Captured in a Flash

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by Enserric

Summary

Kati Jacobs is skilled with her camera. Why else would she get so many chances to shoot the best models in the Big Apple itself? But this new client feels different. This new client, one who seemingly wants a year-long contract, is confusing to the emerging photographer. Kati has had lengthy contracts, but a year-long is a whole new beast. Not really thinking about it at first, Kati is soon forced to reconcile a lot of her personal problems after seeing that her new client is arguably Japan's hottest uma model. In more ways than one.

Gold City returned to modeling after a nasty bout of colic forced her to end the time she had on the racetrack. Something she enjoyed more than anything else, now gone. But with Tracen behind her, she has returned to her old profession with a vengeance, and quickly became not just Japan's most in demand uma model, but top models in general. It's then that her manager suggests flying over to New York to give the American market a shot where she will be under the wing of an old friend of his. But it's only when she meets her new photographer that Gold City has to learn a few new things about herself. Things that she may have buried at the time, but come roaring back.

Notes

Hello, I have come from Ao3 due to the *month long outage* and may even crosspost here. This is my ongoing main Uma fic and if all goes well, I'll have the 23rd chapter up by Halloween. I hope anyone who comes by here enjoys.

Chapter 1: Visions in the Lens

Chapter Summary

> Kati finds herself going about her days in New York while also juggling the idea of becoming a well known Japanese model's photographer during her year long stay in the city. Hesitant at first, she decides to go through with it, and then she meets her new client, the hottest uma model from Japan: Gold City.

Chapter Notes

> Art by Akasukiane

|-Tuesday morning. Apollo's Bagels, 7th Avenue, Manhattan, New York-|

'Yeah, but what does that have to do with my current situation, Met?' He’s so smug, even when texting.
'You know exactly what I'm talkin about.'

I huff. No, I do not know what he is talking about. Why do I bother talking to him about these things?
He always manages to make light of them. Not that I necessarily view that as a bad thing. Met's always been able to get me laughing even in the worst of circumstances. We don't talk about my disastrous second girlfriend but I'll be damned if Met didn't know how to cheer me up.

'No. I don't think I do.' I’m not that observant. How does he not understand?
'You need to start payin more attention.'
'More like you need to stop being so god damn cryptic.'

Three dots appear on my phone screen as he starts with his reply. And then they disappear. Then reappear. Then disappear again. Seems I've struck a nerve. I look up from my little black box for a moment, taking in the sights and sounds. I can see WTC 1 from here if I look south, it's distinctive glass paneling acting as a focusing lens for the sunlight if you get them at the right angle. I wonder if it can cook meat if you angle it right. If I look a bit northeast, I can see the most famous building in the entire city. The view from the top of Empire State is utterly breathtaking. Too bad I'm horrifically acrophobic. Otherwise I'd be up there every day of the year. I then feel my phone hum, so I look down.

'Touchée.' Is that… Met taking the hint?
'Admit you've been beaten.'

'Never!' Damnit. I swear, he knows which buttons to push in order to raise my blood pressure.
'You test me, you know that?'
'I tend to do that with my friends, yes.'
'Bullshit. I've never seen you do this with Mark or Jessica.' I've never seen it. It's always done with me.
'It's because you're the easier target. Far better reactions.'
'You're such an asshole.' Even before the surgeries, he was like this.
'In that charmin way only we New Yorkers can pull off.'

That comment gets a chuckle out of me since he does have a point. I then watch as the three dots imply he's typing out another message.

'Any-who, don't you have a new client to meet tonight?'

Oh right, that... A year-long contract... With one of Japan's most in demand models. And an uma at that. This is... uncharted territory to say the least. I've never worked with anyone with that high of a profile.

'It's not until tomorrow. Maybe tonight if I get lucky. Even then, I don't know if I'll meet her in person.' That's usually how this goes. At least in my experience.
'That's kinda dumb. Like, really fuckin dumb.'
'Well, she's a real famous model coming from Japan and is probably dealing with jet lag. Needs some time to recuperate and whatnot.'

A long pause. Too long for it to be a regular response. Seems I've stunned Met. Not the first time I've done something like that.

'GOLD CITY?! IS THAT WHO THIS NEW CLIENT IS?! Bestie is movin up in the world.'

Ah, jumping to conclusions immediately. Classic Met move.

'I don't know. All I know is that she's on top of the Japanese market.' Really, that is all I know. But it seems Met has a response to that as well.
'Yeah. That would be Gold City, Kati.'
'You sound overconfident.'
'Oh please.'
'You're a photographer. You're the one who should be payin attention to these kinds of things. Not some dirty Motörheader like me.'

I huff again. This man is impossible.

|-Later that night. Noonan Towers, 929 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx-|

I thought about hitting a club. Seeing how many women I could potentially hook up with. Decided against it. I don't need my insecurities biting at my heels. Lonely as I may be, I do know that wasn't gonna be a good idea. Not in my current state. Already ate, took care of dishes I had been putting off for a few days. I look through some of the recent shoots I've done. They're not bad. But they could be better. Maybe this new contract could be better. That's when I hear my phone go off. Not a text message. No, a call. Met? We already talked today. What could he want now? I walk over to the little coffee table I have to pick the device up and... Well the caller ID doesn't have his name at the top. So it's not Met. So why is my gut telling me to answer this call? This is important. Very important. So I hit the green button on the screen and place the little black box next to my ear.

"Uh... Hello.?"
"Hi. Is this Kati Jacobs?" It’s a man. Probably early thirties if I’m to guess his age.
"I am she, yes."
"Alright, good. I matched the right number to the right person. My name is Randy Jenkins. I'm a modeling manager here in New York."

Randy Jenkins? That name sounds familiar. Some new hot shot modeling agent. Has specialized with foreigners for the past five years.

"Am I correct in assuming this is about my new client, Mr. Jenkins?" Not a bad thing for me to ask, given the circumstances.
"That would be correct."

Seems the gut was right. I should stop doubting it. It's almost always right.

"Think you can handle being someone's main photographer for a whole year?" That’s a loaded question he’s just asked. One I've given a lot of thought. Maybe too much. But I have come to some +kind of conclusion.

"I'm going to see this through. See how honed my skills actually are." I respond, wanting things to go smoothly.
"Just what I was hoping to hear. Not that I'd judge you for getting cold feet and declining. This is bold new ground for you, I'm certain."
"More than you know."

I can hear the smug laugh. But I also know it isn't from malice.

"I wanted some new blood to work with this model. Thought it would be good bonding for the two of you." Bonding, he says.
"Go on..."
"You've got quite the portfolio, Ms. Jacobs. A... *unique* perspective let's just say. Showed some of your shots to my new client. Or rather, *she* showed them to me."

Here we go. The increase in heart rate. The slow formation of sweat on my brow. Nerves flaring.

"She likes them. A lot. You were the top choice the second she got here. And she wants to meet you on Friday." Friday? As in this Friday? Okay, breath Kati.
"On Friday? Didn't she just fly in from Japan? Isn't jet lag still a thing at this point?" Jet lag should *definitely* still be a thing right now. Now way she’s adjusted to the change in time this fast.
"She's already been in the city for a week. She's more than adjusted."

He gives me some time to process this information. She's already been in New York for a week? Why do people always leave me in the dark for things like this?

"So... Friday?" I ask tentatively.
"Yes. This Friday. In the afternoon. Think you can make it?"

I pause for another moment before I give my answer.

"Yes."
"Good. See you then. And one more thing."

"Yeah?" Unsolicited advice? Or something prophetic?
"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

|-Friday afternoon. Budapest Cafe, 2nd Avenue, Manhattan-|

I've never been this nervous before. Graduation? No. First date? Tip of the iceberg. First time in bed with Rose after prom? Child's play. I keep thinking about what Met said on Tuesday. Gold City... No. No way in hell that it's her. That would be utterly ridiculous. Why on Earth would she want to work with someone who, as Met puts it, is well versed in the underground. Him and all that metal lingo he uses. I don't think I'll ever fully understand it. The thoughts keep going through my head as I continue towards the meeting place. The Budapest Cafe on 2nd Avenue in Yorkville. Ápa used to take me and anya here every Saturday when he had the chance. I still remember those long metro rides from the Bronx down to Grand Central to avoid traffic after we drove in from Yonkers. Then the buses onto the east side of the island. I get into the cafe and sit down, a waiter gives me a menu, but not before recognizing me.

"Á, Kati. Rég láttalak. (Ah, Kati. Long time no see.)" He says with a slight smile on his face.
"Szia, György. Hogy ityeg? (Hey, George. How's it hanging?)" A simple response. Nothing to fancy from me.
"Ahogy csak tudok. És mi van önökkel? (Doing as well as I can. What about you?)"
"Én is ezt mondhatom. (I can say the same.)"

He hands me the menu without anymore words. As much as I'd like to chat with György, he does have a job to do. Can't blame him for that. I sit for a few minutes, pondering what I should get when I hear two people walk in, seemingly in the middle of their own conversation.

"You sure she'll even be here, Randy?" That’s an unfamiliar voice, but one as soft as silk. Definitely a woman’s voice, and she’s definitely here to see me with Randy.
"Yes. From what I've seen, she's pretty damn punctual." Further confirmation.
"I'm gonna hold both of you to that."
"I know."

A slight pause in their conversing. Must be checking the place out.

"Any reason she chose this place?" I hear the woman ask.
"Familiarity. Kind of a 'meet her where she stands' type-deal. Get the camera person comfortable talking.”

For being Japanese, this new client of mine is pretty fluent in English. I'm not really hearing any accent on her speech.

"Ah, there she is. Come on."

Looks like they've spotted me. I turn around to see Randy and... Bassza meg... Tall ears. Sandy blonde hair. A tail of the same color. Light blue eyes. Blue bow tied at the base of her right ear with a half cover behind it. Plaid blazer over a red shirt with a black skirt. And worst of all: I can hear Met laughing his ass off all the way from his apartment in the Bronx. I hate it when he's right like this.

"Uh..." I’m at a loss for words.
"Kati, meet Gold City." Randy introduces her to me.
"Hi..."

She approaches me and extends her hand.



"It's a pleasure to meet you in person." She says, that silky voice exuding nothing but professionalism.
"I... Can say the same."

Come on, Kati. Try to keep it together. Don't get flustered before you even get a shoot in. Play it cool. Just ignore the sweat forming on your palm. I reach out and take her hand in mine. So soft...

Focus. The gesture is brief, but handshakes are never meant to be long anyhow. I turn to face Randy and do the same.

"Good to see you. Now, let's talk business and how things are gonna work." He wastes no time with his response.

I can feel the tension slowly dissipate, but that doesn't make the nerves any less flustered. I've shot beautiful women before, but Gold City... If ever there was a test the universe sent my way, this would
be it. This is going to be a very *interesting* year.

Chapter 2: Budding Interests

Chapter Summary

> Following her meeting with Randy and Gold City at Budapest Cafe, Kati ends up getting dragged to a meet up with a few friends of hers, all of whom are chomping at the bit to hear every single detail. But Kati is still wrestling to how she responded to seeing Gold City. The softness of her skin. How light was reflected within those blue eyes. She knows this feeling, and is scared of what it might mean. And absolutely terrified about telling her friends about it. Gold City also has her own thoughts on the matter, ones that may or may not be bringing back some long forgotten memories.

|-Friday evening. 38th Sixth Apartments, 38 6th Avenue, Brooklyn, New York-|

"So... Ya signed it, right? Ya signed dat contract and became her photog'apher fo' a year?" How we can understand him through that thick accent of his will forever be a miracle. But I guess that's Brooklyn for you.
"Ah, don't be so blunt, Mark. Give her a wee bit to catch her breath, will ya? To have someone like Gold City want you as her photographer for even just the one shoot... Kati, that'd be enough to make me day if I were wearin' your shoes. But a *whole year*? I can hardly imagine how overjoyed I'd be feelin'." More soft spoken. More my speed.

"I know. I know. It's... A lot to take in." When I told Mark and Jessica about what happened earlier today, they immediately put plans into motion. Got me out to Mark's apartment in Brooklyn. Some Jamaican food from Simpson's right across the street. Only thing that's missing is Met. He said he'd be here at five. It is now eight. Guess the subways must be really busy. It is Friday after all.

I watch as Mark seems to think about his next words before he speaks.
”Aight, aight. Ya probably got a lotta stuff goin' on in dat dome a' yours. I shouldn't add ta dat noise. But, fuhgeddaboudit: Why she wanna work wit' youse? Somebody like Randy Jenkins would def want some wiseguy wit' more cred. I know *I* wood. No offense, of course." He’s a lot like Met: Never one to mince his words.
"None taken." I respond before he continues.
"I ain't sayin' ya don't get good shots, aight? But lookit... Ain't a lotta people know ya name, see? Ya some kinda underground photog-fera. An' now ya gonna get snatched right outta dere. By ***Randy fuhkin' Jenkins***, no less. Fuhkin' fuhggedaboutit!"

I watch as Jessica now takes a deep breath, seemingly wanting to add her own two sense into the mix. "Mark's not wrong now. Jenkins is known far and wide for his work with the fancy models. Especially your ones from abroad. So for him to clap eyes on your photos and see somethin' special, sure, you should be delighted with yourself." She pauses for a bit, seemingly collecting her thoughts. Habit of hers: Stay silent for a good while before suddenly filling the room with sound. Not that anyone minds. She does have a pleasant voice, and that slight Irish tinge only makes it sweeter.

"Ah, Kati, pet, you should really go for it. Sure, I can only see good things comin' your way for your career, so I can."
"Maybe..." I know she's trying to hype me up, but my mind is focused on other things. Gold City... Isten segítsen most. (God help me now.) I've never seen any woman so beautiful, uma or otherwise. The way the light caught in that sandy blonde hair of hers... How it shimmered in her eyes... The softness of her skin. I wonder if it's all like that. Every last inch...

"Kati?" Was that Jessica or Mark? Can't tell. All I can think about is Gold City… Her hair... It looks so silky. What I would give to run my fingers through it, just to see if it feels like silk. Maybe even velvet...

"Uh... Brook-lynn ta Kati. Ya doin' awright up they-ah? How's da eye-on-uh-sphere?" That was Mark, but I'm too zoned out to really notice. Are her lips just as soft? Nem. Puhább. Határozottan lágyabb. (No. Softer. Definitely softer.)

"**KATI!**"
clap

I'm brought back to reality by Mark clapping *right in front of my face*. The nerve of- Wait, Mark is on my left. This came from the right. I turn my head and see tall, jet black ears and a wild mane of hair with a similar color. No face, they're turned back to me but the patches on the denim vest give away who it is.

"Met? When did you get here?" I'm utterly bewildered. How did I not notice my *best friend* walk into the apartment?
"Thirty minutes ago. Not that you would notice bein off in your own world, of course." He then turns around and I see those two toned eyes of his. One purple the other silver. Then I see that dumb handlebar mustache on his face. Why does he *insist* on shaving like that. *Why?* He would look so much better without it. Moreover, why is he constantly listening to that claptrap on full volume? It's still playing through his headphones and I can very much hear it. How has he not gone deaf yet?

"I can hear your music. Turn it down." I make the issue known to him.
"Oh shit, it's still playin?" Got him. Met quickly gets his phone out of his pocket and pauses the music. I know how annoyed he gets when something like this happens. He prefers listening to whole albums at a time, so knowing that he's missed the majority of one is gonna dampen his mood.

"Dammit. How long was it still goin?" His voice is getting a bit raspy. A sign he's agitated. I when watch as Mark stares down Met.
"Hhm... Prolly since ya got inta da buildin'." Mark says in a way trying to antagonize him. And it seems to have worked.
"Fuck... That was two albums wasted." The despair in Met's voice is evident.
"Whaddaya sayin'? Don't tell me it was none-a dat Demolition Hammer crap. Dat'd be a real kick in da teeth for ya, if it was."

Seems Mark has a similar disposition I do when it comes to Met's auditory habits. I watch as he looks down at his phone and goes through his music app, trying to find out what it was he missed. He's always so meticulous about this kind of thing. Tries to have an organic flow between albums so that things transition smoothly. I wish I had that kind of foresight.

"Eugh... FUCK!" He sounds *angry*.
"Yous got a problim?" And Mark isn’t making it any better.
"It was Agnostic Front and Exumer. I was lookin forward to hearin those. FUCK!"

Met stands up, his tail stiff with annoyance. An interesting thought comes to mind. Actually no. He'd kick me if I did that. And he's a war horse. If a racer wasn't unpleasant this would be. The thought exits my mind as Met starts moving, presumably towards the kitchen so he can grab a bite to eat. Mark and Jessica seem to have other ideas though.

"Where might you be off to, now? A bite to eat, maybe? You must be a wee bit peckish. Can't say I'd blame ye." Unlike Mark, Jessica’s words aren’t antagonizing Met.
"To get somethin to drink." His voice is softer now. Jessica just has that effect on people. But then I see Mark spin around, daggers in his eyes.
"Awh, no ya don't, Met. Ya ain't havin' none o' my likka. Not after I seen ya poppin' dat lil' testosterone pill the second ya waltzed in heah."
"What? Why is that your first thought? I may be stupid but I'm not brainless." I can confirm that. Met does, in fact, have a brain.
"Oh, reeeally?" His voice is *dripping* with instigation. Mark can be just as stubborn as Met and prone to not believing it.
"I know better than to drink booze when I've just taken my HRT. And this is a new dosage, too. Not that it matters. You know I don't drink anyway. Just let me get some food god dammit."

He disappears behind the wall as he grabs his food, clearly happy that it's Jamaican.

"Oh shit, Simpson's. Love their jerk chicken. Oh, you got fried plantains too. Nice." Met sounds like he’s about to bust out into song. He then reappears, taking a seat next to me as he eats. He must be starving because it is just being *consumed*. Is he even tasting it? He's eating so fast that he might accidentally choke on something

"You might want to slow down." I tell him, not wanting the inevitable to happen. "Hmph. Oh. Mai bahd." He says with a mouth full of chicken.
He swallows and starts pacing himself before he starts talking again.

"So what did I miss?" He asks, clearly wanting to know what was discussed when he got here.
"Ayy, nuttin' major, see? Just Kati, she decides she's gonna be Gold City's photog, while she's kickin' it heah in da Big Apple, ya know?" Mark says, his eyes meeting mine, smugness evident in his hazel irises. Met almost spits out his food as he slowly turns to me, processing his he information as he does so.

"I fuckin told you, Kati.”
"That you did..."

I hate it when he gets smug like that.

|-That same evening. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street, Manhattan-|

The excitement is still evident, but I have gotten my tail to settle, even if it is still swaying slightly. It's... interesting being in a city like New York. Sure, Tokyo is larger. Both in terms of land and population. But New York? Let's just say when people describe this as an *international city*, they mean it. It's the kind of thing you'll figure out in an *hour*. And I've had a *week*. Still, Randy has done a lot to make sure that I'm comfortable while I'm here. He is quite the researcher when it comes to his clients. A lot of the things he's had this apartment filled with he did so with great care

and thought. I wasn't really expecting it. Hindsight though... I really should have. He's well known for his work in the US with foreign models. But it's usually been with people from like, France and Italy. Japan? I don't think he has experience. Not yet. Despite that, he's clearly knowledgeable about the Japanese market, otherwise Tomo would not have made the recommendation when he brought up the idea of me modeling in the US. I've trusted the man my entire career on the runway. No reason to stop now. Still though, this is way out of my comfort zone. And that new photographer. Kati was her name, right? I should check just to make sure.

I get my phone out of my blazer pocket. Considering how hot it's been, probably wasn't a good idea to wear it today. My shirt's been *inundated* with sweat and it is not pleasant. I feel like a pig. Not the gorgeous uma musume people expect me to be. I open up the notes app and look at everything I jotted down from this afternoon. Yup. Kati Jacobs. Close notes. Go to social media. Look at her professional profile. Those shots are really good. I can see why Randy had her as one of the suggestions. It's the way she captures the human form that drew me in. How she can see the small intricacies and snap them perfectly. I knew from the minute I saw her work there was going to be no other option. She was the one for us. My only concern is if she can keep it up with one model for a whole year. A whole year... Here's to a new chapter in life.

As I go about my evening routine, an odd thought occurs: Why not look through her personal profile? Just so see what she does in her free time. No harm, right? That would be the usual answer, but this time... I'm not entirely sure why it feels different this time. Like I'm about to bend some taboo no one else dare touch. I find the profile and feel a rush of emotions as I look at the posts. She doesn't seem to have much going on. Nothing of real importance. That or she is a private person, which I can understand. I wish I had some semblance of privacy. But with being one of Japan's most famous models and at one point top racers... I don't. People are constantly trying to pry into my life. See things they shouldn't. All eyes all the time. But talking with her earlier today... It felt like she saw through the disguise I have to put on. Not everyday you meet someone genuine like that.

"Kati Jacobs... I have a feeling we'll get along *very well*."

As I look through these posts, an odd feeling wells up inside me. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it feels... familiar. Unnaturally familiar. Like it's something I've known for a good while. The curvature of her body. The way light gets trapped in those dark eyes of hers. That's what is eliciting this response. But again: Why? Why is this happening? And why is it so familiar? Is it something that I've felt before and have forgotten? I don't know. And that's what scares me the most. I need to get some sleep. These next few days are going to be very busy with logistics and planning. Maybe it'll also distract me from... whatever this feeling is.

Chapter 3: Deliberation, Delegation and Logistics

Chapter Summary

> A few days pass and Kati has to meet up with Randy and Gold City again. She's anxious. She's nervous. And worst of all: She's turning into a disaster again. This entire time, her mind was been all over the place, with one singular thought gnawing at her psyche. Kati tries to push it down, but it always comes back up, and she is terrified as to how this will impact her working relationship with Gold City. Speaking of whom, her own interest with her new photographer has been growing faster than she expected. It took hold fast, and Gold doesn't quite know what to do with it. Then there's that odd feeling. Being around Kati seems to heighten it, and Gold City has a few ideas as to what it might be. Whether or not these ideas can properly explain this feeling, only time will tell, and both women have a year to figure things out.

|-Wednesday morning. Tompkins Square Park, E 10th St, East Village, Manhattan, New York-|

Nerves are flaring again. I thought it would stop by now. But it hasn't. If anything, it's gotten worse. Whenever my mind has time, it wanders to Gold City. Her form. Her hair. Those light blue eyes. They way light gets captured in them. It's mesmerizing. Annyira elbűvölő... Órákra el tudok veszni a szemeimben... (So mesmerizing... I can get lost in those eyes for hours...)

A pigeon snaps me out of my trance. As I quickly look around, I spot Randy with Gold City by the Hari Krishna Tree, presumably talking about payments and logistics. Time to get this going, I guess. I make my approach, and Randy is teh first to see me. He simply nods his head as Gold City then spots me. A simple wave, but god damn... *Koncentrálj, Kati. Fókusz.* (Focus, Kati. Focus.) I reach them, and Randy is the first to speak to me.

"Ah, Kati. Good to see you again." His sounds happy to see me. But he also sounds... shaky.? No. Frazzled? I can't quite put my finger on it, but he sounds unsteady. Probably just got a bad's night sleep. Gold City, however...

"A pleasure to see you again." She says, her voice as silky as ever.
"I, uh... I can say the same." *Keep your cool…* Thankfully, my thoughts get interrupted by Randy starting with details about our first shoot together.

"We've got our first shoot in a few days. This Saturday to be exact. Managed to convince David Swirner to let us use one of the pieces in his 52 Walker gallery as a backdrop. STY, I think it's called. By Nicole Eisenman. He's prepping it for exhibition starting in October but he's letting us use it early."
"So then why are the three of us here?" I ask, wanting more details. He hasn’t given enough.
"Relax, Kati. Patience is a virtue. We're here *today* to discuss the cameras we want to use, the kind of shots we're looking for, and of course, payments afterwards."

David Swirner? Isn't he a contemporary artist? And he's willing to lease out one of his galleries for the shoot? Well this should be interesting. I wonder what the piece we're using looks like...

"He's actually letting us use one of his galleries? I didn't think he'd agree." Gold interjects, clearly just as surprised as I am.
"I didn't either, not at first at least. But I managed to break some ground and kept pushing. Within boundaries, of course. I'm not the type to strong arm people. Never good for long term partnerships. I like to avoid unnecessary complications. You've both come to know that very well, I hope."

That's the solid-stone foundation I was expecting to see. A big part of why Randy Jenkins has garnered so much respect is because he's so solid with his words. Utter confidence that comes off as natural and earned, not arrogant. He busted his ass across the Research Triangle and it *shows*. I still feel unworthy being in his presence.

"Camera: a Canon EOS R8. A good autofocus, very, *very* nice full frame sensor. 24.2MP full frame sensor if I'm not mistaken and some very impressive video recording. Quality is rated at 4K resolution. One more thing: I was thinking a fisheye shot with one of the mannequins." He goes on, but now I'm confused.
"Fisheye? Excuse me?" My interjection seems to take Randy by surprise.

"Problem?" He asks, clearly perturbed.
"Uh... no. I'll see what I can do but fisheyes aren't exactly used in modeling. More-so for action shots, music videos, large mural projections and flight simulators."
"And that is exactly why we wanted to use the fisheye lens. Out of the box thinking." Randy now turns to Gold City as she interjects, seemingly affirming the idea.

"Very much, yes. And you..." He points his finger at me in a way that suggests I'm capable of more than I know.

"Are quite the connoisseur with a camera. I don't doubt that you'll get the shots we want. Close ups and mid-range. Nothing too special." One one thing left.
"And that leaves..." I start but quickly get cut off.
"Payment. Gold gets 65% of the cut. I get 10%. That leaves *you* with..."
"25%."

A twenty-five percent cut? Now that's the kind of money I can get behind. Provided we're making a lot of it. But something tells me that money won't be an issue for this next year. Randy then starts talking more privately with Gold City, and once again my mind is off to the races. The way the light gets reflected off her hair... How that blazer accentuates her form, not take away from it... Istenem, annyira szánalmas vagyok... Annyira szánalmas... (God I'm so pathetic... So very pathetic...) I can only imagine how this looks. Especially from someone like Gold City. Actually no, I don't want to imagine that. I'd probably come off like a creep or something. Best not to think about it. But her skin... It looks so soft... Az istenit. (God dammit.)

|-Wednesday evening. The Watermark, Pier 15, 78 South St Pier 15-|

The salt in the air can't be all that good for my hair. My tail especially. It's quite sensitive… I sigh, not sure what to think, really. I still don't know how to process this feeling. And I'm still no closer to understanding why it's so familiar. So here I am at a cocktail bar, trying to make sense of it all. Not just this feeling but everything else. The city is so vibrant. So... alive. Even during the night. I've often heard New York be called the "City that Never Sleeps" and with all the activity that occurs here... I can say those people were right. It's electrifying and infectious. One can't help but join in. Far more lively than Tokyo. Makes me wonder what times like Halloween are like in a place like New York. It *has* to be intense. I know the... festivities back home are. I look down at the

menu in front of me. Should I? I'm not particularly fond of alcohol, but I'm willing to make exceptions every now and then. This feels like one of those times. A waiter comes by, seeing that I may or may not be interested.

"Anything we can get you tonight?" He asks as I examine the menu. The cocktails don't exactly interest me, but these sparklings might be to my fancy.

"Yes, actually. The Val D'Oca Prosecco if you have it." I say, having made my mind up.
"We very much do. I'll need to see some ID and it'll be out shortly."

I grab my wallet from my purse and hand him my ID. He checks it and then heads off. Within a few minutes, my drink is in front of me. I take a sip... and it isn't bad. It's quite refreshing, actually. But I want to pace myself. Inebriation is... not a good look for anyone. No matter what they might say. Something that's best avoided. As I sit and occasionally sip from my drink, my mind wanders to those odd feelings. What is it about Kati that brings them up? And why? Does... Does she feel something similar? Something tells me she might. It's visible, but she does make an effort to make it subtle. The way her voice trembles whenever she talks to me. And *only* me. She had no issues with Randy. Neither today or when I first met her last Friday. She also seems to start shaking. It's subtle, but it's there. I have seen it occasionally. She starts sweating more than she really should. It makes me concerned. But not in the way most would think. I've been nothing but kind and courteous with her. Maybe that's what's causing this kind of reaction from her. Kindness that she's not used to in any kind of relationship. But at the same time, it can't be that. Kati comes off as a very well adjusted adult. So what is the reason? I don't want to make assumptions about her sexuality, but... Kati having more sapphic tendencies would be the only way to explain it. I feel guilty even making that thought, but then again... It does still make sense. And maybe... Maybe this ends up being a two-way street. Maybe I have more to learn about myself than I realize. Only time will tell. And we have a year together. So there's no better time like the present.

I finish the rest of my drink and begin to head home. Well... "home". This is only a year long stay, and time will slip away from you if you're not careful. Five years... It's really been five years since the diagnosis. Since my dreams on the track ended. I still think about it. Often. What could have been if colic hadn't brought me to my lowest. But now isn't the time to dwell on that. No time is really the time to dwell on that kind of thing. That was then. This is now. Again my mind drifts towards Kati. Her rich, brown hair. Those dark eyes that I could get lost in for hours. Is that the kind of thing that goes through her mind when she sees me? It has to be. But what if it isn't the only thing? I do still feel like she is the only one to actually see me. The *real* me. Not the facade. Not the Gold City that people see on these magazine covers and photographs. But the person. The uma. Even if I don't ever return whatever it is she feels, something like that will always mean something to me. I want to keep her close, even when this contract comes to a close.

Chapter 4: Lenses and Dresses

Chapter Summary

> Not owning a fisheye, Kati has to go out and get one before Saturday. The time will allow her to sort out her thoughts, or so she thinks. So to help her keep focus, the ever trustworthy Met is tagging along with her. Meanwhile, Gold City and Randy are trying to figure out just what she will be sporting for the shoot. What was once a seemingly innocuous turns out to be more difficult than either anticipated. Especially as Randy discovers a request of his was overruled.

|-Thursday morning. The Capri, 1700 Grand Concourse, the Bronx, New York-|

Met's car has always been a mess, but it's an endearing mess. If one can even exist. It doesn't take long after I've buckled my seat-belt for his questions to start.

"So… you didn't already have a fish eye? And you want me to go with you to get one? You sure that the place will even have what you're lookin for?" Met's voice is tinged with confusion. He looks at me like I just showed him some kind of eldritch figurine and broke his mind.

"No, Met. I'm a modeling photographer. I didn't think I'd ever need one. And I'm certain. I looked at the catalogue online. They have several." I also point to my camera bag that I've brought with me. "We're gonna see if any of them fit."
"Seems a bit short sighted, if you ask me. Especially since it's Randy Jenkins who's a part of this deal." He says as he starts his car. Almost immediately I'm bombarded by a wall of sound. A wall of sound that is way too loud. How has he not gone deaf? And why does he listen to this?

"Where are we headed again?" He asks as he subtly turns down the music. Not that anyone would really notice.

"K&M Camera." I tell him, perturbed that he didn't remember it when I told him earlier.
"Oh, it's that one place you like in the Lower East Side, right? Yeah, I know where that is." He peels out of his apartment block, almost fast enough to get the cops following us as we make our way through the Bronx. I swear, whenever this loud claptrap is playing he gets more reckless. And he was already reckless, even before he started transitioning. What is it anyway? I look at the central console to try and figure it out.

"*Katastrophic Creation*… Korrosive… What?"
"Problem?" He shifts in his seat, clearly perturbed by my questioning.
"How do you even sit through stuff like this?" A scoff. Something I'm more than accustomed to when I start questioning his auditory habits. A deep breath, and then he starts speaking.

"You really need to understand that this isn't just music, Kati. It's a way of life. A creed almost. A brotherhood. Live fast, live loud and live authentically. And if people object to it, fuck 'em." He lets out a soft chuckle before continuing. "It's an outlet for creativity. For anger. It's how I can express emotions when words fail, which I'll admit happens often."

I have to suppress the urge to laugh at that statement. Met? Struggling to put his emotions into words? I can hardly believe that when he can do it. He just so happens to have the mouth of a sailor when he does so.

We're on the road for a good twenty minutes. Neither of us were expecting traffic to be so bad today. Guess a lot of people are heading to Coney Island to soak up the sun. Maybe I should before the summer ends. But what if she's there? Oh god… Gold City in a swimsuit… I can already see my reaction and it's only just a fantasy. Thank god Met is here to snap me out of this.

"You're daydreamin again." He says, his voice cutting through all the noise in my head.
"What? No. No I wasn't." I try to retort. But it doesn't work.
"Then why was your jaw hangin open and your eyes givin the thousand yard stare?" He then asks, voice oozing with condescension and smugness. I hate it when he gets like that. It's then that the music shifts again. This time to something older, but still the same claptrap. What does that say? Exodus? Something tells me these guys don't talk about the Good Book. More like preach against it.

"Oh sweet. *Bonded by Blood*. Fuck yeah. I was waitin for this one." I hear Met exclaim, excitement inundating his voice. This is going to be a long ride into the Lower East Side.

|-That same morning. 52 Walker Street, Manhattan, New York-|

I can feel the excitement. My tail swaying so much is the proof. But this is a level of excitement I haven't felt in a long time. Not since the race that got me scouted by a trainer. Looking at the mannequins, they remind me of old Roman and Greek statues. I heard that they were once vibrant and full of color. Why were they stripped of that?

"City. You there?" Randy's voice brings me out of my mind. Laid out on the table are several articles of clothing that are... not as risque as I'd thought they'd be. The confusion on my face must be quite evident as I hear Randy begin to question me again."Everything alright? Were you hoping for something more akin to a swimsuit?" He asks, his voice unnervingly, though subtly trembling.
"Uh... No. Not really, but..." I begin to trail off. As I try to formulate a response, Randy cuts me off.
"But what? This is our first shoot. I'm not gonna throw you in half naked. Unless you wanted to, of course." He says, not really giving me some space for my own thoughts to breathe at first.
"No, no. I, uh... I'm not opposed but-" I start, before Randy's voice fills the air again.
"Too early?" He cuts me off again. Again, that unnerving, but incredibly subtle tremble in his voice. It's like he's hiding something. Or rather, wants to prove something. But what could it be? I can tell from the shadows under his eyes that he hasn't gotten a lot of sleep. Or maybe it's just that. Maybe I'm making something out of nothing. Reading too much into things. Maybe it's just because he has a rather... particular sleep schedule. Regardless, I respond to his question.
"Yes. Too early. I want to-" I start before Randy *once again* buts me off. I guess we still have some things to work out. I just hope he can understand.
"Get comfortable with me first. I want that to. When it comes to the models I work with, their comfort and needs are very important. If they feel uncomfortable with the requirements of a shoot, we try our best to remedy the issue. If it can't be remedied, then we call it off and devise something new." He takes a deep breath, as if he's going to continue with that thought, but he pivots to the clothing on the table.

"Locally made, from what I've been told. Mostly from Tribeca 'artisans'. At least, that's what they call themselves." He says. 'Artisans'? Interesting. The thought is quite touching, really.
"So it's a showcase of local artists as well?" I ask, wanting to know some more details if I can.

"That is certainly one perspective." He says, taking one of the articles in his hands. It reminds me of kimonos back home in Japan. The kind worn around autumn festivals. I wonder if the person who made it is Japanese themselves. I look around the other pieces and one in particular catches my eye. It's a combination of indigo, white and brown. I can't explain it, but the combination works well.

"What's this one?" I ask, wanting to know more about the clothes. Randy walks over and examines it himself before answering my question.
"This one... Looks to have been made by a Mohawk seamstress named Ákat." Mohawk? Isn't that a hair style?
"Mohawk..." Before I can say anything else, Randy speaks up again.
"Indigenous nation whose historic territory is largely upstate. I... Had a few objections to this being included. It didn't feel right to have someone who *isn't* Mohawk to be wearing it. But clearly, my objection was overruled." He seems annoyed by it being here. Moreso out of respect for whoever made it. But he can tell it's what I would like to be wearing. "I'll contact Ákat and see what we can do. if she says no, then she says no." Randy then takes the clothing and walks away with it, leaving me with the rest of the clothing on the table. The Mohawk piece looked really nice. I like it. But if we are not allowed to use it, then I suppose I should find something else as a backup plan. I look over a few, and no whole seems to intrigue me, but maybe I can mix a few together. Knowing Randy, he might like the idea. Thinking outside of the box, and everything that it entails.

|-Later that afternoon. K&M Camera, 54 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan-|

My ears feel like they’re gonna fall off… Why? *Miért? (Why?)* We step out and walk towards the store. Already I can feel my nerves ease off, if only a little bit. I know why I’m here, but it does give me some respite, figuring out what lens will work best with my camera. We find the clerk and I set about asking my questions.

”Hi. I have my camera with me and am looking for fisheyes that are compatible with it. I saw the AstrHori 6mm f2.8 and the 7artisans 10mm f2.8 II RF on the website and wanted to know if they are in stock.” The clerk considers my words before he responds.
”I suppose we could help. What kind of camera are we working with here?” He asks, wanting to make sure things go smoothly. I place my camera bag on the counter and pull out my camera.
”A Canon EOS R8. The lenses I mentioned should be compatible with it, right?” I say, watching the clerk ponder the request for a moment, examining my camera before he responds.
”Uh… yes, those are compatible but I’ll need to check if we have either in stock. Those lenses have been in demand recently so we may not have them with us.” He then walks away, going to check if they have the lenses in stock. I then feel something hit my lower back. I whip around and see Met looking at some cameras, back turned to me. He thinks he's slick, does he? Nem az én felügyeletem alatt. (Not on my watch)
"Meteor Hammer. What is wrong with you?" The use of Met's actual name seems to get me a very humorous response as I watch his ears droop and tail stiffen. He slowly turns around to face me.
"Eh... Excuse me.?" He says, voice trembling with guilt.
"You know exactly what you did. Smacking me with your tail like that." I begin my accusation. But I know Met will try to gaslight me to get out of this.
"Me? Smackin you with my tail? The nerve." His voice is just as smug as ever. 'The nerve' he says. The look in his eyes gives it away as he speaks up again. "Must've been somebody else."
I start to look around... and see no other umas here. The lying asshole. But as I'm about to dig in, the cashier comes back.

"So... We don't have the AstrHori or the 7artisan left. But we do have a Canon EF 8-15mm F4 L USM. May I see your camera, ma'am?" I hand him my camera and he starts to inspect it. He takes the lens and starts to try and put it on my camera, albeit with an adapter. To my surprise, it works. The lens is put on without issue. Success. I can feel my heart-rate speed up knowing that we'll be able to pull through for the shoot. The shoot... with GoId City... I quickly snap myself out of this trance before it can go any further and pay for the lens and within minutes me and Met are out of the store and heading back to the Bronx. We get back into his car and the loud claptrap starts once more when the engine is turned on. What does it say this time? D.R.I? And of course we're borderline speeding. How
have we not gotten the cops on us yet? Is Met just that good with malicious compliance? Ó... Isten segítsen most... (Oh... God help me now...)"

|-That evening. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street-|

I lay down on my stomach, tail swaying in the air. Ákat, the Mohawk seamstress, declined to have her piece used in the shoot. Understandable I suppose. So the backup when into effect. Mix and mash a few of the articles into something that will work. And Randy thinks it will work: Black denim jeans, a denim jacket and a ripped red shirt underneath it all paired with black heels and fishnets. It'll pop in the pictures. At least, that's the hope. I can stop worrying about it now. But then there's... whatever
this feeling is. I'm still no closer to understanding it. Or why Kati is eliciting it within me. The answers simply... elude me. I feel like they will for a long time.

I know it's against my better judgement, but I open social media and begin to look through Kati's personal profile. Not much has changed. The last post was made two months ago in April. Again, she might just be a very private individual. What I'd give to have that in my life. Goddesses know I could use some. As a child I wanted to be famous more than anything but now that I have it... It's too much sometimes. Best not to dwell on it. I look at the post, she seems to be at a pool with some friends. April is the time when the weather really begins to change, so I can see why she'd be at a pool. Seems like her friends are quite amicable as well. But then there's the feeling again. Just looking at Kati, in that simple yellow swimsuit... Goddesses help me. I've never felt so lost...

Chapter 5: Through the Eyes of a Fish

Chapter Summary

It's the day of their first shoot, and Kati is trying to keep her composure. She is so taken by Gold City's beauty that she finds it hard to function properly. She tries everything to stay focused, but things fail every now and then. The mask slips off, and the quirks are laid bare. Her only hope is that nobody notices. But Gold City notices. She sees every single fidget and breath. In an odd way, she finds it endearing. So much that she finds herself struggling to keep her own composure. Perhaps these little idiosyncrasies can help her to understand this odd feeling better.

Chapter Notes

Art by AggyTachyon

|-Saturday afternoon. 52 Walker Street, Manhattan, New York-|

Gyerünk, Kati... Koncentrálj... Lélegezz... (Come on, Kati... Focus... Breathe...) I slowly take a deep breath in, trying to steady my nerves. I've worked with beautiful women before, but Gold City... This kind of thing hasn't happened in years, and I don't know how to handle it. I thought I'd be better prepared, but life has a way of messing with even the most well thought out plans. And for it to be like this... in my profession... What am I gonna do? How do I stay professional? Because I *know* that things will get dicey. There's no doubt in my mind that there will be risque shoots. And when that happens... What's the plan? How do I stay focused? How do I not come off as a weirdo? Come on, Kati... You got this... You're *not* a complete disaster of a les-

"Wow, you're here early." That voice as smooth as silk catches my attention. I spin around to see Gold City, and my god... I can feel my heart-rate spike. Any faster and I'd need a defibrillator. The ripped jeans, the heels with the fishnets and the jacket... If Mark was here he'd call her a "rocker" plucked straight off the Sunset Strip. Met, however, would call her a "punk". And then a "poser" for appropriating a sub-culture that was built off of anti-establishment thinking. But all *I* can think about is... **Nem. Hagyd abba. Légy profi. (No. Stop that. Be professional.)** I quickly snap myself out of this trance and formulate a response.

"I, uh... I can say the same about you. Better to be three hours early than five minutes late, right?" I say as Gold City simply chuckles. Oh god...
"Can't argue with that logic, can we?" She then responds, voice still silky. Still... **No. Do NOT think about it like that.** Deep breaths, Kati... Just don't make it obvious that you're a disaster.

As I try to steady myself, Gold City starts to look around, unsure of... something.
"Any idea where Randy is? He said he'd be outside." She asks. Come to think of it, I don't think

I've seen him either. Not since I got here. Maybe he's already inside...
"Uh... I don't think so. What does his car look like?" If Gold knows that and can tell me, we might get somewhere. I watch as her face goes from confusion to ponderance and back to confusion until she gives me an answer.
"I... *think* it's an old Pontiac. Or was it a Dodge? Some kind of 'muscle car'." Well, so much for that idea. But we don't get much time to deliberate as a loud engine pulls up behind her. I peek around to see a sleek black and silver muscle car. '76 Camaro by the looks of it. The kind of car my ápa would love and drool over *for hours*. We watch the vehicle park... and then out steps Randy from the driver's seat dressed to the nines in ripped blues jeans, a white shirt and a black leather jacket. *Perfect* clothes for the Manhattan summer. Truly a genius move. He sees us and makes his approach.

"You're both here early." Randy says, not expecting us to have arrived before him. He seems somewhat elated to be in the company of people who are just as punctual as he is. Gold City is the first between us to respond to him.
"So it would seem. You look nice. Good choices for the heat." She says in a sarcastic manner, something that elicits a small chuckle from Randy.
"Well, when you're in my position, you need to look presentable." He says in response. *Presentable*. Yeah, totally. He then gestures for us to follow him into the gallery and I see what we're working with. It's... statues. They kinda remind me of those old Roman statues you see in history museums. Interested to see what he wants to have done.

Randy stops in front of one of the statues. He looks it over a few times. I notice Gold City do the same thing. In response, I set my bag down and start getting my camera ready, fisheye and all.

"Is every shot going to use the fisheye? Or only a few?" I ask, still not entirely sure what it is Randy wants.
"The majority will use it. These first few won't. I want you two to get comfortable with each other first." He says, still looking at the statue, his voice firm and steady. No hint of hesitation or doubt. He then turns to Gold City, who;s already approaching the statues herself.
"In front of the painting." He points to the abstract canvas hung up on the wall. "That will be our warm-up. Blank expression and neutral pose. Nothing fancy. Not yet. Hold off on the fish-eye." Randy is clear and concise. He knows what he wants and is directing with surgical precision. Like a skilled doctor performing a heart transplant with machine like efficiency. It's... kinda scary, honestly. I watch as Gold City walks over to the painting. She looks at it for a few seconds before turning back around to face me.

Koncentrálj... (Focus...)

I bring my camera up to my eyes, staring down the viewfinder. She looks so... gyönyörű... (beautiful...) Shit. Focus, god dammit. I line the shot, take a deep breath and then...

flash

|-Later that afternoon-|

flash

Another flash hits my eyes. Sun-like and unyielding. But I've gotten used to them. When I first started, my tail would always stiffen, even before the flash. Over time, though, it became more relaxed as I acclimated myself to the sound of shutters and the flashing of bright, white light. The nerves became more stone and cold, far from the mold-able clay that they started out as. Yet this...

I'd be lying if I said the nerves weren't flaring. It's exhilarating. My heart pounding in my chest with each passing second. Only in my first few years as a model did I ever get this feeling, and Kati is able to make them roar back to life in only a few seconds. Every adjustment. Every click. Every flash. The only times it was like *this*... was before a race. Tracen... What I once thought to be my true calling. The memories briefly flood my mind, but for once, I don't feel melancholy thinking back on that time. All the guidance and training from Masaru. The pep talks from Team Spica, despite not being a part of that group. Yuta simply let me into the club room whenever I felt like it. Dread has been replaced by drive. I can feel it in every single vein and artery. And I'm living for it.

flash

Another one goes off. I find my arms draped over one of the statues, as per Randy's suggestion, jacket slung over my shoulders like a cape as if I were royalty. Randy said to give the pose "air of seduction", so I find myself in a position not to dissimilar to what a lover might do. Once more... I look into the camera.

flash

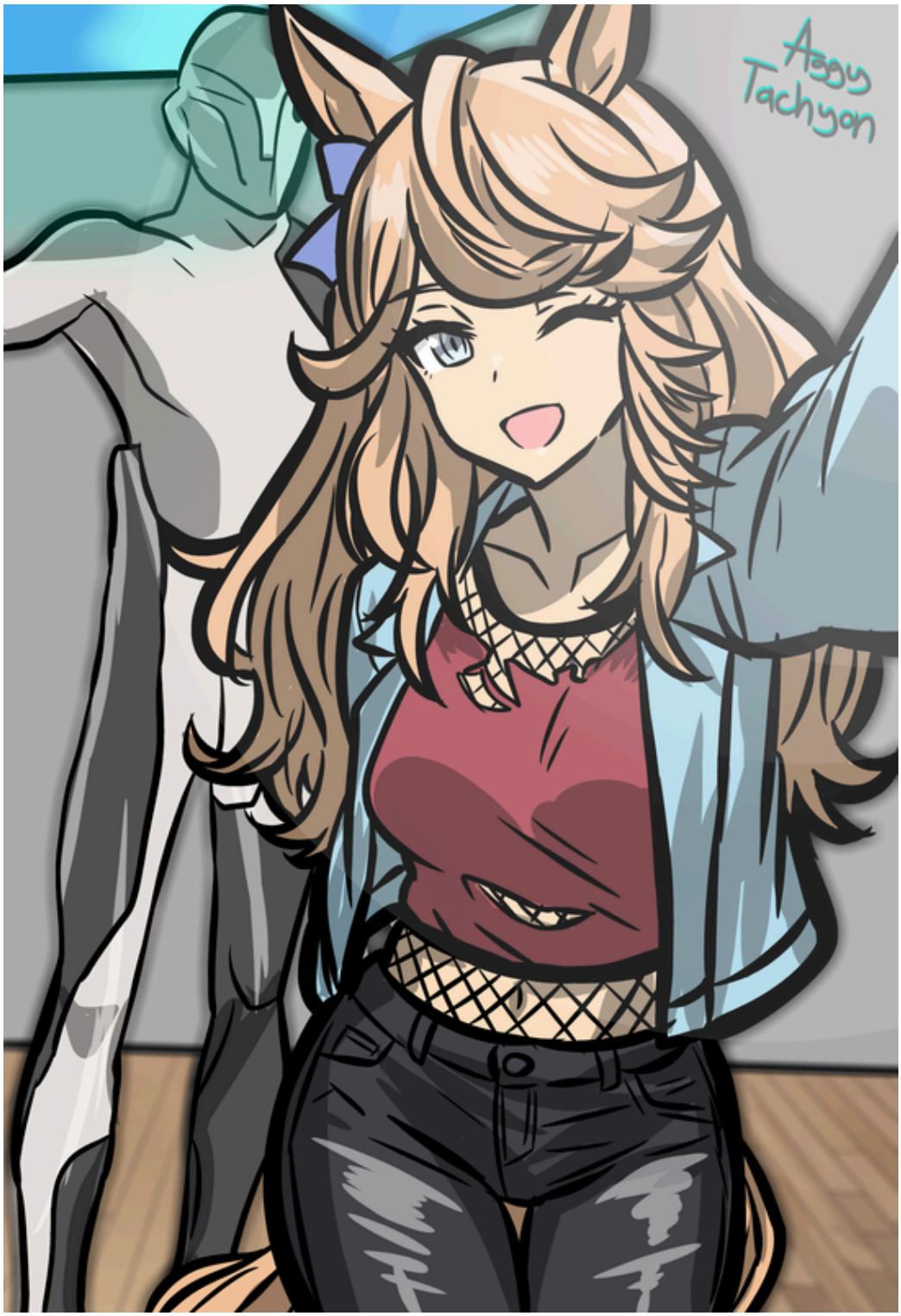
I watch Randy put his hand into the air, intent on speaking his mind.
"Good so far. I like what we're getting. How comfortable are you with a close distance?" The question is poised. I know my answer. But does Kati? She's been trying to hide it, but I did notice her shaking. It's been in motion this entire time. Poor girl's nerves must be on red alert with how much she's fidgeting. I turn to Randy to speak first.
"I'm comfortable with it. What about you, Kati?" We both turn to look at her as I speak, her chest expanding as she seemingly takes deep breaths.
"I... Yeah. I'm fine with that. Just give the order and I'll follow." Randy simply nods at her response, and gestures for her to move closer to me. She gets within two feet when Randy speaks up again.
"That's good. It's close enough, Kati. I want the head of the statue in the shot, partially obscuring Gold's face. Are you alright with that?"
"Of course." I respond, positioning myself in a way where the statue's head can take up a good portion of the frame. I've grown quite the intuition for knowing frame placement despite being the focus of the photographer. We both look to Randy for approval, and he gives it, but not before speaking one more time.
"Purse your lips. Like you're about to kiss the statue. Don't actually do that, though. We already have enough DNA on it." I follow his instructions and purse my lips, getting as close as I can to the statue without actually making contact with the stone. A few seconds later...

flash flash

I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the last flash. ***flash***

"Alright. That's good. Let's see what we're working with." I hear Randy say, signaling to end the shoot. Seems he's gotten what he wanted out of this. Me as well. Maybe even Kati. We both move to a table with a laptop sitting on it. Kati takes the fish-eye lens off her camera before she plugs it into the laptop, at which point we see the photos pop up on the screen within seconds. I can hear Randy mumbling to himself, and Kati takes that as a bad sign.
"Uh... There isn't a problem, is there?" She asks, her voice trembling. It takes a moment for Randy to respond.
"No. Not at all. These are exactly what I was hoping for. Gold?" He turns to me as he says my name, wanting my opinion. I take a few seconds to go through the photos taken today, and they are

all phenomenal. The shadows. The lighting. The way Kati manages to perfectly frame my form. I knew she was special the second I saw some of her shots, but this... *This* is divine.



And all the while, my heart keeps fluttering. Whether it is because of the work we've done today or because of... *something else*... Watakushi wa shiranai. (I do not know.)

Chapter 6: Load of Craic

Chapter Summary

To celebrate a fantastic opening to their partnership, Kati's friends hold a dinner party in her honor. But it quickly goes awry, at least in Kati's mind, when Jessica suggests that they look at the photos she took earlier in the day. It's then that the flood gates in Kati's mind are opened for the umpteenth time ever since she first met Gold City, and she's been having and increasingly difficult time controlling the emotions. Gold City is also having difficulties as she as Randy deliberate on which shots are best to use for the magazine they are submitting them to. Only four can be submitted, so they must comb through and decide based on quality of the photo and it's content. It also gives Gold City another opportunity to try and understand these dubiously familiar feelings that Kati elicits within her.

|-Saturday evening. 38th Sixth Apartments, 38 6th Avenue, Brooklyn, New York-|

"How did it go? Load of craic?" Is what I hear Jessica ask. Load of *crack*? No, not... not *that*. Irish. Keep forgetting.
"Ayyy... So we're... We're doin' DAT now, huh?" It's carried on that thick accent of his all the way from the kitchen. I watch Jessica turn her head with enough speed to give herself whiplash.
"What? Ye want me to apologize for me da bein' a bogger? Not a chance, Mark." We both hear his laughter from the kitchen. That cavernous bellow that could deafen a whale if it could hear him. A few seconds later, Mark appears from around the corner with Met, trays of food in their hands.

"Dinner is served." Met says, his tail wagging with excitement. Whatever is it, it smells *good*. But it's not enough to shift my thoughts. *She* is all I can think about right now. Her silhouette in the camera flash... How the light reflected off her skin... The way her shadow curved around the statues... Mit adnék érte... (What I'd give for that...).

cling
cling

The sound of forks clinking together brings me back to reality as everyone has started eating. I look at the plate in front of me: Mark's famous Sicilian lasagna. A lean meat ragu with peas, mozzarella cheese, chopped hard-boiled eggs and the creamiest bechamel I've ever had. I always beg Mark to tell me how he does it and he *never tells me*. The prick. I cut into the slice on the plate with my fork and begin eating. Just as good as always. The food briefly distracts my mind. I can focus on something else for once.

"So... when are you telling me the recipe, Mark?" I ask, again testing my luck.
"Hmm... How's 'when pigs take to da sky' sound?" He responds, his voice almost being as smug as Met's. Speaking of whom...
"Just take the L at this point, Kati. He's never gonna spill." I really do hate it when he gets like that. But before I can formulate a response, Mark speaks up again.
"So dis li'l photoshoota ya got heah..." He starts, and it causes the images to flood my mind.
"How'd it go? Ya didn't go losin' ya marbles, did ya?"

I try to formulate a response, but the thoughts roar back. I can't string together a coherent sentence like this, but I can't let them figure out how much of a disaster this is making me.
"I, uh... It... It went well." I fumble the words out, making it painfully obvious where my mind has gone. But no-one seems to care. At least not visibly.
"So, a grand bit o' craic? Would ya be kind enough to share them photos?" God dammit, Jessica...

I try to think of ways to get out of this situation, but it's becoming more and more apparent that I've been boxed in. I need to do something.
"I... I didn't bring my camera. S.. Sorry." What should be my ticket out of this mess is rendered invalid... because Met sees through the lie. Just as he always does.
"Isn't your camera in your car? I thought I saw the bag in the backseat." With a heavy sigh I start moving. It's a blur though. In a moment I'm rummaging through the backseat, grabbing my camera bag and the next I'm back in Mark's apartment, hooking it up to his laptop, itself connected to his TV. We then watch as the photos appear on the screen.

"Well, GODDAYUM! I knew ya was good, but dis... dis is fuhhkin' *magical*, Kati." Mark says, clearly impressed by my work. Most definitely in... *more ways than one*. Met then decides to chip in.
"Woah... I could *never* be a photographer. Not on this level." I blush. I'm... not really used to compliments. Not even from friends. Especially when it's coming from Jessica.
"Ah, now, these are lovely altogether. Some of your finest work, Kati." I start taking deep breaths after hearing that. I need to steady myself, but looking at this photos again... It's hard.

The shadows... The curve of her body... The light reflected in her eyes... Miért vagyok ilyen... Miért... (Why am I like this... Why...) My heart-rate continues to climb as we go through the photos. More and more. To the point where I think I'll need a defibrillator if we don't stop soon. This is going to be a *long* year...

|-That same evening. Latitude Talent Studios, 545 8th Avenue, Manhattan, New York-|

"These are all good. *Supremely* good, but we can only use four of them if we decide to go through with this." Randy says, looking over the photos from earlier in the day. The photos from the first shoot are going to be used in a magazine showing off foreign talent here in the US. But the catch, something we've only learned about *tonight*, is that we can't use all of them. So we've been looking things over to decide what the best quartet we can use would be. This is... proving to be more difficult than we anticipated. I look down again, and none of the photos I see can really lead us into things. I want that. I want to have a smooth transition. I'm sure Kati would want one was well. And that's when an idea pops into my head.

"We should lead with one of the warm-up shots. Just to set the mood. From there, we can look through the main shots and pick out which works best for our intentions and what this magazine might like." I suggest, wanting to make things as easy as they can be. It seems Randy might be inclined to agree.
"Maybe. That could work. I'll look through those while you look through the main shots. It's *your* face and body that'll be on the pages, after all." He says as he turns and heads over to his laptop, leaving me with the physical pictures we have. Once again, I find myself enamored with the way Kati has captured my form in a photograph. It's... uncanny. Then, that feeling comes back. I still don't know what to call it. I still don't know why it comes. I still don't know why it is so familiar. And I still don't know why Kati gets this kind of reaction out of me. I'm usually able to figure these kinds of things out with no issue, but *this*... *This* has me at a loss. I have only ever felt something

like this around a *man*. So why is another *woman* making me feel this way? This can't have been the first time this has happened. But right now, I need to focus.

I start looking through the fish-eye shots. The mid-range photos are quite nice, so much that I'll probably choose one of them, but the close-ups... *Those* are the ones. But I need two. Indecision gnaws at my mind. They are all incredible. It's hard to choose only *two*. As I try to process which would look best, I hear Randy from behind me.
"Think any would work?" He asks, wanting to pick my brain. I formulate a response. One I hope doesn't give away my internal conflicts.
"It's... hard. The close ups are too good to choose only two." Is what I say, voice somewhat trembling. "Hmm... What about these two?" He points to two photos specifically. The first and last of the close- ups. I think I seeing the same things Randy is. The angle that accentuates my jaw line. How the shadows add to the effect, not detract from it. The glint in my eyes. These are the ones.

I pick up the photos and hand them to Randy alongside the mid-range shot. He seems content, though I can tell there's *something* behind those green eyes of his. I just don't know what. He then turns and starts towards someone else, presumably with this magazine. Fashionista, I think. But Randy's departure leaves me with my thoughts again. Just what is it about Kati that makes me feel this way? And why? *Why* is it so familiar? Have I felt this way for a woman before and just don't remember it? If so, why can't I recall? And who was it? I don't think I'll find the answers tonight. Or tomorrow night. Hell, I don't think a month is enough time to process this feeling, whatever it may be. This is something I'll need to work on over the coming year. I just... I just hope that I can weather this storm. Under no circumstance do I want to rush into things without fully knowing what it is that they entail. Not like the last time.

"Just what is it you do to me, Kati? What is it about you that makes me feel this way?" I know sleep won't be easy tonight, but any time to figure things out is time I will gladly take.

Chapter 7: Across the East River

Chapter Summary

> Gold City and Randy set out to find a suitable location for the next shoot, but Gold's mind keeps wandering off. Wandering to places that it really shouldn't be going. Places that begin to concern her. She needs to find a way to stem this tide, but that motion will prove more difficult than she first though. Especially whenever she is reminded that this contract lasts a year.
>
> Kati has similar problems. She tries her best to hide it, but the cracks are beginning to show. She needs something to distract her. ***Anything*** to distract her. So she turns to the every trustworthy Met for help, and he has several ideas as to how to distract his best friend. Whether they work is something the duo will find out in real time.

|-Monday morning. Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge, New York-|

I wish this bridge had a view comparable to the Brooklyn Bridge. That is, after all, one of the city's most well known landmarks. But I suppose it can't be helped. Utilitarian design and all that...

My tail sits stiff against the seat, trying to wag itself free as my mind goes off. Kati.... I know I shouldn't be thinking about her like this, but it's hard not to sometimes. I need to compose myself. Thankfully, Randy provides some assistance, whether he's aware of it or not.
"You know where we are going, right?" He asks, testing my memory to see if I do, indeed, remember where it is we are going.
"Roosevelt Island. There's a lighthouse at the north end?" I respond, testing the waters. I'm positive that is where we are heading and why.
"Seems I was a fool to doubt your brain." I feel attacked. Why make such a remark? "Was *that* necessary?" I can feel the daggers in my eyes as I speak.
"Considering you seem to have been off in your own world since Saturday night: Yes. Very much." Seems he's noticed. I try to make it discreet. And I usually succeed. But Randy... Well, nothing escapes his eye. Not even my attempts to hide whenever my mind wanders. I try to make some excuse. *Anything* so as to not be suspicious.

"I... I'm just thinking of home." That's not convincing enough. He'll pick up that I'm hiding something. I sit and wait for the prodding. A prodding that never comes.
"Not surprised. Even with everything in order, some things can't be helped. I won't prod any further." And he just leaves it at that. I don't know whether to be thankful or concerned. We'll have to see.

We come to another bridge, the Camaro's engine humming softly as we begin to cross onto Roosevelt Island. It's quaint. And more populated than I expected considering how thin the island is. Three kilometers long but only, what, 300 meters across? If that? Quaint. Very quaint. And now that I'm thinking about it, this island doesn't seem like all that bad a place to live. I might take residence here if I ever decided to live in New York permanently. Wouldn't that be something? We continue down Main Street until we find ourselves driving by... a hospital. That's... morbid...
"A hospital? I thought we were-"

"The lighthouse *is* ahead. Just past the *nursing home*." He interrupts while also correcting me.
"We're parking here. The rest is on foot." He then says as the vehicle begins to slow, eventually parking, at which point he steps out of the vehicle. I decide to follow. The summer heat hits both of us, though I had the smart idea of not wearing my blazer today. Randy, however, is dead set on achieving a heat stroke with that black, leather jacket of his. We start walking north, coming to a park called
"Lighthouse Park", and I can see why. The lighthouse is at the end of the island. It's... smaller than I was expecting. Far smaller. Can we really call it a lighthouse when it's *this short*?

"That is..." I start, but Randy cuts me off again.
"What? Were you expecting something like Tibbetts Point on Lake Ontario? Montauk Point at the end of Long Island? Cape Hatteras on the Outer Banks of North Carolina? Saint Augustine down in Florida? A fifty footer is all the East River needs." He says, not giving too much thought into the words. It's like he's rehearsed this and gone through the motions before. I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case. He then turns to me, his face an inquiring one.
"Any thoughts?" He asks, wanting my opinion on the matter. I look the lighthouse up and down for a few seconds, indecisive at first, but I see *some* merit: It has an appealing, rustic vibe. It's position gives a good view of the East River. If we aim down south, we get a good view of the park behind the light. The trees provide a good backdrop. It's quite idyllic. I think I'm seeing why Randy might be interested in it. I wonder what Kati might think... Kati... Oh no. Not again. I can't have this happen again. Not here. But this is in vain. I already had her form in my mind. And from there... the gate is open, so to speak.

The thoughts rush in: The kind of lenses she would use. Portrait or landscape? Close-ups or far-away shots? How would she capture my form? Am I the main focus or is it the lighthouse? The main focus... I wonder just how it is she sees me? It is... more than just a pretty face? It has to be, judging solely on how she seems to... breakdown whenever we are close. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't affecting *me* to some extent. I just... I wish that I cou-
"City. You there?"

I'm snapped out of this trance by the sound of Randy's voice. Thank the goddesses. I quickly turn to match his attention so that I can respond.
"Off in your own world again?" He asks,.
"No. I think this can work. We just need to get Kati's opinion on it." I respond, unsure if I'm still entranced or not. Though I have an answer as my mind begins to drift again. Back to...
her... Goddesses help me now...

|-Earlier that morning. Lookout Hill, Prospect Park, 150 West Drive, Brooklyn-|

What's not to love about Prospect Park? We got some sun. Good, fresh air. Trails on trails on trails. It's the perfect place to stretch your legs and go deaf listenin to some Solstice. Which funnily enough, is exactly what I'm doin right now. If I didn't have a tail, you'd be none the wiser to my excitement. But alas, the swishin black hair betrays me. Not that I give a shit. I do, however, give a shit about Kati bein late. She said she'd be here at eight. It's almost nine. Where the hell is she? I start walkin down Lookout Hill and towards the boathouse. Maybe Kati's over there. Certainly wouldn't be a bad place to start lookin for her.

I arrive at the boathouse in like, ten minutes.? Maybe nine. I don't know. I've always been a fast walker. *Brisk* some might say. Particularly in a soft Irish accent. But that's besides the point. I'm here at the boathouse, and I don't see Kati. So I start lookin around. Maybe she's in the shade and I

don't see her. Maybe I'm an idiot and came to the wrong park. Wouldn't that be a shitty thing to do. Confuse *Prospect Park* with *Crotona Park*. Totally haven't done that before. *No Bronxite would ever do that*. But then I think I hear somethin. So I pause my music, *forgive me* *Warbringer*, take my earbuds out of my big ass ears and look around. You see, we umas have got better hearin than humans, so I can easily tell who it was and where they are. I then hear it again, and it sounds familiar. Might be Kati. I turn around and see her approachin, seemingly very confused to see me.

"How... How did you get here... *Before me*?" She asks as she reaches me, still unsure as to how a beat her to Brooklyn, though I feel it should be *pretty obvious*.
"You're an hour late. That's how." I respond, watchin as she gets even more confused.
"An hour late? I said I'd be here at nine." I then take out my phone and check my messages. No. She said eight. No way she- I stand corrected. Lookin at the text, she... *She did say nine*. I swear I'm intelligent. Regardless, I put my phone away and ask her about this little outin.
"So... Any reason we're out here?" I ask, pickin at her brain. She didn't say why we're out here. I want to find out.
"Just trying to clear my head. Thought you might be able to help." She responds. But I'm not buyin it. Not for a second. There's somethin else at play.
"That's the motive. Why *Brooklyn*? Why not Crotona or Claremont Park?" I ask, tryin to figure out more. But Kati doesn't budge. Red flag #1. Then she starts walkin north, like she's headin for the zoo. That, or the conservatory. Best to follow.

It was the conservatory. We walked right past the zoo. Well, "zoo". Prospect Park Zoo is fuckin *tiny*. We're actually on Flatbush Avenue, headin down to Empire Boulevard, at which point we'll turn on to Washington. From there, Steinhardt Conservatory. All the while, we are talkin.
"And remind me again how well *that* particular idea panned out." I hear her say, rememberin some stupid shit I did when we were younger. She says it like both of us forgot.
"Excuse me? We were both *tweny-one*. Legal adults.. The fuck else were we supposed to do? Wait for your dad to come home and kick me out for smokin weed? Hell no. I wanted to make brownies and I had a nug. Shit happens." Context: I nearly burnt down Kati's kitchen tryin to make an edible. She was still livin with her dad at the time, albeit looking for an apartment of her own. Old man lives in Yonkers. Not important. Kati constantly zonin out thinkin about her new... *client*... That is important. And it's concernin me. A lot. She's never been good with romance. But she isn't incapable. Internalizin her own feelins, though? Utter disaster. She can't help it. It's that thing that happens to *every* person who sees a hot woman: You just shut down and fantasize on the spot. This little trip into Brooklyn, at least the conservatory, won't help. I won't make it obvious that I know, but I'll try and help.

"*Calathea wioth*. 'Prayer plant'. Native to Brazil. Huh..." Now that I'm lookin at it, it does kinda look like a dude prayin. Funny. But then I look at Kati, and she seems to be doing a *different* kind of prayer. She's in her head again. Gotta get her out of it. I snap my fingers in front of her, and that seems to do the trick.
"Wah... Met! What-" I interrupt her.
"You were in your head again. Come on, let's ditch this place. You won't get a clear head here." I say, comin up with a very different plan to try and take her mind off things. A plan that involves airtime and a whole lotta screamin.

|-That afternoon. Luna Park, 1000 Surf Avenue-|

Met is *utterly* insane. I wanted peace of mind, not a roller coaster. But I'll be damned if it wasn't fun. I haven't been to Luna Park in *a decade*. I look to my left and see the Spook-A-Rama. Perfect

attraction for Halloween. Too bad it's June and won't hit as hard as it should. Still, pretty fun. It seems Met sees where I'm going and decides to follow.
"Hey wait, aren't you arachnophobic?" I hear him ask, clearly not sure if this is a wise idea.
"No. We've known each other for almost twenty years. It's snakes I don't like. How do you keep forgetting that? Besides, it's a dark ride." I respond as I walk into the attraction's line, Met falling behind me. It doesn't take long for us to get into a car and start moving. It's dark inside. As I expected it to me. We take turn after turn, getting jumped by plastic skeletons and mummy props. But it soon stops. And then we get off. And bid Coney Island's last surviving haunted ride farewell as I feel Met start dragging me west. And I spot what he's marching us towards: Thunderbolt.

We find ourselves close to the raceway, the rev of mini-cart engines blaring in the air, giving me a headache the longer we stand here. But as the headache grows, something catches my attention. Smells like salt, but not from the ocean. It's something else. I turn to see where it's coming from and see a food stall. Now that I'm looking at it, I am kind of hungry. And Met seems to notice. And I can tell he has an idea.
"I see where you're lookin." He says, his eyes now on Salt & Sizzle. He's considering it. I know that look in his eyes. The he starts walking. His decision has been made. And I think I know a big reason why. I follow him into the building, at which point the AC hits both of us, some relief from the heat outside. We find a table, sit down and order our food. And that's when Met pulls out a little bottle from his bag. His HRT. He takes a few pills, grabs his soda, and pops them into his mouth, swallowing soon after.
"So... You forgot to take your testosterone again?" I ask, wanting to get a rise out of him. But I've clearly failed, judging by his confused expression.
"What? No. I take that in the morning and at night. That was my antiestrogen I just swallowed." He says, now making me confused.
"Antiestrogen?" I ask, wanting to know more.
"Yeah. Antiestrogen. Attaches itself to e-receptors to block estrogen from being absorbed. Helps with the testosterone." He starts, not really assuaging my confusion.
"So you... Take it three times a day?" I then ask.
"Yes. I take it three times a day. You can be pretty empty headed, sometimes. What was that about us knowin each other for almost twenty years?" There's the smugness. Can't go a day without it.

We get back to the Thunderbolt after heading out food and that... Well that seems like a bad idea. Going on a roller coaster like Thunderbolt after eating. I'm getting angsty. I don't like it. And Thunderbolt is *scary looking*. But Met insisted. Because of course he did. And, of course, he managed to convince me. Just like he always does. The line moves every so often, the looming metal track coming closer each time. Eventually, we reach the station, and board the car. My heart is pounding. More than it ever has. Then the car starts moving. It's slow. *Painfully slow*. But then we hit the lift. It's vertical. I close my eyes, but feel Met shake my wrist.
"Don't wimp out on me now." I hear him say as we slowly climb the lift. We crest, then we fall. It's fast, and we immediately go into a loop. It's exhilarating, terrifying and breath taking all at once. The kind of rush you'd get playing chicken in traffic. Then a roll, followed by a heavily banked turn with leads into another inversion that turns us around. What follows are several smaller hills until we hit another roll, and then the brakes. We're done here. And I feel... Really good. That was fun. But I think I've had my fill for the day. We get off, and grab out things, where I check my phone and see a message from Randy.

