

Isabella laughed with her cousins that were around her age. But as she looked to their faces. She couldn't make out features and trying to see beyond the haze that prevented her from seeing them strained her and made the rest of her sight face. So she didn't try to determine their faces. Instead she laughed with them as she played tag with them.

"Isabella!" Called her mother.

"Yes mamma!" She called back and looked back in the direction of the house to see her mom. Tall, regal, and proper. Everything she was supposed to aspire to be. So her instructors told her she would one day be.

"Come here sweetie. I have a special gift I wanted to give to you." She said holding a small box in one hand.

Isabella hurried over to her. "What is it?" She would ask happily as her mother handed her the small slender box. Opening it up, she saw a gold necklace with a diamond that had been shaped into that of a heart, with a gold encasing around the heart. She stared at the necklace as she felt something coming from the necklace. She couldn't tell what it was she felt coming from the pendant. But she didn't feel any danger from it and her mother was giving it to her. So she slipped it on, with help from her mother closing the clasp for it behind her neck.

"There, now you look like a proper lady." Her mother said with a smile.

"Isabella! Come on we're playing a new game!" Called one of her cousins taking Isabella's attention from her mother as she looked back to call to them.

"Coming!" She said and then turned to face her mother. Only to see to her horror, fire and flame. With chunks of the house being blown outwards. A large beam was sent hurtling from the house and it pierced through her mothers chest. Catching her mother off guard, but not before a massive pillar came crashing down on both of them.

And with a blood curdling scream Isabella woke up feeling as if she were on fire. Her face covered in tears and sweat from a nightmare she just had. Her heartbeat rapidly within her chest so loud she could swear she hear it pounding. But now that she was awake. The terrors of her dreams began to fade away. The unfamiliar sights of the different bedroom reminded her she was not in her room anymore. And the scent of her father told her she was in his bed and not her own. Calming her down further. But she could not see him. She tried to get out of the bed but found it difficult as she soon discovered she had somehow wrapped herself up in the sheets and blanket of the bed she had been sleeping on.

Untangling herself from the sheets and covers. She wiped her eyes of her tears, it had just been a dream. But it wasn't just any dream. It was a dream she had been having ever since she woke up in the hospital after the explosion. And no matter how much she tried to think about happy things before going to bed this one kept coming back. Getting out of the bed she went to find her father. It wasn't hard to find him. He was asleep on the couch. Smiling, she made her way over to the couch and climbed upon onto the couch and on top of the sleeping form of her father. She never

got to do this with her mother since she started taking lessons to be a ‘proper lady’. She smiled and placed her head on his chest and closed her eyes as she felt him move under her and start to speak and rub her head as she fell back asleep.

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Unaware of what his daughter had just been through, Markus had been sound asleep. Being a heavy sleeper meant he had been able to sleep through a lot of things early on. And now it meant he missed out on being aware to Isabella’s nightmares. Not that he would be aware she had had one.

But he was woken up as he felt a heavy weight climbing up on top of him. And settling on top of him making it harder to breath but not impossibly so. Opening his eyes he saw the little lamia girl who had been turned over to him by the law due to the death of her mother and loss of everyone else, but himself.

Tiredly he reached down and began to rub the young girls head. “Everything alright Isabella?”

But she was already back asleep on top of him. He smiled and shook his head slightly. Impressed just how quickly the little lamia could fall asleep. Wanting to get up and carry her back to bed. Markus tried to move but found it difficult to move while she lay on top of him. Sure he could just roll to the side and she would topple off of him along with any other number of ways to get her off of him.

But he did not do so. Instead he brought his arms up and embraced her. Hugging him close to his person as she slept. As soon as he did so he felt the tip of the lamia’s tail wrap around a foot as she mumbled something incoherently.

“I guess this isn’t so bad.” With that he tried to sleep again. Though this time it was a little harder, but he wasn’t about to complain.

As morning came, Markus was the first to wake up. Even though he had been awoken in the night. His internal clock refused to let him sleep longer. Even if he had a cute daughter laying on top of him. Once again faced with figuring out how to get out from under the young lamia. He put some thought into how to get out from under the sleeping lamia.

Carefully, he set up. Unwinding her tail from around his leg and setting her down on the couch. Letting Isabella sleep just a little longer while he got breakfast ready.

This time he made a proper breakfast for her. Eggs, ham and waffles with orange juice. It was as he was cooking that he could hear the stirring of Isabella. “Good morning Isabella. Go ahead and have a seat at the table. Breakfast is nearly ready.”

When he finished setting up a plate of eggs, another of waffles and a smaller plate with ham. He turned to set the food on the table in front of Isabella. He saw the same smiling face who was

looking forwards to enjoying his food. He watched her eat a little, before he made himself something to eat and sat across from her. Together they enjoyed a quiet breakfast.

When they finished Markus cleaned up while Isabella went back to the living room and grabbed one of the books she had rented from the library. As she read her books, Markus checked the mail that had just arrived. With a sigh he went and picked up the pile of letters addressed to him. And read them in turn.

Bills, more bills.

With a sigh he went back to the kitchen. Picking up a pad and paper and began to open each bill and write down the amount owed. These were just the bills he owed to the city. Past due payment for the apartment, another final warning on that late payment. He rolled his eyes at that one, the city may have sent such warning. But it rarely carried out any evictions. Still he couldn't afford to not take care of it now. There was also a fine for destruction of city property, namely in the form damaging portions of the sub levels of the city during one of his last trips to the sub-levels of the city as part of a job for one of the people he owed money too. Then there were the multiple miscellaneous bills for past due's owed to numerous banks in the Silver Quarter.

