She raises her voice to head Violet’s protest off. “Yeah, Umbrella will fly you out or get a lawyer, it wouldn’t be the first time they’ve got us out of scrapes, but what’s a good story anywhere else is illegal here. What if they don’t get to you in time? What if it threatens a project? None of us are so special, they wouldn’t leave us swinging if it was bad enough. And there’s more than a few who’d like to see us brought down a peg or two, say we had it coming, might actually calm us down a little.”
“I’m with Lena. Have you found out something I should know? Because if it’s just that you’re going back to Raccoon City on your own, you can get to fuck.” Violet folds her arms in irritation.

“What if Credo’s secretly a weirdo? If he murders you and buries you in the basement, how are we going to know?”

“And there it is,” says Violet. “How do we know that Cassie isn’t sleeping with the fishes?”

“Because we saw her last night,” replies Lena. “But, yeah, she could be dead now. Maz, you’re just going to have to face it. We’re not at college anymore. Life’s moving on. We’ll still see each other, but it’s going to be different.”

“I don’t want it to be different,” says Marianna, plaintively. “I’m not ready for this to be it and even if it was, I just wanted one last girls’ holiday before we all went off.”

Violet and Lena move into a group hug. Marianna accepts it before asking, “So, Credo, big everywhere, then?”

***

Lady Kristina is already seated at Peter’s table when he comes in from his walk with Diane. “Who in all the Nine Hells is she?”

Diane’s about to become indignant, when Peter pats her hand. “Maris, Madam Langdon will have her breakfast in the morning room.”

Maris bows and quickly loads up a tray with portions from the table, thanking Diane when she holds the door open for the laden maid. Diane shoots Lady Kristina a scowl before closing the door.

“Well, my breakfast table has certainly increased in popularity these last few days,” says Peter, dryly. “I must send Credo Micellef a thank you note.”

“That hell-spawned bastard’s made a mockery of me, Peter! What are you going to do about it,
hie?” she pouts as she picks a piece of the crust off the croissant and flings it across the room.

“Nothing, and stop making a mess of my table. Maris has enough chores without you adding to them.” Peter actually takes the pastry from her and cuts it for her. “Almond, lemon or apple jelly?”

“Almond paste,” she scowls. “Call Maris back. This is her job.”

“I don’t discuss private business in front of servants and neither should you.” He spreads the paste and sets the pastry back down for her. “Do the next one yourself.”

“Servants don’t care what we’re talking about,” she scoffs. “Why should they? They’re servants.”

“Truly, you cover yourself with glory, Kristina. I don’t know how Credo could resist you.”

“But he did, Peter! He did!” She flings herself out of the chair and begins pacing the room. “Why did you help him get round Papa? Jem was all ready for his challenge!”

“Did you wish to see your brother injured, even killed?” asks Peter. He holds up his hand as she protests. “And Dorcas would have realised eventually that she could have gone for Nero. You’d only have stalled things by a month at most. And even if you could counter Dorcas’ Compel objections, you’d have spent the entire three years of your marriage either fighting in Committee with both of them or he’d have married Pinny before the day was out.”

“He’d have never got it up in the Master’s Chamber. She’s the wrong Agius,” Lady Kristina says scornfully. “And I’ve got my doubts about his new whore.”

“Pinny’s dying and no one will argue with her,” replies Peter. “And you need not start.”

Lady Kristina looks like she’s about to be snide, but sees the look in Peter’s eyes and decides even she shouldn’t chance her luck. “And to be cast aside for that Mainlander! Especially after she bested me in the gelateria like that. I can’t bear it, Peter! I can’t bear the shame!”

“Oh, stay your pelt, Kristina. You’re only in a miff because you’ve ran into the only people on the island who neither fear nor fete you.” Peter punctuates his sentence with his knife. “You never
stood a chance with any of them and your pride overwhelms whatever good sense you may have. You’d be better placed to consider your future, for I fear even your Father must now admit you’ve pushed his loving accommodations to their limit.”

This stops Lady Kristina in her tracks. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t just cause affront to yourself, Kristina. You black-affronted yourself *publically*, in addition to embroiling your whole family in your shame for all to see.” Peter takes a bite of his croissant and a sip of his coffee. “*I could show both your whores a thing or two,* calling Josh Agius a bastard, trying to engineer a duel through your father to restore your hurt pride? Lord Scerri and Lord Agius are meeting with Lord Calleja at your Papa’s house as we speak.”

“How do you know?” she demands, then goes white as she realises. Lord Agius and Lord Calleja have seats on the Faith Committee, indeed General Calleja is the Leader. She shakes her head in horror. “Not Cassius Calleja! Never him! He’s a dolt! He’s so beneath me, even the worms can’t cover him!”

“How old are you now. Kristina? 24? Your Archive Training finished three years ago and your father’s wish to refuse Courting Suites until you were 21 has long since passed into obsolescence.” Peter taps her plate. “Come, eat. You’ve strength to build for your wedding night. Happen as the Wedding Spell won’t work on you, they’ll have to witness the whole thing and I know from experience how you like to put on a show.”

“Peter! So cruel! So savage, when I’m so traumatised at this news!” Melodramatic as she is, Lady Kristina is genuinely horrified at the consequences facing her. She sits down heavily.

“Hie there, Kristina, don’t be so glum. Instead of fornication, you can commit adultery, which I’m told is much more fun. It’s not as if your husband will question you.” Peter finishes his croissant.

Lady Kristina glares at him.

“For all you’ll swear to walk where he leads, we all know it’ll be you leading him and he’ll never raise his voice or a hand to stay you, as long as you learn discretion.” He sets down a pastry before her. “And that’s something you’d never have had with Credo. He’d never have put up with your petulant shenanigans. You’ll be able to have your career, your income, your prestige and your freedom, all for the bargain price of one husband.”
“When you put it like that,” she says, clearly considering her lot in life. “But I haven’t heard about Special Projects yet. Is there really nothing you can do?”

“Well, my dear, that’s why Credo’s new Ladybird was brought on. You weren’t even considered.”

Even Peter’s surprised when Lady Kristina screeches in rage and sends her chair flying through the dining room window.

***

Alice shows Dorcas and the children through to the lounge. Pinny greets her warmly and scolds Josh for trying to steal a cake. “Why don’t you all go and play in your room, Josh?”

“Don’t wanna,” replies the little boy. He picks up a string of pearls and puts it on. “Wanna play dress up with Mami and Edie.”

“By the Saviour, that’s a fine spread you’ve put on,” says Dorcas, taking in the loaded luncheon table. “Aren’t you worried you’ll get it on the clothes?”

“I’m more worried Nero’s going to poke his eye out with that tiara,” says Edith as she takes it from the boy and places it on his head. “Edward won’t be back till late, so we can take our time. I’m rather looking forward to a girly afternoon. I never seem to get them.”

“Your profession will never isolate you in this family,” says Pinny firmly. “Before they come, I have a certain dress in mind for Violet.”

“I know you’ve been raiding Verity’s wardrobe, I’ll be interested to see which dress you mean,” replies Edith. “You and Edward have been rather in cahoots the last day or so.”

“And I, for I know Verity had many dresses that we never saw, for she was never one for dressing up if she didn’t need to,” agrees Dorcas. The doorbell goes and Alice announces the four friends. They just about hear Violet hiss, “Do not show me up,” and Edith hides a smile.

Nero and Kyrie run straight up to Violet, hauling her down to hug and kiss her. Dorcas sees the
look that Marianna gives the other girls and decides she doesn’t like her. She readies her face in a smile. In the long run, Marianna doesn’t matter and as long as she doesn’t get in the way of Credo’s happiness, she can tolerate the girl.

“Oh my God, you’ve been eating cement since yesterday!” Violet groans with the effort of lifting up both children, but she’s strong and she manages. “Right, I tell you everyone’s name and you have to tell everyone, OK?”

“Ma-eanna, Lena and Cassie. Mama, Vee, Pinny, Edie, Ne-o, Josh and I’m Kee-ay,” says Kyrie on one breath as she points out each person. Everyone applauds her and Violet gives her a big kiss.

“How did you get everyone right?” Asks Lena. “You magic?”

“Mama’s magic an’ Pinny’s magic and Vee’s magic an I’ll be magic one day,” says Kyrie, seriously.

“Don’t tell everyone or they’ll all want one,” Violet stage-whispers to the little girl. Kyrie giggles.

“I’m so looking forward to comparing styles and techniques,” says Dorcas. She gestures to a wooden chest. “I’ve brought my box of tricks.”

“So have we,” says Marianna, holding up a Caboodle box and waving a hand at the various bags and vanity cases the other three have brought. “You’ve got electricity, right?”

Dorcas and Pinny share a frown.

“The lights are electric. So they probably do have electric,” says Lena, with a long-suffering sigh. “For someone so clever, you’re dumb, Mazzie.”

“Only God’s perfect,” retorts Marianna, good-naturedly. “We brought trailing sockets for our hair stuff.”

“Oh my God, look at this!” Violet picks up a jewelled hair comb from the table, putting Nero down to do it. “It’s gorgeous!”
“I would love to style your hair, Violet. It’s so long and thick,” says Pinny.

“Oh God, she has such beautiful hair,” agrees Lena, reaching across and stroking it. “It’s so smooth and shiny.”

“Stop it, you weirdos!” Violet laughs. “You’re creeping me out, stalkers!”

“I love Vee’s hair,” announces Kyrie, picking up a handful of Violet’s hair and rubbing it against her cheek while she sucks her thumb. “It’s snugglier than Mama’s hair.”

“Place a wager on who’s out the will,” replies Dorcas.

“Who’s Will?” asks Kyrie.

“I can’t wait to see what you think of Mainland cosmetics, Dorcas,” says Edith. She points to sockets where Marianna and Cassie can plug in their tongs and straighteners and heated rollers.

“The water’s on, Miss Edith, if any of the ladies want to wet their hair and I’ve brought in another basket of strips and papers,” Alice says as she brings in another large basket that’s filled to the brim with scraps of fabric and rustling with what sounds like tissue paper. She sets it on one of the tables.

“What’s that?” Lena asks, accepting a glass of wine from Edith. Edith begins making sure everyone has wine, except for Violet and Pinny.

Dorcas looks at Lena, confused. “To curl your hair with, Lena. What would you use?”

“We got these,” Lena gestures to the side table covered with a towel and an assortment of hair tools.

Dorcas comes over to the table with Lena and Violet. “Watch your hands,” says the latter as Kyrie follows her over, reaching for one of the tools.
“How do you use it?” Asks Dorcas, fascinated.

Violet looks over her shoulder. Marianna and Cassie are good naturedly arguing about a dress they’ve both seen that Dorcas has brought over as they’re closer in height to the older woman.

“Take your hair down and I’ll show you,” replies Violet, picking up the hair tongs and very carefully curls Dorcas’ hair. She holds it for a few seconds before cautiously sliding the curl off the metal barrel. “Kyrie, pass me the hairgrip please.”

Kyrie passes Violet a bobbie pin. “There you go, Vee.”

Violet pins the curl. “Say Violet, Kyrie.”

Dorcas feels the curl. “I’d never thought of pinning curls like that. I’d use irons heated from the fire and papillotes.”

“Papers?” translates Violet. “Is that what the tissue paper is?”

“Curling papers,” corrects Dorcas. “But you have to get it just right or you can singe your hair.”

“Whoa! Really?” Marianna stops tussling over the dress. “That won’t happen with our stuff.”

“See, Violet, I can say your name,” says Kyrie, saying it faultlessly.

“Then why do you keep calling me Vee? I mean you can if you want, but you’re the only person that does.” Violet carries on curling and pinning Dorcas’ hair. “Under no circumstances use the hotbrush or the heated rollers. On hair our length, it just gets tangled in the prongs and you have to cut it free.”

Violet pulls out some skeins of hair from around her head. They’re of varying lengths, but they’re all shorter than her main length. Dorcas makes a sympathetic face and points at a few strands that are shorter than her tailbone length. “Singed off.”
‘Yeek,’ says Violet. ‘So why call me Vee, Chubby Cheeks?’

‘The Blue Man in your head calls you that,’ says Kyrie, matter of factly.

Pinny and Edith stop what they’re doing and watch Violet. Violet gives Kyrie a kiss and smiling at the little girl says, ‘Shall we curl yours next?’

‘What’s the fabric for?’ Lena asks.

‘Curling your hair, rag-rolling,’ replies Pinny. ‘I used to use it to curl my hair overnight or through the day for something at night. I used to do it wet and let my hair dry. My hair was very similar to yours, Violet.’

‘Bendy rollers for that,’ says Marianna, pulling said rollers from Violet’s bag.

‘Can you sleep in them?’ asks Pinny, with a sparkle in her eye.

‘You got me there,’ agrees Marianna.

‘Can I do your hair?’ asks Nero. He’s still wearing Edith’s tiara.

‘I’ll show you how to pleat it,’ offers Marianna. ‘I’ve got all different colours of braid hair.’

‘You can make your hair match your dress? Are you magic?’ asks Nero, awestruck at the idea of rainbow coloured hair.

‘I like playing with Edie’s hair,’ says Josh, shyly. ‘I miss Mami’s hair before it all fell out.’

‘It’s starting to grow back though, qalb ta’ qalbi,’ replies Pinny, self-consciously scratching under her turban.
“I love Mazzie’s box braids. They look awesome,” says Lena. “Only trouble is it takes hours, even with two of us doing it. Maybe do twists for Monday? Be quicker.”

Dorcas is looking through Marianna’s Caboodle at her cosmetics. She pulls out a Barry M lipstick and spends a few minutes trying to open it. When she does and twists it up, she nearly drops it in surprise. “Is this your rouge?”

“Lipstick. Try it, you might suit it,” says Lena.

Dorcas looks behind them to Edith, who’s sitting on the floor so Josh can paint her lips.

Lena mimes the act of applying lipstick and Dorcas tries it. “It feels like lip pomade. How do you make it?”

“Damned if I know. It’s made in a factory and you just buy it in the shop.” Marianna thinks for a moment. “Wait. You mean you make your own cosmetics?”

“Of course. I hadn’t realised Mainlanders didn’t,” replies Dorcas.

The Mainland women crowd around Dorcas, murmurs and exclamations of “Awesome!” “Wow!” “No way!” leading Dorcas to preen ever-so-slightly and start pulling out her jars and potions. “I make my own soaps and – “

“Can you make bath bombs?” asks Marianna.

“I don’t know what that is, but if you describe it, I can try,” offers Dorcas. She looks over to Edith and Pinny.

“I’m sure we’ll have the items you’ll need in the pantry. I’ll ring for Alice.” Edith says as she presses a bell. “Stay here, children. I don’t want any of you around lye or boiling oils.”

Pinny and Edith exchange a look as Alice escorts Dorcas and her students from the room. “You not
“Nah, I’ve got plenty time for that mother-in-law bonding crap later. Besides, they’re happy here,” she says, indicating Kyrie sitting while Violet braids her hair as the little girl puts make-up on Nero. He’s found a string of pearls and his tiara. Like all little children let loose with their mothers’ make-up box, Kyrie has him looking like a clown.

“And you never disturb a happy child,” agrees Pinny. “If I could borrow you, though? I have a dress in mind for you. Being as tall and thin as we are – well, I used to be – it can be difficult to find clothes that fit. If you don’t mind my sister’s clothes, because I don’t see her coming back for them any time soon.”

Violet shrugs. “I guess it’s a shame to waste them, if you’re sure? I wouldn’t like to take anything that’s sentimental to you.”

“I’ll let you know. Edith, pass me my stick, everything’s an effort today.” Violet rushes to help Pinny up as Edith gives her walking stick over. “I’ll be glad when this ball is over and we can have some breathing space.”

“You need to sleep, Mami,” says Josh. He doesn’t get up though and keeps playing with the make up from everyone’s boxes. He’s got it displayed and he’s got a box with a pullout drawer on it and cardboard cut to look like credit cards. Edith’s pretending to buy make up and jewellery.

“I’m a beautician to trade. I used to work in a beauty salon that didn’t mind staff bringing in their children,” says Pinny in explanation. “When I left here, I needed to find a job quickly and I’ve always enjoyed clothes and beauty.”

“Must have been a culture shock, then, Spain, after this,” says Violet as she helps her up the stairs. It takes Pinny a good while and several stops to catch her breath.

“That’s an understatement, but I was 19. You can cope with anything when you’re young.” She leads the way to Violet’s room. “I still sleep in my old room. Papa wants to turn the drawing room into a bedroom for me, but I’m not there yet.”

“How will you be treated if you’re here? Do they have the facilities you need?” Violet realises what she’s said and mentally kicks herself. “I’m-”
“Don’t you dare apologise. I feel like we’ve become firm friends, very fast and I’m glad about that. I don’t have time to waste, Violet. So don’t you ever worry about offending me.” Pinny’s brown eyes sparkle and Violet hugs her warmly. Pinny returns it, just as hard. “I want to spend my time enjoying myself and making memories. I’m also dropping wisdom everywhere.”

Pinny opens the door to Verity’s room and ushers Violet inside. The room is exactly as Verity left it five years previously.

“I take it everyone listens when you’re dying?” grins Violet. “This room is stunning. It’s huge.”

She looks around, seeing the loom, still with the last piece Verity was working on and the various embroidery hoops lying beside them. “That is amazing. I can just about sew a button on a shirt.”

“Vee and I could both make our own clothes. I was better at it than she was, but she was no slouch. She just really wasn’t that interested in it.” Pinny sits on the bed for a moment, while Violet looks around the room, especially at Verity’s bookcase. She pulls some books off and looks at them. “These are similar to what I study, except more New-Agey or like really old alchemy.”

“Perhaps what you study is merely a new way to put old truths,” says Pinny.

“I see what you mean about the adages,” snorts Violet and Pinny laughs.

“So, lets see this dress, then,” says Violet, sitting down at the mirror. There’s a photo on the desk of two teenage girls and one of Credo and one of the girls. “That your sis?”

“Yes, and that’s me,” says Pinny, pointing to the prettier and slightly taller girl. She picks up a brush and carefully begins to brush Violet’s hair. “I was quite a looker. I know what you’re thinking. I think it too.”

“I was thinking I’m not surprised I’ve been getting funny looks from everyone. It’s not a massive resemblance, but it’s there,” says Violet, looking at the photo of Credo and Verity. “That said, Edith looks more like her and you than I do. I thought at first you and Edith were sisters.”

“It’s best not to think about that too much, given her relationships with Credo and Papa,” grimaces Pinny. “I imagine Credo’s explained it though?”
“Yeah, he’s not keeping secrets, I don’t think.” Violet wriggles happily at the sensation of the brush through her hair.

“Good. Forgive me for dropping another pearl of wisdom upon you, but he knows his heart where you’re concerned and I think you do too. You should move at the pace your heart’s setting. Time’s short and you never know how much.” Pinny’s amazed she’s still able to stand and brush Violet’s hair. She doesn’t say she’s missed this. “Hmmm. I think it’s a shame to bind this hair up. What about—"

Pinny takes a bobble and ties a section of Violet’s hair in a ponytail, before taking a wire loop and pulling it through, twisting the pony tail. “Have you still got that comb?”

“Here,” says Violet, handing it to Pinny.

Pinny slides it in the top of the twist and picks up a hand-mirror, holding it so Violet can see the back of her head. “I could curl all this hair, a cascade of tumbling curls down your back. Not ringlets, though. I’d break them up.”

“Sounds good,” says Violet. “Let’s see this dress, then.”

Pinny walks slowly across to the wardrobe and pulls a lilac dress out from it. It’s in a shimmering silk satin, the light rippling across it. It’s got Princess cap sleeves and a round neck. The waist is a high line under the bust. It’s got contrasting gold brocade embroidery that forms a familiar pattern round the waist, cuffs and neckline. There’s no gathers in the material, rather it’s tight and figure skimming to Violet’s body, flaring out slightly at the knee.

“That’s beautiful,” gasps Violet. “Do I need to wear a corset with it?”

“Only if you want,” Pinny looks at it considering. “You could wear a basque, perhaps, as a modern alternative, but whatever you think will make Credo weak at the knees. It’s not like the straps will show nor your tattoos. Fortuna’s very conservative and Credo has a position to keep.”

Violet sheds her summer dress quickly and Pinny helps her into the gown.
“I can’t believe the fit. I don’t have to do anything for it,” says Pinny in amazement. “It’s like it was made for you.”

“You look like a Princess, Vee,” says a little voice and Nero appears at the door. “Is that your wedding dress?”

“Nope, my party dress. Dance with me?” Violet holds out her hands. She’s careful to keep him away from the dress, as he’s covered in bright make-up and still wearing his tiara. Nero takes her hands and they waltz round the room.

“I have something to ask you,” says Pinny. “I don’t know how you’ll take it.”

“Ask it, I just won’t answer the question if I don’t like it,” says Violet, humming a tune for their dance.

“Papa has taken the notion that you’re Verity and won’t be persuaded otherwise,” says Pinny. “I told him about DNA tests and he wants to take one. He wanted me to brush your hair for DNA, but I said I’d just ask you.”

Violet stops for a moment and a range of emotions flit across her face. “I appreciate you actually asking me. But what makes your Dad think…”

“You look just enough like her and you came here at the same time I did.” Pinny smiles, ruefully. “Papa will never forgive himself for how he treated both of us, but he was worse to her. He clutches at any straw he can. He’s done so much for refugees and for women’s rights in Fortuna, but he’ll never right his wrongs.”

“Do you think I am?” asks Violet.

“How could you be? Even if you can’t remember your past, you still had one. And if you are my sister, what happened? Verity was pregnant when she eloped. Where’s the baby? Where’s her husband?” Pinny sits down on the bed. “No, Papa clutches at straws and I should like to disabuse him of this particular one. It helps nobody.”

“I could probably arrange for the test tomorrow, if your father’s willing,” says Violet.
“I’ll tell him,” says Pinny. “And thank you.”

“Violet, dance!” whines Nero, tugging on her hands.

“God, you’re bossy!” huffs Violet as she starts to hum Blue Danube so Nero can twirl her round again.

There’s a flash of a camera and Pinny takes a picture of them.

“I found a disposable camera in a drawer, there’s still plenty left on it,” says Pinny, taking another.

“I want to take one!” says Nero. “Cuddle up, Pinny and Vee!”

Nero takes a picture of the two women cuddling on the bed and then Pinny covers Violet’s dress so she can cuddle Nero for a photo.

“Run downstairs now, I want to get this dress away so it’s safe for Monday,” says Pinny.

Nero skips downstairs, holding onto his tiara.

“Violet,” says Pinny, as the latter hands her back the dress. “Just because you’re not Verity, doesn’t mean I don’t consider you my sister.”

Violet hugs her. “I’m glad we’ve met, even if you’ve only got another twenty minutes.”

Pinny snorts with laughter. “Oh, we’re going to have so much fun, they’ll wish I was dead sooner.”
Well, next chapters are going to be busy - someone gets married, someone gets promoted and Fortuna bites Violet on the ass, hard.

I reckon couple more chapters and then we can catch up with Kyrie and Nero.

I cannot believe I'm 40 hits away from 5K. Thank you so much.
Fortuna, 15 years earlier

Credo can’t sleep. His bed’s too big and too empty without her. He’s kept the bedside light on, just so he can get used to it when Violet’s here to stay. Credo runs his hand over her pillow, tugging on some strands of her hair and rolling over to smell her shampoo from it – honey and almond, his favourite smell. He thinks about the feel of her beside him, the warm silk of her hair spilling over the pillow, her hands trailing down over his body.

Credo slips his own hand down, lightly, the way Violet had the other night. He can see her here, in the lamplight crouched over him, that lacy Mainlander underwear snagging under his calloused fingers. He can’t wait to have her under him, those same calloused fingers inside her, rough against that little nub he knows will make her back arch and her moans break in her throat.

His hand grasps his semi-hard shaft and begins to run his fingers along it, slowly, firmly, but gently, feeling it start to come alive under his touch. He inhales her scent from the pillow.

His door crashes open and Nero jumps onto the bed.

“Sparda’s Balls, Nero! You made me jump!” Credo snaps, a little more harshly than he intends. He sits up carefully, pulling the other pillow over his lap. “Did you have a nightmare?”

Nero doesn’t notice. Instead he looks very thoughtful, the way children do when they’re trying to be grown up. “I want a –“ he concentrates hard as he makes sure he gets it right “- a Dee Enn Ay test.”

“A what?” Credo asks blankly.

“A Dee Enn Ay test so I can find out who I am,” replies Nero, earnestly.

“Why ever would you want a test to tell you who you are? I’m sure such a thing doesn’t exist,” replies Credo. He looks for his underpants on the chair beside the bed, working out if he can put
them on without Nero seeing anything. Oh, there they are. “I’ll make us some hot chocolate and read you a story, then back to bed.”

“Yes, it does! Violet’s having one to find out who she is!”

