

The gentle plink-plink of rain on my windowsill was naturally relaxing. I had begun to see the steady precipitation as a comfortable, natural lullaby of sorts. Its soft tattoo was soothing. It nearly tempted me to change my plans and stay in for the evening, but the leak in my ceiling said otherwise. Rain outside was one thing, but inside it was only frustrating and disappointing. After all, I had been a guest of this hotel many times over many, many years and never once had I been dissatisfied, but the steady plop of each solitary drop on my pillow was absolutely intolerable and demanded remedy.

I sighed as I grabbed my black overcoat and paused to regard the leak once more before stepping out into the brightly lit hallway. I headed quickly over to the elevators, not that I was in a particular hurry. I had always been told I walk with some urgency even in my most casual gait, perhaps it was true. I pushed the down arrow and waited patiently for the summoned transport to arrive. It was fairly late so I expected to be alone during my descent to the main lobby, but as the doors opened I was greeted by a pair of extremely amorous teens. They were obviously as surprised to see another guest at this late hour as I was to see them, and they quickly separated themselves from their previously intertwined positions as I stepped inside the elevator. The doors closed and the elevator continued its slow rumbling descent down the shaft. It was all I could do to suppress a smile creeping across my face as I felt wave after wave of desire crashing upon me emanating from the two excited lovers. The small cabin was so awash with the scent and heat of intimacy unfulfilled that I was considerably relieved when the doors opened to the lobby and could leave the lovers to their fun.

I adjusted my coat and proceeded to the front desk. The normally bustling nerve center of the hotel was quiet and quite empty allowing one's attention to drift more consciously over the gilded cherubim statues, baroque chair rails, and marble counter tops. Every inch of the lobby had been meticulously arranged so that the effect was sophisticated, but not gaudy, luxurious, but not effete. Even the plants, all perfectly trimmed roses, ferns, and some large waxy-leaf looking plants whose name I did not know, but often graced the halls and corners of offices and waiting rooms, were designed to offer the appropriate amount of tasteful greenery without overcrowding the guest or pushing the atmosphere down one's throat.

I tapped the tiny gold bell on the counter top and quietly awaited the response of the night time concierge, a tall, gaunt, polished looking man whose pale face was always slightly upturned so that he could perpetually gaze down his nose at others. He walked with a stiff clip, his hands clasped behind his back and he always seemed to begin each statement with the affected "harrumph" that I had grown so accustomed to. I turned my back to the desk and waited, watching various passers-by on the street through the gleaming gold framed glass doors of the front lobby. I heard the soft sound of footfalls on the carpet behind me and prepared myself for the mild, high-handed verbal assault of the concierge. I decided to beat him to the punch.

“Burgy, I have to say, I’m disappointed. Though I should only blame myself for thinking you to be of any relevant service at all. Truthfully, yes, the fault is mine for believing you capable of genuine service and attention to guests. Why this beautiful hotel would continue to employ a pompous, high-minded, troll-looking windbag such as yourself, year after year is beyond me. I mean really, Burgy, how can,” I said as turned around to meet his severe glower. But a severe glower isn’t what I found at all. Instead it was the slightly amused look of another. She was small; nearly a foot shorter than I and her limbs were thin, but toned with lean muscle like a dancer’s or a swimmer’s. Her eyes were a honey brown that seemed to play off the warm accented glow of her rich brown skin. She wore the simple costume of a concierge: white shirt, black skirt, and heels, accessorized by minimal makeup, pearl earrings and a radiant smile.

“You are not Burgy,” I managed to get out of my surprised mouth.

“Well, I will have to check to be sure,” she said then she casually looked about her uniform, her eyes resting on her own gold-embazoned name tag. “No, I am sure of it, most definitely not Burgy, sir. However, I do hope I can provide you some relevant service.”

“I... I am somewhat at a loss for words.”

“Perhaps, that is due to the large foot in your mouth.”

“That would nicely explain the taste of Italian leather.”

She gave me a polite half grin, before returning to what I suspected was her normal all-business mode.

“How may I help you, sir?”

“There is a leak in my room.”

“Which room, sir?”

“Mine, of course,” I answered casually. At this I saw a slight amusement play over her face and a dimple which I had previously missed before made itself known.

“Of course,” she said not missing a beat. “What is your name, sir?”

“Romanov.”

