Like Father, Like Son

by Rhiw

Summary

The first time Dante met his son, the runt stole his pizza. The second time he had half the police force of Capulet East after him. The third time he saved the Kid's life and got a kick to the face. This time, he was determined to introduce himself.

Notes

Timeframe: Takes place during the DMC anime, post episode 8, after DMC3 and before DMC4. Dante is 31, Nero is 10, and Patty is 9. Okay, so this is a Dante-is-Nero's-father AU. As such, Dante conceived Nero when he 21. Backstory will be explained.

For People Who Haven't Watched the Anime: I don't blame you, it's definitely a low budget anime. Only things you need to know is this; Morrison is Dante's agent – replaced Enzo. Patty Lowell is an orphan that befriended Dante and visits his shop frequently throughout the series.

Pairings: As of now, none for Dante and Nero. There is a possibility of seeing both het, yaoi and yuri pairings as I don't really get hung up on gender. However, this story isn't a romance so don't be looking for it here.

Other Notes: They only name for the city Dante lives in is Capulet City. Couldn't find much else about the city so I sorta made things up. The city has four different sections. Capulet East (the Slums), West (a step up from the Slums, where Dante's shop is located), North (administrative center of the city, where those who have money live) and South (the harbor
and the industrial sector).

Fan art for this chappie was done by Piscosos (you can find it over on DA)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Morrison was such a dick. Dante's agent had called what seemed to be every pizzeria in the Capulet and told them not to sell him any pizza unless he paid in cash or paid off the massive tabs he owed. In response, Dante had to walk from the fringes of Capulet West where the shop was located all the way to Capulet East, the fucking slums, to get a goddamn pizza. In the rain.

Like he said, *such a dick.*

How the hell was he supposed to pay anything off with Trish and Lady raping his wallet every other week anyway? Wasn't fair, goddamnit. A man can only do so much, even when you're as awesome as he. Dante sighed and shoved an entire slice in his mouth in one swoop, hurriedly making his way in between the shop awnings in the hopes of keeping the box dry.

Total bullshit.

Dante's pace slowed slightly as he approached the dark lip of an alleyway. He couldn't smell shit in the rain but his instinct still told him that there was something, maybe not a demon, but *something* all the same was coming his way. Sure enough, a small form came skidding around the corner before launching himself at the hunter. Dante stepped easily out of the way, catching the kid by the back of the hood seconds before the dumbass rocketed himself into the road.

The kid, a street brat by the looks of it, made a strangled sound as the lip of his hoodie caught him around the neck and landed promptly on his ass. To Dante's surprise the boy rolled into an immediately crouch, staring up at him with bright, pissed off blue eyes.

"What the hell, man?" the boy snarled.

"You wanna end up a pancake, kid?"

There was the sound of feet pounding on cement and the boy tensed.

"Crap!" Hands – one bandaged, one not – reached up to yank a raggedy ass looking wool cap far enough down it almost covered his eyes before throwing him a dark, accusing glare and pivoting to face a small herd of approaching teenagers.

Dante recognized the gang's colors immediately. The 76s were a semi-organized gang of teenagers who dealt mostly in drugs. They were pretty violent in a way that Dante usually only associated with stupid, young male humans. The leader of the group was, unsurprisingly, the beefiest teen there. He pointed a pipe threateningly at the hooded boy.

"Thought you were fast, didn't ya, you piece of shit?"

"Faster than your fat ass."

"What the fuck did you just say?"

"Maybe if you weren't a friggin' blimp you wouldn't be paying for it every night. Can't even afford the A-team can you? I don't even wanna know what C-Team pussy looks like."

"You little bitch!"

Dante had to give the kid some credit. The boy was dishing out insults almost too quick for his
mouth to keep up with and was still managing from keeping the gang members from totally flanking him. The group was attempting to form a semi-circle around the kid with Dante completely forgotten about to the left. How, the older man wasn’t quite sure. He was quite tall. And dressed in leather. Red leather. Nevertheless, the leader of the little gang clearly didn't seem to think the hunter was worth paying attention to. It sort of annoyed him.

The atmosphere of the fight circle changed abruptly as guns started to be brandished in response to some of the boy's more creative insults and with a sigh, Dante decided things were getting a little too serious. In the hunter's defense, there was no way he could have known that the pop can he decided to kick at Beefy's face was still half full of orange liquid. The can sprayed violently as it arched through the air, covering the group almost equally before smacking into the dead center of the leader's sports jerseys. The group turned to stare at him as one shocked unit. He gave them a friendly little wave.

"Careful where you point that squirt, guns are dangerous ya know." Dante honestly didn't know what the fuck was going through Beefy's mind that he even remotely thought it was a good idea to shoot at the strange, heavily armed, older man but his actions set off a chain reaction of equally stupid actions.

With a snort of disbelief Dante easily avoided the shots fired his way, shoving both the boy and his pizza into the alleyway and out of harm's way before kicking some major dumb teenage boy ass. It ended, predictably, almost instantly.

"The kids in this town get stupider by the day. I was never that dumb," the hunter announced grumpily as he dumped the confiscated handguns into a nearby postbox. "And now I'm completely soaked too. Hey kid, is the pizza dry--"

The kid was gone.

So was his pizza.

For a moment Dante just stared at the empty alleyway in disbelief before deciding, fuck it, God was against him today and he was done playing His sick games. He was going back to the shop and drink until he forgot how much this day sucked.

Morrison was such a dick.

The streets of Capulet City stretched out like a patchwork quilt of lights from up here. If Nero didn't know any better he'd call it beautiful. But he lived on them and he knew just how ugly they really were. This city was draped in sin, perhaps the only thing that the Order had ever told him that had turned out to not be a lie. And East Capulet was the worst the city had to offer. Nero had seen some shit here in the slums that would make paint peel.

But all the same the half-devil liked it here. As long as Nero kept his hat on and his arm covered no one spared him a second look. Here he was just another nameless street rat. The bar below him was just starting to really get into the swing of things and the roof vibrated pleasantly beneath him. It was an old blues bar, rickety as hell and in the worst part of the neighborhood but Nero liked the tunes.

His foot tapped with a slow rhythm when a familiar ballad came on. They always played the same songs every night but it didn't seem like it hurt the bar's business at all. Nero really liked this woman – he no idea who she was but he liked her songs the best. The young half-devil was stretched on his back, legs propped vertically against the back of the bar's neon signs, a swiped bottle of beer in one hand and equally stolen pizza in the other. The tar roof was still wet from the rain earlier but
considering he was already soaked, he didn't mind it much.

Nero sighed as he took another bite of the cold pizza. Not the best birthday dinner, but he didn't really have that many options. Things hadn't quite turned out as the newly turned ten-year-old had hoped when he had run away here nearly a year ago. But it wasn't as bad as it could be. He'd learned the streets quick enough, and his strength and agility gave him a clear advantage over any of his competition.

The weather here fucking sucked compared to Fortuna. It rained a lot and was really starting to get cold at night. Nero had a horrible suspicion that it was going to get way colder here than it ever did back home.

Not that it mattered. It wasn't like the preteen really had that much of a choice in coming here. Nero brought his right arm up to his face frowning as he stared at the ugly, leathery spot that was there. Blue eyes narrowed as he took in the process the growth had made across his forearm.

*It's spreading so quickly.*

When it had first appeared, the red spot had been barely the size of a dollar coin but within a week it had nearly doubled in size. And now… Now, it spread across the entirety of his forearm, reaching vine-like growths towards his elbow and wrist. It was even starting to grow outwards, forming horny ridges and making his forearm seem like it had tumor on it or something. The majority of it was a dark maroon but recently the bottom of the ridges had begun to change color, the red fading until it seemed purple and in some places blue.

It was this damn things fault that everything had changed for Nero.

He could still remember the day it had appeared – it didn't seem like a year had gone by since that horrible moment. It was when he'd still been back in Fortuna, picnicking with his adopted brother and sister. It was supposed to be a special day. It was to celebrate the fact that Nero had demolished the Order's Junior Knight's Saber III and Up tournament despite being two years younger than everyone else. His sister Kyrie had made him an entire lunch from scratch and his older brother, Credo, had even managed to get the day off from his Order training to join them.

The demons had attacked right when they were about to eat the cake. Credo had done a hell of a job at beating off the Scarecrows, especially considering that fact that he was only sixteen. But the damage had already been done. Nero – the frigging idiot he was – couldn't resist joining in. The preteen had been training with practice swords for the last two years and he was really, really good. But the end result was him looking like a jackass. Even though he did manage to kill one of them on his own, the boy had managed to get himself stabbed quite nicely and Credo had to come and save his ass.

Nero hadn't been too worried. He'd always healed really fast and the next day the wound was gone. But in its place was the growth. Nero's adoptive mother Ruth had taken him to see the doctor, and since both his father and brother were in the Order, Nero had gotten to go see the good ones.

The reaction to his arm had been startling. They took like seven million skin and blood samples and he'd been seen by like four different doctors, and one crazy dude with glasses who just stood in the back and stared at him the whole time. Nero had found it weird but he'd never really been to the doctor before, so how was he supposed to know it was abnormal? After all the commotion the doctors ended up just sending him home with some antibiotics and told them both to come back the next day.

That night his adoptive father had woken him in a panic. Nero's father, Ezra, worked in the Research
and Development division as a lab assistant under someone really important. He didn't talk much about what took place there, but Nero didn't like the way it smelled. His father always came home smelling like dirty blood and disinfectant. Before Nero had really understood what was going on, he was dressed and at the docks, with a handful of bills packed in his tennis shoes. That had been a bad night for Nero. It was the first time he'd heard the words 'half-demon,' 'Agnus,' and 'The Bloodline.'

"I have to leave?"

Credo nodded, checking behind him nervously. They stood huddled in a dark alleyway, their father was a few feet away bartering with the ferry master in quick, desperate movements.

"But I don't want to leave! I wanna--"

Credo's hand clamped against Nero's mouth as he looked around them, every muscle straining as he listened. After a moment, the brunette shook his head and slid his hand from Nero's lips to ruffle his hair.

"I don't want you to either, Nero. But it's not safe here," the teenager explained softly. "Father says they mean to use you for experimentations because of what you are."

Nero looked away, hands fisting as fear and anger rose equally inside him. "You mean a demon."

"I mean my little brother," Credo amended fiercely, the hand on Nero's head falling to squeeze his shoulder tightly. "There's no way a demon could be as annoying as you."
"Hey," Nero complained weakly, trying desperately not to cry. He really was going to be sent away.

"Nero, you'll be fine," the teenager said reassuringly, sounding more confident than he looked. Both his hands reaching out to straighten the wool cap to cover his brother’s snowy hair. "You're smart and you're fast. Keep your head down and stay hidden. Don't let anyone see your hand, okay?"

"Yeah..." There was no denying the tears but damn he was trying. "Where should I go?"

"The ferry will take you to Port Black, when you get there use the money and take a train to Capulet"
"Capulet City, right." A piece of paper was pressed into his palm and Nero looked down at the letters in confusion. "Ellie-Mae? Who's that? A friend of mom and dad or something?"

"No. She's your real mother's aunt."

"You know who my moth--"

"Nero." He'd heard that tone in his brother's voice enough times to shut up immediately. "She'll look after you."

Yeah right. Ellie-Mae, or rather Lady Mae as she preferred to be called, had turned out to be the Madam of a particularly stately whore house in the slums called the Pink Lily. She'd taken one look at him and kicked his ass to the curb. Auntie Mae wasn't a complete bitch though – she would give him food sometimes and even let Nero spend the night if they were slow. Which wasn't often. Who knew that prostitution was such a cash cow?

So far the boy seemed to be in the clear. Nero hadn't seen anyone from the Order coming after him. The preteen reached blindly behind him and grabbed the last piece of pizza. Nero bit into it with a particular sense of relish, thinking of the strange smelling man he'd stolen it from. The dude looked a lot like him. White hair wasn't that common. Well, he didn't think it was as he'd never seen anyone else with it. He kind of wished he'd stuck around and found out more about him, but he didn't want to risk anyone else from the gang showing up, Nero would've gotten away just fine on his own, but it was something else to see the old man kick the shit out of the 76s. And he'd gotten a free pizza out of it.

*Ha, dinner and a show.*

In the distance a bell was announcing the new day. The sounds from below became even louder as the song switched to another one of Nero's favorites and the preteen grinned, taking another swig of warm beer.

It hadn't been such a bad birthday after all.
The Man in Red

Chapter Notes

Last Time: Morrison was a dick, Dante quit life for the day and Nero celebrated a birthday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Patty hummed happily to herself as she made her way back to the shop, carefully licking away at the pink ice cream cone. It was strange but she'd never really liked strawberry anything before she met Dante, but now it seemed like she couldn't get enough of the flavor. She'd bought it with Dante's money – Patty hoped he wouldn't really mind. He had said that she could take anything she found in the couch cushions. And well, the desk may not have counted as the couch per say, but he'd really been ignoring her lately and that just wasn't fair!

There was the sound of shouting from somewhere to her left and Patty had just enough to time to turn and look when something smashed into her painfully. The ice cream cone flew from her hands as she landed painfully on her on butt. Patty was on her feet seconds later, a single finger pointing accusingly at the startled boy.

"Hey! Watch where you going! You made me waste my ice cream!" She would have said more but the genuine regret in the boy's eyes stopped her. He brought a hand up to rub across his nose sheepishly and gave her a crooked smile.

"Sorry 'bout that." Patty knew instantly he was a street kid. She'd known enough of them at the orphanage. The blue hoodie he wore was stained in several places and his jeans were at least two sizes too large. He wore a dark grey wool cap but it was only partially on and Patty felt her eyes widen at the sight of the white bangs.

"Hey you look just like Dante!"

The smile he gave her was down right dazzling. "How nice for him."

"Thief!" A chubby, angry looking baker was in the alleyway that the boy had come from, rolling pin pointed threateningly in the boy's direction. But the Dante look alike was gone. Patty blinked at the empty space in front of her. She hadn't even heard anything.

"Hey, little girl!" Patty's head snapped up and instantly raised a hand to block out the midday sun. The kid was stretched out casually on the edge of roofline, completely ignoring the screaming man. Definitely like Dante.

"I'm not little! And my name's Patty!"

The boy laughed. "Right, 'course not. Any-who, gotta run. Sorry 'bout the ice cream!"

"Wait!" Patty shouted, but the boy was already gone. "Weird."

Suddenly the rolling pin was pointing at her. "Hey, you! You know that little punk?"

"Eh, nope! Sorry Mister!" Patty shied away from the grappling hands of the fat man and took off
towards the shop. What a strange boy.

Nero groaned as he shimmed up a broken fire escape. *Shit, shit, shit!* They were gaining on him, he could hear the sound of their boots slapping on the cement behind him. The rain made his grip slick and the fabric of bandages terribly uncomfortable but Nero knew he couldn't slow down.

He'd really messed up this time. Nero had no idea who the guy was that he'd just robbed, but he must have been more important then he'd thought if the man had managed to get so many cops to chase him in this kind of weather.

Honestly, the young half devil had thought the guy looked like the usual rich john that he stole from. There were a countless number of them at the Pink Lily at any time of the day. Lady Mae was being a major bitch this week. His aunt hadn't let him sleep in the brothel once, even with squall drowning the city.

All Nero had wanted was enough to buy a dryer at the coin laundry down the street. But when he'd seen the well-dressed, well-groomed, and frankly slightly feminine man who had been quietly smoking a black cigar outside the front gates he just couldn't resist. There hadn't been any bodyguards or men in uniform like there usually were for politicians and Nero barely thought twice about stealing the man's wallet.

The half devil had hardly made it to the adjacent corner when things had gone from bad to worse.

"Boy." The voice was cold and clear, cutting through the noise of the rain with startling ease. The command in it was great enough to stop him in his tracks and against all common sense; Nero glanced back over his shoulder.

The man exhaled, long tendrils of smoke curling up and around his nose before disappearing. "I'm going to give you the opportunity to return my wallet. I highly suggest you take it."

"Sorry dude, don't know what your talking about." Nero had said innocently, bringing a hand up to swipe at his nose nervously. The man cocked his head to the side, looking briefly at him in puzzlement. Then he had smiled, his face stretching in a way that made the action seem a thousand times more unnatural then it should have.

It was then that Nero experienced a very bad feeling. Backing up, more then a little unnerved by the smile, the half devil had turned and fled.

He'd made it about a block before the police started to appear. It was the most bizarre thing that Nero had ever seen. In the entirety of his time living in Capulet, he'd never seen so many cops in the slums before. Now it seemed like they were crawling out the damn cracks in the sidewalk.

The half demon sprinted across a rooftop, ignoring the shouts behind and below him and quickly leapt across the small alleyway to the next building. Thank god, they'd crammed the section housing against each other the way they did or else he'd really be in trouble. He let out a groan of frustration; he was starting to get tired. It felt like they'd run halfway across the city already. They probably had.

*This is so messed up. I swear -*

Nero let out a shout as he barely threw himself out of the way of a grizzly looking cop that had burst out of the stairway next him. The man grabbed at him, catching the back of his hoodie, and yanking back with enough force to send him tumbling backwards. Nero hit the ground and rolled, loosing his beloved wool cap to a ripped shingle before shooting to his feet and dashing away. This was all Lady Mae's fault. Next time Nero met his bitch of an aunt he was going to rip off anything that was
fake; which was just about everything.

It was a pretty boring day around the shop. It had been raining for a week straight and the phone had barely rung. The fact that the few times it had rung had been debt collectors hadn't improved Dante's mood very much. Even Patty had been absent. The nuns who ruled the orphanage hadn't been to keen on letting the kid out. Lady was out of town on business, Trish was god knows where and Morrison was escorting another one of his clients to a job.

In short, Dante was seriously bored and had zero entertainment.

From underneath his magazine the half devil sighed. It was too boring to even sleep. That was pretty fucking bored. Dante felt himself perk up as the antique phone on his desk trilled loudly. Slipping the magazine from his face, the hunter smacked a booted heel against the desk and caught the receiver easily. *Please let this be a job.*

"Devil May Cry."

"Dante!" said hunter winced, letting the receiver slide slightly down his shoulder at the sound of Patty's shrill voice. "I'm bored!"

"That make's two of us. What do you want? I'm busy."

"Liar!" Patty snapped with a snort. "I'm bored and the nuns won't let me walk anywhere. Come and get me."

Dante rolled his eyes at the demand. "Why would I do that?"

"Just do it, Dante!" Click. The hunter felt his eyebrows rise in surprise. *Did that little brat just hang up on me?* He had to stop letting her hang out with Trish and Lady. With a shrug Dante stood, pulling his trench coat on. He might as well; there was nothing else to do. Besides, he had to pick up some pizza anyway.

Muttering under his breath about pushy little humans, Dante stepped out into the rain. One quick look at the overcast sky showed the chances of the rain quitting to be fairly unlikely. He wasn't really in the mood to expose either his bike or the convertible (its top had pretty much been stuck in the down position for about five years) to the weather, he began making his way towards the nearest subway entrance. Dante sniggered as he imagined the nine year olds face when he told her she'd have to walk back to shop in the rain.

"Stop! I said stop, damn it!" The scream was somewhere overhead, a ways off but getting closer. Now that he was paying attention, the hunter could hear the sounds of commotion coming from somewhere to his right.

*Police. A lot of them.* Dante furrowed his brows, turning to look up and over at the rapidly approaching sounds. *Chasing a woman?*

"Go to hell!" Another voice, higher and much younger snarled back. *Not a woman.* The chase was growing closer and Dante scanned the rooftops for a sign of what was going on. For a moment, he considered scaling the building but the hunter dismissed it as quickly as it had come. Dante had a piss poor relationship with Capulet cops. Better to not get involved.

The sound of pounding feet was almost atop of him and as Dante watched, a small form catapulted itself off a neon sign and vaulted over him. Time seemed to slow as he lazily watched the boy sail over him. He twisted in the air, the awkward launch sending him over the street headfirst and Dante
snorted at the long stream of curses that were trailing from above. Blue met blue as the two locked eyes. Dante's mind instantly recognized the surprised face as the brat who'd stolen his pizza.

And then he registered the white hair.

It was incredibly dirty, sticking up in wild directions and discolored in several areas but there was no denying the color. Almost in tandem with the realization, the boy passed directly overhead and Dante was treated to a full breath of his natural scent. And then time returned to its normal pace and the boy was gone.

Seconds later a handful of cops followed suit, several dozen more shot across the street at ground level. Dante watched them go, mind still trying to comprehend what the hell had just happened.

Nero heaved a desperate breath, body pressed flat against the side of a decrepit pigeon coop. The thing wasn't very good cover but Nero desperately hoped it would be enough to keep the idiots from finding him. He glanced out of a screened window before ducking down, stilling completely as the police approached his hiding place. Nero felt his breath catch and then release in one long exhale as they sprinted past the coop. Exhausted he let himself slide down until he was sitting, both legs stretched out in front of him.

Nero groaned, bringing a hand up to run through his hair nervously. Outside he could still hear them searching for him. Damn, they just don't give up. The pigeons around him were staring at him, laughing at him, Nero was sure and he sent the one closest to him a sneer.

"The hell you looking at?"

The pigeon didn't answer, head cocking to the side as it continued to observe him. Nero sighed and brought both his hands to rub despondently at his face. He may have really screwed the pooch this time. The police had never gone after him for so long before. Just who the hell was the guy Nero had robbed?

From underneath the bandages Nero's right arm throbbed. He rubbed at it, frowning as he felt the muscles twitch under his fingertips. It hadn't ever really felt like this before. Nero chewed his lip thoughtfully, trying to recall if he'd hit it on something without noticing it. No, it didn't start hurting until I saw that guy again, the one in red. The moment that he'd recognized the man from before his arm had erupted into a strange sensation. It throbbed and twitched even now and while the feeling wasn't painful, it was unsettling.

It hadn't acted like that the when he'd stolen the man's pizza, so why was it happening now? Frowning, Nero slid the sleeve of his hoodie up and pulled at the very top of the worn wrapping he used on his arm. He's only unwrapped enough to see a sliver of twitching forearm before freezing.

Holy flying shitmonkeys, my arm's glowing!

It was very weak but Nero's sharp eyes could easily pick up the faint blue glow coming off the misshapen flesh. What the fuck?

There were voices outside and the young half devil froze, clamping a hand down over the glowing flesh, and sinking down into the darkest part of the hut again.

"What did this kid do anyway?"

"Stole from the commissioner."
Inside the shack, Nero choked on his own spit. It was a public secret that the police commissioner was hardcore mafia. Anthony Rockwell was the youngest son of a rather large crime family and had bought himself the position about two years before Nero had started living here. Capulet city was pretty much run by different families but they all reported to the Rockwell family. And Nero had just stolen from them.

"...damn."

"Yeah, poor little kid."

"I dunno, man. I think he's gone."

"Fine, go tell the captain."

There was the sound of a scoff. "Like hell, you're the senior one here. If anyone's getting reamed here it's gonna be you."

"Feh. Whatever."

"Let's just check the coop," Nero cursed, frantically looking for another way out of the hut, "I'm completely soaked."

He barely shimmied his way out through an unsecured portion of the tin wall, scraping his back and front painfully in order to do so. Trying to make as little noise as possible, Nero slipped over the side of the building, navigating down the straight drop via empty clotheslines, and windowsills before ducking into a dumpster.

The smell made him want to vomit and Nero was pretty positive that there was something living there already but he hunkered down, pulling the lid shut behind him. He crouched silently, eyes adjusting to the dark easily as he listened for sounds of his pursuers. After minutes of nothing but the sound of his harsh breathing, and the rain pelting the plastic lid Nero relaxed. Relaxing fully against the trash, Nero pulled out the stolen wallet. It was expensive, made out of soft, engraved leather with the initials AR on one side and the crest of the Capulet police department on the other. It was long and flat, hinged on one side with a clasp on the other. Opening it revealed a small, neat stack of hundred dollar bills, business cards and a few pieces of folded notebook paper.

Oh shit, what the hell did I do?

Numbly, Nero set the wallet on his knee and leafed through the bills before slowly setting them back in the wallet and closing it.

There's five grand in that wallet, he thought somewhat detachedly, I just stole five grand from the mafia backed police commissioner. Groaning, the half devil rested his head on the side of the dumpster. He was so dead.

"-so I said, what are you talking about? This one was sooo much better. But then Lisa said, no, she liked the brown ones better. Can you believe that? Who wants the browns one when they could wear these cute pink ones?" There was a snort of disbelief. "Crazy, right? So, we got in a fight and I pulled her hair and the nuns-"

Dante tuned out Patty's ramblings from his spot at his desk. The half devil stared at the slowly rotating fan above him, eyes narrowed in thought as he balanced a beer on his kneecap.

That kid...
He'd thought about little else since their second run in. Dante hadn't really given the kid a second thought after their first meeting but now...now the hunter couldn't stop thinking about him. Jobs were still pretty scarce due to the rain and the few that he had gotten hadn't lasted long enough to be fulfilling. Not that he got to keep the money anyway. Dante swore Lady had his phone bugged.

Pale skin, blue eyes, and white hair. The half devil had never seen that particular set of coloring outside of his own family. And that scent! It had been faint due to the rain and sheer volume of filth that covered the boy but it had still been present enough for Dante to catch it. The kid smelled like him, definitely a half devil.

And unless Dante was sorely mistaken, and the hunter doubted he was seeing how he'd never run into another one not related to him in his thirty years, that meant they were blood. So, the kid was either a long lost brother (not sure that the mechanics on that was even possible), his nephew (...kind of hard imagining Vergil doing a human, but maybe?) or his son. Which was not friggin' possible because Dante didn't do kids.

Like at all.

"-ooked like you! You should have seen it!"

Dante straightened in his seat at Patty's seemingly random comment. "Patty, what did you just say?"

The nine-year-old blonde paused mid mop and threw him a dirty look. "You weren't listening to me again, were you?"

"Sure I was. What do you mean a kid that looks likes me?" There was no way in hell. What are the chances that they'd have met?

"Like I said," There was another glare, "I met a boy who looked just like you. Dante! You never listen to me, I told you about it when it happened weeks ago. He was being chased by this fat chef with a rolling pin." Patty said cheerfully as she dunked the mop into the foamy bucket. "I think he stole some bread or something. He's a street kid."

"And he looked like me?"

"Yeah! A whole lot. Same hair and eyes and everything."

...Well. What do you know? It was a small world after all. Shaking his head, Dante took another sip of his beer.

The blonde orphan stopped mopping for a moment and turned a critical eye on him. "Hey, Dante? He's not your kid or anything, right?"

The hunter choked, bringing a hand up to wipe beer spittle of his chin as he stared at the girl incredulously. "Why ya say that?"

Patty rolled her eyes. "You mean besides the fact that he looks like you and talks like you? He jumped on top of a building from the street. I don't know a lot of people who can do that."

"He's not mine." Dante stated firmly, taking another swig of beer as Patty shrugged and went back to mopping. There was no way in hell he had son. If I got someone pregnant, they'd tell me.

... Right?
Shit, would Dante know if he got someone pregnant? What if – no. No. Of course, he would. The chick would be all over him for child support. Probably would want even more knowing what kind of monsters the half devil's bloodline popped out. Right. Yeah. He'd know.

Dante leaned back in his seat decisively.

*No way he's mine.*

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Dante catches a foot to the face, Nero is still being chased, and Lady Mae makes a mistake.
Nero ate the stolen Danish quickly, keeping one eye on the street around him as he made his way from shadow to shadow, trying to get to his hideout as quickly as possible. The cops were everywhere. Like friggin' everywhere. He'd been too afraid to spend the stolen money, so the preteen had ended up stealing his breakfast/lunch from the day old table at some random bakery.

The Danish was hard and the jelly inside slightly too chunky but the boy didn't care. He was hungry. Like really, really hungry or else he wouldn't have dared to leave his hiding place above the blues bar. Nero kept telling himself he was just being paranoid, that there was no way the cops were out looking for him. But it had been two days and they were still everywhere.

Nero wasn't the only one freaked out by the sudden martial presence. The entire slum was on edge. It was more violent here now thanks to all the extra stress and street kids like himself were in more danger than ever.

He didn't dare go anywhere near the Pink Lily and that meant that the few (but still present) handouts he got from Auntie Mae where gone. Nero needed to eat. A lot. For as long as he could remember, the preteen always eaten more than his adoptive siblings. It had never been too much of a problem before coming to Capulet. Sometimes his family had given him shit, especially Credo (Are you going to eat the tablecloth as well?) and his father Ezra (Nero, for the love of the Savior, chew.), but they had always kept enough food on hand.

Now the white-haired child was always hungry. It felt like he spent most of his day just trying to get his hands on enough food. And now that he couldn't move freely due to the police presence his scavenging had been cut in half. Nero felt naked without his hat. He kept his hood up and drawn tightly but he felt like his white hair was a giant 'come find me' sign.

The Danish was gone and Nero was still starving. A quick glance across the street revealed an unguarded fruit stand. He hesitated before crossing the street. This was a stupid idea. Like a really, really, stupid idea. Sharp eyes located the owner a few feet away talking avidly at newspaper stand. The smell of the apples was overwhelming and cautiously Nero began his approach. He had reached the stand, a green apple in his hand and was in mid turn to leave when a blur of blonde and green materialized next to him.

"Hey!" Nero's head snapped to the side, eyes wide as a blonde girl bounced her way over to him. "Remember me?"

It was the ice cream girl from before. What the hell was her name? She was smiling widely at him, clad head to toe in pastels and wearing a large, floppy hat. For a moment he stared at her, beyond shocked that the girl was stupid enough to walk around dressed like that. She was practically asking to be robbed. Nero continued to stare at her, shifting awkwardly with the apple under her bright
"Uh, hi."

"Hey, that's a nice apple! Can I have some?" The girl winked. "You did ruin my ice cream after all."

Her voice was way too loud and Nero shoved the apple desperately into his pocket but it was too late. The words had attracted the attention of the owner quick enough. The huge man came lumbering down the street, screaming his head off. Nero's hands shot out, pushing the girl down angrily.

"Way to go, loud mouth."