“What did you say?” Credo turns round and unthinking, grabs the top of Nero’s arms.

“Violet’s having a test to see who she is, Pinny asked her cos Uncle Edward thinks she’s Velily.” Nero frowns, stumbling over the R and the T in her name. “Pinny asked her to have the Dee En Ay test and she’s having it today and I want one too. I’ll still love you and you’ll still be my real Papa, but maybe I’m a lost Prince and we can be rich and live in a Castle!”

“I’ll look into it,” Credo says, fighting himself back under control. “Now, shall we go and get that hot chocolate?”

“Yeah!”

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Once he’s got Nero back down, Credo goes to his mother’s study. It takes him a good hour going through the Mainland periodicals and textbooks, as well as UO’s own in-house journal, but he finds it.

He sinks down into Dorcas’ chair, a sick feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. They need the person and comparisons and it looks like some kind of blood test, but they can test other bodily fluids, though in this case it’s likely to be blood. Seemingly, it takes six weeks for the results to be revealed.

He finds some paper and pen from the top drawer of her bureau and begins making notes. Credo’s not a stupid man, but he’s not a scientist. If he’s reading this right, then Nero’s DNA test will indeed tell Violet who she is, at least if she’s related to the other tests from the other people they’ll need for comparison – in this case Pinny or her father. He doubts they’ll ask Pinny for a sample, especially if they don’t need her.

In six weeks, his entire world – and Nero’s – and Verity’s, Blessed Saviour - could be blown apart for a second time.
He runs his hand over his face and through his hair.

Dorcas has a mirror in her study and Credo looks at himself in it.

“Not this time.”

He feels around the bureau and there’s a *click* as a set of drawers are revealed. He opens the top drawer and pulls out a diagram. It’s the same one as Violet’s got tattooed on her shoulder, next to the animal bite and if she’s smart, she’ll have a version tattooed where no one will see.

“What are you doing, qalbi?” Dorcas opens the door. “Why are you in my desk?”

Credo colours. Dorcas picks up the diagram. “Why are you looking at my disguise spell?”

“Is this the one that can be adapted to hide memories?” Credo ignores her question. “I know you have one, Mama.”

“I have a lot of spells like that, Credo.” Dorcas’ voice is hard. “Why do you need one?”

“What’s the one that can be activated from afar?”

“They all can, if that’s what was set up from the beginning. Why, Credo?” Dorcas reaches to take it from him. Credo smacks his hand down on it.

“I need the one you did for Verity when she was facing the Witch Trial over Abigail’s death.” Credo looks at his mother.

“Why, Credo?” Dorcas asks again.

“Can it alter the body as well?” he asks.
“What, Credo? It’s not meant for that,” Dorcas protests. “What is this about? What are you hiding from me?”

“Best you don’t know, Mama. I might need you to pass a Trial,” says Credo. “Would it work?”

Dorcas shakes her head and starts to pace. “I don’t know, Credo. I’ve never used it for anything physical. I’ve only ever used my spells to subvert.”

“Appearances, memories, Mama,” replies Credo. “So why not physical properties?”

“I’m sure the best it can do would be to convince people they’re not seeing what’s before them,” says Dorcas, a little distractedly.

“Can you make an existing spell change or adapt its purpose?” Credo presses.

“One already cast?”

Credo nods.

Dorcas shrugs. “I don’t know. I’ve never tried the way I think you mean. You’d have to get the person to accept new tracework. Leastways, that’s how I’ve always done it.”

She turns to face him. “What’s this about, Credo? Are you in trouble? Can’t you speak to Peter or Edward?”

Credo scoffs. “Mama, it pains me for this to be the first time I seek the magician and not the mother.”

“Credo. What have you done?”

“Mama!” Credo looks at Dorcas with steel in his eyes. “Verity’s Memory Spell – do you have it or
Dorcas shakes her head and reaches into the drawer. There’s nothing there and it’s not a big drawer, it’s fully extended from the runners, but she pulls out some glyphs with names in red ink on them. “These are all the spells I have for family. I can use them to hide memories, create memories, convince them and others to see what isn’t there.”

“Can you reactivate one already done?” asks Credo, looking at the top one. It’s got his name on it. It’s in his handwriting, but he doesn’t remember signing it.

Dorcas leafs through, until she finds a couple with Verity’s name at the top in red. “I used this one.”

“What does that do?” Credo asks.

“I think you know what it does,” replies Dorcas. “It’s the one you stole years ago when we had a similar conversation. You wouldn’t talk to me then, either. It will veil what is there, reveal what is unseen, at the whim of its wielder.”

“If the person it’s on has powers, will that affect it?” Credo asks urgently. “How will it affect it?”

Dorcas shrugs. “Yes, but the how will depend on the wearer’s magic and if they’re aware of the effects or not. I couldn’t even begin to speculate beyond that.”

Credo taps the picture. “Show me how to power it up.”

***

The soft-voiced man doesn’t come to her for about two days, she thinks, if she’s counted right against the pain, so four days since she was ripped away from home.

The older man takes over her care and feeding, doesn’t even leave the room they’ve got her in when the man who hates her comes to hurt her more. He comes to her three and four times a day and she wishes she could push it down as just another indignity they perpetuate upon her, but it’s
got a particular horror for her.

Everything else has been incidental, even though the soft voiced man and the older one have protested to the other man about how far he’s going.

They don’t really protest about this, even as they’re trying to feed her chilli and caster oil and a million other old wives’ tales. She vomits too much to keep anything down.

“Hang in there, qalbi, Mama’s got you safe.”

Her shattered arms can’t encircle her stomach, but he still kicks when he hears her slurs through her sobs.

The man who hates her holds her arms down while he takes her, relishing her screams as the bones are bent out of shape, grinding against each other.

She wants to watch when He catches up with her.

She will watch them burn.

***

Marianna finds Violet behind the door and gets her cleaned up, stripping and changing the bed. They’d put a waterproof cover on the mattresses when they came, telling the landlord it was to protect the bed from coffee spills.

Covers protect the mattress from coffee spills after it’s been drunk as much as before it.

“I’m staying,” says Violet.

Marianna’s about to speak when the door goes and whatever she’s about to say is lost when Lena shouts up that it’s for Violet.
“This isn’t finished,” replies Marianna. “I’m going to keep trying to change your mind until I’m on that fucking ferry.”

Violet hobbles past her and down the stairs. “Hey Credo, couldn’t keep away?”

It’s not Credo who answers her.

It’s Pinny.

***

Credo isn’t leaving anything to chance. He’s got a spell if he needs it, but he’s not leaving it to thoughts and prayers.

Luckily, Credo’s well regarded enough that he’s got a lot of goodwill stored up that he can pull on if he needs to.

He rings for his Knight Assistant. “Bring me the list of those consigned to the sea’s cold embrace, for the next three months.”

“Yes, Master Captain.” He pauses for a moment.

*Oh, what now? “Yes, Knight Cassla?” Make it quick.*

“Why do you not have me at your back all day? Most of the other Captains and Generals do,” he asks.

“Would you prefer that? Honestly?” counters Credo.

The Knight considers for a moment, gauging if he should answer honestly. “Conventional wisdom has it that Knights with promise become Assistants so they can learn at the feet of their masters
and have it instil patience and fortitude through the hardness of their physical tasks.”

“Discomfort builds character?”

The younger man nods.

“Do you think it does, Knight, because I just remember every muscle aching by the end of the day, when I was Lord Scerri’s Assistant.” There’s a slight crinkle in the corners of Credo’s eyes. “I think you have enough character.”

The young Knight snorts and bows. He’s back in ten minutes with the list and a cup of coffee, too.

“I didn’t ask for a coffee,” says Credo, slightly confused.

“You didn’t need to, Master Captain,” replies the Knight.

“Dismissed,” says Credo, with a smile. “And thank you.”

Credo knows most of the criminal and order families in Fortuna and it takes him half an hour to find a few possibles. Families of the condemned with members either in the order or with access to what he needs. He circles the names.

Time to see what favours he can call in.

***

“Hello, Violet,” says Pinny. “I’ll have to sit, if you don’t mind. Could I have a drink? It’s hot, even this early.”

Her request shakes Violet out her daze. “Sure, I’ll just get us some Cokes.”
Violet shambles out to the kitchen, pulling the cans out the fridge and collecting glasses from the draining board. She turns, nearly drops them as Pinny shuffles behind her.

“Look at the state of us. It’s almost like we’re sisters or something,” says Pinny, going to the back door. “Have you got a balcony or a patio? I bet the view is amazing from here.”

“Yeah, sun hits the garden all day,” replies Violet as they go to the rattan chairs. She’s glad to put the glasses down on the table. She’s shaking so much she’s going to drop the glasses. Pinny opens the cans and pours the drinks.

They sit in silence, contemplating the view.

“Did you walk here?” Violet asks eventually.

“Goodness, no! Alice drove me. It takes me to walk the length of myself, these days,” replies Pinny. “Something you said yesterday bothered me. I haven’t slept for thinking of it and I resolved to come and ask you myself.”

“OK,” says Violet, warily. “I can’t think what, though.”

“When I asked you for the DNA test, you got the strangest look upon your face,” begins Pinny. “And then you asked me if I thought you could be my sister. Why would you say that? Why would you say that if you were without possibility of the chance?”

Violet can’t meet Pinny’s gaze and looks away over the sea.

“I should hope you think enough of me to tell me the truth, Vee,” says Pinny, not unkindly.

“That’s not my name!” Violet snaps and Pinny jumps at the harshness. “I’m sorry. I’m raw at the minute. I have horrendous nightmares and that’s where I hear that name. I cringe every time Kyrie says it and Nero’s starting as well. But they’re just little kids, what do they know?”

“Who calls you it, in your dreams?” Pinny asks.
“They ain’t fucking dreams, Pinny. They’re fucking horrible. It’s no wonder I don’t remember anything and if you had them, you wouldn’t want to either.”

“My Papa wasn’t always the penitent grandad. He had to sin first. You don’t have a monopoly on horror,” replies Pinny. “I love my son beyond reason, but he should never have come into the world the way he did. No child should. Do you understand?”

Violet stares at her. “Your father is…is..”

“What? No! Papa forced me into marriage and my son comes from that union. I wasn’t a willing bride.” Pinny’s lip curls as she remembers. “It was after my sister and her boyfriend had ran off together. I helped them get away, but I was caught. Papa was furious and as a punishment I was married off to a family friend.”

“Oh my God, Pinny. I’m so sorry.” Violet catches Pinny’s implications.

“He told me he could be a very good husband or a very bad one, the choice was mine.” A tear rolls down Pinny’s cheek at the memories. “By the time I was able to get away, I was pregnant.”

Violet comes over to Pinny’s bench and hugs her. Pinny returns it, breathing in the warmth of Violet’s hair and asks, “Who are you, really?”

Violet pulls back slightly and looks Pinny directly in the face.

“I don’t know,” she whispers.

***

“Credo! Not really your neck of the woods. You’re usually bringing me business, not the other way around.” The squat man behind the desk stands and holds out a hand for Credo to shake.

“And so much of it is repeat business. I have an ask, Uncle Darius,” says Credo, grasping his hand
and trying not to wince at the strength behind it.

“Please, sit. You’ll have a glass with your old Uncle?” He bids Credo sit in the chair opposite.

“At the Ball, Uncle Darius, as my duties are rather more public than yours,” says Credo, waving away the whisky the other man offers. “Coppelia going to have a tray ready at my Ball? It’s well past a dalliance now, surely? Mark’s been her Brother Starling for over a year now.”

“Neither one’s in any rush, been listening to too many Mainlanders. Getting ideas.” Darius knocks back the glass in two gulps. “Still, as long as there’s no ankle-breakers, no harm done, hie?”

“True, true,” agrees Credo. “Though I can’t imagine a circumstance when a broken ankle isn’t a cause for celebration. And you’ll be able to bring out a tray.”

“Dorcas tells me you’ll be bringing out a tray soon enough,” Darius grins. “More than bloody time. Now, we’re busy men and I’ll see you at your Ball. What can I do for you?”

Credo pulls out some paperwork and hands it to his uncle. “I need stays of execution for these three men. It’ll be permanent for one, but I don’t know who yet. But I need them not to be put in front of the Law and Order Committees yet.”

“So you want me to use my discretion, hmm?” Darius takes Credo’s paperwork and looks through it. “Alright, I’ll keep these three back for this drowning, but I’m not happy about this one. I can’t even say that name. Is it Bosnian?”

“I believe so. They’re involved in a wider investigation than the one they were condemned for.”

Darius nods. “I’ll likely be able to keep them back for three Moons before people ask questions, then we’ll either have to go before an L&O Committee or I’ll have to cook up an excuse for one of them. But only one of them. And I hope it’s not him.” He taps the Bosnian name.

“Thank you, Uncle Darius. And who knows? Happen you’ll be one of the Family Witnesses before too long.” Credo stands and offers his hand again.
His uncle takes it. “Can’t be worse than the last time,” he booms, clapping Credo on the shoulder and nearly overbalancing him. He shows him to the door. “Tell Dorcas we’re looking forward to seeing her and Zander for dinner on Friday.”

“I will,” Credo smiles, already thinking ahead to the next part of his plan.

***

Violet tells Pinny the truth. She leaves out the worst of the nightmares, but Pinny picks up the gist. She pulls Violet back against her as she speaks, relishing the contact as she strokes Violet’s soft, dark hair.

“I just wanted peace, Pinny,” says Violet, quietly. “I wasn’t trying to deceive anyone. I just wanted people to see me and not a side-show freak.”

“You thought you were coming to an enclosed island community,” Pinny murmurs against her hair. “You didn’t think you were walking into a hornets’ nest because you look like a long-vanished girl.”

“Exactly.” Violet’s voice is muffled against Pinny’s chest.

Pinny pulls Violet away enough to look into her face. “Given the situation, it’s maybe not a bad thing you did lie, though. There’s enough people who will seek to use you, maybe because you look like her and maybe because of your skills. It’s a good thing my sister is still missing and refuses to speak to our Papa. It must be so painful to have your hopes raised when you are merely a Tunisian refugee left for dead on a beach. No wonder you faked a whole background to give yourself a history and I think it is as well you did, given the family politics you’ve inadvertently wandered into.”

Pinny strokes Violet’s hair and kisses her forehead. “Don’t worry about this DNA test, nor our friendship. You and your friends should come round about two to get ready for the Ball.”

Pinny stands, Violet just as painfully helping her. They hug again and for a brief moment, she has her sister back.

***
Credo knocks at the door of the flat in The Raploch, the proper name for the Kwart tal-Immigranti. A rose by any other name…A shithole is a shithole and the Immigrants Quarter is a shithole. “Hello, Selma. May I come in?”

“Sergeant Micellef? What’s happened?” Her accent’s thick and she stumbles over the Fortunese still. Most barranin prefer to speak their own tongue or English. “Is Dženan OK?”

“Everything’s fine or as fine as it could be, under the circumstances, Selma.” He gestures to the door. “Might I come in?”

“Yes, yes, you come in,” she says, standing aside to let Credo in. He doesn’t correct her about his promotion. It’s hard enough for her in this strange language and this alien place. He stands in the lounge of the small flat. It’s clean and tidy, almost obsessively so.

“I get you tea, coffee, I make uštipci and baklava for Dženan. I take them later to dungeon. I bring some down the guardpost. The men like, yes?” The brightness in her voice is brittle, forced.

“That’s very kind of you. We do love your cooking. It’s very different from what we’re used to,” says Credo. He accepts the coffee and baklava she gives him. This one has a nut paste and it’s delicious.

“But Dženan OK? He say he won’t let you kill him, he kill himself before the Full Moon,” she says and the fear on her face makes Credo feel a little better about what he’s about to ask.

“What if I said I could keep your brother alive a little longer? Maybe even get his sentence stayed?” says Credo, carefully.

There’s hope first, then suspicion, then back to hope again playing across her face. “How you do that? You just a Sergeant. Why you do that?”

“My Uncle is the Warden. He decides the order of execution. He can delay your brother’s drowning if I ask him.”

“You can do that? Uncle can do that?” Selma sounds so hopeful.
“He can.”

“Why would you do that for Dženan? He is guilty of what he did. What you want for it? No favour come free?” She’s suspicious now and there’s resignation underlying it.

“You were a nurse in Mostar, before the war, yes?” asks Credo.

“Yes. When I learn Fortunese better, I become nurse again. Until then, I clean. I clean labs and health centre.” Selma’s curious now. The proposition she expected isn’t coming.

“Can you take blood? For a DNA test? I need you to sub out your blood for a sample I’ll give you.” Credo finishes his baklava.

“And Dženan lives? He does not drown?” Selma asks, as if she can scarcely believe her luck.

“For as long as you keep my secret and change out your blood, he’ll live. I guarantee it,” says Credo.

She thinks, then nods slowly. “You are good man, Sergeant, I think. I will do favour for you. My brother is drug addict murderer, but he is my brother, all I have left. I hate him, but I love him.”

“Thank you, Selma.” Credo stands up, oddly at peace with himself. He’s done all he can.

It’s in Sparda’s hands now.

***

Peter and Diane are enjoying an easy breakfast, kissing and giggling like teenagers as Maris places croissants, fruit and coffee on the table. She withdraws when she’s finished serving with a bow.

There’s a third place set up across from Diane.
“Are we expecting company again, honey?’ she asks, feeding him chunks of pineapple.

“It has been busy through here these last few days, hasn’t it?’ agrees Peter, more interested in sucking the juice from her fingers. She giggles and shivers as his tongue swirls across the pads.

A phone distantly rings and Maris knocks on the door. “Captain-Sir?’

“Yes, Maris?’ he asks, stopping his play with Diane. She pouts.

“The phone in your office, Captain-Sir. He says to tell you ‘Family Matters.’ “

Peter’s whole demeanour changes and he stands. He kisses Diane’s hand. “Forgive me, my dear, I must take this call. I’ll return anon.”

Maris disappears to tend to other chores and Diane pours a coffee before opening the French doors to the patio and sitting in the early morning sun. It’s a little chilly, so she wraps a blanket around herself as she sits down.

She hears slow footsteps on the floor and calls out to Maris. “I’m fine, Maris. I’ll holler if I need ya.”

“It’s got the best view in Top of the Town, this house, don’t you think?’ says Pinny. She nods to Maris as the maid sets her out a light breakfast.

“Madam Langdon, this is Lady Falzon,” says Maris. “Captain-Sir is taking a call. Shall I tell him you’re here?’

“No, Maris, he’ll find out soon enough,” says Pinny. “Leave us, please.”

“Yes, My Lady.”
Diane is tense, waiting for Pinny.

Pinny attempts to smile, but can’t bring herself to try. “Don’t worry, I’m not about to start screaming at you. We’re long separated.”

Diane exhales, loud enough for Pinny to hear. “I-he- Peter said.”

“I’m Lady Agius, though. Not Falzon. I don’t use that name.” Pinny pours herself a coffee. She offers the pot to Diane, who shakes her head. “I do so love the view. I spent a lot of time sitting on this patio when I was married. What do you think of Fortuna?”

This is easier territory for the American. “I love it here. There’s so much history and culture and your traditions are just so quaint. You’re so lucky to live here.”

“There is beauty here, but it tarnishes quickly,” replies Pinny. “Peter treating you well?”

“He treats me well enough. And I’m a good Texas girl. Shoot his dick off if he don’t treat me right.”

Pinny actually laughs. “Then I know what to pray for.”

“Pinny! The one guest I’m actually delighted to have at my table!” Peter strides across to Pinny, beaming so much even his voice is smiling. He pulls up a chair, kissing Pinny on the cheek. “What can I do for you, my ħelwa?”

“It’s not for public consumption, Peter.” She looks pointedly at Diane.

Diane gathers her coffee and breakfast and wordlessly takes it back inside.

“Death’s making you bold, Pinny, walking in here like you own the place,” says Peter. There’s still a smile in his voice, but it’s undercut now.

“Considering the dowry you got for me, I probably do,” she retorts.
“I settled that on you as a dower. I never took a penny from your father that I never gave back to you.” He pours himself a coffee from Pinny’s pot. “Shall we discuss the bride-price your father used as your dowry?”

“You think he sold you and your sister for advancement? He’d sold his integrity long before that. All those blind eyes turned when he was the Captain of the Watch at Port Cerula? Little bit skimmed off the top here of this cargo in and there of that cargo out? And that was just the legal cargoes. Shall we talk about the others, Pinny, my sweet?”

“I know damn fine my Papa’s not perfect.” Pinny breaks the toast in half and offers him some.

“Good, because spare a thought for Josh if something happens to Edward. You have no one else to turn to or you wouldn’t have come back.” Peter takes the half. “I go down, Edward goes down and vice versa. Consider that, Pinny, my sweet love, before you think to threaten me with whatever insurance policy you’re keeping back. Though I’m surprised. Everything you’ll know is five years out of date.”

“Is it though? I took care of the wives and mistresses of a lot of connected men in my salon. It always amazed me how much the women knew, even when the men never told them anything. It was just like Fortuna. Knowledge is power.” Pinny delicately bites her slice. “I know a whole lot more than you think.”

“What do you want, Pinny?” Peter seems almost exhilarated by their back and forth.

“Credo’s new Ladybird. Papa thinks she’s my sister. She needs to fail the DNA test decisively. Papa is wasting too much time on the matter and I need him focused on Josh, not my long-vanished sister.” Pinny sips her coffee. “Besides, you don’t want him getting so distracted that he forgets himself or has an attack of conscience. Who knows what secrets he may reveal?”

“And what do you think, sweetheart?” Peter asks, almost seductively. “Why wouldn’t you want to find your sister?”
“Keep her and her baby safe from you and Lord Scerri. I’m glad you never found her when she ran off with Vergil. You’d have killed her for that baby and Credo be damned.” She snorts. “Still trying to keep up with him I see. He gets an Agius wife, so you get one too, he gets a foreign Ladybird and guess what? So do you.”

“Be careful, Pinny. I’ll only indulge you so far,” Peter cautions her.

“Well? I don’t think so. You’re too cautious to attempt anything against me or Papa. I think you value your attachments and prestige too much to threaten me.” Pinny leans back in her seat. “I haven’t been afraid of you for a very long time. Papa fails this DNA test. See to it.”

“If she’s not your sister, why do you want me to intervene with this test? It’s going to come up blank anyhow,” counters Peter.

“Because I don’t even want the possibility to occur.” Pinny looks at him sharply. “Unless you know something I don’t?”

“You know we tried to find her when she eloped. You know the law. Credo, Edward and I searched high and low for her and Vergil for over a month, but they were long since gone.” Peter manages to look sad. “I think our marriage would have turned out better, if I had found her and brought her home.”

Peter nods. “Alright. I’ll mend this test. I don’t wish your Papa’s attention to be too fractured. But I have my own demands.”

Pinny pales. “You’re not seeing my son.”

“You don’t need to tell him who I am, I just will visit you as an old friend and he’ll be present. I’ll even give you my word I won’t request custody nor paternity when you pass. I’ll sign a Families Committee affidavit to the effect if you wish.” Peter has the upper hand and she knows it.

But only just. “You only ever see him with Papa or myself there.”

“Agreed. And I’ll ensure your other matter is taken in hand.” He offers Pinny his hand. “I’d have
you back today, Pinny. I wronged you and I’d atone for it, if you’d allow me.”

Pinny shakes his hand, then very deliberately wipes it on her napkin.

She leaves without saying anything.

***

Lord Agius ignores the stares of the Tourists as he walks up the ramp with Pinny. The last few days have taken a toll on her and she leans as much on her father as she does her stick.

“There was no need for you to come, my dear,” he scolds. “Much as I’m glad you accompany me, I fret for your health.”

“Papa, I wouldn’t leave you to face this alone. Would you even know what to ask them for?” Pinny stops to get her breath. “Besides, I’ll see my doctor while I’m here. Just a check-up,” she assures him hastily, seeing the alarmed look on his face.

General Agius looks at the doors. “I don’t believe I have ever been here. I’m so glad that I found out that such a test exists. Truly, the world beyond Fortuna is a wonderful thing. Some of it, at least.”

“You haven’t told me, Papa, why you really truly requested it?” Pinny begins to hobble forward. “You can’t seriously believe Violet is Verity. Or do you know something I don’t? Papa?”

She’d swear he pauses, just for a moment.

“I’ve lost so much, Pinny, these last few years. I’ve lost my entire family through my own greed. I don’t delude myself that you would have returned home if you were well.” He doesn’t look at her or blink to stop the tears falling. “I will lose you again, my Lupin. I know this, and much as I’ve come to love Josh, he’s no replacement for you or your sister. I miss your mother. I miss her so much.”

“Would you not begin a family with Edith?” asks Pinny. “I would hate for you to be alone.”
“Edith doesn’t wish children at this time. I think she would prefer not to be permanently involved with Old Families.” Lord Agius still won’t look at Pinny. “Even at my age, I should still consider children a blessing, though I don’t deserve them. But I shall have my grandson, so I am happy, nonetheless.”

