Cost of Living

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Summary

Herbert West, MD, is a scientist with only one burning goal: to cure death. Brilliant but disturbed, disgraced in the medical community, his experiments into the nature of reanimation have already cost himself and his assistant Dan Cain almost everything on more than one occasion.

When a mysterious stranger claiming to be a vampire shows up and offers the key to life eternal on the Devil's Road, West descends into a dark world of passion and possibilities beyond anything he ever imagined. And everywhere he turns, there's a trade-off.

The Night Island is a dangerous place... and the new, genius mortal won't precisely be living there, if Lestat has his way.

Notes

This crossover is a very ridiculous idea handled Very Seriously. Later chapters will include a variety of developing relationships among the characters, as well as lots of body horror, murder, science, vampirism, etc.

It's set after Bride of Re-Animator and Queen of the Damned (book) in the respective series' canons, and diverges from there. Events in later books and Beyond Re-Animator are...
ignored.
I hope all eight people familiar with both things enjoy it, because you have NO IDEA how hard we've worked at it!
In The Red

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arkham, Massachusetts

December 1986

Herbert’s pager shrilled just past five in the evening, flashing an unfamiliar number (unsurprising. His reputation had been spreading). Dan, as always, pretended not to hear, not to care why someone dismissed from the hospital months ago was so constantly on call. Herbert abandoned his half-completed sandwich, went to his room, and closed the door. Dan wouldn't pry, wouldn't pick up the extension.

The call connected, and was answered on the second ring. Rock music and laughter were audible in the background as a warm, musical voice invited him to a ‘party’ at Arkham's premier hotel.

He wouldn’t normally go to a client’s territory on their first deal, preferring to start from his car before making house calls, but the money was good—dangerously good. The address meant that the man could actually pay what he was implying, enough to keep Herbert’s share of the rent paid for at least three months.

Dan was agitating about it again, hinting at finding a cheaper one-bedroom place across town. One he could presumably afford alone.

In the end, maybe Herbert just wanted to get out of their drafty beige-walled Purgatory.

And it was undeniably pleasant being somewhere well-heated and well-lit. Somewhere where the staff deferred to him and looked at him with respect.

The dusting of snow on his coat and scarf melted, rivulets dripping unpleasantly down the back of his neck even as the rest of him overheated during the ride up in the elegant brass-appointed elevator. He avoided his own reflection in the mirrored yellow. He knew he looked no different than he ever had—slight, pale, clad in suit and tie out of fashion for the year and glasses large enough to act as a reflective barrier. A bit sharper-featured, perhaps, but aging did that. He disliked the reminder.

The hall was eerily silent, the entire floor bought out to give a single suite an air of palatial ownership. The decor was ostentatious, because of course it was. He felt like a shadow or dark stain on all the warm golds and tasteful creamy floral patterns, but proceeded nonetheless to the brass-fitted door and knocked. He hadn’t been invited because of his charming social presence, after all.

The door was answered by a punk, of all things. A man a decade younger than him easily, in clothes that looked like they could disintegrate away with the lightest touch. A servant or a front—not Herbert’s business. He did not ask, just shied carefully away from the too-friendly tattooed hand festooned with band-aids and rubber bracelets that sought to guide him into the suite.

He walked into a disaster area. Bottles and glasses of booze full, empty, and overturned; a shattered television next to its larger replacement; the haylike stench of smoke worked in so deep the hotel would have to throw out the pale blue drapes. He'd heard of this kind of thing, of course—the rich
and complacent looking for someone to fuel a week no one would remember. Not his business, he repeated to himself. If they knew him, then it wasn’t his business what they did.

A man held court at the center of it all, not much older than the near-child who’d let him in. But his eyes were enough to set Herbert on his guard.

They were too clear.

Blue as gas flames; bright and intense and not at all impaired. He lounged on the sofa, draped in three half-conscious people of disturbing youth and varying gender, fully dressed in bizarre leather-and-lace style like the subject of a magazine photo shoot.

The room revolved around him, invisibly but tangibly.

His smile was wide and friendly, welcoming even, as he shifted one long leg to plant a motorcycle boot on the floor. That of a friend instead of a client, foolish as that was to imagine.

He beckoned Herbert, the movement gentle so as not to disturb his harem (they moved with him as parasites, breathed when he did. It was… unnerving. And just a bit familiar).

"Please make yourself comfortable," said the voice from the telephone. Odd, that someone like this would bother calling himself rather than having a lackey handle it. “I'm afraid things got a bit out of hand.” He aimed a significant glance at the suddenly shy youth to Herbert's left.

One piercing gaze among a sleepy confederation of bodies. It set Herbert on edge—he was many things, but to be a party to dulling and enslaving the unwilling wasn’t something he wanted on his resume. He'd never been interested in controlling others, forcing bodies and minds into unwanted acts. Hill’s laser surgical drill was rightly regarded as an expensive failure, and the world the better for it.

And yet, when he met those unsettling eyes again, his resolve softened. Surely this man meant his people no harm. He just wanted to have fun with them, to make sure they were as happy as chemicals could allow.

Herbert scarcely noticed he'd moved closer until the moment their hands touched.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance at last, doctor..." The hand grasping his was warm and soft, the hold just long enough to startle him when they part (what was wrong with him tonight?).

"West. Herbert West." It slipped out without thought, a dangerous degree of honesty that sent a bolt of fear through him in immediate retrospect. A dark gold brow rose theatrically.

"We can speak alone, if you'd prefer."

On the one hand, fewer witnesses meant less risk of conviction. On the other...

He’d almost been rolled the month before, had knifed the former client and left him by a pay phone. Some people just couldn’t handle being cut off, reacting vigorously enough that Herbert was instead forced to cut them up.

But a man this rich wouldn't need to rob his dealer, particularly on a first meeting. Bad business, if nothing else.

"That might be best, Mr. ...?" He’d generally found it best to let them invent their own pseudonyms.
"Call me Lestat. It's only fair." He flashed teeth, and for a second Herbert could swear—

The thought slid from his head like water, and Lestat was already disentangling himself from his hangers-on, soothing them with whispers and touch so gentle Herbert forced himself to look away.

"There's a set of adjoining rooms that should do nicely." He was tall, maybe taller than Dan, and broader, sweeping them both from the room with utter authority. "I'm grateful you were able to come on such short notice. They told me you were the best there was."

Herbert shouldn't be gratified by acknowledgement of his superior skills at providing addicts with illicit drugs. The hand on his shoulder, though, with its glossy polished nails, the utterly genuine pleasure in the man—Lestat's—face...

He was good. He provided a service, and did so well.

He cast his eyes down and asked what exactly Lestat had in mind for the whole ‘party’ in the main lounge.

"Nothing damaging, nothing addictive," the client said quickly, left hand fluttering and describing meaningless shapes as he spoke. "They're lovely, all of them. I wouldn't see their bright futures dashed. They tell me you are...responsible about such things." An inquisitive glance at Herbert's dull silence. "Am I wrong? You take such pride in your work, I can tell." They were quite alone. When had that happened? "Tell me what you prescribe, Dr. West."

The right hand hadn’t left Herbert’s arm, the touch subtle and clinging and just noticeable.

He pursed his lips, considering, tucked his own hands into the pockets of his coat. They were icy, more so than usual; he forgot gloves in his haste to get out.

"That depends, sir." Slick packets brushed his fingers, waiting to be sold. "Just what results were you hoping to achieve? You've presumably exhausted the limits of alcohol and marijuana. I can recommend a number of hallucinogens with effects of varying durations and intensities. Narcotics, opiates, and stimulants are trickier, if you want to avoid dependency. Do you have a personal preference?"

"Your best." He's short now, brisk and intent. "Enough to give them ecstasy beyond their wildest dreams, and be no more than a dream by morning. Such stuff as dreams are made on."

The gnawing memory of dependence—addiction—is suddenly vivid. Herbert knows well the crushing, inescapable pain of cravings that cannot be denied.

He almost respects this man for wanting to keep his... people... free of it.

"Oh, and I would like to try some myself. To ensure it won't mix poorly with my own recipe."

He'd been about to inquire further, as to the preferred method of delivery and the environment in which it would be used, but this—

"I beg your pardon?" He stepped back. "If you're already dosing them with something, I cannot and will not guarantee results or interactions. Not without knowing what it was."

"It's difficult to explain. That's why I offered to take some myself—you're welcome to observe and make your own diagnosis." Lestat reached into the back pocket of his shredded jeans (how there was room was a mystery given how tightly they clung) and produced a thin sheaf of bills. "Not that I expect the service for free, of course."
"If you know my reputation as well as you say you do, you'll know I've made a habit of not allowing deaths at my hands when it's avoidable. This," Herber's eyes flicked involuntarily to the money hanging between them, "counts as avoidable."

Lestat let out a dramatic sigh. "Are you sure there's nothing I can say that might convince you? If it's a matter of payment, there is plenty I can offer. Money and otherwise."

"I really can't think of anything." The things Herbert needed weren't ones this dilettante could provide. Money was a stopgap; he couldn't give a job or house or restore Dan's good will. No doubt he had no clue about the mysterious drug he'd been using, the chemistry or the biology of it.

Even a condition such as 'keeping the body in case of fatality' was useless to Herbert right then, with no access to any lab besides the small uninsulated storage space he rented for synthesizing his products.

"I see," the man pouted, expression downtrodden as a puppy newly scolded. "Not even a sample? You're free to do with it as you wish, of course. You don't seem the sort to get caught in your own product. Though if you did, I can promise I would take excellent care of you." The heat never rose to the surface, suffused every word with promises but never lingered—an expert's touch. And then the tension broke with a laugh. "The properties of it are quite interesting. I think even a man of your caliber would find them interesting."

Something new to work with. To use, to study, to make...

...to sell.

Herbert stilled himself, clamped down on the hunger for more and different. Likely it was nothing more than some new blend of street drugs and household chemicals.

"Even if I were to agree, I must stress that it wouldn't make experimenting with it tonight any safer or more predictable," he said coolly. (He never had been good at resisting an opportunity.) "And I'll still need my normal payment, plus something for the risk."

"Please, don't insult my hospitality." Soft hands clasped his, the wad of bills much heavier than it had looked when initially produced. "I only ask that you tell me what you make of it. Your expertise would be gift enough in itself."

For all the artful misdirects up to now, the next step was amateur: Lestat opened the squat mini-fridge on the table, and removed a vial of almost-black liquid. He holds it up. "Personal stock. Very fresh." It dangled from his fingertips, one false move from smashing to the floor. "I'm sure I can count on your discretion, Doctor?"

Asking a drug dealer for discretion. As though Herbert weren't the one at risk. He ignored the caveat, moved instead for the practical:

"What is it, how is it administered, and what are the most common effects? Layman's terms are fine."

The neck of the vial was crusted with a rusty, flaking ring where some of it had escaped containment.

He took it gingerly, by the base, avoiding skin contact.

"It's as simple as drinking it. Small doses like that cause bliss and a few hours of heightened sensation. A larger dose gets a bit more exciting." He smiled indulgently and tilted his leonine
head toward the room beyond, from where Herbert could hear the low sounds of laughter and fumbling. "They like to think of it as lifeblood. It fits with the conceit, you see? And I couldn't resist—a flair for the dramatic has always been my weak point, I'm afraid. Perhaps you know the feeling." Their fingers brushed in the handoff, electrified by an unspoken spark.

"I've no idea what you mean by 'the conceit', but it sounds simple enough." Sounded like something he should avoid, but wouldn't, because he'd eventually need to test it and it'd been so long. "Would you like something that can be taken orally? The one-night parameters put some things out, but I have several extracts of my own devising you could try. I can't allow you to mix more than one of them, given the existing unpredictability."

He was babbling, rambling, avoiding the blue eyes even as pale fingers with white nails delicately folded the vial into his own palm, so cold the refrigerator's chill isn't even a shock.

"Whatever you suggest," (as though it was thoroughly beside the point now that this moment had been accomplished), "I feel quite safe in your care, Dr. West."

Lestat took bags of mundane chemicals alchemically transformed to powders valued in the thousands with only token interest, then produced a business card on heavy, black stock. "You won't find us here after tonight, but I do hope you'll tell me your thoughts regarding that sample. And if you change your mind… my offer stands." He smiled again, warm and real. "I imagine it would be very enlightening."

Herbert was missing something, had gotten turned around somewhere. The card was embossed in silver and embellished with glossy opaque red, bearing a long French name, a PO box address in Florida, and a set of longform phone and fax numbers.

He would leave reeking of pot and hash and snowmelt, with a new drug he couldn't tell Dan about and thousands of dollars tucked in his pocket.

He wasn't going to go home, he realized.

He was going to go to his lab, turn on the space heater, and drip this stuff onto a slide.

He wondered if Dan would even notice his absence—or complain, so long as he dropped the money off first (poor form to look, but the stack appeared to be hundreds all the way down; enough to pay for their illegal sublet into next year). Herbert told himself it didn't bother him, even as the warmth of the impromptu den closed behind him, carrying away that fluid, accented voice.

He wasn't like this. That instant connection—he didn't feel that often, and never without reason.

But of course, there was a reason. He'd been mentally starved, at subsistence levels only since his release from the hospital. (Thank God he'd been employed when the house collapsed, though that changed quickly based on his inability to do rounds while recovering. Based on the fact that he was not... liked. Still, he'd had health insurance when it happened.) A new chemical, a new 'lifeblood'... even if it was just a cocktail, it meant a night's work in his element. A chance to feel himself again, for a few hours.

His fingers kept worrying at the card in the pocket of his coat as he made the trip to his lab; it was innocuous enough, sitting on the table as he completed his setup. And then less so, when he jerked back from the table. The thing under his microscope belonged in a bioweaponry lab, hungry cells squirming and devouring any invading bodies. It was horrifying. It was the most fantastic thing he'd seen all year.
It was blood. It looked... not unlike dead tissue dosed with his reagent, but there seemed to be some mutation present on a cellular level, rather than a chemical enhancement. Viable, uncontained, and the man was feeding it to people, biohazards be damned.

He couldn't immediately tell whether it was some bizarre blood cancer, or an infection seething and replicating—not on a simple optical microscope under flickering fluorescent lighting.

He needed more samples and better equipment—some pedestrian part of him considered, briefly, informing the police. It's what Dan would insist on were he there, pearls clutched. Herbert just wanted to know what it could do, never mind the dangerous questions of whether its owner knew what he had on his hands or if there was someone more powerful calling the shots, dosing out this potent lure through an unassuming, handsome front.

The card on the table winked up at him, catching the light. Outside, the sun had climbed directly overhead while he toiled away.

His pager went off three more times that night, two regulars and one unknown. He ignored it. He could afford to ignore it.

He stowed the remainder of the sample in his (disallowed) mini-fridge, then opened the sliding shutter.

The management probably suspected him of living there, sometimes. He didn't care.

All was normal as rattling metal slid balkily up, up, jammed a bit at waist height, and then—sunlight lanced in, illuminating the rickety table holding his microscope and slides.

The flames were a surprise.

The hiss was palpable, even from a distance. By the time he scrambled back to the viewfinder his slide was empty, the glass cracked from the apparent force of the liquid's evaporation—though the word "combustion" almost seemed more appropriate. What the hell was he sitting on? He glanced at the fridge holding the half-vial that remained to him. Hardly enough to test what the properties would do to a human host, if it could produce that violent a reaction even under skin.

It was a mark of courtesy not to call numbers in their business during daylight hours, lest the wrong eyes catch sight of it. He had never been more tempted to break that edict.

Instead, he made note of the photoreactivity, turned off his pager, and stopped at a snowed-over Citgo for a full tank of gas before heading home. With any luck, Dan wouldn't be there.

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Herbert was not a lucky person.

Dan had regular shifts and days off, was respected enough to get them. Herbert didn't even know what day it was, what night it had been when he left.

Dan looked... tired.

Frustrated, yes, but underneath that, he still seemed worried about Herbert.
Which was unnecessary, of course.

"Where have you been?" He didn't even bother with anger. His voice carried a sigh of inevitability, like he was angry with himself for even taking this tack, for expecting a new outcome.

"You don't want to know." It wasn't demurring, but fact. Dan adored his plausible deniability, the ability to hold Herbert at length like a dead thing on a stick.

A full day without sleep, and Herbert still looked the better of the two of them—at least his clothes were new, were clean.

Dan was already decaying, right here in this apartment. Falling to pieces in front of Herbert.

"Have you eaten?" he asks on the way to the kitchen, realizing he himself hadn't had anything at all since a snatched bite of cheese and tomato during the construction of that half-finished sandwich the night before.

He was ravenous.

"What would you like? I know there's not much here, but I can get groceries later today, after I've slept—"

"Would you stop?" Dan slammed a fist against the arm of the couch. "How long are you going to pretend that this is normal?"

Herbert inhaled shallowly, didn’t turn around to face his friend before answering:

"I had assumed you'd rather I not point out how little you've been sleeping. Or the long hours. I was only trying to be a considerate roommate." And it was safer than trying, ineptly, to pry where he was most certainly not welcome.

"You know what I'm talking about." Dan prowled his way into the kitchen, looking for something else to take his frustration out on. He snatched up the wad of bills on the counter. "What the hell is this? How am I supposed to keep turning a blind eye to this stuff?"

"It's money. Rent, and more. Exactly what you asked for." The fridge was nearly empty, of course. His head was pounding. He could have taken any number of things to avoid that, but hadn't. Dan would be proud, if he weren't turning a blind eye. "I assume you'll proceed as you have been, to protect yourself. You don't need to be involved."

The milk wasn't sour, at least.

"Though I did find a possible new avenue of research tonight." Last night. He no longer measured by days.

"On one of your… jobs?" The disdain hurt, unexpectedly. The one thing Dan had always been reliable for was a faith in the Work, in their work. Now even that seemed to be slipping away.

"A social call." One of the cupboards yielded up a nearly empty box of cereal. Better than nothing. "Do you want to know, or don't you?"

The silence was too long, too ponderous, and when Dan broke it his voice trembled with some unclear tension.

"I want to know what you're doing to yourself. As near as I can tell, this might as well be another
dead end excuse for you to play around with corpses." He shook his head. "It never goes anywhere. I'm tired."

So was Herbert. Tired, lost, but... energized. He hadn't felt this well in ages, despite the long night, despite the pain in his neck (a crick, too long at the microscope). If he could only share this, infect Dan with his vitality.

He reached out, gingerly put a hand to Dan's shoulder before skating it up his throat who-knew-why. Unkempt hair felt feather-soft.

"I know it's been hard," he said as gently as he was able. "I know. Why do you think I leave you out of the things that don't matter?" The light dazzled suddenly, the drafts of the apartment cut through. "But this—you must see it, Dan. It's something else."

"I don't know." Dan's eyes slid immediately around in response to that point of connection, uneasy, but he didn't pull away. Another sigh, heavier. "Who is this going to hurt?"

"It's going to help people. This could be the piece I was missing. Dan, the regeneration in these cells—it's incredible. We could use it to repair brain tissue, preserve consciousness! Real, true life. It's within our grasp. Please," his pride crumbled before this man every time. "Let me show you." It would mean giving up the lab, if he agreed, teetering on the edge of another collapse. It was worth it.

"Dammit, Herbert." Dan wasn't yelling. Not grabbing or shaking. He was stepping back, what, what did this— "You could have done so much."

"Dan—"

"I believed in you. I thought—but look at yourself. Look!" He grabbed then, pinned Herbert’s unprotesting form, rifled unimpeded through pockets full of his wares. Baggies scattered on the floor.

Herbert was never a willing party to shame. Too much of it had haunted his early years, and he had more than had his fill. But just then he couldn't bring himself to meet Dan's eyes, to feel righteous indignation because this was what they needed. Did money come from nothing? Had Dan so much as spoken when Herbert was dismissed, had he hesitated to use this money when it kept a roof over them?

He'd given up using the reagent when Dan asked. He'd given him a bride. Wasn't it enough, ever enough? Tightly, Herbert offered his unimpeachable, useless defense: "I did what I had to."

"Excuses! You could've—"

"Could have what, Dan?" Something angry and predatory and wounded twisted inside. "Could have gotten a job in Arkham, with my history?" He stayed passive, riveting his stare to the scattered hundreds' worth of pills and powders on the stained linoleum. "Or could have left you?"

And now he'd done it, voiced the thing that needed to stay unspoken.

Given Dan that egress.

He closed his bloodshot eyes and waited.

"...God dammit." The hands stripping away at him tangled in his jacket. Dan's breathing went harsh and ragged. "That's not... you know that's not." A thunk. Herbert dared a small glance. Dan's head
was against the wall, his back bowed. From a distance they would look nearly intimate. But no, not that. Never that. "I just want you to be what you promised."

"A savior?" He never could quit when he was ahead.

Dan was already backing away. "A doctor. Someone who gave a damn about saving people, not feeding them to his god complex."

Dan was wavering like a mirage, barely standing. The right push and he'd fall. He'd go along, or he'd run. No half measures.

"Dan..." he raised a hand, reached up. He was so close. Dan's radiant heat was nearly a match to that he felt not twelve hours ago, in a chance brush of fingers with a man so rich he'd have forgotten Herbert by now.

Because Herbert was so very forgettable.

He dropped his hand, dropped his head and shoulders.

Dropped everything.

"I'm tired," he whispered. The wall was cold and hard and real at his back."I need to sleep."

"I'll take care of the mess." Dan always seemed so pleased to be rid of him. He wouldn't do more than watch Herbert go, shucking off his clothes carelessly as he reached the dusty, cold room he called his own.

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There were four missed calls on his beeper when he woke, late in the evening. All the same number, with a non-local area code.

He recognized it from the card.

The danger of an unknown contact, the youth of his followers, the frustration of being used: all of it seemed less important in that moment than the remembered look of passionate interest in Herbert's ‘thoughts.’

Dan was drained nearly dry.

He called back.

He left (Dan was gone, at work or just avoiding him—he still didn't know what day it was), drove in a daze to the address the unknown voice gave him.

The freeway map led him to a colonial-era B&B outside Arkham, kitschy and clichéd and utterly not in keeping with the man he'd met.

Lestat greeted him like an old friend, ushered him back to a secluded table in the rear of the dining room. His wardrobe had changed entirely in modesty but remained just as showy, dripping in black velvet and lace and bits of silver.
"Don't worry, we won't be bothered," he said, waving away Herbert's guarded expression. "Clarisse and I have an understanding. I did a favor for her father some years ago. This place has become something of a home away from home. Please, order whatever you like. I owe you at least that much for my rudeness the other night."

His eyes raked over Herbert, seeming to see through him. "When was the last time you ate, mon ami? You look as if you could waste away at any second."

He avoided the look, snapping his attention instead to the handwritten nightly menu. Three dinner options, all outside his normal budget but well covered by the cash he carried.

His aunt Mary used to fuss over his fat, spoilt cousins that way.

"I'll have the chicken." He set the textured cardstock aside, did not reach for the wine list. "And you were perfectly courteous, given the situation, Monsieur de Lioncourt." (Time in Switzerland ensured his pronunciation if not his comprehension.) "I take it you require my supplies for another group?"

Lestat had no menu of his own. Ate earlier, no doubt.

"If you're amenable. There's no rush." He waved business away as nothing, calling the slender, doelike waitress over and flirting shamelessly before delivering Herbert's order (she seemed delighted; weren't they always).

When they were alone again the man leaned forward in confidence, eyes glittering with some unspent joke. "And call me Lestat. Monsieur de Lioncourt has gone to his rest, and may the Devil have more use for him. But what did you think of it?" No time wasted, pleasantries at last minimal for all the flattery and fine airs

"It appeared incredibly dangerous, highly resilient, and potentially communicable." The crease of Herbert’s left elbow itched where he’d taken blood to mix crudely with the sample. "It was also photoreactive to an extreme degree, and I've no information yet on its mind-altering or addictive properties."

"I see." Lestat’s expression was that of a studious child pretending understanding, but the sincerity of it caught Herbert off guard. "You'll need a test subject for that, no doubt," he continued. "I'd volunteer, but unfortunately it has no effect."

"What I really must know is, who did you bleed to get it?"

That grin returned. "Well, it would be difficult if I had to go through some long chain of suppliers, wouldn't it? I imagine that's why you make your own."

"You." That smile, those eyes, peeking out humorously from beneath thick, lustrous, natural blond hair. So healthy, yet... so pale. And there was something neurological as well, expressions flickering and manifesting seconds late, like a performance. Eerie, in a way that bothered only the hindbrain. "You're suffering this... disease. That's why...?" That was why. His reputation, his... peculiar knowledge.

The purchase a mere smoke screen, with Herbert himself the goal.

How novel.

"Vampirism, a disease!" Lestat sounded downright gleeful as he used the ridiculous term. "How modern. Yes, if you like. Folklore has a few other names for it, but for your scientific age I think
"the term will do quite nicely. As for why..." He gave another careless laugh as the food arrived. "Why do you think? I hope you'll indulge me. No explanation I can give can hope to be as enticing as your own conclusions, you see."

"I've only had one night. Stating any definite conclusions would be hasty." The food appeared, steaming, so quickly Herbert wondered if it had been at the ready all along. "I'll need data on symptoms of the infection if I'm to proceed." He ate carefully, gentlemanly, dismissed the rich hot moistness of fowl, the buttery potatoes and the crunch of dark greens. Wine arrived, unbidden; he ignored it in favor of his water.

"Anything I have is yours," Lestat murmurs silkily. "You need only ask."

Herbert felt himself consumed as he ate, watched with voyeuristic pleasure through half lidded eyes, and foolish superstitions suddenly seemed far easier to believe. He couldn't remember, now that he thought about it, if the restaurant had ever held any patrons besides the two of them.

"I know my impatience is a trial—I assure you, I've been told as much time and again—but it's the only price. All of my resources at your command (and I assure you they are considerable), in exchange for your company." Lestat rested his pointed chin on a pale hand, strange diseased eyes rapt. "For your thoughts."

Herbert's breath caught at that, in spite of himself.

The red wine was deep, flavorful, tangy—he'd never learned how to choose or evaluate alcohol, but this slipped down his throat easily as water. He felt himself heating up, tugged his tie just a bit loose. Relished the flavor of flesh and dairy and vegetables in his mouth, the warmth in his belly, the mellow golden light of the intimate dining room. So quiet.

"What can you tell me?" Herbert asked, intent still, hungry for the mental stimulation that kept him alive. "What—can I tell you?"

The flames of Lestat's eyes dazzled, the glossy nails sparkled; candlelight softened what would have been a disturbing pallor to a pleasant airbrushed glow.

"A great many things, mon savant. Some of them even true. Though none in so efficient a turn of phrase as you're likely hoping. Still, I'm yours."

The words were innocuous, playful, but the wine sent them buzzing through him with an edge, making his conversation with Dan seem distant and cold by comparison. He leaned forward, anticipating the promised reward.

"I am a great deal older than I appear. In fact, my birth was 225 years ago. Well preserved, I think you'll agree." (Lies, most likely, but verifiable through research. And if not... if not, Herbert might yet find his answers, his victory, the one he's always known was his destiny.) "My body is as a corpse during the day—you saw what might happen were that not so—" (protective hibernation?) "and at night I wander the world, unable to eat or drink. Though these are a help." His smile revealed long, pointed canines.

They were alone, then, or surely someone would have come running. Would at the very least have demanded some better explanation for this most elaborate of pranks.

Herbert’s grasp of personal space was poor with patients. His arm stretched out, across the small table—his fingers made contact with full broad lips, careless, spread them for a better look at the dental malformation.
Real.

Real, solid, no wiggling beneath the pressure of his touch, even when he grasped the chin in his other hand. And—

*Sharp.*

He hadn't sliced himself with a scalpel in years, but this felt comparable.

"Careful." The words was breathy against his hand. "That fearlessness might get you into trouble one day." Lestat's tongue ran across his teeth, wiping away the proof of the accident. He caught Herbert's hand in his, brought the bleeding finger back to his mouth, and—

It was obscene. Herbert’s face heated; hard to say whether from the shock or the sight of that full mouth closed around him, a warm tongue feeling at the crevices of his injury.

He was released, the moment a memory almost before it ended. His finger was smooth, as if nothing had happened.

"Another side effect," Lestat said quickly, gesturing at the lack of injury. "Minor healing properties. Very handy if one wants to hide the evidence. Or keep someone alive after an… encounter."

A pause.

"Are you alright, Doctor? Your face is a bit red." Like butter wouldn’t melt.

"You're seriously claiming to be..." he struggled just a touch too long with terminology, "...hematophagous?"

"...A vampire?" Lestat said at the same time with a winsome, careful smile. "Exactly as advertised, love."

The smile dimmed, suddenly, converting to an equally calculated look of dejection as he took Herbert's still-outstretched hand, laced their fingers together in agonising intimacy. "Why—you really don't recognize me at all, do you?"

"I'm afraid not." Herbert tried to pull back, to put distance between them, but the grip tightens, implacable. "Should I?"

Too tight. Lestat wasn't even straining, gave no sign of effort, and yet Herbert might as well have been wrestling with stone.

Stone he'd apparently insulted.

"...Well. It's only, I just." Lestat looked honestly flabbergasted, the cool facade blown. "I had assumed that when I gave you my card, that settled things. Simply *everyone* seems to have heard of me these days." He let go at last, looking positively martyred. "But then, I suppose that means I'm being valued for my charming self rather than my fame." The new narrative seemed to satisfy him, bringing the warmth back. "Yes, of course. A doctor wouldn't have time for such frivolous things as rock stars, now would he?"

"...Quite." This was almost less believable than the vampirism. Ego, pride, power, lies—things to handle carefully.
But then again, the man was clearly not out to harm Herbert. His eyes shone, bright in the candlelight, so warm. Herbert was thirsty, took another drink of wine, expected to finish the glass but no, it was full, still full and delicious and dinner'd been cleared away and yes, Lestat was charming.

And the key to so much, if Herbert managed it all.

"Two hundred years—and you became infected how, exactly? Was it congenital, slowing the aging process, or...?"

He laughed—giggled, practically, a disbelieving patter of sounds that seemed to barely escape his mouth. "You really haven't heard a thing." A fleet of expressions crossed his face, ending in a grand flourish when he stood. "I have some rooms rented here with a comfortable sitting area. I can tell you the whole story.

"If you'd be so kind...?" Honest uncertainty was written across his face as he extended his too-strong hand. "You can ask all the questions you wish. I resolve not to rest until you're satisfied."

"I'll need more." The words spilled from Herbert's mouth, rude, rude, even as he rose to follow. He hadn't been this awkward since Dr. Gruber offered him the position of research assistant, since he had his first real shot at something. "The blood. I need more, to test. And I need an *actual* description of its effects, not what you gave before."

"Of course." There's an arm around his shoulder, guiding him (keeping him steady) to a room on the second floor. "It's a tragic tale, but I'll try to pare it down to the facts." Said as though this would be a great sufferance, akin to the loss of a limb. "I was 20 when I was kidnapped by a man determined to make himself an heir. He locked me away in a tower, gave me this curse, and cast himself into the flames."

"Yes, but —"

"Yes, I'm coming to that." Lestat huffed and rolled his eyes at the interruption. "He swept me into his arms and pierced my throat, draining my blood until I was at the point of death. And then he fed it back to me from his body, held me down until I drank it and my body began to crave it. And when I woke, I was just as you see me now. Well, not just." He'd been pacing the room, acting out his own grand performance, and now he sat next to Herbert on the overstuffed chaise. "I was mad with thirst, but water and food made me terribly ill, sick unto death. Only blood would satisfy me. And when I drank it, I saw the world as if through new eyes. I'm afraid I can describe the sensation to you no better, with the senses you possess."

"So it requires active replacement of a significant volume of non-infected blood through feeding, and has hallucinogenic properties in addition to the feeding problems and enhanced lifespan." Lestat's hands were stroking Herbert's arm, his shoulder, traveling up cheap blue polyester—no surprise if his sensory perceptions were as distorted as he'd described. "No food or liquid works? Not, for example, high-protein broths or iron-rich supplements?"

(He knew the answer was no. He had his suspicions as to why, as to some as-yet-undocumented energizing force responsible for the difference between life and death.) "I need more."

"It's possible to survive on the blood of animals, but not to thrive. Our senses are dulled, our skills blunted. It's no way to live. I have no explanation, I'm afraid. But plenty of experience. " Lestat’s face went distant for a moment, but he returned to the present, hand coming up to cup Herbert's chin. "A little blood won't make a vampire, but I'm told it's quite pleasurable for mortals in small doses. Even the bite itself is rapturous—catch a mortal, and they'll beg you to drink them right
down to their deaths just to sustain the feeling."

Herbert snorted; though he intended to pull back, he found himself suddenly immobilized by that gaze.

It couldn't really be that good—it couldn't really be that dangerous, even. The average human's stomach wouldn't hold enough for the 'drinking' to be fatal, unless the food source were left to bleed out after.

Simple physiology.

Something of this line of thinking must have shown on his face, prompting a gentle laugh from the strange, strange man.

"You think I'm lying? I'm hurt, my friend." Lestat tilted his chin up, leaned in—and brought his lips to rest on Herbert's exposed throat. "I can prove you wrong quite easily, if you're willing to trust me. Don't worry, I've had two centuries to practice control, even on someone as enticing as you." Lestat's other arm crept around Herbert's back, loose enough to break free from but inviting something closer. "I think this could clear up a great many suspicions, don't you?"

This was stupid. This was dangerous and impulsive and everything Dan would tell him not to do.

Dan wasn't there, hadn't been there in ages, left so long ago for his own inadvisable nighttime frolics.

Dan didn't know where he was, he realized, just as an exquisite pain began in his throat.

Dan might never know what happened to him.

_It'll be alright._ No one spoke, but the thought suffused him down to the bones. He relaxed, and as he did the pain went with it, leaving only a heady, breathless feeling. It was like the moment of reagent hitting his blood as he remembered it, but it went on forever. The answers to all of his unanswered questions seemed no more than a thought away, if he were of the mind to pull himself together. But he wanted nothing more than to languish like this eternally, cocooned by a sense of warmth and complete comprehension.

And then it ended, leaving him stunned and gasping.

"Easy, easy. You're alright." Lestat was holding him, warm solidity counterpoint to a distant ache in his neck. He felt weak. "Didn't I tell you? It's quite wonderful for both parties. Better than sex, some might say."

Herbert didn't even try to answer the probing statement, the recognizable praise-seeking trap. He just sat, hunched, tie loose and hand clamped to his neck, feeling a sticky mix of saliva and blood over the puckered itchy tenderness of tangibly forming scar tissue.

"Herbert? Can you hear me, darling? I need you to answer if you can." That hand on his jaw again, insisting on eye contact. "It wasn't too much, was it? I'm afraid I may have gotten carried away..."

He'd lost blood—how much, he didn't know, but a not insignificant amount. His head, though, felt clear and sparkling as it had the night before, as it hadn't in so long.

He needed to examine the teeth for venom sacs.
He needed to avoid that.

He needed healthy foods and liquids to replenish what he lost.

He needed... he needed something, something, and he knew that feeling too well.

Dan would hate him for this, he thinks, even as those eyes bored into him with infinite concern, open giving. So much to learn. So much to work with.

Dan would... he'd have to help, of course. He'd see. This was an advance, proof.

The blue eyes narrowed, the lips thinned.

"Foolish idiot," Lestat muttered. Then Herbert was shifted bodily, cradled in a way that would be humiliating if not for the wine, the anemia, and the strange heated intimacy of the room. "Herbert, darling. I need you to do as I say. I promise I'll take care of you." Like something out of a nightmare, then, Lestat bit a gash into his hand and hovered the sluggish wound over Herbert's mouth. "Drink this. It will help a little. It will make you feel better. Remember what I said—a little isn't enough to change you." An almost desperate strain colored his voice. "Trust me, please."

Dangerous. Wasteful. Ill-advised, to do this without any proper testing. *Infectious*.

And really. ‘Darling.’ The French were so effusive.

That first taste on his tongue felt like a firecracker, explosive distilled energy rushing down his throat and into his system in entirely too few seconds. It carried something with it, a calming, tranquil understanding. An imperative: Dan wouldn't understand, of course. Bringing him in too early would only cause trouble. Might hurt his friend, even.

He knew this, had known it all along.

His world went black, even as he felt more alive than he had in years.

~*~*~*~

He's lovely, Lestat thought, gathering the lax form to his own blood-warm chest.

Overfeeding, perhaps; Arkham was most certainly short a few more cutthroats that night than it might be otherwise, but he'd so wanted to make a good impression. To appear a touch more alive, for this crusader in service to life itself.

He'd nearly spoiled things, getting overexcited by the promise of having those bright, burning thoughts in his grasp. A touch of guilt gnawed at him like a mongrel at a bone—he'd promised himself he'd use as little influence as he could, once he'd lured Herbert to him. What was the point, if he had a puppet and not that keen mind in its true, unfettered state? But he'd heard those insistent whispers of an outsider, and panicked. They weren't ready. Herbert needed to be his friend, his confidant. He was certain they could achieve it, if they went on like this. He moved with unexpected speed, this one. Willing to embrace (or be embraced by) the strange so long as it showed its work.

And yet...
Didn’t he owe his darling something, considering the way he’d outraged him not an hour before? Tumbling the poor boy like an unwary farmer’s daughter—bad form. How trusting he’d been, though, how wonderfully fearless. And completely untutored in the ways of pleasure despite being more than a decade older in his mortal way than Lestat would ever reach; a celibate Priest of his Science. Truly, it had been a bit of an honor to see him dazed and ecstatic in Lestat’s grasp.

And of course, that perfect mouth bore the bruises and stains of feeding marvelously. Fierce.

He pulled off Herbert's shoes and jacket, tucked him into bed otherwise whole. It wasn't how he'd imagined the night ending, but he was as far from regret as he could manage. The poor dear was peasant-thin without his clothes and posture to inflate him. A true Personality.

It wasn’t as though anything he offered would be payment, as such. Nothing so gauche. Herbert was such a brittle creature, so brilliant and yet so utterly lacking in the things he needed to support that brilliance. Barely scraping by, counting every penny and fretting over every debt. Driven to providing for others’ excesses while denying his own.

Lestat had never been a Temperance man.

Things for the scientist’s Work, yes, naturally; he could undoubtedly give whatever he needed to continue his fight against Death. But that he’d been planning to do regardless; this new muse for this new world would need all to properly complete his wonderful theft from the Gods of old. Providing those supplies was simply expected of a patron.

Other things, though, might make suitable recompense for the strumming of his mind and the plundering of his body. Food, tonight, had been an effective and sensual win, and God knew Herbert of the Great Brain needed it. Clothing, perhaps. Maintenance—growing out that dreadful haircut would take time, but they had it, of course. Fed up, clipped and cleaned and polished, Herbert would be a flawless jewel of an Immortal, delicacy and pallor animated by Lestat’s Dark Gift and burning with that rebellious intelligence that already so moved and disconcerted all who met him.

Even now, the sight of the swoon caused by his own substance rushing beneath soft mortal skin was enough to make Lestat wish to go farther. He settled for a kiss only, thief that he was, licking traces of his own blood from parted lips in profound if one-way intimacy. Heartbreaking, to think of losing such a creature to the vicissitudes of mortal life, but he’d rules of his own, after all, and could wait for his latest favorite to choose him and the night and all its unearthly pleasures.

He briefly considered throwing out the pills and powders, the nasty concoctions his mortal made and sold to survive. There would be no further need of them now, of course, not now that he was under Lestat's black-plumed wing.

But perhaps... no, likely, he'd feel better with the illusion of choice. The impression that he still *could* do his odious job, if need be.

Lestat musn't come on too strong with this proud, independent little Self-Made Man.

The room was paid up through the next week; depending on the effects of his mental touch, who knew when Herbert would be of a mind to leave.

He ruffled choppy hair, removed the tragic spectacles (so thick for one so young!), and left his prize slumbering beneath the embroidered antique counterpane.

Morning was only a few hours away, and he had things to arrange for the coming months (and
Herbert woke alone, thirsty and confused (early symptoms, his hindbrain reminded him, sending lines of adrenaline through him). He staggered out of the overstuffed bed and into the bathroom, where he slurped water directly from the faucet. No sickness. It might be delayed, but Lestat had made the digestive distress sound severe and immediate.

So. Nothing worse than a hangover, then. His head pounded as he averted his eyes from the warm light of late afternoon filtering through the window. Shit. Would Dan wonder where he'd gone?

He shied away from that thought, and that of going home to their shabby, ill-furnished little hole in the wall. He’d never been one to care about his surroundings, but the light and general air of upkeep of these hotels was pleasant in comparison to the stained sinks and dingy walls he lived in.

He couldn't stay, of course, had likely overstayed his welcome already. Such an idiot, drinking and then allowing… whatever that was. Biohazardous, for certain. Suicidally stupid. Willful, deliberate contamination.

Of course.

He had it, racing through his veins, multiplying or dying depending upon his immune system’s efficacy. Samples. All thoughts of home vanished: he needed to go to his lab immediately.

There came a knock at his door, startling him into jumping like a nervous cat. He glanced again toward the window. Not Lestat then, unless he was giving away his conceit already (and what a time to do it, after feeding Herbert his blood… and he had taken it in willingly, was driven by some kind of biological high).

Instead, it was the young woman from the restaurant, holding a tray of food. "Sorry. I tried to bring it earlier, but I'm not sure you heard me." She tilted her head. "You did order this last night, right?"

He wasn't so foolish nor so proud as to turn away food when low on blood.

Last night's dinner had been admittedly good. This breakfast—his mouth was swimming in tart orange juice, the fluffy texture of scrambled eggs, fruit-laden crepes like he hadn't had since Europe. Even the coffee, black and oversugared as he always drank it, actually had appeal above the energy he craved.

He may still have been under the influence.

After, he showered. Counted his possessions and products and bundled himself back into his clothes, slunk out under the assumption that the bill was not actually his problem so long as he wasn’t observed.

His pager had somehow gotten turned off in the night; he clicked it on in the car, only to see that the last number to call had been his own.

Dan's, rather.
It chimed again as he drove back into Arkham proper, vibrating on the dash. Dan wasn’t supposed to have this number, wasn’t supposed to acknowledge it.

Lines drawn were breaking down.

A hurricane greeted him when he opened the door. Dan's voice was wrathful.

"Where were you?" He pointedly didn't touch as he followed after Herbert, shadowing him through the rooms. His voice was deafening, more than it should be. Had their apartment always been this bright? "Herbert!" At last, a hand on his shoulder. God, he could feel Dan's pulse through the thumb. "What is the matter with you? Where did you go?"

"Dan," he began inanely, then stopped.

Dan's face was blotchy, alternately flushed and pale under blue-black stubble. His eyes were sunken in bruise-violet sockets.

He looked wonderful, like something Herbert would like to fold himself into and hold onto. He also looked far too fragile—too vulnerable.

Too unsteady to handle the truth, not yet, not without proof, something deep down whispered. The voice of experience, clearly.

"...Out," he answered instead, averting his eyes. He didn’t lie, not to Dan, not in the past. “I was out. Don't you have work today?"

"No. No, they sent me home. I have a fever, it's nothing. I thought I would see you.” Disjointed, flustered. Poor thing. He needed rest. “You were gone all night? That's idiotic even for you. Did you get some kind of breakthrough in your miracle cure?" The words were sarcastic, but held an element of pleading. He wanted to believe it, wanted an excuse to not be angry.

"Patients. Nothing serious." It was easy to lie, but left a poisonous feeling behind. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I thought we might be able to just—never mind. I'm going to bed. It's your turn to vacuum."

"Dan—" he reached out, wanted to touch, to soothe despite his ineptitude, but it was too late. Dan was backing away down the too-short hallway to the master bedroom, to sleep off his fever.

There was food in the fridge.

Dan had shopped, presumably with the pile of cash left carelessly rubber-banded by the phone.

Herbert knew he should feed him, should do the only thing he could to fix the physical.

He was running out of time, though, for the blood contamination burning itself out against his T-cells.

...He couldn't risk it. Dan would forgive him when he found the missing link. It would all be worth it, and he'd have time to make it up to Dan. When he'd earned his assistant's awed smile back, it would feel like a breakthrough.

The sunlight on his skin left no mark nor pain. If anything, it was invigorating. He felt clear-eyed drawing a syringe, preparing another slide (the light was still abysmal, he should ask about that, but not yet).
He caught himself looking over his shoulder now and then, looking for someone to make remarks to and remembering he was free of an audience. He was half convinced, at times, he could hear Lestat uttering ridiculous praises in his ears.

He’d known it was hallucinogenic from the start. Sensory distortions, apparently followed by full-blown imaginary voices. Lovely.

He made a note and ignored it. It stopped eventually, thanks to either willpower or the fading half-life of the substance.

His blood was nearly normal—only a few rogue cells battled sluggishly in the mix, and they withered when exposed to sunlight.

A retrovirus, perhaps. So many things to check.

He kept taking periodic samples all afternoon, left the butterfly needle in for hours, until his arm was blue and aching, just to avoid making a complete raw mess of the joint.

He kept working until nightfall, until his head was throbbing and his vision dim behind smeared glasses.

Until his hearing was fuzzy and remote.

Until he realized how much he wanted more.

He needed to buy sunlamps, to better control the UV exposure, he thought as he laid his head down.

That number was on his beeper again, punching against the fog in his head. Any more, and it'd become a pattern. He made his way to the payphone down the block, too foggy to bother with secrecy. Lestat had made it clear he had little interest in hiding anyway. Doubtless he could make someone disappear with ease if they became a problem. (That should bother Herbert, shouldn’t it?).

"You called?"

"Herbert, why on earth did you check out?" Lestat’s voice, under the arch amusement and odd diction, held a thread of genuine worry. Unusual. I left it to you for the week. And here you are out wandering the street. Are you alright?"

"Why shouldn't I be? I thought the symptoms were supposed to wear off by morning." No sense in hiding the accusation, either. Not with the way he was feeling.

There was a silence on the other end of the line, one that unnerved based on an absence utterly alien. It took him a moment to realize what it was:

No breathing.

The uncanny lack of something so basic chilled him despite all logic, despite knowing that the autonomic functions were likely slowed to near-nothing as in hibernation.

The inhale he heard was utilitarian, preceding speech specifically.

"Mon ami, it's—it's not always so predictable. You took a rather large drink, and besides, didn't you like it? Wasn't it a lovely place?"

"It was fine." It occurred to him, on some level, that this was the man holding the purse strings.
Not just for finances, but future samples. It wouldn't do to make him angry. "I'm not in the habit of
taking days off. It seemed a shame to waste the sample ticking away in my blood."

"Ever industrious," Lestat's voice dripped with fondness beyond what their few meetings should
allow. "Well, you're free now, aren't you? Can you meet me? We can go elsewhere, if you'd prefer."

"I meant to check in with my roommate. He's—" What was he to say? They weren't friends,
precisely. How was he to explain wasting a research opportunity to coddle a grown man? "He's
suspicious."

"Easily handled, darling."

A chill ran up Herbert's spine at the casual menace in his subject's voice.

"Don't—" he blurted, unsure what he could do. He couldn't murder a monster over the phone. He
wouldn't—couldn't—Herbert was disposable, socially speaking, but Dan was employed and well-
liked. He'd be missed.

Let Lestat realize that; let Herbert not have put his unaware companion in danger again.

"There's no need for that." He all but tripped over himself. "He's always been the public face of our
operation. Quite respected at the hospital. It would be a real problem if something were to happen
to him. It's no trouble."

"Oh? But you're prepared to brush off so many secrets to assuage him. That seems like something
that could be quite troubling."

He had a deathgrip on the filthy public phone cord. Was this how it was meant to be? Was he to be
threatened into coming and going at a madman's beck and call?

"I see your point," he said neutrally.

He swallowed, the click of it loud in his own skull. Limits would have to be set, but not likely over
the phone.

He had his knife. He had a pistol if need be, though it usually stayed in the car.

"What exactly did you have in mind?" The metal-wrapped cord froze his skin. "And how long will
it take? I need to be able to make plans for testing schedules."

"Dinner, to begin with," Lestat cooed, voice all silky pleasure and audible smiles once more,
gloating response to Herbert’s capitulation. "You're on your way to malnutrition, cher. Not fit to be
taking nightly blood samples from yourself. Really, even an uneducated man such as myself can
tell that. Why don't you meet me back at the suite, it's easier. And you sound awful; you really
should have better accommodations. We'll plan the rest out from there. See you soon, doctor."
The line clicks, a full stop to a river of chatter that left no room for disagreement.

Herbert resolved to take the gun in with him.

~*~*~*~
The halls of the B&B were still deserted, just the same as they had been the previous night. He wondered if Lestat had rented more than just the room. One hell of an insurance policy.

No sign of "Clarisse," even; he removed his coat and scarf and draped them over his right arm, cover for the weapon. He could afford a new coat now, if it came to it. If he had to shoot through it.

His medical bag felt heavy in his other hand, laden as it was with all manner of equipment, clinking softly while he made his way to the dim, intimate dining room.

Lestat's hair shone like a beacon in the absurd, persistent candlelight. He was contemplating a glass of red liquid that was definitely not wine.

"Herbert!" His face brightened, then dampened again to a look desperately trying for 'restrained courtliness.' He gestured to the chair opposite himself, the very same from the night before. "Have a seat. You can set your things on one of the other tables. I must say I'm disappointed." He took a long sip from his faux finery. "All that study of my blood, and you brought a gun. More pedestrian than I took you for. And completely unnecessary. You have nothing to fear from me."

Herbert considered pulling the trigger then, just to see what would happen.

"I've no idea what you're talking about," he said instead, obstinately placing his bag beside 'his' chair and setting the coat on top of it. The Saturday Night special was small enough to transfer to his lap under cover of the pale linen tablecloth.

The food was already there, table nearly hidden under dome-covered trays. He ignored it, ignored the pangs that attacked in this place with this man.

"Now you're insulting me." Lestat leaned back so far that his chair had to be hovering on two legs. Improved balance, then. "But have it your way. Tell me about these experiments that were so important they necessitated running out into the world under the influence of an unknown substance. What have you uncovered?" There it was again, that sense of genuine interest. "Or did your friend keep you even from that?"

"I could hardly wait for it to dissipate, if I'm meant to be testing it. Or didn't you want results, Monsieur de Lioncourt?" He bit it out as those long-fingered, glossy-nailed hands reach out, trailing lace, to uncover one tray after another. Enough to feed five people, every possible food in combination. "And Dan can look after himself. The fact that he tries to look after me is a positive, not a negative."

"You're angry." Clearly the disease had no positive effect on the intellect. "Whatever for? Haven't I given you everything you asked for? You were, as I recall, the first one to ask for discretion. You can hardly blame me for wanting to do the same. Most of my kind frown upon this amount of honesty, you know. It's all meant to be very hush-hush." Another sip, then a grimace. "Ugh, cold. Every time. Ah, well. Sometimes the aesthetic is its own reward."

"Your version of discretion seems to resemble leaving me with no one to talk to but you." His kind. So there were more, then. Other specimens, victims, sufferers.

The irritation on Lestat's face, the narrowing of his unnatural eyes, boded ill, but Herbert was simply... tired. Long days followed by long nights. He'd done it before, but it grew ever harder as he (inevitably, horribly) aged.

And then in a blink, the pale face cleared, resuming a semblance of open friendliness and apology.
as he dished out small portions of food and shoved the plate at Herbert. The mood swings, the
dizzying behavior, could be either a symptom or an inbuilt trait. Something else to look into, some
time.

"Oh, dear. I'm afraid I am rather close with my secrets, and grasping with the time of those I
adore." Lestat poured wine, both red and white, as he prattled. "In my defense, I am terribly
constrained by my nocturnal lifestyle (if you will), and the last mortal who spent much time
learning the secrets of our kind went quite mad trying to show them to others."

"Really. Yet you didn't see fit to mention that before now. Your concern is touching." The last
lingering effect of the drug in his blood gnawed at him, and he gave in to the plate laid under his
nose. It's felt like ages since he'd last eaten, another thing that had never been a problem before age
began to creep up on him.

"Yes, I'm certain that wouldn't have frightened you away," Lestat rolled his eyes, tossed his Barbie-
doll-gold curls in a showy, affected movement. "After all, look at you now. Ready to shoot me
after a single misunderstanding. How very foolish of me, to try and protect your sensibilities." He
hunched forward, elbows braced and brows beetled. "I am old, you know. Older than your father,
and his father's father. These modern conversational manners don't always come naturally to me."

"I'm not a coward or a fool, Monsieur. And I operate better when given relevant information." It
rankled, that undergrad's face paired with the condescending father-knows-best pontification. Age
had never been an indicator of wisdom for Herbert—quite the opposite, in fact. Aging meant
becoming inflexible and hidebound, drying up into the worst version of oneself. (Not Hans, of
course, but he had been an exception to the rule as much as Dan was to the frequency of youthful
fool.)

But the food was good, chicken and salad, beef and potatoes, all made electric by the remnants of
the infection he can feel dying in his body. Hopefully Dan's would be as easily vanquished.

"You're right. You have a very irritating habit of it. Nonetheless, underestimating you was my
mistake." Lestat bowed his head, penitent once more. "I hope you'll accept my apology." He let it
hang a few moments, then resumed that manufactured casual pose. "I do hope we can put this
behind us."

Herbert was not in the habit of forgetting snakes who'd reared their heads. It was, after all, one of
the many things that had kept him alive this long.

"Honesty will be best for a continued working relationship." Boundaries had to be set, regardless of
the talent Lestat had shown for striding through them.

"Of course, love." He smiled, so naturally that Herbert wondered whether the fangs were artfully
hidden or retractable. "Never let me be thought a liar." The laughter that followed was shrill,
unnerving, and far too long, the answer to some private joke to which Herbert was not privy.

"But in the spirit of that," he continued, voice still trembling with mirth, "I must say—honestly—
that I find your existing 'lab space' dreadfully insufficient."

"And I suppose you have an alternative." He'd finished the plate, his stomach warring with his
dignity for more. "I'll need to approve it. If you've bought some standard setup it won't be
adequate. I have specialized requirements—"

"Anything, Herbert. Didn't I make that clear when we began? All I need is a list of what you
require, and I'll take care of it. It gives me considerable pleasure to give you these things. I'd only
ask you to indulge me."

"Is that all you wanted? A list?" Easy enough to disentangle himself from. Better to do it quick, before this calm, relaxed feeling stole too far over him.

"I had hoped to offer you another of your 'doses,' but it seems the last left you in a bad way. Is there something special about your blood, something I need to know before giving you—"

"I don't need more." He raps it out automatically, the practiced denial of an addict. "Not to—I will need additional samples to work with, but I'd just as soon forgo the... recreational use of the substance."

Never mind the hunger that the food couldn't sate. Dan would never forgive him if he stumbled back down into that pit, and for what? No measurable improvements to function, even, just pointless pleasure and annoying hallucinations.

"I've frightened you." Lestat’s face fell in response to some too-clear, too-easily-read signal. Some awful slipping of Herbert’s mask. "Oh, my dear friend. I want nothing more than for your to feel safe with me." Again with that touch, the gentle contact that Herbert was increasingly convinced has some manner of suggestive power—already he felt calmer. "Come speak with me, in private."

"We seem to be alone already." But his mind was thick, filmed over with a gauzy comfort, no doubt the result of his exhaustion and a proper hot meal. He needed to take better care of himself.

"The atmosphere is wrong for it, regardless." He didn’t even try to deny the eerie silence of the place. Than God, no insults to Herbert’s intellect at least. "I promise you complete control. I have a few more vials, if you like. Empty. I thought you might like to take things into your own hands."

And so, comprehension. Of course. Of course Lestat hadn't meant to upset him, to play upon the weaknesses Herbert wears invisibly etched into his being. The isolation of being afflicted with the disease must be terrible, especially if what Lestat had said about the last person was true.

Grasping at an affinity, a connection, was perfectly rational in such a desperate situation. He’d done the same, once upon a time.

And yes, yes, he needed more samples. Hadn't he just asked? Look at Lestat, being so wonderfully obliging.

The only problem was the gun—keeping it hidden while standing was going to be difficult.

Full lips curved into an entirely different smile, the candlelight flashing coyly over what might or might not be a hint of bizarre dentition, the mark of that mysterious beneficial illness.

That wonderful, immortal dream.

"I'm afraid I'll have to go ahead of you—there are a few things to prepare, if you do intend to take samples. Storage, that sort of thing. Join me whenever you're ready." The touch migrated to his shoulder as Lestat walked past, sparing a smile before tossing his hair—the same utterly ridiculous move Herbert had seen a hundred empty-headed freshmen pull on campuses the world over. With this man, it was quite nearly charming.

He sat that way for a while, willing himself back to sense. He told himself he should go home, check on Dan. He should keep walking, hold onto the small, small victory he'd won after weeks of sweating himself out on grimy sheets.
But if he let this go to nurse his own selfish weaknesses, and it was the key he needed—he'd have failed the legacy Dr. Gruber entrusted to him.

He slipped the gun into the pocket of his coat.

Another several bites of cooling meat and vegetables, a half glass of wine, hurt nothing, had no effect on his pride if no one was watching. He was still craving, of course, but wasn’t hungry at least. The soft lighting made attractive starbursts against his eyes as he navigated narrow Colonial blue halls with vivid white wainscoting. He stopped once to polish his glasses in vain, left his shirt untucked when entering the darkened bedroom where he’d spent one night already.

It felt illicit, more so than the perfectly legal situation called for. It felt... like something else, something foreign to his experience.

He wasn’t afraid of the alien, not enough to back down from discovery at any rate.

"Alright, doctor. Your show, your rules. I remember how to play the student." Lestat was there without so much as a whisper of sound, a shadow against his back. It wasn’t clear anymore which power plays he meant and which were just side effects of his illness that he'd grown used to. Either way, Herbert’s backup plan suddenly seemed uselessly slow.

"Somewhere with a table." He glanced around, cursing the all but useless lamplight. "Can you bring that over near where you’re sitting?" Lestat obliged with something more than simply the ease of a young, powerfully-built man. The strength would need to be evaluated eventually. “Yes, that’s fine. Do you have the needles sterilized?” Even if he was immune to illnesses besides the object of interest, contamination would be ruinous to the sample.

"The—ah. Another thing I've forgotten. My skin... I'm afraid needles are no longer sufficient."

"How do you mean? It seemed to puncture easily enough last night." He shoves away the thought of that filthy, dangerous thing he’d done, the alluring sight of Lestat's white skin smeared with blood like a soiled bandage.

"Touch, dearest." His hand was forced into contact, and before pulling away he felt it—a strange hardness, flexible when moving but weirdly impervious to outside pressure. He tried to palpate, to massage, and it did as much good as manipulating a china doll.

"I have scalpels," he suggested, still running his hands over the gleaming substance that had replaced normal skin.

"I'd suggest one you wouldn't mind losing, if you insist on it." Another flash of those fangs. "I've never seen anything that can get through but another pair of these ."

Another miracle property, there alongside that strange, calming toxin. "What are the chances you'll let me remove one?"

"I'm afraid I have to draw the line at being able to feed myself. Drooling invalidity isn't a particular goal of mine." Lestat’s face seized in a snarl much darker than the words call for, which then smoothed away like everything else. "But I pledge them to your service."

"Hmm." The saliva would be another contaminating substance, but apparently it had been there all along, if he was telling the truth. "Before that, may I examine them further?"

"Certainly, Doctor, if that will help. But why do you need to?"
He prepared preliminary notes and labels for the lined-up vials.

"There must be some kind of additional growth that allows for that placid reaction. No prey animal should behave that way."

Lestat looked genuinely taken aback at this, and then weirdly admiring of so basic a curiosity.

"I see; how clever. Of course, how foolish of me not to think. You'll recall that I've never had the opportunity to experience the wonders of modern medicine." He sat still as Herbert put aside his pen and wished in vain for better light—a penlight had not been among Lestat's supplies, nor had he brought his own. "I've always rather regarded the swoon as a pleasant gift, something that makes it bearable for myself and the one upon whom I feed."

Of all things, those strange blue eyes were easy to see in the dark. They seemed riveted to Herbert’s wrists as he unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves with easy, practiced professionalism.

"A poetic justification," Herbert admitted, drawing a pair of gloves from his bag. They made a pleasant, clarifying snap against his skin when he pulled them on. "Open your mouth, please."

The silence was rare and blessed, even if his movements were blunt. There wasn’t much more he could do, after taking a few swabs, but to reach in and begin feeling around the edges. Dentistry’s barbarism was only faintly related to proper medicine, the mouth covered in a few passing chapters and then forgotten. But the teeth felt normal save for those two pointed canines, and he could detect no swelling, nothing that seemed like an extraneous growth. After a few minutes’ fruitless probing, he left it at that, frustrated. Not much more he could do with an amateur's tools. At least there was the blood (and the sight of Lestat running his tongue across his lips, looking almost childlike as he grimaced at the taste of latex).

Herbert averted his gaze, busy removing the soiled gloves and replacing them with fresh.

"Generally samples are taken from the crook of the elbow," he instructed the subject. Keeping procedures as standard as possible in extraordinary circumstances cut down on unpredictability. Less likely that they’d have to worry about extraneous meat and tendons close to the surface there, too.

"'As you wish,'" Lestat replied, once more making the expression Herbert was coming to associate with extraneous details he was expected to understand. It didn't matter. He was fully occupied just trying to contain the bloodflow and ensure the bottled samples lacked obvious bits of skin.

The flow grew sluggish during the filling of the second vial, and stopped completely before he could manage a third. He noted that as best he could in among all the juggling of bottles and re-swabbing the visibly healing wounds.

When he finished, he looked up from the body part and remembered it was attached to a person.

There were good reasons he was recommended as a candidate for surgery and pathology, rather than encouraged to become a general practitioner.

"That." He cleared his throat. "That should be sufficient. Does it always heal that quickly?"

"Left on its own, yes." Lestat's tongue licked away the spare blood, either for effect or because vampirism involved some catlike compulsion toward self-cleaning (as yet Herbert’s theory remained inconclusive). "It's somewhat different if you have someone drinking it."

"Other vampires?"
"Mortals, too. Something about the blood being drawn out, I think. How else could we make more of our own? Another test to add to your list." His tone was teasing, but he didn't push.

"I've imposed on you enough for the evening." Taking away that much blood, a human (an average human—he couldn't afford to be taken in by Lestat's ghoulish stories) would be left weak.

He stowed the vials in his bag, picked up his coat, and rummaged in the pocket for his car keys.

"Not at all, mon cher. You do me a great service investigating this, and a great indulgence spending time with me." He eyed the keys with obvious dismay and cast his gaze theatrically towards the frosted window, "But surely you mustn't leave now. It's snowing—I can't let you operate an automobile in that."

"I've lived here for several years," he said, already steeling himself for the inevitable five-minute wait for his third-hand rustbucket to warm up. "The weather is nothing new."

Lestat was practically up in arms now, caught in his own mental image. "But suppose something happens to that thing you insist on driving. You'll freeze out there!"

"Your concern is noted, but unnecessary. I really—"

"At least do me the favor of staying a little longer. Just to see if the skies clear. It's always worth stacking the deck in one's favor, wouldn't you say?" He patted the spot beside him on the delicate antique couch. "The samples can be stored in the cooler I prepared. They'll be perfectly preserved. But we cannot get more samples of your brain, Herbert dear."

Herbert for whatever reason acquiesced (true enough that if he was the one the 'vampire' trusted to investigate this matter, his loss would be problematic. Self-interest was a thing he could respect.) Lestat's behavior—whether archaic, cultural, or related to his illness—put him on edge, but it was foolish to alienate the subject too harshly. He nevertheless took the armchair rather than the sofa.

Now, though, Lestat seemed almost well-behaved, quicksilver personality shifting yet again to all disarming soft hopefulness and apparently genuine admiration of Herbert's rudimentary theories.

"I know," he said in answer to nothing, "I've impeded your great work again. Your indulgence is touching, truly. I would love to hear something of your mentor—besides what my research revealed. He must have been a great man, to inspire such passion in you."

If the question was a calculated ploy, it was an effective one. Even nearly two years later, Herbert’s memories of Hans Gruber were still complicated with grief. To finally speak of them in the context of how much they almost achieved felt like a great purging, a pus-swollen boil lanced and allowed to bleed clear. (Dan had offered to listen, once, but wanted only the neat details—had been unable to bear hearing about those who had fallen in pursuit of their cause, no matter how well earned the eulogy).

The snow only came down thicker around them, the cold seeping in through walls featuring period-appropriate weatherproofing alongside the decor. The wind whistled through archaically bubbled single-pane glass.

Soon, he was too worn to drive, too sad and weak with catharsis to insist. Even Lestat's flawless, medical-marvel face tightened at the howling sound of the wind.

Herbert’s tie vanished, somewhere along the way, as did his jacket and shoes. The period-inaccurate gas fireplace made a warm focal point in the room, and he drowsed off mid-sentence as Lestat curled against his knee and blinked away tears.
It was a good night. He didn't have many of those; surely he was allowed, he thought, as he dreamed an oddly vivid sensation of his fingers tangled in that blond riot turned copper by the firelight.

Lestat was gone, again, and once more he'd been tucked away beneath thick blankets. But there was no headache, and no sense of being duped. Nothing taken except his old acrylic scarf, a fine cashmere tucked into its place as though in exchange. It was dangerously close to living up to the promise Lestat had peddled—of truly valuing his mind and his thoughts above all else, of wanting to ensure his ability to continue thinking. Novel. Terrifying for how much he craved it now that he could see the possibility.

He didn't bother going home this time, didn't turn on the damned beeper. Hans was dead, the poison in that wound allowed to fester. He couldn't face Dan or put him in that same danger until he had something concrete to show for it.

It was a principle, he told himself. Not fear that he'd already used his friend up and would be rejected. Certainly not a nagging worry that his mind was no longer enough for Dan, however much it had drawn him at the start.

Patterns. Puzzles. Herbert disliked them, disliked coincidences of interaction not governed by clear scientific logic.

He'd always done his best to transcend human failings, and moments like this only pulled him back in: the desperate need to make a chain of events out of random happenstance. But the thought stayed with him nonetheless. Followed him as he looked over his scribbled notes, as he accepted a doggie-bagged breakfast from the strange, ghostly girl who was there precisely when needed and no more. Chewed toast of all things as he prepared to look over slides of blood so mutated it might as well be alien. Adaptability was one thing he did prize about the human condition. At least he still had that.

He spent half the afternoon drawing his own blood and attempting to mix it in a petri dish. The change was there, but the cells were sluggish, nowhere near the agitated combination he'd recorded after drawing the mixture out from his skin. Something about the ingestion process, then. Something linked to that chemical causing the euphoria, the unnatural calm and trust.

The routine was becoming ingrained, so much so that it felt wrong when the evening came and he turned on his pager only to see that the last number to call was just one of his old regulars.

He kept working, wishing he had access to better space and more equipment, until seven o'clock rolled around and his stomach growled.

Still no calls.

He drove home.

"We need to talk." The most ominous of greetings. Herbert was beginning to wonder, in a vague, abstract way, if these little meetings were doing harm to Dan's standing at the hospital, to his work hours. Not that they needed the money.
"Well, talk, then." He set his ace in the hole on the table, the little cooler sheltering the future.

"Herbert..." Dan cornered him in the kitchen, radiating tension. "Look at me, dammit!"

How could he not? Dan had been his single support for so long, his ideal idealized partner. But now it was like seeing a dead star after basking in the focused adoration of the sun. He felt numb.

"This has to stop," Dan said, tense, tense, breaking again the lines he himself had tacitly put in place when Herbert first parted ways with institutionalized medicine. "You're getting in over your head."

"You're basing this claim on what evidence?" He's hungry. There's a smear of blood on the knee of his pants where Lestat laid his head (something to look into).

"This was the first time someone's found out where we live and come calling."

At this, he does focus.

"Someone—who? Who came here?" It's not as though he'd thought it a secret, really, not from a man like Lestat who'd found Herbert by sifting through the refuse to start with, but he'd expected... courtesy. Circumspection.

He'd thought Dan well fenced off.

"Some college kid, I don't know. He couldn't have been old enough to drink, even. But he left this." Dan tossed a neat bundle of cash onto the counter—enough to buy a new house, practically, from the looks of it. "Kept asking these weird questions." And then, against all call for the situation, a flush crawled up Dan's neck.

"Dan... it's all right," he stuttered lamely. "He won't do any harm."

He hoped.

And really, wasn't it just typical of Dan to become upset when he couldn't ignore it any more—when he was forced to see how sausage was made. The fact that Lestat disgusted him so made Herbert wonder how he'd have reacted to Lizard, or Sal, or the girls down at the Marriott bar with their chronic pains and inescapable careers.

"He won't—so this is how it is, now? I'm just supposed to accept addicts showing up here at all hours looking for you? What the hell, Herbert?" He flailed his hands in the air, rough-bitten nails and calluses, hands that had so often touched and so rarely helped. "I thought you kept me around to try and look normal."

"'Kept you'...." The statement shouldn't have made him angry. It was no different than any of Dan's tirades. "I offered you a chance at greatness. I confided my life's work to you! You weren't so eager to look down your nose at my methods when you thought it would save Meg."

The last time he'd played that card, Dan had shouted and raged. This time, this desiccated creature hissed and paled, drawing back into himself.

"He asked if I'd miss you, Herbert." Nearly inaudible. Might be, for some.

"And... what did you say, Dan?" He was curious, he realized, to hear what had been said about him, not to him.
"I said we're roommates and I need your half of the rent."

The words severed something in Herbert, leaving him raw and aching and untethered. Anchorless. He answered in a fog, eyes on the money again to avoid his... roommate: "I see that's no longer a problem."

"I guess it's not." Dan's posture, in the periphery of his vision, was wary, as if he were afraid of being struck. As if he hadn't loosed the fatal blow.

Herbert unfastened the latch on the cooler with numb hands, drew out one vial of his great proof. Dan didn't deserve it. But it wasn't a gift now, he told himself. It was a reminder of what he was losing. "Keep this, if you like." He set the blood down on the table. "It can serve as a reminder of your victory."

"I don't want your drugs. And what vic—"

The slap startled them both; Herbert's hand stung, palm abraded by the growth of stubble on Dan's left cheek.

He'd never struck anyone before without the intent to kill.

"I told you. I never lied to you—this could be it, if only you'd listened."

"I wish I could believe you." Dan's hand cradled his own dear face, the growing mark flushed with blood and appearing coal hot (how fitting was his name now, huh). Their ambitions lay between them, stillborn as every other life they'd ever created together.

"I'm going. What you do is your own affair." He didn't play games, had no use for them. He wanted so badly to be caught and reassured, for Dan to realize what he'd done. It was humiliating, the keen addicted need he felt.

He reached the door and paused there, the connection between them tangibly stretched, threatening finally to snap.

His beeper chirped in his pocket.

"Don't." Dan's hand was still warm on his shoulder, rumpling the fine soft scarf. He was still present and real as his enormous sad Labrador eyes begged Herbert not to check for the number he already knew he'd see. "Don't—just stay. Just stop. We can find you a job, something safe; you don't have to do this."

Herbert's hand was on his belt, though. His head was far away. His goals were sacrosanct, and he was capable of sacrifice and abstinence, no matter how much it might hurt.

So very clear to him in that moment, something he couldn't put into words before. Dan didn't want him. Not him as he existed, thriving on the edge of possibility, doing what he was made for. Dan wanted him, but only leashed. Puttering about thinking about what he might do, and never reaching that point.

Dan would never want him. Not as he was.

"I've already made plans for the evening," he lied. "There's no need to wait up."

He'd return one day, when he'd won. When he'd done it. He promised Dan life eternal, and it would pain him beyond all else to renege on that. Dan, even faithless and disbelieving, was the first he
would spare from the pain of mortality given the chance.

"If you need to reach me—" He knew better than do this. A clean break would best, and though Lestat had never said anything on the subject of secrecy, he hadn’t needed to. They’d had an understanding, after all, about so many things. Yet Herbert, weak needy Herbert, shoved that silky black card into Dan's hand as he left.

He drove on autopilot to the closed convenience store at the end of the block and fished out a quarter. He always had rolls of them—essential for a low-level drug dealer who couldn’t sell oblivion from the safety of his own home.

Lestat’s voice was soft, careful. Knowing. He didn't offer to meet him at their by-now-habitual rendezvous point. Instead, Herbert had no sooner hung up the phone than he spied a familiar silhouette perched on a streetlamp, tall and silent and perfectly ridiculous.

And when Lestat, magic, miracle, undying, touched down (didn't so much jump as float) and pulled Herbert into his more-than-muscular arms… he allowed it.

"I have something wonderful to show you," a promise delivered direct to his ear, sotto voce.

"What now? Am I to understand you've been keeping more things from me?" This wound was raw, new and not yet finished bleeding, but he couldn't altogether blame Lestat for being the instrument. Might as well blame the scalpel for the scar left by a tumor's removal.

"I simply thought you could use something to lift your spirits. It wasn't ready before now. I promise you'll like it." That touch again, cupping his face in a mirror of Herbert’s petty violence not a quarter of an hour before. "Will you trust me?"

Were he a man of superstitions, this would be his Faustian bargain. Already he stood half wrapped in Lestat's billowing coat, the two of them isolated in a single halo of light. No going back. Science had no use for weakness.

Of course he leapt, like the impulsive fool he'd always been.

Eyes closed against those gas-flame eyes, his voice sounded strange even to himself as he whispered a harsh "Yes."

It should have been more ornamented—more eloquent, but then, Lestat (for all his floridity) actually seemed to like him as he was, not as he might be.

"Then hold tight, cher." Lestat's arms closed around him, scooping him up from the ground, and he jumped—

they were in the air. Herbert could see the lights of the streets below, barely sketch out the shapes of buildings. An undignified yell ripped from his throat, and preservation held him closer to Lestat.

"How?" was the best he could manage.

"I told you—I'm a vampire!" And the half-malignant, half-gleeful grin he gave was without abandon, exposing fangs and all as they soared through the skies over Arkham. The lack of pretense comforted Herbert, even as the cold and the thin air sent his head spinning.

Laughter followed him down into the blackness of his own mind.
Chapter End Notes

Next up, Night Island, other members of the coven, Dan doing things, and dire machinations.
Unexpected Returns

Chapter Summary

In Which Herbert makes the acquaintance of various Night Island inhabitants (living and otherwise), and Dan Cain makes his way down the East Coast.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Night Island, Florida

After more than two hundred years, Lestat was still haunted by cold Decembers. He’d fled France to warmer climes for a reason. New Orleans, Miami—even San Francisco was a better place than Auvergne and Paris in winter. He felt the predation, the deprivation the cold brought—the way those suffering it were reduced to clinging to threads and hunting inhospitable terrain just to keep body and soul together.

(He’d been Risen for two years. He knew, by 1986, that the shining vision of modernity he’d been struck by was only half-true; poverty still cut, and starvation, desperation, and early death still strangled hopes.)

Lestat hated the ice and snow. Hated having to fly up to Massachusetts nightly to see and converse with that which he adored.

All the better reason to bring it home, and quickly. When one flew, even the frigid air that whipped the body was different—active, chasing away the chill of the past. Arriving on the Night Island made him feel like the king of Hell touching back down to the glittering lights of His city, Persephone clutched in his arms.

Likely the Persephone of myth had seemed nearly as annoyed when torn from her mother’s arms as Herbert did once his feet were finally on the ground once more

Herbert was fiery in his anger, his flushed cheeks and tousled hair resembling the aftermath of passion far more than imperious rage. Even his breathing came in pants, torn away by the miles of thin oxygen. Lestat wanted to sweep him up again, just to preserve the image.

"Honesty doesn’t generally require acts of kidnapping. I didn't think you were addled enough to need that explained!" His longcoat enhanced his size, but there was no getting away from the six inches of height difference which deflated any attempts at intimidation. "What about my notes, hmm? My equipment? Or is this you giving up the game and finding an untraceable place to dump my corpse?"

Magnificent little creature. A mouse roaring at a lion couldn't match his fearlessness, however foolish it might be. Like taking on a pack of wolves with an ancient sword—success guaranteed by character, in defiance of all odds. Lestat could have fallen in love right then, if he weren’t already smitten. But the distrust…

"Oh, darling. Please, you mustn't be angry." He put his hands out pleading, harmless. "I had rather
hoped to cheer you."

Herbert recoiled, stiff and icy though his face was flushed and sparkling with sweat. Such a 
dreadful result of bringing him down without warning, leaving him in winter clothes in the Florida heat. Positively enchanting, these signs of life.

"I never asked you to bring me--" and now he spun around, taking in the imported foliage and the rise of shops in the distance. It seemed to strike him then that he was truly lost. "Where are we? Don't tell me you've invested your spare capital in some kind of tacky Vampire Disneyland?"

Lestat was helpless with laughter, eyes pricked with tears. All of the prideful work gone into making this a destination, and Herbert had cut it to the quick in seconds.

Lord, Armand would hate it.

Millions in drug money and pirate gold, designers and developers and a decade's industrious work, boiled down to the tourist trap it was.

Was there nothing about Herbert that was not a joy?

(There was, and it was the fact that he was storming off, directionless but determined, into the blackness of a vampire-infested resort town.)

"Her--” Lestat stopped himself. It would be a matter of seconds to catch up and intervene, to swoop him out of whatever danger he blundered into. But instead he stalked behind, intent on seeing how his mortal, befuddled and driven by wounded pride, would fare.

As Herbert walked he stripped off his coat and scarf, taking a moment to fold them primly on one arm before carrying on with his intent stride. It wasn't long before he stood on the precipice of the spectacle's main street, considering.

He doesn't have any money, it occurred to Lestat. He rushed right out into my arms, and now impulse has taken him again... I wonder if he'll come back.

Herbert walked with conviction, posture straight and head forward.

He crossed a street at the crosswalk, then sat on one of the black wrought-iron benches that lined the orderly sidewalks of the planned traffic grid. He'd passed six identical ones already. Casually, as though without thought, he picked up the newspaper that lay abandoned next to him.

The paper's use was quickly spent, and even then imprecise--Armand ensured that prints were brought over from the Miami Herald, but there were just as likely to be copies of periodicals from the world over left scattered around. Whatever it was, Herbert seemed at least a fraction calmer afterward, his eyes now scanning the crowd without taking so much as a step toward the masses that passed him by.

In one sense he looked ordinary in his black suit and thin tie, a businessman or accountant on the way home--someone far too conservative for the monochromatic youths slowly trickling onto the streets about him. At 9 pm, Night Island was only just coming awake.

He was, however, getting curious looks himself. The pale complexion, odd clothes--they think he's one of us already, Lestat thought to himself, and glowed with pride. A young couple stopped to watch back, and made their way over after a moment of conference. Curiosity piqued by the sudden tension in his mortal's body, Lestat drew closer.
"--necessary. I don't plan on staying long."

"Good luck getting a boat this time of night. It adds to the atmosphere, don't you think?"

"Being trapped on what amounts to a game preserve, by your logic? Hmph. I suppose."

"We know what we signed up for." The speaker, tall and thin and studded with piercings, leaned in. Their voice grew husky. "We don't mind a little danger."

From the shadows, Lestat covered his mouth with his hand. If only they knew how far they set themselves back with this one, acting that way.

True to form, Herbert's spine was locking into its usual self-protective stiffness. "Acting like that, you'll find it in no time. Excuse me."

The pair, the pierced youth and their small companion, were only enticed by the threat. Talking at cross purposes, all three of them. The perils of life without access to thoughts. Herbert hadn't been lying about danger--Lestat could feel, even without trying, the way his thoughts snarled and bristled at the feeling of being cornered, could see a hand slipping into the laden pocket of the coat on his arm.

"That will be quite enough, darling," he said as he put his hand on Herbert's own, letting his own better judgment rear its rare head. "Doing something foolish will bring down the kind of attention you really don't want."

"It already has," Herbert grumbled, half in the shadow of Lestat's embrace.

Cruel, but there were more immediate matters to which he must attend. He smiled at the pair who'd spotted him, wearing the twin looks of awe that were rather more what he expected when walking among mortals.

The Island's spreading, faux-secret reputation for a connection with his abortive career and their tattered coven had its compensations.

"Our little secret?" he asked, one graceful finger to his lips. "I'd be ever so grateful, children. You know how he'd ruin my fun."

They nodded in near-unison, utterly starstruck. Ah, his heart swelled with affection. It was so good to be loved. Their blushing worship was sweet, childish, and how was he to resist leaving Herbert long enough to press a kiss to each of their lovely cheeks and send them on their way.

The current object of his love, though, was considerably less easily impressed.

"You have that patter down well," he snapped.

"I'm a man of many talents." Be soft, be melting. Be irresistible.

Herbert looked resistant.

His shoulders were tense beneath Lestat's arm, his face resolutely directed into the distance. He superstitiously avoided Lestat's eyes, as though that could protect him from mental influence. Precious.

Lestat pushed only gently, only enough to soften his love by prodding his inherent curiosity. Provoking questions. Practically natural, that, for his scientist. Herbert's aggressive inhale was
perfect, so characteristic of him.

"What, exactly, did those idiots expect of me?"

"A pale young man sitting alone, dressed in stuffy clothes? On an island said to be crawling with the beautiful dead? Why, I cannot imagine."

Herbert's face tightened into a sneer, his thoughts locking immediately onto his time in Lestat's arms. How nice to be unforgettable under all the bluster.

"Kidnapped and propositioned. I can see how you thought this would appeal to me." He cast his eyes back to the crowds, the beings they walked beside but not among. "That's the purpose of this whole island? Leave your keys in a bowl, and try your chances?"

"You have an awfully tawdry imagination, for someone so withdrawn," His hand slid down to Herbert's waist, daring anything. Armand's ivory tower of decadence loomed on the hill ahead. "Can you not see how it might be beautiful to connect, for even a moment, with the unknowable?"

That slim waist tensed, fear a conceptual looming thing never before tested. Sad, painful, that Herbert would rebel against a manifest monster but shrank mentally from so simple a show of affection. So obvious an offer.


Rotten of him, to nick those lips when stealing a kiss--evil to gamble upon that effect so recently posited by this very luminary.

But his man deserved better than the shackles he'd been given, deserved more than all those pitiful hopefuls could dream.

He'd have it soon enough.

The flesh before his tongue, under his fangs, was plump and full, a ripe berry freshly-plucked and there for the devouring. (If memory served.)

Herbert was so rarely wrong, and here it was his undoing. True to the man's predictions, the spilling of blood bound them together. Lestat found a willing soul in his arms, at a price: his heart was pierced by jagged images of kisses stolen in panic, locked into dusty corners and hidden from the fear of painful retribution. They poured out of Herbert as from an infected wound, echoing the broken openness he'd worn when speaking of his mentor. Herbert seemed to be riddled with these festering injuries, and Lestat almost too keen at finding them. The release was a good and needful thing; he could not think otherwise, as the man in his arms yielded up snatches of golden joy to flavor the bitterness of his sorrows.

But willing or no, it was Herbert who broke the kiss, wiping at his still-bleeding mouth with the back of his hand.

Blood. Herbert was afraid of blood, and very suddenly. Why, when he was a doctor, a killer, when he worked with it day and night-- The idea locked hand-in-hand with old, half-forgotten kisses, with the time and place and Lestat himself.

"Cher--"

"Don't." Tight, controlled, nothing like the pliant openness he'd hoped to provoke (had provoked, for that bare instant). "Don't--this doesn't have to be like that. We're business partners."
How often had Lestat heard that very phrase, in centuries past?

How often had he been presented as an absolutely inexplicable yet indispensable financial wizard?

His brow furrowed, irate, but he felt tension and anguish echoing and redoubling between them.

_Careful._ Herbert had terrors that hadn't been, those two hundred years past. Had troubles modern and medical and _different._

"Cher, I'm sorry," he said, stepping back just far enough for nominal decency, staying just close enough to remain intimate. "I didn't mean to overstep."

Herbert opened his mouth, prepared to deliver further bluster, but Lestat hastily preempted it.

"But whether or not you feel anything for me--you're a wonder. I'll not--" (he defied his own respectful implications by stroking fingertips moth-light over a cheek, ghosting past those slashed lips, but the meaning held.) "I'll respect your wishes, but you cannot blame me for my feelings. Not on a night like this."

Herbert's hand rose to cover his own, held for just long enough to mark deliberation before pushing Lestat's touch away.

"I've learned control in a normal lifetime," he said with cutting cynicism. "You expect me to believe you've had centuries. I hope you don't expect sympathy."

Smokescreens again, but Lestat was once more reassured that the fire was there. He'd never had to exercise his patience so thoroughly. Not even with… well. But he kept to his side of the invisible wall Herbert had put between them. Instead, he gestured. "Walk with me? There _is_ a reason I brought you, one that should suit your rationalist soul."

He could, quite literally, hear Herbert rolling his eyes. But he did follow.

Lestat assumed an easy, playful gait, walking backwards ahead of his mortal with acrobatic, preternatural grace just to show he could. "You really ought to take pity. Those things you felt when you tasted my blood were but a fraction of how I perceive every second. Everything that lives is indescribable in its beauty. And that certainly includes you, cher. You are exceptional."

"How dreadful," quoth his mordant dear, crushing romance relentlessly beneath his faux-leather Oxford shoe. "Do you find the hallucinations restricted to sensory distortion, or do you experience other things as well?"

Yet he followed.

"You have it all wrong. They're no more my imagination than a wolf's sense of smell. I've simply gained the tools I need as a predator."

Yet he listened.

"A fuller glimpse of the world, as if I were entombed until my birth to darkness." (Herbert made to respond, but Lestat held up his hand.) "Now comes the tricky part."

Yet Lestat had more than a chance, given the way his pretty creature flitted from thought to thought, but always maintained a core interest, a base-level desire to _comprehend_ Lestat's defiance of death.
Poor alchemist, forgetting to defy life while he was at it.

Herbert cocked an eyebrow, but nonetheless fell silent as they approached the enormous fence--high enough that no mortal, no matter how daring, could survive the climb.

Lestat held out his arms. "Once more, if you please. Your prize awaits."

"I'll find another way around."

"And waste the whole night, only to be stranded come sunrise in a strange land? How impractical of you. All to avoid my touch." Lestat's smirk only grew as Herbert acquiesced, stiffly allowing himself to be enfolded once more and lifted clear of the iron barrier.

The grounds were quiet, but then that was to be expected. They were all still raw, each nursing their wounds in a different fashion. Louis would be with his books, of course; Daniel soaking in his near-kin, the living. It was the master of the house, drowning himself in opulence, that they needed to worry about.

And as routine as Lestat's return was, he couldn't help but think that they all should have come running. However many pitiful non-vampiric things stalked the halls night (and presumably day) in and out, this one should be marked out.

Lestat had found their destined newest, their future. It should be momentous, this homecoming.

But then, a performer was so often unable to choose his circumstances. One simply had to play the stage as it lay, elevating the material in this case by presence alone. He fusses over Herbert's worn button-up, only now taking in the immodest flecks of blood on the cuffs. Ah, well. Too late to change. All this found its way out of his mouth as he worked, almost oblivious of the audience.

"Should I be prepared for some manner of resistance?" Herbert's tone was dry, no doubt marking this down as a folly.

"As a matter of fact, it might be time to put on your best behavior. Not all of my brethren are so warm and welcoming as I, love." His own clothes he mostly left, plucking a sleeve or string here and there to create an air of suggestion.

"And what am I to them?"

"The eminent Doctor West, of course." Lestat caught Herbert's expression. "Oh, come now. You can't begrudge me words of affection, too! Asking me not to appreciate beauty is counter to my very nature. How can you study me, if not in my most natural form?" If his collar fell at that moment, exposing the line of his collarbone, it was pure coincidence.

And finally his mental calling sufficed, bringing forth a tribunal, or at least a parody of one. A fine welcome, indeed, to their Hellish little circle.

~*~*~*~

Herbert was still preparing his next volley when they appeared: A boyish redhead descending the stairs like a young regent, shadowed by a tall, bony man about his own age in rumpled, casual clothes. Standing face to face, the boy was roughly Herbert’s height, though the shape of his face
and the puppyish extremities marked him as much younger. But the eyes... they were hard and probing, dissecting him. For one moment, he didn't so much mind Lestat's protective grasp. He felt like a dog put forth for the judges.

He wondered, suddenly, whether something like that stare was why people had so hated him as a teen.

Such a response wasn't fair, but it was... understandable.

They all bore the marks, things he hadn't even realized were symptoms--within the range of human features, but replicated across all. Lestat apparently didn't varnish his nails. Lips appeared rouged, veins blue as those of some fabled aristocrat. Their hair was lustrous and shampoo-commercial full.

Attractive traps. The boy introduced himself as Armand, the apparent architect of the opulence around them. He extended a soft, gentle hand, and Herbert took. But the words that followed weren't been for him.

"A new friend so soon, Lestat?" The grip on his hand tightened, just as cold though not quite so implacably stony (a difference of age? He would need to look into it). "Your impulsiveness will be the death of us all."

"I'm Dr. West. Herbert West." He spoke quickly, calmly, ignoring the way that not-handshake held him. "Your friend has requested that I run certain tests on your... condition."

A sharp inhale sounded then, odd, pointless, some vestige of expression with no remaining utility. (He still didn't know if the boy had a surname.)

"Is that what he asked you to do?" Armand's grip grew painfully tight. His mouth bore a small, poisonous smile. "Does Louis know about this new guest of yours?"

"Not as yet, imp." Lestat smiled in not-quite-fraternal fashion, just a touch wider than usual so that a hint of his canines showed, long, like the actor from that horrendous Navy pilot film Dan loved. "He's a surprise for you all--a lovely one, yes?"

As Herbert prised his hand back and opened his mouth to object to the characterization, Lestat fluttered inhuman-fast to the end of the hall, hair flying, neck craned.

"Where is he, anyway? Reading some mouldy volume on the nature of our evil, I suppose?"

The rangy, underfed blond man coughed ostentatiously into his hand, jerked his head towards the other end of the main entryway. "Uh, 'Stat..."

"What if he asked me not to say? He might have," Armand paced a slow circle around Herbert, picking over every inch of him without so much as a touch. "He's never more despondent than when you're around. Except, of course, when you're not."

"I wouldn't put it past him, but now that you've said he's gone, that definitely settles it. Never passes on the chance to spite me, my Louis."

"Do I." The voice was softer than a whisper, but all heads turned. Lestat froze as if he'd been struck through the heart, and Herbert had no choice but to join the staring. The figure before them commanded it.
"Am I spiteful, Lestat?" There was no reason to find the slim man in washed-out black jeans and fraying v-neck sweater striking. Mesmerizing. But as he glided forward on bare feet (toenails glassy, too, consistent mutation), he demanded all.

"Do I go out of my way to hurt you?" He continued, voice dreamy and distracted coming from a doll's frozen near-smile. "I am so sorry, Monsieur, if the things I do seem calculated solely to defy."

The eeriness was borne of the uncanny--his movements, his skin, were unnatural and graceful, but less so than the rest. Less theatrical. Even at a glance, so very, very close to asymptomatic.

"Louis de Pointe du Lac."

Louis of the tip of the-- ah. The thin, almost bony hand outstretched had not even been visible while Herbert drowned in vivid green eyes.

"Herbert," he repeated. "West." The touch was quite nearly human, cold but soft. Interesting. He must be the youngest then, the one with the lowest stage of infection.

"A pleasure, doctor." He might as well not have been more than a cardboard cutout, the way Louis spoke, but his expression left nowhere to hide. "Welcome to Night Island. I hope Monsieur de Lioncourt's hospitality is to your satisfaction."

Lestat scampered back across the room, was homing in on this frozen waif with arms open. Louis stepped back the instant he arrived, as if there were no one there. "I hope you know what you have bargained with."

"Lestat offered himself as a subject. To my knowledge, he's been completely forthrighting.” Had the man said nothing to his fellow sufferers? Avoided, perhaps, getting their hopes up?

Those green eyes went wide, the rest of Louis' expression paralyzing before it could fully form. "Did he."

Lestat's face was... Herbert had only known him four days.

Four nights.

Four… and he was here, was in this place, was…

Was pursuing his dream. Was warm, and valued, and.

Lestat had turned from the strange one, the distant one, was stroking Herbert's shoulder and patting his dizzy temples…

Louis' face formed a dreadful, painful mask as he turned away, his back ruler-drawn as he left.

So… so something.

The other three wasted no time in descending on him, blocking his view of that curious stranger.

"I'd like to examine him," Herbert said absently, thinking ahead to his work.

The tall man snorted. "Common reaction."

And then the kingly little redhead had no amusement to spare. "Daniel," he snapped.
Herbert froze.

They all turned, stared, riveted him with eyes of blue and coffee and violet.

And then they seemed, as one, to dismiss his reaction in an almost courtly setting-aside.

"Daniel..." the boy continued, while Lestat's hand squeezed Herbert's shoulder. "Be a dear and show Lestat's new... guest... to a room, won't you?" He smiled, bittersweet, sugared almonds hiding cyanide. "You know how this all works, after all, don't you?"

The tall man’s fact tightened, even as he nodded and stepped forward.

"Not necessary," Lestat fenced, pulling Herbert imperceptibly closer. "I haven't so much as given him the tour. You'll make me look bad."

"Try to be practical, Lestat. I know it's a challenge for you." Armand parried. "I still want to hear about where you've been. It's not like you to give up a chance to brag. Besides, don't you think Danny can handle him?"

That close, Herbert could see Lestat baring his fangs like a dog for just an instant. The violence quickly vanished beneath a veneer of eloquence.

"I never disappoint an audience, it's true." Still, he turned and put both hands on Herbert’s shoulders. "But only if you're sure you'll be alright without me, darling. Say the word, and I'm yours again."

Smothering. Patronizing. He sucked his cheeks in in distaste, slid from beneath that insistent grasp.

"I think I’ll be fine with your… friend… Lestat." He tried to smile, then. To convey his dedication to the opportunities, the new start. "But thank you."

And then he turned to the friend, blinked, and tilted his head in inquiry.

The other man seemed… off. Upset? Angry? but his (unwanted) hand was gentle. Tender, perhaps. The sort of touch Dan visited on his doomed, pathetic patients.

"Ever noble." Lestat practically yanked Armand's smaller form from the ground in an attempt to steer him away, leaving Herbert nearly-alone.

"And you are?" Herbert ventured, frustrated as ever by the standard social niceties but aware of the need to blend and behave in a new environment. 

The look of pity he received then was as unmistakable as it was inexplicable.

"You can call me Molloy." Again there was touch, a hand turning him toward the halls. Herbert was content to walk in silence, but his guest seemed allergic to the concept. "Don't pay attention to Armand. He's...he's just like that. You probably won't see him again while you're here-- I, uh, he's gone a lot. Business crap, I dunno. He gets hooked on stuff, has to go see it. It's kinda annoying, y'know? But he comes back, and, uh," he coughed, purely for show given what Herbert knew about their kind. "Sorry. It's been awhile since there was someone to talk to."

Herbert raised an eyebrow.

"Really? Lestat seems to talk enough for three people, from what I've seen."

Molloy's head snapped around, snakelike, and then he let out a harsh bark of laughter, followed by
an absolute doubled-over gale.

(Intensified emotional states.)

"How--how'd he find you?" Molloy gasped, wiping at his eyes. The backs of his hands came away red.

Herbert grew instantly alert, recalling the blood Lestat had left on his clothes. Determinedly not recalling other things, other bleeding eyes in another death-pale face. He reached for Molloy's hand. "Are all of your fluids like this?"

"Uh?" The man blinked, seeming to consider it for the first time.

"Tears, saliva, mucus, semen. Do they all contain blood?" It made sense, of course, if Lestat had been truthful about blood being their only source of food. But a body surely couldn't be sustained in such a way. Decorum forgotten, he stepped close enough to get a better look.

Molloy’s expression was plainly gobsmacked at his boldness. "Where the hell did he find you?"

"Arkham. May I take samples?" Hardening of the dermis--less than Armand or Lestat, but more than Louis. Stubble, sandpapery on the cheeks. No pulse.

Dark blond eyelashes flecked with red, like the mascara Meg had worn and Dan had taken so long to throw away.

Molloy shuddered, flinched back. "Jesus, you're handsy. No wonder."

Herbert stilled his hands with effort. "Is that a no?" He wouldn't acknowledge the implication. Lestat was a hedonist. He was a professional.

"No--yeah--look, let me just show you your room."

Well. At least he got the silence he'd wanted. Molloy all but vanished as soon as he'd nudged open the door to an empty, palatial suite. Herbert was dwarfed by it, without luggage or samples or even his most basic tools. Without even a guide, now.

Without even his beeper--undoubtedly flung from his belt somewhere over the Eastern seaboard.

He rifled through the drawers, looking for pen and paper. The bedside table yielded a King James bible still stamped with a Gideons’ logo and the address of an Atlanta hotel, plus a cracked crystal Bic.

Adapt and survive. At least the fly pages would be adequate.

He wrote quickly, noted down the commonalities, the shared symptoms, the differing degrees of extremity.

Lestat was by far the worst, the most advanced case.

Small wonder he'd sought out a cure.

The tension among members of the community was interesting; apparently their shared affliction was no match for personality clashes. His notes continued on, on, right into the Garden of Eden and temptation itself as he worried his lower lip, feeling the tiny, healed-over silken seams in it.

Remarkable properties these creatures possessed.
Arkham, Massachusetts

Dan waited up all night, again, but Herbert didn't come home after their fight.

Herbert West staying out. Even with his new… income source, he’d only ever gone on errands, not… not left Dan alone. Not until a few nights ago.

He’d certainly never been one to stumble in wearing yesterday’s clothes, a dazed expression, and the languorous air of relaxation that Dan feared accompanied either a new addiction or a really successful walk of shame.

On his way to work, dazed with exhaustion, Dan still managed to see Herbert’s car parked haphazardly by the convenience store down the block, snow dusting the hood and windshield. It was still sitting there when he came home, better after a nap in the break room but worse after two hand-holding deaths and a sleep-deprived mistake caught by a nurse.

He went home, riffled the stacks of cash sitting out by the phone. (No need to hide it, since neither of them ever had guests.) He should just call the police, but… what could he say? My friend the drug dealer is gone, please help?

Instead he called the beeper like a desperate junkie, and when it turned up disconnected he pulled out the card, Herbert’s last gift besides the vial of drugs.

‘Lestat de Lioncourt’ had an address in Miami, and presumably the phone and fax numbers matched. Good news/bad news: Dan’s long distance bill wouldn’t be any higher that month than the last, because those numbers, too, were dead.

Herbert was pragmatic; he'd never go anywhere that he couldn't leave under his own power, something that junkie beater had become a symbol of. Seeing it abandoned set off alarms that should have rated alongside a severed finger or a bloodspattered note.

If only he'd tried harder to keep Herbert there.

If they hadn't fought, this wouldn't have been a problem. Herbert wouldn't have done… whatever it was. Something rash. Shot his mouth off to someone dangerous, overestimating his value and his safety.

Dan had the spare key to the car. Herbert had trusted him with that, as well as everything else. He didn’t allow himself to think too hard as he put his coat back on, took some of the tainted money (not all, just enough to weigh down his pockets and remember the night Herbert talked his way into Dan’s home with a simple rent payment.)

Went over to the car, tapped the windows, and then, with mounting dread, unlocked the trunk. As he raised it up, he wanted to keep his eyes shut, fearing the worst--fearing he'd find a small, curled, frozen thing with blood on its rumpled suit, wrapped fruitlessly in a cheap coat and expensive scarf.

Left for Spring.

No body at least, when he finally made himself look. At least there was that. Maybe Herbert hadn’t
pissed them off--maybe they needed him alive for research

The trunk was full of things he'd rather not see or think about--drugs, chemicals, things stolen and purchased--but no body. No clues, either.

*What now, Dan? You've made another mess.* His conscience always sounded like Meg.

He'd known, dammit. He'd known there was something wrong.

Had known Herbert needed help, was going to get in over his head. Herbert didn't know the meaning of moderation or limits.

He'd just been so… angry. Had wanted to punish Herbert, just a little. Let him see what it was like, having to hide and lie and do terrible things for which he wasn’t suited. Let him *beg* Dan to come back.

And part of him kept worrying away at the feeling of his… friend's… hand on his neck, and the look of naked desperation in his eyes. In anyone else, Dan would have responded. Reached out to hold them, given some kind of friendly touch when it was so obviously needed. Instead he'd felt terror winding up in him like a clock, freezing him uselessly in place until it all went wrong again. He never knew what Herbert wanted. Slow, stupid Dan, there to move bodies and hold beakers, make nice with the authorities.

But if he ran this time, that would be it. No more Herbert West. No great inventions, and no breakthroughs. No meaning to all the death Dan had been party to.

The ADC highway map shoved into the side pocket was dated 1973, making it just slightly younger than the station wagon itself. It was cold, the car took forever to turn over, and the glove box of course held no gloves.

It was also empty of the pistol Dan had carefully never actually seen.

Jesus, he'd allowed so much, just waiting to hear the words even though he could *see* them screaming from under his friend's skin day in and day out.

And then when Herbert finally did ask--

It was for the wrong thing. For Dan to follow him down, not pull him out.

He took the ramp onto the interstate, foot pressing hard on the gas even though he knew Herbert, in his paranoia, would keep the thing nearly empty to discourage theft. It would get him to the next city, far enough that he couldn't talk himself out of this. Whatever ‘this’ was.

*You know exactly what this is,* clinked the damning vial in his pocket. An attempt to balance the scales come far too late, as it always did.

*You're always so sorry, Dan. You're wonderful at guilt. But it doesn't stop you from doing it in the first place.* Francesca hadn't stayed with him long, but she'd had him pegged. And he'd come crawling back to Herbert, who'd let him in with no questions.

He'd only been trying to do the same courtesy.

It was a wonderful way to avoid the responsibility.

South. South, through barren land covered in the denuded skeletons of the trees that had looked
like balls of flame only a month before.

Tourists loved those trees; he'd loved them, his first year in Arkham. Tourists never had to see what happened after they blew through, the way that beauty faded and fell and left blackened death behind.

Deep down, he'd always been a tourist.

He stopped outside a dive motel when his eyes grew too heavy and the car swerved on the road, but he didn't go in. He curled up on the backseat and woke after only a few hours, telling himself it was the pain in his cramping legs and not the nerves that had done it.

If Herbert had been taken somewhere alive, every second he wasted dwindled the likelihood of making things right. He littered the floor of the surprisingly immaculate car with cheap food wrappers, eating like he was studying for a sophomore cumulative knowledge test. He didn't bother asking the locals if they'd seen anything unusual, though he was sure Herbert would be unmistakable anywhere but Arkham.

He passed the turnoffs for Dunwich and Kingsport, moved on with his back to Innsmouth and Bolton. Southward, as far south as the damned car and the cash in his pocket would take him (a considerable way, that second part. Thank God nobody would think to rob him in that vehicle.)

The air conditioning turned out to be broken, which became a problem when heat started to seep through the cracks in the window. Humidity had never sat well with him, and now it was one more factor adding to the sickness in his gut.

He removed his sweater and button-down somewhere near Virginia, sweated through his undershirt with what he told himself was the unnatural winter warmth and not exhaustion and too much coffee

If he knew which bags in the trunk held cocaine, he'd be tempted.

It occurred to him that he'd have to start asking around, and that he knew nothing. He'd taken care to know nothing, not an ounce of how Herbert conducted his illegal dealings or who to talk to. Hell, he couldn't even figure out where to buy weed (much to the disappointment of his gaggle of residents).

He had nothing but the card in his pocket with its unusable numbers, and a location that stopped being helpful the second he crossed Miami's city limits. What was he supposed to do, show the card to the first gas station attendant and hope for the best?

He'd driven 1500 miles on a wish and a prayer. He'd figure it out.

He'd find the fucking Cartel, and it would probably be the last thing he'd do.

~*~*~*~

**The Night Island, Florida**

The mansion turned out to be even more tacky by the light of day. Herbert had fallen asleep bent over the ornate writing desk, pen still in hand, his notes nearly through Genesis. The halls were silent and still, thick shutters parted to allow sunshine through. The only life to be found as he
prowled the halls were an odd array of uninfected people, all young and black-clad and mournful like a photo negative image of a commune from the last decade.

More alarming still, every route seemed to loop back on itself, or leave him stranded in a sitting room stocked with overstuffed furniture and what might once have been elegant architecture. At any moment he expected to walk into a mirrored room and find himself trapped, a looming metal tree and a noose his only source of escape. (He did find a phone, and the image of Dan it conjured in his mind produced a similar tightening of tension around his throat. Weakness. He gave it a wide berth.)

There was, at least, a kitchen. He found the basic necessities for toast, quantities of orange juice and other foods suitable to the treatment of anemia. Nothing that could produce an open flame, though. It seemed that superstition went deep.

One fridge, transparent and locked, contained fat packets of blood – human, he wagered, though getting in to find out was still tempting. What effort it would save. There’d be no more of having to talk to those troublesome (troubling) creatures that preened and gawked. The purity of laboratory research.

A laboratory. Lestat had implied such a thing, and he’d vanished once he’d made sure Herbert had nowhere else to go. Irritation set his teeth on edge, and he returned to combing the mansion with renewed purpose. This conceit of living death, no matter how they enforced it, could surely be broken long enough to draw him a damn map.

He’d seen this hallway before. Four times.

“Hey there, new guy. Feeling overwhelmed?” A head popped up from one of the many couches infesting the place.

“Frustrated,” he ground out.

“First day, huh.” The girl couldn’t have been older than he’d been when he’d left to work with Dr. Gruber. Her solid frame was wrapped in layers of gauzy black fabric, blond hair short and bobbed. Irritating. “It’s easy to get lost.” She made as if to put a friendly hand on his shoulder, and he flinched away. “What’s the rush?”

At least she planned to be useful.

“Lestat’s room. Where is it?” He cursed himself for not bringing paper.

“Whoa, slow down.” She was LAUGHING at him. “I’m sure he thinks the enthusiasm is cute, but it won’t be sundown for another four hours.”

Four--how long had he slept, exactly? “He can go back to sleep when I’m done with him. Do you know or not?”

“Yeah, but you really shouldn’t. Look, why don’t you let me give you a tour, we can--”

“Just, the directions. Please.”

“You’re in the wrong part of the house,” she said, face falling into a scowl. “You need to go into the upper levels.”

It would do for a start, though as directions went, the words proved hardly more useful than wandering blind had been. She (whoever she was, as if it mattered) should have said “find the most
disgustingly lavish set of doors where there are also, conspicuously, no windows, and that’ll be it.” The doors weren’t even locked, opening on a room draped in curtains and brocade and dozens upon dozens of unlit lamps. And squatting in the middle of it all, a coffin. He couldn’t help but laugh looking at it, impressed in spite of himself at the commitment, the sheer temerity of it. And by the look of it, it cost more than a year’s rent on his shabby little apartment back h--in Arkham.

He dug his fingers into the gap where the lid came down, steeling himself against the surprising weight in his hand. It could have been made of solid marble, and he’d have believed it.

“What do you think you’re doing?” A hand seized his wrist, bony and underfed as everyone else he’d met in the last 24 hours. The man attached was older even than Herbert himself (and what a place, where a doctor of 30 was beginning to seem ancient compared to the youthful faces around him), his wan face rather more familiar to Herbert from his days on hospital rounds. It was the look of being eaten from the inside out. “You can’t be in here!”

“Then they should invest in locks.” Herbert pulled his hand free, exhausted of being touched as if any of these cretins had the right. “If you’re so concerned, you’d better step back.”

A mass of ugly velvet and bones tackled him to the ground, trying both to keep him from moving and drag him out of the room.

“Get off me!” Herbert roared, eyes sharp in search of a weapon. He’d end up waking Lestat one way or the other.

“What the hell is going on here?” The girl from earlier stood in the doorway, hands halfway between reaching for them and pointing in pure exasperation.

“Karen, help me! Someone got in, they’re trying to--”

“Okay, first of all. Let go. Both of you.” She grabbed the tall man’s collar and yanked, pointing an accusing finger at Herbert. “You stay put. You, calm down. This guy is Lestat’s. He brought him here last night. Which you’d know if you hadn’t ditched me to try and earn some brownie points. And how’d that go, anyway?”

The man was strangely cowed, eyes on the carpet. “I wasn’t--”

“It’s fine, Joe. Not the point.”

“My name is Damien now--”

“Joe. Not the time.” She rounded on Herbert. “And you, genius. You’re lucky he did stop you from opening that coffin, or I’d be talking to a puddle of hamburger. It won’t kill you to be patient for another couple hours.”

The scientist tilted his head.

“Security Measures?”

“Defensive reaction.” She spoke slowly, as to a child who should know better. “A sleeping vampire can tear you limb from limb if you touch them. It’s how they survive being dead during the day.” When Herbert simply nodded, she frowned deeper. He saw hints of a vein throbbing in her forehead--remarkable she had the blood pressure for that, considering these people’s obvious purpose. “It’s all in the book! How do you not know this?”

“What book?”
Her jaw dropped, gormless, teeth white and shiny in the gap between black-painted lips.

Even teeth. Normal.

"See, Karen?" Damien shouted, triumphant. "He can't be Lestat's. He hasn't even been initiated into the mysteries." He leaned in, too close, breath soured by sickness. "What could Lestat possibly see in you?"

Fingers in Herbert's collar, prising it back from his throat--he slapped them away, stepped back so as not to be loomed over

She rolled eyes. "That proves it. When does he ever share anything? He probably decided it would be fun to pick someone completely clueless off the streets, just so he could shock them." Her gaze was dangerously close to yet more pity. "No offence or anything. He did bring you, didn't he?"

"Yes." He was hunching up like cornered prey. An inquisition was not what he'd agreed to. "We were meant to be business partners."

… shock was quickly competing with pity for his most despised reaction.

"What… are you?" Karen asked, tilting her head to one side. "You can't be in entertainment. If you were, you'd know."

"I'm a scientist." He didn't shake hands, of course. These people were of no consequence. "Dr. Herbert West."

"Herbert." Damien's face took on an expression of unholy, childish glee. "Well, then, Love Bug, welcome to the island."

Karen, for her part, spent a moment in honest puzzlement. "What would Lestat want with a scientist?"

"Apparently to make a mockery of my work," Herbert sniffed. "I was told he wanted someone who could provide answers about his affliction."

"Are you going to prescribe medicine, doctor? Got a cure for the dark secrets of life eternal?" For Damien, it would seem Solstice had come early. "So sorry I stopped you from checking on your subject."

It would be useful to check the reaction rates for the afflicted in sleep, particularly if they really did become comatose. "Do you have a cane, a coatrack? Something long."

"I'll get you a yardstick," Damien snickered.

"Joe." Karen's heel came down hard, the impact muffled by plush white shag carpeting. His whimpering was pleasant nonetheless. She put on a smile, face strained but trying. "Look, I don't know what you 'studied' that caught Lestat's attention before, but if you keep on like this you'll be dead in two days. Why don't you take me up on that tour? Those are the same clothes you were wearing yesterday, aren't they? We can go shopping, or…"

"Unnecessary. Thank you. I've achieved my goal."

"But--"

"Did you need something, or may I leave?" He straightened his glasses and tie and stalked forward,
forcing her out of his path.

He'd figure this out later, these reflexes--when there was no one to interfere.

The floor plan was just as confusing on the second level, just as poorly designed.

God forbid they should ever need to evacuate.

Lestat, when he did wake (no later than the very second the sun touched the horizon, if his speed in finding Herbert was any indication) was all apology.

"Armand is absolutely impossible when he--well, there's a reason he's called the imp, mon ami. A terror, that one. But I was so sure I could break away. I beg your forgiveness."

Herbert hummed non-committally, letting himself be herded from room to room by the steady drone of Lestat's voice, and down a staircase he hadn't noticed during an entire day of searching.

It was every promise Lestat had spun and more. The walls were dark and barbaric, familiar in ways he didn't care to consider, but the counters were polished, disinfected chrome, the equipment clearly untouched. Herbert had never seen anything like it, even at Miskatonic.

"Your kingdom, mon savant." Lestat grinned, pleased with himself and for Herbert. "Tell me you love it. Say I've pleased you." He stretched across the grand operating table at the center of the room. "I could be sustained on those words alone if they fell from your clever lips, dear doctor."

It wasn't to Herbert's specifications. It was better, seemingly made to suit any field of study or whim. There weren't adequate words.

"It's--" He opened cabinets, checking the supplies. Everything, substances common and controlled, arranged in orderly rows, properly stored. "How--When was this all installed?"

"Three days ago." Lestat rolled onto his belly, kicked his patent-leather-clad heels high in the air while craning his neck at Herbert's traversal of the room.

Three days.

"The day after I--"

"Came into my life, darling?"

Lestat cut him off, covered over the circumstances of that meeting. Courtesy or shame? Herbert was a stranger to both.

"… Quite." There were enough petri dishes, and containment units to store them, to keep him going for months without so much as needing to recycle. It was ridiculously extravagant. It was…

"Your trust is," (humbling, surprising, beyond anything Herbert had experienced), "not misplaced. I can put this to good use."

"Ever effusive." Lestat caught Herbert's sleeve as he walked by. "But you do like it, don't you?"
Love would not be strong enough, were he prone to such thoughts.

"It's the best research space I've ever had access to." Honesty for honesty, for the unexpected charm of Lestat's open face. "At least someone here respects the integrity of scientific pursuits."

"Oh?" The vampire had captured Herbert's hand then, traced the lifeline as if playing at reading futures. "Are you not making friends?"

"The other people here--those without the disease--" He hesitated to define them, to ascribe a status.

"The mortals?" Lestat bumped his cheek against Herbert's knuckles, catlike, blue-grey eyes growing heavy-lidded. An indication, perhaps, of some sort of sensory trance. When smooth, silky lips brushed Herbert's skin with a cold electric shock, he tugged away.

"Uninfected." Firmness and precision were important, vital even as the dreamy expression changed into something harder. "They prevented me from engaging in the few tests possible during the daylight hours without access to… " He looks around again, trails off at the still-unbelievable place. His. "… all this."

It nags at him, now, what the man and woman had said. All this; all for him. Surely Lestat wouldn't have bothered if it were just a meaningless game.

"You seem upset." Lestat sat up, folding one leg under him while the other dangled off the side of the table. "Tell me your thoughts."

"You can read them, can't you?" It was harsher than he meant it, but he was already worn out with games.

"I'd rather you tell me." Lestat didn't reach for him again, but Herbert found himself drawn back to that face. Those cold, mutable eyes.

"You know my work," Herbert said at last. "You know what I'll do with what you've given me. I can't say the same. I doubt a cure is what you're after. A transmittal system? Selfish knowledge for a leg up in your little rivalries? What, exactly, do you want?"

Lestat laced his hands in his lap, grinning to himself. "You'll be angry if I tell you the truth."

"Not as angry as I'll be if you don't." Was this just a waste of his time?

"Dear, blunt man. Straight to the point, is it?" This smile--Lestat had so many--this smile was fond and human, concealing any trace of his altered teeth. His hair spilled down, loose and lustrous, as he flung his head back. "How refreshing! Clever as you are, you must have figured out nobody here says what they mean."

"Do you?" He couldn't do this again; couldn't be in this position of uncertainty and dependence. Couldn't worry that his work would be permitted, encouraged, to progress to completion and then--stolen. "What do you want? I'll trade, just stop toying with me."

The smile fell away, the face looking eerily dead in the calm left behind.

"Oh. Oh, Herbert, you do me a disservice." Lestat stood, and Herbert was suddenly and uncomfortably reminded of how large the man was. Tall, broad, and--infected. "No--no, don't be--" The hand then lifted almost made contact, stopping just short of touching Herbert's cheek. It hung in the air, caressing, rebuking. "Herbert… " 
So close. If Lestat breathed, they'd be sharing the oxygen.

"Herbert, it's for you. For your mind--the one that, yes, I can read." Soft touch of the other hand on his elbow, vivid eyes locked onto his own. "It's radiant, and we vampires love beauty."

"Very florid, but that's not an answer." He had to tip his head up to meet Lestat's eyes, the half foot of difference stark at this range. "So, you think I'm 'beautiful.' What of it?" It seemed Lestat's reputation was an impulsive one. It made it his interest likely to fade. "What does that mean to me?"

"I read minds, not hearts. Ah--" Lestat intercepted the disgusted curl of Herbert's mouth. "Now, now. Even if you don't appreciate my poetry, you must know it's true. Our thoughts pair so infrequently with our emotions." The hesitant hand near Herbert's face cupped the back of his neck, running a thumb through short, uneven hair. "Your every thought is suspicious of me, but I think from our conversations your heart might say something different."

"Biochemical cocktails. An unconscious response to stimulus." He was getting distracted again, pulled off course from his answers.

"Oho, you find me stimulating. Well then, let me name my price."

Herbert braced himself, feeling Lestat's other arm snake around his waist. He wasn't going to prostitute himself. He wouldn't allow--

"I want to be your assistant," the voice in his ear whispered.

"Oh," he distantly heard himself say. The words stabbed, sharp and targeted and causing an awful twisting mix of pleasure and pain to lance through him.

Sentimental, but…

He'd never been asked. Had wheedled his way into his position with Dr. Gruber, begged and berated and eventually bribed Dan to be part of his vision for as long as it lasted. For someone to ask, though. To look at him and see, all on their own, something worth listening to and following.

It was flattering, wonderful.

"Ohhhh." He shivered in those cold marble arms, closed his eyes and shook his head.

It was hideously impractical.

"Cher?" Lestat sounded uncharacteristically (four days, they'd known one another all of four--) plaintive, confused.

"You can't--you don't know enough." Pity, such a pity. He'd love to accept.

"I can learn!"

"Really? Can acquire the equivalent of a medical doctorate, just by trying?" He was sneering, could feel it but couldn't help it.

"I read a whole library in a week! I only need to flip through the pages to absorb the knowledge. Simple as that." Lestat's face twisted into an indignant pout. "It can't be hard; that Cain boy was never even with you, and he got the job."
"Dan was--" adequate as a doctor, a gentle hand with patients. A convincing front, with necessary keys. "That was different. I already had the basis for my reagent. This is entirely uncharted territory."

"We'd be learning together. A romantic notion." At Herbert's closed expression, Lestat amended himself. "Your ‘subject,’ then. Until I've passed this terribly high bar you insist exists. I only want to be near you, Herbert. I want to see these things that make you happy, talk about them with you. Surely you didn't intend to scrape me dry and leave me out in the cold?"

That had, in fact, been his intent. There was enough storage space for the samples.

"Is this your plan?" He nodded to their compromising pose. "To interfere with my work at every opportunity?"

"Oh, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," Lestat teased. "This petty pace of yours will keep. I promise to be very good. You'll hardly notice I'm here, but when you call for me. Loyal as a dog."

"I suppose." He wavered. "It would be useful to have a second pair of hands." Before Lestat could respond, he made eye contact. Cold as steel, he left no room for wheedling. "On my terms. You've given this lab to me. I won't have it be one of your little stages for a soap opera."

"You have my word, dear doctor." He pulled Herbert into an honest embrace, carefully orchestrated. The feeling of something being held back was palpable. Herbert would have to test for effects on muscle growth and strength, for the source of the disconnect between that appearance and the crushing hold he found himself in.

"We can celebrate just this once, can't we?" Lestat's voice came rumbling down from the top of Herbert's head, that pointed nose nuzzling his hair. "Before I give you back to your cold, beloved mistress?"

Celebrate.

He knew better, so much better. He'd said already, hadn't he? That he would refrain, wouldn't disappoint…

Well. So much for his worries there.

She was cold, yes, and electric and beautiful and back in reach. And so was this, the feeling of a handsome man's hands on him, a man's fit body close up, a man who listened and asked to learn.

Lestat could hear his thoughts. Herbert didn't have to say yes before his collar was shredded.

Fangs, piercing into his throat, into something deeper, forced a small whimpering noise from him. He clung, tightly, to Lestat's gauzy shirt, writhed as a cold-yet-warming hand grasped his hip and kept him upright through the buckling of his knees.

It felt like it would go on forever, the sickly pained bliss of a mouth suckling a wound and taking something Dan would never understand. Sucking out the venom with the fire.

He never felt this way. Almost never. And here, in a lab, his beautiful lab with this medical freak heating by the second against him.

Celebration indeed.

He surrendered to the velvet blackness.
So marvelous, the way his precious pet shook and fell into the swoon, clutching at first and then limp, weak with blood loss and sinful enveloping pleasure.

So at odds with the images flooding Lestat as he drank: determination, fearlessness. The unregretted moments when this deceptively rabbitlike man had slain adversaries in rage and fear and curiosity.


He could have drunk that trusting, vicious soul down to nothing, there at its moment of greatest joy, in the temple to Herbert’s Goddess of Science. It would have been such a coup, to succeed where others had failed.

Yet to do that would have deprived Lestat of those very same things for which he hungered: the demure, buttoned-down body, the flashing eyes, the calm uneventful memories of hands tacky with the blood of victims, the racing unwavering mind bent in total devotion to his Cause. The late-night talks of hidden sorrows and indomitable hopes.

So instead, when Herbert’s clarion thoughts began to flicker and fade like chalk in rain, Lestat gathered him to his breast and fed unholy life back in, drop by radiant drop until his still-mortal boy was shuddering and hale again in his arms.

“That’s it, darling,” he whispered into a shell-like ear. “So pretty like this. So wanton.” He could feel the swelling of human arousal against his thigh.

From the memories, he knew he’d be the first; he kissed his way up that pale neck and slid a hand down to cup and squeeze and stroke. His little love, devoted and virginal. Pure as the driven snow, and as cruel in that denial.

Lestat wanted to stain the snow, to make his mark again as he always had. So he wrung a soft, dazed cry from full lips, then swallowed it down in a sweet inexperienced kiss.

Celibate, all the way past thirty years. Such particular innocence from a killer, a thinker, an impassioned spirit. A veritable priest.

He hadn’t done this in ages… lifetimes. He’d forgotten the pleasure, the pride of it, feeling hot needy flesh in his grasp. Had forgotten what it was like to be--

“S-stop. Stop, Lestat.”

--to be rejected. But Herbert was shaking, of a sudden, with fright rather than lust, shoving Lestat’s hands away as if they burned him with something besides sin.

“Mon cher--”

“No.” Wet, bloody, sexually tempting mouth shaping words of refusal. “No. We don’t do that.”

Ah, frustration. Gloriously petty and selfish; Lestat hadn’t felt its like in years. He could so easily have overwhelmed Herbert, brought him to glory then and there, but… it was no false demurral he
heard. Regardless of the message being sent by Herbert’s body, his mind and words matched in
their refusal.

Brave, foolish, defiant little creature, cowering over so small a thing as *this*. Some modern man.
Memories and pain flowed jagged from him; fear of disease, discovery, abuse. Shame.

“Before I became your drug dealer, I was a drug *addict*, Lestat,” Herbert bit out, arms holding
himself as Lestat so longed to. “We both know I’m not above using stimulants for recreational
purposes. But I don’t—you’re not going to use me for that, however you think you’ve bought me.”

“Herbert!” Lestat flailed, fought himself, put a hand out but maintained inches of distance. “Will
you trust me, please, only for a moment?” (Only a little mental push. Only for the good, only to
soothe that awful acidic rawness.)

He took Herbert’s pacified-yet-wary hand in his own, lowered and guided it with minimal
resistance between his legs, to touch and explore the softness still beneath black leathers.

“I don’t want to use you, dearest. I can’t.” (Never mind all the ways he truly could, all the things
Herbert’s relative naivete allowed him to dismiss. The comfort was what mattered then.) “It’s not-
”

“This is a permanent symptom?” Scientific passion in those eyes warred with the carnal still
staining pallid cheeks.

“Since I died, yes. All I wanted was to make you feel good.” Better, even, than this felt, the careful
measuring touch on parts no more sensitive than the rest of his vampiric body, but no less, either.
Pleasant, always, to have contact. And humorous, to imagine the sight they made.

Perhaps Herbert realized; perhaps he simply arrived at the end of his examination, with all
necessary data gathered. Either way, he removed his hand and refolded his arms across his chest.

“Thank you for your consideration, Lestat, but I must still decline the favor. And you need to make
me aware of symptoms--this disease is--”

“You’re certain?” Lestat interrupted, hoping to stem the rising tide of scientific scolding.

“Yes.” Short; clipped. As though Lestat couldn’t see, couldn’t *smell*, couldn’t reach out with his
mind and taste the still pulsating arousal within him. He’d have done well in the church, in days
gone by. Lestat could see him, as a simple Brother transcribing Galen or a Cardinal terrible and
powerful, but either way, so severe.

He did a miraculous thing, then: kept his word, and released his prey. Well, let him keep his
peculiarities then (for someone who claimed no interest in courting, the man certainly had a knack
for the game of seduction--hot one minute, cold the next). Lestat would win out in the end, of
course. But the idea that he might *lose*, to such a mortal as this, left a constant, frustrated thrill of
anticipation in his bones.

~*~*~*~

In a little over a week, Herbert learned many things.
Lestat had not lied about his capacity to learn. He picked up terms with ease, and had the sort of open mind that had initially attracted Herbert to Dan. He drank in Herbert's theories about death and reanimation with naked eagerness, then spat them back with florid embellishments that, while useless in the practical scheme of things, had a strangely endearing quality. But it was also a symptom of what Lestat lacked: a scientist's curiosity.

Oh, he was curious, alright. He prodded endlessly for Herbert's thoughts and opinions, dragged him hither and yon and picked up conversations on the most mundane of details. But he was content to take the aesthete's perspective, to ponder fanciful possibilities rather than digging to slot together hard-won probabilities. It kept Herbert's mind sharp, and (though he would never admit it) had led him to the unexpected himself. It also made Lestat infuriating to work with for long.

"Yes, but why does it produce that reaction?" Herbert asked, staring intently into a dish of ash one evening. “Why sunlight, specifically? The ultraviolet lamps did nothing…” He swished it with a glass rod, considering ways to limit or filter light exposure.

"Who can say, mon savant? Perhaps it's inherited into our very nature from our oldest ancestors. Or a demon’s curse, exiling us only from the sun’s grace. Or… "

And on it would go; endlessly, if Herbert allowed it.

If only it weren't for the people.

Not Lestat. Well, much.

The others.

The one with dark hair spent all his time hiding; the red-haired boy threw out arch statements heavy with portent but empty of meaning; Molloy… were all the ones called Daniel so damnably adept at empty, friendly romantic overtures? There seemed hardly a groupie in the house that one hadn’t spent a night cuddled up to.

None were so open with their secrets, giving of their time. None of their little leper colony even seemed to care about the disease that bound them together. How unsettling, to find Lestat hadn’t been lying to make himself look better--either that, or he was quite adept at running a long con. But if Herbert put up with the effusiveness, the hand creeping around his shoulder, then he would find himself gifted of a seemingly endless supply of blood to study. (His sense of humor was unexpected. Dan would doubtlessly not have appreciated the puppetry, given the objects used).

Lestat hadn't tried to kiss him again either, though he went on making distraught, pained complaints at every opportunity.

And upon further observation, Herbert suspected that he was at least partly correct, regardless of what Lestat claimed--that the touching was symptomatic.

They all did it, from what he could tell--to prey animals, soothing, and to each other (not the shy one. He hung back, fled. Herbert had no tools to diagnose trauma, but suspected it nonetheless.)

They had few if any barriers or norms regarding physical touch, stroking and fondling constantly. Worse, the entourage blatantly mimics them.

And there seemed to be an expectation that Herbert would be the same. Were his laboratory not a wonder, he’d still spend all his time down there just to avoid the commune members’ wandering offhand gropes.
The other thing he discovered was Lestat's oddly proprietary approach to his position as a primary sample. Unlike the others, this was no mildly irritating quirk. And it had its way of rearing its head at the ugliest of moments.

~*~*~*~

“Hey,” Dan slid onto a bar stool, stiff with attempted casualness. “I’m, uh. I’m looking for a hookup.” After trying about every dive bar in Miami he’d thought he was getting to be a fair hand at this. But his words only earned an eye roll from the woman next to him before she turned back to her drink, chewing on a straw to keep her black lipstick intact.

Certainly he looked the part now, his khakis and button-down balled up in the back of the car in favor of the cheapest, most threadbare items that the local flea market had been able to provide. He hadn’t thought far enough ahead to think he’d need two weeks’ worth of clothes. He hadn’t thought at all. But he couldn’t give up, not knowing that the house in Arkham was empty, that at this point he probably didn’t have so much as a job to go back to.

He tried again.

“There’s somebody I’m trying to get ahold of.” The card Herbert had pressed into his hands, his one and only lead, at least seemed to fit in here. Its matte black finish, increasingly worn with the number of times Dan had crammed it back into his wallet after yet another failure, matched the gloomy décor and the gloomier clientele. This place had candles for lighting, for God’s sake. He was ready to lay his head down on the bar and sleep the night off here. One more try. “Maybe you know him?” He slid the card across the bar, no longer worried about losing it. He knew all the useless details by heart.

She turned, no doubt ready to tell him off. But the card caught her first, and it was as if he’d at last found the magic words. Her eyes got big as saucers, and Dan was quite suddenly the most interesting man in the room.

“Where did you get this?” She snapped it out, a greedy demand. So it was worth something, finally.

“A friend of mine,” Dan demurred. “I’m trying to get ahold of him, but none of those numbers are any good. Can you help me out?”

A long beat of silence passed between them, then a longer one as the girl called the bartender over. He had the same gobsmacked reaction to that little slip of paper, and a heated whispering match ensued. At last, when Dan was about ready to break in and start demanding answers, they turned back to him. The bartender leaned close, making furtive glances like they were cracking Watergate and not some low-level ring of weirdos. “Come back Saturday night,” the bartender instructed. “I’m not promising anything, understand? And whatever happens to you, it’s not on me.”

Two years ago, Dan would have demanded a promise, an explanation at least. Tonight he nodded, ordered another drink, and resolved to check a newspaper to find out what day it was.

~*~*~*~
Having made no promises on the limits of his research, Herbert resolved to approach the most asymptomatic of the colony of infected: Monsieur De Pointe du Lac, who had proven himself elusive for the past few nights.

It was… uncomfortable… having to ask the hangers-on for directions. Especially because, following the total destruction of his only shirt, he'd been provided a wardrobe of clothes not of his choosing.

The charcoal grey sweater fit well enough and was made of some soft likely-expensive substance; the lack of trailing cuffs was enough of a selling point for his tastes. But when he approached Damien, he felt suddenly, hideously exposed.

There was nothing wrong with his neck. It had healed, Lestat’s bite now only small, silvery-pink lines of scar tissue. Barely noticeable.

Hell, in Florida a turtleneck would have been more obvious.

He held his head high as he spoke, refusing to be shamed for what had transpired. To be thought of as one of them, chasing after baser pleasures as the end goal.

"I need to find Mr. Pointe du Lac. Have you seen him?" Short, pointed. Anything to get away sooner.

Damien's gaze locked immediately to his neck. "Oh, you do, huh Herbie? Need more 'data' for your little experiment?"

Disgusting. As if he were some cheap whore like--"Can you help or not?"

"Why should I?"

"If the wasting is any indication, you'll be very interested in my work. You only hurt yourself by getting in my way."

Damien's face turned strange and unreadable at that. Dan was always the one skilled in interacting with terminal patients--Herbert would just as soon deal with the end results any day.

"Check the library," the man said at last. "He stays there most nights, once he's come back from feeding. Too good for the rest of us. You should get along."

Herbert didn't bother with thanks, just set to his work. The results would be thanks enough, not that Damien would appreciate them.

He was surprised to find the information reliable. There, sitting before the fire with a leather-bound volume in hand, was the arresting figure from his first night in the manion. Herbert hadn't even crossed the threshold before those piercing green eyes set upon him. At least this time he managed not to freeze.

The other man looked more put-together this time, dressed in clothing less tattered than before. Weirdly timeless, though; the loose-fit linen button-front, dark slacks, and black loafers marked him out for no place or era. Nondescript to a fault, like an attempt to blend into a crowd; predatory camouflage? And there was something--

His hair.
His hair was long, half-loose, escaping from being tied back in a ponytail to frame his warmed ivory features in a splash of inky contrast.

"How did it grow so fast?" The words flooded out without decorum, without introduction.

Blinking, birdlike head-tilt. Thinning of red lips.

Uneasiness, mistrust.

"Your hair." Herbert waved at the side of his own head as he approached, feeling some strange tension ratchet up as he did so. "It's--"

"Beautiful?" An ironic not-smile twisted the aesthetically pleasing features into something else as one long leg curled into the chair with abnormal grace and no care for the upholstery. Bitterness bloomed in Herbert's chest, swirling, as Pointe du Lac continued. "You may tell Lestat that his message is received, Doctor. And his preferences noted."

Not an answer. Not even the same conversation. And was he dismissed, or forgotten, as the expression slipped from that face and left it a vacant mask bathed in the firelight and flushed from behind from his 'feeding'?

"Longer." Herbert finished stubbornly. Every person he crossed assumed him to be Lestat's errand boy, a mindless puppet playing at subterfuge. "Is it in a constant state of accelerated growth?" He hadn't been the one to toss manners away, but he could play that game too.

Louis didn't even bother looking at him this time. "I will always look as I did the night I died, Doctor. If you don't know something as simple as that, you can't fault me. All good researchers are meant to read their textbooks, no?"

There again, the mention of books. "I'm open to suggestions."

"You'll get none from me. Good evening, Doctor."

As if he were a child. "This is the second time we've spoken. I see no reason why--"

"I dislike being spied on. If you're insistent, Armand did his share of 'experiments.' Your ambitions will be better served with him."

'Spied on.' Paranoia? That, coupled with the withdrawal, the avoidance of typical coping methods seen in the colony--his behavior, his disconnection, was abnormal.

The hostility grew, festering over a core of something else. Threat. He was being threatened. Something nearby was dangerous; something valuable was being stolen.

"I… yes. Fine." His heart beat too fast, nerves in full fight or flight despite the absolute lack of visible trouble in the warm, elegant confines of the library. He found himself backing away from the room; the bottom of the ocean, in that moment, seemed a better option.

He'd fallen prey to these sudden moments of apparent instinct more than once, and each time he'd added and scratched it off of his list of potential symptoms. There wasn't enough consistency to measure, no apparent exerted force. Only a fickleness in his emotions that hadn't been there before.

But he needed those samples, some diverse option to compare to Lestat's. And the night was, comparatively, young.
At some point he'd need samples from the… prey animals… as well, to see what effect the saliva had on them, but that constituted a secondary goal at best. Another one of the infected; Armand, the boy, it was.

If Louis was evasive and Lestat impossible to shake, Armand might have been called the closest to "compromise." His presence was constant, lordly, and it was never less than clear that he expected the world to come to him.

Herbert avoided the sitting room in question on such nights, knowing what he would find there: a fawning court of the humans--the non-infected. The woman, Karen, was particularly omnipresent at the redhead's side, though she never failed to peel away and pester him with questions of his health when he passed by. It was worse than the glaring, the whispers. It seemed he had stepped on a few toes coming here. Well, he had dealt with the same in Switzerland, swooping in to take one of the few, coveted research positions. He was used to ignoring such things.

He balled his hands into fists once, twice, then forced a veneer of civility onto his features.

"I need to speak with you." He said bluntly as he entered. Sure enough, Armand was curled around Karen, a young man's head resting against his thigh. A deplorably exhibitionist scene.

Choker necklaces, scarves, high collars. Broad cuff bracelets and long sleeves.

Herbert had never been one to pay attention to actual fashion, let alone the absurd 'Grandchildren of the Night' look to which these idiots fetishistically adhered, but as Armand's dark eyes slid his way and came to rest on his neck…

Perhaps, he thought, he was inappropriately attired.

"Mr. West, how nice of you to visit. I see you're acclimating well. I had meant to make sure Lestat wasn't failing you as a host. Please, anything you need." He said it all without budging from his languorous position, his eyes stripping Herbert down to meat and bone.

He found his arms crossing over his chest. "Lestat's aid has been inescapable." Armand's laugh seemed to surprise the both of them. Herbert pressed on. "But my work requires more diversity. Scientific conclusions can't be drawn from one subject."

"An experiment?" The uncanny boy sat up at that, back ramrod straight. "How interesting. And what do you need of me?"

"Blood and tissue samples. Any descriptions of symptoms you can give." Part of him felt uneasy at how smoothly the request was proceeding. The rest was far too happy to have further material to study.

"I think that can be arranged." Armand turned to his pets. "Leave us for a while. I promise I'll make it up to you later, sweet things." Herbert turned away as goodbyes were said, his stomach squirming.