In total his amount came to a staggering twenty thousand credits owed, just to the city. No easy task of paying that all off. When the agent for the Child Protection Service came to visit, they would no doubt question him about those bills. And ask him what he was doing to pay those off. Since he officially had not held a job that the city recognized or could collect taxes on. At least not in the last couple of years.

"I'm going to need to think on this." He said frustrated and rubbing his head in thought.

"Did you say something daddy?" Isabella asked from the living room, her head now peaking over the couch having overheard him.

"Nothing dear," He said and then paused. "Well actually, how would you like to come with daddy and we go on a walk?" He asked her as he needed to get outside and clear his mind. Thinking to much on negatives and being cooped up inside was never a good thing. Better to be outside and think about how to best address his issues. And to also spend some time with Isabella.

Her face turned into a smile and she nodded her head. "Okay!" She said and got herself ready to go outside.

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She wasn't blind. There was something on her fathers mind. Something which was bothering him greatly. She saw it in greater detail when he was focused on writing on the piece of paper back home. She had wanted to ask him for help in saying a word from her book. But he had a look which meant he was deep in thought and bothered by something.

Which after being told multiple times before that it was rude to interrupt people who were in thought, by her families servants. And also being punished for interrupting discussion between adults who were discussing things which upset them. She had learned that grown ups did not want her help. Even though she wanted to help them out as much as she could.

Her mother had explained it as some adults wanting to protect her from things which might hurt her. And while Isabella was still young and willing to help, sometimes adults needed help of those who were wiser then they. Which seemed odd to her. She had always been taught if she needed help, that she only had to ask and people would help her. So it just seemed strange that when she offered help she was turned away.

It was something not even her mother could fully explain. But she tried her best. And for Isabella, just having her mother be there to explain things. Helped her more then anyone of the servants who tried to explain it in terms for a child like herself to understand.

She had waited for her father to be less troubled, before she tried to get his attention. And rather then snap at her, like she had been bracing herself for. He seemed open to her. He did hide what was bothering him, even changing the way his face looked to show her a smiling happy face. Which made her wonder if he genuinely smiled because of her or if he forced himself to smile because of her?

She wasn't sure if she wanted to know the answer. Afraid to find out that he was forcing himself to be something he was not. Because of her. When she really wanted to believe he enjoyed having her and being together.

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Markus smiled as she did so. Taking her hand once she was by his side. Leaving the apartment behind. Markus took to the sidewalk, walking with Isabella and showing her around the block of which they lived. It wasn't much, since all that there was to see were tall apartment buildings. A couple of taxi's and busses. And the other people milling about minding their business going to and from their jobs. Others of course were between jobs, looking for the next place to work to make a pay check.

There were also a few small businesses scattered around as well. Though these were few and far between and even displayed the same level of upkeep common to this area of the Copper Quarter. Ranging from food to clothes to electronics and furniture as well as the common pawn shop.

There was a lot of interesting sights to see. If you were not from the Copper Quarter, such as a little lamia who had recently lost everything they once had.

It was almost enough to make one forget that they lived in the Copper Quarter. Of course, this was the Copper Quarter and just about everywhere you went you were likely to run into someone who was a part of some gang or mafia or other criminal network.

“Hey ass hole!” Shouted a voice familiar to Markus from a nearby alley way.

The older human gritted his teeth. Things were likely to get nasty. Especially if the person in question was on the warpath.

“Hello Joshua.” He said turning to face the male Hobgoblin Lieutenant. Who was flanked by several Goblins. Markus didn’t need to look around to know that there were more of them around. Goblin’s rarely traveled in small numbers. And if Joshua was looking for a fight, then Markus was going to need to book it out of here if he was going to protect Isabella.

“Hmph, seems you finally came out of your damn hiding hole at last.” The Hobgoblin said stepping out into the open but keeping distance between the two of them.

“And good to see you standing in the light. Unlike the rest of your cowardly underlings who seem content to hide in the shadows.”

“You know why I’m here, Markus. And it’s time to pay up. In money or blood, I don’t care which.” The Hobgoblin said trying to be menacing, their hand never leaving the club at his side.

“I’ve no idea what you’re going on about. I owe you nothing. Maybe I should have a talk with your boss? I’m sure they would like a word with you about harassing their allies.”

“Like fuck you’re an ally! You’re just a god damn Monster in the guise of a fucking Downer!”

“Daddy?” Isabella says clinging to Markus’s leg fear in her eyes and voice as she tries to stay behind him.

Both Markus and Joshua look down to Isabella. Markus out of concern and Joshua out of surprise.

“Don’t worry dear. Daddy will be fine. Just having a discussion with an... acquaintance of mine.” He said trying hard to bite his tongue and not say or do something to upset his daughter.

“Wait, when the fuck did you get a lamia kid? Did you fucking kidnap her? I know you’re a fucking Downer but I didn’t think even you’d stoop that low.”

“I didn’t kidnap her. She is my daughter.”

“Bull shit! No way in hell would anyone ever love a monster like yourself!”

“And no mother would ever love a bastard such as you.”