The blonde stared up at him with wide eyes. "I-I'm sorry--"

But Nero was already gone, sprinting down the street at full speed. The sound of police whistled echoed almost immediately with the fruit seller's screams of 'Thief!' and the preteen let out a cry of frustration as he once again found a large number of cops in pursuit.

His only hope was to lose them on the roofs and with that thought the street boy leapt, clearing a store awning before using it as a springing board up to the rooftops. Nero swore as he heard the telltale sound of metal grating on metal as a fire escape to his left was pulled down.

The little blonde just made his hit list, right under Auntie Mae.

"White-haired kid? Damn, everybody wants to know 'bout that brat all the sudden." A wrinkled hand reached up to itch at a raggedy goatee in thought.

Dante fought the urge to snap at the old man in front of him. He didn't look like much, an old (and frankly gross looking) man sitting in a folding chair on his stoop but Dante knew from experience that if you wanted to know anything about what was going on, it was these kinds of old timers you went to.

"Yes, like I said before. This tall, white hair, wrapped arm. Rings some bells, right?"

"Mm-hm. I see him every now and then. Nuthin' but a street punk, that one."

The hunter felt his eye twitch. "I'm sure. Do you know where he stays?"

"Didn't you hear me, boy? I said he's a street punk. He ain't got a home." The old man tsked. "I see him sometimes up at that devil house."

Well, isn't that ironic. "And which house would that be?"

"You know, a whore house. The Pink Lily over there on State." A brothel? What the hell was a kid that young doing at a brothel? Damn, that would be one hell of a place to live. The old man shot him a critical look. "You should take better care of your own, you know that?"

"He's not mine," Dante growled, turning on a booted heel before storming around the corner and making his way towards State. Okay, so yeah, the kid was related to him somehow but the half-devil refused to entertain the thought that he was his. There was no way, especially in Capulet, that a preggers wouldn't hit someone up for child support. The brat had to be his idiot brother's. And if he was it was probably a good thing that Dante had offed his twin, as god knows what little monster Vergil would have turned the kid into.
"Dante!"

Said half-devil's head snapped to the side, meeting a hysterical Patty halfway as she streaked towards him from across the street. He caught the sobbing girl by the shoulders, a quick glance taking in the wrinkled pricey clothes, ruffled hair, and desperate fear on the orphan's face.

*God damnit, I told her not to walk around in those clothes down here.* Dante knew this was only a matter of time. Ever since Patty had spent all that money she'd gotten on clothes and toys, he just knew that someone was going to think she was something more than just another orphan kid.

"Who robbed you?" the hunter ground out, barely managing to keep the grip on her shoulders from becoming painful in his fury. *I'm gonna kill the fucker.*

"N-No!" Patty sobbed, clinging to the front of his duster. "No, that's not it! I did something bad!"

Dante blinked in surprise, the fury dying out to be replaced with irritation. "What?"

"That boy from before. I-I--" Another round of sobs. "I got him in so much trouble! Dante, you have to help him. Those damn pigs!" The hunter blinked in surprise at the derogatory term. It was easy to forget sometimes that Patty was born and raised in the orphanage at the heart of the slums. "They went after him and – and they looked so mean! They're gonna hurt him, Dante please!"

"All right, all right. Stop the water works." He peeled the girl from his waist. "Where – never mind. I hear them." And he did. On the roofs again. "Go wait for me at the shop."

Patty looked up at him hopefully. "You're going?"

"Yeah, now go. Damn." Dante easily leapt from the ground to the building top, hesitating for only a second before taking off towards the south end of Capulet East.

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Nero sprinted past a startled woman and her dog, taking a running leap up a series of stacked boxes before grabbing hold of a low hanging sign and swinging up and over a low lighting roof. He hit the tiled roof at an angle and instantly began to slide, but the street boy readjusted on instinct and was already making his way off the edge and up the side of the building by the time he heard the tell tale thump of his pursuers following him.

The chase had been going on for the better part of an hour and Nero had been forced to alternate in between the streets in the roof in hopes of gaining the advantage. He had always been naturally athletic and he'd grown rather adept at free running during his year of living on the streets. By mixing it up like that, Nero had for the most part managed to lose almost all the cops.

Except these *fuckers* behind him.

They were dressed like cops but Nero would sell his left nut if those assholes were the average Capulet regulars. They sure as hell didn't move like any cops he'd ever seen. There was about five of them and, but *goddamn*, they were fast. He leapt over and crossed over to the next roof before shooting wildly out at a right-angle to the left, catching the edge of a tree branch and using it to launch himself onto the next roof. The boy rolled and immediately dropped to the ground, weaving through random alleyways.

Nero found he couldn't stay in a straight line for too long or the bastards following him would start to seriously catch up. So, even though it was seriously exhausting he was trying to avoid straight lines as much as possible. He swore loudly as he banged him right arm against the side of a brick wall before using a conveniently placed fire escape to propel himself up to the rooftops.
That was another weird thing. The entire time Nero had been chased his arm had fucking hurt – like ached – and he couldn't figure out why. There were shouts behind him and Nero instantly realized his mistake. The preteen had somehow doubled back and now they were almost on top of him. To make matters worse, Nero had reached one of the open areas where several of the multiple industrial canals that littered the south end of Capulet East met and formed one giant, greasy river. This thing was like epically large and he was rapidly running out of roof space on either side to escape to. And going back certainly wasn't an option.

A hand grabbed his elbow and yanked roughly, throwing the preteen instantly off balance. Nero threw a punch out, catching the officer holding him hard against the soft side of his neck and the man howled before releasing him. Nero grinned in victory, stepping backwards to get enough room to pivot and take off again when his foot met air.

The white-haired boy had half a second of pure Oh shit and then he was falling.

Dante reached the fight just in time to see the kid go streaking towards the brown-green goo that was the dividing canal between Capulet East and South. The height of the drop was enough to easily knock out a human, and with the kid being so small the hunter wasn't sure what the hell would happen. So with a sense of resigned acceptance he plunged himself in after him. I'm really not fucking looking forward to this.

The water was thicker than it should have been and it carried a distinctly greasy feeling. The second Dante hit it, the half-devil felt like he'd taken a shower in oil. It burned brutally at his eyes but the hunter kept them open, searching the muggy darkness for any sight of the kid. The canal was easily the most polluted part of the entire city and it was a strange sensation, being able to feel his healing abilities kick in to save the integrity of his eyes, nose, and ears only to have them begin to burn again moments later.

There was a flash of movement to his right and Dante caught sight of a flailing blue-clad arm. The desperate motions were hard to misinterpret. I don't friggin' believe it, the kid can't swim! Who the hell couldn't swim in this day and age? The half-devil reached the boy in a few firm strokes, wrapping an arm around the struggling kid before kicking off the bottom and sending them both rocketing towards the surface.

They broke the surface with ragged breaths – Dante's nose was still on fire from the scents of the water and he could tell from the frantic gagging of the boy in his arms that the kid wasn't feeling well either. Healing abilities aside, it was not a good idea to stay in the water for any longer than necessary and the hunter made short work of dragging them both up and over the concrete lip that lined the edge of the canal. A quick glance at the surrounding roofline showed no sign of the goons that had been tracking the street rat.

Assured that the danger was gone, Dante fell backwards, his head smacking harmlessly against the concrete. For a moment the two just laid there, breathing hard against the stench and pollution. The kid's breathing didn't sound very good. The boy was curled against the hunter's side, his small frame shaking violently with each intake, face pressed against the side of Dante's chest. The hunter pushed himself up on his elbows, brows furled in concern as the boy coughed harshly against the back of his hand.

"Hey kid, you alright?"

The boy stiffened and Dante was amused to realize he had been forgotten once again. A smart ass remark was half formed when the kid turned to look up at him. The look of shock softened the brat's features and made his cornflower blue eyes seemed twice their normal size and for a split second all
coherent thought fled the hunter's mind.

_Holy shit, he looks so much like_ –

The kid moved to bolt but Dante was faster, a lanky arm snapping out and grabbing the preteen by the arm before he could get far. There was a pulse of pure, unbridled _demonic_ energy from underneath his grip that brought him to his feet. The kid was throwing random curses at him, struggling against the hunter in the same manner a wild animal might a loop trap. But Dante didn't really give a shit about that; he was far too preoccupied by the faint glow that was coming off from underneath the crusty bandages.

"What the hell is that?"

"Don't touch it! It's evil!" the boy screamed, his little boy voice rising to a hysterical pitch that made the older half-devil wince.

Dante snorted. "Kid, please, you're a half-devil for fuck's sake."

The kid froze, staring up at him with horrified eyes before yanking his arm away with surprising strength. The action left the rest of the bandages in the hunter's grip and Dante was treated with an unobstructed view of _glowing_ blue and red scales that covered much of the boy's arm.

"Well, would you look at that?" He brought a hand out and snagged the arm again, eyes wide as the glow increased. The boy was screaming insults at him now, his normal hand all but clawing at Dante's. "Will you just calm down? You should be worshiping the ground I walk on for saving your ass."

"Fuck you, old man!" the now-revealed younger half-devil spat out. "I was handling it just fine."

Dante snorted. "Yeah, you were handling it amazingly while you were sinking."

The kid snarled, using the grip to flip his body up and _kick_ him across his face. Dante's head snapped back – the force was enough to incapacitate, if not kill, a human and then the ungrateful _fucking brat_ took the opportunity to escape. By the time Dante had fixed the dislocation in his neck the kid was nothing but a blur of blue against the roof lines.

" Fucking unbelievable," he muttered, bringing one hand up to rub at his neck before the hunter wrinkled his nose against the smell of his own clothing. But still, the arm was something else.

_That face..._ Dante sighed, running a hand through his soaked, gummy hair. _What the fuck, just... What the fuck._

There was no denying it now. That kid had to be Vergil's. A nephew. Damn, he didn't want to deal with a hellish brat of his brother. _And if it's not Verge's? What the fuck you gonna do then, hotshot?_  

_Shit_. Dante really needed to figure out who that kid was; it was driving him nuts. That meant a visit to the Pink Lily. ...after a change of clothes and a thorough shower.

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Two hours had passed before Nero felt safe enough to relax into the small fort he'd made out of used produce crates. The preteen let out a long sigh, bringing an uncovered hand up to stare at it. He'd never let anyone see it since it got like this and to let that guy see it, Nero was furious with himself.

He should have been quicker, he should have been faster. And how the hell had Nero let himself get cornered so easily? And near water? _But the man in red saved me._
The thought of the man in red made his heart pound. Nero knew now that his arm acted weirdly whenever it was around him. Something about that man made his arm throb, and glow, and ache. It never felt like that before except after he had run into that man.

And there had been that other, far more frightening feeling. When Nero had been pulled from the canal, he had felt safe. The feeling had been all encompassing, and at that moment the boy knew, with every inch of his body, that the man wasn't going to hurt him. And as his lungs and eyes burned and his back ached from where he'd hit the water, the only thing Nero could think of was that the man in red was safe. It took Nero far too long – not until the man in red had spoken to him – to realize just whose side he was curled up like a kitten against.

Which was impossible, because Nero never let himself forget what was going on around him. Ever. That was how stupid street kids died. The feeling terrified him because it made no sense. And there was nothing, absolutely fucking nothing, that even remotely pointed to the man in red as being safe. He was big, had lots of guns, smelled fucking weird and was way too interested in his arm. The man in red was definitely not safe.

So why the hell did Nero regret leaving?

The Pink Lily was actually one of the classier brothels Dante had encountered. It was in a grey stone building, though the sides were stained liberally with the filth that was so common in the slums, with high pitched roofs and a large stained glass window above its entry that depicted its namesake. The inside of it was fairly clean with some of the hottest working girls and boys Dante had seen in a while milling about.

He didn't frequent this kind a place; it was all too high class for him. It had been easy enough to get a meeting with the owner of the place – Dante had just walked in and caused enough of a ruckus for the receptionists to all but push him into her office.

The first thing that had hit the hunter about the woman he met with was that she was fucking old. The second thing was that she smelled bad – the horrendous amounts of perfume she wore couldn't cover the smell the decay that hung around her. Just as the copious amounts of makeup she had slathered over her face couldn't hide her age.

She introduced herself as Lady Mae and Dante did the same.

She tried to flirt with him immediately. (Dante Alighieri, huh? My goodness, I've heard of you. Anything I can help you with I'd be more than happy to oblige.)

Dante hadn't taken kindly to it. (Ewwwww.)

Lady Mae hadn't taken kindly to his rejection. (Excuse me?)

Which lead them to this awkward situation of her having a shotgun pointed directly at his chest.

"You better tell me who the hell you think you are." The makeup around her nose and lips cracked as she glared furiously at him. "Waltzing into my place and insulting me."

The half-devil just grinned apologetically and brought both hands up in surrender. "Look, Lady, I just want some information."

"I see." It was like someone had flipped switch and the anger was gone. Lady Mae was staring at him with cold, calculating eyes. "You're here about the half-breed. I should have known, the white hair and all."
Dante felt his eyebrows shoot up in surprise at the sudden change. "...yeah."

Without warning she fired. The force of the shot sent him toppling over the edge of the sofa he'd been leaning against and rolled head over ass. He landed in a twisted heap against a far bookcase. From behind her desk Lady Mae sighed, setting the shotgun on her desk before fishing out a cigarette and lighting it.

"I told Louise we should have drowned that thing at birth." Mae inhaled, reaching down to stroke the edges of a framed photograph on her desk. "I knew it was going to come back and bite me in the ass." She looked at the still body somewhat regretfully. "What a waste, he was very attractive."

"Don't start crying over me yet."

Lady Mae froze at the cheerful statement, eyes nearly bugging out of her skull as the assumed dead hunter pulled himself from the floor. She dropped the cigarette and scrambled for the shotgun, but her hands were shaking so badly she couldn't bring it level. Dante sent her a full smile as he dusted himself off, before reaching over and taking the shotgun from Mae's limp grip.

"Now that we've established that, I've got some questions." The half-devil crushed the double barrel easily before letting the weapon drop to the ground with a thud. Lady Mae paled as she stared at the bent metal. "And I suggest you really stop trying to piss me off."

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Dante becomes really uncomfortable, some rather large breasted women make an appearance and the Police finally get there guy.
The shop was boring without Dante, Patty decided immediately. Everything was clean and shining and even the TV didn't have anything good on it. The blonde watched it anyway, sprawled out on the leather couch miserably. All she could think about was Dante and the boy that looked like him, whether or not the boy was okay. The front door opened but Patty barely looked up from the TV.

"Hey, Patty. Where's Dante?" That was Trish.

"That dumbass, he's never around when I need him." And that was Lady.

"Hey," Patty said sadly, rolling on her side so she could stare at both girls morosely. Trish frowned, cocking her head to the side and sending blonde hair cascading over her shoulder. Patty wished she could do that – it was sooo graceful and beautiful.

"Something wrong?"

Patty nodded and brought herself to sit up cross-legged. "I'm worried cause Dante's not back from looking for the boy that looks like him."

Lady made a choking sound. "The boy who looks like him?"

Trish sent the black haired woman a sidewise grin before plopping down next to the smaller blonde and wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulder. "Maybe you should start at the beginning."

Patty hesitated – Dante hated it when she told the other hunters about stuff in his life. He told her she should just keep her mouth shut and not help them be harpies and ruin his life. But Dante had been gone for a long time and he'd barely even spoken to Patty when he'd returned to the shop to shower and change. And so even though she knew the hunter would be angry, she told them the entire story.

By the end of it, Lady was practically cackling. "This is fucking priceless! God, I always wondered how many kids that man-whore must have sired."

"It could be Vergil's," Trish suggested thoughtfully. That only made Lady laugh even harder.

"Please, you didn't know Vergil. I don't think that guy had a sex drive." As sudden as the laughing had begun, it stopped and Lady looked strangely serious. "What the hell is Dante going to do with a kid, besides get it killed?"

Not one of them could find an answer for her.

All things considered, Lady Mae recovered rather quickly. She lit another cigarette before lounging in her padded chair like it was a throne. Dante indulged her silence for only so long. Getting shot in the chest may not have killed him but it still fucking hurt.
“…any time now would be great.”

Lady Mae snorted before taking a sip of an amber mixed-drink and setting it back down on her desk with a harsh thud. "What exactly would you like to know?"

"A name would be nice."

"His name's Nero. He was nine when he first showed up last year, so I suppose he's already ten by now."

Dante nodded, satisfied to finally have a name to put with the face. "Nero, huh?"

*Not a goddamn bad name, at least I don't have a relative named Eugene or something.*

"So, what's the kid's story?"

"He showed up here about a year ago, thinking I'd take care of him." Mae snorted again, taking a deep inhale of her cigarette. "I offered him a place in my brothel, but he declined."

"Yeah, can't imagine why he wouldn't want to indulge in this kind of work." Dante eyed the woman distastefully – even his twisted mind thought putting someone under eighteen in a sex job was fucked up. Mae just shrugged at his look, obviously not caring to defend her actions to him. "And why would he think you would take care of him? No offense, but you don't seem like the friendliest of women."

There was another long inhale and exhale as the woman stared Dante down with cold, calculating eyes. "His mother was my sister's kid. I have no idea how he got this address, as his mother died a year after Nero was born."

"He didn't grow up here, then?" A curt nod to the negative. The hunter was slightly relieved, since if the kid had grown up here he would've felt like a jackass for not noticing Nero sooner.

"My niece sent him off to live with some priests in Fortuna. Thought they could save his soul or some nonsense."

The half-devil stiffened at that. He'd heard little of Fortuna and none of it had been good. They were supposed to be cultist fanatics up there, following some twisted religion that had something to do with his father's triumph over the Demon World. There was apparently a fair amount of devil haters there, as well frequent demon attacks though the hunter had little interest in ever going there. Between Capulet and Limbo City, he had more than enough work.

Besides that, Dante didn't know much more, mainly because there wasn't much else to know about the city without going there. The place was under strict control, visitors were rarely allowed in and, from what Dante had heard, rarely let out again.

These crazy bitches had sent a quarter-devil baby to possibly one of the most closed-minded places on Earth. How the fuck had that seemed like a good idea? The concept of Nero growing up surrounded by those kinds of people made Dante grit his teeth in irritation. He was incredibly offended on the kid's behalf. *The kid's soul wasn't in any danger, you idiot.*

"So you just sent your great-nephew merrily off to go live on the streets?"

"Please, don't pretend the two of you are the same as the rest of us. Nero was fine. He certainly shows up around here enough begging for hand outs."
"Is he here now?"

"No," Lady Mae answered simply.

"Do you know where he lives?"

"How should I know? He sleeps sometimes on top of Mimi's Blues Tavern; sometimes I let him in here. Don't look at me like that – just because he's my great-nephew doesn't mean I'm responsible for him."

"That's usually exactly how the fuck it works."

Mae sneered at him, stubbing her cigarette out with a vengeful twist. "You really have no idea, do you?"

Dante looked at her warily. "What do you mean?"

The old woman laughed, a harsh warble that set him on edge. "Unbelievable. You really don't even remember me do you?" She reached across the desk and grabbed a framed photo, twisting it until it faced him. "Do you even remember her?"

The photo had two women in it – one was clearly a much younger Mae but the one next to her Dante was hard pressed to remember. She was tall, thin, and beautiful. She had thick, curly dark hair that fell loose around her shoulders and skimmed over the tips of full breasts. Large, striking amber eyes stared out from the photo, framed by lengthy lashes. It was her lips that made Dante remember her. Full, gorgeous lips drawn at a slight slant as she smiled.

There was a horrible sinking feeling in his stomach – a moment of horrible realization. The half-devil had met her when he was still pretty young, full of unbridled anger, violence, and lust. He'd spent only one night with her, but Dante had to have taken her over five times. He swore softly, shaking his head as he brought the photo up for closer inspection.

_Fucking hell_, Dante thought with no small amount of guilt, _I can't even remember her name._

"He's mine." His voice sounded small, even to his own ears.

"Of course he is," Mae answered with a dry laugh, her voice cold and bitter. "How many people do you know have white hair?"

"The mother's dead?"

"Yes, the mother is dead," the Lady said hatefully. "Her name was Louise. That baby killed her; she never recovered from having it. Got sick and just never got better. I told her just to take care of it but no, she had to keep it. She thought having a baby would be such an experience. And then when it came out – we both just knew." Mae took a shuddering breath.

Dante went utterly still.

"A full head of white hair. What kind of baby is born with white hair? And the sound it made when it cried, we just knew what it was. Everyone said you weren't human and damn if I didn't believed them till that moment. I told her to drown it, kill it. It would bring us nothing but trouble. Louise refused, you know? She said she just couldn't kill a baby – not when it was half her fault. So she sent it away with this traveling preacher up to Fortuna. I knew he'd come back to haunt us."

Lady Mae let out a strangled laugh that kept on going, interrupting her sentences at every other word.
"And he did! Came walking up to this place like I owed him something! That fucking demon took my baby girl from me! She was all I had! I wanted to kill him, but he had that arm and I just knew that if I tried, he'd kill me. But he solved that problem for me. Went and stole from the Rockwells! All I had to do was wait until he came here for some food and call the cops. They dragged him out of here kicking and screaming. And you know what? He's probably a smear by now!"

The laughter ended in a spitting gasp as Dante flew across the desk, pinning her against the back of the chair by her throat. He squeezed hard enough to hear her neck pop.

"You stupid bitch. If he's dead I'll tear you limb from limb." The half-devil's voice was gravely with the force of his anger, and it was only Dante's long-term vow to not kill humans that kept him from twisting the old woman's head from her neck. Instead, he settled with throwing her to the floor hard enough to break something and stormed from the room.

He crossed the entryway and made it to his car in seconds. He had to move fast. The members of the Rockwell family were cruel bastards. They killed indiscriminately. Age and gender didn't mean anything to them, especially in the matter of thievery.

*Hold on kid, I'm coming.*

"There is no way in hell I would bite anything that hairy," the thief answered to the rather full room with a shrug. "Dude's lying."

There was little doubt that the kid had, in fact, bitten the cop in question but since there weren't any cameras and no one saw it, there was little any of them could do about it. Across from where the boy was sitting, the cop's partner fumed, pointing a stocky short finger threateningly in his direction.

"If Mike says that little fuck bit him, then he fucking bit him. I want him charged with assaulting a police officer. Mike's gotta need stitches!"

Another shrug. "Like I said, dude's making it up."

From where he was sitting, Jonathan Rilo sighed. It was moments like this that he seriously regretted ever making chief. Jack Wilt had a tendency to act like a dog with a bone – it made him a good cop but an annoying employee. "Jack--"

"No, chief. Don't 'Jack' me. I know Mike Crance, been with him for five years. He doesn't lie."

"Oh, I don't doubt the two of ya know each other real well. It's cute to see you so riled up – down right *romantic.*"

Wilt was a man with a short temper on the best of days, and Rilo was already moving to try to intercept the tall man as his face turned mauve at the insult. He was halfway over to them when Wilt's baton smashed against the smart assed kid's head. The boy crumpled like a rag doll.

"For the love of– Jack!" Rilo pushed his detective away angrily, kneeling down to check on the thief. He sent Wilt another glare before lifting the thankfully still alive kid. "He's just a kid. You could have killed him."

"Sorry, Chief." Wilt sounded remorseful, but sure as hell doesn't look it, grinning smugly as blood leaked liberally from the head wound. Rilo's left eyebrow twitched, a sure sign of his irritation. If they weren't so short handed for officers he'd send that fucker packing in a heartbeat. As it stood, he simply resolved to force Wilt to go see the police therapist. Again.
There was the sound of heavy footfalls in the hallway before the door was suddenly pulled damn near off its hinges, and Rilo found himself face to face with a furious Dante Alighieri. The room fell silent behind him under the strength of the white-haired man's anger.

"Give me the kid."

It's not a request. It's also completely lacking Alighieri's normal style of delivery and it stroked Rilo's pride to know that something he'd done had finally managed to get under the delinquent's skin.

For a few moments, the sound of his men shuffling uncomfortably was the only thing that could be heard. They're scared and he can understand why. Alighieri looks beyond pissed – more intimidating then he can ever recall him looking, but Rilo wouldn't back down. Not this time. They'd let Alighieri get away with far too much. He had let it slide because the man did a much needed service for the slums, and in all honestly there wasn't much Rilo could do to stop him anyway. But not this time.

This little brat had done far too much to far too many important people in this town. And the price on his head alone would be enough to fund the department for at least five years. Not to mention the numerous repairs and upgrades he could finally authorize. The lives that could be saved...

"No."

The sound of a gun being cocked filled the small room and every uniform in the room tensed as Rilo found himself face to face with one of the devil hunter's famed modified M1911. Seconds later a lower, somehow far more ominous noise followed it. Rilo shuddered at the sound, the hairs on the back of his arms and neck standing clear on end as long buried instincts flared to life. Alighieri was growling at him, he realized with no small amount of alarm. There's a strange feeling twisting in his gut all of a sudden, and the police chief couldn't seem to figure out where the confidence he felt moments ago had fled to. The entire atmosphere of the room had changed and Rilo was suddenly aware that it was all just one wrong step away from erupting into hell. One wrong move, and he'd end up with a lot of dead bodies. How the fuck had he lost control of the situation so quickly?

"Jon," one of his men said quietly from his side, voice strained as he fingered the shotgun on the desk. "Look at the boy."

Brows furled in confusion he takes a moment to glance down at the child in his arms – and froze. The sweater hood had been knocked partly off and for the first time he was treated to the sight of a head full of white hair.

And then he understood the severity of his misstep. Holy shit! No wonder Alighieri was so pissed off. Rilo swallowed, painfully aware that his plan had backfired in the worst possible way and now he was standing in between an incredibly dangerous man and his child.

"Okay," he started slowly. "Okay, let's just be calm abou–" The words stalled on his lips as the boy was abruptly taken from him. The kid was (somehow) already in Alighieri's arms and Rilo got the direct impression that he and the entire police department had been completely forgotten as the white haired man carefully cradled the boy against his chest, a surprisingly deft movement considering that it was done one handed. And then in a flash of red Alighieri was moving and Jack Wilt was through the fucking wall.

The white-haired man swung around, his face contorted in rage and – what the fuck? His eyes were red and glowing as he stared them down. "If you ever touch him again, I'll kill you."

And then in a swirl of red he was gone.
Dante had smelled the kid's blood the moment he'd entered the police station. The heavy scent had nearly been the last straw for his already severely strained self-control. He'd stormed his way across the station, practically unchallenged, and the few who were stupid enough to attempt to stop him had ended up with a very intimate meeting with the wall.

His instincts were going crazy. His devil side was chomping at the bit to be let out and destroy the fuckers who drawn his son's blood. The voice in the back of his head wouldn't shut up. Everything was long streams of curses and growls and how dare they touch what is mine. And when he'd seen Nero's unconscious body in the arms of that rat bastard Rilo, he'd damn near Triggered.

Even now as he sped away from the station, Dante really wanted to do was go back there and fucking demolish everyone inside it. It was only the driving urge to get Nero home that was preventing him from doing so. The ride back to the shop seemed to take forever and Dante swore as the rain increased, reaching down to readjust his duster so that it covered the kid more. For the first time in years, Dante wished he'd just gotten the goddamn car fixed.

The girls were waiting for him at the shop, Patty clinging desperately to both women as she stood between them. The little girl let out a relieved shout when she saw him, but Dante ignored her, carefully lifting Nero up before storming the steps to the shop. Lady frowned, letting go of Patty's hand as she moved towards them, concern on her face as she stared at the bloody boy in his arms.

Logically, he knew that Lady wouldn't hurt Nero, but he couldn't help the honest to god snarl that escaped him as the devil huntress reached out worriedly towards Nero's bloody forehead. Lady's hand shot back, one moving to the handle of her pistol as the other pushed a wide-eyed Patty behind her. The sight of the startled girl brought him back to himself, and Dante shook his head in mute apology before disappearing into the side hallway and up to his room. Patty followed him, shooting questions out so fast that she was literally tripping over her words.

Dante didn't answer them, slamming and locking his bedroom door behind him, ignoring Patty's cry of protest from the hallway. He deposited the kid gently on his bed and crossed the room in a few short strides, nearly yanking the cheap blinds off their mounts as he pulled them down. He made short work of the boy's clothes, throwing the soggy, dirty things into a random corner before redressing him in a pair of his own boxers and a sleep shirt.

Nero was incredibly thin, Dante noticed with a grimace, and he had to roll the elastic lip of the boxers down repeatedly before they would sit on the boy's narrow hips. The boy looked smaller, delicate, and almost dwarfed in Dante's clothing, but the sight of it calmed him.

The older half-devil used one of his clean undershirts and an old cup of water from the night before to clean the blood off his forehead the best he could. He carefully avoided the tender ripped flesh. The cut was already mostly healed, but the entire left side of Nero's temple was a nasty, deep blue color. The hunter knew from experience it would hurt for a day before healing completely. Other than another, equally unattractive bruise on the kid's shoulders and mid-back from where he'd hit the water, the hunter was relieved to find him unharmed.

The adrenaline seeped out of him with the realization, and the half-devil leaned heavily against his dresser, suddenly feeling completely spent. What a fucking day. Dante ran a hand through his soaked locks before sighing and changing into dry clothes. He was beginning to think clearer, his inner demon finally quieting now that he'd brought his son to the safest place he could imagine. The sharp instinctive edge that had ruled his actions today shocked the half-devil.

There had been many times in his life when Dante had found himself acting more demonic then human, but usually it wasn't so blatantly obvious. The mere thought of his child in danger had pushed the hunter closer to killing humans then he'd ever been before, had made him snarl at Lady
(who, if Dante was completely honest with himself, was probably his best friend) and barricade himself in his bedroom, the closest thing to a nest the half-devil had.

Dante really ought to go and explain to the girls what had happened, but he had zero intentions of leaving the room. He sat down heavily next to Nero and stared disbelievingly at the boy. He looked so much like him, that Dante didn't know why it taken him so long to accept the connection, especially with the brat's personality. And that arm. The half-devil glanced over at the covered arm curiously before reaching over and loosening the wrapping. He began to unravel it, watching in fascination at the first hints of scales appeared.

"Don't touch it! It's evil!"