When they were alone, Armand rose and shut the door. He seemed to have an awareness of Herbert's every movement without needing to see it. Heightened predator senses. More dangerous than he'd given them credit for to begin with. When Armand did turn back it was with an inquisitor's poise, his arms folded behind his back. It fit him poorly, like watching a child imitate a parent's gesture.

"So, what has Lestat told you? No, let me guess--nothing. And so you've come to me." He smirked. "At least it isn't to ask if our kind is truly damned."
Herbert snorted.

"That would be a waste of both our times."

Armand nodded, almost approving. "What, then? Hoping for vivisection?"

Now that he thought about it, with the recovery rates that might well have been possible. There was a possibility…

"That won't be necessary. Just basic tissue and blood samples.” He lifted the capped needle he’d brought, just in case. “Will this be of any use?”

“You must know the answer, if you’re asking. Lestat came to ME when he was young and seeking answers, after all. Oh,” his hand fluttered to his breast in mock shock. “Don’t tell me you were taken in? I must be the youngest, yes?”

“I have no definitive information yet on how this disease slows the aging process. You claim to be more than 200 years in age?” The boy looked even younger than Lestat, not just for his height (which was just enough to look Herbert dead in the eye) but the softness of his features. He couldn’t be more than eighteen, in purely physical terms.

“Considerably. Half a millennium, give or take a few years.”

“Well, you certainly hide it well. Somewhere a plastic surgeon is bloodthirsty for your secret. Your arm, please.” He removed his scalpel from his small case of tools, doing what he could with the outclassed blade to carve a few flakes for use. It was like chipping away at stone. He

“And what will you do with this research, Herbert?” The casualness of his name, something he’d grown so used to hearing from Lestat, unnerved him now.

“I’ve spent my life studying death. And the cure for it.”

“Well, then your work is done. Here is your cure.” Armand spread his arms wide. “How will you define yourself now?”

“This, as you put it, is far from proof. I won’t be done until I can replicate it reliably.”

“I see. So you’ll make more vampires.”

“The practical applications of the research are too far ahead to consider at this point. I’ll need that blood sample now.”

“Of course. Why don’t we sit?”

Reasonable enough, Herbert thought. It would be easier to take the sample sitting down, and Armand would be at less risk of fainting (not that that appeared to be a problem for sufferers of the disease, but he knew so little as yet.)

"How much do you weigh?” he asked while carefully (fruitlessly) applying his sphygmomanometer to Armand's arm.

Nothing.

"I've no idea, honestly. It's never mattered."

"Hmm. I'll need to find out.” He tugged at the sleeve of Armand's close-fit sweatshirt, tried to roll it
up, but it was too tight.

"Here." Armand took the issue out of his hands, carelessly stripping it off to expose rather more weirdly transformed flesh than Herbert had been expecting. At his stare, the boy smiled slyly. "Don't be shy, Dottore. After all, I'm your patient." He leaned in, almost confiding, placed a long-boned hand on Herbert's (he would undoubtedly have grown further, several inches at least, if not for the disease arresting him here.) "And it's not as though I'm ashamed. I was an odalisque and a model in life, among other things."

"Hmm." He struggled to keep his response noncommittal. It wasn't a doctor's role to pass judgement on patients--Dan certainly lectured him enough for passing comments. And it was true he felt a certain protectiveness for the lives in service of his cause. What did it matter what they'd been, when they were reborn in the service of defeating death? "And how old were you when you were afflicted?"

"Seventeen."

The hardening of the dermis, then, had no effect on freezing the look of the patient. What had Louis said? 'As they looked when they died.'

"Though of course," Armand continued, "I was marked long before then. I was immersed in this life years before it was consecrated. My maker was a patient man."

A certain rancorous disgust flowered in him, imagining such potential drawn into this pointless, wasteful stasis. A child.

"Do you mourn for me? How touching. But unnecessary." Armand drew himself up with a kind of pitiful pride. For a moment Herbert saw himself, announcing his independence. His intent to survive, and damn them all. "I lead here because I'm already the strongest. There are better subjects for your pity."

"I don't waste my time on pity." People were the sum of their actions, after all. They saved or damned themselves. He quashed the uncertainty. "Since you don't know your weight, we'll start with a minimal sample."

"Of course," Armand smiled. "It seems I ought to thank Lestat for finding you. Your mind is… refreshing. Intriguing. Such a thing becomes rare at my age."

The skin of the wrist was almost pearlescent up close, and the mostly-dormant veins showed blue through it. Easy to mark off, to explain what he needed, even without being able to hear or feel the pulse.

"Have you ingested anything tonight?" Herbert asked as he worked, flipping open his notebook to record the data.

"No, I haven't." Armand examined the violet lines over the artery like they were a strange novelty. "I haven't had any blood at all."

Dark eyes. Flat, black mirrors, almost. His own reflection was so clear in them.

"In that case I would recommend you get something to compensate, following this procedure. I shouldn't be taking enough to cause an adverse reaction, but given how little we know--"

"Of course, Herbert." Armand interrupted, flashing his fangs mischievously. "I will take your expert advice and feed immediately. These things must be balanced, after all."
He pulled gloves from his pockets, snapping them on for safety (beside the point now, given what he had allowed Lestat to do--or maybe, from the medical reports he had heard, that only made the danger greater). If nothing else, he'd avoid contaminating the sample.

"Puncture the skin where I've marked," he instructed, unscrewing the lid from a plastic container. "I'll tell you when to stop."

Armand did as he was asked, without further affectation (and how often--but this was cold, and sterile, and safe for both of them). Like Lestat's, the blood oozed out sluggishly, already beginning to heal before the container was even half full.

"That's enough." Saying so was almost beside the point.

Armand licked at the wound as a cat would, cleaning the blood away with little flicks of his tongue. The same oral fixation, too. A side effect of the pack mentality, perhaps. Herbert was no ethnographer.

"Is that all, Dottore?"

"Yes, it should--" That same bony hand grasped his arm, forcing him to look at his patient. He could see himself in those dark, endless eyes. "Let go." To the point. Practical. It should work that way, shouldn't it?

"I'm only following your orders." Both hands were on him now, pushing him down into the couch as Armand's weight, negligible as it was, bore down upon him. His skin prickled, electrified, arms coming up automatically to encircle the coltish body. As he did, something slipped from his grasp and thunked against the carpet.

It was very hard to think, to feel beyond the soft lips mouthing at his throat, the teasing heat calling his veins. His biology, it was so perfectly clear, was tailored for this.

Equitable. Reasonable. Hadn't he, hadn't he said--no wonder the boy thought--

Which was, of course, when the door… not so much opened as embedded itself in the wall.

The slender form covering him arched up as Lestat stormed over, shouting something in rapid French archaic enough that Herbert would be lucky to comprehend more than one word in ten.

He tensed, looking about for the source of the threat and slightly jostling the knees planted either side of his thighs.

Armand replied in yet another language (Italian, perhaps? Romanian?), smiling and reasonable counterpoint to Lestat's rage.

And then Lestat essentially teleported across the room and grabbed Herbert.

It was fast, desperate, hands too strong but not violent as such; still, between one second and the next he had been dragged up and set on his feet.

Hands that could likely bend steel turned his head to one side, oh-so-gently probed the tiny scratches over his carotid where Armand had been about to feed.

He shivered involuntarily; the skin was still sensitized, the calming effect already in place despite a lack of follow-through. Something crunched underfoot as he wobbled and tried to stand under his own power.
Lestat was addressing him now, still rattling away in French. Herbert put a hand to his head, trying to concentrate.

"Would you shut up?" He was almost painfully inflamed with unspent tension, and beneath him--

The shattered remains of his sample, blood and flesh smeared across his heel. He dropped to his knees.

"Herbert!" Lestat fell with him, seeming to remember his audience as he did. "What is it. What did he do?"

"The sample's ruined…" He mumbled. "I didn't bring a spare container. I need one." It was easiest to focus on small, attainable tasks. Keep moving forward. He looked to Armand. "I'll need more."

"Of course," As if butter wouldn't melt. "But you've drained me nearly dry. Unfortunately, I would need to return the favor."

"Fine." He'd already wasted enough time. There was no time to waste, to wait, and this ache in his skin--

"Absolutely not! I forbid it!" Lestat dragged him close, almost smothering him. Herbert felt a shard of contaminated glass slice through his pant leg. It--or rather he--went inches along before it lodged somewhere in the meat of his calf.

"Let me go, you imbecile!" He stood (painfully) to leave, but could get no further with that abnormally strong grip on him.

"How would you have it, imp? A 'tragic accident?' You got carried away by his passion, unable to stop yourself? He's not a bauble for you to steal, to--to spite me!"

"Sour grapes." Armand was impassive. "Letting the past color the present again?"

"You know what they say, Armand. Those who fail to learn from the past…" Lestat trailed off, nostrils flaring and eyes visibly dilating before he refocused on Herbert. "You're bleeding.

"It's nothing, really," he dismissed it, dismissed the pain and the blood on his neck and trickling down his leg.

Nothing. Nothing but a nick, a risk. Not enough, something inside whispered.

He was still… worked up. Responding to the stimulus.

Still…

Lestat rose suddenly, up onto his knees, stony exterior mercilessly crushing the remains of the glass into the carpet.

"Show me, love." Long fingers ran up his leg, stole through the hole in his slacks to probe the tender flesh around the cut.

"You caused this--" he sucked in a sharp breath as Lestat's fingers dipped into the slit. Pain. Pain and concern for infection, that was all. "I can treat it at the lab."

"Why use such an outdated method when you know there's a faster alternative?" Armand's eyes held, for the first time in the exchange, an honest curiosity. "It's faster to have Lestat heal you. But you… hmm."
"Get out," Lestat growled, teeth visible and feral. Territorial. "Or face the consequences."

"Certainly, Marquis. I’d hate to poach on your territory, after all." The youth sketched an elegant, theatrical bow on his way out the vacant doorway.

"I needed that sample." Herbert growled, unimpressed by the show of machismo. His leg still hurt (because of Lestat). His nerves were still raw, primed, unsatisfied (because of the damnable Lestat). He didn't even have the work, his hard-won new data wasted beneath his feet.

"He'd have taken you for all you were worth. You'd be lucky if you moved for days after, if you survived."

"So what? I got what I came for. A little indignity is worth it."

"Indignity." Lestat's sensuous mouth worked, lips sucked back and then released fuller and redder than before even as his face became terrible with... something. "Indignity, is it, my darling?" His hand descended fast and hard, taking fine black wool along for the ride with an audible rending.

"I would so hate for your dignity to be compromised."

The freon-chilled 68-degree air felt cold against Herbert's exposed leg and the rivulets traveling down it.

"Stop--" Herbert hissed insincerely. He was in pain, and Lestat could…

He groaned softly when the hand returned to the cut, dipped in, and pulled--a chunk of glass shredded even more skin on the way out, flew free with a hideous delicious pang.

He wondered how contaminated the wound already was even as Lestat's tongue lapped at the ragged edges.

Then he wondered very little at all as he curled forward, hands coming to rest on broad shoulders, to slide and tangle in gold.

Lestat was ruthless in his slow, methodical movements, barely brushing the torn margins of flesh and threatening, over and over, to plunge deeper only to veer away and work at the sluggish streams dripping steadily toward the carpet. And every time he broke away, retracted to breathe hot, anticipating air over the throbbing gash, the pain redoubled. Herbert's groan of frustration was almost obscene.

"Just finish it," he managed, fists clenched in the fabric of Lestat's shirt.

His tormentor blinked, slow and owlish and affected, as if only now noticing Herbert's distress, the flush staining his neck and cheeks. "Oh, but cher. You did teach me to be thorough. Surely, since this means so very little to you, you can indulge this simple country boy. Hmm?"

Another flick of his tongue, running just along the inside of the wound. Herbert's head snapped back, a current of frustration ripping through him.

It was agony; not the pain, but the anticipation. The knowing that with just a deepened touch, a wetter caress of the tongue, Lestat could end it

but didn't.

Why--why did he--
So cruel. So familiar, to have someone on his knees, faux-subjugated, keeping him on the periphery; prolonging and intensifying this sweet pain because to do otherwise would mean something.

It was so very much like

And then, just then, Lestat surged forward, barreled him back onto the sofa, mouth delving deep and full and finally delivering the sucking filthy soul kiss he'd needed to end the hurt.

It was difficult to move afterward. He felt plagued not just by the exhaustion in his body but a disconnection in his mind, fragments of memories he didn't recognize at his own. And above that, the chatter of Lestat intoning his mea culpa, cradling Herbert close to a body warm with his stolen blood. He resented. How he resented. Not the touch but the notion of being kept, the thought of a leash. But he let himself be coddled, carried, too weak to protest. Lestat could have his way. Eventually he would turn away. And Herbert, waiting, would have his samples.

~*~*~*~

Dan stayed up nights and slept poorly through every noon in a Motel Six just off the highway, trucks rumbling past and light blazing through nicotine-stained curtains. Mornings and evenings were for taking vague care of his bodily needs, the better to hit as many bars as possible before closing time. He. He kept at it, not able to trust that the lead he'd found in the bar called Leptirica would really pan out. Not able to stop and wait for Saturday.

(Possibly, maybe. Any hope was better than none, or at least that's what he'd always believed. That was how he'd gotten mixed up with Herbert in the first place: Hope.)

He couldn't say why he was doing this. Couldn't explain why he owed it to the man who had destroyed his life over and over.

He'd believed, though. He'd hoped and promised to fight for that hope. And he'd failed in the clutch too many times. Never again.

Never again did he want to open a door while suffused with a perfectly rational fear that he'd find a dead friend frozen on the other side.

*He dreamed of Herbert playing poker with all of his dead, anteing vials of liquids green and red and terrible, pips marked in sanguine splashes where his friend's fingers touched. He didn't realize who was winning until Herbert tossed his hand down in disgust and accused him of cheating. The stacks of hundreds before him stained Dan’s palms as he pushed them away.*

He conceded to wakefulness at 6 pm, showered, shaved, brushed his teeth and combed his hair like he was bound for a job interview or a first date. Slipping into his least-terrible jeans and a black tee, he tucked the little vial of tarry who-knew-what in his breast pocket out of habit. He'd been carrying it like a charm, hoping to follow it back to its source.

Looking himself in the eye in the mirror, he didn't like what he saw. That would change, though, if he could just make this right.

The club was almost empty when he arrived, and free of the low drone of music and clove-scented
smoke that had defined it before. The bartender, though, was just as nervous--worse, jittery as Dan had been when, studying for his final exams, he’d downed two entire pots of coffee.

The only other inhabitant, a man about his age, blond and thin, sat at the far end of the bar contemplating an untouched drink. He waved a tired hello when Dan came near, as if they were old friends walking a weekly routine.

"Buy you a drink?" the man offered, giving the same easy smile Dan had tried on a hundred girls in a hundred bars before he'd met Meg.

Was he being hit on? Dan had seen a few things, in his time, and of course at the hospital he’d gotten a reputation for his ability to comfort the dying. He had enough images of emaciated, agonized figures to last him a dozen lifetimes. Nightmares of them wearing Herbert’s face were sufficient to last an infinite number more. It was why he pretended not to notice, why he made excuses and shuffled away from the topic. He was straight, of course. But it was best for both of them.

“Honestly, I’m still working off last night.” He leaned backwards against the bar, hoping to seem casual. At least more casual than the reality, which was keeping the front door firmly in his peripheral vision. “Place is pretty dead, huh?”

“That’s the word.” A beat. “Look, I take it neither of us are great at this small talk thing. You wanna just skip it?”

“God, yes.”

“Great.” The man motioned to the bartender, prompting a disquieting look of relief and an unseemly rush for the Staff door, and soon it was just the two of them. “You have something to show me?”

Dan pulled out the scuffed card and handed it over, drumming a hand on the bar. Yes, the height of calm, he was.

“Where’d you get this?” The card tapped a steady beat back and forth against long, boney fingers--the only sign the man was anything more than nonplussed.

At this point he had a pretty good truncated spiel, quick to the point and light on the details. My friend, genius idiot, probably spirited off by the Cartel, last known trace of him. “My roommate, Herbert West,” he began.

The stranger’s stool clattered to the ground, grinding Dan’s story to a halt. “West,” the man repeated, on his feet with every muscle primed.

“Dr. Herbert West, yeah,” Dan nodded, glad he’d decided to stand. “You know him?” Hopefully this wouldn’t be another case of a mourner looking to take revenge for a reanimated relative.

“Unfortunately.”

That was Herbert, all right.

“Do you know where he is? I just--I wanna make sure he’s alright.”

“Well, he’s alive anyway.” Hard, calculating eyes gave Dan a careful examination--not for his body, but for his character. “Is that it?” It seemed he’d been found wanting. As though this sonofabitch had some right to judge.
“A stranger in a dive comes and tells me my friend is definitely alive, don’t worry about, and I check back out to my normal life?” He wanted to. Very much. “No. I need to see him.”

“I thought you might.” Never had words been more burdened with resignation. Excepting, perhaps, the last time Dan had agreed to Herbert’s pleas that he stay. “Look, this might not end well for you. You know that, right?”

Dan shrugged.

“I figure if you wanted to kill me you’d have done it by now.” The empty bar, the apparently ironfisted control. It was clear nobody would ask after his body here.

“It’s not me you’ll have to worry about.”

Dan swallowed, tried to put up a tough front.

"I figured it wasn't." He wrapped his arms around his own chest, index finger unconsciously seeking the by-then-comforting familiarity of the rubber-plugged vial in the tee's pocket. "But I have to find him. He's..." he trailed off. It wasn't like some low-level dealer would care about who Herbert was, who he could have been.

"What?" The man's eyes were surprising, intent and--violet. Elizabeth Taylor eyes. "What is he to you?"

Dan pressed his lips shut. He'd failed before--whatever it was he'd said last time had been enough to get Herbert snatched.

"Cain." Adrenaline surged at the realization that they knew his name, but the hand clamped to his wrist prevented his instinctive flight. "I need to know why I'm supposed to let you into this. For a roommate? A buddy? A friend?" Nails dug in, into his flesh, painful, endurable. "A lover?"

"No!" He strained something, jerking back. "No-- we weren't. We never." Herbert's face, his hands, the way Dan remembered them--they weren't conclusive.

The other man's face held... pity.

"Oh, buddy." He jerked his skinny arm, little or no effort, and Dan slammed down chest-first to the bar. The other hand set between his shoulders like an anvil. "You think that's what makes a lover?"

"By definition, yeah," he groaned. What was intimacy without sex? It had tied him to every woman in his life, and even Meg--she was more than that, had been his everything, but it had started with shy, awkward fumbling in the dorms. "Look, I'm not--"

"Do you want him or not?" The word was loaded with connotation, enough of it innocuous that Dan could cling to it as a raft, and push what he didn't want to face out to sea.

"Yes, alright? I just, I need to see him. Look," His feet scrambled for leverage on the black-painted concrete. "Whatever he got himself into, we can talk this out. H-he's too important. His work is--"

"Yeah. I know all about his 'work.'" But the iron hands holding him down, seemingly without effort, relented. Dan felt something scratch at his chest as he righted himself. He felt, rather than saw, the dark blotch of blood spreading across his shirt. "Shit."

It was cold, sticky, repulsive. Whatever anticoagulants were in it had kept it liquid far longer than normal, but now that it was out he couldn't mistake the scent and thickness of blood.
"What the f--" he didn't get any farther before the thin man's other hand clapped to his mouth, violet eyes rolling and wild of a sudden.

"Shut up. Shut up, Cain, and follow my lead. You're marked, which makes you safe for now--but your lover dumped you into a whole lot more shit." He let go. Dan's face felt bruised. "Someone's coming. Behave."

In 6th grade Dan had gone to a kid's house and ended up sitting outside the bathroom door, rolling his eyes while the three other boys inside psyched themselves into trying some summoning ritual on a mirror. This felt much the same--with the same chill of dread he didn't want to admit to, which felt just as ridiculous.

Except this time the door did swing open in almost perfect time with his informant--his captor's--declaration. It was an entrance fit for a stage show: backlit against the streetlights, clad in leather and tall boots, and the face--

"You!" Dan couldn't help himself, and his mouth was quickly covered again.

The same pushy, unnerving college student who'd come to his door (the same night Herbert had disappeared, how had he not--) was now busy pocketing a pair of sunglasses, casual smile belied by the obviously tense muscles in his neck.

"What's a boy like you doing in a place like this, Doctor Cain? And why are you covered in my blood?" That grin widened a fractional amount, revealing canines so sharp they had to have been sculpted.

What the fuck had Herbert gotten him into.

"Now, now, this is all your doing. You did give me your blessing when we met, didn't you? You seemed happy enough to take the money. And apparently more than that."

Dan struggled, flailed, against that muffling hand and the immovable body it was attached to until he hung limp in the thin man's effortless grasp. (PCP? The guy was too calm for that.)

"Daniel, let go," said the fucker, and Dan wanted to obey, he did, he'd already released his grip on so much, life and work and self-respect--but then it was he who was released, stumbling and shaky-legged.

"Lestat." Gangly was now wary, shifty, bravado gone as he addressed the apparent owner of the card that had burned in Dan's pocket for 1500 miles and two weeks of terror.

So young. Christ.

Dan could handle young. Dan had lived through wars.

Pretending to be heedless of the blood (Jesus, Jesus, blood on him from a guy like this, clean it off fast but now wasn't the time), he rolled his shoulders back into the stiffest dignity he could muster. (Borrowed from their very bone of contention.)

"Mr. Delioncourt--" The bastard closed his eyes, actually flinched, as Dan tried to begin.

"Language, doctor, please. Pronunciation. Unless you're speaking so badly out of spite, in which case I must commend your commitment to the role."

This cocky little--Dan took a breath. They had every chip. Not pissing this guy off was his only
"I don't know what Herbert did, or what he owes you, but I'm prepared to pay it off. He's got a bright future. He's a good doctor--"

"But a bit rough around the edges for hospital work. Really, Cain, if we could cut through the posturing. I have things I need to do tonight." The way he said ‘things’ was voluptuous, seductive. Horrible. It just confirmed the needfulness of Dan’s fight.

"Whatever contract you have with Herbert, I'll buy it out,” he offered, thinking of the house he’d once planned for, the med school loans he still owed. “I have some savings, I'm good for it."

Lestat’s wide mouth curled up into a smug smile.

"You and I both know that what the good Dr. West can do is prized above what you can possibly offer. But only one of us was foolish enough to let him slip away."

"You drugged him, you slimy little shit! He was half out of his mind, you--you tricked him!” It’s the truth. Dan knows it to his bones, remembers so clearly the glazed-over wreck he’d barely shared a home with those last few days. “What've you done with him?"

"Ah, there's that temper. Good, at least now we're being honest. Herbert would be so proud. And honestly," it was bad enough to hear that name spoken so casually from that mouth, from this punk kid with that accent, but the look on his face. "I've done everything you dreamed about doing. I gave him his breakthrough. I provided everything he could need to realize his dreams. I've reduced him to helpless passion in my arms-"

"You sick fuck!” There was no way the Herbert he knew would've agreed to anything so base. He--he was above it, cleaner than all of them.

"Oh, Cain." The mockery drained from those youthful features, leaving behind something old and weary and rigid. "You know nothing of sickness, Doctor. Sickness is this--this dog-in-the-manger cruelty."

"I'm not--"

"You're perverse. You don't care for him; you never did. You enjoy the scandal, don't you? The shock of him?" The younger man leaned in, burning blue gaze exactly level with Dan's own. "You won't have him, but you'd deny even the opportunity for another to give all he needs."

Those fucked-up, punked-out werewolf teeth bared in a snarl Dan had to look away from.

"He needs me." Saying it aloud, suddenly, Dan felt the weight as he never had. It's not as though it had ever been a secret, not as though Herbert' boundless pride had stopped him from making that clear, but... The lump in his throat made his voice crack. "He needs--please, just let me see him. Even if you're telling the truth--"

"How dare you--"

"--He'll work himself to death without limits. Then you won't get whatever it is you're after."

"And you'll fix him, will you? Drag him back to your little hovel and build the life he ought to have? How noble. How saintly. I've heard enough." Lestat turned to go.

"Whatever you think you've got on him, it won't work." Dan shouted after him. "Once he runs out
of equipment or materials, you won't matter anymore. You never did!"

In the space of a blink the man had leapt across the room and grabbed Dan by the throat, the momentum of it carrying them to the far wall. Dan gasped for air, his toes only barely touching the ground.

"I should kill you where you stand," the monster holding him growled. "You traitorous, cowardly worm."

"Whoa! whoa, whoa, okay, let's all calm down." The second Daniel had a hand on Lestat's arm, his eyes almost as wide and terrified as Dan's. "Don't do anything you'll regret."

"Speak sense, Molloy. I won't regret this; in fact, I think I shall rather enjoy it."

Close, close, too close, and Dan was choking, starved for air--

"Herbert wouldn't like it." Molloy had a voice for radio, even and measured, every syllable enunciated so well as to be intelligible even to someone on the verge of blacking out.

"What Herbert doesn't know won't hurt him--or you!" Lestat snapped.

"Isn't him knowing everything the plan?"

And somehow, that caused a relaxation. Not a release, but Dan could at least put his weight on his toes and take tiny whistling inhales.

"Lestat. Be reasonable," Molloy raised his hands placatingly. There was blood, Dan's blood, under the polished nails of his right hand. "However much of a jerk this guy is... don't you think Herbert's smart enough to see that, once you're side by side?" Molloy stepped nearer, took Dan's shoulder in an implacable grip. "You were just saying you owed him something. Something special. What could he want more than his friend?"

"Fine." Lestat's hand tightened for a moment, nails digging in hard enough to leave bloody crescents behind, and then Dan was released. He collapsed to the floor, vision haloed with white. "Bring him with you to the boat. The less I have to look at him the better."

Molloy waited until they were alone to kneel by Dan's side. "Holy shit, do you have a single brain cell left in there?"

The oxygen deprivation hadn't been that bad. "I'm not--"

"Not dumb enough to run your mouth off in front of the most jealous, short tempered egomaniac on Earth? Yeah, I would've thought so. Apparently I was wrong." Molloy lifted him to his feet by the back of his shirt. "Follow me. And next time you stick your foot in it you can hang. I'm not getting beheaded for your repressed ass."

~*~*~*~

Following the loss of Armand's samples, life at the mansion had quickly taken a turn for the insufferable. Lestat led the charge, having seemingly dedicated himself to the cause of being underfoot. Herbert couldn't reliably state if there had been much quantifiable change in the
supposed vampire’s demands for affection, but his perception had been irrevocably soured. Every pet name now carried a ghost of mockery and the clear, superseding image of the cage Herbert had allowed to close around him.

But it wasn’t just Lestat--at least the man had the small measure of grace, after two days of ineffective cajoling, to leave Herbert to his work. Every interaction now carried the edge of having come down from a blissful high, leaving everything harsher in the comparative daylight. The majority of the uninfected now avoided him, ceasing conversation when he came near as if he counted their words with any kind of importance. It was not unlike being in a high school for the self-proclaimed damned, without the opportunity to test out (but then, academia had proven to share the same petty, clannish tendencies, so perhaps there was simply no escape from human nature).

He had tried, once, to get a second sample from Armand in spite of Lestat’s fuming--and hadn’t gotten further than the door before being stopped by its “guard.”

“You had your chance,” Damien spat. “He might have time to waste on you, but the rest of us don’t.”

“A waste.” Herbert let out a bark of derisive laughter. “As if your paltry grasps at favor have anything on the study of death itself. When you’d be far better served in your goals by helping me with mine.”

“What, your need to give approved, scientific names to truths we already know?”

“To gain provable, replicable evidence of how this disease preserves the body, apparently indefinitely. The greatest breakthrough mankind could dream of. But please, don’t let me stop you from courting a child’s favor. It seems to be going so well for you.”

“You’re bluffing.” Damien growled, beady eyes narrowed still further.

“You said yourself that your supposed ‘Prince’ looks for the exceptional. What better qualification than a man who can defeat death?” Now there was a thought. He’d been so caught up in the new samples, he hadn’t even thought to bring his reagent in as a catalyst, not after those first few experiments. The things he might be able to do… “Forget it. Enjoy yourselves.”

Head full of theoretical equations, he returned to the one space that was truly his. His lab, at least, was sacrosanct. Earnest and duplicitous money spent the same, and he had top of the line equipment to show for it--though the research was too new, too volatile, and (of course) useless without more tests. He took a beaker of Lestat’s blood from the beaker and set it on the counter alongside his scant remaining supply of reagent, hoping against reason that his wonderful creation would once more open new doors.

“Did you mean it?” Asked a voice from the doorway. Damien looked especially drawn in the light of the doorway, his cheekbones almost emaciated.

“About your incompetence? Definitely. Anything else you’ll have to be more specific on.” Herbert finished with the syringe and set it to the side.

“You really--you think you can make it like a medicine. The blood.”

“Grossly simplified, but that is the idea, yes.” He stiffened as the older man drew closer, fingertips brushing the scalpel he’d left on the counter. He was outmatched in size and probably strength. If things went south, they wouldn’t do so in his favor.
“Look, man. Don’t screw with me on this.” Damien said. “You know what the docs told me? Six months to live, and I’ve been here fourteen.”

“I see.” He wasn’t picked for his bedside manner. Dan should be here. Dan knew what to say in this situations. All Herbert saw was a stranger coming closer, eyeing his work. “That’s… regrettable. You have my sympathy.”

A snort. “The sympathy would go down easier with that cure.”

“You can’t!” Instinct drove Herbert back a step, to put himself between this interloper and the research. “It isn’t ready, it may be years before I’m able to isolate anything of use-“

“Bullshit! You’re just trying to--” They were inches apart now. “Look, I know I’ve been an asshole, but please. I need it, this is my last shot, they’re never gonna pick someone as old and ugly as me, I just--” He made a grab for the counter.

In his mind, Herbert saw the grungy basement in Arkham, saw that leering, calculating face that had announced its intent to steal Herbert’s work and to cut away the only good things left in his life. It was happening again, he couldn’t let it happen, he had to

“Stay back!” He snatched up the scalpel, meaning to use it as a barrier. Instead as he whipped it around he felt the smooth, minimal resistance of sharp steel gliding through skin. Blood spattered his glasses. Arterial spray.

“Y-you,” Damien clutched a hand to his throat, blood pouring out from between his fingertips. “Sonofabitch.”

The weapon fell from Herbert’s grasp, clinking to the floor. He would have to act quickly, if he were to do something about this. Gauze, pressure, needle and thread. He would--

Pain erupted in his abdomen. Kneeling at his feet was Damien, all remnants of his strength seemingly channeled into the piece of metal carving a line across Herbert’s stomach. The floor was growing slippery with the gouts of blood escaping both of them.

A timer began in Herbert’s head, born in medical school and calibrated in the tents in Peru. His extremities were already beginning to numb. He’d never make it to help on his feet, and there was no phone installed in the lab. Hell, he wouldn’t make it up the stairs. His options dwindled before his eyes, backed by the steady, screaming need to survive.

No telling yet what the harvested blood would do to someone in his condition and anyway, he didn’t have the vast quantities that were reportedly needed to cause infection. He had no proof it would even be sufficient to heal him if he drank it.

But intravenously…

He shucked his lab coat, trying to staunch the bleeding, and his eyes fell on the syringe containing his mix of blood and reagent. They looked strange, together in the plastic tube--blackened, eerie, but still possessed of a greenish glow.

Herbert wouldn’t be the first scientist to test a cure on himself.

He fumbled with the syringe, old instincts taking over as he fished a strip of rubber from the cabinets and tied off his arm. This would work, or he would be dead. Sinking to the ground, a quickly cooling corpse beside him, he depressed the plunger.
The pleasure hit immediately, the sensory intensification of the infected blood a beat before the mental sharpening of the reagent. He let out a groan at the vices circulating inside him, the utter abandonment of any false temperance. It was the end, after all. There was quite literally nothing left to lose.

His eyes dazzled; he wondered whether the pupils were contracted or dilated. Whether medicine or infection would win out. The skin all over his body tingled like a healed scar ready to shed the scab, itchy and near pleasurable. Tingling. Warm.

He felt the scalpel buried deep, held it in with a hand growing tacky.

Energy, energy, he felt full of it, burning with it, boiling.

Heat, lines of heat shooting up (shooting up, Dan, Dan, Dan's not--) shooting up along his veins and arteries, the glowing internal map of travel he'd memorized and traced in others now blazing with fire.

The spasms that took him ripped away voice, thought, and his arms jerked with the convulsions. He felt something deep within tear further at his disruption of that small terrible bit of steel, felt the molten gold spill into cavities for which it was never meant.

He's been fighting death, but there's no way he'll survive this. So much life will kill him.

Ringing in his ears, the sound tinny and distant, was a scream. The concrete floor--when had he fallen?--was impossibly cool against his cheek; not just coldness but the platonic ideal of it.

Though his eyes were rebelling against him, broken down to show only swimming abstractions of images, he was certain he felt hands laid on him, holding him down so that the lancing pain in his bones could find him. He could've counted each fiber of muscle moving in each finger, and not seen a thing.

Eventually, sensation bled into one steady pulse of LIFE, refusing to let him go, death unwilling to take him no matter how much he begged. This, then, must have been his punishment.

~*~*~*~

Dan spent the length of the boat ride from Miami to their destination wondering how he’d become the sort of man who was kidnapped from goth bars and then held hostage on a boat. His captors didn’t even have any weapons, though the one time Dan had shown signs of not following promptly along Molloy had gripped his arm hard enough that he could practically feel the bone bruising. He’d been quiet after that.

Besides, there was Herbert. Uncomfortable, leering implications aside, Dan couldn’t abandon his quest now--which was feeling especially questlike now, as they approached the doors of a downright palatial mansion.

Lestat tensed as he put his hand on the door. “Something isn’t right.”
Molloy nodded. “I hear it too.”

They were making this up to psych him out. All Dan heard was the chirp of crickets.

The open, white-tiled entryway looked hollow and sterile—an operating theater, with a slim (too slim) Goth girl as the only nurse.

She was pretty, blonde and pale, eyes shadowed and lips flawlessly black under her shiny blonde hair, and she looked frightened.

Composed, though, like someone used to triage. Like a woman in a warzone.

"What--" Lestat begins, and she holds her hands up placatingly, glossy deep maroon nails like dried blood.

"It's him. He's in his lab; we didn't know what to--"

And then Lestat… vanished. Blinked out of existence.

Dan's knees buckled, but Molloy's hands appeared on his shoulders, held him up.

"Calm down. You're a doctor, aren't you?" the man hissed, thin lips drawing back from those same hideous teeth.

Struck dumb, Dan nodded.

"Good. We're going to need you." Violet eyes grew distant. "He's screaming."

"Daniel," the girl came to meet them. "Please, go after him. I'm worried he'll-"

Molloy nodded. "Bring him with you to the lab. I'll go ahead."

Her hands took up the grip on Dan's shoulders, and it was only then that he realized how cold Molloy had been. Chilled as a corpse.

"Can you walk?" She was speaking slowly and clearly, as if he were in shock. It wouldn't be the first time.

"I think--yeah. Yeah, I'm alright. What's--"

"Follow me. I'll explain what I can on the way." She started down a maze of corridors, stopping every now and then to make sure he was behind her.

"What's your name?" he asked, desperate for something like a normal human interaction in all of this.

"Karen," she indulged him.

"Nice to meet you." She walked so fast. Even with twice her stride, he could barely keep up. "I'm Dan."

By the time they got there, even he could hear it: anguished, animal sounds made, he realized as he listened, by more than one voice.

The door in the wall, the stairway down, would have been weird on their own. They were nothing when backed by… that.
Torn-out, hideous, like a man on fire. Like the scream of the dead.

Dan would know.

The scene that greeted him was a nightmare—the corpse less than nothing, the glowing green of reagent almost a comfort in the gleaming alien world he'd entered.

And the rest… Lestat knelt in a literal puddle of blood, animalistic, shrieking, face and hair smeared as he cradled the clammy, twitching form of Dan's friend, long pale fingers on what Dan recognized as a scalpel protruding from the abdomen.

He realized too late the idiocy Lestat would commit, couldn't have imagined seeing that hand grasp and twist and withdraw the slender blade from its wet fleshy housing with a horrific slurping sound.

"Stop!" Didn't he know he would only send Herbert to the grave faster? There was already so much blood. He must've been empty, for there to be that much on the floor. "What are you doing, you're killing him!"

Molloy crouched at Lestat's side, arguing with him. At least someone was trying to talk sense--

Lestat's movement was too quick to see. All Dan could say for sure was that it ended with Molloy colliding against the far wall, a visible crack forming in the concrete. Molloy vanished, then, only the damage marking his former presence. Karen withdrew nearly as fast. And Lestat stood, still cradling that small form in his arms.

Did the freaks have any idea who they were watching die, the great mind guttering out and leaving the body to snarl and snap like a fatally mauled animal?

They were supposed to live forever. Herbert had promised him that, in another basement, such a short time ago. Now…

He felt the comforting fuzziness of shock looming, but pushed it away. With Herbert already in that state, it was up to Dan to function. For once.

For whatever reason, Lestat let Dan through, let him close to do his duty. Laid Herbert out, even, on the operation table for Dan’s inspection, clamped down on wrists and shoulders to stop the flailing.

Dan had to in some way follow his so-oft-violated Hippocratic oath; God knew keeping Herbert alive would harm someone, and soon, but letting him die would harm Dan more, and he’d always been selfish that way.

He ripped the bloody shirt open, began ever-futile compressions by ground-in habit, tears hazing his vision as always. He didn't get ten in before Lestat stopped him. Gently, almost.

He struggled, tried to keep going, only to feel another impossibly strong grasp on him. "Don't," the person whispered, their deep green eyes as locked to the scene as well. "You won't be of any use to him."

"Let go of me," Dan hissed, jerked fruitlessly like a chihuahua on a leash. "He'll die--"

"Yes, he will," they said simply. Brutally.

And yes, of course Herbert would. These freaks wouldn't call for help, wouldn't get proper medical
treatment in the tiny window available, and the most brilliantly vital person Dan had ever met would die screaming in the arms of that fucking kid.

Couldn't Dan at least touch him while it happened? Soothe him, talk to him, maybe slip a traitorous needle full of morphine into his vein?

Maybe apologize and beg forgiveness. For what, he wasn't sure--loss of faith? Cowardice? Throwing himself headlong into death as well? He knows that’s something Herbert would never have wanted, for all his recklessness. He’d fought for life, Dan’s included.

If Dan wanted to help, Lestat said from that echoing distant place outside the trauma, he could sew up the wound.

It always ended like that, someone pulling him away, and he wanted to fight, but… yes, he could sew it up; could return the favor Herbert did him in Peru before they sent his friend to the grave.

The likely unmarked grave, lost to history. They were supposed to be famous.

His steady hands made a surprisingly clean, neat line. The flesh was as cold as the cadavers he’d worked on in med school, and still Herbert had to be held down to keep him from thrashing, bruises barely blooming (how, when his blood was all over the tile, squishing under Dan’s sneakers?).

It was grotesque. He’d thought himself done with the animate dead.

His eyes burned, and the monsters barely gave him time to cut the thread before hustling him back, the green-eyed one holding him still by the door. The perfect vantage point to watch as Lestat bent over Herbert like Prince fucking Charming. He had no right, but there was nothing Dan could do. The one time he was willing to throw his life on the line, the one time he hadn't run, and now he couldn't do anything. The irony was too bitter.

And then, as Lestat stared down into those vacant eyes, something in his expression changed. His mouth set in a firm line, flawless face determined. And he--

"Christ!" The hand on Dan’s shoulder was tight as a vice. And still the pain couldn't distract from the utter horror of seeing Lestat bury his face in Herbert's neck, his tense, corded throat. Those pained, frantic movements slowed and then stilled almost completely. And when the brat raised his head, there was blood dripping from his mouth. When the vampire--the fucking vampire--released Herbert, his face was a blissful death mask. He’d never once looked so relaxed before.

And then the monster ruined all that, too.

"Don't," Dan's keeper said again, though this time the words weren't aimed at him.

Blood, blood everywhere, blood from Lestat's shining unnatural *eyes* like a marble saint.

"I--" that powerful voice broke utterly, a sob welling up from Lestat's chest as his hands touched and caressed Herbert's clammy, limp form with perverted tenderness. "I swore, Louis. Swore I wouldn't. But--You understand."

"We all swear," 'Louis' said with terrible gentleness, then even softer, "Don't look, Monsieur. It is a terrible thing."

Dan didn't listen, had never been good at following orders. Watched as Lestat straddled his friend (never more, never, door closed forever by Herbert's enemy), watched as Lestat slashed his own
wrist and forced his blood into the mouth of a near-corpse, as though the murder weren't defilement enough.

Heard a thin, pained moan, a sound of desperation and something more.

At least this was on some level familiar.

"Birth is always painful," Herbert had said so long ago, and it'd always been true. The writhing, the agony; Dan had seen them too many times, starting with a cat with far fewer than nine lives and far more than one.

And then Herbert was alive, jolted into wakefulness with the same terrible quickness as his reanimates, his hands locking around the wrist at his mouth--not to reject it but to pull it closer.

The sounds were obscene, from both parties. Dan could have closed his eyes and still felt the rending specificity of those gasping, suckling moans invading him to the core. The sight of his cold, reserved genius writhing between a stranger's muscular thighs was only the uncanny icing on top.

A cruel, morbid part of his mind found it ironic that after years of sneering at Dan's romantic pursuits, his friend got turned on by death itself.

It was Lestat--the damnable bastard who had started all of this--who had to break away, wrenching his arm back from the snarling, once-living corpse. But even that was not humiliation enough, as he grasped Herbert's blood-stained face and planted a kiss on his forehead.

"What is wrong with--Jesus Christ." Louis' eyes were wet, streaks of red dripping down from them. Fear seized Dan's heart then, backed by a fresh chorus of screams. Would it never stop. Would they not just let him die?

The sick, sick sonofabitch quelled it in the worst way possible--by fastening his mouth to Herbert's neck again, committing the world's most hideous parody of a hickey. Jesus Christ, Dan could actually see the blood drain from Herbert's straining, pretty features, see the fight flicker out as his body acquiesced to the terrible crushing grip Dan had felt two hours ago.

Hear the pleasured, perfect, impossible sounds falling from corpse-grey lips that should only ever dispense harsh brilliance, diamond-hard gems of truth.

These twisted, predatory freaks had no idea what they were tearing apart, there on that altar to carnage.

Dan closed his eyes, finally, when Lestat began anew the process of putting himself into that languid, gasping, needy vessel. He let himself cry. Mourning for Herbert, and for himself--after all of this, there was no chance that he'd walk out of this mansion alive. Even if he could bring himself to want to.

If only he could close his ears.

It went on who knew how long, how many cycles, each time faster and harder and worse, until finally it ended with a sound of motion carrying an edge of finality and a strangled groan of completion. Cautious, exhausted, he opened salt-crusted eyes.

His heart stopped in his chest.

Herbert was standing in front of him, staring at him, silent and whole. But there was no recognition
in that half-familiar face.

He looked deranged and gore-slick. He looked... not dead. Not reanimated, either. Nor alive.

For all they’d never touched the way Molloy had so aggressively implied, Dan would be lying if he said he hadn't found Herbert entrancing once or twice: when he spoke of what they could achieve, when the bottomless loneliness of Meg's death seemed inescapable, and Herbert was always there. For all his awkwardness and nondescript dress, Herbert had had a violent, magnetic charisma about him fuelled by his own strange passions. But this was different. As Herbert opened eerie, wild, vivid eyes, Dan felt what it was like to be a mouse hypnotized by a cobra.

"Herbert..." Dan tried, sick unto death.

The noise seemed wake the figure before him. He looked gorgeous, carved from blushed alabaster. And he moved so fast. Too fast to see, when he jerked forward to fasten himself against Dan's neck.

Needle-sharp points pierced the skin, and any protest Dan had left flooded out of him with the last of his strength. He felt dizzy and light, almost more blissful for how his mind demanded he be disgusted. He tried to lift his arms, to get a hold on Herbert, but his limbs had been weighted down with lead.

At last he was released, left to slump against the wall with the color draining from his vision. Herbert blinked in and out with his vision, his merciless gaze now intent on his hands. At least, Dan thought, he'd done that much.

He let himself sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter, Entanglements! Blood! Herb being VERY good at dealing with issues! Lestat being VERY good at Maker/Fledgling relationships!
With Herbert's unplanned turning, things in the household are in an uproar. Promises broken, alliances shifting--and in the midst of everyone struggling to cope, a new visitor descends on the Island.

"Well, Louis?" Lestat was winded, weak with the effort of an act he hadn't performed in over 180 years, but the obvious pleasure he took in making a new fledgling was still the same.

Louis' face drew tight in something like revulsion before he mastered it and resumed the smooth, bustlike blankness with which he went through most nights.

"You know what I'll say. I don't know why you ask." He covered the mortal in his loose, tattered coat, refusing to be indulgent. "Did enjoy making me play your precious audience?"

The new fledgling, freshly fed, was deep into the trance of the first night, staring at his own hands in empty fascination. (They were lovely hands, in point of fact--neatly kept, quick and coordinated, with slim, sure fingers and pretty bones. Louis could stare at such hands on another, one not Lestat’s.) West would descend into the last throes of death soon. No doubt Lestat wouldn't wish to deal with it.

"Knowing what you'll say is nothing like hearing it, mon cher." He smiled widely, rudely, baring fangs to emphasize his jolly monstrosity.


There was no point fighting, and the child needed assistance. They had no coffin for him, and Louis well remembered how that very ‘error’ played out on his own first night.

"Come with me." He grasped the new fledgling's wrists, knowing how difficult it could be to break through that initial wonder. (As though he ever really had.) "Your body is still changing. There is still pain to endure." Infinite centuries of it. He briefly tried to meet Lestat's gaze, dare him to take his responsibility back, but their creator was ever-so-busy wiping himself clean of gore.

Those new eyes wandered, locked onto the unconscious mortal as barest understanding dawned.

"He'll live," Louis reassured him, hearing the strong heartbeat, seeing the steady rise and fall of chest. "Worry for yourself now." His maker would be no reliable help. Instead, Lestat smiled like an indulgent uncle and allowed (forced) Louis to take over care of the new creation as he had only twice before.

Too late in the night by far to be starting this, but it was what it was. He hurried West along to the suite of rooms he’d been inhabiting--no good. Windows. (Might be a mercy, but.)

Lestat's ostentatious rooms boasted an equally luxurious, utterly pointless ensuite bathroom, walled
West didn't speak a word through the shower, the purging, attention on droplets traveling down the fine blue marble walls and brass fixtures. Louis wasn't certain the ability to communicate hadn't been lost entirely, would be suspicious of a shattered mind if not for the attentive flick of those eyes every time he so much as lifted his hand.

Yet he stayed passive, easy to direct, his mind quiet with shock even to Louis' crippled senses. It seemed safe enough to leave for only a moment in to fetch an old, loose sweater and a set of pajamas, soft, clean, easy things for the newly intense senses to cope with and possibly take comfort in.

When he returned, the fledgling was peeling silken threads out of his flesh like thorns. A visible line remained on the skin, half healed at the moment of death, but it held well enough that he didn’t fret, and the fledgling seemed intent on his task, so Louis allowed it before taking back Lestat’s ruined hair scissors and tossing them in the wastebasket. He pulled West’s wondering, searching, delicate hands away from what by then were a series of blood-speckled pockmarks, and shepherded him into the only safe coffin he could think of.

At least West's compliance held, or the death sleep threatened early--either way, small mercies. He allowed Louis to seal him up safely, half-curled on his side and idly stroking the worn green velvet pillow in a soothing, sleepy gesture. Louis could scarce bear the thought of sharing a space with another of Lestat's impulses, another punishment for some invented defect in Louis' character that the man would claim to adore. Or worse, some pointless whim, as meaningless as they all were. And so after giving up his own small berth, he had to struggle with himself not to storm back to that hideous room, to give into the fight he was so obviously being baited into. After two centuries, one of them had to be the adult--as this so richly proved.

He could take one of the useless beds for one day. More worrisome was the question of the friend. The doctor--Cain--lay where he’d fallen, neck oozing gently but well on its way to healing. Armand’s Karen gently fussed beside him, their unhealthy pallor making for a matched set.

She wanted to give him of the preserved blood, the stuff held in reserve for when the pathetic mortals the others kept ran dry, as though the end point wouldn’t inevitably be the same for all.

Lestat would no doubt consider the man a loose thread, an impediment to bonding with his new pet. Armand would kill him for spite, if he didn't do worse. Louis sighed. Hardly the ‘sensitive’ one, he'd become the only one left with sense. He'd have to make arrangements for two.

Every step he took, securing the mortal in a nearby room and listening to promises that Karen would care for him through the day, until they saw what would come, further solidified his anger. If Lestat had any sense in his fool head, he wouldn't show his face.

He felt the rage blowing through him like a cold dry wind, mummifying him.

And of course Lestat hadn't sense.

He was waiting there, by Louis' lent-out casket, freshly dressed in his pretend Prince’s raiment of
silks and velvets and denim, beautifully coiffed and looking down with pride at his latest violation.

“Thank you so, mon cher. He makes a picture, does he not?” Come to see the image now that the unpleasantness had passed, nothing to disturb his illusion of generosity. “And you’ll adore him, once you get to know him.”

It took his every ounce of composure not to chase Lestat out with all the grace of a put-upon wife, rolling pin in hand.

"I’ll not know him, Lestat. He’s your affair entirely from this night on, as indeed are you." He could have ranted, railed, but to no purpose beyond his Maker's perverse gratification. The newborn thing Lestat had created lay between them, insurmountable.

"Take him back if you're so concerned. I've done the dirty work on your doll." He'd stab through his own heart to get at Lestat's beyond, blind with quiet fury. Months ago, weeks, Lestat had rushed into his arms and sworn his loving devotion. And now here they were. The sheer depravity of it, the memories they never shared aloud, were so present that night that Louis could almost see her ghost curled up beside this ill-wrought brother.

He’d tend Lestat's son that night, but no longer. Never again.

"Louis…" Lestat reached for him, and Louis drew himself up tall, steeled himself to ignore those expressive, iridescent, false eyes, that practiced actor’s appeal.

The affection and hurt that had so nearly fooled him yet again.

"I wish no part of this. I should do him the kindness of leaving him under the window, and so save him from such a callous maker. If you leave him to me again, I will.” He had never had the overt cruelty of his fellows. But this, this would be mercy.

"For the love of Hell--"

Whatever Lestat was about to say was lost in Louis' purely symbolic slap.

"I may have loved Hell once," he growled, "but no longer."

Who cared that it was a lie. Lestat couldn't feel to know.

"Goodnight." He put out the frozen politeness of a threat. Beneath it, he felt exhausted, death sleep looming not from time but from grief. Repetition, always, things different and the same and newly beautiful and grotesque.

Lestat's eyes flashed, and for a second Louis remembered his own birth and his fear of that ire, before he found it mean and childish. They both knew who would win a contest of strength, but Louis' luck held another night. Lestat stalked out, no doubt preparing for another of his famous sulks. Forming a sob story to tell his precious fledgling.

Louis bolted the door behind him, symbolism upon pointless symbolism.

Memories of his daughter were more a presence, more a comfort to him than the lover he had been close enough to touch. (The former lover.) Hell and damnation.

~*~*~*~
Scientists, by their very nature, adjusted to the unknown. Their work demanded a constant existence on the cusp of destroying all they knew and held dear, and a certain fortitude was necessary to carry on under such pressures. Still, there were limits to what the human mind could absorb at a given time—even when it was no longer, strictly speaking, human. Herbert rose from a coffin in the dead of night, cutting his tongue on the malformed protrusions in his mouth before being engulfed in a familiar and yet newly strange embrace, and it had all been downhill from there.

He’d stared his way through new applications of the ridiculous speech Lestat had given when they met, constantly distracted by the glint of the low-burning lamps or the brush of a velvet curtain; had balked when he was presented with one of the hangers-on who had stared at him with unveiled suspicion when he’d arrived, now wearing an expression of naked, stomach-churning desperation. (But hunger had won in the end, the demands of his strange new infectious passengers all too willing to be puppeteered by Lestat’s insistence. The ‘groupie’ s’ blood loss had been impressive but not dangerous.) The coddling was a low, droning constant as they walked the halls, accompanied by his ‘patron’s’ hands fussing with his hair and bogarting his glasses.

And then they stepped back into his lab, and the world clicked into proper focus, like zeroing a microscope in perfectly on a slide.

“Where is it?” he demanded. There were still traces of blood on the floor, microscopic yet obvious, but the body that had lain crumpled beside his own was nowhere to be found.

“Gone. You needn’t worry about such trash. Never again.” More ineffectual preening, a cold thumb running over his cheekbones.

He grabbed the offending hand. “I want it.”

Lestat blinked, slow and stupid in a moment where Herbert really had no patience for it. “But cher-

“You told me that the contents of this lab were mine. That includes samples. Bring it. Back.” He found that if he tightened his hold he could hear bone and muscle shifting beneath the skin, though Lestat didn’t flinch.

They locked eyes for what might have been (was, by the deafening tick of the wall clock) several minutes. And then it was Lestat, infuriatingly proud and petty, who looked away. “I’ll see what I can do.” He vanished, then too fast even for Herbert’s enhanced perceptions to track.

Given that the infection was minimal (as minimal as possible, anyway), he didn't anticipate the hemophagia presenting too serious of a drive as yet. And he required baseline tests, with no time wasted. So while Lestat was gone, he carefully ingested several cc's of water and a bite of a sandwich he'd kept in the refrigerator.

The emesis interrupted his attempts to take notes. Rather violently.

So. It seemed he had missed a great deal while he was unconscious--the tears produced by the force of his retching were red, just as Lestat's had been. A complete transformation. His nails, too, bore the same unnatural varnish. The disease was quite efficient in its work.

"A gift." Lestat dumped the corpse unceremoniously upon his lab table, the smell of it already pungent (not that his senses were exactly trustworthy at the moment). "Don't say I never gave you
anything, my darling. Aside from life eternal," he added sulkily.

Herbert spat again into the sink, wondering whether he dared rinse his mouth to clear away the peachy blood-mingled saliva.

"Thank you, Lestat, that's very helpful." He banded his notebook shut out of long habit, pushing away memories of the hallucination that had intruded last night--the image of the other person who should by rights be allowed access to his findings.

"Yes, well." It was like watching one of Dan's cats, the infernal beasts that came slinking around no matter how Dan denied encouraging them, arching their backs and hissing for the crime of not intuiting their wants. "I did promise to assist you."

It would've been fine, if only the man could have left well enough alone. But he hovered nearby as Herbert straightened out the body and examined the ugly mess of vocal cords and meat that had been his impulsive handiwork. Far too long dead to make a proper, cognizant reanimation. Well, that was fine. He would simply have to show a bit of *creativity* for this case.

"Don't you feel anything, mon savant? No grand revelation? A belief in the truths I've told you?" Arms snaked around him from behind, a pointed chin resting in his hair. "No sudden passions?"

The touching was… not terrible. Possible to tolerate, to work around. His skin remained soft, no sign as yet of the hardening.

Still.

"Feelings are irrelevant," he said absently, examining the corpse's hands, eyes. Parts were always fun. Eyes milky, sclera marked by the ravages of his cancer and whatever drugs he'd been pumping into his veins. The full necropsy should prove intriguing. "I've contracted a serious illness, and need to keep accurate records of its progression while working to find a means of mitigating the symptoms."

The eyes had been hazel, amber almost, and even now the light caught the pigmented irises in a way… he wanted to see them closer.

"That--it--you've been born anew, and you're still using that ridiculous 'disease' talk? Herbert?" He didn't need to shake completely free of Lestat's grasp, he found, to reach forward. He had scalpels, a whole bank of tools, but the immediacy of need seized him. His nails were sharp; the muscular structures and the optic nerve put up no resistance at all, and then his prize was in his hand. Fascinating. He let the soft, jellied orb roll across his palm, watching it catch the light. Perhaps he could even do fine dissection work without needing an intercession--

No. It seemed not. Why, he wondered suddenly, had he allowed so much viscera onto his hands?

"Poor impulse control," he muttered, glad at least of a secondary sample. Not a complete loss. He could take this waste of space to pieces, slowly, as if he were a fresh-faced med student once again.

The skin was soft, even softer than his own, rough with stubble and coated in powdery, greasy makeup. He could smell it, beneath the pigments and hair spray, smell the sourness of sweat and illness and chemicals. And beneath that, death. The throat smelled good, though, different, razorburned flesh rough against his lips--

"Herbert!" The name carried a French intonation, mispronounced, as he was jerked violently back from the body.
"What?" Now he struggled, only to find the arms around him implacable. "Let go of me, I'm not finished."

"You don't drink from the dead." Each word punctuated with a shake, Lestat's carefully arranged hair falling in front of his eyes. "They'll take you down with them. For God's sake, what is that brain of yours for? If you're hungry, you need only ask."

"I'm not." He'd sat through Lestat's little demonstration, obediently bitten into the squirming lump of flesh foisted upon him. More than he would've 'eaten' in days, back when he was alive. But even as he considered it, the mere thought of blood made his mouth water. "I have more important things to do." He had risen above his needs for years. This infection would not best him.

"Herbert. Herbert, listen to me. You cannot starve yourself at this stage--"

"Why? Is it dangerous?"

Something flickered in Lestat's face then, an expression so fast it would have been invisible yesterday. Consideration.

"... Not immediately." He spoke as though the truth cost him, as though it were a mistake to tell it. "But it can lead to dangerous behavior in young vampires. Things like this, or worse."

His hands felt almost warm on Herbert's cheeks.

Herbert thought of the chilled bags in his fridges, taken as fodder for experiments. "Then preserved blood? Is that also dangerous?"

"No." (An authoritative answer, delayed just long enough to show its own uncertainty.) "It will keep you alive. But you'll waste away, acting like this. Here." Lestat gripped one of Herbert's hands, shoving it beneath the plunging collar of his shirt. It was almost unbearably hot. "You're cold as that corpse already! Use your sense. Aren't children expected to eat, to keep them growing? You've only just been born, love." Lestat manipulated him in, so that the body no longer filled his gaze. "Be kind to yourself."

Kind. Irrelevant as that sentiment might be, though, Lestat had a point buried under his nonsense--and more experience by far with the actual symptoms of the disease.

Endurance testing could wait; for now, Herbert would at least try to play nicely, if only to get Lestat's searching, distressed gaze off him.

(He hadn't realized how cold he was.)

"Fine. Let go." Resistance. "I can't do what you asked if you're hanging on me." Freed at last, he went to the small, squat fridge in the far corner and removed a pint. His teeth made easy work of the plastic, and he braced himself for a similar reaction to what he had taken earlier.

None came. The coldness of the sample only accentuate the metallic taste, and he felt his face curdling with disgust even as he forced himself to keep going. He'd never come back to it if he stopped now. At least when the bag was empty he felt relief from the gnawing in his gut he hadn't even noticed, and he presented his hand to Lestat for approval. Still hot--or rather, he was still cold. An exothermic reaction. But that should have been impossible, a rewriting of biology at its most base level.

"Why didn't that work?" He'd found blunt questions tended to go over better. Less room for Lestat to wriggle free.
"Cold blood is never any good. Bare sustenance, gruel, not what we're made for." Lestat chafed his
knuckles as though attempting to impart some of his stolen warmth. "Living, though." Backed
against a wall, caged by the other man's limbs. He'd thought Lestat physically intriguing before,
but the way his eyes worked now--startling, the difference. Every eyelash sparkling bronze, every
tiny detail of his face... Herbert wanted fiercely to mix an entirely new batch of his reagent, just
for the pleasure of watching the elements come together and flare to incandescent life. "Blood of
the living is our vitality, our desire." Lips at his ear as he was smothered in gold. "Our ecstasy."

"We generate no warmth on our own, then." If Lestat wanted him to be impressed, he would have
to work for it. "Borrowed heat and energy from untainted blood." He's need to test whether the
'living donor' part was accurate, or whether heating it to an appropriate temperature might make it
more effective.

"Transformed. Just as we are." The heat of him was undeniably appealing.

But where did it go? He'd never seen any excreta, beyond the dramatic tears. Did it combust in use,
like the earliest samples beneath his slides?

Oh.

He'd never much cared about the weather, but there was a disagreeable pang to being denied
something he'd always had a right to. He hadn't even considered it.

"Am I now incapable of consciousness during daylight hours? Is there a waning period?"

"You'll die each morning and rise again each night, same as the rest of us. Your waking hours will
become longer with age," (absurd, how counterintuitive--the symptoms made no sense) "but never
again will you see the sun, God willing." His nails felt like chips of glass on Herbert's cheek; his
face was marked with unaccountable sorrow. "And as that is the price I made you pay for eternity,
I hope you can forgive me, my love."

He was beginning to suspect Lestat's effusiveness was not of the common sort. "The alternative
would have been my death. Hardly preferable." It was logical. Simple.

He really wanted to get back to work disassembling the corpse.

"There's no need to hide your pain. Not from me."

Herbert had never been comfortable with naked emotion. His parents had offered none, his
acquaintances had shown the good sense to retain decorum. Even Dr. Gruber had learned to mask
it behind appointed tasks and innocuous, practical gifts. This, practically bleeding in front of him,
was beyond his ken. "My only pain is being kept from getting back to work. Help if you want. At
least have the kindness not to get underfoot."

Lestat's mouth opened, then closed; he nodded sharply.

"Yes, Doctor, I see your point. I should have understood better what you required." The kiss he
stole was not invasive, not troublesome at all-a mere brush to Herbert's forehead before Lestat
fluttered back to stand beside the array of tools, every inch the penitent assistant.

The energy he'd set aside to fight Lestat's demands for attention stalled out, lingering in the buzz of
sensation left on his forehead--a curiosity for another time. He considered the opportunity before
him. On the one hand, there would be a certain satisfaction in removing every part, looking on
familiar anatomy with new eyes. On the other...
"Strap it down." At least they'd get some use out of the heavy restraints attached to the table.

"I doubt we'll have much complaint from him." The comment didn't quite cover the flinch, but Lestat did as he was told.

"I wouldn't be so sure." His supplies were depleted almost to nothing, and he cut his own arm to supplement the mixture in his beaker rather than go through the trial of wheedling more from his assistant. He only vaguely remembered the amounts he'd injected into his veins, the ratio of reagent to infected blood. And combining samples from two different donors destroyed any chance of a pure result. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was seeing things move.

He returned with his cocktail, a syringe, and a scalpel. "Prepare the syringe. Fifteen cc's should be enough--no, better make it 20. We won't get a second shot." No pun intended. He took the private pleasure of creating the Y-incision beforehand, exposing the network of meat and organs. How many doctors got a second chance to perform a vivisection?

"Done." For everything else that came along with it, it was true that Lestat had become a capable set of hands in the lab, learning in their scant weeks what most med students spent their first year fumbling through. Not, Herbert supposed, that it would matter much if a bubble or two wound up in dead veins. He held his hand out for the needle, ignoring the look of reproach (he had a lifetime of practice at it after all). It was true that he didn't need to be so violent in plunging the needle into the base of the skull, favoring the needs of the reagent over the blood. But a little spite had never gotten in his way before.

The pair of them gazed down at the unmoving form.

"There, you see? Nothing. A flight of fancy with no outcome." Lestat folded his arms.

"Wait. He's been dead close to 24 hours. There's no telling how long it will need to take effect." The minutes ticked by, and Herbert felt the familiar dread of tinkering with his first versions of the serum.

"Herbert, leave it. Believe me, I know what it is to have... complicated feelings regarding one's killer. But he can do you no more harm. You waste your new life, spending it in these old haunts." Lestat was shadowing him again, hand at his arm. "Come out with me. I'll show you the pleasures of a warm feast."

"Go without me." His eyes were still locked on the table as his 'assistant' pulled him toward the door. "I'll only have one chance at this."

"Herbert, I insist --"

A rattling breath startled them both, and Herbert raced back to the center of the room, catching himself with both hands on the stainless steel. He made it back in time to see the heart give a mighty, shuddering pump, to watch the polyp-laden lungs flatten and begin another expansion. Under his gaze the whole mechanism was transformed, growing plump and efficient and laden with potential. The things he could do with this. Once more the ability to wait, to consider, left him behind, and he plucked a kidney from the tableau as if it were a ripened fruit. He was laughing, bubbling over with joy. "Look!"

But even as he held it out he felt it waning in his hands, growing cold in a way that was distinct from the air around it. Life was leaching out of it at a rapid rate, like a patient removed from life support. He laid the greying meat to the side and slid his hands back into the mess, looking for another piece to see if the withering would repeat itself--to find where the key to this diseased life
was concentrated.

Beneath him the body twitched and shuddered, seeming to run from his probing fingers. Still no consciousness; that was unusual, given the often… violent reactions to his reagent. Maybe--

"Herbert!"

He heard the sound of ripping steel before a hand grabbed at his face, clawing holds into the flesh with now-familiar chips of glass for nails. Herbert's hands came up to wrap around the offending wrist, slick with gore and small bits of viscera that made it impossible to gain a proper hold. The hand was *digging*, sliding down his face not just through the skin but muscle and veins. A scrabbling finger only just missed his eye, and he screamed. Things *gave*.

"Herbert!" Lestat again, and then the hand was ripped from his face as if it were nothing; he heard it thud against the far wall with a wet splat, heard another as something apparently vital was torn from his not-so-secured patient. It was hard to judge accurately, with the meat of his face so unnervingly insecure.

He’d need first aid--Lestat had shown an uncanny speed in shaking off injuries, but if the pain he was feeling was any indication, then that was a symptom he was not yet privy to. Something to keep his skin from sloughing off would do for the moment.

Or would, if Lestat weren’t busy holding his face.

“Lurghho.” The marks ran from below his eye down to his chin, and apparently had punched through to the interior of his cheek. His mouth was full of blood, movement unrelenting pain. He couldn’t begin to guess the new infections Lestat was introducing with his touch. Ever a giver apparently, that one.

The pain was--intense, horrific, but also *different* from any he’d experienced before. Radiant and specific in every torn fiber, not a dulled-out wash of common agony. So much as to confuse his nerves, the overload of it verging on pleasure when air brushed the exposed pulp and bone. The only other time he’d felt anything like it was the night before, there on the floor and thanks to that very same corpse.

“Shit.” Lestat made such a habit of swearing in his native tongue, there was something unexpectedly vulgar about hearing it in English. “That damnable… can’t let you be seen like this…” He sucked in a breath, seeming to remember that the man he held possessed ears and functional brain cells. “Hold still, darling. I’ll have to be careful so you aren’t damaged.”

Herbert quirked one eyebrow, regretting it immediately after. The sight of Lestat biting into his wrist was familiar to him from the night in the hotel, from--

Wrapping his arms around unyielding limbs, swallowing strange blood and mourning every second that the sweet sensation was ripped from him, knowing there were eyes on him and not giving a damn--

Lestat moved Herbert’s face back and forth as if it were putty, grinding meat together, before applying large smears of blood pleased. His pauses for deliberation sent drops falling to the floor, reawakening the thirst Herbert was already tired of. He bit through the inside of his *other* cheek and sucked down the resulting trickle, felt his nails cutting his palms.

Whatever Lestat was up to, it was effective--the pain lessened quickly, and though Lestat batted his hands away every time he sought to check, he was sure he could feel the skin knitting back into
place. At last Lestat stood back, tilting him into the light.

“Beautiful as ever,” he praised, sounding ridiculously sincere. “A lucky thing I was here.”

Herbert backed away, warily brushing his thumb over the faint silvery furrows still shrinking. His reflection in the chromed cabinetry (clearly that bit was a myth, no surprise there) looked bizarre. Not the blood or the dishevelment—those were ordinary enough.

His face.

The features were… his own, healed perfectly, but not. The same shape but paler, smoother, balanced and pleasing under shiny ruffled hair.

The lack of his glasses (useless now) left him looking open and obvious—he'd never seen himself like that without a blessed myopic haze to conceal how hideously weak he appeared. And his wide, big eyes seemed to glow with that same iridescence Lestat's held.

While Lestat—Lestat, behind him, touching as he had all along, cooing unnecessary reassurances and holding him.

For all the strangeness, Herbert abruptly felt more himself than he had in weeks.

"… Thank you." He could move, speak, and the pain was gone. Ego aside, Lestat's presence had been a benefit.

You'd think he had offered sainthood, the way Lestat beamed. "Of course. As if I could let any harm come to something so precious. So lovely," and now his touch was intimate, grasping, "and mine," he breathed into the shell of Herbert's ear.

"Protecting your investment?" He couldn't stop touching the places where his face had healed, almost eager to do it again just to get a closer look at the process. He should learn more, chart healing times.

And then he felt something wet slide, hot and rasping, along the outer rim of his ear.

He jerked away so fast he felt bruises rise where Lestat's hands had been.

"What in the Hell are you doing?" he snapped, backing up against a counter and gripping its edge hard.

Its temperature felt neutral relative to that of his own body.

Lestat frowned. "Not that it isn't charming when you play hard to get, but really. That's a bit much, isn't it?" He reached out, more tentative now. "I didn't think I'd hidden how I felt about you."

"You… " True, they had kissed. Had nearly done more besides. But that all felt hazy and distant now, difficult to focus on, memories almost not his own. His mind was clear now, even as his newly infected form all but vibrated for more sensation. "This isn't the time for your games."

"Games!?" And the infuriating creature laughed at Herbert. Laughed loud and long and with fangs plain to see. "Darling, really, come here. You look a mess, and I haven't even properly introduced you to the pleasures of your new station."

Herbert held his ground. "Don't play stupid, you were doing so well at proving you're not." His tongue was his only weapon when he was cornered like this, and he'd sharpened it to deadly
precision. "I was prepared to accept your habits, such as they are, when I took this opportunity. I understand that these advances mean nothing to you. Rest assured, I choose my contacts rather more carefully." Not carefully enough.

"Oh, yes, of course. I routinely give the Devil's own Gift to those who mean nothing to me!" Lestat used his greater height to full advantage as he planted his own hands to either side of Herbert's on the steel slab. "Seems to me you're the one playing stupid, Dr. West. You accepted so much more than my habits."

Blood burned in his cheeks. Heightened reactions, making him look like some easily embarrassed middle schooler. He had to tip his head back to meet Lestat's gaze across the half foot difference in height, and squared his jaw all the harder to compensate for it.

"Did you or did you not approach me for me work?" He asked acidly, fear curling somewhere inside at the thought that it might not be true. His one real asset, unvalued as ever. "There are a thousand cheap sluts wasting away on the streets, if you want to fuck. Or do you just enjoy the thrill of making a fool of me?"

"How dare you." It took him a moment to realize what the high, faint shrieking sound on the edge of his hearing was.

Lestat's fingerprints would be stamped into that counter for eternity.

"How dare you demean not only me, but yourself, Herbert. How dare you fail to see the weight of what I've given you, and how precious you are."

Ah. So it was the infection, then--holding some significance, some fascination. Some imaginary connection. He glanced away and back, tired, tense. Resigned.

Lestat's face crumpled, then, and he again tried to touch where blood was crusting and flaking.

"Darling, has no one ever told you?"

"That I'm impertinent? Arrogant? Greedy beyond my station in life? Selfish and blind? Oh yes, no shortage of those. But you are, I admit, the first to try and tell me I'm not vain enough." (He had to admit the fangs gave a certain pleasant weight to mockery.) He had no illusions about who he was. That was why what he did was so important. Destined to outlive him—or not, if he did it right. He brought his hand up to brush Lestat's away, only to have it caught instead.

"You deserve it all, my lovely. All I can give you, if you will but allow it." A kiss to his palm, hot against his icy flesh. "That stupid boy had no idea what he was missing."

Dan. He'd be so disappointed if he knew: that Herbert was wasting his potential, he told himself; that Herbert was considering succumbing to something so base as lust (with a man, a whisper he shoved down into the core of himself). If he could see this, Dan would--

The memory burst into his head, so bright and clear he wasn't sure how he could have overlooked it for a moment. "Dan was here." He remembered the thirst, even more unbearable than it had been tonight. Remembered the rich, tempting, smell, the quenching draughts of heat in his throat, his core, filling him with something he seemed always to have craved, remembered hands pulling him back, murmuring about regret-- "Where is he?"

Again that flicker of expression, that too-fast-to-see facial movement suddenly laid bare and visible to his improved faculties.
"Even if he was, why should you care?" He knew this game--tell no lies, just frame the truth to hide meaning. Ask questions instead of answering. He'd done it himself, many many times. He snatched his hand back.

"He was a great help to me when I had no allies." Truth, true enough. "I owe him at least the courtesy of seeing if he's alive."

"He is." Lestat answered. "There. You're free of your noble obligation."

"He's still here," Herbert hedged. "You wouldn't trying to hide it from me if he weren't."

"In this you claim to know me. Cher..." Lestat sighed theatrically, but underneath looked suddenly older than his 20-or-200 years, more exhausted than he had any right to claim. "Would seeing him help? Really?"

"Yes." He hadn't seen Dan since they'd fought (but he had, hadn't he?), and the raw reminder of that night still gnawed at him, like the preserved pair of glasses tucked away in a drawer in a basement in Arkham, significant to no one living but him.

"Well then," Lestat threw an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close, conveniently blocking Herbert's view of his face. "I said I would deny you nothing. Perhaps this will make you believe me. But Herbert," By the time Herbert struggled to a dignified position Lestat's face had its default expression, grinning and empty in place. "These things rarely bring the peace you expect."

~*~*~*~

Lestat had so hoped, so assured himself.

No, he didn't properly ask, had his fine intentions snatched away in violence and threatened loss. Best laid plans. But if ever anyone's acquiescence could be seen unspoken, surely it was Herbert. Lovely, passionate creature, delicate and so very aware of his mortality--an entire life spent in clawing himself back from the precipice of Death.

Hell, his darling had begun the process **himself**; he'd cleverly kept body and soul together long enough for Lestat to do the rest. And if Lestat were to be damned and eaten by guilt one way or another, he'd rather be so with someone by his side. He'd regret the violation less than the loss.

Poor love. Poor brave darling, with such a horror for his turning; wallowing in chaos and agony rather than the ecstatic claiming Lestat had envisioned. And too soon, soul unprepared for the leap (he’d not even offered yet!), body not polished for eternity (lovely body, sweet body, but not what it could have been after a few months' work. And **scarred**.) Yet Lestat had him, and what a time it had been, strange chemicals burning on his tongue electric as his newest bucked and begged and Became in his arms.

He'd been certain, the night before, that it was all good--as good as any forcible damnation ever might be.

It was only that sureness that had kept him steady as he led his freshly christened love to the isolated little room where Daniel Cain lay sleeping--the man whose handiwork would leave that neat little scar on Herbert's stomach, and far nastier wreckage beneath the surface. He'd forced himself to stand aside as Herbert hovered over the bed, watching the sleeping face and making
calculations Lestat couldn't hear, and never would again. If anything, that was what he mourned. He'd touched it, that mind, had loved feeling it lightning-fast at the edge of his thoughts night after night. He; not the fool who had nearly given his life to help this nascent genius to his Becoming, who would limp away without knowledge or appreciation of the glory he had touched and then given away for a pittance.

Those thoughts were closed to him now, as ever was the case with one's own fledglings, the beauties you made and lost. He wanted them back, wanted to talk, wanted the communion of sharing blood once more, but--patience.

For at the end of the short vigil Herbert came to Lestat, quiet but pliant, and stayed by his side though the night. Fed without complaint, though every time Lestat sought to rekindle the aborted passion he had flinched away, and Lestat had left it at that. He could wait. He could wait at least a little longer.

More than once, Lestat thought of using the hour or two at his disposal near the coming and going of the sun to be rid of their unwanted guest. It would be so simple, and Herbert held enough contempt for mortals and vampires alike that finding a scapegoat would be no trouble. But each time, the image of Herbert's silent, thoughtful gaze would tug at something in him, and he would relent. Patience, he told himself. Try a little patience, for once in your many years.

"You're actually lovesick," Daniel laughed at him. "The playboy felled by a cold fish. Your editors would say it's too cliche."

"The course of love never did run smooth," he'd shot back, thinking more than a little on the reproachful look that haunted the corners of rooms and hallways and had taken care never to speak with him face to face after that fateful night. But he was used to Louis' moods by now. He would be forgiven. A little more patience to add to the seemingly endless, choking buffet set before him.

And so it was that when another of their kind descended upon the household, fond and avuncular and unexpected, Lestat wondered whether his unspoken distress had somehow called the man from all the way across the globe.

A gift, perhaps.

It was on the third night, as was so often true in fairy tales (never so clean and pretty as they'd become), with things reaching their tipping point.

"Really, Herbert, this morbid fascination is a travesty. I cannot stand to watch you wasting away in here. Everyone on this damned island knows to come running for you if he so much as sneezes. There's no need to stand vigil as well." He loomed over his fledgling without even trying, shadow cloaking the man and the bed both. "Need I remind you he was perfectly content with handing you over to me in the first place? A little last minute remorse is hardly worth such devotion."

"You complain like I've asked for your help." Herbert's tone was mild. Everything about him was mild since he'd been reborn, trending toward ice on the best of nights. "I'll find you when I'm finished."

Lestat's temper flared. "Fine. Fine!" He threw up his arms. "Waste your eternity watching this ingrate rot. The Devil take you both." He stormed out, regretting his words before he was over the threshold but far too proud to stop his momentum, let alone apologize.

When he emerged into the main hall, it was to considerable commotion. The mortals congregated around the corners of the room, whispering to one another and casting awed glances to the
entryway. Armand was there too, looking not unlike somewhat had set rancid meat beneath his nose; Daniel, beside the imp as ever, worried his shirrtail in his hands. And at the center of all the commotion, its supernova and central star:

"Marius!" Lestat rushed forward with little more care than a boy, meeting his mentor's embrace with bone-deep relief. Here, at last, was someone who would speak sense.

"Lestat!" Marius's laugh was not just in his voice, but in his mind as he held Lestat close and then eased him back to look his fill. So good, to feel that affection permeating his senses when everyone else was being difficult.

"Marius, back already?"

Marius was as he'd always been (more himself than ever as he would put it), time's ravages being internal for their kind. His hair was cropped Roman-short in concession to the winds of flight, but his faintly lined eyes remained the color of daylight photographs of tropical waters, and his strong arms still held a wonderful comfort.

“Yes, Jesse found me rather a bore, I fear. It seems a fledgling these days has little interest in learning from me when she can avail herself of Maharet’s and your mother’s counsel. Last I heard, she’d taken it into her head to try living in the wilds with Gabrielle, and so I am at loose ends once more.”

Foolish, foolish Jesse--she hadn’t even had to search Europe and Asia for the chance to meet this elder, and hadn’t been shipped off to the New World so soon after. But no matter. Her discard was Lestat’s gain.

“How long are you here for?” He cut to the chase, heedless of decorum.

Eyes of translucent blue slid to one side, a gentle smile curling Marius’s lips. "I think the answer to that question will have to wait until I’ve spoken with your host. But tell me--there's someone different here, yes? Someone new?"

"Yes, yes, you simply must meet him." He nodded, caught between pride and relief. Marius would appreciate his new fledgling's potential as no one else could. And better, he'd be able to coax him into living in the way even Lestat couldn't. Marius was ancient, after all. Herbert was bound to respect the weight of that wisdom. Lestat turned to Armand, making a mocking bow. "I trust I may steal his attention from you for a spell, my lord?"

Armand bristled, and the sight of it sent mean-spirited pleasure down to Lestat's bones. Getting under the unflappable master's skin was one of death's reliable joys.

"Do as you like," Armand said at last. "I'll speak with him later."

Lestat grasped Marius' arm in his own, childish in his relief. He led his prize through the house to the makeshift medical ward, chattering all the while. "--brilliant, Marius, absolutely without match. If he'd been alive in your day, our world would no doubt have skipped the Dark Ages entirely!"

"I can certainly hear something from him, and rather noisily at that. He seems a proper Galen, by your estimation."

"Oh, hang it all--you'll see when you meet him."

Of course, first impressions were never Herbert's strong suit.
And Lestat, blind and deaf to his mind, could not have predicted the spat he and Marius were about to walk into until they were already embarrassingly within earshot.

Damn Cain, Cathy, and the whole mess of it anyway.

"We're not equipped for this! A hospital on the mainland is the better option. Money is no--"

"If you had followed my instructions, you stupid bitch, this wouldn't be a concern! Second usage of a needle, you--"

"I had nothing to do with it! I'm not here to play babysitter to your pet! This is a favor. Just because Lestat thinks there's something great about your snub face--"

"*Lestat* was nowhere to be found when I obtained a medical doctorate --"

"Enough!" Lestat rapped the wall with his fist for emphasis, his blow leaving a mark behind. "Out! You--Armand was looking for you. Get on with it."

"Fine. He should be your problem." She brushed past the pair of vampires in the doorway, the ones who could break her neck before she even realized it, with the confidence only favoritism could imbue.

These necessary allowances had to be made for a coven to remain stable. That same vital protection she enjoyed, that Herbert had been gifted, now prevented any fatal action upon the current irritant, slumbering oblivious to the upheaval he'd caused.

"Lestat, this is unacceptable. That--that woman may be familiar with needles, but the risks she takes--"

"Herbert." Summoning all his control, all his tattered patience, he forced a smooth mask of civility onto his face, held Herbert's shoulders rather than shaking him. "Herbert, there is someone here I'd like you to meet.

Urbane and patrician as ever, Marius at least had the good grace to appear simply amused by the whole humiliation, though Lestat could sense some niggling unease swirling at the edges of his mind.

"Marius de Romanus," he said, extending a hand.

"Herbert West." Herbert looked at the outstretched offering as if it were a distasteful thing, eyes squinting and mistrustful. Only at Lestat's reproachful glare did he at last take the offered grip.

"A pleasure." Once captured, Marius took the opportunity to give the fledgling a full examination. "Lestat has spoken quite highly of you. I'm sorry to have come under such dire circumstances."

"Yes, well. We deal with life as it is, not as we'd wish it." Herbert was unsubtly trying to pry his hand free, to no avail. Did he not sense the power standing before him, able to snuff out his new life in any instant?

But Marius' good humor seemed endless. "Quite right, my friend. You'll be well situated among our kind, with that outlook. But tell me," his eyes fell at last to the cause of all the trouble. "Who is your friend?"

At this, Herbert's eyes narrowed behind his spectacles (spectacles, for God's sake--such an affectation. Such a holdover. Lestat had half a mind to grab the things and roll them between his
palms until they were no more than a wire cage encasing glass shards). Herbert shifted subtly, seeking to stay centered in Marius's gaze when it threatened to wander. That, at least, was an impulse Lestat knew well.

"He is--was--my partner." (Oh, how that cut. To hear long-absent Cain a ‘partner,’ when Lestat had only barely rated ‘assistant’ on sufferance.)

"In life?" Marius asked with as quirk of his lips. "He's certainly a beauty. I can see why you would be so--"

"Business partner," Herbert was quick to correct, as if his nights of doting didn't speak volumes on their own. "I'm merely seeing that he recovers completely. Which would be easier, (now Lestat had his attention, his consideration) "if I had competent support in his care."

"The girl has a point. Money is no object--I can have him put up wherever you choose."

"Come now, Lestat," Marius cut in, measured and silky. “You yourself know the need for a personal touch in these matters, don't you? To see them safely to… completion." Lestat flinched at the rebuke, at the ugly memories of his father's face, eyes rolling and incoherent, face flecked with spittle--not even cognizant enough to hate.

"I admire your dedication to duty, young Mr. West." There it was already, Herbert's posture drawing up to the light of that carefully molded praise. "But tell me, what do you plan to do when your burden is behind you?"

Herbert blinked, then, with that strange obtuseness that Lestat had so quickly learned was almost never feigned.

"Do? I'm a scientist." He pulled back, again, straight-shouldered and decorous finally. "And Dan is no burden, really. I've seen him through worse." A rapid swallow made his throat flash, even behind the button-down and tie he'd dug up somewhere.

"… I see." Marius's gaze turned measuring, considering, but he at last released Herbert's hand, blushed with a faint ring of bruising. "Let us hope that he continues to be so, then."

Herbert nodded, mouth a thin line in his face.

"I look forward to speaking with you more, when you have the time." The blond head returned the nod with the suggestion of a grand bow; courtly dismissal, even when they were the ones leaving the sickroom, Lestat once more alone in Marius's regard.

"He's not usually so… " well, except that he was. That meeting had been Herbert all over. "… much."

"An acquired taste?" Almost, not quite innuendo. Lestat ducked his head anyway, feeling like a teenager introducing a prospective beau. "I believe I've heard that assessment about another young vampire." Marius laid a hand on his shoulder. "But you'll need to be mindful. There's turmoil in his heart, beneath that imperious little facade."

"You sensed something?" Lestat perked up, starving. "Marius, you have to tell me. The silence between maker and fledgling--you know how unbearable it is."

Marius made the soundless, breathless gesture of a sigh. "That I do." Arm about Lestat's shoulders, brotherly as no brother he'd ever had in life. "It is that silence which makes it so vital for us to connect in other ways. Touch, talk, lovemaking… all are so much more important when we are
unable to hear the mind."

"He won't--" Lestat flinched, internally, to confess his shame. But of them all, Marius had seen him at his lowest and helped rather than attacking. Had given him back his sense of wonder when he'd consigned himself to the grave. "He won't let me touch him."

A virgin lover of men, modern and Godless, and Lestat of all people unable to bed him. *Humiliating*.

"I thought that might be so," Marius sounded so mournful in the proclamation. "He still longs for his mortal lover. His heart will admit no entry as long as that is so."

"They weren't--"

"Not in flesh, no. He's quite fierce on that little quibble, isn't he? Completely untouched, so willing to ruin himself that he went to Death's embrace knowing none of life's pleasures. I'm surprised that you, of all of us, didn't see to his needs beforehand."

"He wouldn't--he said no." And well did Lestat know that terror. "He would have hated me."

"In the moment, perhaps. But he'd have come to appreciate what you did for him." Marius stroked Lestat's cheek then, captured daylight in his eyes soft and confiding. "My Amadeo could be confused also--but he took my advice, and it served him well when I could no longer protect him. These are the responsibilities a maker is charged with."

"You're telling me to--to force him?" The very idea was abhorrent, withering to the unslaked amorous thoughts that plagued him. Better nothing than that. Than being the thing in the night--

"Of course not. Only to help him find what it is that he truly wants. Look." Marius, gentle, ancient Marius, caretaker by nature, nodded back toward the sickroom. "Is that happiness, to waste away so?"

It was true, Herbert was as limp and drawn as Louis in his worst moments, drinking blood only at Lestat’s harangues at a time when he should have been glutted with the stuff. Vibrating occasionally with barely-controlled hunger, then weakening from the strain. Maybe it was worse, encouraging him to hold onto those whims.

"I'll… keep your advice in mind."

"I know it isn't easy to hear. But come," Marius steered him away, all cheer once more. "Show me this little kingdom of wonders my Amadeo has made to amuse himself. I want to see everything."

~*~*~*~

Marius found Armand alone in his study, as Armand had known he would. The ways of courtesy, of territory and guesting, had still held meaning in both their times, and Marius was nothing if not polite.

It was almost a blessing, this interruption distracting him from coven business, the oncoming Rube Goldberg contraption of troubles he could sense posed by Lestat’s latest misbegotten and the mortal dragged along at his side.
Once, Armand would have made an example of the mortal--once he had, but of course then there’d been two fledglings and far more bloodshed than ever he’d reckoned on causing. A mistake, one could not repeat. The pet Cain would live, even as he invisibly, unintentionally sowed destruction in his sleep.

Karen, occupied all the day long, yawning discreetly and trying so hard yet to attend to Armand in the night--upset when he offered to let her sleep, as though his favor could possibly turn from so perfect a gentle desperation.

The new one, Herbert, frightened of himself and clinging to the past, refusing to mix with them and become his new self.

Lestat… dear, foolish Lestat, bound by the very rules upon which he’d insisted. The prohibition against killing one another’s ‘special’ mortals, casually demanded as though the rest of the coven didn’t know his reason for such a stipulation. No forgiveness there.

But Marius, he was the same--he untouched, as yet, by the canker lurking in the heart of their rose.

“May I enter?”

“Clearly you feel yourself free to do as you wish, considering your presence here.” A minor breach of protocol, and yet. Better to have it out from the start, to establish his expectations and his awareness.

“I apologize for my haste, and for not calling ahead.” Marius issued an abbreviated bow, stubbled hair sparkling in the light like a frosted hillside or white-sand beach.

“Why have you returned?” Armand rose from his chair, drew himself up as far as he was able, with all the poise and command his years had granted him.

“The truth?” His composed features shifted, shadowed, his shoulders fell just slightly, with the air of one making a sacrifice. “The same reason as ever, my Ama--Armand.” He swallowed, human, after the self-correction. “To look upon you. It's all I've ever wanted, all I dreamed of for so long. And now that I've found you again, whole and perfect--I can wait another five centuries for you to look back.”

“I've had those same centuries to grow wise to flattery, Master. I'm no longer a child.” Behind his back, he clenched his hands into fists, feeling the fine wool bought with his own money, in the house built with his own acumen and the aid of his own fledgling.

“Of course. Clearly you've grown, and so well.” Marius put up a hand, gesturing, not placating or chastising--as he would to an equal, almost. “I cannot express my pride at what you managed to become, given the… disadvantages. At the will you found within you to go on and rule. I always loved you; that has not changed now, simply because you are older.”

“I will never grow older.” He felt the child then, draped in the velvet and furs that delighted the senses of his thralls. He felt small, more than even difference in height and bulk allowed for. He was… had he been pretending, lying to himself after all?

“You encouraged me as you saw fit. In the desires that you found appealing in me. You shaped your pretty piece of art.” He'd done it himself, to Louis. Pushed and prodded until he had his prize. (Out of love) “If my 'will' were to cast you out, what would you say then? If I bade you, from my seat as master of this place, to kill or die. What then, Master?” His hand was so small as he shot it out, up, to grasp Marius’s throat in a careful show of dominance. Territory made all the difference.
"Well, in that case, clearly you never felt sorrow at all for my loss, if you can so readily consign me to flames yet again." The long, proud neck flexed under his hand like a python he'd once seen in an Amsterdam club. "I suppose I should have to weep, and do the bidding of my heartless angel."

"Liar." His grip tightened, enough to draw blood. Surely Marius would draw back, reveal the traitorous desire to live that had kept him hale for so many centuries. But he was unmoved, even as blood sped from a trickle to a steady flow beneath Armand's fingers. And at last, he was the one who broke. He didn't want to see it, that poised head bent and bloodied.

His eyes locked to the shock of red on his fingertips, accusing. Marius didn't act as he was meant to. Marius was unknowable. Marius wanted something from him, and he couldn't grasp what it was.

What should he do? His feet felt rooted to the spot, entranced by the hypnotic drip, drip, drip of spilled blood.

"Ah, Amadeo. I always knew I was right. Such a good, kind boy." Those patrician features smoothed, heedless, into a smile. "You see? I can wait. I'll watch you, until the time is right."

Don't go. Don't leave me again, I'll drown. He wouldn't say it. His fingers came, careless, to his lips, and he forced himself not to clean away the blood. It would mean he'd lost. Tell me what you want, so I can understand it. Your thoughts are blank to me, and I do not understand.

"Don't forget who holds authority in this place." He forced his back to straighten, eyes to turn to steel. He wished he'd cut his hair. "Marius."

"Never, my--shall I call you Master, then?" Voice devoid of mocking, eyes the exact color he'd always put into those forbidden skies, taken by the Children of Darkness’s flames. A kiss, courtly, in the old way of things, brushed to Armand’s bloody knuckles as though he wore a ring.

"No." (As if the words scorched him.) "Armand will do." It took power, half a millennium of it, not to squirm under the memory of that touch. With desire or revulsion, he didn't know (he so rarely had--Marius would tell him, in the old days, and he would be content. And now…)

"Do you intend on staying long?" Pleasantries; vital information. All the same to a coven leader.

"As long as you'll tolerate me, Armand."

"A dangerous answer, to wait on my whims. I'm sure Lestat's told you how implacable I am." His hand felt cold when he took it back (it was always cold, don't be a fool).

"What of your grand responsibilities?" Armand asked, half-turning. Marius, the ancient, the heretic, dispenser of wisdom to some particular seekers.

"Gone to dust, as well you know." Sadness touched Marius's face then, mourning for his statue king and queen and the religion he'd kept to since before the death of Christ. "I'm a free man for the first time in my eternity."

In the past, such a face had meant it time for Armand to play music, to sing or dance--perhaps to sketch a cartoon. To curl up, safe, and warm those cold arms with his living presence. Anything to fend off the mournful blood tears of an eternity--anything to show he was the only boy capable of such.

But then, he was as cold as his maker now. Inside and out, he reassured himself. He forced himself to stay put, though old memories he was certain he'd buried threatened his better judgment.
"Then I extend my welcome, for as long as the peace is kept. If you have concerns, bring them to me. Those living here are under my protection." Even their latest mistake. "We have no spare caskets, but the rooms here are protected. You shouldn't lack for comfort." He risked drawing near. "No harm will come to you." As if it would be the oldest among them who would face danger, and not his attacker. Still, he liked the concept of the danger. The attempt to give back this small protection.

Gracious as always, as men were back in the days when Armand was new, Marius nodded, thanked him as seriously as he'd made the offer.

"Your protection and indulgence are most appreciated, and of course I understand that the same extends to any other of your guests--I'm not special." His face, eyes, mind were impassive. "And I hope that you will feel likewise regarding an openness to air concerns, should you feel the need--though I'll not presume to ask."

He bowed, then, and raised a platinum brow as to say, 'Well, so?'

"Your offer is appreciated." Armand couldn't meet that gaze, sidled to the left. Not special, as if the man truly believed such a thing. All fledglings loathed their makers, and just as surely were marked by them. He felt it now, burrowing away under his skin.

It wasn't safe to look again until he knew himself alone.

~*~*~*~

The pitiable mortals who stalked the halls were ordinarily a good thing--a way for a coven to slake the thirst nightly without leaving their haven littered with corpses. Getting Herbert to master the little drink had proved simple, but in disturbing fashion, as so much about him was becoming disturbing.

Herbert had been a killer in life, remorseless and swift. An addict, as well. If anything, Lestat had anticipated creating a hunter, one whose bloodlust would be unslaked without the death (had almost hoped for one to share that with.) Instead, Herbert submitted to the thirst, drank a taste from this one and that one when prompted or driven before jerking back obviously unfulfilled.

And like certain others Lestat knew, he disliked to be watched in the throes of it. A shame, for illicit glimpses and listening-in indicated it must be a splendid sight.

The wonder of his new life passed Herbert by utterly, the terminology of ‘disease’ that had been so charming from mortal lips now a noose threatening to strangle him in the process of his birth. And Lestat had woven a tidy little noose for himself, as well--Herbert brushed off his explanations of the Dark Gift as artless philosophy, of no point or purpose without the beakers and slides Lestat had lavished on in order to keep the man's attention.

‘Balance’ was, it was only ever more clear, a word foreign to the mind of Dr. Herbert West. And with the wall of silence thick between them, there was nothing Lestat could do but watch it unfold as a night of stilted secondhand shepherding became a week.

There was at least one blessing, one way in which Herbert seemed to respond appropriately to his
changed nature.

Lestat had disliked seeing him visit Cain lying unconscious from his kiss, a veritable Sleeping Beauty in reverse. Herbert had prepared extensive instructions for Armand's little pet (Carol?) to follow regarding the insensate man's care. He'd looked… softer, beside Cain's bed. Gentle, almost, as he took the man's pulse and doctored his blood loss as well as possible. Once, only once, traced the line of a scar on the mortal's abdomen which matched the furrowed reminder of his cause of death.

But when the veil of sleep began to lift, he withdrew from the one all in the house by then saw as an obvious favorite.

~*~*~*~

The first thing Dan noticed was January sunlight. It fell in wide beams across the wool comforter covering him, brightening a small room he had never seen before. He blinked, hard, and tried to remember where he was.


“Lousy; not much; three, unless you count the thumb.” He smiled. “How long have I been out?”

His limbs felt weak and heavy, like he’d just broken through a fever.

“About a week,” she informed him. “I honestly didn’t think you’d make it. You lost a lot of blood. We went through half the transplant reserves keeping you going.”

Blood.

Oh.

The nightmares didn’t flood in. It was more like looking in a new direction and discovering they’d been there all along. Herbert, covered in gore and sporting a waxy death’s mask, stumbling toward him like just another reanimate. “Is he… alive?”

“He’s up and moving. Underfoot, usually.” She patted his arm. “Do you remember me?”

“Karen, right?” That did draw a smile from her, and his chest tightened just a little. “I could never forget someone so strong. You didn’t even flinch, looking all that.”

“Braver than you thought a girl could be?”

“Braver than me. And I worked in a war zone. You were incredible.” He struggled to sit up, lightheaded. He saw a saline drip to the right of him, but that would only do so much now that he was up and moving. “Do you have any water?”

She grabbed a pitcher from a far counter, and he almost took it directly from her before forcing himself to wait. The effect was the same, with a few more seconds spent refilling his glass (dimpled glass, like something out of a museum) over and over. He regretted it almost immediately, his shrunken stomach straining. “Not the best plan I’ve had,” he groaned.
“Next to coming here? It was great.” She looked him over, not quite pitying. “You’re really not made for this place.”

“How can you tell?” he protested. “You just met me.”

“Your idea of hitting on me was pointing out that I’m not fazed by blood. In a house of vampires.” She chuckled as his face heated. “It’s okay. You meant well. But that’s what I mean--do you even know what this place is?”

“… a house of vampires?”

“Well, at least your short term memory is working.” She stood and offered him a hand up. “Feel brave enough to walk?”

“Maybe soon. I don’t want to fall over on you. That’d probably be bad. Definitely, uh, rude. Plus,” (he held up his arm), “I’ve still got all this. Probably should get the doctor to square that all away. Where is he?”

“You’ll see him in a few hours,” Karen said, pretty face gone sour. “He’ll come tearing over here as soon as the sun’s down.”

Sundown.

“What are the odds you have a second vampire doctor?” (Who was painfully rude to women? Who had apparently been by his side for the whole week?)

“It’s him,” she confirmed. “Your friend, or…whatever he is. But if you want, I can help you get cleaned up before then. No offense, you’re kinda…”

His face reddened. “Right. Yeah. That might be good.”

The last time he’d had a sponge bath, Herbert had been the one to give it to him--and Dan had been blissfully unconscious throughout.

Karen was no nurse, quite obviously, but she was calm and collected, keeping his mind off the whole thing as best she could, and helped him into a new set of pajama bottoms from the dresser when it was done. (Not his, but they fit perfectly, and he was in no position to complain.)

"You need a haircut, sugar." She meant it as a joke, but her fingers on his neck made him aware of just how long it had gotten, and he shoved it back with a lead-weighted hand. Shoulder-length, parts of it. "Want a thingy?" From among her rubber and silver bracelets, she pulled a half-frayed black elastic. He took it sheepishly, wondering how much he resembled his senior yearbook photo. '75 had been an embarrassing year.

"Thanks. This--I feel a lot more human now."

"You're welcome." Her smile was sweet but sad. Knowing. “Think you can eat something solid?”

"Worth a shot."

"I'll be right back, then. There's books on the end table for you to read if you get bored."

Pulp horror--not his cup of tea, but he appreciated the thought, at least. As she turned to leave, the slender shape of her, her shining blonde bob above her strange funereal clothing, gave him a pang.

He turned a few pages of the topmost book, notably newer than the others--practically a sore
thumb, by comparison, like it’d been bought out of an airport lounge and then set alongside rare first editions. Vampires, too. He rolled his eyes at the self-obsession before setting it back down. He had enough of that in his reality at present.

Karen returned with a bowl of ramen and a glass of orange juice, shoving the former into his hands and setting the latter on the bedside table. “I know it seems weird, but it helped me through a dozen hangovers. The salt’ll help you feel better.”

Up close, he could see several rows of pink, shiny scar tissue along her collarbone and neck. “Big party girl?” he asked, blowing a little on the sickly yellow broth.

“Kinda. In the way you’re asking and the way you want to.” She crossed one leg over the other knee. “I’ve seen my share of shit, and believe me. This is better than what’s out there.”

“Even with the, the--” he nodded indelicately toward the scars. “That?”

“Especially,” (a conspiratorial grin), “because of that. You should ask your friend, when he gets here. He’s all control these days. Though maybe he’d have a hard time with you.”

"I, uh. I doubt it." Control sounded about right for Herbert--control the guiding rule of his life in everything by The Work. Every ounce of impulsivity and passion channeled into that, at the expense of all else. "He never had any trouble before."

Never until that night, the thing Dan was trying his best not to see everywhere.

His careful, cool friend in the grips of something Dan had long ago accepted didn't exist. Had long ago concluded was for the best, for both their sakes.

He wondered what his own neck looked like.

"If you say so," she left it at that, with the air of indulging a lie rather than accepting a truth. "You might want to steer clear of Lestat, though. I don't think he likes you much."

"Feeling's mutual," Dan said stiffly. Lestat was the reason for all of this. Without him, Dan and Herbert would be… he wasn't sure. But it had to be better than this.

"Yeah, well, you can't crush his windpipe without even breaking a sweat. Trust me, you don't want to make yourself expendable. Nobody comes asking questions out here."

"That… happens a lot?"

She shrugged. "Enough. No reward without risk, right? Just stick with your friend and you should be fine. Even Lestat wouldn't cross the rules about killing a favorite."

"I find that hard to believe." Even minimal meetings had given him the impression that there was very little Lestat would not dare. And the things he did dare…

That made her laugh. "You're not wrong, I mean normally. But it's different right now. They're trying not to fight, I think."

"You know a lot." He set the emptied bowl aside, reaching for the orange juice.

"Pays to keep your eyes open. Seeming approachable doesn't hurt, either. Everybody wants a confidant. Even the undead." She grabbed the dishes, patted his hand. "Just stay here, alright? I'll make sure someone comes to check on you. And try not to go wandering off. Nice boys like you..."
might get into trouble."

"Sure." His pride stung a bit at being condescended to, but it wasn't like his track record was on his side. "Hey! Will I see you again?"

She paused at the door. "I hope not. For your sake."

He wasn't sure why he was waiting. He was a doctor, after all--more than capable of seeing to his own IV.

Instead he lay there, occasionally drifting into a light doze, until the sun sank below the horizon. A bit later--around 6:30--he got what he'd hoped for: the door to the room swung open on soundless hinges to reveal his caretaker.

God.

He'd told himself it was the nightmare quality of the memory that made Herbert seem like that in his mind--that it was exaggeration born of terror, but this.

Pale as his shirt, eyes shiny and almost glassy, movements unconsciously graceful. Oddly weary.

And yet he looked better, so much better than the screaming, dying thing Dan had sunk his needle into and stitched up.

A sob clogged Dan's throat as he choked out the name, as he reached a hand out towards his friend.

He didn't see Herbert move between the door and the bedside.

"Dan," such reverence in his voice, as though Dan were the one who'd risen from the dead.
"You're--how are you feeling? Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine." Though Herbert's grip on his hand was painfully tight. He winced, and pulled back--regretted doing so as soon as it was done, for he could see Herbert folding into himself, retreating from whatever strange openness had reared its head back into cold logic. He tried his best to repair it. "You sent me a great nurse. I'm fine."

"I see." Herbert folded his hands securely behind his back.

"Could stand to be without the IVs." He lifted his arm. Again Herbert moved with eerie unreality--Dan could feel the needles coming free of his arm, could see that Herbert was no longer where he had once stood, but the steps in between were a blur. "Thanks." He flexed his arm and sat up, testing the cool marble floor with his feet for the first time.

"Have you attempted to walk?" The same rote tone Dan had heard during hospital rounds, usually followed with notes regarding bedside manner.

"Not yet. I was waiting for," (not Herbert, but no one else so neatly fit the void in his mind), "I thought I might need someone to keep watch."

"Of course. Here." Herbert slung Dan's arm over his shoulder, a reversal of their first grand outing in the Miskatonic Hospital's morgue. But Dan hadn't been able to lift Herbert like he weighed no more than a doll. Even Herbert himself seemed surprised.

"Riiight. So. The door?" Dan offered.

"Further, if you can stand it. No sense in letting clots develop. Unless you've enjoyed being an
"Point taken. You're the one who's going to have to carry me back." The joke fell flat with the knowledge that Herbert very well could do so, with whatever otherworldly influence was working its way through his system. Dan kept finding himself observing those eyes, strange behind familiar frames, and then realizing he'd forgotten to breathe.

Herbert was cold, so cold to the touch. Dead-feeling; he leaned hard, let his arm clutch what he shouldn't have let go of in the first place. Oddly perfect, the height of his support.

"You look good." He didn't mean to say it—that wasn't them, never had been them, even with their history of near-death experiences. But it fell out of his mouth clumsy and stupid as everything else he'd ever said or done, and there it lay. And there, again, was that shocked gratitude followed by a hardening. Those mobile features opened and closed like a fan.

"I--thank you, Dan. The sentiment is appreciated." Dark lashes lowered. "I'm aware that the symptoms are somewhat obvious."

"No, I mean--" he flailed, drowning, ground to a halt in the middle of a hallway. "Yes, you look different. But you're alive, Herbert, and that--"

Bitter, twisting smile.

"I'm afraid that's a matter of debate these days, Dan." And when he laughed, high, shrill, his lips parted and

oh

oh *God*

It was just the blood loss that made Dan faint. Not the teeth, exquisite little pearly knives winking at him.

Not the teeth.

His neck tingled.

He swayed, and strong arms caught him. Swift white surgeon's hands checked him over.

Darkness crept red-and-black at the edges of his vision.

Herbert's voice came through muddled, as if Dan were hearing it from deep underwater. He felt weightless. And when he came to, he was in bed again, his friend's face still leaning over him. The fangs were hidden once more behind lips carefully compressed into a tight line.

"Wha…"

"Dizzy spell. You're further from being recovered than I thought. My miscalculation." He pressed a glass of water into Dan's hands.

Dan drank slowly, palpably aware of the awkward silence.

The eyes wouldn’t meet his.

"So you… " he tried. "you're," 'one of them,' sounded so melodramatic. Herbert would laugh.
"Infected with a rather potent and apparently incurable pathogen. Nothing more than that. And nothing less, either." He grinned, and it was hard not to notice the pains he took to conceal his teeth.

"So you, I mean, you don't. You really have to drink blood?"

"Unfortunately," Herbert sighed. "One of the more irritating side effects. I haven't even been able to supplement my reagent--Lestat watches me like a hawk."

"Lestat," Dan repeated with a growl. "He's still here?"

"If previous habits hold true, he's currently eavesdropping." Herbert smirked and leaned in close for the benefit or detriment of their unseen audience, until his head hovered in the crook of Dan's neck. "We can use this, Dan. This is it. The key to our work." His breath tickled at Dan's vein, and some buried, dangerous, submissive instinct tipped his head back to expose his throat.

He heard and felt Herbert's respiration speed up (still breathing, still alive, he hadn't watched his friend die on that table--), a winter breeze whipping against his neck.

Something brushed, so soft, smooth, over that spot, the place Herbert had laid his hand weeks ago, the place he'd--

When he felt the cold, gentle wetness of an open-mouthed kiss on his sweaty skin, Dan moaned aloud, reached for

nothing

Gone, vanished like a dream.

"Herbert?" Dan sat up to the sight of a now-empty room. Intent on searching, he made his way to the door, but his weak, shaky legs forced a return to the bed, where he fell in and out of sleep for the rest of the night.

The next day he woke close to noon, his exhausted body still making demands. Atop the stack of novels sat a hand-drawn note penned in a scrawl better suited to looseleaf paper than the heavy stationary it was on; it marked a route to the kitchen. He forced himself out of bed and down the hall, stopping now and then to sink down to the carpet and rest his legs. He might as well have been in a coma, for the amount of strength left to him. And as he moved, he tried to plan.

Vampire. Good place to start. His friend, Herbert West, was a vampire. That meant no sunlight. And killing people for their blood (he'd spent much of the morning pointedly not thinking about the night before, willing away the uncomfortable stiffness in his sweatpants). Being the undead, to the best of his grade school education of sneaking the occasional midnight, was not one of those things a person could just talk their way out of.

But then, normal people weren't supposed to be able to conquer death, either. And Herbert had basically been nocturnal before. He was still the same weird, pale guy playing with the unknown. It was--it wasn't fine, but they could work through it. They could still get out of this. Past this.

Herbert would want to get out--must be waiting on Dan to recover. After what happened… Herbert was many awful things, but not disloyal. Dan had to do his part, now, so they could go home.

By the time he'd psyched himself up to even that level of positivity the cereal he'd poured himself
was a mushy paste, and the clock already read 5:30 pm. He got up from his stool and dumped the food out before returning to the fridge. He let himself linger in front of the open door, a luxury he hadn't allowed himself since he'd had to start paying bills. The cool air was soothing. His eyes settled on a container of lunchmeat. Sandwich, maybe.

"Anything interesting in there?"

"Shit!" Dan dropped the Tupperware to the ground, where it rolled to the far side of the breakfast bar. Standing in front of him, casual as you please (with fucking bedhead), was the man who'd helped kidnap him.

Molloy gave a little wave. "Glad to see you're up. Wasn't sure you'd make it."

"Gee, thanks a lot. Your concern means so much." The bitterness, the edge, was usually something either borrowed from or reserved for Herbert, but just then it spilled free from Dan, pouring out on the only person he'd seen to be angry at.

"Aw, c'mon, man, don't be like that. Perils of befriending a creature of the night." Vampires. Vampires with scruff and band tees and torn jeans. With shaggy grey-blond hair and weird, weird eyes and *friendly* faces, friendlier even than Karen had been.

Vampires returning the Tupperware to the fridge in under a second with a look of exaggerated longing and a wink.

"I would know, after all. You feeling okay? Want anything? I haven't cooked in a while, but I used to be pretty good."

"Can you make anything besides eggs?" Dan’s skills were a hit with his rare one-night stands, but the usages got bare bones pretty quickly. And Herbert had looked at employing of flame for anything less than chemical reduction as a terrible waste.

Molloy laughed. "I think I can manage." He grabbed ingredients from around the kitchen, moving with almost blind familiarity.

"You do this for everybody?" Dan lowered himself back onto his stool, still tense.

"Now and then. The smell makes it worth it. Trust me, you're doing me a solid." The saucepan gave a low hiss as Molloy threw in vegetables and fruit Dan hadn't even seen him chop--onions, peppers, bits of pineapple. All fresher than Dan had seen in years.

"What do you mean, 'you'd know'?"

"Well, I haven't always been like this." There was something oddly fey about the flick of his wrist towards his ivory face, the wiggle of his fingers to display shiny nails. But that face turned serious, then, even as the blade of a Japanese Ginsu knife spun absently in the air.

"Spend time with vampires, and there's three ways to go. I'm the lucky best-case scenario." The knife came down on beef, red, raw, oozing. "You? I thought you'd be second-best."

"What's second-best?" Dan asked, trying not to look at the meat, like the inside of a wound bled almost dry.

"Thought you'd die in your sleep."

Dan swallowed. Something about the blunt phrasing chilled him more than any dramatic
proclamation could've.

"So I'm third-best?" He'd figured that would be the horror movie route, swept up on from behind and left for dead. "I'm still alive."

"That's not it." Molloy scooped the scraps into the skillet. "You've met third-best."

He thought of the scar-pocked tapestry of Karen's skin. "I mean… really? Look, maybe you've lost perspective from the whole death thing, but most of us living types would consider getting to stay alive a pretty good deal." It was why he'd taken up with Herbert in the first place. Anything was better than the terrifying abyss.

"You think so?" The man met his gaze. "She gets whatever she wants. Gets to live, gets her hits. Gets hope handed out to her, enough to keep her hooked."

"So she's an addict. That doesn't mean her life’s worthless."

"That's not the issue. It's… she may be hanging on for life, but it's not gonna to save her." His face twisted, pained, almost but not quite ugly. "With a little help she'll be able to keep up the lifestyle longer than she might've, but that just lets her take more damage before it finally ends. Hope kills you if you stay."

Dan shook is head. "Herbert isn't like that. He won't--"

A plate of stir-fry clattered to the breakfast bar in front of him.

"Honey, you can go ahead and believe that. It's your funeral." Warm breath on his ear. "And all the graves here are unmarked."

Dan jerked his head back. Molloy seemed so normal half the time, and then he had to go and pull something like that. Like… like the men who showed up in the ER with too much makeup and ruined tights, and black bruises to match their eyeshadow.

At least the food was a welcome distraction. Molloy was right--he was a damn good cook. Or maybe Dan's standards had been lowered by weeks of eating at greasy spoons and gas station food. There were probably the first fresh vegetables his digestive tract had seen in months.

"Look, you're still wrong," he said when the plate before him was empty. "About--us. It's not like that. I had a girlfriend 'til recently."

"Huh. Y'know, same here? And yet, shockingly, it didn't stop me from fucking her boyfriend, too. Stranger things," his grin grew in concert with Dan's discomfort.

"Was that before you made 'first best'?"

"Nah, I wasn't that kind of guy. Real button down, looking to be the next Murrow. No time for romance. But," he shrugged. "Like I said. You change. The person you walk into the room as isn't the same one who leaves with bite marks on their neck. Your buddy'll be like that too."

"So it's because of them," Dan concluded, almost triumphant. "Some weird neck sucking thing."

Molloy snorted. "Sure. Whatever. You want some more? With your sense of self preservation, I'm thinking you should stock up on fuel."

He shuddered and shut down the conversation, but he ate seconds, too.
Couldn't hurt.

There was a subculture, there, for the 'mortals': daylight was for eating, showering, choosing clothes and sleeping. Spending time in the sun was frowned on, but he did it anyway--he wasn't like them, a pet playing at being undead. He was in Florida, after all.

Nights were for… the vampires. Spending time with them, letting them do what they did, recovering from the blood loss and what was apparently a Hell of a high.

At first, Dan assumed he was just bad at finding Herbert. Or that Herbert was spending too long in the damned lab, that hell room. (He couldn't wait to leave, so they could go back to working together, but until then--no). Eventually, though, as night bled into night and time lost meaning, he realized it was something else: Herbert was just avoiding him. He had to chase him, follow him, dog his heels for any time at all.

And Herbert's time was taken oddly by the others, the other dread monsters whose names and relationships he learned.

Karen had been right about Lestat (and knew a great deal more besides, he'd quickly found)--Dan couldn't so much as walk into a room with him without feeling a chill go down his spine. And on the rare occasions he had managed to capture Herbert for a few words, to beg him to go, it was always Lestat who appeared to spirit him away, convenient excuse in hand. He'd drape a proprietary arm around Herbert as they left for Dan's benefit, like a high school jock determined to show off his victory. And damned if it didn't work, leaving Dan stranded in the knowledge that it would take him days to engineer another such meeting.

Herbert’s allowing such a thing, putting up with being squired about so, turned his stomach.

But then, it wasn't just Herbert and Lestat. Even Molloy, with whom Dan had developed a strange and unexpected rapport over nightly ‘breakfasts,’ could disappear at a moment's notice if the right hand tugged his leash. Disturbingly, that hand seemed most often to belong to a teenager, even younger than Lestat, with thick red curls and a gaze even colder than Herbert's at his worst.

Even as Dan settled into something like complacency, telling himself he was making plans to get Herbert, compiling his little mental dossier on the strange dynamics of the house, there was one missing element: the vampire who'd been there that awful night, who'd held Dan back while Herbert breathed his last. Who'd worn all the signs of regret, and still done nothing. Since then, Dan had seen neither hide nor hair of them. With everything else that had happened, he was beginning to wonder if "ghost" needed to be added to his list of things to believe in.

Dan had gotten used to the near-routine of Molloy showing up to pester him. On the first night the vampire was a no-show, some unease in Dan’s gut sent him out looking, roaming disconnectedly through the winding white-walled corridors (like a gallery, nothing to distract from the art) that he was by then beginning to know his way through, architecture be damned. Past lounges of human ‘pets’; game rooms; parlors and studies; a small outdated discotheque, abandoned though lipstick-smudged glasses sat damp atop the wet bar. Past the doors to the indoor pool.

Finally Dan found him--if found was the right word for someone so nakedly apparent, leaning against the wall outside the grand double doors of the library, fidgeting with a pack of cigarettes he couldn't possibly use. (Dan had never seen him pick up a book.)

"Hey," Molloy raised a hand in greeting. "What's up?"
Dan struggled for some opener that didn't ring with an air of being stood up. They'd happened to be in the same place for a few nights, that was all. They weren't friends.

"You waiting on someone?" Moloy seemed more than happy to let humans come to him, to let them ask him to do what he did, but then he'd never shown this strange nervousness in front of Dan either.

"Not exactly."

Dan saw something stir through the frosted glass, a shadow of a figure in front of a fireplace. "Looks like they're there already."

He started to push open the door and froze, coming away easily when Molloy tugged on his shoulder. Seated inside was his missing vampire, legs crossed, head bowed over a small, ancient-looking book.

From a distance, not pinned in place by their inhuman strength, Dan was startled by the creature's delicacy.

Beauty, even.

Like a Nagel print come to life, white and black too stark for reality. He'd only ever seen one person with that sort of... severity. Contrast.

"Who--"

"Outta your league, Dan. Leave that one be."

"Come on, man. Is it always about that with you?" He blushed hot.

"Only when I see someone about to make a bad decision. So from what I know of you, yeah. Pretty much always."

Dan punched him in the arm, reminded again when he made cold, almost painful impact that no matter how human Molloy could seem, he was Other. "Who is she though?"

"Merciful Death. The only vampire who doesn't give a damn who he kills, just so long as it doesn't hurt 'em too much going. Men, women, kids. He's our blind eye of justice."

He. Dan could feel the heat radiating from his own face. This damn place. "Why didn't he kill me, then?"

Molloy practically snorted his answer:

"Never in the house." At Dan's look of what must be gormless incomprehension, he continued. "He has rules, just not a type. You're in his home and he knows you, so you're safe. Wouldn't kill an acquaintance if they begged him." The bitterness in Molloy's voice could have rivaled strychnine.

"So what's the problem? He might be able to help me with Herbert."

Another snort. "He won't."

Wading through conversations heavy with hints he was expected to know was quickly getting tiresome. "Why?" He bit, simply because the alternative was knowing nothing at all.

"Him and Lestat have history. Lot of it bad. They were supposed to be making up, headed for a
second honeymoon--but that was before Lestat broke his promise about no new vampires. Louis might just make you an exception for bringing it up."

"Bullshit," he hedged, though one could never be sure with these people. "What's the real reason?"

"Why're you so determined for that *not* to be the reason?" Molloy's face was so often filled with a cheerful, empty good humor that seeing it serious was always arresting. Especially when there had to be some joke.

"C'mon, you've been pushing that explanation for every single thing since the minute you met me. I get that you're... that way... and I'm fine with it, but you can't expect me to believe it about everybody."

Not even the slender, graceful man with long, shiny black hair and torn jeans. He looked like he'd becourting a beating just for existing, if he ventured out in the wrong part of town. One of the many things Dan didn't miss about working the Emergency Room.

(He couldn't think like that. He'd be back there soon enough.)

"Goddamn Cain, sometimes I wonder if you hear yourself when you open your mouth." Molloy shook his head, shoved the cigarettes into his back pocket. "You ever think maybe if you're 'that way' you'd wanna stick to others like you, who'd maybe give a damn if you died? Might not look at you like you're dog shit they stepped in if you tried to kiss them? Besides, once you're dead it doesn't matter much. I sat in a room for three days because this lamp was the most beautiful fuckin' thing I'd ever seen."

"So then, you still like women?" Dan said, latching onto the one thing in his almost-friend’s words he could think to use as an opportunity to regain the rapport he’d somehow lost.

"Oh for fuck's--yes, Dan, whatever gets you off." His Calvin Klein-ad hair stood up where he ran his hands through it, furrowing around his long fingers like wheatfields before a plow. “Look, I don't care if you believe me about Louis, as long as you steer clear of him. Because someone as dumb as you will wind up dead. And I'm not letting you hurt him like that."

"Hurt him? Gee, I can see how me being dead would really break his heart. How thoughtless of me." He rolled his eyes. How quickly it changed from Random Killer to Helpless Victim; Molloy could at least try to keep his story straight.

Forcing his eyes from the man in the library (still reading, oblivious, turning pages just faster than normal), Dan turned to go.

"Dan," Molloy caught his arm. "You're in over your head. I feel for you. I can be a real nice guy, and I don't like seeing Lestat jerk you and your friend around. But I mean it." His eyes were cold and empty. "You mess with Louis, and you won't have to worry about your friend anymore."

And it's on the tip of Dan's tongue to argue, call bullshit on the supposed threat, but then that room, that night, comes back to the front of his mind (never left, not really).

There in the hallway, he felt the implacable grip Louis had kept on him, they way he'd been handed off to Herbert's ravening like a doll.

How he'd been locked down, trapped in there while Lestat did *that*, so tenderly and violently, with--to--Herbert, for all to see. No one to intercede with so much as a harsh word.

"...Fine." He shook off Molloy's hold, retreating back to the safety of "his" room before allowi
himself to acknowledge the bone-deep shiver running through him.

He steered clear of the library after that.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Dan Cain is determined to get Herbert out of there. Also rather a lot of sexytimes. Like, a lot.
Located as it is off the coast of Miami, what could you expect but for things on the Night Island to heat up?
(This is the Sex Chapter. Just... there is plot, but quite a bit of sex happens here. Of both the vampiric and mortal sorts.)

The other mortals all had their favorites, working in an almost unspoken agreement to disperse once a certain hour had passed and all the vampires were awake. The vanished into side rooms as if the grand mansion were an hourly motel, emerging sometimes hours later with blissful expressions and extremely poor coordination.

Dan avoided it entirely.

"Come on, Dan," Karen would coax, sitting on the veranda and looking out toward the distant waves. "You'll have to do it eventually. You can come with me--Armand is gentle, really. You'd like him. And he doesn't mind if we mess around. Or what about Daniel? You guys seem to get along."

Dan would shake his head and change the subject.

"You're gonna grow old, saving yourself for him," Molloy teased. "Come on, Dan. I can show you a good time, if you want."

"No, still good." It had become easier to let Molloy's strangeness roll off of him, to recognize when the vampire was making a comment purely to rile Dan up. He shoved Molloy's shoulder as he walked by, placing his dishes into the top of the line washer. "Take your charms elsewhere, man."

"I'm serious."

That stopped Dan cold, locked him up from the neck down.

"Look, I get it. I spooked you that first night, so you think you can opt out of the game and win that way. It's smart."

"Oh yeah? So what's the problem?"

"That I get a pain in my ass every time I see you walking around with that stick up your ass." Molloy stopped in the middle of wiping the counter down to point a dish towel at Dan. "And that you're deluding yourself. You're never going to get him to leave here. And when you figure that out, you're gonna end up doing something you regret."

"Like what? Fucking somebody half my age?" So much for tact. Regret started before the sentence was even finished forming.
"...Yeah." Molloy visibly deflated. "Like that."

Guilty, Dan withdrew back to a sitting position, conciliatory. "What's his deal, anyway?"

"Same 'deal' as everybody else. Dead."

Dan rolled his eyes. 'Dead', when they walked and talked and did… what they did. He knew corpses, and these weren't that.

"Dead at seventeen, from an ex-lover's poisoned dagger."

"Jesus!" It burst from him then in spite of his knowledge that Molloy was just trying to be shocking. "How in the Hell--"

"Told ya. Lucky ones. He was Marius's…" Molloy seemed for once to be at a loss for words. "… 'apprentice' at the time. When he got--" (a quick, slicing motion of the hand) "Marius turned him."

"Is that why he's so weird?"

"Weird."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do. That's just what he's like." Molloy's tone turned protective, then, hostile at the suggestion that anything might be odd with his (not partner) companion.

Dan felt his lip curling, just a little, at the image, and Molloy responded with that weird intuition he so often showed.

"I was twenty. It wasn't--it was weird, but not because of that. I loved him. And of the two of us, he had the experience. Centuries of it."

"Could've fooled me." Dan didn't get it. Karen was the same way about the kid--her eyes would go soft, sad, and she'd get the strangest smile. He just didn't see it--his brief glimpses of Armand had shown the kid to be skittish and strange, staring for too long or speaking an answer to a question he hadn't formed yet, refusing to relinquish a subject until the other person's well of knowledge had run dry.

He cleared his throat. "So, uh, twenty. He took his time. Or you, uh, no offense. You don't look twenty." Not that he should be throwing stones on the subject.

"Thirty-two. Made it a whole decade before I forced his hand."

"Stabbed?" Dan ventured. He was beginning to sense a pattern.

"Booze." Molloy countered. "… mostly booze. I, uh, wasn't exactly making the best choices. He'd ignore me, I'd do something to get his attention that would land me in the hospital. Or he'd chase me, and I'd get a little closer to a nervous breakdown. The ulcers I had." He shook his head.

"Real romantic." Dan quipped. "You did all that just to wind up a vampire?"

"Hey, I'm not the only one in this room who's done some questionable shit in the name of living forever," Molloy said lowly, pale hair falling over his eyes. Dan could swear he saw flecks of silver mixed in with the blond. "And like I said--complicated. You wake up one night and you don't know how you got there, doing stuff the you who lived in the rundown suburban apartment would never dream about. You know?"
Like stealing bodies from the morgue. Lying to the cops. Pining over an assemblage of parts.
"Yeah." He did.

"That's why I'm telling you: take my advice. You wanna leave without him?"

"No!" He'd come this far, and it was his fault Herbert had ended up like this. And for all the avoidance, Herbert had hung on every one of the few words they'd actually shared.

"Then get your toes wet before you drown. Or someone else gets to you first."

"I don't think I'm in trouble there," he said with something he hoped sounded like a laugh. "Pretty sure Lestat's looking for a reason to trip me down the stairs."

And there was the crux of it. Lestat, and Herbert, and that damned nightmare in the lab. Dan didn't want--that, not specifically. He wanted what he'd had, what he'd failed to appreciate until it vanished.

But now that he knew there was more, he couldn't stop thinking about it.

And maybe, just maybe, it would make a difference. To Herbert.

~*~*~*~

No one else saw what happened. Armand engineered it that way, though it pained him to stalk the halls of his own palace as if he were an intruding thief. The lights were dim. The mortals asleep (all of them, including that damnable--)

They were alone. He and his maker, by the dim light of candles, the smell of paint thick in the air as if his heart still pumped blood and lived again. The very smell of it calmed him, and how he hated that knowledge.

"Whatever is the matter, Armand?" The cold strike of modernity he’d insisted on. Refusing to let him forget.

Lestat’s pet, and his mortal, and the way they threw things to chaos. The strangeness of it, the puzzle that he longed to wrap his hands around but was barred from touching. All of it out of his reach, under his own roof.

“Nothing.” He locked himself into propriety. “I came to see how you were faring.”

Marius set aside the brush, picked up a grimy rag drenched in linseed oil and began wiping streaks of black and white and grey from his long fingers. Familiar and not; the paints came in tubes, not mixed by Amadeo and the other apprentices. They had names now, titanium white and mars black and--

Marius had hated black and white. Black, especially, was to him a Dutch affectation, while white was too cold, unreflective of the candlelit world they inhabited or the blue skies Marius so strove to recreate.

Of course, though, this painting would be cold, given its subject.

The face was only barely roughed in, broad strokes over the graphite sketch, yet there it was
impossible to mistake the intent eyes, the snubbed nose, the mouth strangely soft compared to the
determined chin.

Even here, then, Armand was to find no escape.

"I can see I'm interrupting." He couldn't bear it suddenly, the tidal wave of loneliness. Daniel
withdrew from him. The thralls stared at him as a marble wonder, a dispenser of escape--even
Karen left him cold and empty and alone at the dawn. Louis' face was evermore a reminder of how
unsuitable he was, Lestat's a ghost of past disdain. Old, mechanized memories ran roughshod over
his every moment, overwhelming him with stimuli. There was no peace, not even in the repetition
of dismembering mechanisms or pacing familiar routes. Not even here, in the ancient smell of
paints and brushes. The past rejected him as surely as it haunted him.

"I'll leave you to your work." If he stayed any longer he would smash that painting, that
contemptible visage that was but the last in a long line of unknown quantities.

"The painting will keep. It's not as though I've switched to acrylics, after all." Marius leaned back,
easy, muscles unaffected by a night spent in the posture of a singular pursuit, and removed his
smock to reveal a snug tee shirt and jeans. His hair was messily bound with an elastic band.

"The doctor has interesting features, don't you think? Such a shame."

"Why do you say so?" At least he could take this apart. Words, sentences. The man before him, so
at ease but burning with ancient intensity in his gaze. "If they're interesting, then they'll stay that
way now, thanks to Lestat." Too sharp, too raw.

"True--that's the shame of it. He's so strange. Unfinished. Never to be as intended. I can't quite
capture it… " Marius handed him a brush, then, guided him before the canvas. "Something to do
with the light around the eyes. You were always better with that than I."

It struck him, then, to dash the work before him, to revel in the spite of it. But this was what he had
wanted, wasn't it? A task. It was only stokes on a canvas. He had power over it. He pondered it,
letting the brush pass to his free hand and taking his thumb to the paint, smudging with inhuman
delicacy until the shadows, eternal, beneath those eyes seemed to bleed into the intensity of them.
Eyes that absorbed light, absorbed everything.

Marius' hand was still on Armand’s shoulder, his presence still at his back as a bulwark against the
world. He found himself idly making a few more strokes with the brush, prolonging the contact.
When he stepped back, he felt… calmer. This world was, at least, familiar. "To your satisfaction,
Maestro?" It was so easy to slip into old habits, joking.

"Beyond, surpassing as always, Am--" He broke off, smile still riveted to his face as he corrected.
"Armand."

Armand set to cleaning his brush, careful, quick, methodical, then the one abandoned by Marius
for good measure. Wouldn't do to ruin the fine sable, sable from Russia as Andrei had been.

"Armand… " The hand on his shoulder was ginger, carefully devoid of presumption. So different
from what it had once been, in a place smelling and feeling like this. "Why grace me with your
presence now? Why tonight, my dear former apprentice?"

He chose his lie carefully, safe in the shielding of his mind. "Lestat's fledgling has caused his share
of uproar, and it was… unclear how far it had spread. I promised you my protection, when you
came here."
The image of West's strange experiments, of one of his protected subjects shambling and incoherent and violent, still dogged him. It wasn't punishment, or order, but simply... curiosity. Armand should understand it. But instead it filled him with cold dread.

And Dr. Cain, with all the protections of a favored pet but none of the understanding of his role. None of the sacrifices expected of him. Leaving whispers in his wake, gathered up into his Daniel's perplexed but indulgent grasp. (Armand wasn't jealous, he was--)

He realized then that he'd drifted off, left the air stale and blank for too long. If Marius had replied, it had been lost in the grey haze of his thoughts. "Protection." he repeated.

"Protection." Marius stepped back, sat straddling his artist's bench backwards, long legs spread, bare heels planted. Tall enough that he still came to Armand's chin. So familiar; so much the same. But the words were backwards, too, disrupted the forms. Time reversing things. "I confess, I've never been one to live with so many of our kind--certainly not such a diverse group. Surely you, as the Covenmaster of Paris, know better than I when something must be done. Does the boy's uproar seem dangerous, or merely as sad as you've make him look?" He gestured to the painting, the patterns of pigment mapping memories of light and shadow. Empty, flat thing with no thought or emotion behind it. Sad, apparently.

"He upsets the order." That was no crime on its own, not as it would have been when he huddled, ragged and hungry, in the catacombs. "His actions are unpredictable." He hadn't yet acted against another vampire, it was true. Armand found himself pacing the length of the small room. "He," but he hadn't killed. Not another of their kind, not even a thrall really. He'd done little more than act like the animal he was. "Eludes me." Armand sat on the edge of the bench, careful to keep a decorous distance as he nodded toward the painting. "I fail to see 'sadness' in it."

"Of course," Marius said softly. "He's got a dignity about him, for all his flaws. A pathetic sort of strength. You wouldn't see it as sad." He leaned in, then, so their knees nearly touched. Braced his hand on his own knee, not Armand's. "I know your typical methods, and how Lestat's demands for favor wreak havoc on them. But if it comes to it, there are ways to prune a spirit without killing the body."

"Tell me your thoughts." It sounded less imperious than it should: lost, small. But then, Daniel was always telling him to ask for input... and then grew angry at him for the questions he did ask, drained of indulgence long before Armand had his fill of answers; no, better to be the pretty, mysterious doll and take his knowledge in silence. It was what people wanted; to be known before they even spoke. But here, plain words were his last resort. The heat of his own feeding made the brush of stained fingers against his own as vivid as a brand, but he didn't move away. The cold focused him. And when he did look up (hair short, but already beginning to curl around his face again as the night wore on) they were so much closer than he'd intended.

"Loss, Armand. It is necessary for our kind, to pass from what we were to what we are." Marius's face was terrible in the combination of incandescent lamps and moonlight, half a dozen sources confusing the shading and making a mess of his features and expression. Moon blue clashing with pale gold. But his icy eyes, his hair, still looked the same. "Loss will change him--unbalance him long enough for his new, rightful support to step in. Cut away the thing that will be gone in a few years anyway, and so much the better. Clean."

"Loss," he repeated, dutiful student that he was. "You speak of the mortal. Cain." It made sense, it was true. Armand had been unable to become himself until his home was in flames, until he thought his maker lost to him. "How are you certain it would work as you say? They barely speak. Cain seems more intent on seducing another." Daniel, who displayed endless patience for the
mortal's tiresome hand wringing. Who had no time for Armand. A little prickle of jealousy curled his lip.

"Cain is frightened, rightfully so. To adore something untouchable--something meant for others--
pains him. Pains us all, in our ways; I think you know it as well, to my regret and bafflement." Marius removed the tie from his hair, sat back just a little and ran fingers through it until it stretched straight as the warp of a loom. "The separation has begun. Best complete it, for both their
sakes."

"Lestat… " had the laying of hands upon either of them. But pride stopped his tongue. "It doesn't matter." He had played this game before, and won. Lestat would thank him in the end, and they'd all be free of the Brat Prince's endless fretting that another of his fledglings had passed him over. Yes, the more he thought on it the more it seemed workable. Drive the mortal out, and harmony would resume among them.

A strand of hair was still out of place, spoiling the portraiture before him. He moved to fix it as he had the painting, let his hand grow tangled and bound in the process of his laying the work aright. "Thank you," For what, he was unsure. He avoided those insightful eyes, chin pointed down and shoulders rounded. Prey behavior, he scolded himself. He was stronger than this.

"Oh, Armand." Marius clasped his wrist, kissed his silk-strung palm before releasing him with a
t humanlike inhale through his nose. "Never thank me. Never think you need to--did you not come here tonight to protect me? That alone is more than I could have dreamed."

Red, again, spoiling lashes that would be too pale on a human, showing attractively only because of their kind's unnatural coloration.

Marius stood, abruptly, pulling himself from Armand's grasp to stand back turned beside the bench. "Never thank me for your due."

For a moment he felt bereft, as if he had once more been tossed out into the uncaring world. But this was what he had wanted: to stand alone, to be deferred to and respected by the members of his coven. He didn't need to be held or coddled, least of all by this man. He needed nothing. A coven leader was strong, apparently without limit--he'd risked enough, coming here like this.

He squared his shoulders as he stood, forcing himself back beneath an impassive mask. "If our dottore causes you grief, remember that my door is open. Though I don't anticipate the problems will persist." The memory of a cold, marble touch still burned him. "And the mortals here would no doubt welcome the attentions of an ancient. Take care of yourself."

"And you as well, Angel. Though of course I need not doubt that."

"… Of course not."

---

Dan was getting desperate. Time kept passing, night following day following night, and Herbert showed no signs of breaking away, no desire to leave with Dan and head home to Arkham where they belonged.
No signs of letting go of his sick, Stockholm Syndrome fondness for the thing that had held him down and… used him… on a steel table before he (not died)

When Dan tried (not failed) to save him.

Before he got up again, and moved and spoke, just a bit changed from what he used to be, but not… Dan turned away from that nightmare and others like it; turned his thoughts to Herbert and what Herbert wanted, needed.

What Dan could give him to make it right, to tempt him to freedom. It was no mystery, never had been. No real sacrifice, either. (Though Dan had never really seen himself as a Richard Gere type.)

So the next time he caught Herbert alone, past 2 am in one of the sitting rooms, he got closer.