That managed to get a rise from Joshua who started to pull out the club but paused. “No, I’m no enforcer.” He said putting the club back down. “You listen here you fuck face. I’m letting you go this time, because I’d rather not beat in the face of a little girls father right in front of her. I aint like you, Downer.”

“How benevolent of you.” Markus said rolling his eyes.

“Don’t test my patience dumb ass it! Take your kid and get out of here. I may not be in the mood to mess you up, but my brothers are less inclined to hold back.”

Markus nodded his head. He had run ins with them as well in the past. Each of them were just as eager for a fight as Joshua. But none of them were half as restrained or intelligent as the one in front of him now. “Hey Joshua!” He shouted as the Hobgoblin was already turned and walking away. Only to turn around ready to start shouting.

“What now, Downer?!”

“Tell your boss I’m going to be stopping by sometime soon.”

Joshua stared at him and narrowed his eyes. “And why the fuck would the boss ever want anything to do with you, Markus?”

“I owe him a debt. I intend to pay it off.”

“Really? Well if that’s true, then leave your kid at home. We got nothing but trouble and there’s no way I’m letting you get a kid involved in any of your shit.”

“Trust me, I don’t want her anymore involved then you do.”

“So there is a brain left in that empty skull of yours. That’s a miracle, I’ll pass the message on.” Joshua said and turned to leave once again. The Goblins that had come with him also turned and left.

As the group of thugs left, Markus let out a held sigh. And looked back down to his terrified daughter. Isabella was shaking where she stood and her tail was coiled around his leg in fear and as her thought about it he could not feel his leg with her wrapped so tightly about it.

“There there Isabella, you can relax now. We’re fine now. Daddy will keep you safe.” He said and reached down to gently pat her head. Getting her attention.

“Daddy, why are you and the other person so mean to each other? And why did he call you a monster and a downer?” Isabella asked

“That... well... you see dear. That’s a very long story to why we don’t like each other. But he doesn’t like people like myself who fail to keep up on promises made. And we have butted heads several times in the past.” He said trying to explain in short why he and Joshua seemed hostile to one another. He did not address why he called him a monster or a downer. Those were things that were best left unsaid.

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Isabella looked to him expecting him to answer her other question. But he was clearly not about to answer her.

“Why don’t you ask for help? Especially if you were unable to keep a promise?”

That made him pause and think.

“I, well, daddy is just so used to doing things on his own. And the few times I get into deals with other people. It is purely business.”

“But you have friends, right?”

“Yes”

“Then why would you not ask them for help? Is that not what friends are for? To help you out when times are tough?”

“Well, yes.” He said the look on his face changed as if he was embarrassed that he was having to explain himself to his daughter in the middle of the sidewalk while people kept their distance. No one wanted to be near a man who just dealt with one of the various gangs that ran this part of the Copper Quarter.

“So, why don’t you ask for help?”

Markus frowns unable to come up with a satisfactory answer. “I don’t know Isabella. I wish I could give you a proper explanation. But I just cant. Daddy is just used to doing things on his own and solving stuff on his own.”

Still no answer as to why adults refused to ask for help. But her father partly answered her, but she felt there was more there. That he wasn’t telling her. And she didn’t forget the fact that he did not answer her earlier questions about why the Hobgoblin Joshua called him a Monster or a Downer.

She had no idea what a Downer was. But she knew what a Monster was. Having read stories about them and having heard stories of monsters from her family and the servants. Who told her of creatures who would gobble up children who snuck out of bed at night. Or who had strength of a hundred men and could decimate armies. Or were conniving creatures who could convince a person into selling their soul with a few flattering words.

She didn’t want to think her dad was a monster. But why was he so reluctant to tell her that he was not, if it was not true?

“Hey Isabella? Would you like to see Lance again?” Her father asked getting her attention as she unwound from his leg.

“Lance?”

“Yes, you should remember Lance. The nice Incubus who made all that nice food for you last night. Remember him?”

“Oh! Yes, I want to meet him again, yes please!” She said with excitement as her belly growled letting them both know she was hungry.

Her father smiled and nodded his head. “Alright, lets go visit him at his house for lunch then? That sound good to you?”

“Yes!” She said with a cheer.

“Alright, to Lance’s house we go.” Her father said and the both of them once more took the bus.

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The bus ride to Lance’s house was a lengthy one and it gave Markus time to think. Since he didn’t get much time to think while out on his walk with Isabella, thanks to the Hobgoblin Lieutenant he ran into.

This was not going to be the last time he ran into him, nor would he likely be the last person to come calling. Trying to collect on some debt or for some offence he had done. Which meant Isabella was going to be in danger, so long as she was with him if they were out and about. But he couldn’t just keep her trapped inside for the rest of their days. So he needed to find a balance, between keeping Isabella safe and repaying his debts.

And as she had reminded him. He could always ask for help, from those he called friends.

But that just made him wonder if his friends actually would help him or not? It had been ages since he talked to most of them and some of them he left on less then good terms. Hell, the only people he kept in touch with from before were Lance and his wife Cindy. He still wasn’t sure why they put up with him. After all the things he had done and what he had put them through.

Maybe it was time to start reconnecting with old friends? It would certainly make the task ahead easier. Especially if they were doing better then he was, which really wasn’t that hard to do, since he lived in the Copper Quarter.