He jerked his hand back as if it'd been burnt. That conversation wasn't even remotely funny now. Dante sighed, folding over until his face was pressed against the smooth skin of the boy's human arm and inhaled. His son's scent filled his nose, tainted by blood and filth, but still unmistakably like Dante's own underneath it all. The hunter inhaled again, trying to memorize a scent he already knew he'd never forget.

Dante's heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest. He had a son. He had a son. The hunter was suddenly incredibly glad that Patty had shown some restraint for the first time in her short life, and not thrown a temper tantrum in the hallway. He didn't want to risk Trish or Lady coming up and seeing him like this. A locked door sure as hell wouldn't stop either one. The half-devil had never thought about having kids – never seriously, anyway. He'd never thought it was that important to him. But now that he had Nero in front of him, Dante was almost beside himself with emotion in a way that he hadn't been since Vergil had died.

Holy shit. He had a kid. A son who'd been abandoned by his mother. A son who had lived on the streets for a year, because he was unaware that his own father lived in the same city. Dante let out a choked sound, overwhelmed with the realization that his ten-year-old son had most likely had a childhood that was worse than his own. And that was pretty hard to do. At least Dante had eight years with his family. What did Nero have? He was almost afraid to find out. The thought of how scared and confused the kid must have been – still most likely was – broke Dante's heart.

Why didn't that stupid bitch tell me? I would have taken him.

If Louise wasn't already dead, Dante would be more than willing to set aside his dislike of killing humans. The hunter still hadn't decided what he was going to do to Lady Mae for keeping this from him. All he knew was his son had been given the short end of the stick his entire life and the hunter would be damned if he ever let it happen again.

But first, Dante would have to introduce himself.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Nero wakes up, Dante is overwhelmed and Lady proves she has a heart.
Father Mine

Chapter Notes

Jason M. Lee commissioned ~karaii over at DA for the art for this chapter. Isn't it awesome?

Last Time: Lady became weary, the two were finally united and the police learned a valuable lesson regarding paying attention to details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nero woke slowly. In fact, as soon as he became conscious enough to realize he was, the half-devil instantly tried to slip back into sleep. Nero couldn't remember the last time he felt so warm and comfortable and dry. The bed he was on was just soft enough to give in all the right places and still be supportive and it felt wonderful against his aching back.
The preteen stretched languidly, enjoying the delicious trembling the action brought before settling back down. There was a massive warmth against his back and Nero pressed the length of his back against it before letting out a soft sound of contentment. Despite his best attempts to forestall it, the boy's mind was rapidly awakening. Behind him, the warmth let out a choking wheeze/snore and Nero froze, now fully awake.

The last thing the preteen remembered was being at the police station, surrounded by a bunch of overgrown assholes that were just itching to throw him into general population. Now, he was sleeping pressed up against another person. Please God, don't let me wake up next to some dude. Please, I'll never ask for anything again.

Slowly, reluctantly, Nero opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a worn out dresser with a cracked mirror. Then blue-grey plastered walls that were littered with dirt and ripped nudie posters. On top of the dresser was a jumbo-sized box of condoms and a bottle of bourbon. Next to it a pair of elegant guns was haphazardly placed. For a moment Nero stared at the wall presented to him in confusion. Okay then, he thought as he slowly untangled himself from the (Oh dear god, were those silk?) sheets and sat up. A huge dented and scratched (Were those claw marks?) mahogany headboard filled the peripheral of his vision to the left.

What. The. Fuck?

Careful not to move in a way that would wake anybody up, Nero forced himself to turn and find out whose bed he was sharing. The man in red laid there bare-chested, stretched out on his back next to the preteen, mouth opened mid snore, one hand above his head while the other was most definitely underneath the waist band of his boxers.

Wide, horrified blue eyes stared at the hidden hand in disbelief for a moment then slid down at the oversized clothing – including the matching pair of boxers – the preteen was wearing then back at the semi-naked man. Then back up to the jumbo box of condoms. Then down to the silk sheets, and then – slowly – to the bare-chested man again.

And screamed.

The white-haired man leapt out of bed, head swinging rapidly as he searched the room for the source of the scream, but Nero was already up and fighting with the door by the time he spotted him. In his panic, he couldn't seem to figure out how to unlock it.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Arms like iron bands wrapped around Nero's waist and attempted to pull him away from the bedroom door. Attempted being the key word. Nero wrapped his hands around the door knob like it was his life line and kicked wildly into the body behind him. "Hey! Ow, stop it!"

"Get off me, you fucking rapist!" The street boy was dropped so fast that he smacked his knees painfully against the door's side. Nero spun around, pressing his back to the cold wood as his hand still fought with the door knob.

"Whoa!" The white-haired man stepped from him quickly, eyes wide. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! I think we've got ourselves one hell of a misunderstanding here."

"What the fuck is there to confuse?" Nero snarled, his demonic hand coming out to point accusingly at the taller male. "You obviously bought me from the police. I'm not gonna be anyone's sex slave, you hear me you sick fuck!"

Nero had heard of those poor kids – what street kid hadn't heard of them? Kids went missing all the time from the shelters and street corners, even from the orphanages and back of police cars.
Apparently you could make a hell of a lot of money off of human trafficking. It was the ultimate
gruesome fate for someone who lived on the streets. No way in hell was Nero going to let that
come happen to him.

"Wait, what? No – fuck. You're goddamn right you're not," the man snapped back, a look of abject
disgust on his face so genuine that Nero's frantic scratching at the door behind him paused. The older
man ran a hand through his hair, a look of desperate despair replacing the disgust. "That hasn't
happened to you, right? I mean, no one's… touched you, right?"

"Fuck no," Nero answered reflexively, and then stared in surprise at the sheer relief that blossomed
over the white haired man's face. The older white-haired male leaned against the corner of the
dresser, watching him for a moment before flashing him a somewhat strained smile.

"Look, you clearly got the wrong idea here. Let's just start over, alright? My name's Dante, I did take
you from the police station but not for anything like that. You've got nothing to fear from me."

"Fuck no," Nero answered reflexively, and then stared in surprise at the sheer relief that blossomed
over the white haired man's face. The older white-haired male leaned against the corner of the
dresser, watching him for a moment before flashing him a somewhat strained smile.

"Look, you clearly got the wrong idea here. Let's just start over, alright? My name's Dante, I did take
you from the police station but not for anything like that. You've got nothing to fear from me."

Nero eyed him wearily then snorted and crossed his arms. "I call that bullshit. Nobody just
helps anybody. What'd ya want from me?"

Dante chuckled bitterly. "Normally I'd agree with you, kid. But I'm serious. I don't want anything
from you, Nero. I just want to help you out."

Said half devil's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How do you know my name? I didn't even tell the
cops my name."

"After the swan dive incident I went looking for you at the Pink Lily," Dante explained softly. Nero
felt his mouth drop open as betrayal and rage flared their ugly heads in his breast.

"Auntie Mae sold me to you? I swear to god, when I get my hands on that ancient bitch I'm gonna–"

"For the love of– Nobody fucking sold you to me!" Dante interrupted with a roar of frustration and
Nero flattened himself against the door, eyes flickering from the posed man to the closest window
fearfully. The older half-devil saw the movement and deflated, sagging even further against the
dresser. Dante brought both hands up to drag across his face. "Look. Nero, please. I swear I'm not
here to hurt you. I could never hurt you. You're… you're my son."

This was going so ridiculously bad Dante couldn't even effectively put his panic and disappointment
into words. The boy in front of him stood frozen, staring at him blank faced. The hunter shifted
uncomfortably under such strange observation.

When the kid finally did speak, his tone was flat. "What?"

"I said you're my son," Dante repeated, swallowing against the nervous lump in his throat. Who
would have thought explaining yourself to your kid could ever be so goddamn terrifying? "Look, I
know it's gotta be confusing as hell – it's confusing as hell for me too. I didn't even–"

Nero let out a snarl and suddenly threw himself at the hunter, a small fist landing a glancing blow
across his face. The kid went for another hit but Dante caught the strike easily and then did the same
with the left jab flying towards his chest. The boy struggled against his grip, snarling like a wild
animal as he kicked at Dante's legs. The hunter ignored the weak blows, staring down at his son in
confusion.

"What the hell is your problem?" The question only seemed to infuriate Nero further. "Look, I know
you're pissed, I get it, but you've got to calm down. Seriously–"
"Shut up!" The high pitch scream made the half-devil wince. "Just shud'up! Do you have any idea what the fuck you've done to me?"

Dante froze, his son's hands slipping from his lax grip. Nero stared intensely at the floor, hands fisted at his side as he drew ragged breaths. The air smelled heavily of his son's distress and, to the older half-devil's absolute horror, tears. Instinctively he reached out to the smaller form but Nero slapped his hands away.

"You – You sonuvabitch!" Bright blue eyes glared hatefully up at him, his entire frame shaking as large tears slid unnoticed down flushed cheeks. "I lost everything because of what you did to me! I lost my mom and my dad! Don't you understand? Nobody wants me anymore! Because of this!" Nero shoved his demonic arm forward until it was directly underneath his face. "Why did you even make me? I'm a fucking monster!"

"No," Dante managed after a heart beat of pure horror at his son's words. "No, you're not."

"Don't lie to me!" The hysterical shout was so loud the boy's voice broke. "I know what I am a – a
demon."

"Quarter," Dante corrected desperately, "You're a quarter-devil. Your mother was human and–"

"That doesn't fucking change anything," Nero spat out. "You should have just offed me when I was born, instead of leaving me like this. Why didn't–"

The words were too close to what actually almost happened and the older half-devil let out a choked sound and pulled the boy flush against his chest – if only to stop the bitter ramble. Instantly Nero began to flail in his grip, punching and kicking, tearing and even biting. Dante ignored the hits, only responding to crush the struggling boy closer. The distraught hunter buried his face in the preteen's mop of hair, ignoring the dirt and grime that caused it to cling to his skin.

Dante's entire body was shaking violently as he clung to the furious form of his son, eyes wide with disbelief as he stared at the stained carpet of his room. What the hell had happened to his kid? What had Nero had to go through before he'd made it to Capulet? Dante's heart had sunk somewhere below his stomach, regret and despair a bitter taste in his mouth.

"I'm sorry," the older half-devil managed after a moment, his voice shaking as bad as his body. In his arms Nero went still. Dante quickly carried on, desperate to get the words out before the preteen flew into another fit. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me to be. I swear, I didn't know you existed until I saw you in the city – until Mae told me who you were. I know it's not enough – just shit."

He was acutely aware that these words had to be perfect, had to be absolutely fucking perfect, or he could lose his chance with Nero forever. But what could he possibly say to fix this? His demonic side was silent, offering nothing besides a low continuous whine that did nothing to help his jumbled thoughts. Nero's earlier words kept replaying themselves over and over in his mind.

"I want you, Nero," Dante spoke quietly, "I'll always want you. You're mine, my blood."

And it was true. Now that he knew that the kid existed the hunter couldn't imagine his life going in any direction that didn't involve his son. Nero sagged, becoming dead weight in his arms and Dante easily lifted to boy up, holding him like a toddler and not a ten-year-old. It was impossible to ignore the surge of affection that lit across the older half-devil when the exhausted preteen's head slumped against his shoulder, Nero's breath uneven hitches against his neck.
He made his way to the bed, settling against the headboard, twisting his son so he sat with his back against Dante's chest, small legs stretching out parallel to his own. Nero lay unmoving against him, eyes already half-closed in exhaustion and with a random tear or two still escaping. The hunter wanted to wipe them away but he was still unsure if he would be allowed to touch the boy's face and the last thing he wanted was to cause Nero anymore discomfort. His kid was obliviously emotionally drained, staring blankly at the wall in front of him until he fell back asleep. Dante watched the whole process with equal measures of fascination and distress.

Only once he was sure his son was asleep did the hunter dare to run a gentle hand down the barely wrapped demonic arm. He carefully coaxed off whatever bandages remained and ran his fingers over the raised scutes. They were surprisingly soft to the touch, like new leather and glowed softly now even in Nero's sleep.

"Nobody wants me anymore! Because of this! Why did you even make me? I'm a fucking monster!"

Nero's words were like a punch to the stomach. They seemed to echo Dante's own fears, especially at that age. How could he convince his son that he wasn't something that he was? There was no way to deny that he was a devil – that a part of him was a monster. But that didn't mean that Nero's life was damned. It had taken Dante thirty years to come to terms with that. The last thing he wanted was to watch his own kid go through that. It had destroyed Vergil, his twin brother hadn't been able to accept that he was only half of anything. Instead of trying to come terms with the polar nature of his two sides, Verge had pretty much decided to ignore his human side entirely and try and become a whole monster. What if Nero ended up the same?

No, Dante tightened his grip on his son, I refuse to fail Nero like that. It wasn't impossible. Dante had found a way to live with both his human and demon sides. He wasn't sixteen anymore, trying to track down and save his brother before he even knew how to. Dante knew how to make it work; he'd been doing it for twenty odd years. And if the hunter could do it, so could Nero.

He traced his fingers slowly over each horned ridge, each vine-like path on his son's arm, quietly trying to remember if it looked anything like his own arm when he Triggered. Or perhaps even his brother's.

The sound of the front door to his shop opening and closing caught his attention a few hours later. Nero was still asleep in his arms and Dante stiffened as he listened to the measured footsteps climbing up his stairwell. After a moment he relaxed and returned to his intense study of his son's demonic arm.

There was the sound of footsteps in the hall and then the jiggle of his locked doorknob attempting to be turned. There was the sharp sound of breaking metal, Dante snorting as his lock popped and the bedroom door swung open.

Lady stood there, head cocked to the side and a single eyebrow raised in question behind her sunglasses. An unopened pizza box was in her left hand, a pistol in her right. It seemed Dante's earlier behavior hadn't been forgiven quite yet. He gave her a small wave.

Lady rolled her eyes, sliding the pizza atop the dresser, observing the two of them mutely before bringing a hand up to pull off her sunglasses. "Only you, Dante. I swear, your life is my daytime soap operas."

"Thanks for the pizza," the hunter responded dryly, head titling as he glanced past her to the empty hallway beyond. "Patty?"
"Trish took her home yesterday. The kid okay?"

"No."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Dante shook his head, eyes down as he watched his fingers carefully comb through dirty locks.

"Alright, then I'll go. Try not to traumatize him too much." At his wince, Lady seemed to realize her poor choice of words. "Er, sorry, Dante. I mean--"

"Actually there is something you can do for me, Lady," he interrupted sharply. Blue eyes dark with emotion shot up to look at the human hunter.

"Oh?"

"There's a brothel down on State Street called the Pink Lilly. I want it gone."

Well manicured eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Demons?"

"No."

"You know I don't do humans."

"Lady." Her name was more of a growl than anything else. Said hunter sighed.

"And what did this ill fated place do to you?"

"The owner kept my son from me."

There was a prolonged silence. "I'll call Trish. I might need help with this one."

Dante leaned back against the headboard. It was a stupid, petty revenge and only a fraction of what Mae deserved for keeping his son from him but it would sate his immediate blood lust. "Thank you."

"And you say I never do anything for you." Lady gave him a backwards wave as she headed down stairs. "Enjoy the pizza."

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: The mob makes a bad offer, the boys get to know each other and everyone else is just along for the ride.
Settling In

Chapter Notes

Last Time: There were general misunderstandings, Nero finally found out what the hell was going on and Dante unleashed the girls on Lady Mae.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 1: A Lily's Demise

From where they sat a few buildings down, the two hunters watched the lazy tendrils of smoke that climbed across the city skyline. The streets below them were littered with emergency vehicles. Next to her, Lady let out a self-satisfied sigh as she took a sip of her double non-fat latte. The human girl had always been a bit of pyro, Trish mused with affection as she watched mismatched eyes alight with amusement while watching the scurrying forms below.

Trish turned her eyes back to the carnage. The Pink Lily was destroyed – only the front frame of the brothel remained, the rest having been burnt down to smothering cinders. The rock face was stained an ugly brown and black, the ivy having burned first like kindling and leaving a permanent shadow of its vines on the stone. The stain glass window was also gone, along with Mae's expensive Cadillac resting half-in and half-out of the frame. Mae was long gone, carted off to the hospital for smoke inhalation. The old bitty had refused to leave her brothel, screaming something about going down with her ship. Much to both hunters' disappointment, firefighters had hauled the still screaming woman out seconds before the second floor collapsed.

Trish lit a cigarette and leaned back on her palms, frowning attentively. "You don't think we went overboard, do you?"

"Hm? Oh no. A minute-thirty is more than enough time to grab anything essential and exit the building. Considering the offense, I think we were damn lenient." Lady's eyes narrowed as she spoke the last part, shaking her drink thoughtfully.

Trish made a soft sound of agreement, recalling the drawn look on the half-devil's face as he had carried the bloody bundle into the shop. Add that to what Lady had told her about what she'd seen up in Dante's room and Trish thought they'd been incredibly understanding, all things considered.

It was a rare moment when anything ever managed to get under Dante's skin. The exception was almost always family. The incidents with Vergil, her own appearance and now, a son kept from him. The female demon cared deeply for Dante. Trish didn't know if this was because she was made to be a carbon copy of his mother or just because she felt indebted to him for sparing her life, but the demon wanted things to go right for the white-haired man, at least once.

"I mean," Lady said slowly, "this is a pretty shitty situation. The least I can do is burn down a whore house."

"Well," Trish spoke after a moment, shaking off the depressing thoughts and brandishing Dante's credit card for the human to see, "we need to go shopping."

"Great idea!"
The kid was going to need things if he was going to live comfortably at the shop. The second bedroom was used as storage and was bereft of any kind of furniture, so a bed and a dresser was a must. There was a real possibility that Dante would just move one of the couches up to the bedroom and call it a bed if he thought he could get away with it. Plus, sheets and lamps, maybe a desk or a bookcase for when he enrolled in school. Most likely a new wardrobe as well, if his clothing was anything to go by.

Mental list made, Trish stood and brushed herself off. And if the two of them happened to see a few cute outfits on their endeavor, they would simply serve as proper payment for the hard work and time spent trying to make Dante's son comfortable.

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Part 2: The First 60 Days

Day 1

When Nero awoke next it was to the sounds of things being moved to his left. He sat up slowly, frowning as he took in his environment and more than a little relieved to find himself alone in the room. The man in red's – Dante's – scent was everywhere though, even on him, and Nero wrinkled his nose at the heady smell. The little devil pulled the sheet off of himself, swinging his legs over the side of the mattress before pausing to stare at his oddly naked demonic arm. The preteen stared at it, brows furled as he thought.

"My father, huh?" He squeezed his fist shut, staring hatefully at the scales that had made it past his wrist and dotted the back of his hand like twisted freckles. "What a joke."

There was a particularly loud thud, followed by a male and female voice bickering angrily and Nero slid from the bed and made his way to the door. He was relieved to find it unlocked and after a moment of hesitation, opened it and stepped out into a small hallway. Nero had opened the door as quietly as he cold but the man in r– Dante seemed to have heard him anyway. The older half-devil's head popped out a door directly to the left. He flashed the preteen a brilliant smile.

"Hey! You're up! I was starting to think you were gonna sleep all day. Eh, hold on a sec." The head disappeared into the room and a moment later he reappeared, stepping fully into the hall with a bundle of clothes. Nero stiffened, more than a little apprehensive about being stuck in a narrow hallway with the unknown man but Dante either didn't see it or ignored it, pushing the bundle into mismatched arms. "The girls bought you some clothes, considering the ones you got were gross as hell. They guessed your size, but Trish is pretty good at that so I wouldn't worry."

The older half-devil pushed a door on the opposite wall open to reveal a full bath. The hunter pulled out a thick, fluffy towel from a linen closet across from the shower and made short work of pointing out the toiletries and explaining how to work the shower. Nero glowered at the man. Just because it looked like he'd never bathed before didn't mean he didn't know how to work a shower. What, did Dante think he was an idiot?

"The heat's a bit iffy, kiddo, so you may want to take a quick one. Can't guarantee how long you'll have hot water." Then with a quick pat to the head that made Nero actually flinch, the half-devil left. For a moment the preteen just stared after him, before reaching out to shut the door with a heavy frown.

He stripped quietly, still frowning and kicked the giant-sized clothes spitefully behind the toilet basin before stepping under the hot spray. It was god damn wonderful. Nero melted into the stream, groaning loudly as the water cascaded over his (mostly) healed body and washed the gunk of three weeks off him. The water immediately turned black, streaming like dark tentacles down his body.
The half-devil grinned for the first time of the day and set about scrubbing the filth and blood that coated him off. And the scent. Oh yes, Nero was more than ready to get rid of that man's scent.

"Hey, I still don't get why we need to paint."

Next to him, Trish sighed, bringing a hand up to rub her forehead in a practiced moment as she paused mid-roll. "Because, Dante, you want him to feel welcomed. Water stains aren't exactly welcoming."

Dante tsked, hands on his hips as he took in the spare room. True, there were water stains in a few corners from where the roof had sprung a leak last winter but you could hardly see them. Nevertheless Trish was dutifully painting away, having already done most of the small room. The room wasn't the biggest – neither of the bedrooms were – but the girls seemed to have kept that in mind when shopping for furniture and got multipurpose, compact things. He had to admit, the tan color did look a little better.

He wrinkled his nose in distaste at the heavy smell of paint. Next to him, Trish shot him an evil glare.

"Hey. I paint, you build. That was the deal, remember? So build, idiot."

Dante held his hands up in defeat and went back to constructing the furniture the girls had bought. At first he'd been pissed that they'd gone and spent all his money – again – but once he'd thought about it, the hunter was fairly grateful. He hadn't admitted it to the girls when they'd commented, but he had been thinking about just dragging an old mattress he had in the basement up and putting it on the floor.

A bed was a bed, but the girls – well, mainly Trish seeing how Lady conveniently disappeared once she realized manual labor was going to be required – had a point. He wanted Nero to feel like this was his home now. And if giving him a dolled up bedroom helped make his kid feel like he was welcomed here, Dante was more than alright with the hefty price tag.

The dresser and bed had been brought up by movers, so that just left Dante with putting together the shelving and various (somewhat pointless) knickknacks Trish and Lady had bought. It didn't take them long to finish the room. About two hours into it, the kid had woken up and Dante had done his damnedest to downplay the heaping amounts of awkward that existed between them. It didn't seem to help, much to his dismay.

Nero had stared at him like he had three heads and it had been hard to miss the fact that the kid cringed when Dante touched him. With a sigh, Dante hung the last shelving unit. Next to him, Trish gave a satisfied grin as she took in the decorated room. It still smelled heavily of drying paint (of the fast-drying type), but other than that it looked pretty damn good. Even the random wall knickknacks.

"Yeah, okay. It looks pretty awesome," Dante admitted at Trish's expectant look. "I still don't see why we needed all those things on the wall. A glow-in-the-dark round clock? Isn't that a little fruity?" Next to him, Trish fisted her hands and Dante took a precautionary step away. "I mean, I could have just brought in some of my posters. I got extra."

"Don't be a jackass, Dante," the huntress snapped, reeling on him so suddenly that he actually bumped against the frame of the bed with a nervous laugh. "You're a father now. You've got to grow up, at least a little bit."

"Hey! I'm grown up!"

"Please." Trish's finger jabbed his chest viciously with each sentence. "I mean it, Dante. You've got
The half-devil rolled his eyes. Yeah, he got it. Things needed to change. He wasn't stupid. But just because he was a dad didn't mean he was dead. "Okay, I get it. What do you suggest?"

"For starters, call a plumber."

Dante shrugged. That was a fair point. He guessed he could spare a few extra expenses for constant hot water. Speaking of hot water, the kid had been in the bathroom for a really long time. As if on cue, there was the telltale *whoosh-thump* of the too-low door sliding against the thick hallway carpet. Dante stepped into the hall and paused.

The kid looked good after being cleaned up.

The clothes fit him perfectly (not that he ever doubted Trish and Lady's shopping abilities) and Dante was pleased to see that in properly sized clothes his son didn't seem sickly thin. Nero tugged at the hem of the black AC/DC T-shirt, looking incredibly uncomfortable as he stared down at his bare feet. The jeans were a little bit too big but the older half-devil knew the kid would grow into it sooner rather than later. Especially with all the food he planned on shoving down the undersized boy's throat.

For the first time, the hunter was treated to his son's full scent, untainted. It smelled a hell of a lot like his, but there was still something undeniably Nero about it. He took another deep inhale and chuckled as his kid shot him a dark look before returning to study his feet.

"Don't do that," Nero mumbled, pink from the bottom of his collar line up to his ears.

"Sorry, kiddo," Dante said with an unapologetic grin, one hand reaching out to ruffle his hair. He purposely ignored the way the smaller half-devil stiffened, gently running his hand through suddenly baby-soft white hair.

What the– It didn't feel like this at all last night. Gotta remember to wash my sheets.

"I got a surprise for you."

Blue eyes slowly regarded him. "…okay."

The hunter chuckled at the open suspicion. "Come on, you'll like it. I promise."

Nero was still unsure how he felt about Dante – his father. He had to keep reminding himself of that fact, it just didn't seem real. The preteen didn't quite trust the older man and his constant smiling, and chuckling, and petting. The petting was weird. No one had really touched him in a friendly matter in over a year, and even back in Fortuna physical affection was scarce. It wasn't really the Order's thing. You were supposed to admire from afar. Hell, he doubted that his foster parents ever had sex more than twice.

When it looked like Dante was about to grab him by the hand and drag him into the room, Nero finally followed him. And stopped dead surprise, snowy white eyebrows shooting up and almost disappearing behind shaggy bangs.

The room was painted a tan color and several thick rugs had been thrown over top the ratty carpet. There was a loft bed, with a desk underneath it and two large bookcases supporting it. The bedding was brown with orange stripes, with matching orange sheets and more pillows Nero thought was necessary. A long, lengthy dresser framed the opposite wall, with a mirror hung over it and a lamp that was filled with some sort of brightly colored liquids that floated around on one side and a clear plastic CD player on the other.
The desk had a thin laptop on it with what looked like a well loved wooden desk chair tucked under it. The bookcases were filled with empty metallic baskets and random toys, as well as books with brightly colored spines. Random artwork was up on the walls, mainly industrial scenes and street signs that looked like they'd been bought, of all things, which was beyond bizarre as Nero could have just gone out and taken any sign they'd wanted. There were also a few neon lights nailed to the wall, one around a clock and the other in the shape of a guitar.

Next to the bed, a blonde woman was staring at him expectantly. Nero stared back before slowly turning to observe the room in full.

"This is… mine?"

"Sure is!" Dante said with a grin, leaning against the door frame. "Pretty awesome, huh?"

When the hell did they have the time to do all this? A quick glance at the wall clock revealed it was fairly late in the evening but damn. Nero shifted uncomfortably. Yeah, the room was pretty cool but, all his? His room in Fortuna had been small, dull and Spartan. This all seemed like so much. And he barely knew the dude. The preteen still didn't even know how he felt about the older half-devil for god's sake and here he'd gone and… and spent a freaking fortune by the looks of it.

"So," Nero paused awkwardly, "I mean. Uh, it's nice."

"Surprised?" the woman asked softly, watching him with sharp eyes that made him squirm even more.

"Yeah. You didn't have to do all this. I mean, we barely know each other and—"

"Hey." A heavy hand dropped on top his head for a third time and Nero winced, resisting the urge to shy away from the older half-devil. The man had just given him a hell of a room. "If you're gonna stay here, I want you to be comfortable."

"Right." Nero carefully stepped out from under the hand. "Yeah."

He could feel his father's gaze on him and could see the sharp frown from the corner of his eye. The blonde woman cleared her throat and excused herself from the room, saying she had to get to work or something or another. Nero was too busy fingering the fabric of his covers. It was soft, like a really soft T-shirt or something. He almost wished the weird woman hadn't left. Now he was alone with the man in red.

"You don't like it?" The disappointment was hard to miss and Nero brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck nervously.

"No, I mean. It's not that, the room's great. It's just… I said a lot of mean ass shit last night to you and suddenly we're buddy-buddy? Or, I dunno, it's kinda weird that we're suddenly the demonic version of the Brady bunch?"

The preteen moved so that he was facing the window, glancing at the alleyway the room faced before reaching out to feel the thick flannel of the curtains that framed it. Nero sighed. He had no idea what he was trying to say. Dante was still waiting, though. "Yesterday, I was sleeping under a crate, and now I have a room and a d-dad."

"Things are moving pretty quick." It wasn't really a question and Nero nodded before turning cautiously to look at him. The half-devil didn't look threatening though. He was watching him
intensely but Nero didn't see any violence in it. "I remember what it was like, the first few times I had to go to a foster home."

"You were in a foster home?"

Dante nodded, crossing the room and reaching past Nero to open the window on relieving the room some of its overwhelmingly paint smell. "My parents died when I was eight. The city tried to put me into a few foster homes but they figured out that wasn't going to work out pretty quickly."

Nero couldn't help it. He was interested. "Why not?"

There was a dark chuckle. "I hated that they tried to pretend we were this perfect family overnight. I would move in and then suddenly I was the long lost son, the missing piece of their family. They didn't understand jack shit about me and I let them know it. Besides, I was pretty pissed at my dad. He left us, my mom, me and my brother. Went off and got himself killed and never came back. After that my mom was defenseless when the demons attacked. Not really sure how my brother and I survived."

The preteen as silent for a long time, trying to absorb what his father was saying. "So, I have an uncle?"

There was another long silence that instantly clued Nero into the fact that he'd said the wrong thing. "Used to. He died." There was an awkward clearing of the throat before Dante carried on. "The reason why I'm telling you this, kiddo, is because I kind of know what you're going through. I'm not gonna ask you to pretend we're a perfect family. You don't have to call me dad unless you want to. You take as long as you need to figure this shit out. Hell, I'm still figuring it out myself. All I'm asking is for you to give this a try."

Nero looked up at that only to find determined-looking blue eyes staring down at him. *He's serious about this,* Nero realized with a slight jolt of surprise. *He really wants me to stay here and try and play house.*

Well, it was better than the street. And… and did he really not want to know his own father? Nero still wasn't sure how he felt about everything, yet he couldn't help but remember the sense of safety he'd felt after the canal or the warmth that had filled his core this morning.