'Call me as soon as you can. We have a few ideas for the next shoot.'
No rest for the wicked I suppose.

Chapter 8: Matters of the Heart

Chapter Summary

Kati, after seeing Randy's text, calls him later that evening after returning to her Bronx apartment from Coney Island. It's there that she learns the second shoot will just be her and Gold City. No Randy involved. The idea cause Kati to almost shutdown completely, but she devises plans to prevent this from happening any more. And the baptism by fire occurs when Randy hangs up, and Kati has to call Gold City in order to plan things out, who is finally coming to some kind of understanding with her own feelings, both towards the new partnership and towards Kati as a person. She still is unsure why they are so familiar, but she can ascribe a name to them now.

|-Monday evening. Noonan Towers, 929 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx, New York-|

"It'll just be me and her?" I ask, knowing where my mind will go as the conversation continues.
"Yes. Just you and Gold City. Not my usual MO, but when Tomo made this suggestion, I decided to make some modifications to my playbook." I hear Randy say, his voice calm and sturdy, but also... I don't know. Subterfuge? No. That's not right. It's like... He's trying to hide something but I can't pin down what. Maybe that's a part of the playbook: Make yourself seem weaker than you actually are. No. That's stupid. But there's something that's off. I know I'm not making things up. But no time to dwell on that.
"Tomo? That's her old manager?" I then ask.
"Yes. Not important to this discussion. I want you to go to her apartment, pick her up and then Roosevelt Island in two days to get a feel for the lighthouse again. See if her initial feelings about it were right. I want you there as a second opinion." He says, and that's when my heart starts to pound. Just me and Gold City... Szart... Most már benne vagy, Kati. (Shit... You're in for it now, Kati.)

I breathe, trying to steady myself. I can do this. I've dealt with worse. *Much worse. We don't talk about the disastrous second girlfriend*. Another deep breath. I need to focus.
"What time should I go and get her?" I ask, wanting to figure out more about his plan.
"Morning. But not too early. Gold isn't an early bird." He responds. I... guess that makes things a bit easier. Met's also a late riser, so it's something I'm used to.
"What time does she usually wake up?" I then ask, trying to get a feel for the situation. I don't have to wait long for Randy's response.
"Eight. But she lounges around and takes her time getting ready. So be there by ten." He then sends me a number by text. Ó Istenem... (Oh god...) "What I sent is her number. Text her. Call her. Do whatever. Just formulate a plan."

I feel my entire body starts shaking. Does... Does Gold City know that this has happened? She has to know. There is no way she doesn't. But as I'm about to ask...
"Before you ask: That was her idea." Well, I guess that answers *that* question. "I wouldn't just give out a client's phone number like this if I didn't have permission to." And that explains another thing

that was nagging at my mind. But now... I have to... How am I gonna... Without completely shutting down?

Gyerünk, Kati... Meg tudod csinálni... (Come on, Kati... You can do this...) Don't let this stop you. It's *nothing.* It'll pass by, just like every other infatuation you've had in the past. I *need* to find a way to deal with this. I can't keep locking up like this. Not when it's the bottom line we're talking about. And it starts by simply texting her. It *cannot* be that hard. It just can't be. Or should I call? Then I'd have to hear... Oh no. Repress the thought. ***Repress it***. I can't fold like this. I just can't. I'm stronger than this. I know that I'm stro-
"Kati? You there?" I hear Randy on the other end, completely forgetting I was in a call with him.
"I, uh... Yeah. I'm fine." I respond, totally not sounding suspicious.
"You sure? You were silent for five minutes. I thought the line went dead." He then says, clearly concerned. Five minutes? Valóban? (Really?) I then hear Randy's voice again. "I need to go. I'm meeting with the head of a big fashion blog here in New York tomorrow and Wednesday. Good luck." He then hangs up, leaving me with my thoughts. Just breath. Deep and low. Szedd össze magad. (Collect yourself.) You can do this. It'll be okay. I just... Need some time to think about this.

Five minutes turn into ten. Which then turns into twenty. Which then turns into an hour. I'm frozen. The world keeps spinning and I simply stay in place. Every possible thought goes through my head and I can't stop them. But I *need* to. I can only imagine how pathetic she thinks I am in this moment. Or rather, lack there of. The little icon taunts me. That green circle with the white, vintage phone in the middle. Come on. You can do this... I lift my finger, preparing to touch the button and call Gold City, but I hesitate. What if she's annoyed? Or worse, disappointed? I freeze again. Fear is now getting the better of me. And that's the worst feeling to have in a situation like this. Think of something. *Anything*. My mind races. Disjointed and unsteady until it somehow manages to find a rock. My friends. Mark. Jessica. Met. Met... *Meteor Hammer. Take a page out of his book. Just go for it. Consequences be damned.* The thought hits me like a truck. Before I can give it any more thought, my finger moves, hitting the button. The call starts. And I wait. My heart begins to beat fast. At first, a dull little thud. But over time, it becomes something far more. A set of toms that college marching bands use during a football game. Then the rhythmic slamming of a hammer against an anvil until it becomes this pounding menace that feels like it'll make my ears ring. I can't hear anything save for my heart. The dial tone keeps going while this is happening. Either things go smoothly... or they end in an inferno. I try to steady myself again. Deep breaths. Be és ki. Mély és alacsony. (In and out. Deep and low.) It seems to work but my heart is still racing... and then Gold City actually answers the call.

"Kati, I'm assuming? I was beginning to think you chickened out on me." She says. But she doesn't sound annoyed or angry. Calm. Like she was waiting patiently. Almost... knowing my internal conflict and having faith that I would contact her. Best to make our plans.

|-That same evening. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street, Manhattan-|

I have a name for this. What it is I am feeling: Attraction. The kind you feel when it's someone you fancy in a *certain way*. That much is definite. I can say that without a problem. Just the thought of it causes my tail to sway slightly. I've felt that kind of attraction before, but... never towards another woman. It was always men. This is new. This is uncharted territory. And I have no idea how to navigate these waters because there is still so much about this that I *don't know*: When did this begin? Was it present when I first came across Kati's photography? How can I, someone who was so certain of my sexuality, be so blind-sided by this? And the most pressing question of them all: Why is this so *familiar*?

I roll over onto my back, tail settling stiff against the mattress. I must have felt this way about another girl before. Or at least, something similar. But when? That is the problem. I just... can't seem to recall any moment where I felt something like this. If this has happened before, in my childhood, why am I incapable of remembering it? Is it tied to something that was... traumatic? No. That doesn't make sense in any way. My childhood was good. Not normal by any stretch of the imagination, but it wasn't bad. I was a fairly happy child and I can recall a whole myriad of memories from that time. So why am I drawing a blank on *this*? And *this* specifically?

I don't know how long it's been. It could have been a few minutes or a few hours, but my mind is still racing. Kati... Just what is it about you that I find so attractive? Is it your form? Your eyes? Your smile? The way nerves will get the better of you? It is very cute to see. Maybe it's her personality. The way she seems to lighten any space she walks into. And it's infectious. I can't help but feel whatever she feels at any given moment. I've come to expect that much from the time I've spent with her so far.
...
Perhaps it's a combination of everything I've mentioned and thought about. Or maybe it's none of them and that it's something else entirely. I find myself being partial to the former. The last time I felt this kind of attraction, it was a combination of many factors. I just wish that... it was *truly* mutual. I don't have much time to ruminate on my thoughts when my phone begins to ring. I sit up and search, eventually finding it. It's someone who isn't in my contacts list. But my gut is telling me that I know who it is. I did tell Randy to give her my number so that we can coordinate things. I take the little black box, take a deep breath and answer, setting it on speaker mode.

"Kati, I'm assuming? I was beginning to think you chickened out on me." Is how I open the conversation.
"What? Me? Chicken out? No. Never." I can hear the tension in her voice. That internal conflict of hers is still being fought. She'll make it out, though. I know she will. "So, uh... Randy said that the next shoot will just be me and you. He's not messing with us, is he?" I then hear her ask, wanting to know if that is actually the plan.
"No. That is the plan. Before you ask, no, I don't understand why either." I can tell Kati's not satisfied with my answer, but she doesn't press the issue.
"Oh, well... He, uh... He told me a few things. Not much of an early bird?" She's right. I don't like being up early.
"I prefer to sleep in, yes." I respond, confirming what she was told. "Well, in that case, ten on Wednesday then?"

This call should have ended hours ago, but it just keeps going and going and going. Every time I feel like we've reached the end of the road, a new topic comes up and the motions begin anew. And strangely, I don't mind it. In fact, I welcome it. More than I was ever expecting to. Just as I thought, Kati is a fascinating person: The way she talks about her friends. Her views on life. Her perspective on modeling and why she became a photographer. It's so... *alluring*. And all the while, I feel my heart skip every so often. This truly is attraction that I'm feeling, and for now, I will live with this. I don't want dwell on it. Not yet.

"This 'Met' you know sure sounds... friendly." I say, taking in what Kati has said about one of her friends.
"Well, he never means anything by it. I just wish he didn't sound like an asshole whenever he does it." I hear her chuckle on the other end, clearly remembering this fondly. But I then hear her sigh. This might be the end of the road for now.
"It's... getting pretty late. I should get some sleep." I hear, disappointment evident in her voice. "I'll

swing by at ten on Wednesday. Wear something comfortable. Don't be like Randy with that leather jacket of his."

That statement gets a chuckle out of me. "Noted. I'll see you then. Goodnight." I hang up after saying that, my heart still fluttering. It's one thing to acknowledge that you experience attraction to the same sex. But to accept something like that? I... I don't know if I have the courage. Not yet. I know that I will muster up the courage to accept this, but at this current stage, I can't. It's all... so much. So much to take in. So much to process. Goddesses help me. I truly need it.

Chapter 9: The First Duo Venture

Chapter Summary

Kati makes good on her words and picks up Gold City at ten on Wednesday. From there, the duo head to Roosevelt Island to scout the north-end lighthouse again. Both women have a lot of their minds, especially thoughts towards the other. But they both remember that this is a partnership. Thoughts like that can't be had, unless they want to severely complicate their contract and professional relationships.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

|-Wednesday morning. FDR, Battery Place, Manhattan, New York-|

Wear something comfortable. That's what Kati said. I hope this is up to her standards. It's certainly up to mine. A simple black shirt with a white miniskirt and flats. Nothing fancy. Though I wouldn't be surprised if some people would say otherwise. I sit in the shade of Battery Labyrinth, a small section of a small park across from where my temporary apartment is, waiting for her to show up. It's currently 9:55. It's fine if she's a bit late, but I do prefer her to be punctual. And sure enough, as I start to feel my mind drift, my phone buzzes. I check and see a message from Kati.

'I'm here. You ready?' Is what it reads.
'Yes. I'm over in the Labyrinth. Waiting on you actually.' I respond, waiting for her to come to me once more. Within a few minutes, I see her. Blue denim shorts and a cropped sleeveless shirt with a pair of Converses. I suppose that would be her definition of comfortable. But clearly, what I'm wearing is having an effect on her, judging by her reactions. Something tells me it wasn't quite what she was expecting.

"Woah... That's-" I interrupt her before she can continue.
"You said to 'dress comfortably'. Is there a problem?" I ask, slightly perturbed by her seeming disapproval.
"What? No. It actually fits you." I hear Kati say, launching my heart through the starting gate. But I quickly suppress it. For now. We have important things to do right now. I can't afford to be distracted. Kati starts moving without saying another word, and I take that as my cue to follow her. We make it to her car, a red 2013 Honda Accord. It's quite nice. Small but utilitarian. Comfortable too. And it reminds me of home. Honda is a Japanese company, after all. As soon as we're buckled in, we are on the road towards Queens. It's quiet at first. A bit too quiet. And it's not pleasant. I sneak glances at Kati, not wanting to stare. She's fidgeting. Shaking even. I know I tend to have that effect on people, but she is... how should I put this... *down bad* as Helios would say. I wonder how she is doing? The sound of Kati coughing manages to get my attention, followed by her voice, carrying tones that are sultry, smooth and trembling. Audibly trembling. It's quite endearing, actually.

"So... Roosevelt Island. What's there that caught your eye?" I hear her ask, voice trembling. Though she is fighting it. I'll give her that.
"The lighthouse at the north end of the island." I respond, but Kati isn't quite convinced.
"The lighthouse? Why not the Memorial Hospital or the Room at the south end?" She asks in succession.
"It was Randy's idea. He never elaborated." I say. He didn't tell me. Just said that it seemed like a good location and backdrop. Silence falls again as Kati drives. We travel up the West Street, passing by the World Trade Center as we go. We turn onto Murray Street which then becomes Church. For a few minutes, we stay on Church before turning onto Canal, heading southeast for a while until our next turn, which takes us to Mulberry Stre-
"Do you always voice your thoughts like this?" I hear Kati ask, something that takes me by surprise.
"I, uh... No.?" I respond, unaware that I was voicing my thoughts in that manner. "I was just memorizing the layout of the streets."
"And doing so... verbally?" She continues. "You don't have to do that, Gold. I know the city like the back of my hand." I suppose I should let her drive. She is native to the city, after all. I shouldn't doubt that she knows her way.

"I keep forgetting how small this thing is." I hear Kati say as she gives the lighthouse a once-over. I too look at the building, small and unassuming. I'm still dead-set on having this be the backdrop, but I may be open to other ideas. After all, Kati is here to be a second opinion.
"What do you think?" I ask her, wanting to get that second opinion. She doesn't waste any time, and I get introduced to a new side of her.
"The front side could be good for some opening shots while the back gives a good set with the park behind you. What I want to try is some night shots. The lights from the care center could give a nice back glow without being too overpowering." She says, pointing to various places around the lighthouse. No wonder her shots are phenomenal. Her eye is simply *divine*. It makes me wonder what else she can see. Maybe things... that others can't... quite see... My mind starts racing. Thoughts that I really shouldn't be having in this moment. How does she see me? Just as another pretty face? I wouldn't be surprised but her reactions to certain things... It suggests something more. I still feel uncomfortable making assumptions about her sexuality but, maybe... Maybe it's because Kati feels some kind of way towards me. A *certain* kind of way. And that's why she's so fidgety around me. My thoughts then get interrupted as I hear Kati speak again.

"Wish we could get permission to actually *go inside* the light. I can only imagine what those shots could look like." I hear her say, her gaze affixed to the top of the lighthouse. I find myself thinking about that too, which then turns into quasi-romantic fantasies that I quickly block out. Not repressing, just setting them aside. There is a time and place for those kinds of thoughts. And this is neither of those.
"I can ask Randy. He probably knows someone who can pull certain strings that could get us up there." I say, liking the idea of a few shots on that balcony. That could be very nice, especially with the nighttime Manhattan skyline behind me. That's what we'll do, if we're permitted. Try to get up on the lighthouse's balcony and take the photoshoot. All I need to do is ask Randy.

|-Later that day. Bel Aire Diner, 31-91 21st Street, Queens-|



What I'd give to hear that laugh of hers... Those sweet tones that enter my ears, tickling my brain in all the right but naughty ways... Minden nap minden másodpercében... Hogyan tehetem ezt valósággá... (Every second of every day... How can I make that a reality...) And then I'm taken out of it. Mercifully. The only caveat is that it's the sweet voice I've been listening to that does it.

"Oh, the food is here. G... Guy... What is it called again?" I hear her ask, fumbling the pronunciation.
"Gyros. Ye-rohs." I say, mind still racing with my earlier thoughts.
"Ye-rohs. Ye... Rohs... Doesn't quite roll off the tongue, does it? And how is that the pronunciation?" I hear her ask. I better get this concluded before someone hears her."
"It's Greek." Seems Gold's interest has been piqued more than it already has been.
"Greek? Don't think I've ever had Greek food before." She says as she starts eating the gyro in front of her. I start to eat mine too, mostly to try and block out the thoughts in my head. Anything to prevent them. I take a bite, and it's pretty good. I've always loved Mediterranean food. Greek especially. But as I chew, I glance at Gold City, and the thoughts come flooding in.

The way the light reflects off her hair...
Stop.
How the sun gets caught in her eyes...
No.
Those plump limps...
Repress it. Repress. It.

I'm probably shaking from that bout of mental torment. I wouldn't be surprised. I just hope Gold didn't notice. That she's too preoccupied with the Mediterranean feast we have in front of us. I take another bite, hoping it will block out these thoughts. I don't want to ruin this. Especially so early. We've only had *one shoot* so far. I just need to ke-

"You look pale. Is everything okay?" I hear her ask, interrupting my thoughts. She's noticed...
"I, uh... Yeah. I'm fine." I respond, not wanting her to start worrying. That's the *last* thing I want to have happen.
"Are you sure? You're shaking." She then says. I need to think of something and quick.
"I get cold flashes. Can't really help it." That came out too fast. But it seems to have assuaged her. It's also true, but this is most definitely *not* a cold flash. This is me trying to keep unprofessional thoughts out of my head. Unprofessional thoughts about a woman that I barely even know. Yet here we are. With how well we seem to be getting along, you'd think we were dating. Me and Gold City... Dating... Oh no. ***Repress that. Now.***

The conversation continues on for a good while, shifting topics like the waves on Rockaway Beach. It's weird, honestly. How easily we can talk like this. I don't feel... antsy. Though now that I'm thinking about it, I feel myself start to shake. I gotta control that. Get a hold of myself. Focus on the here and now. But focusing on the moment is hard to do when you're a disaster of a woman sitting across someone as beautiful as Gold City. Someone who seems so... perfect in every way yet is still as flawed as me. Someone who just wants to be comfortable with another person... Hogy fogom kibírni ezt az egész évet? (How am I going to make it through a whole year like this?) But once again, that silky voice interrupts my thoughts.

"So... any other outing ideas or was this going to be a one-off?" It takes me by surprise. This was a spur of the moment idea. I... I didn't expect her to take it *this* way.
"I, uh... I mean, if you'd be okay with it..." I say, fumbling through my words. I can only imagine how pathetic I sound to her. But once again, I'm surprised. She doesn't sound condescending with her response.
"I wouldn't mind. But given what we'll be doing for the next year I don't think it will be a regular thing that happens." I don't know if what I'm seeing is real or just my mind messing with me, but Gold looks like she's blushing. It's subtle, almost too subtle, but I manage to see it in the afternoon sunlight. And then... *the flood*. All potential futures are hitting my head all at once and I can't process it all. Not right now. Does she... is it in *that* way? It can't be. This is just Gold City wanting to habituate herself to me. There's now way that... someone like Gold City could... be with a disaster like me... ***No. Stop. Not now. Not ever. Focus.*** It snaps me back to reality in an instant. I take a quick look around. Was it a few minutes or just a few seconds? I don't get time to figure it out when I hear Gold's voice again.
"I guess it'll just be an 'if it happens' kind of thing, if that's alright." I take a deep breath before I respond, voice more solid than it has been since we got here.
"If it happens... I don't see a problem. Just have to see if we'll both have time." Before I can continue my thoughts, I feel my phone buzz in my pocket. Someone's texted me. Probably Met. So you can imagine my face when I see that it's from Mark. Mark? I'm usually the one texting *him*. Not the other way around. I unlock my phone so I can check, and feel my heart sink into my stomach.

'So... how's the date going?'
I swear to God, I'm going to kill this man.

I quickly look up at Gold City, who seems a bit concerned by this change in mood. "Something wrong?" I hear her ask.
"Not really. But I think we should be going. You do need to see if Randy can get us *in* the lighthouse after all." I then stand, taking some of my food and putting it in a box. Gold does the

same and after that, we walk back to my car, where I'll take her back to her apartment... and then find Mark so I can beat him over the head.

Chapter End Notes

Art by Torigatrigger

Chapter 10: Distractions, Plans and Discoveries

Chapter Summary

> Kati has a chip on her shoulder after Mark teases her about spending time with Gold City outside of their work. But instead of skinning Mark alive, the offender manages to suggest a more peaceful solution to their problem, which all parties agree to. They then head into Manhattan and meet up with Met at a Dave & Buster's to blow off some steam, but the success can only work for so long.
>
> Gold City makes good on her statements made earlier in the day and contacts Randy about potentially getting into the lighthouse on Roosevelt Island. While she explains her plans, her mind drifts back to earlier in the day, that late lunch with Kati. How it made her feel. With it in mind, Gold starts to try and figure out why the feeling of attraction is so familiar, leading to some interesting rediscoveries.

|-Wednesday evening. 38th Sixth Apartments, 38 6th Avenue, Brooklyn, New York-|

I swear, when I get my hands on Mark... Oh, the nerve that asshole has. I know for a **fact** that Met showed him how to be a smug prick. He's getting some too after this. I just need to get to Mark's apartment. 38th Sixth Apartment. I park by the sidewalk and get out of my car. I walk up to the building and enter, making my way to the elevator which I use to get up to the seventh floor. I then march my way to Mark's apartment. Seven 'o six. I knock on the door and hear Jessica's voice first.

"Arrah, now, is that Met or Kati?" I hear her ask Mark.
"Uh... I dunno whatcha mean, Jessicuh." Is Mark's response. "Open the damn door, Mark." I say, knocking again.
"Oh, Jaysus... She sounds fairly cracked." I hear Jessica say through the door, followed by footfalls. Presumably her coming to let me in followed by quicker steps which I assume to be Mark trying to stop her. But he fails. The door opens and I throw my shoe at Mark, missing him by an inch.
"Ay yo, jeez! Lookit, LOOKIT! I didn't mean nuttin' by it, I swear! OH FUHK!" He dives behind the couch in an attempt to shield himself. But it won't work. I jump on the sofa and start dragging him out from behind it, all while Jessica laughs. This isn't the first time me or her have had to do something like this because of what Mark or Met have said to us. But this time, Jessica seems to take Mark's side.
"Ah, now, you might be gettin' a wee bit carried away there, Kati. Why don't you take a step back, have a breath? Surely we can sort this out with a bit of talkin'." It's really, *really* hard to not listen to Jessica. If this little band of idiots I call friends had someone who made sure things didn't get out of hand, it's her. I step off the couch and start breathing. Deep and low. Slow and steady. Make no mistake, I'm still pissed. Just not homicidal. I then watch as Mark sheepishly comes out of his little den, face still red with panic.

"Is it safe ta come outta da hidey-hole?" He asks, still partially hiding.
"Unless I change my mind, yes." I tell him, ready to chuck my other shoe at him if need be. But something tells me that won't happen. So I go to grab the Chuck Taylor that's already on the floor

and slip it back on. I then hear Mark speak up again.
"Aight, so uh... How 'bout we go... blow off some steam, yeah? I heah Met's goin' to dat Dave & Bustah's in Manhattan. We could join 'im." That's... not really a bad idea. Might get me to make peace with Mark after his little *stunt*.
"I don't reckon I've ever been to one meself. We should go. Give Met some company, and all." Jessica says as she heads to her room. Probably getting her sho- Wait, that was Mark's room? Are... Are they dating now? When did that start? Am I really that dense? Never-mind that. We've got an arcade to tear up. I grab my things and start heading down the hall, shouting in the meantime.

"I'll meet you two lovebirds there!" And then I get a response from Mark.
"HOW DA FUHK YOUSE JUST NOW NOTICE?!" I pay it no heed, though. Call the elevator. Wait a minute while it ascends. Door opens. In I go and then... I descend.

It's loud. Very loud. The sound of games and good times is *everywhere*. But the energy that it's exuding ecstatic. So much that it's hard not to get pulled into all of it. But there's one thing missing: Met. We haven't seen him at all tonight. Mark said he was coming here, right? I nudge the Brooklyn jackass to get his attention, and it seems I succeed.

"What's da problem? Ya ain't havin' a good time?" He asks, thinking I'm still trying to kill him by the way his voice sounds.
"What? No. Where's Met? I thought we'd see him by now." I say, worried that something may have happened. But the feeling of hands on my shoulders puts those ideas out of my mind.
"What's up?" I turn around and see Met, black hair sleek as ever. Ears standing tall and he's got... Why does he have a bandage on his shoulder?

"Met? You're not-" I go to say before Mark's voice overpowers me.
"Ay yo, holy shit! Dis guy's got some tatt's on 'im." Mark's interruption gets everyone's attention as he sees the bandage on Met's shoulder. He then walks over and slaps it.
"OW! The fuck?!" Met looks like he's getting ready to punch Mark. What I'd give to see that.
"Ay, shit... Ya just got dun *today*." Mark responds, showing his clear lack of observational skills to all of us once again.
"No shit, you idiot. That's why I've still got a *bandage* on it. AND DON'T DISRESPECT EDDIE!" Am I hearing things? Or does Met sound kinda... spacey? He's not high right now, is he? Wait, wouldn't that mess with his HRT?

"Met... Are you...-" He interrupts me before I can continue.
"Only messes with the hormones under certain conditions. This won't cause any of them." I've learned better than to question his logic by this point. I mean, he is trans. He *would* and frankly *should* know this information. Without any other words, Met starts leading us through the place, passing by machines and games without much of a thought. I guess he's already got something in mind.

"Air hockey? Really? Dat's what we're startin' wit'?" Mark says, clearly not amused by the sight.
"Arr ye scared now, thinkin' you might just lose?" Jessica says, hand still within his. Seems that gets Mark riled up. He slips his tokens in and stands opposite of Met, intent on winning for once. The game starts, and Mark has a good opening, but it becomes apparent pretty quick that he is still out of his league. Met is just... way too good at this game. I would know. I've lost track just how many times I've lost to him. The two keep playing, Mark making some good defense but Met is just *too good*. The points start to pile up and eventually, it ends. 10-1. Wasn't even close. We move through the place again, playing games here and there. Nearly makes me forget earlier. How I

wanted to kill Mark for saying I was out on a date with Gold City. Oh god... Mit tettem? (What have I done?) The thoughts come back with a vengeance. They claw at my mind.

Those lips...
Stop.
What do they feel like...
No. Not here.

The sound of a booth snaps me out of this. Rampage. It catches my eye. Seems to catch Met's as well. Mark and Jessica too. Guess I'll get some reprieve after all. Might as well put in the tokens.

|-That same evening. Flatiron Building, 175 5th Avenue-|

swish
swish
swish

I'm still excited, heart still thumping. I need to keep my tail under wraps. At this rate, I'll accidentally knock something over. Maybe break it too. Can't have that happen. A lot of this looks to be *really* expensive. I approach the apartment door and knock before I start to hear shuffling from behind it, at which point the door swings open.
"Oh, City. Didn't know you were coming to see me." Randy says, surprised to see me at his apartment. Regardless of his confusion, he gestures for me to enter, and as I do, my mind drifts back to earlier in the day. I *know* it was simply a spur of the moment decision on Kati's part. So why does it feel like something more? I'm still trying to make sense of this all. But I have made progress. It's attraction I'm feeling towards her and I *think* I know where this began. Emphasis on *think*: I couldn't have been older than twelve. And it must've been in Hokkaido. But why was I there? Why was I that far north? Was I visiting family that still lived there? And who was the object of my affection during this time? Who caught turned my head and caught my eye? I know it was another girl. It had to have been, otherwise what I'm feeling right now wouldn't be so familiar.

"Hey." The sound of Randy's fingers snapping gets me out of my head. I turn to acknowledge him, ready for any questions he might have.
"Any reason you've come here in person? This has to be important if it's not over a text or phone call." He says, wanting a concrete answer. And I give it to him.
"Do you think it would be possible to get me and Kati on the lighthouse's balcony?" He looks at me, more confused than when I got here.
"Why?" Is the only thing he can muster.
"Kati wants to get some shots from up there. Do you know anyone who can get us access?" I ask again, wanting my own answer. Randy stays silent for a few seconds, the gears in his head turning. I don't think he was expecting me to ask something like this. Or for Kati to make that kind of suggestion. And here I thought that this man was prepared for any eventuality. Seems that I was wrong. He's still deliberating, by the way. Opening and closing his mouth as he thinks.

"I'll... see what I can do. But I can't make any promises." He says, finally giving me a response. But I don't feel satisfied with it. I feel like prodding more.
"Why not? You've been able to keep *every* promise you've made me so far. Why is this any different?" I ask, wanting to get more out of him.
"Because there's no guarantee the LPC will respond. They see an email or missed phone call from me and figure out what I do: that I'm a manager for models, primarily *foreign* models working here in the US, they'll think I'm trying to 'vandalize' the lighthouse. It *is* a designated landmark in the

city. Remember that." He tells me, but there's something else on his mind. Something that he soon lets me know. "But I'll need to contact the LPC anyway just to get permission to use the lighthouse as a backdrop."
"How long do you think it'll be before they respond?" I then ask.
"Like I said, there's no guarantee I'll even get a response. This is a process. Bear with me." Randy takes a deep breath before speaking again.

"Was there anything else on your mind? Doesn't have to be related to our work. Like, anything you might want for your apartment that you can't find anywhere else." He says, and the thought gives me an idea. As much as I prefer running to my destinations, being an uma and all, New York isn't exactly designed with my demographic in mind. But at the same time... It would sound odd, wouldn't it? Ah, what the hell? No time like the present. Might as well ask him.
"A car. Do you think you could get me a car?" I say, voice solid but... a part of me thinks the inner conflict is present in my tone. Whether it's the awkwardness of asking for a car as an uma or the lingering thoughts on my attraction to Kati, I feel like it's there in my voice. But Randy either doesn't notice it or, most likely, doesn't care. No doubt he's had similar experiences with past clients.
"A car? Can... Can you even drive?" I... hadn't thought about that. For a brief moment, I forget the special lessons one Maruzensky gave me before my graduation. Lessons I'll forever be grateful for.
"Yes. Funnily enough." I pause, thinking about what kind of vehicle would suit me before I come to a decision. "I want a 1976 Toyota Celica. My Père owned one when I was a kid. It..." Randy sees where I'm going with that thought.
"Say no more. More than happy to loan one of my own while you're here in the US. I like to collect vintage Japanese cars. Never thought it would come around like this, though." He chuckles at the thought, and I find myself laughing with him. It's hard not to when his laugh is as infectious as it is.
Three weeks and already my life has changed in ways that I never thought possible. And the strangest part is that I don't mind these changes. Not one bit. In fact: I welcome them. It's stupid to be so stubborn in it's face. And I don't want to be stubborn. Not like père. As I leave Randy's apartment, I find my mind wandering again. Random, disconnected thoughts until they drift back towards Kati again. If Randy is able to, we'll be on that balcony. And I can only imagine what those photos will look like. With that park behind me to the south or the Manhattan skyline to the west. I'm going to sit and dwell on these thought. On Kati. I think I can let professionalism go for now. I don't mind it.

Chapter 11: To Get a View

Chapter Summary

Randy meets with the LCP in southern Manhattan to discuss using the Roosevelt Island light as a backdrop, and potentially gaining access to it's balcony. While doing so, his thoughts about New York and his own personal philosophies being to voice themselves, albeit not aloud and within his head. When he finishes his negotiations, he heads out in Manhattan to scout for more locations for future shoots, placing his trust with Gold City and Kati to capably handle themselves.

The duo, meanwhile, find themselves discussing the shoot on their own time in Central Park. Kati, however, finds herself at war with her own mind, the slightest gesture being enough to send the thoughts rushing in. But she manages to find a way to steady herself. At least, a way she hopes will steady herself.

|-Friday morning. Home Life Building, 256 Broadway, Manhattan, New York-|

Just breathe.
Deep and easy now. In, then out.
Do that agin. Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin. Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin.

In-person, huh? Couldn't have just shot me a email or called? Reckon that's what I get for shoppin' way up north in Yankee land. Don't matter none no more. Just head on in yonder. Chat with the fella, and get them papers filed. Ain't no thang. So why's it *feelin'* like a whole bother? I've dealt with stuff like this afore without no fuss. Reckon it's just a piece that's still holdin' a grudge. Can't rightly fault it...
"Oh, you must be Mr. Jenkins. Mr. Caldwell is waiting for you. 11th floor." The receptionist says, pointin' me towards the 'levator. I 'preciate the thought, but it's plain as day where they at.
"Thank you." That's about all I got in me. Wanna git on outta here right quick. Just need to git this here paper signed, then I'm headin' back to Gold City and Kati. Don't wanna dawdle 'round no more than I gotta. I mosey on over to the 'levator and call 'er down. I wait just a spell while it comes on down, then the doors slide open and I hop on in, mashin' the button for the 'leventh floor as I do. Doors slam shut right quick, and I feel 'er start climbin', takin' me on up where I gotta go.

Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin. Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin.

Don't take but a minute for the elevator to get on up to the 'leventh floor. That's where I'm gonna find the LPC at in this here building. And the office I'm lookin' for oughta be a right down yonder from the elevator. I hauled off down the hall, headin' towards the office I needed to be at. Directly, I moseyed on up to the office and rapped on the door.
"Come in." I hear back from the other side, givin' me the go-ahead to open up the door, which I do. There's this fella sittin' at his desk with hardly no hair and a tan suit on. Reckon it's time to get this done. I walked on in the office and eased myself down right there across from the fella, took a good, deep breath 'fore I said nothin'.
"I assume you're Mr. Caldwell?" I reckon it's him I'm lookin' for, and I ain't even gotta ask. "Yes. Mr. Jenkins, I presume?" He answers, pointin' at hisself and me.
"I am he, yes. Let's get to business." I swan, I'm ready to get this over with. I'd druther not waste my time with all this here red tape. Too much paper shufflin'. Too much fancy-pantsin' around. I'm fixin' to cut straight to the chase. No chaser. Honest as the day is long. Caldwell ain't loafin', he's grabbin' them papers. I'm watchin' 'em come up on the screen, one right after the other.
"This is everything pertaining to the light itself: Date of commission. Date of construction. Date of opening and closing. Over here is everything pertaining to it's status as a city landmark. You mentioned you want access to the balcony? We haven't allowed anyone who isn't a maintenance worker up there since the lighthouse was decommissioned." He's explainin', but I can tell he ain't quite caught on to why I'm sittin' here. Reckon it's time to spill the beans, then.
"You're aware I work with models, right?" I'm askin', watchin' his face all twist up and change. He goes from lookin' dumbfounded to right aggravated, then back to lost as he's tryin' to figure out what I just told him. Then Caldwell, he sucks in a whole heap of air 'fore he speaks up again.

"So... you're a modeling manager?" He’s askin', his voice all shaky, still tryin' to wrap his head 'round it. Got that look like a dog watchin' cars. Can't fault the feller. He ain't likely seen nothin' like this 'fore. Most folks in Caldwell's spot wouldn't have a clue, bless their hearts. Dealing with somebody that works with them models. But then he's gotta deal with a modelin' manager that looks just like *me*. "Yes. Foreign and domestic. Male, female and everything in between. Human and uma. Is that going to be a problem?" I poke around, feelin' he's got some kinda hestitation 'bout what I'm fixin' to tell him. Wanna make sure ain't no trouble. Nothin' shady. Nothin' that'll git in the way.
"Uh... No. It shouldn't be, at least. We just want to make sure the structure is respected." He says, his voice still kinda shaky. These here suit-and-tie fellers never do get the picture, bless their hearts. Nor do they reckon someone like me could give a hoot 'bout somethin' with history to it. Then again, I ain't expectin' that kinda fancy thinkin' from no damn Yankee.
"Anything that gets knocked out of place will be returned. Anything damaged fixed to the best of our abilities, if that is what you're concerned with." I answer, even though I know good and well he ain't gonna believe a word I say 'til he sees it with his own two eyes. Shoot, even then he probably won't buy it. Just one more reason not to put no stock in them fancy-pants fellers.

Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin. Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin.

Stepping out, that muggy summer air just clobbers you. Now, I'm used to damp weather, but this? How can a city full of steel, concrete, and glass be so damn wet? Hot too, I reckon. Just don't get it. Don't think I ever will. I'm headed over to my car, that fine black and silver Camaro. The dream right there. I slide on into the driver's side and get on down the road. But I ain't headin' towards the

Flatiron. Ain't lookin' to go home jes' yet. Now that we got the go-ahead to use that ol' lighthouse balcony, I reckon I can start sniffin' 'round for some other shoot ideas. And I got me a few: First off's the Washin'ton Square Arch. Seein' as how NYU's mostly still on summer break, we oughta have free reign to use that arch as a backdrop without no trouble. Leastways, that's the idea. Another spot I was thinkin' 'bout is the fountain over yonder in Lincoln Park, but that's over in Jersey City. Might make things kinda hairy, but it's still worth a shot.

I drove a bit 'til I got up near the north side of NYU's grounds. Parked right on the street and started moseyin' towards Washington Park. 'Fore you know it, I could see that there arch. Good deal. This'll do just fine. I took a look-see at what all was around it: Stone pavers. Trees lined up on the sides of the walkways. That fountain right smack-dab in the middle of the park. Looks good to me. We can make use of this, alright. I'm scratchin' down my notes on this lil' pad I toted 'fore I stash it, then I pull out my cell. I scroll through my contacts and see Gold City sittin' right there. Might as well let 'er know we're lookin' good. 'Fore you know it, the message is done and sent. Now, I'm just waitin' on her to holler back.

'We're in the clear. You and Kati can use the light's balcony. But a representative from the LPC is going to be there to make sure that nothing gets *damaged*. As if you would be capable of damaging anything. I trust you enough to know otherwise.' I'm sittin' here a spell, watchin' that lil' ol' bubble pop up, then go away, then come back as she's tryin' to figure out what to say. Takes her a hot minute, but Gold finally texts me back.
'We can work with that. When were you wanting me and Kati to head back out there?' I start typin' out my answer soon as I'm done readin'.
'Tuesday afternoon. That was the best availability. So you'll have a few days to prepare. I'll see you when we develop the photos and send them to T Magazine. You should already have some of the pieces they provided.' That's what I shot her, waitin' on her to say somethin' back. Which she did here directly.
'They're a bit... *much* but I can work with them. I'll get Kati's opinions on what will work.' I reckon we ain't gotta beat this thing to death no more. I know Gold's smart enough to sort things out herself. I trust her judgment on that, I surely do. So, I'm gonna leave it at that, just turn tail and head on back to my car. But I'll take one last gander at that arch. Yeah, this'll do. This here'll work just fine.

Breathe.
Deep and easy.
In, then out. Do that agin. Breathe.
Deep and easy. In, then out.
Do that agin.
Reckon it's about time to be headin' on back home.

|-Friday afternoon. Tavern on the Green, West 67th Street, Central Park-|

"One platter of meatball sliders. We'll have the rest out soon." The waitress says as she walks off. I'd say it's another ten minutes before we get our food, but these sliders should do in the meantime. They smell *amazing*. But not as amazing as Gold's perfume... What is it? Must be something she brought with her from Japan. It smells... floral. I wouldn't be surprised if it's scented like a cherry blossom. But... *Do I ask? Would that be appropriate?* I decide against it, knowing where my mind would go if I did ask. I don't want to take that chance. Not when I've been able to keep things under wraps so far. I do turn to face her, wanting to get some clarity on earlier events from the day.

"So... Tuesday afternoon? That's when we're heading back to Roosevelt Island?" I ask, still not understanding the situation.
"That's what Randy said. Only time available for the LCP representative." Gold responds. LCP representative? Micsoda? (What?)
"R...Representative? Why?" I ask again.
"They want to make sure the lighthouse isn't 'damaged'. As if we had the capabilities to do something like that." Is her next response. Great. Fantasztikus. (Fantastic.) This will just *complicate* things. But at least we still have access to that balcony. So silver-linings, I guess. As I ruminate on these thoughts, I reach over to take one of the sliders, and apparently Gold had a similar idea as our hands brush against each other for a second. She probably didn't think anything of it, but me... Oh nem... (Oh no...)

She's so soft...
No.
I want to hold it...
Stop.
But City's so-
Purge it.

I manage to stop those thoughts before they can start, but now I'm scared that the slightest thing will send my mind off. And since Gold is sitting *right next to me*, she probably saw this entire thing play out in my head. I wouldn't be surprised if she gets weirded out by this whenever it happens. But she doesn't seem to pay it any attention, grabbing a slider and taking a bite out of it, seemingly savoring the flavor.
"Hmm... That's not bad, actually." She murmurs, forgetting manners and speaking with a mouth that is mostly full. She tries not to spit marinara everywhere, and honestly, she's succeeding. Because of course she's succeeding. Miért ne tenné? (Why wouldn't she?) I decide to follow suit and grab a slider for myself, taking a bite not too long after I have it in my hand. Hmm... Yeah, these are pretty good. I grab a few more, but not too many because I don't want to be too full when our actual meals arrive. While we wait, I ask another thing.

"Do you have any idea what you'll be in for the shoot? Did a fashion mag send anything to try, or..." I trail off, my thoughts escaping me as my gaze meets hers. No... Nem, nem, nem...

Focus.
But she's so pretty...
Do not ruin this.
What if she-
Don't get your hopes up

"I received a few articles from T Magazine yesterday. I was hoping you could help me decide which articles go well with each other. If it isn't too much to ask, of course." The sound Gold's voice snaps me out of the trance. If the slightest thing can send my ind off like that, how can I last an entire year with her? How am I going to survive being at war with my own mind? Totál szét vagyok esve... (I'm such a mess...)
"Uh... When could I come over? What would work best for you?" I ask, voice barely there it's trembling so much. You'd have to be completely deaf. Like, deaf since birth, to somehow *not* hear it. But Gold City... she doesn't hear it somehow.
"I was thinking Sunday. It's two days from now and two days from the shoot. It should give us enough time to get everything ready and sorted." She says, either unaware or unbothered by the internal war that is threatening to undo my entire being. How can she do that? Just what is she

pulling off to not be bothered by it in the slightest.
"Sunday? What time?" I follow up, wanting to solidify our plans.
"Would noon work for you?" She asks in return.
"Yeah, that can work." I say, spotting the waitress walking towards out table, food in hand. Time to set this aside for now. I'm starving. So much that I could eat a- Actually, no. I'm not finishing that thought.

"Thanks for getting me out here. Been a while since I was last there at the Tavern." I say as we pass the Ladies Pavilion. It's so small, yet so cute. I can't help but love it.
"Don't mention it. I just thought it would be a nice idea. I liked it the last time we did that. Just you and me. Not really worrying about this whole year-long contract." Gold responds, those sultry tones making this hot and humid weather worth the outing. I really haven't been to the Tavern in a hot minute. Not since... Oh right, *her. She who will not be named.* I'm moving on before I decide to put myself through a different kind of mind fuck. The things Gold City makes me think are bad enough, I don't need *those* memories to be revisited.
"Something wrong?" I hear her ask, once again snapping me out of my own thoughts.
"Uh... no. Nothing's wrong." I respond, maybe a it too quickly, which gives off the impression that something is, in fact, wrong. Something that Gold picks up on.
"Hm-hm... *Sure*... Nothing's wrong *at all*." Oh god... *Why does she need to be so sarcastic like that? And why is it a turn on for me? Miért... (Why...)*

Focus, god dammit.
It's so hard...
We will bring that up.
No...
Then focus.
But Gold...
You forced this.

As if running on autopilot, my mind starts *flooding* with bad memories. All the times pining over another woman has backfired on me. All the times I've been caught like this. It's so sudden and in my metaphorical face that I visibly wince from the mental onslaught. And I do mean visibly, because the next thing I know, I feel someone's hand on my shoulder.
"Hey, is everything alright?" It snaps me out of it. I turn to face Gold City, who looks atrociously concerned. Oh nem... Észrevette... (Oh no... She noticed...) I need to think, and think quick. What can I say that'll be believable? But before I can get anything out, Gold speaks up again.
"I didn't bring back any bad memories, did I? I'm... sorry. I wasn't trying to." How do I respond to this... Should I just... be honest with her? I mean, it *is* the best policy.
"I mean, a little bit... But it's nothing to worry about. It just... happens sometimes." I respond, not wanting her to worry. I mean, we barely know each other. That would be a bit much. But the idea...

Próbáld ezt. (Try this.)
That's... a different voice... And with it, different memories. More... pleasant ones. Ones of me and ápa. Me and Met when we were young. Me and... anya. Woah... Didn't know I remembered that. Once again I find myself in a trance, and once again, Gold City brings me out of it.
"Oh... I'm... I'm sorry to hear that." She says, her voice more reserved. More... subdued. And oddly, I don't find myself getting set off by it. Weird...
"Don't be. You didn't know." I respond, wanting this little outburst to be behind us. So we keep walking in a comfortable, if a bit tense, silence.

We keep walking, but eventually stop in front of the Hayden House, and something tells me that *this* is where we split for today. We're not going in for a tour. I hate that we have to separate, but I know I'll see her again. I kind of have to, but the feeling of disappointment is hard to shake off. Seems Gold might be thinking the same thing.
"Well, I guess we'll have to go our separate ways." She says wish a sigh, a clear sign of how she's feeling.
"Yeah, I guess so. Do you need a ride back to your place or..." I start, before I notice the car she's standing in front of.
"No, I can get there on my own. Thanks for asking though." Gold's response barely registers as I'm still processing what I'm looking at: A blue and red Toyota Celica. '76 model too. Another car my ápa would absolutely lose it over. Where did she get this? Randy. It has to be.
"Where did yo-" Gold interrupts me before I can finish.
"Randy. Who else? I'll see you Sunday." She says as she gets into the driver's seat, eventually driving into the road, heading south towards the World Trade Center while I'm still standing there, completely dumbfounded. I didn't know... that she could drive...

Chapter 12: A Puzzle of Fabrics

Chapter Summary

> Kati finds it difficult to weather the storm in her head. So she takes the opportunity that Met has given and heads to his apartment for dinner, only for that opportunity to be interrupted by Gold City calling her to discuss the next day. What clothes she will wear on Tuesday and what lenses Kati will use at the lighthouse. All while Kati battles her own mind, a fight she feels she has no hope of winning. Gold, for her part, reminisces about her childhood, thinking back on her time growing up in Hokkaido and Ontario, and how this attraction to Kati is familiar.

|-Saturday evening. The Capri, 1700 Grand Concourse, the Bronx, New York-|

Lélegezz Kati. Lélegezz... (Breathe Kati. Breathe...) The sound of something hitting the floor is a constant as I try to steady myself. Jesus... *That's* what T Magazine sent her? I know it's not risque, but god damn, the implication of something can sometimes be more exciting than the actual thing. As I walk, the thumping gets louder. The fact he hasn't once gotten a noise complaint from his neighbors... I reach the door to Met's apartment and knock. I'd be surprised if he hears it. So when the door actually opens...

"Hey, you made it." Met says, his tall frame looming over me like a predator. Good thing he isn't one. The only thing that's a threat here is how loud the music is. Speaking of...

"My life begins at midnight twelve"
"Masturbate to kill myself"
"BLASPHEMER"

Oh... That's just... Wrong...
"What the fuck are you listening to?" It slips out without much thought. And Met looks offended at my question. But it's not Met who gives me an answer.
"DO NOT DISRESPECT SODOM LIKE THAT!" I hear from the kitchen. I guess Met's roommate is in tonight. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever met him. His name is Scott, right? I step into the apartment and see a man with tan skin and long, brown hair. He's tall, but Met still dwarfs him. He's clean shaven, but his arms are *covered* in tattoos. He then turns to face me, introducing himself without prompting.
"Scott Hall. Pleasure you *finally* meet you." He says as he turns his attention back to the stove. Whatever Scott's making, it smells nice. Is that paprika he's using? Judging by the smell...Édesnemes? (Sweet?) I walk over and look into the pot.

"Oh, ez gulyás. (Oh, it's goulash.)" I say as I realize what it is. He's not making this because of this, is he?
"Met said you were Hungarian so I thought 'Fuck it. Doesn't look too hard.' I like to think I succeeded." Scott responds, voice nonchalant. I turn to Met, and he just shrugs. He then grabs a ladle and a bowl intent on eating some of the stew, but Scott shots him a dead-eye.
"Not ready yet. Five more minutes." Met then sets the bowl down and heads to the living room, and I follow him. We sit on the couch and immediately, he can tell that something is bothering me. It's

that kind of sixth sense some people have. He's also an uma. They have heightened senses naturally. Hearing specifically.

"Somethin wrong?" I hear him ask, voice steady. More steady than I've been for the past few weeks.
"No. Why do you ask?" That was a lie. And he can tell. He can *always* tell.
"You don't have to hide shit from me, you know that, right?" He prods gently. But I don't answer. I *can't* answer. And once again, Met seemingly can tell. "I'll back off if it's too much. Meet you where you are when you're ready."
"Thanks..." Is the only thing I can muster. And Met doesn't prod any further. Instead, Scott comes over with bowls of food. The gulyás is served.

I get a spoonful into my mouth... Wow. Igazából nem is rossz. (It's not bad, actually.)
"To your liking?" I hear Scott ask.
"Very much, yes." I answer after swallowing. "Was this the first attempt?"
"I fucked up about five times." He responds, taking a bite for himself, almost spitting it out from the heat coming off of it. It's kind of funny to watch, since Met ends up making the same mistake. Such a stubborn man.

We continue to eat for a while, conversing at the same time. I'm glad that Met convinced me to come over. The food, the company and the music is a welcome reprieve from, well... *everything* from the past week. But that all comes roaring back as I feel my phone start buzzing. Someone's calling me. I take the black box out of my pocket and see the caller ID. Oh nem... (Oh no...) It's Gold City.
"I gotta go real quick." I say as I stand up, not wanting to be suspicious. They seem to not be bothered by it, so I head over to the balcony door, open it, and step out into the summer air of the Bronx. I take a deep breath and answer her call.

"Hey Kati. I just wanted to make sure you remember what's happening tomorrow." Even over the phone, she sounds so calm and confident. Wish *I* had that.
"Uh, yeah, I remember. Around noon, right?" I respond, trying to stay calm.
"Yeah, noon. You saw the pictures I sent?" I hear Gold say, and those images come rushing back into my mind. But before I can start fantasizing...

Don't even think about it.
Gondolj valami másra. (Think about something different.) That would be nice.
Like how much of a fail-
Ez egy kicsit durva, nem gondolod? (That's a bit harsh, don't you think?) Just shut up...

"Those are... a bit much, don't you think?" I say, still trying to comprehend why she was sent those articles.
"Funny. That's what I said to Randy. It's also why you're coming over. I want some help in figuring out what can work together." She responds. How she is able to be so nonchalant about this baffles me. Then again, she *is* a model. *She's* the one who's been in the industry since she was a kid. She's probably used to seeing and being in things like that. I'm not. I'm just a photographer. Speaking of...

"Oh, I forgot to ask: What lenses should I use?" I get the question out calmly, something that surprises me. And I think Gold is surprised by it too.
"It'll be late in the afternoon. Around six. Borderline evening. Got anything that can do well with that kind of lighting?" The question sends my mind racing. What do I have that can work well for

Tuesday? I've got a 24-105mm f/4 lens. Great for landscape shots, close and far, great shots of regular everyday objects too while also getting some good image quality. I also have a 70-200 f/4. Sharp image quality that takes full advantage of the camera's fast focusing time. Then there's the nifty fifty. A reliable workhorse that should be in any photographers arsenal. Maybe I'll bring my camera with me alongside those lenses. Not a bad idea, honestly.
"I've got a few. I'll bring them so that we can figure out what works best." I say, adding another layer for tomorrow. But we'll manage. Too bad I won't get any of those night shots I wanted to see...
"That's fine. Perfect, actually. I'll see you then. Have a good night." That's the last thing I hear before she ends the call. And I feel... empty. Every phone call has lasted at least an hour, going on and on and on. I guess she has other things to take care of and couldn't keep going. That's fine. I don't want to take up her time, but... It's disappointing. I like hearing her voice...

Stop.
Van idő és hely. De nem most. (There's a time and place. But not now.)
Never. There is no time or place.
Uh... Are we...
Azt javaslom, ne legyél ilyen nehézkezű. (I suggest you stop being so heavy-handed.)
Heavy-handed? I'm trying to PROTECT us from harm.
Az érzelmeinek elfojtása SOHA NEM fog megvédeni minket. Ez csak több kárt okoz. (Repressing her emotions will NEVER protect us. It will only cause more harm.)
As if you would know.
Can we not...
How righteous of you. The supposed voice of reason leading her astray.
Soha nem állítottam, hogy Igazságos vagyok. Te írod fel nekem a minőséget. (I never claimed to be righteous. That is you prescribing the quality onto me.)

No matter who's speaking here, I don't get a say in the matter. There's no winning this war, is there?

|-Sunday morning. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street, Manhattan-|

I don't like brushing my tail. It's *so* sensitive. More than other umas. But if I want to keep up appearances... I brush it twice. Once before I shower and once after. I want to get any knots out before I step into the water, starting at the base and slowly working my way to the tip. After that's done, I start the shower and wait until the water gets warm. Once I see steam, I step in, but not before putting my hair up, slide some ear socks on and then put my tail in it's cover. I don't want to get my hair wet just yet. I use bars of soap. Body wash is... Ça me fait prure. (It makes me itchy.) I don't like the feeling. It's like a constant rash that scratching just won't get rid of. But bars? Especially those made with materials like shae butter and cocoa? It's very nice. Keeps my skin smooth, supple and shiny. Comes off well in photos. I lather every inch of my skin that I can, wanting to be thorough. Once I have covered every space I can, I set the bar own and begin to rinse myself off. Once the suds are flowing down the drain, I take a hand towel, place it over the drain and remove my tail cover. The towel prevents hair that comes loose from draining en masse, clogging the drain. I grab my shampoo, pouring out only a little. I don't like to waste shampoo, and it only goes on the scalp, anyway. I start massaging the top of my head, taking care to not accidentally tear into the plastic covering my ears. I make sure that my back is facing *away* from the shower head so that I can get shampoo on my tail. Again, only the base. I don't want to waste shampoo. Once I feel like I've covered enough, I turn around and wash away the used shampoo while reaching for the conditioner. With conditioner, the amount you pour is linked to the length of your hair. I have long hair that goes to my mid back, only a handful of centimeters above the base of my tail. So I have to pour out a lot of conditioner for that alone. I haven't factored in my tail yet. I have the amount I need in my hand and begin to rub them together as if I were washing my hands.

Then, I start running my hands through my hair, going along the length but never touching my scalp. Conditioner does not go there. Much like how shampoo doesn't go beyond the scalp. Once I feel like I've done enough, I move to my tail, repeating the same motions.Once all of that is done, I rinse off, taking a deep breath as the steam surrounds me.

I shut the water off after wringing out the towel, hanging it nearby so it can dry off until I inevitably repeat this cycle. I take another deep breath before I step out, wanting a clear head. Or as clear of a head as I can get. Hokkaido... Who was I infatuated with while I was there? I'm still trying to figure out this odd memory. It is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the source of this attraction I feel towards Kati. And it wasn't a random visit. Me and my mother had moved back to Japan and she split from my Père. It's been a while since I talked to him. Or was in Oshawa. I really miss Canada sometimes. But that's neither here nor there. I couldn't have been a teenager yet. I started modeling not too long after I turned 14. I was still going to school when this happened. But who was the girl? I can't seem to remember a face. Just that I felt something for another girl. Not a wanting for friendship. Something more. Something... romantic. Of course, I didn't understand it at the time and passed it off as a one time occurrence. Especially since I don't remember seeing that girl again. The more I try to understand this... the more questions are raised. It's... frustrating. Hijō ni iraira shimasu. (Extremely frustrating.) I just can't quite put the pieces together and it is draining.

Okay... Take a step back and breathe. I start drying off and put on some underwear before I head back into the bedroom. The clothes that T Magazine sent me are already in the living room, I made sure of that last night. But I can't be in my skivvies when Kati gets here. I can only imagine what that would do to her. I want to have *some* clothing on before we start judging the pieces. I grab my phone to check the time. 11:00 AM. She gets here in an hour. I quickly head to my wardrobe and pick out clothes at random. I don't particularly care about what I grab. I'm going to be swapping out of them regularly, so what's the point in having them be fancy? Utilitarian isn't my ethos, but I'd be delusional to think it isn't useful every now and then, especially in a moment like this. Ah, this should work. Just a simple grey shirt and black slacks. Makes me feel like a mannequin. Which, admittedly, I am being this afternoon, for all intents and purposes. I slide into the clothing and head into the kitchen for a light breakfast. I don't want it to be too heavy, just some toast and eggs. I quickly make my breakfast and eat, hearing a text tone from my phone as I finish. Kati must be here. I walk over to the coffee table and grab the little box, seeing the message.

'I'm here. What floor are you on?' It reads. I look at the time and see that it's 11:30. Early once again. I won't lie, that tendency of hers is growing on me. It means that Kati is reliable and consistent. I like that.
'17th floor. Unit 1708. I have everything ready and set up in the living room.' Is what I send her in response. Within a few minutes of sending that response, I hear someone knock on the door. I make my way there and p[en it, seeing Kati with a bag on her shoulder. I'm assuming that her camera and the lenses are in there.
"Punctual, as always." I tell her, smiling as I do so.
"Well, you said be here at noon." She responds, not knowing it isn't noon yet.
"And it's 11:34. Come in. Let's get started. Oh, take off your shoes too." I start walking from the door as I get the statement out. I hear her soft footsteps behind me, indicating that she took off her shoes, and as we reach the living room...

"Oh... these are..." I hear Kati start, but she doesn't quite finish the statement.
"Not as risque as you thought?" I ask, knowing that the more... *aggressive* pieces let's say, are hidden away. I don't want to be wearing those. Not yet at least. I can tell that Kati has a lot on her mind looking at the skirts and dresses. And I think I know what she's thinking.
"I know. The *suggestion* of something can sometimes be more arousing than the thing itself. I had

similar thoughts." I tell her, wanting it to be clear that it's alright to think that way sometimes. I find myself having those thoughts more and more. But I set them aside. Professionalism and all that.

We start going over some of the pieces I've arrayed on the sofa. One piece we keep coming back to is this red sundress. It's slim and tight, but I think it will fit my form quite well.
"Want to try it? See how it fits?" I hear Kati ask. It's tempting, but I'm torn. As much as I like it, there are some other pieces that catch my eye.
"What about these four?" I say as I pull a blue bikini top, a black sarong, white swim shorts and a see- through summer jacket with floral patterns. Reminds me of some things Helios would wear during the summer. I wouldn't be surprised if she still does every now and then. I wonder how she's been...
"Hmm... It could work. Not really sold on the color of the sarong. Do you have another?" She says, eyes going between me and the pieces I've gathered. I like the black one, but just to be sure, I search and find another. It's red, and the second I bring it over to the sofa, Kati seems to have some ideas.
"That... looks better. Goes well with the blue. Not that the black didn't. It's just that-" "Red and blue work well together." I interrupt, seeing where it was she was going.

We keep discussing what can work well together, me slipping in and out of the pieces with every suggestion. We eventually settle on the blue bikini top, the red sarong and some white shorts. I'm amazed. I never thought that she would have such an eye for fashion. Guess I should expect more surprise from Kati going forward. The pieces also remind me of the Boho Flare shoot. I liked that shoot. It was nice. Glad I was able to keep the clothes, too. But my reminiscing is cut short when I hear Kati ask another question.
"Did they send footwear? Obviously you're not going up there barefoot." I find myself chuckling at that statement.
"No. They sent a few pairs." I say as I grab some of the shoes I was sent. It's mostly sandals. Makes sense given the clothes I was sent. I set them on the sofa and we start our discussion again.
"Those might be a bit much. The heel would also be a pain as well with the stairs." I hear Kati say, the concern evident in her voice.
"But it's only fifty feet tall." I add before Kati can continue speaking.
"And those steps are steep. A heeled shoe would make falling too much of a possibility." She goes on, the concern still there. Maybe I should listen. I take the heeled shoes off the sofa, leaving only flats. From there, we discuss further.

"These look nice. A bit bulky but they should be serviceable." I hear Kati say as she eyes one of the pairs. They're simple, brown sandals with a slight platform. But it shouldn't be an issue. At least, I hope it won't be an issue. I take the shoes and slip them on, getting a feel for them as I walk around the living room. They're nice. Fit well. Not too tight. Not too loose. Just right. And the sole is sturdy. "Thoughts?" I hear Kati ask, her eyes following me as I walk.
"These are nice. I like them." I respond, bouncing on my heels to test them. Well balanced. I like that. I look to Kati, seeking some validation and she seems to give it to me.
"Is that what you're going with?" She then asks as if she were judging me.
"Yes. Is that a problem?" I counter, wanting to pick her brain.
"Not at all. They look good on you." The compliment makes me blush slightly. I try to hide it, not just to shield myself from embarrassment, but also to avoid Kati shutting down. I think seeing me blush from something she said would utterly destroy her. Let's avoid that if possible. A tense silence then falls in the room. One that quickly becomes uncomfortable. One of us needs to speak, but who will it be? Who will break the ice? It's tense. Too tense. Something will inevitably break. And something does.

"So... the lenses. We should probably test those out." I hear Kati say, making me remember that she did bring her camera with her. She goes to grab her camera bag, coming back in quick succession with it, taking out her camera and the lenses when she sits down in a chair.
"Alright, this is the 70-200 f/4. Want to try it first?" I hear her ask as she screws the lens into place. I nod, wanting to see how the shot looks. I go and stand by the window, which gets a confused expression to form on Kati's face.
"Uh..." Before she can continue, I speak up.
"I thought we were testing the lenses." I say, cocking my head slightly. Kati seems to get the message as lines up her camera. No flash, but I do hear the shutter close. I hear it a few more times, and after the fifth, I move to where Kati is to look at the photos.
"Wow. Those look nice." I say, examining the photos. Seems my compliment gets a rise out of Kati, who starts blushing hard.
"Let's, uh... Let's try the 24-105mm f/4." I hear her say as she starts to unscrew the lens to swap it out. Another minute and she gets the next lens on. I take my place back by the window, and we repeat the process. All while my heart keeps fluttering. Oshawa... Monbetsu... Memories of the past...

Espérons que cela ne me consomme pas. (Let's hope this doesn't consume me.)

|-That evening. Artesano, 90 Chambers Street Unit A-|

"This isn't bad, actually. I quite like it." I try to get Gold to different places throughout Manhattan. Seems to work each time.
"Glad to know that. I've been meaning to come here for a while now." I say, taking a bite out of some yuca fries.
"So this is just an excuse to come to a high end restaurant?" She asks in a fashion similar to interrogation. Why does it...

Stop. Don't even think about it.
Fókuszban az itt és most. (Focus on the here and now.) I'm trying...
Clearly you're not trying hard enough you pathe-
Ne légy ilyen durva vele. (Stop being so harsh on her.)

I mentally sigh, knowing that I won't win tonight. I just hope that she doesn't notice the war that is being waged in my head. And that I'm slowly but surely losing it.
"This kind of place wouldn't get the time of day in Oshawa, let alone in Monbetsu." That gets my attention. I thought Gold City was Japanese. Why is she talking about a place in Canada?
"Oshawa... Isn't that in-" She cuts me off before I can continue.
"Ontario? Yes. Not too far from Toronto. My Père lives there." She says, her voice steady and firm. She's half-Canadian? I never would have guessed. "He met my mother in... 1998 I want to say. She was studying in Toronto as an international student at the time."
"And your mom was Japanese?" I ask, unsure if it's appropriate.
"Yes. She's Japanese. Though... she wasn't born in Japan." Gold responds. Things just keep getting weirder and weirder. "Palermo. In Sicily. Her parents were traveling throughout Europe at the time. What about you? Where are your parents from?" Oh great, now it's my turn to lore dump.
"Ápa was born in Cincinnati. His dad was too. But all his grand parents and mom were from Budapest. Anya was from Debrecen." I say, not wanting to go too in depth. That's for another time.
Like that will ever happen...
"Oh... So you're Hungarian?" Why does she sound so surprised by that? It's not like my first name is Hungarian or anything.
"I... I thought it was obvious?" I say, still trying to figure out how she didn't know.

"You're going to drag me for being surprised to learn you're Hungarian when *you* were surprised to find out I'm half-Canadian? Parlez-moi de doubles poids, deux mesures. (Talk about double-standards.)" Oh, French Canadian. How fun...
"So your dad is from Quebec?" I then ask, still digging in.
"His *parents* are from Québec. Trois-Rivières. But he is not. Père is Ontario born and raised." She says plainly, keeping our witty joust going. Two can play the multi-lingual game.
"Mi történt még Oshawában? Vagy túl érzékeny ahhoz, hogy megvitassuk? (Well, what else happened in Oshawa? Or is it too touchy to discuss?)" My little jab gets a laugh out of her, and dear god...

No. Not again. Stop.
Higgadj le. Hadd találja ki a dolgokat. Erre koncentrálj. (Calm down. Let her figure things out. Here, focus on this.)
It's soothing, what I'm seeing in my mind. Me, anya and ápa at the natural history museum next to Central Park. It's pleasant. I miss it. I should go back at some point. Get some nice pictures while I'm there. But this little detour is interrupted.
"You should do that more often." I hear Gold say, making me blush slightly.
"You can't even understand what I'm saying though." I jokingly say, expecting everything *but* what she says next.
"I can always learn it. Besides, it sounds nice." Once again, my mind starts racing, but I manage to keep things in check. If temporarily.
"Well, uh... Maybe I could learn Japanese and Canadian French." I stutter slightly, but Gold doesn't seem to notice.
"Tu penses pouvoir gérer le français québécois? Fais-toi plaisir. (You think you can handle Quebecker French? Be my guest.) I'd love to see you try." A challenge. I like that.
"Certainly would be easier than Japanese." I respond, taking the presented challenge. "Have you ever been to France?"
"I spent two months in Orléans a few years ago. It's funny. Everyone there thought that I wouldn't be able to or just couldn't understand them. So you can imagine what their faces looked like when I started speaking like I was from Montréal in perfect français québécois." She says, reminiscing on that time.
"What about Quebec?" I then ask, wanting to know more.
"No, not really." Is the answer Gold gives me. That's... surprising. "Père never had the time to visit his parents in Trois-Rivières. Always so busy. Part of why he and my mother split. She took me and booked a flight back to Hokkaido when I was eleven." That's unfortunate. I won't prod. "Are your parents on good terms?" Oh... I... Wasn't expecting that.
"My anya is, uh..." Gold stops me in my tracks, as if sensing where I'm going with this.
"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's... not pleasant, isn't it?" She says, her voice dropping low like it did back in Central Park. And just as our food arrives.

I like the city's night life. It's bright and loud, but not overwhelming. Nothing is too in your face. It's not like Times Square. Just thinking about that place gives me migraines. But unfortunately for me, Times Square is exactly where we are heading. We've come into a reliable rhythm and pattern where Gold City can just tell that I'm not really feeling the vibes.
"Something wrong?" I hear her ask.
"I'm not exactly a fan of Times Square. There's just too much going on there." I say, letting my objections be known. And Gold seems to consider it.
"We can head somewhere else." She says, not wanting to put out a suggestion until I say something.
"No, it's okay. You want to se-" Gold cuts me off again.
"If it's something you *don't* like, then I'm not interested in it." It's firm. Stoic. And it sets my heart

on fire. But I don't get time to ruminate on it as she quickly grabs my wrist and starts walking in the opposite direction. I takes me a few seconds to figure out where we are, but the giant golden statue and towering art-deco skyscraper are dead giveaways.
"What the... The Rockefeller Center?" I'm stunned. This had to be on purpose. No way it wasn't. But what I hear next...
"Is that significant?" I hear Gold ask. Istenem... (My god...)
"You *don't* know about the Rockefeller Center? It's like... the most well known landmark in the city. Right after the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building." I may be from Yonkers, but that just came out of nowhere. How... do you not know... about the Rockefeller Center... It's my turn to grab Gold's wrist and I start to move towards the rink. Looks like they have it set up for roller-skating. I've never seen that before. It's usually got DJs during spring and summer. But regardless, this is perfect.
"Ever gone skating?" I ask as I turn to her.
"Like, skate*boarding*?" She counters. Oh... this is gonna be fun.
"No. *Roller*-skating. They've got the rink set up for that tonight." I pay for both of us up front and immediately head down after we're given our skates. I take some blades. Gold gets quads. Easier to work with. Perfect for someone who's never skated before.

We get the skates on and head onto the rink. It's not as busy as I thought it would be, but there's still people here. I quickly get onto the wood panels, and watch as Gold *cautiously* steps on. She's clearly not used to this. I plan of changing that. I skate towards her, wanting to help her out.
"Here. Hold on to me for now." I say, outreaching my hand so that she can take it, which she does. Woah... her skin really *is* as soft as I thought... Az istenit. Koncentrálj, Kati. (God dammit. Focus, Kati.) I start skating backwards while she struggles at first. It's funny and cute to see her usual confidence melt away like this.
"I, uh... I don't.." She starts, voice trembling.
"Don't worry. Just push like I am. Watch." I let go of her momentarily to show what I mean. I can feel her eyes on me, watching my every move. After a few seconds I spin back around to face her, hands outstretched. But I can tell her confidence is coming back. She's a quick learner, having processed what I was doing and effortlessly copying it. We continue like this for a good hour, and then Gold decides to call it.
"Okay, that was fun but..." I cut her off, knowing where she might be going.
"Tiring? I know. You'll get used to it though." I tell her, knowing that she might want to try this again. We step off the rink and slip back into our shoes before heading back on the sidewalk. But as we walk, something catches City's eye.

"What the... When did..." I walk over to where she's standing, having unknowingly pulled ahead of her. It's an ad featuring an uma model with dark brown hair and blue highlights. I look at some of the info on screen. 'Daitaku Helios'. Hmm... Interesting.
"Do you... know her?" I ask, unsure of what her answer will be.
"She's a good friend. Though I haven't heard from her in a while. Guess I know why now." She says, clearly reminiscing over a few good memories as she looks at the ad. She must've met Helios when she was still racing. I then hear Gold take a deep breath, and she starts walking again. The rest is spent in silence. But it isn't tense. It's comfortable. Think I'll leave it like that. Just the two of us walking down the night streets of Manhattan. I can get used to this.

Chapter 13: To Find a Light

Chapter Summary

Kati is finding it hard to keep her mind focused, especially when, for the first time since meeting Gold City, the fantasies turn from a simple crush to something a tad more explicit. An with what the uma will be wearing for their second shoot, she feels more at war with herself than ever. Who's to say that kind of thought won't come back while she has her camera in hand. Kati needs a way to deal with it, and she thinks she's found one thanks to Met, even if he doesn't know it yet. Gold, meanwhile, finds herself becoming engrossed in fantasy more and more, though by contrast, they are more tame. Regardless, she devises ways to keep her focus. Modeling has been a staple in her life since she was a child. For her, professionalism comes above all else. But for how much longer, she does not know.