“You’re clutching at straws with this test, Papa,” says Pinny. “You’re getting her hopes up and that’s cruel.”

“But what if I’m right, Pinny, hie? What then?”

Pinny stops and looks her father in the eye, almost coldly. “Yes, Papa, what then?”

***

Violet watches as the tourniquet cuts off her blood, raising the vein. “I’ve had so many of these in my time and I’ll have so many more. I’m surprised the veins haven’t collapsed.”

“It’s such a small thing, is it not? Such a little amount, yet so important,” says Lord Agius. “I can’t thank you enough for having this test.”

“Well, if it’ll set your mind at ease over your daughter, I don’t mind,” she replies. She doesn’t pay any notice to the auxiliary restocking the medical trolley.

“You’ve got good veins,” says the practice nurse. She has a strong accent in her English and Nurse Campbell on her tag. “Should see some of the wrecks we get in here, specially the refugees.”

The auxiliary looks sharply at the nurse.

“Well, they’ve been through God knows what,” replies Violet. “Do they use here or the Order hospital?”

“They can choose, but once they become Fortunese, they’ve got to use the Infirmary. Umbrella’s
got their own place that they use, which I think is in HQ.” Nurse Campbell taps the vein and prepares the vial.

“Even some of the Fortunese use here,” says Selma. “It more up-to-date than Infirmary for treatment and a better survival rate. But they fined if caught.”

Lord Agius coughs. “I can’t comment, due to my family’s circumstances. All I can say, if the Health Centre gives my daughter more time, I’ll pay the price for that. I’m looking at perhaps combining the Infirmary and here and lifting the embargo, bringing the Infirmary as up-to-date as this facility.”

He rubs his arm, trying not to fiddle with the plaster in the crook of his elbow.

“You ready, Violet?” asks Nurse Campbell.

“Hit it. It’s going to hurt me anyway,” she replies, gritting her teeth.

“It’s just a scratch,” protests the nurse. She punctures the vein and the blood bubbles into the vial.

“I must be allergic or something, because they set my bracelet off something awful.” Violet grimaces as the bracelet inexplicably seems to glow.

“Trick of the light?” suggests Nurse Campbell. She brushes it with her bare arm as she withdraws the needle from the cotton she’s put in the crook of Violet’s elbow. As her skin makes contact she jumps and yelps. “It’s burning!”

Violet’s face is tight with the pain. She unclicks the bracelet to rub the gouges under it. “It’s some weird reaction thing. Like being allergic to your earrings.”

“I did hear of someone becoming allergic to red meat after they got bitten by a tick,” replies Nurse Campbell.

“I heard that happens if you get kidnapped by aliens as well. You have to become vegetarian,” says Violet. “I gotta admit, the stories about this place is part of the reason I came here.”
“Me too!” says Nurse Campbell. “My husband runs tours for all the aliens and the ghosts.”

No one sees Selma swap out a vial of blood and label it with Violet’s name.

“You mock our traditions!” protests Lord Agius.

“We bring cash to the economy,” retorts Nurse Campbell. She finishes the final paperwork and hands it to Selma.

Selma nods and takes it away.

***

She calls Credo on her tea break. “Is done.”

“Thank you,” he says and hangs up.

His back is to Knight Cassla and doesn’t notice him scratching at a chain around his neck, under his high collar.

The pendant is the Faith Committee symbol.

***

“I’m so sorry,” says the soft-voice man. “It was never meant to be like this.”

“I couldn’t. Give a fuck. What you want,” she struggles out. She shivers and he wraps a blanket round her. Her clothes have long since been destroyed. Makes it easier…to…to..
She’d brush the tears from her eyes, but her arms are too damaged.

“We’ll get through this. We’ll be a family soon,” he says. He strokes her hair, dirty and bloody and tangled.

“I have. A family. A husband. He’s here, isn’t he?”

“Yes. I won’t let him take you.” He looks devastated, and desperate. Like he knows he’s done something, terribly, terribly wrong and he’s trying to fix it. He looks frantic enough to do something so desperate, it will burn the world down. “I can’t live without you.”

“The Saviour’s free! The Saviour’s free!” She can dimly hear shouts and screams above a roar that sounds like an earthquake.

Her answer’s lost in the noise.

Chapter End Notes

The end is nigh! At least for this flashback anyway.

The the final few chapters in the 15 years ago are done and will be released over the next month. I’m beginning the Kyrie/Nero chapters now. Things might take a while as while my dog's surgery went well - no cancer! Yay! - he's an escape artist and has got out every wrapping we've had for the stitches, so he cannot be left alone, not even in another room.

we've had a tee-shirt on him and he got out of it, realised we were watching and put it back on.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Description of an execution

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fortuna 15 years ago

Credo sees the robed figure, sitting on the rock and illuminated by the Full Moon. She’s looking out to the beach by the Short Tower. She’s got a set of binoculars and she’s watching several burly Knights hauling a man who can barely walk out to a waiting rowboat.

They repeat this three times. The little boat sets off, Knights rowing out to the Lighthouse. There’s several other boats flanking them.

He sees her relax.

“Checking to see I kept my word, Selma?” Credo asks in English, sitting down beside her.

“I know you keep word. I no expect Dženan in boat,” she replies in Fortunese. “I just want to see how they do.”

“It’s not something a Lady should see, Selma. You’ll just torture yourself thinking about it,” Credo says gently.

“I see worse,” Selma replies. “Why they stumble?”

“They’re drunk. Uncle Darius lets them drink themselves senseless —“

“So they no fight on boat?” She hasn’t looked away from the scene. They’re nearly at Southworth Rock. One man looks like he’s thrown up over one of the rowers. There’s the distant sound of cursing.
“That and they don’t shout and disturb the Tourists. I’m given to understand that the Mainland doesn’t execute prisoners. It upsets the Tourists to hear them shout for help.”

“I did not believe for kind reason,” Selma replies, hard-voiced.

“My Uncle’s predecessor was re-assigned for running them through once they were tied to the Rock,” says Credo, watching two of the Knights strip down and jump into the thigh-deep water. One of the men is passed to them and even at this distance, Credo can hear him singing.

The naked Knights bind the man by the wrists to a ring in the rocks, one taking a chain and key and what looks like a deep breath as he disappears beneath the water. They’re old hands at this and it doesn’t take them long to secure the other two men.

The last one is sobering up quickly as the other three are declaring they’ve pissed themselves. He puts up a fight, headbutting one and trying to flail around to the other side of the island. It’s clear he can’t swim.

One of the other Knights from the flanking boats comes alongside him and smacks him hard on the temple with the pommel of his sword. He stumbles back and one of the others already in the water grabs his hair and smashes his face against the rocks. The prisoner goes down and they finish tying him up.

“Did you do this?” Selma asks quietly.

“No,” replies Credo. “I was picked to Assist Lord Scerri as soon as I was of age.”

“You agree with this?” She asks.

Credo shrugs. “They are convicted criminals. As is your brother.”

“It is barbaric. There must be human way to do this.” It’s clear she’s thinking of her brother undergoing this. It’s sheer chance he’s evaded it thus far.
“If you had the neighbour who shot your mother and father in front of you, what would you do?”
Credo asks softly. “Or if the French Tourist your brother killed – what of her family?”

“Not this. I will stay to the end,” she snaps at Credo, as he again implores her not to stay.

Credo doesn’t leave her.

It isn’t fast.

As the moon travels across the sky and the sounds of revelry fade into the night, the tide creeps inexorably higher over the course of several hours. The boats stay, the Knights laughing and joking with each other, playing cards or other games of chance as the boats rise above the men. Several place bets on who’ll realise first that they’re in peril.

Credo’s seen this before and he finds it distasteful. Not the dying, per se. it’s the jocularity of the men to whom this is business as usual that he finds offensive.

The man who’d had his face smashed is the first to submerge. He’s never regained consciousness. Some of the men on the boats curse as they lose their bets. The bubbling stops after a minute or two.

One of the men is either sobering up or the water hitting his mouth has clicked some ancient survival mechanism into gear.

The Knights on the boats jeer.

The man begins to struggle, looking like he’s fighting through treacle, swearing and pleading at the Knights on the boat. There’s gentle little wavelets breaking over his mouth and nose as he cranes his head back. He’s spitting out the water and the Knights on the boat cheer as the water rises over his head. They can see him try to hold his breath, but he’s running out of air and he’s running out of time.

He can’t hold his breath any longer and inhales. A cheer goes up from the boats.
Too late, he inhales the water as the need to breathe overrides the need to hold his breath.

Money passes round the men as they have their winner.

The other men were chained around the side of the Rock Selma can’t see.

Selma sits in silence.

There’s nothing either needs to say.

Credo knows his secret’s safe, Vee is safe, as long as he keeps his word.

Uncle Darius won’t be happy.

***

“All packed?” Violet asks Marianna as she fiddles with her bags, trying to get them to zip. She moves things around and tries again.

“Pretty much. One less thing to worry about, tomorrow, cos God knows what state we’ll be in and we have to catch a ferry without the car,” Marianna says as the bag still won’t zip. “Could still pack your stuff.”

“Nah, nah,” grins Violet, wires gleaming in the sunlight. “I’m good here.”

“What is it about him that’s got you? I know you move fast, but you don’t fall fast,” Marianna asks, grunting as she forces the bag to close. She sits down next to Violet on the bed. “I think I’ve seen you fall, maybe, twice for someone? What makes him different?”

“I fell for you quick enough,” says Violet. “You weren’t complaining.”
“Till I ended it and it was the right thing to do,” Marianna smiles ruefully, booping Violet’s nose. “You had way too many issues at the time and I was better placed to help you as your friend. You have to admit, we are much better as friends than lovers.”

“You’re spiritually blonde, Maz, but you’re smarter than me when it comes to this shit. I’ll miss you so much.” Violet puts her arm around Marianna’s shoulders, bumps her forehead to hers.

“But not enough to come back to civilisation with me,” replies Marianna. “So what is it about him? Not this island, not wanting peace, but him?”

“It’s weird and you’ll laugh,” Violet says, a little bashfully.

“Probably, but I’m listening.”

“I feel like I know him already? Like I’ve known him for years?” ventures Violet. “I know that sounds like romance novel crap-“

“Don’t you mock my romances, you cold bitch,” snorts Marianna. “But yeah, you feel how you feel.”

“He doesn’t treat me like a freak or a celeb, he’s attracted to me and I can’t begin to tell you what a novelty that is.” Violet gives a happy little wriggle as she speaks. “I know I’m the first to play on it, but it gets old. And Credo sees me and he seems to like what he sees.”

“Course he would. Does he know about your exciting and varied past?” asks Marianna.

“I dropped it in conversation, and he was pretty chill about it,” replies Violet. “I didn’t mention everything, but he doesn’t need to know about that. But he seemed cool enough with me being bi.”

“I’m less worried about that than you being exclusive, he’s got kids, Violet.” Marianna tips up Violet’s chin. “Or is that the draw? You can’t mess kids about, Vee. Just sayin’.”

The use of the detested nickname drives home Marianna’s point. “I read my file, Mazzie. It could be my only chance.”
“I cleared up the mess when you read your file, babe. I was the mess when you read your file,” says Marianna pointedly. “Like I said, we’re better friends than lovers and if you stay here, you’ll be on your own.”

Violet leans forward and kisses her gently, before breaking off the kiss and leaning their foreheads together. “We’ll be fine, Maz. But we’ll be better apart.”

Marianna stands up. “Come on, we’d better get to Pinny’s.”

***

It’s several hours before dawn when Credo finally gets in. He’d offered to walk Selma home, but she wanted to see the sun rise and the tide relinquish the unfortunate souls. Credo can’t settle and doesn’t see the point of trying to sleep. The execution annoys him somewhat. Normally when he’s like this, he’d swim out to the Island, cutting through the currents to break land on the Rock. Then he’d sit for a while, listening to the sounds out to sea and coming back to Castle Town. It gives him a sense of peace, to be part of the creation of both Earth and Man, something greater than himself.

But for the next day, Southworth Rock is out of bounds.

He decides to clean his room to wear himself out and calm his jitters. Work such as this sends him into an almost meditative state and it’s almost a shock when he’s finished, since he’s lost all track of time.

Knights in their training have to shift for themselves, keeping HQ and their quarters pristine. In that they’re like any other military. There’s no maids to clean up after them. For many Old Family Knights, it’s a shock to their privileged upbringing.

Not so for the likes of Peter Falzon and unusually for his class, Credo. The Micellefs, due to Dorcas’ other occupation, don’t run the risk of a maid. It’s created a young man who’s not afraid to get his hands dirty, who’s methodical and organised. It’s something he’s inherited from Zander and the family winery. The Micellef men, by habit and design, are men who complete things.

The room is spotless and he jumps when Dorcas comes in to see him.
“I hadn’t realised you were awake, son,” she says as Nero and Kyrie squeeze past her. They go straight to the bed and begin jumping on it.

“Couldn’t sleep, Mama. I ended up near the Small Tower and I shall say no more before the children. I have misgivings about the whole business.” He tucks a loose lock of hair back behind his ear as he watches the children bounce. “Be careful! I don’t wish to spend tonight in the Infirmary!”

“‘Tis ne’er a pleasant sight and I can’t think why you would suffer it,” replies Dorcas. “I need to have an answer from you. Caesar Calleja’s son’s going to be bringing out a tray and wants to know if he can complete the rituals tonight as his public declaration.”

“Lord Chetcuti’s not letting the grass grow, is he? Though after her displays these past few days I would be lying if I said I was surprised.” Credo has to raise his voice over the giggling children. “I heard she put a chair through Peter’s window.”

“He said as much to me himself when I was checking in at work. She’s probably going to use the candle to burn the Castle down,” says Dorcas. She looks around the room. “Open a window, qalbi, before the beeswax sees the children half-tipsy.”

Credo goes to the windows and opens them. “If I have company tonight, at least my room will be fit for it.”

“Your room wasn’t dirty before and Violet hadn’t bothered when she’d shared your bed these last few days,” Dorcas points out as Kyrie and Nero start trying to do somersaults. “Stop it! You’ll split your heads and neither of you will go to the party!”

They switch, giggling, to Ring around the Roses and twirling around on the bed.

“I recall you did this very thing the morning of your wedding to Vee,” says Dorcas, quietly.

“This is nothing like that!” Snaps Credo. The children stop bouncing and look at him, blue and hazel eyes just ever so slightly alarmed, so he softens his tone. “This time will have a better outcome, Mama.”

“Are you going to marry Vee tonight, Credo?” asks Nero. “She’s got a pretty dress. And you’ve got
that piece of paper with your names on it, so you’re nearly married, cos, you just need a pretty dress and a party. Will you sleep in the Big Bedroom in the Castle?”

“No, she’s coming here,” says Kyrie. “Mama, tell Credo he needs to put flowers and chocolates on the pillow. Papa says you have to give ladies flowers and chocolates so they’re not hungry afterwards and she doesn’t smell your farts. After what, Mama?”

“Vee’s coming home tonight, Credo? You promised.” Nero’s ice-blue eyes turn storm silver with anxiety. “I love Dorcas, but I want my real Mama to come home.”

“She’s coming home with me tonight, don’t you trouble yourself with that concern, hanini,” Credo smiles as he reassures the child. “Now, let’s find some chocolates and flowers for Violet.”

He holds out his hands to them, and they jump down from the bed.

“What’s Vee going to be hungry after?”

“Credo, do you fart in bed?”

***

“OK, aren’t you going to let me look in a mirror?” asks Violet as Pinny carefully applies mascara to Violet’s long black lashes, waggling the wand back and forth to coat them evenly.

“Nope, you can have the same reveal as everyone else.” Pinny checks the pins holding the cooling curls in place. “Do them last. I do like that colour on you. Brings out your eyes.”

Violet can’t help herself. “How’s Lord Agius been with the DNA test? He was so happy yesterday. He’s going to be devastated when it doesn’t come out the way he wants it.”

Pinny stops and puts both hands on Violet’s shoulders and turns her in the chair. “Papa will have to face reality twice over. But just because we aren’t blood-family, doesn’t mean we aren’t heart-family. You’re going to marry Credo one day. I know, I know, I’m jumping the gun-” she says as she can see Violet gear up to protest. “I have a feel for these things and I can see where it’s going,
you’ll wed Credo in the next few years, give Nero some siblings and Josh some cousins and being an honorary grandad will soften the blow.”

“You’re home now, Vjola,” Pinny says warmly. “Now, keep those tears in, you’ll wreck my hard work. Do you know how hard it is for me to stand and beautify you?”

Violet tries to hold the tears pricking her eyes in check. “Should have used waterproof, then.”

“That face will still be on tomorrow, I just don’t want you roaring and wailing everywhere and showing us up. The Agius’ and the Micellefs have a position to keep,” grins Pinny. “Now, blusher.”

***

“Oh, Son,” says Dorcas admiringly as Credo comes down the stairs, resplendent in his dress uniform. He tugs at his cuffs “Zander, come see our boy.”

“Kyrie, put that jam down,” says Zander as he comes out of the kitchen into the main hall. His own dress uniform is covered by his banyan, though when he’s dressed he’ll give Credo a run for his money. He’s got some tiger bread in his hand as he’s trying to persuade the children to eat so they aren’t hungry at the Ball. “Oh, my, Credo. You cut quite a dash, if I say so myself. Chip off the old block, Dorcas, my ħelwa.”

Zander indicates his and Dorcas’ wedding photo and indeed, father and son are two peas in a pod, separated only by two and a half decades. “Hopefully tonight will be practice for your Wedding Ball. The children will be staying at Edward’s, so you can get my grandchild started in peace. I’m anxious to drink that Cassar.”

“Papa! Not in front of the children! Now I know where they’re getting their ideas from!” protests Credo. “You’ll be scaring her off at this rate.”

“Then she isn’t worth your time,” declares Zander. “True, my love?”

“Sometimes your Papa’s wise and today we’re in luck,” teases Dorcas. “She had better be worth your time, given how hard I worked to get her here.”
"What do you mean? Mama, I'm perfectly capable of finding my own women!" Credo seems to be spending much of this evening protesting his parents' gentle ribbing.

"Hush now, son. ‘Twere it true, you'd have made an honest woman of Edith years ago. She was the Jenny Wren to your Brother Starling all these years." Dorcas admonishes him with a waggling finger. “No, your Mama had to find you a suitable girl. I thought when I met Violet, that there's the kind of girl I'd like for a daughter-in-law and when I found out she wanted to come here, I resolved to do all in my power to make it so."

"Ah, Credo," says Zander. “Your Mother always knows exactly what to do. It's as well they get along or neither of us should know no peace, except in Heaven. It's as well to let them be or we'll spend our lives in such Hell, Death itself will be a blessing."

Dorcas looks like she's about to say something, before Kyrie tries to cuddle Nero, covering his hair in raspberry jam.

Nero shrieks so much, you'd have thought the little girl had poisoned him.

***

The Great Hall is festooned with so many garlands and bouquets of flowers that it very much does look like it’s ready for Credo’s wedding. There’s a low buzz of chatter and the band is already playing in the Minstrels Gallery and an army of servants in their best uniforms, as smartly turned out as any of the guests, relieve them of their cloaks and coats. The guests move out of the way of the door as quickly as they can, as much to move away from the chill from the permanent snow outside as to relieve the crush at the entry way. They’ve the whole castle at their disposal tonight.

Under the portrait of Sanctus on the mezzanine, Credo and his parents stand at the head of the receiving line with Lord Scerri. The guests filter through at what seems like an excruciatingly slow pace, up one staircase and down the other. Credo’s on tenterhooks waiting for Violet to appear and he has a birds-eye view of the doors. He can barely concentrate to thank people for their congratulations on his promotion and thank them for coming. He’s said the words so much they’re just become sounds bereft of meaning.

“When’s your new Ladybird gracing us with her presence, Credo?” asks Lord Scerri between guests.
“I believe she’s coming with Lord Agius and Pinny, My Lord,” Dorcas cuts in. “So she won’t be on the receiving line.”

“Ah, yes of course, Madam Micellef.” Lord Scerri nods, as if in sympathy. In reality, he’s noting that the Micellefs still consider the Agius’ close family. Family don’t stand in receiving lines. “In any case, we couldn’t have Young Lady Agius climbing the stairs.”

Dorcas waves to Darius and his family coming in and promptly moving towards the bar that’s behind one of the curtains on the ground floor. Two of Darius’ younger children – he has six – go over to Nero, Kyrie and Josh, standing by Sanctus Primus with Alice. Josh has brought his ever-present plane with him. Nero wanted to wait on Violet coming so she wouldn’t be lonely till Credo can come down to her.

Credo does give his attention to the Matron and her husband as she congratulates him through gritted teeth. He can’t help but exchange a smirk with his mother.

The little boy tenses as Guido and Casha come over. He’s had run ins with them before and he’s always come off the worst, even when he’s beat them. Kyrie’s already got her indignant look on her face.

Peter’s next with Diane, who’s looking around her, eyes wide and enraptured. Peter introduces them and Dorcas actually chats to her, holding up the line. It’s basic stuff, how’s she finding Fortuna, nice dress, I love your hair.

Credo greets Peter a little more warmly than normal, chatting about foreign girlfriends versus Fortunese ones. There’s just a little innuendo that has Credo colouring ever so slightly, but it’s all in good fun.

“Papa says you’re our cousin now,” says Casha. She looks like an older Kyrie, while her brother looks like his father.

“Nero lives with us now,” says Kyrie and she’s even got her hands on her hips. She’s fronting up to a nine and a ten-year-old, bless her.

Guido nods, as if he’s thinking. Some of the children from the Beechwood have been allowed to come, among them Baxter and Jacob.
“How come you’re not up there with your new Papa?” sneers Jacob. “Fed up with you already?”

“I’m waiting on my new Mama,” snaps Nero, heeding Alice’s warning tug on his hand.

“Your Papa buy her as well? Like the last one?”

“Hush, or your Matron will hear of your meanness,” warns Alice.

“Get to fuck. No one cares what a servant says. Ow!” He yelps as Josh punches him.

“Don’t you be bad to Alice!” snaps the little boy, tears coming. He’s not got as good a hold on his plane as he should.

Peter and Credo look over to Sanctus Primus as the noise of the children’s fight becomes audible over the buzz of conversation.

Jacob knocks the plane from his hand and it smashes on the stone floor. “If it wasn’t for your Mama, you’d be in the home with the rest of the bastards.”

“That’s my cousin, you little get!” Yells Guido as he thumps Jacob. They scuffle and their fight takes them to the floor. Baxter starts kicking Guido in the back and he’s about to hit the hand that’s resting on his shoulder when he starts screaming and runs off out one of the doors. There’s a stink of urine and Casha has a smirk on her face.

“Josh!” Peter vanishes and reappears by the coffin.

She’s about to try for Jacob, but she’s pushed aside as the Matron and Peter pull the boys apart. Guido ignores the Matron, just runs a hand through his hair.

“Muh plane, Uncle Peter! Muh plane!” wails Josh, tears rolling down his face. Peter lets go of Guido and scoops up Josh, holding the sobbing child.
“Get your brats in hand now, Moira,” warns Peter. “If you value your job.”

The Matron merely turns up her nose and storms off in anger, directing one of her staff to take the errant boys home.

“Later, cuz,” says Guido, clapping Nero on the shoulder and sauntering off with his sister.

Baxter runs screaming along the Large Hall.

“Casha made a big dog made of fire chase him,” says Kyrie to Alice. “But there’s not really a dog.”

“I’ll get you another plane,” says Peter, trying to soothe Josh. “A nice metal one, all brightly painted. With propellers.”

“Do they turn, Uncle Peter?” says the little boy, hiccupping as he tries to calm himself.

“Uncle Peter? You presume to break our agreement before it even begins?” Pinny’s voice cuts across them like a knife. She hobbles towards them, unthinkingly reaching for Josh. It strikes Peter how much height Pinny’s lost. She’s easily five foot six now.

“The child was in trouble, I came to his aid, Lady Agius. I bid you believe nothing more untoward than that,” says Peter.

Pinny reaches for her son. Peter doesn’t let him go.

“My Lady, your health Is too precarious to console the child whilst you walk. I beg you, Lady Agius, pray be seated and I will return your precious bundle to your bosom,” Peter says smoothly. He moves Josh to his hip.

“Come, Pinny, there’s a table over here,” Lord Agius says, trying to usher her over to the side. He tries to hide his nerves under his solicitude, though he genuinely doesn’t want Pinny stressed. “Put your health before your pride.”
Pinny reluctantly relents and allows herself to be escorted to the table.

Violet stays off to the side with her friends, as Nero and Kyrie have come beside her. They don’t understand what’s happening, but they can see the tension between the adults.