"...Sure. What the hell. But you gotta stop the sniffing shit." The preteen shifted, letting his eyes drop back down to stare at his feet before finishing at a mumble. "Gives me the creeps."

Dante laughed. "I can do that. Sort of instinctual and all, but I can try."

When the hand came down to pet him a fourth time, Nero managed to keep himself from flinching. The grin he was rewarded with was damn near blinding.

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**Day 3**

On the third day of their co-inhabitance, Dante began to understand just how much he was going to have to sacrifice.

His kid was glaring death at him from the other side of the kitchen table, pointing at the presented plate with a look of absolute disdain. "Sorry, man. But I'm not having *pizza* for breakfast. Again. What is wrong with you anyway? It's been pizza for every damn meal. Who does that?"
"Have you been talking to Trish or Lady?" Dante asked suspiciously, cradling the plate close to his chest in a distinctively protective motion. Nero rolled his eyes.

"First off, I don't know who the hell those people are, and secondly, no sane person just eats pizza."

"Well, it's all I got so take it or leave it," Dante shot back.

"Fine," Nero grounded out, heading towards the front door. "I'll go get some myself."

"Ah, sit the hell down," the hunter said as he reached over and grabbed his leather duster. "I'll go to the grocery, geeze."

Nero snorted and pulled on a thick hoodie. "I'm coming with you. I don't trust your understanding of food at all."

"Whatever, picky-ass brat."

Three hours later and four-hundred and sixty-eight dollars in the hole, Nero was eating a toaster strudel at the table happily and Dante was staring at his account balance mournfully.

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**Day 4**

On the fourth day, Nero met the girls. It had been hilarious. The girls had pretty much left them alone till then so they could 'bond.' Lady's words, not his. Still, Dante had been grateful for the time alone with his son. By the second day of living together he'd learned his kid had a prideful streak a mile long, a head so big it could probably get some air if set free, and was somehow incredibly shy at the same time.

He was also a fairly good wrestler. Dante had found that out after their first fight. The ten-year-old had jumped him, all snarls and scratches and surprisingly harsh punches. Little bastard took after him a hell of a lot. Dante couldn't help but be impressed with himself.

The subject of the fight (and any fight they would have in the coming months) was always over what Nero could and could not do. The kid was used to an ungodly amount of freedom after a year on the streets and while Dante respected that – he was all about the freedom of choice after all – he was going to be damned if he let the kid out of his sight any time soon.

The girls had shown up about ten minutes after one of those fights. Nero was sitting on the couch, glaring death at the cartoon show while Dante fiddled with the mail on his desk. Patty had entered with the grace a whirlwind, questions bouncing off the wall about what was happening, where was the boy who looked like him, why was he bleeding, and how come Dante never called her – before trailing off to a complete stop as she stared at the white-haired boy.

Nero had taken one look at her and turned to throw a dark glare at the older half-devil.

"Please tell me she's not my sister."

That had sent Dante into a fit of hysterics, while Patty became incredibly offended and began to lecture Nero on just how lucky he would be to have her as a sister. Trish and Lady were standing in the doorway, exchanging amused looks as Nero visibly paled at the sight of Lady's gigantic launcher.

"Mind your manners, kid," Lady warned with a sadistic smile. Nero was sickly polite for the duration of their stay.
Day 6

On the sixth day, Dante came home from a late night hunt to find his ten-year-old watching monster movies and making his way steadily through a six-pack. The look of pure outrage on Nero's face as he snatched the half-empty can from him and downed it was hilarious.

"What the fuck, old man?"

He crushed the can and waved it warningly in front of the little half-devil's face. "You're like five. No alcohol."

Dante barely ducked in time to avoid the barrage of empty cans aimed at his head.

Day 7

On the seventh day, Dante wondered if his kid had a hearing problem.

"What the-- Didn't we just talk about this? No smokes. What the hell? You friggin' delinquent."

Day 8

On the eighth day, Nero gave into temptation.

A quick look around the shop revealed it fairly empty. Patty was happily watching TV and his father was nowhere in sight. With a cheeky grin, he took one of the swords down. To his surprise it gave out a scream so loud that his father came streaking down, ignoring the stairs completely and leaping over the railing instead.

Nero had dropped the sword the moment it began cursing at him and had backed so far away from the shrieking thing he was actually pressed against the couch, a shaking Patty peeking out from behind him.

Dante gave a snickering laugh and quieted the weapon, placing it back up on the wall.

"That's what you get, touching my things."

Nero just nodded, too stunned to do much else.

Day 11

On the eleventh day, they had a problem.

"Seriously, Nero. This isn't gonna work. 'Cause I'm not going to stop buying alcohol." Dante ripped the beer can from the preteen's hand and tossed it uncaringly over his shoulder. Nero sputtered as the arching liquid sprayed all over the shop.

"I thought we came to an understanding last time, but apparently not. So…" A second later and a screeching Nero was over his knee. "Don't," whack, "drink," whack, "my goddamn shit," whack, "you," whack, "mini," whack, "alcoholic," whack, "brat!"

"Help!" Nero screamed as he tried to wiggle off his lap. "Help! Raaapppppe!" The front door was suddenly kicked open to reveal a snarling Lady, gun drawn. She stared at them for a moment before
Day 12

On the twelfth day, Nero left. The spanking had been the last straw. All the rules, all the you-can’t-
do-that and you-can’t-do-this had been too much for him. Who was this crazy ass man to think he
could just breeze into his life and set all the rules? And who the fuck did he think he was to spank
him like a three-year-old?

So, father or not, Nero had had enough.

He was not a child. He had lived on the streets for, like, ever, and that pretty much negated being a
kid. Plus, it wasn’t like this dude was his dad. Not really. A dad didn't just show up out of the blue
after ten years.

So, yeah. Nero was done playing house.

The preteen nodded decisively, making his way towards his old haunts. So it'll get cold and he'll
have to fight for his food again. Nero had done it before. Besides, it was better to be his own man,
live his own life than be tied down like some sort of –

The half-devil’s instincts reared just in time for him to avoid a pipe to the head. Nero rolled to the side
and attempted to run away, but found the small street he was in closed off on both sides by two men
on each end. He glanced desperately at the walls, but found little hope of escape on the smooth brick
walls.

Shit, what the fuck do they want?

"Listen, boy. Don't make this difficult," the man holding the pipe advised sharply, "Mr. Rockwell
just wants to have a talk with you. So come quietly and– Hey!"

Nero had launched himself at one of the men, knocking him so hard against the brick face that he
didn't get up. The half-devil swung about, ducking the arms of a third man and dropped, sweeping
his legs out from under him. The preteen made for the now open street exit but a hand grabbed him
by the ankle and brought him painfully down, smashing his chin against the pavement. Nero spat out
a bit of blood from biting the inside of his cheek and instinctively kicked back at the man’s face
holding him.

For a second he was released and then something hard – the pipe, Nero guessed – caught him in the
ribs and the preteen blanched as the pain erupted against his side. A weight settled on his chest and
Nero was just aware enough through the pain of his ribs to recognize a heavy boot.

"Don't worry, kid," the man with the pipe said around a bloody nose, "You're just gonna take a little
nap."

The pipe raised and Nero closed his eyes, turning his head away in the vain hope that it would keep
the metal from hitting anything too vulnerable.

There was a strange sound – sort of a gasp mixed with a yelp and when Nero opened his eyes the
pipe was gone from the man's hand. His father stood above him, feet planted on either side of Nero's
body and snarled at the men surrounding them. As he watched, the half-devil blurred into action,
making short work of the four men. One went for his gun and Dante turned sharply, the pipe
swinging out with enough force that when it made contact with the thug there was a loud, sickening snap.

The man hit the ground at an odd angle and didn't move. For a moment Nero thought Dante had killed him, but then he realized that somehow, despite the pretzel like shape of his body, the man was still alive.

Dante pressed the pipe against the limp man's shoulder and snarled down furiously at him. "Every time you try to move, I want you to remember this moment. I want you to think of me. I want you to think of the moment when you tried to touch what's mine and know that's why you're like this. I want you to realize how fucking gracious I'm being in letting you keep your piece of shit life."

From where he sat, Nero watched with wide, shocked eyes at the frightening sight of his father. He had always known the older half-devil was capable of violence but seeing it – seeing it changed everything.

"And I want you take a message to your boss. I want you to tell him how forgiving I've been in letting you and your little friends live. How kind I am that I didn't take anything off. I want you to tell him how it feels to be trapped in your own body. How much you wish you could move. And then I want you to tell him to back the fuck off. Because if I ever catch one of you fuckers around my kid again, I'm gonna be coming for him. Do you understand?"

There was a weak nod.

Dante dropped the pipe, the sound echoing ominously in the street. He turned to Nero and the preteen couldn't help it, he flinched. The look in his father's eyes was mixed and mostly unreadable, but he could see the hurt – and regret? – reflected in them. The half-devil shook his head, running a hand through his hair with a sigh.

"Come on, let's go home." His voice was strangely hollow and Nero stood, following the man quietly. He still wasn't sure where the defeat that was etched into his father's face came from, but Nero figured it had something to do with him. Which made him feel bad, because the man had just saved his life. Maybe it was because Nero ran away? The more he thought about it, taking nervous glances at the dark look on his father's face, the more Nero began to worry. After ten minutes, he finally gathered enough courage to ask his question.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No," Dante said after a moment. "Just... don't leave like that again, okay?"

Nero nodded and seeing that the look hadn't left, after a moment of careful consideration, reached out and took his father's hand. Dante stiffened and turned to stare at him in surprise. The smaller half-devil concentrated on the cracks of the sidewalk as they passed them and refused to meet his questioning eyes.

After a little bit, his father looked away. Another quick glance revealed that the miserable look was gone.

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Day 18

On the eighteenth day, Rockwell came to the shop. The police commissioner was dressed in a pressed white and grey pin-striped suit, looking around the shop with an air of quiet distaste. Patty instantly disappeared off back to where Dante was working on his car. For a moment Nero and Rockwell just stared at each other. Right when it looked like the police commissioner was about to
speak, his father appeared from the back.

He crossed the room with an air of disinterest, yet Nero couldn't help but notice he'd slung his gun belt on. As discretely as possible – which wasn't very, all things considered – Nero moved until he was partially hidden behind his father.

"Nero, take Patty and go wait upstairs."

"What? But I want to–"

"Now." That tone was chock full of don't-fuck-with-me and Nero didn't. He grabbed the gawking blonde by the hand and made their way upstairs, but that was as far as they went. Both sat at the top, out of sight, and listened in.

"I believe we have a few things to discuss."

"Not really," was his father's icy response.

"...Well. That's your opinion." There was the sound of shifting fabric and settling leather and he assumed Rockwell had sat down. "Your son took something of mine and I want it back. Now, the cash is not that important. But there was some paper there – my personal notes. And not having them has cost me quite a bit of money and standing."

"Again, don't see what that's got to do with us."

There was a sigh and the sound of a cigar being lit. "You don't scare me, Mr. Alighieri." The last name was said with the rolled accent of sarcasm. "I've heard all the rumors and frankly, I don't believe them. You're just a man, Mr. Alighieri, and not even a clever one at that. The half-breed myth has been around for as long as religion has. And I'm not a religious man."

There was a long silence before Rockwell carried on.

"You pay me the money I lost, plus interest and hardship pay for my men you've injured and we'll call it even. If you don't, my friends and I will raze this place to the ground and I'll string you up right next your son."

Another stretch of silence, then, "You done? Good."

There was the sound of a chair being dragged against wood floors and then coming to a squeaking halt. "Okay then, let me tell you how this is going to go. Those rumors? They're only telling half the story." A strange smell filled the room – rough and hot, like sulfur but angrier and when Dante spoke next, his voice was several octaves lower and had a strange echo. "You think you're some tough shit because of your family? I'm the mother-fucking spawn of the devil and I've got a whole load of batshit crazy just waiting to be directed at someone."

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat nervously.

"You're going to walk out of this shop and forget me and my kid even exists. You'll get nothing and be goddamn happy about it. And if I think you're so much as thinking about my son in a way I don't like, I'm going to bring me and all my fucked up friends to your doorstep and we'll just see how far off those rumors are."

"That..." It was more of a croak than anything else and Rockwell stopped, clearing his throat. When the commissioner spoke next, the waver was gone. "That seems acceptable."
"Great. Now get the fuck out."

From next to him, Patty let out a soft sound. "Dante said a lot of bad words."

Nero snorted, a wide grin on his face as he heard Rockwell tuck tail and leave. "No shit."

Day 23

On the twenty-third day, Nero stole for the first time since living at his new home. He pocketed the thick doughnut, napkin and all, quietly and quickly in his back pocket and strolled from the bakery as Patty negotiated with the owner over some hand rolled bread. Nero grinned as he made it successfully around the corner and into a small alleyway.

He pulled the doughnut out, using the napkin to scrape off some of the lint that had attached to it before taking an excessively large bite.

"You steal that?" Nero jumped at the sound of his father's voice, the sugary treat suddenly tasting like ash as he turned to find the older half-devil standing behind him in the alleyway. Uh oh, totally busted. When the hell did he get here?

"No." The doughnut was removed from his hands and tossed over the tall man's shoulder. "Hey!"

"That's for lying to me." Dante took him by the elbow and lead him back towards the bakery. For one horrible moment Nero thought his father was going to make him apologize to the shop owner. But instead Dante left him on the sidewalk and reappeared a moment later with a second, legally purchased, doughnut. "You don't need to steal, kid. You want something, you let me know. 'specially food."

Nero nodded at his father in shock, then stared down at the pastry in his hands before blushing heavily, muttering a soft "thank you." Next to him Dante laughed, reaching out and ruffling his hair roughly.

"It's okay kid, no reason to change color on me."

That only made the blush intensify, but this time out of anger as Nero cursed his father out heatedly. To his fury, Dante only laughed harder.

Day 24

On the twenty-fourth day, Dante broke the bad news.

"What the hell do you mean school?"

He winced at the high pitched screech. "You heard me. Tomorrow, you're starting school."

"What in the flying hell made you go and do that?" Nero demanded angrily. "Well screw that, I'm not going."

"Yes, you are," Trish said firmly from behind the bar. She took a sip of her bourbon. "It's the law around here: if you're under eighteen, you have to attend school. If you don't, it's truancy and you can go to juvenile detention."

Nero had paled dramatically at the words 'truancy' and 'juvenile detention.'
"See, kiddo? My hands are tied here," Dante said with a smirk. "Guess we have to go get you a backpack. Maybe some cute school clothes."

Nero fumed.

Day 31

On the thirty-first day, Dante was called into the principal's office for the first time. He received a call an hour before school was out. The principal, a Mr. Windall, didn't like him much, which was fine, as the hunter didn't much like the repressed old white dude either. The fact that he was an hour-and-half late to the meeting didn't help much either.

When he'd arrived Nero was sitting – stewing, more like it – in a seat in the hallway.

"Well, you made it a week." He was rewarded with the finger.

"Mr. Alighieri, I assume," a sharp, irritated voice called from an office at the end of the hallway. "Why don't you and your son come in."

The room smelled heavily of potpourri and Dante couldn't help but grin slightly at the repulsed look on his kid's face. The meeting was short. Dante was informed of a laundry list of offenses which included but was not limited to: cursing, spitting, fighting, eating and sleeping in class, selling candy and other items on campus, wrongful use of restroom facilities (he'd looked at Nero on that one and the kid just shrugged), insulting teachers, and leaving school property.

"You understand why there is an issue, I trust?"

"Sure do." Dante sighed and gave his kid a baleful glance. "You sorry?"

"...yes?"

"There you have it. Problem solved. Come on, juvie."

"Mr. Alighieri!" the principal started, clearly outraged, but the pair were already making short work of the hallway. As they stepped out into the cold afternoon air, Dante's hand met the back of Nero's head with an echoing smack.

"Try and tone it down, will you? Damn."

Day 37

On the thirty-seventh day, Dante began to teach Nero how to shoot. It had come about after a lower class demon had followed him back to the shop. While he'd been dealing with it, one of its spawns had gone after the kids. By the time he'd gotten to them, Nero had managed to kill it – barely – by ramming a pool cue through its eye.

The cost was pretty high – his kid would be wearing a sling for a week. Still, Dante was unreasonably proud and had insisted on mounting the thing on the wall next to his own kills. It was, admittedly, the smallest and most pathetic looking one of the lot, but the hunter was practically beaming fatherly pride out of every orifice. He'd even insisted on sending a picture to both Lady and Trish (Patty had to help him figure out how to do that on his cell phone).

Nero was incredibly pleased and embarrassed about it, all the more when Dante had lead him into
the abandoned alley outside the shop and brought out his weakest pistol, one with the smoothest and least recoil.

He got four out of the six bottles on his first try. Dante was smirking like an idiot for the next several hours.

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**Day 45**

On the forty-fifth day, it snowed in Capulet. And goddamn, was it cold. Nero was incredibly happy that he was living with Dante. He’d seen pictures of snow before but he’d never even *dreamed* such a cold could exist.

The preteen had played with it for all of thirty minutes before he abandoned Patty to her own devices and spent the rest of the day under three blankets over the top of the heat register nearest to the TV. His pops was out and about on business and so when Patty left after dinner, Nero found himself alone and thoroughly bored.

He stared forlornly at the locked alcohol cabinet underneath the bar. Dante had installed it after the third time he’d caught Nero drinking. Life kinda sucked sober, but oh well. The preteen could always go out and try to steal some, but that usually ended with him getting his ass kicked by Dante and Nero rather liked to avoid that.

Nero watched some seriously bizarre animated shows about the glory of snow and the season before begrudgingly doing his homework and turning in. The only problem was that it was really cold in his room; like, *really* cold. It always was, compared to the first floor of the shop which had working heat registers. After about an hour of seemingly freezing to death, Nero finally gave up and brought his comforter downstairs and with the help of the couch blankets made himself a nest next to the heat register.

Nero was gently shaken awake awhile later. Dante was crouched next to him, the half-devil's eyes glowing eerily in the dark. Nero turned bleary eyes first to glare up at his confused father's face, and then to the desk clock and the blinking 3:47am. With a groan he pushed Dante's hands away and burrowed deeper into his nest.

"'eave me 'lone. I gotta get up early."

But his father was insistent, standing from his crouch and pulling Nero up with him. "Come on, kid. You have a bed for a reason." When he tried to sink back down, the older half-devil snorted. "Either you walk or I carry, but you're going upstairs."

"Fine!" Nero grumbled angrily, pulling his comforter and all the blankets from his nest up into an awkward holding hug and storming up the stairs. He nearly tripped twice, only Dante's quick hands keeping him from smacking face first into the stairs. For his help, the hunter was rewarded with half-spoken swears.

"My, you're pleasant tonight," his father muttered, guiding Nero towards his room with firm hands. "Why do you want to sleep on the floor anyway?"

"'Cause it's fucking *freezing* up here," Nero snapped, climbing up into his bed, dragging the blankets up the ladder behind him like misshaped tails. He made short work of recreating his nest and pulled the comforter over his head before burrowing down. His father lingered in his room for a little while longer before stepping out into the hallway. Nero heard the sound of the linen closet opening and closing and then Dante returned. He peaked out from his nest as his father placed another blanket on
"Sorry, kiddo."

"For what?" Nero snapped irritably. Mentally, he was whining. He had to get up for school in like three hours and the walk was gonna be soooo cold.

"Just get some sleep, okay?"

"Whatever," Nero mumbled, burrowing deeper. Morning came far too quickly and as predicted, it was freezing. To his surprise, Dante was waiting downstairs to give him a ride to school. It was almost unheard of to see his father up at this time.

"I got business in that area anyway," the older half-devil explained.

"Doing what?" the still half-asleep boy asked with a yawn as he climbed into the convertible.

"Work shit."

He blinked at the brisk answer; normally Dante was more than willing to talk about his jobs, before shrugging and just accepted the good will.

A few hours later when Nero came home from school, there was an AC/heater repair van outside of the shop.

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**Day 49**

On the forty-ninth day, the growth on Nero's arm over took his palm and began to reach towards his fingers. Dante found him sobbing angrily in his room, his human fingers digging until they drew blood against the misshapen flesh. His father sat next to him on the floor and pulled his hands off, muttering softly to Nero as he used his own shirt to stem the blood flow until his healing kicked in.

"I'm a fucking monster," Nero had managed between a few body wrenching sobs. "A m-monster. Look at it! Why don't you have it?"

"I don't know," Dante said softly, one hand still pressed firmly to his son's while the other was wrapped reassuringly around his shoulders. "But it doesn't mean shit. I know this is hard for you to understand, but you're not a demon. It's in your blood, just like it's in my own. But that doesn't mean you're evil."

"Bullshit."

"No," his father corrected sharply. "I don't know what kind of crap they filled your head with in Fortuna, but you're not a monster." Nero shook his head miserably. Dante let out a soft sound of frustration before pulling him so his forehead was pressed against his muscled shoulder. "I've seen evil, kid. And you're not it. And I won't ever let you become it, do you understand me?"

"Really?" Nero almost winced at how desperate he sounded.

"Really," Dante confirmed. "If it came down to that, I'd take you out myself. You know I kill any demonic evil. That's my job."

Strangely, that fact gave him more comfort than anything else and Nero sniffed, relaxing slightly into the half hug. "Besides, you keep forgetting, you're only a quarter-devil. Which means all the rest is human. You're not evil, Nero. Not by a long shot."
Nero clung to that – he was mostly human. Overwhelmingly human, right? Three-fourths was a lot of human. Maybe that was just enough? He could only hope.

Day 53

On the fifty-third day, Dante was exhausted. The jobs lately hadn't been challenging but he'd been taking a hell of a lot more of them. Keeping Nero fed and paying back Lady – even if she'd been more generous with her collections – was damn hard work. The kid was like a disposal unit, which wasn't really any different from how he'd been at that age. Puberty, the hunter reflected with a fair amount of amused annoyance, was going to be expensive as hell.

All in all, Nero fitted into his life pretty damn well. The kid seemed way more comfortable around the shop and around him, especially after the whole arm bit. Dante shut the car off, making his way up ice coated steps. A few mishaps here and there, but really that was to be expected. Even the girls were fairly impressed with him.

And Lady said I'd fail as a parent. Ha. Bitch.

He let himself into his shop, a quick scan revealing his kid conked out on the couch. Dante stripped off his duster before making his way quietly towards the downstairs bathroom. The hunter peeled off blood-soaked clothes and tossed them into the downstairs shower before pulling on a pair of sweats that hung off the back of the door for just that very reason. Dante ran a wash cloth over the worst spots on his chest before making his way into the kitchen.

He downed about four glasses of water before glancing at the clock. Almost two – he'd gotten home early tonight. Probably should get the kid up to bed. Nero muttered in his sleep, turning on the leather couch to face him. Dante grinned at the ridiculous picture his kid made. White hair shooting off in all different directions, body dwarfed in one of Dante's old Foreigner T-shirts, remote still grasped in a death grip.

He carefully fished the remote out of Nero's grip before gently lifting his kid up. He was halfway up the stairs when a car backfired loudly out in the street and Nero jerked awake in his arms. Dante stiffened but to his surprise, his kid didn't freak out about being in his arms. Instead the ten-year-old let out a wide yawn, and then another before letting his head drop back down against his shoulder.

"Mmmhmm… Wha' time?"

"Late," the hunter replied softly, toeing open Nero's bedroom door. "Go back to sleep."

The kid comically became dead weight in his arms.

"Mm'k… n'ht, dad."

Dante froze mid shift, eyes wide before remembering himself and finished lowering Nero onto his bed. "Night, kiddo."

He tucked the kid in, rolling his eyes in amusement as Nero immediately pulled his sheets and covers to form a small nest and burrowed, leaving only his stock of white hair visible. He double checked that Nero's alarm clock was set and quietly shut the door. It was only once when he was in the shower that Dante allowed a ridiculous grin to burst across his face.

Little brat called me dad.
Day 59

On the fifty-ninth day, Nero became afraid.

The street kid in front of him was dirty as hell and smelly but Nero didn't mind. His name was John but everyone called him Bets after his unrestrained gambling problem. At fourteen, he was far shorter then he should have been and far too thin. He was fiddling his cap in his hand, cheeks and nose red from the cold. They had shared food and a warm spot on more than one occasion, but they'd barely seen each other since he'd found a home.

Nero stared from him to the square and slightly blue tinted envelope Bets had delivered.

"You sure it's for me?" Bets nodded again. "Alright. You got some place warm to go? Good, here."

He pushed a small wad into the older boy's hands (it was all the money he had saved/stolen/been gifted) in his short stay there. "Thanks."

Bets gave him a short smile, glancing warily at the mounted weapons and demonic body parts before shoving his cap over dirty blonde hair. "Don't be a stranger, okay, Nero?"

Nero looked at the letter in hands with a frown. Who the hell would write to him? He wasted little time in opening it, flipping the neatly folded piece of paper open and froze. It was only four words long and with one initial, but it made fear blossom in Nero's heart so strong that the preteen sank to his knees right there on the shop floor.

'They're coming for you. - C"

Day 60

On the sixtieth day, Dante was worried. He'd woken up to find Nero curled up around his arm, forehead pressed against his bicep. Dante's brows furled in confusion as he shifted to get a better look at the sleeping boy. It was a strange act for his fiercely independent kid. He ran a gentle hand through hair so like his own, pushing sweaty bangs off Nero's forehead as he carefully worked his arm free. It was only once the hunter had replaced it in a more comfortable hold around the younger half-devil did he realize that Nero was trembling.

More than a little disturbed, Dante brushed his face against the tips of Nero's hair and inhaled. Even in his sleep, Nero was giving off the pheromones that the hunter had long ago learned meant fear. Protective instincts flared inside his chest and Dante pulled his son until he was flush against his side, fighting off the urge to growl on the off chance it would wake the sleeping boy.

What could possibly scare his kid so much? If it was Rockwell again, Dante swore he'd break his oath and wring the man's scrawny little neck. Whatever it was, Dante decided after a few moments of forced deep breathing, it could wait for the morning. It was a school night and the school had made it clear that they were going to have a conniption fit if Nero was late one more time.

Besides, it wasn't like there as an even remote chance that he was going to allow anything to happen to his kid. The hunter had meant what he'd said before, Nero was his. And if there was one universal truth about demon kind, it was that they didn't take kindly to people touching things that were theirs. Somehow, Dante just needed to get Nero to understand that.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: There is paranoia all around, Patty accidentally causes the apocalypse, Nero takes a stroll through Hell and Dante loses his temper.
Gloved fingers ran over the poem carved into the corner of a wall that framed one of the many cemeteries throughout Fortuna proper, carefully digging out the moss that had settled in the low curves of indented print. He read the poem with his fingers, his eye staring blankly over the graveyard spread out before him.

*When as a child I laughed and wept,*  
Time crept.  
When as a youth I waxed more bold,  
Time strolled.  
When I became a full-grown man,  
Time ran.  
When older still I daily grew,  
Time flew.

Life, Credo thought in agreement, moved too fast. Had it really only been a year and a half since everything changed? Since his family had shattered into a million different pieces? When he had been younger, Credo hadn't been able to wait for the day that everything would change. For the day he'd be old enough to join the guard as a fully fledged member, for the day his parents would allow him more freedom, for the day Kyrie would finally stop being afraid of the dark so he could get some sleep, and for when Nero would finally grow up enough to not annoy him every five seconds.

Now, the teenager would do anything to go back to that time. Everything had been so much simpler. Credo had followed the Savior's will unflinchingly, without doubt and fear. So did his family, even Nero.

He moved silently from the wall and down the overgrown cobbled pathway. It was the only pauper graveyard in Fortuna, where only the very poor and very shunned were buried. The seventeen-year-old traversed down a side path, each step well memorized.

This is not where Credo thought he'd be at in his seventeenth year. No white guard uniform graced his body, no Saber of the Savior graced his waist. And perhaps the strangest, no Hood of Faith covered his curly hair from the slight drizzle of rain.

Credo ran an annoyed hand through his hair. Humidity always made it curl. He'd shorn it off on impulse; the teenager couldn't stand the fact that his reflection didn't reflect anything but how he had always looked. Not when *everything* had changed. Credo tried to make himself look somewhat orderly. Hands slid over a slightly too large and quite frayed tunic, straightening it before tucking it in to a pair of equally used and dirty pair of trousers.

He ran a gentle hand in a caress over the top of the gravestone before crouching down and digging out the various articles of nature that had clogged up the script, despite the fact that it had only been a week since Credo's last visit. His fingers were careful, despite the fact that he knew he couldn't harm the stone marker. When he was finished he loving traced his mother's name.
No epitaph, no sweet words of blessing. It was all Credo could afford. No grave belonged to his father. He had no doubt that Ezra St. Claire was dead, as his father would never have abandoned his children. Credo simply had no body to bury. He could still remember it – a week after they'd sent Nero away his father had failed to come home one day from work.

They'd held on to hope that maybe he was just working hard and forgot to call and tell them he wasn't coming home. Credo knew better. So did his mother. One day turned into two, then three. Then a week and by the time the month had closed out even Kyrie, despite only being nine, had given up hope of his return.

Everything had gone to hell after that.

A few weeks after they'd finally accepted Ezra was dead and gone, they'd gone to the market together. His mother was wary of letting either one of her children from her sight, which was fine with Credo. He wasn't keen on being separated either. He'd noticed something was wrong on the walk: people stared openly at them, whispering as they passed. Ruth had noticed it as well, the lines around her mouth becoming more and more pronounced with each step. It was clear that something was very wrong. Nothing could have prepared him for what happened at the market though.

They'd only taken a few steps towards a fish stand when a guard member had stepped into their path.

"Traitors to the Faith are not welcomed in the public sphere."

And then, one by one, the entire square – almost a hundred people – turned until only rows and rows of backs faced the stunned trio. Only the guard, a tall red head by the name of Willis, kept eye contact. The man had been one of Credo's teachers. The teenager hadn't been able to speak, to do anything other than feel a thick, blanketing feeling of betrayal. His mother had just gaped, face pale. Kyrie began to cry and Credo had lifted the frightened girl up into his arms, eyes never breaking contact with Willis'. The guard looked away, something that rather looked like guilt on his face. Credo stared for a moment longer before leading his mortified mother away by the hand.