Chapter Notes

Art by EvepolyJAMD

https://x.com/polyjamd/status/2074561611143032870?s=46

|-Monday evening. Pat Auletta Steeplechase Pier, Riegelmann Boardwalk, Brooklyn, New York-|

The salt in the air seems to be calming my nerves, being on the Atlantic out here. No, really. I just need to look to my left a little bit in order to gaze out into the ocean. It's kinda scary. Really scary... The ocean terrifies me. Don't know what could be down there. Any number of things: Sharks. Alien looking fish. Giant squid. Whales that *eat* giant squid. Godzilla. The leviathan. A portal to hell.

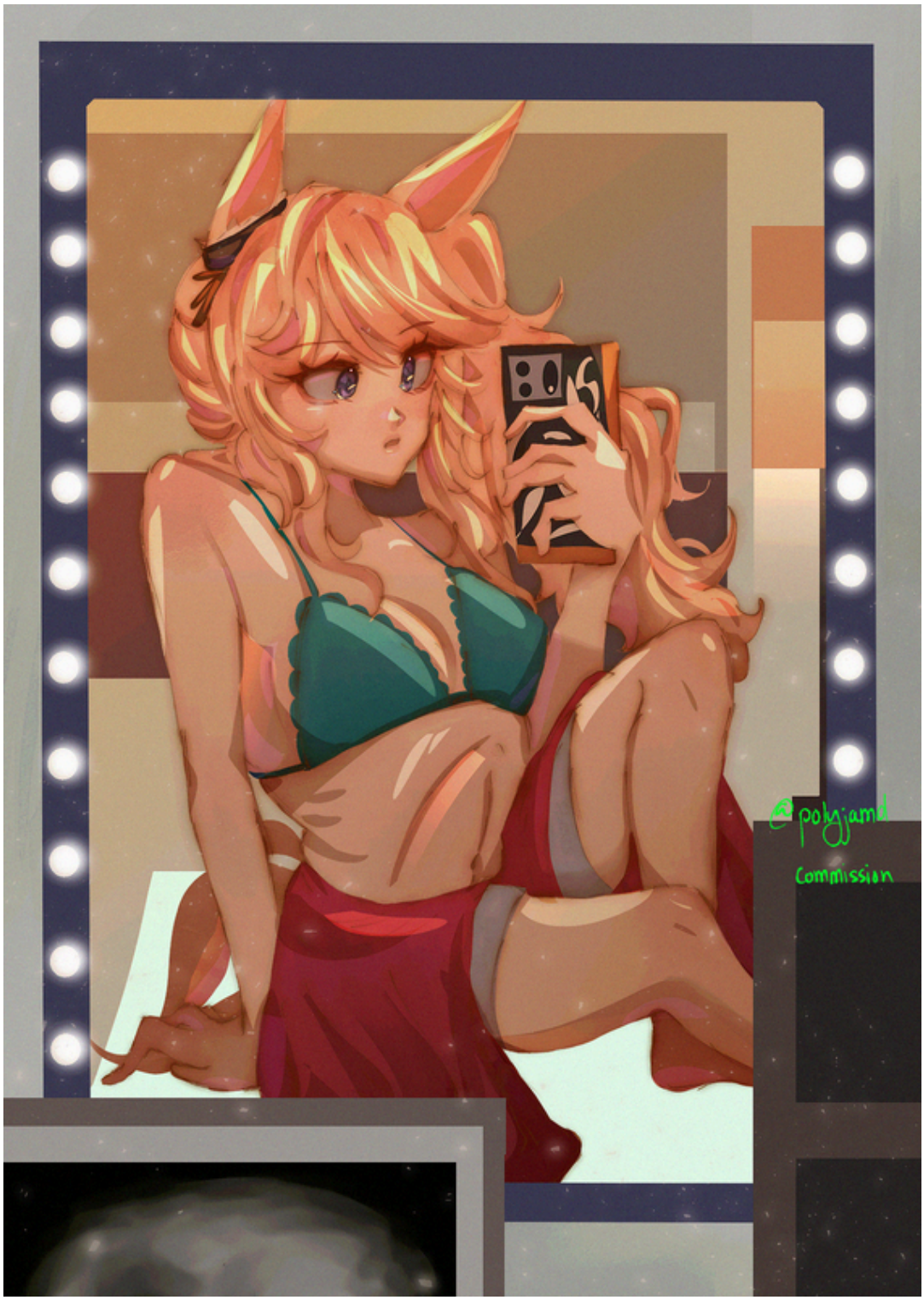
Lélegezz és koncentrálj. Nyugodj meg az idegeid. Földelje le magát. (Breathe and concentrate. Calm your nerves. Ground yourself.)
Yeah, thanks for that...
Ezért vagyok itt. (That's why I'm here.)

I don't know why, but that voice reminds me of anya. Maybe that's why it's so calming. So... soothing. Hiányzik... (I miss her...)

buzz
buzz
buzz

My phone starts vibrating in my pocket. Someone is either texting me or calling me. Could be anyone but my gut is telling me who it exactly is. I pull my phone out of my pocket and see it's from Gold... and it's an *image*... Okay... Just breathe. I can get through this. I tap the message, plug in my passcode and see what she sent. Istenem... (Oh my god...)

'Just a refresher for tomorrow. Try not to get distracted.' She's *toying* with me. And we've only known each other for a few weeks. This really is going to be a long year, isn't it? I'm so focused on the message that I forget that she sent a picture. I focus on it and... Okay. Breathe. In and out. You can get through this. It's What we decided on yesterday. The blue bikini top, the red sarong and the white shorts with the flat sandals off to the side. She's so... beautiful in it...



Koncentrálj. Lélegezz. Mély és mély. Túljutsz ezen. (Focus. Breathe. Deep and low. You can get through this.)
I try to listen to what the voice is telling me, but it's too much right now. My mind is going wild.

How tan lines could look on her skin if she had some... How plump her skin would feel... How firm those muscles would be under my fingertips as I trace them over... How easily I could slip her out of a-

No.
No.
Absolutely the fuck not. No.
What the hell is wrong with me? Why... Why did my mind go *there*? That's... that's such a heinous thing to do. I barely know her that well and I just... I just thought about something like *that*. Jesus Christ...

You disgust me.
Higgadj le. Itt kell gondolkodnunk. Koncentrálj és csoportosulj. (Calm down. We need to think here. Focus and regroup.)
Calm down? Regroup? She's a degenerate. There is no hope for her. The only thing we can do is REPRESS.
Please...

The plea goes unheard as that thought only gets more prevalent and the voices become louder.
Nem. Ne nyomja el a gondolatot. Élj vele és tanulj belőle. Nem adhatjuk fel. (No. Do not repress the thought. Live with it and learn from it. We cannot give up.)
Coward. We do that, we guarantee that this happens again. My methods ensure that they don't.
A módszereid csak ártáshoz és öngyűlölethez vezetnek. Lépj egy lépést hátra, és gondold át. (Your methods will only lead to harm and self-hate. Take a step back and think about that.)

whaaaaauuuuum

My attention is cut by the sound of a ship's horn. I look out over the pier and see the ferry going by. It's a brief respite before my mind goes back to... *that*. I need to get a hold of myself. I slip my phone back into my pocket and find a bench to sit down. I... I need a breather. Jesus...

Deep and low, Kati. Deep and low. Get yourself centered. I don't know how are why my mind went there. It *shouldn't* have. *Those* kinds of thoughts only happen when it's someone I've been with in that kind of way for a good amount of time. Someone like Rose. But that time has long since passed and she's on the other side of the country in Seattle. I wonder how that's going for her. With all those clouds and rainy weather. Another deep breath and I *feel* steady. But I won't know for certain unless... No. I shouldn't. That can only end poorly. And I want to avoid that. I stand back up and head off, wanting to get away from all of this. *Anything* would be better.

I haven't really moved. Still trying to get my bearings. Why did that happen? Why did that cross my mind? Jesus Christ I'm pathetic... That's just... No. I cannot let that happen again. No matter what. I feel so... disgusting. I need a shower. If anything, to help clear my mind some more. So I start my car's engine and start heading back to the Bronx. The engine hums as I pull out of the parking space and onto the road, the evening sky slowly but surely getting darker as the sun continues to descend past that oceanic horizon which is now behind me. I need to think about something else right now. But I just don't know what I can focus on. I fly through thoughts before landing on something Met said a week ago:

'It’s how I can express emotions when words fail.'

Should I... No. That loud claptrap isn't... But what if... What's the name of that band he keeps trying to turn me on to? Steel Girl? No. That sounds stupid. It had something to do with metal. Iron... something. Maiden? That sounds right. And stupid enough. I connect my phone to my car through bluetooth and head to Spotify. The first thing I see after typing in 'Iron Maiden' is a song called '[Hallowed be thy Name]'. Interesting. They don't exactly strike me as the religious type. What, with an album called 'The Number of the Beast' and all that. I tap play as soon as the light turns green, letting the music play as I drive. This is... better than I though it'd be. The music itself is electrifying and lively. And the lyrics... Well, they're fucked up but the story being told is *compelling*. Before I know it, I'm at the end of the song and listening to one of the best harmonies I think have ever been recorded. I think I'm starting to see why Met likes this now. God damn.

I'm home. I still have that music in my head. Maybe it isn't claptrap after all... It's also keeping me distracted. Which is what I was aiming for. Keep my mind off of... *that photo*. I really don't want that to come back into my head the way that it did. Just thinking about that makes my skin crawl. How could I do something like that? Why did pop into my head? Am I really that down bad? Better question is am I really that pathetic. That's what I should be asking. Seems to be very appropriate given the circumstances. Just... Why? Why am I like this?

Of course you're pathetic. Why else would you fa-
Lélegezz. Nem vagy szánalmas. Csak... Elveszett. Megtaláljuk az utat. (Breath. You're not pathetic. Just... lost. We can find our way through this.)

I can already sense the coming skirmish, so I'm going to check out from that. Spare myself the trouble. I walk into the building and head up to the top floor. After that, I walk to my apartment, head in, and go straight to the bathroom. I'm making good on that shower. Isten tudja, hogy szükségem van rá. (God knows I need it.) Maybe I'll listen to some more of that Iron Maiden stuff while I'm in there. Might be enough to purge any unwanted thoughts from my mind. I could always go for that...

|-Tuesday afternoon. Skinos, 123 Washington Street, Manhattan-|

Our second shoot... À la joie des choses en notre faveur. (Here's to things turning out in out favor.) I grab my fork and take a bite out of the food in front of me. Moussaka I think is what this is. It's quite nice, actually. It's like a lasagna almost. And I do enjoy lasagna. Doubly so when it is made well. And this is. Kati is supposed to come and get me at five. It is currently 12:30. Which means I have a lot of time to kill at the moment. My nerves have been flaring since last night, especially after sending that photo. I don't know why, but it felt more risque than any skivvie shoot I have done. And I have done quite a few of those. Some of which I was borderline nude, only a few scant articles of clothing on my body. But that? Seules les déesses savent pourquoi je ressentais ce que j’ai ressenti. (Only the goddesses know why I felt the way I did.)

After I finish my meal and pay, I start to head back to my apartment. It's not too far from there, this restaurant. So it'll be a brisk walk. Not that I mind. It's rather pleasant, the warm breeze and temperature. Almost makes me want to run. But then I remember what colic did to my body. How it robbed me of my racing career. I couldn't eat properly for months. I lost so much of my physique from that and how little I was able to move. It took a year and a half just to walk without pain. I'm surprised I wasn't bed-ridden for longer.

buzz
buzz

buzz

I recognize that pattern... Someone is calling me. Not texting. Calling. I pull my phone out of my pocket and see Victor's name on the screen. Been some time since I last talked to him. I should remedy that. It doesn't take long to hear him speak after I answer.

"Alors tu as vraiment répondu pour une fois. (So you actually answered for once.)" Well, he sounds happy to hear my voice.
"Ce n'est pas de ma faute si tu m'appelles habituellement quand je n'arrive pas à joindre mon téléphone. Tu sais à quel point je suis occupé. (It's not my fault you usually call me when I can't reach my phone. You know how busy I get.)" I tell him, fully expecting what kind of answer I'll recieve.
"Alors tu veux que je m'excuse de vouloir parler à ma sœur? Comme tu es chic de ta part. Le modèle haut et puissant. (So you want me to apologize for wanting to talk to my sister? How chic of you. The high and mighty model.)" His tone is condescending, but in that way that isn't with malice. More like what you'd expect from a younger sibling.
"Une sœur de la moitié du monde loin. Et Uma aussi. Souviens-toi de ça. (A sister from half the world away. And uma too. Remember that.)" I say in response, getting a chuckle from my little brother on the other end of the line.
"Oui, oui. Toujours ma sœur. Comment va Manhattan? J'ai entendu dire que tu avais récemment déménagé là-bas. (Yes, yes. Still my sister. How's Manhattan? I heard you recently moved there.)" I hear Victor ask, his tone lightening a little bit.
"La ville est vraiment belle. Jusqu'à présent, je suis allé dans trois des cinq arrondissements et ça ne fait même pas un mois que j'ai quitté le Japon. Il ne reste plus qu'à voir le Bronx et Staten Island à ce stade. (The city is really beautiful. So far, I've been to three of the five boroughs and it's not even been a month since I left Japan. All that's left to do is see the Bronx and Staten Island at this point.)" I tell him, though one thing is nagging at me: "Qui t'a dit que j'étais à New York? Ce n'était pas Père, n'est-ce pas? (Who told you I was in New York? It wasn't Père, was it?)"
"Non, non. Uh... Un de tes amis. Je l'ai rencontrée la dernière fois que je t'ai vue à ta remise des diplômes. Tosen, je crois qu'elle s'appelait. (No, no. Uh... One of your friends. I met her the last time I saw you at your graduation. Tosen, I think her name was.)" Jordan told him? Didn't know she exchanged numbers with Victor. She doesn't find him interesting in *that* kind of way, does she?
"Toi et Jordan, vous avez parlé? Je ne pensais pas que tu deviendrais un jour amie avec elle. (You and Jordan talk? I didn't think you'd ever become friends with her.)" The surprise is genuine in my voice. I... They never really seemed the kind to bond.
"Si je ne peux pas te joindre, je vais généralement la voir. Et je ne dirais pas qu'on est amis. Plutôt... connaissances. (If I can't reach you, I usually go to her. And I wouldn't say we're friends. More like... acquaintances.)"

I've been outside the building for what feels like an hour, just talking with Victor about anything that comes to mind. It's made me realize that I do really miss him. Maybe I can bring him down here at some point. Ce serait un spectacle à voir, non? (Wouldn't that be a sight to behold?) But for as nice as this was, it does need to end soon. I can't spend all day talking to my brother.
"Je dois y aller. J'ai une séance photo plus tard cet après-midi et je veux m'y préparer. (I need to go. I have a photo shoot later this afternoon and I want to be prepared for it.)" I say, defeat being evident in my tone. I know Victor can hear it. But he takes it in stride.
"Oui, oui. Le mannequinat et tout ça. Bonne chance. J'espère pouvoir te voir bientôt. Ça fait trop longtemps. (Yes, yes. Modeling and all that. Good luck. I hope to see you soon. It's been too long.)" Victor responds, his voice also sounding slightly defeated. "Bye. Je t'aime, Grande Sœur. (Bye. Love you, Big Sis.)" He then hangs up before I can say goodbye. Ne change jamais, petit frère. Ne

changez jamais. (Never change, little brother. Never change.) I step inside the building and head to the 17th floor, making my way straight to my unit. Once I am inside, I slip off my shoes and head to the bedroom. I check the time before I do anything else though. 3:15. I know she's supposed to be here at four, but she is also early. So I need to change quickly. Not something I particularly like since I prefer to make sure everything looks good. But I can manage. I dress down to my skivvies, eventually taking off my bra but leaving the underwear on. I need something underneath the shorts. The bra? I'll have the bikini. No need for it. I quickly get the shorts and top on, followed by the sarong. I'll wait until Kati is here to put the sandals on. No need to have them on until then. So I grab them and head into the living room, lounging on the sofa, waiting for Kati. Thinking about... No. Focus. Be professional. I can have *that* kind of thought at a later date. But I have work to get done today. I can't afford to be distracted by fantasy.

I continue to lounge, reading from a few of the magazines I have appeared in over the years when I hear my phone buzz in the table. Must be Kati. I grab it to check and it is her.
I'm here. Best to not waste any time.' I like how she thinks. I quickly slip the sandals on my feet and make my way to the door, locking it once I'm on the other side. I then make my way to the elevator. Within a few minutes, I'm on the ground floor and see Kati in the lobby. I can see the gears turning in her head. It wouldn't be the first time I've elicited some kind of reaction in an on-looker, but this time... it seems to be mutual.

Be professional.
I'll try.
Trying is not an option. How fun...

I silence the internal dialogue so that I can talk to Kati.
"I see you're early, as per usual." I say when I reach her, voice carrying despite my internal thoughts. "Well, I try to be punctual." She responds, her voice steady but I can tell she's still having her own internal troubles. I... I still do not feel entirely comfortable making assumptions, but I've come to a point where the *only* explanation for things is that Kati is attracted to women. I feel bad for her. I'm not meaning to do this. But I guess some things can't be helped. Especially given these circumstances. "You ready?"
"No, actually. I'm not." I answer, in a sarcastic tone. Which I'm realizing may or may not have been a mistake, judging by the blush that Kati is desperately trying to hide. I should probably change the tone. "Yes, I'm ready. Are you?" It takes a second for Kati to respond, presumably because of her flustered state. But she does eventually speak up.
"Yeah. Let's get going." She says as she starts to walk off. No reason to linger here.

|-Later that afternoon. Roosevelt Lighthouse, 910 Main Street-|

Just don't ogle.
Just don't ogle.
Just don't ogle.

It's going to be hard this time. I know it will be. But I can get through this. I hope...

Igen. Dehogynem. Ne kételkedj magadban. (Yes. You can. Don't doubt yourself.)

"Is the representative already there?" I hear Gold ask, her eyes trained on me as I drive down the Queensboro Bridge.
"She said she'd be there at three. It's quarter after four right now." I say as I look at the clock an my dashboard. We're making good time so far despite the traffic. We quickly get onto the streets of

Queens, making a u-turn onto Queens Plaza Street which quickly turns into Vernon Boulevard. Within a few minutes, we find ourselves driving onto the Roosevelt Island bridge, and from there, we make our way to the lighthouse. I see another car parked by the care center. Must be the LCP rep. I park

next to it, at which point I hear Gold undo her seat-belt, moving to exit the vehicle. Guess I should do the same.

We walk for a bit, mostly talking about what we're hoping to get out of this shoot. Though, I can't help but... get a bit distracted. Just... the way the afternoon sun reflects off her hair. It's mesmerizing. The curves of her bo-

Don't ogle.
Don't ogle.
Don't ogle.
Don't ogle.
Don't ogle.

"Any ideas of what you want to try?" I hear City say, snapping me out of the trance.
"I was hoping for a few close ups if that's alright with you." I respond, knowing that it will probably be the death of me. But Gold doesn't seem to notice that little idiosyncrasy.
"That's fine. I was hoping we'd get a few of those as well. What about when we're up on the balcony? Any ideas?" She then asks.
"Mid to close. Won't really have a good amount of space for long shots." I say, thinking about what kind of angles would work best up there. We eventually reach the lighthouse, and see a dark-skinned woman facing it. Guess she's the rep. She turns around, acknowledging me and Gold as she approaches us.

"Ah, you must be Kati and Gold City. I'm Ms. Pearson. I'm a representative from the LCP." She says in an introductory fashion holding out her hand for me to take it. I do so, shaking it with good intent. "Pleasure to meet you." I say, watching as the same pattern is repeated with Gold, who then takes her own turn to speak.
"I don't think you should be worried about us 'damaging' the lighthouse." She tells Ms. Pearson, wanting to assuage her fears.
"Oh, I don't think you will. Other members of the LCP? Maybe, but I don't. Also, I like some of the pieces you've been in. I'm a bit of a fashionista myself." Ms. Pearson says, clearly taking Gold by surprise. "Come on, I can unlock the door and get you up to the balcony."
"Actually, I was thinking we get a few photos from the ground first. If that's alright with you, of course." I interject before she can move very far.
"Oh, no problem. If you'll follow me."

---

flash

"Okay. That should be the last one. Think we can head up?" I hear Kati say while my eyes still filter out the light from the flash. I watch as Kati come closer, and for a split second I feel my heart flutter. But it then goes back to normal. That, or it was nothing. Most likely the latter. I take a deep breath, but not too loudly for anyone to notice. Though if they did, I could feasible come up with some kind of convincing excuse.
"These photos are being sent to T Magazine?" I hear Ms. Pearson ask as she slides the key into the lock.

"Yes. What I'm wearing are a few pieces they sent me the other day. I had Kati come by my apartment on Sunday to see what worked well together. This is what we came up with." I respond, indulging the representative in her hobby.
"Very interesting. I wish I had stayed with fashion while I was at NYU. Or at least kept it on as a minor." I hear her say as she pushes the door open, leading me and Kati up the steep stairway. Even though I'm not in platforms or heels, I do still watch where I put my feet. These steps are quite steep. We slowly make our way up, eventually reaching the top where Ms. Pearson unlocks another door.
"We don't usually have people up here aside from maintenance. No reason to have the doors unlocked." I hear her say as she gets the door unlocked. She pushes it open, and we all feel the breeze enter the space. One by one, we make our way onto the balcony. The view form up here is very nice. Especially when I look to my left. Manhattan looks stunning from up here and with the afternoon sun behind it. I then hear Kati speak up, immediately seeing an opportunity.
"Head to your left a bit. Poke your head out from the side. I wanna see how that looks." I suppose I could entertain her idea. And I do. I walk away from her for a step, disappearing around one of the octagonal walls of the light itself, I then poke my head around said corner. Within a few seconds, Kati has the shot lined up and then...

flash

My eyes adjust faster this time, but the next *flash* takes me by surprise. I stutter, flinch even. And Kati seems to take amusement with that.
"Heh. Scared ya?" I hear her say, taking pride in her mischief. I suppose I should have expected something like this. But alas, I did not.
"Any *other* ideas?" I ask, half sarcastic, half annoyed.
"Yeah, I'm gonna get up close. Is that okay?" She seems tense asking that.
"I have no issues." I respond, gesturing for her to approach.
Kati walks over, resting her back against the glass of the beacon as she lines up the shot.

"Turn around. I want to get one of you looking at Manhattan." I hear her say, and I oblige. I turn my back to hear, and hear the shutter go off. It's a nice change of pace to not be seeing the flash as I hear the shutter go off a few more times. "Okay. Turn back around." I oblige again, and once I'm facing Kati, I can feel my heart begin to beat faster. Not by much, but enough to be noticeable. Enough for me to *feel* it. But I manage to steel myself. Just in time for...

flash

|-That evening. 161 Bar & Grill Restaurant, 101 East 161st Street, the Bronx-|

After a drive back to her apartment so she can change, we came all the way to the Bronx. She saw this place and immediately said yes. All because I mentioned that it was close to my pad. And I... I don't know how to process that really.
"So you really live close to here?" Gold asks, her voice incredibly seductive in this moment, though I don't think she's intending it to be that way.
"Uh, yeah... Just on the other side of Yankee Stadium." I respond, trying to keep my cool. I watch as Gold swirls the straw in her glass. We finished eating a while ago, spending most of this time talking. "The stadium? What kind of events are hosted there?" She asks, clearly not knowing about New York's pride and joy.
"Baseball, primarily." I tell her, trying to keep my heart rate in check as it threatens to fly out of my chest.
"Really? Think I might go see one then." She responds, standing up in a clear gesture of wanting to

be taken home. I suppose I can oblige. We've already paid for our meals. So I stand as well, grabbing my purse and slinging the strap around me. We both walk out and over to my car, sliding into our respective seats.

My phone automatically connects to the bluetooth and starts playing the last song I had cued. It takes me by surprise, primarily because I had forgotten what was about to play next, but before I can comment on the song...
"Oh... This... This is 'Iron Maiden', right?" I hear Citysay, seemingly recognizing the song and band.
"How... do you know them?" I ask, surprised she *anything* about heavy metal.
"An old boyfriend was into them. Introduced by his dad. Saw the artwork for the *Maiden Japan* release and it kinda snowballed from there. Says he was actually at the show where the record was taped. How do you know them?" She's genuinely interested in this. I can tell by the tone of her voice. Guess I better be honest.
"Met. He's big into metal and keeps bugging me to listen to some of it. I just sorta, caved in, I guess. Decided to listen to some of it last night." I tell her as the song slowly reaches a crescendo. For a heavy metal band, this *acoustic track* isn't half bad. It's actually pretty good. The atmosphere, the way the guitars sound. It's enchanting. Romantic, even... No. No, no, no. Not... Not *that*...

"*Journeyman*... I like this song. It's nice. A welcome respite from the volume they're known for." I hear Gold say, something that snaps me out of... whatever my mind was doing. In my periphery, I can see her holding my phone, looking at the song title on Spotify. She then sets my phone back into it's holster. "Sorry, I should've asked before doing that."
"No, no. It's okay. I don't mind. You can play the next song if you want." I say, interested in what her music taste is like. I won't be surprised if I hear idol groups and other assorted J-pop, but I am surprised to hear *Like a Virgin* play after Journeyman ends. That's just... What do I say to that?
"Madonna? Really?" That sounded... more accusatory and judgemental than I wanted it to. And it seems Gold has taken it that way.
"What? Were you expecting an idol group?" There's venom in her voice. Not too much, but enough to be noticeable to be felt. Now I feel like shit.
"I mean... I wouldn't have been surprised, but... And I'm not judging, but... Madonna? Wow." I need to find a way to recover from this.
"Do you not like Madonna?" She asks in a similar accusatory way.
"No. I love Madonna's music. Anya was a big fan. One of her favorite memories was buying a copy of *Like a Virgin* when she was 13. Very hard to do since, you know, vulgarity laws of the time in Hungary." I say, thinking that I've recovered from the situation. And with the way City reacts, it seems that I have.
"Really? Interesting." She responds, her interest being piqued.
"Yeah. I, uh... I actually have it. She gave it to me as a birthday present." I add, unsure if I should be talking about *that*.
"How sweet. You must've really loved her, I take it?" I hear Gold ask.
"Yeah... I miss her..." That last part is muttered and under my breath. But of course, Gold is an uma. She probably heard it loud and clear.

"How did we go from Iron Maiden, to Madonna, to Akeboshi and then to Deep Purple? Deep Purple? What?" I ask, completely dumbfounded by Gold's taste in music.
"Oh, Deep Purple is *extraordinarily* popular in Japan, even to this day. It was like Beatlemania when they came through in the 70s." She responds, chuckling slightly at my lack of knowledge. Guess I should ask Met if she's telling the truth. He's into Deep Purple as well. He should know

that, right? We're passing through Little Italy right now, going down Mulberry street. Almost at her apartment, which means...

Lélegezz. Koncentrálj. Maradj a pillanatban. Ne tévesszen meg a fantázia. Erős vagy. Túljutsz ezen. (Breathe. Focus. Stay in the moment. Don't get sidetracked by fantasy. You're strong. You can get through this.)
But for how long? I've got a whole year to get through...
Menet közben kitaláljuk. Légy türelmes. (We'll figure it out as we go. Be patient.)

I feel a bit at ease after that, but I know it won't last long. Especially considering where it is my mind went last night, after Gold sent me that photo. That's... That's still bothering me. But I need to keep my composure for now. I need to focus on driving. We continue through Little Italy, which eventually gives way to Chinatown. Getting closer and closer, and my heart is... Well it's doing *something*. I just need to breathe, but I take care to not make it obvious. But Gold... Much like Met, she's got a sixth sense.
"Something wrong?" She asks, concern filling her eyes in the low light of the streets. "Uh, no. Nothing's wrong. Why do you ask?" I respond, trying to play it cool.
"You seem tense." Is the next thing I hear her say. I don't want to out myself like this, so I decide to lie.
"Probably nothing. I'm fine." I say, wanting nothing more than to put this little thing behind us. And it seems to work, Gold simply nodding and turning her head to look out the window. It doesn't take long for us to reach her apartment, but she doesn't move immediately. She lingers for a few seconds too long. Then, she takes a deep breath and speaks.
"Thanks for tonight. It was nice to do that again. I hope that these little outings continue to be a regular thing between us." She says, her voice as smooth as silk. I wonder... No. Not now.
"Any time you want to. You have my number. Just text or call." I tell her, trying to project confidence. I feel like I've failed, but Gold doesn't seem to notice as she slides out of her seat, exiting my car. Within a few seconds, she's in the building, leaving me alone with my thoughts. My sad and... depraved thoughts...

Miért kell így viselkednem? (Why do I have to be like this?)

Chapter 14: The Oncoming Cold

Chapter Summary

Four months pass, and Gold City finds herself conflicted about her feelings towards Kati. It's becoming increasingly difficult to focus on the task at hand, and she is no closer to a true solution. Kati, for her part, is mentally lost. Everyday is a new fantasy. And everyday is a new disappointment. Which in turn leads to more self-deprecation that borders on self-hate. Something that seems to be stemmed by a surprise encounter with Met, who for his part, can accurately gauge what both women are going through.

Chapter Notes

Art by HanaToHikari and JaySenpaiArtz

https://x.com/HanaToHikari_/status/2070194866668134525?s=20

|-Friday morning. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street, Manhattan-|

"Wow, that's a lot to take in." I say as I process what Jordan told me. That girl and her romantic flings. "So how long did *this* boy-toy last? A month? Two weeks? Only a few hours?"
"*She* ended up being a one-night stand. I get why it was like that, but... I wouldn't have minded if it was for a bit longer. She was so pretty and nice and considerate..." She responds, voice trailing off and dropping slightly through the call. I keep forgetting that she's bisexual. *Bisexual...* Right... It's been tense, to say the least. These past few months. Those little fantasies only became more common, though they're still tame. My mind will wander, thinking about how it would feel to have Kati's hands caressing my skin. The softness of her lips against mine. And that's where they usually end. When we kiss... When our lips meet... I snap back into reality. Reality and... disappointment. Deep seated disappointment. I know why. But I don't want to admit it. Because that means accepting the reality this presents. But before I can start sulking, Jordan's voice grabs my attention again.
"So you've been in New York for over four months. How's it been? Anything fun? Any new... *interests*?" She asks, the tone of her voice hinting that she wants to know more about how things have been going. And as always, wanting to pry into my love life.
"A lot more that I was expecting. Hard to believe that four months have passed already, with how much I've been busy since landing in June." I respond, voice lightening a bit as I speak. "The photographer I've been working with has been constantly showing me around every inch of the city every chance she gets. It's more than just Manhattan, you know."
"Your photographer? Is she cute? " Here we go again...
"Really? That's your first question? Not 'Is she nice?' or 'How good are her shots?' or 'Does she get your good side?' You ask 'Is she cute?' That's the *first* thing you ask. I get that your bi, Jordan, but you have to reign that in every now and then. Leave a good first impression." I hear her chuckle on

the other end as I finish speaking.
"Why is the first assumption that you make insinuating that I want to get into her pants?" Jordan counters. That... is kind of on me, now that I think about it. Probably shouldn't have insinuated that she wanted to... do *that* with Kati. "I just wanted to know if she was cute. I didn't mean *anything* else by it."

I sigh, taking the moment to get a clear head before I respond. "I'm sure you'd find Kati to be cute and up to your standards, Jordan. Then again, you don't have particularly high standards. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing." Saying that makes my heart ache.
"Oh, so Kati's her name? How come you've never mentioned that before?" I hear Jordan respond. Have I... really not told her yet?
"I haven't? I could've swore that I did." I say, confused by this.
"Nope. Only that you decided on someone you want to work with." She responds, voice getting more upbeat as she speaks. "Who's this new manager by the way? Been meaning to ask since you said you were heading to America."
"Randy Jenkins. Wanted to, quote: 'Bring the biggest model in Japan Stateside.' I like to think we're succeeding." I say, taking pride in the work we've done so far. It's only been *four months* but I feel like we've gotten a lot done. About twenty shoots so far. Averages around five per month. Not bad. Not bad at all. In fact, some people might say it's a bit *too* much work. But I don't mind. I like being productive in this way. Keeps my senses sharp. Keeps me focused. Wish I could say that same thing about Kati. Poor girl... And just like that, I'm borderline fantasizing about her again. I guess it can't be helped sometimes...
"How'd you meet Randy?" Jordan is my saving grace again.
"Uh... He's a friend of Tomo's. When Randy made his intentions known, Tomo immediately suggested he work with me." I saw, voice faltering slightly, but not enough to be noticeable over the phone.
"He's friends with Imari? Never would've guessed." She sounds genuinely surprised. Frankly, I was too. But after working with Randy, I can see why he and Tomo became friends.

We keep talking for a few hours. Not that I mind. It's been *far too long* since me and Jordan had a conversation like this. It was overdue. But I also have plans today, so I can't keep talking for much longer.
"I gotta go. I'm meeting with Kati later today." I say, sighing slightly as I speak the words.
"Oh? A date is it?" Jordan says, laughing after she says it. The more things change... With that said, I can't help but laugh with her. Her energy is infectious.
"No, no. Just hanging out." I say, adding some clarification to my previous words. Though now that she's said it... Les pensées sont tentantes. (The thoughts are tantalizing.)
"Well, don't let me keep you. I'll talk to you later. Hopefully you won't keep me waiting for months again." She laughs again after speaking before sending me off. "See ya."
"See you too." I don't think I get the say that before she ends the call. So I'm left with my thoughts. My fantastical and... borderline lewd thoughts... Maybe a shower can get my head straight.

I slide off the bed and make my way to the bathroom. I quickly undress and get everything ready. Brush my hair, brush my teeth, put on the ear socks. The standard routine. I turn the shower on and wait for the steam to start rising before I enter. As soon as I see the mirror start to fog up, I step in, the heat of the water hitting my skin, keeping my sense alert. I don't dawdle. I quickly go through the motions. Soap, shampoo, conditioner, tail shampoo, tail conditioner. Step out and dry off. No point in wasting time. I quickly head back into the bedroom and get dressed. Once I have that classic red shirt on, I grab my phone and check the time. Eight thirty. Hmm, interesting. I'm usually a late riser. But a change in routine can be a good things, if you manage it right. I go over to the

dresser to grab a belt as well as some black pants. It's gradually getting colder, so more warm clothes are starting to become a necessity. Now that I think about it... I didn't really bring a lot of cold weather clothes. I should fix that. But at a later date. It's cool, high fifites in Fahrenheit, around 12-13 Celsius, but not warm. So no need to worry now. Kati, on the other hand... No. Not now. I can do that later.
Tiens-toi ensemble, City. Concentrez-vous et respirez. (Hold yourself together, City. Focus and breathe.) I take a deep breath, slowly so that I can let my diaphragm expand fully. I repeat this a few more times before I feel grounded. With that, I continue getting dressed. Mon blazer de confiance. Le confort et la sécurité. Mais pendant combien de temps? Il est mieux de ne pas y réfléchir maintenant. Vivre pour le moment. (My trusty blazer. Comfort and safety. But for how long? Best no to dwell on that now. Live for the moment.)

|-Later that morning. Maine Monument, West Side at Central Park Street-|

"Traffic is not as heavy as I though it would be today." I say, looking at the lack of cars on the streets. It's weird. I'm so used to the sounds of engines and horns. Especially at this time of day. Guess the roads are still a bit too slick after that storm.
"It'll certainly make walking a lot less stressful." I hear Gold say in response. I guess she is right.
"Those smells are... certainly interesting."
"What? The street vendors? May not smell too pleasant but it is good. Come on." I say, almost grabbing her wrist as I do so. We approach one of the carts that's by the monument, and I can see the gears turning in Gold's head. I'm sure that street vendors are a thing in places like Tokyo. But for them to be *this* common? She's probably not used to it.
"Where do I even begin?" I hear her ask, somehow getting the attention of the owner.
"Take your time, little lamb. You're in no rush. Not yet, at least." He says, voice gruff and boisterous. I think I know him... Mr. Abdalla? Thought he opened up at one. Guess he changed his hours. He then appears, face covered in sweat and eyes scanning Gold.
"Made up your mind?" He asks, voice now a bit more laid back.
"Uh... I don't know. There's a lot to choose from." She says, still overwhelmed by everything she's seeing. Guess I should help.
"That's on me. I overwhelmed her. We might come back, Mr. Abdalla. Sorry to take up your time." I say, stepping in to lend a hand.
"Oh, no worries. I'm not actually open anyway. Still setting up, so I won't be pressured for customers anytime soon, Ms. Jacobs." He responds, smiling as he always does as he gets back to setting up his carts. Guess my initial assumption was correct. I gesture for Gold to follow me deeper into Central Park. Not the first tome we've been here, but it's a good place to just spend time, even if you're alone.

We walk for a bit until we find ourselves at Lounging Rock, sat under a tree simply sharing the space we've found ourselves in. It's nothing special. Not suspect in the slightest.
So why...
Is my heart...
Threatening to burst out of my chest...

I shouldn't be thinking like this. I shouldn't be *feeling* like this. It's just time spent between two friends. That's *all* this is. Nothing more. Nothing less. But all those little idiosyncrasies of hers... Her laugh... How she looks at me... The way the light shines in her eyes... Azok a gyönyörű szemek... (Those gorgeous eyes...)

Tartsd. Tartsa magát stabilan. Maradj a pillanatban. Ne veszítse el a fantáziát. (Hold. Keep yourself steady. Stay in the moment. Don't get lost in fantasy.)
I'm trying... but she's making it so damn hard without meaning to.
Pathetic and weak. Just what I've come to expect from you.
Wow. Bit much, don't you think.
For you? No. Exactly what's needed to keep you focused.
Ne is kezdd. Amire nincs szükségünk, az az, hogy rontsunk a helyzeten. (Don't even start. What we don't need is to make things worse.)

Here we go again... I tune out of that conversation. I don't want to feel like a pile of szar while we're out here. I find myself staring in the general direction of Wollman Rink, not really thinking about anything because I know what will happen if I do.
"You okay?" I hear Gold say as she fidgets with the latches on her heels, sliding them off once they are loose. God, those legs on her... The way the fabric of her pants wraps around those toned yet feminine forms... Basza meg...
"Uh... Yeah, I'm fine." I respond, voice trembling. God dammit. I sound *so* pathetic right now. Just don't make it worse, Kati.
"You sure? You sound hesitant." She noticed. Fuck, she noticed. Pivot. **Pivot.** Save face. I quickly clear my throat before I respond.
"Perfectly fine. Nothing to worry about." I say, sounding a bit more solid. But those uma ears can pick up on anything. No doubt she can tell I'm still... well... a mess. But she doesn't seem to press the issue.
"If you say so." Gold says, voice still as smooth as silk. She then looks around where we're sitting, taking in the environment: Couples having an autumnal picnic. Children playing in the nearby baseball fields. People simply on their daily walks. "It's quite nice out here. Pleasant, even. Makes it hard to believe we're in the middle of one of the world's most important cities."
"Funny you say that when we're not even that deep in the park. I can see Empire State through the branches if I angle myself right." I say, trying to get a view of the city's most famous landmark. I crane my neck. Squint my eyes. But it's becoming obvious I can't see it. Not today, at least. Though my heart skips five beats when I hear Gold chuckle at my efforts.
"Hehe. I suppose you won't be able to see it today." She says, that small grin on her face toying with me like it has been doing since June. "Better luck next time, Kati." The next few minutes are spent in a peaceful calm, nothing really said out loud. Just the two of us sat together near Lounging Rock. I'm tempted though... Very tempted... To just each over... Subtly rest my fingers atop hers... If only to feel how soft they are again... I slowly inch my hand towards hers, wanting to be subtle.



But as I get close, City pulls her hand away. She starts to wipe still damp and wet grass as well as leaves off the bottom of her feet before putting her heels back on, fidgeting with the latch again in order to secure the shoes around her ankles. Once they are, she stands up, ears twitching.

"Something wrong?" I ask, not wanting to prod too far.
"Just..." She twitches her ears again, eventually turning them in a specific direction before finishing her thought. "Thought I heard something."
"Wanna check it out?" I respond, not sure if that was a good idea.
"Would you be okay with it?" City retorts. I stand and look in the direction her ears turned. I guess

she takes that as a yes since she then starts walking. Looks like the general direction of the carousel. I follow not too far behind her.

We get to where we see the carousel and I can see the commotion. Looks like someone got into an argument or something. Gold keeps walking closer, but stops as soon as *I'm* able to hear what's happening.
"Aight, aight. Tell dat to ya mudda. Betta yet, imma have you meetin' ya maker in a hot minute if you don't bounce, feel me?"
"Oh, really? I've always wanted to meet Evil Chuck." Evil Chuck.? No, that... That can't be...
"Fuck Chuck. Where youse goin', youse gonna see Lemmy." "Even fuckin better."
Gold seems to has turned away, realizing that it's just a squabble between "thick-skulled hooligans", but I see something different: It's Met and some of his friends. And I *know* it's Met. The jet black hair, tall muscular build, the tail and the ears. No mistaking him with *anybody else*. And why is he not wearing a shirt?
"Hey, where's my shirt? Give me my fuckin shirt and hat you asshole." He says, which promptly gets said articles tossed at him, landing on his head and making him stagger back. He then puts the shirt on, tucking it into his pants before setting the hat between his ears. He then turns around... and spots me. I already know what's going through his head, marked by his signature two-finger salute. I need to go. I quickly turn around and tap Gold on the shoulder.
"What?" She asks as she turns to face me.
"We should get going." I say, speed-walking towards Playmates Arch. She follows, but I can tell she has questions. Questions that are soon answered when I feel an elbow on top of my head. I push it off and look to where it was coming from, only to find...

"Wassup? Havin a good time?"
A kurva életbe... (Fucking hell...)

|-That afternoon. Wollman Rink, Central Park-|

"God... I can't believe you *actually* wear *that* out in public. Do you not have any shame, Met?" Kati says, clearly takin issue with my shirt. Just like her mom... Don't know why Kati has a problem with my shirt. Everyone thinks that it's funny. I know I do.
"Because I think it's funny that Anthrax actually approved of this. I can't *not* have this in my wardrobe." I respond, takin note of how Gold City responds. Not as cold as I thought she would be. More analytical. It's... kinda unsettlin. Then again, she's been a model since she was a kid. Can't exactly say I'm surprised that she's analyzin me up and down. But she is *focused* on me.
"A male uma..." I hear her mutter under her breath. Guess I should let the cat out of the bag. So I reach into said bag and take out some of my HRT. I shake two of the little pills into my hand and reach for my soda, knockin my head back and swallowin. I then watch for Gold's reaction.
"What was that?" She asks. But as I'm about to respond, Kati answers for me.
"Met's trans. That was his HRT." She says in a 'matter of fact' fashion. Classic Kati.
"He's trans? Wow." Gold responds. It's a way that makes it seem like we *don't* exist. "Never thought I'd meet a trans uma."
"Today's your lucky day, I guess." I tell her as I knock back another swig before reachin for my gyro. The man may be Arab but god DAYUM can Mr. Abdalla make a mean gyro. I take a bite and savor the falafel as it hits my tongue. Amazin. Just as it always is. "God damn... Abdalla does it again."
"That he does." Kati says as she takes a bite out of her burger. Damn thing is *big*. I'm surprised she can get it in her mouth. "Maybe Mark can take some pointers from him." She says after swallowin.
"Who's Mark?" Gold then asks. You'd think Kati would tell her about her own friends.
"Some asshole from Sicily we both know." I tell her, watchin Kati's reaction like a hawk.

"Wooooooow. Imagine if he was with us right now and heard you say that." She says while side-eyein me. I'll humor her.
"What could he feasibly do to me? Man's built like a worm." I respond, knowin that if he *was* here, he wouldn't argue with that statement. It also gets Kati to laugh, which in turn makes Gold City laugh. And it's here that I notice somethin: I know that Kati's got the hots for her, but there's somethin in the ways that Gold has been interactin with Kati... it's sayin that she may or may not feel somethin for her in return. I tend to notice things. Small things that would slip by anyone else. Sixth sense type shit that I've had since I was a kid. I *know* when someone is eyein my best friend in *that* way. It's usually these creep assholes that seem to make the Bronx their den, but Gold City... It's not exactly the same.

Gold City's gaze is more... sensual. Protective. If those would be the right words to use. And it seems to be doin a number on her psyche. Every so often, she fidgets, inchin closer and closer to Kati, seekin contact. As if she wants to be held by her. But at the same time, she has that guilty look in those blue eyes of hers. The look of someone who's mind goes to places that it shouldn't. She's learnin things about herself. The question is: Will she be able to accept these things for what they are? Can she rationalize these feelins and accept them as her reality? I'll have to keep watch whenever I see them together.

"Is that a new hat?" Kati's voice snaps me back to reality. For a photographer, she sure can miss things sometimes.
"You've seen this before.?" I respond, still unsure how she could miss it. "I have?" She then asks.
"Yeah. Got in at that concert in Huntington. Joggin your memory now?" I say, watchin her reaction closely.
"Oh, right. That... That was the other day, right?" She asks, now rememberin where I was on the 17th. "Yup. 17th. Neck still hurts from that." I say, now watchin Gold City to see her reaction.
"From what?" She asks. And now I'm questionin how she hasn't gotten the picture yet given how I am currently dressed.
"Headbangin. Moshin. Crowd surfin. Stage divin. Gettin fucked up by Municipal Waste." I respond, still watchin her reaction. It is exactly as I expected.
"Oh... Okay then... Who-" I cut her off before she can continue the question.
"Crossover band from Virginia." I say as I flatten the brim on my hat, showin off the band's logo. She takes a few seconds to read it, after which her focus shifts to my shoulder.
"Isn't that... Ah, what's his name? Eddie, right? Mascot for Iron Maiden?" How the fuck... "How... I... *Cossa? (What?)*" I have no words. How the **fuck** does she know that?
"An ex was a big fan." She says. I'm still just *stunned* that she pegged that. Làm thế quái nào... (How the hell...) Nevermind. Not important.



We lingered by the rink before we start movin again, the sound of Gold City's heels permeatin the air as they hit the stones beneath our feet.
"So where is Jessica from?" I hear Gold ask. And Kati answers.
"Limerick, right? That's where she said she's from? Regardless, she's Irish." She's lookin at me as if I remember what Jessica had said. Limerick *sounds* right. Certainly would be a good place for her accent to come from.
"I think so. I know Mark's dad comes from Palermo. The Sicilian fuck." I add, not at all expectin what Gold says next.
"Oh, his parent's are from Palermo? That's where my mom was born." What do I say to that? How

do I respond?
"You're Italian?" I ask, gettin the feelin that it was a mistake.
"No. I'm half-Japanese half-Québécois. My mom's parents just happened to be in Palermo when she was born." She responds, which gives me another question to ask.
"Québécois? Isn't that French-Canadian? Were you born in Quebec or somethin?" I put it out there, gaugin her reaction to it.
"No. Monbetsu Town in Hokkaido. Père was born and raised in Oshawa but his parents are from Trois-Rivières. J'aurais aimé pouvoir les rencontrer." She says. That's... kinda sad. I think. Don't really know a lot of French. Only standard Italian, Vietnamese and Venetian. "What about you? Where are your parents from?" That's a question I should've seen comin.
"Venesia." I answer, bein simple but coherent. "Your parents are Italian?" I hear her ask.
"Just my dad. Mẹ is from Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Ho Chi Minh City)." Both women look at me like I just opened Pandora's Box.
"Your mom was Vietnamese?" I hear Kati ask. Thought I told her about this.
"You already knew that.? I mean, shit, you've heard me speakin Vietnamese before." I say, gettin legitimately annoyed by this.
"I have?" Oh my god... This woman...
"Cô gái, bạn là một nguyên nhân bị mất. (Girl, you are a lost cause.)" I say as I pick up my pace, realizin as I do so that Kati was just fuckin with me while not really lookin at *where* I am goin when-

whack

"Oh shit!" I say as I stagger back. I walked into a tree. Serves me right for bein an ass.
"Are you okay?" I hear Gold ask me. I quickly turn back, hidin the embarrasin blush on my face.
"Yeah, I'm fine. No me go mai sentìo mejo. (Never felt better.)" I respond, bustin out the Venetian, head still reelin from the impact. I take a step back, leanin on the tree I just walked into. *Play it off. Play it off. Play it off.*
"If you say so." I hear Kati say, clearly not buyin what I had just said. Typical. But that's our dynamic. I wouldn't change it for anythin. But Gold City... It will be *interestin* to see how she's gonna factor into things. Guess we'll have to see as events come.

|-That evening. One World Trade Center, 285 Fulton Street-|

"Thank you for today. It was nice to think and talk about things unrelated to work." I hear Gold say as we pass the World Trade Center. We're almost back at her apartment, so we'll have to part ways soon. I wish I had some kind of excuse to be with her longer. Something I could say that would convince her to stay with me. Even if it is only for a few scant minutes.
"Don't mention it. I think we both could have used this." I respond, ignoring how fast my heart is beating in this moment. The thought still lingers, though. It's becoming more and more present. I need to find a way to deal with it that *doesn't* make me get involved with that internal war in my head.
"I'm inclined to agree. Don't know what we'd be like considering how bust we've been." I hear Gold then say, her voice as smooth as silk once again. "We've been averaging, what, five shoots per month on average? Any sane person would find themselves on their wits end if they didn't take time to decompress on occasion. It's nice to think about other things every now and then. Not just be another pretty face on a magazine cover."
"Guess we're lucky that Randy is as lenient as he is." I jokingly say, knowing that the reason we're so productive is *entirely because* of that man. Him and his Southern work ethic. But it gets us results. And money. *A lot* of money. So I can't complain. Neither can Gold by the sounds of things.
"Speaking of... Have you heard anything from him regarding the next shoot? All I know is that he's

looking at some fountain in Jersey City." Is the next thing I hear. Jersey City? We're taking things into New Jersey? Why didn't he mention that?
"I was not aware he was looking at New Jersey for the next one. Fountain? Lincoln Park, maybe? I don't know. First I'm hearing of this." I respond, still trying to process this.

buzz
buzz
buzz

My phone buzzes. Someone texted me. I quickly glance down and see that it's a message from Randy. Given what we were *just talking about*, I have a good idea what the contents of his text message are.
I'll have to look at it when I get home. Right now, I'm focused on the road. I don't want to get into an accident.
"Oh, looks like Randy is finally telling you about the plan." I hear Gold say as she looks at my phone. She then reaches over and takes it out, evidently going to Spotify or some other music platform. The idea is confirmed when I hear Deep Purple start playing through my car's speakers. Hmm... *Highway Star*. Ápa would *love* this. We stay like this for a few minutes, mostly because traffic is *terrible* right now. I know that Fridays are when people start letting loose after work and stuff, but god damn the streets feel more alive than they ever have. It's then that the music changes again. Something more synth heavy. Must be from the 80s. Sure enough...
"What is this?" I hear Gold ask. It's certainly not Madonna or Depeche Mode. She reaches over and grabs my phone, wanting to see what we're listening to. "Ozzy Osbourne... *Shot in the Dark*..."
"Oh. I bet Met is still hung on about what happened in July." I say. He was borderline inconsolable for two weeks after he heard that little piece of news.
"What happened? Did he pass away or something?" She asks, eyes still on my phone.
"Yeah. It shocked everyone. And I mean *everyone*. It was a common joke that he was immortal because of all the things he survived during the 80s. From what Met would tell me, he mixed alcohol with any and every drug you could think of." I tell her, not sure how she'll respond to it.
"Wow. He surely lived one interesting life then." Gold says, setting my phone back on it's rack.
Traffic seems to be moving now, which means we're closer to her apartment. Which also means my heart beats faster and faster and faster. At this rate, she'll be able to hear it thumping in my chest. But she doesn't say anything. Probably so that she doesn't embarrass me further.

A few more minutes pass and we're at Battery Park. Right outside her apartment building. It's tense. I don't... want her to leave... And I think she doesn't want to either. But we both know that nothing gets done if we linger here. So she unbuckles without saying a word and opens the door.
"Thank you, again. I look forward to the next outing." She says, her voice strained. It... No. No, no, no. Don't. Don't think about it like that. She's probably... Probably just miffed that it's over. That's what it is. Nothing else. Don't read too much into things.
"Same. Same..." The second word comes out as she closes the door, leaving me with my thoughts. I watch as she enters the building, the light from the lobby illuminating her form as she then disappears further into the building.

Csak lélegezz. Túljutunk ezen. Nem kell ilyen jellegű dolgokkal foglalkozni. (Just breathe. We can get through this. No need to dwell on things of this nature.)
But how? How can I get through eight more months of this?
Nem teszek úgy, mintha tudnám a válaszokat. Nem úgy, mint egy másik hang itt. De tudom, hogy jobb napok állnak előttünk. Csak át kell vészelnünk a sötétséget. (I'm not pretending to know the answers. Not like another voice here. But I know we have better days ahead of us. We just have to get through the darkness.)

I take a deep breath. I need to get back to the Bronx. Back home. Home... Maybe I should see ápa. At the very least talk to him. It's been a while since we last spoke. Maybe it could help. He always knows how to get me out of a rut. That classic Ohio charm of his. How else would he have been able to catch someone like anya. Anya... Hiányzol, anya. Bárcsak itt lennél. (I miss you, anya. I wish you were here.)

Chapter 15: In One's Dreams

Chapter Summary

The duo meet with Randy in Jersey City to discuss a new location for the next shoot, but he then details how it will have to wait until after a runway event. One where Kati can't bring her camera. The next few minutes are spent trying to calm down the rising photographer before she splits off with Gold to try and calm herself down some more. At a small park, the two discuss many things, eventually leading Gold to learn that Kati is more attracted to women than men, something she was suspecting based off the little idiosyncrasies she has been noticing. These discussions then lead to... a certain kind of dream. One that leaves Kati reeling with it's ramifications.

Chapter Notes

Art by Sopaipelto

https://x.com/Sopaipleto_/status/2096287556170113121?a=q3c89lmZewAUUCb_Dcg&s=20

|-Sunday afternoon. Lincoln Park, 1 County Road 605, Jersey City-|

"Hmm... Most of what I'm thinking involves her *sitting* on the edge, but I don't know if that's an okay thing to do." I hear Kati talkin'. She might be a flatlander, but bless her heart, she's sharp as a tack. She sees stuff Gold just ain't pickin' up on, and things *I'm* blind to, too. It's a real blessin' havin' her eyes around here. We done good choosin' her. Not only is Gold City takin' off like a scalded dog here on the East Coast in only four months, but Kati... I wouldn't be shocked if she ends up bein' as big as Gold herself. And some folks I know 'round here are sayin' she's fixin' to be in high demand. Four months, huh? That's all it took to get here? Well, I'll be, that's somethin', even by my reckonin'.
"This is a public space. I don't particularly see any issues arising." I say, tryin' to ease any worries Kati might be havin'. Then I glance over at Gold, whose eyeballs are glued tight to that eagle perched up on top of the fountain pillar. She's fixin' to do some thinkin'. And not about the job we're here to do. It's somethin' else entirely. But what that somethin' else *is*... beats me. Been happenin' more and more here lately too. Anyways, she musta felt me lookin' at her, 'cause she turns right around to face me.
"I like the idea. With the pillar in the background... I think we can get some good shots out of it. Especially if we manage to get the eagle in as well." She says, lookin' at that ol' eagle one last time. Now she's thinkin' 'bout that job. Good. That's what I need right now, bless her heart. "Maybe get out here in the evening, just as the sun is starting to set. Make the shots even better.
"Hey, don't take my job." Kati then cuts in, makin' 'em both crack up. Lord, she's been squirmin' like a tadpole these past months, but when Kati gets her mind on somethin', she works her tail off.

That work ethic just shines right through. Another reason we done so good, I reckon. "*I'm* the one who's supposed to see the vision."

Time just keeps on tickin' by as them two are eyeballin' and arguin' 'bout what'll make some purty pictures. What kinda glass they oughta use. How far back Kati needs to be from Gold. While they're jawin' at each other, I'm over here thinkin' 'bout what's fixin' to happen here in a few weeks: That Haunted Runway thing at the Gershwin. Still gotta bring that up with 'em. Got a whole heap to talk about. I just hope they cotton to it. Especially Kati. She ain't gonna be able to take no pictures while it's goin' on, bless her heart. I mosey on over to them two women, fixin' to let 'em know what's what. Shoot, I shoulda said somethin' 'fore now, but stuff just kept gettin' in the way.
"Alright, debate over. Pep talk. Now." I say, tryin' to get 'em all lookin' my way. They mosey on over, heads cocked to the side, lookin' all puzzled and curious-like. "We've got some plans to discuss."
"Those plans being?" Gold's fixin' to ask somethin' fust, wants to rap with me a bit. Reckon I could listen to her jawin'.
"First, the shoot here won't be for another few weeks. I just wanted to see how the place looks." I reckon I'll just jump right in, and they're lookin' at me like I got two heads. Don't seem too happy 'bout me wastin' their time one bit. Guess I gotta spill the beans. "Before either of you ask: Haunted Runway. Fashion show being hosted at the Gershwin that showcases pieces influenced by horror movies and literature. I managed to secure us a spot."
"There's a catch. What is it?" Kati, bless her heart, she clocks right off the bat that somethin' ain't right. Now, how do I get this here bandage off without causin' her too much misery?
"*You* won't be able to bring your camera. They won't allow outside photography at the show." I answered, watchin' Kati's face real close to see what she thought. Outta the corner of my eye, I seen Gold's ears droop down, which meant she weren't too happy 'bout this news. Can't say I blame her none. I felt pretty much the same way myself.

"I... *won't* be able to take any shots? *None*?" Well, she ain't takin' this too kindly. We gotta jaw 'bout this, just us two. Don't wanna raise no ruckus out here now.
"We'll discuss this later. Just you and me. I'm not happy either, if it's any consolation." I'm tellin' her, seein' as how it's sinkin' in some. Leastways a little bit. And that's better'n a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. Means she'll hold her horses 'til we have our... come-to-Jesus meetin'.

"I still don't see why it would be a problem. So what if I'm am 'outside photographer'. Other fashion shows let outside cameras take photos all the time whenever they happen. Like Paris or Milan. Why is *this* different?" Kati's fixin' to pitch a hissy fit, Lord have mercy. Reckon I oughta just let her be and get it all off her chest. But I found out 'bout this whole shebang when I heard they done gone and let Gold in. And that's just how it is—ain't no budgin'. Which is just gonna pour gas on the fire, ain't it?
"Believe you me: I *tried*. I *tried* negotiating. I *tried* diplomacy. Those thick-headed, bougie flatlanders wouldn't listen." I'm sayin', tryin' to get Kati to simmer down. She's gotta quit actin' a fool. I seen Gold peekin' her head 'round the corner yonder. Told her to git on outta earshot, but them dang ol' horse ears o' hers hear ever'thin'. Reckon she jes' can't hep but be nosy. She's gotta stick her nose in. "This is a massive point of contention for a lot of people. But the organizers are stubborn."
"Oh, I bet they are. I bet that they don't ev-" I held up my hand, stoppin' Kati right there. Hit's bad enough Gold's earwiggin' on this. We don't need just anybody gawkin' at a grown woman of twenty- three carryin' on like a young'un in broad daylight.
"Just breathe. Okay? Breathe for me? Deep and low. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Breathe... and *listen*. I'm not happy about this either. In fact, I'd say I'm angrier than you. It's not

just Gold City who's been making waves throughout the Northeast Megalopolis. *A lot* of people want to know who's the magician *behind* the camera." I say, watchin' Kati do like I told her, 'fore it dawns on her what I jes' said. She... well, she looks like she's stuck between bein' momicked and bamboozled. Kinda funny to watch her face switch back and forth like that.

"I'm sorry... What? People want... Want me? No, no, that... That's not... That's not how this works. Like, at all. I'm not supposed... to be famous. I just... I just operate the camera." She's talkin' with a real bad stutter. Reckon confusion won out in the long run. Guess she ain't cut out for the limelight after all. Then again, a lotta folks ain't. I peek over at Gold City; she's still pokin' her head 'round that corner, duckin' back when she sees me lookin' her way. If anybody I done worked with has had a hard time with bein' famous, it's her. Shame that colic made her hang up her boots. Seems like she loved the feel of that dirt track under her feet. Leastways, that's what Tomo told me when he brung it up. I'm fixin' to get back to Kati, though, 'cause I wanna stay right here, right now.
"I know I didn't stutter. Unlike you. It's jarring, I know. But you'll get used to it. Try not to think about it too much." I tell her, tryin' to get her head outta the clouds right quick. I need y'all two ready for whatever might come down the pike. That includes stuff that ain't quite right, like this here. I hauled off and took a big breath, tryin' to get myself settled 'fore I said another dadgum word. Then I watched Kati playin' Monkey See, Monkey Do, takin' one herself as she opened up her ears, listenin' close.

"We'll figure something out later. We have ideas for the future, but for right now, we need to prepare and get ready for the show." I say, knowin' full well ol' Gold been listenin' in the whole dang time. Looks like she done caught on too, 'cause she's comin' our way, ears all drooped down, lookin' right shamefaced. Can't rightly fault her none. Lord, I done been there myself aplenty. Still do, sometimes. Gotta... well, never I mind. Ain't got no time to be stewin' on that kinda stuff. Leastways, not right now.
"How long until we need to be at the Gershwin?" I hear Gold ask, her voice shakin' a little bit. Ain't comin' from me, nor this mess we're in. It's somethin' else. But what in tarnation? What coulda knocked the wind outta her like that? It ain't the bellyache again, is it? Nah. Can't be that. I follow where she's lookin'. It ain't at me... Nope. Uh-uh. I ain't doin' that.
"It's, what, the 12th as of today? The show is on the 23rd. We have eleven days. A Canadian designer is working with us. Best to not disappoint him." I'm fixin' to answer, 'cause I'm ready to be done with this day, I tell you what. Shoot, we done had our fun. Time to sit a spell, and figure out what we gonna do next. "Miguel Brouillard I think is his name."
"Brouillard? Eh bien, c'est intéressant. (Well, that's interesting.) Always wanted to work with him." Gold, bless her heart, comin' at me with that Frenchified talk. But then again, ain't really all that surprising, now is it? Reckon I better spell out how things gonna be, right quick.

|-That evening. Little Island Park, Little Island, Pier 55 at Hudson River Park, Hudson River Greenway, Manhattan-|

The city seems so much more alive in October. Guess it must be that Halloween spirit coming through more and more as the end of the month approaches. You can't help but feel that energy. It's lively. It's invigorating. It makes me want to join in. Inhibitions be damned. I just know that if Helios was here, she'd be the life of whatever party she turns this into. She has the uncanny ability to do that. One of the reasons we became friends. Her energy and attitude is simply infectious.

"Try not to wander too far. No telling how many creeps would try to take their chances." I hear Kati say, her face close to my ears. Don't know why she's so close. I can hear her pretty clearly even if she was on the other side of the park. But to each their own, I guess.
"I'm more than capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much." I respond, trying to

assuage her fears. "If anyone tries anything, I could always kick them." But then again...
"What if someone sees that? I don't want to tempt fate. Gossip spreads fast. Especially here in New York. I don't want to think about what people might say if that happened." Kati says, putting in it my face why that would probably not be a good idea. So I should probably stay close to her. Not that I mind. I've come to enjoy spending time with Kati. Very much. She's nice. She's calm. She's attentive in conversation. And she gets so far into my head...
I still have those thoughts. They aren't an uncommon occurrence at this point. But I manage to keep them in check throughout the day, though sometimes it can't be helped. I slip up. I make mistakes. And it allows my mind to wander. But I can't accept this. Not... Not yet. Not until I can fully understand *why* Kati makes me feel this way. How it's so effortless sometimes. How it can side-track me so completely. I *need* to understand why this happens. I can't do anything else before-hand except acknowledge that I feel sexual and possibly even romantic attraction towards another woman. It's still too much to think about, even with that in mind. Especially when...

No. Do not think about such things. What would mother think?
How is that relevant? She's always been supportive of me. I'm failing to see the connection.
It would not be pleasant for her to find out. There are standards that we must uphold.
Again: I fail to see how this would be detrimental. And what standards? I *want* to be able to accept this. I know what repressing feelings like this do to one's psyche. I'm not keen on becoming another statistic.
This can only end poorly. Just be professional. It's nothing more than an immature infatuation.
Oh great, my own mind infantilizing me. I am a grown woman of twenty-three. I'm more than capable of processing and understanding my own emotions. I just... I just need time with this. I don't want to rush this. That would end disastrously.

We eventually come to a small part of the small park where we have a solid view of the World Trade Center. It's quite nice, being out here. The cool October breeze is something I welcome, and I've been in New York long enough to draw some parallels with Tokyo. Both cities have a large population, being the largest in their respective nations. Both cities have a bustling night-life, clubs and bars being common place. Especially on Manhattan Island. Both cities are world hubs of culture for the arts, theater and music. New York being famous for it, having been the back drop for many different Hollywood blockbusters. Not to mention being an epicenter for movements such as American Punk Rock with venues such as CBGBs. Quite the history. It's fascinating. Almost as fascinating as the way Kati is looking at me. I know it's unintentional on her part, but I can't help...
No. Not now. I can ruminate on that thought at a later date. Besides, her eyes aren't the only ones I feel on me

"It's quite nice out here." I say, more so trying to distract myself from the feeling. I know why it's there: People are staring. I'm becoming quite popular here. It's terrifying, really, how fast this has happened. It took years for my name to become common-place in Japan. But here, in New York City... Only four months. That's how long it's been. And I'm already half-way to what I currently have back home. Again: It's terrifying.
"Yeah, it is. I like Little Island. Nice little green space out in the Hudson. Good place to just... disappear whenever I feel stressed or worn out. Just wish it was a bit closer to the Bronx." I hear Kati say, her voice carrying quite well on the breeze. "Though... Tonight isn't doing us any favors. Not with how many people are staring."
"I know. I can feel it." I respond, surprised by the shift in Kati's voice. She's not used to fame. Frankly, I'm *still* not. Not by a kilometer. I've just gotten used to navigating the terrain. "I'm surprised that no one has come up for a photo or autograph."
"Probably too busy to notice that it's *you*. I'm more surprised no-one has tried to hit on you." That is... and interesting response to hear from her. Why would... anyone want to do that?

"I'm sorry? *Hit* on me? What?" I ask, still trying to process Kati's response.
"I mean, look around. Do you see how many dumbass fratboys there are out here tonight? Anyone one of them could take their chances." She says, gesturing to the people going by us. I see what she means. At least, I *think* I do. A few of the men we've passed by... All young. All looking for their next "date". I don't intend on that being *me*. Not that it matters. None of them are really my type. They seem so... I don't know how to describe it, really. Predatory, maybe?

"How often does it happen to you?" I ask, unsure if I should be putting the question out there.
"Way too much considering the kind of person I am. I just..." Kati starts trailing off. Now I feel guilty. Like I've put her in some kind of limelight that she's woefully unprepared for. "Just wish it wasn't guys all the time." It's quiet, almost imperceptible, even for uma ears. But I still heard it. Do I prod a bit further? Or do I leave it be? My want to respect her boundaries is too high, but so is that dark need at the back of my mind. I need to know.. if she is...
"What do you mean?" The words slip out before I can really think. So much so that I immediately regret saying them when I see Kati ever so slightly turn away from me. I've struck a nerve. I need to course correct. "I- No. Forget I said anything. If it's too perso-"
"No, no. It's... It's alright. Just, uh... wasn't expecting that." Kati cuts me off, waving her hand like it's not a big deal. But I can tell that it is. The hesitancy in her voice. The way she looks at everything *except* me. "I, uh, I'm not attracted to men."
"Oh... I see." Is the only thing I can really respond with. I don't want to make this something grand or worth talking about in public. If anything, this kind of conversation should be happening in a more private setting. But I suppose beggars can't be choosers. For better or worse...
"Yeah. Not... exactly something I like to discuss in public like this." Kati picks up, hesitance still in her voice. We should remedy this. Not that... I want to keep prodding, but...
"We could go somewhere more private, if it helps you relax and feel a bit more at ease. No serious talks. Unless... you *want* to have that kind of thing. I'm fine with whatever happens." I say, watching closely to gauge Kati's reaction. Seems that it worked. She takes a deep breath, and then stands up, confidence evident in her posture.
"Yeah. I like that idea. Come on. Let's go."

We've been driving around Manhattan for goddesses know how long. Not that I mind. I do *enjoy* spending time with Kati. Talking with her. Just... being around her in general. I feel at ease with her. Not just another pretty face to be oggled at. But someone to be listened to and heard. Only other person I felt that way with was my old trainer when I was still racing. I wonder how Masaru's been. I should reach out to him when I have the chance.

"So the term is 'lesbian'? Interesting. How'd that come about?" I ask, engrossed in this little lesson in queer history.
"Well, it comes from the Greek island of Lesbos, which was the home of Sappho, who's name is where the term 'sapphic' comes from. Sapphic is broadly used to describe any woman who's attracted to other women. So lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals. If you're a woman and you feel *that way* towards another woman, you're sapphic. But lesbians like me are *only* attracted to women." Kati explains. She knows a lot about this topic. Rightly so. I would expect it from someone like her.
"Sappho's poetry was so intimately about women. The contours of the body. The ways in which she felt about other women. So when you hear historians say she killed herself over unrequited love for a *man*... Yeah, I'm inclined to call bullshit."
"Well that's certainly colorful language." I respond, chuckling as I do so. Seems I've found a topic that Kati is passionate about.
"It's erasure. Outright erasure. But I'm gonna stop myself there. No need for this to be a rant." She says in response. Probably for the best.

"When did you start feeling this way?" I ask, wanting to know more. Maybe it... can help me understand this bisexuality.
"Oh, that... I want to say I was ten. Maybe eleven. All I can remember is that this one girl just looked so pretty and... I couldn't take my eyes off her. Just grew from there." Kati says, voice growing softer as she speaks. "There was one girl I knew. Mutual friend of me and Met. Wrestled with the thought for months. 'How could I ask her out and not come off as a creep?' Kept me up at night until *she* asked me out."
"Wow. Quite the development." I say, knowing that the conversation will die down soon. I don't mind it though. The silence is welcome in this instance. It allows me to think. To ruminate. I... think I am one step closer to understanding why Kati makes me feel this way. But at the same time... the shame returns. Best to not let it get to my head.

|-Monday morning. Noonan Towers, 929 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx-|



It's hazy, my eyesight. Hazy and full of lust. So much so that I'm unsure if what I'm experiencing in this moment is real. But what I can see... God is it good...

"Oh... Oh wow..." Gold says in a breathy manner, her neck covered in little bite marks and hickeys. Such a beautiful sight... That pristine skin with remnants of my work on it...
"Relax, baby... Enjoy yourself..." I say as my hands roam over her back, looking for the strap to unclasp her bra. I want... I *need* them in my hands. To feel them. To play with them. *To worship them.* Actions befitting a woman like Gold City. I find the strap, and deftly get it unclasped, pulling it forward as Gold brings her hands to cover her chest. Still nervous. Milyen aranyos. (How cute.) I gently place my hands on her wrists, looking deeply into those beautiful blue eyes clouded by lust.

