Nothing Left Unsaid

by astrothsknot

Summary

Vergil refuses to give up on the woman who doesn't remember him or their baby.

Dante refuses to give up on Vergil.

AU of And the Rest is Silence, following that fic until branching off from Nero's birth.
Chapter 1

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.

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“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 Agrippina 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.

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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-tigieġ. 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.
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 dallying with, 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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_Special Projects Division/ Inc Alchemy_

_Designation: Beyond Top Secret_

_Operation Resurrection_

_Phase One_

_Status: IN PROGRESS_
Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.

“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 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 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 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.”

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, stroking 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
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 clt as in her real bed. Her fingers stroke and twist her little clt, 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

Update: Knight Peter Falzon and Knight Credo Micellef

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.
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 Redgrave.”
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.

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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 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’m told 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.”

***

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 as 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 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

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Phase One
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
“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_

Knight 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.
“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.

“Where 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.

“No 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 perfunctional 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.”

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*Committee for the Protection of the Faith*
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.

***

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.

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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 shadowy 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.

“Sparada 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.

“Then best make sure you deserve me,” she replies.

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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 curseys, 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.

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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

Reporting to Supreme General Scerri.
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 5

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: domestic violence

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 *hnn* 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 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.” 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 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 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’.”

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 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.” 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 Agius hear Vergil’s voice and come into the room.

“Mr Redgrave,” says Peter.

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 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?”

“Pilgrim's Progress,” she replies. “There’s a copy over there.”

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, regrettfully. “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.
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 always 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.

*I just have 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 Qaghaq 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 hipbone.

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.

“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.”
“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 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.”

***

After dinner, Captain Agius excuses himself and leaves the three teenagers alone, but makes it 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.

***

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 qaḥb. 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, facilitajiet ta ‘tahriż…”

“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 a 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.

“And 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 8

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 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.” 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 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?”

“Yes, I got your 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.

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“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 Checutiu 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 9

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 colour.

He doesn’t have a manner as much as a miasma. Verity’s observation regarding the flies is not far
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-sheathes 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 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.”

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?”

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 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.”

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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.*

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“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 overpronounces the nouns, Agraapeenaa, Spaaardaaa. “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, Agnooooose.

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’you 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.”

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“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.
Chapter 11

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, qalbi,” 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.

“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. Lets 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.” She could ice a cake with the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

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-bug 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?”
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 electricity.”

“No, we have hydroelectricity for the towns. I thought HQ used that,” she replies. “I swear, for
“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-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.

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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, sabiha?”

Verity shoots him a venomous look. “You return to sweet so soon after sour, qalbi?”

“Oh, 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-please 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 oft time, all one needs.”

“Indeed, sir, ‘tis all in the planning,” agrees Arior. “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 Arior. 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.

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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,” 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?”
“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, hanini. 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.

“Not 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?”

“Inħobbok,” she replies, looking even more frightened, but resolute.

“Inħobbok, 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 sabīh tiegħi _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.

Everyting’s gone.

Everyting’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.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, we’re going on hiatus as i write a difficult bit in the sister fic. rest assured we will continue, we are fully outlined up to Nero's birth, but I need to concentrate on one story at a time.

Thank you for reading, commenting, Kudos and bookmarks. they are appreciated and
really keep me going.
Chapter 14

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.

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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, *sabiha,*” 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.

Agius remembers bringing Pinny through after Verity was born, sitting her up on the bed with Mama, Pinny excitedly asking, “Wheh mah babee? Wheh 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, 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.

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 Agius, as if he’s trying to mollify her. He strokes her hair. “Your sharp mind, your –“
“Sharp tongue?”

“Sharp wit,” concedes 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?” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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.
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.

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“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. Inħobbok, 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 sabiħ 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.”
Chapter 15

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 its creation,” says Captain Agius. “Surely its 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 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 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-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.
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.
“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 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.
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 lóbcock. 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.*

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