As the bus came to a stop at their destination. Markus led Isabella off the bus and to a different apartment complex. Like before when they were closer to the Silver Quarter. Things seemed much cleaner and much better maintained. Even the view of the sky wasn’t so bad here. Though it was still marred by the impossibly tall buildings of apartments and workshops which were the life blood of the city.

The people here were even seemed to have a slightly better disposition then back closer to his place. It was clear people here lived a better life then those in the deeper parts of the Copper

Quarter. And above them, were those who lived in the Silver Quarter. Where things really began to get interesting.

But right now, his focus was on securing his place here in the Copper Quarter. And making a better life for Isabella. Everything else was secondary to that.

Raising a hand as he stood in front of the door to Lance's apartment. Markus knocked on the door several times.

"Just a minute!" Shouted Lance from within the apartment.

A moment later the door opened and there stood the Incubus wearing what looked to be sweat pants and a long sleeve shirt.

"Hello Lance, mind if we come in?"

"Jesus Markus, I know you said you'd be coming by soon. I didn't think you meant the next day." The other man said shaking his head with a smirk on his face. "Yes, come in. Come in, Cindy! We have trouble coming in!"

"You can tell it to stay outside! The last time he came in here I had to clean the house for a whole month because of the mess he made!" Shouted Cindy from further within.

Lance smiled and moved aside to let them both in. "Come in, she'll be out in a moment." Seeing Isabella sticking close to Markus he kneeled down and smiled. "Say, would you like something to eat?"

Isabella nodded her head rapidly. "Yes please! I really liked your food last night!"

"Haha, fantastic! Always glad to hear it." Lance said and reached out to pet her head before he stood up to head to the nearby kitchen.

Markus upon entering the apartment looked around to see what had changed. The TV which last he had seen it, had been crashed around a minotaurs head, was replaced. The couch which had been torn to shreds and was used to pin a large Orc was replaced with a larger couch. And the carpeting was also replaced. As were the various chairs which had been used as weapons.

It may have only been a few months since the incident. But he could still vividly remember when a bunch of enforcers from the Bacchus Cartel tried to come collect on his head while he was celebrating Cindy's birthday.

Speaking of which.

A very voluptuous succubus who matched the description to a "T" walked out of the hall way wearing what Markus could only imagine was a last second grab of clothes. As the shirt was clearly undersized for her chest and mis-matched to the very short shorts that hugged her hips.

“Markus,” She hissed upon seeing him, venom in her voice. “I thought I told you I didn’t want to see you again.” As she said this she didn’t see Isabella immediately, but as she got around the couch she paused at the sight of the little lamia.

“Yes, you were quite clear on that. The headache I got after your... declaration was hard to forget. But as you also made clear, before that. You said if I ever needed help. I would only have to ask.” He said and.

Markus face skewered with a mix of emotions trying to figure out how best to say the words.

“Cindy, I need your help.” He said and let go of Isabella’s hand and placed it on her back. “We, need your help.”

The succubus was speechless as she stared at the young Lamia. A light passing through her eyes as if a memory of a time long past returned for the briefest of moments. Only to disappear in a flash.

“Markus, is she...”

“Yes, the spitting image of her mother, isn’t she?” He smiled.

“By the powers that be.” She said and looked from Isabella to Markus. “Markus, what happened?”

“A very sad tale, which if you’ve heard the news lately, now you know just how bad it was.”

“Oh no, so that means...?”

“Yes, she also got caught in the blast.”

Cindy looked back to Isabella with tears in her eyes.

Isabella looked between the two of them. Not sure what they were talking about, though she could at least understand in so much that they were talking about her in a way.

The succubus walked over to Isabella and got on her knees and sat down. “I don’t know if your mother ever mentioned me. But we were friends once long ago. So I’ll extend to you the same offer I gave her. If you ever need a place to escape to or hide. My door is always open to you.”

“Th... thank you Miss...?” Isabella was confused. The strange lady was not wrong. Her mom never mentioned everything about her friends. The most she spoke about anyone she knew about anyone else was what her mom told her about her father.

The succubus smiled and leaned forward and hugged the young girl tightly. Crying softly, “I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

This took Isabella by surprise, but once the surprise wore off Isabella relaxed and hugged the woman back.

Once she let go of Isabella, the dark haired succubus gave Markus a hard look. “And you you better be doing everything you can for her.”

“That’s the plan. And also why I need your help.”

“Isabella, it would seem the grown ups are going to be spending some time talking to one another. Why don’t you come to the kitchen and have some lunch with me? I’ve made quite the selection of deliciously new choices I am sure you would enjoy.” Lance said walking out to the living room and holding a hand out to her.

Isabella looked up to Markus looking for his approval.

“Go ahead sweet heart. Lance is a good man, enjoy yourself.”

Isabella smiled and took Lances hand and followed the white haired incubus to the kitchen to eat. Leaving Markus and Cindy to talk in the living room.

“Is there a place we can talk in private?” Markus asked looking nervously to Isabella who was sitting at the table.

This made Cindy raise an eyebrow at him and she nodded her head. “Yes, just follow me. Lance, we’ll be back in a couple of minutes. Save something for me.”

“Okay.”

“This way.” The succubus said and left the apartment.

“I’ll be back soon sweetie, be good for Lance!” Markus said and followed her out.

As it turned out. The private place Cindy wanted to take him to. Turned out to be the top of the apartment building. Which instead of being a bare top with fence on it. Looked to be a small community garden by the looks. With several benches.