"Is this okay? You can say if it isn't." I tell her, wanting her to be comfortable with what's happening. I watch the blush slowly creep down from her face and onto the pale skin of her neck, gradually becoming redder and redder as she processes my words.
"Oh, I'm... I'm fine with this. Just..." She stammers. Nerves. She'll get used to it, though. I slowly pull her wrists away from her chest, uncovering that divine bosom I have fantasized about since June. They're even more beautiful than I could've imagined. I go to place my hand atop her left breast, but stop before I make contact. I want to make sure that it is really okay for me to do this. I look at Gold, hoping to see some form of approval, and when she nods, I gently cup her breast with my hand. Soft, yet firm. Plump, yet steady. I slowly start to knead the fatty tissue in my hand, watching Gold's face as I do so. She seems to be enjoying it, judging by her head being craned back and the soft moans that escape her lips. It spurs me on. My hand moves quicker, eventually being joined by the other.

"Enjoying this?" I ask, voice husky with desire. I want Gold to be enjoying this as much as I am. If she isn't, then there are major problems. But the response I get is a good one.
"Yeah, this... this is nice." She says, voice equally as husky. Good. What I want to hear. I slowly lean in, pressing my lips to hers before making my way down, slowly but surely leaving a trail of heat that stops between her breasts. I then lean back, taking in the sight before I lean back in. I tilt left, lips making contact just above the areola before I make eye contact with Gold. I can tell from the look in those lustful blue eyes that escalation is more than okay, so I gently take the sensitive bud between my teeth, occasionally flicking it with my tongue as I slowly squeeze her other breast with my hand.

"Woah... That's..." Gold stammers again. I don't know why, but seeing that confidence of hers melt away because of my own actions here just does something for me.
"Want this to go further?" I ask, wanting to escalate more. But I won't if she's not comfortable.
"Oh, please do..." Gold responds, prompting me to push her onto her back, her head coming to lay on one of my pillows while I slowly close the distance, pressing my lips to hers once I reach her. I can't get enough of them. Their softness... that plump feeling coupled with her wanting for more. So we kiss. And kiss. And kiss, all while my hand goes lower and lower. I gently caress her stomach, delighting myself with the reaction it gets out of her.
"Ticklish much?" I ask in a teasing manner, watching her ears perk up and down as she listens. The soft chuckles mixed with moans is the answer I get. So I continue with this sensual caress of mine. But that lust is telling me to keep going. Lower... and lower...

My hand reaches the lowest point of my desire. I'm hesitant at first, but something tells me that Gold will enjoy this. So I slowly bring my hand closer to that sensual place we share, gently applying pressure, watching Gold's face closely in between kisses.
"Kati..." She whispers, surprise drenching her weak voice.
"If it's too much I can st-" I don't get to finish the statement. Gold captures my lips with hers before I can get the last words out.
"Keep going..." She says after we break away. So I do. I keep going, adding more pressure until I can feel her squirm beneath me. But it isn't pain or fear. It's lust that's making her move like this. I

then start moving my hand in circles, caressing that oh so sensitive flesh beneath the fabric of her underwear before I move my hand a bit higher. I then slip my hand underneath the fabric before resuming that same motion, circling that little sensitive bud with my fingers.
"Oh... Ô déesses... Ça fait... (Oh... Oh goddesses... That feels...)" Seems my little ministrations are good enough for her to start speaking French. I wonder... What else can I do here? What other things can I make her say? So I apply more and more pressure, watching and listening to the sounds that Gold makes. Every moan. Every whisper. I then get risky. With one finger... I apply the most pressure, until...

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ring
ring
ring
ring
ring

Ó Istenem... Miért ilyen hangos? (Oh my god... Why is that so loud?) I turn over to see what's making that loud claptrap. It's my phone. My alarm is going on. I quickly grab the small black box and turn it off, and then realize something odd. I feel... wet. Why am I wet? Did I... Was I sweating in my sleep again? As I try to figure it out, it hits me. The worst possible realization I could have in this moment. Oh no... Oh fucking Christ help me now...

I dreamed of sleeping with Gold City.

Fuck. Oh fuck. Fuck. Just... no... I feel disgusting. I need a shower. That's... That's not okay. Especially with everything we talked about last night. I... I can't tell anyone about this. Ever. *No one can find out that this happened.* I quickly grab a change of clothes and head to the bathroom. I strip, get the water running and wait until it steams. I then step it... and immediately sit down in the tub. Fuck... *Fuck...* How... How and why did this happen? I... I feel sick, knowing that my mind went there.

You should, degenerate scum.
Oh great, *you* again.
Spare the pleasantries. You're in deep shit now. Only one way to end this: Cut things off.
What? No. What is wrong with you?
What is wrong with ME? What is wrong with YOU? YOU'RE the one who dreamed of that. YOU'RE the one who let her mind go in that direction. Cut. Things. Off.

I shut that voice out. I'm not listening to it. I can't let something like this be the end of my working relationship with Gold City. I just *can't*. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity and I can't let it slip away. I *need* to find a way to deal with this. I quickly do my routine before drying off, changing into the fresh clothes when I hear my phone go off. It's not a text. It's a phone call. Who could... OH SHIT! Jessica. I forgot we had that today. I quickly rush over and answer the call.

"Uh, hey Jessica. What's up?" I say as soon as I get my phone in my hand.
"Ye haven't forgotten about our little jaunt today, have ye now?" She responds, her voice soothing, allowing me to forget about my troubles, if briefly.
"What? Me? Forgetting about our plans? Noooooo. Never." I say, trying to be playful and sarcastic in the vain hope that it can mask whatever fucked up mental state I'm in. Seems like it's worked too.
"Grand. That's music to me ears, so it is. You know the spot where we're meetin'?" Jessica

responds, that accent of her helping to calm me down even more.
"Uh, Madison Square Park, right? By the Flatiron?" I ask, confident that's where we're meeting, but somewhat unsure. After a few seconds, Jessica gives me a response.
"Aye, that's right. The park by the Flatiron. Noon we said, wasn't it?" I hear, thinking that sounds like what we agreed on.
"I think so.? It certainly *sounds* right." I then say in response, wanting nothing more than to get out there and clear my head.
"Grand. I'll be seein' ya." Jessica says before hanging up, leaving me with my thoughts.

I take a deep breath. Anything... *Anything* to purge that dream from my head. Jézus Krisztus, mi a fasz bajom van? (Jesus Christ, what the fuck is wrong with me?) I can't let that happen again.
I *need* to keep things in check. We have eight more months to go. If this is how I am *four months in*... No. No time to dwell on that. Not that I want to. I'd rather *not* think about this. Or it's ramifications. So I start getting ready to meet up with Jessica. God, please let her help me. Even if she doesn't know what's going on in my head.

Chapter 16: A Certain Lack of Sleep

Chapter Summary

> Kati is still wrangling with the aftermath of her dream. She hopes that this outing with Jessica can purge the memory from her mind, but it comes roaring back when she sees Gold City is a spot of trouble. She helps get the model uma out of the situation, but Kati can't bring herself to look into Gold's eyes. Not when that deam is still fresh on her mind. Cut to later that night, where Kati is heading to Brooklyn to spend some more time with Mark and Jessica where Met decides to join them, and his observant nature leads him to make a specific conclusion about Kati's mental state that night.

|-Monday morning. Madison Square Park, 11 Madison Avenue, Manhattan, New York-| I still can't get that dream out of my head...

Mennie kell... (It needs to go...)
Mennie kell... (It needs to go...)
Mennie kell... (It needs to go...)

But it just... *won't*. No matter what I do. No matter what I try. Please let Jessica be able to purge the thought from my mind. I fucking *hate* it when I remember a dream like that. Why? Why does it have to be *that*? Why can't I forget it within minutes of waking just like every other dream I have? Why does it have to *linger*? Linger and *taunt* me?

I keep walking, trying and failing to purge those images from my mind. That sight of... Gold City... Nearly nude on my... No. Enough of this.

slap
I realize how ludicrous and uncouth that must've looked. But I really don't give a damn right now.

So now you understand. Good. Degenerate.

Oh shut the fuck up. We're not doing this now.
I stop that before it can even start. I'm not listening to it. Not for a second. Just focus on walking... I come to the reflecting pool and see a woman shorter than me: Shoulder-length auburn hair. Pale skin. Red shirt with a green sweater over it and a white blouse. Yup. That's Jessica. But who's that weird guy with a mullet next to he-

Oh wait. Right. That's Mark. Hey, wait. Why is *Mark* out here? Doesn't he have to work today? Guess he has it off... Okay then... Not gonna complain, really. I continue walking until I reach them, at which point they turn to face me, almost simultaneously.

"Ayy, yo, dat's her- Why ya wearin' dem glahsses?" Mark asks, not knowing that I do, in fact, wear glasses from time to time.
"Arrah, now, is that yer first question? Not a 'How's it goin'?' or 'It's been a grand while'?" Jessica responds, that soft accent managing to calm me.

"Aight, when ya put it *dat* way..." Mark sheepishly says as Jessica rises on her toes, pecking his cheek which causes him to blush. "Aight, real-lee... Ya goin' wit' the PDA out in public..." God, what I'd give to have what they do...
"Uh, yeah... I wear glasses. Ran out of contacts today. Don't really feel like getting more. Why are you here, Mark?" That question came out a bit more harsh than I intended. But Mark seems to take it in stride.
"Wooooooow... Right fo' da jugulah, huh?" He responds before chuckling, which then gets Jessica chuckling, and then me. "I got a day off, see? Figured I'd hop in Jessica's ride 'cause I ain't got nuttin' better ta do. Not dat I'm complainin', nah. Can't tink of a betta way ta spend da day den wit' my two favorite girls in da whole damn city."
That... That makes me feel warm. Never thought Mark would view me so highly. I'll take the compliment though. I... *I could use it right now.*
"Oh... Whisht now, will ya." Jessica says, lightly slapping Mark on the shoulder, something that only makes his blush deepen. Jezus...

"A fashion show? Gawd dammit. Dat's a perfec' oppohtoonity fo' ya ta show da whole damn city whaddaya can do wit' dat camera o' yours, Kati." Mark says, which reminds me of that... new Randy relayed to me.
"It would be... If I was allowed to *bring my camera*." I respond, watching his face go from triumphant to dumbfounded. Which then turns to anger.
"WHAT?! Dey ain't lettin' ya take pitchas? Ya fuhgeddaboudit! Ya fuhkin' kiddin' me? Dey outta dey fuhkin' minds? What kinda dumb shee-it dey pullin'?" He starts to go off, catching a few passerby's attention. Until Jessica manages to get things under wrap.
"Ah, now, now... just breathe, love. Breathe easy." Her words manage to get Mark to breathe, at which point she turns to me. "So why not, aye? Why not let the lads from outside get on with their snapping" "Randy didn't say. All he told me is that the organizers have it covered. Not a really popular move with *anyone*." I respond, not wanting to remember this. Why? Just why? It's so stupid. So *unbelievably* stupid.
"Ah, let's change the tune a bit, shall we? When's the fashion show, now? Any tickets to be had? And if there are, are they costing a pretty penny?" Jessica starts asking, deftly shifting the tone as she said she would.
"It's on the 23rd. So ten days. As for tickets... Nem tudom. (Don't know.) Haven't really had a chance to look. Only found out about this yesterday." I respond, not knowing how they'll take it. I gauge it as *well enough*, but there is that lingering thought in the back of my mind.
"Dis Randy goon couldn't told ya 'bout dis sooner? Whassamatta wit' 'im, what was duh fuhkin' plan?" Mark starts, annoyance evident in his voice.
"Guess he wanted to have outright confirmation that Gold will have a spot on the runway before telling us." I answer. Guess I'll need to sort this out with him one-on-one.

We keep walking as we talk, going in a direction that I think will take us to Union Square. The buildings here *look* like the ones surrounding Union Square.
"So, he wants ta bring some weirdo from Quibeck, huh? An' Gold City, she know dis guy?" Mark asks, voice tinged with confusion.
"Yeah. Apparently he's a designer she's been wanting to work with for a while." I respond, still processing that information from yesterday. A Québécois designer? Guess Randy has friends everywhere if he's bringing in Gold City from Japan and Brouillard down from Montreal. "Very well known in Montreal. I'm just as surprised that Randy knows him. Though, hindsight..." I start taking note of the surrounding buildings as my voice trails off. Yeah, we're *definitely* close to Union Square. I can see the Greenmarket. Wonder if I can convince them to try some kimchee... Wouldn't that be something? The two palest people I know chowing down on some fermented cabbage and

raddish. But as I'm about to bring it up, something catches my eye. It's an odd scene, a group of people all looking in one, singular direction. As if they're focused on one person. Why is this making a pit form in my stomach? Why do I feel dread right now? We keep walking some more, and I get a better picture: They're looking at *her*. Oh god... Oh no...

The crowd that's gathered is trying to *not* make it obvious that they are all staring at Gold City. Not that it matters. She probably already knows she has eyes on her. She has that kind of sixth sense. Natural for someone in her position. She's by the flagstaff, trying to not let the pressure get to her. I know she's used to this kind of thing back in Tokyo, but this is New York City. Population may be smaller by several orders of magnitude, but this is a multi-cultural city. Gossip will spread like wildfire. And for the famous? For *celebrities* like Gold City? I gotta do something. I see her get up and start moving, people within the crowd turning their heads to follow her as she moves. I'm seeing a variety of people, but it's mostly men that are watching. I'm not liking this. Not at all.

I break off from Mark and Jessica, something that they don't notice and make a b-line for Gold. She cannot be in a situation like that. Not with the kind of men that I saw staring at her. I'm not trusting any of this. I see her over by Engel Plaza, making me quicken my pace, wanting to reach her before anyone else. But I don't. She stops, or rather, *is stopped* by somebody else. I can feel my heart pulse in my chest, the rate of beats increasing every second. But as I close the distance, I can tell that it's not a guy who's stopped her. It's an older woman. And a child...

Oh... Well... This has gotten interesting. Guess the kid wants an autograph? But going off of Gold's body language... She doesn't exactly seem comfortable. I think I can still help out here. I slow my approach, but I'm still walking over to her. I eventually get close enough to hear what's being said, because there *is* a conversation taking place.

"Would... Would it be..."
"It's alright, sweetie. No need to be shy." "Really, there isn't."

Poor kid. Heart's probably racing just *thinking* about what they're gonna say to Gold. Do they want an autograph? A picture? Who knows. Only the kid.

"But, uh... I..." I hear the kid stutter as I finally reach Gold City. Immediately, I manage to find *some* words that I *think* will get us out of this situation. Save us all from embarrassment.
"If it's an autograph, then we'll have to disappoint. Have to go through her manager for that, otherwise we'd be here all day and get nothing done. Sorry, kiddo." I say, catching everyone's attention. I can see the look on the kid's face, how her eyes start dimming as she realizes that this opportunity will pass. That is... until her mother decides to chime in.
"Oh, well, that certainly makes *some* sense. Come on, sweetie, we'll have another chance if we see her again." The woman says as she takes her daughter's hand. They then start to walk away, but the kid gives Gold one last look, to which she responds with a small wave, a gesture that brings some light back into the young girl's eyes. Gold then turns to me, face slightly red from the experience.
"Uh, thanks for that. I... I didn't quite know what to say. I didn't want to disappoint her, but as you said, if I started giving out autographs because people asked, we'd get nothing done for the year." She says, ears flattening against the top of her head as she speaks. It's cute, in a humorous way. But then I remember that dream... *Nem tudok a szemébe nézni... (I can't look her in the eyes...)* I quickly avert my gaze, trying to not make it obvious that I'm avoiding eye contact.
"I'm just glad it was a kid that started talking to you. Do you know how many men were looking your way?" I respond, knowing how she might answer, still trying to avoid those pale blue eyes of hers.
"I know. I saw them. I'm glad it was that girl, too." She responds, confirming some suspicions. "I

take it she was a fan?" I then ask, also knowing what Gold's answer will be.
"Yeah. Said she wants to be as pretty as me and head down the runway when she grows up." Gold says, eyes now looking off in the direction the girl's mother took her. "I hope she does. And I hope that... she can deal with it better than I can."

As I formulate my response, just about to get the words out, I feel someone tug at my shirt. That's a no-go. A *big* no-go. But as I'm about to turn around and smack whoever decided to lay hands on me, I hear Mark's voice.
"Holy shiiiit, dis took longer than it needed ta. Don'tcha *eva* disappear on us like dat again, ya hear? If ya gonna walk off, at least tell us." He says, annoyed that I didn't say a word before leaving him and Jessica. "One sec ya wit' us, den ya ain't. We went up an' down Broadway lookin' fo' ya. Couldn't find ya no-where. What's the fuhkin' reason ya gotta just poof like dat, huh?"
"Uh... Hello there." Gold says, walking out from behind me and greeting Mark, her ears now standing up straight as she tries to process his words and his accent. And just as Jessica manages to catch up, though she seems to have heard the entire exchange.
"Ah, well now... That's a bleedin' good reason, if ever there was one."

|-That afternoon. Barbounia, 250 Park Avenue South-|

"Well damn. Ya dat famous ova in Japan, huh? An' ya pulled half dat off hea in jus foah mont's? Fuhkin' fuggedaboutit. Dis Randy guy's givin' ya both a real beatdown." Mark says, that accent of his not being as difficult as I thought it would be to understand. Seems Kati isn't as truthful as she portrays. Not that I mind. I've been wanting to meet her friends since she mentioned them back in June. I've already become acquainted with Met. So Mark and Jessica were next. Naturally. I just wish it was under... better circumstances. Even here, I can feel people staring at me. Waiting for their chance to approach me. Ask for an autograph. A picture. Potentially even shoot their shot, so to say. I pray it's not that last option. Not with how often I...
"Ah, sure, he can't be too much trouble to work with, goin' by how we bumped into her today." Jessica says, both responding to Mark and cutting my thoughts off. Her accent... I thought it would be a bit more pronounced since she's from Limerick. But it's no bother. I like her demeanor. She reminds me a lot of Fine Motion. Wish that I had the chance to know her better. She was... a very nice person.
"We've been averaging around five shoots per month. So it's not *too* hard on us." I hear Kati say, her eyes flicking over to me as she speaks, but never settling. They dart away whenever I look at her. Something's wrong. I can tell. But what is it? I'll need to look more a bit later. For now, though...
"Yeah, it hasn't been nearly as hard as I thought it would be. When Tomo brought the idea up with me, the impression of Randy he gave was someone that of who puts his models and photographers through the gauntlet ten times over in a *single week*. But Randy is incredibly lenient with time. Far more than me and Kati would have ever thought." I start saying, reflecting on the past four months. I really have gotten halfway to what I have in Japan, haven't I? It's a lot to take in. Becoming so well known in such a short amount of time.

I take a deep breath, but I manage to make it subtle. Not noticeable. At least, that's the hope.
"As for the fame... Well... You probably saw the... *situation* I was in earlier." I look down at the plate in front of me after I say those words: A flatbread with mushroom paste. It's not bad. Quite good, actually. I take my eyes off it briefly to find Mark looking me up and down. Seems he still has questions.
"So, all dis fame an' modelin' shit aside: How ya like New Yawk? Can ya even compare it ta Tokyo? Betta? Woise?" He asks, wanting to know how I view the city. "Which boro is ya fav-o-rite?"

"It's quite nice. I'm partial to Manhattan, mostly because this has been where I've been staying. The city is a bit of a mix of Toronto and Tokyo. It's very interesting." I say, catching him by surprise. Seems Mark doesn't know.
"T-Toronto? What're we draggin' Canadeh inta dis for? I tawt ya wuz Jappaneeez? Aint youse?" He says, confusion drenching his voice as he speaks.
"Because I'm half-Canadian.? Because half of my childhood was spent in and around the Greater Toronto Area living in Oshawa.? Mon Père est un Québécois né et élevé en Ontario. (My father is Québécois who was born and raised in Ontario.) It's not that hard to understand." I respond, watching as Mark only becomes more confused.
"But yer mother's Japanese, isn't she?" Jessica then asks.
"Yes. She grew up in Monbetsu Town where *I* was born. It's up north in Hokkaido. Though... she herself wasn't born in Japan. She was born in Palermo while her parents were traveling through Europe in the '70s." I say, answering Jessica's question. Something that gets Mark's full attention.
"Oh shit, she was popped outta the womb in Palermo? E' di ccà ca veni la famigghia di me patri." I hear Mark say. My Italian is... lacking. So I don't quite know what he just said.
"Excuse me?" I ask, wanting some clarification on his words.
"My ol' man's whole family's straight outta Puh-lermo." He then says, something that then catches Kati's attention.

"Wait, I thought *all* of your family was from Palermo?" She asks Mark, getting a small glare from the man.
"Nah. Just my old man. Ma's from Saragusa. Ya know, *Syracuse*." He tells her, his face stern and cold before returning to that fiery aura I have seen so far. "Ti devi fari controllari a testa, Kati. La memoria ti putissi mancari."
"Oh yeah? Emlékeztess még egyszer, ki hív szlováknak? (Remind me again who keeps calling me Slovakian?)" Kati retorts, the more robust tones of Hungarian providing a distinct contrast to the melodious timbre of whatever Italian dialect Mark was speaking. It's a witty joust of words. One I wish I was able to join in. If only...

"Aight, I guess dat wraps up dis whole shindig. Ya comin' back wit us, Kati? Or ya gonna jaw 'bout bidness wit Gold City?" Mark says as we exit the restaurant. He's blunt. He's brash. He's unapologetic. But it's endearing. *So* endearing. I can see why Kati is friends with him. That bluntness makes him honest. It's not always pleasant, but it's welcome.
"Uh, you two go ahead. I'll swing by tonight if you've got the time." Kati tells him, her eyes going between Mark and Jessica as she speaks.
"Ah, sure, isn't there always time we can find for ya?" Jessica responds before she then turns to me.
"Ah, you're grand to tag along as well, Gold City. So you are. I wouldn't be mindin' at all, not a bit."
"I appreciate the offer but I will be busy tonight." I tell her, not wanting to get her hopes up. Maybe another time...
"Ah, it's grand." She says as she turns to face Mark. "Ah, come on now, let's be headin' home, handsome.' She and Mark then start heading of in one direction hand in hand, leaving me and Kati to ourselves as people walk by us, some going into the restaurant we just exited.

"You never said they were a couple." I say as I rest my eyes on her.
"I... I did.?" She responds, confused by my words. Did she actually mention that? Or is she imagining things.
"You did? I don't remember it." I then say, confident in saying that she didn't mention this. "They do make for a good couple though."
"Yeah... They do..." I hear Kati then says, voice trailing off, getting quieter. "Wish I had something like that..." She murmurs, thinking I can't hear it. I can *very much* hear it. But I won't press the

matter. It's clearly a sensitive topic for her. I don't want to make it worse for her. I can't help but recognize just how *lonely* she must feel. Lonely and jealous.
'Wish I had something like that...'
I could tell from her *cadence* that it was *serious*. I can tell from her *tone* that it was *real*. I can tell from the *rise and fall* in her voice that it was *genuine*. Of course, *I'm* not helping matters. She still locks up every so often. Gets trapped within her own head every now and then. And I know what she's thinking about.

She's thinking about me.

I wish I could be more open with her. I *want* to have that. But I can't. Not at this stage, at least. It will only complicate our working relationship. It would make us both *sloppy*. It would make us *unfocused*. It would be *unprofessional*. It would be *uncouth*. *Unnatural* if the little oni and nain rouge on my shoulders are to be believed. Not to mention that I am *nowhere near close* to accepting my bisexuality. I still need to understand it better before I can act on it. Well... *If* I can act on it. So I resign myself to this... pining. Pining for something I don't fully understand. Longing for a woman who's heart I'll... most likely have to break when summer returns. I don't want to. Goddesses know that I don't. But I need to be realistic.

"You have some... very interesting friends, Kati." I say, breaking both the tension and uneasy silence that had fallen between us. it still surprises me just how loud it can get, even in a bustling city like New York.
"Yeah, I guess I do... But I'm happy for it. Life is better with them in it." She responds, volume coming back to her voice. that's good to hear. We're talking about something that means a lot to her. Her friends.
"I can tell. You seemed a lot more relaxed with them. That's a good thing. It means you trust them." I say, recalling how she seemed more at ease when Mark and Jessica were here. Now that they're not, that sense of comfort and safety is gone. I felt that same way around Masaru and Yuta. Masaru, my trainer. A man that was like a second father to me. Yuta, Team Spica's trainer. More like an older brother. I'm always half-tempted to reach out to either of them. Just to... hear their voices so I can steady myself. Same with Helios, Palmer and Jordan. What I'd give to talk to each of them again. Even if it was for a few minutes.
"So, are we going to linger here or are we heading to a second location?" I ask, getting out of my own head and turning to Kati. She turns to face me, but her eyes do not meet mine. I'm still in her head. To what extent, I don't know. But it's enough to make her avoid eye contact.
"Uh... I guess we could head back to your place. But I can't stay long. I did kinda... say I'd be in Brooklyn tonight." She responds, voice trembling ever so slightly as she speaks.
"That's fine. I don't intend to keep you long, anyway. I just... enjoy your company, is all. I want to make the most of it while I'm in America." I then say, not intending to make Kati blush. But she does anyway. I guess some things can't be helped. Poor thing. We then start walking, heading back towards Broadway which we turn onto. Before long, we reach her car, parked not too far from an apartment block on 6th Avenue.

We both get in and within seconds, we are heading to the Financial District. I sneak glances at Kati every so often, taking note on how her eyes are glues to the streets ahead of us. It's unsettling. Normally I feel so... *seen* with her. But this? Whatever was bothering her must really be serious. I'm tempted to ask what it is, yet at the same time, I feel like that would be pouring salt on the wound. But against my better judgement...
"You've been tense ever since we left Barbounia. Something wrong?" I ask, feeling a pit form in my stomach as the words escape my lips. Kati's eyes dart to me for the first time since she started driving, and when we hit a red light, she speaks up.

"It's, uh... It's nothing. Just didn't sleep well last night." I can tell that's a lie. It's obvious that's what it is. But I don't prod further. I entertain the lie. If for anything, than to save Kati's dignity.
"Anything I can suggest that might help? It most likely won't be much, but anything it better than nothing." I then say, wanting to help a woman that I've come to trust and view as a friend.
"I'm... open to ideas." She responds, voice trembling again, eyes never making contact with mine.
"Well, back in Japan, whenever I had bouts of fitful sleep, my mother would have me take a warm bath. The heat of the water helps relax the muscles and ease any tension that you might have while the temperature will cause the body to cool off, which then leads to the brain telling you it's time to sleep. Maybe you could try that tonight when you get back to the Bronx." I say, watching her face close so I can gauge her reaction. "Green tea and valerian root can also help, if you're so inclined."
"Maybe... I'll try those tonight. See how they work." She responds, eyes now finally meeting mine for the first time today. It's brief, only a second or two, but it's enough for me to see the appreciation in those rich brown orbits. She then slows her car down again, and I notice that we're at Ocean Luxury. Guess this is where we part for the night. I unbuckle, step out, but before I head for the building...

"You don't... have to come in. This was enough." I say, leaning on her window which she rolled down. "More than enough, really. Considering what happened earlier."
"No, no. It's okay. You said you enjoy spending time with me and... I enjoy it too." She says as she unbuckles herself. She then steps out of the vehicle and we both make our way inside and up to my apartment.

Combien de temps peut la relation entre nous rester comme ça avant que quelque chose ne se brise inévitablement? (How long can the relationship between us stay like this before something inevitably breaks?)

|-That evening. 38th Sixth Apartments, 38 6th Avenue, Brooklyn-|

"Sacrificing lives with apathy!"
"Torturing their captives ruthlessly!"
"Misery and anguish morbid pleas!"
"Forgotten ghaslty atrocities!"

Chết tiệt... Những quảng cáo đó không hề đùa... (Holy shit... Those ads were not kiddin) These headphones are *so fuckin good*. Just what I was hopin for. A big ole pair of over-ears with good sound quality made specifically for umas. Son *tanto contento*. (I am *very happy*.) But I've got to stop the music. Don't want to repeat what happened a few weeks ago. Still can't believe I did that *again*. Let my music keep playin, makin me miss out on Phantom Witch. Dio, son un mona. (God, am I an idiot.) Doesn't matter though, I'm almost at their buildin. Weird... Thought Kati would be here *before* me. Though with that bein said...

"Met! Da questa parte! Brutto coglione! (Met! Get ova heah! Ya fuhkin' asshole!)" These are noise-cancellin headphones... Địa ngục... (How the hell...) I quickly give Mark an Iberian slap before I respond, takin off my headphones as I do so.
"Vaffanculo anche a te, Mark! (Well fuck you too, Mark!)" I shout, watchin as he starts laughin. Fuckin Sicilian asshole. Why do I even tolerate him?
"Tipiche buffonate veneziane. Andiamo. Porta qui il tuo culo alto. (Typical Venetian shenanigans. C'mon. Get ya long keister ovah heah, ya big lug.)" He shouts in response. I'll show him how Venetians roll. Papa didn't raise no bitch.
"Ci sei dentro, stronzo. (You're in for it now, asshole.)" I yell as I quickly find a crosswalk and make it to the other side of the street. Upon seein this, Mark starts shittin bricks. *As he should*. He

tries to make a break for his apartment buildin, but I'm an uma. *I'm faster than him. All six feet and ten inches of me. Like a proper destrier.* I quickly close whatever gap Mark was hopin to create and grab him by the shirt, liftin him with no problems whatsoever.
"Ehi! EHI! METTIMI GIÙ, FIGLIO DI PUTTANA! (Ayy! HEY! PUT ME DOWN, YA SONOVABITCH!)" He shouts, tryin to wrest himself free from my grip.
"No. No penso che ło farò. Penso che te porterò fin al pavimento e nel tuo appartamento. (No. I don't think I will. I think I'll carry you all way the up to your floor and into your apartment.)" I say, bustin out the Venetian as a way to pour salt into the wound as I walk towards the elevator, Mark in hand, passers-by scratchin their heads at the sight. I enter the lift, punch the floor, and start headin up.
"Jessica se la farà da ridere quando la te vedarà. (Jessica is gonna laugh her ass off when she sees you.)"

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knock
knock
knock

"Who's there at the door, now? Is that you, Kati?" I hear from the other side.
"Special delivery. One Sicilian asshole for a kind-hearted Irish woman." I respond, gettin a chuckle out of Jessica.
"Aww, COME ON! Dis shit ain't funn-AY!" Mark protests. But there's not much he can really do here. I hear shufflin on the other side, and then the door opens, at which point Jessica starts laughin her ass off. I then hoist Mark up so that we're at eye level.
"Te l'ho cazzo detto. (I fuckin told you.)" I say to him before I mercifully let him go. He then walks into the apartment, and I follow. "I take it Kati isn't here?"
"Nah, she's on her way dough. Hung out wit' her *goilfren'*. Had some quality time, ya know?" Mark responds. He's *really* gotta stop callin Gold City Kati's *girlfriend*. Not because it will never happen. I can tell that the two of them hookin up is practically inevitable. Mark needs to stop sayin it... because they're not *ready* for that to happen. Gold and Kati have *a lot* to work through in their own heads before they can consider datin. Mark and Jessica aren't seein what I am. They're not as *observant* as I am. They see Kati bein a down bad mess and Gold City bein this stoic woman who pays it no heed. But I see the *real* thing here. I saw it when I ran into them in Central Park on Friday. Every single fidget. Every single glance.
"Well, when you put it *that* way... How long until she gets here?" I ask, wantin to not focus on my best friend's mental torture at the moment and enjoy my night.
"Ah, she can't be too far off now. I'm thinkin' she was just about to be crossin' the Brooklyn Bridge the last time she said a word." Jessica says, voice carryin through the air. Guess we just have to wait then. In the meantime...

I reach into my bag and grab both my testosterone and antiestrogen. I waltz over into the kitchen and grab a glass, fillin it up with water before I pop some of the pills into my hands before knockin them back. They go down a lot harder than they should've, but it's fine. I've had worse. I walk back into the livin room, eyein Mark with some insidious intent. I could... But I won't. I've already embarrased him tonight. Don't need to do anythin else.
"I guess we're doin pizza tonight?" I ask, noticin the lack of food. Mark spins around, eyes gleamin.
"Ay, foah pies from Patsy's, see? I should prolly head ova dere now to get da pies. Dey should be done by now, ya know?" He says, walkin over to the door when he reaches into his pocket and takes out his phone. "Huh... Guess Kati hadda same kinda idea. She's grabbin' da pizza."
"Did you be tellin' her what we were after gettin'?" Jessica asks Mark, eyes never leavin him for a second.

"I mean, yeah, I did it. But I didn't tink she'd actually grab it on her way, ya know?" He says, glancin back down to his phone. "She's on Flatbush. 'Bout ta make a right onto Sixt'. I'm goin' down dere ta help haul dem pies upstairs." But as he's about to head down, I start walkin.
"No, no. I'll head down. You stay here." I say as I open the door, makin my way down the hall to the elevator.

"You... didn't really have to do this, Met." Kati says as I grab the pies.
"Mark ordered *four large pizzas*. You're delusional if you think you can carry *all* of this on your own." I tell her, watchin her fac closely. Somethins wrong. I can tell. It's in her eyes. She looks more tired than usual. And this is Kati I'm talkin about. She is a woman who *regularly* deprives herself of sleep. She can't help it. But this? This is different. Don't know how Mark and Jessica didn't see it earlier today. But then again, they don't see the things I do. And from the way they were talkin, seems like Gold City became a part of their little outin. But I don't make this known. I don't need Kati to be a mess right now. I will, however, try to pice together why she looks worse for wear.

I hoist the pies up, carryin them as we both head back into the buildin. Once inside, we make a b-line for the elevator. Kati presses the button and we step inside once it gets to the bottom floor. The rise is slow, givin me time to put the pieces together:

Kati seems to be on edge. As if waitin for somethin that won't actually come. What is it?
The bags under her eyes are bigger than usual. Tells me she hasn't been gettin enough sleep. That, or it hasn't been pleasant.
She saw Gold City today. Wasn't planned, but it still happened. I noticed how she is whenever she's around. Struggles to keep herself together. Her mind will go off. Her cheeks will flush read as blood rushes to her brain. I don't want to be makin assumptions right now, but if I know Kati as well as I think I do, then... Well...

She must've dreamed about fuckin Gold City.

Not a pleasant thought. Not in the slightest. But I've known Kati for over twenty years. There are only two people who know her better than me. Her dad and Rose. And I know that they would both reach similar conclusions. Provided that they knew what was happenin and were payin attention. But enough of that. I don't want to think about it. Not now, at least. She could use the rest. The distraction. Hopefully we can give it to her.

Chapter 17: White Ladies and Maroon Wax

Chapter Summary

Finding themselves at the Gershwin inspecting the stage and lighting for the night of the 23rd, Gold and Kati talk about the former's time at Tracen, which then leads to a discussion of fashion designer Daiwa Scarlet, an old classmate of Gold. A woman she wishes she had become friends with. While in the middle of this discussion, Randy comes onto the stage with Miguel Brouillard, who has prepared a piece inspired by the Chute de la Dame Blanche, an old Canadian ghost story he and Gold are familiar with. After changing into it, Gold comes out and gives praise and criticism where needed, and Kati feels her mind slipping slightly, unable to truly look at Gold. Later that night, Gold convinces Kati to try on lipstick, something that then leads to an intimate encounter between the two women... or so she thinks as her attention is brought back to reality by Kati, and later Met, who's silvery-purple gaze can sense things that Kati may not be able to.

Chapter Notes

Art by Caja Trash and Lueduar

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|-Wednesday afternoon. The Gershwin Theater, 222 West 51st Street, Manhattan, New York-|



"Really? Her mom works for a major fashion outlet in Japan? And you haven't shown off her pieces in shoots... why? That seems like a major missed opportunity, showing off the work of a former classmate like that." I ask Gold, wanting to know more about this 'Daiwa Scarlet' she's been talking about.
"That's the thing: I *have* shown off pieces designed by Scarlet. Wonderful pieces that showcase her skills. What I *want* is to work with her *directly*. See her in the middle of her craft." Gold responds, voice echoing slightly as we stand on the theater's stage. That fashion show is in a week, huh? Wonder what Mr. Brouillard will put her in: Bride of Frankenstein? A vampire? Maybe a she-wold. That would be interesting. My thoughts get interrupted when Gold speaks up again, though I... I

still can't look her in the eyes. "I want to see if she *really* has that spark or if it is all just nepotism like her critics are saying."
"Nepotism? Well, if what you've said about the pieces you've showed off are anything to go by... I think she has that spark. Sure, she has the position *because* of who her mother is, but Scarlet has *clearly* shown she knows what she is doing." I reply, watching as Gold's face goes through a myriad of emotions before she gives a response.
"It's not that I'm doubting her skills. Far from it. I did praise her work, after-all. It really is top-notch. Some of the best pieces I've ever worn and showcased. I just want to see her in her element with my own eyes." She says, ears drooping slightly as she speaks. That tells me something is wrong. That... she feels a certain kind of way about Daiwa Scarlet.
"I take it that you... didn't quite get along with her while you were both at Tracen?" I ask tentatively, not quite sure if it's something I should be asking. Gold turns to face me, and for a brief moment our eyes meet, light, pale blue connecting with rich, dark brown. But I subtly break it. Not with... Not with *it* still lingering in my mind.
"No, no. That's not it at all. To be honest, Scarlet always seemed like the kind of person that I would, and frankly *should*, have been good friends with: She's smart, honest, assertive. She's blunt and gets straight to the point. She knows what she wants and how to get it. She never lets anyone talk over her or take up her space." She pauses briefly before continuing. "We just... never really seemed to interact much while we were enrolled. We never talked. Our paths rarely if ever crossed outside of school assemblies and major races. So much that we never seemed to really acknowledge each other even when we were the *only* people in any given room or space. And this is all in spite of me spending some time in the very clubroom of her now fiancé's old racing team." Gold responds as she starts to pace the stage, getting a feel for it before she walks down in a week. It's fascinating watching her be in her element like this: She tests every plank that makes up the stage, seeing where they sag, where they rise, where they sit just right in it's construction. She looks up at the lighting rigs, taking note of the size of the spotlights and their presumed luminosity. She thinks about how they can backlight her as she walks. How they can sell the setting. I can't help but get enamored by her attention to detail. Makes sense, though. I wouldn't expect anything less from someone like Gold City who's been in this industry since her childhood. "I was friendly with Tamamo. I like to think that I was at the very least cordial with Cheval and Haru. They were all friends with Scarlet if the way they talked about her was anything to go by. Then there's Vodka, and... well they're engaged now, so I think that speaks for itself on what the state of their relationship currently is." She pauses again, stiletto resting on a particularly saggy plank in the stage, heel applying pressure then letting it go, eyes resting on me for a fraction of second as if she was analyzing me before her gaze drifts down to the seating in front of the stage. "I'm just... I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's... a more selfish reason than I'm letting on. Wanting to work with Daiwa Scarlet directly... Make up for lost time, if that's understandable..."

The sound of footsteps starts coming close, grabbing both our combined attention. From stage right, we see Randy followed by an older man. Guess that must be Mr. Brouillard. And they seem to be talking as they walk.

"You're sure about that, Miguel?"
"Oui. More than sure, even. I'm certain that she will like it."
"You know I'm not the only one who will hold you to that, right?"
"Je sais. (I know.)"

The two men eventually reach us, and Randy is naturally the first to speak.

"Ah, you two are early again. Good, good." He says, clearly still not accustomed to our punctuality. Wonder when he'll finally get used to it? "This lovely gentleman is Miguel Brouillard. He's the

designer we'll be working with on the night of the 23rd in around a week's time." Mr. Brouillard then steps forward, the light from the overheads catching in his greying hair.
"Merci de m'avoir invité. (Thank you for having me.) It is a great pleasure to be working with you." He says, eyeing Gold as he speaks that specific dialect of French. Yeah, he's from Quebec. It is *very obvious*. And I'm getting better at understanding it. *I think*. I watch as Gold approaches Brouillard, introducing herself in French as if to taunt me and Randy.
"Pas besoin de remercier, Monsieur Brouillard. L'honneur est à moi d'avoir finalement la chance de vous travailler. (No need for thanks, Mr. Brouillard. The honor is mine to finally have the chance to work with you.)" She says, some of the words registering in my mind and others not.
"Ah, c'est ainsi que ça se passe? Je vois. (Ah, so that's how it is? I see.) But let's keep things to English, though. Easier communication." He responds, accent not being as thick as I thought it would be. Brouillard then turns to me, gray eyes locking onto brown before he speaks. "Shame that you're not allowed to bring your camera. I would like to see what you're capable of, Ms. Jacobs."
"I'm sure a lot of people would." I respond, voice carrying a hint of annoyance as I remember that *I'm barred from taking any photos*. Még mindig dühös vagyok. (I'm still mad about that.)
"I've seen some of the pieces you two have worked with. Ils sont très gentils. (They're very nice.) Very nice shots. You have quite the eye. Shame the organizers of the show have barred outside photography." Brouillard then says, the compliment failing to register in my mind for a few seconds. "Well, I try." I respond as he starts walking towards the backstage area. I feel confusion for a second before realizing that his piece is in a changing room backstage. So I start to follow, especially after I hear Gold's heels start clicking against the stage.

"Woah... That's... Eerie..." I say, looking at what Brouillard has planned for Gold to wear. She keeps looking it over, eyes going from the top to the bottom, analyzing closely as if she knows what it's supposed to be.
"This... wouldn't be inspired by Chute de la Dame Blanche, would it?" She then asks, eyes not leaving the dress. It gets my attention. Chute de la Dame Blanche? What could that be?
"What's that?" I ask, impulsively letting the thoughts inside my head become voiced. I almost regret it before Brouillard starts speaking.
"An old ghost story from Montmorency Falls outside of Québec City. One of many stories about a so- called 'White Lady'. You're familiar with the concept, oui?" He says, those uncanny grey eyes never leaving me.
"Uh, yeah, I have. My anya would always tell me old ghost stories she heard from all over Magyarország every October before she moved to the US. She was particularly fond of the rumors surrounding Báthori Erzsébet." I tell him, remembering those frankly terrifying stories she would whisper to me. Mindig rémálmaim voltak. (Always gave me nightmares without fail.)
"Ba-tory Air-je-bet... You mean Elizabeth Bathory?" I hear Randy ask. I just glare at him, which seems to be a sufficient answer. "Reckon that's a yeah..." Brouillard doesn't seem fazed, and neither does Gold City.
"Matilde Robin was her name, right? And her fiancé, Louis, was killed in the Battle of Beauport during the Seven Years War?" She asks, catching Brouillard's attention fully once more.
"He, he. Une observation assez intelligente. (Quite the astute observation.) Oui, that is all correct. After learning of Louis' death, Matilde donned her wedding dress, tailored and saved for an occasion that would now never occur, went to the falls and threw herself off. You can see her most during summer and early autumn, when the sun shines just right on the water in the evening." He takes a deep breath before he starts speaking again, than thin, raspy voice sending chills across my body as he does so. "When I learned that I would be partnered with you, I knew that I had to bring some kind of... connection to our shared heritage. Quelle idée, non? (Quite the idea, no?)"

City puts out her hand, hovering over the white dress as if she wants to touch it. But she's hesitant. It shows.
"Would it be alright if-" She starts saying, but Brouillard cuts her off before she can finish.
"Is that not why we are here?" He counters, watching City's face intently before she gives a response. "I suppose you're right. Is there anywhere I can change?" She says, now looking to Randy. He then gives the room a once over before settling on a corner with a divider. He ponders it for a second before eventually responding.

"Not exactly a lot of room back there, but behind that divider should work." He says, pointing to it, at which point Gold takes the dress, the veil and the shoes and moves behind the divider. Soon after, we hear the sound of fabric shuffling as she starts changing into Brouillard's piece. The man then turns his eyes on Randy.
"So this fashion show... What else will be happening? Anything during the day?" He asks, something that gets my curiosity as well.
"Yeah, is there anything else happening during the day or is it just the runway event in the evening?" I echo, wanting to know more. Randy shifts in his position, taking a deep breath before he answers.
"Don't know. As far as I'm aware and was told, this is the first time the Gershwin is doing something like this. Organizers may just keep it to the runway event." He responds, eyes darting between us and the divider that Gold is behind. I subtly do the same, noting how her blazer and shirt are resting on top of it, soon followed by her skirt. Then she starts speaking from behind it.
"Don't really know what else could be done, honestly. Maybe a photo-alley of the designers' previous pieces? That's the only thing that I can really think of." She says as she starts to put the dress on, the shuffling of fabric becoming more uneasy as she figures out what goes where with the piece.

"Almost done back there?" Randy asks, wanting to know if she's ready to show us how it looks.
"I think so. It's... a lot more complicated to put on then I thought." City responds as the sound of fabric ceases. We then hear the sound of heels on tile as she steps out from behind the divider. Istenem, kérlek segíts... (God, please help me...) I subtly look down, only taking scant glances at Gold as she approaches us. She look so... gyönyörű... és csinos... és tudom, hogy ha jól megnézem, elveszítem az eszem a fantáziához... (beautiful... and pretty... and I know that if I take a proper look I'll lose my mind to fantasy...) I can already hear the voices in my head engaged in their verbal battle. I try not to listen in, but I can't help but hear it.

Pathetic. So damn pathetic that she can't even look at her without having degenerate thoughts.
Ő nem egy degenerált. Ellentétben egy bizonyos valakivel, akit a hozzáállásukkal leírhatok. (She's not a degenerate. As opposed to a certain someone whose attitude I can describe.)
As if. If only you would listen to me, we may not be in this mess.
Ó, kérlek. Ha meghallgattunk volna téged, ő egy remete lett volna, és nem lenne biztonságos hálója, amibe vissza tudna vetni magát. (Oh please. If we had listened to you, she'd be a recluse with no safety nets to fall back on.)

I tune out, not wanting to hear more of it. My self-esteem is already in shambles because of that damn dream. I don't need this war inside of my own head to degrade it any further. These thoughts get interrupted though when Gold starts speaking.
"I like it overall. The white of the dress will provide a nice contrast to the dark lighting that will be present and the veil will add some hint of mystery and mystique to the whole look. I really like the sleeves. Juliet style if I'm not mistaken." She says, getting Brouillard's attention. But he doesn't say anything. Not yet at least. He wants to hear constructive criticism before anything else. "But there are a few problems. It's a bit to loose, particularly around my waist and bust. Feels more like a

flimsy costume than something a young girl would have made herself. It's also a bit too long. You clearly made this for someone who you thought would be taller than they actually are."
"Je vois. Merci. (I see. Thank you.) I did not have ready access to proper measurements so I simply made a base that I can modify later afterwards. If you would so kindly-" City cuts him off before he can continue with his proposition.
"B85 W58 H82. Height is 158 centimeters. Do with that information what you will. I look forward to the adjustments." She says as Brouillard grabs a notepad and jots down what he just heard.
"Blunt and straight to the point. J'aime ça. (I like that.)" He responds as he finishes writing, at which point Gold returns to the divider where she changes out of the dress. She's quicker this time, now that she's become familiar with the dress. Within only a few minutes, she's changed back into her usual red shirt, blazer and long, black skirt. She then eyes Brouillard, intent on speaking her mind.
"I'm told that there will be choreography when the each model has the stage. Care to elaborate on what I'll be doing?" She asks, something that comes as a surprise to me. Didn't know there would be stage play involved. This *is* a fashion show. Not really something you associate with models on a runway. And it's another thing Randy didn't tell me about. The prick. But as I look over to him, it seems he's surprised to hear this as well.
"Choreography? Huh?" He says, pausing before he continues on. "I was not told there would be dancing of *any* kind."
"I've been talking with some of the other models that'll be here. They *all* said that the pieces are attached to a story." Gold tells him, eyes moving between Randy and Brouillard before she speaks again. "Guess it was a recent development if you weren't notified of it." She then starts walking back towards the stage, intent on knowing what it is Brouillard will have her do in that dress. That dress that makes me... Tisztátalannak érzem magam. (Feel depraved.)

"So the plan is for the lighting to be a part of the scene? I... like that, actually. I don't think I've ever done something to that effect before." I hear City say as we both process what Brouillard said. Have the lighting team make it seem like the White Lady is interacting with her lover? That's genius. People will definitely like that.
"That's the kind of thing *I* would come up with, Brouillard. Makes me wonder if that was a part of why you got paired with us." Randy says, eyes never leaving the overhead rigging. I then feel his eyes on me, followed by City's and Brouillard's.
"Uh... Why is everyone looking at me? I can't give any opinions on this. I'm just a camerawoman who can't take photos." I say, not wanting to be put under so much pressure. It seems to get Randy and and Brouillard to turn away, causing them to discuss things amongst themselves, but Gold's gaze lingers. Under any other circumstance I'd feel uncomfortable, but with her... I don't. I can't explain it. The way she looks at me. The way I feel seen by those pale, blue eyes. But then that dream comes to my mind again. I quickly look down, which in turn causes City to tune into whatever conversation is staking place between Randy and Brouillard. This leaves me with my thoughts. Thoughts I can't shake. Thoughts that taunt me with something I *know* I can't have. It will complicate things. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be fair. I don't deserve to have someone like Gold City in that way. De az isten verje meg... Az a gondolat is olyan csábító... (But God damn it... The thought is so tantalizing...)

|-That evening, Noonan Towers, 939 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx-|

The night is young, or so they say. Perfect opportunity to let Kati try some new things. If this odd haze can clear itself from my vision, of course. But I press on regardless.
"Hold still, Kati... And purse your lips. We want every centimeter covered." I say, pulling my hand away from her lips. She's clearly never used lipstick before. At least not heavily. So this is a

learning experience for her. I watch as she tentatively does as I say, motions that make my heart flutter. I could easily press my lips to hers like this. And she wouldn't give me any resistance in the slightest. A familiar dance for us. At least, I *hope* that it will become a familiar dance should I commit to the idea.

I gently take her chin between the index finger and thumb of my left hand as I bring the tube in my right hand close to her lips. After a deep breath, I slowly creep closer until the lipstick makes contact, at which point I start to slowly make my way across her lips, covering every possible centimeter of skin that I can with the maroon-shaded wax. After I have them covered, I take my hand away, noticing the goosebumps leaving an impression of the extremity that then slowly begin to dissipate. Kati then opens her eyes, those rich, dark brown irises meeting my pale-blue ones as if waiting for more instructions.
"Okay, the lipstick is on. Now we need to make sure that it settles. Watch." I say as I roll my lips into themselves, a familiar motion for me but one that is clearly foreign to Kati. "Do that."
"Like this?" She says, fumbling with the motion at first, but she eventually finds a rhythm that works for her. She then looks at me, waiting for a response and criticism. "Does... does it look good?" She asks, voice trembling ever so slightly. I reach over to the coffee table and grab my pocket mirror, opening it and letting Kati see for herself.
"You be the judge." I say, noting how maroon is a good color for her. The warmth of the shade suits her personality well. But Kati isn't convinced as she looks at her lips in the small mirror.
"I... I don't know, Gold. You're the model. *You* tell me if it looks good." She then says. I suppose I can indulge her.

"I think it looks nice. The maroon is a nice compliment to your eyes and hair. Not to mention that it fits well with your personality. It's a warmer color and that is the vibe I take away from you as a person." I say, watching as the compliment makes her blush. Seeing this makes me needy. *Greedy* even. To the point where I might act irrationally. My ears stand straight and tall. My tail swishes back and forth, thumping against Kati's small sofa with every pass left. Against all better judgement, I lean in and press my lips to hers, getting a small gasp out of the humble Magyar maiden. And it drives me wild. One isn't enough, I need *more*. I need to satisfy that *greed*. So I continue to kiss her while she murmurs against my lips.
"Mi... Mit csinálsz... (Wha... What are you doing...)" She mumbles whenever she has air.
"I wanted some of it for myself but..." I start saying before I cut myself off with more kisses, kisses that slowly become reciprocated as Kati offers me no resistance as I thought she wouldn't. She's just as hungry... as *greedy* as I am for this. Like the lustful sapphic she is. "I think I want *this* more..."

My hands start roaming Kati's thighs of their own volition, something that makes her place her hands on me in turn. It's a positive feedback loop of sensation: I do one thing that makes Kati repeat that motion which only makes me do it more and more. Rinse and repeat. And I have no intention of stopping this. Not when it feels *so good*.

Kati's hands start reaching around my body, resting on my posterior. I feel the odd sensation of weight back there when she suddenly pulls me into her lap without warning.
"Oh... C'est une surprise. (That's a surprise.)" I say before I return my lips to hers.
"You were too far... You need to be closer if we're gonna do this..." Kati responds as she parts my lips with hers, something that is followed by the sensation of her tongue entering my mouth, the muscle exploring every centimeter of my gum-line before I decide to have my own dance with it. I want nothing more than for this moment to last as long as it can.



Her hands start moving again, one coming to rest on my breasts, gently kneading the fatty tissue underneath my shirt while the other come to the base of my neck, craning it where I feel Kati place her lips on it. To say it feels exhilarating would be an *understatement*. A trail of fire works it's way up my neck and across my jawline, undoubtedly leaving maroon stains on my skin as she does so. But Kati eventually returns to my lips, where she then says something that catches my attention.
"Rock your hips..." She murmurs between kisses and heavy breaths.
"Rock my hips? Anata nitaishite (Against you?)" I ask, voice thin from the intense intimacy we are sharing. I feel a hand come down to my posterior again, nudging me to start rocking back and forth. I then close my eyes, taking in the sensations that I feel doing this. But when I open them...

"Gold? **Gold!**" I hear Kati say, trying to get my attention. I quickly look around to see where I am: That small sofa in her apartment. But I'm the only person sitting on it. Kati is in the kitchen preparing dinner. I then look to the coffee table and see only two half-full glasses of water. No tubes of lipstick. No pocket mirror. That tells me that what I saw was nothing more than another fantasy. I take a deep breath, wanting to steady myself before anything else happens. That was... the most intense one yet. It kept going after the initial kiss. This is the first time that has happened. But I don't get a lot of time to ponder it's ramifications.

"Hey, City. Are you listening? Are you okay?" Kati says, not approaching me, green apron wrapped tight around her abdomen. I swallow some of my pride before I respond to her
"Uh, yeah. I'm okay. Why do you ask?" I tell her, trying to project some confidence in my voice.
"You sure? You looked like you had zoned out there for a minute." She responds, face not one of anger, but concern.
"Just thinking." I say, needing to choose my next words carefully before I can continue. "Thinking about home. Hokkaido, Oshawa. Thinking about Tomo. Masaru, my friends and Tracen. Thinking about all the work we've done so far." I look back at her, pale blue meeting dark brown, though Kati darts them elsewhere. Something is still bothering her. It's not only thoughts of me. I just don't know what other thing could be. And it's starting to make me concerned. Concerned and frustrated. I've only known her for a scant four months, but Kati has already done more than enough for me to care deeply about her. For me to see her as a friend. A friend...

Here we are again. Lusting over Kati Jacobs. A woman you can never have.
Oh hush. I'm not in the mood for this.
Women like you do not look at women like her in that way. Women like you do not look at any woman in that way.
Need I remind you that Palmer, a member of the esteemed Mejiro clan, is a lesbian? That her cousin McQueen is in a relationship with Tokai Teio, who is another woman? That Tosen and Helios are both bisexual? All three of my closest friends have had both romantic and sexual relationships with other women before, during and after we graduated. You didn't have a problem when it's them. Why is suddenly a problem when *I think* about these kinds of things? How many will they, won't they stories between students have occurred at Tracen in it's tenured history? Vodka and Daiwa Scarlet were not the only ones, you know. Do you know how many racers paired with a female trainer developed feelings for said woman after coming to realize they see her not as a friend, sister or mother figure, but rather as a potential romantic partner in life?
You don't know what went through their minds. How they rationalized the unnatural, unprofessional and uncouth thoughts.
I have pretty good ideas of it, actually. And what about this is unnatural? Do enlighten me.
There are standards and customs that must be upheld. To go against what it established and expected is to flirt with disownment.
Oh please, like *I* would ever be disowned by *any* part of my family. Even the more conservative

members in Hokkaido wouldn't go that far. I've had enough of this. I won't allow my own mind to berate me over something so trivial.

I stand up from the sofa and start walking to the bathroom. Kati sees me and I can tell she is slightly concerned.
"Where are you going? Bathroom?" She asks, voice trembling slightly, but still firm elsewhere.
"Yeah. Just to freshen up a bit before we eat, if that's alright." I say, wanting to assuage any concern and worry she might have. Upon hearing them, she simply nods and points to where it is. I walk into her bedroom and then immediately turn to the bathroom. I close the door behind me, the only sound filling the room being the pipes in the walls and my feet transitioning from carpet to tile. I rest my hands on the sink counter and then look at my reflection in the mirror. Gold necklace, red sweater, black skirt and of course, the ribbon and back cover that matches my eyes. The only two things I still have as an adult that tie me back to Oshawa. I remember when Père first gave me them: How he and mom laughed at how it was a bit too big at the time. How he then said that I would grow into it. Je serai foutu s'il n'avait pas raison. (I'll be damned if he wasn't right.) But then I look into my own eyes. Others might see beauty and femininity. I see something else. I see someone who just wants to be seen for who they are. For the person beneath the mask. It's a shame that right now, only Kati can do that. And she's at war with herself. Why else has she been avoiding eye contact since Monday?

"Où est-elle allée? Qui se sentait vu par tout le monde? Que lui est-il arrivé? (Where did that girl go? Who felt seen by everyone? What happened to her?)" I murmur to myself as I stare at my reflection. "Elle s'est-elle cachée encore une fois? Après tout ce qui lui a permis d'être vue a été pris si soudainement? Pourquoi elle se sent comme ça? (Did she hide herself away again? After everything that allowed her to be seen was taken so suddenly? Why does she feel this way?)" I start to think about that fantasy again. The one that Kati had snapped me out of earlier. It felt... far too real for a simple dream. To the point that I feel ghost sensations across my body just thinking about it. The softness of Kati's lips pressed against mine... The warmth of her tongue dancing in my mouth and intertwining with my own muscle... The robustness of her hips as I slowly rocked mine into them... Are these the kinds of things that she thinks about when her mind wanders? Is this why she can't look me in the eyes? kanojo wa watashi nitsuite onaji yōna kūsō o motteirukaradesu ka? (Is it because she has similar fantasies about me?)

My ears perk up as I hear something from the living room. It seems Kati is heading to the door. She's having another guest? Odd of her to not tell me. I hear the door open, and Kati start speaking to somebody in a surprised tone.
"Met? What are-"
"Don't tell you forgot..."
"Forgo- Bassza meg... (Fuck...)" "Dio diavolo."

Meteor Hammer's here? Kati had plans for Met to come over and forgot about them? That seems... Well it's oddly in character for her. I listen in to the conversation a bit more before I walk out of the bathroom.
"Uh, is there anywhere I can put my vest? Don't want to just throw it around haphazardly." "Yeah. Over here. Just make sure you don't cover City's blazer with it."
"Gold City? She's here?"

I walk out of the bathroom and back into the living room, seeing Meteor Hammer's large stature looming over Kati by the dinner table. I've never really taken a moment to process just how *tall* Meteor Hammer is. The tallest uma I knew before meeting him was Hishi Akebono, and Meteor Hammer looks to be almost a third of a meter taller than her. War horses really are just *bigger* than

racers, I suppose. Though in hindsight, considering the heights that drafters can reach... Meteor Hammer then turns to face me, sensing my presence in the room.

"Welcome to the Bronx." He says, assuming that I haven't been here yet.
"Not my first time in the borough." I respond, eliciting surprise from the taller uma. "Cazzo... She's been here before?" He says, turning to Kati.
"The Bronx? Yes. My apartment? No." She responds, another thing that gets Meteor Hammer surprised. I don't think I've ever seen him quite this flustered. It's quite amusing seeing his usual bravado fall apart like this. "She's been pestering me to bring her here ever since I told her it's not far from the stadium." Meteor Hammer chuckles in response, those hetero-chromatic eyes of his landing on me as I formulate a response. His gaze is... odd. I felt it when I first met him on Friday. It's as if he knows what goes on in my head whenever I look at Kati. What she thinks when she steals glances at me when she thinks nobody will notice. Yet despite observing these things... he does nothing. He does not stop me. He does not stop Kati. It makes me wonder if there's an ulterior motive there. If so, what is it? And why? Why does he choose to not act? Is he waiting for the right moment? The only thing that can give the answers is time.
"I wouldn't say 'pestering'... more like 'suggesting'." I finally say after what feels like an hour, though in reality was only a few scant seconds. I watch as Kati starts chuckling, which then cause Met to chuckle.
"*Suggestin* she says. *Suggestin*." He echoes, casually teasing me as though we've known each other for a lot longer than we have. I suppose that I'm "good in his books" given how close I've been with Kati. A friend of a friend type of situation. He then turns to Kati. "Only took you four months. How many times have you been to *her place*?"
"Uh... I, uh..." Kati starts stuttering, mind assaulted by what Meteor Hammer said. I know he didn't intend it that way. But impact matters more... "Guess I decided to indulge her curiosity."

Meteor Hammer goes to speak again, but the music that has been playing since me and Kati walked through the door of her apartment shifts. It's something soft, yet still has an edge. It's soothing, yet I feel like it can still unsettle me. Meteor Hammer seems to recognize it instantly.
"Lȧȧz Rockit? You-" He stares right at Kati. "Listenin to *Lȧȧz Rockit*? Lạ lùng..." He then points to her stereo system, the source of the music, where her phone is plugged in. "Maiden I get. Metallica I get. But *Lȧȧz fuckin Rockit*? What the hell happened?"
"Uh, you. I blame you for this." Kati says as she walks back over to the stove where she starts to finish her dinner preparations. "If I hadn't forgotten you'd be here tonight, I'd have prepared enough for three people."
"Eh, it's fine. I already ate before coming here, anyway." Meteor Hammer responds, looking at Kati's back. "When Jose offers you a quesadilla, you accept it. It is a non-negotiable item." They both start chuckling, and I feel the urge to join in. It's infectious like that.

"And *no one* believed me." Kati says, finishing her story. It's a statement that has Meteor Hammer's long ears standing straight up. Seems he doesn't quite agree with it.
"Oh, that's bullshit and you know it." He tells her, eliciting a confused expression on her face before he speaks up again. "The *only* reason you made it out of high school is because me, Rose and your dad believed in you." Kati blushes after hearing and processing Meteor Hammer's remark. It's funny, how they interact: Someone with deep-seated insecurities who doesn't quite know how to deal with them has a tremendous amount of help from their best friend is who loud, proud, boisterous but still deeply caring. I can help but think of me and Tosen. It's... *extraordinarily* similar. But I don't mind. If anything, seeing Met and Kati interact in these ways is comforting. Seeing something so familiar in such a foreign place. Yet despite this, I feel like my time here is

coming to a close. At least for now. And Kati seems to sense it as well, judging by how she looks down at her phone, presumably checking the time.

"Oh, you should probably start heading back to the Financial District. You have to work through all that choreography with Brouillard tomorrow at noon." She says, defeat in her voice. She doesn't want me to go. Hell, *I* don't want to go. But she is right. I do need to head back to Manhattan. So I stand up to grab my blazer and shoes. I walk over to the coat rack where it is, and notice a large and ratty denim jacket that has had it's sleeves removed and a myriad of patches put onto it. My eyes immediately go to the large one on the back. "Solstice" it says at the top in purplish-pink lettering and nothing else while depicting what looks like a salary-man frozen solid in an abandoned and icy Lexington Avenue right next to the Chrysler Building. *How pleasant...* I can feel Meteor Hammer's eyes on me again as he lounges on the sofa. He's watching like a hawk with those eyes of his: One silver, the other purple. It's that same gaze from earlier, analytical and observant. I swiftly grab my blazer and slip it on before I grab my heels, sliding my feet into them before latching them tight. I then grab my car keys and open the apartment door.

"Hope I see you again soon, Kati." I say as I walk out the door.
"Me too." She responds, voice still sounding defeated in a way. Meteor Hammer, however, is still silent. He's still watching. Though his gaze does eventually drift to Kati, where I assume she now feels that same analytical scrutiny I did. Pourquoi n'agit-il pas? Pourquoi se contente-t-il d'observer? Une question pour un autre jour. (Why does he not act? Why simply observe? A question for another day.)

Chapter 18: The Steps that We Take

Chapter Summary

Gold City finds herself up at an earlier time than she usually is. To make the most of it, she heads over to the Gershwin before either Randy or Brouillard, where she spends most of the time talking with Tosen Jordan, something that Shichi is greatly appreciative of. Though her own
mind continues to wander, even as she rehearses the choreography that has been laid out to her. That evening, a respite at a ramen shop brings her closer with Kati, allowing her to get some understanding of why it is she finds herself so attracted to her photographer. Conversations that only make her heart yearn for Kati more and more...

Chapter Notes

Art by Araneru

|-Friday morning. The Gershwin Theater, 222 West 51st Street, Manhattan, New York-|

I'm here... a bit earlier than I should be. Okay, more like a *few hours earlier* than I should be. It's nine. Brouillard and Randy don't come until ten. Even then, we don't start rehearsing with the choreography until eleven. I'm... surprised that I even have energy at all, considering how I didn't really get a good amount of sleep last night. I know why. It was another fantasy. Almost exactly the same as the one my mind ran to Wednesday night. Virtually identical save for the context. No lipstick. Rather... a movie.
In my apartment. Just thinking back on it is enough to replay the scene in my mind. Jū fun Jordan watakushi denwa suru koto ni shi ta san-nin no megami ni kansha shimasu. Watakushi wa kanojo nashi de na o suru ka wakara nai... (Thank the three goddesses that Jordan decided to call me ten minutes ago. I don't know what I'd do without her...)

"Look at you. All prim and proper and up at a good time." She says, teasing me for my history of waking up late.
"Excuse me?" I say in response, taken aback by the statement.
"Oh come on, Shichi. Every tall glass of water needs her beauty sleep, you know. But never-mind that. You legit *do* need to get out more." Is the next thing I hear from her, watching as she does her nails on the video call. She's always so meticulous about them. Wanting them to be just glossy enough. And always in pristine condition. I never quite understood that part.
"I *do* get out, thank you very much." I say, showing off the faux contempt in my voice. All it does is make Jordan laugh.
"Girl, you know as well as I that is not true. Not with how much you've been working yourself. I'm surprised you had the time to talk, honestly." She says, laughter subsiding, revealing a more serious tone. Or was it? I still can't quite tell when she is teasing me or being serious. But I guess that's

Tosen Jordan for you.
"It is, actually. Kati makes sure of that." I say as I give Brouillard's piece a once over, catching Jordan's ears perk up on my phone screen in my periphery. Des erreurs peuvent ou ne peuvent pas avoir étécommises... (Mistakes may or may not have been made...)
"Oh really? So you two are... *like that*?" She says, that teasing tone returning with a vengeance.
"No. We're not... It's not like that." I say in response, wanting to choose my next words carefully. "You know I swing one way and one way only."

That... That stung. Saying that. Out loud. But what else can I say? I'm no closer to understanding *why* I feel so attracted to Kati in *that way*. Nearly five months at this point, and no real progress. Maybe I should be honest. After all, I could always rely on Tosen. But at the same time... How could I say this? How could I convey what it is I am going through in a way she'll understand? Megami-tachi, tasukete kudasai... (Goddesses, please help me...) Thankfully, Jordan doesn't seem to press the topic. Though I get the feeling she is suspecting... *something*. Even as she becomes curious as to what it is I am holding.
"What's that?" She asks, pointing to her screen after finshing , presumably at the dress if she was actually here.
"Oh, this? This is for that fashion show next Wednesday." I reply, watching as she scrambles to her feet.
"OHMYGOD!OHMYGOD!OHMYGOD!SHOWME!SHOWME!SHOWME!" She starts, grabbing her phone in a joyous haze. "I want to see it!" I decide to indulge her. So I walk over to the music stand I've set my phone on and pick up the little black box. I then walk over to the piece, hearing Jordan 's giddy laughter as she processes what it is she is seeing. "Wow... that is very bridal. I thought this was suppossed to be spooky."
"It is. The designer, Brouillard, based it off of Chute de la Dame Blanche. It's an old ghost story from Québec City." I say, knowing that I have most likely confused Jordan.
"Québec City? All the way in France?" *sigh*... On recommence... (Here we go again...)
"No, no... Québec City is in Canada. You know, in *Québec*." I respond, surprised that her geography skills have not improved in the years since we graduated. The more things change... *dot dot dot*...
"Canada? But it's French? They speak French?" She then says, still not knowing a lot about history either.
"Jordan... The first European settlers in Canada were French. I would know. Père est Québécois. (Père is Québécois.) His family are descended from French fur traders who settled what is now in Trois- Rivières during the 17th century." I start saying, taking in the silence from Jordan 's end. Seems she is processing what I've just said. Or rather, making an *attempt* to process what I just said.
"So... where is he from?" She then asks.
"Oshawa." I respond, knowing I'll need more clarification. "It's in Ontario. His parents moved there around the time he was born. My grandfather's job had moved him to Toronto in May of 1967. Père was born a year later."

Another few seconds of silence pass before Jordan breaks it.
"So you're Canadian?" She asks, something that may or may not be testing my patience at this point. "I'm half-Québécois, Jordan. I've... I've told you this many times." I say in response, trying to jog her memory of every instance where I told her this exact information. She seems to take the hint.
"Québécois? Is that-" I cut her off before she can continue. Jordan... Ne changez jamais. (Never change.)
"Most French-Canadians are Québécois, oui. Try to remember this for the future." I say as I hear the voice of two men outside. Brouillard and Randy.

"You are sure she is here? From what you told me... Elle est une ressortissante tardive. (She is a late riser.)"
"Positive, Miguel. I recognized the car." "La voiture? (The car?)"
"Yeah. *The car*. It's one of my own. I *gave* it to her."
I immediately return my attention to Jordan, sad that our call will have to end. "I have to go. Randy and Brouillard are here." I say, watching as her ears droop on the video.
"I get it. You, the busy model. Try to get some better sleep, okay? And good luck." She says, almost devoid of her usual slang. Come to think of it, ever since we graduated, our conversations have become gradually more slangless. It's odd...
"I will. You sound... odd without the slang." I say, almost blurting it out on accident. But Jordan just laughs.
"If you think *that's* strange, you should try talking to Helios sometime soon. She sounds like a completely different person most days. But you do need to go. Don't let me keep you." She quickly picks up her phone before giving me one last smirk. "See ya next time." The call once again ends before I can properly say *goodbye*. Not that it matters. Je sais que nous allons parler encore. (I know that we'll talk again.)

The door to the dressing room opens, and Brouillard is the first to enter. He sees me and confusion immediately sets on his face.
"Oh... Vous... Vous êtes ici. (You... You are here.)" He says, looking back to Randy briefly before returning his attention to me. I suppose we should get to setting up for the rehearsal.

"Really? You're dad is French-Canadian? Never would've guessed." The woman says. She's the model who goes on before me. Rebecca? C'était son nom, non? (That was her name, right?)
"Oui. His parents are both from Trois-Rivières." I say as Rebecca's manager walks over to us, presumably after having conversed with Randy and Brouillard.
"Alright. That's everything we need to do. Time to head out." He says to her. But she gives me one last statement before she slips behind the curtains.
"Good luck."