Herbert looked tired. Thin.

Wonderful.

Dead, indeed--working himself to the bone, more like.

"Hey." I can do this, Dan thought as he sat down on what he'd been reliably assured was not a couch but a 'divan.'

"Finally caught you." He patted the spot beside him. "Come sit down already, before you fall."

Herbert regarded him with wary eyes, worried his lip between those long, pointed teeth before acquiescing. When he sat, he made sure there was a safe distance between them.

"You're not eating," Dan scolded, playing to the argument they'd had over and over in the house. Their house.

His reward came in the form of a sigh that held lifetimes, and mountains of weight.

"Need I remind you that my condition requires me to subsist on blood from live human donors?"

Dan shrugged. "I haven't seen anybody turn up dead. These other vamps are managing somehow."

"A mystery for our times." The merest glimpse of his roommate's cattiness brought a smile to Dan's lips--which in turn, loosed the smallest bit of tension from Herbert's shoulders.

"Come on, Herbert. You didn't come this far to starve yourself to death. You survived getting strangled to death by a giant, vicious intestine." Their life always sounded stranger when put into words. He swallowed. This was the moment. He scooted just a little closer, so their knees touched, and tugged down the neck of his shirt to reveal his collarbone. "Here, you can borrow some of mine. What are partners for, right?" He closed his eyes as he said it, feeling like an awkward girl on prom night.

"Dan, I don't--"

"C'mere." Herbert could have resisted him--strength of ten men, these people had--but he let Dan pull him close, onto Dan's lap, legs spread across Dan's thighs.

You can do this.

Sex, and blood, and hadn't those two things always threatened to unite? Hadn't he always suspected it of Herbert, when he thought of it at all?
"Why do you still wear these?" he asked, pulling Herbert's glasses down his nose to expose those eyes, shiny and glazed. God, he could be alluring, maybe even more so with this new bleached-bone finish lending an otherworldly beauty.

When they kissed, when Dan put his hands on a waist thin enough that the hipbones felt sharp, he became certain: not only could he do this, he needed to.

He was a doctor. He knew how sex with a guy worked (intellectually).

He'd brought the supplies, and was definitely--capable.

He ground up, gently, wondering whether Lestat'd been there very recently. Wondering what Herbert knew about how sex with a guy worked (practically).

Herbert shuddered against him, incoherent as he snatched another kiss. Dan remembered Molloy's descriptions of vampirism being more or less like a constant drug high of intensified senses… but he took the ego boost anyway, happy to have his first attempts at whatever-this-was so well received. He slid Herbert's glasses off by inches, setting them gently on the carpet nearby.

At the very least, it seemed that Herbert had learned a few things about kissing. His acidic, clever tongue was merciless in probing Dan's mouth for sensitive spots, and his apparent lack of need for oxygen meant Dan came away from each meeting literally dizzy. He was already hard, could feel himself straining against his jeans.

Herbert was the same as when they'd started.

He frowned. So much for the ego boost. The idea of touching someone else's dick brought the weird feeling of nerves back into his stomach. He'd assumed, on some level, that it would just kind of happen.

It's just Herbert, he told himself. Just his friend, with glittering eyes and no sign of circulation beyond the barest flush in his cheeks, and icy hands. He reached forward, trying to undo the buckle of his former roommate's pants.

Herbert caught his hand. "Don't."

"No, it's okay. Look, I'm nervous too, it's--"

"I can't, Dan. Quite literally."

"What, you need," he struggled, "more blood or something first? To make it work? I was serious, you can go ahead. I, uh," he looked down. "I trust you."

"Dan-- why?" Something panicked, trapped, flared in those eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want you." He knew, as he looked and touched and held, that it wasn't even slightly a lie.

"No, you don't. You never did. Not before." And now his careful, safe avoidance came back to haunt him.

"Herbert." Their foreheads pressed together, like resting against a mirror in the dead of night. He'd never been left by this man, before. Never been threatened with losing. Never, ever had to pursue.

He'd driven 1500 miles for this.
"Why now?" Herbert was pulling back, wriggling away, but with no more than human strength. "Is it the disease? Does it do something to you, too?"

"Herbert, stop!" Dan toppled them both to the thick carpet as Herbert retreated, muttering about symptoms and patterns. He rolled them and hung on for dear life to the cold, living thing beneath him with his friend's lovely face.

"You shouldn't trust me, Dan. I'll--" He clapped his hand over that mouth, the one he'd dreamt of having on him in the past.

"I do." He breathed, shuddering. "I trust you, and I want you, so please!" Herbert made as though to reply, but Dan used it as an opening to swipe his thumb over a fang. It was sharper than he'd imagined, slicing through his finger like a blade with only the barest of pressure. Blood dripped from the cut into Herbert's mouth, and the effect was almost instantaneous--Herbert's eyes rolled in his head, taking Dan back to their days in college, Herbert pale and pleading for the needle in his arm. Had they, even then, been rehearsing for this? He encouraged it as much as he could, squeezing his palm with his free hand. He'd heard about the weird mental link vampires could get through blood. If Herbert got a taste of Dan, he'd know he wasn't lying.

He was idling in the memory when the balance shifted, Herbert's supernatural strength coming to the fore as he rolled them over again and pinned Dan to the carpet. His fangs were fully visible now, bared almost in a snarl.

Part of Dan's brain told him to run like hell, to do whatever it took to get away from the predator on top of him. He forced it down, and instead craned his neck as much as he could to give Herbert access. "Come on," he panted. "Do it."

Herbert's lips descended on the joint of his shoulder and neck, sucking hard enough that he could already feel the bruising. Herbert's teeth were clumsy, maybe uncertain of how to balance between the desire to explore and to bite (to eat).

What Dan hadn't expected was the pain--as Herbert's teeth tightened his gasp changed into a hiss, unprepared for a tearing of skin that wasn't neat and clean.

Herbert was across the hall before Dan had even drawn his next breath, looking as if he was the one who'd been bitten. He burred and resolved once more, clutching his glasses, straightening his tie. "This was a mistake," he said, shakily. "I--I have to go."

"Herbert, wait!" He clapped a hand to the ragged cuts, nowhere near any major vessels. "Jesus, aren't you supposed to know where--"

He was speaking to air.

Again.

Fuck, wasn't there anything--

Wasn't he the one Herbert had wanted for so long? Shouldn't he be enough?

The tears in his eyes were from the pain. The hard-on was from the friction.

The stabbing in his chest?

FUCK.
He stood, gathering the tattered remains of his pride as he went. At least he knew where the infirmary was (such as it was). His face burned with embarrassment. All that-- *all that*, and he'd been rejected. Supposed years of pining, nights of waiting for him to wake, and now Herbert was scared to even touch him. He'd have to start again, take it slower. That was fine. Whatever this was, this knot in his gut (not to mention the issue below his belt), they'd work it out. They were partners, after all--

The thoughts withered and died as he turned the corner. Herbert's small frame was currently pressing a familiar, blond figure up against the wall, practically climbing to get at him--and from what Dan could hear (for the two seconds he could bear to listen), they seemed pretty enthusiastic about the situation.

He stumbled back, not sure if he imagined Lestat grinning at him from his position of triumph, one arm around Herbert's waist and the other squeezing the ass Dan hadn't even gotten near.

He'd never backpedaled so fast in his life, heading for the only friendly spot left he could think of.

~*~*~*~

It took all of Herbert's willpower to leave Dan behind. His teeth ached in his gums; his mouth was dry, as if he hadn't seen water in a decade or more. He wanted nothing more than to return and tear his friend's throat out, to let his hands roam the unfamiliar-familiar form as the last thrashes of life left Dan's body. The vividness of the images left him shaken, and no matter how much distance he put between himself and his almost-victim the feelings refused to abate. What, exactly, was the vampiric equivalent of a cold shower?

That was when Lestat, with his impeccably poor timing, showed himself. Or rather, when Herbert ran smack into him in the process of running from himself.

"Herbert!" Lestat's voice was all conviviality. "I had hoped I would find you. I--why, whatever is the matter?"

"Nothing." If he said it often enough, it would be true. Would become true, given the time to get a grip on himself.

"You've spilt." As soon as Lestat said it, Herbert realized the smell still hung on him, when he'd thought a mere memory; Dan's vital essence, there on his face, his collar, calling him back to its source. He shuddered as Lestat's long index finger swiped along the corner of Herbert's mouth, brushed his lip oh-so-feathersoft only to withdraw, to steal that lingering drop.

He chased it, lunged up in hot (so hot) pursuit and slotted their lips together clumsily.

He didn't taste Dan there, but felt the energy of this man, the pleasure of eager hands pulling him close. He was held there, secure in the embrace of one he couldn't possibly kill.

He pushed forward, trying to close any possible space between their bodies until he'd pinned Lestat against the wall. He broke the kiss only to immediately take another, his hands fisted in the extravagant leather of Lestat's jacket. He anchored himself to the man holding him, in safe harbor at last.

The longer he stood in that embrace, a danger to no one, the bolder he grew, trailing down the side
of Lestat’s neck and grazing marble skin with his teeth. He heard Lestat's breath hitch, and the perfectionist in him felt a glimmer of pride.

"Not here," Lestat panted, writhing under Herbert's experimenting, almost methodical touch. "It shouldn't--I want you to be comfortable."

"I'm comfortable." He gasped, uselessly, pulling himself up by those shoulders as Lestat boosted him with a hand on--not his hip. "I'm very comfortable." Loose, ruffled shirt giving way under his touch, golden hair all around.

"Ah, ah! I just knew you'd be like--" Lestat heaved a breath, went very still for a moment, and then eased Herbert back with strength impossible to defy. "Darling, this is wonderful, but anyone could find us here. Do you really want that?"

Lestat was a preening, vain peacock, utterly shameless. He wouldn't care, which made this consideration for Herbert's modesty all the more touching; all the more sobering. Herbert slumped forward to rest his head beneath Lestat's chin, familiar comfort by now, and concentrated on counting to ten to calm himself.

"I take it you have a suggestion," he ground out through the feel of Lestat's hand tracing small circles on his back, calming and electric at once.

"Any number, mon amour. But one in particular you may find appealing." He gripped Herbert's hand, and the scientist let himself be led.

Herbert had expected something plucked from the height of the mansion's opulence, drowning in brocade and velvet and mountains of overstuffed pillows. But the room Lestat brought him to--far, far from the tentatively curious eyes, down a hallway where dust hung and the lights flickered dimly, forgotten--was sparsely furnished, though each piece could surely have paid a year in medical school. The bed was wrapped in white sheets, a mourner's shroud, and when Lestat sat on the edge of the mattress he was resplendent as the sun in contrast.

"To your satisfaction?" he asked, leaning back on his hands to offer a fuller view of his loosely draped shirt, the leather hugging his hips.

He'd been playing at this for weeks; this posing, flirtatious invitation. Herbert had told himself that it wasn't serious, that it couldn't be serious. Not someone like that--not for someone like himself.

(Dan had used a numbered scale for women. Herbert hadn't had to think about it to know which end he'd rank closer to.)

But then, Lestat didn't have to be serious. Because he was there, and Herbert needed him. Wanted him.

Had him. For now.

He felt clumsy and stupid as he crossed the room, got a knee up on the bed before remembering his shoes and stopping to kick them off. Embarrassment had him sucking his lip between his teeth, and he surrendered his glasses from an outdated wisp of thought that said he wouldn't have to see his partner's disappointment so clearly without them. (No such luck, now--everything stayed crystal clear.)

Clear enough to see the affection on Lestat's face. A soft, friendly smile.

"What a gift you are," Lestat breathed. "Oh, but I am wicked, to have stolen such a treasure." He
threw away his jacket as Herbert neared. When Herbert tripped in the process of discarding his
socks Lestat only opened his arms to catch him, tumbling the pair of them back to lie side by side
on the mattress.

"And you, my Prometheus, have caught me." Lestat shifted his weight to one hip, planting a hand
on either side of Herbert's supine form. He leaned down, his curls forming a curtain as he
whispered against Herbert's lips. "Now what's to be done about that?"

Herbert framed Lestat's face in his hands and pulled him in for another kiss, moaning the smallest
appreciation when Lestat's weight came to rest on top of him. Each kiss succeeded only in needling
Herbert more, leaving him frustrated and inflamed, almost whining as Lestat placed gentle,
nibbling kisses along his neck.

"Eager as ever," Lestat chuckled, withdrawing altogether to pluck at the buttons of Herbert's shirt.
The rush of air was a torment. "Won't you let me savor the sight of you, without this cheap suit
covering your beauty?"

If he could flush, his face would be burning.

"Don't--joke about that, Lestat. You don't have to flatter me." Not now, not when Herbert was in
his bed, closer to this than he'd ever allowed in his life.

He was already a sure thing.

"Flatter you?" With a twist, a button came loose, glinting like a pearl as Lestat tossed it away.
"Darling, do I look like a man who needs to employ flattery?"

He didn't, and of course that was the point. That was the damned trouble--but they were doing this,
and so what did it matter which pretty lies Lestat spun?

Instead of fighting further, Herbert redirected Lestat's attention to the one thing he knew reliably
would capture it:

"Why you keep your hair so long?" Hand buried in thick curls, yellower than any he'd ever seen
naturally, and softer (he imagined) than anything from a bottle. "Is it a standard growth limitation?
Will mine…?"

"The fashion of the time, my love. Preserved forever in this humble, devastatingly handsome
specimen. I could cut it, of course, but it would return to this by sunset. And I do wear it well, don't
you think?" He grinned with the confidence of a man who knew his allure, and stroked Herbert's
rebellious cowlick. "I'm afraid we shall never know how long hair would suit you." (Made no
sense, anagen phases weren't dependent upon cutting, why--) "A tragedy, but a far smaller one
than the thought of losing you." Lestat's thoughtful look turned wolfish. "And you, clever boy, are
trying to distract me." The next button he destroyed with his teeth, the mere pressure of his mouth
on the softness of Herbert's stomach an unbearable anticipation.

The shirt was in ruins now, Lestat as unfussed as when they'd begun, and Herbert desperate not to
show himself coming undone. His resolve wavered and cracked as Lestat sucked a bruise onto the
crest of his hipbone, gone almost as soon as it was made, and another thereafter.

Once Herbert was a whimpering mess, Lestat laid his head on his victim's abdomen. "I could spend
whole nights this way. Tasting every inch of you." His fangs grazed Herbert's nipple eliciting a
strangled scream. "But I think I know something you might prefer. Tell me, love, would you like to
hear it?"
Herbert clamped his lower lip between his incisors, his own breathing loud in the otherwise still room. To his enhanced senses, everything carried a sound—the rustle of their movements, the slick stroke of Lestat's tongue slipping into his navel, darting away to play at the scar that had been the catalyst for Herbert's changed circumstances.

"I can torment you forever, you know. Keep you beneath me, screaming in pleasure, for all eternity unless you answer." The final kiss he pressed to the cicatrice was almost reverent, and then he was back, lying just so that their faces lined up and legs tangled carelessly. "I'd do that anyway if you wished it, but you'll like this much better, I can promise."

And as Lestat's hands stole into his shirt and played along his ribs, he forfeited.

"Tell me."

His reward was another deep, slow kiss.

"Let me share with you."

"What?"

It sounded—vulgar. Humiliating. Promiscuous. *Hadn't swinging gone out of fashion half a decade ago?*

"Share blood, my love."

His mind rejected the thought instinctively, the many fears of his mortality rearing their heads. But he was already diseased, wasn't he? What could possibly harm him now, in the face of an infection that mimicked death itself? He started to laugh, helplessly, turning Lestat's face into a sour frown.

"You'll forgive me if I don't get the joke."

"It-it's." He forced himself to breathe, just to collect himself. "It's nothing. Tell me about this proposition of yours. What good is my blood to you, if you've already infected me?"

Now it was Lestat's turn to laugh, a rumbling sound that he hid in the crook of Herbert's neck. "Your blood was rich indeed," he assured. "But nothing compared to what we can share now." He nipped once at Herbert's throat, then drew away again. "In sharing this, our minds can join once more as they did before I made you. And that is a mere inkling, a hundredth of a hundredth of the joy of it. There is no more treasured act among our kind."

Sex, then, or a version of it. Lestat had a way of exaggerating, but even if he was, it was what Herbert had come seeking at the beginning of this encounter. He propped himself up on his elbows, easily finding the promising blue line in Lestat's throat. "You'll have to show me."

"Hmm, so I shall, but never fear; someone as clever as you is bound to catch on quickly." It was a joke, and yet—so serious, those grey-blue eyes. So sincere. Herbert's own lashes fluttered shut as Lestat kissed him again, gentle and cherishing.

Lestat rolled them, put himself beneath and Herbert above. Kissed his way from Herbert's fingertips to his wrist, up the radial artery to where his rolled cuff impeded progress and back down again. Tiny, flickering, cat's tongue kisses that made him shiver and lick his lips, made him want to mouth at the neck there below.

"Lestat--"
"Whenever you're ready, Herbert. Do what you--Ah!" The sound of Lestat's gasp was not lost in the flood; nothing was. Everything intensified as he drank, hot, burning, like swallowing liquid life--like his reagent going down. The recirculated air, the faint hint of dust; the shifting of their clothing and the solidity of a body against his. Even the pain of fangs piercing his wrist was sweet, aching, the drain doubling and redoubting the ecstasy.

And then--more.

He'd thought it poetry, Lestat's description, but then he was there, above the crowd, and he wanted to weep.

Every thought roared in his ears a millionfold in intensity. He watched Lestat absorb the ardor of thousands and yet he drank it in too, alive with the sensation of finally being seen after so long, of his voice being heard at last.

What came after he only vaguely sensed, the blood and despair and the desperation of Lestat-himself trying to salvage what he held dear, tossed on the pyre by his bravado. Louis, reserved and enduring and yet fragile as spun glass, there on the executioner's block if he didn't--

But those thoughts strained and pulled away from Herbert's grasp, replaced by a deluge of images of worlds long gone to dust. Nights, countless, and days so few in comparison; cities on so many continents, music from a dozen eras. Of Herbert himself, almost haloed in the light of awed memory.

Lestat's emotions were almost a torment in their intensity, love and passion and anger springing fully formed over Herbert's tongue and through his mind only to fade away into low tones of regret, loyalty that couldn't hope to match the breathtaking heights of rage and adoration, but struggled to survive nonetheless. It was as though he had been given a map, legible only in the light of this roar of blood.

He broke first, overwhelmed and shaking, only then aware of the exhaustion that wracked his physical form as well as his mind.

And still Lestat clutched him tight, nursing at the vein as though he simply couldn't get enough of Herbert. He was warm and safe and not dead of Herbert's desires, and Herbert relaxed into that heat. He went limp, fulfilled, as he had as a human when Lestat did this, but better. No troublesome after-effects.

Lestat was almost burning by the time his eyes snapped open and he released Herbert's arm.

Herbert made a sleepy sound of loss, thread of rock music still traveling through his mind.

"Herbert? Herbert, darling, are you--" Warm hands on his forehead, like a child home sick from school in a film. Herbert's family had used thermometers. "When did you stop drinking?"

He needed to look into the exact, altered connection between the digestive and circulatory systems, he thought absently.

"Hmm." Words required an impossible amount of energy, movement more so. Instead he pressed closer to the burning heat of Lestat's body, trying to preserve some semblance of the connection.

"Herbert." Lestat's voice was taut as a guitar string, and just as musical. His hands manipulated Herbert's body, pulling him up to the still pink skin of Lestat's throat. "Here, love. Drink."

He could hear it, the blood, but he couldn't bring himself to move. If he drank more now his body
would catch fire, oversensitized and spent at once. He kissed the spot instead, allowing himself to
ride the uncharacteristic wave of uncomplicated fondness permeating him.

A chemical reaction, he thought. Similar to bonding hormones in sex. But he couldn't bring himself
to be concerned, much less enraged. Lestat's strange sincerity had underpinned the whole of it, and
rarest of all was the thought that perhaps Herbert could trust his clumsy offerings of assistance.

"Oh." Lestat's proud voice shook at that tender touch, and he cradled Herbert to his breast. Perfect;
perfect, to be like this, encircled so he couldn't fly apart. "Oh, how--but you must drink, my dear.
You have so little blood in you. I don't see how you stand it."

"Later," Herbert managed, carelessly bringing his knees up as well into a fetal curl on the mattress.
"Later. For now, the sensitivity is too much. The lights I saw…"

He trailed off, feeling Lestat wiggle out from under and then turn to put his chest flush to Herbert's
shaking back, chin tucked over Herbert's shoulder with the ease and awkwardness of one who
knows this position, but not this partner. Still, for all the beds Lestat must have shared in two
centuries, he was a grounding force for Herbert at that moment.

"Footlights," Lestat murmured, then began some sort of 200-year retrospective on the history of
theater lighting, half in French.

The words didn't matter. It was the tone and the thought that counted.

The low, steady murmur lulled him into a doze, warm and safe, and when Lestat again pressed him
to take more blood he turned away. He only wanted to sleep like this, the weight of thousands of
long nights crashing down on him all at once.

"Dawn is coming," Lestat warned him, and made to move away.

"Stay," Herbert mumbled, and Lestat's hands stopped halfway to scooping him up.

"For you, anything." The warmth returned, impossibly soothing, and Lestat drew a blanket over
both of them. He was there when consciousness stole out from under Herbert's grasp, whispering
reassurances all the while.

~*~*~*~

When he'd arrived on Night Island, Daniel had elected to go for a "free and easy" sort of pace.
Being barely dead and the recent witness of genocide had a way of affecting your priorities. And
besides, somebody had to opt out of treating vampiric life like the high school of the damned. He'd
figured he could manage that.

He should've known better.

The cloud of emotional distress wafting from Dan Cain preceded him by almost the length of a
room, meaning Daniel was more than prepared to catch the other man-- were they friends? he'd
never been good at making friends --when he stormed by. "Hey, whoa, what's the trouble?"

He could guess. Not even in a psychic way. In a ‘Dumped and Depressed 101’ sort of way. But
mortals got all kinds of freaked out when you jumped tracks in the conversation on them.
"You know goddamn well." Cain countered.

Ah. So much for keeping it casual.

"He said no?" Herbert couldn't have refused entirely, given the scent of blood in the air. But the real question was why he would have at all. His infatuation was so obvious, for all the avoidance. You could taste it in the air around him.

"Fed me some line about not being able to--he doesn't want me anymore, and now I can't… even…" Such arrogance, to be so shocked that The Queer could move on *just* when he bothered to go over and indulge him.

But Christ, Cain was *crying*, salty human tears welling in his big puppy eyes. Daniel was a sucker for a sad face, Lord knew.

"Hey, c'mon. Lemme see." He didn't get an answer, but unbuttoned Cain's shirt for a look anyhow. The cuts were… enlightening, at least. Badly positioned, poorly incised--exactly what wouldn't kill a victim. "He seriously did this?"

Cain nodded, head buried in Daniel's shoulder.

"Want me to fix 'em?"

"… No."

"No?" It would be so easy, so delicious, to just lick over the ragged meat, encourage the knitting and healing. Prevent a scar. (Sloppy seconds, as though Daniel gave a damn. As though he hadn't run a train onstage in Berlin in '78.)

"I want you to fuck me."

"… Say what now." He cocked his head. He'd imagined that. He'd gotten too focused on the treat dangled under his nose, and he'd imagined "Fuck. Me." Cain enunciated. "I'm taking you up on your offer."

Daniel was not imagining this. He also wasn't sure if he should be offended; he at least liked to think he had a little more dignity than being a rebound lay. "Yeah, okay," he huffed, "Go cool off, buddy. We'll talk later."

"What, suddenly I'm not good enough for you?" Cain shoved him.

Daniel tried to nudge him off, but Cain only came back with a harder shove, all his hurt bleeding into the pettiest possible reaction. When he'd had enough, Daniel grabbed the mortal by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall, hard enough that he could practically hear Cain's teeth rattle. The body under his hands vibrated with nervous energy, eyes darting back and forth. The muscles in his neck hurt just to LOOK at, they were so tight.

"You think you want this?" he sneered. "You don't know a goddamn thing. You're hurt, and you want me to make it go away. Put off paying that hurt another day. Guess what--it's still gonna be there tomorrow. And the next day. So either you deal with it, or you wind up like all the rest of the junkies you think you're better than."

"I--"
Daniel bore down on him, mouthing hard onto the open wound and forcing himself not to drink.
Cain let out a strangled yelp, struggling to get away from the pain. Point made, Daniel ran his
tongue over the mark. Like hell he'd let infection find its way in over some martyr's bullshit.

Cain shook a little, through the healing, and Daniel ignored the persistent hard-on. Frankly Cain
didn't deserve to have it dignified, after that experimentation bull. He kept at it just until the
bleeding was stopped and the skin barely knit.

"Sun'll be up soon," he said, releasing his not-prey. God forbid any of them should cross that line
with a favorite, even one lying fallow like Cain. "Go to bed."

"It's 3 am."

"And time is relative, babe. That's how you ended up too late." Cruel to be kind, maybe, or possibly
just hurt a little himself. Cain sagged against the wall as he turned to leave.

"Daniel." Voice rough with sadness, the weight of the world packed into mourning something he'd
never properly touch. God.

"What?" he gritted out.

"If it still hurts tomorrow… " Trailing off like Daniel would just jump in and rescue him--or push
him off a cliff.

"Use your words."

"Can you fuck me then?" At that he turned back, idiot that he was.

Sorrowful eyes, chasing ruin. Honestly, Daniel knew what Cain was feeling, in spite of himself. He
understood at least part of it--the drive to throw oneself into damnation for some hope that might
prove as distant as the moon or as insubstantial as smoke.

And if it wasn't him, Cain would find somebody else to destroy him.

It's what Daniel had done, after all. Lucky one.

"Ask me tomorrow," he said at last. Turn him down, the dying remnants of conscience in his head
screamed. He ignored it. Cain's baggage wasn't his fault, wasn't his problem unless he chose to pick
it up. But the guilt nagged at him anyway, reminding him who exactly had egged Cain into digging
into a full lifetime's worth of repression, sat atop a gasoline fire of bloodlust. If the kid came back
(man, mortal, prey--they were still close to the same age, but he found himself falling into the
habits of the Old vampires regardless), clearheaded and willing, well; it'd been a long time since he
turned away a willing body.

Cain nodded, shoulders drooping, and turned to go. Daniel forced himself not to watch, and spent
even longer struggling not to entertain the traitorous fantasies of what he could do to a gullible face
like that.

Armand was gone from their suite when he got there--out feeding his latest obsession, no doubt, or
cuddled up to Karen.

Daniel had never conceived of being less special once he was changed, but there it was.

Armand had needs, things he demanded Daniel work with him on, and so far he'd tried. Spent a
decade proving how accommodating he could be.
Maybe just this *once* Armand would work with him.

--

Cain waited just long enough for Daniel to suspect he'd given up on the idea. He was all set to tell himself how relieved he was when he heard a knock on his door.

"Come on in," he shouted, pulling on a holey t-shirt that had somehow escaped the laundry purge.

"Hey." Cain's voice had the barest quiver in it, and that was the only thing that kept Daniel from bursting out laughing when he turned around.

The guy had *shaved.*

"Hey." Christ, they were awkward. But he liked the look of Cain, long dark hair and pervasive sorrow for something thrown away and later regretted. "Come here often?"

"Not yet."

Laughter helped—helpless, dissolving laughter at that terrible joke, giggling so hard Cain finally joined in sheepishly.

He'd feel guilty when this was over.

They shuffled awkwardly around each other, hopelessly awkward. Daniel's undead state left most of the buffers Cain was no doubt used to--dinner, drinks--out of the question. And Daniel wasn't cruel or kind enough to just throw him down on the bed and have done with it.

"So, uh," Cain sat down on the edge of the bed. "Do we, um. Should we. Kiss?" He finished lamely.

He couldn't do this. Not alone. They'd get halfway through and Cain would find his moral high ground, his conscience or cowardice or whatever he chose to call it.

"Why don't you stay there. Just for a minute!" He soothed when he saw Cain's face. "I'm gonna go get some stuff. Help you relax a little. Just… stay there. Take some deep breaths."

Determined not to prove a liar, he did stop by the kitchen on his way, plucking a bottle of something cheap and strong from the cabinets. But his goal was further down the hall, swathed in pretentious curtains and velvet and *sliding doors* of all things.

If he weren't constantly, painfully aware of the silence between them, he'd have said Armand was expecting him.

"Armand." He swallowed, suddenly remembering every other time he'd wandered into his lover's presence carrying a bottle and a torch. Slow suicide, and here he was on the other side of it. "I--is Karen--"

She wasn’t a prostitute; not precisely. None of the mortals they kept were anything, precisely.

But she was *friendly,* and he knew she'd made Cain offers before.
"Hmm, love?" Armand raised his head from where he'd had it pillowed on her belly, watching a documentary on auto manufacture with all apparent interest. "Karen and I were just settling in."

Daniel missed it, being there. Missed the contact that came with being the worst-case scenario.

"Right. Could I, uh, borrow her for a minute?" An hour, an evening. God, he couldn't just ask her to her face. The things he'd grown used to. He tried to amend his clumsiness. "Karen, can I talk to you?"

"What's up?" She lifted her head to meet his gaze, but her hand never stopped its slow, methodical stroking through Armand's hair.

"Alone?" he pushed the point, knowing that the very suggestion would ruin any chance of it actually happening.

Armand sat up fully, his direct, dissecting gaze now swung onto Daniel (how long since he'd held that attention last? was this the only way to get it, lying and subterfuge?). "You're not keeping something from me, are you?" His tone was warm, but Daniel knew better. That was the tone that sent young vampire girls and boys to their deaths.

"I didn't think it would interest you." Already he was on the defensive, arms crossed.

"I'm interested now," Armand said, as if it were simple, obvious fact.

"West's mortal is in the other room, waiting for me to fuck him." Bluntness was his only unique weapon against the stranglehold of courtly doublespeak.

"Well." The slight laugh suggested a surprise that Daniel was suddenly sure was far from genuine. "You've certainly stepped up your game, Daniel, I'll say that. And for what do you require my Karen?"

He shifted, wondering where the trap was.

"Karen." He tried, futilely, to keep his focus on her. "If you're interested, I think you might be able to make him more… comfortable."

She was already half under, smiling sweet and slow, and Armand might as well be operating her like a puppet with the way he whispered in her ear before she answered.

"I'd be happy to help." She smiled, and there was none of herself in it. It was slow and sloppy, the work of a ventriloquist's dummy. Daniel had always hated this part. It was why he had no 'favorite' of his own, why he was careful to hold every mortal who crossed him at a distance, with no illusions of what they'd get from him. This little pageant before him was too cruel.

She came to him then, a perfect fit under his arm. God, she was warm. And he was hungry.

"Whatever you need," Armand-through-her offered, and that was enough to put him back on track.

"Thanks." He turned to go, only to hear the soft shuff sound of moving carpet behind him. "What're you doing?"

With the difference in their heights, Armand's arms naturally circled him just below the heart. He could feel that sharp little nose nudging against his spine. "You're cruel, Daniel." Armand whispered. "You've forgotten our arrangement already."
Their arrangement. The time when Daniel had been the puppet for a thousand mortal lusts, eyes hungry and desperate for Armand's approval. "It seemed like you lost interest."

"Never." Armand shook his head, squeezing tighter. "You have no idea how it pains me, to be so close to you and hear nothing."

He wanted, more than anything, to believe that. But when Armand took it in his mind to play games, nothing that came out of his mouth could be trusted. "You warned me things would be different. My fault, I guess, for not realizing how far that went."

He was released, and silence stretched taut between them. He was about to make his excuses, when Armand said, "Let me come."

Daniel looked back, not sure what he expected to see. Not the threat of tears. Not the demon of his last mortal years practically pleading with an open face. Games, he reminded himself, thinking of Louis walled in the catacombs. But it was a rare bargaining chip, and he was just bastard enough to use it.

"Let her up." He nodded to Karen, nuzzling contentedly into his side with no sign of awareness that a conversation was happening at all. "I don't want--she should know what she's agreeing to. If she even wants to."

"Fine." Armand drew close to his favorite, taking her face in his hands and placing a gentle kiss to her lips before pressing their foreheads together. When he backed away again, her eyes were clear, and her smile was still in evidence, now rueful and fond.

"You're such a softy, Danny." But he heard the echo of thanks in her mind. "So, he's finally taking the plunge, huh?"

"Scared out of his mind," Daniel confirmed. "But determined. I thought--he seems to like you."

"He's sweet," she said. "Dumb as a post about everything outside his med books, but sweet." She squeezed Daniel's arm. "Yeah, I'll come along."

"It's settled, then." Armand took the lead, presumptive as ever.

Daniel caught his arm as he passed. "Don't touch him," he warned. "His mind either. He's barely ready for me. He sure as hell can't handle you."

"Whatever you say, Danny." All acquiescence and smiles. As their little group traveled down the hall, he couldn't help feeling like he'd already put his head in the noose. Or someone else's.

He knocked as he entered, brandishing the bottle ahead of him like a peace offering. "I brought booze!"

Cain practically melted with relief. "Hey! I thought you'd, uh, changed your mind or something." He was still in the same damn place Daniel had left him. Probably too scared to move an inch. Why the hell was he agreeing to this?

"Nah, man. I just," he watched Cain's face turn confused and then pale as the other two entered the room. "Hey, hey," he switched into damage control mode, kneeling so that he took up Cain's vision. "Don't freak out."

"What's going on?"
Flashes of fear, vague, unformed, thoughts of murder or beatings or God knew what all flitted through Cain's mind, and Daniel summoned a gentle, safe half-smile.

"Relax," he soothed, consciously taking up the space between Cain's knees, parting his lips just so. He knew how to put on a show. "Karen's gonna help, okay? You'll like it."

"I'm not having sex with him." Such distaste for Armand, so unhidden--not that Daniel could fault Cain's judgment, tastes aside.

"You don't have to. He just wants to watch." He could hear movement behind him, knew without looking which chair was being shifted into what position. Could feel the exact angle from which they would be observed.

Armand in his silk pajama bottoms and burgundy smoking jacket, bare feet tucked up beneath him. A little Hugh Hefner enjoying the very rarest pornography Daniel could embody for him. Apart, always.

"I don't--"

"He--Dan, he's my lover; I can't cut him out. He's part of my life." And maybe it was the slightly-too-truthful statement, the edge of pain that crept into Daniel's voice unheeded, but Cain's face cleared into some terrifying comprehension. Some awful affinity.

Daniel would tell himself, later, that it had just been manipulation. Him twisting Cain, not begging for this time, an echo of things lost to them both. Either way, Cain downed two fingers of whiskey like it was water, then coughed like it was gasoline. Good kid. Still time to turn back.

Of course, he didn't.

Whiskey-bold and despair-willing, he crumbled under Daniel's touch. Smooth cheeks, destined for stubble burn; Daniel hadn't exactly had time to pretty himself up, there at the end, and Don Johnson would envy his eternal two-days-growth. Glossy, handsome Cain tasted like smoke and death and pain, the first steps down a road to oblivion. Only a little way in; he had to be able to see a way out from there.

"Just like that," Daniel soothed, careful to stay on his knees to start. Cain's type had their precious little issues about being manly men, and there was always a certain amount of ‘fun’ involved in figuring out where they were willing to let those prejudices crumble away. He plucked at the fingers of Cain's soft, worn button down, exposing a broad chest with an incoming growth of fuzz. God, was there some part of the 80s myth Cain didn't fit?

He left claiming lips behind and trailed down Cain's jaw to the crook of his neck, felt an instinctive tensing-relaxation that he had seen happen a hundred times over. If Cain stuck around, he'd sure as Hell fit right in. More than anything, that laced sorrow into Daniel’s chest. He pulled away from the temptation of the blood--too soon, way too soon, for something he was beginning to regard as some kind of warped apology--and kissed his way down Cain's chest instead, dragging the sharp little assets in his mouth over Cain's hardening nipples. The gasps of appreciation barely made it to the air before vanishing, and he felt more than saw Karen reaching in to turn Cain's head, to draw out sweet, safe kisses while Daniel was left the work of "debasing" the man who'd begged for it.

There were a few things Daniel couldn't do anymore, mostly involving his teeth and his dick. So many more that he could, though, things that felt good and looked good--things that everybody loved.
Everybody wanted a vampire. Any vampire.

Cain shivers at the touch of his cold, dead hands on skin bearing just the first flush of Florida sunburn. Daniel could make him come just like this, and then could drive him to death besides, making him chase the high for days or weeks or years.

"Karen," he said instead, pulling away from that exquisitely sensitive spot just below Cain's ribcage, "C'mere, honey. Let's give him a rest."

She was a lovely girl, really, he thought as he laid against the headboard on the slippery satin sheets (cold and uncomfortable, he remembered from when he was human, but they looked so good) and let her curl up before him, hips between his thighs, back to his chest.

The almost-whine of disbelief that left Cain's mouth was worth the feint all by itself, his overlong hair now loose and wild around his face. Shirt open, still salted with sweat from the heat of the day--he looked like some kind of escapee from a pinup magazine. And he kicked his Reeboks off before crawling all the way onto the king-sized bed, revealing socks with a hole in one toe.

The whole point of this, Daniel reminded himself, was not to keep him. But damn, the man wasn't making it easy. And he didn't even know it.

Daniel thrust a hand out, spooking Cain into freezing there on his knees. And then he turned his attention to the woman in his arms, world-weary and kind and closer to death than even himself. He knew his larger body blocked Armand's view in this, and couldn't say he was sorry even if he hadn't consciously planned it that way. She had so little she hadn't spent or thrown away.

He hooked his finger under the strap of her dress, rolling the thing material between his fingers before sliding it down and off, following suit with the other one, plus her little silk scarf, though her hair he left pinned back. He could see through the thin fabric that her nipples were peaked with either anticipation or the ice of Daniel's touch. He nuzzled her neck, nipping at the tender, healing skin, and she wasn't nearly so shy in holding back moans as Cain had been. Some of them were even real.

He took a little then, knowing what it would do, wrapping an arm around her waist to hold her steady as they rolled together in steady rhythm. It wasn't much, not more than a mouthful or two, but he was exacting in his healing, liberal with the probing ministrations of his tongue over pink scar tissue; the hand at her waist crept down under skirts of tulle and black lace, careful to remove nothing as he slid long fingers between her legs.

He heard Cain's breath catch in tandem with Karen's, hands bunching in the sheets even as he stayed obediently still through her reward.

More than Daniel's nails glistened when he withdrew from her, and when he held his hand out, Cain responded almost too eagerly, crawling up the bed to lick, suck, her juices from Daniel's fingers.

*Christ*. Cain groaned aloud, just from that. Just from Daniel, in him, long after any trace of Karen had to be gone.

"That's enough, Dan," he rasped, pulling back from that warm cavern with its blunt human teeth.

"Please--" (cut off when Karen knelt up behind and grabbed, hard, at what looked to be an almost painful erection.) "Please. Let me." And then Cain’s hand was in Daniel's crotch, feeling for something he'd never find.
He let Cain have a few awkward, fumbling moments before pulling that hand away. "Don't worry about it." He cupped his hand around the back of Cain's neck, drawing him in closer. "Lemme show you how I get my kicks." Spoken against the soft privacy of Cain's lips. He took a long, wet kiss before drawing away again to leaned back as if he hadn't a care. "Strip," he commanded.

Cain almost fell over himself to comply, fumbling to kick off his jeans and, after a questioning look up at Daniel, his underwear. "Now you," Cain tried.

It kept getting clearer, in those little moments, that there was a wide gulf between Cain's understanding of his own power and reality (paired with a total lack of awareness for the allure he did wield). For a human, the only difference in sex with a naked versus a clothed vampire was how cold you ended up feeling. But still, Daniel pulled off his shirt. If nothing else, it made a show of good faith. And then he held his hand out again, luring his prey closer.

Maybe he was warm enough in their company not to mind, or just too far gone with lust to notice, but Cain maneuvered into the very same position Karen had occupied not long before, shuffling a bit to compensate for the height difference.

"How're you doing, Karen?" Daniel called, knowing better than to trust the placid stillness as she kneeled in Cain's old place. There was a flush threatening her neck and chest, alluring even with her clothes barely ruffled.

She smiled, stretching out on her stomach along Cain's leg, running a torturous finger along his hip. "I don't think I'm the one you need to worry about right now."

True, Cain looked ready to shake apart at any second. 'Hmm.' Daniel played at consideration, nibbling at Cain's shoulder, barely dragging across the skin of his neck. "You think we should help him out?"

"He's been awfully well behaved," she agreed.

"How about it, Dan?" He breathed the words into Cain's ears. "What do you want?"

"I--I--" Daniel was beyond playing fair as he gave brushing, teasing contact to Cain's neck, while he dropped a knee and insinuated it between legs as long as his own and then levered sideways to spread and expose.

"What, Dan, baby?" (Cain shuddered, discomfited as always by that even when in bed with a man.) "C'mon, tell me."

"F-f--"

"Nothing you don't want. Nothing at all." Muscular thighs, thick pubic hair to stroke; Daniel didn't have to think about how good a picture they made. He'd seen it all before in mirrored ceilings. Cain's ass pushed back on instinct alone as Karen weighed the other side down with her slightness, human and soft.

"Please." Cain's voice cracked when Daniel played along the hard tendon of the inner thigh, so close to that place where he could bite and kill. "Please. Fuck me. I don't--don't care how, just--"

Right/wrong answer.

"Shh, honey. I've got you." In my clutches. Cain practically screamed when Daniel gave his hot cock a tug.
Cain's endurance wasn't made for any kind of teasing--Daniel barely had to squeeze after that first jerk to find new clear, sticky fluid dripping over his hand. *Fair's fair.* Except when it was torture, making Cain watch as Karen took the hand he offered and licked it clean. Then Daniel's fingers only had to brush the length of him before he came, his tanned stomach and chest catching the majority of the mess while Karen swallowed his screams.

When the fog cleared from his brain, Cain wore a look of embarrassment (you didn't even need telepathy to read this boy; it was downright unfair) as he started to sit up, looking for something to clean himself off with. "Sorry," he mumbled. "It's been a while. I didn't mean to--"

"Don't worry, baby." Daniel pinned him back down with one hand, exhibiting just a little of his otherworldly strength and getting a gratifying shiver in response. "We're not even close to done with you."

He swiped his hand across Cain's chest hard enough to draw pinpricks of blood, licking up each bead of red before it could fully bloom. Still tingling and oversensitive from his climax, Cain could only whimper at the new, different pleasure being visited upon him.

"I don't know if I can go again."

"You'd be surprised." And then Daniel showed him what it was like to fuck a vampire; showered kisses at neck and wrist thrumming delicately beneath his fangs, nicked papercuts here and there but didn't drink. He did just enough to have Dan desperate again within minutes.

And then he again grabbed hold of Karen, so patient--tugged her arm right across Cain's sprawled body.

Cain squeezed her breasts and grabbed her hips like it meant anything at all in light of her looming fix.

"See, Dan?" Daniel whispered. "This is what we do."

He bit, ungenerously, into the wrist of an arm no longer pockmarked by track marks because she'd found something better and worse.

The wonderful, terrible thing about the blood high was that there were no diminishing returns, its hooks biting just as fresh the hundredth time as the first. Veteran though she was, Karen's body tensed and hardened immediately, breathy pleas accompanying a quickening, desperate thrust in her hips.

*Don't leave her hanging,* Daniel instructed, and if Cain even noticed the words landing in his mind rather than his ears he made no show of it. Just as Daniel had promised, Cain's erection was already struggling back to full height. The smallest bit of confident familiarity lit in Cain's eyes as he pulled Karen in tighter, rubbing himself against her damp curls. And it was, pathetically, Daniel that he turned to for confirmation before going further.

Daniel closed the wound he'd made, far sooner than if they'd been alone (and she knew it, glaring at him ever so slightly over Cain's shoulder). "Patience," he grinned. "Fair's fair." His attention returned to Cain. "Get on your knees," he breathed, running one nail down the man's back before squeezing his ass.

That froze Cain in his tracks. "Whoa, whoa. I'm not--"

"Dude, I just jerked you off while another guy watched. You're fine." More gently, he added, "Trust me. I do this, you'll come so hard you'll be seeing spots for days."
The reminder of Armand's presence brought a sudden stop to Dan's movements—though not his arousal. If anything, he got harder even as he tried to whip his head around to their audience.

Daniel stopped him by way of an implacable hand in his hair. Long, dark, shiny hair—Daniel's favorite since sometime around '72.

Daniel didn't want him disappointed by the view of what waited outside their little scene. Like he had been, at first, by Armand's intent stare, casual posture, and affectionate but utterly detached interest.

"Sh-sh-sh. It'll be fine." It wouldn't, of course, but that had nothing to do with the sex. "Trust me." And if he used his strength, just a bit, to move and shift Cain—what harm when the man melted for him this way? When the exercise of his powers seemed to relax his partner?

God, what a sight—shoulders and back and hips, bronze torso and lilywhite ass, as though anyone within the compound would've complained about nude sunbathing. He'd slap it just to see the flush if he weren't distractingly inclined to worry about the man it was attached to.

"Let's see if we can't all slip into something more comfortable, huh?" Just as before, the idiocy of it sent Cain into a helpless fit of laughter, muscles unknotted inch by inch.

"You two," Karen rolled her eyes, but he'd heard her snort just the same. "One of you does plan to finish what you started, right?"

"I never disappoint a lady." And the noble self-seriousness that Cain loaded into the sentence was enough to force both his puppeteers to bite back new, crueler laughter.

"Okay, Romeo. One step at a time. And relax, for Christ's sake." Karen reached over to the table for him, tossing a bottle of lube Daniel's way.

Cain had the sort of ass diamonds were formed in, tight enough that Daniel needed several minutes of slow, methodical work for even his smallest finger.

Daniel wondered how it felt to have something so cold up there. He'd never—one of the few things he'd never. Whatever it was like, Cain had grown a new, saintly patience—or was maybe just distracted by the woman in front of him, bored of waiting for them both and now lazily working her own hand in and out of herself, skirts hiked up to provide a peek.

"What do you think we should do, Karen?" he whispered, adding a little more lube to the situation.

"I think you should both put your mouths to good use," she said.

She didn't mean it like Cain imagined, of course—wasn't nearly as interested in oral sex as he hoped when he dropped down and buried his face under her petticoat. But she wasn't above it, either; mortal orgasms were nothing to reject, especially when still chasing the high of the bite.

And all so fucking hot to look at, besides.

Two fingers and Cain's moans joined hers. Daniel just hoped he wasn't bruising anything too badly with his strength.

And when she raised one skinny leg up, silver bells jingling at the ankle right there, he had to oblige. Owed it to her.

Cain probably thought the bucking and squealing was all his work.
They made a strange, disjointed animal, the three of them, any thought of performance or grace lost in the animal pursuit of those sparking, shooting nerve endings. When Daniel released his feeding grip again, now almost warm, Karen gently pushed at Cain's shoulders until he backed away from her. "Ready for the big finish?" She wiped her thumb across his lips, almost tenderly, and then lay back on the sheets, pulling him down with her. Half kindness, half anemia, but if Cain didn't recognize it there was no need to tell him.

Daniel felt rather than saw him slide into her, changed the rhythm and angle of his own probing fingers to hammer away at that crucial little cluster of nerves. It wasn't long at all before Cain pulled out, coming with a hoarse groan (A-1 safe sex from the physician. The splatter reached almost to the antique armoire a good foot away. Not bad, though Daniel'd seen more impressive stunts. Hard not to, when your count of partners had numbered in the triple digits by time of death.

Both of his mortals curled up on the sheets, short of breath and sweating, and Daniel found himself feeling that strange, inhuman fondness that urged him to pretty them up like beloved toys, to tuck them away for his private amusement. It scared him more than the desire to kill, those moments.

Cain was smiling, soft and sweet, and something in Daniel's heart broke. There was one thing he hadn't done yet. "Hey," he started, stroking those dark locks. "How you holding up?"

"I feel… " He blinked fuzzily. "I'm good."

"Yeah, you are." It wasn't flippant, and the kiss Daniel granted wasn't artful. Poor, doomed thing, he thought even as he took care to protect Cain's tongue from cuts. "You really are."

"Thank you." When they broke, all he saw were big, dark, wet eyes full of gratitude and hope. A bullet would be kinder.

"Don't thank me, sweetheart." Cain nestled closer, relaxed and careless, and it prompted a dangerous urge to tell the truth. "He wasn't bullshitting you, or feeding you a line about what he couldn’t do. We're just dead."

"No, you're--"

"I'm not alive, Dan." He pressed the doctor's ear to his chest, to his unbeating heart. "Not. Human. The only way I can really get off on you is dangerous." His abandoned lifeblood, stripped-down factual reportage.

"Does it… " Cain swallowed, blinked, every little living tell for fear and arousal and curiosity all at once. "Does it hurt?"

Daniel closed his own eyes then, cut off the static iridescent lure he knew they made even as he moved in for the kill. "Nothing you don't want," he murmured against that warm, living throat scented with sweat and cheap cologne. He let his tongue flicker along, tender, gentle, far higher up than those healing marks on the shoulder. He knew perfectly well the effect of his breath along those exposed veins, relished the prickle of goosebumps. "No pain."

(And he knew, without seeing, that Armand flinched at that.)

Cain remained silent in his arms for one long, precious, considering moment, long enough that Daniel himself felt a spark of vicarious hope.

"Then do it."

And so he did.
The body in his arms stiffened when he bit down, unconscious instinct begging to fight before the high began; but the mind he touched opened with pitiful eagerness, starved for the smallest morsel of understanding. Daniel saw the ghost of the girl who'd been with them all evening, saw Cain trying again and again to chase after her image, the sweet scent of her preserved in the way only the dead could hold to, in the one place where the little indignities of life could no longer gain traction. And deeper than that, Dan himself: an uncomplicated, molten ball of want that felt agony at every death; that shone so bright in his compassion that he only rarely saw beyond his own perspective, or the damage he caused because of it. The warmth of it was tempting as a siren's song, warming him even as he felt his prey growing cooler, pressed into the mattress and babbling incoherently for more. Weeping, though he didn't seem to know why.

Dan wandered through halls of memory, propelled by spikes of fear that were so inextricably linked to desire that even telling them apart was almost impossible: a kiss goodbye, reunion snatched away before it could begin; cold, dead skin that might one day live again, sick with terror that that wasn't the whole of what made it beautiful; gore, endless amounts of it. Always there was blood, infecting him even when it wasn't there--breathing down his neck on the streets, implied by his own paranoia in glances on the street. On the tip of his tongue as strange bodies invaded him, burned his veins from the inside out while his mind was locked to cold eyes, as often green as they were brown. Blood blooming under his skin, hidden beneath thick sweaters in the dead of summer, that still were never warm enough.

Beneath it, beneath it all, the fear. Death loomed for Danny in needles and morgues, in every lover he dared to touch, all cold and gone so early. Death and then not death, animating the most gorgeous things Danny had ever seen, making them awful and twisted and wrong.

Blood and death and the ones you could never get close enough to touch, the coldest ones of all with their laughter and devotion and dreadful, terrible, beautiful hope.

Danny moved as one, tanned and bleached, on black satin sheets made slicker than ever by spilled droplets of precious living dying red. Writhed until they didn't.

A stranger's hand broke him apart, withdrew just as quickly to escape the retribution of his terrible snarl.

And then he was back, the room was back, and Karen was looking at him with naked fear, holding white-knuckle tight onto Armand's hand.

"Boundaries, Daniel," his killer said.

Beneath him, Cain's breath was shallow, his eyes glazed and nearly empty.

"Shit." He pressed his ear to Cain's cool chest, relieved to hear the slow but persistent thud of blood passing in and out from his chest. Any further, and there'd have been hell to pay.

"He'll be fine," he lied. "I'll watch him."

"He survived that much?" Armand leaned over his shoulder, craning to get a look at Daniel's victim.

"Leave it, Armand." He bristled, face hot with shame at his own lack of control.

"Daniel, you were--you are very young." Armand's face flickered, set into a mask of imperious command, eyes dark and unfathomable and disappointed. "Control is never perfect, but this is a problem. Do you understand?"
"… Yes." Mulish, his admission. Grudging, to cover the pain. And here he'd thought West was going to be the one to shatter Cain.

Armand took a long breath through his nose, reached out and carefully wiped a smear of blood from Daniel's mouth in what could have been anything from rebuke to comfort.

"You will allow Karen to care for West's companion. She's used to it. You just… keep to your quarters."

"But--"

"Don't question me, fledgling."

Rolling panic in Karen's eyes, wafting from her mind, as Armand lifted a body so much larger than himself like it weighed nothing.

"Armand, should we maybe, y'know," (Daniel could hear her fast heartbeat, the clicking sound of dry swallowing, as they departed down the hall) "see about the hospital on the mainland? I could go with him…"

He listened to his maker. He hugged his knees to his chest, stayed on his bed, in his room, until the death sleep stole over him.

~*~*~*~

"What do you want, imp?" Lestat didn’t bother getting up from his spot on the roof. Let the conniving little beast come to him. He wasn’t in the mood for the boy-demon’s machinations just then, when he was trying to savor the memory last night’s pleasure and tonight’s gentle closeness. Skittish, still, his love, but charmingly so--and sweetly lacking in expectation of a reward for his acquiescence. Puttering away, as usual, until he’d grown drowsy and allowed Lestat to take him as far as his chambers but no farther.

"We have a problem." For someone who had spent decades living in sewage, Armand was awfully prim in picking his way across the decaying leaves and puddles that hadn’t yet fallen away.

"Actually, you had a problem, and now it’s become mine."

"Is this about Herbert?" Armand’s curiosity about the scientist had simmered beneath the surface, far enough down that Lestat could pretend not to notice. But recently, something about it had gone… strange.

"In essence. I tolerated you bringing him here, and the mortal you clearly didn’t anticipate. And now that mortal is a danger to my fledgling. And that, I won’t allow."

Lestat’s eyes narrowed. "Be direct for a change, or just let me read your mind."

"First, I wanted to see where your loyalties lie."

"Ah, yes, because you're such a one to talk of loyalty. Come to pitch me off this tower and claim Herbert for your own, perhaps? Just for old times' sake?" Could he not just move on? Of course not. They were as they were, frozen there for always.
"Joke if you like." Their faces were inches apart, Armand still fond of his little displays even in the presence of another vampire. "But don't forget who holds authority here."


"You may be right about that." And he leaned away, huddling in on himself in the breeze. "Either way, that mortal poses a problem. Either you can take the opportunity to craft how the story is told, or you can bear your fledgling's wrath alone. I only wanted to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Cain will be gone by tomorrow night." The statement brooked no resistance, and while Lestat's very nature chafed at so unilateral an exercise of authority, his interests made him disinclined to fight. Would this not help, as Marius had said? "How do you think West might react to the news that his favorite was inconstant?" So-very-hypothetical, Armand’s tone. So full of speculation.

"That's no surprise. Cain's love, such as there is, was sworn by the moon, and well Herbert knows it." Any yet--and yet he kept that unassailable place in Herbert's heart. Infuriating.

"As I suspected." Dark, the look on his baby face; wrathful. Who knew what that papillon's behavior had entailed to so disturb the calm of such a vampire. "I can ensure that he stays gone, and that there's no reason to search--but you'll owe me."

It was a deal with the devil, no doubting that. But a damn tempting one.

"Should I ask--"

"Not if you want your story to be convincing."

"What do I tell him? The man who drove hundreds of miles to find him threw him away just as quickly?"

"Well, he has reason to think so, doesn't he?" That devious smile again.

"Explain."

"Oh, of course." There was nothing worse than dealing with Armand when he knew he had the upper hand. "You wouldn't know. I had assumed he told you, but. Well. I know as well as anyone how fraught the relationship between maker and fledgling can be. Especially for yours. They have such… difficulties."

"Get to the point."

"Cain made his move, it would seem. And your scientist turned him away. Strange, considering his behavior up to now."

"Truly?"

"I'd not lie to you in a matter of our coven's peace, Lestat. We all know where allowing these things to fester leads."

And in spite of the jibe--joy.

Wonderful; incredible to hear that Lestat's persistence and devotion were paying off, regardless of his darling's professed irritation. Perhaps, then, Herbert had simply been inclined to protest too much, while that connection remained.
Had anyone but Armand come carrying this tale, Lestat would have twirled them across the roof singing.

As it was, he couldn't hold back a fit of laughter.

Not least because he knew Cain had seen, before he went, the ways Lestat could surpass him.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter--Hunting, new connections, body horror, and various complications.
Hunting does not go as expected. Herbert makes a new acquaintance. Lestat gets advice.
Things are less than ideal.

Contains a scene that can be read as the vampiric equivalent of an act of sexual assault.

Herbert’s last warning seemed to have proven effective: his friend had made himself scarce following their ‘encounter’ two nights ago, and that was a good thing. It had been tempting almost beyond the limits of his will to have Dan beneath him, offering to share the experience of Herbert’s newest and most unorthodox research in the most intimate way possible. Looking down at that familiar face so transformed—disheveled, pupils dilated with lust, pulse elevated—Herbert had grasped an ounce of sense from Lestat’s speeches about the irresistibility of mortals. He’d been so close to taking Dan in his arms and swallowing him, draining his body in one hot arterial spray and taking all his memories with it.

But it wasn’t Dan yielding to him, not really. No more than one of Hill’s victims had understood their actions, or an ant infected with suicidal spores. His disease had offered him the vehicle for an illusion of his desires, but he’d triumphed. Dan was safe for the moment; Herbert would have to see about getting him home soon. There just always seemed to be something more urgent needing his attention.

“What’s this, then?” Or rather, some one kept urgently demanding his attention, full enough of self-import for all of them.

He’d thought his prime subject overfamiliar before they added that strange, intimate act to their repertoire. Now, it seemed a full-blown clinginess had developed. Lestat loved resting his chin atop Herbert’s head or on his shoulder, slotting them together in a deliciously evocative but disastrously distracting echo of their joining. “Still haven’t solved all our mysteries?”

“You make it difficult.”

“Fallen for my charms at last? Ah, but even that would be no match for the great Dr. West.”

“Your mockery is not as endearing as you think it is.”

“Sincerely.” Lestat leaned over the counter, trying to catch Herbert’s eye. “No mind in a century has been so breathtaking as yours.”

“You picked a poor century to survey, then.” He had yet to revolutionize a field to down to its core.
Yet. Still, the words left a certain warmth behind them. "But your attempts are appreciated."

"For one determined to see his name written in lights, you have little faith in yourself in the interim." Grey eyes, crackled through with glints of blue and violet, met his with as much gravity as they ever held. "Will you not accept that I see your worth? I am connoisseur of the exceptional, after all."

The thumbs rubbing at the nape of his neck, the tops of his shoulders, would have been a godsend before the illness--they pressed into the very spots where he'd once held tension and pain. Now there were no cramps to cure, nothing but a spreading calm and relaxation.

"Trust in others, love. Would your dear Hans have taken a nothing for his apprentice?"

It wasn’t the same, not at all. But how to explain that hunger, that dreadful need to do enough--be enough--that the world would finally be unable to deny him, regardless of his flaws?

How to explain such a thing to someone like the man before him?

"I believe in results," he said at last. "If I die before I achieve them, I'll be forgotten." Like his mentor. Brilliant, indispensable knowledge had flowed from that mind, but now no one but Herbert and a few musty medical journals would remember his contributions.

"Then your problems are solved." Lestat pressed a kiss to the back of Herbert's skull. "For you will never die, and your brilliance will have til kingdom come to be recognized." The vampire grew daring then, plucking Herbert's hands away from his work and turning him around. "Age cannot wither you. And you, in turn, will slay it, and illness, and show all the world your discoveries."

For everything else that he was--a liar, a vainglorious peacock, a hair-triggered egomaniac--Herbert was forced to admit that the man was not stupid. Or at least, he was beginning to learn which strings to pluck. When Lestat again gathered him into his strong arms, Herbert felt himself sway and waver.

"Something wrong?" He felt the movement of that wide mouth against his ear, so nearly the connection that had given him such pleasure, and felt a little weak.

"I may have neglected my blood intake," he admitted.

"Cher, I knew as much the moment I touched you. You're like ice, and so," Lestat paused, almost imperceptibly, "frail."

Diagnostic--how novel, the excuses. How practical. Nearly charming, if he were honest with himself, to see such an application of his teaching.

To have someone to check up on him.

Herbert couldn't help but laugh at the irony.

"Won't you feed, Herbert? Won't you let me teach you? Properly, not with these… stopgap measures." (Lestat was always well-fed, always buzzing with energy before Herbert ever rose in the night.)

"The stopgaps are sufficient."

"But why settle for sufficiency?" Lestat's eyes gained a rare, blazing intensity. "They would love you. You could tell them--no, with your abilities you could give them the gift of understanding
your work. They would adore you, just as you've always wanted."

"And for listening, their reward would be death. Antithetical."

"Then pick criminals! Scoundrels, rapists, thieves. Plagiarists." Lestat smirked, not in mockery but a joke shared, and Herbert couldn't deny the appeal of that particular image.

"Are unscrupulous academics in high supply on this tourist trap?" He quipped, letting Lestat draw him a little closer.

"Come away with me. I'll fly you across the seas to find your victim if that's what it takes. I'll dress you in leather and silk, to display your perfection," Lestat touched his face, plucked at his glasses as though to cement the flattery with a ‘why, Miss X--you’re beautiful!’ moment. Herbert batted him off, well aware of the futility of that cliché, and Lestat shamelessly recaptured him. "There's nothing that need tether you here."

"Whatever I want, hmm?" Herbert… if he leaned into the touch, what harm? The craving was symptomatic (undoubtedly so for Lestat), but for Herbert, at least, it was also something he’d felt in life. A want for nearness, the sort of thing he'd only ever had in snatches and fragments, at the worst of times for others.

And this letting-go was a time of sorrow for himself.

"What would you recommend?" (Sick, sick to play along, but then he was sick, wasn't he, the illness in him and Lestat and all the others, the burning low in his belly and the wash of saliva in his mouth.)

"Whatever you want." Lestat's voice was low. "I could find it for you. A pretty boy perhaps, tall, dark, and handsome. We could tear his throat out together, have him both at once."

He let himself imagine it, a man with Dan's face and an anonymous, useless status. The quelling of that desire with no guilt. It was pitifully simple psychology, the stuff of serial killers. But if it kept him from hurting Dan…

"I have something to handle first." He could say his goodbyes, make promises. To Dan, to himself. It would only be a little while, until he could minimize his symptoms safely.

Lestat held him fast. "Herbert," he said. "You don't."

"A decision, then. Have your pedantry."

"Herbert… I told you. There's nothing for you here."

"Explain yourself." Part of him knew. A genius-level IQ couldn't let it pass by, not something so blatant. But he needed it to be untrue. And so he asked.

"Must I?" Herbert's stare had rolled over better men than Lestat. Worse, too. Wide lips pursed, then parted to deliver the news he’d on some level sensed since waking, like an absence in his head. A loss foretold; mystical nonsense. Lestat broke the stare first. "They left sometime during the day."

"They?"

"He never cared for you, love, you were just a tool to him!"

As though that made it better. Herbert shook free of Lestat's grasp, wrapped his arms around
himself and tucked his head down.

"They. Explain, before I lose patience."

"He was using you, and you deserve better!" Lestat’s eternally-young voice rose in a near whine, full of a freshman’s conviction.

"Tell me!"

A long sigh, then mock-reluctant acquiescence. "He took Karen with him when he left. Armand's having a fit about losing his favorite."

The girl. The little blonde thing who wore just enough of a dead woman's face. Dan had--he hadn't even promised, had he? But he had come, and Herbert had thought that proof enough.

"Get out of my way."

"Herbert--"

"Move." He was no match for Lestat in strength, but the ferocity of his expression was enough to make the man step back. It was all the space he needed to make for the steps, to storm through the halls of the mansion. Every mortal he saw he seized, demanding to know when they had last seen their unofficial leader. And each, to his increasing unrest, gave the same answer: not since last night.

"Damn that bitch!" He let his temper get the better of him, slamming his fist into the wall. The crack in the concrete beam didn't even register as numbness in his hand.

Damn Herbert, while he was at it. He hunched forward, gripping the edges of a hideous ancient knickknack table taking up hallway space for no good goddamn reason. Wood splintered in his hands, sliced in and sent flickers of that strangely electric thing pain had become since his change radiating up his arms.

Damn his lack of control--this very danger; damn the disease for getting Dan in a state that he no doubt had to work off.

That was always how it started: Dan confusing needs and feelings, and always, always, Herbert and the work coming dead last.

The worst of it was that if only he could have given in, he'd have tied Dan to him with an unbreakable tether. If he'd taken Dan up on it and managed not to kill him, Dan would have stayed, starry-eyed and subject to Herbert's whims as ever he was to Megan's. He was that sort.

Loyal, but only if you could be what he needed.

Damn the bitch for giving in, and for knowing just what a good thing she'd caught.

"Dr. West?" one of the other mortals ventured, timid, heartbeat racing loud, so loud, fear and something else a stinking delicious cloud around them, breath fast palm soft warm living he could almost taste it--

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Lilies and water arced to the floor as the thrown vase smashed through the library's glass double doors.
Movement from within the library caught his eye, and when he looked closer silent, reproachful green eyes met his gaze. They followed him in spirit as he turned and stalked toward the main entrance, plucking splinters from his hands and snarling when the cuts refused to heal. Lestat wanted him to hunt? Fine. He would hone control on his own. And when he left, that would be on his own too.

He was sent reeling by the assault of smells when he stepped outside--he'd seen little reason to venture out since his death, and now the onslaught of new stimuli terrorized and beguiled his senses. He blinked hard, forcing himself to take a long set of breaths followed by long, purposeful strides. He was fine. This was the first step in learning control.

The wrought-iron gate at the end of the parkway was locked tight, as before, but now scaling it was child's play. And with his increased speed, he made it to the edges of the tourist throng in just seconds. Already, his mouth watered.

Eyes looked at him and then carefully away, all but clearing a path for him as he walked. He could hear all of them, the beating of their hearts and the idle chatter in their heads, each compounding his hunger until his teeth threatened to burst through his lips and send rivulets of drool dripping down his chin.

He fisted his hand in his hair, taking useless breaths. No amount of counting was helping.

"Hey, you alright?" The voice was near, uncomfortably so; the din all around had concealed its owner's approach. "You look-- whoa." Black-ringed blue eyes went wide when Herbert turned to face them.

"I'm fine." He forced his flexing, shaking arm down to his side, pulled himself straight. He must look like one of his old customers, like himself two years ago, jonesing out in public.

He could handle it.

"You… need something, sir?" They weren't alone, a friend, so very friendly the touch to his tie, his lapel, there under an old-fashioned reproduction street lamp. "You're awfully pale."

The first one was nodding. "Yeah, yeah. We'd be glad to help. Anything you need." The look of hunger on their faces palely reflected his own, and he could have laughed.

"No. That's--that won't be necessary. Thank you." He reached out to touch them, infected by Lestat's habits, and pulled back at the last minute. He started to walk away. He couldn't eat until he had a grip on himself. There was no point to it.

"Hey, wait up," The pair had caught up to him. The smaller one put a hand on his arm. "Look, let us get you somewhere quiet. You really don't look like you should be out. Just until you feel a bit better, yeah? We could help you relax."

He did laugh at that. Did they mean to murder him? They'd find themselves in for a challenge. But the thought of darkness did appeal, and he found himself steering toward the nearest crevice between the overlit shops. Fools or dedicated thieves that they were, his two attaches followed.

Or led. It was, he supposed, a matter of interpretation.

And the change of venue did help. The dark didn't assault his eyes, and the artfully uneven brick was cool and soothing at his back. The humans conferred with one another--he could smell the sweat on their palms, and something else--and then the first approached.
"Hey, it's okay. It's all cool. Sometimes I get a little overwhelmed out there, too. Bad trips, y'know?" And as they said it their head tilted far to the side, exposing a long obscene line of neck.

"You should stick to controlled environments," Herbert gasped, old habits taking the place of genuine attempts at interaction in distress. Everything was so strong, so rich, the smell of surf and some native flowers mixing with food waste and clove smoke and beyond that, human. He clamped his arms around himself.

Control.

"Well, I don't think you have much room to talk, Monsieur." This one butchered the word, clearly had no French to speak of, but did have piercings, little steel bars picking up pinpricks of starlight and sending bursts of it knifing into Herbert's mind. Their tongue darted out, brushed against one, then flicked back in. Their mouth was so close--when had they gotten so close?

He was the predator; the stalking beast.

He felt so weak.

"Let's see if we can help you, mon cheri." The random, American-accented French--He twitched away from their seeking, but met only masonry at his back, and there was one to each side. "C'mon, play along. It'll be fun."

They pawed at him, touched his body and held him there with what they clearly thought to be playful force, both nuzzling at the crook of his neck in a stilted approximation of an embrace. He groaned, moving into their grasp rather than away, hot, gentling, good, and the throb of the carotid artery just under his nose was more than he could take. He did what he needed, hard, and felt skin and muscle rend under his teeth, flesh give way for his desires. Severing such an important artery meant death within minutes, and almost instantly the body in his arms slumped into unconsciousness. Great founts of blood gushed down his throat, and the hunger he had ignored now roared to the front of his mind as a raging, implacable monster.

Good, good, warm as he hadn’t been in ages even with tropical weather--as perhaps he’d never been, hot and salty and reviving him with each swallow. Too fast, too little, something bright and delicate as the cotton candy sold by vendors melting against his tongue, inside his mind.

Already his meal was slowing to a trickle, refusing to yield even when he sucked at the wound. He pushed the head farther to the side, and farther still, until muscles and tendons ripped and splattered him with a few more precious droplets.

I could dismember the body this way, he thought distantly. Suck the life from every pore. But movement distracted him, and the acrid stench of vomit. His second pursuer was backing away, pale and trembling, hands over their mouth. They tried to run past him, and he caught their arm, feeling the joint of the shoulder pop and then tear as they struggled in his grasp. He tore at the fabric of their shirt, uninterested in a vein when there was messy, immediate food for the taking. He yanked harder, until there was a clean stump to wrap his mouth around, and he had to hold his victim fast to counteract the spasms of shock.

Not enough, something in him said, and he left the ragged meat to bite out the throat, a pressurized jet coating his face and neck before he could properly attend to his food.

The world exploded around him, harsh as when he'd first tasted a hit of Lestat's blood. He could hear the 'palmetto bugs' whirring repulsively along; felt breezes on his exposed skin, fine-milled fabric on the clothed; the body he held was a marvelous instrument, strung together as beautifully
as any creature of his own design.

The blood coated him, bathed him, sticky-slick and cooling between his and the other’s hot flesh so perfectly that he wanted to feel it forever, filled him flowing thick down his throat like nothing else and he sucked down every swallow until it slowed and something screamed at him to release his victim.

Staring through the blood on his glasses, he saw only horror, and jerked back with an inarticulate cry that sent the last mouthful of food spilling down his chin. Destruction--animalistic ruination of two perfectly healthy bodies.

His jacket tore as he again slammed back against the wall and slid knock-kneed down it to crouch and stare at the results of his loss of control.

He took off his glasses, hands shaking, trying to clear away the blood but succeeding only in making the lenses into a cloudy, useless mess. He tucked them into the pocket of his (tacky, soaked) shirt, clenching and unclenching his hands in an attempt to stop the trembling.

There were no longer humans in the alley with him--just gibbets of meat, torn from the butcher’s window and wrapped in fabric. He fell to his knees, retching, adding more blood to the carnage.

He heard the click of soles touching down nearby, not walking up but simply appearing; he couldn’t bring himself to look up even in self defense. Something touched his shoulder, and he started, lashing out on instinct.

"Be still," a soft voice laced with iron commanded, "And do exactly as I say." The same green eyes that had followed him from the library were now a point of clarity to hold onto. He nodded, unable to stop the bobbing motion even though it surely made him look like a gibbering idiot.

"Herbert." The figure--Louis, the strange, withdrawn one--knelt before him, steadying him. "Focus on my words. This feeling will pass. I am here to help you."

And as he spoke Herbert did feel calmer, though he felt no overt touch on his mind (he could have felt, in that moment, the idle imagining whisper of a thought halfway around the world). Louis, it seemed, simply exuded an air of calm in the manner of an oasis.

"You killed tonight," Louis said, soft voice soothing as the words were brutal. "This is too long coming, but now you see, yes? What we are?"

"I could have--" Could have kept using the people at the mansion. Could have subsisted. Could have controlled--but Louis shook his head sharply, hair falling forward to obscure his so-natural features.

"Not forever." The words carried the import of a natural law. "We kill, whatever that place made you believe. Our lives are at the expense of others, and an unequal exchange at that."

"You--you don't--use them." Of them all, Louis was the one Herbert had never stumbled upon in a clinch with some poor unfortunate. And God, one would think they'd try. He still wanted that exam; still wanted to see the source of this one's resistance. Nearly perfect, that preservation.

Heavy-lidded eyes. A sweet mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "Hide your kills," he said, no answer to the question, but good advice--that strange disconnection again.

"Where?"
"Not far. This is our island."

'Not far' was a pit at the end of the street, a convenient dump that showed signs of regular traffic but was concealed from the main drag by foliage.

Herbert was a conspicuous sight at Louis' side, and yet no one stopped them or made so much as a comment. When the pieces were buried he looked to his impromptu guide, frozen with uncertainty.

"Follow me." Louis spoke no more as they wound their way through the stores and hotels, the curiosity shops and theaters. Louis produced a key to an unassuming door in another brick alleyway, and another for the door at the top of a dimly lit staircase.

Behind that second door was a wonder: a clean, quiet studio apartment with bookshelves on every wall and a worn, plush chair in the center of the room.

"There is a small shower to your right."

Herbert bolted for it in what to normal eyes would seem a red-black blur, tearing his stiffening clothes in an attempt to get free of them faster. The hot water was a mercy, though it seemed his skin would come loose before the blood did. He lost himself in the rhythm of scrubbing at the evidence, as he had too many times before. The water was long cold by the time he stepped out.

His skin still felt feverish.

His hands were healed; he covered himself with them, reached for the too-far-away towel hanging on a pole, and stared down at where he'd dropped his garments as the warm air evaporated the drops lingering on his skin.

The suit was gone, and in its place lay a neatly-folded pile of shabby, too-long, nondescript things. Clean things.

He dared a glance as he bent to pick them up, remembering the locker rooms of his youth, but Louis sat with his back to him, nose buried in a battered paperback far too shabby for the shelves of the mansion's library.

The clothes were an odd fit--baggy around the shoulders, stretched ever so slightly tight across the stomach, and far too long--but he was glad for the gesture. It made him feel--but then, he wasn't human, was he. Tonight had made that point abundantly clear.

"How long have you been coming here?" He abhorred smalltalk, but it got Louis to look at him.

"Not long after our fellows began to test my patience," he replied. "Within as long as a week."

Herbert suppressed a smile. "I wasn't informed this was an option."

"I would appreciate your discretion." Louis placed the tattered book back on the shelf, where many of its like rested. "A word Lestat cannot be trusted to hold to. And I would hate to live up to my reputation." He smiled a private smile.

Refuge from Lestat was a motive Herbert could more than sympathize with. He stood in the center of the room as Louis made a leisurely examination of his tomes, waiting for some appraisal.

"Well?" He prompted at last, sure the other shoe was soon to drop.

"Well?" Louis blinked at him, those large, startling green eyes fringed with long black lashes that made them seem sleepy and gentle until they focused. "I am choosing a book, Dr. West. You may
do as you wish."

The vagueness, the oddity of the man, were everpresent. Herbert had heard more than one cut-off whisper about Louis' lack of 'ability', his 'weakness', whatever that meant, and their few conversations had all shown this same odd lack of engagement. Yet his affect was more fluid, more human and less artful, than the rest—the performativity a trait that seemed to increase with time, judging by the relative degree of other expressed symptoms.

At some point, Herbert realized he'd been staring for who knew how long, simply watching Louis move in the apartment's mix of moonlight and half-burned-out track lighting. The sound of rough acid-degraded paper shuffling against itself was oddly soothing, as were the fluctuations of emotion on that near-human face as he paged through a fat paperback called The Flame and the Flower.

Louis spared not one more glance, though he must have been aware of Herbert's gaze. Any mortal would have noticed attention that intense and clumsy, let alone someone infected with senses such as theirs.

That was it, Herbert reassured himself. The blood was making the parasites in his body active, inflicting the same old hallucinogenic effects onto him. That was what was making Louis so intriguing, the simple flick of his fingers as he turned a page entrancing.

Being ignored was its own novelty, he realized, a relief from the constant affectionate scrutiny and pursuit from Lestat and the addicts. He made a pass over the shelves, finding them mostly filled with trade fiction and a few lurid paperbacks with florid scripts like Louis' current object of interest. No textbooks, no journals. He did linger, briefly, over a small collection of pulp science fiction that could have been snatched from the floor of his childhood bedroom, but ultimately he left it. Who knew what dredging up old memories and older feelings with Sturgeon would do to him in this state.

He was considering taking a seat on the thick area rug when a certain innate nervousness needled him. "What time is it?"

"Nearly a quarter past five. Do you not have your watch?" So calm, so disinterested, as though the place didn't have unshielded windows on two sides—as though there were nothing to fear. The slant of light coming in from the East, the sleepiness, meant they (or at least Herbert) had less than an hour, give or take a few minutes.

"We need to go." Herbert heard, dimly, the shaking of his own voice, saw his hand reaching out towards his strange companion. "We need to--this isn't safe."

"Correct, Doctor. Many things are unsafe." Louis licked his fingertip and turned another page.

His wrist was thin, almost bony, and painfully cold when Herbert pulled it down to break his concentration, "Louis. We need to go."

"Still determined to survive, despite your professed horror at our existence." Louis finally looked at him, possessed of a pronounced anguish that seemed to radiate out from him. "I know the feeling. I've never found the wherewithal for suicide, as often as it appeals. Remnants of dogma, perhaps." Still he made no move to get up, and Herbert felt a strange reluctance to leave him. The potential data that would be sacrificed in the loss of this man—unacceptable. "Is that your intention? Death? And you mean to take me with you?"

"I've done nothing to keep you here. You could find your way back to the mansion in time, if you
left now."

"I assume the others would have my head if you died on my watch," Herbert bluffed. He wasn't sure why.

"Ah. So. Fear holds you to me." Words, phrases, statements that almost fit their contexts but not quite.

"Hardly."

"I've only diagnosed your words. What else can I use?"

"I will not die debating pointless semantics." Herbert tugged, hard, and was almost surprised when it was enough to pull Louis to his feet. "Come with me."

It seemed an agony of waiting, as Louis slid a creased receipt between the book's pages and reshelved it, then straightened the other volumes at human speed. He made sure both doors were securely locked lest someone pilfer his *valuable* stock of trash novels. All this, while Herbert hovered shaking with tension, so very close to simply bolting--and then Louis reached out and took his hand, casually, as though it meant nothing to touch him.

"Ready?" Smooth, guileless face that had helped him hide a body, lit by the lavender hints of dawn. Gentle, truthtelling voice asking insanely whether Herbert was prepared.

He nodded, and then together they ran.

It was only panic that told him dawn was chasing their heels, the thought no less terrifying for the fact that it was impossible. They crossed the threshold and the doors like children reaching 'base,' and Herbert felt Louis hold him up as his legs grew clumsy, his head heavy. He had never been so acutely aware of how this disease could steal his body from him, leaving him at the mercy of a veritable stranger. His steps became a blur, and he woke alive, alone, and half-convinced Louis had been no more than a dream.

The clothes, though--the clothes, and the color of his skin in the mirror told him otherwise.

~*~*~*~

Herbert was back in his lab as if nothing had happened. As if he hadn't vanished the night before, leaving terrified thralls and considerable property damage in his wake. He didn't even have the decency to look up when Lestat entered, shaken to his very core with worry.

"So. You didn't throw yourself into the sun," Lestat began, too disturbed for preamble. "That… that's something, at least."

His precious love made no sign of hearing him, bent over his tattered little notebook and scribbling away. Lestat grasped his shoulder, compelled to shake some sense into him. The sensation all but burned him.

"You're warm." Nothing near what a newborn vampire should have been, but by Herbert's standards it was as good as being set ablaze.
"Yes. What of it?" Still, still only the barest of acknowledgements.

"Tell me where you went last night."

"Out," he grunted, like a sulky teen in some moralistic television film.

"Out." Lestat stared, long enough to see blood rising, responding, in the close-to-living capillaries of his cheeks. So beautiful at this stage, their kind--so fragile. "Define 'out' for me, Herbert, as you're so fond of precision."

"Outside these walls, Lestat, as you've apparently become incapable of even basic conjecture." Acid, biting, enunciated, was the non-answer: what could have been bantering conversation warped into bitter and condescending mockery.

Lestat snatched the notebook from Herbert's hands with preternatural swiftness to survey the notes he guarded so jealously from his 'assistant.'

--fluid intake from two (2) separate food sources; quantity impossible to determine. Feeding lethal to prey, though possibly remains that mortality was result of secondary injuries rather than direct exsanguination. Postmortem data unavailable, but--

"You killed." The block-lettered words all but reached out to slap him. Herbert's first true kill, all but deliberately excluding him. How beautiful his fledgling must have looked, bathed in lifeblood and fed by it.

"Reading comprehension. Very good." Herbert grabbed book, cradling it close to his chest. "If you're satisfied, leave."

Satisfied. As if being robbed of such a powerful moment could ever be paid for. He had half a mind to hold his fledgling down and steal the memory back, body to body and mind to mind in this place he'd created. Could he not at least glimpse the experience he had offered with earnestness, only for it to be turned against him?

But Herbert, guarded and angry and all too new to their pleasures, would likely react poorly to such a liberty.

"And who helped you with this little outing? I recall hearing no news of bloody murder--you and I both know Armand would let the token little police force haul you away if you were found out. Tell me, cher, who helped you?" Who exactly did he get to take his rage out on?

The superior twist to plush lips was cruel, as was the laugh that spilled from them.

"Why, Lestat, don't be ridiculous. It's not as though I'm exactly new to homicide, now, is it?" The fire in him--the blaze of it seemed so much brighter than Lestat had even seen, even in life. "Or were you anticipating some naive innocent, one you could instruct?"

Damnation, but it pained him to see this now, with the mind closed to him.

Inflamed him, too, to see his lover healing.

And if feeding from only 'two sources' could do this much--could bring such life back to his darling…

"Vicious." He lunged forward and wrapped Herbert in a fierce embrace, doing his best to shelve the anger in favor of its twin, passion. "Vicious, fierce little minx… Oh, love… "
The anger and jealousy would stay, stabbing their knives in him, but this, warm, in his arms, was just so very much.

Herbert pushed and struggled against him, using his little share of strength to make space between their bodies. "I said I was busy. Try to remember, difficult though it doubtlessly is."

Not to be deterred, Lestat pushed.

"A vampire's hunger is never sated. You'll need to kill again. Grant me this little favor. Let me see you kill." It was beneath him to beg, but there was a certain thrill in playing to Herbert's imperiousness. Their little game.

"We've had this discussion. The answer is still no. This is delicate work--if you have any interest in the results, you'll leave. Find some other warm body to inflict your lust upon."

"You say these things to spite me. What 'work?' This blank counter and your petty imaginings? The greater crime would be to let you waste away here." He tried to steer Herbert toward the door, and was rewarded with an accidentally erotic show of teeth.

"I am not your plaything. Release me."

"Is it a fight you want?" And that too, was its own kind of pleasure. "I promise you won't enjoy what comes of it, fledgling." (Lies; Herbert would enjoy it immensely. Lestat would make sure of that even if Herbert's biology weren't so wonderfully responsive.)

A snarl rose, like that of some wild cat that stalked Gabrielle's beloved jungles. Herbert's marvelous eyes rolled, showing white all around, and his hands curled into claws.

"I want to work, you imbecile. That thing you claimed to care about before all…" he seemed to lose all vocabulary, gestured roughly in the small space between them, "this occupied what mind you possess. I am trying to cure this!"

The rage, the panic of him--the hurt. He'd not seemed so terrified on the edge of death (not that he'd known, not that Lestat had asked his permission then either.)

"Then you have my assistance." Frightening, this sudden shift. To think he could prompt it. "As promised." He would make this work, no matter the measures.

A strange fleet of expressions crossed Herbert's face, and once more Lestat cursed the silence between them. "I need supplementary reading."

He vanished before Lestat could tighten his grip.

At least he was out of the lab.

~*~*~*~

Herbert considered vanishing into the night and fending for himself, free at last of the pathetic tyranny of the cult of disease around him. But memory of the night before quickly put paid to those thoughts, and he found himself gravitating toward the library after all. The window was still broken, the glass all carefully swept aside. Empty, for all intents and purposes.
He lost himself in the stacks, the excuse to escape Lestat quickly becoming a real curiosity. Here there were works that Miskatonic would have committed a not inconsiderable series of murders to lay their hands upon, many folios and scrolls in dead languages that Herbert hadn't the faintest grasp of how to parse.

He found himself shuffling out from the stacks with a pile of translation dictionaries, only to discover that detached appraisal once more set his way. But Louis made no attempt to approach him, much less mention the events of the night before. Instead, apparently satisfied that Herbert posed no harm to the books, he returned to his repose in front of the fireplace, leaving them both in blessed silence.

~*~*~*~

Lestat wasted half the night on the mainland, stalking the streets like the predator he only occasionally allowed himself to forget he was. He laid waste to a rapist, a murderer, an abuser--it was so easy to find them in the city. But their blood tasted bitter in his mouth, and even the brightness of sensation gave him little pleasure. He could bring it back to Herbert like this, as if he were a mother bird, but--

The look of cold fury that had refused to leave him reasserted itself. No. Herbert would take nothing from him tonight. As usual, his temper and impetuousness had made a mess of things.

His head hung low when he reentered the mansion, well and truly feeling sorry for himself. Down the hall he caught sight of Armand, arms tightly folded over his chest as if it could disguise the slight flush on his cheeks, and heard Marius' gentle laughter.

Marius. He would know what to do.

He caught Armand's eye as he passed, the two of them sharing a brief moment of colluded understanding, and then he knocked at his teacher's door.

"Am I interrupting?" He may have posed a little in the door. Even sorrow left room for a good entrance.

(Demanded it, in fact; to suffer beautifully was an art all its own, and one in which Lestat constantly found himself upstaged.)

They'd not spent near enough time together since Marius' arrival--only a few brief evenings, before Lestat's charge rose and demanded his attention. Rude, perhaps, to come begging soothing as well, but Marius surely knew already, and motioned Lestat to the couch with a smile.

"Just a moment, and I'll join you--you seem in need of something to soften your thoughts." Music (not Lestat's--something old, sweet and wordless) soon floated out from a portable cassette player, and then Marius settled beside him with a sigh. "What's troubling you, then?" he had the grace to ask, despite all his powers.

"All the ills of life," Lestat began, holding onto his dramatics a moment longer. "It's become more than I can bear."

"The quandary of our condition. Not, I'm afraid, something I can solve in this one night, even with my considerable experience. But," he laid an encouraging hand on Lestat's knee. "Perhaps there is
some smaller matter I can aid in?"

Lestat flushed, squirming internally at the thought of disappointing this worldly man with his blunders.

"My fledgling," he confessed in a rush. "He confounds me. I had thought that once we…" (He gestured, brushed his own lips almost contemplatively at the eternally vivid memory of that sweet, impassioned yielding. Kissing and telling, but he'd only ever been a gentleman in theory, and Marius was important.) "But he does not seem to like me, even, nor want to be close."

"Oh, Lestat." Marius' face took on a sympathy that, for all his pride, was a lifesaving draught. "Surely he is not already proving… unstable so soon?"

"No, no," he shook his head. "Only temperamental. Every move I make only makes him angrier. I am not a patient man. I--I'm afraid I can't be what he needs."

He turned his gaze down, moved closer to avoid having to see that painful kindness. Their hair looked pleasing, mixed on Marius' shoulder--white and yellow, straight and curled, a sunshine riot.

"And who is it that decides what he needs?"

"What?" At that, Lestat could not help but startle, only for Marius to pull him back in. The next words rumbled through his chest, reaching Lestat's skin before his ears.

"He is but young, Lestat--barely born into our world. And he has given in to you once already. Will you let him have his confused head in all things, and so destroy himself?"

"He's a man, half again as old as I was." A man with a profession, and more knowledge than anyone, human or vampire, could possible know how to use. Even all Lestat's reading had only shown him the mechanisms of the body, their workings and wonders bare, not the infinite questions lying behind them.

"You were a man then, in Egypt. And did I not tell you what was best, absent any other elder?"

"Yes, but…" But Lestat had sought him out. Had begged for knowledge and guidance and taken it gratefully. Herbert's admiration was given sparingly, and he'd more than made it clear Lestat didn't meet the qualifications. "He resents my intrusions. He went out alone rather than accepting my help."

"And?" Marius prompted.

"And… he was fine. He was right about not needing my help."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." A cold hand carded gently through Lestat's hair.

"What do you mean?" Lestat sat up enough to search his face and found only paternal amusement.

"It seems your fledglings are bonding. As you'd hoped, no?"

It took a moment to understand--to even remember what he'd so diligently been putting out of his mind, given the current strain. And then, something went still in Lestat as the connection snapped home.

Louis. Beautiful, sensitive, angry Louis, Louis who had sworn never again to have anything to do with Herbert. How badly had Lestat failed, then, if even his most troubled living fledgling was
preferable and willing to assist?

"What… happened?" He was an actor. His voice did not shake as he asked this question, this invasion, of the one who saw and knew all.

"It was as you feared, I'm afraid." Each cruel word was punctuated with a loving touch. "Your Herbert was unprepared for the world of mortals, and he made a slaughter of them. It seems dear Louis was prepared to do as he saw necessary."

"God." Lestat trembled, imagining the near miss, what could so easily have happened because of his negligence.

"I am unsure what swayed his decision, but he gave shelter to your young one instead, protected him from himself. He was as fine as any maker." Marius might as well have stabbed him through the heart with that praise and implication mixed.

"You think it's going to happen again."

"I fear it. Your Herbert is headstrong. His pride will be far more a burden to him than a boon if he continues on like this. Are you prepared for that, Lestat? To finish Louis' task?"

"No." He had done such horrors to preserve that life. "No, it won't come to that."

"How can you be sure?"

"I won't let it. He's my responsibility, and--I just have to make him see." Had that been the trouble so often? That he'd created fledglings and let them have their way, failed to show them properly the things he'd learned by force, alone?

God, spare his children from his own mistakes--his own blind fumbling years with no guide.

"Lestat, you're trembling."

That deep voice, those strong arms, repulsed Lestat suddenly, made him feel trapped and helpless in the darkened room. He forced himself up and cradled his head in his hands, making a frame of himself to still the shaking.

Adrenaline? Or whatever strange stuff traveled the bodies of the dead instead? Just another thing Herbert would want to know.

"I can fix this." Whether he told himself or Marius was a matter of some question.

"Lestat--"

"Thank you for listening, Marius." Lestat stood, avoiding the touch. "Don't worry, this won't be a problem." He'd double, triple down if that was what it took to keep Herbert alive. And speaking of--"I'd appreciate it if--"

"Say no more. Poor Armand has been under such strain of late. There's no need for such little problems to reach his attention. Wouldn't you say?"

Oh, it was good to have him back. If he were in charge here, so many of Lestat's problems would fade to nothingness.

But still… he resolved to wait a few more nights before putting his plan into action. There was no harm in waiting for the best entrance, after all.
The translation project, impromptu as it had been, was proving to be slow work. A thorough grounding in German and a smattering each of Greek and Latin did little for the kinds of books which now occupied Herbert’s time. He returned every night to page through a few more volumes, glad of his accelerated reading speed, but even that was only so much help in the face of modified or coded versions of dead languages often written in smudged, bloody, or shaking hands. Still, it was threatening to become something like a routine: nodding to Louis as he passed through the foyer, then disappearing to the table that had unofficially become his.

Tonight, though, a different question occupied him. He’d spent the last hour making shallow cuts on his hand and then sipping at a cold container of blood, trying to ascertain the rate of healing to damage. Charting the results himself, alone, not that he required assistance for so simple a task. It was fine enough, feeling out the new knowledge by degrees. It was logical. It was… dull beyond description. He resolved to take a new tack in the name of moving things forward. That was the only way he’d be able to scratch the surface of the unknowns before him.

Restraint accomplished only the waste of time, as poor Hans’ death had taught him so well.

He took a scalpel from the table beside him, rolled up his sleeve, and drove the knife into his forearm. He stopped only once he hit bone, and then dragged the blade up the length of his forearm. When he pulled the instrument clear, the result was an almost foot-long gash that bled sluggishly as if he were a corpse. The pain was certainly insistent, but not comparable to normal sensation. Confused nerves, sending an almost pleasurable heat, a pure intensity of feeling in addition to the hurt. He gritted his teeth against it. He could feel, too, the constriction of capillaries consistent with the smaller healings. But the wound remained, dripping down his arm. Deeper curiosity seized him: would the disease in his blood drive out other infections? Would it heal of its own accord if he were to take in no new blood? He resolved to leave it for that evening, at least, and rolled his sleeve back down over the experiment before taking his nightly walk to the library. They could clean the damn carpets themselves.

The pain, that enveloping, energizing burn, seemed to wash over him in waves, never departing exactly but pulsing low and slow every few minutes from his chest to his wrist. He forced himself upright and ignored the absurd stir his appearance provoked from the milling sheep (you'd think that if anyone were capable of seeing a little blood without panicking, it would be them, but clearly Herbert had once again expected too much of others.)

He’d have to be careful with the books, he thought absently; wouldn't want to damage them or render them further illegible.

The doors had been reglazed, with rippled panes rather than frosted this time. Louis appeared to be sitting behind a frozen waterfall. Too thin, the past few nights; his cheekbones, always prominent, looked sharp enough to cut. Not that Herbert had room or call to speak on that.

They made their now-customary silent greeting, but as Herbert passed Louis held out a hand. "You've injured yourself," he pointed out, with the air of one discussing the weather.

"Yes." One could be direct with Louis. Herbert was beginning to appreciate it.

"You'll bleed on the books." Louis eyed the soaked sleeve of Herbert's shirt. "Feeding will take
"It would defeat the purpose of the experiment."

"Ah." He asked no more, but instead stood and made his way to the doors. "Stay there," he said, and vanished.

In no more space than a blink he had returned with a familiar white box in hand, a roll of bandages in the other. He nodded toward his usual chair, bidding Herbert to sit.

Somewhere in the distance, Herbert could hear a commotion, the stir hitting not just his ears but his mind. Irritating. He ignored it, focusing instead on what was before him, pale mouth parted and eyes riveted to his blood.

Such control.

"What are you planning?" he asked warily. The current pain he endured was less than optimal, and he'd just as soon not start over.

"Something to keep the books from becoming casualties of your curiosity. What did you intend?"

"To ascertain the limits of healing under this infection." He sat, back stiff as Louis knelt before him.

"'Infection.' Yes, Lestat mentioned you thought of it that way."

"You disagree?" Herbert prepared himself for another tiresome onslaught of theology.

"I only hope your pursuit of answers proves more satisfying than mine. Your sleeve, please."

He rolled it up, carefully, eyes catching on the splatters decorating white marble, the smears soaked through cotton. Some sort of modern art, destined to vanish in a puff of smoke with the morning light. Best biohazard disposal method in the world, and most inconvenient.

When Louis began squeezing the sides of the gash back into alignment with a butcher's detachment, he had to speak. "Not too tightly."

"Painful?" Green eyes shone through his black fringe, pantherlike.

"Don't want to actively promote healing," Herbert replied.

"Ah, yes, how foolish of me." Wry smile as he began winding the bandage on, beginning at the elbow and spiraling distal.

"Your pursuit?" he asked, for courtesy. For something to say.

"Many and many years ago, that was. And the answers I found proved… unsatisfying, in the long run. So I've ended up back at the beginning, and here I stay." Louis broke the gauze with a sharp movement, tucked the end in. "Can you move?"

He could, if there weren't a hand on his knee--oh. The arm.

He rotated; range of movement as good as could be expected given the damage.

Louis nodded. "Your hand?"
He blinked—it must have occurred to him on some level, since the injury wasn't on his dominant arm, but the conscious thought was new. "Stiff." He admitted. "It's possible I caused damage to the tendons."

"See that you call me for anything heavy, then. The volumes that have caught your interest won't hold through much fumbling."

Part of him was surprised Louis had noticed his studies—though they acknowledged one another, the man seemed to pass each night in a cloud of insensate melancholy. But perhaps that Louis was only a screen, giving way to the cold and practical creature who had come to his aid. His resolve to examine the man rooted ever more strongly in his mind. "Yes, fine."

The hand on his knee was gone, briefly intensified by yet another human gesture as Louis used him for leverage and then retreated. Herbert couldn't stop flexing his hand, curious at how he could have possibly missed such a thing.

He had no tingling, and brief tapping indicated no loss of sensation—though he lacked base data on reflexes, something that would need looked into. Presumably nerve damage was minimal or nonexistent.

The hand was… flexible. Dexterous.

Fingers, though stiff, could be manipulated farther than he remembered. Pulled back, back, nearly perpendicular—

"HERBERT!" The new glass vibrated but held when the double doors blew open as from a hurricane gust. Lestat fairly blurred the air around him; worse, he was followed by the other three members of the… colony. Commune. (Not coven.)

The others were quiet, but the buzzing in his mind intensified. Only Lestat was silent in that way, making up for it with his more mundane noise.

He weighed the options of holding his position and making Lestat come to him, but decided against it—that would be a precious few minutes he might need later, or at least it would mark his little table as yet another place Lestat felt comfortable intruding.

He took a casual pace to the foyer, where Louis and Lestat were already locked in verbal combat.

"--no restraint, but is it so much to ask that you not bring your hysterics down on my head?"

"Just tell me if you saw him! I need to find--Herbert!" Lestat's voice really was almost painfully loud in the quiet space. "My God, what have you done?"

"None of your concern. You've made it clear how little importance you place on my work."

"So you seek to punish me?" Lestat's eyes were locked on the bloodied bandage, on the odd angle of his fingers that hadn't quite reset themselves.

"It has nothing to do with you, you preening imbecile!" Herbert fumed. "If you have no interest, at least do me the favor of not being a hindrance."

Lestat's frame stiffened, as though he'd been struck. His eyes darted, ever so slightly, to the side, and his face set in a serious expression. "Let me see it."

"It's just been bandaged--removing it is contraindicated for--"
"For living humans, yes, Herbert, I'm not an entire idiot." (His jaw worked mulishly) "Whatever you may think."

"Then why--"

"SHOW ME, for the love of Hell, or I will look myself!" Herbert had been shaken before--often, even. It was almost calming, this expression of frustration; almost home.

Louis stood, head lowered, hands loose at his sides as though switched off. No help there. And the others… they circled, arrayed themselves in sequence, heads cocked and noses raised in an eerie, inhuman pack behavior.

Predators scented blood.

Dignity was so often making the choice oneself, rather than allowing something to be done, and so Herbert ignored the rest of them. He met Lestat’s eyes unblinking and dragged his glassy nails down the lapped gauze, which shredded, easily, as did his first layer of skin. Unimportant, that last, so long as the experiment was revealed as requested.

Lestat grabbed his arm, staring at the incision with something akin to horror as it released another slow flood of nearly purple gore.

"Mon Dieu… " His face looked like it should be paling. "Mon--When did you do this? Has it healed? At all‽"

"I'm attempting to chart regeneration rates--"

"For once in your damned existence, Herbert, answer a simple question!" His grip was almost painfully tight.

"No," Herbert bit out. How had he ever thought this creature was truly interested in helping him? "You haven't fed."

Not a question, but Herbert answered it anyway, standing like the dutiful schoolboy he’d never been for his interrogation. "No."

"In God's name, why?"

"I was attempting to tell you before you expressed your clear disinterest in the answer."

"Well, I'm listening now. Out with it."

Ordered like a performing parrot. "To chart rates of regeneration under the infection's influence."

Lestat’s sigh was exasperated, as if Herbert had broken his toys. "And for that you risk losing an arm? Where is your sense?"

He hadn't considered the possibility, in truth, had assumed he would recover as easily from all else. But he wasn't about to lose now. "There are always risks in science."

The points of Lestat's nails tore holes where they gripped his shirt. "I could throw you from the roof, you foolish, foolish thing. The harm you could have done… " And then he let go, biting a matching gash in his own forearm. He held the dripping offering out. "Take it."

"No."
"No?" Something flared in Lestat's eyes. "If you're going to defy me, by all means, prove you're able."

Herbert gritted his teeth, pulled back against a grip that might as well be stone for all it yielded--though the blood still dripping down his wrist gave him a certain amount of slickness to work against, he was still leaning at a 45-degree angle before he realized just how ridiculous he must look.

Did basic *physics* not work on them now?

"Ready, love?" Lestat asked when he stilled.

"No."

A hard hand on his arm reeled him in, as though they were partnered in a tango. Chest-to-chest, Lestat whispered down, "Don't do this. Don't make me."

Herbert's pride stung at this effortless brutality. His head swam with the scent of blood all around and what he knew it would feel like to taste. And he had always had poor judgment in his personal affairs.

So what choice had he, but to sneer, to curl his lip and say a third time, "No."

Lestat's eyes grew clouded with some emotion Herbert had no interest in naming--if it was regret, it wasn't enough to stop what he did next. Those implacable hands dug into Herbert's hair, forcing his head back, and took the opportunity to force blood into his mouth as he gave the smallest hiss of pain.

The whispered apology was probably his imagination.

It was over as soon as the fluid began to ooze over his tongue and down his throat, his traitorous new biology acting of its own accord. When Lestat released him he didn't even think to run, instinct calling him to seal his mouth over the wound made for him.

Hunger drove him, but it was more than that. Some chemical that seemed unique to this man sent shivers through him, tightened the muscles low in his belly as though he were still capable of mortal lust. He was again insatiable, the scent of copper clouding his thoughts. The only sound in his ears were his own throaty sighs, unnecessary and yet impossible to stop. The rest of the room stood silent as the grave.

At some point his knees must have grown weak, for he could feel a support as strong as stone pressed against his back. He nuzzled into the touch, desperate in his craving for sensation. Diseased.

The hand in his hair had relaxed, changed from tearing to petting, by the time he came whimpering back to himself. Gentle; blissful. Deceptive, insane counterpoint to the force just inflicted.

"Good, love; that's it. Just relax."

He wanted to tear his own skin off, begin anew in a different body, one not polluted by these uncontrollable thirsts.

He wanted more, collapsed as he was between Lestat's spread knees, back to that broad, hard chest.

"There, there. I've got you, and you're all better now."
He wanted never, ever to have to open his eyes and see the faces of the observers before whom he'd suffered this humiliation.

Predictably, he could have precisely none of those things.

His right hand went to his left arm before he looked; healed, perfectly. Wasted. All for nothing—all for this.

And all around him, faces, eyes, knowing and baffling.

Daniel, lips parted and something between shock and intrigue in his violet eyes, like the viewer of an elaborate show; Armand, unreadable as ever but studiously avoiding Herbert's gaze; Marius, with a small, bland smile and frank approval.

Louis.

Louis, flushed, staring at the bloodstained floor, too-thin arms locked around his torso, fingers still maroon with Herbert's own filthy blood.

There was more than enough blood in him now for shame to stamp itself across his features, humiliation and fury making twin demands for his attention. He staggered to his feet, and this time Lestat let him go, left him to stand alone on his pyre.

He summoned what dignity he could muster, all the years of pride and bearing into stiffening his spine as he stalked past them all and out into the sepulchral halls of his prison.
An Arm and a Leg

Chapter Summary

Herbert ventures further out in his hunting, and brings home research materials. Information is gained, at a cost. For Lestat and Louis, memories are ever-present. Armand, Daniel, and the rest of the coven feel repercussions.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a scene of rape. See end notes for more information.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At some point Herbert’s sense of time began to suffer, though obviously it was difficult to pinpoint just when. He’d never particularly cared for the sun, but its lack coupled with the tropical weather left his life a nearly-unbroken blur of nights.

Without even experimental timelines to demarcate…

He pushed that aside, along with thoughts of that last foiled test.

A break to recalibrate was necessary.

No safety in the library, but the books called to him, boasting clues hidden in works on alchemy and natural philosophy: discoveries had been made and then lost when their 'mad' authors died ignominious deaths and were written out of the canon. And so the texts, crumbling and mislabeled, had made their way to the climate-controlled limbo of this useless place and its collection-minded inhabitants.

(The irony was far from lost on Herbert.)

It was as painless a way to lie low as he'd been able to find. And after all, Dr. Gruber's theories had come from texts dismissed as outdated. It would do him nothing but good to hone his critical eye, apply scientific logic to artful ramblings and see what remained.

Louis was a comforting quiet, often appearing at Herbert’s table to inquire after his studies, and floating away on his cloud of self-absorption when the conversation withered away. If he noticed that Herbert avoided meeting his gaze after Lestat's damned display, he didn't comment on it. He asked nothing of Herbert beyond the most tentative of curiosity, and Herbert had always been weak to those willing to engage him with questions, even laymen. Louis was surprisingly intelligent, even, for one untutored in medicine or science (one who still vaguely referenced miasmas and humors, of all things--a clue to his vintage, if nothing else). It was one of many admirable things about the man. Enough, or nearly, to counterbalance the frustration at being continually turned down for an examination.
What was it, he wondered, that set the so-called "Beautiful One" apart from the rest of them? So much older than Herbert, yet softer. More 'human.' Quiet, perhaps traumatized. In the disturbed pack hierarchy that the mansion's colony had set for themselves, everyone in their place--Marius, the living history; Armand, the executor; Daniel, the go-between; Lestat, the hunter--Louis stood separate, communally appreciated and yet untouched. What did they want him for?

He'd moved from his original table to the balcony above since the incident, a spot that gave him a clear sight of the door and more distance to plan any needed retaliation. He hadn't expected to use it to spy. It was hard not to, though, when the participants seemed by their very proximity to perform.

The powerfully enhanced senses, too, made eavesdropping less a choice than a foregone conclusion--though it was what his mandatory, pointless Psych class had referred to as the 'Cocktail Party Effect' that clinched it.

When someone says your name, you hear it.

"Where is he?" Lestat asked silkily, almost shamefaced, like Dan after blowing Herbert off for a date with a girl. Aware he'd caused irritation and still certain he could worm his way back into the good graces of the one he'd wronged.

Louis' eyes rose from his book and focused only slowly, after a series of blinks. "Beg pardon, Lestat?"

Sleepy, almost, so calm and distant.

"Herbert, Louis. Is he here?" He leaned in over-familiarly and plucked the book from Louis' hand, preserving the page with a finger. "Are you getting along?"

"God forbid I should be caught doing any such thing."

"God forbid, yes. You might show yourself capable of some feeling, and we all know how your little screed touted your shriveled heart."

Louis' expression never wavered. "Is this when you begin weeping? I've been so eager to see one of these famed outbursts."

"Why should I waste it on you? You've made it more than clear you've no use for me." Lestat raised the book over his head as if to toss it in the fire, but some look Herbert couldn't see passed between them, and he threw it onto the table instead.

"For that you damn a fresh soul. Should I be more wooed by your rashness or your cruelty?"

"If you'd just--" he broke off with a snarl. "If I'm so vile, why do you remain here? Why, beyond to punish me for the sin of enjoying life?"

"You are not the sun, Lestat. Whatever poetry you might spin." Louis reached for the discarded book, and Lestat caught his wrist. The air grew tense.

"Why? Why did you come? Was I always so repugnant?"

"Non, Lestat." Clear as a bell and completely ambiguous, that answer; his eyes glittered unnaturally green in the golden light of the crystal chandelier.

(They didn't need the lamps--Herbert had tested. His eyes could have read by the few stars in a cloudy sky on a moonless night a thousand miles from civilization. And yet they kept their home
"No?" Lestat's hand notched into place under a pointed chin, tilting back the head on that fragile neck so that black, silken hair fell away like curtains. (Lestat preferred it long, Herbert recalled distantly, foreboding rising in his gut.) "No, my love?"

Louis' placid face tightened, and Herbert's body with it. Were he free of the infection, the pounding of his heart would have revealed him. Instead, he was able to remain still as the dead, up on his balcony.

Was this the missing piece of the puzzle, then? The purpose behind their keeping such a weak, helpless, disconnected creature enshrined in the library like a piece of art suddenly seemed altogether more disturbing.

When their lips must have been only a breath apart, if they hadn't in fact brushed, Louis spoke again.

"No, Lestat."

Herbert waited for it to go on--he'd learned well enough how useless that word was--but Lestat backed away. "As you wish."

"If you'd been so accommodating with your newest, he wouldn't hate you," Louis said. Herbert dug his nails into his thighs. Anger, amorphous and potent, needled him.

"So he's spoken with you," Lestat's voice sparked with renewed energy, and ebbed just as quickly. "... so he does hate me."

"At your most tyrannical you never laid hands on me. Your powers may be changing you as you feared. The Lestat I knew was petty, but he was never so unfeeling as that." Louis retrieved his book at last. "If we're monsters, I wonder what it is you'll become."

"You already think me the Devil," Lestat said, voice snappish and hot. "I may as well live up to my reputation." He stalked out, leaving the crackle of the fire to fill the sudden silence.

Herbert waited perhaps a quarter of an hour, perhaps longer--more and more he found himself slipping into those displaced states.

(Perhaps a side effect of the dormancy that replaced sleep.)

Finally, he walked down from the upper level, cloaked in the oblivious, incurious manner he'd always used to bull through uncomfortable situations. Louis had, after all, done him the favor of not asking--what could he do but respond in kind?

It didn't work, of course.

"Where are you going?"

Herbert paused, hand on the glazed door.

"Out. I think I've exhausted this place's interest." He'd hate it, but he'd hate more to bring his trouble on yet another person.

He learned, slowly.

"You needn't. He can't take anything from me I won't give."
Why, Herbert wanted to ask, but Louis was so close suddenly, gliding up without a sound. "He can't hear us, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"You poor thing. He keeps us ignorant, always, to tie us to him. But we’ve one thing in common.” Breath, cold and without scent, brushed Herbert's cheek as hair trailed across his shoulder. "No vampire can read the mind of one they've created, nor vice versa. It is a blessing and a curse."

The hand that trailed over his shoulder and down his arm left him frozen and tingling.

A defense, unique to Louis (if Louis could be trusted, trusted him). "And we're the only two outside his hearing?"

"Yes." There were stories there, there and in the mention of Herbert as ‘newest,’ but Louis said no more.

"Interesting." And then, as an afterthought, "Thank you."

Louis stepped away from him and Herbert was surprised, with all he'd endured in the past few weeks, to find himself missing the proximity. "I hope this place hasn't been tainted for you," Louis said.

It had, well before this. But that was all the more reason to come back, to prove himself stronger.

"I'm sure I'll see you again." If he tested this theory of mental quiet by thinking up the filthiest insults he could attach to Lestat's name, then the man would apparently be none the wiser.

~*~*~*~

When not in the library, Herbert kept one eye on the door of his lab, waiting for his sanctum to be breached. But Lestat didn’t approach, though more than once Herbert caught sight of him at a distance feigning disinterest, eyes sliding away the second Herbert caught on. Even given space, all it served to teach him was that he had a bigger cage.

But the lab and library grew suffocating with time (he’d need a calendar and newspaper to say accurately how much), the simmering fires of Herbert’s resentment fed by the same waiting intensity that he had once directed toward the tenured and doddering who turned him away. He would not be kept forever. And if bombast yielded yanks on his chain, then he would employ subtler devices.

He began taking walks around the grounds, observing the security measures that went deeper than the imposing gate. When that provoked no response he made tentative ventures back into the busy streets of the tourist district, taking care to drain several bags of cold, unpleasant preserved blood beforehand. The observation of the milling dolts, infatuated with the urban legends being spun to them for money, left him cold. He wanted nothing to do with them or their pathetic, pleading looks, as if he had something worth coveting. (Though he kept the image close in his mind—for hadn’t he been the same, desperate to stave off death at any cost?) He’d had more than his fill of the fenced playground.

Some weeks into these excursion, he found the boats, tied up to a private dock back behind the
mansion and well-hidden from the regular tourists, for whom a lack of escape was part of the gimmick. Those who lived in the house, of course, lacked any inclination to leave, strung-out on hope and pleasure.

His familiarity with the vehicles was negligible at best, but it took not more than a few minutes of study to puzzle the mechanics out. The sharpening of his mental faculties was—not worth all of the rest, except for when it was. And so he began sketching, in his mind, the basics of a plan. He couldn’t leave, not yet. But the first step would be setting foot once more on the mainland.

The next night he sacrificed his preferred wardrobe for something less conspicuous (“something Dan would wear,” he found himself thinking, and the bitterness of abandonment felt still fresh as he rooted through the provided garments in the room that had become his). He made his way down to the docks, and the few humans there gave him no more than a passing glance as he plucked transport without permission or invitation. No stranger to pale, unsightly creatures, these retainers in their crushed velvet and black dye. He was part of the family, he reflected bitterly. And by rights, that made everything before him his as well.

The ride was short and rougher than expected, his inexperienced hand more than once driving him dangerously close to detection or disaster. Once and only once, he reflected how convenient it would be to be more like Lestat. That yet-unexplained power of flight would have reduced a great deal of headache and hardship. But it mattered little now, in the face of a cacophony of life and stimuli the island couldn’t have possibly prepared him for.

The lights of the city were startling even on approach: pink and teal, neon lines stretching vivid along dove grey concrete and over the slickness of glass and chrome. Floating like confetti on the surface of night-black water. Not painful, per se—not what he was coming to know as pain. But distracting. Mortals had designed this all for their weaker, dark-oppressed eyes, shedding just a little sunlight in the night. For him, the world was ablaze.

Night Island's mellow, old-fashioned trappings made more sense with this to compare them to. Not merely vanity or gimmickry, but the careful management of sensory symptoms disguised as aesthetic.

He walked, sometimes ran (too fast to see, a breeze in the warm seasonless night) up streets smelling of salt and food, smoke and gasoline. Retreated, finally, into a dimly-lit bar, apricot-toned with walls of blue-illuminated glass bricks.

He'd never been seductive, not in life, yet now mortal eyes settled on him and followed with a dim fascination--bitter confirmation, but knowing the truth was more important than ego-salving illusions.

No sooner had he sat down in a battered booth in the back corner, than he had company. A young woman, dark-haired and smiling, leaned over his table. "Mind if I join you?"

He'd had no time or interest for the so-called fairer sex in life, but whatever parasitic compounds were drawing people to him apparently held an effect in reverse--looking at this mortal, he felt an almost-affection for her bold curiosity, the sound of her mind spinning theories about this pale stranger and elaborate fantasies of where he might have come from. Resolving to see his little experiment through, he gestured for her to sit.

She proved quite capable of carrying on conversation herself, which was good--Herbert was caught on the musicality of her voice, the unusually low timbre of it, and the graceful fluidity of her hands as she described the city's many oddities. He was fond of her, for no reason he could explain.
Drinks had appeared, and when he left his untouched she finished it for him, smiling and touching his hand now, his arm, to emphasize her points. Quite drunk, by any estimation. And then she slid close, and put her lips to his ear. "Wanna go someplace more private?"

He hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. In his endless descriptions Lestat had described choosing a victim, stalking and making them his own. (Disturbing to extrapolate from there--to think himself so much meat to be romanced and fucked and killed, before a stabbing and a twist for the dramatic changed all that.) But as in so many things of late, Herbert found himself swept up.

She touched him, confident, toying with the v-neck collar of his knit shirt. Had he thought Lestat warm to touch? She was radiant. Her perfume and cosmetics mixed with the scent of her flesh, not unpleasantly. So close, he could almost taste it.

Her heartbeat was fast when he turned his head and ever-so-carefully dared press a kiss to frosty copper lips. Her spray-lacquered hair rasped against his fingertips.

He experienced a weird doubling, a conflicting perception as though the viewer of a not terribly convincing film. It was mockable, pathetic, the way she offered up her vibrancy, her real working living self without any notion of the danger he represented--yet so clearly, now, he saw the unfairness of it. The trap he and others like him represented.

Her dress was a complicated thing, pleated and gathered all over and yet somehow still made to show the shape of her fit, healthy, sun-bronzed body. Dan would have found her nearly as entrancing as Herbert did in that moment, when he stroked one hand down her exposed back there in the smoky bar.

Her laughter was bubbly and just slightly disjointed, her grip perhaps too tight as she rose and pulled him up with her. If she noticed the strange coldness of his touch she gave no sign, except to hold him tighter. And it was he who wound up supporting her, her steps wobbly with drink in her high spiked heels. They made it no further than the dark, quiet space behind the bar, corralled by cardboard boxes and overflowing dumpsters and the overpowering scent of a brief night’s rainfall washing it all clean. It mattered nothing to him in comparison to the microcosm of the universe in his arms, the thrill of life that had drawn him to his field contained in one being.

She was been taller than him even without the shoes, and so had to stoop her long neck for their kiss; for him, it proved a perfect opportunity to nip at her throat and observe the keen shiver of her chest as she reacted to him. How entrancing, to be a force of nature.

But like all inexperienced lovers, his patience wasn't made for the long haul. In no time he had sunk his teeth into her neck, holding her up effortlessly when she collapsed against him. The pain he saw there rent his heart, the careful application of long skirts and scarves and fear trusted to him in one moment of uninhibited connection. Her heart was fierce, struggled against him and at last dug its hooks into him as surely as a siren's song, beckoning him to follow that fading star down to earth.

It hurt to pull back--felt like spraining something, losing something. The disconnection left him suddenly alone not only in his own mind, but in the alley. She was still living--just. Teetering on the edge of death, last few beats of her heart loud in his ears as he held her through it.

He'd been gentle, he told himself. He'd been hungry and lonely and he'd seen sunlight in her mind. He'd once had reasons for killing; now, there was the temptation to let all that be enough, as it was for the rest of them.

He owed her more than that. Owed all the living ones more--the same he'd always owed.
She was a shell, light and empty in his arms as he carried her back to the boat.

Above all, he would not be wasteful.

The memory of her failing breath pained him as he made his way back, spurred the engine to dangerous speeds that caused it to run hot and stuttering within its casing. He carried her reverently when he disembarked, his nerves tight as piano wire. He moved with all his available speed: prepared to face an onslaught of derision, but wanting nothing more than to avoid it. He snuck in through a window like a teenager he’d never been, and felt no peace in his heart until she was safely upon his examination table, his altar to life and death.

At the time when speed was more of the essence than it had ever been, he froze with indecision. The parasite had to be ingested, and so could not infect an already deceased host. Still—he tied off her arm, taking a small sample of cooling, coagulating blood and adding some of his own to it. No harm in seeing its rate of survival in the dead, how hale this unknown he was working with was.

Every time he looked back he lost another minute in memory, seeing sights that were not his but hers, recast.

With her on his table, he wished to do right; his still-imperfect reagent would be a crime. He was forced to slit the cheap Valentino knockoff dress, the pantyhose and lacy undergarments parting between the blades of his shears. Into the incinerator they went, along with her so-high heels. The modesty drape served no real purpose, but if she lived again surely she would prefer it.

The makeup would make diagnostic work more difficult, and so he wiped it away with a pang of regret at how hard she’d worked to get it 'right'. Her features, the high bones and straight nose, the dark arching brows, were still pleasing without it. He found himself arranging her limbs with utmost care, tilting her head just so.

He had spent many hours seeking to recreate the exact cocktail that had prolonged his own life at that crucial moment, unable to remember the exact parts, the freshness of the reagent’s catalyst components. He’d tried in vain to calculate how much of Lestat's long-infected blood had been left--and how much of his own, diluted by comparison, could perhaps suffice.

The pain of it had been unbearable; he remembered that all too well that. But what human, given the chance, wouldn't take temporary agony if the alternative was a frightful oblivion? She would forgive him, surely. Her heart had held many such boons, though she often regretted it. And no one now would help her, remember her, but by his hand.

He filled two syringes with his cocktail, red-black tinged with a sickly glow, and debated for some time whether his tried method of the base of the skull would work for this, or if the veins or the heart itself might prove a better delivery method. He would, he suspected, have only one chance. If he failed, he would be back in that office in Switzerland, taking in the horror of his failed experimentation, the trust wrongly placed in his ability.

Before he began, he c bolted the vaultlike steel door against that strange world outside, ensuring himself a few seconds of preservation should they prove necessary. And then he bent to his work, pressing one more kiss to her cool forehead. They were already hours past his most successful reanimation. He positioned the syringe over her heart, and plunged it in.

There was no reaction at first--shades of the incident with Damien. And of course he had no guarantee that the remaining restraints would suffice for even her slender limbs; he held one of her wrists tightly, immobile, attempting periodic reflex testing with pinpricks. If nothing else, the Glasgow Scale might help indicate rising consciousness.
At the four-minute mark, something. A twitch, a welling drop of blood blackened and abnormal: circulation. He felt for a pulse, then pressed his head to her breast in search of respiration.

Unnecessary, that last; breath groaned *into* her in the antithesis of a death rattle before she began to scream.

"Sondra--it's all right, you're alive. Sondra." He grabbed her face in an attempt to meet his patient’s gaze and reassure her, but there was no reasoning there. No sense.

Her eyes spilled black, tacky fluid, like the mascara he'd wiped away staining her cheeks running free. Her mouth was *wrong*, crackling sounds coming from somewhere deep in her mandible.

Herbert had always detached himself from his creations. Sacrifices were necessary in the face of the great machine of progress, and he was prepared to make them. But this sight grieved him utterly, the snapping, drooling maw and those blank, blank eyes. To say that it lived would be a grievous falsehood, and yet it--no longer she--was far more docile than his earlier reanimates.

Curious, he retrieved some of his own food supply from the fridge and cut the top, supporting his creation's head so that it could drink. Its teeth snapped, almost rending the bag in an attempt to swallow down the blood faster. And when the food was gone, the slurping sounds were replaced with an empty, almost piteous moaning.

So. This parasite was more powerful than he had assumed it to be--its powers of animation had no need of consciousness to work the most basic effects. The most mercenary curiosity at his core thrilled at the thought of what he might discover here, what Sondra, his short-lived dear, might gift to him in death. And oh, how he loved her then.

~*~*~*~

It took more willpower than Louis had expected to leave Herbert to his own devices. He’d learned his lessons, though, about those human impulses to nurture and coddle. And if Herbert would reject his status as Lestat’s creature, he would need to stand on his own--and yet he found himself noticing the conspicuous, courteous absence in what had for some time been his private sanctuary.

He’d told Herbert that withdrawal was unnecessary.

He found himself looking to the door whenever there was movement, only to feel guiltily disappointed when it was one of the shy mortals Armand kept or worse, Daniel, biting his tongue once again on some burdensome thought. It grieved Louis, always, to see the young man he had hoped to save look at him with such hollow, hungry eyes, seeking exactly the sentiment Louis had told him was lost.

When at last Herbert did stalk to the door, back ruler-straight and nodding a silent greeting in spite of everything, he found he couldn’t help himself.

“Would you like to sit with me?” he asked, gesturing to the empty seating arrangement and unused coffee table. “I find small changes can be a help.”

“A help.” Herbert repeated, guarded.

“You’ve been looking at the same page for three weeks,” Louis smiled. “Sumerian is far from my
specialty, but I can perhaps provide a little company.” He held up his own tome, part of him wishing instead for the intriguing little volume of Foucault squirreled away among his less impressive-looking collection.

Herbert’s eyes widened slightly behind the affectation of his glasses before he vanished into the stacks, and Louis prepared himself to accept that that would be all. But then the young vampire returned, a different book entirely in his hands, and took a seat in one of the high-backed chairs on the other side of the fireplace. He eyed the flames. “An ectothermic impulse?”

Louis started to seek clarification--withholding knowledge or acting like one possessed more than they truly did was a beloved tactic here, but it gave him no joy when there was honest discussion at stake--when his mind grasped a vague image of reptiles seeking out sun, cold gravitating toward warmth. Herbert gazed at him expectantly.

“I suppose so.” He thought, unable to contain a shudder, of the cold marble of Akasha’s body, passed on to Lestat and transforming him overnight from one Louis knew and had found again to something impossibly more alien. That gulf was just one thing among many to separate them, this ferocious youngster being the latest. (Not his fault, poor ignorant boy.) “It’s a pleasant feeling, but we cannot retain it. There’s only one true way for our kind to bogart warmth. You know it well.”

“Hmm. Herbert’s beautiful birdlike hands darted out, very nearly making contact with Louis’ arm before the motion cut itself off with a sharp upward turn and transformed into florid gesticulation.

They hadn’t touched since the night Louis bound Herbert’s wounds; a shame, almost, as he could still remember the pure feeling of those fingers laced in his as they raced the dawn back to this accursed place. “So if I were to introduce an alternative source of energy to power the body--”

“There’s no substitute for human blood.” Louis shook his head, unwilling to be a party to dead ends, even for one determined to cure damnation of all things. “Our nature as killers demands it.”

That stone gaze pinned him to the spot. “You’ve tried.”

“A very long time ago. For many years I was the terror of the animal kingdom. I’ve since yielded that delusion.” And how, he wondered, had Lestat managed to find and turn and ruin one so thoroughly unaware of even those basics they had together printed ten feet high on every wall?

“When you were made…” Herbert grew distant, staring into the fire’s blue-gold patterns which reflected back upon his soft face, almost luminescent. So new, but thrumming with Lestat’s blood and whatever weird stuff he’d forced into himself before that. “And the others, did they do this?”

“They would be insulted by the suggestion.”

“I see. So, the less apparent symptoms might have something to do with the difference in composition and early feeding habits.”

And there it was, that remark upon his person. Expected, always, though not in that form. Louis crossed his legs and leaned back. “Am I through with my examination, doctor? Or must I allow a bloodletting?”

Rather to his surprise, Herbert looked chagrined. “Your answers have given me a great deal of hope for progressing my research. Thank you.”

From then they kept talking, Herbert tensing as Louis had long ago learned not to show whenever those small interruptions threatened. Their conversations were oblique, circumspect, dancing on the edges of theory and melding philosophy with science in torturous metaphor. It was barely even communication, at the worst of times, but jargon was its own protection; their ciphers were near unbreakable despite never being discussed. Like Louis' age and origins: for whatever reason, Herbert never asked.

Herbert, in fact, seemed quite happy simply to spend time in his presence, a few nights a week, whether he made a lively companion or not. It was… pleasant. Enough so to erode his own carefully-held distance, born of a conviction that this one was either Lestat’s utterly or not long for the world.

Or both. And so,

"Would you walk with me?" Louis asked one night. "I find the air stifling this evening."

"I have other matters in need of my attention," Herbert replied. And yet--so intelligent, the muffled mind Louis could sense only dimly with his broken perceptions.

(He wondered, at times, whether his origin had to do with it; whether the presence of others to whom he hadn’t been blinded early on might have allowed his mental abilities to operate normally. Ah, well.)

Trust, that old folly, led Louis out onto the path alone, and when he reached the gate Herbert was waiting for him, leaning against the cold iron. "I've been told subterfuge isn't my strength. Thoughts?"

"An admirable performance," Louis smiled at him. And together they went, without discussing the destination, to the little sanctuary Louis called his own.

As before, Louis left his companion to make himself at home among his books, plucking something especially torrid from the shelf for his own evening’s entertainment. The words mattered far less just then night than the feel of print beneath his fingers.

Shuffling off his fanaticism for composure before this somehow trusted audience, Herbert set his back against one of the bookcases and slid to the ground, legs akimbo. "I would have taken all this for beneath you."

"You and many others. It has often proved an inadvisable mistake."

Herbert's eyes narrowed, not in malice but calculation, as if he could pluck the full story from a few scant words. "Do you plan on escaping?"

He hadn't thought about it, in truth. It had been enough until now to have this place.

He hadn’t considered how this place was a prison, how they all made them to trap those younger and weaker. But apart from that--"I thought I would have a reason to stay." Foolish of him, to once more give his trust into Lestat's hands.

"You chose to be here?"

"Didn't you?"

"Touche, Monsieur." Herbert's accent was coming along respectably. His expression turned inward, and he tucked one knee up to his chest. "I suppose we all chose, didn't we?"
"Except for our Prince, of course." Honesty compelled Louis to remind Herbert. Honesty in return for the only honest words Lestat had ever granted, though never to Louis' face.

"Beg pardon?"

"Lestat did not choose. His maker forced this upon him."

Herbert snorted softly, uncharitably. "Marius does seem the type, though clearly they've gotten over it. Like calls to like, I suppose." His bitterness was almost as striking as his misinformation.

"Marius may have shaped Lestat," Louis conceded, "but that was long after. His making was… violent. As he tells it." Lestat had a way of giving things away in his stories without realizing it, threads Louis could pore over on the page that utterly eluded him in person.

"Oh?" A contemptuous curl of the lip, disbelieving.

"He wrote it all down, you know. There are answers there, if nothing else." Louis had a copy, though if Lestat found out he had kept one there would be no end of it.

(Everything Louis'd asked and begged for, little and contained in pulp two hundred years too late, yet he'd been willing to take it for the chance at reconciliation. And now Lestat labored over another volume, tales of his vile beloved statue-Queen and the massacre of their kind.)

"Self aggrandizing nonsense, no doubt." Herbert's body seemed to curl in on itself, put on the defensive against even the mention of such a threat.

"A touch." He pushed it no further. Lestat's past would offer only ammunition to Herbert in his current state. It was almost impressive, seeing the charred remains of that bridge. Another question came to him. "Has Marius spoken with you?"

"Only when I couldn't avoid it." Herbert's strongest emotions had a way of pushing themselves out of his head; Louis caught sight of Marius' smile, hazy and melded with another long face. "I'm familiar with his type."

It was a strange relief to hear it--Lestat so passionately loved his teacher, and even Armand had spoken of his Maker with sorrowful reverence. It left Louis little room, on finally meeting the man, to put voice to his unease. "He is from a different age," he couched.

This time Herbert's dismissal was perfectly audible, pointed. "An excuse that's served him well many times, no doubt."

"We are marked by our times," Louis said absently, struggling to remember from whom exactly he'd heard that pearl of wisdom. "Each of us, in his fashion, and we all remain in some way was we were when we died."

"Well, certainly; what's the point of immortality if we lose ourselves? But there's a difference between being the product of something and being beholden to it, isn't there? The will resides in the body, not… the past." Herbert wrapped his arms about both knees, then, socked toes curling against the threadbare area rug. "Living humans replace every cell in the body every seven years. I am not, will never be, who I was seven years ago, ever again."

Louis licked his lips before answering.

"But you will be who you are now for eternity."
"Are you sure? I'm already the product of Lestat’s blood, and whoever made him, and whatever mortal--" he held himself up, then shook his head and continued, "whoever crosses my path. I see their lives when they die, and you say you remember all your victims. We change more in a night than the people out there will in their entire lives."

"You might say the same of humans then, when they eat meat." He found himself leaning forward over the arm of the chair, his book forgotten.

"Not the same," Herbert dismissed. "They have no way of knowing what their food went through before it died, whatever those idiots at PETA might say. Humans are changed by ideas, and that is the very core of this disease. We starve without their ideas."

"Daniel told me Armand said something similar, once." Louis mused. "That he was desperate to meld with the modern world, and convinced he would die otherwise."

"Exactly!" Herbert leaned back in triumph. "Even a child can grasp the concept."

"You know, he is older than all of us save Marius. You could learn a great deal from him."

"Hmm."

Louis' hair, neglected, spilled over his face. "And how does your theory explain me? I have made no efforts to integrate with this age. I avoid it to--let me see--'rot with my moldy paper.'"

Herbert barked out a laugh. "I told you, you're the ideal. Sitting here accumulating every human thought. You've done nothing but take a history of the times. Maybe there's a psychological effect after all."

"And Lestat?" He couldn't quite resist prodding, giving his own complicated feelings a chance to nudge closer to the surface. "Your diagnosis?"

"If I knew who Lestat was, I might have a guess. As it is... " his hands clenched into small, hard fists, knuckles so white it looked as though the bones would rip free of the flesh. "A month ago, I would have said he loves ideas. Would have been convinced he wanted them. But I've never been a good judge of that."

And dear God, under the rage and indignity--hurt. Genuine pain, open confusion, two handsome faces: one swarthy, the other fair. Unworthiness.

Trust Lestat to manage that, atop all else. To make a genius feel a fool.

"Herbert..." Louis dared, then, to reach out. To touch. He had to slide from his chair to do so, ending up somewhere between a kneel and a crawl to gently grasp the forearm below a rolled sleeve. "You are exceptional. You cannot doubt that, truly?"

"I'm a failure. It's what I do."

"Is that not the purpose of your field? To prove oneself wrong, constantly? To dismantle the world's knowledge? That is the essence of discovery, is it not?"

"Well, then I am exceptional after all." His smile was humorless, but his arm relaxed ever so slightly beneath Louis' hand.

"Yes," Louis answered in earnest. Taking the risk, he pulled himself to a more comfortable position at Herbert's side. Their shoulders touched. "If there's one thing I know of Lestat, it's his love of
passion, those the world would mark out as special if it had not foolishly cast them aside. And even if I did not know him as I do, I would reach the same conclusion. Your words give you away. There are many things to doubt among our kind, but never that."

They spoke no more that night, but sat in companionable silence until once more the dark outside began to lighten. Louis took with him his cursed little confession, and pressed it into Herbert's hands as they parted. "If you still wish it once you know these things, I would speak with you more."

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Never in his life had Herbert more regretted his disinterest in fiction. The book Louis had given him looked like all the rest of the trash novels that lined his private shelves. But a few pages made its true, veiled nature more than clear: a written account of the centuries lay in his hands, a key to the afflicted who populated his nights. Yet another thing of which Lestat had failed to inform him--a continually growing list, and by Louis’ account one he should only expect to lengthen. The man on the page was all of Herbert’s worst fears, petty and conniving and fond of the thrill of power over others. That he had been led astray so easily pricked his pride, and he vowed to redouble his vigilance. He wouldn’t be taken for an idiot again.

Of particular interest was the figure now conspicuously absent: the child Claudia. The idea of continued brain development following apparent stunted bodily growth set his mind aflame with potential applications. But something stopped him from pressing Louis for more details--the hard-won knowledge that certain griefs were to be disturbed only for the highest of reasons, the surest of bets. And beneath that, the thought that Louis might once more look upon him with disdainful disinterest froze him in his tracks.

When Louis had given him room for questions, only one had seemed pressing. “What happened to that idiot you told all this to?”

Louis had covered his mouth with his hand, eyes sparkling and then sad. “You’re already familiar with him.” And he left it at that, their conversation under the chandelier purposefully pointing away from the past.

Of course, there was only one ‘reporter’ among the infected of Night Island. It was all so painfully, hysterically obvious in hindsight. Particularly Daniel’s perennial position outside the library doors, wearing the sad, pitiable look of longing. Herbert knew it well, from--

Anyway.

If he truly wished to spare Louis his more incisive questioning, it left only so many options. He’d been surprised how many medical theories he’d been able to extrapolate from the book’s florid descriptors, and now the thought plagued him constantly. If he was to be barred from his most practical experiments, then he would use his time lying low to gather information of a different sort.

“Not going in tonight?” Well, at least now Herbert knew the source behind Daniel’s perpetual nosiness. He seemed to go out of his way to acknowledge Herbert’s presence; and while with Louis it had become comforting routine, Daniel never failed to get under his skin.
At least he hadn’t followed Herbert down to his lab, or found the wonders within.

“No. Your chance has finally arrived.” There was transparency, and then there was being so obvious even Herbert took note. It must’ve been a Dan-centric trait.

Daniel’s face clouded. “Do you have to be a dick about everything?”

“Only when incompetents waste my time.”

“Why do I even--fine, whatever. Fuck you too.” He resumed his post against the wall, glowering.

A thought dawned in Herbert’s mind. “How did you convince him to infect you?”

“Oh, now I’m smart enough to answer questions? I’m really moving up in the world.”

“I might be more warmly disposed if you proved useful when the situation called for it.” What was so difficult about answering, to necessitate this verbal joust?

“You know what, I’m done.” Daniel started off, then stopped, hands clenching and unclenching with indecision. At last, he said. “And he didn’t make me. He hasn’t even bitten me since he ran me out 14 years ago.”

"Really?" Herbert frowned, considering. "I was under the impression--" an ugly thought occurred, then. "Just how many individuals in this house share my strain of the disease?"

Daniel snorted. "Face it, buddy--at this rate, we're all in line for superinfection sooner or later."