Violet glances up to the mezzanine, looking for Credo.

“Will you bring the plane tomorrow, Uncle Peter? When I go to see Grandad at work and you can read me another story?” Josh asks, a little happier.

There’s no way Pinny doesn’t hear it. She looks up at her father.

“He was in my office when Peter called upon me. I could not turn him away and Josh asked for him to return. I was not of a mind to deny the child,” he says, a guilty look upon his face.

“Your Papa never sought to deceive you,” agrees Peter. “We saw no value in troubling your mind and Josh was always free to mention my presence. I will honour our agreement, rest assured of that.”

“It was folly on my part to presume you different after all our trials,” says Pinny, her tone somewhere between anger and disappointment.

Lord Agius looks stung as Peter passes Josh back over. Pinny hugs the child tight and kisses his dark curls. She looks like she’s holding back tears. She briefly meets Violet’s eyes and for a moment, Violet can see the rage there. She’s about to go to her, when there’s a hand on her arm.

“No, let them be. This is betwixt father and daughter,” says Credo. He looks at Violet as if she’s the only woman in the room. “Come away. Nero, Kyrie, come get Violet and her friends drinks and food.”

“But, Credo, what about Josh? Shall we get something for Josh?” asks Nero, looking between Credo and his friend.

“Uncle Edward will get him some victuals later. Right now, introduce me to Violet’s friends,” says
Credo, allowing the little boy to bring him over to the group. It includes Diane, who’s standing slightly apart from them, looking over to Peter and Pinny. She looks very uncomfortable.

“Do you want to come with us?” Violet calls across to her.

Diane looks back to Peter, who’s deep in conversation with Lord Agius as Pinny tries to ignore him. He calls over a waiter for drinks and food for her.

Diane comes fully over to the group as the women, not bound by Fortuna’s customs introduce themselves to her. Marianna finds out she’s American and the two women start chatting about places they’ve been, making Diane feel more welcome.

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Up on the mezzanine, Dorcas stays on the receiving line, watching the drama down below.

“I fear we have lost our Guest of Honour, Madam Micellef,” says Lord Scerri, following her gaze.

“He’s gone to make Violet welcome,” replies Dorcas. “He only has eyes for her.”

“As it should be, Madam. As it should be.” Lord Scerri pauses. “I have high hopes for our Captain Micellef and Miss Alighieri. I’m told she’ll be invaluable to our Projects.”

“As do I, though for rather different reasons,” says Dorcas, coolly.

“Then, Madam, I imagine we shall both be satisfied.”

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Credo leads his party to several tables, swinging Nero up onto a chair as Violet shows Kyrie the conga. Lena and Cassie bring up the rear. Nero looks at the group and Credo nods, setting the child down, both of them smiling as Nero skips off to join them. Some of his new cousins come over, chatting to Violet as Nero and Kyrie introduce her.
They nearly knock over Lady Kristina as she walks over to Credo. She gives them a pained look, almost like she’s trying very hard to hold her temper in, before fixing her smile back on her face. Violet looks back to Credo, winking as she and Nero stick their tongues out at Lady Kristina’s retreating back. They go back to their conga.

He hides his grin behind a glass of wine, standing to greet her as she reaches him.

“Captain Micellef,” she says formally, bowing.

“Lady Chetcuti,” he returns. “Thank you for coming to my Ball.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” she replies. Oh yes, Lady Kristina is fuming.

“Will you sit?” He asks, indicating an empty chair. “I believe it’s at least another hour till the dancing begins.”

“Your Mama and Papa will be a while yet on the receiving line,” she agrees. She looks at Violet and Nero, then over to Diane and Marianna, still deep in conversation. “Lord Calleja’s bringing out a tray for myself and Cassius tonight.”

“So, congratulations are in order, then?” says Credo. He’s wary, but he doesn’t see the point in antagonising Lady Kristina.

“Not really,” she replies. “Papa has agreed that my wedding should take place at the next Full Moon. This time next month you’ll all be dancing at my Ball. Then the Master’s Chamber for me.”

“It’s well past time and it was never going to be me,” says Credo. “Cassius isn’t that bad, he’s just Cassius.”

“I deserve better,” she retorts. “Have you seen Peter?”

Credo looks over to the Agius party, Edith and Pinny sitting as Josh tells his mother all about
Uncle Peter’s visits to Grandad’s office. Peter and Lord Agius are in a deep discussion with Pinny and each other.

“She dallied with Cassius in her youth, did she not?” says Lady Kristina.

“I believe so,” replies Credo.

“Am I always to play second fiddle to an Agius?” she scowls, almost absently. “What’s so special about them?”

“You were not so concerned with that question when you pursued me so doggedly,” points out Credo.

“Oh, but you are vicious towards me still, Credo, to remind me of that,” she says, more subdued than she’d usually be.

“Twas but three days ago you did all in your power to bring out a tray for me, Lady Chetcuti.” He stands, wanting to head this conversation off at the pass. “Come meet my guests for this evening.”

He can’t introduce Cassie and Lena, as they’re still ta-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-hey-ing across the floor and around Sanctus Primus. But he introduces Marianna and Diane.

“I do believe you’re Captain Falzon’s…companion,” she says to Diane. She doesn’t make it sound like Diane is the dirtiest of split beards in Port Cerula and this alone has Credo eyeing her suspiciously.

“You put the chair through the window,” says Diane, somewhat guardedly.

“I had had distressing news,” responds Lady Kristina.

“Well, I wish you every happiness in your future, otherwise you’re going to burn your house down,” smiles Diane. “Best make sure your new man’s not in it.”
“Oh, come now,” says Lady Kristina, sitting down beside the American. “There’s not a woman alive who doesn’t want to wring the neck of her man at least once a day.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” laughs Diane.

“Credo! Mazzie! Come do the Conga!” shouts Violet, nearly bumping into Lord Azzopardi, escorting Emmeline and her Italian husband, Giancarlo. There’s shocked inhales and bitchy whispers at her short, bleached pixie cut.

Marianna pulls Credo over to the conga line, where they pick up the rhythm quickly.

Jem Chetcuti stares open mouthed at Emmeline and Giancarlo, stomping angrily out the Hall to one of the other bars down the Hallway.

“Sidestepped a sword with that one,” says Lady Kristina. “It caused such a fuss when she chose a Mainlander over my brother. But I don’t see how one can be happy if one doesn’t have at least some affection for one’s life’s partner.”

“Doesn’t it just,” agrees Diane.

“So, Diane,” says Lady Kristina, conspiratorially, reaching for glasses from a passing waiter. She passes one to the American. “How ever did you meet Peter? And you must tell me how you’re acquainted with our dear Violet. Were you at college with her?”

Chapter End Notes

And Hell hath no Fury
As a Woman Scorn’d

Violet really should have read the small print on that Undertaking.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Things I have discovered during this section -
Regency dances were lively and long, they lasted at least thirty minutes and were more akin to a ceilidh than what we think of as a ball, which is just walking to music.
Dinner in distinct courses didn't begin until the mid-19th Century. before that, all the courses would be on a table and guests would help themselves, like a buffet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fortuna, 15 years ago

The receiving line is eventually done and the balcony is quickly set with tables and chairs so that guests might rest and recover between dances. It echoes the pattern of tables underneath the stone arches.

The air of the night and the buzz of the chatter changes, it’s excited, anticipatory.

Credo guides the conga line off the dance floor, ensuring the children have drinks, both Farrugia and the slyly-invasive Coke. He hands a glass of wine to Violet, fingers brushing hers as she takes it from him. Credo’s heart jolts with the contact and he thinks she’s taking a similar effect from him. He’s not the best at reading those kind of signals, but she’s sending off enough heat to set a wet fleece alight.

Credo mentally checks himself. Of course Violet’s sending off those kind of signals. That’s one of the things he loves about her – there’s no deceit or artifice. She’s not backwards about coming forwards and in the world of smoke and mirrors he’s been forced to inhabit, it’s refreshing.

He could love her for that alone.

He's broken from his reverie by the sound of the band striking up and he grabs Violet’s hand, leading her to the floor. “Just follow my lead,” he murmurs in her ear. “Keep moving to your right.”

The couples line up, men on one side, women on the other, as a lively jig starts up. It's nothing like
the stately waltz she must have been expecting. As guest of honour, Credo and his partner are the lead couple, deciding the main of the steps and any flourishes. He's feeling a trifle mischievous and dances the most complicated steps he can think of, almost like the on the spot skipping of an Irish step dance.

If there was one thing Vee excelled at, it was dancing, even if Cassius Calleja had her convinced she moved like a man in drag. Nothing anyone said ever convinced Vee otherwise. Perversely, Cassius' insult simply made her practice harder.

Violet picks up the steps, picking them up with only a slight hesitation, as she skips in place. Credo turns to the woman on his right, bows to her, then dances the skip jump step again, then dancing in a circle to put him standing next to Violet. He knows he's more obvious than he should be, but he can't help watch her as she repeats his steps perfectly, so she's opposite him again.

“You’re doing much better than I thought you would,” says Credo.

There's a glint in her eye as Violet does that skip step -Nine Hells, but can he remember what it was called? He spent long enough in the practice room under Monsieur Dupuis that he was jigging in his sleep- and holds out her hands to him as she skips towards him. He mirrors her movement, following as she spins him, setting him back in the line, then that little skip step.

“Pinny gave us a lesson when we had our girly day,” she replies. “And we all got cheat sheets.”

They bow to their diagonal partner and the dance continues until they've moved up three people.

“I do aerobics to keep fit, so it’s not like I’ve never danced.” Violet spins round Emmeline’s husband.

“I’m sure I can disconcert you somehow,” smiles Credo, aware of the eyes on them.

“You’re going to have to get up really early to get one over on me,” she returns as each line of three joins hands and skips to and fro the middle.

Credo glances up the line, just to see how her friends are doing. Dorcas is next to Cassie and Zander has partnered Lena, so they’re stumbling a little and sometimes going the wrong way, but the others on their line keep them right. Their group is only a little behind the more experienced
dancers. It looks like Lena’s fudged the skip-step, but Zander does a small step that’s still in time, so Lena keeps the beat. He looks down the line to Credo and winks as he raises an eyebrow at Violet.

Credo blushes and shakes his head as he prepares to move into the next part of the dance. It’s probably the most intricate part of the frolic, a complex interweaving of each dancer at a lively pace, with pirouettes and circles and travelling up and down the line.

He skips into the first hey, diagonal to the woman opposite, his attention torn between her and Violet as he comes into a figure of eight. She’s smiling wide, the wires catching the candlelight of the Hall, eyes shining as the partner of the other woman turns her in a complicated Tulloch turn as the rest of the dancers skip in a circle round them. Credo’s not surprised Violet gets it straight off. He can see Cassie bump into his mother out the corner of his eye, but Lena’s following his cousin Coppelia’s lead with a far less fancy step that still gets the job done.

“Told you I can keep up with you, Captain Micellef, Actually,” grins Violet as she passes him in a grand chain that turns into a Tulloch turn. He can’t help but return her grin as they move smoothly back to their fancy setting step.

“Never thought any different, Miss Alighieri,” he replies, grinning so much his face is hurting. He never smiles this much, ever. “Anyone would think you were an old hand with this.”

They clap and stamp before moving under the arch of arms of the dancers before them to meet up with the next group of three, Zander, Coppelia and Lena.

“Who says I’m not?” teases Violet and it’s Credo who nearly trips this time.

“God, I’m sorry. I thought I had it this time,” apologises Lena, as Credo sets to her, toning his step down to a much simpler one for her.

Zander’s opposite Violet and takes the opportunity to set with the same complicated skip-step that Credo had used, which of course Violet returns. Zander smiles approvingly. “You know what they say about dancing?”

“What do they say about dancing, Zander?” says Violet, knowing full well what he’s about to say.
“Sparda’s Balls, Papa!” So does Credo.

“Shows how compatible a couple is,” says Zander. “On and off the dancefloor.”

“Totally, Zander,” agrees a giggling Violet. “We’re in complete harmony. Run away with me.”

“I’d miss Dorcas’ cooking,” replies Zander.

“I won’t miss Credo’s,” laughs Violet.

“I can still wed Kristina Chetcuti!” Credo mock-threatens.

“I’m sure my son has other compensations,” Zander teases.

Credo has gone scarlet. “Papa! Some decorum in front of your future daughter-in-law!”

“Certainly does,” says Violet in a tone that has Credo colouring deeper, but he can feel his body start to respond in a way that has nothing to do with the exhilaration of the wine and dancing.

“Well, like you say, Zander, it’s a metaphor for compatibility on and off the dancefloor,” she replies, still in that tone.

“Doubtless, you’ll find out tonight.” Credo tries to keep up with the banter, though at this rate he and Violet will never see a bedroom. “I’m sure I could arrange the Master’s Chamber.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Lady Kristina hasn’t got plans for that,” declares Zander. “She hates she’s lost. She won’t take it lying down. So to speak.”

“She’ll have to go through me,” says Violet, pinching Credo’s bum. He flinches and raises his eyes to the Heavens.
“Oh, I’m sure she’ll try, teżor,” warns Credo. “I’m sorry I brought such an enemy to your door.”

“Our door,” Violet corrects him as they dance under Zander and Coppelia’s arms and begin the dance again with the next couple.

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It takes nearly an hour to go round all the couples in the dance twice, ending back up in their starting positions. Everyone’s perspiring and panting, with fans fluttering so hard, the holders might levitate.

“It’s all Jane Austen in here, with all these heaving bosoms,” says Violet to Credo as he walks her to the bar for a drink. There are waiters walking around, but he just wants to get her somewhere more private, to chat and catch their breath before the next dance.

“What did you think?” Credo asks. “You are a shockingly good dancer. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’d been trained to it.”

“Pinny and Dorcas gave us lessons and cheat sheets,” says Violet, spreading her fan. It’s got all the dances and steps written on the side facing the holder. “Pretty sure I can manage the waltz though. After a drink and sit down though.”

“Yes, your bosom is heaving,” smirks Credo. “Shame the collar’s high enough to deprive me of its sight.”

Violet folds the fan with a snap and runs it down Credo’s face and chest, before spreading it wide and using it to hide their kiss. It starts off gentle, just a push of soft lips, Credo deepening it as his arms slide over the silk, pulling her close. Keyed up by the dancing, both of their bodies respond instantly, blood singing in their deepest parts.

Credo wants nothing more than to push her against the wall and finish what they started on Friday night. Well, to Hell with it. it’s his Ball, why not? “We could sit out the next dance…”

“We could sit it out somewhere quieter and cooler,” Violet murmurs against his lips. “Get the drinks and we’ll catch our breath.”
Credo reluctantly lets her go and gets some drinks from the bar, before taking her hand and leading her out into the Large Hall.

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Lady Kristina is still deep in conversation with Diane and Marianna. Peter can see them across the room as he finally leaves Pinny and Lord Agius. He walks over as quickly as he can without running, but Jem Chetcuti stumbles in front of him, Peter instinctively grabbing him. He reeks of drink.

“You see-see her, Peter? Yousee’er?” He slurs. “Fuckin’ brash nerve, comin’ back ere and flauntin, flauntin that lan…lanky streak a’ Talian pish in-in mah fashe.”

“You need to sit down, Jem, have some water.” Peter carefully and distastefully removes the other man’s hands from his arms. “Or better yet, there’s rooms available. Sleep it off.”

“Needs to ‘rest ‘er, Peter. She’s commi’n…commi’n Immodest Behaviour. T’ain’t wedded, not prop’ly. I ‘mand you ‘rest ‘er.” Jem’s swaying.

“What a prize you are, Jem. The best Old Family Blood. No wonder she wed the Italian and moved to Turin.” Peter motions across some Knights on guard duty and instructs them to find a room for Captain Chetcuti. “What makes you think you’re worth more than the servants you brought with you in the Great Flight?”

Jem shakes off the Knights trying to escort him to somewhere more quiet. “I’m a fucking Chetcuti. Emmie’s going to regret refusing my Suit. And Micellef’s going to regret not wedding Krish..Krish. Her mother’s a whore, but she’s my sishter. You see if I don’t make them regret it.”

Jem sways off in the direction of the bedchambers.

“Keep him out the offices and away from the Micellefs and the Azzopardis,” says Peter to the Knights. They don’t have time to bow in salute before Jem tilts into a wall.

Peter carries on over to the three women, bowing to them and taking Diane’s hand, kissing the
Lady Kristina does the honours. “Captain Peter Falzon, this is Marianna Maldini. She’s a friend of Alchemist Alighieri and also works for Umbrella. Sadly, she shan’t be joining us beyond tomorrow, as she’s currently engaged at one of Umbrella’s American facilities, so she and Madam Langdon have been educating me on all the delights of that great nation.”

“Delighted, I’m sure,” Peter replies to Marianna’s pleased to meet you. He knows exactly who she is, even though she’s several years older than her photostrip with Alighieri. He wonders if Credo knows who she is. He doubts it, or she’d not be here.

He hides his apprehension at the three of them together, though surely Lady Kristina must have an inkling? No matter. Peter hasn’t risen this far, this fast without being able to pull a circumstance to his advantage. Some people are born survivors and he’s one of them.

Still, he feels better when he knows what he’s up against.

He sits down next to them. “So, tell me, what tales do you have of Alchemist Alighieri that I can regale the company with when they wed? It’s long been a mischief of mine to bring a blush to Captain Micellef’s cheek.”

Marianna’s smart enough to see where the land lies and tries to think of the more innocuous things they’ve done. “There was the time we were late for a lecture so we parked the car in the lecture theatre, Violet refused to get out because she was in too much pain to go through the rigmarole, we did our notes from the car and then drove off when we were done. I mean, we had to get to the bar, it was Cassie’s 19th:”

Diane and Lady Kristina giggle. “Oh, but we must hear the details! I imagine you’ll have other stories just like it!”

“There was the time we broke into the Louvre, to see the Mona Lisa and there was the time when I was accused of cheating on an exam – I hadn’t – she got into the Directors house and convinced him I hadn’t cheated, but the examiner had marked wrong and didn’t want to admit it. She did a whole presentation and everything to him and his wife at 3am.” Marianna pauses. Most of the shenanigans coming to mind are illegal, immoral or fattening. “And there was the time she blagged our way onto that VIP junket. She had everyone believing I was related to Paolo Maldini and even when we got caught, she still sweet talked everyone into letting us stay and giving us more stuff.”
“She sounds like a most loyal and beloved companion,” says Peter. “I imagine you will be heartbroken to lose her.”

“Broke my heart long ago,” says Marianna under her breath. “I’ll miss her, cause she’s so fun to be around. She just grabs life by the balls and says let’s go, baby.”

“Sounds like my kinda gal,” says Diane, more than slightly tipsy. “I think if you’ve had a second chance at life, you appreciate it more.”

“As you certainly seem to appreciate your good fortune, Diane, after your untimely widowhood,” says Lady Kristina, obsequious and fawning over the American.

Diane doesn’t catch it, but Peter does, looking at Lady Kristina long and speculatively.

“I would fain to dance, though I’m loathe to choose one lady, thus offending the other two and indeed, would find such a task impossible,” declares Peter. “Truly, it’s a trial ordained by Mundus himself.”

“How in all the Nine Hells did your petite belle extricate you from further consequences?” asks Lady Kristina, ignoring Peter’s attempt at distracting her.

“When?” asks Marianna.

“When you were confidencing?” confirms Lady Kristina. “Madam Langdon has told me a fascinating tale, though surely she must be mistaken and our brave Alchemist cannot be the damsel of whom she speaks.”

“I’d bet my life on it,” declares Diane. “It’s definitely her. The name, the photos. It’s definitely her.”

“Who?” asks Marianna, looking more and more like a deer caught in the headlights.

“What was the name you used, Madam Langdon? A most charming name for such a terrible tale?”
“She’s just really good at talking her way out of shit and Umbrella tends to bail her out if she can’t,” says Marianna, almost relieved. Peter has the idea she pulls that explanation out a fair bit. “She’s just that good at her job, they’d rather bail her out than risk losing her. Same as me.”

“It’s indeed a fortunate thing to be indispensable,” says Peter, cutting across the conversation.

“La Serena Spezzata,” Diane helpfully provides. “I’d swear blind it’s her.”

“Don’t either of you dare go across and talk to Violet about it,” warns Marianna, in a tone that gives even Peter pause.

“Have no fear on that score, Miss Maldini,” Peter assures her, with the same warning in his tone. It even gets through Diane’s drunken haze. “I give you my personal assurance that neither Lady Kristina nor Madam Langdon will trouble Credo’s beloved. I won’t allow anything to stand barrier to their happiness.”

Marianna looks around the Hall, but she doesn’t see the lovebirds.

“I’ll hold you to that, Captain Falzon. Excuse me, I think I can see Pinny sitting. I’m going to say hello.” Marianna sweeps away, running into Cassie on the dance floor, clearly telling her what’s transpired.

“Come and dance with me, Lady Chetcuti,” says Peter, holding out his hand to Lady Kristina.

“We can’t leave your guest alone, Captain Falzon,” replies Lady Kristina, her voice full of false sincerity. “Both for hospitality and her own propriety.”

“I’ll have one of the Agius’ come over for her,” counters Peter, voice tight. He hauls Lady Kristina upright. “Now come and dance with me.”

She stumbles behind him to the dancefloor as Peter waits for the quadrille to reset before he joins a set of dancers. A space opens and he pulls her in.
“Such rough wooing, Captain Falzon!” Lady Kristina is an excellent dancer. Monsieur Dupuis taught her well.

“I would rather run you through on this dancefloor than let you ruin Credo’s Ball,” Peter warns her. “And I’d take on your Papa and all your brothers if I have to. Whatever you’re planning, forget it.”

“Duelling my brothers would certainly ruin Credo’s Ball,” she replies, grimacing against the tight hold he has of her hand. “Fear not. Papa has cautioned me in no uncertain terms that I will do nothing to prevent my forth-coming nuptials. I can see the advantages they may bring me.”

“Good. Remember them when temptation seizes you,” he snaps and the people around them look, catching his tone if not the words.

“I give you my word, Peter, that I shan’t do anything to injure Credo’s happiness,” says Lady Kristina, in the subdued tone she’d had with Credo earlier.

The dance leads them to face each other and he scrutinises her face. “I’ll content myself with that.”

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Credo leads Violet along the Large Hall to near the bedchambers, before stopping. He pauses for a moment before turning to her. She waits for Credo to speak.

“Don’t think me rude,” he begins, wondering how to put this. “I love you beyond measure, early as it is to say those words and the thought of sealing our love physically makes my soul sing—“

“But?”

Credo’s tongue is running away with him as much as his John Thomas. “I have a wish for how I would desire the first time I leave you proud with that loving act and I would not wish for it to be here.”

He looks down and away for a moment, as if he’s building up strength for what he does want.
“Credo,” says Violet and her brows are furrowed as much as her eyes shine. “I didn’t understand a word of that.”

Credo smiles shyly and Violet draws him in for a kiss. He allows it to deepen, gently tracing the lines of metal in her mouth. Violet almost purrs with pleasure and Credo chuckles as he pulls back. “Hie there, Miss Kitty. Would you like me to say it in English?”

She kisses him again. “I think it would help in any language that wasn’t Jane Austen.”

Credo’s hand’s found the nape of her neck, warm under all her heavy hair and he massages it, trying to find words she’ll understand. “I want you, my treasure, I do. But when I find release at your hands again, it will be deep inside you with you calling my name as you break apart under me.”

Violet kisses him and smirks. “Nope. Not a word.”

“I swear you’re doing this to vex me,” he mock scowls.

“I just love the sound of your voice saying those words,” she whispers. “And you’re funny when you’re annoyed.”

“Do so at your peril, Madam,” he mock warns. “I still hold your Undertaking and even once your friends depart, it will still hold true for you, three years hence.”

“Oh, Master Captain, whatever will you do to me? How ever will I stand the torment? Have mercy on my poor body!” Violet swoons like a 1920s film heroine.

“No,” says Credo, voice rougher as he pushes her into an alcove and against the wall. The wall of the alcove has a tapestry, some dogs hunting a unicorn as a maiden stands between it and the hounds. He keeps his body flush against hers, trapping her against the exquisite tapestry. Violet makes a small *hnn* as her back hits the wall and for a second Credo pauses, mindful of hurting her.

She kisses him and he smiles briefly, before grinding his hips into hers, fighting to keep his reaction in check. It’s her reaction that’s the important one. Credo keeps her body pinned against
the tapestry as he pulls her skirt up over her hips, enough that he can get a hand or a prick under the frill, but not so that the top of her legs are on show. The world won’t be seeing her wares.

Credo nudges her legs apart slightly, so he has room to work. He slides a hand into the apex, feeling the lace underwear, rough and snagging slightly against his fingers. Violet pushes her hips against his hand.