I turn after they disappear, facing Randy and Brouillard as they give the computer one last check. I walk over, the thick heels of my boots clicking on the wooden stage in the theater. It gets their combined attention, judging by how they turn to face me.
"Is everything set?" I ask, watching as Brouillard gives one last look to the lighting rigs before returning his attention to me.
"Oui. More or less. I would like to show you something first before we start. Si vous entreteniez l'idée. (If you'll entertain the idea.)" He responds, motioning for me to follow him to his laptop nearby. I briefly look over to Randy, and he simply nods.
'Trust him.' Is what that tells me. So I do. I trust Brouillard and follow him. I see on the screen a layout for the choreography. Interesting. Smoke machines in addition to the lighting rig. Wonder what he has planned.

"Wow. That is quite detailed for a sketch." I say as I process what it is I am looking at. Brouillard doesn't seem to mind. Instead, he chuckles before turning to face me once more.
"Merci. It is merely a suggestion. I fully expect you to take things your own way." He says as he looks over his work. I decide to look at it further. Seems this choreography will have me actually tell the tale of Chute de la Dame Blanche. Certainly will grab people's attention next Thursday. Which is the exact thing we want to have for that portion of the show.
"Visual story telling. J'aime ça. (I like that.)" I say, processing the sketch as I take more of it in. Brouillard's face doesn't change direction, but his eyes do.

"My personal motto is 'Show, don't tell'. Glad you think along similar wavelengths." He says, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I have a few mannequins that will serve as your Louis, if you are so inclined."
"I don't mind." I say, looking back to Randy to see if he approves of it. He seems to give the green light before he then speaks.
"If it helps to enhance the scene, then why the hell not? I've got no reason to give any opposition." He says before he motions to the lighting operators. I watch as the stage dims, leaving a spotlight close to stage right. I suppose that will be my entrance for the scene.
"Wow. How fancy." I say as I start walking, boots falling on the wood once more. I eventually stop by the curtain, staying just shy of the cone of light that marks where I am supposed to be. "I assume this is how we start? Me coming from stage right?" I say, putting some effort into my voice so that the two men can hear me.
"Oui! We'll go without music at first. Just to get a feel for the steps." Brouillard responds, raising his voice when he doesn't necessarily have to. I gave him a nod, signaling that we can start.

We work on the choreography for a few minutes, working out every kink that may exist so that the performance can be as smooth as possible. We're close to the end of our second run through, getting a feel for things before we can add the music.
"So Gold City goes up onto that platform and then she... jumps? I assume there will be some form of cushioning at the bottom?" I hear Randy ask Brouillard. He answers without facing him.
"Oui. Just like Matilde after learning of Louis' death. Don't worry, there are several mats behind the rock facades. They should be enough to soften the fall when she lands on them. Au moins, c'est l'espoir. (At elast, that is the hope.)" He says as Randy then looks up to me.
"Care to corroborate?" Randy asks me. I look down and see the line of black mats. Behind the rocks, just as Brouillard said.
"Yeah, I see them." I say, feeling a bit nervous as I stare at the drop. I must be at least three meters in the air. That's, what, eleven to twelve feet in imperial? C'est terrifiant. Mais je n'ai jamais laissé la peur m'arrêter auparavant. Soshite mada... īe. Ima ja nai. koko ja nai. Shūchū shi nai to. Ima koko ni shūchū shi te kudasai. (It's terrifying. But I've never let fear stop me before. And yet... No. Not now. Not here. I need to focus. Focus on the here and now.) I take a deep breath, readying myself for the drop. I take one step off the platform, and feel gravity take me the rest of the way. It's only a few seconds, but it felt like forever. The mats care not for my perception of time, however. I land with a soft thud, something that catches the attention of both men.

"Uh... You alright, now?" I hear Randy ask, the sounds of his shoes coming closer and closer as I start losing myself in the fantasies my mind begins to weave. Watakushi wa chōdo kare-ra ga honmono dat ta negat te i masu... (I just wish they were real...) The way Kati's lips felt... How she effortlessly pulled me onto her lap... Her hands leaving that trail of fire across my back... Watakushi wa ga dat ta koto o nozomu dono yō ni megami... (Goddesses how I wish that it was real...)
"Gold... You alright there? Nothing broken?" Randy is now looming over me, that long, dirty blonde hair of his almost touching my face. He must be kneeling down.
"Yeah, I'm fine. Nothing hurts. I don't feel sore anywhere. This will work as the end of the performance." I tell him as I start to get to my feet. I step back onto the stage from the mats, somehow not losing my footing during the transition from soft mat to hardwood stage. But I manage it, coming up to Randy so that we can discuss things a bit further. "How was it?" I ask him, wanting to get some criticism on how it went. "The fall? The motions? How did it all look?"
"Looked good. What do you think, Miguel?" He says as he glances over at Brouillard. He simply nods, giving his approval as he talks to one of the lighting crew. Randy then turns back to me, eyes looking me up and down, presumably waiting for me to speak.
"So, are we ready to try this with the music?" I ask, looking between Brouillard and Randy. The former turns around to face us briefly before turning back around, giving a signal to someone in the

pit. Presumably, someone who has music loaded and ready to go. I watch as she moves over to a laptop and presses play on something. I then hear it over the speakers and PA system in the theater. It's soft, ethereal. Fitting for a ghost story. Especially one where our titular white lady throws herself from the top of a waterfall to her death.

|-That evening. ICHIRAN Ramen NY Times Square 152 West 49th Street-|

I like the smell in this place. It reminds me of Monbetsu. I'm glad Kati suggested it. Seemed she knew that I would enjoy this. Enjoy reliving a few memories.
"So... how did it go? The rehearsals?" I hear her ask as she blows on her ramen, making sure she doesn't burn her tongue as she eats it.
"Well enough. Brouillard wants me to come back tomorrow to run it a couple more times. Then a few days of rest before we run through it again." I tell her, taking some of the noodles between my chopsticks before slurping them into my mouth. It's not bad. Dare I say it's almost as good as some places back in Japan. But nothing compares to what existed around Tracen. And I think Kati knows that.
"How many?" Is the next thing I hear her ask. I turn slightly to face her so that she can hear me better over the noise.
"At least two. Brouillard is hoping to get one last run in *day of* before the theater starts getting everything ready for the night." I respond, watching as Kati takes a few more noodles into her mouth. Someone needs to show her how to properly use chopsticks. It's frankly embarrassing.

"Goddesses help you... Come here. If you're gonna use chopsticks, at least let me show you how." I say as I reach over, taking the hand holding the chopsticks so that I can show Kati how poor her technique is. "You hold them *like this*." I say as I maneuver her hand into the positions it needs to be in. I can tell that this is having... an *effect* on Kati's psyche. But we can worry about those ramifications later.
"Hold your dominant hand loosely. I assume you're right handed?" I ask as I take her right hand. But Kati pulls it away.
"I, uh... I'm a lefty. Well, actually ambidextrous, but, uh... I prefer my left hand." She says, stuttering slightly as she brings up her left hand. We can still make this work.
"That's okay. I did say dominant." I respond, taking her *left* hand within mine and reaching for her chopsticks. "So you hold your dominant hand loosely. Keep it that way. You then take one of the sticks and place it into the valley between your thumb and index, having the midpoint of the stick rest on your ring finger." I start explaining. Kati is a *very* good listener, judging by how well she is taking these instructions. But that's not the only thing I'm noticing. Her palm of her hand... Utilise-t-elle souvent la lotion? Je serais vraiment surpris. Elle n'a pas l'air particulièrement du type. (Does she use lotion often? I would genuinely be surprised. She doesn't particularly seem like the type.) I'm tempted to just throw everything out the window and run my fingers along the smooth and supple skin. But that truly *would* be throwing everything out of the window. I can't risk that, despite how tantalizing the thought may be.



You need to stop with such immoral thoughts, Shichi.
I won't even begin to entertain your nonsense, little demon.

I ignore the little oni on my shoulder, not in the mood for whatever nonsensical "logic" it tries to force upon me. Instead, I continue to guide Kati on how to use chopsticks.
"Now that you have the first stick in place, you take the second..." I take mine into my right hand to show her the next step. "And hold it as you would a pencil: lightly pinched between your index finger and your thumb." I set my sticks down, reaching for the twin of Kati's. I then hover it between the index finger and thumb of her left hand, motioning with a nod for her to take it. She does, and once again, she takes to it quite easily.
"Like this?" She asks, those rich brown eyes of hers meeting pale blue before immediately shifting away.
"Yes, just like that. You pretty much have it. Only thing left is the motions. Watch." I say as I take my hand away from hers, wanting to show her the motions. "The bottom stick stays stationary. You primarily move the top stick."I say as I make the motions. I hover over my bowl with the sticks, deftly taking some out of the noodles with ease. I can tell that Kati is watching intently, wanting to make sure she doesn't make any mistakes as she tries to replicate the actions she just witnessed. I look to her and nod. 'Your turn.' is what that conveys. I watch as she hovers her left hand over her

own bowl, and with slow, methodical movements, she gently takes some noodles up with the sticks. A fast learner indeed... She manages to bring all the noodles up without issues, taking them into her mouth where she then slurps them down. Good. But we can't just practice with the noodles.
"Try grabbing the egg. See it?" I say, pointing at it with my own sticks. I watch as Kati again hovers her sticks over her bowl, but not before bumping me with her elbow.
"Oh, I'm sorry." She says, but I just chuckle.
"No harm done. Here, maybe we should switch seats so that you're not hitting me with your elbow." I say, standing up so that we can make the swap. Kati doesn't seem to object, standing up as well. I then sit down in her seat, and I take my bowl back, sliding hers over to her as she sits down.
"There. Now, grab the egg." I say, watching her again hover over the bowl. With more deliberate movements, she snatches the egg, surprising herself with the ease she had just showcased.
"Wow. That was... easier than I thought." She says before popping the egg into her mouth.
"Probably should've prefaced that it's a lot easier than you think. Then again, you are a fast learner." I say, watching as a deep blush forms on her face. Kati quickly turns to face the other direction, and I find myself now blushing. Given the lighting, I don't think she can even see it. Kati eventually does turn back around, taking a deep breath to steady herself before she speaks. And it is something that takes me by surprise. shikashi, go chie de... (Though, in hindsight...)

"You know, when we first met back in June, I did some research when I got home that night after leaving Mark's apartment. You're *nothing* like what I was expecting. *Nothing* like I was reading about." She says after taking another bundle of noodles into her mouth.
"How do you mean?" I ask in return, wanting to pick her brain and figure out what she means. Or rather, I tell myself that. I already know what she means.
"You've got quite the reputation in Japan. Top model, yeah. But also difficult to work with." She pauses briefly before she speaks up again. "Difficult to the point of nearly ending contracts on the spot. But you don't do that with me. Miért is? (Why is that?)" Kati asks me. Guess I can be truthful to some degree here. It's the least I owe her after a so far successful four-month span.
"Most of the photographers I've worked with saw me as little more than another pretty face to add to their portfolio. A trophy if you want to view it that cynically. So I just... disappointed their expectations, I guess. Put on the tsundere act as a defense and coping mechanism with the hope that it would get people to change their minds. Never did." I take a deep breath before I move on to my next thought. "But you..." I start to say, stirring some of the noodles in my bowl with the sticks.
"You don't. You actually treat me like a person. A living, breathing person and not some kind of hyper-mobile mannequin that you can play dress-up with." I can already tell that she's blushing, even without looking at her face. "You're *interested* in me. You *want* to *know* me. You're *curious* about my life. You... You want to be my friend. It's enough to make me feel more than comfortable. Like I can let my guard down and just... be myself. The *real* Gold City. Tomo and Masaru are the only other people who see things that way." I can tell from the extended silence that Kati is processing what I've just said. I throw a glance her way, catching my face with that oh-so subtle blush reflected in the lenses of her glasses for a brief moment before she focuses on her food. It stays like this for a few, tense seconds before Kati finally speaks up.
"The *real* Gold City... You really think I can see that?" She asks, doubting what I've just told her.
"I'm... I'm just some little, loser lesbian with a camera from Yonkers. Not really much to say about that..." Self-deprecation. No. Not a good look on her. Not in the slightest. Watakushi wa koko de sore o kyoka suru tsumori wa arimasen. (I am not going to allow that here.)
"I don't just *think* I can see that. I *know* I can see that. It's the reason I suggested working with you to Randy. You can capture things that most people can't." I say to her, not giving the self-hatred a second to breathe. "The way you frame the models you've worked with. How you use lighting to accentuate their forms. That alone was enough for me to know *you* were the right person for me to

work with. But then there's..." I gesture around myself. "All of this. These past four months. They've frankly been the most alive I've felt since my days on the turf."

Kati takes a deep breath. She's clearly not used to this kind of praise. She's not used to working with someone with as high of a profile as me. She's not used to collaborating with someone who is as hard working and methodical as Randy. She's used to small scale projects that barely get noticed. Indie shoots and student films. Fashion showcases for underground distributors and magazines. So to be plucked out of that so suddenly and so brazenly... Parfois je me sens mal d'avoir effectivement forcéça sur elle. (Sometimes I feel bad for effectively forcing this upon her.) But then there are moments like tonight. Where we can both relax and let our guards down. Learn from and about each other. And maybe... *Just maybe...* I can finally start to understand why it is I am so attracted to her. Why I feel this... I hesitate to call it love. My gut says to give it that name but... If I can't understand why it is Kati makes me feel this way, then I am effectively dooming whatever potential romance could exist between us. I want to be certain of things. I want to be able to definitively say, with full confidence, that I am am a queer woman. That I am *bisexual*. Then, *and only then*, can I start to make those kinds of moves. But for now, I guess I have to settle with figuring things out. All while my mind tortures me with visions that, for now, are unobtainable. Megami-tachi... anata ga dekiru hōhō de watakushi o tasukete kudasai. (Goddesses... Help me in whatever ways you can.)

We eventually leave the restaurant and... well we're just wandering around the area near the Rockefeller Center. The lights are bright, and the atmosphere is electrifying. Halloween is only two weeks away. This will be the first time in a long time I've spent it outside of Japan. I know that the celebrations in Tokyo are quite the spectacle, I've seen my share of parties while I was at Tracen. But here, in New York? I can't help but wonder how a city like this celebrates the holiday.

We stop by the rink. I remember how Kati showed me how to skate back in June. I made it a personal mission to come here whenever I had the time. Just to try and improve those skills. It's quite fun, skating. I hope that I can do it again with Kati sometime. Maybe when the rink is ready for winter use we could...
"Woah. There she is again." I hear Kati say. She's clearly looking at an ad on a nearby sign. I walk over to her and see it. Helios. Hmm... I've been seeing her in ads like these a lot lately. Looks to be for some perfume. Never really thought her to be the type for that. But I guess your tastes do change as you get older.
"Indeed." Is the only thing I can get out of my mouth. I immediately can tell that it's painting a not so good picture of my relationship with her in Kati's mind. Something that is confirmed by the next thing I hear her say.
"You don't get along with her?" She asks.
"No, no. Helios is... She's a good friend. We've just..." I start trailing off, finding myself unable to finish the thought. Kati finishes it for me.
"Haven't kept up much?" She says, probing a bit further into my mind.
"Yeah... Haven't kept up much. She... I don't know how to really say this, but..." I trail off again, not sure if the thought should be completed. "We weren't all *that* close. I think how little the two of us have talked since we graduated shows that."
"Oh. No, I get that. There's a few people I consider to be good friends that I haven't really talked to since we got out of high-school. They're off doing God knows what and I'm... I'm still in the metro. Still close to home." Kati responds. I feel my heart flutter again, knowing that... we're not really as different as appearances may first present. Maybe that's part of why I find myself attracted to her. Because I see some of myself in her. Because she is a kindred spirit in a way. Peut-être... (Maybe...)
"Was she at least a good person?"
"Who? Helios?" I ask in return. "Yes. Very good. Loud and boisterous. Always knowing how to

make a party come alive. But that never took away from her ability to care. Her means of loving her friends and whatever partner she found herself with, be they man or woman." I say, knowing that the last part will catch Kati's attention.
"She's bi? Why is that so surprising?" She says, chuckling as she does so.
"She's bi. Jordan's bi as well. Then there's Mejiro Palmer, the last member of our little quartet. She's like you: A lesbian." I say, heart still fluttering as the light from the advertisement bathes Kati in a warm, orange glow. It's since moved on to a different topic, hence the change of color.
"And that leaves you as the token straight friend." She then says. It hurts. It hurts to hear her say that. Because as time goes on, I realize more and more than I'm not straight. That I am queer. All thanks to her. Ā, watakushi wa kanojo ni sore o tsutaeru koto ga dekire ba ī no desu ga. (Oh how I wish I could tell her that.) But as I watch Kati closely, I see that same pain in her eyes. Oh... Ā, watakushi no... da kara kanojo wa watakushi o sono yō ni kūsō *shite* imasu... (Oh my... So she *does* fancy me that way...) I can tell by how she averts her eyes, never meeting mine for a second. The tone of her voice as the words came out of her mouth. This... This is just another reason to try and understand this attraction. I can use this for a good purpose. To learn about myself. To *accept* this facet of myself. But how? How will this factor into things?

yaaaaaaaaaaaaawn
It comes out uncontrollable. I try to fight it, but it's of no use. Kati notices, and makes comment.
"You tired?" She says in a half-jest. It's the only thing she can muster.
"A little bit. I... didn't really sleep well last night." I respond, not wanting her to worry too much.
"Oh. Guess you're little tricks don't help out quite as well as you thought." She then says, forcing out a chuckle to try and save face.
"Maybe not that time. But they should tonight. I'll see you around?" I say, managing to make eye contact with her, if for only a brief moment.
"Yeah. I'll definitely see you on the 23rd." She responds.
"Well that's a given." I say in turn, taking a deep breath, sad that our little outing is ending. But all things end eventually. Nothing good can last forever. So we continue back to the ramen spot, parting ways there: Kati gets into her car and drives back to her apartment in the Bronx while I... I make my sad little march back to the Gershwin, fingers fiddling around with my car keys as I do so. I... Watakushi wa kore o ukeiretai. Totemo hidoku... (I want to accept this. So badly...)

Chapter 19: Sights from the Past

Chapter Summary

> Needing a break from her mind, Kati takes a little trip into Yonkers where she ends up going down memory lane. Met takes her to their old clubhouse in Tibbetts Brook Park before then visiting her father, where both find a few things from the past: Met gets his first vest while Kati see a photo of her and her mother. Later that night, while on Staten Island, Gold City ends up picking Kati's brain slightly, resulting in a further conversation where she learns more about her photographer's parents.

|-Monday morning. Noonan Towers, 929 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx, New York-|

I need *something* that can prevent those thoughts. Every last one of them. Nem tudom, meddig bírnám ki, ha nem. (I don't know how long I can last if I don't.) So I've turned to Met in the vain hope that whatever insanity he has planned will be able to distract me during the day. *Napközben. (During the day.)* Gold City texted me earlier this morning letting me know that she wants to head out somewhere later tonight. Staten Island. Miért pont *ott* kellett lennie? (Why did it have to be *there* of all places?) God I hate Staten Island. So naturally... I agreed. Because of course I did. How could I possibly say no to a woman like Gold City? I hate how much of an iron-clad grip she has on my psyche. She's not even trying. She... She doesn't even know, does she?

Here we go again...
Oh, fuck off.
How undignified. How rude. How disrespectful
Tartogasd. Talán a nap kitisztítja a fejét. (Save it. Perhaps the day can clear her head.) sigh

I'm already dressed, that black shirt with the camera on it, my usual pair of black Converses. My brown jacket and an old pair of blue jeans. Probably had them since sophomore year of high-school. Surprised they still fit me. They're beat to hell and back, full of holes. But not torn anywhere. At least, anyehere I can easily see. I *guess* that's a good sign that they've still got some life in them. I stand up and start pacing around my apartment's living room. I should really start looking for a new place. Not a lot of *good* memories here. Mostly bad. That one stain is still there from when *she* was in my life. The less said about *her* the better. I notice another stain on the floor by the fridge. Looks like some old soda. Met most likely. Wouldn't be surprised if this was from when he first came to visit after I moved in. Damn, that was... over four years ago now. After I dropped out of NYU. Man... Wonder where I'd be if I had kept up with my academics. Guess some people aren't cut out for college. Wish I hadn't learned that the hard way. What would I be doing now if I stayed? Actually had clarity of mind and didn't get so hung up on Rose being on the West Coast? Sok kérdés van ott... (Lots of questions there...)

I continue this pacing when I feel my phone buzz in my pocket. I pull it out and see that Met's texted me. He's here already?
'I'm outside. Ready to head into Yonkers whenever you are.'
So we're heading home? That's his great plan? I will *never* understand how his mind works.

'Yonkers? I thought we were heading to the aquarium? And where are we even going? You're not getting ápa involved, are you?' I ask him, wondering how and why he changed his plans.
'No. Your dad isn't getting involved. Besides, you *know* where I'm takin you. Now get your ass down here signorina (little lady).'
'You're such an asshole.' I text back, mind in full of anger.
'And yet you wouldn't change a thing.' I slide my phone back into my pocket after reading that. Best to get downstairs and outside. Meet Met where he stands so he can pull whatever craziness is on his mind. I just hope it can keep me distracted from... whatever mental anguish I'm, going through right now. Isten tudja, hogy szükségem van rá. (God knows I need it.)

"Come hear, the moon is calling"
"The Witching Hour draws near"
"Come hear, the bell is tolling"
"Mortals run in fear"
"Prepare the altar now"
"And hear the virgins cry"
"Hold fast the sacrifice"
"For now it's time to die"

"God Met, can you turn this down?" I tell Met as we pass by University of Mount Saint Vincent. Seeing the sign makes me think back on the last time I was in Yonkers. Six months ago... Damn. That was for ápa's birthday. Six months. Has it *really* been that long?
"Oh please. Halloween is right around the corner, Kati. What better way to get in the mood then by blastin some Venom? Maybe I'll put on some Mortician for ya, too. Most brutal band in the world." He says as he cranks the volume *even louder.* Seggfej. (Asshole.) I just sigh and look out the window. A lot has changed here in Yonkers ever since me and Met graduated and started living in Gotham: A lot of independent small businesses have come and go. New highrises were built where older houses were torn down. Good 'ole Lincoln High got renovated multiple times. But I know one thing that's stayed the same: Ápa. Speaking of whom...

"Hey, wait... Why are you going down Franklin Avenue? I thought you said we weren't gonna botherápa." I say, the observation making my annoyance from earlier return. I don't want him to see how much I'm struggling right now. He doesn't need to worry about me again. Not after... Igazából nem. Jobb, ha nem gondolok rá. (Actually, no. Better that I don't think about it.) I want to *forget* that she existed.
"Would you relax? We're not gonna bother your dad. Though you probably *should* do that at some point. When was the last time to spent the day with him?" Met responds as we pass by ápa's house. Looks like he's raking some leaves, but he's taking a small breather. Meaning he *does* see me and Met pass him. He gives a confused wave, and so do I. I then turn back to Met.
"Last time was... Bassza meg. (Fuck.) His birthday. That was six months ago. Micsoda lány vagyok... (Some daughter I am...)" I start feeling *really* bad after saying that out loud. As if I wasn't before.
"You should probably fix that." Is what I hear Met say next.
"Not my fault I've been busy like a bee for almost five months straight." I respond, looking back out the window. We've already turned out of Ludlow by this point, though we are still in the suburbs. Looks like we're heading downtown. But what could be there?
"That may be true, but I find it *very* hard to believe that you haven't had time to at least *talk* to the man." Met says, side-eyeing me while still driving. How he hasn't gotten into an accident doing something like this still astounds me. But here we are.

"With everything I've been having to do? Yes. It is true." I respond, eyes going back to the road ahead of us.

After a few more minutes of Met's erratically controlled driving, we reach Nodine Hill. Some very nostalgic memories here. Think we're close to Rose's house. I wonder how she's been...
"You're thinkin about Rose again." I hear Met say, getting my attention. "Am not." I respond. But Met always comes prepared.
"Nhảm nhí. (Bullshit.) I can tell when you're thinkin about your exes by the look in your eyes. Those rims and lenses won't help you. They don't cover your irises. And they sure as fuck don't hide your face. Not from me. You're thinkin about the past, Kati. This time... it was Glass Rose. Don't even *try* to lie to me." Met goes. I try to formulate a response, but by the time I open my mouth, the music has changed.

"Long black coat and fingernails"
"The size of fucking trees"
"My head is bald, my ears they point"
"Just like my fucking teeth"
"I stalk upstairs, I raise your hairs"
"A dirty, stinking fiend"
"I got no time, I got no mind"
"My kind just wants to feed"

What even is this? It sounds like that weird punk he likes, but...

"Blitzkid... Nosferatu... What kind of childish and immature-" Met cuts me off before I can even finish the thought.
"Don't even *think* about callin Blitzkid childish. You want someone to blame for this bein in my playlist, blame Jeremy. Take it up with him." He responds as we pass by the middle school. Looking at the gym makes me think back on the first major thing me and Rose did when we became a thing. God, that dance was so corny and cringe. Thinking about it makes me feel embarrassed. And yet I wouldn't change it for anything. It doesn't take long for us to get onto Hillcrest, and then Rumsey from there. Wherever Met is taking us, it sure does *feel* familiar. *Very* familiar. It's not... Nem. Kizárt dolog. (No. There's no way.)

"You're not taking us... *there*, are you?" I ask him, realizing that we're heading to Tibbetts Brook Park. "I can neither confirm nor deny." Is the only response I get. It also gives me my answer.
"You are... such an asshole." I tell him as I look out on the road. We're on Cross Country Parkway by this point, though Midland Avenue is right there and we do exit onto it. It does not take us long to reach Teresa Avenue after that. He was right: I knew *exactly* where he was taking us.

"God, I can't believe this place is still here." I say as I walk around the old "clubhouse". A lot of good memories were made here. Me, Met, Rose and whatever little friend group decided to come with us at the moment. But at the end of the day, it was just the three of us. Three little misfits: One loser lesbian, a warhorse that had to deal with gender dysphoria and a racer who's heart would literally stop in it's tracks if she tried running on the turf. I look at one of the old posters Met made. A little tribute to one of his favorite bands.
"How has this not rotten away yet?" I ask as I look at the sheet of white construction paper, starting at the top. 'Exodus' with that vibrantly red logo outlined in black and white with Met's crude drawings of all the members.
"Ask your dad. He and Rose's parents pay a *fuck ton* of money to keep this spot from gettin

overgrown." He says as he leans on the wall next to me. Didn't know ápa still kept in touch with Matt and Tracey. I should ask him how they're doing next time I talk to him.
"They are? Why? Why would they... Why would they care about this?" I then ask, raising my eyebrow as Met shifts his massive frame while I press my finger onto the poster. Someone laminated it. So that it can be more hardy against the elements. Smart idea.
"Because they know how much this place means to us." He responds, ears twitching as if he heard something outside. It was probably just a squirrel though, judging by how those black spikes on top of his head relax after a few seconds.
"Does Rose know about this? Do you two even still talk?" Is my next question.
"No. No ghe l'ho ancora dito. (No. I haven't told her yet.) And yeah, we still talk. Why wouldn't we? I imagine she'll be just as surprised as you when I get to it. Mark my words." He says as he picks up an old trophy from a nearby shelf. Looks like it was from that mathathon that happened during freshman year. Spring semester I think. "I'm gonna try and get her back here. In New York. She told me she's plannin on takin a gap year from UCLA. Wants a break from all the studyin. Can't say I blame her. And if I do manage to pull her back from California... This is the first place I'm takin her."
"Neither would I. Paleontology is no joke." I say, heart jumping at the prospect of seeing her again. We ended things not too long after she had moved out west, but she still wanted to be friends. Still wanted to be in my life. Ezért mindig értékelni fogom. Mindenért. Az összes emlék, amit készítettünk. Jó és rossz. (I'll always appreciate her for that. For everything. All the memories we made. Good and bad.)

I walk over to Met, taking note of how many things are in here: Make shift trophies, odd bits and bobs Met would collect. Rose's rock collection. Surprised nobody has touched that in close to five years. But the one thing that stands out to me the most is one of the photos. It's framed, probably as the date on the back. I pick it up, and the first thing I notice is Met. I don't even recognize him like this. It's hard to believe that the girl in the middle of this photo would become the man standing right next to me in ten years. The facial hair, the piercings, the tattoo, but most of all: The ear ornament. His little lac birds on that cross. But it's on the left ear in the picture, not on his right like how I'm used to now.
I flip the frame over, and just as I suspected, there's a date on the back.

'October 20th, 2015. Three little idiots. Inseparable till the end. - Glass Rose'

I feel myself choke up a bit, a tear forming in my eye. A lot of life has happened in the decade since this photo was taken. Me and Rose becoming a couple, the three of us graduating high-school. Rose taking me down to Kentucky to see her sister run in the Derby. Rose then heading to Los Angeles. Met properly starting his transition, anya... Anya... Annyira hiányzol. (I miss you so much.) My breathing becomes shallow as the memories start coming back to me, and Met notices. He doesn't say anything, but he does place his hand on my shoulder. It doesn't really help. The tears start falling anyway. So I do the only thing I *know* will help. I turn to face met and bury my face in his chest. It's not heavy, but I feel my cheeks get wetter and wetter. A result of all the memories that come flooding back.

After a few minutes of standing like this, Met pushes me away. It's not malice. That much I can tell. He walks over to a stereo system. Looks familiar. Think I might've put it in here around freshman year of high-school. Met plugs his phone into it, and music starts playing. I just hear bass at first, but it gradually ramps up.
"Might not be your thing, but it's better than nothin." He says as he looks at me, his white shirt marked by patches of grey from my wet face.

"Heaven sends me here to you"
"And if a-you fear you've reason to"
"Open up all seven seals"
"The beast is come to claim the youth"

It's... oddly calming. Didn't expect that from this kind of music. Seems Met didn't either.
"Or maybe it is your thing... Didn't know you would vibe so well with Samhain..." He says, laughing slightly as the words come out. I guess he's right. I don't mind this. Kinda like it, actually. I'll have to see what I can find later on. But that can wait. For now... I think I'll let whatever this song is ease my mind. Even if it's about a fallen angel trying to bring about Armageddon.

|-That afternoon. 95 Franklin Avenue, Yonkers-|

"I cannot *believe* you talked me into this." I say as Met pulls his car into ápa's driveway.
"He's your *dad*, Kati. You need to see him more often. You know how lonely he gets out here." Met responds, side-eyeing me as he puts his car in park. I then take a look around the area: This place is nice. It's where I grew up. No ugly or horrible memories. Well, except for.... *one* memory. I hesitate to unbuckle, mostly because I don't want to bother ápa. I look around the yard. Seems he's got all the leaves he could before more started falling down. Met's the first to get out of the car. I guess I have to follow now. Just so that he doesn't get into any trouble. I quickly unbuckle, open the door and nearly fall out because of how tall his car is. I keep forgetting that Met *is* a giant. He turns around just in time to catch me, though.
"Careful there, cô bé. (little girl.) Wouldn't want you to get hurt." He says, teasing me for my clumsiness.
"Oh, fuck off." I tell him in response.
"Oof. Imagine if your dad heard you say that." He then says, those hetero-chromatic eyes of his giving me that very familiar piercing gaze. We walk up to the front door of the old house and Met rings the door bell. When did ápa get a Ring? Doesn't matter. Met rings it and we wait for a few seconds. Which then turns into a whole minute.

"Guess he must be out back. Stay here." Met says as he turns on his heel. Though, he doesn't make it very far.
"Oh. So it *was* your car I saw pass by earlier. Wasn't expecting you to drop by though." The sound ofápa's voice gets me to turn around as well. How does he manage to look *that* much older in only six months? Miféle átokkal van dolga? (What kind of curse is he dealing with?)"
"Hey Pat. Been a while." Met says before moving slightly. "Brought someone with me."
"Well, lookit that. Kis virágom. (My little flower.)" He says, Ohio accent slipping out and face lighting up as he processes what's in front of him. He drops what's in his hands, walks over and pulls me into a bear hug. Utálom, amikor ezt csinálja. (Hate when he does this.) It's somehow worse then Met.
"Oh...kay- Can't breathe..." I whimper out as ápa lets go slightly. It's just enough for me to get air into my lungs, but he's still got a tight hold around me.
"Oh, uh... My bad, ya know?" He says, finally letting go of me. He then gives Met a two-finger salute as he goes to gather what he dropped, gesturing for us to follow him inside.

I take in the smell as I walk through the door. Paprikás. Hmm... Guess ápa just had lunch when we arrived. Seems like Met smells it too.
"Oh shit. Is that chicken paprikash I smell? Got any left?" He asks, making a b-line for the kitchen.
"Only a little bit. Save some for Kati. Well-" Ápa turns to face me. "Kérsz belőle? Éhes vagy? Nem baj, ha nemet mondasz. (Do you want any? Are you hungry? It's okay to say no.)"
"Jól esne egy kis csirke paprikás. (I could go for some chicken paprikash.)" I tell him, which causes

him to turn around and yell to Met.
"Save her some." He shouts before getting a response.
"No bisogna dirmelo do volte. (Don't have to tell me twice.)" Met shouts back, followed by the sounds of silverware and plates. While that is happening, ápa turns to face me again.
"Szóval, hogy vagy, kis virágom? (So, how have you been, my little flower?)" He asks, brown eyes looking me up and down as he waits for my answer.
"Voltam már jobban is. De nem rossz. (I've been better. But not bad.)" I tell him before asking the question in return. "És mi van önökkel? Hogy vagy? (What about you? How have you been?)"
"Ó, csak a szokásos. Nincs miről beszélni. (Oh, just the usual. Not much to talk about.)" He says as he takes a deep breath. "Kitakarítottam a kertet. Előkészítettem márciusra, amikor újra el tudom ültetni a dolgokat. De meg kell bizonyosodnom róla, hogy az ültetvényesek tiszták. Azok a levelek szúnyogfészkeket hoznak létre, ha nem vigyázok. (Cleaned up the garden. Got it ready for March when I can start planting things down again. But I do need to make sure the planters are clear. All those leaves will end up creating mosquito nests if I'm not careful.)" Oh right, he gardens. Forgot about that. One of the *many* things anya showed him.
"Még mindig kertészkedsz? (You still garden?)" I say in a teasing manner. It gets both of us to chuckle before ápa speaks up again.
"Hé, ne kopogj, amíg meg nem kóstoltad. (Hey, don't knock it till you try it.)" He retorts. "Akarsz valakit hibáztatni? Keress egy képet az anyádról. (You want someone to blame? Find a picture of your mother.)" Just mentioning her is enough to dampen the mood slightly. Something that ápa immediately picks up on. "Sajnálom, én... Enned kéne. A Met vár. (I'm sorry, I... You should probably go eat. Met's waiting.)" He says as he sets the rake down and heads into the kitchen. I follow suit, or rather, I would. But one of the pictures on the wall catches my eye. I walk over to it and realize that it's of me an anya, Must've been taken in 2015 during one of our yearly summer trips up in the Adirondacks, judging by how long my hair is in the photo. This was next to Sacandanga Lake. Fun times. Fun... I walk into the kitchen and find Met sat at the table, the chair underneath him barely holding his weight as he shifts around. Just the sound alone... Enélkül is boldogulnék. (I could really do without that.)

"Took you long enough. Here. Saved you some." He says as he slide a plat to the opposite side of him. I walk over and sit down. I grab a fork and knife and start eating, savoring the flavor as it hits my tongue.
"This is how your mom made it, right Pat?" Met asks after he swallows his last bite. Ápa looks at him and then starts thinking, judging by the look in his eyes behind those glasses.
"Uh... My dad, actually. And he learned it from his aunt." He then looks right at me. "One day I'm gonna show you. After that, you're getting this old house and I move back to Cincinnati."
"Okay then... That's a bit much, don't you think?" I ask, a bit overwhelmed by what I just heard. He's really just gonna... Nekem adod a házat? Aztán visszamész Ohióba? (Give the house to me? And then head back to Ohio?) I don't know if I can accept that. That's... That's *too* much. But I don't bring that up. I don't want to dampen the mood.
"Damn. Just... *Wow*. You're givin this old place to *her* and then fuckin off back to Ohio? Vorìa poder pianificar cusì. (Wish I could plan like that.)" Met says, somewhat voicing my own thoughts, but in his own, blunt way. I expect ápa to feel indignant at the words, but he just laughs.
"You kiddin' me? That was *always* the plan. Only reason I've stayed in New York is 'cause of you and Kati. And you're both grown-ups now, ya know?" He says, still chuckling as the words come out. I feel a knot form in my stomach as I process it. He want so give me this old place... Nem tudom, mit kellene éreznem ezzel kapcsolatban. (I don't know how I should be feeling about that.) It... It just doesn't feel right. This house? Being mine?I focus back on the paprikás in front of me, hoping that it can purge that thought out of my head. Seems to work, if temporarily...

"Really? *That's* where this has been the *whole time*? I was wonderin where the hell it went." Met says as he looks at his first vest. I'm surprised that it's still intact, if torn in a few places. Met then brings the ratty old denim up to his face ans smells it. "Eugh... Điều đó không đặc biệt dễ chịu. (That is not particularly pleasant.)" He says as the *aroma* hits his nose.
"What'dja expect, Met? It's been up in that musty attic for like, ten years. Of course it's gonna smell bad." Ápa says as he judges Met's reaction. I'd be saying the same thing, honestly.
"You should probably wash that. Might have mold on it too..." I add, taking note on some of the splotches that dot the patches and bare denim.
"No shit... Thanks though. It's got a lot of sentimental value." Met says as he rolls up the vest, carrying it under his arm as he heads downstairs. This leaves just me and ápa again.
"Met mondta, hogy egy másik dögös modellel dolgozol. Hogy hívják? (Met tells me you're working with another hot model. What's her name?)" He asks, clearly wanting to open Pandora's Box. I take a deep breath, but don't answer immediately. Instead, I start walking... right into my old bedroom.Looks just like how I left it when I graduated high-school. It's so... *meticulously* clean. Ápa must come in regularly to tidy up. Make sure nothing's out of place. "Ó. Vigasztalást akartál, mielőtt elmondtad? Oké. Ezzel semmi gond. (Oh. Wanted some comfort before you told me? Okay. No problem with that.)" I hear him say as I sit down on my bed.
"Tudod, hogy nem szeretek a munkáról beszélni. (You know I don't really like talking abot work.)" I say, jesting in this moment, but... well, I guess I can spill some. "Gold City. Így hívják. Legnagyobb uma modell Japánban. A fele itt van New Yorkban, és csak június óta van a városban. (That's her name. Biggest uma model in Japan. Gotten to half of that here in New York and she's only been in the city since June.)" I watch as ápa takes a dumbfounded look onto his face.
"Japán? A fenébe is... Meddig dolgozol vele? Mikor volt az első lövés? (Japan? Well damn... How long are you working with her? When was the first shoot?)" He then asks, wanting to know more.
"Egy éve. Az első forgatás egy héttel azután volt, hogy találkoztam vele. Hadd mutassam meg. (A year. The first shoot was a week after I met her. Let me show you.)" I say as I pull my phone out of my pocket. Ápa then sits next to me while I show him all the shoots we've done so far. Seems he's already taken a liking to her.
"Tudod, ahhoz képest, hogy Japán, tényleg úgy néz ki... Kaukázusi, mondjuk úgy. (You know, for being Japanese, she sure does look... Caucasian, let's just say.)" He says as a joke, laughing as the words slip past his lips.
"Az apja francia-kanadai... (Well, her dad's French-Canadian, so...)" I say absentmindedly. I have just busted this box wide open. But for whatever reason... ápa doesn't press it. Instead...
"Nem vagy oda érte, ugye? (You don't have the hots for her, do ya?)" I feel indignified by that. Why? **Why** would he ask that? He's messing with me. That's what this is.
"Micsoda? Nem. Miért... Miért kérdezed ezt? Tudod, hogy próbálok profi lenni. (What? No. Why... Why would you ask that? You know I try to keep things professional.)" I tell him, annoyed that he... That he's getting so close without realizing it. I don't want him to figure it out, though. God no.
"Hé, sosem tudhatod, mi történhet. (Hey, you never know what could happen.)" Ápa responds, jesting further. "Egyik nap a forgatáson vagy, a másikon pedig randira hív. Csak légy résen, én mondom. (One day you're at your shoot and then the next she's asking you out. Just be prepared is all I'm saying.)"

The sound of the front door closing is enough to get our attention. Seems Met has come back in. That could mean one of two things here. Either we're hanging here for a bit longer or he's ready to head back into the city. I get my asnwer a second after the thoughts enter my mind.
"Hey Kati! Come on. Let's head back." I hear him shout. I put my phone back into my pocket and stand up from my bed. I then give ápa a look that tells him Met is serious. He understands though. We both walk out of my old room and down the stairs, seeing Met by the door. He opens it, but doesn't walk out yet. Ápa walks over to him and nudges his elbow into Met.

"It was good to see you, Met. You should come up here more often." He then turns to me one last time. "Same with you." He pulls me into another hug, this time *not* choking the life out of me as he does so. I return it this time, seeing as how I am able to move my arms. After a few seconds, he lets go and I hear Met start walking out the door, prompting me to follow. I then close it behind me, but not before giving ápa one last look, smiling as I do so. After the front door is closed, me and Met walk back to his car. I manage to get into the passenger's seat *without* tripping myself up while Met casually slides into the driver's side. Once his key is in, the music starts. It's this weird atmosphere for a few minutes with weird spoken word before it goes into something that sounds like "deathrock" or whatever Met calls it.

"Salt the dead, you close the veil"
"The changer of shapes alone on hooves"
"Autumn's cold brings the pagan dead"
"Who seek the warm of the Samhain fires"

"No savevo che gavevo *Initium* in ripetision... (Didn't know I had *Initium* on repeat...)" I hear Met mutter to himself as he gets us moving. Doesn't take long for us to exit the neighborhood. All while this Samhain keeps playing. Met, however, is more focused on me in the moment.
"So, happy I got you out here?" He asks, eyes not leaving to road as he speaks. It's uncanny how well he can multi-task, even among drivers. Guess he *can* be a good driver.
"Yeah, a little bit." I tell him, shifting in my seat so that I'm a little more comfortable.
"Good. You looked like you needed it. I'll stop at my place and you can probably just walk back to your apartment." He says. Prick. Not dropping me off at my place.
"You're such an ass..." I mutter. But of course, Met hears it.
"Kati... I'm just fuckin with you." He says as we exit Yonkers' city limits. Won't be long now until we're back in the Bronx.

|-That evening. Snug Harbor Cultural center & Botanical Garden. 1000 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island-|

I don't like Staten Island. It's too bougie for my tastes. But Gold City wanted to come here. And she does enjoy spending time with me. So I have to swallow my pride for the night. Not that it matters.Úgy tűnik, észrevette az elégedetlenségemet. (She seems to have noticed my discontent.)
"You look tense. Everything alright? We can go somewhere else if you'd like." She says, trying her best to put me at ease.
"It's... It's nothing." I respond, knowing that she'll see right through it.
"Chūkū no sakurya ku. Something's wrong. Out with it." Is the next thing City says, more insistent this time.
"I... I don't really like Staten Island. Too judgemental. Too... conservative." I say, airing out *some* of my grievances. I watch as her ears perk up before relaxing. Then she takes a deep breath before speaking up.
"Je vois... (I see...) You don't need to go on. I think I understand where you're coming from." She then says as she shifts her weight on the stone bench. From where her eyes are going, I'd say she's looking at the Chinese Scholar's Garden, but can't quite make out what it is she's looking at. "Nan desu ka... Nippon teien? Īe... Nan. Ka ga okashī..." I hear her mutter to herself in Japanese. I remember what I said a few months go, how I could learn it and Quebec French so that we can better communicate. Already gotten good with the French, I think. But Japanese... Oh, okay. I get it now. Guess I'm starting to see why she thinks I "see the *real* Gold City".
"That's the Chinese Garden. Do you, uh... Want to check it out?" I say, watching her ears perk up again before relaxing in the same motion.

"Chinese Garden... I wouldn't be opposed." Gold says, standing up as she does so and walking towards the Chinese Garden, heels clicking on the pavers as she moves.

Within a few seconds we're at the Chinese Garden, taking in some of the views we can get from here. "It reminds me of the Forbidden City in Beijing. Always wanted to see it." She says as she glances over the small pond that the garden has. I feel like agreeing. But I don't say anything. Not immediately. Especially when City starts speaking again. "For as different as our cultures are, I find it fascinating how similar they can be. China and Japan. Many things that are common place in Japan were once imported from China, after all. But I won't go into that too much. Mostly because it's... It's complicated."
"Yeah... I bet it is..." Is the only thing I can eek out of my mouth. I'm too distracted. By a lot. But in this moment... The way the last rays of sunlight fall on her skin, reflect off her hair... It makes me want to run my fingers through those golden strands. See if they really do feel like silk... And her pale, plump skin... Is it as soft as those devious fantasies make me think it is? I look down, roll up my sleeve slightly, taking in my own somewhat tan skin. How strained it looks... How rough my palms feel compared to hers... Ha lesz rá esélyem, hogy megfogjam a kezét. (If I'll ever get the chance to hold her hands, that is.)

Pathetic.
Didn't I tell you to fuck off already?
Being crass won't help you. You know that.
As if I care right now. Just leave me alone.
You know I can't do that. Not when I'm trying to protect you.
You sound like a mob boss.
Maybe I am. Maybe I'm, not. But you are GOING to listen. Whether you want to or not, young lady.
I'm not listening to any of your bullshit. Not now. Not ever. Now fuck off.

I tune back into reality, seeing Gold City looking at me, eyes carrying a worried stare again.
"Something's still bothering you." She says.
"It really is nothing this time." I say, knowing that she won't fully believe me. But she doesn't seem to press any further. No additional prodding. Just leaves it there. Does she really trust me that much? Szörnyű döntés, tényleg. (A horrible decision, really.) My attention is then taken by the sound of her laughter.
"I don't know whether to take you at face value when you say that. Come on. I've had my fill. Don't want to keep you 'suffering' any longer than I need to." She says, heels once again clicking on the stones as she walks. I follow suit, my Converses making small scuffs with each footfall. But one thought keeps nagging at my mind as we walk back to my car: Why is she so interested in me? I think I understand why she's so relaxed around me, but... To have someone like Gold City want to spend time with me outside of work, that's... I thought it would just be a one off back in June. After we scouted the lighthouse so she and Randy could get a second opinion. But since then it's been me and her going around the city whenever we both have the time. It's the most alive I've felt since me and Rose were dating, yeah, but... I don't know. Something feels off. I *know* it's my own insecurities and impostor syndrome getting the better of me, but I can't shake this horrible feeling in my gut. Will it sour things between us? Maybe... But I have to ask. I *need* to know. I manage to catch up to Gold, matching her pace, taking a deep breath before I ask the question that will probably ruin me.

"Why do you spend so much of your time with me outside of our work?" I can tell by the way her ears perk up, by how she stops in her tracks that it was something she did not expect to hear. Something... she didn't *want* to hear.

"How many times have I told you? It's because I *enjoy* being around you." She says. That old repeated mantra that never puts me at ease. Gold City *enjoys* spending time with me. I can't wrap my head around it.
"You need to be more specific. What is it about some little, loser lesbian like me do you find enjoyable?" The knife twists deeper as the words come out of my mouth. It takes a few seconds before I get a response. She had to think about what to say next. I don't blame her. I'd be blind-sided too if someone I've been so comfortable around for almost five months started talking this kind of way.
"D'accord. .. Je vois qu'une réponse simple ne suffit pas pour vous. (Okay... I see that a simple answer isn't enough for you.)" She says before taking a deep breath of her own. "Why do I spend so much of my time with you? Could it be that I think you're a kind person? Always attentive to my wants and needs in your own way? Maybe it's because you're a great listener. You almost never interrupt me when I'm speaking or when I'm laying out plans. Can't tell you how many times that's happened to me." She pauses oh so briefly before continuing on with her impromptu speech.
"Perhaps it's because you're able to bring out parts of me that I didn't know were there. Or maybe it is just as simple as I've been telling you: I find you to be enjoyable company." I don't know what to say. How do I respond to this? What do I comeback with? I don't get a chance to answer though. Not when she speaks up one last time. "Time spent with you is not time wasted, Kati. It never has been and it never will be."
"I, uh... I..." God I sound pathetic. I expected this to turn into an argument. A shouting match. But it didn't. It's not. But one thing sticks out to me... 'Bring out parts of me I didn't know were there.' Is... Is she trying to say... Nem. A legkevésbé sem. Túl sokat olvasok a dolgokban. Kizárt dolog... egy olyan nő, mint Gold City, megkérdőjelezhető... (No. Not in the slightest. I'm reading too much into things. There is no way... a woman like Gold City can possibly be questioning...)

"Kati? Are you there? Hey, talk to me." I get snapped out of this little fugue state by the very same woman my mind has been torturing me over. She's close. Maybe *too* close. And she has that same worried look in her eyes from earlier. And that's when I feel the slightest pressure on my arm through the sleeve of my jacket. I briefly glance down and see that he's holding my arm ever so gently. Trying to ground me back into reality. I swallow hard before I look right into those pale blue eyes of hers, immediately averting my gaze before taking a deep breath and standing up straight.
"I, uh... I'm sorry. I shoul-" City cuts me off before I can continue my apology.
"Kati. Ī n da. It's okay. There's no need to apologize." She says as she mercifully takes a step back. "But don't *ever* say things like that again. Promets-moi que tu ne le feras pas. (Promise me you won't.)"
"I... I'll try." Is what I mutter out. I expect her to have a firm response ready, but all she does is smile at me before she speaks up again.
"That's certainly better than nothing. Come on. Let's head back to Manhattan." She says as she spins on her heel, once again sending my mind off to the races.

Nyugi. Lélegezni. Túljutunk ezen. (Relax. Breathe. We can get through this.)
Can we? I already know where my mind will go...
Igen. Megtehetjük. Tudom, hogy megtehetjük. Hogy képes vagy rá. (Yes. We can. I know that we can. That you can.)

sigh

This is going to be a long night, isn't it?

|-That night. Lower East Side, Manhattan-|

"To walk the night"
"To feel no love"
"To know the touch of another kiss"
"Never more"

"What is this? It sounds... Familiar. But I can't put my finger on it." City says as she reaches for my phone. She taps the screen to see what's playing and starts reading the name of the song. "*To Walk the Night*... Samhain... *Why* is that so familiar?"
"You know them?" I say, shocked that she'd even be familiar with this kind of music. "I didn't think Danzig would be up your alley."
"Danzig? Glenn Danzig? He fronted another band?" City then asks. Okay... Who *doesn't* she know?
"Let me guess: Another ex was a fan of theirs." I ask, half joking but there is an air of seriousness in my words.
"No. My brother, Victor. He often sends me pictures of how life is back in Oshawa. His room is *filled* with hard rock, metal and punk memorabilia. He has *all* of the Misfits releases before their initial split. Hmph... I guess *that's* why Samhain sounds so familiar." She explains as she sets my phone back into it's holder. "I think he'd like you."
"Oh, he'd *definitely* like Met." I say as I turn off of Delancey and onto Bowery. This will take us through Chinatown and straight to the Financial Disctrict.
"I'm assuming Meteor Hammer is how you know Samhain?" I then hear Gold ask, getting my attention as I slowly creep my way south-west.
"Yeah. We were up in Yonkers earlier and he started playing it. Don't know why but... It just made some things click, I guess." I say, not really knowing what the right words would be in this situation. Maybe Met is righ when he says certain artists can't be described. You just need to *listen* to them to understand.
"Yonkers... Is that part of the city? Or is it seperate?" I hear her ask.
"It's in Westchester County, not Bronx County. Though Yonkers *is* part of the megalopolis." I tell her, satiating some of her curiosity.
"Why were you there? I'm assuming Yonkers is important to you." She says, wanting to know more. I guess I can keep talking, especially since this light is stuck on red. Traffic is *really* bad tonight.

"It's where me and Met grew up. All of the friends we made since moving into New York always give us a hard time for it." I start saying, reminiscing on those first few months in the Bronx, how alone I felt before learning that I was only a three minute drive from Met's apartment. "Everyone kept telling me and Met that we weren't *true New Yorkers*. That we're outsiders from upstate. Just ignore the fact that the Bronx has been slowly but surely melting into Yonkers." I pause, getting a quick look at City. She's fully engrossed in what I have to say. "We don't actually live that far from each other. Just like how it was back in Yonkers growing up. Only a three minute drive away." That gets her to chuckle. I'm lucky the lights outside my car aren't bright enough to fully illuminate my face, otherwise she'd see how much I'm blushing.
"Did you two plan that? Or was it a happy accident?" She asks, still laughing as the words come out. "Oh, no. It was completely unplanned. By the time I decided to drop out of NYU and move into the Bronx, Met had already been there for a year. He moved into New York City practically the second he graduated." I answer, stopping at *another* red light. Jézusom, mekkora a forgalom ma este? (Jesus, how bad is traffic tonight?) Well, at least I can sneak glances at Gold City. Admire her beauty in a way that *doesn't* feel like I'm ogling her.
"When did you and Meteor Hammer graduate? Was he a year ahead or a year behind?" Is the next question I hear.
"Met was a year ahead of me. He graduated in 2019. I was the next year in 2020." I start saying, having an idea of what her next question or statement will be. I get to mine before her, though.

"Magna cum laude. Not valedictorian though. I... I wasn't smart enough for *that*."
"Wow. I bet your parents were proud in that moment. Dropping out of college... Well, I'll let you talk about that one." She says, eyes never leaving me.
"Well, ápa wasn't happy at first. But then I tried to explain why I did it. It was... *far* too much for me to handle. I just couldn't keep up." I say, not seeing it, but feeling her gaze shift from me to her lap then back to me. She doesn't say anything in response. Not yet

"It didn't strain things between the two of you, did it?" I hear her ask. It's not at all what I thought it was going to be.
"In the immediate, it did. But after I explained my reasoning he seemed to accept it. Plus, he could never really stay mad at me. Knowing that I'm doing what I love is enough for him to be happy." I say, feeling her eyes drift again.
"What's he like? Your father." Is the next line of questioning Gold goes for. I think I'll oblige her.
"He's kind. He's funny. He's thoughtful. He likes to garden and cook. Learned all of that from his aunt. She'd teach him her own personal recipes whenever he'd visit her in Budapest." I start saying, catching Gold shift in her seat as I talk. "He'll talk your ear off, but you won't get tired of it. Kind of a talent of his, I guess. Never really being able to annoy people unless he wanted to."
"Hmm... Like father like daughter, I suppose." I hear her say. I am... No.
"Look, I love my ápa, but I am not that much like him. Inkább olyan vagyok, mint az anyám. (I'm more like my anya.)" I start saying, realizing too late that I've opened Pandora's Box.
"Anya? Is she like a family friend? An aunt?" The questioning is more intense than it actually is... I shouldn't feel so interrogated by City in this moment.
"Mother." I say, watching her face shift from one expression to another.
"Oh... What's she like, then? What makes you think you're more like her than your father." She then asks, prodding just enough to where it seems plausibly deniable.
"She was quiet. Reserved. Almost clairvoyant. Could sense when things would work and when they wouldn't." I start, knowing that this is a bad idea. "She was smart. She was kind. She was loving. She was beautiful." I pause for a brief moment before continuing. "Everyone keeps telling me I look like her." That gets those pale blue eyes on me again. For the umpteenth time tonight.
"Maybe they're right. I certainly wouldn't be able to find reasons to *not* believe the statement." She says, hand coming up before immediately falling again. Was she... I can tell by the look in her eyes that she wants to change the subject. And to her credit, she does.

"Have you considered growing your hair out? Not saying it looks bad, just..." She starts, but trails off, almost knowing that somehow it will bring us back to anya.
"Makes me look too much like anya when it's long." I say, seeing how it stops just above the base of my neck in the rear-view mirror. I never really liked how I looked with longer hair. Neck length was always the best. But...
"Well, if you want *my* opinion: I think you can wear it long in ways that *won't* make you look like your mother. It's not just about having it long, Kati. Style is also important here." Gold starts saying, bringing up her hand once more. By this point, we're already at her apartment. The last few lights we mercifully green the entire ride back.
"May I?" I hear her ask. Oh, she... she wants to feel my hair. Okay... I nod, giving her the okay and feel those slender fingers of hers slowly move through my hair. "Hmm... if you go down to here..." She says as she slowly trails down my neck, stopping an inch and a half below my shoulders. "There's a lot we can do with that. What do you think?"
"Uh... Talán.? (Maybe.?) I don't know." I say, trying to not think about how I felt as she ran her finger down my neck. I know it wasn't intentional in *that* way, but fuck... Before my mind can go off, City shifts in her seat again.
"You... don't particularly like talking about your mother, do you?" I hear. If only she knew... "You

parents didn't get divorced, did they? Like mine?" Don't... *Don't*...
"N... No..." Is the only thing I can muster in the moment. "Oh..." Is the only response I get.

Anya... How do I... How do I talk about this? I thought that I had enough time to process everything from that day, but...
"She's been dead for nine years." The words sip out, almost unconsciously. I regret it almost immediately once I realize what it is I just said. Once I process the vocalizations. City's gaze is far more intense now before it fades away... Mint anya... (Just like anya...)
"Oh, I... I think I see why it's such a... *touchy* subject now. I'm sorry." I hear her say, followed up by... "How did- No. I shouldn't ask."
"Sudden brain aneurysm." I say, knowing that this won't be easy to get through. "Met was the first person to find her. He immediately called 911 but by the time paramedics got there... she was already gone."

Silence. *Excruciatingly* tense silence is what follows. Nem kellett volna mondanom semmit. Nem kellett volna részleteznem. I... (I shouldn't have said anything. I shouldn't have elaborated. I...) I get pulled out of this rut by the feeling of someone's hand on my thigh. I look over and see Gold's arm right there. She then moves it up to my wrist, slowly taking my hand in hers. We then lock eyes.

"I... I'm so sorry that all of this happened to you. You know, if you ever feel like just... talking certain things out, I'm willing to listen. Or if you just want someone who can be there. No words needed. I... I can tell how much she meant to you. That's good. Très bien. (Very good.)" City lets go of my hand before she unbuckles and opens the door, stepping out into the cool evening air of October. But she gives me one last look before she starts heading to her building. "Hey, look at me." Another brief silence. "Never forget the good times that you had. Remember those the most. I'll see you Thursday."

She closes the door and walks towards her building, stepping into it and then out of sight. This now leaves me with my thoughts... and they are everywhere. If I wasn't falling for this woman *before*... Most már biztos vagyok benne. (I'm sure as hell am now.)

|-Tuesday morning. Noonan Towers, 929 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx-|

It's hot. Too hot. I hate summer. Especially here in the Adirondacks. Too hot. Too stuffy. Too humid. And Sacandanga Lake isn't helping. It's making things worse.
"Mi a baj, kis virágom? (What's wrong, my little flower?)" Anya asks as she walks over to me, sitting down on the shore next to me.
"Túl meleg van, anya. (It's too hot, anya.)" I say, poking a toe into the sand before immediately retracting it from how hot it is under there. "HMPH! Látod? (See?)" Anya just laughs at my suffering. She looks out over Sacandanga Lake before she speaks up again.
"Hát, a nap közepe van. És ez a kis hegyi tó nem olyan, mint Ontario. Este visszajövünk. Akkor hűvösebb lesz. (Well, it's the middle of the day. And this little mountain lake isn't like Ontario. We'll be back out here later tonight. It'll be cooler then.)" She says, still laughing as she turns her eyes to me, those dark brown irises boring a hole right through me. "Ma este az ötvenes évek közepén járunk. Az a ropogós hegy csodákat tesz a lélekkel. Legalábbis nekem azt mondták. (It'll be in the high fifties tonight. That crisp mountain does wonders for the soul. Or so I'm told.)"
"Hey Kati! You getting in, babe?" We both look out and see Rose in the water, black hair obscured by the sunlight being reflected off the lake's surface. I *really* don't want to get up and walk on this hot sand, getting it in every crevice possible, but god dammit the way Rose's voice sounds... Then there's Met.
"GET IN HERE YOU COWARD!" The only thing I see that is recognizable is the giant binder on

his chest, light also being reflected off of the metal parts. I hate him so much sometimes...
"Seggfej... (Asshole...)" I mutter under my breath, catching anya's attention.
"Vigyázz a szádra, ifjú hölgy. (Watch the language, young lady.)" She scolds, "slapping" me on the shoulder before relaxing next to me again. "Ugye nem akarod, hogy a nagyapád így halljon? (You wouldn't want your grandfather to hear you talk like that, would you?)" I take a deep breath, resting my head on anya's shoulder as I do so.
"Fáradt? Délben? Egy szép nyári napon? (Tired? At noon? On a lovely summer day?)" Anya says as she *lets* me do this.
"Túrázni akartam a tó körül. Nem úszni benne. (I wanted to go hiking around the lake. Not swimming in it.)" I respond, lamenting how the day is currently going. "Akkor legalább lenne árnyékunk. (At least then we'd have some shade.)" Anya chuckles again, formulating her own response to what I said. "Nos, néha az élet nem egészen úgy alakul, ahogy szeretnéd. Csak az számít, hogy mit teszünk, ha nem. (Well, sometimes, life doesn't exactly go the way you want it to. What matters is what we do when it doesn't.)" She finally says, looking back out at the lake towards Met, Rose and ápa. Rose's parents finally arrive, getting in the water as soon as they take off their shoes. Then Met turns back to face us on the shore.

"STOP STALLING!" He shouts.
"WHAT HE SAID!" Rose follows, itself being chased by the sound of ápa's voice.
"May as well get in, virágom." He says, laughing as he watches Met hit Rose in the face with a stream of water form a super soaker.
"Menj. Ne várakoztasd meg őket. Úgy tűnik, apád már megvert ott. (Go. Don't keep them waiting. Looks like your father has already beat you there.)" I look out at the lake and see that ápa has indeed gotten in the water, throwing a football at Met, who catches it easily. Guess I have to get in now, don't I? I stand up, immediately regretting the decision as the sand starts burning the soles of my feet as I start walking. I make it quick, not wanting to be in the sun for too long. Within a few seconds, I reach the water and step in. Sokkal menőbb. (Much cooler.) I briefly turn back to see anya, but she's moved. Presumably getting in the lake not too far from me, judging by the sound of her voice mixed with ápa's. Then I feel someone's arm come on my shoulder. I turn around and get greeted by a peck on the cheek from Rose.
"Took you long enough. Come on. Let's go deeper." She says, dragging me deeper and deeper in until it's up to our waists. Then she shoves me, at which point I start swimming. In between catching my breath and being splashed by Met, I catch glimpses of ápa and anya with Rose's parents, all four looking at us with broad smiles of their faces.

I snap back to reality from that memory. I'm sat on the couch in my little Bronx apartment. It's not June. It's late October. It's not noon. It's nine in the morning. And it's not 2016. It's 2025. I stand up, noticing the cup of coffee that's on the table. Then my phone. It's on a photo. One of me and anya... At Sacandanga Lake... Two months before...

I find myself tearing up looking at the picture. It's too much to take in. I quickly swipe off it before I really start crying. Talking about her last night with Gold City is still fresh on my mind. I don't... Nincs szükségem több emlékeztetőre. (I don't need anymore reminders.) As I switch off the photos app, I get a text from Randy.

'Me and you. Friday morning. You choose the location.' He asks. Seems important.
'Uh... Okay. I can do that.' I respond, waiting for his. But it doesn't come. He just puts a thumbs up on my message. This is going to be... one interesting conversation.

Chapter 20: Chute de la Dame Blanche

Chapter Summary

The 23rd arrives, and both women feel their nerves flaring for one singular reason: Kati will need to see Gold City in Brouillard's piece. The thought has been weighing down on both of them, and when night comes, they both realize that things between them could potentially be far more than either woman could have anticipated.

Chapter Notes

Art by r1kaluri and Preface Grim

|-Wednesday evening. 38th Sixth Apartments, 38 6th Avenue, Brooklyn, New York-|

"Lay down your souls to the gods rock 'n' roll"
"Metal ten fold through the deadly black hole"
"Riding Hell's stallions bareback and free"
"Taking our chances with raw energy"

I cut the music off there. On the one hand, I hate pausin in the middle of a song. One the other… I'm not repeatin that blunder back in June. Ancora non riesco a credere che ho scopato così. (Still can't believe I fucked up like that.) Sun's finally dipped below the horizon as I make my way into the building. Mark and Jessica are on the sixth floor, so I head to the elevator and punch the button that takes me up, waiting a few seconds since it apparently already has passengers in it. Chỉ là may mắn của tôi. (Just my luck.) The doors open and I step in, punchin the button for the sixth floor and feel it jolt to life as I start to head up the building. Only takes a few seconds for me to reach my destination. Well, "*destination*". Still need to get to their apartment. 6H. Just down this hall.

My footsteps echo off the walls more than they should as I look at all the Halloween decorations. Love this time of year. Everyone gets spooky and they won't judge you for it. You can watch horror movies every night and no one will think you're a psychopath. Hard to do that any other time. A few more seconds of walkin and I'm at their door, knockin hard so that they can hear me. It's Mark that answers first, though he does it *without* openin the door. Mona. (Pussy.)

"Passa parola, per favore. (Password, please.)" I hear from the other side. So he thinks he can be sly, huh?
"Butto giù questa porta se non la apri, Mark. (I'll kick this door down if you don't open it, Mark.)" I respond, not really in the mood for jokes. Not that this Sicilian asshole cares all that much.
"Se la memoria serve: quella non è la passa parola. (If my memory serves; That is not the password.)" I hear, followed by someone's footsteps behind Mark. Jessica, naturally.
"I'm not much of a fan of this game, Mark. I think it's best if you go and open the door, aye?" I hear

her say as the latches click.
"Anythin for your woman, huh?" I reply smugly, knowin that Jess didn't *intend* to be on my side this time. The door swings open and Mark is as red as the tomatoes he uses to make his lasagna. Questo lo dovaria insegnar al so culo siciliano. (That should teach his Sicilian ass.)
"You're a real dick, ya know dat?" He says as he steps out of my way. Is he tryin to intimidate me? Because he knows that won't work. I'm 6'10". He's 5'9". We've been over this many times. Doesn't matter as he then turns to where the kitchen is. "An' don't tink you're safe from this either, Jessica."

I walk into the small apartment and immediately take notice that someone is missin. Someone that I thought would be here before me.
"Is Kati late?" I say, knowin that this really isn't like her. Jessica comes from the kitchen, smellin like she just walked straight out of a pizzeria in Palermo.
"She says something's popped up. Won't be able to make it." She says as she looks up at me. How has she not hurt her neck doin that?
"Is it *that* important?" I then ask, wantin to know some more.
"From da sounds of it, yeah, seein' as it was Gold City who swiped her tonight." Mark interjects as he then heads into the kitchen, shoutin his next words out. "Wouldn't be surprised if it's got sumthin' ta do wiv dat fashun show tomow' night." Coreto... (Right…) She did mention that the other day. Guess her little muse is havin some second thoughts about it. Or maybe Kati is and Gold City picked up on it. She seems like the observational sort like I am.
"Hmm… Interestin. Speakin of those two…" I decide to bring this up. I don't know if Mark or Jessica have met her yet, but I'm about to find out. "Have either of you *met* Gold City yet?" Jessica lights up like a damn beacon.
"Oh aye!" She starts, jumpin as she does so. "About a week back, I reckon. It was meant to be just me and Kati, but Mark decided to tag along, see, since he had the day off."
"Oh yeah, you did. Fannullone pigro. (Lazy slackass.)" I say as my eyes drift towards him.
"You oughta grab a manager slot, Met. It'll do ya wonders, ya hear?" Mark responds, that Brooklyn accent of his *really* comin out in force. I say that like it doesn't already. "But yeah. We wuz walkin' down by Union Square when we lost Kati. Started lookin' an' found her apparently gettin' City out of a dicey situation."
"I wouldn't be callin' it *dicey*, now. More like havin' to let down a grand fan of hers." Jessica adds before Mark speaks up again.
"Yeah, dat. Whaddya askin'? *You* meet her or sumthin'?" Mark says as he glares at me.

"Around the same time. Maybe a few days earlier. Did you notice anythin *odd* with how they interacted with each other?" I say, gettin the question out now so that it doesn't get awkward later. Mark and Jessica just look at each other. Neither one of them really wants to answer first, but *someone* has to. Sarà che toca a mi 'n'altro volta. (Guess it'll have to be me again.) "Any weird looks between the two of them? Stares that go on a bit too long? Hands that look like they're gonna start wanderin if nobody's lookin?" That seems to get the gears turnin in their heads. Mark then looks back to me after a few seconds, an idea clearly in his head.
"Now dat you went an' said it, yeah. Kati couldn't even look Gold City in da eyes. Den again, this is *Kati* we talkin' 'bout. We know how she gets 'round ladies like Gold City." He says. Mark's only statin the obvious. And Jessica will only pick up on it *now* after I've mentioned it. Once again, people aren't seein what I am.
"I think it's mutual, this time." I say as we hear the timer go off. Pizza must be done. Mark seems to think the same thing as he rushes into he kitchen, followed by the sounds of him pullin somethin out of the oven. Jessica then walks over to me, her soft footfalls remindin me that I still have my shoes on. So I take them off as she talks to me.
"D'ye think Gold City's got a soft spot for Kati? Maybe that's why she's workin' alongside her…" She says as I set my shoes down by the door.

"Nah, I think it started *after* the two met back in June. Gold City's got that look of someone who feels guilt over their attraction. Like it's somethin she views as bein wrong." I say as the scent of freshly made Sicilian pizza wafts through the room.
"I dunno, Met. Gold City's a pro model. Ain't it kinda messed up for her ta be gettin' with her photographer or manager?" Mark says as he brings the pizza into the dinin area. He then heads back into the kitchen, presumably to grab another pie, all while keepin his end of the conversation goin. "I'm jus' sayin'. Dat feels like a psych gettin' busy wit dey patients."
"Không nơi nào gần mức độ cấm kỵ đó. (Nowhere near that level of taboo.) Not as bad. Besides, I've read a lot of news articles about models hookin up with their camera people and managers. But Gold City and Kati?" I pause for a split second so I can get as much of that scent into my nose. Smells pretty damn good. "Non lo so. (I don't know) This *feels* different somehow. Can't quite explain it."