And that… that was interesting. The terminology, the familiarity. "Were you a medical journalist?"

"I was jack shit other than a wannabe and a New York Times fiction bestseller." Daniel's eyes, more violet than grey--an intensification, almost, of Lestat's--darted away, then, looking resolutely over Herbert's head.

He wasn't that short.

"There goes my betting pool." Daniel wore the same slack smile that Herbert had seen too many times to count. "I was sure you were under some magical curse. You being out here kinda, dashes that."

"No more curses than the common one." Herbert would've known it was Louis by Daniel's mooning face alone, but the voice was confirmation. "Given Herbert's usual social graces, I thought it best to make sure no second doomsday had befallen us."

Daniel's smile became sharper, delighted. "Nothing new here. The usual barrage of questions about our 'condition.'"

"I see." Louis' fingers knitted together. "I take it that you finished it?"

Daniel's eyes darted between them for a second. "I'm surprised you gave him our--your book. I thought Lestat had some kind of setup to burn copies whenever they came across the threshold."

"Then he must be slipping," Louis said. He caught Herbert's eye, and his hands fidgeted ever so slightly. "You're satisfied, then? With what you read?"

Not by any means. "You'd find my questions upsetting." Rare honesty for honesty.
Daniel's eyebrow practically disappeared into his hairline. "Only Louis." He shook his head.

"I'm willing to discuss whatever might assist you, Herbert. I--"

"'If he held something too close for you to ask about, he would not bring it up in the first place,'" Daniel quoted in an odd, lilting cadence and a hint of a French accent. "Right, Louis?" The mimicry was eerie, too good for mere memory or joke, made more so by how easily he dropped back into his normal self.

"In essence, correct, Daniel." Louis' attempts at smiles were sad, sweet, dreadful things that nonetheless made Herbert wish to see more.

He found that he didn't want to be the cause of seeing fewer.

"Your offer is appreciated, but hopefully unnecessary. I intend to pursue other avenues before inflicting it on you." He'd done that too often in the past--run roughshod over another's sensibilities, heedless of the pain it caused. Heedless of how it would drive them off.

His aloneness could at least serve as a lesson.

"'Other avenues.'" Molloy's mimicry of Herbert wasn't so perfected, but the bones were already there; the stiff carriage, the guarded brow. And then, just as before, gone. "Who else…?" And then, as if a calculation had just finished in his mind. "You're not."

"Herbert," Louis began. "I hope you don't find me incapable of common sense. I made my offer knowing a little something of your tact."

Awkwardness curdled Herbert's tongue. He'd never been precious about feelings before, and it turned the process of finding words into a hunt over broken glass. "I know. But as I said--"

"Armand is going to eat you alive. Or you're going to get along like a house on fire." Daniel looked unsure as to which possibility he found worse.

"If you truly read my account, you know what I'll say." Louis said. "If you insist on this, take care. Armand is skilled in getting what he wants from you. He's had centuries to hone his skills in deception."

"Sure, make him sound like some kind of mastermind." There it was again: that strange, defensive posture.

"Wasn't he?"

"Maybe. But mostly I remember him waking me up at 3 AM because he'd broken all the appliances in my apartment while I was sleeping and rang up a thousand dollar phone bill calling cross-country."

"He drove you to your death," Louis added quietly.

"I was driving. He just put gas in the engine. And you," for the first time, Daniel looked at Louis with hard eyes, "gave me the keys."

Louis' eyes closed, a small crease appearing between his brows. "And here it was meant to be a caution."

At that sign of pain, Herbert's cruelty and defensiveness flared alongside a pang in his chest. Louis
was so clearly vulnerable. Damaged, in whatever indefinable way they each seemed to be by the ravages of the illness. Hurting him was poor form.

So Herbert returned to an earlier line of questioning.

"Tell me, Mr. Molloy, just how fast *were* you and Armand driving? And where exactly did someone like you learn about superinfection?"

It was nasty, the insinuation. Improper and rude.

Perfectly like him.

Daniel laughed in his face, knife-sharp. "You're trying to shame *me*? Do you have any idea what I've seen? I went to Hell and back waaaaay before I died, and no hotshot little shit from Boston is going to get the satisfaction of dragging me into the mud." But despite his brazen declaration, he avoided looking at Louis.

"Daniel…"

Herbert could have killed him then and there over the anguish in Louis' voice.

"Don't. I don't need pity from you, Louis. I--forget it." As he passed Herbert, he gave a poisonous glare. "If there's a God, there won't be anything of you left when Armand's done picking you over."

(All that, over a few simple medical questions.)

"There was no need for rudeness," Louis chided him when they were alone. "He's right, after all."

"There was no need for it from *him*, either," Herbert muttered resentfully, bothered by an irritating, subliminal-- *mental* --humming that he only now realized had been chewing at the edges of his consciousness throughout the exchange. Static in the brain.

"Herbert, much as I appreciate your efforts, I don't need you to defend me. From him, or from yourself. I gave you that book in aid of your work, not to drive you off." And then he reached out, doelike timidity putting the lie to all that.

Herbert forced himself to passively accept the gentle pressure on his arm, much as he wanted to reciprocate (or initiate) as he once would have. He'd been so *handsy*, before, had not asked permission, and Louis--he needed to be careful with Louis.

"Thank you," he said, hoping that the sincerity could be heard or felt through their supposed sixth sense. "Truly. You've given me so much more than I can possibly pay back."

"If you feel the need to repay me, then I've failed." The touch became a gentle squeeze. "But your company is always welcome." His other hand reached into his pocket, and he pressed something into Herbert's hand. A key, by the feel of it.

"I… would like to talk more. Later."

"Of course." Louis, too polite for his own good, as fragile as he abhorred being labeled in this matter of trust. "Later, then."

Herbert pocketed the key, fighting the urge to marvel at it in public view. Indulgent fondness in his chest or no, there was still work to be done. Death waited for no man.

Not yet.
Armand was the obvious one to ask about Claudia, for multiple reasons. The first, the **polite** one, was simply that he knew her.

The second was the obvious.

He may not have been a toddler, but was far from mature when whatever stomach-churning event left him stagnant in that body and brain. The question of mental development there would be worth pursuing through observation, if direct questioning proved inadvisable.

Of course, Herbert hadn't really... interacted with him much. Not since the blood samples, when he was mortal.

Hadn't been in a room with him since Lestat's demonstration.

Needs must. He'd dealt with worse in school. And he'd done worse to spite idiots like Molloy.

When Herbert found him, Armand was alone in his rooms, tucked into the corner of an overstuffed chair. It was a far cry from the feline, lounging creature who had held court when Herbert first arrived. His eyes flicked to the doorway immediately, but he made no move to strike a more intimidating pose. Instead, he followed Herbert's movements with careful studiousness as the scientist let himself in and stood before the chair.

"What is it you're after?" Armand asked, voice distant and, perhaps, half to himself.

"Answers," Herbert said simply.

"You'll find the same response as all the others. My age has yielded no great truths concerning evil, the soul, or our purpose. In such things, I am a void."

"I'm not interested in philosophy," Herbert dismissed.

"Is that the sum of man's nature in your eyes?" Armand's own expression took on, at last, a light of interest.

"It's none of my concern." Leave it to the idle, those without anything to give. "I want practical answers."

Finally Armand unfolded himself and leaned forward with interest. "So you think you have new questions."

"Apparently." Herbert crossed his arms. "Will you answer them?"

"If they are, indeed, new." Armand responded. He gestured to the bed, the only other seat in the room.

Herbert stayed standing. "What can you tell me about Claudia?"

Armand shook his head. "A well-trod street. Not very impressive, doctor."

"I'm not trying to impress you." Rude, blunt, perhaps, but a bald approach had been effective enough the first time. Clarity was in such short supply in this place. "I'm looking for information on brain development." Speaking to laypersons was a challenge even when they weren't refugees from other times, but he'd certainly been getting practice, and his reward was a quick nod of that head of full, copper curls.
"And you think I can help?" The boy (or not-boy, depending) sounded eager. How dull his life must be, how constrained. How much worse, to be even smaller.

"I think you met her, and had no emotional investment." Herbert put it lightly, trying not to think of the damage caused by Armand's actions with regards to that rival. If Louis could stand it… it was not his place to interfere. "Louis characterized her as fully mature, mentally. Is this consistent with your own assessment?"

Armand's face went blank, then, dark eyes distant and considering. One fingertip stroked over his lips and then dipped just slightly inside as he zoned.

"She was… " he seemed to struggle for the words. "Small," he offered. "Louis carried her often. Like a doll. A child." His eyes grew distant again.

"Her mind," Herbert prompted, frustrated.

"She told me that her wish was to have a body that matched her mind. I tried…"

"What?" This information had appeared nowhere in Louis' account. "Explain."

"I did as she asked," he said simply. "At best, she'd have left. At worst… an executioner's duty is to grant last requests."

"How?" Herbert pressed. "Was it successful?"

"Oh. I severed her head, and stitched it on to a woman's form." His voice was flat, as if Herbert had asked him to describe a Rorschach test and not a memory.

A total cranial transplant. Did the pathogen's healing spread that far? "Was she still cognizant? What did she feel?"

At that Armand grew agitated, his featured contracting into near pain. "I don't know. I don't--" he broke off, trying to retreat into the posture he hadn't bothered with before.

Herbert let out a frustrated breath. The information was there, clearly, items of potentially extreme value, and yet they strangled themselves on Armand's tongue. He tried again. "Why did you think that would work?"

"The body was one of ours. We are… " he paused. "Modular?" Another pause, then a nod, as though that had made sense.

Herbert struggled for a moment, trying to logically integrate the idea behind the word with concepts of medicine. None of these people spoke his language, knew his thought patterns. "Interchangeable?" he ventured at last. "Pieces can be moved, one to another?"

"The Queen Regent has mortal eyes," Armand said solemnly. "Limbs severed can be returned. We are eternal, even piecemeal, given the right conditions."

Had he only had this knowledge, this blood, a year ago, Dan might still have a Bride, might still be with Herbert. Golden hair, black stitches wreathing a pale neck like some gaudy necklace…

The mental image shivered, blurred, and Armand's face lit up suddenly.

"Truly? You as well?" He clasped his hands before him, rapt. "You must show me."

Herbert balked. "I didn't give you permission to search my head."
"I merely saw it. Your subtlety is lacking." Armand scooted forward, on the literal edge of his seat. "If you show me this memory, I will give you access to mine. Direct examination might yield the answers you seek. A quid pro quo, yes?"

"How--"

"Through the blood, of course," sly fox smile on those sharp features. "Did Lestat not explain?"

*(He hadn’t of course there was more--)*

"Perhaps you should clarify."

"We share our minds with the bite." Armand said with a distantly mature and feminine flutter of lashes. "Two in one allows the passage of memory and meaning; a true communion. This I would share with you, to see what you have."

A symbiotic cycle of blood, not unlike what Lestat had offered that once, with laughing indulgence and shuddering sensation. Tantalizing, to touch those distant thoughts within their otherwise insurmountable walls.

No other reason.

Certainly it would be different, with one older and more intellectually inclined.

And after all, it seemed Armand could look into his mind at any time without any particular effort. Herbert would have only this one chance to return the favor.

"Fine." He sat on the edge of the bed, back stiff.

Armand observed him for a few minutes, unmoving.

"Well?" Herbert broke at last, gesturing impatiently, and apparently that unambiguous signal was all it took. The small vampire slunk near, all but crawling on hands and knees when a few simple steps would have done. It was as though every piece of him were manufactured, a mirror made by a poor craftsman, and so doomed to an eternity of warped images.

"Get on with it." Herbert held out his arm, but Armand bypassed it in favor of nuzzling his nose into Herbert's neck--it sent a shiver down his back, and left a cold rock in his stomach.

"Why--"

It got worse--Armand on his lap, straddling him, arms on his shoulders. Those long-boned, coltish limbs were ill-disguised in his linen rich-boy beachwear, half-transparent in the soft boudoir lights.

"We'll both enjoy it more this way, friend." He laughed, incongruously. "So easy to reach!"

They were the same size, precisely; it shouldn't feel so strange not to lean or strain.

And still, the mouth on him had him back there, as helpless as he'd been on that couch when he'd let himself be seduced and dazzled like a fool. Wet, delicate, that play over pulsing need--damp flesh working him up and forcing vulgar needless breaths from his mouth. Just from a little sucking, a brief tease before they… traded.

Trading *ideas*.

He was less naive, now, than when Lestat had taken him in and held him up. He was--when a
moan mounted in his throat, he bit before it could break free and expose his unwarranted lack of composure over this mind in the body of a teenager.

There, see? Armand gasped, and the words were not on the air but in his mind.

Herbert drank, floundering in vain for how to begin plumbing the information before him. The halls of Armand's mind were different from Lestat's; different from any of the mortals he had touched. They were still and silent until he touched them, and then they roared, a single moment captured in every sensation, the intensity of them often blurring and crossing until he was forced to back away from the cacophony. They waited, patient, for him to come to them. A parade of static images flicked from side to side as if they might create the illusion of motion.

And the first into which he plunged--

It bled and called, and he'd barely prodded it when it rose up to swallow him: a dark street smelling of all the best and worst of humanity, sweets and perfumes and shit and decay filling him up as he picked his way home with gifts for Ricardo and his beautiful, terrible, wonderful master. He was intent, so intent, he didn't think to stop for the shadow in the dark.

It was familiar. It was in his way. He didn't want it anymore, and told it such. He'd never wanted it, only been dancing the orders set by that devil he adored.

And then agony, the sound of red blooming in his eyes as part of the world went dark; the burn went deeper, dripped into his bones even when the blade was gone, and deeper still into his heart. Nobody wanted an ugly whore.

But Marius was there. Marius, cold where the poison burned (so his master pronounced it, and he knew, as he knew all things). Marius who loved him, who couldn't bear to lose him. He wept tears of salt and gore and shuddered as he was told what must happen. He would have to endure. He'd endured so much by, for, this man.

Amadeo loved his master so. He couldn't bear the thought of it all if he didn't.

If he reached for one he could find himself sinking into precise sensations: the smell, the taste, the aural symphony of centuries past. And yet, unmoving they remained, daring him to make meaning from snapshots without sense.

[Herbert shuddered and gasped in the grasp of an implacable, stunning being. He screamed and wept, knowing all too early the futility of his fight against the knife; yet he lived, after a fashion. He sought to study the cause, to apply his science to the meat upon his table, but it rose and struck--

“... Can't let you be seen like this--”

Nobody wanted an ugly whore, he realized, words mapped over the memory of fingers gently aiding in the repair of his ruined features, pain an afterthought.]

He rejected it and forged deeper, looking for the memory of Claudia that Armand had promised. And again something flickered briefly to life in his mind's eye. He reached for it instinctively, drawn to the life hidden in that silent gallery.

He sank into another small body, hungry and cold. She looked out the window of a truck, and thought about how little in her backpack would be worth stealing. Joke's on him if he kills me, she thought, and her voice was young and high and already exhausted. It would be better, she knew to her core, than going home.
The memory flickered and melted, and she was still in the cabin of a truck. Her legs were covered in black lace, and the man beside her was friendly. She knew it well, they realized. Here, in this memory, it had fed her and let her curl up in the passenger seat while long miles of road passed by. In another life, in another time, the man had stabbed a scalpel into his guts, blood pouring from his throat. Now they had nowhere to go, the two of them. So they were heading east, and hoping.

He struggled to break free for air, but the memories went on unspooling before him. She crouched in tattered sneakers in a gas station bathroom, scared to death as she watched Joe—not-yet-Damian—cough up actual bits of lung. Scared in a different way as she watched her travel companion's face grow fanatical in the face of death. But the thought of vampires, strange rumors on the coastline—those weren't frightening. When Joe left her alone in dark rooms she pretended not to be too young, and all the liars said that was good enough. It became a trick to feel very little: death loomed near in many forms, none as terrifying as a future without prospects or skills or goals.

There were other thoughts: shoulders square and pistol drawn, bluffing on empty; hands on a wheel they had never touched as Joe slumped to the side, breath inaudible; cigarettes on the hood of home. But they all fell into orbit around the appearance of Armand's outstretched hand and his smile. Night becoming another that asked for nothing but the indulgence of rapt fascination and strange, looping patterns. Hands that never touched until she reached out first, to her breast and to her throat, becoming a habit. Existence, broadly, better than life.

You'll die, Herbert's brain told him. If you stay here you'll die, and you'll leave a shell behind.

Then they saw Dan.

Then Herbert dared to hope—for of course, they'd escaped, hadn't they? Taken Dan and run, back out into the sunlight.

They didn't care for Dan at first, though. Saw him tall and naive and... ordinary, as Herbert had never once perceived his friend. Saw the sprinkling of premature grey starting at his temples, saw him collapsed beneath the mean little fucker Lestat had brought in.

The mean little fucker who did it.

It was true, what Louis said in his book, the one she'd read to pieces somewhere around Baton Rouge and replaced the next time she'd managed to hold onto an extra five. (The warning sign Dan didn't read.) The blood made you more. More beautiful, alluring, than before. There'd never been any basis for comparison with the others; they were all eternal. Herbert was transfigured.

If he could be like that, what could it make of them?

And then she didn't really want to die. She wanted to be like that. He was an awful, rude person, eyes only for Dan (so sweet, so dumb.) He'd killed Joe, left him there in that puddle of blood eight months after the cancer should've taken his ass down, and she didn't miss Joe at all.

But God he looked good. Like she'd kill to be. Kill every night, for that.

Dan was in over his head. Mooning after the coldest, worst of the whole coven, and not even aware. Not even being used like the rest of them, not even getting the pleasure to go with his pain. No clue what he was missing.

Herbert was so off, the time she and he did it together—so starved, he seemed not to even realize who he was was with. Even when she made him take the neck. He'd shuddered and relented like he was doing her a favor, only really close when he was clearly gone, deep in his own sensations, his
own needs.

Even when they fell together, when his hands went to her shoulders, her breasts, her hips—even when he ended it early and left her there on the floor, wet. Alive.

Unfinished.

She'd be that. She'd manage it.

When Dan caught on, finally, she knew an end was coming. Sex wasn't the same as stealing, but…

Herbert's mind was still screaming for the romance, the explanation, when their little ‘moment’ began.

Tawdry.

Tender.

Casual.

Dan tried so hard and looked so gorgeous with a sheen of sweat rising on his tanned skin. His perfect physique, so much what Herbert had admired, shook and squirmed between hot and cold flesh. Being fucked by him was a non-event, his soft, sloppy cunnilingus nothing compared to the sight of him getting his second dose of what a vampire could give. So gentle, Daniel. Drinking so deep, so passionately, even after all he'd had already.

And still this person wanted only Armand, only the sweet, painful love he gave with no regard for who they were so long as they gave it back. Wanted the source of that soft, intent gaze, turning distressed, interfering as he never had before--

Seeing a vampire weep over an accident--

Dan lay, limp and pale again, in a darkened room, and she asked Armand.

Was this enough? Had she done it, proved her worth, her beauty, her use?

He smiled, so kind. She loved him so as his burning brand seared into her neck yet again, as she focused on the near-smile of Dan's vacant features.

It hurt how kind Armand was, when he held her. When her heart slowed to a near-stop, and then… cold distance. A gentle kiss to her lips, but not the one that counted.

Surely Karen was perfect now--the very picture of anguish.

Surely she'd bought her eternity.

But nothing, nothing. No blood. A chill that felt curiously distant, as if it were happening to someone else

and then

quiet

Herbert broke then, tore himself loose with an anguished cry that sent Armand tumbling to the ground. The redhead lay there, still and overwhelmed, eyes blown wide in parody of the empty look on Dan's face.
Dan, cold and distant and--

Herbert clutched his head in his hands, staggering to his feet and stumbling as if he hadn't walked in a thousand years.

Dan hadn't left him. Dan was dead. And he, deep as he supposedly was in his fight against eternity, had been none the wiser.

He’d allowed it to happen.

He’d become distracted. He’d let himself become ensnared in these ridiculous games, the pantomimes of affection and base rutting in the dark. He had nothing. He wouldn't even have been able to save his partner--his friend--his--if he had known.

He found the nearest empty room and curled, paralyzed, into the corner, trying to make sense of his thoughts. He had to solve it, cure death, too late. He owed it to Dan's memory; one more to carry on his back. And this one, rightly, stabbed with every step.

~*~*~*~

Daniel had seen horrible things since his rebirth: genocide, mutilation, cannibalism, and deaths by the hundreds in his own arms. But he couldn't remember feeling quite as frustrated as he did just then, thinking of Herbert fucking West's smug expression as he all but called Daniel a whore and a junkie to his face. In front of Louis, no less (at whom he'd had plenty of opportunities to muster anger, but could usually only manage despair). As if the snub-nosed little punk was one to talk. He’d caught Lestat's eye and lucked his way into eternity, ears plugged all the while, and had now apparently set himself a mission of destroying all of them from the inside out.

When Herbert left on his little quest for knowledge, Daniel told himself he was waiting around to see what came of it. He wasn't quite good enough at lying to himself to disguise the truth: he was waiting to make sure he got to see the rejection. But Herbert, it seemed, had learned something in the way of staying out from underfoot. The first one Daniel saw emerge from the hall wasn't the scientist, but Armand.

His maker's movements were stiff and strangely articulated, as if he were a doll becoming aware of his strings and every step reminded him anew of his limitations. He stumbled and nearly fell, stopped only by Daniel's hands on his shoulders. Armand's own slender hand came up to fist in Daniel's shirt, hard.

"Daniel, I need... " any mortal would have found it seductive. He had, once. Now he was only stung to be receiving such a manufactured, practiced ruse.

"Not really in the mood right now, Boss," he lied. He was always in the mood, rare as Armand's interest had become.

"Daniel, you must explain."

"You--" He sucked in a breath of surprise at the sight of blood on normally immaculate features, then, which only made it worse.

Christ, the smell on him: unmistakable.
Vampires exuded no scent of their own, carrying instead the essences of what they did and where. Louis, with his cedar and paper and dust; Armand with his ozone and grease.

This, though.

He reeked of chemicals. Not his normal scent.

Daniel jerked back so hard the fist in his shirt got to keep its handful of fabric, reminding him how they were stone people wandering a tissue world.

"Jesus Christ, Armand, him?" West. "Of all people, you had to--" They don't have profanity for the things they did, the bizarre sexual acts they practice together. The lack of terminology did nothing to prevent Daniel from knowing.

"He asked questions."

And Armand loved questions. Loved asking them; loved answering them. Had loved Daniel, when he was a hungry young reporter.

But now Daniel had his Answer, the only one that had mattered to him before he died, and Armand was as cold to him as the light of a dead star. "Yeah? And I bet the only way you could tell him was on top of him. Was he good?" It was cruel, and they both knew it. Armand's still images of life simply were, and translation was difficult. It was part of why Armand had leaned on him. Part of the thin, tenuous connection remaining between them, the thought that in this, still, he had special knowledge.

"Why are you angry?" Armand asked, his fingers already working new disassemblage on the shred of cloth in his hands. "You spend time with him. And Louis."

"Not--" worse that the question was in earnest, that in some ways it was right. He struggled for an explanation that would withstand Armand's strange scrutiny. "What the hell could he possibly give you?"

"I don't know! I need you to explain it." Armand tugged down hard on his collar, revealing the fresh red mark, raw and still moist.

"Christ, put that away... " He turned aside, the urge to hit something returning.

"Why are you being unreasonable? This is what we've always exchanged. I'm saying I want you. What more do you require?"

Love. I require your love. The thought floundered and died against the wall between their minds. Too weak, to incomprehensible to the one who saw him as a translation service at the best of times.

"He's horrible, Armand," he said instead, a safe and true excuse. "Why would I want that in me?"

"Horrible?" Armand fingered the weals in his own neck almost too hard, digging in and rubbing like some other act entirely. "He's dignified. And I wanted to see him. So strange, the things he does."

It was parodic of seduction, the way he slunk.

"I wanted to see how he works, but I need you to help."

He almost let it happen, let Armand have his way for the few seconds of gratitude that might not
appear at all. But then he imagined having to see, secondhand, the image he'd coveted and clutched only rarely in so many years: his maker adoring and probing and flushed with affection, eyes lit with pinpricks of life that trained on you like you were all that existed in the world.

West probably hadn't even appreciated what he'd had.

Daniel ran his fingertips down Armand's face, his neck... and then planted his palm on that narrow chest, shoving hard. "Go find someone else to use." Armand's face was baffled, hand over the place where Daniel's touch had been. "I can't look at you right now."

Let him find some patient thrall to explain it. It wasn't Daniel's fault that Armand had broken his favorite toy. None of it was his job anymore. But even as he told himself that, payback had a certain appeal.

Armand would be fine, Daniel just couldn't deal with that right then. More proof that whatever they were since Armand's gift of eternal life, it wasn't 'lovers'

He shook out his fist, trying to remember the last time he'd punched someone without the likelihood of it snapping their neck. He was going to enjoy this. All he needed to do now was open his mind to the sound of condescension.

Their minds all had tones. Flavors. Things that tinted and colored them, differentiated each from the next.

West's was bitter, electric, and normally racing. Normally smug, sitting in judgment of everyone around him save those he'd decided to gift with his poisonous affection. The shame alone made him hard to be around on a good night, but now--he was a cacophony, screaming out of his skull in a deluge of half-random images and nonsense. Mother of God, but the little creep could project.

He hadn't even gone far--just few rooms down from Armand's bedroom, where he'd no doubt been tumbled between those silk sheets and shown the kind of good time he'd been too cowardly to do more than long for in life.

He looked weak when Daniel walked in. Good.

He wasn't above hitting a guy in glasses.

"Get up," Daniel ordered. When West gave no indication of listening, even hearing, Daniel reached down and grabbed the man's shirt, hauling him up. Streaks of red were vivid against West's pale cheeks, his eyes raw. Daniel shook him, trying to rattle sense into the watery expression. "Hey! You sonofabitch, you've got a lot to answer for."

"You." West's eyes narrowed, the switch from grief to cold rage as fast as flipping a switch. The scream of images that Daniel had almost numbed himself to screeched out anew; he had a chance to recognize one very familiar face before West's pointed nails took a swipe at his face.

Daniel dropped him, jerking his head back so the scratch split a line across the bridge of his nose rather than through his eye. He countered with a swing, memories of adrenaline powering him forward, and he felt his knuckles connect with West's temple as the small man ducked, heading for his abdomen with a sharp, bony elbow.

West fought with neither grace nor any evident experience, but he made up for it with an unfiltered savagery that benefited from that calculated gaze. Daniel found himself barely avoiding more than a few cutting swipes aimed at his joints and tendons, and the difference in height between them gave West an advantage in striking his low blows.
But, Daniel smirked to himself as he felt a solid punch land on West's jaw at last, bone crunching beneath his knuckles. I can hit harder.

They staggered away from each other, him bleeding and West swollen, each staring the other down.

Surprisingly, it was West who broke the silence. "Tell me why you killed him."

Killed. It was confirmation of the worst sort. They hadn't discussed Dan aloud, after Armand dealt with it. Hadn't said the word. Hadn't talked about what--who--Armand gave up, either. "There. There was no 'why.'" He flexed his stinging hand, clenched and released and heard the knuckles crackle. "It was an accident." A stupid, stupid accident, even with all his precautions, all he'd drunk beforehand.

He'd just tried to show Dan a good time, and instead… It was so very far from the first time that intent had killed.

"Not good enough," West snapped, something raw and empty torn loose inside. Daniel hadn't thought that he felt anything, really, let alone this. "You can't have just--he shouldn't be--"

"What, he should've been yours? You slept on that one." Cruelty for cruelty, Dan shoveled out. Guilt to go around. He remembered, so well, the terrified release Dan had at his hands.

"He--I couldn't!" High voice edging higher, into panic, half-muffled by his jaw rearranging itself. Healing, thanks to Armand's blood. Sob somewhere underneath. "I was going to send him away."

"So was I!"

"I assume a body bag was not part of the plan." But there was less menace in it, a sudden exhaustion weighing down West's limbs.

"No," Daniel admitted. "I didn't--he was too…" Wordsmith, writer, interviewer him, and all at a loss for words over a victim. A friend, nearly.

Someone else’s lover, as much as Daniel had been Armand’s.

“Too good, when you touched him. Warm.” West’s voice was clearer, with the mouth healed, and so so quiet. “You just wanted all of him.”

“Yeah.” He huffed softly and looked away. “Why’d you leave him for me, West? You could've done anything. Took him away. Told him to leave. Turned him into one of us, hell! You did nothing, and now you're all tore up?"

"I was waiting. To get it right. He deserved…” West sobbed, an aching thing, and the smell of blood in the air intensified. Delicious. Sexual. Despairing; vampiric impulses made no distinctions. "It doesn't matter. I've wasted enough time."

"Done with jumping in and out of beds?" It's a low blow, but it soothed the raw hurt.

"Is that what this little show of machismo is about?" He snorted. "Keep him. I have what I can use."

It was hard not to laugh. The power to do more was so suddenly gone. "Well, don't you fit right in."

"Never in my life." Hollowed out, bitter as black coffee three days in the pot, and wasn't West just
the embodiment of every sad little gay boy left out at lunch, papered over with excuses of intellectual superiority. Arrogance over anger.

The will to fight leaked out of Daniel, replaced with a pitying distaste. The two of them, West and Cain, had really been made for each other—one hot on denying who he was, the other twisted up in refusing to go after what he wanted (irony of ironies). "Look," he sighed, "I'm sorry about your dead boyfriend." Sorry the poor bastard ever met either of us.

West said nothing in return, only nodded in acknowledgment.

Daniel blew out a breath, counted. "You gotta make it hard, don't you? Look, stay out of my way; I'll stay out of yours. Deal?"

West nodded again, swiping his tongue out over his split lip and sucking the scum of blood off his teeth.

"Fair enough, insofar as anything can be calculated." He sounded rough, and the guilt filling the room like mustard gas could have been from either one of them at that point; burned both their eyes the same.

Daniel wanted to reach out, but there was no connection there. Nothing to build on but a corpse. And so he made for the door, for his Armand.

"Molloy?" West's voice was soft, subliminal almost.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you all, for not… allowing me access to the body. It would have displeased him."

So many levels. So many traps.

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut and muttered, on the way out, "You need to learn to shield your mind better."

He could maybe learn to like West, he thought, if the man showed a little more of that open, baffled face. Well. If he didn't burn himself out in a year, he'd have an eternity to warm up.

~*~*~*~

Marius' rooms, in the weeks since he had arrived, were transformed by subtle hands. They were nothing like the home Armand had designed, instead ever more resembling a recreation of old memories brought to fresh life by an artist's hands. Full of stolen blood, another of his kin's, skin hot and mind besieged by monsters of his own creation, he trembled upon the threshold. It was as if he were mortal again, contemplating his first lurid invitation to a "private session," knowing what that meant for many (but not Marius, his maestro would never, no matter what he'd been trained to expect.)

It took no more than a meeting of eyes—that smallest of acknowledgements—before he flung himself into that cold grasp, words momentarily beyond him. He buried his face in sculpted marble and bit his lip until it bled, refusing to allow tears. He'd done everything right, and yet.
And yet.

Cold hands smoothed his hair, moved as if to encircle him--and gripped his shoulders instead, pushing him back to arm's length.

"A strange greeting from a coven master." Marius commented. "Has something happened?" He seemed in earnest, trusting that Armand would have the answer.

Shame bubbled beneath Armand’s skin. He had insisted that he would be strong, hadn't he? But the inner reserves he reached for were depleted beyond repair, yielding only Daniel's distant judgment and Herbert's shaken upset. Some leader he was, that they despised him so.

"I…" how to explain himself, what he had done. "I met with Lestat's fledgling."

"The doctor?" Marius sought clarification, because of course, of course there were two by that description--one already at the natural state of equilibrium every fledgling reached with his maker soon enough.

Louis' hatred: just yet another confirmation of the way of things, a match to Daniel's boredom and Armand’s… whatever that feeling was.

"Herbert." The name, the name so few had used in the man's lifetime, the name he owed to the one he'd so effectively broken to pieces in the clutches of passion. "He… I thought that I needed to know him." I wanted to know him, he thought but did not say--a secret safe behind his walls.

"And?" Marius' face betrayed nothing, "What did you find?"

"Ruin." Not strictly true--he had not found it there so much as left it in his wake, the pieces of himself that Herbert had managed to glean as quick and lethal as poison in tender tissue. Armand hadn't noticed, drawn down by the fascinating melding of order and denial to such an extent he'd strayed from his mission. "I had meant to reassure him about the mortal. Ease his suffering."

"Oh, Armand… he reacted poorly, then? Is he a danger?" Thinking only the best, Marius. Believing.

The feeling a fledgling had for his master--never simple. Even Lestat, the cleanest-cut story of them all, had found his emotions complicated in the few hours he'd spent in Magnus's power. Armand forgave himself, therefore, for his creeping hands, his burrowing tight into the body unchanged by time. Let the cold clean him, let it leech away the heat he himself took by an act not even explicable as violence.

"No. I don't--no." Not to them, anyway. To himself, that was another matter. Were he a responsible leader, he would have gone to tell Lestat to keep watch.

"He forgave you?" A hand under his chin, forcing eye contact. "He understood your actions?"

"I." He didn't know. Couldn't fathom. He would have been… furious. Would have left to plot and heal. But Herbert had worn a different kind of ice in his expression. A pure calculation. "It wasn't discussed." If he'd done it correctly, they wouldn't have needed to. Herbert simply would have accepted things as they were, and they could have had their understanding of one another's minds. Broken partway, he wasn't sure how to begin dealing with the mess.

"Not--how could he not wish to talk of it? Now that he knows it was done for his peace?"

Peace, indeed. Herbert's memories were not as Armand's, surprisingly; were made up of chains and
corridors, branching concepts, some followed to endless multiplying conclusions and others truncated by a lack of interest. He's expected similarity, for whatever reason, full moments and static images painted and dried.

Somehow the moments Herbert had wandered through had done harm.

"He did not seem amenable. Or healed."

"Is he… " Marius paused, closed his eyes in pain. "You know how Lestat's blood runs. Is this one, too… ?"

_Madness._ It was an awful thing to suggest, a curse to speak aloud.

"He's obsessive," Armand confided. "But I can't be sure. His mind was… organized. Sensible." Beautiful, with its flashfires of insight and endless winding conjectures. He'd wanted to venture deeper, before he was forced out. "He wouldn't allow me to look deeper."

"'Allow,'" Dry amusement. "Has this one earned your favor at last? Or were you simply not strong enough to prevent his actions?"

"No!" He couldn't look away--the attempt left his neck pained, his chin still locked in that stone grasp. "I feared I would damage him."

And then he was gathered in, held, as though some signal had been given. Must have been, heedless.

"Sweet boy." Marius's rumbling voice came through muffled by Armand's hair, the vibration of his chest like a cat's purr. "Gentle, kind boy. So--" he broke off, dropped to one knee. "Would that I could protect you from these things. These choices."

"There's no need." Doubtless he looked like a maiden in a classical tableau, eyes demurring and hand clasped by a beseeching beloved. "I took this responsibility willingly. No one forced it upon me." Though Daniel wouldn't have done it, nor Louis. Lestat would have grown bored within the month, and left them all to drown. Who else but him?

(But Daniel did the business, didn't he, walked out into the world to places where Armand would be dismissed as--)

"I told you I'm no child." It wore at him. How he wanted to make the harangue of it end, to retreat back into that brief, blessed embrace.

"Of course not." Marius's head on Armand's chest, lower, so strange; Marius's hair covering them both like a cape. "I know--I know you don't need me any longer, that you have another to help shoulder your burdens. But pity an old man."

_Old._ Marius had been near forty, and yet every century made him seem younger.

It was all backwards, everything reversed from what it should be. These things couldn't change, couldn't--

Daniel had gotten what he needed, was no longer Armand's to keep and command.

These things couldn't change.

"Humility doesn't suit you, Maestro." Discomfort drove the words more than any barb. "You were
always so proud to be the eldest and strongest.” And now he was, the only one with words left to speak and a willingness to speak them.

"Lift your head." He tilted Marius' face up in mimicry of minutes before, "I can't bear to see you in such a state." When he was young and foolish he had imagined his maker bent just so, weeping for his loss, so bereft that he would swear his love to Amadeo and no other, if only it would bring them back together.

Childish. Marius didn't want him. Not the person he'd become.

(Who did?)

He laid his arms across Marius' shoulders, sinking into the embrace until his knees touched cold tile on either side of his maker's thighs. Prostration, unspoken, Was it so selfish, to want this comfort without giving up what he had made of himself?

Whatever that was. The thing he'd become destroyed what he touched, as perhaps they all did--he'd been so blind as to not even realize how much there was to harm in that strange creature whose arms he'd spent too few moments in. Too many moments, to hear Daniel tell it--white-lipped, livid Daniel. Daniel who refused him this when he asked, because Armand was meant to be the master.

"Oh, my precious boy, tempt not a monster…"

His neck had barely healed, and yet Amadeo felt only gratitude at the thought of it being torn once more as he was pressed back onto the floor.

(Nearly only.)

Marius had been his whole world when they were like this, an eternity ago. His master, broad-shouldered frame blocking out the light to make a saintsly halo about his image. It was old habit for Amadeo to stretch his arms above his head, to bite his lip and play at helplessness for the sake of his audience.

Was this, then, all he was good for? A breathless gasp as familiar hands made ruins of his fine linen clothes, a borrowed blush at the idea of being discovered so by those who claimed to respect him.

"Maestro." he made to sit up, only for unyielding hands to hold him in his place. "I don't..."

"Hush, puer. You are strong and beautiful, and it will all be better soon." That shiver, that strange mix of emotions again--they were monsters, after all, and musn't desire always be mixed with revulsion and fear?

He'd died in these arms, so many times. He'd die in them again.

Part of him.

Struggling was perfectly normal, alluring even.

He knew how to do it already--close his eyes and bare his throat, shrink until he was able, almost, to step outside and see himself. To see what he was: fragile and weak, and fooling himself for five centuries.

"Yes, s--" his voice was stolen, swallowed by the mouth on his. Skilled, sure. If he stopped thinking, it would tell his body how to feel. Already his nerves stretched taut, his veins all but
trying to leap from their prison.

His hands were released, almost like trust. He thought again of moving, running until his mind was sewn once more into his body rather than watching, curious and cold, even as he burned--

Long, sharp fangs tore into him before the thought was half complete, shocking in the pain that preceded the swoon. The hands that had released him found their way to other uses, pinching and bruising to crest every sigh of pleasure with sharp, clarifying pain, shattering his focus on the rocks of sensation. He couldn't watch himself anymore. He couldn't think at all.

When he was released he curled onto his side in Marius' arms, dimly aware of the idle touch still ghosting his form.

~*~*~*~

One night, past midnight, after his own hunt and well after he might have considered venturing outside the compound, Louis sat rereading a hundred-year-old work on aesthetics. The only extant copy, perhaps, and yet he found himself longing for greater perspective. Longing, perhaps, for an incisive wit to match it to.

Over the past few weeks, Louis discerned that Herbert's aversion to touching was… not feigned, precisely, but artificial. Calculated. It occurred only when Herbert was paying attention to their interactions, and only from Herbert's end. If Louis reached out, Herbert would allow it, even lean into it, but never reciprocate or initiate.

Brushing fingers when exchanging books had become his new pastime, a small experiment of his own.

That night, the library was quiet for the fourth night running--mortal ears would detect no difference, but Louis keenly felt the lack of pages turning, the scraping of chair legs and the quietest of footfalls. He had grown accustomed to Herbert's silent presence, subdued though it had become (for reasons more than clear). He missed their passing conversations. Their areas of study overlapped not at all, and yet they were companionable.

Still, he had adjusted before. Many times, loneliness so often ascribed to the withered nature of his heart.

"Louis!" Throwing open the double doors, Herbert looked more vibrant than Louis had ever seen him. He buzzed with energy though his pallor clearly indicated he'd returned to his neglect of the kill. "Louis, come with me."

"Good evening, Herbert." Part of him felt cruel, but the other was more irritated at being assumed as an accessory to yank hither and yon at a moment's notice. And there was always room for good manners. "Is something the matter?"

"--can't explain it to you, but you just have to see! It's more progress than I've made in years--"

The fingers of the left hand were straight again, their dexterity restored, and now they flinched away from contact. Such a tradeoff.

"--so beautiful--"
He tuned back into the words, somewhat alarmed. "This thing you've made-"

"Louis, please, it will be far more efficient if I show you. I'll give every answer I can then."

Was it something about Lestat's fledglings that held sway over Louis? He found himself standing, following after the still-chattering scientist until they reached the accursed little grave he had carved out for himself. The stench of rotting meat was almost overpowering, and Louis stepped back instinctively. "Herbert," he breathed. "What have you done?"

"That's only a side effect. The process isn't perfect. Follow me." Herbert walked down into the dark as if greeting a dear friend, and Louis' curiosity outweighed his unease. He followed.

"Look," Herbert commanded, and Louis did. "Isn't she beautiful?"

He could see how she had once been so. Her fine features, the long grace of her limbs. But the dripping ichor, the foul smell of rot: all marred the image, a portrait for the eager Dorian beside it. "What have you done?"

Herbert flinched as one stung. "Given her life. Given her death at my hands meaning. She has done so much service for humanity already; I owe her so much."

Louis was sick at heart, looking at him—caught between the vampiric nature to love their fleeting contact with their prey and his mind's dogged inability to let go. "Herbert," he tried again. "This is not life."

"The effects have begun to wane," the scientist admitted. "I'll have to hurry, to make the most of the potential results." And then he slipped, nearly, into the manner of a doctor--a white coat to be donned, no more. "Sondra? Sondra, can you look at me?" He shone a tiny penlight into clouded eyes, made notes in all apparent seriousness as she sat, still and composed. (Decomposed.) And her, he touched, examining her skin and joints, moving her about like a mannequin.

He kept up a relatively soothing patter, though it was all nonsense to Louis; technical terms and numbers, all at or near zero.

She responded to nothing, not even the prick of a needle to the lace-textured pads of much-tested fingers, acrylic nails peeing half-off. Only when he stroked the widening, dried puncture mark that denoted her mortal wounding did she evince anything at all—a wet, guttural moan issued from lips pulled back from misshapen partial fangs.

"I know, I'm sorry. I'll try to be more gentle. And it's almost time." A clump of hair detached from her skull when he patted it.

When Herbert stepped away from her, Louis reached out for his shoulder. It was enough to freeze the little man, to get his attention properly.

"Herbert, this is a revenant."

"She's an experiment." He said it as though the applications should be self-evident, kept facing Louis while edging towards his steel refrigerator.

"An experiment I have seen before, then. But she is not alive."

Herbert's expression warred between offense and intrigue, and the latter won out, as it seemed it always did. "Then this what you saw in Romania?"
"Substantially, yes, though I need no tables or notes to be certain." *(Nothing save the hideous memory of his and Claudia's encounter with those mindless wraiths, crawling from the muck of a graveyard to kill and feed and achieve no more that that ever. Herbert knew this.)* "I would not wish it on anyone."

"Regardless, the data may prove useful," Herbert countered.

"There's no sense in it! No life to preserve, not in the way that gives it meaning. There is no soul in a creature such as this. What you've done is cruel."

Herbert's face had gained a look of lofty condescension at the mention of the soul, but it came down quickly as Louis finished. "She's in no pain," he defended himself. "I've ascertained that multiple times."

"You have tied strings to the dead and move it for your amusement. Nothing more." Louis would have no part in Herbert's delusion. From here it might spread, leak infection to all the precious, vital mortals outside.

And then came a sound--the reveal happening then made so much more sense, really, given Herbert couldn't possibly have kept hiding his thing.

Footsteps upon the hastily-poured concrete stairs attested to that.

"What the Devil is that smell? I've been getting complaints all night--" Lestat froze at the bottom of the steps. "What is that?"

"My work." A blizzard could not have yielded more frost.

"A corpse. You've brought a corpse here, into our home." Louis flinched at the echo of the words, and that was all it took for Lestat to round on him. "Louis! How could you have allowed this? You, of all people!"

Anger stabbed, then, inward and out, and he smiled, just slightly, in mockery as he spoke words to cut them both as always he did.

"I wasn't aware that anything was mine to allow or forbid, Lestat. It's not as though your fledgling is my child, after all." Lestat's eyes showed white all around, and his lip curled up in what could be any number of unpleasant emotions.

"It is a *corpse* in our *house*, Louis! It's clearly days old--"

"There you go, underestimating me again," Herbert cut in with suicidal nonchalance.

Lestat looked as though he wasn't sure which of them to do violence to first, when the dead woman took the decision from him entirely.

The groan was just as Louis remembered it, coming from those misty roads and rotted cemeteries. The corpse came down from the table, leaving flecks of skin behind, and bared her misshapen teeth at Lestat.

Louis' maker changed almost instantaneously, body responding to the threat with predatory, defensive instinct. "Both of you get back. I'm dealing with this one way or another."

Deep in his vein of foolishness, Herbert stepped between Lestat and the corpse. "You will not take this from me." He was so outmatched, perhaps the weakest there by virtue of his meager
experience despite the strength of the blood in his veins trumping Louis’ frailty. "I warned you, Lestat-" his words became a cry as ill-equipped and half-formed fangs tore into the meat of his neck from behind, shock constricting his whole body as if in new death.

"Herbert!" Lestat was on the unfortunate creature in an instant, rending limb from limb with no more resistance than he’d get from wet tissue. Rotted limbs splattered across papers and vials until they stood in a sea of gore. When it was over, the head stared up at them, working its jaw slowly and searching for its stolen meal.

It squished like a rotten pumpkin beneath Lestat's shoe.

The tremor in Herbert's limbs was still in evident, but when he opened his mouth it was clearly no longer from fear. "Will you not rest until you've destroyed everything I might value?"

"I would settle for an ounce of gratitude, but it seems I could end the human race before I saw so much as a trace!" Lestat, brusque in his anger (how often Louis had seen him thus, the petty tyrant, and yet it seemed… off), yanked Herbert's hand away from his neck. Muscle and bone stood exposed to the elements, and Herbert hissed. "See what comes of your reckless behavior?" Lestat scolded.

"Let go of me. Let--g--don't touch--" the shaking intensified, changed into something different. A fit. Herbert collapsed, jerking like a marionette operated by an idiot, into the splattered remains of his half-child, and Lestat lunged after.

"Spine. Spinal cord," Lestat muttered, turning Herbert's head gently but forcefully to the side to peer into that mass of torn flesh. Whatever he saw there must not have been pleasing, given his expression.

"Darling, can you hear me? You're seizing. You've suffered a spinal cord injury. She--you're badly hurt. You need… " Lestat raised his hand to his own mouth, then froze with some strange indecision.

Blood foamed from Herbert's mouth. In an instant, he was back up on that cursed table, now bent nearly beyond recognition by whatever it was he'd been doing down here since the last time Louis saw this happen. He wanted both to watch and to avert his gaze from yet another violation.

And then came Lestat’s frightened, angry voice:

"Hold him down. He needs to be immobilized."

"I can't--I don't know how."

"Then make yourself useful some other way, you gawking tourist!"

"Blood." The word was strangled, clogged coming out of that throat, and apparently shouldn't be possible at all if Lestat's reaction was anything to go by.

The spasms grew worse, violent, and with them the terrible screams, gurgling and drowned in blood. Lestat threw himself over Herbert's body, pinning his shoulders while the legs twitched and struggled uselessly. "Louis, help me. Please!"

Blood spreading in a pool on the carpet, Lestat's imploring hand reaching out to him and his body frozen and useless—it was less memory and more as if he had been transported back, and the dread paralyzed him once more.
Lestat swore. "Useless idiot." He turned to his poor fledgling, panic rising in his eyes. "Herbert, I have to. You can't, you need--"

Louis' mind, in comparison to his fellows, was a walled garden. He coveted that quiet serenity, that illusion of peace. But even he couldn't ignore the screech of panic that hit, a tidal wave of primal emotion that seemed to be Herbert's last resort. Sooner death, he understood in those panicked images. Sooner death than forced submission, stronger than even his indomitable need to survive. It called Louis. It *needed* him.

"I'll do it." He was beside his maker then, closer than he'd allowed himself to come in a long time. Since--since this thing, so easily lost, came between them.

"You're not strong enough! What if it doesn't work?"

"Then he'll die. He'd prefer it, after what you did." And there is satisfaction in the look of anguish, the flinch.

"Only what you can spare." Lestat directed him as Louis cut a vein."The wound first; he can't drink as he is."

It wasn't so impressive as Lestat's miracle blood, the slow knitting of tissue beneath a deluge of red. The only reason it did much at all had to be Herbert's tendency towards deprivation. But the fitting stopped, and that was enough for Lestat to step back, expression unreadable, and allow Louis to take Herbert in his arms.

This was not a thing Louis did, in the ordinary run of things. Not something to which he was accustomed. He hadn't even done it often in his years with Armand, but what else had he to draw upon? So similar, the small fine-boned shape here with him. It lay still now, mostly--quiescent save for faint shivers traveling all the way from the core out along the limbs.

He should keep it clinical, he knew. Businesslike. But like that first terrible night, he could not keep himself from certain little acts of tenderness; removing the spectacles and tucking Herbert close in preparation for *healing*. Nothing more. Nothing less, either.

He heard a soft, apologetic whimper an instant before the unmistakable sensation of fangs piercing his throat like twin arrows.

The connection would invariably be imperfect unless the circuit were completed. Undoubtedly Herbert got far more from Louis than Louis received back, but he tried to make it good.

Tried to give the poor scholar something he'd value--memories of horrors learned, information clumsily packaged and with wisps of vulgar emotion and memory clinging like bits of rotten shroud. Tried to ignore the horrid, echoing grief of creating a beautiful, flawed daughter and losing her over and over again, twinned suddenly in that labyrinthine mind.

(Tried to ignore the ecstasy of that touch and pleasure and bottomless need, making him desire to go further, touch more--)

He knew it was done when Herbert began to pull himself nearer, strong enough to try winding his arms around Louis' neck. They stood then on the threshold of deniability, and Louis would not be the one to make the decision. He struggled free, though Herbert initially clung tighter in the face of losing connection. But when they were severed, Louis nursing his own wounds, Herbert gave him a grave little nod before retreating into his rigidity.
"Well? What do you have to say for yourself?" Lestat's voice was tired, the sound of it almost violent in comparison to the utter stillness of moments before. Louis had forgotten he was there at all.

"The same thing. If you find it unsatisfying, that's your own problem. Mine," he stood on wobbly legs, "is cleaning up the mess you've made of my work." The smallest hitch, almost imperceptible, in his voice.

From then it was as though Lestat, at least to Herbert, vanished from the room. He touched a hand to his temple, considering. "How did you do that?"

"A little more specificity, please." Though he knew.

"The transfer of concrete data--I had thought it was a purely sensory relay, impressions and contextless moments at best."

He didn't ask how Herbert knew; Lestat, with his lack of modesty and propriety, had ensured they all saw his mastery, chest heaving and body at first resistant and then ravenous. At the time, Louis had forced himself to scrub the blood from his own hands, lest he give in to his urge to lick the fragrant wetness, taste some hint of that suddenly-impassioned creature clinging there. That same smell hung now in this room, discernable even beneath the filth and rot of Herbert’s mad creation--Louis shook himself, averting eyes and thoughts from the slick of blood on Herbert’s tender, healed neck. "I would tell you all I know, but you've seen the whole of it. I have no interest in becoming more monstrous than I am already."

"Monstrous?" Herbert blinked, tilted his head in an eerily familiar gesture. Like looking in a mirror, sometimes, after. Armand had been similar. "You're very nearly ideal. Few to no overt symptoms--if I could just figure out how to treat the hemophagia, you would be the goal."

Hemophagia, from the Greek-- blood-eating. A neatly medical way to phrase damnation.

_goal_. It hadn't occurred to Louis that the doctor had any such things; he'd seen his reading, heard obliquely of the demand to mutilate his murderer's corpse. A verdict of madness seemed foregone, despite the conscientious breakdown Louis had witnessed in the alley and the intelligent companion in reading and talk. But to try and cure damnation? And how unusual, too, for someone to speak so matter-of-factly about Louis’ vaunted humanity, his so-alluring feebleness. Neither eroticism nor pity touched Herbert's tone, if he were even capable of either sentiment.

Such a shame that that intellect couldn’t be directed to realer, sweeter goals, things of lasting import and beauty.

Louis had no wish speak with Lestat present; it would not do to appear too interested, for either of their sakes. Instead he found himself trying the thing he had not in so very long, reaching blindly and wordlessly to try and give some impression of his mind.

(He'd thought it simple affinity, once, two minds well-suited. Before he knew himself crippled in his senses. The wound of Claudia’s death was raw that night.)

Herbert was learning, more's the pity; his strange eyes, glowing perhaps more than usual, flickered up and then returned to his grizzly task with no other acknowledgment.

Outside the blood link Louis found it difficult to form words, like trying to move an atrophied limb. The best conception he could muster was _bright_, in all its myriad forms: the newness of Herbert's presence in darkness, the light of ideas and interest and knowledge. A positive.
Let him come away from this horror, into wonder.

His words, then, meant no more than cover. "I'm afraid I've had my fill of such goals for the evening. Please, take better care with your life. For the sake of those that value you." Let Lestat think he was the one implied. He turned to leave them, but to his surprise, Lestat followed him out.

"What am I supposed to do with him?" their terrible maker hissed like a gossiping servant. "He'll burn the house down at this rate!"

"I would think you more prepared than most to face that potentiality."

Lestat glowered. "Fine, have your little jokes. Saintly Louis, so above the rest of us. So very nearly human."

This was not the jealousy Louis had expected. "So you do have regrets. A pity it never stops you from acting."

"What else was I to do, then, if you're so wise?" The sarcasm was only barely present, a scrim over something strange and unPrincely. "Should I have allowed my fledgling to starve and wound himself, with no regard for the needs of his body and mind?"

"His wounds were bound," Louis soothed and accused at once. "No doubt he'd have noticed soon enough that it was not healing--"

"He doesn't!" Lestat fisted his hands in his hair, disarranging its spray-frozen perfection. (For whom had he styled it?) "He has no conception of what it should be like! Pretending that it would heal merely caters to his delusions of humanity!"

"But why like that, Lestat? Could you not allow him to realize these things on his own?"

At this, Lestat sagged against the wall in a surprisingly naturalistic piece of performance, face buried in the crook of an arm. It muffled his voice enough that his next words took a beat too long to register:

"Mon Cher, having tried that once, I think we can all agree it's an experiment not worth repeating."

Louis kept his face still with great effort and long practice, but felt it go livid nonetheless--damn his 'ideal' countenance, sometimes, with its still-mobile blood.

"Good night, Lestat."

"Louis, wait!"

He kept walking, shoulders set. If he looked back, he would be lost. And whatever Lestat had mired himself in this time, he couldn't allow himself to be mired in it. Herbert, God knew why, found Louis dependable. And perhaps that would be enough to save him.

~*~*~*~

Lestat wished to scream, to perform, to cry into the night. Mostly he wrote, setting down the sorrows of Akasha and his foiled rock stardom rather than think too hard about the present. His darling, clever Herbert had brought that ghastly thing into the mansion, and with it a host of ugly
memories. The way his fledgling had cooed over it frightened him most of all, as if the dripping,
stinking pus and brainless gaze were invisible before Herbert's appraisal. Lestat had done what he
had to, and yet he couldn't deny that crushing those rotting bones had as much to do with the panic
in his soul as the threat to Herbert's safety.

Happening again, things repeating with this watchful, quiet, spitfire little love who'd seemed to
hate him. Happening so fast--an eyeblink rather than sixty good years before the crash.

Their relationship had been tenuous after Lestat's rashness in the library, but he'd tried to give
space, be respectful. (He feared, now, that his distance had allowed madness to take root in his
mind.)

He cursed that particular concatenation of circumstances, though such thoughts never passed his
lips. It had been poorly done. Herbert had been so beautiful in his arms, and he had been so proud,
thinking he had at last created the bond Marius had told him was possible, and for all to know,
even. (He certainly couldn't have backed down, not with everyone watching.) But the anger, the
distrust in his fledgling's face when it was done--he might as well have gutted Lestat and had done
with it. He'd seen no way to breach the gulf of it, and bringing it up to Marius, already so
astonished that Lestat couldn't keep a one-time lover permanently in his bed, was outside the realm
of possibility. Once again, he had backed himself into a corner, the Brat Prince having drank fully
the supply of patience for the beloved faces that surrounded him.

But his return to the laboratory, and the medical incident there within, seemed to mark at last a
turning point in Herbert's rage; if not a thaw, a lessened chill at least. And perhaps it was
something so selfish as loneliness that pushed him to come running when Herbert acknowledged
him once more.

Too pale, his love, and not in the way of the ancients. Sickly, like Lestat had seen before; willfully
starving, like some mortal model in a glossy magazine. Like the sad, broken beauty sitting silent at
his studies. Oh yes, Lestat had seen this before. He could be so wondrous, would he feed. Would
he care. Roses rising in his high-boned cheeks humanlike, even as preternatural grace perfected his
allure… Victims would flock. Instead--this. Entombed in his sepulchre. What was it about Lestat
that did this to his lovers, rotted them entirely from the inside while leaving the surface pristine?

"Lestat. I'm. Gratified. That you're willing to assist." Herbert's eyes flickered over Lestat in the
manner of a mortal viewing the sun.

"How could I resist this chance to be near you, after so long apart?" Sincerity must always be
buried in extravagance and he had to fight back the urge to sweep Herbert up as he had that first
night they had arrived. He drew as near as he dared, drinking in the sight he was starving for.
"What whim calls me here now, o Prometheus?"

"Your metaphors are getting sloppy." Herbert picked up a long blade--ancient but sharp and
preserved, no doubt procured from within the mansion--and ran his thumb along the blade.
"Prometheus stole a discovery he could not comprehend. I don't intend to rest until I can conjure
with my own hands."

"To what end?" He was wary now of encouraging this morbidity, well remembering the long gash
in Herbert's arm. Mutilation; an exhausting inability to accept the pleasure of things as they were.
"I'll need you to perform an elective transradial amputation of my left hand."

"What?" The words, clinical, hit Lestat like an avalanche, and he recoiled.
"Since my motor functions will likely be hindered," Herbert continued on blithely, "you'll need to record notes as I dictate them, before and after reattaching the limb." He held out the blade. "Unfortunately, I am not equipped for surgical precision of this kind. We'll have to make do."

Herbert might just as well have offered a cobra; its bite sank into his heart, the acrid poison paralyzing his limbs. Dismemberment now, by choice. How much longer until his precious sense was lost? Until he begged for the flame? Had he thought it would move his fledgling, he would have fallen to his knees and begged. But Herbert wasn't like him.

"You can't." Practical. Constrained. "What possessed you to ask such a thing?"

Herbert's plush mouth thinned--never a good sign. "I most certainly can, with assistance. And I've been informed that the procedure is both possible and preceded." A pause. He seemed to melt, then, like wax. "Won't you help me? It's so fascinating, and I'd be grateful--" Cold, small hand on Lestat's forearm, calculated and empty.

"Non!" Below Herbert, this… inept flirtation. Whoring. That precious, brilliant mind, trying to use his body so. And. "Who in God's name 'informed' you of such horrors?"

Herbert blinked, slow, drugged almost.

"Does it matter? So long as it's real data, the source is irrelevant."

His cheek was so cold to Lestat's touch, his movements so stilled as though in anticipation of more.

"My love, you cannot blindly trust your 'sources.' They could be lying."

"They weren't." Casual. Certain.

And, oh, then the fires were stirred, deep below. For how, and who, and when? How else would Lestat be robbed?

"Tell me, or I won't help you. I'll walk out of this room and ensure you have no one else to help you either." Petty, but so was he in such things. He knew it was the wrong thing even as he said it, always moments too late to change.

"Armand." Clipped; his face dared Lestat to make something of it.

He shouldn't have been surprised. Who else? Who else was so adept at falsehood that seemed like truth, empty wanting that seemed like love? Who else, above everything, so reveled in stealing Lestat's most beloved away from him?

Had the little bastard sunk so low at last to once more sink this knife into his heart?

"Fine." He saw only one course before him--it was true, in material fact, that Nicki's hands had been returned. For Herbert, that would be enough. That left but one tactic to dissuade him. Lestat snatched the blade, brandishing it with a useless flourish he had learned from the stage. He would dig out his own heart here, and weave a gruesome tale, so long as it kept the fragile being before him whole.

"Do you know," he asked, "what else Armand did with his amputations? Did he tell you of the torture? Bricking our kind up in the walls and listening to them scream, waiting for them to starve? You're already halfway there. I could do as you ask," a slash within a breath of the sleeve of Herbert's shirt, "and as you lay bleeding, lock you in a coffin for a fortnight. Do you know what would happen?"
"Death from starvation, I presume." Herbert lifted his chin, eyes steely.

"No, nothing so kind as that. Madness, my darling." He used the flat of the blade to tilt that proud chin. "That perfect mind of yours gone to waste. Yours to suffer for eternity, until you begged for the sun. Shall I do it?"

"I see no reason to replicate the aftercare scenario." The smile above the blade was damaged. Joyless. Perverted. "But by all means, if you prefer that way, have at it. There's so little point to existence without application."

"You don't mean that." Lestat shook at the very idea--his fierce, ingenious champion of life laconically courting living death.

"Of course I don't mean it, you idiot. But the disparity in our abilities leaves me little choice but to play along with you."

That was the cruelest blow of all--the thought that he would only ever sway Herbert through brutality, only ever receive acquiescence as a means of survival. Marius had told him love grew through fostering obedience, through loyalty, but this left him feeling hollow and sick. He dropped the blade to the table. "Then act alone. I won't lend my hand to your pointless destruction."

"Pointless," Herbert hissed. "Fine. Watch, then, as discovery leaves you behind."

Metal caught the light as it curved down, cleaving through meat and sticking in clean white bone, sawing through with an agonizing slowness until it hit the table below. The spray of blood coated Lestat's face, drenching him in red as Herbert's face drained grey.

And so it was all coming to pass, again, every one of Lestat's nightmares and mistakes bound up in this one sweet fledgling. Ghosts, come to possess and haunt and remind.

He had not seen his first lover's hands taken, had learned bloodlessly of the destruction wrought through a letter on the road to Cairo. He could not then have pictured this: the sloughing of flesh and the crack of bone; the way it dangled at the last from a string of tissue before falling separate to the table; the sudden vacancy in animated features. He had run from the madness, then.

This time he breathed deep and snapped his fingers before opalescent hazel eyes, tracking the so-very-slow response and the way they returned, endlessly, to the lost piece. He tied back his hair, walked across the hellish little chamber that had been his betrothal gift, and pulled out the already well-used suture kit. He'd never worked tatting or embroidery in life, preferring the fields and forests or hours in conversation to such pastimes.

How things changed, conversations most of all.

The thing was limp and nearly weightless in his grip, a dead rat, its loveliness transformed into horror with the passing of their semblance of life from its veins. Still Lestat handled it as gently as he was able.

Herbert flinched when he grasped the truncated forearm.

"It's all right, my love," he lied. "We'll have you good as new soon."

The flesh of the inner arm was a mass of healing scars, thin sliver lines and small round pockmarks. No sign of the gash Lestat had taken it upon himself to fix, of course; these were all newer.
"You needed your left hand more than you realized, didn't you, dearest?"

It was cold marble in his grip--had he tried to twine its fingers with his own, he felt a sudden certainty they would shatter, as statuesque as Akasha on her throne. How different, that feeling, from the soft, damaged meat that poked out tendrils from the site of violence.

"Don't worry," he said, threading a needle like a child at his mother's knee. "It will be alright." Herbert had no regard for such platitudes, eyes following slowly and only debatably with comprehension. So perhaps he said it instead to his Nicki, to the ghost that followed on his heels no matter how he tried. The needle bit into cold flesh, thread pulling taut.

He recalled then, something else Marius had said long ago. About their spirits being eternal. He’d thought of it often in his time with and without Louis, his longsuffering and reclusive beauty. But Louis had strength, a will of supple iron that flexed where the rest of them would break. Not like Nicki at all, who'd dashed himself against the walls of his life until he cracked, wailed until he broke.

*Nicki staring at him with a smirk at his provincial ways, loving his unworthy heart and foolish flights of fancy. Nicki whom he had abandoned to a city that didn't love him, to be swallowed up by madness. He'd left, and his love had come rightly to hate him.*

Another loop of thread, and another. Even when he tugged it tight, the ends of flesh married once again, the hand hung dead and useless from the site of attachment. Blood. His love had so little blood.

He could have done it again, forced his own healing blood and all it carried with it down that slender throat. It would be *so easy* in this moment, with Herbert reduced to passivity by trauma and pain and… resignation. 'Little choice,' indeed, should Lestat press him.

But Herbert was already silent and strange, already hateful and wary.

Already dragging home victims' bodies to treat as dolls that he loved more dearly than his maker.

Already turning Louis' thoughts, what remained of them, from murder to protection.

So instead Lestat tested the fingers repeatedly over the next few minutes, for mobility, pain response, reflexes; any sign of regeneration. Nothing; this hand forced his.

"You must drink, Herbert." He said it smoothly, with a performance of professional confidence, as he pressed one of the loathsome blood packs into the hand *not* braceleted with his own gruesome stitches. Better than nothing, and nothing was what his youngest would accept willing from him.

Still-sensate fingers flinched from him; his whip-smart scientist was agonizingly slow at looking down to the offering there. When he saw its safe packaging, he raised it to his lips and drank, dull and passive.

Lestat forced his attention to the hand. Almost more slowly than a mortal wound he saw it begin to join together, the muscle taking hold to its erstwhile mate and the bone spinning marrow from strange blood. He got another of the plastic bags, bastardized containments of what they were, and pressed it too into Herbert's hand. His love was faster this time, some small spark returning to his expression.

Nerves must have been next, shooting through the tissue. Slow, impossibly slow, as if time had stopped only for him. As endless as Lestat’s dark thoughts, so long at bay and now threatening his good sense at the thought of such a tremendous loss. He forced them back with all the fierceness of
a killer, the sort of man who could have killed enormous wolves with no more than his raw potentiality. The sort of man who could shine like the sun, and at last convince the world to love him. That man could at least hold together long enough to repair one thing he had broken. Just this one.

The pinky finger scratched against his palm, slow and sleepy but responsive to his tests. His heart thrilled to the success. "Did you feel that?"

A shake of the head. Nerves still missing from their post, even as a striated blanket covered over the healed bone. He kept watch, praying more fervently to this Mystery than he ever had to God.

At last the hand moved coherently; first it flattened, then clenched, then the fingers flexed in rippling succession like a hammer on and pull off to an invisible guitar's frets.

It rotated at the wrist, elegant as the motion of a ballet dancer or puppet (or both).

And then it turned over and interlaced with Lestat's own, black nylon threads scratching his wrist like thorns.

"Thank you, Lestat."

Thank *God*, rather, that the voice hadn't gone as well.

He would defy anyone to blame him for weeping at this cataclysm.

Chapter End Notes

The scene of vampiric biting is depicted in the perspective of a person experiencing Stockholm Syndrome and dissociating from the act.
Chapter Summary

Poor decisions are made all around as the coven continues to spin within its own little bubble. This is absolutely a sustainable situation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After seeing the rotting, violent hulk in that laboratory, Louis began to fear the worst for both vampire and victims whenever Herbert disappeared to hunt. Louis’ indiscriminacy had been called cruel by those with moral rationales for their kills, but he had seen their newest’s preferences: the healthy and hale, those who might benefit most from the treatments he fancied he could administer. Herbert claimed he could scent out those terminal ones who would have crossed his path in life as patients, and Louis believed it—if only because it somehow frightened him more to believe that strange, frank mind possessed the twisted kindness that would birth such a lie. He changed the subject when it arose, tempting Herbert’s thoughts from the physical to the metaphysical, and they spent whole nights in such talk.

So many thoughts Herbert had on life, eternity, and the soul itself, loath though he might be to use such a term. He saw it as energy, precious and imperiled and bound to body and brain. Physical; irreplaceable and finite.

He had no appreciation for the concept of scarcity as a determinator of value.

“The DeBeers corporation must love you, Louis,”’ he’d snort, and to be argued with rather than put off was energy in itself, a glow in Louis’ veins.

(There were many things of which they didn't speak. Like daughters, or the two men’s faces that flickered through Herbert’s mind when he most vehemently grappled with the finality of death. Or the sharing of blood. Certain topics of conversation were ungentlemanly to pursue, regardless of the thoughts one might entertain in private or the memories one happened to harbor of shaking and cries and hot, sweet pains writ large on pretty features.)

And so Louis awaited his companion to return from his ill-fated forays, while around them their little microcosm shook with seismic shifts. Daniel prowled the halls bearing a look of consternation; Armand simply withdrew; and though Louis had glimpsed Lestat, his maker had rushed away from him as if a vengeful ghost hovered over his shoulders, and music had struck up suddenly in another room. He knew by now that when Lestat ran from something it was best to let him go, lest he tear you apart for stopping him and go on running anyway.

The solitude would have been a pleasant thing, were it not for the singular fear of ill omen. So preoccupied was Louis by the thought that even coming at last upon Herbert, nestled in his usual chair, sent a momentary chill down his spine. Herbert’s smile did the rest, sending a different sort of nerves through his dead form.
"Louis, I've made a breakthrough."

"Not tonight, please." He couldn't bear any more talk of humanity reduced from thinking beings to animate pieces, ghastly building blocks strung together by chance or, worse, design.

Herbert's crestfallen face was punishment in itself. "Later, then." His gaze sharpened, taking in Louis’ more-than-usual deshabille, paisley shirt threadbare and once-black jeans worn to a shredded butter softness through more than a decade’s use. “Have you been out? You seem exceptionally drained."

"I don't require--" He nearly missed it in his carelessness, almost failed to hear that wordless plea tugging the edges of his mind. Herbert's face was already closing off by the time Louis caught up. He should not allow himself to be at this one's beck and call, yet… "You may be right. Perhaps closer to midnight I will find what I need."

The flash of relief showed nowhere on Herbert's expressive face; all internal. All hidden, speaking soul-to-soul what they dared not vocalize. Louis hoped his sincerity could be as easily felt as he passed by on his way into the stacks. Herbert smiled again, not sweetly but honestly, and turned a page in the ancient folio he was investigating.

Which was when Louis saw his wrist.

"What devilry have you conjured now?" He half-whispered it, reverent. At the barest glance it looked almost like a bracelet--broken brackets of black sticking out of Herbert's skin, little isolated islands on otherwise untouched flesh. Out of character, though, any such adornment; Herbert was devoted to his pauper’s clothes and their excessive formality. Without thinking Louis reached out, taking Herbert's hand in both his own. They were changeless beings, and yet Herbert conspired to make permanent marks. They were lost from history, and yet Herbert conspired to make his mark upon it.

"It's nothing."

"Uncharacteristic humbleness. It must have been disastrous."

"Hmm," which was as good as an admission, coming from him.

No wristwatch would fit comfortably over such modifications, though truly they’d no need. A vampire who lost track of time in the short run need only trust instinct to guide him in evading the sun, if he wished to do so. And in the long run, time mattered not at all.

Louis ran his hands along those fleet fingers, bending and marveling at all the could have been lost, unnecessary breath catching when those digits curled around his own like plants seeking for the sun. Bright as a photograph in his mind he saw Herbert leaning forward, linking their hands as their lips joined, breathless and probing. It was as intense as the feeling of cool breath on his cheek, soft skin--

He pulled away, as if stung by an electric charge. In a way, he had been.

"What is it?" Herbert was half out of his chair, anticipating danger. He looked so composed, as if his thoughts contained only cold chemistry and not--

"I--" he struggled to compose himself. "I was unaware your feelings were so… developed."

"Feelings?" Herbert blinked, intense as ever, and cocked his head to one side. "I'm unclear what you mean."
And it was so serious, that statement. Not heavy with deception, or concealment, or modesty. More like that image was… normal. Ordinary. Not worth bringing up or commenting upon.

"Herbert." Louis bit his lip, reached out ever-so-slowly to tilt his friend's face up, so as to meet those searching eyes. "Herbert, you said nothing, but your thoughts…"

Another flash, this time of being kissed--of Louis leaning over Herbert and capturing his lips, flashing a hint of sharp fang and then--

Their noses were almost touching before he realized it, so vivid was the scene. What little blood flowed through Louis was spent on flushing him pink, and Herbert’s faintly-lined brow furrowed, the small remaining creases in vampiric flesh visible only with their faces no more than an inch apart.

"I apologize. I’m attempting to control it."

“You needn’t.” The words leapt from Louis without his conscious thought, sending Herbert’s eyes wide. *Needn’t, truly, you felt good in my arms and I couldn’t even taste you then, in that charnel pit.*

Herbert looked like Lestat in that moment, eyes flashing with challenge and opportunistic craving. “Do you mean…?” That delicate chirurgeon’s hand fluttered up and back grasping only air, weird reticence bothering Louis less than the question of what those stitches might feel like beneath his tongue.

And so he gave in, ever the fool (but were not all philosophers, at least as Lestat's precious Bard wrote them?) There was a scar on Herbert's lower lip where he must have worried it in life, and traces of blood in the corners of his mouth. It was gentle, soft, and when Louis pulled away Herbert chased after him, pulling back once he came to himself.

"Was that what you had in mind?" Louis asked, holding himself on tenterhooks.

"I'm not sure," Herbert confessed, hand ghosting over his lips. "What does this mean?"

What, indeed, did it mean, what could it mean in this place? For creatures like them? Feelings between the willingly damned were dangerous, violent things, short-lived flames that left behind acres of char.

And yet… Herbert was no roaring conflagration, but the steady electric glow of something stranger. Newer. The brightness of his intellect shed light such as Louis' nights had not seen in more than a century.

And that very man looked so lost, standing there, blind to his own wonders and without even the hope of a candle to light his path home. Louis saw the dire need of a path away from his dreadful miseries, when there was such spirit in him (whether he liked the term or no) that could be snuffed out if he continued to wallow in the dark. (On that they agreed; death would be an end, truly, to all that Herbert was. No eternal souls for the damned tied to flesh and blood.)

"It means you are a luminary," he said, so close their breath mingled and chilled his damp lips. And the next kiss, too, was a beautiful thing--tender and almost shy. "It means you give me a light in the darkness." Louis' hunger rose in concert with that he saw in those eerie eyes each time they broke for the air they didn't need.

Herbert's hands, his lovely imperiled hands that wrought evils untold, finally touched Louis of their own accord, here and there and charmingly undirected. The black sutures snagged Louis' hair,
serving as a reminder, uncomfortable and clear, of the night of this one’s making. Bloodstained silk picked free of newly vampiric scars, marks that should have spelled death but hadn't. He'd been so intent on removing the things then: small fine-made creature, only half a step past mortal and cutting away in vain effort to return his flesh to some semblance of its human state.

Naked, entranced and heedless; God alone knew whether he even remembered how Louis had done his best not to soothe the transition.

The scar on his abdomen should have vanished, and perhaps it was his strange concoction that had frozen it instead, a singular mortal mark in preserved flesh. Louis’d seen it again, the night he went out to take final mercy upon the despairing one and instead found a panicked creature fighting to survive.

This man was not for him; this man belonged to Lestat. But so lovely a spectacle--for, yes, Louis had looked. Had watched Lestat make him, gasping and insensate. Had seen Lestat claim him, angry and shame.

Had held him in his own arms, so gentle, so frightened and apologetic, and had told himself that he’d put it from his mind. Liars all, on this Night Island and throughout the world.

When death brought a madness by which all things were beautiful, one normally learned to avert one's eyes all the harder, and yet… Was it any wonder that something like those grotesque, storytelling stitches in a fanatic's forearm were what caused Louis to fall, again, at last?

Wonderment kept some small measure of space between them as they kissed, stray touches now and then producing shocks of emotion in tandem with the sensations, an alien image of perfect clarity tinted with Herbert's fiendish speculations.

His lovers had often accused him of being cold--fiery Lestat, looking for combustion but in need of rain; Armand, empty craving mirror who had found no purchase on his inner life; woeful Daniel, who had touched him only once and been scarred--and he supposed it was true from where they stood. He could be contented to spend an evening curled in a chair and come to know, completely, the rippling impact of a single thought; could spend nigh on 70 years touching fleetingly and in shadow, and call it contentment.

That Herbert was all intensity, fierce and swift as a striking kestrel, should have given him pause. But there was something undeniably appealing in being followed. In the thought, not in words but pointed, jagged sensation, that there was no need for Louis to be drawn out if Herbert could simply burrow in after him. He wasn't sure what possessed him to take Herbert's hand, beyond the lingering spectre of eyes peering out from the shadows cast by firelight. Louis’d grown tired of being watched, exhibit to others’ mummified feelings though he might be.

This was new. Present, not past, and as private as the dirty laundry he’d aired in print was now worldwide public.

The shelves were thick with the ghosts of forests felled to build and fill them, absorbing sound as the pair retreated into their embrace. Herbert’s wide, curious eyes followed his slightest movement, cool fingers relaxed in Louis’ grip. The humanlike trust in it broke his heart. He let go then, turning with near-desperation to this thrall he had tempted (unwittingly, he told himself; but even he wasn’t that naïve. Pang of conscience from the one called most dangerous, but he’d not intended to be so in this.)

“They’ve told you, haven’t they? I’m not meant for companionship. I return, always, to myself.” It was safer to believe it, accepting the accounts of those he’d left behind and who’d in turn left him.
Left him for new, and warm, and lovely and more visibly broken. The damage in Herbert and Daniel was as obvious as Louis’ was hidden, and could he blame Armand and Lestat for wanting that surety?

“Then you don’t wish to continue?” Herbert tried valiantly to disguise his disappointment, as if it weren’t written all over his face. All over his thoughts, that raw mind visible even to Louis.

“That’s not--” He caught Herbert’s hand again, avoiding the touch of the stitching. “I do. I only wanted to warn you.”

“You’ve done it.” Firm jaw, low-to-the-ground determination in every line of him. “And now?”

By the advice of sense, one or the other of them would turn and leave. Neither did.

Herbert stepped closer. He reached up, freed Louis’ hair from its elastic band, and oh-so carefully used it as a rein to draw Louis’ head down not for a kiss but for a faint, cautious nuzzle to the hollow of his throat.

Senseless, the both of them. Purest sensibility. Driven by passions not in the ordinary, throwing themselves into mental pursuits in vain effort to blank out the throbbing pleasured pain of their perceptions.

That gentle, inhumanly erotic touch of skin brought a gasp to Louis’ lips, and he cradled Herbert's head in turn, pulled him tight by the small of his back.

_I have so little to give_, he thought somewhere inside the kiss he forced simply to slow that freight-train pace.

_I want everything, but can live on nothing_, something answered, welling and ravenous. Vampiric.

They were close, chests flush together as they slid to the ground, as his knee parted Herbert's legs just to slip between and further meld them. But it wasn't enough. Not while there was still the slightest delay between their consciousness, a barrier between their yearning Self. His kiss became sharp and poisonous, and his mind was so much water collapsing into their mutual need to know.

Everything was baptized new again, a touch along his scalp the crackling burst of God's hand creating their unwatched universe in a supernovic burst. Their limbs grasped and ground together, left unattended by ascended minds. There was so little blood between them, and it mattered not an ounce in the frankensteinean welding of communion and covalence. This is my body, this is my blood. These are the simple matters of our biology, the clay that gives way to all that we call ourselves.

This is where the will resides, here in the flesh. This is where our souls are buried, Earthly damnation. This was but an instant, one they would have eternity to regret, but for that endless instant their minds were unity. The completion of the link quenched a thirst for each to feel each; to Know in more than the biblical sense.

In those moments, a pile of joyous writhing limbs and wet, sucking need on marble near as cold at themselves, they didn’t simply hunger or lust (though there was that, entwined as all were for their kind.) They loved--no other word for such a knowing of another, no other explanation for the pain they would cause and feel.

When it was over, they lay in the wreckage of the known, battered and bruised mentally and physically by the crash of destructive renewal through them. Dangerous, it had been, thirst slaked in one instant and reawakened in the next by the simultaneous taking and giving until they could
take no more and broke apart in mind to endure the aftershocks in their entwined-but-separate bodies.

Louis had always been one to love the saints and the fanatics, the ones filled with faith he failed to possess himself. To see one below him, though, debauched and enriched and joyous--he had not Lestat's talent for tears. Another soft, mortal kiss would have to suffice.

"So," Herbert said, words left behind in whatever wave of emotion they had shared. He looked a mess, wonderful, with hair mussed and pupils blown wide.

"So," Louis returned, lacing his fingers with his lover's and squeezing softly. Lovers. For he already saw down the road to this happening again, both of them starved and now revived by a miracle of chance.

“What does this mean?” Herbert asked again, all that burning need to learn now focused on Louis as he crept closer, birdlike frame nearly in his lap.

“It means…” he trailed off at the sensation of flesh warmed by his own blood slotting into place against him. “I do not do this lightly. It means I love you. You understand?” Saying it was a formality, truly, for in the blood they’d felt all there was of one another, but he sensed the shy, grasping pleasure Herbert felt at the utterance, and was warmed by that reflection.

“So it’s not a ‘one-night stand’?” Bitterness touched Herbert’s voice, tied to memories Louis didn’t yet share. But he was distracted by how innocently erotic all the things a doctor did to a vampire when taking liberties proved. Fingers touched his wrists and neck, ear over his heart. Gathering some sort of data on the specimen Louis occasionally was.

The numbers would all be off, given how his pulse quickened with it, and a tremor came into his voice when he answered.

“Non, mon coeur.” He captured a hand and kissed it once more. “I would not treat you so cheaply as that.” Warm glow; his love needed to be valued, wanted adoration. Disquieting to see shades of Lestat there.

“Though… we should keep it quiet,” Louis added. “For now.”

At that, Herbert’s gaze sharpened back to its usual razor edge, and he nodded. “Until we can escape.”

Louis closed his eyes and didn’t answer that with more than a final kiss to flushed cheeks.

They both knew how to keep secrets. To straighten their clothes and hair, to make sure they weren’t seen leaving together or touching with undue intimacy. This small thing was only for them, safeguarded from the usual prying eyes. It alarmed him to know, already, that they would both kill to keep it.

~*~*~*~

Once upon a time, before the word stopped having much meaning, Daniel had thought he had the makings of a real reporter. A nose for news, to be old timey about it. It had been enough to lead him to Louis, the biggest story of anyone’s life. These days it hadn’t amounted to much more than
puzzling out Cain’s sad little motives and playing a heightened game of people watching. But it meant he noticed things.

Louis had always been secretive about his hunting, and fierce about protecting that privacy. But Daniel began to recognize some nights when he didn’t come back at all, only streaking across the lawn with dawn at his heels. Daniel was plagued with thoughts of Louis’ accounts of seeking suicide, passive and noncommittal but persistent. Maybe that made him look closer. Maybe he just wanted to be seen.


“I’m sorry, Daniel.” Why did he always have to be so kind, dammit. “I’m afraid I have my own plans.”

“I could tag along, then!” God, he was cringing just thinking about it. “You just seem…distant, lately.”

“More than I always am, you mean?” Such a beautiful smile. “Your concern is touching. Perhaps another night?”

It was always another night. And that, damn it all, was when he started noticing West.

It was nothing overt--and that, in itself, was a Hell of a clue coming from Dr. No-Tact.

But West treated Louis differently. Always had, really, kid-gloving the deadliest of them for months. Now, with so much time spent in the library over crumbling books half-translated from Arabic, scribbling in his notebooks, he seemed comfortable enough to talk to Louis.

But what he said made no damn sense--walls of gibberish thrown up like a screen alongside flashes of thought and emotion alien and painful.

And he hunted, like Louis, too--as little as twice a month, or as often as once a week, he hunted. You could always tell by the flush, and occasionally by the trails of blood and shrieks in the hallways near his lab.

On other nights, though, he 'hunted,' coming home pale and empty-handed.

The pieces all lay before Daniel, and he refused them. The alternative was to use his precious extra minutes of consciousness to grab the little bastard and throw him onto the back porch to burn, and write his own suicide in the process.

Some useless, vestigial thread of honor, mindful of their truce, kept him from following West on his little jaunts. Or, if he was honest with himself, some fear of looking for West and finding Louis instead. Daniel knew how Louis treated new members among them, or he thought he had. He’d told himself that some sorrow of damnation was what kept Louis at arm's length, unwilling to break his heart again on a new addition to the undead.

But there he was, clear and deadly as the sun, bending over West's shoulder and turning a page in his book. And then, one night, coming home an hour on the dot after Lestat’s fledgling dragged himself in, like they were hauling themselves out of a bush in Central Park.

He’d never believed Louis stupid, nor (intentionally) cruel. Nor impulsive enough to… trespass… as a game.
So instead of rocking the boat until it broke on those rocks, he slunk back to Armand, nursing a whole cocktail of reasons to be disgusted with himself. He had to look for his maker, normally so easy to predict. The halls were bereft of his presence, the elaborate screening room Armand had labored over empty.

It ended up being like catching sight of a ghost. His small, erstwhile killer, pale and barefoot in a slip of moonlight. Frozen. He looked strange, beautiful and ethereal, like a photo rather than a real person. Like himself in his coffin, filmed all the day through while Daniel checked in and changed the camcorder’s tapes every six hours. He looked so small.

The right tailoring could do a lot for a man: change his body, his height, his whole shape, given the right styles and confidence. Armand adored good clothes for the illusion of aging they provided.

Daniel didn't recognize the shirt Armand was wearing, but he damn well recognized the size. Appropriate for a tall man, one with shoulders broader by far than Daniel's own (he could charitably be described as 'thin', nutrition not having been at the top of his priorities in the time leading up to his death.)

Armand swam in the thing.

"Daniel." Said as if his continued existence was a surprise, the sight of him mystifying. Nice to know he'd been missed. The low light cast dark shadows on Armand's exposed chest, his collarbone. A trick, vanishing as a small hand came up to hold the material together. He looked like a child wearing his father's suit. God.

"Long time no see." Sure, try for casual. Things certainly couldn't get any less surreal. "I, uh," missed you, and didn't know it until you were standing here in front of me; need you madly, to chase away this feeling of being utterly insubstantial, "I was gonna go watch a movie. You wanna come? This shirt's pretty done for, so it's no big deal if you pick at it." How many hours in Daniel's borrowed shithole apartments, pretending they were a normal couple. Ignoring the tightening rope around his neck as he went on aging, and all of a sudden he was a creep and not just a degenerate.

"That sounds," Armand took a step toward him, and it was almost as easy as that. Almost. "… Oh. I have other plans."

"I see." He chewed the inside of his cheek, wishing he still smoked just for the excuse to cover his mouth and hide a frown. "Lot of that going around, lately."

Silence, withdrawal, bodies matching minds.

"Armand." He tried again, as his onetime lover turned into a silver-red halo and that shirt glowed in the moonlight.

"Yes, Daniel?" No eye contact. Bad, when he refused--meant he was focusing on something else.

"You--you'd tell me, if there was somebody… newer than me, right?" Somebody other than poor little Karen, life drained away in the aftermath of Daniel's mistake, when she would have helped anchor Armand for a good decade or more. "You know I'd understand."

"Yes." His fingers picked at the linen thread of his cuffs, one-word answer more dutiful than sincere. "I have to go."

It was Daniel's right to follow. He'd spent so long being stalked himself, the center of a panopticon of scrutiny, but when he did, fuck, how he wished he hadn't. It hurt more than he could've predicted, seeing Armand greeted by their seemingly permanent visitor. To see a broad hand tilt...
that proud, pointed chin back and forth as if in inspection before bending down to bestow a kiss. To see Armand go limp in his arms, seemingly in bliss to have returned to his old master.

Of course. Why shouldn't Daniel have assumed he was only a holdover. A translator. Nothing.

Twelve years; more than a third of his lifetime.

A blink, for Armand.

He'd convinced himself *so hard* that he was special, more, just because he was the only one. The one allowed to hold the purse strings, the ostensible owner of all Armand's vast works.

But now that the coven was reformed, the first tall, handsome blond man back from the dead, what need did Armand have for Daniel, really? He'd learned well enough to pass in the present years ago; 'Daniel's' property would have to pass on sooner or later, whenever his twenty-to-forty face stopped remotely matching his documented age.

Christ, thinking he'd gotten lucky, when he really was just another junkie pet.

All he wanted then was to clear out as many memories as he could and forget. He couldn't drink anymore, not since he became Armand's accident. But he could tempt the thralls into his kitchen with a pasted-on smile they'd never be able to dissect and ply them with every rare vintage he'd collected, bid them drink until they were a pile of hot, heavy limbs on the floor. After all, for all they knew they'd end up just like him someday.

It wasn't fair game, but neither had he been.

Nobody was, in the face of a vampire.

Not a one of the people and ex-people under that palatial roof had ever stood a chance.

The kitchen was beautiful, designed to let moonlight stream in the windows and onto black marble--probably prettier in the dark than the light, though of course he'd never be able to compare.

Cain, rest his small, sweet soul, had liked it well enough.

If only West knew how much Daniel *hated* him for what he'd changed and what he hadn't, for being the harbinger if not the catalyst.

Instead, West, dickhead, monster, stumbled through the kitchen an hour before dawn and found Daniel insensate and crying, blood on his lips a match to the wine on his victims', kisses the only way he'd ever taste his old vice again.

The look on that smug face, the curl of disgust to his lip; West was very lucky that Daniel's legs were no longer responding in any kind of timely way. He'd throw aside their truce just for that one satisfying snap.

"Got something to say?" He growled.

"No." He glowed even paler than Armand in the greying light, dark hair accentuating his oddly appealing features. "How you waste your time is of no concern to me."

"Oh yeah?" He sat up, disturbing his little throne of fools. "You got better ideas, West? Suggestions?"
"Not for you." He turned to go.

"For Louis, right?" Daniel sneered. And that stopped West cold. "Yeah, that's right. Screwing around behind Lestat’s back; nobody else’d dare. You're not as fucking smart as you think you are, trying to survive that."

The steadying breath he heard was so age-specific--one of those dead giveaways for the newest and weakest among them. Daniel did it, too, as did their bone of contention.

The laughter that followed was more of a surprise. Soft, quiet, self-deprecating, as he swiped a hand over his eyes and oh-so-casually grasped Daniel's wrist.

"In that case, I must be an absolute drooling moron, Molloy."

"What?" The unintentionally sexual touch distracted him, even as he knew West was just opportunistically testing his pulse.

"I am saying," Asshole enunciated obnoxiously slowly, "That I feel approximately as intelligent as you."

"Fuck you."

"No thanks, I don't know where you've been."

"You know one place--and boy, was that a vacation spot." It was worth the crunch of his wrist bones to see the jab hit home. For someone who'd spent his life on the wrong side of the law, West was an awful liar. You just had to know what buttons to press. The seconds it took for the fucker to find his composure were sweet beyond words.

"I'm not surprised you appealed to him," he said at last, face contemptuous and eyes dark. "Dan had a taste for bubble-headed garbage. How unfortunate that you ended things so quickly. You might have ended up on my table. Dan had a talent for that, too. And then he smiled, if you could call it that. It was a convincing enough show. They'd probably stamp him with sociopathy in the nuthouse.

But two could play at insults.

"Well, I bet he'd have been real proud to hear how you're making up for lost time." Daniel jerked his hand free, wrist already healed by the glut of blood he’d consumed that evening. "How much longer 'til you put on another show? You weren't half bad when I didn't have to listen to you talk. I can give you some pointers, since we're so alike." He knew what he was. It was well past time West faced his own admittance.

"I did not--"

"Did you know we were all following you, that nigh?" Exaggeration, maybe, but at least half true. He bared his fangs in the most provocative grin possible. "We're predators. You went around dripping blood like you didn't even remember what we all are. You're lucky Lestat got there first, and that he fed you instead of doing what anybody else would've."

West's face went livid, practically glowing in the dark, and he was across the room in a split second.

There was something weird about his arm, where he clutched it. No wristwatch, and. Something.
“Not Louis. He didn’t--”

"No, of course not. Not Louis." How fickle. Lover not yet in the ground for a year, and West had thrown his lot in with someone else. Never mind that the 'someone else' was irresistible. "He'd have just killed you. He wanted to--even someone like me could hear him planning it. He must have just decided you were too pathetic to bother with."

“You--”

"Or maybe," his eyes flicked again to those strange, spidery marks, "he figured he could just wait for you to off yourself."

A long pause. West's thumb dug at those little black flecks, and then he laughed, half-unhinged. "I had no idea you were this pathetic. Of course you hate me--what do you have left to offer as the modern man besides being whore? You can't even manage that."

"Not with this kind of competition, no!"

"How. Dare--"

"You've fucked half the coven, sweetheart. Look down on me all you want, but the fact you never gave Dan your special treasure doesn't make you superior. And I have to admit, you put on a nice show." Daniel concentrated, remembering how West had moaned and whined and sucked, cuddled in Lestat's arms for all to see. He lit up the room with that image.

"Stop saying that!" West's fist was apparently no match for stone countertops, not yet--bone gave, provoking a strange cry between pleasure and pain.

It was his turn to laugh now, enjoying how his sleeping, drunken thralls' dreams turned filthy at the thought of prissily private West. "You can keep whatever clean, scrubbed-down image you like down in your little dungeon, but up here facts catch up. You ever hear Lestat's little speech about 'becoming what we always were'? Don't worry, you will. Wonder what that says about you." (Daniel'd always been an affectionate drunk, which made him wonder who in the puppy pile he'd borrowed the nastiness from. He'd need to thank them later.) "You ever kill anyone so you could take them home and chop 'em up? Maybe get distracted thinking about getting on your knees at the nurse's station and sucking Cain off right there? Or maybe-"

"Shut your filthy mouth!" The light of the kitchen was eerie and blue, the better to see West taut as a piano wire. Murderous intent, just short a weapon. Daniel wanted to see him try.

"Dan. Was. Special." West spat the words like dead blood coated his tongue.

"Special--"

"Shut up. You had your turn, you miserable drunk." He flipped the lights rapidly on and off with his good hand, sending blinding bolts into Daniel's head. "Dan was special," he continued as Daniel groaned. "Lestat gave me no choice but to be--seen--by all of you. And Louis didn't touch me when I was vulnerable."

Something shifted, then, as those disconnected thoughts lined up, spun, rearranged into an entirely different picture.

Christ, just what had Daniel been mocking?

His piece said, West drew himself up to his full height and turned his gaze away to the clock on the
microwave. "There are 73 minutes until dawn. Clean yourself up."

"Why?" Why bother saying anything at all, when he was such a disaster. Why shouldn't he just lay here and turn to ash?

"Louis feels responsible for you, and I owe him this much. Much as it pains me to think of your continued existence."

Daniel let him go without a parting shot. The urge to fight, or to do much of anything, had gone out of him. All he'd have to do was not act. If the reason held out had been anyone but Louis (Louis, who had passed him over twice, and seemed increasingly likely to forever), he might've. But some stubborn, ugly hope urged him up. Who was the pathetic one now?

He wished he was still really drunk. It would've made his guilt easier to ignore. He could've kept it locked in the kitchen, along with old ghosts of shame and self-loathing he thought he'd slain years ago. Sexual liberation was tougher to embrace when it had been tied up with impressing a lover who'd left you behind once his older, better match came along. Anonymous bodies had been sweetened by the presence of a stable pillar, a lighthouse to bring him home from the sea of others and assure him he was special. And here he was, lying in a coffin alone, adrift and purposeless. Self-empowerment was tough to come by on Night Island.

~*~*~*~

Molloy’s taunting shouldn’t have been able to touch it. He knew it for what it was, after all, had enacted the same cutting little jabs himself in that endless expanse of Before. It would be as effective for his would-be rival now as it had been for him back then. He’d take no small satisfaction in driving that point home. But behind Molloy stood a greater problem: that apparently what he had thought of as discretion had proved insufficient. It was one thing for them to be noticed by Molloy, whose fondness for Louis and unsubstantiated evidence would likely keep him from acting. But if Lestat were to catch on then things would become complicated very quickly.

Louis might be permitted to remain solitary, but Herbert had been shown that there were expectations regarding conduct; his own professed desire to remain disengaged was not seen as honest or plausible. And Lestat and Armand would never permit the open expression of those particular needs with Louis.

The book had proven that.

“The Beautiful One” was, in essence, a demilitarized zone--left alone not in recognition of his desires or agency, but because a move upon that territory constituted the opening shots of World War III.

And lacking, at this time, a nuclear option, Herbert resolved to create them a cushion of plausible deniability. Louis, after all, was as happy to have nights to himself as he was to be in Herbert’s company; to him, he’d explained, they brought equal and different joys.

“The same as a walk taken alone or with a companion. Both have their place.” Even Louis’ attempts at comfort wound up tinged in poetry.

While Louis courted his lover, solitude, the other infected seemed as happy to trade among one another (and Herbert) as they did with their pets. Armand had had at least three partners since his
arrival, and Lestat had shown himself interested in pursuing Louis even when supposedly engaged with Herbert. The heightened craving for contact eroded the barriers between them, and communal living had done the rest. He felt no need to mourn for the vanquished corpse of monogamy, but it had caused the setback that now stared him down. He would need an alibi, someone to vouch for the reason behind his occasionally visible satisfaction.

The question of who he could stand to be near proved to be a field that narrowed quickly: not Molloy, unless someone was on hand to dispose of the body; not Armand and his eerie, painful memories. Marius’ patronizing smarm left a powerful hatred in him that was only half old memories.

Which left Lestat. The thought was… less distasteful than he had expected. The man’s proficiency and discretion some weeks before had softened Herbert’s anger at the wounding of his pride, though he would obviously have been a fool to look to Lestat for constancy. Rather, the odds were now higher that he could be nudged to acceptable rather than abhorrent behavior. And his ego would be far too great to wonder why Herbert had chosen this time to further thaw the wall between them.

Herbert was halfway through planning another invitation to his lab when he realized it was better not to bother. Lestat had shown his true colors, after all. (Albeit ones complicated by the surprising show of confidence that still marked his wrist.) In the end, he went forward with no excuse at all. Knowing Lestat, he'd believe his own presence draw enough.

He was surprised to hear the sound of music, melancholic and low, drifting from Lestat's room. The man had never invited him inside, he realized--he’d snuck in like a thief that first day and never been back. And at that time, decor had been the least of his interests.

He let himself in, calling for attention (for he had found no one would give it otherwise). "Lestat."

He expected, perhaps, mirrors on every surface. Love letters to Lestat's visage writ large. The dressing room of a grand dame. What he found were lights, glowing and soft on every possible surface, illuminating fabrics seemingly chosen for the joy of tactile sensation, resplendent and gaudy as if the era of dandies had never left. Carpets from Turkey, intricately patterned. A desk holding a word processor, dot-matrix printer, and stacks of floppy disks. And the piano, low and wooden and weathered by time, one of a few odd, old trinkets scattered about. Secret sentimentalities.

"Herbert!" Lestat moved more slowly than he might otherwise have, hampered as he was by an acoustic guitar. Discordant notes twanged as he extricated himself from the strap and set it carefully upon a stand. "What on Earth are you doing here?" One would have thought he had caused the sun to rise there in the room.

"If I'm interrupting your work, I can leave." The man had loved his music--that much Herbert knew, through those same strange mechanisms by which he recalled the scent of indigo and magnolia blown on a Louisiana breeze free of industrial pollutants.

"No--not at all, my. Herbert." His broad lower lip pinched boyishly in his teeth, he moved forward as though hoping to go unnoticed. "I was just thinking of you."

"What was that?" Not one of the songs Herbert knew, the earworms he'd been unable to avoid a few years ago and never properly connected up to his host prior to their… encounter.

"What was what?"
"The music."

"Just something new I'm toying with," the least modest creature on the planet said. "Nothing that would interest you, I'm sure."

"It isn't my area of study. That doesn't mean I'm disinterested." It would be easier than conversation, to let him spin on like this. "What is it?"

"You," Lestat said, a brush of red crawling up his neck. "That - I was thinking of what sounded like you."

"Oh?" One eyebrow raised, a tickle of genuine curiosity stirred. "I'd better hear it, then."

"If you wish it, who am I to deny you?" The flourish as Lestat picked up his guitar didn't quite hide the way he bit back a smile. "It hasn't poetry yet, I'm afraid."

As though there should ever be poetry to something that sounded like Herbert.

The strings must have been a fascination to touch, humming as they vibrated out sounds into the air—a rapidfire screech of sound no mortal hand could wring descending into the low, languorous tones that Herbert had heard as he entered. A pulse that became an elegy and back.

It was a few minutes before he realized Lestat was looking at him. "It's--good." He coughed, embarrassed at being so thoroughly deprived of vocabulary.

Lestat smiled at him. "You needn't offer me a thesis, darling. Just tell me how you felt."

He knew that it was unappealing, rude even, to frown the way he did then. Especially in response to a gift. But this was a test for which he'd never studied.

"It was unnerving." Lestat's face fell, and Herbert floundered. "Idealized. There were… two different sounds?"

"Yes!" Lestat was there, suddenly, hands clutching the air in excitement. "Yes, and?"

"And--" He searched his mind, his memory, for any hint of what was wanted, the information to answer these questions. Frustrating, unsettling. "You flatter me."

"You just said it was unnerving." Lestat smiled, then, slow and self-satisfied as if Herbert had walked into a trap. (All to the good, considering why he'd come.) "Now I make too much of you?"

"I am unnerving. It's the other part that doesn't fit." The rhythmic, driving, nearly-relentless portions, with their building, terrible energy—those he could see. But the other.

The other was.

He turned away, desperate for some way to direct this conversation back where it belonged.

"It's written on your face even now." Lestat laid hands on him with terrible gentleness, kneeling before him as if in worship, "The man who mourns death so fiercely he cannot rest until it's slain. Yours is a funeral for all the world."

There again, the mirage of words that went on appearing from that self-centered haze. The sense, if only for a moment, that Lestat understood in a way even Dan hadn't. But it was always gone again. Inconstant as the waning moon.
"It seems artistic critique isn't in my future."

"So much the better. Critics are terrible bores, cold and dusty standard bearers all. You're far too alive for that. Full of new ideas."

Stop it, damn you. Herbert hated him then, and the trap that remained alluring even now that Herbert saw the shape of it.

"But tell me, why have you really come? Not simply to praise me. Not that I'd stop you." He gave a little laugh, tossing his hair over one shoulder.

"I realized it's been some time since our last real conversation."

The words brought a strange cloud over Lestat's face. "Yes," he said. "It has."

"I wanted to thank you." Stiff, halting, because it wasn't actually a lie. "Your assistance with the procedure was. Helpful." (He could still see it, in his mind, when he wasn't careful. Limp and curled, less life to it than that little creation Dan had so disliked--the only one that never did him any violence.) Like a dutiful schoolboy, he continued. "You were correct that continuing the experiment any longer would have been. Unwise."

"Yes, I suppose you'd thought to leave it in a box for the better part of--" Lestat's jaw snapped audibly shut, and he took a fast breath through his nose. "I'm glad that you've come to your senses. It worried me, you must see that?"

He knelt up, grasping the marked, bizarre appendage in his own music-making ones, pressed his cheek to Herbert's hip.

If Herbert buried his right hand in full, golden glory… that was what he'd come for, wasn't it? That false thing they'd had, before they both showed their true colors?

"I had to know. Science carries risks, and--" He gasped, shivered, because Lestat was… proceeding as hoped. Showing his appreciation for the restored limb by drawing the index finger into his wet, warm mouth. Not biting, but simply suckling at it.

"You risk much, my love," Lestat said in a shattering pause. "You risk my very heart, and it bears stitches of its own."

Lies, skilled lies from that skilled tongue that was venturing onto the palm, the webbing between finger and thumb, the knuckles.

"You'd have me forsake what I am?" A strangled yelp softened the words, his train of thought thrown off track as Lestat returned briefly to his fingers, swallowed the ring and middle fingers down to the knuckle, jaw stretched with the effort. A ridiculous evocation of acts that were no longer possible for them. Pointless. And yet, how it kept his wordless attention as muscles tightened, hot and slick, around him. How it left him breathless as Lestat slid off, trailing the barest hint of saliva.

"I could make a feast of you," Lestat's voice rasped ever so slightly from the irritation, his eyes heavy, "and never be filled."

It was typical of Lestat to dodge the question. It shouldn't have been in Herbert to feel disappointed. He'd come here to create his own lies, so why begrudge the other party for telling their own. But it gnawed at him, still, and he pressed. "Is this the end of your charade, pretending interest in my work?"
"Oh, my own," Lestat pressed the stitches to his cheek. "You love your cold goddess, I know. And I love all that you are. But not to your grave, you see? Won't you indulge me that far?"

It sounded reasonable, so said. It never was. It didn't matter. Play nicely. "I suppose," he managed.

"Let me make it up to you," he nuzzled against Herbert's palm. "Those who say I'm ungrateful have never had the gift of my gratitude. And I am very grateful for you."

"The feeling appears to be mutual, then," Herbert replied, daring to grasp that proud chin and pull, tilt it up and back, stretch the long neck which bore no scars but showed an obscene tracery of blue veins. "You'll forgive me if I never learned to say thank you properly?"

"Better, mon savant," Lestat said. So passive, lids heavy, he stayed held as though the power weren't all his. "I shall teach you--you're sure to be a fast study."

His vaunted intellect, reduced to this.

He couldn't summon shame at the prospect.

He knew what he must look like as he backed towards the bed whose purpose had once eluded him--thanks to Daniel, he at last had no illusions as to the propriety of his reactions to this man. Lestat followed, all feline grace, drumbeat pulse thrumming in Herbert's hand like the rhythm of that song.

If this were to be his lot, he would not, at least, go passively. When the bed frame bumped the back of his knees he struck, guiding Lestat ahead of him and pushing him down into the plush material. The look of surprise in the man's eyes was worth it, enough to shoot a genuine thrill of power through him. Power still held its intoxication, even when it came from so petty a source.

"So, this is humility?" Lestat teased.

"Who mentioned that?" Herbert countered. "I said I was grateful. I'm giving you what you wanted. Or did I read the evidence incorrectly?" He drew up his hand, still glistening and damp, and flicked his tongue along one finger.

"No," Lestat barely breathed the word. But their senses didn't require any more noise. No, that wasn't true. He required a great deal of it, to be paid in full for his presence here tonight. And part of him, now that he'd opened this door, was curious as to how far the proverbial rabbit hole would go.

"Well, you've caught me." Lestat watched him, amusement in his voice but tension, delicious and taut, in his muscles. "What will you do?"

"Get rid of that outfit. It ruins the view." It struck him that he could do many things, could cut Lestat's throat then and there and have whole seconds before the game was up. He did precisely nothing as he watched his supposed master go graceless with the desire to please.

Lestat's physique was pleasing (and well he knew it, stripping off his flowing blouse first before bending forward at the waist to remove the high boot from each foot, extended as in a bow. The leather pants followed in a jingle of belt and a slick stretching sound. Nothing lay beneath.)

Strong, lean, well-muscled without being overdone or ornamental: this was the body of a man who had been used to physical labor.

His legs, in particular, were those of a runner or rider; no casual use of cars to let them go to fat.
His shoulders and back were nearly artistic, belonging to a statue of whitest marble.

His other attributes… well.

Herbert would be lying if he claimed a purely anatomical appreciation, irrelevant and shallow though it might be.

He'd never been so close to such outside of a procedural setting.

Lestat's hips swayed, deliberate, provocative, as he walked along the side of the mattress to where Herbert lay back on his elbows.

"Well, darling?" He stroked up Herbert's thigh like they were still normal. "Do you like what you see?"

"Hmm," he demurred. "Well, you can take direction. That's good. But what about your promise to teach me?" He caught the hand that had touched him, tracing lines on that cold, perfect skin. Here is where they would cut for amputation. There for skin grafts. There to strip for parts.

"Come closer, and I'll show you." Predatory grin, once more thinking he was on firm ground. That wouldn't do.

Once more he coiled his strength into an unexpected movement, pulling Lestat onto the bed. He'd let the man touch no more than his shoes, and slapped his hand away when those long, fine fingers tried to undo the knot of his tie. "They call you a prince."

"So I've been told." Lestat was still reaching for him, and Herbert acquiesced. He rolled over to straddle his naked canvas, centimeters from touching on all sides.

"Then I'm at your command. Tell me how to enact this 'gratitude' of yours."

"Touch me."

And he did, still holding himself aloft: the very tips of his fingers brushed Lestat's shoulder. "You'll have to be specific," he chided. "I'm such an innocent, after all."

Lestat's pupils blew wide at that, like those of a stalking cat.

(Fetishists were so terribly easy to predict. Disappointing, almost.)

"Oh, my darling," Lestat rumbled. "My little priest. I'll never understand--" Herbert shifted, just barely, and allowed his loose tie to graze skin just for an instant. Lestat grabbed it like a leash. "You've tested, haven't you? The way we feel?"

Herbert nodded tightly. The experiments had been troublesome, utterly subjective attempts to establish a baseline.

"My skin is ever fevered, love. Put your hands on it; do what feels good to you." As an afterthought, he added, "According to your… tests."

Dirty, that. Lascivious and dismissive. But not wrong; pleasure responses were less interesting than pain, but so utterly prevalent now. So much so that it was hard to tell the difference.

Herbert felt a pang somewhere distant, internal, as he pressed down on icy white stone that was utterly impervious and unmoved by his strength.
He mapped Lestat as though he were marking a new textbook, first with fingertips and then with his nails. When the first hints of blood seeped through a trail delineating the muscles of the rib cage, he felt Lestat tense beneath him. But the rules of the game were set. He watched and smelled as the blood bead and begin to cool, and finally to heal, tracing the skin around it and opening another mark when the process was done. Over and over, in proper scientific method, until he barely had to touch Lestat's skin to bring the man's back arching completely off the mattress.

"You're a devil," Lestat gasped.

"I thought I was a man of God." He licked his thumb where blood had spilled, crack of intoxicant on his tongue, but still didn't touch. "I've done as you asked."

"Damn you!" Ah, there. He'd pushed too far. Lestat pinned him, looking half ready to shred his clothes to pieces.

"Forfeiting already?"

There was one baseline established—the limits of patience, the degree to which Lestat would grant him the illusion of power. Choice. He refused to subject himself to the indignity of a losing battle, and instead did as he'd always done in life when a stronger man seized him: went limp.

It was not surrender. It was waiting.

(It was a memory of loss, big hands on his shoulders and loud voice damning him--)

But he tilted his neck just so, issued a cooing moan and a half-feigned whimper, watched through his lashes as Lestat's eyes widened and lips curled in delight.

"Oh, no. Will you be taking your thanks now?"

The kiss was not gentle, not careful or sweet like Louis' caresses. Violent and bruising. For all Herbert had to compare, these could be considered different acts entirely. But where this lacked the almost holy calm of his private, adoring friend, its fire and strength stirred his body in ways it seemed utterly designed now to accept.

The destruction of his shirt was something he'd expected; the pants, less so, but as Lestat's hands roamed over more exposed skin than he'd ever thought to try stimulating, he couldn't bring himself to care.

"My god, you're beautiful," Lestat whispered between sucking bites that purpled his flesh without piercing the skin. Lies, lies, lies. "So perfect--so cunning." Praise dropping from his lips like a nobleman pointlessly seducing a whore, but it all felt good, and what other point was there?

"Tell me." Lestat dragged his prey closer, hooked Herbert's knee over his shoulder - the better to steal his leverage. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Bastard. Not content to have his claim over the body, he wanted what mattered. As if that were any part of this. Lestat's mouth burned hot against his thigh, making him abruptly and viscerally aware of the desperate throb of his own femoral artery. And the moan it drew from him was the closest to honesty either of them had come, hips bucking and muscles seizing in parody of what this was, in the end: fucking, no more meaningful than animals in a barnyard.

"Tell me," Lestat repeated, bending Herbert almost double in his bid to get at more. More secrets, more flesh. Riding the indistinguishable boundary of pleasure and pain as he pinched one pink, sensitive nipple and demanded.
And Herbert, who had waited and calculated but never begged, said "please."

"Anything for you, anything." So magnanimous, as if there were feeling in this. As if the singular softness of a kiss before he bit down, hard, undid moments and months of what had come before.

But thoughts traveled through the blood; that was the risk of it all.

So Herbert closed himself up, walled it off; gave into the sensation and the need and the dying sleepy swoon. Took himself back, mentally, to Before-- long before.

To childhood, to high school, to the days before there was anyone who could be harmed by touching him because no one did.

Not college. Not Switzerland. Not Arkham or Peru, not the library here.

He made himself that boy who would've let Marcus Whitney, the basketball player with the smile, touch him in the school broom closet just for a taste. Would've, but never had the chance.

He prayed it was enough of a shield.

And fool that he was, Lestat seemed pleased. Had light in his eyes when he let go and kissed Herbert with blood still on his lips. "Innocent devil."

Herbert expected that to be the whole of it, to be tossed aside now that his supposed seducer had spilled his lust and lay sated. But Lestat was almost gentle (no, no, no) in disentangling himself, in cutting deep at the hollow of his throat and drawing Herbert's head there.

He took it. Sucked hard at the wound and took the memories spurting over his tongue and down his throat, trying to parse them for information of use. But it was all floral and fond, as much a lie of omission as what he had given: soft evenings by candlelight in Parisian squalor, the screech of violin music, fittings of useless and extravagant clothes surrounded by thick Southern accents. And briefly, flickering, a darkened tomb watched by cold eyes that only appeared unseeing.

He let go and pulled away, playing at feeling overwhelmed. His skin still ached, painful to the touch, and the return of excessive input to his every sense once more threatened his better thoughts. The instinct that infected him wanted nothing more than to lie still and contemplate the silk and velvet in reach of his fingertips. It was instinct, then, that wanted to roll over and curl in the shelter of that fool's arms. Herbert, the thinking being, wouldn't allow it.

His clothing was a ruin--not unlike himself, debauched in the fullest sense of the word, as though he'd ever had any 'innocence' to lose. Still he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat for a moment, weight braced on shaking arms. Those useless memories echoed, still, in his mind.

Skinny arms, just enough muscle for the Work in life. Skinny legs, whipcord body covered in scars.

It anchored him, seeing and remembering what he was next to who he was with.

(He should use the legs for testing--they were so much less likely to be seen and provoke comment. Ordinarily, that was.)

Fewer scars, with the infusion of a higher load of the infection. Carefully administered slices and burns visibly faded, throwing off all his timetables. Some sort of metaphor, like those fictions Louis loved, where this could heal and things made sense.

The echoes…
"Paris," He muttered absently.

"What, love?" Lestat hummed in sleepy satisfaction, tracing a shivering path down the knobs of Herbert's spine. He shrugged it off irritably.

"That's where it came from. The music."

"Music?" There was a sudden, heavy pause. "What music?"

"The violin." Did he always have to be so unbearably dense?

"I heard no music. Where did you get that?" The mood in the room shifted, suddenly tense.

"From your memories," he snapped, the insult barely staying shut inside his mouth.

"Oh. Yes, Yes, of course." A breaking, something being tucked away. Lestat was up suddenly, curling around Herbert's back. "I must have been distracted by the more appealing music you made."

"Mm," he let it pass, unwilling to let what had come before be for nothing. No need for the oaf to get suspicious.

"Shall we go out? You've underfed again. I could taste it. Or perhaps," a kiss to the joint of Herbert's neck, "you'd rather stay in?"

"I think I'm well-fed enough at this point, considering our activities." He pushed himself up. "The music… they sound the same. What you were playing tonight, and the other." Why he returned to this--but Lestat had asked what it made him feel.

And he should know that Herbert was no fool to be taken in by something written before they ever met.

"Similar. Love--"

"Similar, then." Standing in the middle of the room, he was at a loss as to how to leave it. Not for him, the 'walk of shame' (shame was for those who refused self-knowledge). But naked, bloody, and next to a blue steel coffin he stood. What had happened to his life?

(It ended, they'd all say. But he wasn't dead.)

"Herbert." Lestat appeared before him, so fast, looked into his eyes with a measuring, tracking gaze that matched the coffin's hue. So vain. (Deserving of that vanity.) "You're dazed, still. Won't you let me do something for you?"

"Clothes, please." One only got what they asked for in life, after all. "My experiments won't keep." They would. It was only cultures. Research in the library that continued stalling out in the name of other distractions. But it was such an easy out, when Lestat was still pretending he cared for some unknown reason. He'd had Herbert's body, after all.

And it worked still. "Yes, of course." In an instant he produced a shirt and a long coat. "The pants, I'm afraid… " (A little shrug.) "Apologies, cher. I got carried away."

"This will do." Enough to return to his own wardrobe with a minimum of questions answered. Tripping over pant legs made six inches too long would only be a hindrance. He paid little mind to the smears of blood.
Lestat looked him over. "Add some breeches and tights, you would be right at home in Paris." A caress, aborted halfway, as if the man were frozen by some other sight.

"Yes. Well. Later, then." There'd at least need to be the promise of it, for a proper alibi.

He was half out the door when Lestat swooped in with that faster-than-fast movement of his and stole another kiss, fond and proprietary. "Until later, then, mon savant. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow."

With a roll of his eyes he took himself back to his own quarters, in desperate hope of regaining some semblance of propriety.

Only a semblance, as this had proven.

~*~*~*~

It had happened. Just there, not two feet from where Lestat now stood, Herbert had come back to him of his own free will. All was not so lost as he had feared. He could still see it, his proud creation yielding to his presence and then further still, truly opening his heart to Lestat’s touch. He’d been so beautiful, perhaps more so when he’d stood cold and immovable, demanding Lestat bow to him. Part of him regretted not seeing the game through to the fullest of what Herbert could’ve made of him. But he was not a patient man, God knew (before His gaze had turned away). He could hardly be expected to lie in wait when such a thing was in his reach.

Next time, he would be better; there would be a next time. He tried to think of that, rather than the words that had come after and frozen his veins to ice.

No, no need to linger on that.

He bubbled over with joy and the need to share his wonderful news. It would only be right for him to tell the man who’d been so patient and understanding with him. To whom he owed so much.

It was strange how Marius’ rooms had acquired an almost otherworldly air to them; one was left with the feeling that they had stepped through a portal into the soft, warm glow of a better time, lovingly preserved by wise eyes. Lestat was fascinated by it, though he would admit that he much preferred the roaring, endlessly-surging life that the future represented. The need to move forward, regardless of what it cost, was so perfectly captured in his scientist.

Still. Without the wisdom of the ages he wouldn't have his man of tomorrow, now would he?

He let himself in, preparing to be scolded for his lack of manners. But inside he found not Marius but Armand, stretched across a divan and contemplating a canvas. His arms draped over the side; a brush dangled in his fingers. It's not right, he said without speaking, the rare unguarded thought catching Lestat by surprise. He leaned forward to get a better look at the painting, and Armand startled at the movement, hurriedly turning the easel away from the door.

"Oh," he said after a moment. "It's only you." He was dressed in a long linen shirt smudged with paint, an approximation of a tunic, a painter's smock, and a lover's mark all in one fell swoop. His feet were bare: all in all, an undeniably alluring portrait. But it left Lestat no less curious about the one on canvas.
"Afraid I've come to steal your great work?" Not even Armand's poisonous tongue could ruin his good mood. Not tonight.

"Do what you like. I've long given up that fight." He turned the easel back. "Ma--Marius doesn't like this one, anyway. You won't impress him by fawning over it."

"I can see why." The shape of it was human, almost photorealistic, but the eyes were terrible pits of blackness, and the mouth stretched too far in a scream. "Ghoulish." He wrinkled his nose.

"You slept through expressionism, as I recall. No doubt you'd prefer paintings of men on horseback. Or naked women."

"There's nothing more lovely than the human form. Not even your sour face can change that." He paced the room, desperately needing to move. "Where have you hidden Marius?"

"He's out. As I'm sure you observed."

"And you happen to be here waiting for his return, dressed like that? I see I'll have to work hard to steal his attention."

Armand blinked and sat up, then, posture shifting to that of an attentive, serious listener.

"As he's currently not available, I don't suppose I can help?"

Looking at his old, old companion, Lestat considered. Ostensibly the master of this place, Armand was entitled to know his doings; further, as a friend he had the right to share in Lestat's happiness.

But.

It was no secret how Armand's relationship with his own recent lover was proceeding, the dissolution with Daniel fast, ugly, and blatant as ever Lestat's had been with Louis. Whereas this scene only attested to Marius' skill in reconciliation despite those silences which plagued maker and fledgling pairs.

And too, Armand, sitting there, poised, posed, but fidgeting with the bristles of the brush, unwittingly spreading black over ivory, made Lestat remember things.

Things he'd rather forget.

"Nothing you'd be interested in," he said breezily. "As I recall, you detest my charm and confidence in my classic good looks."

Armand's scowl was almost perfunctory, sinking quickly back under the waves of strange melancholy. "You can certainly be counted on for constancy."

Caution or no, there was still room to share his good mood if not the details of it. Especially with someone he was often fond of (or was now, having mostly forgiven the business with the tower). "Come now, it's not as bad as all that, is it? Here, call me a blasphemous, vainglorious imbecile with no regard for tradition. You'll feel much better." What was there to feel bad about, anyway? "Daniel would take you back, you know."

"Your advice is as ill-informed as it is unwanted." Armand turned his familiar, searching look onto Lestat. "Why are you bothering?"

"Why aren't you happy?" A question for a question. "Aren't you happy to have your maker back?"
"Would you be?"

An unfair question. Magnus had been a terror, brutal and unyielding and gone in a roar of flame. "If I were as lucky as you."

Armand, the jaded little pretender, snorted and flopped sideways on the divan, gangly legs splayed and heels barely touching the floor. His head and arms hung over the other side, brush before his face as he arranged the bristles into a row of sharp peaks. Auburn curls could've been used as a dust mop with a slight push.

Lestat had never seen him look quite so boyish. Natural, almost, without the weight of centuries on him.

Lovely, really, and so Lestat joined him, perching at the foot end of the crushed velvet lounge and staring at the unnerving painting.

"Daniel called himself lucky." The high, clear voice floated up from below. "Lucky, he said, to have a maker he loved, who loved him. But it changes, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps it needn't." And he thought of Herbert, returned of his own free will. Of Louis, staying near however much he professed to loathe absolutely everything Lestat did. "Perhaps it all cycles back to love, in the end."

"You would say that." Bitter little thing, witness to endless horrors. "Didn't I tell you? It always comes to the same end. The means might change, but you still end up alone. Eventually, they hate you. Even when they love you, the hate is always there. Waiting."

The dull, rote conviction of it shook him somewhat, and he grasped for an out. "Alright, theologian, what of our souls?"

"You broke up my coven," Armand reminded him none too gently.

"Not that claptrap Satanist nonsense. Marius' theory. About our souls being reborn. Do you think it's true?"

"It's not part of dogma." A smile, bitter and black. Lestat remembered his own Dark Moment, and pitied his fellow. "But so little of reality is, it seems."

"Do my ears deceive me? I thought I heard you agree with me." Lestat reached out to ruffle Armand's hair, but somewhere along the line it became a gentle pat.

"It's been a strange time. Why are you asking?"

Nicki and his ghostly music, hanging around Herbert and his stitched hand like a shroud. "Do I need a reason to prattle on?"

"I never thought you stupid, Lestat. Only ignorant." The boy monster rolled, curling around Lestat on that small space, balance precarious.

Lestat smiled, only a little bitterly. "Can it not be both? Surely the world at large can't be so very wrong."

He shifted a bit, to better accommodate the cuddling. Just the right size, five and a half feet and thin… and so cold against him.
Almost right. Almost what he'd hoped to keep in his bed, but had to set free.

Arms around his waist, paint smearing into his shirt, but why care? All was right in the world, as right as it could be for vicious beasts like themselves.

"You're not stupid, my friend." Armand whispered again. "Only blinded by your own light."

"But it's warm, isn't it?" Was he such a glutton, that Armand was cold as ice against him? Armand, who so loved the pining mortals who shored him up?

"Yes. Just as the sun is before it takes us. To be near you is to court beautiful destruction."

Lestat shivered. "I won't let that happen."

"You'll try." It was so hard to tell what words from that mouth were poison and which were simply part of Armand's shatterglass existence.

He wouldn't see Herbert destroy himself. Before, he had turned his eyes away, and his oldest, dearest love had gone into the flames. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

They lay like that for a while, Lestat absently stroking Armand's hair. And then it was as if the room filled with light, radiating from the doorway. Marius was so full of stolen mortal passions he seemed ready to burst with them. Lestat felt Armand squeeze him tighter, no doubt worried about his cushion retreating in favor of the new guest.

"Lestat--so you're here. What can I… " He was halfway to the couch before he truly looked, and the startlement on his serene features was a powerful reminder. "Armand, I hadn't realized. Shall I leave you boys to your visit?"

Even the best of them suffered that emptiness where their dearest should be.

"No, Marius," Armand said before Lestat could answer. "I was just going to remove this painting. You may have your time."

He rose on bare feet and padded silently to the easel, leaving Lestat oddly bereft. Strange, to wish he'd stay, when he'd just been the essence of polite and courtly withdrawal. When Lestat didn't wish to speak of this with him.

The painting had to be held far at arm's length, and his blackened fingers smudged the very edge, where a frame would cover it.

"You're very lucky," Marius remarked as he came to sit at Lestat's side "Armand rarely lets others see him. What did you think?" At Lestat's puzzled expression, he chuckled. "Forgive the turn of phrase. The painting."

"Ah," he tried to nod as if he'd understood all along."It's… unnerving." To poach a phrase.

"So, you agree. I'm not sure it's good for him to obsess over something so dreadful." A thoughtful expression crossed his face.

Lestat started to protest, knowing how Armand got when his fixations were pulled from him. But then, Daniel had indulged Armand's habit's, and look how that had turned out. Maybe Marius had some deeper insight. Little matter. "You've been to the city?"

"And beyond. At my age, it takes a great deal to truly satisfy the thirst. Extremity or quantity; we
succumb in the end. I had hoped to share with my darling student but… ah, well. He neglects himself too much. Forgive me," another of those warm smiled. "What is it you wanted to speak about?"

He started to spill out the news, but something held him back. The air was ripe with metaphors. "If we are eternal," he asked instead, "are our souls doomed to the same mistakes?"

"I'm not sure I follow, unless this is your way of leading up to confessing some dire brattish sin." His eyes twinkled with fondness and concern, and perhaps it was unfair to attempt to pick up a conversation 190 years old as though it had never been dropped. But it was so much on Lestat's mind, and minds so much Marius' expertise. The need to explain had truly not occurred to him.

"You said, once, that our kind return. Come back with knowledge no mortal souls have, and beg their way back into this life. Like Pandora. So in that case… must we recur?"

Platinum brows knit in earnest consideration.

"Ah, Pandora, my wayward love…" Marius shook his head. "I remember, now. And this has been on your mind all this time?"

*How could it not?* Lestat wondered, leaning his shoulder against Marius'. Hard, impervious, like Lestat. Built for the ages.

"Some would say," Marius began gently, with such care in his voice, "that simply making the choice to return to this evil when given another chance is proof of repeated mistakes."

"But why must it be evil?" he burst out. "Can we not do good? Isn't the act of saving someone from death a show of love?" How Nicki's confession taunted him, risen from the grave to stab through his heart. That his love for Lestat had been a means only to damn himself… But think, only think of the good Herbert might do, could he succeed.

"For any we might save, we condemn a thousand to their deaths. You run from it with your rapists and thieves, but you still know it to be true. It is admirable, in its way. A little candle against the darkness."

"Then is there nothing to be done?" Despair, so long contented at the corners of his mind, threatened him.

"That is a question I'm certain your Louis has thought on. But you, I think, are more a practical man. Am I wrong?"

Of course he wasn't. Marius knew all their minds, save Armand's. But it was kind of him, Lestat thought, to ask. "Your advice… Herbert has been coming around."

"That's wonderful, my friend. And yet?" he prompted.

"The things he says. The things that he sees when he feeds from me. I worry about what calls to him."

"He is… intense, from what little I've seen of him." Marius spoke carefully, a thousand things unsaid in the gaps between his words. "Given to loops and rings of thought, circling all about his peculiar interest."

'Obsession' was such an ugly word. So modern; so clinical. So terrifying.
"But he avoids me." *(Troubling, that sort of distrust.*) "Armand would know more--they had a talk, some time ago, about your daughter."

Marius had never chastised Lestat for that act he must have learned of only in hindsight, from Louis' cursed pack of truths--the edict Marius had given never to make one younger than Armand shattered in a night of impulse, a deathbed reprieve.

That rule Lestat had broken, and the vow of silence he'd kept. Even now, with all the blood and fire his choices had wrought, in his heart of hearts he wouldn't have it the other way round.

He'd loved his angry, vicious, silent daughter with her secrets and lies and corpses.

"Armand's solutions don't often favor me." More often they left corpses. His daughter's ashes, Louis' broken heart. Nicki's tormented mind, and his own broken body.

"I know your history has been fraught. But seeing you two just now, I thought--"

"I don't trust him for advice." A thought, a solution. "You seem happy here, Marius. Wouldn't you consider leading us?"

Marius turned toward him, placing a steadying hand on his arm. "I haven't come to lead a coup on my fledgling, Lestat. But," a weary sigh, "If you trust me that much, I will give what help I can."

"How did you bring Armand back to you? He looked as if he would hand you off to Mekare next, when you came back. And now he's yours again." At poor Daniel's expense, but such were the perils of love.

"I'm afraid my answer isn't as mysterious as you're hoping: I was honest with him. I told him that I couldn't live without the sight of him, and then I waited for him to return."

"And if it comes back, as they say, it's yours?" So simple--so hopeful. For his Herbert had come back, in so many ways. Had brought, perhaps, pieces of those gone before with him, but even that--even that might be to the good. If Lestat could look into hazel eyes lit by the fires of science, and on occasion see the hint of a violinist or an infant predator peering out, how could he begrudge? Would he not once have given anything for such a miracle? Let alone within his already adored, brilliant, beautiful fledgling, marred by life and strong enough to drag himself from its cruelties.

"He's so much, Marius," Lestat said, throwing himself dramatically to the side in a mock-swoon worthy of an ingenue in the Commedia. "When he had me tonight, I thought I'd burst from happiness. Masterful. And what he showed me in the memories… "

Simple history, unadorned and intimate. Truth and trust and the little human wounds that made a man.

Marius' lips thinned.

"Quite something, your young one. Not more than a year, and already he grasps what it is to speak without words. And ‘Masterful’; you'll have to take care."

"What do you mean?" Lestat peeked out from under his arm, still thrown across his forehead.

"Ah, no. It's cruel of me to spoil your happiness."

"Marius, please." Lestat reached for his hand. "I asked for your thoughts. I treasure them."
A sigh, full of relief. A natural teacher fit to explode with ungranted wisdom looking for an opportunity to share. "Your fledgling makes great strides in such a short time. No doubt it will serve him well as time begins to pass him by. But you must ensure that he does not burn too bright, and thus flare out."

A bonfire. A sunlit tomb. A clearing for burning witches. The very thought tore a helpless cry from Lestat’s lips.

"Here now," Marius pressed his hands. "Don't be discouraged. You've done well. Already he's come back to you. You need only protect him from himself. It needn't be forever. But such bonds are important when one is young," As if anticipating, he went on. "You needn't cage him in. Only keep watch. You want to show him you care for him, don't you?"

"More than anything."

"Then as his maker, you must be a central point to which he can return. Otherwise, you risk losing your position." Such safety, avuncular caring in Marius’ closer lean-in. "You and I are much alike, my friend. We adore our charges, and wish above all to care for them. To ease their passage through the nights. And as their makers, it is our privilege and responsibility to do so. When we love one so much younger than ourselves, it's only natural to keep them from our own mistakes."

"He's so independent, Marius. He needs none of me." Was that not always the way with Lestat's lovers? Brilliant, all, but beyond him. From Gabrielle onward.

"Truly? Or has he merely been forced to behave so?"

And that… that was a truth, disquieting to consider. Herbert, so strong and sharp, and yet...

He'd sold himself to Lestat for the promise of a listener. A conversation. Had clung to Cain like a drowning man, though Cain swam on oblivious. Tried to keep his mentor past death itself, without the gift of vampiric power to aid him.

Had never been touched all his mortal life, never made love to, despite all the passion and command within his strange, foreign soul. Or brain, as he would put it.

"There, you see?" Marius spoke in response to the direction of Lestat's thoughts, smoothing gently over the curls Lestat only then realized remained ruffled and disarrayed by his earlier lovemaking. "He needs a guide. A patron, if you will. Yearns for it, though life forced him to be otherwise."

"He'll never admit it." Herbert's companions were all chosen and kept near by his own will, balking at influence.

"Hasn't he come back to you?" Marius countered. "He's seeking, but he knows not why. This is your chance to show him. Your grave responsibility as his maker. Provide what he needs, even if he may not know what it is. Safe harbor from his own destruction."

"I'll try." Anything to keep Herbert from tearing himself to pieces. Anything to make him happy.

"Your love does you credit, Lestat. You give yourself deeply, with all your heart. But now you must master yourself, for his sake."

Vigilance. He understood. A wicked thought struck him then, an irresistible chance to use the vast knowledge before him. "He… Marius. Is he happy? Have I made him happy?" Petty and childish, but it nonetheless consumed him. He wanted to be no less than the sun.
Grave and unmoving as a face carven into a sarcophagus (an abandoned one, in an abandoned tower, so long long long--stop), Marius let his eyes drop closed a moment. "Lestat--you know I prefer we use words to communicate, rather than rely so on the speech of our minds. It is treacherous, and things can be--"

"Tell me!" Once, those shoulders had been as iron bars beneath Lestat's hands, capable of holding and mastering his near-newborn form with but a whim. Now they flexed under his stolen power, one in the same.

And when the summer-sky eyes opened again, he felt pierced to the soul by the ancient foreboding there.

"He is seeking." that powerful, sonorous voice boomed. "He is lost and frightened, and he feels a loathing somewhere inside. He mortifies his flesh and writes himself fictions as to the reason. He needs you, but he is not yet happy. And his steel-appointed tomb is well-prepared already, should he never be."

The prophecy, for it could be called nothing less, cut him to the quick. If he failed, he would lead his beloved once more to death. Terror, blooming as a poisonous flower, paralyzing him. And for a raft, he could cling only to the simple thought of need. Herbert needed him.

"At last you see the weight of the crown upon our heads. Yes, Lestat," he answered a question unspoken, "there is still time."

"I won't fail him." If that was what it took, he would become Herbert's shadow. At least it would keep him alive until the answers of happiness presented themselves.

"Take care, Lestat. And remember, what he rushes to embrace may lead to his end, no matter how he tries to convince you otherwise. He cannot help it. And so, you must."

Obsession clouded the mind. Marius would know--he'd seen Herbert's mind just now, after all. He could be trusted, when nothing else could. Lestat's idea of recompense suddenly seemed a pale imitation, and it was with no small embarrassment that he offered it. "About Armand…"

"Oh?" All the talk about words, and none of them could resist the temptation to know the minds closed to them.

"He's…" (afraid, for something Lestat couldn't pinpoint, all of it bound up in love and a thicket of dark emotions that had pushed him out before he could touch them) "cold. He's neglecting himself pining away for you. Romantic, coming from him. But I thought you would want to know." Hadn't they just spoken of happiness, and their responsibility to give it? It was as though the moon broke through clouds, illuminating Marius' proud features. Such joy in the very thought of his fledging, where Lestat's were ever creatures of despair.

"There, you see?" Handsome smile on thin lips Lestat had once dreamed of claiming for his own; how times changed. "You understand how it is with our charges, particularly the fragile ones, and I thank you for the aid."

A kiss, chaste and speaking friendship itself into the chambers of Lestat's mind. "You were made to love your creations. And you will prevail."

The image of that beatific approval followed Lestat as he left Marius' chambers. He wanted that joyous calm, coveted it. He wanted Herbert to enjoy the full promise of eternity, not a few scant years before his adversary Death snatched him back. And so he resolved, eyes on the door now so
tentatively open between them, to make sure his fledgling was not alone.

~*_~*_~*

Louis had begun more than a few recent nights wondering whether his current entanglement was a mistake. Herbert was so young, and so prone to fixation. He was dogged in a way that could well destroy him, given the right opportunity. But even as Louis rose each night promising himself that he would be reasonable, the urge would melt away at the sound of that pointed, driven voice and the sight of eyes that glittered with possibility only Herbert could see. His mind’s eye fixed on Louis’ ideas, and he never sighed or squirmed when discussions passed long into the night.