Cindy sat down on one that looked out to the depths of the Copper Quarter and left a spot beside her for Markus. When he sat down, she stared at him again. “Alright, speak.”

Markus breathed in and exhaled deeply. Leaning back in the bench and starrng up at the sky filled with clouds and smoke.

“Where do I begin?”

“Start with the beginning. What happened? You asking for help is something you never do. Nor do you ever show a vulnerability to anyone.”

Markus frowned and shook his head and put his head in his hands as he leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. She was right, he never asked for help and he never let anyone see a weakness in him. Well almost, anyone, the only person he ever let close was now no longer among the living. And yet, here he was going to have to share something with someone else.

“Markus,” Cindy said with a firm voice but with concern. He also felt a hand on his shoulder. “Markus, is everything alright? You’re, crying.”

As she said this, he became acutely aware of the fact he was shaking and making the strangest of sounds for which he would never imagine himself making. Yet he was.

“Cindy, she’s dead.” He said as a wave of sadness seemed to overtake him. “I never got to tell her goodbye and now she is gone forever. I failed her back then and I failed her now. Just like before.”

“How did you fail her?”

His gut wrenched itself into a knot. He felt like everything he had done since they had separated, since he let himself slide into obscurity and out of his loves sight a failure.

“I was a coward. When her family threatened to not only kill me, but also disown Merida for ever becoming involved with someone of my status. I did not just back away or leave her life. I fucking ran.” He said still not looking the succubus in the face as he kept his face in his hands. His own crying had stopped as he began to talk. “I wasn’t scared of their enforcers. I can handle a few snakes on my own. But I was so scared of what them disowning Merida would do to her. That I did not think to warn her or tell her why I left. I just left without a word.” He said with frustration he moved his hands from his face and placed them on his knees as venom entered his voice as he spoke in disgust about himself and his actions. “I ran away and didn’t look back for a long time. Not until I thought I had gotten far enough out of their attention. That at one point even I wished I had not existed. And so began my spiral down to where I am today. A Downer who wastes his time doing the odd job for questionable people. Just to make it by to the next day.”

As he said this he could feel a hand be placed on his shoulder as she spoke softly. “So, how are you going to make things right?”

“I don’t know. I owe so much to so many people. I’ve gotten into to many deals and made enemies of so many people, powerful people. I owe money to a lot of people as well. And I don’t even know if the people I used to call friends are even alive still or if they even know if I am alive.”

“To whom are you indebted to and how?” She asked moving her hand from him as he sat up.

As Markus sat up, she saw that his eyes were red, and tears were still fresh on his face. But he soon wiped them away as he looked down to his hands. Remembering what he wrote on his notepad at home, as well as what he could remember of his 'business' dealings.

“I owe Amanda, the Queen of the Copper Quarter and the Den of Deviants a huge sum of money to make try and get myself setup down here. Try and open up my own business down here, like Lance did. Not that that went anywhere, other then to get me involved with the seedier elements of the Copper Quarter. So either I pay her off or...”

“Or you do her a huge favor or work in her Den of Deviants for the next several years.”

He nodded his head yes. A shudder covered his body at the thought of having to work for the Lilum who made her home in the Copper Quarter when she could be living it up in either the Gold or Platinum district like so many others. Nothing happened in the Copper Quarter underground without her say so.

“I also owe the Oni Usha's Clan a job or two. As a favor for being one of my regulars when I *did* run my own business. As well as some money to keep my sorry ass in the apartment I got. While their boss did say I don't owe them anything. One of their Lieutenants accosted me while I was out on a walk with Isabella earlier. While nothing really happened. It made me remember that while their boss may say everything is good, it may not seem like it to those under them.

“Is that everyone?”

“No, not even close. I owe several banks in the Silver Quarter loans. When I crashed down into there from my short lived stay in the Gold Quarter. As well as guild dues and fees to the Iron Hold Guild. Since I used to be a member for them and they're a widely recognizable name in the Silver Quarter. I also owe the Ingo Clan several favors, since I asked them for help in getting stabilized in the Silver Quarter in the earlier years.

And after them I owe several thousand Tiberius Rex of the Chambers of Sorcerers. As well as an apology for screwing up one of his experiments. I've no idea if he'll even listen to me before he scorches me into ash.”

“Tiberius is known for being rather short in temper with those who mess up his experiments. Though I hear he is entering his twilight years as a dragon. Maybe now might be the time to see him since his powers are likely waning?”

“He's a god damn dragon. And not just any dragon he is a monster of a dragon. The man is capable of leveling an entire city block on his own with a spell!”

“Yes, but you will need to deal with him anyways. And you wont get any better chance than the present.”

Markus nodded his head. He knew he would have to deal with him. It was more a matter of how he was going to talk to him.

“Anyone else?”

“The Engel Syndicate as well. I owe them more money than I care to recount.”

“How much?”

“A five hundred thousand credits.”

It was Cindy’s turn to once more be silent. “What did you ask of them to owe them that much?”

“I asked them to arrange one last meeting between me and Merida.”

“Wait I thought you said you didn’t look back or try to talk to her again?”

“Yes, but I tried one last time thinking I was smart.”

That made the succubus smile. “So was that when...?”