Mark cuts the pies and I waltz over to grab a slice. Margherita and pepperoni. Not bad choices, honestly. Though I do want to know what possessed a *Sicilian* to make somethin that's *Neapolitan*. But that's for another day. I grab my slices and head over to the table, sittin down as Mark and Jessica flank me. No me pias questo. (I don't like this.) It's too empty without Kati. But that doesn't stop our conversation.
"Ya really tink Gold City's got a thing fer Kati? 'Cause I didn't see nuttin' suggestin' dat when me an' Jessica ran into 'er." Mark says as he starts eatin like the slob that he is. *Still* don't know how Jessica thinks this man is attractive with that mullet and damn cop stache on his face. Not to mention the Mötley Crüe shirt he's got on right now. Jesus dude… Lấy một gợi ý chết tiệt. (Take a damn hint.) I quickly look down at my own shirt: Demolition Hammer. Actual *good* music. Then I look back up at Mark before shiftin my attention to Jessica.
"Maybe she does. Maybe she doesn't. All I know is that my gut hasn't been wrong yet. No reason to start doubtin it now." I say as I take a bite, letting that savory taste and juicy tomato sauce hit my tongue. I really hate to give credit to a bunch of southerners, but god damn Neapolitans *do* know how to make a good pizza. I look over at Jessica as she swallows, wipin her mouth off with a napkin before she speaks.
"I mean, it *was* Met who suggested I stay with ye. And we know fine well where that led us." She says as she gives Mark this lovey-dovey look that makes my stomach churn. She then looks back to me as she sets down her slice. "But do ye think a bit of a thing between Kati and Gold City might work? She won't be stayin' here in New York forever, now."
"Time's the *only* thing that can answer that question. And from the looks of it, our model friend is havin a little battle with her own mind." I start sayin and I take another bite. Pepperoni is pretty good. Guess Mark went to a meat ship to get the slices.
"Whaddya mean by dat?" I hear the Sicilian ask. Guess I can give him an answer.
"Gold City's got the look of someone who was sure they were straight. Then she met Kati, and is now havin to second guess her *entire life*." I say as I go to finish one slice. I quickly chew and then swallow before I start speakin again. "It's doin a number on her. But she's… I don't know. She looks to be doin a lot better than you'd expect. Still, wouldn't wish that kind of thing on anyone. Tryin to piece together if you felt that same kind of attraction to other women in the past. Havin to revaluate how you feel around your friends. Seems like hell."
"An' you look like de kinda person who gets dat whole dilemma, ya know? Bein' trans an' all dat." Mark responds as he stands to get himself another slice or two.
"No, not really. Gender dysphoria and figurin out your sexuality are two *very* different experiences. Only thing that ties me and Gold City together is the fact that it makes us both queer. That's about it." I say as Mark sits back down, eyes goin from me to his pizza. I then sigh, thinkin about my next words carefully. I don't want to trip up. Any friend of Kati's is a friend of mine. That's my philosophy. But with all this… It's gonna make things a little difficult, and frankly, I *don't* want

that. Gold City is an extremely nice woman. She seems like the kind and carin sort under that up front coldness. And I do understand why she puts on that facade. Seems like a kind of defense. And given her line of work? Can't say I really blame her. Hmm… Think I'm startin to understand why she feels attracted to Kati now: Kati doesn't see a livin mannequin. She sees a *person*. Someone who is worth respect simply because *they are*. Come to think of it, maybe that's why Kati stuck around with me for so long. Sẽkhông ngạc nhiên. (Wouldn't be surprised.)

I stand up, headin over to the cabinets to get a glass. I get one in my hand and walk over to the sink, pourin water into the cup before headin back to sit down, where I then reach into my bag and take out my HRT. I tap three of the little pills into my hand and down them, swallowin hard to make sure that testosterone enters my system. I then take a deep breath, still tryin to figure out what my next words will be.
"Gold City… bein a model ain't easy. She's got this reputation back in Japan. *Very* difficult to work with. Never really bothered with formin a bond with the photographers she worked with. Yet with Kati…" I start, piecin the puzzle together as I go. Seems Mark and Jessica are startin to get the picture too.
"She trusts 'er. Tink I'm startin' ta see where you're goin' with this, Met. Still, would dat even work? Dey got two *real diff'rent* personalities." Mark says as Jessica still thinks about what she's goin to say. But she doesn't say anythin. Seems Mark took the words out of her mouth. Bastardo astuto. (Sly bastard.)
"You say that when she's stuck around me for twenty years." I respond, gaugin Mark's reaction. Seems I hit the right spot.
"Yeah, so whatah I'm sayin' is… Look, Met, I didn't… Ya know whatah I meant." He fumbles, tryin to course correct but clearly failin. And Jessica isn't helpin his case, seein as how she's tryin not to laugh at his expense.
"Aye, well, when ye put it *like that*, then." She says, still laughin slightly as the words come out. This is gonna be one *interestin* night.

It's almost ten and I have work in the mornin. So I need to head back to the Bronx. But not before one last little nugget of information.
"Aw shit! I awm'st forgot." I hear Mark blurt out as he comes running to the front door just as I get my shoes on.
"What? What is it?" I say as he reaches me, hands behind his back like he's about to fuck with me. I swear, if he flashes me with his phone camera again… El xe un morto. (He's a dead man.)

"Dis." He says, pullin his hand out from his back and presentin me with… a ticket.? For what? I get my answer almost immediately. "It's fer dat fashion show tomorrow nite. Jess got one fer evry one o' us." That's when I notice that there's only three in his hand.
"What about Kati?" I ask, feelin a bit irritated that she didn't get one for *my best friend*.
"She's already got one, so she has. A grand seat too, from what she's telling me. We're practically up in the rafters." Jessica says as she lounges on the sofa. Right… She *would* get one for free… And it *would* be in a good spot. Damn… Maybe *I* should get into fashion photography. I'd have one helluva teacher. But then Jessica goes and says somethin that blind sides me. "Here's hopin' she can sneak the three of us backstage, so we can all see Gold City together, lovely as that."

Tôi- Cái Gì- Không. Chỉ, không. (I- What- No. Just no.) So par sicuro che łe parołe "scónderse indriołe cuinte" no łe xe vegnùe fora dała so boca. (I know for a fact that the words "sneak backstage" did not just come out of her mouth.) Cô ấy có điên không?! (Is she crazy?!) No la pol esser seria. (She can't be serious.)

"I- Are you- You're absolutely fuckin delusional if you think you can get someone as big as me behind *any* stage without bein spotted." I start sayin, still tryin to process the fuckery I just heard come out of Jessica's mouth.
"Aw, c'mon Met. It ain't *dat* hard, is it?" Mark retorts with that annoyin Sicilian charm of his.
"Motherfucker- I am *an uma who is* ***transgender***. And this is without mentionin that as a *derstrier*, I am *six feet and ten inches tall*. People are gonna notice." I respond, not wantin *anythin* to do with this plan.
"We'll be jus' fine. You worry too much, ya know dat?" Mark retorts, once again with that annoyin charm of his. I hate it so much. Siciliani e le loro stronzate pompose. (Sicilians and their pompous bullshit.)
"You know what? No. I'm gonna leave this shit to you two. I'm goin home." I say as I walk out the door, down the hallway and into the elevator. Within a few seconds, I'm on the ground floor, walkin out of the building while reachin into my pocket. I pull out a fat joint. Great way to get rid of some stress after a long day of bullsh-

Cazzo. (Fuck.) Tôi để bật lửa trên bàn cà phê của họ. (I left my lighter on their coffee table.)

|-That same evening. Noonan Towers, 939 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx-|

I'm nervous. Far more than I anticipated. Far more than I should be. I've done fashion shows before. I've given performances while in a piece before as well. This *shouldn't* be flustering me as much as it currently is. Et pourtant... Voici. (And yet… Here we are.) The smell of salmon permeates the air as Kati opens the oven. Seems like dinner for tonight is finished. I hear silverware clatter as she sets the table for two, then she speaks up.
"Okay. Should be ready. I just… Hope I didn't over cook the fish." She says, nerves tinging every aspect of her voice, something that makes my heart skip a beat for a millisecond. Dō? Kanojo wa dōyatte sonna ni raku ni sore o suru no desu ka? (How? How does she do it so effortlessly?) I stand from her meager sofa and sit at the table, watching as she sits across from me. With how small it is, one could mistake this as a more… intimate affair when the reality is quite different. I look down at my plate: Salmon with some lemon and asparagus, not bad. Smells quite nice. I take my fork and cut into the salmon, noting how tender it is. Pas de meilleurs moments comme le présent. (No better time than the present.)

I separate the small division from the rest of the fish and bring my fork to my mouth. I can tell immediately that it is cooked perfectly once it hits my tongue. Hmm… Maybe Victor could learn a thing or two. But that's for another day.
"So… What's wrong, City?" I hear Kati ask, accurately pinpointing why it is I am here. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"
"No… Well, maybe. But I'm not pulling out of the show. It's too late for that. I just…" I stare at the wall behind Kati, not really sure what to think. "I don't know. Just nervous, I suppose."
"You? Nervous? That seems like a oxymoron." She responds sarcastically, something that once again makes my heart skip a beat. But Kati's tone quickly becomes serious and understanding.
"Maybe… Maybe it's because this is the first major runway you've done outside of Japan. I don't… I don't really know what your past schedule looks like so I could be wrong." It gives me a second to think. Ever since my full commitment back into modeling after graduation, I haven't really done fashion shows all that much. The only ones that really come to mind were all in Tokyo. Maybe Kati has a point. Maybe *that* is why I feel so nervous. But I know that it isn't. At least, it doesn't explain it entirely. I *know* the true reason:

She'll have to see me in that dress.

That thought alone has kept me from a proper night's sleep ever since Monday. And I know it won't get better. Not if I continue to ignore the elephant in the room. It's a funny thing, sexuality. Omoshiroi to *meiwaku* na koto. (A funny and *annoying* thing.) I find it funny because of how suddenly this has happened. Never did I think I would ever have to question something that seemed so trivial up until now. But in that same breath, it's annoying because of how much stress it has been putting me through. Every time my mind wanders, the little oni and wendigo appear on either shoulder. Taunting me. *Insulting* me. Goddesses how I hate it. I wish accepting that I am bisexual wasn't such a Herculean task. I wish that I could just come to terms with this. Come to terms with… No. I can't. Not… Not in a moment like this. So instead I'll bite the pain. Comme je l'ai fait depuis juin. (Like I have done since June.) Bite the pain and suffer in silence. Then I hear Kati speak up again.

"You know, I was supposed to head down to Brooklyn and spend some time with friends tonight, but well…" She starts trailing off, making me feel guilt for apparently ruining her plans.
"Oh, I… I'm sorry. I didn't-" I start, but she cuts me off before I can continue.
"No, it's okay, City. This seemed important so, we're here now. I just hope that it can help." She says, the sincerity in her voice providing a soothing counterbalance to whatever guilt I may feel right now. I… I think I need it, honestly. "You know, you said that you would lend a shoulder if I ever needed one and… I wanna do the same."
"That's very kind of you, Kati. Thanks." I say, looking down at my plate to try and hide the blush that is creeping upon my skin. Makes me wish I wasn't so pale. Je pourrais le cacher beaucoup plus facilement. (I could hide it a lot easier.) We continue to eat in relative silence, speaking up occasionally about things we think the other might find interesting. But the conversations never really last. I'd usually be off-put by that, but with Kati… I'm not. That is both relaxing and stressful. Relaxing because it shows how much I trust her. Stressful… well, the topic of sexuality comes back to my mind when I think about that.

"You know, for someone raised in a mostly bilingual household, you don't really have much of an accent." I hear Kati then say. It gets my ears standing straight up. This is… well, I guess I can explain the subject.
"I don't see why it's much of an issue." I say in response, not particularly wanting to talk about something so mundane, but this is something that does bother me to some extent. "I mean, I spent ten years in a Canadian town speaking a mix of French and Japanese at home while everyone else around me really only knew English. Then I moved back to Japan with my mother after she and Père divorced."
"And that explains the lack of accent how exactly?" Kati retorts, tone unshifting from her previous statement.
"Well, my mother was friends with an American girl from California. San Diego, I think. Her father was in the military and was stationed in Japan for about ten years. My mother learned most of her English from her." I respond, hoping that ends this conversation. But I know it won't. And I also know that I won't stop Kati from prodding.
"So I take it your mother doesn't have much of an accent either? Or, maybe more of a SoCal accent I guess." She says, but then the thought returns. "Wait, that still doesn't explain… Nevermind, stupid question." She stops herself before she can continue. But then a new thought comes to her.
"I… Does *everyone* ask you this?"
"Subete no ima shite, hai. (Every now and then, yes.) But it doesn't bother me all that much." I say, wanting this to end. But it doesn't. Old thoughts and feelings come back to me against my will. And this time, I don't think I can keep them form bursting out. "Actually, no. I take that back. It *does* bother me when people ask that." My eyes dart back and forth around Kati's apartment before they settle on her. She looks defeated, guilty even. Like someone who wishes that they didn't exist in this moment. "I'm not mad at you, Kati. Hell, I don't think I have it in me to be mad at you. I

just…"
"Does… Does this go back to… you not feeling like you're seen as a person?"

Kati… This poor girl… Always hitting the nail on the head without knowing it… Qu'ai-je fait pour que tu entres dans ma vie? (What did I do to have you come into my life?)

"I guess it can. I certainly won't stop you from seeing it that way. The whole 'tsundere' act and this lack of an accent… Sometimes it makes me wish I never returned to modeling full-time. I thought that by going to Tracen I'd be able to be seen as something other than a pretty face, but when the requests and advertising agencies kept writing to me, I just… Wakaranai. (I don't know.)" I start saying, hoping that I can somehow get *some* kind of point across. And it seems to work. A little bit. Sometimes Kati's expressions can be difficult to read.
"Have you ever considered retiring? Maybe finding another outlet for yourself?" She asks before immediately apologizing. "Sajnálom. (I'm sorry.) I… I shouldn't be giving you advice like that. We've only known each other for four months. It… It's not my place."
"Maybe it is…" I say, mostly under my breath but I think it was loud enough for her to hear it. "You've grown quite a lot on me in just four months. After all, you're one of only a handful of people who really *sees* me. *Understands* me. I don't have to be so defensive with you. I feel like I can be myself around you." I pause briefly before continuing. "I'm open to suggestions if you have any." Kati's face flushes read after hearing those words. I don't think she was prepared for a statement like that. She quickly takes a deep breath, then another when it becomes clear the first didn't get her the results she was looking for.

"I, uh… I… It *really* isn't my place to do that. I… I don't live your life. Frankly, I don't think I *want* to." Kati finally replies after a solid two minutes of thought. "I don't think I could manage all that stress. I'm barely keeping it together right now. I… Never expected people to latch onto me like this." "Then I guess we can both learn something. Mutual exchange, if you will." I respond, blush returning to my face slightly, though I doubt Kati will be able to see it since her head is tilted down, pinning her eyes to her small kitchen table. "I show you ways that I manage my stress from this profession and maybe… Maybe you can show me something that isn't modeling here in New York that I can latch onto when I return to Japan."

That leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It's eight, soon to be seven months away. But I've already grown so close to Kati that it'll be hard to go about life without her being a constant presence. I've already told myself that if nothing comes out of this attraction that I still want to have her in my life as a friend, but… With how things are currently going… Comment je me sens quand je suis avec elle... (How I feel when I'm with her…) Do I even *want* to leave New York? Do I *want* to return to Japan and leave behind someone who has been nothing but kind, caring and oh so understanding.

I don't think that I do.

But I have seven months to think about it. Seven long months to mull it over, guess and second guess myself. I can only imagine the things that Kati must be thinking. How she rationalizes everything that happens with us. I wonder: Does she *notice* those long glances I give her? Does she see every time she makes me blush? Tashika ni kanojo wa migi, suru hitsuyō ga arimasu ka? (Surely she has to, right?)

buzz
buzz
buzz

I don't get much time to ruminate on those thoughts as me and Kati both hear her phone go off. Someone is texting her. Could be Randy, wanting to see if she's okay about tomorrow night. Possibly asking about me as well since I told him I would be here. Could also be one of her friends asking her where she is tonight since she *did* have other plans before I came over. Quels étaient leurs noms ànouveau? (What were their names again?) I know Met. He is simply and outright unforgettable. No way in hell you could miss him in a crowd. But the other two… Mark and Jessica.? That *sounds* right. I feel bad for forgetting something like that so quickly. But they seemed nice when I met them. Jessica is remarkably kind and reliable while Mark… Well he's rather blunt and honest but that doesn't seem to stop him from caring. Good people to have as friends, I'd say. I watch as Kati stands and goes over to her coffee table and pick up her phone, looking at the message, seemingly recognizing who sent it.
"One of your friends? Or is it Randy?" I ask, wanting this tension to melt away.
"Uh, no. It's ápa." Kati responds, eyes never leaving the screen of her phone. "He's just wishing me luck for tomorrow. Not that it matters. I can't… bring my camera to take any pictures." Oh right, I had forgotten about that.
"Did you ever learn *why* outside photography is barred?" I then ask, still unsure why that rule is in place.
"Nem. (No.) Never found out anything. Neither could Randy." She says as she sets her phone down again.She then turns to face me, the tan skin on her face flush with color as her eyes do everything then can to *not* connect with mine. "You… feeling any better about tomorrow?"
"A little bit. We won't have much to do during the day, so I'm not opposed to another outing if you're open to the idea." I answer, taking a deep breath before I continue. "Maybe we could even start finding me some other interests. I *certainly* wouldn't mind that." Kati turns an even deeper shade of red as she processes those words. I'm leaving it up to her to find something that might interest me. For all intents and purposes: My future is in her hands. And frankly, I don't think there is anyone I trust with my future more than Kati Jacobs in this moment. I then pull my own phone out of my pocket and look at the time. Ten thirty in the evening. I suppose all good things must come to an end.

I sigh before looking back up at Kati.
"I should head home. It's getting late and I want to be rested for tomorrow night." I say as I start making my way towards to door. It's silent. And tense. I almost *don't want to leave* but I know that I have to. There's not much of a choice to be made here. I slip my shoes on and take my car keys of the little rack Kati has set up for her own. I then open the door, but turn back briefly before I step through.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I say, noticing that her blush is still there.
"I… yeah. See you tomorrow." She says as I leave her apartment. I *long* day ahead of me tomorrow. And an even longer night.

|-Thursday morning. Flatiron Building, 175 5th Avenue, Manhattan-|

I can't stand havin' to wear a necktie. But from what I'm hearin', we're fixin' to need at least somethin' semi-formal tonight. So I reckon I best get used to it. Ain't no helpin' none with *her* yappin' in my ear on this video call she went and forced on me this mornin'.
"I thought you said the show wasn't until tonight, Randy. Why are you-" I cut her plumb off 'fore she could even finish her question.
"The dress code tonight is apparently 'semi-formal' to 'formal', though all men need to be wearing neckties. I want to make sure I get this on right." I say as I finally get it fixed up right. I give it a tug, then loosen it just enough to slide it off without undoing the knot I just tied. I ain't in the mood to do this all over again. "I hate these things."

"I can tell. You were at it for twenty minutes." She says, havin' a good ol' laugh. Thinks she's a hoot, does she? "So what's in two hours? You said you couldn't be here for long."
"For all of the models participating, the managers need to have a meeting at around one in the afternoon today. It is currently half past eight." I say as I put the tie with the rest of my suit, just takin' a minute to catch my breath and get my head straight. Reckon it's mighty important in my line of work. "We need to finalizing who's going when on the runway. You know that three of the models showcased tonight have special performances based on their piece, right?"
"I did not know that second part. I'm assuming there's a livestream I can watch?" She then goes and asks. Did she really not know 'bout them performances?
"Uh, there should be. Straight to the Gershwin's channel on UmaTube. Runway is at seven. The special performances are at eight." I start, fixin' to let the cat out of the bag. But she beats me to it.
"Awesome. Can't wait to see what Shichi's wearing, and I know her performance will be good too." She syas, and I'm standin' there plumb baffled.
"How'd you-" I start to say, but she cuts me off right quick. Guess that's just what goes around comes around.
"She told me not too long after finding out. I've been meaning to ask, how has Shichi been doing? Has she taken to New York well? I can't speak for her, but I like to think I acclimated myself to Cary pretty quickly." I hear her ask. Reckon that makes sense, 'cause they're tight. Still, I'm plumb surprised she didn't just ask City herself.
"Well, first off, you should've asked *her* that." I say, makin' sure we're on the same page 'fore I get goin'. "But City is doing *very well* for herself. I thought she would need more time to get past the jet lag afte touching down at JFK, but she was already giving *me* suggestions for photographers only a day after she arrived. Two days after that we make our decision and then we went into Yorkville to meet Kati a few days after that." I say, lookin' back on how quick City got used to bein' in Gotham. It's plumb eerie, now that I'm thinkin' on it.
"Really? All that in, what, two weeks?I knew Shichi was adaptable but damn…" I hear her say. Always a hoot gettin' a few choice words out of her.

By now, I got my good shirt on and I'm grabbin' my jacket. I'm fixin' to head out, but I got a few more things to say first.
"Alright, leaving in a few. Want to scout out some more locations for future shoots before I make my way to the Gershwin." I say, standin' here watchin' her head jerk right back to that phone to look at me.
"Really? Well, then don't let me stop yo-" I go 'head and cut her off again just so she can hear what I'm fixin' to say.
"You're not keeping me from anything, Palmer. I just need to know your availability for Halloween." I say, seein' her look plumb confused. Palmer doesn't say a word, though, so I just keep on talkin'. "Fox had to bail. Her cousin is getting married in Frankfurt on the first so she'll be in Germany that whole week. Can you fill in for her?"
"I, uh… yeah, I can do that." Palmer says. Think she's fixin' to break a sweat.
"Don't get cold feet on me. And *definitely* don't get cold feet on Helios. She won't appreciate her best friend flaking on her." I tell her, just makin' sure she's got this handled.
"Me? Flaking on Helios? No. *Never*. You and her can count on me, Randy. I'll send the photos when I get them processed." Palmer says as she hangs up the phone, so to speak. With that, I head on out of my apartment and hit the streets of Manhattan. First stop: The Empire State Building. Reckon it's a fine spot for a set of New Year's pictures. I always like to get my ducks in a row ahead of time.

I'm drivin' up 5th Avenue, and I end up pullin' up right in front of the most famous buildin' in the whole wide world. I park my car right next to it on the street and head on inside. I ain't even through the door 'fore one of the folks workin' there recognizes me.

"You must be Mr. Jenkins, correct?" She asks me, lookin' me up and down like she just can't believe her own eyes.
"What were you expecting? Some hipster, bougie bastard in his thirties with a man-bun? Yes, I'm Randy Jenkins. I assume you're Halloway?" I ask her back, watchin' her eyes fix right on me.
"Yes. Riley Halloway. The head of staff saw your email last week and was intrigued by the idea. So I'm here to maybe help out with it. See what we can do." Hallow starts up right quick as she swings the door open for me. "You're interested in the 102nd floor observation deck for your photo shoot, correct? Odd that you're already thinking about New Year's when we still haven't reached Halloween." "I like planning ahead." I holler back, letting Halloway know what I'm up to as I head into the building. We fixin' to catch the first elevator, and it comes down quick as can be. Don't hardly gotta wait none, seein' as how I'm the first one in.
"We don't usually let visitors up to the top observation deck so early, but given what it is you're asking to use it for, I believe we can make an exception." Halloway says as we head up to the fifth floor, stepping out so we can trek further in to find an elevator to take us even higher up.
"I've noticed. I came in pretty much as soon as you opened the building to tourists. Wanted to get here sooner but a friend had some different plans." I say, grabbin' my phone quick to check the time. Nine fifteen. Ain't too bad. Reckon I can get this knocked out fast. Best to get some observations down 'fore we do a real deep dive.
"I see. I also heard through the grapevine that you're on a tight schedule today. Something about a fashion show at the Gershwin later tonight. I suppose managers like you need to be there early to discuss layouts and plans for the evening." Halloway's spittin' straight facts. My face tells her everything she needs to know. She knows she hit the nail right on the head. "I'll try to keep things brief then. Wouldn't want to take up too much of your time."

"Hmm… East should be… *this* way. Good." I say to myself, just lookin' at where that sunlight is pourin' in. Yep. I'm fixin' to have some ideas. That's a good sign. Means I've found us a mighty fine spot. Reckon Halloway sees it too.
"Already getting ideas? I like that. Having your model face east to symbolize the new year coming in. Not a bad position." She's fixin' to agree with what I'm thinkin'. I'll need to sit down with City and Kati to hammer out the details, but I can hold off on that 'til Christmas time. For now, I best be headin' over to the Gershwin. I pull out my phone again to check the time. Nine forty-five. Hmm… Got a whole heap of time to kill.
"Well. That's all I wanted for right now. My apologies for being brief." I say as I head back to the elevator. Halloway don't seem to mind none, though.
"No apologies needed, Mr. Jenkins. You're a busy man. I do hope to see you again soon so that you can get a better idea of what you're wanting to see come December." She says 'fore she turns back to them big glass panes, lookin' out over Manhattan below as them elevator doors shut. It's a blur, truth be told. One minute I'm perched atop the Empire State Building and the next I'm down on the streets. Reckon I better get a move on. And get me some grub. I'm plumb famished. Never a good idea to skip breakfast.

I hop in my car and head out. I know a little spot that oughtta be right down the road from the Gershwin. Just a small bagel place. Ain't a bad idea. Won't take me long to get there, neither. Just a few minutes. Ain't too bad for a Thursday morning in Manhattan. I pull up, hop out, and head on inside real quick to the counter. I already took a look at the menu, so I know *exactly* what I'm fixin' to get.
"Good morning. I'll have a bacon, egg and cheese breakfast sandwich with black coffee if it's not too much to ask for." I tell 'em and the cashier scribbles it down right quick. She tells me the damage, I hand over the cash, and then I'm sittin' down with my coffee. I reach into my bad and pull out my laptop, lookin' to go over a few more things before I head on over to the Gershwin.

Shoot schedule, who we're workin' with, those magazine deals - just the usual stuff. Then I start lookin' back at our old shoots, really checkin' out Kati's work. She just *knows* what she's doin'. It's eerie. I knew she was somethin' else when City sent me back her own list of folks to call, and her name was right there at the top. All that hard work… Makes me wish I'd had someone like Kati in my corner when I wa first startin' out. Reckon it would've made them first few years a whole lot easier. Wouldn't have to be so hard on myself over every little thing. But enough talkin' 'bout that. Let me get down to brass tracks on what's comin'. Our first shoot after Halloween is gonna be down at Lincoln Park over in Jeresy City. Lydia's fixin' to make somethin' real nice for folks like Gold City, so I'm gonna jot this down real quick:
'Give Lydia a call'

Next up, we gotta figure out them lenses. A panorama might look purty good. Got that fountain all squared up. City sittin' right under it. Ain't a bad id-
"Here's your sandwhich, sir. Have a great day." A runner says as he hands me my sandwich. I thank him and take a lil' bite just to see how it tastes. Ain't bad. I take another one 'fore I get back to where I was at. Right. Lenses. Panoramic shot. Gold City sat right there under that fountain. That'll do for a starter. The nitty-gritty… Low and close shots lookin' up, with that fountain hangin' over Gold City. She's gonna love that one. I reckon Kati will, too. Them seem real fond of them close-up shots. Got me wonderin' why… Nah. Ain't gonna go there. Best to just mind my own beeswax.

I finish up my food and drink the last of my coffee, tuckin' my laptop back in my bag after I toss my trash. I pull my phone out again. Eleven-fifteen. Still got a bit of time to kill, though I ain't sure what
I'm gonna through with it. I might head over to the Gershwin now. Reckon I ought to make sure all of Gols City's clothes are squared away. I'll give Brouillard's piece a quick look-see. Might even holler at him to see if he's actin' all fidgety if he's already there.

…
…
…
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That ain't a bad idea.

I head out of the place just as quick as I came in and hop in my car, fixin' to head down the road toward the Gershwin. Before long, I'm there, and as luck would have it, Brouillard's there too. I step out and he spots me, hollerin' for me to come on over. So I do, seein' a big ol' grin on his weathered face.
"Ah, Monsieur Jenkins. I see you have come early today as well." He says, givin' me a friendly greetin'.
"Well, I had a lot of time to spare so I thought I'd come up earlier than needed. Managers all have a meeting at around one this afternoon to discuss line-ups. And *three* of us need to figure out wat the performance order is." I tell him as we head into the theater. Out footsteps echo a mite as we make our way down to the stage, trekkin' up those old steps to get to the back.
"Interessant. (Ineresting.) Very interesting. I'm hoping Madame City is the last performance. End the night properly and so forth." Brouillard responds when we finally get backstage. He leads me over to where that dress is hangin', and I can see right quick that he has made some changes: a slimmer waist, a bit more room in the bust, and the hem's shorter so she won't trip in them heels he's got her wearin'. Reckin he took her critiquin' just fine. Good. just what I was hopin' to see.
"Hmm… You're quite the astute listener, Brouillard." I say as I turn to face him. That grin of his

says it all. He's fixin' to see it on the runway. And he's *mighty* eager to see that performance. And that energy… well, it's just catchin'.

|-That same morning. The Met Cloisters, 99 Margaret Corbin Drive-|

"An art museum? Certainly an *interesting* choice. Never really considered myself an artist but I'm willing to see why you think I'd like this place." Gold says as I park my car. This medieval art museum wasn't my first choice. Not even at the top of my list. But… It seemed the most promising. Bármilyen okból. (For whatever reason.) Maybe… Just *maybe* there's something here that can turn some gears in her head. I unbuckle my seatbelt and step out of my car, listening as she does the same thing.
"I'll take that as a compliment." I say as I meet her on the sidewalk. "Ready?"
"Always. Come on." Gold says as she starts walking, heels clicking away on the pathway as we make our way to the entrance of the museum. Immediately, she stops, taking notice of how the building is designed.
"It looks… It looks like an old monastery." She says, turning to face me with a bewildered look on her face. "What's the theme? Religion?"
"Medieval art." I respond, piecing together my next words carefully. "I thought it could maybe get some gears turning."
"Maybe it will." City responds as she continues to make her way up the cobblestone path, heels clicking away with each footfall. "There's only one way to find out."

We enter the building, immediately stopping in front of some tapestries. Seems they've gotten Gold's attention. Seems I was right. I walk over to her, looking at the same tapestry she is, taking in it's appearance. Met might get a kick out of this one.
"Reminds me of the Venetian flag." I say as I give that lion another look. Gold turns to me briefly before she looks back at the tapestry.
"Hmm… maybe. It's just a normal lion, though. Not the Lion of Saint Mark." She says as she starts walking through the "abbey", looking at various pieces as she goes. I decide to follow, wanting to see where she goes. I can't quite get a good reading, but it seems like she's heading outside towards a garden in the courtyard. Maybe gardening can be something that occupies her time. The cool air immediately hits me as soon as I'm outside the building, but Gold doesn't seem to react much to it. I mean, she did grow up in Canada and Hokkaido. Maybe she's used to the cold. She goes over to a tree, kneeling down to read the little plate on the ground, wanting to know more about it while I'm more so looking at it's autumn foliage. The hues of red, orange and yellow with the occasional splash of purple are quite the sight to behold. Then there's Gold City underneath all of it.

Don't even start.
Not you again…
Oh yes, it's me again. Don't get deluded. You'd drive her away. And then you'll have nothing once more.
Megint rosszul olvasom a helyzetet. (Reading the situation wrong, once again.) ***I'm being realistic.***
Yeah, putting me down for things I can't control. How realistic of you.
Egyet kell értenem vele. (I have to agree with her.)

I immediately tune out of that interrogation, not wanting the moment to be ruined or lost as Gold stands up, turning to look at me.
"Is this a place you came to often when you were younger?" She asks, thinking that there's more to coming to the Cloisters than simply wanting to find her an interest other than fashion and modeling.
"Eh… Not really. Only, like, three times with anya and that was about it." I respond, thinking about all the time ápa and anya came down to the city. "I mostly went to the zoos, natural history museum

and aquarium when it came to family outings. What about you? Did you ever go to similar places when you lived in Oshawa?"
"Hmm… Can't quite think of the specifics but I do *vaguely* remember some trips to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto." Gold starts, thinking about her words as she goes. "Wasn't necessarily an art museum, it had fossil exhibits and many displays about various cultures that call Ontario home, but apparently it left a mark on me. Well, if you take my brother and Père at their words."
"Why do they think that?" I ask amusingly, taking this chance to learn a bit more about this woman. Not like there's much more to learn about her, but little secrets every now and that can't hurt, right?
"Apparently one of the special exhibitions we perused through was focused on French fashion from the eighties and Père took note of how enraptured I was with the displays. I think that's what made me interested in modeling. I wanted to look *just like* some of the women in the photos the exhibition had." She says as she turns again, looking towards the well in the center of the courtyard. She walks over to it, looking down into the structure before walking back inside the museum. I once again follow her, but I get the feeling like she has seen what she wanted to here. That suspicion seems to be confirmed when I see her take a deep breath, steadying herself before she speaks up.
"Okay. I think I've seen enough. Can't quite say if anything here was enough to pique my interest, but…" Gold trails off, seemingly not wanting to disappoint me with her thoughts but realizing she failed. "I'll keep this thought in the back of my mind. Maybe sleeping on it will change my mind."
"That's… That's fine, actually. I didn't really think I'd find something that gets your interest immediately anyway." I tell her as we make eye contact. It's subtle, but there's something there in the pale blue of her eyes. I just can't tell what it is. Longing? Yearning? Nem. Ez nem lehet igaz. (No. That can't be right.) I've seen nothing but confidence from her the entire time we've known each other. If she's longing for something, what could it be? Definitely *not* me. I… I'm not that delusional. I don't *deserve* to be with someone like Gold City. Nem mintha számítana. (Not that it matters.) I doubt she's attracted to women. We eventually break this eye contact, which if I'm being realistic, was barely half a second. But it felt like a lifetime. She then starts walking, heels clicking away once more on the abbey's stone floor, me following behind her with dull footfalls in Chucks.

"You make Yonkers seem like a quaint little town." Gold says after finishing her salad. I mean, she isn't *necessarily* wrong, but…
"I mean, you're not wrong. But there wasn't really much to do in Yonkers. Always had to come down into NYC or head up into the Adirondacks if we wanted to do anything interesting." I say, watching as her ears perk up.
"The Adirondacks?" She asks, ears still standing straight up as she looks at me from across the table.
"They're mountains upstate. We'd go up there every summer at the end of July into the start of August. Me, Met and Rose. I really enjoyed it whenever we went up there. Hiking on the trails was always a treat." I start saying, watching as that same look from the Cloister comes back into her eyes.
"Who's Rose? I assume she's a friend of you and Met." Gold says, not knowing that little part of history.
"Rose, uh… She is… *was* my first girlfriend. We split not too long after she moved out west and started college in Los Angeles." I start, watching as Gold's ears droop ever so slightly. Ez nem azt jelenti, amire gondolok, ugye? (That doesn't mean what I think it means, does it?)
"Oh, I see." She says, immediately assuming the worst from the little I've said.
"We… We're still friends. She just didn't think that we could pull off a long-distance situation. In a lot of ways, we're better as friends than we were as a couple." I say, watching as her ears rise

slowly. Though they don't stand straight like they were doing. I think she's still trying to process what I said, though she doesn't show it on her face. De az a tekintet a szemében... Mit jelenthet? (But that look in her eyes... What could it mean?)

"I see… Is she nice, at least?" City then asks, wanting to know more about Rose.
"Very nice. She's kind, caring and thoughtful. A bit on the cynical side but she still has a sense of humor." I start saying as City watches me intently. "Met's trying to get her back in New York around New Year. She's taking a break from UCLA, so… If you… feel inclined…"
"I think I would. You've already painted quite the picture in my mind. She seems like someone I would at least be cordial with." She says as our food arrives.
"Here you go. Two full plates of pasta primavera. I hope two ladies enjoy your meal." The waiter says as he sets down the plates. It's one *expensive* lunch but with how the money from each shoot is being split, me and Gold are able to afford this with a lot of ease. Still can't believe I'm getting a full quarter of that money… I watch as City starts to twirl her fork in her pasta, wanting to get enough one it before she takes her first bite. I decide to do the same, mirroring her actions quite well given that I'm a lefty. Once I think I have enough on there, I bring my fork up and start eating. hmm… Not bad. It's quite nice. I bring my fork down and get some more before I notice that Gold is looking at me. Is… Is she… Nem. Nem tehet ilyet. (No. She can't be doing that.) I'm imagining things. I go to take another bite, and I catch her staring again. Something's up. I want to know what it is.
"Is something on my face?" I ask, bringing attention to this.
"Uh… Shitsurei shimasu ka? No, nothing's wrong. Why do you ask?" She says, ears going flat against her head like she was just caught doing something she shouldn't have been doing.
"You were, uh… You were staring. I thought that there was something wrong from that. I'm sorry." I say, now feeling guilt and second-hand embarrassment.
"Oh, no. Ne vous excusez pas (Don't apologize.) If anything, I should be the one saying sorry. I just…" She starts trailing off, which could mean any number of things. "I don't know. You're quite the looker, you know that?"
"What's *that* supposed to mean?" I ask, watching as Gold's ears relax again.
"What do you *think* it means?" She retorts before taking a bite of her food. She then speaks up again after swallowing. "I'm saying that you're good looking. I'm sure a lot of women would find you attractive in one way or another." I… This… Tudja, hogy flörtöl velem? Mert ez az egyik módja annak.(Does she know that she's flirting with me? Because that's certainly one way to do it.)
"Sounds like you're trying to say that *you* find me attractive." I say, immediately regretting it as the largest blush appears on her face.
"Well, when you put it that way… *ahem*" She quickly clears her throat before she continues. "I don't think I necessarily have to be queer to find another woman attractive." That sounds like a deflection. But I can't prove it. That, or it was just a playful kind of flirt. The kind that two friends engage in to try and make each other feel better. I've had that happen with a lot of my straight friends. I mean, it's nice, but… Kezdek előreszaladni. (I'm getting ahead of myself.) And I'm *definitely* overthinking things. That's all it was. Just some playful flirting between friends. Just… Just friends being… Friends…

"Hey, you okay? You seem a bit down. Was… Was it something I said? If so, I apologize. I did not intend t-" I stop her before she can continue.
"No, I'm okay. Just thinking." I tell her, lying so that I can hide how I really feel.
"Are you sure? The look in your eyes says… Quelque chose de différent. (Something different.)" City responds, almost immediately seeing through me. Oh nem… (Oh no…)
"I promise I'm okay. You don't need to worry." I say, wanting this heat off my back. It seems to work, too.
"Well, if you say so, then I won't prod" She says, but I can tell she doesn't fully believe me.

Frankly, I wouldn't either. I hate lying to people. Makes me feel like shit. But sometimes… Nincs más választásod. (You don't really have a choice.)

|-That afternoon. The Gershwin Theater, 222 West 51st Street-|

"So you want Gold City to go last. Is this for the runway portion of the show or fo-" He cuts me off 'fore I could even finish my question. Reckon them folks runnin' the show had the wholething rigged from the start.
"Oh yes, Mr. Jenkins. last in the performances. She is making quite the name for herself here in New York. May as well give the good ticket payers their money's worth, am I right?" The man says. Older fella. Reckon he's pushin' sixty. Seems to know his business.
"I'm well aware, Mr. Franklin. I've been keeping a *very* close eye on this since we started in June." I tell him as them other two managers head on out, lookin' plumb satisfied with where they landed on the setlist. But I could tell they were fixin' to want that end slot. You'd be a fool not to. "The amount of times she's been recognized while we've been out scouting locations for shoots is frustrating, if you ask me."
"Oh, I do not doubt you, Mr. Jenkins. I'm certain anyone would fins those happenings frustrating.But go, see to it that Mr. Brouillard has everything on his end ready and set one last time. We will discuss setting the stage for Gold City later after I have a chat with the others." Franklin says as he heads out. Reckon that leaves me plumb alone with my thoughts. What's fixin' to happen *after* tonight? How many more folks are gonna come a-botherin' us while we're out tryin' to get some work done? A double-edged sword, or so they say…

I start pacin' 'round the place, can't get it off my mind 'til I figure that I oughta check on Brouillard. So I head out the room toward the dressing areas and see Brouillard right quick.
"Miquel. Ready for tonight?" I ask, watchin' him spin 'round to face me so fast that he oughta've snapped his neck.
"Oui. More than ready, even. I am very excited to see her on the runway in it. Then of course, there's the performance. By the way, did yo-" I reckon it's my turn to cut someone off, 'cause I start jawin' 'fore he could even fiish his question.
"We're going last." I tell him, watchin' his face light up. Ain't quite what I was reckonin' to see, but it ain't no shock either.
"Très bien. (Very good.) I assume the good Mr. Franklin is discussing the performances of the other models a this current moment?" Brouillard goes and asks. So I just tell him straight.
"Yes. He is. What time is it right now?" I go 'head and grab my phone 'fore I say more. "Three thirty. Okay, we've got time. if he's being quick, I'd say he'll spend no more than forty five minutes with each model just to make sure they are satisfied with their placement and to make sure that everything is set for their performances."
"Ça fait du sens. (Makes sense.) I just hope that we'll have enough manpower to move all the heavy stuff." Brouillrad says, makin' me reckon up that we got that big ol' heavy platform Gold needs to jump off of.
"Right… We need to make sure it's in the right spot so that she hits the mats below and not the *hard wood stage*." I add to it. Don't want to be the reason she ends back up in the hospital. Brouillard just nods, grabs a notebook, and scribble that down.
"They should have scored where the platform goes the other day. But I'll make sure they get reminded of it." He says as he sets that notebook down. Then he wanders over to the water cooler, grabs a cup, pours a little out, and turns 'round to face me. "Would you like some?"
"A little wouldn't hurt." I say, watchin' him grab another cup and pour me some water. He then walks over and hands it to me, holdin' his own up like we're havin' a toast. A bit early for all that, but I ain't gonna rain on his parade.
"To a successful night." He says as I clink my foam cup against his. We then take a sip, and that

water is ice cold, just the way I like it. Cold and refreshin'- Just what you need to quit overthinkin' things. To stop worryin' 'bout what's next and just be right here.

We're sittin' there well over an hour 'til we hear a knock at the door. Reckon it's Franklin. Brouillard heads on over and swings it open, and sure enough, there's Franklin standin' right there.
"Mr. Brouillard. Mr Jenkins. Good afternoon." He says, givin' us each a nod as he wanders in, proppin' his cane by the door 'fore he settles in. He looks my way first. "As you are aware, for this show we are not allowing outside photography. This was a first for the Gershwin and we were a bit apprehensive about certain things. My apologies for any frustration it may have caused. Perhaps if we organize another show of this caliber in the future we'll be more lax and lenient." He starts goin' on about why Kati can't bring her camera, even though it aint' much to look at. But I ain't fussin' none about it. We've both just settled it. "There will be a lot of eyes on Gold City tonight. Do you think she can handle this?"
"Gold City? Buckling under pressure? Mr. Franklin, with all due respect, I think you might be a bit slow." I think I got that old timer gigglin' with what I said. "Yes, she can handle it. It's not like she's been a model since she was a young teen or anything."
"Too right you are, Mr. Jenkins. But I wanted to have bases covered. So I asked anyway. As for you, Mr. Brouillard." Franklin turns to him, lookin' all stone-faced but still kinda sweet on him at the same time. "It is a marvelous piece you have made for Gold City. Are you certain that it will be as vibrant during the performance as it will be on the runway?"
"Oui, Monsieur Franklin. I made sure the lighting techs have everything on the right settings for her performance. Where it swells, where it dies down. How it follows her. How it illuminates the visage of her Louis." Brouillard gets goin, 'bout to plumb forget that platform. But he does bring it up, though. "Oh, j'ai presque oublié. (Oh, I almost forgot.) The platform. The stage technicians have scored where it is supposed to go as they change the scenery on stage, correct?"
"Yes, Mr. Brouillard. You do not need to worry about the platform. The stage hands here at the Gershwin are quite capable with their job." Franklin says settlin' me and Brouillard right. Then he takes a long ol' breath, shownin' that he's either done talkin' or we're fixin' to be here a hot minute. "Gentlemen, there is much to discuss."

Well, there's my answer.

|-Later that afternoon. The Capri, 1700 Grand Concourse, the Bronx-|

"Brought you into this world"
"You were a child full of hate"
"At first, I tried to save you"
"But you knew it was too late"
"Grew up to be a man"
"That would defy all the heavens"
"Only hope left on Earth"
"Are the deadly seven"

"Damien, the son who has come"
"To bring death to us all"
"Damien, by one of the seven"
"Black blades you will fall"

"Hey Met, the fuck are you doing man?" I hear Scott yell. I'm not bein *that* loud, am I? "Lookin for a vest." I shout back, fully expectin him to not understand what I mean.

"Didn't you just wash yours? It should be hanging up in the tub." I hear him shouts back. Exactly as I expected.
"Not the battlevest you moron. A suit vest." I can tell by the silence that he is completely gobsmacked. Doesn't know what to say here. No che me spetaria che el savesse cossa dir. (Not that I'd expect him to know what to say.)
"I- A *suit*? For what? Where the hell are you going?" I then hear.
"A fashion show. Friend bought three tickets and gave me one." I ay, immediately takin not of the laughter comin from the livin room. I barge out out my room, tie not worn properly around my neck because I can't be fucked to learn how to actually wear a neck tie. "Don't you fuckin laugh. Have you seen my vest or not?" Scott has to take a second to get his bearins.
"I… I think it's hanging up in the laundry room." He says, wipin away a tear from his eye as I start walkin. "Why are you going to a fashion show, anyway? You know that's not your thing."
"My best friend's involved." I tell him as I open the closet doors, immediately eyein the black vest hangin over the washin machine. Scott stops laughin. He knows to never laugh when it's about Kati. Trừ khi nó là khách quan vui nhộn, tất nhiên. (Unless it's objectively hilarious, of course.)
"Oh... Okay, I get it now. Supporting your best friend and shit. Well tell her I said 'hi'. If you see her, obviously. She might be busy all night taking pictures." He says, no longer laughin at this point. Not even a hint of a chuckle.
"Well, we're gonna try and see if she can sneak us backstage, which… Good fuckin luck with that." I say as I slip the vest on. Hmm… fits just as good as I thought it would. "I'm an uma who's 6'10" and trans-masc. You *will* notice." Scott starts laughin again, this time, at the absurdity of the situation. No posso dir che ghe do ła colpa. (Can't say I blame him.)

I walk back into my room, wantin to see where those shoes were. Not used to dress shoes. Don't really like wearin 'em. But the dress code is apparently "semi-formal to formal", so do I really have much of a choice here? Tôi không nghĩ vậy. (I don't think so.) I'm just glad I have some that can fit my giant- ass feet. I slip them on, taking note of how tight it's gonna be despite them bein size 18s. Oh well. I stand, and take not that these aren't actually as bad as I thought they'd be. Hmm… Perhaps I misjudged them. I then walk back out, gettin Scott's attention as he tries to process what it is he's lookin at.
"You're not gonna tie the tie? Button up the vest?" He asks, still lookin like a dumbass.
"Pffp… *No.*" I tell him as I start for the door, pausin the music before I head out. "I'll be back at like, one."
"*One?!* ***In the morning?!*** Oh hell naw. You better not-" I don't know what Scott says because I close the door behind me before I get a chance to actually hear it. I start makin my way down the hallway, reachin the elevator and hittin the button that'll take me to the ground floor. Don't have to wait too long for it to get here, at which point I enter, press the bottom floor, and hear the winches start whirrin, slowly lowerin the elevator down. It's a *bit* of a bumpy ride, but I make it to the bottom intact. I think. *I'm* fine. L'asensór xe na storia difarente. (The elevator is a different story.)

I start walkin down the sidewalk without too many weird looks. My goal: Subway. I'm gonna look *real fuckin weird* on the metro like this. But do I give a damn? Tuyệt đối không. (Absolutely not.) I find the nearest subway entrance and start makin my way down, pausin at a map to make sure I get on the right line. Vóio ndar a Brooklyn. (I want to head to Brooklyn.) So I should hop on the D-Line down to Grand Central. From there, I actually stay on the D-Line. It'll take me straight to Long Island Rail Road. All I gotta do after steppin off is head up to Flatbush and then I'm there. Alright. Have a plan now. I walk forward, pay my till so that the dirty capitalists can get more money out of the public and continue doin fuck all, and get on the train. Already, I've got eyes on me. Then again, I've *always* got eyes on me. Hard to miss a dude who's trans-masc, has ears and a tail and is also *six foot fuckin ten*. Speakin of being 6'10"… Họ thực sự nghĩ rằng họ có thể lẻn tôi vào hậu trường? Giống như địa ngục sẽ xảy ra. (They *really* think they can sneak me backstage?

Like hell that'll happen.) I take a glance around, seein more than a few people who are dresses about as nice as I am. Hmm… Okay, more *more* nicely than I am. Guess they're headin to the Gershwin tonight, too. Sẽ không ngạc nhiên. (Wouldn't be surprised.) Honestly thought I'd see a lot more dumbasses and wannabe thugs considerin that *this is the Bronx*. But I guess that even they can freshen up every once in a while.

Another stop means more people pilin into the train. Gettin pretty full now. Wouldn't be surprised if most of them peel off at Grand Central. But I'm not. I'm stayin on the train until Brooklyn. Though with where I am currently standin… Podarìa sercar un fià de spasio pa respirar. (I could go for some room to breathe.) I start makin my way to a spot that isn't as crowded, lettin my intentions be known as I move. Though again, with how big I am, not that hard to miss.
"Excuse me. Pardon me. Comin through. Let me just *squeeze* in there real quick." I say to every person I pass as I reach the new spot. Little bit more wiggle room. Always nice. I then feel my phone buzz in my pocket. I pull it out and see that Jessica is textin me.
'On your way?' She's asked. It's only, what, five o'clock? Show doesn't start till seven? I've got time.
'Yeah. About tor each Grand Central.' I shoot back, knowin that it'll make Mark flip his shit. I can already *feel* the Sicilian copin as he knows that despite all of this: *I will still make it to his place early.* Magna merda e more, Mark. (Eat shit and die, Mark.) Another few stops and we're already at Grand Central, and just as I was thinkin, almost *everyone* currently on board steps off. Seems like they've got plans beforehand. Too bad for me, I guess. I stay in place, waitin for the train to start movin again towards Brooklyn. Shouldn't be much longer, honestly. Only a few more stops before I'm under the East River. And from there: Long Island Rail Road.

Only takes a few more minutes before I'm in Brooklyn. Then after that, I'm steppin off the train sooner than I though I'd be. Just gotta make my way to Flatbush Avenue, which should be… *This* way. This gets me to Prospect Park, so I just walk up Prospect Park West until I hit Flatbush. I'll know I'm there because it goes through the Army Plaza. No se pol mancar. (Can't miss that.) Once I'm up on the street, I start walkin towards Prospect Park, reachin it in no time, meanin that I'm already on the street I need to be on. Within a few minutes, I'm at the Army Plaza, which means I'm now on Flatbush. Good. Just need to follow this until I reach 6th Avenue, at which point I can see Mark despair. Seems he already is, judgin by how my phone is goin ballistic right now. I don't need to look to know it's Mark. Who else would be sendin texts to me *that fast*? A few more minutes go by and I'm already on 6th, and I can see their building. I already feel the grin formin. I quicken my pace, wantin to get there before six thirty. Hell, I might get there before six fifteen. Doesn't take long to get an answer. I reach the building, pull out my phone at check the time. Six ten. *Very go-*

"Ya muddafucka. HOW DO YA DO IT?!" I hear Mark shout as he steps outside, Jessica followin not too far behind.
"Uh… Let's *not* be so loud, Mark. I'd rather not cause a spectacle." She says as she gently tugs at his sleeve. Mark's got on one of his dad's old suits. Surprised he can fit in it. Meanwhile Jessica looks like she's stepped straight out of some Gala from the 1920s. I like how the green compliments her hair.
"Well you two look nice." I say, watchin Mark's face turn redder as I successfully ragebait him again in the span of twenty-four hours.
"Youse said… Dat you'd wear sumpin' nice, Met. What da fuhk is dis getup?" Mark then asks, takin a breath in between to try and calm himself.
"Is this *not* nice?" I ask, watchin as he clenches his fists before lettin them go.
"Ya look like a delinquent who somehow got invited to prom." He responds, takin another breath, still tryin to calm himself.
"Rich comin from someone who used to run with gangs when he was younger." I tell him as I look at Jessica. "I assume we're takin *his* car?"

"Well now, 'tis the only one we have that you can fit into." She says as she briefly looks at Mark, then back to me.
"Ain't dat de trooth. C'mon. Let's go befow traffic gets bad." He says, turnin on his heel and walkin towards where his car is, Jessica followin suit. Guess I have to as well.

I catch up to them as we reach Mark's car. He unlocks it and we all pile in. Naturally, *I'm* the one who has to get in the back. Stronzo. (Asshole.) Mark turns the key, lights the ignition and starts drivin while I'm still bucklin up, all while tryin to talk as he does so.
"Got any ideas on what we'll see? How much you wanna bet we bump into Gold City first?" He starts, already makin himself look like an idiot. Che l'è tipico dei siciliani. (Which is typical of Sicilians.)
"What makes you think she *wouldn't* be backstage?" I answer, watchin as Jessica turns back to me before turnin to Mark.
"I think Met's got a point. We'd have a grander chance of runnin' into Kati than Gold City." She says as she turns back to face me. "Got a similar notion?"
"More or less. Though I doubt we'll run into Kati before the show starts too. I saw *a lot* of people dressed nice on the metro. Place is gonna be *packed* tonight." I tell her as we get onto the Brooklyn Bridge. Bit of a bumpy ride, but we're all good by the looks of things. "Though a place like the Gershwin… How the hell are they gonna pull off a fashion runway?"
"Ya guess is as good as mine, Met. Eidda way, we're gonna find out real soon." Mark says as we keep drivin on the bridge. Doesn't take long before we're in Manhattan. The Gershwin is by Central Park, right? That sounds about right.

"I'm well exicted now, or ye ghad. How about you two?" Jessica asks she she flips her eyes between me and Mark.
"I mean, if you're excited, den I'm excited too." Mark responds. May as well make it a hat trick.
"I got no reason to complain." I say as Mark turns onto 8th Avenue. I'm seein a lot of people lookin fly walkin down the street. Guess we're gettin close. Mark slows as he sees this column too.
"Woah… I guess we're in da right place. You two get out first. I'll find somewheres to pahk an' I'll meet youse at da t'eatre." He says as he pulls up to the curb. Doin as he suggests, me and Jessica unbuckle and step out onto the sidewalk. Mark then pulls away to find his parkin spot, leavin me and Jessic to walk all the way to the Gerswhin on out own.
"A fair few folks here tonight, so there is." She says as she scans our surroundins.
"That's what it looks like, yeah." I say, doin the same, realizin that I've got a better view because of my height. "Huh… Think I see Kati. Though…"
"Though… what? Let's be off and meet up with her, shall we?" Jessica says, startin to walk towards where she thinks I see Kati. But I stop her.
"No, not a good idea. Qualcosa no va. (Somethin's wrong.)" I say as I get a hand on her shoulder.
"She looks like she's in a rush. Like she's lookin for somethin." Jessica jumps up and down for a second before spottin Kati. Seems she can see the same thing I can.
"Hmm… More like lookin' for *someone*. An' we both know who." I tilt me head down after hearin those words come out of her mouth.
"Mà chúng tôi làm. (That we do.)"

|-That evening. The Gershwin Theater, 222 West 51st Street, Manhattan-|

"Really? Well, I can't imagine what that must've been like. Spending all that time with a guy, thinking that you have this real connection only to learn that he didn't see it the same way. Sorry that happened to you." The makeup artist says as she puts the finishing touches on. I haven't worn makeup like this in a little bit. C'est sympa, honnêtement. (It feels nice, honestly.)
"Well, that's what happens when most of the men who want to date you do so because *you're a*

model. You get used to it, though. As morbid as that sounds." I tell her, taking a moment to breathe deeply. I don't want my nerves to get the better of me. Not when… *she* is out there right now.
"Oh, I believe you. As much as I like men, they can be simple minded and dense, sometimes. Not appreciating the finer details. Not like a woman can." She says, making my ears stand up slightly, almost hitting hers an their way up. She noticed. "Oh, that got your attention, didn't it?"
"Well, when you put it *that* way." I say, trying to be cordial while injecting some humor into the situation. "Something like that doesn't seem like the kind of thing you just spring onto someone."
"I prefer to live authentically to myself. Sometimes that means outing myself to strangers if I get to comfortable. I'm just lucky most people don't seem to mind it. For as much progress as there has been, it's still tough being queer. A bi woman especially." She says, bringing the brush up to my face one last time to put the final mark. "There. That should do it. What do you think?" She says as she spins me in my chair.

I look into the mirror, taking note on how well of a job she's done. I really *do* look like a ghostly bride.
"Hmm… Je suis impressionné. (I'm impressed.)" I say as I give my face another look in the mirror.
"I'll take that as a compliment. Not like it's *my job* to do this or anything." The makeup artist responds as she sets her brushes down. "Though, I will say, probably my *finest* work. Makes me wish *I* was your betrothed." I can feel my heart stop for a moment as she says that. Sore o sōzō shite mite kudasai. (Imagine that.) Me, marrying another woman. Inevitably, my mind goes exactly to where I think it will. To Kati. I have to hold back my laughter, but it is funny how all of this has happened so quickly. All of this in only four, close to five months now. Tonight will… show me whether or not we can continue like this. Yearning and pining for something that will cause our working relationship to collapse if we don't tread carefully.
"Oh please. You've flattered me enough." I say as I turn to face her again. I should thank her but… I don't think I ever got her name. C'est rude de moi. (How rude of me.) "But thank you… I apologize, I don't think I ever got your name. The thought never occurred to me until now."
"Verdant Green." She says as those piercing emerald eyes lock onto me. She's got *some kind* of idea in her head.

"You're quite the looker, you know that City?" Green says as she starts looking me up and down.
"So I've been told." I respond, humoring her flirtatious advances, which I am certain she will stop soon after this. She's most likely assuming that I am not attracted to women. I don't blame her for that, though.
"I'm sure you have, but damn… *Beauty of the Century* indeed. No picture can do you justice. And you're just my type, too. Shame you don't swing like I do. No offense, of course." Green says as she starts to put her supplies away, keen on watching the show or maybe even heading home for the night. I feel odd, receiving a compliment like that from her. C'est gentil, oui. (It's nice, yes.) And it did make my heart flutter, but it's not like when I'm with Kati. That is an entirely different level. Kati is…
She's… Kusowwatakushi wa kotoba ga hontō ni sore ga watakushi ga kanojo o mite iru hōhō o setsumei suru koto wa dekinai to omoimasu. (Damn, I don't think words can truly explain how it is I see her.) But I'll continue to humor Verdant Green while we are still here.
"Well, I'm of the opinion that I don't *have* to be queer to find another woman attractive." I say, watching as Green's ears perk up as she hears the words.
"Oh really? Go on." She responds, eyes locking onto mine once more.
"Well, *you* for example. You are a *very* attractive woman. I'm sure any man or woman should consider themselves lucky to spend a single night with you." I say, watching the faintest blush creep up on her face. Not really my intent, but I'll take that as a success.
"You wouldn't know the half of it, City." She says as I hear something from outside. Verdant hears

it too, judging by how her ears now stand straight up just as mine, turning slowly to see where the sound is coming from. It's two people talking. Outside the dressing room. I think I know who it is.

"You know you can't be back here, right?"
"Does it matter? I just… Just let me have this, okay?"
"Kati. Don't do anything stupid."
"Nem fogom. (I won't.) Just… Trust me?"
"*sigh*… You have twenty minutes before the runway starts. Make it quick."

"Seems like someone wants to see you before you walk. I'll give you two some privacy." Verdant says as she finished putting her supplies away. She then takes them and slides them into her bag before walking away from me, opening the door and saying something to Kati as she walks in. I close my eyes, taking a few deep breaths to try and calm myself. Elle me surveille. Je le sais. (She's watching me. I know it.) Kati's probably taken a back by everything she sees. The entire piece with the corpse paint. I open my eyes, stand up, turn around and-



"Oh… You look…" Handsome. I almost say handsome out loud as I see what Kati is wearing. I expected some kind of dress or a skirt. But no. It's more akin to a suit. Just without a jacket. The black vest complimenting the deep and dark red shirt alongside the dress pants and the verdantly green shoes. I can feel the blood rushing to my head as I'm most certainly blushing under all this makeup. "You look nice." I manage to eek out, saving myself… *Both* of us from embarrassment. "Uh, yeah… You… You too, City." She says, almost whispering it for most likely the same reason. She then ducks her head down. A bit too fast by the sight of her adjusting her glasses while still

looking at the ground.
"Is there… Any particular reason you're back here right now? You know the whole event starts in twenty mintutes, right?" I ask, not sure why Kati's here. She *knows* she can't be backstage right now. "I need to get going. I'll see yo-"
"I… I know. I just… I needed to see you beforehand. I know it sounds stupid but…" She starts but quickly trails off, almost ashamed to say the next thing out loud. J'aimerais qu'elle le fasse. (I wish that she would.) What I'd give to hear her say it. To get some form of validation for all the things this woman has made me feel over the past four months. I slowly walk towards her, stage shoes clicking against the dressing room floor as I do so.
"Hey, look at me." I say, watching as Kati slowly tilts her head so that we can make eye contact. "I am glad that you're here. Being around you… I don't know how to explain it, but it calms me down somewhat. Keeps me steady." I watch her blush return in force, turning her naturally tan skin a deeper shade of red in only a few seconds. I don't think Kati will *ever* get used to someone telling her things like that. *Watakushi* wa oroka. (Let alone *me*.) "Come on, let's head down." Kati simply nods, and we both head out of the room.

It's a tense walk towards the ground floor. The silence just looms over us. Someone needs to say *something*. *N'importe quoi*. (*Anything*.) So I break the silence.
"You do look nice, tonight. From the looks of it, you've had those clothes for a while, haven't you?" I say, tilting my head only slightly so that I can both see where I'm going and judge Kati's reaction.
"Uh, thanks. Yeah, I've… I've had these for a while." She starts, unsure if she should continue the thought. "I'm surprised they still fit."
"How long have you had them?" I then ask, wanting to know more.
"Since high school. I, uh… These are actually what I wore to prom in junior year." Kati responds, her voice becoming less shaky as she presumably remembers some good memories. "It's funny. I wanted to wear this cute little dress I saw in the mall one time but Rose told me not to. Said I'd look better in a vest and jacket."
"I think she was right." I say, watching Kati turn her head away from me again. Not a good idea, especially since she almost walks into the railing as we reach the stairs. I almost chuckle at that, but I manage to keep it down. "You should watch where you're going." I say as Kati finds her place besides me again as we start walking down the stairs. She then holds out her arm, as if wanting me to take it.
"Are, uh… Are you okay getting down stairs in those shoes or do you need some help?" She asks, her face flushing red again. I don't *need* the help. I can walk fine in these shoes, regardless of stairs. But something is telling me to take her up on the offer. But as I'm about to respond, the little oni and nain rouge appear on my shoulders. Tokei shikake no yō ni. Tōzen da. (Like clockwork. Naturally.)

How uncouth.
Quiet, you.
You should listen. What happens if someone comes across this and see the two of you?
No one will see it. Now leave me be, foul demons.

I block their voices out in my head, slowly setting my hand against Kati's arm. She looks away again, clearly not thinking that I would take her up on this. Whatever she is thinking and feeling right now… It's flashing across my mind as well.
"Not particularly. But you did make the offer. And there doesn't seem to be anyone else around at the moment. May as well, right?" I say as I start walking, something that gives Kati some confidence as she follows me. It doesn't take long for us to reach the bottom of the stairs, where I know we need to part for now. "I need to go this way. Lineup for the runway is over here." I say as Kati looks at her watch.

"You've got five minutes. Go. I'll see you later." She says as I start walking. Fast. I just hope that no- one is miffed about my tardiness. Ce serait *très* inconsidéré. (That would be *very* inconsiderate.)

|-Later that evening-|

"Holy shit, a succubus. Surprised *dat one* got the green light. Just look at how much skin she's got showin'." Mark says as the next model begins her walk down the runway. I don't know why I was surprised to see them use this space on the ground. Hindsight says it's the *perfect place* to put a runway: Plenty of space for lighting and cameras. Good clearance for a raised runway. It also gives good coverage in case people thought it would start raining. I really should think more ahead like this. "Me too, Mark." I tell him as I feel Met loom over me on my right. Well, he's looming over *everyone* here. Nem mintha sok választása lenne. (Not that he has much of a choice.)
"Yeah. She's a real looker. When do you think City's walkin down? Has to be soon, right?" Met asks as Jessica tries to look through any window she can find.
"She could be next, she could be last, she could be in the middle. All I know is that this started ten minutes ago, so it did." She says as she finally gets a good look at the model. "Woah… Keep 'er away from a convent." I hear her mumble to herself. You can take the Irishwoman away from the church, but you can't take the church away from the Irishwoman, it seems.

The announcer speaks up again, but it's not who we want to see, so I don't pay it any attention. All I know is that Mark is having his faith tested with every model that walks down, occasionall saying things that are presumably to calm Jessica, who is just engrossed with everything she sees right now. Then there's Met. The perpetual fish out of water. I nudge him with my elbow, making him shift down so that we can have a "private" conversation.
"Qualcosa che te dà fastidio? (Somethin botherin you?)" He asks, thinking that something is wrong. I mean, he isn't *necessarily* wrong. But this is different.
"Surprised you came here. This isn't your thing." I say directly into his ear so that he can hear all of it. "Yeah, well, *you're* involved. I know how much stuff like this means to you. Vì vậy, tôi ở đây. (So, here I am.)" He responds, that usual smugness I know and "love" coming back as he looks out at the runway. "Woah… Ma Trành…" I… Erre nem számítottam. (I didn't expect that.) "You know that one?" I ask as Met looks down at me.
"A little bit. It's Ma Trành. So called 'slaves of the tiger demon'. Pretty nasty spirit in the folklore of the Mường. They live in Hòa Bình. Just south of Hanoi. That province got incorporated into Phú Thọ back in June." Met says as he looks back at the runway, seeing the model finish her walk.
"Some ofông nội's friends from the war were pissed about that one." He then turns to face me again. "I need to see who that woman was. Meet the designer too." Met then turns his head again to where the model just was, watching as she passes us by again when I hear him speak one more time. "Ben, se Jessica la pensa che el so pìcolo piano el riesse, magari mi no. (Well, if Jessica thinks her little plan succeeds, maybe I won't.)"

"What plan?" I ask, getting his attention as his ears perk up, head turning to face me.
"Huh? What?" He responds, trying his best to play dumb. De tudom, mit hallottam. Azt hiszi, ügyes a flancos Velencei beszédével. Nem fog. (But I know what I heard. He thinks he's slick with his fancy Venetian talk. He's not.)
"You heard me. What plan?" I ask again, watching as his ear's droop. Seems I'm not in the know for some certain details. I then feel someone tug at my sleeve. I turn around and find Jessica there.
"Ah, I nearly forgot to ask: Would ya be able to sneak the three of us backstage when this is over? D'ya think?" She asks me. Ó. Nos, *ez* érdekes. (Oh, well *that's* interesting.) I look at Jessica for a second, then to Mark who's engrossed by the next model coming down the runway, then to Met, who's sweating. Met… Sweating… He thinks it can't be done. I give Met one last look before I turn

my attention back to Jessica.
"Oh yes. I *most certainly* can." I tell her loudly, seeing Met's face turn red as he hears the words. Valaki bosszús. Jó. Ez a karma, te seggfej. (Someone's annoyed. Good. That's karma you asshole.)
"**WHAT?!** No, you can't be…" He starts, trying not to cause a scene in front of everyone here. Some people notice though, but quickly ignore it as another model starts her walk. "The fact that I'm *six ten* alone means this won't work."
"Oh hush, you. I can make it work." I tell him, noticing how his tail is swinging erratically, most likely so that he doesn't hit anyone with it. He's not doing too bad, honestly. "Security will probably start being lax around five minutes after. Most models tend to clear off around that time. We should be clear to go then." I say, again watching his face turn red with annoyance.
"You… Anh phải đứng về phía Tôi đây, Kati. (You're supposed to be on my side here, Kati.)" Met says, still flabbergasted by me siding with Jessica over him. Then Mark comes over, and Met gets even more annoyed.
"Told ya not to woy." He says as the announcer's voice comes through again. This time, it feels different. Like I know what she's about to say. Suspicions that are soon confirmed.

"Up next is a model described as the *Beauty of the Century*. Someone with looks you see only once every one hundred years. Coming all the way from Hokkaido in Japan, she is showcasing the finest work of Canadian fashion designer Miguel Brouillard who wants all of us to get a taste of Quebec's paranormal vistas: It is Gold City showcasing *Chute de la Dame Blanche*."

Everyone immediately turns their head southwest as the smoke machine starts again. Camera flashes go off, people gasp in awe. Then we see her. Gold City. In that stunning lavender dress and ghostly makeup. With all the smoke and fog, she really *does* look like a ghost doing this. I can only imagine what the performance is going to look like. It's slow. Well, not really. Models have to move fast on the runway but… It *feels* like times slowed down. I can feel every step she takes reverberate through the platform and onto the ground beneath it. How she's singularly focused on the moment, not being phased by any of the camera flashes that go off. Impressive for any model, but umas in particular have a nasty time with it. And Gold City doesn't even flinch. Same as our shoots. It's mesmerizing, really. Annyira elbűvölő. (So completely mesmerizing.)" Somehow, amid all this noise, I can hear a few people talk about what they're seeing.

"Woah…"
"She's even more beautiful in person…"
"That makeup is *so good* on her."
"That dress, though."
"Whoever hooks her is a lucky man."

Aaaaaaaaaand *that's* when I tune out. Don't want to hear *any* of that. Instead, I focus my attention on Gold City, who's now making her way back up the runway at this point and for the briefest of moments, I think her eyes drift. Again, it's only for a split second, but it's as if she consciously changed her focus to find me and did. I knew she was hoping to casually spot me in the crowd, but this feels… It feels targeted. Like she was *actively searching* for me among all these people. But then again, it easily could have been a trick of the light. My mind messing with me like it usually does. It was most likely nothing. Just me imagining things. Overthinking things. Abba kell hagynom, hogy ennyire reménykedjek. (I need to stop getting my hopes up so much.) By this point, the last few models are making their way down the runway, and Gold City is back inside the theater, getting ready for her performance. Meanwhile, I'm out here, considering the death of my professional career as a fashion photographer all because of *one* woman. The runway soon ends, and I feel Met tug at mt sleeve on my right.
"Dai. (Come on.) Time to head inside."

|-Inside the theater-|

Iki o sutte iki o hakinasai. (Breathe in and breathe out.)
Watakushi no kokoro o shūchū sasete kudasai. (Focus my mind.)
Watakushi no shinkei o ochitsukasete kudasai. (Calm my nerves.)

Iki o sutte iki o hakinasai. (Breathe in and breathe out.)
Watakushi no kokoro o shūchū sasete kudasai. (Focus my mind.)
Watakushi no shinkei o ochitsukasete kudasai. (Calm my nerves.)

Iki o sutte iki o hakinasai. (Breathe in and breathe out.)
Watakushi no kokoro o shūchū sasete kudasai. (Focus my mind.)
Watakushi no shinkei o ochitsukasete kudasai. (Calm my nerves.)