And, too, there was the Herbert who appeared when they were safely alone in Louis’ shabby flat, whose methodical doggedness became something ever so slightly more timid, determined to turn calculation into a gift of sensation, given by someone used to measuring and not at all to feeling. They’d made love a handful of times more, in the armchair and on the rug and once beside a window, moonlight streaming in on them. Gentle and ecstatic, the melding of minds and bodies (and, yes, *that* Herbert did sigh and squirm). More often it was simple closeness, sitting together and reading or talking, two corpses touching with tenderness but not that ravenous hunger.

It should have been hasty, yet, to say that he loved. But there was no other word to explain the sudden pain when the visits became sporadic and then, for nearly a week, Herbert seemed to avoid him entirely. Nor another reason for the urge to see his face, strong enough that it drove Louis out of the library in search of his erstwhile friend.

It was not Herbert he found.

“The Scholar emerges from his paper tomb! I didn’t expect this night to offer such a precious gift.” Marius turned his attention away from the record player in one of the mansion’s many parlors.

There was no concrete reason to explain Louis’ feelings toward the Roman. Lestat adored him, had made that clear through every page of his book, and the man had come to their aid during the terrible events following Lestat’s concert. But none of that chased away the unease and desire for flight that curled in Louis’ limbs, vestigial impulses of the ultimate predator.

Still, manners above all. “Good evening, Monsieur Marius. Have you seen Doctor West? I had hoped to discuss something with him.”

“Oh, Lestat’s newest. He has created quite a stir, hasn’t he? Something about him seems to inspire fascination.”

Louis had grown up in society, and was no fool unaware of insinuation. Yet as his sister had once explained, long into the nights after his death and before the fire that let her know to put his name upon the crypt, sometimes the key to dealing with such was to maintain a sweet innocence, a determined obliviousness.

(Adelaide had taught him much, so much more than Paul and his visions. Louis had held her close to his heart, and even Daniel had never heard her name spoken. Had never cared to ask.)

And so his reply was mild.

"Dr. West is a highly intelligent man, and he borrowed a book from me..." he paused for a moment,
genuinely confused. As bad as the sense of time ever was when the world became one endless
night, so much worse here, where the tropical heat removed even the passing seasons as markers.
"Two weeks ago?"

"Hmm. I believe he’s indisposed at the moment, more’s the pity. It seems he's borrowed a good
deal from you." Marius leaned in. "You have beautiful hair. The way it catches the light makes me
wish to paint it."

Louis' back stiffened under the inspection, barely used to Herbert's cautious forays, out of practice
with Lestat's bold flirtations and Armand’s genteelly proprietary handling. This was none of those.
This crept, silken and slimy, down his back. "I'm afraid you would find me a poor subject. Lestat
was left at his wit's end when he tried to schedule me a sitting. I simply haven't the temperament
for it." The insinuation was a more dangerous thing, best not left to fester. "It's true the doctor and I
have sparred on occasion. Philosophy is benefited by opposition, wouldn't you say? A voice such
as his is a valuable dissent."

"You do a credit to your era, my friend." Another of those smiles that said nothing, nothing, but
veiled the arrow to come. "Such graciousness, even to a rival. It must be a rare sight indeed, to see
you lose composure." A cold hand brushed along his much-remarked-upon hair, down his cheek.

"I fear you're under the same illusion as many who don’t know me well, Monsieur. It’s good sport
to make much of my meager virtues, as though there were no man beneath them." He extracted
himself from the touch, taking a few extra steps back for good measure. Dangerous, this man.
Powerful and capricious, but without even Lestat's warning forthrightness.

"Surely not. No one could possibly forget that. Least of all one as hot-blooded as Lestat, if you’ll
pardon the expression--however his current preoccupation must hurt."

Lestat, the mercurial one, given to his meteoric highs and abyssal lows--God alone knew what he
must be up to now. The thought of him weeping over some new catastrophe of his own device was
simply tiring.

"That's none of my affair." He cursed the phrasing as soon as the words left his mouth. "Lestat's
troubles are his own."

"And yet you involve yourself in them time and again, don't you?" Marius smiled, a facsimile of
heat in it despite the fact that he'd died while Christ was still a babe in arms. "Charming, how well
you play with your master’s younger offspring."

"I have no master," Louis replied tightly, making his face like stone. The greatest evils of his
lifetimes had involved slaves.

"Haven't you?" Smoother yet, soft as snow falling. "Well then. How strange it must be for you, an
exquisite treasure so unguarded."

"I neither need nor want safekeeping." He cursed Herbert, logic be damned, for drawing him out
into this hellish interrogation wrapped in manners. "I am a self made man."

"Oh?" One slim eyebrow raised. "Did you not, then, inherit your plantation? Your immortal blood
from Lestat? Your freedom by your daughter, and your knowledge by my Amadeo? But now this
new child." He closed the gap between them once more, gently gripping Louis chin. "No doubt
Lestat adored giving you his all, before your friend came along."

"You go too far." Louis could feel flames rising in his cheeks, knew it was what they liked to see;
that ‘ideal’ humanlike response of every little blood vessel and emotion. It was all he could do not
to bare his fangs, to let the predator take over and so risk a losing battle. Or worse. "You insult
me."

"I assure you it was not my intent." How sorrowful he sounded, even as he held Louis immobile as
much with his presence as his stony hands. "It's such a shame to see you abandoned by your maker,
now that he’s taken your dear friend in his arms."

Louis had been only half-listening the the absurdity, the rambling, already plotting his escape from
the conversation, until that last gem dropped fully into his consciousness, disturbing all like a stone
flung into a pool.

"I beg your pardon?" he managed, numbed slightly with surprise at the thought that the oldest
among them could be so very confused.

"You mean he hasn’t told you? So private, that Herbert." His voice took on a confiding tone, while
across his aquiline features crept the satisfied smile of a matchmaker whose work has been well-
done. “Lestat’s finally managed to melt that chilly heart." (Nothing chilly about it--all speed and
electricity and sharp pained sweetness, and God, Lestat had tasted that too--of course he wouldn’t
have ceased his pursuit--) “Why, I can hear them half the nights, getting better acquainted. Lovely,
when these things go as they should between maker and fledgling.”

Breath on Louis’ ear and neck, purely for effect, and he made himself ice against its offer, ice as he
should be against all such advances. “I wouldn’t know,” he managed somehow, eyes trained on the
vivid glass of a Tiffany lampshade.

“Though I suppose you may have to wait a bit longer for that missing book." Missing, or
abandoned, or stolen. "Of course," Marius captured Louis' trembling hand then in his own beringed
one. "This must leave you at loose ends, musn't it?"

“I can wait for Herbert to return,” he said firmly, something tearing behind his calm facade. “He
will no doubt have much to say regarding our studies, given Lestat’s lack of interest.”

“Such hurtful things you say, though perhaps I cannot blame you. Do you think I cannot feel how
my dear friend’s abandonment hurts you?” Cold, marble hand at his throat, blond waves in his
face. “You’ve been alone so long, with none to cherish you.” Lips a breath from Louis’ as blue
eyes bored into his.

The wrong blue; wrong blond; wrong marble.

(And those should be wrong, too, should not be in his mind at all, let alone there with Herbert--)

Marius waited with the patience of ages, inviting Louis to move that final space himself. (It was,
after all, a time-honored tactic.) But as he was a gentleman, Louis recovered himself with a breath
and held himself to rigidly correct posture, even within the cage of those hands.

"Your offer is appreciated." He wanted nothing more than to pry his way free, but that would only
make him look more the fool. "But at this time, I feel any new… connections… would be unwise.”
Tell the truth; tell the truth to the ones who could see your thoughts. Always and only simple truths
from a simple mind, and they wouldn’t see the nuances.

Armand had taught him that, all unknowing.

Marius only chuckled. "Of course. The only one of us not to go to ground. Strongest and most
independent. I admire that in you." He stepped back and then raised Louis' hand to his lips, courtly.
"Perhaps another night."

Never, not if he had any power to change it. But he swallowed that down as he took back his hand, both of them turning at the sound of feet.

Armand was staring, and Louis, unsettled already, forgot his manners in trying to place what was so off about the redhead. He was dressed in one of his suits, well cut, his hair cut short and his skin pink with stolen blood, the very image of self-possession. But there was something frozen in his expression, his whole body, fingers worrying at the button of his cuff until it came free of the fabric.

Marius was once more a smooth surface of magnanimous warmth. "Armand, how good to see you. I had feared after our last conversation that you would wish never to see me again."

"It was my possession. You had no right." But Louis could hear it, untrained though he was. The slight, couched hesitance in the ancient boy's voice.

"Forgive an old master the habits of the studio coming back to haunt him." Something in the too-intimate hand Marius put to Armand's neck took Louis back a hundred years or more, to when he would receive that very caress, cold behind his collar. Learned, apparently, and mimicked as so much of Armand's behavior was. "It was not well done of me to dispose of it, whether or not its style was what I would have permitted when you were my boy."

"Armand," Louis began, wetting his lips unconsciously. Human habit, that nervous twitch. "Have you time to talk? It's been so long…"

The mix of hurt and venom in that tobacco-leaf gaze stung, as did some subliminal lance of feeling Louis had never learned to comprehend a fraction as well as the rapport he shared with Herbert. (Had shared.)

"No need to talk, Louis. I'm sure you can find others to occupy your time."

The blunt unwelcome was a slap, and he realized he had never been less than beloved in Armand's eyes. How different it felt now. How sad, the loss of something he hadn't even known to value. "I'll leave you to it then."

He left them, relief now tinged with regret. He had always assumed those who called him cold had merely been shallow, only interested in his appearance and unwilling to plumb deeper. Now he added another might-have to his list of regrets, long as Marley's chains.

Even as he contemplated it, some hot impetuousness in his gut told him to go to Lestat, to prove that Marius' words were a falsehood manufactured for reasons unknown. But no. That, he reminded himself, was what Lestat would do. And Louis had always had to be the adult. He could be patient. He would wait and hope that Herbert came to him soon, and wait for his companion's reassurances to set things aright.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, things on Night Island come to a head.
Chapter Summary

For months, the Island has spun along in precarious balance despite its inhabitants' various ever-growing webs of connection. Now, discoveries and revelations threaten to bring the whole thing crashing down. Herbert hatches a plan; Lestat seeks new and different counsel; and an old friend makes a new appearance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Night Island, January 1988

"Herbert, I insist."

"You've done so several times, and my answer remains the same." Herbert clasped the final button on his shirt, now wise enough to keep an extra set in Lestat's drawer--a practicality, given the man's lack of restraint.

"Whatever it is, it can wait! You molder away inside these walls. I haven't seen you leave to feed in weeks."

Herbert turned back to the bed, where Lestat lay propped up on his elbows. "And whose fault do you suppose that is?"

"It is a crime to be so irresistible," Lestat nodded gravely before grinning. "Which makes me even more determined to make it up to you. Anywhere you want to go, name it. Just as we'd planned."

'Planned,' if one could call it that, almost immediately before the revelation of Dan's loss. No, the thought did not appeal. But Lestat would go on this way until he had what he wanted--either Herbert, or a sufficient excuse.

"May I be frank?"

"It is one of your more charming features."

"I," a calculated hesitation, "maintain certain reserves about being seen. The act of killing is an overwhelming one."

"Oh." The hook sunk deep. "My darling, you needn't be embarrassed. It is a beautiful thing to share. An honest expression of passion, even love."

"I am aware of that, Lestat. Acutely." The passion he'd felt for Dan, that night he almost went too far--the tenderness for Sonya--much as he loathed it, the effects were undeniable. "I simply don't feel comfortable sharing those feelings with both my chosen," (he paused, searching for a word that made him sound less like a serial killer), "individual, and a spectator." He sighed, just past the
threshold of audibility. "I suppose I could continue using my stock of whole blood, though at this point--"

It was unfair, he supposed, using what he now knew of Louis' past feeding habits as a tool in this negotiation. Still, the way Lestat's face tightened at the suggestion told him he was on the right track.

"You can't!" And then, in a rare small show of self awareness, he amended it to, "You shouldn't. A fledgling of your age needs living blood. We're not so different from humans. These years must be given over to becoming strong, so that you can last through the ages."

(As *if he were a collectible to be dusted.*) "Give me time, then. Let me know who I am alone before I invite you in."

"Alright." Lestat sounded as if it had cost him dearly - no less than a death. "But you will be careful, won't you? You know how I care for you."

"Of course." To all questions and none. Facade re-secured, he turned to go.

"Wait!" Lestat struggled to the side of the bed and held out his arms. "Before you go."

*Endure,* he told himself as he retraced his path from the door. It wasn't so awful, feeling Lestat's arms around his neck, a quick press of lips.

"A stolen kiss," Lestat proclaimed, proud as a child. "You'll have to return alive to reclaim it."

Herbert raised an eyebrow.

Lestat looked down at his hands, smile small. "A silly little superstition, I know. But let me have this foolish comfort."

Something about that look, unguarded and simple, twisted Herbert’s stomach. He couldn't be there anymore. "Until later, then."

He forced himself not to think as he returned to the lab, puttering an hour away on minor matters and bookkeeping, spreading out the time to avoid suspicion (and he did decide on the whole blood-time being less than a luxury).

When he returned to Lestat's room to find the man gone, he made his trip to the library, stress shuffing off his shoulders in waves. Here, at least, was good conversation.

Louis nodded to him from his usual chair, book in hand. "I wasn't sure I'd see you this evening."

"It required some definite finagling. Lestat has been keeping me under close watch, for whatever reason." The library seemed… off, somehow. Darker. Tinged with a sense of foreboding, not unlike the few times he'd tried to creep in and investigate its inhabitant as a mortal.

"Has he?" Louis crossed his long legs and turned a page. "I hadn't noticed."

Herbert smiled softly at his friend. Firelight lanced between the strands of his jet black hair, warming the white planes of his face. So distractible, when he focused on his studies.

Was it any wonder they fit together so well?

"Come out with me." He whispered it while passing, heading into the stacks, rather than as he'd like to. He'd like to drop to his knees by Louis' chair and put his hands on the armrests, so he could
ask and then beg a quick kiss. Lestat's influence flowing through his veins, no doubt; he couldn't really see Louis, with all his reserve, appreciating something like that even if it were permitted. "I've missed you."

The weight of his key in his pocket was a curiously intense sensation, made so by significance rather than gravity.

Another few moments went wasted in pantomime before he could slip out the door (Louis still seated as though nothing had happened) and make his way into the streets. While part of him was tempted to linger on the streets, watching--Lestat's thought patterns again, no doubt--he pressed on to the little apartment that he could almost, in his weakest moments, imagine becoming a home. A small hole for ideas and quiet, more reminiscent in some ways of the Arkham basement than his new lab in spite of its place on a second story. A place he'd been invited, chosen.

He settled himself into the chair to wait. The high of Lestat's blood hadn't yet worn off, the hallucinogens of it prompting him to stroke his hands down the fabric of the chair, the thick carpet, his own clothes. He picked up one of the yellowing paperbacks and riffled the pages back and forth over his fingertips, heedless of the words inside. The blood left yearning, unanswered, under his skin. It plagued him still nearly an hour later, when Louis appeared at last.

He resisted the urge to go to him, instead trying to salvage a respectable pose. "An eventful journey?"

"I wanted to be sure I wasn't followed." Louis strode over, picking up the book Herbert had set aside in the throes of his fascination. "I wish you would care for these as you do the ones in the library."

"They're easily replaced, aren't they? Mass market editions, most."

"Some. But I remember all of them. Every acquisition is something I wanted to preserve here. Is it too much to ask that you respect what I value?"

"What happened?" Louis' behavior was so strange, uniquely agitated. "You're behaving irrationally. Did you ingest something unusual? Has anyone tried to give you something?"

"No, Herbert," Louis said, jerking his wrist irritably out from under where Herbert fruitlessly sought a pulse. Old habits; green eyes flashed bright, but showed no particular evidence of intoxication. "No one has given me anything." A flush rode high, almost fevered, in his cheeks--he'd fed on his way.

"Well, then. I finished that translation of Barthes you lent me; it's still out of my depth, but I'd hoped you might be willing to--"

"I'm shocked you bothered. It's not as though it's precisely where your passions lie, is it, mon cher?"

(Stranger and stranger. Louis never used such--) Herbert collected himself, stood and drew near enough to peruse an adjacent shelf of cheap, sweet books.

"You knew well enough that anything called the 'death of the author' would attract my attention."

"I'm no longer interested," Louis said bluntly, focused, and no, no--he'd said he could do without, that he returned to himself, but surely not so soon. Surely there was something Herbert could offer, even if only attentiveness.
Surely the things he’d felt when that lush, dark, open mind enveloped and blanketed his in centuries of velvet dark punctuated by gold and rubies couldn’t be spent so soon. Not without warning, at least.

"Then I take it you've moved on without me to Radway?" he tried, tamping down the tension and grasping fear as best he could.

"One of us has moved on."

"That's enough!" Herbert slammed his hand down on the shelf, leaving a crack in the oak. "I have no interest in doublespeak. Least of all where we'd established an agreement of honesty."

"Honesty then," Louis bit. "Where have you been, the nights you are not with me?"

Herbert blinked, because such a complaint was--weirdly hopeful. Positive; based in wanting more of his presence, not less. "Continuing my work, which you claimed no interest in."

"Perhaps I should have." Louis’ lips thinned, but at least his large green eyes were intent, not vague or glassy as they sometimes got. Engagement was necessary.

"We can't be seen together at all hours, you said it yourself. The point of it was to avoid arousing suspicion."

"For which you enlisted Lestat."

"Yes!" So, Louis had worked it out. That did make things simpler. "He's an utter irritant to be rid of lately, but it defers suspicion. That's why I--"

The slap cut him off, hard enough that his glasses flew from his face. Louis' eyes burned. "How dare you."

Herbert knelt to retrieve the frames. "Since we'd agreed to avoid calling attention to our… " friendship, relationship, affair, feelings “association, I elected to take an added measure. If someone read your mind, they wouldn't detect any kind of foul play. It wasn't my intent to lie to you."

"I'll not be made a fool of, Herbert. Least of all with him." The pain blazing through those eyes was fresh, no coolly intellectual; a new wound, and one Herbert thought he recognized, from the emotion that jabbed him then. Him, the deciding factor.

Oh. Ooh. Damn his idiocy, and damn his failure to understand books, however many critics' works Louis spoonfed him.

"I--hadn't realized you still harbored territorial feelings for Lestat." He should have; living together, as family, for nearly a century? With someone like that? He breathed carefully and worked to modulate his voice. "Had I known, I would have chosen someone else." Armand. Daniel. He could have pretended affection for a mortal, if need be; the tall boy coming down off heroin had more than shown an interest. He could have--

"You think that is the problem?" Louis' eyes blazed through his curtain of hair, his shoulders tucked in and low. A protective stance, one for fighting. The swirling, unsettling hostility that manifested here and there finally made sense.

'Lacking in telepathy' indeed.
"Isn't it?" He nonetheless countered, perplexed. "You all seem to have created a communal living situation of your own free will. Touch is expected without territorial bonds. What makes more sense than diverting attention this way?"

"It isn't done," the soft voice rose nearly to normal conversational levels. "It isn't meant to be this way. Have you so lost your bearings that you've forgotten what it means to give yourself to someone?"

"You--" Somehow it hadn't occurred to him that Louis, ever a student, would have grown so ossified in his ideals. "--want monogamy?"

Louis' laugh was bitter, and Herbert bristled. "What are you laughing at?"

"You. This place has crept inside you while you erected your pretenses of objectivity. Think of what you've said. Would a sane man, a moral man, argue that he must go to another's bed to keep his beloved safe? Would you have, before you came here?"

Color stained his cheeks. "Adaptation or death is common to all organisms."

"To animals. Were that all we were, you would feel no need to justify your lust to me."

"I." He swallowed, stalled out.

The idea of making such a demand had never occurred to him--had never been realistic or plausible even before he arrived on the Night Island. He'd never dreamed of starting such a fight when he knew it to be unwinnable.

The idea of anyone else wanting it from him?

"I honestly didn't realize. You never said, and I've never--" He wrapped one arm about his torso to clasp the opposite shoulder. "I'm sorry. I can leave, if this is. If my behavior has." He hadn't the words, hadn't the tools--it felt like a small amputation when he reached into his pocket and extracted the small brass key he'd apparently never deserved. "I'm sorry, Louis." (He'd never apologized enough, when he was alive. Had never learned to let go, leave well enough alone after causing damage. His clinging killed, either feelings or bodies; strangled the life from them.)

He was halfway to the door when a hand on his biceps made him flinch and freeze.

"Wait. Don't go." The 'yet' hung unspoken above him, a veritable Sword of Damocles he hadn't even noticed before. Louis' voice was softer, though still laced with his unmistakable steel. "Lestat can be very persuasive. He enjoys twisting those he touches, using them, and I know just how much he affects you in particular on a physical level."

Yes, the whole house knew--

"It's pleasant." How much honesty did Louis truly want? Better to keep it vague. "But I value our time together more. Now that I know it's a problem, that will be the end of it." If only Louis would keep holding him safe, he'd improve his espionage.

Louis sighed. "It isn't that simple. If you withdraw now, Lestat's suspicions will run away with him. You'll cause the very situation you set out to prevent." He turned Herbert away from the door, back toward him. "I fear that may do more harm to you than me."

"Then what do you suggest?" Every move beyond the little island of allowance he stood on was a minefield.
Louis was silent for a long time, doing battle with himself. "For now, carry on your plan. This only hastens the inevitable." He let go of Herbert then, arms wrapping around himself as he sank into his thoughts.

"So you're giving me permission to keep hurting you?" Herbert didn't reach out; didn't know that he had the right, after what had apparently been a betrayal. He longed to, though. "It's not as though it means anything to Lestat; he won't care if I stop."

And then he was held tight in thin, strong, cold arms, face crushed to Louis' collarbone and nose filled with the scents of cedar and old wool.

"Non. Non, mon ami, he would care. Lestat is jealous, don't you know that? He is dangerous, and I cannot--" he broke into French, then, and Herbert had been working at learning it, but cuneiform and Arabic were such distractions and the spoken form went so fast and

Then he picked out one name from the torrent.

'Claudia'.

Well then.

Louis' gentle hands turned desperate, and his lips pressed to Herbert's bruise-warm cheek felt at last like a hint of forgiveness.

"Death has come for me more than once. It hasn't succeeded yet." Well, technically, he supposed. Lestat did hold the record on that front. "I'll just have to keep a closer eye on my back. And yours."

"That's no way to live. Even for us." Louis pulled him closer, and an idea began to form in the silence. "It's time to go."

"Now?" The suddenness of it threw Herbert for a loop. "Do we have funds? Housing?"

Louis shook his head. "Not yet. But soon. Vampires are solitary. Covens like this one always break down--we must be gone before it takes us down with it."

Finally. Part of him regretted the loss of observable subjects. But then, hadn't he resurrected his study of death wherever he went? This time would be no different. "I'll prepare accordingly."

"It will take time," Louis mused. "We'll have to be certain we're not followed. And you, my dear," an almost fond smile, "must do something about your thoughts."

Pulling back was an almost physical pain.

"I've been told as much before. I can't promise you that; my work is non-negotiable." Stupid-stubborn, but that was the one part of himself the disease hadn't changed or stolen. Besides Louis, that was the worst of what Lestat's endless, irritating blandishments denied him.

(He still didn't know why he remained animate, if not alive. There was no reason for him to have been saved, by any logic his maker worked by. Not beautiful, or talented, or anything Lestat was capable of valuing.)

"There. That's what I mean. Not your work, but your thoughts. They're too transparent; even I can feel them." Louis' thumb felt gentle on the bruise. "And I'm sorry you've been given no answers."
Ah. The psychic, or empathic, connection the others possessed. He'd pushed it to the side in his research, frustrated with his inability to make progress. He studied the body, and the brain was its own matter. It would take time to crack that. Now he regretted delaying. *Then you can hear this?*

"No." Louis shook his head. "I had a sense of questioning from you just now, and little more. But my senses are undeveloped; on occasion I receive images, strong emotions, no more. But the others will hear you as clearly as if you had spoken aloud."

He cursed himself. All that work, and he'd left an obvious weakness in his plan. "You say there's a way to control it."

"Yes. We'll work on it together. If you cannot block them out entirely, you'll at least be able to misdirect in future. It explains why so many find me empty headed, non? How they never caught me, after the Theatre."

He couldn't help grinning then. "Brilliant. Absolute brilliance." Raised in an aesthete's era when even germ theory lacked acceptance, and still Louis had survived by devising clever tricks. "They won't know what hit them."

"The fact that Lestat will never hear either of us is the greatest advantage we possess."

And yes, there was that, at least; the first real, good advice Louis had given besides the practicalities of body disposal. Blood still rose in Herbert's cheeks at the memory of skillful manipulation, the now-obvious use of his own mortal thoughts against him coupled with that inescapable fascination they all inflicted upon the living.

Louis continued. "He'll not hear one thing in our heads; it's the others we must worry about."

Stranger and stranger, the symptoms of their disease. Never an obvious answer—shouldn't related parasites make such feats *easier?*

"Armand seems to have no interest in others." Herbert mentally crossed him off.

"But Louis shook his head. "He relies on reading minds to ease his way. He's become gifted at planting desires or thoughts in others."

"Herbert raised an eyebrow, recalling only the endless slew of questions. "Won't it be more suspicious if he's suddenly without that information?"

"Obfuscation is easier. One must only keep a simple thought atop all true concerns. Like turning on a radio."

Conceptualizing the attempt was already giving him a headache, but he tucked it away for later.

"Marius, too. His reach is considerable and his mind could overwhelm one of us easily, if he took a mind to it. Distract your thoughts. And rely on his manners. His rules, then," Louis corrected at the sight of Herbert's sceptical face, pale face tense and contemplative for a moment before reengaging. "And then there's Daniel…"

"You won't have to worry about him," Herbert said dismissively.

"Oh?"

"It's obvious that he's pining away out there, lurking by the library every night. He wouldn't do
anything to put you in danger." Men like him were predictable that way.

Louis regarded him sadly. "You still know so little about us. Our love is closely tied to violence, Herbert. One can become the other without warning."

Herbert was the one to snort, then.

"You really think me so naive?" He sneered, recalling what he'd almost done to Dan (what he should have--at least then Dan would have died in the arms of one who knew and loved him), and what Lestat had done to him in public and private. "I've seen it all before. Dead or alive, that's not so unusual." The things he'd done back, in Lestat's decadent bedroom--they danced on an edge, and if it was the disease twisting him so, perhaps he should be happy for the excuse.

At least that would separate him from the human predators he'd known.

At least what he felt for Louis was safe.

Louis was reaching out again, touching him more, and for a moment he felt so nearly real again. Close to human--perhaps better.

"My love, you court destruction by dismissing what we are. Learn to behave normally, lest they suspect something worse than trickery and act accordingly."

Hands on his face, forcing contact with those startling green eyes.

"I would not see you in the fire, for all Lestat's blood carries a flaw."

"A mutation?"

Louis shook his head, weary. "Herbert, please. Just for tonight, accept what I tell you. Leave the puzzles for when things are safe."

Life was never safe, and waiting for it to become so would mean a life wasted. But-- "Very well. But when we discuss these things, sometimes, I would appreciate you joining me in my lab. It would," he stumbled, sincere emotion clumsy on his tongue, "My work is important to me. It's something I only share with those I trust."

For a minute Louis didn't meet his gaze, and Herbert regretted his foolishness. At last, he said, "Very well. Another night."

Herbert nodded. "You'll still need to explain your theory."

"Lestat's fledglings are damaged souls," Louis said, fingertips absently tracing the stitches in Herbert’s wrist, eyes directed somewhere distant. "I don't know if they call to him in life, but in death they have all been unstable."

"Yourself included?" (As though the damage weren't obvious--but stable, so very resilient nonetheless. Functional.)

"I was left too noncommittal to pursue my own end," he affirmed, and thank nonexistent God for that very fact. "Cowardice was my savior. That I'm cut off from the stronger abilities may affect it too." He paused for thought as he so often did.

Ideal. Herbert had known it all along. "All the others were stronger?"

"He never told me these things, you understand. I had to read about it, like everyone else." The
hurt there was palpable, so raw even Herbert could sense it. "He turned his mother to save her from death, and she left to pursue solitude, leaving him behind. He made his childhood friend, and the turning drove that one mad. He went into the fire under Armand's watch, begging for death. My Claudia... she was too clever by half. Too ambitious for the fate our selfish fighting drove her to. She couldn't hide what she was either. Not in the end." He covered his mouth with his hand, still on the verge of tears after all this time.

Herbert shifted on his feet, left adrift as ever with open emotion. A thought occurred to him, a simple diversion from the one wound in Louis raw enough to move him quickly. "Did one of them play the violin?"

And Louis looked at Herbert strangely. "He spoke to you of Nicki?"

"Not a word." Lestat's obnoxious reticence, as so much else, held true from the days of Louis' memoir. And when they were together, he and Herbert didn't spend much time talking. Nor working, anymore. "I just hear echoes sometimes, in his mind. Is it important?"

"Nicki was his first love." No bitterness there on Louis' part, oh no. "The one who burned. Armand would know more than I, but--"

Herbert shook his head violently, unwilling to travel back down that path for simple gossip. (Though if it truly was a trackable pathology, it might soon constitute medical history and therefore necessity. He'd been called mad often enough while alive; he was not prepared to succumb to a tainted parasitic infection now that he'd surpassed that.)

"No, I thought not." Louis bit his lip. "He was a savant, to hear Lestat tell it. A brilliant--"

That soft, hushed voice continued, but Herbert heard only the sound, not the words, preoccupied as he was by the sound of blood rushing in his ears as the pieces snapped into place. His hands clenched into fists.

It wasn't enough that he was a plaything, a momentary amusement. He was a replacement. Was Lestat sending him those thoughts on purpose? His tightlipped reaction would suggest not... but the music. The notes from the past Lestat had sworn were written for him. He'd heard, distantly, of psychic driving. The slow breakdown of identity. And how convenient that these little reminders were cropping up now that Lestat had begun expressing 'worry' about his experiments.

"Herbert?" Louis' touch cut through his thoughts."You're bleeding."

His nails had cut through his skin and into the muscle of his palm, creating a steady drip of blood. He hadn't even noticed. "Ah," he said, staring at them. He was Herbert West. A scientist. A self made man. He was infected with a pathogen that had certain irritating side effects, but he would not be overcome. He would defeat death, and anyone who stood in his way.

"Herbert!" Louis was shaking him now. "You're pale. Did you kill before you came here?"

"No time," he muttered. Anger gave him focus. Anger was helpful. It pushed other thoughts, complicating thoughts, out of the way. "I have something we can use in our escape."

"It's soon yet." Though he'd suggested it, something now held Louis back. How interesting.

"We'll need to test it at least once. My reagent has been known to cause disproportionate strength. With the way this disease recycles blood, we can use that." They could tear the others limb from limb, if they had to.
Some of the violence in his mind must have gotten through to his gentle lover, as lovers they still seemed to be.

"You would have me become a greater monster, despite all your protestations?"

"No." Herbert shook his head. "I'll never ask that of you." (Nearly as much for fear of ruining that perfect, stable expression of symptoms as any sentimental reasons.) "You can administer it to me, and I'll get us out."

Herbert was no stranger to massacres or escapes. He'd made the last stand for a beloved friend more than once. It was always worth it.

"Only the sort of monster I've always been, then." Louis kissed him for real at last, dancing with utmost delicacy around the edges of his fangs until Herbert's mind reeled. "No, my love, I'll not repeat my old mistakes. It's time I stopped hiding behind those stronger of will."

~*~*~*~

When Herbert admitted his actions, so brazenly offhand, Louis saw another beneath his skin. The blood animating him at that time was not that of any mortal victim, not like Ruth whose essence lit Louis’ own flush of anger and whose remains would never be found.

No, the mannerisms Herbert had just then were all Lestat, proof enough in the very tilt of his head and the way he absently sucked his own lower lip. So perhaps that sight made Louis rash; perhaps old habits died hard, but the slap felt so good, like two birds with one stone. He was ready to call the offender a devil and hear peals of laughter when Herbert stilled himself and apologized.

The claims that he'd not known he was doing wrong were sheer absurdity, and yet--Louis knew him entire, had drunk deep and felt the way confusion threatened at times. He knew how little of that life had been spent with the living, learing how to behave on more than a superficial level. Like one raised by wolves, as vicious and simple. Yes, it was a madness; but one guileless, unthreatening, and how Louis did want to believe, when Herbert so quickly accepted the blame. Contrition was new, never before seen matched with the expressions of Lestat’s which danced across that face.

Herbert was easy, asked almost nothing of their time together.

And so Louis had spoken foolishly, giving in to that runaway fantasy Herbert had entertained so long.

He’d not expected a plan--certainly not thought that it would involve Herbert’s experiments. But after their fight, he owed his friend some reward of time and effort, did he not? Especially when it mattered little, in the long run?

A night later the laboratory was cold, an icehouse almost, and to Louis’ oversensitive nose smelled of a dozen different deaths in various stages. The furnace in the corner held not just ashes, but a suggestion of burnt meat.

There was a certain stark beauty to the cleanliness and order of it all, alien though it was to Louis’ sense of aesthetics. For him, the cyclical, untrammeled growth-death-decay-birth of wild nature, or the exquisite unconscious composition of an artless mortal going about their brief life. But this
place showed a care like nothing else from Herbert, gleaming and polished and organized for the scientist’s strange purposes, the things he did which called his passions.

Here and there, irreparable vagaries disturbed the machined perfection: a cracked wall, a gurney not matching the rest of the decor and with frame subtly bowed by inhuman strain. A chromed countertop reflected Louis’ fluorescent-illuminated face like a mercury mirror, flawless save for eight whorled spots impossible to scrub away. Fingerprints, pressed in by marble hands; Louis’ own nearly fit, but the reach was wrong, long musician’s fingers describing a ratio Louis had once known too well.

Those hands had held Louis seventy years and more, brought him into death itself. They’d pulled him from fire, given and taken a beautiful, perfect daughter. They’d written a history and composed an opera to draw him back, then left him lie fallow in favor of grasping for another.

They’d made Herbert, there in that cellar, while Louis watched; they’d killed and saved that beautiful, wonderful, damaged creature Louis loved, and clearly they’d held him, too. Touched him and enjoyed his charms with the blunt, brute joy they’d always taken in Louis, and what an image that was burning in his mind.

Handsome both, fierce both, strange and wild and raised by wolves, and Louis gnawed his inner cheek to keep from gasping aloud at the thought.

And yes, ill-considered though it was, he realized that perhaps they should run, before these entanglements grew more… disturbing.

Clearly those hands would keep reaching out to both of them over the centuries.

He sat down upon a stool with eyes closed tight, to await his Herbert’s return and what would come of it.

~*~*~*~

With the knowledge that Louis’ wellbeing, the very solvency of his mind, was in his hands, Herbert took every precaution in preparing his serum. He pulled every detail he could remember from his former subjects and from his own infection in an attempt to find a mixture that would enhance ability without destroying mental faculty. But nothing was certain without testing, no matter how many theoreticals he explored. In the end, there was nothing but his best laid plans and hope, an emotion he was both intimately familiar with and rightfully disdainful of.

And one other thing.

The knowledge of his place in Lestat’s mind, his now-obvious purpose, still bubbled like acid under his skin. He had thought he could bear it, the humiliation and uncertainty and otherness of it all. But the knowledge that it was not even for him, that whatever uncomfortable feelings had lodged in him were utterly false, was beyond the pale. He would have his own manner of goodbyes, however Louis advised against it.

He only had to enter Lestat’s room, where the man had become used to waiting for him, and this time he sent that wretched song tripping low off his tongue. The effect was immediate, however Lestat chose to play it off. And the fool put his arms out as if things were the same, caught Herbert’s hands to reel him in for a kiss. "An hour away is tantamount to an ocean. A whole night
nigh unbearable."

Herbert bore it. It was easier now to put away the heat that tickled the back of his mind. "I've been thinking more about your offer."

"Mm, which offer is that, my darling? To dress you in something more befitting your station,"  
(more befitting the person he was meant to become) "or to make love to you under the full moon?"

"Your offer to run away with me, of course." He shook off the gentle, seeking touches and dragged Lestat's head down to toothlessly maul his neck before whispering in his ear. "I'm nearly ready."

Lestat shuddered, hands roaming freely over Herbert's body with the confidence of a longtime lover. Two hundred years' long.

God, he'd been stupid.

"What, pray tell, prompted this change of heart, Herbert?" Lestat gasped, just like a real boy.

"I suppose I'm just seeing things a bit more clearly." Herbert allowed himself to be lifted and shoved onto a table, spindly and antique and in all likelihood destined to be a pile of splinters before the night was out. "My glasses must have been clouding my vision."

"You really do look better without them, love. Your eyes are so striking." So saying, as if it were meant to be some grand compliment, he kissed Herbert's eyelids. "Piercing."

Herbert worked a finger into the knot of his tie, fantasizing what he could do with it if only their lungs weren't so utterly unnecessary. "I've thought of a location as well."

"Let me guess. Some wondrous research facility? A terribly thrilling university? Dare I hope for something as romantic as Switzerland?"

He barely kept from balking. Those were happy memories. His feet had stood on solid ground there. *Lestat couldn't have them.* "Paris," he said.

Lestat floundered. "Paris? But - it is the city of love, of course, but why?"

"You lived there, didn't you? Before you died." It cost him to use their mythos, but the reward was worth it. The little flinch. "I'd like to see what made Lestat de Lioncourt who he is."

"It's a dull story." Lestat tried to nuzzle back into his neck, but Herbert was undeterred.

"Sometimes it's as if I can see it in your mind. A little hovel in happier times, and music between us."

The convulsive clench of Lestat's hands bruised his hips, but that was nothing new. Heat, dull and sluggish, pooled under his skin.

He hummed a few more bars of the song.

"Fancies," the bastard muttered. "Nothing more. As dreams, vanishing upon waking."

"'Think but this, and all is mended,' hmm?" He'd spent so long ignoring the Shakespeare, and now thanks to Louis it was wedged irrevocably in his eternal memory. *(So would this be).* He granted a brief, nipping kiss and wrapped his legs around his index case, his carrier, his killer if their cosmology was to be believed. "Tell me anyway, Lestat. Lie if you want. I hardly knew you before you did this to me; the curiosity's driving me mad."
"You knew me--know me. As much as you need." (What did a puppet need to know of its puppeteer, after all?) "Please, darling, let me closer."

"You make me feel like I'm burning."

Lestat flinched away, but he was trapped. "You're saying these things on purpose."

"What?" He'd been a passable actor in his own right, when he'd needed to. Lying his way into Miskatonic, a poor shaken young man reeling from his mentor's untimely death. They all saw what comforted them most. "Where are you going? You wanted me closer. Weren't we going to run away to Paris?"

He could see the tremor travel Lestat's frame, feel it gripped between his knees. Lestat put his arms on Herbert's shoulders. "No," he shook his head, hair following the near-convulsive motion like the tail of a kite. "You're not yourself. Whatever it is, let's let it pass."

"Now? After you've already pulled me in? Damned me with your affections?" Words pulled from none of Louis' story, but there in his mouth nonetheless. Repeated as if rote. "Don't leave me again." (Where had that come from? He needed Lestat to run from him, not make himself more of a nuisance!)

Lestat gave a muffled, pathetic cry from behind a hand and crushed Herbert close to him. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I failed you."

He didn't deserve pity. Herbert refused to let him have that peace. Instead he pulled back and kissed him hard, teeth clacking and skin bruising with the violence of it.

When they broke--when he allowed Lestat to break--a half-clotted string of blood hung in the gap between their mouths before falling to spatter clothes that would soon be ruined anyway.

"You get what you pay for, with your coin of the realm." The words were strange in his voice, but the sentiment rang true. He'd whored himself for days, weeks, months--years, really, long before Lestat ever entered his life. Played the game and appeared as they wanted, if only it got him closer to his truths. "You and your gifts."

Lestat was weeping in earnest by then, tears streaking his face like honey on Herbert's tongue. Flashes, bittersweet and vindicating, of a place and a person and a feeling.

Lestat's stained gauze shirt shredded like tissue beneath his nails. Shredded like that corpse, that first night, that first sign of what demented thing Herbert was going to become when it was all said and done. At a glance he half-expected to find ribbons of flesh hanging from his fingertips, a forensic scientist's dream.

It wasn't unlike the night that had begun this stage of his sickness, him fully clothed and pressing a pliant and naked lover down into the sheets. But that was the trick, wasn't it. They all looked the same, even while they rotted from the inside out. Lestat hadn't wept for him, not then. Hadn't given up so thoroughly, arching his naked form desperately closer as Herbert pierced his neck and rifled through memories as dark, throaty moans rang in his ear. Something, anything, he could give to Louis in payment for this. He couldn't pretend not to enjoy it, the rush of heat. The lean muscles contracting and gripping helplessly in search of release. He'd made such a fool of himself, all for this.

He let go, and Lestat made no move to ravage his veins. Lestat instead curled around Herbert's form as if it were a fire in winter, his eyes clouded as ominous thunder. "You'll forgive me, won't
you?" His voice was exhausted. Good; drained and passive, he’d hopefully be well-slowed. Herbert told himself he didn't care as he kept his gaze resolutely fixed upon the wall. Was this the pitiful, cringing thing of Louis' account? He reminded himself of the tricks that had come before. What he stood to lose if he faltered.

"Is that what you thought this was?" he asked in an approximation of tenderness, bloodstained golden curls tangling briefly around his fingers. His stitches snagged, tearing a few strands like sparkling wires free. Lestat's hands on his waist were weak; he could have held Herbert trapped, if he wanted, but let him slip from the bed as though his decision to do so mattered.

Games and lies and this, night after night. Herbert was... ill-suited.

"This was fucking, darling. The damned don't have the power to grant reprieves." Truth and dogma lay unhomogenized on his palate. "And unlike you, I don't believe everything in this world can be bought."

Lestat looked so young, with his features drawn and the infinite sorrow of a liar caught scripted across his brow. Only twenty—ten years younger than Herbert, and two hundred older. And still making mistakes.

Herbert felt certain that was the one trait they held in common.

"Darling--" Lestat began as Herbert tugged his tie into position, snug against his now-strong pulse, black silk charmeuse delighting his senses in spite of himself.

"Say my name." His own voice sounded distant, foreign. Musical.

"Love--"

"Tell me who you had in this bed, sweet Prince. Who you thought came to make peace."

"Her--"

"Liar." He didn't need to shout. His voice was at absolute zero, daring to be disobeyed.

"... Nicolas." Lestat's voice was so small, so broken, no living soul could have heard. He dripped streaks of red onto the sheets. "I didn't mean--"

"Pathetic." He had the confirmation he needed, raw and ugly enough to cut him free. There was someone who needed him. Someone who trusted him. He wasted no more time, hurrying to the lab with all his considerable speed.

Louis looked stiff and out of place in the antiseptic setting, sitting stiff and prim so as not to touch anything. "Are you alright?" he asked when he caught sight of Herbert. "You're crying."

He touched a finger to his cheek, and came away with a smear of red. Lestat's, no doubt. "We should have some time, but that's no reason to delay. Are you sure you're ready?"

Louis was silent, taking a perfunctory breath. "Yes."

"Since our infection came from the same host, I used my blood as a baseline in balancing the mixture, then diluted the solution. It should augment your strength without affecting your mind."

He paused. "Will a needle pass through your skin?"

"I'm not certain," Louis admitted.
"Better just administer it orally. It would be risky to waste time trying to find a good vein." Herbert held out the vial.

Louis smiled. "Yes, we wouldn't want to bring risk into this endeavor." But he hesitated as he took the softly glowing serum, the bright green almost completely diffused by already blackening blood.

"I'll watch the door." Herbert laid a hand on his arm, patted it gently. "You're safe."

They both should have known that he had made his bones as a reckless liar.

Louis downed the blood in one gulp, old habits as a practiced drinker useful again. Even his gentlemanly manners couldn't keep him from grimacing at the taste of it. They stood together in the near-dark, waiting for something to happen. It couldn't have been longer than a minute, though the time seemed to stretch to ten times that.

And at last Louis fell to his knees with a groan, shuddering and foaming blood from his mouth. Scientific protocol crumbled, and dangerous personal attachment took hold. "Louis! Can you still hear me? Are you-" Louis raked a hand across his throat, shredding the tissue easily. Though Lestat's blood healed it almost as quickly, the shock held Herbert immobile long enough for Louis to start for the door.

"Lhurghhh--" Fluid bubbled in Herbert's minced throat, muting him and aggravating a gag reflex he'd thought long gone. Vestigial, apparently.

He hawked up a deep red-purple clot the size of a plum as he stumbled, then tried to accelerate to the strange, instantaneous speed they possessed.

He rocketed into a wall, leaving shattered plaster in his wake. Panic ate away at him. He'd thought he would be enough of a safeguard on his own, bolstered with Lestat's blood, to keep Louis safe. He didn't have any other failsafes, and if Louis got out to the mansion now, they'd be done for. They'd be stopped. Permanently.

"Lhuiuu," he rasped, muscle still knitting together and head dazed by the collision. Fuck. Fuck. Louis had reached the door. Herbert staggered to his feet--

Lestat was standing in the door, holding a struggling Louis at arm's length seemingly without trouble, despite Herbert's efforts to weaken him. Advantageous for now. And thinking beyond now wouldn't help Louis. Everything's a tool, if you're not so stupid as to stick with the hammer.

"Restrain him!" Herbert shouted. "He'll need a transfusion." His surfeit of blood would be useful for something at least.

Lestat's eyes were pinpricks, unable to tear themselves away from Louis' struggling, vicious form. "What have you done?"

"That's not important right now--"

"What have you done?" The fool, the incompetent imbecile, freed one of his hands to grab Herbert by the throat and slam his head against the table. Herbert felt a fracture, already beginning to heal even as it formed.

"It'll be worse if you let him get away!" He grabbed Louis' other arm and hauled him toward the
examination table. How many deaths this place had seen; he'd had to replace the restraints twice. But they held now. Louis thrashed and snarled, but he was no stronger than a normal reanimate. He was what Herbert would have made of him, had he been tasked with saving his life. The thought turned Herbert's stomach.

"Fix him," Lestat snarled. "If you've done something irreversible to my Louis, so help me--"

"Be useful or get out," Herbert snapped. *His* Louis. As if he'd come anywhere near the man but to leer and make tawdry flirtations. As if he understood him at all.

"I would forgive you nearly anything," Lestat said. "But not for him. Tell me the cure is to bash your brains out and feed it to him, so I can have done with this raving, damning lunacy of yours!"

"Shut up and put your lying mouth to better use. He needs to be drained." Instinct spoke, that shameful unacknowledged assistant who had always guided Herbert in his times of greatest need and worst inspiration.

"What?"

"Do you know of a better way to remove it from his system?" Lestat, opportunist that he was, didn't hesitate, wrenching Louis' head to one side and drinking deep.

It was—a sight. They were a beautiful match even in this hideous state, even with Louis reduced to feral instinct, with Lestat clutching and ravenous. Louis' making must have been something like this, so many many years in the past.

Herbert hadn't thought Louis could get any paler, but from ivory he lightened to snow, faint charcoal shadows forming beneath eyes not just green but glowing with Herbert's poisonous innovation.

"Enough--he's weakened. I can't--"

"You'll keep going if you want his mind back, Lestat. Of course, if he's just another toy… " Cheeks hollowed just slightly, throwing his appearance from 'beautifully fragile' to 'horribly gaunt.' The bones in his elegant wrists showed, and finally, *finally* the light in his eyes went dark.

"That's enough."

Lestat was full, burning, and half-crazed when Herbert dragged him off that beloved bundle of bones.

"It's too much! He's dying, you little--"

"He'll live." Scalpels still worked on Herbert's flesh, teeth too intimate for a calamity like this. As he pressed Louis' mouth to the incision on his throat, he wondered whether he would see another night.

For almost a minute Louis was still, the blood trickling over his lips with no reaction. And then, as if a switch had been flipped, he clamped down, grasping the will to live with painful certainty. Herbert almost jerked away, his own survival instinct balking at the ravening thing sucking him dry. He forced himself to lean into it, for once paying the cost of his actions. Even when his knees gave out, and it was little more than the table holding him up.

Strange, strong hands appeared to break them apart, freeing Louis from his bonds and setting Herbert upright against the counter. Lestat held him steady, as they both stood watch, waiting.
Their sleeping beauty stirred by inches, flowering under the infestation that animated them. He sat up slowly, as if time had gone away. "Herbert." He blinked. "Did it--Lestat?" Honest confusion wrapped in wariness.

"Louis!" Lestat rushed to embrace him, leaving Herbert staggering at the sudden lack of support. "Louis, love, are you alright?"

"Fine." No need to count the extra seconds before Louis pushed his maker (one of them, now) away. "What's happened to Herbert?"

"Nothing he didn't bring on himself," Lestat said darkly. "We need to get you out of here. This hellhole is no place for recovery."

"Lestat, put me down. I'm not one of your mortal conquests." Though weren't they all? Herbert's hopes, ones he hadn't even known were there, flared as Louis knelt beside him, gently taking his face in those cold hands. He looked different now. Smoother. "Are you alright? Did I hurt you?"

"No, Louis. You--it was my fault. I was wrong." He strained, reached hard with that part of his mind he'd only just begun to learn, and felt a foreign confusion, a mounting distaste. A hint of duty.

Not his own.

Thank God, he hadn't lost that mental connection, however much it was unwittingly broadcasting to him.

Louis flinched back, suddenly, and, yes, evidently it still worked both ways.

He had tried to tamp down the images.

"I was--" Terror, self-disgust in the one remaining person who had trusted. Had believed.

"Contained," Herbert interrupted bluntly. And still his (not friend, not lover--he ruined it, always) looked nearly dead on his feet. "Take him away, Lestat; he needs rest. I'll dispose of… all of this."

The struggle was clear in Lestat's face, but his affection (such as it was) for Louis won out over the obvious rage at Herbert.

"Later for you."

Undoubtedly.

There was no way Lestat could have missed Herbert's flavor in Louis' veins, the electricity of the reagent flowing freely. He'd tasted it often enough beforehand.

Herbert just hoped he could take the lab to pieces before he died.

When they were gone he gave himself a few wasteful minutes of reflection, thinking of ways to spin this. It was all meaningless now--Louis wouldn't want to be near him, much less chance everything on an unknown future. But still he did what he always had, and fitted together a lie that would cover their attempted flight. No bags to account for. No funds. It hadn't been much of a plan at all. Just… an experiment. Friendly, gone awry.

It hadn't been more than five minutes, by his estimation. He was preparing to get up, though his body fought him. And then Lestat was there (neglectful, throwing Louis aside after only a few minutes) looking down with a storm in his eyes. The clock, broken, had moved forward an hour.
"You little fool." Herbert was too weak to protest as Lestat scooped him up and carried him, not to his own rooms but a spare with a coffin and a lock. "I should kill you for what you did to him," Lestat said as he dumped Herbert onto the bed.

Herbert rolled onto his side, trying to concentrate on recovery. He needed blood. Everything hurt.

"At least show some regret, damn you!" Hands pressing down on him, forcing him to look.

"All I have are regrets. If you can't see that--"

The slap was a battering ram in his barely-healed skull. Could none of them but Daniel have the grace to punch him like it was a real fight?

"I see only a vicious, arrogant brat who has no appreciation for anything good in this world." So close, he could feel Lestat's breath on his face; in a moment of unreality, memories swam and he thought he was about to be crushed to death, suffocated by the unbearable strength of his own folly as his love made it safely out. But the body on his was hard, cold, and he remembered its yielding fragility of a few hours past.

"I suppose that makes two of us, then." He made a show of licking the near-nonexistent trickle from his split lip.

"I found you in the gutter, an inch from death!"

"YOU SHOULD HAVE LEFT ME THERE!"

Something broke then, as those foreign words hung in the chilled air. Something inside Lestat’s expression vanished; something in Herbert’s chest flickered out.

"And so I leave you here, my mad darling." Blue-grey eyes, more blue than grey then and fairly glowing with rage where Herbert had once been foolish enough to see interest and affection. "May you enjoy what it does to that mind you so pride yourself upon."

Some one had to, Herbert thought distantly as the door slammed shut.

There was a window.

The question at that point became whether to bother dragging himself into the coffin.

He knew he would. He was a survivor, for all the good it did.

~*~*~*~

This had been one of the worst nights in Lestat's recent, perfect memory. He'd bared his heart only to have it torn out by vicious, poisonous hands (and still, still he wanted a reason to forgive anything at all); and then he'd chased after, wanting to make things right… and found his worst nightmare made flesh. Another one of his cursed fledglings nearly dragging a sibling down to death. He was certain his heart was still pounding even now as he sat by Louis side, eyes sharp for any change.

"You're sure you're all right?" He asked again.
"Yes, Lestat. There's no need to fuss over me now that you've remembered my presence."

Nobody else cut him to the quick with quite such ease (until tonight, until--) "Louis, I'm sorry. I--I got caught up. Dazzled. You know how I am. But you… if anything were to happen to you, it would all be worthless. I would move through this second life as a ghost, and there would be no joy left in it."

Louis rolled his eyes, but Lestat felt cool fingers soften and return his hold. "Fool me four times." He shook his head. "You have a talent."

"I'll always come to your rescue, mon amour."

"So you did, I suppose." He sighed. "You went back for him. Is he alright?"

"He's safely contained, mon cher." Lestat hadn't liked installing the 'extra' coffin; he'd told himself it was for visitors, or newborns, intended merely to cater to the needs both Herbert and Marius had found lacking upon their arrivals. All that, even as Herbert descended further into his strange, maladjusted behaviors.

"Contained? But you know he'll need to feed, after all that," Louis said too mildly, some hint of lightning snapping in the back of eyes that had been dull and empty for so long.

Louis' beautiful face, unmarked--his whole beautiful perfect self, there for Lestat to hold. His gentle soul unchanged by that hideous, effervescent stuff that had coursed through his veins, the fluid that had worked its dark magic on Herbert just as much as had Lestat's blood.

"He'll need to be dealt with." He'd been so sweet, once, in Lestat's arms, shivering and begging and alive. Fragile.

All a mask for such cruelty, such lack of common decency that he'd strike the most precious being in the house. He'd filled Louis with his poison, and then sat quietly in his cursed laboratory after, pondering his horrors wrought. They were all dead, but Herbert was cold.

"And here I'd thought his fears baseless." Louis looked stricken, and in all too familiar a manner.

"His fears?" Lestat gawked. "He courts your death, nearly destroys your mind, and you worry about his concerns?" When had this happened, that distant and remote Louis had grown to care for someone else?

"I agreed to it," Louis said with a calm, measured, almost dreamlike conviction. "He warned me of the dangers. I'd rather you didn't treat me like a simpleton." He started to stand. "I'll see to him if you won't."

"Louis," Lestat caught him. "You can't be serious."

And then that calm shivered, serpents cutting beneath the surface of a black pond.

"You abandoned another of your impulses, and it was left to me." Disturbingly familiar, the hint of a smile on Louis' tragic face. "Isn't this what you always wanted? A brother, a fellow to keep me content? It's your oldest tactic."

"He's monstrous, Louis. I can't let you near him." From whence this devotion? This ridiculous care?

"He's what you made of him!" And it could be one hundred and fifty years ago, with the way blood
(Herbert’s blood, late of Lestat) stained Louis’ cheeks with the marks of rage and passion, as the pain flashing in his eyes showed him still to be alive, not drying up into a horrific marble monument to his beauty. ‘From that first night until this. You and your selfish, draining 'love' that demands every soul bend in worship to your whims, and wait in stasis when you run after some new folly. You brought this on your own head."

"Betrayal again, Louis? So much for 'old tricks.'" But it hurt like the first time, as much as when Claudia had slashed his throat. As much as when Gabrielle had left him behind, and Armand had whispered sweet poison before pushing him from the tower. Tears pricked, but Lestat would never let them fall. Not before proud, cold, perfect gentleman Louis, though the rest of the world could drown in them for all he cared.

"There was nothing for me to betray," Louis spat, in blatant disregard of their past family, their reunions twice over, their sweet promised future. As though he weren't made for Lestat' safe harbor, his eternal homecoming. "You chose another, and the fact that you find him lacking only now that your schemes to part us have failed says less about him than about you."

"Has everyone in this house gone insane?" The line between hyperbole and deadly seriousness was hair-thin for their kind. And Lestat heard a near-whine tightening the back of his throat. "You disliked him! I never stopped you talking."

"You kept him to yourself for how long, defiling him in his innocence and his madness, and I forgave him that infidelity because he came back to me."

"You're not making--" And suddenly the puzzle clicked into place, and Louis' words made altogether too much sense.

*Infidelity*. As though, were any loyalty owed, it wouldn't be to Lestat--as though he weren't the one made a fool in the matter. He swallowed dryly; old wars given new life.

"You and… how long?"

"You have no right to know that," Louis said with supercilious primness.

"I have *every* right. I made him. And you, lest you forget! Was it your idea to set him on me in the end, or did you just bat your eyes and suffer beautifully until he arrived on his own?" For what could Lestat believe that last, savage joining had been but an aborted killing, with this new information so raw in his mind? He pushed Louis away. "Don't worry. I'll check on your precious beloved."

"Lestat--"

"*Don't* test me, Louis. Or I may rend him limb from limb before I have time to regret it. I'll be the very tyrant you love to paint me as."

Anger held him up and kept him moving. How dare they. How dare they, when he had begun to hope--and to bring Nicki’s memory into it, to upturn that sacred grave just to be rid of him. He didn't go to Herbert's room. It would be too dangerous; he truly would do something he'd regret, whatever show he'd put on for Louis.

Instead, he went to that wretched basement. He could barely stand to look at the thing, the damned workshop he'd built with his own two hands. A marriage gift, a bride price for his horrid love, the one who kept wounding him. Lestat smashed everything he could reach, the explosion of glass and crunching of steel the smallest of balms on his anger.
When it all lay at his feet, it still wasn't enough. And he remembered his own stroke of genius, the reinforcement meant to wall this place off from the rest of the house. Yes, there would be great pleasure in seeing it burn, twist and melt. It was so easy to coax the flames hot and blue, to get lost in the roar as it began to collapse in on itself. He understood a fraction of Louis' fascination in that moment.

And when the fire raged high and threatened to reach for him, he slammed the door shut to leave it to suffocate, Herbert in effigy. Smoke and ash clung to his hair and his clothes. He carried the stink of it with him to the little makeshift prison he'd made, where Herbert was collapsed half-in the coffin, lid unfastened. He should leave him. He needn't even act. For once, he could fix his mistake with ease.

And yet he tucked his failure of a fledgling into the coffin and straightened his hair, pressing a kiss to his cold, still forehead. If only, if only it hadn't been Louis. But there were lines. He couldn't bring himself to kill Herbert, but he couldn't keep him here either. He slammed the coffin lid down, the effect lost on his sleeping audience. He fought the urge to lock the box for spite, and retreated to bed (not his, not that room, anywhere but that) to nurse his broken heart.

~*~*~*~

When consciousness came to Herbert again, he could barely move. The coffin lid above him was impossibly heavy, his limbs shaking as if he'd just suffered a hemorrhagic fever. He pushed at it anyway, but it wasn't his strength that pulled it open--Louis, beautiful and vengeful Louis, knelt at his side holding out a glass.

"Drink this."

It was cold, and Herbert wanted to reject it out of hand, to reach for the warm comfort of the man who had, against all odds, come back again despite his mistakes.

"I'm sorry it isn't more," Louis said. "I'm not sure tonight is a good time for other means."

Herbert finished the offering with a grimace. At least he could sit up now, though it wasn't nearly enough. "There are supplies in my lab."

Louis took his hand, helping him up. "There is no lab, mon ami."

Dread sunk a lead weight into his stomach, and he took two steps before he stumbled. "I need to see it."

It was important to confirm a death, to record it for certain.

"I'll take you there." That impossible gentleness after all that had come before. Herbert hated pity. "Hold onto me."

He still accepted the aid, though, let his taller, better friend support him, because it was over. Despite no gifts, no promises, nothing new or beautiful to offer--Louis’ mind still spoke a warmth and closeness, but with steel beneath, now.

No more.
He couldn't ruin another.

The gutted cave held fewer ashes than might have been expected; he hadn't been given to keeping extraneous papers about, and the closing of the doors on a negative pressure zone (properly built, to all lab safety standards) had ensured the fire's damage was localized only to Herbert's space. Nothing anyone else valued had been touched.

Lumps of metal and glass lay, melded and deformed, in the wake of the destruction. Some of the glass contained inclusions of glowing green, like some portentions art piece on the dangers of the atom by an artist with no concept of that which they protested.

Staring down, Herbert felt something within him curl and blacken as well. He shrugged off the gentle, coddling grip (too good; too easy to destroy), found the iron in his spine, and muttered some mealy-mouthed lie about wanting to be alone--'solitude, you understand, don't you?'

Finally, finally he understood one of the monsters in his shared Hell.

A lost calling was reason enough to seek oblivion, and thanks to Daniel, the once-reporter, he knew how. The trip to the mainland was a blur.

He'd avoided alcohol those first 30 years of his life--it dulled the senses and took time from his progress, and all its supposed benefits were little more than loathsome social traps to him--but he sought it out now in earnest. He didn't flirt (the very thought of acting at all like Lestat set his skin crawling, more than ever) but he found he didn't need to. He could be as cold and dismissive as he liked and still they would flock to him, one after another convinced they could warm him with spirited conversation or suggestive touch. The booth he sequestered himself in was dark, and they all knew the game. Herbert did enjoy blunt understanding his business transactions.

The bartender approached him, nervous and fidgeting, at four in the morning--not to kick him out (Lestat's money flowed, and Herbert, as it turned out, was a very quiet drunk) but to offer him 'accommodations' in the little room behind the bar. Better than going home. Better than facing all he had lost. He accepted and gave the poor fool what they wanted in exchange, enough to leave them weak-kneed and gasping on the sticky floor. Had he been so transparent, such easy prey? It was practically cheating when their minds all screamed at him. When he got up, the bar was open again, and it was simple to begin the cycle over, to half-walk and half stumble to another dark hall and then another, pressed on all sides by willing bodies and poisonous blood. By the time his tormentor came looking for him, he was a disastrous sight and couldn't have given less of a damn about it.

"Pathetic." Lestat returned his word to him, standing over him in the suddenly completely hushed room.

"It's none of your concern," he sneered.

"Mine and no-one else's, damn my folly. I'm taking you home."

He reached out, and Herbert struck a bottle against the table, pointing the resulting jagged shard at his maker. "Get out."

"If you want to act like a child, that's how I'll treat you." The glass was gone from his hand in a blur, his senses dulled nearly to what he'd been before, and Lestat had lifted him over his shoulders. And then, then he had the gall to smile for his audience. "Apologies, my darlings. I do promise I'll make it up to you another night."
"He's lying!" Herbert shouted. "That's what he does!"

(He'd had dignity once. No more.)

He flailed and spat like a cat in need of a good strangling, because if he couldn't kill the man, he could at least make his 'unlife' miserable for a few moments.

And because he didn't want to leave.

He'd worn thin the bartender and waitress's memories of the tall, dark stranger who'd been and gone one Friday night just after last Christmas, but that didn't mean he wouldn't like to see them again before bedding down for the day.

"I confess I've never seen a vampire poison himself, but you seem to be making quite an experiment of it; I do hope you're keeping accurate notes."

He snapped and snarled with as much mind as one of his reanimates then, bitter mockery overruling his desire never to have any part of his maker near his mouth ever again.

Lestat simply pulled back on his much-remarked upon hair, so undesirable, such a shame that haircut, and leapt effortlessly into the air.

The gap between them had never been so apparent--functionally as great as before he ever visited his infection on Herbert.

"Molloy says you won't stop screaming his name. He hears it every time he comes into the city."

"Mind your own business!" The wind chilled him, blew through his ears, and his head spun like a top. "It's not--the Island's not my home."

"Then you have none, here at least. The world cast you out, cherie. And fool that I was, I took you in." He was going faster for spite, had to be. Herbert hoped certain mortal faculties remained--he would be happy to ruin this bastard's clothes.

"Put me down. I don't want your charity," he spat instead.

And then he was falling through the air, the lights of the Island rushing up to meet him, the smell of blood and regret and his own fear in his nose before Lestat snatched him up again by the back of his shirt, baring a mirthless grin. "You rely endlessly on charity, poor fool. It's time you recognized it."

They alighted on a balcony, and Lestat dumped his cargo to the floor, folding his arms as he perched on the railing. "I've spoiled you, and it's led all around you to ruin. But I'm going to give you one more present."

"Fuck you." The alcohol was in his blood, firmly entrenched and going nowhere. He felt sick.

"Manners, Doctor. Your pet will never take you back looking like this."

The effect he'd always hoped to avoid burdened him now, made him stupid and slow. "--what?"

Lestat leapt down to kneel in front of him. "Daniel Cain is alive. I don't give a damn what you do with this knowledge. But if you harm Louis ever again, if you lay so much as a hand on him, I will see that you make your appointment with Death. Your little games mean nothing in comparison to him. Do you understand?"
For a split second he hoped, for just that one instant the world was less terrible than it had been, and then--

"Liar." Lies, lies, lies. Father of Lies. "You could have left me there if you wanted me gone. Don't- -" If a sob rose in his throat, it wasn't him. It was the alcohol. "You didn't have to bring me back."

Something happened to Lestat's face at that simple truth, his white face and sunshine hair floating in the dark above an all-black ensemble. Like a funeral; celebrating the death of so much.

"You love to accuse me of lies, mon savant, but what evidence--"

"I SAW IT!"

Saw it, Hell--felt it, the visceral pain of watching from the outside a moment of love, intimate, fleeting, and not for him, manifest and crest and end just as he would have ended it. There had been such jealousy in that memory, such pained inability to breach a gulf; he knew well what had been locked tight in Armand's chest as he watched, in Herbert's as he'd listened even farther in the past.

His pain he'd swallowed, just like with Hans, with his ability to practice; just like with everything he lost. He'd drunk down his pain, and Armand's, and Louis' sorrow, and Sonya's loneliness and Karen's hope and Michael's fear and Julie's doubt Chad's shame every single one for a year he'd taken into his mouth chest body mind and will and he needed to SCREAM

The sound that escaped him wasn't human. It was raw and retching and layered with a dozen, hundred other experiences, Dan barely a thread of a memory among them.

And Lestat, damn him, was laughing, the noise dry and almost unhinged.

"Bastard!" Herbert reached for his throat, powered by strength beyond his age but leashed by the still burning alcohol. It was so simple for Lestat to catch his hands and hold him still.

"I'll never understand how I'm the renowned liar, when Armand is so much more skilled. It must be the corpses he leaves in his wake." He forced Herbert's arms behind his back, pulled until the muscles threatened to pop. "So you saw it from him, did you. Took it for gospel from our little sage?"

"Thoughts don't lie."

"They do nothing but! They tell us false memories, false feelings. They convince us we can trust liars and demons." Herbert went still, and Lestat released him. "No doubt it was very tragic, what you saw. I imagine it would have been marred by the epilogue. When he came to me and told me how he planned to concoct his lie and get rid of your troublemaking little pet."

"But." But why, he didn't ask, because he knew. Knew what he would have been willing to do, to remove a threat.

They all would, given the chance. Witness the moment.

"We're none of us what we seem, Herbert--you most of all, frankly, if you truly took that serpent to your breast." (Would these faux-bohemians never let up about Herbert's apparently so-shocking promiscuity?)

"I'm devastated to have disappointed you, Prince." He hung suspended, a scruffed cat, feeling the joints grind and threaten dislocation. "But that doesn't mean I believe you over him. Words lie,
When Lestat's grip shifted, Herbert went limp, preparing to roll with the blow he knew would come as it always did in these situations.

Him and his mouth.

"What would convince you?" Lestat instead tipped his chin up, gentle as he had once been **unfailingly**, so careful then with Herbert's breakable mortal frame for who knew what reason.

"Does it matter? You want me gone. You'll make it happen, one way or another, just like when you wanted me here."

He smelled blood in the air, tainted with a dozen different forms of cheap rotgut. His face felt sticky.

"I loved you. And I've made you the creature that stands before me." Arrogant. Here was Lestat offering to take the blame for all his failings, and he found it left him nothing but angry. "I owe you this."

"Show him to me then." That, he was certain, would put an end to this farce.

"Of course. No belief without visible proof. Not for you. Come, then." Lestat held out his arms. "There's no faster way."

He had so little left to lose. If Lestat dumped him over the ocean it would be just as well. "Do you people not believe in cars?"

"Oh, stop pretending you're any different. It's tiring." This time Lestat held Herbert in his arms as he had that first night, though everything else was wrong. The cold no longer bit at him, nor the close presence of his insufferable maker. He was exhausted, but no sleep would come, forcing him to watch the blurred shapes below and wait for the other shoe to drop.

It was cold in Arkham, a thin sheet of January snow making a muddy nightmare of the roads. Lestat touched down on the roof of a building across from the hospital and set Herbert down beside him. They stood in silence, Lestat apparently waiting and Herbert almost afraid to shatter the illusion. Then, as the snow threatened to thicken and stick, Lestat pointed. "Like clockwork."

A tall man was walking out of the doors, waving to someone inside before adjusting the scarf around his shoulders. It took a moment to recognize him; he'd cut his hair so short. Herbert was frozen to the spot.

"You're lucky," Lestat remarked, leaning over the ledge. "As I understand it, he's all nine to five these days. There must have been quite a shortage to get him in this late."

"You've proven your point." Herbert wormed his fingers into his sleeve, worrying at the hanging loops of black nylon. He'd left them in, ignored, for months--gotten used to the scratch and snag, the way one would occasionally drop off in the shower after a particularly violent bout of killing or sex (what difference, for them?)

"Well?" Lestat said, expectant. Proud. **Hopeful.**

"Well, what?" The alcohol was burning off, leaving him worn and empty.

"You'll be alright? With him?"
Herbert let out a harsh bark of laughter, so preternaturally loud that the beautiful living man crossing the parking lot turned and looked up. He wouldn't see anything. Not with those eyes, those dark human eyes. But Herbert could drink in his face and use it to strengthen his resolve.

"I won't go anywhere near him, Lestat," he cackled like the mad scientist he'd always been. "I'll never see him again."

Lestat watched him until the laughter died away, until Dan had gotten into his car and driven out of sight, back to his normal life. Until it was just the two of them, cold and dead and pretending. Lestat clapped a hand on his shoulder, expression rueful and distant. "You may have more sense than me after all."

"You're going to leave me here?" Lestat had wanted rid of him, after all. Whether he took the peace offering should make little difference.

"What do you want?" He was so fond of asking questions he couldn't answer himself.

Herbert wanted Dan. He wanted to race after that damned car and crush that familiar figure against him, drink his blood and hold him until there were just two cold bodies in the snow. Take and take until the heat, the soft animating draw of Dan, was consumed utterly, and whether his beloved still walked and talked then would make no difference. He wanted to cut out what tried to persist of his humanity, the emotions that made him foolish and susceptible to weakness. He wanted to go back to his work and lose himself.

"Take me back," he said instead.


"Better the devil you know." He rested his forehead against Lestat's warm shoulder. He hated him. He had nowhere else to go.

Lestat said nothing as he picked him up. "If you're going to drop me," Herbert said, head resting against Lestat's chest. "Pick something quick."

"Shut up for once." Lestat was staring hard at something in the distance.

By the time they approached the Island, their fool's errand had taken the whole night. Herbert barely clung to consciousness, feeling a rising, instinctual panic in his chest, and he would swear he felt some faint sting developing in his exposed skin.

Idiots said that when God closed a door, He opened a window.

Herbert's room had a window.

Night after night after night, he would have options.

~*~*~*~

Sunsets were a curse. Lestat rose just after the sun had escaped his grasp once again, just far enough out of reach to remind him of what he was. Normally he prowled the city, feeling singular
and alone even among his kind. The adoration was fine, really, and he so loved his mortal fans. But he'd trade it for an opportunity to wake and see Louis waiting up for him, smiling as he hadn't in years.

Now, though, he was grateful for it, and the opportunity to save face that it presented. It had taken all the strength in him to bring Herbert back to their unhappy home, to recognize the willpower it took to truly leave a mortal life behind. It had built dangerous hope in him, persisting against what little sense he possessed and the anger that still burned away in his core. He couldn't bear to be in that house for one second longer, not with the anguish that lurked around every corner. He took the time to dress in his most practical clothes and little else, launching himself into the cool evening with little in his mind beyond a vague direction pried from Marius and never used.

Jesse's mind had always spoken loud, like a beacon; strange, the constellations of powers they inherited from their progenitors, and she had received more of a wealth than most. Strange, also, how they all changed with the blood, scales falling from their eyes, at least with the young ones. She and Daniel and Herbert, even the rest of Lestat's offspring, suddenly lacked the powerful fascination for their elders that had ever been there for mortals and Lestat. She wouldn't climb a stage for him any longer, that was certain.

But she would, apparently, answer his calls and let him follow that thread down to some Godforsaken jungle, barren of humanity. He heard the movement of two people, but felt only Jesse's thoughts. So Marius had been correct; Lestat's other living connection was accompanied. It didn't sting, to know that she would allow another where Lestat had been unable to come.

He lied, indeed.

Jesse came to greet him, barely recognizable but for her bright, verdant eyes. Her hair was mussed and streaked with mud, her clothes likewise a wreck. And she regarded him with unmasked suspicion even as courtesy pulled them into a brief hug.

"Have you already stirred up another apocalypse?" She asked when they parted.

"If that were the case, I wouldn't have had to fly all the way out." Joviality; let her guess his misery if she couldn't see it. "Am I not allowed to desire your company?"

"You'll have to think of a better excuse than that for her."

Her. The figure who pointedly hadn't appeared to greet him. "I suppose she sent you to say that I'm a feckless idiot, and she'll have nothing to do with my problems?"

"She didn't say feckless." Jesse's smile was almost gentle, and the blow no softer. "As long as you haven't brought trouble, she'll be happy to see you."

"Oh? And here I thought that was just the gift she'd prefer. She did leave to look for it."

"Bitterness doesn't suit you," a new voice spoke from above, its owner crouched and observing.

Gabrielle: his first, fiercest creation, just as he was hers. She'd need no one to slay wolves for her now, this lithe panther-person stretched inhumanly out in the canopy of a vine-draped tree.

"I've been trying new flavors since last we met," he replied absently, half caught up in the sight of her stable strength, like none of the rest of them. He wanted to borrow that strength, as he had in his past despairs; wanted to curl and press his face to her breast and know his pains were understood as only a mother and a twin could.
"I can smell them on you." She swung herself down, fell and landed not like a gymnast but like an animal, too-small girlish features intent. Her delicate nose twitched, scenting him or just playing, he wasn't sure.

She had been a mystery even before he made her, though she could always see through him like glass.

One-way mirrors.

She must have seen his pain, for she allowed his desperate embrace and his effusive greeting. Tolerated being swung about by the waist.

And then he fell silent, sitting morose by her campfire for some untracked span of moments.

It was only the two of them soon, Jesse leaving armed with a tape recorder and a determined look (an echo all but designed to show him what he'd thought he had). She'd kissed his mother goodbye as she left, thorough and uncaring of the audience. And now here they were, him left as tongue tied and awed as ever in her stern presence.

"A little young for you, isn't she?" he remarked, knowing how she hated pointless talk but unable to reach out any other way.

"You're not here to talk about that. You know better." She was brushing out her hair, her battered straw hat beside her on the ground. He hated the wild already.

"Well, at least you grant me that."

"I love you, dear. I'm just uninterested in entertaining your sulks." Another pass with the brush, plucking out a twig. "So, who is it this time?"

Where even to start. The events of the last year seemed impossible to condense. "You know Armand's coven?"

"He invited me. I wasn't interested in hiding."

"Not all of us are as resilient as you." What had brought him here, knowing this was how he'd be received?

"Louis is. You chose well with that one." His face must have showed his misery. "What did you do this time?"

"Only saved his life!" He threw his hands up in frustration. "Only rescued him from a violent madman determined to drag him down as well--and now he'll have none of me!"

"Did you, now. What a hero you paint yourself in all this. I take it your beau did not precisely wish to be saved?"

Lestat buried his face in his hands.

"He makes no sense--neither of them does. They drive me to distraction, and Marius thinks me a fool."

Gabrielle arched one eyebrow at the mention of Marius, but held her peace. "You'd better tell me about this latest folly."

"He was perfect!" Lestat burst out. "A modern man fighting against Death with mortal tools,
without even an inkling that deathless beings roamed this earth. He had so much passion, such energy--"

"And then he stumbled from the pedestal you set him upon," Gabrielle finished. "How foolish of him."

"He tried to kill Louis. He--" Here he hesitated. "He reminded me so much of Nicki."

"Oh, Lestat. Again?"

"I didn't notice at first! But he remembered things, things I hadn't told him. He worked as if he were possessed by a demon. I thought if I could save him,"

"The world is not the practice grounds for your penance. Nicolas is dead. You do no one any good by dragging his memory like a millstone around your neck." She set the brush aside, and Lestat yearned suddenly to help. "May I?"

"If you must."

He moved beside her and began dividing her long, fine hair into sections, weaving the braid slowly to savor the contact. "I must have let the memories through by accident. But he--he pretended as though he were possessed. He did it purely to cut at my heart. Marius was right."

"And what, exactly, has that man been feeding you now?"

"He's been nothing but helpful," Lestat stressed, feeling the dirt and grime falling easily from her hair at his touch. They were unmarked, even by human filth.

All except for his disaster.

"He's a touch too fond of his position as sage, if you ask me, and you all too eager to play acolyte."

"He cares for his charges," Lestat snapped, hearing the edge in his voice but unable to suppress it. "I hardly have any other role model there."

"The fact that I didn't hug you as often as you'd like as a babe does not mean I don't love you, Lestat."

"No, but it makes it difficult to interact with those who need more than the occasional acknowledgment in times of deep despair."

He was halfway down her back, hands full of a more physical tie to her than had ever been possible before he took her in his arms and ended her life. And when she became this other being, no longer his mother, she had eluded him. A pattern, there; the ones who read books and lived in their heads.

She sat, silent, waiting for him to give conversation she cared to respond to.

"Marius helped," he tried again. "He told me how to bind Herbert--if Herbert hadn't been mad… " It hurt to think of what might have been, his pretty, clever creature so twisted by his failure. "He could have been a wonder."

"If only he'd bent to your whims."

"If he'd listened to me!" Lestat snapped. "I wanted to keep him safe."

"I've been kept 'safe,' Lestat. All it meant was that I had more time to imagine how I might
humiliate my captor." She pulled free of him, tying off the end of the braid.

"I'm nothing like him." How strange, to find that wound still tender to the touch. "And you're nothing like Herbert. He brought \textit{bodies} into our house. He nearly killed Louis. He needed guidance!"

"What shame you must have felt, to know Marius thought you incapable of controlling one little pawn."

"You're not listening." Why had he come. How could he possibly have thought he would find comfort here.

"I don't know this new child of yours," she said, turning to straddle the log, long bare legs splayed to either side. "But I know what comes of resentment. Was he this way when you found him?"

"No!" It had all started out so perfectly.

"Coincidental, that his madness came hand in hand with Marius' advice, hmm?"

"You're subtle as a flung brick, Marquise." Her face tightened at the mention of her former position, the dead role she'd not mourned but rejoiced in shedding along with her dresses.

"A flung vegetable at worst, Lelio--letting you know of a poor performance." Her silvery voice with its accents of high-class Italian and provincial French carried a warning with the insult.

"What would you know of it, who stalks the wilderness as do animals? Who lived in books before that?" Who abandoned Lestat for those escapes, time and again? "I need help from one who knows what men do together."

Her lip curled to show a kittenish fang, and she snorted.

"And what, then, does your brilliant teacher tell you of what 'men' do? As a simple \textit{woman}, I should like to hear."

She wasn't a woman, the Gods knew, and he'd wounded her with the jibes--he'd feel sorry, but wasn't that always the way. And she'd get her own back soon enough, predator that she was.

"He knows what it means to care for others! If I followed your advice, I'd have left them behind when I tired of them."

"How unlike you." She'd withdrawn from him, the fire between them. "So why have you come? My advice is clearly detestable."

"I thought I'd find comfort here. That was my mistake." His cheeks burned as he stood. "I won't trouble you further."

"It's near to dawn. You'll burn up over the ocean if you leave now. Come inside. You can take up resenting me again in the evening, when you're alive to do it."

"I don't need your pity." Lies, lies, always he lied.

"If you think that's what this is, then go. I'm tired of arguing."

She left him sitting there, disappearing into the dark, and he considered going just to spite her. To prove she was wrong about him. But that would mean admitting to losing the fight, too. He'd stay until tomorrow, if only to have the last word.
Lestat spent the better part of a week feuding and sparring with his mother and her so-modern lover, tolerating jungle heat and eating from the beasts of the wild like Louis.

They simply didn't comprehend the situation; no grasp of the depth of his hurt nor the scale of Herbert's crimes.

He'd given his little beast the world and half his heart besides, and seen both dashed against inexplicable, defiant meanness.

So when he left near midnight, streaking westward ahead of time itself to Florida, he remained undecided as to what he might do, or how he might handle the lonely ghost that would now haunt his halls.

He couldn't put it out in the world; couldn't fix it. (Could, perhaps, wait, wait for it all to get worse as he'd done before--)

There were those who would act for him, in the event his soft heart failed again, but Louis' devotion would have to be stemmed first.

Marius would help in that, at least, the preservation of such art his greatest calling.

Flying was the final removal of barriers, the freedom to be where he chose and when, slave to no one but his whims. Yet when he returned to earth he always felt numb, lonely and alien in a body that found new and frightful ways to betray as often as it amazed. He'd heard, once, that the eldest of them found satisfaction only in draining a still beating heart, and he shuddered to think of himself coming to such a fate. He was young, truly; it wasn't fair.

He almost streaked past the island entirely, wrapped deep in his thoughts. The little rock was free of sound, all the shops dark and taped off. And the overlighted mansion itself was no longer a landmark on the night sky. It was nowhere at all.

He didn't bother with secrecy as he touched down, knees trembling and threatening to reject his weight. The skeletal structures still stood, creaking and moaning in the breeze. It bared black teeth at him as he entered, almost ankle-deep in ruin.

They were all gone, he told himself with frantic false hope. And no doubt they were. He might be crushing any one of them beneath his foot as he trod an approximation of the halls, the numbness that had frightened him now keeping him upright and walking.

'Scatter the ashes,' he'd been told--the first and most awful of the few things about their hideous nocturnal existence that the one who turned him had ever bothered to tell.

Who knew, truly, what happened if one didn't? Only one of them had ever been twisted enough to test such a thing, but lacked opportunity, and this--

Once-pristine marble, upon which spattered blood had looked so beautiful, now bore a lampblack coating that clung to Lestat's motorcycle boots. The waffled footprints shone white in the uninterrupted moonlight as he traced the remembered floorplan.

The mansion had been designed for secrecy, disorientation, to make time and space even more dreamlike and abnormal. Designed, perhaps, to kill in the event of fire.

Few bones; perhaps the bulk of thralls had managed their pitiful escapes, or the human authorities had already handled the corpses.
The windowless upstairs wing had half-collapsed into the ground floor, his own steel coffin standing upright in the discotheque like some gruesome monument. Gone, then, his guitars and piano, his desk and computer and the manuscript in progress.

They'd each had their little territories.

He knew before he came to the library what he would find, or maybe just what he feared: loose pages and charred spines, the fireplace still standing free, a monument to the ruin. There wouldn't be anything left, of course. He told himself that, over and over. Louis was too mortal. Too soft. He'd be one with his beloved books at last. It didn't stop fat red drops from rolling down his cheeks, forming black muck where he'd stepped (he was struck, half mad, with the idea that he might bleed himself out there on the floor and so give his love new life yet again). But he was dead.

He had to be dead.

It was more than Lestat could bear. He collapsed to his knees and wailed, hands clenching in the fine black powder that offered him nothing. It was the not knowing that struck deeper than any blow. His dark moment and its nerve-burning uncertainty came for him again in new clothes, whispering what-if, and if-then, wrapping him up and slamming him back down into the awful sea of grief before beginning the process anew.

What if Louis had been out hunting with Herbert. If they'd seen, then

If Marius had heard there was to be fire, he might have sheltered them all, and then

But each explanation sounded hollow in his head, and nothing could beat back the despair that so completely overwhelmed him. He was prepared, as he lay there, to wait for the sun.

But of course, he carried the blood of Akasha, their deposed Queen and Mother, deep in his veins--more even than Marius had had, when 200 years ago he'd named himself truly immortal.

Dead, all dead, his poor broken beauties, and truly it was worse than he'd been told. 'Don't make more than a few a century, for the blood grows thin; they grow weak.' yes, well enough, but. The minds that rotted at his touch!

Gabrielle, his first, was the only one left, and the only one stable.

Nicki, dogmatic, damned, cruel and spiteful lover; Claudia, his vicious angel girl-woman; Louis, perfection itself frozen, loved and lost and sucked empty of passion.

Herbert.

God, at this moment he could mourn even Herbert, his last and greatest mistake, catalyst of this chemical reaction.

Such a wonder he'd been, they all had been.

Ashes, crumbling where he trod.

Lestat fancied himself suddenly the only real thing left in the world, fallen into some burned-out Hell town where nothing real remained save his own regrets and failures.

There was nowhere to go but from whence he'd come, covered in the ashes of the dead like a failed martyr, like the holy man he'd wanted to become lifetimes ago. He was a blight against the stars,
crashing down with all the grace of a meteor and knowing they would find him--not for care of his safety, but their wary curiosity around their little territory.

He could feel Gabrielle storing up some cutting, indifferent remark as she crept up on him, but he only met her eyes with the same pathetic defiance of the child who'd tracked mud into her library. She took in the ash muddied by river water, making falsely human mourning tears on his face, and his ruined clothes; and then she walked away, the only clue that he was welcome coming when she stopped at the horizon to wait for him.

"You were right." He wanted to get it out of the way quickly. Jesse might want her chance to gloat, and he knew his mother would enjoy it too, if more stoically.

Still she said nothing, walking the winding path back to the godforsaken little camp on the edge of the world.

"I said you were right. Take joy in it." His sad, pathetic temper, wet and deflated, was all he had left. "Say something damn you! So I know I'm not mad!" The way his body stayed distant from his mind, it was all too likely he was following a spirit conjured from his deluded head.

She paused, at last, and turned her golden head towards him. "Oh, Lestat," she said with a sorrowful shake. "Did you never read 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'? We're all mad here."

His tears and the ash streaked her khaki shirt and left her looking like the survivor of a massacre.

Which of course she was.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Lestat begins to investigate the mystery of what exactly happened in those lost nights out of his view, uneasy alliances are forged, and new connections form.

The world of 1992 is a changed one.
Arkham, Massachusetts
June 1992

The clear, white-yellow sunlight of a nearly-summer morning blinded Dan as he stepped outside, nursing a crick in his neck (always sore, always sensitive these days). The mountain of paperwork on his desk had done him no favors, and the sweltering humidity was without relief. If Arkham had ever had a hotter summer, he couldn't remember it.

He made his way down to the cafe on the corner, determined to enjoy his brief snatch of solitude before it was back to the grind. He didn't miss working the emergency room, really. He was better served lending a hand to patients who saw the end looming before them. He'd always had great things to say about Dan's bedside manner.

Dan bit down on his sandwich (turkey, no cheese, no mayo, whatever vegetables they could throw at it) and forced himself to think of anything else. He knew what they said about him at the hospital: health nut. Vain, set in his ways. Such a waste. He determinedly didn't notice the conspiratorial whispers in the hallways, or the meaningful looks whenever he volunteered for the universally-loathed duty of educational outreach, a glorified version of giving ‘the talk.’ It didn't matter. He was helping people. All the hours he worked, he could probably retire at fifty. But he just wanted to do something, anything good.

"Is this seat taken?"

Dan's first reaction was honestly surprise--nobody wanted to eat with him these days. Some wouldn't shake hands, all based on conjecture.
That was fine.

He didn't like shaking hands much either.

Then he actually looked at the person talking to him, and.

She was slim and blonde, long hair pulled into a careless bun, thick glasses perched low on her nose, but more importantly she was juggling a stack of manila folders, a tray of food, and a rubber-tipped cane.

"Oh! N-no, I--let me--" He wrenched himself to his feet.

"You don't need to--" She moved back.

"No, I insist--" He dragged the seat out as she tried to set her things down, and his elbow got a little too close.

Which was how he ended up scattering her files across the courtyard.

"Shit." Human contact was apparently now beyond him entirely. He sprinted after the papers the wind had snatched, his long legs protesting the unexpected stretch. He'd found some solace in running every morning and evening, but between that and the hours on his feet, his body refused to thank him for it. He brought the papers back like a shamed puppy, head hung low and the back of his neck hot. "Sorry about that. I wanted to help, but I, uh, guess I made things worse." Story of his life.

"No harm done." That was a lie--already her tone was cooler. But she sat down anyway, stabbing at her food with more obligation than enjoyment. "It's hard to find a table here this time of day."

"Oh, yeah? I must just have this one staked out." The upside to being quietly removed from working with anyone expected to live.

"You're more social than I expected. I always see you here alone. I assumed you preferred it."

"Guess I'm just used to my routine," he shrugged, strangely comforted by her bluntness, like an echo. "You get wrapped up in where you're going next, and you forget to take it easy. You know?" Eyeing the large stack of files (which were probably causing six privacy violations just by sitting out there), he had a feeling she did.

"Hmm. All work and no play, you mean." She pursed her pink-glossed lips, running a finger down the tabbed sides of the folders. "I would have thought someone who deals primarily with end-of-life issues would have a way to decompress."

"What?" So casual, her behavior. No indication that this was personal. She might have just overheard--

"You're risking burnout, staying so involved." A bite of oozing chicken salad (too much cholesterol for Dan) made its way into her mouth while her gaze remained on the mess he'd created.

"So this isn't a chance meeting, then." He sounded weird to his own ears--frosty, defensive.

"Does that bother you?"

"I like being involved." Needed to be involved. Needed the work, something in his life to feel right about. "And you've probably been told I had my burnout incident years ago, Doctor… ?"
"McMichaels. Katherine. It's not healthy."

"It's bad manners for doctors to give each other consultations, but that hasn't stopped you."

"If I let social mores get in my way I wouldn't have gotten half as far in life. You haven't addressed my point." Another bite, barely noticed. "If you continue to push yourself, you'll collapse. They'll take you off your current assignment. That, in turn, will drastically decrease the number of people you could be helping, far more than shortening your current overtime would."

It sounded so neat and clinical. She probably had a file on him. "Look, I don't know what brought on this sudden concern, Doctor, but--"

"Katherine."

"What?"

"You can call me Katherine. I imagine your work habits have either caused or stemmed from a lack of a social life outside work. Am I right?"

Except for the 'because everyone thinks I'm a walking plague' bit, he thought. "What's it matter to you?"

"You're an advocate for your patients, Dr. Cain. There aren't enough of those here in Arkham."

"We're a teaching and research hospital," he replied evasively. Defensively. In honor of a legacy nobody else in the world was aware of. "There's inevitably going to be an emphasis on publication over patients' rights sometimes."

"Which is why people like me need people like you." She looked distant and pensive for a moment. "To keep us ethical."

Christ, if she thought that…

Her eyes were blue, past the thick glasses frames. Myopic, by how she squinted subtly at the paperwork.

Intense, with a low-to-the-ground, terrierlike focus.

"I'm not really that rare, am I?" He tried to play it off, uncomfortable with the sincerity that had crept up on him.

"Enough that I'm sitting here." She gave him a smile then, the sight of it a little awkward. Like it was something she was aware people did in these sorts of situations, rather than something that occurred naturally. "I've been proven right in my professional curiosities in the past."

"Oh?"

A softer smile, brief but fond. She wore it well. "My roommate tells me I'm too standoffish."

"So I'm a homework assignment." That was better than pity, if only just.

"Think of it as a mutually beneficial relationship." Her tray was empty, his barely touched. She offered him her hand, picking up her cane with the other. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Roommate, noted the part of his brain attached to a sex drive he was sure had been consigned to a withering death. "It's a date."
Lestat and his mother weren't meant for one another; they never had been. That Gabrielle let him stay with her as long as she did, not commenting on his paralyzing despair but not disparaging it either, was nearly proof of divine existence.

Still and all, he wouldn't have survived above the ground that first year, without Gabrielle's quiet, bitter strength, her mortal lifetime one long lesson on disappointments he'd only ever encountered at the most traumatic points of his own. Things normal to her had always left him shattered with grief.

"You're assuming again," she said once. "I knew despair well."

(He'd never asked, for instance, about the four elder siblings gone before his birth.)

How was he to know? Others were so often a mystery, impenetrable when he was robbed of his mental powers. He'd made himself nearly whole again, and so her receptivity to his tears had departed, leaving him again with the beloved stranger who'd grown beyond him before his very birth.

She was made cold before death, and was he ever to see his last fledgling as a crystal refracting fragments of all the others' lights?

After some unnumbered span of months, he'd made the decision to leave on his own. The rock sat no less heavy on his heart, but knowing that there was some scrap of life he might return to, some vestige of what he had known, allowed him to carry on. He understood a little of Louis when he walked the streets then. Everywhere were dazzling sights, and he wanted none of them. He could have made another; a whole host, weak enough that they were enthralled to his will. Dependent on him evermore. But he hadn't, barely able to feed with anything like peace. His evil victims, for months, had died weeping his tears.

So it went from night to pointless night, in New York and Amsterdam and Tokyo--places he'd never been with any of them--until he happened into a mall’s gleaming chain bookstore and saw a familiar name emblazoned on the shelf. And from it seeped the very color of the world, vivid as being born anew.

His book, his own chosen title, sat under the name Daniel had chosen as a front for their works while Lestat still slept in New Orleans (what a mess, these modern rules.) His words inside, though reading them now--

"I'm the Vampire Lestat. Remember me? The vampire who became a super rock star, the one who wrote the autobiography?"

He’d been reeling from a tragedy already, those few years ago when he wrote it. So many dead, human and vampire alike, and fame in his grasp only to be snatched back in a single night. The end, answers to the mysteries he'd pursued from his creation. Akasha's abduction, love and terror and revelation. His words on the paper had been a purging as much as anything else, and had (he'd thought) perished in the fires along with all the other wonders he'd ever created.

If this survived, though? Finished and edited and, in one section, containing considerably less discretion than Lestat had intended to employ for the benefit of the one described?
It meant at least one witness.

Molloy, the boy reporter, Armand's pretty, indolent hanger-on; Louis' hopeless swain. The canny, craven one who'd known better than the all his elders how to tell their stories without dying for it.

Lestat had scarce spared a thought for that vampire since the fire.

He opened his mind as wide as he could; not calling but demanding evidence of Molloy's existence; if he intended to profit from Lestat's suffering, the very least he could do was heed his elder's call.

Nothing.

He left the bookstore, left the state, screaming his challenge without words. It didn't matter, soon, if the boy answered. All Lestat needed was a whiff of him, an unintentionally broadcast breath. He called, briefly, for Armand--if anyone had cared whether Molloy lived or died, it would be their laissez-faire would-be leader--and when there was no answer, the ache in his heart surprised even him. They loathed as often as they tolerated one another, but at least Lestat's demon rival-friend had always been around, solid as brimstone.

A press of choking terror threatened him again; the image of walking a barren earth, utterly alone and unable to seek solace. Even the Devil would forsake him then. He trembled at the thought, all the more devastating now that he'd been poisoned with hope. The tidal waves of emotion sent him fleeing back to the quiet corners of the world, to the pair that had reluctantly become his touchstones for reality.

Jesse was kind to him now, in her invulnerable way (soaked in the blood of the ancients much as he had been, though centuries younger, they were cousins of a kind). She left her mind open, a candle in the night for him to follow.

South and west he flew, across the Central and South American continents to the jungles of Peru. Peru, where a war had been fought, one he'd gotten in snatches and glimpses of filthy tents and dying soldiers--he shook that thought off.

Herbert had never cared for the archaeological secrets of the Inca, wouldn't have been caught dead sneaking nightly about the ruins surrounding Machu Picchu, but Jesse and Gabrielle were two of a kind.

History of their species, isolated wilderness, all in one. It suited them, he thought as he alighted on a crumbling pile of pale stone, brand-new hardbacked book clutched in his arms with dust jacket tattered by the violent winds.

"You've been busy," Jesse greeted him, ever the begrudging bearer of social niceties. She was scuffed and covered in dirt, the bright curls that had drawn Lestat's eye in a crowd of thousands cut down to almost nothing.

"Someone has," he agreed, thrusting the book out for her appraisal. "I left these pages behind in the mansion. How do you suppose they survived the fire?"

"Another great mystery for you to ponder," she said. "Is that all? Because Gabrielle and I found a collapsed passage and we could use an extra pair of hands. Lot of bodies from the poisonous gas." How quickly the cold reached their hearts, all of them.

"In fact I came to see you, mother dear." He'd called her such once in a fit of pique, and her irritation had ensured that stuck. "Wondering what you've been getting up to amongst the dead."
"Just because I can make small talk doesn't mean I'll play your games. One of us has to be an adult."

"Well, by all means," he said, ushering her grandly before him, "Age before beauty, and you may show me your little catacombs as we talk."

At least that startled a snort from her pert nose.

"Hey, if you're trying to make me jealous, it's not gonna work. You are almost as attractive as Gabrielle."

There was no good way to argue that. Not with Gabrielle possibly lurking somewhere in hearing range, ready to crack him about the ears with her dry, cold humor. Instead, he followed his mother’s lover down into her ruins, careful not to brush his fingertips along the walls as instinct demanded for fear of ruining the flaking paint and carven glyphs and so angering their conservator.

Jesse's continued interest in tracing the history of the world left him with the same confounded admiration he reserved for any of their kind capable of living outside the present moment. She'd been Talamasca's finest, but there was no need for that now.

"Are they still looking for you?" he asked.

She knew, of course. One didn't make an enemy like that and not reserve some constant thought for them. "I'm dead to them. They'd love their chance to make good on it."

A running theme. Lestat picked over a mummified corpse outstretched in supplication, pleading to deaf ears. He knew the feeling.

"How talented you are in making things disappear."

"There isn't a conspiracy against you," her voice was mild, hand hovering over some discarded trinket with all the tenderness she couldn't spare for him. "Prince or not, don't expect everyone to come running to you for approval every time they sneeze."

"Why shouldn't I take an interest in my family? You're all I have left, feral things though you are." He could smell the toxic fumes with his heightened senses, though they couldn't touch him. The promise of knowledge at the end of an endless hallway, choking the life out of any who sought it with invisible hands. "Why bother with any of this? You won't share it."

"Not everything in life is meant for public display." Gabrielle's voice echoed through the dark like the God she'd so often been to him--cold and uncaring, but there.

"It's none of my work, this time," he called lightly as ever he could. "It seems I've been plagiarized."

"Fascinating," she said, emerging from what might be a side passage or might be only a hole, green chemical sticks glowing at her belt. He looked away from their brightness, focusing on her face in the sickly light instead.

"But don't you see?" he asked, fingering the white-and-silver cover with its European marble statuary (the farthest thing possible from the Egyptian Queen whom he'd loved and hated and cowered before.) "If Daniel lived…"

He'd just assumed it a sudden disaster, one which angered Marius and Armand because of the destruction wrought upon that haven and all its possessions. And where fire went, so went blame
attaching itself to Lestat's line, who courted that doom over and over again unto their final end.

Daniel, though, had been as delicate as the other two, only three years dead despite being fortified by Armand's aged blood.

"If Daniel lived, what?"

"You know what," he replied, petulant and suddenly afraid that saying the words would reveal their impossibility. This once, she humored him.

"Then why come to us?" What pain, still, to hear her accept companionship. Proof that it was his character and not his humanity that made him unbearable. "They haven't been here."

"But you have to know!" He glared at Jesse. "He would have called, the coward, to make sure I wouldn't show up in the dead of night to avenge this theft." He brandished the book again.

"You look like one of those squat little preachers in the square, baying about damnation." Gabrielle looked disinterested already.

"It should tell you something, if you think they've been hiding from you," Jesse cut in. "Louis' proved himself capable of getting attention if he wanted it. Sounds like you scared them off."

"Then he is alive." He felt as though he was again clawing his way up out of desert sand or cemetery dirt, deaths and time falling from his shoulders as something ignited within his chest.

"Maybe." It was subtle, the way Jesse moved, insinuating herself between him and Gabrielle. Drawing his gaze like some pack animal, keeping his attention upon her form, strong and resilient as his own.

"You let me mourn him," he growled, clenching his hands into fists at his sides. "Both of you."

"I don't know for sure." Jesse's eyes picked up that eerie, scientific light, green and glowing and reminder of too many things at once. "Daniel keeps things hidden, for reasons of his own. But I suspect they're as alive as any of us."

"It's a pity," Gabrielle said, "that they presumably know how little use you have for your red-headed stepchild. One wonders why you bothered to make him at all, the way you talk."

"How could I have known? Akasha didn't grant me prophetic sight." Herbert had been so wonderful when he was made; Lestat had thought they might all live again by his hand.

Gabrielle pursed her lips. "So you rushed in blindly, as you always do, and left it to others to clean up your mess."

"I suppose your suggestion is that I leave them to the world, and think no more about it."

"I'm tired of this argument, Lestat." The earth around them growled. "Move, or you'll be pinned here." They climbed along a passage that had killed dozens, perhaps hundreds, as if it were an afternoon hike.

"I didn't come to have it. I want to know where I can find Daniel. He'll tell me what I need to know." On way or another.

Even in the darkness ahead, Jesse's eyes seemed to glow. "So you can kill them in a rage? Kidnap them? Repeat whatever sorry mistakes you made before you came here? No. Let them rest."
"It's not your business, Miss Reeves." Lestat stalked forward, into the moonlight, feeling his spine straighten and his shoulders roll back. He took up more space when he was angry. "I need to see my fledgling."

"You don't scare me, Lestat," she said, anger undercurrent to her calm. He felt her mind sliding shut to his vague probes. "And behaving like that? Not something that makes me want you anywhere near someone I consider a friend."

"Louis is mine! He's delicate--"

"He's stronger than any of us, and you know it," Gabrielle said from behind. "Better ask yourself why he felt the need to set a fire when he and his lover ran."

And that--that was everything Lestat had been trying not to consider.

"It's the only way he knows how to make an exit," he quipped, determinedly not thinking of the fight he had forced in the Rue Royale, nor the horrible account of what had happened in the catacombs. Louis never acted for nothing.

"If you can't take responsibility for your own actions, then we have nothing else to discuss. They're simple terms. Do you accept them or not?"

"Fine!" They had the power to disappear if they wanted, leave him truly alone as he had been after Nicki's death, after the fall from the tower. "If it pleases you to catalogue my sins, have them. I lost my temper. I wanted him gone. But I never laid a hand on him."

"The threat of you counts for enough these days," Gabrielle said. "Who else did they see?"

"Daniel mentioned Armand and Marius," Jesse volunteered. "They've had a hand in their share of deaths."

"Marius would never." It would be just like Armand to wait until his back was turned and then spring--but it rang false. Armand carried a stunted torch still for Louis' affections, secret even from himself with his talk of dead hearts.

"Then where is he? You touted him as your savior last time things went wrong."

Lestat balked. "You're one to talk! He came to us after you threw him out."

They laughed, sharp, hyenas in the night.

"Is that what he told you?"

"Fuck, Lestat--" he'd lived with actresses and whores and walked among killers, yet it still occasionally shocked him to hear a well-bred woman swear. "If he wanted to hang around, we weren't stopping him. But I've got a PhD in archaeology. I didn't need his help understanding what I was seeing, and Gabrielle didn't need someone strong to keep her safe." (Jesse's protective position gave the lie to that last.)

"That's just his way," Lestat said defensively. "And surely there was much you could have learned from one with his perspective?"

The chance she'd had and squandered still burned. Marius, free of his obligations and free with his time and knowledge; what Lestat wouldn't have given, once, for that.
"He wasn't interested in sharing what he knew," Gabrielle said, arms crossed. "Just teaching."

"Why not?" he argued. "He's older than all of us. He deserves respect."

"Respect is earned. And I give reverence to no one. I left that behind with your father."

"He saved my life." Lestat bristled. "Isn't that deserving enough?"

"You always took things too far," she said. "So you're grateful to him. And so you should bend around his will, and the rest of us too?"

"This isn't about him!"

"It is," Jesse said. "Daniel wouldn't tell me much. Probably because he knew this conversation was coming. But he said enough."

"Ah, so it's not just a betrayal but a grand conspiracy I've been excluded from. Wonderful."

"If this is how you behave when told you're wrong, you have no right to see Louis. Or your youngest, if you deign to remember him. You're too old to turn over my knee, but I don't have to suffer your tantrums either."

"For the love of--you're all terribly eager to show your sympathy for someone you've never even met!"

Why, why, why must they keep up with this tack? Herbert lived. He'd stolen Louis, but that was no true obstacle; even one as alluring as Armand hadn't been able to hold that quicksilver beauty for long. What more could anyone ask than Lestat's mercy?

"And whose fault is that?" Gabrielle strode past him carelessly, braid swinging and boots crunching in the underbrush.

"His!" Lestat flung his hands wide. "He's a wretched little monster, if he's still living at all! You should be thanking me for never introducing you!"

"Are you in the habit of giving eternal life to wretched little monsters?"

He wanted to say yes, just to spite her (and because there was a grain of truth there), but instead pressed his lips together and chewed the inside of his cheek.

"I made a mistake," he ground out.

"Any number," she agreed. "But your fledglings are not toys to break and reset until they please you."

"I gave him back his precious mortal. I let him go. Why should he be my problem?"

"He isn't." They stopped as Jesse hoisted herself into a tree, checking where the moon had traveled to the far side of the sky. He half suspected she did it just so she could look down at him. "But neither is Louis. They're your equals, whether you like it or not."

"I made them!"

"And so they owe their lives, their obedience, to you? They should be grateful for any kindness you give?" Gabrielle baited him.
"No, that's not--" he was caught in his own contradiction. He still remembered that night in the library, the feeling of sickness as he'd forced Herbert to come to him. It was only that he'd had no option, that they wouldn't listen.

"I thought I loved your father," Gabrielle offered, rare and unprompted. "It took years to erode that away, as he strangled my freedom from me. But I promise you that by the end, I would have killed him myself. Take care, my son. You have your father's blood."

The idea of his parents loving one another was foreign, even absurd, like a note from a story not his own. Gabrielle had hated his father; truth like bedrock, the silken thread that had bound them to one another in that impoverished castle. That she could have felt differently once, as a young wife of sixteen perhaps, half-Italian and carting her trousseau of jewels and books and finery to the home of the handsome blond Marquis who'd so charmed her and carried her over the threshold, pressed her down onto a bed of furs, told her how he adored--

(He shuddered, suddenly, at the vividness of the image and sensation. Minds closed to one another, but that held a ring of truth imparted perhaps in the unholy love they'd shared in her making.)

"I have the blood of many." And three fathers, at least.

The Marquis of Auvergne, cruel and stupid, dead and burned in New Orleans, utterly unmourned; Magnus, revolting, terrifying, who snatched Lestat from his bed and Nicki's arms and gave him death and life took so much more.

Marius, who lifted him from the sands of Egypt after Nicki's death and Gabrielle's abandonment; who kissed him tenderly, fed him selflessly, and taught him the secrets of their kind before setting him free to make his way in the world.

Of them all, Marius had been there for him, been mother and father at his lowest point and given him new purpose. Even Armand, broken and alien, had spoken of the man with adoration in Paris those many years ago. If it came to a choice--

It wouldn't. He shoved that thought down. Marius would never. His love was as unbinding as it was fulfilling, everything Magnus wasn't; everything his mortal sire had denied. "I should at least be allowed to say goodbye, shouldn't I? Haven't I that much right?"

"And you'll promise, cross your heart and hope to die, to be on your best behavior. How could I resist?" Jesse rolled her eyes. "Look, say Marius is as great to you as you say. What about the rest of us? Should we just accept being children for all eternity?"

"You're blowing it out of proportion."

"Says the man with all-powerful blood," she said. "David gave me the same shit. Extra check ins he wouldn't give the men, extra ‘concern’ I didn't need. It's never about us. It's about your ego."

These modern women. Interesting, fascinating, but--

"You were angry that Talbot stopped you researching vampires," he began with a sigh.

"Nuh-uh, buddy. You know what I told you. That doesn't mean you get to speak on my life." Jesse huffed and tossed her hat up onto a branch. "This isn't a girl thing. Not--not just. You guys, the older, stronger ones, act different around anyone you think is ‘weak,’ never mind that every one of us is a thousand times more resilient than humans. You think you should get to control us, and that nobody should ever ask questions." And then she gave him her back, walked into the dark, and that small show of trust sparked a hope.
"Gabrielle," he appealed in desperation, "I didn't do that. I don't. You left me!"

"I wanted to keep myself from hating you like I hated the Marquis. It seems I made the right decision." Her gaze was terrible in how close it cut, down to his core and deeper still. "What was it you told me before, about what you 'had' to do?"

Always, without fail. "I," he floundered, struck so unawares by the changed topic that he was without a happy story to spin. "I was afraid for him. I helped him." (And it had been sweet, and ugly, and they'd all seen what a lovely responsive prize he'd gotten--seen him master it because he was not to be ignored--)

"And who told you to do such a thing?"

Marius. But Lestat refused to give them that fodder.

Gabrielle spoke over his silence. "Not your Herbert, I take it."

"He would have died!"

"And why not? Didn't I tell you we are predators? If he was so unfit, then he'd die. Or perhaps he'd prove stronger than you feared, and leave you behind, and so you sought to bind him to you."

"I--" his pale, feeble, deceptively pretty creature, shaking and dying and oblivious to his own peril so many times. "I didn't want him to die."

Never, ever wanted him dead.

And he'd forgiven Lestat for that small misstep; come to his bed and made love with him and nearly died so often there for his carelessness. Spellbound by the swoon and vulnerable as a human, in Lestat's arms. Nearly as spellbound as Lestat himself had been.

"But did you want him to live, or only to reflect you?" Socratic, obnoxious, his mother's questions. Guiding him to her preordained conclusions.

"What does it matter?"

"A man's measure isn't in how he treats those he thinks are equals, son."

"Have your game, then," he snapped. "I was wicked and damned as I always am, and I bent him to my will. And now I can't abide that he's escaped my clutches. There are no depths to which I won't sink, no depravity I won't commit." There was solace, as there always had been, in painting himself the sinner. But his judges were unmoved.

"Your soft heart is what saves you from their ranks," Gabrielle said. "Don't discard it on your wounded pride."

"This secret cabal of demon men, yes. I'll be sure to check my closet come dawn." The veiled compliment bit deeper than he dared let on. How he longed to be good, had always, only to find himself incapable. Surely this would be the same.

"Look at it this way," Jesse returned from where she'd scouted ahead, her legs spattered in mud. "By your word I should tell you where my friend is so you can torture him and go on to 'punish' the lovers who ran away from you. Would you do it, if I were looking for Louis?"

He'd kill her first, and well she must have known it.
"But it's different, right," she went on. "Because it's you. You're special and different. You're the best of us. So I should just trust you to do what's right, when you won't listen to a word I say."

"You'd have me adhere to morals." He sneered. "A murderer without equal, bound by the Golden Rule?"

"What else have we?" Gabrielle sat down on a log at the edge of what only slowly resolved itself into a campsite in his eyes. No need for food, nor water, nor fire; no tent but the pits to the edge of the clearing. Unnatural. Inhuman. Strong, for all her frailty. "Would you prefer we go on as we have thus far, with the strongest of us carrying others off into the night to do as they will?"

"What's to stop them?" Nothing ever had--nothing had saved Lestat from Magnus, nor Akasha, and he'd loved them both before they died. Natural order, among predators.

"Disapproval, Lestat," Jesse's face, as she tilted her head, was nothing he recognized. Angry; sad. Frustrated. "We may not be able to stop you harming somebody like Daniel, but we can refuse to help."

"And if you barrel past and ruin him or the others out of cruelty, we can most certainly hate you for it."

Even in the jungle, Gabrielle could chill him to the bone.

These brief moments of connection, ties to times and people long dead, were often all that made the prospect of eternity bearable. To live without them--"And you say you have no power."

"If one can't win with force, they must use subtler methods. You've never had to learn that." He got the sense that he was being pitied, and it threw fresh kindling on his temper.

"So speaks the lioness." He held out his hands. "And what can I give you? My solemn word? Shall we find some Bibles to swear on?"

"The promise of what will come if you leave a path of destruction will have to do." Gabrielle caught Jesse's eye; was he always to play audience to his fledglings' quiet conversations, to see what he was forever shunned from?

"Fine," she said at last. "Even you can't be stupid enough to cross your mother." The image of a house, weather-beaten and isolated, took its place in his mind, followed by a street address. Jesse eyed him suspiciously. "You should go. Before I regret this more than I already do."

~*~*~*~

By late July Dan and Katherine were something of a fixture at the little cafe, two workaholics among many who used it as a place to connect and pause, just for a moment, between shifts.

Apart from anything else, it was helpful from a totally clinical perspective. Talking with a fully trained and certified psychiatrist, even one with as specific a field of study as Katherine's, let him feel like he wasn't disastrously wrong in his handling of patients based on guesswork and self-study.

They kept their pagers lined up at the edge of 'their' glass-topped table; when one or the other went
off, it rattled the whole surface, and its owner would depart without a word. Sometimes one or the other of them wouldn't show. That was the way, with doctors.

Her brusqueness in that, and her acceptance of his urgency, was almost comforting. *(When it wasn't too close to home, of course.)* She spoke obliquely about her own life, leaving most of it vague compared to her work. Her passion.

And then one day she arrived as usual, but with a buzzing tension to her. She was short with Dan, tapped her fork and drummed her cane.

When the cafe owner came over and said she had a phone call, she looked almost relieved, despite her uncharacteristic apologies.

He couldn't see the conversation from where he was sitting, and Katherine's usual mask made it hard to tell if things had gone well or badly. The tension wasn't gone--just shifted. Who knew what that meant.

"I apologize. There was an incident this morning." She was eating now. Good sign.

"Your roommate? She okay?"

"He's fine, yes. His condition keeps him at home the majority of the time. These panic attacks have become rare enough that it's," (an indecisive pause), "alarming when they come up."

Dan hadn't heard past the first word. "You're living with someone?"

"I told you that when we met." Like it was no big deal.

"Yeah, but I mean I thought--" He flushed. "I didn't think you were seeing someone."

"That's too bad. I thought I was."

"Well you could've--" She was looking at him. "Oh." Better check, just to be sure. "You mean… ?"

"This might be a good thing. Crawford's been wanting to meet you." She steepled her hands, as if this were a business meeting. "He suggested dinner. Between us, that's almost one half-decent cook."

"I can cook." The words leapt from Dan’s mouth unbidden.

"Really, now?" Her skepticism wouldn't have been far off the mark, back before… before.

"I can!" But skills were still valuable, no matter how you acquired them, and being able to produce healthy food was something he'd taken to in earnest.

"Rabbit food, I suppose," she said, quirking her lips to show she was teasing. "Some low-fat, low-cal, margarine--"

"For you, I'll use real butter and eggs." It felt good to tease, even as he somehow dug himself in.

"Eggs I can make," Katherine countered. Figured.

"Yeah, but can you put them in things? Morning-after breakfasts don't count."

She sat, wooden, for a moment, and then shook herself. "Well, clearly I need to learn. It's settled, then?"
"What?"

"You'll cook for us, Friday."

"Wha--you invited me!"

"I thought I'd be doing you a favor. Give you a chance to sweep me off my feet."

"Says the woman getting free dinner," he grumbled playfully.

"If you don't want to--"

"Oh no, you're not getting rid of me now. I'll be there." His heart thumped against his ribs, reminding him, as it had every day for four years, that he was still inexplicably alive.

~*~*~*~

The place Lestat found was no proper home for someone who was, on paper and in practice, a wealthy man several times over. The owner of the Night Island inhabited a modest apartment in the outskirts of that endless, melting sub-to-urban sprawl that sullied the East Coast of the United States, in no city and two at once. Unremarkable, to say the least.

But then, Daniel Molloy had never learned comfort with the trappings of wealth; Lestat had learned that well enough during their last series of 'interviews,' when he was compiling the manuscript for his stolen book.

Daniel Molloy, the millionaire who nearly died of drink on a park bench.

This place must be seen as an improvement upon that, at least.

Molloy's thoughts were masked, crackling and sending out bursts of garble like the static on the sort of public radio for which he'd once slaved, seeking his big break.

Lestat considered knocking, but that sort of entrance didn't really suit their long time apart. Several years of lying low had done nothing for Lestat's generosity--Daniel might have learned a thing or two about hiding from vampires in his years with Armand, but he'd forgotten that Lestat had scoured the earth for the oldest and most reclusive among them. And that he didn't like being hidden from.

Daniel's apartment was woefully under defended, only a simple latch on the window to keep Lestat from slipping inside. The furniture was worse, threadbare monstrosities that looked like they'd been picked up on the roadside. But he'd endured Gabrielle's living conditions, and worse besides once upon a time. He stretched out on the couch, the crackling mental white noise washing over him as he waited for his audience's entrance.

"Holy shit!" Daniel never did disappoint. The mug in his hands dropped to the ground and shattered, filling the room with the scent of burnt coffee (pointless to drink, but the smell was stronger).

"Surprised?" Lestat moved barely an inch, deploying every inch of feline grace he could muster. How long since he'd been able to play the villain? "I can see why. You've spent some effort
avoiding me. Armand's suggestion?" Only a fool would discount that threat. And Daniel needn't know of his promises.

"Funny." Daniel's mind might be locked up tight, but that didn't hide the near-mortal stink of fear rising from him, nor the way the whites showed around his violet eyes (true violet, not Lestat's changeable grey.) "Get the fuck out."

"I'm not some mythical beastie, Danny. Your lack of invitation has no effect upon me." He showed his fangs, relishing the role Daniel had never ceased seeing him in. So unfortunate, when first impressions were given through secondhand accounts.

"I'm not some pet for you to play with, either." Daniel's hand slipped down, to the pocket of his jeans, and Lestat took petty pleasure in catching the wrist faster than even Daniels senses could track. The lighter he crushed to a mass of twisted metal.

"Behave yourself, Clark Kent. I have questions."

"Good for you. I don't know shit about shit, and you can quote me for your next book." The wordless panic beating against Lestat's mind said otherwise, though, and he carefully released the younger vampire, walked human-slow to the other side of the room.

"Why, Daniel?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you conceal it?"

"My house? Probably to keep vengeful psychopaths from bursting in at all hours. Didn't do much good, apparently."

Lestat struck his hand against the couch. "This little show of ignorance isn't cute, and I promise it won't keep you alive. I can handle whatever backup you're stalling for."

"That's some theory you've got. Did I mass an army in the last two years?"

"I imagine your faithful master would do. Or is Marius hiding here from me too?"

The mere mention of those names sucked the air out of the room, and Daniel sagged like his strings had been cut. "Well shit. Aren't you behind the times."

"Aren't you the boy wonder who was determined to chronicle all our secrets?"

"You need to check back in with comics. Robin's dead." But still, he motioned for Lestat to follow him to another room and flipped on the light.

The wall was covered in an enormous bulletin board nearly three feet high, every inch of it covered in paper and photographs that spilled over onto the walls. Red string wrapped around thumbtacks and pins, connecting pieces of a map to blurry photographs and shredded news articles. Daniel stood back as Lestat looked at the mess, hands in his pockets.

"Like I said, I don't know shit. Believe me, I've tried."

Obsessions; they all had them, the younger ones. All so frightening, all so strange--save for when one remembered that just-born Lestat had chased around the word for a slip of a hint of a legend of a Roman painter who was supposed to be dead.
Not so different, after all, from his fledglings.

And there was always some *rationale* to their fascinations.

So he tilted his head to one side and looked, reaching out at the same time to glean what he could from Daniel's unguarded instants.

Hints of high finance, art acquisitions, primarily in Eastern Europe and Asia. Companies changing hands, the world reshaping itself with the fall of the Berlin Wall and someone with a long, long vision and an eye for patterns following suit.

Renaissance-era art, acquired in auctions after the opening of vaults once owned by the Reich through which Lestat had slept.

"You lost Armand. And Marius. And you're... searching?"

It didn't add up; there were pieces missing, events that had occurred in those few days he'd been absent which didn't fit with his assumptions.

Daniel's eyebrow rose, suddenly, and Lestat remembered from whom he'd sprung. "I'll show you mine, and then if you help, we might do something about yours."

Trades. Always, always, trades.

There was nothing else for it. He could force Daniel's mind until it broke, tear him open and pluck out the memories of what shell remained. But he was tired. Tired of violence and mistrust and destruction. He went back to that ugly couch and threw himself down, fingers pinching his brow. "If I'm to play the part of the intrepid adventurer, I think I should know the setting."

Daniel looked him over, mind making links under the crackling static, and sighed; then he flopped down down beside Lestat and began to speak.

~*~*~*~

The house had been in an uproar after Lestat's stunt with the lab. Fire was the most serious threat, both in itself and the holes it could leave in the structure. The mortals were in an uproar for hours, sent hither and yon checking for damage before Lestat's role in the thing became clear. Why they hadn't guessed it from the start, Daniel didn't know. Not like he had much room to complain—he hadn't been helping, barely able to stir himself since Louis' affair and Armand's abandonment had become clear. The self-pitying thought of 'what's *he* got,' cliche though it was, echoed in his head. When the rumor drifted down that Herbert had gotten his ass handed to him, all he could think was 'good.' When he learned the incident had involved Louis… that was a different matter altogether.

Louis had looked gorgeous, moping there outside the gutted shell of Herbert's little freak show. Placid, woeful, and strangely empty.

Daniel had never really understood the others' insistence on treating Louis as less-than, some weird art object without a mind--not considering the vampire he'd met fifteen years ago. Handsome, vibrant, flirtatious and *funny*. But then, he'd been hiding out, cowardly, not getting close enough one-on-one to really sense Louis' thoughts.
Or rather, the lack thereof.

The hollowness he sensed from his first, most bittersweet killer was horrifying.

Louis was supposed to be weak, impaired in sensing others' thoughts and oozing his own like pus from an infected cut. Instead, he moved and spoke and smiled, so politely, and never ever thought a single thing he didn't say.

When Daniel asked how he was, if he was alright, he smiled and batted his lashes and said yes, of course. Only a small lab accident.

Like a mere accident could have sent Lestat off the rails at his newest fledgling.

While Louis had sewn himself up, silent as the grave, West had become a hemorrhaging wound. He'd always been loud, but now he screamed even when sitting utterly immobile, sequestered in a room bare of touches of him.

And Lestat, bold and blond and brash, was nowhere to be seen in the wreckage. Of course.

If Louis heard the screams, he made no comment. Maybe that's what had kept him at West's bedside night after night, bringing blood like a mother bird. The sounds to which Daniel eavesdropped—he'd feel guilty if they weren't so muted, clearly not assignational in nature.

It wasn't charity that made Daniel approach West. He just couldn't take the headaches any more. West was a wreck, his clothes rumpled and hair oily.

"If I ask what's wrong, will you keep it down?" He hovered near the edge of the bed.

"I don't remember talking to you."

"Your head, West. I can barely think with all the noise you're making."

He waited for another barb, a return of the ugly fencing from weeks prior, but West was worn down into forthrightness. "He's alive."

"Say again?"

And then moon-drenched Herbert didn't have to say anything, not with the image and the pain leaking from his mind clear as the days they'd never see again.

_Cain._

Daniel would've called bullshit, but for that--for the secondhand sight of his one-night lover, alive and breathing. A walking proof of just what their 'elders' were willing to do to their minds, all in aid of keeping them leashed.

He'd known he didn't drink that deep.

He'd _never_ known the sepsis that was festering in West.

"Are you--" he wasn't okay. _Daniel_ wasn't okay, not with Armand's machinations exposed. And there was something… _off_ about the room. Something not right about this place where West had been installed by his maker, and it made Daniel's skin crawl the longer he spent there.

"You wanna come outside? We can… punch some shit, I dunno."
"No."

"Work with me here." He took maybe too much enjoyment in picking West up, playing the bad guy (would've been more fun if the man weren't so limp). Anything, so long as he got out of that room.

He took West back to his room--let the rumor mill churn, let Armand feel something if his dead heart was capable--and turned on the taps before throwing him into the shower, clothes and all.

The shock did its job, bringing West to temporary, sputtering life. The need to breathe was an instinct too powerful even for their dead bodies to forget. "What--"

"You stink." He shrugged. Then, more quietly, for the two of them. "I'm sorry about Cain."

"I told you he isn't dead."

"Yeah, I heard. And if you know that, I know what that means too. That's… shit. I didn't have anything to walk away from."

"Your sympathy is noted." His tone was dry, but he ducked his head back under the water and reached for the shampoo. Something to do, the little rote movements.

Daniel left him in there, throwing in a pile of clothes and stewing as he waited. He'd tried. He'd tried so goddamn hard, bent over backwards until his spine was broken. Why even bother lying to him, if in the end Armand was going to leave him (and how pathetic was he, that the jealousy stung more than the mistrust?)

He wrapped his arms around himself, cold comfort in every sense of the phrase, and longed for a drink--but with West just coming off a bender, that was the last thing anyone needed.

Why it was his problem, he wasn't sure. Maybe because they were both alone, out of favor with the ones who'd so charmingly driven them to their deaths.

"So what now?" Herbert asked quietly, so close Daniel jumped.

And then flinched and looked away, because Herbert was only wearing a towel, and Jesus God the scars. Why had nobody noticed the scars? His wrist, for God's sake, after so long.

He was fucking half the house; somebody should've noticed.

"Put some clothes on," Daniel grated out.

"Why are you caring for me?" Charming.

"We're a matched pair. Cheap, fast, and easy, and nobody else is gonna."

West nodded sharply.

"Get dressed."

"They won't fit."

"Yes, they will."

"You're six inches--"
"They're your size!" Daniel snapped, trying not show how it pained him to think of the abandoned half a closet's worth, the second dresser.

Based on West's expression, he failed, but damned if the man didn't put on the fine linen shirt, the light wool suit with its knife-sharp creases, the silken socks and polished Cordovan leather brogues.

"Now what?" West stood before him, awkward and shuffling.

"You need to eat something. One. Whatever."

"I'm not interested in any more of that."

"Good, cause I wasn't offering." Even he wasn't desperate enough to get a taste of Armand secondhand, third, whatever it counted as now. "Just pick someone in the house."

"No."

"Fine, go kill someone, I don't give a fuck. I'm not going to babysit you like Louis."

Ah, that got a reaction.

"So that did happen."

Jesus, how out of it was he? "Yeah, he's been a real devoted wife about it. Feel honored."

"You had your chance to kill me. You'll get no pity from me."

_Every time. Did the guy just default to asshole?_

"Point is, if you don't eat, you're gonna Starve. And sooner rather than later. It's not a pretty sight." Armand had shown him, using fear as the usual cudgel to impress the importance of feeding. God forbid he show a little trust.

"I'll get it out of storage. Problem solved."

"Would be, yeah, if there was any left."

"It can't have all been in the lab."

Well, at least he was finally taking that in stride. "It wasn't. This is a Marius de Romanus special. Some shit about embracing our true nature. And since Lestat went running off, there's nobody to stop him." Armand least of all, now wrapped completely around the man's finger.

Herbert nodded. "Then I'll make my case. Until supplies come, and I can do as I like regardless."

Daniel snorted. "Yeah, good luck with that."

"I've met his kind before." West'd been doing better, overall, but things still leaked--a long face, older, steel-grey hair and a _smile_. And foreboding.

West was slim and trim, though not quite right, in beautiful clothes tailored to another. Fake-self-possessed walking out the door.

Later, Daniel would swear he hadn't meant it to go the way it did. Hadn't actually thought--hadn't realized, yet, what it was about Herbert's room that bothered him.
But at the time he just shrugged and let the man he couldn't be friends with go, into the den where
his lineage dwelled.

The mental yelling didn't start until hours later.

He’d thought he was imagining it at first. It sounded like the echo of a recording played
underwater, not so different from a noisy mortal thought beating at his still-shoddy barriers. He put
it out of his mind, passing a cup of coffee back and forth between his hands along the breakfast bar,
until he saw Louis all but hurtling by.

"Where is Herbert?" No preamble, no manners.

"Whoa, whoa. Calm down. Deep breath." Like they needed it.

"He isn't in his room. He isn't answering. Have you seen him or not?" Louis looked harried, and
Daniel supposed he couldn't blame him. Not with what had happened last time one of Lestat's
children had gone missing in Armand's coven.

He held up his hands, placating. Defensive. "I just got him up to get him new clothes, alright? He's
still in the house."

"Where?"

"Went to talk to Marius about the blood bags."

"You can't possibly." Soft, dangerously so. "You couldn't possibly have been so incompetent as to
send him, weakened and alone, to that man."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. He knew why he was jealous, but this was unexpected. "Something you
wanna tell me?"

"Herbert is not… diplomatic." Louis forced out the halting phrases, as though they went against
some personal set of rules for expression.

Daniel bit back on the 'No shit, Sherlock,' settling instead on a noncommittal, "And… ? Marius is a
gentleman, after all." If it was bitter, oh well.

"He is not! He sees himself and Lestat as like minds, and the rest of us as like bodies."

The tickle in the back of Daniel's mind grew, just a bit, in concert with Louis' vehement assertion.
Something--off. Not fear, precisely, though that was part.

"Armand thinks he---"

Louis twirled on his heel, then, a black streak, a long, straight back turned to Daniel and leaving
him behind.

Of course Daniel followed. Just as he had the first time, though then it had taken ten years.

And as he did, the feeling grew stronger, mounting and wordless and present as they approached
Marius' studio.

Later, Lestat would protest that his friend must have meant it all for the best. That he himself had
set the precedent; it was medical, not lascivious. It must have been.

At the time, though, Daniel saw what he saw.
West had blood trickling from his mouth and fresh puncture wounds evident at his throat, harsh rasps escaping him from where he lay beneath Marius' frame, mouth fastened over that dead, ancient heart. Though his movements were subdued beneath the weight, there was no misreading the desperate jerk of his hips, the familiar convulsions helped along by strong hands. But his eyes. Daniel remembered them too, clearer than anything, though he only saw them for a moment: glazed and distant, empty as they hadn't been even during Lestat's little performance. Wherever West had gone, he wasn't here.

No, he was in Daniel's head, in all of theirs, screaming and cursing and seeing flashbacks of a tall man soon to be missing a head. Even Armand couldn't have missed it. Must have had a pretty fucking great view from where he sat, knees drawn up to his chest and eyes studiously avoiding Daniel's. Always one to keep his hands clean when he sent others to their doom. Disgust rooted in him, flowering into a sneer.

"Release him." Louis, the steel in his voice harder than Daniel had ever heard it.

"Whatever is the matter?" The bastard didn't even move. "Your friend came to me in his hour of need. I've only attempted to offer my assistance."

Talking through that--through West's body whining and shaking, while West's mind shrieked in rage and sent out a flurry of sickeningly mixed images. Blood and death and nudity, corpses that stared and devoured. Being forced out, out to watch his body defy his will, and knowing that no one would save him. That support was to be removed. That his life, what there was, would be taken for another's purposes, and his connections severed. Himself reduced to an object to be used.

West and a blonde woman, faces melting together in the hands of powerful, dead men.

Daniel's stomach turned, and he'd never understand the strange strength that came over the weakest of them in that moment.

"You will release him, Marius." Mild, colorless voice. Smooth movements, like Louis' joints were ball bearings as he approached the tableau. "He has had enough, and does not wish to continue. Lestat will not thank you for this meddling."

"Why do you think he left?" Marius smiled so kindly, avuncular (a real funny uncle), as he obliged, disengaging Herbert's mouth from his breast and caressing slack lips. "You all know Lestat is not one for doing his own dirty work. Too tender."

Armand nodded along.

"The liberties you take are beyond the pale. Even Lestat wouldn't wish this."

"It's true I may have become… overenthusiastic. This one has been so reticent in speaking with me. I simply couldn't pass up the opportunity to share that persistent, dogmatic little soul. I'm sure you know the feeling."

Louis switched gears then, moving his attention from Marius to West. "Herbert. We're going. Stand up."

"Your boldness is charming. So kind of you to take charge of him while Lestat is away." He tried to take the hand extended to West, and Louis went very still, and fixed his eyes on Marius once more.

"Know this. You are ancient. I'm quite aware that my existence is little more than a candle flame before your power. But if you touch me, or Herbert, again, you will rue the day you sent Lestat to
the New World. I'll see to it myself." And he reached for West, pulling him to stand (if it could be called that--West swayed like a zombie, with just as much brain).

"Then I bid you goodnight," Marius said, ever-magnanimous. "I understand it grows late sooner for you young ones."

And all Daniel remembers in the telling, bright in his mind when it was no more than a trivial glance at the time, was the way Armand had curled in on himself as they turned to leave him behind.

That, and what Louis had pointed out only moments later: West's room had windows, and was bolted from the outside.

The fire was a mercy. Certain, knowing, voluntary--better than a surprise flash of dawn or sunset in their sleep.

~*~*~*~

Silence settled over the apartment, Daniel seemingly content with having said his piece. It wasn't enough. None of it was enough.

"And the fire?" Lestat prompted.

Daniel shrugged. "Things got burned real good. I got out and didn't look back. Beyond that, real hard to say."

"You miserable little--" Lestat started to reach for him, to throttle the information out of him, but his victim only grinned.

"You agreed to the deal. Maybe I'll remember some more when this is said and done: just a little tracking mission for the world’s greatest hunter. Or you can waste weeks here trying to crack my brain open and lose your only possible lead. Your choice. Can't say I give a damn either way."

Daniel had a handle on suicidal nonchalance that even Louis would have to be impressed by. Lestat dropped him. "I hope you'll be telling me the real story before then."

"That was real. If you don't believe it, that's your problem."

"I refuse to sit here and hear my mentor be painted as a sneering pantomime villain by a jealous lover," he snapped.

"Door's over there. I know what I saw."

"Fine," Lestat scowled. "I'll help you find him. If only so that I can prove to you how utterly misguided your little grudge is."

"Suits me," Daniel grinned, making a death's-head of that handsome modern face. "I'd kill for a world where I'm wrong, but as it stands, you're condemned by your own words." He pointlessly brandished a copy of Lestat’s stolen book.

The brazen opportunist. It was almost amusing.
Especially when one considered Herbert’s probable reaction to so blatant a theft.

~*~*~*~

The cooking turned out to be a godsend for Dan. Katherine loaded him down with groceries and left him to his own devices in the outdated kitchen, where his hands could be kept busy and there were fewer opportunities for him to put his foot in his mouth.

He’d wondered what Katherine looked like off-duty, and it turned out the answer was ‘basically the same, sans labcoat.’ Long, pleated slacks; a short-sleeved sweater that fit too well not to have been chosen deliberately. There were a few strands coming loose from her bun, which was shockingly close to letting her hair down. The mysterious roommate, though, had shown neither hide nor hair of himself.

The thought gnawed at Dan ever so slightly as he tossed salad and checked the oven. He should take Katherine at her word, owed her that much at the very least, but--if she was lying, how would he know? Would it be better or worse if he did?

He pushed that thought down and bent to his task, going through drawers like it was an unfamiliar operating theater so he’d know where everything was when he’d need it.

The roommate's 'condition' was still a mystery, though at least there were no food restrictions to cook around.

Whatever their situation was, it was… long-term. Intimate. You could tell these things, interacting with someone's house (itself fairly intimate).

There weren't separate shelves of food in the fridge, nor multiple sets of dishes. No his-and-hers, just theirs. This wasn't a setup designed to end; Dan recognized that.

He'd had that, once.

He tenderized the meat a little harder than he needed to, bringing the mallet down with a series of dull, wet thuds.

"Since you're cooking, I took the liberty of getting you and Katherine wine."

This was it, then. The big awkward moment. Dan turned to thank this mystery fixture, and blanched.

The man standing at the table, bottle held in front of him like a shield, was short and dark haired, pale and drawn. He looked like--

The mallet slipped from Dan’s hand and slammed onto his foot, making a solid impact even through the shoe. He hissed for half a minute to avoid swearing.