“Romanov... ah yes, here you are, room 312,” she said as she quickly tapped in the information and pulled up my reservation. “Yes, sir, I noted your problem and I will have a repairman sent to your room immediately. The hotel apologizes for your inconvenience. Is there anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant?”

“Well, there is one thing...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Your name,” I answered. To this she seemed taken aback for a second, but she quickly recovered; this time, however, she was not looking directly at me.

“My name? Why would you need my name?”

“Because, as we have already determined you are not Burgy, my curiosity must now be quenched. Besides, without it, asking you out would be far harder for me to do.”

“Asking me out?” she said slowly. She seemed to ponder it a moment, crossing her arms over her chest and looking me over from head to toe. She must have approved of me on some level, because she returned to her computer and said, “Concierge Aya Kimbrel.”

“Concierge Aya Kimbrel,” I said feeling her name roll over my tongue. “Well, Concierge Aya Kimbrel, I would very much like to take you out for dinner. Perhaps tomorrow?”

“No,” she said quickly.

“No?” I had to admit I was more than a little crestfallen to hear how swiftly she answered. Perhaps I had read the entire situation incorrectly. Perhaps I was losing my touch. Perhaps...

“No, I will still be covering Burgy’s shift tomorrow night, but I will be back to mornings after that.”

“Oh,” I said trying to carefully mask my chagrin. I did not succeed and I could tell that she knew she had gotten me as her radiant smile flashed again.

“Then I shall see you then, say.... eight o’clock, here in the lobby?”

“Eight it is.”

“Until then,” I said with a slight bow. She blushed. Perhaps I still had my touch after all. Having left a fairly decent impression on my beautiful concierge, I took my leave, pulling my coat in close and fastening it as I stepped outside into the crisp Chicago night air. The rain had apparently stopped, or at least taken a brief repose, allowing me to move about the streets unassaulted. I walked for some time in silent thought, simply passing block upon block of brick townhouses and corner laundry mats without truly regarding them at all. I stopped my wandering and looked at my surroundings for the first time and realized my feet had guided me to Grant Park. I wasn’t really surprised to find myself there. I had often passed many quite nights there taking in the darkness with all of

my senses. What did surprise me was the presence of another. I wasn't startled; the person was, after all, my former mentor.

"Beautiful night tonight, isn't?"

"I suppose one's as good as another. It's good to see you, Sergei," he said as he took a seat on a nearby park bench. He stretched his long legs out crossing them at the ankles. I joined him on the bench, resting my left arm on my leg.

"How have you been, Kristos? It's been what... three, four years?"

"Five, but who's counting?" Kristos said looking ahead into the darkness that surrounded us. He didn't seem to be focusing on anything in particular, but rather lost in deep thought. But I knew better than to assume that. Kristos was always watching something or someone. His focus never flitted about casually, but rather bore into his subjects, stripping them down until he saw the heart of them. I said nothing as he sat there, olive skin glowing under the half moonlight, contrasted only by the sheer darkness of his hair, which was the thick, deep black of a Greek heartthrob. Indeed, I knew Kristos had a reputation of being a lady killer, however, most people had no clue how apropos that title may have been many years ago.

"So, how have you been? How is Luca?"

"Luca is," he paused waving his hands in exasperation as the right words seemed to elude him. "Luca is Luca."

I didn't quite understand his meaning, but decided to let it go. I had known Kristos for much longer than I had known his brother Luca, but what little I did know of him was that he was the more eccentric of the two. Kristos was meticulous, Luca was mercurial. Kristos obsessed while Luca seemed to flit about carelessly and ceaselessly, occupying only one space or one thought long enough to get into some sort of trouble that Kristos would inevitably have to fish him out of.

"Last I heard he was in Italy."

"With her?"

"That would be my guess."

"Well, he is a braver man than I, considering the way he left things."

"Brave is not the word I would use," Kristos started, but then abruptly paused as he sat up, noticeably alert. I leaned forward as well trying to divine what had caught his attention. Then I found it, or rather I found her; a lone jogger on her pre-sunrise run. I admired people like her. The dedication to exercise in the pursuit of physical perfection was not something I was born with or had yet cultivated. She was following a path a few

yards away from us that would lead her to the Buckingham Fountain and back around again. She ran, unaware or unconcerned, of our stares. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail that bobbed back and forth as she made her way through the park. Her dark blue sweat suit seemed to camouflage her as her figure disappeared behind the trees and other foliage that marked the distance between us. Kristos looked at me with his characteristic smirk.

“Don’t worry, Sergei. This one is all yours.”