Shortly after that, his little sister had failed to come home from school. When they'd gone to retrieve her, the teacher had simply looked at them before telling them she'd been removed for her own protection by the Order.

His mother had gone absolutely mad in her grief. Ruth had shut herself up in her bedroom, only accepting the food that Credo brought her and eating very little of it. Within three months she was gone. Death from a broken heart.

The seventeen-year-old sat with his back against the headstone, staring blankly up at the cloudy sky. The house had been taken from him shortly after his mother's death and Credo had been given a small shack on the edges of town. No one would employ him – he hadn't even been able to attend school.

The St. Claires had been removed from life within Fortuna. Even Kyrie, the teenager felt a lump form in his throat at the thought of his baby sister, had been given a new surname. He watched her sometimes, hidden in the shadows as she played in the nun run orphanage. Credo didn't dare talk to her though. The one time he had, Kyrie had shunned him, big brown eyes full of hate and fear as she turned her back to him and ran to find one of the nuns.

Credo knew it was because they had helped Nero escape. He knew it was luck that he was allowed to live; that only his youth and previous faith and excellence in the guard training program that had
saved him from sharing his father's fate. Despite the fact that every grievance in his life could be traced back to that one moment, Credo didn't regret helping Nero.

He had tried to – Savior, had he tried. It would have made things so much easier if he believed what he’d been taught all his life: that demons in all form were evil and it was Nero's presence that had doomed his family. But he just couldn’t see him that way. Not when he had eight years of memories of Nero being his little brother. When Ezra had come to Credo and told him of the Order's plan for Nero in sharp and frantic words, all he'd been able to think about was the first time he had met his adoptive brother.

"Well, Credo? Go on, say hello."

The unsure nine-year-old brunette glanced suspiciously at the two-year-old sitting on a blue bunny blanket in their living room. He took a step closer before looking back at his parents. His mother was beaming at him from where she was breast feeding his baby sister and his father held a camera, gesturing for him to go on with a wave of his hand.

Credo approached the toddler, eyes narrowed as he assessed the newest addition to their family. He didn't know why his parents had gone and got another child – especially another boy. The boy was cute though, hair so blonde it looked white which framed a pair unreasonably large blue eyes, with pale skin rosy in a way that belonged only to young children. As Credo drew closer the toddler stopped his game of ramming a stuffed bear's head into the floor repeatedly to stare up at him from around a brilliantly orange pacifier.

The staring match lasted for several minutes, interrupted only by the continuous sound of his father taking pictures and the soft giggles of his mother. The pacifier was released, rolling harmlessly down to the blanket and leaving a trail of drool on the baby bodysuit. After a long moment the abused bear was offered up to him, Nero's head cocked rather adorably to the side.

"Be'r."

The generally serious nine-year-old felt his lips twitch as he reached out to take the bear. He made it stand before the toddler, hopping up and down as he moved it. The younger boy let out a high pitch trill, hands waving around before he pulled the bear back and gave it a full body hug.

"What's his name?"

"Nero," his mother answered.

Nero stilled at the sound of the name, mouth curled around one fuzzy ear, blue eyes glancing to his mother before settling back onto Credo. The nine-year-old reached out a hand to rest atop soft white hair, brown eyes gentling slightly.

"Hello, Nero. I'm your big brother."

Nero damn near became his shadow in the years that followed. When he came home from school or practice he would undoubtedly find Nero waiting for him, sometimes with Kyrie, sometimes without. The white-haired boy followed him around everywhere, which was a source of endless amusement for his parents and annoyance for himself. As they grew older, it had become clear that Nero's personality was as far from Credo's own as possible.

While the oldest St. Claire tended to be reserved and quiet, even a little uptight if Nero's words were to be believed, his little brother had always been absolutely wild. They had begun to fight more – Credo far too often mortified by his younger brother's actions, which always stood out in out their
conservative town, and Nero forever indignant whenever anyone tried to reign him in.

But just because the white-haired boy had never ceased to embarrass him didn't mean that Credo would ever allow anyone to hurt him. The seventeen-year-old sighed.

"I'm sorry it's been so long since I visited, Mother." His voice was rough with disuse. "It's probably going to be a lot longer before I can again. I'm… leaving the island for a while. I know you told me to always look after the little ones and that's what I'm planning to do. I have to leave Kyrie here. I'm sorry, I know it's not what you'd want but they almost killed me when I tried to take her."

A hand rose to his left eye, gently running his fingertips over the bandage that covered it. The eye itself didn't hurt, the nerves within it damaged beyond repair – just like his sight. The socket itself ached something terrible, though. Credo had almost made it out with her too, but Kyrie had been taught to fear him and her screams had brought the guards at a run.
"I think it's too late for Kyrie." His voice broke with grief and guilt and the teenager – really, he was almost an adult – took a moment to gather his control before continuing. "But I promise I'll come back for her. And I'm not going to fail with Nero. They're going after him, to bring him back and use him like Father said. He's still such a child, he won't…"

Credo faded off, ears perking up at the sound of voices from ahead. He cursed silently, getting into a crouch. They'd found him already. He gave one last glance to his mother's resting place before sprinting off into the woods. He stopped only to gather his bearings before taking off in the direction towards the commercial docks.

*I won't let them hurt anymore of our family, Mom. I promise.*
There were some things in life which Nero couldn't explain. It wasn't so much that it was a lack of life experience – even though that was partially true, he was only ten – nor was it because of a lack of understanding or care. His foster parents had tried their best to educate the young boy, to pass on their life experiences. And if they sung the righteousness of humanity perhaps a tad bit too verbosely, who was Nero to say anything?

He understood what he was. Maybe he understood what he was all too well. And what his foster parents hadn't been able to give him, Nero had learned through blood, tears and long hours spent in quiet confused silence, struggling with the strange side of him that made the preteen so unlike his siblings and schoolmates.

But there were moments like now, when things went beyond the life tools that Nero had found and been given and the half-devil found himself at a standstill.

Because Patty Lowell was asking him out on a date.

The ten-year-old stared at her like she had grown a second head. Behind him, with his head tilted back and a milk carton glued firmly to his lips, a stunned Dante was doing the same. The little blonde was… kinda… cute, but who in their right mind would want to date a girl? Nero had no idea what made it so appealing to adults – girls where fucking nuts!

"Well, go on. Answer her, kid."

The pure amusement in his father's voice sealed the deal and Nero cross his arms angrily, glaring at the girl's ridiculously bow filled shoes. "Hell no! No offense, Patty, but you're like my really, really annoying little sister."

For a long moment Patty didn't say anything. Finally Nero glanced up, brows furled in confusion, only to find the blonde girl staring at him with tear-filled eyes. Nero felt his heart skip a beat at the look of hurt.

"Uh… wait, I –"

"You're such a jerk, Nero!" Patty shouted, throwing the broom she been using at him before running from the shop. For a moment both males simply stared after her, then Dante let out a low whistle.

"Man, kid. You've got a lot to learn." His father made his way to his side, milk carton still in hand before frowning at the tidy pile of dirt and trash. "…I may actually have to hire a cleaning lady now."

"Shut up, old man." Nero ground out, tossing the broom angrily away.

"Seriously though, I think you probably hurt her feelings. I could be wrong… Nah, you totally
crushed her little heart."

Nero's hands twitched by his sides with the urge to punch his father. *Don't do it,* his mind whispered urgently, *it never, ever, ends well for us.* The half-devil forced himself to take a deep breath.

"I don't know why girls have got to be like that," Nero started slowly, still fighting to control his temper. "She's like the third one to ask me out."

"That's because you take after your papa," Dante teased with a wicked grin.

Nero growled, shoving his father angrily before storming towards the stairs. "Why the hell do I even bother talking to you? All you do is make jokes."

"Hey, hey." A strong hand halted his advance. "Just calm down, have some milk."

Nero stared at the offered carton in blank disbelief before shifting his eyes over to the locked alcohol cabinet. "Aren't you supposed to give upset people a shot to calm them down?"

Rolling his eyes, Dante bopped him lightly on the head. "No way in hell, kid. My shit's too expensive to be wasted on brats. Look, next time you see Patty, apologize for being such an ass and she'll get over it. You're both a little young to be dating anyway."

Nero made a sharp, affirmative gesture with his hands. "Friggin' right? I'm ten for Savior's sake, why the hell would I want to date girls?"

"Trust me, kid," Dante said as he chuckled. "Give yourself a couple of years and you'll be foaming at the mouth at the sight of a pretty little blonde."

The look of disgust on the smaller half-devil's face sent the hunter in a wild gale of laughter. After a moment the hunter slowed to a stop, wiping a tear from his eye. "Ah, the naïveté of youth."

"Whatever, old man. You going out?" Nero asked, watching with mild interest as his father geared up.

"Yeah, and I want you to stay in the shop today. There's been rumors of a white demon roaming about that's apparently one mean ass bastard. He's been asking about me so, yeah, stay inside." The hunter finished holstering Ivory and Ebony before pulling on his duster.

Nero frowned. "A little hard to mistake the two of us, don'tcha think?"

"That's not what I meant." A heavy hand rested on his head, ruffling his hair. "Just listen to me this once, alright?" There was actual worry in those normally amused pale blue eyes and so Nero nodded. "Pizza's in the fridge, don't order any movies – I'm still paying off that night Patty slept over – and call me or one of the girls if something happens. I'll be back late, so don't wait up, okay?"

"Jeez, you act like you've never left me alone forever before." The smaller half-devil rolled his eyes and flopped down on the couch. His dad was so freaking dramatic. "What about that time last month when you were gone for two weeks after you left to buy milk?"

"Hey," Dante answered with a shrug as he made his way to the front door while grabbing his bag, "sh*t happens. I already apologized for that anyway."

There was a casual, haphazard wave thrown in his direction and then the sound of the bike roaring to life. Nero waited until it faded away before jumping back up. Like a switch had been flipped, the casual and easy going attitude was gone. Nero stared hard at the door, his expression a mix of
determination and unease. The preteen made short work of the stairs, disappearing into his room only to reappear seconds later with a pair of sneakers and a hoodie thrown on.

He stopped in the kitchen only to shove nearly an entire slice of cold pizza in his mouth. Half the slice hung from his mouth as he went to dig around his father's desk drawers, slowly rotating with each chew. The huge knife was almost the length of Nero's forearm but its size didn't deter the preteen at all when he finally dug it out. He strapped it to his leg, flipping the cover of the procured boot halter over the knife's handle so it wouldn't be quite so obvious.

The spring air was still rather chilly, despite it being almost noon. Nero reflexively narrowed his eyes at the bright sunlight before pulling his hoodie up until it covered his hair. He glanced back warily at the shop, Dante's earlier warning making him hesitate before turning determinedly away from it and heading back towards his old neighborhood. He needed to find Bets, figure out where he'd gotten that note. Nero didn't know why, but he felt like he was running out of time.

Nearly nine hours later, an exhausted and thoroughly pissed off Nero stormed back towards the shop.

"Un-fucking-believable." Bets was just gone. Just gone. The blonde street kid was nowhere to be found. It was like the teenager had just disappeared. At first he was worried, as it wasn't so uncommon for kids to be taken or killed, but word on the street was that he'd fled the city due to some debts, and then Nero had just been pissed.

Because he needed to know where that note had come from. If "C" was Credo then it meant the Order was coming… And who else could it have been from? If the Order was coming to take him back, what would Nero do?

The preteen was cold, tired, worried and terrified all at once. Nero brought his right hand up to rub at his eyes in frustration, steps slowing to a stop. He was across the street from the shop and while Nero could tell the older half-devil wasn't home yet, he still wasn't ready to go in. Not with his mind so messed up over this. He had to get his shit together – Nero wasn't planning on letting his father know about this unless he absolutely had to.

It wasn't that the preteen didn't trust the hunter, because honestly he did. It was just that Nero's track record with family hadn't been great at all so far. Abandoned by his mother, forced to leave his adoptive family and then the train wreck that was Mae...

Sure, Dante had protected him so far but would the hunter still feel that way if he had to face a small army? His father didn't like to work on the best of days.

What if he just gave Nero up?

Worse yet, what if Dante died?

True, the older half-devil was strong but the Order guards were really strong and all they did was train to kill demons. Nero's heart ached in his chest, his stomach twisted in knots. He knew his father was strong, but how could one man, even if he was a half-devil, stand up to the blessed forces of the Savior Sparda?

Losing his father either way wasn't something Nero was willing to risk. Which was why if they were really coming, Nero was going to leave. It was better that way. Then Dante wouldn't be given a chance to do either – die protecting him or abandoning him to avoid the effort. The concept of leaving made his chest ache even more. Nero was happy here. He felt like he finally belonged
With a sigh he let his hand drop from his face. And froze, blue eyes widening. A large man stood in front of him, clad head to toe in white. For a moment he was too surprised to think anything other than *I just used my devil arm in front of someone* and then *Lots of white.* Nero reached over and quickly yanked the end of his sleeve over his devil arm. He couldn't really smell the man in front of him – the wind was blowing the stench of the soap factory towards them. Still, the young half-devil got a bad feeling about him.

He gave the man a stiff nod, his mind still distracted by what the adult was wearing. Nero couldn't figure out why, but he felt like he'd forgotten something. *White... white...* He rolled the word around in his mind as he made his way carefully past the weirdo. He made the connection between the color and Dante's earlier warning seconds before a hand the size of his head wrapped itself around his throat and the preteen was lifted clear off the ground.

Nero let out a choking sound, hands clawing at the iron grip on his throat while his legs kicked viciously at the stomach of his captor. The actions didn't seem to affect the unknown demon at all.

"You carry the blood of Sparda... yet you are not Dante."

"No... shit... Sherlock!" Nero managed around his desperate attempts at breathing. His insolence was rewarded with a quick visit to the nearby building wall. He left a huge dent in the wall, the bricks giving away under the force of the throw and Nero let out a gasping, silent cry, the air stolen from his lungs. He'd only just begun to fall forward when the hand returned, this time pulling him upwards by the hair.

"You are his child then," the demon remarked, a dark frown pulling his lips down even further. "You were foolish to wander so far from the protection of your nest, little boy."

"Piss off!"

"Your grandfather would be appalled by your language," the white demon rumbled, head cocked to the side as he examined him. "You are not fit to carry my master's name. You will die after your father."

Nero groaned, blinking heavily against the light headedness that was starting to obscure his thinking. Blood was leaking liberally from his right arm – the preteen was sure he had felt it shatter when he'd smashed into the wall – and there was something wrong with his ribs. He dug his left hand's nails into the demon's hands in a last ditch effort to stay awake.

"Now would be a great time for you to come home, old man."

Eventually his hand went limp, falling from the demon's as he felt his consciousness begin to wan.

"Brother!" a sharp, angry voice cried out. "Let the boy go!"

Almost instantly the pressure on his scalp lessened before disappearing as the hand relocated to his neck yet again. Nero's head lulled to the side, blinking as he tried to clear the tears from his eyes and get a better view of his possible rescuer. When everything about the demon currently trying to kill him was white and large, the demon that stood in front of them was opposite – tall and thin, outfitted in black leather and a black trench coat that seemed to blend in with his lengthy hair.

"Stay out of this, Modeus."

"A child? You would kill a child?" The darker demon's – Modues' – voice was raw and hurt, dark...
brown eyes filled with a mix of injustice and disbelief. Added with the slight tremble of his lower lip, the whole image rather reminded Nero of a kicked puppy. "Baul… What have you become?"

At the sound of his name the white demon tensed, a strange look flashing across his features before disappearing behind a cool mask of indifference. "I have warned you before, Modeus. Do not interfere here."

Indecision flared across the dark demon's face and for one long, terrible moment Nero thought the demon was going to his death. But then a shiver ran though Modeus' frame and suddenly it was as if his features were carved from stone.

"I will not allow you to do this. Dante is one thing, but this? Never." A sword materialized out of the air, long slender fingers wrapping around the gothic ornate handle.

The white demon gave a harsh bark of laughter, his grip tightening once more. "I have no interest in fighting someone who abandoned the sword for so long."

"Regardless," Modeus threatened, slipping into a stance. From this distance the demon's black eyes seemed to glow like two hot coals. "I will fight you."

"You'll die." Even half conscious Nero didn't miss the unease on Baul's face, a contrast to the dark certainty in his voice.

"Then I will die." The black-haired demon's voice was harsh. "But the boy will not."

The way he said it, so confident and strong, the half-devil believed it. Without warning Nero found himself flying at another wall, slamming into it so hard that the air from his lungs was expelled out, accompanied by the contents of his stomach. The preteen had little time to notice the vomit that coated his front – he was too consumed with the explosive pain that was tearing his head in half, and the sharp, body length jolts of pain that originated from the middle of his back. He was vaguely aware of Modeus' black form streaking towards Baul, a roar of outrage escaping from his lips. But the pain was far more important and Nero laid still, afraid and far too stunned to do anything other than lay still and feel.

He was pulled back from the strange, awkwardly narrow plain of thoughts that the pain had sent him too when he felt a calloused hand brush over his forehead tenderly and Nero found himself staring up at the concerned face of his savior. Instinctively, the half-devil flinched away from the strange demon, lips pulled back into a weak snarl.

"Be calm." Modeus' voice was ragged, mouth flecked with a bit of liquid and Nero smelled the demon's blood long before he registered the pool slowly gathering at his crouched feet. "I will not harm you. I drove Baul off, but it will not be for long. Forgive me, for this shall hurt, but it is not safe for us to remain outside."

The preteen let out a harsh cry as he was lifted up, the movement jostling his nearly destroyed body. Nero must have passed out, because when he came back to himself, he was being placed on the pool table he recognized belonging to Dante, was shirtless, and his rescuer hovering over him worriedly. He couldn't keep the pathetic whimper from escaping as he was laid flat.

"I know," the dark demon soothed as he tied something onto the boy's arm, "but your spine needs support."

"Who are you?" Well, that's what he meant to say. What came out sounded more like garbled crap because of his swollen throat. The demon seemed to understood anyway and gave him a soft smile.
"I am Modeus. I served your grandfather."

Suddenly he tensed, dark eyes flickering to the shop door seconds before it was thrown off its hinges.

Dante snarled as he kicked his door open, Ebony and Ivory pointed threateningly at the soon to be dead man who was covered in Nero's blood. His kid smiled weakly at him, relief clear on his face even from the doorway. It only served to piss the hunter off more.

He gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to Trigger. Nero had never seen him in his demon form and with his reactions to his own devil arm, Dante didn't know if he ever wanted the boy to.

"You have three seconds to get the fuck away from my son before I redecorate my shop with your insides."

"My name is Modeus, I –"

"Buddy, I don't give a flying fuck. Move."

"I mean your son no harm, I–"

Too. Fucking. Long.

Dante was a blur as he unsheathed Rebellion and threw it across the room, pinning the unknown demon to the back wall. He made short work of the shop, immediately hovering over his son worriedly.

Nero's right arm was expertly splinted by a broken cue stick, the flesh a sickly purple and red with a long gash by the elbow that was deep enough bone could be seen. The entire right side of his face was red and scraped from where he'd impacted the wall outside (the dented bricks of the café had been Dante's first red flag) and the matching side of his chest and ribs were a pattern of bruising. But the most painful looking injury was the neck, which had turned an angry grey-green.

"Dnaadh," Nero wheezed, his uninjured hand reaching up to him. He took his son's hand, tenderly pulling the weak grasp free and tucking it gently by his side. Dante shushed him, hands carefully feeling for other damages as he probed the abused flesh. Nero let out a soft whine at the touch and the devil inside him reacted with a vengeance. Ivory was a flash of white and gunpowder as he unloaded a clip's worth into the still pinned demon angrily.

"Nnh!" Nero whimpered, his body bolting forward to knock Ivory down. His son let out a pained scream, falling backwards almost immediately as he clutched at his bruised side, having aggravated his injuries, especially his back. Dante had a moment of pure panic as he watched his son sob breathlessly and then he was a blur as he hovered over his son.

"Shhh, Nero," Dante soothed, one hand running gently through the boy's hair while the other cupped a wet cheek. His son gripped at the sleeve of his duster, blue eyes wide and slightly wild as they stared up at him desperately. "I know, kiddo, I know."

He had a large Vital Star in his pack – it wouldn't heal Nero's wounds completely but it would take care most of the life threatening ones, buying the smaller half-devil some time for his demonic healing to kick in. Leaving Nero, even if it was just to retrieve the bag he'd left on the front porch, was the hardest thing Dante had ever done.

Every time he attempted it Nero would whimper, his body shaking pathetically as he clung to him,
big blue eyes begging him not to leave his side. Eventually the hunter managed to pull himself away, ripping his favorite canvas bag apart by the seams in his haste to get the green star out. Dante bit off the cap, trying to spill as little of the precious green liquid as possible. The stuff was foul-tasting and smelling and the half-delirious Nero had rejected it the moment it touched his lips. Dante had barely saved its contents from spilling.

At first Dante had to beg. "It will make you feel better, I promise. Come on, Nero, please, buddy."

Then he attempted bribery. "If you drink this, I swear you can have anything from the liquor cabinet."

Finally, he had to force it down his kid's throat, one hand covering his bucking son's mouth while the other fought to keep Nero from making his injuries worse once the last drop was consumed. The Star began to work immediately and Dante felt a moment of pure relief as his kid slumped against the pool table, the lines of pain around his eyes and mouth softening even as the bruising on his skin lightened until they seemed weeks old. A quick check revealed that his son's back had returned to its proper alignment, despite the still prominent ugly marring.

The hunter carefully removed his hand, brushing his son's sweat slicked hair from his forehead. "See? Much better."

"Tashted likhe assh," Nero slurred as he sluggishly nodded, eyes already half-lidded from exhaustion. Dante let out a strained chuckle before sending the still pinned and quite unconscious demon a harsh, evaluating look before carefully lifting his kid off the pool table. The younger part-devil let out a soft sound of disagreement before burying his face into the stained shirt. He soothed his battered kid the best he could as Dante slowly – carefully – made his way upstairs.

It took almost a full hour for Modeus to heal himself, the attack by the son of Sparda coupled with the damage his own brother had done was more pain than the black-haired demon could recall feeling in centuries. When he came to, Modeus was greeted to the sight of a darkly furious Dante. The chair was placed directly in front of where the hunter had pinned the demon, and the son of his master was sitting in such a fluid pose that it seemed illogical he didn't slide right off of the rickety wooden chair. Though the pose itself was purely casual, there was little about the half-devil's aura or expression that matched it.

Modeus could smell and feel another demonic presence, though this one was distinctively female and distinctively… wrong. Whoever the demoness was that Dante had called to sit with his son (Modeus had noticed almost instantly that the white-haired child had been moved), she felt unlike any breed or class he had ever felt. Considering the numerous types of devils he's met over the centuries – and Modeus was very old indeed – that was saying something.

"Is your son alright?" he managed to ask around a ragged voice. It hurt to talk, although that was mainly because he had the second largest of his master's three swords pinning him to the wall. Blue eyes flashed red and Modeus couldn't help the slight flinch when a bullet grazed his cheek before embedding itself in the wall. "Of course, a foolish question. Forgive me."

"The only reason you're alive is because you saved my son's life." Dante's voice was unsympathetic.

"I know," Modeus acknowledged quietly. "My brother –"

"– is dead." The dark demon couldn't help the gasp of pure sorrow that escaped him. "He just doesn't know it yet."
Modeus closed his eyes in both relief and bitter disappointment. Relief because his brother still lived, disappointment that Baul's life had not ended when he had an opportunity not to witnesses it.

"I no longer recognize my brother," he stated truthfully. "His hatred --" The wrong word, but Modeus did not know quite how to explain his older brother's obsession. "-- has twisted him into something I can no longer ignore. To slay a child, much less the grandchild of our former master… Do what you must, young Sparda, I will not interfere."

"Hope you're not too offended when I say I don't believe that."

"Kill me, if that is your wish. My life is yours, Dante." Modeus looked up, catching the half-demon's eyes for the first time. He willed the hunter to believe him, putting all of his conviction and utter submission into his gaze and posture. For the majority of his life, Modeus had served a Sparda. If Dante gave him the choice, he would serve that line for the rest of it. If that meant forfeiting his life… How could Modeus object? When it was his own brother who had almost killed their beloved master's only grandchild?

There was a long silence as the two stared at each other, a few long moments of half felt fear and excitement of the unknown, two emotions that the full-blooded demon rarely felt.

"Tell me everything. Starting with why your brother wants me dead so badly."

It was not a request and Modeus obeyed it without question, explaining that Sparda had saved their lives when their clan had been destroyed in the Demon World. Being taken in as vassals of his line and teaching them his style of sword fighting. Told him of how Modeus and Baul had helped Sparda rebel from the shadows – forbidden to do so openly for their own protection. Spoke of how they had been there at his birth, how he had held each twin in turn, felt, and acknowledged their power and worth despite their half-breed status.

And how Baul had grown more and more distant and arrogant since that day. The white demon had not found either child acceptable – how could they possibly be viable fighters with such a weakness in them? He had been absolutely positive that Sparda would grant him total inheritance of his lands, of his titles, and most importantly, of his swords because of the human stain.

But when the time finally came, Sparda gave his swords to his half-breed sons. And it had been Modeus, the younger and weaker brother, who had gained his titles and lands. In his own foolishness, Modeus had renounced his inheritance to his brother in the hopes it would soothe his angry soul. The unintended insult had been too much for his prideful brother. And so Baul had waited until he deemed Dante strong enough to be a proper opponent.

Because despite everything, his brother still had his sense of honor.

Or so Modeus had thought, until he had to pick up the sword for the first time in thirty years to stop him from slaughtering a defenseless child.

At the end of it, the young Sparda had simply clicked his tongue against his teeth in annoyance. "Old man still finds ways to make my life hell."

Modeus imagined he looked rather like an angry cat, the way his entire frame had stiffened indignantly. "Your father--"

"Please," Dante interrupted with a sharp sneer, "save the speech for someone who gives a rat's ass." The half-devil stood up casually, pulling the sword from his chest in one smooth move and ignoring the flash of pain crossing the older demon's face. "I'm going to go take care of this. You're going to
stay right here – right on this fucking spot, until I get back and decide what to do with you. You try anything stupid and my lady friend up there is going fry you from the inside out. Capeesh?"

Modeus nodded and leaned back against the brick wall, arms crossed as he tried not to think about the fact that he was willingly allowing the man that would soon all but demolish his foolish older brother leave.

_Forgive me, brother…_

It was always the same god damned thing. His father. His father, his father, _his father_. Ninety percent of the shit that had gone down in Dante's life had to do with someone chasing after his father's shadow. If the devil had truly been that freaking impressive, Sparda wouldn't have gone and gotten himself so spectacularly killed.

At some point, Dante would _really_ like to go a year without someone trying to kill him because he was "the Son of Sparda". And now, the steering wheel creaking under the pressure of his grip, now it was starting to fuck up his own kid's life.

_Nero…_

His hatred for his father's legacy had just reached a new level. It had cost him everything - his mother, his brother, and now this. This was the most intolerable of them all.

Dante had never seen a child so beaten and broken before, and the fact that it was _his_ Nero… Images of his son's abused body had been playing on constant repeat since he'd first seen it. Dante couldn't so much as close his eyes without seeing his son's blood staining the green felt of his pool table brown. Couldn't inhale without remembering the disgusting scent of fear and blood mixed with bile.

He was furious. No, he was beyond that.

The level of rage Dante felt was unlike anything the hunter could have imagined from himself. It hummed underneath his skin, running from nerve to nerve ending, making his muscles tense in pure anticipation of the violence he was about to unleash. He was so angry. Angry at the son of a bitch coward that had dared to hurt a ten-year-old because of a long dead demon's decisions. Angry that Nero hadn't listened to him and just stayed in the shop. Angry that he couldn't just unleash his fury and rip Modeus apart right alongside his brother.

He didn't _want_ to be understanding towards the foreign demon; what Dante wanted was to tear the world apart until the dark ache in his chest was spent and gone. But some part of him – shit, he didn't know which part – could relate to the demon's very real sorrow. Probably because of Vergil.

_Damnit_, the demon thought bitterly, _you're more like Dad than you could ever hope, Verge. Both of you fuckers keep making my life hell from beyond the grave._

But none of that mattered now, not when he was speeding towards the white demon. Because Dante Alighieri was going to repay every scratch on his son tenfold. He wasn't going to just kill Baul – he was going to _eviscerate_ him. Dante was going to fuck the devil up so badly that no demon would ever think of trying to emulate his actions.

Because this could never be allowed to happen again. There were so many that wanted harm on him. Never before had the reputation the hunter had built up over the years felt anything less than prestigious to Dante. But now… The fear that had filled him when he'd entered the shop and saw Nero was intense. The concept that he could lose his son after such a short time of finally having him was more than Dante could bear.
When Nero had been lying in front of him, crushed and near lifeless, Dante had a moment of true clarity about himself: If the world had taken one more of his family away from him, the half-devil would have torn it down around them.

The car came screeching to a stop, doing a complete one-eighty before sliding neatly into a parking spot between two delivery trucks that would've made any parallel parker envious. He could feel Baul, just a few feet away in the park, waiting for him.

The park was abandoned by some luck and the two stared each other down in front of the god awful statue of his father that looked nothing like how Dante remembered him. Baul gave him a deep frown, giving him a dismissive once over.

"How pitiful to allow your emotions to have such a hold over you. To become so worked up over something as pathetic as that watered-down mixed-breed."

Dante felt a terrible, cruel smile climb across his face, more Vergil's than his own and for the first time in his life, he skipped his much beloved battle banter. His Trigger crawled across his skin far slower than it ever had before, the wealth of his anger so strong that it made each cellular change far more intense.

Baul was still lecturing him about his bloodline and his own crushed dreams when it finally overtook the younger man. The white demon was fast enough to call out his own sword to his hand in defense but not in time to raise it up. Dante smashed into him with the speed and force of a semi going at full speed, sending Baul rocketing into the base of the Sparda statue and sending it toppling over backwards.