"Are you alright?" The man started toward him, seemingly against his better instincts--the second Dan held up a hand, he retreated.

"No, no, it's fine. You startled me is all. My bad." Now that he got a second look, he felt stupid for even making the comparison. Similar height and build, sure. But the hair was longer than Herbert
would've ever stood for, bangs wisping low over his forehead; and the eyes were too gentle by half, expressive and, at the moment, very nervous. "You must be Kat's roommate."

"Crawford Tillinghast." Another hesitation before he held out his hand. "She lets you call her Kat?"

"I'm kind of trying it out," he admitted. "You think she'll hate it?"

"If she does, you'll hear about it." He smiled, a matched set to the small, private grin Katherine had given when speaking of him. Dan's heart sank just a little. "It's nice, isn't it? Knowing where you stand."

"Yeah. Guess I hadn't thought about it. Are you joining us?"

"Oh, no. I've got a pile of journals I've been putting off; I'll stay out of your hair."

He didn't know what made him dig his own grave. Could've been the fragile hope he'd accidentally sparked, or maybe just imagined. "Nah, stay. There's more than enough food. Besides, Kat said you wanted to meet me. Hard to do if you're hiding up in the attic, right?"

Crawford froze and seemed to shrink into himself for a moment, before summoning another timid but genuine-looking smile.

"Heh, r-right… " he fidgeted minutely, then said in a very quiet burst. "I can't drink."

"What?"

"The wine," Crawford gestured at the bottle anxiously. "I can't… "

"Oh. Oh. Is it… ?"

"Partly by choice, partly medical."

"Well." Dan paused. Medical reasons; don't pry, don't make it weird. "Uh, thanks, then, for your generosity. I'll try and enjoy it for you."

The smile he got then was just… sweet with relief. Almost more interesting than the faded scars on forehead and cheek which caught the light as Crawford turned to go.

Dan’s hand rose unconsciously to his neck, to the old marks everyone studiously avoided talking about even when he caught them looking. Sometimes he regretted not making them bigger, claiming some kind of horrendous mugging instead of the strange failed suicide he was sure most assumed.

Don't ask, don't ask, don't ask. It wasn't really that difficult. He knew about being stared at. And worse, if he did ask, Crawford might ask about his. He'd tried so hard to bury those months, had put the whole of Before in a box and closed the lid down tight. He was a new man now. A better one, actually doing people some good instead of getting them killed.

"Dinner's ready!" It started as a shout that faltered and faded halfway through, overtaken by awkwardness.

"You weren't lying," Katherine remarked as she entered, stopping to breathe in the smell. "I'm impressed."

"Not a liar. Quite the compliment." He dabbed sweat from his forehead, glad to play it off as heat from the stove and not nerves.
Crawford came on her heels, the two of them sharing a look. He jumped in. "I invited him. You said he wanted to meet me, so I uh, thought it would be rude. I guess, I didn't want to be too romantic. Unless that was your plan, and I ruined my chances, in which case I feel pretty stupid right now." Shut up, shut up. He hadn't even been this awkward in college.

"It's fine. It's always nice to have you, Crawford." What a weird, formal way to say it, even for her. But not as weird as the way she pulled out a chair for him to sit in, or the glass of water she pressed into his hands.

She introduced herself by giving you a psych eval, he reminded himself. Maybe this is just how she is.

Dinner was strange. Not bad, necessarily, but... not quite normal, even for someone like Dan, whose social life had taken a hard turn towards nonexistent five years ago and never really recovered. Never would, probably.

Katherine served, dishing the food out and passing the plates to each of them individually rather than sending them around clockwise. She checked in often, asking graciously whether they needed anything from either the wine bottle or the water carafe; after Dan had two glasses of what he assumed to be a passable red, she stopped asking and just gave him water.

It felt a little like third-wheeling a married couple, at times, except for when it didn't. When that strange formality between his hosts descended, or when Katherine would stroke Dan's arm while avoiding any contact at all with Crawford.

And Crawford… he didn't seem to mind. Little, rabbity man, eyes riveted to his plate.

"So," Dan scrabbled for something, anything, to discuss. "Have you two known each other long?" Whose date was this anyway?

Again with the weird meeting of eyes, the silent conversation. He half wondered if they could speak mind to mind. Maybe they--no. He'd seen Katherine in daylight. Forget about it. It was only then that he realized Crawford had been talking. "Sorry, can you say that again?"

A little embarrassed wince, but he complied. "Katherine and I met a few years ago. During a research project."

"You work in psychology too?"

"Engineering." For a minute he lit up. How did Dan always find the workaholics. "I was working on a machine that--" he caught himself on something unseen. "It doesn't really matter. It didn't work." He scratched his hairline, just over the scar.

"That's too bad." It was like trying to swim for air with lead weights tied to his ankles. "Are you still working on it?"

"No!" Like he was shocked Dan would even ask. And Katherine was glaring at him.

"Sorry." Some nerve he'd touched. "My old roommate never gave up on anything. Even when he blew up our house. So, I guess I figured…"

Katherine's eyes darted to Crawford, but he actually smiled. "One of the hazards of living on the brink of discovery. I wasn't cut out for it."

"Yeah, I can understand that." He'd tried, God knew, but in the end--well, Dan was alive, and he
told himself that was what mattered. Some days he almost believed it.

Looking at Crawford, it was a little easier to think that.

After a moment of silence, Crawford, with visible effort, took up the challenge of keeping the conversational ball rolling.

"What is it that you do, exactly, Dan? I know it's at the hospital, and that you're an MD, but beyond that Katherine hasn't said much."

Dan froze with a mouthful of water. He had answers, premade ones, that he gave out to people when he didn't want them reacting poorly. Truths that would demand they read between the lines to get the real sense out of it. It let him keep things light, and also civil, depending on his audience's attitudes and politics.

Katherine's presence eliminated that option.

Then again… her roommate had a medical condition.

Dan swallowed and sighed. "I work with terminal patients, mostly suffering infectious diseases. Pain management, that sort of thing. Some community outreach work, too."

"Katherine mentioned you helped people. Comforted them." He smiled into his plate. "That's what she likes about you." The glance he shot her was almost sly, but gone too quickly to judge. She refilled his glass until it almost spilled over.

It wasn't the worst dinner he'd ever had, though it was hard to pinpoint exactly how he was supposed to think of it. Was he being approved, or doing the approving? A little of both, maybe. Crawford vanished after dinner and Katherine with him, though she returned to help Dan with the dishes.

"That was nice."

"Was it?" He winced. It had come out more snarky than intended. "I just, I had a good time. I just wasn't sure I made a great impression."

"No one died, and nothing exploded. It sounds like that's a fine starting place for everyone involved." She took up drying, her arm brushing his every so often and sending up sparks.

"Right." He tried to focus on the dishes.

"You made a good impression on Crawford." Before he could feel relief, she went on. "You wouldn't still be here if you hadn't."

"About that. Are you and he--"

"He's very dear to me. There are certain things that, if you survive, tie you to another person for life."

Well. He couldn't argue with that.

"I think we could stand some more of you around here. Your opinion?"

"Well, professionally speaking…" he faltered, unsure if she'd been joking. Katherine's sense of humor could be hard to pinpoint. "It was nice to have someone to cook for," he admitted.
"It was nice for us, too." She smiled, softer and less forced than that first day, and her damp hand on his shoulder was almost enough for him to miss the 'us'. Always 'we, us'--a unit, somehow.

Dan wondered whether he'd ever sounded like that, and if so, with whom.

He let their shoulders brush as she returned to toweling off the plates and glasses.

It was too soon to ask about Crawford's condition--too soon to be worrying whether there was a reason she'd approached Dan in particular and dragged him home.

AZT could interact with alcohol, and water was recommended, but neither were really significant. Not proof by a long shot, and Dan knew all about jumping to conclusions.

So he smiled and asked what they'd like next Friday.

~*~*~*~

"This is pointless!" Lestat threw the newspaper in his hands onto the pile. "You won't find him this way."

Daniel looked up from his own stack. "Sorry I don't have a decade to wander around writing on walls."

"Fortune favors the bold," Lestat shot back. "You, of all of us, should know."

"I don't have a decade to waste away, either. Look, Marius obviously doesn't want to be found. A paper trail is our best bet." He shook the reports in his hand for emphasis.

"You young ones always insist on making things complicated." Lestat threw himself back on that threadbare couch with a dramatic sigh. He hated it, and hunting was thin in this little suburb. Death was out of the question. "Have you called?"

"My thoughts don't reach that far." Daniel's face grew tight. "Besides, I don't want him to know I'm coming."

"And that is why you haven't been invited. You'd be a terrible guest, with those manners." He'd had enough. He stood. "We're going."

"Did you not--"

"I'm not limited by your fears." Or anything. He'd long said farewell to limits. "We'll fly, and I'll call until he answers. Unless it's not dramatic enough for you, to simply be invited in by one of our oldest and wisest…"

"How can you still cling to that horseshit? He's a fucking--"

"So help me, Molloy, if you say--" Any of the revolting, vilifying, dismissive, erudite terms lurking in his poisonous little writer's brain--Lestat shook his head and stalked to the window, with its gorgeous view of a sandy alley with pretensions towards being a grass-lined path. "Marius is deserving of your respect. Our respect."

"Do you even listen to yourself, 'damnedest creature?'" Molloy sneered. "Have you read your own
"I am literate," Lestat snapped, old wounds flaring at the jibe.

"Not what I asked. Do you pay attention to what you wrote?"

"Strange that you'd ask, since I trusted those words to you."

"You're trying to turn this on me now?" Daniel swore. "I can't believe this."

"You're trying to muddy the name of a man who saved my life. Whatever you think you read, I know what I saw."

"Yeah? So do I. So I guess we're at a standstill."

"You are," Lestat tied back his hair, reaching for his coat. "I intend to get things done."

In spite of himself, Daniel followed. "Should we look forward to the apocalypse this time?"

"Don't worry fledgling, I'll protect you." He shot Daniel a mocking grin.

"Yeah, 'cause historically you've done so well at that," the boy responded with a bitter smirk. "I'll pack a fire extinguisher."

Lestat resisted the urge to set the boy aflame. "I need you for the moment, Molloy. Don't make the mistake of thinking it grants you immunity."

"No worries there. I know what this is. Doesn't mean I have to play nice." He slouched into a denim jacket, looking as unpleasing as any modern youth in his torn denim, creased flannel, thick-soled boots and backwards cap, hemp bracelet fraying at his wrist. Small wonder someone like Armand had traded up, given the chance.

Lestat stopped at the porch, rising on the balls of his feet. It never stopped being a delight, having such unlimited freedom. He held his hand out to Daniel, who kept right on walking.

"We're not doing that." He went as far as the curb. "I'm not falling for the Lois Lane treatment."

"And what would you suggest?" Lestat sulked.

"Cab to the airport should be here in five. We're doing this the normal way. Not like either of us is hurting for money."

"Airport?" His lip curled in disgust.

"Too good for it, Mr. All Life Is Beautiful?"

"Appreciating beauty doesn't require packing oneself into a cattle car." Mortals sweating and milling around at their lowest, their most callous. He'd certainly find victims to his standards there, if nothing else.

"Relax, O Prince; we can afford first class." The cab rumbled to a stop in front of the building, and Daniel got in without waiting. His information held hostage, Lestat had no choice but to follow.

It was every bit as horrendous as he'd imagined, poor unfortunates curled on stiff, uncomfortable seats and packed along walls as if Ellis Island had been reborn. And the smell—everything about it screamed of the aspects of mortality he'd been glad to leave behind. Molloy was going to pay for
this, one way or the other.

The worst of it was Molloy's ease, evoking a clear familiarity with the whole process. The way he chatted and flashed smiles for the white-shirted drones at their computer terminals, suddenly charming and loose and likable. He spoke their language of points and layovers, flight plans and wait times, and when he came away he told Lestat that they'd be in the Balkans in only 67 hours.

"Sixty-seven--and just how do you propose that we live through such a trip? Surely Security would take issue with us packing ourselves into luggage."

Daniel smiled, easy, that adopted persona still clinging to him.

"Relax. We're going west, young man--you'll get to see what it's like to stay awake for damn near a day, uninterrupted, with a layover in Anchorage."

Not to face the dawn--to evade it, for nights at a time, over datelines and countries and never feel that creeping death at one's back.

He broke into a returning grin in spite of himself. "You clever boy." This must have been what Armand saw, beneath the sullen quips and abominable fashion. "Very well, I leave myself in your hands."

"Not one of your better plans," but even his shields didn't hide the small tickle of pride. "You can ping down and see if you find anything on the way, but I bet he's gone to ground somewhere old. Or at least decrepit."

The jibe soured the mood a little, but he was determined to stay on this bubble of hope. This would be over within the week, and then he would be able to fly to his fledglings. Who knew, maybe Marius would take Daniel in too, once he saw the flicker of ingenuity.

Planes proved to be another inconvenience Lestat knew little about, the confinement outside the death sleep unexpectedly difficult to bear now that he knew a mode of travel that could so perfectly match his whims. But it had its pleasures. There were minds aplenty to read, weak and open with exhaustion. Whole life stories opened before him: him, a businessman gone to visit a second family in the icy north; her, an artist who'd barely scraped together the funds for this one chance to get away; rich and poor, young and old, a cacophony of dreams confined in an overheated, airborne metal tube. It was magnificent, the more he thought about it. And there was, he discovered, a way to tease Daniel with it too.

On the first flight an older woman had caught his eye, memories flashing with a hard and unyielding life, her back set straight against her woes. Lestat had merely wanted a closer look, and discovered only after that he was suspected of what Daniel tersely called 'the mile high club.' Well, there were a lot of flights. And Lestat did so love being thought exclusive.

He flirted with them ostentatiously, courted them with a shamelessness worthy of the stage, and took almost nothing despite how big a show he made of it. Tiny, warm slices of human lives, there in his arms and then gone, wobbling back to their mundane existences on weak legs. Too dazed to notice or care how well the rest of the passengers knew of the 'trysts.'

By the fourth changeover, Daniel was refusing to look at Lestat or acknowledge that they were seated together. He simmered with hostility, leaking out through the cover of his constant, vigilant shielding, and as for eating--Lestat suspected he was refraining from pure spite.

Instead he hunkered down, Walkman on his head to repel interest but not turned on, and flipped
Routine had smoothed and then congealed Katherine and Crawford’s lives ever since they’d met five years earlier. It should have been pleasing—they functioned, and she didn't want for money even if her career hadn't ascended to the heights of fame she’d hoped for before crossing paths with the Resonator. There were even times like this now, when Crawford unshackled himself from the house and ventured out, and she was given a few moments truly alone.

She hated the resentment. She would have done anything to protect Crawford, felt fondness in equal measure to responsibility. And yet there the feeling sat, fat and curdling in a vat of fear; that the function they had come to was not their choice at all, but Pretorius' hand having a last joke from beyond. She remembered too well donning symbolic leather as if in a trance, in thrall to the unearthly machine's effects on her pineal gland. The self was little more than the composition of brain chemicals, and the thought that ceding to Crawford's requests (that the thrill she felt in seeing him willingly helpless before her) might feed his trauma haunted her.

Crawford had left a note saying that he would be at the library until early evening neatly taped to the fridge. She took the opportunity to sink into the couch, cataloguing the aches in her body as if she were 90 and not a few years shy of 40. At first, she mistook the knock on the door for yet another painful throb in her head.

"It's open," she said, her discomfort for once greater than her fear.

Dan poked his head around the corner of the room, holding a bottle like a peace offering. "I thought I'd come early. See if you needed any help."

"Why, Dan. What a nice surprise." She smiled slowly, a bit bemused by her own pleasure at seeing his hopeful expression. He looked like he'd be good at helping--he radiated the aura of a man built to assist and support. Those broad shoulders could probably bear a great deal, with proper instruction.

"I'd get up to meet you, but… " She gestured to her head just as he flipped on the lights on, sending knives stabbing into her eyes.

"Ouch!"

"Oh!" Darkness descended again, and suddenly Dan was there beside her, rubbing her forehead and muttering apologies, so sorry, didn't realize she had migraines...

There was experience to his soothing; he'd done this for someone somewhere before.

There were calluses on his hands, rough and soothing at the same time. Of course a man who cared for the dying would have certain skills in comfort, but she hadn't thought.

"Is this helping?" he asked, lost and puppyish. Eager. She could hardly be blamed for taking one of
those gentle hands and guiding it down to the vee of her half-undone button up. Endorphins were good for pain.

He took direction well, just as she'd thought he might (not some instant recognition in the eyes, but a keenness to the way he set himself to tasks, that same eagerness practically bleeding out of him; the looks for reassurance whenever he'd so much as held her hand). He slipped his hand under the soft cotton, under the satin of her bra, making those same gentle circles with his hand. His other hand wrapped around her back, drawing her closer by degrees. It was so uncomplicated, addictive, the gentle pressure and rhythm. She pressed her face into his neck, speaking thanks that came out as a sigh. And when he opened his mouth to speak, she closed it with a kiss (talk, there was so much talk).

Enjoying the simple press of lips, the play of his tongue on hers, she ran her fingers through iron grey hair. It was just barely getting long enough to feel--she wanted to grasp it, dig her nails in and direct his movements by gentle pulls or the occasional sharp tug. 

Instead she grabbed his shoulders and dragged him down to half-cover her, one foot on the floor and the other knee between her legs ("This isn't hurting you, is--" "No, no, keep going--")

Somewhere along the way he figured out it was a front-closure bra, probably about the same time she got his button-down open. *God,* the diet and exercise were paying off for him.

His shirttails flapped like a cape around her waist as he curved his long back and mouthed at her breasts, first one, then the other--so responsive to her every sound and movement.

So well-behaved.

His teeth grazed over her nipples and ignited a shiver, a gasp he took for pain and quickly followed with apologies. But sweetness wasn't charming--not just then, not with her patience at its end. She trailed her own hands up her stomach and over the damp swell of her breast, her own touch leaving harsh, tender redness behind; putting on a show and an object lesson, relishing the way he began to blush (wouldn't he be fun to teach, to redirect with a word or so little as a sound).

It was good, and it wasn't enough. She couldn't get anything in the way of friction, and her leg was keeping her from pushing him down and taking charge. She'd just have to give stronger direction. Her free hand traveled the well toned plane of his stomach, then lower still; loosed the button of his slacks and reached inside. She could already feel him hot and swelling against her, but as she moved closer he retreated.

"Wait," his hands on her shoulders, gentle but firm. "We don't--I mean unless you have some condoms hidden in the cushions, we'd better stop."

Condoms. She thought of the rumors she'd overheard, and then of Crawford.

Crawford.

Jesus.

"Off. Off; let me up."

Dan scrambled back, down on his knees on the carpet (where she'd like to see him more often, but), big hands and strong arms helping her into a sitting position with complete awareness of how best to do it. On the job training, no doubt.

"Kat, I--I'm sorry, please--" He looked like a border collie, white all around his eyes, and what did
it mean that sort kind of panic looked so pretty when it was over her well-being?

His hands were gentle on her bad leg, utterly professional despite being above the knee, despite what they'd just been doing.

"Stop."

"I--"

"Stop talking, Daniel." She didn't intend to do it.

But he responded so well to commands, falling back on his heels with perfect, thoughtless submission, wide gentle mouth snapping shut.

She pulled her top closed, ignoring the bra for now, and patted her hair to cover her furtive glance.

He was still hard, tenting his chinos.

And evening was falling.

Crawford could have walked in.

They'd agreed to many things, but not to that sort of surprise.

"Take the bottle to the kitchen." She added a 'please' as a near afterthought, counting slow inhale and exhale. She could have picked a worse night, but she wasn't sure how. She was still flushed, still affected, though not nearly so conspicuously as Dan. They had to fix this, tonight. And after that--

No more slips. Crawford trusted her to have control, to manage what was best. And when he asked her what she wanted, she'd long ago decided that she would turn the question back to him. It was only fair, after she'd broken him. She certainly couldn't fuck him, not with his fears, and she couldn't use Dan for something like that. Not without proper discussion beforehand.

"Katherine?" Crawford always opened the door like an explosion was waiting on the other side. The clock chimed six, on the dot. "I brought groceries."

"Dan's in the kitchen," she called. "He'll help you put them away." Keep it together. She wanted another one of her pills, medical advisories be damned. Instead, she snapped her bra, shoved her breasts back into place, and went about the task of making herself presentable.

~*~*~*~

It had turned into a habit, the three of them around the worn kitchen table thawing the relationship that was less ice than plasticine, stiff and awkward and made of unknown substances. Katherine, Dan had thought he knew how to deal with. Crawford had cut to the heart of it that first night--she might not hesitate to call you an idiot, but you'd always know where you stood. It was the shade of a man she lived with that was the problem. Dan had fallen out of practice with delicacy, and it felt patronizing to bring the techniques he used on his patients to the dinner table. Speaking naturally worked better, and when Dan had the chance; Crawford started drifting in before dinner to watch Dan work.
Dan had thought it was all going well, until the night he finally got somewhere with her, and then had to look Crawford in the eye while cooking dinner with a hard-on.

He had to know, didn't he? Dan had been coming over, and Katherine must have talked about him (but how? his mind whispered, ever full of doubt). He floundered in uncertainty and, as always, was too stupid just to be content with the happiness he'd stumbled on.

"Are you alright with me being here?" he asked.

"You're not fishing for compliments, are you?" Crawford folded his arms on the back of the chair. "Yes, Dan, you make the best dinners I've ever had."

His cheeks went hot. "That's not--I mean, thanks, but--I meant me and Katherine."

"If I weren't alright, you wouldn't be here." Rock-solid confidence, all of a sudden, from a man Dan had seen allow Katherine to choose his portions. "Katherine wouldn't do anything to damage my equilibrium."

Dan was still trying to work out how to feel about that--the idea that Crawford could somehow veto him--when

"And yes, Dan, I'm alright with you and Katherine, and Katherine and me."

Dan choked on a chunk of carrot.

Crawford was beside him in a flash, pounding on his back with almost useless, if well meaning, enthusiasm. Dan waved him away, blinking back tears. "Run that by me again?"

"You're worried that Katherine's cheating on you with me, aren't you?"

"I mean, now I kind of am." He thumped his chest, clearing his throat. "So you and her,"

"It's complicated."

"Yeah, I'm getting that feeling. Try uncomplicating it for my monkey brain."

"I thought--" he started fidgeting with the hem of his sweater. "We shouldn't do this without her here."

Dan nodded, sharp, and turned back to the food. It was suddenly real tempting to let it burn. He felt like an idiot.

And Crawford wasn't leaving, stayed stationed in the room, tiny and curled into himself and staring at Dan. Raising his tension by watching every move.

It was intent, but not hostile, and Dan didn't know what to do with that déjà vu.

So he ignored it, and once he had the stew going and the biscuits in the oven, he turned to the sink just for something to do. Usually he left it for after dinner, but usually he was in the mood to actually speak to Crawford.

Doing the dishes could get really loud when he channeled his anger into them. He was so busy slamming things around in soapy water that he honestly didn't realize anything was amiss behind him until Katherine's voice cut through the haze with a, "Crawford!" and then a beat later, "Dan!"

He turned his head and froze, hands red and raw under the stream of hot water. Katherine
continued. "What's going on?"

"He's upset," Crawford started, just as Dan said "You lied to me!" They both stood like students, waiting for the teacher to sort things out. (She’d changed out of her work clothes, the top he’d unbuttoned not half an hour ago replaced by an oversized floral-print tee, and he almost wished he’d been stupid enough to say the Hell with safety just to see the rest of her.)

"Dan, can you leave the food on its own for a while?"

He glanced at the timer. "Twenty minutes, if you think that's long enough to--"

"Both of you, come with me. We should all be able to sit down for this." She turned and left, like they were supposed to follow without a trace of argument or complaint. And Crawford, at least, did. Dan found himself sulking and dragging his feet, deliberately taking slow steps as he turned the stovetop down to a simmer and shut off the water.

Maybe he shouldn't have. By the time he walked in it had given them time to slap him in the face with a too-private tableau: Crawford on his knees, his arms wrapped around Katherine's waist and face buried against her as she bent to whisper in his ear. How could Dan not have guessed?

"The food's almost done," he announced from the doorway. "Hope you two enjoy it." He wasn't going to stick around for this.

"Wait right there, Dan," Katherine said in a measured, serious tone, tilting Crawford's face up so their eyes could meet. Crawford looked--weirdly desperate.

"I'm sorry," he said, biting his soft lower lip and leaning up into the touch of her hand. "He asked me directly, and I didn't want to cause problems."

"I know, Crawford," she replied, low and serious, pushing his shoulders back so he settled on his heels by her chair. "You're forgiven."

Something indeterminate flitted over Crawford’s face, too fast for Dan to register, before he cast his gaze down onto the hardwood.

"Now, Dan." Katherine finally deigned to direct her attention back his way, pinning him to the wall with her too-hard stare. "You accused me of lying to you."

"You said we were seeing each other. You kissed me."

To say the least.

"You said we were seeing each other. You kissed me." To say the least.

"Yes, I did. I also told you that I live with Crawford."

"So what--" A sour taste curdled on his tongue when the penny finally dropped. Jesus, how did these people find him? "This isn't the seventies. I'm not going to be a--a toy for some bored, swinging couple to fuck over."

His neck burned; he forced himself not to rub it, to instead leave it hidden under his chocolate ribbed turtleneck.

The accusation hung in the room unaddressed for a long minute, and then something strange happened. Crawford grabbed Katherine's forearm and tapped two fingers against her wrist. It was like flipping a switch. She squeezed his hand, and he stood tall beside her, a completely different being from the kneeling pet of seconds before. "If that's what you think this is, you should leave."

That was it; that was Dan’s out. If he was smart, he'd turn and go and never look back, draw into
the safety of his lonely routine.

Nobody had said he was smart since Med School.

"So explain," he said, shuffling awkwardly, not feeling comfortable taking a seat for whatever this was. "You can start with whatever the hell just happened there. She give you permission to take your spine back?"

"You were so promising when I met you, Dan. Try not to ruin that all in one go," Katherine remarked from her chair. But she made no further effort to intervene.

"I don't do anything I don't want to," Crawford said with a particular pointed emphasis.

"Well good for you. What's that got to do with me?"

"We like you."

*Like it was simple.*

"Yeah, well, you can 'like' me all you want. That doesn't mean I want to be jerked around." It stung, the time he'd put into this—the work and effort. He'd thought it was something he hadn't had in ages, with his solitary days and temporary patients.

Crawford licked his lips and stepped closer, hands out in a gentling motion. He was sweating a little, forelock damp with it.

"Katherine and I have different rules for our relationship than most people," he said. "She met you, you liked her--"

"And, what, you figured the rumors were true so why *not* bring me home to the boyfriend?" Dan snapped at her, their silent, measuring instigator.

"I'm not Katherine's boyfriend." Crawford answered for her.

"Whatever. Clearly, neither am I." He wasn't sure who he pitied more, in this situation: Crawford or himself.

"You're making this harder than it has to be." Crawford said.

"You're the one who keeps feeding me bullshit non-answers!" he accused. "She might have you whipped, but I want a goddamn real answer."

"I'm not 'whipped.' Pain is an entirely different set of tastes."

Dan gawked at him. "I didn't actually--"

"I know. But you won't let me talk, so I'm working with what I have." Crawford was fidgeting again. "Think of it like cooking. Uh, Mashed potatoes and french fries. Same ingredients, different methods. You can have them on the same plate without having to eat them at the same time. Right?"

Dan was more stranded than before, but something about the proud hopefulness Crawford displayed at his word salad sentence softened Dan's temper just a little. "If you're not her boyfriend, what are you?"

They looked at each other. "Her..."
"Responsibility," Katherine finished. "I told you when we met - certain things bind you together. Crawford and I are survivors."

"That's not all it is," Crawford mumbled under his breath, just a little defensive.

"What else is it, then?"

"I need to feel safe, and harmless. I have very specific boundaries, and Katherine is able to accommodate them by keeping things under control."

Control he had, but Dan couldn't remember the last time he'd felt safe.

"And I'd be…"

"You can be whatever you're willing to be in my life, Dan, but only if you respect the fact that my relationship with Crawford exists. That's non-negotiable." She smiled, a little, looking almost hopeful. "And as long as you keep cooking dinner for us."

"Both of you."

Their pretty faces hardened, in unison--the kind of matched looks you saw in long-term couples.

"Non-negotiable. Got it." They let him stew over it, seemingly content with the silence. He wished they'd jump in, give him anything to work off of. "I need time to process this."

"That's reasonable." Katherine nodded.

"What if I said I wanted to feel 'safe' too?" That threw her for a loop. (Curiosity and the cat. His had always had bad luck.)

"We'd talk about it," she said finally, after one of those long, dissecting looks through her thick glasses. (Her eyes were so blue.) "It's not something you get into without knowing what you want, by definition."

Pretty much ruled him out, then. "Is this gonna be a regular thing? If we start… continue… whatever, are you gonna go out and find some other guy too, as part of this arrangement?"

"I hadn't planned on it." Cool as you pleased, like she'd considered the option and set it aside. "I don't have time to arrange that many dates."

"Just dinners." Well, didn't he feel special. He rounded on Crawford. "What about you? Are you going to bring some girl home who needs to know about me and Kat and this whole whatever thing you have? How far does this go?"

"Well." Crawford looked a touch disconcerted (finally, finally somebody else was uncomfortable), coughed to himself, and said, "I'm not interested in an additional heterosexual partner, if you must know. And of course--"

"You'd get everyone tested." Dan heard steel in his voice, but that was his rule, he realized. Out of everything--that was non-negotiable, given what he did and what he'd seen. "I'll run it myself. No records."

"That's your objection?" Tension slipped away from narrow shoulders like a dropped bedsheets.

"That's the only reason to object. It's--" he paused. "If we… do this… we should all be tested anyway."
"That's reasonable." Katherine leaned forward, visibly engaged at last. "You should know that our terms will be our own. It doesn't need to be identical to the terms Crawford and I have agreed to. And..." she met the small man's eyes again with an odd, prompting air. *That was going to get irritating.*

"I know you're not dating me. I won't put pressure on you to do anything," Crawford finished.

"But you will be civil," Katherine went on. "And dinners are still non-negotiable. Agreed?"

"Are you... am I going to have to sign a contract or something? Should I have a lawyer for this?" So much all at once, and all of it so stiff. Dan had never had a talk like this, even with girls he'd gone steady with. Even with Meg.

"It is kind of a lot all at once, isn't it?" Crawford had a nice smile, when it showed up. Dan had seen it so rarely before now; God only knew why *this* was an occasion worth bringing it out for.

"We may have accidentally ambushed him." Katherine pushed herself up. "Better now than later." She came to Crawford's side, the two of them staring at Dan. "What's your decision?"

*Say yes,* his mind screamed. *Say anything so you don't end up alone again, probably forever.* "I--I still need time. Can we just take it slow?"

"You'll have to make up your mind before things go any farther. But," she looked to her small shadow. "It might not hurt to take a few days and talk more. Something less high stakes."

He swallowed hard. "That's reasonable. I--do you still want to eat dinner? It'll be about ready by now."

"Well, it's up to you, but I'd hate to deprive you. You eat so little actual food, Dan."

He should leave, should take the few days to think, but having a grace period had never done him any good. And the stew was a new recipe.

So he breathed in, and jumped.

"I'll get the biscuits out, and we can have dinner as friends. And then--I'll call you."

~*~*~*~

Lestat’s plane touched down in Latvia (‘Riga International’ read the sign) amidst a crackle of energy, a certain disbelief still in the air that so many Western feet could now step freely onto this previously forbidden ground. The struggles of mortals was so often distant, swelling and ceding and failing to touch their vampiric lifespans, but it was hard not to feel touched by the effect of a change on so many individuals.

And then there were the two undead among them, themselves looking to heal a rift. Lestat glanced over to the young upstart at his side, now thoroughly receded into his sullen facade. "Well, you can't go looking like that."

"Shut the fuck up," Daniel grumped.

"No need for jealousy. I enjoyed a veritable feast thanks to your efforts. You simply needed to
reach out and take it." High on the thrill of impending victory, he threw his arm around Daniel and pulled him along.

"You would say that." He allowed the contact, showing a slip of the loneliness Lestat himself knew well. "We don't even know he's here."

"I have a feeling." Bold confidence won many a day. "We'll be amongst our kind before the night is out."

"Great." Could nothing please this one? Had his fascination with Louis at last doomed him to that same sort of morbid dissatisfaction with all things? And Lestat was tied to him until such time as his vile suspicions had been laid to rest.

Cold modern minds. To think, Lestat had believed this a new, Godless age of enlightenment; now he saw only cynicism all about.

Perhaps it was just within himself.

"You know, you could at least try to enjoy my company." He attempted to soften the conversation yet again, steering Daniel towards what he gleaned from the wordless images in mortal minds was a street of clothing shops. "Most do. And surely I needn't remind you that it was you who chose our destination."

"Yeah, well, you're my bodyguard, for as long as it lasts." Daniel tugged his backpack tighter on his shoulders, his American-ness sticking out like a beacon on a street still marked by Soviet history. "Keeps me from having to worry I'll get my face torn off immediately if I'm right. Doesn't mean I wanna play by his rules."

"Being a proper guest is important, Daniel."

Daniel snorted. "And yet look at what he did on my island."

"Beg pardon?"

"The Night Island was mine, Lestat--you wrote it down and forgot, and made sure the rest of them did too, but you and your daddy were incredibly shitty to me as a host."

"You certainly didn't show any interest in leadership," Lestat huffed. "You ceded all your authority to Armand, for all the good it did you."

"It's not about 'authority!'" Daniel burst out, the last of his patience giving with an almost audible snap. "It’s about being a decent--Why did you even do all this, the whole showy ‘look at me’ bullshit, if you're just going to drag all of us down into the musty old systems you supposedly hated? Or was that just when you weren't in charge of them?" The next he muttered under his breath, but Lestat heard it clear as day: "No wonder they ran."

"What did you say?" Lestat gripped Daniel's arm hard.

"Deal's still on. Go ahead and call, already. I wanna get this over with."

Lestat clamped down on his rage. For all his complaints, the courtesy Daniel had apparently found so lacking was the very thing preventing Lestat from dragging him into some dark room and simply taking what he needed, whether by drinking, or battering through his defenses, or means of interrogation altogether more human.
He would see Louis again, ensure that his love was well. Would see Herbert again, for what that was worth. He would know that they had run, not died, and for that he could tolerate a great deal.

So he closed his eyes and reached out, into the city, country, region Daniel the reporter had settled on through his meticulous looks into border crossings and unseen hands.

It wasn't just for the bargain that he did it.

So much easier to find, now; no need to fall to the sands in despair.

At the first shining glint of Marius' mind, he thrilled to its merest suggestion--captivating him. Inviting him.

Once, Marius had promised him they would be lovers, given time. Apparently his door remained open, though their chance had passed.

It drew Lestat like little else could, that beacon in the dark. Much like Magnus’ turning, Akasha's blood had left him stranded, feet to either side of a gulf that only seemed to widen as he tried to bridge it: too impetuous to be an ancient, too powerful and detached to be regarded with anything but suspicion by the youngest. Marius' offer of companionship, and above all understanding, was an irresistible thing: a comfort even Gabrielle had not, in the end, offered (though her measured, cutting voice refused to leave the back of Lestat’s mind).

"And there we are," he declared with a flourish. "Welcomed home as prodigal sons."

"Lambs to the slaughter," Daniel replied.

"Enough." Only the crowds around them kept him from exploding; he seized Daniel's wrist in an iron grip, dragging them into a secluded alley. "Whatever you think I'm here for, remember this: if you can't hold your tongue, I'll have no problem stepping aside so that he can rip it out." He tugged Daniel against his chest. "Let's go."

"I said I won't--"

"We can go this way and be in Lithuania within the hour, or use your affectations of mortality and take two more nights by automobile. No more stalling."

Survivor that he was, Daniel held tight once they were in the air, and Lestat took more than a little cruel pleasure in challenging that grip, taking daring swerves and drops that threatened to separate them only to correct at the last minute. Daniel's independence was well and fine, but delusions as to his abilities would get him nowhere (said their kind's very own Prometheus).

The house was a lavish thing, solid on the face and yet spiraling out far beneath their feet, intimidating architecture that hid far more than it showed. How like him. Lestat's heart swelled with fondness, feet touching down in a well kept courtyard.

Good evening, old friend. Marius' mental voice was a comfort, a balm. Enter. We await you.

French doors around the courtyard stood wide, open to the air of the summer night--like a Roman villa, Lestat presumed. And inside, lights blazed in an airy second-floor room. Warm lights; not incandescent, but older. Amber-toned. That much fire would always make Lestat uneasy, regardless of how beautiful it was passing through creamy lace curtains that blew in the breeze.

He took the balcony in a single leap, leaving Molloy behind to decide whether to follow or to use the stairs. No matter.
"Marius."

"Hello, Lestat," Marius said from a relaxed position on a pillow-covered settee. "Amadeo and I weren't expecting you for some years yet, in mourning as you were."

His long hand played through long curls burnished penny-bright by lamplight. They were an easy reach, given Armand's position on the floor beside the couch.

"I'm hurt." And he was, a little. "Finding you once wasn't enough to warrant a forwarding address?"

"There were things to be dealt with. And you're far stronger now; I had full confidence in your abilities."

The compliment soothed Lestat's ruffled feathers.

"No grand welcome, imp?" He was surprised at the wave of relief he felt to see the little redhead alive and well--a little paler than he'd been, but that could have just been the lights. Lestat had always assumed he could see Armand die and care only a little. How strange, to find friendship lurking in his heart.

"I'm busy," Armand said from his position, head resting on Marius' knee and eyes closed.

"Don't be rude, child. He's our guest." Still, Marius' face never looked less than fond. "So impetuous."

It hurt, seeing them together. He wanted that back. And cooperating with Daniel was how he'd get there. So he smiled and gave the opening: "Actually, I didn't come alone."

"I'm aware. Even shielding is not silence," Marius replied, head tilting towards the interior double doors, past which sounds of movement indicated Daniel had elected to climb the stairs. No flair for the dramatic. "Have you taken Armand's boy for your own, then?"

The very idea had Lestat in near hysterics by the time Daniel finally entered the room conventionally.

"Nice to see you again, Daniel." Marius, ever the picture of mannered grace as Lestat bent double with helpless laughter.

"Marius." Daniel looked stiff enough to break, glaring at Lestat with double the force of anything from their trip together… and then his violet gaze shifted to Armand. The poor boy. He thought himself so well held together, but Lestat could read him like clear water.

"Armand." He took the smallest step forward, clearly barely holding himself back. "I--"

"Don't call me that." Cold, even for him.

Marius stepped back in to keep the peace.

"He's taken back his old name. You couldn't have known, of course. But he is rather insistent on it." Another loving stroke of those thick curls. Armand's face was buried in Marius' leg, avoiding even looking at his erstwhile fledgling.

"Armand, please. Please. Don't shut me out, I can't--"

"It's been a long night," Marius interrupted. "I'm sure you're both tired from your travel. Please; my home is open to you. Stay as long as you like."
Lestat beamed, wiping a stray tear from his face. "We'd be honored."

A return to simpler, happier times; how beautiful. True timelessness realized.

Pity he couldn't broach his suspicions, his hopes, just yet, but--give it a few more decades. Fires could be forgiven only slowly, in Lestat's experience.

Regardless, he put his arm around Daniel and squeezed the man's shoulders. A slow, fixed smile developed upon Daniel's face as the static in his mind increased.

"Yeah, thanks, Marius," he said. "Really appreciate you putting us up."

The tension under Lestat's hand felt as rigid as the stone of an ancient.

Fool boy.

Chapter End Notes

Three more chapters to go!
Next, Dan's association with Crawford and Katherine becomes strained due to events in all their pasts, while Lestat and Daniel learn more of the circumstances in which Marius and Armand... well, 'live' isn't precisely the right word, is it?
Escape Clause

Chapter by dorothy_notgale, dorothy_notgale and Tromperie (dorothy_notgale), Tromperie

Chapter Summary

Four and a half years after the burning of Night Island, our characters have moved on--but to what? The lives they're living are complicated and circumscribed, and it takes effort to begin to unearth the whys and wherefores of it all.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains both discussion of consensual BDSM and depictions of an abusive Stockholm Syndrome relationship. These are different situations which take place on opposite sides of the planet.

Dan spent the week eating in his office, picking over paperwork that definitely needed doing and wasn't an avoidance tactic. And though he caught sight of Katherine sitting at their usual table as he rushed past on an errand, she didn't stop him. It was fine. He was thinking. He thought about how the hell the weirdos of the world managed to find him. He thought about Katherine's brusque intelligence and soft curves, and (just a little) about Crawford's shy smile. He thought about how lousy he was at passing for normal.

Then, on Friday, he went home instead of showing up for dinner. Didn't think about that at all, just marched home and sat on his catalogue-ordered couch and watched TV, and noticed around ten that he felt an ache at the lack of company. He didn't call, and the phone didn't ring.

The next morning, he got up at five and went to the store for ingredients. Buttermilk, eggs, butter--all things he didn't keep in his strict fridge. He made more pancakes than three people could ever eat with the determination of a man possessed, loaded them into tupperware, and didn't stop to think again until he was knocking at the door of the unassuming house in an upscale suburb (did the neighbors know, he wondered).

After a few minutes, he moved on from knocking to ringing the doorbell, because dammit, if they could inconvenience him by upending everything decent people did, he could inconvenience them by bringing breakfast. Finally, around the sixth ring, the door flew open.

Crawford. His ruffled hair sticking up in all directions (exposing the scar, weirdly centered on his forehead like a fatal gunshot wound), skintight school tee, short boxers, bare feet.

Surly goddamn expression, all half-asleep squint.

"Can I help you?" he asked, giving Dan an up-and-down like he was a particularly early-rising door-to-door salesman.

"I missed dinner, and I thought..." he hefted the peace offering. "Where's Katherine?"
"Still in bed, probably, or trying to get up. She sleeps in Saturdays, and won't have taken her painkiller yet."

Fuck. Fuck. Dan felt a flush rise in the tips of his ears and over the back of his neck, and muttered, "Any chance the instructions involve taking it with food?"

Crawford looked down at the stack of boxes like it was a live, writhing squid, with confusion to match. Apparently deciding it was too much to process all at once, he got out of the way with a simple "c'min" and then disappeared back down the hall, covering a yawn as he went.

Another unexpected drawback of his completely dead social life. Though now that he thought about it, he'd always been alone in his early-rising habits. Meg had always tried her hardest to slip out before she could risk spending the night, and he'd always left one night-stands sleeping while he got himself together. And Herbert, well. He hadn't exactly been an earlier riser, even before-- Before.

Dan slammed the boxes down on the table, angry at his own stupidity. It would be worse if he left now, but only marginally. *Might as well make the best of it, Danny-boy.*

He was putting a skillet in the oven to keep the pancakes warm, realizing he hadn't even thought of syrup, when he heard the tap of Katherine's cane on the linoleum.

"Morning - wow, you look nice." She was wrapped in a fluffy blue robe, her hair hanging loose and curling on her shoulders.

"Was that a compliment?" The acid that underpinned her day to day was now at surface level. Even less a morning person than Crawford.

"Trying. My track record's not looking good this morning." Crawford entered, now wearing pajama pants over the boxers but otherwise unchanged. Dan turned away when he leaned in to kiss Katherine's cheek. What was he supposed to look at? Where did privacy even fit into this weird...whatever it was. He wondered if they could just leave him in the kitchen for life, where it was safe.

"Hmm. Pancakes." She raised an eyebrow and headed to the cupboard for a frying pan. "I suppose the least I can do is handle the eggs."

Dan smiled in spite of himself, then. "Doesn't count."

"You said morning *after* breakfasts don't count. Morning before is different." And in spite of the weirdness, there was the person he ate lunch with.

"Careful, Dan, she tends to break the yolks," Crawford chimed in quietly.

"That was *once*, and I didn't hear either of you com--" her back went stiff, suddenly, and she cut herself off. "I haven't cooked for three in a long time. Here's hoping the results are up to your standards."

And, well, at least Dan wasn't common.

It wasn't bad - the food or the company, though it was clear to all of them that they were inching around a gaping pit in the center of the conversation. The pancakes were a little raw at the center; the eggs wound up scrambled. Dan was happier sitting at that table than he'd been in months.

"I have to go in to finish some paperwork," Katherine said, finishing the last dregs of a mud-thick
cup of coffee. "I should be back by late afternoon. I'll call if something comes up."

"Will you be alright?" Crawford asked. "It's only nine."

"I took it at eight thirty, thanks to our guest. I'll be fine." She kissed his cheek and, hesitating as she passed, gave the same to Dan. "Be good," she called. The door shut, and they were alone.

They sat in silence, Crawford pushing the remains of his eggs through the buttery remains on his plate. Dan washed the rhythmic movement of the metal, almost hypnotized. "Why do you let her do that?" Not enough to stop his stupid mouth.

"More specific." Still not up to full sentences for the early morning interlooper, apparently.

"The food. Is that part of the," a vague gesture to the living room, "the thing?"

"Don't you ever feel like you want someone to take decisions out of your hands?"

"I mean," he thought of all the things he'd waffled on, until Herbert barreled through and told him how it would be. The frustration, and beneath that... "Not if I didn't even have the option."

"It's just breakfast. If I wanted, I could get it myself."

"So it's meaningless." Playacting, games--no point.

"Things don't have to be life-or-death to have meaning, Dan." Crawford took a drink of coffee, rotated the mug and nudged it to perfect alignment with the corner of his placemat. "Frankly, I prefer them not to."

"You've been...?" The idea of this man...There was a vulnerability to him, but also an openness. Something inviting but shielded. Something that flashed in the back of his eyes, so fast Dan was convinced he'd imagined it.

"I've been in situations where people's boundaries didn't matter, and bad things happened. My relationship with Katherine gives me permission not to worry about that, because I can trust her."

"So it's some kind of... 9 1/2 Weeks, Exit to Eden thing."

"Kind of, in the same way your job is just like General Hospital."

"Point taken." It was like chipping away at a mountain with a spoon. "So what is it like?"

"Like..." he frowned. "Setting up rules in sports." What did it say about him, Dan wondered, that that was the metaphor Crawford picked. "Everyone knows the rules beforehand, and you can tap out if it gets out of hand."

"O...kay."

"It's hard to explain. We kinda stumbled in. Katherine bought some books, actually. Hold on." He got up from the table, disappearing into the other room. How the hell, Dan wondered, did a person stumble into a situation like that?

(The same way you stumbled into--no, don't think about that.) He began clearing away the detritus of breakfast: plates and glasses, silverware and mugs. He'd already known Katherine took hers black, but Crawford--white, no sugar.

Something to remember, he thought. When had this thing become a possibility for the future?
She's said he didn't have to do *that* part; that he could just be her boyfriend. Just a boyfriend, who ate dinner with her and her “responsibility,” who trusted her to make him feel... safe.

To let him “tap out.”

Dan had always been... influenced... by strength. Less the physical than by strength of will. Strength rolled over him and took away all his morals, all his duty to think.

He'd been cut loose from power three years ago, and told himself it was good riddance. Cut his hair, picked himself up, and moved on.

*(It crept along in his shadow sometimes, when he wasn't careful. Not just his dead friend, but the friend who might have been. The ones he'd failed to save, and woken up to realize his life was a desecrated wasteland.)*

The water ran from warm to scalding, and he yanked his hand away with a small hiss.

"You okay?" Crawford was back, setting a stack of books almost a foot high on the table. "It can be unpredictable."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Wasn't paying attention." He switched the stream to cool, running it over the not-quite-burn.

"Went away somewhere in your head and couldn't find your way back."

"Something like that." Crawford's little moments of clarity never stopped being creepy. "Jesus, all that? I didn't even think there were books for this."

"Perils of dating researchers." If he realized the dangerous vagueness of his speech, he didn't show it. "The one on top is probably a good place to start."

*The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*. Great. "I already know plenty about that. And it's not what I asked about."

"There's not exactly a lot to work with. We're still the weirdos nobody but Kinsey wants to talk about."

Dan was ready to start on the whole heterosexuality thing, but it made him think of Molloy. And that made him... tired. Tired beyond words.

Because regardless of what he remembered, what he'd done and been and locked up in a box, the past left marks.

So rather than fight over it, he cracked open a few of the books, scanned the tables of contents--flipped through the glossiest of them and slammed it shut on the black-and-white photographs.

His cheeks burned, and when he looked up, Crawford's face bore a small, pleased smirk he tried to hide behind his coffee mug. "Find anything interesting?" he asked, like butter wouldn't melt.

"I--" Dan rubbed his neck and cleared his throat. "This looks-- very helpful."

"Mm. I'm sure. You seem to be getting a lot out of it."

"I don't--" His instinctive defensiveness reared, sputtered, and died, because Crawford's mockery was gentle. Fond almost, not shaming his ignorance. "I don't know what I'm looking at. You're a researcher. Can you...?"
"My field of study wasn't bondage. Not that my mentor didn't try. No," he cut Dan off before he could start. "That's not why. E--he wasn't interested in trust. He just liked hurting people."

Dan knew that little vocal hitch. The secrets and regrets. Something unknotted in his gut. Crawford wouldn't push, not if he knew. "I just want to understand. You can't blame me for looking for an explanation."

"Do you have to? I mean, Freud would be proud, but. If I asked you what you liked about Katherine, what would you say?"

"You know already."

"But I could keep asking. About when you'd started liking blondes, or academics, or outsiders. But I don't want to explain you, because I'd rather get to know you. Sorry." He ducked his head as he came to the end of his speech, embarrassed.

"No, you're right. I can't promise, but I'll," he sighed. "I'll try. It's just a lot."

"Come on. You survived med school. This must be nothing compared to finals all-nighters."

They spent most of the afternoon like that, bent over the books--though Dan made a point not to open the enormous book of portraits, lest those black-and-white expressions pull out something he wasn't ready to find just yet. At some point Crawford edged his chair closer to get a look at a book, and he stayed there, his shoulder flush against Dan. He smelled like fresh laundry and sweat.

"I'm back! I brought dinner, Crawford, I didn't know--" the men scooted apart, spell broken by the noise. "I wasn't sure you'd still be here."

"Kat," Dan sputtered. "Should I not be?" Her place, and he'd effectively invited himself over and monopolised her 'roommate' for the whole day. "I'm sorry, I can go."

"No, Dan, that's quite all right. I'd rather you stay here than avoid me." She smiled coolly and handed off a bag of Chinese food on her way past to Crawford. "Showing Dan our books, Crawford?"

His eyes with their fluttering lashes looked enormous, his face painfully naked as she ran a pink-nailled hand through the hair on the back of his head.

"Yes, Katherine," he replied quietly.

"Were you good?" Such a strange little question, so seriously delivered, as though to a child. Crawford's eyes fell shut.

"Yes." He half-whispered.

"Completely?" Her lips tilted so faintly, just the smallest hint of a Mona Lisa smile, as she tipped his chin up.

He bit his soft lower lip, disturbing, that bit of flesh clutched between--not fangs, just straight white teeth. Human.

"Tell me."

"I teased Dan," he whispered, loud in the suddenly charged atmosphere.

"Did you? How?"
"Showed him the Mapplethorpe book."

"It's fine," Dan attempted to defuse the situation. "I don't mind."

"Hush, Dan." It was offhand, but she might as well have stapled his mouth shut. "Crawford, what did we decide?"

"Don't scare him."

"You broke the rules." She tapped him on the nose, and he flinched into himself. "Are you ready for your punishment?"

"Yes, Katherine." He was almost vibrating. Dan's whole body tensed, waiting for a strike. Wondering if he'd be able to keep from intervening.

"Go into the living room and kneel. I'm in need of a very thorough massage after today." Crawford rose, almost upending the chair in his hurry to follow directions, when she stopped him. "Apologize to Dan."

Crawford turned to him, dutiful, and bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Dan."

"It's uh, It's really no big," Katherine caught his eye, and he tried to mimic what he remembered of their interactions. "You're forgiven."

He was rewarded with a smile like the sun. When Crawford had left, Katherine sagged visibly. "Thanks for that."

"Uh," sarcasm or honesty. The eternal question. "You're welcome."

"He's so afraid to ask if he can touch."

Dan swallowed hard at the implications of that. Sure, he'd more than gathered that Crawford was some flavor of homosexual, but the idea that he was being courted...He could at least handle it with better grace now than he had five years ago. Age and experience did that.

He nudged the books into stacks, folding the open volumes into one another to save the pages, and then peered into the bag of food. Chinese; MSG-laden Heaven, like he'd eaten at least twice a week Before. Maybe even from the same place, the Lucky Dragon near the hospital.

"Why is he afraid?" he asked, keeping his eyes riveted to the search for chopsticks and fortune cookies in amongst the duck and soy sauce packets.

"Something happened to him. He's afraid of hurting people he cares about." Her voice carried an air of finality.

At least he wasn't afraid of being hurt by Dan. Whom he 'cared about,' apparently, in his timid, teasing way.

He broke one of the cookies, old habit sneaking up on him before he remembered that this wasn't his food. He crumpled the fortune without reading it--probably "you'll meet a tall dark stranger" or something, add "in bed" to the end for a laugh. He'd had enough of that. Then the second realization landed. "You're--you're not just going to leave him there all night, are you?"

"No." Matter-of-fact. Already decided. "But he can wonder." Another part of the game, then.

"Should I stay in here? I feel bad eating your food, especially if you're..." fucking? "...busy."
"It's your choice." A lot of people said that. A lot of them were liars. "We were both serious about not wanting to scare you."

"But," he prompted.

"But," she conceded, "he'd probably like it if you saw. And it might help as much as the books."

This was another one of those moments. A door was being offered to him, a way out. Instead, he kept on past it. "I should put this in the fridge."

"Don't be long." She sank into that same authoritative command with him when she wasn't paying attention, and he didn't much mind. Maybe even the opposite of minding.

Front of boldness aside, he still had to spend a few minutes psyching himself up to go through with it. By the time he entered Crawford had already removed Katherine's shoes and socks and was bent over her foot, fingers massaging and stopping every few seconds to check for reactions.

Dan hadn't asked about the leg--he'd gathered that it was some sort of adulthood injury, localized near or above the knee, and had assumed 'car accident'. She didn't talk about it, beyond one passing mention that she missed being able to wear heels. Judging by how Crawford played over the skin and the way the foot drooped, there might be some nerve damage as well.

It clearly didn't keep her from enjoying the massage; for someone giving out 'punishments', she appeared quite pleased. And Crawford--

He looked.

He had small hands, soft save for a writer's callus on the right index finger and a few small burn scars from working with a soldering gun, and the thumbs worked with practiced sureness over muscle, tendon, and bone. His back curved willowlike, contrast to her straight, upright poise, and his knees were a few handspans apart.

His face, though. Soft. Sleepy. Lips parted for shallow breaths. Scar shiny and prominent, limned with the light from the kitchen falling at just the right angle. It was almost as though he were hypnotized, completely engrossed in the minutiae of his task and the sound of Katherine's breathing. Less a human than an instrument. That queasy feeling returned, and Dan forced himself to sit on the edge of the couch, in full view of the strange show. They went on as if he weren't there, and he was getting ready to make his escape when Katherine looked over at him, then bent down to whisper in Crawford's ear. He nodded, hard, and then they were both looking at him. Conspiring again. He swallowed.

Crawford didn't stand. He made his way across the room on his hands and knees, crawling like a pet in search of new attention. He knelt at Dan's side, hesitating a minute when they first made contact (again with that darting glance, and Dan realized he was holding his breath) and then beginning to untie Dan's shoelaces.

The exposed air, which must have been temperate--it was August, for fuck's sake--felt like a cold shock. It was hard not to squirm, and he wasn't sure why. His feet probably stank, were probably sweaty and disgusting and poor Crawford was going to put his hands all over them.

Then the sock, and a ripple of goosebumps with it. Crawford was bent so close that his nose touched Dan's skin. He thought, for a fleeting moment, that he felt the brush of lips.

"Can we--can we--stop? Just for a minute?" He wasn't sure he'd meant it, but Crawford backed off as though he'd been burned, returning to Katherine's side. Dan missed the touch. "Sorry," he
"I shouldn't have pushed," Katherine said. "That wasn't fair to either of you."

"Sorry. Sorry, sorry, I won't--please, trust me. I won't do it again." Crawford almost babbled, and now Dan could hear (in retrospect) the anticipation that had threaded through the last apology. Now he just sounded on the verge of panic, knuckles white where they twined with Katherine’s.

"It's not you..." There was no way to finish that that wasn't cliche. He tried anyway, pitching his voice to project a level calmness. "I'm not upset, or bothered. I just wanted to stop because I don't know what you want me to do."

Crawford looked up at Katherine for some sort of reassurance. When he spoke there was a little less wildness in his eyes, but a lot more regret.

"You aren't... expected to do anything. I was attempting to invite you, but we haven't negotiated what, if anything, you'd be comfortable with accepting from me. We're not in a relationship, and you're not part of the scene. It was a mistake. I shouldn't have done it."

"Negotiation, like everything was some kind of goddamn battle plan. Like just doing what felt good was too difficult."

Not that he'd wanted--

But instead of fussing with that thought, Dan closed his eyes and considered what they'd read today, piecemeal.

"So if I am involved, and I say no, or...whatever...you'll really...?" *Stop? Let Dan go, with nobody to point to as the reason but himself?*

"Absolutely." His head bobbed like a puppet's on a string, too hard, and Katherine gentled him with another stroke like he was a beloved pe-- *STOP*.

(Strange, how she let Crawford do so much of the talking.)

Dan inhaled; this many jumps in, it was basically freefall. So what. He asked:

"What's your word?"

"What?" Startlement.

"If this is going to be going on, I need to know, right? In case there's something you don't want me to do to you."

Something terrifying and hopeful lit Crawford's features then, wonderful for how it transformed them and yet awful because of what it implied.

"Actually," and Dan wondered if Crawford had lectured once, before the nebulous Something had transformed him, "I don't have one. We tried, but it didn't really work for what I need."

"But, that thing you did," Dan mimicked it, tapping two fingers on his wrist.

Another increase in wattage in Crawford's smile. "That's the closest. If I don't want to play anymore." *Please don't say it like that.* "Otherwise, it's more like stoplights. Green is good, red
means stop. Yellow's...maybe, but usually it ends up meaning stopping anyway if I say it.” Another soft stroke from his...what, was Dan supposed to call her Mistress?

"I think that's enough for tonight. You need to eat." She stood, levering herself up with a firm hand on Crawford’s shoulder before making a gesture for him to stand as well. "You're welcome to stay, Dan. I got extra."

"I have to--" Tomorrow was Sunday. No work, no religion, no responsibilities.

She folded her arms. "Don't make excuses. If you want to go home, just say so."

"It's been a long day. It's a lot to process." Amazing how easy it was to fold open under her suggestions. "I'll see you at lunch?"

"Don't be late." Another of those rare, cherished smiles. A reward for telling the truth. His stomach did a flip.

He was in deep, deep shit.

~*~*~*~

Marius's villa was prepared for guests--the wine cellar below the house held simple coffins lined in that classy staple of his, red velvet.

Daniel reassured himself that at the very least, killing him in his sleep would be inconvenient; Marius would have to drag him upstairs, and go through his 'roommate' Lestat as well.

He'd traveled light for years, his knapsack basically a go-bag even when alive. It was more streamlined than ever with no need for food or water or weapons other than pen and paper. He had two pairs of jeans, four of socks, his belt, four tees, two flannel shirts, his Doc Martens, a watch, a bracelet, a necklace, and a hat, none of them what his elders would like but all clean and free of blood.

He had his own book, and both of Lestat's.

He had notebooks, paper, pens and highlighters.

He had his passport and a wallet full of cash and cards, and in a slit in the inner lining of the bottom of the backpack he kept a few fading Polaroids of a pair of pretty boys, almost the same age--the blond looking just a bit older, the redhead just a shade more serious.

He had his shields, most of all. They would get no more from him than Armand could; not that revealing himself did anything, anyway, where Lestat was concerned. The truth of his observed memories, dismissed as so much foolishness.

He had a secret, and a debt, and a quest.

What he was quickly running low on was patience. He gritted his teeth through the first night, listening to Lestat and Marius parrot empty words and self-congratulatory smiles at one another. He tried to catch Armand's eye and got nothing--those deep expanses of amber were empty and dark, the same expression Armand had worn as he stood over Daniel's dying body and decided.
Wherever Armand was, it sure as hell wasn't a Lithuanian villa. Daniel'd been proven right, and never in his life had he been more sorry.

That made Objective Two "get Armand alone."

"I take it you're going sightseeing?" he asked Lestat as he pulled himself out of his coffin, stuffing his feet into shoes that only begrudgingly held together. He wasn't sure if he should be worried or-- no, just worried--that the more powerful vampire had been waiting for him to wake.

"Not a bad idea." It was barely worth having a 'bodyguard' as an exchange for the verbal Russian Roulette Daniel found himself constantly playing. You never knew if you were getting affectionate-drunk Lestat, blowhard Lestat, or the secretly crafty one that fucked everyone over seemingly by accident. At least this was promising. "It's been nights since I had a proper meal. And a social call should help your little problem, too."

Still treating him like he was suffering a brain hemorrhage. "You wanted to catch up with him. Wouldn't want to get in the way."

"Suit yourself. I'll get the truth either way." Lestat waved him aside. But when he brought the offer to Marius, he was turned down flat.

"I had hoped to enjoy your company privately, at least this first night. It's so easy to get lost in the cries of humanity, wouldn't you agree?"

The look on Lestat's face was nowhere near the frustration of knowing it was back to the drawing board.

He meant to slink away; he was no stranger to skulking around places where he didn't belong for nights on end. He could hang around outside the lounge, like he had at the door of a library gone to ash. But Marius had other ideas.

"Tell me, Daniel," he said with the sort of patronizing smile that made Daniel wish to rip his throat out, "With what are you amusing yourself now?"

And Daniel… he'd always had more guts and heart and brains than sense or good judgment.

So he smiled and said, "Editing Lestat's latest book before it's sent off to the printers. Fascinating, what you can learn when you read closely."

"Another, Lestat?" Marius' voice held all the weariness of a beleaguered parent. "Was your little pageant not sufficient in spilling your fellows' blood?" So spoke the man who had shut himself off for centuries and didn't give a damn about any of them save his prized property.

"Only trying to live up to the title you granted me myself," Lestat grinned, taking the surprise in stride. "You know I can't spare an opportunity to correct misapprehensions."

So it was to be war between them. "By the time I'm done with it, we might have something like the truth."

Marius shook his head. "I wouldn't advise it. But then, there is no greater power left that would care to intervene in your foolishness, my boy. As for you," he turned his attention to Daniel. "Keep your company carefully. The last shall be first, should danger call upon us again."

While he was trying to work out the tangle of where exactly he was being threatened, their final member entered the room. It was an effort not to gasp.
Armand was a picture out of history, his slender limbs draped in a silken tunic and tights that were only barely more than sheer. His skin was almost diamond-white in the dim, and around his neck he now wore a wide band of hammered gold that caught and warped the firelight. It was undeniably a beautiful sight, and yet it set Daniel on edge, like looking at an android just on the cusp of humanity. Armand had never liked jewelry, for all his particulars about clothing; and likewise, he paid extravagant fees for tailoring his expensive suits when he didn't go the opposite direction and ‘blend in’ with items stolen from Daniel's ramshackle throwaways. But the Ren Faire look? Never.

"Boss," Daniel said, looking too-directly into the youthful face wreathed by full, untrimmed hair. (So strange, to see his former lover's eyes downcast; Armand never had gotten the hang of how much eye contact was appropriate versus unnerving, and with his eyes the behavior had always ridden over the line into hypnotic. No doubt West, myopically obsessed with their 'disease' to the exclusion of all other explanations, had thought it an adaptation.) "How's it going?"

So much for Armand's need to move with the times or ossify; clearly the grounding force of the present wasn't being offered here.

Daniel wondered whether this place even had as much stimulation as a television or radio. Marius had owned those, he knew, less than a decade ago when he was the Keeper of more than one murdered teenage monster.

"The world continues to turn, Daniel." So unnerving, the sight of his maker in that getup swanning up in silent suede-soled slippers to nestle in the readymade space beneath Marius' arm. "And I am master to none. Call me by my name."

It stuck in his throat, the word he knew was expected. 'Beloved of God,' supposedly, and Daniel knew exactly who the God in this shrine was.

"Aren't you a sight," Lestat cut in, saving him without even knowing it. "Pretty as a painting."

"Amadeo was always my greatest masterpiece." Marius ran his hand along Armand's frame as if he were a pet; watching his maker stretch into the touch, eyes empty, was almost more than Daniel could bear. The other two talked about Armand like he wasn't there at all.

"If only we could all find that same happiness with our fledglings," Lestat sighed. If he was trying to wear Daniel down into giving out his one bargaining chip, he couldn't have chosen a worse tactic. And then, then the bastard turned to look at him. "Poor Danny's jealous that he doesn't have anyone to hold him."

"What can I say?" Daniel shrugged. "I come from a long line of Irish drunks, and everybody knows we're hopeless romantics. Sometimes it's just comforting to know your loved ones're still alive. Or as near as it gets, anyway."

He schooled his face into an expression of pity, so sorry for your loss, and patted Lestat on the arm while allowing his shields to slip, just a little.

Just enough to push forth a flash of books burning.

The stricken rage on Lestat's face was only improved by Marius' solicitous soothing of their Brat Prince.

(When had he become this person--this vampire like the rest of them, playing their games? Maybe they really were diseased.)
The small talk was agony, words mixing together into a meaningless paste dripping with self-congratulation. All he wanted in the world was for Armand to look at him, to prove that he was still himself under that ridiculous costume. To tease Lestat with words that danced on the line of affectionate and cutting. Why didn't any of them notice; why didn't they care?

He'd stood without realizing it. "Sorry. Need some air."

"You don't breathe," Lestat reminded him.

"Youth is a difficult time," Marius said. "You yourself had difficulty coming to terms with what we are."

Now he wasn't there. Fine. He could make that a reality. He made for the balcony they'd seen on their first night, wishing for a breeze to disturb the sweltering summer heat. Not that it mattered for their kind, but he wanted to pretend. If he were still mortal, he could run out of this place and know that Armand would chase him, or the little sliver of something fascinating that hadn't yet died in his chest.

"I can't do this," he mumbled into his arms.

"You need to feed."

He couldn't turn around. It would be too cruel to hope.

"You never take care of yourself. It's a bad habit." Armand, looking at him like nothing was wrong, like any of this was normal.

"Worried about me?"

"My master doesn't wish to be a poor host. I can show you into town, if you'd like."

It had been so close, close enough to slip the knife between his ribs at the last second. "He sent you."

"I might have come anyway."

"Don't bullshit me."

Always-silent movement somehow quieter still, now. As though the person at his side were a ghost, not a vampire. Mist lacking a body.

When of course they were all so very embodied.

"Language, Daniel."

"Can't help being who I am."

"None of us can, I suppose," Armand said too coolly, bracing at the waist and leaning out over the wrought-iron railing with that terrifying, theatrical, inhuman balance that made him appear to float on the cusp of a great fall, legs kicked up. "But I'm not lying. I still take an interest--" (care, say you CARE, Daniel shouted at the walls inside his head, hands tightening on the day-warmed metal) "--in your well-being, despite our current circumstances."

"And what circumstances are those?" The sentence felt truncated without an address, but Daniel would rather use no name than the one Marius slapped on a child bought from a whorehouse.
"Whether you choose to believe it or not, I'm cared for here. I'm where I belong."

And what about what you believe, huh? What about how you're lying to yourself? "Where does that leave me?"

"You can do as you like. That's always been true."

"As I like." He grabbed Armand by the shoulders then, surprised by how easily manipulated his killer was (but was he really). "What if I want you? Huh? What if I wanted to grab you and run, and never look back?" It was dangerous to lay his cards out on the table, but then the odds of Armand thinking him a liar were high too.

"I gave a serious response, and you mock me." Armand peeled his hands away as if the years-denied clasp were nothing. He was so cold.

"You came out here to lecture me on my diet, but you feel like you've been standing in a freezer. What, you have to earn your right to eat, too?" He'd meant it as another dagger, hail on an impenetrable surface; instead, he was rewarded with a small flicker of life that quickly shut itself away. "My condition is acceptable. Marius wouldn't allow me to endanger myself."

Acceptable. What a pat little word that was. It could mean whatever you wanted to hear and promise nothing at the same time. Armand acted like his touch was nonexistent, no more bothersome than a passing breeze.

"I'll go if you do." Holding himself ransom like it would actually do any good. "Marius' whole deal is supposed to be about strong vampires protecting the weak, isn't it?" Lording it over them, more like.

"If I don't?"

"Guess I'll have to tough it out." A bluff of the highest order; already he was aching for the kill, strung tight by long nights of Lestat's flaunted trysts. He'd have gnawed off his own hand if it would do any good. But pride, of all things, made him fight to conceal it, like they didn't all know his very recent provenance.

"Don't do anything foolish," Armand told him, and he laughed.

"You're about a quarter century too late on that one."

Another reward, a crack in the veneer in the form of a small frown. It might as well have been a screaming fit for how it clashed against that manufactured mask. "Suit yourself."

By the time Daniel followed his maker back in Armand was once more in Marius' shadow, his lips brushing the man's ear as he spoke. Like they didn't all have super hearing. Daniel folded his arms, feeling even more the sullen outcast child.

"My apologies, Daniel. We've been inconsiderate." He was trapped under the lens of Marius' inspection then. "It's easy to forget the thirst at our age. Please," he stood in one fluid movement, with a grace made for robes that didn't suit his modern attire. "Let me show you the city, both of you. It really has been too long. I've neglected it."

"You're going out after all?" Daniel asked.

"Amadeo will stay and tend to things. His health has been delicate since the fire." Again with that hand, tucking Armand against him. "I trust him completely in these matters."
But not enough to let him speak. Marius arched his brow, and Daniel locked down harder on his defenses. Anger would get him killed if he wasn't careful. Go along, idiot. Let them think you need them. Already he was thinking of excuses to slip away and return on his own.

And of course, the alternative to going out to voluntarily feed had been graphically demonstrated twice over, back before the fire.

For all the time he and West had spent calling one another whores, Daniel couldn't flatter himself that he'd somehow have the control or the strength to escape that same treatment if push came to shove. Hunger made objects of them all, at the hands of their elders.

~*~*~*~

Dan kept waiting for it to get less weird. Ever since that whirlwind week of more research than he'd put into his first years of medical school memorization, he'd lived on waiting. Instead, things went back to the way they'd been before: he had lunch with Katherine, he made dinner on Fridays, and he sat at the table coaxing Crawford into conversation (shy, nervous Crawford, who treated him like *he* might break if they got too close).

But after all that studying, nothing that mattered had changed. Katherine kissed Dan goodnight and held him at arm's length, while Crawford practically flinched from his gaze. If there was more...discipline going on, he hadn't seen it. He was at a loss to see how he'd failed, why they were shutting him out. He'd been sure he understood, and nothing had come of it.

"Hey, Crawford?" He tried over a bowl of unassuming cereal, on a Saturday not unlike that first.

"Mmm?" Crawford was intent on a sheaf of crumpled notebook paper, his expression melancholy. (Still not a morning person, though now he'd flattened his hair into something like a shape.) A wonderful start.

"Everything okay?" Dan stayed on his own side of the table, trying not to snoop. The writing was too uneven to read at a glance anyway, like it had been written with the wrong hand.

"Fine," Crawford answered, folding up the paper. "It's good to--it's fine."

"You wanna talk about it?"

Crawford shook his head. "Not much to say. There was someone else with us the night of the...accident. We offered to let him stay with us, but Arkham didn't have the physical therapists he needed. So he writes." Crawford's smile was watery. "We weren't sure he'd be able to."

"Right." Great fucking place to start. Of all the times he could've chosen to bring this up--but then again, this was something. Communication, instead of nervous blushes and furtive looks.

"You reminded me of him, a little. At first." His pale brown eyes flickered over Dan's face as though testing how this information would fare.

"I did?" He bent closer, trying to seem willing to listen without being pushy. This near, Crawford's eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks. The fact that he volunteered anything at all was, at least, a hopeful sign, considering the still-garbled account Dan was working with.
"He cooked. That first night you came over..." (sheepish, secretive little smile as he rolled the corner of the letter between his fingertips, crushing it cotton-soft) "I asked Katherine, after, whether she'd told you to make stew."

"Random guess," Dan said with what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

"Good guess." Crawford folded the letter back into its envelope, folded his roughened electrician’s hands before him, and met Dan’s gaze levelly. “You want to say something.”

"Did...did I do something wrong?” Dan regretted it as soon as it was out. That was the kind of pathetic question you asked when you were three sheets to the wind on a Friday night, not sitting through an awkward Saturday that wasn’t a morning after.

Especially since Crawford beetled his straight, dark brows over big eyes and snub nose and just for a moment looked so heartbreakingly familiar in his confusion (that was the expression that cut Dan the most now in his memories--not the anger or the command, but the in-over-his-head bafflement of someone doomed to be swallowed up. STOP.)

"I'm sorry, Dan, but I don't understand." Crawford was Crawford, though, shy and kind.

"Is she...am I being punished? For not getting with the program, or--" He touched his neck, carefully controlling the desire to dig his fingers into the grooved marks and instead redirecting the movement to look like a simple effort to ease stiffness. "I just don't."

And then Crawford was there, beside him, gingerly slipping in between and beginning an actual massage.

"No, Dan, she's not--Katherine would never do something like that to mess with you. You haven't done anything wrong. Why do you feel like this?"

"We haven't--" His face was flaming, he knew it, from the thought of discussing this with her...lover? Partner?

With the feel of those hands on his neck, rubbing carelessly into the muscle beneath his scar.

There was something so wrong about the conversation.

"You haven't had sex yet." Flat, unbothered voice, no interruption of the touch.

Dan shifted in his seat. "N-no."

"You specified a limit, Dan. To my knowledge, we haven't fulfilled your conditions yet."

"What--no I didn't! What are you talking about?" Crawford's fingers hit a knot and Dan hissed.

"You said you weren't ready." like that explained everything. "You haven't said you're comfortable with our arrangement." A hard grind, and Dan whimpered at the almost exquisite pain.

"I didn't mean it like that. I figured it would just, y'know, go like normal."

"You can't treat this like that." Another knot, another wave of pain. "We talk about everything. We have to--there's no script for this. And we don't do anything that the other person hasn't asked for. You have to get used to it, because Dan?" A whimpered acknowledgement. "It's not going to go away. You're not going to 'understand' us into being a nice normal family. I'm not going away."

"I don't want you to!" It was weird, unusual, strange. But Crawford was among the good in it.
Without him, Dan would just be drowning.

"You always talk about what you don't want." Crawford's voice was so soft, breathed into his ear. "What do you want, Dan?"

"Kiss me." He tipped his head back, breathless with the tingling in his nerves and the touch.

"You know, if you say you want something," that soft breath, ghosting over his face. "I'm going to believe you."

Dan swallowed. "Kiss me. Please."

And then Dan Cain was kissing a man, awkward, tilted upside-down over the back of his chair in a sunny kitchen. He tasted like milk and coffee and let Dan pull him down deeper, hands on one another's collarbones.

The sun through the white-curtained windows blazed red through his closed eyelids as he slid a hand over a surprisingly muscular shoulder and back to the curve of Crawford's waist.

The sky that framed Crawford's face was blue-and-white as Dan licked his lips and scraped his chair out from the table. Crawford made to shrink back, but Dan grabbed him around the waist and tugged him into the space now accessible between his knees.

He reached up for another kiss, but slim shoulders went rigid beneath his touch.

"Have you done this with a man before, Dan?"

"N--" The lie stuck in his throat. "Kinda. Uh, once. But I don't know if that makes me an expert. I just thought--y'know, we'd go with it." Always the talking, now making him want to shrink into himself.

"Go with it." Crawford sounded a little distant, a little distracted, as he licked his lips and leaned in close. "You are," and his breathing was a little fast, a little heavy, a little human as he leaned in and sniffed at Dan. "But this is something else besides kissing. And you're scared out of your mind."

"I'm not."

"Your hands are shaking."

Dan didn't answer, just muffled the shake by putting them back on those shoulders and tugging them nearer. He was expecting something more--some sort of rule, or limit, something like high school and bases, over the clothes or above the waist. Instead, Crawford tugged another chair out, sat down, and leaned in, eyes heavy-lidded and almost drugged-looking.

They began with Dan leaning out from his seat, hands on Crawford's cheeks. He kissed him deep on that full, soft mouth, slipped his tongue in and played along the blunt teeth.

It was different. Not because of the flat planes of chest or the hint of stubble.

It was… charged, in a way he didn't remember it being with Judy Collins, maybe not with anybody before Meg. And the distance of the two chairs was too much, even when he scooted forward, even when their legs interlocked like the teeth of a zipper.
Dan slid forward more, stealthily, off his chair and onto the linoleum, kneeling up straight to pull Crawford in, to run his hands down his back and then up under the curling hem of his tight tee shirt to feel the small hard nipples on a sparsely but undeniably hairy chest.

And he realized that it had taken him weeks to get even barely this far with Katherine.

Certainly he'd never heard her moan quite like that, low and needy in a way that sent signals directly to his dick, until he was almost painfully hard in his jeans (fuck, the dry spell had been longer than he'd thought). He was pulled up by strong, sure hands, into a clumsy joining that smashed their noses together before they could break and reorient, laughing just a little at themselves (and that part was not like high school at all, that breath of ease).

Dan wanted to pull him off that chair, lay them both flat and savor every inch of friction he could manage. He wrapped his arms around Crawford's waist, experimental, and pulled, bringing the man down to the floor, to the small vee of space between Dan's legs. Crawford came willingly, one hand fisting in Dan's hair to bring him closer, a soft *growl* coming from his throat. This close, it was almost impossible not to notice Crawford's own affliction, barely hidden in those thin boxers. They weren't nearly close enough, even when Dan sealed their mouths together again and pressed as far forward as he could, sliding a hand under that worn waistband in an attempt to do a kindness for the sweet, gentle man in his arms.

Crawford made a sound, almost inhuman in its intonation, and shoved Dan back, onto the floor, banging one shoulder against a chair and taking deep, snuffling breaths in his hair, his neck, tugging at his belt with neither grace nor coordination.

"Jesus, Crawford, slow down--"

It ended like a clap of thunder. Crawford jerked away, face distraught. "Dan!"

"God, you're really--"

"I--I'm sorry. I shouldn't have--" The Crawford in front of him then was almost a different person, coiled and hard-eyed and tense like a cornered animal--a cute fluffy cat right before it scratched your eyes out.

"Crawford--" Dan reached a hand out, but missed because of the sudden flinch.

"I have to go. I have to shower." That light, thin voice suddenly rasped like steel wool on sandpaper.

"But--"

*(It hurt; it was too familiar, seeing his almost-partner flee the room. Though at least this time, there was none of Dan's blood smeared on those lips to serve as their only goodbye. STOP IT.)* It struck him then to get on his knees, to plead his case and promise anything so long as it meant he wouldn't be sent away. He was back on the floor of that opulent mausoleum, without even an open wound to blame his pain on. Silence weighed down on Dan alone, heavy and oppressive on that beautiful summer morning.

Whatever he'd done wrong, it was bad--clearly bad. He swallowed, his throat suddenly thick. He'd never be allowed back. He'd have no purpose beyond the hospital with its dark whispers and stiff, friendly smiles. The avoided handshakes they thought he didn't notice.

He stood on leaden legs, walked the pace of a dead man. Made it all the way outside before punching a wall, a move that left his knuckles bleeding and his heart no less burdened than before.
Walking disaster Daniel Cain. He shook his hand as he walked, selfishly holding onto the light at the end of the week. If he were any kind of man, he'd let them go before he killed them. And that was where Katherine met him, passing on the driveway with a stack of papers under her arm.

"You're leaving?" She pecked his cheek in greeting, and he had to try hard not to react. "That's too bad. I guess we'll see you next time."

Next time. He could feel the stickiness of her lipstick on his cheek, marking him like blood, and it would be goodbye. She'd let him go with not one word of explanation, if he didn't offer it.

Because of course, she didn't know--didn't have any idea what had just happened. Had trusted him, just like Crawford, to follow a few simple rules while she was out--

He wasn't Crawford. He didn't have to be, could have just been her boyfriend, but they'd gone awry somehow and now he had to go.

His breath came ragged, causing her to pivot halfway through the door, and he jumped again.

It didn't feel so much like falling this time, more like grasping a dangling rope, when he closed his eyes and said, "Kat--Ma'am, I--I think I did something wrong."

She regarded him for what felt like an eternity, the sparks of her brilliant mind weighing the scene. And then, as if she hadn't heard him, "What was it?"

"I," he already felt ridiculous, guilt weighing him down even as a flush burned his skin. He choked.

Three measured steps to make it back to him. A gentle finger lifted his chin. "Dan. What were you going to say?"

He closed his eyes, tried to remember how Crawford had done it. "I don't know. Ma'am. We--I thought he liked it, but Crawford’s upset."

"Stay right there." A veil descended over her expression, and she left for the kitchen. As if she knew that place was ‘theirs.’ Something else Dan had broken.

He wasn’t Crawford. He didn’t obey.

He ran.

~*~*~*~

Whispers were part of Crawford's everyday. Katherine's soothed him to sleep or led him out of nightmares; hospitals tittered about his incarceration in the psych ward; and most frightening of all, he was sure he still heard them. Pretorius, come back at last to drag him down to the Hell he deserved, the hunger and the need. Those days, almost nothing could stop the shaking.

And since there was no telling when those moods would strike him like a wave, it had been easier to take Katherine's suggestion and work from home. It wasn't as though there were colleagues who would miss him, after all. He'd been such an idiot. Practically gift-wrapped himself as Edward's tool, and now he was paying for it.

Not now. He could do this. He'd told himself he'd bring food for Dan as a gesture of goodwill. A
concrete action that would do something for the hard little knot of guilt in his gut (they didn't take him seriously, none of them did, didn't they know what he could--had--done, didn't they realize). It was more for his sake than Dan's. But he missed that dopey grin, hoped he could at least keep it around to look at if he couldn't trust himself to touch.

The hospital layout was not what he remembered.

"Excuse me," (He'd only had to psych himself up for a few minutes before approaching the nurses' station.) "Do you know where Dr. Cain's office is?"

The woman behind the counter looked up from her computer terminal, an expression of dislike (no, no, don't be paranoid. She doesn't know you. Doesn't know how awful you are) annoyance at the interruption crossing her face. Then, as her gaze raked over Crawford, her expression softened into something resembling pity.

"Are you one of his patients, sir?"

Dan worked with the dying, Crawford recalled. People wasting away, terminal, no hope.

The body betraying them--bodies changed. But their minds are indivisible.

"N-no, Nurse." Crawford ducked his head and hefted the plastic bag he carried. "Just a friend, bringing him lunch."

Looking out from under his bangs, he saw her face change again. "He's in the clinic right now, sir. But you could wait here, if you'd like."

"Thank you." The waiting room was across the hall, separated by scored glass and stucco. Just him and the occasional patient shuffling through, eyes distant with their own problems.

"Did Cain say he was getting a visitor?" All that space between them, of course they'd feel safe whispering among themselves. They couldn't have known about him--about the scar on his forehead and the things it had seen, the mark of heightened sensitivity it had left on his senses. They could've been at the other end of the hall, and their murmuring would've reached him.

"Not that I heard. You recognize him?" The younger nurse, eyes lit with curiosity, was doing a poor job of pretending not to look at him. He pretended obliviousness for her.

"Of course not. Cain keeps to himself."

"Do you think he knows?" Another nod in Crawford's direction. He shouldn't be hearing this. His fingers went to his scar out of habit, waiting for that atrocious thing to creep out, no matter how many years passed.

"He must, right? I mean with what Cain does, anybody who knows him would have to." (Crawford didn't know him. Not really. Just his smile, and his touch, and the weight that lay on his broad shoulders and would crush him soon. Just that he felt sorry--)

"I still don't buy it," the younger nurse said. "Just because he works with the AIDS patients doesn't mean he has to have it."

AIDS--he'd assumed cancer. Had thought it was tumors, bodies and organs twisting and growing and melting, mutable. His head didn't hurt; the pineal growth was more absent than present now.

"...Wait, you think that's why people guess?" The one at the receptions desk startled, rustled her
papers and finished off a few keystrokes.

"Well, yeah. That and his thing about gloves and blood."

"How long have you been at Misk Gen?"

"Two years."

"Oh, kid." The older duty nurse glanced around, voice going low and conspiratorial. Anticipatory. "You're on break, right? Get us coffees and strap yourself in."

Crawford could've used some coffee too, but they didn't ask. He was the unanticipated spanner in the works yet again. He found himself holding his breath.

"Well?" The younger one prodded, offering in hand.

"They still tell stories about Herbert West to the interns?"

"He got kicked out, right? I heard at the university that they named laws after him."

"Close enough. He never got officially fired—we're too hard up for that around here, God knows. Since the cops couldn't make anything stick, they let it go. But there was definitely something shady about him."

"So what?"

"I'm getting there. This is the reason you keep screwing up your rounds. Honestly..."

"Okay, I'm sorry! So, West," the young one prompted.

"Before West showed up, Cain had a perfect record. Top of his class, engaged to the Dean's daughter. Then West shows up, and all of a sudden he's barely going to pass. And his girlfriend is 'accidentally' killed."

"No! You don’t think he—"

"No, that wasn't it. Cain was devastated. But the weird thing is he kept working with West. They were roommates."

"After that?"

"After all that. They even did some Peace Corps stuff together—this was maybe... '84, '85?"

"Sounds like Cain."

(It did. For as little as Crawford apparently knew—Dan was kind.)

"Not like West, though. Real cold fish, that one," the elder said, taking a noisy sip. "Ow! They didn't have any milk to cool it?"

"Just the powder stuff, sorry."

"Hmm." She blew on the brew, which somehow smelled both weak and burned at the same time. "West was this little, pale guy. Studied in Europe. And at some point, maybe a year after he showed up, he stopped working here because of 'health problems.'"
"You mean..." The little one trailed off, looking for a rescue.

"Could've been. He never touched anyone, you know? Played it off as disdain. But looking back...he looked like one of ours. Might've had a low T-count."

They nodded together in silence for a while, and Crawford slipped into his own thoughts. Dan was so careful, so insistent on running their tests. But he'd showed them the results, too. Crawford tried to think. Had Dan included his own bloodwork in the papers he'd shown them? Belatedly, he realized the two women were speaking again, and hurried to tune back in.

"Just a wreck. Claimed West 'moved,' but who's going to check, you know? Not a lot of visitors to that headstone."

"To most of them," said the other, somber and oh-so-pitying.

"Cain came right back to work, though. After his leave, worked every shift they would give him. And they let him for a while. He was a staple down in Emergency Medicine."

"Oh my God. They let him operate?"

"He patched people up, but he was always...he came back like he is now. Just wanted to work. Forget."

"What about the new guy?"

They were looking at Crawford; he’d have felt the weight of their gazes even without his senses. He stared harder at his bag.

"That's the thing--he's a dead ringer for West. Poor guy. Probably has no idea."

"You really think they're friends?"

"How many times have you heard that line, working here? They have to say that."

"God." The youngest stared down into her coffee. "Poor Dr. Cain."

"Hey, he's gone a good five years. Do you know how rare that is?"

They kept on with their gossip, pernicious, excited whispers for once about someone other than Crawford. He used their distraction to withdraw to the restroom, where he splashed water on his apparent doppelganger face and then sat in a graffiti-engraved stall to think.

~*~*~*~

"Just leave it in my door," Katherine said without looking up, already entrenched in a mountain of research and proposals. Someone was knocking, but what else was new? She hadn't been home before seven in weeks, and conference season was only beginning its hellish descent over them all. Not for the first time, she cursed the authority she'd taken at the expense of her scientific autonomy.

The knocking came louder. "I said later!" she shouted.
Desperate now, as if they wouldn't stop until the door rattled off its hinges. She uprooted herself with more than a little frustration, cane gripped as much for potential defense as balance. She unlocked the door, and it swung open without her help.

"Crawford?" To any passers by he no doubt looked normal, but her eyes were already trained on the tremor along his arms. No time to waste, then. "Get inside."

He collapsed into the chair across from her desk, still as a rabbit trying to avoid a predator. She counted to ten in her own head, sliding on the mask she'd never really meant to take up. "What are you doing here?"

No answer. "Crawford. I asked you a question. Are you ignoring me?" She held out her wrist, the out easily within arm's reach.

"I brought Dan lunch." Low but articulate. No issue with muscle paralysis then, at least in the jaw.

"And what happened?" For him to be so worked up after showing initiative, leaving the house of his own free will--she would hold him, when he calmed, which he would. God knew she knew the routine.

She'd been pleased by how he reached out to Dan, a plant in sunlight. She'd been relieved when Dan showed signs of reaching back.

If Dan had set him off him again...

If she'd brought poison into their home, another like Crawford's mentor, she'd never forgive herself.

"I heard people talking." Her chest clanged, and she was already considering dosage adjustments behind her calm expression when he clarified, "Not in my head. Rumors. About Dan."

Nonsense, she thought, but held her tongue. Saying so wouldn't stop Crawford's fears, just his willingness to talk to her. "And what they said unnerved you?"

"They didn't think I could hear them. My--they didn't know." A change in his thoughts, jumping tracks. "Katherine, did you know a Herbert West?"

"I've heard of him." She chose her words carefully. "We never worked together."

"But you saw him," Crawford probed.

"It's possible."

"Don't lie, Kat. We said no lies." Dan's nickname for her sounded strange out of Crawford's mouth. She wasn't sure she liked it. He was growing agitated, straining against the rules that had kept him safe. "You'd know, if you saw someone who looked just like me."

"Crawford, look at me," she took his face in her hands, forcing his eyes level with hers. "I never met Dr. West. I said it's possible because he worked here. But we never spoke. I wouldn't have remembered his face. Even if he looked like you."

"Exactly like me," Crawford's expression was surly, and beneath that, hurt. "At least now we know why he was interested in me."

"You've jumped ahead again."
"Dan told me he'd been with a man. The rumors said West got sick and 'transferred.' Dan wouldn't do more than kiss you until we got blood tests. I know I was the engineer, but it's not tough math."

He could do something dangerous in this state, to himself or someone else. Stay logical, stay cool. God, she needed a stiff drink. "I assume you asked him about this?"

Crawford held out a plastic bag. The lunch, then. Undelivered.

"Lock my door and sit by me."

It was a risk, an awful risk. They all knew she wasn't to be disturbed, but still, she was on edge the entire time she stroked his hair and ate what he'd brought, flipping pages in her work, tilting his head up every so often to feed him a choice bite from her fork until his breathing and pulse slowed to something like normal. After, she spoke low and serious.

"You're angry at Dan."

"Yes."

"Because you heard people talking about him."

"Because I--" he cut himself off, biting down on his lip and staring fixedly at her pencil cup.

She removed her glasses.

"If you're so upset about this, you need to talk to him."

He shook his head mulishly. No longer so out of control--just stubborn. So stubborn and ruined, and so much of the damage her doing. Hers to shelter.

Hers to push.

"What did we tell him, love? We said he needed to discuss things. Every thing. It's not fair to hold ourselves to different rules."

"It's not fair that he's using me as a stand-in, either. A lot of things in my life aren't fair, but they keep happening."

All very true, good, noble. All excuses to pull back from the impulses he felt and feared, the ones she’d found him muttering about after a few kisses with a man bothered only by their loss.

"Crawford." She weighed her choices. Push too hard, and she'd break him all over. "Did they say that Dan was engaged?"

"Yes."

"And you know what happened to her." The sharp nod he gave in answer was too curt; he showed his hand so easily. "Her name came up when I was researching him--"

"You knew all of this, and you didn't tell me?"

"No, I didn't. I didn't research gossip. Just facts. Like the fact that his fiancée was a petite blonde medical student." His face twisted, and she shook her head. "People have types, Crawford. I wouldn't have brought him home if I thought he'd hurt you." She paused, and then added what she knew to be the real holdup: “Or if I thought you would hurt him.”
He turned away, facing the door and curling his arms around his knees, fingers locked white-knuckled on his elbows.

Such a gamble, to bring a stranger into their rickety survivors' shelter going on nothing but a few faded newspaper articles and a list of distant observances. She bet too high, always. And always, there was another shoe somewhere. She hoped this wasn't it. "If we blame him for having scars, then what do we make of our own?"

"This isn't the same."

"That's enough. I'm issuing you an order: go home. Calm down from this. I'll invite Dan over, and we'll talk about all of this like adults. Understand?"

His fingers flew out to hover over her wrist, twitching uncertainly, then withdrew. "Yes, Katherine."

"Call me when you get there. I should be in my office until six. Do you need an escort?"

"No, Katherine."

Brave. She kissed him on mouth and cheek and forehead.

He walked out radiating more determination than confidence, his willpower holding him together like nothing else would, and she yet again wondered what he'd been like before she and Pretorius had taken their turns with his mind. All very scientific, her interest in the young man in the cell; all so justified, forcing him back into the place with his mentor's brain-warping machine, which he swore was the source of his troubles.

She'd had a voice of ethics with her then, and hadn't listened, and here they were--functioning.

Stable, in the sense that any patient who ceased manifesting changes was stable.

Static.

Her leg hurt as she powered back into her paperwork, walling the issue off so that it couldn't affect her job. At five-thirty (early for her, but this mattered) she walked down to Dan's territory, trusting face-to-face over attempts at wrangling the interoffice phone system.

He greeted her with a smile, waving her in over his own not-inconsiderate pile of forms, his colored by sprinklings of glossy pamphlets and letterheads amid the more standard forms.

"We need to talk." Pleasantries had never suited her, but she almost regretted it as she watched his shoulders tighten, heard the long breath whoosh out through clenched teeth.

"I was afraid of that," he said. "Give it to me straight, doc. Should I prepare for more lunches alone? Or am I just barred from the house?"

"Neither." The both of them, assuming the most dire answer at every turn. No wonder they treated her like the answer to their problems (and well she knew what a lie that was). "Crawford came by today."

"Really?" He didn't even disguise the way he lit up with nerves. And hope. "I must've missed him."

"Your staff has colorful ideas about your history."

"They--oh. Oh, no. Look, I didn't bring it up because I didn't want to scare you, but it's not true,
alright? I'm clean. I've got the tests right here, hold on," he started digging through atrociously
organized drawers.

"Dan," she tried. "Dan!" He froze. "Can you wait for me to finish talking before you ignore me?"

"Sorry, I just--that's what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Actually, he was more concerned about your love life. Or, the one that's been spun around you."

"Haven't heard that one." His voice strained with false cheer.

"Then you and Dr. West were only colleagues?"

He didn't answer--a response in itself. "To clarify, then: the HIV-positive status is fiction, but the
relationship was real. Should I assume he isn't dead?"

"No, it--it's complicated."

"Which part?"

"All of it. You won't see him around anymore, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not the one who's worried. Crawford thinks you see him as a replacement for West."

"What? That's ridiculous! He looks nothing like--I mean, a little in the build, I guess, but nothing
important."

Katherine held up a weathered piece of newsprint featuring a blurry photo of the late doctor. "They
could be brothers. If you deny it, he's only going to distrust you more."

"What do I say?"

"Are you attracted to him because of his resemblance to Dr. West?"

"No!" His face was uneasy, but only for a moment.

"Then tell him that. Dinner, tonight at seven. And bring some whiskey." She had such a headache.

~*~*~*~

Lestat was in his element once again, passing from hand to hand with a smile for each vibrant body
and a laugh as they fell into his arms. No doubt he didn't mean to make Daniel feel cloddish by
comparison (Lestat was many things, but 'self absorbed' well and truly took the cake), but Marius'
patronizing smile was there for him nonetheless when he stumbled away from his own victim,
ravished without elegance or long selection. He took another for spite, and for something beyond
that--the man was drunk, only slightly, and Daniel knew how to play that card.

"Daniel, come here! You must see this view." It was as if Lestat had forgotten the purpose for their
visit altogether, a vibrant mirror reflecting the tentative joy all around him. Already he was dressed
in the local fashion, half of it gifts from admirers.

"M'not..." pause just there, for effect. "Not feeling great. Shit, they make it strong here."
"Stay close," Marius admonished him. "We will see you home safe."

As if he wasn't still the deadliest thing on the streets even dead drunk. "No, no, s'okay. I just want...I'll meet you later." And he stumbled away, pretending to be insensible and deaf to their cries. He kept it up for blocks, well into the dark, cranking his defenses up as high as they would go before bolting back for the grounds. The feel of Armand's icy skin still chilled his fingers.

He could move silently when needed; he may have admired Louis' human carelessness, but he'd sprung from the blood of unearthly Armand, and such things marked them. The balcony he'd refused to attempt before was child's play with no observers (and a bit of Dutch courage, yes.)

If he'd learned anything from his fellow weaklings, it was that shows of vulnerability were sometimes the only defense available. Willows, not oaks; standing strong meant you broke in the winds or attracted lightning.

And so he hopped up, stole through the lacy curtains like the thing he was, stealing into the boudoir of a carefully guarded jewel.

One he'd helped make prank calls to Australia, and to whom he'd explained how shaving cream canisters worked.

He was full, and warm, and probably looked almost like a real boy--like the one Armand had loved--and he was willing to use that if all his other charms had died with the roses in his cheeks.

There was a fire going in the fireplace, and beside it a fur rug.

On the rug lay an alabaster statue, nude, one leg drawn up in false modesty. The fingers of his right hand pressed to the brass screen before the flames.

He was loathe to disturb the sight at first, wasting precious minutes enraptured by the once-familiar sight of Armand's single-minded fascination. He crept a few steps closer. "Am I interrupting?"

"No." He'd hoped, knowing it was in vain, for some sign of surprise. But Armand only moved his hand, beginning a slow trace along the grate.

But the job was still done, and Daniel settled himself beside his maker on the rug, muddy shoes and all. Like he belonged there. "Anybody ever mention you shouldn't play with fire?"

"It hardly matters, does it? I won't burn. I'll simply be restored as I was."

Daniel snatched Armand's hand, an apparently calculated ploy made out of simple fear. "It'd matter to me."

"Why?" At last, at long last he was truly being seen, wrung dry for answers as if he once more held all the world's fascinations.

How to answer, when Armand hadn't believed. When they were so used to *not* saying what they meant.

He sighed, looking at the hand in his, expecting familiarity--the one index nail chewed eternally shorter than the rest, the thumbnail uneven and a touch longer than that on the left. The small human imperfections frozen in time.

The nails had been pointlessly, fruitlessly clipped. Under them lay traces of paint.
"You're wrong, you know," he whispered, tracing what he assumed was the lifeline--long and clear creased into flawless skin, save for a break close to one end. "We don't all hate our makers."

"Give it time." The touch was allowed, submitted to like everything else. "You're very young. There's much left to poison."

He didn't have names for the other whorls and forks, but he lavished the same gentle attention on them, as if they would yield the secrets of communication at last. "Then why are you here?"

Armand sat up, pulling himself free of Daniel's touch. "There are answers here, given freely," he said. "What I've always wanted."

What a crock of shit, he thought within the safety of his head. They must've stayed up all the day long having those conversations--Daniel hadn't seen anything beyond manhandling and orders. "Where does that leave me?"

"You're free to do what you like." The firelight made deep circles under Armand's eyes.

He was still trying to pick the right words, the key to getting his tangled feelings across without revealing his depth of desperation, when Armand went on. "Why is this important to you?"

"Why?" he repeated, baffled.

"You didn't seek my company when we lived together. You resented my intrusions into your life. When Louis came to you for help, you left me behind in the fire. Why, then, are you making that face now? Is it disappointment that I survived?"

"I--" his voice cracked; it was pathetic. And surely the rotgut his meal had consumed was evident in the tears he felt threatening. "I love you, Boss. I always--but you didn't--" Deep breath, even as that impassive face looked on. "You didn't want me anymore, once I stopped changing."

Armand wanted, needed, someone else to grow and move, to learn and teach him the scripts of each changing time. Daniel had thought that would be his duty, always, but apparently only the living would do.

He'd swallowed his pride of place, salved his stung ego, and resented.

"And I helped set the fire because I didn't understand. If I had, I'd have grabbed you, but you never told me about Marius. You never told me so many things."

Only the books, the ones Lestat hid unacknowledged truths in, had told the tale--framed in the most flattering light available for nocturnal predators.

"Was it terrible?" Armand asked absently, "To see them die? The kindness can be a burden."

He almost gave the game away, tripped up by hearing such a master manipulator swallow that lie without thought. "I try not to think about it," he said, and hoped it would be enough.

Armand considered his words, almost disappointed. "Of course. It's easier that way. We save ourselves by becoming cold. Caring becomes an affectation remembered. One believes in it, for lack of anything else to hold onto."

But that wasn't it at all. He couldn't shut it off, that was the matter with him. Couldn't stop wondering about their erstwhile fugitives or feeling inconvenient stabs of near-pity at Lestat's flashes of guileless sorrow; couldn't stem dangerous hatred, even when it would certainly kill him.
Instead, he changed the subject. "Is that why the new look? Trying to make the outside match the inside?"

"I don't follow."

"And I don't believe you." Gently as he could, he laid his hand against Armand's cheek, the disparity like fire. "It's all yours, if you want it. I did it for you." He swallowed, aware of the danger he could do to his own cause. "I miss you."

"Truly?" The firelight reflecting in glassy eyes rendered them unreadable.

"Truly. You know--I always let you bring me back." He gave a helpless little laugh. "I guess it was about time I did the chasing."

"You're trying to tempt me." Too blunt, that statement. Too painful, to think what a poor seducer he made, for all he'd stolen in here to press his case by a fire. "Unruly. But..." Icy hand on his chin, tilting it this way and that. Trailing down his throat, after, over the territory that on Armand was the only thing hidden by that sheet of hammered gold. "There is no other motive I can discern for your behavior..."

"No, none. I just want to be with you." He dared to touch, to run a hand over cheek and shoulder, bypassing the jewelry. "You're so cold. Can't we take a bath or something?"

"It would make no difference."

"I'd get to hold you." His hand stopped on one thin, pale arm, afraid to overstep.

"You don't need water for that." A crawl closed the small distance between them, less a seduction and more the careful inching of prey; hedgehogs trying not to wound one another.

Daniel folded himself around the small body in his arms, relishing the smell and the soft, tentative touch like a man rescued on the brink of death. It was only a trick of his mind, he knew, that made Armand look thinner. It didn't stop his distress.

"Please, Boss, I'm begging you. Take it from me." How things had changed. He presented his wrist, safe and distant and, in that moment, hotter than the fire.

"Why do you refuse to call me by my name?"

*Because you didn't choose it.* But what if he had? "Do you want me to? Would it make you happy?" *Will it make you save yourself?*

Armand was silent a long while. "I'd like to hear you try."

"Amadeo." He tried to make it soft, but it stuck and slimed in his throat, threatening to choke him. He was sure he felt his maker flinch.

"It won't be necessary," was all he said as he kissed Daniel's wrist, the very tip of his fang grazing across burning flesh.

Daniel closed his eyes and shuddered, waiting, waiting for it, as he'd done so many times when he was still human. As he'd been doing since he stopped being human.

A flicker of cold tongue at the vein, the body in his arms shifting, moulding, yes, please--

And then Armand's cherub mouth withdrew, leaving Daniel aching and rejected.
Not even worth feeding on.

Before he could even recover, Armand was lounging on the couch, almost modest beneath a throw, and then Daniel heard footsteps.

He went limp, putting on a sprawl out of one of his worst drunks there on the rug before the fire.

At least that answered a few questions.

"So you found your way back after all." Lestat peeked around Marius into the room, upside down and barely visible from where Daniel lay.

"Ughhhhh," he managed, lolling his head as if he'd just noticed the guests.

"Entertaining guests, Amadeo?" Marius sounded amused, but there was a deafening silence on the heels of the question.

"No, Maestro." No more gifted liar among them. "He stumbled in, and I left him where he lay. It seemed harmless. He said he enjoyed the flames."

"I'm sure," Lestat muttered, determined to have his place in the scene even when it didn't call for him.

"I'm surprised at your kindness," Marius said.

"You did tell me our hospitality was paramount. Did I act incorrectly?" A careful tilt of the head, like a marionette.

"So I did. You've done well. Come here; after so many years, I cannot bear to be apart from you."

Armand went, the blanket puddling at his feet as he folded himself into Marius' arms. He seemed not to notice his nudity or his audience, head lolling back as Marius kissed his throat.

Daniel caught Lestat shooting him a look, and wished he'd chosen a more mobile pretense. It would save him watching the other half of the audience eat it up.

Two of a kind, maybe--he'd thought Lestat was just stupid and carrying a boatload of daddy issues around on his back, but the more time they spent together, the more Daniel wondered.

Wondered whether he'd have to renege on their little 'deal,' such as it was, to spare his fellows yet more of...this.

He'd go on the record with a lie, if it would protect others, he thought.

And yet--as hungry as the look in Lestat's eyes was, it was tinged not with lust or gratification, but longing. Sadness and a disturbing, dazzled hope.

Not that it made much difference; love could drive as many fucked-up choices as anything else.

Still.

He rolled and groaned, making a show of levering himself up on hands and knees supposedly shaky as a newborn fawn's.

"'Stat," he slurred. "Help a guy out, huh?"
Lestat shook himself free of whatever thoughts, good or ill, had ensnared him, and went to Daniel's side. "To bed with you." Daniel let himself be hauled up. "Let's leave the lovebirds be, hmm?" A pat to his chest.

As soon as they were alone, Lestat dropped him like a sack of potatoes. "I saw better acting in my traveling days. You're lucky Marius humored you."

"What're you talking 'bout?" He held to the performance, calling the bluff.

"Oh, it was an inspired choice," Lestat admitted. "But you gave the game away before you even came here, remember? Not that I care," And here he knelt, closing in until his face was centimeters from Daniel's own. "You have what you want. Now give me what you promised."

"I don't have jack shit," he spat.

"There's nothing more pathetic than a sore loser. Our agreement was finding out whether your impish little maker was alive. I didn't contract to help your romantic notions."

"Just so long as I feed yours."

"You owe me, Molloy. Now tell me where Louis is."

Once, Daniel would've cowered from the villain of the story that had sent him to his death. Now he saw with different eyes, and zeroed in with predatory precision: "And Herbert."

"What?"

"And Herbert. You want them both, right? Heal your rift?" He smirked. "I mean, you care so much about both your fledglings, right?"

Lestat shifted, eyes narrowing as though in search of a trap.

"Herbert was--difficult."

"Yeah, s'what I thought," Daniel said, stripping down to his boxers and tee and stowing the rest in his bag, which he tucked way down into the foot of his coffin. "You're one cold fucker."

"How dare you, you infinitesimal little scandalmonger. Your muckraking dirties everything you touch."

"Cry all you want, Brat Prince, but when it comes down to it you don't really give a shit about anybody but yourself, huh?"

A strong hand wrapped around his throat, holding him aloft. "I could rip your mind apart and take what I wanted. This cooperation is a privilege, not a right."

"Oh, yeah," he wheezed. "That really makes me want to tell you." Lestat threw him down and he massaged his throat. "Forget it. Deal's off."

"Why, you--"

"I'm not sending them back to you. Go make new dolls if you're so lonely. You might get a century before they run away from you, if you play it right."

Lestat set his shoulders, apparently collecting himself. "Fine. Then I'll tell Marius what you're up to with his fledgling."
"Go ahead," he laughed. "Good luck getting your precious information out what's left of me."

"I won't need to." Lestat's eyes had a dangerous glitter. "All I'll have to do is ask him to pluck it out of you before he ends your miserable, unwarranted existence."

"Given up on proving you're not both utter bastards?"

"Jealousy at being bested is an ugly thing, Daniel. Especially when directed at--"

"At your best friend, yeah, yeah, we all know. Pot and kettle on the jealousy thing."

"I'm not jealous."

"No? Because you sure as hell seem to think Louis is escaped property, and even I felt some serious envy when I saw the two of them together. They're...sweet."

Bitterness coated his tongue at the truth, but that was life, right? And he'd seen what he'd seen, Louis’ endurance transformed into terrible strength, Herbert's viciousness directed and targeted and encompassing the protection of exactly one person.

And both of them so dreadfully gentle, defying the predatory love and sex that marked their kind.

Daniel was jealous, all right, but not of Marius.

Something must have shown on his face, because just then he felt an increased press against his sheltering static. Lestat, trying to break in just a sliver, worm his blunt, unskilled way inside and steal that knowledge.

So he spat back a paired set of images, one real, one constructed from Lestat's own words, lovingly matched:

Young men, one blond, one dark-haired; terrified, pale, struggling beneath ancient vampires, blood pouring down their throats--blood they didn't want. Blood they'd rejected.

Sumptuous tropical mansion bled into decaying grey stone castle; faces merged and blurred.

Daniel hadn't heard Armand in nearly a decade, but he'd learned well how to manipulate and wound with thoughts.

Maybe this could even instruct.

Lestat recoiled as if struck, glaring like he was the wounded party and not a tactless invader. Daniel took the moment to revel in his victory, the one show of strength he had in this den of lions.

Like all things in his life, it came around to bite him sooner rather than later. The minute he stumbled out of his coffin and into his clothes (beginning to smell just a little off, crumpled from being stored in his battered bag), he found the committee waiting for him.

"Good evening, Daniel," Lestat smiled, the formality raising every red flag he possessed.

"Where's Armand?" he asked.

"Resting," Marius demurred. "The excitement of all this activity has left him unfortunately drained."
Yeah, I'll bet. He was formulating an excuse when Lestat extended a courtly hand.

"Come sit with us. Marius was about to tell me about his time with my poor Herbert. It...helps. To share memories." An actor's mask of sorrow, like this was about his grief. As if the man understood the word.

"I'd really rather not," Daniel said, schooling his face to soft regret. "Give me a few decades, maybe, but--I don't want to remember that night."

Not that he could forget.

"Daniel," Marius began in his pious, lecturing, honey-dripping tones, "you are very young, and surely you've seen how dangerous it is for vampires of your recent creation to be without some measure of control."

"I don't. Want to."

"We'd hate to lose you as well, with our numbers so depleted already, and you aimless. Let it be an object lesson." Marius' hand was nearly warm when he carded long nails through Daniel's hair, and Lestat's face almost hopeful.

"Yes, Daniel. Let us help."

They were all nearly the same size and height (same coloration, even, a spectrum of blond all in a row), and Daniel had learned to scrap a little, but with vampires none of that mattered. He didn't have the weapons to fight back, so he did what any weakling had to, and nodded.

Nodded and steeled his mind, while he followed them up to a simple sitting room.

"I should never have made him," Lestat began, one couch short of a therapy session as they settled into the furniture like statues.

"You can't allow yourself to think that way," Marius scolded. "We all have our errors in judgment. Our little mistakes. We must teach ourselves to see the good in it."

"Ah yes, the good," Lestat's smile had more grimace to it than anything. "He endangered us all and himself with his obsession, stole my Louis from me, made a fool of me with all and sundry--He certainly lived up to his ambition."

"Lestat..."

"I can't, Marius. I can't." His voice turned strange, choked. "There was love there, I know it, but I can't remember it."

"Didn't you tell me he was brilliant, when you introduced us?"

Daniel's hands knotted into bloodless fists. He couldn't do this, waste a night listening to self-pity when Lestat was the one whose stranglehold had driven everything to the brink. Couldn't listen to how earnestly lost the man sounded, a walking hurricane totally oblivious to the devastation he left in his wake.

"You felt him, didn't you?" Lestat pressed Marius. "You spoke with him. Surely you must have understood. You must have seen into his heart and known how to help him. I need you to tell me."

And tell it just so, Daniel thought. Lestat wasn't asking for answers, but for a bedtime story. That
would soothe what little conscience Daniel had pricked back into life.

So much for his 'bodyguard.' But.

"He was an asshole," he threw in just to disrupt that flow, the twisted funereal soothing he could sense coming. "He was arrogant, pushy, and judgmental, and not one person helped when he started cutting himself up."

The scars haunted him--or maybe worse was their absence, after Marius’ intercession.

Perhaps worst yet, the image of nylon stitches in unmarked flesh melting and stretching, curling as if alive in the ambient heat of a burning room.

"He was fucked up and he deserved better than he got."

"It isn't as though I didn't try!" Lestat said. "He refused me at every turn for those damned--"

"Lestat," Marius cut him off, and Lestat settled back into his armchair with notable reluctance. "There's no denying your fledgling was troubled. We all did our best to help him, but...the Dark Gift is an irresistible call. Some minds are simply lost to it."

"There must have been something I could've done." Lestat insisted. It was somewhat unexpected to hear him bypass the easy out. But then, maybe he just wanted to wallow in the guilt a little more.

"He wouldn't have taken your help as he was. He resisted my advice as well, even when he was on the brink of starvation."

"But you just couldn't take no for an answer, could you." Daniel couldn't let it slide. Not that.

"Daniel's under the impression that you," Lestat's mouth twisted and worked, trying to find a way around the ugly word, "pressed Herbert into taking your blood. As if someone who was so interested in our history wouldn't have jumped at the chance to taste such ancient secrets." He was even framing the out, saving Daddy the trouble of having to fabricate his own excuse. Daniel had never so much wanted to melt into the floor. Or set it ablaze.

And then Marius had the unmitigated gall to smile sadly and shake his platinum head.

"No, Lestat. I wish I could tell you that your fledgling was so rational as to give in willing." He sighed heavily. "But you knew him--we all did. How he would fight until mastered, and then fold so beautifully. And he was starving, my friend. Without you present to do as was your right, his care fell to me."

At that, Lestat looked subtly shaken; fuck him. Daniel chewed the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood and then spoke.

"But that's your thing, isn't it, Marius? Caring for any of us that can't fight back?" Even Akasha had hated him, in with the two millennia of Stockholm love she bore. She'd told Lestat as much, and he'd laid it out in black and white for Daniel to find.

The Roman smiled wider, nostalgic. "Yes, my boy. I've seen it many times--those that would not survive on their own. Hothouse blooms. It's an honor and a burden men like Lestat and I must take on."

"Yeah? Well just so we're clear, I'm not interested." He couldn't take another minute of it, that smug satisfaction at how noble it was to reduce them down to meat. He forwent dignity in the
name of speed, tackling the first unfortunate who crossed his path as Louis might have, leaving them little more than a pile of bones and organs. He hated what he was. Hated the loneliness of it, the stasis. The looming suggestion that the only way to get stronger would be to play predator in more ways than one. He clambered onto a roof well into disrepair, the tiles coming loose and no doubt dripping steadily on the mortals below. It was there that Lestat found him, form and face schooled into blank elegance.

"You're as dramatic as Louis, I swear."

"Fuck you." Daniel drew his knees up to his chest, wishing he could still smoke.

"I've come to tell you that thanks to your poor behavior, you're not invited on tonight's little excursion. I'll be taking Marius' time on my own to see the sights. Since I've never visited this place before, I imagine I'll want to be thorough." He looked dead ahead as he pronounced all of this. "Maybe even until tomorrow night."

Lestat playing subtle was no subtlety at all, the haughtiness undercut by continual flickers of eye movement to gauge Daniel's reaction.

"Boo hoo," he deadpanned.

"You brought it on yourself," Lestat went on, playing to his script for their audience of none. "You'll have to deal with the consequences of the imp's tender mercies."

Lestat left after his little pronouncement, swollen with the pride of his little spark of cleverness, and Daniel stayed frozen on the roof. A quarter, then half an hour passed, and he stayed still, waiting for the punchline to this joke at his expense. Trusting Lestat was like stepping out onto a bridge constructed from creamer cups and tissue, but what choice did he have? He couldn't leave Armand as he was. Not after last night.

~*~*~*~

Lestat was glad of his time on the stage as he walked beside Marius on the streets, discomfort pooling in the back of his mind. The calm in Marius' eyes as he'd described what he'd done--every slander Daniel spewed confirmed, and worse for the lack of remorse--chilled him still. Worse, it had pulled out a foundational brick, and now doubts were cascading down on him. What else, exactly, was Daniel right about?

_You're being foolish_, he scolded himself. _Don't give him credit for things he wasn't there for_. After all, Daniel hadn't known Marius before Akasha's crusade. He hadn't seen how kind, and how wise, the man could be. Lestat still remembered that man. He could unearth him, dig that back out--return at last the favor of his own resurrection in time of despair.

"It's unusual for you to be so silent," Marius teased him, gentle, brushing a hand against his shoulder. "Has something caught your eye?"

He could've lost himself, as he had in nights past, in the beauty of the people of this city. They were survivors, beaten down but not broken. Still so capable of warmth, after all the deprivation and change heaped upon them. He met Marius' eyes. "I realized I'm regretting not inviting Armand out with us. I must have shocked myself." He chuckled, pretending good humor he didn't feel.
"I suppose I cannot fault your taste, and your fondness for my Amadeo does you credit," (a hint of correctional stress on the name was matched by a guiding pressure drawing him along into the old, crooked ‘Pre-War’ streets and alleys). "But he is rather too weak, since the fire. I would not wish him exposed."

Guilt pressed like broken glass within Lestat's chest. So often had Lestat and his kin destroyed and reshaped Armand's worlds, all uncaring. (Mostly uncaring; no, caring intensely, Lestat and Louis both, but never enough for that imp’s hunger.)

"Is that why he's so cold?" Lestat fixed his eyes on the moon for a moment, halted beneath a store with sign written in three languages none of which he knew. "The injuries?" Even when he and Armand had fought, he'd never wished to see his friend burned. If it had been so, blackened, crisped expanses like veins of coal in white flesh, copper hair turned to flames in truth--he could see where the blood would go then. Scientific principles, nearly, the body consuming more than its usual needs in order to repair itself. Mass to energy, and something more, something demoniacal.

"The hurt was not to his body," Marius said with an ancient weariness in his tone. Funny how distant it all seemed, that dark moment lurking somewhere near and making the arm about Lestat’s shoulders unreal. (Funny, that the one who Lestat needed eternally to chase away his dark moments was ever enveloped in his own.)

"A bit like that, yes," Marius said, likely plucking the image of Louis' pain from Lestat's mind. "Such care they require of us."

Care. His mind went again to the threshold of that thought, of their conversation earlier that night. He bit his lip, indulging the old habit. Be bold, Lestat. Where did his skills lie, if not at blundering into truth? "It seems more like keeping than care."

An arch of that fair brow. A warning. He was good at ignoring those. "I half-thought I was back in Akasha's chambers when I touched his hand." He tried to keep his tone light, joking. It had to be an accident. There had to be a reason that his friend, ever focused on the future, now so perfectly reflected the past.

"Lestat." He felt it this time, the brush along his thoughts before Marius continued. "You presume a great deal. Not least that others would survive the things your own foolhardiness brings down on your head."

"You did name me." Brat Prince, with a court of none.

"Rushing headlong into this new world, with all its unknowns, is not always the best means of survival."

It was his own fault that he saw Herbert then. Had to be.

"His very memory causes you pain," Marius said, white and silver-blue like the summer moon under which they stood.

"Of course it does. He went wrong; how could I not--" He calmed his rising voice, stilled himself to the degree of maturity he'd always sensed Marius expected of him. "I think I hurt him."

"His turning was... violent, yes?" (They'd not spoken of it, Lestat wishing to move on from the horror and hoping the others would follow suit. But of course one so gifted would have gleaned at least part of it.) "You must have wanted him terribly, to take such a risk when he was yet unprepared."
So terribly, such chaos spinning out because he'd not wanted to lose that face and body and mind to the grave from which their owner fled. And he'd told himself that he was not Magnus, that he'd always hear refusals—he'd been so careful, when Herbert lived and breathed as a mortal, to respect his strange sexual boundaries, the desire and the rejection.

"I couldn't bear the thought of losing him. Even if it meant he would hate me." He wrapped his arms around himself.

"You understand better than you think. My precious fledgling was lost to me for so long. It pained me to know he continued, while his mind was poisoned by the superstitions of fools. He survived, but he did not live; I have striven to give that back to him."

The villa, with its low lights and paints and antiquated dress. A recreation of the past, and happiness. How often had Lestat wished Herbert were mortal again, that he might start fresh and overwrite his mistakes.

"And he...that makes him happy?"

"Was he happy when you freed him from his illusions in Paris?" Marius chuckled, already well aware of the answer. "But it was to his benefit, in the end. He would have died there, in spirit if not body."

True, very true. And soothing. But even as Lestat relaxed into the thought he heard Louis' voice, telling him that Herbert would sooner die than take his blood by force. An unthinkable edict. But his dearest love so rarely voiced such cold, sure conviction -- so striking it followed him even now.

"You and I are strong, Lestat, my dear damnedest creature." Cold stone hands, a match for Lestat's too-soon-ossified flesh, prized free his self-protective grip and gathered him close. "We are destined to love those who have need of that strength, if they can bear it."

"Herbert hated it." And then--after, he'd come to Lestat's bed of his own accord, or so it had seemed. To Lestat's, and Louis', and even Armand's. (Lestat hadn't had the heart to ask whether Daniel, too, had availed himself of that blood, whether he'd been so thoroughly--) Herbert had been...indiscreet, which in turn had made a convenient excuse for resentment and dismissal of Daniel's charges. But now Lestat wondered whether any of those actions had been by choice, any more than when Lestat made a spectacle of him, or when Marius...

"My son--" thin lips parted artfully a breath away, pale tongue flickering out in an uncharacteristically human gesture of hesitation which seemed suddenly calculated rather than accidental; a choice, not a slip. "I know you're averse to hearing advice, but permit an old man to offer some, regardless."

"Marius..." a thought seized him then, held within that firm grip (it would have taken some struggle for him to break free; for anyone of lesser strength--). "Would you have done the same to me?"

"I was under the impression that I had. You were in no condition to raise yourself from the grave, my boy. I couldn't bring myself to leave you." Cold fingers against his lips--they must have looked like lovers, there in the shadows. "I couldn't have predicted what you'd become."

"You were hoping I'd be more like--" it tripped and caught in his throat, "your fledgling."

Marius looked thoughtful. "I have thought, now and again, of what it might have been like to keep you at my side. You were a thing of beauty when I pried you from the earth, the creature that
raised the dead in every nation to summon me. I think..." his brow knit together, "such deaths I might have prevented, if only I had been a firmer influence in your life."

Lestat's music, a message for Marius --

Well, hadn't they sworn they'd meet again one day, for all Lestat was meant to go forth and multiply with his chosen beauties? He'd thought that door closed, though, these many decades since falling headlong and heedless for his devastating, devastated Creole heartbreaker.

"You were firm enough, sending me away as you did," he said, stepping back with an uneasy laugh.

"For the best, so I thought. You were already so much your own man, and strengthened by our Queen's blood." Surely that rage couldn't still burn hot under the placid, benign surface. Surely it was only memory that made the grip on his biceps seem for a moment painful. "You'd live and grow, or you'd come back to me once more for shelter."

"And here we are." Poor words for a strangely empty moment, despite the love.

"Here, indeed." A wing of straight platinum hair fairly sparkled as it fell to cover Marius's regal, downcast face. "Lestat?"

"Yes?"

"Never forget that you live now because ones older, wiser, and stronger cherished you enough to make the choice for you."

He thought of Akasha, and how her love had felt: exhilarating and engulfing and terrifying, as he felt himself kept and yet held powerless as she wrought her destruction. Without her blood, he would be dead a dozen times over. Without Marius, he would still be slumbering in the earth, broken and mourning. Without Magnus' favor, so violent and painful that he had wept for days, and raged for decades more, he would be long moldered in the ground. Suddenly he could no longer see himself for the shadows that had twisted his life, twisted and bent him along the path he so prided himself on walking of his own will.

How he hated them, just for an instant, before guilty love reminded him of what he owed the man before him. He would be dead. He didn't have the right, no matter how he had fought to rid himself of those hands.

Oh.

"I-"

He was released, Marius' back stiffening at the sound of some unspoken word. Lestat started to ask what it was--and then he didn't have to.

Damn these romantic young fools, Lestat thought as he launched himself into the air over Vilnius after Marius. Irrepressible; impulsive; tactless and incapable of control.

And when exactly had Lestat stopped being so?

~*~*~*~
Daniel picked himself up and went down into the city, killing quickly and without elegance (wondering, fleetingly, what Louis would have made of him), and once more returning wrapped in the cloak of false mortality.

Armand made every appearance of indifference to his presence, and for a minute Daniel waited in the window of that same grand bedroom, lingering in that mysterious pretense of the thief in the night. But the longer he waited the more he realized that his maker had barely stirred from the grand bed that held him, swaddled in opulent fabric.

"Hey, Boss." He crept close, touching his fingers to one bony shoulder. Cold. Armand's eyes followed him with almost mortal sluggishness, his body burrowing deeper under the blankets even as his hand reached for Daniel's own.

He wrapped himself around Armand almost on instinct, anger kindling in his guts. Twice now they had ended up like this, and each time the Armand he remembered seemed to grow more distant, slumbering inside the dull-eyed marble beauty in his arms.

"This okay?" He only thought to ask once he'd done it--he was becoming more like them than he'd thought. If he wasn't careful, boundaries would become at best an inconvenient suggestion. He started to backpedal, but Armand refused to let go, resting Daniel's fingers against his lips. The touch made him shiver.

"Offer's still open, y'know." He wanted to ask how it had come to this, but there'd be no answers. Not from this shade barely clinging to survival. Blood was the only gift he had to give.

"Still?" Armand's body was colder even than the thing around his neck. "You're certain?"

Lips like that should never be so pale, nearly violet. He looked too spare, like a Calvin Klein model; all high cheekbones and dark circles beneath those eyes. Each lash stood out prominently, little copper wires sparkling in the firelight.

"Of course. Go ahead--it's for you. Every kill I've ever..." he trailed off and Armand curled nearer, snaking an ornamented leg up and around his waist. Chilly even through denim; anklets jingled softly with the movement.

"No, Daniel. Your offer to...stay with me. You really want to be with me again?"

"More than anything, Boss." And it was like ten, fifteen years had never passed--like they were back Before, with Daniel begging his beautiful, unnatural lover to uplift him; to save him from age and decay and the speckling of blood-dark sarcomas he hadn't yet known enough to truly fear.

"Anything." And again, Armand's brow creased in some sort of pain, a devil unwilling to accept a trade.

"Take my blood. You'll know I'm not lying." He sat up far enough to peel away his shirt, the near-literal baring of his heart appealing to the frustrated poet in him.

"You ask for these things, and then you resent the cost." Armand laid his head against Daniel's shoulder, listening.

"I don't care what the cost is. I spent years wondering if you were alive or dead. I managed. And I hated every minute. Whatever you've got, it has to be better than that." Damned if he did or didn't. He didn't share Louis' profound melancholy, but in this moment he could understand the sentiment.
"Just promise you won't shut me out."

"I can't lift the silence. You know that."

"You know--" but he didn't. He was so obtuse where it mattered. "That's not what I mean. Don't leave me behind. Don't use me in your games. I want..." he faltered, frightened of his own exposure.

"Tell me," Armand ran a hand up his neck, burying slender fingers in his hair.

"I'm not your thrall anymore. And I don't want to be your master. I just want you. Even terms."

"Daniel." His maker's voice was thick, and in lieu of an answer he kissed Daniel's neck, every inch of him seeming determined to melt into his fledgling's skin and vanish.

"Babe." Daniel swallowed, running a hand down his lover's slender, young, unchanged back; every knob of spine felt like a homecoming.

He'd be lying if he said he could do this forever. He wanted so much more, the victim's blood in his veins pulsing and hot for it. "A-Armand, please. For me?"

The sweet, stunning pain of his maker's bite was something Daniel had only ever felt with one other, and that one just the first step that led him here. Now, he was overwhelmed with a feeling of intense, wordless regret; his or Armand's, it didn't really matter. They'd done it all wrong from the start.

Each sucking draw upon his veins made his own need intensify, an aching, hollow thing growing in his gut. His fingers, still chilled with that soft kiss, groped for the pulse of the jugular but were confounded; metal crumpled like paper and fell away to reveal a pink lacework of scar tissue, etched and remade and fading under his touch even as he plunged his own teeth in.

And as he completed their link, their cycle, he found one or the other of them thinking that perhaps it had never been about saving Armand. Perhaps it had always been futile.

It might have just been for this--this moment when their souls touched again, him feeding all the love and strength he could muster back into the reawakening life in his arms.

There was no art to what they did, every movement shot through with desperation and craving for plain comfort. It seemed possible to stay as they were forever, a work of art depicting eternal, uncomplicated devotion. He'd never felt prouder in his life, his soul untethered and shouting for joy at having found such a companion. They sang the feeling in harmony, silent in their understanding. Free, for one second, of the uncertainty of questions and withholding nothing.

It seemed certain that they condemned themselves to a tomb as they lay together. Neither gave a damn. All that mattered just then was the peace.

~*~*~*~

Crawford wasn't stupid. He was--he had been --brilliant, once. Had made a thing, an actualization of theories, which was
beyond the comprehension of anyone else including the sick bastard under whose direction he'd worked.

(When he worried, Katherine reassured him that that part had actually happened. It wasn't a delusion.)

He was so far from innocent, too--in any sense of the word. He was nice, and disabled, and that made them assume things. Made them mistake him for safe.

He knew how much Katherine wanted Dan. He'd happily dealt with the results before.

But the question of whether Dan actually wanted him: brilliant, dirty, damaged, nice, disabled, dangerous ...that was not something on which he was inclined to yield.

The fact that Dan himself showed no indication of knowing the answer either didn't help matters. *Do I remind you of Herbert West* . It sounded better than *am I stand in for a dead man*, anyway. He rehearsed the question over and over in his mind, clenching his hands in his slacks as he imagined various outcomes--all of them inevitably awful, competing with one another for worst case scenario. Adrenaline pumped through him, running from nothing, his muscles tense as though he'd been pumped with a marathoner's share of lactic acid. *Calm down. You will survive this. You've survived everything* .

Dan was all nervous smiles when he arrived, ducking his head and busying himself with utensils and dishes. He didn't reach out at all--and when Crawford reached out to lay a hand on his back, experimental, he felt Dan freeze. Was he trying to break away? Enduring an attack? More paralyzing possibilities.

He swallowed. "Do you need any help?"

"Think I've got it covered in here." Still no eye contact.

The slog through dinner was an agonizing one, until Katherine rapped her knuckles hard on the table. "It's a discussion, not a death sentence."

Dan's mouth did something then, like his lips were being chewed from inside, and then he sat back in his chair, eyes trained on the ceiling.

His posture was loose, not with relaxation but resignation. Nihilistic calm.

"Okay." He breathed deep. "What do you suddenly want to know?"

He was so handsome, so kind. His body felt good near Crawford's, his flesh tasted good, and he asked no questions that Crawford feared answering.

Crawford didn't have that luxury, so after a look at the one sure thing in his world, now aching because of the inconvenience of his existence, he steeled himself and said, "Are you humoring me? Or do you want me to..."

How far would he go, he wondered, to touch this man and to ensure the happiness of this woman?

Not that far.

He didn't allow that. He was allowed to say no. So were they.

"You're the one that wanted to pull back," Dan said. "I was trying."
"Wonderful. I'm glad you could bring yourself to touch me," he snapped vituperatively, covering over his guilt and fear with nastiness.

"That's not what I meant." Already sitting up, on the defensive.

"I want to know why. Are you tolerating me for Katherine?" He continued over Dan's open mouth. "Or is this about Herbert West?"

"Where did you hear that name?" Guarded eyes. Cornered. Like Crawford when they'd thrown him in the nuthouse.

"I apparently look so much like him complete strangers feel the need to make comparisons. Are they wrong?"

"I guess." Dan shrugged, still not looked. "I mean, your hair's the same color."

"Don't lie to me. I'm so tired of people sparing my feelings."

"Crawford," Katherine cut in, trying to play mediator.

"No. He has to answer this. He has to be honest about one fucking thing."

"Yes!" Dan burst out. "I knew him. What does it matter?"

"Did he infect you with HIV? Is that really why he died?"

"No!" Dan shouted, angry at last, at last honest. And then it wasn't anger, but something worse; his voice rising up the scale, panic and pain and finally bodily retreat across the room while he shouted. 'I'm clean. And he's dead, I swear, and we never--' His voice cracked as his hips hit the counter, and he turned to brace himself over the sink. Lowly, he went on.

"He wouldn't even let me save him. Too little, too late."

"Save him from what, Dan?"

"He was dealing drugs, after he left the hospital. I don’t know if he was using again--I tried so hard not to know--"

"Using?"

"Dan, that’s…"

"You’re not hearing me right. He wasn’t some...loser. No matter what the b--drugs did to him. He could be so...amazing...when he talked. Or when he didn’t." Dan raised a hand to rub his neck, the odd, parallel scars there. His breathing was a little uneven, his lips parted just slightly, and he stared as though in a trance. “He could’ve made me do anything, I think. But then they found him, and changed him, and killed him. And I woke up in a Miami hospital with a story I never wanted to tell.”

God. So sadly mundane. Drugs and death and this…ache. It explained everything; the tests, the obsession, the wariness.

“I just--he was so much more than he ended up. And I loved that, even when it went wrong. Even when he…died. There were. Feelings. I could never get close enough. The last time I saw him, he was turning me down, and that’s the nicest thing he ever did for anyone. I would’ve let him eat me alive.” Dan’s eyes raised, locked back onto Crawford and the present, like the years were shifting
before him and this was a handle to what was real. Familiar feeling. “You look like him, I guess, but that's not—that's not what I see in you. You're kind.”

Crawford felt anything but as this man bled in front of him.

“I see.” Crawford had slashed a wound, and the poison dripping out was still fresh. It needed time to heal. “Maybe...maybe we need to stop.”

“Why!”

“You don’t know me, Dan--”

“But I want to! I want--you can’t--you made me tell you this, you can’t just...”

“It’s his choice, Dan,” Katherine cut in. Her voice was as sharp as steel and solid as granite; implacable, unquestioning protection Crawford didn’t deserve. He held up one hand, and she pressed her lips but went quiet. Watchful.

He licked his lips, trying to deny that he’d like to eat this man alive, but Dan interrupted.

“I don’t mean like that.” His face was muffled in his hands. “I mean...of course it’s his choice. But at least tell me which part of me is the dealbreaker.”

“It’s not--” he began, slinking forward and seeing tension rise in Dan’s shoulders. “It’s not that, Dan. It’s me. I have...issues. And you have boundaries. And I’m...afraid...of hurting you.”

“Hurting me!?” The incredulity in Dan’s voice was comforting on the one hand, irritating on the other. The idea that Crawford was so weak, so--ineffectual? Impaired? As to present no threat, no worry--“Why would you ever think that?”

“He has his reasons, Dan.”

“And it’s really neither here nor there.” Crawford mustered a smile, telling himself to ignore the images of blood, the false, intrusive thought that Dan would like to be covered in it, taken over, preyed upon. “Touching me is not a requirement; you know that. If you’re not really interested, you don’t have to--don’t push yourself. Be Kat’s boyfriend.”

He wrapped his arms around himself, craving reassurance but unwilling to put Katherine in that position just then.

He asked so much from her, and this was her chance to have something she actually wanted.

He could wait in his bedroom for them to be done.

He could turn on music, could--could go to the library. Anything to keep from hearing it and imagining, like he’d heard Pretorius so many times with his women.

"That relationship is yours. I'm not part of it."

"It's not that I'm not interested!" Dan looked at him at last, indecision writ large on every part of him. "I--you're great. Both of you. But every time we start--you run away, and I don't want to hurt you.” He sighed. “I...don't want lose someone again."

"I thought you said no--"

"I said slow down. I'm allowed to say that, aren't I? Without it meaning you hurt me?”
“You just wanted me to--” Crawford closed his eyes, hunched down. “You actually wanted to slow down.”

“Well, yeah.” And Dan gave a small, sheepish, cracked little smile, watery through his misery. “I don’t exactly have much experience. And I want it to last.”


Dan bit his lip, then turned his head to focus fully on the woman Crawford loved so much. Dan’s handsome features in that moment before it all would end were a puzzle, confusion mixed with resolve, and then he spoke: “May Crawford and I have your permission to kiss, Ma’am? And would you intervene, if things get too...” A faint blush rose on his tanned cheeks. “Heated?”

It felt as if the room itself were holding its breath, and from where he sat Crawford could see the whirring wonder of Katherine’s mind at work. He asked so much of her.

“You may,” she said. 'Gently.'