Credo doesn’t take his eyes from her face, resisting the urge to kiss her so that he might see Violet’s reactions. He keeps his fingers light, gentle, teasing her as he learns her responses. The lace pants are dampening under his fingertips as he traces the outlines of her nether lips, watching as she licks the ones in her flushed face.

It’s so hard not to kiss her.

Her breathing has quickened as Credo increases the pressure on her commodity, running his middle finger into the gap between her lips. He skirts the cunny-hole that has her sigh as her eyes stare deep into his, eyes that are near black in the lamplight.

A trifle mischievous, Credo tickles his fingers over the lace. Violet jumps and gasps, trying to push down into his hand, trying to get more pressure there. He doesn’t let her, enjoying the feel of her hips rocking against him as he teases her. He moves his fingers to the front of her Jane Brown and tickles the little nub that’s hiding just inside the lace.

Violet tries to grab Credo’s wrist and direct his hand where she wants it, but he blocks it with a slight twist of his hips. He uses his free hand to seek out both of hers and pins them above her head, fingers entwined. The effect is to arch her back and push her breasts forward and against his chest, moaning as she tries to lean forward to kiss him.

Credo thinks she sounds a little desperate and he files that away for when they finally do make love.

He puts her out her misery or teases her a little harder – given where he’s finally touching, it’s not really clear – and presses her little nub through the lace. He knows that the lace creates a sensation that’s unmatched and uses that now to put the look on her face that he’s dreamed about since that first dance all those years ago and never thought he ever would.

His fingers move deftly against that little button, pushing it almost mercilessly given the shake
that’s started in her thighs and the shortening breath that flutters the hair that’s escaping from his braid. Violet’s pants are sodden under his fingers and he can smell how aroused she is. He fully intends to take her to bed later, but he wants her primed and ready. He wants everyone to see in her movements on the dancefloor how ready she’ll be for him. A prime wench can’t settle and it drives her higher. How hard will she explode around him when he’s been so mindful of her fuse all night!

He’s been dreaming of this night for years and their first real time together will stop the stars in their paths across the sky.

He’s pulled out of his reverie by Violet chanting his name and grinding her body against his, trying to get more purchase against his fingers. She’s shaking like a leaf and Credo can’t help it, she’s so beautiful when she’s wanton and desperate.

He pulls his fingers away, smiling at her irritated whine and finding her waistband – waistband! There’s even less of these knickers than the ones from Friday – pushes his fingers under it and into her cunny for real.

By the Saviour, she feels amazing under his hand – hot and wet as he avoids her little nub, he doesn’t want her coming so soon, wants to pleasure her a little longer, return the delight she selflessly gave him on Friday.

Credo pushes two fingers inside her cunny, marvelling at how tight she is and he wonders how he is going to fit his shaft inside her later. Surely it’s going to hurt? It strikes him then, that he’s not even worrying about performing, considering that he’s functionally impotent with any other woman and he grins. It’s almost devilish and Violet actually stops moving for a moment. It’s as if she sees something else deep within his eyes.

It gives Credo pause, as he waits to see which way she’ll jump, but that dark look of desire is on her face, even with the change in their positions since Friday. Whatever she’s seeing, it’s not put her off.

“Credo,” she says in a low, husky murmur. That slight challenge, that playfulness is back. “Show me what you’ve got. I can take it. I can take you.”

He doesn’t answer, just pushes his fingers slowly in. Her walls are tight around them and it’s a small effort to move them, but oh, it’s worth it for her response.
Violet’s breath’s coming in short, ragged pants, echoing in the alcove. She can’t keep still as her legs shake and her body can’t decide if it’s arching to or fro him, fingers digging into the back of his hand as he presses it still against the tapestry.

He can feel flutters and quivers in her most intimate muscles. Credo slowly pulls his fingers out, almost to his first knuckle, bending his fingers so they scratch her as they go.

Her cry is sharp and immediate, echoing down the hallway and he doesn’t try to shush her. It’s almost as if he wants people to see. It might scandalise some of the more staid Fortunese citizens, but more likely there’d be amazement that there’s some kind of passion burning inside the reserved young man.

It’s the quiet ones that are the worse, isn’t that what they say?

Violet’s pushing down onto his hand, desperate for more friction, rocking her hips back and forth. She hasn’t got much leeway, trapped against his body the way she is. Credo can’t help the dark smile that crosses his lips as he watches her come undone before him. He twists his hand and crooks the fingers as he pushes deep inside her. He doesn’t rush the pace, keeping it slow and controlled, letting it build within her body in its own time.

The flutters in the muscles pick up speed as his hard fingers move deep inside her.

The only part of her body where Violet has any freedom of movement is her head. She can’t keep it still and Credo pulls back, just a little so she doesn’t inadvertently give him a Glasgow kiss. That would be rum doings and no mistake. Not quite the climax to proceedings he’s planning.

Her face is honest and desperate as the sensations sing along her nerves, she isn’t hiding or feigning her reactions to him and his thrusting hand driving her onwards. It strikes Credo as ironic that Vee’s responses to him are more true now that she’s concealed than they were when they were finally together after they were wed.

Credo would carry this on longer, but the next dance is due soon and Violet will need to compose herself before it starts. There’s still a while yet to supper. He turns his hand slightly and presses the pad of his thumb to her little nub. Violet’s head snaps back so hard the crack’s audible and he would stop but for her hissed “Don’t you dare.”

It doesn’t take much to bring her off, her cunny squeezing tight around his fingers as her back
arches, a stream of obscenities falling from her mouth and worst among them is his name.

Credo works her through it, drawing it out as much as he can, stowing away what he’s learned about her body for later when he can take his time pleasing her.

At last, he can wring nothing more from her and slowly pulls his hand out. “Take care, Madam, for I fear your legs might go from beneath you,” he teases, making sure he’s supporting her, lest her legs really do fail her.

Violet’s still breathing heavily as she swallows. “I can manage. Just. Can you very carefully bring my arms down? I can’t move them if they’re held like that for a while. They just lock.”

A stab of guilt pierces Credo’s heart, but it’s no more than his due, for the wrongs he committed and allowed others to commit against her. If this is the price he pays for atonement, then he’s glad to meet it,

He brings them down as requested, whispering nonsense to Violet to soothe her through the discomfort, draping them over his shoulders. He’s glad as she pulls him close, kissing him gently and sweetly.

“Credo, that was…that was amazing.” Her flushed-shining face breaks out into a giddy smile, wires catching the light. She’s still panting, like she’s been dancing.

“I have more in store for you, my treasure,” he says, leaning down and kissing her softly, gently tracing the wires that befix her teeth. She shivers.

“I just want you to know that I never really let myself go with anyone, but with you, I did,” Violet says, almost shyly and Credo’s willing to bet that’s not a label that can be applied to Violet Alighieri most days. “You make me feel safe.”

“You are safe, my love,” he replies, gently, as he straightens her skirt. “Are you ready to return to company?”

She nods. “We need to answer the most important question though.”
Credo’s eyebrows knit, confused.

“What the hell did Pinny put in this lipstick? It’s fucking glued to me! Nary a smudge on either of us!”

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The next few hours are a blur of dances both long and energetic and slow waltzes. Violet never sits down once when Credo and she return to company. She sees her friends while they dance and they seem to be having as much fun as she is, though demanded by the company of more than just Violet’s single suitor.

Poor Diane doesn’t seem to be doing any dancing though and she’s been sat on her own long enough that Pinny’s invited her to their table. She looks glum, even as Pinny’s trying to draw her into the conversation. There’s more than a few wine glasses in front of her.

The children form their own little circles and lines, recreating the dances of the adults more or less. The only real bit of bother is when one of the Al Burj children keeps kicking Nero or standing on his toes during the dance. It’s not clear whether or not he’s doing it on purpose, but the result’s the same. Soon, he and Nero are fighting with the rest of the set piling in on either side.

Peter and Lord Agius separate them, with Peter holding a scowling, struggling Nero, trying to clean him up before Credo finds out.

“Making a habit of it tonight,” says Lord Agius, lightly.

“Takes me back to when I and his Guardian broke up fights down the Docks,” Peter says, not sounding at all nostalgic.

“Uncle Peter, Felix started it, not Nero,” says Josh wide-eyed and earnest.

Peter smiles. “Young Master Al-Burj will have to pay more attention in his dance classes. Happen they’ll pay off long before that turnip field’s ever settled.”
“Your guest doesn’t seem to be enjoying herself,” says Lord Agius. “You are rather guilty of neglecting her. Josh and Pinny will be fine.”

“I merely wish to smooth over any blame Pinny might find incumbent upon you for our arrangement, especially when she and I have reached our own such pact,” replies Peter. “And keep Lady Kristina in check, for Cassius never will.”

“The Old Blood runs thin in that one, for otherwise you’d never have cuckolded a Calleja,” says Lord Agius.

Peter makes sure that the children have run along and no one else can overhear him. “And you’re my honoured father-in-law, because one daughter you held down screaming while I took her in the Chamber over yonder and we provided the same service to the other to bring the child who’s blood’s on this handkerchief into the world.”

Lord Agius’ jaw works. “I have never forgotten that my good fortune was paid for in my daughters’ blood.”

“So many whores sell their daughters’ flowers for velenu. Tell me again how you’re too good to foul a plate with them,” snaps Peter. “You’re in no position to lecture me on Old Family superiority, Edward, are you, really?”

“They’ll be setting up for dinner soon,” says Lord Agius, barely suppressed anger in his voice. “Should you wish to say good night to my grandson, you’d best go now. Alice will be taking them home shortly.”

He stalks off. Peter waits a minute, then follows on, watching Violet and Credo dancing with Emmeline and Giancarlo and their respective parents. Lord Chetcuti meets his eyes, nods a greeting. There’s something extra there, animosity, maybe? Regret? But it’s not aimed at Peter, it’s aimed at the only High Old Family who preferred their daughter married a penniless Italian bartender than a Chetcuti.

That slap in the face has began a feud that will probably still be running 500 years from now and the cracks that began to show in Fortunese society with that simple yes will continue to fracture it for years to come.

The dancers move off while the floor is cleared so the dinner tables can be set up. The first course
is announced for twenty minutes away and Violet goes to sit down with the Micellef-Agius parties. Cassie’s sitting down with some Umbrella employees and Lena is …somewhere. Marianna and Peter are chatting as Diane’s acquired a bottle of red from somewhere. She’s talking rubbish and it’s making Josh laugh as Alice appears with the children’s coats, it’s nearly ten pm and they’re overtired, with both Nero and Kyrie whining. They hug their parents, with Nero taking just a little longer with Credo.

“Don’t forget, you promised to bring Violet home so we can be a family,” he whispers earnestly in Credo’s ear.

“I promise,” says Credo, knowing tonight’s good, but no idea how he’ll manage the day after that.

Pinny’s still fair buzzing with anger, even as she smiles and nods. She kisses Josh goodnight, ignoring her father. It’s clear that Lord Agius is distressed by her treatment of him. He tries to get her a small appetizer and she waves him off. She doesn’t even look at him.

Josh comes over to Peter, tugging on one of the tails of his jacket. Peter crouches down. “Yes, Young Master?”

“Don’t forget my plane tomorrow,” says Josh, shyly. He’s not used to asking for things for himself.

“You have my word upon my honour,” replies Peter.

Josh nods, satisfied.

“If only all children were as easily satisfied,” Credo remarks ruefully to Peter.

The children wave as Alice leads them away.

Pinny watches them go. “Violet, would you help me to the ladies?”

“Course,” replies Violet as she gets up to help Pinny stand.
Lord Agius jumps up to help and this time Pinny accepts his aid, though she still doesn’t look at him.

“Should I or Edith escort you along with Violet, my dearest?” he chances, sensing the thawing in her manner.

“No, Papa, Violet will be fine,” replies Pinny. “Perhaps you could get me some water for my tablets and check that the cooks recall mine and Violet’s dining requirements?”

Lord Agius bows and heads off to confirm Pinny’s request.

“Let him think I’ve shed my miff,” says Pinny when they’re out of earshot.

“You haven’t though, have you? You’re still pissed off at him.” Violet walks slowly as Pinny puts as much weight on Violet’s arm as she does her stick.

“I’m wondering if I’ll be on a Zimmer frame sooner than I thought,” Pinny says, shuffling. “Though it’s been a busy last few days and maybe I’m just more tired than I should be.”

Violet catches the fear in Pinny’s voice and she can see the concern on her own face reflected in the mirrors of the Large Hall.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m pissed off at Papa or not, Vee,” says Pinny and Violet doesn’t correct the nickname. “I’m back in everything I left, once again a golden bird in a gilt cage. And I have to be, for Josh.”

“Are there really no other options? No friends in Spain that can take him? I’d take my mates’ kids and I know they’d take mine.” Violet almost wishes she hasn’t spoke when Pinny’s head whips round with a death glare that would strike fear into an angel.

“Good for you! Don’t you think I asked them?” she spits. “I’ve not another option for Josh, so I have to smile and nod and let them think it’s all forgiven. Fortuna does that, Vee. Women have to bend lest they break and Old Family women have to bend further than most. You’ll find all that out soon enough.”
“I won’t let that happen, Pinny,” replies Violet, resolutely. “Credo won’t let that happen or he’d have been as well with Lady Kristina.”

Pinny smiles darkly. “Credo will have no choice, good Son of Fortuna that he is. He’ll have done worse and will do so again. He’ll fool himself he can protect you from the worst of it but Credo’s always had a talent for self-deception.”

Violet looks at Pinny, and she can’t hide the growing chill inside her. “OK, I won’t let that happen, Pinny. I’ve been through way, way fucking worse than anything Fortuna can throw at me.”

Pinny pats her arm. “You would think that, wouldn’t you?”

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By the time Violet and Pinny have returned from the ladies, the Great Hall has been turned into a banqueting hall. There’s a large Top Table for the Micellefs and Lord Scerri and smaller tables for the other guests, a mix of top UO staff, Order, Guilds and Old Families.

“Wow, it looks like a wedding,” gasps Violet. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s a similar layout to a wedding,” says Pinny. “Let’s go up to the mezzanine and see the full picture. I forget you’ve never seen this before.”

“Not really been to a lot of fancy dinners,” confirms Violet. “Not like this.”

Pinny smiles. “I doubt many people experience a fancy dinner like this anymore.”

“Do you really want to walk up the steps?” asks Violet. “I’m not being funny, but you look exhausted.”

Pinny looks at her and then the stairs. “I’m shattered, but I don’t want to leave. Both for my own sake and Papa’s. But there’s no lift and unless you’ve got a magic trick up your sleeve, shanks’ pony is our only option.”
Violet looks around, but no one is really looking at them. “Hold on to your hat.”

The next second, both women are standing on the mezzanine, looking over the room. “You’re right, it’s even better up here.”

“What did you do?” asks Pinny, staggering a little.

Violet grabs hold of Pinny, even firmer than before. “Just a little magic trick I had up my sleeve.”

“Energy worker?” Pinny guesses as Violet nods.

“I’m told that’s what it’s called,” replies Violet. “I’m available for children’s parties, very cheap.”

Pinny laughs. “I wouldn’t go broadcasting it. The Order is suspicious of magic it doesn’t control, particularly if the wielder’s female, I used to have that power, but not anymore. It faded along with my health.”

“Was your sister –“

“Oh yes, she could blow a hole in the wall and frequently did,” replies Pinny. “But, I’m not joking about the Order and magic. Be very careful how you reveal it, particularly with your lack of history. You seriously don’t want to end up on the Faith Committee’s radar more than you already are.”

“I don’t follow,” frowns Violet. She can see Credo looking around for her and waving when he sees her, pointing at a chair at the Top Table. She waves back.

“You’ve hitched up with one of Fortuna’s favoured sons from nowhere, you’ve caused him to reject a very advantageous marriage and you look like my sister. You bet your arse you’re being looked at.” Pinny goes completely serious. “Do not piss off the Faith Committee. They have power you wouldn’t believe and with Fortuna opening up to foreigners, they’re under a lot of pressure.”
“You make them sound like the Stasi,” says Violet.

“You wouldn’t be far wrong,” says Pinny, wryly. “Come on, let’s go down to dinner. But let’s just walk, shall we?”

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Dinner’s halfway through the second course, the wine’s flowing freely and the company is lively. Peals of laughter can be heard from around the room above the buzz of conversation as everyone mixes.

Credo’s attentive to Violet, keeping a supply of water ready in case she chokes. She doesn’t, as the kitchen staff have indeed remembered the various requirements of their diners. For her part, if she and Dorcas aren’t talking shop with the section heads of both the Order and UO, she’s keeping them regaled with racier versions of the escapades of she and Marianna and trots out the Spiderwoman story again, as Dorcas missed it the first time round.

“He’s so prim and proper now, Violet,” says Zander, conspiratorially. “But this very room was where Credo challenged Cassius Calleja to a duel for insulting Verity. In a dress. Remember, Son?”

“Papa, Violet really doesn’t need to hear about –“

“I should hope Verity was wearing a dress,” replies Violet. “I’m getting the idea that’s a thing around here, women in dresses. Gorgeous dresses. I love them.” She gestures at her dress and the room in general.

“No, he was,” replies Zander, more than a trifle disguised. “Dorcas, it’s a funny story and Violet understands a man has a past. It’s his future that matters. So, my dear, Verity, Pinny’s sister, for some reason only known to herself, had a massive crush on Cassius –

“You’re so bitchy when you’re drunk, aren’t you Zander?” Violet giggles.

“By the Saviour, Papa. None of us need to hear this again. We were all there.”
“You’re not too big to go over my knee, Son. I can still give you a good spanking. We’re both Captains now.” Zander has a mock sword fight with Dorcas as she tries to stop him gesturing with his knife.

“Papa, you never put me over your knee when I was of an age. I was more afeared of Mama than you.” He turns to Violet. “I was bribed not to tell Mama of half my escapades. Though it were Pinny and Verity that led me astray most of the time. They’d get in scrapes, mostly because they were trying to show themselves better than the Chetcuti children, who were hellions first to last.”

“Aw, I bet you were the voice of reason and kept trying to keep Pinny and Verity safe and ended up getting the blame all the time,” smiles Violet. “I think that’s sweet.”

“Zander, carry on the story,” says Pinny. “I don’t think we can wait for the wedding and embarrass him with the best man’s speech.”

“Verity, for reasons known only to herself, had a massive crush on Cassius and worked up the courage to ask him to dance,” begins Zander.

“Cassius is an extremely attractive man,” replies Pinny. “He’d just not learned tact and besides, he was espousing views that weren’t his. Chetcutis are far too inbred, if you catch my meaning.”

“Not really,” says Violet, entertained nonetheless.

“Vee gears herself up and Cassius says loud enough for all the company to hear, “Dance? With you?” And Vee’s tearing up, but her pluck was up and she shouts back “Yes! With me!” and he replies back “Sorry, I’m not dancing with a man in a dress. Maybe if you throw your sister in, because that’s the only reason any man would look at you.”

Zander can see his audience is enthralled, even if just to see Violet’s reaction.

“That’s horrible,” replies Violet. “Poor Verity. What happened?”

“Papa, really, it was years ago.” Credo’s trying to hide how uncomfortable he’s getting, even if the party mistake it for embarrassment.
“Hush, son, it’s a brilliant story for a wedding,” retorts Zander.

“Like my last one and that went so well,” replies Credo.

“Happen this one will be better,” cuts in Lord Agius. “Zander, we’ve heard this story and it’s painful to me.”

“Why Papa?” asks Pinny, somewhat pointedly. “All we have now of Vee are memories and soon, it shall be all you have of me. Tell us, Zander, for it’s amusing to watch guilty people squirm.”

Zander’s too tipsy to notice the barbed comments flying around him. “Credo sees poor Vee barely just keep her dignity, but found the insult to her maidenhood most objectionable.”

“No bloody wonder!” replies Violet, entranced by the story. She looks at Credo. “Poor Vee!”

“So, our White Knight here, goes and demands his Mama’s dress, which she gives him and –“

“Oh my God, Dorcas, you gave him your dress!” Violet looks between Dorcas and Credo.

“She did. And your Beau here, my son, Blessed be the Saviour, puts it on and storms up to him, sword drawn –“

“Bullshit! Really?”

“Really, storms up to him, sword drawn, in front of the whole Great Hall, those steps over yonder and shouts at him, “Calleja, would you dance with this man in a dress?” “Zander pauses for dramatic effect. Violet is enrapt. She’s reached for Credo’s hand at some point, holding it tight.

“And Cassius laughs at him, says “Hie there, brave soldier, but aren’t you worried your hem will trip you up?” “

“Never! And what did Credo do?” Violet turns back to Credo, and the look she’s giving him makes him wish he was in her head right now. It’s exactly the same look as when she saw he was going to
challenge Cassius.

“He retorts “Fie upon your false concern and let our blades waltz!” and Cassius laughs, but ‘ere long twas his arse that laughed harder than his face,” finishes Zander, proudly.

“Thanks to you, Papa, I have some skill with a blade.” Credo cuts across his father. “Cassius was squarely bested and Edward asked as to Courting Gifts on the spot. None of which matters now.”

He says this with a warning clear in his voice and even his father catches it.

“Aw, you’re a knight in shining armour and now you’re my knight in shining armour,” giggles Violet, kissing him. She hasn’t caught the tension in Credo’s voice. “I think that’s lovely.”

Lord Scerri stands and taps the side of a wine glass and the company quietens.

Lord Scerri cuts in before anyone can say anything else, though his comments are addressed to the company at large. “Indeed, Credo, that duel was the happy accident that drew my attention to you. It was never a coincidence that you became my Assistant and partnered with Captain Falzon the very next day, for that duel showed to me and to all of us, that you had the honour, integrity and loyalty that a Knight of the Order of the Sword requires to battle the evils within and without.

I could speak of the skills of Credo with his blade, but I could not do his talent justice. I would rather speak of the man who wields that blade, from the young Knight defending a maiden’s honour, to the Knight we see before us who has fought alongside his men without hesitation, both on the battlefield and off. Several Knights still have their careers but for Credo Speaking for them in their Courts Martial, actively investigating to discern the truth and thus save their careers and indeed, their very lives.

Here is a man who will defend not just those under him, but the people he protects – he’s spoke in Committee to defend the civilians of Fortuna and help those who are without – without money, food, shelter, clothing, a homeland, a family – both alongside his esteemed parents, Zander and Dorcas and his former father-in-law, General Agius and his shelters for refugees and the homeless. Even as a young child, Credo worked to provide for those who were without.

He asks nothing of any man that he would not ask of himself, demanding the same virtues of honour, loyalty and fairness in them, as in himself, as the Saviour asked of us when he sheltered us here in Fortuna all those years ago. It is an honour to serve as his Supreme General – My Lords,
Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Holy Knight Captain Credo Alexander Micellef of the Order of the Sword!”

There’s thunderous applause and Credo stands up, blushing. “Oh shush.”

There’s laughter at this and calls of “Speech!” echo round the room.

“All of you know me as a man of action, not words-“ and this brings more cheering “-so you’ll be pleased to hear I’m going to keep this short, particularly as there’s two people here with far more important news to share than simply me being good at my job.” Credo pauses and sips his wine. “But a Knight is only as good as the people around him, all of us really are only as good as the people around them. I’m lucky enough to have been surrounded by the best of you.

“I must credit those, however who had a singular influence upon me and for that I give thanks to Mama and Papa, whose most excellent example of those virtues Lord Scerri and this present company find acceptable, created in no small part the man you see before you. They created in me the foundation for all that has followed, that Lord Scerri has seen and his careful teaching has allowed to flourish. I must thank you, my Lord for seeing in me the man you could mould me into and the opportunities to serve yourself, the Saviour and Fortuna. My life would have been vastly different but for you. Lord Agius, your daughters and your sadly deceased Abigail – thank you for being my second family as a boy and my friend and advisor as my superior officer.”

Credo pauses. “Peter, our association has taught me much. I hope it has for you also.”

Peter raises a glass to Credo and nods in acknowledgment, but doesn’t stand to make a speech.

Credo finishes up his speech. “I can only give you my vow that I will continue to earn the faith you show in me by pledging my faith in you and serving you as dutifully and completely as you all serve me.”

There’s rapturous applause and shouting as Lord Scerri stands again.

Peter watches as Jem Chetcuti comes in and sits at a back table. He’s tidied himself up, but he still looks shocking. Where he’s sitting, he’s got a direct line of sight to Emmeline Azzopardi and a drink in his hand. And they wonder why no one wants to marry into them.
The Knights are still with him, so hopefully they can keep him out of trouble.

Lord Scerri makes a signal and a hush falls upon the company. It’s been an open secret that this was coming as an ornate silver tray is brought out to the Chetcuti-Calleja table.

Violet watches intently, Credo explaining each aspect as it happens.

Lady Kristina goes through the motions with an extremely bad grace, casting occasional glances at Credo and at Violet.