Dante was on the devil before he had a chance to recover, lifting the stunned demon up by his throat. "Now, where should we begin? A crushed throat or broken ribs? Let's see, Nero said his back hurt the worst so let's start there, shall we?"

Baul attempted a counterattack but Dante's new found power allowed him to catch and crush the offending arm easily before he forced the white demon into a bowed position backwards, pushing slowly but with increasing force until he heard each vertebrae shatter.

"What's the matter? Not so mighty now that you're not up against a kid?"

Baul growled up at him, his features twisted in a look of pure hatred. Dante sneered back and slammed his forehead against the demon's. Baul went limp in his grasp and the hunter heaved him easily over one shoulder and made his way back to the convertible, changing back to normal for the time being.

What he had planned was a little too much for such a public place.

Dante was not particularly proud of what he did next. Never before had Dante done such a thing. Never before had he purposely kept death from an opponent for a sense of pleasure. But that night Dante did.

And the half-devil relished it.

He carried Baul to an abandoned factory and killed him in slow degrees throughout the night, stopping only to bring the demon back from Death's door with half of a small Vital Star before beginning again until he ran out of healing items. Dante tortured him until neither the hunter nor Baul could recognize the white demon's twisted body. He did things to Baul that he hadn't truly thought he was capable of doing. Crossed lines that Dante never thought he would ever cross… and in some
weird way that would keep him awake, uneasily thinking for nights on end afterwards, made the hunter feel closer to Vergil than he had in years.

And when he was done Dante dumped Baul's body at a well used demonic gathering area, his scent littered across the body, and Nero's bloody shirt shoved through a gaping hole where Baul's heart should be. It was a message. A warning to stay away from Dante and his own.

And sometimes – months down the road when he would be sipping beer with Modeus – the hunter would unwillingly recall the methods that he had used to destroy the dark demon's broodmate. But he never regretted it. Not when Nero would forever have a scar along his back from where his spine had been all but crushed.

No. Dante was not proud. But he never once regretted it.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Dante deals with the aftermath of his pity, Nero meets a ghost and Patty finds her elusive mother.
Chapter Notes

Art in this chapter is done by Piscosos, over at DA.

Last Time: Nero crushed Patty's budding romantic dreams and learned that perhaps (occasionally) it's best to listen to his father, Modeus finally took a stand, and Dante found his darker side.

From where he sat sprawled across the leather couch, Nero hummed to himself in boredom. His father sat at the other end, flipping through a motorcycle magazine with the glazed expression of one equally bored.

It had been roughly a five days since that son of a bitch Baul had been put down by his father and for the most part the small part-devil was healed. He still walked with a bit of a limp, the damage to his spine so severe it would take a week or two to fully heal.

And Dante wouldn't let Nero out of his sight. The hunter had refused two jobs already because it would mean leaving him behind. They slept together, ate together, even watched TV together. It was a miracle that Nero was allowed to take a piss by himself, really! Admittedly for the first few days the older half-devil's presence had been a relief. It was a strange experience for him – the boy had never been clingy. But for two or three days after the attack he'd wanted nothing more than to stay glued to his father's side.

Dante had been all too happy to oblige his sudden influx of insecurity.

But now…now it was driving Nero bonkers!

The preteen rolled his eyes as Dante set Patty off again, the little blonde shrieking loudly. He responded by turning the volume up on the TV. A square mop was pointed threateningly at Dante.

"I mean it! I'm done this time, you stupid head! I clean and I clean and it's always like this! Clean. Up. After. You. Eat!"

"Whatever, girly. Don't get so mad. The place gets clean."

"Because I clean it!"

Nero tuned the rest of it out, only checking back in as he watched the petite blonde beat the hunter repeatedly with said broom, the latter mockingly "defending" himself. The fight accumulated in Patty destroying whatever cleaning job she had just completed and leaving in a righteous fury, door slamming behind her.

"And you say I handle her badly." Nero said with a smirk, taking in the destroyed shop.

From his seat Dante 'tched.' "She'll get over it."

"Hey, bring me a soda, old man."
"Get your own."

Nero sighed, making a big production of slowly sitting up, then reaching up to grasp the edge of the couch as he stood stiffly. A second later and his devil arm shot out to catch the can of soda rocketing towards his head.

"You're just milking the hell out of this aren't you?" Dante's voice was dry but amused, a quirked smirk of disbelief on his face as he leaned against the refrigerator.

"Don't know what'cha talking 'bout." Nero replied happily, nestling back into the couch as he took a long sip of the cool, sweet liquid.

"Sure ya don't." The front door opened with a soft 'whish.' "What you want?"

"Hey, Morrison."

"Hello, Nero. You're looking better."

The preteen tipped his soda in a small salute. "Feeling better."

The agent laughed, shaking his head as he observed the destroyed shop, dark eyes twinkling slightly. "I see you've made Patty angry again."

"Is there a reason you're here?"

"Got a job for you, what else?" As he spoke, a woman slowly made her way into the shop, eyes flickering over the destroyed area with a look of minor annoyance. She was incredibly blonde and incredibly pale – she almost looked like a living doll. As Nero watched, she gave his pops a not so subtle once over before continuing in her scan.

Nero felt his eye brows rise in surprise, the soda frozen halfway to his lips as green eyes stopped and widened at the sight of him. The stare continued and Nero could feel himself becoming unnerved, the little hairs on the back of his neck standing up. And then he realized what she was staring at.

He was holding the soda with his devil hand.

His unwrapped devil hand.

Suddenly overwhelmingly ashamed and embarrassed Nero abruptly lowered the arm, tucking it and the pop in the small area between the couch arm and his thigh. The lady watched his movements, green eyes riveted to the glowing limb. Nero felt heat color his checks and ears red, a far too familiar feeling filling him. One that he'd hoped to never feel again but always knew he would.

Dirtiness.

Nero's arm as dirty. It was a taint on his person, a physical marker that set him apart as a freak from everyone else. It was…it was…Damn't! Why didn't I wrap it?

Because he hadn't been wrapping it, not like he did back in Fortuna or when he'd been on the street. Nero had felt – mistakenly – that it was alright to leave it free around the shop. Why was he so stupid? He should have –

And Savior she was still staring.

Nero grit his teeth, free hand coming to clasp over the limb, trying to further hide the freakish scuttles and glowing light. There was a rustle of leather, the soft thumps of booted feet and suddenly his
father was standing in front of him, blocking him from those green, green eyes.

"Did anybody ever tell you that staring's rude?" The hunter's voice was icy, hands at his side curled ever so slightly. His father's scent washed over him and the tension fled from Nero and he collapsed back into the couch, grabbing a pillow and using it to cover his arm.

Dante's pose was as casual as ever but Nero knew the half devil well enough to recognize the angry stiffness to his stance. Apparently Morrison did as well because the agent immediately stepped in to smooth things out.

"Ms. Nina here would like to hire you to protect this." The blonde man place an ornate amulet on the coffee table and Nero had to tilt to see it, fervently keeping his gaze away from the woman – Ms. Nina – who was still staring at him. "And she's going to pay you rather well to do it as well."

"Isn't this more a job for the coin lockers downtown?" The words were joking, a mild insult but the sarcastic edge to them was sharp.

Morrison just sighed and shook his head. He launched into an explanation of how the amulet had been in her family for a very long time and was priceless in value. She'd inherited it when her father had died and in the ten years following said event, the attacks on Ms. Nina's person had increased in number and severity.

Nero could tell that his father wasn't buying the story. He wasn't either. Something smelled off about the woman's story and the amulet made Nero feel…weird.

"Will you take this job?" Ms. Nina asked quietly and Nero accidently found himself staring into those bright pools of green again. A second later and Dante had shifted into their line of sight again. Nero shuddered, human hand digging into his twitching devil arm as he stared at the back of his father's shirt.

'Don't take it, pops,' Nero pleaded silently, 'she freaks me out. The lady's bad news.'

It seemed that devil they may be, they lacked of the ability to communicate mentally and Dante shrugged, agreeing to take on the job with the same nonchalant, mocking tone he'd been using since the conversation began.

They two left the shop as quietly as they had entered and Nero couldn't help the gasp of relief that escaped him when Nina and the strange presence she had finally left. Dante turned to look down at him and frowned, a lazy finger pointing towards his covered hand.

"Jeez, now look what you've done."

Blinking in surprise, Nero followed the point to realize he'd all but shredded the soda can and released its contents all over the pillow. Embarrassed he shifted the soaked pillow away. "Eh, sorry."

His father just sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Kid."

"It's my own fault," The part devil muttered, "I should have it covered when I'm down here."

Nero yipped in surprise when he found the shredded can yanked from his hands and tossed away, his devil arm pulled almost harshly back up. Dante's face was hard as he stared down at the preteen, blue eyes livid.

"You're not doing that."
"What? What's wrong?"

"You're not wrapping your arm here."

"But I could have lost you the job! The next person will probably-"

"I don't care." That… was impressively almost a full growl. The half-devil sat heavily down on the coffee table, the misshapen hand cradled between his own larger ones. "This is your home. You're not hiding it in your home. You don't even have to cover it when you go out if you don't want to."

Nero ducked his head down, unable to hold his father's burning gaze. He spoke mainly to his thighs, so most of the sentence was a mumbled mess. "You say that 'cause you don't have any freaky parts."

There was a long silence before a strong hand gripped his chin, forcing the younger part-devil to look up once more. Stubbornly he focused on his the collar of his father's shirt, refusing to meet the older half-devil's eyes.
"Nero." The sound of his name was a shock – Dante never called him by his name – and the preteen's eyes snapped back up in surprise. "Kid… Don't you know…" The hunter shook his head, pale blue eyes searching his own with a strange sort of desperation. "You got nothing on you I'm ashamed of."

That… hadn't been what Nero meant by what he'd said at all but somehow, in some way he hadn't even been aware of, that was exactly what he needed to hear. Aware that he was blushing something terrible Nero quickly looked away.

"This-" His voice cracked. Savior, he sounded pathetic. Nero cleared his throat and roughly pulled away from his father's hands. "This is way too much of a chick flick moment for me to handle."

There was an abrupt, almost startled laugh. "Yeah, it kind of is."

A short pause.

"You hungry? Let's hit up Freddie's."

Nero perked up. He loved Freddie's. The man could make a mean grilled cheese.

Freddie's was surprisingly crowded for the time of day but that didn't stop them from being seated immediately. Nero was working on demolishing his fifth grilled cheese sandwich and third plate of fries and Dante watched his kid's face in amusement as he made his way through a pizza.

The amulet pulsed in his pocket and the hunter pulled it out, watching it swing for a moment before setting it on the table. From across the booth, his kid paused mid bite. He swallowed hard and shifted noticeably away from it.

"I don't like that thing." He said slowly, "It ain't normal, no matter what she said."

Dante nodded in agreement. "No, it's not. You can feel the demonic energy in it."

"It makes my arm hurt."

The hunter's head snaps up from his sundae so fast he actually hurt his neck. "What do you mean, it makes your-"

"Hey!" The spoon in his hand bent a bit in irritation. 'What terrible timing – she has got to have my place bugged.' "Why the long faces?"

"Hey, Lady." Nero greeted, scooting over to allow her slide in before returning to his grilled cheese.

"Brat, you're gonna get fat." Lady warned as she pushed a series of dirty dishes away with a look of disgust. "If you got time to overfeed the runt, you've got a time to take a job." She eyed the amulet. "What's that?"

"My job," Dante answered tonelessly. "Would you like me to write you a check now or do you prefer to wait until you can take the money out of my wallet directly."

Nero snorted and then let out a sharp, hacking wheeze when Lady elbowed him harshly as her hand snapped out like a snake, snatching the amulet up. Dante eye's narrowed at the way his kid tensed, tucking his devil hand away from the swinging necklace.

It didn't seem to escape Lady's observation either. She tossed it back, a harsh gleam in her mismatched eyes that Dante long ago learned meant trouble for him. She stood, not evening
attempting to half-ass a lie to make her departure any less obvious before she all but sprinted from the restaurant.

"You've got really weird friends," Nero commented around a mouth full of cheese and bread.

Dante tucked the necklace away with one hand, the other raised to block the unappealing sight in his kid's mouth. "You seem to be under the misconception that I get to choose them."

A half hour later and sixty bucks in the hole, the duo were walking the short distance back to the shop. Nero was only a few steps in front of him, arms propped behind his head as he railed on about some kid or another at school who had pissed him off. Dante was only half-listening, his attention split between the strange pulsing taking place in his pocket and the ever expanding growth on his son's arm.

It wasn't as cool as it had been and Nero's walking with most of his arm exposed showed more than normal – most likely the sensitive boy was unaware he had pushed the sleeve up so far. Dante studied the lines of thick flesh that had made its way over his kid's knuckles and making short work of the pale forearm. It cast the back of Nero's white hair in a soft blue light.

The half-devil knew that it was only going to keep spreading. How far, he didn't know, and he almost doesn't want to know. Not with how badly it made Nero upset. It was strange for him. The hunter had never felt such an overwhelming need for someone to just... be okay before. To be happy, to be safe. He'd felt something akin to it when he had been separated from Vergil but the depth of what he felt for Nero continued to surprise the hell out of him.

In front of him, Nero stopped.

Dante frowned, coming to a stop next to him. "Something wrong?"

His kid shook his head, lips pulled in a decisive frown as he rubbed his right arm with his human hand. "It... it's like... throbbing."

The hunter frowned and reached out to take the misshapen limb and a split second later Rebellion was the only thing standing between them and an ugly green demon. The force of its charge was enough to send him skidding backwards, pinning Nero harshly between his back and a shop wall. The preteen let out a panicked sound and Dante could feel small hands fisting against the back of his duster, pushing him desperately forward as the demon attempted to pin them even harder against the creaking stone wall.

All the hunter could think of was scarred flesh and the sight of blood against green velvet and –

Sheer will power gave Dante the strength to hold against the onslaught, his legs and arms almost shaking from the effort as he created cracks in the street from being pressed down so hard.

The demon growled obscenities at him around his sword blade, dark eyes furious. "Where is the woman? You. Do you have the magic stone?"

The hunter smirked, whipping the amulet out. "Magic stone? You mean this?"

The reaction was instantaneous and Dante barely managed to whip Nero out of the way, shoving the kid blindly behind him as he leapt up the side of the wall. The demon followed him immediately, claws swiping roughly – and uselessly – after the amulet.

Though he would deny it like hell afterwards, Nero almost pissed himself when that devil had
appeared out of nowhere. And for one horrifying moment, he thought he was going to be crushed again. As it stood, his father had managed to catapult him out of the way of the fight, though he probably hadn't meant to (at least Dante better not have meant to) launch Nero into the opposite alleyway wall.

As it was, the preteen let out a series of groaning curses. He'd been way too intimate with way too many walls lately for his taste. Nero stood carefully, a hand running over his sore lower back to check for any more damage.

Satisfied that short of a few already healing scrapes he was fine, Nero glanced warily up at the roof tops before deciding to move to the streets in hope of a better view. He only made it a few paces before coming to a complete standstill.

Ms. Nina was there, staring at him with those alarming green eyes, mouth slightly opened in shock as she takes in his ruffled appearance before settling – again – on his arm. Nero yanked his sleeve down angrily, giving the blonde his most intimidating glare.

She wasn't alone – there was a man standing behind her in a suit, wearing sunglasses despite the fact that it was nighttime like a douchebag. Nero can't help but tell him so. The man gave a sharp smirk.

"I don't think you, of all people, should be insulting appearances."

"Simon!" Ms. Nina's voice was full of reproach as she shot a look of disbelief at the suited man.

Nero bristled, not just at the insult but at the sound of his voice. Something was wrong. His arm ached and Ms. Nina was still staring and the man was still smirking. There was a sudden rush of air as his father landed lightly in front of him, cutting Nina's view of him for the second time that night. These two were just fucking wrong. Everything in the preteen was screaming it and he can't help but step slightly closer to his father's back, eyes still locked on the strange man.

There was a whole conversation going on there, Nero's sure, but damn if he could understand it.

A startled, pain-filled gasp sounded out behind them and almost as one the entire group looked to the side. Nero's mouth dropped, stunned to find Patty standing there, eyes almost crystallized with tears. She took one step forward, lip trembling, then another, tears falling freely now and Nero found himself moving towards her in concern before he even processed it. The little blonde let out a strangled hiccup of a sob that somehow sounded like "Mommy!" and launched herself forward. The older preteen reached her seconds after she stumbled, arms shooting out to support her even as he's turning to stare at Ms. Nina in shock.

But the older blonde was already walking away, shoulders set and spine straight like a metal pole had been shoved up her ass. Dante was looking resolutely ahead, face unreadable.

"That woman," Nero couldn't help the way that word came out, because there was something just plain wrong about her, "is your mother?"

"She is!" the little blonde insisted sharply, yanking herself free from Nero's grip. The white-haired boy let out a soft sound of thought, looking at his father for clarification. But Dante only shrugged.

"Come to the shop tomorrow, Patty. That woman you think is your mother is supposed to show up to pay me."

"I know she's my mother!" Patty snapped angrily. "I know she is!"
And then she was gone, running desperately away from two rather confused males. Nero let out a disgruntled sigh, exchanging a bemused look with his father before noticing another pair of grey eyes watching him intensely. The creepy man, Simon, was still there and Nero bristled at the look he was receiving.

"Can we go home now?"

Dante frowned, casting the dark haired man a look of distaste before turning on his heel.

"Yeah, kid, I think we've had enough excitement for one night."

It was late when Nero finally woke up. The sun was shining brightly through his curtains, casting a long shadow over his carpet. It was later than he would usually be able to sleep in, even on a weekend, but Dante had been cutting him a lot of slack since he'd been injured.

The preteen could hear voices below. His dad's and Morrison, Patty's as well, which meant it was really, really late because her maybe-mother wasn't supposed to show up until three-ish and Nero doubted the pissed off blonde would be spending time with the objects of her irritation willingly.

Because, damn, when Patty wanted to hold a grudge, she held it well.

The preteen slid out of his bed with a yawn, pulling on a rumpled sleep shirt over his striped pajama bottoms before scratching the long scar on his back. His leg felt way less tense then it normally did when he woke up, so Nero took that as a good sign.

He supposed he ought to go downstairs, but the white-haired boy really wasn't looking forward to being received another set of Patty's death glares. Hell, Nero had only just been forgiven for snubbing her date and that was probably only because he'd been beaten half to death and the blonde liked the idea of being able to play nurse.

Nero shuffled over to the window, bare feet sliding against his thick carpet and pulled the blinds up. He blinked against the glare of the sun and then jerked forward, hands moving automatically to yank open his window as Patty all but streaked out the front door.

"Patty!" The blonde froze and turned to stare up at him, blue eyes wide. They were filled with emotion – despair mixed with frantic desperation. "Patty? What's wrong?"

The orphan shook her head, hands fisting at her side – and shit, there was that freaky ass amulet – before she sprinted away. It took Nero about three seconds to make his mind up. He rammed a pair of trainers onto his feet and scrambled out of the window, wincing as his weak leg protested the two story drop. The preteen stumbled into a run from his clumsy landing, cursing as spikes of pain began to shoot up his back and over his shoulder blades, as if reminding him that he still wasn't fully healed yet.

It didn't take the part devil much time at all to catch up with the blonde, even injured. He grabbed her roughly by the arm, turning her around before grasping her harshly by the shoulders.

"Are you out of your damn mind, Patty? That thing's dangerous as fuck! Not to mention the friggin' heart attack the old man's gonna have when he figures out its gone!"

"Let me go!"

"No!" He shook her a few times for good measure. Nero didn't know what was going on with Patty but this was going beyond stupid. That thing was a demonic magnet and the blonde was beyond...
defenseless. "You've been acting batshit ever since that creepy lady showed up! Tell me what's going!"

Patty's eyes were so blue they seem to glow. "My mother's not creepy!"

A burning sensation erupted under his palms and Nero yipped, yanking his hands away quickly before waving them back and forward, trying to push the cool air over the singed flesh. Patty was staring at him with wide eyes, a hand pressed to her mouth.

"I…I think I did that."

"Yeah," Nero snapped, holding up his slightly red palms just to see the color fading to pink. "I think you did, too. Now will you please tell me what the hell is going on?"

"I have to go see her," Patty explained miserably. She reached up and pulled the locket from her neck. It was the same one he'd seen her wear a million times, and clicked it open, showing him the picture inside. "I know that's my mommy. And this is hers, just like the amulet. I thought… I thought if I brought them to her… Please don't take me back to Dante!"

The blonde let out a heart breaking sob, tears falling steadily down her cheeks. 'Ah hell,' the younger half-devil thought with a groan, 'I hate it when they cry.'

Looking thoroughly uncomfortable, Nero cleared his throat. "Alright, fine. I'll let you go. But only if I go with you."

Patty let out a sniffle, blue eyes painfully wide. "Really?"

"Yeah." The older preteen looked away, cheeks red, his human hand rising up to brush at the end of his nose. "That thing's dangerous. Can't let you go – Ack! Get off me!"

The little blonde squeezed him even harder, if that was possible. "You're my best friend, Nero!"

"…whatever."

The stupidity of humans never, ever, ceased to amaze Dante.

Why, for instance, they constantly stuck to their codes and protocols when they should be listening to their inner instincts – all of which would be telling them to either flee or just give the angry man with a sword and guns what he wanted. The half-devil wasn't asking for much. Just the floor and number of Nina's room. Instead, the stupid manager had decided he was going to insist on his guests 'rights of privacy.'

And so now he had a gun in his face.

The hunter could feel the weight of Morrison's disapproval but Dante couldn't bring himself to care. All he knew was that his kid and his dumbass ward were up in a private suite, probably getting eaten by a demon while this jackass was ruining his favorite pair of slacks.

When Trish had called him at the shop to tell him just what the amulet did and who it belonged to, it had only confirmed Dante's suspicions. He had known there was something off about Nina when she had shown up and Nero's reaction about the tall blonde and her amulet had only deepened them. She had never stated her last name, not that Dante made his clients do that, but it was with good reason.
Because if the hunter had known that he was dealing with anything that had to do with Aeron Lowell, Dante would have handled this entire thing differently.

Starting with locking his impossible, disobedient and trouble magnet of a son in a closet somewhere far, far away from that amulet.

Because Aeron Lowell had been an alchemist but not just any alchemist – he was the Alchemist. Through black magic the human had found a way to control demon kind by funneling his will power into his craft. The legends said he grew so powerful that out of all demons, there was only one other demon Lowell couldn't control, next to Mundus.

Abigail.

Sure, Dante had heard the horror stories about Abigail, but he always figured they were just that, stories. Abigail, the only devil to ever fight the Demon Emperor Mundus to a draw and not be killed, other than Sparda. Abigail, the only other demon capable of withstanding the bewitching of Aeron Lowell. Abigail who'd been tricked and sealed into an amulet for all eternity.

Supposedly anyone who managed to get a hold of the necklace was somehow able to harness all of Abigail's power and become more powerful than the kings of hell, if not outright be on Mundus's level. It was like the demonic equivalent of the Holy Grail.

And it had been in his office for two whole days.

No wonder Nero had hated the thing.

It hadn't bother Dante, but his demonic blood was more stable. Despite what he had told his son, the fact that he had mostly human blood was a disadvantage in some areas. It made his demonic blood weak enough not to be able to control its reaction to certain elements. Like the Lowell Amulet.

Nina probably didn't know that, but she knew that the moment the words 'Lowell' and 'amulet' were used in the same conversation, the hunter's rate would have either sky-rocketed or he'd refused the job.

Dante didn't have a clue as to what Nina was up to, but he'd be damned if he left either one of those kids in her presence any longer then he had to.

And why the hell did Nero always seem to end up in the friggin' middle of everything?

Frustrated beyond belief, a gloved hand shot across the bar to grip the manager's tie threateningly.

"So, tell me." In his hand, Ivory cocked threateningly. "Would you rather break some precious hotel policy of yours or have a gigantic hole in your head?"

Nero kind of realized he may have made a mistake in letting Patty come here about the time they had reached the hallway of her mother's room. His hearing was considerably better than the little blonde human and so he was treated to a little bit more of the menacing conversation than she was.

He froze mid-step, blue eyes wide with alarm as the gravelly voice floated through the walls. One hand shot out to grip the back of Patty's dress, motioning for her to stop. The blonde glared fiercely at him but waited.

"You killed Simon, didn't you?"
A woman's voice, must be Ms. Nina.

"Guilty as charged. He made quite a good suit though... Not a lot of room to move around, though."

Nero's mouth dropped open. Oh shit, that didn't sound--

"It's just about time to pick them up, don't you think?"

"Pick them up?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I know about that necklace and your daughter. I need them both together or I can't complete the ceremony, right?"

"I'm begging you, just leave Patty out of this!"

"Patty," the older preteen hissed urgently, "We need to go, it's a tra--"

But the blonde pulled away roughly, ripping the back of her dress nearly in two before sprinting down the hallway to the doors. He reached her seconds before she yanked the door open. With a curse he attempted to shove the girl behind him but Patty bit his hand (his demonic hand!) and ran into the room. She made it only a handful of steps before coming to a dead stop.

"You..." Her voice was a mix between shock and awe. "You really are my mother!"

From where he was standing at the door, Nero's eyes could see easily into the dark room. And it didn't look good. Ms. Nina was tied to the chair and a very, very ugly ass man was standing threateningly in front of her. The rest of the room was done up with drawn seals and writings, five altars placed strategically around the center.

Nero carefully made his way to the stunned girl. "Uh, Patty--"

"Patty, run away!"

"--let's take your mother's advice, yeah?"

The man tsked. "I actually rather think I have use of you, little scion," and with a wave of his hand sent the half-devil smashing into the adjacent wall with a loud thud, the suite doors slamming shut ominously behind them.

"Nero!" Patty knelt by the unmoving boy, hands wavering around his still form, afraid to touch anything. The white-haired boy's back wasn't all the way healed yet! 'What if -- what if --!' And it would be all her fault! "Nero! Nero, wake up!"

"Quiet, girl."

Patty gasped, in her panic she'd forgotten completely about the scary man and her mother, and spun around to face him, standing protectively over the unconscious form of her friend.

"How dare you do that to Nero?"

"I said, quiet!"

The blonde could feel terror uncurl itself in the pit of her stomach, making her shake violently. The man looked like a frog, only far more frightening, and the look of abject horror on her newly found mother's face and long, wicked knife pressed against her throat wasn't helping Patty regain her
"W-Why is this happening?" the orphan thought with a shudder. 'All I wanted was to meet my mom!' But now Nero was hurt and her mother was staring at her with something akin to disappointment in
her eyes and –

"Listen to me, little girl, or I'll carve your pretty momma a new smile."

"No!" Patty shrieked, clutching the amulet against her chest. "Please don't!"

The ugly man nodded towards the altar in the middle of the room. "Go put the amulet on the altar, there. Right now!"

"Don't do it, Patty!" a strained, but livid voice demanded.

Patty spun to face the newly awake boy. "Nero!"

"Yeah. Walls," the boy mumbled as he unsteadily climbed into a crouch, "why the hell is it always walls?"

"Listen to him, Patty! Don't do this!"

But then that knife was covered in her mother's red blood and the smallest blonde was nearly flying across the floor to make it to the altar. How could she not? She'd waited for her mommy for so long… She couldn't lose her now!

"Patty, no!" Nero shouted angrily. "Think of Dante!"

Patty froze, the amulet inches away from the varnished wood of the altar.

The ugly man growled and shot across the room far quicker than Patty thought he was capable off. In seconds he had Nero pinned against his side, knife pressing so harshly against his cheek it cut.

"You, are just like your father; loudly incompetent." The knife slash and Nero howled. "On the altar or your little boyfriend gets it!"

Patty slammed the necklace down so hard the altar vibrated. The second metal touched the carved runes the entire room lit up in brilliant shades of pinks and blues. The man ran past her, carrying a wildly flailing Nero along with him, pausing only long enough to sneer at the quivering blonde.

"Thanks so much, sweetcakes. Do me a favor, when Dante arrives kindly direct him to me, yes? We have a score to settle. Besides," He gave Nero a shake, "I think he'll be wanting this back anyway."

"Dante's gonna kick your butt!" Patty shouted, hands fisted as she stared teary-eyed at the furious form of what was undoubtedly her best – and only – friend.

"Please. When I become the king of the Demon World I'll be more powerful than even the Four Great Demons. I'll crush him like the bug he is and you'll have no one to blame but yourself!"

And then he was gone and so was Nero.

From where she lay, her mother was sobbing, still bound to the chair.

"Oh, Patty. Oh, Patty, baby. What have we done?"
The second Dante had arrived on the floor he could smell the magic. It was heavy and thick, like a burnt cinnamon. And underneath it all was the scent of Nero's blood. Gritting his teeth the hunter slammed the suite door open, eyes darkening at the sight of the lit circle and the summoning objects.

He recognized all four.

The skull of a fire demon killed by Dante in Morris Island, a mask of the wish bringer, the skull of Baul, and the skull of the demon that had attacked them in the alleyway the other night. Dante felt his irritation flare. This was personal. They were all connected to him.

Patty was seemingly unharmed, crouched by Nina, trying desperately to untie her from a chair.

"Dante!" Her face lit with hope at the sight of him then crashed into one of despair. "Nero! That horrible man took Nero into the light and-"

"Morrison," Dante said harshly, stalking over to the open hell portal, "get these two away from the hotel."

"What the hell is going on, Dante?"

"No time," the hunter growled out as he stepped into the white abyss. "Just get everybody out of the hotel, alright?"

Arriving into Hell via a portal gate and not a door gate was an uncomfortable feeling. He felt like he was constantly falling until he blinked after a while and realized that he had actually been standing still all along. Dante grimaced inwardly at the feeling as he adjusted to the new dimension, blinking against the slight feeling of dizziness as he looked around.

The plain of Hell he landed on wasn't one the hunter had been to before. All greys, twisted metals and murky browns. Dante wish he could say he was surprised to see Sid's deformed face cackling at him, but he wasn't. If there was one goddamn thing that the hunter would regret for the rest of his fucking life, it was not killing Sid when he had the chance to.