“No, we erm did that before then. Plus I didn’t see her since her family found out about us and started their campaign to destroy me. Apparently they were serious about destroying me. As they somehow learned about the meeting setup to meet with Merida and sent several of their enforcers to make it perfectly clear how unwanted I was.” He said shoulders slumping in defeat.

She felt remorse for him and placed her hand back on his shoulder.

“And that is it?”

“That’s it. There are a few bills which I owe the city. And a few minor people who I need to pay off. But those are the people whom I owe money and favors to. Not counting the numerous groups I’ve pissed off on my climb in status and subsequent fall into obscurity.”

“So what are you going to do about all this? And were does Isabella come in in all of this? I know you. If you were just yourself and you decided to finally clean up your act. You would take care of everything without a second thought or be reaching out to me for help.”

“You’re right, I would normally just put my whole person into taking care of this and be done in a year. But that isn’t going to work anymore. Not if I want to hold my promise I made to myself and Isabella.

I want to give her the best life I can give her and be there for her. And to do that, I have to take clean up my act. And I can’t really do that while also raising Isabella and being her father.”

Cindy nodded her head understanding. “Well you will need to find a way to balance the two out now. One way or another. Especially if you plan to be in her life.”

“I do want to be in her life. She already had everything in her life ripped away once. I do not want to see her go through that again. The first time was one time to many. I could not live with myself if I made her live through being ripped away from her family a second time.”

Cindy smiled and pat him on the back. “See, now this is the Markus I knew. Before he let himself become the person I had to kick out on his ass for ruining my last birthday.”

“Haha, I swear it was not my fault! I told you I would make it up to you!”

“Yeah, and I have yet to see you do so!”

“Well, how can I make it up to you?”

Cindy sat back and crossed her legs as she looked up to the sky in thought. “I never really thought about it. I knew then that you were a mess. A mess of a person who I did not want in my life anymore. But I did hold hope you might change. Return to who you were.” She said and looked back to him a gleam in her eyes. “So, are you back Markus? Are you ready to work your ass off and give that little girl I just saw a life worth living?”

He opened his mouth to speak but caught himself and closed his mouth. What did she mean was he back? He never left, and he just said he was willing to do everything possible to give her the best life he possibly could and be there for her. So what was she looking for?

“Am I back? Not one hundred percent, it will take me a little bit to get there. But you know me Cindy. Once I start going nothing will stop me until I complete my goal. But I am back. No longer will I just stand aside and let the world go by me.

And as for Isabella. I will make sure she lives a long happy life free of sadness and misery and woe be to those who think to...” Markus reeled as Cindy flicked him in the head and sighed. “Ow, what was that for?”

“You’re ranting! I’m not looking for a rant. Or some monologue. Just tell me, yes or no. Are you back and are you going to work your ass off for her?”

“Oh,” He felt a hint of embarrassment. “Yes, I am back and yes I will work myself to the bone if need be for her.”

“Good, that is what I wanted to hear.” She said with a smile before standing up. “Come on, the food Lance made is likely getting cold. And I am sure your little girl is worrying about you.”

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Isabella smiled happily as she finished another plate of food. The nice man who was friends with her daddy had made her so much food. Pizza, pasta, lasagna and just now having finished off a plate of chicken. The small naga felt incredibly full and now, tired as well.

“Hehe, thank you I don’t think I could eat another bite!” She said happily as even she didn’t think she could eat anymore.

“Oh? Does this mean you’re finally full?” Lance asked with a laugh as he watched the little lamia nod her head yes.

“Mmm, well I probably could. But I would just make myself sick. And Mama said not to eat to the point I got sick.” She said and then her smile started to go away. She missed her mom and just bringing her up made her feel sad once again.

Lance must have noticed such as he walked over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up to him. Not crying but just looking very sad.

“You miss her, don’t you?”

She nodded her head yes.

“Come here, why don’t you relax for a little bit? I’m sure your dad and Cindy are still busy talking and wont be down for a bit. Even after this time.” He said and led her from the kitchen as Isabella got up from the table.

She followed him from the kitchen to another room in the apartment. This one was a bedroom as well. But unlike the rest of the apartment, this one did not smell of either the incubus or succubus to Isabella.

“Here, this is our guest room. Why don’t you take a nap and I’ll have your dad come wake you up when he gets back, okay?”

“Okay, thank you.” She said and slithered into the room. Lance closed the door behind her leaving her alone.

Once more Isabella was alone. There were no windows here. The only light coming from under the door frame. And a small wall light. She shivered and whimpered softly to herself as she hugged herself tightly before climbing in the bed.

Why was her daddy taking so long to come back? She wondered as she laid on the bed. And who was that lady exactly who said she knew her mom? And just what exactly was her relation to her mother?

It was clear her father knew the lady very well and that two of them knew each other for a long time. Maybe she could ask her father about the lady and how she knew about her mom? But what happened to make her hostile to her father? And again, what was her relationship to her mother, that the lady forgot her anger as soon as she saw her?

Isabella tossed and turned in the bed for a few minutes. Trying to think of possible answers. But none of them really made sense to her. She would need to either ask her father or ask the lady.

And speaking of her father. What was he talking about with her? What were they discussing that would take this long? This was the longest she had been without him. And now that she was alone fear began to creep into her. Was her dad really forcing himself to smile around her? Was her presence a burden on him?