“She’s got a face on her that would turn the milk sour,” murmurs Violet, shivering as Credo strokes her back under her tumble of curls. There’s still a flush on her cheeks that has nothing to do with alcohol and Lady Kristina can see it. Lady Kristina chokes on the bread that Cassius tries to feed her with and he spills the water down her gown.

There’s gasps and murmurs round the Hall of bad omens as General Chetcuti and General Calleja shoot each other anxious looks. Cassius leans over and whispers something to his father, who angrily points back to Kristina. She for her part looks pleadingly at her father who bangs his hand down on to the table, making the tray jump and clang, knocking the candle over. It falls on the tray and rolls a little, but it can’t go anywhere.

Clearly reluctant, the couple kiss, but there’s nothing behind it, at least not on her side.

She convulsively moves to wipe her lips, but is stopped by her father. He says something to her that makes her hang her head and blink convulsively.

Violet can tell Lady Kristina is holding back tears.

There’s a very half-hearted toast to their health as everyone raises a glass to the couple. Both fathers look furious as they regard their offspring. Marcus Azzopardi looks relieved, turning and making a comment to Emmeline and Azalia, Emmeline’s mother.

Normally, even though the meal’s halfway through, people would still circulate, go up to the couple, but no one moves and the atmosphere is oddly subdued. There are still mutters of jinxed and Mundus-cursed from various quarters.
Lord Scerri looks as if he’s considering how to raise the spirits of the company, when he sees Lord Azzopardi go up to Lord Calleja and Lord Chetcuti. They shake hands both with each other and the couple. Lord Chetcuti casts an anxious glance at his son, glaring daggers at Giancarlo.

Lord Azzopardi goes to speak to Lord Scerri, who stands up, tapping the wine glass again. “It would seem that tonight we are truly fortunate, for a third blessing comes our way.”

Lord Azzopardi clears his throat, positively beaming. “I’m delighted to announce grandchild number four is on the way. Emmie and Giancarlo are expecting their first child in January.”

There’s cheers and applause at this, as babies are always welcome in Fortuna. People begin to circulate now, congratulating the expectant couple, over the newly-affianced.

“It’s a fuckin’ outrage! She’s not even decent wed! An’ you’re all per-per-perp’tratin’ the affront ’gainst my fam’ly!?”

The crowd parts as Jem easily throws off the Guards and storms up to Lord Azzopardi’s table.

“How can you condone turnin’ Emmie in’a whore? Wass so wrong wi’ mah fam’ly you’d rather she whore’t hersel with that Talian peasant?” He’s unsheathed his sword, sweeping it in a circle as he gestures at the room. “Wass wrong with mah sister, Micleef, that you’d marry a foreign slut over her? They’re makin’ her marry Caesar Calleja’s dullard mistake an it’s all your fault!”

Lord Azzopardi turns to Lord Chetcuti. “Get him in hand, Emilio, before someone takes up his challenge. There’s several here who’re better than him and you’ll be attending a funeral, not a wedding.”

“I don’t need you to intercede for me,” says Jem, sounding almost sober. He slams his sword down on the Azzopardi table, Giancarlo pulling Emmeline away and behind him.

“Bow down or draw your sword,” snarls Jem, pulling his sword free and lunging forward.

His balance is way off and it’s easy for Giancarlo to avoid him, throwing his wife into the arms of her uncle. The dodge and parry continues for a minute as it’s hard to get near Jem to restrain him
and he’s strong with drink.

“I don’t want to fight you!” yells Giancarlo.

“Give him a sword!” Lady Kristina shouts. “Let him defend himself!”

“No! If he picks up a sword, he’s accepted the challenge!” Peter shouts. “Credo! We’re closer!”

“Leave your sword!” Credo calls to Peter. “We can’t accept a challenge if we’re not holding them.”

Credo hands his sword to Lord Agius as Peter hands his to Darius.

Diane’s voice slurs through the gasps and cries of the crowd as Giancarlo keeps sidestepping and fleeing Jem’s drunken attacks. “Ish thish like per-per-performance art? Is that a real sword?”

The arrangement of the tables makes it difficult for Jem to catch up to Giancarlo as well as the people scattering and fleeing before them.

It also makes it difficult for Giancarlo to weave and dodge around the tables and keep an eye on his adversary as Jem sweeps his sword in wide slashes. “Stand and face me, you shitten coward!”

“Emmie cast you aside for a girl, Jem!” Yells Lady Kristina. Even Lord Chetcuti looks at her as if he’s seeing her for the first time, but she doesn’t notice.

Credo and Peter don’t even need to consider their line of attack, they work so well together. Credo works out quickly that he’s not going to get around the tables and glances at Peter, before he takes a run and springs atop the nearest table.

Peter follows on his side of Jem, trying to avoid the glasses and crockery as best he can as he leaps lithely from table to table, closing in on his side of Jem.

“Credo! Be careful!” calls Violet, reaching for Pinny’s hand. The other woman grabs it. They’re watching with their hands over their mouths.
Credo’s about to reach Jem and readies himself to bring down the enraged fool before he kills someone, when he slips on a plate and lands on the floor. He doesn’t have time to be winded before Jem’s upon him.

Credo feels the *whoosh* as the sword just misses his head. He thinks he’s heard Violet scream his name, but it’s hard to tell with the *clank* of the blade hitting the stone floor by his ear. Jem raises the sword again and Credo rolls backwards onto his feet and into a fighting stance. He looks around for *something* and grabs a plate, throwing it at him.

Jem swings for it, hitting it and from the look on his face, he’s as surprised as everyone else. It doesn’t keep him occupied long and he roars as he goes for Credo again.

Credo grabs more crockery and aims for Jem’s face. Some he gets and some he misses as Jem’s blade swipes wildly at the plates and bowls and chunks of food. One good shot is a chicken in the face and Jem’s nose bursts all over his dress whites.

Credo’s distracted Jem long enough for Peter to work his way around the room and come up behind him. He grabs hold of an empty chair and swings it at the back of Jem’s legs. Jem goes down like a tonne of bricks, his incensed expression turning to befuddlement as he topples. He grabs a tablecloth as he goes down, pulling the settings off with louds smashes as they hit the floor.

There’s a loud yell as Jem lands on his sword as he goes down and a scream from the ladies around the scene.

The blade’s gone right through his leg. He reaches dumbly to pull it out.

“No! Stop him! Keep it in!” Yells Giancarlo. “He’ll bleed to death faster if he takes it out!”

There’s already blood spreading out on the floor, staining his dress whites a bright scarlet. “It’s hit the femoral artery. Emmie, get our bags, we’ll get him stable and then get him down to the Health Centre. He’s probably going to be air-lifted to the Mainland.”

He runs across to Jem and directs Peter to wrap the leg around the blade with the tablecloth. “Help me carry him to the car, Marcus, call ahead and let the Health Centre know they’ve to prep for surgery.”
“Of course,” says Lord Azzopardi running for a phone.

“Emmie, help me keep him stable, Azalia, you drive,” Giancarlo gives out the orders as if he’s back in the Naples hospital where he’s a surgeon and his wife’s a junior doctor.

Lord Azzopardi calls across guards to help the young doctors carry the future of the Chetcutis out to his car. He looks across to Lord Chetcuti. “Emilio, aren’t you coming?”

General Chetcuti looks at the retreating group. “Not now. Nothing I can do there. I’ve a mess to sort out here. I cannot apologise enough for the grave offense my family has committed upon your honour, Marcus.”

He bows as he speaks.

“Godspit and fucking shit, Emilio! Your son could die! None of that matters just now!” Lord Azzopardi snaps, urgently. “Giancarlo’s honour will be satisfied when his scalpel cuts Jem’s flesh, I’d say for that’s as much he’ll be concerned about it.”

“You’re very gracious, Marcus, but I will attend to the matter at hand first. I must speak to Lord Scerri and Caesar.” He bows abruptly and heads back towards his table. Lady Kristina runs from the table, Cassius staring after her helplessly.

Lord Azzopardi stares after General Chetcuti, mouth agape, until Emmeline calls for her father. He comes to himself and hurries after her.

“Credo! Credo! Thank God you’re alright!” Violet exclaims as she runs up to him, feeling all over him. He’s sitting in his shirtsleeves, jacket flung carelessly aside.

Credo accepts her ministrations, stopping her only to pull her into a kiss. “All the better for your tender care, my težor.”

“I can’t – I mean, what the fuck? He came at you with an actual sword! You could have been killed! I could fucking kill his sister! I could fucking kill you, I -oh, my fucking God!”
Violet is babbling with the emotions flooding through her and can’t even draw breath properly through her restricted mouth.

Credo pulls her back in, careless of the indiscretion. She’s his Ladybird, let them all see.

There’s a polite cough and he pulls back to see his Mama and Papa standing beside him, a mixture of relieved and amused. She makes an imperceptible nod toward the front of him. Lord Chetcuti and Lord Calleja stand before him.

Credo can’t stand up, given that Violet’s sitting on his lap. “My Lords.”

“I can’t apologise enough, Captain,” says General Chetcuti. “I don’t know what’s got into my children lately. When Jem recovers, I won’t argue should you wish to satisfy your honour.”

“I’ve no wish to. There’s been enough blood spilled tonight.” Credo thinks for a moment. “I’d just ask that a blood tariff be paid to either the Beechwood Children’s Home or Abigail’s Refugee Centre.”

Lord Chetcuti nods and offers his hand to Credo. “I’ll see to it. I have a matter of some delicacy to ask you.”

“But you wouldn’t if it wasn’t important,” Credo guesses as he shakes Lord Chetcuti’s hand.

“Given how out of control Kristina’s got recently, I think it best they marry as soon as possible,” says General Chetcuti. He glances at Lord Calleja, who nods.

“I don’t follow,” says Credo, looking between the Generals and Dorcas.

“You mean tonight,” cuts in Dorcas. “Else there would be no reason to consult with Credo.”

Lord Calleja nods. “They’re setting up the Master’s Chamber as we speak. Those who’d be witnesses are all here, won’t take long for the nuptials and I don’t imagine that much of the
Committee would be missed. Leave it to the youngsters to party.”

“Wouldn’t be in this situation if Azzopardi had put his foot down with Emmeline and that boy, had them properly married. Marrying Mainlanders is all good and well, but they need to respect our traditions,” says Lord Chetcuti.

“And that worked so well for Verity and Credo,” snaps Dorcas. “For had Edward allowed Tony Redgrave’s suit, at least four people in this room wouldn’t have had their lives destroyed!”

“Mama! That past doesn’t matter now!” Credo chides Dorcas, as Violet looks between the parties. The look on her face is speculative and this alone makes Credo fretful. He’s not ready for her questions.

They, Nero, he, could lose her again.

“Dorcas, hold your tongue lest you afear the maid,” retorts Lord Calleja. He turns to Credo. “So, no objections on your part?”

“None, my Lord,” replies Credo, anxious to get them away before Violet comprehends the situation won’t gee. “I’ll leave you to your preparations and wish Lady Kristina and Cassius a fruitful marriage.”

Shut up. Go away. For the love of the Saviour, fuck off.

“Well, one hopes whatever the Priests cook up will overcome that hurdle,” says General Chetcuti. “All those women Cassius has bedded and not one bachelor child between them. Yet as soon as they’re away from him, their vines bare fruit. Pinny Agius, my niece Rosanna, that Ladybird he kept for a time with Marcus’ eldest boy. Who was that Umbrella secretary he was entertaining for a while? Saw her yesterday in front of me, ankles so broken I’m surprised she could walk.”

“One could say the same for Kristina,” snaps Lord Calleja. “She’s hardly pure and innocent and yet she’s never been caught once. Not a turned ankle nor a broken one. There’s an abortionist embedded within the Old Families and when I catch them, Southwork Rock will be a blessed relief.”

“What’s broken ankles got to do with getting pregnant?” asks Violet, thoroughly confused.
“My Lords, if you’ll excuse us,” Credo says as he stands up, holding on to Violet to steady her. “I’m going to see if I have a spare uniform. Papa, might I try your office?”

“Of course, Son, here’s my key,” says Zander, equally desperate to end this conversation. “Dorcas, my helwa, shall we attend to Violet’s friends? We’re bad hosts and this must be so confusing to them. Hie, the floor’s been cleaned and the tables reset.”

“Credo, seeing as it’s your night that’s been upset and all, you’re a Captain now, you’re entitled to witness the proceedings. It would bring some restoration of honour between the families and I doubt Emilio minds,” offers Lord Calleja suddenly.

“It will drive home to the little hedge whore how dimly I view her behaviour if she sees the object of her affection view her marriage’s consummation,” agrees Lord Chetcuti.

“I thank you, but I must decline,” says Credo as he bows and begins pulling Violet away.

“What do they mean, witness the proceedings?” she asks as he hauls her past them. She’s stumbling a little as he hurries her away.

He catches some of the conversation as he goes.

“Your office, hie, Zander?”

“Clean uniform, my arse. Happen you’ll have some good news coming from this night after all.”

“Be witnessing Credo’s wedding night soon, by the looks of it. His Ladybird seems decent enough for a Mainlander.”

“Credo! You’re going too fast! What the hell is wrong with you?” Violet demands as she skips lest she stumble in his haste to get her away. “What was all that about? Why did you turn down being a wedding guest? I mean, other than all the bullshit before it.”
They’re in the Large Hall, on the way to the restricted sections of the Castle and there’s not many people down here, though the sounds of the ball make it this far along.

“Nothing’s wrong, dearest. I just don’t want to rob salt into Lady Kristina’s wounds, that’s all.” He pulls her in for a kiss to distract her.

She allows it for a moment then draws back. “What do they mean, breaking an ankle?”

“It’s a –“ Credo searches for the word. “A euphemism, a saying. It means to be heavily pregnant or to give birth. Turning your ankle means to get pregnant. That’s why I wanted to get us away. I don’t want to distress you.”

Violet kisses him gently and runs a finger down his nose. “You’re too sweet. But I can’t shy away from people having kids just because I can’t have them. Mazzie jokes I’ll just need to marry someone with kids.”

There must be something in Credo’s face because she says quickly, “I’d already taken a fancy to you when I first saw you. And then I got to know you and I was certain you were The One. Nero and Kyrie are a bonus.”

Credo pushes down his sudden flare of guilt. “The Lord Sparda smiles on both of us. Come on, I need to get out of these breeches.”

“Actually, I kinda need a pee. I’m just going to the Ladies. Catch you back at the table.” She gives Credo a kiss, before running back in the direction of the Hall.

He watches her until she turns a corner and she’s lost to his sight.

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Violet gets a little bit lost on the way to the toilet, completely missing the Tourist toilets and finding a small dressing room near the balcony. It’s not locked and Violet opens the door without looking or knocking.
Lady Kristina is curled up in the chair and she looks miserable.

“I’m sorry, I was just looking for the toilet,” says Violet.

“In there,” Lady Kristina gestures at a door.

Violet goes towards it and stops as she puts her hand on the latch. “I guess congratulations are in order.”

“Are they?”

“I’m not your enemy, Lady Chetcuti. We got off on the wrong foot, but we’re going to be moving in the same circles, at least at work. I’m happy to put it behind us and at least be civil to each other.” Violet comes and sits on the arm of the other chair.

“I’m about to be married to a man I can’t fucking stand in about an hour and then he’s going to fuck me in front of my father and his father and the fucking Faith Committee,” Lady Kristina says scornfully. “Do you truly think I care a whore’s cunt about work?”


“Oh, I see. Your beloved hasn’t exactly been honest with you, has he now, Miss Alighieri? Left out some of Fortuna’s less delightful traditions, I take it?” There’s a cold, quiet anger burning through her voice.

“They can’t make you…” Violet’s too shocked to get the words out.

“Yes, they fucking can!” Lady Kristina screeches as she leaps up from the chair. “They can do whatever they fucking want! If I don’t appear in an hour, they’ll drag me from this room and my dearest Papa will hold me down on that bed in the Master’s Chamber while my new husband fucks me!”

Violet barks out a short, incredulous laugh. She’s too stunned to speak for a few moments.
“Credo’s made no secret that he’ll marry as soon as you’re ready. Same thing awaits you as soon as that ring’s on your finger.” Lady Kristina sounds almost triumphant as a horrified Violet has Pinny’s words ringing in her ears.

Lady Kristina can’t hear them, but she can tell her words have hit home.

“You can leave here, I’ll drive, my friends are leaving tomorrow,” says Violet, urgently. “You can take my passport, Umbrella will get me out.”

Neither of them notice the door opening.

“Why in all the Nine Hells would I accept aid from you?” Lady Kristina sneers. “Credo and you are well matched, pair of liars that you are! As if I’d accept anything from a lying refugee whore who’s deceived those who’ve taken her into their hearts! Didn’t think we simple Island people would see through your witty masquerade now, did you, Violet?”

Violet shakes her head, whispering, “It’s not like that…”

“Violet Alighieri isn’t even your real name – you don’t even know your real name,” Lady Kristina snarls through angry tears. “I’ll take no relief from a nameless, faceless, deceitful whore who doesn’t exist.”

“See? I told you it was her back in Rome, Peter, honey, but you didn’t believe me. Told you she was the Broken Mermaid,” Diane says proudly to Peter, Dorcas, Lord Scerri and Lord Chetcuti.

“What did you call me?”

“What does she mean, Violet?” asks Dorcas. “Why wouldn’t you know who you were?”

“I have to get out of here, the walls…” Violet starts to hyperventilate as she blindly pushes past Diane. She feels hands grasping for her and almost reflexively she ports past them. She goes through the first door and finds herself on the balcony. She isn’t really seeing, she’s just overwhelmed by the light and the noise and the people. They’re closing in, it’s all closing in.
Vee sabiha says the voice that haunts her dreams and out the corner of her eye she can almost see the blue-coated man it belongs to. This way.

It’s almost as if he’s walking in front of her, sliding a way through the crowd for her. Violet would swear he’s reaching back for her and in her unreal state she reaches for his hand.

*Keep it together, Vee. It’s not a nightmare.*

“Stop that lying bitch! She’s an imposter!” Lady Kristina’s striding out behind her, now she’s found a target for her grief and rage she’s not letting it go and who better than this upstart nothing who dare call herself a rival?

Credo’s just arrived back into the Great Hall, carrying a clean jacket over his arm and looks up to see why Lady Kristina’s skriking.

His heart stops when he sees Violet teetering blindly along the balcony.

He ignores the murmurs around him – isn’t that Micellef’s new Ladybird? What’s Lady Kristina’s going on about? Should we grab her or not?

“Seize her! What are you waiting for! She’s lied to us all!” Lady Kristina yells at the company.

*Keep going, Vee. Don’t let her bait you, sabiha.*

“What in all the Nine Hells is going on? Don’t you ever stop, Kristina? You’re getting married in an hour!” Credo’s calm and controlled on the outside. Inside, his heart’s in his mouth.

“She’s got us believing that she lost her parents in an accident and that’s why she can’t remember anything! Truth is there’s nothing to remember, there never was an accident, she washed up on a beach five years ago! She’s just another fucking refugee polluting Fortuna!”

Lady Kristina’s reached Violet by this time and grabs hold of Violet’s shoulder, spinning her
Violet punches her hard in the face.

Lady Kristina drops like a tonne of bricks.

She’s only out for a few moments though, running on adrenaline and misery fuels her righteous anger and she kicks out at Violet, catching her behind the knee. Violet drops on top of her and Lady Kristina reaches back for a slap.

Violet catches the arm and pins it down, yelping as Lady Kristina grabs her hair and twists her hand in it.

Violet’s free hand drops a couple of punches to Lady Kristina’s face before groping for her wrist to relieve the pressure on her scalp.

The two women grapple on the ground for a moment as Credo and Peter run to separate their lovers, kicking at each other as they’re pulled apart. Peter has to prise Lady Kristina’s hand from Violet’s tresses and there’s still a large clump of hair wrapped around her fingers.

“She’s a fucking liar, Credo! She washed up on a beach with no memory! She probably fell off a boat! She’s let everyone believe she’s Verity! Why else would Edward have that Mainland test! She’s probably going to magic the result of it, false, ridden Jade that you are!”

Instead of horror, there’s hope on Lord Agius’ face as he realises that he’s right, *he must be, it all fits, he knew it!*

“She’s famous in Italy, Broken Mermaid cause of how she was found, false, noughty laced mutton, slut! Ow!” Peter’s kicked her in the shin to silence her, making it look like she banged herself in her struggle. He grew up knowing how to cease an uppity woman without disturbing the patrons.

“She is this true? Is it true? Why did you lie?” Credo has to go along with the fiction and he hates himself for it. Why does everything he does end up hurting Vee?
Violet’s face tells him everything he needs to know, but he doesn’t get a chance to respond before she drops limp in his arms, twists round and elbows him hard in the dick.

Credo grunts in pain and drops her. Violet bolts, hauling the hem of the tight dress up her legs as she runs.

Marianna and the other two get right up and run with her.

There’s a cry of “Stop them!” from somewhere, when Pinny Agius throws up and faints, her Papa barely just catching her with a panicked cry.

It’s enough time for the four women to get out the main door.

“How are we going to get home?” asks Lena.

“Hold hands and let’s save on a taxi,” grins Violet.

By the time the door’s opened, the portal’s closed.

***

“Let me go, Peter! Let me go to him!” Lady Kristina renews her struggle as Peter holds her fast.

“Can’t you stop making a show of yourself, Kristina?” Credo grunts breathlessly as he pulls himself up on the balustrade. He fights down the nausea. Dorcas runs up to him, embracing her son. “I’ll be fine, Mama. I need to find Violet.”

“How can you still want that lying Mainland whore over me?” Lady Kristina shrieks, incredulously.

“I’d rather have that lying Mainland whore over you, nasty, vindictive bitch that you are!” Credo retorts. “I’m just sorry that Cassius is stuck with you, but there’s no way in all the Nine fucking Hells I’m ever going to be with you!”
“You can’t mean that! You’re free now! Credo’s free, Papa, I don’t need to wed that hell-cursed nick-ninny!” she pleads with Lord Chetcuti.

“I’m sorry you’re so deluded that you won’t stop making a fool of yourself like this, Kristina,” Credo retorts. “It’s tragic.”

He pulls himself upright. “Papa, Peter, I’m going to find her.”

“Papa, you go too,” says Pinny, weakly, but not as weak as she probably should be. “I’ll be fine with Edith and Dorcas. We’ll probably just go home.”

Lord Agius looks between them both and nods, kissing her cheek. “You were always sweeter than I had any right to.”

He throws Credo’s jacket to him. Credo catches it easily with one hand and begins to walk off.

“Credo, Credo, no, please,” begs Lady Kristina, trying to grab at Credo. He shakes her off. “Papa, please.”

There’s a ringing slap and a short squeal amongst the gasps of the company.

“You’ve embarrassed this family for the last time, Kristina,” growls Lord Chetcuti. He’s got her firmly round the upper arms as a red handprint forms on her face. “Caesar, tell Cassius she’s ready.”

Lady Kristina screams and struggles all the way to the Master’s Chamber.

Pinny holds her hands over her ears till she’s home.

***
The four young women land in Top of the Town, near the Micellef house. It’s very quiet as most of the residents are at Credo’s Ball, so no one bothers them as they walk back down into the town.

“Going home?” asks Lena. “Get out these dresses?”

“All our clothes are packed,” points out Cassie.

“What do you want to do, Violet?” Marianna asks. She’s walking with her arm round Violet’s shoulder. The other woman is more subdued than she usually is.

“I think we should just find a bar and get hammered. And dance. I wanna dance to something that didn’t come out before Jane Austen had pubes.” Violet’s bravado sounds forced, but none of them say anything.

Marianna hugs her tighter, teetering on the cobbles in their shoes. “We’ll go back to that bar from the other night. Can you remember where it was, Cassie?”

“Maybe. Who cares? Let’s get liquored up and laid down!” Violet cuts across Marianna. Her eyes glitter wetly in the lamplight.

***

Credo hammers on the door of the house in Castleview. “Violet! Open up! I just want to talk! Open this fucking door!”

“Anything round the back, Edward?” calls Peter.

“No. There’s no lights on and the back door’s locked.” Lord Agius comes back round the corner. He still has that hopeful look on his face and he’s nearly as desperate to find Violet as Credo is.

“Credo, your lock picks – I don’t imagine you have them upon you?” prompts Zander. He’s sobering up rapidly at his son’s distress. “I still don’t understand what started this?”
“Not in this uniform,” replies Credo, standing back from the door and listening to see if he can hear any sounds coming from inside the house. “Kristina fucking Chetcuti said something to her and it must have been bad.”

“Their cases are in the living room,” says Peter, hands to the glass and peering through the window. “There’s only three large cases there, if it’s any comfort.”

“Why was Kristina calling her a lying Mainland whore? What did she mean she doesn’t have a past?” asks Lord Agius. “Credo?”