Dan's touch was tentative, but there was new confidence in it--caution born not from fear but consideration. He leaned into it, pressing his cheek to that rough palm. Though he had permission, Dan still stopped when their mouths were centimeters apart, close enough to share breath. "May I?"

"Yes." Sweet, tentative touch and newly familiar lips on his.

It was a start.

~~*~~*~~*~~

Lying like this, entwined with his fledgling in his maker's bed (his first year he had wanted his own coffin, his own space, and now the very thought of sleeping alone crushed him in a vice of anxiety)--Armand had never felt such a quiet devastation.

No fire, this time, to mark the world-shaking change. Just a mistake that meant an end to so much. Stillbirth.

Master would not approve.

Daniel was pretty. Daniel was fragile. It had made the argument easy to offer: witness him, rudderless, there on the floor last night; would he not be one who could be kept?

Was it not so very important to keep them safe?

Had not failed leadership caused those last, painful deaths?

He’d employed every persuasive word ever given to him, every wile his Master had once set him out into the world to learn. An admirable student, Marius had said, an argument worthy of the oratories. Though your voice is best suited to music. He’d known that as his cue to lay back and be cared for, to empty his thoughts and let his mind be filled. But still. Hope, dangerous and fragile, had come alive in him.
How quickly he’d frittered it away.

Memories were close; immersive, swelling and pushing like ocean waves. Like the blood he’d taken and given.

He fell back, entranced, even as he knew doom bore down upon them.

Marius had been the only real thing in the world since the fire. A blinding-white pillar of certainty, there to hold him as the news came that yes, Daniel was dead. Herbert and Louis were dead. Night Island was in ruin. And he’d been left behind, wanted by no one but his maker.

It felt as though he had woken in some black sea, slipping inexorably into a morass that slowed his thoughts and sapped his muscles until he moved as aimlessly as a mechanical doll; when he stopped to think, looking over his frozen memories, he couldn’t say how he had changed. He might as well have always been this way (maybe he had; had lied to himself all those times before).

The first year of his new life had been marked by pain, screaming-red and louder than his own thoughts. He’d felt every nerve resonating as if in song; and relief, blessed and gold, came melded with the smell of old paints and linen. Marius was safe. Marius was a reprieve from the agony of living. From the hellish punishment of his mistakes.

Agony was the nights when Marius was gone, leaving him to the ravages of his “independent” tattered flesh while he was too weak to hunt on his own; when Marius would stand over him, just out of reach, with his eyes lowered in mourning.

“It pains me to see you this way,” his savior said.

“Please!” It was all he knew how to say, convulsing in skin that stretched too tight over his bones, veins knotted and tendons cored and bulging. He had left Lestat this way, in agony, and then punished his trust by throwing him from the tower. This was the Hell he had bought.

“It might be kinder to kill you,” that voice mused, heavy and mournful. “The world will break you again. And I would die to know it.”

He passed beyond words, jaw tightened until his meager ration of blood began to trickle out and down his chin. There was nothing besides that voice. A cool hand touched his cheek, and he snapped at it, desperate. It became a paralyzing grip on his throat, holding him down (of course; for as his master had explained later, he’d been a danger to himself). A hard pull could have separated his head from his body.

“...No.” Marius’ head on his shoulder, his curtain of hair falling over a chest riddled with new scars. “I’m selfish, my beautiful Amadeo. I won’t lose you.”

His memories were foggy—he’d heard the story again, later. At the time, he would have done anything to end the suffering.

“Promise you have come home to me.”

He’d said yes, of course. He must have, because the next thing he remembered was his master’s blood in his mouth, making him anew.

Marius called it “their second chance.” He re-baptized his fledgling Amadeo, and complying seemed the least he could do. Guilt needled at him whenever Marius spoke of his worry, his anguish. Amadeo owed him so much, then and now. What was a name, when he had been given so many.
“Place your safety in my hands,” Marius had said, massaging small circles across Amadeo’s aching flesh. And it was like second nature, one evening, to call him Master again. It felt right when he tottered and fell, his body still weak and dependent, and his master fretted over his fragile state (saying, over and over: *see, this is why you must stay with me*).

Amadeo was beautiful without. A masterpiece, someday, if he could improve within.

The necklace lying crumpled on the sheets--*the collar*, some remaining waspishness not driven out of him whispered--had been a gift. It was important, Marius had said, to take care with his healing. There were no other vampires around--and look what Marius’ ancient blood, taken too quickly, had done to Lestat’s cursed line. Look what a glut of mere mortal blood had done to that same man, creating a twisted and ugly mask (that man Armand had seen as the sun itself, had loved--wanted--with such ferocity that its alchemical transformation into hate had scarred them both). It balked against what he knew; but what had he known, really, that wasn’t tainted by lies from the Children of Darkness and flawed observation. No, that fate was not for Amadeo. He was to be nursed, slowly, to ensure his return to perfection.

But it was true too that he was irresistible. His master’s great downfall, the angel with a poison tongue. He would drink his allotment of blood only for Marius to fall upon him in a passion, taking back what he had given and more still, leaving Amadeo sluggish and unfocused. The blood that restored his body to flawless, pale smoothness didn’t touch the punctures that had begun to scar his throat.

“For your beauty will undo you, dear child,” his master had said as he presented the hammered gold. It would have looked more at home on Akasha’s neck than his own. “They would take you for their own, and chain you so you never again saw the stars.”

Once, he would have protested that he was old, and that anyone capable of restraining him was dead. But all that came to his lips was a comment on the waxing moon outside their balcony. The collar seemed to suffocate him as the clasps locked around his neck. Fortunately, he had no need to breathe.

Amadeo was Marius’ boy, beloved and cared for, and some nights he could almost forget the two dead boys he’d deprived Lestat of. (Beauties, weaklings who couldn't thrive on their own. Like Amadeo. Like, he so feared, his poor Daniel).

He hadn't seen them burn, but so many others--he knew how it went. He knew the calm and the terror, the false resignation that gave way suddenly when the flames licked up and caught on hair or clothing. When tender flesh bubbled, crisped, went to ash with the force of cursed blood igniting.

The screams as the bodies to which they were wedded by their marital nights with darkness combusted and took the souls with them (*Lestat would never forgive)*.

He knew what it must have done to his Daniel, to be forced into that final act. Daniel, who had adored one and loathed the other until he *didn't*.

Daniel, in his arms.

He’d left, only once, to try and ascertain answers for himself. To comb the world for his fledgling. His master had been a terrible sight, eyes like vengeful pale fires. Amadeo was immune now to the whip, his body quick to heal--his master had shut him away instead in his coffin (the one he had demanded, always the architect of his own destruction), until he screamed and promised his body and damned soul if only he could be held. If only it would stop the terrible, crushing silence and
the dark. He had wept and shook as Marius held him, hatred never greater than the terror of being without that touch.

It was only a matter of time before his fledgling, his one and only, came to his senses—to that poisonous mix of hatred and self-loathing love that tied a vampire and their killer. Armand knew that. Amadeo had hoped, or Andrei perhaps, deeper still. He’d gone to Marius on the night when Daniel had first come to him alone, taken of a real desire for the first time since his strange dream had begun.

"He needs us," he’d said, covering the perfect tango of lies he and Daniel had danced not an hour before even as his master’s hands stripped him bare. "He has no one."

"Lestat's taken an interest. Let him shelter the boy." Marius sank to his knees, and how it made Amadeo dizzy to think of his master, who would die for him (had said as much, that he would die if Amadeo left him behind again), prostrate before someone like himself.

"I would regret his absence," he admitted, careful of admitting the frightful pit of affection that lurked in him.

"Are you asking for a plaything, Amadeo?" Endless indulgence. He despaired at the thought that it could vanish into air; that he would find himself locked in the dark again.

"He could be good for you," Amadeo avoided pleading, lest he imply a deficiency in the current circumstances. "He is lovely, wouldn’t you agree? His hair and eyes are to your taste." Blond and true violet—rarer even than Lestat’s changeable grey. Marius adored those like himself, never stinted on praise for Lestat and Mael’s tall forms and Gallic ancestry.

Small Russian boy, red-and-white like bloodied sheets. But beautiful, though...unfinished. Never to be as intended.

"Ah, my love. So kind. But what need have I of such a one, when my Angel has returned to me? You fill all my heart, amor meus." His lips fluttered along that vein, the one so situated as to make this act undeniably similar to a mortal one. Guaranteed to remind Armand of those he’d had before his master, the ones he’d been ordered to go to.

This was better.

Daniel deserved better. Better than what Armand had sent him to: that pox they’d courted in blood and not-blood, unknowing, until his precious mortal life was cut shorter still.

"Is it not what he needs that matters?"

"And what would you know of that?" A laugh in his master’s voice as he turned Amadeo’s careful arguments into mewling whimpers.

"I survived centuries without you." He fitted his finger between his lips, biting back a cry. The skin gashed against his fangs. "I commanded many."

"All gone to ash." Not cruelty. Truth, and he swallowed it.

"Then," his breath hitched, and he saw Daniel’s face as he squeezed his eyes shut. "Isn’t that more reason to protect him? If you love me. My blood flows in him. I wouldn’t see it burn."

No answer, only the sharp pinch of fangs at his thigh. It was his punishment; his master told him often how tempting he was, how he seduced without words (or even, it seemed, conscious intent)
and forced these attentions.

"My precious Amadeo," Marius gathered him up, his limbs now too heavy to move on their own. "It pains me to my core to see you suffer. It is the last thing I would give to you." The blankets around him did nothing to block out the chill of his skin, though surely they were chosen with a painter’s eye.

“Then…” he tried.

“Perhaps.” What a beautiful word. “You are infirm yet, beloved. Still recovering. Suppose you wake one night, ravening, and he cannot defend himself? Suppose I am not there to stop your mistakes?”

Images of that lightless dungeon came back to him, that fetid hole where he’d locked many of his memories to keep from going mad. Riccardo had suffered for it. That memory was before him now, Riccardo’s bloating mortal corpse wearing Daniel’s face, the victim of his animal starvation, his senseless slaughter.

Marius was shaking him, asking him what was wrong. Of course he didn’t know. Those memories were protected, walled away thanks to the silence. He hadn’t known anything about the creature christened Armand, not where he was or what he suffered; he’d surely have come, if he had. Surely he’d have come to rescue his fledgling, loving him as he professed to. It was only by accident that he’d evoked the memory now paralyzing what remained of Amadeo’s strength.

“Don’t let me…” Not Daniel. He’d die, fling himself into the sun with whatever strength remained to him.

“I won’t.”

Marius had left him there to rest; he’d lingered, languid and clinging to hope. If only Daniel were good, if only he listened, he might not have to leave. Marius would keep him safe, too.

But this--his master would not approve, no more so than Lestat could have condoned the affection between Louis and Herbert. It was not possible in the end, such a connection between the weaker ones. Not for someone like him, with no restraint on how much he took.

And Daniel had offered. He’d said they should be equals--that he would submit so was a revelation (Amadeo had always expected him to grow into a Master, a man, but perhaps this crippling was his fault, too).

They mightn't be lovers, not with the demands of fealty, but...perhaps siblings, of a sort. Shoulder-to-shoulder, coffins to either side of Marius', and Amadeo might steal into Daniel’s and lie there to wake him each night.

They might feed together, might pretty one another up for their Master's approval.

Might even...when he desired...

Daniel knew how to play to an audience. They could be beautiful together, he was certain.

More beautiful by far than his own failed portraits.

He savored the feeling of warm strength under his skin, more stable than he had felt in months. He was filled with giddiness at the dangerous, forbidden power so surreptitiously gifted to him. He held Daniel as close as he dared, and more besides, wanting to know every inch of him and what
he had seen (greedy already, taking advantage), as it all shattered around them.

They were being watched.

Instinct made him break away, drove him to shield Daniel with his smaller body--Daniel, who didn't yet realize the danger they were in. Daniel, who claimed to love him despite the deafening silence between them. Despite all that he had done (and it had been so different, so safe, without the lingering sickness of fear and helplessness and--).

"Welcome home," he said, as if nothing was the matter. As if he weren't vibrant and pink, the gifts of gold he'd been adorned in crumpled and forgotten on the sheets.

So recently had he played the model boy, in efforts to secure Daniel's place here.

Ashes.

Foolishness. Playing with doomed mortals was one thing, always had been even when Marius sent him out in the sunlight to grow and welcomed him back in the dark with that forbidden kiss (their little secret, always), but this.

That proud face bore disappointment with such a lack of control; such disobedience and lack of respect.

And in came Lestat, all aflutter--would he, too, be angry? Would this trespass upon Daniel be seen as poaching a planned paramour? Part of Amadeo hoped so. Idealistic fool though Lestat was, he at least didn’t leave empty husks when he was done with his lovers.

Daniel's ripped-denim-clad legs cradled Armand; long arms wrapped over his chest like the springing branches of laurel about Daphne in her final flight from Apollo.

Amadeo had painted that, once, in the day. When night came his master found it wanting, for all that he'd been the model for the most beautiful of Gods.

"Amadeo," the veneer of good humor held even still, when those eyes had already fixed him with damnation, "this is rather beyond the expected scope of hospitality."

He felt Daniel drawing air to speak, and hurried to beat him to it. "You approved of him last night. It seemed your intention was to make this his home." The protection drew back just a little--Daniel's foolish, wounded pride, as if his very life weren't at stake here. And yet he didn't cast his failed maker aside; guilt was a powerful glue.

"I did not concede to this, my cunning child. Should I next expect a knife to sever my head?"

Lestat stepped between them, and Amadeo's hand found a grip on Daniel's knee--not protection, but all he could do. "It's natural, isn't it?" Lestat was saying. "Maker and fledgling reunited; you told me yourself to chose my companions with utmost care. How could you expect them not to succumb at the mere sight of one another?"

Marius snorted. "Lestat, you may be a romantic, but don't play the fool. That was my prescription for a beginning. You know as well as I how often those feelings change when not properly managed."

Lestat's shoulders stiffened, and his outstretched hands dropped slightly.

"Low blow, Marius," he murmured, loud in the silent room.
Armand had hoped, once, to be taken away by that beautiful, vibrant man. It was too cruel, how much Armand had taken from him when refused.

He shifted forward slightly, pulling against Daniel's hold.

"It's alright, we've spoken. Daniel promised himself as an equal. He's no danger to you." He slipped free from those protective arms, his own hands beseeching. Pride was for great men and greater fools, and he was neither.

"Be silent, Amadeo." Thunderous, that face. "You've done your part."

"Maestro, hai promesso--"

"Enough!" Marius folded his arms, keeping council with himself. "I expected more of you. I thought, at last, I might trust you."

All the protections of ignorance now struck as knives, a cold night that clung to him while the light of knowledge glittered behind closed doors. "I would not let him harm you." Just as Marius had promised to keep Armand from doing harm. An exchange of devotion. His feet touched down on the cold marble, more aware and sensitive than they had been in months. His limbs felt strong, as he'd forgotten they could be.

"As though he could," said that silken, hated voice. Beloved voice. "He's new, my child. Not yet ten years old."

"Marius--" Lestat interrupted, stupid man, and Marius' icy eyes went to his devoted friend.

"Yours was younger still, Lestat. And with some control he might have seen an age approaching ours. Instead--ashes." Truth, not cruelty. Harsh wisdom. His platinum hair picked up the firelight, dazzling like a memory of a new name. "Now, child, you'll come to me, and leave your playmate behind. And he may live."

"I'm beginning to doubt your reasoning, Marius," their brat drawled, stepping in and putting a familiar hand on that broad shoulder.

"You behave like such a sweet boy sometimes," Marius said with a soft smile, a smile he gave at the most terrible wondrous times. The welcoming smile that had made Andrei cower in fear. "But you're a man. Act like it."

The sharp retort of marble on marble, too fast to see, split the air of the room, and suddenly Lestat lay sprawled upon the Turkish rug. His hair was a halo. His cheek had the wrong shape.

Instinct tore Armand in half—he wanted to go to his adversary-friend. He needed to obey, to protect Daniel as only he could now. Foolish, wonderful Daniel, who was trying to come to his aid. Amadeo stood rooted to the spot. His mind, once a puppeteer of dozens of his fellows; after that, an engine that took the world to pieces in endless hunger for understanding; now it sat dumb. He could only wrap around the one thought over and over: "You promised," and more importantly still, "he's mine."

"If you want to protect him, you will listen. Come. Here."

"And what if he doesn't?" Daniel, making everything he had done worthless. Standing at his side.

"Your memory is short," Marius said. "Already you've forgotten how weak you are."
"No need for threats." Lestat was standing again, rubbing his jaw where it melded back into shape. 
"It's unbecoming among 'men,' isn't it?"

"Are you offering him your protection?"

"I'm beginning to find the whole idea a little suffocating."

Promised. He'd promised. Everything Amadeo had done had been in trust that Marius was 
protecting him. That he loved him. But Daniel wasn’t a danger, he was in danger, and Marius had 
as good as promised to protect them both. And now...

"Stop." He took a step forward. "I know my place." He laid his head against his master's chest, the 
fragile bones of his neck exposed. Equally fragile, sharp ideas forming in the depths of his mind.

Children of the Millennia did not burn. Too cold, too hard; no help to be found in Louis' practices, 
in the lover Armand had chosen and made his own for a time by force and subtlety. He'd felt a 
mirror of this terror--this threat--this tearing division--in Louis' mind in Paris, and known it for 
love.

Had felt the fear cease in New Orleans, and known love was dead. Dead as Louis, who was warm 
and soft and could burn.

Armand had already become cold. In another five centuries, he might be hard, too. But just then 
there was enough of Daniel in him to make him flinch.

"Marius, you're not--this isn't you," foolish, placating Lestat said, as though he knew anything. 
"You've not been right since Akasha. Please. Listen to me."

"I think it would be best if you left, Lestat." Calm, measured. Able to do anything. His hand 
cupped the back of Amadeo's neck, held him in place as much as he comforted. "Your welcome 
has worn thin."

"You're not the Keeper anymore. See reason!" At least he was smart enough not to come within 
reach again. "Come back with us. There's no need to shut yourselves off. We can be family again."

"I'm not joining any family that has him in it. And I'm not leaving Armand." Daniel said, feet 
planted. Fire still in his eyes, though it was anathema to them. Fire would do him no good.

And all the while, Amadeo wracked his brain. His nails were cut short; even with Daniel's gift his 
limbs weren't what they could be, had been. Was this why? He listened for a heartbeat, for an 
indicator of the love he had told himself was there, and heard nothing.

"Armand, please." No, no, he couldn't take that. Not Daniel's pleading voice, right on the heels of 
the memory of his touch.

"You've had your say." Marius held him closer. His hand was almost painful, fingers woven tight 
in those russet curls. "You broadcasted your little theft loudly enough for the entire city to hear. 
What do you think brought us home so swiftly?"

"It wasn't theft," Daniel snarled, magnificently and pointlessly fierce. A pathetic dignity, held in 
check by Lestat. "He's a fucking person, not a toy or a--a blunder, you twisted fuck!"

"Amadeo is mine." The hold on him was ever tighter, painful as any love but Daniel's, same as 
ever save for the ones defying its sovereignty. "And of course he's not a blunder. He's perfect."
"Perfect." Lestat's voice was flat, unprojected, no theatricality from the master performer. "You made me swear--you said it was the worst thing you'd done, to make one so young."

"And did you not defy me?" Marius' hands on his body. Marius' lips at his ear, his whisper perfectly clear to preternatural hearing. The whole of his world, for three years before the first fire and five since the latest--and apparently all five hundred besides.

"I shouldn't have." Pain still in his voice, pain beyond sense.

"There you have it." Words trailing down to Amadeo’s bare throat, his shamelessness. Pricking his veins for the smallest drink, just enough to make a show of him. To make his knees tremble as Daniel's gift began to drain away. It was so cold, by comparison. Marius shared no thoughts with him; he saw only his own mind, a kaleidoscope of painted images reflected back. It made it easy to go away.

And then he was himself, his body weakened but his own once more.

"I'd hoped for better from you, Lestat." (Daniel was on the floor, his nose broken and bleeding. When had that happened?) "I thought we understood one another. Particularly after you told me of how you made your poor Herbert."

"Throwing my own 'blunder' in my face now?" Lestat's pride made his rage radiant, beautiful.

"On the contrary. You understood better than I thought you would. Sometimes one must take extraordinary measures to ensure the proper outcome."

"I took no--he was dying!"

"As I told you, be wary of your power over the dying. It gives us an advantage, one you've always employed to its fullest." Gabrielle; Nicki; Louis, dying of nothing so much as the demons of his own mind. Claudia and Herbert. "But nothing settles the matter quite so well as a knife, does it, my friend?"

"You--" Lestat had been innocent once, Armand recalled. He'd been so achingly naive and vulnerable, in a way lost to Andrei even before the first time Marius pressed his forbidden kiss to too-young flesh; and yet also, Lestat had been hurt in his creation. So his singer's voice cracked. "You-- caused --Marius, no."

No.

Not accepted.

Not condoned.

Not an accident.

A poisoned knife to his face--as good as told it was his own sluttish fault.

A frantic day's wait, a night's begging.

The time to grow, to become who he was intended to be--lost.

He felt detached from himself as he lifted his hand to caress his maker's face, as his fingers drifted down and fluttered over the strong muscles of his killer's neck. A voice like music, that had bought him and made him like a painting. That had ordered him and comforted him and wrenched cries of
love and agony and ecstasy from his lips. That had bared itself to him when he was coven master, or thought he'd been, confident that he wouldn't act. Confident now in the same thought.

They'd forgotten him, but not Daniel. Daniel was watching him as he put all of his strength into digging under that marble exterior, his hand closing around meat and veins and delicate pipes while blood spattered his face and drenched his hair.

He'd been so nearly finished. Almost grown and ready to see the world, though he'd wanted nothing more than to stay at his master's side. Already he could feel his hands shaking, his feet backpedaling from what he'd done and the retribution sure to follow. But his fingers, as if to reassure him, tightened around the little bit of flesh he'd taken for himself.

That tongue: purpled and grey, not silver, velvety-rough on one side and slick on the other. Hideously long when separated from throat and jaw, trailing shreds of muscle and vessels which dangled and writhed repulsively. Seeking their source, Armand's source.

This tongue had done him in.

Dimly he recalled Mekare's ascension, her reign dependent upon the ingestion of those things which had created her predecessor--and predicated, also, upon absorbing their imbalances.

She slumbered, now, in her sister's 'care.'

He clenched his fist about it, crushing it to pulp, and flung the residue off the balcony to meet the sun.

In the midst of their scuffle the grate had fallen from the fire, its own tongues licking at the room. They were small, all of them--even Lestat and his stolen power, a soft heart bared beneath his hardened skin. But in that softness they knew each other, and soon the flames leapt high with Daniel's encouragement, stoked and burning as everything had done since his fledgling's arrival. The smoke was thick, hot and high as the pyre that had threatened the boy when he was barely born. Hot as the Hell he had feared and served. Always the flames came for him, and even knowing he would have to protect himself, he couldn't move.

Daniel ran. Of course. The boy should expect no different. He wanted his fledgling to survive. He denied his own bitterness until he felt arms enfolding him, carrying him forward out the window and over the balcony, the pair of them plummeting out of the flames like a falling star. As they fell he caught sight of Lestat, face hidden and skin bloody, shoving the boy’s maker into the heart of the fire.

They landed in a crunch of bones, rolling across the lush gardens in the grey early morning. Daniel groaned as he tried to stand on shattered legs, dragging the pair of them into the shadow of the arches, eyes darting back and forth for any source of shelter.

The boy's manicured fingers clawed the thick, black dirt of the walled garden, digging into it with the instincts of the most primitive of their kind. To be covered with earth--to descend into his own grave, the perfect fit, made just for himself. And for Daniel. It was not death, but the opposite; none would search disturbed earth when there was the more pressing issue of a burned-down house.

So well he knew this.

Well, too, Lestat would know it.

Nearby something slithered, repulsive and sluglike. Morning would come for it soon enough.
It was a shallow grave, no more than four feet long and barely wide enough to protect them. But he crawled in anyway, dragging Daniel with him and laying the lanky man on the floor of the grave before dragging their earthen cover back over them. If worst were to come to worst, he would survive the sun better than his fragile fledgling. The boy would protect Daniel--the knowledge that he could sent strength through him, pushed him through the premature exhaustion thickening his thoughts.

Daniel's breathing was deafening in the small space, shallow and panicked with a false remembrance of mortal fears. The boy--not Amadeo, not yet Armand again nor anyone else--hushed the sounds with a kiss, not relenting until he felt Daniel go still with the death sleep. After that there was plenty of time to listen in terror, certain vengeful footsteps would stalk over their grave at any second. He was still listening when the morning's death came for him.
Chapter Summary

It's 1994, and as Lestat makes his way back in to the sphere of his fledglings, certain developments in the vampiric media empire begin to strangely and tangentially affect the lives of Dan and his partners. They're all connected, somehow. And of course, blissfully happy, one and all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Arkham, Massachusetts
October 1994

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." Dan bowed his head lower, knees drawing up to cover himself. "I didn't think-"

"That's not good enough." Katherine was lovely, swaths of dramatic black fabric highlighting the blonde curls tumbling around her face. "You're so selfish. It's disgusting." She grabbed his chin, hard, pulling his head forward. He whimpered. "Look at yourself."

His stomach was still sticky, jeans sliding off his hips. "I thought I locked the door."

"Excuses." She let go. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know." He'd never been so red in his life.

"Are you waiting for me to tell you?"

"Yes," he mumbled into his chest.

"What was that?"

"Yes, please," he spoke up. "Tell me what to do."

"Take off those filthy clothes." He scrambled to obey, standing for inspection. "I got you something, but I'm not sure you deserve it now." All she had to do was draw her nail down his chest, and he ached.

"Please." Teeth clenched tight, body taut.

"You'll have to change my mind."

"How may I do that?" he asked, straining towards her internally even as his body remained straight, properly on display, each hand clasped on the opposite elbow behind his back.
"Considering your current state, I really don't know, you wasteful mess." She stalked around behind him slowly; he didn't turn his head to follow the movement. "I shouldn't even bother. After all, I have someone else who is much better behaved. Don't I, Crawford?"

Dan bit his lip. Unfair. Crawford had been the whole reason, giving him a neck massage that turned into a long backrub, grinding against Dan's ass and telling him not to reciprocate. Leaving him there in his room with that smug little smile.

There was still oil lingering on his back when Katherine stroked from the base of his skull down his spine, vertebra by vertebra, all the way down to the coccyx and trailing off at the barest suggestion of more.

"I have an idea." Crawford's eyes were ingenue-wide, guileless.

"Do you now? What a good boy." She left Dan standing there, walking to the doorway. Her nails, short but manicured, caressed his head. "Go on."

"I'd say his hands need a rest." He melted under her touch, rising on his toes to meet her in a thorough, rewarding kiss.

"An excellent idea. Give me your belt." She held out her hands for the strip of leather, only then returning to Dan. He felt the still-warm material wrap around his wrists, binding them loosely behind him. "That's a start."

"Now?" he asked. Refractory periods were hell by his age, but every muscle in him was trying.

"It's rude to speak out of turn, Dan." She sat on the bed, beckoning Crawford with one finger. "I want you to stand there and think about what you've done. Make sure you don't look away."

She let Crawford crawl to her, eyes adoring, and part her legs with hands as sure as they were gentle. Dan wanted to move, to get closer. Wanted to touch more than he wanted air. He could only see the subtle movements of Crawford's head between Katherine's thighs, see the hint of her breasts as her breath grew short and heavy.

"That's enough," her voice strained and squeaked over the last syllables, and Dan didn't have to see Crawford's face to know he was smiling.


"Still talking out of turn." She came to him all the same, the front of her dress hitched up to her thighs, and pressed against his still flaccid dick. He could feel damp warmth against his skin, her and Crawford combined and brushing against his own sweat. So close, and nothing he could do about it.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." His hips wanted to buck forward, but he mastered that impulse, stomped it flat. Not his right, and dangerous, besides, to risk knocking her down. "May I touch--"

"You can stop talking now, Daniel," she said very, very seriously. Another gift.

He didn't have to argue. He didn't have to do anything.

"Your hands stay tied, you understand? You misbehaved with them." She paused and tapped his cheek, meeting his gaze until he nodded. "Time to use your mouth for something better. Down."

Kneeling without hands wasn't easy, but he managed somehow, guided by her careful grasp. She
wouldn't let him fall. Never, never let him fall.

So close, the smell of her arousal made his mouth water and nearly distracted him from her next words.

"Crawford was very good. He deserves a treat."

He heard her call Crawford over, heard but didn't see the kiss that followed, the sound of a zipper being pulled down. He swallowed, tongue licking a circle around his lips. He focused himself on his task, determined to please.

There was still a lingering sense of strangeness in giving a blowjob, and Dan was grateful that Crawford was smaller than him--enough to take almost to the base of his shaft. Unfettered, he could've finished the man off in a matter of minutes (had, in point of fact, on more than one occasion). Without his hands, the prospect was more difficult. Crawford was only halfway hard, and he had to crane his head forward and down to reach his goal, extend his tongue as if he were softening a popsicle. Hands on his shoulders held him steady, and it wasn't long before he was rewarded with a groan, and a brush of clear liquid against his lips. A small victory. He savored his own internal smile.

The next part he knew, engulfing first the tip and then the shaft in his mouth as murmurs of encouragement came from above; he hollowed his cheeks and ignoring the slight ache in his knees. He was dragging himself free, slowly, teeth grazing the skin, when he was surprised with a jet of salt down his throat. He coughed, choking, and Katherine was there in near to a blink, holding a handkerchief to his face.

"Spit," she commanded. He was happy to oblige. He'd do any number of things, but he'd never gotten over that taste.

"Good, Dan." Two gentle hands in his hair, one from each of them, her soft voice soothing Dan as she cleaned all trace from his lips. That voice turned reproachful, but not at him, not at him: "Crawford, you were supposed to warn him."

"I'm sorry, Katherine," their lover said, slight tremor in his voice that could be anything from excitement to fear, and was most likely a combination of many emotions. His hands crept around, covering himself modestly but not tucking back in. He hadn't been told to.

God, he still had his shirt on, had stood there fully dressed and fucked Dan's mouth while she watched.

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to." Knowing. "Am I?"

"You are not, Katherine." Shaking voice, the sort of thing that made Dan instinctively want to rip free of his bonds and save him. He didn't--Crawford hadn't said no to anything, nor tapped out.

"You need to apologize to Dan, don't you?" she continued, doing something behind him that made him shiver and close his too-seeing eyes.

"Y-yes."

"Well, go ahead. Dan, look him in the eye."

He did as he was told, pained by the distraught look on Crawford's face. "I'm sorry, Dan," Crawford whispered. "I lost control."
"It's okay. You're forgiven." Dan smiled, tried to make it clear that he was fine--Crawford worried so strangely. When he was certain that the message had been received, he added, "even if you did get me into this."

"What was that?" Katherine asked, eyebrow arched.

"He turned me on and then left." Dan knew better than to say 'nothing'. That would be a lie. He saved lies for different things.

"Is that true, Crawford?" she asked.

He didn't even speak. Just nodded, a little proud, a lot shamefaced.

"Dan, stand up." Katherine returned to him, circling around to undo the belt. "You're forgiven." She kissed him, sliding a hand between his legs. Finally he was able to respond, in more ways than one. "Go lay down on the bed, and get a condom from the drawer." she ordered. While his back was turned, she addressed Crawford. "Have you been sneaking around on me, Crawford?"

No answer but a high-pitched whimper and a rustle of heavy cloth, both of which made Dan harder. He resisted the urge to look, to jerk his cock, to do anything but reach into the drawer for protection and then arrange himself on top of the comforter.

Only then did he see that she'd lowered Crawford's jeans to mid-thigh. Whatever was going on in front, from behind Dan could see how she squeezed one pale asscheek, nails digging in just enough to create a bloom of pink around those points of contact.

"You know better, don't you?" she asked, backing him towards the bed. Another whine, accompanied by frantic head-nodding. "But you did what you wanted, no matter what I told you."

"Y-yes, Katherine. I mean, negative, Katherine. I didn't break any rules."

"Are you trying to get out of your punishment?" Her hand spread flat, leaving a vivid imprint as she smacked and withdrew.

He cringed. "N-no. You told me not to fuck him. I didn't. I promise I didn'-ah!" Crawford's knees gave out as he reached the edge of the bed, his back pressing against Dan's leg. He was already getting hard again--amazing the difference a few years made.

"You're going to make it up to him. And me." She leaned close to his ear, speaking in a stage whisper that reached Dan. "If you can walk when this is over, you weren't working hard enough."

God, she was merciless. Dan was leaking precum, lip red with the effort spent not touching himself. At last, she turned that all-consuming gaze back to him. "Dan," he sat up on instinct, desperate for instruction. "Get out the lube, and another condom for Crawford. Make sure he's stretched. I want him to take every last inch of your cock."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be careful," Dan said seriously before turning his attention downward. "You heard the lady." He dragged him along by the waist and climbed on top. Crawford was a small man, but it was his willing passivity that made him so easy to manhandle. "Better get you ready."

"Be gentle with me."

Dan wouldn't actually have needed either warning to comply. Crawford was so sweet, and so needy, and he would wear himself out like this.
"Always." He bit down on the 'baby' at the tip of his tongue, not knowing from whom the endearment originated.

This needed to be new.

Dan never wanted to see Crawford hurting with more than boneless exhaustion from what they did. Never wanted to see blood or pain or real fear here.

His lovers shouldn't ever know that razor's edge of terror, lust and self-disgust that came from getting too close to the uncanny and inhuman.

So he kicked Crawford's pants the rest of the way down (commando, naughty boy) and started working him open.

It was its own reward, feeling muscles clench around his slippery fingers in time with Crawford's whimpers, seeing his pale thighs and his heels try desperately to find something to hold onto. It took so little to make him feel good, and the reward was beyond compare.

Dan withdrew, wiping his hand clean before fumbling the condom on, the haze of lust over his brain almost making him forget that there was something beyond the need to be closer.

"Wait." Katherine stopped him once he'd slid the latex on. "Don't forget your manners."

"No, ma'am." He nodded, though he was so hard it hurt.

"Lay back down," she told him, and to Crawford: "Do it yourself."

Crawford's face was flushed as he scrambled to comply, straddling Dan's waist without ever taking his eyes off Katherine. And though his face was hidden as he sank down, Dan could read the whole of it in the tensing of his back, the slow hesitation and then the indescribable heat as he slid all the way down.

"That's good," Katherine praised them, her own breath shallow. Even she couldn't help being affected, though it was Dan being undone by the unbearable squeezing and writhing on top of him.

She came to them, stopping Crawford's movement with the barest touch of her hand, holding them both in agonized suspension. "Do you think you deserve this?" she asked him.

"No," Crawford whimpered, and there was something too raw in his words.

"What do you deserve?"

"Use me," he begged. "Fuck me."

"What do you want, Crawford?" She lifted his head, her touch gentle.

"W-w," he struggled, keening, and another contraction drew a corresponding groan from Dan.

"Don't you dare come," she ordered. "Tell me what you want."

"I want y-you, Katherine, please." His voice shook. legs trembling with the effort of holding himself up.

"Alright." Those gentle hands took the second condom and slid it over him, half kneeling on the bed. Their precarious position wavered, and Dan forced himself up, holding Crawford steady so that he could support Katherine's weight as she guided him inside. He was their strength, all the
years he'd put into rote exercise and training at last good for something.

Dan was glad Kat never asked what he deserved. It sure as Hell wasn't this--getting off twice in one night at his age, with two lovers who couldn't possibly fit his preferences better if designed for him.

None of them could move without sending aftershocks through the other two, soft gasps and cries rising in the late-afternoon-to-evening light slanting through their window.

His arms burned. The muscles of his core were on fire, as were his legs, this lactic acid so much better than from the running he'd spent what felt like half his life doing.

Everything burned, hotter and sweeter than he could ever have imagined.

When it was over they covered Crawford in kisses, cooing and reassuring him of how well he'd done, how much they loved and adored him. Banishing the ghost of the scene, and his tears with it. He always smiled at them like he knew something they didn't, and cuddled down as they nursed the various aches and the regrets they were sure to have into next week. It was quite dangerously perfect.

~*~*~*~

Lestat recalled that Louis had said "Time passes quickly for mortals when they're happy." It was perhaps the one unfettered admission of their love in all his bitter little diatribe. But he'd never heard mention of the reverse: what a crawl the passage of time became when forced to watch someone else's happiness, and know that your own lingered just out of sight.

"Left, you have to go--shit, see? I told you."

"I'm learning the map's design. It would go more quickly if you'd stop interrupting. Unless you wanted to face me again?"

"Fuck no, you're a freak with these things. There's no point. If I wanted to get my ass handed to me I'd have other suggestions."

"Your lack of patience undermines you yet again."

"That's it; c'mere, you little--"

There was no greater travesty, Lestat was beginning to realize, than being forced to listen to reunited lovers. Their kind's predilection for the dramatic made the deluge of reborn fascination impossible to bear, and he was at the fringe of it, barred from his due until he passed some vague metric of Daniel's design. So he thought, and he traveled, and he came back and back and watched Daniel's gaunt and troubled face shift into this new glow. He would, normally, be aglow with happiness himself. But he kept thinking back to that terrible night, when the fire had raged high and then turned to ashes, and him nearly with it.

His hair had ignited, light shirt catching and burning away in spots not smothered by his heavy leather jacket. The soles of his boots melted into black, tarry prints on the white marble and fine rugs as they fought.
He hadn't understood, before, the weight he was putting on those he adored—the expectation that they freeze, lovely and perfect as he desired them, with no thoughts to who they could be.

He hadn't realized what stagnation he was supporting; the death within their death.

Marius, tongueless, drained, arms and legs a bundle of sticks, had reached out in some sort of appeal to Lestat, mind oozing diseased images no longer beautiful with the veil of kindness ripped asunder. Boys, girls, statues, paintings, films...all one and the same, things to be preserved. ‘Kept.’ Even Akasha, Lestat’s dreadful fierce Queen, at her best when still and silent and needful.

The ease with which Marius acted so, the utter righteousness he felt—no past experiences could justify it. He had shown Lestat *Herbert,* trapped and struggling in first Lestat’s own arms and then those of the wraith he pushed into the heat of the fire.

It wouldn’t kill him, but it would keep until the next night.

He’d been tempted to lay down and let the fire work its will on him, to test the terrifying suspicion that not even the sun could deliver him from this life now that Akasha’s blood rushed through him.

But there was still Daniel, young and fragile. There was Armand, with those placidly calculating eyes that reflected and survived the Hells into which he was thrown. Lestat’s companion in stubbornness, even if their hearts had never truly reached one another. There were things to do yet, and so he put aside the indulgent thought of death and made a bed in the earth, dawn raining ashen snow upon his head.

It astonished him, when he came to, how little had been disturbed. He’d grown used to America, where the sight of such tumult would draw curious eyes like a beacon. Here, it seemed, the city was full of survivors who knew better than to lift their heads to the destruction of the cursed castle on the hill.

The flames and the sun had made a monstrous thing of his teacher. Louis would have some ponderous statement about internal character, but Lestat only had the sickness in his stomach as he made for the opulent, almost untouched wine cellars with the dormant thing in his arms. Only his own thoughts, themselves tamped down to keep him from stopping in his actions as he made a tomb and walled it up. The Keeper, kept without watch. It would be damnation for all of them someday, a hundred or a hundred hundred years off. But he’d never been good at thinking about the long term.

His skin was streaked with ash and grime when he returned to the scorched remains of the garden, to the one patch of disturbed earth where Armand sat, naked and covered in dried blood (not that Lestat was his usual picture of grace himself). Waiting. Lestat sat beside him.

"You never told me." With another he would have been delicate, but Armand was beyond such affectations, however he aped them.

"I told. You never heard me." High, sweet voice, forever caught at the cusp of manhood. Choose them because you like to look at them and you like the sound of their voices…

How blind could he have been?

"You made him sound wonderful," Lestat whispered, shrugging out of his burnt, dirty, vagabond’s jacket ($300 off the rack in Beverly Hills, butter-soft and au courant). It hung about Armand's narrower shoulders, covered his drawn-up knobby knees and lanky thighs, and his fingertips worried at the scorched lapels. "The only light in this night."
"He was not so severe as the Children of Darkness, nor one to ask so much of me. I was...rested, with him, and never had to send anyone to the fires."

And what was there to say to that, to the boy who had locked those memories in his heart through three centuries of faith in the Devil, and then given them as treasure to the one who coaxed him out of his grave?

"What do I call you now?"

A shrug. "My names have all been given to suit pleasures and purposes. Amadeo no longer suits me. Armand was chosen by my first coven, but it is how I came to know you and Louis. And Daniel." His eyes never moved from the earth. "It will do."

"It could be hours before he gets up. A lot to heal at his age." He knocked his knee against Armand's leg, trying to coax response. To keep him present.

"Then I'll wait," the boy responded.

"A lot to heal for you, too." He knew what it was to be finally, completely adrift. Left in the dark.

"Come to sweep me up and care for my every need?" Even his venom sounded hollow.

"Hell no," he laughed, though it was a small thing. "I'd rather not see you dead. So I'd better not be in charge of you."

"Hmmm." Armand drew the coat closer, and they lapsed into silence, waiting for their mutual savior--one delivered, one deferred.

In the end, Armand had to help with the last few feet, and Daniel's eyes were wild with panic when he emerged back into the air. He threw his arms around his maker as though it had all been a dream, and he was once more a mortal man. Ah, what a delusion to dash.

"You can stop looking like the devil's at your heels," Lestat told him. "There's none here but us."

"How long has it been?" Daniel asked, clearing clumps of earth from his mouth and staring up at the sky.

Lestat was confused for an instant, and then. Well. He schooled his face to devilish seriousness.

"Fifty years. We flew back in our Japanese hovercar, just for you. Ashes are the grand fashion at this point, and mortals all eat their meals in pill form."

Daniel was blank, utterly, for a long moment, and then descended into an edge-of-hysteria laughing fit that could have done Lestat proud.

And so from that terrible joke, to this. This... holding pattern, vicarious enjoyment of the quiet, slow courtship of Daniel and the new person Armand became.

For they did not fall immediately into one another; it took near a year to even begin, while Lestat busied himself with aspects of the ridiculous tangle of rights and ownership represented by his and Daniel's accidental media empire.

He could have been sued, back in '84, for touring as himself. What a legal mess the future was.
"Well, I can see when I'm not wanted," he said, incapable of not making a spectacle of himself, even when he was content enough, as things went. Content but for the slow, constant fear in the back of his mind that had been left behind after time drained his anger away. He just wanted to see them. To know they were alright. That was all (and if Louis was taken with his newfound humility and fell back into his arms, what soul would blame his joy?).

He leaned out over the balcony, taking in the sight of Christopher Street below, coming to life with the glow of lovers and thrillseekers alike despite the late-autumn chill. He loved them dearly, one and all, and spent whole nights just staring down at the revelry. But it wasn't the same.

"Saw a cut of the trailer the other day," Daniel said as he came to lean beside Lestat, a cigarette lit in his hand for show. "Looks alright. Armand's pissed, by the way."

"Good." He smiled. "It isn't for him."

"This is your big plan? I won't give you the goods, so you went to Hollywood? What's next if this doesn't work?"

"I hear nuclear warheads are an excellent way to get oneself noticed." A couple ducked into a doorway, lost in one another, and his heart ached.

"The nuclear option. Sounds like you."

It was a clove cigarette, passe verging on silly, but more pleasant by far for their senses than what passed for pure tobacco.

Lestat had smelled real, properly cured tobacco on plantations and in drinking halls. Phillip Morris hadn't a clue.

This, though--this reminded him of things entirely more recent, the peculiarly rapid shift of fashion meaning things that would have lasted decades now demarcated increasingly brief periods. 'Gothic' boys and girls, sick and sad and beautiful as they all were, trapped in a half-life with the dead. How awful was that vampiric vision which made him see the loveliness inherent even in the most hideous of corpses.

"It does, doesn't it?" Hadn't it always been his way. He took the cigarette in hand and played it through his fingers in dexterous sleight-of-hand patterns, blurring and leaving glowing trails in the darkness until finally the cherry flew free and fell, flickering out halfway through its descent to the gutter. "I just need to know, Daniel. To see, and to apologize. You wouldn't understand."

"Of course not." Daniel snatched the guttering stick back, taking a long draw just for spite. He started to cough almost immediately. "You're the only one who truly feels the real, pure passions of our kind. How could I forget."

"You shouldn't. My passions paid for this apartment, Monsieur Journaliste."

"If I recall, you practically begged me to put your rambling into something filmable. I saw that first draft."

"Oh, blame the country bumpkin."

"You're about three centuries too late to pull that excuse."

Lestat smiled against his hand. His little family. The visit had done a great service in soothing his heart, far better than being alone. "Am I to give proceed onto my grand finale, then?" Not really
nuclear arms, of course. But he did miss the spotlight now and then. There might be something to
that.

"Here." Daniel dangled a ragged scrap of paper in front of Lestat's nose. "I wrote that two days ago,
so don't think this pitiful display convinced me."

Lestat snatched it, staring in mute wonder at the chickenscratch script. No matter how petulant he
was accused of being, he would never quite get over the awe of really getting his way. He grasped
for a clever quip, but managed only, "So you've resorted to bribing me in order to have your
honeymoon."

Daniel was watching him, chin rested on his palm. "Yeah, you're welcome."

The lack of fear in Daniel's eyes would have been unimaginable once; the first impression Louis
gave had seemed both insurmountable and inconsequential. Now, he gave off an air of experience
and maturity wholly different than Lestat's centuries had imparted. More, he was a friend, and the
lover of a friend. So Lestat admitted the weakness already glaringly visible.

"Is he--" *Is he happy*, as though Louis had ever in the world been happy. As if he hadn't been
entranced by that boundless capacity for sadness. "Will I like what I find?"

"Depends," Daniel said, dropping his amethyst gaze. "He's not alone. You think you can handle
that?"

"They're still together." Of course. Louis had not been one to leave, ever. Not of his own volition.
And it was not Lestat's place to gainsay. "It's his choice."

"Yeah, it is."

"You remind me of my mother."

"That'll make this weird, then."

He tasted of smoke and blood, long body gentle and companionable against Lestat's in the
moonlight. Friendship, simple after all the complication, and Lestat fell into the momentary
closeness with the pain of too long holding only the dying in his arms. When they broke, he
lightened it the only way he knew.

"Not so 'weird' as you might think, mon ami. Gabrielle and I--"

"Oh Jesus, stop right there!"

He went away laughing, and that was nearly as great a gift as the knowledge now blooming
beautifully in his mind. In spite of himself, he began to make plans. He'd fill the house--sure to be a
squat little shack, between the two of them, or perhaps a mausoleum--with flowers, with all manner
of beautiful life that Louis could spend his nights looking upon. That Herbert could study, if indeed
something so mundane would bring him any satisfaction. He'd hire a suite of musicians to mimic
every songbird that ever perched along the Rue Royale, every slow and easy swing of brass that
had graced their years together.

But then, he'd done all that, or versions of. It was cliche, practically. And worse, Louis had loved
him no more for it. He looked up at the stars. In truth, he was surprised. Their kind tended to
gravitate toward what they had known, but he would have expected more caution from Louis. At
least enough not to let their youngest flee right back to his old haunts, still within a generation of
his death. On the bright side, it would be a short flight from New York.
There were lights in the window. That was the first surprise. Aside of the passing fondness for cinema they all shared, Louis had little interest in technology, or rather, in its upkeep. Left to his own devices, he'd rot away with his books, using his powers for little more than turning pages in the dark.

The second was that the house, a charming little two-bedroom, stood alone in a patch of old farmland. No, that wasn't it; Louis abhorred crowds, and Herbert was no better. It was the warmth of the place that threw him, how utterly picturesque the portrait was. He watched it for hours from as close as he dared, which was several miles hence, and pondered. Wondered at the lives at play inside, and what they would make of him. It was maddening to do nothing, and it wasn't long before his resolve crumbled. Three nights simply to observe, he'd promised himself. To see if they were happy. Instead, he found himself knocking on the door scarcely six hours in.

He heard them movements of two bodies with only his mundane senses, and then the door opened to show

*Louis.*

Beautiful, still; thin (not too thin, surprisingly) and pale and gorgeous as ever, eyes brighter and lips fuller than even Lestat's flawless memory had painted them. His luxuriant black tresses had been cropped on the sides and left longer on top; he was simply dressed in a faded green plaid shirt and black jeans, feet bare in his own home. God, he was always perfect.

And near shaking apart with tension.

"Lestat." One hand remained in his hip pocket, cradled around some contrivance that mortal eyes would never see gave off a hint of glow. "You've found me."

Once, Lestat would have shaken him in a rage, or swept him up in his arms. Once, Louis would have submitted to the first and returned the other, but not now.

"Yes, Louis. I found you both."

Genuine, honest fear then overwhelmed the anger and distrust; something Lestat hadn't seen in so long. His green eyes flicked side to side, and then he licked his lips (still so human!)

"Is Daniel well?" he asked softly, braced as for news of tragedy.

Once, Lestat would have mocked him for that.

"As intolerable as the young always are, when they're in love. I couldn't bear it any longer. I've seen Armand disassemble enough computers to last a dozen lifetimes." He could have his little fun, but he found he had no taste for reveling in his cruel reputation. Not tonight.

"Armand." Louis' eyes had white all around. "Then you came with Marius."

Of course he wouldn't know. Lestat had lost a weapon in his precious arsenal, for all the good it did. The accusation still cut.

"No need to worry about that."

"Oh? Have you come to do your duty, then? To tell us we're protected, and should be grateful?" There it was, the fearful fury that razed the world.

"No." It pained Lestat beyond words not to rise to the bait. "He sleeps. For a decade, a century."
You needn't fear."

"There is a great deal to fear, Lestat." There was movement inside the house, too fast for a mortal but still clumsy.

"Not from me," he said. "You can tell him to put that away, whatever it is."

Louis' sooty lashes flickered, his expression going pained (what Lestat wouldn't give to kiss that away, to dismiss the poor beauty's fears and see him safe). "No," he murmured softly in response to someone else. "I can..."

And then the door stood fully opened, with Herbert’s slight frame filling the rest of the space.

Finally, the little coward.

"I'm sorry, Louis," the youngest among them bit out with an unnerving steadiness. "But we should get this over with."

He looked the same--foolish to comment upon, perhaps, but he was still in his tie and shirtsleeves. Still wearing spectacles, though a different style. Still parting his hair on the left. Still standing as though his spine had been reinforced with iron, though he might just as well be paper.

And with that desperate scrappiness in his face, right then he looked like the lovely, devoted, feisty mortal Lestat had thought he'd seen before real acquaintance turned them both bitter.

Almost tender, the feelings stirred, even before Herbert stole his words.

"It was my fault," his last fledgling said. "Louis had nothing to do with it."

Baffling, the assertion--so clearly, pointlessly untrue. It made him blurt, careless in response.

"He's taught you to think so little of me." He'd barely kept his tongue in check for Louis; with Herbert, it would be impossible.

"That knowledge wasn't hard to come by," Herbert replied. Oh, but he did look fierce, all the more so for how outmatched he was.

"Any more than the knowledge that where flame goes, Louis follows. But that's not why I'm here."

Apologize, get it out now, you utter simpleton.

"Out with it, then." Even deference turned to that short tempered snapping.

"He at least could have taught you manners," he fell to it already.

"Lestat. If you have nothing to say, you should go." How bold his Louis was, when it was for anyone's sake but his own. "We don't have many visitors. You'll draw attention."

Attention from whom? The houses acres away? The foxes and rabbits and whatever small beasts occupied Massachusetts farmland, not yet bedded down for winter?

"That would be unlike me, wouldn't it," he teased instead of refuting. "But how else will I tell you about your gift?"

That set him on guard once more, as badly as anything Lestat had said. Their gifts were dreadful, bloody affairs. "You needn't have," he started.
"But I did. Such is my wont, devil that I am. Come into town next month, on the eleventh. To the picture house. You'll see." He was certain they wouldn't have a television, and banked on it to coax them out. Let it be for fear of some cataclysm. "Until then!"

The upside of Akasha's blood, really, was how well it lent itself to making an exit. He was a dot in the sky by the time he could properly curse himself. Damn, damn, DAMN. Why had he done it? Fallen prey again to his need for a reaction, to see Louis prove anything but cold to him. And suppose they ignored him, Or packed up overnight, not even telling Daniel where they'd vanished to? If Louis didn't see the film—worse, if he hated it? If the oblique threats seemed too real? You've made a mess of it again, Lestat.

~*~*~*~

Five years spent remaking something from ashes, and one night had shown its fragility. Herbert cursed his own shortsightedness—he'd wheedled a little apartment for his own use from Louis' endless indulgence, unable to keep from watching Dan for the first year after they'd fled. Louis had claimed to be content anywhere, and there had been a gift of funding from their conspirator. Not endless, but more than sufficient; proceeds from books. Louis had asked so little at the time.

Eventually, Herbert had given him everything.

Now there was nothing for him to do but pace the perimeters of the cage he'd helped build. The world's most ambitious scientist, whiling away his eternity in a parody of domesticity. It was all fragile as spun sugar, and just as poisonous.

"Herbert," Louis' voice was level from his armchair. "Sit down."

"I intend to die on my feet." It was a pity that the myth about asking for entrance wasn't true. It would ease his mind.

"He won't harm you. Not as long as he has no one else to blame it on." Sanguine. Accepting.

"How comforting," he snapped. "And you intend to do as he says?"

"If I don't go, he'll show back up with something more outlandish," Louis said. "And I admit I'm curious."

This, after a single meeting. Within a week he'd leave Herbert for dead. Would just leave him, stranded in suddenly unbearable loneliness.

Just because Herbert was in love, it didn't mean he was stupid. He was so easy to leave.

He didn't even have anything with which to draw Louis back, no fascinating new discoveries to hook him anew. No bride or daughter or golden-haired angel to offer (there was the thing he held in common with his maker: the worst mistake).

Lacking the ability to do his Work (such a small thing to give up, in exchange for the only perfect person ever to tolerate him for any length of time—ever to fight for him), Herbert had read, first the stolen manuscripts of the Mad Arab Abdul Al-Hazred, then from disciplines of science not his own—things distant and cold and dead, like him, which needed no experiments to comprehend.
Entropy was easy. Over time, every small flaw increased and magnified, trending irreversibly towards decay.

Like his work.

Like this soap-bubble of time, pressure and tension holding them together in something apparently stable, but sure to explode with the slightest prick.

Lestat was far from slight.

If he was to be left, for dead or...otherwise, given the nature of their kind, what choice had he but to steal what little time was left? He'd cling with his nails to this thing that he hadn't even earned.

And Louis didn't mean it to hurt, after all. Herbert could feel his love, gentle and encompassing and fooling him into thinking he had worth even without any way to make his mark. Doubt the stars are fire, but...

Yet Louis fooled only himself with his 'indifference' to their maker.

"I'm coming," Herbert declared when the night came, pulling on his ancient coat and a soft, delightful scarf he'd somehow never replaced.

"I'm glad," was all Louis said, and what was worse was that he sounded it. There was nothing to give weight to Herbert's fears, which only made them hover just out of reach.

At least he could take joy in having Louis by his side in death, a privilege he knew now was his alone. Together, they were quiet and contemplative in it. Herbert had grown a fondness for killing, and the processes it allowed him to observe. The last vestige of research left to him, to cull knowledge from unwary minds.

They did it quietly, one shared victim enough for them both to function. Louis chose a middle-aged man walking alone down an alley, and they took care with him, trying not to cause undue pain. Their bodies cradled the victim’s, supporting him through the shock of pleasure and the rush of thoughts about home and family and supper, before Herbert’s hand sought out Louis’ and held it through the pitiable flagging heartbeats.

A few moments later they emerged back onto the main drag, a little stunned and dazzled still. They walked human-slow up to the Mirage Theatre, where small clumps of Friday-night people milled about blowing off steam. The lighted marquee explained a great deal, and Louis stared until an usher came out to ask if he was alright. Inside, they moved as in a daze to purchase their tickets (no popcorn, no drinks, no candy, though it might have helped them blend more. The blood they'd taken was enough to make them appear a little more flushed, a touch more alive; ready for the show).

The movie theater was rundown and creaking, and their screening room had been ill-advisedly built around a giant concrete support structure. They were alone.

"It's the fashion to take the back row, isn't it?" Louis commented, a private smile on his lips, "but we may be too old for that."

The thought of going but utterly failing to absorb Lestat's vanity project was appealing, but Louis didn't mean it. It was obvious by his spellbound movement, the soft fearless amusement in his head. So instead, Herbert consigned himself to two hours of voyeurism. He knew the story well by now, but it was something else to see it, and to know Lestat had a hand in it besides.
Louis was the aesthete and poet. Herbert was no film critic, for all the reading he'd done. His tastes tended towards splatter, camp, and black humor, rough-hewn shamblers of talent and story held together by the barest threads of explanation.

But even he would not have predicted this creation.

Emotional, off-key, and overwrought, but utterly in sympathy with its miscast lead. Not argument, but apology, it seemed--ceding control of the narrative to the primary text, rather than Lestat's own subsequent 'corrections'. He had to force himself not to watch-Louis-watching, to see if this offering with its swells of a heavy and sentimental orchestra and lavish scenery was having its surely-intended effect.

For it was a love letter between two men, ending uncertain, broadcast to all the world as (Herbert had been given to understand) his lover and their maker always did these things.

Their's was the romance of centuries, after all.

T heirs.

Louis was quiet as they walked home, his thoughts pointedly closed as Herbert made a tentative mental reach. That, more than anything, left him uneasy. It was easy to shrug away the rest--there were no books written about him and his strange, unromantic loyalty, not that he needed to be so sung. But that soppy piece of celluloid had clearly done its job. And all Herbert could do was stand by, knowing that any comment he made would only further unbalance the scales.

He barely had to make excuses when they arrived home. Louis let him slip back out among the populace, and he took his time in dissecting the poor man who crossed his path. Love, or his best approximation, had at last reduced him to the realm of a horror movie villain.

When Louis asked "are you alright," Herbert's lie was accepted without question. But at least his quest for closeness was too, as he pressed his head to Louis' chest in the dark, wondering how many nights of this were left to him.

~*~*~*~

A doctor's night off was not unlike the typical person's conception of a threesome: unlikely to happen, too exhausting to really be fun, and with far more logistical issues than most were prepared to plan for. Two doctors? Forget it. But then, Dan had seen more than a few uncommon situations in his life. And yet, he thought to himself as he flicked the radio station to get away from yet another report of a disappearance and navigated the on-street metered parking to get them as close as possible for Kat's sake, he did think that seeing a movie about vampires with the no-nonsense head of the psychology department hadn't been on his list of likelihoods.

He hadn't asked much about the movie at all, too entranced by the prospect of a night without a pager and the unexpected passion on Kat's face when she'd asked if he'd go. Crawford had bowed out, nerves unwilling to bear the press of crowds in the dark, but had waved them off with promises of his own plans (and Dan knew him just well enough to be both alarmed and intrigued by that innocuous statement). In fact, while he made the best of the cramped seating and sticky floor, he'd have been just as happy if they didn't do much in the way of watching at all.

He was quickly very, very sorry for his lack of curiosity.
Dan was familiar with psychosis, hallucination, delusion, even simple dissociation. A relationship with Crawford meant he needed to pay attention. This was none of those, but within the first ten minutes, Dan was digging his nails into the red-velvet armrests.

The names—a vampire called Louis could be coincidence. "Lestat," though?

That wasn't even a name. And Tom Cruise--

This lush, gold-toned, historically-tilted version of vampirism glowed and pulsed across the screen even as every name was disconnected from the appropriate face.

"Real button down, looking to be the next Murrow," Daniel had said, but--darkly hilarious, the over-the-top fifties Clark Kent presented here.

Dan had never even imagined.

"The person you walk into the room as isn't the same one who leaves with bite marks on their neck."

"This is wrong," Dan hissed thirty minutes in. "This isn't how he's supposed to be. Louis isn't--"

Louis is, was the trouble. There had been no neutrality to that strange, severe creature. There was no artificiality to the 'ha ha, cynical' narrator.

Lestat wasn’t--

Not in reality.

"You've read the books?" Katherine was a portrait in black, silver, and gold, a velvet painting in the theater lighting. And so happy.

"Just...heard a few things." He didn't want to spoil it for her. He could do this.

None of the actors could hope to live up to the violent, beautiful creatures that haunted his memory; he imagined this was how it would have felt if he'd actually been able to force himself to watch the "dramatic reenactment" scenes of the TV coverage for the Miskatonic Massacre. He'd heard Lestat was a rock star. It wasn't beyond imagining, he assured himself, that the man had sold some story to Hollywood in pursuit of more widespread fame.

He wasn't prepared for the fire, and the visceral nausea it produced in him. He could too easily imagine Herbert getting trapped in his lab, going up like a candle with a scream no one would bother to heed. Herbert courted danger so relentlessly; Dan hadn't realized how much he'd banked on the assumption that his old friend was now beyond harm even from his own foolishness. He went to the lobby for air when Louis made his journey to Europe, and couldn't bring himself to go back in.

Kat found him sitting on a bench with torn cushions. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Yeah, just caught me off guard. We can go back."

She gave him a stern look, but he wasn't Crawford; his obedience was a private affair. She'd have to trust him. "Alright." Still, she took his arm.

He had to stifle a laugh when he saw "Armand," thanking whatever filmmakers had insisted on the casting. He remembered that steady, chilling gaze and its youthful owner. To his surprise, Kat
laughed alongside him.

"He's aged a few years," she remarked.

For her, this was fiction. How deep, he wondered, did this little media goldmine go?

"It certainly could have been worse," Katherine said as they trickled out. "But it's nice to get out. Should we stop and get a present?"

"Seems fair." This was better. This was real, as unlikely as it seemed. Him, being happy.

"Oh! I forgot--dammit, the store's going to be closed." Already it was almost nine. "Can you stop by the bookstore for me tomorrow? I have to work late, and you know how they are about holds."

"Did I forget something?" He didn't recall any recent digests or textbooks to which she'd contributed, nor any fiction anthologies to which Crawford had gifted his fragmented, incisive quasi-prose.

"Well, I thought you'd know. Enclave of Darkness launched today."

"I'm--a little out of the loop," he said, dithering.

She roller her innocent, human eyes.

"The latest book, Dan."

*Of course.* "Any news on this one?"

"Early critics say it's too raw, but they said that for Exit to Eden, too, and look how well Rice did then. I'm looking forward to a more modern perspective, personally."

Dan nodded along, focusing on the road rather than the words. He flinched away from touch that night--couldn't tell his lovers why. He slept in his own little-used room, smelling the dust and starch on sheets not used in six months' time.

~*~*~*~

Lestat was a sharper manipulator than Herbert remembered--he didn't show up the next night, but gave it almost a week after, allowing thoughts of him to permeate the house and the heart to grow proverbially fond. Herbert made sure he answered the door.

"Oh, it's you," was an utterly mutual reaction.

Louis was there, which meant that Herbert was safe. Lestat wasn't so stupid as to remove his mistake in full view of his goal, not with their connection so tenuous and memories of Claudia so fresh.

*(She'd been smaller than the actress, with sharper features and a tiny pox blemish at the arch of her left eyebrow. Her favorite color was peach. Blood shared so much.)*

"Come to boast of your box office profits?" he drawled, taking up as much of the doorway as possible in a deliberate staking-out of his pitiful territory.
"Oh, no, I'd never do that," Lestat said, flipping his shining backlit hair over the shoulder of a suit that must have cost more than all the money Herbert had owed in loans and scholarships at the time of his death. "Universal adoration is so terribly passe, darling."

At the double jab, Herbert felt his face still into the kind of death mask to which vampires tended to be prone.

"I wouldn't know." He drew back into himself, calling to his for-now lover. *Lestat was here; would Louis come? Did Louis want him?*

Of course he did.

He was about to step aside and allow entry into his house when a long, pale hand reached out in his direction.

"There's no need to run off." Lestat's hand on his arm was gentle, deceptively easy to break from. "You are the host, after all."

Ah, so he wanted to rub it in. To prove he could take Louis back directly from under Herbert's nose, as though that were ever in doubt. "Not everything I do is a response to you." As long as one included every event before his death as well.

Lestat opened his mouth, but whatever retort he'd planned died as Louis entered. Lestat's pupils dilated like a junkie at the methadone clinic (an unpleasant few months that had been), and he seemed to restrain his urge to touch only by fussing incessantly with his sleeves.

"Well?" Lestat burst out at last, when they had all stood staring for an unbearable eternity. "Hollywood has made you even more impatient." Louis extended an arm, beckoning the two (among countless) whom he held effortlessly in his sway. "You'll forgive my Southern fondness for preamble, I hope." Though there was no tea to get, no mortal rituals to waste time and frivolous conversation on. They were certainly skilled at it, much as Louis professed to hate liars.

"Sadist," Lestat growled, but there was a gentleness to their passes that left Herbert more melancholy than an outright show of affection could have.

Louis looked wonderful, though, in the glow of Lestat's presence. Lestat himself, theatrically dumbstruck with schoolboyish infatuation, reminded Herbert of the way it felt to be the focus of that poisonous glow.

False sun in his hair, mock summer-sky in his eyes, even as November snow threatened in the lowering clouds that blocked out the stars.

Louis' poetry--leaking through their shared minds for seven years.

Herbert should steal another coffin, he thought idly from his position beside the fire and outside their circle of warmth. He should store it in his apartment for when the inevitable happened, beside his writings and stored, unused blood samples. He wouldn't.

He'd never been good at letting go.

That was why he was still alive, inconvenient as that might be for some.

Worse than their conversation was the feeling of the occasional, offhand olive branch extended by one or the other, trying to draw him into what had been so clearly shown as *their* story.
Eventually he rose to go without comment—he'd grown used to doing so, his quiet affinity with Louis propping up his social weaknesses. But this time, he was stopped.

"Leaving so soon?" Lestat, of course.

"I have things to attend to."

"Ah, your work. How could I have forgotten." If Herbert didn't know better he'd say the man sounded affectionate. Subtler mockery, more like. And then the man confirmed it. "You could always tell me about it."

"I recall you having very little interest." It was easier than the correction, his empty hours that books couldn't fill, not with the same vibrancy.

"Am I not allowed contrition?"

"Ask your philosopher." He didn't bother with his coat. It was all affectation in the end, and he was growing tired of it with less than a quarter of a century under his belt. If this became a habit there would be trouble: the killing, the violence, the vice. An addict's personality, through and through. He contemplated finding some cellar to hide out in for the day, to avoid the sight he was certain to come home to. But that would mean being alone with his thoughts. And these days, that was the one thing worse than Lestat.

He wanted Louis in his arms, in his bed, in his head and his coffin. He wanted to press himself close and enjoy the privilege of that tenderness and mercy. He wanted his lover's blood on his lips.

He got Eric's.

Handsome enough—slim and golden-complexed with overlong dark-auburn hair; let it never be said that Herbert couldn't become a true parody of himself by developing a Type. Gentle. Sad.

A children's librarian at Miskatonic Public, nobody waiting at home. No surprise, considering what they had in common. Still hoping; what a shame. He bought the drinks, entranced by Herbert's interest in his thesis on linguistic and cryptologic anomalies in occult manuscripts from the Early Modern period. Concerned at Herbert's birdlike build, his coatless body, his pallor. Kind.

Taller, of course; weren't they all.

What he did didn't count if they were victims.

~*~*~*~

Dan remembered to pick up the book.

It was an unassuming thing, dust jacket solid black with the title big and centered in an elegant font. He'd expected something with a musclebound highlander on the front. He didn't crack the cover until he was safely home, where he shut himself in the spare room after the barest hellos he could manage. Dinner could wait—he was only going to skim it and see what the fuss was about.

**PROLOGUE**

_Hey, everybody—all you vampire groupies out there in the night. I'd tell you that's a bad thing to_
hang your hopes on, but then again, the Devil’s Minion’s got no room to talk.

My name is Daniel Molloy, if you didn’t know already, and I’ve conducted no interviews for this book. Not possible. This was pure observation, embedded in what was once my own home and playing audience to my guests on the Night Island.


Oh, yes, there are people you haven’t seen before, because we are as a species wholly greedy, overpowered by an endless thirst for more that I couldn’t possibly have understood when last I prepared a manuscript for your enjoyment. I was human then, and as poor, perfect, flawed Louis put it, you might as well try to describe sex to a virgin. (Though that, too, might be a fallacy, from what I’ve seen since.)

Well, here you are, you voyeurs like me, you trainwreck fetishists; you’re the people who made “If it bleeds, it leads” the motto of the news industry. Here’s the story of our little coven, of loves and lies, new faces and old. Passion, beauty, ugliness and pain.

Death.

Above all, that last--because in case you all forgot, we’re a bunch of fucking killers, when it matters most.

It was like hearing Daniel again, through some strange filter of composed, literary voice. Confrontational and accusatory, but also romantic as he’d probably been when drunk before the disease (both of the diseases). And Dan was hooked into the story, the place and the time and the echoes of some undiscussed catastrophe and whatever might have passed in his absence; without meaning to, he settled in, reading on his stomach and ignoring the growing crick in his neck (it had been so much better for so long.)

The tremors in his hands began threatening sometime around the third chapter, when a tall, handsome athlete and unassuming mortal had taken up with narrator Daniel Molloy. All of it was a little too close, a lot too detailed. A huge bit inaccurate, when Molloy got him facedown on the mattress and fucked him with more than fingers--with some hysterical permanent vampire hardon, Jesus. All things he remembered. And after ‘Connor’ was gone, dead, it kept going.

Passion and pain indeed; a goddamn game of musical chairs, flowery and seductive and ridiculous. Unbelievable and therefore safe.

Until it wasn’t. Until it darkened farther.

He sank down, down, until he hit bottom on page 289, when the thinly veiled stand in for his friend and never-lover, Herbert West, took a final action. And Dan found out through a fucking mass market novel.

He felt numb, like he hadn't in so many years. Since her. Shock--the blanket around his shoulders didn't help this time.

The words were like Molloy was there with him. Like his hands were on Dan again, holding him and killing him at the same time. He could smell burning flesh and hear the screams, the terrible screams. He wondered what the final straw had been, and feared that he knew. Because Herbert
had never given up before, not when Dan had been there for him to come back to.

"Dan?" A knock at the door. Crawford could've gone anywhere he wished in the house and been welcome, but he held a strange reverence for closed doors. "Are you in there? Don't let me cook, I'll burn the house down."

He couldn't have moved if he wanted to. At some point he'd become comfortably settled in a stranger's body, eyes fixed on the point where the book had fallen.

"I'm coming in." And even then he knocked a few times more before nudging the door open. "Dan?"

The weirdest part was that as Crawford got close his words turned into so much radio static. When he touched Dan's face, looked in his eyes, it was like feeling through anesthetic. He'd sworn Crawford didn't remind him of Herbert and meant it, but now all he could see was that sweet, open face contorting in agony. Peeling away as it burned, like movie magic.

He should have known.

They didn't come back. Not really. Meg's funeral had been closed casket, her beauty stretched and warped beyond all recognition by Dan's desperate attempts to keep her with him. But Herbert should have been different, should have been safe when Dan ran like the coward he was.

At some point he had started weeping, quietly and without words; the only reason he knew was because he could feel the wetness when Crawford's fingertips glided over his cheeks.

"What's wrong?"

Hand in his hair, too long hair, he needed to cut it when he left this place--cut off the person he'd been and start fresh.

Hand trailing down, brushing his collar, dipping in, in, touching the aching wounds, aching with pain and something else, sticky blood and saliva and--

At some point he started screaming.

They were both there, too good for him by half. He felt the tremor in Crawford's hand as it wrapped around his own fingers, refusing to let go. Katherine was wrapping him tight in blankets, holding his face in her hands.

"Talk to me, Dan. Do you want me to take you to the hospital?"

No, no, that was the last thing he wanted. Meg had died there, and Herbert too, back at the beginning (he'd been living on stolen time, and Dan had known it all along). If he went there he'd kill them too.

"Breathe. Dan, breathe with me. In for five, out for seven. You know how this works." She demonstrated, and he wanted to obey. He did. His attempts elicited wracking, wet coughs.

"We're not going anywhere." Crawford's voice was gentle iron. "You're not hurting us."

How much had he said out loud, he wondered. How long had they been here, wasting time. How long until they demanded answers--

He remembered Katherine's face in the theater, caught up in the safe, false story on screen. She'd
go looking for them, just like Herbert. She'd get herself killed, and Crawford would fall with her. He started pulling together material for a lie, knowing the questions would come.

"Talk to me. Tell me what you're feeling." She was so strong. Crawford had climbed up beside him and covered him in an embrace, warm as a blaze. The trouble with having a doctor for a patient was that they were well equipped with the answers you wanted to hear.

"I'm okay. Just stay, just for a minute." He'd never been able to bear being alone, even when he'd managed it.

They did, strong for him when he was so weak. He'd always attached himself to strong people, hoping they would be able to bear his weight. When he quieted, she asked again, voice firm and sure.

"What was that, Dan?"

God, he wanted to say. He wasn't supposed to lie to his partners; that was an important rule. But he forced himself to adopt a semblance of calm, flexing the too-often-used skills of deception he'd been developing all his life.

Clean-cut Dr. Cain, certainly not a man who'd help steal bodies from the morgue or experiment on soldiers. Never lived with a drug-dealing murderer.

Certainly wasn't involved in some strange three-way relationship.

Most definitely didn't believe in vampires.

"Nothing. The book reminded me of some things I wanted to forget."

So much compassion on their faces, such 'understanding' there for him, when they didn’t know the half of it. Should never know the half of it.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." He made it sound light; borrowing Crawford's certainty in refusal would only set off alarm bells. "Not right now--it just hit me funny, I guess."

The hateful thing lay on the floor, black and gold and boasting its author's bestseller status.

'Verse Vampires'.

"You've got the other ones, right?"

"I do." More than a bit of reluctance in her voice. "But I'm not sure that's a good idea, Dan. You could hit another trigger."

"I'll give it a few days," he promised. He didn't tell them not to worry. He'd let it fade away on its own. And then he'd start reading, see what else he could find. Nothing like solace, but maybe...

"Do you mind if we get takeout tonight?"

He savored the feeling of Katherine's head against his chest, Crawford's arms around his waist, committing it to memory. He should've known it couldn't last.

~*~*~*~
It was a grand gesture, Louis thought, and Lord knew that was Lestat all over. But this time there
was something like humility to it, rather than the self-justifying reveal of his last bid at fame.

Herbert, of course, was unimpressed, his own clashes with Lestat perhaps still too fresh to feel that
clean-slate philosophy that vampires tended to adopt when renewing their acquaintance after time
apart. He was such a stubborn, moody lover, and when he got into his funks, Louis could only
make himself available.

So when Herbert rose from his chair and made for the door, Louis let him go, only to be surprised
a moment later.

"Why did you let him go?" Lestat asked, face more honestly appealing than it had been all night,
for all his charm. "I wanted to talk to him."

"You did?" It was with some shame that Louis realized that such a thing had never even occurred
to him.

"Of course," he said. "There wasn't much for him on the screen, was there? A personal touch is the
best I can do."

"I think he's had enough of that." Lestat was one of many subjects Herbert declined to speak about.

"And you took him at his word, did you? Oh, Louis, Louis, Louis," Lestat shook his head. "You're
the same as you ever were."

"And you intend to change his mind?"

"If I can."

"If that's your intent, you'd better leave." He was surprised by how much the thought already
pained him. "Last time he barely survived your help."

"I won't touch him." Lestat met his eyes. "Not unless he asks."

"So you've said before." Never with such conviction; there was a story there. "Have you learned
some new great truth in your travels?" Louis asked as if Lestat would tell, though of course he
wouldn’t. He loved his air of mystery too dearly, even after centuries.

"You'll have to be my conscience, then. I trust you remember the role." Lestat reached for his hand,
running his thumb over the peaks and dips.

"It's a demanding part." And yet they found one another time and again, at the eye of a hurricane.
Unable to see the destruction they left in their wake.

"That's why it has to be you, my dearest," Lestat said. "Anyone else would break." His face fell.
"We're not all so strong as you."

"You could kill me in an instant. Even Herbert could." Poor Herbert, made on blood tainted by the
Queen of the Damned.

"Ah, you see. That's what I mean. You see our power and overestimate our strength. We break,
cher, and you don't notice. I think," a pause, as if he for once chose his words carefully, "that there
are many things you don't notice."
"Accusing me of self-absorption, then, Monsieur le Scriptwriter?" Louis teased gently, wanting to lift the mood with this not-even-funny play upon the gentlest moment of their tumultuous past. That singular night before it all came down.

"Not accusing. Merely observing," Lestat replied with unwonted seriousness, brushing his lips to Louis' knuckles. "You see and hear so much, with your eyes for all the corrupt beauty of our world, but sometimes I fear that sensibility for the subtlest details blinds you to larger troubles."

"Speak plainly. What is it you wish me to notice about my lover?" Lestat's expression became sulky and dissatisfied, as though he'd been telling himself untruths about Louis' availability. Louis took his own hand back, not wanting to keep up something potentially deceptive. "He is my lover, Lestat. You cannot simply pretend him away because you want me."

"Apparently I needn't pretend, as he's willing to flee his own home rather than spend any time with the two of us," he said with some asperity, and finally Louis frowned.

"This truly bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Louis," he said, exasperated. "You did name love as one of my many tempestuous impulses, didn't you?"

"Favor, maybe. You threw him away, Lestat. You can't blame him for not running into your arms when you take new interest. How long until it wanes this time?" They'd all wondered that, all his dearest loves proclaimed throughout history.

"You know I'm a terrible teacher. A wretch of a mentor." He sounded miserable. "I can only be as I am."

"And so you needn't change, and the world can continue to spin around you." The same as always. Why even contemplate welcoming him back, when the dance would end the same way?

"Mon dieu, you make this hard." As if his faults were Louis' responsibility, too. "I want to make it right. I can't do that if he won't let me near him. He looks at me like I'm the Devil himself!"

"You reveled in the comparison before," Louis recalled.

"Not like this." There passed an ominous silence, Lestat's hands clenching and working free against his knees. "I need you to tell me what happened when I left. I need to hear it from you. He must have told you; he wouldn't keep secrets from you."

Louis pursed his lips, unsure of what he might safely say. Lestat had claimed to be on poor terms with Marius at this point (whatever he actually meant by his extravagant offhand reference to dragon-slaying), but their bond was something old and profound.

Too, making his lover sound mad when Lestat had been so afraid of that very condition back then...Finally, Louis closed his eyes and settled on diplomacy.

"Herbert was quiet for some time after you left. Motionless. He would not leave the chamber in which you placed him; I fed him, when he would take it." And how terrible had been those moments, his empty love's lips to his neck without thought or desire, only a halfhearted tender need filled with guilt.

How dreadful, the nights when he had rushed in just before the sun entered through the window, an echo of his own spiteful threat on the night of his dear one's making now a true possibility. Herbert had never resisted being placed into his coffin, and that much Louis counted as a
continued desire to live.

"One night Daniel forced him out and dressed him. It--they were Armand's clothes, as the two are of a size." Beautiful, Herbert would have been, in fine garments. Louis wished--but his love was what he was. The finest garment he owned now was some old muffler, slung careless about his neck every night he remembered a coat. "He wanted--not to feed. To drink from his stores. I believe that Marius may have...misunderstood. Found him...provocative. In his lover's suit, you see." Lies, but what else would Lestat understand? How close to a truth could Louis go, when it was his lover's privacy and pride at stake? "They had an encounter."

"Do I have to beg before you deign to be honest with me?" Lestat snarled. "An encounter." His lip curled.

"I've given you the facts," Louis said, a pillar in a storm.

"And what about the truth? Daniel tells it differently."

Ah. He'd failed another of Lestat's secret tests. "What would you have me say? That he was damaged, and only you can heal his wounded heart?"

"God dammit Louis, why must you torment me? Just tell me what happened!"

"Fine." Let him suffer the truth, then. "You left hoping Herbert would die and save you the trouble. I don't know what you said or did to him, but he tried. Daniel and I kept him alive, and just as he was beginning to live again your master made a plaything of him. I haven't seen such a shameful display since Armand's theater. He's put that behind him, and now you want to rip it open so that you can play the prince yet again. Is that truth enough?" He'd stood at some point, half prepared for Lestat to lash out at him.

"He's moved on, has he?" Lestat asked instead.

"Yes." Herbert never spoke of it, not even in their most private moments. He was not a man to dwell, it seemed.

"My cruel beauty." It was a phrase built for mockery, but Lestat said it with perfect sincerity. "This is why you need me."

"Ah yes, with your formidable insight and ability to read his thoughts." Unfair to bring up that barrier, but always Louis had been inclined to viciousness in their arguments; more so when another he loved was at stake.

"With my experience, love."

Louis snorted indelicately, and Lestat's grey eyes at last flashed in anger, sensuous mouth twisting into a shape hard and hurt both as he snapped out his next words:

"You've never been raped."

The word, finally spoken, hung in the air like some foul miasma, darkening the very walls of Louis' cozy living room.

Then Lestat pulled himself up short, a look of distant horror flitting across his features as he reached out in an abortive comfort gesture. "Have you?"

"No, not--" Pressure, predation, seduction; all were the ways of their kind, but Louis had been
"Thank God for that mercy," Lestat whispered. "But Louis, he is harmed by it. You don't even seem to know half of it; have you never asked him?"

"He doesn't speak of it, Lestat. I'll not trespass in what he wishes to forget."

"Your kindness will be the death of us all."

"What was I to do?" Part of him meant it. "What could I have done that wouldn't make him more alone, more terrified? He knows I'll listen."

"In my experience, your listening ends in drastic action you can't ignore." Lestat touched his throat, though the wound was long healed, forgotten even as it was committed to film. "You managed to ignore Armand into leaving you alone. Not just anyone can manage that."

Armand. Louis had forgotten to consider him once again, consumed with his responsibility for Herbert. Again, that wan connection had withered and died. "Is he well?" He couldn't help asking.

"I'll never understand that little brat," Lestat said, harsh words undercut by a strange new fondness. "But he may manage to remake himself yet."

He nodded, relieved. "Yet you don't believe the same of your own child."

"Poor form," Lestat tutted. "Trying to catch me with your 'false equivalences."

It always surprised him to hear Lestat borrow from academia; the man's intelligence was so often a matter of hard-won cunning that it had let Louis dismiss him as stupid for many years. "The matter remains," he amended. "Why should I force him to listen to you?"

"If you'll believe nothing good of my intentions, then this: He's frightened of me, and I do not know why. If we're to associate like this, you and I, then I can't have him jumping like a hare from hounds. I have to make him see that I am sorry."

"So it's for your sake, then."

"Would you truly cut off his nose to spite my face, dearest?" Lestat appealed with sad humor quirking the corners of his eyes. "You cannot tell me he seems entirely well."

"He has never been entirely well." Like all of Lestat's creatures; strange and damaged and beautifully cracked. Like all vampires, needled by their damnation. "He is loved. He functions, as do I."

"But it's such lovely nose, at that."

It was, Herbert's snub nose, his sweet face, beautiful hands and hard sharp mind all Louis' own. And so much more precious than to simply be treated as an obstacle to Lestat's friendship.

"Why do you care now?" he asked, crossing the room to stare out the window. No movement under the moonlight; nothing setting off the outside lights with their motion sensors. He'd been gone so long. "You wished him dead before--"

"I did not!" Lestat lied, voice raised in incensed complaint, hands and hair flying in the reflection in the window. (Easier, sometimes, not to look directly upon the sun.)

"When you left, we all knew," Louis said so softly, like the snowflakes lightly dusting the fields.
He'd not seen snow himself until dead eighty years. "You orphaned him for trespassing with me; had he been mortal, you'd have put a gun in his hands and invited him to stop the pain."

"What are you talking about?" Hands that could crush stone to powder nearly grabbed Louis' shoulder from behind, freezing and dropping in uncharacteristic restraint. "I locked him away for one night, showed him his love lived, and brought him home at his request! Hardly an execution!"

"The window, and the door. That prison told all anyone needed to know of your expectations. When he went to Marius--" Louis pressed his hand to his mouth then, feeling rare tears threatening. The eternal mourner, he, but weeping was ordinarily Lestat's territory.

"I never touched the damn door!" Lestat insisted. "I went out the window, the same way I came. Not my finest hour, it's true," at least he had the decency to look chagrined, "but I left him whole."

"What on earth could you have expected?"

"I was jealous! Does that makes you happy?" Hardly. Lestat's jealousy was an omnipresent beast. "I thought he'd go back to his mortal, maybe make another vampire, I didn't care. I just--couldn't. I wasn't thinking clearly. He pretended to be Nicki, Louis." There was still such reverence in the way he spoke that name, though when Louis had met the man on paper he's left a less than favorable impression.

"And so you had your revenge." It didn't matter if Lestat had meant it. He so rarely meant the damage he caused, but it was left all the same. But it would kill only one of their beloved; Louis would make sure of that.

"I'm telling you I didn't!" The smash of a table breaking under Lestat's fist. He was slipping. Louis could see him staring at what he'd wrought, an apropos illustration. And then he wrapped his arms around himself. "It must've seemed...my God, I didn't think Marius would go so far."

"Now you turn on your beloved teacher? You've fallen far this time." It wasn't that Louis didn't agree, but Lestat's dogged loyalty was as much his charm as their ruin.

"Do you want to know what I was doing this past year?"

"Slaying dragons, I hear." He should go look for Herbert. Protect him from the dawn.

"Yes." Before Louis could make another remark he went on. "Your confidant was so desperate he told me where to find you. At a price."

Oh, Daniel. His latest failure, and surely not his last. "You're here now. What does it matter how it happened?"

"Because of what he asked me to do."

Louis sighed, pressing his palm to the windowpane. No halo of condensation developed around it.

"I know he's putting out another book, one you must have--"

"He asked me to help save Armand."

"Save him?" Louis turned, finally, at that, to look fully upon his destroyed home and the guest who'd done it. "From what?" What could ever threaten the fierce creature who had killed so much of Louis, sucked him empty and left him dry as any victim?
"From whom." The Brat, the Damnedest Creature, the devil himself, collapsed into Herbert's armchair and put his head in his hands. "From Marius, Louis. He. Please, for the love of Hell, stop mocking how alike we are; I am sick to the soul from seeing what he made of his eternity."

It could easily have been an act. In all likelihood it was. But Louis fell back in every time, searching for the scrap of sincerity that was more beautiful than any of his maker’s charm. He let himself be drawn back, knelt before his former lover, his always beloved, hand on that knee like the lie Lestat had so faithfully preserved on film. "Tell me."

"Don't ask that of me, Louis. Take it from me if you must--but I can't speak it real. Not so soon."

There it was. The trick to get him close, lure him into the blood. "Keep your secret then. You always do." He shut his eyes and cursed himself.

Lestat caught him. "I didn't--I'm not trying to seduce you. Not with this. If you could see what I saw..."

"But of course I cannot, and must take your word for how dreadful it was and how brave you were." It was cruel of him, but giving Lestat an inch led to losing one's whole world.

"Call Daniel, then. Make him tell you the whole affair. He'll be no happier to do it than I. Though undoubtedly more smug." Lestat dared a touch, hand cupping Louis' face. "I've taken too much to ask you to trust me, haven't I?"

Louis didn't bother answering. They both knew. "I should find Herbert."

Such sorrow, immaculately reproduced. "Of course." He stood as if he were every inch the millennia in his veins. "I'd better make my grand exit then."

Louis caught his arm. "This isn’t a banishment. But--"

“You need to be certain. I understand that.” Understood, perhaps, but didn’t like, by the mixed sorrow and frustration carefully contained in entrancing grey eyes. "Think about that call--I trust that technology isn't beneath your mourner's aesthetics?"

"Good night, Lestat." He shut the door on a smiling mask, the brief sadness already covered. It was happening again. He was already slipping.

Herbert arrived home precisely thirty minutes after Lestat's departure, wearing his determined distraction like a cloak and smelling of blood and cologne. He asked no questions about the ruined table; asked no questions about anything. He settled with a book not in his own chair, but on the carpet by Louis, head resting gentle against a knee as he cracked open a text on the life of Paracelsus.

In a way it was sweet, a reminder of the stolen time they'd spent in Louis' hidden apartment, furtively allowing their romance to grow.

In another way it was awful, for the same reasons.

That synchronized return, that avoidance of curiosity--the sacrifice of his own small space in order to claim instead a sliver of time.

The book, adjacent to his interests but not of them.

Louis buried his hand in short soft hair and waited for his lover to make a move, any move, so that
they might know one another again.

"You didn't feed," Herbert commented, seemingly indifferent to Louis' touch.

"No," he admitted, making a slow stroking motion. Herbert took pains to disguise his softness, to emphasize severity in his dress and manner (and drawing to him, perhaps without meaning to, lovers all the more dazzled by the promise of what might lie underneath). It was a secret only for Louis, and even then grudgingly revealed rather than flaunted.


"I know," Louis said. Herbert had more than once offered to lure food to their home, seemingly oblivious to the mess it would create. Though even if the law turned a blind eye, Louis would refuse. He had standards still. "I'll be alright."

Herbert grumbled and, after some small deliberation, anchored himself up on Louis' knees. Louis tucked away the memory of his conversation with Lestat, still so fresh and now eerily mirrored. "Even so," he said. "You shouldn't suffer."

"That is an inevitability." Louis smiled. "But it's less when I'm with you." He kissed his strange, unexpected love, but ignored the implied offer. He wanted mundane closeness. Herbert should know that he was valued for that. He pressed Herbert's head down to his chest, resting his chin on top of that fine black hair. He tried to live in the moment between them, but part of his mind couldn't help returning to the puzzle of what Lestat had said, the irresistible promise of knowledge that always drew him to disaster. Daniel. He hadn't spoken to Daniel since a year or so after the fire.

He would call soon--in a few nights, whenever Herbert's greater, younger hunger forced him out into the world. For now, he cradled the blood-warm body on his lap, so nearly alive.

Herbert hungered often, and no longer seemed inclined to leave himself wanting. His killings, when not shared with Louis, were private things. Often they took a few hours, though none were the months-long seductions some of their type (Lestat) enjoyed. And when he bore home that blood beneath his skin, the stolen daylight gleaming in his eyes--Louis was only human, or a simulacrum thereof.

When he reached out to touch that wonderful, devoted mind, there was something there, something soft and dangerous and wild. Something that loved him without limits of its own.

He wanted to deepen the kiss, to push his love down onto their floor and drink from him until dawn sent them running hand-in-hand, but instead he spoke.

"You were missed tonight."

"I'm sure." Herbert suppressed a yawn. "It would be simpler for him to be rid of me if I stood still."

"I won't let him harm you."

"No," Herbert agreed. "But you're not always around, are you? Don't worry," he chuckled, low and bitter. "He'll be in for a surprise when he tries it."

"Herbert..." They didn't talk about the man's proclivities, what he'd given up (first for the sake of staying out of sight, and then after Louis had reminded him what had come of it before). "He claims he wants to make amends."
"How generous of him." Herbert lifted his head, straining free of Louis' hold. "Louis. If you want him around you don't need to convince me. I'll make myself scarce."

"That isn't what I want." Louis readjusted his hands, trying to hold onto that warmth. "I won't make you an intruder in our home."

"Tell me what you do want." Herbert's touch was tentative, much as it had been when they'd first come together. More.

"Come to bed with me tonight. Let me hold you."

"And?" He'd taught the man too well, it seemed--always waiting for disaster.

"If he returns, remember what I said; you're wanted."

"You ask so little." Herbert always smiled as if he had a secret. "And everything at the same time. It's quite a talent."

Smiling.

Louis brushed his thumb over the curve of full, pink lower lip, then trailed up along the cut of jaw, watching singularly gentle hazel eyes fall closed at the delicacy of his touch.

"Too much, mon amour?" he murmured, entranced by the mahogany-dark lashes that bristled, the tiny incised lines starting about the eyes of a man who had lived thirty hard years and would forever bear those marks of character.

"Hmm? No, keep going." Herbert butted his head against the hand like a cat might, begging even simple affection, and so it seemed more important yet for Louis to press his forehead to that subtly lined one and whisper lip-to-lip, "Do I ask too much of you?"

A tremor passed through, too fast to see, like a milk-glass vase Louis had owned in San Francisco that shivered with every tectonic shift. He'd lost it, at last, one day in 1968, rising to find it dashed to pieces without him there to catch it in its fall from the mantel.

"Nothing that isn't worth the trade."

A kiss, for that non-answer. What would one sell, for something they thought precious?

"Do you trust me?"

"I love you," Herbert said instead, curling himself into an S-configuration against Louis, blanketing him with heat. It wasn't an answer, not to the question he'd asked at any rate.

Louis carried him upstairs to the bedroom with its bricked-up windows. Herbert rarely allowed it, but when he did, Louis adored the feeling of strength it gave him to transport that fierce spirit in his arms as though he could protect it. And if that happened to be familiar--they all had memories and ghosts. He and Herbert knew one another's well. This time, Louis had managed the strength to break them free. Herbert lived because Louis had taken that leap.

The bed was an ordinary double, nothing extravagant, and Herbert landed on it with a light bounce and a laugh.

Laughter.

Smiles and laughter and love, and yet-- why was he suddenly sure that his devoted one and only
wasn't happy? What poison had Lestat fed him?

"You're distracted," Herbert said. Blunt as always.

"Only admiring you," Louis assured him.

"Wait until I'm dead for that." Herbert grinned. "That should give you a few hours."

It sometimes disturbed Louis how Herbert had come to embrace the darker aspects of their nature, the death to themselves and others. There was viciousness in him, newly discovered in the light of this little peace. He often wondered where it had sprung from.

"Louis." The smile transformed into a frown.

"It's nothing," he took up the job of smiling, wrapping Herbert in an embrace. His thoughts were too scattered for passions, too liable to wound without intent. And after a few truncated kisses, Herbert settled against him, breathing deep and evening out and, finally, gone.

There was only so much life to suck out of the little suburb where they'd entrenched themselves. The unquestioned strangeness that permeated Arkham's history allowed them to exist without much scrutiny, and made the deaths at their hands another local quirk rather than the subject of a national inquest. But that blind eye also meant that the town kept itself relatively undisturbed; artists traveled through rarely, and the rare volumes that Louis had taken for granted on Night Island were held under closest scrutiny. Lestat had claimed that Louis could while away whole nights on a single candle, but at this moment he began to feel a restlessness. He wondered if they hadn't entombed themselves, he and Herbert, and convinced themselves their cave showed the brilliance of the outside world.

It was easier to question with the arrival of Lestat, awe-inspiring and deadly as the sun. He illuminated possibility wherever he went, and Louis couldn't help but feel the calling that had pulled him out to a crowded concert with death and bodies pressing in all around. And now that he'd noticed Herbert's lingering unhappiness, the question of why plagued him. But he found himself unable to ask, ashamed that he hadn't noticed until their disastrous creator pointed it out. Gone for more than five years, and he'd pinpointed in a moment something Louis had thought settled.

And there was, too, Lestat's strange request. The agony might well have been an act, or a bid for pity. Who knew what waited on the other end of the line; he'd never believed Daniel a traitor, but the years brought out hidden truths (so often dark and damaging ones, so rarely kindness and understanding).

He was briefly distracted by the intriguing feel of the tightly curled phone cord beneath his hands as he waited for the call to connect (it occurred to him only then that his contact number might now be useless--suppose meeting Lestat had driven Daniel into hiding?), and didn't immediately recognize that the low briiiiiiing of the earpiece became a voice.

"If you don't have anything to say, I'll have to hang up."

"Armand?" Shock, less that the redhead was there and that one piece of Lestat's story was already true.

"It's nice to hear you, Louis." And he sounded it, odder still. "Still searching for your answers, even now?"

"For Daniel, actually. Is he--" available, alive, still the person Louis'd known at all?
"He's outside. I can get him for you." And then a pause.

"Yes, please."

Armand made a humming noise on the other end of the line, and only after the phone was set down did Louis think to say, "we can speak later."

"Huh?" Daniel's voice answered.

"Nothing," Louis said. "Poor timing."

"Louis." Daniel sounded nervous. "So I guess you got the package I sent your way, huh?"

Louis smiled in spite of himself and the supposed gravity of the situation.

"He arrived undamaged, yes."

"Well." Breathy smoker's laugh, holdover from life. (He'd been such a sweet thing once, barely even inhaling but trying, all to project the authority of a veteran reporter.) "Considering what happened, I'm glad to hear it."

Unprompted reference. But Lestat had never been given to conspiracy, never shown the skill or inclination to involve others in his deceptions. Hence isolation and information blackouts being his favored methods of control.

"Will you tell me what happened, then?" Louis asked.

"Yeah, I figured that might be it. You're not exactly one for social calls." Another laugh, lower and sad. "It'd help if I knew what he'd told you."

He wanted to defend himself--could he be blamed for withdrawing, when every interaction with his kind ended in fire and death?--but restrained the impulse. "I'm sure you can guess."

"Either nothing, or some total bullshit. So, good as nothing," Daniel replied. "That about right?"

"It's like you know him." It pained him still, to hear Daniel's insight; the things he could've made of himself.

"It's not exactly dinner conversation stuff. You mind the short version?" In the silence following Louis' affirmation, he seemed to collect himself. "I may have used you as a bargaining chip to get Lestat's help tracking down Marius. Figured since he did it before...anyway, we found him."

The silence was so long that even Louis was moved to prompt him. "Is that all?"

"Not even half of it," Daniel said. "Just, you had to--he was keeping Armand like a goddamn pet. Could've said the moon was purple and gotten an agreement. Lestat took it hard, which I guess is a point in his 'basic fucking humanity' column. Even someone as oblivious as him couldn't ignore what we saw."

"Armand." Louis' brain ground and stalled at the image of the one who had so dominated him laid low, rendered subservient.

Louis had adored and feared Armand in equal measure, bound to that cruel, distant, seductive boy in the aftermath of the fires which took the last of all he'd known and loved. There had been fascination there, but more than that was the irresistible power of one strong enough to take what he wanted by force.
At the time, Louis had bent like the proverbial reed, springing back up where the stronger ones were rent asunder. He'd submitted, utterly, to a personality unchanging and powerful, infused with the wisdom of centuries and its implacable cruelty.

He still felt, sometimes, the sensation of Armand's body against his own; he'd spent years subject to the gentle touch of the thing that had murdered his daughter-lover and banished his maker. To be crushed beneath Armand's dainty boot was no hardship, for one who could not muster the strength to desire freedom.

And so through his apathy had Louis become boring enough to be abandoned.

He'd since grown cold, it seemed; Daniel's distress touched him more than any of the actualities described. He was used to biding his time. The terror lay more in the thought of what one who could cow Armand could do to the rest of them--and this thought he kept from Daniel, saved by distance. It had all worked out, hadn't it?

He was a damned monster, after all.

"It's been slow," Daniel was saying, "but I think we're making progress." He really was the modern one among them, fully embracing this idea of self-reflection and actualization. Louis seemed to stall out at the former.

"Lestat truly helped you?" Cynicism lived deep in his bones now, it seemed. "Are you certain he didn't set out to make himself the hero? You did say you took his word about the body."

"Louis," Daniel said after a long pause. "What are you actually looking for, here? Cause enough questions from the right angle can frame an interview any way you want."

"I..." He wrapped the cord around his finger, watching flesh squeeze between the coils. They twisted backwards when he pulled free; the kink would never leave. He wanted a reason to believe. "I need to know whether it's safe to associate with him. For the both of us."

"For Herbert," he didn't say. Dignity was such a flimsy thing, and one of the first of which his lover had been deprived.

"Probably the safest it'll ever be. His whole penance thing should spot you at least a few years before it all goes to hell again."

"You're at odds with your own advice," Louis noted.

A heavy sigh from the other end. "I said it's probably safe. Whether it's a good idea is totally different. But what do I know, right? I'm shacking up with the devil himself."

"You--" He'd thought himself contained.

"You've got a lot of bad feelings there. I don't blame you. Who knew that kind of thing could travel through telephone wires," Daniel paused. "For what it's worth, he waited for me to tell him. Low bar, I know, but he spent a long time hanging around and doing whatever passes for his version of thinking. Whatever he's doing, he's at least trying to do it right."

"I'll keep that in mind," Louis said. "Goodbye, Daniel."

"Don't be a stranger," Daniel threw out before the line went dead.

Louis stared at the receiver, willing an answer out of it. For all the resentment that clung to him
throughout the centuries, the impulse to wait for direction remained with him. But he couldn't do that. Not this time.

He set the phone back in its cradle before picking it up again, punching the number of Lestat's eyesore of a portable phone. "We go out in the early evenings. But we're often here again by midnight."

"An invitation?" His smile, his wide sunny smile bubbling over with joy, was audible even over wires and air and distance, but he didn't push his luck further. "Until then."

Until then, indeed. It was happening again, but perhaps it needn't be terrible--he selfishly hoped.

~*~*~*~

"I should be home within an hour. There ended up being more than I planned on--yes, I know. I trust you with him. I'll see you then." Katherine leaned back in her chair, the bridge of her nose pinched between her fingers. She and Crawford had taken turns watching over Dan in the weeks since his episode, shadowing him for signs of relapse or further trauma. He was the sort of person who'd promise things were normal when they were at their very worst, effectively doubling the amount of scrutiny needed to keep him safe. And it had all been going so well.

Crawford had pulled her aside the night after, saying in barely audible tones that they should put things on hold until they knew where Dan was at. She'd agreed, thinking at the time that it wouldn't be any different; they'd fallen into their system for Crawford's sake, she reminded herself. If she let it go, it would just be carrying on with her responsibilities (and if it bothered her--if she admitted she missed it--what did that make her? Some kind of monster who couldn't function unless she was ordering her loved ones around?). It took almost thirty minutes for her to admit that none of her work would get done that night, and she started the long process of locking up and heading home.

Dan and Crawford were curled up on the couch, the soft tones of Discovery playing on their outdated television. They rose to greet her, but she waved them off, heading for the pain pills in the bathroom. She was almost noticeably limping by the time she got there, stress and overwork exacerbating her pain. She bit the inside of her cheek. Get it together, McMichaels.

"Katherine? Should I go out to the car? I didn't see you come in with any bags." Crawford peeked his head around the corner.

"Dammit. "No, it's--I forgot my pills this morning. I needed to come back for them first." Much better than admitting she'd skipped.

"Oh," He inched in by degrees, perching on the edge of the tub, looking so pretty from that angle. "What should I do, then?"

So in need of direction.

"Nothing, it's fine," she turned her eyes away from the temptation, burying the urge to order him to do something. Anything. "How's Dan?"

"He says he's fine." He breathed through his mouth, an old nervous sign. "He's. He's not, though. He's highlighting them, now."
'Them'--the damned books had somehow become a fixation, a monomania, out of nowhere. The change in their lover's behavior was so sudden and inexplicable as to make Katherine fear the worst; her training said to call for an MRI, while her experience reminded her of the cruelty she'd done to Crawford, back when they first met.

Personal feelings shouldn't trump treatment, especially when brain tumors were a possibility, and yet. He'd begged, and she'd run roughshod over that, effortlessly wielding her power over a patient. *The Terminal Man* was garbage, but Crichton had had his points. If a patient said 'no' to a procedure--

Dan hadn't refused, not yet. He might, though, to any number of things.

She turned and braced her hands against the counter, both resting her back and making it easier to meet Crawford's gaze.

"Does there seem to be a pattern?"

"I haven't gotten a good look at what he's highlighting. But it's mostly the new one; it's more like he's using the older books to fact check. If you could call it that."

The new one had triggered all this in the first place. "Have you read it?"

"Skimmed. It was hard to piece together with all the writing he's done on it. But," he stopped.

"You have a theory?"

"Should we be diagnosing him?" Crawford picked at the hem of his shirt.

"Nobody's more impossible to treat than a doctor. And even if we took him in..." her turn to hesitate now, "I don't exactly have confidence in the facilities here."

Crawford's smile was a bitter thing. "You run them."

"The old guard's still around. You know that." *The ones who kept their brains intact, at any rate.* "And I mostly have power over research and projects for the student population. We have to be careful."

"Then we'll take care of it," Crawford concluded. "I'll keep him busy, you see what you can get from it. We don't have much choice," he finished, stepping on her objection. It came out so rarely, the hardness at Crawford's core. She'd barely seen it since he'd almost been eaten alive.

"I'll try to make it fast." She winced as she pushed away from the counter, and he was there without asking, tucking himself under her arm as a support. Serving unconsciously, such a good, sweet thing. She pulled back before she could relish it too deeply, and they re-entered the living room together.

"Dan?" Crawford called. "Everything alright?"

"Fine," he said, eyes glued to the gold-and-lapis funerary mask onscreen.

"'Mysteries of Tut's Tomb,' 7/6 Central" flashed a narrow, angular yellow text crawl, designed to appear as though written with a reed or quill.

She almost wished he wouldn't make it so easy, but this obsession wasn't furtive. Not with him pursuing the Egyptian backstory. God bless Crawford for his few classes on lore; he put forth a
quick question about Nyarlathotep, and that engaged Dan enough for him not to notice her fleeting theft of the book when she kissed his cheek and claimed an intent to take a hot bath.

It would release the kinks in her back, if not her mind, and who didn't read in the bath?

Lavender and jasmine oils poured beneath the hot faucet perfumed the air, and she felt a superstitious urge to light candles in the room to aid the atmosphere. The heat was such a relief, to leg and back and body overall; she slumped down to make sure her cane shoulder felt some of it, and settled in to read her book.

Taken just on its own, she'd have said it underwhelmed. New characters. new style; she'd always been indifferent toward Daniel, which put it immediately on a bad foot. But there wasn't time to parse that now. She skimmed only enough to get a basic sense of the plot, and then turned her attention to Dan's notes.

It was less a pattern and more a screaming red flag. Even if Dan hadn't told them about his unresolved friendship with Herbert West, it would've been too easy to see the man's ghost in Dan's markings: a cold, blunt scientist turning the world of vampires upside down. As the book went on, the notes became harder to read. And when "Robert" died, consumed by fire--there was a hole in the page where the pencil had gone through.

It couldn't be that simple, could it? Dan functioned so well. He'd always shown a firm grasp of the divide between fantasy and reality. But as she thought back to how they'd begun, she remembered the night he'd first spoken Herbert West's name. The only night, because they'd let it lie, respecting his trauma as he respected theirs. And even then he'd moved on from the subject as quickly as he could, offering up the barest of details: a sketch and no more.

Unresolved grief; some psychologist she was. Dan didn't mourn, or he was always mourning, kicking himself for his failures as he tried to escape his past. They'd let him carry on with it, taken him at his word when he said that things were fine and they could trust him.

It was going to be ugly, no matter what she did or when. She pulled herself out of the water, the ache in her muscles temporarily banished, and made her way back to the living room. Crawford had tucked himself up like a cat against Dan's chest, holding him down as much as he was comforting.

She set the book down on the coffee table, taking her seat in the chair across from the couch. When in doubt, she favored the direct approach. "It's been a while since we talked."

"Has it?" Dan asked absently, eyes still glued to the flickering light. It wasn't even the same program. The late night infomercials would be starting soon.

"Crawford, would you turn the TV off?"

It left them in near darkness, the illumination of the lamps barely extending from the corners of the room. She could've started with the whole intervention piece, but they'd done that song and dance before. Dan wriggled free every time, smiling and lying. "I think we should talk about Herbert West."

"I don't." Dan's eyes were black in the darkness, pools reflecting light but not meaning.

"Daniel--" Authority was hard, in her fluffy robe and shearling moccasins, the only slippers that didn't have a tendency to slide free of her drooping foot. "We think you're thinking about him again, and it's upsetting you. We want to help."
"Am I not allowed to think about things now, Kat?" His handsome face did something that would have resembled a smile to anyone who didn't know him. "Does that not meet your approval?"

"That's not what this is about." She'd pulled back to prevent these accusations. Even when Dan said he understood, was doing his best, there was a piece that held back, that saw them as the freaks he was humoring. And there was that part of her that feared the same.

"No? I've bent over backwards to make this work. Now you have to have that, too?"

"We're not taking anything from you. We want to help." She drummed her nails on the slick hardback, purchased early at twice the price because she didn't want to wait on the softcover.

"Help by leaving it alone." His shoulders were hunched, defensive. "I told you he's dead. It doesn't matter." He flinched from Crawford's touch as if it burned.

"It matters to us because it's upsetting you, and something's brought it back up." Sweet, gentle Crawford, bringing his dogged righteousness to the table where he feared showing his fierceness.

"I never asked what happened to you." Out loud, it was so clear that Dan had been holding that card in reserve, there on the tip of his tongue as a last resort.

"We'd tell you," Crawford responded without hesitation. "Or I would." He looked to her and she returned his gaze with a nod, albeit a reluctant one. Dan probably wouldn't turn them in, but... "We trust you, Dan," he finished.

"Sure. Because I'm so trustworthy." He laughed darkly.

"We've made peace with what happened," (Or as close as anyone could, to the melting barriers between realities, she thought.) "You...you're acting like you never even mourned. Like the grief is new."

Whatever he'd intended to say next was lost in a dry sob, his throat closing around the words.

"Dan..." Crawford tried again to touch, to hold him, and this time Dan collapsed, clinging like a drowning man. His eyes were dry, but his limbs tensed against endless, invisible waves.

"What is it about this book, Dan?" she asked. They couldn't let it go on like this.

"It's nothing. Just what happens when you leave someone for dead," he said into Crawford's shoulder. "Survivor's guilt, or whatever you want to call it."

She cursed herself, internally, for their failure to do due diligence in the matter years ago. Dan had been so normal, so much what they needed; the worst thing in his past was the loss of his fiancee in the inmate uprising that had happened a few years before she joined the staff.

That, and his roommate’s criminal background, and the rumors. Rumors about homosexuality; addicts; disease; death; and could it be so simple?

This had started with the movie, after all, before the book gave him this 'Robert' to fixate upon.

"How did you leave him? You said it was in Miami, but what exactly did you leave him to?"

Silence, for so long she thought they'd hit another dead end. And then he said, "Promise me."

"What?"
"Promise that if I tell you this, you won't--you'll stay here. Give me your word."

It was the height of idiocy to promise to something sight unseen, but they might never get this chance again. Dan's eyes were wild, like Hell itself was at his heels. "As long as it won't hurt any of us...I promise."

Dan took a deep breath, then another, screwing his eyes shut as he steeled himself. "Vampires."

She'd been afraid of this. Grief and shock were beginning to break down his senses. Who knew how much of his admission they'd have to decode. "You mean--"

"I mean fucking vampires, Kat. Just like the ones in that book," Dan said. "I--Jesus, he really put it all in there. Way to kiss and tell, Molloy."

Crawford's wide, frightened gaze met hers over Dan's head. She'd promised them stability, the both of them, and so she swallowed hard.

"You're saying that--Daniel--based this story on real events." Her voice was even; statement, not question.

"What he knew about them, anyway. There are changes, but..." He half-dragged Crawford across the room to her chair, where he fumbled the book three times trying to page through it with palsied hands. "Look."

She read:

Connor was good looking, in that aw-shucks, cornfed kind of way. Like he'd lend you the letter jacket he still had right off his back, and probably spent his free hours helping kittens out of trees. He came chasing after Robert, and stumbled his way to me. I really couldn't tell you which was worse.

It could've described Dan...but it could've described a lot of men. A fantasy. "You think this character is meant to be an analogue. For you."

"You can stop with the frightened deer tone, Kat," Dan said. "I'm sane."

Crawford flinched, hardness growing in his expression. Damage control for later.

"I'm not--it's right here! The worst three months of my goddamn life."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked, flipping through for more passages on Connor. He hadn't marked most of those.

Careful balance, trying to get the meaning from the symbols.

"No, but it's obviously not my choice, is it? I get to fight you over the fact that I saw my--Herbert turn into a fucking ghoul, and that's not even in here!"

"Herbert is dead, Dan."

"Yeah! He is! Twice, at least!" He laughed, high and weirdly tinged with disbelief at his own raving. "He came back to me before, but you have to hand it to vampires--they did it. They finally killed him."

"I'm not following you. Walk me through."
He snatched the book back again, flipping to a spot he clearly knew by heart—the spine was already cracked there, less than a month out of the bookstore. She recognized the passage on sight: the ripped page, the notes devolving into gibberish.

Maybe it was the fear, or the pain, or just the knowing that nothing would ever change; that we were trapped, still, in these cycles of blood and death and sex indistinguishable from terror. Maybe it was something intrinsic to Robert, or something that cracked when his bone-china vessel was filled with Lestat's volatile blood. I didn't know the man before his death well enough to say.

Whatever the reason, that was the night it all went from bearable to too much, and when he and Louis asked for my help--

I was angry, too, hurting with the knowledge of Armand's deception and his abandonment. And this was perhaps the only favor I could ever do for the Dark Angel who started me down my path to eternity.

Fires are freedom, to our kind. The Talamasca tracks us by them, down through the ages.

So I freed them, there in the library while they touched and held and ached in my mind. I freed us all that night.

And then I put my back to that warmth and ran.

"He's dead," Dan said when she lifted her eyes from the page. He looked like a prizefighter who'd gone ten rounds. "Not a vampire, not anything. Ash.

"You think this...Robert is Herbert West, and this accounts for what happened to him?"

"Why not, right?" She backed out of his reach on instinct, too experienced with breakdowns to trust the harmlessness of his waving arms. "Everything else is in here. And everyone thinks it's fake! Why not put murder down for posterity?"

"But Dan," Crawford broke in, still too close. No self-preservation to speak of. "You said there are parts of your memory that aren't in here. How can you be sure you can trust it?"

"He left stuff out, but he didn't really lie. He--I told myself he was happier. That he'd have come back if he hadn't meant it. But now."

"Now what?" She steeled herself. Crawford was there to hold him up. She got to play bad cop. "What could you have done?"

"They did things to him that the Herbert I knew wouldn't have wanted. It changed him." Dan chewed his lip hard. Back, forth, back, forth went the jaw, abusing the clamped bit of flesh. "I could have told him I loved him. If he was with me, he wouldn't have..." He shuddered, suddenly, one hand straying to the back of his always-stiff neck.

"He was terrified of death. And sex."

How much, at this point, was really even about the dead man, and how much Dan's own projections?

"The vampires in these books are killers. You wouldn't have stood a chance." If she didn't accept his precepts, at least for now, they'd get nowhere. "If Lestat chose him, really, then you'd already lost."
"No!" Agitated again. "That bastard did something to him. To his head. Herbert never wanted anything but to perfect his reagent. He never--he shouldn't be in a romance novel! He was coming around, if I'd just--"

"You can't think like that," Crawford said. "You can't know what would've happened."

"He made his own decisions," she chimed in; even if it wasn't true, it was what Dan needed to hear. "Let him go."

"No, No, I know how he made decisions. He used to decide everything for us--that's what he did. When he left me, that's how I knew it was wrong." He went distant, staring. "Herbert didn't want me gone."

Of course he hadn't. Who would, if they enjoyed control?

In the breath of space before Katherine could respond, Crawford spoke, so soft:

"What did you want, Dan?"

"I--" he stopped. "I want him to be alive."

"I know," Crawford said. In moments like this, Katherine sometimes suspected that he suffered lingering effects from his time working on the Resonator. He was too perceptive, too perfectly responsive to what the other person needed to hear. But then, she wasn't exactly the best benchmark to measure from.

"You know you can't change that," Crawford went on. "Whatever happened then is over. You can't fix it."

Dan started to laugh, broken. "You don't, ha," another of those dry, choked sobs, "You don't know. We already proved you wrong on that, for all the good it did me."

"What do you need? Can you tell me?" Crawford asked.

"I don't know." He sounded lost, and of course he did, when the edges of his reality were peeling away. What she wouldn't give to succeed, to find a way to help or explain or wipe away the delusions and the fear and everything that had taken her father and hurt Crawford and now, now was threatening her Dan.

"Dan." She stepped closer, though still out of range; with her balance, she couldn't risk a push-and-fall. "You've been bottling this up for a long time. You need to talk with us about it. And about these feelings. Do you understand?" She was who she was, knew what she knew and communicated it as best she could.

"You think I'm nuts."

"Welcome to the club," Crawford said with a timid, twisted smile.

"It doesn't matter what we think right now." He needed a doctor, needed someone to take control, and that was her, whole and entire. "What matters is how bad this is making you feel."

"I couldn't tell you."

"How would you feel about us reading it, and asking questions?"

"You wanna set up a book club?" His voice dripped sarcasm.
Crawford wrapped his arms around Dan, grip loose. "Kat's actually good at baking. And I can buy wine with the best of them."

That got a laugh, small but real. "I guess it can't get worse, can it?"

"Always," Kat couldn't help saying. "But we won't let you go alone." She held herself apart, accepting. The feel of his arms around her was a surprise, warm and drenched in nervous sweat but welcome nonetheless.

"Thanks." his voice almost too soft to hear.

She rested her hand in his hair. "You didn't think you were getting rid of us that easily, did you?"

He didn't answer, but tightened his grip until she gasped.

"Sorry--oh my--"

"No! No, please, it's fine." She gathered them both in. "You can hold on to us as hard as you want."

~*~*~*~

Herbert had declined to hunt with Lestat. Herbert had, in fact, declined everything to do with him for the past few weeks, even with Louis' very lukewarm encouragement. When he wasn't hovering around Louis like an exceptionally well-kept pet, the young vampire would slip from the house with no mention of where he was going, and stay away far longer than anything that could account for his hunting habits--at least, as Lestat remembered them. And since discourse had proved to be completely non-viable, he'd taken the only avenue still available to him: dogging Herbert's steps and hoping for a revelation.

What he saw left in him a profound sense of unease. After a few nights of nonstarters, keeping too far away for fear of discovery only to lose Herbert after a few blocks, Lestat had hit upon a pattern. His youngest, it developed, was quite poor at disguising his pathology. He'd linger on the street or in dark bars, talking to intelligent dark-haired men with sad eyes and haunted expressions. They never stood a chance, not a one, as Herbert drew them into his stunning gaze and finally led them away at his side.

Herbert, it seemed, kept a room of his own. What he did in there Lestat hadn't yet discovered, but it was certain that when two entered, one came out alone, often dotted with blood, and only after many, many hours. And then he would go back to Louis as if nothing had happened. As if he still killed quickly and mercifully.

There was poison in it, and it would kill them both. Louis would take the high road when he found out, as he always did. And however their unknown quantity reacted, nothing good would come of it. Lestat wasn't quite so deluded as to call his motivations selfless, but he still felt nothing so much as need to interfere as he followed Herbert into a dingy dive bar.

He looked like a vision out of the past, moreso than any Lestat had ever made. Ten years ago, a hundred years from now, he felt suddenly that this man would be the same; lurking in the dim light of sleazy bars in suit and tie, scarf and trench coat, seeking to sell pleasure that would kill. Seeking to buy his survival.
This night he sat delicately at the bar, ankles crossed on the rail and fingers playing at the rim of a Shirley Temple he occasionally touched to his plush lips with such potent suggestion that none who saw bothered to notice that the liquid inside diminished not a drop.

He looked...destroyed. Ruined, with his tie a touch askew, hair rumpled. Exactly the way Lestat had liked him.

Tragedy in progress.

His eyes scanned the room with the sad implication that he'd like a lifetime, but would accept a single night. One in the same, for them.

And when he found that night's target...

God, how unfair. An innocent, gentle and half-mad and utterly, utterly harmless.

And lovely, admittedly: a sparrow to match Herbert's kestrel.

Lestat wasn't ashamed to say that he cheated, taking full advantage of his ability to listen in while seated across the room. They'd been sitting together not half an hour, but already Herbert leaned in with a conspiring look, making sure the man's drink was just full enough to keep him talking.

"Fascinating. I considered attending there myself," Herbert was saying. "but finances being what they were, well. They must be diminished to lose a man so innovative as yourself."

As if on cue, the man looked down into his drink. Lestat found himself torn between pride and sorrow, to see the blunt and unpolished creature he'd plucked out grown so adept at seduction. He ran his finger around the edge of his own cocktail, accepting the curious smiles sent his way but warding them off, gently. Let them live tonight, and never know how close they'd come.

Herbert's hand came down from the bar, brushing the young man's wrist. All of it so casual as if to seem accidental. A drunken flush animated the conversation.

"You don't need to flatter me," Herbert said. "It's not brave. I'm just too stubborn to hide. They tell me it's more trouble than I'm worth."

"I'd kill for some of that trouble," a very slight slur, quickly disguised. "Better than being somebody's embarrassment."

"Mmm, I suppose it's a matter of interpretation," Herbert said with a sad smile. "I'm nobody's anything." Red effervescence brushed his mouth with a visible tremor that Lestat was suddenly afraid might be real. "Easy to leave; my work tends to alienate them."

Easy to leave. As though the little beast hadn't led a flight en masse into the night.

"I'm hard to leave, but only because of guilt," the other grumbled. "They could be--it could be perfect, the two of them, without me there."

Poor doomed creature, fretting over his lovers. Leaning into the monstrous thing in the stool beside his until he nearly overbalanced, caught in slender, deceptively strong arms.

"Careful," Herbert whispered into a shell-like ear "Why don't we move this to a booth? I so rarely get to just talk to anyone."

So frail, the flesh-and-blood sculpture suddenly seemed. And Herbert, so falsely innocent.
They moved themselves to a corner where Lestat couldn't see them, couldn't follow without giving himself away to Herbert (was already pushing it, with his bright blond glare against an ocean of souls beaten down by life before their time).

Doctors. Something about doctors.

"It makes sense," Herbert chuckled. "No one understands the needs of the work so well as a colleague."

"They treat me like their patient," the man complained. "I," a small hiccup, the kind Lestat thought only happened in movies, "I'm the one who's shtable, not th't they notice. Treat me like I don't know what's good for me."

"A fact your proclivities no doubt exacerbate."

The man's head shot up. *Badly done,* Lestat thought. *Can't let them know you're reading them.* He would know, wouldn't he? He'd played Herbert just as artfully, a lifetime and an eyeblink ago.

"You mentioned earlier--forgive me. I visited a few clubs in San Francisco. I picked up on the terms."

"Right," though he still looked wary. "Y'r prob'ly right. I like--like," a vague gesture that meant a great deal to him, and nothing to anyone not a mind reader, "so that means I can't decide on my own."

"I've upset you." Herbert was speaking more softly. He must've been close.

"No, no," insistent as only the drunken could be. "It's good. I needed this."

"At least let me walk you home. I'd feel terrible if something happened to you." There: in for the kill. Lestat's conscience, anemic though it was, seized him. This young man all but vibrated with the care poured into him, the potential and the scars. It would be a crime to wipe him out.

No crime at all, next to Lestat's thousands, but--he felt that tender connection, that conviction he'd allowed to guide him to and from victims (that hadn't protected Herbert or Louis), and so he moved.

Slowly.

Uncertainly, weak and confused and calling out the false name that his progeny had employed.

"Hans? Has anyone seen--" He stumbled theatrically against another patron, a tall woman with soft features and cropped hair; she gave him a stern look until he gazed at her with wide, appealing eyes which carried with them the powers he'd so mercilessly employed to render a mortal pliant and confused in his grasp.

Merely a mortal man, chasing down a friend.

He arrived at their booth as though by accident, just in time to collide with Herbert, his solicitous predator, rising to fetch "a glass of water, that's all. Just to clear your head."

"Hans!" He turned the collision into an embrace, swaying as though Herbert was the only thing keeping him afloat. "I'm so sorry, please. Please, you have to forgive me."

Herbert stiffened beneath him, vibrating with poorly concealed rage. "I don't,"
"Please, monsieur," he turned to Herbert's would-be victim, laying his accent on ever so slightly too thick, "You have to tell him to take me back. I'll die without him in my life, I know it."

The poor man appeared completely baffled, his mind already slowed by the alcohol. "Sorry? I don't..."

Herbert was struggling free of Lestat's hold, face more than a little murderous. "You had your chance." Barely even bothering with the pretense, his emotions bubbling to the surface. Lestat almost found himself lost in those intense eyes. "Let go. You're making a scene."

Oh, Herbert had no idea the sort of scene of which Lestat was capable.

He didn't actually burst into tears, if only because blood would have spoilt the effect, but did let his face crumple into a picture of despair and longing. Let the world see a guilty, contrite boy madly in love with a man ten years his senior.

"Mon amour, can you not find any forgiveness in your heart? Did the good all mean so little?" Tremor in his hand as he reached out to caress the high bones of Herbert's pale cheek.

They hadn't touched, he realized, in five years. Not once since Lestat blew back into his life with kisses and caresses and adoration for Louis had Herbert so much as offered his hand.

Rather than striking, as would have been his right, Herbert froze.

His skin felt so soft, even though it was petrified by blood far stronger than what had made Louis. One could almost fool themselves into believing him human. It was barely an act at all anymore when Lestat savored that moment of contact, until Herbert grabbed his hand and pulled it away. Held it in his grasp, though he could've crushed it without onlookers knowing. "I'm too old for you."

Smart, so smart. Keenly aware of what the world saw when they looked at him. "I don't care. I would learn anything you loved, and make it my beloved too. Let me know you. Let me try." They had a little audience now. He tried to quash the urge to perform for them and not for his most important audience of one.

"Why don't you sit with us?" A warm, living hand on his arm. Herbert's victim already looked halfway to sober, the potent wake up call of fear coursing through his veins. "You're not one of his students, are you?"

Lestat's heart seized, overcome with fondness for this poor lamb. He thought he was doing the protecting, trying to save a hapless young boy from himself.

"I could have been," he said, pushing his hair back from his face and sliding into the booth opposite while Herbert gathered up his old, tattered coat and scarf.

He didn't want to crowd, to seem an aggressor in this way. Not with what they'd still not discussed hanging over them both.

He trailed a finger through a moisture ring on the scarred table and let his mouth go soft, sulky, full of reminiscence. "But he said it was wrong, when I was in his class." Shimmer of pride, just a hint, at his own confabulated romantic audacity. "I dropped the course."

"A good move. You never cared for the subject anyway," Herbert replied, face masklike and pained at the same time. He let himself be caught so easily, trapped by a mere human's gentle hand on his forearm.
Herbert had always allowed so much in that way.

He’d been a lonely child, a lonely young man; those memories were given and matched wholesale through blood in what Lestat had believed to be a show of trust and healing, and Lestat allowed a little of those long-dead boys to creep into his voice.

"I cared. If only because you loved it so. I longed to be as high in your regard. I only wanted to understand you."

"Hmph." Neither of them were playing now, not really, "I recall a different motive. One in which I was wholly uninterested."

He held back the retort he longed to make, the cruel jab of remembrance at their intimacy. Herbert had proved himself so capable of lying.

"I thought it was special," he pouted. Unfair, but now their audience was on his side.

"So you were..."

"Briefly," Lestat mourned the true lie.

"Before I came to my senses."

The young man's face grew fierce, and Lestat hazarded a dip into his mind. A predatory mentor of his own--Lestat had played the right tune without even knowing. "So you used him."

Herbert looked caught off guard, now trapped by the fiction he'd created. He could hardly say that the student had taken advantage of him, now could he?

"I should have known better," Lestat pressed his advantage. "I knew there was someone else. I knew he'd--he'd lost someone important."

"I didn't lose him," Herbert snapped. "He was taken from me. And you never--" His generous mouth compressed into a thin line. "I was never what you wanted."

"You keep saying that," Lestat said, throwing his hands out in appeal suddenly more genuine than his role. "Why was he the only one allowed to love you?"

"He didn't, either." Such cruelty, such pain in Herbert's bald conviction. Such a lesson Lestat had taught him through that engineered abandonment. "That's not the point."

"What is the point, then?" the mortal asked warily. "That it's all right to take advantage of someone?"

"I did no such thing. The only thing worse than an abusive mentor is a student who takes those lessons to heart."

The flinch that ran through Lestat wasn't fake, but it still did its job better than he could've hoped.

"You're disgusting." The mortal was touching him again, unaware of how appealing he smelled.

"Yes," Herbert agreed, seemingly unfussed.

"No," Lestat countered. "He's right. There were things I did. I hurt him so badly."

"A position of authority makes you responsible. People trust you." Soft brown eyes burning with
righteous indignation fixed on Herbert. "There's nothing worse than taking advantage of that trust."

"You're right," Lestat and Herbert spoke at the same time, and another look of indecision crossed Herbert's face.

"Why don't I see you home? I'm sober. I can walk you." Lestat stood and offered his hand.

"That's kind, thank you. It's too far to walk, though."

"Don't worry," he cast his eyes over his shoulder, daring Herbert to follow. "I have excellent endurance."

He already had the house in his mind's eye as they left, and its occupants too. Lestat wondered whether Herbert knew, whether his jealous retribution had been conscious. When they were out of sight he put his hands on the man's shoulders.

"I don't know what impression you got, but I'm seeing someone." Ineffective touch, then the struggling, more violent and feral than Lestat would have anticipated.

"Hush, Crawford. I'm not the one you need to fear." He took a little then, just a taste. The swoon made it easier to upset the memories, to erase his and Herbert's intrusions. And the uncomplicated pleasure that shuddered through the body in his arms was a gift he could give for the mortal's place as their unwitting referee. When Crawford was woozy and pliant Lestat picked him up and took to the air, depositing him on his front step in a matter of minutes.

"You should be careful about talking to strangers, my friend." He planted a brief kiss to the dazed man's cheek, and vanished into the dark.

Herbert was waiting for him only a few blocks away, bundled in his outerwear and with a thunderous glower on his face. "What was the point of that little show?"

"What was the point of that? He was innocent, Herbert--"

"We're killers. You choose your way, I'll choose mine. He thought things, and I wanted them."

"Thought things?"

"S'not your problem," and now Lestat heard a distinct slur. Wonderful, a spiteful drunk for his trouble. God knew where the corpse was. And what fun to relive that collapse; only the high points with this fledgling.

He'd been so sweet in life, back when Lestat could reach in and twist his mind into the passive shapes he'd wanted.

Now, Lestat's only recourse was to snatch him and leap to the relative privacy of a nearby church's belltower.

"It will be, when you bring the police to your woefully undefended door!"

At that point, confusion melted from Herbert's face, replaced by a clarity Lestat was suddenly unsure he liked.

"Ah. For Louis." Superior little smile caught the starlight, even as he wobbled across the tower to lean against the less-than-waist-high barrier. "You'll be pleased to know that this is within his rules."
"Rules?" But of course Louis had rules. His gentleman's facade called for no less, and Lestat had indulged it in his time. It seemed they both did, desperately trying to meet standards even an immortal couldn't match. To be loved by Louis was to teeter, constantly, on the edge of a pedestal. "He'll forgive you."

"I just told you--"

"You shouldn't pretend to be happy for him. He'll let you. And it will destroy you both." All he'd done and lost.

"You can't think I'll trust any advice from you," Herbert sneered.

"Twice I lost him, and still he takes me back." Bad wording, or somesuch--the reassurance didn’t reassure caused instead a tightening of Herbert’s face, a clutch at the soft fiber of his scarf. Lestat continued, nonetheless. “Louis survives. He forgives. But he hates liars. Why hide your efforts in some drab workshop, if you weren't afraid of him?"

"It isn't work." Herbert was too quick to correct. "If I take my time in killing them, that's my choice. I'll tell him as much."

He thought Lestat meant to tattle on him, like they were children fighting for favor. "I am trying to help, you impossible--" no. It would end just the same if he did it that way. "I was wrong to trust Marius."

"Louis told me you'd say that," he said flatly. "But we both know what you wanted. We both know you can't ever bear to deal with us yourself." (Us--us: the implication was disastrously clear. The flawed ones. The twisted, damaged, hateful ones. Herbert classing himself with Claudia and Nicki, his predeceased siblings from whose disposals Lestat had escaped.) "It seems to me he and Armand were admirable choices for you to trust."

He looked so nearly human against the sky, clothes and hair fluttering in the icy wind. So very like he had been when they met, and Lestat wished to the Devil himself that he could do what he had back then and plunge into the racing, quicksilver stream of thoughts.

He'd fallen fast for that mind, for the fine creature who owned it, for the vicious cunning and the mire of wounded exhaustion to which his darling was visibly succumbing even then.

Herbert would be near a decade dead even had Lestat never carried him over the threshold to a stabbing.

He looked a thousand years more weary now, facade dropped without Louis about to try and please. Without Dan to serve and cage.

"I didn't want him to harm you, Herbert. I didn't--he was so good to me. I thought he'd be good to all of you, too." He crept forward, slower than a mortal ever could, in search of some sort of connection.

Cold eyes followed him, somehow seeming to sag within the confines of his stiff posture. "You were wrong."

They were so close. If Lestat had been fool enough to reach out, their hands would meet again. "Disastrously. I delivered you to the very nightmare I swore never to allow after my own making."

Herbert locked up tight, the shutters of his defenses falling over his expression. "It's in the past."
"If you really believe that," he shrugged, going for nonchalance he didn't feel an ounce of, "then we needn't speak of it. But if you have something to say, you don't need to hide it from me. I know."

"You know," Herbert spat the words back in his face. "I don't doubt you know. No doubt you're a master of the art."

"It seems Louis didn't give you my book. He's upset it sold more than his, I expect." He tried to crack a smile, but it was no good. "At least he told you of my promise?"

"The choice you never had.' Since it had no bearing on the night you infected me, I assumed it was another line."

"You were dying; there wasn't exactly time to ask. Would you have preferred I left you?"

"No," Herbert said after a long moment, face turning away and down to look over the living town. "It's everything after I resent."

"All of it?"

"Not Louis." So fast, that statement. As though failing to appreciate would mean his love being snatched from his hands.

Just that one thing.

"That's--" Lestat struggled, thinking of the myriad pleasures and joys he'd found in this unasked-for existence. The lights in the darkness, the devilish wonders. This hungry, lean man had wanted so much, once, had desired all the world. An ascetic, to be sure, but Lestat had thought that discipline only, soon to vanish with the initiation into the sensual realm of the vampire. "Was there nothing for yourself?"

"What do you want me to say?" His eyes glittered in the night, weirdly dark even in the sclera. Inexplicable until a chance razor-sharp breeze carried the scent of blood Lestat's way. "It's all gone. Dead."

Lestat bit his lip at this wreckage before him. He'd told himself Herbert was a mistake or a lost cause, but--he'd loved him. The destruction of that spark tore open the wound he'd denied, and the next selfish question leapt crassly from his mouth:

"Was it awful with me?"

"It--felt good. You made me think it felt good." That didn't sound like a good thing. Herbert wrapped his arms about himself and turned to look out, small features limned in night's violet light and tragically beautiful in profile. "The people feel good. I can be close to them, for hours, sometimes, if I do it right. And I can keep them, for awhile." He gestured at his head and then sighed, softly. "Sometimes Louis likes the good parts. The personalities."

"Is he not content with you as you are?" He realized how it must sound, goading, but not until it was out of his mouth.

"He finds me unsettling. It's a common reaction." A sideways glance. "You're familiar with it."

"I was afraid--" a sad grin plagued him. "You took my advice. No more using yourself as a canvas."

"No, it wasn't practical. Louis thought a lab would be conspicuous while we hid from you. And
when he ran out of excuses, I knew that it disturbed him. So I made sure he never saw it. He thinks I'm a mere murderer."

"I'm impressed the news hasn't picked up on you." Lestat put his hands in his pockets. They were safer there, for the moment. "Your fondness for type goes to extremes."

"I should prefer blonds instead?"

"Whatever you want. I've realized that imposing on you is the one thing most likely to drive you from me."

"How nice for you." He turned back at last. "You set all this up just to tell me that? Should I fall into your arms?"

"I'll carry you down if you like, but all I wanted was to see you. You don't make it easy."

"I didn't intend to." Again, a scrutinizing look. "If this is your way of getting my blessing, there's no point. Especially since you'll do what you want either way."

Lestat wished he'd ever conveyed anything to the contrary. Wished he'd shown that his loves' choices had ever meant anything at all, next to his own desires.

Playing catch-up.

"It's not about what I want," he said, edging nearer, around curve of the tarnished brass bell.

"No." Herbert shrugged, unmoving save for the icy breeze whipping his necktie and teasing his short hair. "It's about what he wants. And I know--" sharp, audible inhale. "You're the one he wrote about. I feel you there, when we...It's you, always, that he remembers."

Gratifying, what Lestat had known and assumed and come here to cash in on, and yet...

"He ran with you," he reminded, reaching out to hover his touch over soft, well-worn cashmere. "Burned the place down about your ears."