One more time, deep breaths through my diaphragm as I look at myself in the mirror. I wish my tail would sit still. It's getting uncomfortable like this, sitting in this stiff chair. That's when I hear a knock at the door. Must be Randy.
"I'm in here." I say as the door opens. Just as I thought, Randy walks through, eyes looking nervous. Je suppose que je ne suis pas le seul. (Guess I'm not the only one.)
"You looked good out there on the runway. Think you can handle this?" He asks me, giving me a once over to make sure everything is in place.
"This again?" I start, feeling a bit insulted by his question. "Yes, I can handle the performance. We always did winning concerts after every race. Of course, the racer who took the gold was the star of the show, and that wasn't always *me*. But I can handle myself on a stage, Randy." I briefly look at myself in the mirror through me peripheral vision before focusing back on Randy. "I'll be fine. Nothing that I can't handle."
"Just wanted to make sure. You looked a bit… Well I don't want to say unfocused because that seems disrespectful. Also, with the way the lighting was rigged and all the cameras it's possible that I was just seeing things." He says, and I immediately know what he means. I caught the briefest glimpse of her. Of Kati. In the crowd by the runway. It took *everything* I had to keep my head in place. Shikashi, watakushi no me... (But my eyes…) My eyes betrayed me in that moment. A mistake. A mistake that… only three people will truly know about. But enough on that.
"How much longer until I'm supposed to be in the wings?" I then ask, wanting to know what the time currently is. Randy pulls his jacket sleeve back for a moment to look at his watch before he gives me an answer.
"It's about nine fifteen. Riley should be close to the end of her performance. Not too long after that, ignoring stage crews getting everything in place for you, obviously." He says as he turns on his heel, but not before saying one last thing. "Good luck. An' give 'em one helluva show, City." For a brief moment, it feels as if Randy let something slip. That odd mask that he's been wearing ever since I met him. But I shouldn't ruminate on that. Not in a moment like this.
"I will."

Iki o sutte iki o hakinasai. (Breathe in and breathe out.)
Watakushi no kokoro o shūchū sasete kudasai. (Focus my mind.)
Watakushi no shinkei o ochitsukasete kudasai. (Calm my nerves.)

Iki o sutte iki o hakinasai. (Breathe in and breathe out.)
Watakushi no kokoro o shūchū sasete kudasai. (Focus my mind.)
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Iki o sutte iki o hakinasai. (Breathe in and breathe out.)
Watakushi no kokoro o shūchū sasete kudasai. (Focus my mind.)
Watakushi no shinkei o ochitsukasete kudasai. (Calm my nerves.)

"Everything should be in place. You ready?" One of the stage hands asks me as he finishes rolling back the winch that holds the backdrop up.

"Of course I'm ready." I tell him, taking one last deep breath to steady myself as the announcer begins to speak. She has a rather lovely voice. I wonder if she is one of the many actors who works here. Has she performed in any operas? A thought for another day.

"Picture this, if you will. It is the 18th Century. The late 1750s. The middle of the French and Indian War. A young and fair woman named Mathilde is, betrothed to the ever charming Louis. But duty calls, and Mathilde sees her love off as he must defend their home against the British redcoats who seeks to take it by force. She thinks nothing of it, at first. But when the battle concludes in a French victory and she finds herself at their usual waiting spot, the place their love first blossomed."

The music starts, and I walk out the spotlight immediately finding me as I roam around the stage, taking in the decor and props, doing my best to sell the bit. That I a*m* Mathilde searching for her beloved Louis. The music matches the scene, starting slow and quiet to set the pace.

"Mathilde waits and waits, becoming more and more restless ad Louis fails to arrive. 'Where could my beloved be?' She thinks to herself as she begins to search the surrounding woods for him."

I remember my notes. Gradually become more annoyed the longer the search goes on. And so I make some of my movements more and more erratic as I fail to find my beloved Louis. All while the announcer continues to tell the story, pacing her narrative in sync with the music as it grows more restless with each measure.

"Mathilde nearly gives up. She thinks that, perhaps, Louis had forgotten where they had planned to meet. A simple mistake. One that could be forgiven easily should they meet later in the night. But fate had other plans…"

I pause, noticing the glint by the front stage left corner. Comme prévu, naturellement. (As planned, naturally.) I make my way to it as the music pauses for dramatic effect. I look down to feign disbelief and sorrow.

"Mathilde learns that… Louis did not survive the battle. Perhaps in the most horrific and sorrowful way. She finds his body at the bottom of the falls, floating lifelessly by the shore. Mathilde's grief is immeasurable. She begins tearing away at the wedding gown she had made for their marriage. A gown she had tailored herself. Thread by thread. Sheet by shee. Until it is the most bare it can be while still covering her."

I make the motions, doing my best to sell the bit. Make it believable. Make it seem like I am grief stricken and mourning my soon to be husband. Peut-être d'une certaine façon... Je fais juste ça ce soir. (Perhaps in a way... I am doing just that tonight.) Because my mind drifts. I am simultaneously focused on the performance and thinking about Kati. How handsome she looked earlier. The blush on her face when I set my hand against her arm. How she looked so small and cute from the runway. How she'll… No. I can't think about that now. I *need* to focus. I drop to my knees, head in my hands, on half of my mind mock crying over the man that I will now never marry. The other

wrestling with this lingering demon of bisexuality that has clawed away at me for almost five months now. Then, I hear the announcer's voice once more.

"Mathilde's grief… cannot be assuaged. She cannot be consoled. Her one and only, her beloved Louis lies dead. Limply floating by the shore of the river at the base of the falls where his blood now staind the water a deep crimson. She then looks up, seeing the top of the falls. And it's then that a morbid solution presents itself."

I do as the story demands. I lift my head, jolting my shoulders to give the impression of one last sob raking my body. This is when the idea forms. Jump. Jump and see Louis once more.

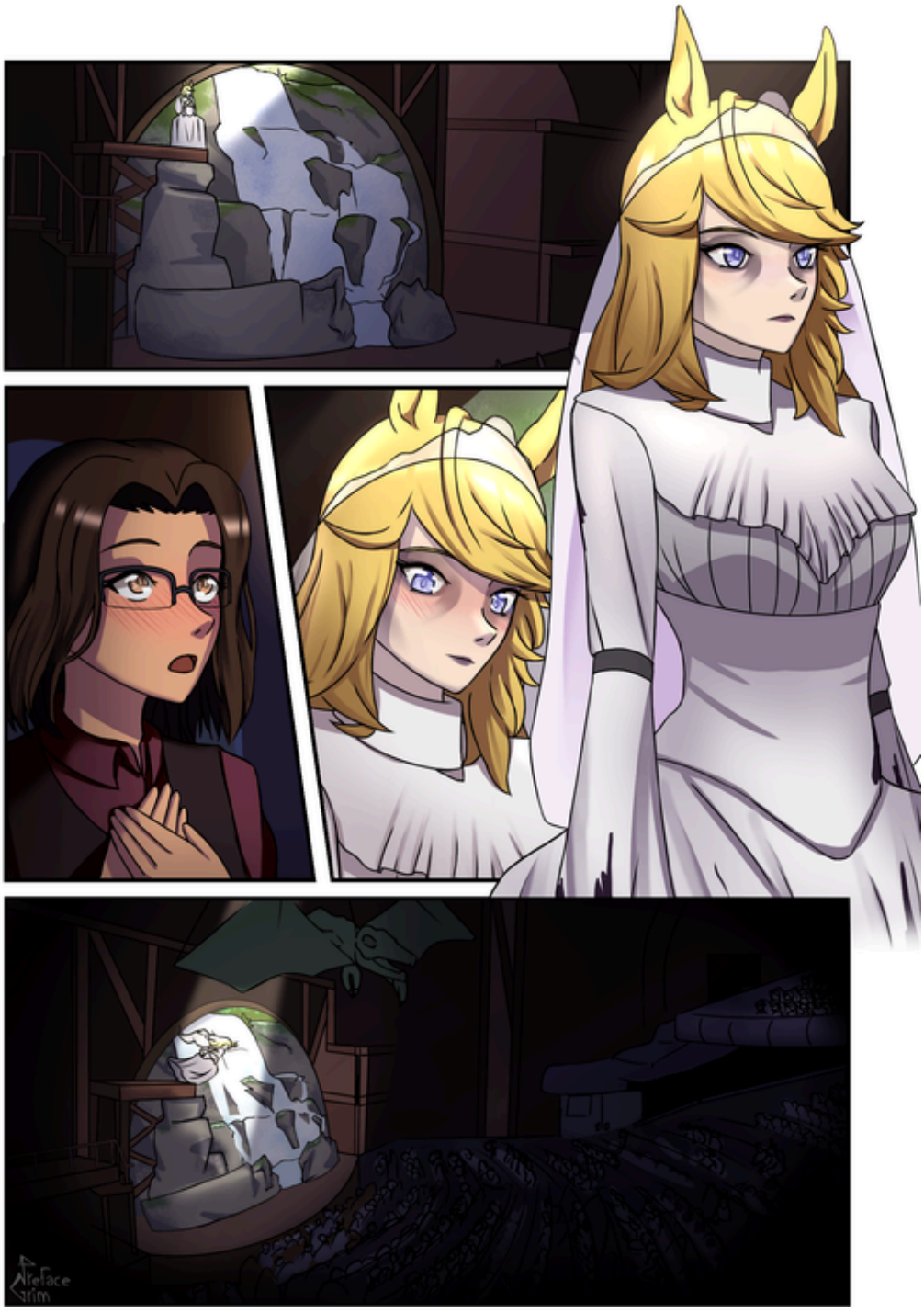
"She sees the water at the top. Sees it at the bottom. 'Yes. *This* is how I can see my beloved once more.' Mathilde thinks to herself as she begins to climb the falls."

I quickly make my way to the side of the platform's scaffolding, where I being to climb, my faux suicide being the only thing occupying my entire mind. I reach the top, make my way to the edge and look out, where the announcer gives her last bit of narration.

"Now at the top, the smallest hint of hesitation forms in Mathilde's mind. 'No. This is sinful. I cannot do this.' But it is overruled as she takes the last tentative steps towards her doomed fate."

This is when time feels like it stops. Da kara kanzen ni soshite totsuzen. (So completely and so suddenly.) For a brief moment, I *feel* Mathilde's hesitation. As if her spirit is possessing me in this moment. I scan the crowd one last time, and I find myself shocked by what I see. Whether it be coincidence or some unholy miracle, I find her. *I find Kati*. Her face… Her blush… Goddesses help me now. How I wish to see it everyday. Those kind and soft eyes seeing the real woman behind this forsaken and damnable mask. How she tears down all my defences and barriers with the slightest ease. And how I let her do so because I enjoy it. Moshi shunkan ga atta to shitara… *ima* ga sono toki da. (If ever there was a moment... *Now* is that time.) But enough of that. Because there is only *one* way forward if I'm even going to *consider* the first step. Time resumes. My foot leads… And gravity takes care of the rest as the music reaches it's final crescendo. One last bout of energy before the end comes. Before *my* end comes.

I fall.
I do not know where.
But I fall.



thud

The lights dim, and the audience is in an uproar. A deafening applause reaches my ears, yet I do not hear it. An active choice on my part.
Someone died tonight.
That someone was Gold City.
At least… the Gold City the world knew and admired and "loved".

In her place, there is someone else. Quelqu'un qui a tellement à apprendre sur lui-même. (Someone who has so much to learn about herself.)

Chapter 21: The After Effects

Chapter Notes

Art by maviena and beezlebuggie.

|-Thursday evening. The Gershwin Theater, 222 West 51st Street, Manhattan-|

"Ah, hush now, would ye? Don't be wantin' to let a soul know we're here." Jessica says as she shoves me past the wall to hide me. For someone *that* small, she sure is strong.
"Hey! Careful! You rip my dad's vest, you're payin for it." I tell her as I get steady on my feet. Sta tosa, ghe giuro a dio. (This girl, I swear to god.)
"Like hell she's payin' for it." Mark chimes in before lookin me dead in the eyes. "Impara a vivere un pò. (Learn to live a little.)" I go to respond to that but Kati cuts me off.
"SHH. Someone's coming. Be quiet." She says, peerin over the wall to see who it is. We then hear her take a deep breath, seemingly realizin who it is. Kati then looks back at us and makes a gesture sayin 'Stay here. I'll handle this.' She then walks out and starts talkin to whoever it is.

"Oh, Kati. You're still here?" Someone says in a gruff voice. Masculine, probably close to his thirties.
"Yeah. Still here Randy." Kati responds, givin me an answer to who she's talkin to. Vậy ra đó làgiọng của Randy. (So that's what Randy sounds like.)
"Looking for City, I take it?" Randy then asks, almost immediately peggin why Kati is back here.
"Who else would I be here for?" Kati retorts, givin him some sass. My pupil has learned well, it seems.
"Point taken. She's still in the dressing room. Just checked on her. Might want to hurry up though, place is about to close." Randy then says as he starts shufflin himself down the hallway. Kati comes back once it's clear and leads up down to the dressin rooms, but not before I catch my elbow on the corner of the wall. I try to not make any sound, but it seems like someone noticed. I turn around and see Randy just starin at me, dumbfounded. Tipico. (Typical)



"What the…" Is all he can muster out as I just stand there. It's funny. He's *shorter* than I thought he would be. Either way, I just give him a little wave and make my merry way to the dressin room with everyone else. Though now I'm curious… Tôi tự hỏi liệu người mẫu trông giống Ma Tràng đó có còn ở đây không. (I wonder if that one model who looked like Ma Tránh is still here.) Probably not, but it is an interestin thought.

We move silently through the halls, or at least as silent as we can given that I am *fuckin six foot ten*. I have loud footsteps you can hear a mile away. Doesn't matter since there doesn't seem to be

anyone else here at the moment. From the sounds of things, I'd say we're not that far from the dressin room. Only a few more steps if I'm bein conservative. And that hunch turns out to be right as Kati starts slowin her pace as she approaches a closed door. I look at the signage near it and it confirms everything.
'Ladies dressing room'
Ben alora, ła dovarìa esar na situasion interesante. (Well then, this should be an interestin situation to be in.) Kati knocks on the door, waitin a few seconds where it then slowly opens, followed by a familiar voice comin from the other side.
"Kati, I… What are you still doing here?" City asks her, confused as to why Kati has stuck around.
"I, uh… well, *we* wanted to congratulate you." Kati responds, makin City even more confused.
"We? Wha… Who do you me-" She starts before I cut her off, leanin over Kati from behind the door, gettin a surprised look on City's face.
"Hi." I say as Mark and Jessica then move out from behind the door. City can only laugh in response before she speaks up.
"You are just… I'm surprised. Really surprised." She says as I give her a once over. Her posture, her stance. Her general body language. Somethins tellin me that what happened tonight had a major effect on her. And I think I know what. But for now, I'll just observe. I don't want to jump the gun.
"It, uh… It was Jessica's idea." Kati says as City looks to Jessica.
"This was your idea? All four of you coming back here?" She asks her, causin a large smile to form on Jessica's face.
"Ah, sure, after a night like this, the only proper way to congratulate someone is in person, so it is." She says, smile beamin so bright it could light up a cave.
"I guess that's just how it is in Ireland, yes?" City says as Mark replies.
"If it helps ya rationalize what's happenin', yeah." He says before lookin at me. Seems like he's noticed what I have. He then turns back to City. "So are all of us allowed in, or do da men need to stay out?"
"Usually I'd say to stay out but given that everyone else is gone, I see no harm in it." City says, openin the door all the way so the four of us can enter, Kati first, then Mark and Jessica before-

whack

"EUGH. Địt mẹ. (Fuck.)" Comes out of my mouth as my head makes contact with the top of the door frame. *Why is that so damn short?*
"Oh, Met. Are you okay?" I hear Kati say as she runs over to me.
"Yeah, I'm fine. I've had worse, you know that." I say as I rub my forehead, duckin down and slippin through so that no other accidents my happen.
"Ya owe me ten bucks, Jessica." Mark says, clearly havin made a bet on whether I would knock my head against somethin tonight before I got to their apartment.
"Stronzo. (Asshole.)" I say to him as I take stock of the room. Hmm… smaller than I thought it would be. Kind of like Randy. "Pretty quaint little place they put you in."
"Yes, it is. I'm surprised everyone could fit in here given how many models were walking tonight." City says, agreein with my assessment as she makes room for the four of us. But there's somethin in the way she walks. It wasn't present like it was earlier in the month when I ran into her and Kati in Central Park. An… uncertainty. No. No l'incertesa. (No. Not uncertainty.) She is *absolutly* certain of… *somethin*. What that *somethin* is, well I have a pretty good idea. I could see it in her body language on the runway. She didn't seem as focused as I thought she would. Somethin was clawin at the back of her mind. And it came roarin to the forefront durin her performance. She's fallen. *Hard*. The question now is: Can she deal with this? Chỉ thời gian mới trả lời được. (Only time can tell.)

I find a good spot that can accomodate me easily and park there, watchin over everyone else in the room like a wizard watches the kingdom from his tower. Reminds me, still need to get that one photo of me and popà framed. Halloween, 2013. Gandalf and Aragorn. Cuttin back to reality, I watch as Jessica gives City a once over. Okay, scratch that. More like a *four over* with how many times her eyes go up and down.
"It's so… *ethereal*. I like it, so I do. No, not just like it. I love it." She says, causin City to chuckle a little as Mark decides to chime in.
"Youse ain't the only one who loves it, Jess." He says, not so subtly side-eyein Kati as he does so. No. Non sul mio orologio ti putto siciliano. (Nope. Not on my watch you Sicilian bastard.) I reach over and grab Mark by the collar of his shirt, hoistin him up just as casually as he glared at Kati.
"YOU MOTHERFU-" He starts but the sound of the ladies laughin gets him to shut up.
"Seems they disagree with you." I tell Mark as I set him down, though he does not move from his position. In fact, he gets closer to me. Seems he wants a bit of a private talk.
"Da quando ne hai parlato ieri sera, non posso non vederlo. (Ever since you mentioned it last night, I can't *unsee* it.)" He says, keepin his voice as low as possible so City doesn't hear him. Don't think it will work as much as he wants, but we're also speakin Italian. No ła saverà comunque cossa che disemo. (She won't know what we're sayin anyway.)
"È curioso come ciò accada, non credi? (Funny how that happens, don't you think?)" I say, ponderin what the say next. I've know Mark for a few years now. I can trust him with a lot of things. *Usually*. This is an entirely different beast. Don't know if I can trust him enough to not make a fool of himself. "Ho bisogno che tu mi faccia un favore. (I need you to do me a favor.)" I say, gettin his full, undivided attention. But he doesn't speak, not yet. That's just how he is. He asks questions after eharin someone out. Tôi thích điều đó ở anh ấy. Điều đó có nghĩa là anh ta rất nghiêm túc với mọi việc. (I like that about him. It means he takes shit seriously.) "Ogni volta che ti trovi con Gold City e Kati, osservali da vicino. Ma non renderlo ovvio. So che non sei attento come me. (Whenever you find yourself with Gold City and Kati, watch them closely. But don't make it obvious. I know you're not as observant as me.)" Mark looks down for a second before he returns his eyes on me.
"Non posso fare promesse ma ci proverò. Lo vedi anche tu, immagino? (Can't make any promises but I'll try. You're seeing it too, I assume?)" He responds, now lookin at Gold City. I can see it clearly, every minute fidget she makes. Every sneaky glance towards Kati. Don't know how much Mark can see, but I *know* he sees some of it.
"Tutto. Ecco perché ti chiedo di guardarli. (All of it. That's why I'm asking you to watch them.)" I tell him, now lookin at Kati, how her face is slowly turnin redder and redder, usin the dim lights in the space to try and mask the blush. Ma la vedo. (But I see it.) And City sees it too. "Ancora. Non renderlo ovvio. Basta uno sguardo ogni tanto. Probabilmente avrai maggiori possibilità di farlo se Jessica è nei paraggi. (Again. Don't make it obvious. Just a glance every now and then. Probably have better chances of doing this if Jessica is around.)" Mark just nods at that. No more words spoken. No more words are necessary.

I watch as Jessica yawns pretty wide. Gets Kati and City yawnin too. Even Mark. But not me. I'm used to being up this late. Though I so suppose I need to head home. No voéo ciapàr ła "rabia" de Scott. (I don't want to incur Scott's "wrath".) But I'm not the first to speak.
"I should really be heading home now. It's gotten late and the theater should be closing for the night soon." City says, getting a defeated look form Jessica before she eventually relents.
"Ah, sure it is that. And don't let us be blockin' your way." She says as she looks to Mark. He moves towards her, whisperin somethin in her ear that I don't particularly care for. I do care about what Kati says, though.
"Do you, uh… Do you have a ride back to your apartment? Or did Randy get you here?" She asks, and I watch as those tiny, near invisible fidgets return to City's hands as she responds.

"He did, yes. I don't want to saddle you with this, but if it's alr-" She stars, but Kati cuts her off before she can finish the thought.
"Oh, of course. Don't worry about it. I'll stay behind and wait for you to change out of that before we head south." She says as Mark walks towards me, words comin out in English rather than Italian this time.
"Guess dis is our cue to leave. Big boy heah bummed a ride wit us." He says, thinkin that I'm heading back to Brooklyn with them before I head back to the Bronx.
"What? Nah, I'm headin straight home. There's a metro station, like, two hundred feet from here." I say, gaugin. Mark's reaction as he formulates a response.
"Cawse yuh'd say dat." He finally responds, turnin around and headin for the door, but not before I catch one last thing. "Asshole." I linger for a few seconds, makin sure they're gone before I head out myself. But before I do, I turn back to see Kati and City one last time.

"See you two around. Take it easy. Be safe." To them, it's just a goodbye for the night. For me, it's somethin else. Xe una vana speranza che i tiri avanti. (It's a vain hope they pull through.)

|-Friday morning. Noonan Towers, 939 Woodycrest Avenue, the Bronx-|

I can't tell if it's my glasses or something else, but my vision seems kind of blurry right now. Probably my glasses. I'll need to clean them off when I get home. Vagy nézd meg, hogy szükségem van-e új receptre. (That, or see if I need a new prescription.) Probably the second one. Doesn't matter, we're at City's apartment now. We both linger in my car for a second. I… don't quite know why. The silence in here is tense until City breaks it.
"You're welcome to come in for a little bit if you want to. I wouldn't mind the company." She says, offering me an invitation. I don't know if I should take it. Would it be wrong of me to? No, it wouldn't. It's not like I haven't accepted this *before*. But at the same time, it's past midnight. I need to head home. A few seconds goes by and it feels like a lifetime. But I do eventually answer.
"Probably against my better judgment, but sure. Why not?" I say as I unbuckle my seatbelt, hearing City do the same. We cross the street and enter her apartment building, making a b-line for the elevator to take us up to the 17th floor. That painful silence comes back though. It stays the entire time. *Nem tetszik. (I don't like it.)*

We eventually reach the 17th floor and exit the elevator, heading to room 1708. We reach the door, and City puts her keys in, unlocking and then pushing the door open, allowing both of us to enter her apartment, the silence following us as we do. I watch City slip her shoes off, immediately regretting it as my mind starts going to places it shouldn't. So I turn away from her, taking my shoes off as well, setting them down with a soft *thud*. I don't really know what else to do here, so I head over to the couch while City heads to the kitchenette, presumably to get herself a glass of water. How she manages to look just a beautiful outside that dress, in those simple black clothes, astounds me. I sit down and take a deep breath. I try not to let my mind go to those places, but after tonight… It'll be hard.

I hear soft footfalls on the tiles behind me transition to nothing as I feel the sofa settle next to me. I look over and see City has two glasses of water, one for me and one for her. She extends her arm, wanting me to take one.
"Here. You look like you could use some." She says, seemingly having noticed whatever blush is on my face. I take the glass and sip a little. Szép. Szép és menő. (It's nice. Nice and cool.) I take another sip before turning slight to look at City, though I don't make eye contact.
"Thanks." Is all I can muster out as a whimper. And City notices. Because of course she notices.
"You look a bit nervous. Is everything okay?" She asks, almost causing my mind to burst at the seams.

"Yeah, I… I'm fine. Nothing wrong at all." I say, voice still shaky and lacking confidence in the lie. And once again, City notices.
"Please don't lie to me. Remember what I said the other day? How I'm open to listening to things if you want to get something off your chest? Please, tell me what's wrong." She responds, laying out an interesting path for me to take. A dangerous one, but still interesting. I take another deep breath, trying to figure out what I can say. If I should even go down that path. For the second time tonight, I go against my better judgment.
"It's just… I… I feel…" I start, but the words won't come out easily. It gets to the point where rational thought takes over. "I was thinking that… No. No, I… I can't do this. I can't say *this*. Not to you." City gently places her hand on my shoulder in response.
"Yes you can, Kati. I won't judge. Je vous le promets. (I promise.)" She responds, both calming my nerves and making my heart beat so fast it feels like it'll burst out of my chest. Another deep breath. Another sip of water.
"I just… You looked so beautiful on the runway on in the theater that I… My mind couldn't help itself and I…" I trail off again as my eyes meet hers for the first time today through this cloudy haze. The thought forms, and before rational thought can protest, the words come out. "Would it… be alright if I…" It takes hole, stopping me in my tracks. "No. I can't do that. I can't say *that* to you. You… You'd think less of me." City just looks at me, hand leaving my shoulder, trailing down.
"I… Wow. You were really about to go there, weren't you?" She says, and at first I prepare for the worst. Prepare for rejection. But that's not what I get. "You would like that, wouldn't you?" It's not harsh. It's not angry. It's… Valami más. (Something else.) But I don't know what. At least until City speaks up again. "Certainly an interesting thought."
"No, don't…" I start, stoping abruptly to think about my next words carefully. "Don't entertain my delusions. Please." Gold just looks at me with those gorgeously pale blue eyes of hers. And then she places her hand on top of mine, gently squeezing it to try and reassure me that nothing about this is wrong. She then speaks up again.
"I think… That I wouldn't be opposed to something like that. That I want to know what it feels like." She says, eyes never leaving mine, even as her face flushes red with blood as she blushes hard before she speaks up one last time. "Tonight was… certainly an experience. Eye-opening at that. So much was going through my mind, but you were the one constant. The one thing that kept me going throughout all of it. Everything we have done so far… It means a lot to me. *You* mean a lot to me." She pauses for a second, collecting her thoughts before she continues. "I *want* to know what it feels like. To be intimate with another woman. And I think that I trust *you* enough to show me."

The haze gets thicker as my heart rate spikes. I can only imagine how fast City's heart is beating as I watch her lean in. I then do so, whether consciously or not, I don't know. All I know is that we're getting closer and closer.
"Is… Is this really okay…" I whimper as the distance between us grows smaller and smaller. And City gives me an answer. Not with words, but with her lips. My eyes go wide as I actually process what's happening. Gold City's lips. Against mine. They are… Sokkal puhább, mint azt valaha is el tudtam volna képzelni. (So much softer than I ever could have imagined.) Once I accept that this is happening, I close my eyes, wanting to savor and enjoy every last second of this while it lasts. Her hand shifts so that our fingers can be laced together while we kiss, but I break it. My right hand finds her left, fingers locking as my left hand comes to rest on her cheek, where we then break away for a few seconds, eyes meeting while we catch our breath.
"That felt…" City starts, trailing off only slightly before she continues. "Très bien. (Really nice.) But it can be better." She follows up with her lips once more, pressing the soft skin to mine, this time with more purpose. City *wants* to make this enjoyable for both of us.

And I'll be damned if I don't match her energy.

My hands move again, coming to rest on City's hips where I slowly push her onto her back, something that she does not protest. In fact, she goes with the flow, letting it happen. The result is me on top of her, now grazing the pale skin of her neck with my teeth, leaving small, but noticeable marks in my way. I listen closely to all the sounds City is making. Every small groan and sigh of content as my hands now wander over her torso, wanting to feel more. But I need to make sure it's okay to do that before anything else. I push myself away slightly, making direct eye contact as I ask the question.
"How… How far are you comfortable with this going?" I ask, watching her eyes look up and down my body before she responds.
"As far as you want it to go, I'll follow." She responds, prompting me to move my left hand over her right breast.
"So… If I did this…" I trail off, hand hovering over her chest, waiting for consent. "It would be alright?" City responds by taking my hand in hers and gently lowering it until I am cupping her right breast.
"More than alright." She says as she snakes her hand behind my head, slowly pulling me back down to her where our lips meet once more. I shift, one leg crossing the other so that we are comfortable doing this. I break from City's lips again, tilting her head slightly so that I can have good access to her plump neck. I lightly rake my teeth against her skin, eliciting a soft moan from her lips as I kiss the small pain away. It's at this point my hand finds it's way underneath her shirt, and she immediately knows what I want to do. City pushes me to a sitting position as she rises, looking deep into my eyes as she pulls at the hem of her shirt, lifting it over her head before throwing it to the floor. She then looks at me, face flushed red with blood from arousal and exertion.
"I can't be the only one undressing, can I?" She asks as she starts to unbutton my vest. I let her before I undo my shirt, deftly loosening the buttons before it too is thrown to the side. I feel her hands reach around my back, trying to unclasp my bra so that everything can be laid bare. I hear a soft *click*, and then the garment slides off my chest as I watch City reach behind her, doing the same before she gently places her hands on my head, craning my neck where she does to me what I just did to her.

"Ó, hűha... (Oh, wow…) Didn't expect that from you." I whimper out, taking in the sensations as they come.
"Let's just say I'm a fast learner…" Gold retorts as she unbuttons her pants, moving back from me slightly so she can pull them off her legs. Before I know it, those too are thrown to the wayside as she spreads herself as much as the sofa allows her to, inviting me in so that we can continue. I take the invitation, leaning back in, lips meeting hers as my hands roam over her stomach. The perfect blend of soft and toned. What I would expect from someone who spent almost three years running some of Japan's toughest tracks. My hands go lower and lower as Gold drapes her arms over my shoulders, letting all of this intimacy happen without so much as a second thought. I decide to be bold, letting my hands go as low as they can, a finger sliding beneath the fabric of her underwear where I start to circle the sensitive bud that is hidden away. Another soft moan comes from her lips as she leans up and nibbles at my ear. It makes me chuckle slightly as I turn my head, looking deeply into those pale blue eyes before I close the distance and press my lips to hers once more. It starts slow, just a few tense circles at first. But as we get more comfortable with this, I ramp up the pace as I feel my wrist getting tired from the motions I break away again, looking into those blue eyes just to make sure.
"Is… This okay?" I ask, watching as City writhes gently beneath me, eyes trying to focus on me through their half-lidded stupor.
"C'est... c'est... (It's… it's…)" She struggles at first as her breath becomes slightly ragged, but the words come out one way or another. "It's more than okay, Kati… Keep going, please." I waste no

time, taking my hand back and hooking my fingers into the waist band of her underwear, slowly sliding the fabric off of her and then discarding it, just as everything else has been. I take one look at the sight before me and feel my heartrate spike. Nem tudtam, hogy ennél erősebben tud verni. (Didn't know it could beat any harder.) I gently push her legs apart, leaving a trail of fire as I press my lips to the skin of her legs, slowly making my way to where I want to be. Once I'm close, I look back up, wanting to make sure that *this* is okay. No words are spoken, just a nod. But it's all I need to-

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I shoot up to a sitting position, my alarm sounding louder than it usually is. Guess I must've been really tired after last night. But that dream… A fenébe is, miért? Miért történik ez folyton? (God dammit why? Why does this keep happening?) I need a shower. A hot and long one. So I get out of bed and walk over to the bathroom, taking off my pajamas and turning on the hot water. I step in, immediately letting the heat wash away whatever sin I had been soaking in during the night. Nem akarok tovább meredezni ebben az érzésben. (I don't want to steep in that feeling any longer.) I just stand there, eyes closed, head tilted down. Shame and guilt washing over every fiber of my being alongside the water. I don't know how long I've been in here, but it feels like an eternity. Long enough for the water to start feeling cool, so I turn the handle in order for the heat to return again. Maybe it'll be hot enough for me to melt away in here. But that doesn't happen. And somehow, I manage to turn off the water and step out. I start drying off and head back into my bedroom afterwards, hearing my phone buzz as I start getting dressed. I walk over and see it's a text from Randy. Oh right… That…

'Heading up to Claremont Park in twenty. Expect to see you there.'

|-Later that morning. Claremont Park, Clay Avenue & 8016 East 170th Street-|

Zborowski Point, huh? That's where we're meetin' at? Oughta be a gazebo-lookin' thang up on the north end of the park. I hop out of my car and start walkin', passin' by a few folks out for their mornin' jog and others just loungin' in that crisp fall air. Ain't but a minute 'fore I spot that gazebo, and sure as she said she'd be, Kati's sittin' right in there. I mosey on up, lettin' her get a good look at me.
"Oh, Randy. Right on time." She says, but somethin' ain't right. Plenty ain't, if I'm tellin' the truth. But I can smooth over those wrinkles later. For now…
"You say that like I'm late all the time." I fire back, watchin' a funny look creep onto her face while I keep on jawin'. "Lincoln Park. That's out next shoot. Autumn chic is the theme. I was thinking about using the fisheye again."
"Oh, uh… Yeah, I can work with that." Kati says, straightening up[when it's mentioned. We ain't used the fisheye but a few times, but every time we have, it's been a sight to see. Seems like that's out ace in the hole. I like that. Reckon Kati and City do too. "EF 8-15mm again? or do you want me to use a different fisheye?"
"I was thinking an AstrHori 6mm f2.8. You don't need to worry about buying one yourself. I already went out and got you one the other day. Should be arriving at your doorstep sometime Monday." I say, watchin' her face go through a right mess of emotions. Even the one that's got me a little skittish. It's just a blink, but I know it all too well. No, what I *ain't* ready fer…

"Is Gold up to date? Does she have any clothes for this? You said 'autumn chic', right? Does she know about the lens we're using?" Kati starts in on me, and it hits me that I oughta have been ready for somethin' like this. I keep my breath even, then I giver her my answer.
"No. Not yet at least." I start, catchin' that little ol' bit of mad creep onto her face. "I told her to take today and the weekend to rest. I'll let her know on Monday." I wrap it up, watchin' that mad on Kati's face ease off some. But that thang I been seein' for goin' on three weeks now is still hangin' around. An' it gits my goat that I cain't put my finger on it. Worry? Unease? Naw. I reckon I been more than easy on Kati and her ways so far. Leastways, I *hope* to goodness I have.
"Who are… Who are we working with for this one?" I hear Kati askin', joltin' me out of my daydream. She reckons it's another mag shoot, and she ain't too far off. More like a particular designer from Old Bridge's Waterpass Outlet - Douglas Howley.
"Douglas Howley. Works for Waterpass Outlet based in Old Bridge Township. I pegged him as someone we could potentially work with at the end of September but he wanted to see more of City in action before he made a conclusive decision. Seems last night's show impressed him." I tell her, rememberin' what that up-can-comin' big shot said to me and Brouillard 'fore we headed into the theater for the shows.

'A model who can perform is a model who can last a lifetime.'

That sorta thing sticks with ya. And Gold City, she's right at home on that stage, what with havin' to play all them shows after every race. But then again… would it be wrong of me to put her through that? Have I already done her dirty by movin' her here to New York for a whole year? 'Cause I've seen the looks folks give her when she's out and about. *That* kinda attention. The grins and the peepers. The fangs and the bait. The sneers and the grimaces. *The hawk-eyed looks*. Some folks ain't cut out for the limelight. I know Kati's one of them, but I'm startin' to reckon Gold City's one of them too. I sure don't blame her none. I ain't too keen on it either. I'd rather stay back in the sticks. But with what we do, sometimes that limelight's just bound to find ya. No two ways about it. Anyhow, I'm fixin' to have a sit-down with City on Monday. Pray she's in better spirits by then. She looked… kinda off last night. Like somethin' was eatin' at her. Maybe this three-day break'll help her get her head on straight. Speakin' 'bout folks who ain't got their head on straight…

"One last thing before I let you go." I git started, drawin' Kati's eye right off. She perks up quick, movin' so fast her glasses 'bout slip off her face. "Is everything alright? You've seemed kind of… spacey these last few weeks." I keep on, watchin' a little bit of red creep up on her face, makin' her shut down all quick like. Like she's guitly of somethin'. Can't see her face clear, but I know it's got that same ol' look on it again. And I know she's fixin' to tell me a lie, say she's doin' fine, that it ain't nothin'. that ever'thins right as rain in her camp even though we both know good and well it ain't what it looks like. And the worst part is that I"m gon' let her get away with it, 'cause I don't want her to feel like I'm puttin the squeeze on her. 'Cause I still ain't got a clue what's eatin' at her.
"Uh, yeah. I'm fine. Maybe a bit tired from all the work, but fine." Kati starts tellin' that lie, and I'm seein' through it. Mostly 'cause she ain't lookin' at me. She's lookin' *past* me, like I ain't even here. I get that she's shy and all, but bless her heart, this is jsut flat-out embarrassin'.
"Are you sure? Again, you don't seem to be all there. You *can* talk to me. At least, I hope you trust me enough to say certain things in confidence. I understand if you don't." I answer back, aimin' to get Kati as settled as she can be. Get her head right so she can spill the tea. But it ain't workin'. Not right this minute, leastways. Not like I figured it would fix things right off. Keep my hopes low, and all.
"Yes. Very sure. Just… not used to working with one person for so long. And then…" She starts to fade out, like she's wishin' she never started that thought. My eyes spill the beans, and this time, it takes. I catch a slice of the why. A half-baked truth at best, which is likely all I'm gonna get for now. "I don't… like the attention that much. Being recognized and spotted like I'm a zoo animal.

Utálom a paparazzikat... (I hate paparazzi…)" The tail end of it slips out like a whisper, and I reckon I catch her drift.
"Yeah, me too. Paparazzi are scum. They contribute nothing and sometimes make someone's life worse. You're not alone with that thought." I say as I plop down in this gazebo, the crisp fall air driftin' through free as leaves get whisked up in the breeze. Kati does the same, lettin' her legs take a load after Lord knows how long she's been standin'. "It doesn't get much better, honestly. Which is horrible to think about, but that's just how it is. Some things are beyond our control. I think City would know about that more than both of us."
"Maybe she can teach you a few things on how to deal with them." Kati says, half-laughin' as the words slip out, hidin' what's goin' on in her head with that dry, Hungarian humor. Is dry even the right word? Don't matter none. Ain't important.
"Maybe we both could." I say as I get back on my feet, keepin' my hand low, tellin' Kati to stay put. Reckon she could use a breather. "I need to head down to Old Bridge. Talk to Douglas about what he clothing he wants to showcase. I'll see you then." I say as I start heading back to my car, leaving Kati to chew on those words. But the more steps I take, the more it feels like a big 'ol mistake. This poor girl... Vad har jag gjort med ditt liv? (What have I done to your life?)

|-That afternoon. Morningside Park, Morningside Drive, Manhattan-|

I take a deep breath, letting the cool autumn air fill my lungs. I'm still shaken by last night. All the things that were running through my mind. How it all made me feel. The things it… made my subconscious conjure up while I slept. Sono kōkei wa marude shinsen na mama no yō ni, ima mo nao nokotte iru. (The scenes still linger, as if they were fresh.) I felt so dirty, so… wrong to think of Kati in that way. Not even a long shower could seemingly remove the invisible filth that I was covered in. Yet at the same time, considering *everything* that I have to rethink and revaluate, it felt oddly right. And that's the part I hate most. That the dream was sensual and intimate, yet still soft and tender. It felt like I was peering into another timeline. Seeing a different way events could have unfolded. The way Kati's words entered my ears, soothing every insecurity I had. Those little nothings whispered, the ones that you only tell someone when you *know* you feel a certain way about them. Ce serait agréable d'avoir ça maintenant... (Would be nice to have that now...) To have her here to reassure me that everything I feel towards her is valid. That it can be reciprocated. That we *can* make this work. But then again… How could we make it work? There's still so much about this that I don't know. It's not enough to acknowledge that one can be queer. De mo, sono genjitsu o ukeireru dake no tsuyo-sa ga jibun ni arudarō ka? (But am I strong enough to accept that reality?) Am I *ready* to aceept that I am falling in love with another woman?

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My thoughts get interrupted as I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. Someone is calling me. It's not Jordan or Palmer. I already talked to them this morning. Maybe Victor? I quickly reach into my blazer's pocket to grab my earbuds before I take out my phone and immediately see that this is different. It's not Victor.

It's Père.

I connect my earbuds to my phone and answer immediately, Père's gruff voice coming through clearly as he answers.
"Ah, City." He opens with, voice gruff, but also calming. Je ne savais pas que je devais l'entendre tant. (Didn't know I needed to hear him this much.) "Comment vous êtes-vous passé, mon petit

trésor? (How have you been. my little treasure?)"
"J'ai été bien, Père. Et vous? (I've been well, Père" What about you?)" I respond, taking a deep breath so my heart can stay steady as his voice comes into my ears again.
"J'ai certainement vu de meilleurs jours. Bien que je puisse dire que c'est une journée beaucoup meilleure maintenant que j'entends votre voix. Ça fait trop longtemps depuis que nous avons parlé la dernière fois. (I've certainly seen better days. Though I can say that it is a much better day now that I'm hearing your voice. It's been too long since we last talked.)" He says, a slight amount of joy filling his voice as he speaks.
"Oui, c'est vrai. Nous avons parlé la dernière fois, la dernière fois que je suis revenu au Japon? Bien sûr, avant de m'emballer pour l'Amérique, je le sais. (Yes, it has been. We last spoke, what, last time I returned to Japan? Certainly before I packed up for America, I know that.)" I then say, hearing a sigh from Père on the other end as he ponders his next words.
"Non, ce n'aurait pas pu être avant. Ou est-ce Victor que vous avez parlé la journée avant de partir aux États-Unis? En parlant de votre frère, il m'a montré les vidéos de hier soir ce matin. Vous avez l'air étonnant, comme toujours. (No, it couldn't have been before then. Or was it Victor you spoke to the day before you left for America? Speaking of your brother: He showed me the footage from last night this morning. You looked stunning, as always.)" Père responds, and hearing that Victor showed him the footage of the fashion show irks me. *I* should be the one sharing yet. Yet he always got to it before I could. "Chute de la Dame Blanche, non?"
"Oui, Chute de la Dame Blanche. Nous avons travaillé avec Miquel Brouillard qui est basé à Montréal. Je voulais travailler avec lui depuis longtemps, alors c'était agréable d'avoir finalement l'opportunité. (Yes, Chute de la Dame Blanche. We worked with Miquel Brouillard who is based in Montreal. I've been wanting to work with him for a long time, so it was nice to finally have the opportunity.)" I tell Père, my own voice filling with pride as I remember some of the night. I kept seeing every major modeling and fashion magazine saying that it was the best piece I've ever showcased, and looking back on last night, I'm finding it harder to disagree.
"Votre grand-mère aurait aimé ça, vu comment elle était de Boitschatel. (Your grandmother would've loved that, seeing as how she was from Boitschatel.)" He then says. My grandmother… Come to think of it, I don't know if I've ever actually met Père's parents. That is… Zotto suru kangae da. (A horrifying thought.)
"Je suis sûr qu'elle l'aurait fait. Est-ce que je l'ai rencontrée? Votre mère? Vous n'avez toujours eu qu'une louange à dire à propos d'elle. (I'm sure she would have. Did I ever meet her? Your mother? You've always had nothing but praise to say about her.)" I respond, unsure if I should bring something like that up. But Père doesn't seem to mind it, giving me a *very* concrete answer.
"Malheureusement, non. Elle est morte deux ans avant votre naissance. (Unfortunately, no. She died two years before you were born.)" He says, voice becoming somber as I look out towards the pond, starting blankly at the waterfall. Naturally, my mind starts to wander.

All the little things that I let slip by between me and Kati. All the things I could've said. Could've *done* to show her that… Maybe I'm not as certain of myself as I claim to be. And then, as if on cue, the little wendigo and oni appear on my shoulders, whispering their venom and poison into my ears.
Foolish little girl. This can only end ONE way.
Oh please, like I'm afraid of that.
You should be. Think about how many women in your position had everything come crashing down because OF WHOM they decided to pursue.
Are you trying to tell me that queer models can't exist? Because Helios being openly bisexual runs counter to your narrative, little oni.
She is the exception that proves the rule.
You should listen to us. Listen to your conscious.

"City? Mon petit trésor? Vous êtes là? (City? My little treasure? Are you there?)" I hear Père say, snapping me out of whatever fugue state I found myself in while banishing the oni and wendigo to whatever decrepit pit they crawled out of.
"Uh… Oui, je suis toujours ici. (Yes, I'm still here.)" I respond, voice weak though I try to hide it.
"Bon. J'ai peur de devoir terminer ceci ici. J'ai quelques choses à attendre sur la ferme. J'espère que vous appréciez le reste de votre journée, mon petit trésor. (Good. I'm afraid I'll have to end this here. I have some things to attend to on the farm. I hope you enjoy the rest of your day, my little treasure.)" He says, something that brings my day down a little. I was hoping to talk with him a bit longer. "C'était agréable de vous parler, City. (It was nice to talk to you, City.)"
"Je peux dire la même chose, Père. (I can say the same thing, Père.)" I say as he hangs up. As much as I wish we could've talked longer, he is a busy man. I reach up to take the earbuds out, sighing as I place them back into my blazer pocket. I take one last look at the waterfall before I turn on my heel and start walking south. The click of my heels against the cobble pavers beneath me is enough to keep my mind from wandering, but I don't know for how long. It's then that I feel a yawn come upon me, and I do not fight it. With everything that has been on my mind since yesterday, it was hard to get a good night's sleep. I take the moment to listen to my surroundings, taking in the noises that permeate the air on Manhattan Island. Central Park isn't too far from here if I'm not mistaken. Maybe I can go to the North Wood to try and clear my head. Īe. Mattaku warui kangae de wa arimasen. (No. Not a bad idea at all.) I open my eyes and start to make me way there when I come across something, or rather *someone*, I was not expecting to see today.

Kati. All by herself. Sitting on a bench. Uchū tte hontō ni omoshiroi yūmoa ga aru ne… (The universe sure has a funny sense of humor...)

I stop, heels no longer making noise and it seems that absence catches Kati's attention. Her head snaps to where she thinks she heard something, only to find me, and her face flushes with red. As a result, Kati looks down at the ground, hoping that I didn't see it. Of course, I did. But for her sake, I'll pretend I didn't. Not that it matters. I can feel blood rushing to my head as the sight of her is enough to bring back last night's dream. I slowly approach, letting her know I'm here. That this isn't some kind of dream.
"Well… Wasn't expecting to see you out today." I say, taking note of how her eyes are effectively glues to the ground."
"I, uh… I can say the same about you." Kati responds, voice trembling with anxiety. I know that she most likely feels a *certain kind of way* towards me, but this… Je me sents mal pour elle, honnêtement. (I feel bad for her, honestly.) "Randy says you have today and the weekened for rest and releaxation."
"That I do. Room for one more?" I ask, watching her blush become more fierce as she processes the question. But she does pay it some heed, sliding over to give me some room. I then sit down, looking into the softball diamond Kati was, though I don't think she was interested in the game that was being played here. No, her mind is somewhere else. And I think I know where. The way she avoids eye contact with me. How fidgety and nervous she seems to be. She must've had another fantasy last night. Just like I did. Looks like it did a number on her as well. Wouldn't be surprised to hear her say she didn't get a lot of sleep last night after she got home. "Simply out and about? Wanting to take in some sun before the days get too short?" I ask, wanting to make some small talk to try and ease the tension that has been built up so far.
"Uh, yeah. Something like that" She says, voice still trembling but at least she is able to look at me this time. Well, look in my *general direction*. "Didn't… really sleep well, last night."
"Me neither. But that's just par for the course in my life. Makes sense why I'm such a late riser now, doesn't it?" I respond, catching Kati sneaking quick glances at me in the corner of her eyes every so often. It's hard not to feel like I'm in a trance looking at her. For as much as she compliments my beauty, she is quite the looker herself. Especially with the glasses and how they frame those

gorgeous brown eyes of hers.
"I… can certainly see that now." Kati feebly retorts, voice still nervous, though she is more comfortable. That much I can tell. I just wish… Kanojo ga ima konna ni kokoro o tozashite inakere ba ī no ni to omou. (Wish that she wasn't so closed off right now.) "Did your work ever interfere with your track record?" Now *that's* a question I haven't heard in a while.
"It was more so my academics that took the biggest hit as a result of me still modeling while I was enrolled at Tracen." I start explaining, remembering a lot of sleepless nights and rough mornings where Bamboo Memory had to effectively pilot me to make sure I wasn't late for any classes or training sessions. "Every now and then it would interfere with the training regimens my trainer, Masaru, had planned out for me, but he was always able to work around it whenever that happened." I say, feeling another yawn rising. I don't fight it again, letting it happen as I slink back, head coming to rest on Kati's shoulder, left hand falling atop her right, albeit inadvertently.



The odd thing is that neither of us stop it. At least, not at first, we just simply let ourselves exist like this. As if it were nothing. And for the briefest moment, I feel compelled to let Kati know what it is I feel. How I see her. What she makes me feel on a daily basis. But I immediately shoot that idea down. I need to learn to accept my bisexuality before I can even confess that kind of thing to Kati. This is also when we seemingly get our heads back onto our shoulders, as I feel her tug at the sleeve of my blazer.

"Uh, you okay over there? Guess you *really* didn't get a lot of sleep last night." She says as she slowly pulls away, allowing me time to get my sense of balance so I don't fall.

"No. It would seem not." I say as another yawn decides to rise up. This time, I manage to control

myself a bit better. I don't bump into her this time. Nor do I linger there. Though the warmth that radiated into me was… very nice. I wish I could feel it again. Certainly a bulwark against the cooling air of October.

"I assume you got here on your own?" I ask as we step out onto Manhattan Avenue, looking around to see if I can spot her car. Though I don't seem to have any luck.
"No. I took the metro. I'm actually meeting with Met in about an hour after he gets some free time." She responds, and I feel a hint of disappointment hearing it. Of course, I *know* why. I'm attracted to her. But I can't let that get in the way right now. Kati has her own life she lives. It's not my place to dictate who she spends her time with.
"I see. Well, I hope the two of you have a good afternoon then. I'll see you, Tuesday? I think that might be when Randy has us back out in Lincoln Park." I say as Kati takes a second to gather her thoughts. I don't think she has considered that.
"Uh, Randy wants to speak with you individually first before we head back out to Jersey City. Mostly about clothing." Kati says in return. Oh right, I haven't actually gotten anything to wear for that shoot. All I know is that it's supposedly "autumn chic" in theme. I'll have to see how this plays out. Regardless…
"I see. Well, I'll see you… whenever we both feel like it I suppose." I say, watching as her face starts to flush read again. Seems she still can't understand that I genuinely enjoy spending time with her. I don't think she ever will at this rate. Shōjiki, kawaī. Kanojo ga konna fū ni sukkari awatete iru no o miru to. Watakushi ga kanojo ni kore hodo made ni horekonda no mo muri wa nai. (It's cute, honestly. Seeing her get all flustered like this. No wonder I've fallen for her as much as I have.)
"Uh, yeah…" Kati starts, clearly having multiple thoughts form in her head at once that cause her to trail off. "Tuesday? During the day? If it's alright with you?" She then adds. A proposition. One I will gladly accept.
"I see no reason to decline. I'll see you Tuesday." I say as I turn on my heel again and head north to where I've parked my car, listening closely as Kati's footsteps become more and more distant with each footfall.

If this much can happen in four months... Où serons-nous dans les quatre autres? (Where will we be in another four?)

Chapter 22: Anxious Interludes

|-Monday morning. Flatiron Building, 175 5th Avenue, Manhattan, New York-|

"Douglas Howley? That's the designer's name?" City asks, finally reachin' for her coffee as she pops the question. I ain't rightly sure why, but she still seems a mite on edge. Reckon Thursday was more'n we bargained for. Maybe I shouldn't've given her a slot at all.
"Yes. Douglas Howley. He works for Waterpass Outlet." I start, watchin' ever' little move City makes, makin' sure it was just a trick of the light I saw. It… ain't lookin' too good the more I watch. Maybe I oughta ask 'bout it 'fore she heads off. "I tried to get Douglas on board a few weeks ago but he wanted to see you in action first. He liked what he saw, so we're working with him for our next shoot. 'Autumn chic' is the theme." City takes a sip of her coffee as I wrap up. She's chewin' on what I said. Good. I like that 'bout her. Sharp. Calculatin'. Always good traits to have.
"When are we heading out to Lincoln Park? I know it's after Halloween, but specifics wouldn't hurt." She then asks me, wantin' to git the lowdown on the shoot 'fore we git started. Ain't no harm in tellin' her, I reckon.
"The 6th. I told Kati to use an AstrHori 6mm f2.8 fisheye. She should be getting it later today." I say, watchin' City's ears kinda droop when she hears our camera gal's name. Yeah, no, somethin's up with her. And I gotta find out what. Seein' both City and Kati like this ain't sittin' right with me.

It gets quiet for a few seconds 'fore I decide to push.

"Is everything alright with you? You've been acting odd ever since that performance at the fashion show last Thursday."

Gold City draws in a deep breath, takin' her sweet time pickin' her words real careful. I got a hunch she's gonna feed me a line like Kati did on Friday. But it ain't like that day- I can't let this slide. I gotta know what's up with City. A flustered camera gal I can work with, long as it don't turn into a whole mess. But a flustered model? That just ain't gonna work. After a spell, City pipes up.
"I… I *want* to say that I'm fine, but that wouldn't be honest now would it?" She says, reckonin' that I'd see right through that tale somehow. I done sold her short.
"No… It wouldn't…" I say, voice sly but warm as I see City get to thinin' again. Don't take her long to pipe up. She finds the words quicker.

"My mind has been… wandering whenever it can. And there's not really much I can do to stop it when it does. It's hard to focus. Hard to concentrate. Hard to work. C'est très frustrant. (It is very frustrating)" She's tellin me, watchin' my eyes close to size up how I'm takin' it, See if I can be a shoulder to lean on, so to speak.
"I imagine it would be frustrating." I say, reckonin' that I give City a minute to chew on it, If she's fixin; to tell me somethin' that's hush-hush, I wanna make sure she's alright with it, but I pipe up again first. "Care to tell me about these things? About what's going on in your head?" She takes another deep breath, tryin' to find the right words to say, So when she does pipe up, I'm a mite let down.
"Not at the moment. It's not that I don't trust you, Randy. I just… I don't want to strain any working relationships." She says, lettin' honesty drive, and I can't say I blame her for not wantin' to talk it out, 'cause I can't. It's perfectly understandable, perfectly reasonable. Though with that said…
"I see... I won't push the issue then. Though I do hope that you tell me at some point. I like to think that you can trust me with… touchy subjects. What I don't want is to lose you because your own mind is tormenting you. I've had that happen before and… It wasn't pretty." I tell her, watchin' her

ears perk up slow, that confidence f hers comin' back to her as she just nods, tellin' me she's fine with that notion 'fore I say one last thing. "I'll see if I can't get Douglas to sne a few articles to me on Halloween. I'll then get them to you the next day. Sound like a plan?"
"So I won't have to worry about the rest of the month? I like that plan. Arigato. (Thank you)" City says, standin' up as she talks and walkin off, endin' our little meetin'. I then pack up some of my stuff and head back into the Flatiron, wantin' to get some logistics done 'fore anythin' else. I make my way through the lobby to the elevator quick like, punchin' the button for the lift to come down. The lift comes down, the door opens and I punch the button for the seventh floor, waitin' a few seconds as it goes up. The door come open agin and I step on out, headin' on to my apartment. I stick the key in the lock and turn it, push the door open and walk in, sittin' down on the sofa and gettin' my laptop out.

'Call Douglas tomorrow. Ask about articles of clothing for photoshoot. See about having them sent by by Halloween.'

I read back over that note I just wrote out, tickeld pink with my little scheme. It's a real shame Lydia couldn't pull through on this one. I'da loved to see what she'd come up with, She did say she can make it up to me, though. Maybe the week after.

'Call Lydia about week after Lincoln Park shoot.'

I read that note back, and I was right pleased with it too. Then a lil' notification pops up on my phone. It's Lydia textin' me. No harm in seein' what she's got to say, I reckon. I hop over to the messenger app and take a gander at what she sent.

Lydia J: Hey, sorry again for not being able to do anything for the shoot at Lincoln Park.
Randy M: Don't worry about it, Lydia. Things happen.
Lydia J: I know, but I do want to make it up to you.
Randy M: So you said. I wouldn't mind that. Maybe something for the week after that shoot.
Lydia J: That's perfect, actually. I have this beautiful, red peacoat I've been wanting to have shown off for a while and I think Gold City would love to use it.
Randy M: Let me see it.

Lydia then sends me a picture of that coat, and it sho' do look right nice. Yeah, City gon' be tickled pink with this 'un.

Randy M: Methinks she'll love it.
Lydia J: Methinks I appreciate that. I can send it over after Halloween if that's alright with you.
Randy M: Fine by me. Thanks, Lydia.
Lydia J: No problem, Randy. And tell Bre I said hi if you see her. Been a while since I last talked to her.

Yeah, I'm all for that, givin' that message a 'thumbs up' as I tuck the thought away in the back of my mind while I turn my focus back to the laptop. 'Call Douglas tomorrow.' Good call, that. And now we're gettin' everything lined up for the long haul, just like I did Thursday mornin' up at the Empire State Building. Always a good move to get your ducks in a row early so you ain't sweatin' later on. Precis som mamma alltid sa till mig. (Just like mom always told me)

|-Later that morning. Shakespeare Garden, Central Park, 79th Street Transverse-|

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

No matter how much I repeat that mantra, things still… aren't clicking into place. The things that have run throuh my mind since Thursday only grow in number. And I *hate* it. Not because I am afraid or because I hate the prospect of being queer. Bien loin. (Far from it) Rather, because these thoughts get in the way of me *understanding* why I feel this way towards Kati. If I am to accept the fact that I am bisexual and can be in a relationship with another woman, be it romantic, sexual or both, then I need to understand the *why*. Everything else is moot otherwise. So here I sit in Central Park, at the Shakespeare Garden, trying to escape from all my mental troubles for now. The converstaion earlier this morning keeps coming back to me. I wish that I felt comfortable telling Randy this. That I feel something for Kati. But I can't. I don't feel comfortable with that. How would I start explaining this? Where do I start and end? And of course, it would *severely complicate* my working relationship with her and with Randy.

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

Another deep breath comes and goes, entering my lungs before being exhaled just as swiftly as it entered. Maybe a change of scenery could help. I get up and start wandering, passing Belvedere Castle as I walk south-east, mind still wandering on its own as it has been for the past few days. The cool Autumn breeze blows by, slight goosebumps raising on what skin is exposed as I see the art museum through the trees. Trees that are gradually losing their leaves. Sore wa… to yū kanji desu... shōchō-teki na. (That feels… symbolic.) I decide to make my way towards the museum, eyeing an obelisk nearby. This could be nice. I walk over, noticing that it is covered in Egyptian hieoroglyphics. Seems fitting for an art museum. I make my way towards a bench, sitting down and simply staring at the obelisk, closing my eyes and repeating the mantra once more to see if this change of scenery will help.

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

"Well I'll be damned."

My eyes shoot open, looking around to see who the voice belonged to, though I have a sneaking suspicion who it's owner is. Masculine, gruff yet with a tinge of compassion hidden underneath.I *know* who this is, even if I haven't interacted with him all that much.
"Fancy seeing you here, Meteor Hammer." I say as I finally spot him. For someone as tall as he is, he can be surprisingly adept at hiding. "Never took art to be something that interested you."
"I was just walkin by." He says as he approaches, large frame swaying gently as he does so. He stands opposite me, putting some distance between us. Understandable. I've only known for for a

little over a week. Though if I want to nurture *something more* with Kati, maybe Meteor Hammer could help.
"Just 'walking by'? Is that how you justify crashing any of Kati's outings, Meteor Hammer?" I ask, watching his facial expression scowl slightly.
"Just call me 'Met'. And it's not *my fault* I keep findin her at bad times." Met says with a chuckle. I can't tell why, but there's something in his eyes. Something that sees right through me. That same silver-purple gaze from when he came by Kati's apartment that night. Like then, it's almost as if he can *physically see* what is going through my head. Far more analytical than simply reading body language. "Somethin's botherin you. Seemed to start… Thursday night? I'm not wrong, am I?" He then asks, testing his luck and prodding. Once again, I'm in a tough situation.

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

"It's not… something I'm particularly comfortable talking about." I say, giving the same excuse to Met. He takes a deep breath, seemingly understanding my discomfort. His gaze seems to soften as well.
"Can't say I blame you. You looked pretty flustered when Kati snuck us backstage. Guess nerves got the better of you?" He says, placing his hands on the railing that surrounds the obelisk. "What *are* you comfortable with sharin, if you don't me askin."
"I feel… exhausted. My mind is constantly wandering off whenever it gets the chance and I… It's not exactly something I'm used to." I say, a small chuckle escaping my lips as I watch Met sublty shift his position.
"I can tell. I certainly would be if I were in your shoes. Somethin like Thursday night… That would shake me too." He says, now crossing his arms across his chest, a stray leaf blowing across the space, landing on his shoulder, obscuring one of the patches that has been sewn into his vest.
"How do you deal with these kinds of things, Met?" I ask, watching as he unfodls his arms and starts to approach me, eventually sitting down on the same bench, once again keeping a respectable distance from me.
"Now that… That is… Một câu hỏi hay. (A great question)" He starts, leaning forwards as he thinks. It takes a few seconds for thim to respond, but he does. "I can't say if this will work at all, but if it help, you could try focusin on good memories and experiences. Things that made you feel happy and content. Usually works for me." It's an interesting proposition. Thinking about the past, but for good reasons. Cela fait certainement du sens d'une certaine perspective. (It certainly makes sense from a certain perspectives) "Wanna give it a try?" I hear Met ask, and I turn to face him, unsure in the moment.
"I don't know. What if it doesn't work?" I ask in return, watching those silver and purple eyes flick between me and the obelisk in front of us. They then settle on me as he speaks up.
"Then we try a different angle. What that angle *is*… Well, learn by doin, right?" He says as he stands, walking back towards the obelisk, back turned to me as he looks it up and down. "That's what's tricky about this. It works differently dependin on the person. For a whole host of reasons. Upbringing, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality." He turns back to face me for a moment, smirk on his face, facial hair turning with it. "Gender." He turns his face back to the obelisk.

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low.

Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

I deicide to take the plunge. I take one last deep breath and close my eyes, head tilting slightly as the memory comes to me. Heh… Woodbine Beach in Toronto. Last time Mama and Père seemed to be truly happy before their divorce. Before Mama took me with her back to Hokkaido. It's fuzzy at first, but the details become clear as I think about it more. Me and Mama playing volleyball while Père and a baby Victor watch. Looks like I was winning, but Mama was always better than me. She could snatch victory from the jaws of defeat like no one else. And for a moment, I feel at peace. Chanto ugokimasu. (It works) I open my eyes, seeing Met standing in front of me. Still keeping distance between us, but not as much as there was when he arrived.

"How we feelin?" He asks as I stand.
"Better. Much better. Though… I don't know if it will be reliable." I say, watching Met chuckle again before he responds.
"Preoccupazione comprensibile. (Understandable concern) It won't always be. Hence why you have alternatives at the ready." He responds as he starts walking away. A little annoying. Walking awau like that before I can properly thank him.
"I-Well thank you." I say, getting his attention. But he doesn't turn around.
"You can save that for later. Somethin tells me this won't be the last time this happens." He says as he keeps walking, tall frame growing smaller with each of his long strides. "I've got a friend to meet up with."
"A friend? How quaint. The war horse is capable of making friends. I *never* would have guessed." I say as he moves farther from ear shot.
"You wouldn't want her to know you said *that* about *me*, would you?" He says with one last chuckle. I should not be surprised that he's meeting with Kati somewhere. Je ne devrais pas. (I really shouldn't.) And just like that… Im thinking about her again. Let's see it this methond can work again.

Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)
Iki o sutte. Fukaku te hikui. Ima kono shunkan ni shūchū shimashō. (Breathe in. Deep and low. Focus on the moment)

|-That evening. Playground of the Stars, Crotona Park, 1511 Fulton Avenue, the Bronx-|

"You just… *ran* into her?" I ask Met, wanting to know more about his little conversation with City. I can't shake this feeling that he went out of his way to find her, though I *know* that he didn't. If Met is specifically looking for someone, he makes it known. Utálja, ha titkolózik. (He hates being secretive)
"Yeah, Central Park, right in front of the art museum by that obelisk." He starts, looking out at the many Halloween decorations that are everywhere, prompting me to do the same. Whoever set this up *really* pulled out all the stops. Crotona's never looked so spooky and grim. Valójában ez egy kicsit szép. (It's actually kind of nice.) That's when Met gets my attention again. "She looked kinda… off. Like somethin was botherin her."
"Gold City? Bothered? I doubt it." I say, *knowing* that Met is probably right. Ever since the fashion show ended, she's been weirdly anxious. When we ran into each other at Morningside Park on Friday replays in my head. It's not a good look. I've become so used to that high confidence and

swagger. To see her so dour is… Ez tényleg aggasztó. (It's really concerning)
"You sure? Because these eyes know what they saw." Met retorts, two fingers pointing to his silver and purple orbits as he adjusts his posture, eyeing some of the attractions that have been set-up. His ears then perk up, shuffling his hat slightly as he tunes himself to where he tries to hear whatever sound has his attention better. "Dai, de sta parte. (Come on, this way) This they've got somethin ineterestin at the first baseball field."

Met starts walking and I have no choice but to follow him. We quickly make out way to the first baseball diamond, crossing Crotona Avenue before Met stops, head turning to each side as he takes in what he sees.
"Hmm… Thú vị đấy. (Interesting)" He says as I reach him, eyes now spotting what he finds interesting. Looks like a mock-up of a corn maze. Not a bad one, either. It's actually pretty good all things considered.
"What has you interested?" I ask as Met walks over to a sign, reading it before he turns back to me to answer.
"Looks like a scavenger hunt. Find three things and you get a prize. Faster you find all thre, the better the prize." He says as he looks over at the maze. "Wanna see if we've still got the touch?" I then look over at the maze, considering it for a second.
"Seems like fun." I say, watching as Met's face contorts into one of smugness.
"Fun? They've got zombies and ghouls in there." He says, letting the sarcasm soak into every aspect of his voice.
"I think I can handle a few people in costumes, Met." I say as I start walking towards the maze, pride hurt slightly by what Met just said to me. He starts following me, and we line up for our turn in the maze. There's a few signs detailing what will happen and what we'll see while we're in there. Costumes actors heckling us, three gems to find that can end the "zombie curse" that's overtaken the farm. The line moves, we reach the front and we pay our little entry fee and start searching, using a small map of the maze for guidance and what the best times are. Not that it matters. If Met's right, elmegyünk innen, mielőtt észrevennénk. (We'll be out of here before we know it)

"Okay, first gem should be right here." I say as I start looking through the suitcase that's lying there, not taking too long to find the gem. That's out first one. I hand it to Met when we hear some rustling and groans around us.
"Time to go. Second one should be around the corner but it's behind a locked gate." He says as he briefly looks at the map before he starts to move. "Got to get through a puzzle, through. Looks hard, too." I follow him as quickly as I can, rounding a bend to find a metal gate. Gondolom, itt van a rejtvényünk. (Guess this is where our puzzle is) I find where it is and get to work. This is what they consider to be "difficult"? A child could get through this without any problems. I find the answer quickly and open the box, seeing the key inside and slotting it into the hole, unlocking the gate where we search for the second crystal, finding it under some rocks that have been scattered around the maze, presumably for this exact purpose. I look to Met, wanting to know where the third one is, at which point he looks down at the map, scanning it for a few seconds before he answers.
"We'll need to get through two puzzles before we can even entertain the idea of grabbin that third rock. By the way, we're doin fantastic on time." He says as he starts walking, looking around everynow and then to make sure we're in the clear. I'm really glad he's an Uma sometimes. His better sense of hearing comes in handy for things like thuis. He can tell when someone is coming at us.

"First puzzle should be here." I say, looking briefly at the map. We search around for the little box and find it.
"Looks like a Rubik's Cube." I hear Met say as I pick it up. I immediately start moving the sides into place, each swipe quick and light as I solve the cube. Met looks at me like I just cured cancer,

his face completely dumbfounded. "Gesù Cristo... (Jesus Christ…)" He mutters as I slide a face off completely, pulling out a small disc-like object. Guess this must be another key.
"Where's the second puzzle?" I ask as I watch Met look down at the map.
"Three turns from here. Right-left-right by the looks of things. Come on. Down this way." Met says, ears perking u as he hears something I can't. No reason to *not* trust him. I follow his lead, and we eventually come upon the second puzzle. Ó, ez egy találós kérdés. (Oh, it's a riddle) I quickly look at the little plaque, reading what it says carefully so I don't mix anything up.

'I stand guard with no feet, a sentry to secrets deep. What am I?'

That's… actually a pretty good one. Standing gaurd with no feet? First instinct is to say a scarecrow, since they're on a pole that's stuck into the ground, but that doesn't feel right. A sentry to secrets deep… Ó, értem már. (Oh, I get it) That's a dead giveaway for what it is. I find a small keypad that has whatever is inside locked away and tyoe out my answer.

'Keyhole'

That answer gets accepted, and something clicks behind the plaque. I slide it and find another disc. Two-part key. Kind of genius, really. I take it, noticing that it's larger than the first. I take that out, and place it inside the larger disc. I then turn back to Met, who immediately knows what I'm about to ask.
"Center." He says, and I start moving.
"No time to waste." I say as I round the bend, almost being spotted by an actor, but Met pulls me back as the actor starts moving, slowly shambling past us, where we then move out of the little corner we're in. We quickly make out way to the center of the maze, checking the map every now and then to make sure we're not getting lost. After about a minute we reach a large clearing with a small antennae in the center of it surrounded by two people. We approach and give them the three crystals where they then put them in small holes and the light at the top of the antennae goes from red to green.
"Congrats. You lifted the curse that has come over the farm. Record time, too." One of the people says as they point us to the exit when Met then asks something.
"If we set a record then what was our time?" He asks, watching the other person shift slightly as they answer.
"Eight minutes and five seconds. Over two and a half mintues faster than the previous best time." She says as me and Met look between eachother, a smug smile on his face as we walk out the exit so that we can claim our prize.

