

She was seated in the corner of the coffee shop, just as her message said. There were a few people here, but only one could be the dealer. Her long hair was stringy and combed partially in front of her face, black save for a shock of bright purple about a third of the way back. As I walked up to her table, I noted she was wearing glasses, the better for maintaining her poker face, as I doubted vampires needed vision correction. Or so I'd heard.

"H-hi..." I started.

"What do you want?" She said curtly, not glancing up from the laptop she was typing furiously on.

"I've got the cash." I said quickly, handing over the envelope.

She leafed through the bundle of cash and glanced up, giving me a once-over. "Sorry, you're a lot nerdier than my usual clientele. I thought you were just hitting on me." She patted the seat next to her in the booth. "Have a seat!" She said perkily.

As I sat down, she adjusted her hair so it wasn't hiding her face, and shimmied her tank top down to expose more of her cleavage.

"What was it you were after again? What was your name, hun?" She asked, stroking my arm flirtatiously.

"My name is Nemo. Just pneuma."

"Aww." She sounded almost genuinely disappointed. What was she hoping the answer was? She gestured to my pressed, straight black pants and non-descript black top. "What's with the get-up?"

"Just on my way home from work."

"For the mob?" She giggled girlishly.

"I work as a cook." I reply absently, as if I am bored. "Can we just get on with it?"

"Sure!" She slammed the laptop shut and held up her coffee cup. "Want a sip?"

"Doesn't it have blood in it?"

"Of course!" She winked. "You know what kind of shop this is, don't you? And I need lots of refills, especially for an order this large."

Yes, I knew what kind of shop it was, from the fact you had to go down a dark alley and give a password at the door, to the fact she had zero concerns about being overheard dealing. The refills comment was illuminating, though. There were lots of theories about how V's produced pneuma, but not every vamp could do it and the ones who did weren't talking. She tilted her head back and drained the cup, dumped her laptop into a large purse and swung it over her shoulder. "Let's go!"

As she stood to lead me to our destination, I suddenly realized how tall she was. She was easily 6 inches taller than me, in addition to wearing high heeled boots. With the boots she wore long black lacey stockings, ascending to a garter that disappeared into a pair of black shorts. Her lips were painted black, and they twisted into a smirk as she noticed me checking her out. She took my hand and led me out the door I had come in, as if it was an everyday thing.

We walked down the block and around a corner. She stopped at the back door of a regular detached home that had obviously been converted to apartments, unlocked it and showed me down a flight of stairs.

The entry room slash living room was sparsely decorated. A chandelier strung with black beads hung over a large hardwood table, which was scattered with beading projects. A cracked

and peeling pleather couch was against one wall, and a TV mounted on the other. There was a painting sitting on the floor, waiting to be hung on the wall.

I picked up a half-finished beading project and turned it over. "Pretty."

"Well, I have a lot of time to get good." She giggled again. "Buying beading supplies is a good cover for the baggies for the pneuma, and a beading club explains why I have people coming and going all the time. Plus, I never sleep, so I have lots of extra time."

"No sleeping in coffins for you?"

"Oh, I do have a coffin. For the right price, you can sleep in it with me." She winked.

"Just the pneuma."

"You're no fun." She pouts, but she stomps off down a hallway and comes back with a large bag of vials. "This can't all be for you."

"Does it matter, as long as I'm paying you?" I reached for it, but she held it out of my grasp.

"It does. Cops know a V has to be producing it. They catch you dealing, they'll try to track down the V who produced it for you."

"Good point." I acknowledged. "Like I said, I work as a cook. High stress job, long hours. Plus withdrawal is a bitch. I try to keep my co-workers stocked up."

"With a cut on the side?" Her lips twisted into a wry smile.

Before I could decide what was too much to tell her, there was the sound of someone beating angrily on the door. "I know you're in there, V!"

I glanced at the door. "Former customer or former boyfriend?"

"Both?" She shrugged, spreading her hands. "He should go away in a few minutes if we're quiet." She said casually, but there was a note of fear in her voice.

I strode confidently over to the door. I counted the time between the hits, and as his fist had to have been falling to bang on the door again, I wrenched it open. Inertia took him forward, face first through the open doorway. I grabbed the scruff of his neck and brought his face down into my knee; blood bubbled forth immediately. A second hit, and then a third, and he was dazed, his entire weight dangling limply in my grasp.

I leaned down to his ear and muttered, "If I see you here again, I will do much worse than this."

Taking a pair of snips from my pocket, I fastened them around the last joint on his pinky finger, and squeezed. With a pop and a scream of pure pain from him, the last inch of his thick pinky finger fell to the off-white carpet, staining it red. Then I threw him out the door and closed it behind him.

"Oh my god!" She exclaimed, hands covering her mouth. "I can't believe you did that! No way you're just a cook. A cook for the mob?"

I shrugged. "Not so far as I know."

"What if he goes to the cops?"

I gave her an incredulous look. If he was going to go to the cops, he would have done it already, to bust her for dealing or hooking or whatever he was getting for her, and she had to know it. Nah, guys like that don't rat.

I held out my hand. "Alright, I've taken out the trash, and I paid you. Trust me yet?"

She reluctantly handed me the bag of vials. "Couldn't you stay the night?"

"I've had a long day, and I really just want to go home and sleep."

She leaned forward and planted a soft, gentle kiss on my lips. "Next time." She said in a breathy whisper.