Isabella sniffled and closed her eyes tighter. “No, daddy won’t abandon me!” She said trying to fight back fears of being abandoned. That she was somehow a burden, like her older cousins would torment her with and what some of the other adults would say in hushed voices when they thought she wasn’t listening. “I’m not a burden! I’m not!” She whimpered softly. And tried to sleep in the hopes that by sleeping these horrible thoughts would go away.

But the memories and thoughts echoed in her mind. “Half-breed, dead weight, burdensome, wasted space, fodder.” And many other insults echoed in her head from her older cousins insulting her.

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When Markus finally returned to Cindy and Lances apartment with the succubus. He felt tired, exhausted, which was odd. He had not done anything today to warrant this level of exhaustion. So when they made it back to the apartment and Lance offered them food. Markus did not argue at all.

“Took you two long enough. So is everything under the bridge, as it were?” Lance asked as the two sat at the table as he set plates in front of them and filled them up with what was left from his cooking for Isabella.

“Yes, we are good.” Cindy said with a nod of her head.

“So, mind if I ask what you were talking about?”

Markus winced and looked around for Isabella not wanting to say something that would upset her. “Where is Isabella at?” He asked not finding her.

“She is resting. I must have found the mark for her. Because the little thing was about to pass out in her chair. She is in the guest room napping right now.” Lance said sitting down with them.

“Okay, good good. I’ll wake her up in a little bit then.” He sighed relieved.

“So...?”

“I need to turn my whole life around. I owe to many people to many favors and to much money. And I’ve got to many enemies who would just love to get a crack at me. And a daughter who does not need to get involved in her fathers mess.”

“Markus has a lot of work cut out for him.”

“If that isn’t the understatement of the year. And I need help.” He said looking up to Lance and then back to Cindy.”

“With doing what? I don’t keep in touch with our old ‘work partners’. At least not the more seedier types. And I run a business, so there isn’t much I can do to help.”

“No, no I don’t need you to do any jobs with me or anything like that.” He would say shaking his head no.

“He’s right Markus, both of us have pretty much cut ties with all our old contacts. I might not be running a business-like Lance is. Working with the Copper Quarters district office is also very taxing hard work. So what kind of help are you looking for?”

“I just need,” What did he need? He needed at the bare minimum, a place for Isabella to stay, for when he went off to do jobs. Dangerous jobs which would keep him away for days. He also needed someone to help him protect Isabella and keep her from being targeted by his enemies and angry collectors. “I need a way to help me keep Isabella safe.” He sighed.

Neither of them were dumb, they both knew in one way or another. Just how much trouble Markus was in and how much trouble he tended to get himself in to. “Well, I cant say I have any real ways to protect her. I’m no mage. But if you need keep her safe for a few days. Me and Cindy can watch over her.”

“You would do that?”

“We can. And before you start to worry about owing us. So long as trouble doesn’t follow you back to us. Then you can consider this a favor for her.”

Markus looked from Cindy to Lance surprised they would offer to take her in. “I don’t know what to say.”

“A thank you would be nice.”

“Thank you, Cindy, Lance, thank you. That lessens my worries considerably.”

“Now you just have to worry about protecting her, right?” Lance voiced with a smirk.

“Yeah, which is going to be tough. I already had a run in with a lieutenant of the Lichen Gang while I was out walking with Isabella. We didn’t come to blows, but that was only because said lieutenant was the smarter variety of hob and not your average violent out for blood type. And backed off when he saw Isabella. I cannot say the same for everyone else I might possibly meet. And I don’t want to put Isabella in danger.”

“Then you had best start clearing your debts off fast. If you want to cut back on such run ins.”

“Right, that is the plan. But then again,” He was cut off.

“Markus, if you’re going to be worrying about her safety. Then you need to get both yourself and her out of the Copper Quarter. You should be aware just how bad this place is.”

“I know, and the only way to get out of the Copper Quarter is to do a lot of jobs. And work my ass off. Which I am not opposed to.”

“You just worry about her safety in the time it takes to get the two of you out of the Copper Quarter.”

“Exactly!”

“Well, if your goal is to get out of the Copper Quarter. Then start paying off your debts to the city first. And start looking for a place to live where the gangs and mafia’s cannot get at you so easily.”

“And for the money?”

“I’m sure you can work out how to get money while also working for those you want to clean up with.” She smiled.

“This isn’t some easy task I can complete you know! She’s going to be in danger the entire time!”

“Yes, and don’t think I am not aware of that fact. So consider it an extra push to get out of here.”

He gritted his teeth. He knew she wasn’t trying to make his position sound so simple and easy. Or that his worries were something easily solved. It just frustrated him, that every time he thought about what he needed to do. He kept coming back to the same problem. Isabella was not safe. And until he got out of the Copper Quarter, she would never be safe.

“So then, that’s it? Do what I can. Wipe away the debt and do my best to protect her in the process and in those times where I have to be away for an extended period. I ask you two to look out for her?”

“Sounds like it.” Lance said sensing the Markus was almost done making up his mind.

“You’ve already said this isn’t going to be easy. But the best time to start is right now. But if I were you, I would explain it to her first. And help her understand why you have to do what you are doing.” Cindy added.

“Right,” Markus sighed making up his mind in deciding how to best deal with the tasks ahead.

“So, what have you two been up to? I know I was a mess when we were last together. But it has been ages since I’ve had a chance to sit down with people who I worked with from our group of miscreants.” He said with a smirk as he tried to change subjects and lighten the mood.

