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Blood is Thicker Than Water

 The subtle chill of the air crawled under my skin as I walked into the cobblestone square and took in my surroundings. Usually, the most famous square in Florence was bustling with people, even at this time of night. There would be musicians playing beautiful music to the stars and couples milling around the restaurants. The smell of the delicious dinners would permeate the air and laughter would ring. But today, the only footsteps heard in the square were mine. The cloudy, black sky reflected the darkness hanging over the deserted, silent piazza. No musicians played. No food was being cooked. The smell of sulfur pressed on my nose and the only ringing I heard was in my ears. Thunder played as background music as the tower of the Duomo loomed above me, the intricate stone ominous and darkened by the stars that burned above. In my hand I clenched a letter desperately as if it were my lifeline, when in many ways, it could be the opposite. I did not need to look at the creased and wrinkled paper; I had already memorized the words scrawled in haste:

 *Luc,*

 *Piazza del Duomo. The witching hour. I assume the church being closed is not an issue for you.*

 *A. Masen*

 I hadn’t heard from Adrian in 7 months, so I had assumed he had disappeared and moved on, but now, as I stood in front of the church with shadows creeping into my mind and ghosts prickling the back of my neck, I knew I had assumed wrong.

 At last, I forced my feet to comply as I slipped around the side of the large tower that had been dominated by vines, pulled out my tools, picked the lock of the nearest door, and slid inside. Even before I had turned around, I could feel the weight of my memories settling on my shoulders. The past was something I had always failed to forget, as hard as I attempted to. Bracing myself and pulling my coat tightly around me to fight the cold that threatened to swallow me, I slowly pivoted until my back was pressed against the door and I could finally see what I had tried so hard to avoid for so many years. My heart thumped—I heard a loud pounding as though some ungodly being was bashing my skull over and over and over and over and over and I slipped on the thick, red, dark blood that was not there when I entered. My hands changed to the color of the blood as I tried to stand in vain. Atlas’s burden was upon my back and I turned my head from left to right over and over and over and over and over in an attempt to shake the memories that were spiders advancing towards my head. I felt the familiar hilt in my hand—the worn leather, the dents where I held it, the jewels that I could not see but knew by heart that they formed the family crest. I was fighting off the demons to raise the sword higher when I heard the satanic lull of his voice.

 “Hello, brother,” Adrian hissed, smiling as he towered above me, sneering at my figure on the ground. I groaned and shook my head a few times to clear it, starting to push myself up. My hands were empty. The floor was dry. The church was vacant except for the tall, dark-haired man who stood smirking in front of me wearing an all-too-familiar long black coat.

 Rubbing my forehead, I sighed. “Adrianus. I thought you had finally left me alone, but apparently you just enjoy bothering me and my life.”

 Adrian’s eyes flashed. “No need to get snappy, *Lucianus*, and I thought I told you to never use my full name as long as the universe exists.”

 “Well, just because Mother named you after ‘darkness’ and me after ‘light’—”

 “Stop! I did not call you here for a petty fight, though that *is* what you are best at. I called you because I need your help.”

 I scoffed, turning away and walking towards the stained-glass windows on the other side of the dome. The church had turned even darker, as though the stars unseen behind the clouds were slowly dimming. Vines were starting to grow around the cracks of the stone walls. “Why on Earth would I ever help you?”

 “Don’t tell me that you’ve forgotten, brother, that you owe me.”

 Still looking away, my head slowly dropped down, my eyes closing as the memories started pounding at my brain again. “No. I’ve never forgotten. You’ve never let me forget. So, are you saying that if I help you, my debt will be repaid?”

 Adrian walked up behind me, careful not to stand so close that there was any danger of us touching. “In full, brother. You will owe me no more. You can be free.”

 I sighed again, hesitating. I had not missed my brother, and it would be nice to never have to see him again. He hated me too much, even though I had done what I had done for the betterment of everybody—

 No. I was not going to think about that. After I helped him, I wouldn’t have to think about it ever again. “Okay, deal. I will help you this one last time, and then I will be free. Swear on your grave, *brother*, that after we are done here, we are done forever.”

 Adrian’s eyes glinted, but he nodded. “I swear on my grave. You help me, and you will never have to see me again.”

 “What do you need, then?”

 Adrianus Masenterminus, my identical twin brother and my childhood best friend, stood in the center of the dome, the darkness throwing shadows on his sculpted face that had always looked exactly like mine. “I need to move on, Luc. I need to leave. At first I thought that *she* was the reason I can’t leave, but it’s more than that. I have an idea, but it will need you. After all, you are the one who—“

 “Stop! Don’t talk about the incident. Do… Not,” I shrieked, startling him.

 Adrian’s eyes flashed again, the way mine always did when I was angry. My stomach turned*. I cannot think about it. I will not.*

 “Why shouldn’t I talk about it?” he screamed back, causing me to stumble slightly. “Why shouldn’t I? You lost the right to stop me from talking about it when you killed her, you filthy—you killed her. My one and only love. The only person I ever lived for. You murdered her right in front of my eyes.” His voice had dropped down to a deadly whisper. Demons started walking towards me again. My head spun and my stomach heaved.

 “She had to be terminated, Adrian. She had a choice. She had a clear choice. And… she chose you. I offered her the treasures of the world: to be a wife, a housewife, in my home, taking care of our children, and to have me as her husband. She instead chose you. She made the wrong choice. She was not worthy of walking upon this Earth.”

 Adrian screeched, the noise reverberating against the stone walls and shattering the glass windows. “*SHE* wasn’t worthy? YOU aren’t worthy, you sick, horrible—You know why she chose me? She chose me because I loved her and was not going to keep her in a cage. We were going to fly free, together.”

 Saying this, he walked towards me, quickly and smoothly, demons following. Thunder and rain started to rattle the church and the walls started to explode, bursting into flames, little by little as he walked towards me, eyes glinting with the reflection of the flames. Dark creatures started to swirl around me like a tornado, knocking me off my feet and onto the hard stone floor.

 “Lucianus, you agreed to help me today. You agreed to help me move on. The only way I can truly move on is if the person who wielded this weapon—” here he pulled out the sword, the family sword that had been displayed in the glass case in our manor for centuries, “— if the person who wielded this weapon to murder me—and my love—no longer walked upon this Earth alive.”

 After he had spoken these words, he and all the other creatures of the night that filled up the church leapt towards me. I screamed as the church exploded around me in a bright flash of light and fire and heat and the ghost of my brother thrust the sword into my heart and all the demons and ungodly creatures that used to fill Hell but now walked upon this Earth entered me.