

“I know you’re there.” I waited. “Erik.” He peeked out from where he’d been swallowed in the dark behind my curtains. He didn’t speak, but his eyes were softened with familiarity. I rolled my eyes and turned back to my book. “You should know better by now.” Every time I left my windows open for a breeze I knew there was a chance that he’d show up. The white of my curtains waved around him in the breeze, the orange-gold of golden hour poured into my lavender room. Spring was finally waking the world bit by bit.

“How long has it been?” His deep baritone immediately plucked at my strings. I paused and looked at him once more, trying to keep the swell of old feelings down to a simmer. The outline of his mask was outlined in gold. Even though he was in the safety of my room he was still wearing it.

“We met in... 2008. No, 2007.”

“What year is it now?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“You don’t keep track?” He shrugged his thin shoulders but otherwise remained perfectly still, testing his permissions with me slowly.

“I’m a monster.” He said, as if it answered the question. I smiled despite myself and took a few notes in the book. “How long does it feel like it’s been?” I continued to work while he thought, taking a few notes, content to keep the conversation slow.

“It feels like a hundred years as much as it feels like nothing.”

“Try 16 years. Technically.” He sighed.

“Sixteen.” Like he was tasting the word in his mouth. “You weren’t even 16 when we met.”

“I know. It’s been a long time.”

“How old were you?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I never really knew.”

“I was 14.” I could hear him shift his weight.

“You didn’t look 14 and anyway, you came and found me.”

“Yes I did.” I flicked my eyes to meet his only for one loaded second. The silence of knowing filled the space. I let him stand there like that, chewing on his own thoughts in the dark for at least a half hour. Sulking and brooding were his greatest talents, so I let him indulge. Meanwhile, I had things to do.

At some point I'd stopped really reading. I just stared at the page, thinking about how stupid and naive I was to hunt him down for myself, how I snuck him through the window and hid him in the pillows of my childhood bedroom. Nothing happened of course, not like that. Not for a long time. At first it was just the presence of him. I was addicted to the thrill. He was all I thought about day and night. Thinking of when I'd see him again. It was ages before I begged him to kiss me. And I did beg; I'd nearly been in tears. My stupid, fumbling kisses and his gaunt awkward face and long, thin limbs. As time went on I became a hungry young woman. The time we spent between the folds of time elongated, I became both wiser and hungrier. Eventually the compounded time between us amounted to longer than I'd actually been alive. My ghost and I had built a strange, funhouse mirror version of a life together. This was the longest I hadn't seen him. Time in the real world passed so slowly.

"You haven't turned the page in five minutes."

"I'm a slow reader."

"No you aren't." I snapped the book closed.

"Are you done?"

"With what?"

"Sulking in the dark over there by yourself. Come here." I tossed my book onto the side table and made room for him on the couch. I finally got a good look at him for the first time in years. "You look healthy. Still thin as a rail, but... better." His smirkish smile was shy as he came to sit down next to me. I put my feet up on him, crossing my ankles.

"Thank you. I'm trying."

"Why are you hiding? I know your face." He hesitated. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just been a while." He ran a hand through his thick black hair before delicately removing the thing and set it aside between us, its empty face staring at me. He was bare to me, death incarnate with those big, sad eyes. Horrifying and beautiful all at once. Those eyes always made my chest feel so tight with pity. He was the reason I'd seen so many pitiable men since. I always felt like I could save them, like it was my job to.

"Have you seen Daroga at all? Madison?"

"Not since you have." I was surprised he brought up Madison, we never talked about her part in all this.

"Deja?" He piqued my interest.

“You remember her?” He nodded and tested a hand on my knee. I allowed it.

“We’re still close, actually.”

“Good. I liked her.” We were both silent while we adjusted once again to each other's presence. He looked out the window to the trees. My chest felt like a loaded gun with the unasked question. I carved out his familiar profile while trying not to choke.

“How’s Sofie? And James?” I whispered, almost hoping he wouldn’t hear me. They were the elephant in every room. He turned to face me again. It was my turn, it seemed, to be the pitiful creature. My nose prickled, but still I tried to hold it all in. I could see all his sorrow and sympathy swimming in those damn eyes.

“Don’t do this to yourself.” He spoke like I was some small, injured animal. Maybe I was. I could feel the overwhelm coming, tears threatened. I clasped his hand and held it to my heart. It was better not to know. They weren’t real. They’re soft, small features weren’t made for this world, but his. I should have known he’d refuse me. I’d asked him to. “They’re fine. They’re good.” I held up a hand. That was enough. Should I miss them more? Should I miss them less? There are no rules for this kind of situation.

“Okay.” The breeze picked up again, blowing the curtains up and into the room in rolling waves in the setting sun. His amber eyes closed, long black eyelashes resting on his pronounced cheekbones and he kissed the palm of my hand. I finally brought myself in closer, almost close enough to sit in his lap and took in the smell of him that brought me right back to warm summer nights in the hills. We sat like that while the yellow light turned purple, and to blue before plunging the whole room into darkness. There weren't a lot of him that didn't hurt to rest on, but long ago we'd learned how to sit against each other comfortably so that his bones wouldn't cut into me. Finally he spoke into the darkness.

“I miss you.”

“I know.”

“Will it ever-”

“No. It won't. It can't.”