“Open the fucking door, Violet! I need to talk to you!” Credo resumes thumping the door, finishing with a frustrated kick. He mentally curses that the owner had taken up his security concerns so quickly.

Lord Agius puts a hand on Credo’s shoulder. Credo glares at him. The older man drops his hand, a little self-consciously. “Her papers said she was an orphan who’d lost her parents in a terrible car crash that left her nearly dead. Why was Kristina screaming that wasn’t true?”

“Because it isn’t,” Peter says, with a sigh. “I was sent to investigate her. That’s where I met Diane and apparently stories like Violet’s are right up her alley. She’s famous. She’s known as the Broken Mermaid.”


“Diane is Violet? What poppycock is this, Son?”

“Zander, pray hold your tongue and I’ll tell you,” says Peter. “Violet.”

Peter glances round the three men, looking longest at Credo. Credo looks away and Peter realises that Credo already knows. He files it away for later. That knowledge doesn’t suit his plans just now, but he needs to find out how, because he’s damned sure that Alighieri didn’t tell him – not with that reaction - and he can’t see the friends cueing him in.
“What Kristina says is true. Violet was washed up on a beach in Southern Italy five years ago. They think she’s Tunisian and her family murdered her in an honour killing. She doesn’t know or remember anything,” and Peter’s voice has taken on a warning tone. Drunk as he is, Zander’s no fool and he’ll pick up if any one of them slip up.

“An honour killing? That’s barbaric,” says Zander. “That poor girl. What she must have gone through. How could someone do that to their own child?”

“You’re an honourable man, Zander and had I followed your and Marcus’ example, I’d still have my daughters and my wife,” says Lord Agius.

“There’s a world of difference between killing a child for disobedience to recovering runaway lovers or gently persuading stubborn offspring to accept their Divinely-ordained nuptials, Edward,” says Peter.

“There isn’t,” says Zander. “I only went the last time to support Credo and that’s why I’m here again. I was hugely relieved that we never found Vee when we looked for her. I’m sorry, Credo, but it has to be said!”

“I just want to find her, Papa, I just want to talk to her and tell her I don’t care that she lied.” Credo runs his hand through his hair, before saying brokenly, “I just want Vee back.”

Both Peter and Lord Agius look sharply at Credo for his use of the nickname.

“I’m going to try the Docks, where the nightclubs are,” says Credo and sets off, shoulders square and steps determined.

***

They can’t find the club they’d been in the other night. They wander about for a bit and find one that’s lively enough. It’s on the borders of the DTA, but usually the ambience is enough to chase away the tourists after one drink.

“Wonder if we’ll get the funny looks in here?” says Cassie.
“We’re overdressed,” says Violet. “But I earned my fucking dress. They can fucking rip it off me.”

“No chance of that happening now,” observes Marianna. “I’m going the bar.”

The barman, as do the patrons, do a double take as she pushes her way through. “Four Rum and Cokes please.”

“Miss, I-er, we can’t serve ladies. Do your husbands know you’re here?” says the barman.

Marianna doesn’t miss a beat. She turns to the burly docker next to her. “Buy me our drinks?”

He can’t get his wallet out fast enough.

***

Credo shoulders his way into the crowd of the latest club. The crowd doesn’t part for him, not that they could. It’s packed. The thumping beats are giving him a headache and a look at Peter tells him the man shares his view.

“How can they stand this?” he yells.

“Damned if I know,” Peter yells back. He can just about hear Credo. “Can you see them?”

“They don’t even try to move aside,” marvels Credo, before trying to see over the crowd. “I can’t see her, it’s far too much of a crush.”

“No respect for authority,” agrees Peter. He tries to see Zander and Lord Agius and he thinks he sees them staring at the girls in the club. Neither of them know where to look.

“Your Papa looks like a deer in the headlights,” says Peter, pointing out Zander.
Despite himself, Credo laughs. “Edward’s eyes are on stalks.”

They’ve made it to the bar when Peter catches the eye of the barman, recognising the accented English that marks him as a Fortunese native. His eyes widen as he sees the uniforms and swords. “Saviour be with you, Master Captain, what can I get you?”

“Credo,” he says, gesturing to the young man. “Can I use the phone?”

“Through the back, Master Captain,” he says pointing the way to Peter as Credo pulls out the Umbrella ID photos of the four women. Peter leaves them discussing whether or not he’s seen them.

He finds the phone in an office and calls into the Castle. “Any word on Alighieri?”

“No and possibly,” replies Knight Cassla. “She’s not gone back to the house, but there has been a report come in for Guards to go to the Mermaid Tavern down the Docks. Some Fortunese women have been causing some kind of ruckus and two are engaging in Immoral Conduct.”

“Cancel whoever has gone down there on my orders. I’ll take it,” replies Peter. He looks back through the glass at Credo. “Be prepared to act on short order.”

“Yes, Master Captain.”

Peter hangs up.

***

*Dale a tu cuerpo alegría Macarena*

*Que tu cuerpo es pa’ darle alegría why cosa buena*

*Dale a tu cuerpo alegría, Macarena*
Try as she might, Violet can’t get into the mood, no matter how much she drinks. She’s the only one drinking out a straw, despite the barman’s best attempts and he’s given up trying to find out who their menfolk are, so they might come and get them and end this outrageous display.

There’s no shortage of men in the bar eager to buy these bawdy strumpets drinks, but he’s sure they’re not from the Port Cerula bawdy houses, they’re too well dressed for that and if they were foreign, why are they wearing ballgowns? If they’re well-to-do Fortunese, then this is a new one on him. Usually they sneak into the Tourist bars, not blatantly coming into the working mens’ taverns.

“Are the Guard coming?” he asks the boy who runs his errands. He looks about 12. The boy nods.

The barman looks back over to the fireplace where they’ve gathered quite a party around them. There’s some awful Mainland song pounding over the jukebox he’s had to install for the new foreign workies, even though they tend to go to the Tourist bars.

Dale a tu cuerpo alegría Macarena

Que tu cuerpo es pa' darle alegría why cosa buena

Dale a tu cuerpo alegría, Macarena

Hey Macarena

Awright!

Empty fucking Night, now they’re dancing on the table in time to the Spanish racket.
“I really like him an I thin’…think I was in love with him, Mazzie,” slurs Violet mournfully, cuddled in to Marianna. “And I know it wasn’t long, but I don’t wanna leave the kids. I wanna be a mum, Mazzie. I wanna know how it feels to hold your baby in your arms. I’m never gonna get that. This was the next best thing and I’d have been good at it. I know I would.”

“You will be a good mum, just not with these kids or this man. You’ll meet someone else. It’s best to go now, before they’re too attached,” comforts Marianna. “It’s two weeks out their life, it’s nothing. They’ll be fine.”

“What if they’re not? What if they never trust anyone again and it’ll be all my fault?” Violet’s face crumples and it looks like she’s about to cry. She sips on her drink. “I might have had too many of those. I want another one.”

“They’ll be fine, they’re loved. Love solves every problem,” Marianna soothes her. She kisses Violet’s forehead. “I’d love to know what Pinny put in this lipstick, it won’t budge.”

“S’good, innit?” Violet giggles. She reaches up and pulls Marianna down, kissing her a little sloppily.

*Dale a tu cuerpo alegría Macarena*

*Que tu cuerpo es pa’ darle alegría why cosa buena*

*Dale a tu cuerpo alegría, Macarena*

*Hey Macarena*

*Awright!*

Marianna resists slightly, before relaxing into the kiss, sliding her tongue around Violet’s mouth, licking the inside of her cheeks. The music of the bar thumps through them and it’s a surprisingly ancient rhythm their bodies pick up.

Violet’s hand traces over the silk of Marianna’s dress, an extra layer of sensation that both of the
would swear they could hear over the noise. Violet shivers as Marianna hits all the spots that make her skin tingle.

Violet fingers trace deft patterns over Marianna’s back and the noise and the rhythm and sensations are linking up all over her body –

“Godspit and shit, Vee, what the fuck are you doing?”

-and suddenly there’s strong hands hauling her backwards, pinning her against a solid wall of muscle and the world’s spinning as she goes. Her front’s cold as she’s wrenched away from Marianna.

Violet looks across to Marianna and sees Peter hauling her in the opposite direction. He looks disgusted, angry and aroused all at once. He’s got her firm as she struggles and shouts at him.

Violet’s just really confused. “Credo? What’re you doin’ here? You magic too?”

There’s a mirror above the fireplace and she can see them in it. it looks like a couple embracing, but he’s got the strangest expression on his face. Horror, grief, pain. Heartbroken she thinks, that’s the word.

Credo is heartbroken.

“You’re coming home!” he snaps and he’s furious, she can tell that much through her drunken haze.

“You can’t make me!” she slurs.

“Wrong.” He looks at Marianna, ignoring Cassie and Lena. “Peter, I’m invoking the Undertaking. I want them off the Island within the hour and she’s coming home with me. Have her goods and chattels brought to my house. She’ll be there for the foreseeable future.”

“Why are you so upset? And shouting? Was only a fucking lil’ kiss,” slurs Violet. “Didn’t fucking mean anything. Just wanted to feel better.”
“I’ll see to it,” says Peter. “You deal with her.”

Violet’s struggling. “I wanna go home. I don’t feel so good.”

“You broke your Undertaking, Violet. I warned you to read it.” He knows she’s too drunk to pay attention, but he’s so incensed that he has to say it, for himself if no one else. “Break it and the Countersigning Captain has your custody for the term agreed.”

“I feel sick, Credo,” says Violet, eyes clearly not focusing. “I think I’m a lil’ bit drunk.”

“So they’re barred from Fortuna for the next three years and you’re coming home with me.” He looks at her. “We’ll talk in the morning when you’re sober.”

Credo starts to haul Violet away when she drops limp and manages to turn in his arms. He’s not falling for that twice and adjusts his grip on her, bracing himself for the blow.

Violet vomits all over both of them, choking as the acrid liquid gets trapped behind her teeth. Credo fights down his disgust and helps her get it out.

“Told you I was gonna puke,” she says. “But you’re a keeper.”

“Glad you think so,” replies Credo, as he stands with her. Sparda’s Balls, but he stinks. He can feel the vomit seeping through his clothes. “Let’s see if you still think that in the morning when you find out for real that you signed a piece of paper that says “Violet belongs to Credo.”

*Hey Macarena*

*Awright!*
There's one more chapter in this flashback and then we can get back to present day. I've done enough research now for Nero and Kyrie's section to make sense and it should be up in about a month.

I feel like this section has eaten my brain.

Again, thank you all for your support and encouragement. I couldn't have got this far without it.
Chapter Notes

Agnus paraphrases Rimbaud

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fortuna 15 years ago

_Pas de basque. That fucking step was called pas de basque._

Credo gets the drunken lush home eventually and they’re covered in rather more vomit than when they started. He puts her to his bed, but stays with her through the night, as she rushes through to the ensuite, holding back her hair as she pukes and swears to God she’s never fucking drinking again. He brushes the tears from her cheeks and the snot from her nose, even hooking a finger in her cheek so she can puke properly without choking.

He strips her down and puts her into one of his shirts – twice! – as she alternates between telling him she loves him and she really, _really_ wants to be a mum to Nero and she wasn’t lying, not really, _bleurgh_, oh God, just fucking kill me.

Lord Sparda was apparently known for his impish sense of humour and this one would be right up his alley – the woman he loves, in his bed, saying those words and so utterly, utterly drunk she should be arrested.

Oh. Wait.

Empty fucking Night. Why does everything have to be so complicated?

Well, at least he’s kept his promise to Nero.

***
“Can I see Violet? I wanna show her my picture!” Nero runs in excitedly, clutching several drawings and a wooden sword. Kyrie runs in behind him with a few pictures of her own. “Violet!”

“Shhh, she’s sleeping, she’s not very well,” says Credo, cuddling the children. He takes the pictures that Nero has thrust at him.

“How is she? Is she awake?” Lord Agius asks, eagerly.

“It’s my family,” says Nero. He points everyone out, even though Credo can recognise everyone well enough. “That’s us and that’s Zander, Dorcas and Kyrie.”

He’s drawn them as two distinct, but connected family groups. Credo and Violet on one end, with Dorcas and Zander on the other. Nero and Kyrie hold hands in the middle, joining the families through their respective Mamas.

“I’m sure she’ll love it, but leave it just yet, young soldier. Not yet, Edward, she’s still sleeping it off.” Credo yawns. “I only got to sleep about 7. She was still cascading till dawn.”

“Did she say anything? Anything about why she hid her past?” Lord Agius presses. He sounds so hopeful.

“Edward, she was drunk and rambling and when I speak to her, I imagine she’ll be more concerned with her confinement than her supposed origins. You’re better placed to look to the results of the test.” Credo pours some coffee for Lord Agius.

There’s a knock on the door and Credo goes to answer it. Two Knights Lord Agius recognises with the Law and Order Committee, come in with bags and boxes and deposit them in the living room. Credo goes out to speak to their Sergeant as they go back and forth, directing each other around the cosy room.

The door from the hall opens and Violet shambles in. “Oh, hi.”

Lord Agius rushes forward to help her to a chair. “I left Pinny in a better state than you.”
The crooked smile quirks briefly and Lord Agius sees Abigail in it - and Nero. His voice is strangely choked. “Come, my dear, what can I get you to lighten your dis-ease?”

She groans as she sits down, smiling as Nero and Kyrie try to give her a glass of milk and some cake, despite her protests, Nero babbling about how she’s come to live with them now. She’s in too much pain to argue and can only direct Lord Agius to the cupboard where she has an emergency supply of her drugs. Nero is already running for a bowl for the General to tip them into.

“How do I feel like a blade of grass,” he offers and Violet gratefully nods as he gently places each pill in her mouth, as if he’s feeding a baby, holding the tumbler carefully so he doesn’t hit her teeth.

“I’ll start feeling myself in about an hour,” she grits out. “Where’s Credo? One good thing about being on stuff as strong as I am, kicks hangovers in the arse. Bum! Bum!”

This last is because she’s remembered that little ears are listening and giggling.

“They do all recall the curses more than other words,” chuckles Lord Agius. He looks concerned. “Can I get you anything else, my dear? You look like you’re suffering the torments of the damned. You shouldn’t drink so much.”

“Yes, Dad,” she smiles weakly. “I’m like this every day. Not this bad usually, but it’s my own fault for drinking so much. Oh, my God, I’m feeling it more than usual. I can’t remember much past the fight.”

“Yours or Credo’s?”

“Who’d I fight with?” Violet winces at the sudden movement. “Lady Kristina and Credo. You’ll not be having relations for a while and I don’t think even Dorcas is going to get those stains out of his uniform,” says Lord Agius.

“Why was I fighting with Credo?” she asks, grimacing.
Lord Agius looks up as the man himself comes back in.

“That’s the last of it, according to the landlord. Start getting it away over the next few days.” Credo pauses as he sees Violet. “You’re awake. Can I get your tablets?”

Violet frowns at the look on his face. “No, Edward’s already…”

“I see.” He looks like he’s fighting with himself. “You’ll have missed your friends.”

She looks at the clock. “Aw, fuck! The ferry would have gone by now. Dammit! I’ll call them tomorrow. Shit! Fuck! The kids!”

Nero and Kyrie are giggling even harder. Even Credo’s stern look, thin lipped with disapproval doesn’t really put a dent in them and Credo really doesn’t want to do this in front of the children. Then again, perhaps the presence of the children will restrict the rage that Violet’s more than like to unleash.

“Why did you kiss a lady last night, Vee?” asks Kyrie, curiously. “Credo’s upset.”

“I did what?”

“Kyrie, hold your tongue!”

“The Blue Man says that’s not the stupidest thing you’ve ever done, Vee.” Kyrie frowns like she’s listening. “I’m not too young to know! I’m a big girl! Vee, he won’t tell me the stupid thing.”

“Kyrie, child, be silent!”

“No, I wanna know what she’s talking about. What Blue Man, Kyrie?” asks Violet.

“Why did you kiss a lady? Were you kissing Dorcas night-night?” asks Nero.
“Why don’t we go back out to the park, children?” Cuts in Lord Agius. This is not a conversation he wants to be there for.

“Don’t want to go the park,” says Nero. “I want to stay with Violet and Credo.”

“Both of you, go to your room and play,” says Credo, totally at a loss as to where this is going. Worse than he thought seems to be the general direction. “I need to speak to Violet.”

“You’re married now,” says Kyrie. “You and Credo signed that paper when we had ice-cream and now you’re going to stay here with us forever and ever.”

“You’re really my Mama now?” says Nero, getting up and cuddling her. “You’ve already got a wedding dress and you had a party.”

Violet returns Nero’s cuddle. “What are you going on about, toots?”

“I’m not telling either of you again!”

“The Blue Man says Lady Kristina is a bitch,” nods Kyrie, sagely, in the manner of small children being adult. “You downed her apple cart good and proper.”

“Will you pair go to your rooms, this instant!” snaps Credo.

“What the hell are you pair going on about?” Violet looks even more confused as she sees something in the living room. She looks back to Credo. “What the hell is my stuff doing here?”


The look Violet gives Credo makes him feel that he’s the one in the wrong.

“That’s a look you shoot your enemy,” says Nero.
It goes slightly better than Credo would have thought.

Violet merely locks herself in Dorcas’ office and calls Umbrella. He can hear her talking to Paul Duffield, her supervisor at Umbrella. Her voice is quick and angry, moving so fast he can’t keep up with the modern English she’s speaking.

She’s in there for a good hour, before she comes out. “They’re sending someone over. Have you got the original document?”

“I can have it brought over, but it’s the same as our copies, teżor,” Credo replies. “Right down to the lovehearts.”

“Lovehearts? The actual fuck?” She’s still wearing his shirt, hair messily spilling over her shoulder in the braid he did while her head was buried in the toilet. She looks exhausted and there’s nothing more he wants than to embrace her and let her rest against him.

She’s also furious and he’d like to get through today without being eaten.

“Are you hungry, hanini? I have some soup that I’ve made for the children,” he offers. There’s no point in troubling himself, he realises. The Undertaking is watertight. She can thrash against the bars of her cage as much as she chooses, she’s still trapped. “Kyrie’s artwork. Documents are copied exactly and handwritten amendments are considered more representative of the parties’ wishes.”

“No, I’ve had your porridge,” she replies, jaw even more gritted than usual. “Where’s the kids? Actually, where’s your parents?”

“They’d arranged to go to my uncle’s, so we could have time alone. I don’t think this was how they intended it.” Credo sets the kettle to boil and prepares some tea. He makes her the soup regardless.

“It smells nice,” she offers from the doorway. “Where’s the kids?”
“Sleeping. Last night was too much excitement and then they spent all morning running about with Josh and Edward. He’s had a new lease of life since he became a grandpapa,” Credo watches the soup reach a rolling boil. “Mama made the soup yesterday, so we’d have light meals that we didn’t need to cook.”

“Didn’t think you’d made it,” she says, the merest ghost of a quirk fleeting across her lips. “I’ve been told what happened at the Ball. I’m so sorry I ruined it for you. Is that what this is about?”

“I have to invoke the Undertaking, Violet, or both the Law and my authority as a Captain would be severely undermined.” Credo sets her soup on the table, along with a bowl for himself. “These are difficult times for Fortuna. There’s been more change in the last five years than the last five hundred. It’s too much, too quickly.”

“Not enough, if you ask me,” she scowls as she sits down.

“Why do Mainlanders do that? Find somewhere that’s quaint and perfect and real, declare they love it, then proceed to wreck it? It’s not modernisation, it’s cultural vandalism disguised as progress. Then you’ll call it too commercial.” Credo tears his bread apart in annoyance.

“So what’s quaint about chasing down grown women across five countries because they won’t toe the line?” she retorts. “I know what people said about Emmie and her husband and how she and her father have spat in the face of Fortuna! We got talking last night. Giancarlo and she are fucking doctors, but all anyone goes on about is he’s a peasant.”

“Well, you’ll have plenty time to get used to Fortuna, for you’re here for the next three years,” he scowls. He can’t resist a low blow. “Nero will be heartbroken if you leave. I doubt he’d ever recover.”

She looks stung and he feels simultaneously glad and ashamed, but she’s prevented from replying by the ting of the doorbell.

***

Paul Duffield sits in Credo’s living room while the company lawyer goes through the Undertaking.

“…right, so what about that clause? They’re not going to be coming back anyway…”
Credo paces as they deliberate. His stomach’s in knots as he thinks about the children upstairs.

“I got in a fight, apparently and decked the daughter of one of their head bummers. I’m going to be working with her, so yeah…”

How in all the Nine Hells will he explain it to Nero if they can break the Undertaking?

“Who drew the lovehearts?”

“A little girl. You seriously don’t think I did?”

What will it mean for Fortuna if they do?

“After the stunts you’ve pulled? I wouldn’t be surprised and nevermind last night. I mean, brawling with a colleague and the daughter of one of the Executive Council families.” Duffield punctuates his sentences with stabs of his finger. “Violet, do you realise the trouble you’ve caused? The Fortuna facility is too valuable to Umbrella’s research to lose.”

“They’re not going to throw us off the Island for me getting in a fight, surely?” scoffs Violet, incredulously. “They’re not going to throw away what they get from us, especially if it took that long to let us in.”

“Do you know how hard it was to get the Order to agree to let us in to begin with? It took five years of negotiations and prep work before we even set foot on the Island. They still won’t integrate half their projects and that means no access to the research.”

Violet rolls her eyes.

“You’re brilliant, I don’t deny that, but we’ve done you no favours by bailing you out so much.” Duffield sits back in his chair, looks at the lawyer for confirmation. “The situation with the Order is too delicate and everything you’ve done so far just adds more weight to the arguments to kick us out.”
“It’s not the first time you’ve been warned,” says the lawyer. “You have three options. You can be confined to HQ for the next three years, you can go back to the Raccoon City facility.”

“What’s the third?” asks Credo, hoping beyond hope he knows what the lawyer’s about to say. Judging by Violet’s face, she’s got there too.

“Violet can adhere to the terms of the Undertaking, if and only if you agree to the loosest possible interpretation of the terms, Captain Micellef.” He’s about to continue, but his voice is lost over Violet’s “You’re fucking shitting me!”

“It would show that Umbrella is prepared to respect the Order, even with the dispensations we receive, allows for further integration of our projects, personnel and resources.” The lawyer looks directly at Violet. “We’re also prepared to compensate you handsomely, Violet. For the duration, your salary will be doubled and you’ll be automatically offered the pick of promotions and projects.”

“I’m not a fucking carrot that you can dangle in front of the Order!” snaps Violet. “I’ve heard enough. Can you get someone to take my stuff to HQ until I can go back to Raccoon City?”

“No! You c-c-c-an’t! There’s so much for you to d-d-discov-er!” The door crashes open and the tall young Black man from Violet’s first day comes rushing into the room. He’s staring at her with the intensity of a butterfly on a pin.

Credo instinctively moves to block him. “Stay away from her!”

“Agnus! What the hell are you doing here? This doesn’t concern you!” Duffield’s began to rise from his chair.

Agnus has a hand on his shoulder and forces him back into the chair like he’s nothing. “No, this doesn’t concern you.”

He turns back to Violet. “There shall be angels! Demons! All of Creations’ wonders spread before you, just beyond our grasp! You shall find the unknown and twist it to your will! You will come upon strange, unfathomable, repellent, delightful things. We shall take them, we shall comprehend them.”
He tries to push past Credo, but Credo won’t be moved so easily as Duffield. His anger at Violet’s decision fuels his strength. “I told you to stay away from her.”

“Will you always wonder what light you’d shine on the darkness? The mysteries you’d reveal?” Agnus’ voice gets louder as he beseeches her.

“Why’s everybody shouting?” Nero asks as he wanders into the room, rubbing his eyes sleepily. He’s clutching a stuffed pink rabbit as he looks for Violet. He runs up to her and jumps in her arms, clocking Credo struggling with the strange man. “Don’t you shout at Violet! You’re not making her go away!”

Violet stands up and adjusts Nero to her hip, moving away from everyone. She turns to face the room and kisses Nero.

Credo sees it before she says it, knows she was fooling herself if she ever thought she was going anywhere.

“It’s ok, sweetheart, I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to live here with you and Credo. I mean there’s a piece of paper that says Violet belongs to Credo. It’s got lovehearts and everything on it!”

***

It’s a few hours later when everyone leaves after a rough contract for Violet has been drawn up and Credo’s had to work out in far more detail than he’d ever thought exactly what the Undertaking would entail. He’d never actually thought it would ever be invoked, so the last 24 hours have caught him on the hop.

He’d have agreed to anything though. He didn’t hear anything after she told Nero she was staying. She’s been unusually subdued, at least compared to how he’s known her. She’s pretty much sat on the settee the whole time with Nero, and later, Kyrie when she woke up. The children have been given more or less the main of her attention and they’ve been happy to receive it. Nero has been particularly keen to show her the picture he drew, pointing everyone out to her and telling her of all the plans he has now that they’re a real family, all the school plays and parents’ evenings she and Credo will come to.