The demon held Nero crushed against his side, an arm wrapped tightly around the preteen's side while the other gripped his neck loosely.

Out of some misguided sense of mercy Dante had let the lesser demon go instead of blowing his brains out. Sid hadn't seemed like much of a threat at the time; his strength was hardly more than a human. On par with a user on an acid rage more than anything else.

But when Sid had kept showing up again and again, the half-devil began to realize he was manipulating something big from the sidelines. He would never had credited the little weasel of being capable to come up with a plan as convoluted as this one though.

"You can come here but you're too late to do anything," Sid taunted. "Unfortunately for you I've gotten a hold of Abigail's legacy. Wait, come to think of it, I've gotten yours too!"

Nero, if anything, looked more like his devil heritage than ever before. Cornflower blue eyes burned red with the force of his fury, his demonic arm glowing so brightly it lit up the air around it, illuminating the large cut that ran the length of his left cheek.

"Hey, kid."

"Care to explain what the fuck is going on?"
Dante felt a thread of pride at how in control his son sounded. Pissed, oh yes, but still not letting his emotions get the better of him.

"I'll tell you later."

"Like hell–" Nero let out a shout of disgust as the hand gripping his neck pivoted his head roughly to the side and a long, amphibious-like tongue ran up the length of the cut on his cheek.

"Mmm, tastes good. I'll bet he'll be a tasty little mouth full."

It took every inch of Dante's self-control not to trigger. Every. Fucking. Inch.

But he couldn't risk it. The hunter couldn't guarantee that he'd make it to Nero before Sid would have a chance to break his neck. So instead of letting the liquid rage in his veins crest over him, the half devil pushed it back, promised it that it would have its chance.

"I'm going to kill you." Dante stated simply, his tone nothing more than informative. "You've been scurrying behind the scenes all this time, and frankly, I'm tired of seeing your face pop up. Let's say goodbye, shall we? Goodbye, dickhead."

Sid howled in laughter, "What? Did you think I'd beg for my life or something?" The arm holding Nero squeezed until the preteen gave a frustrated, breathless yell and went limp. "Fool! I'm different then I was before. I'll show you."

The half-devil tensed as Sid's body began to shift and change. 'Shit, he's merging with Abigail's powers! I have to stop it – but damnit! I can't risk Nero!'

Sid's body was transforming at a rapid rate and Dante snarled, ignoring his weapons and sprinting towards the growing demon. He'd rip him apart with fucking hands if he had to.

"I'll show you the power of Abigail, who once rivaled the demon king!"

"You piece of shit! Give me my son!"

Nero awoke to a burgundy sky. For a long moment he lay still, staring at the oddly colored sky in confusion. His leg and back hurt – but for the life of him, the little devil couldn't remember why.

Eventually the preteen managed to sit up, hand rubbing at the back of his neck in confusion.

He couldn't help but feel like he was forgetting something.

A light from the corner of his eye caught it attention and Nero leapt to his feet, turning in a full circle before he realized it was coming from his devil hand. The white haired boy stared at it in shock, eyes wide as he traveled its path from his elbow all the way down his finger tips and into sharp, pointed nails.

'What the fuck? It wasn't that far this morning! Oh hell, I gotta show the old man–'

'...'

'...'

'Shit! Dad!'
And just like that Nero remembered exactly what had happened that had gotten him sent to this place. He spun in his spot, searching desperately for any sight of his father. The last thing he remembered was that demon pulling him through a portal. Dante had followed him and then – then something had happened and Nero had passed out.

Cursing, the preteen looked at the ominous woods surrounding him.

'Where the hell am I?'

After a moment of frantic pacing, Nero decided to climb a nearby tree in hopes of getting high enough to figure out where he was. It was unbelievably easy to climb the slick tree, especially with the claws on his right hand. After only a handful of minutes he'd made it the top and stuck his head out of the foliage.

Whatever Nero had been expecting to see, this was not it.

The forest ended just a few feet in front of him and then there was nothing but an endless, grassless plain that went on seemingly forever. To his direct left, however, was a tall, hulking castle made of black stone. It seemingly sucked the light around it into itself like a black hole and it took Nero very little time to make the decision that whichever direction it was he was going to walk in, it was going to be the hell away from that thing.

He'd made it halfway down the tree when the wind shrieked harshly through the treetops, making the trees groan and moan as they swayed. Nero found if he listened hard enough, he could understand what they were saying.

The white haired boy damn near jumped the rest of the way, stepping away from the trees with wide eyes as they began to truly scream around him.

Pri~innceeli~inngg

Lo~onnggi~inngg

Fre~eeu~sss

So~oaa~alloo~onne~ee

Lii~iilt~lle~ede~emo~onli~ing

Their words blended together, making it impossible to tell what they were asking and become nothing more then one, long, agony inducing scream.

Nero sprinted from the forest, hands crushed over his ears and didn't stop until he was deep in the plains. It was only then that he paused, giving one last, terrified glance at the swaying forest. The wind blew again and Nero turned from the woods, inhaling deeply. It reeked of his father's blood. And so with he began to jog against the gale, trying hard not to shudder at the heady scent that was so like his own but not.

It felt like he'd been running for days.

Every now and then these horrible little rabbit-like demons would attack him. At first they scared the crap out of him, but the younger Alighieri found he could kill them easily enough, as long as he attacked with his demonic hand in the lead.
His new claws seemed capable of shredding through weak demonic bone and armor with complete and utter ease, and Nero found he rarely had to attack twice with it. It was after his ninth or tenth kill that the preteen made a horrifying realization.

Each time he used his demonic arm here, the growth grew further.

By the time Nero had noticed it, it completely over taken the palm of his hand and for the first time made clear progress pass the elbow.

After that, he had taken to out-running the rabbit-demon things if at all possible. It seemed to work, as there hadn't been any new growth. But because a true sense of time was impossible to grasp down here, Nero didn't know if that was because he had stop killing things with it or because of something else completely.

All the running was exhausting and it seemed like he was getting no closer to finding his father. So when Nero approached a small lake filled to the brim with strange, metallic water, he didn't think twice about collapsing down next to it. He didn't know where this place with the red sky was but for some reason it felt like the preteen he'd been here once before. Like when he was really, really little or something.

Nero let himself lie against the dusty ground, chest heaving as he attempted to rally a second wind to chase after his father's scent. He knew he had to keep going. Dante could be dying somewhere, but he couldn't quite get himself to move just yet. It seemed like he had only closed his eyes for a moment but when Nero next woke the world around him had changed.

Everything – from the drab colors to the dulled scents – was the same but somehow something vital had changed.

The young part-devil sat up warily, absentmindedly rubbing his aching devil arm as he tried to understand what had changed so drastically. It was only a few moments later that Nero realized the lake was moving.

The entire lake was shifting, changing, forming into something.

Nero watched, open mouthed, as it formed into a four legged gorilla-like demon that was easily the size of semi.

With a cry, the white-hair boy threw himself to the side violently, barely missing a claw swipe that dug a car-sized hole where he'd been sleeping.

"Sssilly lissle demonssssslings," the lake demon hissed, towering over the shuddering preteen easily. Nero found himself unable to move, unable to think besides the all-encompassing terror that froze his muscles and stilled the breath in his lungs. "Cosssmingss so fars withsouts its massers."

Nero let out a pathetic whimper and squeezed his eyes shut as an elongated jaw that could easily fit him whole descended. A last ditch, instinctive action had him hiding his head in between his knees, arms wrapped protectively around it.

'I'm gonna die here!'

The heat of the demon's breath made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

'I don't want to die! Please!'

Pointed fangs scrapped against the flesh of his raised arms –
Dad!

A spike of pain so sharp ripped through his demonic arm and Nero was sure the thing had bitten him. A split second later there was a flash of brilliant, piercing white light so bright it blinded him even from beneath his eyelids. Suddenly the hot breath and teeth were gone, a sick and wet popping noise echoing oddly in the sound-dampened place. Blue eyes snapped open in shock as he felt hot body fluids spray violently over his person.

For one, incredulous moment the preteen thought his old man had actually found him.

But the person standing amongst all the gore, holding a piece of the demon in each hand and looking completely unbothered by the mess, was dressed nearly head to toe in purple. And though he had white hair, Nero knew it couldn't be Dante because his dad hated purple with a passion.

Which meant the unknown demon had probably killed off the other one just to eat Nero himself. With that thought the white-haired boy let out a groan, burying his face into his knees once more.

'Great,' Nero thought bitterly, 'at least now I get to be eaten by an even bigger one.'

The demon made no sound as it approached so it was with some matter of surprise that Nero felt a hot, heavy weight rest upon his head. Having received the gesture more times than he liked from his father, it didn't take the confused preteen long to realize he was being petted.

He dared a peek between his knees then, but oddly, all the younger part-devil could see was purple and the landscape behind it.

Because, Nero realized with no small amount of growing alarm, he could see through the demon crouched before him. The hand felt absurdly hot against his skin and it left a trail of heat as it slid down his face, over his stinging cut, and Nero dug back in against his knees, shuddering at the odd touch. Fingers traced the curves and dips on demonic arm and Nero retreated even further.

There was a sigh that the preteen somehow (impossibly) felt rush through his entire being.

"I gave nothing to my line that they should be ashamed of." The scorching fingers left his arm before resting ever so lightly on his hair once more. "Nor any more that I did not believe they couldn't handle."

Nero blinked hard against the weariness that was filling him. Why did he want to sleep so badly? How could he possibly sleep when this weird demon was about to eat him? Yet no matter how hard he fought it, the exhaustion spread.

First his shoulders dipped, and then his knees sank open, followed by his arms drifting down to rest by his sides. He was aware enough – if only because of those insanely warm hands – to realize that he was being lifted and the addled boy gave one last, hard push to wake back up.

There was a soft chuckle that seemed to vibrate in his own chest and Nero couldn't help the little whimper that escaped him as he stared up at his captor. Surprisingly tender grey eyes studied him, though a rather terrified part of Nero couldn't help but notice that the demon was even more see through then before.

"Rest now, little one."

The landscape around them was changing, morphing into someplace else: a black place that held nothing but a crooked cross at the top of a hill. In the vaguest sense Nero was aware of being laid gently on the ground before the cross, and of those rapidly cooling – yet still quite warm – fingers
tracing his still features.

"You made a beautiful child, my son."

The voice was nothing but the faintest of whispers now, but it didn't matter. Nero was too far gone by that time to have understood the significance of those words even if they had been loud enough, and the only other who could have possibly heard them was strapped lifeless to the cross before them.

"-my son."

Deep within the black, nothingness that was what was left of Dante – something twitched.

'...Father?'

"–ad! Dad! Please, wake up!"

'Nero!'

"Goddamnit, old man! I didn't not hike half a fucking planet to die here, wake-up!"

Blue eyes snapped open in alarm to find his son's bloodstained face inches from his own. There were heavy tear tracks cutting through the dried flakes on his cheeks, but the fire in Nero's eyes stated the tears were of pain and irritation more than grief. Thick streams of his kid's blood was flowing down the blade of Rebellion from where Nero was desperately attempting to yank it from Dante's chest.

There were black, misty demons all around them, faces twisted in various expressions of delight and agony as they sneered at the two devils from beneath their hoods. Their claws swiped and tore at his son, shredding his night clothes even further and scenting the air heavily with Nero's blood.

Growling, Dante snapped the bindings on his arms, ignoring the pain of Rebellion stabbing him as he lashed out and knocked the greedy demons away from his kid. The half-devil kicked his legs free, landing easily despite having both the massive blade and Nero crushed against his chest. The hunter snarled, bearing elongated teeth, red eyes flashing warningly as he littered the air around them with his scent, instinctively seeking to cover the scent of Nero's weakness. Dante easily yanked his sword from his chest one handedly and the hooded demons skittered away, scowling and sneering as they sunk into the grounds but knowing better in the presence of someone more powerful than them despite his injured appearance.

"Yeah, you better run," Nero muttered angrily, climbing down his pant legs like a monkey shakily. "Nice of you to show up late to the party."

"Sorry I was late," Dante murmured, one hand resting possessively on top of Nero's shoulder while he glanced around the plain wearily. "Hell's not my favorite place."

"Wait – back up." The older half-demon glanced down at his son in surprise at the high pitch of his voice. "We're in Hell? I just took a hike around Hell?"

"Damn, I've got a lot of shit to explain to you," Dante muttered, reaching down to lift Nero back up again. "Shut up and don't argue, your back's all messed up again."

Where the hell was – ah, there. In the gloom, the portal was like a spotlight.

"Hold on, kid, this is going to kind of suck. I promise though, when we get home I'll buy you that
shitty Chinese food you like and answer all your questions. First, I have to save the world."

In his arms, Nero snorted but hung on tightly nonetheless. "So dramatic."

An hour later found Sid completely and utterly destroyed along with the power of Abigail (turns out it wasn't all that hard core when faced with a pissed off Dante with no hostage, go figure) and both Alighieris were alone in the safety of their shop. Patty was off bonding with her mother, Trish and Modeus had gone off to double check no additional demons had escaped from the portal, and Lady was off doing… well, whatever the hell Lady did when she wasn't harassing Dante.

To Nero's embarrassment moments after Dante had hung up his weapons, he'd been herded over to the couch and promptly been pulled into the hunter's lap and ordered to tell his story. Nero protested loudly, as any self-respecting ten-year-old would, but didn't try to pull away. They both needed the physical contact after coming so close to losing each other.

Besides, Nero couldn't quite stub the excitement of talking about his first real adventure to his father. By the time he'd reached the point where Gigantor – as he had dubbed the lake demon – was about to eat him he'd forgotten his discomfort completely, hands flying almost violently as he talked.

Pressed so closely to Dante's warmth, Nero could literally feel the reactions to his story. The soft huffs of disbelief, the not-so-quiet snickers at his expense, and the strong, steady thump of his father's heartbeat.

"Then I heard this sick pop-shhhhhhh-ripppp–" Dante snickered at his vocal reproduction of the demon being ripped apart but Nero ignored him, determined to tell his story, "–and when I looked up again all I could see was blood and body parts flying everywhere. So I figured that something more bad ass had come and that it was probably going to eat me instead."

"Probably a safe assumption, considering where you were. Yet you're still here, huh, shrimp?"

"Do you wanna hear this or not?" Nero snapped, elbowing his father harshly in the ribs.

Another snicker. "Sorry, sorry. Go on."

"So, I… eh… just ducked down again. I thought whatever killed that giant had to be like, way worse, and I definitely didn't want to see it eat me," there was a low vibration against his back, almost like a purr but sharper, "so I ducked down again. But right before I closed my eyes, I saw it. I thought it was you at first so I thought you'd found me–"

There was a sigh against the back of his neck but Dante didn't interrupt.

"But I knew it wasn't, 'cause this dude did have white hair but was dressed all in purple and you said you hated that color, so I–"

"Purple?" The reply was so faint, so weak… so not Dante that Nero craned his neck around to see his father's face. He'd gone completely pale, lips pressed together in a thin white line, emotion making his eyes grey.

"Yeah," Nero answered slowly, looking forward again so he could escape that strange look. "A purple coat, kinda like yours but not leather. More like a trench coat that Morrison wears."

For a long moment Dante was silent. The air around them felt thick, tense with something the younger part-devil couldn't identify. Unsure what to do as the silence stretched on, Nero started his story again.
"I thought he was going to eat me or something, so I just closed my eyes. But instead whatever it was he put a hand on my head. Kinda like a pat, I guess. Like how you do it all the time. And he said…” Nero paused, trying to remember the exact phrasing. "He said that he gave nothing to his line that they should be ashamed of, nor any more that he believed they couldn't handle."

Behind him there was a sharp intake of breath as the arms around him tightened almost painfully. Nero gasped as his father abruptly buried his forehead against the shoulder of his stained T-shirt.

"Gross, old man! That's dirtier than hell!"

The hunter didn't respond, if anything his grip only tightened. Nero struggled to shift so he could figure out just what was wrong enough that the older half-devil would want to smother his nose in bloody fabric but Dante's grip was unrelenting.

Something warm and wet was making its way through the fabric of his shoulder and Nero paused, eyes widening considerably in stunned realization. With a sigh he went limp, practically melting into the hard lines of his father's lap and chest.

Nero placed his hands over his father's clenched ones, letting his head tilt back until it rested against a broad shoulder, staring up at the slowly rotating ceiling fan with tired, baffled eyes. He wasn't quite sure what was going on, but for once Nero contented himself with quietly waiting.

After all, he had been promised answers. And Chinese food.
Interlude II: A Weekend with the Alighieri

Friday

If there was a scene that Dante honestly thought he'd never be at on a Friday night, standing in the back of an auditorium full of gossiping mothers and bored fathers was one. The red clad half-devil was the actual subject of most of the gossip and while Dante found that amusing, there was still a part of him that couldn't believe he was standing in the middle of hot, overcrowded gymnasium suffering through class after class of crappy grade school performances of Disney songs and children's plays.

On a Friday.

Oh, how his life had changed.

If there was any consolation the half-devil knew that Nero was equally pained by the whole situation. His kid had practically begged Dante not to come.

"It's just… retarded and embarrassing as Hell. Please, just, go get drunk or something."

But there was no way in Hell the hunter was going to miss this bout of childhood humiliation. Honestly, the kid was just lucky he hadn't invited any of the girls. Dante perked up slightly as the rather chubby chorus teacher announced Nero's class number. The class filed out onto the stage… and Dante had to damn near swallow his tongue to keep himself under control, a gloved hand slapped over his mouth in a vain attempt to keep his nigh on hysterical laughter quiet.

Each student was wearing an outfit of some kind, mostly made out of felt, each with a different crudely cut out kitchen or cleaning utensil on it, and for the most part all looking various different degrees of excited and/or nervous.

And then there was Nero.

His kid glowered like a brooding storm cloud in the line, his expression blank. As the music over the loud speakers began to play the karaoke version of Be Our Guest, the class began to do cute little gestures that matched the lyrics they sang.

But not Nero.

His son just stood there, arms cross angrily over his fork outfit, glaring death resolutely at some spot on the stage before him, lips pressed firmly in together distaste.

Dante let out a choked sound, ribs aching from the effort to keep it together. Parents near him were glaring at him, not that he really cared, and his son's eyes had zoned in on him almost instantly and the distance between the two of them could not hide the pure threat in those astonishingly crystal blue eyes.

There was a low pitch hissing that the hunter's hearing could just pick up and as he watched Nero glanced to the side of the stage, where the music teacher was gesturing wildly for the white haired kid to do something. Slowly, as if not to unbalance his fork costume, Nero extended a felt clad arm and flipped the balding man off.

In the back, Dante rolled over and died.
Some part of him – the hunter inside that noticed everything – was aware of the female teacher who was watching him in disapproval but at the time, Dante hadn't thought much of it.

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_Saturday_

"Well, bless my soul. If it isn't Dante Alighieri."

The devil hunter stopped mid-step, a lopsided grin on his face as he spun around to face the barely-dressed woman who had greeted him. Jasmine looked as gorgeous as she always did, all curved lines, tan skin, and beautiful, beautiful full lips that could swallow a man whole.

Literally, Dante knew that first hand.

She looked stunning in leather pants and a see-thorough sequence top, the dark pink of her nipples only just hidden from sight. Jasmine sauntered up to him, more feline in her movements then any human had any right to be, before trailing her hands over his broad chest, taking time to trace the outline of his muscles, seen so easily underneath his shirt before sliding them up and around his neck.

Dante slid a hand around her thin waist, the other easily sliding up and across a firm rear end. "Hey, sugar, still looking sweet as ever."

"Oh baby." The gentle kiss to his neck and not-so-gentle grind against his hips made Dante bite down hard to keep from moaning. It had been three months since he'd gotten any. A record, since the hunter had hit puberty, to be sure.

And Jasmine, well, there just weren't a lot of whores of quality that looked like Jasmine.

"I've missed you."

"Really, well I'll have to–"

"Hey, old ma– Oh, for the love of the– My eyes! Get a room!" Nero was standing at the entryway of the side street, hand raised up to block the image of Dante and the prostitute. The hunter pushed Jasmine so far away from him she almost lost her balance.

"Uh, this isn't what it looks like!"

"Right. Anyway, Dad," Nero drawled dryly, jerking a thumb over to his shoulder to point at a stern looking young woman who was standing behind him, nearly radiating condemnation. "This is Ms. Fullance, _my teacher._"

Jasmine let out a sputtering sound. "Since when do you have a son, Dante?" The prostitute peered at the miniature version of the hunter. "Damn, he looks just like you."

"Sure does," Dante spoke with a slanted grin, ruffling the kid's hair. Nero hissed, sounding more like a cat than anything else, batting his hand away forcefully.

"Mr. Alighieri," a stern voice began, "I hardly think the red-light district is an appropriate place for a young child to be wandering around by himself."

Dante snorted as he took in the enraged teacher's face. Clearly, Nero hadn't shared his past year on the street with his school friends. "He does alright on his own. Practically a little street rat, that one."

Nero looked almost proud, if the squaring of his shoulders told any truth. Ms. Fullance looked horrified by his flippant treatment of the situation.
"Mr. Alighieri, this is hardly a joking manner." The teacher pushed her bangs behind her ear, her blue eyes burning with anger. "You son isn't even eleven, you shouldn't allow him to be wandering off while you consort with… you know!"

Jasmine's eyebrows rose in surprise and then she started laughing. "I don't 'consort' with anyone, sweetheart. I'm a whore." Still chuckling, she patted Dante on the bicep. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and an order to come see her again before she sauntered off, still laughing.

"Hey, Dad?" Dante looked down at his son, instantly wary at the look of fake confusion on Nero's face. "What's a whore?"

With a roll of the eyes he gave the kid a light smack on the back of the head.

From where she was standing, the teacher looked like she was going to have a fit. "Mr. Alighieri! That was hardly necessary. Nero was only curious and you wouldn't have to handle uncomfortable questions if you had kept him out of the red-light district to begin with!"

"Um, Ms. Fullance?" Again, that fake innocent confusion. "What are you doing here?"

The teacher blanched at Nero's question, turning a brilliant scarlet. "I… I mean… T-That's not the point!"

Dante's grin was downright devilish. "Sure. I tell you what. You keep your secrets and I'll keep mine, yeah?" He led his son away from the stunned teacher. "Come on, kid. You deserve an ice cream for that one."

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**Sunday**

"Wanna tell me why you left this for ten' o'clock on a Sunday night to do?"

From where he was laying out an oversized tri-fold poster board Nero sent him a dark glare. "Look, are you going to help me or not, old man?"

With a shrug Dante joined him on the couch and picked up the project assignment. The title of it made him freeze.

*Document Your Family Tree*

…this was going to be awkward. He must have been staring at it for too long because next to him, Nero gave him a sharp kick.

"You okay there, pops?"

The hunter set the paper down with a shallow nod. "Look, I don't know if you're going to be able to do this."

The boy frowned. "I mean, yeah, we don't know much about my mom besides Aunt Mae, but we can still put down your side, right?"

"It isn't that simple, kid." Dante sighed and ran a hand through his hair. *He had to find out sometime.* "My dad is, well, kind of famous. In fact most people don't even think he was real." That earned him a thoroughly confused look. "Nero, have you ever heard of Sparda?"

"Of course. He's the Savior. His Choice saved us all. He Chose to forsake the demon world so that we humans could live in peace. I had to memorize the Sacrifice from the Book of Truths in school.
Well, before I came here.

Dante almost shuddered at the sound of the blatant religious rhetoric coming from his flesh and blood’s mouth about his own father. Sweet mercy, he almost didn't want to know but… "Did they say anything about his boys?"

"Yeah, they think he had twin sons, but some of the other priests deny that. It's actually a big fight in Fortuna. The nuns at school believed that he left his sons here to protect us humans because they were born of a human mother and—" Nero stopped suddenly, slowly turning to stare up at him with a look of pure disbelief. "You have got to be shitting me."

Let it never be said that his kid was slow on the pickup. Dante just shrugged uncomfortably. "Get comfy, kid, cause this is going to take a while. It may be hard to believe, especially because of your life in Fortuna, but everything I'm about to tell you is true."

It took him three hours to tell the story of their family. He had ghosted over his brother's betrayal, telling only as much as was needed to understand what had happened. Nero was, understandably, blown away by the revelation that he was related to what he had been raised to believe was God. They sat in silence for a long time, staring at the blank poster board, each lost in their own thoughts. Eventually Nero stood, picking up the board before heading over to the stairs. Dante caught his wrist, stalling the movement.

"What're you doing? We've got to finish that, don't we?"

"And say what? That I'm related to the Savior?"

"Please don't call your grandfather that."

Another awkward silence.

"Look," Dante sighed and took the poster from Nero, "it's fine. We can use the name my mother called my father when we were in hiding: Marcus."

He set the poster back down, uncapping the marker and writing the name "Alighieri" up top in all caps before jotting names down. Nero watched silently from where he stood as Dante drew a marriage line from the two names and then a birth line down to his and Virgil's name.

"Should we make Trish my younger sister? Ah, why the hell not. She's practically family and she looks so much like my mom anyway." He glanced at his son, uneasy that the white-haired boy’s face was void of emotion, before writing out Louise's name next to his own and then drawing a line from the pair down to Nero's name. Another line was then drawn from Louise to Mae's name, a small note indicating their aunt-niece relationship. "There. Small, yeah, but your family tree."

The boy stared at the tiny chart, eyes remote, before turning wordlessly and heading towards the stairs. Frowning, Dante followed him up to his room. Once inside, the kid stopped just before his window, entire body tense. More than a little concerned, the hunter came up behind him, placing a gentle hand on a stiff shoulder.

"Kid?"

The preteen swung violently around to stare at him, face suddenly etched with miserable anger.

"It's just so fucking stupid!" The hunter took a step backwards at the force of the emotion, watching in confusion as his kid began to pace the small length of his room. "Do you know why I had to leave Fortuna? Why I had to leave my adoptive parents and Credo and Kyrie?"
Dante eyes widened at the unknown names. His son had never spoken of his life in Fortuna and he
had never pressed.

"Because of my fucking arm – because it meant I was part demon. But even with it my parents loved
me. Yeah, they didn't understand me and it was… it was… I don't know!" The younger part-devil
threw his hands up in frustration. "Really fucking annoying sometimes but damnit, they loved me!
And I loved them! And I loved my brother and my sister! I wasn't always happy but I was
alright! I was alright because I was with the St. Claires and they loved me!"

The hunter tried to deny the fierce jealousy that erupted in his chest as he thought of the couple that
had raised Nero. That they had taken what should have been his. It was unreasonable to feel like
that. He knew it was. If anything, he should be grateful that his kid had been with people who cared
about him. But it was still there.

"And now I find out that I'm--!" Nero let out a sound that was a mix between a sob and growl. His
demonic arm was glowing so brightly it dwarfed the yellow light of the lamps. "They wanted to
chop me up, use me as an experiment because of what I am and I had to leave everything I ever
cared about behind and I'm the grandson of the fucking Savior?!

His human hand shot out, grabbing the clock lamp on his dresser before throwing it with enough
force that it shattered against the opposite wall.

"It's so stupid!" There were tears now, tears and so much anger and helplessness that Dante didn't
know what to do. His kid's shoulders slumped in defeat and Nero let out a low whimper. "It's just…
It's just isn't fucking fair."

The older half-devil couldn't explain the range of emotions he was feeling at the moment if he had to.
It was something between jealousy, pity, rage, sorrow, and guilt. So much guilt. All of this was his
fault. Because he wasn't careful. Because he hadn't paid attention to his rubbers. Because he'd never
given Louise a way to find him afterwards. They stood like that, both staring at each other but not
seeing either at all, for a long time.

"I'm sorry," Dante managed after a moment, his own voice hollow. He had never felt so helpless –
so utterly incompetent and out of his league before. He didn't know what to do, didn't know how to
make it better. "I can… I can take you back."

I can fix this.

He had no idea how, but Dante knew if that was what his kid wanted, the half-devil would find a
way to get Nero back to his family.

His family. The family he loved. His family that didn't contain Dante.

Wasn't that a bitter pill that was hard to swallow.

Nero glanced up at him, a strange look on his face before it morphed into something like panic and
before Dante quite registered the change he had an armful of Nero. Thin arms were wrapped like
steel bands around his waist, his face buried against his mid-chest. Instinctively his own arms
wrapped around the smaller frame.

"Kiddo," the hunter spoke softly, gently prying the younger part-devil away enough that he could
kneel down in front of him. He had barely readjusted when the boy reattached himself again fiercely,
this time pressing his face against Dante's shoulder, arms wrapped around his neck. "Please don't
cry."
His kid only shook his head fiercely and the hunter sighed, burying one hand in white locks while the other was firmly around Nero's waist and stood. His intent was to make it to Nero's computer chair, but the ten-year-old wrapped his legs tightly around his waist, making the move impossible. With another sigh, the hunter accepted the position, sliding one arm underneath Nero for support while the other rubbed a repeating circle against the distraught child's back. He'd meant to calm his son down, not make him even more upset. Still, Dante couldn't deny the pleased feeling that the whole thing brought about.

Nero didn't want to leave him either.

There was another whimper and his grip tightened even more. The next few words were so soft, so muffled that only his half-devil hearing enable to him catch them. "Please don't send me away, Daddy."

Dante's breath hitched, his eyes squeezing close against the sheer force of the wave of tender emotion that single word had wrought in him. He hugged Nero even closer – so close he doubted the kid could breathe – and pressed a kiss against the crown of his head.

"Never. I'd never send you away, Nero," Dante promised fervently. "I just want you to be happy. If they make you happier than I do, I'd want you there."

"You make me happy," Nero said quickly, almost desperately, pulling his face from its hiding place. "You understand me and don't stare at my arm and… and… please, don't. I just want to stay with you."

"Alright," Dante accepted smoothly. "I'm sorry I even suggested it. I owe you so much, kiddo. I want to be sure you're happy."

The younger Alighieri gave him a weak smile before resting his head on a broad shoulder once more. "…I love you, old man. You know that, right?"

Dante swore he'd never heard anything so sweet in his life.