"Cursed, black magic night"
"We've been struck down"
"Down in this Hell"
"Spells surround me day and night"
"Stricken by the force of evil light"
"The force of evil light"

I pause the music and take my headphones off as I see Kati movin this way. Settlin down by Hylan Park wasn't all that bad of an idea. Không một chút nào. (Not in the slightest) I grab my phone to check the time, seeing that it's almost 9. Shit, forgot my HRT. I quickly reach into my bag and grab the bottle, getting it open and shaking a few of the pills into my hand before I knock them back, drowning them with a swig of tea as Kati comes back with some candy apples. Uno par mi. Uno par ela. (One for me. One for her) She hands me one that's covered in purple-colored caramel while

she takes the green one, givin it a few licks before she turns her attention towards me.
"Don't look at me like *that*." She says, thinkin I had some weird thoughts on my mind. Like that would ever happen.
"I'd rather jump off the Empire State Buildin then do that." I say as I look the apple in my hand over a few times before I decide to be an ass and just *bite into it*. A satisfyin crunch fills the air as Kati looks at me like I just sacrificed her first born.
"What the hell is wrong with you? Are you… Your teeth, Met…" She says, brown eyes lookin me up and down as she tries to find a logical reason for my actions. Spoiler alert: *No ghe ne xe. (There isn't any)*
"Could've been worse. Could've bitten down onto a Jolly Rancher without suckin on it first." I say, cockin my head as I realize that didn't exactly come out how I intended it to. "Okay, that sounded better in my head."
"Óh, tényleg. Azt hiszed? (Oh really. You think?)" Kati responds, as she nibbles on some of the caramel as the bottom of her apple. I, however, go in for another full bite. Another crunch fills the air as I chew on the caramel glazed apple when I start hearin somethin weird, ears perkin up and movin so I can hear it better. Well, not so much *weird* as opposed to *shitty*.

"It's rude to stare, honey."
"Better to ignore *her* and whatever delusion *she* has."
"Less said about *that*, the better."

This *bullshit* makes my blood boil. Bunch of insecure jackoffs projecting their problems onto me because I have the *audacity* to go against the grain and be true to myself. True to how I *view* myself. I hate how much this pisses me off. How much it gets to me. How much *some* people can't let others live in peace. Lũ lợn vô cảm. (Insensitive pigs)
"Met. Just ignore it." I hear Kati say. But before I can even get a response, she finishes her statement. "I *know* where your ears are pointing. I *know* what you're hearing. Just ignore them. What they have to say about you is unimportant and petty. Don't give them the attention they're craving."
"Hard to do when you know the assholes are starin at you." I say, takin another bite out of the apple as I keep hearin those assholes talk.

"How could someone throw away such grace like that?"
"Unsightly for a once beautiful uma."
"Just a god damn shame."

Just a bunch of sad and pathetic little homonculi. Wouldn't want to live their lives. They eventually stop, realizin that I won't give them the attention their parents refused to give them when they were children. I take one last bite of the apple before I end up chewin on the stick, leavin it hang in my mouth like I'm some kind of cowboy, hearin Kati chuckle as she sees it.
"You have… caramel flakes all over your face." She says as I start brushin my fingers against my facial hair. But it seems I'm hittin the wrong spots. "Chin." Kati says as I then pulls some caramel off my chin. Beh merda. (Well shit)
"God dammit. Why does caramel have to be so sticky?" I say as the flake pulls from my chin, a long string of caramel connectin the two. I manage to get it off, but now I need to actually wash my face. How fun. I get up and walk over to a nearby water fountain, gettin my hand wet and rubbin it all over my chin to get any remainin caramel off. Once I'm sure it's all gone, I make my way back to Kati, sittin down next to her, watchin people occasionally go by.

"This was… fun. Thanks for bringing me out here." I hear Kati say as she finally starts bitin into her apple, startin small before takin bigger bites. Penso che ła vołe gustar el gusto. (Guess she

wants to savor the taste)
"Don't mention it. You looked like you could use somethin like this." I say, knowin that Gold City is still on every inch of her mind. Can't say I blame her. If *I* was in Kati's shoes, and had to deal with her tendencies, I think I'd be thinkin of similar things. And Kati doesn't mean to do stuff like that. Which honestly makes the situation worse. I can't imagine how she must *really* feel about this. Not bein able to have *normal* thoughts anout the person she's already spent close to five months workin with. Maybe if I can prod a little I can help her out a little. After all, isn't that what a *best friend* is for?

"Got a lot on your mind?" I ask, lookin her over to make sure that I haven't gone too far. Doesn't look like I have.
"*Too* much." She says. That's not a good sign. Not with the tone that's in her voice.
"Wanna talk about it?" I ask, proddin a bit further to see where we can go.
"You'll think less of me." Kati responds, retreatin into herself a bit as she finishes her apple. Không, tôi sẽ không để chuyện đó xảy ra. (Nope, not gonna let that shit happen)
"That's bullshit and you know it." I smugly say, watchin her reaction closely. Looks like I got to her. I think. It's sometimes hard to tell with this girl. Maybe it's all the maskin she does with her ADHD. Bad habit if you want my opinion. She takes a deep breath before she speaks up again, voice low, almost whisperin. Dio diavolo. (God dammit)
"It's been… *way* too hard to focus recently. My mind keeps going everywhere and anywhere it wants an it's so… fucking frustrating." She says, spewin profanity so brazenly as she does so. Cái này. Chắc vui lắm đây. (Well. This is going to be fun)
"Doesn't sound like the ADHD talkin." I say, tone serious so Kati knows I'm not jokin around this time. And she realizes that.
"It's not." She says, damn near whimperin. I won't prod further, I think I've gone far enough. But I know that I can still do *somethin* that can help out here. I look out at the park and in the dimlight spot a scarecrow. *Bersajo perfeto. (Perfect target)*
"See that scarecrow?" I say, watchin Kati's eyes drift towards it, the thick frames of her glasses stayin on her face perfectly as she turns her head. "Pretend it's that one dickhead from highschool."
"You gotta be more specific." She says, wantin some clarification.
"Asshole jock I sent to the hospital that one summer." I respond, watchin Kati's face still be confused.
"*More* specific, Met." She says, side eyein me as her head stays focused on the scarecrow.
"The fuck you want me to say? Tall, blonde. Had a pervert's smile but in the pathetic kind of way not horrifyin." I tell her, watchin her expression change to realization as she figures out who I'm talkin about. "Got him pictured in your head? He's your intrusive and impulsive thoughts. Chuck a brick at them." I say as Kati turns her head to face me, mortified by what I jsut told her to do.
"What the… You're crazy." She says as she looks back at the scarecrow.
"But you're gonna do it." I retort, watchin the gears turn in her head, goin from lewd thoughts about Gold City to that one dickhead, who then gets pelted by bricks until that fuckass, pretty boy face of his turns battered and bruised from the masonic assault. Good. *Fuck that guy*. Hắn là một tên khốn. (He was an asshole)

"I'll be okay. Do *you* need a ride back to your place?" Kati asks me, wantin to make sure I get home safe evne though she *knows* I will. You'd have to be high out of your mind to test me like that.
"I'm fine. You worry too much." I say, watching the gears turn in her head as she processes what I said.
"Are you sure? What if… someone tries to… *you know*… because you're… *you know*…" She then says as I get my headphones on my ears.
"Then I'll punt them into the Hudson." I say as I start walkin, music blastin in my ears as I go.

"Erase - The rules that are set there to keep you down"
"Break down - The chains that keep you to the ground"
"Erase"
"Erase - And follow me to where the real fun is"

"It is not a shame to be called insane"
"And to go against, against the grain"
"Demand the right to set your own rules"
"Not walk the path of those who are lame"

Chapter 23: November Coming Fire

Chapter Summary

> Halloween arrives and Kati finds herself taken up by the day's festivities, spending the whole day with Met while the morning also finds Gold City joining them after having some interesting and *private* thoughts in the bath. The evening culminates with a bar crawl where she finds Gold City, tipsy and surrounded by people that Kati *does not trust*. She quickly gets her out of that situation and makes her way to the model's apartment where she makes sure that she doesn't hurt herself in any way.

Chapter Notes

> Hello. First new chapter since the site went down. Let's see how this goes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

|-Thursday afternoon. Museum of the City of New York, 1220 5th Avenue, Manhattan, New York-|

City being interested in New York's history? I never would have guessed, that sort of thing never really struck me as something she would want to know about. Mégis itt vagyunk. (Yer here we are) I sit at one of the tables, waiting for her to get here when I see that familiar red and blue Celica coming up Fifth Avenue, eventually parking on the side of the road, City stepping out into the brisk and cool autumn air in that blazer I've grown quite fond of. Seeing it makes we want to get one similar for myself, but… that thought alone sends a chill down my spine. Gold walks over to me, heels clicking on the stones below her where she greets me with a smile.
"Good day to you, Kati." She starts, projecting that usual confidence though I can tell it's not all there. Szerintem ő is tudja. (I think she knows it too) "Thanks for coming out here with me today."
"Oh, don't mention it." I say, trying to keep my voice steady as I stand up. "Honestly, it was the perfect excuse. I've been wanting to come out here ever since I moved into the city from Yonkers."
"Well, glad I could give it to you then. Sā. (Come on) Let's head inside." She says as she starts walking towards the front door, pausing and then turning around, waiting on me, where I then start walking. I reach the door first, grabbing the handle and watching as two people walk out before City walks in, me following behind her. The warm air is a nice contrast to the cool autumn breezes outside, but I don't get a lot of time to really savor it as Gold is already moving and fast. Úgy tűnik, megtervezte a délutánját. (Seems like she's planned her afternoon)

We move to the second floor, where we stop in front of a rather elegant looking dress colored in pale, almost coral pink. The kind of thing I imagine City herself would have worn to some prestigious event. Legalábbis valami hasonló. (At least, something similar to it) She seems to recognize it.
"Know who made it?" I ask her, trying to be nonchalant, expecting a very quick and simple answer.

"Pierre Balmain. I recognize this piece. There was once a reproduction on display in a special exhibition on 1950s French fashion at the Royal Ontario Museum." She says a she hyper focuses on the dress.
"I thought you said that special exhibition focused on the eighties?" I then ask, watching as her ears perk up in response to it.
"This was a different exhibition. One of the last trips we all took together as a family before… things fell apart and my mother took me back with her to Hokkaido." Gold then says as she briefly turns her head my way. I don't know what it is, but there's… *something* in her eyes. It was brief, but I know I saw it. Just what it is though, I don't know. And I don't want to prod on it, either. It's not my place to. "Balmain had a lot of pieces in that exhibition. Mostly reproductions and replicas. But *this*… this looks to be the original. It's one of my favorite pieces he's ever done. So to see the original… Cela me fait sourire. (That brings a smile to my face)" She then turns around and starts walking again, heels clicking on the floor as she moves. "But that's not the primary reason I wanted to come here." She says, beckoning me to follow her. We weave through other guests and some staff, passing my a large diorama map of Manhattan depicting how it looked in the 60s. It's weird to see the island with the Empire State Building as the tallest building there. I'm so used to the World Trade Center at this point that not even seeing the original Twin Towers is kind of odd. But Gold passes it by without so much as a second thought, continuing her little march until she arrives at her new destination: A display housing… indigenous clothing? Ez érdekes választás. (That's an interesting choice)

City looks it over a few times before turning her head to me, a question on her mind.
"Know what it is?" She asks, though I get the feeling this is a rhetorical question. Like she already knows the answer and wants to see if *I* know it.
"Uh… indigenous clothing? Delaware I think." I say, hoping that can satisfy her. "I know that they were already here when the Dutch arrived and settled New Amsterdam down in what is now the Financial District"
"Hmm… More knowledgeable than I thought." Gold responds as she turns her head back to the display. "From what I understand, they called themselves the Lënapeyok. Lënape to refer to a singular person while Lënapeyok is plural. They also referred to their homeland as Lënapehòkink, and it encompassed much of southern New York but also New Jersey, most of Delaware and eastern Pennsylvania." I was… not expecting her to know that. Hell, *I* didn't know that much and I've lived in the metro area my entire life. "I want to know more about native peoples. Here in New York with the Lënapeyok. In Oshawa and the Greater Toronto Area with various Anishinaabe and Algonquian peoples. Even back in Hokkaido. I'd *love* to learn more about the native Ainu." Hát ez meglepetés. (Well that's a surprise)
"I… didn't know Japan had native peoples…" I say, not exactly knowing how to process that information. City turns to look at me, that same odd glint from earlier still being in her eyes. The fact that it's still there has me concerned. That glint being there means that Met was right; Something really *is* bothering her. And I have no idea how to help her. Knowing me, I'd only make it worse and I don't want to take that risk.
"Yes, Japan has her own indigenous groups. As far as I'm aware, only the Ainu and Ryukyuans have any sizeable populations left after Yamato." She says as she looks at some of the other items in the display, notably a bandolier and a bag before she returns her eyes to me. "But, since I'm here in New York, I may as well start with the Lënapeyok."
"Makes sense you'd want to look at their clothing." I say as I look at the display again. They look *old*. Like, museum's trying their best to preserve them *old*. I look over to my right briefly and see a small thermostat on the side. Climate controlled case. Értelmes, hogy a szövetek ne hervadjanak el. (Makes sense so the fabrics don't wither away) I hear Gold's heels start clicking again, meaning she's moving. Seems like she's going back the way we came, so I follow. It only takes a few

seconds for us to reach her destination, seeing as how she stops before the large diorama of Manhattan.
"There's a lot missing, don't you think?" I hear her ask, voice low so she doesn't get anyone else's attention.
"Well, it looks like Manhattan in the mid-60s. The original World Trade Center didn't break ground until 1966, and even then, the Twin Towers wouldn't be completed for another seven years in 1973." I say, turning my head slightly to face Gold, where I see that glint again. It *still* hasn't left her eyes. I don't want to, but at some point I'll need to prod. Nem hiszem, hogy lesz választásom. (I don't think I'll have a choice)

"I don't quite know. These past few years, I never really had Halloween to myself." City says as she reaches for her glass, the light from the lamp above the booth reflecting off her pale skin as she moves. I try to not let my mind wander, but it's so hard with these damn dreams popping up every time I sleep. Bárcsak megállíthatnám őket. (I wish I could stop them) "What about you? Any plans for tomorrow?"
"What? Hoping to drop in for a few seconds?" I say in jest, but the idea wouldn't be all that bad.
"If it's alright with you, yes." Gold responds as she eyes me down, that glint never fading. Just what is it? And why is it there? I just don't understand.
"I wouldn't mind, but… You'll have to deal with Met and his shenanigans." I say, watching her face to gauge her reaction. "He's hauling me *all over* the city. the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan. Even Staten Island for whatever reason." I say as City finishes her food, setting her fork down on what remains on her plate.
"I wouldn't mind dropping in for one or two events. Depends on where they are and how long you'll be there." She responds as I watch her eyes flick between several places. But never on me, not for long at least. Almost like she's embarrassed. She's not… Nem. A pokolban esélytelen. Nem gondolhat így rám. Miért tette volna? (No. Not a chance in hell. She can't be thinking about me like that. Why would she?) "Plus, Met doesn't seem all that bad if I'm being honest. Sure, he can be a bit blunt and rough around the edges, but he means well. He *cares*. I like that about him."
"He certainly grows on you." I say as I try and fail to make eye contact with her. This is actually getting annoying. I'm *genuinely* frustrated that I can't figure out what that glint is. Silence falls over us after my statement, and this feels a good a time as any to prod, even if I feel like I shouldn't.

"You okay? You look kinda… off." I say, watching as City's ears droop and then perk up as she tries to find the right words to say in this situation. She wants to answer this carefully, and I certainly don't blame her.
"A little bit, yeah." She says, letting that linger for a few seconds before I speak up again.
"You wanna talk about it?" I then ask, feeling a knot form in my stomach as the words leave my lips. Unlike before, where Gold took a few seconds to figure out her answer, I get one faster, more immediate.
"I'd rather not. Not yet, at least. I don't want to… Faites les choses compliquées. (Make things complicated)" She says, reaching for her glass and drinking whatever is left of her tea before she settles, ears then drooping with shame. But shame over what?
"We… don't have to talk about the *specifics* if it could complicate certain things." I respond, watching her ears slowly rise again as she looks at me, our eyes finally meeting properly for the first time today.
"I don't know where to start, really. I find my mind wandering constantly. Whenever possible and it is frustrating. It keeps getting in the way of my focus. It derails entire trains of thoughts and I… Sometimes it's overwhelming." She says, watching my face closely like I did with her earlier in the day. "Have you ever felt that way?"
"All the time." I say, wanting to give her some comfort to the best of my abilities. "Having ADHD

tends to do that to you. Even when my medication should be doing it's job in my bloodstream during the day, I still lose focus from time to time and have to retread my footsteps, usually having to go all the way back to the start of whatever I was working on." I watch as Gold's ears slowly turn my way, showing that she is listening close. "Thank god I have Met. He can usually keep me in check."
"Funny you mention him." She says, gently resting her chin on her hand as she leans onto the table. "I ran into him on Monday in Central Park by the Met."
"Met was by the Met? Guess Hell has frozen over." I say, getting a chuckle out of her, which then makes my heart pound in my chest. "What was he doing out there?"
"In his words; just 'walkin by'." Gold responds as she takes in a deep breath. "He tried to give me some advice. Something that could help keep my mind on track."
"That's not surprising." I say, chuckling myself as I think about my next words. "Did it work?" I then ask, keeping our eye contact as we speak.
"Not always, but he himself admitted that it wouldn't always work." She says as she starts swirling the straw in her cup around with her finger. "I'm open to suggestions if you have anything you think could help." I feel my heart flutter as the glint shifts for the first time today. It goes from subtle and solemn to confident and… yearning? Is that even the right thing to call it? Nem tudom. (I don't know) But the effect is the same regardless. I hate how easy it is for her to get me like this, all warm and mushy. Which then invariably leads to… *those thoughts*.
"I, uh… Wish I did." I tell City, watching faux disappointment form on her face before it quickly disappears.
"C'est bon. (It's okay) You don't need anything immediately." She says as she stops twirling her straw right as someone comes by with the check. Gold reaches for her purse to pay but I get my wallet out faster, something that she notices. "Oh, you don't have to-" She starts but I cut her off.
"No, no. It's okay. You paid the last few times and I thought I'd take it up." I say as I look over the check. That is… not as bad as I thought it would be. I place my card on it and watch as the waiter heads over to a register to get the food paid for just as I feel City's eyes on me again. I can't shake the feeling, it's like she's… No. I can't think that. It wouldn't be right. Gold City *does not* look at other women like that. She can't. Tud ő? (Can she?) I try to compose myself as she turns her attention elsewhere. something that gives me some reprise, but her eyes come back. I try to not let it get to me, but as always, she notices.

"Something wrong?" I hear her ask, and I try to find the right words.
"Yeah, uh… I'm alright." I say, voice trembling as I try to keep my cool.
"Doesn't really sound like it. I… haven't made you uncomfortable, have I?" City follows up, voice dropping slightly as she seems genuinely sorry for something she *didn't do*.
"No, I'm okay. Not uncomfortable at all. Why do you ask?" I return, watching the glint in her eyes go back and forth between what it was during the day and what it had become a few seconds ago. It takes a few second for Gold to respond, but she does.
"It's just… I don't want to pry, but…" She starts, trailing off slightly before her voice drops again, this time to a near whisper. "Are you with anyone?" How do I respond to that? If this was any other situation I could answer reasonably well, but given the weird, mixed signals I've been getting from City since the fashion show, it hits harder than I think she intended for it to.
"I, uh… That's a bit much, don't you think?" I retort, watching as her ears droop immediately, taking that as a rejection of the question. I then hear her mutter something under her breath before she returns her eyes to me.
"It's… nothing. Forget I asked that. It was too much." She says as she reaches for her blazer, but I stop her.
"No, it's fine. I'm not… off put by it. Just… I'm not that interesting. I have a hard time believing that people want to know things like that." I say, watching Gold take a deep breath before she

answers.
"I see… I just… I don't know. As much as I *think* I know about you, I feel like I could know more." She starts, pausing briefly before she finishes the thought. "I'd very much like to stay in contact when we're finished with this contract. Knowing something like that feels… important. I can't quite explain why, though."
"Yeah, that… That makes sense." I say, swallowing before I say the next words in my mind. "No, I'm not seeing anyone right now. I, uh… I want to stay single for a bit. I'm not ready to put myself out there again." I watch as City simply nods, giving me the opportunity to ask the same question. "What about you? Are you seeing anybody right now? That special someone who's waiting for a year back in Japan?"
"Believe it or not: No. I'm also single." Gold responds, catching me off guard as she continues. "My last few partners were, how to put it, not particularly respectful of my autonomy. I felt more like a trophy for them to show off and that's not how I want to be remembered. That, plus the late night shoots, the need to find suitable photographers, the constant travel across Japan, and now having to be in America for a whole year would put a strain on *any* relationship." She finishes as the waiter comes back with my card. I take it and slide it back into my wallet, after which we both stand up, City sliding her blazer on as we walk towards the door.

"Thank you again for coming out with me today." She says as she briefly looks back towards 5th Avenue before looking back towards me. "It means a lot."
"I feel the same way." I say as City takes a deep breath, satisfied with my response. While this would usually be where we part ways, City does something different. "Did you take public transport again, or did you drive yurself here?"
"Bus." I answer, watching gears turn in her head. I get the feeling I know what she's going to ask next.
"Would you care to ride with me?" She then asks,my heart fluttering as I try to find an answer.
"That sounds… Well that doesn't sound bad at all." I say as we start walking back towards the museum, making small talk where we can to add some more sound to the laready busy New York night life.

|-Friday morning. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street-|

I wake up slow, as I always do. Comme toujours. (As I always have) It's slow, groggy and deliberate. And that's when I check the time; seven in the morning. Hmm… another early rise it seems. Sore mo tsukatte mo ī ka mo shiremasen. (May as well use it) I get out of bed and head to the bathroom, quickly brushing my teeth then my hair and tail before I jump into the shower. But as I reach for the water, I decide on a bath. Given everything that's been on my mind lately, I could use one. I set the plug in and start filling the tub, undressing as the water rises to where I want it to be, watching small amounts of steam rise, making me realize that it might be too hot. To compensate, I add some cold water to balance out the temperature. Once I am satisfied with it, I step into the tub and sink down, grabbing some soap and sprinkling it into the water so that suds may form. When I have enough, I start rubbing them across my body to clean myself, yet for whatever reason… J'ai l'impression que quelque chose manque. (I feel like something is missing)

Kati

It's such a small thought. As it always is before it inevitably starts rolling down the hill and growing, becoming something that I just can't ignore anymore. The thoughts twist and turn, from soft and caring to more… illicit and sensual. Like they are doing *right now*. It's rather annoying, since I'm in here to *wash up*. Especially as my hand starts moving to… a rather specific place. I don't really notice it at first, but when I start running my hand up and down my leg, I notice. I

immediately stop, taking a deep breath as I return to what I was doing before, washing myself with the suds as the thoughts come back. It's harder to ignore them, something I thought was impossible, and like before, my hand moves seemingly on it's own volition. This time, the urge to too strong to stop. It starts slow, a simple movement here and there before it escalates. One finger, slowly tracing up and down that most intimate of anatomy. That stops me briefly. I shouldn't. It's not right. I can't do something *like this* while thinking about Kati *like that*. But the urge comes back, and my hand moves back to that area, finger tracing up and down myself like it was before I stopped. That internal conflict remains, but with how good this feels in the moment, I don't think I can stop myself this time. My movements start becoming more deliberate as I chase the rabbit, each pass causing my breath to hitch as I turn my attention to that small, yet sensitive bud at the top. I swirl my finger around it, letting the sensations wash over me like the water I am submerged in.

The circle motions I make become faster and faster as I close in on the rabbit, but I don't want to catch it yet. I want to savor the chase. Relish the hunt. So I move further down again, putting pressure until my finger slides in. It's surprising at first, I've never really taken it *this far*, but it also feels good. *Amari ni mo yoi. (Far too good)* To make the sensation better, I start moving my finger back and forth, finding a good rhythm that makes my breath hitch again. I try to relax myself as this happens, taking deeper and deeper breaths to steady myself as my mind solely focuses on Kati. How much I admire her. How much I respect her. How much I want to know her better. How much I… *want her*. All the things I want her to do to me flood my mind like how the water will flow down the tub's drain once I pull the plug. This euphoric feeling builds inside, becoming greater and greater as I take the time to savor these thoughts. If things come to that between us, how would I initiate it? How would I let Kati know that this is something I want to explore with her? Dore mo hontō ni miryoku-teki desu. (It's all so tantalizing) My pace increases as I think about Kati running her hands over my body, sifting her fingers through my hair, pressing her lips to my skin and gently sinking her teeth into me, leaving only the most scant of marks in her wake. I inadvertently let out a small moan as I think about this, which only causes the thoughts to become more ravenous. Those soft hands committing to these exact movements. I imagine that Kati would be quite *skilled* in that regard. How it would feel to have her do this to me, her slender fingers thrusting back on forth while intermittently circling that small bud that crowns the sex. How it would feel for her to add her tongue into the equation. That small yet strong muscle pulsing back and forth against the slick folds with delicate, yet masterful ease, leaving a feeling of fire in its wake that I only begin to crave more and more. It all becomes overwhelming as I start thrusting my hand harder and harder, pretending that it is Kati's, until I lunge and catch the rabbit, that large wave of pent up euphoria finally crashing down against me before I realize what it is I just did. Oh. Oh non. C'est... Qu'ai-je fait? (Oh. Oh no. This is... What have I done?)

I quickly wash up, spending time with my hair and tail before I drain the water and carry on with my usual routine, taking care of my tail before I walk back into the bedroom to clothe myself. After what I just did, I want to be as covered as I can. The thoughts still linger in my mind: How it felt, how the rabbit tasted when I caught it. I take a deep breath, feeling ashamed of my actions. Is this what goes through Kati's mind when she has *those* kinds of thoughts? The shame and disgust that they inevitably bring? Kanojo ga saikin motto heisa-teki ni mieru no mo fushigi de wa arimasen. (No wonder she seems more closed off lately) I quickly find some comfortable clothes for the day, remembering that today is Halloween. So I search for whatever I have in my wardrobe that is orange and purple. Once I find some suitable clothing, I hear my phone buzz. I get the clothes on and take my phone, seeing a message from Kati. Omoshiroi desu ne. Fudan wa watakushi ga saki ni kanojo ni messeiji o okurimasu. (Funny. I'm usually texting her first)

'Met and I are gonna be at the Arsenal in front of the Central Park Zoo at 9. Heard it's being turned into a haunted house type thing for the night. They're letting people in during the day to see the

process happen. Wanna come with us?' I read as I spot three dots floating as Kati types another message to send. 'You can say no if you don't want to.' I chuckle slightly at the message. A haunted fortress? On Halloween of all nights? Quelle jolie. (How cute) Not a particularly bad idea.
'Think I'll take you up on that. It certainly sounds interesting.' I send back, feeling my heart flutter slightly in my chest as my mind goes back to Kati. I quickly try to suppress it, thinking about some good memories from my time at Tracen. Funnily enough, the first thing I think of is a Halloween party Helios put on at the Mejiro's manor. The look on McQueen's face as she walked in with Teio will always make me laugh. Then how she joined in on the festivities. I get taken out of the memory as I feel my phone buzz in my hand.
'I'll let him know then. Oh, and get a witch hat.' Kati responds, once again making my heart flutter slightly. I quickly slide my phone into my pocket and make for the door, slipping on my shoes before grabbing my keys. I then make my way to the elevator, waiting for a few seconds for it to arrive before I can head down to the lobby. When it does, I enter and press the button, hearing the mechanical whirring of the lift move me downward as it descends. before long, I'm out on the street, heading to my car. But then I remember what Kati had said. 'Get a witch hat'. I suppose I could follow her advice. I quickly search up quick stores and find one close by. The drive isn't long, and I step out, walking in as I feel a few people look at me. Unfortunately, I *know* their reasoning. But I try to not let it get to me as I immediately find a good hat that is made specifically for umas. I take it and pay for the item, putting it on my head before I get back into my car and head up to Central Park.

|-Later that morning. The Arsenal, Central Park, 830 5th Avenue-|

"How long is she gonna make us wait?" I ask Kati as I scan around, looking for City.
"She said she was close. Maybe she go- Oh wait, there she is." Kati says as she starts wavin, seemingly havin spotted the little blondie. Don't know why she's doin that, though. It's not like I'm impossible to miss or anythin. Te gavarìa da esar orbo pa farlo. (You'd have to be blind to do that) I look around, spottin City after a second or two of lookin. We watch as she walks over to us, grettin us nicely as she reaches us.
"Good morning. Nice to see both of you today." She says as she looks between me and Kati. She's projectin her usual confidence, but I can tell she's on edge. Still tryin to figure herself out. But there's somethin else in those blue eyes of hers. Looks like… Xấu hổ? (Shame?) Was she… doin what I'm thinkin… No. There's no way. Đó không phải là... những gì đã xảy ra... Trừ khi... (That's not… what happened… Unless...) No. She *would* think about somethin like that. That is, if my hunch is correct. No matter, though. This isn't the time or place for proddin on somethin like that.
"It's nice to see you too, City." Kati says, the slightest tremor in her voice as she speaks. In know she's puttin on a face to not embarras Kati, but I know City heard it too.
"I *guess* I can say the same." I say, tryin to be sarcastic to inject some humor into this situation. Seems to work. *Briefly*. But that doesn't seem to phase anythin, and we watch as City looks around us, takin in her surroundins.
"Well, shall we?" She says a she looks at the Arsenal, wantin to head inside. Kati takes the first step towards the buildin, City followin close behind her. That leaves me. Me and somethin that is very clearly not a choice. No che me lamento. Dopo tuto, questa ła jera ła me idea. (Not that I'm complaining. This was my idea after all)

We make our way to the front door, puttin ourselves in the line where we are soon let in. After that, we are free to explore as we see fit. Not a bad deal. One we are a good bit inside, both women look up at me, thinkin I have an idea of where to start.
"Uh, what are ya lookin at me for?" I ask, purple and silver dartin between the two of them.
"This was *your* idea. Lead the way." Kati says as she looks around her, takin in the decorations and festive buntin that is on every conceivable surface.

"Kati does have a point." City adds, puttin more pressure on me. Merda. (Shit)
"Uh, fuck, I don't know where to start. I've never actually been *inside* the Arsenal before, so…" I respond, watchin a look of judgement form on City's face while Kati rolls her eyes.
"Természetesen. (Of course)" She says, takin one last look around her before she speaks up again.
"Well, let's head this way. To the third floor. I wanna see if they still have those dinosaur skeletons." Kati says as she starts movin, me followin her as I hear the *tiniest* gasp from City. I subtly look down and see that Kati has City's wrist in her hand. She *definitely* doesn't know she did that. Because if she *did* know, her face would be as red as a tomato and she would be meltin into a puddle on the floor. I try not to stare for too long, but it doesn't matter. City's eyes catch mine, and I can see the thoughts swirlin in her head. I mentally laugh as I follow Kati's lead, who relaxes her grip enough to let City out, now followin her of her own volition.

It does not take us long to get up to the third floor, and the first thing I spot is a fossilized skull.
"Oh, nice." I say as I spot it, tippin Kati off that her precious bones are up here, somethin that I *know* will put a smile on her face.
"Oh wow… They still have a few…" She says as I take a look around. Looks like the staff are still settin things up for later tonight, though some places look to be up and runnin. May as well check them out. See if we can't do anythin right now. I walk over to one of the stations that's still bein set up, takin a guess as to what it could be.
"Magic mirror?" I ask, gettin one of the staff's attention. The dude approaches me, a slight smile on his face.
"Something like that, yeah." He says as he briefly turns back to it before returnin his attention to me. "When we have this set up it'll hopefully be like those hall of mirror attractions you see at theme parks where you'll sometimes find a mirror that distorts your reflection, but also having ghosts and ghouls in there as well."
"How do you plan to pull *that* off?" I ask, watchin his face light up. That tells me everythin I need to know.

'Follow me.'

The guy walks over to some of the mirrors, gently turnin one around so I can see the mechanisms behind them. Santa merda che xe inpresionante. (Holy shit that is impressive)
"Woah… Its like those ghost ball things." I say as the dude's smile gets bigger.
"Oh yes. We've got a translucent film behind the first glass layer of the mirror and all the way at the back. If we get everything right, then the light sould pass throughthe first translucent layer, get somewhat obscured by the aluminum backing and then pass through the second translucent layer and hit the glass." He says, usin the simplest terms he can in his explanation.
"That's fuckin cool." I say, watchin as the guy turns the mirror back around to the spot it was in before he moved it. I take that as my cue to find City and Kati, which isn't all that hard given the black and purple hat Blondie is wearin. It's weird she's the only person I've seen wearin one so far today. Em nghĩ anh sẽ thấy nhiều hơn. Rõ ràng là không. (You think I would've seen more. Apparently not) I make my way over to them, watchin as they spot my reflection in the glass case they were lookin into.
"Oh, there you are." I hear Kati say as City looks up at me.
"Where'd you go?" She asks, adjustin her hat slightly so it fits better on her head.
"I was checkin out some of the things they're settin up. They got these mirrors that'll be like those ghost balls you see sometimes. You know the ones. Where they have like an iPad underneath projectin video footage inside the ball?" I say, watchin both women to see their reactions. Guess they know what I'm talkin about.
"Oh yeah. I think I know what you're talking about. Didn't Rose do that one for a Halloween party?" Kati says, and I notice somethin subtle with City when she hears Rose's name. Her ears

droop ever so slightly. So she knows that Rose is Kati's ex? Does she know that they're on good terms? That Rose has no real intention of getting back together with Kati? I have to assume she mentioned that if she ever brought it up. But moreover, this tells me that City really *is* feelin somethin for Kati. What I saw when I first met her by the carousel wasn't my eyes messin with me. What I saw in the dressin room after the fashion show wasn't some trick of the light.

Gold City *wants* Kati.
And it is tearin her apart. Because she doesn't know how to accept her queerness. It's one thing to acknowledge that. But *acceptin* it? If you're not careful, it can kill you. Dio sa che quasi me xe capità. (God knows it almost happened to me) Thank fuck Kati and her dad were able to pull me out of that. Help me get the treatments I needed. Puberty blockers, binders. General support. But Gold City? She's got nobody she can really rely on here in New York. All her friends are back in Japan. At least, I'm *assumin* they're still in Japan. And the one person she realistically can rely on in this situation is the person who's caused this. And she's standin *right next to her*. Fuck, I wanna help her. Nhưng như thế là quá nhiều, phải không? (But that would be doing too much, wouldn't it?)

I let the problem rest for now. I'd *rather not* fuck things up if I can help it. And that's when me and City make inadvertent eye contact again, and I decide, most likely against better judgement, to help to some degree. A simple gesture, a nod. That should get the point across.
'Remember my advice from Monday.' Is what I say without words, and City seems to recognize it. The gears start turnin in her head and she thinks about some good memories. And that helps, at least in the moment. Which is good. Even if it's small, a win is a win.

"Well, that was interesting." City says as we walk back out the front door, the autumn chill hittin my face.
"That's one way to put it." I say as I watch people go by, walkin into the Arsenal, but not before a few give me weird looks. *Fuckin jackoffs.* "What's next up? Rockefeller Center?" I ask, gettin Kati's attention.
"I think so." She says as she looks to City, wantin to know if she still wants to be out with us. While she's hopin, the answer is *yes*, she gets slight disappointment.
"I wish I could, but right now I need to head home for a little bit. Maybe I can drop by later today if it's alright with you." She says, where *I* then have to lay on the disappointment.
"Eh, we'll be up in the Bronx for the whole afternoon. No tellin how bad traffic will be by then." I say as Kati starts pattin herself down. Par che ła se gabia desmentegà calcossa. (Seems she forgot something)
"Bassza meg. (Fuck) I left my phone in there." She says as he briefly turns around. "South bathroom on the second floor... I'll be right back." She then says as she darts back into the Arsenal, leavin me with City, who starts fidgetin with her hat again as I decide to approach her while I wait for Kati.
"You headin back to the Financial District now, or…" I open, watchin her reaction closely.
"If I can, yes." She says, voice tense as she tries to *avoid* eye contact. Cô ấy biết tôi muốn nói gì. (She knows what I want to talk about)
"Still tryin to find some alternative methods?" I ask, rippin the band-aid off so we can get straight to the point.
"I'm… open to suggestions." City says as she reaches into her pocket, seemingly to see if she has her keys on her., eyes occasionally dartin to me as she checks.
"Not anythin at the moment, no." I tell her as she takes a deep breath. that tells me all I need. 'I see. Thank you regardless.' Kati then comes back out, phone in hand, just in time for City to start leavin.
"Alright, crisis averted." She says as she looks over at City. "If you can find the time and can avoid

traffic, I wouldn't mind you dropping by again. I don't know about Met, though."
"I wouldn't either. I'll let you know." City responds as she then turns to leave, heels clicking on the sidewalk as she gets smaller and smaller. I know I should be more honest with Kati. She is my best friend after all. But given the circumstances, I think that would do more harm than good at this stage. These two need time to figure things out on their own. City especially. Nhưng nếu mọi thứ trở nên không thể duy trì được, tôi sẽ không có lựa chọn nào khác. (But if things become untenable, I won't have a choice)

|-Late afternoon. The Capri, 1700 Grand Concourse, the Bronx-|

"Prone of the operating table"
"Deep incision sliced on inanimate flesh"
"I love my disgusting equipment"
"Needles, scalpels and brainscoops to diagnose death"
"Succumb to my horrible experiment"
"Intestines and limbs agog in fiendish disarray"
"Mutating your natural composition"
"Rearrange your vital organs in horrific display"

"I'm the ghoul of the medical profession"
"Foetid corpses and carcasses line the basement wall"
"With glee I dismember cadavers"
"I affix the pancreas where the stomach should be"
"Rejuvenate the rancid corpses"
"The innards glisten in their new anatomical display"
"I cackle with post mortem delight"
"The walls reek of sin and the stench of horrendous decay"

"God, could you turn it down?" I ask Met, getting the feeling that my temples are about to collapse in on themselves from how loud the music is. Met just glares at me while Scott leans over from behind the wall and casts judgement.

"No."
"Absolutely the fuck not."

They say in unison, getting a grumble out of me as I have to now deal with this claptrap for a few more hours until I hear from Mark and Jessica that they're ready to go. Scott then comes out of his room fully, towel on his head, water droplets absorbing into the collar of his shirt as he walks over, beads of water still on the whatever exposed dark skin their is, sitting down next to me.
"So what'd you think? Good movie?" He asks as Met laughs from the kitchen.
"Oh come on, Scott. You know she doesn't do well with horror." He says as he tosses his head back, swallowing his HRT when Scott answers him.
"I don't know, Met. She seemed to do pretty okay." He says before hos eyes lock onto me, gaze burning into my skull. "Let's see if we can get one more in. I'm thinking… The Exorcist."
"Nah. Don't think we'll have the time. We're headin out to do some bar hoppin with some friends tonight." Met interjects, saving me from further nightmares. I already know I'm not gonna sleep well tonight. "Speakin of… heard anythin from Mark."
"I would've told you if I had." I say as I watch my phone vibrate on the coffee table. I reach over and grab it, seeing that it's Jessica that has texted me.

'We'll be ready in five minutes. First stop is Dutch Kills up in Queens, right?' She asks. That *sounds* right. I'll need to check with Met.
'Think so. Let me ask Met. This was his idea.' I send back as I turn to Met. "Jessica says she will be ready soon. Dutch Kills is first right?" He scratches his head briefly before he gives me an answer.
"Uh, no. We're starting in Brooklyn at Bearded Lady. We're not even touching Queens. It's just Brooklyn and Manhattan." He says as I text the answer to Jessica.
'Bearded Lady. Shouldn't be too far from your apartment. We're also not heading into Queens. Just Brooklyn and Manhattan.' I send her, watching as she types her response before sending it.
'Got it. I'll let Mark know. We can meet you outside.' I then look over at Met, wanting to know if he are good to go. He nods, and I stand up, walking over to the door and slipping ym Chucks back on as I turn back to Scott. "Thanks for letting me come over."
"No problem. Anyone who's a friend of Met is welcome here at anytime. I do not mind." He says as he gets the towel of his head, dreadlocks cascading down his back as he stands up himself.
"Besides, you're not the only ones heading out. I gotta meet up with Chantel here in a little bit down in Times Square. You two have fun." He says as he heads into his room to get changed, me and Met heading out the door and into the hallway.
"I'm assuming Chantel is his girlfriend?" I ask as Met turns his head down to me.
"They prefer the term *partner*, but yes." He answers as he turns back to his apartment, wanting to close the door but getting a few last words in. "Hey Scott! If we end up at Times Square by the end of the night I'm bummin a ride home off you!"
"Because of course you are you broke ass bitch! Anything to avoid paying fare!" Scott shouts back, getting a laugh out of Met.
"We live together you fuck!" He retorts as he closes the door, walking with me down the hallway and towards the elevator. We reach it, Met pushing the button and me hitting the button for the lobby once we're inside. While we head down, I feel his eyes one me. One purple, the other silver. He's analyzing me again. Utálom, amikor ezt csinálja. (I hate it when he does that)

"Could you… not stare like that?" I say, voice low and wimpish as it usually gets like this.
"You know, you *can* tell me when somethin is really botherin you. I hate playin the guessin game." He says, reminding me of our little conversation Monday night in Crotona Park. "I do want to know what's goin through that head of yours. No keepin secrets, okay? This ain't like the other day at Crotona."
"You'll think less of me…" I say, voice almost inaudible thought I know Met heard it clearly. Úgy tűnt, ez nem tetszik neki. (He didn't seem to like it)
"Don't start with that bullshit, Kati. How long have we known each other? Most of our lives? Come on, out with it. As much as you are comfortable with while we're still in here." He says, genuinely wanting to help. I guess I *could* use some. Don't know how useful it will be, though.
"You already know." I say, watching his eyes remain on me as he turns his head in my periphery.
"Oh, it's like that? Can't say I'm surprised. What's she like?" He asks, wanting to get as much out as he can before he takes action, though… something is off. I can't shake the feeling that Met *already knows* who's taking up so much of my mind. Wouldn't be the first time, either. So I need to choose my next words carefully.
"She's kind, caring and thoughtful. Very headstrong and confident in ways I *wished* I was. Always tries to plan ahead and is quite intelligent. Drop dead gorgeous." I start, taking a brief pause as I accept reality. "And completely out of my league." I finish, sighing as I get those final words out. I then hear Met chuckle as he forms his response.
"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were talkin about Rose. Especially with that last part." He says, getting a chuckle out of me in turn. I guess I did think she was out of my league at one point.
"I said that about her?" I say, snapping my head to attention as I look Met right in his eyes.
"Yeah, ya did. Multiple times, in fact. Kinda got annoyin after a while." He says as the elevator

stops, door opening, where we then step out into the lobby. "But enough of that. Come on, we've got a Sicilian at a bar to meet."

"Well, you twos sure took ya sweet time, din't ya?" Mark says as we reach him and Jessica, watching her chuckle as we both know Mark is just messing with us. "Glad ya could make it." He then specifically looks at Met. "Nice makeup, Met…"
"It's not makeup. It's *corpse-paint*. **Get it right**." Met responds, which allows me to slide in, prodding Met slightly.
"Don't even try to argue, Met. It's makeup. And I helped you put it on." I say, watching as Met snaps his head down to me, Mark and Jessica laughing at the emasculation I have just subjected him to where he then leans down, whisepring into my ear.
"Don't you ever… *fucking do that again. So help me God if you do, I will punt you into the East River.*" He says while I turn my head to make eye contact.
"You care too much to do that." I say, defanging the threat because I *know* Met will never commit to it. Not on me, at least. "Wanna head in? It's six o'clock." I say, wanting to get the night started before anything can derail it.Everyone ust nods and we walk into the bar.

We make our way to a booth where a waiter comes over to us. We grab a large appetizer as well as our drinks, with water as well so that we don't get *too* inebriated. Not that it matters for Met. He doesn't drink.
"Can't think of a better way to spend Halloween than bar crawlin with some of my favorite people in the entire city." Met starts, briefly looking at Mark as he finished the thought. "And I guess Mark, too."
"A'ight, first t'ings first; Fuhk you. You Venetzian dick." He says as Jessica calms down the faux tension.
"Och, hush now. Sure, ye know he means well." She says as she looks over at Met. "Just a root beer, is it? that's all?"
"Uh, yeah. You know I don't drink, Jessica." Met says as he looks around, seeing a lot of people in costumes, seemingly with the same idea as us.
"Guess it's not the most *original* idea." I say, getting Mark's attention most."
"Yeah, well, it's a good one. So fuhkin fuggedaboutit." He says as the appetizer arrives, along with our drinks. "Oh hell yeah. Big-ass plate uh nachos. Love t'see it." He says as he reaches for one of the chips, eating it quickly before he then takes his drink, piping a sip down through the straw, savoring the taste as he goes for another. Jessica also takes a sip of her drink, taking a few seconds before going in for another while Met chugs his root beer. I then look over at my drink, this *cherry bomb* that I know will not do my head any favors. Soha nem voltam még ennyire jó az alkohollal. (I've never been all that good with alcohol) I take a sip, feeling the burn of bourbon go down my throat as I reach for my water, Mark degrading me as I do so.
"Looks like sumone's a lightweight." He says as Jessica jabs him with her elbow.
"Don't be too harsh now, would ya?" She says, but I do have to agree with Mark.
"No, no. He's right. I am a lightweight." I say, chuckling as the words come out. This is going to be on *very interesting* night. As I look around, I watch as an idea starts forming in Jessica's head. Conveniently, right as Met gets more root beer. She raises her glass up, wanting a toast.
"Every bar we step into, a toast. What would ya be sayin'?" She asks Mark responds.
"Amen ta dat." He says as he moves into position.

"Happy Halloween."
"Happy Halloween, everyone."
"Here's to November's coming fire."
"Here's to a blessed Samhain, so it is."

Just one more bar… And I can get some rest. I hope. I tried to not drink as much as possible, knowing how bad I am with alcohol, but when you're in good company… Mondjuk gátlások általában nem léteznek. (Let's just say inhibitions tend to not exist) We step up to one more club, Deluxx Fluxx, and I get the feeling that this will be the last one *for me*. Sometimes the gut just acts like that. Hard to stop it, I guess. That or it's nausea. Probably nausea now that I'm thinking about it. Thank god Met is here, though. I feel him catch me as I start to sway slightly, something that immediately gets my attention.
"You okay there?" I hear him ask as I slowly turn my head up to him.
"Yeah, I… I'm fine. Azt hiszem. (I think)" I say as I watch Mark and Jessica get the door. Wish I had their constitutions. I'd be able to enjoy the night more if I did.
"I can get you home if you need to. They'll understand." Met says as he straightens my posture, guiding me towards the door like I'm blacked out.
"No. I can get through one more. I'm fine." I say as my head starts to feel a bit light. I should probably *not* drink any more booze tonight. Water will be my best friend.

Met gets me through the door, much to my chagrin, and we immediately set to finding Mark and Jessica, who've already got themselves a table by the dance floor. Seems they've already ordered, since they're looking at me and Met.
"Awright Kati, since me an' Jessica already know what we want, I'll hand this to *you*." Marks says as he slide me the drink menu, but I decline.
"I'm good. I think I'll just take some water." I say as Jessica turns her attention to me.
"Ah, think you'll be needin' to head home soon?" She asks as I wave the concern off.
"Pff, *nah*. I can last one more dive." I say as Met takes another soda, thanking the waiter as she shuffles off to get our drinks.

"If you need to, I can get you home. Remember that." He says, reminding me of my own state right now, having to project his voice over all the music. I look around, seeing how lively the club is tonight. I shouldn't be surprised though. Halloween is the *perfect* time for a night club to be open. So many people on the dance floor, getting all that energy out of their system. In full costume too. Some of them look *really heavy* to be lugging around. And yet they make it look easy. Also makes me feel… kind of under dressed. I look down at myself, simple black pants, black shoes and a black shirt with cat face paint on my cheeks. Not the most original idea but it gets by. Elég már. (It's enough) I can also say the same for Jessica, who looks like a banshee. Fitting since she's Irish. Mark though…
"Oh my god… Did Mark really dress as *his dad*?" I ask, poking some fun at how Mark looks tonight. He puts on a show of faux offense as he responds.
"Don't you *evah* disrespect da good name of Vito Corleone like dat again, little lady." He says before he starts laughing as Met just stares at him.
"Ya know, for someone tryin to get away from all the gangs he ran with in high school, you *sure are* fascinated by organized crime." He says as our drinks arrive.
"Well, Gawdfaddah is my old man's favorite muhvie. Pawt Two specifically." Mark responds as I drink *half* of my water in one go, taking note of just how dry my tongue has gotten over the course of the night. And that's when I notice another thing; How much I need to use the bathroom. I never really noticed it until now, given how busy we've all been. But it can't be ignored anymore at this point. I quickly excuse myself and head over to where the women's restroom is, pushing the door open and heading into a stall to relieve myself. Doesn't take long, and I quickly exit the stall, heading over to the sinks to wash my hands where I decide to splash some cold water on my face to

try and sober up a bit more. Though when I look in the mirror… Isten bassza. (God dammit) I washed off most of my makeup. Oh well.

I leave the bathroom and start making my way back to Met, Jessica and Mark when I spot something, or rather *someone* familiar. It all starts with a large purple and black witch hat. No way… I try to get a better view, and see Gold City, at a table surrounded by people talking to her. Or rather, talking *at* her. And she… Oh god she looks like she's been drinking a lot. I don't like where this is going. Not with how many guys are here tonight. *I don't trust any of them*. I quickly make my way over to the table, gently pushing a few people aside to make a path.

"Excuse me. Sorry about that. Coming through. I need to… get over here real quick, sorry."

It takes a few seconds, but I reach her, the concern only growing in my mind as I look at how pink her face is. I know Umas have a higher metabolism so it takes a lot more for them to get drunk, but if she's this blushed, she must've been drinking *a lot*. Probably enough to give someone like Mark a nasty hangover. A few people look at me funny, but right now, I don't particularly give a shit. I *do*, however, give a shit about Gold. I make it apparent that I'm here, tapping on her shoulder to get her attention, which works as she turns her head slowly.
"Oh, Kati I… I wasn't expecting to see you here." She says, words slurred ever so slightly.
"Oh no, we're leaving now." I say as I gently take her by the wrist an leading her away form the table, upsetting *some* of the guys that were here. Good. They'd never deserve her anyway. But City seems to be a bit upset herself.
"Wha… Kati, I'm fine." She says, swallowing hard, telling me that she must be a little dehydrated.
"Not in a place *like this* in the *state you are in currently*. Come on." I say, watching as she seemingly processes the concern in my eyes. Whatever resistance she's put forward so far melts away entirely, putting her full trust in me. Frankly, I don't know what to do right now. Ez egy kicsit lehengerlő. (It's a bit overwhelming) But I press on, making my way towards the door with Gold in tow, seeing Met as I do so. Somehow, we make eye contact, and he also sees City with me. He just nods, understanding what's going on, relaying that to Mark and Jessica, though I imagine for the sake of my pride he doesn't give too many details.

We make it out of the club and onto the street, sitting down at a bench so that we can get our bearings somewhat.
"Hey, look at me." I say, watching as a look of slight annoyance creeps on City's face.
"I'm not… *that* drunk. Only a little tipsy." She says as she looks around before focusing back on me. "Thanks though, even if… it felt like it came out of nowhere. I *was* enjoying my night."
"I know, I know. And I'm sorry for doing that suddenly but… Did you not see the way some of those guys were looking at you? A tipsy woman in a night club surrounded by a bunch of meatheads? I didn't want to take any chances with that." I say, watching as the realization slowly but surely comes over her. But she doesn't respond, not verbally at least. She nods as I get my next question out. "How did you get here? Do you… Do you have your keys on you?"
"I walked. It's only around five kilometers." She responds. *Great. Just what I needed to hear*.
"Okay, I can work with that." I say as I look around. Street looks pretty clear right now. So a taxi… I stand up, motioning for City to stay seated while I walk to the edge of the sidewalk. Once I spot a taxi, I wave it down, looking back at City who then stands up. The driver slows the vehicle and stops by the sidewalk, allowing us to get in the back.
"Where ya goin'?" He asks as we slide into the back of the car.
"One West Street." I say as the driver types the address in, chuckling slightly as he does so.
"That's a pretty fancy place." He says as he starts moving, the taxi slowly pulling off the sidewalk and into the street again, taking us south towards the Financial District.

"Looks like you two had a fun night." The driver says as he looks and me and Gold in the rear-view mirror.
"Something like that." City responds, words still slurred as the driver chuckles again.
"Seems like someone had a bit too much to drink." He says as he continues his drive, occasionally looking back at us. "So are you two together?"
"I, uh… uh, no?" I quickly say, catching Gold off guard, making me think of something else to say.
"Well, we *came here* together, but we're not… You know." I say, feeling like I've just dug the hole deeper. Especially now that I realize she's been resting her head on my shoulder this entire time so far as I briefly look in the rear-view mirror myself.
"*Really?* Well you coulda fooled me." The driver responds as the cab goes quiet, his words dampening my mood as I feel City's ears droop, the tips ever so slightly trailing down my cheek. The rest of the ride is spent in silence.

"Thank you." I say as we get out, me lingering a little longer so I can pay the fare.
"Don't mention it." The driver says as I step onto the sidewalk, hearing City take a deep breath as I turn around to face her. I then look to the building, a subtle suggestion that we should probably get inside. She agrees and starts walking towards the front doors, me following at her side. I get one of the handles and pull the door open, letting Gold walk in first, me behind her where I see her start swaying slightly. I quickly move to catch her like Met did with me earlier, and I realize that this is a *bit too much* contact for my liking. So I qu9ickly get her straightened and star moving to the elevator. I push the button for up, it comes down and we walk in, City hitting the seventeenth floor where I then turn to ask her a simple question.
"You *have* your keys, *right*?" I ask, wanting to make sure we can get into her apartment.
"Yes, they're in my pocket." She says as she pulls them out, handing them to me so that I can get her door unlocked. Again, putting her trust in me for this where she then asks me something in return. "Remember what unit it is?"
"1708." I answer just as the elevator door opens. We step out into the hallway, me occasionally taking glances at City to make sure she's okay. We get to the door, and I slot the key in, turning it to unlock the door before pushing it open.

We step inside, and I take my shoes off, immediately going into the kitchenette to get her a glass of water. I take a cup out of a cupboard and walk over to the sink, filling it up as I watch Gold slowly take her shoes off. "Here, drink this. It's just water." I say as she takes it, taking one small sip to see if I'm telling the truth. Once she is satisfied, she starts drinking more and more, eventually downing the entire cup and handing it back to me. "Need some more?"
"I wouldn't be opposed." She says, voice already sounding more full. I quickly make my way back into the kitchenette, refilling the cup as I hear City set herself down on her sofa. I make my way there and hand her the cup again. She drinks some before setting it down on the coffee table, drawing a deep breath into her lungs before slowly exhaling.
"How are you feeling?" I ask, watching as her ears slowly rise as she turns her head to face me.
"Light headed. Thirsty. Tongue is *incredibly* dry. Maybe it *was* good that you caught me when you did." She says as she gently places her hand on my shoulder in a friendly way, shaking me gently. It's such a small gesture, but it sends my mind spiraling. I quickly try to think about something, *anything* else. Which seems to work as City speaks up again. "Thank you, again."

"So… *why* did you decided to go clubbing by yourself?" I ask, wanting to know more. Gold takes another deep breath before she answers, reaching for the cup of water and finishing it again before anything else.
"Well, I had come back here after we were at the Arsenal in Central Park and decided to talk to an old friend." She starts, and my immediate thought is of Tosen Jordan. They're pretty close, right?

Makes sense she'd want to talk to her. But that's not who she mentions. "So I called Helios, wanting to catch up a bit with her."
"Oh, and how did that go?" I then ask, prodding a little bit. Maybe some of those cat-like qualities weren't *entirely* rubbed off in the bathroom.
"Well, she's currently staying in North Carolina. Funnily enough doing some modeling for Randy." City says with a chuckle, looking at the cup, letting me know she wants some more water. I get up and refill it, letting her speak as I go. "Funny how that works, isn't it?"
"A little bit, yeah." I say, a small chuckle escaping my lips as I fill the cup for the third time tonight. I then come back to the sofa and sit down next to City, handing her the cup as she continues her story.
"It was the usual sort of thing you'd expect. We ask each other how we've been, talk about what we've been doing, who we've been seeing if we were with anyone. And then we started talking about plans for Halloween and I mentioned how I didn't really have any. At which point she suggested I go to a night club." She says, pausing to take a sip of water. "I *tried* to remind her that it's really not my kind of thing but she insisted. And I won't lie, it did seem fun. Helios can make *anything* sound fun."
"Well, you certainly looked like you had some." I say, letting a bit of sarcasm fill my voice.
"Yeah… Peut-être un peu trop. (Maybe a little too much) You know how these things go. When you're in seemingly good company, one drink becomes two which then quickly becomes three. Which shortly after that turns into four, the next thing you know becoming five." Gold says in response, taking another sip of water before continuing. "I think I was eight or nine drinks in when you showed up and pulled me away. Which then begs the question: What were *you* doing there?"
"Bar crawling with some friends." I say. something that gets her ears pointing straight up. "I was… actually gonna head home after that spot. Was starting to feel a bit tipsy myself."
"I take it you don't do too well with alcohol?" She says as she looks at me, blue locking onto brown, the glint from last night returning to her eyes.
"Not in the slightest. I think I would've passed out if I had drank as much as you had tonight." I say as I start feeling thirsty myself, getting up and grabbing a cup of my own, filling it up with water before taking a small sip. I then once more return to the sofa, sitting back down next to City. "I almost *did* pass out when I turned 21. Met decided to take me on a bar crawl. Helluva way to learn you're not compatible with liquor."
"It certainly sounds like one. Can't imagine how what Met would be like when he gets drunk." Gold says as he head sloops down a bit. Guess she must be feeling tired now.
"Well, he doesn't drink so we'll never know." I respond, watching City's ears perk up again.
"He doesn't? Oh wait, it would mess with his HRT, wouldn't it?" She then says, picking up on something that she feels is obvious.
"That's what he says. But… I can't shake the feeling that it isn't the *full story*." I say as I take a deep breath. "I did some research a few years ago and learned that alcohol doesn't really mess with most forms of HRT."
"Then that begs the question: Why doesn't he drink?" City asks in return, and I suddenly feel uncomfortable. I shouldn't really be talking about personal things like that. Especially if it's about Met. But at the same time, it's only really a guess.
"I think it has something to do with his mom. I know at some point she started drinking heavily before she moved back to Vietnam and before Met properly started his transition, but… I don't know. That's too much of a personal thing and I don't want to be that kind of person. Especially since we're talking about my *best friend*." I say, watching a look of understanding form of City's face.
"I see. I think we should change subjects then." She says as she takes another sip of water, setting the cup down on the coffee table as she pulls both legs onto the sofa, wanting to talk just a bit longer before she dozes off.

Ugyan már, Kati. Együtt is tarthatod. (Come on, Kati. You can keep it together) It's *really* hitting her now. Even among Umas there can be those that just take a minute for booze to kick in. Guess City is one of them.
"Careful…" I say as I lead her into her bedroom, keeping her steady as she walks to her bed, having some difficulty sitting down on the edge, meaning I have to help again.
"No, no… I can sit down on my own…" She says, words slurred again as more alcohol hits her brain. Though I will say, this isn't anywhere near as bad as I thought it would be. When Gold said she could feel the liquor affecting her a bit more I started prepping for the worst. Of course, assuming that we've already gotten past it. I hear her take in a deep breath, hoping that it can help her sober up when I look towards the bathroom, the idea forming in my head.
"Head into the bathroom real quick. Splash some cold water on your face. That could help." I say as she takes a few seconds to process what I said. She then nods and I walk over, wanting to help her up if she needs it but she doesn't. She manages to get up on her own and walk over to the bathroom sink, turning the faucet on and getting some cold water in her hands which she then rubs onto her face, beads of moisture slinking around on her soft, pale skin. She then comes back to the bedroom and sits down on her bed, tipsy blue eyes lounging on me as she looks around her.

"Could you… help me, you know…" She starts, pointing to certain things on her clothing before she continues. "If you're… comfortable with that, at least. I don't… want to make it seem like I'm being…"
"No, no. I understand. I can help." I say, trying my bet to not let *certain* thoughts come into my head. She's been drinking tonight. That kind of thinking wouldn't be okay.

Right. Because those thoughts are perfectly fine when she is sober?
Ó a francba... (Oh for fuck's sake…)
Don't even start, young lady.
Could you fuck off for five minutes, please? I'm not in the mood.
Yes, you'd like that, wouldn't you? You disgusting li-

No. Not now. Not ever. I quickly refocus on City, wanting her to be a bit more sober than she currently is so that no miscommunications happen.
"I'm going to get you another cup of water, okay?" I say as I turn back and head into the kitchenette for the umpteenth time tonight. I fill it up and bring it back to her, handing it over gently so nothing gets spilled. I watch as she takes a few sips before turning her head to look at a closet, pointing at it.
"There should be a… silk robe in there. Red and black, I think." She says before taking another sip of water. I walk over, open the closet and find the robe after a few seconds, pulling it out to show to her so I can make sure it's the right one. "Yeah, that's the one…" She says as I bring it over, watching as she slowly starts to unlatch her belt before unzipping her pants. "Could you, uh…"
"Oh, uh… No problem." I say, taking a deep breath as I help her get the pants off. I then set them aside as I hear more fabric be shuffled, turning around to see her struggling to get her shirt of.
"Need some help with that, too?" I ask as she stops, putting it back on before giving me an answer.
"That would be appreciated." City says as I walk over, gently taking the hem of the shirt between my fingers and hoisting it over her head. I then start looking *up and above her* for the sake of modesty. "I can get the robe on. You… don't need to worry." She says as more fabric shuffles. After a few seconds, I look down to see her in the robe, noticing that it is tied snugly.
"How much of of a headache do you think you'll have in the morning?" I ask, briefly looking over at the cup of water on the night stand.
"That is… a great question. I do not know." Gold responds as she lays down, leaving me at the foot of her bed. I take one last look around the room before I turn when I hear her speak up one more

time. "if it's not too much to ask… could you… stay the night? Just… to make sure nothing happens? Like, me throwing up in my sleep?" I take a few seconds to process what I just heard. Now is not the time to get locked up, so I take a deep breath and give her an answer.
"Yeah, I… could do that. Do you… have any spare blankets?" I respond, heart pounding in my chest as I look at City lounging on her bed.
"There should be some in the closet." She says, prompting me to walk over to the closet and look. Doesn't take long to find them, and I make my way towards the door.
"I'll be on the couch. And I'll leave the door open if that's okay." I say, watching her nod in approval as I head back into the living room. Well, I *was* right. This was most definitely an interesting night. Csak nem úgy, ahogy elképzeltem. Boldog Halloween. (Just not in the way I imagined. Happy Halloween)

|-Saturday morning. One West Luxury Apartments, 1 West Street-|

I wake up more groggy then usual, throat dry, tongue seemingly barren of moisture and with my head feeling like it could split open at any moment. Kore wa hijō ni fukai desu. (This is very unpleasant) I slowly get up, rubbing my temples so that this numbing pain can go away. I need a shower. I stand up, noticing an empty cup on the night stand. I don't… remember putting that there last night. It's an odd sight, but I pay it no attention in the immediate. I quickly make my way to the bathroom and undress, taking off the robe and my underwear before I start the water, adhering to my usual routine. The warm water feels nice though. I could probably waste some time in here. Help relax the muscle and ease away this headache. But I can't stay in here forever. After a few minutes of lounging, I step out and dry off, heading back into my bedroom to put some simple clothes on. Well, as simple as can be for someone like me. Black pants and a red shirt should do. I quickly put them on when I hear something from the kitchenette. Il y a quelqu'un d'autre ici. Qui? (There's someone else here. Who?) I cautiously make my way towards my bedroom door, opening it slowly, seeing nobody at first before I step out fully, finding-

"Oh, I didn't hear you wake up." Kati says. What is… *Why* is…
"Kati… What are… How did…" I start, trying to find the right words to say as she walks over to me.
"So, I was out bar crawling with Met, Mark and Jessica last night as a part of our Halloween celebration and I ran into you at a club. You were, uh… surrounded by a lot of people, mostly guys and had been drinking. By your own admission about eight or nine." She starts, a great deal of care in her voice. "So I… decided to pull you out at that situation and get you back here. Tried to get you sobered up as best I could so that the hangover wouldn't be as bad but with how much you drank, an Uma's metabolism being what it is and you apparently being one of those people where alcohol take a a lot longer to hit the brain, it got kinda hard at the end." She… She *took care of me*? In a vulnerable moment? How do I respond to that?
"I, I just… Wow. That's a lot to take in. But then… why are you here? I didn't give you my keys, did I?" I then ask, still unsure of *why* she is here. I can tell Kati has an answer, but isn't sure if she can really say it. But then she takes a deep breath and speaks up.
"I helped you get changed and then you asked me to stay the night. And… so I did. To make sure that nothing bad happened like you throwing up in your sleep." She says, and I feel an impulse start growing. And growing fast. To the point where I can't keep it down. Without really thinking, I close the distance between us, wrapping my arms around Kati as I let her warmth seep into me.



"Oh, I, uh… Well that was unexpected." She says, snapping me back into reality as I quickly push myself off me.
"Oh, I, uh… apologize for that. I… should've asked first." I say, the second part coming out as little more than a whisper as I retreat back into myself slightly. But I don't feel shame. Rather, the oddest warmth grow inside me. Kati's own still lingering on me. It felt… Totemo suteki desu. (So nice) I then take a deep breath before I decide to speak up again. "So I take it that cup on my night stand was your doing?" I ask, watching a small, wry smile form on Kati's lips.
"Well, I didn't want you to be dehydrated. Helps you stay comfortable while the body processes any alcohol that's been ingested." She says as she looks over to the fridge before returning her attention to me. "Speaking of; How are you feeling? Headache isn't too bad? Mouth not dry or anything?"
"When I woke up at first, yeah, my head hurt pretty bad but I jumped in the shower to see if it could help." I say as Kati looks me up and down.
"Did it?" She then asks.
"A little bit. But some food and drink wouldn't hurt." I say as I look towards the door. Kati does the same, and simply nods. No words needed. 'Yeah, let's head out.'

My head still hurts a little, but it's far more manageable than it was earlier. Taking some aspirin helped, but my stomach could still use something in it. And just as it growls, our food arrives.
"You two ladies enjoy your meal." The waiter says as he sets the plates down, both having bagels on them.
"Are you *sure* this can help with the hangover?" I ask as I pull my plate towards me, gently pushing my tea aside, the smell of ginger wafting into my nostrils from it.
"It should, yeah. Eggs have a good amount of protein and Vitamin B which can help alleviate things like nausea and headaches. Same with ginger." She says, something that makes a lot of things start making sense.
"I see… No wonder you insisted on the ginger tea." I say as I pull the cup towards me, wanting another sip before I start eating. It was rough at first, but after a few sips it started to taste rather pleasant. Once I'm satisfied I look to the bagel and gently pick it up, taking a bite as I savor some of the textures. "Hmm… never had a poached egg on a sandwich before."
"Well is it good?" Kati says as she takes a bite of her bagel.
"Very, yes. Good call coming here." I say, mind still going back to how she was concerned about my safety last night. How she saw a potentially bad situation and acted in the moment. I don't think I want to know what would've happened if she wasn't there and pulled me from that table. If I had stayed there and kept drinking. By her own admission there were a lot of men that potentially had some… less than savory intentions. How she made sure that I was okay afterwards, that I had water to stay hydrated throughout the night. Tout cela… (All of it…) Goddesses help me now, I really *am* falling for her, aren't I? Funny how things of that caliber can occur in such a short amount of time. How in only four months my entire world has been shaken it it's core. But then the dragon comes back, the oni and nain rouge appearing on my shoulders once more.

Think of mother. Think of father.
Think of how the establishment would react.
Kindly return yourselves to whatever depressing hellscape you both crawled out of.

I pay them no need. Ils ne sont qu'un obstacle de toute façon. (They're only a hindrance anyhow) But as I dispel the little oni and nain rouge, I remember that I am in no way capable of accepting this. Not at the current moment. And it is so *frustrating*. Why can I not be honest about my feelings? Why do I have to feel so ashamed when I'm with Kati? Why can't I *accept this*? this bout of self-doubt becomes so engrossing that I feel myself zoning out, and that's when her voice pulls me from it.

"City? You're looking a bit lost again." I hear Kati say as I snap back to reality, pale blue eyes locking onto those deep, rich and beautiful irises she has.
"Lost? What do you mean?" I ask, trying to diffuse the situation before it can grow out of my control. But Kati seems to know better.
"I don't know, you kinda… zoned out I guess." She says, concern deep within her eyes as she speaks.
"No. I'm… fine." I muster out, inhaling a deep breath as I take another bite of my food.
"Still bothered by the fashion show?" Kati then asks, the silence between us after she speaks becoming deafening until she cuts through it again. "We don't have to talk about it if you're still uncomfortable with it. I'd understand."
"I know." I say as I take another deep breath. "Shitte iru. (I know)" That comes out more as a whisper as Kati checks the time on her phone. Judging by her reaction, it seems like she's needed somewhere else. Presumably it's Met.
"I should get going. I told Met what happened and he'll be here in a few." She says as she starts to stand up, prompting me to do the same. We grab boxes so that we can take home whatever is left of our food and walk through the door, heading back to my apartment building.

It doesn't take long for us to reach the building, and I spot a large vehicle parked not too far away, over by the Battery.
"I'm assuming that's Met?" I ask as Kati as she also sees the vehicle.
"Yeah, that's him." She says as she starts to make her way towards it, but something in me doesn't want her to leave just yet. On an impulse, I reach out and take her wrist in mine, getting a soft gasp out of her. "Uh… That's, uh…
"I-Sorry I just… Before you go would it be too much to…" I try to say, but the words keep failing me. I can't ask that. Not in this state. But Kati, being the understanding woman she is, picks up on what it is I want.
"I *think* I see what you're getting at. It's okay. Come on, bring it in." I hear her say as she relaxes in my grip, approaching me slowly before the hug connects. That same warmth from earlier seeps into me again, and I almost don't want to let her go. But I know I have to. She has her own life to live, and I will respect that. We slowly push off each other before I speak up.
"I'll let you know when I get everything for the next photo shoot. Standard routine; you come over and we see what goes together best." I say as my arms fall back to my sides, her warmth and scent still lingering on me.
"That sounds good. I'll see you then." She says as Met gets out of his car, waving Kati down while shouting.
"WILL YOU HURRY UP WITH THE SENTIMENTAL SHIT! I DON'T HAVE ALL DAY!" He says as Kati adopts a quicker pace, disappearing into the passenger side of his car, which then slowly drives past me. It's then that I feel the lump in my throat. The kind of thing you feel when you want to cry.

Kono ai o ukeireru tame ni, watakushi wa nan o sure ba ī no deshō ka? (What do I have to do in order to accept this love?)

Chapter End Notes

Alright, I don't know I can really say down here since, you know, most of my audience is on Ao3. And most of you don't really know the story all that well. I did only migrate everything

over the course of two days, so I don't blame you. Regardless, drop a kudo, leave a comment telling me what you think and I will see you next time.

Art by Lueduar

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!