“Ah, well since we last met,” Lance started with a smile and leaned in close and whispered. “Between the three of us. We’ve been trying for a kid of our own.”

Cindy rolled his eyes. “Yes, make our private life common knowledge to everyone why don’t you?”

“Well you don’t seem to mi,” Lance cut himself off as Cindy gave him a stare that could quell a raging river.

“We have been busy remodeling and looking to move out to the Silver Quarter. Lance would still be keeping his shop here in the Copper Quarter. But he would be leaving it to one of his assistants he has been training.”

“Oh, yes! That’s right! So it’s a really good thing you came here when you did! I’ve been looking into places to open up a new shop. And I think I’ve narrowed down the search of places to open up a new shop. So sometime within the next year. You can see my restaurant up in the Silver Quarter and making twice what I make down here.”

“And when he opens his store there. I’ll take time off from the office and we will focus on making our family.” Cindy said with a nod.

“I thought you said not to make our private life common knowledge?”

“I did, but you started the talk off with it being the first thing. Bringing it up now, is a better time.” She stated matter of factly to which Lance laughed.

“Sounds like you two got your own plans ahead of you. Good luck with them. Speaking of plans, I should go grab Isabella and head home. Thank you for having us.” He said standing up.

“Hey, you’re welcome to stop by any time.” Lance said and stood up with him holding a hand out to Markus, the two of them shook each others hands.

“And feel free to bring her with you.”

“I will.” Markus said with a nod and went to go collect his daughter.

Markus smiled as he saw Isabella sleeping soundly in the room. Walking over to her, he gently shook her shoulder to wake her up. The little lamia yawned as she opened her eyes and stared up at him.

“Daddy?”

“Yep,” He said happy to see her. “Ready to head home?”

She nodded her head yes and climbed out of bed after he asked. Looking ready to go herself.

“Okay, lets go say good-bye to Lance and Cindy before we head out. I’m sure they would like to say good-bye to you too.” He said holding his hand out to her, which she took.

“Okay!”

Together they said their good-byes and headed home.

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“Daddy?” Isabella asked once they were back in the apartment.

“Yes dear?” He asked as he looked over to her from the counter.

“A... Am I burden?” She asked him looked down to the floor.

This seemed to have caught him off guard. But she soon felt him come close to her, kneel down and pull her into a tight hug.

“Never in a million years.”

“But... but you always seem so happy. When I am watching. And when you think I’m not you frown a lot. I... you aren’t making yourself be happy to make me feel happy, are you?” She asked.

He sighed as he sat down in front of her. “Isabella, remember when I said I’ve been living alone for a long time? Well, during that time daddy made a lot of bad decisions. Some of which have impacted him when he made those decisions. And some of them have lingered around since he made them. And now I need to set things right.”

She frowned a little bit. Not sure she understood how an adult could make bad decisions? Weren’t adults only capable of making good decisions? It didn’t seem right. But she trusted him.

“Will making things right be like apologizing for breaking an expensive vase or eating the last piece of cake that momma was saving, because I was hungry?”

Her father smiled and nodded his head. “Yes, sort of like those. I have to apologize to people and make up to others for doing those wrong things.”

“So what happened when you ate mommies cake? If I remember right, your mom was an amazing cook, though she specialized in desserts. I believe she taught Lance a few recipes as well. Though she always made the best cakes.”

Isabella blushed. “Mommy was upset with me. But she was pleased to see I had taken responsibility and the initiative to apologize. Rather than to be quiet about it or blame someone else and lie.”

He nodded his head in approval. "Lying to your mother is never a good thing. She has this sense about her that lets her detect whenever someone was lying when they were near her or talking to her."

This prompted her to ask. "What about you daddy?"

"Hm? If you had eaten my last piece of cake I would be impressed. Since I am so crap at cooking cake." He laughed, but he sensed this was important to her. "I don't like lying either. While I cannot sense lying as good as your mother. I promise you, if you do something wrong. I won't punish you or be angry with you. So long as you are honest to me from the start, okay?"

Isabella nodded her head in understanding.

"Good," He said and went to stand up.

"You never answered my questions earlier."

He paused and looked at her. "What questions?"

"Why that one man call you a Downer and a monster."

"Ah," He sighed and sat down to rub his head.

"Remember when I said I made bad choices? Well a Downer is someone who takes some very bad items that help them forget things. To cheer them up, but once the good feelings wear off. They become very sad and sometimes violent. And the things a person takes to feel that make them feel better. Can become very addicting, and bad for your health. Daddy used to take a lot of these things a while ago. When he, well, when he started making a lot of bad choices.

As for being a monster? I would rather not say." He told her shaking his head.

"But isn't that the same as lying? Holding information back? Momma said that was bad thing to do!"

"And she is right. And, I will tell you. I just don't think now would be the best time. Since the way daddy earned such a bad name. Was due to him doing a lot of bad things. To a lot of people. And to tell you that story, is not a proper story to tell a young girl. I promise I will tell you later when you are older. Okay?"

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"Cross your heart?"

“Cross my heart.”

She wasn't happy with him not telling her what he did. And him just telling her that he did a lot of bad things to a lot of people did not sit well with her. It made her worry of him and while she didn't notice nor did he notice. She moved away from him just slightly. Putting distance between the two of them no matter how imperceptible a distance it was.