"I love you, too, kid."
Chapter Notes

Last Time: Disney made an appearance, Nero won ice cream and homework was left to the last moment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sound coming from his own mouth could hardly be recognized as human. From where he was chained, Credo arched violently against his restraints, body a perfect 'c' as he desperately tried to escape the burning within his own body. The pain was incredible. Never, in all of his years, did the seventeen year old think such pain was even possible. The teenager had no idea what they were doing to him; except that he was sure it was killing him.

Agnus – the bane of his existence – jotting notes down furiously from where he stood safely ensconced behind safety glass. There was sizzling sound and Credo was only just lucid enough to make out the smoke that seemed to be pouring out of his skin. Not for the first time the Faith Traitor wished he would just die. Die so he could finally sleep and escape the never ending pain.

This…this…whatever the hell they had been doing to him had been going on for months, ever since they'd caught Credo trying to escape to Port Black. The brunette sagged, the manacles around his wrists the only thing keeping him vertical. Credo let out a groan, ignoring the way the metal bit into his flesh as let his body go completely limp. The pain had ebbed till it was only a whisper of the hell it had been before.

For a moment – one desperate, crushing moment – he thought they were done for the day. How could they not? How could they possible surpass the hell he had just experienced? But Credo's hopes were dashed at the all too familiar pink-scrap-shhhhhhhhh of the metal door of his prison being pushed open.

A single eye, unnatural in both its amber color and glowing brightness, snapped up to stare at the approaching scientist. He recognized the man as Josiah Wisk, a colleague of his father. Credo had gone to school with his twin daughters. His eye locked immediately onto the large, 100mL TCLP syringe full of disgusting, slothfully swishing sludge that glowed a repulsive khaki color, before locking on the greying man's composed face.

There was a spike of coolness against the side of his neck as an alcohol pad was swiped against it. Credo stared at the man, silently begging Wisk to remember the many after-service dinners the two families had shared. To remember that he had dated the elder twin Hanna for a short time. To remember that he was once Ezra St. Claire's best friend.

There was a flash of something in those brown eyes before Wisk dropped his desperate stare, a flush on his cheeks as a tongue darted out to wet dry lips, a nearly silent exhale of 'I'm sorry' that the brunette could only just hear. Then there was the uncomfortable sensation of pressure breaking against his skin as the injection was issued and Credo let his head hang loosely against his chest in defeat. The teenager winced as he felt the awful feeling of something that had the consistency of peanut butter being pushed into his blood stream.

Credo closed his eyes, lips quivering as he forced himself to recall better times.
A breezy summer day when his family had been happy and whole and full of love. The feel of Kyrie's little hand in his own as he walked her home from school. His father's proud smile when he'd made Knight Junior Grade. The cool touch of his mother when he'd been struck ill years past. The warm weight of Nero's lissome frame against his own, limp and so trusting as Credo put him to bed.

He tried – so very hard – to hold on to those images as the pain began again.

"Dante!" A shrill voice cut through the music blaring throughout the shop. "Neroooooo!"

From where he was attempting to finish his math homework, Nero looked up and grinned as Patty came rocketing into the shop, all poofy blonde hair and smiles. Dante chuckled as his kid let out a laugh as the smaller girl tackled him. The little girl had spent the last three months abroad with her mother while Nero would never admit it, the half-devil knew the preteen had missed her. Dante smirked as his kid hugged her back tightly, the red dusting his checks visible from where he was methodically cleaning and reassembling Lucifer. He shared an amused look with Trish from where she lounged. At their exchange, Nero blushed harder and gruffly pushed the girl off him, ignoring her howls of protest.

The hunter gave the blonde a cheerful wave. "How ya been, Patty?"

Dante received a prattle of happy answers. He watched, amused as his kid looked the blonde up in down in confusion before interrupting the stream midsentence.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

From the couch, Trish choked on her wine, turning into a cough to cover her snickers. Patty wore a simple long-sleeved grey dress, paired with high knee socks of the same color and simple black flats. The outfit was devoid of the frills or glitter or lace or anything that usually made it into Patty's wardrobe. Even her hair was in a simple braid with no ornament or snappy hat.

"Huh?" Patty glanced down, her hands pulling her skirt out wide, "You don't like? I have to wear it because I'm in training."

There was a shit ton of warning in her tone, paired with a withering glare, but Nero was…well…a soon to be eleven year old boy and completely missed the signs.

"Training?" Nero wrinkled his nose in disbelief. "You're too dumb for training."

Patty's eyes flashed – the air around them bustling with barely suppressed power. "Hey!"

Trish gave him a long look and the hunter rolled his eyes in acknowledgement at the threat, making his way over to the two an whacking his kid on the back of the head even as he placed a placating hand on the petite blonde's shoulder.

"Don't be an asshole, Nero." Dante said, "Patty's in training to be a priestess, like her Mom, right?"

"Yep!" Instantly, the teen year old's spirit seemed to be restored, the power dissipating as if it had never been there. "This uniform had been worn by trainees forever!"

Nero looked ready to object – because it was Patty, Patty who was as graceful as a stick and spent all of her time watching day soaps – but Dante sent him a warning glance that silenced his protests. The last thing the half devil wanted was to deal with a pissed off mini-priestess going off on his kid.

"How long you in town for, Patty?" Trish asked, gliding her way over to them and giving the girl a
one armed hug.

"Only for the weekend," the blonde said sadly, "so I was kinda hoping I could stay here while my mom does her research."

Both hunters perked up.

"What kind of research is she doing, sweetie?" The blonde demoness asked smoothly as she played with the lengthy braid.

"Well, I'm not really sure, but she said the stars have been crazy for the last month. 'Specially over the skies of Fortuna Island."

At the name Nero had gone completely stiff, cornflower blue eyes widening before narrowing. "Yeah, well your mom doesn't know shit."

"What?" Patty sputtered, staring at the boy like he'd grown a second head.

The smaller half devil just glowered at her, turning abruptly and storming from the room, the back door banging loudly behind him. Icy azure eyes followed his retreat in minor annoyance. His kid had been an absolute nightmare lately. Trouble at school, rude to customers – hell, even to Trish, which practically equated a death sentence, the preteen had been seriously pushing all of his established limits. It clearly had something to do with his old life, and it wouldn't piss him off so much if Nero would just tell Dante what the hell was upsetting him. Instead, the kid had been throwing tantrums left and right.

As it was, it was getting to the point that Dante was about ready to Have A Conversation.

Patty stared after him in hurt confusion. "Nero…? Did I say something wrong?"

"Of course you can stay here, honey." Trish smoothly redirected, pushing the girl towards the phone. "Why don't you call your mother and tell her it's alright?"

Dante shot his longtime friend a look of thanks before slipping out after his kid.

There wasn't a backyard, really, as much as there was a narrow strip of cobblestone with a cheap six foot fence that separated it from the alleyway behind the shop. The fence door was unlatched and open and Dante slipped out into the alleyway just in time to see Nero navigate around his convertible and head towards the street mouth. The hunter let out a sharp whistle and his kid froze mid-step, glaring over his shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I needed some fresh air."

Dante snorted. "Try another. Get your butt over here and tell me what's going on with you. You've been acting squirrely all week."

Nero's eyes narrowed. "I'm going for a walk, Patty's being annoying."

Blue eyes flashed warningly, gloved fingers snapping before pointing roughly at the spot in front of him. "Get over here."

A scuffed sneaker took a single step backwards. "…no."

Dante growled warningly, a finger pointed threateningly at his kid. "Not another step, I mean it, kid."
Another, less hesitant step. "Don't you dare –Nero!"

The preteen was a blur of blue as he shot out of the alleyway mouth. He only made it a few steps before Dante had yanked him backwards by his shirt. Nero let out a snarl and swirled, a clawed hand digging into flesh as he attempted to escape the iron-clad grip. The hunter hissed, tossing Nero bodily behind him. The kid skidded on the pavement and rolled, using the momentum of the throw to leap to his feet and shot off to the other end of the alleyway.

With a roar, Dante tackled the small frame, grabbing Nero by the scruff and shoving him against the back wall of the shop. With pitiful ease the older half devil immobilized Nero against the brick, one large hand wrapped threateningly (though lightly) about the back of his neck while the other held his arm twisted roughly backwards. He yanked the kid around until he was pinned with his back against the wall, Dante's hand still pressing around his throat.

"Get off me, you son of-" The half devil snarled, aware that his eyes had bled scarlet and Nero – showing the first sign of common sense since he'd left the shop – immediately dropped his gaze, going utterly limp against in his father's grip.

"I don't know what the hell is going on with you, kid, but just because your upset doesn't mean you get to treat people like shit." Dante yanked him forward by the front of his shirt and pushed him towards the back door. "Go apologize to Patty – then get your ass in your room and stay there until I can look at you without wanting to kick your ass."

Nero grumbled but disappeared inside. From where he was standing, Dante let out a harsh breath, running a frustrated hand through his hair.

"Did ya get a good show?" The hunter asked seemingly to empty air.

From where he was perched on the rooftop, Modeus shrugged and hopped easily down. "I suppose."

"Tch. How the hunt go?"

"Well." There was a pause. "You handled that correctly, Dante."

"Did I?" The half devil said with more than a measure of annoyance, eyes still glowing an angry scarlet. "I still have no idea what he's upset about. I mean, what the fuck was that about?"

Modeus gave him an amused grin.

"Puberty."

"Excuse me?"

His friend gave a short laugh, patting the hunter on the back. "It starts younger for us then humans – and lasts longer. He'll be challenging you more often the older he gets. What happened just now had nothing to do with what was upsetting him."

The hunter just stared at the dark demon mournfully. "You're telling me he's going to be like this for years?"

"You were considered a nightmare until your thirties, were you not?"

"Damn't." Dante ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "I could not have been that bad."
"Have you seen your juvenile record? Because apparently Trish has, and the stories—"

"Shut up." The hunter said darkly. "Look – I can handle snark, alright? I promise you, Nero ain't got nothing that can piss me off sarcasm wise. But he's clearly upset about something. Why won't he just talk to me instead of exploding all over the place?"

Modeus gave him a small smile, "Youth is an odd thing, milord. Go, talk to him, perhaps he will apologize."

"My ass he will, little punk."

The dark demon laughed. "Think of it this way, at least he is comfortable enough to act out."

"Yeah." Dante said flatly. "What a victory."

For a moment Credo almost couldn't believe it. He stared at the angry red welts around his naked wrists in shock. He was free. From where he was standing, Wisk looked just as shocked as Credo, the key in the scientist's hand still posed as if unlocking something. An amber eye glowed as it slowly turned to stare at the startled man and Wisk visibly shuddered under the intensity of his gaze.

- tear him apart for what he has done to us! Rip and shred and –

The teenager took a heavy step forward, the metal plating underneath his plate vibrating with the sound. A low rumbling was echoing from his chest and with no small amount of alarm Credo realized he was growling. The force of the realization caused him to tear his glare away from the shaking man, single eye narrowing in distaste. Credo let out a huff of irritation, shaking his head as if he could somehow shake out the wrathful voice that had become a constant in the back of his mind.

Shut up, damn you!

There was a heartbeat of silence and then the voice began again, through lower and slower as if a petulant child. Ever since that final night…the night where they'd taken him to the White Room, everything had changed. There were no more injections, no more experiments. They had finally reached the plateau of perfection they had been searching for. Agnus had called it an 'Ascension Ceremony,' the final step into ascending to an Angel.

Credo, however, recognized it as what it was.

How could he not, when the teenager had spent the majority of his youth hunting them? The Faith Traitor did not know how, but they had made him into a demon. Everything had become so much sharper – all of his senses. He healed at an astonishing rate. And Credo craved bloodshed in a way he had never thought possible.

From what his enhanced hearing had been able to pick up from the conversations on the other side of the observing window, Ascension was the sole reason why Credo had not been killed. They had experimented on him every way possible and now that they had achieved their success, Credo would be killed, dissected for scientific propriety, and top-pier Knights were already undergoing Ascension with a success ratio of three to one.

The exile had almost accepted his fate. What was life now that he was some artificial creature? But then, startlingly, Wisk had come and freed him. Some sort of guilt to his father, Credo was sure, but he accepted it nonetheless. The Faith Traitor gave the quaking man a sharp nod of thanks, before crossing the small room in three large steps. The metal doorknob crumbled like an aluminum can under his grasp and Credo pulled his hand away, brows furled as he stared at the damage before
shaking his head and pulling the door open.

He stepped out into the abandoned hallway, eye blinking against the fluorescent lights, before making his way to up a short flight of stairs out into a small, poorly decorated elevator lobby. A guard was longing in a chair, booted feet propped up on a desk. His neck made a sickening crack as Credo snapped it, watching in disinterest as the man slid from the chair. The exile pulled the chair the rest of the way back, causing the body to collapse completely. The adult male was just a bit taller and wider than his lanky frame, but Credo stripped him nonetheless, wincing in distaste as the clean clothing stuck and tugged on the dirty stickiness that seemed to coat his body.

Wisk made his appearance shortly after Credo finished tying on slightly too large boots. He gave the horrified man a glance. "You should most likely leave this place while you still can, Mr. Wisk."

The scientist nodded, his eyes locked on the dead guard, only looking up when Credo pulled the discarded Order trench coat up with two hands. With his strange new strength, the teenager easily pulled off a strip, tying a makeshift eye patch to cover his mutilated eye before pulling the jacket it on.

"The weapons my father were working on, they are still down here?"

The scientist jumped a foot in the air before nodding. "T-Through the last door to the right, third door on the left and first on the right. It should, uh, be abandoned at this time of the night."

"Thank you, Mr. Wisk. I think it best if you are gone before I return."

Credo made short work of the distance – long legs moving at a pace a beat faster than he had ever done before. His father's workshop was just as he remembered it and for a moment Credo could only stand in the doorway, glancing about the space as his heart ached. But time was of the essence and somehow the teenager managed to make his grief-stricken limbs move again.

Black King rested proudly alone on the weapon rack, the black and grey metal shining even in the dim light. It was a Great Durandal, with an Exceed system unlike any other sword currently made save its unfinished sister sword. It was highly complicated work and Credo was somewhat surprised to see it had been completed after his father's death. Reverently, the brunette brought Black King down, running his hands over its blade edge, watching curiously as it did not slit his skin as it should have, before sliding it into its frog, the sword hanging heavy from his slim waist.

The teenager could almost hear his father's excitement as he showed the blueprints to Credo on the dinner table, much to his mother's ire.

Ezra, who had made his fame first as a diligent researcher and then a complex engine-weapons designer, had been commissioned to make weapon sets for the Vicar's Right Hand, the Commander of the Holy Knights, Elam Rolands and his Left Hand, his Holiness private bodyguard, Alvah Thames.

One set – the set his father had been the furthest along with had been completed, while the second had been left unfinished. Most likely because they did not know how to complete them with it being so far from being finished. Red Queen, the sister sword, lay incomplete. Credo snorted at the Order's incompetence before sliding the unfinished blade on his back.

By the time he returned to the lobby, Wisk was wisely gone.

The elevator ride was a short one but Credo used it as a moment to center himself. He loosened Black King from its frog and rested his hand on the hilt, gaining comfort from it. The doors slid open.
and the newly made devil stepped out. The Junior Grade sitting behind the desk gave him a double
take before slamming his hand against a button under his desk.

Credo winced at the overly-loud wails of the alarm system. He moved towards swiftly towards the
door, knowing as well as anyone else in the Order that once the alarm sounded it would take the
Knighthood less than a minute to converge on its target. Credo had participated in the drills after all.
The Junior Grade side stepped into view, Durandal level with Credo's face.

"Don't move, demon!"

The brunette stared from the fear-bleached face down to the shaking sword tip pointed at him before
sighing. It took him only a moment to put a name with the familiar face. Jeremiah Anders. He was an
age-mate of Nero, only a few years older. His younger sister had been a playmate of Kyrie. Their
mother had had Credo watch over them when they were all too young to play outside alone. "I do
not wish to harm you, Jeremiah."

The Junior Grade paled even further before spitting at Credo's feet. "How dare you use my name,
traitor!"

There was the sound of pounding feet on marble and the brunette felt his shoulders sink slightly at
the sound. "I will not warn you again, remove yourself from my presence, boy!"

"I will not!"

The lobby was slowly filling white hoods, angry faces, false bravado and hidden fear.

"A hard fight to get out of here," The Faith Traitor mumbled to himself, single eye trailing over the
twenty or so Knights that had filled the atrium. The majority of them were Junior Grades, though,
and most were barely over the age of twenty, placed on the unpopular night shift.

We can take them.

Credo hesitated – he knew almost all of these men. Had trained with them, had fought (beaten) most
of them. Many the teen had once called friends. Could he…could he really bring himself to kill the
men he'd once hoped to serve with? The ones he had dreamed of leading?

They betrayed us! Remember our sister! Our brother!

That's right, Credo thought, his grip tightening, I still have to find Nero. But…they're my friends.
How can I-

In front of him, Jeremiah sneered, finding his courage in numbers. "You've brought this on yourself,
Credo! Always so high and mighty, always preaching! So much better than everyone else – look at
you now!" The teenager was heaving, eyes burning with years old jealousy, seeming unaware of the
mixed looks he was receiving from his fellows, "They'll put you down like the dog you are – and
then your stupid, freak of a brother too!"

As soon as the words left the Junior Grade's mouth, he seemed to realize he made a mistake. But it
was too late. The smell of rotten eggs seemed to billow out from where the silent exile stood, his
right hand twitching on the mammoth Durandal's handle.

"That," Credo ground out, a crimson eye snapping to stare at the frozen teenager, "was not wise."

Cool blue eyes drifted lazily around to take in the slumbering contents of his living room. Lady was
curled like a kitten in his leather recliner. The recliner was Dante's – a Christmas gift (and the first gift) from Nero. No one ever sat in it but him. Except when Lady was over. She was such a sadistic bitch. Patty was sprawled across the huntress' lap, her face nestled against a large breast. Dante – god help him – had only just managed to keep a comment from escaping that would have gotten himself smacked by one of the girls or even Nero, who seemed to have a low tolerance for the hunter's perversions. Across from her, Modeus and Trish were out on the couch, the blonde woman comfortably snuggled up against the dark demon's side.

Nero was completely pliant against his side, one thin arm tucked in the small space between Dante's body and the couch cushion, the other still haphazardly grasping a half-eaten container of Chinese food. The kid had been on his best behavior since his outburst on Friday, even apologizing to Dante when they'd gone off to get food together. He still wouldn't tell the older hunter what was troubling him so much, but the half devil didn't need to mention 'Fortuna' to know it would send his kid into another moody tail spin. Honestly, Dante figured it had to do with the revelation a month ago about his heritage.

In the background, the sounds of a cheap horror movie (Nero's favorite kind) filled the quiet of the room comfortably. The smell of Chinese drifted from the container loosely held in his kid's demonic hand. The night air was cool, cool enough that the hunter had turned off the air conditioning and left the windows open.

There was no danger of theft – no one in this neighborhood was that stupid.

The hunter had known Nero for almost a full year. Fall was approaching again and with it the kid's eleventh birthday and the anniversary of their meeting. It seemed impossible that what he felt for the little bastard had only had a year to develop. Dante couldn't imagine the level of possession if he would have felt if had the kid for the full ten.

But fuck, the hunter still wish he'd had the chance to find out.

Dante carded a hand through hair so much like his own, and wondered if the intense love that he felt for his son didn't have a bit to do with his own vanity. The kid was a spitting image of himself, after all. A breeze cut easily through the open house, carrying the smells of the city with it, and Dante watched in fascination as goose bumps rose up along the length of his son's exposed arm. Next to him Nero let out a little sound, more of an exhale than anything else, and rolled, flopping his arm over top Dante's stomach as the container tumbled over the couch edge. It was at that moment it that it fully hit the half-devil.

Dante was happy.

Like, honest-to-god happy.

…That was kind of a big deal for him.

There was a soft grunt from next to him and Dante's eyes flickered over to the opposite couch. Modeus was awakening, black eyes doing a quick, calculated sweep of the room before carefully rearranging the sleeping blonde between his legs as he sat up.

That whole development was...strange. To say the least. The hunter shuddered as he recalled the conversation that had christened his awareness of the affection between the two demons.

"Dante, may I have a word?"

Dante glanced up from his parts magazine to find a (nervous?) looking Modeus standing before him.
Trish was standing a few paces behind him, looking way too interested in her nails to appear as indifferent as she probably hoped. From where he sat on the couch next to him, Nero had stopped watching his cartoons, glancing up at the dark demon in interest.

Right.

Nothing suspicious about this at all.

"...yeah?"

"I would like permission to court Trish."

The hunter blinked at the devil as he felt his stomach flip in something that felt uncomfortably like horror.

Modeus was interested in mating with Trish. Who, from her blush (had he ever seen Trish blush?) seemed more then amenable to the idea. He wanted to...with Trish...who looked like his mother. Oh for the love of – the mental images! Dante couldn't help it, he shuddered. Next to him, Nero sniggered at his discomfort.

Dante took a swig of beer, desperately hoping when the beer bottle was done blocking his view he'd realize this was some sort of horrible nightmare. But alas, Modeus was still staring at him, eyebrow cocked.

Oh crap, he actually had to respond.

"And just why did you think you had to ask me for permission?"

"I have sworn fidelity to you and your house. Thus I must ask for you, as your line's head, for permission before I court. Besides that," A pale hand gestured to where the family tree poster board was resting against a nearby wall, "You have claimed Trish as a sister, no? Demonic ritual demands that I parley for breeding-"

"Stop! Just, yes, alright. And please, next time just assume you have my permission on these kinds of things, yeah?"

Damn Modeus for looking so damn amused. "So I take it you do not want us to seek your blessing if we decide to mate?"

Unbidden, images of the two of them coupling bloomed into his mind only to almost immediately morph into images of his parents and –

"Most definitely not."

Modeus gave a short bow, the dark haired demon still looking tickled at Dante's discomfort. He turned, taking a still blushing Trish by the elbow and lead her from the room.

"Hey, pops?"

"I don't want to talk about what just happened, kid."

"Hey-"

"I mean it. That was traumatizing enough."

"It's about homework, I swear!"
"Alright, what is it?"

"Should I add Modeus' name in next to Trish? I mean, now that they're doing the hot and dirty –" Nero let out a screech, desperately trying to scramble away as Dante launched himself across the couch, fingers instantly digging into the soft skin of his son's sides.

"You just wait until you have a girlfriend, pal," Dante warned his hysterically laughing son, "I'm gonna make you pay for that."

Nero had been insufferable, focusing on the hunter's awkwardness about the whole affair like the vicious predator he was and constantly making jib little comments. Dante had been forced to accept the development quickly for within a week Trish had been claimed – the heady smell of Modeus' power overwhelming the fading scent mark he'd placed years ago.

"Have I missed much?"

Dante shrugged, giving the dark haired demon a quick overview of the movie. "-so now they're trying to find a way to kill Santa Claus and save the children."

Dark brows furrowed. "I was under the impression that St. Nicolas was well beloved to the children of the mortal realm."

The hunter chuckled softly, his hand still gently stroking his sleeping kid as he explained to the confused man that Hollywood was pretty much running out of ideas. Modeus had (somehow) become a close friend. At first the two had been stand-offish. It was hard not to, with the dark demon's god-like worship of Sparda and Dante's own daddy issues. But after what had happened with Nero in hell…

Besides, he was a good guy. The demon Knight had quickly climbed in Dante's respect in the months he'd spent around the shop and participated in hunts. Deadly capable, honest to a fault, loyal to the point of irrationality, and utterly devoted to the continuance of the line of Sparda, the half devil had found in Modeus something that he had not even been aware he had been missing desperately – a male friend.

The fact that Dante knew he could leave Nero in Modeus' care and know that no harm would come to his unlucky kid short of Mundus himself storming the shop spoke volume of how much he'd come to respect and trust the devil. Nothing short of Modeus' death would lead to him allowing harm to come to either one the remaining Alighieri.

How could Dante not enjoy such blind fidelity?

Coal black eyes were currently roving over the slack face of his kid, thin lips pulled slightly in a smile. "I am happy to see the little one so comfortable at last."

"Yeah." The hunter agreed just as softly. "It's taken us a hell of a long time to get here, though."

"There was a definitely ache of regret in his voice there. Dante struggled, sometimes daily, with the fact that his son had been separated from him so long. Again, the white haired man didn't know if it was a human or demonic (maybe both?) emotion. Modeus watch him carefully for a moment before a gentle laugh, sounding sweeter than a devil should have been capable of, filled the room. It was followed by a stare of affection that made the half devil almost uncomfortable. "The best things in life are hard won, are they not?"

Dante nodded in agreement, unable to hold that tender look and turned back to the television. There were moments, more in frequency now that they had become closer, where he was almost…
unnerved was not quite the right word for what the hunter felt but it was close.

There were moments when Modeus looked at him and all Dante could think of was his father.

He wasn't quite sure how he felt about the fact that the Knight felt paternal towards him. It wasn't…it wasn't horrible though. Modeus was a wealth of information about the demon world, teaching him things about his heritage that Sparda hadn't ever had the time to impart to the hunter. Dante had found himself going to the dark haired devil for counsel more often then he'd like to admit; particular about Nero.

The half devil would never admit it, even in the safety of his own mind, that he may even enjoy the way Modeus acted towards him.

"He is a strong child, more than worthy of his grandfather's blessing."

Dante frowned at that, taking a full swallow of beer before letting his eyes flicker back over to the demon. "You believe it was Sparda he met then?"

There was a long silence and he was once again the subject of the devil's stare. Modeus cocked his head to the side, a look on his face that the half devil didn't quite know how to decipher. The stare down continued and Dante had to beat down his devil, chastising its snarls and demands for dominance.

Modeus was no threat to him.

The dark haired demon averted his eyes and instantly the brute in the back of his head was silent.

"There is no way I could know without having been there, milord. But from how Nero spoke of the encounter, I believe it so."

"So what, my father is wandering around hell as a ghost?" That was a depressing thought. Dante may not be overly fond of his old man but in his heart of hearts, the hunter had always hoped he'd found peace in death.

Black eyes flickered up to glance at him once more before dropping. "No, I do not believe that is the case. Tell me, Dante, what do you know of your father's devil arms?"

Blinking at the seemingly random question, the hunter felt his brows furl, not quick sure where this conversation was going. "I was under the impression that he never needed anything other than his swords."

"This is true," Modeus answered carefully, as if he was picking each word, a clawed fingers gently threading through lengthy blonde hair, "Lord Sparda's blades were beyond legendary. I was there when he forged Rebellion and Yamato." The older demon's face took a faraway look, eyes distant as he became lost in memories. "It was an awe-inspiring event to witness. But your father was already feared as a mighty enforcer of Mundus long before he had made even his blades. Before Force Edge, before Rebellion and Yamato he was feared for his Devil Bringer."

Dante startled attention fully on the older demon, eyes wide as excitement bloomed. "My father had another sword?"

He was practically salivating at the thought of a new Devil Arm.

"No," Modeus said slowly, "the Devil Bringer was not a sword. I have never seen it myself, your father had Force Edge for as long as I knew him. It was passed from heir to heir down through your
father's line since before Mundus' rise to power. It was said that even the Dark Emperor was jealous of the Bringer's power and coveted it as his own. To this day, the only Arm more lusted after – above even Yamato – in the demonic realm is the Devil Bringer. The greedy search for it still.

"What has that got to do with Nero seeing my old man?"

That earned him a chastising glance before Modeus carried on. "The Bringer was a weapon of great power – so great that only devils of enormous strength could control it properly. If the inheritor proved too weak for such power the Bringer consumed them."

"What – you mean it ate them or something?"

The dark devil looked uncomfortable. "I am not sure. Like I said, I never saw the weapon myself."

"That's one hell of a risk."

"There is more, I am afraid. If chosen, the Bringer bonded with them on a level never before seen in a Devil Arm. Like a parasite, it became so entwined with the one who held it that the only way to separate the two was through death. The Bringer was said to steal parts of its wielders very soul."

"That's... intense." Blue eyes narrowed, searching the thoughtful face for any sign of misdirection, "but I'm still not quite following you on why you think it had anything to do what I asked."

Modeus looked troubled, the hand petting Trish stilling. For a moment the devil seemed to be faltering, as if second guessing himself, his patrician features slanted with indecision. Well, Dante decided with a wry frown, that probably isn't a good sign.

"Modeus?"

"Lord Sparda once told me that shortly after he had inherited the Devil Bringer and had yet to fully bond with it, he was gravely injured in battle. As he lay there dying, certain that death was upon him an image of the previous barer – your grandfather, the Great Lord Aurelius Marius, appeared to him."

"I have a –" Dante just barely managed to stop himself from finishing that incredibly stupid sentence, "– wait, like, as a ghost?"

A stiff nod. Some odd foreboding was crawling its way up Dante's spine, making the hair on the back of his hair stand up. He was suddenly aware, in a way that one was rarely aware in such moments, that his life was about to change. Radically.

"The shade destroyed the villains around your Lord father, charged him with keeping the line and faded away, never to be seen again. The Lord Sparda believed there to be a portion of his father's soul that still remained within the unbonded Devil Bringer, that in his great need Aurelius managed to materialize a form but in doing so, burned the cache from within the Bringer."

...wait. Wait a fucking minute. There was no way – he couldn't be implying –

"What the hell are you saying?"

Dark eyes flickered down to his waist. Dread had pooled itself, thick and heavy, in his stomach as Dante followed the glance to stare at the glowing appendage. His breath caught harshly as the full extent of what Modeus was implying sunk in.

"I have seen the growth on Nero's arm only once before."
"-in your Lord father's devil from."

The hunter's grip tightened on the sleeping boy so much that Nero let out a grunt of annoyance, the sharp tips of his claws pricking easily through Dante's shirt and against his side warningly.

"Dante,"

No.

"When it reaches full power,"

No, no, no.

"-if it does not kill him-"

- kill him?! -

"-they will come for it."

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: There is (yet again) paranoia all around, Dante demonic side has some major feelings of neglect, and a Traitor takes his first steps on a foreign land.

End Notes

Next time: In which Nero pisses off the wrong person and Dante's curiosity is peaked.

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