“And Dorcas and Zander,” he concludes. “Because we’re all a proper family now. Are you crying, Vee? Why are you sad?”
“I’m not sad, sweetie, just tired. It’s been a long day,” she replies, meeting Credo’s eyes over the top of his snowy head. “I’m not crying.”

“So you’re happy?” he anxiously confirms. He glances at Credo, who nods, with a small smile.

“Violet is tired, Nero, she’s had an eventful few days and she’ll be missing her friends.” Credo’s seen that look on her before and it chills him. It’s immortalised in their wedding photos. *This is different*, he reminds himself. *She chose to stay.*

“I liked Mazzie. Will she come back for Midwinter Night?” asks Nero. “Will she bring presents from Ah-Merica?”

“Probably not, she’ll be busy,” replies Credo, stamping down on his jealousy as he sees that kiss in his minds’ eye again.

“Credo doesn’t like Mazzie,” says Kyrie. “Vee and Mazzie had a married kiss. Don’t worry, Credo, Vee thought you didn’t love her, but you do. I’ll tell her.” Kyrie looks up at Violet, hazel eyes earnest. “Credo loves you, Vee, more than Mama and Papa and that’s bigger than the Moon And Back. He doesn’t care about the Bad Thing. What’s the Bad Thing, Vee?”

She cocks her head like she’s listening. “I’m not too young!”

Credo’s had enough. “Shall we make some soup? Mama left us soup.”

“Where’s Mama, Credo? I want to show her my new doll,” says Kyrie. She cuddles a ragdoll. “Pinny made it.”

“I’ll make the soup,” says Violet, gently untangling herself from the children. “Tell Credo about your new stuff.”

"I got a new sword, Credo," Nero chatters excitedly, running to get his little wooden sword. It's made in the age-old style that every Old Family boy is given round about this age, so he can begin his Knight’s Training.
Nero babbles almost incoherently about Knights in the stories and how he'll grow up to defend people from the demons, just like Credo and Zander and Uncle Edward. "Will you show me, Credo, you and Zander? I want to be just like you when I grow up, because you're my Papa now."

"Of course I'll show you, hanini, but being a Holy Knight isn't just about being good at fighting. It's about being loyal, defending people who can't defend themselves-"

"Like Lord Sparda protected everyone from the demons?" Nero says in his enthralled little voice.

"Just like that," agrees Credo. "Your sword is only part of being a Holy Knight."

"So helping people like in the children's home is part of being a Knight?" Nero is hanging on Credo's every word. He's so serious. People don't see the sensitive, earnest little boy who'll one day turn those traits to fine service, a pure Knight.

"Uh-huh."

"Even if it's Jacob and Baxter?" frowns Nero.

"Even them."

"But they're arseholes." He looks glum.

Credo tries to hide his smile and can't drown out the laughter coming from the kitchen, though he doesn't want to anyway. This is a difficult time for Violet and he'll take what he can get to lighten the load.

"It seems to me," says Violet, carrying in the trays of soup and bread. "That a Knight is someone who does the right thing, because it's the right thing to do."

"I couldn't put it any better myself," agrees Credo. "Tomorrow, we'll go and help in the children's home, because Micellefs live to serve."
"Even the arseholes?" Nero’s confused face is adorable.

"Especially the arseholes."

***

It’s a pleasant enough meal and Credo is glad that Edward is automatically assuming that Nero is going to begin Training, as befits his place as the son of an Old Family that traditionally provides Knights of the Order. He can’t help but wonder how the lad will perform, given his heritage.

Everything is falling into place. Credo just has to sort out the mess with his mother first. Violet he corrects himself. He needs to think of her as Violet and only as Violet. He needs to pass a Witch Trial if it comes to it.

She still hasn’t regained her former humour and her smiles, such as they are, are aimed at the children and don’t reach her eyes. Her face loses all animation when she does look at him.

Credo’s nerves are starting to get the better of him and he can’t help but recall how like his wedding this is turning out. He knocks over the butter tray.

Violet and the children laugh at him.

“Silly Credo!” says Kyrie.

“Better nail the table down before you send that flying,” says Violet, pointedly.

“I’m all fingers and thumbs,” says Credo as he sets it right, though the butter is quite, quite ruined.

“Thought I was the lush,” says Violet, but there’s no humour in her face.

Credo takes his time clearing it up. He’s torn between wanting the children to stay up to prevent
the inevitable confrontation and sending them to bed so that he might lance the boil.

*Like his wedding, didn’t want to be alone, couldn’t wait to be alone.*

“Can we have a story?” asks Nero, even as he’s falling asleep in his soup.

“We’ll both read you one each,” he says, trying to postpone the unavoidable.

“Upstairs, teeth and toilet first,” says Violet.

Neither child protests and they’re gone before Credo can protest.

“On you go,” says Violet, coldly. “I’ll still be here when you’re done. It’s not like I can actually go anywhere, now, is it?”

Credo’s jaw clenches, but he’s not going to argue in front of the children. “I’ll call you up when they’re ready.”

“Whatever,” she mutters, looking through her baggage for something and ignoring him.

Violet must know something he doesn’t, because they’re both asleep by the time he’s two pages into *The Auld Man O Jerah*. He pulls the covers over them and kisses their foreheads. He makes sure the nightlight is on and closes the door.

Credo leans against the wall, looking at the floor where only four days previously he and Violet had been so close. He can’t understand how it’s gone so arse for elbow.

He can’t hear anything downstairs and he’s still loathe to break this the storm that’s gathering over their heads. There’s a rush of adrenaline through his system that’s giving him the jitters and he has to pass his room anyway, so he brushes his hair from its ponytail and cleans his teeth, giving his face a quick wash. His hair waves halfway down his back as he dries his face.

Credo looks at his reflection as he dries his face and realises he can’t read his expression.
It doesn’t take him long to get downstairs and push the door open. Violet’s cleared the table and she’s washing the dishes. There’s a chill on the air and Credo lights the fire as Violet comes back through.

She’s brushed her hair out. She’s taken out his braid and brushed it out. She’s still in his shirt and a thought occurs to him, that despite her obvious fury, she’s as on edge as he is.

But she’s still Vee, with all the subtlety of a truck through the wall.

“So, I’m your fucking prisoner, then.” It’s not a question.

“No is so many words,” Credo replies. He’s still sitting on the floor by the fire, tending it as the flame catches.

“Well, how many fucking words, Credo? Huh?” Violet demands.

“My hands are tied, treasure, I have to invoke the Undertaking…” His voice trails off. “You should recall this – that if nothing else, you all willingly signed it. You came to my house to get it signed.”

“We were only going to be here for two weeks!”

“Them, perhaps,” replies Credo, keeping his voice low and calm. “But you were not.”

“You weren’t supposed to use it!” she retorts.

“It wasn’t me who started a fight with Lady Kristina and it wasn’t me who lied to everyone who showed you kindness.” Credo pushes larger blocks of wood around the kindling. He’s glad he’s got this to fiddle with. He looks at her. “And as far as I can see, there was never a reason for your pantomime.”

“I don’t need to justify myself to you,” she snaps, but she’s looking at least a little shamefaced.
The light from the flames catch the lines of the markings on her legs, the flickering makes them seem mobile and alive. It’s hard for him to tear his eyes away and keep them on her face.

“Perhaps not, Madam, but we, I deserved better treatment, especially if you ever spoke true to me,” he replies. “And of the children upstairs? What of them? Would you have left them without a word? Nero considers you his mother and you’ve done nought to disabuse him of such a notion.”

“You’re making it sound worse than it is,” protests Violet. “I wasn’t leaving. I was just royally fucked off.”

“As was I, yet, still I would take the same action and for the same reasons.” Credo uses the tongs to move some wood around to encourage the flame. It’s strong in the middle, but now he’s going to feed it. “I’m my Papa’s son, in this one regard. I can’t read minds.”

“Either way, Credo, I’m still a prisoner. I get to go to work, then after that I’m under house arrest. I can’t even go the fucking shop by myself.” She punches a cushion.

“I’ll relax that condition in due course,” he replies. “If you merit it. But after the uproar you caused in the bar, I have to be as strict as I can be under the agreement we made with Umbrella.”

“Oh my fucking God.” She shakes her head in disbelief. “Violet really does belong to Credo. Wait, what bar?”

“You truly can’t remember?”

She shakes her head.

“You and Marianna…you were…I won’t share you…”

“Oh, so that’s what this is really about, isn’t it? I told you I was bi, Credo! You were chill with it! I thought we were over!” She’s shouting and so beautiful when she’s angry and Sparda’s Balls why in all the Nine fucking Hells can’t he get through to her how serious it is?

“If you’d given me a chance and actually spoke to me, then you wouldn’t be in this mess, Violet-“
“So you cut me off from my friends? Pretty fucking obsessed, much?” She throws the cushion at him, meaning to hurt and she gets him in the face. It’s the words more than the blow that causes him to leap to his feet and haul her up.

“It’s fucking illegal in Fortuna! It’s demonic possession. They’ve tortured people to death for less and if I don’t make a point, they’ll do the same to you!” He explodes, furious and terrified and desperate.

“What?” she breathes. “This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening.”

“You have to trust me, please, treasure, please.” Credo leans his forehead against hers. “I love you so much, I’ll do everything I can to protect you, but you have to let me, please, Violet, please.”

Violet takes a huge, shakey breath as her hands come down to rest on his biceps, the muscles tensing under her arms. He thinks he can hear her breathe bend or break as wisps of hair flutter around his face. She tilts her head slightly and kisses him, just as lightly, lips first and as that deepens, her little tongue slips up under his lips with the merest of touches.

Credo doesn’t hesitate. His tongue rises to meet hers, gentle, but demanding. Wasn’t how he’d planned it, but if this is how the Saviour is granting his dearest wish, he’ll take it. His lips work against hers as his tongue traces the lines of metal along her teeth, the posts creating a unique feeling that he’ll get from no one else and she’ll grant no one else after this.

He can feel himself start to strain against his trousers and he marvels how quick his body reacts to her, then quashes it. Didn’t he always?

Credo can feel Violet moan deep in her throat and his dick goes all the way hard. Despite their looser fit than the breeches, he’s still uncomfortable. He breaks off from where her little tongue’s licking inside his lips and kisses along her jaw, gently, slowly, his lips sensitive to the feel of the plates and screws that hold it together.

Violet’s breathing quickens and her eyes are blown enough to be black in the firelight, as Credo kisses up over her cheekbones. His hands have dropped their hold on her arms and he’s held her so hard she’ll mark, already is. His hands slide round to her back, pulling her close and her arms are just as tight around him as her fingers trace patterns over his back, delicate trails that burn even through the fabric of his Jacobite.
Her fingers, realises Credo as he mouths gently over her forehead and her eyelids that flutter oh-so-delicately under his lips, have found their way under his shirt and are searing across his skin. She’s concentrating ever-so-carefully on his sensitive areas and he’s flinching, just a little. Violet’s thumbs catch on his shirt and draws it up, skimming the material along the expanse of his back and Credo shivers.

She reaches his shoulders and Credo raises his arms up, letting her hands glide up over his biceps, shaking his hair clear as the shirt passes over his head. He helps her pull it up and off his hands, tossing it aside. His rings chink with the movement and Credo pauses for a moment.

Violet’s hands come to rest on his chest, stroking her palms over his nipples. It’s Credo who’s trembling at the feel of her circling the little nubs with her fingers. She drops one hand down his torso, writing symbols lazily over his abs and his obliques and he inhales, sharp, quick as she hits a sensitive spot.

Credo pulls her close again, languorously kissing her mouth and over her throat and face. She makes a noise between a gasp and a cry as Credo’s hands do some roaming of their own. They spend time learning each other’s bodies and responses as hands and mouths trace paths around the sensitive skin, building on previous pleasures.

There’s almost a challenge for Credo – Violet’s vastly more experienced then he is and she’s doing her damndest to put him off his stride as her hands and mouth wander over his chest. He’s not to be outdone, though, not when he’s got the love of his life exactly where he wants her.

Thanking the Saviour for his famed self-control, Credo drops to his knees before her, skimming his hands up and down her legs as he looks up at her. Violet doesn’t suppress the shiver as she bites her lip and the look on her face is such a gorgeous mix of desire and mischievousness, that it’s a struggle not to cut to the chase and wipe that smirk from her face.

It’s Nero’s smirk, no doubt about It and the idea that soon, it could be that smirk on their childrens’ lips makes his heart soar.

“Hey, Credo,” Violet’s sultry voice breaks his reverie. “I’m up here. Getting a bit distracted by the goods, huh?”

In reply, Credo slowly skims his fingers up her legs again and hooks his thumbs in her lace knickers, drawing them down her legs just as slowly. He keeps his eyes on hers as he makes sure to
caress her with his fingers as his hands descend. Violet bites her lip and the smirk tips a little further over to desire as her breath quickens.

He has to tap her ankle to prompt her to step out of them.

Credo’s about to slide a strong finger between the dark curls when he feels her lean on his shoulder and a pressure that's almost too much on his dick. It catches Credo off guard and he grabs on to her sharp hips hard enough to bruise, leaning his head on her stomach.

Violet is balancing on one leg like a dancer, rubbing him through his trousers. The sensation of it takes Credo by surprise, the weight of it, the feel of the material and the bumps of his buttons against his prick. It's almost too much and he's got to fight hard, panting against it all as it threatens to overwhelm him.

Violet chuckles. “You’ll have to work harder than that to get one over on me.”

Her longest toe worms its way under the top button of his fly, as her big toe pushes down on the opposite end. Credo holds his breath against the feeling.

She flips the button in the hole and the fly springs open.

Credo’s stomach jumps and Violet smiles that playful, deadly smirk.

She does it again.

Credo grunts as his confined dick is slowly revealed.

He’s too far gone to notice that the fabric under his forehead is being pulled up as Violet takes the shirt and her bra off and tosses them aside. Her hands come to rest in his hair, gently massaging and it’s just another level of sensations burning through his nerves. His fingers jerk, digging into her hips and she moans.

Credo kisses her stomach gently, licking a small scar and her breath hitches. He smiles against her stomach, using lips and tongue to delicately tease his way along the scars and ink of her body.
She’s gone rigid as he moves up her stomach and her breath has quickened. The skin of her back is smooth between the scars and warm under her hair, and Credo marvels at the difference of the skin under his hands and mouth.

Violet’s hands begin to move more dreamily through his hair and he can feel it brush against his back as the tip of his tongue picks out the shape of the scars on her stomach. Dimly, he wonders what they are, there’s so many of them and they’re so close together. They’re rough and crepey compared to the dips and ridges of her back.

His stomach crashes and he almost starts to soften as he realises what they are.

*Stretchmarks.*

He takes a moment to quell his reaction, leaning his forehead against her for a second time, breathing through the sudden nausea. He’s been given a second chance and by the Saviour, he’s going to make it up to her.

Credo puts everything he’s got into his caresses, sliding his hands over her back and sides as his mouth teases her, licking a wet trail along her ribcage. His mouth and her murmured entreaties to gods he doesn’t believe in spur him on. He begins to rise up her body, his unfastened trousers falling down his legs. Violet’s hands in his hair pull him closer to where she wants him and he doesn’t fail her, concentrating harder on the spots that bring out that strangled cry and those panting breaths.

Credo reaches Violet’s breasts, barely a swelling with a nipple on top.

He pauses for a moment as she comes round slightly and with a hell of a lot of effort, says, “I used to have my clit pierced, until a tongue ring accident.”

Her quirk’s back as she says it and the rings in her nipples swing slightly as they rise and fall under her gasping breaths. Credo stands up fully, kicking his trousers away. He hesitantly runs a gentle finger over one, outlining the erect nipple.

Violet shakes against him as Credo drops his head to the other one and lets his tongue mirror his fingers. His tongue outlines the areola, darkened by passion and Violet can’t breathe fast enough.
Tongue and fingertip swirl round closer and closer as she whines deep in her throat. Her legs almost go from under her as Credo flicks the rings before closing his mouth and his hand over the nipples and playing with them, wet flat of his tongue and dry pad of his thumb contrasting too much for an already ramped up Violet.

Her fingers dig into his head, pulling on his hair and she gasps his name, legs going out from under her. Credo grabs her as she gives several full-body spasms that must be running in time to the ones in her monosyllable. But it’s Violet’s face he watches as she climaxes, flushed and gasping. Her face is screwed up, like she’s concentrating hard and it’s just so free and unaware, it’s beautiful to behold.

She’s exquisite. Credo can’t understand why Vee would ever think otherwise.

He’s smiling as it moves over her and finishes, waiting for her to come round. It takes her several minutes for her breathing to slow.

“You’re naked,” she says, breathily, dreamily. “I can feel all of you.”

It’s almost like she’s in a vision or a trance – he’s seen his mother in them often enough to know them. He knows that the magicians use them for powerful rituals and spells, and he’s been around Peter long enough to know how some of them are used.

“As I can feel all of you, treasure. I haven’t even finished yet.” He’s walking her slowly backwards towards the settee.

“I wanna see you,” she murmurs. One of her hands is reaching between them, searching for his prick.

“You will, Miss Kitty,” he replies, catching her hand and pulling it back up. She’s reached the settee and he guides her down, laying her against the cushions. He makes to work his way back down her body, but she stops him.

“Credo, I don’t wanna wait anymore,” Violet breathes, pulling back on his hair, wrapping a leg languorously around him and absently stroking it over him, pushing her foot against his arse to keep him there. She’s rocking her hips like he’s already inside her. “Fuck me now.”
She tries sitting up to pull him closer, but Credo resists, drawing himself upright.

“Don’t say it like that. Don’t cheapen us like that,” he says, kneeling on the settee between her legs. He casts his eyes down at her commodity. It’s swollen and glistening and he can smell it from here. She smells delicious, but he’s holding this line. “I was going to tease forth the little man with my mouth. Don’t you want that?”

Violet looks up at him like she’s starving and he’s a banquet. There’s a sheen of sweat slicking her skin, both their skins, really and her chest is heaving enough to make the little nipple rings bounce.

“What was it you said? ‘When I find release at your hands again, it will be deep inside you with you calling my name as you break apart under me,’ ” she says. “I want that. I want you inside me, Credo.”

Blessed Saviour, he almost releases there and then at the words he’s waited all his life to hear from her mouth.

His sword hand’s found his shaft and he’s absently stroking it as her eyes wander up and down his body. She licks her lips as her gaze hits on his stroking hand.

Credo leans over Violet, bringing himself down atop her carefully, relishing the touch of her skin against his. Empty Night, she feels so delicate underneath him as he carefully places his dick at her entrance.

“I thought you were meant to be impotent?” she gabbles, writhing under him. Nine Fucking Hells, he’s not even inside her yet.

“Not with you.”

Never with you.

Credo braces himself, laying his weight on her as her legs wrap around him. Her arms are resting on his back, but they can’t keep still, constantly moving over his back and up into his hair.
“Go slow,” she whispers, dark eyes gazing up at him. There’s almost a sense of awe over her face. Credo would wager a sense of reverence mirrors on his own visage.

“Of course, treasure,” he replies, stroking her hair and leaning down the few inches between them to kiss her.

Credo pushes slowly into Violet and it feels like Heaven in the tight heat of her cunny. He doesn’t stop or pull back, just stays braced between his knees and elbows and slides smoothly forward.

Violet’s shaking and writhing under him, hands ceaselessly roaming over Credo’s back, his shoulders, his arse, her voice moving between a sob-sigh and Mainland swearing. Credo doesn’t care. Here, like this, she could be chanting to bring demons forth, as long as that voice that sends shivers against his skin keeps on.

Credo bottoms out and Sweet Saviour, he’s all the way in. The sensation’s too much for him and he has to stop for a moment, let them both adjust to the feel of each other. He’s packed in so tightly, he can feel her muscles trying to adjust around him, feeling the individual minute accommodations her cunny makes around his prick.

Violet clings to him, her body rigid against him. Her lips are moving like she wants to say something, but no sound’s coming out, just ragged breathing. She meets his eyes and tries to smile, but she’s too overcome.

Credo knows how she feels. There’s no words that could describe how he feels right now, physically and emotionally, the love of his life under him as he’s deep inside her. He’s sensitive to her movements and she’s starting to relax.

Violet’s hips make a few rocking motions, as if she’s testing the waters and Credo takes her point. He’s not a fast lover in any sense of the word – if the few times he’s got this far can be taken as a guide. Credo pulls out as far as his position will let him and slides gently back in, watching Violet’s face for any discomfort.

Try as he might, he can’t forget that isn’t truly their first coupling.

“Credo…Credo,” she gasps and he stops.
“Why’d…you…stop?” she grits out. “Don’t…stop. You…Jesus fuck!”

Credo doesn’t reply with words, just the movements of his body, gently, but firmly sliding in and out.

Violet feels amazing under him.

She urges him on, writhing under him, hands never settling anywhere and it burns through his skin, regardless of her touch being fast or slow, heavy or light. The world could end just now and he’d never notice. Credo doesn’t even feel real right now, like he’s drunk or flying or something. He’s losing all his words, except her name and if it’s the one she never uses, she doesn’t notice.

Violet’s babbling a litany of nonsense when she can speak, otherwise her words are lost in ragged panting and broken cries. The only thing that stands out clearly is his name and it’s a blessing when it falls from her lips, breathy and broken.

Credo’s intent on dragging this out as long as he can and he shifts his position slightly. It forces him to change how he’s moving inside her and Sparda’s Balls, but it’s actually better, both in how his dick feels from the difference and the comfort of the position. His hips still piston slowly, but now it’s in a more circular motion and from how she’s reacting, it’s as good for her as it is for him.

“Oh-anything to please you, treasure,” he murmurs, kissing anywhere he can reach. Her jaw, her lips, her cheeks, her eyes, anywhere just so he can drive her higher, reward her for staying with them, with him. He’s careful, even in the throes of passion, to be watchful of pressing too hard. He’s felt the shapes of the plates and the screws he had a hand in embedding in her face.

It presses him on to put her pleasure first – but when was that ever not the case? It’s not even that hard as Credo gives fully in to the sensations singing through his nerves and the emotions searing through his heart. It’s almost as if his soul breaks free with hers and they’re dancing and entwining free of the bounds of this dimension and again he’s aware of everything, can see everything.

Credo’s thrusts and her reactions bind them both to their bodies and free them from them and he couldn’t say where she was – Violet’s part of him and separate from him in a way he can know, but have no words to explain.

There’s the same energy flowing from and around Violet that there was in his first time with Peter. He files that fact away, he’s too taken with his own Angelic energy mixing and mingling with
Violet’s. It reminds him, as he watches it, of the Spirits when they set the Wedding Spell – the conjoining of two separate energies into one whole and if that isn’t a metaphor for a child, then he doesn’t know what.

He pushes that nightmare down, but realises to a certain extent, he’s laying himself bare before her, divine passion stripping him of deception and trickery. He can see hers, he thinks, as the visions play out before him, seeing her life from the first moment she’s aware of the cool comfort of the ocean.

Credo’s physically gone as far as he can and he starts to pull back into his body, the physical sensations drawing up into his body and his back as his pace quickens, though still gentle, always gentle.

Violet’s gone still in his arms as tremors run along her cunny, announcing her imminent release at his worship of her body. Credo tries to time his thrusts to them, but he’s so close himself. She’s clinging tightly to him, like she’s about to get swept away in a Winter storm.

If she goes, he’s going with her. She’s staring right into his eyes, like they’re bottomless cenotes he could fall into.

And he does.

They fall together.

His thrusts time themselves with the clenches of her cunny and he explodes within her, sparks of energy creating fireworks over their skin.

They lie there, complete, eventually drifting off to sleep in front of the crackling fire.

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Violet comes round with Nero looking at her curiously. She and Credo are still entangled in each other and the fire’s burned low as dawn’s breaking under the curtains.
“I had a bad dream and I couldn’t find you in Credo’s room,” he says.

“What was your dream about?” she asks, freeing a hand to stroke his face and brush the tear tracks away.

“The bad men tried to steal you. But they won’t steal you, will they?” he asks, hanging on to her every word, as if it’s gospel, desperate for the reassurance.

“Not this time,” she replies and she doesn’t know where the words come from.

Nero looks closer and sees they’re naked. “Did you and Credo kiss naked?”

“Yes, we did.”

“So are you really married then?” Nero is still earnest with a child’s curiosity and acceptance of how things are in their world.

Violet dimly recalls something someone said about weddings here and gives the most honest answer she can. “As married as we’re going to be.”

“Oh,” says Nero, visibly brightening at this new event in his world. “Can I have cake?”

“There’s some in the cupboard. Take some up for Kyrie.”

Nero leans over and gives her a kiss. “Love you, Vee.”

Chapter End Notes
Owing to Real Life, This fic is on hiatus.

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