Herbert nodded, squeezing his eyes shut behind those useless, perfect glasses.

"You should do it quickly," the whisper, high and harsh, rustled like wind through dead leaves. "And lie better, this time."

"What?"

"Don't make him forgive you again. He will, but--it hurt him, to forgive her death."

For a split second he wanted to do just what Herbert asked, if only for being forced to remember that terrible night.

"I didn't," he started. But he had. If he hadn't gone to Armand that night. If he'd been less harsh. If he'd let her die back at the beginning. There were so many places it could've stopped. He laid his hand on Herbert's back, letting his head fall on his fledgling's shoulder, wrapped in the scent of damp wool. He wanted it to stop. All of it. To make it all right. His sins towered high as a mountain, and he hadn't the slightest clue of how to begin. "I'm sorry."

Muscles tensed beneath his forehead. A quick inhale of breath.

"I'm sorry," Lestat went on, "that I ever let you fear this from me." He did put his hand to Herbert's
neck, and felt a thick swallow. "You were difficult, and reckless. And I wasn't the teacher I should have been. I never am. But I loved you. Know that."

"Do you often give funerary speeches?" Herbert's eyes were still closed, his body carefully passive: the fight-or-flight response mastered in the worst way.

His darling had always had too much in the way of dignity. Lestat curled his fingers, felt the touch of something becoming familiar; an old memory strangely present.

"No," he said. "I run, and pretend I can't see the mess my brashness has made of things. But you won't let me forget. So this time, I thought I'd try making it right."

"If I say no?"

Lestat slid his hands down, down, to grasp the slack of the once-expensive seven-year-old bit of cloth that had been plaguing his back brain. A gift, a simple, ordinary gift--not Dark or deadly or even erotic.

He'd cared for this man's comfort, once. His voice was thick when he answered.

"I won't stop speaking with Louis. He was mine before he was yours. He's dear to me. But you'll find no threat from me."

"I don't hear a choice." Herbert was studying him now from within those tethers, weighing pros and cons.

"Because you haven't listened," He bit the inside of his cheek. "I made you, but I know so little. That absence has only come to pain me more. But you're alive. It doesn't need to be the end of it."

*Let this be the beginning,* he wanted to say, but that empty, mirror-like gaze on his face kept him quiet. Distrust--no safety, of course, in the grasp of one so much stronger and more experienced.

He felt so very young again, remembering that feeling, and was about to move away when Herbert's pink tongue flicked out to wet his lips and he said, "Do what you like. I'm not stopping you."

Permission or capitulation? Either way, Lestat missed the face he'd seen back when he'd thought they knew one another. The smiles, the laughs, the fearless irritation. And so he unclamped his hold on his natural charm, touched their noses, and batted his lashes oh-so-theatrically.

"My darling, considering you're meant to be a genius, it pains me to say that that is quite possibly the most foolish sentiment any person, living or dead, has ever expressed to me."

"Heh." Dry, crackling huff erupting from the mouth he'd once kissed and claimed as his own, willfully certain that it was mutually joyful. "Ha." With each breath, the sounds grew nearer to hysteria, Herbert's eyes growing saucer-wide and tearful as he laughed out the terror in a reaction perfectly familiar to Lestat.

Some wandering moon, reflecting near planets or trapped in their dark shadows.

The body in his arms shook and shuddered with every little touch, passionately responsive as ever.

Once, he would have taken that as invitation; now, he hung on and feared what wasn't being provided. Feared knowing the 'closeness' Herbert felt with his hours-long killings.
His fledgling's laughter stood in for tears, raucous and hysterical. He wrung himself out, resting a heavy head against Lestat's chest when there was no more sound in him. Time had a way of slipping away from their kind, and Lestat couldn't say how long it was before Herbert spoke again. Only that the moon had waned away and left them, bequeathing its light to Herbert's eyes.

"The least you can do after all this is take me home," he said. All business, despite the blood in his eyelashes and how he clung.

"As you wish." It meant Lestat could hold him tight as he had once, when he'd spirited the man away to his death. Now he merely returned him to his lover, the journey less than a blink. He reminded himself not to touch excessively, not to overstep himself and ruin what little sapling was beginning to take root. "I hope I'll see you again, my darling."

"I don't see how I could prevent it." But there was no real hardness to the words, and Herbert lingered in his arms until at last reaching for the door and shutting himself off from sight.

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter coming soon, you guys, and I can hardly believe it! *shrieks*
In it, Lestat's attack on Crawford has bigger consequences than anticipated, and Louis' handling of the situation with his lover requires some re-examination.
Chapter Summary

The end at last! Chapter 12 AND Epilogue.
Dorothy: Sorry for the one-week delay; my computer suffered a disaster which prevented me from doing the final edits until all was repaired. I hope you've all enjoyed this crazy crossover half as much as we enjoyed writing it. It's been a great universe to play in.

Arkham, Massachusetts
December 1994

Crawford came to with the most agonizing headache of his life--no, the second worst. He went stock still, trying to figure out where he was, how he'd gotten there. If he'd killed anyone.

No blood on him. At least there was that.

The throbbing persisted, and in the corners of his vision Crawford see vague, floating shapes. Shades of ultraviolet. He began to tremble violently. It was coming back, all of it. He'd banished it only for a time, and now it would take him over and bring down everyone he loved. He should take care of himself before that could happen, do what he'd been too cowardly to do the first time--

He forced himself to breathe. Evidence, he had to gather evidence. He'd had vivid nightmares before, things he thought were from the beyond that were only projections of his mind. But GOD his head --

Memories of the night before trickled by, piecemeal and resistant to his touch. There'd been a man, German, who'd had a fight with his lover. Who had offered to walk him home. And then--

Another wave of pain hit him, and he doubled over. It was unbearable. He would die like this.

"Oh, shit. Kat!" The voice wasn't his own. Warm hands on his temples and soothing words in his ears, asking him what was wrong, telling him it would be alright. Lying.

If he tried, he would probably feel it already--growing, there in his head, no matter how Katherine had cured him and saved him before. The clarity she'd brought back with the brutal crunch of teeth on that malformed sensory organ was slipping, slipping.

Humans weren't meant to sense so much.

His mind was indivisible, but--

She'd know, when she saw his body. She'd hate him for turning back into that thing she'd had to fight off.

But he could sense hands on him, could feel that intense, uncontrollable arousal through his entire body, exactly like before, when just the scent of Bubba's cologne or the sight of golden flyaway
hairs at the back of Katherine's neck had been enough to strike him dumb with desire.

He tucked his knees up as Dan tried, somewhere far away, to calm the body.

Dan's hand touched hair, not bare scalp, and it was Dan holding him, not Bubba.

And yet the colors pulsed all around, even when he closed his eyes, because he didn't see with his eyes. Didn't see them at all; they stimulated other senses, interpretable in the human brain only through synaesthesia.

Grand, terrible things were out there, would turn their eyes to him if he so much as moved. Pretorius was looking at him, he was suddenly certain, never mind the corpses he had seen--the headless first and the mangled, meaty second. They were going to find him, and he'd pay for what he'd done.

"--ford. Crawford!" Cold, slim fingers on his head (no, no, she'd feel it growing there) called him back, demanding his attention. "You are to answer me, do you understand?" Her voice shook, the appeal to authority all that kept her together.

His throat was thick, mouth gummy, as if he were drowning in his own saliva (did they know, could they possibly know what they were doing to him, how he wanted to ravish and then devour them both?) and he could only manage a nod.

"Tell me what you see," she said.

"Nothing." It was true. He was smelling the things creeping around at present, hearing their brightness.

"What's happening to him?" Dan demanded. "Kat, what's going on? We need to get him to a hospital!"

The "NO!" was audio-stereo, and for just an instant he thought it was them before he recognized Katherine's harsh, commanding voice joining his in refusal. Agreeing, she agreed with his 'no' rather than forcing him--it anchored him to hear that change.

"No hospital," he groaned. Hospitals make it worse.

He made hospitals worse, too.

He was just lucky that, after the rampage, they hadn't tried to use the late Dr. Hill's laser drill to resolve the issue once and for all, as they had the first time patients went rogue.

"Crawford--baby, baby, what's going on?" So strong, so kind, Dan, even with his own mind crumbling around him
telling himself he was

seeing

vam

p i

r e

s
vampires.

Something, something from the night before kicked at Crawford's brain, even as those colors and sensations kept him spellbound. Writhing against their dear hands, he sucked and chewed his own lower lip.

"Dan!" He flailed his arms up until he caught hold, forcing his eyes to find the outline of the man's face. "Dan, I saw them."

"What?"

Crawford laughed, the sound of it choked through his overtaxed muscles. All that fixation and now he didn't get it. "I saw--I saw your vampire. He got in my head. He brought me home. He was here."

Dan's demeanor changed on the spot, growing tense and pack-leader agitated. A prowling primitive trying to protect his territory. "Fuck."

"Dan!" Kat lowered her voice to a whisper, like Crawford couldn't hear everything. "Don't encourage his hallucinations. We need to be stable for him right now."

"This is how it starts, Kat. I can't believe I didn't recognize it." Dan's fingers ran along his throat, searching, and Crawford groaned. His tongue flicked out between his lips, searching. He could suck on them, bite them off.

"This is a relapse, and if we're not careful he'll hurt us and himself," she snapped.

"What the hell kind of relapse looks like this?"

"It's not a standard diagnosis, Dan. There was a lab accident--pineal--cancerous growth--"

She was breaking up, muffled by the touch of foreign minds and alien thoughts. Impulses galvanizing him as he sought their familiar flesh to press against.

"So we have to do something, Kat. We can't just--" Cut-off hiss as Crawford sought his cock, delicious, fleshy. Not hard, not hard despite the Resonator's effects, but Crawford could change--"No!"

Sting he tasted in his hands, slapped away by the one refusing.

Relapse. Hallucinations. They were real, somewhere, somewhen, but she couldn't say that. Wouldn't say that, despite knowing the truth.

He felt a touch on his brow that he'd have called cool before feeling that blond boy's icy skin, one in the same with the whipping winds through which they'd traveled.

Now? Hot, so hot he couldn't stand it.

He giggled, just a bit, and then forced himself into a seated position, hands fruitlessly covering the aperture on his forehead that somehow remained closed. Scar tissue protected him from the fullness of it all.

"Tell the truth, Katherine," he managed. "Tell him what I can see."

"Crawford," Hesitating, trying to placate him.
"Tell him!" His nail scratched at the scar, threatening to tear it open. "Or I'll have to show him."

"No!" She took his hands in hers, caging them more than holding them. She was so beautiful.

"Hold me," he whimpered, unable to bear the isolation.

"No," she said, soft but firm.

"Kat, don't be cruel," Dan said. "Crawford, I can-"

"Don't touch him, Dan. He's not himself right now." He squirmed in her grasp, reminding her, and with a long sigh she relented. "The accident--something unbelievable happened. Crawford was working on a machine that would enhance the pineal gland in the brain. He thought it would give him insight into other dimensions parallel to ours."

"They're there," he insisted. "Right now, beside you." She'd admitted it once, then locked it all away when she dragged herself out of that burning Hell.

"What we know," Katherine pressed on, "is that a pineal gland enlarged through the machine’s interference is linked to hypersexuality, violence, and very...vivid hallucinations."

"So--so what do we do? How did you make it stop before?"

"I destroyed the damn machine! The only one." Her voice pitched and then leveled as she reined her panic in. "He shouldn't be doing this. I don't know what could've caused it."

"He played around in my head," he explained again, simple as you please.

"Crawford. You need to calm down." She sounded sure, so sure, and there was probably a Thorazine on offer if he couldn't.

She wouldn't force him.

He could refuse.

But--

Dan's reaction derailed that train of thought, more urgent, more in-tune.

"Who, babe?" Closer, so close, touching him, and he forced the desire back down to a survivable level. "Who hurt you?"

*Humans are such easy prey*. They were, they had been, and apparently from predators of types Crawford had always dismissed.

"Didn't hurt. Felt good." He touched his mouth, seeking the spot where it had happened and then becoming distracted by his own blunt, penetrating fingers. Sucking, sucked, it felt good on any skin and there was a *twinge* where the cuts remained--

Body, on his, his own hands torn away and pinned to the floor. Dan wasn't so indifferent now.

Not unmoved, but unmoving. Still as stone.

"Do it. Kat, whatever it is you need to calm him down. Anything."

Crawford heard footsteps retreating, the heavy stomp of Katherine's cane--Cain, ha, as much the
crutch as his name—retreating into the bowels of the house. "Lean in," he entreated Dan. "I'll tell you."

Naughty boy, he cast a look over his shoulder, and then he did as he was asked. Close, not quite close enough for teeth and tongues and all manner of wonderful pain. "Who did you see?"

"A very bad man," he confided, though he couldn't imagine why now. A teacher ought to instruct their student. He'd been stupid to turn down Edward back then. How he'd resisted, he couldn't fathom.

"What does that—what did he look like? Did he tell you his name? Crawford—"

"Dan, move!" Katherine pushed him aside, knelt though it must have been agony. She did that to herself for him. It sent a shiver through him, and he caught Dan biting his lip.

"I have your medication, Crawford. I want you to take it."

"What if I say 'no'?" he teased.

"You know," she answered.

"If I'm good, will I get a treat?"

"Ask me again after." She was petting his hair, the strands stuck to his head with damp. It felt like home.

"Make it stop." His mouth formed the clarity his mind couldn't.

A sting, on his arm, like the attack of that small unearthly creature which had first heralded his—Edward's—success in piercing the veil to what lay beyond. He jumped at the small pain, sending the offending object clattering to the floor.

"Thank God for unbreakable plastic," Dan muttered, face distorting into an unfamiliar grimace.

Whatever was in the syringe, it worked, a muffling blanket rolling over all of Crawford's too-many too-vivid senses and darkening the din in his skull.

He still craved them, hungered with that inhuman, uncaring, destructive lust, but they stayed close anyway as his muscles unknotted and he fell into magenta-blue dreams.

Waking up was an experience; dry mouth, full bladder, crusted eyes stabbed by sun on whatever day it was. But he was home in their big bed, not hospitalized, and he didn't taste raw meat.

He limped unsteadily to the bathroom for a piss, then clung to the railing on his way downstairs.

Morning.

Breakfast.

Katherine making eggs; for a moment the past was too strong, too real.

But it was Dan at the table instead of Bubba, staring blankly at his newspaper and listening to 'Waterfalls,' and Crawford was able to ground himself by those differences.
"Hey,"

They turned to look at him in unison, like he'd announced he was holding a bomb. "How're you feeling?" Dan asked.

"Like I got hit by a truck." He stole a drink from Dan's coffee, closing his eyes and savoring the spike of caffeine over his tongue. "Did I--"

"We're alright," Katherine said.

"Just worried," Dan finished for her.

Crawford touched his scar, looking around for signs of those horrible creatures. "I'm alright now."

"Do you have any idea what might've triggered it?" Of course now that he was sane Katherine would start the questions again. She couldn't help it.

"The man I met." He knew he'd spoken the words before, though his memory of last night was hazy. "Poked at something in my head."

It was clearly the wrong answer.

Tension in the airy room ratched up to tangible levels (though really, that was relative where Crawford was concerned.) And curiously, it seemed to be present between the other two, as a long, telling staring contest ensued.

They'd been talking about him. Of course--babying him, the odd one out.

But he'd expected them to present a united front; disagreement was... unusual.

Dan licked his lips and said, "Yeah, about that, Crawford--why don't you tell us about him?"

"Actually, I think we should start by discussing where he went Tuesday night. Don't you, Dan?"

Katherine's eyes were so blue, blue as the lights of the other world they'd both touched.

He shouldn't resent her mental wholeness. She'd more than paid in pain.

But his lovers could both fly under the radar, and now they were talking over him entirely.

"I got a drink." That wasn't so unusual. He'd spent nights on his own, knew his limits. He hadn't driven.

"Crawford." She was biting down on scolding him, he could see it. "Why didn't you call one of us?"

"I wanted time to myself. I'm allowed that, aren't I?" He hadn't tapped out, but then the game had been on an unspoken hold ever since Dan's breakdown. The lingering dregs of what that meant lurked at the corners of every discussion.

"Of course," Dan answered for her. "What about the people you met?"

She was glaring at Dan again, but Crawford pretended not to see. "It's fuzzy," he admitted. "There was a professor, something German. Heinrich. Herman. Smart guy."

"Pale? Handsome?" Dan asked, with the weird underlay of some additional meaning. "Magnetic?"
"Dan," Katherine cut him.

"Yes." That had been it exactly. A *draw* to him.

"You'll influence what he remembers." Stage whispers.

"Or maybe I just know what he saw," Dan hissed back.

"We were talking about," about them, and this very thing, "his work. One of his students interrupted us."

Dan vibrated like a piano wire, leaning in. "What work? Was he--"

"Translation," Crawford interrupted. The game was off, and this wasn't Dan's time. It was *his*, and he wouldn't allow himself to be discounted because of his 'suggestibility.' "Arabian and Egyptian texts. It wasn't really the point. *He* was."

Gay. So obviously gay, sitting there in one of Arkham's bars where nobody asked questions sipping a non-alcoholic drink and people-watching, and Crawford had admired that audacity for just an instant.

Before the other things the man was were revealed, that is.

"He was looking for someone to talk to." To take home, and Crawford wouldn't, would never, but--he'd been taken seriously, for that hour or so. "Figures," he snorted softly. "I must have it tattooed on my forehead."

Submissive. Attracted to authoritative, intelligent people.

Exploitable, part of a pattern.

"He didn't hurt you?" The concern was almost token.

"No, he didn't." It was hard not to be snide, and so he didn't bother. "His friend took care of that."

"What happened?" Katherine cut Dan off before he could speak.

"A kid came up to us. Blond. Barely old enough to be in a bar. They were...together." He still wasn't quite over it, the boldness of having that discussion in a public place. Even one with a mutual agreement of silence. "He was deluded." He was who Crawford could've been, if he'd let himself be drawn in by Edward's breathy, "casual" suggestions of further discussion. If he hadn't started locking the doors before the house had been filled with the sounds of women screaming.

"And then?" Dan prompted. Not fair to blame him. He hadn't known. Crawford was angry at him anyway.

"And then I fucked them both," he spat, just to be spiteful. Just to get their attention. He did.

"Crawford--"

"You--"

Twin looks of horror, not betrayal but shock that he could even think such a thing. "I'm kidding," he assured them, voice deadpan. "I let him walk me home."

He wasn't sure, still, why he'd agreed to such a thing when it was so cold out and he'd kept cab fare
in his wallet all evening.

But the nameless student had been so overwrought, and it was one night he could keep them apart.

"We weren't home."

"Yes, Dan, thank you for stating the obvious," he snapped, and Dan's big puppydog eyes filled with a mix of frustration and hurt.

"Will you let us--"

"He's just worried, Crawford." She effectively gagged Dan with the pointed glare. "Please, continue. What happened when he took you home?"

"He--" he raised his hand to his mouth, feeling the scab on the outside and the silken healed line within. "He touched my head. He wanted me to forget, but instead..."

He didn't really remember their faces, barely their conversation beyond the main impression of revulsion for the older one, but what he'd gotten instead--

Horrible things. Blood, death, clothing and music from centuries ago, and an intensification of feeling, a desperate hunger. Too familiar. Not the same as that other world, but just as predatory a lust in Earthly surroundings.

"It made me want things."

Dan's hands were wandering, at his throat, on his mouth, and Crawford reached almost in a trance to pull Dan's collar down to match.

There wasn't much there now, tan hiding the worst of it, but Crawford remembered. Remembered when Dan had come home to them the first time, with old pink scars on his neck. Strange and pointed like needle marks, but too large and in the wrong place.

"Stop it, both of you." Katherine pulled his hand away.

"This is it, Kat. This is what I was talking about. He felt it. Look!" He pointed to the scratches Crawford had come home with, now barely noticeable.

"He was practically seizing last night. He could easily have bitten himself then." She pointed out the bruises lingering on his arm where he'd banged against something, the strawberry on his cheek from the carpet. "Crawford's health is precarious, Dan. I told you that when I met you. You can't do this to him!"

"I know what I saw! He's describing the same thing. We have to do something. We're not safe here."

"Stop it! You won't uproot our life because of a delusional fixation. We're happy here, we finally found peace after what that monster did to him--"

"And you," Crawford said. She ignored him.

"For someone who loves to lecture me about trust," Dan was saying, "you're real good at hiding shit from me."

Katherine pressed her face into her free hand, then, and let out a barking laugh. "Oh, and I suppose there was ever a good way to tell you about this? Face it, Dan, that kind of science shouldn't exist."
Dan's mouth opened, but she went on. "And you never trusted us with your story, either. Just what we could gather, and we had to accept that." They'd gathered so much, beyond what he'd said. Everything was a clue, to drugs and disease and a tragic Christmas loss. But the vampires. “Which I did, right up until you dragged Crawford into a fucking folie-a-deux.”

Dan clearly didn't know the term, but Crawford did. And it stung fierce as a slap. He slammed his hand down on the table. "Enough!" He was as surprised as any of them to find himself shaking. "Both of you, shut the fuck up."

At least shock kept them silent now, gave him a minute to speak. "I know you'd rather have a dog or a baby that will sit while you fight over it, but you have me. Katherine," he turned to her. "Pretending I'm delusional won't erase what happened. Taking care of me harder won't fix you."

He caught Dan's fraction of a smile and rounded on him. "And you. You think you're better than us?"

"No! I--"

"Then stop acting like it. Poor crazy Crawford, needs a white knight to come in and save him." He shook his head, stepping on Dan's explanation. "I know when I'm unstable and when I'm not. But you could at least pretend you value my opinion beyond when it suits your story."

They sat there, staring at him like he'd transformed into an utterly alien being. As though they'd never fathomed him actually asserting himself, when his knowledge of his limits was supposed to be the foundation of their interactions.

Christ, was he only an adult when they fucked him?

His knees felt weak, but he kept standing out of spite. He wouldn't let them have the chance to coddle him and fuss at this 'overexertion.'

The trip back upstairs was calming, one step after another, and he was in the bathroom stripping for a shower (clean it off, the slime, the biological filth) by the time they reacted.

The door handle jiggled, and then they knocked.

"Can we come in?" It started as a whisper, and Katherine had to repeat herself over the roar of the water. Crawford stared at the lock, weighing the benefits of riding this out, letting his anger carry him through the day. In the end he undid the lock and closed himself off behind the shower curtain before giving them the go ahead.

He almost felt them entering the room, and quashed down panic that it was the extra senses rearing their head again (he'd never be free, not really; he could only hide it and hope he didn't destroy this fragile little peace). He had to sit on the floor of the tub to give his aching muscles a little rest, but if they noticed they didn't comment.

"We're sorry." Of course it was Dan. All emotion wrapped in a human frame, no filter and no restraint and only a little idea of how his passions sometimes hurt as much as they helped. "We didn't think."

"You scared us last night." There it was, that united front. Trying to bring him back into the fold. "You've been stable for a long time. I--" a breath. 'I was wrong' always sat like poison on her tongue. "--I should have listened to you. We both know what happened last time I didn't."

"Great." And it was, to an extent. But it was just one moment. "How is this going to change
anything?"

"I..." Katherine shifted awkwardly, then flipped the lid of the toilet down so she could sit and relax her leg. "I think we need to talk about what these vampires mean."

"Spare me the psychoanalysis, Kat," Dan said, breaking their uneasy alliance again that quickly. Selfish, changeable, always superior and apart, despite how involved he was.

"You want me to be the bad guy? Fine," her voice sounded thick, even through the muffling sound of water. "I can accept that you both are authentically experiencing something that I'm not. But you must know that this isn't a thing I can take on faith, and I'm worried about you."

"I'm not playing these--"

"No, Dan, she's right," The grip bar made standing easy, and he lathered Suave into his hair to kill the remembered feeling of mucus. "After all, you were ready to believe that what happened with me was easily explained."

"Okay," there was only more irritation in his voice as he gave in. "How do you want me to prove it? Let Crawford be bait? Let him walk out to his death so that you can feel really sure about his corpse?"

"You're doing it again," Crawford pointed out from under the water.

"There has to be a safer way," Katherine added at the same time.

"They wrote it down! It's right there!"

"They're sold as fiction. It doesn't prove anything on its own." She sighed. "I want to believe you. I know it's important to both of you. But we can't uproot our entire lives and careers on a feeling."

"So we should just wait." Dan's disgust was palpable.

"I don't see another option!"

"They'll come back." He'd struck them silent again. "If Dan's story is true, they'll come looking for me again. You'll just have to make sure you're with me." He scrubbed at his face, his body, trying to will life back into them.

"I thought you didn't want us to baby you."

"Don't make me point out all the things I've let you do, Dan. I know how to embarrass you. I'm giving you permission to watch me." His power to choose powerlessness, his right. They always forgot that step.

"Dan," Katherine said softly. "You keep saying that this reminds you of the past, but--none of that's in the book. Robert and Connor just show up. And--" she cut herself off so cleanly that Dan swallowed whatever it was he was going to say and waited while she rephrased. "Crawford didn't have sex with those men."

"What exactly do you mean by that, Kat?" Dan's voice was deceptively mild. Crawford rinsed, his arms, his legs, his back, before forcing himself to direct a cold jet at his still-too-sensitive crotch.

God, he was hungry.

"He's safe, Dan. Unlike Herbert."
"Oh Jesus, next you're going to tell me you believe the shit at the hospital."

"Dan-

"They're not metaphors, Kat! If they were, I would be as sick as everyone thinks I am. We didn't even use protection." Crawford could hear him laughing, bitter, at his own stupidity.

"So you admit you had unprotected sex, and it scared you."

"Not--" he blew out a frustrated sigh. "Not like that. He made all that up. When I was there, they couldn't hammer it home enough about their dicks not working. It was all biting. Blood." A patented Dan Cain silence, a little beat of omitted information after the sentence actually ended.

"Dan--"

Crawford tuned out, focusing on his own traitorous body and slipshod mind as his lovers chased each other's tails. Both of them were too stubborn to give, less sure of themselves than scared about being wrong. He turned the water off and listened as the conversation stop dead. Reveled, just a little, in holding the room captive.

"So vampires either exist, or are projections of our subconscious fears of disease and exploitation, respectively." They watched when he exited the relative privacy of the shower into the too-small, too-crowded, too-steamy room. Not sexual, their gazes. Apprehensive. He rubbed the towel over his hair before wrapping it around his waist. "Can we all agree that staying close and watching one another will make us feel safer?"

"You...want that?" Stupid question.

His voice cracked a little, weak, when answering, and he stomped on the threatening tears.

"I was attacked, Dan. My brain--I thought I was relapsing. Last time I--" (Don't cry. Don't lose this ground.)

"It wasn't your fault, Crawford," Katherine said, too compassionate, too strong, too forgiving.

"It was my body, Katherine. I hurt you." He wanted to submit, then, felt a fierce craving to be controlled and punished and made safe for his lovers to be around. To be the one in the restraints, maybe even made to cry as hard as he deserved, as she never ever made him.

"I never blamed you," she said, soft.

"Don't lie--"

"I'm not. I was afraid. Of you and for you. But I never blamed you." She touched him, just his hand. and he almost lost it.

"Will you," he swallowed hard. "Do we still have the ropes?" She knew what he meant, she always knew; the ones they'd deemed too heavy and thick for scenes.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea right now. Until you've had a few days to recover,"

"Not for sex." Though he could feel himself standing on the edge of a cliff. One wrong push, and he'd be down again. "I just--I want to be sure I won't hurt you."

"You won't," Dan reassured, too fierce.
"Say it all you want. I need to feel it." There was only one person who could give him permission anyway. "Please? Just for a little while."

She didn't meet his eyes as she deliberated. "Not more than an hour. They're not good for your circulation, if I remember. Deal?"

"Yes." He took her hand and let her lead him, Dan trailing behind, to their room. Katherine tied his hands in front of him, a weight lightening in his chest from the simple feeling of constraint. She kept working, crossing ropes and knots across his abdomen, around his thighs, the actual loop that held his legs together loose. He could've run if he'd wanted to. But he felt hemmed in, sheltered by the embrace of her hands and the thick cords, his head pillowed on Dan's thigh.

"I'm scared," Dan said, somewhere in there, after time started to go soft and formless, hand in Crawford's hair keeping him real. "I want to run away. I always did; that's what's not in the book."

Considering what all was in it--'Molloy,' or Rice, had spared no detail of the decadent, weirdly empty span of time--Crawford wriggled, trying to put more of his weight on top of Dan's body.

"You always wanted to run?" Katherine's soft voice, careful in the midst of what was and wasn't a scene. "From what?"

"Everything."

Dan still ran, when the weather permitted; it was his favorite form of exercise. He looked good doing it, fit and browned and sweating, iron-grey hair finally long enough to flop over a sweatband into his dark eyes.

Crawford loved seeing him come home like that.

"Even us?" Crawford mumbled, exhausted though he'd just woken up.

"Yes." It came so easily. Dan had learned an almost hallowed respect for this space. "I always wanted to be normal. But I only ever get the opposite."

He could practically hear Katherine biting her tongue. "What changed?"

"I stopped lying to myself," Dan chuckled. "That must be why I thought I could tell you this now."

"If nine in ten families are abnormal, then what's normal anyway?" Katherine mused, half to herself. A favored question for freshman psych majors.

"It's not as good as this." Dan sounded so sure. Crawford nuzzled against him. "That's why--even if you were right. Even if you think I'm," he stopped himself, "wrong. Just. Please. Let me protect you. I can't take losing either of you."

"We're not going anywhere, Dan," Katherine said. Crawford could feel her working at the knots on his feet. He wanted longer--but he'd promised.

"Let us protect you," he added. Dan always forgot that part. He rotated his wrists and felt blood flow return, curled himself comma-like around Dan and found Katherine's hand. They'd waste the whole day if they stayed like this. Better, for the moment, than what was outside their door.

~*~*~*~
New York, New York
December 1994

Daniel had expected to hear from Louis: if not about Lestat, then about the book or the film. But when the phone had finally rang a little over a week ago, he hadn't expected the impact of hearing that voice again--or rather, the lack of it. He still felt warm fondness in his bones, and saw the space where it could flare up again into devotion. Not in ten years, maybe not in a hundred, and it lurked, dormant for now. They said you never forgot your first love, but awe would never be part of it again. Not since they'd parted at the edge of Florida’s mainland.

Perhaps the writing had exorcised those ghosts, at last.

The door clicked, as intrusive as a slam, and startled him out of his thoughts. "You're back early," he called.

No response.

He let it be. Armand's curiosity would find him eventually, and he'd learned to appreciate the time apart that kept them from killing one another. Instead, he watched the couples going to and fro beneath his balcony, wishing he felt up to walking out among them. Armand had been pestering him about some grueling eight-hour theater performance, which he'd managed to avoid so far. He wasn't sure he was ready for the subject matter.

The sky greyed, and he ducked back in, closing the shutters behind him. They kept perfunctory locks, more for the sake of Armand’s love of technological toys than anything else. Their own room was well disguised.

Armand lay in the lavish four poster bed that blocked the view of the coffins, limbs akimbo like a broken doll. His eyes stared at the wall, unseeing; his hand had rubbed a hole in the velvet comforter.

"You okay?" Underreaction of the century. He had a gift.

"Daniel." Armand’s tone was absent, acknowledgment of a new presence rather than conversation, but Daniel took what he could get at times like this.

"Can I sit down?" he asked, venturing gingerly into the room. (He hadn't expected Armand to want to share, not so soon, maybe not ever. But if that was what made him comfortable... the books said people all had different boundaries and could heal in different ways.)

"Go ahead." Slight shift to make space on the immense mattress, shadows rendering auburn hair a blackened spill over the ivory pillowcase.

Daniel closed and locked the door against daylight before sitting up against the headboard, one finger brushing the aureole of soft curls gently enough not to disturb.

"I killed two people tonight." There was always a sliver of the Catholic in these moments, the dropping of details craftily hoping to be confessions.

"Yeah?" was all he said.

"I gave one of them a knife. I told her that if she stabbed her lover, she could live. And she did." Even-keeled.
"Jesus, Boss." He always thought he was too tired for shock. He was always wrong.

"I wanted to see what she would do." He curled onto his side, drawing inward. "If such acts are born from the dark gift or merely encouraged by it."

They hadn't talked about that night at the villa. Daniel was sometimes sure conversations like this were the closest they'd ever get.

"Did you let her go?" What else could he ask, and still bear to hear the answer?

"No."

No. Of course not. Something about that placid surface always prodded Daniel to play armchair shrink, throw darts at why Armand might've done it. Anger. Disappointment. Some frenzied desire to put down weaker copies of himself. He never asked. He couldn't. Being in love was a bitch that way.

"Do you think he told Lestat what happened?" Armand's thoughts had jumped tracks, and it was only long experience that let Daniel follow.

"Doubt it. Louis doesn't like to dwell." On the universe, sure. His own actions merited only the most reluctant of comments.

"I thought you were dead." Armand clutched his own shoulders, cross-body, fingers worrying the seams of his thick sweater.

The oversize fad was flattering on him in all the wrong ways.

"That was the idea, Boss." Dan walked his hand up, spiderlike, to brush those working digits.

"All of you. I remembered--not enough to be sure."

Not enough to extrapolate another conclusion, not with his prior experiences. Fires were a pattern, but not one with which Armand had good associations.

"I know."

"Can you explain?"

Finally, finally, "Yes." Daniel felt like he was releasing a breath held for nearly seven goddamn years.

"I think they'd been trying to get out for a long time," he started. "What happened with West just sped things up."

Armand didn't flinch--of course he didn't; with enough buried nightmares to mark a hundred lifetimes, what was one more--but he did grasp Daniel's outstretched hand. Anchored himself to a loose boat, poor boy.

"Why did you help? You disliked West." It should've been blame, but the words had long gone hollow.

"Wasn't the biggest fan," he admitted. "But..."

He'd been angry. Disgusted, to see West just staggering back to his feet only to be dealt a heavier blow. Daniel recognized the dark, drawn look West had worn when they'd led him away. A look
that saw the world new, with only ugly things in it.

Daniel had never much conceived of what Louis might look like angry. Even during that fateful interview, describing the vengeful things he'd done, the vampire had sounded detached. He'd cultivated an image of that stone face cutting down stragglers and lighting the world up like so much kindling, but that didn’t do it justice. It was all in his eyes, cold fury burning deep but unmissable, transforming his whole face like firelight in a dark cave. *I want your help,* Louis’d said.

Daniel continued talking, clipped sentences failing to convey the totality of the experience, but Armand listened.

"Herbert was--in some kind of shock, I think. He could barely stand to have Louis touching him, let alone me, but we had to drag him to the library. Louis said it was the best place."

Louis had radiated a righteous fury that made Daniel see him as an angel of an entirely different sort than he'd seemed in the past. No gentle harbinger of love or death or sweet sensual pleasure; this was an avenger, ebony hair shoved back from ice-carved features.

Even Herbert, with his too-loud mind, had seemed quiet and daunted when Louis pushed him into one of the armchairs by the fire.

He had reason enough to be, after all.

The silk shirt in which Daniel had dressed him like a sacrifice was ripped and stained at the collar.

'*Fetch bags, Daniel. Empty. Nothing too large for a mortal to carry.*'

He’d done it, of course he had. One didn’t hear the voice of God and turn away, and Louis had been nothing less to him. If he'd thought of Armand, it had been with contempt, sour with all that had sprouted up between them.

He came back with what he could carry, suitcases on rolling wheels and bags that sat neatly on top, West’s old coat and scarf stuffed in the bottom of one on impulse. He’d figured the man should have something of his own. He'd started to go back for more clothes, the meager effects in Louis’ room, but had been stopped with a word.

*This will be enough.*

And then Louis had gone to the stacks, plundering with reverence the oldest and strangest bits of arcana until the bags were all full to bursting. Even still, it was only a fragment of what was on the shelves. An idea of what was happening started to form.

"He told me to go ahead and take West and the bags down to the woods."

He’d tried, too, and almost lost a hand for it. He still remembered West's expression, feral and guarded, everything under that cool superiority now thrust to the surface.

"I asked him what he was going to do." Though he’d known, of course.

And he’d said, *Are you sure you want to know?*

"So I told him it was a little late for plausible deniability." In the present, Daniel chanced pulling Armand into his arms, tensing for a fight. Nothing but a sluggish readjustment that passed for acceptance.
"You helped him?" Armand asked.

For once, Daniel was grateful for that clinical detachment. "That was later.

"West was--it was bad. He wouldn't let me take him away from Louis. Wasn't all there, I think." Fears, nonsensical and formless, had swirled around him, but worse were the sensations. The slime and disgust and reverberating pleasure.

The hunger for something clean, when vampiric appetites were inherently anything but.

The certainty that death was happening that night, for West, one way or another if it hadn't already.

"That happens," Armand said absently. "You learn to leave. He was good at it; fast. Coming back is difficult."

Daniel didn't squeeze him, however much he wanted to at this quiet approval of someone's skill at dissociating from the unthinkable. He pressed a kiss to wiry curls instead.

"It can be…good, to have someone there. Louis is quiet." *Safe*, Armand didn't say, because as they all knew Louis was anything but that.

"The books--the books were where they lived," Daniel said, voice thick with the memory. "I think that's where they..." *Fell in love* should have stuck in his throat, inconceivable as it had been back then, but instead it slipped from his lips with the ease of obvious truth. "It hurt West to see Louis tearing it apart."

West's wrist had felt strange in Daniel's grasp, bristling black sutures rasping against his palm. Ugly. Scarred.

Marked as none of them ever were.

He'd offered to do it, when it became clear that West was immovable without Louis at his side.

*Do what?* It was only later that Daniel had realized Louis wasn't only playing coy.

"Don't treat me like an idiot," he still wanted so much to be held in that esteem.

And then Louis had made it clear. *We can't be followed*.

"You locked the doors," Armand said, disjointed pieces coming together.

"I didn't want to," he scrambled to make excuses for himself. "He was worried about Marius, not you. But I couldn't tell you without tipping him off."

"You're boring when you lie, Daniel."

Boring. Their own strange little threat. The word that had nipped at his heels in his mortal days.

"I didn't want to kill you," he held to it. "I didn't really think it could. And I was...okay with the thought of you spending a few years fucked up." As if he wasn't all the time, scars everywhere in spite of his beautiful face.

"I forgive you." Perfunctory. Mea Culpa and penance.

"No you don't," Daniel said under his breath. Armand didn't. If one was lucky, other events piled over top of the ugliness and took precedence. But he never forgot.
"No," Armand admitted. "But I love you."

Good enough among their kind.

"How did you seal the doors?" Now he was to be punished into details, ugly and unflinching.

"Wasn't hard. The stacks weren't bolted down, or anything." At the time he'd been worried that Marius would come following, angered by the noise; now he worried what had kept the eldest of the coven so occupied.

Armand's collusion in rape was so much less cut-and-dried than he'd thought, back then with anger, hurt, and guilt blinding him.

The worst had been the mortals, his sweet trusting little pets. Anesthetized by their proximity to pleasure and death.

Those who would run, he'd sent out through the kitchen tunnels and the docks, their own secret service passages.

Those too broken and in love...

He was strengthened, that night, stronger than he'd ever been in his unlife, and blood tears had streamed down his face.

Katja and Raven and Leslie; Julio and Marcus and Jo. (Wolf, Raven's lover, had run, and Daniel had lied as he drank Raven down. Let them think that promises of an afterlife together would be kept.)

They were broken dolls, like the thing now in his arms, when he tucked them into their beds.

"I see." Accepting of the logic and no more. No less, either.

"Tell me what happened to you." He clung tighter, like that would make any difference.

"Marius was with me until I fell asleep." Even now he talked about it in antiseptic terms. "I was already impaired when I smelled the smoke. I spent a long time wondering how you'd done it."

By cutting it damn close, West a dead weight by the time they'd stopped. But it hadn't been anywhere near close for Armand. Not if he'd had his wits left to him, or his blood. Daniel had counted on his addled senses, and in turn Marius' desire to preserve his pupil superseding his rage. He regretted agreeing to talk about this, despite the necessity.

"I waited for you to come looking for me so that I could save you. Marius had to drag me out." Ash in his hair, blood on his cheeks. Daniel could see it, clear as if the silence had lifted.

"I'm--" no more apologies. He'd been barred from them. "I'm glad you're alive."

"What changed your mind?"

"I woke up." Noticed the story right under his nose. Some reporter he was.

He'd stolen Lestat's damned book. Spite, avarice, pure goddamn curiosity about the stories he always missed out on no matter how hard he pursued.

*The Vampire Lestat* had taught him more about Armand than he'd learned in his whole life. He'd assumed *Queen of the Damned* would be the same.
And oh, oh how he'd regretted realizing he was right in a thoroughly unexpected way--seeing the hints and shadows encoded without comprehension by an author thorough and adoring but uncritical.

Hints and inconsistencies, mismatches and stray threads. *Little blunder; come into my arms.*

And with bridges and mansions burned, there was no way for Daniel to ask for help, no communication but the method Louis and Lestat had used in their strange failed courtship. Absurd desperation, but he still held the rights to the series, and it had worked. Summoned Lestat right to his door; a little false reluctance had sealed the deal.

"You really love me?" He asked, starved for the words now that his soul was bare.

"Yes." Promises from a liar, an ancient boy who sucked people dry and walked away, having stolen every scrap of love they had to give. "More than anyone." He put his hand to Daniel's rib, as he had that night when the first red-raw mark of execution had appeared.

"I believe you." He'd given up telling Armand he loved him. There was never a fill of the words, never an end to the gnawing uncertainty. He filled it up with other things, things neither Amadeo nor Armand had thought to ask for: trust, belief, accountability; reliance without obedience. Adoration without collaring.

"Promise," he started to say, and then didn't know what to ask. Any uttered word would kill the moment. "Promise," he mumbled again, mind fogging over with sleep.

He felt Armand leave his grasp, lift his lanky form with ease and set him in the long, wide coffin made beyond the specifications of any one man.

"Love you." He had to get it out, in case. He was always preparing for goodbye.

A little breath, and a long stillness. Then the silk lining of the coffin crinkled as Armand crawled in beside him, fingers resuming the steady worrying on the already thin material of Daniel's t-shirt.

"You don't have to." It would be hours yet before Armand fell back to his sleep.

"Close the lid, Daniel."

~*~*~*~

Arkham, Massachusetts
February 1995

A truce of sorts, uneasy but holding, had kept the house together since the night after Crawford's breakdown. Neither Dan nor Crawford made mention of vampires, but neither did Katherine comment when Dan came home with three of the portable phones that were beginning to take hold. The Nokias were smaller than the brick-like monstrosities of a decade ago, but still absurdly extravagant.

"I hope you brought a bigger bag so that I'll have room for my papers," was all Katherine said.

Crawford took the contraption without comment, reduced almost to muteness by what had
happened. Every time their hands brushed Dan felt a flinch, and he even shied away from
Katherine unless she (haltingly, all of them still on unsure footing) gave him an order to come near.

The almost Jekyll and Hyde turn that gentle soul had taken was a conspicuous hole at the center of
all their days. Explained in the barest sense, there was an unspoken agreement that they would
protect Crawford and themselves by cutting it from their lives. Dan found he couldn't help thinking
about it: the raw, almost animal ferocity; the hot rush of blood at the thought of what might've
happened if he'd been just a little slower.

God, he was fucked up.

There was no way he could tell Crawford. Not with everything the man had been through, was still
fighting through. But he couldn't keep it in either, found the idle thoughts intruding when he was
alone and undisciplined, until he snapped back to find he'd bitten the inside of his cheek bloody and
had an uncomfortable hard on in his office.

"You've been acting nervous," Katherine remarked one night as they worked through the dishes,
Crawford stretched out on the couch in the next room.

He thought about denying it, carrying on until the wound healed itself and he could no longer do
any harm. But when he opened his mouth, what he said was, "I need to tell you something."

"Go on." He could see her steel herself, putting on that smooth, confessional, controlled persona
that made her their guide, and he could also see the strain underneath. His fault, his tainted past
straining them.

But they were supposed to be honest. Really honest, now, and maybe the best-case scenario would
be them deciding they'd had it with him.

"I think I...want...something. Or, I've always wanted it." He focused on the plate he was cleaning,
rubbing at a particularly stubborn smear. "But I don't think I should."

"You mean something sexual." Her elbow brushed his as she dried a bowl, then took the plate from
him.

"Yes."

"You'd better start by telling me what it is, then."

"I--" he swallowed hard, mouth desert-dry. "You...remember the book. With the sex scene."

Connor spread out beneath me like a willing feast, body and mind both begging to be devoured like
the man he loved wouldn't dare, and I flattered myself it was because I was good.

Looking back, all vampires love their victims, but most don't love them enough to pull away, and
for all his flaws, Robert-the-vampire had adored and feared Connor-the-mortal in equal measure.

Me? I loved him just enough to eat him alive.

"I remember."

"That--parts of it never actually happened." (Not the point, right now, to fight over whether
vampirism was one of those things.) "And...Herbert never...he ran away, mostly, when I tried to
touch him. But we got close once."
Stupid of him, so stupid, the way he'd grabbed his friend and held him too late, taunted and tempted his instincts until he was pinned to the floor and begging for an ecstatic death that never came. He hadn't understood, then, how hard Herbert was trying.

"And then Daniel--I ended up in the hospital."

"You're afraid of--"

"No."

"What, then?" She set her work aside, eyes burning into his.

"When Crawford was," he steeled himself. "When he relapsed. I wanted to let go. To see what would happen."

"You wanted him to hurt you?"

He shook his head. "I wanted him to fuck me." Until he couldn't move, couldn't think beyond begging for the next touch. He hurried ahead to the damage control. "I know I can't ask him that. I don't want to--I just thought someone should know."

She was quiet for a long time. Too long. The heat of the water steamed her cheeks, made them pink. "You should tell him."

He gaped at her.

"He'd want you to," she said. "You can't have forgotten our dressing down already."

Never. The sight of Crawford, woozy and sick and yet with all the bearing of a king, reminding them of who he was. "I don't want him to hate me."

"Don't ask him to do it," she coached. "Crawford's always worried about hurting others. But it might help him to hear that you don't find that part of him repulsive."

"I don't." Beyond understatement, that, when he thought of how Crawford had writhed and groped, hungry hands demanding Dan give up every part of himself. "I--I could never."

Even if it were as horrifying as it should be, Crawford was--sweet. Fun. Part of Dan's life, now.

"That matters. That you'd say that." Kat nibbled her lip, glasses sliding down low on her nose. She wouldn't push them up, not until they were done; she hated spreading any damp or grime from her hands. "He's lost a lot, and you've been good for him."

"But that's the problem," Dan said, reaching to rub his neck and then redirecting to lean against the cabinets. "I don't want him to think I'm fetishizing his condition, on top of everything else."

"You're jumping ahead." It was an accusation, if a gentle one, that she'd thrown at him many times over the years. He couldn't say she was wrong--two dates in and he'd find himself picturing the white picket, 2.5 kids, and the whole damn thing. "Tell him you aren't angry, or afraid, and go from there. It wouldn't be the first time he's surprised us."

"Not even in the last month," Dan agreed, though it did nothing for the knots in his stomach. She kissed him as she handed over the next plate, and he breathed in the small scrap of domesticity this room had become. Here, of all places, he was never out of his depth.

When they were finished he turned to go upstairs, brain fretting away, and she caught his arm.
"You're thinking about putting it off." Translation: *if you don't do it now you never will, and eventually things will explode.*

"Yeah." He swallowed. The hangman it was.

He’d been hoping it would be the rare night Crawford had decided to go out (but he didn’t, clutched his phone until his knuckles were white every time one of them was away). But no. There was Crawford in the living room, reading a letter. Quiet and serene, and Dan was about to dash it to pieces.

"Crawford, I--" he breathed in heavily, searching for the words. A preamble. Anything. He leaned over the back of the couch, imagining it could hold him up.

“Something wrong, Dan?” His hands trembled, rattling the sheet of paper with its awkward scrawls.

*Great timing.* “I wanted to talk to you about--”

Big, nervous eyes looked like they were expecting an execution, and Dan impulsively pulled Crawford’s head against his shoulder.

*Comfort. Not avoiding his gaze.*

There had to be some way to explain. Maybe if he started all the way at the beginning, it might make sense by the end. His whisper sounded harsh to his own ears as he spoke. "I never really told you about Herbert. Who he was, before, I mean."

"Besides a doctor?" Crawford prompted.

Dan huffed, half laugh and half exhaustion. "He didn't care about that. Or..." that wasn't fair. Herbert had done it for all of them, after all. "It was a means to an end. He wasn't interested in individuals."

"You must've been pretty special then."

Even now, his impulse was to deny it. "I guess I thought so. He fucked my life up pretty bad." Crawford nodded—they'd discussed Meg once, briefly, and he was glad not to revisit it. That ache would stay with him until he died. "But I kept going back. I liked feeling like I was doing something good. I liked that he took charge of things."

"Doing good?"

Jumping ahead. "Herbert had this--it wasn't a theory, but it was never right. He thought he could reverse death. And he did."

He expected a wave of questions, but Crawford only nodded, waited for him to continue. The upside of dating someone else scarred by forbidden science.

"We could get people to come back, to move. But they weren't right. They were more like zombies, like there was nothing home upstairs." *Except when there was, and then it was worse.* “But he swore the next one would fix it, and I needed to believe him. Otherwise I'd--" in for a penny, in for a pound, "I'd have stolen all those bodies for nothing."

Crawford was staring, face blank and then shifting towards horror so slowly that it was almost imperceptible.
Dan drew back.

"He made you do that?" Thin hand, with a few nicks and solder burns and bitten-down nails, snaked around Dan's wrist and held him trapped. "He made you...?"

"Yes--no--" Dan sighed. "I did things with him I'd never do on my own, but. That was the point. He was brilliant, and I liked it. He just took my life and..."

"Destroyed it."

"Parts of it." (The normal parts, the safe parts.) Thirty-eight was too old to be climbing over the back of a couch, but Dan was in good shape for his age. He heaved himself up and rolled down almost gracefully into Crawford's lap, all without breaking that grip. "Brilliance is dangerous."

"It shouldn't be," Crawford said, bitter. "Not like that."

Dan shrugged. "I hated it. But I didn't know what to do with myself without him. I'd try to find what I thought was normal, and a few months in I'd end up back in the basement. I missed the danger."

"I'm not sorry he's dead." Crawford pulled him closer, voice hideously soft for the harsh words. "You deserve better than that."

"Maybe." Damn questionable, with everything he'd done, but that wasn't the point right now. "But if it hadn't been for him, I'd have run away when Katherine brought me over for dinner. I needed all those years of practice coming back."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Because I liked it when you scared me, and I want more.

"I got the running out of my system. Even if there's some in there--nothing I've seen in either of you scares me."

"You loved a monster who was a man." Crawford's voice was harsh with self-reproach even as he clutched Dan greedily close. "Not someone who--"

"I know you," Dan broke in. "You're good to me. For me. Whatever. And...you read the book, right?"

"Of course." Belief from Crawford; real but oddly subjective. He still thought it was 50/50 whether it had actually happened, despite having memories of just that. "It was very...complimentary."

It was a lot of things.

It had told Dan that Herbert loved him, and that he'd died painfully. It had told truths and lied and was only partly wrong even then.

"Daniel didn't fuck me," he whispered into a thin shoulder.

"Oh." Noncommittal. Careful. "Then all of that was..."

"Some of it was real." Even all these years later, he blushed. "But not the whole, I mean. He told me their bodies were dead. Honestly, I think I was more mad about that than the fact that he almost killed me. All that buildup, and all he had for me was his hand."

"Oh," again, but different. Pieces clicking into place. "I'm, uh, still not sure what..."
"I'm not asking you for anything," he rushed to set the disclaimers in place. "I don't wanna push you into anything you'd rather forget. It's just, oh boy, "when you were on top of me the other night. It reminded me of back then. He could've held me down with one hand and there wouldn't have been a damn thing I could do about it."

"And that didn't scare you."

"I'd never been that turned on in my life." His face was going to burst into flame any minute. "I think--I know I wanted him to fuck me. Hard, like some kind of punishment."

Crawford had gone still as the grave beneath him.

"When you were--y'know--I thought the same thing."

He didn't say the rest of it; that he'd liked having his life devoured all those times. Enjoyed how Herbert had reached in and ruined him, no choice or thought on Dan's part as to how to resist even as Meg broke herself trying to pull them apart. No limits there; nothing but that fascination.

How Daniel had banished normality, worked Dan into a frenzy, and then sank his fangs in and turned him into so much meat, a morsel of time measured against the vampire's lifeline.

He only barely remembered the stony hands that had pulled them apart too late, his body heavy in slender arms, but he did remember the warnings and promises delivered in fierce, knowing, boyish tones.

*Leave, or die like this*; and he hadn't been suicidal. Not quite. Not if it wasn't Herbert taking him in for all eternity, for his sins.

God, he'd been in love. God, he'd been bitter at not getting what he'd realized too late he wanted.

"I'm a coward," he said softly, turning his face down to burrow in familiar human warmth. "I want someone to handle me."

"You'll need a real safe word." Crawford's voice was distant, thin, as he stroked Dan's hair. "And we'll both need Katherine."

~*_~*_~*_~

Two months or more had passed since Lestat had interfered in Herbert's feeding.

Two months since Herbert had wobbled up the stairs, drunk off a messy kill he'd taken hastily in hopes of going to his death with some semblance of calm.

Louis had noticed the inebriation, cooed and cossetted and kissed him so very gently. Had refused him anything more, though, ardor apparently dampened by Herbert's forward desperation. (And the less said about the cause of that need, the better. He'd silently made his promises after the Island.)

He was living on borrowed time, even if Lestat wouldn't dispose of him. Louis would choose, would have to sooner or later.
They hadn't--he would know, the moment it happened. Not just from the gentle touch of Louis’ mind on his, raised in the kind of passion Herbert well knew Lestat could provoke, but from the blood coursing through his for-now-lover's veins. And because of Louis (honest, forthright, monogamous Louis) gently putting him out on his own for the first time since...

Even in Switzerland he'd practically lived on Hans' couch.

And maybe the worst of it was the absence of ill-will in Lestat. He was polite unfailingly, pleasant and friendly. He pretended interest as well as he always had, back when shopping for a body to fit some alleged soul.

Maybe the worst of it was when Herbert would forget, and so allow himself to be drawn into conversations, feeling that false, sunlamp heat on his skin. (He hadn't slipped too badly yet, hadn't fallen into the habit of trying to discuss real Work.)

They'd sit together in the small library Louis had cultivated in their time together, made up of castoffs and oddities and a few rare volumes from unknown sources. Herbert stayed now, reluctantly, though he would try to slip into unobtrusive silence and let Louis have the conversation he'd obviously missed. But Lestat, damnable Lestat, would make the pointed effort to loop him back in as soon as more than a few minutes had lapsed. Playing by the rules of the space, Herbert supposed. That didn't mean he had to like it (but he did; basked in a certain glow under those questions that seemed, in the moment, so sincere).

And the time came when Louis' defenses began to crumble. A symbolic ceding of territory, when Louis marked out a public reading he'd planned on attending and didn't bother to revoke Lestat's invitation to the house. No, he threw Herbert to the wolves instead, kissing him goodbye without a second thought and hiding (poorly) the ripple of nerves as he left.

Herbert had almost an hour to himself, only to find he was totally incapable of enjoying it. He paced the halls, waiting for that knock at the door. When it came, he stood in the doorway, seeking to save the man trouble.

"He went out. You may as well come back tomorrow."

"Good evening to you too, Herbert." There was always a strange hand movement whenever Lestat saw him--a reach that cut itself off within inches. "May I come in?"

He could, in theory, have said no, but that would be so many 'wrong' things. Gainsaying Louis; being territorial; being rude.

Being alone all evening, when he'd just killed two nights ago and couldn't risk going out again so soon.

And if Lestat was willing to go this far in his pretense, why not make it worth it?

So he nodded curtly and headed back to what would have been a dining room, had they any need of such a thing. Books, instead; two chairs set to either side of a chaise; a desk.

Louis took the chaise by himself when they were all present, the other two flanking him in the chairs by silent agreement. (Herbert wondered, at times, where Lestat had sat--or lain--on the nights he left them to it.)

Tonight, neither of them seemed to know what to do with themselves until Lestat determinedly spun the desk chair about to sit backwards in it, long legs spread and chin resting on hands resting on the back, green-shaded desk lamp illuminating his unbound mass of hair from behind.
"It's lovely to be able to spend time with you tonight, my friend."

"You're--" he'd said Louis wasn't there, hadn't he? What was Lestat up to, carrying on with the flattery with no audience to play to? "Well enough." He finished, answering a question that hadn't been asked.

A few awkward seconds ticked by without Louis there to breathe the conversation into life. Lestat tried again. "You still haven't shown me, you know."

"What?"

"Wherever it is you're shutting yourself away when Louis allows it." Lestat rested his chin on his arms. "It's alright. I promise your secret will never spill from these lips."

A trick. Cruel mockery at best. "This floorplan doesn't allow for a basement."

"Yes, I saw. I thought you might've changed things up with an attic this time." He'd seen Herbert's victims. He couldn't be this naive, could he?

"There isn't one," he answered at last, flat. It would be alright if that answer got back to Louis, at least.

"Then where do you--hells, Herbert, where do you work?"

"There." He gestured vaguely to the desk, with its unassuming stack of books and accordion folders, pens and pencils and notebooks.

"Here."

"I've been doing translations. Theory." Almost unconsciously, he stepped near and ran a finger up the spine of the largest book.

It still smelled of smoke. They'd carried it all, as much as they could hold, that night; Louis grabbing rare first editions of poetry, art, philosophy, Herbert laden in lore and alchemy and irreplaceable horrors left to rot in that library. Things even Miskatonic had owned only piecemeal.

"You were telling the truth, then," Lestat said, craning his neck to cast an almost distressed look Herbert's way as Herbert toyed with the scalpel he used as a letter opener. "To that victim."

"Hmm?" He slit the useless elastic band on one of his notebooks. Ridiculous, how he'd hoarded his knowledge when he was younger. Short-sighted.

If he'd given in to Hill, his work would be known the world over by now, even if his name was lost to history.

Now they both gathered dust, and nothing changed.

"Why'd you do it?" Lestat pressed, leaning off the chair as though he were chained to it.

He could've played dumb, but that wouldn't throw Lestat off the scent. It would only prolong the irritation. "Louis asked me."

"That's it?"

"Yes." Louis was everything he had now. Not Dan, not glory, not a cure for death (a viable one, anyway). "It was impractical. You might've found us."
"Then you're in the clear. Here I am."

"It doesn't matter." It did. Fear of Lestat had kept Herbert in check, kept him submerged in the loyal affections he'd pledged to Louis. But now Lestat was here, and so was the anxiousness of discovery.

"Bloodsport is beneath you." Lestat had gotten up at last, though he still hovered at a distance. "You were meant for purer things."

"You're tired of me, so now I was meant for scientific discovery?" Where were these words when there had been a lab and endless possibility?

"I--" Lestat cut himself off. "I want you to be happy. You've thrown yourself between extremes. Is there nothing else?"

"You're one to talk." Professing undying devotion one minute and leaving him for dead the next.

"I'm all extremes, dar--Herbert. Surely you don't mean to emulate my foolishness." He came nearer and held a hand out towards the little handwritten notebook. "And in some things I am ever constant, you know."

"Yes, I know." How well Herbert knew the constancy of Lestat and Louis' love. He'd plumbed its depths so many times, allowing Louis' pleasurable memories to infuse him and live in his mind. The sensation of their long-time devotion was staggering, existing on a timescale that dwarfed Herbert's lifetime entirely, and Louis was not greedy with his memories.

Herbert had found within himself a taste for their happiest times, and how could he begrudge or deny so authentic a feeling?

He handed over the book, if only to watch Lestat's face. Surely there would be a tell: boredom, irritation, eye-rolling disdain at the pages written smaller than any human could manage, the intricately-shaded diagrams of muscle and sinew and exposed organs surmounted by untouched faces helpless with ecstasy.

(They enjoyed it. He always made sure that they felt pleasure over the pain, that as he sipped away their lives they were given such small recompense as he could manage. He made sure they didn't die lonely.)

"Beautiful." Heartfelt and brief. "She drew, you know. Nothing like this."

"Yes." Louis didn't talk about the child, but Herbert knew. How could he not? He felt her ghost constantly, a metaphor Louis would take for reality if he ever spoke it.

"Good," Lestat said. "I was never much for long conversation. We actors revel in dramatics, but we're piss-poor at dwelling on anything of depth. Too messy."

Herbert felt the weight of observation.

"It's good that he has you." Lestat flipped to another page, leaving the subject behind. "What will you do with it?"

"What?"

"You had such grand plans for your research. Infamy through the centuries. What's to become of these lives you've honored?"
It touched something in him to hear Lestat hit so casually on the idea of preserving the dead. Louis would see slaughter, cruelty. Wasn't it crueler, Herbert had argued many times in his own head, to have them die quick and meaningless deaths? Here, in that little book, they would live lifetimes. But.

"Nothing."

"Time's slipping away from you already." Lestat handed back the book. "Don't let them go to waste. I could find you a publisher; a whole horde."

"There's nothing in it. No conclusions worth reading yet." What vain hope, to allow himself that 'yet."

"What of fiction?" Lestat remained, face calm and too knowing. "It's an old trick, but a good one." Herbert had to smile wryly at that. "You'd have me write the next volume of your Chronicles?"

"Already out, thanks to Daniel. You'll have to speak with his lawyers. But surely an artbook would be better."

The notebook went on and back, at times containing studies of older reflections. Hands, so many hands: his own, severed; the grotesque, friendly little thing he'd made to impress Dan once; those that had touched him either too infrequently or too much. Small, chubby, little-girl hands in dainty gloves. Rawboned boys' hands on paintbrushes and...other things. A pair Herbert didn't recognize, folded neatly into a box with a violin bow.

He took, when he drank.

"And you of all people should know how much fiction can do for a young person." (A lonely young person, isolated and strange, reading and rereading Shelley and dreaming of an endless future. He'd shown so much of where he'd come from to this man while doing his best to conceal what he thought really mattered.) "You might be an inspiration." Lestat's face was soft, meditative. Hopeful, as he leaned close.

"Of all kinds of things." His work might lead to so many places, zeniths of medicine and depths of serial killing. "It's not ready."

"The offer stands." They were close enough for Lestat's curls to brush his shoulder, and there was something between them. Magnetism. Curiosity. A dare. Herbert held his position, waiting to see if Lestat would make a move, but after a long moment of nothing Lestat drew back, and he found he regretted the distance.

"What would it take," Lestat was asking, "to make it complete?"

"More," he said. There were so many more lives to catalogue. Generations of them. He could work tirelessly and never be done. Without the concrete goal of his reagent, he was adrift. Gathering information for its own sake, hiding the work he had always been proud of.

"A vampire at last. Endless greed." Lestat smiled, hands clasped behind his back. "I don't regret making you."

"Comforting." It was, but the bitterness was stronger.

"It was meant to be. And I would, further, regret your loss. In any capacity."
Regret. Didn’t they all have them? Herbert looked up, finally, at the view he’d been avoiding. "Did you really miss me, Lestat?"

"Most assuredly, mon savant." Big eyes, grey and striking, shone down into his with such sincerity. "You’ve never believed in your own worth, which I would go on many more quests to prove."

It was an ego stroke, something he'd always enjoyed (craved) unabashedly. Not that Louis didn't love him—he did, absolutely, in his quiet and conditional way. His love’d kept Herbert alive through every night since the first time they made that leap.

But Lestat had pulled him from his mortal downward spiral into obscurity and death, when all he could think of was the next sale. He'd been Herbert's first in so many ways, had made him feel cherished and adored and sexy regardless of the truth. Made him feel smart. And since then--it was impossible to make love to Louis without feeling Lestat's overpowering presence, there in the memories.

(When Louis would make love. Herbert had made his mistakes, damaged that connection, and he'd still not quite figured out the combinations of behavior that made Louis want him again. Didn’t try too hard, because no doubt ‘spontaneity’ was part of it.)

"Hmm." Leather jacket and silk traded in for denim, a little less flashy for their neighborhood, but broken-in and delightful to their fine-tuned senses.

Herbert had killed that closeness with his rage at an insult. He wasn't Nicki and never would be, and the way Lestat had come apart for him that night had cut both ways. He'd learned, since then, to ask for so much less.

(It was hard to say at exactly what point it became inevitable. Maybe years ago.)

Lestat's skin was harder than Louis’ memories preserved it, turned to stone by more potent, ancient blood. Louis had known Lestat, held him, in the time since then, but his memories seemed to be crystallized in the Rue Royale. Herbert wanted to know if the smell was the same, if he was really experiencing the moment or floating unanchored in thoughts not his own. He pressed his nose into Lestat's collar, inhaling. Scenting like an animal.

His prey held still as only the dead could manage, not even embracing him as Herbert's gaze rose to meet eyes that were wide as saucers, lacking the bravado and suaveness their owner had long ago worn as his persona. Not even offered the deniability of a stronger, insistent partner, Herbert was left to damn himself. And he did.

(Entropy was just too slow.)

Lestat responded to the first kiss not at all, hands hesitating around Herbert's face when it ended. The second was the roar of a burst dam, raw and physical in a way that Herbert had never felt safe to experience. Not even (especially not) for Dan, who wanted gifts from his mind, or else a dream of him. Not for Louis, in whose eyes Herbert was a glass projected image. But Lestat gladly held the physicality of him, the meat and bone and inconvenient, ugly sounds. Lestat swept him up when Herbert ordered it, burying him in the crook of the chaise lounge, hiding him with kisses and cold, sheltering bulk. Skin didn’t break, but he felt dizzy. He didn't need to breathe, but he was drowning.

There was no point to removing clothing (Louis had made that clear), but Lestat always did, and true to form Herbert’s tie went flying. Lestat's belt tore, buckle twisting until the tab snapped off and fell to the shag carpet.
"Oh, darling," Lestat gasped, "Oh, my love, my own," he lied, he lied, and it felt so good to be wanted back for his flesh and his blood as lips played over his throat.

And when his shirt came unbuttoned, Lestat's large musician's hand stole unerringly inside to stroke the textured scar Herbert still bore from the knife that had made their decisions for them.

(Lestat had married in haste as always, and Herbert had long ago forced himself to make peace with the idea that he'd be a matter of repentance in leisure. But Lestat said he was glad, said he didn't regret what that pathetic idiot had forced upon them all.)

He pulled Lestat tight within the vee of his legs by clutching denim lapel and plunged a hand into a back pocket too tight to ever hold a wallet.

"God, I love you, still, Herbert. Your passion--"

Something... clicked, inside, like a dislocation or a relocation of a joint, right when Lestat's fangs grazed his throat. Barely a nick, but.

Passion.

That's what Marius had called it that night. Echoing in Herbert's head, rattling in his bones. He'd laughed, and said, "Your passion is admirable," when Herbert made his request--his demand.

Armand had risen to meet him at the door. Armand, the dead child-adult-murderer-innocent, who wore more of Herbert's own face than he wanted to admit. Who'd said, with cruelty that now seemed kind, "This island is full of donors. Take care of it yourself." He'd made to turn Herbert away, a spring of coiled irritation that went deeper than Herbert's presence.

He remembered nail marks that matched Armand's outsized hands; had watched later as the redhead wrapped arms around himself and dug nails in until he bled.

He hadn't come closer to the ancient vampire, but in a blink he was inside the room. There he was, explaining his philosophy. There he was. Passion. The invigorating passion of a new age.

"That's what keeps us alive," Marius had said. "We vow never to make another in our image, and yet we cannot help it. Without that theft, we would wither away. We can't help but be overcome by such beauty."

Herbert had felt himself moved, coming closer in what sick recognition told him was the dumb calm of too many victims. Susceptible, too susceptible, if even Louis could turn this down.

He'd kept talking, stating his case and giving his rationale ("Too intense--unstable--just temporary--rest--my choice") even as his body moved into the den.

There Marius was, smiling, saying how pleased he'd been to see that passion. How important it was for Herbert to become comfortable with his urges.

There it was, the hand on Herbert's shoulder, touching the soft, beautiful, subtly sheened fabric of the finest clothes he'd ever worn. The type of thing Lestat had offered to dress him in; the things Armand had left abandoned. No need of them here, something whispered.

"Lestat may be angry. He was quite territorial with me, when this one was mortal." Bored, jaded, almost jealous boy's voice, as though Armand had not 'trespassed' later on.

There was a memory, pulled to the front of Herbert's mind like scrolling through microfilm, of a
tongue in a gash and the most exquisite pain of his mortal life. His hands on broad shoulders, grey eyes blazing up and claiming him from a kneel. Marius's smile was smooth, calm, and so very, very like Hill’s. He shuddered and bulled on.

"Lestat's decided I'm not worth the trouble." Maybe it was his own bitterness that had blinded him as he signed his own execution. It didn't matter now. It hadn't mattered to him then like it should have.

"There you have it," Marius had smiled. "His own man. I'm honored to be trusted with your confidence."

It had been nothing of the sort, his rage and nothing else, but it worked its charms: Armand shivered where he sat, drawing his knees up to his chest as he worried away at those red, red marks on his arms. Herbert remembered staring at them, entranced, as he found his chin gripped between cold, calloused fingers.

"I'm so sorry for what you have suffered." Soothing. "Lestat's negligence is mine as well."

"It's not important." He'd been overcome with a need to be elsewhere, anywhere, so long as he was away from that room.

"It is," Marius had insisted. "He's left you with no one. Adrift, barely a year old. Too vulnerable to survive on your own. It's inexcusable."

He wasn't alone. He had Louis, and the library, and that elusive regard. But he couldn't say so. He hid his thoughts as deep as they could go, and his dead heart quickened with terror as his own limbs became remote to him.

This was how death happened, the death of all that mattered, for Herbert West: his body trapped and forced to move to another's will, tears streaking his face. The body giving what he valued in defiance of his brain. Giving secrets, and life, and knowing it was all corruption.

Last time he had fought. Last time he'd had the will to resist.

This time--

This time there had been no shovel handy.

This time he'd given in.

His body had lain down, a hand cradling his head, one leg crooked up at the knee, and Marius's kisses had felt good on his mouth and neck and wrist. His body had writhed and moaned like that of a whore, but he was no such thing—he hadn't the dignity of claiming the reactions were faked.

When Marius pierced him low on the throat and hummed a connoisseur's enjoyment of his meager blood, he'd thought that was the end. Death, in a vampire’s embrace; the natural order of things.

He had things to lose (he had Louis, and maybe a friend in Daniel, if his ministrations had truly been kindness and not gift-wrapping), but--he'd thought that was the end, with Lestat's tacit approval.

He'd been wrong.

There had been humiliation yet, as he was offered like a party favor, shared like a loving-cup. As a second pair of fangs pierced his wrist, the few seconds of contact an eternity before it withdrew.
He could see Armand retreating to the safety of his chair, wrapping himself tighter while his face flushed with Herbert's blood.

"Don't worry," a voice had reassured him, "this is a gift." And he'd been released, let up, before Marius dragged a cut over his heart and forced Herbert's head down, allowing no resistance and then encouraging, praising his vivacity. Herbert had run to the only place left to him, deeper and deeper until the words in his ears were spoken as if through cotton. By the time he knew who he was again, Louis had a death grip on his arm and wouldn't look him in the eyes.

Louis had been so angry, the feeling rolling off him in waves. Once that guiding hand was no longer necessary, Louis recoiled from his touch. Spoke to him like some cracked, ruined maiden, and kept his distance.

Which was, of course, fair enough. Louis had been clear about his expectations; Herbert's ignorance and the already-existing situation had saved him before, and he knew the final night with Lestat had been pushing it, excuses of revenge and distraction aside.

For him to allow himself to be overcome so easily, though, by his physical desires?

He was lucky Louis had ever relented, that rigid, proper spirit bending enough to forgive Herbert for his weakness and the mess it caused. Forgive him the fire and the flight and the loss of Lestat's nearness (how long it had taken him to understand that wound).

He'd been so lucky, and now?

'Passion' was a kind way to describe what Daniel had seen clear in him as he'd fucked his way through that household.

For this there would be no excuse, no remorse.

And just like that, Lestat had won. By forfeit.

"Get off," Herbert gasped. He needed space.

"What's wrong? Did I hurt you?" Did he intend to keep this charade up until Louis found them together, in flagrante delicto as it were?

"Get off." He was freed, but not fast enough, never fast enough to beat out the terror of losing the ability to move. His struggles left marks on Lestat's arms, and the confusion was becoming a shrewd sort of understanding that was worse by far.

He braced himself for some platitude, some simpering expression of solidarity, but none came. Instead Lestat folded himself onto the ground with his back to the chaise, staring ahead. "You should tell Louis."

"That would make things easier for you." He was exhausted, muscles overtaxed.

"For you. I can help."

Herbert bristled. "I'm sure. Wouldn't want to miss any lurid details."

"Lurid--" Now he was good enough for eye contact. "What are you talking about?"

"This was your master plan, wasn't it? Prove I'm faithless, so Louis will be yours again?"

He locked himself down, slammed his mind shut much too late. It wasn't as though he could lie,
but he could spare his ex-lover his shame and hurt, at least. Spare him the visuals.

"My love, you'll have to back up. We can't all be geniuses." Lestat's hand touched his no-doubt-mussed hair, another tell, and he slapped it away without thought.

Lestat had the nerve to react as though it hurt.

"He told me. Warned me, before--I can't do it again." Herbert gave a hiccupering little laugh. "No common decency."

Easy, had he always been so easy? One night of a tall, handsome, powerful man looking at his useless writing, a few platitudes about his pretty pictures and frustrated hopes, and he'd tumbled. Like he'd blundered into death, like he would have done had Dan ever so much as hinted an attraction in his life.

Out of control. Impulsive. Terribly terribly destructive.

"Louis." And now that handsome face darkened, mouth tightening into something cruel and grey eyes snapping with ugly, smoldering anger, and Herbert couldn't even bring himself to care as Lestat drew back with bizarre caution and growled, "Call him. Please." (an afterthought) "He does allow that much, doesn't he?"

Louis already knew. Of course he had to, the way Herbert's emotions had come loose from his control. He'd be here any minute, no doubt. Herbert laughed, unhinged. He'd given up his great work for that man, and thrown the recompense away so quickly.

~*~*~*~

"Why'd you agree?" Dan asked later, much later, with Katherine in his arms. No doubt she could hear the hammer of his heart, trying one more time to escape. Crawford hadn't said when he'd be home. They were waiting, knowing without knowing.

She buried her nose in his sweater, worn thin from years of washing. The university logo was almost illegible now. "I was relieved," she admitted. "If I'm some kind of monster for enjoying doing all this with you...at least I'm not alone." She wasn't made up, wore pajamas and a ponytail and a clean face--the scene wasn't for her, after all. But still his heart broke with affection, with near-to-awe.

"We'd be lost without you." Simple truth.

"That's what I keep telling you."

"I mean it." His face grew serious. "We trust you. We love you. And," he leaned in, "it is really hot when you tell us what to do."

"And if I hurt you?"

"You wouldn't. Not unless we asked."

"I'll have to take your word for it." She let him tighten his embrace, both of them bathing in the healing of that basic contact.
Another quarter hour passed, the ticking of the wall clock deafening by the end. When the door
opened at last, Dan's guts knotted tight enough to strangle him. Crawford wore the same distracted,
distant look he'd had that night, gone from his higher judgement and boiled down to raw instinct.

"You need something?" Dan asked, playing along; half of him had already slipped into the fantasy,
confused and unbalanced.

Crawford ignored him, eyes trained on Katherine. "You've had him long enough. I want him."

"Why?" Dan felt her spine turn to iron as she sat up, pulling free from him.

"None of your business."

"I'm not going to let you break my toy." Bored, almost, but unyielding. She had a proprietary hand
on Dan’s leg. "I like the way he begs."

Crawford could move with eerie, fluid speed when he wanted, was on them in a second with his
hand wrapped, feather light, around Katherine's throat. "You can have whatever's left."

She flicked her eyes up and down, measuring him. "Fine." And then she got up from the bed,
gesturing with grand manners.

"Kat, what the hell?" She was supposed to fight for him, wasn't she? He got up to follow her, but
Crawford stepped into his path.

"Shut up," Crawford growled.

"Be a good boy, Dan," was all Katherine had to say as she settled herself into the nearby armchair,
leaving him to his fate.

And then Crawford put his hands on him, and it wasn't Dan's choice to be backed over towards the
bed where he and Kat had just-so-happened to be going through their restraints earlier (expensive
restraints, safe ones; Kat hated the idea of anything jerry-rigged, got upset the time something
worked free and chafed him--)

"You're beautiful," Crawford said so gently and objectively it was almost perverse--like Dan was a
thing instead of a person. "I'm going to touch you."

Not 'may I', no question, just hands at his hips pushing him back step-by step, just a hard cock
digging into his thigh when he balked.

"Crawford, what--" His own voice sounded high and foreign in his ears as he froze, grabbing
weakly onto Crawford's shoulders.

"I'm not going to tell you to be quiet. You can talk." Hand, hand, sliding back and around to grab
his ass and make him grind against Crawford; he yelped and jumped and then with an almighty
\textit{crack} his cheek was just barely stinging.

"Slow down." Fear screeched across his nerves like a bow. He was already getting hard. "You're
acting weird. We should," he swallowed hard as Crawford touched the red spot on Dan's cheek,
cool by contrast. "We should talk."

"So talk." For a moment Crawford's hands were gentle, so gentle, that Dan didn't notice the cuff
until it was cinched tight around his wrist.
He tried, but the words turned into a moan as vicious fingers pinched his nipple and twisted.

"Is that all?" Crawford laughed at him.

"You're not--" he didn't want to talk anymore, wanted Crawford to eat him alive with that well-honed tongue. But every time he reached out the man backed away.

"I barely touched you, and you're as wet as a five dollar fuck." Eyes, judging, when Dan wanted his hands. "You're so respected. Handsome man among men, Dr. Cain. How do you think they'd feel about you now?"

Shame burned in his cheeks, and when he reached to touch himself Crawford caught his hand.

"I bet they'd want you as much as I do. I could line them up and watch them bend you in half, until the whole block heard you scream. Not that you'd be able to talk. I'd keep your jaw busy."

Wanted.

Vanity was an embarrassing fault, but it was what Dan owned. He'd loved being loved, having a vicious, deadly regard focused utterly upon him --and when it turned from him, when it didn't go far enough, he'd resented.

So many times the man who'd forced him into horrors had stopped just short of giving him love as he understood it. Some nights Dan's face and throat still ached with remembered, unfinished touches.

"I--I don't want that," he stuttered, unable to disguise the way he was already panting. "You can't make me."

"Oh, Dan. Of course I can." A shove got him off-balance and his wobbling allowed Crawford to capture his other wrist, lock him down (down, down, trapped pinned to a table--stop). "I can do whatever I'd like to you, because you won't fight me."

He yanked so hard and fruitlessly against the cuffs that he overbalanced and landed on the mattress, and there Crawford was, on top of him, hand at his throat and knee jammed up between his legs beneath his slippery-hard cock.

"No--I don't--" So possible, suddenly, the idea of a parade of men there to see him bent and subjugated, when before he'd always hidden the desire inside him. They’d laugh, at first, sneer at his unmanly position. Until they saw Crawford fucking him black and blue, heard him moan like he might die for the pleasure of it. Then they’d be aching in their prim, stiff suits. Their orderly little worlds undone, just like Dan’s. Because of him. Wanting him, wanting to be wanted as badly as he was; either way. The once-abhorrent little thought was making him dizzy.

"But I won't," Crawford whispered in his ear, easing his shirt up to expose his chest. The cuffs meant it had to stay on, rucked-up and ridiculous and somehow sluttier than he ever was topless. "Do you know why?"

Full lips brushed over one hard nipple as they formed the words, and he couldn't help straining up to meet them.

"You're mine." Crawford bit down, sucking the little nub raw.

"N-hgh!" Dan choked as Crawford shoved his fingers into his mouth, holding Dan still when he balked at the taste of sweat and skin. The spread of them forced his jaw wide, and a trail of drool
dripped down his chin as he sucked, helpless. Just before he was able to shut his mind off, Crawford withdrew. Dan whimpered, shivering as his lover wiped those wet digits down his chest, his stomach--and stopped.

"I want you to beg for it." Crawford met his eyes, and for a second there was a flicker of uncertainty behind the act, watching for Dan's response.

"Please," Please use me. Please make me feel needed. Please don't let me get away .

Another slap, light and tingling. "That could mean anything," Crawford chastised him. "We both know you're filthier than that."

"Just, fuck --please!" He groaned.

Crawford straddled him, smiling, and began to rock his hips against Dan's trapped erection, drifting up toward a peak of sensation and then crashing down again. Dan tried to reach for him, to relieve the pressure himself, only to be stopped short by the restraints.

"Oh. You wanted me to go, right?" Crawford asked, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

It didn't register, at first, what was happening. The weight on him diminished, and Dan closed his eyes, waiting to be rolled over or repositioned.

"Wh...?"

The mattress shifted, bounced up with the loss of 140 pounds of man, and Dan tried to sit up.

Clank. The restraints caught on the headboard.

"Crawford, what--"

"You heard me, Dan." He took a step back, delicately, and the cruelty on his features was alien and so, so fucking sexy. "Beg for it."

And he didn't want to; more than that, he couldn't, voice gone, words caught and choking him in his throat.

Worse, though, he couldn't reach out. His hands couldn't catch onto anything but the things holding him back as the one who'd put him there moved away.

"Don't." He let go of his last grasp on the frame, and fell. They all left, running ahead toward death. He was struck by a sudden certainty that if he lost sight of Crawford, he'd see the man next in pieces. "Don't go. Please, please." His lips were too dry. He was cracking. "Don't, you don't--I'll do anything."

Crawford took a step back, wavering, and tried to hold onto the role. "Anything?"

He rattled his restraints, felt them take the smallest chip out of the headboard. "Crawford, please!"

"Your word, Dan," Katherine stepped between them, stilling Dan's shaking with a cool hand on his forehead. "Say the word."

Crawford's face appeared over her shoulder, stricken. "Are you alright? I thought--you didn't say it. I thought you were okay, God I'm so, so sorry, I should never have--"

"Crawford. Listen to me."
His mouth snapped shut.

"We're going to figure this out. Dan first." She reached up and began loosening the first restraint.

"Wait! I'm," he gulped, "I'm okay. I don't want to stop."

"You didn't look okay." Her eyes scrutinized him like she was preparing a case file.

And yeah, maybe he wasn't...a hundred percent. But fuck, he'd seen Crawford reduced to tears and gasps and thankful words a handful of times over the past two years, and he'd never had to use a safeword.

Dan could stick it out in his own scene.

So he swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to meet Kat's turquoise gaze unwaveringly. He mostly failed.

"I can handle it," he said.

"Dan." She stroked his hair back so he couldn't hide behind that steel curtain (another reminder, same-but-different again since he'd grown it out). "This is serious. We care about you, and it would upset us to harm you. Are you really alright?"

"I need to be." He shuddered. "I need to know I can do this."

"It doesn't have to be right now." She held his face, brushing her thumb over his cheekbone. "We can wait, try again--"

"Yes it does." He'd never be able to look Crawford in the eye and ask him for this again. "There has to be one thing I don't run away from." Not again.

"Think of Crawford, if not yourself," she warned him.

And he did. "You were doing great," he reassured the man, mustering up a smile. "Just don't--do whatever you want to me. Be rough. Just," it felt shameful to admit, but he owed it. "Don't say you'll leave. Pretend that you need me."

"We do," Crawford whispered, and Katherine leaned her head back to nuzzle gently against his shoulder.

"One more time," Dan pleaded. "If I really can't handle it, I'll use the word, okay?"

They teetered on the edge, both men looking to Katherine. At last, she nodded. "Alright. I'm holding you to your word. I'll be very disappointed if you let me down."

As she retreated she touched Crawford's arm. "I'm still here," she murmured. "I won't let you hurt him."

"Promise?" Crawford's whispering voice was harsh in the quiet bedroom--the main one, the one that held Kat always and the others depending on comfort levels--

And oh. Oh, Jesus. Dan had thought this was about himself; what wasn't, after all?

"Hey." He stomped the self-loathing down hard and hooked an ankle around Crawford's hip. "You love me." He craned his neck to ensure contact with those almost-not-quite-panicked eyes. (They hadn't, they'd never said--) "I trust you not to really hurt me. And I won't make you, okay?"
"I--" Crawford swallowed hard.

"Please, babe." Dan couldn't repress the phrase, one he'd used for lovers before the worst (and the best) happened. "Just--just go nuts, okay? I want you to."

"You don't know what that means." Crawford's eyes were haunted.

"I'm the guy who almost died having kinky vampire sex, remember? I'd say that makes a better barometer than most." (Or worse.)

"This is serious, Dan."

"I'm being serious. I'll tell you if it hurts; and even if you got carried away, that's why Kat's here. Come on," He made a small circle with his foot against Crawford's skin. "I'm giving you permission to do all the bad, scary things you ever thought about."

No answer. When Crawford finally spoke again, it was to Katherine. "If you have to, promise you'll hit me. Whatever it takes to make me stop."

"I won't let you hurt him," Katherine repeated. "And I know I won't need to hurt you."

"...Okay." Crawford twisted his hands together in front of him. "Should I start over?"

Dan shook his head. "Just kiss me. I shouldn't have asked you to do all that." Too much, too much all at once. Give Dan Cain an inch and he'd take your whole life.

Still looking to Katherine for reassurance, Crawford crawled between Dan's legs, grasping his face with both hands before going in for a deep, gentle kiss. Then another, both of them careful with the flagging embers of their libidos. With the third Crawford bit Dan's lip and tugged, running his teeth along the captured skin before pulling away again.

"Like that," Dan sighed, pushing himself to be as vocal as he could to encourage Crawford.

"Like that, huh?" The growl, oh God, not threatening but definitely there.

Touches skated up his arms and back down, then over his chest and along his sides.

Stroking, kneading almost, at his body, real and present and alive. Crawford nuzzled and then bit his earlobe, sucking too lightly to leave a mark, and Dan groaned in disappointment.

Christ, imagine going in to work with a hickey at his age.

Let them all wonder.

"So responsive," the whisper tickled his ear. "I'm going to drive you up the wall."

"Please." He got a leg up, over Crawford's hip, and dared to try and pull him in with it. Their erections ground together, and it was nice to feel that warmth and care, but he didn't just want nice.

"Harder," he muttered into his own arm.

Crawford pulled back, instead, not going away but tracing feather-light tormenting strokes over Dan's goosebumped skin.

"You really want..."
"Yes." He gripped the headboard and arched up, tipping his head back to expose his throat in a gesture of complete submission.

Ruin me, he thought.

With his eyes closed, he was left to track Crawford by sensation: his weight, tentative and gentle, closer and then gone again; the damp heat of his breath over Dan's Adam's apple, scenting like a predator before clamping down--not the move of a killer but an alpha, demanding obedience. Demanding awe. And Dan gave it without hesitation.

The marks he would have--he wouldn't be able to hide it any more; not what they thought of him, but what he really was. He groaned through the kiss that followed, straining into the roughening touches as Crawford squeezed his hips, his ass. The ache left behind was proof this was real.

"You're so good," Crawford ground against him again, his voice a guttural grunt with the exertion. "I should keep you like this."

Chained here and used, adored, for the rest of his days. Crawford and Kat taking turns, just--"Yeah." The bruises were thick around his throat now, skin flaming red when he nodded.

Crawford's whispers grew lower, the heat of his breath carrying them across Dan's skin, at ease in a way the previous act hadn't been. And Dan swallowed it greedily.

So good. Made for this, to be spread wide and begging. His lovers', and no one else's.

"More," he rasped. Even the marks weren't good enough, weren't deep enough. Even like this, one foot gripped toward either side of the mattress, all but presenting, he had to plead.

"Not yet." Crawford scooted down the bed to nip at the arch of Dan's hipbone, tongue playing teasingly along his pelvic cut.

"Come on!" He flexed his arms, trying to pull himself up to argue, but he was pinned there. A tiny peck on the head of his dick made him jump.

"No. I'll tear you up." Snuffling breath, then Crawford palmed his cock with that same agonizing gentleness.

I wish.

"I'm ready," Dan whined. He just got a headshake and an almost painful squeeze in response. "Check!" Their eyes met, and Crawford slipped his other hand up, brushed Dan's balls, and then ventured further back to discover the slickness there.

"When..."

"Earlier." He forced himself to stay still, passive, rather than thrust down on that not-quite-there finger. "I wanted to..."

(Kat had helped, soothed him through the stretch and his blushes and shocks. The blush was back now.)

"You're still--"

"I'm good." Beyond. He was going to snap from the ache. "Just like this," he said again.

Crawford bit his lip, his own arousal flushed and evident beneath the hurriedly applied condom.
His eyes narrowed, his finger withdrawing only to shove two more inside, rough and merciless even with the preparation. Dan gasped.

"You want this?" Crawford asked him again, stretching his fingers apart. "You want it so much, you deprived me of the chance?"

It hurt, right on the line of a perfect burn that hazed his mind. He took it as a challenge. "Harder."

"You can't handle it." Part of the game now, fingertips brushing knowingly past those crucial nerves and ignoring them.

"Goddamn it," Dan was sweating, muscles clenching and twisting and unable to reach relief on his own. Unwilling to. "Do it already!"

His skull almost hit the headboard when Crawford pulled on his hips, dragging him down the bed until his lower back was lying on Crawford's kneeling form. He must've looked ridiculous, overlong hairy legs half-hooked over his small lover's shoulders, hips bucking and grinding against air.

Crawford kissed the inside of his thigh and bit down again, drawing tiny pinpricks of blood. Dan's vision crested with white, remembering what almost was. This isn't him. Crawford won't hurt you. No matter how much Dan wanted him to in some twisted backdoor of his mind.

"You think you deserve this, Dan?" Crawford asked through bloody lips, eyes burning into Dan's head, his soul. God, God, blood, so dangerous, so filthy, even though they were all clean it still made his heart pound-- "You want me to fuck you?"

"Ye--"

He didn't get the word out before a sudden thrust gave him what he'd been begging for and punched the air right out of him.

Jesus.

Jesus.

Holy fucking God, that was tight.

Crawford froze, remaining utterly motionless and weirdly focused through Dan's shocked silence. After a moment, he heard someone shift, bare feet padding across the room, and he managed to spare enough attention for quick nod and a thumbs-up before Kat had to intervene again.

Because she would.

Because he was safe.

He went limp.

Impossible though it was, in that moment it felt as if Crawford and Kat were the only things holding him together, the momentary stillness little help as he panted and clamped reflexively around the strange invasion. He tried to dig his heel into Crawford's back, to draw himself down further (it wasn't even all of it, what was he thinking ohgodohgod but he needed it), encouraging.

It started slow, Crawford's careful rolls and thrusts as much to hold himself back as to ease Dan in.

"Hold on." There was some awkward fumbling as Crawford crawled backward, his knees sliding
loose and the two of them uncoupling. He ached at the emptiness.

Crawford leaned over him, on hands and knees and firmly with the upper hand. "I need better leverage."

They started again, and Dan barely had time to readjust before he was empty again before being blinded by another thrust that became another. Crawford moved now at a steady, relentless pace that barely left Dan time to breathe, wet slaps of skin accompanying their harsh grunts.

It was beyond good or bad; he didn't have room to think as his body was buffeted and broken into something new. He didn't recognize his own hoarse voice at first, transfixed completely by the breath between separate and together. Wondering if they'd rattle the bed to pieces, both of them far too old for it.

He was leaking, balls drawn tight with need as Crawford learned his way around and found the prostate from inside. Then--then it was merciless, each startled, pleasured cry Dan made seeming to draw him on harder, faster, more targeted as he braced a hand to either side of Dan's torso and buried his face in Dan's bruised neck.

His wrists were chafing and he was getting a cramp somewhere in his left hip and his back might never recover, but it was perfect.

He'd thought he wanted danger.

What he got--overwhelmed, beyond refusal or lies, tied up, bleeding, bruised, devoured and subjugated to his lovers--was safety.

Katherine was there when they broke apart, undoing the restraints and pressing a mug of water into Dan's hand. Crawford watched him with wary eyes, on the edge of panic. Dan smiled, his aching arm reaching down to cover Crawford's hand with his own.

"You were great." He was going to need to sleep for a week, and he'd look like he got hit by a train for at least as long, but there was a lightness in him that he hadn't felt for a very, very long time.

Crawford collapsed on top of him, squeezing hard enough to add to the bruises in his relief, nuzzling and kissing and laughing, ever so softly, with relief.

"Honestly." Dan didn't have to see Katherine to know she was smiling.

He scooted over as best he could, inviting her in beside them. He didn't mention what they'd discussed. "Couldn't have done it without you," he said instead, resting his head against her hip.

She'd probably hoped it would stop him believing in vampires. It hadn't. But stronger than his memories now was a need to protect this little peace, more important than any half-remembered devotion from the past. He spared a thought for his roommate, his friend, the center of his universe. And he put him to rest.

~*~*~*~

It took almost half an hour. Louis walked in as though he was prepared for a war zone, and Herbert forced himself to stay in the chair where he'd dragged himself, faking composure as best he could.
"Lestat, what have you done?" Louis started, more weary than angry. As if it had only been a matter a time.

"What have I--" Lestat's inexplicable anger, sunk beneath the surface as they'd waited, exploded. "You insufferable snob. Do you know what you've done, with all your noble suffering in silence?"

"Herbert, has something happened?" Ignoring Lestat entirely, as if the tall man were a child having a tantrum.

Herbert found his throat too tight to answer. He shrugged instead.

"You didn't call me home just to tell me you were rejected, did you? Because I--"

"Shut up, Louis! For once since your miserable death, shut up. You told me he didn't want to talk about it."

Louis' face hardened immediately. "I also said that was none of your business."

"Do you know why he didn't want to talk about it, mon amour?" Lestat growled. "Did that thought ever enter your self-righteous, cowardly brain?"

"Every man has his pride, Lestat. I'll not have you badger him simply to satisfy your vulgar--"

"Herbert, tell him!" Lestat's eyes were wide, voice almost shrill, and Herbert obeyed half just to try and stop the escalating shouting:

"I--I have to leave."

Louis, sweet, trusting Louis, who let him hunt alone and knew not of his practices (didn't want to know), simply asked, "When will you be back?"

"Not," Herbert sputtered. Even he'd understood, back when Dan told him as much. "I have to leave, Louis. I can't--control myself."

Apprehension. Startlement. And something canny, plots and schemes in that beautiful head. "Who did you kill?"

"He didn't kill anyone!" Lestat shouted in grand absurdity, grabbing Louis by one shoulder to gesture in Herbert's direction. "He kissed me!"

"And?" Wide-eyed mildness, that cruel prompt for more information. Explanation. Confession.

"Don't--you were very clear."

When Louis crossed to him and knelt by the chair, deja-vu of the first time but so much worse, he prepared himself mentally to move with the slap; it wouldn't do to allow Louis' wrist to shatter on top of all the rest. But rather than striking him, those beloved hands just reached out with infinite gentleness to force him into eye contact.

"I may have been clear, but you are not. Why must you leave? Are you unhappy, here with me?"

Beautiful and frightened, that green, like the memory of leaves in sunlight.

His shoulders shook at the thought of losing it.

"Don't punish me again. Don’t be angry," he hissed. Ingratitude. "I can’t bear waiting for you to
He’d become sentimental in death. Before he had known how to close himself off, to place his hopes wholly on the work. Gruber's death wouldn't be meaningless; Hill wouldn't walk free; Dan would come back. All because of the work. He never spoke about it--let them think he was a heartless bastard, as long as it ended in results. Well, now he had his results. No glory, no infamy, no good to the human race. He wasn't a scientist without his work, and who the hell was Herbert West otherwise? No one worth keeping. All he’d had, really, was the man staring at him with open confusion.

"I don't understand," Louis said.

"Of course you don't," Lestat spat. "Saint Louis, beneficent above all of us. You're so deep in your philosophy you have no time for our petty, lowly agonies."

"Be helpful or get out," Louis snapped at Lestat, softening as he returned to Herbert. "Please. Tell me."

"You made it clear my..." He swallowed the lump in his throat. Cold. He could be cold. "...indiscretions were not going to be tolerated after we left that place. I accepted your terms, and now I've violated them. Additionally," he fell off.

"Additionally?"

"While I was certain my prior involvement with Lestat and the other--encounter--wouldn't be replicated, I'm not confident of my restraint in this case."

"Such compliments," Lestat beamed, before remembering. "You see, Louis? An encounter. You could have waited for him to confide in you until the end times." And to Herbert, too serious to be an aside: "Older vampires than you have bent to that will, my friend. Why feel shame?"

Why. Of course someone like Lestat, to whom the rules didn't apply, wouldn't understand. Herbert struggled for a moment before exploding out of his chair in agitation.

"What do you care? You've won!"

"I wasn't fighting, darling," Lestat said too gently, gaze level and hands tucked into his pockets.

"Well, that makes it so much better," he spat, tucking his arms around himself and backing over to the desk. Away from Louis; away from them both. Towards the shreds of what he used to be. "I'm such a slut I can't even resist someone who has no interest in me."

"That's not what I said at all!"

"It felt good," he hissed, feeling his lips draw back, ugly, exposing his fangs. "The stimulus and the cravings affect me beyond my limits of control." They always did, growing worse the more he struggled to resist indulging. He’d thought being a junkie was bad. "It's disgusting."

"It always feels good." Lestat stood there in his torn clothes and tousled hair, the picture of deshabille, staring down at his boots. "It--we cannot help reacting to it, no matter who--" he twitched, rubbed his hands together, and said with some finality, “It wasn’t your failing.”

"I wasn't angry with you," Louis' voice barely registered above a whisper. His gaze flitted between
them as he took a few steps away from Lestat himself, pose beseeching. "I was angry for you. For what you'd suffered. How could you--"

"I suppose you told him this before right this moment?" Lestat studied Louis’ expression. "No, of course not. He should just know. Your communion beyond words; what wonders it's done for you."

Herbert ignored the seething, whatever it meant. "Why are you saying this now?" What benefit in trying to get Herbert to stay? He'd offered to remove himself.

"It's my failing for not saying it sooner." Louis' hands on his arms, too kind. "I never blamed you for it."

"And my work?" The root of it all. The little book hidden among his effects. The pursuit that had powered his very being.

Louis had no answer for that.

"One way or another, I'm unsuitable." Herbert hadn't meant it as an accusation. It was simply what was.

"You nearly died," Louis said. "So many times."

"Oh? I thought it was to keep the big bad wolf away." Lestat's eyes flashed, on the prowl. "Well, here I am. I might as well walk him down the path. I find a little danger has always been preferable to dying by degrees."

"I--" Louis shuddered, came close and pressed his soft gentleman's hands to Herbert's cheeks. There, eye-to-eye with a fey creature only slightly off-human, anything seemed possible. He wanted to close his eyes, but that would have meant losing time. "Your mind is so sharp, mon amour. So agile. I had thought that you merely required some other paths to apply it to, and you would grow content."

"It's alright," Herbert said numbly. "It was worth it, to have you this long." He turned and brushed a kiss to the left wrist. Louis gasped: too forward, too erotic a move, particularly in company, but he felt such love and emptiness in that moment that he couldn't care. "You don't have to fight for me. I yield; conscience clear." He looked past, to Lestat, so gold and blue and hungry. "No payment needed, though the offer is appreciated."

Everything was a tradeoff in the end, if you forced it to be. Louis was more than that. His Work should be more than that. He could be more than that.

"Don't let this happen." Lestat couldn't help himself in the end, it seemed. His hands were gripping Louis' shoulders. "Louis, for once in your life fight for something instead of mourning it. Tell him!"

"That's enough!" Herbert glared.

"He's right." Louis held his hand, refusing to let him retreat. "I can't falter in this."

"You don't have to do anything," Herbert assured him. He was sick to death of false pretenses.

"I chose to leave tonight knowing he would come here. Knowing you had begun to forgive what he
"You--" set me up "Why?"

"Vampires move slowly. I have heard so few answers that soothed my soul. But Armand was right about one thing--if we do not change, we condemn ourselves to death."

Hadhn't he? Changed his whole biochemical structure, his career, his very self. But Louis went on. "I was jealous of your connection with my maker, Herbert. And jealous of him for capturing your attention. In my paltry defense, you were determined to destroy one another then. But now..."

"But." He floundered, beset by confusion. "But--you're monogamous. You didn't tell me." He'd worked so hard to conform to the expectations given to him, in word and code and subtle mental cringes. It had been essential to do it right, this time: to achieve perfection and make up for how often he'd failed. Witness how Dan, whom he'd loved but not honored or obeyed, had left him.

"There, you see, mon cher?" Lestat sneered, so strangely taking Herbert's side after all that blood under the bridge. "How simple, to expect him to intuit it, when you put the very fear of--"

"And, Lestat, I--I'm not him. Whoever Nicki was to you, I can't--pretend." His voice sounded harsh in the warm room, as he gathered his notebook to his chest. (If he were smart, he'd have accepted what he was offered, but apparently being a substitute stung as much now as it ever had.)

"Is that why you did it?" There was still anger there, but it was hushed.

"It seems I wasn't the only one giving expectations." Cutting, decorous Louis, words honed to deadly precision whenever he spoke.

"You chose the information you showed me. What else should I have concluded?"

"He is with me still. It's true I saw him in you. Your ferocious pursuit of your talent. Your acidic wit. You are so like him, in some ways." Lestat's hand covered his mouth, eyes shutting briefly in a fit of despair. "Nicki went into the fire. The Dark Gift drove him to the pit of madness, and Armand pushed him in. I can't forget him."

So, there it was.

"But," Lestat went on, "I wouldn't ask you to become him. Any more than any one of us can be who we've lost."

"Careful. I might suspect you've grown up," Louis murmured.

"The curse of immortality, cher," Lestat chuckled wetly through unspent tears.

The cynic in Herbert wanted to puncture the idyllic scene. A scientist couldn't be content until a hypothesis was proven. Over and over. "I can't give up my work." That would certainly break things. "I agreed to stop to keep you safe, Louis. And that threat is standing in the living room propositioning us."

"Weren't you listening?" Lestat had composed himself in the quiet. "I'm good at keeping you out of trouble. I have quite the resume. I'm strong, experienced--I know your limits better than you do." His voice hardened. "If you promise no further experiments on yourself."

(Hand in a steel basin, blood running free, knowledgeable, nimble work of stitching by long fingers strangely accustomed to sewing if not medicine--)
"Why?" It rankled, that pointless limitation. Access to the most pristine testing ground ever seen, with full and complete ethical consent, and he was expected to abstain?

He'd wasted ten years not testing it on anything that would take more than a few hours to heal.

The fingers and eyes borrowed and transplanted from victims had been particularly...interesting, even if he hadn't been able to keep them.

(Skin grafts lasted longer, given Louis' typical lack of interest in undressing him.)

"I can control it. Why shouldn't I take advantage of a resource?"

"Because you can't!" Lestat threw his hands out. "You cannot stop, you won't listen. Tonight you shred yourselves to pieces, tomorrow you might walk out into the sun to prove me a liar!"

"Your only limit has always been death," Louis added. "And, it seems, a fear of me. Can you blame us for wanting to keep you safe? Is this so much to ask?"

Us. They both heard it, and Lestat was emboldened. "You still think like a mortal. You needn't dash yourself to pieces on some impossible timer. Wait! Let mortals find some darling new machine, some new smaller creature that crawls under human skin. You can learn so much. You can be invaluable to whoever you like, bestow your gifts on them as you choose. But only if you keep yourself whole. Hell and damnation," Lestat laughed at himself. "I'd make you a dozen poor lambs to toy with before I'd see you harm a hair on your head."

"You're concerned. For my safety." He meant it to be a skeptical statement, jaded and cool (left for dead so many times he'd grown used to the feeling), and yet it came out...breathy.

Vulnerable.

Hopeful, even, as his eyes darted between the two men whose regard he'd spent so long preparing himself to live without.

Dark and light, two gorgeous creatures far beyond his league and utterly absorbed in themselves and one another. (Though they'd saved him, both gone back into danger at risk to themselves, no one did that, no one--)

And it was Louis, of all people, who leaned in and kissed him, and Lestat, so surprisingly, who asked, "May I?"

It had become familiar and yet never less than surreal, the very idea of Louis. His lips were soft and clever and cold, and after only a few minutes he drew away, freeing Herbert to answer.

"Go ahead." He played a gruffness he didn't feel as he held his hand out to Lestat, invited him close under the scrutiny of those green eyes. For all his drive to be noticed and praised, he'd always hated being watched. At best it was beside the point of what he wanted them to see, the import of his work and his ideas; at worst it was dangerous, humiliating, removing him altogether from his body and painting a target on his back.

This was different. Even as Lestat stepped in and stole the taste of Louis that still lingered on his lips, even as he found himself caged in dead, impossibly loving arms on both sides, he didn't feel cowed. They held him, not back but up, a fearsome guard against the outside world and not a leash. Herbert had never been in the habit of turning down a resource, but now he floundered. These two
had each waded into blood and fire to save him rather than turn tail and run, though he’d offered nothing they needed. Perhaps that was the difference; their affections, if that’s what they were, were freely given rather than purchased.

"Why?" Why, his mind echoed. They looked with minimal interest past the achievements he was so proud of and to the man beyond. And he felt--felt--

"It’s obvious isn't it?" Lestat asked as Louis rested his chin on Herbert's shoulder.

"If it was, I wouldn't have asked."

"How many times have we said it, my darling?" Sweet, that nickname, the one Lestat had always used. Sweet, the look on his handsome face as he cast his warm, admiring gaze over them both, moving one hand up to stroke Louis' soft cheek. "I know it’s been at least a thousand on my part, and however reticent Louis might be, he's had considerably longer to catch up, haven't you, mon amour?"

And Louis beamed, suffusing the room with the sort of feeling Herbert had feared could be directed to only a single target.

"I regret to say I've likely been remiss there," he said softly, into Herbert's ear, "though perhaps we should be guided by Catullus. 'Give me a thousand kisses / then a hundred / then another thousand...'"

Herbert had always known intimately of Louis' silent love; unmistakable, with their minds so open to one another. He'd thought he knew it entire, the depths and the boundaries paced out to the inch. He'd always been noisily told of Lestat's, walls between them eternally an easy excuse to doubt and dismiss his own irresistible desires.

But here in their arms, all at once, he felt himself beginning to shake with the terror of belief. They held him closer, until he was left with nothing before him but the moment. But he'd always been a fool, hadn't he, never a thought beyond the next result, the next fix of any sort. He could feel Louis responding to the pulse of his thoughts, directing Lestat's hands as if in a dance. And though their hands met and their gazes held, they never turned their attention from Herbert.

Do it, he thought, his skin on fire and his all-important words left aside. But the painful relief didn't come.

Louis kissed him again instead, and smiled. "Words, love. It isn't fair to Lestat."

"Bastard," Herbert choked out, sharpened by need beyond his usual trained restraint. They could tell, surely they could--

"So few have the honor of ordering a prince, cher," Lestat murmured against his skin. "Don't let it go to waste." His every touch was its own restraint, careful within the boundaries Louis set, skating to the edges and then retreating. Cautious to a fault.

Herbert wondered at the story that changed, controlled manner told. It somehow seemed possible that he'd learn one day, if he asked.

"P--please," he managed, voice high and thin and humiliating in any other context. The word was one he'd always hated being forced to use. Demeaning, to beg. But here, hanging half-suspended through his lovers' effortless, inhuman strength, their hands and lips working so hard for him and
only him, it was right.

"Please what, mon coeur?" Louis whispered, heavy-lidded tease that he'd been long ago and hadn't shown since the fire. The *eroticism* of it--

Two pairs of cold hands, one marble, the other silk, both moving with exquisitely painful tenderness over his screaming skin, nails like glass touch-and-go over nipples and hair and scar tissue.

"Do command me," Lestat said between tiny cat's licks, making Herbert whimper the first few times he tried to answer.

"Please--" he finally groaned, arching up and back, "you. Kiss one another. Please."

Louis caught his eye, asking-without-asking if he was sure.

"You heard him." Herbert could hear the grin in Lestat's voice as he leaned across Herbert's shoulder.

"Not there." Herbert stopped them. "I can't see."

"Well, we can't have that," Lestat purred. "Here, Louis dear. Our scientist demands a demonstration."

Louis walked with apparent demure acceptance, but it was Lestat who gasped and bent beneath a subtle, sure touch. They were art centuries in the making, lost for a moment in the act. Herbert would've let them have it, knowing on some level he'd set them to a cheap test. But soon enough Lestat pulled away, eyes glittering and mouth red.

"Educational?"

"Very," Herbert managed.

"You look shaken," Lestat grinned. Even without linked minds, without a word between them, they were at his side in tandem, guiding him toward the chaise. They started again at his wrists, stretching him taut with complete gentleness, freezing the moment he pulled back.

"Whatever is the matter?"

"Not here." There wasn't room, not for all he wanted to see.

"Upstairs?" Louis offered, hesitant. It would mean many more things, in that private sanctum they'd built.

"Yes." He could've spun the logic of it--to them, to himself. But he wasn't so blind as to ignore what he was giving in to; he just didn't care.

They trooped along the neutral-painted hall, up the faintly creaking, uncarpeted stairway with scarred blondwood banister and bleached-out vacancies on the walls where the previous owners had bothered to commemorate their small suburban lives.

For nearly a decade, it hadn't mattered what this place looked like--not to Herbert or to Louis. Why decorate, when it was destined to decay?

And yet...seeing Lestat's blazing self outshine the bare 40-watt bulb of the hall light made it seem small. Cold. Unnecessary.
Lestat would have papered the walls in flocking and gilt, gotten portraits painted just for the pleasure of seeing them. (Had, so long ago.) He didn't even seem to notice, though, walking airily backwards so he could look at them both until they reached the bedroom.

What little they had spared in decor was here, like reaching the soft heart of a stone fortress: the walls in soft green, the bed swathed in a high thread count; and all the most precious of the damaged, crumbling volumes that were the sole survivors of Night Island. It was cold--why oughtn't it be, between Louis' self-flagellation and Herbert's indifference?--but Lestat was quick to find delight in the crumbling fireplace both the others had ignored.

"It won't do," he clucked to himself; then looked to the books and to Louis, saying with a smirk, "I suppose I just can't resist the thrill of temptation."

It had doubtlessly taken many years for Louis to perfect staring down his nose at the taller man, but he pulled it off with aplomb. Herbert breezed past their argument, running his hands over the sheets with new-again fascination, senses always so primed with the disease. Curse.

"Gift."

"Lestat," Louis said, mild as ever, some communication passing between them outside Herbert's sight. And then they pounced, Lestat wrestling him onto the bed while Louis took his clothing to pieces, a team as they'd so rarely managed on their own.

Again it was strange, at once familiar and utterly different; he'd been with both of these men before, and they in turn were no strangers to one another.

But this wasn't just the serene, holy gentleness of Louis, nor the wobbling imbalance of lust and fear and raw power he'd had with Lestat (nor the prickly too-close-not-close-enough they'd shared with one another).

He should have felt uncomfortable to be so exposed, but there was no time for that as the two most gorgeous dead creatures he'd ever seen took up positions to either side of him on the mattress. Denim and cotton and gold rings on one side, linen and threadbare corduroy on the other sent his bare skin into a frenzy; his nose filled with a mix of Dior cologne and candle wax as Louis took his mouth and Lestat worshipped at the sharpness of his clavicle.

One of them played his ribs like a xylophone while the other chilled the inside of his thigh and the back of his knee with a ticklish, icy stroke.

He'd have let them drain him dry had they asked, but there seemed an unspoken pact between them to keep him on the edge, each moan they tore from him provoking a fond smile or encouraging kiss.

He brought his hand up and raked it over his chest, and even that was its own kind of joy: the feeling of severed tissues and the anticipation, unbearable, as to what they'd do next. Lestat's tongue was appallingly gentle, covering the marks until they healed and no more, nowhere near the sweet brutality Herbert had known him capable of even Before. He caught those grey-blue eyes, and did it again, this time ripping open his shoulder.

Louis must've known what he wanted, but went even slower than Lestat, lapping shallow and fleeting against the cuts as they healed while Herbert's heels dug into the bed and his hips rose in memory of unused instincts. Before he could open himself a third time they caught his hands, one on either side, and cut their own wrists. The blood, shared and estranged and joined again in him, dripped over his mouth and his chin and warmed him to the core, some strange unholy communion
of the damned (he'd been born an atheist, whatever his parents may have tried, but for this he could comprehend reverence). They filled him and held him and took not a drop for themselves, whispering devotions in his ears.

In the past he'd kept himself hungry, starving, and so blamed his inhumanly ravenous cravings there.

In years since he'd kept himself fed and sleek and sated, and loathed that it didn't dampen the desire.

Now--he wanted it, burned for it, as much as he ever had, eyes rolling back and body going paradoxically helpless as he fed upon their richness.

In their arms, in their minds, he fell through into the death of something he'd never acknowledged but always nurtured to his breast: shame.

Alley, wet Southern heat, stench of sex and booze and manure horse and otherwise. Beauty, golden, lips at his throat and hands on his already-spent body, seeming almost to relish the stickiness left behind. Something undeniable, even at the verge of the death sought.

Alley, delicious American warmth, humanity redolent about him. Beauty, living and silvered and inky; full-moon night itself flushed with aimless empty lust. Spent and still able to rise and meet his adoring touch. Something strange and strong, heart beating past the death supposedly wanted.

Beauty, beauty, need and filth and blood and where where where did he fit--

Alley, icy New England Hell. A routine jaunt, waiting in the car as the toys bought themselves doses of poison Lestat would taste soon enough. Dark eyes terrified and yet unyielding, sparking like flint in the night.

Alley, tropical Florida heat. Conviction to do a kindness, perform the mercy that none other would grant the angry, scared, ill-used creature--and then blood, and death, and a stunned desperation to continue, somehow--recognizable. Kindred.

Ridiculous faux-ancient hotel, beauty in tears and exhaustion and death itself lingering at the base of the drive to conquer.

Haven of dead words, invaded by something too close to both death and life, moving thinking bridge to the outside. Beautiful, finding a path uncharted.

Those same eyes, sick and only just comprehending, hands slick with blood. After, after the Act (life and death and life again): gazing, secretive, changing and newly sensual, utterly unforeseen.

That same beauty, violated and yet entering the haven again, head high and spirit held together by bravery and determination and the gossamer threads that made for a true eternal.

He saw himself as if through the looking glass, through their eyes: strong and beguiling and enraged and unforgettable; iron to bind between gold and glass. Wanted. Needed, in spite of it all.

He wasn't sure when it ended, when the meteoric high of sensation ebbed away into the exhausted shelter of arms and legs entwined. The wind howled outside, battering the windows, but it seemed impossibly warm inside--the thud thud thud of his dead heart and the quiet murmur of after-talk in his ears. Herbert West, in one crystallized moment, knew peace.
After he and Lestat swept Herbert off his feet and into bed, after they fed him and held him through the tears he didn't seem to notice and drank just a little, just because he asked them to and burned so badly for it, after he dropped dead in their arms and Louis followed and the sun rose and fell--

After all that, Louis still didn't understand how he could have gone so wrong with one he loved so much.

He was beginning to become suspicious of happiness itself. Always, the emotion seemed to blind him to what lurked beneath, wrapping his thoughts in a thick blanket of warmth. He had failed Claudia, and now he had nearly done the same to Herbert. All that philosophy, and he'd repeated the past again.

"You're making that face," Lestat was laying back with his arms behind his head, Herbert still dead and sleeping between them.

"You'll have to be more specific." He turned his face away as he said it, showing his small smile only to the moon.

"Thinking thoughts too deep for we poor peasants, no doubt."

"Apologies were never your strong suit," he agreed, unable to resist laying the bait. It felt good, this prickling affection.

"I wrote you a book!" Lestat protested. "I prostrated myself before the whole world, and still you say such things. Impossible." He, too, was smiling.

Louis looked down at his fellow, his lover, once his friend. "First one has to know where to begin."

"You're stewing, aren't you?" Lestat said with a wry smile, stroking a careful hand over Herbert's dead, white arm, too gently to make him lash out (if indeed he could--there were differences, small but acute, to his makeup. The strange circumstances of his creation had done things incalculable.) "Martyring yourself?"

"You think I shouldn't feel guilt for what I've apparently done?" Martyrs fought and resisted. Louis hadn't had a real discussion in two hundred years. "He loves me. Us. And I made him miserable." The taste of him on Louis' tongue, unbound and torn open...all the things Louis had thought safe and comforting, revealed as thorns he drove into his beloved's very flesh.

And medically speaking, Herbert was a natural choleric to Louis’ melancholic. Both bile inside, dry, and to imbibe from Louis might well have further imbalanced his love’s humors without the sanguine influence of one like Lestat or--

"You kept him alive," Lestat broke Louis’ train of thought with the new, mature seriousness he'd so seldom shown before. Platitudes.

"I made him hate himself." How could one be so loved, and yet internalize none of it?

"That...happens, sometimes, my love." Sparkling grey eyes went distant, tracking a hairline crack
on the far wall. "You might have done better, but we all scar."

"Do we, my Devil?" Strands of spun gold fairly glowed around his fingers. Truly a Lucifer, Angel of Light in all their darkness.

"Even you." He pressed his face against Louis' hand, catlike. "There are alternatives to burning all your possessions every few years, even if you're loath to believe it."

"Are there?" Not fires, maybe, but things always seemed to crumble. When they didn't just explode.

"You might tell us what you're thinking for a change. Herbert can read your mind, and you still remained a mystery." He felt Lestat's lips curl into a smile against his palm. "I'm afraid you've chosen dullards, unschooled in your gentlemanly manners. You'll simply have to be blunt for our fool sakes."

"You all claim to prize my difference, yet you disavow what allows me to survive." If he'd stood strong then he would be dead now, many times over.

"You needn't fear, beloved. I'm the strongest there is, after all."

"And if it's you I'm standing against?" This couldn't last. They fell apart, every time, the sweetness lost in yet another tempestuous fight.

"If anyone could find a way to take me to pieces, it's our necromancer." He didn't sound afraid--but then, he never did, much as he claimed to feel such things on the page. Lestat clothed himself in such material splendor; it was a rare sight to catch him literally and metaphorically bare, watching Herbert with undisguised affection.

Herbert, too, was naked and beautiful in Louis' bed, and never had it occurred to him to have the man so.

That--that was a lie.

Never before had he allowed it.

He had made assumptions, the first few times Herbert had come to him after it happened. The fear beneath the skin, the beautiful, delicate porcelain hands deftly playing at Louis' buttons...all that allure had spoken to him of one taught wrongly, damaging himself, and so he'd eased Herbert back and kissed him gently. Tried to show him that Louis could love him for more than just that.

Herbert had stopped.

"He liked that. The touching." Louis swallowed hard, daring a pet to that sweet corpse's hair. Claudia had slept beside him so, dead and weak and empty until her mind flared to life with sundown. "I had believed that he was merely...yielding, to survive."

Like Louis did, had done so often, but not like that. Not in that.

Because you think yourself superior, something ugly whispered.

"Then you and I crossed wires," Lestat said. "I was sure he loved me."

"He did, when you were kind." Herbert's thoughts on his maker were a tangle of thorns, resentments and bitterness forming an impenetrable thicket around something softer and denied.
"You know how often that is." Lestat's voyages into self-deprecation never shook the air of vulnerability.

"You said once that we become more who we are already."

"Not me," Lestat interrupted, face mournful.

Louis pressed on. "I wonder if this boasting, vain creature will slay the gentle hearted boy you wrote of." Soporific, but this was the place for such things. "I would like to know him better."

"He was spirited from his bed and murdered by a demon before we ever met. Didn't you hear? The funeral was quite the affair."

"Then why are you here?"

The lump in Lestat's throat might have sunk the Titanic, it sounded so large.

"Even devils can love, my dear. And you both are deserving of that and more." Straight teeth, a genetic gift in their time, chewed a full lower lip. "You deserve happiness, and more fool I to think I might provide it."

The sight of his hand on Herbert's back was so lovely, respectful and yet not patronizing as Louis had been.

His hand on Louis' cheek was like memory perfected.

"Imagine," he said between kisses so light they barely counted, leaning over their exquisite corpse. "You call me the martyr, and then claim this utterly selfless devotion to others. Truly, you must be one to give your all."

"I'll give all I'm allowed," Lestat whispered. "Can we not find our way hand-in-hand through all this darkness?"

"We never have before." And oh, how they had tried.

"Pessimist," Lestat pouted. "We were strangers before, utterly. We never spoke when we could argue. And now we have this one with us."

"You mean to use him to keep us together?" They'd fall on the wheel again and stretch to breaking.

"I told you. I plan to love him, and you, as you permit." He moved in for a longer kiss, thorough and soft. "We might pin down that demon Happiness after all."

"Do you mind?" Herbert grumbled, the bleariness of sleep unstopping his tongue. "Of all the places to carry on..." his voice fell off as he turned onto his side.

"But then we might have missed your lovely waking face, darling." Lestat brightened immediately with a light that was half mask and half true emotional shift. He nuzzled behind Herbert's ear. "Louis is already hard at work worrying for our souls. I've brought dreadful, sinful corruption all the way from the manner of the French."

"Sin is a construct. Damage has to be measurable in order to properly assign blame." Herbert never had taken to either philosophy or religion beyond a materialist, mechanistic sense of things. How had Louis ever thought him content with that?

He loved Herbert's face bare of spectacles, though he'd never managed to convince him of such.
Too dear a defense, perhaps, considering how those naked, mobile features showed every emotion like a poor hand at cards. Startlement and nervousness had flared in dark eyes upon waking, smoothed over by chill composure only after a glance at Louis.

And so Louis had no choice but to lean in, tilt his lover's chin up for a kiss first gentle, then lascivious (if he happened to nick his tongue on a fang, what of it?), and then break for a caught breath.

"Will you not kiss Lestat good evening, mon coeur?" He smiled into Herbert's suspicious face.

So often had Louis refused offers to taste his lover when flushed with the blood of hunts, and later the suggestion that Herbert fetch victims home for his delectation. He'd not wanted to use one so hurt, had thought to prove the 'purity' of his love through avoidance of those things of which they didn't speak. Instead he'd given rise to the spectre of filth irredeemable, the idea that white hands were sullied by unwanted blood and not even worthy to procure something fresh enough to touch. The past night’s loving had been painful in its ecstatic truth, but Louis'd no right to complain given the years of buildup.

Herbert still looked to him as he turned, right up until the instant his lips met Lestat's. Louis surprised himself—he had expected to accept the moment, cognizant of how it would help and little more. He wasn't prepared for the affectionate warmth that overtook him at the sight of them: how Lestat's hand hesitated before curving around the back of Herbert's neck, how Herbert's hesitation became a full body shudder of contentment, both of them wearing transparent looks of wariness as they came apart.

They could waste long nights like this, shut off from the world and subsisting on Lestat's rich blood, decadent in one another. Louis had never been tempted by the thought before.

"I begin to fear this house is no longer suitable for us." His hand crept lazily along Herbert's back, relishing the simple joy of closeness.

"Oh?" Herbert asked.

"We've outgrown it." True in so many ways, not least in the memories that walked the streets.

"Have we?" Moving too fast; Louis felt the nervousness in Herbert and saw it creeping in the back of Lestat's eyes, but even they didn't truly have eternity to waste.

Death came easy and swift, too often.

"You need space to work, do you not?" he asked, stroking a cheek flushed with blood more vibrant than human. "And a larger city to hunt in?"

The identical disbelieving delight on those two faces was a painful thing.

"Clearly you know best." Herbert said, twining one leg with Louis' and reaching behind to grasp Lestat's wrist. A study in tactile comfort. "Where would you have us go, then?"

A house with room enough for a conservatory, a study, shelves of books meant to be read, not displayed. Closets of clothing beautiful and functional. Spaces for them each to be alone or together. He could see it, almost, there in his mind.

"Yes, Louis, do tell," Lestat said, cuddling up and blind to the images that were no doubt causing the small, secret smile that graced their young lover's cherub mouth. "Back to Louisiana, perhaps, or--"
"Why not search for a time, and then choose somewhere new?"

New Orleans had been home for 70 years. Loving, tender, painful years; years Louis alternately treasured and mourned, but to return now would be too soon.

The shadows of their past might be everpresent, but they needs must try to shed new light.

Herbert nodded, a whirlwind of ideas clipping across the surface of his thoughts. Then his face fell. "There's something I have to take of."

Of course. The reason they'd come here, though Herbert steadfastly refused to speak of it. Louis forced himself to find hope in the statement, a desire for closure rather than renewal. "Shall we come with you?"

"I doubt I'll be in much danger."

"Nearby?" Lestat cut in. "At least let us play the audience, if we may not assist you."

Herbert's lips thinned, pensive at the thought of the long-delayed act. "As you wish, I suppose."

"Of course," Louis soothed. To preserve this, he'd have agreed to much. "This experience comes to all of us. We are forever saying goodbyes."

Herbert said nothing more but nodded, resolute, and drew the pair of them closer around him. A shield from what was to come.

~*~*~*~

Katherine arrived home on a too-late night, body aching and mind full, and sat in the driveway for a moment. She was tired, dog-tired, and for a moment the house seemed far away. Cold, too; Dan's car was gone, and all the lights were out, meaning Crawford was gone, too.

She was steeling herself to get up when a shadow detached itself from the porch and walked up to her car, setting her heart pounding.

The man was small, dressed in a well-tailored black suit and tie, with neat features and thin-framed glasses which greatly magnified his eyes. When he knocked on her car window, she saw that his nails were polished.

Gripping her cane, she rolled down the window.

"Can I help you?" she asked warily. He stared at her face for a long, searching moment, then blinked and nodded.

"I was looking for Dr. Cain," he said softly, stepping back onto the grass. "Does he live here?"

"Why do you ask?" With what Dan did, that question could be dangerous. But this little, pale man, with the nails and the delicate mannerisms--

"I'm sorry, I know it's rude of me to show up out of the blue like this. I just need to see him, to make some...final arrangements."
A patient, then. Dying, and yes, it was inappropriate, but he seemed harmless enough. Without really knowing why, she wet her lips and said, "He'll be home soon. You can wait for him inside, if you'd like."

He smiled, a tight little thing on rouged lips, and carried her files in for her.

There was just a calming aura about him, something indefinable. Something lonely in how he drifted over to the mantel to survey their photographs with a distant eye, hands politely clasped behind his back.

"Would you like a glass of water?" Katherine broke in last, when he stared for seconds too long at a picture of the three of them, Dan's long arms encompassing Kat and Crawford both in a lean just to the left of casual.

He spun quickly, as though caught at an illicit act, and smiled again.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Cain--"

"It's Dr. McMichaels." She could hear the steel in her voice, irritation bleeding through at the assumption.

"My apologies. I don't drink water." Something mirthful sparked across his face, then smothered.

"You should." The words came without thought, old forthright instincts still at play. What did it matter to the dying if they were hydrated?

The man didn't reply, and she found excuses to linger in the room, one watchful eye on him even as he settled into Dan's chair (a coincidence, surely). He was unsettling in some way she couldn't pinpoint, a physical presence that barely stirred the air as he moved, pale as a death's mask.

She was thinking it over, slow and careful, when the door opened - Crawford and Dan, back from one of their quiet evenings together. She moved to greet them. "Dan, there's someone who wanted to see you." (why had she let him in, what had possessed her, she was always careful about their home).

Never quite in sync in the way she and Crawford sometimes were, Dan and Crawford nonetheless wore almost identical looks of horror.

"What are you doing here?" Dan's voice trembled even as he tried to shove Crawford protectively behind him, but Crawford stepped forward instead, the snarl ripping from his throat inhuman.

"Dr. McMichaels invited me in," the man replied, holding his hands up in truce, his pale hands with their glassy nails--

"Not that you need it."

"No more than you. But my companions deplore rudeness, you see." "I neglected to introduce myself. My name is--"

"Hans."

"Herbert West."

Crawford and Dan spoke at once, and the intruder nodded.

*You're too young*, she wanted to say. Young and pretty and sick, probably not a day over thirty.
"But a dead ringer for that faded scrap of newsprint." "You're supposed to be dead," she managed instead as he glided across the room, eyes riveted to Dan's face like a starving man looking at a feast.

"Am I? Some would say." It was absently said, but Dan flinched at the unfunny joke, and Crawford leaned forward pugnaciously.

(God, they could have been brothers. They looked nothing alike.)

"Where are your...companions?" Dan's eyes widened like saucers, and she wanted to scream, to hit West, to do anything in the world to keep him from following this monster he clearly feared and once loved. This man who had commanded him beyond his limits, once upon a time.

"Elsewhere. This is personal." Red mouth opened, and she could swear she saw the edge of something white and abnormal within. "Please, Daniel. I just want to talk. For old times' sake?"

~*~*~*~

They’d been out for groceries. Just normal, everyday groceries, keeping body and soul together. And he’d come home to--this.

Still thirty, still smooth and bone-white and preserved, the only difference a pristine suit he never could have afforded in life. That, and that eerie stillness, the pauses in movement; a listening attitude Dan had realized in hindsight denoted mind-reading. How dare he walk back in like nothing had changed, like this was a week since they’d last parted and not nearly a decade. How dare he look the same, when Dan was beginning to feel the aches of age even with his rigorous self-care.

"The old times weren’t so good," he pushed out over a frozen tongue, doing his best to shift Crawford (protective, possessive, terribly breakable human Crawford) out of the way. Herbert, meanwhile, drew back into himself, hands behind his back and features freeze-thawing into that weird delayed reaction they all had shown back on the island.

(They, them, and now Herbert was so clearly not an us.)

But Kat and Crawford were there, beautiful and alive, and half-paralyzed by the intrusion of the weird and uncanny into their world. Incontrovertible; sane.

"And you promise it’s just--you’re only here for me?" Time to pay the piper, Dan’s conscience said. You can only run for so long.

“I promise. I wouldn’t harm your family.” He turned to the half-feral man vibrating in Dan’s grip. “My apologies to you, in particular, for the previous...unpleasantness. It was an accident, and will not happen again.”

"You were--"

"Looking for a drink. I'm terribly sorry we were interrupted in such a vulgar manner, though clearly it's for the best."

Dan marked it as some kind of personal achievement that he just felt angry--not jealous that
Herbert had chosen someone else, not sorrowful at what he was going to become. "You were going to kill him."

"Yes."

"Jesus, you’re--"

"Dan," that wheedling tone he knew well, always one breath from convincing him to do something monstrous. "How could I have been expected to know he was yours? You were always very clear in your preferences." He pushed up his glasses. "Now that I know, he'll be in no danger from me. Nor will you. I won't allow it."

“Dan, don’t--”

“I won’t harm him, either, Dr. McMichaels. And I thank you for your hospitality.” So, he'd been away long enough to pick up that eerie habit that Dan now recognized as mindreading. His eyes bored into Dan's. "Lovely as your home is, perhaps it would be better to do this outside. Before your lovers set me ablaze."

Crawford and Kat stood, lulled, as Herbert snaked out a hand and drew Dan out to the porch of his own home, his only one since he’d finally broken the lease on his apartment six months ago.

He had a life, goddammit.

"I haven't done any of this to hurt you, Dan," Herbert said, study in contrasts against Arkham’s early-February snow. Echo of an echo of the worst time in Dan’s life, though Dan hadn’t known it at the time. "I wanted to make amends."

"You're supposed to be dead," Dan repeated Kat’s earlier words, and it wasn't until he put it out there that Dan realized how much of a relief he'd seen that as, on some level.

His smile was the same, so very familiar--twisting up on one side, patronizing and affectionate.

"I suppose that's a matter of opinion at this point," and God, the chuckle at the bad half-spoken joke--

the book hadn't had that.

Dan hadn't described that.

Nobody else on Earth had known the way his friend could laugh.

No one living.

"Okay. You found me. I'm alive, you're...whatever the hell you are. It's been real." He couldn't do this. His eyes were as stunning as ever when he flicked them up at Dan, seeming almost to glow with the aura of his bizarre science, and he was still wearing glasses.

“I didn’t need to find you. I’ve known for years. I needed to speak to you.”

"So..." he floundered, the air taken from his sails.

"You've been worried about boogeymen in the shadows. It's very like you." He'd never seen Herbert smile like that. Wistful. Sad. "I wanted to reassure you that you have nothing more to fear than arthritis."
"What, are you planning on standing guard? Sending a newsletter to the rest of them?" He almost asked about Daniel, God help him.

"No. No, I don't think you'll see me again." Again that sad, small smile. "You can't say you regret all of it, can you?"

"I--" he pressed his lips together, ran a hand through the hair whose premature greyness he fully blamed this man for. "I regret the things we did. And."

_The things they hadn't done._

He regretted never taking this man in his arms and weeping into his narrow shoulder; never holding that live warmth flush against himself in the dead of night when they were both wrung out from exhaustion. Not stepping in in time to stop the killings or the drugs or the spiriting-away to that Hellscape.

Not getting there fast enough to prevent the horror on the stainless-steel slab and...this, this stagnant, cold, ivory sculpture standing before him, looking fresh and young and _exquisite._

And dead.

They were all sexy, he told himself. That was part of it--but not all. He'd spent eight years learning to _allow_ himself to find something sexy, without needing the excuse of magic powers. And Herbert was.

"None of this is what I wanted for us." The vampire sounded rueful. "I had grand plans. Eventually, it seemed impossible that you wouldn't be part of them."

But here they were. Different men, separated by the very barrier they'd once tried to tear down together.

"I would do it if you asked me to," Herbert remarked suddenly. "I owe you that much, after all our work together."

_It._ Eternity offered so nonchalantly. He wouldn't have been human if he hadn't considered it. But.

"No."

"I didn't think you would. You were always strangely practical that way." Then, as if to reassure him, "You would hate it."

"Do you?" The franticness that had hovered around Herbert in the weeks after his death was gone. Maybe it had just been drained out.

"How could I turn down the opportunity to pursue my work indefinitely?"

"That's all?"

"It's enough. Even if it weren't, I'm not so alone as you might think."

That sent a shiver through him. He was suddenly certain he could see eyes in the dark. "So I guess," he scratched the back of his neck, feeling awkward. "This is goodbye then, huh?"

"Yes." The stared at each other for a minute, and then Herbert took a step closer. He moved with a pretense of humanity, but Dan still felt powerless to evade as Herbert put a hand on the back of his neck and leaned up. He closed his eyes, preparing for the pain--and felt a brief, chaste press of lips
against his own.

His hands rose of their own volition to grasp slim hips when they parted, Herbert's eyes heavy-lidded and soft in the porchlight.

"We never had a chance, did we?" he whispered, a breath away from a thing that didn't breathe. The head on his shoulder turned pointedly out, away from his burning, aching neck.

"I'm afraid not, my love." Such words from that mouth. "Not for anything survivable."

Cold, so cold and soft and tender as the ache inside.

And he had to ask.

"Are you...happy, Herbert?"

Because Dan was.

He had love, and life, and a job that mattered. He had sunlight and food and aches in his back. He had plans to shock his whole family, back in Illinois, come next Thanksgiving. Herbert would have hated all of it.

And Herbert had never been happy.

"It's not the outcome I would have chosen." He lifted his head. "But I wouldn't change it."

It was practically a glowing report by Herbert's standards.

"Okay." He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "You'll take care, right?"

"Only one of us has to worry about death now, Dan." He turned to go, then stopped. "I'll miss you."

Dan knew he was talking about more than the next ten years. He let it lie. "Bye, Herbert."

He watched the man who'd made him walk away into the night, letting his thoughts spin out what might have been. The heights they might have achieved. The destruction they might have wrought.

"Dan?" Crawford was back at his elbow, pulling him in. "You're letting the snow in. Kat made cocoa--I think she wants to apologize..."

That was when he realized he didn't regret his choice at all.

He could fret and cry over the lives to be lost over the ensuing centuries, and yet...

Herbert West was a force.

Vampire or no, there would always be dazzling highs and dreadful lows. (And, he half-believed, it would still have continued on for an eternity; he might have been by that shadow's side.)

The price of sharing his space for a time had been so great, more than anyone should ever pay, and yet he'd let Dan go. Being set free shouldn't feel like a gift, but…it had never really been Herbert who'd held him captive. He'd done it all willingly.

And he'd walk away the same way, he thought as he sat down on the couch and folded himself into
the safety of his lovers' hands.

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